

EMERGENCY-PERIOD CORONA LORE IN THE SPHERE OF INTEREST OF THE RESEARCHERS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF FOLKLORISTICS OF THE ESTONIAN LITERARY MUSEUM¹

On 12 March 2020, the Government of the Republic of Estonia announced emergency situation in Estonia until 1 May and imposed special measures to hinder the spread of COVID-19. Although public gatherings had already been banned, the international conference under the heading “Between individual and collective trauma”, with Liisi Laineste, senior research fellow of the Department of Folkloristics of the Estonian Literary Museum (ELM), as the main organizer, continued with presentations also on 13 March. Conference participants from St. Petersburg were the last ones to cross the border at the Narva border checkpoint in a coach. Truth to tell, the coach did not cross the border anymore; the passengers had to switch to another one on the Russian side.

Soon enough the state of Estonia had been put on lockdown and information about unlocking it was postponed into the vague and tremulous future. The world in lockdown had to face a new reality with new touchstones. The Estonian Literary Museum also shut its doors to visitors until the end of the emergency situation on 17 May, and most of the researchers went to isolation in home offices.

Contemporary folklore has attracted constant academic interest of the Department of Folkloristics (the working group of contemporary culture and media studies of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies works under the leadership of the researchers of this department), so research focus was quickly shifted towards the topical corona virus and issues related to it. Researchers started to collect corona folklore and crisis lore that spread on the internet and through participant media, and to analyse it proceeding from their research topics and viewpoints. The new research grant application submitted to the Estonian Research Council in April focused, among other issues, on different

natural, economic, political, and cultural crises and disasters as well as mechanisms and models for managing them, so various directions were included. A crisis or a catastrophe may bring about a renewal, yet definitely a search for adaptation tactics. More often than not, such a situation gives an impetus to a turning point required for a new development direction or economic rise, yet crises doubtlessly bring to the fore social bottlenecks, psychological and other social shortcomings, and ideals and living standards are often far from being compatible (cf. Hart 2006; Post 2015). We have to admit that so far pandemics have been either territorial or taken place long ago, so we still lack global comparisons in the topic of One World.

Corona lore was part of our sphere of interests already earlier. Archivist-referent Maris Kuperjanov started collecting internet lore already in January, when the new corona virus devastated the city of Wuhan in China. On 25 February, at the seminar of the working group of contemporary culture and media studies of the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, Maris Kuperjanov made a thorough presentation on the responses to the coverage of the new coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 in (social) media. She also published several articles on the corona lore (Kuperjanov 2020a; Kuperjanov 2020b; Kuperjanov 2020c), which give an overview of the initial period of the outbreak of the new coronavirus as well as public reactions to the virus-related news in media commentaries and social media environments. Although at the time the pandemic was still in its initial phase and the knowledge about virus SARS-CoV-2 and the disease COVID-19 caused by it was increasing and still does on a daily basis, the increasing flow of information and the rapid escalation of the situation provided a fertile basis for the spread of thematic folklore already from the moment the virus was detected. It was possible to observe the spread of jokes and internet memes, misinformation due to human errors or lack of knowledge, malignant fake news, conspiracy theories and other narratives, which often accompany epidemics and may even be more harmful for the society than the disease itself. Folklorists were quick to ascertain that several motifs and storylines were already long known and universal and emerged as similar situations arose both in Estonia and in the rest of the world (Kõiva 2020).

The vernacularity of the crisis or all kinds of popular or grassroots reactions to it constituted a wider perspective (about vernacular religion see Primiano 1995). It is namely crisis folklore that reflects and demonstrates the complexity inherent in modern society, so folklore became a kind of communication

means for the crisis period, which expressed different emotions related to the coronavirus, for example, fear of the so-called unknown. Vernacular web – a concept elaborated by folklorist and media researcher Robert Glenn Howard (2008) to explain grassroots networks that surround certain web pages – became a significant keyword in internet folklore studies. Reet Hiimäe, senior research fellow of the Department of Folkloristics, compared the vernacular tactics of the 21st-century corona crisis with the past and mythical events, for example, plague lore (see Hiimäe 2020a; 2020b). When collecting and scientifically analysing the collected material, the practical aim of the studies of corona lore was formulated: to create comparative models from vernacular reactions to crisis situations, which would help to shape a set of strategies for reacting to crises in the future.

The research focus of the Department of Folkloristics in the corona crisis proceeded from four wider subtopics intertwined with one another:

- 1) Folk medicine, e.g. disease narratives and healing practices;
- 2) Folk narratives, e.g. contemporary legends, fake news, rumours, and conspiracy theories;
- 3) Folk religion, incl. beliefs, relation to the supernatural, magic;
- 4) Folk humour, incl. all kinds of forms of humour, e.g. memes, linguistic jokes.

A wider umbrella keyword was managing the crisis in all spheres of life: how to cope with the ordinary necessary everyday procedures in the new situation; for instance, teleworking and distance learning, shopping for groceries or medical help. The emergency situation gave rise to repeated hashtags, such as #loveyoufromafar, #distance, #noplayingwithlives, #emergencysituation, #keepdistance, #isolation, #quarantine, #wewearmask, #corona, #crisis, #emergefromthecrisis, #pandemic, #washmyhands, #restinestonia, #stayhome, #staywell, #wecancope, #stopcorona, #orderhome, #supportlocals.

The bulk of the material was recorded from the comments in the main news portals and media publications (e.g. *Delfi*, *Postimees*, *Päevaleht*, *Õhtuleht*), and from the newsfeed of social media networks, such as Facebook and VKontakte. Senior research fellow Eda Kalmre recorded and analysed various conspiracy theories and fake news (e.g. Kalmre 2020), following their progress and fight against them in the social media in official and unofficial (e.g. Propastop FB) channels. The material shared by (national)-conservative Facebook friends (conspiracy theories, beliefs, fake news) constituted a special sphere of interest.

The crisis intensified the formerly more hidden hostile attitude towards the minorities, and the open opposition between liberal and conservative views became more manifest.

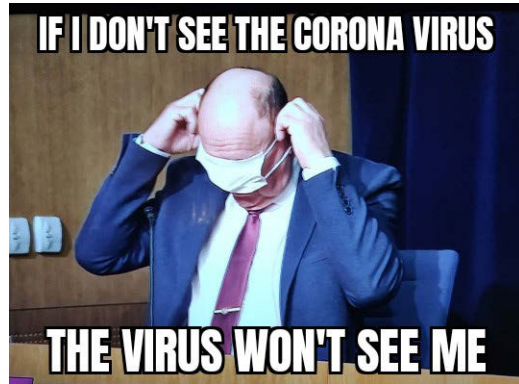
Researchers joined several international networks. For instance, voluminous meme material was collected through the collection module of the Belief Narrative Network (Mare Kõiva, Mare Kalda, Eda Kalmre), which starts research lectures in the autumn.

More concrete joint researches with specified material collection were defined; for example, in April 2020 Reet Hiimäe recorded all the stories related to alternative medicine (incl. folk medicine) in the newspapers *Postimees* and *Õhtuleht* and magazine *Naisteleht* (44 screenshots). Based on this material, a comparative joint article on the representations of alternative medicine in the media will be published in collaboration with Terhi Utriainen, Professor of Religion at the University of Turku, who recorded thematic stories in three Finnish media publications in the same period.

Researchers followed the posts of several social media groups. Senior research fellow Eda Kalmre constantly observed the reactions of different interest groups, for example, the members of the mainly female group *Käsitöö* (Handicraft; with nearly 40,000 members), to corona quarantine. Senior research fellow Piret Voolaid observed the construction of fan culture under the conditions of field game deficiency during the corona crisis on the basis of the activity of the Premium League 2019 four best football clubs – Flora, Levadia, Nõmme Kalju, and Paide Linnameeskond – in the social media. FC Flora FB-community had about 15,000 followers as of 17 May 2020 (end of the emergency situation), FCI-1 Levadia had 7,000 followers, Nõmme Kalju FC – 17,600, and Paide Linnameeskond – 5,300. The pandemic put people's values to the test and brought forth a number of stereotypic understandings. Internet memes in different languages also dealt with values and ways of thinking that needed re-estimation in the crisis (<https://meeldib.com/hispaania-bioloog/>).

Sport and fan cultures were highly meaningful in the corona crisis in Estonia, as the official report of the Health Board confirmed that in Saaremaa, the county most devastated by the coronavirus, the virus was literally spread through cheer fan horns. Culturally, it is intriguing that earlier on fan horns constituted a serious discussion object in fan culture and the corona crisis revived this discussion. Now football fans created a counter-opinion: “If you want to support a team, do it by singing as Estonians always do. If you do not want to sing, then clap your hands.”

The meme mocking the Estonian Minister of the Interior, downplaying the risk of coronavirus.



Anastasiya Fiadotava developed the comparative sports folklore direction in the pandemic situation, dwelling upon football and fanship in Belorussia, where, unlike in the rest of the world, football competitions, including championship games, still continued. While football games were discontinued practically all over the world, research focused on the FK Slutsk Worldwide Facebook page, created for the Slutsk football club (Belorussia) on the initiative of the Australian fans on 23 March 2020. The group of more than 7,000 members regularly shares memes (308 memes collected so far) and jokes, but also discusses the issues of football and corona pandemic, keeping up the community's spirit and supporting the team.

Mare Kõiva was deeply interested in celebrating (religious) holidays in a crisis situation, which results in a corresponding overview about Estonia at the Ritual Year working group 2021 research panel (Helsinki, June).

Most of the holidays in Estonia were celebrated virtually, yet those interested were able to participate in holiday celebrations and rituals that were filmed and posted on YouTube or Facebook. Sketes were closed down in Estonia due to emergency situation, but it was possible to watch recordings of holiday celebrations from the past years on TV and on the web. Individual adaptation patterns resulted in different solutions. Those interested participated in international choirs, listened to or watched on the internet liturgies from previous years, etc. The important holidays during this period were celebrated in the family circle. It is also clear that the emergency situation made people in several countries celebrate only with the family and close relatives, and revived several customs involving the elderly also in bigger cities. However, we also

had some unexpected actions initiating discussions; for example, Archbishop Urmas Viilma's appeal to ring church bells to make the government allow ordinary services.

Video recordings of the leaders of different spiritual movements in nature or in a holy place (Selena Fox's rituals, etc.) could be watched on YouTube and on Facebook. Some movements' YouTube posts were deleted as unsuitable, even if the message was anti-magic, considering different races and genders, and brought forth the disadvantages of capitalism, emphasising the need to pay attention to those without benefits. So only poignant questions remained: "Isn't it sad that the common people and the poor are currently grovelling in the mud? In essence, a disease that was spread by the rich as they flew around the world will now kill millions of the poor."

Against this background it is clear that restrictions differ by countries. Situation in Estonia cannot be compared to conflicts between the Orthodox Church and the police actions in Russia, not to mention fanatic religious groups' convictions about the effect of the godly powers of a temple/church, church wine, icons, etc., and massive cases of infection over there. Research results obtained in folkloristics, psychology, crisis anthropology, and the new media contribute to the analysis of the collected data (e.g. Zappavigna 2012; Brahman & Wagg 2014, etc.).

Data from many countries reflect the relationship between pets and the environment in the corona period. With this topic in view, Mare Kõiva has also collected these data herself, yet so far they have been related to the connections and awareness of protest movements and environmental topics through events and calendar holidays (e.g. St. Georges' Day, the Earth Day and an article co-authored with Andres Kuperjanov, "Ancient lights"). However, focus has been, besides social media groups, on following comment activities and forums; for example, Eesti Metsa Kaitseks (Estonian Forest Protection), etc., which are a quick way to different humour forms, novel linguistic forms, values, pastiches, etc.

One of the research complexes was related to the issues of medical anthropology. Mare Kõiva has participated in the seminars of the international medical anthropology networks as much as possible. The study of epidemics is one of the oldest topics, which also covers the development of medicine and hygiene, in most cases from the Middle Ages to the present day (Vasold 1999). Today's situation is remarkable due to the diversity of recording techniques and the

increasing attention to the way of life and mindset of an ordinary person. Topics intertwine in this all-embracing crisis, which is true especially today, as different groups have become active and they have had similar standpoints – end-of-the-world announcements and mystifications of climatic changes resemble, for example, explanations for diseases and religious viewpoints (COVID-19 is God’s punishment, the disease has been caused by one’s own behaviour or is due to people’s enormous impact on the whole planet, Armageddon is about to arrive). Similar viewpoints were also expressed by those disseminating fake news as well as some others.

No doubt the dynamics of attitudes during the pandemic was and is interesting in health care, politics, and also on the level of scholarship, as we witnessed quick changes in views already during a month. However, people’s real attitudes towards medicine (is it reliable; can doctors be trusted) and medicines (whose recommendations to follow) are also eloquent: how similar are older methods to newer ones, what are opinions about mortality and replacement vaccines, and what is regarded as a miracle medicine. This is closely linked to diet beliefs as well as the emergence of extreme viewpoints (anti-vaccine, vegans, MMS, advocates of drugs, etc.). Against this background the revival of old beliefs can be expected; for example, disseminating cholera by estate owners or suspicions that substances added to potable water affect people’s health and mentality (adding chlorine prevents people from getting ill; the opposite – the authorities poison the drinking water). The same attitudes were topical during the past cholera outbreaks; also, there are beliefs from the past that additives make you impotent or calm down (cf. beliefs about the diet in the Soviet Army – inhibits sexuality and makes you obedient). In several countries people voiced the opinion that the authorities were willing to get rid of the elderly; also, it was often opined that the pandemic was caused by pharmaceutical companies interested in increasing their profits – what they failed to do with SARS and EBOLA, they managed now. An article co-authored with Elena Boganeva about controversial opinions and especially Doomsday messages has been planned (as the virus outbreak started somewhat later in Belorussia, a change of topic is also possible).

Mare Kõiva’s most recent research has been related to the issues of charity medicine and assisted suicides (Kõiva & Kuperjanov 2019); this sphere included much remarkable, and it is definitely one of the topics to be continued. Amidst several panic waves, TV broadcasted a series under the heading *Iseolemine* (Self-being), which introduced stories about managing serious diseases and

about the wish to be part of society. Donations to food banks were discussed, and sponsoring of rare diseases continued, yet it became increasingly clear that it was not only those with diseases that needed help, but the risk group was wide and folklorists were supposed to reach all of them in their analyses. Also, folkloristics, among other sciences or even before them, has to direct attention to the models and mechanisms of making scapegoats, for which today's situation is rich in material.

One of the most significant research topics was the reuse of folklore or return of seminal texts and core topics into circulation during the pandemic. Some genres, for example proverbs, were used profusely in the crisis communication both at official and grassroots levels (see Voolaid 2020a). Reet Hiiemäe recorded lore and behavioural motifs occurring in the case of historic epidemics (e.g. the plague). The material served as a basis for overviews of the topic (Hiiemäe 2020a; 2020b). Senior research fellow Mare Kalda's special attention was attracted by a meme flow with international images, which was adapted to Estonian conditions and had texts in Estonian. Such units have as visual characters and favourite objects – as it often happens in memes – characters and situations from popular culture, which are linked to quarantine, obtaining toilet paper, personality features, emotions, and other similar aspects. From popular culture we can see house-elf Dobby, Beavis and Butthead, Drake, and two monkey dolls. As an example of the creation of place connections, we can mention the reaction to an international trend, according to which crowded places become places of untouched nature, where miraculous creatures reappear (e.g. a pair of dolphins at Taevaskoda in south-eastern Estonia). Several local folklore expressions of the international corona crisis were recorded and interpreted, which were initiated by occasional topical events during the period; for example, Piret Voolaid (2020b) introduced a case related to bears who wandered in the streets of Tallinn in May 2020, which pointed to relationships between people and animals and town and nature.

Research fellow Nikolay Anisimov carried out a joint research with his Udmurt colleague Galina Glukhova, "COVID-19 and Udmurt traditional culture", with an aim to analyse media posts in Udmurtia, oral messages and observations of how people celebrated different holidays and performed rituals in isolation and quarantine. The study discusses the peculiarities of organising traditional ceremonies, people's adaptation and reactions to the crisis situation. Special attention is paid to song lyrics dedicated to the topics of coronavirus and isolation as the Udmurts' reaction to the global virus outbreak.



One of the main topics at the web meetings of the Department of Folkloristics of the ELM in the emergency situation was the collection of corona lore and its initial analysis. Above: Teams, March 2020; below: Teams, April 2020.

Humour related to coronavirus, including internet memes, became a separate field of studies. On the first days of the emergency situation, Piret Voolaid and Anastasiya Fiadotava joined the international project of corona folklore and -humour research, “Humour during the global corona crisis”. The leading partners of the cooperation project are Giselinde Kuipers (Leuven Catholic University) and Mark Boukes (Amsterdam University); the project involves

researchers from more than 30 countries. By means of a questionnaire translated into different languages (<https://edu.nl/kp8xe>) people were asked to send jokes and memes spreading among internet users. The global collection will be made available to all the project parties for comparative studies already in the autumn of 2020.

In addition to this, the meme collection of the scientific archive EFITA of the Department of Folkloristics increased by more than 2,000 meme units. Apart from that, materials related to concrete contexts created as a result of certain actions were added; for example, Variku Basic School in Tartu organised a meme competition for schoolchildren in April 2020, under the heading “Minu distantõpe” (My distance studies), which gathered 540 memes in all. In May the collected material was handed over to our humour researchers by Eele Avalo, the activity leader of Variku School, and it will be preserved at the Estonian Literary Museum.

This paper is just a brief overview of what kind of lore was collected during the corona crisis and from which research directions the collection proceeds. A more thorough analysis with conclusions relevant for society is forthcoming. A number of novel traditions were initiated during the emergency situation. The Department of Folkloristics, together with the Centre of Excellence in Estonian Studies, started a series of video lectures on 1 April to introduce the research results to the public. Home videos on very different subjects can be found on our homepage at <http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/loeng/>, and the department’s YouTube channel FoMeedia (<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPEHx7jSdjSaMMm9Dtj0sqA>). On 18 August 2020, the first international corona conference organised by the Department of Folkloristics of the ELM under the heading “COVID-19: Management strategies and communication models. I” took place, and the video recordings of the presentations can be found at <http://www.folklore.ee/rl/fo/konve/2020/covid.htm>.

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Note

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