The Moon, Astronomic Objects and Symbolic Rites in Healing Strategies

Abstract. Astral beliefs have retained practical value in healing rituals. Modified astral beliefs are an important part in new healing practices, media-mediated medical knowledge and traditional family heritage. A significant renewal has taken place in sun-related beliefs where medical information competes with the modern trend of sun-shine trips and sun curing.
Moonlight not only cured, but also caused certain diseases and general ill feeling; the sun and excessive sunbathing were also considered dangerous, and stars caused some diseases.
The article analyses symbolic rites in healing strategies (incl. settings for space and time, physical objects, sex, age, dress-code, etc.) and incantations connected with celestial bodies (using moonlight for curing, transfer of disease to the moon, etc.).

Key words: astral beliefs, astral rituals, healing, incantations, Moon, new spiritual healing, symbolic rites

Magical texts include references to the sun, planets and stars (constellations). Texts concerning lunar magic comprise content-coherent (but sometimes contradictory) sets of beliefs and practices. It is obvious that the importance of the sun or sunlight for health, as well as the influence of the moon and lunar phases on the success of the domestic activities, was widely recognized wisdom for centuries.

Starting in the late nineteenth century, but more so since the early twentieth century, social and economic conditions have changed very quickly, with modernisation setting a fast pace. Innovations in agriculture and economics decreased the need to appeal to astral objects for help, or to even consider the phases of the moon. However, during the second half of twentieth century, the importance of annual critical times (equinoxes and solstices) and the belief in the powers of the Sun, the Moon and other astronomical bodies started to increase again. They gained value in the teachings of various new spiritual movements and representatives of alterna-
Astronomic Objects and Symbolic Rites in Healing Strategies

Mare Kõiva, Andres Kuperjanov

These movements comprise a variety of traditions, but use also Estonian traditional knowledge, gained either through oral heritage or text-book sources. Eric Hobsbawm has declared that the most interesting feature of the phenomenon of invention is the use of ancient materials to construct invented traditions of a novel type for quite novel purposes (Hobsbawm 1983: 6).

Sources, Methods

Folklore collecting in Estonia was initiated in the nineteenth century by well-known Baltic German and Estonian cultural figures. Specifically, the call to collect folk astronomical wisdom came from Jakob Hurt in 1880s. In the twentieth century, folklore collecting was carried on by various academic societies and folklorists, but also astronomers and for example the physicist Paul-Egon Prüller (Kuperjanov 2003). The results presented here are based on material in the Estonian Folklore Archives, the dialect archive of the Mother Tongue Society and other folkloristic archive texts that have been digitised by the Folkloristic Department of the Estonian Literary Museum. Currently, there are more than 9700 texts pertaining to astral topics. The texts date from the early nineteenth century to the twenty-first. Statistical and topographic analysis on the data presented here was carried out with the set of scripts –“Scriptorium” – written by Andres Kuperjanov. Scriptorium is by its nature the opposite of a database: the material is presented as an array of single-line strings, allowing fast processing of large text corpora. Out of more than 130,000 full texts from 27 archival collections, astral beliefs were sieved out: yielding 9794 texts. For the remainder of the analysis, folkloristic indexing, text classification and comparison were used. The discussed phenomena are found with fairly similar patterns among all European and other nations, leading to the conclusion that the results can be generalised for other nations as well.

Subjects of Astral Beliefs in the Data Corpus

The material comes largely from the largest four collections: H – 1860–1906, E – 1880–1934, ERA 1920–1944, and RKM – 1945–1996. Statistical analysis of belief texts indicates that although the content varies, the proportion of astral beliefs has been over the past 100 years constantly around 10±2% of all recorded beliefs.

Astral beliefs in the four largest collections, listed by location of origin, indicate that in the nineteenth-century astral beliefs are dispersed roughly equally. More astral beliefs come from regions that have yielded more folklife material in general (South-Estonia, northern coastal area). The exception here is Rõuge parish (mid-southern Estonia) where a few enthusiastic correspondents concentrated primarily on astral folklore, leading to a spike in our data. The twentieth century displays more inequalities in geographic distribution of astral beliefs. For one thing, annual professional fieldwork resulted in significantly more material, more informants and local correspondents. More material is recorded from parishes that were targeted for fieldwork (incl. South-East Estonia) and had eager local correspondents. Sadly, regions poorly represented in nineteenth-century recordings became even worse off.

Astral beliefs and magic pertained to several important spheres of life (economy, health, etc.). Looking at records spanning more than 100 years, we can see that astral phenomena were considered important first of all for meteorology, agronomy, medicine, incantations, tree lore, and veterinary medicine.

The most numerous group is astronomy-related records, followed by meteorological omens for both short-term and long-term weather forecasts.

Surprisingly, a very popular subject of astral beliefs is agronomy (1917 texts). The positions of astral bodies, when and how they appear, etc. is used for agronomic prognosis and timing magical procedures. These beliefs have seen fairly little change over the past 100 years, probably because it was only in late twentieth century that astrological plant-growing tutorials appeared in Estonian. Archived belief records reflect which agricultural crops were central for daily life: by far the most records concern the potato (the most popular food culture since the 1850s, losing importance in the twenty-first century), followed by grain crops, and then to equal extent peas, turnip, cabbage and general planting advice. When new cultures, like tomatoes or cucumbers, are introduced, an effort is made to match them to the old rules, and they appear in recorded astral beliefs.
Another large group is astral belief and magic records related to trees (1607 texts in the digital corpus). Most of the records teach how to fell and process trees correctly, to recognise times when trees are alive or dead, when you get the strongest wood, etc. – practical knowledge that is still considered valuable. As expected, most records concern acquisition of wood useable for house-building – depending on the species, the tree needs to be felled during the waxing or waning of the moon, in a certain direction, with certain type of wind, etc. Many records also concern the broom (which was an important artefact in family tradition, housekeeping and magical procedures) and whisks (an important part of the sauna traditions; a whisk made at the proper time gives health to the whisked person, deters itching; the whisk is more durable, etc.).

Veterinary medicine instructions (1473 texts in the digital corpus) concern healing, mostly of sheep (also dictating times of shearing), pigs and cows. For all other domestic animals, lunar phases and other astral phenomena carried little health significance.

References to human healing (651 texts in the digital corpus) concern general rules for recuperation, followed by tips for warts, hair care, various skin ailments (called generally *maa-alused* ‘the undergrounders’), rheumatism and similar diseases, some contagious diseases, small tumours.

### Symbolic Rites in Healing Strategies

The Sun and the Moon were believed to have specific influence on health. According to belief records, both heavenly bodies can cause specific ailments; certain problems are caused specifically by moonlight: headache, torpidity and sleepwalking (“moon disease”) or feeling bad.

> For me, if the moonlight falls onto me, I feel sick. I feel nausea, my head aches, I feel woozy and... Like with too hot sun. But I have not started to [sleep]walk, I only feel sick. (RKM II 446, 326 (7) < Torma, 1991)

Old disease-cause rationale has in part persisted – astral bodies should not be pointed at with a finger, nor badmouthed unless you were looking to get ill.

But sleepwalking was also said to be caught if you say something bad about the moon or to the moon in moonlight. This was told by our neighbour’s shepherd Aleksander, 13 years old, from Luunja, and he seemed stupid, perhaps he had said something bad to the moon. (RKM II 391, 281/2 (45) < Võnnu, 1984)

The appearance of the Moon could be an omen of disease. It was believed that if the new crescent moon lies on its back many will fall ill that month, or that if the moon was gibbous (in the first quarter) then many will die that month.

One of the best known magical healing methods was the symbolic transfer of disease to the moon and washing the disease off with moonlight (in case of skin ailments, rashes, tumours, sprains). Central to these short symbolic rituals was imitative washing or whisking. Healing with moonlight called for exposing only the afflicted portions of the body to moonlight. For example, sprains and warts were treated by folk healers by symbolically palming moonlight and “washing” the affected area with circular motions; sometimes the patient was told to wash hands with moonlight, imitating hand washing. Moonlight was also important for curing chicken-pox by whisking in moonlight – the patient was in the moonlight, the charmer in the shadows, shaded from moonlight, and performing the whisking with a specially made whisk.

> And once my own grandmother comes to visit us: “Oh, poor child, your hand is bleeding, oh, god, oh, how do you manage. Washing laundry – and the laundry gets bloody. At full moon go to the window, sweep with your hand, but don’t show yourself, stay behind the window.”
> And I did this and, see [shows], nowhere any sign of it. It started to vanish, vanish, I did not notice when it disappeared. The full moon helped this. And I also did like that, I did not tell anyone. (RKM II 395, 301/2 (10b) < Võnnu, 1985)

There were some exceptional healing rituals that called for healing in full moonlight, for example to cure fright (*ehmatus*) by spinning the patient three times in moonlight (ERA II 28, 216 (11) < Lüganuse, 1930).
The few veterinary records we have indicate that healing methods are similar to those used for humans. Moonlight was used to heal bone tumours and skin disease.

The healing power of sunlight was well known: “Those that were in poor health and ill had to be kept in sunshine for a long time. Sun on St. John’s Day restores the weak and ill, it also loses parasites from kids and cattle.” (ERA II 291, 580 (2d) < Martna, 1941).

A number of generalisations corroborated that the sun must not be gazed at in order to avoid eye diseases, and sunburn along with excess sunbathing were to be avoided.

Astral bodies, including moonlight and sunlight, are used in healing rituals according to general rules for ritual performance. The rules include chronological order, time anchors, prescribed duration and performance frequency as well as a typical pattern of pauses during which no observable treatment or charming takes place. Holding pauses is characteristic of traditional folk healing in general and it is as important as the ritual crying, laughing or swearing performed as part of traditional customs (cf. Kõiva 2014).

For healing with sunlight there was often no time anchor; sometimes time anchors included the time before sunrise, before sunset, after sunset (so-called koivalge). It is interesting to note that drinking water before sunrise and after sunset was prohibited in order to avoid accidents. Also, clothes of babies and young children were not to be left to dry outside, that is, in moonlight, setting or dawn sunlight; otherwise the child was in danger of loose bowels, the cure for which was addressing an incantation to evening light (eha ‘sunset’) and dawnlight (koit ‘dawn’).

Although each rite has predefined requirements for space and place (usually a forsaken place near the house, one of the household edifices, the sauna, cross-roads), physical objects (a sauna whisk, rope, knife), is participated in by people specified by sex (e.g., children’s diseases and moonlight cures fell in the women’s domain), age (middle-aged and older) or dress-code (wearing clothes, naked to some extent, totally naked; for example, washing with moonlight calls for exposing naked flesh), an important time anchor is the day of the week. The general belief held that healing is to be performed on even days of the week (Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday), but Thurs-day was clearly the preferred one. Often, two time anchors were combined: the week day and the lunar phase. If there was time to delay with the healing ritual – e.g. to heal congenital developmental problems, joint problems and rheumatism as well as other chronic diseases – a Thursday of a suitable lunar phase was chosen. Approximately 80% of Estonian records of wrist joint and congenital problem healing rites were performed on a Thursday (or rather, on three consecutive Thursdays).

While a good time to exterminate pests, charming and healing (and planting plants) was forbidden when both the moon and the sun were in the sky. Most healing rituals were performed during the waning moon, many records indicate that the full moon was just as suitable, and in some cases the new moon was called for. For deterring disease, the waning moon was the best time period; to promote economy, heal broken bones, sprains, guarantee subsistence, a favourable court ruling and plant growth, the waxing crescent moon was addressed.

*I take the old moon very much into account. To get rid of all kinds of skin problems: swellings, warts. I have also anointed my bones and I draw a cross sign on them.* (RKM II 455, 358 (6) < Pilistvere, 1993)

A sample of the rules would say that a disease contracted during a waning moon is complicated and lingering while falling ill during the waxing crescent moon you get well easily. A wound gotten during waxing moon tended to fester while a waning moon wound healed fast. The Thursday of a waxing crescent moon was the time to prepare medicines, and treatments were more effective during the waning moon phases. Cupolas were applied during, and sauna even-ings timed for, the waning moon phases. Sauna whisks were also made during waning moon phases to be less itchy and “helps against nine dangers”. A waxing crescent moon was best for “returning” congenital children’s problems to the animals that “caused” them (wolf, dog, etc.), also to cut the so-called devil’s hobble (äiokammit, kuradikammit), to help a child start to walk.

The new moon period when no moon is visible was believed to be a good time for massaging dorsal sinews, cupping, healing skin disease and general witchcraft.
Incantations and Their Time Anchors

The Sun, stars, the sky are named, collated, or referred to in various healing incantations.

For chest pains.

Mother of under-chest, pain of under-chest, be as still as the sun, as the stars, as the sky. Like the moon in thunder and God is pleased, like the king is pleased with his soldiers, be as clear, as clear as a spring. Bone pain, bone rot. Bone, do not rot. In the name of God x, the Son x and the Holy Ghost x. Amen. XXX. (ERA II 115, 283/4 (35.1) < Sangaste, 1935)

In the early twentieth century it was still common practice to “send away” small tumours during the full or waning moon phases, when they were offered to the moon with the words “Look what I have and you don’t – take it!”, or a symbolic throwing gesture was made towards the moon with similar accompanying words.

One of the fixed cure formulae using moonlight was “Go like the waxing moon goes from the sky!”, repeated three or nine times. The same incantation formula was often used as the final phrase of a longer curing formula. The lunar phase was on the same principle used in Bulgarian, Udmurtian, Lithuanian, etc. incantations (Amrojan 2005, Panina 2014, Vaiskeviciene 2008).

The most common incantation, however, is one appealing to the Moon for young looks.

When you saw the new moon crescent for the first time you had to say three times: “I will grow young, you will grow old!” After that you could not talk to anyone that night and had to go to sleep silently, then the wish was fulfilled – the girl stayed young. (RKM II 106, 575 (51) < Isaku, 1960)

The moon was addressed, for example, in order to dismiss sleepiness and laziness (cf. E 47310 (107) < Rõuge, 1910).

Conclusion

Analysis of the Estonian digital corpus of astral beliefs shows that astral phenomena have, during the past hundred years of written records, remained a stable portion of all folklore recorded, with a surprisingly small sub-portion dedicated to medicinal records. The system of beliefs relating to agrarian practice and general practical housekeeping centring on lunar phases is popular to this day and has persisted fairly well.

Astral beliefs have retained practical value also in healing rituals: some reports indicate the importance of using moonlight for curing, some concern transfer of disease to the moon, some the moon and lunar phases as time anchors. A significant portion of curing was performed during daylight hours with exceptions specifying a time either before sunset or sunrise. Moonlight not only cured, it was also the cause of certain diseases and general ill-feeling, just as looking straight into the sun and excessive sunbathing were considered dangerous. For choosing the best time for a ritual, in addition to illumination, the day of the week was important, as well as spatial anchors and other settings (wind direction, magical objects). In contemporary times, those who believe in the moon’s health influence face the most difficulty in choosing the best time for surgical operation in order to get rid of the disease and to ensure that the wounds heal fast.

Modified astral beliefs are an important part in new healing practices (cf. Kõiva 2014). In the Estonian case, media-mediated medical knowledge and traditional family heritage are blended with international new religious practices. A significant renewal has taken place in sun-related beliefs where the medical information that excessive suntan causes skin cancer competes with the modern trend that considers solariums and sun-shine trips an inseparable part of Nordic lifestyle.

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Sources

Astronomical data from the digital corpus of the Folklore Department at the Estonian Literary Museum.
Lunar Magic in the Modern Greek Folk Tradition

Abstract. The paper refers to the Modern Greek folk beliefs connected with the moon which is supposed to influence human health and routines and to “lunar magic” – various folk practices and rituals (usually timed to a particular lunar phase), which are performed with an intention to take advantage of the Moon’s strength and power.

Key words: ethno-linguistics, folk astronomy, Modern Greek folklore, the moon, charms, lunar magic

The paper refers to the basic areas where lunar magic is used, i.e. folk medicine practices, agricultural and household magic rituals, as well as in the different kinds of divinations.

Traditional culture treats the moon as an extremely powerful creature, often personalized as a human-like being or as an animal. Appealing to the moon and asking for its help can be found in the incantations of folk healers, in the texts of the charms used by girls wondering who their match is going to be, and also in the special formulas people tend to pronounce to welcome a new moon.

1. Folk medicine believes that human health is in a large measure influenced by the moon, which is considered to be a source of malady and, on the contrary, a healer. Such relation of the moon and diseases can be sometimes either “read” in the very nomination of the disease (e.g. σελινιασμός, φεγγάριασμα ‘epilepsy’ < σελήνη, φεγγάρι ‘the moon’), or mirrored in the explanations of the illnesses’ origin and reflected in the ways of treatment (frequently coinciding with the time of a precisely chosen lunar phase). The same co-relation is also shown in the texts of the spells pronounced by folk healers. Obviously not every disease is said to be ‘sent’ by the moon. ‘Lunar’ diseases tend to include skin diseases, yellow disease (icterus), toothache, epilepsy and some other mental affections. The reason may be that their symptoms and signs correspond to the specific moon characteristics and features, some distinctive motives of
THE RITUAL YEAR 10

MAGIC IN RITUALS AND RITUALS IN MAGIC

Edited by Tatiana Minniyakhmetova and Kamila Velkoborská
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