

Digital Press Social Sciences and Humanities

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The 11th International Conference on Nusantara Philosophy

Rangga Kala Mahaswa, Taufiqurrahman (eds)

Death and Grief in Indonesian Culture During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges to societies worldwide, imposing unprecedented restrictions on the way people grieve and commemorate their departed loved ones. In the context of Indonesia, a country renowned for its rich and expressive cultural and religious mourning practices, these restrictions have profound implications. This study explores the intricate relationship between death, grief, and the limitations imposed by pandemic-related protocols within Indonesian religious culture. Indonesia's diverse cultural landscape encompasses a myriad of religious traditions and religious rituals that offer solace and support during times of loss. However, stringent safety measures, including restrictions on funerals and burial practices, have disrupted these customs. This paper delves into the emotional and psychological impact of these restrictions on the Indonesian population, examining the tension between the deep-rooted religious and cultural practices surrounding death and mourning, and the necessity of adhering to public health measures. The results of this study unveil the silent sorrows experienced by Indonesians, who have been forced to adapt their grieving process. It explores the innovative ways in which individuals and communities have sought to maintain their religious and cultural identities while adhering to pandemic protocols. Furthermore, it reflects the resilience and adaptability of Indonesian society in the face of unprecedented challenges. By shedding light on this unique intersection of religious and cultural traditions, pandemic restrictions, and grief, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of how societies cope with losses during times of crisis. It emphasises the importance of preserving religious-cultural identity and mental well-being even amidst adversity and calls for a more nuanced approach to pandemic management that respects the cultural tapestry of a nation while safeguarding public health.

Keywords

death, grief, Indonesian culture, Islam, covid-19, bioethics

1 Introduction

Many people regard death as the end of life, signifying the conclusion of worldly existence and being understood as a change in physical form. The human body, no longer sustained by blood as a carrier of substances essential for life, undergoes gradual decay. The brain, serving as a regulator of movement in the body, ceases to function (White, 2019). These changes are what we commonly refer to as 'death.' However, death as a phenomenon is certainly not simple and cannot be rigidly defined solely based on biological criteria.

Death, by nature, is transformational; the lives of both the deceased and those who surround them are irrevocably changed. They can never again be met, contacted, physically felt, seen, heard, or communicated with through any social media or device. Living people are aware of the physical absence of the deceased, knowing that the person they once loved is now completely separated from them. While we continue to breathe, live in the world, and enjoy all kinds of frantic lives, we are still able to recognise that those who have died are no longer able to enjoy the worldly life we have. This series of understandings can be seen as the social dimension of death. The event of a particular death or death can be interpreted more broadly than the scope of an individual human life. This broader aspect is closely related to the characteristics of humans as social beings.

Humans are generally regarded as social creatures and we are unable to live without one another (Petersen et al., 2019). When we eat, the food ingredients have been processed by others, and previously, those materials were harvested or planted by other people. When we drive a car or motorcycle, there is already a factory or mechanic that produces the vehicle. Before it reaches our hands, distributors already sell cars or motorcycles to us. Within society, we can observe thousands of comparable social interactions; in thousands of ways, both minute and major, our lives affect other lives. The same principle applies to death: we cannot die alone, and death has major effects beyond our individual lives.

Death in Indonesia is widely perceived as a profound transformation which means holds cultural significance deeply rooted in local customs. These customs not only shape the rituals surrounding the deceased but also influence how the deceased and their families experience this transition. In many Indonesian societies, mourning ceremonies play a crucial role in the aftermath of death. Families and communities come together to honour the deceased and often engage in specific practices that may vary based on cultural traditions. The belief in the interconnectedness of life and death is evident in these customs as the body may decay physically, but spirituality will continue through the rituals, emphasising the holistic nature of death in Indonesian society.

Meanwhile, the feel of loss due to death extends beyond the individual and is seen as a collective experience within the community. Their social bonds acknowledge the absence left by the deceased, who believe that they have gone to another realm and can no longer partake in the worldly life of living. Within this explanation, rituals and support networks hold a significant meaning that emerges during times of loss for both individuals and the community. However, everything took a different turn during the COVID-19 pandemic, making it impossible for society to adhere to local traditions, such as timing and disrupting the established norms surrounding death and its profound dimensions. The pandemic itself posed a challenge to deeply rooted local customs, changing traditional societal responses to loss, and resulting in a particularly strong response from Indonesian society.

2 Result and Discussion

2.1 Death in Social Context

Once deceased, an individual cannot be separated from their relationships with others who have known and loved them or are familiar with the details and nuances of their lives. Individual death cannot be regarded solely as a separate occurrence and must also be understood in the context of the social consequences of death (Ahmed et al., 2022). The event of death is not only considered as the end of one's life in the world, nor does it only signify the separation of a person from their loved ones. Death itself and its associated rituals also stand as social phenomena involving culture, meaning, and interactions within a society. As such, these rituals serve as vessels to convey the basic beliefs and values surrounding life and death that exist in society (Bynum, 1974). Thus, death in the context of any given society will be entangled with and affected by social views, norms, and paradigms regarding the end of life.

Social, economic, and political implications and aspects are associated with the context of death. Rituals around and after death are often seen as a form of social control over death, an uncontrollable and inevitable biological event (Silverman et al., 2021). Here, death is viewed more broadly, extending beyond a mere biological event involving the human body.

Individuals and communities construct the meaning of the deceased's life and death by shaping the post-death status of the bereaved within the broader community. In societal life, a series of cultural norms, expectations, values, and discourses can determine many aspects of death. These discourses dictate what features of the given individual's life and death are permitted to be emphasised and remembered, when, where, and by whom they are commemorated, as well as determining which features are to be forgotten, thereby shaping the legacy of the individual. Thus, by acknowledging that this set of features influences how society perceives an individual's death, it is also possible to recognise that some deaths may be judged by value (Silverman et al., 2021), thereby introducing the concepts of a 'good death' or a 'bad death' in society.

The quality of death, whether deemed good or bad, can be associated with the presence of family members or loved ones around the dying person. It is generally accepted that a good death involves the care and presence of loved ones. Conversely, if someone dies alone without their family or loved ones, it is often assumed that they have experienced a bad death; there is nobody to care for or mourn them, and they are forced to face the end-of-life alone without a companion. Death is commemorated through the event of

mourning. Typically, communities host certain ceremonies, rituals, or prayers for the deceased (Silverman et al., 2021). The grieving process also varies widely across cultures and traditions, meaning that culture significantly impacts the way or process of grieving, especially in Indonesia.

According to Silverman et al. (2021), the response to someone's loss is always in an intersubjective relation, meaning that there is a corresponding reaction dependent on the position of the deceased. For example, given the loss of a husband, a wife is left to grieve not only her spouse but also her marriage partner. If the husband were the head of her family, her children would also miss their dad and now lack a paternal figure. The experience of loss because of death impacts others around us as well. Undoubtedly, this demonstrates that mourning is a communal and inter-relational process (Silverman et al., 2021). There will always be a relationship between the deceased and living, and death will always have social and communal consequences.

In a funeral home, it is rare for the body to not be visited by anyone: during a period of grief, there are always crowds of people who come to visit the dead body. Each funeral home provided a room to receive mourners during visits. Such visits can provide comfort to the family, pay respect to the deceased, and offer prayers for the deceased and the bereaved family. It can also happen that religious ceremonies take place at the funeral home or any establishment hosting the physical corpse.

Every moment of grief is an open invitation for others to come, and it can be observed that one of the aforementioned social dimensions of death is shared and communal grief among those who had relationships with the deceased. Grief is an interaction between the internal, interpersonal, communal, and cultural narratives of one's society (Silverman et al., 2021). There will always be an interconnection of multiple perspectives regarding death: grief should not be experienced alone — it includes both person-to-person relationships and cultural elements.

Not only does culture affect the meaning assigned to death, but religion also plays a major role. According to some religions, death is not simply considered the end of life but a transition from one form of life to another. While each individual religion has its own interpretation of the meaning or value of death, there are commonly shared ideas regarding two significant outcomes that may be found in death: those being a good outcome as a reward for encouraging particular behaviours, such as reaching Nirvana or being reunited with the Creator/God, or a bad outcome as a punishment for misbehaviour or sin, such as eternal damnation. Belief in the existence of life after death is generally perceived as fundamental to most religious doctrines, regardless of the specificity of the form or value of death. These form fundamental principles that guide and influence those who are religious regarding their interpretation and understanding of death, and it is not uncommon for death as a phenomenon to be welcomed and celebrated with joy (San Filippo 2006) — for example, as the longing for reunion of the self (spiritually) with the transcendent (God) or past families.

2.2 Grief and Bereavement Practices in Indonesia

In Indonesia, approximately 273.5 million Indonesians comprise 250 ethnic groups, the largest of which is Javanese. In a national socioeconomic survey conducted by the Central Statistics Agency in 2015, data indicated that most households had attended at least one death ceremony or ritual. According to the data, death ceremonies, such as funerals, are the most frequently attended traditional ceremonies compared to other ceremonies related to religion, marriage, birth, harvest, or circumcision ('The analysis of local wisdom in terms of cultural diversity', 2016).

In Indonesia, many people recognise and identify themselves as religious, with six officially recognised religions: Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Confucianism. The majority of the population in Indonesia is Muslim, with approximately 207 million adherents, representing almost 87.2% of the total population. In contrast, Christians account for 6.9%, Catholics for 2.9%, Hindus for 1.7%, and Buddhists for 0.7%, with Confucians representing the remaining 0.05% of the population ('Religion' 2021). However, our focus in this discussion will narrow down to followers of Islam in Indonesia, a group that has harmoniously assimilated into local culture. This illustration showcases the diverse manifestations of religious and cultural practices coexisting in Indonesia, making it impossible to discuss each individually in this paper. Based on this explanation, our aim was to comprehensively examine and explore one specific practice in greater detail. Furthermore, despite the widespread influence of Islam in Indonesia, a notable aspect is the integration of pre-existing indigenous customs and beliefs into religious ceremonies. This syncretic approach resulted in a unique combination of Islamic rituals and indigenous traditions, presenting an intriguing case for further examination.

Furthermore, the demonstrated form of assimilation shows that it extends beyond religious rituals to include social practices and values. It is noteworthy that Indonesians effortlessly integrate indigenous

customs influenced by Islamic teachings to foster a unique blend. This syncretism not only fosters a sense of unity but also emphasises the resilience of Indonesian society in preserving its diverse local traditions while embracing ethical principles rooted in mutual respect, interconnectedness, tolerance, and communal harmony, especially during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, which we discuss later.

Meanwhile, returning to the discussion at hand, for the majority of religious people in Indonesia, death is understood as the separation between the body and the soul. The body decays through death, but the soul is believed to be eternal, and death is seen as a temporary separation in this world. Furthermore, the souls of the deceased are thought to have returned to God, their creator. The soul is seen as an element that cannot die, whereas the body is considered a component that can be destroyed.

The Islamic worldview emphasises that every human being possesses a spiritual essence, and life on Earth serves as a test ordained by God. The Qur'an states that the life of this world is nothing but the enjoyment of deception and that every soul will return to God through death to be held accountable for its actions (Abdullahi, 2021). This test evaluates whether humans become consumed and too attached to the physical aspects of life, forgetting to maintain a continuous connection with God (Seise, 2021). The religious dimension is a major consideration that cannot be disregarded when carrying out recitation and burial rituals for the deceased.

Siese (2021) asserted that Islam views the living world as a transitional stage in a sequence of different life stages. According to Islamic belief, earthly life is preceded by the 'arwah realm' or life in the realm of souls and will be succeeded by the 'barzakh realm' or life in the realm in-between in the grave until the Day of Judgment. Consequently, death has the potential to determine whether a person has entered heaven or hell. This means that there are signs that indicate a 'good' ending to earthly life known as 'husn al-khatimah' and signs that point to a 'bad' ending known as 'su al-khatimah'. Recognising positive signs during a person's transition to the next stage of existence is particularly important for the family members left behind, as it provides them with solace, alleviating their worries and burdens (Siese, 2021). They often find comfort in cherishing the good signs observed during passing.

2.2.1 Religious-cultural Perspectives and Ceremonies Surrounding Death

The Indonesian death and grief ceremonies explored in this writing are limited religious-cultural surrounding death ceremonies in Indonesian Islam such as 'shahadah', washing the deceased, shrouding the deceased, 'salat al-janazah', and also post-death ceremonies such as 'yasinan' or 'tahlil', and 'selamatan' or 'kenduri'. All of these are practically the same in function – they serve as a commitment to honour and pray for the deceased, seeking relief and forgiveness for their sins.

However, before addressing post-death ceremonies, it is essential to understand that practices surrounding death are often influenced by both religion and culture, particularly in regions such as Indonesia and other Southeast Asian countries (Seise, 2021). The coexistence of religious and cultural elements makes this unique. Such ceremonies are rarely found in Middle Eastern countries, which are predominantly Muslim and the epicentre of Islam's spread. In these regions, ceremonies primarily revolve around religious practices.

In the Islamic worldview, during a person's final moments, family plays a significant role in ensuring a good death for the individual. Typically, family members make every effort to be present and offer support to a dying person. In these crucial moments, accompanying family members guide the dying person in reciting the profession of faith or 'shahadah'¹ (Seise, 2021). This act symbolises an individual's unwavering remembrance of God and cherished religious beliefs throughout their life. Conversely, the inability to recite the profession of faith is considered a sign of a 'bad death'. It is believed that this inability indicates a failure to remember one's spiritual beliefs when facing the end of life. This difficulty in reciting the profession of faith is often linked to the individual's lifelong deeds. Neglecting to perform good deeds throughout their lives may lead to extreme agony, as they approach their final moments. This agony can manifest in various forms, ranging from severe pain to unsettling sounds (Seise, 2021), making it challenging for them to recite the profession of faith because of the overwhelming suffering they endure.

After passing an individual, the deceased body undergoes a washing process, as prescribed in the Hadith. The general guidelines outline the steps for washing the body of the deceased, shrouding them, offering funeral prayers, and then proceeding with burial (Abdullahi, 2021). The responsibility of washing the deceased's body typically falls on close relatives, often their children, with the assistance of an experienced

¹ In the Hadith, it is stated that during the time of death, the dying individuals are encouraged to repeatedly recite the 'kalima al-shahadah' until they pass away, by repeating the statement there is no God but Allah or 'la ilaha illa Allah'. Abdullahi, M. A. (2021). Janazah in Islam, Its Application and Practice by Muslims in Katsina State, Nigeria. *Spektra*, 3(2), 27–42.

individual knowledgeable in the practice of deceased preparation. Gender conformity is a critical aspect of the washing process, with only males permitted to wash a male's body and vice versa. This practice is closely tied to the *mahram* provisions in the Islamic worldview (Tolba, 2022). However, it is worth noting that some opinions suggest that the process of washing the deceased body is not obligatory, but rather a recommended act of worship as a way for the living to honour and show respect to those who have departed (Abdullahi, 2021).

Following the washing process, the deceased's body was shrouded using a simple, long, clean white cloth. The cloth used for shrouding the deceased's body should not be something expensive; rather, it is typically an ordinary white cloth without any additional clothing attributes or perfumes. This practice is considered obligatory in the Islamic worldview and in accordance with the tradition of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), as stated in the Hadith (Abdullahi, 2021). This practice serves to emphasise that when individuals pass away, they leave behind all worldly possessions, with nothing to accompany them in the afterlife. Before God, everyone is equal and there is no distinction.

The final step is to offer prayers for the deceased, known as collective prayer (*salat*) for the deceased or '*salat al-janazah*'. This prayer duty is considered obligatory for the entire Muslim community, and it falls under the category of '*fard al-kifayah*'. The purpose of this practice was to seek forgiveness from the deceased. If there are Muslims who take on the responsibility of performing this prayer, the obligation is met. However, if no one steps forward to fulfil this duty, then all Muslims in the community will share accountability for their sins collectively (Abdullahi, 2021). Afterwards, the deceased's body is taken to a local cemetery, where a grave hole has already been prepared for their final resting place. Here, they continue their journey in the realm in-between life in the grave until the Day of Judgment.

2.2.2 Religious-cultural Perspectives and Ceremonies Post-Death

Over the day and next four or seven days, the family conducted nightly readings of *Surah Yasin*, also known as '*yasinan*' or '*tahlil*'², and provided food for guests as an act of charity or '*sedeqah*' on behalf of the deceased. It is believed that these acts of kindness contribute to good deeds and will benefit the deceased by providing them with spiritual light in the grave, illuminating their path (Seise, 2021).

This well-known belief is associated with the reading of *Surah Yasin* and supplications. Muslims believe that these actions help bring light to the deceased's grave, which is essential because, according to Islamic beliefs, the deceased are thought to remain sentient in their grave (Seise, 2021). The '*yasinan*' or '*tahlil*' itself is a long-lasting consecutive event, which begins from the day of the death. Then continue to the third/fourth, the seventh/eight, the fortieth, the hundredth, and the first anniversaries, and finally the thousandth day from the date of death. The ceremonies are led by a preacher or '*kyai/ustadz*' (Yanti, 2019; Nasir, 2019).

Reading *Surah Yasin* is a common practice in connection with a '*selamatan*'³ or '*kenduri*'⁴ ceremony following a person's death. This Muslim tradition is prevalent in many other Southeast Asian regions. These ceremonies serve as a way to seek forgiveness from God for the transgressions or sins committed throughout life and to request safety for the deceased in the afterlife. It also serves as a reminder to those left behind to lead righteous lives and honour God before their time is over (Almu'tasim & Hendrajaya 2020).

During the '*yasinan*' process, family members and other guests gather to recite and read *Surah Yasin* together. *Surah Yasin* is often chosen because it is regarded as the heart of the Qur'an and believed that reading its verses is equivalent to reciting all the surahs in the Qur'an ten times (Seise, 2021). For others, this gathering provides an opportunity for extended family, neighbours, and friends to come together to

² Ritual remembrance of a person's death, which may include reading the Qur'an and offering supplications on behalf of the deceased, serves as a way to honor and remember those who have passed away. Seise, C. (2021). Dying a Good Death: Indonesian Rituals and Negotiations About the End of Life. *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, 1(2): 168-190.

³ Can be understood as traditional communal feast. Some animistic elements in these feasts still visible (and become syncretistic with other religion) such as slaughtering animals and offering the food to be eaten together with on behalf the deceased. Ali, M. (2011). Muslim diversity: Islam and local tradition in Java and Sulawesi, Indonesia. *IJIMS*, 1(1), 1-35; Nasir, M. A. (2019). Revisiting the Javanese Muslim Slametan: Islam, Local Tradition, Honor and Symbolic Communication. *Al-Jāmi'ah: Journal of Islamic Studies*, 57(2), 329-358.

⁴ Can be understood as the tradition of mourning together, accompanied by a feast at the funeral home, is intended as a form of charity and an expression of apology on behalf of the deceased from the grieving family to the guests present. Yanti, F. (2019). 'The Meaning of Kenduri Death in the Terong Island of Batam City' (Makna Tradisi Kenduri Kematian Di Pulau Terong Kota Batam). *Diakronika*, 19(2), 78-92.

support and console the grieving family. The practice of 'yasinan' is closely connected to the localised Islamic concept of keeping/mending ties between family/kin or 'silaturahmi'⁵. It is considered a quasi-obligation to assist the grieving family due to the 'silaturahmi' ties one shares with them as a family member, friend, or neighbour.

It is customary for family, friends, and neighbours to support the grieving family during this time by assisting with cleaning, cooking, and preparing everything for each 'yasinan' night (Siese, 2021). Guests are expected to provide comfort and aid to deceased families. The 40th day after death holds significant importance, as the family distributes small Yasin booklets on behalf of the deceased. This gesture is rooted in the concept of continuous charity, or 'sedeqah jariyah' on behalf of the deceased. There is a belief and hope that if a person reads from the Yasin booklet given on behalf of the deceased, it will be counted as both the deceased's and the reader's good deeds (Seise, 2021).

Based on this, we can conclude that the ceremonies display a religious-cultural complex surrounding death, as the funeral ceremonies commemorate not only the death of an individual but also the wider social change of a family missing a member, a community transitioning from who they were together before and who they are now that one is lost. According to Swazey (2013), this transition is just as much about the identity of the living as the remembrance of the dead.

According to Niels Mulders (Almu'tasim & Hendrajaya, 2020), there is a strong sense of obligation to participate in grieving practices. The basis of this obligation is usually found in the idea that death, as a key part of the circle of life, is too important to be ignored and to disregard it as an insult to life itself: in a religious context, life is sacred and demands respect, and correspondingly, death is equally as important.

Additionally, in the Islamic worldview (and this concept may also be present in other faiths), believers are taught about the importance of offering prayers for family or loved ones who have passed away. It is believed that through these prayers, the process of transitioning from life to death becomes more bearable, and those who offer them are rewarded. This practice is further emphasised in the hadith, where it is deemed obligatory for the living, including neighbours, extended family, friends, and others, to be present and support the grieving family during times of trouble and sorrow (Abdullahi, 2021).

Based on the above explanation, it can be deduced that there is a major influence on an individual's understanding and expression of their personal feelings regarding another's death relative to their community and culture, affecting how they may process sadness, guilt, shame, or loneliness. These emotions may be mediated or expressed by a ritual, tradition, or practice, which allows grief to function not only as an internal process but also as an external and social process, which can reinforce social bonds within a community through shared grief and counsel (Gire, 2014).

Moreover, rituals and ceremonies surrounding death, as well as post-death ceremonies, play a vital role in strengthening the relationships between individuals within a society or community. They contribute to the preservation of social harmony among those who are grieving and ensure the continued relevance of the deceased's memories. These communal practices aid individuals in coping with complex emotions tied to grief, such as sadness, loneliness, and guilt, by offering them support and companionship. This shared experience can be seen as a coping mechanism, reminding us that no one should bear their burden alone. Consequently, these grieving practices reinforce feelings of mutual dependency, support, and assistance, which are often rooted in shared religious beliefs (Almu'tasim & Hendrajaya, 2020).

Other than being a spiritual or emotional affair, a grieving practice may also function pragmatically to bring people together in the community and offer support, both emotional or concrete, and to create a sense of unity on a deeply held basis such as faith or spirituality (van der Geest, 2000). The neighbours establish their own support networks to ease the burdens on the grieving family, creating support that extends beyond covering expenses related to shrouds and burial arrangements, including expressions of condolences, often taking the form of monetary contributions or practical items such as rice, tea, coffee, cooking oil, etc. These acts of solidarity emphasise the community's commitment to supporting one another during times of loss as they visit the homes of grieving families. This tradition reinforces the belief that the duty of living is to assist the deceased and alleviate their burdens to the greatest extent possible.

⁵ In the Indonesian context, 'silaturahmi' can be understood as the practice of maintaining social interactions, often motivated by religious values, both consciously and unconsciously, across various societal levels. These levels encompass kinship, education, economics and religious connections. Seise, C. (2021). Dying a Good Death: Indonesian Rituals and Negotiations About the End of Life. *International Journal of Islam in Asia*, 1(2): 168–190.

2.3 Effect of COVID-19 on Death in Indonesia

In Indonesia, mourning ceremonies and rituals are conducted based on a certain belief system or religion. The culture of the local community also influences the implementation of the mourning ceremony and ritual, as well as the cleaning of corpses and funeral processes. According to Giménez-Llort et al. (2022), the universality of the death and mourning processes is shaped by cultural perspectives, whose relevance is enhanced in devastating scenarios. In the current pandemic COVID-19, these processes mirror the singularity of individual and societal impacts which can be alleviated through resistance and resilience.

Despite the importance and frequency of grieving, mourning, and death rituals in Indonesia, government protocols are often directly contradictory to the traditional dictation of these rituals (Milko & Karmini, 2022). Due to the potential contagion of the bodies of deceased COVID-19 victims, the care of these bodies falls within the jurisdiction of government officers responsible for handling the deceased. This frequently results in families being unable to carry out religious or cultural procedures, with the responsibility for fulfilling these duties falling on the shoulders of designated officers.

Death and mourning, as innate human capabilities, are fundamentally related to both group demographics and individual variables, including sociocultural features such as religion and culture (Giménez-Llort et al., 2022). As a result, cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspectives surrounding anthropology and death studies possess the unique ability to assess events of death and mourning through a new lens. Such perspectives have identified the 'transcendental relevance' of being supported and accompanied through grief and how isolation caused directly by the COVID-19 pandemic may have affected the grieving process. The 'silent cries' intensify the pain of the lives ending, particularly in scenarios where COVID-19 denies families the opportunity for a final goodbye (Giménez-Llort et al., 2022). The unprecedented and extreme nature of the COVID-19 pandemic introduces risk factors not only for everyday life but also for grieving and mourning processes.

The importance of ceremonies and processes related to funeral and grieving rituals has rarely been overstated. These ceremonies not only commemorate the loss of an individual but also affirm the value of the deceased life and allow for the reflection and processing of the bereaved. According to Gonçalves Júnior et al. (2020), funerals can offer families support and a 'feeling of belonging' to a culture capable of providing predictable responses, especially when the shock of loss leaves them numb and disjointed. Another significant factor is rooted in the religious context, as these practices are often guided by religious guidelines and responsibilities stated in the Hadith or the Qur'an. It is essential to note the therapeutic functions of these traditions, which include helping family members and friends come to terms with the loss, providing a space for reflection on death as an integrated process of life, and facilitating comprehension of the grieving process (Gonçalves Júnior et al., 2020). Given the established increase in psychological afflictions such as depression, suicidal ideation, and insomnia due to the ongoing pandemic, these functions have become particularly crucial, highlighting the detrimental impact of the inability to grieve properly.

With the increasing number of deaths resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, conflicts surrounding the use of coffins by Muslims in Indonesia have become increasingly common. During the pandemic, Muslims were encouraged to follow health protocols while adhering to religious laws. Balancing these two priorities is undeniably challenging, as both are equally important. The issue at hand is to find a way to reconcile these perspectives in the context of a pandemic's urgency and emergency. In times like these, the importance of a 'humanised' death is highlighted (Bermejo, 2020). The coronavirus has stripped away humanity from the patient, adding to the suffering experienced during the dying and grieving process. Humanised death allows each individual's unique qualities to be acknowledged, where feelings, desires, preferred company or solitude, and expectations can be adequately expressed.

It is generally understood that each religion has unique and distinctive ways of honouring and tending to the physical remains of the deceased, as mentioned earlier regarding humanised death. This is exemplified in Islam, where the central aspect of this respect involves the obligatory recitation of the profession of faith, washing the deceased, shrouding the deceased, and conducting collective prayers (salat). According to Hadith, one who witnesses and obeys the funeral rites until the prayer will be rewarded for a single good *reward*⁶, while those who follow the dictates until the deceased is fully buried receive two *rewards* (Nurhayati & Purnama, 2021). It can then be understood that Islam places great

⁶ In the hadith, the expression used is 'qiraths' which refers to a special unit of measurement for the reward given by God. It is said to be equivalent to Mount Uhud. Nurhayati, N., & Purnama, T. B. (2021). Funeral Processes During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Perceptions Among Islamic Religious Leaders in Indonesia. *Journal of Religion and Health*, 60: 3418-3433.

importance on caring for and respecting the dead. However, in emergencies or unusual circumstances, the mandatory actions as stated above can be modified, such as washing by using soil with certain conditions with the intention of purifying it or 'tayammum' (Nurhayati & Purnama, 2021).

Moreover, there are other ceremonies intended to deeply honour and show respect for those who have passed away. These include practices like 'yasinan' or 'tahlil', as well as 'selamatan' or 'kenduri'. These ceremonies often entail communal gatherings where friends and family come together to share food, sometimes involving the sacrifice of animals such as chickens, lambs, cows, or buffalos. In essence, these ceremonies function as a symbolic medium to pray to God for every change in life (Nasir, 2019), such birth and death, will be passed in a smooth, safe way, so that it will not disrupt or cause trouble in one's life. While the food itself symbolises blessings or 'berkah' and charity or 'sedeqah' on behalf the deceased, these additional ceremonies, along with the essential ceremonies surrounding death, show the profound importance Islam places on caring for and respecting the dead. They not only fulfil religious obligations but also offer solace and support to those who have lost a loved one in times of need, reaffirming the interconnectedness of life and death within Islamic faith.

These practices did not pose significant issues until the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the management of bodies exposed to COVID-19 in Indonesia, especially in washing and shrouding, suddenly had to be carried out in accordance with medical protocols and carried out by the competent authorities, while still observing the provisions of the sharia (Nurhayati & Purnama, 2021). Meanwhile, praying and burying are carried out as usual while keeping them from being exposed to COVID-19. Under the medical protocol, the deceased body is covered with cloth and wrapped in a bag to prevent contamination, and then sealed into a waterproof and air-tight coffin to be buried. While the burial must be carried out immediately as mandated, with a maximum time span of 4 hours from the time of death, it must take place in a location far from residential areas and any water source, at least 50 meters from the place (Wiryani et al., 2020). This protocol may directly conflict with modified versions of various traditional burial processes, meaning that certain practices cannot be carried out because of medical considerations regarding public safety and the possibility of viral transmission (Nurhayati & Purnama, 2021). Furthermore, it is also stated that actions that are considered to hinder or contradict established policies regarding the handling and mitigation of infectious disease outbreaks are considered criminal and can be subject to punishment (Wiryani et al., 2020).

Therefore, the guidelines for burying the bodies exposed to COVID-19 in Indonesia are carried out as follows: carried out following sharia provisions and medical protocols, carried out by inserting the corpse along with the coffin into the grave without having to open the coffin, plastic, and shroud, with the burial of several bodies in one grave permitted due to emergency, as regulated in the provisions of the Indonesian Ulema Council Fatwa number 34 of 2004 concerning Management of Bodies in Emergency Conditions (MUI, 2020). This fatwa serves as a reference, providing a framework for handling situations in which traditional burial practices may need adjustments to address public health concerns. The implementation of these guidelines reflects an approach that considers public health imperatives during challenging times.

Another argument supporting the government's implemented medical protocol is the mode of virus transmission, which occurs from person to person through bodily fluids. This transmission method targets the respiratory system, leading to infections that can be fatal and result in death within a short period of time (Wiryani et al., 2020). It is crucial to note that the pandemic was very dangerous before a vaccine was successfully developed. Even in cases where an individual dies from the virus, it can persist for some time in bodily fluids, such as sweat or blood. Based on this consideration, the government has implemented a specialised policy to prevent, control, and handle the spread of COVID-19 among both living and deceased individuals. This includes protocols for handling the bodies of those who have died due to COVID-19 and aftermath must follow the protocols established by the World Health Organization (WHO), including procedures related to funerals and prohibits any activities involving many people, such as collective prayers and so on (Wiryani et al., 2020). By implementing this measure, the risk of infection from the corpse will be reduced for the person handling it.

An increase in restrictive protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic has not occurred without some reactionary consequences. One noteworthy example of such defiance comes from a Muslim community, which was reported to have acted following a public outcry. There have been instances of deceased individuals being forcibly retrieved from hospitals by a collective group of people within their community (Milko & Karmini, 2022). The aim was to secure a suitable and proper Muslim burial following essential death-related ceremonies. This group entered the hospital premises and removed the deceased body less than half an hour after the officially declared time of death, even resorting to threats against multiple nurses and violating COVID hospital protocols. When questioned by the police, a community member remarked that what they had done was noble in God's eyes, but despicable in the eyes of law (Milko & Karmini, 2022).

This serves as a striking example of the impact of COVID-19 in Indonesia, a country with the highest Muslim population, on grieving and mourning processes within communities. Groups and individuals who prioritise grieving rituals and honouring traditions have often found themselves in conflict with government-imposed safety protocols regarding the organisation of deceased bodies.

This emphasises that the use of coffins is not common in Islamic religious rituals. Various problems and conflicts have arisen owing to the use of coffins during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it contradicts the guidelines and customs found in the hadith. While it is acknowledged that coffins can serve as a tool to prevent the leakage of fluids that may contain infectious viruses, it is undeniable that conflicts have arisen because of religious prohibitions and cultural practices. To address this conflict, the Indonesian Ulama Council issued a fatwa (MUI, 2020) stating that the use of coffins is acceptable and permissible for Muslim corpses in times of crisis, such as pandemics. This may not pose a dilemma for non-Muslims, as some religions in Indonesia traditionally use coffins for burial. Nevertheless, a similar outcry against restrictive burial protocols can be found in almost all religious communities in Indonesia, underlining the importance of providing suitable and proper burials for the deceased.

The distrust between religious communities and healthcare professionals can serve as an amplifying factor in acts of defiance. Religious communities often lack guarantees that their customs and religious priorities are being upheld, particularly in states of emergency. Within certain faiths, the forceful retrieval of a deceased body from a hospital can be justified as an act of respect and honour for the deceased, guided by their religious beliefs, and as an expression of love to ease their transition into the afterlife. Certain practices are designed to guide and facilitate the deceased's journey into the next life or transition to the afterlife, such as 'yasinan' or 'tahlil'. Neglecting these practices could be seen as an incomplete send-off, causing distress for the family and community. Thus, it is evident that ceremonies and practices within the context of religion and culture serve as a means to express, reaffirm, and reinforce beliefs about life after death (Adesoji et al., 2021).

Conversely, the insistence on carrying out traditional ceremonies can be explained through a need to soothe and ease sociological and psychological distress caused by grief. When hindered by medical protocols, families who are unable to engage in customary grieving practices experience a lack of support and catharsis. Additionally, isolation may deprive them of a support framework from other people, further worsening their distress and making it increasingly difficult for them to cope with their grief. The inability to carry out these ceremonies creates a sense of guilt⁷ within the deceased's family, as they are unable to accompany, be present, pay respects, and atone for their feelings of guilt during the final moments (Sinatra, 2022). Therefore, it is understandable that these pressures can lead to extreme responses, such as the forceful retrieval of deceased bodies from hospitals.

Here, it can be observed that culture and religion play important roles. Religion and culture are the major factors that determine the course of the process of remembrance and burial of the corpse, even during the time of pandemic COVID-19, indicating the importance of public health. The introduced protocols are not accepted as totally outweighing the cultural and religious values that are already embedded in end-of-life practices. If culture and religion are not respected in the context of grief, especially in Indonesia, a country with a culturally diverse and religious population, it will certainly cause conflicts. Both the family of the deceased and those around them will question the process of mourning if sufficient attention, care, and respect are not paid to traditional ceremonies. An argument advocating the stance of the middle ground between valuing religious-cultural rights and public health can be made, so our society can still respect and uphold their values and traditions based on their culture and religion, but also respect protocols in order to maintain public health and put the interests of many lives into practice. By doing so, in the future, we can prevent the chaos that occurs in multicultural and multireligious societies, especially in an Indonesian context, as a result of a clash between both cultural and religious values and public health values.

3. Conclusion

In this paper, the authors have presented arguments and analyses regarding death and grief. These two things, namely death and grief, have social characteristics. Humans, as social beings, interpret death and grief over death in the context of their lives together with other humans. This social context involves elements of religious culture. In the context of Indonesian society, religion and culture also influence death

⁷ This can be understood when considering individual final moments, especially in a hospital setting. In such situations, family members may find it challenging to assist or accompany the individual in their last moments. These unmet emotional needs, filled with sadness and disappointment, may intensify over time and could potentially reach a point where they manifest in actions or expressions of grief.

and grief. Indonesia has a variety of cultures and religions. Without considering the social aspects of culture and religion, death and grief in Indonesia are meaningless. Indonesian people pay significant attention to these aspects when undergoing the process of grieving and dealing with events of death in life within society.

There are implications that might arise from this understanding of death and mourning from a sociocultural perspective. The bodies of people who have died must be treated according to their culture and religion. If a person is not treated according to that culture and religion, death and grief are stripped of their social meaning, potentially causing conflicts within both the family of the deceased and the wider community. We argue for the need to advocate a middle ground between valuing religious-cultural rights and public health.

Allowing the family to conduct post-death ceremonies like 'yasinan' or 'selamatan' with a limited number of people during a pandemic or similar situations can be a compromise. This approach ensures that the family does not feel alone, and the presence of others during their time of need can ease the burden. By doing so, our society can still respect and uphold its values and traditions based on culture and religion while also adhering to protocols to maintain public health, considering the well-being of many lives as the 'summum bonum'. This approach can prevent chaos that might occur in a multicultural and multireligious society, especially in the Indonesian context, as a result of a clash between religious and cultural values and public health values.

In the end, this gives us a lesson and reminder: if the social context of the life and death of a human being is not recognised, one may only perceive humans as individual beings without respecting and paying attention to their social characteristics within the broader social sphere of life. The appropriate attention to the religion, culture, and beliefs of the deceased will help health workers and public servants who frequently deal with death and bereavement in Indonesia – integration of these considerations into the practices fosters a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Acknowledgments There is no conflict of interest in this article. The authors reported that there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article. This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

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