



Modelling Comet Lore

Estonian Folklore Records and 17th Century Japanese Diary

Mare Kõiva

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- * 400 hundred records from Estonian Folklore Archives.
- * The Estonian material represents a cross-section of verbal accounts
- * from the middle of the 19th century to date,
- * from the agrarian village society to the urbanised present.
- * The corpus is made up of short belief accounts and narratives with features of memorate (1st person narratives).
- * First and foremost, they are retrospective omens of disaster or interpretations of such.

Astronomer Erik Tago points out that in the last three thousand years, nearly 70 000 comets have been registered:

„Contemporary telescopes make it possible to discover a few dozen comets a year, but only one in every three years is visible to the naked eye and one in ten years is bright enough to merit wider attention from the public. So the few hundred brightest comets have been noted down in history one way or another”

A high frequency of appearances leads to belief systems and their activation on recall, oral transmission of the heritage and presumably also a natural variability.

Communication between different social groups within a society acts along networks of kinship, friendship and professional connections, jumping the group borders by help of the media and disseminating belief to all groups.

Just like rumours, discussions of beliefs and prejudices move across borders of social groups and, no doubt, contribute to the dramatisation of a crisis situation.

Beliefs are also similar to rumours in their social dynamics and the ability to transform into a socially disruptive panic.

comet, star with tale, talestar



Foto Jaak Jaaniste.

✦ Cometomantia was an influential field of study in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times. Rulers took notice of what they predicted.

Appearance of a comet portended disasters and destruction of life:

- ✦ the end of the world
- ✦ war and slaughter
- ✦ plague
- ✦ famine
- ✦ failure of crops

predicted good things

- ✦ Less: a comet predicts good times or good harvest.
- ✦ The looks of a comet, the time of its rising and direction were significant: tail points the direction of war, an autumn comet a far-away and spring comet close-to-home war, upwards tail means success.
- ✦ The tail of a comet is described as a big red or white or crooked sword; a wide and long brownish bride's veil, it may have a visible cross in the tail part; its core is bright and tail darkaba tume.



1843

„One of the most outstanding comets appeared in 1843. It passed very close to the surface of the Sun, being 60 times brighter than the full moon and visible during the day beside the Sun. Its tail was also the longest ever seen – approximately 300 million kilometers, i.e. two astronomical units” (Tago 1997).

Its impact on the society can be found in many records, both in Estonia and elsewhere.

The situation in America is described by Moncure Daniel Conway in his diary:

"But the greatest sensation was caused by the comet of 1843. There was a widespread panic, similar, it was said, to that caused by the meteors of 1832. Apprehending the approach of Judgement Day, crowds besieged the shop of Mr. Petty, our preaching tailor, invoking his prayers. Methodism reaped a harvest from the comet. The negroes, however, were not disturbed; - they were, I believe, always hoping to hear Gabriel's trump." (Kronk 1996).

An American Hopi Indian description of a comet falling:

If fell down once, thousands of years ago. Like the Sun. The star had a wide tail, it will once return and destroy the world. Its tail was radiant and hot with burning.

When it fell, that comet burned the Earth so that nobody except the Indians were left alive - and they had been warned by the holy spirit Chimanitou. They hid in a bog and rolled in mud to protect themselves from the heat.

It was so hot that everything, even the stones, was baked. Giant animals died out. You can still find their bones on the earth. It is said the comet fell down and its tail covered miles and miles.

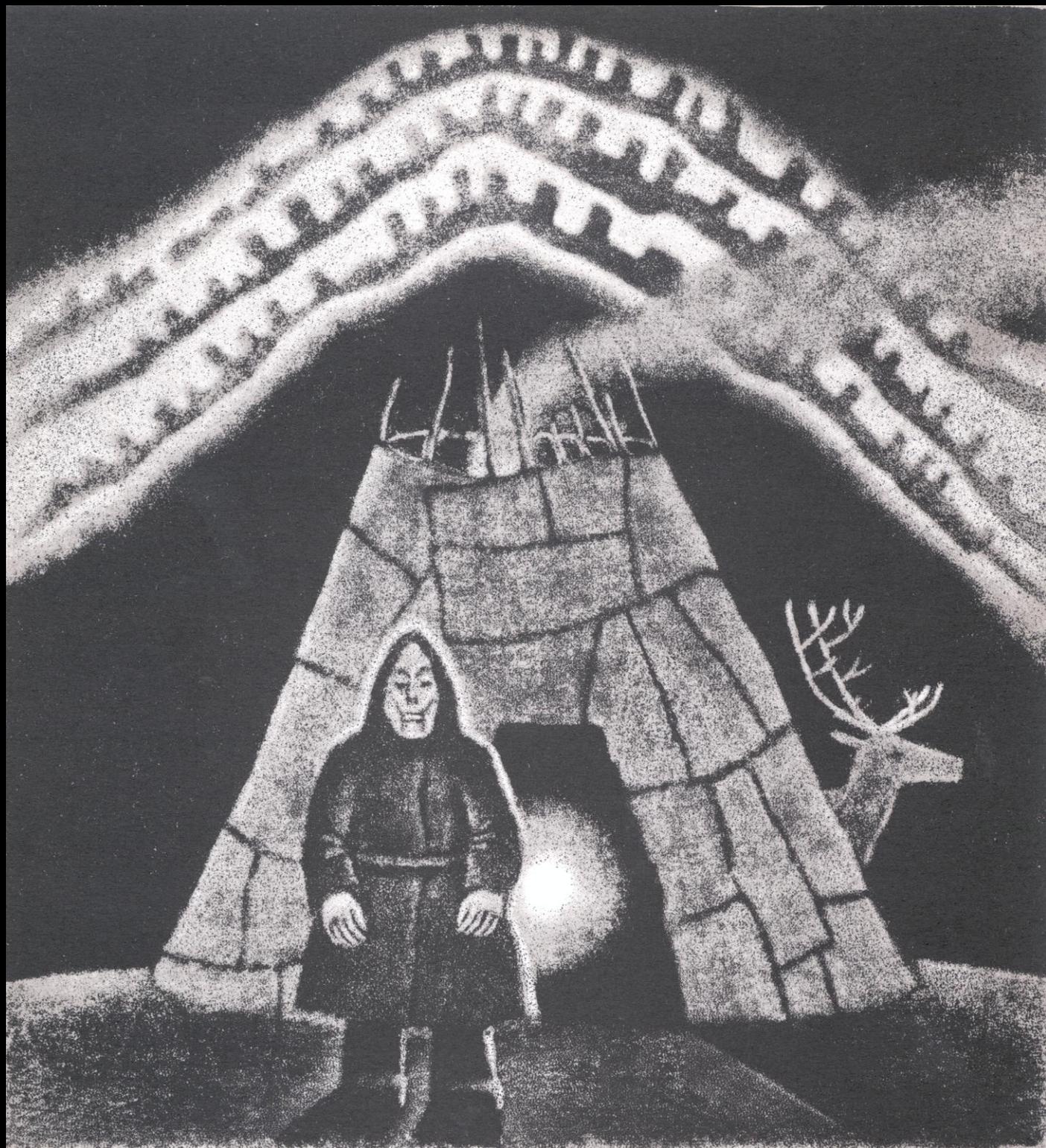
Collection of Gary Cronk

Motives are similar to

Bible

Old Edda

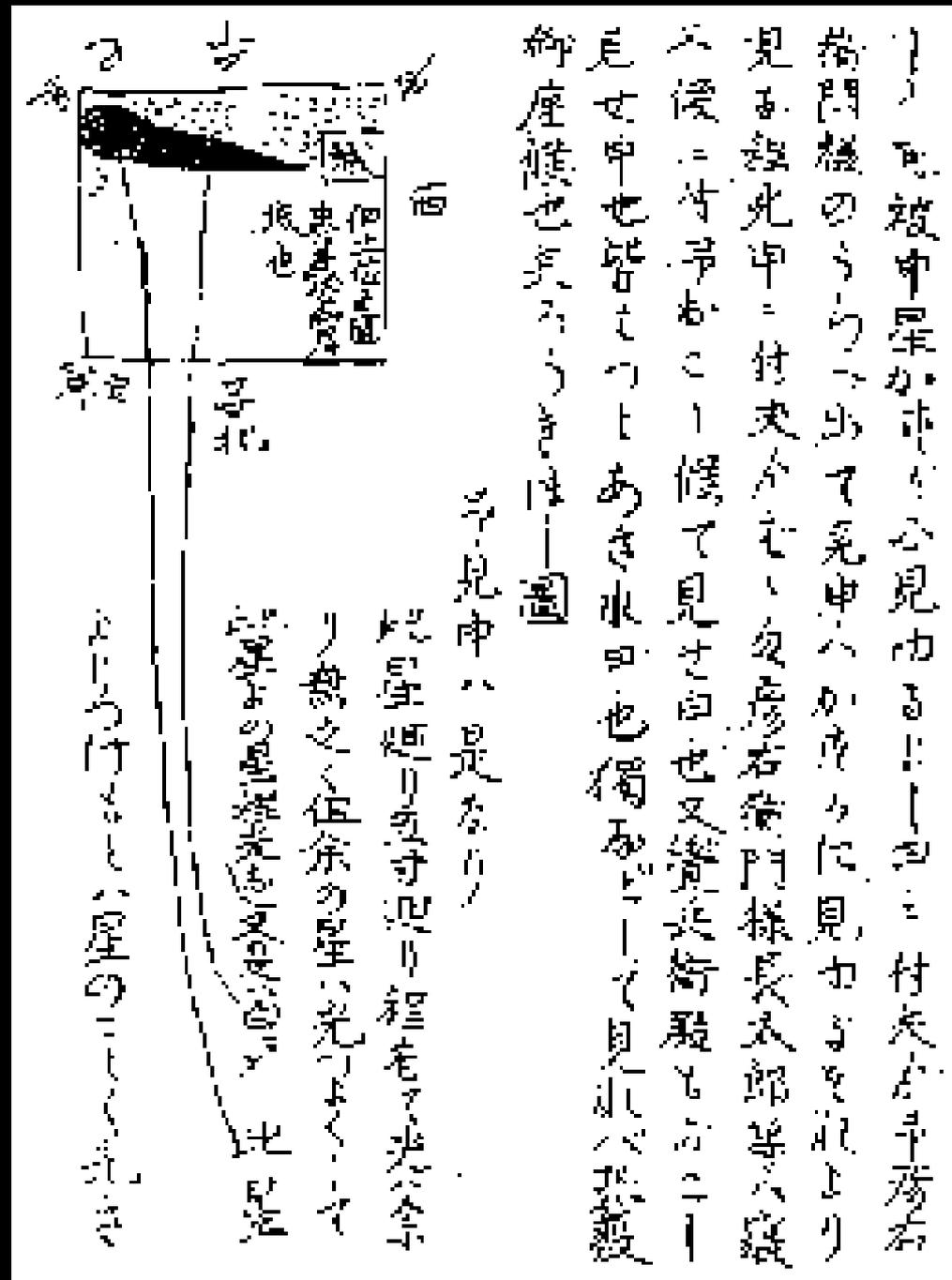
folklore about Doomsday, gigant animals



The mechanism of dispersion and action of comet folklore was revealed by a diary written by the Japanese boy Matasaburo in 1664.

12-year-old boy's drawings of the celestial sphere and other astronomy description that are remarkably captivating and tell us a lot about contemporary knowledge of astronomy.

The diary: opportunity for insights to the everyday life of the society and the heritage as well as the raw emotions of contemporary people.



On December 16, 1664, he writes:

„Some people are saying that 13 years ago, after the Siege of Osaka, there was a comet. Some people say this is right, and some people say this is wrong. Other people are saying that there was a comet the day before the Siege of Osaka Castle, and people also say there was a star like this at the time of the Shimabara conflicts [riots by farmers in the early part of the Edo era, around 1637-38].”

People refer to several earlier comets and connect their appearance with bad omens for the society. The next day, after having a discussion with the doctor whom the boy respects, Matasaburou adds: „[---] Dr. Jian also told me that the appearance of comets is a sign of evil. Something bad can happen like the emperor getting sick, or something bad could happen to the governor's health, or the land [feudal domain] could be changed. [---]”

The boy writes in his diary about the bad health of the aged governor already before the comet appeared – which suddenly casts a bad omen on his prospects of healing. Since the comet stays in the sky for months and the situation remains undecided, rumours take on the role of disseminating information. The trends and dynamics of beliefs are fascinating – initial connections with revolts are soon joined by ill health of ruler(s) and administrative land reforms.



Different new explanations: the comet as a foreteller of good events is opposed to the distressing accounts of the comet as portender of some bad event.

Comparing these notes with 19th century Estonian folklore records show us little differences. The dynamics of dissemination, the locality of events and interpersonal relations are, still, more clearly seen from the narrative format of the diary.

Although explanations typical of a nervous setting are predominant, there is no way to determine the extent to which people believed what they were telling.

Probably the proponents of various positions believed their interpretation of whether it was a good or bad omen. Presumably, some role in this is played by the subconscious wish to maintain stability, to avoid outbreaks of panic and to that end present good omens to balance the bad ones. Or was it wishful thinking?

„People worry too much about it because every day they say some kind of revolution will happen. It may be true. But some say we don't have to worry about the comet because something good may happen. [---]

Some people think there may be a war, but others say it's just not true... war or revolution or something to the emperor or something that will make high people fall. People are confused. [---].

The boy's daily notes have a routine beginning:
„I woke up in the morning, fed my bird and did
some homework”

– the latter refers to copying poems and other
small jobs. This is followed by descriptions of
what kids, servants, adults do, holidays and
everyday life, stories told. We also get to know
Matasaburou's social network – for example the
doctor he refers to is the personal doctor of the
governor.

Already on December 16 he knows that the comet was observed by the governor himself at 2 in the night.

His notes also report his own nightly observations of the comet, which may also explain his more detailed descriptions of the weather conditions.

The boy also records what people remember about peculiarities in the sky during past events.

The discussions continue in town for several months.

In time, the boy realises the superficiality and conflicts in the adults' knowledge, that they are based rather on hearsay and memories than regular observations.

„Tonight, I went over to Hisabe's house. Six people were there including me. We began to talk about the comet, and then we decided to watch it all night and not go to sleep. Hikozaemon's servant Nanahei told us that when he came by to get his pay at 10 o'clock tonight, he saw a fireball. He said everyone else in town saw it too.

After awhile, I asked Nanahei to check outside and see whether or not there was a comet. He ran back into the house and said that there was a comet faintly visible from the ESE to the NW.

So I went over to Hikozaemon's backyard, and I saw that it was faintly visible. As I watched it, it became brighter and brighter.

I woke grandma and Choutarou and Mr. Kakubee and showed the comet to them. Everybody was so surprised. I was too scaed to watch it by myself. [--]

I have picked two noteworthy events from the diary. One is a political decision -

* on December 25 the governor cancels sumo contests due to the comet, to give no reason for harmful rumours or interpretations.

* The 73-year-old local governor Tadayoshi falls ill on January 6 and dies of lung disease on January 10. The diary-keeper skips eating fish the following morning (a sign of honour) and notes a new bad omen - in the evening, a hundred crows flew crowing over someone's house. But no following disaster is mentioned.

„[---] This morning, I did some homework and went to see Dr. Jian. But he was gone to the castle because Governor Tadayoshi's illness is much worse. I heard that Samurai in the castle are in a panic. On the way back from Dr. Jian's house, I went to see the big gate of the castle. Though the big gate was quite beautiful, I couldn't stay there and watch it peacefully because there were many horses and vehicles and people and swords and spears. They were all visiting the sick governor. [---]“

The governor's death was on the first fulfilments of negative forecasts and it seems to also have been all the local trouble the comet caused.

There were no retrospective evaluations about the fulfilment of the omen. These are often found in archive records.

The boy himself considered the comet a herald of a new era that began when the comet disappeared in spring. We are witnesses to the emergence and diminution of interest in the comet.

Some conclusions

Researcher of the history of modern cosmology, Sara J. Schecher has argued in her monograph that advances in science in the 17th century created a gap in the way the intellectual elite and common people treated comets (Schechner 1997: 105) – this was the beginning of an unalterable process of distancing.

* However, the 17th century diary shows us the general level of knowledge and social agreements had the same influence on different layers of members of the community, but in a crisis situation they did have different responsibilities.

For example in this case the authorities forbidding sumo wrestling to curb the spread of hearsay.

* We can see a difference in the way the comet and comet lore were evaluated as potential destabilizing factors. Also different social groups had different power over preventing or eliminating comet lore and beliefs by their decisions.

* The omens discussed were practically identical to those found in much later folklore records.

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- * Matasaburo's documentation indicates how different and contradictory were explanations of the heavenly phenomenon by members of one community.
- * Beliefs with a negative prognosis are contradicted by beliefs that prevent negative or signify positive prognoses.
- * The length of time that comet was visible resulted in diminishing acuteness and loss of interest.
- * There was no medium nearby to and channel the comet fear and confusion into a full-blown panic.

