

## Death Rituals and Grief during the Pandemic of COVID-19: The Balinese Family Responses

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The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic leaves great number of human deaths since its first emergence. The Balinese that praise death through rituals should make some adjustment as there are some religious and traditional activities restriction to mitigate the COVID-19 pandemic. Studies on human rituals have indicated lifelong changes, including in funeral rituals. This research addresses the meaning and adjustment of the death rituals employing various sources and perspectives. Benefiting the investigative study, this research explores the impacts of the COVID 19 pandemic to the adaptation of death rituals practices by the Balinese. The research was conducted in Tabanan in the period from May-September 2021. The qualitative research design with focus on observation, in-depth interviews, and visual documentation of family members who lost other family members due to COVID-19 was employed. Data analysis was performed through inductive thematic analysis for data interpretation. Research results indicated that the experience of the sudden loss of family members due to COVID-19 is worsened because of the absence of the proper funeral rituals. The absence of rituals eliminates the social connections and social functions as it serves function as the social-cultural support to accept death. Additionally, it also diminish the grieving period as well as reducing the role of the traditional social institutions (*desa adat*) as the social-cultural supporter. This paper offers the deeper elaboration on how the Pandemic Covid-19 has affected the Balinese in overcoming death both socially and culturally.

*Kata kunci : Bali, COVID-19, death study, family, funeral ritual, Hindu cremation*

### ***Ritual kematian dan duka selama pandemi COVID-19: Respons keluarga Bali***

Pandemi global COVID-19 memiliki efek mendalam pada seluruh aspek kehidupan keluarga dan komunitas. Pandemi COVID-19 yang datang tanpa direncanakan dan dibayangkan oleh umat manusia berdampak pada tingginya jumlah kematian manusia. Ironisnya, pelbagai ritual penghormatan bagi yang meninggal tidak dapat dilakukan oleh keluarga karena adanya pembatasan kegiatan keagamaan dan adat. Studi tentang ritual manusia telah menunjukkan perubahan sepanjang hidup, termasuk ritual kematian. Dalam penelitian ini, makna dan penyesuaian ritual pemakaman didekati sebagai sumber untuk penjabaran mengenai makna ritus kematian. Artikel ini adalah studi investigatif terhadap dampak atas perubahan praktik upacara kematian pada masa pembatasan kegiatan masyarakat selama pandemi COVID-19 di Bali. Penelitian dilakukan di Kabupaten Tabanan Bali selama periode Mei-September 2021. Desain penelitian secara kualitatif dengan memfokuskan pada observasi, wawancara mendalam dan dokumentasi visual dari anggota keluarga yang anggota keluarganya meninggal akibat COVID-19. Analisis data dilakukan melalui analisis tematik induktif untuk interpretasi data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pengalaman kehilangan keluarga secara tiba-tiba akibat COVID-19 bertambah buruk karena absennya ritual pemakaman yang pantas. Absennya ritual menghilangkan fungsi dan koneksi sosial, kerja berkabung dan peran lembaga sosial masyarakat (adat) di lokasi penelitian dalam konteks pengalaman kehilangan, sambil menawarkan kepada keluarga yang ditinggalkan dukungan untuk menjadi bagian dari budaya dan pemahaman bersama tentang kematian.

*Keywords: Bali, COVID-19, keluarga, ngaben, ritual pemakaman, studi kematian*

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## INTRODUCTION

Religious rituals have long been recognized as one of the supporting aspects for family resilience (KPPPA, 2016; Puspitawati, 2012). Religious rituals as a manifestation of spirituality and religiosity (Imber-Black, 2020; Turner, 1969). The aspects of spirituality and religiosity are the determinants of family prosperity and are believed to play a part in forming resilient families (Cardoso *et al.*, 2020; Kaufman & Morgan, 2005; Walsh, 1996). Additionally, religious rituals play an important role for family welfare in dealing with threatening situations, one of which is the Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19).

The pandemic of COVID-19 is a hard hitter for humankind, even more so since many people spend their time at home. Since the appearance of COVID-19, enjoyment has been replaced by prolonged worry and fear. This condition emerges due to the waves of plentiful and inaccurate information that society has received. As an example, the struggle of discourses on social media in relation to COVID-19 has caused confusion in society (Wirawan *et al.*, 2021). A conducive home environment and family support through worship and religious activities are very much needed in order to maintain mental and spiritual in the midst of the uncertain conditions due to the pandemic. The prohibition by the state on conducting rituals in order to suppress the pandemic causes different reactions among the people. Some of them support and others oppose with various reasons. However, the government and religious organizations have agreed that during the pandemic, rituals must be postponed temporarily.

The pandemic has limited movements and changed habits of worship and rituals (Imber-Black, 2020; Lee & Neimeyer, 2020; Matsuda *et al.*, 2021). The daily rituals that occur at special times had to be reorganized. The practice of death ceremonies also was not exempted from the regulation. Death is understood as the change in the form of the presence of people who pass away. This situation causes grief for the people who are left behind (Silverman *et al.*, 2021, p. 6). Death, both medical and psychological, is the biological phenomenon of the loss of vital functions that support signs of human life. Based on sociological and anthropological aspects, their presence is recognized as the event or process of separation of the spirit and the body (Brussel & Carpentier, 2014; Robben, 2004). Meanwhile, death rituals are spaces of expression for loss that allows for connections among individuals within a community (Silverman *et al.*, 2021). This activity is a practice that involves cultural traditions to respect

the dead. Death rituals possess a special dimension for families as well as communities from which individuals originate. Death ceremonies are often illustrated as the momentum to release spirits or souls to their highest degree to unite with their creator in Eastern culture (Hindu). Death rites also mean the release of constructions of socio-culture that adhere to the human body. Thus, the ceremony at the same time also marks a new circle of life for the journey of a spirit (Engelke, 2019; Kiong & Schiller, 1993).

People of Bali who are known for the richness of ritual, culture, and religion activities believe that death rituals are sacred. When the pandemic intensified, all forms of death rituals had to be conducted as simply and immediately as possible (Cardoso *et al.*, 2020; Matsuda *et al.*, 2021). If a person died, the establishment of an auspicious day (*dewasa ayu*) to conduct the funeral rituals (*ngaben* or *metanem*) is quickly determined together with the chief of customary village (*desa adat*) and the priests. However, during the pandemic, all of those conditions became difficult to be fulfilled. People who died and were indicated to be infected with COVID-19 had to be immediately cremated or buried with minimal presence of family members. Chief of the Indonesian Council of Hinduism of Bali (PHDI Bali), I Gusti Ngurah Suidiana, stated that at least until pandemic conditions end, *ngaben* must not draw crowds; if a person died due to COVID-19, the person must be immediately cremated while still following health protocols, with music (*gamelan gong*) and coffins (*bade/wadah*) being absent (Tribunnews, 2020). This situation is considered to cause the lives of the people to be threatened because they judge that there are rituals that are not performed. This situation often causes unrest for not only extended families but also for the public. Families condition become weak with the pressure of stress and guilt toward extended families and other people. Although the intent is good, being to suppress the spread of COVID-19, the restrictions on rituals cause the situation to be not conducive. Yet as a good Hinduism, the ritual *ngaben* or *palebon* is required to be conducted and constituted as a form of respect to ancestors (Arsana *et al.*, 2014, p. 108).

For Balinese Hindu, *ngaben* is the evidence of the balance of life and relationships of people with God, human, and environment. For the families members who are left behind, this funeral practice represents an obligatory form of devotion to the souls of the dead (Suadityawan *et al.*, 2015, p. 1). In this ritual, bodies are burned as the form of sending off souls toward the Creator, and its execution always

involves relatives and the surrounding people (Arcana, 2021). The non-perform of dignified death rituals due to COVID-19 certainly causes pressure on the member of families. In addition to rituals are being an element of peace, satisfaction in conducting ceremonies and religious rituals is an element that supports the prosperity of families. Nonetheless, Balinese are creative people who will continue to innovate in conducting the funeral practice (Segara, 2020). Spiritual happiness through religious activities affect the resilience of a family, consequently, delaying the funeral ritual will affect the spiritual happiness of a family because it concerns the values that are believed and impeding the fulfillment of devotion to the ancestors. This research examines the influence of limiting the execution of death rituals activities toward the lives of the families and the cultural as well as the spiritual aspects in Bali. Specifically, these questions, among others, are posed: How are death rituals regulated during the pandemic in Tabanan Bali? What is the response of families to death by COVID-19 and the absence of rituals? What special strategies are conducted by Balinese families in order to the needs of spiritual fulfillment?

This study is fundamentally an effort to escape the domination of the theory of death that centers on the documentation of death rituals and the domination of institutional analysis. By exposing death as a social construction as explained by Leen van Brussel and Nico Carpentier (2014), this article establishes the concept that death is a continuous 'process' of forming meanings. The meaning of death is considered not fixed and universal. With the case of the pandemic, this article unveils the construction that is taken for granted regarding concepts, views, management practices and methods of a community in responding to the phenomenon of death. This article eventually makes the argument that death is fundamentally a space of negotiation between the living and the dead by involving the cultural narratives and constructions of a community. Therefore, this study is a work for seeing the formation of individual and societal views toward a death event during the pandemic.

### RESEARCH METHOD

This research adopts the method of qualitative research that emphasizes on cases of loss experiences by Balinese families. It was conducted in Tabanan Regency, Bali. The criteria of Balinese families that are intended for this research are those who belong to the Hindu religion, are active as part of customary villages members (*krama desa adat*) and have lost family members due to the COVID-19

pandemic. The limitation of the families invited in this research involve the extended family that expressing Balinese kinship.

Through the primary method of observation, in-depth interview, and visual documentation obtained from the closest people to COVID-19 victims, participants were selected based on some consideration viz. represented as husbands, wives, children, in-laws, nieces or nephews, and grandchildren related to family members who died because of COVID-19. There were 7 (seven) people were chosen who possess direct experience of the loss of family members and underwent the performance of funeral practices, whether through cremation (*ngaben* or *mekingsan di gni*) or direct burial (*mendem ing pertiwi*). Additional respondents that were interviewed in this research were priests, the Indonesian Hinduism Council (PHDI province Bali and Tabanan regency), and the representatives of customary villages. The names of those involved in this research are kept confidential to protect them from indirect pressure that emerges from traditional social institutions (*desa adat* and *banjar*) or other family members.

The participants involved in this research were interviewed in a closed manner at their homes and a few others at their workplaces during the midst of July until the end of August 2021. All interviews were conducted under strict health protocols. All of the interviews were conducted by the first and second authors. Most of the interviews were conducted with usage of Indonesian and Balinese languages. The first and second authors are Balinese people, which facilitates interaction at the early stage of conducting the research. Even so, because this research is categorized as a sensitive research, the interviews were not conducted in a hurried manner. The execution of the interviews depended on the preparedness of research respondents on the field. The interview results in verbatim were then processed with inductive thematic analysis for similarities of themes and patterns that emerge from respondent narratives. At the final stage, all researchers had the obligation to read over the entirety of the themes in order to obtain the same representative understanding of the textual narrative of respondents.

### DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Death is an unsolvable mystery. Not every person is able to accept death that befalls a beloved family member. In order to identify practices of funeral practices and grief management by Balinese families in relation to COVID-19, the aspects that were

examined are on how changes to death rituals take place, for both funeral and cremation. This study reveals a description of the conditions of death experienced by Balinese families during the pandemic, namely in regulations, responses, and spiritual strategies. Thus, it becomes important to see how death is regulated during the pandemic through state and traditional regulations.

#### **'Regulating' death during the pandemic**

The protocol for the handling of bodies of people infected with COVID-19 had been regulated by the Decree of the Minister of Health number HK01.07/MENKES/413/2020 issued on 13 July 2020 (this Decree repeals Decree HK.01.07/MENKES/247/2020 on the same subject). However, the Indonesian Council of Hinduism (PHDI) in Jakarta issued a circular letter number 312/SE/PHDI Pusat/III/2020 on the guidelines for caring for the body and the *Pitra Yajna* (for human beings) for the bodies of COVID-19 Patients (*Pedoman Perawatan Jenazah dan Upacara Pitra Yajna bagi Jenazah Pasien COVID-19*) on 27 March 2020. Considering the timeline of the COVID-19 outbreak in Indonesia, it appears that the enactment of the circular letter was as a response to the speech by the Indonesian President Joko Widodo on 15 March 2020. The circular letter established guidelines for handling based on regulations from the ministry of health. It affirmed the standard operating procedures regarding the care of bodies from the point they are declared dead to when the cremation or funeral process is completed. The PHDI letter stated that the death ceremony, which is called as *pitra yajna* (sacrifices for human being), during the COVID-19 pandemic was explained to be able to be conducted up to cremation (*mendem/makingsan ring agni*) or funeral (*mendem ring prthiwi*) with minimal offerings (in the Balinese term as *banten*). The process may not involve the participation of many people.

The circular letter also explained that holy waters such as *tirtha penglukatan-pabersihan* (the two are applied for the soul cleanser before one starts the ritual) and *thirta pangentas* (applied for the cremation of the dead) were asked to the high priests (*pedanda pamuput karya*) at the brahmin compound (*griya sulinggih*). According to Ida Pedanda Putra Keniten, the high priest from Griya Gede Timpag Tabanan, *thirta penglukatan and pabersihan* are the type or holy waters is used in every ritual and it can be produced by high priest and a lay priest (*pemangku*). However, the *thirta pangentas* is a holy water performed by the high priest which also to accompany in the cremation in order to help the dead to find the smooth path in journey to heaven. The

late of holy waters only produced by high priest (Interview with Ida Pedanda Putra Keniten 9 September 2021). The process of funeral during pandemic at the graveyard is conducted by a presence of a lay priest (*pemangku* or *pinandita lokapalasaraya*), customary village representatives (*saksi desa adat*), offerings specialist (*serati* or *tukang banten*), and family members in limited numbers. The funeral practices may be conducted directly only through the procession of body burning or cremation. Meanwhile, for bodies that are buried, the *ngaben* process cannot be conducted directly or according to the customs of each traditional villages (*sima*). The circular letter of PHDI also accommodates groups of Hindu people who do not recognize the *ngaben* tradition by regulating the funeral process based on burial procedures.

The PHDI Bali and the Majelis Desa Adat Provinsi Bali (MDA Bali) responded to the circular letter of PHDI Pusat by holding a joint meeting (*paruman*) on 28 March 2020 at Denpasar. The document is signed by the head of PHDI Bali I Gusti Ngurah Sudiana, Bendesa Agung MDA Bali Ida Pangelingsir Putra Sukahet, and the Bali Governor I Wayan Koster as the government representation. The decision of the meeting, both parties agreed to issue Joint Decree (*surat keputusan bersama*) number 020/PHDI-Bali/III/2020 and Number 04/SK/MDA-Prov Bali/III/2020 on the regulation for the execution of the five kinds of holy sacrifice (*Panca Yadnya*) ceremony and/or traditional village activities (*aktivitas adat*) during the pandemic in Bali. The primary consideration for the issuance of this joint decree is the order of the president a speech on 15 March 2020 on the spread of the coronavirus in Indonesia, Indonesian police chief notice number Mak/2/III/2020 on 19 March 2020 on the compliance with government policies for handling the spread of the virus, data on the spread of COVID-19 that tended to increase, and circular letter of PHDI Pusat No. 312/SE/PHDI Pusat/2020 (Interview with PHDI Bali, 27 August 2021). The PHDI Bali and the MDA Bali felt that it was necessary to create stipulations for the execution of the *yadnya* (in Kawi *yajna*, sacrifice) ceremony and other traditional activities. As such, the context in this joint decree is the regulation of rituals and *adat*/customary activities (Interview with MDA, 27 August 2021). This decision caused disappointment for the people, which consequently led to a pileup of bodies in hospitals (see [Winatha, 2021](#)).

The number of deaths caused by COVID-19 in Bali when the research was conducting in September 2021 reached 506 people and that number reached 4561 on May 13, 2022 ([Pusat Krisis Kemenkes,](#)

2022). The situation left challenges and difficulties to execute the funeral ceremony. In the beginning, many death bodies (*layon*) of those infected with COVID-19 were not suggested to be cremated concerning the potentials of spreading infection. Many authorities suggested government that the bodies should be buried. However, the circular letter from PHDI Pusat and the joint decree of PHDI Bali and MDA Bali emphasis that the funeral can be conducted directly through cremation, but this practice is acknowledged as an incomplete ritual yet (*tidak lengkap*). If the body has been infected by COVID-19, families or other people are not allowed to conduct rituals such as bathing the corpse (*nyiraman layon*) and other processes that involve direct contact with the body. The similar practices are also applied for those who died without Covid-19 infection with the exceptions for the high priest and a lay priest. Even so, this joint decree also accommodated for *ngaben* rituals that cannot be postponed on the condition that the ceremony is conducted in a modest way, with limited attendance and without generating crowds.

### **The response of Balinese families**

The COVID-19 pandemic is a disaster that was never imagined by Balinese families. Many families who experienced losses of family members considered that the death is not one that could be imagined. Consequently, the sudden loss of family members can lead to the loss of hope, prosperity, and peace within the families. In the midst of uncertain situations due to limitations resulted from the strict government regulations that are supported by state agencies and local institutions (*desa adat*), the illustration of death and narration of family endurance has never been fully presented. The following are responses to deaths due to COVID-19 for the Balinese family members.

### ***Death by COVID-19 as an unanticipated and terrifying matter***

Family members who loss their family due to a death by COVID-19 stated that they completely never expected that one of their family members would become a victim. As expressed by AS (40 years old) who shocked upon finding out that the aunt of IAS was hospitalized and declared to be infected by COVID-19. His aunt, MN (62 years old) suffers from a chronic kidney failure. After examining that his aunt's condition was not good, IAS contacted his cousin, who lives in Denpasar, to go home immediately to bring his mother to the hospital in Tabanan. After several hours, the aunt had been cared at the hospital, and this brought relief to the family. However, grief came to them several days

later, precisely on a day before the feast day of Galungan (Hindu Balinese day). On Thursday, 15 April 2021, the village chief (*kepala desa dinas*) came to their house to inform that MN had died due to COVID-19 infection. This unexpected situation shocked them. At the same time, only a little neighbor came and everyone restrained themselves from visiting as they are obediently waiting for information from the village chief. This situation was described by our interlocutor,

“COVID-19 came so suddenly. I do not know why our family experienced such a disaster. We did not know what we had to do. Everything became dark and no one knew what we had to do in these conditions. This situation is unusual; it seems that no one cared about the problem that we were experiencing.” (Interview with AS, 26 May 2021).

The concerns of families who have family members infected with COVID-19 are quite well-founded. No one suspected that COVID-19 would infect their family members so easily. Several other family members tended to question the situation that is quite unfair for them. Family members wonder why MN, who is considered as a good person (*orang baik*), had to die because of this plague. Eventually, the unexpected situation brings about another fear, which is the uncertainty of how they would face the situation, specifically regarding the wish of the family to hold proper death ritual.

Two matters that often came up facing the family members is the loss of access to grieving and there is no certainty to be allowed performing a death ritual. The loss of an opportunity for the member of family to see the dead body or the inability to treat the dead body properly becomes a trigger for their anxiety. An example from another family is storied by IBS's son at Tabanan who is dead on 24 August 2021. IBA's father, another interlocutor, was declared dead due to COVID-19 at the age of 59 years (Figure 1). The father, a civil servant retiree, initially complained of chest pains and requested to be brought to a public hospital for an intensive medical checkup. Upon arrival, the treatment is run by the medical staff. After the medical examination process was conducted, laboratory test showed that his father was infected with COVID-19. A follow-up examination procedure was conducted on IBA (23 years), whose test results were declared negative. The doctor suggested IBA go home and conducted a self-quarantine. Two days later, the hospital informed him by phone about the death of the father. None of the extended family or him could believe what happened. “*Ajik* [father] was well. He never complained of severe illness. Since COVID-

19, he rarely went out of the house. We asked him to just stay at home. Even my cousin, who is a doctor, often reminded us that my father be kept mindful of his activities. We could not imagine how he is suffered alone [passing on] to his death.” (Interview with IBA, 5 September 2021).



Figure 1. Situation of burying the body of IBS (59 years old) due to COVID-19 in Banjar Anyar Kediri, Tabanan. The rest of the family only watched from 100 meters away from the burial site, as this photo angle was taken. (Source: IBO, 2021)

One of the intentions of this unexpected event is the emergence of the assumption that family members who die in general “did not experience a serious illness” (*tidak mengalami sakit serius*). This understanding is continuously accompanied by the emergence of hoax or fake news. For example, MD (55 years old), one of the public figures in Tabanan, suspected that the issue regarding death that is referred by the term “claimed as COVID-19 (Indonesian: *di-COVID-kan*)” may be right. The narrative that is obtained from conversations with colleagues affirms the opinion. Waves of discussions from social media such as WhatsApp groups affirm such ideas of conspiracy. This kind of issue usually becomes the suspicion of the people due to the lack of access to deceased family members.

### **Rejection of the situation**

Sudden losses have caused trauma for family members who are still alive. The inability of family members in gaining access to deceased relatives led to anger that tended to be accompanied by rejection of the situation. The absence of access to organize memorial ceremonies placed stress on the family. The family who had felt abandoned by their neighbors and other people obtained information from various parties on events that occurred after family members were buried. For example, PD (34 years old) told of the situation when MN died:

“On that day, I was late in hearing about the death of MN. My family and I had gone to our relative who lived in another town. Information about the death of MN I obtained when we were on our way home.

It was already close to home at that time. So, when we arrived home, it was late in the afternoon. I was surprised - no neighbors were around. It was very quiet. I changed clothes quickly. The time was already close to Six PM. It was already twilight [*sandikal*]. I rode my motorcycle to the graveyard [*sema*] at the end of the village. Upon arrival at Pura Dalem (temple), several neighbors stopped my motorcycle and gave a sign for me to pull over. From them, I knew that the *bangbang* [grave] had already been dug. The situation that day was very creepy. When the body came with the ambulance, none of us dared to come close. We stood 200 meters from the funeral location. The others were even farther, silent and close to *Dalem* temple. The *strongking* [kerosene] lamp that was hung between the coconut trees gave sufficient light to the activities that night. The burial was very quick. Once it was done, we all immediately and quickly left. Without serves offerings [*banten*], it seems that we are just burying an animal.” (Interview with PD, 5 August 2021).

The threatening situation did not stop there, a few days after that death, the villagers started to feel restless. NS (female, 46 years old) who lived in the same houseyard (*natah* or *pekarangan*) with PD told her unique experience after the death of MN. “Every night, there was a crying that could be heard in the gap beside the brahmin compound (*griya*). My husband and I felt afraid of the happening. The sound was clear, but then over time it disappeared. It has been three days that I have heard the sound. It was MN's voice; I knew her voice very well. Her soul must be unable to enter the home. How unfortunate her family is.” In the Balinese tradition, death that is considered to be untimely, called as *ulah pati*, indeed often causes an uproar (Suyatra, 2018). The belief that the spirits of deceased people cannot go back to their homes because they are “not yet clean” (*belum bersih*) causes the threatening situation in the village. The soul of this death is considered not yet able to be accepted by the ancestors. Therefore, the *ngaben* as funeral ritual needs to be conducted to free the soul in order to be able to reenter the premises of the family home (*sanggah kemulan*).

Narratives regarding COVID-19 victims who died unreasonably or had not been given *banten* (ceremonies) is a developing discourse in Bali. Even so, a lay of priest of Prajapati temple informed us that the burial of bodies with COVID-19 still peruses simple offerings consisting of betel (*canang*) and *segehan*. The principle is the informing of the god of Durga in the *setra* (place of burial) about the burial of the body. The *Pemangku* has the pretext that if such a request were not made, the consequences

would be worse for a village. Balinese people are known to possess complex rituals of transfer, which includes death rituals. Balinese people very much believe in life after death in their cycle of life (see [Sebestény & Emmons, 2017](#)). This kind of narrative continues to be produced, causing feelings of discontent, embarrassment, sadness, and anger for the family members. The primary anger is directed to oneself, and after the situation has calmed down, the next target is the community. This situation was revealed when the first author participated in a grave-digging activity at Kerambitan Tabanan. Our interlocutor AS expressed anger as the following:

“Just wait! I will always remember that event [the dead is aunt]. When my mother [MN, his aunt] died, not one of them came close; everyone looked from afar. They only saw. Traditional village officials who should have supported us also kept a distance. I feel *kutang banjar* [casted away by the community neighborhood/wards]. One day when someone in their family dies, I will be silent. Just wait.” (Interview with AS, 6 August 2021).

This situation indicates that during the pandemic, the social support that is renowned to be possessed by Balinese society seemingly disappears. The neighbors chose to stay and restrain themselves in their respective homes. Few people have the courage to just come to show condolences. If anyone comes, most of them sit near the entrance of the house which is guarded by village security officers (*Hansip* and *Pecalang*). They complied, awaiting guidance from *desa adat* officials regarding the situation. In this case, the loss of social networks in society and suspicion in social organizations of the people becomes a challenge for the wards (*banjar*) and traditional village (*desa adat*) during the pandemic.

#### **Powerlessness due to the absence of death rituals**

No meaningful effort could be made to repay the family ‘debts’ (*utang*) to people who have died during the pandemic. Rituals as final respects for the people who died (*palatra*) could not possibly be conducted during the pandemic due to permission that are certainly difficult to obtain. In general, for Balinese, death rituals are one of the forms of tributes for children when their parents die. Death rituals are a symbol that children have repaid their debts to their parents. This does not mean that the relationship between parents and children has ended. However, during the pandemic, death rituals could not be conducted directly.

When the pandemic came, death became a matter that could not be fully predicted by Balinese families. Isolated death experienced by Covid 19

victim from the time their illness to burial without the presence of their family already becomes a painful matter as well as the powerlessness of the family to hold ceremonies, becomes less acceptable by most respondents. A woman named DK (47 years) whose older sister died due to COVID-19 explained the following:

“When my sister was reported died on 4 July 2021, we realized that it is impossible to hold funeral ritual directly. We thought that cremation would be performed. But my suspicions were incorrect, and it turns out my sister in the end was buried directly that very day. We observed the [burial] process from far away. We did not understand the family decision there (Kediri, Tabanan) with *adat* officials. It was the first time that it happened. We come from the highest caste, a Brahmana family. There was never a story of our family being buried. We have the special right for *ngaben*. But now, it seems that the right is useless. Everyone has to obey the government, no matter who we are [our backgrounds].” (Interview with DK, 30 August 2021).

The situation of powerlessness and the inability to conduct the *pengabenan* ritual must be obeyed by families. State and *adat* regulations have the consequence of being non-negotiable by members of society. For Hindu followers whose family members died because of COVID-19, the execution of funeral practices of the *palatra* along with the series of other accompanying ceremonies is usually conducted by cremation (*makingsan ing Gni*) or buried (*makingsan ing Pertiwi*), without the sound of slit-log drum (*kulkul*) and member of village community (*nedunang krama adat*), directly at the *setra* of each *desa adat* or a crematorium that allows, while still adhering to strict and disciplined health protocols (Surat PHDI Bali Number 078/2021).

#### **Special strategies for spiritual fulfillment**

Prohibition of death rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic in Bali was fundamentally based on joint circular number 076/PHDI-Bali/VIII/2021 and 008/SE/MDA-Prov Bali/VIII/2021 on the limiting of activities of the *Panca Yadnya* and crowds in Bali in the situation of pandemic (*gering agung*) COVID-19 that was issued jointly by PHDI Bali and MDA Bali on 14 September 2020. The usage of the term “*gering agung*” (a great diseases) indicated the scale of the pandemic in Bali by *sekala* and *niskala* (seen and unseen world). By *sekala*, it can be seen that the two organizations are committed to support government policies fully. The important point of the circular letter is that traditional villages need to carry out commemoration (*ngepeng-ngepeng*)

within the sphere of physical world (*sekala*) and its relationship with the metaphysical world (*niskala*). *Ngeneng* means that all community members (*krama desa adat*) are encouraged to stay at home (*meneng*) according to government recommendations, work and worship can be conducted from home. *Ngening* means that all community members and guests pray morning and evening at their respective shrines. For Hindu Balinese, *gering agung* is also properly regarded by praying in each temple (*pura*) belonging to the *desa adat* and the family clan. During the pandemic, some of the strategies that were conducted by Balinese families who grieve due to death by COVID-19 in the midst of reductions and prohibitions are (i) partaking in burials according to government protocols, (ii) utilizing crematorium services for cremation and the *ngaben* ritual, (iii) following the suggestion of the *desa adat* to wait for the allowing of permits to hold death ceremonies, and (iv) sharing memories through social media or family groups.

In the middle of the uncertain situation, Balinese families are not completely silent. They actively seek information from *sulinggih* (high priests), the wards member, or other media for information. For example, the family of MN utilized their status as a temple priest (*pemangku*) that possesses rights in the cremation ritual to approach actively to the leader of the *desa adat* and *banjar* to ask for the possibilities of being allowed to conduct *ngaben*. The family actively consulted to high priest regarding actions that might be conducted to bring calmness for deceased spirits. To conduct cremation outdoor clearly cannot longer be done because it is regarded as tantamount to violating the regulations of the *desa adat*.

Several Balinese families realized such a situation during limitations and worry due to the difficulty of obtaining permission to conduct the funeral ritual in the *desa adat*. Crematoria are considered as a way to resolve the problem (see, for example, [Pitana, 2020](#); [Suadityawan et al., 2015](#); [Suka Arjawa, 2016](#)). This was revealed by respondent AW (40 years old), whose mother was declared died due to COVID-19. When the mother died, the family established coordination with other families. Their extended family who lives in Singaraja - Buleleng offered for the body of the mother to be cremated at the crematorium managed by the *desa adat* Buleleng (Figure 2). With this information, the Buleleng family organized the funeral ritual with the managers of the crematorium of the Yayasan Pengayom Umat Hindu (YPUH), and the family in Tabanan coordinated with the Sanglah General Hospital in Denpasar. The cremation process for the

body was attended by only representative family members, the COVID-19 task force, assigned military/police/traditional police (*pecalang*) personnel, crematorium managers, offerings specialist, and the *sulinggih* who led the ceremony. All ritual equipment and priests are provided by the crematorium. Other family members then participated in the following ritual, which is the scattering of the ashes of the body in the sea.



Figure 2. Crematorium for the burning of COVID-19 bodies at Setra Gede Buleleng, Bali. Our research interlocutors in Tabanan used this crematorium to cremate their mother due to the scarcity of crematorium services during the pandemic. (Source: I Wayan Suyadnya, 2021)

The scattering of ashes of the body was conducted at the Beach of Buleleng Harbor. After scattering the ashes of the body, the following ritual was conducted under the leadership of two priests. This ceremony was similar to the *ngaben* for non-COVID-19 (Figure 3). The difference was only on following health protocols, which was continuously reminded by the crematorium managers. Even so, not all of the people followed the advice. Close to 6 PM in the evening, the ritual was completed, and next, rituals were conducted with involvement of each family. In the days of the pandemic, 20 bodies were cremated by the crematorium. Of these, 10 bodies infected with COVID-19 were cremated at the upper location and 10 non-COVID-19 bodies were cremated at the lower location. Cremation was divided into three batches, two batches in the morning and one batch in midday. For the family of AW, the usage of the crematorium during the pandemic helped to overcome the problem of the absence of death rituals. For families who are less able, the families only pay approximately 24 million rupiahs. This is far cheaper than other services in Klungkung and Bangli ([Rosidin, 2021](#); [Suarsana, 2020](#); [Yayasan Dharma Kusuma, 2020](#)). For other families who do not possess sufficient funds, they could elect only to conduct cremation without being followed by other rituals.





Figure 3. Ngeroras ceremony during COVID-19  
(Source: I Wayan Suyadnya, 2021)

For other families who cannot conduct the *pengabenan* ritual or cremation in the short term, nothing else can be done except to wait until permits for conducting cremation are approved. This situation is indeed admitted to carry negative energy in the family. For Balinese families, sharing grief and mourning cannot be done as with funerals for non-Hindu followers, such as those which are conducted by Muslims or Christians. At a time when mourning and grieving for death is carried out through a Zoom Meeting, this practice is still taboo to be conducted for Balinese families. For families, the only kind of grieving that can be done is to speak with other family members or to share memories through photos on social media such as WhatsApp groups. This kind of practice becomes commonly conducted by the youths, though occasional for older generations. These strategies are considered effective to bring peace to families at a time when the series of proper rituals in order to honor deceased family members cannot be conducted.

### **An appropriate ritual and a dignified death**

The death ritual and the grief in the context of sociology and anthropology indicate a multidimensional experience from a “loss” (*kehilangan*). Physically, a loss means having something gone, never to return. Death is a loss that exists in the cycle of life of people after the events of birth, childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, followed by aging. Thus, death becomes the peak of reality for the physical life of people. During a loss event, an experience of loss is formed by social, cultural, historical, and political factors (Silverman *et al.*, 2021). Death that is caused by the pandemic in this case is responded as a confusing, terrifying, and unexpected matter for Balinese families. Families also react to reject the situation that is present due to losses during the pandemic. In the end, a situation of powerlessness and uncertainty

must be faced by the family members who are left behind. The high rate of death due to COVID-19 has forced the world to adapt with new habits that are very much different from the previous situation.

The death ritual can be considered as a way for people to express their loss (Bann, 1998; Robben, 2004; Testoni *et al.*, 2021). For Balinese families, death also means the loss of family members (see Barth, 1993; Sebestény & Emmons, 2017; Wikan, 1990), but the deeper meaning concerns the linkage between those who are dead and those who are alive. As such, death does not stop at the context of physical loss, but is a step to trace the imaginary space of the life-death dimension. For Balinese people, “ancestors” possess an important position in supporting the continuity of life for those who are alive. Balinese people believe that the *ngaben* ritual, for one, is the basis for those who have died to prepare themselves in the process of rebirth.

One of the most upsetting matters during the pandemic is the limitation of conducting “proper” rituals for those who have died. Death rituals must be conducted in order to balance things that are seen and unseen (*sekala* and *niskala*) for marking the end of the cycle of life. For these reasons of balance and harmony, rituals and worship become an important element for Balinese people (Fox, 2015). Additionally, Balinese society is facing the demands of the complexity of preparing for rituals (Karuni *et al.*, 2019) even before the pandemic. Furthermore, referring to the facilities preparation for the ritual itself, the demands of the socio-economic status within it also plays an important role. The function of the socio-economic status of the family also becomes a consideration for families when death rituals cannot be conducted directly. The absence of this honoring procession is considered to lessen respect toward the ancestors. This situation can be seen in the families whose Brahmana status, who in the end were willing to allow the body of one of their family members to be buried because of having been infected by COVID-19.

During the pandemic, as in other places, the execution of death rituals in Bali has changed. The PHDI and the MDA strictly regulated the execution of death rituals to follow health protocols that consequently caused changes in the organization of death rituals in general. During the period of deaths due to COVID-19, there was almost no opportunity for families to send off the deceased family in a proper way. The time leading up to death for sufferers of COVID-19 was filled with emptiness because it can be assured that they are not allowed to be accompanied by family or loved ones. Families

did not have the opportunity to see their family members one last time or ensure that they indeed have died. There was no ritual of cleansing the body according to the adhered Hindu religion. There was no longer the mobilization of people (*ayahan*) as a tribute of the community to the deceased. The vanishing of rituals becomes the assumption of the persistence of the pandemic. As a result, families may just experience a great sense of loss due to the sudden departure of family members who are the main support of the family.

Grief for Balinese families is not only about the loss of family members due to death, but more about the regret for the inability to organize death rituals properly. For Balinese people, death is a natural event that they consider as the moment for spirits to take off their worn 'clothes' (*tubuh*) and change to new one. Therefore, death according to Balinese people is an event that must be commemorated properly and with great joy. Death is welcomed with a grand ceremony that contains the meaning of commemorating a progression toward something new. So, according to the Balinese, death is an event that must be celebrated properly. Death is greeted with a big ceremony which means there is a commemoration to something new. A good and dignified death is everyone's hope (Brussel, 2014).

Death rituals facilitate the purpose of conciliation of the living and the dead. Death rituals provide a guarantee for both parties to create conditions that support each other. The implementation of a proper ritual and 'good' death is believed to be able to lead the spirit to follow the right journey to heaven. The belief of Balinese families that the soul who is delivered properly, through rituals, they will arrive at another step of Hinduism life circle, namely preparation for reincarnation. Thus, the fear of Balinese families is not only limited to the dead but further is the reincarnation of the next generation. This means that Balinese families emphasize the importance of regeneration within the family

During the pandemic, there are nothing may be called as a good death and what is left is only bad death (Simpson *et al.*, 2021). As explained in the previous analysis, the ritual is the main component in assessing the merits of the meaning of death. It can be understood that the pandemic of COVID-19 has brought the phenomenon of 'bad' deaths from the perspective of the Balinese family. In uncertain situations, various strategies are conducted by families in order to create harmony between the living and the dead. There are efforts for families to focus on the stabilization of communal elements that form the frame and construction of grief in society,

such as social norms, rituals, social institutions of *banjar* and *desa adat*, and social relationships. This view explains that grief and death has an important position in the culture of Balinese society. Disturbances in the ritual function are disturbances in the relation between individuals and society as well as a provocation of the imbalance in the cosmos of the universe. If rituals for the death of an individual cannot be performed according to the prevailing general culture, this becomes an overall problem. Thus, it is clear that in the end, the issue of managing grief for death by COVID-19 is a form of culture-based pathology.

The findings of this research give a strong indication of the existence of psychological social anxiety in Balinese families. The belief of holding an improper ritual is interpreted as a lack of capability to serve the ancestors. Therefore, a greater source of anxiety for Balinese families is the possibility of reincarnation will not happen in the future. Hindu Balinese believe that the implementation of the ritual adheres to the concept of space (*desa*), time (*kala*), and ways or habits (*patra*). This concept means that the implementation of rituals is managed by the rules of customary law and in this case the decision on the form of rituals which should be conducted based on each rule. However, this study shows that the psychological comfort of Balinese in accepting the death of family members is not always in line with customary decisions, especially the practices surrounding of the preparation and dedication of offerings (*banten upakara*). The period of ritual preparation, starting from the moment of death is basically a way to allocate more time for the family to 'take care' of the deceased. This phase sociologically marks the space for Balinese families to manage their social identity changes due to the death of a family member. Families that are fragile due to loss can continue the social ties that exist among them. The deference of rituals is often considered as something that extends the guilt of the family to the deceased, the ancestors, and their communal society. The deference of rituals only extends the pain and guilt of families and does not provide solutions for the problems that emerge in the pandemic situation. The vanishing of rituals in the end causes the failure of the family to construct memories of the people who have died for their community. Ultimately, death rituals in Bali are the placement of a post-death status for grieving families in a broader manner. In its practice, the pandemic opens up the space that the formation of new meanings and ideas exceeds the discourse of cultural constructions through communal narratives. This article finally takes the prediction that the presence of innovative grief strategies during the

pandemic, such as the execution of cremations in crematoria, drives a transformation of rituals, traditions, emotions, and expressions of faith or social organization (*adat*) in Bali.

Van Brussel and Carpentier (2014), who borrowed the concept of discourse from Laclau and Mouffe, see that the constructive discourse and cultural narrative regarding death is brought from an argument that is carried by the community. When the meaning of death – in this case ritual practices that accompany it – is considered as an element that can be taken for granted, the dominant construction of the structure of death is then considered as something that is difficult to change. It becomes clear that the pandemic in the end changes not only perceptions regarding death rituals but also the meaning of death itself. Previously, death ritual is considered as a sacral process that is luxurious and involves “prestige”, now it takes a new meaning as ‘an ordinary event’ due to the efficiency, economy, politics, and the spread of conflict in *desa adat* and *banjar* that occurs in the cycle of life (rite of passage).

### CONCLUSION

Death caused by the COVID-19 pandemic inviting complex problems for families in Balinese society. Moreover, it caused a hindrance in the execution of death rituals to purify the spirit. The restriction of the *ngaben* ritual is taken as the failure of the family in providing proper honoring for the deceased as it is not only meaningful as a form of family tribute, but also a guarantee for family stability in the midst of a disaster situation since the aspect of a belief system based on ancestors becomes the basis of the strength for family resilience in facing a crisis. Since the ritual system of the Balinese Hindu community is dynamic, which allows flexibility in performing rituals, the deference of the execution of the *pengabenan* ceremony is realized through various ways such as conducting burial ceremonies, performing cremation in crematoria, and obeying government regulations by reluctantly waiting until permits are granted. Although the cremation performed in crematoria is considered as the best strategy, but there is the emerging tendency that several Balinese families at the village level have begun to consider *ngaben* ceremonies through crematoria because they are considered simpler, timesaving, uncomplicated, and efficient. The conclusion of this article is that death during the COVID-19 pandemic opens up a transformative space of the transfer of death rituals from being based on the *desa adat* to the management of crematoria, which consequently leads to the

possibility of the transfer to a simpler execution of rituals for Balinese families. In other words, death during the pandemic at its peak is a site of negotiation for the living and the dead, the traditional and the modern, and the body and the spirit.

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