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'The most difficult time of my life' or 'COVID's gift to me'? Differential experiences of COVID-19 funerary restrictions in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, the government of Aotearoa New Zealand imposed some of the most stringent funerary restrictions in the world as part of its efforts to eliminate COVID-19. This article explores how people experienced this situation, asking why restrictions that some described as precipitating 'the most difficult time of their lives' were described by others as a 'relief', 'blessing', or 'gift'. Much existing literature frames funerary restrictions as a distressing assault upon established ways of grieving to which mourners must try to adapt – and in Aotearoa, both the stringency of the restrictions and the means by which they had been imposed did lead to many people finding them challenging. However, for those with ambivalent pre-existing feelings regarding their funerary traditions – such as many in the Samoan diaspora – COVID-19 restrictions afforded both a reprieve from burdensome practices and a much-welcomed opportunity to reimagine their traditions. Funerary restrictions, though disruptive, are thereby shown to have generative potential.

KEYWORDS

coronavirus; death; funerals; lockdown; pandemic; Samoans

Introduction

On 11 May 2020, 47 days after Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter Aotearoa, unless referring specifically to the New Zealand state) entered its first nationwide lockdown, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern addressed the sensitive subject of funerary restrictions at

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the daily press briefing. Journalists reported she appeared ‘genuinely moved’ (Roy, 2020). ‘The thing that I have found, as a human, hardest in all this has been funerals and tangihanga [Māori funerary rituals of farewell]’, she said. ‘We know this is causing pain’.

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, funerals and tangihanga had been banned outright at the height of the lockdown (Level 4), alongside strict curbs being placed on personal movement and the closure of schools, most businesses, and most retail.¹ During this time, the only people allowed to view the deceased’s body or attend a burial or cremation were members of the deceased’s ‘bubble’ – the small, exclusive social network (usually coterminous with a single household) in which people were asked to spend the Level 4 lockdown (see Long et al., 2020). As community spread of COVID-19 diminished and Aotearoa transitioned to lower ‘Alert Levels’, funerals and tangihanga resumed, but with numbers strictly capped. Just ten attendees were allowed at Level 3. At Level 2, this initially increased to fifty – and eventually to 100. Only at Level 1 were funerals and tangihanga free from restrictions, notwithstanding a requirement that attendance be recorded for contact tracing purposes.

Funerary restrictions were in place nationwide for a total of 74 days between March and June 2020 and have been reintroduced several times at both regional and national level following the detection of COVID-19 cases in the community.² As Ardern acknowledged, and as our research corroborates, these restrictions have ‘caused pain’. Munford (2021) identifies them as responsible for some of ‘the most overwhelming feelings’ that people in Aotearoa experienced during lockdown (p. 111). Yet these same restrictions, which caused so many people so much distress, were sometimes described by our research participants as ‘a relief’, ‘a blessing’, or even ‘a gift from God’. These were descriptions most frequently and consistently (though not exclusively, or universally) articulated by research participants of Samoan descent. Foregrounding these Samoan narratives, this article examines why the restrictions were experienced in such diverse ways, and what the implications are for theoretical models of funerary restrictions’ impact. We argue that scholarly debates regarding funerary restrictions should move beyond analytics of ‘deprivation’, ‘disenfranchisement’, ‘cultural marginalisation’ or even ‘adaptation’ and ‘resilience’, all of which view restrictions as an intrinsic hardship. Instead, we advocate the more neutral and open-ended analytic of *disruption*, showing that, by changing the allocations of responsibility underpinning funerary practice, state-mandated lockdowns can elicit both distress and relief.

Background and context: funeral topologies in Aotearoa

Located in the southwestern Pacific Ocean, Aotearoa is an island nation of approximately five million people. Legally a bicultural nation, in which a formal treaty relationship (Te Tiriti o Waitangi, signed in 1840) exists between Iwi (sovereign Māori nations) and the British Crown, Aotearoa is increasingly considered a ‘superdiverse’ country due to its large and diverse population of migrants (Chan, 2019). Such superdiversity extends to the nation’s death practices (notwithstanding certain obligations and rights that apply to everyone living and working in Aotearoa – such as the requirement to register deaths, and entitlements to at least one day’s paid bereavement leave a year). A tremendous range of funerary traditions was practised before the pandemic (Schwass, 2005).

Not all of these traditions were equally vulnerable to the impact of COVID-19 restrictions. Schäfer and McManus (2015) estimate that before the pandemic, 10–30% of all funerals in Aotearoa involved very small numbers of attendees, comparable to the numbers allowed under Level 3 and 4 lockdown restrictions (p. 64). Such funerals might have been chosen if the deceased was considered a ‘very private’ person, or if key mourners felt uncomfortable about displaying their emotions in front of a large group (Schäfer & McManus, 2015, pp. 64–67). In such cases, COVID-19 restrictions might only have had limited impacts. However, most lockdown funerals differed markedly from what might have been anticipated or hoped for. Studies of death rituals in Aotearoa have often emphasised the importance of the large scale and collective nature of funerals: qualities essential for supporting the bereaved; for providing a ‘configurational eulogy’ (Bailey & Walter, 2016, pp. 162–163) that pays tribute to the value of the deceased’s life; and for honouring the deceased’s membership of a family, community, and, in the case of Māori tangihanga, iwi (see e.g. Ritchie et al., 2013; Schäfer, 2007). All of these collective aspects of funerary practice were compromised by the COVID-19 restrictions in place at Level 4, Level 3, and even at Level 2.

The importance of collective congregation is an especially prominent theme in accounts of funerary rituals amongst the Samoan diaspora – one of the largest diaspora populations in Aotearoa, numbering 182,721 in the 2018 census (3.9% of the total population). While a small number of Samoans in Aotearoa trace their ancestry to American Samoa, the vast majority are connected to the Pacific nation of Samoa (formerly ‘Western Samoa’), which was administered by New Zealand from 1914 to 1962 and has served as a source of migrant labour since the 1950s (Lee, 2009, pp. 9–10). Samoan funerary rituals (*falelauasiga*) typically combine a church service and funeral feast (*fa’aafe*) with a week of visits, prayers, and vigils in the deceased’s family home, where the body lies in state and visitors can pay their respects, offer the grieving family support, and give gifts such as money, food, and ceremonial mats.³ This process transforms the home into ‘a sacred space to reconnect’, providing ‘meaningful pathways in grief resolution for the many mourners who spent time there’ and enabling ‘bonding’ between mourners who feel they are ‘one in their loss’ (Seiuli, 2017, p. 38). Following the funeral feast, ritualised practices of cultural exchange occur: the grieving family reciprocates the gifts their guests have provided, thereby showing their appreciation, and showcasing their love for the deceased one final time (Seiuli, 2017, p. 41). Because the costs of these ritualised exchanges and preceding feast are met via a ‘complex network of money-collecting activities’ within the ‘*aiga* [extended family]’ (Ablon, 1970, p. 210), large-scale funerals serve as a principal way in which Samoans in diaspora can express allegiance to their wider kinship group (Gershon, 2012, p. 40). In this, they stand alongside other *fa’alavelave* – a term denoting a disruption or interruption to daily activities that requires the rallied support of one’s kin (e.g. funerals, weddings, and house/church dedications).

A sense of cultural identity can also be at stake in Samoan funerary practices. Macpherson (1999) outlines how the social and political dynamics of life in post-war Aotearoa led Samoan migrants to develop a heightened sense of their identity as ‘Samoans’ – an emergent migrant identity that rested on the *aganu’u fa’aSamoa* (Samoan worldview), of which funerary traditions are an important part (pp. 52–54). Seiuli et al. (2016) argue that ‘for many Samoans, active engagement in funeral rituals assists them to transfer [their] cultural ideals into a living identity to validate their Samoan

heritage' (p. 5). Moreover, they claim that such affirmations of 'Samoanness' are closely linked to continuities of practice, since 'funeral customs materialise history and culturally patterned relationships by keeping them alive and evolving through their continuous enactment' (Seiuli et al., 2016, p. 5). It would thus seem that for Samoans, as for many others in Aotearoa, COVID-19 restrictions threatened to affect what funerals 'do' on multiple fronts. However, by delving more deeply into the experiences of the Samoan diaspora during the Level 4 and 3 lockdowns of 2020, this article demonstrates that the situation is more complicated, adding nuance to theoretical debates regarding the effects of COVID-19 funerary restrictions.

Theorising responses to restrictions

At present, two theoretical approaches predominate within scholarship on the impact of COVID-19 funerary restrictions. The first, which we term the *deprivation model*, emphasises what funerary restrictions take away – and the distress, both short- and long-term, that this can cause. For example, Albuquerque et al. (2021) suggest that by limiting mourners' autonomy and curtailing their opportunities to support each other through both physical touch and expressing grief in each other's company, COVID-19 funerary restrictions heighten the risk of disenfranchised grief, fuelling an epidemic of prolonged grief disorder (see also Kokou-Kpolou et al., 2020). A second approach, which we term the *adaptation model*, acknowledges the magnitude of the changes introduced by the restrictions, but highlights how individuals and communities are 'displaying resilience' and adopting innovative practices to meet the needs of the bereaved (e.g. Bear et al., 2020; Enari & Rangiwai, 2021; Ronan, 2021).

The adaptation model has clear theoretical advantages over the somewhat monolithic deprivation model, as it acknowledges that people are not passive victims of restrictions but can respond creatively to their circumstances. However, given that some people nevertheless find restricted funerals distressing, this approach needs to account for why some adaptations of funerary practice yield more satisfying outcomes than others. Burrell and Selman (2020) have suggested that 'it is not the number of attendees or even the type of funeral which determines how supportive it is, but rather how meaningful the occasion is, and how connected it helps mourners feel', emphasising the role of funerary professionals in enabling the bereaved to stage funerals that are 'expressive of collective grief and support' under COVID-19 restrictions (p. 32). Nevertheless, structural factors may mediate professional labour's ability to render a funeral 'supportive'. One such factor could be the specific content of the restrictions in force. Axes of cultural difference might also shape the magnitude of the difficulties arising from funerary restrictions.

Moore et al. (2020) describe how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Black Americans has been devastating not only because of disproportionate levels of mortality, but because dying, death, and grief protocols during the pandemic 'disrupt traditional customs and grief practices' and thus constitute an 'assault' on 'Black people and their communal/collective way of being': 'for many Blacks ... their lived experiences were laden with racial discrimination and structural racism, and now the restrictive public health and funeral industry's funeral and burial policies and protocols robs them of the opportunity to transition from life with their human and cultural dignity' (p. 2). On the surface, similar claims could be made with reference to marginalised social groups

in Aotearoa, including Samoans and other Pacific peoples – groups widely associated with ‘collectivist’ cultural identities (Fa’alau, 2016) that are expressed and reaffirmed by funerary practices, and for whom coming together and collectively processing grief has conventionally been seen as an important aspect of ensuring a funeral is ‘meaningful’ and ‘supportive’ (Seiuli, 2017). Indeed, drawing on research with Pacific peoples, Māori, and people with refugee backgrounds in Aotearoa, Elers et al. (2021) argue that the ‘erasure of cultural voice’ in a pandemic response ‘immersed in Whiteness’ resulted in ‘new forms of ... cultural marginalization’, such as ‘not being able to attend funerals communally’ (p. 113).

While such arguments are important for highlighting that pandemic control measures may be differentially experienced along axes of cultural difference, it is crucial to avoid unduly reductive portraits of ‘cultural voice’. Under the circumstances of a pandemic, ‘collectivist values’ may find expression in unfamiliar ways – for example, in avoiding communal gatherings to protect each other from infection. Moreover, researchers have repeatedly documented ambivalent attitudes to collectivist cultural norms in Pacific societies (see e.g. Berman, 2020; Mageo, 1991), let alone amongst Pacific diaspora communities in Aotearoa, whose members must reconcile the ‘collectivist’ values of their families with ‘the more individualistic values which pervade many New Zealand institutions’ (Fa’alau, 2016, p. 26). Funerary traditions are not exempt from such ambivalence. As noted earlier, Samoan funerals in Aotearoa, the costs of which regularly exceed NZ\$50,000 (Dreaver, 2014), are funded via money-collecting activities amongst the deceased’s kin, affines, friends and church family. Such elicitations exemplify ‘collective support’ and are highly valued as such. However, they can have deleterious effects on contributors’ finances, plunging many into debt, and generating stress and resentment (Firestone et al., 2018, p. 59; Gershon, 2012, p. 41; Seiuli, 2015, p. 110).

When funerary traditions are saturated with ambivalence, neither the deprivation nor the adaptation model may adequately capture the impact and experience of COVID-19 restrictions. Both models share a foundational assumption that the disruption of conventional funerary practice is a challenge or a problem. Yet, the disruption of a tradition that is itself a source of tension and frustration may be experienced less as an ‘assault’ upon collective ways of being than as a reprieve, with the impact of restrictions not causing deprivation, nor prompting adaptation, but inspiring that tradition’s reimagining. To understand whether, when, and why such possibilities come to be, abstracted notions of ‘cultural voice’ must be supplemented with the actual voices of people who lived through funerary restrictions.

Research design and methods

This paper draws on two sources of data. The first is a series of non-probabilistic online surveys designed by the research team and distributed via word of mouth and paid Facebook advertising at Levels 4, 3 and 2 of the March–June 2020 national lockdown and during the Auckland lockdown of August 2020. These surveys, which received 4171 valid responses, were exploratory in character, asking open-ended questions about life at each Alert Level. While they did not contain specific questions about bereavement or funerals, some respondents addressed these themes in their responses. We also draw on semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 117 respondents recruited via the surveys

and pre-existing research networks. Interviews afforded us opportunities to tease out the contradictions, complexities, and multiple ‘horizons of meaning’ (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995) surrounding funerary restrictions, yielding rich insights.

We focus in particular on the accounts of the 140 survey respondents who identified as ‘Pacific’, and the 33 Samoans who took part in interviews and focus groups, contextualising these, where appropriate, in trends observable across our respondent pool as a whole.⁴ Pacific peoples have been underrepresented in international research on COVID-19 funerals to date, with existing works either adopting a ‘theoretical and phenomenological perspective’ inspired by normative cultural models (Enari & Rangiwai, 2021, p. 346) or conducting visual analysis of funerary photography (Vave, 2021), rather than foregrounding experiential accounts of funerary restrictions. However, it was the Samoan participants in our research that most consistently highlighted a hitherto under-theorised aspect of funerary restrictions – their generative possibilities – indicating that their accounts warrant closer attention.

Attitudes to restrictions

Notwithstanding a small number who professed COVID-19 to be a hoax or expressed concerns about human rights, nearly all interviewees and survey respondents strongly supported stringent pandemic control measures. Pacific research participants were no exception. Francesca, a 78-year old Samoan woman, explained that although she had found lockdown restrictions ‘hard to begin with’ because of ‘the thought of not being able to see or be around other family members physically’ she nevertheless ‘totally agreed’ with the lockdown and felt it was ‘justified’ and ‘correctly managed’.⁵ A 49-year-old Pacific man suggested the stringent restrictions showcased the virtues of the ‘village mentality’ once said to characterise post-war Aotearoa (Alley, 1986, p. 67) and still considered typical of Pacific societies, highlighting how lockdowns and ‘social distancing’ are not necessarily incompatible with collectivist values but can be seen as expressions thereof:

Is [lockdown] necessary? Absolutely. We do not sacrifice our elderly or vulnerable. We do what needs doing then adapt to the new way of life. We do not put livelihood ahead of people. We are raised in a capitalist society and so this is what turns our wheels, would it hurt to recalibrate and reflect on what is happening to the greatest capitalist country in the world (USA)? Do we want to live by those values? I think we have a better spin on it, VILLAGE MENTALITY (once looked down upon, but now posing a question).

Nearly every research participant who discussed funerary restrictions accepted the need to depart from pre-pandemic practice. Some even felt the rules for the lower Alert Levels did not go far enough, such as a 53-year old Pacific woman who wrote in our August 2020 survey that ‘[We should] stay at Level 2 for the rest of the year. Tangihanga and funeral should be restricted and reinforce to a maximum of 10 people’. Others felt the rules had been too strict, especially at Level 4. Manu, a 72-year-old Samoan man explained that ‘[lockdown] was the right thing to do [but] there could have been a bit more room for families to be able to hold funeral services for loved ones’. Even in this case, however, Manu only wished for ‘a bit’ more room. It was the specifics rather than the general principle of funerary restrictions that led to disquiet.

Within our national respondent pool, some research participants questioned the process by which the restrictions had been devised and implemented. Particularly important concerns were raised regarding tangihanga – a point which cannot be overlooked in a discussion of funerary restrictions in Aotearoa, even though tangihanga are associated with Māori, rather than Samoans (who are the primary focus of this paper). Tangihanga are occasions when ‘Māori religious attitudes, values and practices are transmitted in full force in the language of their ancestors’ (Edmonds, 2016, p. 32). Moreover, ‘of all Māori cultural expressions, [they] remain closest to those practised before colonisation’ and are thus central expressions of Māori identity (Rangiwaiti & Sciascia, 2021, p. 4). Restrictions on tangihanga had nevertheless been imposed by the government, despite the ostensibly equal partnership established between the Crown and chiefly representatives of Māori through Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Several research participants, both Māori and non-Māori, emphasised that decision-making processes around tangihanga were matters on which Māori tino rangatiratanga (self-determination; sovereign autonomy) should have been more fully acknowledged and respected (see also Moeke-Maxwell et al., 2020, p. 30), suggesting that consultations with Māori communities had been ‘tokenised’ and ‘after the fact’, rather than ‘genuine negotiation’. In this regard, the restrictions introduced during 2020 resonated with, and perhaps intensified, political concerns over the character of Māori-Crown relations that predate the COVID-19 pandemic.

The theme of inadequate consultation was also relevant to matters directly affecting Samoan research participants. Tyrone, a semi-retired Māori funeral director from Auckland, noted that ‘one of the main things that was missing in [the] process of developing restrictions around tangihanga was the fact that they didn’t have the intelligence of te ao Māori [the Māori worldview; perspectives based on the cultural, historical and modern experiences of Māori⁶] from within that industry’. But he also highlighted how this oversight mirrored a broader failure to consult with funerary professionals of any cultural background. ‘The [Funeral Directors Association] didn’t really have a well-established relationship with the Ministry of Health’, he explained, ‘and so ... there were decisions being made for that industry, the funeral industry, with no common sense’. Restrictions requiring only one bubble to attend a burial, for example, had posed practical challenges for carrying the casket and placing it in the grave, while a ban on loved ones viewing the deceased in funeral homes overlooked the strict cleaning protocols that, in Tyrone’s words, left ‘funeral homes ... more sterile than most hospitals’.

As this discussion demonstrates, disquiet regarding funerary restrictions is not necessarily about having a restricted topology *per se*. It can relate both to the colonial character of those restrictions’ imposition, and to a sense that the restrictions’ design is ill-informed. Nevertheless, most accounts of lockdown funerals did focus on the impact of radically altered topologies. It is to this issue that we now turn.

Challenges and adaptations

Echoing dominant framings in the literature, research participants often spoke of funerary restrictions as challenges – albeit ones to which they had tried to adapt. Nevertheless, these adaptations were often considered only partially effective, especially under the stringent restrictions of Level 4, where only those who had been in the same bubble as the deceased could view the body or attend a burial or cremation and bereaved people were not allowed

in-person contact with people in other bubbles as they processed their grief. Though some put a positive spin on makeshift arrangements – for example, by suggesting that they exemplified the deceased's own qualities of 'resourcefulness' and 'adaptability' (Kavanagh-Hall, 2020) – commentary on Level 4 restrictions was frequently peppered with claims that they were 'difficult', 'hard', 'unnatural', 'weird', or 'wrong'. Such claims were made by respondents of all demographic backgrounds, including several of our Samoan interlocutors.

Jasmine, a 45-year-old Samoan woman, explained how a member of her church had died overseas during Level 4. She described this as 'difficult for our church as we were unable to be physically there with the grieving family to support them', while 'the very hard and sad part' for the family had been that international travel restrictions meant they could not see their relative before or after her death. Manu, the 72-year-old Samoan man introduced in the previous section, described how:

At level 4, we had the burial for my wife but unfortunately, many of our family [were] only able to attend via livestream. This was the most difficult time, not being able to farewell my wife properly as we would in our culture ...

We call this in Samoan *o le oki o le kamaikiki*. It's like the death of a little kid. You just bury them without formal cultural rituals and formalities. While all costs were paid for by monies received from loving friends and families, I feel extremely bad that our family, especially me, were not able to reciprocate people's generosity according to our culture.

As such testimonies reveal, Level 4 restrictions compromised people's capacity to provide, receive, and reciprocate care and support in circumstances of bereavement. As Zigon and Throop (2014) argue, care for constituting relationships is a lynchpin of moral experience; policies that interrupt its provision can therefore result not only in people being deprived of support, but also feelings of guilt and shame.

While self-reported levels of compliance with lockdown restrictions in our surveys were high, with fewer than 8% of respondents admitting to breaking the rules, the breaches that did take place were often driven by moral imperatives to provide care and support (Long et al., 2020, pp. 45–49). For example, bereaved respondents (of all backgrounds) sometimes 'bent' the rules by going on outdoor walks with people from other households or merging their bubbles with those of other family members before this was formally allowed. Restrictions on funeral attendance were, however, more difficult to 'bend'. Consequently, many felt compromised in their ability to provide a final act of care in their relationship with the deceased. The pain this could cause was articulated movingly by Manu, who recounted that 'it was the most difficult time of my life not being able to farewell my wife as I feel she deserved [...] I do not know when or if I will be able to get over this very sad time for me and my family'.

By contrast, even the minimal funerals permitted at Level 3 proved valuable for processing not only one's grief, but also the difficult feelings associated with being unable to stage a 'proper' funeral. For example, a 42-year-old Pacific woman described how, at Level 3, '[being] able to have a small gathering of people to celebrate one's life who has passed away helped us, and my relatives, to mourn our loved one and keeping us all from feeling guilty in not saying our proper farewells to our loved ones who have departed this earth'.

Overall, this research indicated that the stringency of Level 4 restrictions made it difficult for anyone in Aotearoa who was bereaved during the lockdown to feel adequately supported in their grief. We thus agree with Elers et al. (2021) on the importance

of ‘expanding the scope of what we examine as health amidst the pandemic, from looking at the direct risks of the infection to the health challenges of everyday living and livelihood that are exacerbated by the pandemic and by the responses to it’ (p. 113). We nevertheless question their intimation that the challenges associated with funerary restrictions result primarily from an ‘erasure of cultural voice’ (Elers et al., 2021, p. 113), as opposed to a more general failure to adequately factor bereavement into pandemic response preparation. For instance, the multi-household bubble arrangements permitted during Level 4 for people with complex childcare needs or in co-parenting arrangements could have been extended to the bereaved.

That said, additional feelings of sadness, frustration, or guilt at being disconnected from cultural traditions – sometimes invoked with reference to ‘the proper’ way of saying farewell – were reported by some respondents. A 50-year-old Pacific man even suggested that the lockdown restrictions had been ‘particularly hard [for] Pacific communities [due to] restrictions on church gatherings and events such as weddings, birthdays and funerals’. Such responses offer support to arguments that COVID-19 restrictions may be disproportionately painful when experienced as an ‘assault’ on cultural traditions and communal or collective ways of being (cf., Elers et al., 2021; Moore et al., 2020). Before reaching such a conclusion, however, it is important to consider a countervailing perspective present in our research data.

Relief and reimagining

Mandy, an 81-year-old Samoan woman living in Auckland with her daughter and son-in-law, is the oldest remaining member of her transnational family. When recounting her experiences of bereavement during the pandemic, she began by offering a narrative similar to Manu’s, emphasising the traumatic nature of bereavement during a time of social distancing and restricted travel:

It’s not easy not to be with my family when they grieve. My youngest sister passed away in Samoa during COVID. It has to [be] one of the saddest days of my life . . . I called together my family here, had Zoom meetings with the other *matais* [titled persons] in America, Hawaii, Australia and everywhere. My family saw how lost I was to make decisions . . . We did send a big amount of money to Samoa, but nothing replaces being there for my nieces and nephews . . . We watched everything online, family service, funeral service, cultural hospitality, and I just cried as I saw my sister, her poor children, and wished I was there.

Nevertheless, Mandy’s perspective on the funeral was shortly to change:

After a few days or maybe weeks after my sister’s passing, my daughter and I just sat and discussed things in general then we touched on the whole funeral service that we saw online. And I thought, what a different way of doing our culture with things such as funerals. Had I gone over to Samoa for the funeral, I would have had to take my personal contribution to the funeral as the family’s matriarch, have some money for the *matais*, my friends in the village, the pastor, and whoever was going to attend to my needs as I don’t have any more children in Samoa. On top of that, at least one or two *matais* from here would have accompanied me, and maybe my daughter would have wanted to come for a holiday as well. So you look at the costing for all of that and think, COVID and lockdown wasn’t a bad idea after all. So now whenever my family comes together here for meetings or lunch that is our hot topic, how do we practise our culture during funerals, weddings and birthdays in a sane manner that will not impoverish us . . . ?

While, at the time, Mandy had ‘wished she was there’, she now looked on the virtual funeral as ‘a different way of doing our culture’. Rather than framing the funerary adaptations as regrettable but necessary for public health, it was precisely the modifications of the funerary practice, and the lessening of their economic burdens that led her to conclude that ‘COVID and lockdown wasn’t a bad idea after all’. Mandy’s account illustrates two themes that recurred in many of our conversations with Samoan respondents. Firstly, restrictions, while in some ways painful, were also a relief. Secondly, rather than necessarily being experienced as a form of ‘cultural marginalisation’ (cf. Elers et al., 2021, p. 113), they could also pave the way for cultural reimagination.

The theme of restrictions-as-relief was most often raised in relation to the economic burdens of conventional Samoan funerals, which were considerably lessened by restrictions on gatherings and travel. Restrictions did not halt the flow of resources altogether – Mandy, for instance, had still sent ‘a big amount of money to Samoa’, thereby providing her family with economic support. However, the restrictions had spared her the extraneous expenditure of travel, visiting, and reciprocated gifting, a change she had come to view in positive terms. Sally, a 41-year-old Samoan supermarket worker living in Auckland with her two sons and brother, also testified to the lessened economic burden resulting from the restrictions, speaking not as someone who would have to travel but as someone who would have had to host visitors as a relative of the deceased. Having experienced a ‘stool of funerals’ (*pupu oti*, referencing a banana stool with overcrowded shoots) during lockdown, Sally reported that she could ‘hardly breathe now with so many *fa’alavelaves*’. This comment highlights how much of an economic burden it remained to send money to bereaved family members, even during the pandemic. Yet Sally was aware that the situation could have been much worse. ‘The only good thing is COVID, especially the lockdowns, stopped travel and so I didn’t have to host the Samoans and Australians who would’ve come for these funerals’, she reflected, ‘That I think is COVID’s gift to me’. Sally spoke from bitter experience. In 2019, she and her brother had hosted six guests for her grandaunt’s funeral in their three-bedroom house, including two church ministers, who she described as ‘very demanding’. Her brother had told her that ‘while the pandemic is unfortunate, to him, it has been a blessing because what we spent on the two funerals we’ve just had, plus other *fa’alavelave* recently, is nothing compared to what we may have ended up spending on hosting people who would’ve come over for just one funeral’.

COVID-19 restrictions could also alleviate what a Samoan woman named Monika termed ‘the disruption of families’ daily functioning’ by funerary practices. In a focus group, Fred – a 55-year-old Samoan truck driver – described how, as the main talking chief of his family, he would always go to the funerals of his family’s senior members, including those living in Samoa and the USA. While for Fred, the ‘biggest benefit of the pandemic’ had been avoiding the costs of travelling to two family funerals in Samoa, his wife Fanny (a 56-year-old Aotearoa-born Samoan) highlighted the toll that Fred’s obligations to his *aiga* had historically taken on their nuclear family. ‘Thanks to COVID that Fred didn’t have to go for any more funerals’, she interjected. ‘He missed out on the birth of all our four children because he was always in Samoa, America and all over for these cultural stuffs. I hope this will bring a new beginning for our family’.

These commentaries reflect the deep ambivalence that has long resulted from the way the cultural responsibilities of *fa’alavelave* sit in tension with personal aspirations and obligations to one’s nuclear family (Gershon, 2012). Lockdown led such feelings to give

way to a new modality of ambivalence, combining sadness at physical separation and a sense of ‘strangeness’ regarding online funeral formats with such relief at being spared conventional burdens that COVID-19 could be described as ‘a blessing’.

For some respondents, this sense of ‘blessing’ extended to the opportunity the pandemic offered to reimagine their relationship to their culture and inaugurate new, less burdensome, traditions of funerary practice – something that Mandy noted had become a ‘hot topic’ within her family. Several revealed that the pandemic had already precipitated a decisive break with the past. ‘I think I’ll spend the rest of my time [on this earth] with my [immediate] family’, Fred stated, ‘and I’ve shared that with my extended family. COVID has allowed me and my wife and my siblings to refocus on our priorities’. Peter, a 64-year-old Samoan church minister who had been advocating the scaling back of funerary practices since long before the pandemic, explained that ‘COVID brought home the essence of my message to my church and parishioners. COVID for me allowed people to accept the message of being grateful, saving for the rainy days, and living within your means [. . .] My wife and I now have a different strategy for our church funerals. Stay away from cultural competitions and extravagant show when performing our Samoan culture’. In these cases, and unlike the adaptations made by, for example, Māori interlocutors (who described adjustments to cultural protocols as temporary measures), the pandemic was birthing new traditions of practice with potential to persist in a post-COVID world.⁷

Given that many Samoans have felt ambivalent towards *fa’alavelave* for decades, with calls for their reform widespread but failing to gain traction (Shankman, 2018), the question arises as to why the COVID-19 pandemic should have proven so decisive in initiating new traditions of practice, at least in such milieux as Fred’s *aiga* and Peter’s church.

Cross-cultural work by anthropologists underscores that mortuary rituals ‘play a role in the expression of personal and social worth – or wealth in people . . . and money is part of that expression’ (Mulder, 2020, p. 245). Thus, even when ‘people know the difficulties funeral expenses will cause’ and are riven with ‘ambivalence and paradoxical feelings’, the ‘dialectic of interiorised norms and social pressures often convince the vast majority of social actors to organise funerals beyond their means . . . Expenses are conduits of honour rather than mere ostentatious consumption’ (Noret, 2012, pp. 279–283). Prior ethnographic work in Aotearoa reveals that funeral arrangers of all cultural backgrounds will take on funeral debt when they consider it integral to ‘acting responsibly’ towards the deceased and fellow mourners (McManus & Schäfer, 2014, p. 394), while Samoan failure to participate fully in *fa’alavelave* can result in shame, loss of status, and ostracism (Gershon, 2012, pp. 41–42; Seiuli, 2015, p. 110; Shankman, 2018). Indeed, even after the 2009 tsunami in Samoa – a time of hardship, during which Samoa’s Head of State actively encouraged funerary simplicity – families arranging a simple funeral still faced ‘pressure to have a more elaborate ritual’ (Seiuli et al., 2016, p. 3).

That COVID-19 inaugurated new traditions of practice does not merely reflect the opportunities it offered to reassess priorities but also a shift in the allocations of responsibility undergirding funerary arrangements. Pre-pandemic, responsibility for decisions to keep a funeral simple, or not attend in person, lay with funeral arrangers and mourners. Consequently, even in the difficult circumstances of the 2009 tsunami, such decisions could lead to personal criticism and shame. During COVID-19, however, decisions were taken out of the hands of Samoans living in Aotearoa. Small funerals had been mandated

by the New Zealand government and rendered necessary by the pandemic (reflected in respondents' frequent use of such phrasing as 'thanks to COVID'). The ethical and affective potentials of a simplified funeral topology under such circumstances were thus not the same as if the format had been freely chosen.

While some interlocutors, like Manu, expressed guilt that their loved one was denied the traditional funeral that they might have wanted or deserved, nobody reported feeling pressured or judged by other people. Without such criticism (or the fear thereof), it became possible to engage positively with the new topology in its own right. Peter, who had officiated at five funerals during lockdown, described how, although they were 'unlike our typical full-on Samoan funeral', with 'no extravagant show of ... *fa'aSamoa*', the 'support for the family was still felt [...] It was simple but still honourable and respectful'. He had enjoyed novel aspects of the format, such as 'our young people [being] centre-staged' due to their aptitude with technology. Longstanding funerary traditions, by contrast, were no longer seen as essential 'cultural responsibilities' but recast as 'extravagant'.

Indeed, the experience of funerary restrictions had led many research participants to appreciate the flexibility and resilience of their 'Samoanness'. This in itself was sometimes presented as a valuable epiphany occasioned by the pandemic. As Fred's friend George pointed out in their focus group, not travelling to Samoa had done nothing to diminish the value of Fred's title. 'Other people had stepped in to run the show', revealing that Fred's cultural obligations were not, in fact, obligatory. 'Maybe COVID came at the right time ...' George reflected. 'You're not wrong', Fred agreed, 'We're still Samoans with a Samoan culture whether we give thousands, millions, or maybe nothing'.

While scholars such as Albuquerque et al. (2021) present the limited autonomy that mourners experience under COVID-19 restrictions as an intrinsic deprivation that puts them at elevated risk of prolonged grief disorder, the material presented in this section reveals how being forced to deviate from established traditions may not only be a relief but can create liberating possibilities for expressing one's grief – and understanding oneself and one's culture – in new ways.

Conclusion

This account of life in Aotearoa during the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates that the very same funerary restrictions that initiate the 'most difficult times' of some people's lives can nevertheless provide relief and hope to others. Theorisations of funerary restrictions should be able to account for these diverse responses, yet the deprivation and adaptation models that currently predominate within the literature struggle to do so because both, ultimately, conceptualise funerary restrictions as intrinsically problematic. A better approach, we suggest, is to view funerary restrictions as something more neutral: a *disruption*. Such an analytic acknowledges that funerary restrictions often require dramatic breaks from established traditions of practice in ways that can prove distressing and may require innovative responses. However, it also acknowledges that disruptions – unlike deprivations – can have positive qualities, creating opportunities to reimagine and refashion one's traditions and enabling personal flourishing, at least for some (see, Long, 2019).

Several factors influence whether, and to what extent, the disruptions wrought by funerary restrictions give rise to relief or distress. Of particular significance is the stringency of the restrictions themselves – with those that provide no opportunities for gathering with people beyond one’s immediate bubble (e.g. Level 4 in Aotearoa) proving substantially more difficult than restrictions allowing even a modicum of interaction. The legitimacy of the authority imposing the restrictions should also be considered carefully when investigating restrictions in nation-states with colonial histories, such as Aotearoa. No less important, however, is the relationship one has to the disrupted funerary tradition. When that tradition was cherished and its enactment considered integral to the honouring of the deceased, being required to devise an alternative may prove stressful and distressing. Yet when a tradition is viewed with ambivalence, its prohibition may feel simultaneously unsettling and liberating, and devising modified forms of funerary practice less like ‘making do’ than a ‘new start’. As we have shown, this latter scenario has been the case for many Samoans living in Aotearoa, but it is not exclusive to them. Similar feelings of relief at being exempted from particular cultural or familial funerary traditions were reported by some research participants of Tongan and European background, and members of the research team have encountered comparable sentiments in a parallel study of funerary restrictions in the UK.

Three further conclusions stem from these findings. Firstly, research on the ways that different cultural groups are affected by COVID-19 restrictions must attend carefully to the specific – and often diverse – ways in which members of those demographics relate to their funerary traditions, rather than assuming an unambiguous identification with the normative cultural values their traditions exemplify. Secondly, pandemic control measures should not simply be seen as imposing ‘restrictions’. Rather, by actively requiring the development of alternative topologies, they give licence to innovate to those for whom decisions to deviate from established protocol would previously have been a source of shame. It is for this reason that lockdowns have proven pivotal in inspiring new traditions of (rather than temporary adjustments to) funerary practice amongst some Samoans in Aotearoa. Finally, this material reveals how central experiences of death and bereavement have been to many people’s narratives and figurations of ‘the pandemic’, ‘the lockdown’ and ‘COVID-19’. For Manu, funerary restrictions led to the lockdown being ‘the most difficult time of [his] life’. For others, the lockdown provided opportunities to rethink their relationship to their culture and develop new funerary practices. In this sense, COVID-19 was experienced as a ‘blessing’.

Our interlocutors had, of course, been insulated from the worst ravages of the pandemic by COVID-19’s rapid elimination from Aotearoa and its virtual absence from their Pacific homelands during 2020, and they might otherwise have characterised the pandemic rather differently. Nevertheless, academic accounts of COVID-19 must not shy away from documenting such ‘positive’ narratives (which are, in any case, shot with complicated feelings). Not only can they help us more fully understand the multiplicity of ways in which the pandemic has proven consequential, contributing to a broader intellectual project of writing against singularising narratives of the pandemic (Appleton et al., 2020). They also demonstrate how profound the tensions and frustrations associated with longstanding funerary traditions have truly been, inspiring critical reflection on how similar ambivalences might be averted or resolved once restrictions are lifted.

Notes

1. For a full overview of restrictions at each Alert Level, see <https://carulcollective.wordpress.com/summary-of-restrictions/>
2. For a detailed timeline, see <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-levels-and-updates/history-of-the-covid-19-alert-system/>
3. The historical development of these practices is documented in Seiuli (2015, pp. 83–132).
4. Given the sample size, we make no claims that the material presented here is representative of all Samoans in Aotearoa. Two skews were apparent in the Samoan respondent pool: residence (all but two interviewees lived in Auckland), and age (all but one were over 35).
5. Pseudonyms or demographic identifiers have been used for all research participants unless they specifically indicated that their first name be used. Survey quotes retain respondents' original spelling, grammar and punctuation.
6. See White (2016).
7. Whether and why such traditions persist as restrictions are lifted and vaccines rolled out remains a matter for ongoing research.

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Notes on contributor

This piece has been written by members of the Care and Responsibility Under Lockdown (CARUL) Collective. We are an international, interdisciplinary social science research group who have published on numerous aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand, including 'bubble' and 'buddy' arrangements, homeschooling, policing, social recovery, and the experiences of frontline workers. To find out more about us and our research, please visit our website, www.carulcollective.wordpress.com.

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