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*Scientific articles*

## **Resignificación de las prácticas masculinas en los rituales fúnebres durante el covid-19**

***Resignification of masculine practices in funeral rituals during COVID-19***

***Ressignificação das práticas masculinas nos rituais fúnebres durante a covid-19***

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### **Resumen**

La pandemia causada por el virus de covid-19 transformó la realidad en la que vivimos, desde lo social a los ámbitos más íntimos. Por ejemplo, las restricciones gubernamentales implementadas obligaron el cierre de los cementerios, lo cual afectó a los espacios y a las actividades desarrolladas por hombres y mujeres en rituales fúnebres. Por eso, el objetivo de esta investigación es analizar cómo los varones resignificaron sus prácticas en las ceremonias fúnebres durante la emergencia sanitaria del virus de covid-19 en una comunidad del Estado de México. Para ello, se empleó un método cualitativo, mediante una etnografía en la comunidad, así como entrevistas en profundidad a los varones que durante varios años se han encargado de realizar actividades en los funerales del pueblo, lo cual les permite cumplir con su lugar dentro de lo que Connell llama *orden de género* (Connell, 1987). Los principales hallazgos muestran que los varones resignificaron sus prácticas para cumplir con el mandato de ser buen hombre, esposo y padre que debe proteger a su familia. También, se halló que los rituales funerarios actualmente presentan resistencias, aunque los varones buscan volver a instaurarlos para volver a la estructura y el orden previamente establecido.

**Palabras clave:** masculinidades, rito, duelo, covid-19.



## Abstract

The pandemic caused by the Covid-19 virus has transformed the reality in which we live, affecting both the social and the most intimate aspects of our lives. Government restrictions mandated the closure of cemeteries, thereby fracturing the spaces and activities traditionally associated with both men and women in funeral rituals. Against this backdrop, the objective of this research was to analyze how men redefined their practices in funeral ceremonies during the COVID-19 health emergency in a community in the State of Mexico. The method employed was qualitative; it involved ethnographic research within the community, alongside in-depth interviews with men who have been responsible for conducting activities at funerals in the town for several years, while conforming to their roles within what Connell refers to as the gender order (Connell, 1987). The primary findings indicate that men redefined their practices to meet the expectations of being a good man, husband, and father, responsible for protecting their families. Additionally, it is evident that funeral rituals encountered resistance, as men sought to reestablish them to conform to the previously established structure and order.

**Keywords:** Masculinities, rites, mourning, COVID-19.

## Resumo

A pandemia provocada pelo vírus covid-19 transformou a realidade em que vivemos, desde o social até às áreas mais íntimas. Por exemplo, as restrições governamentais implementadas obrigaram ao encerramento de cemitérios, o que afetou os espaços e atividades realizadas por homens e mulheres em rituais fúnebres. Portanto, o objetivo desta pesquisa é analisar como os homens redefiniram suas práticas nas cerimônias fúnebres durante a emergência sanitária do vírus covid-19 em uma comunidade do Estado do México. Para isso, utilizou-se um método qualitativo, através de etnografia na comunidade, bem como entrevistas em profundidade com homens que há vários anos se encarregam de realizar atividades nos funerais da cidade, o que lhes permite cumprir o seu lugar dentro comunidade, o que Connell chama de ordem de gênero (Connell, 1987). As principais conclusões mostram que os homens redefiniram as suas práticas para cumprir o mandato de ser um bom homem, marido e pai que deve proteger a sua família. Além disso, constatou-se que os rituais fúnebres apresentam atualmente resistências, embora os homens busquem restabelecê-los para retornar à estrutura e ordem previamente estabelecidas.

**Palabras-chave:** masculinidades, ritual, luto, covid-19.

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## Introduction

“The human species is the only one for which death is present throughout its entire life, the only one that accompanies the death of a funerary ritual, the only one that believes in survival or in the resurrection of the dead.”

Edgar Morin in *Man and Death* (1974)

As a result of my extensive research during my doctorate in Sociocultural Studies—focused on the analysis of the construction of meanings of the oath to stop drinking in relation to masculine identity projects among men in the community of San Matías Cuijingo, located in the State of Mexico—I have managed to identify the deep-rooted presence of rituals that last throughout generations in this town. In particular, funeral rituals stand out as fundamental elements, which incorporate a series of practices that both men and women must meticulously observe to guarantee the success of the ceremony and ensure that the deceased reaches the promised destination in the afterlife <sup>1</sup>.

These practices, inherited and transmitted from generation to generation, have established a solid structure that lasts over time and remains an essential part of the social and cultural fabric of San Matías Cuijingo. Through my research, I have confirmed how these funerary rituals, beyond their intrinsic meaning in the spiritual and commemorative sphere, play a fundamental role in the construction and affirmation of gender identity, both masculine and feminine, in this community. In fact, beyond their merely ritual nature, they also act as vehicles for the transmission of values, traditions and gender roles, thus contributing to the formation of a collective understanding of identity and the relationship with the past.

However, in 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued an alarm about the appearance of a new virus (called SARS-CoV-2) spread through tiny particles of respiratory secretions between humans, which it enters the body through the respiratory route and is characterized by its high contagion capacity. Early reports indicate that the virus originated in the city of Wuhan, China. By January 11, 2020, the first death related to this was confirmed. On January 30, 2020, the WHO officially declared SARS-CoV-2 an international

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<sup>1</sup> According to Durkheim's proposal (2000), I understand a ritual as a practice linked to the sacred, based on norms that emanate from tradition and that are preserved and transmitted by communities, whether orally or in writing.



public health emergency, triggering alerts and preventive measures in all regions of the world. The rapid spread of the virus and its ability to cause severe respiratory illness, in many cases leading to pneumonia and in some cases resulting in death, generated an unprecedented global response.

The declaration of a public health emergency by the WHO led countries to take drastic measures to contain the spread of the virus, including closing borders, imposing movement restrictions, social distancing and implementing protocols hygiene and safety around the world. In addition, scientific research was encouraged to better understand the nature of the virus, as well as diagnostic tests to find effective treatments and vaccines.

The situation resulting from the SARS-CoV-2 emergency caused a coordinated global response, with the collaboration of governments, international organizations, health institutions and scientists from around the world. The resulting pandemic, known as Covid-19, had a significant impact on public health, the economy, society and daily life in all parts of the world. In Mexico, the first reported case was recorded on February 27, 2020. By March 2020, the country entered phase 2 of the health contingency, so strategies such as social distancing and confinement were implemented.

According to data provided by the Ministry of Health of the State of Mexico in 2022, 186,139 confirmed cases of covid-19 were reported, with a total of 24,730 deaths due to this disease. These figures highlight the magnitude of the impact of the pandemic in the region, which has been among the most affected in terms of infections and fatalities.

In the specific case of the municipality of Juchitepec and its Cuijingo delegation, official statistics reflect 102 confirmed cases and 10 deaths. However, it is crucial to consider that these records only reflect cases tested positive for the virus. Additionally, it is important to note that many community members may have contracted the disease without being tested, which likely led to a considerable underestimation of the true impact in the region.

In this context, reluctance to seek medical attention and reluctance to go to hospitals for fear of a fatal outcome may have contributed to a further underestimation of cases and deaths in the area. Collected testimonies and direct observations suggest that the actual number of victims in the Cuijingo community may have significantly exceeded official figures, with the possibility of an even higher death toll in Juchitepec in general. These data highlight the need for a broader and more comprehensive assessment of the real impact of the pandemic in the region.

As a result, in San Matías Cuijingo, located in the municipality of Juchitepec, local leaders took additional measures to address the virus, with a set of specific guidelines for the management of deaths related to the virus. In this sense, the population was urged to proceed with the immediate burial of any person who had died from covid-19 or even if it was suspected that the cause of death could be related to the virus. In addition, restrictions were implemented on traditional mourning practices, such as prayers and ceremonies, and coffins were requested not to be opened.

These measures had a significant impact on various aspects of the community. For example, at the sociocultural level, the imposition of limitations on mourning practices and the social distancing necessary to prevent contagion generated tension in the town, where funeral rituals and expressions of mourning have deep cultural and social meaning. Likewise, the lack of ceremonies and rituals impacted the way the community processed grief and supported each other in times of loss.

Indeed, the adoption of exceptional measures, such as not opening coffins, influenced traditional forms of farewell and public acceptance of the reality of the pandemic and its consequences. In other words, the community was faced with the need to balance public health measures with the practices and values embedded in its identity and culture.

The implementation of restrictions in San Matías Cuijingo had a profound impact on the social and cultural structure of the community. Funeral practices and rituals, which had been an integral part of community life over the years, were significantly altered due to the measures necessary to curb the spread of Covid-19. This situation generated a series of transformations in different aspects, which changed the way the community interacted with deaths and grief in their daily lives. Adaptation to these new circumstances altered routines and usual ways of relating to death and mourning. In fact, the gender roles that had been present in previous funeral rituals were also affected.

This resignification of masculine practices was reflected in the fact that men who traditionally carried out certain actions within these rituals were forced to reconsider their roles in this modified context. For example, men were previously expected to be in charge of collecting firewood and delivering cigarettes and liquor during prayers; However, with the pandemic, they had to stop these practices and accept their new reality.

Now, academic studies that have been interested in knowing the effects of the suppression of funeral rituals on the population have focused their attention on understanding how the relatives of the deceased grieved during the pandemic. An example is the research

of Oliveira *et al.* (2020), which highlights that the suppression of funeral rituals represented a traumatic experience in most cases, since the relatives, upon suddenly losing their loved ones and not being able to perform the proper rituals, experienced disbelief and indignation.

Another relevant study, interested in knowing the consequences of funeral restrictions, is the one carried out by Padilha *et al.* (2022), who point out that the relatives of the deceased had to develop other forms of expression to express their loss.

In the field of psychology, the research carried out by Robayo Carrillo (2021) focused on analyzing how people grieve when they have lost a family member to covid-19 and what types of trauma arise from this experience. Furthermore, research on funeral rituals during a pandemic has explored the modification that these practices have had, as evidenced by the work of Sánchez and Restrepo (2022). These authors, through semi-structured interviews, approached the way of ritualizing mourning during the pandemic, thereby showing the changes in funeral rituals and how the community has interacted in the face of these new circumstances. In addition, they highlight that people tend to prolong their grieving because they were not able to grieve in a traditional way.

On the other hand, the covid-19 pandemic has generated significant interest in understanding its impact in various spheres, including gender relations. For example, anthropology has contributed to this understanding through a variety of studies that examine how the pandemic has differentially affected people based on their gender. Some of the relevant research topics and findings include differential impact that reveals how the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing gender inequalities. This includes the disproportionate burden of care responsibilities on women (Amilpas, 2020), as well as an increase in gender-based violence during confinements (Vallejo and Trejos, 2022).

However, it should be noted that, despite these studies, the literature still lacks a focus on the presence of gender in funeral rituals during the Covid-19 pandemic. That is, it has not been addressed how the gender order has been restructured (Connell, 1985) in funeral practices and rituals during this period, specifically in the role played by men in the mourning processes.

Therefore, through an ethnographic analysis and in-depth interviews, the objective of this research is to analyze how men have reinterpreted their roles in funeral ceremonies during the health crisis caused by covid-19 in the community of San Matías Cuijingo, Mexico state.

This article follows the following structure: first, the methodology used in the study is presented, providing the approaches and techniques used to collect and analyze the data. Subsequently, the theoretical and conceptual axes that guided and founded the analysis are presented. In the results section, the key findings derived from the study are described. The discussion section focuses on thoroughly analyzing the results in light of the existing literature and the previously mentioned theoretical frameworks. Next, the conclusions derived from the study are presented. Finally, the limitations of the study are addressed and possible methodological weaknesses or biases that could have influenced the results are explained.

### Theoretical axes

To meet the stated objective, I focused on the concept of *gender*, since it is an important vector in the lived experience. Feminisms have played a relevant role in trying to explain this term with the purpose of making inequalities and the condition of women visible, and seeking a more egalitarian society (Bartra, 2010; Eichler, 1987). Following Lamas (2010), I understand gender as the set of beliefs and prescriptions that are socially constructed based on sexual difference. Social construction serves to classify people depending on the body of a man or woman, so they function to catalog what is typical of women and men, as well as establish social obligations for each gender.

Therefore, the concept of *gender order* proposed by Connell (1987) is taken up, which refers to the “structural inventory” that reproduces the system in an entire society, which differentiates it from gender regimes such as the structural inventory of a specific institution. . That is, the gender order is the system of social organization that produces power relations and reproductive hierarchy between men and women, establishing norms and practices that correspond to men and women.

The gender order, therefore, implies a social and cultural hierarchy that assigns specific roles, expectations, and behaviors to men and women based on their gender identities. These norms and expectations are reinforced through social practices, institutions and discourses that perpetuate and reinforce traditional conceptions of what is considered masculine and feminine in a given society. Thus, the gender order is established around the widespread conviction of the “naturalness” of disparities between men and women. This conception presupposes that women exhibit different interests and practices than men, and

that these differences are considered intrinsic and fixed in society. These practices occur ritually in everyday life, which is why Lardellier (2015) suggests the following:

[A rite] is a particular social context, established within a “spectacular device” that is characterized by a codified set of normative practices and by a strong symbolic value for its actors and spectators. It has the ability to “defunctionalize” gestures, words and objects to reinvest them symbolically (p. 20).

In this way, men, by having defined rites in funeral rituals, produce and reproduce the gender order, since “the order of the rite is normative” (Ladellier, 2015, p. 20), and carries with it practices and meanings of what that must be a man.

In the case of women, they have historically been assigned the responsibility of providing emotional support during grief, as they are expected to offer comfort and emotional care to affected family members and friends, and to show their pain in an open and obvious way. Instead, men are assigned more practical and physical tasks, such as coordinating logistics of the funeral and participating in specific activities during the ceremony, such as carrying the coffin or leading certain rituals. This distribution of roles reinforces the idea that women take care of the emotional and relational aspects, while men take care of more practical and physical matters. From the above, it can be inferred that these assigned roles are based on pre-established gender expectations and stereotypes that reflect social and cultural norms around the responsibilities and behaviors considered appropriate for each gender.

Taking the above into consideration, for this study, talking about masculinities refers to the fact that the meanings attributed to being a man are not finished facts, but rather are an object of daily dispute through games of competition, testing and assignment (Núñez, 2007). Therefore, I consider that the construction of what it means to be a man involves an identity project that is not finished, hence I define it as a *masculine identity project* (Flores, 2021). Thinking about it this way indicates that masculine identity is a social project, in which gender conceptions are present; Furthermore, as a project, it implies that masculine identity is constantly developing, it is not something static.

Furthermore, the performative nature of masculine identity is exposed, which generates a series of effects and is manifested in daily ritual acts mediated by gender norms. The masculine identity project presupposes that this performative character of gender precedes us; They are ritual acts that have been repeated infinitely and that men embody.



However, they can be reinterpreted, implying that the meanings of masculinity can change. Through the narration of their lives, men will reveal the meanings of masculinity in their daily experiences, which depend on the social and cultural context of the community.

Based on the proposed theoretical framework, the fundamental role of funeral ceremonies in the community of San Matías Cuijingo in the construction of meanings and in the configuration of daily life is highlighted. These rituals, rooted in the course of time, provide structure, order and meaning to the daily life of the community, according to Torres (2006). Through their symbolism and rituals, funeral ceremonies establish a deep connection with the identity and values of the community.

In San Matías Cuijingo, the funeral rites transcend the single farewell, as they are impregnated with meanings intertwined with the construction of masculinity. These rites are related to a specific daily practice: alcohol consumption, carried out mainly by men, and are part of the subjective masculine dynamics that are also manifested in mourning rituals.

The connection between funeral ceremonies and alcohol consumption, along with the division of activities by gender during rituals, reinforces Connell's proposed notion of gender order. In this context, there are norms and practices accepted by the community that define what is considered natural or common sense for men and women. Gender-based role assignment in funeral ceremonies exemplifies how these gender dynamics are embedded in traditional practices and are reflected in rituals that shape daily life and community identity.

It is proposed, therefore, that the funeral ceremonies in San Matías Cuijingo not only have deep and symbolic meanings, but also play a crucial role in the construction and reproduction of gender identities, particularly masculinity. The interplay between rituals, alcohol consumption, and gender dynamics illustrates how funeral rites are not only an essential part of everyday life, but also offer a window into understanding gender structures and their impact on the community.

## **Methodology and context**

Considering the objective indicated for this study, I chose to carry out the research using a qualitative methodology, which focuses on delving into the realities, relationships and structural dynamics (Fernández, 2002). This methodology allowed me to thoroughly explore men's experiences during funeral rites in times of pandemic, which facilitated the analysis of how they reinterpreted their roles within these rituals. Following this approach, I conducted ethnography in the community along with in-depth interviews with two men who,



over several years, have been in charge of carrying out various activities at the town's funerals, respecting their position within what Connell (1987) defines it as the gender order.

Ethnography is framed in qualitative methodology, which represents a process of analysis and understanding of how a group lives, which serves to draw a portrait of its lifestyle (Paz, 2003). Ethnography not only allows a descriptive study of cultures, but also enables access to various social realities. Its application in this study facilitated the description and interpretation of funeral rituals prior to the pandemic, as well as the analysis of how they evolved during this period. Ethnographic observations were carried out throughout 2021 and early 2022.

Specifically, in-depth interviews were carried out with the objective of determining the narratives of the individuals within the sociocultural framework in which they live their lives. Through these interviews, it was possible to access the individual and subjective sphere in relation to the social and collective environment (Alonso, 1998). These face-to-face meetings between the researcher and the interlocutors not only sought to obtain answers, but also to learn which questions to ask and how to do so (Taylor and Bogdán, 1987). In the context of this research, in-depth interviews allowed us to capture the experiences of the men and show that during the pandemic they had to devise strategies to carry out the grieving processes and to fulfill their duties within the community.

As already mentioned, the study was carried out in the rural community of San Matias Cuijingo, located in the east of the State of Mexico. This is a population of pre-Hispanic origin, which has 7,532 inhabitants: 3,832 are women and 3,700 are men (INEGI, 2010). Their main sources of income come from temporary jobs in Canada, work in the fields and the corn husk trade and the sale of chamomile.

The field work in which the data for this research was collected was carried out during 2021 and early 2022 in the community. In 2021, extended observations were conducted in the community to understand the meanings, interaction, and language of the community (Creswell, 1998).

To carry out the ethnographic observation and interviews, we worked with a guide for both observation and interviews in which the research objective was operationalized with the purpose of generating a conceptual scheme that helped guide the analysis. In this way, observable components could be achieved, starting from abstract concepts to the concrete (Avalos, 2014). To contact the interlocutors, I resorted to chain or network sampling

(snowball), which allowed me to identify key participants to add to the research (Morgan, 2008).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and common themes were highlighted, for which special attention was paid to discursive metaphors related to gender. In this way, a hermeneutical unit was built that compiles the data and analysis of this document. Initially, the life stories were read and reread repeatedly in order to perform coding and capture some emerging theme. The first coding was carried out in the Atlas ti program in order to achieve the operationalization of previous concepts. Based on their narratives, the following analysis and interpretation was carried out.

## Results

To analyze how men have redefined their practices during the covid-19 pandemic, we worked with two axes: 1) funeral rites before the pandemic, specifically in the practices carried out by men during funerals, and 2) funeral rites during the pandemic, analyzing and describing how male practices in funeral rites have changed.

### Before the pandemic

Funeral rituals play a critical role in helping families of the deceased adapt to changing circumstances and manage the grieving process. These rituals, established as a series of actions to be carried out when someone dies, provide a structured means to confront and assimilate the loss. Additionally, they act as the starting point for the grieving process, so that people begin to work through emotions and find ways to make sense of the death.

The idea that grief should be imposed by the group, according to Durkheim (2000), suggests that communities establish norms and practices that guide how the grieving process should be carried out. In the case of the community of San Matías Cuijingo, these funeral practices have been defined and transmitted over the years, which has established a specific structure to live and experience mourning in that context. However, with the emergence of the health emergency caused by covid-19 and the subsequent restrictive measures, these traditional practices were affected and modified.

Specifically, the community learns of a death when the church bells ring, a sound that becomes a symbolic element with various meanings for the residents. When the bells ring nine times, it indicates that someone in the town has died. In this way, the community begins to wonder who the deceased person was and preparations begin for the ritual activities of the

funeral. One of the first actions is to call the godparents of the deceased person to dress the deceased. If they are not available, it is the women of the family who assume this responsibility.

Once the deceased is dressed, the men of the family make cardboard huaraches with white ribbons to place on the deceased's feet, while a stick of Castilian rose is placed in his hand. In the case of young people who die "chaste", in addition to the rod of castile, a jug is placed in their other hand, since it is believed that, upon reaching the kingdom of heaven, the young man will use the jug to obtain water, continue his work as a farmer and look for an honest woman with whom to spend eternity. This practice reflects the ideological weight of compulsory heterosexuality and the role of the father-husband for men in the community, since even in the afterlife after death, heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage are expected to be fulfilled.

Another practice of men at funerals is the tradition of "going scratching." According to one of my interlocutors, going scratching is a town custom because "it is known that life is borrowed and we hope that when we die someone will support us by scratching" (Luis, 42 years old). In the village, it is customary for men to go scratching if they know the deceased person. To do this, approximately between 15 and 20 men gather, although, according to the stories of my interlocutors, only five people are dedicated to scratching, while the others participate in a kind of get-together.

According to Carlos, one of my collaborators "it is a type of party where there is alcohol, beer and pulque" (Carlos, 45 years old). Even the men on the death squad<sup>2</sup>, who are men who have given themselves over to alcohol, go to scratch because they know there will be free alcohol, and many of the men who participate end up drunk.

Another activity that reveals the gender division in funeral rituals is the wake of the present body, which consists of the first prayers that the deceased receives, which generally begins at dusk and lasts all night. It is common to see women inside the house praying or preparing tea, while men are in charge of looking for firewood to make a bonfire that must be kept lit all night. Additionally, they are usually responsible for distributing liquor and cigarettes to other men present.

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<sup>2</sup> The death squad is made up of middle-aged men belonging to different socioeconomic levels. They have a common habit of consuming alcohol uninterruptedly, regardless of the place, day of the week or time. They often start drinking early in the morning and continue throughout the day. Some of them are sought out by their families to rest or eat, while others choose to sleep on the street and then resume consumption the next day.

The description of the post-wake phase in the funeral rituals of San Matías Cuijingo offers a deeper perspective of how the community honored and said goodbye to their deceased loved ones before the health emergency caused by Covid-19. The process of preparing for the burial involved various practices and elements linked to both symbolic aspects and gender dynamics present in the community.

The celebration of a meal after the wake, which included an elaborate and specific banquet, represented a way of paying tribute to the deceased and offering a gathering space for the grieving community. The responsibility of preparing this banquet fell to the women of the community, reflecting the gender division in roles and tasks during funeral practices. The menu, composed of traditional dishes such as mole, ayocote beans, rice and handmade tortillas, carried with it a cultural and symbolic value. The inclusion of drinks such as pulque or high-quality liquor highlighted the importance of giving the deceased a dignified and respectful farewell. Additionally, the presence of a musical band or even a mariachi during the meal added an element of solemnity and celebration in honor of the deceased.

This description highlights how funeral practices not only represent moments of mourning and farewell, but also of community gathering and cultural expression. The active participation of women in the preparation of the banquet, along with the presence of significant musical and culinary elements, illustrates how these practices are deeply rooted in the identity and daily life of the community. These rituals not only serve as symbolic acts of farewell, but also reinforce social and cultural ties between members of the community.

The post-wake process, which involves carrying the coffin, prayers, and activities in the days following the funeral, further highlights the gender norms and expectations embedded in funeral practices. The responsibility of transporting the coffin to the cemetery falls mainly on men, which shows a clear differentiation of roles based on gender. Men take on the physical role of carrying the coffin, possibly to reflect cultural notions of physical strength and endurance. Furthermore, the occasional participation of women in carrying coffins, especially in the case of babies or children, indicates an adaptation of roles in specific situations.

The continuity of the gender division across the nine days of prayers indicates how these norms endure throughout all stages of the funeral process. Women must carry out daily prayers and prepare meals, while men are responsible for specific tasks such as distributing alcohol and cigarettes, as well as collecting firewood. The exclusive participation of men in

these activities highlights the persistence of traditional gender roles, as illustrated in photo 1, where men are observed collecting firewood.

**Photo 1.** Men collecting firewood (2021)



The image of men collecting firewood, with the observation that they often consume alcohol at the end of this task, highlights the intersection between cultural and gender practices and alcohol consumption in the community. This behavior may reflect the connection between community activities and certain cultural practices associated with masculinity and camaraderie.

Then, at the end of the nine days, a cross must be placed at the head of the grave and a border of earth is made. In Cuijingo this is known as shadow, and represents a sacred hill on which he was buried. This description highlights how funeral practices are not only a matter of commemoration and mourning, but also evidence and reinforce gender norms and traditional roles within the community. Each stage of the funeral process reveals a gender structure in which the roles and tasks assigned to men and women are clearly defined.

However, it is important to consider how these norms were disrupted when facing challenges or adaptations in the context of the covid-19 pandemic and the associated

restrictions, so men have had to redefine masculine practices and have had to seek ways to be able to occupy a place within the gender order in funeral rituals in the new normal, as will be shown in the following section.

### **After the pandemic: redefining practices**

The change in the meaning and use of bells in the community during the contingency of the covid-19 pandemic is a concrete example of how cultural practices can be transformed in moments of crisis. The ringing of bells, which used to have a specific symbolic meaning, became a constant and often disturbing signal during the health emergency. In this regard, my collaborators mentioned the following:

There was a lot of fear, the bells were ringing at two or three in the morning, one was used to it being in the morning or afternoon, but now you could always hear the bells, there was no established time. I woke up my wife to say: “Hear the bells; “Surely another person has already died.” There was a time when my wife couldn't even sleep anymore because she felt ugly; He thought that one of those days it would be one of his relatives (Carlos, 45 years old).

There was a time when they were ringing at all hours, there were like four or five deaths in one day, whether you like it or not, because it gave you a kind of fear or even horror to hear the bells often (Luis, 42 years old).

The above excerpts show us how the fear and uncertainty surrounding the pandemic caused a change in the rules of use of bells. For example, the absence of a set time for ringing the bells generated anxiety and concern in the community. Furthermore, the frequency and surprise of hearing the bells in the middle of the night increased fear and the feeling of vulnerability.

Carlos's testimony shows the complete transformation in the relationship with the sound of the bells. Instead of being a signal commonly associated with funeral rituals and mourning, the ringing of bells became a constant reminder of the presence of the virus and the possibility of further losses. Carlos's concern for the safety of his loved ones intensified as a result of this change, underscoring how uncertainty and fear can profoundly affect both individual and collective perceptions.

This alteration in the practice of bell ringing highlights how crises can change the meaning of long-held cultural traditions and how communities face unexpected challenges.

It also illustrates how cultural rituals and symbols can be redefined and reinterpreted in response to extraordinary circumstances, and how these reinterpretations can have a considerable emotional and psychological impact on people.

Bremmer (1978) points out that funerals are not limited to burial or cremation alone, but involve a whole series of rituals. The outbreak of the pandemic, which modified the intricate ritual framework already established in this community, caused people to reinterpret previously rooted meanings. The ringing of bells was now associated with fear, a feeling that permeated people's subjectivity and that manifested itself in the way men organized themselves in funeral rituals during the pandemic.

On the other hand, the activities of scratching and collecting firewood were interrupted not only due to the restrictions imposed, but also due to fear of contagion. One of my collaborators expressed in this regard:

They no longer let us go to scrape or fetch firewood, in any case, even if it had been possible, whether you like it or not, there was fear, we didn't recognize it, but there was fear of getting together. Also, especially thinking that if I got infected, I could infect my mother or my family (Carlos, 45 years old).

Carlos's testimony highlights how risk perception and fear of contagion during the pandemic affected not only cultural practices, but also people's willingness to participate in traditional activities. The restriction and alteration of activities such as scratching or collecting firewood, which were part of funeral and gender rituals, were influenced by both the imposed measures and concerns about the spread of the virus. Fear of contagion, particularly the possibility of infecting loved ones, emerged as a central concern.

Although Carlos points out that it may not have been fully recognized, the fear of gathering and doing group activities affected the decisions and actions of people in the community. The perception that interactions could result in transmission of the virus dramatically changed how people evaluated and participated in their traditional practices.

The fact that firewood scraping and collecting activities were suspended, even though they perhaps could have been carried out with additional precautions, highlights the importance of fear in decision-making in this context. This change in behavior reveals how risk perception and the need to protect family and community can overcome adherence to entrenched cultural practices. Furthermore, although alcohol consumption is part of the dynamics of male subjectivity, many had to reduce their intake not only in funeral rituals, but



also in their daily lives. Some considered alcohol as a kind of shield to protect themselves from Covid-19, as one of them told me:

I hardly drank... but well, they say that with alcohol you clean yourself, you see, none of them have died from the death squad, that's why I say that alcohol protects them so they don't get infected (Luis, 42 years).

Luis's testimony reveals a diversity of attitudes and perspectives around alcohol consumption during the Covid-19 pandemic in the community. Although this practice is part of the dynamics of male subjectivity, the health crisis led some people to reduce their consumption, both in funeral rituals and in their daily lives.

However, for others, alcohol takes on a different meaning: a kind of protection against contracting Covid-19. Luis's comment about the “death squad” and his apparent immunity to the virus due to alcohol consumption exemplifies how beliefs and narratives can influence risk perception and protection strategies.

Although the veracity of such a statement may be questionable from a medical perspective, the story illustrates how certain cultural and personal interpretations can give rise to specific decisions and behaviors. The relationship between alcohol and the prevention of contagion of covid-19, as Luis mentions, may have originated in part as a coping mechanism against the uncertainty and fear generated by the pandemic. In times of crisis, people often look for ways to feel safer and more secure, even if these ways may not be supported by scientific evidence. Attitudes towards alcohol consumption, whether as a form of moderation to reduce risks or as a possible protection, show how people seek to adapt and cope with the situation in the best possible way, even if these decisions are influenced by subjective perceptions and cultural narratives.

On the other hand, although in the established gender order it is stated that men are in charge of going scratching, the men were asked to suspend that activity. The municipality hired a machine that scratched four or five holes in a day. For the men, this was a bad omen, according to their stories:

Scratching two holes is bad because it calls for the dead and that causes other people to die, that's why the deaths don't stop because there are open holes that are calling for death (Luis, 42 years old).

Luis' story shows how cultural beliefs and spiritual narratives can influence responses to and perceptions of events in a community. Although traditional practice dictated that men were in charge of going scratching, this activity was suspended and replaced by a machine

hired by the municipality. However, the arrival of this machine was not greeted with enthusiasm by everyone, as some people interpreted the action of scraping as more than just a physical process. The belief that scraping two holes was considered a bad omen calling for death, according to Luis's narrative, highlights the way in which symbolic and mythical interpretations can influence the perception of events and decision making. Likewise, the notion that the activity of scratching could be related to death, and that it could attract it in some way, reflects a deep spiritual and cultural understanding in the community. This belief could have reinforced apprehension and fear in a time of uncertainty and crisis, such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, since the coffins could no longer be opened because they arrived covered, the complete ritual could no longer be performed. Therefore, men could not make huaraches or put a rose of castile stick on the deceased. In this regard, one of my interlocutors commented:

The deceased are no longer buried as ordered, and this calls for death; That's why the pandemic doesn't stop (Carlos, 45 years old).

The idea that not performing certain rituals, such as putting huaraches or a stick of Castilian rose on the deceased, may be “calling for death” reflects a deep symbolic understanding in the community. In many cultures, funeral rituals serve functions beyond the physical farewell, such as honoring and guiding the deceased on their journey to the afterlife, which can have significant spiritual and social implications. The perception that the deceased were not being “buried as required” could have originated in the idea that these rituals are an integral part of the protection and spiritual guidance of the deceased and the community in general. The disruption of these traditional practices, in the minds of some, can be interpreted as a contributing factor to the continued spread of the pandemic.

As a consequence, the role of men in the gender order during the pandemic had to be different, it had to be resignified. The men stopped going scratching, fetching firewood; many of them chose not to expose themselves, to stay at home. Luis mentioned:

Everyone was taking care of their people, their family, we didn't want any more to die, let alone ours. I heard that there are several families that lost up to four or five people. There were those who lost their wives or their children, so I better calm down, it's better I hardly go out (Luis, 42 years old).

These stories relate to the notion of men playing the role of guardians of their families. However, the other man interviewed noted that they were willing to take risks and defy restrictions, as reflected in Carlos' last quote:

Although it was not allowed, we organized funerals; many of us didn't care. There were several cases in which we felt a responsibility to give a proper funeral to our deceased loved one (Carlos, 42 years old).

Carlos's story highlights his willingness to challenge the restrictions and social norms that prohibited the organization of funerals. Despite the social prohibition, Carlos and other men were willing to carry out these acts. The main reason behind this decision was his deep sense of responsibility towards his deceased loved ones. That is, they felt a moral need to provide an appropriate and respectful funeral to honor those they had lost. This story underscores the importance of family and these men's commitment to ensuring that their loved ones received the respect and tribute they deserved, even if it meant defying established norms.

However, at the beginning of 2022, due to the decrease in infections, the state and municipal governments decided to lift health restrictions in the municipality. In this way, the funeral rituals were carried out in the same way as in previous years, thereby reestablishing the gender order.

## Discussion

The study's findings highlight that, overall, the restrictions imposed in response to the Covid-19 pandemic caused profound changes in the life of the San Matías Cuijingo community. Indeed, modifications in funeral practices, daily life, and gender roles reveal how crises can lead to significant sociocultural changes and challenge previously ingrained norms and values in the community.

In this regard, Harari (2020) points out that the impact of the pandemic significantly transformed the perception of life and death, as well as the way we interact and organize our societies. Consequently, the Cuijingo community was forced to adjust its relationship with life and death.

The discussion on the resignification of men's practices during the Covid-19 pandemic in relation to funeral rites sheds light on the intersection of cultural and gender norms and exceptional circumstances. Likewise, the pandemic revealed the capacity of communities to adapt to extraordinary situations, as restrictions and fear of contagion led to

a rapid reassessment of funeral and gender practices. In other words, the priority shifted from following traditional rituals to protecting family and community.

In this sense, Bauman (2013) suggests that fear is a relevant mechanism that intensifies certain fears, so that the change in the perception of the meaning of bells and funerary practices illustrates how cultural traditions can be reinterpreted in times of crisis. . That is, funeral rituals are not simple mechanical actions, but rather have a deep symbolic and spiritual meaning that can evolve.

On the other hand, it is worth mentioning that the pandemic not only had physical effects, but also emotional and psychological effects on the community. For example, fear, anxiety, and concern for the safety of loved ones influenced people's decisions and actions, demonstrating how crises can profoundly affect individual psychology and perception. This aligns with what was stated by Thomas- Sábado (2020), who states that covid-19 generated fear, anxiety and uncertainty as it was perceived as a real threat.

On the other hand, it is crucial to highlight that the men's responses were not uniform, as some chose to abide by the restrictions and protect their families, while others defied the rules to provide a dignified funeral for their loved ones. This indicates the diversity of attitudes and approaches present in the community. Furthermore, it points out that masculine identity projects are not static, but rather evolve and come into conflict (Flores, 2021). In this way, there is no single identity project that defines the way in which men responded to the health crisis.

Likewise, the reinstatement of traditional practices after restrictions were lifted suggests that entrenched gender norms in the community remained strong. One example is that previous gender structures were reaffirmed once restrictions were lifted. Furthermore, despite the challenges and temporary changes, the community demonstrated strong cultural resilience. The preservation of traditional practices, such as the role of men in funeral rituals, highlights the importance of cultural identity and a sense of community.

In conclusion, the covid-19 pandemic caused a series of transformations in funeral and gender practices in the community, which showed people's ability to adapt in times of crisis. In such sifting, individual responses varied, but ultimately, cultural and gender practices were reaffirmed once restrictions were lifted, showing the importance of these norms in the community.

Finally, while this research provides valuable insight into how communities face unexpected challenges and how cultural and gender norms influence their responses, some

limitations also need to be noted. Firstly, due to the pandemic, only two men could be interviewed. In other words, although it is a qualitative study and does not seek numerical representation, it would be relevant to include the perspective of more men, not only from this community, but also from other urban areas, to analyze how other men redefined their practices during this health emergency. In future research, it is also recommended to collect the women's narratives, since in terms of gender they also had to change their role in the community, which could complement this study.

## Conclusions

Throughout its history, the men of the San Matías Cuijingo community have occupied a clearly defined place in the gender framework, which establishes specific practices to follow during funeral rituals. However, the arrival of the pandemic disrupted this traditional gender order, leading men to reinterpret and adjust certain practices in search of a new perspective: that of being responsible fathers and caregivers, willing to avoid any scenario that could represent a risk for their families, although it should be noted that this redefinition of roles and practices during the pandemic was not permanent, since since the beginning of 2022, funeral rituals have once again been celebrated according to custom, which has forced men to resume previous practices and rituals.

Consequently, it could be argued that these funerary rituals represent a space of resistance, where men seek to reestablish the structure and order that had previously been established. This means that the adaptation process followed by the return to previous practices shows how changing circumstances can influence gender dynamics and deep-rooted cultural practices. Therefore, the struggle to maintain and recover these rituals, despite temporary alterations, highlights the importance of continuity and tradition in the construction of masculine identity in the community.

## Future lines of research

This research has the potential to enrich and advance the subfield of gender studies of men and masculinities (Núñez, 2007). Furthermore, it deeply explores how men redefine their role and participation in the context of funeral practices, especially when faced with situations that challenge the norms traditionally assigned to men and women in these farewell

rituals. Likewise, it can contribute significantly to gender research and its relationship with funeral rites and ceremonies.

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