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INTRODUCTION INTO HEALTH-RELATED FOLKLORE AND ITS RESEARCH: FROM FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCES TO SECOND-HAND NARRATING MODELS

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Abstract: By accentuating the central keywords and observations of the articles published in this special journal issue, the author – situating the articles in a broader theoretical framework – offers a glimpse at the role of the humanities in the research of the realm of health in such a unique period as the Covid-19 pandemic. The author concludes that based on the complexity of the topic (its physical and mental, individual and collective angles, impact of the mass media and partly recycled narrative models), health research needs to take into consideration the topic's social, narrative, religious, belief, and other aspects in a nuanced way, and here folkloristic and medical anthropological approach with its specialized methodology and empirical groundedness can offer significant added value.

Keywords: Covid-19, dialogues of disciplines, health beliefs, health folklore, vernacular medicine

MULTIDIMENSIONALITY OF HEALTH

Although "Health" was chosen as the general title of this special journal issue already before the Covid-19 crisis, the extraordinary timing of the editing work – in the middle of the pandemic – left its imprint on it and all articles are quite expectably at least in some sense related to the coronavirus, describing, for example, changes in the religiosity and the emergence of new forms of rituals during the crisis but also representations of alternative medicine in the media, new facets of the vaccine hesitancy problematics, characteristic features of health-related conspiracy theories and other narratives, and the rise of emblematic hero and horror figures during the same period. The geographi-

cal grasp of the journal issue is remarkably wide – analyses of the situation come from Estonia, Finland, Bulgaria, Netherlands, Udmurtia, Tanzania, and even as a global cross-section. A couple of the articles – the ones from Thomas Ndaluka et al. and Angelina Ilieva – are elaborations of the papers that were presented in the thematic international autumn school "Dialogues with Health" for PhD students, which was held in November 2020 in Värska (Estonia). There is an overview of this autumn school in the news section of this journal (Ilieva actually raised her topic already in August 2020 at the conference "COVID-19–I: Coping strategies and communication models" from slightly different angles). One of the conclusions of the autumn school was that, more clearly than many earlier crises, Covid-19 has exemplified the multitude of combined dimensions that approaches to health can take. Besides purely medical and bodily outputs, significant social, religious, narrative, emotional, and material-technological aspects arise simultaneously, and need to be taken into consideration in research as well as in practical health care and policymaking.

The impact of emotions has especially been pointed out as a trigger for the development of alternative health explanation models and practices; for example, Nina Jankowicz (2020) notes in a generalizing way that disinformation runs on emotion. Yet so do also other types of information, including health information representations in the mainstream media. As the topic of health directly touches and concerns everyone, there is a huge potential for emotional reaction. It has also been observed that in the case of a clash of different worldviews, it is not sensible to fight with merely strong emotions against information that qualifies as health misinformation from the viewpoint of the official medical discourse. Of course, there are cases when sober and rational arguments have equally marginal effect. Until feelings of powerlessness or other reasons that feed a health belief do not fade, and the belief does not exhaust itself or become boring to its users, it may continue persisting, even more so when a belief or theory helps to work through an emotional burden. Thus, health beliefs can sometimes also have a function of constructive psychological self-help – as long as they do not obtain an extreme form and their users do not isolate themselves into a closed like-minded group.

There are many factors (e.g. the personality and reaction type of a person) that can contribute to the calming, constructive, or frightening impact of alternative health theories. Some booms of certain beliefs or approaches go through their natural life cycle and are eventually abandoned; however, in the case of the ones that persist tenaciously, it is worth investigating which aspirations they fill that they are continuously needed. In the context of vaccine problematics, Marko Uibu analyses some of such functions in this journal issue.

At the same time, the handling of health-related emotions and insecurities depends very much on a particular narrative. It is clear that stories shape our perceptions of disease (cf. Lee 2014) and different stories can do it in a positive or negative way. It is often possible to avoid catching a disease, but it is almost impossible to avoid topical messages and narratives (media texts, experience stories from relatives and friends (and their friends), rumours, legends, conspiracies, memes), especially those related to more serious or more prevalent diseases. Most of all people thirst for getting an answer to the question of how to keep oneself safe – a majority of beliefs and narratives revolve around this very question. In all cultures, people's perceptions and belief systems regarding health are closely tied to the basic survival instinct and universal fundamental values, such as "those concerned with the maintenance of life and the loss of life and to certain conceptions of 'the good life'" (Alver 1995: 22). As Jon Lee notes, the differences that exist between the answers given by a doctor and a layperson thus emerge not because of the question that focuses on health and safety in both cases, but because of the different worldviews held by those groups as a result of their training and experience (Lee 2014: 2). Combined with particular health theories are usually understandings of the right and wrong behaviour, which can be based on very different information sources and sometimes limit themselves to passive prevention and avoidance, yet in other cases take the form of active intervention. All these dimensions deserve a scholarly analysis.

FINETUNING OF RESEARCH APPROACHES

Dorothea Lüddeckens and Monika Schrimpf (2018: 6) point out that health and healing are a contested research field; according to their observation, studying, for example, traditional and alternative medicines inevitably leads to accusations in partiality: one is blamed either for taking sides in favour of biomedicine or advocating alternative healing systems without sufficiently pointing to the possible drawbacks that these imply. This tendency also applies to the research of alternativity in a wider sense: alternative theories and those who show interest in them without expressing outright disgust (even if it is just scholarly interest from the viewpoint of cultural research, social psychology, and political science) often risk being viewed as pathologized (cf. a similar thought in Butter & Knight 2018: 33) because dealing with such heavily connotated topics openly is not considered as serious research. Thus, it is important to be aware that researchers themselves would not end up silencing each other while using the same polarizing and demonizing scripts that we meet in vernacular debates.

At the same time, folklorists, medical anthropologists, and representatives of other humanities can have a unique role in studying vernacular health concepts, narratives, and behaviour while having the necessary research tools that enable them to see wider patterns of vernacular reaction behind the clusters of narratives from individuals – narrative scripts, diachronic and synchronic changes in these scripts, universalities, key metaphors, mental maps and their creation mechanisms. Folkloristics, especially, critically scrutinises information of various levels and its sources, making different groups (including small ones) audible. Such a specialized methodology and empirical groundedness can offer significant added value to biomedical approaches or quantitatively based sociological surveys. The ideologies and values that rise from clearly mentioned scripts and contexts have an impact on health attitudes and behaviour. So, for example, some alternative views and critics related to the official medical system and its approaches (e.g., vaccination, restrictions) are much more sharply accentuated during the corona crisis than during other times. Yet at the same time it is deductively expectable that the emerging vernacular health theories have to resonate with the already existing worldviews in order to gain ground, or – as some researchers have shown – people first and foremost pay attention to what confirms the already existing experiences and beliefs, and lived experience of a close family member, and this information often outstrips the lived experience of the many, because the many show up as mere statistics (Bodner et al. 2021). Thus, it deserves more scholarly analysis and underlining in which cases there is a higher probability that narrative logic goes into conflict with the logic of statistical facts.

Several researchers have emphasized the need to pay more attention to which health-related views and in which contexts are given voice publicly. For example, Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs (2016: 5–6) analyse how the uneven distribution of rights to produce and circulate knowledge about health is closely related to health inequities. Believing in some alternative health theories can be sometimes irrational and harmful but the conclusion that such theories are always per se dangerous cannot be taken for granted automatically. Thus, the actuality that some theories seem extreme and illogical does not mean that all others can also be deemed as incorrect or ridiculous. Here again, certain patterns of information production, established power relationships and information hierarchies play a role. For example, it can be observed with some regularity that the rhetoric of demonizing, polarizing, ridiculing, and doubting the adequacy of a representative of certain views only occurs if somebody's theories conflict with socially and politically recognized epistemic authorities – such as the mainstream media, scientists, medical professionals, government officials, historians, and other experts (cf. Räikkä & Basham

2019: 181). If similar arguments are presented by a journalist in a mainstream newspaper, the journalist's views are not any more called an alternative or conspiracy theory but investigative journalism.

Communication researchers and folklorists should also point more to the tendency that in public debates, believing in alternative health approaches or using these is mainly exemplified against the backdrop of the bizarrest theories (e.g. claims that the WHO cooperates with reptile aliens in creating certain health policies). One of the consequences of such an approach can be that a number of people start applying critical thinking to only those health theories that are not taken seriously by most people anyway, and are not alert to milder-sounding theories that do not fill such criteria of bizarreness. It is also relatively common that the public media and sometimes even researchers handle the users of certain health theories or healing practices as a monolith group. Joining such a group is described similarly to a fatal infection – once one affiliates, say, the group of MMS-users, there is no way back. Here more awareness of fluctuating group dynamics would be needed. While describing the thinking patterns of certain groups, similarly a more differentiated approach would be justified; for example, stereotypic accusations in credulity cannot be evenly applied to all alternative thinkers as many of them clearly make huge analytical efforts and weigh different information channels in order to make conclusions about the correctness of their views, thus working through much more information that the ones who only read selected mainstream newspapers or news portals but who are never pejoratively categorized of being irrational believers. Such a more nuanced approach would also help to find out in which cases the perception-psychologically grounded tendency occurs that even when comparing various information channels, some people still select only the information that supports their existing beliefs. In short, individuals are extremely diverse but in some cases the users of alternative health explanation patterns and curing, and mainstream thinking seem to have quite similar ways of communication and information processing: both are convinced that they own the correct information and believe that those who think differently are naive or biased.

Many scholars and journalists focus on the question about why people believe in alternative health theories and in conspiracy theories in general. Only few researchers (e.g. Räikkä & Basham 2019) have dared to raise the opposite question – namely, why do people not believe in such theories. Räikkä and Basham argue that such a behaviour can be explained with conspiracy theory phobia which manifests when a person rejects conspiracy theories out of hand without any appropriate evaluation of the available evidence, or if their reaction towards such theories is explicitly one of mockery, contempt, or hostility. The

risk of being stigmatised in relation to alternative thinking is so huge that it is much safer to believe dominant mainstream information. But automatically rejecting everything that differs from conventional information can cause people to give up healthy and justified critical thinking that could lead to informed conclusions and decisions.

Folklorists (and other humanitarians) can offer empirically grounded analyses of the combinations of alternative, evidence-based medical and rational-scientific health thinking in its complex forms and symbioses that can change in time and lead to mature informedness in some cases, but in others also to extremism. It is expectable, though, that the majority of people belong to the group with "coexisting worldviews and ontologies" (Utriainen 2016: 48) and derive their information from ever-increasing number of sources. Thus, the aim of folkloristics and neighbouring disciplines should not be stressing the dichotomy between the truth and non-truth or forbidding certain beliefs but rather exemplifying the emergence and spreading patterns of certain health beliefs and their causes, which can be related to economic and existential, past and present, individual and contextual insecurities in a combined way. All in all, the use of biomedical as well as alternative health approaches and their mixed forms arises from the need for self-protection and the desire for a fulfilling life.

HEALTH IN MEDIA REALITIES

As the article by **Reet Hiiemäe** and **Terhi Utriainen** in this volume and research from various Western countries confirm, the general attitude towards alternative healing and explanation theories and certain alternative approaches (e.g. vaccine hesitancy) in the mainstream media is ridiculing and stresses the dangerousness of such approaches. For example, vaccine hesitancy is often viewed as going hand in hand with the irresponsibility and credulity of the parents who are depicted as believing everything that they find on the internet (as if the internet would contain only non-plausible information). Yet, when interviewing such parents, it turns out that it is namely their feeling of responsibility towards the wellbeing of their children that trigger their alternative thinking and anti-vaccine behaviour – only their argumentation is not congruent with official viewpoints on the topic. Thus, publicly disparaging their behaviour or accusing them of acting irresponsibly cannot lead to positive results because they do not feel that such accusations are justified in their case.

Research has shown (e.g. Seale 2003) that when journalism aims to eradicate some risky health theories, their thorough description – even with pejorative epithets – is not an effective means but can produce the opposite effect. For

example, through formats of science fiction, reality shows, and news journalism elements of alternative health theories reach millions of people who would probably otherwise not come into contact with them. Empirical media analysis shows that often reflections of alternative health theories in the mainstream media sound like copy-paste passages from alternative social media groups, just that a disparaging frame has been added. In this way they arouse interest in people who usually do not search information in alternative channels. Some authors (e.g. Schultz 2018) have compared the information presentation of conspiracy theories, folktales, and journalism and found significant similarities. Repeating the same content frames, narrative patterns, and even folktale archetypes in journalistic reporting perpetuates them on another level, sustaining for the media consumer the impression that these have an important message to spread. Even social media fact control marks sometimes rather increase than decrease in the curiosity of people as they arouse the feeling that the given information is something forbidden and secret. Additionally, fact controls are seldom perceived as neutral because even those cannot take place outside of certain ideologies.

In addition, an example about corona-deniers in Estonia (described in the article by Hiiemäe and Utriainen in this volume) shows that although the information about them was presented with strongly pejorative epithets, the number of people who joined their social media group increased rapidly after a TV show that confronted them. Thus, any type of visibility can attract new interest, and the interest of the already existing followers of a health approach will not fade simply after calling them stupid publicly. Alternative health theories and vaccine hesitancy that has reached new levels during the Covid-19 crisis are largely fed by the obscurity of information. Thus, a balanced fact presentation without sensationalising, demonising, and illustrating the information again and again with extreme cases would be more useful for increasing the clarity and transparency of information. Nevertheless, in the interest of covering the subject matter all-inclusively, it is fitting to add that public warning does not always appear without a moral reason: some promoters of alternative health approaches or products can indeed use outright lies, manipulate and play one group against the others, and gain profit from it, but without further analysing such cases neutrally and thinking about their motives critically it is difficult to understand which types of individuals use such methods and why.

PSYCHOLOGY, RELIGION, NARRATION, AND HEALTH

When analysing health-related and other alternative theories, psychological moments rising from them are often pointed to, mainly stressing that they create fear, panic, and confusion, but the relevance of such material in psychological coping should not be underestimated either. There are still some – relatively few – authors who note that these approaches can also bring about subjective feelings of comfort, control, certainty, and solidarity (cf., e.g., Bodner et al. 2021). Psychological mechanisms of alternative health reasonings are important already in explaining the ways of information processing: various health theories and rumours offer critical avenues for discussing unfamiliar and dangerous situations, providing form, direction, and shape to these and release from stress in information vacuums and gaps (cf. Lee 2014: 173). Vernacular health explanations function as a way of giving understandable meaning to blurred matters in complicated times, offering emotional relief in at least some cases. It is therefore quite expectable that alternative theories gain more ground in the times of a pandemic or other disasters, when official health suggestions and restrictions sometimes change on a daily basis. For example, in a situation when a health crisis is accompanied with some other (e.g. political) crises, it is especially likely that some narrative shortcuts are sought to make sense of the state of affairs. When in January 2021 the sitting government was replaced with a new one due to a governmental crisis, and the new government changed the length of the compulsory quarantine from 14 days to 10 days without further explanation, many people were faced with the question of how the illness became suddenly less infectious just with the change of the government and respective new conspiracy theories emerged.

On the other hand, personal helplessness (e.g., fear because of the health of one's child) also seeks ventilation. If official information sites do not enable such a ventilation, it will find alternative outputs that can, in the worst case, take a radicalised form. Spontaneous social media groups are an important platform for sharing health-related experiences and opinions, but the reactions that the information shared in these groups can trigger can be different. As **Marko Uibu** notes in his article in the current volume, talking about health or particular health behaviours (vaccine-hesitancy) in social media groups does not necessarily lead to actual or persistent refusal of vaccines or other science-based medicines, or conflicts with representatives of the official medical system because group members already get their feelings of relief and empowerment from sharing respective stories. For example, Uibu's case analysis of personal experience narratives, which described contacts with the official medical system showed that – willingly or not – the descriptions of the situation are modified

during re-narration, whereby the helplessness that was experienced in the real situation turns into controlling the situation in the narration. Here, the most important aspect of the discussion is not the call to rebel against the official medical system but getting confirmation from oneself and other group members that the narrator is a respectable person who is able to make right decisions.

Several articles in this special issue touch upon psychological mechanisms that are used for coping with the pandemic or other health crises; for example, processing of tensions through the prism of humour in memes, modified proverbs, and joking personal experience stories is elaborated in the article by **Reet Hiiemäe**, **Mare Kalda**, **Mare Kõiva**, and **Piret Voolaid**. **Theo Meder** takes another important angle, while comparing the thematical, narrative, and emotional niches that various genres (Covid-19 conspiracy theories, urban legends, memes) fill. He points out that in various genres, the expression of frustrations, malicious pleasures, fears, and feelings of distrust occurs in different ways. For example, the author initially expected that the jokes would contain plenty of morbid disaster humour, but it was not the case as the joke genre suited better for expressing other types of reaction. The contemporary legends and conspiracy theories, on the other hand, were polarizing and panic-mongering, and their mistrust was mainly directed against the elite of politicians, scientists, doctors, and journalists.

The aspect of religion is continuously important in relation to health beliefs and practices. Already a decade ago, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart concluded that while factors such as desire for human contact and solidarity or probing into the meaning and purpose of life continue to remain important, the importance of religion in the contemporary people's lives is increasingly reduced because of high levels of existential security in post-industrial societies (Norris & Inglehart 2011: 245–246). However, global health risks like Covid-19 and other disasters show that physical as well as existential security can, even in the modern times, be not granted at all. It can even be said that because of the extremely fast information flows and the need to continuously process them, existential insecurity and stress related to the ambivalence of life is higher than ever before although the basic physical needs of the majority of Western people are met and, for example, diagnosing opportunities have never been so good as now. Therefore, turning to religion and forms of spirituality at least during crisis periods has not lost its importance and can be observed also in the sphere of health. Although biomedicine is at the highest level of technology, many unexpected and not easily understandable occurrences still take place (sudden illnesses or traumas, allergic reactions, etc.), triggering religious and belief-based interpretation. The mass media (including social media) enable many competing theories to spread fast and be simultaneously visible whereby

the responsibility of making the right health choices lays with the individual. Due to such a multitude of avenues for information, the authoritative role of established power structures is challenged – besides official recommendations from the WHO and ministries of health, alternative theories and local group leaders and gurus are equally omnipresent, undermining the information distributed by these organs.

In the modern post-secular Western world, health-related vernacular approaches can reach from explanations and help models based on canonical religions to manoeuvres picked from vastly heterogenous forms of spiritualities. For example, for a number of esoteric circles 21 December 2021 was the day when the earth was supposed to shift into a new finer and cleaner energy, and for making this shift smoother and at the same time also decreasing the ravagement of Covid-19, a global mediation took place simultaneously everywhere at 21:21 on this day (partly related to the number combinations of 1 and 2). In this context, health is not viewed as a particular health condition of a single person, but the joint meditation can be seen as a way of averting the end of the world as a global irreversible health problem.

In this issue, Hiiemäe and Utriainen write also about media rhetoric that combines the topics of alternative medicine and religion in the mainstream Western journalism. The expression of novel religious outputs in finding empowerment in the times of a pandemic is the topic of the article by **Thomas Ndaluka**, **Magolanga Shagembe**, **Jonas Kinanda**, and **Vendelin Simon**. Their article describes the dynamics of religion in the times of Covid-19 in Tanzania, where the collected data showed an increase of the intensity level of religiosity during the pandemic. This activism was expressed in peoples' participation in religious activities like ecumenic religious gatherings, frequent prayers, and other religious practices, encouraged by the speeches of important public figures like the president of the state and church leaders who continuously positioned religion positively as a source of solace, hope, unity, and stability. It becomes clear from the article that the pandemic had a unifying role for different religions as they converged in the fight against one enemy – Covid-19. Thus, the authors show that the cooperation of religion and official medical structures is possible and in the case of a deeply religious nation and limited resources of the economic and medical system, spreading of official health advice with the help of religion can give good results.

Another interesting case study about the connection of health and religion comes from **Nikolai Anisimov** and **Galina Glukhova**, who concentrate on the Udmurtian context. The article highlights how, especially during major crises, it is difficult for people to give up their habitual rituals that strengthen the feelings of safety and solidarity, and followers of both Christianity and

ethnic religion therefore find creative ways to continue organizing and attending them even in the changed conditions and despite the prohibition of mass gatherings. The article discusses the spring rites and summer prayers during the quarantine period, which partly found expression through new alternative ways of communication (e.g., outputs of rituals in social media; describing the pandemic situation through tradition-based humorous songs which helped to ventilate concerns related to the quarantine and self-isolation).

RECYCLED REACTIONS TO MAJOR HEALTH CONCERNS

A number of authors (Lee 2014: 4; Hiiemäe et al. 2021 in this issue) have pointed to remarkable similarities of epidemic narratives and reactions through history: when a Covid-19 narrative is compared to earlier narratives related to AIDS, H1N1, influenza, cholera or plague, the stories often bear parallel forms, plots, and meanings. I agree with Lee, who postulates: "Concerning novel diseases, people use certain sets of narratives to discuss the presence of illness, mediate their fears of it, come to terms with it, and otherwise incorporate its presence into their daily routines" (Lee 2014: 169). One of the repeated reaction models is stigmatization and polarization with the aim to mark the borders between good and evil, safe and dangerous. As the analysis by Hiiemäe and Utriainen (in this volume) about representations of alternative medicine in the mainstream media in the spring of 2020 indicates, media reaction also has certain recycled models, containing motifs of danger, risk, and stupidity and raising the need for sanctions related to healing methods used in contemporary spiritualities.

At the same time, recycled narration models also follow certain dynamics. For example, the article by **Maris Kuperjanov**, which gives a global picture of folkloric trends immediately after the beginning of the corona crisis in early spring 2020, makes clear that despite the fact that several narrative motifs are still recurring after a year, the foci of the topics were operatively changed according to the emergence of new information and findings about Covid-19 and these changes sometimes took place in the course of only a few days. For example, when in the beginning Covid-19 was depicted as something far and distant, only a couple of months later it was already viewed as a danger that is close and concerns the whole world either from a medical or economic viewpoint.

In crisis periods, personified heroes and scapegoats are needed in order to find a palpable channel for insecurities, aspirations, and other emotions. The article by **Angelina Ilieva** depicts the emergence of a positively presented emblematic figure in Bulgaria, offering a case study on the evolvement of the public image of the "Corona General" Ventsislav Mutafchiyski and the specific

fan culture that emerged around his media persona during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. The author describes how this one person who personified the hopes of very many people became extremely popular as a public figure – as a fictional character, Mutafchiyski inspired numerous forms of vernacular creativity: poems, songs, material objects, jokes, fake news, conspiracy theories, and memes, becoming the focal point of a participatory pandemic.

On the other hand, as several authors have pointed out (e.g. Lee 2014: 74ff.), seeking a scapegoat tends to be used as a mechanism of projecting helplessness and anger that can bring along manifestations of cultural othering and xenophobia – for example, initially the danger of the corona pandemic was vernacularly heavily associated with the Chinese people, yet in some African countries it was, in turn, viewed as a white man's disease. Awareness of the researchers as well as health authorities of the patterns of othering is clearly necessary in the context of health crises.

FUTURE VISIONS: DIALOGUES WITH PLURALISM AND AN ALL-INCLUSIVE RESEARCHER GAZE

It is naturally possible to investigate the topic of health from many more angles than the limited volume of this special issue allows. For example, the group dynamics described in the article by Marko Uibu would certainly deserve a further analysis in the context of Covid-19 vaccines. A wide and important topic would be the changing of health approaches through one's life cycle and in the light of the increasingly longer life expectancy of the people in Western countries. Viewing health and artificial intelligence in cultural comparison and exploring other multidisciplinary combinations, for example with sociology, linguistics, and toponymy (see more about using place names in the context of pandemics in Hiiemäe 2020) would certainly give interesting results. The main focus of this special issue is on the context of the Covid-19 crisis that involves enormous numbers of people. But equally important are subjective opinions of individuals about their own health peculiarities and conditions and their empowering self-help narratives (e.g. about illness prevention, keeping a good immune system and mental health) that go hand in hand with wider therapeutic trends and discourses (cf. Salmenniemi et al. 2019).

Obviously, with the influence of globalizing health trends and perceptions, the pluralism and heterogeneousness of health beliefs and approaches is on increase and the interactions of media representations, personal and family traditions, teachings from exotic healing courses related to health and illness offer endless research horizons and aspects. For example, even the curriculum

of an Estonian traditional ethnomedicine school offers subjects like tantra, Ayurveda, and Native American healing, but also courses on preventing illness through keeping mental and physical balance (see more on the topic in Kõiva 2020: 18). As it is possible to speak of multiple, fluctuating, and situative spiritual identities in Estonia (Hiiemäe 2021), the same applies to health-related belief worlds. There are more and more symbiotic relationships between various approaches that cannot be classified into fixed categories, therefore a dialogical and open researcher gaze seems appropriate. It is continuously topical to find ways for seeing a common ground in different health discourses, and reasonably mitigate the modes of hierarchic and polarizing information production. Methods of meaning-making and psychological coping are important in any period and will continue to be so also in the future, even during the eras of the most elaborated health technologies, and therefore their expressions are ongoingly worth studying.

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VERNACULAR REACTIONS TO COVID-19 IN ESTONIA: CRISIS FOLKLORE AND COPING

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Abstract: The objective of the article is to give an overview of the vernacular reactions to the corona crisis in Estonia, based on COVID-19-related folklore collected from written, oral, and online sources from March to June 2020, i.e., during the emergency situation established due to the coronavirus. The methodological approach of the article was a context-dependent comparative content analysis studying the functioning of thematic texts in the wider trans- and multi-media communicative process. The similarities and modifications in the content, structure, format, and function of the subject matter as well as people's attitudes, expressions, ways of information synthesis and narrative generation in the respective social context were placed under the microscope. By giving examples of thematic religious lore, memes, and proverbs, we point out how certain core motifs and core texts become actualised whenever a new epidemic occurs. We presume that the recycling of known and tested motifs in order to give meaning to the situation helps mitigate the unpredictability arising from the epidemic and determine the borders of danger and safety with the help of narrative, thereby

increasing the sense of coping, although some folk motifs may also create or deepen fears and irrational behaviour.

Keywords: belief narratives, memes, proverbs, recycled folklore motifs, vernacular reactions to COVID-19

INTRODUCTION

2020 will make world history as the year of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 pandemic. The coronavirus outbreak which started in December 2019 in Wuhan, China, reached Estonia with its first officially diagnosed case on 26 February. An emergency situation was called in Estonia from 12 March to 17 May 2020, under which extraordinary measures were applied to prevent the spread of coronavirus. Public gatherings were prohibited, standard work and study formats were replaced by distance or home formats, sanitary controls were established at the borders, museums and cinemas were closed, and all cultural events and sports competitions were prohibited. Important restrictions included the dispersion rule, i.e., adherence to the 2+2 rule, which meant that in public spaces people could move around in pairs or with family members and the distance with other people had to be two metres. Adherence to the hygiene rules became important as well, especially the rule concerning washing and disinfecting hands. People diagnosed with COVID-19 were obligated to stay in quarantine and people in immediate contact with them had to restrict their movement.

New living arrangements and other pandemic-related nuances were widely reflected in folklore. The objective of this article is to give an overview of the recycling of folkloric forms and motifs as a way of coping, based on COVID-19-related narratives collected from written, oral, and online sources from March to June 2020.[1] By giving examples of thematic belief lore, memes, and proverbs, we point out how certain core motifs and core texts become actualised whenever a new epidemic occurs. The article exemplifies the dynamics of epidemic folklore based on the above major folklore fields[2] – which motifs gain ground with the occurrence of a new epidemic, how these are modernised according to the situation, and which functions they perform in overcoming the crisis.

The corpus of material analysed in the article is formed by the subject matter gathered during the crisis period. In the case of proverbs, approximately 50 sayings from a variety of usage situations were taken as a basis (e.g., screenshots of memes containing proverbs, the use of proverbial sayings in media articles, including advertisements, photographs of the use of proverbs in urban space gathered in the EFITA catalogue (F02-020) of the scientific archive of the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum).

Earlier proverb recordings in folklore databases formed a reference basis. Folk-belief-related material is taken from interviews and conversations (including conversations in internet forums) as well as from thematic media coverage and commentaries thereof. Archive material is used comparatively (e.g., plague and cholera legends, beliefs, and urban legends related to aids, swine flu, and avian influenza from the last couple of decades). In the case of memes, the source used was the meme collection of the same period that has been described in more detail in the respective subsection.

The methodological approach used was a context-dependent comparative content analysis studying the functioning of thematic texts in the wider trans- and multi-media communicative process. An additional facet was added by the religious phenomenological view with the aim to observe similarities and differences in the content, structure, format, and function of the subject material, as well as by the religious psychological perspective (both in the individual and social psychology sense) with the aim to analyse individuals' attitudes, expressions, information synthesis, and narrative generation, and the functions thereof in a social context.

CHARACTERISTIC TRAITS OF EPIDEMIC FOLKLORE

Throughout time, folklore has been a source of operative explanations and coping strategies for severe illnesses, especially epidemics which threaten large populations and provoke the emergence of thematic narrative scripts, motifs, and metaphors in both imagery and textual form. The objective of such folklore is to show where the borders of dangerous and safe are, to help understand what is happening, and to work through possible reactions, but respective lore also gives reference to the fears and vulnerabilities in the spotlight of society in this context and also on a more universal level. As Diane Goldstein notes, the disease narratives with their emphasis and motif selection "don't just articulate the perception related to the disease reality, but these narratives also create these realities" (Goldstein 2004: XIII). Jürgen Habermas points to the existence of a more general reservoir of vernacular interpretation models; according to his viewpoint, the society (*Lebenswelt*) at a given point in time is represented by "a culturally transmitted and linguistically organised stock of interpretive patterns" (Habermas 1987: 124); therefore, the proven types of folk interpretations are recycled according to the unfolding problem. Reet Hiiemäe (1999) has pointed to the cyclical nature of disease folklore (cf. Lee 2014: 184). Often the dispersers of such folklore-related and thematic conspiracy theories are blamed for propagating false information and instigating panic, but the importance of

such material in spontaneous arguments about the truth and possible solutions and, all in all, in forming a part of psychological coping, cannot be denied.

Disease folklore affects not only the so-called ordinary people and their decisions and behaviour, but also the social-political reaction; for example, media coverage whose aim is to declare some disease narratives as false information, despite their emphasis on denial, usually reproduces the initial folk narrative, becoming a link in its distribution chain. As the present pandemic has been multi-vocally documented, it can be seen that the belief narrative is dispersed across all layers and age groups of society, from authorities to intellectuals, from officials to ordinary people: it is information that evolves and shows, in addition to material-based convictions and beliefs, the conscious distortion of myths for economic or political reasons (White 2020; Kalling 2017). An example of how one single folklore unit may play a role in devising countermeasures to the epidemic and the political rhetoric associated with this process, setting off entire new folklore chains, is former Minister of the Interior Mart Helme's goose fat controversy (i.e. his claim that coronavirus can be compared to an innocent cold which can be conquered by wearing woollen socks, spreading goose fat on your chest, and applying a mustard plaster), which quickly manifested in vernacular circulation in the form of modifications of figurative language or memes with (partly) recycled subject matter. Clearly the mass media of today plays a significant role in directing epidemic-related beliefs and fears; moreover, the media-coerced sense of fear is characterised by the fact that the fear is less based on personal experience and, increasingly more, on the abstract experience presented by the media, which is heard in the form of narrative from the start (cf. Grupp 2003: 43).

The reaction of the media between pandemics is also recurrent; for example, there are regular articles stressing the need to prepare for the next pandemic, which give reference to earlier disease outbreaks and speculate on the next ones. A 2016 media article presented as scientific results drew attention to the cases of anthrax or the Siberian plague of 1979 and 2001, adding a speculation about the severeness of the disease if bioterrorists were to use it (Aljas 2016). The combination of several actual fears (epidemics, terrorism, and the motif of deliberate infection often used in folklore) manifests itself in this narrative in an especially effective manner, by cumulating the effect of the message, although it was only a hypothetical possibility and not a description of real facts.

During the corona crisis, journalists in Estonia have often asked historians and folklorists for comments, comparing the present situation with discussions of epidemics in the past (e.g., Hiiemäe 2020; Voolaid 2020b). The recycling of narratives characteristic of times of crisis has been analysed by several media researchers, e.g., Franco Moretti, who has stated that the general core principle

of the mass media is the following: "It must tell ever-new stories because it moves within the culture of the novel, which always demands new content; and at the same time it must reproduce a scheme which is always the same" (1983: 141). The circulation of similar models and plot lines in the public naturally does not mean that absolutely all people have the same beliefs (cf. Lee 2014: 169); in some cases, diametrically opposite beliefs can occur, but discussions as to the correctness or fallibility still take place in the same traditional reference system and keep the link with the given belief active.

John D. Lee claims that all disease narratives "revolve around a single emotion in all its many forms: fear", and that the more frightened and anxious the listener felt about a plot line, the more likely they were to pass it on (2014: 169, 171). We find that this claim does not convey the complexity of generating disease-related narratives – in parallel to and at times even stronger than fear, we see coping on the forefront (e.g., when discussing the theme through the prism of surreal humour in order to alleviate personal and social tension, but also the need to reflect on the possibilities to protect one's health; cf. coping-centredness in the case of other crisis-related folklore, e.g., Hiiemäe 2016; Kõiva 2014). Bernd Rieken refers to self-centred causative explanatory patterns as a regular aspect of crisis folklore – everything is directly connected to the right or wrong behaviour of a person depicted in the lore text, and determining the wrong behaviour makes it seemingly possible to protect oneself in the future by avoiding unsuitable behaviour (cf. Rieken 2008: 115–116). Similarly, Priscilla Wald (2008) describes 'outbreak narratives' whose typical plot begins with an outbreak of a dangerous disease and ends with the restraining of the disease or at least hints at the possibility of getting it under control. Both the official instructions for conduct as regards the coronavirus and the respective folklore repeatedly showed right and wrong courses of action in a polarised way (keeping physical distance, wearing a mask, the use of certain substances, such as alcohol, lemon, garlic, ginger, apple cider vinegar) despite the fact that these may have taken a caricatured or criticised form in the vernacular discussion.

Another vernacular approach targeted at the exclusion of chance is the search for predictions relating to the epidemic in the supposed statements of clairvoyants who lived centuries ago, but also in the words of more recent ones (cf. Kõiva 2010). In conversations, social and printed media coronavirus was associated with the remote statements by both Nostradamus and Vanga, but the astrological prognosis by Igor Mang for 2020 was more specifically thought to refer to the arrival of an epidemic (cf. Lotman 2020). Mang's prognosis caused arguments both in conversation and in social media, but even the fact that it was talked about indicates a familiar pattern – the crisis being associated with its predictability. Recent research results indicate that the need to maintain

personal wellbeing is the greatest motivating factor during a pandemic and this may set off various beliefs, even the denial of the existence of the disease (Singh et al. 2020).

The personified and localised depiction of threat seems to be universal in disease narratives. In Estonian as well as wider European plague lore, the plague comes from a certain direction and passes certain places. The urban legends related to AIDS consider certain restaurants and petrol stations to be dangerous places in which an unsuspecting visitor may allegedly become infected. The threat of illness is also marked by the selective use of place names. In Estonian and international news media, it seemed almost ritualistic to begin every coronavirus-related news story by stating the fact that the virus was born in the city of Wuhan, China – this model was followed long after the virus had gained a global grasp. Narrative speculations about the place of origin or main spreading centres of a disease probably emerged in the case of all major epidemics (cf. Spanish flu, also the Ebola virus that was officially named after the Ebola River). In the Estonian vernacular discussion, a limited number of places marked with the respective name also became selective sources of infection associated with corona – for example, the island of Saaremaa was named *Koroonasaar* (Corona Island), and its biggest town Kuressaare was named *Koroonassaare* or the corona capital due to its becoming a centre of infection, and in August Tartu was named the virus capital after a relatively small-scale new virus outbreak, painting a polarised and simplified image of the spread of the disease.

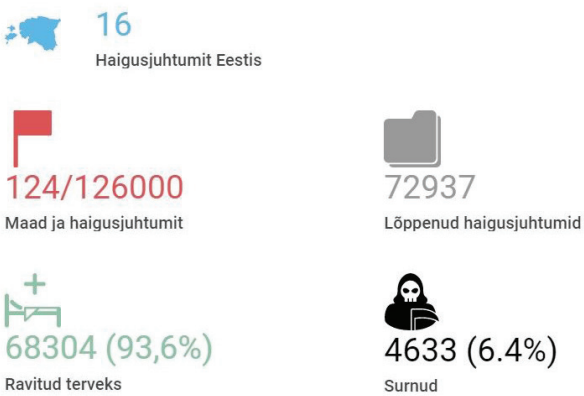

Figure 1. *Screenshot from* Õhtuleht*, 19 February 2020. Source: https://www.ohtuleht.ee/992731/uus-koroonaviirus-ei-taltu-surnute-arv-tousis-ule-2100-uus-suur-haiguspuhang-avastati-louna-koreas, last accessed on 12 February 2021.*

The mythological disease spirits in older lore, who were thought to be recognised with the help of certain characteristics, have been replaced by attempts to detect danger based on other external traits – during the corona crisis, danger manifested itself in people who coughed and sneezed (sneezing was historically considered a symptom of plague as well, although a runny nose may be a symptom of any cold or allergy), and in the initial phase of the epidemic also in people of Asiatic origin (cf. the blaming models related to the cultural 'other' in Kitta 2019: 27). A remarkable visual example of the personification of danger was seen in the daily corona victim statistics in the daily newspaper *Õhtuleht*, in which the section on the dead was marked with an image of a black grim reaper (Fig. 1).

FROM PLAGUE SOWER TO BIOWEAPON: RECYCLED RELIGIOUS MOTIFS AS A VERNACULAR INTERPRETING AND COPING STRATEGY

Dan Sperber (1985) indicates that folklore shows certain universal patterns and activating methods, the objective of which is to remove the threat whenever a new similar threat occurs. Sperber also notes that the construction of new ideas, word uses, and behavioural patterns does not evolve in random directions, but is infection-like, arising from the attractors that form centres of reaction. At the end of the 1990s, narratives that recycled legend motifs related to historic plague epidemics (cf. Hiiemäe 1999), which had reoccurred in connection with cholera epidemics in the nineteenth century (cf. Kalling 2012) spread in Estonia as the number of AIDS-infected people grew. The idea of dangerous people and places and instructions for behaviour that is considered right is recurrent; a running theme is fear related to the loss of control resulting from unawareness that manifests itself in the narratives depicting the spread of the disease due to deliberate infection; similar motifs were present, as expected, in connection with the outbreak of SARS (2002–2004) and swine flu (2009–2010) as well as in the coronavirus context of 2020.

Examples of the recycling and interweaving of religious motifs are given below in a case study on variations with poking, rat, and lemon. In different storylines, these are productive elements related to deliberate infection – crystallisation points of folk-belief colouring. In the spread of the historic plague, the domestic rat played an important role, but the association with its core motif is still present during later disease analogues in the spread of which the rat played no role. For example, probably the most well-known storyline in connection with AIDS-related lore involves the rat – according to an urban legend,

the conscious infectant who had a short love affair with the victim, hands the victim a shoe box containing a dead rat and a message saying that the victim had been welcomed to the AIDS world (Hiiemäe 1999: 37). The outbreak of the coronavirus has been associated with the current Year of the Rat (e.g., a reference was made to the astrological connection of the Year of the Rat with fear, panic, and collection of resources in the prophesy of Igor Mang; see Lamp 2020). Associations with the rat also emerge in memes that depict catching the coronavirus (or according to another version, the people who went along with buying panic) with a rat trap into which a toilet paper roll has been inserted as bait (EFITA, F08-004-0001), i.e., the second element that has shown strong attraction for folklore adaptations in connection with the corona crisis. According to one culture-scientific interpretation, the act of disproportionate storing of toilet paper could at least partly be explained as a compensatory cleansing ritual targeted against the disease, i.e., symbolic impurity (cf. Lotman 2020).

Narratives about criminals who supposedly spread plague by sticking needles into their victims are known from first-century Rome (Hiiemäe 1999: 37). In the Middle Ages, the motif of intentional infection with plague strengthens in lore and is later also transferred into vernacular discussions of cholera (cf. Campion-Vincent 2005: 109; Kalling 2012). The Estonian plague legends of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century show infection via poking by stick as one of the most common culmination motifs. In the 1990s, urban legends about infecting innocent people with AIDS with a needle spread in several Western countries (including Estonia). Pricking with a needle also manifests itself in a rumour that has become a backbone among AIDS legends, according to which drug addicts go around in grocery stores, disinfecting their needles in lemons. Although later representations of this storyline have at times reached the level of grotesque humour, e.g., the alleged personal experience story published in a commentary of a 2011 article, according to which the narrator claimed to have witnessed ten drug addicts at a Tallinn marketplace cleaning their needles in lemons at the same time (Eesti Ekspress 2011), it is noteworthy that the motifs of sour food and needles are recurrent. In the early 2000s, when panic was spread in Estonian media with rumours of needles being cleaned in lemons and other ways of infection with AIDS, folklorists, psychologists, and the police were asked to clarify the comments clearly indicating that the rumours are folklore in nature (cf. Sikk 2000; Vainküla 2001); nevertheless, the recycling of these rumours has periodically continued. The above discussion in the weekly newspaper *Eesti Ekspress*, titled "Can you get AIDS from a lemon bought at a shop?", highlights a reader's letter indicating specific dates and places (it is not impossible that it was a phony letter), its author claiming that they found needle marks in a lemon bought from a shop and then found, with an internet

search, the storyline about drug addicts cleaning their needles in lemons, which the author claims to be a 'stupid rumour', and a scientific discussion of urban legends by folklorist Leea Virtanen, which seemed to be solid information for the author. Therefore, it was confirmed that in the case of recycled religious motifs, the listener does not necessarily consider its context important (e.g., whether it has been presented in a commentary by a scientist as an example of a rumour, as humour or as a report from real life) but picks out the motif itself and considers repeating it (or the high number of results based on an internet search) as proof of its validity. The same phenomenon is seen in the experiments described by Jon D. Lee (2014: 176–177), in the course of which test participants were asked to read religious motifs presented as either true or invalidated; after some time, the participants did remember the belief motif, but not whether this motif was presented in a confirming or invalidating format.

With this reader's letter, *Eesti Ekspress* also printed a comment by the AIDS support centre leading specialist Nelli Kalikova, who did not answer the question about the possibility of such infection but stressed that drug addicts never clean their needles in lemons. Such failed communication launched even more folklore-related speculation sequences in the commentary on the same article – the comments included panic, humour, variations of the same urban legend, mental maps of needle cleaning sites, stylistic identity shifts by presenting storylines in the first person, e.g., "Of course, we clean our needles in lemons, I personally clean my ten needles at the Kadaka supermarket every morning" (Eesti Ekspress 2011). In 2021, when stories of ill-making corona vaccine injections abound, the topic of needles becomes active again.

The cyclical representation of folklore motifs in the media is supported by traditional calendar holidays and international theme days in connection with which relevant retrospective or topical information is published. In both 2016 and 2018, prior to International AIDS Day, newspapers published a news story about a HIV-positive person who supposedly deliberately infected their partners (Vasli 2016; Veltman & Tark 2018). A multi-recycling of motifs occurred (cf. Hiiemäe 2016: 34); the repeated motifs were complemented by a review of existing rumours on intentional infection. The 2018 media article also resonated with online commenters who added stories of intentional infection within their circle. Therefore, it is a clear example of how the themes focused on in the media resonate on the level of ordinary communication.

Lemon as a remedy for preventing infection or as a method of treatment again recurred massively in the corona lore of 2020; however, until now without any association with intentional infection, but combined with the claim that attempts are made to cover up the effectiveness of lemon and vitamin C in general (the vernacular discussion concerning vitamin C was powered by controversial

media stories about the effectiveness of its clinical use practices). Controversy as regards the anti-virus effect of lemons could be noticed in dozens of media articles and also in people's personal oral and online communication; for example, in the following description of life in the era of corona:

> *I started noticing that everyone talked about lemons. I also started noticing that even in my own home, where I had lemons very seldom, suddenly there were lemons on the table all the time. Since the beginning of the epidemic* [the beginning of June 2020]*, lemons have been our everyday companions. In the case of lemons, it is especially nice that, as opposed to MMS or things like that, where things are confusing, lemons definitely can do no harm, but the probability that they are useful for avoiding infection is still there.* (EFITA, F08-004-0002: male, b. 1978, in 2020)

In the end, this topic was discussed even at the government press conference where the then Prime Minister of Estonia, Jüri Ratas, tied his viewpoint to the level of belief, noting: "I have always been a believer in lemon and garlic, so I also recommend it" (Pressikonverents 2020). Expectably, the instruction to use all things sour and dip food in vinegar or lemon juice can be found already in 1348, in one of the most influential plague instructions of the time, *Compendium de Epydimia*, which was compiled by a panel of the most prominent doctors in Europe at the time and became the most important guideline for times of epidemics, leaving its mark in folklore (Zimmermann 1988: 13).

When looking at ways of interpretation that have a folk-belief background, it becomes evident that the vernacular discussion in the case of plague epidemics, AIDS, and the corona outbreak is often associated with divine punishment, despite the fact that statistically the number of people who consider God and religion important is relatively small (cf. Saar Poll 2015). In connection with the corona crisis, the explanatory narratives of the disease list punishment by God as well as punishment by nature – in parallel with the shift towards secularity and environmental awareness, the identity of the punisher has also been modified. Media interviews and even the editorials of magazines (e.g., Luik 2020) also articulate the role of the punisher depicted in a conscious, personified form. Rats make an appearance once again in the narrative on the revenge of disturbed nature where they are especially named as dispersers of dangerous diseases (cf. Väli & Kõrvits 2020), although bats are also often exaggeratedly portrayed as dangerous (cf. the association of bats and other animals with infectious diseases in Briggs & Mantini-Briggs 2016: 195). Here, the abstract and invisible corona threat for which even the autumn of 2020 did not bring full clarity regarding an effective vaccine or treatment is given a specific and tangible form by the rat who is considered disgusting, but against whom there

are both mechanical and chemical repellents. A parallel storyline is formed by narratives and memes depicting the return of wildlife with a more positive message, which shows exotic species allegedly having been seen in the external environment that has become cleaner and quieter during the quarantine; examples of this are given below.

PROVERBS AS MEANS OF TRANSMITTING A MESSAGE IN OFFICIAL AND GRASSROOTS CRISIS COMMUNICATION

According to common knowledge, a proverb is a short familiar saying conveying an instructional message, containing glorifying wisdom, truth or advice (Krikmann 1997: 8) and belonging to the crossover of language and folklore as a rhetoric-folkloric genre. A proverb may be viewed as a short performance of the flow of speech (Granbom-Herranen 2016: 322) that we meet in everyday communication, where it is one of the powerful decorative tools of the spoken word. The spread of proverbs as well as religious motifs is amplified by modern media and social media (Granbom-Herranen & Babič & Voolaid 2015).

Crisis-era communication showed the re-use of earlier proverbs one on one; for example, proverbs were widely used in warning instructions and signs and in so-called serious official discourse, which applied traditional proverbs in earlier wordings, but also created proverb-format models by expediently following new ones in both a more serious and a more humorous key. Proverbs were seen in colloquial speech, the language of the press, statements by politicians, crisis instructions by local governments, and in all kinds of advertisements and social media posts, including visual meme formats.

At the beginning of the emergency situation, a cliché was heard in the media which stated 'never let a good crisis go to waste', meaning that the crisis must be put to work for the good of yourself, for example, by investing (Randlo 2020); during the earlier crisis of 2009, the same was said by Andrus Ansip, the then Prime Minister of Estonia (in English, the statement 'never let a good crisis go to waste' is attributed to Winston Churchill), or 'corona virus is here to stay', complemented by topical modifications involving corona-related lexis, e.g. 'distance work has come to stay' and 'digital technology has come to stay'.

The proverb (saying) format may be viewed in wider corona-crisis communication as a metalinguistic code used to transmit a message so that the meaning is understood better by the communication partner (Voolaid 2012: 243). Such communication may arise from the need to present institutional instructions and announcements or may manifest in the alternative vernacular reaction to official messages. Proverb heritage is a cultural resource available to all of us, which

we have acquired during our lives (e.g., from our childhood home, textbooks, cinema, theatre). The politicians' rhetoric, the language usage of journalists (Voolaid & Voolaid 2020: 57) as well as the language of a person of any social background prove this – depending on the situation, we immediately find the suitable pieces from our mental proverbial trunk. During the emergency situation, at the height of the spread of the virus, the well-known Estonian proverb *käsi peseb kätt* (EV 4992[3]) 'one hand washes the other' (Engl. 'You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours')[4] was taken into active use also in its direct meaning. When there is a risk of infection, hand washing is one of the most important prevention methods, but equally important in the social behavioural pattern of a crisis is the figurative meaning of the proverb – a favour will be returned. People in quarantine or lockdown need to know that, when needing help, they must also help others or that when they help others, they will also be helped if in need. On the other hand, this proverb alludes to dirty, concealed actions, for example, political corruption, which also occurred in the crisis situation.

For an informed user, the established proverb format may be used for the purpose of persuasion because, in terms of their function, among other things, proverbs are considered authoritative means of expression. This has been pointed out, for example, by Liisa Granbom-Herranen (2016: 321), who studies pedagogical speech, but also by Wolfgang Mieder, who has studied political speech (Mieder 2005; see also Orwenjo 2009). It is as if it is not appropriate to argue with a proverb (and if you do argue, it is only by using a proverb with the opposite meaning). In several Estonian towns, the local government directed people's attention to official corona rules (cf. Terviseamet 2020) mainly with proverbs. For example, Rakvere City Government decided to remind its citizens of the need to stay at home and adhere to the 2+2 rule in bus stops, using old words of wisdom, such as *tervis on parem kui rikkus* 'health is better than wealth', *ela sa kükakil või käpakil, ela kui tahes kehvasti oma kodus – oma päävarju all ikka parem kui teiste kõrval* 'live squatting or down on your knees, no matter how poorly you live in your home – it is still better to be under one's own roof than next to others' (EV 539), *ettevaatus on tarkuse ema* 'caution is the mother of wisdom' (EV 727), *igal pool hea, kodus kõige parem* (lit. 'everywhere is fine, home is best' (East, west, home is best) (EV 1078); in its crisis exit strategy, the city of Tartu used posters at bus stops with sayings "Wise men do not rush" (Fig. 2a) and "I love you from a distance" (Fig. 2b). Researchers have proven that serious folk wisdom as well as humorous modifications of proverbs are more effective, attracting the attention of passers-by with their familiarity, wittiness, wordplay, and aesthetic design – it is the same reason paroemia is used in graffiti and street art (Voolaid 2013: 12).

Figures 2a & 2b. *Application of expression folklore in local crisis communication in Tartu. Photographs by Piret Voolaid 2020.*

Based on earlier proverb material, new constructions were developed alongside old and distinguished ones. This was effective in the imitation of the proverb format model. One of the most fascinating examples in the Estonian corona crisis was an idea in the form of a proverb, "Better one week too many than one day too few", which was phrased by the then Prime Minister of Estonia, Jüri Ratas, at a routine emergency situation press conference on 23 April 2020, when explaining to people the need to prolong the emergency situation by a minimum of two weeks. The government's announcement poster sent out a day later via various distribution channels featured the same proverbial saying (Fig. 3), which uses the common syntax format element characteristic of proverbs "better… than…" According to Arvo Krikmann, such a formulaic model does not merely function in the form of formal logical components but participates in giving substantive meaning to the whole text (Krikmann 1997: 267). This example proves how the concept of the proverb as a historically anonymous expression has changed; thanks to quick communication, it is possible to identify the 'first' user in many cases (Granbom-Herranen 2016: 321). Hence, the crisis clearly highlighted the role of the individual in lore creation.

Figure 3. *Government announcement on the extension of the emergency situation on 24 April 2020.*

Proverbs as short clichés in folklore were a suitable foundation for lovers of creative wordplay, thanks to whom several new proverbial sayings were created during periods of crisis, which proverb researchers have dubbed as quasiproverbs or proverb parodies (e.g., Krikmann 1985), or *Antisprichwörter* or anti-proverbs (Litovkina & Mieder 2006; Mieder 2008: 87–119). An important part of the traditional proverb format is maintained, and part of its composition is replaced, or something is added so that a humorous version with a new content and purpose is created – the so-called funverb.

Several national institutions applied proverb modifications to attract people's attention; for example, the Estonian Information System Authority issued a caution on 8 May, during the emergency situation, to keep in mind cyber security: *Tänasida tarkvarauuendusi ära viska homse varna!* 'Don't leave today's software updates hanging until tomorrow'; *Ole eriolukorras eriti IT-vaatlik!* 'Be especially IT-cautious in the emergency situation', which plays on the near-homophony with the Estonian word *ettevaatlik* 'cautious, mindful'.[5] The former is a successful modification of one of the most popular proverbial expressions from the Estonian national epic *Kalevipoeg* (Son of Kalev) by Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald: *Tänasida toimetusi ära viska homse varna!* (EV 12411) (Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today). The website also features other Estonian proverbs, such as *Ettevaatus on tarkuse ema* (EV 727) 'Caution is the mother of wisdom', and *IT-tarkus on tarviline vara* 'IT wisdom is a valuable property', coined by a small addition from the proverbial expression *Tarkus on tarviline vara* (EV 11685) 'Wisdom is a valuable property' (also a quote from Kreutzwald's epic *Kalevipoeg*).

Based on the earlier proverbial saying *hirmul on suured silmad* 'fear has big eyes' (fear has a hundred eyes) (EV 1293), a modification was made to create the saying *hirmul on Hiina silmad* 'fear has Chinese eyes' (EFITA, F02-021-0001). An intriguing parallel with the latter comes from the Soviet era when relations between the Soviet Union and China became tense and a joke began to circulate in the form of a question and answer: "How does folklore change? – When in the old times there was the proverb 'fear has big eyes', now people say that 'fear has Chinese eyes'" (Viikberg 1997: 101). Hence, China-related associations have accompanied this proverb before.

At the beginning of the corona crisis, there was a widely used saying in Estonia that became nearly the most popular folk wisdom of the emergency situation: *Julge hundi rind on hanerasvane* 'The chest of a bold wolf is covered in goose fat', which is a modification of a proverb *Julge hundi rind on rasvane* 'The chest of a bold wolf is covered in fat'. This humorous parody was used by people to react to the then Minister of the Interior Mart Helme's attempt to declare the disease narrative a myth and a hyperbole by referring to the use of goose fat. The long-known popular remedy – goose fat – certainly became one of the most symbolic forms of figurative language during the corona era.

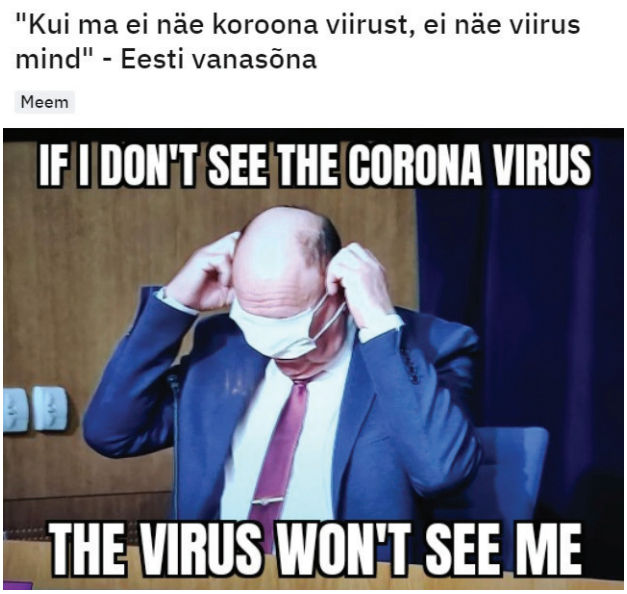

Figure 4. *Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/Eesti/comments/g6sdth/kui_ma_ei_n%C3%A4e_koroona_viirust_ei_n%C3%A4e_viirus_mind/, last accessed on 8 January 2021.*

Juicy comments from the then Minister of the Interior Mart Helme gave rise to some more proverbial pearls during the corona era: *Kes kevadel köhib, see sügisel läheb* 'Those who cough in spring will go in autumn'; *Kes ei taha kuulda võtta, see peab tunda saama* 'Those who do not want to listen must feel it!'; *Inimene on täpselt nii suur siga, kui tal olla lastaks* 'A human being is as big a pig as they are allowed to be'. Inspired by the Minister of the Interior's statements, according to which corona panic is senseless fearmongering by journalists, several new aphoristic maxims were taken into use, for example, the one nicknamed an Estonian proverb in memes is: "If I don't see the coronavirus, the virus won't see me", which is also a development of the well-known meme "Maybe if I don't move, they won't see me" (Fig. 4).

During the corona pandemic, new proverbial grassroots-level reactions to people's behaviour were witnessed. In the form of a news folklore meme, "The winner is the one who has the most toilet paper when they die" started spreading, making fun of purchase panic, including the stocking up of toilet paper prior to the announcement of the emergency situation. At the beginning of the corona crisis, a well-known slogan, "Volleyball is wonderful" (a proverb from Saaremaa Island) became topical as an internet meme (Fig. 5), making ironic references to the fact that the spread of the disease began in the county most

ravaged by the corona crisis because of a volleyball game, more specifically fans blowing their bugles. During the pandemic, another new proverb emerged, which is based on ethnic neighbourly humour mocking the people living in the Mulgi region (Viljandi County) in Central Estonia. According to a popular ethnic stereotype, Mulgi people are historically wealthier but also stingier than the rest of Estonians: *Mulk oma kodust nallalt midägi vällä ei jaga. Teeme koroonage kah sedäviisi!* 'A Mulgi man hardly shares anything. Let's keep it the same way with corona!' (Fig. 6).

Figure 5. *Source: https://www.facebook.com/100013286351092/posts/887880004998203, last accessed on 8 January 2021.*

Figure 6. *Page of the Institute of Mulgi Culture, available at https://www.facebook.com/mulgimaa/photos/a.247518538640300/2960490550676405/?type=3&eid=ARC4OzpUaDBUteC7FbXNdmcXeR6Yv8Lvon1TLoHTewDqBYkDbFvRz-1J5Qfed9dGMu5SoDadGAxwQrsO&__tn__=EHH-R, last accessed on 8 January 2021.*

Figure 7. *The swine flu proverb spread on the internet with a picture depicting the sculpture Bronze Swine by Mati Karmin in front of Tartu Market Hall. Fearing the swine flu epidemic, the townspeople protected the bronze swine by covering its face with a mask. Photograph by Ilmar Oja 2009.*

It is worth recalling that the fear of infectious diseases has previously been treated with paroemia as well. There has been a conundrum since autumn 2009 when a new disease, named swine flu among the population, spread panic throughout the world, including in Estonia; it is once again proof of how the former models of one genre live on as parodies of another genre's functions: "How do you tell the difference between flu and swine flu? Those who have good flu, sneeze, and those who have swine flu, squeal."

RESPONSE TO THE EPIDEMIC VIA MEMES

As expected, various disease outbreak-related memes circulated. Internet memes – expressions of internet users' understandings and reactions that are diverse in their content, format, and attitude and can be interpreted in many ways – are a genre that has emerged in computer-mediated everyday communication.[6] According to Limor Shifman (2014: 41), these are "a group of digital items sharing common characteristics of content", the users of which are aware of other similar items, and which were circulated, imitated, and transformed by many internet users. This subject matter requires participatory media conditions for dissemination and is expressed in the form of verbal expressions,

images, (video) clips, and combinations thereof (Milner 2016: 1–4). The triumph of memes is mainly associated with generation Z, i.e., the communication methods of those born in the 1990s and later; for example, Daniel Tamm (2018: 11) states that memes are one of the main elements of the communication language of such users (see also Shifman 2014). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, this diverse group of meme users has been joined by people from earlier generations who gradually allow themselves to be engaged by 'hypermemetic logic' – according to Limor Shifman, this means that they allow themselves to be engaged by a situation characteristic of communication in a participatory culture in which public events and conditions create flows and waves of memes (Shifman 2014: 4). Communicating largely in visual language involves watching memes, reacting to received memes, sharing memes on social media as well as making and spreading memes if the person so desires and has the required skills. The examples below originate from posts taken from their direct usage environment, i.e., these were shared with the authors of the present discussion (primarily with Mare Kalda), but the conclusions have been drawn based on more comprehensive material that circulated among Estonian social media users in the spring and summer of 2020, and was downloaded to the digital collection of the Department of Folkloristics at the Estonian Literary Museum (approx. 2000 units).

The epidemic-related meme corpus (as well as the material driven by other events) shows an enormous number of globally spreading examples that often function as the recycling of an established template. Alongside these, the local culture creates meaningful subject matter that plays with intra-cultural connections. Liisi Laineste and Piret Voolaid have noted that, in the case of humorous memes and virals (i.e., the vernacular digital content mostly forwarded to a greater or smaller extent without any amendments), users wish to adapt them to the local language and culture, resulting in intertextuality in the interaction of the local cultural memory and global cultural influence (Laineste & Voolaid 2016: 26). When we observe the spread of corona-related items on Estonian social media, we can see that plenty of international material was taken over as virals without being specially adapted. The presence of English text sections in memes does not inhibit the spread of such virals, as even in Estonian culture English is the *lingua franca*[7] of memes (Shifman 2014: 155; Laineste & Voolaid 2016: 27). Therefore, in the spring and early summer of 2020, the same memes were circulating on the social media pages of the Estonian internet population as elsewhere in the world: the memes depicted the purchase panic to buy toilet paper and other essentials, the side-effects of lockdown, coping in the emergency situation, the positive and negative aspects of forced distance work and the paradoxes thereof; memes were used to express discussions as

regards the necessity and obligation to wear masks and the scarcity thereof, and what group photographs would look like in the future when wearing masks becomes the 'new normality' (cf. Kuperjanov 2020).

When handling the material, we apply the methodology of active ethnographic presence in social media, i.e., we collect material as regular users of social media (Hine 2015: 71–74). We have followed the recycling of international memes – not so much adaptations, but the different uses of well-known meme formats and works and characters of popular culture in the local setting – on Facebook meme pages such as 'Märgatud: koroona Eestis' (Noticed: corona in Estonia), 'Memeootika' (Memetics), 'Põlva meemid' (Memes from Põlva), '10-sekundilised videod Eesti elust' (10-second videos about life in Estonia), and 'Rõsked meemid' (Dank memes).

In the manifestations of digital vernacular productions, special crisis meme surges have been noticed (Rintel 2013), which showcase meme format reactions to catastrophes that have taken place in recent history and are renewed in the case of similar events. Some examples of the depiction of these motifs can be seen in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, a fire depicted in a meme symbolises the receding economy and at the same time points to the evil and dark sides that manifest in complicated times (Rintel 2013: 263 ff.) – locked inside a burning house are the neighbours infected with corona. Previously known crisis memes are not favourites in the world taken over by the pandemic. One reason for this is the wearing off of 'old' memes – even if template-based memes are adjusted and brought into new contexts, some templates are left behind. Another reason is the nature of a serious situation: crisis memes depict one-time events – fire, flood, damage caused by a catastrophe, a political act. A pandemic, however, is a longer-term crisis situation to which other images of digital folklore are used to respond.

Figure 8. *Broadening opportunities to work from home as understood by an internet user. A post sent to Mare Kalda at the end of March 2020.*

Figure 9. *Reaction to travel restrictions. The viral circulated from 25 March 2020.*

With viral content and global memes, Estonian social media content is characterised by memes reconstructed for Estonian context, which are complemented by local memes – local both in terms of content and format. While in other connections meme themes combining global and local subject matter have been interpreted on the one hand as an attempt to solve problems that occur in a faraway land and on the other hand as the dissemination of local phenomena to a wider circle of users (Laineste & Voolaid 2016: 28), the pandemic is not a problem of a faraway land from any perspective – it is a common threat, a situation that caused similar worries and was responded to in much the same way all over the world. In the units contextualised into local culture, the characters and objects of interest – as is common in memes – are characters and situations of popular culture related to quarantine, the purchasing of convenience goods and food, personal characteristics, emotions, and many other similar aspects. The text fragments in Estonian are either translated or are completely new – designed for specific use. Of the fictitious and actual characters from popular culture, we meet Dobby the house elf, Beavis and Butthead, Drake, two monkey puppets, etc. (this list could go on forever).

Estonian internet users also responded with their own contribution to the flow of memes concerning the return of wildlife – the dolphins as characters of such memes were placed not only in the images of Venice, but also in Saesaare reservoir in Põlva County.[8] Such corona-era nature folklore was supported by the news covered in daily newspapers; for example, on 2 June 2020, the daily newspaper *Postimees* covered a story about a dolphin sighting in Kopli Bay in Tallinn.[9] In addition to having a real effect on the lives of townspeople, a bear seen in Tallinn caused memetic furore. This incident took place during the lockdown, on 14–15 May 2020; the recommendation to keep away from the bear was also an official recommendation to stay at home. The Rescue Board informed citizens with a meme, using the folkloric warning model 'The Bear is Coming!' (Voolaid 2020a).

Figure 10. *Meme of two monkey puppets in Estonia. On the left: an adaptation of a common meme template (see https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/monkey-puppet) for the Estonian islands from spring 2020 when there was an increase in the infection rate. Folks on the island of Hiiumaa look aside when they hear about the high incidence of infection on the island of Saaremaa (a screenshot from the Põlva memes page[10]). On the right: a meme with the same visual unit in the social media group 'IT huumor' (IT humour)[11] in the second half of May 2020.*

From the second half of March 2020, video memes quickly became popular and widespread, for example "Coronavirus Rhapsody" (inspired by the immensely popular song "Bohemian Rhapsody" by Queen in 1975) and several songs from

the film *The Sound of Music*. These are video-meme parodies that aim for a certain musical resemblance to the original. In the case of clips from *The Sound of Music*, some versions have retained the visual part, but the texts are always completely reworded. In the case of variants of "Coronavirus Rhapsody", in some, the visual part is completely changed. On Estonian sites, the version circulating was the one by singer Adrian Grimes (uploaded to YouTube on 21 March, with 5.2 million views and 4039 comments by 16 July 2020). Other parodies of the same song did not become famous in Estonia to Mare Kalda's knowledge.[12] Of the songs from *The Sound of Music*, "Do-re-mi" and "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?" have been adapted to the corona theme.[13] Song parodies have several common traits – starting with the use of popular, even beloved, pieces and ending with an expression of the content of the message conveyed and a serious scale of reactions caused by the epidemic. Namely, the songs include a whole package of recommendations on how to avoid the disease and how to cope in the conditions of the epidemic, i.e., using the familiar and humanised meme-language, the video memes communicate official instructions, adherence to which has in fact helped many countries get the disease under control.

An obvious parody was the reinterpretation of Estonia's 2017 Eurovision song titled "Verona", under the heading "Lost in Corona" (the female vocalist's part is performed by a male voice and the lyrics contain many absurdities and otherwise juicy expressions). A video started circulating on 18 March 2020 as the next contribution to internet folklore by parody-maker of earlier Eurovision songs *Shir-el does Eurovision.*[14] The amendment of the song was prompted by the announcement that the Eurovision Song Contest 2020 would be cancelled as well as the naturally emerging word play connections between Verona and Corona, but also by the fact that Verona is in North Italy, i.e., the region that was one of the hotspots of the March epidemic. As the result was connected to Estonia, the video parody was shared on many local sites and on 19 March a media message was published in the newspaper *Õhtuleht*.

At the time of writing this article, COVID-19 continues to elicit responses in the form of digital folklore, yet below, we will highlight the most important meme-creating tendencies noticed in the first six months of the folkloric reflections of the pandemic that hit mankind in 2020.

The crisis brought about by the illness differs from one-time catastrophes and acts of terror and has influenced the folkloric interpretation of the situation: meme creation is contributed to by the stages of crisis development. The existential panic of the first months and the accompanying purchase frenzy have been replaced by expressions of the aspects of a prolonged crisis, the search for possible solutions (instead of stockpiling behaviour, we see discussions about vaccination), the fear of another corona outbreak, and the forecast of the wider impact of the disease.

Memes as a genre of digital vernacular communication are engaged in official crisis discourse, containing strategies and instructions from above (quotes, references, sayings), but these have been placed in various connections and contexts and accompanied by the visual and verbal images characteristic of meme communication. The depiction of the pandemic in the vernacular meme format therefore differs from the official mainstream discourse, as memes can show, and in fact do present ignorance, guesswork, opinions, fears, popular solutions, and ridicule. Through memes, it is possible to talk about virus-related problems based on the principle that if something can be discussed in a familiar language, then it is possible to cope with it, to phrase grassroots-level scenarios and to tell stories, including those that do not come to fruition in real life and are deliberately fictitious. We have noticed that some memes get stuck in the process of fact control – there are conflicts between folklore and the controlled (or allegedly controlled) data.

Corona memes are directed at avoiding the disease or being rescued from it; the memes lack the perspective of having direct contact with the disease. Memes rarely depict sick people and hospital wards. If they do, then an image in the form of a caricature is created (instead of the usual photo editing). The depictions of the virus stem from the virus itself. This stereotypical presentation depicting a colourful ball with spikes helps make the virus symbolically comprehensible and treatable and therefore less frightening. Such a procedure is also reflected in a meme adapted to the Estonian situation 'If X wore pants would he wear them like this [image] or like this [image]'.[15] The virus has been made to play along with this game: the meme depicts the virus as a living being wearing trousers (Fig. 11).

Figure 11. *Memes aim to depict the virus graphically. The sphere-shaped virus is depicted via the meme model 'If X wore pants would he wear them like this or like this?' A post sent to Mare Kalda on 31 March 2020 in private conversation.*

Memes are often based on subculture (Shifman 2014: 119, 171–172; Kalda & Tuisk 2019: 153–154). As the pandemic affects people all over the world, you might think that corona memes are somewhat more comprehensible as they were created for that purpose. There is indeed such a tendency, but even a small example of a meme taken from the IT Jokes group (Fig. 10) shows the connection between the meaning of corona memes with social, professional, or other groups. The message conveyed by the monkey puppet meme about the end of shaking hands in 2020 as bad news in the IT sector is not understood by a meme viewer who is not familiar with the concept of a handshake in IT lexicology.[16]

The memes involved in the discussion of coronavirus and the related circumstances show who and what is involved in the joint pandemic discussion. Crisis memes in 2020 each deal with describing the situation in their own way but are guided by the joint objective – to cope with the situation. The colourful collection of associations formed by memes increases the diversity in the world without bringing finite clarity and solutions that are 100 percent correct.

CONCLUSION

As indicated above in the coronavirus-related examples and case analyses, the seemingly uncontrolled disease folklore feeding on diverse global sources consists, to a large extent, of quite a limited number of recyclable motifs, images and techniques. Although it may seem that in the era of information abundance the individual has immeasurable freedom of choice when giving meaning to their life and seeking protection against problems, a closer analysis shows that people tend to make choices between a limited number of previously tested motifs and practices (such as blaming the cultural 'other', being guided by simplified mental maps and renewed paroemic words of wisdom). The folkloric presentation of modern epidemics has a strong reciprocal effect on the conveyance of the message of beliefs, fears, and mass media: there are points of contact between the reciprocal recycling of lexis and figurative language, narrative and image-based motifs, elements of belief and so-called waves of fear. The existence of paroemia, including the excessive use of proverbial clichés, in crisis communication expands the functions of the archaic form of folk poetry and confirms the all-around vigour of the genre in the present day. The use of Estonian proverbs was manifested in the local expression of the international corona crisis based on the resources of one language and its particular features and possibilities. In the era of visual culture, it is self-evident that, compared with earlier epidemics, the present one had an especially visual form. This

article showed that even if disease folklore is often about the fears and threats associated with a disease, an important message of topical folklore material is coping with the crisis.

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NOTES

[1] The term *recycling folklore* is hereby understood to denote the use of known folklore motifs or format tools in the context of modern epidemics from the perspective of the researcher.

[2] The article uses the term *epidemic folklore* and not *pandemic folklore* as the observations made also relate to outbreaks of epidemics without a pandemic reach.

[3] Hereinafter, proverbs are accompanied by type numbers if these differ from the type numbers in the academic publication *Eesti vanasõnad I–V* (EV 1980–1988).

[4] The phrase also spread in the elaborated variant *käsi peseb kätt, ühed mustad mõlemad* 'one hand washes the other, but both are dirty'.

[5] See www.itvaatlik.ee, last accessed on 8 January 2021.

[6] Without exception, all of those discussing internet memes refer to Richard Dawkins' ideas (1976; in Estonian in 2014). As the connection between the 'internet meme' and Dawkins' 'meme' or the lack of such a connection is not the theme of the present discussion, the question will not be further analysed. The concept of an 'internet meme' is a user's own concept that analysts have taken over (Jenkins 2014).

[7] While English is the *lingua franca* of the verbal part of memes, Ryan Milner, for example, considers memes to be the common language of the media (Milner 2016).

[8] See memes from Põlva County, available at https://www.facebook.com/polvameemid/photos/a.212362505884988/932180490569849/?type=3&theater, last accessed on 8 January 2021.

[9] See https://www.postimees.ee/6987487/kopli-lahes-nahti-delfiine, last accessed on 8 January 2021.

[10] See https://www.facebook.com/polvameemid, last accessed on 8 January 2021.

[11] See https://www.facebook.com/groups/IThuumor, last accessed on 12 February 2021.

[12] For example, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9Eo9M4-BrJA (last accessed on 8 January 2021), 3.3 million views as of 16 July 2020.

[13] See, for example, "Do-re-mi" (https://www.thebreeze.co.nz/home/must-see/2020/03/-sound-of-music--song-turned-into-hilarious-parody-about-covid-1.html) and "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?", which can easily be paraphrased as "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Corona?" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M4jR_9-YPK8 5) (both last accessed on 8 January 2021) from April 2020.

[14] See https://www.facebook.com/162111721174824/videos/346668679596943/, last accessed on 8 January 2021. As of 16 July 2020, the video had been shared 3200 times and had received 2400 reactions.

[15] See the history of the meme template at https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/if-a-dog-wore-pants, last accessed on 8 January 2021.

[16] Handshaking is an "authentication protocol in which the authentication agent (usually a network server) sends the customer programme a username and a key for encrypting a password" (see Arvutisõnastik, headword 'handshake').

ARCHIVAL SOURCES

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F02-020 – collection of epidemic folklore (Piret Voolaid)
F02-021 – proverbs' collection (Piret Voolaid)
F08-004 – collection of epidemic folklore (Reet Hiiemäe)

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THE GENERAL, HIS FANDOM, AND A PARTICIPATORY PANDEMIC

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Abstract: In February 2020, the Bulgarian government established the National Operational Headquarters for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria. General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, a military doctor, professor at the Military Medical Academy in Sofia, was appointed as its chairman. This paper presents a case study on the public image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, its readings and interpretations by the audience, and the specific fan culture that emerged around his media persona during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria. Placed in the spotlight of the media at the very beginning of the crisis, Mutafchiyski became extremely popular as the public figure most strongly associated with the fight against the spread of the disease in the country. Around his media persona, shaped in the public imagination as a wartime leader, a fan culture has grown with all its characteristic features and dimensions: *fans* and *anti-fans*, *affirmative* and *transformative* fandom. As a fictional character, Mutafchiyski has appeared in numerous forms of vernacular creativity: poems, songs, material objects, jokes, fake news, conspiracy theories, and memes. In this way, *the General* has become the main character of Bulgarian pandemic folklore and the focal point of a participatory pandemic.

Keywords: COVID-19, fandom, General Mutafchiyski, participatory pandemic

INTRODUCTION

On February 24, 2020, after an emergency meeting of the Consultative Council on National Security, the Bulgarian government announced the formation of the National Operational Headquarters (NOH) for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria. Major General Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, D.Sc., a military doctor, professor of surgery, and head of the Military Medical Academy in Sofia, was appointed chairman of the new body. The NOH was officially established on February 26 by a special order signed by Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov. Among its main responsibilities was "to collect, summarize and analyze all information on the development of the situation related to the spread

of COVID-19, and to inform the media and the public".[1] The NOH held its first media briefing on February 25, a day before its formal establishment and two weeks before the first confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Bulgaria. For the next one hundred days, the NOH delivered 129 information briefings, not counting emergency briefings and the various media appearances of its members.

The first cases of COVID-19 in Bulgaria were confirmed on March 8. On March 13, despite the small number of confirmed cases – only 23 at the time, the Bulgarian Parliament unanimously voted to declare *a state of emergency*, which remained in force for two months. On the same day, the Minister of Health issued an ordinance introducing the main preventive measures against the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in accordance with the social distancing recommendations. Restrictions were imposed mainly on indoor gatherings: all public halls, bars, restaurants, coffee shops, and shopping centers were temporarily closed; all sports, cultural, entertainment, and academic events were canceled; schools and universities adopted distance learning; employers were urged to provide opportunities for remote work. Only a week later, on March 21, the measures were tightened with certain limitations on outdoor activities and movement: walks in public parks and gardens were banned; sports and children's playgrounds were made inaccessible; in supermarkets and pharmacies special shopping hours were reserved for senior citizens; checkpoints were set up at the entrances and exits of the main regional cities. The necessity for greater and stricter restrictions, the details of their implementation, and the penalties for violating them were always explained by the NOH during the regular briefings. At that time, briefings took place twice a day, and a few emergency briefings were called late at night.

In the communication model chosen by the Bulgarian government, the official information about the development of the pandemic crisis and the anti-epidemic measures was announced and elaborated on by members of the National Operational Headquarters, most often by its chairman Ventsislav Mutafchiyski. In a situation of increased social anxiety and a higher demand for legitimate information, the attention of both the media and the public was focused on one person and his public appearances. Placed at the center of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis management and in the spotlight of media attention, the NOH chairman gained immense popularity; he became a celebrity and an object of fandom.

In this paper, I will examine the public image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski, its readings and interpretations by the audience, and the specific fan culture that emerged around his media persona during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria. The purpose of my study is to shed light on a hitherto underexplored issue: how fandom and participatory culture operate during the

pandemic and how the key figures of the crisis management are affected. In a recent publication Penny Andrews briefly mentions "multiple fan groups on Facebook and works of productive fandom" to which the UK's Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty became the subject (Andrews 2020: 904). Dr. Anthony Fauci, the leading member of the US President Donald Trump's Coronavirus Task Force, inspired a large fan following[2] and was named "a pop culture icon" by the media.[3] In my study I aim to explore in depth the Bulgarian variation of this cultural phenomenon.

I prefer the research strategies of the case study method, which is relevant when we seek to examine *how* or *why* a contemporary phenomenon works within a real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and its context are not entirely clear (see Yin 2003). The time scope of my research is limited to the first one hundred days of the work of the NOH and focuses on the period of the state of emergency. As I am going to explain, after that period the main features of both the case and its context significantly changed. I used exclusively qualitative research methods, such as (participant) observation, collection, textual or discourse analysis. My primary field of observations and data collecting was Facebook, although I also occasionally reviewed the commentary sections of news publications and of YouTube videos. However, before presenting the case itself, I would like to elaborate on the key concepts of the theoretical framework of my study: fandom, anti-fandom, and participatory culture.

FANDOM, ANTI-FANDOM, AND PARTICIPATORY CULTURE

Once described in terms of pathology and deviance, imagined in the negative stereotypes of "the obsessed individual" and "the hysterical crowd" (see Jenson 1992) or envisioned with the romantic aura of subcultural resistance (Fiske 1992), fans and fandom are nowadays mundane phenomena of the media world. Modern fan studies still feature debates on the definition of fan, since the concept has become increasingly malleable and marketable (see Click & Scott 2018). Despite the ongoing disputes over definitions in contemporary academic discourse, fandom is primarily understood as and through *participation*.

The terms 'fandom' and 'participatory culture' are tightly interconnected by the work of media scholar Henry Jenkins. In his seminal book *Textual Poachers: Television Fans & Participatory Culture* (1992), Jenkins presents fans of science fiction and other television programs not as passive spectators but as a creative community. According to Jenkins, fandom encompasses five levels of activity: as a particular mode of reception, which involves sharing, enunciating, and debating meanings with other fans; as a particular form of criticism, which

is "playful, speculative, subjective"; as a base of consumer activism in defense of fans' cultural preferences; as a particular art world with its own aesthetic traditions and practices; and as an alternative social community. As he specified later, in *Textual Poachers* Jenkins coined the phrase 'participatory culture' to contrast participation with spectatorship and to make descriptive claims about "the cultural logic of fandom" (Jenkins & Ito & Boyd 2016: 1). Jenkins and his followers have further broadened and developed the concept to refer to every culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement; strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others; a certain type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices; and members who believe that their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (Jenkins et al. 2009).

Jenkins builds his understanding of fandom within the classic "encoding/decoding" paradigm in media and cultural studies, introduced by Stuart Hall's eponymous essay (Hall 1980). Hall conceptualized media consumption as part of an abstract communication model: producers construct messages by 'encoding' preferred or 'dominant' meanings into them; audience members read or 'decode' the messages according to their social positioning and subjective experiences. Every audience performs interpretative work, in which some read the messages mostly within the terms of the dominant ideology; others resist or fully reject them; but the majority *negotiates* meanings in a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements (ibid.: 126–127). Henry Jenkins understands negotiated readings "not in terms of how an individual negotiates their relationship with a text but rather how community members negotiate interpretations (and rules for forming interpretations) among each other" (Jenkins 2018: 16).

Understanding fandom as "negotiated readings" has many conceptual limitations but it allows researchers to step beyond the idea of fans as an "adoring audience" and to enter the realm of anti-fans: "the realm not necessarily of those who are against fandom per se, but of those who strongly dislike a given text or genre, considering it inane, stupid, morally bankrupt and/or aesthetic drivel" (Gray 2003: 70). The emotions that motivate and drive active engagement with media or cultural texts are not necessarily positive, nor are they necessarily extreme. Scholars distinguish between 'affirmative' and 'transformative' fans, for example:

> *Affirmative fans tend to collect, view, and play, to discuss, analyze, and critique. Transformative fans, however, take a creative step to make the worlds and characters their own, be it by telling stories, cosplaying the characters, creating artworks, or engaging in any of the many other forms active fan participation can take.* (Hellekson & Busse 2014: 3–4)

Henry Jenkins explains:

> *Embodying Hall's concept of reading as negotiation, fan culture is often motivated by a complex balance between fascination and frustration, affirmation and transformation. Because cultural materials fascinate fans, they sustain their interests. Because they are also frustrating, fans actively rework them. … Understanding fandom, then, as a form of negotiation suggests* a continuum of possible relations to popular texts*, as well as an ongoing process of negotiation with changing meanings that reflect changing times, rather than fixed positions and binary oppositions between fans and antifans.* (Jenkins 2018: 16; emphasis added)

Among the most interesting developments of the notion of 'fandom' is one in the field of political participation (see Sandvoss 2013). Fan subcultures, grassroots activism and participatory practices have been retrospectively interconnected as sharing common roots (Delwiche 2013). Fans of a given cause, of given politicians, or of a certain type of political performance utilize the same forms of practices, emotive attachments, interpretive communities, and collective actions displayed by popular media fans. The 'fanization' is as evident in politics as in other cultural spaces such as entertainment, arts, and commerce (Sandvoss & Gray & Harrington 2017). Cornel Sandvoss convincingly argues for the conceptualization of emotive, partisan, and regular engagement in political discourses as fandom and anti-fandom. According to Sandvoss, fanlike activism in politics usually constructs an imagined Other – or an *anti-fan object*: a text or textual field (such as a politician, political party, or political cause) with which to engage through strongly negative emotions.

> *A strong identification with a given political party or course, much like fan affiliations in different forms of popular culture, becomes part of fans' identity positions, which in turn are reinforced through fan practices and performances … including the articulation of differences and distinctions to other (fan) groups.* (Sandvoss 2019: 131–132)

Over the almost thirty years since the publication of *Textual Poachers*, the idea of 'participatory culture' has evolved from a concept describing a peculiar cultural phenomenon to a key term explaining the common everyday attitudes and behaviors of millions of Web 2.0 users. It no longer describes the cultural production and social interactions of fan communities, but "now refers to a range of different groups deploying media production and distribution to serve their collective interests, as various scholars have linked considerations of fandom into a broader discourse about participation in and through media"

(Jenkins & Ford & Green 2013: 2). The technological platforms of Web 2.0 enable a major shift from the "distribution" to "circulation" of media content and an even more participatory model of culture, "one which sees the public not as simply consumers of preconstructed messages but as people who are shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined" (ibid.). The contemporary world is defined by the technological possibilities for creating and sharing knowledge and artistry, ideas and causes, and media participation can take place through countless individual or collective actions: from the simple exchange of recipes or opinions about books in Facebook groups to large-scale projects and collaborations in knowledge, creativity, science, education, civic activism, and democracy (see Delwiche & Henderson 2013).

THE GENERAL AND HIS FANDOM

Prior to February 2020, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski's media appearances occurred in a strictly official professional context. Most often, his name appeared in the news related to his appointment as head of the Military Medical Academy – one of the largest hospitals in Sofia.[4] Articles in the mainstream media, covering his public activities, usually describe him rather as a medical person – either a surgeon or a manager – than as a military one.[5] Even a special presentation on the information website of the Ministry of Defense, published in May 2017, introduced him mainly as a (military) doctor, surveyed his professional path as a surgeon, and referred to two of his military missions primarily as an inspiration for his two academic dissertations. It also mentioned several details of his private life: for example, his hobbies of skiing and riding a Vespa, his passion for good wine, his twin sons.[6]

At the time of his nomination as the chairman of the National Operational Headquarters for Combating the COVID-19 Pandemic in Bulgaria, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski was vastly unknown to the general public. In the commentary sections of news outlets and on social media, his patients would speak of him as a good doctor and an excellent surgeon. However, the focus in his media presentation shifted after his nomination. Mutafchiyski's other public roles – those of a doctor, professor of surgery, and hospital manager – were left in the background, and replaced by a strong emphasis on the features of a high-ranking military officer: Mutafchiyski would always appear in a uniform, his voice and gestures were firm and unwavering, his statements and answers during media briefings were organized around the key ideas of *discipline* and *responsibility*. Both journalists and his NOH colleagues would address him as General Mutafchiyski, and soon most of the public started referring to him likewise.

The metaphor of war was not uncommon in the political discourses surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic. As a rhetorical figure justifying the restrictions, which were unprecedented in peacetime, and the imposition of anti-epidemic measures, it appeared in the public statements of leading European politicians: for example, the six repetitions of the phrase "nous sommes en guerre" ('we are at war') in the address by French President Emmanuel Macron on March 16,[7] or the declaration of the COVID-19 crisis as the greatest challenge for Germany since World War Two, requiring wartime solidarity, in a speech by German Chancellor Angela Merkel on March 18.[8] The Bulgarian government probably expected the ideas of wartime discipline, solidarity, and sacrifice to be more convincing if suggested by a wartime leader, and shaped Ventsislav Mutafchiyski's media persona accordingly. As some media critics have observed, during that period Mutafchiyski seemed to be "the most qualified person in charge"; he appeared as "a stern, concerned general who has acquired the status of 'the Voice of Fate'".[9]

On March 14, during an evening emergency briefing, he delivered an extremely emotional public address in defense of tightening the anti-epidemic measures; that speech could be considered the birth moment of his fandom. "An epidemic is coming our way, whose fury is unheard-of in human history," said Mutafchiyski, and that statement became one of his most popular catchphrases. And he added:

> *We are facing times of trial ... Human lives will be lost. The lives of those we love very much. Those who gave us life. Those who raised us. Those who doted on us when we were young and watched us grow. Those who are proud of our successes. We should not disappoint them with our carelessness.*[10]

Like all the previous updates from the briefings, the speech was widely circulated in the media, complete or in segments, and provoked hundreds of reactions and comments. However, the public responded not only to the newly imposed restrictions but also to the emotional appeal and dramatic discourse. For the first time, its attention became intensely focused on Mutafchiyski himself.

In the following days, many websites republished the already known facts of his official biography,[11] and the tabloids started digging for private photographs and personal details. On Facebook, dozens of groups[12] were created with distinct goals and motivations, as is evident from their titles: "Mutafchiyski Rules";[13] "I Support General Mutafchiyski";[14] "I Trust in Major General Mutafchiyski";[15] "General Mutafchiyski for PRESIDENT!";[16] etc. The largest and most active Facebook group, "The General Said!",[17] reached nearly one hundred thousand members. In the comment sections of online newspapers and on social media,[18]

a flurry of interpretive work began where every fragment of Mutafchiyski's CV, personality or public appearances was loaded with controversial meanings. Fans and anti-fans utilized the same facts, messages, or gestures to construct various – and often oppositional – readings; e.g., his professional achievements were used as proof of both his supreme competence in medicine and his absolute incompetence in pandemic crisis management (what could an army doctor and a surgeon possibly know about infectious diseases?); his emotive, figurative rhetoric was appraised both as perfectly adequate to inspire solidarity and as ill-suited, triggering panic; his public appeals were seen either as signs of genuine concern, or as poorly disguised aspirations for a political career. The spreading rumors of Mutafchiyski's running for president in the upcoming elections would frequently push the negotiated readings into an entirely political context, would modify and adjust them to existent political narratives, and would mobilize partisan supporters of the main Bulgarian political parties in heated online disputes over his persona.

At the end of the same memorable briefing of March 14, Mutafchiyski made a spontaneous reference to one of the allegedly first internet memes, featuring him as a character: a two-part photo collage with a shot from the official video of the song "We're Going to a Party" by young pop singer Djordjano, and a picture of Mutafchiyski saying, "You are not going…" (Fig. 1). "This is not the time for parties!", he emphatically concluded, and that inadvertent endorsement led to an unprecedented boom of meme creation in the next weeks. The primary type of the General's memes followed the same idea and pattern: two-part photo collages featuring Mutafchiyski in a dialogue with a popular song or a movie/cartoon character. For the second part of the collages, a specific set of photographs were used, accompanied by repetitive phrases, such as: "You are not going (out)!", "Don't go out!", "Where (are you going)???", "Stay at home!", i.e., *memetic images* along with *memetic phrases* (as per Milner 2016: 17–18). The traditional media "discovered" the growing meme culture and promptly reported on it, thereby providing it with more visibility among the mainstream public. The memes crossed the boundaries of the digital world and entered the physical one: images of Mutafchiyski asking "Where are you going?" started to appear on exit doors and in building elevators; others were spotted on cars along with the warning "Keep your distance!"[19] A complex mixture of fascination with the memetic practices, creative engagement, and seeking of publicity resulted in further spreading them into the realm of commerce: the well-known images and phrases were used as decoration of T-shirts, socks, towels, masks, cakes,[20] haircut,[21] manicure,[22] and Easter eggs.[23]

A fan culture was growing around Ventsislav Mutafchiyski in both its characteristic aspects: *affirmative* and *transformative*. The regular briefings and

other media appearances of the NOH chairman were closely watched, and parts of them were cut and reposted on social media as invitations to in-depth scrutiny. The preferred place for both humorous and serious discussions was the Facebook group "The General Said!". It was also the usual space for sharing all kinds of COVID-19-related creative works: photo manipulations and collages, cartoons, poems, jokes, etc. Many of them featured the General as a character. On Facebook, several declarations of romantic love were made to him semi-ironically, semi-melodramatically, and a few love poems went viral, e.g. "To Him with Love" (by Rositsa Dyulgerova) and "That Man" (unknown author). The folk singer Smilyana Zaharieva, who is listed in the Guinness Book of Records as "the person with the most powerful voice",[24] dedicated to him a special performance from her balcony.[25] Mutafchiyski himself was made into a rap singer, when parts of his media briefings and interviews were remixed as the rap pieces "We're Going to a Party"[26] (in a duet with Djordjano) and "Stay Home"[27] by the mock label Misirki Records. In the two remixes, he "raps" key anti-epidemic restrictions and recommendations: "no, you are not going [to a party]", "it's not time for parties", "isolation, quarantine", "personal hygiene", "disinfection", "stay at home", "this is a state of emergency, it must be obeyed", and so on. One self-proclaimed "unemployed programmer in quarantine" created the video game *Coronyo vs the General*, in which the player-controlled character of the General walks the streets of major Bulgarian cities and tries to put all undisciplined disobedient citizens in isolation before the villain virus arrives.[28]

Along with the fandom, the anti-fandom was also growing and gaining strength. In an interview for *Deutsche Welle* at the end of April, Mutafchiyski said that he had been receiving death threats.[29] Anonymous or signed, the threats would arrive by email or a text message, and then he would report them to the police. However, the most noticeable public peak of anti-fandom occurred after an interview with journalist Mirolyuba Benatova, aired on May 14, which Mutafchiyski interrupted angrily with the phrase: "I expect many people to die, and die mightily!" The phrase became proverbial and caused a fierce controversy. One of the smaller political formations in Bulgaria even appealed to the Supreme Cassation Prosecutor's Office with a request to bring criminal charges against Mutafchiyski for "communicating deceptive signs of alarm in the form of misleading information that many people will die and die mightily".[30] The interview provoked heated online disputes, where both parties were accused of being "too arrogant, unmannered, unprofessional".[31] Mutafchiyski was mainly reproached for not being kind, caring and comforting – that is, for failing to behave like a "proper doctor".

THE GENERAL AS A FOLKLORE CHARACTER

As the public figure most strongly associated with the pandemic crisis management in Bulgaria, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski appeared in the majority of COVID-19-related artistic production circulated in the media during the spring of 2020. I will focus my analysis on the cultural forms that could be defined as belonging to the genres of (digital) folklore, mainly on *memes*. First, because memes "actually reflect deep social and cultural structures"; shared norms and values are constructed through them, therefore researchers define internet memes as "(post)modern folklore" (Shifman 2014: 15). Second, because the genre relies on collective creation, circulation, and transformation, its fundamental logic is "textual poaching" (see Milner 2016: 26–29), and in this sense it fully embodies the principles and mechanisms of participatory culture. As proved by Anastasia Denisova's latest research, memes are also the most popular contemporary genre for political engagement and political resistance (Denisova 2019: 32–38). It is important to distinguish the fictional character who exists in many forms of vernacular creativity from the real person Mutafchiyski, so in the following part of this paper I will refer to the former by the colloquially used sobriquet "the General". Like many other folklore characters, the General is *ambivalent*: his features are fully dependent on the functions and roles he performs in given narratives or contexts.

The majority of the cultural forms I analyze in this part of my paper have been collected from Facebook, principally from the group "The General Said!" During a brief interview via Messenger, the group's administrator Stanish Rangelov explained to me that the group had been created by him and one of his friends mostly to gather collages featuring Mutafchiyski. The group was originally dedicated to humor and the alternative names, discussed by its two creators, had been "Laughter against coronavirus" and "Laughter during a state of emergency".[32] Created on March 20, the group grew quickly and reached nearly one hundred thousand members from one hundred countries around the globe.[33] The group was deleted by Facebook on September 2. Stanish Rangelov suggested that the published content had been systematically reported as violating the rules and "Facebook community standards".

With the group's erasure I faced one of the greatest challenges of internet ethnography: the disappearance of studied materials, thoroughly collected and organized in bookmark folders. I had downloaded many memes, jokes and other textual forms to my personal archive.[34] However, they were all deprived of their immediate context of reactions, comments, and interpretations. As Anna Haverinen points out, it "felt like a natural catastrophe had wiped out 'the village of my fieldwork'" (Haverinen 2015: 86). Apart from my personal collection,

the following analysis is also based on numerous YouTube videos, designed as slideshows of memes and jokes.[35]

Figure 1. *Presumably, one of the earliest photo collages which set a pattern of memetic creativity. It features Djordjano singing "We're going to a party!!" and Mutafchiyski responding "You are not going…".*[36]

The General's original and most common function was to personify the anti-epidemic restrictions and recommendations. In this interpretation, the character appears in hundreds of two-part collages, in which the first part illustrates a refrain in a popular song, a line or a frame from a movie, or a quote from a book, and the second part is an image of the General responding with a prohibition, encouragement, or (dis)approval. Here are a few examples of interaction with popular movie franchises:

> A frame from *The Lord of the Rings: Frodo, we are going to the greatest adventure!*
> The General: *You are not going!*[37]
>
> A frame from *Avengers: Infinity War: I'm sorry, Earth is closed today.*
> The General: *That's right, excellent!*[38]

> A frame from *Home Alone: I'm thinking of staying home…*
> The General: *Attaboy!*[39]

The fictional role of imposing interdicts or sanctions on every attempt at movement, association, or entertainment is an analogy to Ventsislav Mutafchiyski's actual public role as head of the NOH. The part played by the General in the fictional worlds of movies, songs, books, and cartoons (Fig. 2) reflected the duties performed by Mutafchiyski in the real-life context. The imagined situations and the character himself serve as allegories of the pandemic reality.

Figure 2. *The General asks Little Red Riding Hood, "Where are you going???"*[40]

The character's authority and powers were then hyperbolized to the point of absurdity, and the General started issuing sanctions on or interdicts against natural processes, scientific laws, and sacred religious events: e.g., he would forbid babies' teeth to *come in*, he would ban the spring from *coming*, and he would ask Jesus when getting out of the tomb, "*Where are you going???*"[41] On the one hand, the character's development was subjected to language games and puns; on the other, it reflected the progressive tightening of the measures. The public perceptions of totality of the NOH powers and the excessive restrictiveness of the anti-epidemic measures were articulated through various

textual forms and genres. They were expressed in jokes (e.g., This snow has been ordered by General Mutafchiyski so he can tell if anyone's been out by the footsteps[42]), in satirical fake news (e.g., New checkpoints to be introduced between our living rooms and bathrooms[43]), or in a thematic subgroup of memes in which the General would (dis)approve of movements during sexual intercourse. A presumably real story went viral on Facebook about a woman with an overdue pregnancy, who wrote a personal email to Ventsislav Mutafchiyski on behalf of her unborn daughter, asking for permission to get out. Mutafchiyski played along and granted it.[44]

The character, already shaped as an ultimate authority, was further utilized to asseverate diverse and long-standing political positions and attitudes. The General confronted major Bulgarian and European politicians and opposed significant political agendas, such as:

> Prime Minister Boyko Borisov: *I'm going for a fourth term.*
> The General: *No, you are not going.*[45]
>
> President Rumen Radev: *On May 9, I'm going to Moscow.*
> The General: *You are not going anywhere!*[46]
>
> UK Prime Minister Boris Jonson: *We are leaving the EU.*
> The General: *No, you are not leaving!!!*[47]

In numerous subsequent incarnations, the character was adopted as a tool for expressing common opinions, preferences or wishes; he started giving orders, such as "Drink BEER!"[48] and "Cheers! This is an order!"[49]; telling jokes (e.g., "What is the most unused object during a quarantine? Bras!"[50]); absorbing previously existing memetic trends (e.g., the meme "There are two types of people. Avoid both."[51]) or speaking on behalf of disappointed soccer fans (Fig. 3).

Figure 3. *The goalkeeper of the Bulgarian national soccer team Nikolay Mihaylov: "I have a headache, General. Did I catch the virus?" The General: "I don't think so, Nicky. You can't catch a ball, let alone the virus."*[52]

The media coverage of the pandemic crisis and the questions asked during the information briefings by journalists, especially from the tabloids, were subjected to constant public criticism, which was articulated through different humorous genres. In memes, some journalists would appear as secondary characters asking silly questions, such as: "General Mutafchiyski, is self-infection possible if a person spits on themselves while coughing?"[53] In jokes, witty situations would be played out:

> *The General gets admitted to a hospital with a head trauma. The doctor examines the patient and concludes, "He was hit by something heavy and dull. Perhaps by a real dumb question."*[54]

Ne!Novinite, a website for satirical fake news, published a list of 10 stupid questions that had not yet been addressed to Prof. Mutafchiyski[55] to help journalists with suggestions; e.g. "Which zodiac sign is most vulnerable to the infection according to mathematical models?" or "What would you say to yourself if you were God?" In a mock interview on Bazikileaks – a blog parodying the news leaks website WikiLeaks – the General complains how his daily interactions with journalists make him "feel duller and duller" and speak nonsense himself.[56] As is evident from the examples, this thematic subgroup of textual

Figure 4. *The General having an argument with himself: "Starting from tomorrow, everybody with a mask!" – "Without masks!" – "With masks!" – "Without masks!" – "With or without masks?" – "Why are you listening to this guy at all?"*[57]

forms constitutes a separate field of interpretations of the character in a very distinct manner: the General here is no longer seen as the powerful person in charge but rather as a victim of aggressive incompetence and stupidity. His function is to embody the public's irritation with the inaccuracies and failures in the media coverage of the pandemic crisis; to suffer symbolically the social afflictions caused by bad journalism.

Last but not least is the character's function as a manifestation of resistance against the anti-epidemic restrictions and measures. In a more specific and direct manner, objections would be raised by reversing the memetic structure so that the General himself would be subjected to sanctions or prohibitions. Public dissatisfaction with certain undefined or frequently changed recommendations would be expressed by portraying the character arguing against himself (Fig. 4).

In a more abstract, symbolic manner, the idea of rebellion would be conveyed by transforming the General into a fictional emblem of evil (e.g., the Night King from the TV series *Game of Thrones*[58]) or a historical emblem of dictatorship (Fig. 5). The idea was reinforced by inserting the character into varyingly complex conspiracy narratives, already circulating on social media. These plots present the General either as the original source of evil, or as an accomplice in a global coronavirus hoax, or even as a puppet ruled by ubiquitous and omnipotent extraterrestrials.

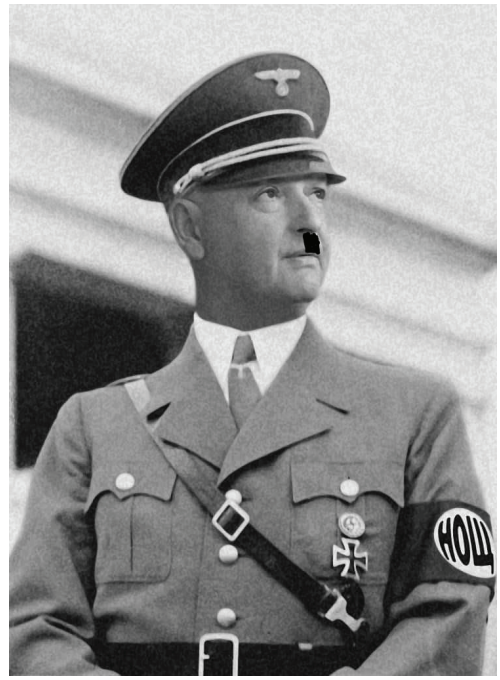

Figure 5. *The General as the epitome of dictatorship.*[59]

ASPECTS AND EFFECTS OF A PARTICIPATORY PANDEMIC

As the case of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski proves, fandom could be considered not only a common phenomenon of the contemporary mediated world but, under given circumstances, inevitable. Placed at the center of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis management and in the spotlight of media attention, the NOH chairman inspired a distinct fan following. The growing fan culture around his media persona was fueled in a particular cycle of media coverage: fan works and practices were covered in mainstream news and spread into thus far unexploited channels and spaces.

The interpretive process of Mutafchiyski's media image, or its 'negotiated readings' by the audience, developed on at least three levels, each with a specific time and dynamics. In the beginning, it depended on whether the public accepted the "wartime leader" persona that Mutafchiyski was role-playing and the messages of discipline and restrictions he was enunciating. Some read those messages with the preferred 'encoded' meanings, but in others they triggered resistance and "psychological reactance" (Steindl et al. 2015). Then, when Mutafchiyski became better known, the contradicting readings were oddly bound to his different public roles, shaped by radically different stereotypes of behavior. The same actions and discourses would be judged either as too soft and tolerant for a general or as too harsh and aggressive for a doctor; thus, interpretations diverged into separate narratives and agendas. And finally, each different reading served as a reference point or context for subsequent ethical assessment of Mutafchiyski's words and gestures, i.e., for his further readings as a "moral text" (as per Gray 2005). On a more abstract level, Mutafchiyski's media image and its interpretations by the audience became a crossroads for many conflicting interests, an area of political confrontation: between the government and the public, between approval of the imposed measures and dissatisfaction with them, between different groups in Bulgarian society.

The negative effects of anti-fandom affected mostly Ventsislav Mutafchiyski and his colleagues at the NOH. As researchers of anti-fandom have noted, in cases where hostility and aggression are directed at a person or a group of people and not at a text or genre, the expressed negative emotions, insults, threats and hate have a real negative impact (see Jane 2014). During the morning briefing of April 29, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski expressed the wish of the National Operational Headquarters that the established information model be changed, as it had become extremely stressful for both the NOH members and the public. "Bearers of bad news are usually killed," he said. "We are about to be killed." In the previously mentioned interview for *Deutsche Welle*, published on April 28,[60]

he pointed out that his image had been "too often satanized", and even quoted a rather striking example of the hateful messages he was receiving: "I want you to smile when I shoot you dead."

On May 2, the briefing was chaired by the NOH secretary. Along with the usual updates, it announced that regular briefings would be discontinued since they were evaluated to be no longer needed. A storm of response followed immediately; hundreds of emotional statuses were published on social media: "Stop, don't go!", "We'll miss you, General", "This is the end of an era", "Bring back the General to the people!", "They killed the General", etc. On the morning of the next day, a Sunday, Prime Minister Boyko Borisov called a special press conference to refute the speculations about the disbandment of the NOH and to show everyone that the General is alive and well. Mutafchiyski attended the press conference wearing a suit, not a uniform. Information briefings switched from a daily to a hebdomadal schedule, and on June 4 – one hundred days after the formation of the NOH – their termination was proclaimed. During the following summer months, Ventsislav Mutafchiyski almost entirely disappeared from the media.

The positive effects of fandom, however, were much broader and more visible. During a difficult and stressful time, which many members of society endured in physical isolation, fandom and other shared interests motivated connections, communication, and joint creativity. The Facebook group "The General Said!" functioned as a place for escape and lifting people's spirits and these effects were openly stated by members of the group: "Thank you for this group. Definitely helps maintain the mood in the whole situation we are in" (T.T.); "The truth is that I am also entertaining with these collages my mother, who is 70 years old and is currently isolated in her apartment" (V.V.).[61] The abundance of transformative works, the numerous incarnations of the General – as Superman,[62] as Napoleon[63] or Hitler, as a sexy Australian firefighter (Fig. 6), as Mr. Bean,[64] as John McClane from *Die Hard*,[65] as Maleficent,[66] as Morpheus from *The Matrix*,[67] as Lord Stark or the Night King from *Game of Thrones*, and as many other popular characters – are not merely reflections of different attitudes, points of view, or 'readings'. To a large extent, they are the results of a collective creative play of imagination and interpretation; they emanate from the shared pleasure of producing new cultural forms, by the fans and for the fans. The active engagement with the cultural practices of fandom – and not only transformative, but also affirmative practices, such as gathering memes in collections, curating them in YouTube videos, circulating and discussing them on social media, etc. – has indisputably positive socio-psychological effects.

Figure 6. *The General as a sexy Australian firefighter, posing with a kitten. The appeal reads "Keep your distance!"*[68]

In Jenkins's seminal book *Textual Poachers*, the cultural production of fandom has been defined as "a contemporary folk culture" (Jenkins 1992: 279). The majority of COVID-19 related works featuring the General belong to the genres of vernacular creativity. The General is undoubtedly the main character of Bulgarian pandemic folklore. The fan culture that appeared around his media persona remained alive long after Ventsislav Mutafchiyski had left the public scene. The new reaction, added on Facebook at that time, "Even Apart We're in This Together", represented by a *care* emoji hugging a red love heart, has been transformed into an emoji embracing the General (Fig. 7), a beautiful symbol of both the relationship between the General and his fans, and the connecting role of fandom.

Figure 7.[69]

As the character himself, the fandom of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski was an *ambivalent* sociocultural phenomenon. One part of it was rather serious and genuinely political fandom / anti-fandom (as per Sandvoss 2019). In the fan (or anti-fan) object, constructed through "the dual strategy of *interpretation* and *selection*" (Sandvoss 2013: 277), the political cause of COVID-19 pandemic management and the public figure most strongly associated with it could not be clearly separated. Another part was openly humorous or ironic fandom, emanating from the attitudes and pleasures of mockery and shared laughter (as per Ang 1985: 96–102). One part of the affective engagement with the media image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski was public and very productive in both affirmative and transformative practices. Another was hidden and determinedly destructive and led to the deletion of the Facebook group "The General Said!" The emotions that motivated the engagement and the practices they were realized through, ranged from casual liking and sharing (or reporting) Facebook content to passionate zealotry and purposeful harassment. On a more abstract level, people utilized the cultural logic and mechanisms of fandom in a similar manner as textually productive fans utilized the General – to serve their specific needs, attitudes, opinions or agendas. Building my analysis on Henry Jenkins' understanding of fandom as "a continuum of possible relations to popular texts" (Jenkins 2018: 16) allows me not to exclude any forms or aspects of the studied phenomenon. With all its facets and manifestations that phenomenon comprised a significant segment of the public response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Bulgaria during the spring of 2020; hence, I suggest the notion *participatory pandemic* to describe it as a whole. Participatory culture during a time of crisis has been rationalized in terms of globally emergent collaboration, remote assistance and "crowdsourced" information which help save lives (see Liu & Ziemke 2013). In my study I have employed the concept to explore how media fandom and participatory practices affect the key figures of a health crisis management.

After a few months of complete absence from the media – meaningful in its contrast with the previous over-presence – Ventsislav Mutafchiyski returned to the public scene in the autumn of 2020, along with the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. On September 25, the renewal of the regular briefings of the National Operational Headquarters was announced, however, on a hebdomadal schedule. Despite retaining his position as a chairman of the NOS, Mutafchiyski was no longer leading the briefings, ceding his place in the spotlight to the Minister of Health. During the last months of 2020, his public activities and appearances in the media were primarily related to the pro-vaccination campaign and on December 27, his name day, Mutafchiyski was the first person who took the COVID-19 vaccine in the Military Medical Academy in Sofia. On the hospital's Facebook page, the news gathered hundreds of positive reactions

and comments.[70] It is plausible to claim that in many ways Mutafchiyski has returned to his rather "medical self". It is also worth noting that in the national media coverage (i.e., on Bulgarian National Television and Bulgarian National Radio) he has been currently addressed or referred to as "Prof. Mutafchiyski".[71]

The still active Facebook groups, created by his supporters, such as "I Support General Mutafchiyski" and "I Trust in Major General Mutafchiyski", have been transformed into places for sharing and discussing COVID-19-related information. The groups and pages dedicated to memes and humor, e.g., "Mutafchiyski Rules", have remained like small islands of once ubiquitous culture. Although rarely, new memes and jokes are being published in reaction to current affairs[72] as if to indicate the fandom is still alive. Attention should be paid to the fact they all feature the General, exactly as the character was originally created, and no adjustments have been made to reflect the current, more "medical", public image of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski. The General has now become an independent cultural phenomenon.

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NOTES

[1] A quote from the establishing order of the National Operational Headquarters. Available in Bulgarian at https://coronavirus.bg/bg/231, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[2] See https://www.theverge.com/2020/4/3/21206011/anthony-fauci-coronavirus-pandemic-stan-fandom-hero-donald-trump-white-house-task-force, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[3] See https://www.nbcwashington.com/news/local/cocktails-sexiest-man-alive-and-shirts-dr-anthony-fauci-on-becoming-a-pop-culture-icon/2326166/, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[4] See https://www.mediapool.bg/hirurgat-ventsislav-mutafchiyski-e-noviyat-vremenen-nachalnik-na-vma-news263441.html; https://www.dnevnik.bg/bulgaria/2018/01/31/3121678_sled_vremenniia_post_polk_vencislav_mutafchiiski/; https://bntnews.bg/bg/a/prezidentt-naznachi-prof-ventsislav-mutafchiyski-za-shef-na-vma. In Bulgarian. All last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[5] See https://www.capital.bg/specialni_izdaniia/zdrave/2018/05/18/3386492_prof_d-r_vencislav_mutafchiiski_dmn_izplatihme/; https://clinica.bg/9759-VMA-razshiri-transplantacionnite-ekipi. In Bulgarian. Both last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[6] In Bulgarian at https://armymedia.bg/archives/88923, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[7] In French at https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[8] See https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-germany/merkel-tells-germans-fighting-virus-demands-war-time-solidarity-idUSKBN2153GX, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[9] Quotes from Yasen Boyadzhiev and Georgi Lozanov's analyses for Deutsche Welle (DW). In Bulgarian. Available at https://www.dw.com/bg/мутафчийски-да-поеме-държавата-как-се-справя-българия-с-коронавируса/a-52805286; https://www.dw.com/bg/коронавирус-и-медии-мутафчийски-на-върха-на-пирамидата/a-53056298, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[10] The full text of the speech in Bulgarian is available at https://www.monitor.bg/bg/a/view/mutafchijski-kym-nas-se-zadava-epidemija-s-nevijdana-jarost-v-choveshkata-istorija-c-ja-lata-re-ch-191613, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[11] It is worth noting how many publications in that moment shared a similar title: *Who is Ventsislav Mutafchiyski?* See http://wars.bg/кой-е-венцислав-мутафчийски-биографи/; https://www.actualno.com/curious/koj-e-general-mutafchijski-video-news_1442598.html; https://bulletin.bg/koy-e-gen-mayor-ventsislav-mutafchiyski-chovekat-koyto-vpechatli-s-plamennata-si-rech/; https://hubavajena.bg/koy-e-general-mutafchiiski/, all last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[12] At the time of writing of this paper, eighteen Facebook groups and pages dedicated to Mutafchiyski were still active, their members ranging from a few to many thousands.

[13] In Bulgarian: "Мутафчийски Рулз". A public group, created on March 21, 2020, with 3,666 members (see https://www.facebook.com/groups/629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021).

[14] In Bulgarian: "АЗ ПОДКРЕПЯМ ГЕНЕРАЛ МУТАФЧИЙСКИ". A private group, created on March 14, 2020, with 17,081 members (see https://www.facebook.com/groups/519134345645398, last accessed on 15 March 2021).

[15] In Bulgarian: "Аз вярвам на Генерал-майор Мутафчийски". A public group, created on March 14, 2020, with 5,333 members (see https://www.facebook.com/groups/649744365809580, last accessed on 15 March 2021).

[16] In Bulgarian: "Генерал Мутафчийски ПРЕЗИДЕНТ!". A public group, created on March 17, 2020, with 3,883 members (see https://www.facebook.com/groups/561505638125376, last accessed on 15 March 2021).

[17] In Bulgarian: "Генералът каза!". A public group, created on March 20, 2020. The group was deleted by Facebook on September 2, 2020. I would like to thank the group's administrator Stanish Rangelov for providing to me his personal archive of the group's statistics and screenshots to which I reference in this paper. Also, he was kind to answer a few questions via Messenger.

[18] For example in discussions, provoked by the emergency briefing on March 14, on Facebook pages of mainstream Bulgarian media, such as bTV (https://www.facebook.com/btvnews/videos/216426003061071); "Свободна Европа" (https://www.facebook.com/svobodnaevropa.bg/posts/2267111230252236); "Капитал" (https://www.facebook.com/capitalbg/posts/10157381296721032), all last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[19] See https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3349232791776540&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[20] See https://www.bgdnes.bg/Article/8403113. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[21] See https://btvnovinite.bg/bulgaria/obrazat-na-vencislav-mutafchijski-se-prevarna-v-pricheska-video.html. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[22] See https://www.standartnews.com/lifestyle-lyubopitno/zashcho-manikyuristkite-obozhavat-gen-mutafchiyski-420062.html. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[23] See https://www.24chasa.bg/region/article/8473896. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[24] See https://offnews.bg/kultura/balgarka-s-rekord-v-gines-smiliana-zaharieva-e-chovekat-s-naj-mosht-706381.html. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[25] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tHVIpc0oX7I, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[26] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a66LfI6bTvc, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[27] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3rOJ_zurlMQ, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[28] The game is still available to play at https://koronio-vs-generala.com/, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[29] In Bulgarian: https://www.dw.com/bg/коронавирус-в-българия-ексклузивно-интервю-с-ген-мутафчийски/a-53265618, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[30] The full text of the appeal in Bulgarian is available at http://www.boec-bg.com/archives/3254, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[31] See https://www.facebook.com/dnevnik/posts/10157413814628310; https://www.facebook.com/OFFNews.bg/posts/2991675274221152; https://www.facebook.com/eurocom.bg/posts/1608886985956336. In Bulgarian. All last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[32] Screenshots of private text messages. Courtesy of S. Rangelov.

[33] According to group's archives the group members were 96,676 in total, 90,669 of them from Bulgaria, 1,564 from the UK, 1,195 from Germany, 458 from Spain, 314 from the USA, etc. The lowest number of 1 member was registered from 21 places, e.g., Angola, Greenland, New Zealand, Thailand, etc.

[34] The materials collected by me are now available in the National Center for Intangible Cultural Heritage (NCICH) at the Institute of Ethnology and Folklore Studies with Ethnographic Museum – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, under the archive numbers FtAIF 1856 (462 items collected from March 20, 2020 to August 24, 2020) and FtAIF 1869 (61 items related to the General, collected from October 8, 2020 to November 29, 2020).

[35] I would like to express my special thanks to Snezhana Tasheva (Janie Fallout) for her eight 5-minutes-long YouTube videos with memes and jokes featuring the General, many of which I failed to add to my collection. See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rWjWgZai1rI; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r3c2SUURdFk; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AyxUUD_ONEo; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p59i4vw1gsQ; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLaP9UkeB0k; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i-OBJ1pDA_s; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H8UyyKAUnTA; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xlh35QBm6Kk, all last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[36] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 010. Collected on August 16, 2020. Although in some media publications it is claimed to be "the first meme featuring General Mutafchiyski" (see https://bpost.bg/generalat-kaza/; https://btvnovinite.bg/lifestyle/liubopitno/generalat-kaza-koronavajral-senzacijata-u-nas-v-15-kartinki.html, both last accessed on 15 March 2021), that claim could not be verified. An early publication of the meme, still available on Facebook, is from March 13, 2020, however, slightly altered: https://www.facebook.com/Д-р-Коронов-104895457804189/photos/106985177595217/, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[37] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 091. Collected on March 23, 2020.

[38] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 098. Collected on August 21, 2020.

[39] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 101. Collected on August 21, 2020.

[40] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 116. Collected on March 20, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=225108715357267&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[41] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 370, 371. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2928597763900692&set=g.629456334504004; https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=662635664526340&set=g.629456334504004, both last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[42] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1869: 107. Collected on October 23, 2020.

[43] In Bulgarian available at https://www.nenovinite.com/ne/politika/kpp-mezhdu-hola-i-toaletnata, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[44] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 440. Collected on March 29, 2020. The story was told in the Facebook group "The General Said!" by the woman's mother and supported with a screenshot of the messages. The email address, displayed on the screenshot, is an actual contact of Ventsislav Mutafchiyski (see https://bestdoctors.bg/doctor/id/320). The story has also been reported in the media at https://www.bgonair.bg/a/163-lyubopitno/189745-humor-pri-pandemiya-bremenna-zhena-poiska-razreshenie-ot-gen-mayor-mutafchiyski-da-rodi, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[45] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 154. Collected on August 21, 2020.

[46] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 177. Collected on April 29, 2020.

[47] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 180. Collected on March 24, 2020.

[48] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 321. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2880164582065290&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[49] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 332. Collected on August 13, 2020.

[50] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 427. Collected on August 20, 2020.

[51] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 325. Collected on April 3, 2020.

[52] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 199. Collected on August 16, 2020. Another version is available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3157731560926665&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[53] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 222. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2949516025142199&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[54] Collected on August 17, 2020, from a post in the Facebook group "The General Said!". Personal archive.

[55] In Bulgarian at https://www.nenovinite.com/ne/rubriki/10-maloumni-vuprosa-koito-vse-oshe-ne-sa-zadadeni-na-prof-mutafchijski, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[56] In Bulgarian at https://neverojatno.wordpress.com/2020/04/09/general-3/, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[57] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 333. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3253216458044841&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[58] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1869: 065. Collected on October 23, 2020.

[59] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1869: 061. Collected on October 13, 2020.

[60] See https://www.dw.com/bg/коронавирус-в-България-ексклузивно-интервю-с-ген-мутафчийски/a-53265618. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[61] Screenshots taken on March 22, 2020. Courtesy of S. Rangelov.

[62] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 387. Collected on August 13, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3182710378428783&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[63] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 393. Collected on August 13, 2020.

[64] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 392. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=2876980255731415&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[65] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 379. Collected on May 29, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=876076856223970&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[66] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 388. Collected on August 12, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=3203470153019472&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[67] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 390. Collected on June 9, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=700323977424175&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[68] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 404. Collected on March 20, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10218278375964227&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[69] NCICH archive, FtAIF 1856: 386. Collected on May 2, 2020. Also available at https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=1676306285845517&set=g.629456334504004, last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[70] See https://www.facebook.com/mma.vma/posts/4065518406805473. In Bulgarian. Last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[71] See https://bntnews.bg/news/prof-mutafchiyski-e-parviyat-vaksiniran-sreshtu-covid-19-medik-ot-vma-1088855news.html; https://bnr.bg/post/101413709/prof-vencislav-mutafchiiski. In Bulgarian. Both last accessed on 15 March 2021.

[72] See https://www.facebook.com/groups/629456334504004/permalink/827941997988769/; https://www.facebook.com/groups/629456334504004/permalink/839473253502310/; https://www.facebook.com/groups/629456334504004/permalink/860041664778802/, all last accessed on 15 March 2021.

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COVID-19 AND THE TRADITIONAL CULTURE OF THE UDMURTS

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Abstract: The article discusses the spring rites and summer prayers of the Eastern (Trans-Kama) Udmurt and the Udmurts' festivals (*Bydzh'yn nunal, Akashka, Paskha, tulys kis'ton, Gurt / -en vös', and Mör vös'*) during the quarantine period related to COVID-19, as well as comic songs and chastushkas (ditties) on the topic of quarantine and self-isolation. It is the first attempt to describe and characterize the consequences of the global pandemic as reflected through the traditional culture of the Udmurt people. Materials used for the analysis were internet posts, data from informants, articles from district newspapers, and the observations of the authors. The presented materials allow us to speak about changes in the form of the Udmurt traditional ritual events and people's ability to adapt to a crisis situation. Self-isolation has caused concern among many villagers because of the inability to hold festivals in real time and space. A study of internet posts has shown that the Udmurts willingly share their preparations for the festivals and send greetings to each other that reflect both joyful and sad emotions. Udmurt songs and chastushkas with humorous content uploaded on websites help them to overcome the difficult situation caused by the coronavirus.

Keywords: chastushkas (ditties), comic songs, COVID-19, Internet posts, rituals and festivals, self-isolation, traditional culture, Udmurts, virtual space

The complex epidemic situation due to COVID-19 has affected the way traditional cultures practice national customs and rituals. The way national rites and customs are performed has changed significantly and in some cases these

had to be completely abandoned (see, e.g., Coronavirus 2020; Manichkin 2020; Japanese 2020; Amelina 2020; Prange & Zhukov 2020; Kulichenko 2020). On the other hand, they have also found ways to overcome the crisis situation through adaptation (Volodina 2020; Traditional medicine 2020; Korovina 2020).

Due to the outbreak of the coronavirus in all regions of Russia, from March 30, 2020 the state decided to impose quarantine and to follow a regime of self-isolation, which meant that people had to stay at home and avoid events where groups of people gather.

It should be noted that before the events of early 2020, external factors had had a gradual impact on the traditional culture of the Udmurts. However, the conditions of quarantine and self-isolation have put the Udmurts in a difficult situation, which asks them to abandon the established customs and behavioral patterns, and to find compromises and adapt to the current reality instead.

In this study, we analyze the practice of the spring rites of the Udmurts in the context of the pandemic (the ritual cycle *Bydzh'yn nunal* / *Bydzh'ym nunal* / *Bydzh'ynnal* / *Bydzh'ymnal*[1] ('the Great Day'); *Akashka* ('the Feast of the Plow'), which marks the beginning of the year according to the national calendar and the beginning of spring field work,[2] Orthodox Easter, and *tulys kis'ton* 'spring commemorations') as well as the summer prayers of the Udmurts of Bashkortostan. The choice is justified by the fact that these particular rites and festivals coincided with the quarantine in Russia. The article also discusses how the phenomenon of writing songs and chastushkas devoted to the theme of the coronavirus and self-isolation is a creative reaction of a society to extraordinary life events.

The nationwide COVID-19 crisis has caused some informants' extreme anxiety, as it is possible that the extinction of traditional rituals may cause people to completely abandon them in the following years. As the informants noted, the collective participation and consolidation of the kin and community were threatened in favor of individualism, as the mentioned festivals imply the participation of a large number of people visiting the houses of relatives and holy places as well as communal discussions and meals. For instance, the Southern Udmurts' ritual visits to their relatives' houses in the patrilineal group *vös'nerge* ('the ceremonial guesthood by the family'), performed on the day of the *Bydzh'yn nunal* celebration, have gradually faded in recent years. Locally, some families separated from the lineage group and stopped participating in *vös'nerge*. In several ethnographic groups, the ritual visits during the spring memorials – *tulys kis'ton* – had completely disappeared by the beginning of the twenty-first century. This practice can be found only in separate local traditions or in single families.

During the pandemic, mass gatherings of people and visits to cemeteries were also prohibited, as was reported in the news or via public information campaigns. In some areas, members of police teams that monitored quarantine adherence were at the entrance to the cemetery. Villagers also had to refrain from visiting sacred places in groups and participating in public ceremonies. At the same time, people have become quite active in the internet space, primarily in social networks: for example, on Vkontakte, Facebook, Odnoklassniki, and Instagram.

Thus, the authors of this article chose to rely actively on online methods and to adopt virtual ethnographic approaches, as it was too complicated to make full-fledged fieldwork. A whole range of published studies (e.g., Markham 2004 [1997]; Hine 2000; Sergeyeva 2010) about research in the digital milieu allowed us to turn towards this kind of experience. In this regard, the main sources of research were various posts by the Udmurts on social networks concerning our topic, online interviews and communication with the Udmurts from different local groups, and the personal observations of the authors.

It should be noted that today the Internet has significantly influenced the modern life not only of city-dwellers, but also of villagers, due to its availability and its increasing use in daily life. The quarantine of the rural population has led to all live public festivals and rituals being moved to the virtual space. In order to diversify the leisure activities of the residents, rural cultural centers, like other cultural institutions, one of the main tasks of which is to hold events with mass gatherings of people, also found a new format for the pandemic: for example, videos made by specialists of cultural institutions in the form of various actions, flash mobs, online concerts, etc. As a result, on the one hand, people are physically isolated, but, on the other hand, the virtual world has become a tool to unite people from different strata and professions.

In some cases, at the request of the informants, information about the source is anonymized. In other cases, informants agreed to have their name published.

TRADITIONAL UDMURT CULTURE ON THE INTERNET AND IN DAILY LIFE

The internet posts studied can be conventionally divided into several categories: preparation for the festival, the festival itself, ritual dishes, greetings, and information about the rite. According to the available internet materials, it appears clearly that some Udmurt Christians use both Christian and folk symbols and terminology for rituals in their posts; for others who profess Orthodoxy more

actively, pre-Christian elements are rare or absent. The practitioners of traditional Udmurt beliefs do not use Christian symbols. The posts were published in both Udmurt and Russian.

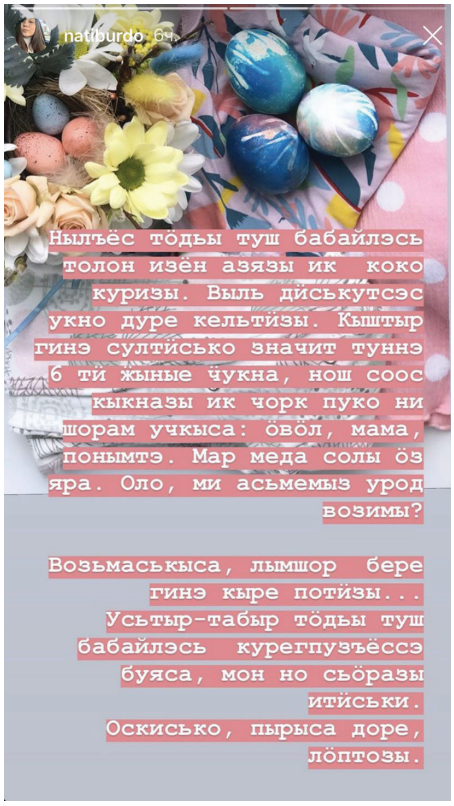
Below we briefly review each thematic block.

Preparing for the festival

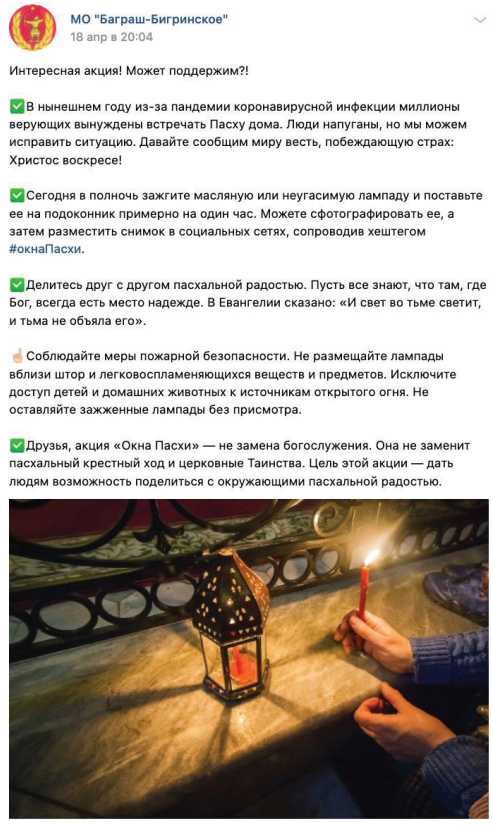
Since the quarantine of the population has given people the opportunity to spend more time at home and, in particular, on the Internet, people began to post on various social networks how they prepared for the festival. Most people posted photographs of their festive meals and laid table with a text message about their readiness for the rite (Example 1). They also shared recipes for cakes and posted images of colored or decorated eggs. One post contained information about the choice of attire for the upcoming rite of *Bydzh'ym nunal* (Example 2). An Eastern Udmurt posted on Instagram about the custom of putting on new clothes and leaving gifts and colored eggs for children on the windowsill, which were allegedly left by the character *Tőd'y tush babay* ('White-Bearded Grandfather') on the Great Day (Example 3). In addition, the Bagrash-Bigra municipality in Malaya Purga District, Udmurtia, mobilized people on Easter Eve with the hashtag #*окнаПасхи* (Easter windows), which encouraged the audience to put a burning icon lamp on the windowsill at midnight and, if desired, post photographs on Vkontakte with this hashtag (Example 4). As noted by the organizers, the purpose of this mobilization was to give people the opportunity to share Easter joy with others. But it is clear from the general text that uniting people with one action is an attempt to relieve tension. Note that Bagrash-Bigra village was closed in April for a sixteen-day quarantine due to a local resident having caught COVID-19.

Example 1. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall62160647_7686, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Example 2. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall78392984_1912, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*



Example 3. *Source: https://instagram.com/natiburdo?igshid=vakfekw744bk, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*



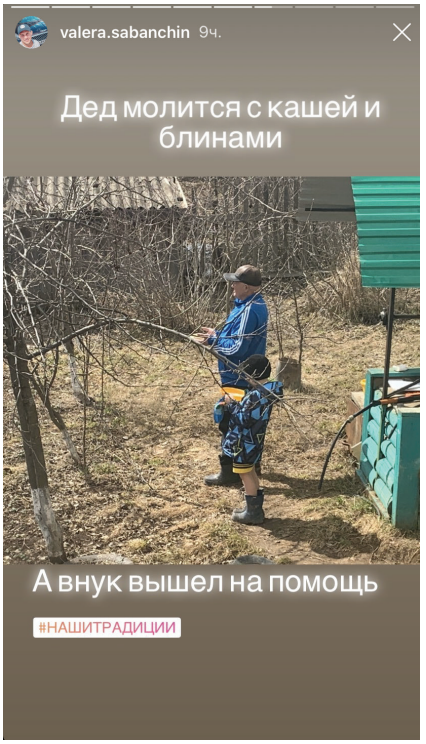
Example 4. *Source: https://vk.com/mobagrashbigra?w=wall-165541235_4326, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Holding the festival

As the materials show, people often shared how they celebrated the festival at home. Irina Samigulova shared information about how she performed the rite of the Great Day, offered holiday greetings, and attached photographs of 2020 in her posts (Example 5). It is noteworthy that Anatoly Galikhanov, an Udmurt sacrificial priest from Altaevo village, Burayevo District, Bashkiria, immediately reacted to this post and tried to explain the rules of behavior on this day and the observance of the ritual via his comments. In particular, the priest writes that on *Bydzh'yn nunal*, you must bring water from the spring, using a shoulder yoke resting only on your right shoulder, and in no case should this water be put on the ground. Alcohol can be consumed only in the afternoon, after the family prayer and a taste of the consecrated porridge. Instagram user Valera Sabanchin from Malaya Balzuga village in the Tatyshly District, Bashkiria, posted a photograph of his father's prayer address with his son with the hashtag #*нашитрадиции* (our traditions) (Example 6). In order for the festival activities during the quarantine period not to get out of control, some representatives of district organizations had to participate in raids. As an example, we can mention the post of Natalia Antonova, head of the Department of Culture of the Alnashi District, Udmurtia (Example 7). Apparently, it was not possible to maintain quarantine measures in all villages. According to another VKontakte post, children participated in the collection of painted eggs and Easter gifts, as the tradition had an important intergenerational meaning for the users (Example 8). In the Vkontakte group of the Udmurt-language newspaper of the Kukmor District of Tatarstan, *Vamysh* (Step), an anonymous survey about the ritual collection of eggs was conducted, which contained one question *"Tunne nylpiosty potizy-a kuregpuz bich'any?"* ('Did your children go out to collect chicken eggs today?') with three response options: *"potizy buskel'e"* ('went to the neighbors'), *"öz pote"* ('didn't go out'), "*bydes gurtez ortch'izy"* ('went around the whole village'). The results of the survey were as follows: 22.5 percent (9 people) went to their neighbors, 72.5 percent (29 people) did not participate in egg collection, and only 5 percent (2 people) went around the whole village. In comments to the survey, Vladimir Zhukov said that despite the prohibition of officials, he and his son went to the neighbors for eggs, which caused disapproval of some users. Natalia Matveeva, a resident of Varkled-Bodya village in the Agryz District of Tatarstan, published on her Vkontakte page a video greeting on *Bydzh'yn nunal* and performed the ritual chants in honor of the *Akashka* festival (*akashka gur*) with her mother. During the expedition of 2017, Nikolai Anisimov recorded the performance of this chant during the feast with a group of relatives in the patrilineal group (see Toulouze & Anisimov 2018: 81). In Udmurt culture, the performance of a ritual chant or a part of it during

the ritual is important as a guarantee of the success of sacred actions and for structuring the mystical order of the world. This is probably why, despite the failure to perform the traditional scenario of the rite, the performance of the ritual chant served as a symbol of a special day and its completion.

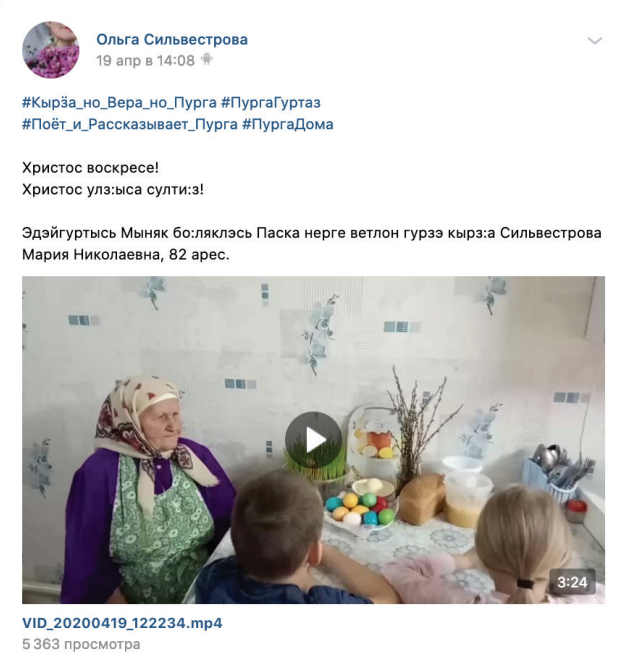
Example 5. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall22919365_12005, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*



Example 6. *Source: https://instagram.com/valera.sabanchin?igshid=1prluiaho9jcu, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Example 7. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall187813714_2144, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Example 8. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall142962886_1592, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*



Example 9. *Source: https://vk.com/id161457323?w=wall161457323_550, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Another example is the video on the Vkontakte page of a resident of Bobya-Ucha village of the Malaya Purga District, Udmurtia, Olga Sil'vestrova, in which her mother-in-law Maria Nikolaevna Sil'vestrova (born in 1938) performs *Pas'ka n'erge vetlon gur* (the visitation chant [of houses of the kin] on Easter) of the *Mynyak bölyak*[3] (Example 9). The name of the chant clearly indicates its functional meaning. Perhaps that is why the daughter-in-law asks her mother-in-law to perform this ritual chant during the quarantine on Easter Day. The video shows an elderly woman singing a song at the table with children, which symbolically already serves as a festival feast. Since this type of tune is rarely performed nowadays, and is disappearing, below are the lyrics of the song:

Ар(ы)мисьогполлыктылэ(й)ук Быдӟын нунал юондыр,	Once a year there is a holiday of the Great Day,
Ой(ы)долэ но шул(ы)дыр(ы) карыса, кыр(ы)ӟаса пукоме.	Let's have some fun and sing songs, sit.
Ой(ы)долэ но шул(ы)дыр(ы) карыса, кыр(ы)ӟаса пукоме.	Let's have some fun and sing songs, sit.

“Осто” гынэ шу(в)имы ке, Инь(ы) мар кабыл(ы) мед кароз.	As soon as we say “Oste[4]”, let Inmar[5] hear.
Кырым(ы) тыр(ы) гынэ (й)асьмиёс, мусо гынэ кайёсы.	There are few of us – just a handful, my loves.
Кырым(ы) тыр(ы) гынэ (й)асьмиёс, мусо гынэ кайёсы.	There are few of us – just a handful, my loves.
Кизьылэм но ю-няньёсмы сӥзьылозь мед кисьмалоз,	Let our sown seeds ripen until fall,
Ужась гынэ адямиёслы тазалыкзэс мед сётоз.	For working people, let [God] give health.
Ужась гынэ адямиёслы тазалыкзэс мед сётоз.	For working people, let [God] give health.
Ой, тау улэ, тау улэ (й)ук, мусо гынэ кайёсы,	Oh, thank you, thank you, my dear,
Талэсь но бон(ы) бадзынъ(ы)ёссэ шӧдьтыса но(й) улэлэ.	Finding more than this [wealth] live.
Талэсь но бон(ы) бадзынъ(ы)ёссэ шӧдьтыса но улэлэ.	Finding more than this [wealth] live.
Тау карыса (й)ум(ы) кошкиське, нош но вуомы (й)али,	Thanking don’t leave, again, come again.
Тау карыса (й)ум(ы) кошкиське, нош но вуомы али.	Thanking don’t leave, again, come again.

(Source: https://vk.com/id161457323?w=wall161457323_550, last accessed on 1 December 2020)

The ethnomarathon *Daur shykys* (‘Chest of the Century’), dedicated to the 100th anniversary of the statehood of Udmurtia and marked by the hashtags of #*культураУдмуртии* (culture of Udmurtia), #*этомы* (It’s us), #*АлнашскийРДК* (Alnashi community center), #*сидимдома* (stay at home), and #*100летУдмуртия* (100 years of Udmurtia), was announced in the group Alnashi RDK. The aim of the project was “to increase interest in the traditions and customs of the Udmurt people and the preservation of intangible cultural heritage”.[6] The first category of the ethnomarathon was announced as *Anai-atai gur”esmy* (‘Chants of our fathers-mothers’), where it was suggested to record ritual chants of *Bydzh’yn nunal, Akashka,* and *vös’nerge* festivals as they exist in the family, clan or village. Ten home videos of ritual tunes were attached to the post. Most of the participants were natives of the Alnashi District of Udmurtia, and one video was from Vyazovka village of the Tatyshly District of Bashkiria.

During the writing of the article, informants also reported that in one of the Udmurt settlements of Tatarstan, despite the quarantine, the annual tradition of the spring rites was not interrupted. The rites were held according to the established canons and with the participation of almost all the villagers. Due to the quarantine, only those former villagers who went to live in other districts and towns and are no longer permanent residents of the village could not attend the ceremonies. The decision to hold it was made by the majority of the villagers. As one informant jokingly shared: "We are doing disinfection for the coronavirus" (anonymous, oral message, 2020), meaning they were consuming alcohol. It should be noted that here the tradition was never interrupted, even during the years of Soviet atheism and religious persecution. Moreover, scientists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries noted the zealous observance and preservation of customs by these Udmurts. On this basis, it is possible to understand their choice in favor of their faith and traditions, even during the global pandemic of the early twenty-first century.

Orthodox Udmurts also found themselves in difficult circumstances. Due to the coronavirus, parishioners and pilgrims were forbidden to visit churches (Example 10). Instead, representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church invited them to watch a live broadcast of the divine service. In addition, the dangerous global COVID-19 situation has become an occasion for increasing anxiety and worry about the descent of the Holy Fire in Jerusalem. As stated, if this fire does not descend to Earth, it will mean the beginning of the end of time. Almost all the media, bloggers and Internet users were talking about the possibility of the end of the world, which created even more panic and anxiety among the population. However, divine services were held in churches, but only a small number of people participated: priests, singers, helpers. So, in the Udmurt parish of Izhevsk, singers could visit the temple to participate in divine services (oral report by Irina Pchelovodova, 2020). Thus, services in churches were held and even broadcast on television and social networks. For example, Galina Shushakova's post indicates that holding the Udmurt divine service is important, for which she thanks Father Pavel and Father Mikhail, as well as the singers (Example 11). During the Easter service, some stood at home in front of the TV, lit candles and prayed as if they were present in the temple during the service. Others consulted with priests and, depending on their circumstances, prayed alone or with their families. Many asked for protection from disaster in their prayers. However, these forced conditions, as noted by informants, did not bring much joy and created a sense of solemnity in the celebration of Easter. Perhaps this was due to, for example, the abolition of collective participation in the festival, the lack of spiritual unity during the important event, and the inability to be present at church as a place of worship. Pre-Easter and post-Easter days are

considered great days in Orthodoxy, so the divine services on these days are special for parishioners. In this regard, because of the prohibition of going to church, many Udmurts tried to find ways to transmit notes about health and about relief from stress to be read by priests during the liturgy: for example, those who knew Father Pavel personally called him directly; others contacted him through the singers. As a whole, the peculiarities of the Udmurt Orthodox religious services are very close to other ceremonial practices in other regions of Russia (see, e.g., Soldatov 2020; Kuznetsova 2020; Radchenko 2020).

The special conditions also included the conclusion of the *tulys kis'ton* (spring commemorations), which are usually held a week after the *Bydzh'ym nunal* celebration. It should be noted that the spring commemoration also includes a visit to the cemetery on May 9. Initially, this day was dedicated to the memory of those who died during the Great Patriotic War. It later became the day of commemoration of all the dead. In the case of the Easter celebration, people were not allowed to hold a commemoration ceremony with a large number of attendants or to visit the cemetery. In this regard, in some traditions in which relatives' homes are still visited, the spring commemorations were held with the participation of the closest relatives only (Example 12).

Example 10. *Source: https://vk.com/myudm?w=wall-25185834_24314, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Example 11. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall55651469_1753, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Example 12. *Source: https://vk.com/shaislamova15?w=wall160459663_7557, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

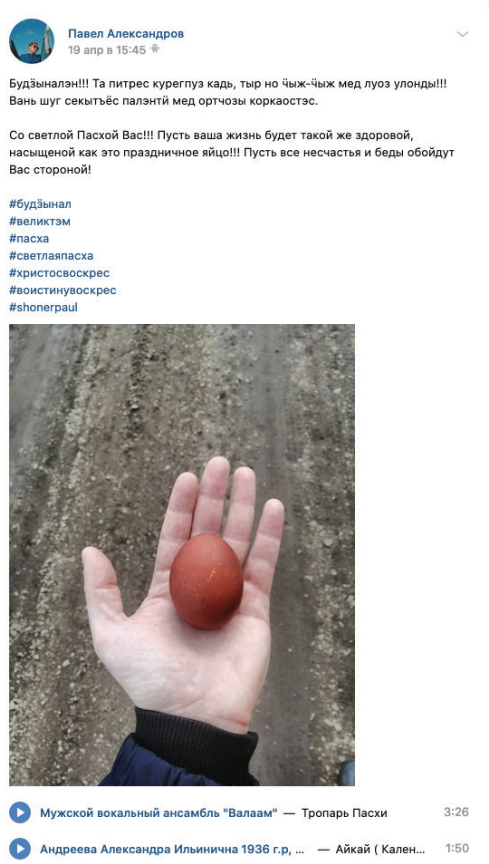
In another case, the commemorations were held within the family circle. According to informants, a certain paradox arose in one of the Bashkortostan districts: despite the mentioned prohibitions, it was ordered to do Saturday community work to clean up local cemeteries. Part of the population followed self-isolation measures, held a commemoration ceremony in a narrow family circle and did not visit the graves of their dead. But according to informants, most people still took part in the traditional visit to the cemetery. "The cemetery was like *Sabantuy*[7]," said one of the informants (anonymous, oral report, 2020). In some cases, safety precautions and social distancing were disregarded. For example, according to tradition, when remembering their dead, many did not wear masks and drank from the same glass (anonymous, oral message, 2020). Also, at the spring commemorations and on May 9, villagers who had left for other districts and cities came to pay respects to their deceased ancestors. It should be noted that in some areas (e.g. Izhevsk) by this time there were no strong restrictions or special warnings about visiting cemeteries, but the risk of infection remained. When remembering their dead, people also asked for their protection from the spreading pandemic. Moreover, the informants reported that in one district of Udmurtia, a large number of people gathered for a funeral to pay their respects to a deceased woman in one case and a deceased man in another. At the same time, none of the funeral participants felt in danger of getting seriously ill. Tradition was stronger than the newly announced rules of behavior. These examples show a special attitude towards deceased ancestors and a steady belief in their help and protection. As our informants note, spring commemorations and May 9 are considered the festival of the dead who wait for their living relatives. It is believed that not observing the simplest ritual actions (not visiting the graves of the deceased relatives or not remembering them) can lead to various problems.

Greetings

Many posts were dedicated to holiday greetings in both the Udmurt and Russian languages, sometimes with various hashtags reflecting the message content: for example, #*будӟынал,* #*великтэм,* #*пасха* (all meaning Easter). Some contained a short greeting, while others were expanded with various wishes, often protection and keeping disease at bay. Here are some examples:

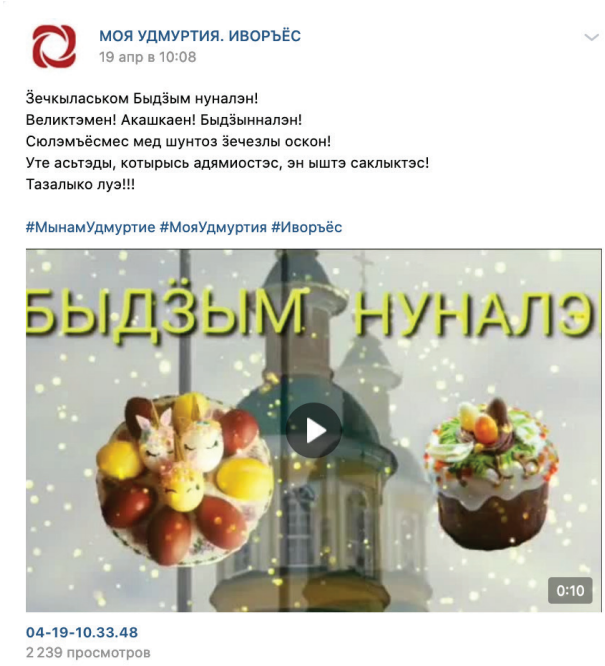
> *Будӟыналэн!!! Та питрес курегпуз кадь, тыр но ӧыж-ӧыж мед луоз улонды!!! Вань шуг секытъёс палэнтӥ мед ортчозы коркаостэс.*
> Happy Easter to You!!! Let your life be as healthy and full as this festive egg!!! Let all misfortunes and troubles pass you by! (Example 13)

Example 13. *Source: https://vk.com/shonerpaul?w=wall44496167_8688, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*



ХРИСТОС УЛӞЫСА СУЛТЭМ! ЗЭМ НО УЛӞЫСА СУЛТЭМ! ЮГЫТ АКАШКА НУНАЛЭН ТИЛЕДЫЗ! АРМЫ КАПЧИЕН, ШУЛДЫР УЖЪЁСЫН МЕД ОРТЧОЗ! ТАЗАЛЫК, ТУПАСА УЛОН, ШУДБУР, КАНЬЫЛЛЫК МЕД ЛУОЗ КОТЬКУД КОРКАН!
Christ is risen! Indeed he is risen! Happy *Akashka* day to you! Let our year pass easily with joyful works! Let health, sympathy, happiness, and ease be in every home![8]

Ваньдэсты Быдзым Паскаен! Котькуд семьяе мед пыроз Яратон, Тазалык, Шудбур,вань висенъес палэнэти мед кошкозы! Чагыр инбам но яркыт шунды котьку мед луоз!
Happy Easter to all! Let Love, Health, and Happiness come to every family, let all diseases be avoided! Let there always be a blue sky and a bright sun![9]



Example 14. *Source: https://vk.com/myudm?w=wall-25185834_24321, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Example 15. *Source: https://vk.com/id455362247?w=wall455362247_1418, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Ӟечкыласьком Быдӟым нуналэн! Великтэмен! Акашкаен! Быдӟынналэн! Сюлэмъёсмес мед шунтоз ӟечезлы оскон! Уте асьтэды, котырысь адямиостэс, эн ышты саклыктэс! Тазалыко луэ!!!
Greetings on the Great Day! Happy Great Day! With *Akashka*! Happy Great Day! Let our hearts be warmed by faith in the good! Take care of yourself and your loved ones, do not lose vigilance! Be healthy! (Example 14)

Как жаль, что мой кулич не подарить, яйцо по интернету не отправить… Осталось лишь "ХРИСТОС ВОСКРЕС!" сказать и луч тепла в душе у вас оставить!!! Со светлым праздником Пасхи, друзья!
What a pity that my cake is not a gift, an egg on the Internet is not sent… It remains only to say, 'CHRIST HAS RISEN!' and leave a ray of warmth in your soul!!! Happy Easter holiday, friends! (Example 15)

Югыт Пасхаен! Быдзынналэн! Ваньмыз умой мед луоз!
Happy Easter! Happy Great Day! Let everything be fine![10]

Ӟечкыласьком Акашкаен!	Congratulations on *Akashka*!
Чылкыт малпанъёсын	With pure thoughts
Тырмытом улонмес.	we'll fill our lives.
Ӟечезлы осконэн	With faith in the good
Юнматом сюлэммес	we'll strengthen our hearts

(Example 16)

Example 16. *https://vk.com/feed?w=wall128050325_1070, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

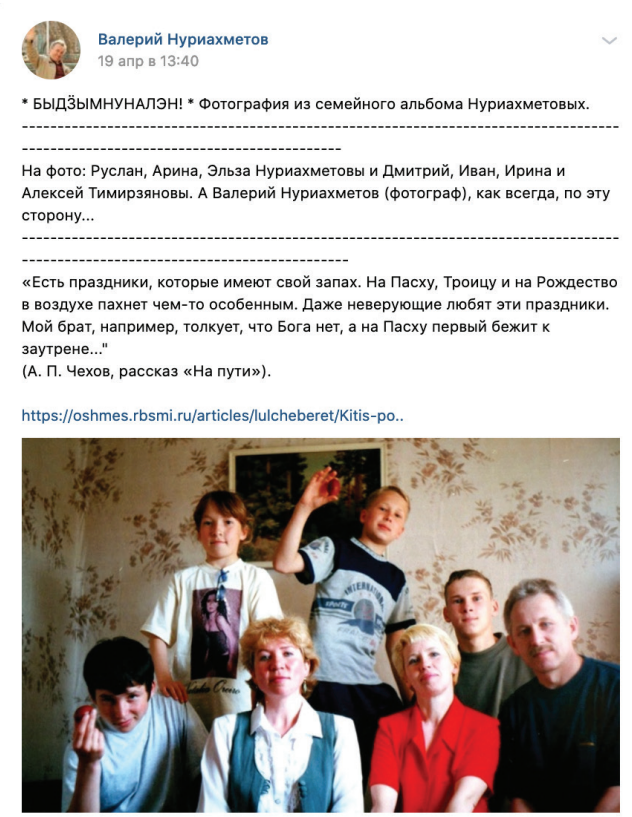
On his Vkontakte wall, the Udmurt priest Anatoly Galikhanov even published prayers. One prayer is for the kin, to which a photograph of a summer ceremony in the sacred grove is attached. The other is in honor of *Bydzh'ynnal* festival to which a photograph of *taban'*[11] (as an important ritual dish) is attached, and an audio recording of a prayer by the sacrificial priest Islam Armanshin, preserved since 1973:

> *ШУДО БУРО МЕД ЛУОЗ БЫДЗЫНАЛМЫ!!! Тани нош улон сюрэслэсьлэсь ог ӟоззэ ортчим. Куриськемъёсмы Инмар Бабыкаймы доры мед вуоз. Куриськеммэс кабыл мед кароз, мед басьтоз. Омин!*
> Happy be our Great Day! Here again, one period of the road of life has passed. May our prayers reach our elder Inmar. Let him hear and accept our prayers. Amen![12]

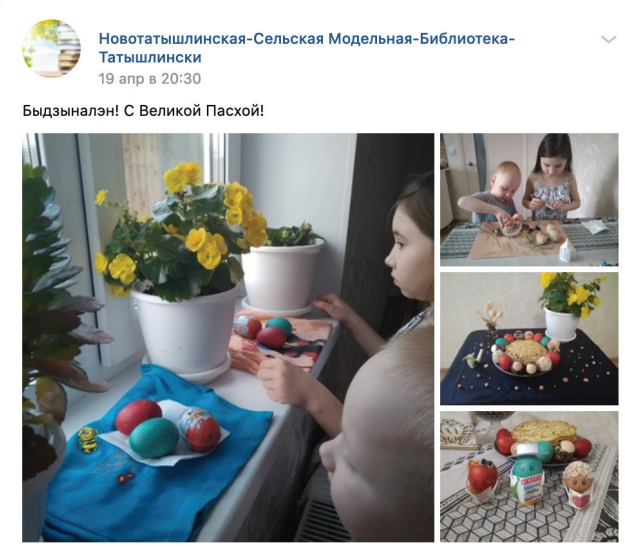
ВЫЖЫ ПОННА КУРИСЬКОН	PRAYER FOR THE KIN
Югыт но мусо Инмаре-Кылчинэ,	My bright and sweet Creator Inmar,
Азьпалан улонын милемлы Тон юртты!	In the future, you will help us!
Выжымес шудбурен, зечлыкен юнматы.	Strengthen our kin with happiness and kindness.
Кутскем ужъёсмес пумозяз вуттыны	To complete the work started
Кужымдэ но визьдэ сёты Тон, Инмаре!	Give us strength and intelligence, you, my Inmar!
Янгыш сюреслэсь утьы Тон выжымес,	From a wrong path save you our kin,
Азвесь кенерен котырты дышмонлэсь.	With a silver fence surround from the enemy.
Через", кыльдэез" тузонэн Тон пазьгы,	The disease, infection you turn to dust,
Андан-азвесен тазалык Тон сёты,	give you [like] steel-silver health,
Мамык киыныд вешалля ныпимес,	Smooth our children with a gentle hand,
Югыт Шундыен шунты та улонмес!	Warm our life with the bright Sun!
Ванен но бурен, тыр шудэн но ӟечен,	Prosperity, full of happiness and good,
Гид тырос пудоен, бакча емышен,	Full of cattle and vegetables,
Нянен но вӧен, мушен-чечыен,	Bread and butter, honeybees,
Ныльн но пиен, семьяен, туганэн,	To daughters and sons, family, relatives,
Калыкен огкылысь улондэ сёты Тон, Инмаре!	In harmony with the people give you life, my Inmar!
Кабыл но басьты куреммес милесьтым,	Accept our prayers,
Югыт но мусо, Инмаре-Кылчинэ!	Bright and sweet, my Inmar-Kylchin[14]!
Омин! Омин! Омин![13]	Amen! Amen! Amen!

On his Vkontakte wall, Valery Nuriakhmetov posted with greetings a photograph from the family archive, where his children show painted chicken eggs (Example 17). This example shows how people turn towards the family album as the guardian of family history, and reveals the virtual call upon the family, as well as publicizes the importance of the emotional unity of relatives during festivals, which they were deprived of due to self-isolation.

Public organizations and public figures post their greetings and focus on the need to stay in self-isolation and follow precautionary measures. Special importance in such posts is given to illustrations and photographs that highlight a festive table, decorations, and ritual dishes, various attributes that symbolize the festival (e.g., the willow, candles, flowers, or new clothes for children of the Eastern Udmurts (Example 18)).



Example 17. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall135609259_99037, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*



Example 18. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall262345748_1048, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Explanatory notes

During this period, it was also possible to notice posts in social networks explaining, for instance, what to do during this or that holiday, what actions to perform or, on the contrary, what is prohibited, or what dishes to cook. For example, the Udmurt sacrificial priest Anatoly Galikhanov in his Vkontakte post described the traditional celebration of *Bydzh'ynnal*. He wrote that during this holiday at first the guests were invited by the relatives living in the part of the village located at the lower reaches of the river;[15] during *Bydzh'ynnal kel'yan* ('taking leave of the Great Day') they were already visiting relatives whose house was located at the upper reaches of the river; the indispensable dish of these rites was porridge with goose meat. It is also noted that during the commemoration, relatives whose house was on the upper reaches of the river were invited to come over and eat soup, and then the houses of others on the lower reaches of the river were visited. On the Vkontakte social network, the district newspaper of the Kukmor District of Tatarstan *Vamysh* ('Step') posted a photograph of colored eggs with a short message about the actions that are performed during the *Bydzh'ymnal* and *Akashka* festivals. Liliya Garaeva, a connoisseur of Udmurt traditions and the wife of the sacrificial priest of Aribashevo village in the Tatyshly District of Bashkortostan, published an article under the heading "*Vös' ortch'yton esep"yos*" ('Rules of prayer') in the public-political, social, cultural, and educational newspaper of the Bashkortostan Udmurts *Oshmes*

('Source'), in which she wrote about the prohibition against the participation of a large number of people in the traditional summer prayers of the Eastern Udmurts, and appealed to the readers, explaining the importance of following the rules of behavior at the ceremony and the "dress code" during the ritual (Garaeva 2020: 2).

Example 19. *Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall82757120_1445, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

Example 20 (below). *Source: https://vk.com/vamysh_kukmor?w=wall-108797331_3361, last accessed on 1 December 2020.*

COVID-19 AND THE TRADITIONAL SUMMER PRAYERS OF THE EASTERN UDMURTS

The Eastern Udmurts are a special ethnographic group of peripheral Udmurts, who avoided Christianization and have practiced their religion to this day. This year, the traditional summer prayers of the Eastern Udmurts were held in special conditions. For instance, in the Tatyshly District of Bashkortostan, during the quarantine period, the population discussed the possibility of broadcasting ceremonies online via the Internet, as was organized for the services in Orthodox churches or, for example, for the traditional ceremonies of the Mari (Agavairem-online 2020). However, broadcasts of Udmurt ceremonies did not take place. In the same district, in the ritual group of Novye Tatyshly (Udm. Vil'gurt)[16], the council of sacrificial priests and elders preliminarily discussed the conditions for holding ceremonies with the head of the Novye Tatyshly Village Council. The head gave instructions to the participants of the ceremony to wear protective masks and take precautionary measures. The organizers of the ceremony were informed that during the ceremony there may be an inspection. It was planned that only priests and a few helpers would participate in the ritual event, *Gurt/-en vös'* ('village ceremony') would be held, but there would not be a collective ceremony with the participation of several district villages – *Mör vös'* ('district ceremony') (Baidullina 2020). Further, based on the data from the Internet and online interviews, we will briefly consider the characteristics of the ceremonies of the Eastern Udmurts in COVID-19 conditions.

In Urazgil'dy village of the Tatyshly District of Bashkortostan, *Gurt/-en vös'* (village ceremony) was held on Thursday, June 4, although ceremonies are traditionally performed on Fridays. The informants felt that the ceremony should be held before the full moon, that is, on Thursday, because the full moon coincided with Friday. Two days before the prayer, specially appointed people (nine women) collected money for the ceremony *vös' dun* and grain for porridge from the villagers, but with the mandatory "dress code" of protective masks and gloves (Fig. 1). The day before the ceremony, the holy place was cleaned and prepared for the upcoming ritual. The ritual itself began on Thursday, at 8 am. This year, the prayer was attended by a sacrificial priest *kuris'kis'*, male helpers, and some female helpers who had the task of cleaning the entrails of the sacrificial animal. The overseer of the holy place *vös' kuz'o* distributed protective masks for the ceremony participants. In their prayers, both the priest and the ceremony participants also asked for protection from the dangerous disease that had taken over the world. After the end of the prayer, several participants were treated to *kumyshka* (moonshine) behind the fence of the holy place. Other villagers were forbidden to participate in the ceremony at the

sacred place. They received their portion of consecrated porridge only in the evening after the ceremony, after 4 pm. On the evening of the same day, each family gathered at the same table and tasted the consecrated porridge with a prayer addressed to the gods (oral message, anonymous, 2020).

In Malaya Balzuga village in the Tatyshly District of Bashkortostan, also only a sacrificial priest and a few helpers participated in the *Gurt / -en vös'* prayer. While in the past years the grain for the ceremony was collected by children, this year the grain and money *vös' dun* for the ceremony were collected by seven adult helpers. The ceremony itself was held on Friday. Unlike the previous example, the local priest listened to the advice of Liliya Garayeva from Aribashevo, a connoisseur of Udmurt traditions, who referred to the fact that the full moon began only on Friday evening and lasted until Saturday. The same example was followed by the priests of Novye Tatyshly, who held a ceremony on Friday. Afterwards, the consecrated porridge was brought to the village, and seven helpers distributed it to the villagers. In previous years, people received the ritual dish directly at the sacred place (oral message, anonymous, 2020).

In Asavka village in the neighboring Baltachevo District of Bashkiria, almost all the traditional summer ceremonies – *Gurt / -en vös'* and *Mör vös'* – were held.

Figure 1. *Collecting grain and money* vös' dun *for the ceremony. Urazgil'dy, Tatyshly District, Bashkiria. Photograph by Anna Baidullina, June 2, 2020.*

Figure 2. *Prayer address by priest Ralif Garayev. Urazgil'dy village, Tatyshly District, Bashkiria. Photograph by Anna Baidullina, June 4, 2020.*

Figure 3 (below). *Participants of the Gurt/-en vös' ceremony. Urazgil'dy, Tatyshly District, Bashkiria. Photograph by Anna Baidullina, June 4, 2020.*

Figure 4. *Participants in the prayer in Asavka village, Baltachevo District, Bashkiria. Photograph by Victoria Kiryanova 2020.*

According to the sacrificial priest, this year they could not hold a ceremony in honor of *Mukylchin*, the deity of the land, because the village did not have a suitable sacrifice – a black ram/sheep. According to the village priest, before the ceremonies he called the priests of the Tatyshly District and consulted with them on how they had planned to hold the ceremonies in the current conditions. In the end, he decided to hold all the ceremonies, but with the use of personal protective equipment and disinfection (masks, gloves, alcohol solution). The ritual was attended only by those villagers who expressed their desire, mostly elderly people. It is curious that the Tatars living in this village supported the ceremonies of the Udmurt by donating money. This year, several Tatar families donated money in denominations of fifty and one hundred rubles. In his prayer, in addition to obligatory requests, the priest asked for assistance in protection against diseases, referring to this year's pandemic. Together with two elders, he prayed on his knees and consecrated the porridge, which was then distributed to all present. The priest noted that upon the declaration of

quarantine on the streets of the village, a local police officer drove around in a car and announced to the local residents through a loudspeaker that it was forbidden for elderly people to walk on the street. After the *Gurt / -en vös'*, a small informational article was published in the Udmurt-language newspaper of the Bashkortostan Udmurt, *Oshmes* ('Source'), with the title "*Vös'as'kemzy kabyl med luoz*" ('Let their prayers be heard/accepted [by God]') (Kiryanova 2020). The article describes the specifics of the ceremony, emphasizes the small number of participants, and expresses the hope that, despite the current situation, *Inmar-Kylchin* will hear/accept the prayers of the villagers (ibid.).

***Figure 5**. Cooking the ritual porridge. Asavka village, Baltachevo District, Bashkiria. Photograph by Victoria Kiryanova 2020.*

SONGS AND CHASTUSHKAS ABOUT THE CORONAVIRUS AND SELF-ISOLATION

During this period, a curious phenomenon appeared in Udmurt culture. People began to compose songs and chastushkas dedicated to the theme of coronavirus and self-isolation. It is known that in the folklore of any people humorous songs and chastushkas (ditties) belong to the lyrical kind of poetry, so their main purpose is not to describe events, but express and transmit feelings, thoughts, and moods. As a rule, the messages reveal that the lyrics of songs come from the performer, and music can be both a folk tune or the performer's. It should be noted that writing musical texts on this topic has gained a wide scale (see, e.g., Chastushkas from Kuzmich 2020; Chastushkas about coronavirus 2020; Competition 2020; Italian 2020; Music video 2020; Kakha video 2020). Interesting examples were also found in the modern culture of the Udmurts. Here are the lyrics of the songs at our disposal, most of which are based on humor.

Example 1.

Везде кипишь, везде шок,	Everywhere turmoil, everyone in shock,
Киттокын но тоже шок.	And so is China, too, in shock.
Та вирусэз маин виёд,	How to kill this virus,
Рецептсэ кытысь шедьтод?	Where to find the scheme?
Та вирусэз маин виёд,	How to kill this virus,
Рецептсэ кытысь шедьтод?	Where to find the scheme?
Ураме потса учки вал,	I went outside to look,
Огкин но ӧвӧл, паймод!	There is no one, what a surprise!
Доре прыса киме миськи,	I got home, washed my hands,
Курыт вуэн чушиськи.	And wiped myself with alcohol.
Доре прыса киме миськи,	I got home, washed my hands,
Курыт вуэн чушиськи.	And wiped myself with alcohol.
Сиса адӟем вал чеснок,	I tried eating garlic,
Зыныз потэ, ой, чоньдод!	The smell is, oh, you'll perish!
Собере нош курыт вуэн	Then again with alcohol I
Чыртыме гылтӥ кык пол.	Gargled twice.
Собере нош курыт вуэн	Then again with alcohol I
Чыртыме гылтӥ кык пол.	Gargled twice.
Кытын чырты, отын гылӧн,	Where's a neck, there's a throat,
Кошкиз, кошкиз гань-гань!	It's going, going smoothly!

Вот табере мон валай,	Now I understand,
Айбат "дару" принимай!	Take good "medicine"!
Вот табере мон валай,	Now I understand,
Айбат "дару" принимай!	Take good "medicine"!

(Performer anonymous, Bashkortostan 2020)

Example 2.

Ужтэмлэсь уж луоз али –	Idling will become working –
Вина пӧзьтыны пуктӥ.	I started to cook kumyshka.
Ужтэмлэсь уж луоз али –	Idling will become working –
Вина пӧзьтыны пуктӥ.	I started to cook kumyshka.
Гажано туган-ешъёсын	With dear relatives and friends
Юны мед гожтоз али.	Let it be fated to celebrate.
Гажано туган-ешъёсын	With dear relatives and friends
Юны мед гожтоз али.	Let it be fated to celebrate.
Ай, три-дари та-там,	Ay, tri-dari ta-tam,
Вай, три-дари та-там.	Wai, tri-dari ta-tam.
Ай, три-дари та-там,	Ay, tri-dari ta-tam,
Вай, три-дари та-там.	Wai, tri-dari ta-tam.
"Короновирус" шуыса	Saying "Coronavirus"
Доръёсамы пукиськом.	We are sitting in our homes.
"Короновирус" шуыса	Saying "Coronavirus"
Доръёсамы пукиськом.	We are sitting in our homes.
Оскисько черъёс ортчыса,	I believe when the disease passes
Жоген чошен пумиськом.	We'll meet again soon.
Оскисько черъёс ортчыса,	I believe when the disease passes
Жоген чошен пумиськом.	We'll meet again soon.
Ай, три-дари та-там,	Ay, tri-dari ta-tam,
Вай, три-дари та-там.	Wai, tri-dari ta-tam.
Ай, три-дари та-там,	Ay, tri-dari ta-tam,
Вай, три-дари та-там.	Wai, tri-dari ta-tam.
Тазалык, шудбур сӥзьыса,	Wishing health and happiness
Чаркамес шукком али.	Let's clink our cups.
Тазалык, шудбур сӥзьыса,	Wishing health and happiness
Чаркамес шукком али.	Let's clink our cups.
Пуком удмурт гур кисьтыса,	Udmurt melody performing, we'll sit,

Эктыса но шудыса.	Dancing and playing.
Пуком удмурт гур кисьтыса,	Udmurt melody performing, we'll sit
Эктыса но шудыса.	Dancing and playing.
Ай, три-дари та-там,	Ay, tri-dari ta-tam,
Вай, три-дари та-там.	Wai, tri-dari ta-tam.
Ай, три-дари та-там,	Ay, tri-dari ta-tam,
Вай, три-дари та-там.	Wai, tri-dari ta-tam.
Ой, эсьмаса, эсьмаса,	Oh, so yes, at least
Сӥзьыл палэзь кисьмаса.	With ripening rowanberries in the fall it would be.
Ой, эсьмаса, эсьмаса,	Oh, so yes, at least
Сӥзьыл палэзь кисьмаса.	With ripening rowanberries in the fall it would be.
Лыктэлэ вал тӥ, ешъёсы,	Would you come, friends,
Чошен юом эсьмаса.	We'd celebrate together.
Лыктэлэ вал тӥ, ешъёсы,	Would you come, friends,
Чошен юом эсьмаса.	We'd celebrate together.
Ай, три-дари та-там,	Ay, tri-dari ta-tam,
Вай, три-дари та-там.	Wai, tri-dari ta-tam.
Ай, три-дари та-там,	Ay, tri-dari ta-tam,
Вай, три-дари та-там.	Wai, tri-dari ta-tam.
Лыктэлэ вал тӥ, ешъёсы,	Would you come, friends,
Чошен юом эсьмаса.	We'd celebrate together.
Лыктэлэ вал тӥ, ешъёсы,	Would you come, friends,
Чошен юом эсьмаса.	We'd celebrate together.
Короновирусэз вормыса!	Defeating the coronavirus!

(Performer Minliaskarova Irina, born in 1959. Starokalmiyarovo village, Tatyshly District, Bashkortostan, 2020)

Example 3.

Мар пукиськод али дорад?	Why are you staying at home?
Мар карыса кыллиськод?	What are you doing?
"Коронавирус" шуыса,	Saying "Coronavirus"
"Коронавирус" шуыса,	Saying "Coronavirus"
Пумиськытэк кыллиськом.	We live without meeting.

Мон азбаре потай али,	Well, I went out into the yard,
Юрт котырез тазартыны.	To clean around the house.
Мон азбаре потай али,	Well, I went out into the yard,
Юрт котырез тазартыны.	To clean around the house.
Курег басьтыса шашлык лэсьтӥ,	I bought chicken, soaked shashlik,
Настроениез жутыны.	[To] cheer up.
Курег басьтыса шашлык лэсьтӥ,	I bought chicken, soaked shashlik,
Настроениез жутыны.	[To] cheer up.

(Anonymous, town of Chernushka, Perm region, 2020)

Example 4.

Вирус вуэм Алнаше!	The virus has reached Alnashi!
Вирус вуэм Алнаше,	The virus has reached Alnashi,
Калык урамысь ыше.	There were no more people on the streets.
Ветло ураммӥ “эшъёс”,	“Friends” are walking down the street,
Ваньзэс улляло соос.	and making everyone turn away.
Вася бертыны потэм,	Vasya left for home,
Алнаш пала ни вуэм,	and has already arrived at Alnashi,
Дугдытэм сое патруль,	A patrol stopped him,
Поворачивай, пе, руль.	Said to turn the steering wheel.
“Едь туда, откуда сам”,	“Go where you came from,”
Но пырон сюрес ворсам.	And blocked the road.
“Как же так?” – шуэ Васи,	“How so?” – says Vasya,
“Я же местный Ӟатча пи”.	“I’m a local guy from Varzi-Yatchi.”
“Как же так?” – шуэ Васи,	“How so?” – says Vasya,
“Я же местный Ӟатча пи.	“I’m a local guy from Varzi-Yatchi.
Лэзе тӥ монэ гуртам,	Let me go home,
Сю манет за это дам”.	I’ll give you a hundred rubles for this.”
“Уксёдэ тон ват бордад,	“Keep your money,
Со уксен ветлы в продмаг,	With this money go to the grocery store,
Ну, а маска ке кузьмад,	Well, if you give us a mask,
Может, ми лэзём гуртад”.	Maybe we’ll let [you] go home.”
Василэн синмыз долказ,	Vasya stares surprised,
Дас маска бардачоказ,	There are ten masks in his glovebox,
“Мелэ, ваньзэ сётӥсько,	“Take it, I’ll give you everything,
Тӥледлы мон оскисько”.	I trust you.”

Баш на баш ужа Алнаш,	Alnashi works tit for tat,
Васи тот ещё торгаш,	Vasya is such a tradesman,
Со тодэ таре секрет,	Now he knows the secret,
Кыӵе ценится манет.	How the ruble is valued.
Со тодэ таре секрет,	Now he knows the secret,
Кыӵе ценится манет.	How the ruble is valued.
Кызьы можно бертыны,	How he can go home,
Алнаше но пырыны.	And stop by Alnashi.
Алнаше но пырыны.	And stop by Alnashi.

(Once again 2020)

The following example is related to the *Ektonika* (from the noun *ekton* 'a dance, hopping') project initiative as presented by Vladislav Gorzhak. One of the project's participants, a young poet Bogdan Anfinogenov, wrote the Udmurt-Russian text, and Vladislav Gorzhak composed an arrangement based on a wedding melody of the Western (Trans-Vyatka) Udmurts. The result was the recording of a song and shooting of a video for the song "*Kosh tatys', koronavirus*" ('Get out of here, coronavirus') with the participation of people famous in Udmurtia and all those wishing to take part in the action (Ektonika 2020). The video was marked with the hashtags #*ЛучшеДома,* #*ДорынУмойгес* (better at home), #*ОставайтесьДома* (stay at home), #*КоронаВирус* (Coronavirus), #*МояУдмуртия* (My Udmurtia[17]), #*КылзэДорын* (listen at home), #*StayatHome,* #*Удмурты* (Udmurts), #*Удмуртия* (Udmurtia).

Example 5.

Я сижу на карантине,	I'm in quarantine,
Я сижу на карантине,	I'm in quarantine,
Убираться нет уж силы,	I'm exhausted from tidying up,
Нет уж силы!	I'm exhausted!
Укно миськи, выж но миськи,	I washed the window and the floors,
Оти миськи, тати миськи,	I washed it there, I washed it here,
Нош ик куать час бере сиськи,	I ate again after six o'clock,
Куать час бере!	After six o'clock!
Астэ ачид нимаз висъян,	Self-isolation,
Астэ ачид нимаз висъян,	Self-isolation,
Карантин та акыльтӥз ни,	I'm tired of this quarantine,
Карантин та!	This quarantine!
Кош татысь, коронавирус,	Get out of here, coronavirus,

Кош татысь, коронавирус,	Get out of here, coronavirus,
Эн ветлы татӥ тон, изьвер!	Don't walk here, you wild beast!
Эн, эн ветлы!	No, don't go!
Ой, ты, порушка-пораня,	Oh, you, porushka-poranya,
Ой, ты, эктоника родная,	Oh, you, darling Ektonika,
Зачем я опять встал рано,	Why did I get up early again,
Очень рано!	Very early!
Я за то люблю диваны,	I love sofas for that,
Ой, я за то люблю диваны,	Oh, I love sofas for that,
Поваляться с книжкой славно,	It's nice to lie around with a book,
Можно славно!	It's nice!
Астэ ачид нимаз висъян,	Self-isolation,
Астэ ачид нимаз висъян,	Self-isolation,
Карантин та акыльтӥз ни,	I'm tired of this quarantine,
Карантин та!	This quarantine!
Кош татысь, коронавирус,	Get out of here, coronavirus,
Кош татысь, коронавирус,	Get out of here, coronavirus,
Эн ветлы татӥ тон, изьвер!	Don't walk here, you wild beast!
Эн, эн ветлы!	No, don't go!
За продуктами я вышел,	I went out to get food,
Мусор выкинул не слышно,	I threw out the garbage quietly,
А погодка прям по кайфу,	And the weather is so-so nice,
Прям по кайфу!	So-so nice!
Ку ини чорыгало мон,	When will I go fishing
Сцена вылын кырзало но,	And sing on stage again?
Одно ик вормом эшъёс ми,	We will definitely win, friends,
Одно вормом!	Win!
Астэ ачид нимаз висъян,	Self-isolation,
Астэ ачид нимаз висъян,	Self-isolation,
Карантин та акыльтӥз ни,	I'm tired of this quarantine,
Карантин та!	This quarantine!
Кош татысь, коронавирус,	Get out of here, coronavirus,
Кош татысь, коронавирус,	Get out of here, coronavirus,
Эн ветлы татӥ тон, изьвер!	Don't walk here, you beast!
Эн, эн ветлы!	No, don't go!

Массовый движ избегаю,	I avoid mass events,
Массовый движ избегаю,	I avoid mass events,
На балконе занимаюсь,	On the balcony I take exercise,
Я качаюсь!	I pump iron!
На гармошке разминаюсь,	I warm up on the harmonica,
На гитаре я лабаю,	I play the guitar,
И чтобы не заразиться	And in order not to get infected,
Распеваюсь!	I sing!
Астэ ачид нимаз висъян,	Self-isolation,
Астэ ачид нимаз висъян,	Self-isolation,
Карантин та акыльтӥз ни,	I'm tired of this quarantine,
Карантин та!	This quarantine!
Кош татысь, коронавирус,	Get out of here, coronavirus,
Кош татысь, коронавирус,	Get out of here, coronavirus,
Эн ветлы татӥ тон, изьвер!	Don't walk here, you wild beast!
Эн, эн ветлы![18]	No, don't go!

The difference of this example from the previous ones is that this song has a didactic function, was widely promoted in the Internet space and is a pre-planned action. In the first four cases, the initiative was spontaneous and was not aimed at a widespread distribution but was rather a creative expression of a person's will. Recordings of these songs "from the people" are not always available in the public domain and are mainly sent only to one's friends and acquaintances via social networks or messengers. These recordings are later distributed through these friends further to others. The main theme is the fight against the virus and the description of life in self-isolation. These examples are a kind of reaction of society / creative individuals to extraordinary events taking place in the country and around the world. In this respect, musical language is a good way for people to express themselves and to relieve psychological tension. Because such songs contain plenty of humor, they evoke a smile or even laughter from the listener, which most likely also helps to relieve anxiety in the face of the pandemic. The same can be seen in various comments and a positive feedback from listeners, although there are those who disagree, saying: *"Chto za shuzi kyrzan"* ('What a stupid song') (Ektonika 2020).

CONCLUSIONS

This study allowed us to briefly highlight the most striking aspects of the existence of traditional culture of the Udmurts under the quarantine and self-isolation declared in Russia in connection with COVID-19. These examples show various effects of COVID-19 on the traditional ritual culture of the Udmurt people. There are several factors that characterize the behavior of people in this situation: 1) following quarantine and performing rituals in the family circle or by a limited number of people; 2) activity on social networks through posts and discussion of photographs and videos showing the preparation for and the performance of rituals; 3) performing traditional rituals as usual in some rural areas. Apparently, it is not appropriate to talk about the villagers' disregard of the state decree. The action of local authorities played an important role: measures were taken in a timely manner to quarantine villages and cities in Udmurtia and nearby regions, so during the pandemic the coronavirus had little opportunity to spread in the villages. In this regard, the situation with COVID-19 likely did not cause much panic among the villagers. On the contrary, they performed their rites in a calm atmosphere.

Of special interest were chastushkas and songs that were composed during this period as a kind of creative reaction to the circumstances and as a way to relieve stress.

The prohibition of mass gatherings forced people to look for alternative ways of communication. This was the case with the Internet. In the virtual space, there is an opportunity to share life in the pandemic context with friends, relatives, and the world. It should be noted that the Internet has become a valuable source not only of the behavior and occupations of the population in the conditions of self-isolation, but also of the study of the current state of traditions and their existence in a crisis situation.

In addition, the materials above showed the importance of emotional communication between people and the need for spiritual unity in the moments of celebration of rites and festivals. Despite the various options offered instead of ritual ceremonies, people could not fully feel and receive those feelings, and therefore expressed their frustration and bitterness. At the same time, according to Internet posts, the Udmurts tried to support each other in this difficult life situation. The lyrics of songs are a good example of this.

Today it is difficult to talk about the serious impact of the coronavirus on the traditional culture of the Udmurts. Doing so will take time and require further observation. However, this study is valuable because it has recorded information, facts, and phenomena from this period as well as people's comments on this issue. In the future, such information will allow us to trace the subsequent possible changes caused by COVID-19 in Udmurt culture.

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NOTES

[1] The name of the festival is used in different forms in different regions of Udmurtia.

[2] Currently, these holidays are timed to coincide with Orthodox Easter. Usually, *Akashka* is held on the eve of Easter, and *Bydzh'yn nunal* is seen as Easter, so it is celebrated on Sunday, Easter Day. In 2020, Easter was celebrated on April 19.

[3] The *bölyak* is a smaller kin group consisting of some families in the patrilinear line.

[4] Prayerful address similar to the Russian "Oh, Lord!".

[5] Theonym of the supreme celestial god in the Udmurt pantheon.

[6] See https://vk.com/alnashiclub145006838?w=wall-145006838_2653, last accessed on 1 December 2020.

[7] The agrarian festival of the end of spring field work.

[8] Source: https://instagram.com/ymia_library?igshid=torhnvtvvzlv, no more available.

[9] Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall251706873_893, last accessed on 1 December 2020.

[10] Source: https://vk.com/feed?w=wall10544255_2116, last accessed on 1 December 2020.

[11] A variety of pancakes made of sour yeast dough.

[12] Source: https://vk.com/id82757120?w=wall82757120_1447, last accessed on 1 December 2020.

[13] Source: https://vk.com/id82757120?w=wall82757120_1440, last accessed on 1 December 2020.

[14] Kylchin = 'angel'. An ordinary way to address God.

[15] The fact is that in the Udmurt tradition, it is still strictly observed from which end of the village, from the house of which relative, to start visiting yards. The ritual visits of houses on calendar holidays (*vös'nerge*) began at the head of the river or upstream (*Shur vyllan' vetlyny,* 'to go/walk to the head of the [river] upstream'); the ritual visits of houses during the memorial days (*kis'ton*) began downstream (*Shur ullan' vetlyny,* 'to walk/go to the lower [river] downstream') (Vladykina & Glukhova 2011: 146).

[16] In the Tatyshly District, researchers have identified two ritual groups. Each group has its own traditions and features of holding prayers, but together they form a single, well-functioning system. The Novye Tatyshly (Vil'gurt) group got its name from the ritual center in the village of Novye Tatyshly (for more details see Toulouze & Niglas 2014: 111).

[17] A radio and television channel in the Udmurt language.

[18] The text provided by Vladislav Gorzhak is given with the original punctuation and spelling preserved.

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FAITH IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19: INTEGRATING RELIGION IN THE FIGHT AGAINST COVID-19 IN TANZANIA

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Abstract: When and where a crisis such as a pandemic arises, people turn to religion in pursuit/search of comfort, justifications, and explanations. This article describes the role of religion in Tanzania in the times of COVID-19. The data collected through a questionnaire from 258 participants asserts that COVID-19 increased the intensity level of religiosity in Tanzania. This was seen in peoples' participation in religious activities, i.e., religious gatherings, frequent prayers, and other religious practices. This article has established that the process of de-secularization was strong, and religion became a provider of hope, unity, solace, and socialization. Moreover, COVID-19 has also facilitated the convergence of different religions and thus ecumenism and pluralism of faiths have been strengthened in the country.

Keywords: COVID–19, de-secularization, faith, religious gathering

"Churches are like hospitals for the soul"
Polish Deputy Prime Minister (2020)

INTRODUCTION

In African societies and particularly in Tanzania, religion and religious institutions play a dominant role in the lives of millions (Sundqvist 2017; Ndaluka 2012; Mbiti 1969; Lawi 2015). According to the 2009 survey by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 93% of the Tanzanian population said that religion was very important in their life. This implies that for most Africans, religion and religious beliefs provide the basis for moral values, religious practices and ceremonies. Tanzanians engage in religious practices not only in the case of physical diseases, but also for social, psychological, and interpersonal problems (Lawi 2015). Regular religious participation, write Kowalczyk et al. (2020: 2671), "is connected with better emotional health outcomes".

In Tanzania, since the second half of the twentieth century, modern health interventions have been brought in by missionaries as a way of winning new converts to religion (Ndaluka 2012; Sundqvist 2017). Since then, the role of religion in the provision of health to the Tanzanian population through religious/faith-based organizations has been significant. It is estimated that faith-based organizations provide from 30 to 70% of the health services and interventions in African countries (World Bank 2013).

In his article "In a pandemic are we more religious? Traditional practices of Catholics and the COVID-19 in southwestern Colombia", Diego Meza (2020) writes, pointing to the Colombian context, that diversity caused by adverse and unexpected events increases religiosity. He asserts that there is a correlation between fear and beliefs (ibid.). The emergence of COVID-19 in Tanzania in early 2020 brought many unprecedented apprehensions and consequently both short- and long-term socio-economic implications arose in the community. A similar observation was reported by Kowalczyk et al. (2020: 2675) and DeFranza et al. (2020), whereby the former added that "religious beliefs and practices are associated with various health aspects, such as ability to cope with a disease, recovery after hospitalization and positive attitude in a difficult situation, including health".

Evidence from literature affirms that faith can be used to help communities deal with adverse challenges and fears. In doing so, it reassures permanent security and a state of stability (Meza 2020; Kowalczyk et al. 2020). People turn towards religious beliefs to deal with social, economic, and health ramifi-

cations resulting from calamities and diseases such as COVID-19 (Kowalczyk et al. 2020). Kowalczyk et al. (2020) add that faith or spirituality is a force that helps to overcome mental crises and facilitates adaptation to diseases. They see that COVID-19 has made people more open to their religious beliefs and religious practices (ibid.).

Meza's question is, therefore, relevant in this context. This paper intends to answer a similar question: After the emergence of COVID-19, have Tanzanians become more religious? Perhaps it is also relevant to add more questions to this: Does the emergence of COVID-19 reinstate the power of religion in Tanzania? How have religion and religious practices participated in the creation of new forms of dealing with the pandemic?

COVID-19 IN THE CONTEXT OF TANZANIA

COVID-19 was first reported in Wuhan city in China in December 2019 and rapidly spread throughout many countries in the world, including Tanzania. According to the WHO Coronavirus Dashboard,[1] as of December 7, 2020 (3:47 pm CET), 66,422,058 people were infected with the virus globally, while the death toll was at 1,532,418. The pandemic struck the Americas hard with 28,355,791 confirmed cases, Europe with 20,154,730 cases, South-East Asia with 11,114,545 cases, Eastern Mediterranean countries with 4,319,467 cases, Africa with 1,556,168 cases, and Western Pacific nations with 920,613 confirmed cases (WHO 2020).

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Tanzania was officially confirmed by the Ministry of Health, Community Development, Gender, Elderly and Children (MoHCDGEC) on March 15, 2020. The first case was reported in Arusha region, where a patient who had travelled from Belgium tested positive. As of May 2020, the country had 509 confirmed cases with 12 deaths and 183 recoveries. However, in May 2020 the government of Tanzania stopped reporting publicly the status of COVID-19 cases in the country. Despite that, the government promoted preventive measures as per WHO guidelines, such as closure of schools, social distancing, wearing of masks, hand sanitization, and frequent hand washing. The rate and level of compliance to these measures varied based on collective culture and scarcity of resources. By July 2020, the government of Tanzania had re-opened all schools, encouraging people to live a normal life with less fear of COVID-19. This step was taken by the government after realizing that the restrictions related to the pandemic and COVID-19 infection would have a devastating effect on the health and economy of the population in an unprecedented scope and magnitude, and an ongoing lockdown and closure of borders

enforced by the government would not only paralyze the economy but also exert a severe impact on the welfare and social life of the general population.

The pandemic has raised many concerns, faith being one of the subjects addressed in this paper. COVID-19 is being regarded as the most serious public health calamity of the twenty-first century, and governments and the global community are still struggling to contain its spread. COVID-19 has reminded the society of the role that faith plays in addressing health calamities during difficult times. Although the pandemic imposed strains on faith (some religious leaders closed religious buildings in the Kagera region and Zanzibar, causing mental strains to believers questioning their religious leaders' commitment to their faith), people attempted to make adjustments within their capacities through religious practices (Kowalczyk et al. 2020). Religious doctrines and beliefs provide certain explanations and meaning to the occurrences of events such as COVID-19 (ibid.).

There are only limited studies on the connection between pandemic diseases and faith. However, there is no denial that religion is a potent and pervasive social force. The power religion generates can be an important instrument to spread but also fight pandemic diseases. While religious gatherings are known to be potential sources of virus spread, they are at the same time known to have been used in helpful ways to provide knowledge about pandemics. Often the role of religious actors is to give hope and combat fear with knowledge. Religious leaders are expected to encourage and offer prospects to their followers. They are also assumed to prepare the efforts of many other actors during the fight against epidemics. These leaders are further expected to sustain and ensure continuity of worship in life in the case of disruption and show God's compassion and care of community members. However, unlike other pandemics, COVID-19 and accompanying policies stood against religious gatherings. Thus, COVID-19 tested the faith and particularly the religious leaders who were still supposed to support those in suffering.

Without doubt religion has had an impact on the transmission of COVID-19 in numerous ways. In some cases, it has escalated the spread of the disease through religious gatherings, especially when public health measures have not been observed. At the same time, religion has slowed the spread when it has been used as an instrument to provide credible health information in a theologically trusted manner. This article concentrates on the role and outputs of religion in the time of COVID-19 in Tanzania, based on a particular set of fieldwork material and general observations.

DE-SECULARIZATION VERSUS SECULARIZATION TRENDS

After World War II, classical secularization theorists observed a declining trend of religiosity (Gorski 2003), which was attributed to modernity. The central premise was that, as the world was modernizing, religious beliefs and practices started to be perceived as insignificant (Norris & Inglehart 2004). Friedrich Nietzsche's statement (2020) "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him"[2] became a famous buzzword.

C. Wright Mills (1959: 32–33) writes, in the same vein:

> *Once the world was filled with the sacred – in thought, practice, and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe, and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course the sacred shall disappear altogether except, possibly, in the private realm*.

Mills represents the viewpoint of many classical thinkers of the nineteenth century (Durkheim 1995 [1915]; Marx 1964; Weber 1963) who prophesized the decline of religious beliefs and practices in society due to modernization and technological advancement.

Weber's Protestantism thesis, for instance, declared a change of work attitude and consequently contributed to economic growth and development through the spirit of capitalism (Norris & Inglehart 2004). Weber saw religion not only as a system of ideas, but also as informing actions in the form of rituals and symbolic ceremonies (ibid.). Weber believed that logical explanation grounded in physics, biology, and chemistry drives human reasoning and consequently leads to advancement in technology and innovation in all spheres including medicine, engineering, and manufacturing industries (Norris & Inglehart 2004).

Karl Marx, on the other hand, thought religious beliefs and practices would wither away as the community gains true consciousness. According to Marx, this will be realized after the capitalist system has reached its climax (modernization). Although Emile Durkheim (1995) was, in turn, of the opinion that religion is the cause of social solidarity and cohesion and maintenance of order and stability, he also saw a decline in religion with the emergence of specialization in the industrialized society.

Nevertheless, the ideas of classical secularization theories and thinkers have not materialized as predicted. The claim that modernization, urbanization, rising levels of education and wealth weaken the influence of religion in society has been put to test. This steered quarters like Peter L. Berger to assert that the contemporary world is more religious than it was before modernization. According to Berger, the trend is reversed toward de-secularization because religion

has not disappeared from the world as it was predicted before (Berger 2014). Writing about social cohesion and conflict in Tanzania, Ndaluka (2012, 2015) noted the reemergence of religion as a public domain in Tanzania. Additionally, several researchers have shown that the times of public and personal crises bring along particular modes of religiosity (Ganiel & Winkel & Monnot 2014).

Norris and Inglehart (2004) have suggested a different way of looking at the role of religion in the contemporary society. Their thesis is based on the argument that the development of countries is not universal, so the level of religiosity in a particular society is also different. To them secularization is much apparent in developed countries (with the exception of a few countries such as the USA, Poland, and Ireland). In the countries where the level of economic development is low, religiosity is still strong. Their thesis is: "Human development leads to cultural changes that drastically reduce religiosity and fertility rates" (Norris & Inglehart 2004: 26). Nevertheless, the view that the level of development between countries is different, greatly articulates the determinant level of religiosity and, therefore, suggests that societies' cultures will never converge.

Whereas in the case of COVID-19 in the majority of developed countries a closure of religious institutions was adopted, in some developing countries such as Tanzania religious institutions remained open for believers to practice their faiths. The president of Tanzania was reported in several local and international media outlets as urging people to attend religious buildings, and he was also quoted as saying that COVID-19 is "satanic and therefore cannot thrive in churches" (Kombe in VOA News, March 27, 2020 04:29 pm). It was not only the developing countries that demanded the opening of religious institutions and buildings; in the USA a Florida pastor, Rodney Howard-Browne, refused to close down his church, and President Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil overruled the decision which was made by several state governors and the city mayor, exempting churches from the general closedown.

The emergence of COVID-19 is a perfect phenomenon to look at the role and expressions of religion in the twenty-first century. In his article "Viral visions and dark dreams: Ecological darkness and enmeshment in the time of COVID-19", Gentzke (2021) looks at COVID-19 as a disruption to self and the construction of meaning and values. For Gentzke, the pandemic has demonstrated the limitation of the authoritative discursive reason. The pandemic has also shown that the world is both connected and not converging at the same time, questioning Samuel P. Huntington's thesis about the clash of civilization (Huntington (1996). Huntington's cultural clash perspective was thought to be a major cause of international and domestic conflict (ibid.). This prediction has

never materialized and instead we see an increase in the convergence of cultures, especially during the peak of COVID-19 period. Kearney (2021) asserts that COVID-19 has made things, such as religion and social relations, to be taken for granted, to be more desired and appreciated than before. McGrath (2021) says:

> *In this destitution, this suffering of the absence of God, Christians are never more Christian, never more followers of the Christ who redeemed the world by losing and becoming lost to the Father.* (McGrath 2021:63)

As Norris and Inglehart (2004) noted, health problems are always linked to beliefs and practices, and COVID-19 has reaffirmed the role of religion in society during hard times and showed that, indeed, the role of religion is not passive but can be dominant in the public sphere. Milbank (2021: 78) asserts that "for many people, the pandemic is a warning of our disordered human relationship to life on earth".

The argument this work presents is that the forces of secularization have not managed to remove religion from its position in society at least in the times of major crises. Religion has played a significant role in explaining the mechanisms available against COVID-19, and provided an alternative way of coping and dealing with the pandemic. Findings from the field amplify this argument in a more empirical manner.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employed a quantitative research approach, using the descriptive case study research design. The rationale for using this design and methodology is that the study focused on people and their beliefs, opinions, perceptions, and practices associated with their faith in the times of COVID-19. Therefore, we used a standardized data collection method for current fact-finding purposes. The study was conducted in Dar es Salaam region covering all the five districts: Ubungo, Temeke, Ilala, Kinondoni, and Kigamboni. The selection of the study sites was based on the trend that focused on high-intensity / high-risk areas. At the time of designing this study, the statistics showed that Dar es Salaam was the leading region in identifying victims of COVID-19. Other areas reported to have had documented victims of COVID-19 were Zanzibar, Arusha, Kagera, Tanga, and Mwanza.

The data were collected in June and July 2020, using a survey questionnaire in a sample of 258 respondents in Dar es Salaam region (Creswell 2003; Williams 2007). The survey questionnaires were distributed and filled out through

face-to-face interaction between the researchers and respondents. The questionnaires were translated from English into the Kiswahili language to facilitate answering for the respondents. The data collected was entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 23. The analysis of the data focused on descriptive and inferential statistics, where descriptive data is presented in the form of frequencies and percentages in tables and diagrams, while inferential data is presented in a statistical significance form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-demographic characteristics of respondents

A total of 258 respondents selected from five districts in Dar es Salaam region completed the social survey questionnaire. Demographic variables were recorded along with other factors regarding the populations' faith in terms of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Out of the 258 respondents that participated in the survey, 130 (50.4%) were females and 128 (49.6%) males. In this case, the number of the respondents was not significantly different in terms of gender. Most of the respondents' age ranged from 18 to above 60 years old, out of which 122 (47.5%) were aged between 18 and 30 years old, 82 (31.9%) aged between 31 and 40 years old, 35 (13.6%) aged between 41 and 50 years old, 10 (3.9%) aged between 51 and 60 years old, and 8 (3.1%) aged 61 years old and above. In this study, the sampled youth were half of the population because according to the collective culture, young people are more easily accessible and were expected to be involved in administering preventive measures suggested in the country.

In terms of educational background, most of the respondents – 104 (40.6%) – had completed secondary school level education, 75 (29.3%) had completed tertiary education, 70 (27.4%) had completed primary school level education, and 7 (2.7%) had not completed any level of formal education. This shows that most respondents had received secondary education and were thus expected to be more knowledgeable about the preventive mechanisms and receptive to the government directives. Moreover, having more respondents with secondary education is attributed to the government's effort of offering universal education at primary and secondary levels.

Variable	Ubungo	Temeke	Ilala	Kinondoni	Kigamboni	Total
Frequency						
Sex (n=258)						
Male	28	30	29	21	20	128
Female	28	30	31	29	12	130
Age (Years) (n=257)						
18-30	33	24	24	21	20	122
31-40	14	19	21	21	7	82
41-50	6	12	10	4	3	35
51-60	0	3	2	4	1	10
61+	3	2	3	0	0	9
Education level (n=256)						
None	0	0	1	5	1	7
Primary school	7	23	26	0	5	70
Secondary school	22	28	22	16	16	104
College or higher	27	9	11	19	9	75

Figure 1. *Demographic characteristics of the respondents. Source: social survey June–July 2020. The number of respondents is different as in some cases answers were missing.*

Faith and COVID-19 in Tanzania: From believers' perspectives

Profiling respondents as per religious affiliation

Respondents were asked to state the religious denomination to which they belong. The results indicate that 20% belonged to Christianity, 40% to Islam, while 20% belonged to other religions such as Hinduism, and 20% said that they did not belong to any religion (non-believers). Figure 2 gives a summary of religion distribution.

These results are attributed to the fact that Dar es Salaam is a region dominated by Muslims. The same applies to other coastal regions such as Pwani, Lindi, Mtwara, and Zanzibar. In the recent decades the Tanzanian government has removed religion-related statistics from the national census reports. The last census report conducted is from 1967, and it showed that the religious landscape in Tanzania was generally diverse, with 31% Christians, 29% Muslims, and 36% believers of African religions; 1% were believers of other (mainstream) world religions, and 3% belonged to other religions (Population Census 1967). Nevertheless, the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life published data on religious affiliations in Tanzania in 2009, and the results showed that 60% were Christians, 36% were Muslims, 2% were believers of traditional African

religions, and 1% belonged to other religions. Figure 2 indicates that Muslims were twice as many as Christians in this study because, in the region where data collection was carried out, Muslims dominate other religious organizations. In conclusion, this indicates that Tanzania is a pluralistic country where many religions and believers coexist and practice their faiths.

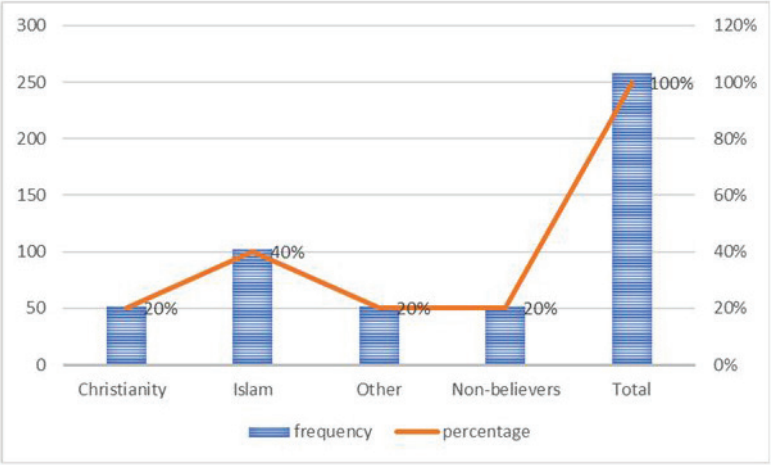

Figure 2. *Respondents' distribution as per religious affiliation. Source: social survey June-July 2020.*

Participation in nationwide prayers against COVID-19 pandemic in Tanzania

The respondents were asked whether or not they participated in the nationwide prayers against the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of them reported about participating in the nationwide prayers as indicated by 84.5% of the responses, while 15.5% did not participate. The possible explanation to this higher participation in national prayers against COVID-19 is the one provided by Kowalzyk et al. (2020), who note that once again religion became a source of solace during desperation, and, as Berger (2014) predicted, it resurfaced and became the dominant discursive resource for people to use. Nevertheless, the participation of Muslims, Christians, and people with other faiths (particularly indigenous non-Christian religions) in the national prayers was not common and can be attributed to the person who called for the countrywide prayer. The prayer was organized by the president of Tanzania and not by a religious leader. The fact

that the call came from a political leader and not a religious leader provided a neutral ground and encouraged believers of different faiths to join in the announced practice. In this manner, such a prayer united all people regardless of their differences in faith. And henceforth, this contributed to eliminations of expressions of negative coping related to religion among people (e.g., accusing other groups which belong to different faiths). Later on, the President of Tanzania, Hon. Dr. John Pombe Magufuli, declared that Tanzania was coronavirus-free, and thanked the citizens for participating in the nationwide prayers. On Sunday, June 8, 2020 in Dodoma he said to the worshippers:

> *I want to thank Tanzanians of all faiths. We have been praying and fasting for God to save us from the pandemic that has afflicted our country and the World… I believe, and I'm certain that many Tanzanians believe, that the corona disease has been eliminated by God.* (BBC News 2020)

Also, on July 20, 2020, President Hon. John Magufuli once again declared Tanzania to be coronavirus-free, and expressed his thanks to prayers by stating: "We decided to pray to God to save us from the Coronavirus (Covid-19). God has answered our prayers" (The Citizen 2020). This suggests that even the top leader of Tanzania was in support of prayers as a key tool to fight against the COVID-19 pandemic; hence it should not be surprising to see an increase in the rate of prayers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Tanzania.

Women's participation in nationwide prayers against COVID-19 was higher (52.8%) than that of men (44.8%). This is not surprising because even an earlier study by Trzebiatowska and Bruce (2013) reported that, despite being excluded from leadership positions in most cultures and religious settings, women tend to be more likely to pray and worship, and to claim that their faith is important to them. Moreover, in some cases women tend to dominate the world of spirituality. Even in normal circumstances, women's attendance in religious gatherings is higher than that of their spouses. Likewise, a study conducted by Zhang (2010) in China revealed that women have higher proportions of religious participation; however, the cognitive benefits of religious participation are stronger in the case of men. Other authors have attributed this fact to the patriarchal system and unequal power, whereby attending religious gathering provided solace to women in the context of powerlessness associated with the patriarchal system. Generally, the findings of our study and other global research suggest that women tend to participate more than men in religious practices, i.e., pray more and/or feel a greater presence of God in their everyday life (Forlenza & Vallada 2018). This may be due to psychosocial differences between men and women, and thus, women's participation in prayers was at least partly a response to their anxiety due to the pandemic (Kowalczyk et al. 2020).

Moreover, the percentage of respondents aged 18–30 years old participating in nationwide prayers was 47.4%, followed by 31–40-year-olds (32.2%), while the ones aged 61+ years old participated the least (2.4%) and the percentage of the rest of the age groups was 18%. This finding may suggest that, in the times of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic, most people become more open to faith and prayers (cf. Kowalczyk et al. 2020). As Kowalczyk et al. (2020) reported, young people may participate more in prayers because of their belief that it will protect them from the coronavirus infection, while engaging in various economic activities such as trade and street vending. Again, provided that young people are less likely than older people to be seriously infected with COVID-19 (WHO 2020), the pandemic is still having a huge impact on the lives of the respondents in this age group, such as losing their loved ones or jobs. Additionally, the high rate of participation among young people in the nationwide prayers is associated with their supposed smaller vulnerability to COVID-19 infections than that of the other age groups such as the elderly, as reported by the WHO (WHO 2020). Therefore, they seemed to worry less about being infected with COVID-19 than other age groups, especially old people.

Initially, the general understanding about COVID-19 was that the pandemic affected a particular group of the population. This study aimed to understand the respondents' knowledge of this issue. The majority of the respondents (62.6%) acknowledged the fact that the elderly are more vulnerable to the pandemic than other segments of the population (37.4%). Figure 3 further illustrates the above argument by disaggregating respondents' knowledge of vulnerability in different age categories: children (4.7%), the youth (2.3%), and all people (29.8%).

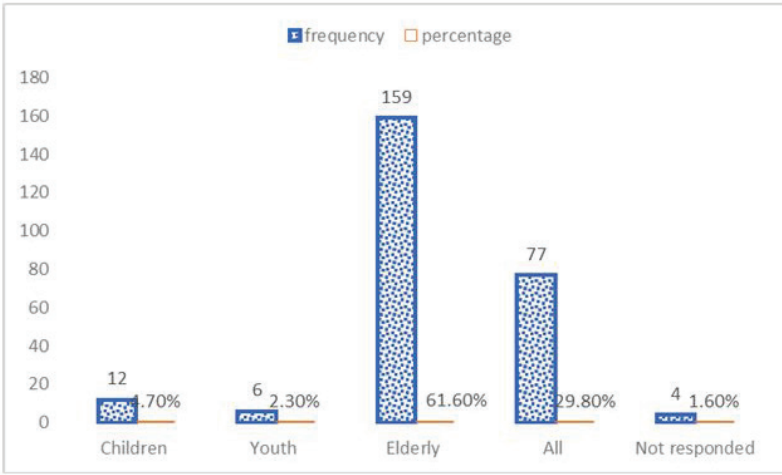

Figure 3. *Knowledge about the age groups vulnerable to COVID-19 infections. Source: social survey June-July 2020.*

This result showed no statistical difference when cross-tabulated with gender, age, marital status, level of education, and residence (P>0.05). This finding from the respondents reproduced a picture that is being shared globally – the elderly are at a higher risk for COVID-19 infection.

Types of religious practices against COVID-19 conducted by the respondents

When asked to mention the type of religious practices they participated in, 40.5% named religious gatherings; 25% fasted; 21.1% were engaged in home-based prayers, while 13.2% uttered daily prayers. Figure 4 summarizes the type of activities against COVID-19, in which the respondents participated.

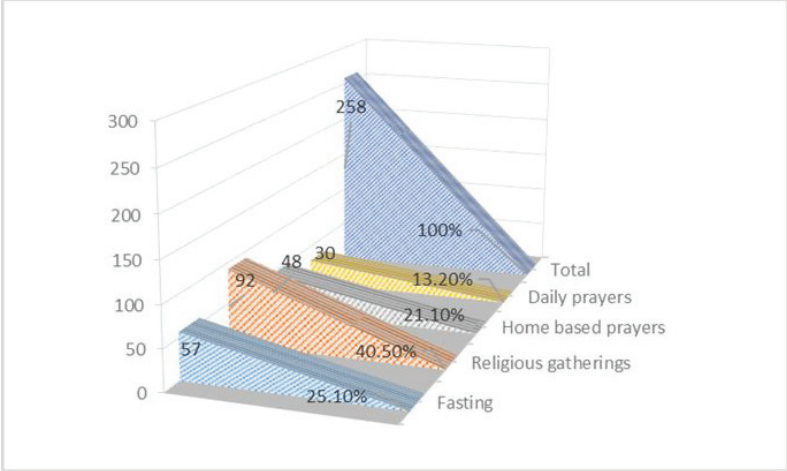

Figure 4. *Types of prayer activities against COVID-19 pandemic. Source: social survey June-July 2020.*

A possible explanation to this greater participation in religious gatherings against COVID-19 was provided by Isiko (2020), who is of the opinion that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought about common and practical needs at both the individual and community levels, which were meant to be met in order to defeat the pandemic.

In general, religious gatherings signified to people companionship, unity, commonness, togetherness, and socialization. These were powerful mechanisms during the period of COVID-19, when most individuals felt at least some degree

of desperation. It implied that, despite the desperation, individuals were not alone and the message "we are in this together" was strongly echoed. In doing so, religion's status quo in the public domain was maintained, and thus principles of secularization did not deter the forces of religion in providing an alternative remedy in the time of pandemic, as summarized in Figure 5.

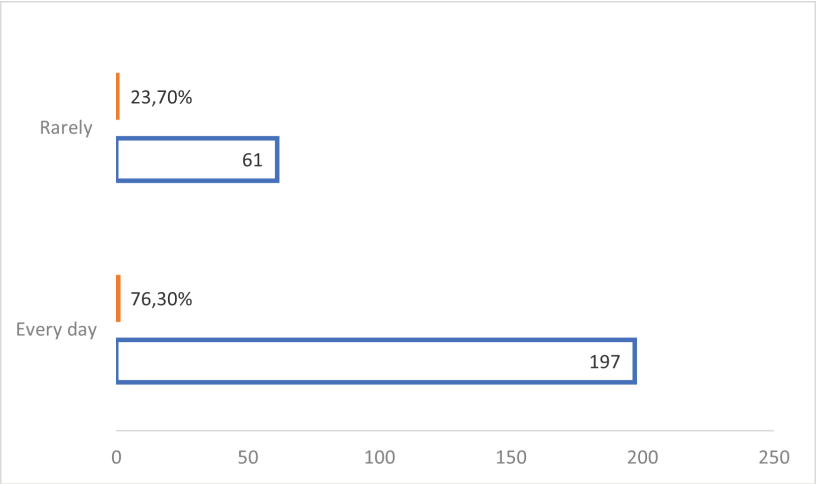

Figure 5. *Frequency of prayer activities against COVID-19. Source: social survey June-July 2020.*

When asked how often participants prayed against COVID-19, 76.3% said they prayed every day, while 23.7% prayed rarely. These data indicated that the level of religiosity in Tanzania increased during the period of COVID-19. This result corroborates with the 2009 Pew Forum Survey on religion and public life, and answers the question asked by Meza (2020) about if in a pandemic people are more religious. This implies that the pandemic caused heavy insecurity and tensions in people and they opted for frequent prayers as a mechanism to reduce their tensions. Indeed, COVID-19 can be said to have increased religiosity in terms of increased frequency of prayers, attending religious gatherings, and participating in fasting.

CONCLUSION

Our observations suggest that in general, Tanzanian population demonstrated intensified but still reasonable religious practices during the pandemic outbreak. The role of religion and God was emphasized in the public rhetoric, but it was a combination of religious and scientific strategies stressing the need for safe, medically grounded behavior (wearing masks, avoiding social contacts [shaking hands], closing of schools and colleges and constant hand washing). In that regard, based on the significance of positive religious practices, religious institutions are encouraged to maintain similar practices in other comparable situations. Correspondingly, there is an implication to the government and policy makers to ensure that these practices are framed and maintained for the benefit of and are in line with the culture and values of the Tanzanian society as well as scientific medical recommendations.

COVID-19 has reminded the researchers and the society alike of the increased role of faith in difficult times and in addressing health calamities. Although the pandemic imposed strains on the faith, people attempted to make adjustments within their capacities through prayers. It should be emphasized here that Tanzanians' engagement in religious practices is not only used for preventing and stopping physical diseases like COVID-19, but also for solving social, psychological, and interpersonal problems. The COVID-19 pandemic gives evidence of this attitude and behavior.

Furthermore, Tanzania's experience has discursively conveyed a picture that reproduced an ecumenic and pluralistic society whereby different religions converged in the fight against one enemy – COVID-19. Ecumenism and pluralism found a spontaneous expression supported by the public utterances of certain key persons (president of Tanzania, religious leaders), and religion was positioned positively as a source of solace, hope, unity, and stability, and thus dominated the public domain. This way religious beliefs contributed to cementing the country into a united nation.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to express our heartfelt appreciation to the University of Dar es Salaam through the Directorate of Research and Knowledge Exchange for sponsoring our study on the preventive measures against COVID-19 in the context of scarcity and collective culture in Tanzania where we extracted the data for this paper.

NOTES

[1] See https://covid19.who.int/table, last accessed on 5 March 2021.

[2] The statement first appeared in Nietzsche's 1882 collection titled "The Gay Science", which also translated as "The Joyful Pursuit of Knowledge and Understanding".

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ONLINE COPING WITH THE FIRST WAVE: COVID HUMOR AND RUMOR ON DUTCH SOCIAL MEDIA (MARCH – JULY 2020)

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Abstract: In the course of March 2020, the Netherlands, Flanders, and a large part of Europe were affected by the first wave of the COVID-19 virus. For four months, the population was in lockdown, and many issues had to be handled online. Social media became important to keep in touch with and to air opinions. Two folktale genres, namely the joke and the modern legend, were used to express frustrations, malicious pleasures, fears, and feelings of distrust. During the first wave, Theo Meder and Mathijs Kroon did some intensive collecting of jokes, memes, fake news, and conspiracy theories. It was expected by folktale researchers like Giselinde Kuipers and Theo Meder that, just like in former crises, jokes would contain plenty of morbid disaster humor, but that did not happen. Contemporary legends, on the other hand, were polarizing and toxic, and mistrust was mainly directed against the elite of politicians, scientists, doctors, and journalists. The corona crisis was seen as some kind of hoax in many ways, while most of the "sheeple" refused to wake up. The analysis of folktales during the pandemic provides an insight into the feelings and emotions in society.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, corona, COVID-19, fake news, first wave, humor, jokes, legends, memes, pandemic, rumor, social media, virus

With the lockdown in mid-March 2020, many people ended up at home and interest in social media increased, both in the passive and active sense. Up to and including July, for the Dutch Folktale Database[1] of the Meertens Institute, Mathijs Kroon and I daily collected modern stories that had something to do with the COVID-19 crisis: mainly memes, fake news, and conspiracy theories that represent the folktale subgenres of the joke and the contemporary legend.

It is certainly not the case that this pandemic is unique in generating jokes, rumors, and conspiracy theories: in the (recent) past, for example, the polio,

AIDS, and SARS viruses also struck worldwide, whereby "members of the public engage[d] in rumors about who has the disease, places and people to avoid, mandatory quarantines, and government health conspiracies" (Goldstein 2004: XIV). It is just that, due to social media, the number of postings has been very large this time.

I mainly collected contributions in the Dutch and Flemish languages, so that it was certain that the message was addressed to a Dutch-speaking community in the Low Countries, although some English, German, and French language variants were sometimes included, because humor and rumors are in general not bound by borders.[2] Most of the material has been collected on Facebook,[3] and to a lesser extent on Twitter, YouTube, and internet forums. More than 770 representative stories and memes have been put together in a digital exhibition.[4] In four months, the entire collection quickly amounted to about 3,000 memes, jokes, and rumors. It is possible that I still missed a few things.

The aim of this article is to exemplify and analyze which emotions and topics are recurrently reflected in the observed material and in what ways various phases of the pandemic and various genres bring in new tonalities.

DISASTER HUMOR AND MINOR SUFFERING

The corona pandemic can rightly be called a worldwide disaster, and one would therefore expect harsh disaster humor within days or weeks. After all, previous disasters produced such jokes after only a few days: the Dutroux pedophilia affair, the attacks of September 11, the tsunami and nuclear disaster in Japan, etc. (Kuipers 2002, 2005). However, during the corona crisis, morbid jokes emerged neither in the Netherlands and Flanders, nor worldwide (Kuipers 2020). Apparently, the threat was now too serious, too personal, and came too close. The theme of illness and death may be fit for dark humor when people far away are concerned, but apparently is a taboo when people themselves, their family and friends can also be victims. So (maybe partly as a distraction) the focus was mainly on less sensitive subjects. A few fairly innocent jokes were found about death, such as how to assemble a coffin yourself with the IKEA Kövid package.

Another joke played around Easter:

> *Special message from Jesus: Given the situation this year, I will not be coming down at Easter. You just come up.*[5]

These were the darkest jokes about illness and death, and these are nothing compared to the usual morbid disaster humor.

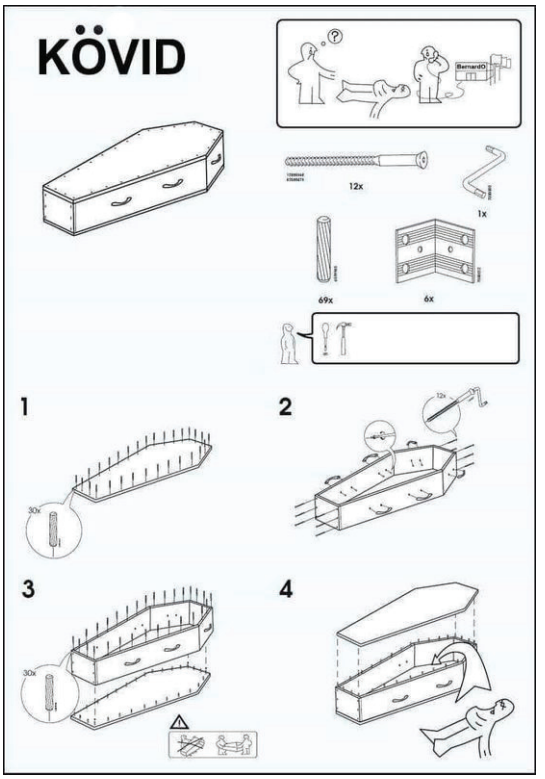

Figure 1. *How to build a coffin with the IKEA Kövid package. Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129105, last accessed on 8 February 2021.*

The vast majority of jokes and memes were about relatively minor suffering: keeping distance, face masks, quarantine, the weather, boredom, working from home, home schooling of children, the bear hunt (people put teddy bears behind the windows for children to spot), relationship problems, alcohol (and closed bars), no hairdresser, no festivals, no sports, and the summer holiday that threatened to be cancelled. Unprecedented creativity was shown in making jokes about these subjects.

For many people with practical professions, who had to be in lockdown but were unable to work from home, boredom quickly set in.[6] The jokes include a man who has completely disassembled his washing machine,[7] but is still unable to find that missing sock. Another dismantles his car[8] and is satisfied that it consists of 35,067 parts. Someone finally has the time to neatly line up all the chocolate sprinkles on his sandwich.[9] Someone starts counting the rice grains in a kilo pack from two different supermarkets and ends up with an unequal number.[10] A lifeguard has placed his chair in the bathroom and watches over his wife in the bath.[11] A traffic cop flashes traffic offenders on his television,[12] and a fisherman casts his fishing rods into his own aquarium.[13] The theme of boredom also includes jokes about pregnancy and the expected baby boom in the winter.[14]

Figure 2. *Working from home 2.0. Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129028, last accessed on 25 February 2021.*

Figure 3. *When the hairdresser is closed for ten weeks. Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128969, last accessed on 25 February 2021.*

The small inconveniences also include the fact that one cannot go to the hairdresser.[15] Many memes were circulated of overgrown and fierce corona haircuts. People tried to trim their hair a bit at home, but sometimes an ear was lost.[16] And many hairstyles looked awful after a failed haircut.[17] In several memes even prostitutes were visited with the question whether they could also (illegally) give a haircut.[18]

A meme that is depicted in several variations is a photograph of a mum or dad working behind the laptop, while the restless children are gagged on the floor.[19] After all, the parents had to work from home, while the schools were closed. The fact that the parents now had to do homeschooling[20] turned out to be a problem for some. While working from home, according to several memes and jokes, the children could be a distracting nuisance.[21] Photographs of a handwritten paper taped to a door,[22] intended for the children when mum had a meeting via Skype or Zoom, went viral. It concerns a ban on entry, as well as answers to the most frequently asked questions:

Mum is in a meeting!
12:45–15:15
[road sign for no entry]
! Do not come in!
Maybe the answer is here:
Upstairs
In the laundry basket
I don't know yet what we're eating
No!
In your room
I do not know
Eat an apple

Figure 4. *Tied-up children. Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128881, last accessed on 25 February 2021.*

Figure 5. *Me after 10 days in quarantine. Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129336, last accessed on 25 February 2021.*

A strikingly recurring theme is the desire for alcohol and pub visits.[23] While in 2019 people were called losers when sitting on the couch, drinking beer all day, in 2020 such people are heroes[24] saving lives. Jokes are made about the increased alcohol consumption during quarantine through photographs of a house full of empty beer cans,[25] or a full bottle bank[26] with countless empty bottles next to it. It is regularly confirmed that visiting the pub[27] is sorely missed, because of the alcohol, but certainly also because of the fun of companionship. And of course, a number of jokes have been made about Corona beer. One of the first practical jokes was invented at the beginning of March in a Brussels branch of the Delhaize supermarket chain: when purchasing two bottles of Corona, a bottle of Mort Subite (acute death) was added for free.[28] The photograph of the advertising offer went viral in no time but was labeled as tasteless humor by the head office. Although the action was quickly halted, memes with Corona and Mort Subite continued to be repeated. Another meme that was circulated internationally in several variations concerns bottles of Heineken beer wearing face masks, to protect themselves against a bottle of Corona beer.[29]

There was no lack of creativity or sense of humor, but as said: the jokes and memes during the first wave of the corona crisis mainly focused on minor inconveniences.

PHASING: FROM FAR AWAY TO AWFULLY CLOSE

Like the virus, the jokes and memes came in waves. First, racist jokes were mainly made about weird Chinese people who eat strange food, such as bats. An artist called Toon of Rotterdam composed a carnival song, entitled "Beter Voorkomen dan Chinezen", which literally means "Better Prevention than Chinese", a wordplay on the proverb "Prevention is better than cure". Already in early February, this song was reported by the Chinese community as discriminatory and hateful (Chinese gemeenschap 2020). A cartoon from March (Fig. 6) illustrates well how the Chinese were viewed. The caption of the cartoon reads: "Never before collected this much from the Chinese...". The drawing shows how an Asian is removed from a (Dutch) Chinese takeaway by a man in a suit that protects against radioactive radiation and is taken to a van with a sign "Corona prevention" on it. For a long time, the fact that the outbreak took place in Wuhan meant that the Chinese and Asians in general were considered to be the "instigators" of the pandemic. As Kitta (2019: 26) says: "Narratives about disease often function as a simple, shorthand way to stigmatize outsiders. Moreover, linking an outbreak to a foreigner or immigrant can immediately exacerbate their outsider status." Remember, too, that Donald Trump eventually began referring to the corona virus as the "Chinese virus" when he began to lose his grip on the pandemic: it is a strategy to designate "the Other" as a scapegoat (Bodner et al. 2021: 29–35).[30]

Figure 6. *Cartoon: "Never before collected this much from the Chinese..." Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128870, last accessed on 26 February 2021.*

Figure 7. *Hooked up to IV drip with bleach: "I already feel much better". Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129343, last accessed on 26 February 2021.*

In the next stage, the virus comes closer: the mockery focuses on Italy and especially on the first local outbreak in the Dutch province of Brabant; some jokes are made about Brabanders,[31] but the focus quickly shifts again. The hoarding,[32] particularly of toilet paper,[33] becomes prominent in the jokes, followed by the longest wave of quarantine jokes[34] and its many inconveniences, such as lonely birthdays. In the final phase, as the tight lockdown is being slowly relaxed, jokes and memes start to get a bit grimmer and take on a polemic character. In the eyes of people, and especially entrepreneurs and the self-employed, the relaxation of the lockdown measures is not fast enough: home isolation is damaging the economy considerably. The danger of the virus is downplayed, more freedom is demanded, and protest demonstrations take place; one demonstration is allowed despite the fact that social distancing cannot be enforced (Black Lives Matter on Dam Square in Amsterdam)[35] while other demonstrations are prohibited or being dispersed by the police (The Hague, Volk Wordt Wakker and VirusWaanzin movements against the lockdown).

People started grumbling about political arbitrariness and censorship, and sentiments like these can be found in the latest memes. At that time, the one-and-a-half-meter distance measures also started to be involved in the issues that were actually unrelated to virus infections: (protests against) racism and police violence (in the US, but also in the Netherlands). The corona crisis started to shorten the fuses.

The memes usually responded to developments very quickly: Donald Trump had not yet recommended taking disinfectants, yet the first jokes about Dettol

on the rocks[36] had already been made. Several cartoons and memes showed people on an intravenous drip of disinfectant.[37] In the corona era, social media was ideally suited for detecting emotions and discontent, and the multitude of memes and jokes clearly showed what people were really concerned about.

As soon as a serious relaxation of the corona measures was implemented in the Netherlands and Flanders in July, especially with regard to the lockdown, the number of corona-related jokes and memes rapidly declined, and humor largely returned to its normal routine. However, this was not the case with the modern legends, the lifespan of which was prolonged due to actions such as the Virus Madness movement (later renamed Virus Truth) and other protest groups and believers in virus hoaxes and conspiracies.

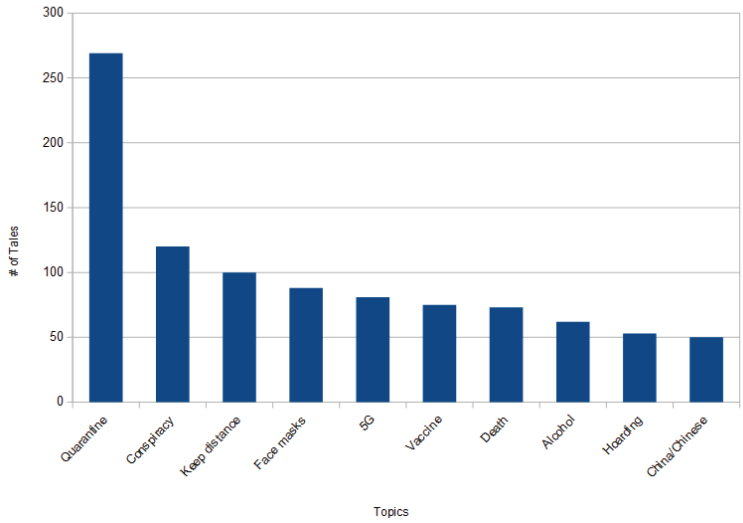

Figure 8. *Top ten topics in corona folktales (jokes and legends) (N=769).*

FAKE NEWS AND CONSPIRACIES

Modern or contemporary legends "provide an index to what intrigues us, concerns us, frightens us, and puzzles us about quotidian reality. They capture our thoughts and understandings of health, illness, risk, life, and death and turn those thoughts outward in ways that are not otherwise easily seen" (Goldstein 2004: XV). Incidentally, we must take into account that some of the fake news and conspiracy theories have been spread by (Russian) trolls, not out of conviction, but purely with the intention of disrupting common sense and stability in society (Assen 2020; Nepnieuws 2020).

These modern legends that circulated on social media during the first wave of the corona crisis, represented in fake news and conspiracy theories,[38] also closely followed all the developments. Plenty of (mis)information spread like an oil slick on the Internet platforms. Initially, official reporting was sparse and ambiguous. Is it going to be a terrible pandemic or is it just an outbreak of flu? People filled the gaps in the news by, for example, coming up with simple home remedies[39] to prevent or cure corona: drink water every 15 minutes, drink warm water, drink salt water, drink water with baking powder, etc. It is said that in India people even started drinking cow urine (Hindoes 2020). Gradually more reliable information started to come from the government, but for many people the line between information and misinformation remained fluid: uncertainty reigned and what seemed misinformation yesterday could be correct the next day and vice versa; for instance: the mechanism of group immunity, the need for face masks, the distinction between aircraft and coach (full of passengers or practically empty), or the risk of contamination by aerosols in confined spaces versus contamination in the open air. Very slowly the realization was growing that the greatest risk of contamination lay in indoor festivities where people sing and shout: carnivals, apres-ski, nightclubs, church services, choir singing. But the conditions in slaughterhouses also appeared to be far from optimal. For experts, the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM), and politicians, this pandemic was also a matter of advancing insights.

Calamities spawn stories (cf. Goldstein 2004: 74). Lack of information, uncertainty about facts, and social unrest in times of crisis constitute a fertile ground for modern legends, with social media as a catalyst (Havermans 2020; Prooijen & Vugt 2018: 784; Prooijen 2018: 23–25). Most conspiracy theories already existed roughly twenty years ago (Meder 2006: 227–240), but today everything gets magnified, and the conspiracy ideas give plenty of food to already present suspicion and frustration (Visser 2020a, 2020b). Conspiracy videos rapidly appearing on YouTube received tens of thousands to millions of likes and subscribers. As it happened with AIDS, it is constantly suspected that the coronavirus was developed by humans in a laboratory and could even be used deliberately as a bioweapon (cf. Goldstein 2004: 52–53, 80, 91–99). Over time, famous and less famous artists, influencers, and pseudo-scientists, such as Gers Pardoel, Robert Jensen, Tom Zwitser, Janet Ossebaard, David Prins, Dienie Wakker, Youri Plate, Doutzen Kroes, Robbert van den Broeke, Micha Kat, Willem Engel, Maurice de Hond and later Famke Louise spread their contemporary legends online, while the rapper Lange Frans scored a hit with his song "Lockdown (Fall Cabal)"[40] with the recurring line "Welcome to this mega-weird festival", in which he professes his belief in a worldwide conspiracy and praises Janet Ossebaard, supporter of QAnon.

People who believe in a secret agenda of the evil rulers (the elite, the cabal, the cartel, the 1 percent, the Deep State, the Bilderberg group, the Illuminati, the Reptilians) are producing memes about the danger of 5G and mandatory vaccinations, about the constitution of a police state and a global fascist dictatorship, about the "sheeple" (sheep / people) who do not want to wake up, and so on. Skeptical people post memes and jokes about the bizarre and impossible conspiracies that the "covidiots" and "tin foil hats" believe in. Once online fake news and conspiracy theories get removed by Facebook and YouTube, conspiracy theorists complain about censorship and in fact feel empowered to believe that the elite is systematically opposing them and trying to silence them. This confirms their convictions even more.

Social psychologists Elliot Aronson and Carol Tavris explain much of such behavior during the pandemic with the concept of *cognitive dissonance*, which is "the motivational mechanism that underlies the reluctance to admit mistakes or accept scientific findings – even when those findings can save our lives. This dynamic is playing out during the pandemic among the many people who refuse to wear masks or practice social distancing. Human beings are deeply unwilling to change their minds. And when the facts clash with their preexisting convictions, some people would sooner jeopardize their health and everyone else's than accept new information or admit to being wrong" (Aronson & Tavris 2020). The brain then constantly searches for patterns and reacts to danger, even when there is none: "people sense danger even when there is no pattern to recognize – and so their brains create their own. This phenomenon, called *illusory pattern perception* ... is what drives people who believe in conspiracy theories, like climate change deniers, 9/11 truthers, and 'Pizzagate' believers" (Sloat 2020; cf. Prooijen 2018: 40).

MISTRUST IN THE ELITE

Initially, the conspiracy ideas still consisted of loose fragments (which sometimes contradicted each other, such as harmless flu versus a bioweapon), but thanks to Janet Ossebaard[41] in particular, a narrative gradually crystallized in the Low Countries: corona is in fact just an ordinary flu and a smoke screen for other developments. The physical complaints that people develop are caused by the radiation from the 5G network, but all the conspiring doctors use COVID-19 as an excuse. People must become frightened of the virus, so that everyone will soon be ready to get vaccinated. This vaccine is being developed by Bill Gates (Fig. 10) (who, by the way, is a strong proponent of reducing the world population), and that vaccine contains nano-chips that get injected into the

bloodstream. These chips are then in contact with the 5G network, so that everyone can be monitored and controlled anytime, anywhere. Opponents of the regime could even be silenced or killed with it.

The measure of social distancing is to make the facial recognition software work better. In this way, politicians, scientists, doctors, and journalists (that is, the MainStream Media, MSM) work together to establish a global New World Order (NWO) soon. Such meta-conspiracy theories are spread worldwide by an internet group called QAnon and many related websites, by British author David Icke and an American radio host and filmmaker Alex Jones, and the Low Countries could not escape their ideological influence either (see Wat is QAnon 2020; Icke 2000; Klomp 2020).

Figure 9. *Burning a 5G transmission tower that causes flu-like symptoms (or even spreads the virus). Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129166, last accessed on 26 February 2021.*

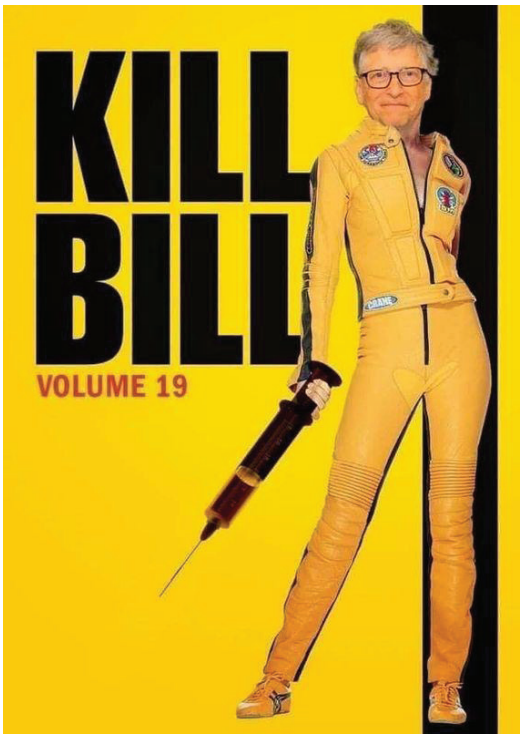

Figure 10. *Bill Gates wants to control and kill people by putting nano chips in his vaccine. Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129181, last accessed on 26 February 2021.*

The conspiracy theories came to the surface in the course of the first wave and gradually became more prevalent. On Nu.nl, one ZussieCoolface testified:

> *Unfortunately, I work with several people who strongly believe in this. And believe me: it is very tiring to deal with. I hold my breath with every news item – what are they going to come up with now? In the beginning I tried to refute their positions with facts and evidence. It is always written off as untrustworthy sources and I am told that I should not believe what the 'normal' media presents to me. The stories I hear are really too crazy for words. From implanted chips to group child rapes by the elite. I am called a sheep of society because I do not go along with their madness. I keep being told that people who don't believe in it are stupid and should 'wake up'.* (response in Wat is QAnon 2020)

The breeding ground for all these conspiracies seems to be deep-seated mistrust. This distrust is in fact an evolutionary ingrained psychological function, a universal survival strategy, designed to protect people from real danger. Your own group or clan can usually be trusted, but others – outsiders, strangers – cannot always be trusted to the same degree. Caution is advised so that in the

case of real malicious conspiracies one can react to danger in time (by fleeing or fighting, for example).

In the past and also in the present, however, this has also led to believing in conspiracies that did not actually exist (cf. Prooijen 2018: 24). In the Middle Ages, a marginal group like the Jews were suspected of poisoning the wells during epidemics. They were also suspected of kidnapping, murdering, and using children in satanic rituals. Other groups that have been distrusted throughout history have been women (witches), the Gypsies (child robbers), and freemasons (Satanists). Thus, the distrusted groups with malicious intentions could as well consist of a marginalized underclass as an elite with a secret, invisible alliance. Sometimes the danger from a strange group can be real, but as soon as people think they recognize hostile signs and threatening patterns that are not there, we speak of conspiracy theories. This form of *illusory pattern perception* can lead to all kinds of hasty conclusions and irrational (religious) beliefs (Prooijen & Vugt 2018; Prooijen 2018: 40–48). This does not mean that we are dealing with pathological behavior: distrust is ingrained in the human species, and many people with fairly absurd suspicions can nevertheless continue to function well in society (Prooijen 2018: 15–17).

During the corona crisis, distrust is pre-eminently aimed at the elite suspected of corruption, misconduct, and a secret political agenda. In the medical field, the government, medical specialists, and the pharmaceutical industry have traditionally been under suspicion – and not always without reason (Goldstein 2004: 52, 99, 166, 171; Prooijen & Vugt 2018: 775).

Even the American Pizzagate affair[42] about powerful, suspect elites, which has been denounced several times by skeptics, reappears during the corona crisis. According to the story, a powerful elite exists, including the Clintons, the Rockefellers, and the Rothschilds, who congregate in a specific pizza restaurant, where in the sex dungeons children (supplied through secret subterranean tunnels) are abused and killed during satanic rituals (sometimes even by shapeshifting reptiles). An armed American once believed this story so much that he started shooting in the restaurant. The restaurant in question did not even have a basement. Still, this elite is held responsible for planting the virus, using 5G, and forcing the scared population to accept vaccines with micro-chips in them – all steps from the Deep State towards a full control and a global New World Order.

During the corona crisis, a British-Dutch team from the C-TRUTH project conducted a survey into media use and belief in fake news and conspiracy theories. The survey included one open question about whether people had heard any modern legends or rumors about the coronavirus. One respondent answered: "The oak processionary caterpillar plays a role in the spread of the

coronavirus (via Facebook)". This story can really only go back to one Internet report, "How the oak processionary caterpillar helps spread 5G" (Hoe de eikenprocessierups 2020). There were already rumors that 5G was the spreader of the coronavirus, but this message is not about that (the respondent remembered that incorrectly). The report states that where 5G cell towers are set on fire, the genetically engineered oak processionary caterpillar takes over the transmission with its antennae-like hairs. However, this post is intended to be satire, but it is written seriously enough to leave the readers in despair. Some of the readers admit that it made them laugh heartily, while others wonder whether this is true. Later, the first part of this message was again posted as a serious news on Twitter and then on the Facebook page of "Complotdenkers Nederland" (Conspiracy Thinkers Netherlands), a satirical page that makes fun of conspiracy theories. So satirical conspiracy news can also be taken seriously by some people. Yet, online communication can be more ambiguous and therefore create more misinterpretation than face-to-face communication.

One detail is true, by the way: due to the many rumors that the radiation from 5G would make people sick, help spread the virus, or could communicate with the nano-chips in the vaccine, nearly thirty cell towers have been set on fire in the Netherlands (and also in the UK; see Waarom worden 2020). Several perpetrators have taken the stories about the harmful 5G network seriously and acted on it. In folktale research, such a phenomenon is called *ostension*: modern legends influence people's behavior and can even encourage them to act in all kinds of ways (Goldstein 2004: 28–30, 120–121; Meder 2006: 241–316; 2014).

In the final phase of the first corona wave, memes and modern legends are often about the desire for freedom, about censorship and repression by the media and the government, and about doubts about the authority of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment (RIVM); groups of people refuse to accept social distancing measures and ignore the command to wear face masks. There is plenty of resentment and anger (Havermans 2020). The "woke" action group Wij zijn het Volk (We are the people) already demonstrated in Eindhoven on May 24; it was a mixed company of yellow vests, supporters of the Nexit (Dutch exit from Europe), anti-vaxxers, and people who distrust the government and the media, who were all against the lockdown and the 1.5-meter distance measures. Some protesters were interviewed by the *Eindhovens Dagblad* (Nolles 2020).

S. S. from Eindhoven believes:

> *Very slowly, the government wants to control us more and more. The media don't want to hear our voice, but we want to speak up. Doctors who are opposed to the lockdown are being removed from YouTube. Based on incorrect information, we have locked up our elderly in nursing homes.*

> *That is not freedom. We think that behind the scenes a shadow government is pulling the strings. They make us so anxious that soon we won't even dare to step outside. That way they will soon be in control.*

M. R. from Eindhoven states:

> *If there is a vaccine soon, I don't want to have it injected. For all other viruses, it takes ten years before there is a vaccine. And with corona it can suddenly be done within a year. I think that vaccine has a chip to keep track on us. They want to see where we are and who we associate with. Moreover, the media distort the facts. Full beaches in the Netherlands? They are images from a year ago. It is all wrong. We are being made afraid. My mother was recently in hospital, the staff was just picking their noses. It has never been busy there.*

The developments described above are unique neither to the Netherlands and Flanders, nor to this pandemic. About the worldwide AIDS epidemic, Goldstein (2004: 8) writes that "rumor and legend revealed a deep-seated sense of concern, fear, distrust, and even resistance … Legends focused on what was still unknown, unproven, unspoken, and most of all, uncomfortable". And she adds: "Because blame is ever present in epidemic and health crisis situations, it is not surprising that conspiracy beliefs arise as a counter-attack from those who feel disempowered in general" (ibid.: 53). This lack of power is an important factor in the corona crisis: the conspiracy believers who act against the elite often experience powerlessness to change what they consider an alarming situation, which in turn manifests itself in anger, protest, and aggression (see also Prooijen & Vugt 2018: 780–781, 784).

Figure 11. *Ironic comment on the hoarding of toilet paper: New folkloristic headgear from the province of Zeeland. Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129136, last accessed on 26 February 2021.*

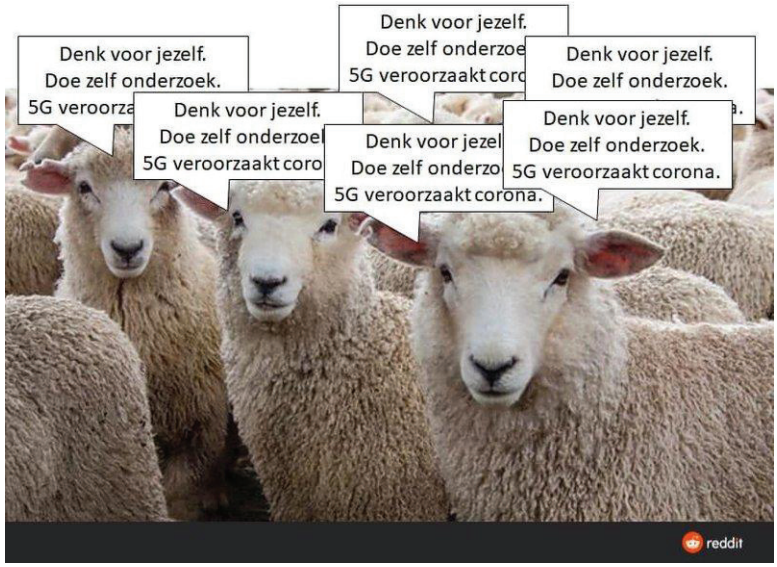

Figure 12. *Conspiracy theorists as the real "sheeple": "Think for yourself. Do your own research. 5G causes corona". Source: http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129451, last accessed on 26 February 2021.*

TEMPERATURE OF MOODS

Folktales can act as thermometers of feelings and emotions; jokes, memes, fake news, and conspiracy theories during the corona pandemic are good examples of this. The jokes remain good-natured for a long time during the pandemic: really painful subjects are avoided, and the harsh morbid humor remains unspoken.[43] As soon as the corona measures are relaxed, the corona humor also decreases rapidly, in contrast to the modern legends that linger on much longer and more aggressively. The fierceness and toxicity are therefore mainly to be found in modern legends.[44] In that respect, the corona crisis even seems to be a booster that is making previously odd and marginal conspiracy theories more and more mainstream, in which mistrust of elitist groups is being fueled: the government, scientists, journalists, etc. Conspiracy theorist and protest leader Willem Engel predicted a bloody revolt against parliamentarians in August (which did not take place, by the way), while rap artist Lange Frans and QAnon supporter Janet Ossebaard wondered on YouTube who should shoot Prime Minister Mark Rutte (Teeffelen 2020; Akkerman 2020). The polarization has taken serious forms in the Netherlands and Flanders, but just as well on a global scale. Facts hardly matter in emotional debates. Those who believe firmly in the conspiracies will

not be easily confused. Or, as Hester Zitvast (2020) puts it: "After countless columns about vaccination, I should have known that having a discussion with people who have taken a turn towards suspicion is completely pointless." At best, facts or the ridicule of anti-legends can change the people in doubt.

Anti-legends initially look the same as legends, but eventually turn everything into absurdity, thus providing a humorous commentary on the legend (Ellis 2004). Doubters can thus see the absurdity of certain views. During the corona crisis, various anti-legends[45] appeared on Dutch and Flemish social media. Several times the following message was distributed in different variations, sometimes with a logo of the Dutch or Flemish government or the RIVM:

> *Important RIVM research*
> *Tomorrow evening between 6:00 PM and 11:00 PM, a satellite with Ultra-Lasers will measure the body temperature of the population to map the current level of infection with Covid-19.*
> *It is very important that you stand naked on the balcony, in the garden or in front of the front door and hold your ID card up in your right hand.*
> *Thank you for your cooperation.*[46]

The communication scoffs at the belief in science-fiction-like technologies with which the government would (can / will) constantly control the entire population. The requirement to stand outside naked turns the message ridiculous.

The lack of harsh jokes and the highly polarizing conspiracy theories are, after all, two sides of the same coin: both phenomena confirm the seriousness of the situation. You do not make harsh jokes about the deadly risks you run yourself, but you may speculate all the more seriously about the possible abuse of power and repression. It is to be hoped that the situation will return to normal as soon as a vaccine has been found, that the ideological polarization will end, and that the Netherlands and the world will not be condemned to a permanent fear of contamination. Unfortunately, by now, large parts of the world have been hit by a second and a third wave of COVID-19 variants, which keep the corona folklore going. A recent curfew in the Netherlands, partly inspired by conspiracy theories about an evil government with a hidden agenda, led to violent protests in several cities.

NOTES

[1] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[2] It is hard to make an accurate estimate, but probably at least half of the memes on Dutch and Flemish social media were in British or American English. Of all the memes in the Dutch language perhaps a third were translated from English into Dutch first.

[3] The author is most active on Facebook, and his co-collector used Facebook Messenger to send in memes. The research could have been focused on Twitter or Reddit just as well, but Facebook alone provided plenty of material (which needed to be entered in the Corona exhibition of the Dutch Folktale Database on a daily basis, including metadata).

[4] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/exhibits/show/corona2020/corona2020, last accessed on 4 March 2021.

[5] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128893, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[6] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+verveling, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[7] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129034, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[8] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129192, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[9] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128889, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[10] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+rijst, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[11] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128991, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[12] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129028, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[13] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128963, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[14] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129521, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[15] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+kapper, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[16] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129290, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[17] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128884, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[18] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129304, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[19] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128881, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[20] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128828, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[21] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129152, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[22] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129139, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[23] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+alcohol, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[24] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128922, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[25] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129616, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[26] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129336, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[27] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+cafe, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[28] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128780, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[29] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129030, last accessed on 25 February 2021.

[30] See also "the Other","stranger danger", and the "obsession with origins" in Goldstein (2004: 45–52, 77–78).

[31] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+brabant+AND+besmettingshaard, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[32] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+hamsteren, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[33] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+%22wc-papier%22, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[34] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+quarantaine, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[35] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129652, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[36] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129328, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[37] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+ontsmettingsmiddel+AND+infuus, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[38] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+complot, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[39] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+wondermiddel, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[40] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/129190, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[41] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+ossebaard, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[42] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=pizzagate, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[43] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona&facet=58_s%3A%22mop%22&free=, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[44] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona&facet=58_s%3A%22broodjeaapverhaal%22&free=, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[45] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/solr-search?q=corona+AND+%22anti-sage%22, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[46] See http://www.verhalenbank.nl/items/show/128983, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

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EARLY DAYS OF THE NOVEL CORONAVIRUS: PUBLIC RESPONSE IN SOCIAL MEDIA DURING THE FIRST MONTH OF THE OUTBREAK

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Abstract: The aim of the article is to give an overview of the first month of the novel coronavirus outbreak and of the public reactions to the news in media comments and social media environments in both local Estonian and global contexts. The pandemic was still ongoing at the time the article was published and, with some modifications and new emphases, vernacular reactions in the media (incl. social media) continued flourishing. During the first month (January 2020), the growing flow of information and rapid escalation of the situation made the topic more noticeable in both the media and social media, and thus provided a fertile basis for jokes and internet memes, legends, fake news, misinformation, conspiracy theories, etc., as was the case with the former bigger epidemics and pandemics. As it has also been observed previously, the consequences of some fake news, misinformation, and conspiracy theories may often be more harmful for society than the disease itself. Several motifs and storylines are universal and surge as similar situations arise both in Estonia and all over the world.

The article also presents a selection of more prominent topics and examples of the outbreak from social media environments during the initial phase of international awareness of the novel coronavirus.

Keywords: conspiracy theories, coronavirus, internet memes, public health, social media

This article is an empirical approach to initial rapid reactions aroused in response to the emergence of an unknown viral outbreak in China, the identification of a novel virus not yet described in humans, and a fast response to constantly changing news in social media. I followed the news published in several international media channels (*BBC News*, *Channel 4 News*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Global News*, *Arirang*, etc.) during the first month of the outbreak (January 2020), but soon the news from China reached also local Estonian media

(e.g., *Postimees*, *Delfi*, *Eesti Ekspress*) and the topic became more visible domestically. To assess more objectively what was happening in the media and social media, I observed disease outbreak news reports and subsequent daily situation reports issued by the World Health Organization, as well as the first information and articles in medical journals *The Lancet* and *JAMA*. To gather the emerging virus-related material for the research archive of the Department of Folkloristics (EFITA) of the Estonian Literary Museum, I also relied on my friends and colleagues who forwarded to me the thematic material they encountered, mostly memes, jokes, and stories. Therefore, the material (consisting of approximately 130 images and 800 text examples) was not collected specifically by keyword search but was a random sample that reflected the general distribution of opinions, reactions, and memes. Already during the first month of the international knowledge of the outbreak, the emergence and, in some cases due to the time-critical nature of the material, also the disappearance of more popular themes can be noticed.

Internet studies, including the study of internet medicine and memes, have been popular in the last decades (e.g., Blank 2009; Goldstein 2004; Shifman 2014; Kõiva 2010, 2014; Voolaid 2014; etc.), yet these have mainly addressed other types of diseases or cases; however, epidemic lore has an important role also in internet folklore (e.g., HIV, SARS and Ebola lore). Having evolved from the first identified cases to a global pandemic in barely a few months, the novel coronavirus outbreak gave an opportunity to observe in real time the emotions and reactions accompanying the first information bits about the new virus and the rapid changes that occurred simultaneously all over the world.

In order to understand the material, it is useful to recall the timeline of the first month of the outbreak. On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) China Country Office was informed of cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. The outbreak was associated with exposures at a seafood market in Wuhan, which was closed down for environmental sanitation and disinfection on 1 January 2020. As of 3 January 2020, a total of 44 patients with pneumonia of unknown etiology were reported to the WHO by the national authorities of China (WHO 2020a). The Chinese medical authorities identified a new type of coronavirus (2019-nCoV, on 11 February 2020, officially named virus SARS-CoV-2, causing disease COVID-19), which was isolated on 7 January 2020. Other respiratory pathogens such as influenza, avian influenza, adenovirus, SARS-CoV, and MERS-CoV were ruled out as the cause (WHO 2020b). Coronaviruses (CoV) are a large family of viruses that cause diseases in mammals and birds; six of them were previously described as affecting humans, causing illnesses ranging from the common cold to more severe diseases such as SARS (outbreak in 2002–2003

resulted in 8,098 cases, including 774 deaths reported in 17 countries) and MERS (first reported in Saudi-Arabia in 2012, with the known case fatality rate of ca 34 percent). The novel coronavirus is a new strain that has not been previously identified in humans; the suspected route of transmission at the beginning of the outbreak was from bats to snakes or pangolins and then to humans. The origin of the virus is under investigation to date.

The genetic sequence of the 2019-nCOV China shared with other countries on 12 January 2020 enabled the rapid development of specific RT-PCR diagnostic tests. According to the information passed on to the WHO by Chinese authorities on 11 and 12 January, 41 cases with the novel coronavirus infection were preliminarily diagnosed in Wuhan, seven of them severely ill, and also the first death of a patient with other underlying health conditions was reported. According to the official data from China, made available to the WHO on 12 January 2020, no additional cases had been detected since 3 January 2020. At this stage, there was no infection among healthcare workers and no clear evidence of human-to-human transmission reported by Chinese health officials (WHO 2020b). However, on the same day, doctor Dr Li Wenliang was diagnosed with nCoV, so the human-to-human transmission was obvious. He was the first to warn about a possible outbreak of the new virus on 30 December 2019, when he posted a warning to a group of fellow doctors about seven patients with SARS-like symptoms, who had been hospitalized and quarantined in his hospital (see Wenliang). This was deemed as disturbing the social order by local authorities and the doctors were targeted by the police (Xiong & Gan 2020). Dr Li died of the disease on 7 February 2020, and this provoked additional anger against the Chinese authorities and accusations that if the doctors had not been harassed and their warnings had been taken seriously, the outbreak would have been contained better and faster.

The timing of the outbreak was of the utmost importance regarding the quick spread of the virus – China celebrated the Lunar New Year (from 10 January to 18 February 2020), which can also be considered as the largest annual human migration in the world. It is estimated that people take around three billion trips for the Chinese New Year holidays both in China and abroad.

Soon after the 2019-nCOV specific RT-PCR tests were available, the first lab-confirmed nCoV case abroad was reported in Thailand on 13 January 2020. The case was clearly imported from Wuhan, China: the patient developed symptoms on 5 January and travelled to Thailand on 8 January. The first cases in Japan (15 January) and South Korea (20 January) followed shortly, also originating from Wuhan, China. The first case in America was reported on 23 January and in Europe and Australia on 25 January 2020.

The Chinese authorities decided to quarantine Wuhan and several other cities in Hubei Province on 23 January 2020 to prevent the further spread of the virus. Still, it is estimated that around five million people from Wuhan travelled out of the city before the closure and therefore the increase of infected patients was expected. However, these draconian measures implemented by the Chinese authorities possibly helped to delay serious outbreaks in other countries, providing at least some opportunity for preparedness.

Medical journals (*The Lancet*, *JAMA*, etc.) began to publish virus-related rapidly changing and evolving information and articles, creating designated novel coronavirus-related resource centres,[1] where it was possible to follow topical evidence-based information. The WHO also compiled a virus-related emergency page (WHO 2020c), where it was possible to get advice about the virus and protection against it, and to follow daily situation reports. The Johns Hopkins University started tracking official cases according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and WHO data from all over the world on 20 January 2020, showing the concentration and spread of the virus, and the topic was also included on other world statistics websites (e.g., Worldometer, Our World in Data). The WHO Emergency Committee held meetings about the virus outbreak, but it was not considered serious enough to declare public health emergency of international concern before the meeting on 30 January 2020 (WHO 2020d). The officially announced confirmed infections on a global level at the time were 7,736 in China (including 170 reported deaths) and 82 infected persons in 18 other countries. According to the WHO, the aim of declaring emergency was not the situation in China, but the possibility that the virus outbreak would be a very serious problem when it reaches poorer countries with weaker health systems.

INCREASE IN INFORMATION FLOW IN (SOCIAL) MEDIA AND PUBLIC REACTIONS

The increasing information flow from China and other affected countries in January made the topic of the virus outbreak more noticeable in both traditional and social media. The number of articles, posts, videos, as well as comments and reactions to them grew significantly. Similar to former bigger epidemics and pandemics, this provided a fertile basis for jokes and internet memes, legends and conspiracy theories, etc.

Memes differ from iconic images and viral texts that do not experience much alteration (Denisova 2019: 8). Both modified memes and more static elements, such as viral texts, slogans, and images related to the topic, emerged after virus

notifications. The wide variety of meme generators makes it easy to quickly produce, use previous prototypes, copy, alter, and share the created content in social media. Many well-known and often-used memes were modified to match the content of a specific event or reflect topical news (e.g., Joey's Delayed Reaction, That Would Be Great, The Plague Doctor, to name a few from Know Your Meme site,[2] which researches and documents internet memes and viral phenomena), but there were also more specific ones to reflect this particular event. When humour travels across borders, nations, and cultures, it acquires new interpretations through translation, but also through adjusting to the target culture, at the same time retaining its connection to the source (Laineste & Voolaid 2016: 28). In addition to the material in English, I kept track of local Estonian memes and media responses. Most of the content in the local language, at least at this initial stage of the epidemic, was mainly translated and perhaps somewhat customized, as an example of user-generated globalization (Shifman & Levy & Thelwall 2014: 728). The relative insignificance of local references may be attributed to the fact that at that time the topic was not yet highly relevant in the country as there were no direct contacts with the outbreak, no infected persons (the first case was diagnosed in Estonia on 26 February 2020), no direct transport routes to Wuhan or China, etc., which would have been some possible reasons to provide a local aspect to the globally spreading memes.

Figure 1. *Estonians (as well as Finns and other Nordic nations, but also introverts, programmers, etc.) are relieved as social distancing is habitual anyway (EFITA F32-002-0112).*

The information and knowledge of the topic was changing rapidly, and new information became available on a daily basis, creating a mixture of most recent, adjusted, and already outdated news; also, mis- and disinformation was highly visible. Misinformation can emerge in various forms and ways and can be shared with different intentions or a mixture of intentions, for example as rumour, mistake, or humour, whereas disinformation is deliberately misleading, consciously constructed, and malicious. To distinguish between real news and fake news or rumours is often difficult for people even in normal circumstances; this kind of rapidly changing situation makes it harder for the recipients to analyse the information and differentiate real stories from fake ones. As Lynne S. McNeill has pointed out, the stories do not always circulate as news articles, but rather as legends (McNeill 2018: 494). A new virus outbreak is not different from other significant events: the society often responds to such outbreaks by constructing rumours, legends, jokes, and conspiracy theories. A comparison of the plague legends from the late Middle Ages and past-century AIDS-related urban tales and their background demonstrates that there are striking similarities in terms of both specific behavioural patterns and oral tradition (Hiiemäe 1999). However, unlike in the times of historical epidemics, the spread of epidemic lore and public reactions has become instantaneous and global due to the possibilities of the Internet. American folklorist Jon D. Lee has examined responses to epidemics in the case of the previous coronavirus SARS, showing similarities between the narratives of SARS and of previous HIV/AIDS and H1N1 influenza, and suggests that disease narratives are constantly recycled (for more on the recycling of epidemic lore see Hiiemäe et al. 2021). He also points out the often more damaging effect of the narratives than that of the disease they reference (Lee 2014). Julii Brainard and Paul R. Hunter have also indicated the harmful role of misinformation related to infectious disease outbreaks, and show the impact of influenza, monkeypox, and norovirus (Brainard & Hunter 2019).

Conspiracy theories usually tend to circulate and be eagerly discussed in echo chambers, in which people with similar world views, interests, and beliefs participate, yet special events enable the topics to surge and be more visible in the mainstream media and social media platforms. After such surges the theories often continue to live their own life on designated websites and channels in latency, as can be observed for popular topics like Freemasons, clandestine government plans, New World Order, etc., and emerge again when the conditions are favourable. The main aims seem to be a search for the enemy or culprit, disbelief in natural phenomena or processes, and sharing of the "special knowledge" that the masses who believe in the official information do not possess. According to American politologist Michael Barkun's classification, in

the case of a novel coronavirus, both event conspiracy and systemic conspiracy seem to surge, the theories mostly offering multiple options to believe (and share) different versions of the origin of the virus. It is possible to observe that posts refer to previous significant events not connected to the case, sometimes deliberately changed to match the current situation. Although some conspiracy theories may have certain benefits, raising issues in society that need to be addressed, these have been predominantly linked to harmful social, health, and political consequences (Douglas et al. 2019: 17).

Xenophobic responses accompanied the infectious disease threats in the past and the current pandemic followed this pattern (cf. White 2020; Shimizu 2020). Some signs of racism started to emerge as the virus progressed; there were some news describing the avoidance experienced by Chinese journalists, and later on also by the entrepreneurs in Chinatowns in various countries. In the spreading memes and comments it can be observed as a reference to Asian food (bat soup), recommendations to avoid coughing and sneezing Chinese students, in some conspiracy-related comments (virus was man-made and/or designed to affect only Asians/Chinese, therefore no threat to other races or nations), etc. In response to the avoidance suggestions, some Asian people shared photographs of themselves with the sign 'I am not a virus'. Still I would estimate that the racism issue was not predominantly intended to incite tensions between different races and make the containment harder during the early phase of the outbreak – differently from the situation that could be observed during the 2014 Ebola outbreak, when a "white people" conspiracy hoax spread on Nigerian websites, claiming that the virus had been deliberately created by the Western countries, often by using black magic, evolving to the presumption that Europeans and Americans had a new racist cult that hated Africans and worshipped Ebola-chan, a white lady wearing the uniform of a nurse, who is holding a bloody skull, her long and dangling hair looking like a dangerous Ebola virus strain (Kharel 2014). In the case of Ebola, the hoax added more fear and tension to the already complicated situation in which the healthcare workers trying to contain the outbreak were threatened and attacked by people who believed the disease was only fictional, spread by medical personnel, or that the purpose was harvesting their organs for sale in Europe. The fear and violence towards medical workers may in severe cases even lead to fatalities; for example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo four health workers were killed just shortly before the timeframe observed in this article, in November 2019 (Burke 2019). The meme of the personified virus, Ebola-chan, acted also like a sort of chain letter, threatening with excruciating pain and death unless the viewer posted the phrase "I love you Ebola-chan" in the comment section; the same principle has been used for other virus outbreaks, e.g., Zika, and also in this case as Corona-chan or Wuhan-chan.

Below is a brief overview of some more prominent topics and examples from social media environments about the outbreak from January 2020, the first month of the international awareness of the novel coronavirus.

THE CURSE OF THE TWENTIES

As the first information of the new virus became publicly available at the beginning of 2020, there were many comparisons between the previous and current year ("2019 the year was bad yeah, but 2020 is like 2019 but worse in a single month"[3] (EFITA F32-001-0014)), New Year's resolutions ("New year's resolution: Survive 2020!" (EFITA F32-001-0155)), and the highlighting of some major global events of January 2020 ("First month of the new decade we've unlocked these achievements: China: coronavirus; The US and Iran: nearly World War III; Australia: bushfires; Kobe: dies; The Philippines: volcano" (EFITA F32-001-0011)). We can also see a number of suggestions to restart 2020 or go back to year 2019 to keep bad things from happening ("This is why we should of make a continue of 2019 by 2019 version 2. If it was 2019 version 2, nothing would be bad" (EFITA F32-001-0012)).

Many people shared references to some previous major disease outbreaks which had occurred in the twenties of different centuries – in every hundred years there seems to have been a large pandemic that followed the same pattern as the current viral epidemic in China (1720 – the Great Plague of Marseille, 1820 – cholera pandemic, 1920 – the Spanish flu). Some of these comments and memes were just of a describing nature, but others also mingled with conspiracy theories, mainly indicating that this could not have been a coincidence, something evil had to be going on. This category was one of the earliest in my material and although this time-sensitive topic was highly visible at the beginning of January 2020, its importance diminished fairly quickly by the end of the month.

Figure 2. *An internet meme depicting major disease outbreaks in the twenties of different centuries (EFITA F32-002-0082).*

CORONA NAME-RELATED MEMES

One of the largest groups is the Mexican Corona beer brand related news, memes, and comments provoked by the name of the virus family. The topics vary from Corona beer as a virus spreader, vaccine, and treatment to Corona beer company allegedly suing the Chinese government due to "putting the bad taste in people's mouths regarding the name Corona".[4] Different memes of Corona beer circulate in the web with various added virus-related texts. As Corona advertisements often feature lime as an addition to beer, it has also provoked the connection with Lyme disease.

It has been noted that Google searches of the viruses/diseases are peaking at the time of the outbreaks, as was described in the case of Ebola in 2014 and now for the novel coronavirus; however, at this time it was pointed out that searches for *corona beer virus*, *beer virus* and *beer coronavirus* increased significantly after the number of virus outbreak news increased. From 18 to 26 January, the number of enquiries for *corona beer virus* increased by 2,300 percent (Bostock 2020).

The name-related group is also one of the largest to provoke the earliest local lore besides internationally spreading memes, as in addition to internationally known 'corona' meanings *koroona* (or *novuss* in Latvian) is a well-known game originating from Estonia and Latvia. Although the name topic has been represented continuously, the main phase of the development, spread, and significance of this group remained at the beginning of the outbreak.

Figure 3. *This meme uses both Corona beer and* koroona *game: Coronavirus – now also in P.E. classes of Estonian schools (EFITA F32-003-0002).*

BAT SOUP, MADE IN CHINA, KUNG FLU

From the very beginning of the outbreak, people speculated online about the origin of the virus. The ground zero for the outbreak was believed to be a seafood market in Wuhan, which traded illegal wildlife among other goods. This prompted many remarks about Chinese cuisine and eating habits. One of the most viral videos showed a Chinese woman allegedly eating bat and admitting it tasted like chicken; it caused outrage in social media, and the Chinese eating habits were blamed for the outbreak of viral diseases. Actually, the video was filmed in an archipelago in the western Pacific Ocean in 2016, and had no connection whatsoever to the Wuhan market or disease outbreak; yet it is evident that every little thing can be a powerful catalyst in social media flame.

Figure 4. *Bat-related memes (imgflip.com, author's collage).*

Other memes indicate that there is no need to worry about the rest of the world – the virus will not last long because it is "Made in China"; sometimes it also resulted in a recognition that everything is produced in and comes from China in the contemporary globalized world.

> *Don't worry about Coronavirus bcoz its MADE IN CHINA* (EFITA F32-001-0045).
>
> *Wait isn't EVERYTHING in our daily lives MADE FROM CHINA* (EFITA F32-001-0046).

As at the beginning of the outbreak the spreading speed and mechanisms of the virus seemed to be similar to those of influenza, the Kung Flu (originally in slang meaning flu originating from Asia but now used also for the novel coronavirus)

Figure 5. *Memes depicting the "Made in China" comments (imgflip.com, starecat.com, author's collage).*

memes were associated with it as a virus name and also in the meaning of the martial art to fight the virus; for example, a meme of a doctor reassuring that there is nothing to be worried about as he knows Kung Flu. The virus has also been called Wuhan Flu or WuFlu, or the CCP[5] virus as a hint to the political regime in China. The significance of new China-related topics decreased as the virus spread all over the world, yet they can still be found.

REFERENCES TO THE WORLD OF ENTERTAINMENT

As expected with the disease outbreaks, there are myriads of posts and comments related to the contemporary entertainment world, mainly apocalyptic computer and video games, movies, and TV shows, the Plague Inc. computer game being the most relevant in this case. Questions are asked about who is playing the game that has now been transferred into real life ("When God decided to play Plague inc." (EFITA F32-001-0017)), game strategies are suggested to deal with the virus destruction/containment or to flee from it to a safe

place, for instance, to move to Greenland ("Plague inc players be like: MOVE TO GREENLAND! Me, an intellectual: Go do that, wait till it evolves cold resistance" (EFITA F32-001-0020)).

References to movies with epidemiologic content indicate similarities with the current situation, some of them insisting that they predicted the coronavirus. The most prominent would be the animated comedy "The Simpsons", which has been credited for years by its fandom for several accurate predictions, the more widely known examples being predictions of Donald Trump becoming the US president, the discovery of the Higgs boson, the invention of autocorrect, smartwatches, etc. Other more frequently mentioned films under this topic are the American thriller "Contagion" (2011), the TV series "Pandemic" (2007), and later on the Netflix docuseries "Pandemic: How to Prevent an Outbreak", released right at the beginning of the outbreak in January 2020, as well as South Korean action films "The Flu" (2013) and "Train to Busan" (2016), the latter with the recommendation of a possible new sequel called "Planes from Wuhan".

Popular art memes have also found their place in the virus responses around the world, Estonia being no exception (e.g., "The Last Supper", "The Birth of Venus"). The occurrence of the topic has remained quite stable in time; the scenes or characters of the entertainment world are omnipresent in memes in general as well as in the current virus lore and evolve as the crisis progresses.

SATIRICAL ILLUSTRATIONS IN NEWSPAPERS WORLDWIDE

As the virus spread, it became more and more topical for the press worldwide. In addition to informational articles, it has initiated thematic illustrations to this day, and these can also become viral. One of the scandalous illustrations depicting a Chinese flag with its five yellow stars, replaced with images of coronaviruses, was printed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* on 27 January 2020. The same newspaper had a previous scandal with printing the Muhammad cartoons in 2005, which even escalated into violence (see Muhammad cartoons controversy). On this occasion the feedback was fortunately not that severe, but still resulted in furore in both the political sphere and in social media.

The Chinese embassy saw the image as an insult to China, hurting the feelings of the Chinese people, and demanded a public apology from the Danish newspaper and the illustrator personally. In response the newspaper declared that in the circumstances where the virus had already claimed the lives of over 100 people, they had no intention of degrading or taunting, and the drawing was supposed to do neither; it could have been the case of two different cultural understandings (The Local 2020).

Figure 6. *Original illustration from* Jyllands-Posten *and the responses from imgflip.com, Twitter, and Weibo (author's collage).*

COMPARISON WITH OTHER KNOWN VIRUSES AND DISEASES

In the initial phase of the outbreak, the novel coronavirus was estimated to be far less deadly than other severe coronaviruses, SARS and MERS, yet as infectious as seasonal influenza. Many comments referred to annual fatalities due to seasonal flu, cancer, or heart diseases, indicating that the current virus was not serious and panic had been instigated by the media to create hype and gain from it like with previous virus epidemics.

> *Imagine if no one watched news. This would be exactly what it is... nothing.* (EFITA F32-001-0076)

> *hmm its nothing compared to the flu.* (EFITA F32-001-0077)

The arrogance was quite common in these circumstances, reassuring people that there was nothing to worry about, the virus would not affect white people, or only old and weak people die. As it was a new virus with no specific cure, no vaccine, no previously acquired antibodies, and there were not enough possibilities to treat the growing numbers of severe cases due to the overloaded

medical system, the situation was indeed serious in Wuhan by the end of the first month of the outbreak. At that time, it was too early to estimate R_0 (the basic reproduction number showing how contagious the infectious disease is), the percentage of mild and severe cases requiring the intensive care unit (ICU), as well as the case fatality rate (CFR), and the way the outbreak could affect the rest of the world. The comparison with the flu and downplaying of the virus consequences also continued later, and in several countries the leading politicians also played their part in it (e.g., the USA, Brazil, etc.), and this provoked responses in social media.

ORIGINS OF THE VIRUS AND VARIOUS CONSPIRACY THEORIES

Like any other major event, the sudden outbreak of the novel virus provided plenty of opportunity to interpret the news in various ways and discuss the origins of the virus. The beginning of January seemed quite quiet at least in the mainstream media; the topics started to emerge as the information flow regarding the infection gradually grew in the second and third decade of January. The Chinese' official statement that the virus started to spread in a seafood market was often objected and by the end of the month these theories evolved into numerous different narratives; some of them were refuted shortly after emerging and are not in active circulation anymore, whereas others are still spreading around the world.

One of the first theories was that Chinese agents working in a Canadian laboratory were caught smuggling the virus to China and then it was weaponized. Canada soon denied the probability of theft. In some cases, other countries have also been held responsible for the outbreak, mainly the USA.

Many articles and videos suggest that the virus escaped from China's only P4/BSL-4 laboratory, which handles level 4 biosafety pathogens that are most dangerous, with a high mortality rate and no known treatment, such as Ebola, SARS, etc. It is hinted that China was developing bioweapons in the laboratory and the current novel coronavirus is a new bioweapon designed by the Chinese government. The biosafety laboratory in Wuhan indeed studies hazardous viruses and as in 2017 US biosafety experts had expressed concerns that viruses could 'escape' from the laboratory due to unpredictability of laboratory animals, it has now been speculated that the laboratory is the source of the spreading virus. Soon pictures appeared of the alleged logo of the Wuhan biotechnology laboratory, which was oddly similar to that of the Umbrella Corporation (reference to Resident Evil video games / film series where the Umbrella Corporation

was responsible for the outbreak and the Raccoon City was destroyed). Later it was revealed that the laboratory with a similar logo was located in Shanghai and was not related to the Wuhan laboratory.

Figure 7. *A Twitter post from user Undoomed has been circling the news and comments as an example of the similarity of the logos of the Chinese research laboratory and the Umbrella Corporation. Source: https://twitter.com/undoomed/status/1221545217641402370, last accessed on 4 February 2021.*

There were also rumours and beliefs that pharmaceutical corporations were responsible for distributing the virus in order to earn fortunes by first provoking panic and then selling the vaccines and remedies. In many cases there were suggestions that the vaccines/cure had already been developed before the virus was released; this was also a common theory with previous outbreaks. The denial of the modern science-based world view was common; some commentators indicated that the current knowledge of viruses, the zoonotic nature or mutation ability of viruses was false. It was argued that the transfer of the virus from

animal to human could not have been possible as eating habits regarding wildlife had been similar for centuries and so the transfer should have happened long ago – which brought us back to the man-made virus theory.

> *seems to be about a 1.22% death rate. So much coverage, must be for making people run to get the soon to appear vaccine.* (EFITA F32-001-0061)

> *Corona virus is a patented disease which means there's also a patented cure. Look it up.* (EFITA F32-001-0062)

One of the recurring conspiracy themes is related to Event 201, a high-level pandemic exercise held only a few months before the virus outbreak, on 18 October 2019. The event was hosted by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security in partnership with the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The purpose was to point out areas where public/private partnerships would be necessary in response to a severe pandemic in order to diminish large-scale economic and societal consequences (Event 201). The script of the exercise simulated an outbreak of a new coronavirus that would kill 65 million people in the first 18 months. Many people back then disapproved that the focus of the exercise was not the health and well-being of people but the economic consequences for governments and private corporations. The conspiracy theories regarding the event were expected when shortly after the pandemic exercise a real epidemy of a novel coronavirus occurred; it was suggested that the exercise was a prediction, or hinted that this could not have been a coincidence.

Public health simulations with epidemic scenarios are conducted consistently at various levels; in addition to scientific, economic or political aspects these may rely on popular memory, historical research, and systematic use of public health records (Keck & Lachenal 2019: 28). Another role-playing exercise connected with another billionaire, George Soros, is also mentioned; it was called Food Chain Reaction: A Global Food Security Game[6] (2015) and predicted that in five years' time the population growth, rapid urbanization, extreme weather conditions, and political crises (and as commentators stress: disease! 2020!) combine to threaten global food security. It was being questioned if these scripts of the simulations were now coming to life and who was behind it, yet the severe economic and societal issues of a possible pandemic brought up by these exercises were not yet noticeable for the Western general public during this initial phase and therefore rarely appeared in the material collected at the time.

As for years Bill Gates has warned the society that the greatest risk of a global catastrophe nowadays could be a highly infectious virus and the world has no strategies to stop or fight the pandemic effectively, he is incorporated

in the comments both as an individual and as a representative of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. He is also visible in connection with another conspiracy topic – depopulation of the planet, according to which the virus was designed and deliberately spread to control the population.

> *This is one of the ways they're trying to control their population.* (EFITA F32-001-0057)

> *NWO needs 80% + of all population in each economic zone to be depopulated. This will help.* (EFITA F32-001-0165)

The concept of the elite (aristocracy, nobility, landlords, billionaires) being responsible for diseases or any other miseries has been known for centuries. As an example from the local material, it is possible to find tales in the Estonian Folklore Archives of landlords spreading the plague, cholera, murrain, and other diseases (Hiiemäe 1997: 111–114); in the historical tradition collection of the Estonian Cultural History Archives there are also notifications about evil people at the service of the landlord, spreading the plague, or about another landlord having the cure for the disease and the village was spared (Tavast 2020 [1931]).

In recent years the implementation of the new 5th-generation high-speed telecommunication networks has been a target of various concerns and conspiracies. New technologies have often been adopted with hesitation, and one of the reasons for suspicion in this case could be the same as for a virus: it is possible to see neither the virus nor radio waves, they are not tangible and without knowledge and trust in science it is hard to comprehend them. Although the 5G technology has been declared safe, the conspiracies gained popularity as the novel coronavirus surged, trying to explain the emergence and rapid spread of the virus with 5G (see also Ahmed et al. 2020). The theories were also mixed with vaccine hesitancy and depopulation theories, claiming that by means of 5G it is possible to activate heavy metals or alleged microchips in the vaccines, enslave people, and/or the world population growth could be reduced. The conspiracy theories linked to 5G later led to dozens of real attacks made on telecom masts in several countries.

As it is possible to witness in various crisis situations, several conspiracy theories usually circulating in their own designated echo chambers emerged quickly to gain wider audiences and to evolve according to current circumstances. The dissemination of the theories may serve diverse purposes, from sharing them as humour or "secret knowledge" to the attempt to disrupt the society. The prevalence of conspiracy theories related to the virus was growing daily during the second part of the month under review, and later became one of the most fertile topics.

CLOSING OF THE BORDERS, EVACUATION STRATEGIES, AND PUBLIC RESPONSE TO RESTRICTIONS

As the virus escalated, the neighbouring countries started to close the borders with China, and the possible restrictions to international travel came under discussion. Several countries were considering repatriation or evacuation of their citizens from the virus epicentre Wuhan. The idea was publicly criticized because of the fear of spreading the disease both by their compatriots and by the potential evacuees in Wuhan. Though the WHO stressed on several occasions that there was no need for disease prevention measures, such as international travel and trade restrictions, most of the biggest aviation companies stopped their flights to mainland China by the end of January 2020.

Several approaches were adopted by different countries with regard to the returnees. At first the health officials of most countries did not find it necessary to quarantine them; it was maintained that the transmission occurred only when symptoms manifested and therefore it was expected that a routine check for the main symptoms of the virus (fever, cough) on arrival at the homeland airport would be sufficient. This irritated the public; on the one hand people insisted that this would not be sufficient to prevent the spread of the virus and accused the governments of a belated response, and on the other hand the opponents claimed that the outbreak was insignificant and posed no threat but was merely a hoax or panic provoked by the media. However, some countries were already more cautious and were contemplating the need for quarantine.

The first countries to speak about evacuation were the USA and Japan (first special evacuation flights on 28–29 January 2020), and other countries followed quickly. Britain and Germany announced their plans to evacuate their citizens and stated that the returning people were supposed to undergo quarantine after arrival. This brought up a new aspect in the topic. In response to the Twitter tweet by Matt Hancock, the British Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, about the isolation of the returning citizens from Wuhan, in addition to public safety issues the question of the human rights of the returning people kept in quarantine arose (The Guardian 2020). The question of human rights and freedoms became more and more highlighted as restrictions and lockdowns were implemented. Germans were evacuated from Wuhan by the German Air Force (*Luftwaffe*) and quarantined in a military base in Germersheim, which also provoked indications of World War II and concentration camps, and was therefore called *coronacaust* or *Auschwitz'20*.

In some cases the local communities opposed the governments' decisions to transfer the evacuees to their communities (e.g. Australia, where reactions also referred to stigmatized leprosy (Michelmore & Parish & O'Connor 2020)).

The fear of the novel and unknown infection coming to the local community was visible.

Several other countries also evacuated their citizens, but the total number of evacuated people was marginal compared to the departure wave before the lockdown of Wuhan on 23 January 2020, and other Hubei Province cities in the following days. News channels in different countries started to publish interviews with people in quarantine and several vlogs of the people sharing their experiences and everyday life became popular. This way the evacuated people became closer to the audience and were not so anonymous and repelled; mostly benevolent and encouraging comments can be found for these texts and videos.

The public responses to governmental restrictions proliferated later at the same pace as the virus and the attempts to suppress it, and gained great popularity starting from March 2020, when most of the world experienced lockdowns and restrictions for the first time. Numerous new topics developed to describe the new normality, including social distancing, working from home, distance learning, travel restrictions, societal and economic crisis, etc.

CONCLUSIONS

On 31 December 2019, the World Health Organization was informed of the first cases of pneumonia of unknown etiology, detected in Wuhan City, Hubei Province of China. Soon it became evident that the cause was a novel coronavirus that was spreading rapidly. The first cases were detected earlier in the month, but the doctors discussing the possible new virus were arrested and silenced with the accusations of disturbing social order. Many people believe that as the information was not shared publicly in the first place, it led to a faster escalation of the outbreak and also contributed to a heavy flow of topical folklore and alternative theories. The fast escalation has been pointed out also in the comments and memes, as can be witnessed in the following examples:

> *I bought elderberry syrup!* [3 days later] *Do they sell family pack hazmat suits?* (EFITA F32-001-0162)

> *Mainstream media in January: It's more likely to get impaled by a wild unicorn than to die from the coronavirus.*
> *Mainstream media in February: Okay the coronavirus is a bit scary but the flu is far deadlier.*
> *Mainstream media in March: The coronavirus pandemic is very, very bad but nuclear apocalypses are arguably worse.*
> *Mainstream media in April: …* (EFITA F32-001-0161)

After the official information about the outbreak started to come more regularly from China, the information flow in the Western media grew enormously, especially due to the fast escalation of the virus. Similar to any other outstanding events, including the previous virus outbreaks, there was like an explosion in social media – from numerous articles and news stories published, shared, altered, and commented, or social media content creators taking advantage of the situation by using clickbait, to spreading computer viruses (Paganini 2020) exploiting the growing interest in the topic. The power of social media became more and more eminent as the pandemic progressed. We can see the emergence of a wide variety of jokes and memes, but in addition to the pandemic we can witness an infodemic (a blend of *information* and *epidemic*),[7] a massive spread of both accurate and inaccurate information, fake news and conspiracy theories (both ignorant or malevolent to provoke panic), which can also take a physical form, causing protests and material damage, as well as the countermeasures that social media platforms used to contain them. Several social media platforms have involved fact checkers to review and debunk false claims to limit the spread of fake news and fear; others are demonetizing coronavirus-related content to reduce the producing and spreading of the thematic content. The extent of the rumours and misinformation about the virus was so great already at the beginning of the outbreak that public health scientists from several countries published a statement to strongly condemn conspiracy theories, suggesting that the virus does not have a natural origin, confirming that scientists from several countries have analysed genomes of the causative agent and they overwhelmingly conclude that this coronavirus originated in wildlife (Calisher et al. 2020). The official investigation of the origin of the virus is ongoing to date.

The rapid escalation of the outbreak enabled researchers to observe how the focus of the news and, correspondingly, the public response changed within days from something far and distant to something closer and concerning the whole world either from the medical or economic viewpoint. This article provided a global overview of some of the recurrent topics and their representations in the media (incl. social media) during the first month of the pandemic.

Most of the reviewed categories of the collected primary virus-related folklore material in our archive are quite consistent, equally represented also after the first impact of the outbreak, and constantly evolving as the situation changes. However, it is possible to observe that some topics lost their relevance sooner, even within the first month under review; for instance, the time and place of the virus origin became less evident and less important. At the same time other topics also present in the initial stage gained momentum as the pandemic progressed, often driven by the response of politicians or state regulations. The vernacular narrative and belief impact of the novel virus outbreak is more and

more visible in various fields. The medical aspects (the spread or containment of the virus in different parts of the world, development of cure/vaccines, whether or not it becomes endemic) and the overall global economic and societal consequences continue to provide rich folklore material for an extended period of time.

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NOTES

[1] See https://www.thelancet.com/coronavirus, and https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama/pages/coronavirus-alert, last accessed on 2 February 2021.

[2] See https://knowyourmeme.com/, last accessed on 3 February 2021.

[3] Hereinafter the spelling and grammar in citations remain unchanged.

[4] See https://empirenews.net/parent-company-of-corona-beer-sues-china-over-bad-press-during-their-coronavirus-scare/, last accessed on 26 February 2021.

[5] Meaning the Chinese Communist Party.

[6] See https://foodchainreaction.org/, last accessed on 4 February 2021.

[7] The term was coined already in 2003 in the SARS crisis by journalist and political scientist David Rothkopf in a *Washington Post* column and has seen renewed usage. The WHO started to use the term for COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 (see https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/words-were-watching-infodemic-meaning, last accessed on 5 February 2021).

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FROM "UNBELIEVABLE STUPIDITY" TO "SECRET CLUES FOR STAYING HEALTHY": CAM LANDSCAPE AND BOUNDARY-WORK IN ESTONIAN AND FINNISH MAINSTREAM MEDIA IN APRIL 2020

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Abstract: Based on a one-month (April 2020) comparative observation of media content in three Estonian and three Finnish mainstream media sources (two daily newspapers and one weekly women's magazine) along with some examples from an earlier period, the authors analysed the representation of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in the media. The analysis showed that the media from the two countries presented CAM both in its various mainstream and more fringe forms, and that pejorative as well as complimentary and attracting undertones were present. The authors conclude that CAM topics were present in the selection of sources as methods for wellbeing and healing but also as entertaining, exoticising, warning, and mystical-metaphorical allusions along with different levels of boundary-work, especially science. The authors also noted interesting differences between the chosen media both within one country and between the two countries in terms of how much CAM was present as well as in which ways it was treated. In the Estonian material, the scale of tones was broader: the texts presented highly sensational, exoticising and othering angles towards approaches that were considered extreme and dangerous but mainly entertainment-oriented, and they positively described healing and wellbeing practices, sometimes with a mystic touch. The Finnish media was more low-key in its representations and tone: the mentions were shorter and less frequent. Although the Finnish material had more positive representations, this does not suggest that CAM is more tolerated in Finland – the Finnish media presented less extreme forms of CAM, which gave less ground for journalistic opposition.

Keywords: alternative medicine, boundary-work, media representations

INTRODUCTION

In the recent decade, interest in alternative medicine has been consistently high or has even increased in Estonia. Representative statistics show that a significant number of people are ready to use or already use alternative medical approaches (e.g. in a 2015 Estonian poll, 62 percent of respondents agreed that some sensitive persons can heal illnesses; see Saar Poll 2015). At the same time, in 2019, the National Health Board of Estonia organised a public media campaign for raising awareness of the health risks associated with 'fake medicine' (meaning non-evidence-based alternative approaches) (Terviseamet 2019). In Finland, the use of CAM seems to have slightly declined between 2008 and 2018. One possible explanation for this is that the medical establishment has publicly expressed very open criticism; another reason may be that today's particularly popular practices (such as yoga, mindfulness, various mind-and-body treatments and energy healing) were not included in the survey designed in the year 2008 (only prayer represents spiritual healing methods), and it is thus possible that the use of CAM is more widespread in reality. While it is difficult to compare the popularity of CAM internationally (due to the lack of compatible statistics), the use of CAM in Finland is estimated to be at the level of the Scandinavian average, which shows that around 30 percent of the population reports the use of CAM for personal health and wellbeing. Research clearly emphasises the importance of CAM to those who engage in it (Vuolanto et al. 2020).

In 2018, the general estimation (using 2014 European Social Survey data) was that 25.9 percent of the European population uses some form of complementary and alternative medicine – with considerable differences between countries (Kemppainen et al. 2018; some estimates are even higher, e.g. Weeks & Strudsholm 2008: 3). This trend goes hand in hand with the general therapeutic turn of recent decades and the permeation of therapeutic discourse in the cultures of the Western world (cf. Illouz 2008; Madsen & Ytre-Arne 2012: 20; Salmenniemi et al. 2020). Interesting socio-democratic differences are associated with CAM in Europe, indicating that use is more common among women and individuals with higher education who often combine biomedical and CAM therapies (Kemppainen et al. 2018; Uibu & Vihalemm 2017: 356).

Although numerous authors have drawn a parallel between the increasing popularity of CAM and reasons such as individuals' dissatisfaction with the state medical system (long queues, limited visit time, invasiveness of methods, etc.), other research has shown that often people are not necessarily unhappy with the state medical system or biomedicine use CAM; they rather hope to benefit more from combining the two instead of using one separately (cf. Ruggie 2004: 49–50; Lüddeckens & Schrimpf 2018; Kemppainen et al. 2018). One of

the key factors of the popularity of CAM seems to be the availability of respective information (mainstream as well as alternative media, courses, services of practitioners), which enables recipients to complement their existing medical knowledge without an explicit conversion from one medical system to the other. However, patients are not eager to discuss their interest in CAM with conventional doctors during their visits, fearing that they would be condemned or simply not understood (cf. Hiiemäe 2017: 26; Passalacqua et al. 2004: 1081; Penson et al. 2001: 463; Kemppainen et al. 2018: 449). Thus, a significant amount of the information on CAM is elicited from other sources.

There are a number of research articles that stress the role of mass media in spreading information about CAM and influencing decisions for its use; for example, according to one study, "many consumers use popular media, especially women's magazines, to learn about CAM" (Dunne & Phillips 2010: 671; see also Utriainen 2013) and, according to another, "many cancer patients within developed nations cite the media as informing their decision to use complementary and alternative medicine" (Mercurio & Eliott 2011: 67). However, it is often not clear from such research which exact details media users learn about CAM from the media and through which practical output such information finds them (e.g. decisions to use or avoid certain CAM; the media can also reflect and construct curiosity towards CAM-related topics that is not directly connected to its use). Respective research articles do not usually cite the direct feedback of media recipients, but conclusions are drawn on the basis of a set of investigated media articles. For example, one article concludes that as most media articles about CAM are "quite simplistic" (i.e., present only limited facts in an often prejudiced journalistic frame), they are not very informative or useful information channels for media users (Dunne & Phillips 2010: 673), and another presumes: "It appears that much of the information the public receives about CAM is inaccurate or incomplete" (Bonevski & Wilson & Henry 2008: e2406; a similar study: Lewis & Orrock & Myers 2010). At the same time, a problem is that in earlier studies the role of electronic media (e.g., online commentaries and forums) is underrepresented, and the focus is mainly on the printed media. In our study, we also considered, to some extent, online comments on our sample media articles.

Our material proved – as some of the above-cited works also indicated – that the information about CAM in the media is often presented in stereotypical ways, in many cases using strong opposites and contrasts of science versus non-science, dangerous versus safe, experts versus deniers, etc. For example, we found (especially in the Estonian material) modes of description that claimed in a critic-free and absolutizing manner the effectiveness or dangerousness of CAM. We suggest that despite the tone of an article, it can still raise interest in

media users and trigger them to seek additional information. Several observed articles on CAM were followed by online comments such as: "Journalists make such a heavy advertisement that I'm already getting interested in this stuff" (this particular comment followed an Estonian newspaper article on the dangerousness of Miracle Mineral Supplement (MMS)). Even if such comments are sometimes written ironically, the idea that a media article elicited interest in dangerously depicted CAM occurred in comments remarkably often.

THE AIM OF THE ARTICLE

The aim of the article is to analyse comparatively the portrayal/representation of CAM topics in three mainstream print media in Estonia and Finland in April 2020. We discuss some aspects, such as the general tone and choice of the agents who mediate the information; epithets, connotative meanings, evaluative adjectives, overtly or covertly negative representations through ridiculing, othering, exoticising and contrasting axis lines (e.g. safe – dangerous; we – the cultural/ideological other) to express support to certain dominating ideologies and attitudes towards alternative approaches. One of the aims is to show how CAM is represented by and through boundary-work between science and religion. We follow Vuolanto's (2013: 14–17, drawing on Gieryn 1995) understanding of boundary-work as the power-laden rhetorical differentiation between diverse cultural fields or territories such as science, non-science, and religion. Boundary-work is an analytical perspective most fruitfully applied to cases of debate and controversy or to the interfaces between cultural domains, and we are interested in the ways in which boundary-work against influential cultural systems such as religion and science takes place in relation to CAM in our selection of media material.

Estonia and Finland are neighbouring countries with similarities and differences in their religious profile. Both have an increasingly pluralistic and religious landscape, but the role of the Lutheran Church is less substantial in Estonia. Even if the dominance of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (ELC) is diminishing in Finland, it is still a relatively strong cultural model (over 68 percent of the population still belong to ELCF in 2020), and the public presence of new spiritualities and neopagan forms of religion is more moderate than in Estonia. However, religious diversity and privatisation of religion is a steadily growing trend which is also reflected in mainstream Finnish media (Taira 2019). We hypothesised that the level of representation of various forms of and approaches to alternative medicine (debates and boundary-work about

the truth, depiction of miracle healers) is visible in the media and there are some repeated common models.

As for science and biomedicine, according to a Eurobarometer study, 91 percent of Estonians consider the impact of science and technology on the society positive, and 56 percent are interested in developments in these fields, whereby 58 percent think that, in the next 15 years, scientific innovation in medicine should be a priority (Raudvere 2016: 4–5, 8). The Finnish Science Barometer (2019) indicates that Finns have high respect for science and especially medicine: 74 percent of the sample reports interest in science and scientific research and 68 percent in the advances of medical knowledge. Although all segments of the Finnish population show interest in medical knowledge, women are clearly more interested than men. The mass media, and increasingly the Internet, is presently the most influential source of this knowledge. The socio-cultural value of religion and science, in important ways, frames the interest in CAM in our two countries.

ADDED VALUE TO PREVIOUS TOPICAL RESEARCH

Most of the previous topical studies were conducted by researchers with a background in medicine or communication/media research, often relying solely on quantitative methods (e.g., Weeks & Strudsholm 2008; Lewis & Orrock & Myers 2010). Having our background in folkloristics and the study of religion, we approach representations of CAM in the media in relation to people's beliefs and narratives and the behavioural models derived from these in their situative, varying, and fluctuating modes of use (see, e.g., Hiiemäe 2021; Utriainen 2020). For example, it seems insufficient to declare that "allegiance to the entertainment factor in health benefit or risk information may actually be dangerous" (Lewis & Orrock & Myers 2010: 69), without knowing the actual reception models of various groups of media users. We support an approach which postulates that various discourses within media representations of CAM appeal to various specific audiences through resonance with their specific and often situational concerns and familiar discourses (cf. Weeks & Strudsholm 2008: 1). For example, the same person may in some cases consume CAM-related media content because they are trying to find a cure for a health problem or, in other cases, get entertained by the dramatic contrasts or effectful shows presented (although the boundaries between these categories are again blurred).

Existing research focusing on certain groups of media users concentrates mainly on patients with a certain diagnosis (e.g., Mercurio & Eliott 2011; Passalacqua et al. 2004); however, a significant target group, which may be

testing media information on CAM mainly for preventive purposes, are healthy subjects whose interest in CAM may build just part of a lifestyle or be triggered by spiritual or psychological concerns that do not qualify as medical diagnoses. We suggest that a significant amount of CAM-related media content is rather directed towards the general population, including healthy subjects, even more so in the time of a general health crisis such as COVID-19, which potentially impacts everyone. Our analysis also indicates that CAM is a topic that has a place in several sections and story-types in mainstream media.

Finally, topical comparisons of various countries are quite rare, thus a comparison of the media situation in Estonia and Finland is an interesting and worthwhile addition to the research field – even more so because the majority of earlier studies are based on English-language media. We worked with Estonian- and Finnish-language media.

MATERIAL AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This article is based on a one-month (April 2020) comparative observation of media content in three Estonian and three Finnish mainstream media sources (two daily newspapers and one weekly women's magazine) along with some salient examples from an earlier period. The viewed Estonian media consisted of the largest daily Estonian newspapers *Õhtuleht* and *Postimees*, and a weekly women's magazine *Naisteleht*. The Finnish media studied were daily newspapers *Helsingin Sanomat* (the largest national newspaper) and *Iltalehti*, and a weekly women's magazine *Anna*. We included a popular women-oriented magazine from both countries to see if representations in a media source focusing directly on women are different from others, since several researchers have concluded that CAM practices attract more female than male users (e.g. Kemppainen et al. 2018: 451, 453; Sointu 2011; Sointu & Woodhead 2008). As proof of such a demand, *Naisteleht* was preparing to publish a special issue, *Mystics*, offering interviews with healers and shamans in May 2020, which was advertised in April. As to Estonian media, digital versions were used for the newspapers, and the print version for the weekly magazine. As for Finland, digital versions of the media equal to print versions were used. In the following we cite our media material following the model PM5-11/4, where PM stands for the abbreviation of the media source, 5 for the number of the particular article that was given on a rolling basis, and 11/4 for the date when the article was published.

When the sample month was agreed as April 2020, we did not yet know that it would be the time of the COVID-19 virus spreading aggressively and also

affecting the media treatment of health issues. The timing of the collection of the research material had a relatively strong effect on what our material looks like. The material is thus coloured by and portrays the ways in which the three chosen print media give space and value to CAM in this very special time in these two Northern European countries.

Our approach was qualitative content analysis, which first identified the CAM-related content and the section of the newspaper/magazine in which it appeared, and then detected the tonality of articles, recurrent metaphors and motifs (e.g. symbols of war or fight against misinformation, self-development, lifestyle, myth-busting), the gender of people depicted in relation to CAM as well as agency and voice (who speaks in the name of whom, is the voice given to the practitioner/service-provider of a type of CAM, a doctor or professor of conventional medicine or a journalist). We also paid attention to the journalists' sources – whether they referred to a scientific article, another source or nothing. A descriptive grouping of statements enabled a thematic analysis. Our method draws on that of Teemu Taira, who studied the representations of and references to religion in Finnish newspapers over one week (Taira 2014; see also 2019).

As criteria for what to consider as material, we used a broad understanding of CAM: any topic related to medicine other than conventional medicine, anything mentioning complementary, alternative, spiritual, religious, natural healing, therapy or wellbeing. Thus, we use the term CAM in our article to describe heterogenous approaches of diagnostics, prophylactics, and treatments that are not scientifically approved (or in some cases even contradict the existing scientific understanding) – such as spiritual or energy healing, magic healing objects (e.g. semi-precious stones), breathing and meditation therapies. In our study, we also include the theme of anti-vaccination and deem the preventive and healing systems of traditional folk medicine (e.g. Ayurveda, Chinese and Tibetan traditional medicine, local traditional Estonian and Finnish folk medicine) as belonging to CAM. We define our theoretical understanding of CAM in the following chapter.

DEFINITIONS AND BOUNDARIES OF CAM IN RESEARCH AND MEDIA

Definitions of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) in research literature are numerous; the majority of them stress that CAM is not presently considered part of conventional/mainstream medicine (cf. Micozzi 2006 [1996]; Bauer 2007; Ernst et al. 2008: 2). There have been attempts to categorise various types of CAM by characteristic techniques (energy medicine,

mind-body medicine, herbal medicine, lifestyle-based preventive medicine, etc. (see, e.g., Dunne & Phillips 2010: 671; Kemppainen et al. 2018: 450), but the borders between these categories are blurry. Pekka Louhiala (2010: 115) has even concluded that because of the multifacetedness of therapies and blurred boundaries, "there seems to be no such thing as 'alternative medicine' in any meaningful sense". Some researchers still, in turn, try to differentiate between complementary and alternative medicine (the former being viewed as closer to conventional medicine); for example, Estonian medical professor Arvo Tikk finds that "some alternative medicines like manual therapy, acupuncture, osteopathy, aroma-, light- and music therapy are somewhat justified and accepted as part of medical interventions and, in the case of their targeted use, they are somewhat helpful and do not harm a person. These are called complementary medicine" (Tikk 2005: 294).

Hence, from the official healthcare perspective, the term 'complementary' may refer to a method that can be used alongside conventional medicine, whereas 'alternative' is understood as treatment used in place of conventional medicine. The category 'alternative medicine' is thus often used more critically by the representatives of the medical establishment because it can (at least seemingly) build on premises that contradict standard empirical and evidence-based approaches (see Gale 2014; Green 2018). In the actual individual use of various health approaches, the picture is seldom as black and white because "therapeutic practices and discourses can be productively conceptualised as diverse, situated, and context-specific 'assemblages' that may be politicising or depoliticising, individualising or collectively oriented, commonly welcomed or shunned by the public imaginary – and, of course, many of these things simultaneously" (Salmenniemi et al. 2020: 2).

The fact that there is not one single indubious understanding of CAM among doctors, cultural and social researchers, alternative practitioners or CAM users (cf. a similar conclusion by Tovey & Easthope & Adams 2003: 2) is understandable because the subject's borders are changing in time with new regulations, trends, and visibilities, mirroring important social and cultural power relations (Gale 2014; Lüddeckens & Schrimpf 2018: 14; Vuolanto et al. 2020). Thus, boundaries of medicine and science are not determined by their intrinsic nature, but rather by the ways in which society, in a given period, defines them – a negotiation process going hand in hand with societal changes (see a similar thought by Jacob 2015: 357). Our material showed active boundary-work between science and other knowledge systems concerning the relationship of science with non-science, religion, magic, irrationality, New Age and other systems of knowledge considered unscientific (see also Vuolanto 2013: abstract;

246–269). Even in geographically, politically and, in some respects, religiously similar countries, societal and media attitudes can be somewhat different, as we noticed in our examples from Estonia and Finland.

ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTED MATERIAL

Estonia

There was almost an equal number of positive and negative CAM mentions (26/57 negative, 28/57 positive and 3/57 ambivalent). However, it was remarkable how the three Estonian media sources differed in the tone in which they depicted the topic.[1] Most of the articles related to CAM were full, long articles, only a few of them focused on other topics, containing some short references to CAM.

Table 1. *Tonality in the Estonian sample of 57 articles.*

Source	*Postimees* (mainstream newspaper)	*Õhtuleht* (tabloid)	*Naisteleht* (women's weekly)
Negative	11	14	1
Positive	0	17	11
Neutral	1	2	0
Total	12	33	12

Postimees (PM)

All articles in the mainstream newspaper PM had a connection with COVID-19, often taking a moralistic tone regarding alternative forms of medicine that were repeatedly called "dangerous". PM posted five full articles on CAM-related topics that depicted folk or alternative medicine in foreign countries – all in a clearly critical othering and exoticising tone. The titles of this article set include, for example: "Peculiar occurrences and unbelievable stupidity go hand in hand with corona crisis" (PM1-1/4). It is repeated three times in PM1-1/4 that the described activities used against coronavirus (e.g., drinking cow's urine, showering disinfectant on people, using special shopping orders) are "peculiar", once that they are "silly and peculiar", and the opinion that "India seems to be an especially good soil for oddities" also makes an appearance. There is a clear

boundary between CAM and belief on the one hand, and science on the other hand, putting CAM and belief into a negative light, e.g. in sentences like "For many Hindus, belief is stronger than the voice of scientists" (PM1-1/4). Nameless experts are cited representing the voice of science.

A retrospective article about Ebola in Africa in 2014 (PM2-4/4) gives a polarised and absolutising description of Liberian society: "There was a clear divide between belief and science, many [Liberians] had no earlier contact with Western science-based medicine because they were cured by local wise men and women." In another article about Africa (PM3-6/4), the author, who is given the title 'expert of Africa', mentions that "according to a wide-spread myth [in Africa], COVID-19 is a white man's disease," thus degrading a local hypothesis as 'myth' and leaving no space for the possibility that some local people may not share this belief. The article is illustrated with a photograph from a slum, thus connoting poverty and non-civilization in relation to people who believe in 'myths', and at the same time creating a one-sided othering picture as if all of Africa consists of slums. The author claims that because of the African belief that "Africans are immune to corona because they are God's children, the virus can start spreading in Africa even faster than in Europe," creating the polarised opinion as though there were no comparable beliefs in Europe. Othering claims referring to extreme stupidity occur again, e.g. in this sentence: "It is actually Zimbabwe from where the weirdest claims related to corona come, for example, when people gather in a church, they go directly to hell", picking out the most absurd-sounding beliefs to represent the African reaction. Bringing an example of one extreme form of CAM as representative of the absurdity of all types of CAM has occurred in several articles.

One article (PM7-18/4) claims that during the corona crisis, the need for cat and dog meat has increased in Asia "because people believe in the healing abilities of dog and cat meat". The sentence talks in an absolutising way about 'people', presenting the opinion that everybody in Asia shares this belief, and simultaneously creating a negative connection between local health behaviour and beliefs. The article offers another absolutising claim, saying that "health workers talk to patients routinely about the usefulness of cat and dog meat", as if all health workers in Asia give such advice on a daily basis. In this context, the health workers are not representing science or scientific medicine, but there is still boundary-work with science – the article repeats twice that there is no scientific proof of the healing abilities of such meat. Again, acting as a contrasting counterpart to those who use CAM, nameless 'experts' give a warning in the article about "spreading dangerous diseases" by "keeping large numbers of animals in cages and killing them non-hygienically", bringing additional connotations with non-purity and danger.

One article (PM4-8/4) describes a popular Ukrainian-born healer who is called a charlatan healer and an alleged miracle healer. PM4-8/4 gives a retrospective overview of his popular TV healing shows in the Soviet times and his new activity during the corona crisis. The disparaging tone makes allusions with madness and danger, for example: "Ukrainian-born healer, who turned people mad (allegedly also literally) 30 years ago, posted a new healing séance on his YouTube channel a week ago, which has now been watched 350,000 times". Later, there are clear hints to charlatanism, greed, and the need for scepticism, e.g. conclusions that "some of his séances are comical", he "obviously sees crises as a possibility to make money", "we should be sceptical of his healing abilities", and "it is clear that his words do not help against corona".

Articles about local situations also often create polarised negative depictions of groups related to some types of CAM, exposing them to the backdrop of science or conventional medicine. For example, an article in the humour section makes jokes about the stereotypes related to the anti-vaccine movement (PM5-11/4). The humourist takes over the role of an anti-vaccination activist, talking in the first person. First, he hints at the simplified stereotypical understanding, according to which anti-vaxxers only get information via Internet search engines: "I have googled so much that I have become an expert in the medical field and I'm completely well oriented in the topic." Secondly, he claims that according to anti-vaxxers, COVID-19 did not disappear because of vaccinations "but because of smearing with goose fat and using vodka socks, strengthened by a Christian worldview and traditional family values", which is at the same time a hint at the beliefs and values allegedly held by Estonian conservative party EKRE. In conclusion, the humourist says that the fact that viruses pass without vaccines is as sure "as the fact that the Earth is flat", making a rhetorical hint at a much disputed belief that has become a symbol of silliness and naivety in Estonia. Another article (PM11-27/4) written by an Estonian politician hints at the goose fat cure, putting it in the context of scarce school education and thus equating its use with simple-mindedness.

Several times, the articles clearly call some types of CAM that have become popular during the corona crisis 'false', 'false beliefs' or 'fake news', e.g. an article is titled "Fake news having a golden time" (PM9-25/4). On the other end of the scale are experts who correct these beliefs. For example, a woman named an 'expert' in an article title (PM10-27/4) – although the text later reveals that she is a junior researcher, which, in the research hierarchy, is not considered a very high-level expert – says that if someone were to inject disinfectant (which US President Donald Trump jokingly suggested), "it is highly probable that it would kill us". In the next sentence she adds that "the same applies to spirits and various alcoholic drinks if someone would try to use them internally for

inactivating the virus", and also to chloride (MMS) use. There seems to be a conscious attempt to signal that certain types of CAM can kill. In another article (PM8-21/4), the WHO warns that "alcohol does not protect against viruses and consuming it during epidemics may even decrease the ability of the immune system to fight viruses". The only somewhat positive mention of alternative approaches in PM comes from a psychologist who suggests that when a person in a crisis feels that a method is helpful to them, it is acceptable to use even meditative practices or superstition to help decrease anxiety and fear (PM4-8/4).

It was characteristic of articles in PM that a voice was almost never given to the practitioners of CAM and, if at all, only in a short expression that was later reframed by the journalist. CAM was mostly opposed in favour of science or evidence-based medicine.

Õhtuleht (ÕL)

The tabloid ÕL used a wider spectrum of tones and characterisations of CAM. However, most articles can still be classified into three categories: entertainment, teachings of living (mainly given in a positive tone and bringing 'softer' examples of CAM that are accepted in the society), and moralistic warning (always served in a strongly pejorative or sarcastic tone, supported by negative epithets and rather extreme examples). Interestingly, even authors who were sarcastic towards CAM used figurative language referring to mystics and religion to describe the corona crisis situation. For example in ÕL2-1/4, an older journalist styling herself as 'aunty' said: "Aunty has the feeling that the gods have organised a roundtable discussion and decided that something should be done to hinder the unstoppable growth of the population and the even more unstoppable growth of environmental pollution". In ÕL19-23/4, a well-known doctor (with the epithet 'PhD of medical sciences') writes, in metaphorical language, about the possibility that the tuberculosis vaccine helps protect against coronavirus: "But possibly, there is one more protective angel who protects us against this wicked COVID-19 virus."

As in PM, five moralistic articles published in ÕL within this period contain rather extreme or ridiculous-sounding examples of alternative medical approaches from foreign cultures (e.g., using bear bile to cure corona in China – ÕL3-1/4; a goat owner covering the faces of his goats with self-made protective masks to protect them from COVID-19 in India – ÕL8-9/4). In these articles, the main voice comes from the journalist who uses pejorative framings, such as "The impact of corona in Tajikistan is weird" (ÕL15-14/4) or announces in the title of the article that using bear bile is 'humbug' (ÕL3-1/4).

In several cases, there is negative connection drawn between CAM and religion, e.g. a sentence in ÕL14-14/4 sees causal relationships between corona and religion: "Bnei Barak is one of the most religious cities in Israel; unfortunately, this means that corona is spreading incredibly quickly there". The article describes in a moralistic tone how religion makes people passive and reluctant towards vaccinations, bringing the example of last year's measles epidemic in the orthodox areas of the USA where "the number of vaccinated children was very low, circa 77 percent".

Also in some other articles anti-vaccine ideals are equated with stupidity and danger; e.g. in ÕL12-11/4, an Estonian developer of vaccines says that the grassroots anti-vaccine campaign "is the biggest nonsense" and "if there were no vaccines, we would be attacked by serious epidemics which we have already forgotten but which are at least as dangerous, if not more dangerous than COVID-19". ÕL2-1/4 describes "fighting anti-vaxxers" who think that "vaccines are from the devil" and who "do not remember the terrible consequences of the polio epidemic". ÕL20-23/4 is about corona-deniers who promote "fake medicines like MMS". Additionally, the article mentions that an anti-vax social media group got 3000 new members in just a few weeks, concluding that "during pandemics, besides the virus, fake news is a big problem". ÕL20-23/4 cites 'scientists and other experts' who stress that such denier theories are not only absurd, but also dangerous. In ÕL1-1/4, there is talk about the "shopping boom of the COVID-19 'miracle medicine'", connoting that using a medicine whose effectiveness is not yet scientifically proven is irrational and dangerous.

The newspaper criticizes several times US President Donald Trump's sarcastic suggestion to use disinfectant internally (ÕL21-25/4, ÕL25-28/4) and one of his supporters promoting the use of bleach as a miraculous cure. ÕL21-25/4 additionally mentions the death of 300 people in Iran who died of methanol poisoning, and concludes that such cases show how dangerous the dissemination of such 'misinformation' can be.

In articles with a positive tone (e.g. describing exercises for reducing stress, increasing energy flow and creating mental balance), scientific language is often combined with a mystic vocabulary, and the border between curing illnesses and simply safeguarding wellbeing and pampering oneself is blurry. As visuality has become important in the written media, ÕL repeatedly reflected on a series of video shows titled 'Minutes of zing/energy shot', in which a man dubbed 'health guru' and 'health devotee' taught practices, such as Tibetan yoga (ÕL17-14/4), a "sexy stretch that helps let female and male energies flow" (ÕL22-28/4), and "fire breathing that makes our organs function well" (ÕL29-30/4) in an entertaining way. A couple of separate articles with a positive tone

are more information-oriented but still non-critically absolutising, praising yoga lectures for men (ÕL23-28/4) and "peaceful body-mind training" combining Tibetan sun-greetings and stretching "that suits all" (ÕL26-28/4). There were also some personal experience stories from healers, healing plant specialists and their family members, who described various health philosophies and practices (e.g., a well-known healing plant specialist teaches how to 'sense' which healing plant is right for you (ÕL24-28/4); a former journalist describes how she healed herself and later changed her profession to a kundalini yoga teacher (ÕL18-16/4); "a guru of conscious breathing" teaches how to overcome mental traumas with breathing techniques (ÕL11-10/4); the "best-known witch in Estonia" describes the most common problems that her patients have and also the risk for healers from working too much (ÕL6-3/4)).

In conclusion, similar to PM, critical articles in ÕL polarised science and evidence-based medicine against religion and CAM / traditional ways of healing, as seen in a boundary-creating comment by a journalist who printed an earlier interview with a 'miracle healer' and 'hypno-energo therapist-surgeon': "For April Fool's Day and because of the corona crisis, we remember miracle healers from earlier times. Attention! This is an entertaining article; in the case of health problems, please go to qualified doctors" (ÕL4-1/4). In articles with a positive tone, CAM connoted health and inner balance; yet in articles with a negative tone, CAM connoted danger, fanatic belief, and stupidity. In all articles with a positive tone, a voice was given to CAM practitioners; however, in articles with a negative tone, a voice was given to the journalist or someone called 'expert'.

Weekly magazine Naisteleht (NL)

The articles related to CAM in NL can be classified mainly into the category 'teachings of living'. The journalistic framing of CAM (mostly rather 'soft' types that are accepted in the wider society as lifestyles, e.g. mind-body exercises, meditation, astrology) is positive, even the chief editor of the magazine sometimes uses somewhat mystical language, e.g. "the virus came to teach us something" (NL1-1/4). According to one article, we should perceive even the tiny details of everyday life "as a miracle and a blessing" (NL7-8/4). NL contains almost no contrasting rhetoric that would oppose CAM and conventional medicine or science; religion is also described in a rather positive tone. There are longer interviews with an astrologist titled 'the first lady of astrology in Estonia' (NL3-1/4), a pastor (NL2-1/4), and an ex-criminal (NL11-22/4), who talk about their life philosophies that contain opinions about coronavirus but also tips for finding

and maintaining inner balance. For example, the ex-criminal describes how he wrote letters of forgiveness to all people in order to achieve peace of mind.

Five of the articles are from the weekly series of *Avesta* – a calendar written by an Estonian numerologist, allegedly based on ancient Zoroastrian teachings. *Avesta* also contains health tips related to the moon – e.g., which organs can be strengthened, or which medical treatment gives better results during a waxing moon. Every week, it also gives a list of body parts and organs that are more vulnerable on specific days and thus need special protection.

The activities for keeping good health are sometimes described as a luxury, e.g., according to the description, a made-in-Estonia relaxing app helps preserve mental health and offers a "spa-experience for the senses" (NL6-2/4). There is only one article with a somewhat negative tone that analyses vernacular health tips during the corona crisis, revealing them as 'myths' that do not work, but the connotation of danger is not present here.

Finland

In the Finnish material, we found mentions of CAM in 51 articles during our sample month. The three Finnish media sources showed some differences in the tone in which they depicted the topic, so that in both *Anna* (women's weekly) and *Iltalehti* (tabloid), most of the mentions were presented in a positive tone (9/12 in Anna and 11/15 in IL). The mainstream newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* differed in that it gave somewhat less positive representations (14/24), meaning that around one-third of its depictions were either critical or ambivalent. All in all, neutral/ambivalent mentions were rare: only two in HS, none in IL, and one in *Anna*.

Table 2. *Tonality in the Finnish sample of 51 articles.*

Source	*Helsingin Sanomat* (mainstream newspaper)	*Iltalehti* (tabloid)	*Anna* (women's weekly)
Negative	8	4	2
Positive	14	11	9
Neutral	2	0	1
Total	24	15	12

We will provide an analysis of the contents, context, and tone of the CAM presentations as well as the voice and boundary-work used in the construction of the representations. There are similarities with the Estonian material; however, our Finnish findings seem slightly less colourful and extreme in comparison. We give our observations starting from the biggest daily newspaper and first present the more positive and after that the more critical tones and framings, paying attention to boundary-work along the way.

Helsingin Sanomat (HS)

The mainstream newspaper HS had very few articles in which a CAM-related topic was the main one,[2] and most of them were feature stories. More often, CAM was present in the text as a shorter mention. We also observed different rhetoric uses of CAM in the material. In the very first observation of the sample month, there was a feature article on a male mentalist (HS1-2/4). Since mentalism is a lesser-known skill or profession to many Finns, mentalist was differentiated from a spiritual medium in the text. There was thus negative, or critical, boundary-work towards a form of traditional or vernacular CAM practice. To counterbalance this, mindfulness was mentioned in a very positive tone as an important mental and wellbeing practice for the interviewee.

There were also other feature stories in the HS material portraying well-known people such as actors, musicians, and athletes, both men and women, who talked, more or less in passing, about their mindfulness and yoga practices or, much more rarely, their religiosity or spirituality (HS2-4/4, HS7-14/4, HS9-15/4). There were several mentions of yoga, meditation, and especially mindfulness, and they were all given in a positive tone (HS1-2/4, HS12-18/4, HS17-24/4, HS19-25/4, HS21-27/4, HS23-30/4, HS24-30/4). This positive portrayal was generally framed as a secular personal wellbeing device. In many of these articles, mindfulness especially was described in psychological terms as a useful, scientifically based and validated means of reducing stress and enhancing emotional skills – both being deemed as important wellbeing tools in a time of crisis such as the COVID-19 epidemic. In one article mindfulness was also recommended for small children (HS12-18/4). Meditation received positive mentions in articles whose topic was the sauna (HS23-30/4) and audio books (HS19-25/4) – meditation audio books were recommended to be listened to at a slower speed than some other literary genres, thus emphasising their special content or use. There was also one long interview with well-known historian and non-fiction writer Yuval Noah Harari, who was said to practice Vipassana meditation on a daily basis (HS5-11/4). The article also recounted

Harari having commented on the present COVID-19 crisis by saying that it will make even religious leaders rely more on science.

Some feature stories in HS described less publicly legitimised, scientifically anchored, and secularised CAM methods, and sometimes made use of them in rhetorical ways. In a feature article on a popular female TV host and her sister, the interviewee jokingly says that she has tried to 'inflict' alternative (she uses the word 'humbug') thinking on her sister (without success) and that she has given energy-healing to her own husband (HS2-4/4). Another full-length feature story (entitled "The alchemist of male souls") on a male wellbeing coach makes rhetorical use of an "ancient Finnish witchcraft ritual" in its depiction of the special outlook of the topic and the featured male (HS11-weekly supplement 23/4). There was one more critical mention of yoga in a column in which the columnist writes about India and gives space to well-known writer Arundhati Roy's widely circulated text which sharply contrasts the yoga videos shared by the Indian prime minister with the abuse of homeless migrant workers during the COVID-19 regulations (HS10-16/4), thus indicating that the head of the state puts more emphasis on middle-class wellbeing than the suffering of lower-class citizens.

With a clearly critical tone and framing, there was a long column on the use of crystals and semi-precious stones which are popular in some new spiritual practices (HS3-5/4). The long title of the column summarises its content: "Stones bigger than life: The popularity of new spirituality grows, and so does the market of crystals. These beautiful stones have their darker side." The criticism in this article is not only targeted towards spirituality as a worldview and commercial phenomenon, but also its connection to the exploitation of third-world mineral resources and workforce. Therefore, we might say that the article applied a post-colonial frame.

As the media often circulates and comments on other media, HS commented on a column published in the national broadcasting company by a well-known academic, essayist, and self-identified atheist who often openly critiques religion and spirituality and non-scientific worldviews. His column entitled "Truth returns to the time of post-truth" emphasised the "return of rationality" and declared how "even alternative folk returns from silver water to hand disinfectant" (HS8-15/4) in the pandemic. His voice and position as a public intellectual and thought leader, making very visible boundary-work, is noteworthy in this context.

The overall content of the HS material during the sample month was very strongly pro-science. This became clear both in the ways in which mindfulness and yoga were framed and justified by science and in the great volume of articles and news related to the medical framing of COVID-19. We did not collect all of

the material in our sample, but in some of the articles CAM-related topics were taken up in a critical tone and contrasted with science. One such article, on the development of a vaccine and medicine against coronavirus, draws a sharp contrast between two blocks in the contemporary world, one being those (good modern) countries in which "the only common god is handwash" and the other (less developed) countries in which the "healthcare system and larger society function very much on prayers alone" (HS6-12/4). Hence, polarisation between science and medicine on the one hand and religion and traditional ways of healing on the other hand was present, even if our HS material did not give much independent space to the latter.

Iltalehti (IL)

Like HS, the Finnish tabloid (IL) also featured some stories, often in the lifestyle section, on individuals and their practice of yoga, meditation, mindfulness or spirituality (IL2-4/4, IL5-14/4, IL8-18/4, IL10-21/4, IL11-23/4). Some of these articles, categorisable as art of living, were about new work-life phenomena or the change of profession of individual interviewees; one such article was titled "From hobby to work" (IL2-4/4). These articles gave a voice to the interviewees, both male and female, and depicted mostly positive aspects of their (new) way of life. There were also tips on how to practice yoga by video connection and how to use mindfulness for learning not to touch your face in order to prevent infection (IL9-18/4, IL12-26/4). One article mentioned the popular KonMari method for organising life by getting rid of unnecessary material possessions (IL8-18/4). More general articles wrote about how different kinds of stress-reduction techniques, such as breathing techniques or emotion-work methods, can be learned and integrated into one's daily life, and also how they may become useful in the time of the epidemic and isolation (IL1-3/4, IL14-28/4). In the IL material, there were a couple of mentions of the potential positive effects of vitamin D and organic medicine (IL4-14/4, IL6-16/4). We found one long feature article that gave space to the topic of sex as a form of healing (IL3-11/4). There was one short positive mention of clairvoyance (IL5-14/4) as well as one mention of premonition dreams (IL11-23/4), both in the context of interviews with well-known female individuals.

IL circulated and made use of a comment made by the Finnish prime minister who had said that, in the present COVID-19 situation, Finland does not need a crystal ball, but rather a useful road map (IL7-17/4). The columnist comments that this is a positive approach since "a crystal ball is a humbug method of a clairvoyant and we do not need that". Here we can see very clear

boundary-work between humbug methods and what is considered sound politics. The most critical tone towards CAM-related topics in IL is seen when the journal recounts and reflects on US President Donald Trump's suggestion to use disinfectant (MMS) internally, and on some of his supporters who promote the use of bleach as a miraculous cure (IL13-11/4).

Weekly magazine Anna (A)

In the women's weekly *Anna*, the topics were mostly similar to those found in the newspapers and, as in Estonia, were mostly portrayed in a positive tone. Mindfulness, meditation, yoga as well as other breathing or mind-body practices were portrayed and framed in very positive ways and often presented in connection with wellbeing methods such as sport. In *Anna*, however, there was more variety present than in the newspapers and even versions of CAM, such as dream maps, numerology, sauna therapy, laugh therapy, and astrology were mentioned – representations were given in both positive and more critical tones (A1-2/4, A2-2/4, A3-8/4, A5-8/4, A9-22/4).

As women's magazines give relatively much space to feature stories, we found several articles that involved CAM in the lives of the individuals portrayed (mostly women). One unemployed actress recounted how she had studied as a sauna therapist and built a therapy room in her home, and how she wanted to continue to study to become a laugh therapist, too (A5-8/4). A female ex-model and chef mentioned her interest in yoga, but also how she has seldom time for it (A10-29/4) – as if yoga was something that needed to be mentioned positively in such an article and context. In a special section for recounting ordinary women's life stories, there was a one-page biography of a woman who had first studied as an engineer but later became interested in complementary and alternative medicine and, since she liked the exactitude of numbers, educated herself in numerology (A9-22/4).

The tone, however, is not always positive in the articles in the Finnish women's weekly. There were two articles that took a reserved or critical stance towards CAM. One of them mentioned methods such as dream maps, palm-reading, and astrology, saying that it is psychologically understandable that people turn to them in critical times of life and that these methods may be therapeutic but that they are often non-realistic (A3-8/4). In another article, a well-known female psychologist cautions against the 'over-positivity' that she finds has become a new 'mantra' and reminds the reader of the important lesson that life is not entirely in one's own hands (A7-22/4). There is also a long article entitled "Too good to be true", which writes explicitly about the dangers

of complementary and alternative medicine in its different forms and manifestations, such as health business, those who decline vaccinations, black salve, silver water, cancer-inducing bras and fake media (A11-29/4). As if to counterbalance this clearly critical article, the same issue in *Anna* includes a column by a known female entrepreneur and ex-politician, who writes in favour of self-help literature and mentions, for example, her important contemporary Buddhist teachers (A12-29/4).

In summary, it can be said that this Finnish women's weekly seems to balance the pros and cons of CAM as part of contemporary culture and women's everyday lives. *Anna* also gives more voice to the practitioners of CAM than IL and HS. Together with the other two Finnish media sources, *Anna* respects the authority of science but also understands non-scientific worldviews better than HS and IL, thus confirming research findings about women's interest in medicine, CAM, and spirituality.

REPRESENTATION MODELS: POLARISATIONS AND CONTRASTS

Representations are a way of attaching meaning to something that, in a broader sense, cocreate cultural attitudes and even culture as such (cf. Hall 1997: 3). However, media representations are often based on a limited number of contrasts and story lines that have similarities with folk narratives. As Clive Seale (2003: 518) points out, the media – similarly to folk narratives – often works by creating and then exploiting oppositions that are based on classical, even archetypal, opposites like heroes and villains, pleasure and pain, safety and danger, clean and dirty, orthodox and alternative. Studies from various countries have pointed to the opposing sensationalism or tabloidisation that occurs in media reports about CAM (cf. Bonevski & Wilson & Henry 2008; Seale 2003: 518). Some authors have concluded rather positively that tabloidisation enables democratic participation in the public sphere through the popularisation of otherwise complex areas, thus drawing in more participants than in the case of long and nuanced scientific representations (Seale 2003: 519). On the other hand, Norman Fairclough (2015 [1989]: 80) finds that in the media rhetoric, contrasting representations, interpretations, and wordings express and serve the interests of society's power-holders, though they appear to be those of the newspaper.

We agree that it can be true in some cases. For example, in several Estonian and some Finnish test period articles about the corona crisis, divisive epithets were used to demarcate the roles of the respective persons – 'experts' (often

without any name or professional background listed) who represented the official medical interpretation of COVID-19 along with the respective preventative and curing methods, whereas 'deniers', 'opposers', and 'believers' signalled those using unacceptable alternative theories of the disease and/or alternative healing practices. For example, an Estonian article describing a TV debate was titled "Corona denier Jaya Shivani Kracht", and had the following opening lines:

> *Who are corona deniers and does their story contain even a single gram of truth? Why do people who seem to be intelligent and are well known doubt universally acknowledged truths? This week's* [i.e. 22 April] *TV show 'Pealtnägija' confronts official experts and corona sceptics*. (ÕL20-23/4)

Later, a powerful danger symbol already familiar from previous years' Estonian media debates comes into play when the article mentions that Kracht's texts invite people to use MMS. Such symbols and epithets put the journalist in a power position, enabling them to create, against a backdrop of "universally acknowledged truths" and "official experts" (ÕL20-23/4), a demonised opponent. Certain repeated types of CAM (e.g. MMS, anti-vaccination) act as alarms that automatically connote danger and (semi-religious) extremism, thus experts are stereotypically cited as 'fearing' that CAM will cause harm, 'warning' of CAM and seeing it as 'dangerous' (also observable in ÕL2-1/4, ÕL12-11/4, PM4-8/4, IL13-27/4, etc.). Although warnings can indeed be justified in some respects, we agree here with Clive Seale, who exemplifies that the strongly negative depiction of certain groups or illnesses can increase respective fears in low-risk groups but tends to leave the opinions of high-risk groups unchanged (Seale 2002: 5).

Several other authors have also found that in the media rhetoric against alternative medicine, the accusation of being a believer is used as a rhetorical strategy to delegitimise opponents and imply that they are gullible (Caldwell 2017: 393) – thus believing is expressed here as a negation of reliance on accepted science and mainstream press (e.g., HS6-12/4 reporting that in some countries praying is the only form of healthcare). However, our material showed that in the case of an attractive personality or message, the representatives of alternativity can sometimes be given a voice in the media without any othering or demonising epithet, depending on the tonality of the article.

TONE, VOICE, AND AGENCY

Although media studies have applied three categories – positive, negative, neutral – to describe the tonality of their sample articles (Taira 2014, 2019), it became clear on the basis of the Estonian material that articles about CAM

with completely neutral tonality are rare – either outright opinions or more implicit connotations contained in the text make them belong either under positive or negative tonality. Depending on the position on the positive-negative axis, sub-tonalities like 'ironic-ridiculing', 'danger- and fear-mongering', and 'heroic-praising' were observable, especially in the Estonian material. In the articles with negative tonality, the use of CAM is ascribed to simpleminded and gullible persons, e.g. in the recent years of the media debate against the use of MMS, the newspapers have repeatedly used epithets like "simpletons who believed that MMS was a miracle remedy" (Delfi 2019). Such media content resonates with online users' commentaries, such as: "It's hard to make clear to the stupid users that this substance is not meant for curing" or "If you are really so foolish and eat all kinds of stuff, the taxpayers should not pay for you when you need treatment – this money should come from the pocket of the fool" (ibid.). The Finnish material was often quite positive towards what we might characterise as secularised forms of CAM (particularly yoga and mindfulness) or CAM when reported in the context of feature stories. This positivity, however, could perhaps be further specified as positive-neutral since it was rather more appropriately described and reported (as part of a specific context or as practiced by the featured individual) than enthusiastically applauded.

Several studies show that the repeated tonality of media representation can indeed have a deciding role in directing real-life processes, as became clear in an article (Caldwell 2017: 380) that described how, in the years 1999–2009, media coverage of a vigorous campaign from scientists in the UK against the degree courses in homeopathy finally resulted in the expulsion of the courses from the curriculum (e.g. the constant use of rhetorical strategies stressing contrasts, such as rationality versus faith and logic versus magic, which had been used in media reports previously).[3] Caldwell also noticed a shift from positive to disparaging tonality in homeopathy descriptions when she compared media reports from 2007 and 2011 (2017: 394). However, even if much of our material was relatively pro-science, conventional medicine is not always described more positively than CAM. The authors of an analytical survey of UK media reports (four daily newspapers on four randomly chosen days) on medicine found that coverage of CAM was much more positive than coverage of mainstream medicine (Ernst & Weihmayr 2000: 707).

Understandably, the media usually does not bother to offer comprehensive definitions of CAM but still gives clear, often absolutising hints about what CAM is and which types of CAM are acceptable or dangerous, although such differentiations can vary from one report to another (e.g. based on the tonality of a given report) and over the course of time. Additionally, in our material, there were some approaches that were considered more alternative in media

reports – e.g., energy healing, MMS use, coronavirus denying, and the anti-vaccine movement, some of which have developed into powerful media and colloquial catchwords with negative connotations (e.g., dubbing people who are not following conventional quarantine rules as *kovidioodid* (cov-idiots) in Estonia). Less alternative and bordering on mainstream practices were various vitamin and antioxidant complexes, yoga, mindfulness, chiropractic, acupuncture – although, in Estonian media, more so than in Finnish, some representations of yoga stressed the mystic features (e.g. fire practices of a yoga master).

Depending on the tonality of the article, well-known practitioners of CAM can be depicted as having extraordinary skills or being stupid and unscientific. We also observed that in the case of negative media representations, practitioners were less directly quoted than in positive representations. In the test period, Estonian newspaper *Õhtuleht* launched a positively connoted web TV series titled *Särtsuminutid* (Minutes of zing/energy shot) with a charming 'health guru' who gave exercise instructions. Such emblematic depictions do not leave space for the possibility that a person can act differently in various situations and roles or that the use of CAM can vary from person to person – for some users being a rather technical or medical aid tool, for others a sacred means. Another Estonian example is well-known astrologist Igor Mang, who was heavily condemned in the media in 2018 because of a harassment affair, yet he was again depicted as a hero and given more voice in the media during the COVID-19 crisis in relation to allegedly having been able to foretell the pandemic.

BOUNDARY-WORK

Scientific-unscientific debate

Boundary-work between CAM and science was very much present in the material from both countries, and one of the most common conflict lines in media discussions on CAM lies on the axis of scientific-unscientific (cf. Saks 2011 [1999]: 381, who notes in the context of England that this rhetoric axis has occurred in medical disputes since the nineteenth century).

As was shown above in the context of Estonian corona deniers, the rhetoric and metaphors of unscientificness and stupidity are often combined with the language of danger and criminality. For example, Estonian Minister of Social Affairs Tanel Kiik, in a 2019 interview, called alternative curing methods in general *uhhuu-meditsiin* (mumbo-jumbo medicine), and his words were also widely shared in the media (e.g. in newspaper *Eesti Ekspress* (Vedler & Moora 2019)). Both Estonian and Finnish articles from the test period mentioned

alternative approaches such as "humbug" or "mumbo-jumbo" (ÕL3-1/4; IL7-17/4; HS8-15/4; A11-29/4). Stressing that modern biomedicine, in comparison with alternative medicine, is scientific, provides a pivotal axis for distinguishing it from primitive and outmoded alternative therapies (c.f. Saks 2011 [1999]: 386). More positive boundary-work was underway when mindfulness and meditation were often clearly placed on the side of science and depicted as distinct from religion, and this was supported by giving voice to scientific and intellectual authorities.

However, research has not found a real correlation between CAM and low education (see, e.g., Ruggie 2004: 55). On the contrary, recent research on the use of CAM in Europe reports more interest among the population with a higher socioeconomic position (Kemppainen et al. 2018: 454), and some interviews conducted in Estonia showed that there are no CAM users who would use all types of CAM, despite the impression created by the media that corona deniers, vaccination opposers, and all others build a homogenous 'other' against a scientific worldview.

CAM and religion debate

In recent decades, several healing systems that are originally rooted in a particular cultural-religious tradition have become available in a global marketplace, whereby the media often serves as the first introducer of respective information. However, in public discussions, overtly spiritual and esoteric topics are still mostly met with scepticism and disdain (see a similar observation in Uibu 2013: 14; Koski 2016: 19–21), and CAM practices grounded in new spiritualities or modern forms of religiosity often give rise to jokes and parodies (cf., e.g., Heelas 2008: 12), as has been the case with corona pandemics. Some well-known medical scientists have therefore denied any reason for CAM, considering it rather a religious matter (ibid.). The boundaries between alternative medical approaches and broader philosophical-esoteric worldviews tend to be fuzzy, and the media often depicts CAM in relation to religious beliefs. However, simple herbal cures like linden blossom tea for fever are not presented as CAM, but rather pragmatic folk wisdom which connotes a naturality that in media rhetoric is mostly deemed safe (cf. Ernst 2008: 528).

In Estonian and Finnish media, there were several forms of CAM in which the scientific, medical, and psychological language use was interwoven with religious vocabulary, signifying certain spiritual worldviews, concepts, and practices. This tendency became clear even with illustrations – both Estonian and Finnish newspaper articles representing views of conventional medicine were

often illustrated with photographs of people in white medical attire, microscopes or the magnified virus; however, especially in Estonian cases, descriptions of CAM were illustrated by ethno-religious symbols, connoting (exoticised) closeness to religious and spiritual ideas.[4]

In our April test period, Estonian media especially published articles describing traditional folk-medicine and magic-based reactions to COVID-19 (e.g., PM1-1/4 about drinking cow's urine). In the Finnish material, we found the contrast built between countries that believe in high-level hygiene and those in which "healthcare and the whole society function very much on prayer alone" (HS6-12/4). However, metaphysical or religious backgrounds of certain types of CAM are also represented in articles with positive tonality (e.g., stressing the long traditions of Ayurveda or Chinese medicine). Yet, in negative representations, even 'soft' therapies may be called 'voodoo' or their practitioners 'sectarians', which, in an overtly secular society, creates a strong pejorative contrast effect. Remarkably, the word 'humbug' was used by critics as well as proponents and practitioners of CAM, thus indicating interesting cultural rhetorical negotiation.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PERSPECTIVES

Our comparison showed that mainstream Estonian mass media reports on CAM matters more frequently and with longer articles than Finnish media, but CAM is still visible in the media in both countries. There was a relatively equal number of findings in the two countries (57 in Estonia and 51 in Finland). In shorter reports with an informative focus as well as longer narrative reports, limited contrasting pairs of metaphors and rhetoric occurred, emphasising a sharp divide between scientific biomedicine and CAM. However, polls and interviews show that the majority of Estonian population uses both approaches, yet the proportion and grade of alternativeness may vary from rather 'soft' approaches (e.g. reading a magic health spell when giving antibiotics to a child) to 'hard' ones (e.g. using poisonous substances or refusing biomedicine in favour of the services of miracle healers). Our Finnish material gave significant space to scientifically legitimated forms of CAM (yoga and meditation and especially mindfulness) but contrasted some other forms of CAM very strongly with science. At the same time, a growing number of doctors themselves offer alternative therapies (usually certain limited types) or approve their use by patients (see a similar observation in Saks 2011 [1999]: 393; Uibu & Vihalemm 2017: 344). Thus, the coexistence of CAM and conventional medicine is obviously greater than the media suggests.

As for types of information, reports on CAM (including folk medicine) are much more frequently than reports on conventional medicine presented as entertainment or danger, the information tends to be given in the form of archetypical folk tale oppositions, and there are relatively few articles with an informative function or neutral tone. Such ways of information dissemination can make CAM journalistically more attractive than conventional medicine, e.g. some types of CAM are presented as a privilege, luxury or pleasure (e.g. with manual therapies, the aspects of pleasure and cure coexist). In comparison with reports on conventional medicine, the CAM toolkit contains more "symbols, stories, rituals and world-views" (Swidler 1986: 273) and employs the aspects of empowerment, emotional care, and mysticism, which are also depicted in media presentations. Thus, CAM can be framed as medicine as well as religion, entertainment or a scandal, having more versatile journalistic potential than conventional medicine.

On the other hand, the medicalisation of the body occurs in reports related to conventional medicine as well as CAM – quite normal bodily functions and conditions are presented as needing a cure (e.g., occasional feeling of energy loss or decreased interest in sex, feeling low during the COVID-19 quarantine). Such conditions tend to get more media attention than serious chronic diseases like cancer (cf. a similar observation in Kline 2006: 47).

Reception studies often presume that consumers are easily suggestible by the media. Kline concludes, based on a 10-year survey period of studies on health media representations, that popular media is not likely to facilitate understanding that is helpful to individuals coping with health challenges (Kline 2006: 44). Distributing ambivalent signals in the media and representing CAM one-sidedly is indeed potentially misleading, as health-related media content doubtlessly has a role and impact in forming the users' attitudes. However, it is unjustified to assume a straightforward process according to which positive CAM reports would increase their use and negative reports would stop people from using CAM. For example, it is unlikely that anybody in Estonia or Finland would ever try extreme health behaviours from faraway cultures, which were described in our media sample (e.g. eating cat and dog meat, drinking cow's urine), even if these were presented in a less condemned way. Decisions to move from passive interest into actual one-time or repeated CAM use are based on much more complex information processing (e.g. consulting Internet forums, talking to friends and relatives and hearing their personal success or horror stories, personal short-time testing). Even articles with negative connotations have an informative role that may trigger a person to seek further information, eventually leading to experimentation with a certain form of CAM, but also to withdrawal.

Insofar, only few authors acknowledge the need for more audience reception studies (e.g., Weeks & Strudsholm 2008: 8; see also a detailed reception study by Passalacqua et al. 2004) in order to find out about actual reception patterns in various groups (e.g., the patterns seem to vary in the case of serious chronic illnesses like cancer, compared with healthy persons who use CAM mainly because of a certain worldview and/or lifestyle). For example, several sample cases (e.g. negative media representation of corona deniers in Estonia) have shown that media witch hunts of certain alternative practitioners or substances may lead to even stronger support of these among respective communities and bring in new members. Therefore, media reception studies are one of the future perspectives to concentrate on. It would be especially interesting to conduct such research in a comparative research design and investigate the kind of similar and dissimilar attributions and orientations we would find in two or more societies.

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SOURCES

PM – newspaper *Postimees*, April 2020
ÕL – newspaper *Õhtuleht*, April 2020
NL – women's weekly *Naisteleht*, April 2020
HS – newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat*, April 2020
IL – tabloid *Iltalehti*, April 2020
A – women's weekly *Anna*, April 2020

NOTES

[1] Cf. an Australian study finding that 81.3 percent of representations of CAM in Australian women's magazines were positive (Dunne & Phillips 2010: 671).

[2] This is comparable to Taira's findings (2014) when he studied religion in Finnish newspapers: religion was present frequently, but mostly mentioned insignificantly.

[3] For relatively similar cases from Finland in the case of nursing training, see Vuolanto (2013).

[4] However, CAM is not viewed in a religious context everywhere; e.g. Dunne and Phillips (2010: 671) point to a sample of three Australian women's magazines that were analysed over a period of a few months in 2008, in which the media representations generally suggested that CAM "works in ways analogous to orthodox treatments" (ibid.). These authors also noted that their material contained very little coverage of types of CAM that use radically different notions of aetiology or illness, such as Ayurveda or QiGong (Dunne & Phillips 2010: 673, see a similar observation in cancer-related media content in Australia by Mercurio & Eliott 2011: 67). Supposedly because of representations similar to conventional medicine, there were no grounds to oppose CAM to orthodox medicine (see also Dunne & Phillips 2010: 673). Another author found that a general tendency in mass print magazines in the USA and Canada since 1980 has been the persistence of a biomedical perspective in articles about CAM; however, the proportion of articles on CAM increased twofold by the end of the second decade (Clarke et al. 2010: 127).

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"DOCTORS JUST DON'T CARE ABOUT PEOPLE!" HOW MEDICAL SPECIALISTS ARE DEPICTED IN A VACCINE-CRITICAL ESTONIAN FACEBOOK GROUP

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Abstract: Vaccine hesitancy as a great health risk is related to trust in health-care providers' recommendations and provider-parent interaction. The negative image of doctors and their motives may hinder open communication and trustful relationship. As the role of the internet as a source for health information and emotional support has become significant, social media discussions about health and medicine provide valuable opportunities to observe the formation of critical attitudes towards doctors and medicine. This article examines representations of medical specialists in an Estonian vaccine-critical public Facebook group. On the forum, doctors are depicted as dumb and blind believers who operate in a wrong paradigm and are not able to see the full and accurate picture of "real health". According to the group rhetoric, doctors' willingness to help parents and children is limited as they depend on a broader exploitive medical system or Big Pharma. As medical specialists are not trustworthy and do not take any responsibility, parents feel that they must closely control all the actions. The group members believe that it is better not tell the truth to doctors and, if necessary, to threaten them with law enforcement. Many of the forum posts are very emotional, illustrating the heavy burden parents perceive in taking vaccine-related decisions. The ridiculing of medical specialists has an empowering effect on patients to feel more in control. Forum posts emphasize common belonging and shared concerns. Therefore, social media is not only a stage for vaccine information but an active factor contributing to the circulation of meanings and enabling emotional support and community formation.

Keywords: anti-vaccine culture, childhood vaccination, doctor-patient relationship, health communication, internet forum, representation of doctors, vaccine hesitancy

As vaccine hesitancy has become one of the greatest health risks according to the World Health Organization (WHO 2019), the multifaceted phenomenon

of hesitant or refusing parents has been heavily studied (Dubé et al. 2018; Reich 2018 [2016]; Majid & Ahmad 2020). Despite numerous calls for potential interventions to increase vaccination rates (Smith 2017; Salmon et al. 2015), no strong evidence has been found to support any intervention that addresses vaccine hesitancy and refusal (Sadaf et al. 2013; Dubé et al. 2018). However, health professionals' important role in addressing parents' concerns and maintaining public trust in vaccination has been emphasized (Leask et al. 2012; Connors & Slotwinski & Hodges 2017). Trust in healthcare providers' recommendations and personalized provider-parent interaction are the main reasons why vaccine-hesitant parents might still decide to vaccinate their children (Yaqub et al. 2014; Connors & Slotwinski & Hodges 2017). The negatively biased images of doctors and their motives could hinder open communication and trustful relationship. As the role of the internet as a health information source has become significant, the present study examines representations of medical specialists in the stories that are posted in a vaccine-critical Facebook group.

In its broadest sense, vaccine hesitancy is a symptom of the erosion of trust in medicine and pharmaceutics. There are several social and cultural processes behind the hesitancy, such as a general distrust in big corporations and a pursuit of the natural and ecological (Attwell et al. 2017) as well as salutogenic lifestyle and parenting (Ward et al. 2017). Parents have become critical consumers of health services and products (Yaqub et al. 2014). Foremost, vaccine hesitancy is a problem of wealthy developed societies and privileged parents who have time and resources to execute "individualist parenting" (Reich 2018 [2016]). Also, the efficiency of vaccines is eroding the perception of their necessity: as vaccine-avoidable diseases have become rare, people do not perceive them as a threat.

In the review of 34 qualitative studies, Majid & Ahmad (2020: 1762) identified seven main factors influencing the decision not to vaccinate children: previous experiences; "natural" and "organic" lifestyle; perceptions of other parents' behaviour and attitudes; interactions with health care providers; information sources; distrust in health system players; and mandatory vaccine policies. Hesitancy and opposition to vaccines are supported by topical information channels on the internet (Tangherlini et al. 2016). Internet forum discussion topics cover most of the key factors for vaccination decisions (Majid & Ahmad 2020).

Having doctors as the main information source decreases hesitancy as compared to other sources (Yaqub et al. 2014). Increasingly, sharing information on online health platforms is taking over the role of expert knowledge by providing more opinions of "lay experts" (Prior 2003), as well as networks of other common people sharing their experiences (Griffiths et al. 2012; Bakke 2018). Internet forums have contributed to the growing diversity of "healthcare knowledge cultures" (Keeling & Khan & Newholm 2013). The increasing diversity in

the context of health has been depicted as postmodern fragmentation and the emergence of diverse microcultures (Thompson & Troester 2002). Alternative health-focused channels hold and support specific norms and regimes of normality and increase distrust in the medical system. Online health communities have proven to be the sources of knowledge and even more – of emotional and affective support (Oerle & Mahr & Lievens 2016). Participation creates social capital (Stewart Loane & Webster 2017); specific (speech) communities are formed that are characterized by common understandings, norms, and communication styles (Uibu 2012). Internet discussions on health allow people to take the expert role and address topics that could otherwise be ostracized (Kõiva 2009).

Many parents, especially the more vaccine-critical ones, claim to have the internet as an important source of information (Kender 2018). Parents' affective connection based on a similar position and easily relatable personal stories on internet sites may contribute to the adoption of certain beliefs and value positions (Tangherlini et al. 2016). The decision to vaccinate a child or refuse vaccines is highly relational: the proportion of non-vaccination attitudes in the members of the parents' network predicted their non-vaccination decision better than any other trait, even their own explicit attitudes towards vaccination (Brunson 2013). The deeper rationale for vaccine hesitancy in high-income countries is quite homogenous (Dubé et al. 2018). However, the medical system and cultural norms for health differ and create culture-specific patterns.

The present study focuses on Estonia – a country with a state-funded medical system and newly emerging forms of medical pluralism and anti-medicine discourses (Uibu 2020; Koppel & Uibu 2020). Already historically, compared to the consumerist healthcare models of the West, the Soviet-style "motherly" care involved high professional medical authority, mandatory regular medical check-ups, and administrative power given to doctors (Haug 1976), which caused feelings of paternalistic inequality and low personal agency of patients. Even the contemporary post-Soviet medical systems are still more normative than in the West; there is a much weaker sense of autonomy and the mentality of doctors' "independent profession" (Riska & Novelskaite 2011). "Paternalistic" and "consumerist" approaches in doctor-patient relationship have fundamental differences that can easily lead to conflicts (Beisecker & Beisecker 1993).

The polarization in the understandings about health and legitimate sources of health-related knowledge poses challenges for interactions between doctors and patients. Estonian healthcare professionals have been hostile towards alternative medicine and health approaches (Tikk 2005; Uibu 2020). Doctors who encounter anti-vaccine parents more often tend to become more intolerant and less willing to discuss their concerns (Leib & Liberatos & Edwards 2011). There

is an intense discussion held by Estonian medical specialists about "brainwashed" patients believing in the fraudulent CAM (Uibu & Koppel forthcoming). On the other hand, the emerging discourse by CAM proponents depicts "narrow-minded" physicians and medical science being corrupted by the Big Pharma (ibid.). These differences create communication barriers: for example, when patients perceive the hostility of the doctor towards CAM, they avoid telling about their CAM experiences and plans (Lubi & Vihalemm & Taba 2016).

Estonian vaccination policies are liberal: vaccines are not mandatory but strongly recommended.[1] Still, some ten years ago, the percentage of vaccinated children was well over the herd immunity requirement of 95 percent but has dropped since then. All the estimations based on different methodologies and data sets demonstrate a steady decline. Compared to 2009, 3 percent more parents refused to vaccinate in 2019 (Health Board 2020). According to doctors' official reports, all the vaccines were administered to less than half of the 8-year-olds and no vaccines to 6.5 percent. Parents' refusals were marked in 13.6 percent of all the children (Tamm et al. 2020).

Several anti-vaccine groups and people have emerged in Estonia in recent years; for example, NGO Estonian Parents of Vaccine Injured Children. In addition to several translated and published books, the internet has probably become the most important source of vaccine-related information. Among numerous vaccine-related posts in the most popular Estonian forum *Perekool* (Family school), vaccine-critical posts were proportionally strongly over-represented (Noorem 2015). Curiously, the forum *Perekool* belongs to the Estonian Midwives Association and should therefore be supposedly not biased towards anti-vaccine position. The content analysis of the forum posts suggests that the posters have settled attitudes towards vaccination and seek reassurance for their current beliefs and behaviour on the forum (Noorem 2015). It has been suggested that anonymous personal stories shared on the anti-vaccine Facebook forum may deepen the readers' distrust and fear of vaccines and healthcare workers (Mägi 2020).

The present study focuses on one lively community on the Estonian-speaking internet – a Facebook group dedicated to sharing information and discussing the adverse effects of medicine and vaccines. Considering the important role of medical experts in the vaccination process raises two main questions: (1) How do the group members depict medical specialists and medical system? and (2) What kind of suggestions and specific tools are shared for communicating with medical specialists?

METHODS AND THE SITE OF RESEARCH

The study is based on online ethnography and the analysis of the posts in the Estonian Facebook group *Ravimite ja vaktsiinide kõrvaltoimed* (Side-effects of medicines and vaccines).[2] I chose this specific group due to several reasons: it is fully public and has very active and numerous membership (ca 13,000 people by the end of 2020). The study could be placed most broadly under the discipline of health and medical anthropology which emphasizes "fundamental importance of culture and social relationships in health and illness" (Singer et al. 2019 [2007]: 8). Taking the online group as the main site of research, I have followed the principles of passive online/digital ethnography (Pink et al. 2016) and "netnography" (Kozinets 2019). However, the analysis of online material is strongly supported by my deeper familiarity with alternative health subcultures as my ethnographic fieldwork has included participation in offline events and interviews with people with alternative and anti-vaccine attitudes.

I have been a member of the "side effects" group almost since its foundation in 2017. My interest in the group grew out of my long-term research on Estonian spiritual and alternative "milieu" and a specific interest in health-related issues. During my fieldwork since 2011, I have been a member of social media groups for new spirituality, alternative medicine, and conspiracy theories, and have participated in thematic "offline" events (see a more detailed overview in Uibu 2016 and 2020). Internet has become an excellent fieldwork location for contemporary folklore to detect stories and narratives shared in various communities (Kõiva & Vesik 2009). The intensity of online health-related communication has led many ethnographers to observe the 'alternative lifestyle' online communities to analyse, for example, online narratives and behavioural intentions in health-related misinformation (Lavorgna & Myles 2021). Ethnographies of social media have become a developing field (Wilson 2019).

My low-intensity online ethnography in the "side effects" group involved reading and making notes during a longer period of two and a half years. In those observations I noticed regular occurrences of stories about personal encounters with doctors as well as specific instructions for how to handle these situations. Therefore, I examined these topics more systematically, with a focus on the depictions of doctors. The present study is based on a corpus of topical texts, consisting of 28 longer threads with comments (altogether 955 posts, most of them short).[3] Ten of these threads started with personal stories about vaccination experiences and side-effects, three were posted by the administrator as anonymous narratives. Using qualitative thematic analysis, I coded the texts and identified different elements characteristic of the depictions of medical specialists.

The "side effects" group is explicitly critical of vaccines and the medical system. Even the description of the group emphasizes its dedication to anti-vaccine information. The need for that is explained by the aggressive pro-vaccine campaigns and multitude of information available "from this side": as information in favour of medicines and vaccines can be found in official channels, this information is not disseminated in this group. The group does not aim to provide a platform for balanced information and critical arguments for different positions. It is presented and administered to be a haven for vaccine-critical opinions and experiences as the group's rules emphasize that they keep the focus on understanding and helping, not confrontation. Based on the argumentation analysis of the "side effects" group posts, it was concluded that highly emotional stories contained several argumentation and logical errors that were overlooked in the comments (Mägi 2020).

The important function of the group is to get and give advice and specific suggestions (including with diagnoses or health problems), but the group's description explicitly rejects any liabilities regarding the information shared:

> *The Facebook group does not offer professional advice. Its aim is to exchange information and broaden horizons. Each member of the group is responsible for what he or she says but is not responsible for anyone treating his or her story as something other than the free expression of a common citizen. The promoters or administrators of this group are not responsible for any ideas or advice posted here.*[4]

Although the group is positioned as a parents' forum, some active members and authors are professionally related to alternative medicine. The group had more than 13,000 members by the end of 2020. Although both men and women post on the forum, women tend to submit more stories about encounters with doctors and more emotional-personal information while men rather share conspiracy-type information.

The "side effects" group offers a great opportunity to see how vaccine-related discussions take place on a public platform. With an aim to attract attention and operate as an information source and promotion channel not only for the members but also on a broader scale, this group is maximally public so that anyone can see who is in the group and what they post, including non-registered users.

The research on (childhood) vaccines and the use of online discussion material is ethically sensitive. Despite the fact that all forum texts are public, I have followed several ethical considerations. I do not refer to any names. The posts are in Estonian, therefore, already the translation process eliminates the chance to search direct quotes on the forum. In addition, for more sensitive examples I have used quotes from anonymous stories. Therefore, translated quotes from

the forum do not lead to actual postings and even if it were somehow trackable, the anonymous stories could not be related to any specific person. Furthermore, I have deliberately focused on the rhetoric and meanings and do not go deeper into specific personal examples that could cause harm or reveal the identities of the writers. As my observations remained passive, I did not ask for informed consent forms from the group members as I felt that it would have been practically infeasible for 955 posts as well as disconcerting and too intrusive. Similar considerations have been followed in current research standards (Lavorgna & Myles 2021).

As the observation period included the beginning of the COVID pandemic, the dynamics and the proportion of the users' posts changed considerably due to the increasing amount of COVID-related material. The virus information comes mainly from international conspiracy-theory and "alternative" groups and websites. Due to these posts, the dynamic of the group has changed, containing more information from international sources, conspiracy-related memes, and clips. Also, the dangers of COVID tests (and the mandatory nature of those) and vaccines are heavily and very emotionally discussed. However, stories about encounters with doctors and specific questions still remain on the forum despite its shift towards COVID-related material and conspiracy theories.

RESULTS

Doctors and the medical system are crucial participants in the vaccination process. In the "side effects" group, people commonly share personal stories about encounters with doctors and ask for advice about how to handle these situations. In addition to certain ways of depicting doctors, the posts feature some characteristic elements of style and rhetoric. For example, there is a significant number of markers of common belonging: emphasis on "us", and "we as young mothers" clearly unite the group. The style of the posts is very emotional, especially in the stories that are personal and painful. Generally, the names of the medical specialists are not mentioned in the stories despite the severe accusations and detailed descriptions. There are very few direct confrontations. The doctor is rather presented as an impersonal caricature, referred to as a "generic" and faceless category. There are also several posts that are rhetorically addressed to pro-vaccine doctors with pleas and warnings. As the group is homogenous and probably not involving any doctors who could be convinced, it seems to be a rhetorical tactic to add severity to the claims.

There are also certain repeated elements in how doctors are depicted. In the first subchapter I will point out some main characteristics of medical experts presented in the stories and comments.

Portrayal of medical specialists

Doctors as dumb and blind believers

Several funny and mocking stories or dialogues depict doctors as having very limited knowledge and a blind belief in vaccines. One viral transcript of a dialogue presents a mother asking critical questions about tetanus vaccine from a doctor who wants to administer it to her child who has a fresh wound. Due to the mother's examination, the cornered doctor is not able to provide coherent responses – or finally any responses at all – so the punchline is that, according to the doctor's logic, the vaccine would start to protect the child a week after the child's potential death by tetanus. The clever and courageous mother concludes: "Scares me that I have more information than a physician. It should scare you, too." (T10)[5]

This story and many similar others emphasize the limitedness of knowledge the doctors have and their inability to understand the basic principles. The comments section includes many exclamations, such as "How silly can he be?!" (T10-C6). Indeed, some of the doctors are depicted as so incompetent that it raises some doubts about the accuracy of the stories. Retrospective personal narratives that are presented with significant bravado could, indeed, be altered versions that adjust the actual course of action. The story "as it could have happened" helps to give power back to the mother and lets her feel that she has cleverly and elegantly stood up for herself and the child.

Doctors operating in a wrong paradigm are not able to see the full and accurate picture

Similar to the dumb doctor's narrative, it is common to explain doctors' limited understandings not only with their intellectual incapacities but with the fact that they are wearing blinders to the narrow paradigm of Western medicine. As a common critique by alternative health practitioners, this discourse depicts vaccines as useless because real health comes from healthy lifestyle and "natural healing".

> *The trouble is that, unfortunately (at least it seems that way), no school of medicine teaches the integrity of the body... they do not teach the causes and why diseases arise at all, nor do they teach how to heal naturally*. (T1-C48)

It is believed that faith in Western medicine hinders achieving better health but may also be outright dangerous. Vaccines, for example, are believed to interrupt

the "normal" functioning of a body and add poisonous elements. Furthermore, more critical posts are accusing scientific medicine of being the very reason for so many diseases and patients.

> *…we have too many patients, which is the direct result of the medical industry. Just as the military industry ignites wars to sell weapons that only boost wars, so does the medical industry try to do everything to have more diseases, to sell more drugs that cause even more diseases, and so on.*
>
> *Dear doctors, take a couple of weeks of unpaid leave, analyse your work and the results that you have achieved. Think about how many people you have healed – completely healed – with your common methods "taught" by pharmaceutical companies. Use your logical thinking and conclude that it is time to quit the role in dealership and resume the former dream that you had before entering university – TO BE THE ONE WHO HELPS PEOPLE*. (T16)

Emphasis on an exploitive system

The previous quote strongly emphasizes the role of "industry", "pharmaceutical companies", and "university". The doctor is not seen as a caring expert but part of a big manipulative system that functions in its own interests. This argument has many variants, from purely organizational aspects (like a special credit system) to the deeper conspiracies of the Big Pharma.

Vaccination bonuses as a motivation for a doctor

Several posts give "insights" into the system, explaining doctors' behaviour and requests based on some implicit logic behind the actions. In one of the stories, a parent described how the GP put pressure on her to vaccinate or to sign official refusal letters (T23). The discussion quickly delved into the explanation that she was most probably "collecting points and rewards based on that [number of vaccinated children]", but also conspirational hints to pressure "from above" that the doctors have:

> *It is very suspicious that your GP woke now; in general, they do not bother anymore after the age of 3 because for their scoring system these children are out of the suitable age range and GPs cannot collect rewards anymore. Only when the child goes to school, then again* [they are] *back in the scoring system but then you must visit the doctor to get the bill of*

> *health anyway. The question arises as to why, from somewhere above right now, the family doctor was pressurized and who made them collect the signatures….???* (T23-C5)

This hidden agenda "from above" could be more present in Estonia because of the historical experience with the hierarchical and opaque Soviet system, but it is also a common element of conspiracy logic that assumes powerful hidden influences and actors.

Doctor as an entrepreneur

As in the Estonian system GPs have to operate and budget their practice, this is another factor casting doubt on their suggestions and decisions. Vaccines are seen as a steady flow of income, memes with slogans like "a healed patient is a lost patient" are shared. One commenter directly explains it: "After all, family doctors are entrepreneurs; the purpose of entrepreneurs is to make a profit, not to treat the sick" (T21-C2).

Doctors are the puppets for the Big Pharma

The depiction of the pharmaceutical industry as hugely influential and immoral is a core element of conspiracy theories. On the forum, the manipulations by the Big Pharma are a common knowledge which initiates emotional pleas to doctors like "Please co-operate with parents, not with Pharma!" (T16-C13). As the trope of linking doctors to the Big Pharma is very international, there are many clever memes shared, including pictures of doctors whose white robes are covered with the logos of pharmaceutical companies like sportsmen demonstrating their sponsors (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. *A meme from the "side effects" Facebook group.*

Path dependency

Some seemingly more emphatic posts try to understand the logic behind doctors' behaviour. After a story about vaccination resulting in a severe kidney failure, in which the author expressed puzzlement about how these grave mistakes could continue and be kept secret, a group member explains the logic:

> *It's very simple. If you're a family doctor who has given this injection* [that allegedly caused the illness as a side effect] *... what do you do then? If you have something functioning in your brain, you will search Google (for vaccine associated nephropathy) and you will find that already 20 years ago some doctors wrote articles on the subject to look for a link between the vaccine and the nephrotic syndrome and other kidney damages. And then what do you do as a family doctor – do you look this parent in the eye and say that sorry, we weren't told about this at UT* [University of Tartu where doctors are educated]*? That they still tell students only that there's redness at the injection point – and fever and anaphylactic shock? No, you tell the parent that you don't know where it came from. Because by no means are you going to report it as a vaccine damage if none of the Estonian doctors up to the State Agency of Medicines have heard anything about this result* [vaccine-caused disease] *... you will only be making a fool of yourself. And so it goes. And that's why there are so few of these reports and evidence; everything has been done to keep it that way.* (T9-C12)

This explanation well illustrates the construction of a "system" and the logic that individual doctors might be unable and unwilling to stand up to. These are explained as broader norms and path dependencies that keep doctors doing such a harmful thing as vaccinations. As another person explains:

> *…doctors just do their job like other people. It is about a more general social system, one part of which is the medical system with pharmacy .... For the most part, people sincerely believe in and serve the whole system that they have created. Doctors just don't care about people. They only need to complete their plan*. (T9-C38)

According to the posts, seeing through those alleged factors that influence doctors' behaviour is disillusioning and frustrating but also empowering. Although doctors are sometimes depicted as shrewd, their agendas and choices are generally presented as simple and predictable. Phrases like "As I expected…" are common to depict doctors' reactions or attitudes. This fulfils several functions: offers a somehow superior position and an insightful point of view but also constructs a certain norm – it is so common and predictable that doctors' behaviour follows certain patterns which are not in the interests of a patient.

Doctors as treacherous agents

However, several narratives contain suspicions about doctors' motives – and some of them have proven to be correct. According to the stories, even if doctors seemingly act as if taking care of the patient, they rather execute their hidden agenda of administering vaccines. Thus, doctors could be treacherous, giving just an impression and acting as a helpful expert.

In one highly emotional anonymous story, the mother accuses vaccinations of killing her new-born baby. She argues that vaccine shots were given behind her back; describes several occasions when she tried to be more involved in and oversee the process but doctors "gently" pushed her away. For example, already before giving birth she tried to talk about vaccines and her planned refusal with the doctor: "Before I gave birth, the doctor said that she had read the statement of refusal, but I should focus on my delivery" (T2).

Shortly after the birth the child was taken from the mother for measurements:

> *I argued that maybe she* [the nurse] *could do it later so that I could come myself. I was told that under no circumstances ... that I had to rest from childbirth. Against my will, I handed over my child for a while, but I felt that it was suspicious.* (T2)

According to her story, the child was later returned with several strange symptoms (inactivity, torpidity). The child's health deteriorated quickly and soon she died. The mother points out the potential causes of death and accuses vaccines, which is very much agreed to in the comments. The implicit element in the story is the explanation of how she tried her best to take care of and protect the child, but assumingly the caring doctors and nurses managed to trick her. The story also illustrates the paternalistic approach that she perceived in communicating with doctors and nurses.

Similar to this story, it seems that the driving force for many posts is the unanswered doubts about vaccination effects and the perceived guilt over not doing enough to protect the child when health problems occur. The active users on the forum present the dangerousness of vaccines as granted. Blaming vaccines is something that the parent of a sick child would prefer to believe as it gives some certainty in the emotionally extremely difficult situation. If the explanation of the negative effect of a vaccine settles, it is probably exceedingly difficult to turn it around.

Doctors do not take any responsibility

The question of responsibility appears regularly on the forum and points out the heavy burden that parents perceive. Even a small likelihood of a potential vaccine damage is a huge risk as the parent is the one who has allowed the vaccination to take place. However, the decision not to vaccinate also involves risks – if an unvaccinated child gets a disease, it is the parents' fault. One mother shares her suspicions about vaccines but then ponders about the potential risks of leaving the child without the protection of vaccines: "Isn't it too much of a responsibility that if something should happen, the doctors will say it's your own fault not having [the child] vaccinated, so you're responsible now?" (T23) This post gets multiple responses, such as "you are always the only one who is responsible" (T23-C2). It is emphasized that the burden of responsibility is much greater in the case of side effects of vaccines because nobody in the medical system would even admit that the health problem is the result of a vaccination.

The following quote from a mother who believes that vaccines have caused a severe illness to her child sums up several of the different motives pointed out above:

> *I would never have thought that the doctors we trust as young mothers and hand over our healthy children to them could finally turn our lives and children's health upside down.*
> *I'm so exhausted by all this, I just live one day at a time.*
> *If only I had known before that we could do so much for the health of our children by researching and deciding ourselves.*
> *We will not give up; we will continue to fight for the health of our children.*
> *Now that you've read the stories of other mothers, please think before you trust that the doctor still knows exactly what they're doing. After all, they do not take responsibility, they do not have to live with your sick child.* (T17-C66)

This warning and the war-cry-like post illustrate well the pressure parents experience. In a very individualist paradigm about guarding their children, there is a strong emphasis on the common situation the parents have found themselves in. The group offers an opportunity to share this considerable emotional and liability burden.

Specific suggestions for communication with doctors

The perception of a doctor as an adversary means that the encounters with them are perceived as challenges and need special preparations. On the forum, some specific advice is given about how to behave and what to tell the doctor. As a general suggestion, one mother emphasizes the importance of preparations before a visit: "Try to be tough and firm. Prepare yourself well before going to the doctor ♡" (T17-C10). Obviously, the critical pre-set disposition influences the interaction as well as the interpretation of a doctor's behaviour and messages. Therefore, the forum discussions create expectations and a specific lens through which to look at the encounters with a doctor.

Suggestions to control/monitor all the actions

Several posts and suggestions reflect the perceived necessity of constant control. In one thread, a pregnant woman shares her fears and asks for advice.

> *I have a bit of a phobia about the fact that when I go* [to give birth]*, maybe after the birth the baby will be taken away for a while and the shot will be secretly given… should someone be kept next to the baby all the time?* (T8)

This fear illustrates severe distrust in doctors and nurses. In the same thread, another user suggests specific forms of refusal as well as the need to "keep an eye on things".

> *I would recommend preparing two documents* [vaccine refusals] *and having both signed by the doctor, stating that they have read and accepted it. Then one will stay with you and the other will be in hospital. In any case, ask somebody to keep an eye on things. I'm going to give birth soon as well. The same fears.* 😊 (T8-C5)

Characteristically, the writer emphasizes her own very similar position as a pregnant mum, which creates a sense of a shared situation and community. The forum also gives specific advice about how to submit forms of refusal: specific formats and file templates are shared.

Suggestions of what to tell the doctor to avoid vaccines

It is suggested that telling a doctor that the child is coughing or has other signs of illnesses could avoid getting vaccinations. Some members also give recommendations of how to give false impressions concerned with other issues.

> *If you want a sick note, say to the doctor that you have back pain … it can't be checked but will get you the document (my story is illegal… but it works).* (T13-C31)

Tricking doctors into believing certain things is considered to be a good solution.

Threatening with law

Although avoiding direct confrontations seems to be the preferred scenario, there are also several suggestions of how to impose your position and rights. For example, it is pointed out that by referring to law it is possible to defy the doctor's authority:

> *Even if there are no plans to go to court, threatening to do so is the only way to really demand that they follow the law. Otherwise, they will do whatever they want and no one will even look into what is or is not written in the laws.* (T28)

Similarly, very confident posts illustrate that parents perceive that they have all the legal rights. According to this view, doctors can dominate in the medical expert sphere but have no power outside of it.

Suggestions about doctors who tolerate vaccine refusal

Internet forums and parents' groups are an important source for finding doctors who tolerate vaccine-hesitant parents or even more, are themselves critical of vaccines. The conversations illustrate well the normative nature of the Estonian medical sphere. For example, the names of the doctors are not shared publicly. When asked for recommendations about doctors who are not hostile towards non-vaccination decisions (this is a recurrent topic on the forum), people are asked to contact in a private message. One happy parent describes her encounter with a new doctor:

> *I transferred to her list knowing that she herself was against vaccines and a proponent of naturopathy. Namely, I knew two anti-vax friends on her list already before, and this doctor had dropped a few subtle hints to them in secrecy. So, towards the end of the visit today, the doctor asked me how we were going to do about vaccines. Knowing her position, I replied with an extremely satisfied face that neither of my children had received any vaccines and I would continue to do so. The doctor then looked me deep in the eye, and a smile appeared on her face, which is not something*

> *that anti-vaccine parents would get often as a response to this answer. A wide, joyful, sincere smile, full of absolute understanding and the joy of recognition! It could be read from her face that she would have wanted to say something as well, but the family nurse, who obviously is in favour of vaccines, was there at the same time, with her back to the doctor at that moment. I smiled at her. It was a complete understanding without words. After that, the already pleasant doctor became even more pleasant, and her respect for us was palpable. And of course mutual! Her attitude created a very pleasant mood for me for the whole day, and I am sincerely glad that there are doctors in our medical system who are actually seers!* ☺♡ (T14)

Although it seems that there are not many doctors like the one described above, this post still got some responses with similarly good experiences. Mainly there are numerous requests to share the doctors' names: "Could you write the names of these doctors in a private message, please? :)" (T14-C3)

This secrecy creates a sense of a community of illumined rebels who understand and share the "actual knowledge" and are against the repressive norms and "the system". It may also resonate with Estonian recent past as during the Soviet rule some topics were a taboo and hidden. Obviously, the repressed knowledge constituted the truth in comparison to the flawed state propaganda. Paradoxically, the privacy settings of the group are as public as possible so everybody's responses could be found even without logging in to Facebook. Therefore, the secrecy and closedness is an illusion created in the group.

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS

Social media discussions about health and medicine provide valuable opportunities to observe the formation of critical attitudes towards doctors and medicine. Social media is not only a stage but an active factor contributing to the circulation of stories and meanings by enabling specific formats for discussions and community formation.

Anti-vaccine proponents point out many elements that are part of the common critique of Western medicine, such as the medical approach being very narrow in addressing human health (Lázár & Johannessen 2006) and simultaneously colonizing too many spheres of life due to medicalization (Conrad 1992). Also, pharmaceutical companies undoubtedly influence the medical system. Total distrust in medicine expressed on the "side effects" forum illustrates the difficult challenge of keeping a balance between acknowledging problems in medicine and having enough confidence not to avoid medical expertise and

help. Obviously, the overly critical opinions on the forum do not necessarily mean that users would keep these convictions in other social situations or refuse medical services. Online discussions are a specific format and attitudes expressed there do not have to correlate with actual behaviour. It has also been pointed out that even strong opposition to vaccines does not evoke opposition to medicine or trust in doctors in general (Attwell et al. 2017). However, if a parent has already chosen to join a group like "side effects", it may easily broaden their scope of distrust as the torrent of "alternative" information and the accusations addressed to doctors are so overwhelming. "Preparations for meeting a doctor", based on forum suggestions, could influence the interaction with medical specialists. Also, it could considerably complicate the procedures when parents do not agree to leave their child in the care of medical specialists or are very suspicious about any suggestions the doctors give.

As the "side effects" group involves people with diverse attitudes, the discussions are not homogenous, and some dissenting views can be detected. Some users bring out their experience and impressions, such as "my GP really cares about my child" and similar dissenting opinions. Most of the posts and active participants still keep an overly critical tonality; besides, the rules of the forum also emphasize that it is not allowed to share pro-vaccine information. The accusations could, therefore, become too radical and offensive to relate to moderately hesitant and critical parents – driven by group dynamics, radicalizing statements could alienate more moderate readers.

On the other hand, the emotional tonality of the comments serves an important function. Stories shared by parents are usually very personal and often traumatic. Told from a perspective of an average parent, the emotional relatability supports the positive reception of stories and messages. The emotionally very difficult content blocks dissenting views efficiently: you cannot easily tell a mourning mum that there are gaps and illogicalities in her story. Critical posts in these situations may be dismissed as rude and offensive. The community bolsters affective participation – parents often describe decisions that they have already taken or plan to take. In these cases, it is not about asking information for deciding but for getting confirmations. The emotional support is evident – it is reassuring to receive hundreds of supportive and emotional messages. It has been argued that the success of similar online communities derives from each other's mutual support, reassurance, and a sense of agency given, which helps to gain control over their lives. It is not only about persuasion but restorative narratives that enable the members "to find a renewed sense of the self, of morality and of purpose" (Lavorgna & Myles 2021: 15).

The motifs from the forum illustrate the pressure parents perceive, which expresses in the hesitancy about vaccines and any decisions related to that.

Hesitancy as a concern or doubt about the value or safety of vaccination is an increasingly extensive phenomenon (Yaqub et al. 2014). It is much broader than the direct refusal of vaccines or active anti-vaccine movements. Increasing hesitancy has become a natural part of contemporary parenting (Reich 2018 [2016]). The pressure to perform as a good parent is probably one of the reasons why parents come to the forum to get confirmations about their choices and not to feel alone with the decision to refuse vaccines. The received feedback and support easily normalize vaccine refusals.

The forum gives an opportunity to talk like an expert – give advice, express opinions. The storytelling on the forum could also be a re-performative attempt to alter the actual interaction with doctors. Some dialogues that depict a doctor or a nurse as highly incompetent are so unrealistic that it is very unlikely that these occasions have actually happened. Rather, they resemble folktales or urban legends which act as restorative narratives. The aspect of not mentioning any names and the fact that people share stories anonymously encourages this kind of "empowering" alterations.

In the pro-medicine and science discourse, ridiculing of non-scientific and alternative methods is a common tactic (Uibu & Koppel forthcoming). In the Facebook group of vaccine-critical people, ridiculing is turned around – the doctors with their "fancy" training are depicted as limited, errant, and bound to the repressive system. Doctors in the stories are commonly reduced to caricature-like simplistic figures – mostly silly and predictable, working for the "system". A deeper contact with a doctor could help to contradict those sketchy descriptions. The doctor's empathic approach to vaccine-hesitant parents would probably surprise parents who have read several discussions on the forum – although it could be interpreted also as shrewdness and hidden agenda. Another suggestion for medical specialists would be to openly discuss and admit some inherent flaws and problems in the medical system. It could help to disrupt the perception of polarized stances and of the doctor/nurse as being on the other side of the frontline.

Due to historical-cultural reasons and the public health insurance system, Estonian medical culture is more hierarchical and paternalistic than private medicine in the USA; for example, it keeps the provider-client relationships and a flexible vaccination approach (Reich 2018 [2016]). Therefore, depicting doctors as narrow-minded or even ridiculous helps to "empower" Estonian patients and break up the perceived hierarchies. Several parents seem to be very self-confident even in the posts that are grammatically heavily misspelled and incompetent content-wise. However, vaccine hesitancy is generally more common to privileged parents with a better education and financial situation – the opposition towards vaccines is clearly an elitist pursuit (ibid.). Characteristically,

vaccine-critical parents think much about health issues and might have concerns and knowledge that a doctor is, indeed, not able to respond to. Very health-conscious parents are not satisfied with standard procedures and require extra attention and tailor-made plans for their child. Also, the influence of more holistic and alternative health discourses, which depict Western medicine as severely limited, is clearly visible.

This study has raised several concerns about the risks related to the "side effects" and other similar social media groups. Indeed, it would be best if people did not feel the need to search for information and try to get confirmations from (anti-vaccine) Facebook groups. However, lively discussions and the great number of personal stories in this group indicate that these forms of communication are important and fitting for people. Therefore, it could be beneficial to provide accurate health information and discuss popular health concerns in formats that allow a closer contact, such as personal stories, discussions, and suggestions based on those. Forums and collections of stories including the ones with (seemingly or actual) adverse effects in a more balanced medium would deprive people with a clear anti-vaccination agenda of the possibility to shape attitudes. It would also be important to acknowledge the pressure that parents perceive. It is not only information that people need but also emotional support and the opportunity to share their doubts. Doctors and medical specialists as genuinely interested listeners may be a model that these moderated environments could offer.

The development of the anti-vaccine movement and attitudes towards the medical system and specialists in different countries would need a comparative study. A broader social context for vaccination decisions and the healthcare system in general influence information sharing and relations with doctors. For example, Estonian schools do not require vaccination and there are basically no limitations on travelling or public services for not vaccinating children. Therefore, the interactions with doctors become the major pressure points in Estonia as doctors have the most direct task to persuade parents. This is probably one of the reasons why medical specialists have become the main adversaries on the forum as other, rather liberal systems, give parents more freedom and do not direct them to vaccinate.

It is visible that anti-vaccine culture has become highly (and increasingly) global – the "side effects" group provides many links, audio-visual material, and translated texts, some without any indication that it does not originate from Estonia. With COVID fears and considerations, the group dynamics has changed considerably, and conspiracy theories have taken the main stage – people share material in different languages, and the information flow has intensified. It is still unclear what kind of impact the pandemic and the COVID

vaccinations exert on the anti-vaccine subculture and especially on hesitant people. As vaccination will most probably be voluntary, the low uptake could constitute a new and urgent problem. However, the pressure parents perceive because of childhood vaccine decisions remains one of the core issues driving the vaccine debates. Undoubtedly, internet platforms have an important role in this matter.

NOTES

[1] Vaccines are given by the same doctor/nurse who does the mandatory health check-ups for children. Estonian GPs are called "family doctors" and nurses "family nurses" as they are supposed to have a good connection to the whole family. However, too long lists of patients mean that the strong doctor-patient connection is not that common, especially in the cities.

[2] See https://www.facebook.com/groups/282626385574048, last accessed on 9 February 2021.

[3] In the results section, the number of a thread for a quote is marked with T and if the quoted text is from a comment to an original post, the position of the comment in the thread is marked with C. Although some active users posted regularly, all the quotes in the article are from different users (unintentionally).

[4] See https://www.facebook.com/groups/282626385574048, last accessed on 9 February 2021.

[5] The text illustrates that people do not share only their personal stories: the dialogue cited is translated into Estonian from English and was distributed broadly on English-language sites already in 2017 but reached Estonia in 2020. However, in the story there is no indication that it is not a personal story or has not happened in Estonia.

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NEWS IN BRIEF

AUTUMN SCHOOL CONCENTRATED ON INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUES WITH HEALTH

On 19–20 November 2020, the Estonian Literary Museum organised an international autumn school under the heading "Dialogues with health" for graduate students of the humanities in Värska – a borough in south-eastern Estonia which is historically well known for its mineral water and therapeutic mud resources. The lectures and discussions of the autumn school approached the topic of health in a broad and interdisciplinary way, looking at respective language use, belief and narrative worlds, emotions, fears, philosophies, lifestyles, and coping mechanisms in the times of epidemic as well as in everyday life, and their cultural, linguistic, and semiotic outputs.

The event took place in cooperation with the Graduate School of Linguistics, Philosophy and Semiotics, but this did not hinder the inclusion of students from other branches (e.g., cultural research).

The title of the autumn school was chosen a few years earlier when nobody could have foreseen how exceptionally topical this would be in 2020, in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even without this context, in the recent decade, there has been more and more awareness in the media as well as research articles on the role of social sciences and the humanities in analysing and commenting on thinking and behavioural models related to health and offering practical outputs and solutions, so the topic is continuously highly relevant. The autumn school offered eighteen multifarious presentations and workshops, including an experiential field presentation on Seto folk medicine in the nearby Värska historical farm museum, which emphasised the role of singing and charms in traditional rural healing culture, and a poster presentation on etiological legends such as the creation of the womb, menstruation, and childbirth in Bulgarian folklore and their historical role in distributing traditional understandings of health.

Several presentations touched operatively on vernacular responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, Angelina Ilieva (Bulgaria) described the emergence of a military doctor and professor as a popular folkloric hero named 'the General' during the first wave of COVID-19 in Bulgaria, introducing the concept of a 'participatory epidemic'. Thomas Ndaluka (Tanzania) analysed the tremendous role of religion in interpreting the COVID-19 pandemic and initiating preventive measures in Tanzania. Virginia García-Acosta (Mexico) described the religious models of explaining epidemics and other disasters in Latin America through time, pointing to the repeated motifs of guilt, culprits, and punishment, and the dichotomy of right and wrong behaviour. Michele Tita added a historical touch by bringing examples of narratives and hoaxes related to infectious diseases in Italy and listing some of their contemporary counterparts.

The presentation by Kadri Vider (Estonia) gave an overview of the possibilities of the network of CLARIN (Common Language Resources and Technology Infrastructure); for example, describing research that has already been conducted in order to find out how COVID-19 is reflected in language use and what its impact on the humanities is

in more general terms. Kadri Simm (Estonia) dissected the ethical problems emerging in society during times of epidemics.

Terhi Utriainen and Linda Annunen (Finland) delineated their research project LeNeRe, which concentrates on the relationships between alternative medicine, spirituality, and learning, envisioning the possibilities for dialogical reflection on the example of sound healing practices. Mare Kõiva (Estonia) comparatively analysed three Estonian magical healing practitioners from various periods of time and stressed that so far the focus has been on the skills of the healers, and their personalities have not deserved sufficient attention. Tõnno Jonuks represented the archaeological view, introducing traditional magical healing artefacts in Estonian museums.

There were also several interesting case studies from PhD students. For example, Age Kristel Kartau offered glimpses into the semiosphere of Buddhistic manual medicine in Estonia, pointing out that Thai massage and some other Eastern massage and stretching systems are generally viewed as belonging to new spirituality by theologists, cultural researchers, and the general public, although the ways of participation in these techniques can vary highly based on a concrete individual. Danila Rygovskiy described reasoning models of Old Believers' ritual purity practice in Estonia and Russia (e.g., dietary restrictions, proscription of praying with strangers, and prevention of eating at the same table and with the same tableware), showing connecting points between theological and medical discourses. Saswati Bordoloi outlined some traditional healing rituals from Assam in north-eastern India, showing their interaction with certain goddesses and other supernatural beings. Alexandra Chereches described folk narratives about health and disease, especially about the evil eye in Romanian traditional and contemporary oral literature and, on the example of Roman immigrants in Madrid, concluded that in times of global immigration many respective beliefs are introduced into new urban settings.

Anastasia Fiadotava took a somewhat metaphorical angle on health when she compared humour and viruses, pointing out that because of the similarity of humorous memes to the spread of viruses, the former have been called 'viruses of mind', which infect people irrespective of their will and sometimes without any concern for the wellbeing of their host. The author concluded that not only the content of humour should be considered in the discussion of the current pandemic reflection in popular communication, but also the very mechanisms of humour contribute to a better understanding of the interrelations between social and natural phenomena.

Finally, Aimar Ventsel exemplified that in a certain segment of punk subculture, heavy drinking is seen as an act of rebellion and proof of masculinity; thus, paradoxically, the ability to drink a lot and excessively is also perceived as a sign of good health and physical form. The presenter showed how punk music is one medium that creates and carries this trickster story and the associated identity.

All in all, the presentations of Estonian as well as foreign specialists and PhD students formed a multifaceted whole which gave a concentrated picture of the topic of health on the synchronic as well as diachronic axis. As expected, the discussions deepened earlier understandings of investigating health and helped envision the potential of the humanities in dealing with the respective topics.

Although the process of organising the autumn school was extremely complicated – until it started, it was not clear whether the event could take place in physical form

because of increasing corona restrictions, and the presenters from other countries could only participate via the Microsoft Teams video platform, which generated new challenges in solving technical questions – in the end, the autumn school still proved successful. One of the relevant conclusions of the autumn school was that, besides being a medical phenomenon, health has important social, religious, narrative, and material-technological dimensions that need to be taken into consideration in policy-making and research. The event was organised with the support of the European Regional Development Fund (ASTRA project EKMDHUM) and was also related to the project PUTJD962 (Estonian Research Council).

Reet Hiiemäe

DOCTORAL THESIS ON THE USE OF OBSERVATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM IN VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH

Liivo Niglas. *In Siberia with a Camera: Observational Documentary as Audio-visual Ethnography*. Dissertationes Ethnologiae Universitatis Tartuensis 12. University of Tartu Press, 2020. 347 pp.

On 14 December 2020, Liivo Niglas defended his doctoral thesis at the University of Tartu. The thesis was supervised by Professor Art Leete, and the opponents were Dr Toomas Gross from the University of Tartu and Dr Pille Runnel from the Estonian National Museum.

Liivo Niglas' doctoral dissertation "In Siberia with a Camera: Observational Documentary as Audio-visual Ethnography" is a voluminous study consisting of an extensive cover text and four research articles published in 2011–2013. It is based on fieldwork carried out approximately within the same time period, which dates back several years. It is this time distance that has probably helped the material to mature and the research problem to crystallize. The result is one of the most interesting doctoral dissertations defended in the field of ethnology at the University of Tartu in recent years. It is important to point out that in all major and minor research projects that have formed the basis of the doctoral thesis, observational ethnographic filmmaking has played an important role, and visual anthropology is actually the core of Liivo Niglas' research approach. The duration of the research projects that are part of the dissertation, and the nature of the research problems closely related to the duration of the projects, have varied to a large extent, ranging from research based on shorter research trips to long-term collaboration with the Forest Nenets Juri Vella, his relatives and community. Such variability adds another dimension to the analysis of the research question under consideration in the doctoral thesis – the opportunities offered by observational ethnographic documentaries as an approach to anthropological research.

Although Liivo Niglas emphasizes in the introductory part of the dissertation the desire to distinguish texts and films as research outputs so that they would be able to

speak to different audiences, it is expedient for those interested in visual anthropology to consider them as a whole. If possible, those interested should simply follow his recommendation that films (which are, before they can be considered as research, still primarily film as an artistic genre) should already be known before one starts to read research articles completed alongside films.

The aim of the doctoral thesis is to analyse the possibilities offered by the ethnographic documentary film in conducting ethnographic research and presenting the results. The author's thesis is that the audio-visual approach provides an important addition to text-centred anthropology in the treatment of certain research topics. Consequently, the focus of the dissertation is not on the cultural analysis of the societies being filmed, but on the question of the ethnographic film from both the methodological and epistemological point of view. The introductory part of the doctoral dissertation is also a theoretical analysis of the research problem and in a sense the author's autoethnography, because unlike, for example, research in the field of film theory, the author has created the object of analysis by himself. It gives him an additional tool to look at the film not only as a finished text, but to approach the film process as a whole, from its preparatory stages to the stages of fieldwork, editing, and reception. Questions about the possibility and justification of non-textual research in anthropology are not new, but Liivo Niglas extends this debate into the present day, where art-based research and artistic approaches to present research results are used as experimental not only in anthropology but also in many related fields ranging from arts research to media and communication research.

However, Liivo Niglas' doctoral dissertation remains consciously within the field of visual anthropology, excluding the proposals made in some of the key debates in this field to reformulate this research domain (e.g. Marcus Banks) and limiting his discussion to the most central part of this approach – the observational ethnographic documentary, by both supporting and deconstructing it. As the author of films, related research articles, and finally the introductory umbrella chapter of his doctoral dissertation, he is able to talk from an analytical point of view to the previous key authors in the field, who have usually been authors and creators of film theory (most importantly Timothy Ash, Anna Grimshaw, Paul Henley, Gary Kildea, Sarah Pink, Jean Rouch, Jay Ruby, Lucien Taylor, and especially David MacDougall). In his doctoral dissertation, Niglas has addressed all major researchers in the field, including visual anthropologists from Europe, Australia, and the USA. In presenting and analysing these views, he also makes significant use of autoethnography – his personal filmmaking experience. He shows convincingly that the anguish of various critics of observational ethnographic films towards this genre (e.g. Banks, Hastrup) is largely unjustified. "Observation" as the starting point of this approach does not signify a passive, absent (positivist) pursuit of objectivity, but is rather an active process across all stages of filming, film editing, and finally reception, in which the physical and sensory aspects of filmmaking play a very important role.

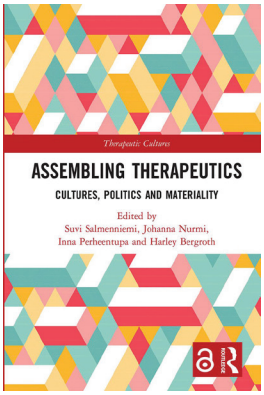
Thus, it can be said that the concept of physicality (and one's body as a research instrument) is at the heart of the dissertation and constitutes a cross-cutting theme in all articles that are part of the dissertation. It should be noted, however, that despite the importance of this topic there is no dialogue with researchers in this field to the same extent as in the field of visual anthropology in the dissertation. The author agrees to the conclusions of his introductory chapter (in which he relies on the analysis of other

theorists as well as his own film practice) that the genre of observational ethnographic film is suitable for analysing and conveying various aspects of human experience, providing good opportunities for several research topics within the field of phenomenological anthropology. Especially, for example, when the goal is to understand bodily experiences, the anthropological understanding of which is difficult to express in words. This gives the research method a potential to address a number of important research questions today (sensations, emotions, material environment). To some extent, the limitation of this approach is its ability to study human agency through just particular people and particular situations which are not necessarily generalizable. Although contemporary applications of innovation in visual anthropology seek to overcome this limitation through other approaches, criticizing ethnographic film as a problematic genre, the author has deliberately left out other approaches from his research. In this way, he has been able to create his own clear view of the border between anthropology and cinema. One of the interesting concepts that emerges here, which could be considered the author's own contribution to the debates within visual anthropology, is his observation that an *ethical-aesthetic* approach is at the heart of observational filmmaking: in order to find the right approach to the research problem with the help of a film camera, the driving force is not research questions or hypotheses characteristic of science, nor, on the other hand, artistic aspirations characteristic of film as an art genre, but ethical choices, which determine Liivo Niglas' attitude as a filmmaker and his relationship with the protagonists, as well as the role that the camera can play in research. However, these choices are also evident in the editing of the film, where his directorial approach is to interfere as minimally with the material as possible and try to respect different views and moments in filming. This includes long shots, following the pace of real life within the length of film frames, which Liivo Niglas has also called 'aesthetics of humbleness'. Finally, it is worth noting that since the very voluminous introductory chapter of the work is written in Estonian, in addition to its research value, the work is also important for teaching visual anthropology in Estonia, because it introduces and synthesizes debates that would otherwise have branched out across the professional literature throughout several decades.

Pille Runnel

BOOK REVIEW

ASSEMBLING THERAPEUTICS



Suvi Salmenniemi, Johanna Nurmi, Inna Perheentupa, Harley Bergroth (eds.). *Assembling Therapeutics: Cultures, Politics and Materiality*. New York: Routledge, 2019. 237 pp.

Forms of therapeutic help can be seen everywhere as offers in complementary, alternative, and ethnic medicine, massages, exercises, self-help courses, media interviews and TV shows with life coaches, angel therapists, healers who claim to be able to cure even the traumas of your previous lives. Researchers talk about a general therapeutic turn in society and the omnipresence of therapeutic discourse in the Western world, which increasingly create symbiotic forms with new spiritualities and religion and involve an assemblage of approaches to physical, mental as well as emotional health. *Assembling Therapeutics* mediates a multifaceted *status quo* of this situation, investigating "how human and non-human actors, systems of thought and practice are assembled and interwoven in therapeutic engagements" (p. 2). Based on lived experiences and empirical case studies, the book describes and analyses the impacts of the therapeutic turn on society at the micro as well as macro level – in some cases, in rather surprising settings, viewing the topics through a scholarly gaze that avoids being judgmental and unduly generalising. It is clear that one book cannot cover the expressions of this wide phenomenon in its entirety, but it still gives valuable glimpses through topical examples and explorations.

Several chapters look at the metamorphoses that the initially spiritually grounded practices undergo during the process of mainstreamisation and secularisation. For example, as mindfulness is increasingly visible and perceivable as part of mainstream culture in many Western countries, it is worthwhile to read the elaborations of Steven Stanley and Ilmari Kortelainen on the transformations of mindfulness-based therapies and techniques across time and place. The authors show that, with its roots in Buddhistic practices, mindfulness has obtained a much wider spectre of meanings than spiritual self-healing and is used as a tool for enhancing one's practical competitiveness in capitalist pursuits of success and wealth. Tatiana Tiaynen-Qadir shows that although the roots of modern self-help and therapeutic ethos can be seen in Protestant Christianity, therapeutic knowledge and practices within Finnish Orthodoxy are best understood through the concept of 'glocalized' therapeutic assemblage, which involves secular as well as religious interpretations. Julia Lerner makes an attempt to show the global post-Soviet characteristics of new Russian-immigrant religiosity inside and outside Israel, describing how her interviewees merge with what she refers to as a contradictory but meaningful, neoliberal religious-therapeutic subjectivity. Another author dealing with Israeli settings is Ariel Yankellevich, who observes the developments of the local coaching culture.

There are also chapters that explore how therapeutics emerges from secular practices and settings and often acquires a touch of personification and supernaturality on the way. Harley Bergroth and Ilpo Helén observe the interactions of therapeutic life management and technology, focusing on the use of near-body gadgets and the related software applications that provide measurements of the rhythms and patterns of everyday life – for example, step counts, heart rate, and sleeping patterns, concluding that although similar gadgets have existed for decades or even centuries, the contemporary therapeutic mythos of becoming a better and more holistic person has caused an unprecedented boom in their design and advertisement. Another article on similar technical tools, written by Felix Freigang, describes mood-tracking applications. Virve Peteri gives an overview of existing research on fun and playfulness in organisations and shows, on the basis of empirical examples, how new forms of office decoration, spatial planning, and organised self-help connect with the therapeutic tenor that has brought emotions to the core of organisational culture.

Suvi Salmenniemi, Johanna Nurmi, and Joni Jaakola bring in a political dimension when they look at the fusion of therapeutics and neoliberalism, showing how neoliberal work ethics (e.g., demands for competition, productivity, and performance) shape self-identification but can also cause dysfunctional relationships between the world and the self. In her chapter, Inna Perheentupa points out that the feminist movement was among the first political movements and cultural resources in the 20th century to draw from therapeutic discourse when stressing individual and collective empowerment and overcoming past injuries and memories, but in the 21st-century Russia, feminist activists connect their protest activities increasingly with the conservative state politics related to the control of the body (e.g., sexual and reproductive rights, gendered violence). The author shows how certain recurring keywords are narratively produced and how therapeutic elements are assembled to form contemporary public activism and politics.

Several chapters of the book make an attempt to move beyond the traditional human-centred definitions and description modes used in therapeutic approaches, taking into consideration objects, spaces, imaginations, and the supernatural realm. Marjo Kolehmainen's chapter focuses on relationship and sex counselling practices in Finland, aiming to use the lens of affective atmospheres to map how situational and material therapeutic practices operate through both human and non-human bodies. One article that offers rather innovative conclusions about human and non-human relationships is by Kia Andell, Harley Bergroth, and Marja-Liisa Honkasalo, who discuss the therapeutic potential of uncanny experiences, viewing these as part of people's existential repertoire that helps them make sense of their unusual experiences and perceptions, thus working as a form of self-care and care for others.

It can be concluded that the expressions of therapeutic discourse can indeed be observed everywhere, but the question of vulnerability also emerges, as therapeutic culture simultaneously seems to presuppose a parallelly existing culture of vulnerability and brings up the need for a fine balance within therapeutic assemblage in order to avoid the risk that the wealth of readily available gadgets, courses, books, counselling, organised self-help, etc., especially to the middle-class, would direct their therapeutic life processing in a certain homogenising way, thus robbing them of individual self-reflection and dynamic learning. In any case, this book should be of interest not only

to sociologists, folklorists, and cultural scholars, but also to psychologists, journalists, health policy makers, and others.

Reet Hiiemäe

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On the cover: The sculpture *Bronze Swine* by Mati Karmin in front of the Tartu Market Hall. Photograph by Piret Voolaid 2020.

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