

# Emotions of Fear in Narratives about the Plague and the Contemporary Pandemic

==== Monika Kropej Telban =====

Pripovedi o kugi in drugih pandemijah povzročajo strah in napovedujejo smrt in lakoto ter povzročajo vrsto čustev med ljudmi, predvsem nelagodje. V tem članku je analizirano, kako pripovedno izročilo o kugi, čeprav staro in preživeto, ponovno prihaja na dan v kolektivnem spominu in podzavesti, ko ljudje ponovno doživljajo podobne izkušnje, kot jih je izkusilo človeštvo pred stoletji. Čeprav pandemija Covid-19 – s katero se soočamo med leti 2019 in 2022 – ni tako smrtonosna kot kuga, jo vendar občutimo, kot stalno grožnjo. V članku je predstavljeno, kako stari tradicionalni družbeni konstrukti ponovno prihajajo na dan v sodobnih povedkah in pripovednih diskurzih o Covidu-19 in kako se občutje strahu odraža v družbenem življenju ljudi, kakor tudi v njihovih pripovedih, vicih, teorijah zarote in lažnih novicah, ki krožijo po spletu.

KLJUČNE BESEDE: pandemija, kuga, Covid-19, folklor, sodobne povedke

Narratives about the plague and other pandemics essentially induce fear and predict death and hunger, triggering a variety of emotions among people, particularly anxiety. The paper discusses how the motifs of plague narratives – despite being ancient, traditional and old – resurface from the collective memory and the subconscious as people now have experiences comparable to those endured by humanity centuries ago. Although the COVID-19 pandemic that confronted the planet from 2019 to 2022 is not as deadly as the plague, it is still an ongoing existential threat. A discussion is also presented of the ways that old traditions and social constructs re-emerge in contemporary narratives and discourses about COVID-19, and how the atmosphere of fear affects the emotional and social lives of the people, along with their narratives, jokes, fake news, and the conspiracy theories that have been circulating online.

KEYWORDS: pandemic, plague, COVID-19, folklore, contemporary legends

## INTRODUCTION

In Slovenian and some other Slavic languages, the word “fear” translates to *strah*, which may also mean “ghost”. Discussed is a special kind of spectre of fear – the pandemic or global sickness, also known as the Black Death.<sup>1</sup> Contemporary legends and discourses

<sup>1</sup> The name “Black Death” for the plague appeared during the devastating global epidemic of bubonic plague that struck Europe and Asia in the mid 1300s. The plague arrived in Europe in October 1347 when 12 ships from the Black Sea docked at the Sicilian port of Messina. The name “Black Death” was later used for all plague or cholera sicknesses.

about the COVID-19 pandemic are compared with the experiences of similar fears and distress during the plague, cholera, the Spanish flu, and other similar virulent diseases.

Lutz Röhrich established that among narrative folklore it is precisely legends that are the most pessimistic and often characterised by anxiety or fear since the humans appearing in them are typically at the mercy of supernatural forces, and in folk narratives there is a looming, primary fear of being decimated, even vanquished by a certain disease (Röhrich 2018: 252). Further, Jon 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 those listening felt about the plot line, the more likely they were themselves to pass it on (Lee 2014: 169, 171; as cited in: Hiimäe et al. 2021: 25).

In the modern European narrative world, frightening supernatural creatures in particular are preserved, expressing the fear of dying, of the dead, of the dangers and terrors of black or malefic magic and, not least, a perfectly well-founded fear of illness (Šešo 2020: 192). These types of stories, namely, also help to disperse and transmute the fears that overwhelm people in certain situations.

The plague, as referred to in the lore of some European nations, had nearly fallen into oblivion before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out in 2019 in Wuhan. This global phenomenon revived narrative folklore surrounding a ‘plague event’, also seeing it widely return to the people’s mode of cognition and mental discourse.<sup>2</sup>

After exploring the Estonian folk narrative on the plague in comprehensive archived materials (Hiimäe 1997), Reet Hiimäe established that within the framework of legends about dangerous places – for instance of the places where spread of the plague is mentioned – a mental map can be formed, which covers the threat’s emergence in the community, and escaping from it (Hiimäe 2016, 179–181). Timothy Tangherlini concluded similarly – also while focusing on plague narratives – that in folk belief, people quite logically try to create narrative maps of the route of the plague spirit as personification of the disease (Tangherlini 1988). Many similar motives were spread in plague narratives across Europe because folklore shows certain universal patterns and activating methods.

### BRIEFLY ON FOLK NARRATIVES ABOUT THE PLAGUE AND HEALING PRACTICES<sup>3</sup>

Plague epidemics have stricken humanity in various periods of history, causing massive death of the population, even the collapse of cultures. In the wake of the Plague of Athens, the Ancient Greek state began to shrink, the Antonine Plague in the second half of the 2nd century triggered the Roman Empire’s downfall, while in the 6th century the Plague of Justinian likewise shook the foundations of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Bubonic Plague or Black Death, which killed nearly one-third of Europe’s

<sup>2</sup> Kaarina Koski (2016, 32) introduced the term “mental discourse” in the sense of a cognitive map reflecting the conditions in which people live, and their narratives about what is happening to them.

<sup>3</sup> I analyse the plague narrative tradition and healing practices in more detail In Kropěj Telban (2022).



Figure 1: Danse Macabre, Church of the Holy Trinity in Hrastovlje, painted by John of Kastav, finished in 1490. The motifs are influenced by the medieval pandemic of the plague ([https://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mrtva%C5%A1ki\\_ples\\_\(Hrastovlje\)](https://sl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mrtva%C5%A1ki_ples_(Hrastovlje))).

population, arrived on the continent in 1347 on trade ships from Central Asia. The Great Plague in the late 17th century also left grave demographic and economic devastation, particularly across Europe.

The plague anchored itself in the people's historical memory and subconscious. Already in Ancient Rome, it was thus stated: "From plague, pestilence, and famine, Good Lord deliver us!" [*A peste, fame et bello – Libera nos Domine!*].

In folk ideation, the plague was an evil spirit killing cattle and people. Affected populations, especially in Europe, conceived it as a supernatural or mythological entity, the way they imagined death, nightmare, famine and various other afflictions. In a personified form, it appeared in the demonology of many nations, as a figure of one of the greatest fears in those epochs and places where it was ravaging. The plague narratives in European folklore were preserved as either accounts of the conditions and escape from the pandemic of the plague and its potential treatment, or as folk legends of the Plague personified – a demon massacring people and animals. This ideation joined death, famine and pestilence as some of the biggest archetypal fears of the time.

The motifs of the folk narratives concerning the plague were included in "The Migratory Legends" catalogue (1958) by the Norwegian folklorist Reidar Christiansen in the sub-chapter *Legends Concerning the Great Plague*, (7080–7095). Their thematic horizon is naturally far more diverse, as seen in the materials preserved in the archives of various research institutions, academia, and in printed sources.

In the Slovenian space, a folklorist who wrote about the plague and accompanying famine – in the shape of the insatiable creature *Netek* – was Ivan Grafenauer (1958). The plague was associated with hunger, which the *Netek* personifies in Slovenian folk tradition. People narrated that *Netek* (Gluton) travelled the world, bringing hunger to a homestead if he was not fed well while visiting. Similar narratives can be found in other parts of the Alpine world, among the Rhaeto-Romance people in Switzerland, and in Voralberg in the Austrian Alps, in the figure of the voracious man Glutton.

Elsewhere as well, the narrative tradition speaks of war and famine related to the plague. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, legends state that a year of plague is followed by a year of famine (Softić 2020: 165). Romanian peasants, in fearful expectation of the plague which supposedly wanders around in the figure of a woman, left food by the side of the road for travellers to feast on, with a view to turning the malaise away (Grafenauer 1958: 190).



Figure 2: Gvido Birolla: the Plague (Möderndorfer, Šašel 1972).

In the European space, the plague is represented in folklore by personified images of a woman, man, boy, girl, or a contagious travelling pair. In regions where the word “death” is of the masculine gender, the plague is often also represented as a man, while where “death” is feminine in gender, the plague often analogously appears in the image of a woman. Also frequent are representations of contagious couple – a man and woman who go from town to town causing people to fall ill. A German legend from Schweinfurt by the River Main talks about a deathly man reaping the souls of people and a pestilent woman (the plague) raking them aside. Similar narratives have been preserved in Central Europe, especially in the Alpine world, they have been documented in Northern Europe as well, even in Iceland as analysed by Terry Gunnell (2001: 49–50).

Swedish legends narrate how the plague arrives from the South in the form of a beautiful young boy followed by a pestilent girl (*pestflicka*), who sweeps her broom outside houses causing everyone in the village to perish (Grimm 1835: 994).

In the Estonian narrative tradition, the plague is personalised in masculine form as a young or “black” man, enumerating the places where he is destined to go, allowing the people to evade the plague or attempt to prevent it (Hiimäe 2016).

In Europe, a widespread idea was that the plague cannot cross water alone and will frequently be carried or ferried to another place. Timothy Tangherlini establishes that Scandinavian people often spoke of a plague that travels a set route to the places it is headed to, being ferried across a river, or across the sea to an island (Tangherlini 1988). Similar legends are also documented in the French-Breton, Prussian, and Polish folk traditions. Many stories of this kind were narrated by the South Slavs, among others they were published by Matija Valjavec (1858: 243) and Friedrich Krauß (1883, 1890: 67), while also inspiring the Slovenian poet Anton Aškerc (*Midnight Passenger*, 1890). The plague epidemic was spreading in Serbia which was at that time ruled by the Ottoman Turks even as late as in 1787 when Vuk Stefanović Karadžić was born in Trsić, with these places leaving an impact in his life and his work.

The legends frequently mention that the plague is afraid of dogs or cats, while also being driven away by the crow or a rooster (Valjavec 1858; Softić 2020: 164).

To protect themselves from disease, the people ploughed the ground around their village in various ritual ways, for example having women drag the plough around the village thrice (Möderndorfer 1964: 130). Tradition in the surroundings of Bosnian Gradiška speaks of how the village required twin sisters and two black oxen born by the same cow. Overnight, a brand-new plough had to be constructed and the twin sisters ploughed a furrow around the entire village while fully naked (Softić 2020: 163). In this custom, next to the geometric element – a circle, supposed to protect from evil forces, magic power was attributed especially to the ploughed furrow-line as an enchantment, where the details of who and how this action was performed were highly ritualised. Memory of the old agrarian rituals is preserved in these narratives from the South Slavic space.

Believing that the demon of a person’s disease could be defeated by a positive spirit, people also practised a magical treatment: ‘hammering the plague’ into a tree. They bore a hole into a tree (linden, oak, willow), which was supposed to be a holy tree. At sunrise on the following day, they placed in the hole a small amount of the sick person’s blood,

some nails or hair, then crammed it into the hole, put a nail in the tree, and hoped the demon of the disease would be defeated by the tree's spirit (Travner 1934: 78–79).

People also tried to keep the plague at a distance with incantations and protective magical seals, apocrypha and charms, albeit not many of these remain intact. One of the oldest Slovenian charms against the plague is described in the Carinthian *Duhovna brauna* (Spiritual Protection) from 1740<sup>4</sup>:

*Sir Franciscus Salorius bore witness to bishops and other men of the cloth having gathered to hold a council in 1547. Because twenty bishops and several senior clerics had already died of the plague, the Patriarch of Antioch (?) recommended using all letters (buhštabi) that Bishop Zacharias from Jerusalem had approved to protect homes from the plague. They were to be printed and worn on the body. People heeded the advice, and no one died of the plague again; and when they wrote them on their front doors, no one ever died of the plague from that house again. These are the letters against the plague: + ZDIA + BIZ + SAB + ZHGP + BFRS.*

An incantation from 1851 against all contagious diseases was also preserved in the Book of Incantations by Jakob Rant from Dolenčice in Poljanska Dolina.<sup>5</sup> The incantation runs as follows:

*I call Jacob in the name of Saint Benedict and in the name of the holiest of Saints in the Heavens and on Earth, looked on with zinaji (?) of Adonis (?)*

*Attanatos Deous*

*God the mightiest of the Holy Trinity*

*zpik = tro = ik = volf*

*This is Hallelujah Hallelujah Hallelujah. Draw three crosses and take three breaths in the air, and then make four heavenly signs using (?) (. S ō . . S S ō S S o. L. ♀). Then pray seven of Our Fathers in honor of the Holy Trinity and the Patron Saints.*

It was a common practice across Europe for people to wear pouches around their necks containing sewn-on charms or magical protection seals written on pieces of paper.<sup>6</sup>

To defeat the plague, people erected plague columns, churches and chapels dedicated to patron saints considered as protectors from the plague, notably Saint Roch, Saint Sebastian, Saint Rosalia, Saint Barbara and Saint Oswald. One of these columns still stands in the district of *Krakovo* in Ljubljana where in 1598 the plague spread quickly. It is inserted in a house fronting as a sculpture in the form of an angel sitting on the

<sup>4</sup> Dolenc/Zupanič Slavec, Makarovič 1999: 45; Kroje Telban 2022: 31.

<sup>5</sup> The Book of Incantations by Jakob Rant, locally known as Kočar from Dolenčice no. 9 in Poljanska Dolina. The manuscript is from 1851 (Möderndorfer 1964: 23–24).

<sup>6</sup> For more on this, see Kroje Telban 2022: 70–71.

skull of death with a sand glass clock in his hands. Legend has it that the plague stopped at this house at 21 Krakovska street, and ceased killing.

Prohibiting travelling to another place can amount to an extremely strict and demanding human sacrifice. A story preserved in Treibach in Austrian Carinthia speaks of the tragic fate of a young girl who was thrown into a pit and buried alive to prevent the plague from spreading (Möderndorfer 1964: 33). In towns with a plague guard in place, newcomers and wares were not allowed to pass without health certificates called *fede*.

Especially prevalent and broadly used were rituals of protection from the plague or for treating it using medicinal plants and apotropaic ceremonies. Spaces in houses and stables were fumigated with juniper (*Juniperus communis*) and charcoal, with the addition of Alpine valerian (*Valeriana celtica*), myrrh (*Commiphora*) and incense. Plants holding special powers were seen as particularly including garlic, burnet saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*), wild angelica (*Angelica silvestris*), white butterbur (*Petasites officinalis*), cuckoo-pint (*Arum maculatum*) and heath speedwell (*Veronica officinalis*). Medicines or apotropaic ingredients also included parts of toads (*Bufo vulgaris*), spiders (*Araneida*) as well as snake-stones.

Similar plants and practices were also used to heal from or treat the illness. The plague was primarily treated with medicinal plants, vinegar, wine, honey, tobacco and a range of other natural remedies.

In the countryside, for help people most often turned to village healers and witch doctors, whereas physicians, if accessible at all, mainly tended to patients in towns and mansions. During the plague, they would don special protective outfits to avoid becoming infected with the disease themselves. They wore a leather cloak and covered their faces with beaked masks and spectacles. The long 'beaks' were filled with a mix of aromatic herbs believed to protect against infection (Golec 2001: 37).

From the time of the plague

Sneezing was seen as a symptom of the plague, with this expression "God help you!" or "God help us all!" becoming widely used throughout Europe. Moreover, some curses or swearwords spread at that time, for instance in Slovenia "Naj te kuga!" or in the Slovenian region Bela Krajina: "Kuga te vgnjela" (666/31:19), meaning: "Let the plague take you!". People also invented proverbs like:



Figure 3: Plague sculpture in the district of Krakovo in Ljubljana, 1599 (Photo: Stanka Drnovšek).

*Se prikaže kuga v bližini, kupi si par močnih črevljev in beži tako dolgo, da bodo podplati raztrgani.*

[If the plague appears nearby, buy yourself strong shoes, and run as fast as you can!"]<sup>7</sup>

Vernacular health concepts, narratives and behaviour during the plague, and later on at the time of cholera varied, reflecting the time and circumstances of their existence.

## DISEASE NARRATIVES AND CRISIS FOLKLORE ABOUT COVID-19

As Reet Hiimäe stresses, COVID-19 shows the multitude of combined dimensions that approaches to health can consider. Besides purely medical and bodily outputs, significant social, religious, narrative, emotional, and material-technological aspects arise simultaneously, and must be taken into account and researched (Hiimäe 2021: 8). All of these aspects are reflected in the narrative culture and pandemic lore of the time.

Humanity's recent past is a macabre reminder of the plague during the period of some epidemics like deadly cholera, or the Spanish Flu which caused many deaths after the First World War, and resurfaced after the Second World War to a somewhat smaller degree. Now, in the third millennium, when most people had believed this impossible in the developed world, we are witness to a global pandemic of a new 'plague', the respiratory disease COVID-19 which – while less deadly – likewise causes mass death, fear, anxiety, neuroses, poverty, widespread economic crisis, and violence. This is all reflected in contemporary legends, narrative discourse, conspiracy theories, and other pandemic lore.

The Internet has become an important forum for discussing the supernatural, the extraordinary, and the emotional experiences that people are forced to cope with (Koski 2016: 13). This means discourses based on people's interaction with COVID-19 – their opinion of the pandemic and their lived experiences of the circumstances – are part of everyday discussion online, chiefly on social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and Internet forums.

Early responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, already during the first wave in March 2020, included frequent humorous dialogues, jokes and memes about the subject, in line with the understanding that people ease their existential fears, traumas and distrust using humour. Online humorous content began to circulate, ridiculing the emerging conditions of life. Although these conditions caused frustration and deep anxiety, it is interesting that not much of it was specifically morbid disaster humour, as established by Theo Meder based on content collected in the Netherlands (Meder 2021: 135).

In Slovenia many puns, jokes and memes were recorded,<sup>8</sup> for instance:

<sup>7</sup> M. Slekov, Kuga na slovenskem Štajerskem. Slovenski gospodar 17, št. 18 (3. 5. 1883), p. 142.

<sup>8</sup> For more, see: Mencej 2022.





Figure 4: Little Red Riding Hood in the time of COVID 19.



Figure 5: Just to remind you who invented greeting people with a forearm.



Figure 6: *Be good, I'll be back soon.*



Figure 7: *Damn, they have made such a panic that even I am afraid of it.*

*Mars says to Venus: "Look how Earth's been improving since it's been on COVID-19!"*

*Why are folks buying toilet paper like crazy? – Because 1 sneezes and then 10 shit their pants!*

*They told me a mask and gloves were enough to visit the store, but I'm smart enough to wear a shirt and jacket as well.*

As these examples reveal, many jokes and memes originating during the COVID-19 pandemic attempt to diffuse fear and ease the emotionally-laden situation through humour and catharsis.

In the first wave of the epidemic, people often shared advice, encouragement, vernacular cures, and personal experiences. They also reanimated the memory of the literature and arts concerning the plague, among others writing:

*Doing similar activities as the literary protagonists of Boccaccio, we may get ourselves through the dark times of the coronavirus. There are, of course, many alternatives to storytelling – board and card games, watching series or films, cooking, reading ... all such leisure one might normally, when not under a forced quarantine, have no time for. Panicking makes no sense since there are no reasonable actions to take, except for following the epidemiological and hygiene guidelines, and diligently keeping away from those who might be at serious risk of infection. And so, focusing on various activities at home and staying safe is the way to go.*

The interest in such literature was so strong that it then became impossible to obtain the book *Decameron* by Giovanni Boccaccio.

Popular advice also appeared with regard to practices that might protect people from the virus, or at least ease the disease symptoms, such as by consuming vitamins C and D, vinegar, zinc, plenty of vegetables etc.

During wave two of the epidemic that began locally in October 2020, people described their lived experiences with the virus, for example in the report below published on 14 March 2021 at the website Protikorona.si:

*I'm a 59-year-old entrepreneur from Ljubljana, and I've recently gotten over an infection with the SARS-COV-2 virus. I was probably infected on 29 February when my friends and I had dinner together. Nobody was then showing any symptoms of the disease. A few days later, on 3 March, I was still free of any symptoms and going about my day, spreading the virus. In the evening, I had a meeting with 12 people. We were in a confined space, most of those present were eventually infected even though we were several metres apart.*

*The next day, I felt a little sore in the morning but had no other problems, and so I held a few more meetings where I likely infected another three people. In the afternoon, I felt so tired that I decided to stay at home. My condition worsened considerably on Thursday, 5 March. After 4 March, I was in self-isolation, although I wasn't aware of my exact disease yet. I suspected it was the flu, which was then in season. On Sunday 8 March, I was informed that two of my friends, from among those at our dinner together had tested positive for the novel coronavirus. They immediately told me while I was self-isolating. My partner and I went to be tested the next day, and received a confirmation of positive. I then quickly told everyone who I'd been in contact with. /.../*

*Unfortunately, my illness progressed: the infection spread to my lungs and I was hospitalised at the infectious disease unit of the UKC in Ljubljana. At 59 years of age, this was my first stay ever in hospital! It wasn't pleasant. My mind was full of questions to which there were no answers. I must say the staff were incredibly dedicated, kind, always ready with a smile, so full of positive energy and encouragement even though the conditions are harsh ... with face-coverings and goggles that keep getting misty ... /.../ After a week, my condition improved sufficiently to be released. /.../ The last two tests for COVID-19 were negative, but it'll take me a long while to fully recover seeing that I lost 8 kilograms during my illness. It's definitely done damage to my body.<sup>9</sup>*

Curiously, the date the author purports to have been infected (29 February 2021) does not exist since 2021 was not a leap year; and the 8 March mentioned was not a Sunday as is stated but a Monday, while likewise 5 March was not a Thursday but a Friday.

<sup>9</sup> Also published in "Glasilo Ljubljana", March 2021, dedicated to the novel coronavirus.

The general style and syntax arouse suspicion regarding whether the post was written by an actual COVID-19 patient, given that it is oddly reminiscent of a political messaging ‘discourse-template’ of the possible consequences of treating the virus lightly.

Presented here are only some examples of expressing certain vernacular health concepts and behaviour in Slovenia on which ideologies and personal values have a great impact.

It is characteristic of many of these discourses that they reveal a certain mistrust of the punitive and therapeutic politics of the State. In public discourse, it was often only stressed how COVID-19 is harmful, without not enough advice being given to people about how to improve their immune system. People understood this as a threat and hence many of them developed mistrust, and searched for consolation on the Internet.

The genres of narrative discourses and stories emerging around the subject of the coronavirus online in the Slovenian space primarily fell under conspiracy theories, fake news, and a wide variety of circulating rumours. Oft-discussed themes included that the outbreak of the virus had spread from the ‘wet market’ in Wuhan in China; or that the virus was purposefully created in China in a laboratory as a biological weapon. Common themes also referred to the breakdown of society, of institutions and of individuals.

On the other hand, the central messaging of the conspiracy theories was that the intention behind the virus’ global spread was to reduce the human population. Many of these theories related to the topic of the creation and dissemination of the coronavirus, and the problematic issues of the vaccine.<sup>10</sup>

Conspiracy theories of this kind are global and often rely on the QAnon movement, one of the centres from which conspiracy theories have spread with considerable speed.

In Slovenia, a growing number of people either categorically disbelieve the existence of the COVID-19 phenomenon (and interpret the deaths as being due to pneumonia, the flu, a sinister plan etc.) or, in even bigger numbers, follow the alternative narratives of ‘self-professed doctors’ and public thinkers warning people against vaccination and compliance. Further, some intellectuals developed their “reasonable theories against vaccination” – mistrusting the government and science – explaining that people also die from vaccination, and that it is the right of every individual to decide what is done to their body.

Under the influence of conspiracy theories, on 12 June 2021 a vaccination station in Ljubljana was physically attacked and its staff temporarily prevented from working. An “anti-vaccination” group of people also started in 2021 to organise demonstrations on the streets of Ljubljana or in front of the premises of the broadcaster RTV-Slovenia. Their reactions to the advice of doctors or politicians were not only hostile but often even threatening in character.

During the first wave of the pandemic crisis in 2020, people revived old beliefs and narrative traditions with the aim of defeating COVID-19. These narratives soon

---

<sup>10</sup> For more about this, see: Babič 2022; *Folklore ee* 82 / 2021; *Contemporary legend* 10 / 2020: *Special Issue on COVID-19*.

became global. In Italy, they sang from the balconies. In the UK, they placed pictures of rainbows in their windows. In India, they chanted “Go corona”. Around the world, solidarity in the face of the coronavirus took many forms.

In Japan, memory resurfaced about the ancient beast *Amabiko* renamed *Amabie*, which helps ward against the coronavirus. It has three legs, a beak, scaly skin, and floor-length hair.

*Amabie: The Ancient Beast Helping Japan Ward Off the Coronavirus*  
The mermaid-like creature began appearing on social media in Japan in early March and was soon being tagged in upwards of 30,000 posts a day. Manga artists rendered the creature in their own styles, sharing images alongside messages wishing for an end to the virus.

*Amabie then got official recognition when Japan's health ministry made it the face of its public safety campaign. After that, it started appearing on cookies, face masks, candy, bread rolls, the obligatory Starbucks logo pastiche, and even statues in parks.*

*According to a woodblock-printed news sheet dated April 1846, the creature made its first and only appearance in the sea off Higo Province, now Kumamoto Prefecture, on the southern island of Kyushu. As the story goes, a government official went down to the beach to investigate reports of something shining in the water.*

*When the official arrived, a mermaid-like creature emerged, introduced itself as “Amabie who lives in the sea”, and issued two predictions. “For the next six years, there will be a bountiful harvest across Japan, but there will also be an epidemic”. Amabie then told the official, “Quickly draw a picture of me and show it to people”, and disappeared back into the sea.*

*Nagano Eishun, librarian of the Fukui Prefectural Archives and an expert on ancient spirits, says Amabie is one of more than a dozen prophecy beasts reported during the Edo period, and it probably derives from an ape-like creature with a similar name.*

*In 1843, three years before Amabie first appeared, there were reports of a three-legged simian in the same province. The furry beast went by the name Amabiko and its origin story was strikingly similar. A woodblock printed news sheet from the era said a man went down to the sea to investigate reports of glowing lights. Amabiko introduced itself, predicted a rich harvest and an epidemic, then claimed that people would survive and live long, healthy lives if they saw the creature's image.*

*“The two have so much in common, it's natural to think that Amabiko was Amabie's former self”, says Nagano. And he says the monkey was far more famous than the mer-creature in the 19th century. During times of plagues, such as cholera and dysentery, people used a picture of Amabiko as a good luck charm.*

*Nagano says the creature probably changed form as its story spread across the country through drawings and people took liberties with their interpretations. He adds that commercial interests may have driven both the creativity and the creature's insistence that it had to be seen.*

*"The woodblock printed news sheet, called kawaraban, was basically a single sheet of paper with a piece of illustrated news or gossip", he says.*

*"The producers always wanted an interesting story to catch people's attention, so they got inventive, like perhaps letting a spirit warn people they'd get sick unless everyone had a copy of that image".*

*After many decades out of the spotlight, Amabie is finally getting the attention it craves with some help from social media.*

*It seems human nature hasn't changed much since the 19th century, and the image of this strange creature is still able to provide some kind of solace. But Nagano says there's a fundamental difference between then and now.*

*"Back in the 19th century, those images were only supposed to save the person who bought the news sheet. But now people are spreading the images to protect everyone. I would say that shows we've made big progress."<sup>11</sup>*

The reminiscent on the plague columns is the "plague column – Corona" – erected in Vižmarje in Ljubljana. The sculptor Franc Zavodnik says he has been regularly disinfecting it with WD40.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 8: Amabie – the Ancient Beast Helping Japan Ward off the Corona-virus.



Figure 9: The "Plague column – Corona" in Vižmarje in Ljubljana with the sculptor (<https://www.dnevnik.si/1042934644>).

<sup>11</sup> NHK Japan Broadcasting Corporation World-Japan: Yamamoto Saori; <http://www.pitt.edu/~dash/type7080.html#denmark>, accessed 15. 4. 2021).

<sup>12</sup> <https://theworldnews.net/si-news/v-ljubljani-kuzno-znamenje-ki-je-posveceno-koronavirusu>.

Narrative discourses connected to the COVID-19 phenomenon can easily be found on the Internet. Researchers already began collecting such online records during the first pandemic wave. For instance, at the Institute of Slovenian Ethnology in Ljubljana the blog “Vsakdanjik” was already set up in April 2020, and numerous ethnological institutions are compiling entire archives of this content, providing interesting and valuable documentation of the pandemic era.

## CONCLUSION

In grave situations like the outbreak of an epidemic or pandemic, people adapt to the newly arising circumstances and look for ways out of the crisis. Their daily practices and narratives reflect the ways and customs they rely on to deal with an infectious disease.

Narratives emerging around the subject of the disease – precisely because they address fears – have a fundamental function of assisting people through difficult existential situations. Conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a huge number of stories, jokes, memes, contemporary legends, and other epidemic folklore seeking ways out of the crisis or allowing individuals to express their emotions and experiences. These reflect how people tried to protect themselves from becoming ill, what their reactions were like, and how they survived the pandemic. On the other hand, many fake news and conspiracy theories have emerged and continue to do so, causing a destructive current of ideation and even activity. As the Dutch folklorist Theo Meder established, these types of narratives provide complex insights into the emotions and lived experiences in society. Notably, the lockdown in mid-March 2020 led to many people being confined to their homes, sparking markedly increased online activity and interest in social media, in the active (creation/narration) and passive (consumption) senses (Meder 2021, 135).

While old legends surrounding the plague narrate how it was spreading – often in personified form: how the people protected themselves from it, and how they treated it, the narrative discourses on COVID-19 describe the lived experiences of individuals, their ways of enduring the pandemic, their thinking, including pessimistic examples, and humour through which they attempted to achieve catharsis and emotional stability – and all of this occurring in the modern, highly technologically advanced era characterised by global media ubiquity. As Ian Brodie stresses, “our knowledge of legends, rumours, and conspiracy theories is little comfort in this ever-changing world as we also seek scientific knowledge about this virus. /.../ As folklorists, and legend scholars in particular, we are uniquely able to recognize immediately the patterns of contemporary legends and quickly provide a critique of them in real time, placing the legends within the longer arch of legend history” (Brodie 2020: 1).

The anthropologist Dan Podjed posits that the virus is not just a natural phenomenon but also an important social actor since the pandemic has radically transformed the ways we live, work and socialise. In addition, it has further deepened the disparities between rich and poor, leading to economic, demographic, and various psychological crises (Podjed 2020).

It is clear that pandemics, including COVID-19, are some of the worst catastrophes affecting humankind. They bring fear of physical and mental suffering at a very fundamental level of human existence.

The COVID-19 crisis has evidently also called into question the freedom of the individual, extreme solitude, the economic crisis facing many people, and psychological problems. The atmosphere of generalised suspicion concerning the masks, test materials and vaccination was provoked. The narrative folklore reflects all of this, having become extremely globalised due to the digitalisation of society and “techno-feudalism”<sup>13</sup>. Also globalised has been the advice regarding what to consume to remain healthy, even if some practices are extremely strange, like drinking bleach (Varikina) or inserting WD-40.

While tradition addresses epidemics from ages past with considerable seriousness, obedience and worry, the modern responses are often different. They also exhibit humour, expressions of irony and frustration, anxiety, malicious pleasure and general distrust, especially in the mainstream media and politics. Narrative discourses also attempting to identify a culprit are based on emotions like fear, confusion, anxiety, doubt and mistrust. Nevertheless, even though the past and present activities and discourses appear quite different at first glance, they share some underlying similarities. These loosely include: folk advice on foods to eat and for protection against infection, the closing of borders and quarantine, the personification/memefication of the disease – and even in contemporary world, plague- or corona-columns, the summoning of ancient mythological beings back into the popular consciousness to assist in the struggle against the virus. New and traditional elements sometimes interweave, despite the very different societal and cultural attitudes causing them.

The COVID-19 pandemic is surrounded by a huge number of conspiracy theories and fake news. Researchers in the USA as well as Europe establish that the people resonating with and spreading conspiracy theories are often in conflict with the government or the prevalent cultural and social order; and yet, the context of such inclinations and activities is far broader, more nuanced and complex. Folklorists should continue to research this pluralism of opinions and perceptions and the heterogeneousness of health beliefs, narratives and practices.

## REFERENCES

- Brodie, Ian, 2020: Precedent: COVID-19 and Vernacular Response. *Contemporary Legend. Series 3, Volume 10: Special Issue on COVID-19*, 1–16.
- Byford, Jovan. 2014: Beyond belief: The social psychology of conspiracy theories and the study of ideology. In: Antakiand, C.; Condor, C., (eds), *Rhetoric, Ideology and Social Psychology: Essays in Honour of Michael Billig. Explorations in Social Psychology*. London: Routledge, 83–94.

<sup>13</sup> This term was presented by Cedric Durand (after Monique Selim 2021: 16).



- Christiansen, Reidar Th., 1958: *The Migratory Legends. A Proposed List of Types with a Systematic Catalogue of the Norwegian Variants.* (FF Communications 175). Helsinki: Academia scientiarum Fennica.
- Dolenc, Milan; Zupanič Slavec, Zvonka; Makarovič, Marija (ur.), 1999: *Zagovori v slovenski ljudski medicini ter zarotitve in apokrifne molitve.* Ljubljana: Inštitut za zgodovino medicine Medicinske fakultete Univerze v Ljubljani.
- Golec, Boris, 2001: Kužne epidemije na Dolenjskem med izročilom in stvarnostjo. *Kronika* 49/1-2, str. 23–64.
- Grafenauer, Ivan, 1958: Neték in »Ponočna potnica« v ljudski pripovedki. V: *Razprave Razreda (II.) za filološke in literarne vede* IV. Ljubljana: SAZU, 157–201.
- Grimm, Jacob, 1835: *Deutsche Mythologie.* Göttingen: Dieterich'sche Buchhandlung.
- Gunnell, Terry: Mists, Magicians and Murderous Children: International Migratory Legends Concerning the 'Black Death' in Iceland. In: Ó Catháin, Séamas (ed.), *Northern Lights. Following Folklore in North-Western Europe.* Dublin: University College Dublin Press 2001, 47–59.
- Hiimäe, Reet, 1997: *Estikatkupärimus* [Estonian Plague Tradition]. Tartu: Estonian Literary Museum.
- Hiimäe, Reet, 2016: Narrative Maps of Danger as a Means of Subjective Protection. *Etnološka tribina* 39, vol. 46, 176–186.
- Hiimäe, Reet, 2021: Introduction into Health-Related Folklore and Its Research: From First-Hand Experience to Second-Hand Narrating Models. *Folklore ee.* 82, 7–20.
- Hiimäe, Reet; Kalda, Mare; Kõiva, Mare; Voolaid, Piret, 2021: Vernacular reactions to Covid-19 in Estonia: Crisis Folklore and Coping. *Folklore ee.* 82, 21–52.
- Koski, Kaarina 2016: Discussing the Supernatural in Contemporary Finland: Discourses, Genres, and Forums. *Folklore ee* 65, 11–36.
- Krauss, Friedrich S., 1883: *Südslavische Pestsagen.* (Separatdruck aus dem XIII. Bande [Neue Folge III. Band] der »Mittheilungender Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien«) Wien: Verlagdes Verfassers.
- Krauss, Friedrich S., 1890: *Volks Glaube und religiöser Brauch der Südslaven worwiegend nach eigenen Ermittlungen.* Münster.
- Krojež Telban, Monika. 2022: Pripovedi o kugi in zdravilne prakse proti tej bolezni v ljudskem izročilu / Folktales about the Plague and Healing Practices against It in Narrative Folklore. *Kronika* 70, 27–40 in 127–139.
- Lee, Jon D., 2014: *An Epidemic of Rumors. How Stories Shape Our Perception of Disease.* Boulder: University press of Colorado.
- Meder, Theo, 2021: Online coping with the first wave: Covid humor and rumor on Dutch social media (March – July 2020). *Folklore ee* 82, 135–157.
- Mencej, Mirjam, 2022: Življenje s koronavirusom v spletni folklori. *Studia mythologica Slavica* 25, 49–75.
- Möderndorfer, Vinko, 1964: *Ljudska medicina pri Slovencih.* (Classis II, Gradivo za narodopisje Slovencev) Ljubljana: Slovenska akademija znanosti in umetnosti.
- Möderndorfer, Vinko; Šašel, Josip, 1972: *Koroške pripovedke.* Ljubljana: Mladinska knjiga.
- Podjed, Dan 2020: *Antropologija med štirimi stenami: Spoznavanje družbe in sebe med pandemijo.* Ljubljana: Založba ZRC, ZRC SAZU.

- Radmirović Maček, Kristina; Babič, Saša: COVID-19 Conspiracy Theories in Slovenia. *Studia mythologica Slavica* 25, 27–48.
- Röhrich, Lutz, 2018: Predaja – bajka – narodno vjerovanje: kolektivni strah i njegovo svladanje. V: Marks, Ljiljana i Evelina Rudan (ur.), *Predaja: temelji žanra*. Zagreb: Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 351–370. [Original: Röhrich, Lutz, 1984: Sage – Märchen – Volksglauben. Kollektive Angstund ihre Bewältigung. In: Eifler, Günter, Otto Saame, Peter Schneider (eds.), *Angst und Hoffnung. Grundperspektivender Weltauslagung*. Mainz: Studium Generale der Johannes Gutenberg-Universität, 173–202].
- Selim, Monique, 2021: The pandemic: catalyst, analyzer. In: Selim, Monique (ed.), *Anthropology of Pandemic*. Paris: Association Française des Anthropologues, 11–18.
- Softić, Aiša, 2020: Zapisi usmenih predaja o kugi u Bosni i Hercegovini s kraja 19. stoljeća. *Godišnjak. Centar za balkanološka ispitivanja / Jahrbuch. Zentrum für Balkanforschungen* 49 (Govedarica, Blagoje, ur.). Sarajevo: Akademija nauka i umjetnosti Bosne i Hercegovine, 155–169.
- Šešo, Luka 2020: The Supernatural Beings of Belief Legends – Old Fears in a New Context. *Studia mithologica Slavica* 23, 183–202.
- Tangherlini, Timothy R. 1988: Ships, Fogs and Travelling Pairs. Plague Legend Migration in Scandinavia. *The Journal of American Folklore* 101/400, 176–206.
- Travnar, Vlad, 1934: *Kuga na Slovenskem*. Ljubljana.
- Valjavec, Matija, 1858: *Narodne pripovedke skupio u i oko Varaždina Matija Kračmanov Valjavec*. U Varaždinu: Josip pl. Platzer.

## ČUSTVA STRAHU V PRIPOVEDIH O KUGI IN SODOBNI PANDEMIJI COVID-19

MONIKA KROPEJ TELBAN



Pripovedi, ki nastajajo na temo bolezni in pandemij, kot sta kuga in Covid-19 pogosto zbuja strah in napovedujejo smrt in eksistenčno krizo. V članku je na kratko predstavljena motivika folklornih pripovedi o kugi, ob tem pa primerjalno predvsem razmere ob pandemiji Covid-19.

Številne pandemične pripovedi, diskurzi, vici, memi in sodobne zgodbe iščejo pot iz krize ali posameznikom omogočajo, da izražajo svoja občutja. V njih se kaže, kako so se ljudje skušali braniti pred tovrstnimi boleznimi, kakšne so bile njihove reakcije in kako so premagovali epidemijo. Nastajajo tudi lažne novice in teorije zarote, ki povzročajo destruktivni tok razmišljanja in dogajanja. Tovrstne pripovedi omogočajo vpogled v občutke in čustva v družbi.

Medtem ko povedke o epidemiji kuge pripovedujejo, kako se je kuga širila – pogosto v personificirani podobi, kako so se ljudje branili pred njo, kako so se zdravili in so epidemije iz preteklih obdobij obravnavane z veliko resnostjo

in zaskrbljenostjo, se teh tem sodobni odzivi na Covid-19 pogosto lotevajo s humorjem, izražanjem frustracij, strahov, zlobe in nezaupanja. Vendar pa tudi opisujejo življenjske izkušnje posameznikov, kako so premagovali epidemije, njihova razmišljanja ob tem, tudi negativna in kontraproduktivna. Vse to pa je v sodobnem visoko tehnološko razvitem času zaznamovano z globalno medijsko odmevnostjo.

Za razliko od reakcij na kugo so s pandemijo Covid-19 povezane številne teorije zarote in lažne novice. Raziskovalci tako v Zveznih državah Amerike kot v Evropi ugotavljajo, da so ljudje, ki širijo teorije zarote in tisti, ki jim verjamejo, pogosto v konfliktu z vlado ali družbenim sistemom. Vendar je kontekst tovrstnih nagnjenj in dejanj mnogo širši in bolj kompleksen.

Virus torej ni le naravni pojav, ampak pomemben družbeni akter, saj zaradi te bolezni živimo, delamo in se srečujemo drugače. Poleg tega pogloblja razliko med revnimi in bogatimi, povzroča gospodarske in demografske krize in številne psihične težave.

Vendar pa, čeprav so pretekla in sedanja dejanja in diskurzi na prvi pogled povsem drugačna, je med njimi nekaj podobnosti. Tako npr. tudi v času pandemije Covid-19 ljudje svetujejo kaj jesti in kako se obraniti pred virusom; uvaja se zapiranje meja, karantene; ljudje so celo začeli poosebljati bolezen in oživljati oziroma posodabljati stare bajeslovne like, ki naj bi pomagali premagati virus.

---

Monika Kropej Telban, Ph.D., Research Advisor, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Institute of Slovenian Ethnology, Novi trg 2, SI-1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia, monika@zrc-sazu.si