Imagining cultural wealth: producer perceptions and potential value in cultural markets

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Abstract

Whether the result of purposeful nation-branding projects or longstanding traditions, associations endure between specific nations and the particular goods they produce. Such associations can be harnessed on behalf of the symbolic and economic value recently recognized as national cultural wealth. Further, the cultivation of impression management strategies about geographical origins is requisite for specialty food firms: terroir is a foundational convention of the gourmet food industry, and its potential value is significant. For entrepreneurial firms in the specialty food market, the process of strategically connecting to cultural wealth would seem to depend upon their particular geographic location. But while some national origins add both symbolic and economic value to cultural products within the global marketplace, others potentially threaten that value. In this paper, I read closely the discursive data contained on a nearly complete collection of two case study firms' food packages ($N = 100$) to illustrate the firms' unexpectedly divergent perceptions of cultural wealth, despite their identical national location. I further analyze interview data to describe the vital (and potentially valuable) interaction between producer perception, imagination, and cultural production. By redirecting analytical attention toward profit-seeking producers, this paper aims to increase the analytical power of the concept of cultural wealth.

Keywords Cultural wealth · Cultural production · Impression management · Economics · Emotions · Discourse analysis

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Introduction

The idea that nations contain and depend not only upon economic forms of geographically particular national wealth (as Adam Smith (1776) contended), but also upon what has been called cultural wealth, has been fruitfully influential since its emergence. No longer confined to scholarly conversations about nation-building or immigration, the analytical usefulness of cultural wealth has moved well beyond the social sciences. Social scientists remain its strongest constituency, however, and we find its clearest articulation in Bandelj and Wherry's pioneering 2011 volume, *The Cultural Wealth of Nations*.

The conceptual definitions offered and clarified by the volume's editors and contributors continue to frame empirical studies and theorize attendant social phenomena (recently, cf. Banks 2018; Levitt 2015; Reyes 2014; Singer 2018). Clearly, many owe a great deal to this collection and to the relatively young analytical framework it clarifies. I propose, however, that the volume's groundbreaking definitions and conceptual clarifications of "cultural wealth" rest upon consequential assumptions. I intend the current study to be a theory-building intervention into the way in which cultural wealth is understood and used by scholars and especially by cultural sociologists, to make its conceptual power even more complex and muscular.

This project's two comparative case study firms are similar: founded within a year of each other, they are anchored in the same national location—Indonesia—and seek profit in the same industry by exporting and selling the same type of meaningfully charged commodities. As such, they are subject to the same set of marketplace expectations and conventions that anticipate details about origination and that emphasize storytelling (Becker 1982; Wyshak 2014). Scholars of cultural wealth would thus expect both firms to tell similar kinds of stories about the national origins of their food products; these would be stories directed toward the same target audience—US consumers—about Indonesian origins, about Indonesian cultural heritage, and therefore about Indonesian forms of cultural wealth. And yet these firms, over time and in consistent ways, create vastly *different* kinds of packaging stories to communicate with the *same* consumers. I am interested in what underlies the difference between their packaging stories, and, therefore, their claims to cultural wealth. Despite the many similarities of these specialty food firms and despite sharing an identical target audience for their impression management efforts, their perceptions of Indonesia's international reputation differ and so their symbolic strategies differ in response.

In this paper, I read closely the discursive data contained on a nearly complete collection of two case study firms' food packages ($N = 100$) to illustrate the firms' unexpectedly divergent perceptions of cultural wealth, despite their identical national location. I further analyze in-depth interview data with the directors and marketing managers of both firms to provide empirical support for claims about their perceptions of Indonesia as a source of cultural and economic value, and to describe the vital (and potentially valuable) interaction between perception, imagination, and cultural production.

Cultural wealth: current understandings

Bandelj and Wherry (2011) introduce their volume by clearly establishing its goal, which is to explore the economic advantages (or disadvantages) experienced by firms “by virtue of their location and by virtue of the meanings encased in place” (1). In this way, the essential elements of cultural wealth are preliminarily identified. “Meanings encased in place” are further elaborated as “the symbolic resources” (1) and “symbolic qualities” (4) particular to a specific nation or region; such symbolic resources include “the narratives that relevant market actors share about the kind of place that anchors the firm and the types of things people in that place are good at doing” (1). In these ways, a tentative definition of “the cultural wealth of nations” begins to emerge as a collection of symbolic understandings that fuse the reputation of a place with the value of its cultural goods in a global marketplace. Cultural wealth thus consists of “the plentiful supplies of stories, symbols, traditions, reputations, and artifacts that are collectively held and that confer benefits” (2).

Such symbolic attributes and qualities, narratives, and reputations link specific locations with particular meanings and associations about that place, its people, and their longstanding traditions and cultural heritage. Profit-seeking firms, all but the most transnational of which are inevitably and often strategically anchored within a particular place, activate and mobilize claims to the national cultural wealth of that place through symbolic and relational work. Claims to cultural wealth often take the form of impression management strategies that are directed toward specific target audiences. Based on these conceptual innovations, a body of research has emerged which deploys them deftly in order to examine, for instance, how the market outcomes of contemporary art are related to broader efforts to shift the value of art produced in particular places (Banks 2018). Without dismissing the scholarly accomplishments that make use of this idea, I aim to increase the analytical power of the concept by identifying the ways in which its formative definitions rest on assumptions that my comparative case studies make both visible and problematic.

Notice how formative articulations of cultural wealth imagine it as singular. Cultural wealth is presented as a single distinct collection, a unified set of meanings or qualities associated with a certain place; it consists of “the symbolic resources [that are] particular to a specific nation” (1). In practice, this suggests that there exists one set of reputations, narratives, and symbolic qualities that have come to be associated with a specific location. Rural Tuscany, then, can thus be understood as representing or containing “an iconic brand” after narratives of authenticity were negotiated through a decades-long political process (Gaggio 2011, p. 111).

Cultural wealth appears, further, to be both particular and singular but also stable and widely understood: it is “shared” by relevant market actors whose associations with a nation’s reputation about “the kind of place that anchors the firm and the types of things people in that place are good at doing” (1) are “collectively held” (2). In other words, cultural wealth is currently understood to derive from a cohesive,

stable, widely shared set of reputational attributes.¹ Based on these conceptual foundations, then, it stands to reason that all entrepreneurs within a particular national location would make claims to (or distance themselves from) the same set of collectively held narratives and reputations about the kind of place it is understood to be and the types of goods and cultural commodities that people in that place are widely known to be good at making. However, the data I have collected over a period of ten years from two case study firms in Indonesia thwarts these expectations.

Although both my case study firms are anchored in the same national location and both sell the same symbolically rich commodities in the same competitive and potentially profitable marketplace, the founders, directors, and marketing managers of the two firms have consistently communicated their dramatically different perceptions of Indonesia's cultural wealth. And these contrasting perceptions of geographically particular reputations powerfully structure their use of such potentially valuable "meanings encased in place" on the market devices—the packaging materials—they design to communicate with their potential consumers (Cochoy 2007). Bandelj and Wherry have noted that a firm's products are literally "wrapped" in narratives about the symbolic qualities and reputations of a particular place. I agree, and suggest that by attending to the narratives that envelop cultural goods, we will discover variability rather than stability within the social processes and perceptions that form the basis of claims to cultural wealth.

The communicative packages of specialty foods

In the specialty food store, boxes and jars sit silently on shelves alongside their competitors, all of which use words and images to emphasize the many ways in which each is a worthier choice.² The various producers of such meaningfully charged commodities—who, earlier in the supply chain, grew and harvested and processed them and arranged for their distribution—are nowhere to be found. They must advocate from afar: responsible for the construction of meaningful culinary details and discourses on behalf of inarticulate goods, food producers speak through packages (Smith-Maguire 2010). Put differently, specialty food packages are left with the task of expressing what makes each item the most special, and which specific attributes contribute to its distinction. The US food marketplace is currently so full of narrative-wrapped foods that grocery store shelves have come to bear a striking resemblance to those of libraries (Kniazeva and Belk 2010).

Packages have not always needed to be so communicative. In late-nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century food markets, consumers were reliant on a grocer

¹ Bandelj and Wherry are careful to explain elsewhere how these narratives are widely distributed through the media and other channels, and how they can be changed over time. Their commitment to these conceptual foundations, however, remains strong.

² Gourmet is an industry classification for high-quality, premium food products in the United States. However, the high-end segment of the food market itself is known as the specialty food industry. Among consumers and retailers, sometimes the words *gourmet* and *specialty* are used interchangeably. For the purposes of this discussion, however, *specialty* connotes this distinct segment of the wider food industry.

to tell them the cost of an item, and then to hand it over. The grocer literally stood between shoppers and merchandise (Hine, 1995). Following the advent of self-service merchandizing, however, goods for sale became rivals and “had to ‘sell themselves’ on their own” (Barrey 2007, p. 92). I approach this project with the premise that food packages act as protective containers for the foods they transport but also as vehicles of culinary discourse, and so, therefore, as cultural productions whose purposes far exceed meeting US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) labeling requirements.

Underwood’s (2003) argument that packaging could be “communicative” (62), both in the store and in the home, transformed academic understandings of packaging. While branding gives goods a collective corporate identity, packaging is “the discourse most firmly wrapped around consumer products” (Elliott 2008, p. 181). Here, by packaging I mean not only the “communicative containers” (Hine, 1995, p. 13) that sit on store shelves—the boxes, cartons, and bottles that enclose food products for sale—but more specifically the gourmet food writing that is intentionally inscribed on those containers whose auxiliary details strategically describe the food’s social meanings and uses (Johnston and Baumann 2007). In the crowded marketplace for consumer goods, making a product stand out requires not only words and pictures “but also a kind of plot” (Barrey 2007, p. 95).

Furthermore, in the competitive world of specialty food, storytelling is a convention explicitly encouraged by the marketplace itself: producers in this segment of the larger food industry are encouraged by educational events at trade shows and by articles in trade magazines to tell the story of their product in pursuit of profit.³ A recent issue of Specialty Food News, for example, elaborates the art of successful storytelling. Not positioned as incidental or decorative, strategic storytelling is credited with critical marketplace achievements: “concise and compelling” stories educate customers; create demand; and, “when done right, can create a competitive advantage” (Specialty Food News 2019: para. 6).

Communicating from a distance

The rise of omnivorizing consumer preferences (Hirsch 2011; Johnston and Baumann 2007)—in combination with new critiques and anxieties relating to the industrialization of food production and the resulting health and environmental impacts—has transformed both discourses and practices of culinary cultural consumption (Jackson 2010; Szasz 2009). Mistrust of standardized foods produced by industrial agriculture has added salience to transparency in agricultural production practices (Bowen 2011) and quality has come to be seen as intrinsically linked to issues of origination and production (Murdoch et al. 2000). At farmers’ markets, as a result, producers tell stories of localness, authenticity, and value by communicating with

³ The US specialty food market has both expanded and become more profitable over the past ten years: the Specialty Food Association—the industry’s principal trade association—reported that sales in 2013 reached a record high of \$88.3 billion (Specialty Food News, 2014). By 2018, total sales had nearly doubled, reaching \$148.7 billion (Food Business News, 2020).

consumers about their particular nonindustrial production conditions (Ocejo 2014; Winter 2003).

It is not possible, however, for all food producers to sell directly to consumers at local markets. Even if producers genuinely enjoy or appreciate the interactions and opportunities such spaces facilitate, some food products are impossible to both grow and sell locally: tropical commodities like cacao and coconut sugar, for example, require environmental conditions that, largely, do not exist anywhere in the US. Yet the producers of tropical commodities want to reach US consumers, many of whom—especially consumers of specialty foods—prefer to have these kinds of interactions with the producers of their food. Fortunately for such producers, their inability to interact directly with far flung consumers can be compensated for through “‘face-to-shelf’ interaction”(Cochoy 2007, p. 116) in the store. As Marsden et al. (2000) suggest,

it is not the number of times a product is handled or the distance over which it is ultimately transported which is necessarily critical, but the fact that the product reaches the consumer embedded with information . . . which enables the consumer to confidently make connections and associations with the place/space of its production. (425)

As is clear, within the economy of culinary qualities, even substantial distance between production and consumption can be overcome by strategically valuable details. For the producers of tropical commodities who cannot sell their products at local farmers’ markets even if they wanted to, it is both possible and critical to infuse product packages with informative stories about the people, places, and cultures engaged in their production (Raynolds 2002). As a result, producers strive to communicate with consumers from a distance, using product packages to do so (Latour, 1987; Singer 2018).

Although the average specialty food entrepreneur has generally never created a value-enhancing brand strategy for a food product, this task is nonetheless one of their many responsibilities. In the specialty food industry, firm directors are likely to occupy what Ocejo (2014, p. 195) has identified as “dual roles”: they not only produce but also, and simultaneously, promote their own branded goods. Acting as both producers and promoters, they regularly design and author their own communicative food packages.⁴ My focus in this paper is, therefore, on cultural production. How consumers might respond to such food packages, while important, is beyond the scope of this study. Contributing to an emerging literature on the cultural wealth of nations, I focus intentionally on the strategic efforts of specialty food entrepreneurs to communicate on behalf of their branded food products. This emphasis on the articulation and creation of cultural value from a distance and from within a particular national location attends to the vital importance of communicative stories and, simultaneously, to the efforts and emotions of their authors.

⁴ Like their peers within the specialty food industry, the directors of my case-study firms all design and write their own packaging narratives, so are directly responsible for this form of cultural production.

The emotional & imaginative labor of cultural producers

Economic transactions are like other interactions in that they require communication and occur within particular structural and cultural constraints. They contain varying degrees of uncertainty and therefore require confidence and positive emotional assessment to be completed. Buyers in a given market must feel that they are making informed distinctions between products since their eventual choice reflects something about who they are and has repercussions for how others perceive them (Bourdieu 1984; Wherry 2008). Emotions, or the states consumers experience when presented with particular products or market information, are, therefore, an essential part of transactions (Bandelj 2009a, 2012). The emotions of sellers, however, have not yet been sufficiently attended to in studies of emotions in markets, yet they, too, are engaged in economic interactions and transactions which likewise require emotional labor if they are to evaluate risk and communicate effectively.

It is vital to recognize that when specialty food firm directors in Indonesia act as cultural intermediaries on behalf of their inarticulate goods, they *imagine* their potential consumers in the US in order to craft effective stories about the most valuable qualities of food products. Unable to have face-to-face conversations, they prepare instead to have face-to-shelf interactions via product packages (Cochoy 2007). More specifically, the authors of these packaging stories are attempting to anticipate not only their target audience's potential questions about specialty foods, but also their possible fears and concerns about Indonesian food products in particular. The expectations that guide them in the production of such packaging stories and marketing materials are therefore second-order expectations—not expectations that one personally holds about oneself, but those one believes specific others hold in the given situation (Ridgeway and Correll 2006; Troyer and Younts, 1997). Such second-order expectations about relevant social distinctions are a form of status belief and, so, a type of social reputation.

In other words: during the necessary and value-enhancing process of cultural production, when firm directors attempt to describe and promote their food products to US consumers, what is most relevant is not what they themselves know or believe to be true about Indonesia as the place where their food products originate (and where they themselves reside), but what they imagine their US consumers believe or fear about Indonesia itself given its international reputation. As a result, Indonesia's international reputation—as it is imagined by both firms' directors as they attempt to forecast the expectations of their target consumers—plays a determinative role.

That social relations matter in markets is a trademark contribution of economic sociology. Overall, the importance of social relations has been captured by the notion of embeddedness, deriving from Granovetter's (1985) pioneering argument that economic behavior, like human behavior more broadly, is embedded in networks of social relations. That such social relations exert influence over economic behavior and economic outcomes is now even more fully understood as research has continued to investigate how network embeddedness and social ties shape economic decision-making. More recently, economic sociologists have begun to broaden their understanding of social relations to include "relations between actors, shaped

by affect, meaning, and asymmetries in power” (Bandelj 2009b, p. 227). Building on conceptual innovations by Viviana Zelizer (2005, 2012) and her focus on relational work—the effort by which people try to find appropriate matches between and among social relations, economic transactions, and instruments of exchange—such research takes seriously the symbolic work of meaning-making in which economic actors engage and also the role of emotions in their economic processes (Bandelj 2009b).

I argue that despite a recent theoretical emphasis on emotions as constitutive of economic action, scholars have generally refrained from examining the efforts of producers to create and sustain emotional connections between their prospective customers and their products. The growing literature on emotions and the economy reveals that economic actors—most often consumers—use emotions to guide their purchasing decisions but pays little attention to how the emotional connections between purchaser and product are constructed by profit-seeking producers and the stories they tell. In this article, I demonstrate that cultural producers play a critical role in this process by exploring how the directors of two case study firms in the same industry and the same national location construct claims to cultural wealth differently.

National reputation & impression management

Brand management and the projection of ideal images represent a form of impression management in creating and enhancing brand reputation through the intentional work of constructing a set of positive associations on behalf of the brand’s identity and products (Beverland 2005; Goffman 1959). Research has failed, largely, to examine how profit-seeking food firms build such reputations through careful impression management, especially when geographic associations at the national level—containing valuable forms of cultural wealth, expressed on behalf of food products through stories and details—are potentially negative. I address those gaps by examining how specialty food companies create and maintain valuable associations on behalf of their brand identities and products, especially as they relate to place.

Similar to national governments, firms accomplish this goal largely through the symbolic work of strategically creating and managing their own reputation. A recent study takes up the question of how cultural wealth at the national level can be managed in response to a threat to its international identity by focusing on how the Croatian government transformed impressions of that country in the aftermath of its well-publicized violent war (1991-1995). Rivera (2011) argues that a Goffmanian theoretical framework provides a useful way of understanding impression management strategies when the identity at hand—in this case, that of an entire nation—might be tarnished or stigmatized. Croatia looked across the Adriatic Sea and symbolically linked its own touristic characteristics to those of Italy, substituting a highly valuable set of national symbolic resources for a less valuable one. Relatedly, this paper’s focus on Indonesia makes visible the cultural opportunities available to

food entrepreneurs within the same national location and the same globalized marketplace, on behalf of the same reputation and audience.

My analysis also, however, suggests that such cultural opportunities must first be perceived and imagined as valuable to specific others if they are to become viable as impression management projects. The upscale, expanding, and competitive specialty food industry in the US is an ideal and analytically productive example of such a globalized marketplace. After describing why specialty food entrepreneurs in Indonesia might be concerned about the place-based associations US consumers might hold, I analyze two case study firms both based in Indonesia to explore how food producers can make claims to valuable forms of cultural wealth through reputation-enhancing impression management projects that are articulated by their packaging materials and the stories contained therein.

Indonesia's international reputation

The last years of the 20th century brought seismic social change to Indonesia. As a result, conditions created in Indonesia led to largely negative impressions outside of it. Indonesian entrepreneurs are widely aware of how Indonesia and its products are perceived by international consumers, so specialty food entrepreneurs working in Indonesia to sell Indonesian food products engage in strategic impression management projects as they communicate with their target market—consumers in the US.

In 1997, largely because of the Asian financial crisis, Indonesia's national currency depreciated almost 80 percent against the US dollar; food and gas prices shot up as a result, and many Indonesians could no longer afford daily necessities. Food shortages and mass unemployment led to widespread political unrest in several Indonesian cities, but when four university students were killed by armed police during a protest in Medan, violent riots broke out around the country. These riots—known in Indonesia as “The 1998 Tragedy”—led to the death of over 1,000 Indonesian protestors, looters, and ethnic Chinese shop owners, according to local estimates (Vickers 2005).

Enormous changes in the years that followed—the period of Reformasi—increased already tense conflicts between coexisting religious groups in Indonesia and likely accelerated a process of Islamic radicalization (Aspinal 2009; Vickers 2005). With increasing frequency, Indonesia has been the site of violent terrorist attacks. Foreign embassies and hotels in Indonesia's larger cities have been frequent targets, ensuring that details of the bombings reach news outlets around the world. Especially after the events of September 11, 2001, religion and Islam have become a focal point of international interest in Indonesia, widely recognized as having had the world's largest Muslim population in 2001 (Hellwig and Tagliacozzo 2009). Such demographic statistics about Indonesia were not socially relevant until the events of 9/11 gave them their current particular meaning.

Indonesia's history of political turmoil and internal religious conflict, when coupled with violent attacks targeting foreigners that have become even more frequent and deadly since 9/11, has led to international associations of dangerous violence and Islamic extremism with Indonesia (Prajha 2006). Foreign governments have

officially issued warnings about traveling to Indonesia. The UK, for example, currently warns its citizens that “terrorists are very likely to try to carry out attacks in Indonesia” (UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office 2020), suggesting that British travelers “be vigilant and take care at all times.” Similarly, the US State Department emphasizes that “terrorists continue plotting possible attacks in Indonesia” (US Department of State 2020) and in response, until March 2020, had issued a Level 2 travel advisory, urging US travelers to exercise increased caution at all times.⁵

While the Reformasi period eventually facilitated increases in political, social, and economic access, Indonesia has actually become a more unequal society overall during this period, with rising inequality strongly linked to insufficient and constrained economic growth (Tabor 2015). Such patterns are unlikely to be reversed in the near future given continuing weaknesses in global economic activity, weak international commodity prices, and rising foreign financing costs.⁶ In sum, Indonesia operates far below its economic growth potential because of longstanding structural constraints.

This is the context within which the profit-seeking case study firms I discuss here, and their directors, operate. Historical and economic contexts shape their experiences of producing specialty foods in Indonesia, but also—and importantly—their perspectives as they approach US consumers. Two widely publicized 2016 reports further reinforced the perception that international others view Indonesian people, places, and goods with suspicion: 47% of sampled Australians reported holding somewhat or very unfavorable views of Indonesia, while more than half considered it unsafe and unclean (Australia-Indonesia Centre 2016). And during the same period, Indonesia earned its all-time highest score on an international index of corruption perceptions (Indonesia Corruption Index 2017). Indonesian politicians, scholars, and entrepreneurs are widely aware that international perceptions of Indonesia are negative (for example, see Djalal 2015; Hitchcock and Darma Putra 2018).

Following Rivera (2011), I frame these events and associations as having the potential, from the perspective of the firm’s directors, to collectively stigmatize and damage high-value food products. Such social and economic realities explain why specialty food entrepreneurs in Indonesia, working to bring Indonesian food products into US specialty markets, would worry about the expectations that US consumers might hold about Indonesia as a place of production, origination, and terroir. What US consumers might actually think about or associate with Indonesian farmers or agricultural products is not the focus of this project. Instead, I analyze impression management strategies by the firm on behalf of its own collective identity and specialty food products. Given their cultural toxicity and pervasiveness, negative

⁵ Currently, in response to the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, the US State Department has issued a Level 4 travel advisory for Indonesia, urging US travelers not to travel to Indonesia. Despite the current advisory’s emphasis on health, however, it concludes: “Exercise increased caution in Indonesia due to *terrorism*” [emphasis theirs] (US Department of State, 2020).

⁶ In addition to these pre-existing economic features, Indonesia’s economy is expected to be significantly damaged by the long-term economic impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak. For example, “export earnings from tourism and commodities are forecast to decline” alongside “increased finance market volatility” (Asian Development Bank, April 2020).

international associations such as these can be expected to play a role in shaping the process by which profit-seeking food entrepreneurs located in Indonesia negotiate with place-based forms of cultural wealth in their impression management projects.

The cases, sample, & methodological approach

Citing a philosophy that blends economy with ecology, the Indah Food Company was founded by an American entrepreneur in 2002 and focuses on being a sustainable transparent specialty food business based in Indonesia.⁷ The fledgling firm began to export a growing line of Indonesian food products—including honey, chocolate, and coconut sugar—to US markets the following year. Since then, the Indah Food Company has become financially profitable by successfully developing and marketing its food products, growing as an organization, raising capital, and creating profit for investors. The firm began as a small startup with two employees in 2003, employed 175 in 2012, and more than twice that number in 2017; unprofitable in its earliest years, by 2008 it generated annual revenues of around \$350,000 and, in 2016, of between \$12 and \$15 million.⁸

In 2003, just a year after the Indah Food Company was founded, two Javanese sisters started a business called Jambu Monyet in order to collaborate with local Indonesian cashew farmers and bring their cashews to US consumers.⁹ A smaller firm than the Indah Food Company, Jambu Monyet remains a family business and has struggled to expand or attract investors: during its first decade, the firm regularly relied upon volunteers, interns, and family members to provide unpaid but valuable forms of labor. The firm's US director, however, has benefitted from strong mentorship and slowly achieved organizational growth and financial profitability. Like the Indah Food Company, the directors of Jambu Monyet articulate a desire to protect and preserve traditional agricultural practices while promoting, whenever possible, Indonesian craft commodities and customs. Both businesses are aware that markets in Indonesia have so far been unable to provide the economic support that such traditional farmers need to thrive given that their non-industrial production processes drive costs up, along with prices. As a result, both firms have identified specialty food consumers in the US as the primary target market for their Indonesian food products, knowing that this group of consumers will want to know from where such foods originate (Trubek 2009).¹⁰

⁷ In this paper I have changed the name of the company to protect its anonymity; *indah* is an Indonesian word that simultaneously connotes 'beautiful' and 'fancy.'

⁸ This organizational data derives from interviews conducted with firm directors, and from confidential internal documents.

⁹ I have also changed the name of this company; *jambu monyet* is the Indonesian phrase for 'cashew apple,' the fruit of the cashew tree.

¹⁰ In interviews, I have regularly asked the directors of both firms to describe their target consumer. In response, both sets of directors have consistently identified specialty food consumers—for example, "people who shop at Whole Foods"—as their primary target market. Neither firm has pursued sales within "grocery," a separate segment of the broader food marketplace.

Both firms center production in Indonesia and maintain smaller offices in the US in order to manage US-based retail relationships and distribution processes. Both attend the same US-based industry trade shows. Both connect with US consumers through their websites and social media platforms but spend far more time and energy managing the representation of their food products on their own packaging materials. With tiny budgets for advertising, both firms rely on packaging materials to communicate valuable details and narratives to distant potential consumers. In addition, because they are unable or unwilling to hire professional brand managers, both firms create and revise the gourmet food writing on their own branded food packages.

For the purposes of this in-depth comparative case study, additional similarities become relevant and significant: most significantly, that both firms sell food products widely understood as ordinary pantry staples and commonplace snacks in Indonesia, where they are grown, but discursively framed and priced accordingly in the US as specialty food products. In other words, both case study firms sell Indonesian foods in US specialty food stores with the goal of constructing a premium food product. Ultimately, both firms pursue profitability in order to continue to sell Indonesian food products and to support Indonesian farmers; in order to become and stay profitable, both firms must distinguish their products and justify the price they are asking US specialty food consumers to pay.

Clearly, there is much that is similar about these two firms but something vital remains distinct: one firm has covered its products in symbolically and economically valuable narratives that connect the firm and its food products to Indonesian cultural wealth while the other has not. Instead, the other firm has avoided, largely, the use of Indonesian origin stories while including other non-geographical forms of gourmet food writing (Johnston and Baumann 2007). Their divergent representational strategies in the highly competitive specialty food marketplace allow me to explore how these collections of food packages make claims, however differently, to cultural and economic value via cultural wealth. I selected these firms for the analytical potential of their similarities and contrasts since this will provide a rich, comparative, in-depth case study.

As a cultural field, gastronomy is textually constituted (Ferguson 2004). This comparative case study—intended as theory-generating—thus relies on the textual data contained on product packages, including discontinued materials.¹¹ I have compiled a nearly complete collection of the two firms' food packages whose every surface I have photographed, and whose words I have transcribed; the final sample includes 100 packages that represent the two case study firm's attempts to sell a variety of food products in a variety of ways over time. While the Indah Food Company has released new product lines and revised continuing product packages over time in five waves, Jambu Monyet has redesigned its product packages only once and has added new products less frequently. In analyzing this collection of texts, I

¹¹ The only missing data includes two Indah Food Co. packages which are duplicates of packages sampled (given a slight variation in flavor and name) and one item which has never been available for purchase in the US.

do not read them as what might be thought of as natural or objective works. Rather, I seek to understand these gastronomic documents as the intentional products of profit-seeking actors, and therefore as shaped by particular market situations, cultural understandings, status perceptions and anxieties, and power relations. As others have pointed out about reading sociologically, it is vital to consider “who (author) is writing to whom (audience) and why (the purpose or reason for the text),” alongside the social position of actors and their relations within the broader social and economic fields within which the text exists (Reyes 2019, p. 17).

In this paper, I also incorporate a second source of data—38 in-depth interviews conducted with the directors of the two firms and their employees in Indonesia and in the US between 2008 and 2018—to provide empirical support for claims about the directors’ perceptions of Indonesia as a source of potential cultural and economic value. Together this data supports the analysis of the efforts of these two case study firms to communicate with consumers in the US about the quality and value of their food products as well as their distinctive geographical origins, given the “meanings encased” (Bandelj and Wherry 2011, p. 1) in that place alongside their perceptions of the impact of those meanings on US consumers. While previous scholarship envisioned such cultural resources as singular, stable, and shared, my analysis instead suggests that cultural wealth must first be imagined and evaluated by cultural producers before it can be strategically deployed on behalf of meaningfully charged commodities.

Discourse analysis and packaging stories

In 2001, food journalist Michael Pollan observed “a flowering of supermarket narrative”: food packages had begun to tell “a little story” (paras. 1–2) about their contents. Scholars, too, started to notice the work of commercial storytellers: Kniazeva and Belk’s groundbreaking work on marketplace mythology explores how corporations reach consumers through what they call “packaging stories” or “the ‘poetry’ of packaging” (200, p. 52). By taking packaging stories as their unit of analysis and treating them as literary texts which can be, as they say, unpacked, their work expands perspectives on cultural production.

My project takes packaging stories seriously in the way that Kniazeva and Belk recommend by focusing on what Pollan might recognize as supermarket stories or what Johnston and Baumann (2007) identify as “gourmet food writing” (170)—the “omnivorous culinary discourse” (176) and “specific discursive strategies” (177) that contain messages about culinary value. My analysis, like that of Kniazeva and Belk, homes in on the notion that profit-seeking firms can be understood as commercial storytellers in their use of food packages as vehicles for discourse designed to communicate with consumers. Rather than to mythologies, however, I look to the origin stories and auxiliary details of gourmet food writing—intentionally authored by a profit-seeking firm’s own directors, who work on behalf of their own products by constructing communicative market devices—to explore the strategic characterization of the geographic origins of foods. Shifting analytical attention away from cultural consumption and, instead, toward production, I describe how these case

study firms create, differently, product packages whose place-based narratives and details strategically communicate information about geographic origins and, so, cultural wealth.

Kniazeva and Belk (2007) argued that the analytical work of “unpacking packages is long overdue” and that “the role of packaging stories as symbolic communication remains to be addressed” (52). Consequently, I conducted a sociological discourse analysis—a close, critical reading of textual data—across this sample of food packages to both scrutinize the efforts of the firms in my case study as commercial storytellers, and to contribute to the emerging scholarly—but not yet deeply sociological—literature on packaging stories (Elliot 2008; Roberts 2014). Having first digitized and transcribed the complete collection of package data, I developed coding categories inductively and refined them in tandem with data analysis, following the analytic strategy of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). I then quantified frequencies of themes by category using the data analysis software package ATLAS-ti, comparing them across coding categories and in co-occurrence tables. Finally, I incorporate interview data to analyze the ways in which the directors and employees of both case study firms describe their perceptions of Indonesia’s international reputation, their target audience’s perceptions, and their subsequent representational strategies. As a result, this project contains a comparative analysis not only of my case study firms’ strategically communicative packaging stories, but also the perceptions, anxieties, and goals of the directors of both firms. In the following section, I analyze first the packaging stories and then the producer perceptions of each case study firm, beginning with Jambu Monyet.

Analysis: Jambu Monyet’s packages & perceptions

Packaging stories

Of the sample’s 100 packages, 25 (25% of the total) represent the complete collection of Jambu Monyet’s specialty food products. The smaller of the two firms, Jambu Monyet has focused, intentionally and from its earliest years, on four flavors of Javanese roasted cashews, sold initially either in 2 oz. sealed, colorful metallic packages or in a small variety of gift containers made of Indonesian materials (such as dried, woven pandan leaves). One such gift option from Jambu Monyet’s first collection of offerings consisted of four cashew packages wrapped in a piece of colorful, reusable batik fabric (itself handmade in Central Java, near where the cashews were sourced). When the firm later decided to redesign its branded aluminum foil packages, it revised the words and images on the packages, made its small packages slightly smaller (now 1.7 oz.), and added a larger version (at 4 oz., more than double the current small size) for each of the existing four flavors along with a bulk option (sold by the pound not in branded, sealed packages but in clear plastic bags labeled by hand). In addition, the firm developed a wider range of handcrafted gift containers along with four burlap gift bag options (three small and one large, with a different message on each).

Jambu Monyet's branded metallic packages, both before and after being redesigned, were created by one of its directors who has a degree in graphic design. Heat-sealed to protect the cashews on their journey from Indonesia (where they are roasted and packaged) to US markets (where they will remain fresh for up to a year, or until opened by the consumer), both sides of the two-sided aluminum foil packs contain words and images. On the front, a brightly colored drawing of a single cashew and between ten and twenty words, on average, identify both the brand and flavor of the nuts; on the back, in addition to the FDA's required Nutrition Facts table and the product's SKU barcode, both words and images describe the cashews and the firm.

As a collection of materials that share a common brand identity, the Jambu Monyet metallic packages are small and colorful but display little text, and that text does not vary widely across packages. Other than differentiating each flavor's distinct name, giving a brief flavor profile and precise ingredient list, each package contains the same single paragraph about the firm and its cashews, although this paragraph does vary slightly from the first collection to the second. Likewise, the back of the first set of packages each contains the same photographic image of cashews, while the back of all second wave packages includes a colorful drawing of the firm's three founders, all of whom are Indonesian women, smiling widely while standing behind (and holding out) an enormous bowl of cashews. In addition, and in a small font size, ingredients are listed, disclaimers are made (for example, "gluten-free and dairy-free"), contact information is provided, and the country of origin of the nuts is identified.

By law, the US Food & Drug Administration requires food packaging labels to contain specific pieces of information, including the product's identity and national origination, net quantity, and 'Nutrition Facts' along with the name and address of its manufacturer, packer, or distributor. In accordance with such FDA regulations, the packages that Jambu Monyet has designed to contain and communicate information about cashews note that these particular cashews are the product of Indonesia.

This moment of geographic identification, while legally required, is one of few such connections made between this specialty food product and its place of origin. On the firm's first collection of branded metallic packages, US consumers learned only that these cashews were sourced "direct from small farms in Indonesia." And on the redesigned collection of packages, the word "Indonesia" is used twice, first in acknowledgement that, "Growing up in Indonesia, our family snacked on cashews made by Grandma," and later in reference to "the Indonesian sun" under which the cashews grow. In these ways, the communicative devices of Jambu Monyet affirm that their branded cashews originate in Indonesia. However, these packaging stories more fully describe both the personal connections of the firm's directors to cashews and to each other, and the simplicity with which these cashews are grown and processed—"with love" and "in small batches." Since these are alternative forms of valuable gourmet food writing that allow consumers to recognize the firm's cashews as authentic and status-enhancing, the firm can be understood to be engaging in discursive tropes that will be familiar to their target audience: consumers having face-to-shelf interactions with product packages in US specialty markets (Johnston and Baumann 2007). While the packaging stories of Jambu Monyet contain discursive

details that identify the firm's directors and specialty food products as originating in Indonesia, however, they do not contain the types of symbolic resources defined as the cultural wealth of nations.

Bandelj and Wherry (2011) insist that "a firm's products and services are wrapped in the narratives that relevant market actors share about the kind of place that anchors the firm and the types of things people in that place are good at doing" (1). This particular firm, however, does not include narratives describing the kind of place that Indonesia is, nor the types of things that Indonesians are good at making. These packaging stories include no auxiliary details about Indonesian landscapes or agricultural histories and no descriptions of traditional production processes. It would appear that for this firm, the Indonesian sun is no different from the sun that shines on hand-gathered cashews in Tanzania, or on farmers harvesting in crops in Kerala, India. The only claim that the firm makes on its product packaging materials about "the unique culture of Indonesia" can be found on the tag that accompanies gift containers made of Indonesian materials and applies only to the container, not to the cashews it contains. Clearly, these packaging stories fall short of making claims to cultural wealth.

Perceptions of Indonesia's international reputation

Longitudinal interview data reveals that the directors of Jambu Monyet consistently view the country of their food products' origin primarily as a source of challenge and harm rather than of cultural wealth. At times, these challenges are practical and administrative. For example, because of Indonesia's geographical distance from the US, some customers are simply unsure of where Indonesia is. One of the firm's founders reported, "When I do some food tastings, there are some people who say, 'My gosh!' when they find out it's from Indonesia. They're like, 'Where?'"

More significantly, however, the directors of Jambu Monyet have regularly described their perception that a variety of the social actors with whom they interact and upon whom they depend—from US Customs inspectors to retailers and consumers in the US—associate Indonesia with terrorism specifically, and, more generally, with potentially dangerous forms of disorganization. In 2009, for instance, the firm's creative director acknowledged her belief that "Indonesia is always associated with terrorism, with things that are unstable." Later in the same interview she noted again, "There's *always* [emphasis hers] this connection with terrorism." Although observing, "I never have problems [getting shipments of cashews] from there [Indonesia] to here," she does perceive US Customs officials as having specific concerns about her imported goods because of their geographical origins, explaining, "Whenever they see something from there, they're like, 'Uh oh.'" The directors' clear sense is that widely shared negative ideas about Indonesia pose a challenge to the economic success of their business enterprise. Within the global specialty food market, they perceive Indonesia's international reputation as stigmatizing and potentially harmful to the sale of their cashews.

Rather than making claims to Indonesia's cultural wealth, the directors of Jambu Monyet have consistently described an alternative strategy of

impression-management in response to their expectation that US consumers associate Indonesia with terrorism or related stigmatizing characteristics—burying the connection of the firm and its products to Indonesia while focusing on non-geographical sources of distinction in the specialty food marketplace.

Burying it

Reflecting on how she approaches the development of her packing materials, the creative director of Jambu Monyet perceives that particular non-Indonesian national origins provide value to food products easily and immediately, but worries about the effect of Indonesian origins on the status of her cashews. She says, with envy evident in her voice,

You know, for example, if you hear that this salt is from France... right away you're not thinking, 'Oh my gosh, what about safety?'. You're thinking, 'Oh, it must be yummy, it must be good because it's from France.' You know what I mean? But I'm not too sure about Indonesian cashews, if people have the same kind of perception. So that's why I buried it [the word Indonesia].

Putting distance between her cashews and their Indonesian origin is a logical strategy given her reasonable and widely shared second-order expectation that US consumers are likely to associate Indonesia with violence and/or danger. Jambu Monyet's directors are clearly trying to think strategically about how best to create and protect the value of their product as a specialty food:

I just want to have a cashew, and help the cashew farmer in Indonesia, but there is too much 'Indonesia-as-fucked-up'... and I don't know if people are going to like it. You know? If the American audience is going to think of it as a safe thing.

Because they perceive Indonesia to be stigmatized and therefore subject to reputational vulnerability, the association of the country with their product provokes anxiety and the impulse to conceal—rather than emphasize—the geographical origin of their cashews.

Rather than directing its audience's attention toward Indonesia by engaging with the specialty food marketplace's tradition of product packages that highlight the particular and valuable terroir of their contents, Jambu Monyet instead strategically redirects attention away from Indonesia, sometimes even by leaving the word off the package entirely.¹² Instead, the firm identifies alternative sources of distinction and value on which to focus, such as the particular size and flavor of their cashews as compared with their competitors', their commitment to hand-processing and small-batch roasting, and their family recipes and traditions. Intentionally emphasizing the non-geographical characteristics of their cashews, the directors of Jambu Monyet turn away from a focus on national cultural wealth in the design of their product

¹² None of the firm's bulk labels, nor its burlap gift bags, contain any geographical reference at all.

packages. Given their perceptions of and worries about their target audience's second-order expectations of Indonesia, they focus instead on sources of value that spring from their own family traditions, the food product itself, and the firm's production processes.

Analysis: the Indah food company's packages & perceptions

Packaging stories

The sample's remaining 75 packages represent the nearly complete collection of food products that were once or are currently being sold by the Indah Food Company. Because this firm has repeatedly expanded and revised its product line since its first attempts to reach US consumers in 2004, its products have been released in four collections over time.¹³ The first set of products (2004–2009) consisted of its “artisan line” of Indonesian salts, peppercorns, honeys, and a snack chip made from the seeds of an Indonesian tree. In the second collection (2010–2012), the firm added new products like coconut palm sugars and new product lines: raw products; chocolate bars; and coconut water drink mixes.¹⁴ In the third (2013–2015), all product packages were revised given the firm's decision to focus on coconut-derived sugars and drink mixes, and on raw and cold-processed foods so several product lines became unavailable including the “artisan line.”¹⁵ And in the firm's fourth set (2016–2017) of food products, most packages were again revised while two new products were released: a coconut-based soy sauce alternative; and coconut oil. Unlike the packaged cashews of Jambu Monyet, which contain no third-party certification labels, the Indah Food Company's packages all contain at least one third party certification label, nearly all contain several, and the overwhelming majority are certified organic by the US Department of Agriculture.

Again in contrast to those of Jambu Monyet, which are largely standardized and uniform, the collection of Indah Food Company packages is a diverse and even rowdy group of paper boxes, glass jars, and sealed upright plastic packages. This is not only because different products are being sold in a variety of ways but because, over the course of package debuts and redesigns, even a single food product may be variously packaged and described.

¹³ These date ranges should be understood as somewhat approximate since the Indah Food Co. has not released food products all at once or in always consistent ways.

¹⁴ These coconut water drink mixes were the firm's first foray into the world of what is known as outdoor retail, beyond the organizational boundaries of the specialty market. Because the drink mix targets a different group of consumers and retailers, their packages contain narratives and auxiliary details that diverge in important ways from gourmet food writing.

¹⁵ These products are still occasionally available from third party online retailers but are no longer available from (or even discussed on) the firm's own website.

General trends over time

From the start, the Indah Food Company has used branded containers whose words regularly and in heterogeneous ways reference places of origin. The firm's earliest packages, however, incorporated a wide range of geographical details that included but were not limited to Indonesia. While Balinese sea salt was wrapped in packaging stories about Balinese beaches, a medley of non-Indonesian places also appeared in the firm's earliest culinary narratives: cacao was "used for long treks by the Mayans and Aztecs" and black pepper was "once hailed by Romans as the ultimate peppery spice." Sweeping claims about products being the "best in the world" appear alongside concrete, meandering details about Indian spices and Filipino supply chains. All such broad claims and varied auxiliary details, however, were immediately replaced with Indonesian ones on later packages. After the second collection of packages was released, every geographic reference was to Indonesia. The swiftness and subsequent consistency of this discursive adjustment suggests that the firm made an intentional correction.

From that moment on, a face-to-shelf encounter with an Indah Food package would include both origin stories and details, and more specifically, the regular and increasingly frequent use of paragraph-long packaging stories about Indonesian places and traditions, Indonesian place words in product names and packaging stories (and as a result, also in ingredient lists whenever one product is used in the formulation of another), and Indonesian-language words in packaging stories. It is to the careful analysis of these discursive features, which promote geographically specific narratives alongside evocative place-based details, that I now turn.

Origin stories (of cultural wealth)

The Indah Food Company's Indonesian food products are routinely wrapped in evocative stories about the particular traditions of the place where they originate, and often these stories make reference to the traditions of the people who grow, harvest, and consume them. When the firm sold a (now-discontinued) line of Indonesian honeys, for example, it described them as "traditionally used throughout Indonesia as natural remedies for common ailments." One story describes how a single variety of honey was collected in a uniquely Indonesian setting and manner: "rare in its natural habitat, indigenous people in Borneo and beyond have a tradition of 'honey hunting' high in the treetops." Through packaging stories like these, the Indah Food Company discursively frames its branded specialty food products as irrevocably shaped by their national and traditional origins. This particular honey, its packaging story attests, is valuable not only because it is rare and natural but also because it is harvested by people who have been perfecting their production and consumption practices—"honey hunting" for "natural remedies"—over generations. Similarly, the farmers who cultivate and harvest the firm's cacao are described as "working with it for thousands of years" while the firm's salt "crystals have been treasured . . . since ancient times."

More recently, the firm has authored packaging stories that emphasize even more clearly the relationship between the quality of its food products with their origination in Indonesian growing conditions but also its symbolic and religious landscapes. Certain cacao products, for example, are “nature’s crafty work, unconditionally intertwined with the pulse of Bali” while others are described by their packaging stories as simultaneously the product of Indonesian farmers, Indonesian soil, and even Indonesian religious traditions:

Everywhere one goes on Bali, one sees offerings. The cacao that grows from the rich volcanic soil is no different . . . the communities that grow cacao and many other fruits pay Tribute to the earth, as to the sky, as to the deities that exist on and around Bali.

In these ways, the Indah Food Company’s directors have authored an extensive collection of packaging stories which communicate, through vivid narratives and evocative word choices, the Indonesian origins of their specialty food products. Not only are this firm’s foods legally identified as the products of Indonesia, but they are wrapped in origin stories—a narrative form of gourmet food writing that describes foods being grown and harvested in traditional ways by Indonesian people according to beautiful customs for age-old purposes. The firm’s product packages communicate through origin stories that theirs are not industrial honeys, produced through the instrumental manipulation of bees in factory settings, but, rather, honeys harvested by indigenous Indonesian “honey hunters” who possess traditional forms of knowledge about how to tame and nurture “rainforest nectars.” This honey is not only made in Indonesia; it could not have been made anywhere else, and its origin story attributes symbolic quality and value to its specific geographical origin.

Origin stories like these are authored by the directors of the Indah Food Company to communicate with US specialty food consumers thousands of miles away, and they incorporate symbolic resources available to them by virtue of Indonesian cultural wealth. The 28 distinct origin stories wrapped around this firm’s specialty food products express powerful narratives “about the kind of place that anchors the firm and the types of things people in that place are good at doing” (Bandelj and Wherry, 1).¹⁶ Because the Indah Food Company is anchored in Indonesia, and because its directors imagine US consumers to associate value rather than vulnerability with Indonesia, their packaging stories engage lyrically with valuable Indonesian forms of cultural wealth by chronicling “meanings encased in place” (1).

Origin details

Like most specialty food product containers, the Indah Food Company’s packages are relatively small and variously shaped, so the process of storytelling is inevitably

¹⁶ My analysis identifies 28 distinct and original origin stories across the collection, some of which appear on more than one package. A single origin story about harvesting sea salt, for example, appears on the packages of several varieties of salt.

constrained.¹⁷ As a result, strategic geographic origin details efficiently reinforce, support, and extend the longer origin stories that elsewhere establish discursive claims to Indonesian cultural wealth. Of the total number of Indah Food Company product packages, 66 (88%) contain a combination of origin stories and origin details.

To anchor symbolically the firm and its foods in Indonesia, the Indah Food Company regularly uses Indonesian place names in its product names, selling Balinese salts alongside Javanese peppercorns, for example. Through the incorporation of place details and because product names often repeatedly appear in a large font size, the Indonesian origins of these products are prominently and repeatedly communicated by product packages. Given their proximity to FDA-required acknowledgements that every product sold by the Indah Food Company originates in Indonesia, such place names extend Indonesian origin stories even for consumers who might not recognize them on their own. In addition, because the firm regularly uses its own products as ingredients in other products, Indonesian origins are additionally emphasized even in ingredient lists. In these ways, the relationship of the firm and its food products to Indonesia is claimed and specified, rather than buried.

Another use of origin details by the Indah Food Company is less specific but no less geographical. The firm's directors consistently create packaging stories on behalf of its specialty food products that use origin details to allude to Indonesia as the place where those foods are grown and harvested. A frequently-used narrative describes the firm itself as being driven to "highlight the natural bounty of the world's largest archipelago," for example, while regular references to "wild-crafted local honeys," and "exotic varieties" "from faraway lands" imply that the firm's food products have non-US origins. The most evocative type of origin details, however, use words from the Indonesian language—Bahasa Indonesia—to quickly communicate both geographical specificity and distinction. The firm's packaging stories use only two syntactic categories of Bahasa Indonesian origin details—proper nouns and adjectives.

The Indah Food Company regularly uses Indonesian language proper nouns as descriptive adjectives to name their specialty food products. Rambutan Honey and Korintje Cinnamon number among their offerings so named, while packaging stories (for snack chips, for instance, "made from the fresh seed of the Molinjo tree") similarly make use of proper nouns in Bahasa Indonesia. It is unlikely that US consumers will recognize these words as proper nouns from the Indonesian language, and such awareness is largely irrelevant. By including Bahasa origin details like these, in the form of proper nouns from the Indonesian language, the firm's longer, more narratively descriptive packaging stories are quickly reinforced and expanded upon. A consumer who looks up one of these words will learn about Indonesian

¹⁷ Food product packages are constrained not only by size, but also by their other duties as communicative devices for imported specialty foods. They are legally required to include specific details alongside the stories they want to tell: each product's net weight, manufacturer's address, and nutrition facts are all required by the FDA.

islands and trees,¹⁸ but even the consumer who does not Google will intuit from such Bahasa details the sense that these must truly be distinctively Indonesian foods.

Similarly, a few of the firm's food products incorporate Indonesian adjectives into their product names and packaging stories. One variety of the firm's branded salts, for example, includes the Indonesian adjective "kechil" in its name, and its package explains that "in Balinese, kechil means young or small; our Coarse Kechil refers to the smaller coarse grains that appear during periods of hot mornings and rainy afternoons." While this story is not accurate—kecil is the Bahasa Indonesia word for small, not its Balinese counterpart—its use further communicates Indonesian qualities on behalf of this particular variety of sea salt. Not only are its grains delicate, and not only were they carefully harvested under particular natural conditions, but they are "kechil" and so come to possess delicate Indonesian characteristics.

The notion that particular places of production generate distinctive sensory qualities in handcrafted food products has become increasingly articulated in the US through the notion of *terroir*, a term originally used by 13th century French winemakers to describe the impact of geographic specificity on the taste of wine (Guy 2003; Trubek 2009; Trubek et al. 2010). In France, this concept has come to possess a wider constellation of referents: a certain soil structure; a specific geologic history; and also—most recently—cultural ideas relating to social identity, traditions, and heritage in relation to a particular place (Guy 2003; Trubek 2004). In this project, I envision *terroir* as a specific form of cultural wealth that applies exclusively to food products.

Just as winemakers use geographical details to describe the taste of wine, the directors of the Indah Food Company use origin details like these to evoke symbolically valuable associations between their food products and their Indonesian origins. In many ways, the directors of the Indah Food Company are participating in a widely-held marketplace convention, and yet their origin stories and details anchor their firm and its products to a nation whose international reputation is often perceived as stigmatized and, so, stigmatizing. The directors of Jambu Monyet struggle with their justifiable expectation that US specialty food consumers associate Indonesia with terrorism and political violence. It becomes important to explore the relationship between the Indah Food Company's perceptions and emotions, on the one hand, and the packaging stories they write on behalf of their food products, on the other.

Perceptions of Indonesia's international reputation

When the Indah Food Company's founders or employees discuss Indonesia in relation to the firm, they do so in a variety of contexts. Most frequently, they discuss Indonesia as the pragmatic context of their work, the geographic landscape within

¹⁸ The consumer who Googles "Korintje" will learn that it is the Dutch word for Kerinci—the region of Western Sumatra where that variety of cinnamon was first cultivated—so might even learn about the colonial history of Indonesia.

which their supply chains begin. They describe the farming communities that produce their foods and the organizational systems within which those food products move, from Indonesian farms to processing facilities and then to other sites where they are packaged, labeled, and ultimately shipped to warehouses and distributors in the US. The Indonesian government is regularly referenced as a source of constraint or opportunity, and recent changes in Indonesia's economic infrastructure are noted as challenges or openings. It is striking, then, that despite (a) the correspondence of their founding with the most deadly terrorist attack in Indonesia's history, (b) the proximity of their offices¹⁹ and homes in Bali to the site of that attack, and (c) the sheer volume and density of the data I have collected from the Indah Food Company,²⁰ there has been no mention of terrorism—in general, nor of actual terrorist attacks in Bali or Jakarta or anywhere else in Indonesia—in any of my interviews with the firm's founders or employees. I have found surprisingly little evidence that the Indah Food Company's founders or employees perceive Indonesia as a source of reputational stigma, despite the nation's well-documented tarnished international reputation as well as the persistence of terroristic violence in Indonesia across this study's time period. Instead, the firm's directors and employees recognize Indonesia as a source of distinctive cultural wealth.

Throughout our interviews, they regularly recounted the ways in which they bring ideas about Indonesia into their packages. For example, an Indah Food Company marketing manager in 2008 described how "the look of the packaging, the whole feel, what we're going for is very natural. Artisan. Very hand-made and very local: Indonesia. Which is the stuff we see, like banana leaves, like rattan, bamboo." And her ideas were clearly reflected in the products' presentation at the time: food products were then packaged in small brown burlap bags or in small brown cardboard boxes that appear to be wrapped in kraft paper, or, most evocatively, in small, hand-carved coconut shells.

Across the entire collection of 25 in-depth interviews with the Indah Food Company's founders, directors, and employees, only a single marketing manager—and only in response to a direct question about whether the firm would use Indonesian words to name or describe the upcoming line of food products in US markets—mentioned that a specific group of US consumers "might get turned off" by their impressions of Indonesia:

If I want to sell a product down to Texas, to born-again Christian communities, they all think that Indonesia is a bunch of fanatical Muslims. Which, of course, is their own ignorance but at the same time, I still want to appeal to them. (2012)

¹⁹ The firm's first headquarters was fewer than 10 miles from Kuta, the site of the 2002 Bali bombings.

²⁰ Fieldwork and in-depth interviews with the firm's founders and employees began in 2008, and since then more than twice as many interviews have been completed with the Indah Food Company as compared with Jambu Monyet; the Indah Food Company is a larger firm and so more time has been spent—in Indonesia and the US—across a variety of their production locations, at trade shows, and in their offices.

In this moment, he imagines a specific group of consumers who might arrive in the specialty market with a negative perception of Indonesia. He is not—like the directors of Jambu Monyet—worried that all US specialty food consumers associate Indonesia with terrorism or political violence. Instead, he imagines a discrete group of consumers whose particular geographic and religious characteristics are associated, for him, with particular biases. Importantly, he frames this group of potential customers as ignorant and their associations as incorrect and distasteful. Given his second-order expectations of their biases, his profit-seeking strategy is to sidestep their particular imagined prejudice—understood as their personal problem and not as Indonesia’s responsibility—by including communicative packaging details about the food product’s other distinctive qualities.

This marketing manager—who ultimately became responsible for the firm’s impression management strategies as its co-CEO—does not perceive himself or his firm to be stigmatized by negative perceptions of Indonesia held by others. Instead, he strongly rejects the stigmatizing association. He calls it a function of “ignorance” and dismisses it, even as he works to extract a sale from this group of imagined customers. In this moment, it is clear that he is not anxious about whether the firm’s collective identity might be vulnerable to reputational stigma, even given his expectation that specific hypothetical US consumers could be biased.²¹ Although there had been two significant acts of deadly terrorism in Indonesia during the months immediately prior to this interview, he is not concerned with negative perceptions of Indonesia’s reputation, nor does he feel compelled to systematically bury or hide Indonesian origin stories or details.

In fact, in his very next statement he vigorously reaffirmed the firm’s commitment to telling US consumers stories about the Indonesian communities whose efforts the firm supports and whose agricultural products it sources, along with other geographically-specific details. Even on the smallest packages, he next noted, there is often room for “maybe even just two sentences, saying, ‘We’re based in Indonesia. We work directly with 13,000 farmers there. We pay fair trade wages to support families. Go to our website to learn more.’ Because that’s all the room we have.” Without hesitation or concern, this marketing manager is eager to identify his firm’s food products as originating in Indonesia and to urge consumers to go online for additional information about Indonesian foods and farmers. In a separate 2012 interview, one of the firm’s American directors similarly fused the firm’s identity with the place where its food products originate: “This is who we are. All of our products come from the tropics. We *are* from Indonesia. We *are* from Bali.”²² In this moment, we can see just how easily this informant identifies the firm’s identity as Indonesian.

Rather than worrying about the firm’s geographical and symbolic proximity to negative or stigmatizing associations, the Indah Food Company focuses instead on Indonesia’s cultural wealth and so strategically wraps its products in “stories, symbols, traditions, reputations, and artifacts” (Bandelj and Wherry 2011, p. 2)

²¹ The group at risk of stigmatization in this moment, instead, may be the particular group of US consumers whose negative associations he forecasts, acknowledges, strategically avoids, and dismisses.

²² The italics are mine, to communicate the emphasis in his voice as he makes these two statements.

particular to Indonesia. Both firms, it must be noted, imagine consumers in the US and design packages that they imagine will appeal to these consumers. Of the two firms, however, only Jambu Monyet perceives Indonesia as a source—for US consumers—of reputational stigma and only Jambu Monyet designs symbolic impression management strategies for its product packages with this stigma in mind.

Discussion

Whether the result of purposeful nation-branding projects or longstanding traditions, associations endure between specific nations and the particular goods they produce. Widely known examples include Swiss watches and Danish furniture. Marketing scholars were quick to recognize this phenomenon as the “Country of Origin” effect (Bass and Wilkie 1973) and subsequent research suggested that geographical associations and national reputations—especially with regard to food—can be “sticky” (Pike 2015, p. 3) and so, once accumulated, difficult to change. Where marketing scholars perceive “sticky” associations, sociologists recognize symbolic opportunities and so have begun to attend to the economic value deriving from associations with advantageous geographic origins—cultural wealth.

Further, the cultivation of impression management strategies about geographical origins is requisite for specialty food firms: *terroir* exists as a foundational convention of the gourmet food industry, so its potential symbolic value is significant. Specialty food entrepreneurs are widely expected to tell stories about their brand and their products, and consumers of gourmet food writing anticipate narratives about geographical origination. But while some national origins add both symbolic and economic value to food products within the global marketplace, others potentially threaten value (Ariel 2012; Rivera 2011; Singer 2018). For entrepreneurial firms in the specialty food market, then, the process of identifying and strategically connecting to cultural wealth via *terroir* would seem to depend upon their particular geographic location.

My analysis of the nearly complete collection of the packages of two case study firms—the discursive strategies, stories, and details of the gourmet food writing inscribed on them—alongside longitudinal interview data suggests that cultural wealth lives within what I call origin stories. The evocative narratives that contain cultural wealth bring to life “meanings encased in place” (Bandelj and Wherry 2011, p. 1) by discursively linking a specific location with stories about that location’s traditions, strengths, and heritage. In addition, origin stories can be powerfully expanded upon and supported by vivid origin details, words and phrases which quickly evoke or amplify narrative connections made elsewhere between place and value, location, and distinction. Unexpectedly, however, only one of this project’s comparative case study firms authors such stories and details while the other designs product packages that contain no origin stories that illustrate Indonesian forms of cultural wealth.

It seems worth noting that it is impossible for a profit-seeking firm to write stories. People write stories; as impersonal business organizations, firms would seem incapable—grammatically, at least—of authorship. Yet economic sociologists have

begun to conceptualize firms themselves as having not only a shared identity but also a shared intentionality, which together support a new form of organizational awareness—the “reflexive capacity” to perceive, think, plan, and act, given the situation in which they operate (Aspers 2011, p. 78). From this perspective, firms not only possess a collective identity but also strive—as a collective “we together,” guided by shared intentions—to take into account “the situation in the market—including [their] own identity in the market as seen by others—when acting” (79). Similarly, the firms in my comparative case study each collectively imagine how they and their place of production might be perceived by others as they act as authors within the global economy of culinary qualities. These analytical insights clarify how a profit-seeking firm’s reflexive capacity and collective identity lead to a shared concern with how that identity might be perceived by others, and so to a particular plan of action.

My analysis describes how two profit-seeking specialty food firms take steps to imagine what their target audience—US specialty food consumers—believes to be true about Indonesia as the place where each firm’s food products originate. During these moments of imagination and reflection, the associations they conjure are not their own. Instead, they are those they believe specific others hold (Troyer and Younts 1997). The firms are, in other words, laboring to imagine the second-order expectations of consumers in the US about Indonesia’s characteristics, status, and value. Having collectively imagined the associations of their target audience with Indonesia, they then create packaging materials intended to avoid anticipated concerns and instead communicate acceptable forms of value. Given their different shared perceptions and imaginations, however, the firms perceive divergent associations on behalf of US consumers encountering Indonesian foods in their local specialty market, and so author packaging stories according to divergent narrative strategies. One firm not only makes claims to Indonesian forms of cultural wealth through evocative origin stories, but amplifies these claims by incorporating origin details even on its smallest packages. The other firm steers clear of origin stories, investing instead in alternative forms of gourmet food writing and avoiding the kinds of narratives that communicate both symbolic and economic value through national cultural wealth.

In response to Benedict Anderson’s (1983) insight that all national communities are imagined, a scholarly literature has emerged to explore the material and practical conditions for the production of national imagining. This imagining of nations has required new tools and forms of imagination—new imaginaries (Taylor 2004). Envisioned as a form of work—both in the sense of labor and of culturally organized practice—and as a form of negotiation between individual social actors and global fields of possibility, imagination works across national boundaries to produce locality as a spatial fact and as a sensibility (Appadurai 1996). For some, the imagination may even be “the key component of the new global order” (Reyes 2019, p. 31).

Infusing this interdisciplinary discussion with her sociological perspective, Reyes (2019) describes how global borderlands—legally plural places controlled by foreigners, or people not from the host country—are built around what she identifies as “consumption imaginaries” (159). These relate to how people connect their consumption decisions to their identities and their relationship to the broader world

around them. Scholars have long recognized how consumption relates to identity and status, from Veblen (1899) and Bourdieu (1984) to contemporary scholars like Zukin and Smith Maguire (2004). My project argues for the theoretical development of production imaginaries, which instead relate to how cultural producers (such as food entrepreneurs) connect their production and promotion decisions to their perceptions of the broader world around them, and especially to the expectations of their target consumer audiences. This work, an element of their productive labor, is vital, potentially profitable, and largely imaginative. It requires that cultural producers imagine national communities both local and foreign, and engage in imaginary conversations across national lines and about national attributes.

On the ground, this form of imaginative labor requires that profit-seeking firms develop a shared reflexive capacity, based on their collective identity and intention within the marketplace, to perceive, think, plan, and act (Aspers 2011). This reflexive activity culminates in strategic impression management projects—inevitable and vital when face-to-face interactions with consumers are made impossible by distance—and requires awareness not only of what the firm wants to be and accomplish in the market, but also of how others in the market perceive it. The use of packaging stories by cultural producers to communicate about Indonesian qualities—and negotiate with Indonesian imaginaries—suggests that Anderson (1983) might now recognize product packages as both responsive to and simultaneously constructive of national communities, and, so, as a quietly valuable and ubiquitous form of print capitalism.

Conclusion

Given its emergent and foundational definitions, cultural wealth is currently understood as stable, singular, collectively held, and either available to firms or not, depending on location. My project suggests otherwise, finding, instead, that analytical definitions and empirical applications of cultural wealth should take into account that national reputations are first imagined and evaluated before they can be strategically deployed. More specifically, my comparative cases make clear that even within the same national location—one widely associated with a negative, and so potentially harmful, international reputation—there exists a vital socio-emotional process between the fact of that reputation and strategic claims to, or deployments of, Indonesian cultural wealth.

My analysis describes both case study firms as intentionally working to create packages that strategically communicate with US specialty food consumers—their target audience—about the distinctive qualities of the Indonesian food products contained in them. Not professional cultural intermediaries but entrepreneurs who, according to the conventions of the wider marketplace, occupy the “dual roles” of producer-promoter, each firm’s directors decide how to represent each firm’s products within a marketplace that anticipates origination details. Because both are situated within a national location widely understood to have a negative international reputation, they must also imagine the fears or concerns of potential consumers in the US, thousands of miles away, as they determine how best to represent the firm’s

identity and intentions through narrative forms of gourmet food writing (Johnston and Baumann 2007).

For one entrepreneurial firm, the Indonesian origins of its specialty food products are perceived as potentially damaging to the value of their firm's meaningfully charged specialty food commodities because of the negative associations that US consumers are imagined to have, and so their Indonesian origins are acknowledged only briefly. For the other entrepreneurial firm, however, no such fears, worries, or negative associations are anticipated or interpreted as valid. Their packaging stories instead feature both origin stories and details that serve to amplify the Indonesian origins of their food products, even on the smallest of their packages. For this firm, Indonesian origins are imagined as a source of value and distinction, not damage. Fundamentally divergent second-order expectations of US consumers, and their imagined associations with Indonesia, play a critical yet overlooked role.²³ Rather than as a stable, widely-held set of symbolic and economic resources available to those in particular places, the cultural wealth of nations can thus be envisioned as a form of potential value, available only to cultural producers who perceive or imagine cultural opportunities to enhance reputation through strategic associations with place.

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²³ Future research might explore why second-order expectations might vary, but that question is beyond the scope of the current project.

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