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Getting married during a pandemic: Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand

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Abstract

Marrying during the pandemic has necessitated various adaptations of custom.

Themes

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COVID-19 restrictions have impacted the ways we mark established rites of passage, from birthdays and funerals to religious festivities.² Many have also been forced to revise their plans to marry – which, in many cultures, involves more complex rituals than other life cycle events.³ This entry explores the impacts of mobility restrictions for nuptials in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand by outlining the experiences of three couples who married during the pandemic. While each couple had a distinct experience, their narratives share some commonalities, including planning small ceremonies, making flexible plans based around governmental restrictions, live-streaming the wedding day on Zoom, and making plans to have a larger celebration at a later date. Marrying during the pandemic has therefore necessitated various adaptations of custom – as Evan Imber-Black terms “ritual-making inventiveness”⁴ – which may persist for some time to come.

Restrictions on non-essential gatherings

In March, Aotearoa-New Zealand was subjected to Alert Level 4, the most severe of four tiers of restrictions, which saw a categorical ban on gatherings and the closure of all public venues.⁵ Betrothed couples’ plans to wed were further complicated by the country’s external border closures: having international guests, or a destination wedding (say, on a neighbouring island) were quickly rendered impossible.⁶ Meanwhile, in Australia, all states and territories have imposed and lifted various restrictions on weddings since March. These have included restrictions on the numbers of guests, on singing and playing wind instruments, and on communal food or beverage service areas.⁷ Some states have also required records to be kept of guests’ names and contact details.⁸ When certain restrictions were re-introduced in July, NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian reminded the state’s residents that weddings could have “no singing, no mingling, no dancing.”⁹ At the time of writing, all jurisdictions across both countries remain subject to some restrictions on non-essential gatherings.

² Imber-Black, Evan. 2020. Rituals in the Time of COVID-19: Imagination, Responsiveness, and the Human Spirit. *Family Process* 59(3): 912-921.

³ Terian, Sara Karkkainen. 2004. Marriage Rituals. *Encyclopedia of Religious Rites, Rituals and Festivals*. Edited by Frank A. Salamone. 230-235. Routledge: Abingdon

⁴ Imber-Black. 2020: 917.

⁵ NZ Government. 2020. *Everyday life: United against COVID-19*. Available online at: <https://covid19.govt.nz/everyday-life/>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁶ Fotheringham, Caleb. 2020. Coronavirus: Covid-19 restrictions put wedding sector in turmoil. *Stuff NZ*. 9 May 2020. Available online at: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/life-style/weddings/121464542/coronavirus-covid19-restrictions-put-wedding-sector-in-turmoil?>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁷ NSW Government. 2020. *Wedding ceremonies and receptions*. Available online at: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/covid-19/covid-safe/wedding-ceremonies-and-receptions>. Last accessed 22 December 2020; South Australia Health. 2020. South Australian Roadmap for Easing COVID-19 Restrictions: Step 3 – From 29 June 2020.

⁸ The Guardian, 2020. *Australia’s state by state coronavirus lockdown rules and restrictions explained*. 12 October 2020. Available online at: <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/oct/12/australia-covid-19-lockdown-rules-coronavirus-restrictions-by-state-how-far-can-travel-interstate-border-social-distancing-nsw-victoria-vic-queensland-qld-wa-sa-act-how-many-people-over-house>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

⁹ ABC News. 2020. “No singing, no mingling, no dancing”, NSW Premier outlines new wedding restrictions. 17 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-17/singing-mingling-dancing-gladys-berejiklian-nsw-coronavirus/12466322?nw=0>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

Passage now, rites later: adapting custom

Restrictions on mobility – especially, both countries’ external border closures – have placed various restrictions on planned nuptials. Anjali and Rahul, who live in Sydney, had originally planned to marry in May, and had organised a large wedding, expecting guests from around the world. When lockdown restrictions and border closures were suddenly announced in March, however, “everything changed within a matter of five days”. Anjali further explains that postponing their wedding would have required Rahul, an Indian national who carries a temporary visa, to return to India, and the couple to face an indefinite separation.

Meanwhile, Gauri and Bhuvan, who live in Sydney, had planned to marry in India, where they have extended family, in June. When this plan became infeasible following Australia’s external border closures, they became reluctant to indefinitely postpone their wedding, fearing an elderly family member would pass, in which case, per their families’ Hindu customs, they would be unable to marry for another year.

Annie and Sam, who live in Hamilton, on Aotearoa-New Zealand’s North Island, had also planned a wedding for February 2021, with overseas guests: Annie has extended family in Chile and Australia, while Sam’s siblings live in New York and Sydney. Realising that New Zealand’s border closures were unlikely to be lifted before their wedding, Annie joined a Facebook group for New Zealand brides, to “get a feel” for what others in their situation were planning. Australia’s and Aotearoa-New Zealand’s border closures – which have impacted both incoming and outgoing travel – thus drastically affected these couples’ plans.

While many weddings have been cancelled or postponed, the couples discussed in this entry proceeded with their plans – with various adaptations.¹⁰ Imber-Black dubs couples’ decisions to marry during the pandemic an example of “the enormous contrast of sheer disappointment versus creative ritual making.”¹¹ As Anjali found the idea of having a traditional Hindu ceremony without close family members being able to attend from overseas “too painful” to consider, she and Rahul decided to marry in May, as planned, instead opting for a small civil ceremony in Anjali’s parents’ house. Gauri and Bhuvan also decided to retain their original wedding date in June, and organised a small Hindu wedding at a Sydney temple. And when Annie realised that many couples on Facebook were opting to “just do it,” she and Sam cancelled their wedding, and chose to marry “elopement style” in a small outdoor wedding in August. Each couple also made sure to have a flexible plan for the wedding day, and closely monitored social distancing requirements in their cities. Each of these couples therefore reorganised their weddings in line with what was permissible under local lockdown and social distancing restrictions.

Still, despite proceeding with their weddings, each interviewee reported a sense of sadness that they were unable to celebrate their unions with family and friends. They therefore made attempts to include them in the festivities, including by broadcasting their weddings on Zoom. This is consistent with broader trends:¹² in Australia and Aotearoa-New Zealand, greater numbers are opting for intimate ceremonies, or moving their celebrations online. Anjali and Rahul also invited close family members and friends to visit the house in pairs according to a rigid schedule

¹⁰ Tong, Karen. 2020. Four weddings and a pandemic: Coronavirus has reshaped tying the knot – and the nerves that go along with it. *ABC News*. 25 July 2020. Available online at: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-07-25/getting-married-coronavirus-restrictions-changed-the-way-we-wed/12485002>. Last accessed 22 December 2020.

¹¹ Imber-Black 2020: 917.

¹² Ibid.

following the ceremony. Despite having inhibited mobility, each of these couples made a concerted effort to connect with others on their wedding day.

Each couple further reported varied plans to celebrate on a larger scale in the future, when border closures and social distancing restrictions ease, and they can reunite with family and friends. However, none of the interviewees had any concrete plans for these celebrations – in part due to the persistence and continuing uncertainty of the restrictions – and appeared content that they were already married, no matter the circumstances. Annie also mentions she is “stoked” at having saved considerable money by having a smaller wedding, and believes many couples will continue to do the same, even when it is no longer necessary. While restrictions on mobility have certainly disrupted many rites of passage, many have proceeded with their plans to marry; albeit with adaptation of custom – which, like the other adapted practices discussed in this Inventory, may well continue into the future.