

# Fear of Comets and Coping Mechanisms: Social Dynamics on the Example of a 17<sup>th</sup> Century Japanese Diary and Estonian Folklore Records

**Abstract:** The aim of the article is to outline comet-related folklore, the fear of comets, doomsday omens and the mechanisms for coping with this. The way comet folklore is reflected in social space, prophetic predictions and the dynamics of the process are viewed, using the example of the 17<sup>th</sup> century diary, written by the Japanese boy Matasaburou in 1664, and comparatively Estonian records.

**Keywords:** comet lore, doomsday omens, social dynamics, Japanese folklore, beliefs

After I had worked through the text corpus of comet sightings of about four hundred records digitised from the manuscript collections of the Estonian Folklore Archives, I was faced with questions I could not answer. The Estonian material represents a cross-section of verbal accounts describing one single phenomenon – from the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to date, from the agrarian village society to the ever more urbanised present. The corpus is made up of short belief accounts and narratives with features of memorate accounts. First and foremost, they are retrospective omens of disaster or interpretations of such. Like other omens, comet omens include those of natural catastrophes, political, meteorological, astrological, luck and success omens. However, in the case of comets, bad omens make up the majority, compared to the dozen good omen accounts. Older

books and periodicals did not have much to add to this variability. Estonian comet omens are very much similar to German and the general international beliefs (cf. Bächtold-Stäubli & Hoffmann-Krayer 1987; Leach 1984: 243).

So, based on folklore and media texts – are good omens really the extreme minority? How are different omens activated with the appearance of a visible astral phenomenon, a comet? Considering the periodic nature of comets, shouldn't there be more accounts of relations between catastrophes and specific astral phenomena? We can't really answer these questions based on the archived folklore material. However, the mechanism of dispersion and action of comet folklore was revealed by an unexpected source I discovered in the Internet – a diary written by the Japanese boy Matasaburo in 1664.

Next I am going to review how comet lore acts in society, using the example of the 17<sup>th</sup> century diary, and comparatively Estonian records. The aim of the article is to outline comet-related folklore and the fear of comets and the mechanisms for coping with this.

## **The appearance of the Comet as Reflected in the Society**

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 (Tago 1997).*

A high frequency of appearances leads to the emergence of 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 flows along networks of kinship, friendship and professional connections, jumping group borders by help of the media disseminating belief to all groups. For the last three centuries, at the least, what

people know has been also unified in many cultures by uniform school education and statements published in the media.

Studies about rumours assert that they involve some statement whose veracity is not quickly or ever confirmed. Gordon Allport and Joseph Postman (1947: 75) concluded that, over time rumour grows shorter, more concise, more easily grasped and told. Allport and Postman used three terms to describe the progress of rumour. They are: *levelling*, *sharpening*, and *assimilation*. Levelling refers to the loss of detail during the transmission process; sharpening to the selection of certain details which to transmit; and assimilation to a distortion in the transmission of information as a result of subconscious motivations. Just like rumours, discussions of beliefs and prejudices move across borders of social groups and, no doubt, contribute to the dramatization of a crisis situation. Beliefs are also similar to rumours in their social dynamics and the ability to transform into a socially disruptive panic.

One of the most noteworthy comets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was seen in 1843, a very bright and long-tailed comet that was visible beside the sun for a long time. 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 autobiography:

*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 s.a.).*

That same comet was also noteworthy from the astronomer’s point of view:

*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 kilometres, i.e. two astronomical units (Tago 1997).*

Japanese astronomers Steve Renshaw and Saori Ihara have deciphered 17<sup>th</sup> century drawings by a 12-year-old boy of the celestial sphere and other astronomy descriptions that are remarkably captivating and tell us a lot about contemporary knowledge of astronomy and observations of the starry sky. The diary excerpts also give a golden opportunity for insights to the everyday life of the society and the heritage as well as the raw emotions of contemporary people. The youngster has meticulously recorded accounts of his daily life. Between everyday errands and work there is the story of the comet intertwined. So are the events of his home town, his visits and meetings, rumours and beliefs, circulating in the town. Matasaburou is objective within the limits of the knowledge of his time and age, noting down daily events, being sceptical and analytical towards hearsay. On December 16, 1664, he writes:

*Some people are saying those 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 1637–1638] (Renshaw & Ihara 1996).*

So, 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. [---] (Renshaw & Ihara 1996).*

The Japanese youngster 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.

Over time, different new explanations rise: the comet as a foreteller of good events is opposed to the distressing accounts of the comet as portender of some bad event.

In Estonian heritage, the appearance of a comet is related to all bigger wars of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that Estonians were involved in, as well as disease outbreaks. Since the Antiquities, the defeats and retirement from power of famous emperors and rulers (e.g. Augustus, Claudius, Nero, Vespasianus, and Napoleon) has

been related to comets appearing in the sky. As a rule, the fate of the small people is governed by that of their ruler and great dangers such as hunger, plague or war.

The content and context of rumours are universal. Comparing the 17<sup>th</sup> century Japanese notes with the 19<sup>th</sup> century Estonian folklore records show us few differences. The dynamics of dissemination, the locality of events and interpersonal relations are, however, 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? Matasaburou writes in his diary that people are confused. We can see from his notes that more is talked about the possible good the comet augurs than we could imagine from what we know about any society, including the Estonian archival records:

*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*



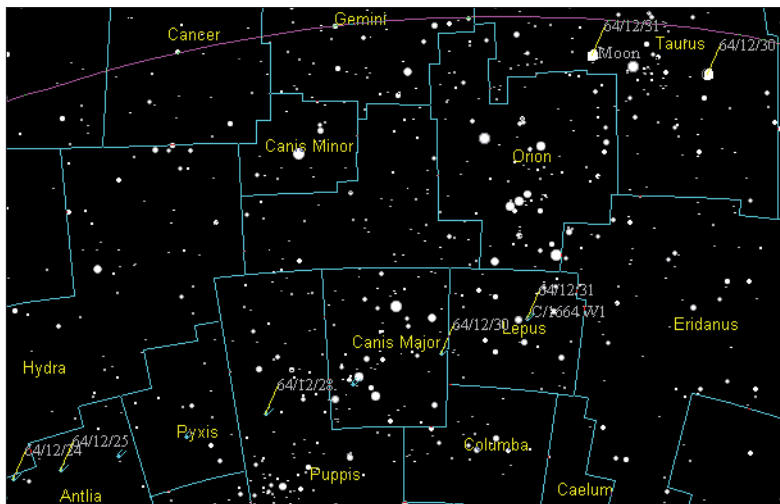
*Close-up of Matasaburou's First Drawing.*

*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. [---] (Renshaw & Ihara 1996).*

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, festivities and everyday life and stories about the comet during the months it stayed in the sky. 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 at night. His notes also report his own nightly observations of the comet,



*The mass suicide of Heaven's Gate religious group recorded the Hale-Bopp comet in cultural history. The comet as photographed at Raadi, Tartu, on March 12, 1997. The picture presents both the white dust tail and the light-blue gas tail. Photo by Jaak and Helle Jaaniste.*



*The Sky Simulation of Comet C/1664 W1 and the Moon through December 31, 1664 (Gregorian). Full Moon will be on the morning of January 2, 1665.*

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. Discussions continue in town for several months, their main topic is the previous appearances of comets and the catastrophes they supposedly evoked. In time, the boy realizes the superficiality and conflicts in the adults' knowledge, that they are based rather on hearsay and memories than regular observations. The town is also getting used to the comet and more and more often the question is raised – when will it disappear?

I have picked two noteworthy events from the diary as regards to the bad omens. One is a political decision – on December 25 the governor cancels sumo contests due to the comet, to give no reason for harmful rumors or interpretations of the contest results. 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.

The diary is a mixture of personal and objective accounts of events, centring naturally on the writer's person:

[---] *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 scared to watch it by myself. [---]*

[---] *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. [---] (Renshaw & Ihara 1996).*

The governor's death was the first fulfilment 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. On the contrary, the Estonian archival records include mostly fulfilled omens – the disaster and what preceded it.

Matasaburou's documentation indicates how different and contradictory explanations of the heavenly phenomenon by members of one community were. 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.

## Conclusion

Recent studies in the field of rumours found that rumour transmission is probably reflective of a “collective explanation process” (Bordia & DiFonzo 2004). The 17<sup>th</sup> century diary indicates that the comet had been sighted in nearby settlements some weeks before already and it was the question whether they could also see it that made inhabitants of Matasabourou’s home town look it up in the sky. We can see from the diary how people in different social positions treated those belief omens, making them into narratives or using their authority to prevent rumours driven by comet folklore and the harm these could do.

Researcher of the history of modern cosmology, Sara J. Schecher has argued in her monograph that advances in science in the 17<sup>th</sup> 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 17<sup>th</sup> century diary shows us the general level of knowledge and social agreements had the same influence on all 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. Here we can see a difference in the way the comet and comet lore were evaluated as potential destabilizing factors. Different social groups had various degrees of power over preventing or eliminating comet lore and beliefs by their decisions.

The 17<sup>th</sup> century diary indicates that during the four months the comet was visible in the sky, the omens discussed were practically identical to those found in much later folklore records, but their proportions are different – beliefs with a negative prognosis are contradicted by beliefs that prevent negative or signify positive prognoses. Naturally, the length of the time the comet was visible resulted in diminishing acuteness and loss of interest.

Folklore accounts in the archives provide insights in the beliefs and opinions of the common people, but usually reveal little about how this influenced their behaviour. From the diary,

we can see that people were confused when the comet appeared. 344 years later we can only say they were lucky there was no medium nearby to collect and channel that fear and confusion into a full-blown panic.

## References

- Allport, G. & Postman, J. 1951. *Psychology of Rumor*. New York: Russell and Russell.
- Bächtold-Stäubli, H. & Hoffmann-Krayer, E. 1987 [1932–1939]. *Handwörterbuch des deutschen Aberglaubens*, 5. Berlin & New York: de Gruyter.
- Bordia, P. & DiFonzo, N. 2004. Problem Solving in Social Interactions on the Internet: Rumor As Social Cognition. *Social Psychology Quarterly* 67 (1), pp. 33–49. doi:10.1177/019027250406
- Kronk, G. W., s.a. C/1843 D1. *Great March Comet*. Gary W. Kronk's *Cometography*. <http://cometography.com/lcomets/1843d1.html>; date of access: 20 Dec 2013.
- Leach, M. (ed.) 1984. *Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend*. New York: Harper & Collins.
- Renshaw, S. & Ihara, S. 1996. *The Tiger Tail Star Matasaburou and Comet C/1664 W1*. <http://www2.gol.com/users/steve/matasab.htm> & <http://www2.gol.com/users/steve/matasab2.htm>; date of access: 20 Dec 2013.
- Schechner, S. J. 1997. *Comets, Popular Culture, and the Birth of Modern Cosmology*. Princeton (New Jersey): Princeton University Press.
- Tago, E. 1997. Sabatähed, mis tegid ajalugu [Comets that made history]. *Mäetagused*, 3, pp. 53–56.

# Through the Ages II. Time, Space, and Eternity

Mare Kõiva

<http://www.folklore.ee/ri/pubte/ee/sator/sator13/>

ISSN 1406-2011 (print)

ISSN 1736-0323 (web)

ISBN 978-9949-490-98-1 (print)

ISBN 978-9949-490-99-8 (web)

Tartu 2015

Printed version: Mare Kõiva. **Through the Ages II.  
Time, Space, and Eternity.** SATOR 13. Tartu 2014

Author: Mare Kõiva

Series editor: Mare Kõiva

Editor: Liisa Vesik

Translators: Liisa Vesik, Mall Leman, Lii Liin,  
Tiina Mällo

Cover design: Lembit Karu

Designed by NGO Estonia Folklore Institute

HTML: Diana Kahre

Electronic version editing is supported by EKKM14-344  
Expansion of the sphere of use and introduction of the  
Estonian language, culture and folklore in electronic  
information carriers.

© 2015 ELM Scholarly Press

© 2015 Mare Kõiva

© 2015 Cover Lembit Karu