Denial, solidarity and protest. Changing attitudes toward death in pandemic times

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Abstract: *In this article, I explore the ways in which people have dealt with death since the COVID-19 pandemic arrived in the Netherlands. Using a dossier with newspaper articles, tweets, Facebook posts, books, online stories, and interviews, I trace cultural patterns or so-called death mentalities. The theoretical framework is based on both P. Ariès's and M.H. Jacobsen's characteristics of different ways of dealing with death, which involve both ideas and practices. A tentative conclusion is that, on the one hand, there is denial of death; on the other hand, changes in ritual indicate a protest against death caused by the coronavirus.*

Keywords: *Death mentalities, Philippe Ariès, funerals, rituals, cultural patterns*

Negación, solidaridad y protesta. Cambios de actitud con respecto a la muerte en tiempos de pandemia

Resumen: *En este artículo se exploran las formas en que la sociedad holandesa ha afrontado la muerte desde la llegada de la pandemia COVID-19. A partir de un dossier con artículos de prensa, tuits, posts de Facebook, libros, historias en línea y entrevistas, se trazan los patrones culturales o las llamadas mentalidades en torno a la muerte. El marco teórico se basa tanto en las propuestas de Philippe Ariès como en las*

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de Michael H. Jacobsen sobre las diferentes formas de enfrentarse a la muerte. Estos patrones culturales se refieren tanto a las ideas como a las prácticas. Una conclusión provisional es que, por un lado, existe una negación de la muerte; por otro, los cambios rituales indican una protesta contra la muerte causada por el coronavirus.

Palabras clave: *Mentalidades en torno a la muerte, Philippe Ariès, funerales, rituales, patrones culturales*

1. Introduction

The moment I started writing this article (in September 2021), the predictions and emotions surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic in the Netherlands were conflicting. On the one hand, there was a strong sentiment against preventative measures, and many were inclined to resume life as if the coronavirus (hereafter "corona") no longer existed. On the other hand, many feared that there would be a resurgence of corona in the fall caused by the opening up of education and other relaxations of corona measures. Corona not only created a robust social debate on the streets, in the workplace, and in the media, but also led to new understandings about work, travel, climate, and dependency in the global economic order. The question, then, was whether these new insights had also led to new cultural patterns.

One of the key aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic that has thus far remained unaddressed concerns attitudes[2] toward death. According to the Dutch National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), nearly 23,000 people have died due to corona in the Netherlands since the outbreak.[3] The presence of death in society became especially visible through the iconic images of people in intensive care units (often lying on their stomachs and on life support), the rows of coffins in Bergamo (Italy),[4] and the external cooling units used for the deceased at crematoriums.[5] During the peaks of the pandemic, daily news sources reported the numbers of deaths. Many of these people died, almost silently, in nursing homes.[6] The question I want to explore in this article is whether the dominant presence of death in Dutch society due the coronavirus has led to new attitudes toward death, and thus to a new cultural pattern.

The question of how we deal with death has a long history. The tracing of cultural patterns in attitudes toward death was first initiated by French historian Philippe Ariès (1914–1984). I use his work as a conceptual framework for my

2 In this article, attitudes encompass ideas, values, and practices.

3 See< https://coronadashboard.rijksoverheid.nl/landelijk/sterfte> (retrieved November 11, 2022).

4 For example, see <https://www.ad.nl/buitenland/italiaans-bergamo-verandert-in-spookstad-elk-half-uur-een-begrafenis~a921e480/> (retrieved September 1, 2021).

5 For example, see <https://www.1limburg.nl/extra-koelruimte-bij-crematorium-wegens-hoge-sterftecijfers> (retrieved September 1, 2021).

6 See, for example, the post on the EenVandaag website (April 16, 2020) by Jan Salden, Stille ramp in verpleeghuizen met honderden doden door coronavirus, *Te lang niks gedaan met waarschuwing*. See: <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/stille-ramp-in-verpleeghuizen-met-honderden-doden-door-coronavirus-te-lang-niks-gedaan-met-waarsch/#:~:text=gedaan%20met%20waarschuwing'-,Stille%20ramp%20in%20verpleeghuizen%20met%20honderden%20doden%20door%20coronavirus%3A%20'Te,lang%20niks%20gedaan%20met%20waarschuwing'&text=Terwijl%20het%20aantal%20coronapati%C3%ABnten%20op,pati%C3%ABnten%20en%20die%20van%20zichzelf> (retrieved October 14, 2021). Nieuwsuur also looked at nursing homes in its April 10, 2020 broadcast. See: <https://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2330102-stille-ramp-in-verpleeghuis-de-ouderen-gaan-hier-een-voor-een-dood> (retrieved October 14, 2021).

exploratory research on attitudes toward death in Dutch culture in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. To be specific, the central research question is as follows: How did people in the Netherlands deal with death during the corona crisis, and what cultural patterns can be identified in attitudes toward death? I should say right away that I cannot fully answer this question, simply because the question of cultural patterns can only be answered when sufficient time has passed; since the coronavirus is still present in today's society, too little time has passed, and we are too close in time to the events to see the pattern (or patterns) properly. However, the corona period lasted long enough for the outlines of some patterns to become discernible.

The structure of my article is as follows. In the next section, I discuss the work of Ariès and the relevant literature published after his seminal studies. I then provide some insight into the relevant sources and the methods of analyzing them. Then, I present the results of my research. Finally, I come to a preliminary conclusion.[7]

2. Conceptual framework: Cultural patterns in attitudes toward death

French historian Philippe Ariès conducted several studies on concepts that seem self-evident although they have taken on different meanings over time (and are thus less self-evident than they may at first appear). For example, his writings include those on childhood, family, and death. His first book on death and death mentalities, based on a series of lectures he had delivered at Johns Hopkins University in the United States, was entitled *Western Attitudes Toward Death from the Middle Ages to the Present* (1974). A few years later, *L'Homme devant la Mort* (1977) appeared, translated into English as *The Hour of Our Death* (1981). In his studies, Ariès distinguishes between four (later five) "death mentalities" or, in other words, attitudes toward death that are reflected in people's thoughts and actions. Consequently, the concept of a "death mentality" refers not only to how people think about death, but also to how this thinking takes shape in their actions (e.g., in funeral rites) and other cultural expressions (e.g. visual art and novels).

These mentalities have both individual and collective dimensions that are closely related. Following Ariès, I am concerned with collective attitudes toward death and patterns that can be traced in cultural expressions. On this, Ariès says the following"

7 I thank my student assistant Juliette Berndsen for her help in completing and organizing the dossier on corona rituals that forms the basis of this article.

> […] the attitude toward death may appear almost static over very long periods of time. It appears to be a-chronic. And yet, at certain moments, changes occur, usually slow and unnoticed changes, but sometimes, as today, more rapid and perceptible ones. (Ariès, 1974, p. 1)

Danish sociologists Michael Hviid Jacobsen and Anders Petersen (2020) argue that, from a cultural and sociological perspective, attitudes toward death change because of "changes in the way we live our lives and organize societies – due to developments in demography, science, technology, economy, values, norms, politics, beliefs, and ways of cohabitation" (p. 4). It is precisely at this point that the following question arises: Have attitudes toward death changed as a result of corona's impact on the societal dimensions mentioned by Jacobsen and Petersen? While Jacobsen and Petersen also address this question in their article, they do not rely on clearly defined sources and empirical research; instead, they provide a reflective response to what was broadly going on in the first few months of the corona crisis, particularly in Europe (March to May 2020).

Any changes in attitudes toward death are best revealed in comparison with earlier cultural patterns or "death mentalities." For this reason, the work by Ariès and Jacobsen (mentioned above) is particularly useful. Ariès distinguishes between four cultural patterns, to which Jacobsen adds a fifth. I shall describe these briefly below and return to them in the last section as comparative material for understanding attitudes toward death under the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the history of attitudes toward death, Ariès sees a sharp caesura in the 18th–19th centuries. Before that, death was regarded as self-evident; however, from the 18th–19th centuries onward, death was seen as a "drama" and was increasingly rejected, denied, and declared taboo. Ariès begins his history in the early Middle Ages, where he distinguishes between two cultural patterns (Ariès, 1974, pp. 2–52). He characterizes the first pattern as "tamed death," where the fear of death is "tamed" by a self-evident, ritual handling of dying and death. This pattern undergoes a subtle but important change in the 12th–13th centuries. The ritual forms are maintained, but the emphasis on thinking about death strongly shifts to the individual in relation to the Christian idea of the Last Judgment. Ariès characterizes this emergent pattern as "my death." It can be seen, for example, in *Dies Irae*, a chant that was added to the Requiem Mass during this period, in which a protagonist begs and prays for salvation and mercy (Hoondert, 2012). Slowly, but surely, the focus shifts from the hour of death and its accompanying rituality to an ever-present awareness of mortality; the art of living and the art of dying thus become closely intertwined.

From the 18th century onwards, death took on a new meaning, and new cultural patterns emerged. Partly due to the development of the nuclear family, the death of a close relative is experienced as a tragedy, an unbearable loss. Not only is death perceived as less self-evident, but the emphasis shifts from one's own death to the death of the other. Ariès calls this pattern "your death", in which the death of the other is experienced as a separation. He speaks of an "intolerance of separation" (Ariès, 1974, p. 59), which leads to an elaborate culture of remembrance, with cemeteries serving as park-like landscapes in which the living can spend time with the dead.

A major change took place in the 20th century, when death disappeared from public life. People no longer die at home; they die in hospitals. Dying is the final stage of a sickbed, when medical intervention no longer leads to significant results (see also Becker, 1973). Ariès refers to this "death mentality" as the "invisible or forbidden death". Jacobsen and Petersen link this new cultural pattern of attitudes toward death to modernism:

> Death was incompatible with modern society, modern medicine, the modern way of life, and with all its promises and beliefs in its own superiority. Death – and not least the failure to defeat it – was seen as a "scandal of reason" and an insult to the rationality of modern science trying to control every single aspect of human and social life. (Jacobsen & Petersen, 2020, p. 7)

The taboo on death leads to both a professionalization of everything to do with dying and death, and a change in rituality. Dying and death, extending in time from the sickbed to the funeral, are placed in the hands of professionals, including doctors and funeral directors. Funeral rituals become more sober and business-like, and there is an increase in the use of the crematorium, with a practically short ritual (Nijland et al., 2017). Signs of public mourning, as evidenced in the clothing of mourners, effectively disappear from the streets.

Building on the work of Ariès, Jacobsen adds a fifth "death mentality." He sees this emerging cultural pattern in the late 20th and early 21st century and refers to it as "spectacular death" (Jacobsen, 2016). While Jacobsen perceives some continuity with the previous period, especially in terms of medicalization and the attempts to control death, the label "forbidden or invisible death" and the taboo on death no longer match the way people deal with death in this later century. Jacobsen thus characterizes death as a "spectacle": "It is something that we witness at a safe distance but hardly ever experience upfront" (Jacobsen, 2016, p. 10). Death is ubiquitous in our culture, especially through media coverage, but it remains at a distance in our personal lives. This also has an impact on the rituality of death. Since the late 20th century, funeral rituals have become

more elaborate: the short ritual of 20–30 minutes, concluded with coffee and cake, is becoming less common. Now, we see an increase in rituality, including elaborate catering at funerals (Venbrux et al., 2008; Venbrux et al., 2009). These changes are also visible in the emergence of a new profession: the ritual counselor (Embsen & Overtoom, 2007, 2017). However, what is most striking about this re-ritualization of death is that it is not so much death itself that is discussed, but the life lived. In other words, death is once again kept at a safe distance, but this time by primarily "celebrating" life (Wojtkowiak, 2012).

I interpret these five cultural patterns first and foremost as a tool for thinking about death. Unlike Ariès and Jacobsen, who place the cultural patterns on a timeline, I see some continuity and simultaneity of the cultural patterns in attitudes toward death, as well as in the changes they undergo. My thesis is that the aforementioned cultural patterns, or at least elements of them, persist at the level of both thinking and doing. Even today, the idea of a "tamed death" exists, for example, in funeral rites in churches. Furthermore, the "your death" mentality is also visible in the culture of remembrance surrounding individual deaths. I thus use the notion of "death mentalities" as a heuristic and hermeneutic tool that allows me to track and understand developments in attitudes toward death.

3. Sources and analysis

3.1 Sources

To study attitudes toward death in times of corona, I align with the approach adopted by Ariès, who advocates an exploratory but somewhat subjective and intuitive approach, whereby "the observer scans a chaotic mass of documents and tries to decipher, beyond the intentions of the writers or artists, the unconscious expression of the sensibility of the age" (Ariès, 1983, p. xiii). From the beginning of the corona crisis in the Netherlands (i.e., March 2020), I started to create a dossier consisting of news items and reports from newspapers and magazines, online articles, opinion pieces, tweets, and posts on Facebook. Most of the items in my dossier concern the situation in the Netherlands, but some are also opinion articles addressing the situation in Italy and the UK, among other regions.[8]

A second part of the dossier consists of books that explicitly address the corona crisis. Specifically, it includes Ten Bos's (2020) *De coronastorm; hoe een virus ons verstand vervaagde* (*The Corona Storm; How a Virus Blurred our*

8 I omit an international comparison of both changing rituals influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic and the related changing attitudes toward death in this article. For more on this, see the forum "Ecologies of the dead and the living: Mourning out of place" at <http://tif.ssrc.org/category/exchanges/ecologies-of-dead-living>/ (retrieved October 12, 2021).

Understanding), Pfeijffer's (2020) *Dagboek in tijden van besmetting* (*Diary in Times of Contamination*), *CoronA tot Z* (*CoronA to Z*) by Jim Jansen and Dolf Jansen (2020), *De kracht van samen* (*The Power of Togetherness*) by Hella van der Wijst (2020), about the beginning of the corona crisis in the east of Brabant, and *Coronakronieken* (*Corona Chronicles*) by Daan Heerma van Voss (2020).

A third part of the dossier consists of personal stories collected as part of the research project "Funerals in Times of Corona", carried out by the Funerary Academy from the initial webinar in November 2020 to October 2021. Professionals, family members of the deceased, and others uploaded stories on a website to generate a so-called "story wall." I have included these stories in my research.

A fourth part of the dossier contains ten interviews I conducted with professionals working and researching in the field of dying and death as part of the Funerary Academy project mentioned above.[9]

3.2 Analysis

After collecting sources, the first step toward answering the research question, it is my task as a researcher to present what I read in the sources in an orderly manner. Ordering is the second step in the process of conducting research and is based on an analysis of the material. I conducted this analysis through two cycles of coding: (1) an *initial coding*, in which I assigned key words (codes) to the individual fragments that were framed in terms of content, and (2) an *axial coding*, in which I clustered the codes from the first cycle into content-coherent categories (Saldaña, 2021). Of course, this content clustering was completed within the context of my research question on changing cultural patterns in attitudes toward death. *Axial coding* as such is therefore both an ordering of data and an interpretative process. The orderly presentation of what I found in the sources, as shown in the next section of this article, is the result of these two cycles of coding.

4. Results: Attitudes toward death in the Netherlands during the corona crisis

In the following section of this article, I present the data from my corona dossier, using the categories that emerged from the process of coding.

9 A recording of the webinar, stories and interviews have been collected at <https://www.totzover.nl/funeraire-academie/uitvaart-in-tijden-van-corona-overview/>.

4.1 Time

An important dimension of attitudes toward death is time. Particularly in the first wave of the corona crisis (March–June 2020), death due to corona was often unexpected. People were admitted to intensive care units (ICUs), often hastily, where they were put into a coma and placed on life support. Contact with the patient was often not possible, partly because hospitals severely restricted visits to ICUs. Patients often passed away without their immediate loved ones around them. Consequently, many "last words" could not be said, and there was no time or space for reconciliation. As has been stated elsewhere, "The opportunity to 'come to terms' with each other is not always present now during the corona crisis. Loose ends can no longer be tied up, which can lead to years of guilt and grief."[10]

Time also played a role in planning funerals or cremations. Some crematoriums were so busy in the first wave that families had to wait a long time before a cremation ceremony could be scheduled. In late March 2020, cremations were scheduled on Sundays and in the evenings in Noord-Brabant, one of the provinces in the Netherlands.[11] The editors of the current affairs television program *Nieuwsuur* reported the following on Twitter on March 28, 2020: "People from Brabant are living to the rhythm of funerals these weeks. One after the other. Some funeral directors are so busy that they are forced to say 'no.'"[12] In the documentary *Zesendertig*, employees of the funeral cooperative DELA talked about the impact of corona on their work. One of the employees explained how corona "came in" very suddenly, albeit somewhat cautiously at first, but then with a spike in the number of deceased. At one point, there were 36 deceased in the crematorium's cooling rooms, an exceptionally high number.[13]

Time was also an important factor in the interment of those who had died of corona. At the beginning of the corona crisis, it was not clear whether the virus remained contagious in a dead body. For this reason, the deceased had to remain refrigerated for 48 hours, and no one was allowed near them. Not until these 48 hours had passed were they allowed to be laid out at home or elsewhere (Wijst,

10 Coronacrisis: het belang van een goed afscheid (March 31, 2020). See <https://www.movisie.nl/artikel/coronacrisis-belang-goed-afscheid> (retrieved August 4, 2021). All translations from Dutch to English are the responsibility of the author of this article.

11 Maarten van den Hurk, Steeds meer crematies op zondag en in de avonduren door vele sterfgevallen, *Brabants Dagblad* (March 27, 2020), <https://www.bd.nl/uden-veghel-e-o/steeds-meer-crematies-op-zondag-en-in-avonduren-door-vele-sterfgevallen~a3074297/?referrer=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.google.nl%2F> (retrieved August 4, 2021).

12 See the report by *Nieuwsuur* at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FKILmFu9zFc> (retrieved September 8, 2020).

13 See the documentary at <https://www.dela.nl/inspiratie/impact-van-de-corona-uitbraak-op-dela-collega>s. See also the story by Hella van der Wijst about funerary service provider Claassen in the village of Veghel at Van der Wijst, De kracht van samen: kroniek van een crisis, p. 136.

2020, p. 94). Condolence visits in the days leading up to the funeral required careful planning to avoid having too many people around the body at once. This had an added advantage, which is exemplified by the story Hella van der Wijst tells about the death of Toos and the way her two daughters, Femke and Baukje, shaped the farewell:

An interment at home is not allowed and saying goodbye to Toos at the funeral home is difficult with all the corona guidelines. But by making good arrangements (...) Baukje and Femke set up a schedule whereby the family and friends who were willing could still say goodbye. Everyone waited in their car until it was their turn. Perhaps saying goodbye in this way is more intense and personal than when everyone comes at once, and you don't actually have time for anyone. (Wijst, 2020, pp. 146–147)

4.2 Place

The high number of COVID-19 related deaths also led to a lack of space. Mass graves were constructed in Brazil, New York, and other places around the world to bury the large number of deceased.[14] It did not come to this in the Netherlands, but the "place" dimension did come into play on several fronts. First, sometimes people could not die in the place they or their close relatives preferred. Instead, they died in hospitals or nursing homes without the option of being taken home. Second, many could not attend the funeral of a relative, friend, or acquaintance because of the limited number of people allowed at a funeral (ranging from 30 to 100). People were forced to attend funerals remotely at home, sitting behind their laptops (more on these livestreams later), or had to say goodbye remotely in a drive-by procession or by standing at the side of a road as part of a guard of honor. Third, funerals were organized in alternative spaces. For instance, funeral director Elbert Sluijmer told me that he regularly organized funerals at the cemetery or in natural places.[15]

4.3 Body

One notion that often recurs in stories and testimonies about corona is the "body." First, this particular use of the term refers to the sick, sometimes infectious body – the body that one dares not touch, that one keeps at a distance. Second, this notion is associated with closeness, or, in this case, the lack of it. Proximity is

14 For example, see <https://www.parool.nl/wereld/corona-in-brazilie-een-gevaar-voor-de-hele-wereld~bfddea59>/ (retrieved August 4, 2021).

15 This interview can be listened to at <https://www.totzover.nl/funeraire-academie/uitvaart-in-tijden-van-corona-overview/interview-met-uitvaartondernemer-elbert-sluijmer/>.

usually expressed physically through a handshake, a hug, or an embrace, but because of the 1.5-meter distance restrictions, such physical contact was not possible. Ritual counselor Simone wrote the following on the story wall of the Funerary Academy:

> In keeping the 1.5-meter distance, I find it most difficult when, as a ritual counselor, I receive the family at the crematorium. I see and feel their discomfort. But in these times, I cannot step up to them for a handshake or a tap on the shoulder.

For the expression of condolences after a funeral, funeral cooperative DELA suggested alternative forms, such as greeting and comforting the mourner by placing a hand on the heart.[16] Such a lack of physical contact can lead to more stress and even to prolonged grief, according to professor of psychology Geert Smid: "Relatives feel less support at funerals with limited access, but also afterwards. Just a hand on the shoulder can make a difference. We know that stress is reduced by physical contact."[17] As crematorium director Roel Stapper stated in an interview, it is precisely where physical contact is lacking that language becomes more important.[18]

4.4 Ritual flexibility

The previous ideas mainly focused on what was lacking or not possible in dealing with death and the deceased in times of corona; specifically, there was a lack of time, place, and physical contact. Concurrently, another section of my dossier shows what was still possible and addresses the growing number of alternative rituals or ritual elements. On the one hand, people struggled with the restrictions imposed and the breaking of fixed patterns and traditions; on the other, new possibilities emerged, and new freedoms were appreciated and even cherished. Research commissioned by the funeral institution Monuta shows that in 2020, two-thirds of bereaved families could not invite the people important to themselves or the deceased to the funeral. However, despite the restrictive measures in place, 80% of those attending a funeral felt good about how it went.[19]

16 See <https://www.dela.nl/over-dela/nieuws-en-media/20200309-informatie-over-uitvaarten-en-corona-virus> (retrieved September 1, 2021).

17 Annefleur van Wanroij, Verlies van een geliefde verwerken lastiger door corona, experts verwachten toename rouwstoornissen (March 26, 2021), <https://eenvandaag.avrotros.nl/item/verlies-van-een-geliefde-verwerken-lastiger-door-corona-experts-verwachten-toename-rouwstoornissen/> (retrieved September 1, 2021).

18 This interview can be listened to at <https://www.totzover.nl/funeraire-academie/uitvaart-in-tijden-van-corona-overview/interview-met-crematoriumdirecteur-roel-stapper/>.

19 A. Luiten, *Uitvaarten in Coronatijd. Onderzoeksrapport* (July 2020), <https://branchebladuitvaartzorg.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/20200727-Rapport-Uitvaarten-in-coronatijd-NL-Eyes-1.pdf> and the

A striking number of stories in my dossier are about the intimacy of funerals. The language used here is important: funeral directors and ritual counselors do not emphasize what is not there (e.g., "there are fewer people at the funeral"). Instead, they emphasize what is there, which is intimacy. Funerals with fewer people present, often a circle of confidants and people who "really matter," offer freedom in design and approach and opportunities for improvisation. According to funeral director Elbert Sluijmer, such contexts allow bereaved people who would not dare to speak at a "normal" funeral to stand up and share their memories.[20] Ritual counselor Petra Stevens emphasizes precisely this value of a small, intimate farewell in an interview in the local newspaper *De Limburger*:

> Funerals are forced to be sober, held in silence, without embellishments. As if the idea prevails: not much is possible anyway, so forget it. And that requires a counter voice, Stevens believes. Together with six other ritual counselors from Dutch and Belgian Limburg, she launched a campaign to raise awareness of the benefits of a small, intimate funeral. "Farewell rituals are important, especially now. You can do things now that would not come into their own in a large gathering. For example, at one funeral we had everyone personally place a candle around the body. Thirty little lights."[21]

Alongside tips and examples for rituals that are "corona proof" provided by funeral directors and ritual counselors,[22] stories appeared in the newspapers and on social media about new and changing funeral and mourning rituals. On the online platform NieuwWij, Yvonne Brink wrote about changes in rituals surrounding death in Islam and Judaism. Muslims were allowed, if they wished, to perform the ritual washing of the deceased's body in a symbolic way. In Judaism, the *shiva*, a seven-day mourning period when friends and family visit, was done online via video calls.[23] Alternative funerary rituals were mostly expressions of solidarity, and I present some examples in what follows. For instance, @TheRealYorin reported the following on Twitter on March 20, 2020:

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press release <https://www.monuta.nl/over-monuta/nieuws/onderzoek-een-derde-nederlanders-geconfronteerd-met-overlijden-coronatijd/> (retrieved September 2, 2021).

20 See note 13.

21 R. Wiche, Flesje bier op de kist: ook een kleine en intieme uitvaart kan troost geven, *De Limburger* (June 3, 2020).

22 For example, Simone Snakenborg, Tips voor het afscheidsritueel op anderhalve meter (July 17, 2020), <https://www.rememberme.nl/inspiratie/blogs-van-simone-snakenborg/tips-voor-het-afscheidsritueel-op-anderhalve-meter-afstand> (retrieved September 2, 2021). See also Arq Kenniscentrum Impact van Rampen en Crises: Verlies, rouwen en rituelen in coronatijd. Informatie voor nabestaanden, <https://www.impact-kenniscentrum.nl/sites/default/files/domain-26/documents/arqimpact_verlies_rouwen_en_rituelen_in_coronatijd_-_voor_nabestaanden_02042020-26-1585904438233669645.pdf> (retrieved September 2, 2021).

23 Yvonne Brink, Rituelen in de coronatijd (July 20, 2020), <https://www.nieuwwij.nl/opinie/rituelen-in-de-coronatijd/> (retrieved September 9, 2021).

> Our neighbor passed away completely unexpectedly this week. Because of the corona crisis, only 30 people (including those from the funerary service provider Monuta) are allowed to attend the funeral tomorrow. So, with all our neighbors, we made the neighborhood a bit more agreeable for when they return from their condolences tonight.[24]

Accompanying this tweet were pictures of little lights and candles in the shape of a big heart. At a funeral in my own circle of acquaintances, all the people who would have normally attended were asked to light a candle at home and send a photo of it to the immediate family. Pastor Joost Röselaers posted the following on Twitter on April 1, 2020:

> An acquaintance of mine passed away the day before yesterday (due to the coronavirus). All of her loved ones were asked to listen to her favorite performance of Bach's "Erbarme Dich" at the same time. Bonding in times of corona.[25]

Finally, @Koopmandick, posted on April 2, 2020: "Said goodbye to my girlfriend today. Corona. Stood by the road with a red rose. Deep silence. Odd, empty and loving."[26]

4.5 Livestream

A direct consequence of the restrictive measures on the number of people allowed to attend a funeral was the increasing use of livestreams (see above in the section entitled Place). Many crematoriums were already offering the option of recording the ceremony in the auditorium or broadcasting it via livestream, but corona made livestreams a given. Because of this development, funeral participants could be divided into three groups. First, there was the direct bereaved family and the limited group of invited guests who attended the funeral on site. Second, there were the invitees who were sent a link to attend the funeral via livestream. This group included people from the social networks of the deceased and/or the next of kin. Third, there were the uninvited, including people who saw the link in the obituary in the newspaper or found it via the internet. This was a varied group, as it could consist of people from the deceased's social network, but also strangers.

There is much to be said about the use of livestreams at funerals. Questions arise regarding participation, degree of involvement, physicality, and sensory experience. The number of views of a livestream says little about the level of

24 Twitter account has been deleted (retrieved September 9, 2021); photo of the tweet in my dossier.

25 <https://twitter.com/Roselaers/status/1245253516421206017> (retrieved September 9, 2021).

26 <https://twitter.com/koopmandick/status/1245674380404940800> (retrieved September 9, 2021).

involvement, because it is unknown whether the "viewer" follows the entire funeral, or only part of it, or whether he or she watches while working on something else or is involved with full attention. Megan van Kessel described these dilemmas in the daily newspaper *Het Parool* on November 28, 2020:

> A funeral in times of corona makes death exhausting. I had to make do with a link from a livestream I had to access with a password. The service was held during working hours, and I hesitated about whether to ask for time off. It felt dramatic to take time off. I felt sad that corona took away the ritual of dressing nicely and putting on the shoes you never wear. Being physically present at farewells reminds you of how much of a privilege it is to be alive. It helps you reunite with distant relatives and makes you realize how trivial many of your problems are. Corona measures gave drama no room on one of the few occasions when drama is allowed to be there. The web link also offered little room for empathy. "I have to go to a funeral in a moment" has a different effect than "I have an online funeral in a moment" (...) When you are at someone's funeral, you keep your gaze fixed on the coffin or a door handle. Then, you don't see your fellow man's grief so much, because you are partly busy adopting an appropriate stance. But also because you don't stare at people the way I did from behind my laptop. If I had been sitting in the audience, I probably wouldn't have cried because the grief of others is greater. Now, I was allowed to cry really hard for Aunt Tineke, even though she was my great-aunt and I had never spent a lot of time with her.[27]

From this long quote, we can conclude that some things are missing from online funerals, including the social contact of a physical gathering. However, people have a strong feeling of involvement and are less awkward about showing their emotions and crying. That livestreams and emotional involvement do not get in the way of each other is also shown by a tweet from Evelyne Verheggen on May 30, 2020: "Following a funeral via YouTube; it moves me more than I thought."[28]

For the first group, the next of kin, there is sometimes a different concern. Although a large part of their social network may not be physically present at the funeral, they still want to share their grief and stories about the deceased with a wide circle of people. Hella van der Wijst writes about the aforementioned sisters, Baukje and Femke:

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27 Megan van Kessel, De link van de online begrafenis werkt niet. En nu?, *Het Parool* (November 28, 2020), <https://www.parool.nl/columns-opinie/de-link-van-de-online-begrafenis-werkt-niet-en-nu~b8c6e458/> (retrieved September 10, 2021).

28 <https://twitter.com/EMFVerheggen/status/1266665472742821888> (retrieved September 10, 2021).

> With all the restrictions surrounding the funeral, Baukje, Femke, and their father have only one goal in mind: high audience ratings for the livestream of the funeral. That's what Toos deserves, without knowing that hundreds of friends and family members would end up watching the farewell via livestream. (Wijst, 2020, p. 147)

I myself experienced how the first (offline) and second (online) groups become connected, despite the physical distance. During my mother-in-law's funeral ceremony, when I had to speak, I caught myself becoming very aware of the cameras. By means of a red light, you could see which camera was active, and I had to suppress the urge to focus on it. I kept telling myself that the farewell ritual had to happen here and now, around the coffin and with these 50 people present. Yet it was precisely through those two cameras that the presence of the large circle of people involved was felt: there were 50 of us there, but what happened was visible to and experienced by a larger circle of people. That involvement was evident after my wife had spoken about her mother. Immediately after her speech, she received a text message from a niece: "Beautifully spoken. How strong you are." A few minutes later, a second text message from a close friend followed. The presence of the large circle of people involved, albeit at a distance, became instantly visible and tangible due to WhatsApp.

4.6 Counting and commemoration

The final section in my dossier looks at how the deceased are named and commemorated in Dutch society. In the first months of the corona crisis, every evening, the news on television reported the day's corona statistics, including the number of deaths due to corona. Counting and commemoration also played a role both internationally and locally. In a ritualistic manner, corona deaths were named and commemorated in *The New York Times* on May 24, 2020, under the title, "U.S. Deaths near 100,000, an Incalculable Loss." In Tilburg, a commemoration was organized in February 2021, during which 2,874 candles were lit for all the people from Brabant who had died of corona up to that point.[29]

The COVID-19 pandemic, which we can define as a "slow disaster" (Hoondert et al., 2021), also raises the question of a national commemoration and monument. Among others, Christoph Jedan from Groningen University argued for a monument that has both offline and online dimensions:

29 Marjanka Meeuwissen, 2874 brandende kaarsjes en woorden van hoop en troost: Brabantse coronaslachtoffers herdacht, *Brabants Dagblad* (February 27, 2021), <https://www.omroepbrabant.nl/nieuws/3349949/2874-brandende-kaarsjes-en-woorden-van-hoop-en-troost-brabantse-coronaslachtoffers-herdacht> (retrieved September 10, 2021).

> Not only should it be a tangible monument, but there should also be an online platform attached to it, perhaps with a QR code. There should be space on the website to share individual stories, to tell stories of individual and collective resilience, and to express gratitude to care workers.[30]

Commemorations were organized locally.[31] On October 6, 2020, there was a National Day of Reflection in the Netherlands, with a monument being unveiled in the village of Oisterwijk on September 8, 2021. This monument not only commemorates those who died of corona, but it also serves as a tribute to care workers.[32] The focus on corona victims at the national level in the Netherlands compares somewhat poorly with commemorative practices in other countries. For instance, China held three minutes of silence for corona victims in April 2020. Spain followed in May 2020 with 10 days of national mourning, and Italy declared March 18 a national day of remembrance.[33] In London, a National Covid Memorial Wall was built.[34]

5. Interpretation of data from the dossier

Over the past two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has not only threatened human lives and livelihoods; it has also changed our experiences of dying, commemoration, and mourning. At the same time, it is evident that individuals and communities have responded to restrictive measures with great creative energy, with the emergence of new ritual practices and new uses of technology. The question remains as to whether these changes have led to a new cultural pattern in attitudes toward death. As mentioned in the Introduction, this question regarding the "death mentality" of the (post-)corona era cannot (yet) be answered, or can only be answered with some restraint; both in the Netherlands and worldwide, we are still in the midst of the complex circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, some lines of development have emerged from the ordered analysis of the dossier.

30 Toske Andreoli, Er moet een nationaal monument voor Covid-19 slachtoffers komen, *Science Guide* (May 29, 2020), <https://www.scienceguide.nl/2020/05/er-moet-een-nationaal-monument-voor-covid-19-slachtoffers-komen>/ (retrieved September 10, 2021).

31 See <https://nos.nl/artikel/2375678-mensen-bedenken-zelf-corona-herdenkingsplekken-blijvende-herinnering> (retrieved September 10, 2021).

32 Kim Spanjers, Coronacrisis herdacht met standbeeld: prinses Margriet en Hugo de Jonge bij onthulling, *Brabants Dagblad* (September 9, 2021), <https://www.omroepbrabant.nl/nieuws/3859231/monument-voor-coronaslachtoffers-onthuld-in-oisterwijk> (retrieved September 10, 2021).

33 <https://www.thelocal.it/20210318/italy-marks-first-national-day-of-remembrance-for-covid-19-victims/> (retrieved September 10, 2021).

34 <https://nationalcovidmemorialwall.org/> and <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/18/wall-of-love-the-incredible-story-behind-the-national-covid-memorial-led-by-donkeys> (retrieved September 10, 2021).

5.1 Solidarity

A strong desire for "togetherness" and solidarity is especially evident in the dossier. People publicly applauded care workers. There were local initiatives to commemorate corona victims, and networks around the deceased invented new rituals to express their respect and involvement (e.g., guards of honor and flags at half-mast). Relatives offered the opportunity to attend funerals through a livestream. Hella van der Wijst entitled her book *De kracht van samen* (*The Power of Togetherness*), which, as it turns out, was well chosen.

5.2 Control

At the same time, there was a desire for some measure of control. The repeated mention of the number of infections, hospital admissions, occupied ICU beds, and corona deaths was not meant to be a description of reality. Instead, it served as an expression of the desire for control over the virus. Ilja Pfeijffer aptly describes this in his corona diary:

> The numbers of infections and deaths are decreasing in Italy. We can question all the figures, but it was the same before, and the unreliable figures of today are decidedly lower than the unreliable figures of before. (...) We said that we had to beat the virus. But that was not what it was all about. It was about control. (...) One dastardly, microscopic virus shattered our illusion of control. This explains our panic and our excessively violent reaction. We tried to regain control by bringing everything we could think of under draconian rule. (...) But the virus was not defeated. When we give up control of the figures, it does not mean that we regain our old illusion of control. (Pfeijffer, 2020, pp. 97–98)

The loss of control demands that we "do something"; it demands a different foothold. The rituals of solidarity that I mentioned above can be understood, at least in part, in terms of this search for a foothold.

5.3 Ritual flexibility

The corona crisis and related restrictive measures required a strong degree of flexibility from people. We saw this, for example, in families with school-aged children, for whom home schooling suddenly had to be organized.[35] We see similar flexibility with regard to rituals around death. Established ritual patterns, such as the ceremony in the auditorium of the crematorium with speeches,

35 See, for example, the results of research by Utrecht University of Applied Sciences: De impact van COVID-19 op gezinnen, <https://www.hu.nl/onderzoek/onderzoek/de-impact-van-covid-19-op-gezinnen> (retrieved September 13, 2021).

music, and pictures from the deceased's life, were found to be adaptable. As opposed to Italy, for example, people in the Netherlands did not choose direct cremation without a gathering or an extremely austere ceremony at the grave. Instead, in most situations, a gathering was organized, though with fewer people than preferred. In an interview, I asked ritual counselor Ger Thonen whether the funeral ritual had changed under the influence of the corona measures. His answer was a firm "no," as he believed that the ritual was essentially the same; it was solely the approach that had changed.[36]

5.4 Personalization

For several decades, there has been a trend of personalization in rituals surrounding death (Garces-Foley, 2006; Walter, 2020). Kathleen Garces-Foley characterizes personalized funerals as follows:

> Personalized funerals have by now existed long enough that they have begun to develop their own "tradition" in the sense of frequently used elements like the celebration of life theme, shared eulogy, and incorporation of pictures of the deceased. (Garces-Foley, 2006, p. 224)

This "tradition," as Garces-Foley describes it, took on a somewhat different quality due to restrictive corona measures. New means were used to shape personalization, such as impromptu speeches during a funeral in a small circle and the sharing of memories in an online video conference.

5.5 Digitization

Death practices were carried out online during the pandemic. This is most evident in the livestreaming of funerals, but it is also apparent in, for example, online singing sessions[37] and church services.[38] Online participation in rituals is often described as "disembodied," given that physical contact is missing (Hoondert & Beek, 2019). However, research shows that this does not mean that the body of the person behind the screen does not participate. The body is involved in the ritual in other ways, such as intense crying, and the lack of physical closeness can be bridged through other forms of proximity, such as sending a WhatsApp message.

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36 This interview can be listened to at <https://www.totzover.nl/funeraire-academie/uitvaart-in-tijden-van-corona-overview/interview-met-ritueelbegeleider-ger-thonen/>.

37 For example, see koorantaine.nl: Samen zingen in tijden van afzondering.

38 See the 2021 theme issue of magazine *Laetare* on hybrid liturgy (*Laetare*, *37*, 2).

6. Limitations and conclusion

Before formulating the (preliminary) conclusion, I need to address the limitations of my research. After all, the conclusion is largely determined by the idiosyncrasies of the dossier. There are, of course, blind spots in the dossier, and it is a good idea to explicitly identify them.

6.1 Limitations

I am aware that the dossier I have compiled focuses heavily on rituals, especially funeral rites and commemorations. Articles and stories on, for example, the impact of COVID-19 on palliative and nursing home care are largely absent from the dossier. While the ritual perspective provides acute insight into the values embedded in a culture, a broader view could provide a better and, above all, more complete picture of the cultural pattern regarding attitudes toward death. Interdisciplinary collaboration is needed for this. Incidentally, stories from nursing homes are not entirely absent from the dossier. In particular, Hella van der Wijst's book discusses the impact of corona on nursing home care, partly through the stories of Helma Huijsmans, team manager of the Simeonshof residential care center in the village of Erp.

The composition of the dossier upon which this article is based was more or less accidental. It contains the sources I came across; I did not systematically scroll through Twitter or Facebook for posts about corona and death. A big data approach like that works well for finding cultural patterns (Thelwall & Thelwall, 2020), but I am not trained in such methods. Instead, I have tried to understand changes in culture on the basis of "small stories," which is a qualitative, ethnographic approach (Blommaert, 2013).

6.2 Conclusion

In a thought-provoking article in *The Guardian* published on April 20, 2020, Yuval Noah Harari addresses the question of whether the coronavirus will change our attitudes toward death. According to Harari, the answer is no, as we are expected to stick to our faith in science and continue to try to control death:

> We assume that humankind has the knowledge and tools necessary to curb such plagues, and if an infectious disease nevertheless gets out of control, it is due to human incompetence rather than divine anger. Covid-19 is no exception to this rule. The crisis is far from over, yet the blame game has already begun. Different countries accuse one another. Rival politicians throw responsibility from one to the other like a hand grenade without a pin. Alongside outrage, there is also a

> tremendous amount of hope. Our heroes aren't the priests who bury the dead and excuse the calamity – our heroes are the medics who save lives. And our super-heroes are those scientists in the laboratories."[39]

What Harari describes fits with the line of development I identified in my description of control, and it is alongside or complementary to this modernist, secular attitude toward death, which is characterized by a great reliance on science, self-determination, and control. I have also observed an attitude by which people more or less conquer death, through both a ritual embedding of death (ritual flexibility) and a strong degree of ritual solidarity. The ritualization can be interpreted in line with what Ariès called "tamed death," although, here, the self-evident nature of death as part of life is missing, as is the acceptance of this self-evident nature by both the dying and their loved ones. Both are important features of this "death mentality." I interpret the search for new forms of involvement and ritual engagement as a form of resistance to or protest against both death by corona and the impact of the coronavirus. The intensification of rituality (the lines of development identified above point to this) functions as "words against death" and "a form of positive rhetoric of death, grounded in theologies and liturgies, through which death, bereavement and afterlife beliefs are formulated and expressed" (Davies, 2017, p. 251). Douglas Davies, an authority on death studies, uses this theory to show that people use words, music, and rituals in their response to death and mourning so that death does not have the last word (Davies, 2005, p. 20). The guard of honor we have seen in many places, whereby people who could not be at the funeral because of restrictive measures can still express their involvement, is a good example of this.

In summary, several cultural patterns in attitudes toward death in times of corona have emerged in the Netherlands. On the one hand, we have seen that people continue to rely heavily on medical science and thus see death by corona as a failure of science (see Ariès on the denial of death). On the other hand, this exploratory study reveals that ritual practices dynamically adapt to a new context, so that death does not have the last word, and the bereaved family is not left alone in their grief. In many ways, people tried to embed the dying process – from sickbed to mourning – in a new or changing ritual context, which demonstrates a shift in attitude toward death and expresses both strong mutual solidarity and protest against death. In line with Ariès's characterizations of various cultural patterns of attitudes toward death, we could call this "our death." Both this new

39 Yuval Noah Harari, Will coronavirus change our attitudes to death? Quite the opposite, *The Guardian* (April 20, 2020), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/apr/20/yuval-noah-harari-will-coronavirus-change-our-attitudes-to-death-quite-the-opposite> (retrieved September 10, 2021).

way of dealing with death and the "denial of death" were simultaneously present as cultural patterns that determined thought and action during the pandemic.

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