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.
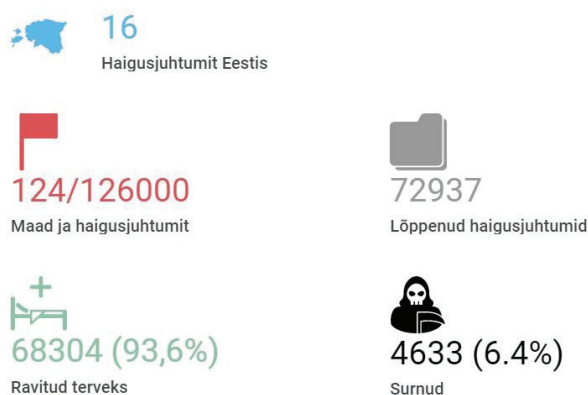

Figure 1. Screenshot from Õhtuleht, *19 February 2020. Source: https://www. ohtuleht.ee/992731/uus-koroonaviirus-ei-taltu-surnute-arv-tousis-ule-2100-uus-suur-haiguspuhang-avastati-louna-koreas, last accessed on 12 February 2021.*

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.

Eriolukorra pikendamine

▮ Valitsuse otsusega pikendatakse koroonaviiruse levikust tingitud eriolukorda kuni **17. maini (k.a)**.

▮ Eriolukorras kehtestatud piirangud on aidanud saada koroonaviiruse leviku Eestis kontrolli alla.

▮ Piirangud on jätkuvalt vajalikud, kuna Eestis tuvastatakse üha uusi nakatunuid ning uusi haiguskoldeid.

▮ Piiranguid leevendatakse sammhaaval, et inimesi ei tabaks uus haigestumise laine.

Parem üks nädal liiga kaua, kui üks päev liiga vähe.

VABARIIGI VALITSUS

📞1247 **kriis.ee**

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.

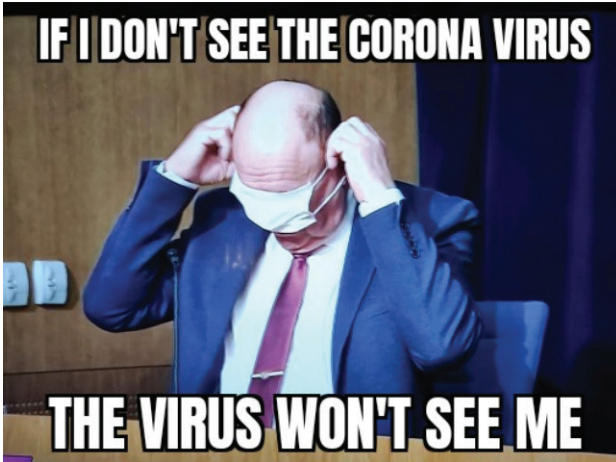"Kui ma ei näe koroona viirust, ei näe viirus mind" - Eesti vanasõna

Meem

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=ARC4OzpUaDBUteC7FbXNdmcXeR6Yv8Lvon1TLoHTew DqBYkDbFvRz-1J5Qfed9dGMu5SoDadGAxwQrsO&__tn__=EHH-R, last accessed on 8 January 2021.*
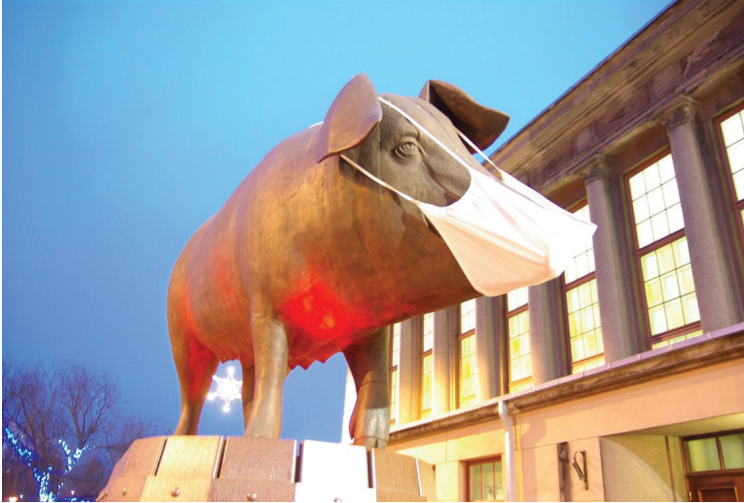
Figure 7. *The swine flu proverb spread on the internet with a picture depicting the sculpture Bronze Swine by Mati Karmin in front of Tartu Market Hall. Fearing the swine flu epidemic, the townspeople protected the bronze swine by covering its face with a mask. Photograph by Ilmar Oja 2009.*

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).
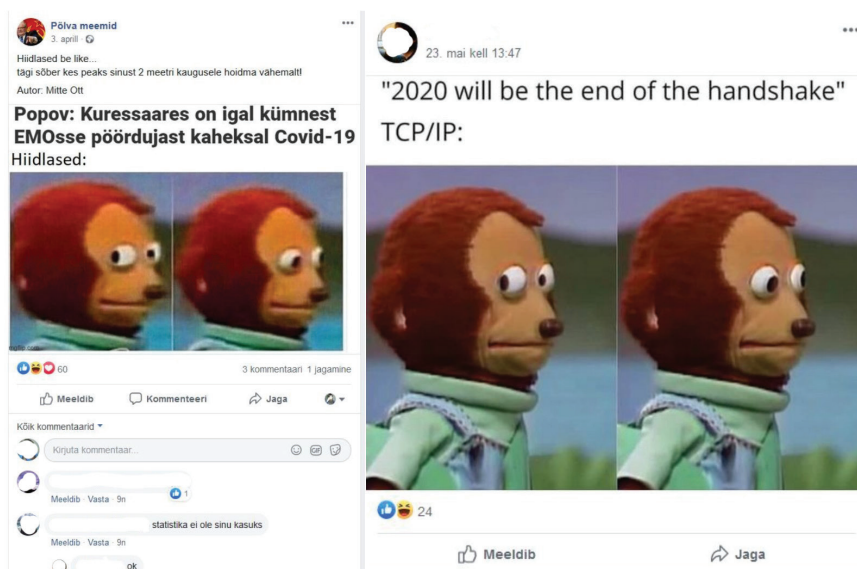

Figure 10. *Meme of two monkey puppets in Estonia. On the left: an adaptation of a common meme template (see https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/monkey-puppet) for the Estonian islands from spring 2020 when there was an increase in the infection rate. Folks on the island of Hiiumaa look aside when they hear 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).
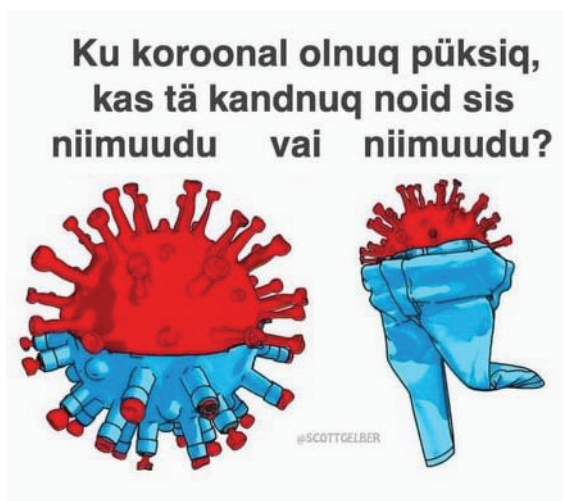

Figure 11. Memes aim to depict the virus graphically. The sphere-shaped virus is depicted via the meme model 'If X wore pants would he wear them like this or like this?' A post sent to Mare Kalda on 31 March 2020 in private conversation.

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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').

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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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