

Haus krai for John Nahau Rooney, Lorengau, Manus Province.



COVID-19 and the haus krai

By Nayahamui Michelle Rooney
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Papua New Guinea's COVID-19 situation is worsening. As vaccines arrive, PNG battles disinformation, confusion, and resistance to the vaccine. This is fuelled by [social media](#) threatening any responses. Difficulties with messaging about COVID-19 because of [customary practices and religious beliefs](#) have been highlighted since the pandemic began in PNG.

It is important to distinguish between social media hoax theories on the one hand, and cultural and religious beliefs that shape how people respond to COVID-19 on the other. These two phenomena may intersect and may be related, but they are different. Deliberate misinformation about COVID-19 and the vaccines needs to be countered at every turn. Cultural, social and religious responses need to be understood.

PNG leaders are operating within a difficult political economy. In 2020, the first lockdown had severe economic and social consequences for many Papua New Guineans. With many people reliant on daily trade of agricultural produce in the [varied and changing](#) marketplaces, the 2020 lockdown measure had an immediate impact on people's livelihoods. It sparked widespread debate about the need to balance between COVID-19 measures aimed at addressing public health, and the impacts on livelihood and the economy. In August 2020, the PNG government instituted the [Niupela Pasin](#) - or New Ways of Living - policy, which effectively placed the responsibility for preventing COVID-19 on Papua New Guineans.

Haus krai is one of PNG's social and cultural institutions that makes social distancing a foreign and undesirable idea for many people. *Haus krai*, in the contemporary PNG context, refers to the attendance to the social and cultural obligation of burying loved ones. *Haus krai* is more than just paying respects to the deceased, attending a funeral, or burying the deceased. *Haus krai* is the expression of the collective love and obligation to bury someone. In countries like Australia, this duty to bury the deceased is often outsourced to the funeral home industry who may take carriage of the process. By contrast, in PNG, death is a collective event that the entire community surrounding the persons participates in.

Attending *haus kra* is a regular feature of social life in PNG.

In the past, this would have been a straightforward affair, as most burials would have been conducted locally in village settings. In the contemporary PNG context, however, where many people have migrated or are living multi-locally between their home provinces and another area, *haus kra* is also associated with *karim bodi go bek long ples* – the repatriation of a deceased person home for burial. In [my PhD](#), I discussed the importance of *haus kra* and *karim bodi* for migrant communities in their places of residence and for their ongoing connections with their home communities.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, *haus kra* and *karim bodi go bek long ples* have continued. In fact, acknowledgement of its importance is reflected in the 2020 — and now reintroduced — [measures on domestic travel](#). The repatriation of deceased persons home for burial is among the few exceptions for which domestic travel can be approved.

When our mother passed away in 2020, at the height of COVID-19 internationally, I was fortunate to be in a financial situation to return home. This was also made possible by financial contributions from my circle of friends and family. Such support is also counted in the process of *haus kra* and can be understood in terms of a reciprocation for help previously given, to be reciprocated in future need, simply out of care, or the realignment of important social relationships. When provided by larger groups such as families, clans, or institutions, the process may be more political. *Haus kra* is therefore not only collective, but it occasions the opportunity to publicly express important social relationships. Travelling to PNG during this time, I observed state and international border crossings, quarantine periods, and *haus kra* during COVID-19.

In Port Moresby, with thanks to a wide network of family and friends, supported by mobile phone technology and other means such as social media announcements, measures were instituted at home for the *haus kra* – a health professional to take people's temperature, hand sanitiser available for people, and time restrictions. There was little stigma attached to anyone who wished to protect themselves by wearing a mask or other measures. People's choices were respected. But it was impossible to socially distance. The idea of a cremation or burial in Port Moresby for my mother, in view of the COVID-19 situation, was culturally unacceptable. Given her stature, many people made contributions, including the Manus provincial government, enabling a relatively large contingent of people to accompany her deceased body home with relative ease.

Throughout, I feared contracting COVID-19. A couple of people in Port Moresby had contracted it and had recovered. I was also anxious that we might carry the virus to Manus.

My anxieties were allayed by the knowledge that this was a collective obligation. Many people were coordinating it to make it as safe as possible. Another factor that eased my mind was the knowledge that PNG's COVID-19 measures allowed for the repatriation of deceased people home for burial, and COVID-19 measures were being eased at that time.

In Manus, provincial authorities and airport staff professionally implemented COVID-19 measures. The casket was sprayed at the airport and arriving passengers were channelled through an enclosed area for COVID-19 clearance. The Provincial Government officiated over a formal programme before returning our mother's deceased body back to family. Once we left the official spaces, however, social distancing was impossible. There were signs that COVID-19 messages were followed. Some people tried to protect themselves by wearing masks. On one street, I noticed a hand washing station made from a plastic container. These small but important signs show that messages about simple protective measures do reach and get taken up by communities.



Casket being sprayed at Momote airport before being released. (MN Rooney)

Fortunately, and maybe with luck, our collective effort to return our late mother's body home for burial did not coincide with any COVID-19 cases in Manus, though, in hindsight, her *haus krai* may well have contributed to the spread of COVID-19 in Port Moresby.

More recently, the passing of much-loved national figure, founding father Sir Michael

Somare, coincided with the rise of COVID-19 cases. It would have been impossible for officials to restrict Somare's *haus krai*; such was his importance in PNG's political, historical, social, and cultural fabric.

If the current trend in COVID-19 continues, more people will die and this will impact *haus krai* processes. Even though increasing numbers of people do bury their loved ones where they pass away, the repatriation of deceased people home for burial will remain important, especially for people who are wealthy enough to afford it, or who have the standing to attract financial support. *Haus krai* is where families deliberate over important decisions like how and where their loved ones will be buried. *Haus krai* also plays an important part during the grieving process and in longer-term social safety nets. An early appreciation of the role *haus krai* plays in social lives and in the burial of deceased loved ones will be important for the prevention of and responses to COVID-19.

The kind of hard lockdowns that have become the norm in Australia will be difficult to enforce for long periods in PNG and may in fact be undesirable if they impact on important social processes and rituals of burying deceased people, including people who die from COVID-19. Instead, understanding and respecting PNG's culture and supporting people to adapt to the COVID-19 context might be a better way to go.

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