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HANDBOOK OF DISASTER RITUAL

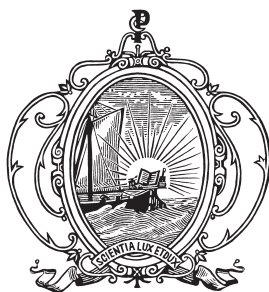
MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES,
CASES AND THEMES

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RITUALIZING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
GLOBAL IMPRESSIONS

The COVID-19 pandemic has suddenly and unintentionally made this disaster ritual book project very topical, relevant and urgent. At the moment of writing this introductory text (January 2021), we are still in the middle of a slow disaster with tremendous impact on the lives of individuals, social structures and economics. It is obvious that we cannot ignore this pandemic in the book project. Several authors have mentioned the pandemic in their contributions. But shouldn't it also be discussed explicitly and separately and if so, how? A thorough treatment of rituals in times of COVID-19 requires a certain distance. That distance is certainly not here yet. We are in the 'middle of the storm'.

These questions and considerations remind us of the previous book project on disaster ritual when we were confronted with the 9/11 attacks in the USA while finishing the work on the publication (POST, NUGTEREN, ZONDAG: *Rituelen na rampen* 2002; POST [et al.]: *Disaster Ritual* 2003). At that occasion, we were able to include a contribution by Ronald Grimes in the English edition. In a now widely quoted contribution, Grimes did not present a balanced analysis of the 9/11 rituals, but described a memorial ritual at his university as a personal account ('Ritualizing September 11. A personal account').

Following Grimes's example, we asked some of the contributors to this book project to describe rituals or ritual-like practices related to the COVID-19 pandemic, and we present these personal and contextual accounts as a kind of collage and final 'case study' in this part of the book.

JAPANESE FUNERALS DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

SÉBASTIEN P. BORET & YU FUKUDA

This essay discusses how Japanese people tailor funeral ceremonies during the COVID-19 pandemic. It also comments on the possible impact of these adaptations on the future of mortuary rites in Japan.

The impact of coronavirus-related measures on Japanese funerals

On 3 April 2020, the head office of Ehime Prefecture reported that a COVID-19 cluster had been linked to a funeral.¹ According to their report, at least nine of the twenty-one people present at the memorial parlor of Matsuyama city had tested positive. The infected people took part in the traditional rites, which consist of a wake and a ceremony the following day. The wake often consists of a ritual when participants gather closely in a small room and listen to the sutras recited by a monk. The gathering closes with the offering of incense at the altar and the sharing a meal and sake. The following day consists of a funeral, the cremation and a farewell to the deceased – a perfect sequence for people to gather and chats, touch each other and spread the virus.

At the time of this publication, the death toll of Japan's coronavirus crisis has reached over 1,600, and over 86,000 infected people have been reported. Like most social gatherings, funerals present a high risk of spreading the virus. The risk increases since the ceremonies are especially attended by older people particularly vulnerable to the virus. Unlike in European countries, however, the Japanese Ministry of Health has not prohibited funerals.² Instead, the central authorities published guidelines for funeral companies and bereaved families to take adequate measures

¹ 'Funeral clusters? 9 infected people in...Matsuyama', in *Yomiuri Newspaper*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.yomiuri.co.jp/national/20200403-OYT1T50166/> [last accessed 9 October 2020]. Press Release from Ehime Prefecture, <https://www.pref.ehime.jp/h25500/documents/020331press.pdf> [last accessed 9 October 2020].

² *Euronews*, 28 March 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/03/30/coronavirus-grieving-and-goodbyes-difficult-as-lockdown-compounds-the-pain-of-those-left-b> [last accessed 7 October 2020]. Reuters, 19 March 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-rites-insight-idUSKBN2161ZM> [last accessed 7 October 2020].

against the virus while respecting the memory and dignity of the dead.³ Local governments, municipalities and private funeral companies have come together to apply these guidelines and develop adapted strategies.

One of the measures consisted of monitoring the origin and the number of participants. Funeral parlors encouraged the bereaved to refrain from inviting relatives or friends living outside their prefecture.⁴ They also requested families to reduce the scale or even postpone the ceremony for better times. It is important to note that depending on the region, the cremation of the body takes place before or after the funerals.⁵ In the northern region of Miyagi Prefecture, the cremation usually takes place before the memorial. It would be possible to imagine families postponing the funerals. In the southern Prefecture of Fukuoka, where the funeral ceremony precedes the cremation, however, people may not delay the rituals. One of the related trends is the preservation of the corpse in dedicated private morgues (*goitai azukari sabisu*) by the Oominami Sousai Company to provide more time for bereaved to organize the funerals.⁶ If the dead died after contracting COVID-19, some funeral companies in Tokyo went as far as asking that no one came to view the body or attend the cremation, if the dead had been contaminated.⁷

Another measure demanded the use of technology to ensure social distancing. Some funeral companies began conducting online funerals using Zoom or YouTube. Participants located outside the funeral hall present their farewell as they watched the live video of the deceased resting in a coffin. Seigetsuki, a funeral company in Sendai, started a similar service before the pandemic. It consists of making a slideshow using the deceased's photos with his/her favourite music in the background. Seigetsuki then distributes a QR code to those willing to participate in the funeral. The QR code enables participants to access to the movie

³ Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare and Ministry of Trade, Economy and Industry, 29 July 2020, <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/content/000653447.pdf> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

⁴ *Kaboku Shinpou*, 6 April 2020.

⁵ R.K. BEARDSLEY, K. HALL, J.W. & R.E. WARD: *Village Japan* (Chicago 1959). R. SMITH: *Ancestor worship in contemporary Japan*. (Stanford 1974).

⁶ <https://www.oominami.net/azukari-service/> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

⁷ 'Funeral businesses offer online forms of farewell as Japan adapts to virus distancing', in *The Mainichi*, 8 June 2020, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200606/p2a/00m/0bu/016000c> [last accessed 9 October 2020].

remotely. Since COVID-19, the company also places an incense stand outside a funeral hall so that participants do not have to enter the facility.⁸ In addition to funerals, companies offered to attend and film the cremation on behalf of the bereaved before depositing the urn containing the cremated remains of the dead on their doorstep.⁹

Another new feature of funerals during the coronavirus crisis is an online service related to the traditional *kōden*. *Kōden* is the Japanese funeral tradition of giving a monetary offering to the bereaved family at funerals. Uniquet, a funeral company based in Osaka, created a smart-phone application that enables relatives and acquaintances to offer *kōden* by electric payment together with a letter of condolence.¹⁰ Like funeral ceremonies, the practice of gift-giving had already become more restricted in pre-COVID-19 Japan as more and more of bereaved families do not accept *kōden* to avoid social obligations.¹¹

Transformation or trend?

Should we conclude that these trends represent some form of departure from the ‘customary’ funeral practices? In pre-COVID-19, Japan, funeral ceremonies were already undergoing a lot of change.¹² The demographic and family changes, as well as the religious and economic considerations, encouraged people to simplify mortuary rites. ‘Family funerals’ (*kazokusō*), which consist of limiting the participants to the immediate relatives, have become pretty much an accepted and common practice. More radical, ‘direct funerals’ (*chokusō*) have done away with the wake, the funeral ceremony and the picking of the cremated bones of the dead. The dead body is brought directly to the crematorium for a farewell ceremony attended by family and friends. Finally, the last option is known as ‘zero funerals’ (*zerosō*). This form leaves only one rite of passage: the disposal of the cremated remains into the

⁸ *Kahoku Shinpou*, 18 May 2020.

⁹ *The Mainichi*, 8 June 2020.

¹⁰ https://www.life-ending.biz/_ct/17346735 [last accessed 21 July 2021].

¹¹ Y. TSUJI: ‘Mortuary rituals in Japan. The hegemony of tradition and the motivations of individuals’, in *Ethos* 34/3 (2006) 391-431. Y. TSUJI: ‘Evolving mortuary rituals in contemporary Japan’, in A.C.G.M. ROBBEN: *A companion to the Anthropology of death* (Hoboken, NJ 2018) 17-30.

¹² H. SUZUKI: *The price of death. The funeral industry in contemporary Japan* (Stanford 2000). H. SUZUKI (ed.): *Death and dying in contemporary Japan* (New York 2014).

grave.¹³ If they do not form the majority culture, these trends suggest that both funeral companies and their customers were already adopting simpler and less attended funerals before the COVID-19 outbreak.

With regards to their impact on the future of Japanese funerals, one may venture to argue that the restrictions brought by the COVID-19 pandemic have the potential to accelerate the liberalization of death in Japan.¹⁴ The pandemic might justify the choice of a *kazokusō*, *chokusō* or *zerosō* that might have been seen as rather inappropriate among certain families in normal circumstances. COVID-19 might therefore contribute to the continued reduction of the number of ‘physical attendees’. At the same time, the development of ‘Zoom funerals’ might allow gathering more considerable numbers of ‘virtual participants’ without increasing the cost of the ceremonies or, equally important in Japan, increasing the sense of obligation on the part of the participants.

The intriguing impact of ‘Zoom funerals’ is the potential de-location of death in Japan. Until now, death ceremonies (as well as cemeteries) were more or less limited to specific spaces and places. Funerals, even if filmed, were only accessible on specific websites and in certain conditions. We saw the introduction of technology with the digitalization of the memorialization of the dead with ancestral altars.¹⁵ However, the platform used by funeral companies (i.e., Zoom) is by nature no longer attached to a place. The company can send the link, meeting ID and the password to any potential participant. The silent and remote observer could choose to watch a relative or friend funeral in one’s car while having food or even during work. The experience of death may just be another app on the screens of our smartphone.

In conclusion, one may argue that, if it did not produce revolutionary changes, the COVID-19 pandemic might have created an environment where smaller and remote funerals may become a reasonable choice for the many, no longer an alternative for the few. If only temporarily, COVID-19 may have further increased the physical distance between the living and the dead.

¹³ H. SHIMADA: *Zerosō. Assari shinu* [Zero funerals. Dying in a simple manner] (Shūeisha 2015).

¹⁴ S.P. BORET: *Japanese tree burial. Ecology, kinship and the culture of death* (London 2014).

¹⁵ H. GOULD, T. KOHN & M. GIBBS: ‘Uploading the ancestors. Experiments with digital Buddhist altars in contemporary Japan’, in *Death Studies* 43/7 (2019) 456-465.

VIRAL RITUALS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM:
PUBLIC RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

DAVID CLARKE

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 and the ‘lockdown’ of the United Kingdom in the spring and summer of that year, which is still partially in effect at the time of writing (early June 2020), produced a number of forms of ritual activity that were featured prominently in the national media. The most well publicised of these was the ‘clap for carers’ proposed by a Dutch national living in London, Annemarie Plas, who was inspired by a similar one-off event in the Netherlands. This weekly outpouring of support began on 26 March to honour “NHS [National Health Service] workers and care workers”,¹⁶ but soon extended its remit to “[d]octors, nurses, healthcare workers, emergency services, armed services, public transport staff, delivery drivers, porters, shop workers, teachers, waste collectors, manufacturers, postal workers, cleaners, vets, engineers and all those who are out there making an unbelievable difference to our lives in these challenging times”.¹⁷

To understand the significance of this phenomenon, which was widely supported by ordinary British people every week on Thursday at 8 p.m., I would argue that we need to see it in the context of a range of other ritual behaviours in this period that I understand as both viral and memetic. They are viral in the sense that they have spread throughout the population by means of a process of mediatized sharing, often but not always transported by the ‘new media’ of Web 2.0. They are memetic, by analogy with internet-based memes, because participants have responded by modifying their own performance of the ritual so as to express individuality.¹⁸ Much of this ritual activity has in fact been mediated by the internet, in that participants have used social media to record and share their own performance of rituals. In addition, online

¹⁶ P. GRAFTON-GREENE, R. SPEARE-COLE & S. MORRISON: ‘Clap for our carers. People across UK come together in mass applause for NHS coronavirus heroes’, in *Evening Standard*, 26 March 2020, <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/clap-for-our-carers-coronavirus-applause-a4399096.html> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

¹⁷ <https://clapforourcarers.co.uk/> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

¹⁸ L. SHIFMAN: *Memes in digital culture* (Cambridge, MA 2014) 19-20. R.M. MILLER: *The world made meme* (Cambridge, MA 2016) 38.

practices of cutting, pasting and remixing familiar from the world of digital memes have led to crossovers and dialogues between different forms of ritual behaviour. In this brief analysis, I will consider three strands of such activity: the display of ‘Thank You NHS’ signs and rainbow designs; the ‘clap for carers’ ritual itself; and the commemoration of the Second World War, which became relevant when the coronavirus crisis coincided with the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the end of the War in Europe.

The creation of rainbow artwork, often incorporating ‘Thank You NHS’ messages, to be displayed in windows began as an activity for primary school children after the closure of schools and was intended to spread a hopeful message. The exact origin of this practice is unclear, but many shared their efforts via social media, and the display of the rainbow symbol became more widespread, not just among children. In my own neighbourhood, rainbow murals incorporating a range of visual elements were chalked on the walls of houses and on pavements. While people were unable to congregate, the display of such images both online and offline became a form of ritual communication, “directed not (...) toward the (...) act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs”.¹⁹ However, the modification of the image through individual creativity (for example, fashioning a rainbow of balloons on the front of one’s house or baking a rainbow cake) recalled the internet meme’s propensity to speak to an experience of ‘networked individualism’,²⁰ in which both connection with others and the expression of a distinct individual identity are valued. Although organizations such as newspapers offered pre-printed rainbow signs for display, and despite the swift increase in commercially produced ‘thank you’ signs primarily displayed by businesses, it was handmade and individual artwork that proliferated in ordinary residential streets and online.

The ‘clap for carers’ ritual demonstrated similar viral and memetic characteristics: it was spread initially by social media users and was then subject to widespread personalizing modification by participants, with this tendency increasing as the weeks went by. Some participants played musical instruments, some donned fancy dress, others let off fireworks or banged pots and pans. Social media users posted photographs of themselves and their neighbours during the ‘clap’ and, where participants

¹⁹ J.W. CARY: *Culture as communication* (London 2008²) 15.

²⁰ SHIFMAN: *Memes* 106.

found particularly unusual ways of taking part, they were often filmed doing so (or filmed themselves), so that this could be shared via social media. The rainbow symbol and the ‘Thank You NHS’ message were mobilised in signs, banners and clothing during the weekly event, and Twitter posts frequently combined the hashtags such as #ThankyouNHS, #clapforcarers and #clapforNHS. This tended to emphasise a focus on the NHS in the ‘clap for carers’ event, although its instigators eventually incorporated other groups of key workers, as noted above.

The coincidence of these rituals with the celebrations of 8 May, known in the UK as VE (Victory in Europe) Day, had a significant impact on the discourse surrounding the two ritual practices outlined above. The 75th anniversary of the end of hostilities in the European theatre of World War Two was to have been a major national celebration, with the traditional May Bank Holiday moved to accommodate participation. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a danger that this would become an example of failed ritual, with many elements of the official celebration cancelled. The UK government proposed alternative commemorative activities that could be performed by people at home (such as standing on their doorsteps to raise a toast to those who fought in World War Two or picnicking in their front gardens), but these suggestions did not appear to be widely taken up.

Nevertheless, the link between the War and the coronavirus crisis was further established during a fundraising campaign by veteran Captain Tom Moore, who was attempting 100 laps of his garden at home before his 100th birthday on 30 April to raise money for the NHS. The campaign went on to raise over £30 million and the coincidence of the VE Day celebrations with Captain Tom’s popularity arguably help to create associations in the minds of many between the heroism of those fighting in World War Two and NHS staff and other essential workers. In my own neighbourhood, for instance, one window display at a local nursing home put the matter plainly: ‘VE Day heroes then, key workers our heroes now.’

The incorporation of this aspect of the UK’s memory culture into the ritual practices that emerged around the pandemic had a notable effect in terms of the transformation of these apparently consensual performances into arenas of contestation. Some health care professionals began to reject their characterization as ‘heroes’, claiming that the analogy between wartime heroism and their professionalism was inappropriate. In particular, some medical personnel pointed out that the dis-

course of heroism potentially de-politicised the situation in the NHS during the crisis, by portraying staff as selfless and self-sacrificing, rather than drawing attention to deficiencies in funding, equipment and personal protection.²¹

What can all of this potentially tell us about the role of ritual in the UK during the coronavirus crisis? Firstly, it demonstrates that offline ritual practices were increasingly spread by social media in a viral fashion, but that these rituals also took on characteristics associated with memetic forms of internet communication. Specifically, the modification of ritual to simultaneously express personal identity and collective solidarity was significant. Secondly, we see intense feedback loops between ritual in the online and offline worlds, with ritual performances enacted in the street, but also digitally recorded and photographed for sharing in social media, encouraging imitation and further modification. Thirdly, we can see how different strands of ritual behaviour (clapping for carers, creating rainbow artwork, acts of commemoration for World War Two combatants) were combined by participants, both in their online and offline performances. Fourthly and finally, it appeared that, at least in the case of ‘clap for carers’, the opening up of the ritual as a space of political contestation led to its demise, with the originator of the event questioning its appropriateness once the ritual became ‘politicized’.²²

As a form of ‘networked individualism’, then, the ‘clap for carers’ was initially sustained by its apparently simple and apolitical message of celebration and thanks, which refrained from offering an interpretation of the context of the actions deserving of that gratitude. Once the notion of (military) heroism became more and more associated with the ritual, the question of how that context should be understood became a matter of public contestation, undermining its consensual intent. From the point of view of ritual studies, this case raises questions about how and

²¹ E.g., S. AKRAM: ‘Don’t clap for carers tonight – it means nothing when government is failing them so badly’, in *Independent*, 21 May 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/coronavirus-clap-for-carers-ppe-shortage-boris-johnson-nhs-a9525596.html> [last accessed 21 July 2021]. ANONYMOUS: ‘I’m an NHS doctor – and I’ve had enough of people clapping for me’, in *The Guardian*, 21 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/21/nhs-doctor-enough-people-clapping> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

²² PA MEDIA: ‘Let’s stop clapping for the NHS, says woman who started the ritual’, in *The Guardian*, 22 May 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/22/lets-stop-clapping-for-the-nhs-says-woman-who-started-the-ritual> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

to what effect societies facing significant challenges to their resilience in the coming years (for example because of the consequences of the current epidemic, or indeed in light of the growing climate crisis) will develop viral and memetic rituals that straddle the online and offline worlds.

‘NO-TOUCH GREETING GESTURES’

ALBERTINA NUGTEREN

While many Dutch citizens will probably remember 9 March 2020 as the day when the habitual handshake was banned, I personally remember the date because of a word that was cropping up for a few days in most Dutch news media: the Sundanese (way of) greeting. Our royal couple Willem-Alexander and Máxima, on an official visit to Indonesia, were among the first whose pandemic-etiquette was measured up: official protocol prescribed that they were not to shake hands. Instead – how fitting and culturally specific! – they would use the so-called Sundanese greeting. And they did, gracefully, comfortably, and even light-heartedly, at that early moment of what was to become a crisis later.

I was delighted in more ways than one. First, there was the name, especially the spelling. Obviously, the Dutch-colonial spelling (Soenda) had made way for the more international spelling (Sunda). But much more delight was in the graceful greeting itself, which exists in countless variations all over South- and Southeast Asia. The choice of this alternative to the handshake was self-evident. First, it is local, home-grown, age-old. Second, it is the best no-touch greeting gesture that could replace the entire array of the usual international salutation repertoire: it is respectful, graceful, reverential, and light as air. Third, it is fine-grained in social nuance: the height of the clasped hands corresponds to the social stature of the person saluted. Fourth, it is perspiration-proof in sticky heat. Fifth, it is ideal when persons differ greatly in height and bulk and body odor. And sixth, the most elegant and truly enlightening characteristic is that one keeps one’s gaze eye to eye, soul to soul.

Although for some this obviously counted as ‘a new ritual’, it is in fact ancient. Clasping the palms together solemnly in a respectful fashion and holding them in front of the chest testifies to Indonesia’s Hindu-Buddhist past. Appearing in intricate variations such as the *sembah* (Sunda), the *sampeah* (Cambodia) and the *wai* (Thailand), it has its origin in India’s Sanskrit culture, in which it is known as *namaste*, *namaskār*, *praṇāma*, or *añjali mōdrā*, respectively.

Greeting is a fine art. Greeting is also a minefield of embarrassment, eternal shame, and diplomatic scandals. Whereas Prime Minister Mark Rutte had jestingly suggested alternatives such as ‘*voetzoenen*’ (kissing

someone's feet) or *'elleboogstoten'* (the elbow bump), let us drop the habitual but clumsy Dutch *'drieklapper'* (three kisses on the cheek) for good, even in post-COVID-19 times. Let us adopt the Sundanese greeting as a homage to the rich traditions of our erstwhile colony and to mark the year when the king for the first time ever expressed Dutch apologies to the Indonesian people.

(P.S. Yesterday was the first day when Dutch pupils went back to primary school after many weeks of 'forced holidays'. In Nijmegen the children were offered a variety of fifteen salutations from a distance of 1.5 meter. Among the more predictable 'cool' gestures, there it was: the *namasté!*)

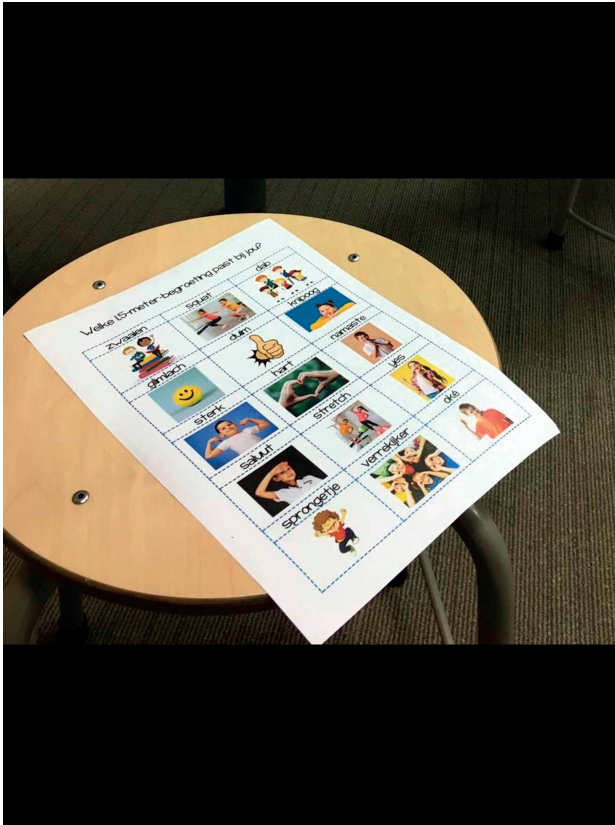


Figure 27.1: Variety of salutations, TaalSter, Nijmegen, May 2020.

HAZARD AVOIDANCE DEVICES AND COVID-19

PAMELA J. STEWART & ANDREW STRATHERN

The advent of the coronavirus and the dangers it entails have given rise to the orchestration of a complete new set of taboos, ritual rules, spatial behavior, and efforts to avoid ‘pollution’ from the virus. These taboos have impinged very directly on the lives of everyone, not least by way of regulations of ‘lock-downs’ (e.g., closures of businesses, schools, movements of people and goods) or ‘shelter in place’ (orders to stay at ‘home’ and leave only for obtaining food or medicine) that governments stipulate about what people can or cannot do. These new taboos also shift over time and are difficult to enforce. New rules of physical/social spacing have placed untoward constraint on patterns of social interaction, for example in terms of access to shops, spacing in queues, and face to face interactions. Even the meaning of ‘face to face’ changes as a result of the requirement to wear masks that hide most of the face and thus block vital aspects of communication between people. Authorities specify variations in how such taboos are to be applied, for example saying whether or not masks are to be worn whenever a person leaves their dwelling place or only when they enter a store. Ritual guardians are stationed at the liminal approaches to facilities, often administering temperature test to shoppers. The operation of rules about the use of all spaces may carry over into institutional contexts beyond stores, for example with the closing of university buildings, such that people are not permitted to enter their own customary work spaces and draw on their carefully constructed resources for teaching and research. In general, ‘face to face’ has become ‘zoom to zoom’ (video conference platform) as a category. Students, in turn, may not feel that their embodied experiences of university life can be maintained under such a regimen.

Taboo systems, as we know them from ethnographic contexts around the world, depend on the power of authority to institute and maintain them. Often that authority is related to religious ideas. In the case of COVID-19, authority stems from government and the general ideology of public health. We see, however, many daily examples of how taboos and stipulations may be resisted or ignored. Each one of us, as an individual, is faced with the choice of resistance or compliance. The main locus of resistance lies in the sphere of collective behavior humans are used to

herding together, and it is precisely this that authorities prohibit. So, we have pockets of resistance, children playing together in the street, raising the danger that they may be spreading the virus to others, even if they themselves are asymptomatic. The potential sanction here is the power of the virus itself, so here 'authority' rests with the virus itself, and risks flow to the adults in the community.

Our point here is that all of us are affected by this new structure of ritualization, so we experience it intensely as individuals and as members of society, entrapped within a new world of taboos that often runs counter to pre-existing social patterns. Stress and dissonance can emerge and require further ritual therapies to counter them. All in all, this is a world where taboos rule and will continue to do so as long as the danger of infection by the virus remains in play. On a broader analytical front, we need to understand how eco-cosmologies are emerging around the virus and its ramifying implications in our lives. Each country is dealing with this pandemic differently and social, political, and cultural dynamics are impacting how people respond.

A FUNERAL DURING LOCKDOWN IN SOUTH AFRICA

CAS WEPENER

Tuesday, 19 May 2020 – the country has been in lockdown for fifty-three days because of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been almost nine weeks since South Africans, of which 84% belong to the Christian religion and another 9% to other religions, have not been allowed to gather for worship purposes. As in many countries elsewhere in the world, worship services have since gone online and have been conducted via electronic media in many formats. In the late afternoon, our faculty receives the sad news that one of our colleagues died after an operation. I see the terrible news on Facebook. I phone a colleague who tells me that it happened just ten minutes ago. Under normal circumstances colleagues would leave their offices, meet each other, and make plans to visit the deceased's relatives. This is not happening and not allowed, as we are in lockdown level 4.

My colleague was a well-known leader in church circles globally and under other circumstances would have received an enormous funeral. A big funeral is however not possible as it is not legal. According to some of the regulations of the 'Disaster Management Act: Alert level 4 during coronavirus COVID-19 lockdown' that function in this time, movement between provinces for a funeral is strictly regulated and only permitted for very close relatives, such as a spouse or child; attendance is limited to fifty people; all hygienic conditions and distancing measures must be adhered to for the limitation of exposure of persons at the funeral to COVID-19; in addition to many regulations related to the transportation of a corpse, as well as other lockdown regulations that needs to be adhered to, such as physical distancing during the funeral.

On the WhatsApp-group of the Master of Divinity class the students organize among themselves a Zoom meeting for 21 May at 7 p.m. The invitation states that "during this brief moment of reflection, we hope to recognize her as faith ancestor who embodied unity, reconciliation and justice" and the invitation also indicates that this is deliberately organized to overlap with the Thursdays in Black movement, in which many students and staff members participate on a weekly basis.²³

²³ Cf. <http://www.thursdaysinblack.co.za/> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

Simultaneously the condolences and announcements on Facebook and Instagram (two of the more popular social media platforms in South Africa) continues. Many photographs of the deceased are shared, especially photographs in which the deceased appears along with the person making the post. There were furthermore pictures of burning candles with messages such as “Of A Life So Beautifully Lived And A Heart So Deeply Loved” and very often the line “’n Seder het geval” (A cedar has fallen) is shared. Apart from social media, in the electronic version of several South African newspapers articles about her death appeared within three hours that are widely shared on social media and commented on.

The funeral was conducted the following week adhering to the strict regulations of the Disaster Management Act and live streamed to make more participation possible. It is however doubtful that, even though there was a funeral liturgy and burial, this rite of passage will in our context be appropriated as sufficient closure.

Small gatherings of just a few people as a thanksgiving, without an elaborate liturgy and full burial ceremony, are confined to suburbs in cities such as Johannesburg and a peripheral phenomenon in South Africa. For the largest segment of the South African society funerals are usually large and very important occasions with many people gathering. Even though a big funeral was not possible, electronic and social media assisted in initiating both a grieving and ritual process. Cyber space created the opportunity to mark the death as well as creating space for people to express grief, appreciation, present eulogies and more. However, in many cases in South Africa when people die and are indeed buried during lockdown, as will probably be the case with the death of my colleague, this is probably just a case of postponed rituals or rituals left in liminality. Even though the funerals and burials occur whilst adhering to the regulations, physical social gatherings will most probably still occur, just at a later stage when they are permissible.

What did happen with regard to this rite of passage of my colleague was probably that social media made it possible to announce and ritually mark the arrival of the threshold within the ritual process, however, as long as we are in lockdown the ritual and the participants will, with regard to her death, remain in liminality and the need and longing to complete the ritual will also remain. In (South) Africa some rituals and liturgies that are enacted during lockdown may seem complete, even when a body is lowered into the ground and the funeral

liturgy celebrated, however, I doubt that that is the case. Usually liminality is to an extent managed by a rite of passage such as a funeral in order to serve the passage; however, during lockdown it seems as if the process is inversed and the rituals are governed by the liminal context and the passage, the completion, is either postponed or prevented. Time will tell.

REFLECTION ON RITUALS FOR DYING AND DEATH
IN HEALTHCARE SETTINGS DURING THE COVID-19
PANDEMIC: INSIGHTS FROM CHAPLAINCY

JOANNA WOJTKOWIAK

In the beginning of 2020, the world went into lockdown. In most countries different restrictions and social distancing were encouraged or enforced. Social exchange and physical contact were put on a minimum. In the Netherlands, as in other countries, chaplains or spiritual counselors who work in healthcare were challenged to offer spiritual care to patients who were dying alone due to visiting restrictions. Family members were often unable to say goodbye to their dying loved ones and funerals were not possible. The Dutch Professional Association for Chaplains (VGvZ) initiated a crisis team to gather information on rituals in death and dying in the context of the current pandemic. Chaplain Esli Jongen, master student Kyra Haerkens and I started to collect and report on examples from chaplains who initiated or created ‘universal’ rituals for farewell in the process of dying.²⁴ The suggested rituals can be used when there is time pressure or when there is not the possibility to ask for a chaplain from one’s own religious or spiritual background.

Within a short amount of time, we wrote this crisis document with the valuable information from chaplains working in healthcare settings. How to offer condolences when you cannot shake a person’s hand? How to organize an online funeral? How to give the family a chance to say goodbye when they are unable to visit? How to be there for the patient who is dying alone? These were some of the questions that were addressed.

The suggested rituals included giving families an (indirect) role in the ritual when they cannot be there. When a telephone or videoconference is not possible one can make symbolic links between the dying and their loved ones. Name the people who cannot be there and make them symbolically present. Light a (digital) candle to think about someone. Send an object to make a link between the deathbed and loved ones. The

²⁴ <https://vgvz.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/050720-Afscheidsrituelen-definitieve-versie.pdf> [last accessed 21 July 2021].

caregiver can stand next to the deathbed and tell the patient that now it is time to let go. The suggested texts to read during such a farewell ritual came from poems or were written by the chaplains themselves.

The term ‘universal ritual’ has been used more than once in this context, also in the final document. Can we create these universal rituals that can be offered to various religious groups? The term is difficult and perhaps not correct: can there even be a ritual for us all? Rituals are embodied within worldviews and beliefs. However, in a crisis situation, such as COVID-19, it seems that the term is embraced when there is not the possibility for organizing a ‘requested’ ritual. The pandemic has (temporally) shifted social structures. Chaplains and other healthcare professionals have to improvise and do the best they can. Showing compassion and ‘being there’ for the other is meaningful across cultural borders.

Ritualizing death and dying in such a crisis situation is about small gestures, such as taking a moment to sit with the patient, letting the family know about the patient’s final moments or sending a card of condolence or another symbol to family. These ‘little’ rituals can be immensely meaningful. In case of time pressure, no preparation and lack of attributes, small gestures do count. Just being there with a patient and saying that the patient is not alone can make a difference. Telling someone that it is okay to let go and have a poem in your pocket in case you have to do an improvised farewell ritual. The pandemic has shown that during such a crisis ritual and worldview borders are even more dynamic and fluid, as long as one conducts acts that feel authentic and that one is familiar with. The strength of symbolic representations and communication through ritual has shown to be of great significance.

CAN A RITUAL BE DIGITAL?
A REFLECTION ON DIGITAL PUBLIC EVENTS IN NORWAY
DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC FROM
THE VIEWPOINT OF RITUAL STUDIES

HANS STIFOSS-HANSEN & LARS JOHAN DANBOLT

We have previously studied the massive ritualizing that took place in Norway in the wake of the 22 July 2011 terror attack, a true disaster, unprecedented to Norwegians (cf. the article by the authors in this volume). The onslaught of COVID-19 could also be seen as a disaster, creating the same reactions in people: fear, anxiety, uncertainty. And in both situations the population was coming together in front of their TVs, expecting national leaders to demonstrate control, give advice, and distribute comfort.

And so it was done in the initial phase of the coronavirus pandemic (from 12 March to the end of April 2020), but there was a drastic difference from 22 July 2011 situation: during the lockdown people were strictly and forcefully advised (even legally required) to stay apart, to isolate, to stay home. In contrast to 2011, when people came together in all imaginable ways, during the COVID-19 lockdown people were to a large extent left to themselves and their immediate cohabitants, in their homes, and – if being careful – on walks in nature. When university campuses, schools, and working places were main arenas for mutual comfort and support in 2011, all these arenas were closed and stayed so for several months. The population was deprived of their main instruments for overcoming the emotional reaction to the shock. No churches or temples were staging disaster rituals.

The result was an explosion of digital activity – communication, relating, digital coming-together. This was in no way a result of a grand strategy, but a spontaneous employment of digital instruments that were already present and in use. Some digital activities were organized, like digital teachings and classrooms in schools and universities. People who were required to stay home established a workplace at home, linked to the workplace. But mainly, in addition to this, like a flourishing field of expressions, digital platforms and events were launched with the obvious aim of providing comfort and feelings of safety and normality. Media companies contributed to this ‘corona-help’, but also nonprofessional

actors and organizations were very active – a very important feature of the process is the fact that producing and transmitting a short film with a message is cheap and quite easy.

THE RITUAL STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

A significant portion of this media phenomenon was produced by churches and faith communities, cooperating with a range of artists and musicians. None of these transmissions were ‘disaster rituals’ in a strict sense or labelled so – but many of them included elements that could be recognized from disaster ritualizing, like candle lighting, emotional or solemn music, poem readings, and meditative image use. Some of the transmissions were of religious services, with all the elements that can be recognized from such.

So ritual – yes, but were these digital ‘rituals’ ritualizing of the actual disaster, the coronavirus pandemic? Our answer to that question is both yes and no. No, because, as we said, they were often not explicitly designed to ritualize the COVID-19 event or situation. But yes, since the coronavirus situation was (and is) omnipresent in our lives and our societies – and thus also in the digitally streamed rituals.

Firstly, the very existence of those digital phenomena was entirely conditioned by COVID, and they would not have occurred without it. Many of them were labelled things like ‘a silent evening in corona-times’. Large media companies selected shows and films that were obviously meant to provide comfort and safety in hard times. But secondly, and important to studies of disaster rituals, the services and meditations that were presented by religious actors generally included explicit verbal and nonverbal references to the ongoing situation. In many religious traditions, references to actual stressful situations are a common and important feature of the ritual.

We will illustrate this feature by an Easter Sunday service in the Lutheran Cathedral of Oslo on 12 April 2020. This was a one-hour transmission on TV (Figure 27.2). The picture shows the service, with pews totally empty apart from technical personnel and the bishop officiating with some other clergy.²⁵ There was a minimal choir of five persons on the lectern, with two musicians, who provided the hymn/musical part of the service.

²⁵ <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/gudstjeneste-tv/2020/DNRR67500320/avspiller> [last accessed 21 July 2021].



Figure 27.2: Easter Sunday service in Oslo Cathedral on 12 April 2020 (photograph: Fredrik Hagen/NTB).

The impression of emptiness is striking – definitely for the TV audience, but certainly for the persons performing the roles in the church as well. We are certain that the service is experienced on a solemn background, as if something fateful is nearby. Consequently, audiences will most likely interpret what they hear and see on this background, and everyone will realize that it is the COVID-19 context that is manifesting itself in that way. After all, it is the first time in modern history that these traditional rites are not carried out according to tradition during Easter.

So COVID-19 was inevitably framing the message – but furthermore, the components of the service were also modified and shaped according to this frame. Elements like hymns, prayers, and sermon were addressing the situation, more or less explicitly. Some prayers were formulated with explicit prayers for strength and comfort ‘in this difficult time’.

This is not the proper context for discussion of the definition of ritual or disaster ritual – though we will suggest that such rituals as the one described above could be understood as a disaster ritual – because of its functions and its similarities with rituals where more participants are present. This taken as a starting point, our observation is that disaster

ritualizing has taken place to a large extent in Norway during the coronavirus pandemic, particularly when the society went into a lockdown on 12 March 2020 until the gradual opening in May/June. (After the end of the school holidays in the end of August, things functioned more normally.) During the lockdown period, when the digital phenomena flourished, faith communities and religious organizations seem to have been very active in presenting digital events targeted at coping with the COVID-19 situation. These included fairly characteristic religious services, but also short digital events with music, theatrical elements, verbal meditations, etc. These events characteristically took place without an audience present (like the service described above); they included implicit and explicit references to the COVID-19 situation; they reflected features from their religious or cultural tradition; and religious services typically combined focus on the pandemic experience with representations of a liturgical tradition or calendar and employment of their symbols and metaphors.

The question of ritual innovation is interesting. One obvious factor is the complex and overwhelming technological innovation – it makes the whole phenomenon happen, but it also becomes integrated in the message. The audiences are aware that they are participants in a digital performance. In addition to technological ritual innovation, the practices point to an implicit mode of disaster ritualizing, different from the explicit ritualizing of the disaster on 22 July 2011. This could also be seen as innovative – the disaster not so much being the object of ritualizing, as it was being the palpable context of it.

As far as the content of the ritualizing is concerned, one might suggest that it is at the same time to some extent counter-innovative, in the sense that the transmitted content is characterized by traditional material, designed to make the audiences feel comforted and linked to tradition.

The critical question seems to be what the digital ritualizing does to the initial pain, the unpleasant isolation of individuals and families, in a time of crisis, when we should have been together, activating our social capital. The outcome is likely to be ambivalent: the digital compensation is certainly experienced as helpful – surveys strongly confirm that a majority of the Norwegian population preferred to join many of these digital ‘get-togethers’. On the other hand, since the digital events in general exposed the emptiness of the halls and the absence of audiences, they may at the same time have reminded people of the potential danger of the situation.