



# Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW) KONINKLIJKE NEDERLANDSE AKADEMIE VAN WETENSCHAPPEN

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**published in**  
Western Folklore  
2009

**document version**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in KNAW Research Portal](#)

### **citation for published version (APA)**

Meder, T. (2009). They are Among Us and They are Against Us. Contemporary Horror Stories about Muslims and Immigrants in the Netherlands. *Western Folklore*, 68(2/3), 257-274.

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# They are Among Us and They are Against Us

## *Contemporary Horror Stories about Muslims and Immigrants in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>*

THEO MEDER

### ABSTRACT

*In contemporary legend and rumour, fact and fiction often mingle. Modern legends and ostensive action can have a tremendous impact on the perception of reality and they can form a barometer for the social climate. For ethnologists and folklorists, the perception of truth should be more vital than truth itself. The question is why certain legends are believed to be true. This article explores that question through material collected from the Netherlands that portrays immigrants and Muslims as dangerous "Others."*  
**KEYWORDS:** contemporary legend, Netherlands, ostension, rape, xenophobia

*We have to accept that fact can become narrative and narrative can become fact.*

—Linda Degh, 1995

The following story is supposed to have happened in Utrecht, the Netherlands. One evening, some Dutch friends end up in a Turkish restaurant, and they decide to have some *doner kebab*. They choose the garlic sauce to go along with it. Shortly after eating the kebab, the friends turn violently ill. They need to be hospitalized and have their stomachs pumped. After examination, the doctor asks them if they had oral sex that evening: sperm of several different men had been found in their stomachs. Shortly after, the Turkish restaurant is closed down by the commodity inspection department after discovering that the garlic sauce contains the semen of seven different men.

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Of course, the story is not true; it is a contemporary legend, internationally known under the title "Masturbating into Food" (Brunvand 1986:121; 1994:338). According to Dutch narrators, the events happened not only in Utrecht, but also in Amsterdam, Arnhem, Delft, Leiden, The Hague, Rotterdam and Enschede.<sup>2</sup> The garlic sauce can contain the semen of one man, but in some versions of the story no less than 72 men had masturbated into the sauce. In most cases, the owner of the restaurant is Turkish or Moroccan. There are other ethnic restaurant stories in the Netherlands too, for instance about the Chinese using pets like cats or dogs or taboo animals like rats in their food, but the masturbation legend is almost exclusively told about Muslims. Although it is seldom explicitly said, the subliminal message of the tale is that Muslim men masturbate into the food out of contempt for their Dutch customers (Siegenbeek van Heukelom 2004).

In Utrecht, Mr. Atteya got fed up with the nasty rumours about his Turkish grill room Piramiden and contacted the local press in 1996. In the newspaper *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, he explained that the rumours were false.<sup>3</sup> An official from the commodity inspection department even confirmed that no semen had ever been found in the garlic sauce. However, the newspaper article only made matters worse: now *even more* people had read and heard about the nasty rumour, and Mr. Atteya closed down his grill room anyway.<sup>4</sup> It was not the first time that the debunking of a contemporary legend in the news media resulted in an even wider distribution of belief in the legend by the public (Burger 2004:76). For some reason, a lot of people seem to prefer to believe the contemporary legend, even though they should know better.

For most journalists and folk narrative researchers, the distinction between reality and tale appears to be quite clear: a contemporary legend like the masturbation tale is untrue, even though the general public may believe otherwise. Fact is, that the boundaries between true and false are not always that clear. Anthropologists and modern ethnologists have tried to put the contrast between true and false into perspective. Some rumours, tall tales and contemporary legends may have a grain of truth in them. In many cases there is at least a connection between legends and the general *conception of reality*, which gives people the impression they have good reason to believe the tales. This principle works the other way around as well: pre-conceived tales in people's heads influence their interpretation of reality (Venbrux and Meder 1995; Meder and Venbrux 1996). What is more, narratives and

legends can be a source of inspiration for human behavior and action. This is why folk narrative researcher Bill Ellis, in a somewhat provocative manner, puts it like this: "Legends are not folk literature but folk *behavior*" (Ellis 2001:10). Although the masturbation legend was untrue, the tale led Dutch customers to avoid Mr. Atteya's grill room.

Reality, or at least the conception of reality, brings forth narratives every day. Conversely, narratives influence people's conception of reality, and consequently their daily behavior. Therefore, the motto of this paper is a quotation from the legend scholar Linda Dégh: "We have to accept that fact can become narrative and narrative can become fact" (Dégh 1995:261).

#### OSTENSION

In their narrative research on the boundary line between legend and reality, both Dégh and Ellis made use of the concept of *ostension* or *ostensive action*. Ostension is the occurrence of events and behavior in daily life in the way they occur in legends. It is all about real-life action guided by pre-existing narrative, or as Ellis puts it, about "dramatic extension into real life" (Ellis 2001:41). Ostension is neither narration nor a theatrical act. Ostension is the more or less conscious or unconscious reproduction of narrative scenarios. In short, the concept of ostension deals with "legends we live," to quote Ellis (2001). An American example of this could be the appearance of poisoned candy and apples with razor blades during Halloween, well *after* all kinds of horror stories circulated (Dégh 1995:243-44). In their turn, these facts spread fear and generated new stories. Incidents generating narratives is, of course, considered to be the standard routine. However, Bill Ellis takes a more provocative stand in stating, "Events provoke stories; but it is far more likely that stories provoke events" (Ellis 2001:164).

Within ostension, we can discern three subcategories. To keep things simple, these subcategories distinguish the serious re-enactment of tales from the "prank," the "lie," and the "mistake":

1. Pseudo-ostension is the deliberate re-enactment of a legend as a hoax or a practical joke.
2. Proto-ostension. A narrator can transform a legend into a personal experience story. Through a process of appropriation, a tale can turn into a personal narrative, into a *memorate*.
3. Quasi-ostension. Pre-existing legends can lead to false readings of normal facts. Quasi-ostension is a mistaken interpretation of

ordinary events on the basis of narratives in our heads. (Ellis 2001:162–63)

#### THE LEGEND AS A MIND VIRUS AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Tales are not only spread by ordinary oral narration and human behavior, but also by our news media. Television and newspapers, for instance, provide us with stories on a daily basis (Burger 2004:72–75). Some stories have a tremendous impact on human belief and behavior. The First Gulf War (1990–1991) was actually triggered by the testimony of a Kuwaiti girl in tears before an American congressional committee. The girl told how cruel looting Iraqi soldiers had taken Kuwaiti babies out of their incubators and had left them to die on the cold hospital floor. This story is in perfect accordance with other horror stories from other wars. Moreover, the story is in perfect accordance with the image the Americans already had of the hostile Iraqi soldiers. At the end of the First Gulf War, the American journalist John McArthur conducted an investigation into the story, which turned out to be fundamentally untrue: no babies had been taken from incubators and left to die. The crying eyewitness turned out to be the daughter of the Kuwaiti ambassador in the US. The story had been made up and carefully orchestrated by public relations bureau Hill and Knowlton and was sponsored by a wealthy lobby group called Citizens for a Free Kuwait (Van Ginneken 2000; Ellis 2001:237–38; Verkaik 2002; Burger 2003:39).

This re-enactment of a testimony-of-war-story in order to manipulate public opinion is another example of ostension. In an extreme case like this, and thanks to worldwide media coverage, such a story can lead to war. Although journalists are supposed to check the facts and report the truth, such an assignment cannot always be fulfilled. Apart from the fact that there is no such thing as absolute truth, we have to acknowledge that events and facts cannot always be checked right away (Verdonck 1995). Like all other human beings, even the most scrupulous journalists can fall for a catchy story. Especially when the message of the story (for instance, the Iraqis are evil) forms a perfect match with pre-existing prejudices and belief tales.

Modern narrative research does not only deal with human behaviour involving contemporary storytelling, but with the *behaviour* of these stories as well. A legend can be called a *meme*, which is an

elementary cultural entity (Ellis 2001:76). What the *gene* is for human biology, the *meme* is for human culture. The *meme* is an independent building block of cultural information. As far as legends are concerned, the word *meme* is often translated as “mind virus” (Brodie 1996). A legend is a virus, transmitted by storytelling from one human mind to the other. If the virus is contagious enough to remain in the mind as a parasite, it can successfully infect other minds by means of narration. As soon as the narrative parasite loses its power, it may die out completely, but in most cases it will remain quiet and resident for some time or mutate to regain its power again. The legend can wait until the time is ripe for its message again. Through mutation a legend remains fit to survive. It can, for example, adjust to new situations, it can appoint new scapegoats, or it can become more violent or horrific. Just like real viruses, people can carry the mind viruses from one place to another, creating new seats of infection. Although not in all cases, mind viruses can cause illness. Legends can sometimes lead to mass hysteria. Mind viruses need not be orally transmitted: they can be spread by means of printed text, e-mail, and pictures, too (advertising agencies insert commercial mind viruses into our heads every day).

The better subliminal messages of legends fit in with the worldview of the public, the easier they cling to the memory. If the legend confirms what people want to believe, the narrative piece will fit into the puzzle of the people’s sense of reality perfectly. Anti-legends (making fun of the mind viruses) may serve as an antidote (cf. Ellis 2005). Of course, the whole idea of a mind virus is a kind of metaphor: there is no such thing as a cultural organism with a will of its own and an inner urge to survive. Viruses are living cells, while mind viruses are just human-made ideas—they cannot be seen under a microscope. Even if a mind virus proves to be very contagious, there will always be people who remain immune. Still, if we combine the concepts of ostension and memetics, we could establish the following: contemporary tales are mind viruses that influence human behavior. Firstly now, I would like to look into a funny case of ostension, in which belief and behavior were guided by legend. Secondly, there is a serious case, in which reality provided for a narrative scenario, leading to ostensive action.

#### LEGEND CAN BECOME “REALITY”

In 1994, international news media covered the Dutch story of the false teeth that had been found in a cod. That year, Mr. Cor Stoop became seasick on a fishing trip and as a result his upper dental plate

went overboard. Three months later, on the same boat, Mr. Hugo Slammat caught a cod, and while gutting the fish he found a dental plate. Along with a journalist, Mr. Stoop paid Mr. Slammat a visit, put the false teeth into his mouth and . . . they fit perfectly! Of course, the story is very similar to international folktales about lost rings and other objects that return in the stomach of a fish.<sup>5</sup> Actually, these folktales seem to be the most important source of inspiration for the *interpretation* of the events.

In fact, the false teeth had never been inside the fish for three months. The first fisherman's dentures that went overboard are still lying on the bottom of the sea. Three months later, the second fisherman became the victim of a *practical joke* by two taxi drivers, who were on board as well. They took along a spare dental plate from home and put it in the fish when Mr. Slammat was not looking. It was pure coincidence that these dentures fit Mr. Stoop, because they were not his at all! A humorous Dutch contemporary legend inspired the two taxi drivers to use the dentures in a practical joke. This legend is about a fisherman who loses his false teeth while vomiting into the sea as well. A second fisherman wants to fool his unfortunate friend. He hooks his own dentures to his fishing rod, pretends to pull them up out of the sea and exclaims: "What do you know? I am pulling up your teeth!" The unfortunate fisherman puts the dentures in his mouth, pulls them out again and immediately throws them overboard, shouting: "Those aren't mine at all. They don't fit!" (Venbrux and Meder 1995; Meder and Venbrux 1996).

Putting the dentures in the cod was an act of *ostension* by the taxi drivers: they wanted to re-enact an existing funny legend. At first, Mr. Stoop and Mr. Slammat believed the events to be *proto-ostension*: a ring-in-fish-like folktale turning into a memorate—a real personal experience story. On second thoughts, it was a case of *pseudo-ostension*, because the taxi drivers intended to pull a joke and fool the others. The fact that people thought the dentures miraculously returned in the stomach of a fish, can be characterized as *quasi-ostension*—a misinterpretation of facts, based on existing stories.

#### REALITY CAN BECOME "LEGEND" (AND FALSE MEMORATE)

I start with the grim reality. At the end of 1999 and the beginning of 2000, a 13-year-old, mentally challenged girl named Tessa was the victim of a group rape more than once. Threatened with a knife and a fake gun, the girl from Amsterdam was molested and raped by

fourteen boys between the age of nine and 16. The offenders threatened to kill her foster parents and to blow up her house if she ever talked. Most of the offenders had a migrant background; the majority were Moroccan. After several months, the police were informed. The delinquents were arrested, and the ones older than 12 were convicted. Officials of the Westerpark district decided to keep the whole affair quiet, in order to prevent stigmatization and ethnic riots. More than a year later, in November 2001, a leak to the national press led to general indignation, not only because of the shocking character of the sexual abuse, but also because of the decision made by the authorities to hush up the matter.<sup>6</sup>

So far for reality. Now for the stories that imitated the actual facts. In March 2002, a 14-year-old girl from Nijmegen reported to be the victim of a group rape. After investigation and interrogation by the police, it turned out that the girl made up the whole event. In November 2002, the girl was convicted for reporting a fictitious crime.<sup>7</sup> This case in Nijmegen did not cause as much public disturbance as a case of group rape in Assen.

On September 18, 2002, the Dutch newspaper *De Telegraaf* reported about the systematic group rape of a 13-year-old girl called Miranda.<sup>8</sup> She claimed that it all began with a group rape by predominantly juvenile Moroccans. For the next sixteen months the girl was kidnapped no less than twenty times by the group. She was offered to adult men as a sex slave. When her parents were away from home, the boys came to her house and kidnapped Miranda, threatening her with a knife or a gun. Blindfolded and transported in a Mercedes with shaded car windows, she was taken to a discotheque. Threatened with knives and firearms, she had to lie down on a bed, after which she was abused by several paedophiles. The kidnappers received money and hard drugs from the violators. One day, the terrified girl tried to escape the Moroccan gang and fled to Amsterdam. After five days, she returned home to tell her parents the whole story. The parents believed Miranda, and in May 2002 they reported the crime to the police, in vain. Miranda wrote an elaborate report about the events, and the crime was reported to the police a second and a third time. Still, police investigations remained slow and no arrests were made. Meanwhile, the perpetrators openly passed the house where Miranda and her parents lived, and they intimidated them. Only after *De Telegraaf* published the whole story in September, the police seemed to be willing to form

a research team. In the same newspaper, Miranda's therapist stated that "at least two other girls" were victims of the Moroccan group rape gang. Local politicians were indignant about the whole affair. In late October, after thorough and extensive police investigation, the prosecution decided that the reported crime should be considered "not credible." Social assistance was offered to both Miranda and her parents.<sup>9</sup>

Apparently, the narrative scenario was in the air and contagious, because at the beginning of October 2002, another ethnic group rape was reported in Hoogezand. A 13-year-old Antillean girl called Tathnoeska Edwards claimed to be raped by eight Turkish boys, after which they set fire to her home. On October 4, 2002, photos of the burned-down house were published in national newspapers, such as *Algemeen Dagblad* and *NRC-Handelsblad*. An interview with the victim's mother was broadcast by the local television station RTV-Noord. The next day, *De Telegraaf* published the story, including an interview with and photos of the girl and her parents.<sup>10</sup>

According to Tathnoeska, on Tuesday, October 1, she was riding her bike from school to home. Suddenly, she was surrounded by a group of immigrant boys, perhaps Turks. They threatened her and claimed to speak on behalf of her Moroccan neighbor: they told her to stay out of his affairs and stay away from her former Moroccan boyfriend, Saïd. After this, Tathnoeska received a blow and was allowed to cycle on. At home, she told that she was afraid to go to school the next day, and her mother reported her sick.

According to the girl, the next morning she was home alone, lying asleep on the couch. All of a sudden, there were eight masked boys in the room. They were wearing gloves and expensive designer clothes. They hit the girl because she refused to have sex with them. While they were threatening her, Tathnoeska learned from their language that the boys must be immigrants. On second thought, she was no longer sure if they were Turks. She said, "Actually, I don't know. They spoke a foreign language. They could have been Moroccans just as well. I can't tell these languages apart."<sup>11</sup>

The boys tied her up and they tried to keep her silent by cutting her in the leg with a knife. After that, they gave her a small pill and they taped her mouth. Then they undressed her and she was raped by all eight boys. The victim lost consciousness. She woke up again when she heard her girlfriend Renate scream outside. The boys had already fled and now the house was on fire. With the help of her girlfriend

Renate, Tathnoeska just barely managed to escape the burning house. Strangely enough, Tathnoeska was wearing her knickers and her top again, and the ropes and the tape had disappeared. Finally, she sought refuge with her Uncle Mou, who lives two houses away. The police arrived, the fire brigade extinguished the fire, and an ambulance took Tathnoeska to the hospital for examination.

Meanwhile, the Turkish community in Hoogezand was deeply shocked by the events, and the initial accusations led to major unrest. Somehow, ethnic tensions appeared to strengthen on the basis of this affair, although the resentment seemed to shift from one suspect Mediterranean group to the other: Moroccan neighbor, former Moroccan boyfriend, immigrant boys, Turkish rapists . . . who could tell the difference? Uncle Mou admitted that there were problems with the Moroccan neighbor. Father Jimmy Edwards was outraged about the fact that mayor Mirjam Salet of Hoogezand preferred to attend a meeting of the alarmed Turkish community rather than comfort the Antillean victims. Mr. Edwards exclaimed, "We have simply been dumped. But we are human beings too, you know. We have the Dutch nationality as well."<sup>12</sup> Under the circumstances, such an emotional statement was quite understandable, but it looked as if ethnic competition was playing a significant role.

After elaborate technical and medical examination, after investigations in the neighborhood and interrogations, on October 11 the police revealed that the girl made up the whole story. On November 8, 2002, the public was informed that Tathnoeska set fire to the couch in the living room herself. After she lost control over the fire, she decided to tell the group rape tale—primarily to avoid punishment, so it seems. In February 2003, the court demanded 50 hours of community service and five months of conditional youth custody against Tathnoeska. Again, social assistance was offered.<sup>13</sup>

John Staps, a specialist in sexual offence cases, claims in an interview that after police investigation, about ten percent of the accusations prove to be false. He argues a story needs careful examination. The use of blindfolds or an indistinct description of the offender may be indications of a false statement. A false report of a sexual crime may cover up other actions or motives, such as revenge, jealousy, adultery, or remorse over a sexual relationship. Adolescents can have other motives as well, such as unwanted pregnancy, venereal disease, loss of virginity, or just an alibi for why they came home late. Staps says, "They are inspired by stories in the media. This explains the extreme

crimes, like group rapes. A common rape doesn't even make the headlines anymore" (quoted in Pels 2002).

With the accusation of rape, one can plead innocence and put the blame on somebody else. When a child lies to his or her parents about a rape, he or she is often unaware of the consequences. At a certain moment, the story reaches a point of no return; it can no longer be withdrawn. As soon as the invented crime is reported to the police and hits the news, the consequences are awful.<sup>14</sup>

#### COPYCAT BEHAVIOR AND PROTO-OSTENSION

We can establish that the reality of the ethnic group rape in Westerpark led to a story in the media that started circulating among people. The story is shocking, but for many people it fits in perfectly with the negative news coverage and general image of delinquent groups of immigrant boys. The affair in the media provided a horror scenario, ready to be recycled and enlarged by three adolescent girls within a few months. Their ostensive conduct very much resembles the so-called copycat behavior that leads news stories to provoke similar events (Dégh 1995:245-46; cf. Fine and Turner 2001:200). Not only does this copycat behavior lead to imitation of action, but to ostensive reproduction and re-enactment of stories as well. In a sense, it is the normal situation in which real-life events lead to new stories. Still, in the perception of the unsuspecting newspaper readers, the friends and relatives and other people involved, these stories are for real—at least for a while.

In July 2004 it happened again in Paris, as Marie L. claimed she had been attacked in a train by Arab and African boys, because they thought she was Jewish. They used a knife on her hair and clothes, painted swastikas on her body and threw her baby on the floor, while all the other people in the train compartment looked the other way. After a few days, Marie confessed that she made the whole story up and that the cuts and swastikas were self-inflicted, but she claimed her story was based on the testimony of a Jewish friend, who really was brutally attacked (Van den Blink 2004).

More than we realize, we find ourselves in a twilight zone as far as these kind of stories are concerned. A story can be true. The truth can be slightly stretched. The reproduction of facts can be filtered or coloured. Facts can be manipulated or can turn out to be propaganda. Stories and events can be re-enacted. A story can be a contemporary legend, but a contemporary legend can turn into a real event as well. A

story can be a rumour, gossip, or a lie. Not all facts are verifiable, and many people particularly believe what they *want* to believe.

If a story about a real group rape is appropriated by girls with the intention to tell that something similar happened to them, it is called *proto-ostension*: a shocking piece of news turns into a personal narrative, a *memorate*. In the Netherlands, we have experienced a similar case with the Jewish actor Jules Croiset in 1987. It was in a time when feelings started running high in a public anti-Semitism debate. Inspired by existing scenarios for extreme right-wing terror and kidnappings, Jules Croiset sent threatening letters to people in the name of the "Fascist Dutch Youth Front" and then staged his own kidnapping. By doing so, he literally acted out the hard evidence he needed to prove the revival of anti-Semitism (Heumakers 2000).

Victims can count on our sympathy: they are fundamentally innocent, not guilty. The number of examples for the appropriation of violent and abusive scenarios can be extended quite easily.<sup>15</sup> There are not only examples of violence by immigrants, but also of the opposite: stories of immigrants claiming to be the victims of white racists. The stories need not be ethnic; they can contain any kind of rivalry. In 1995, 11-year-old Donny told his parents that a gang of youths in Groningen set fire to him. Actually, the boy later confessed he had an accident while playing with fire, but he told the story because he feared a firm beating by his father. The story caused a lot of unrest, and even though the tale turned out to be untrue, people living in the neighborhood considered it to be highly exemplary. During a meeting, all the frustration about the neighborhood came out: arson, theft, noise, battery, extortion, intimidation, aggression.<sup>16</sup>

#### EXEMPLARY FUNCTION, THE IMAGE OF THE "OTHER," AND DEMONIZATION

Although the story of Donny was not true, in the perception of the neighborhood residents the tale was an *exemplum* (an exemplary narrative in the sense of the ancient Catholic saint's life); in this case, a perfect example of life in a troublesome area. Donny's imaginary misery was a narrative representation of the neighborhood's problems. It is almost as if the offenders in the story wanted to make the social problems as clear as possible.<sup>17</sup>

In many true, semi-true, and untrue stories, the fear of "The Other" is essential (Ellis 2001:47-48; cf. Fine and Turner 2001). Distrusting "The Other" seems to be a universal human feature, almost an

evolutionary strategy for survival. We come across this basic distrust of "The Other" in all times and all places. "The Other" is different on account of categories as culture, politics, religion, sexual nature, and ethnicity. As an adolescent in the 1970s, I heard and believed contemporary legends in which dangerous "Others" like bikers, blacks, and homosexuals played a part. Later there were punk rockers and skinheads. After September 11th, the emphasis shifted towards ethnic and religious differences: above all, the immigrant and the Muslim became the "Others."

There is, of course, little political correctness in the criminalization and demonization of immigrants and Muslims. Still, stories enable people to speak their mind in a way that is intolerable in normal debate. The willingness to believe the tales, in which immigrants are portrayed as criminals and Muslims as terrorists, is an indication for hidden ethnic and religious bias.<sup>18</sup> Lately, these prejudices are fostered by world news coverage, especially since September 11th 2001, and again since March 11th 2004, the terrorist attack in Madrid.<sup>19</sup> For years now, the Middle East has been a scene of outrageous violence. In the Western news media, Muslims are almost exclusively displayed as troublemakers and terrorists casting stones and bombs. In the Netherlands, the condemnation of Islam as a "retarded culture" by the assassinated right-wing politician Pim Fortuyn temporarily fell on fertile ground. Dutch news coverage of recent fatal cases of senseless violence, in some of which several Moroccans and a Turkish boy were involved, has only made things worse for the image of ethnic minorities in Dutch society. The media hardly bring any positive news about Muslims and immigrants: at the moment, their presence is considered a problem rather than an enrichment by many.

A survey in June 2004 revealed that only 14% of the white Dutch population has a positive image of Muslims. No less than 36% has distinct negative feelings about Muslims and 16% of them feels intimidated by the presence of Muslims in Dutch society: these people fear immigrant street gangs, terrorist attacks, and future Muslim domination. Actually, 67% of the Dutch population does not know any Muslims personally: they just see them on the street or on television. Furthermore, the survey made clear that most Dutch people do not make a distinction between immigrants and Muslims anymore—all immigrants are considered to be Muslims nowadays.<sup>20</sup>

These facts constitute a tremendous breeding ground for rumours and contemporary legends. These stories imitate or exaggerate real

life. They can be invented as a projection of one's own fears and delusions, or as a means to put the blame on others rather than on oneself. The stories can spread because they verbalize the latent fears perfectly. Subsequently, other people can experience the stories as actual facts.

In 2003, there was an epidemic scare about the Smiley Gang in the Netherlands, a subject treated by Peter Burger in this issue. In December 2002, another legend with a negative message about Muslims reached the Netherlands. On December 17, journalist Peter van der Hoest wrote a column in the *Haagsche Courant* (The Hague) about the threat of Christmas Fair terrorism.<sup>21</sup> The journalist is convinced that the story is true, and claims he knows the women involved personally. At the beginning of December, two ladies take a bus tour across the border to the German city of Oberhausen to do some Christmas shopping. In the shopping centre they stumble upon an abandoned bag that contains at least a 100,000 dollars. Just as they decide to take the bag to the police, a nervous man with Arab features arrives. He has lost his bag, and since he is able to give an accurate description, the ladies decide to give him the bag. The grateful man wants to take the ladies to a jewellery shop for a present. The women refuse and the man says, "I do want to give you something! That's why I'll tell you: do not return here before Christmas. You have to promise me that; do not come back!" Then the man takes off. The women started to realize that a terrorist attack must be on hand, so they notified the German police. Once home, they informed the tour operator about the incident, who then decided to cancel all trips to Oberhausen. Finally, the journalist states that the two women are reliable informants, and that they still have not recovered from the shock.

The "Christmas Fair Terrorism Tale" circulated for some time, not only in Oberhausen and other German cities in the Ruhr-district, but also in the Dutch province of Limburg, especially about the Christmas Fairs in Maastricht, Sittard, and Heerlen. Newspaper *De Limburger* stated that due to the persistent rumours, fewer people visited the Christmas Fair on the Vrijthof in Maastricht. Travel Agency Milot in Rotterdam actually shifted some shopping trips from Oberhausen to Düsseldorf because of the stories. The German and the Dutch police received a lot of upset phone calls from civilians, but a crime was never reported. Investigation by the police led to no result: neither the ladies, nor the Arab man were ever found.

The fact is that the contemporary legend involved is already almost a century old. During the First World War, in 1915, the rumour



circulated in England. After being treated well by a British nurse, a grateful German officer warned her that a bomb attack would be carried out on the London subway (Hayward 2002:19). After the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers on September 11th, the contemporary legend made a tremendous come back. In the US, as well as in the Netherlands, the rumours were buzzing about: the attacks had already been announced by a grateful Arab, or new attacks were predicted by such a person. In the Amsterdam subway, an Arab supposedly lost his wallet. As a woman returns the wallet to him, the man tells her not to go to London on a certain date, because there is going to be another major attack.<sup>22</sup>

It is clear that the dreaded Other in the story changes along with social circumstances: in the past the enemy was the German, today it is the Muslim extremist. The contemporary legend of the "Christmas Fair Terrorism," also known as the "Grateful Arab tale," strongly appeals to hidden feelings of discomfort and paranoia towards Muslims. From a white Dutch perspective, the subliminal and paranoid message of the tale is: "They are *among* us and they are *against* us." What is more, the symbolic value of a story about an upcoming attack on a Christmas fair is enormous. The story suggests that Muslim terrorists are aiming to destroy our western prosperity and our Christian roots.

This kind of paranoia was confirmed once more at the beginning of 2004 when a rumour and an e-mail circulated about a Muslim bomb attack in Amsterdam during Queen's Day, April 30th. Rumour had it that Muslims in the Netherlands informed each other in mosques and through e-mail, that a major terrorist attack was planned. All Muslims were advised to either avoid or leave Amsterdam on Queen's Day. So they knew, but they didn't want to tell us. Because the e-mail was actually circulating among the Dutch people, police and press started investigating the story . . . to no avail. Presumably, the e-mail and the rumour were started by some right-wing Dutch youngsters, aiming to incriminate Muslims and scaring people off to visit crowded Amsterdam on Queen's Day. Needless to say, nothing happened that day.<sup>23</sup>

As far as the research into contemporary legends is concerned, these pessimistic narratives seem to reveal a growing demonization of immigrants, Muslims in particular. In the stories, they increasingly are depicted as the dangerous "Others": the untrustworthy outsiders, the violent ones, the terrorists, the criminals. It goes without saying that our immigrant and Muslim citizens are not amused, and strongly object to these incriminating images.

## CONCLUSION

We can conclude that in daily storytelling, in which the media play an important and sometimes even decisive role, fact and fiction often mingle. Modern legends and ostensive action can have a tremendous impact on the perception of reality and they can form a barometer for the social climate. For ethnologists and folklorists, the *perception* of truth should be more vital than truth itself. The question is why certain legends are believed to be true.

Legends and tales based on ostensive action are *memes*—cultural building blocks—and in many respects they spread and behave like viruses. They can infect journalists as much as ordinary folk. Furthermore, we can establish that stories do not only imitate real life, but real life imitates stories as well. We tell, hear, see and read legends, but we believe, experience, re-enact, and live legends too. The notion of *ostension* is used to comprehend the mechanism of legends we live. For other kinds of legends, the notion of *proto-ostension* is used, namely when people tell legends as if they were personally involved: because they *believe* so, because they *want* to believe so, or because they want *others* to believe so. This goes for the Kuwaiti girl, for Jules Croiset, for Miranda, and for Tathnoeska. In their stories there are dangerous "Others" (like in contemporary legends) who are guilty and not to be trusted: hostile soldiers, right-wing extremists, and, to an increasing extent, immigrants and Muslims. For ethnologists and folklorists this is a cultural and historical fact, for the media this is a reason for caution and restraint, and for politics and society this is a cause for concern.

## NOTES

1. This paper was presented at the 22nd Annual Perspectives on Contemporary Legend International Conference, University of Aberystwyth, Wales, July 23, 2004.
2. More than twenty versions of the story have been collected in the Dutch Folktale Database of the Meertens Instituut in Amsterdam, [www.verhalenbank.nl](http://www.verhalenbank.nl). For a published version see Burger (1995:117).
3. "Keuringsdienst: 'Sperma in shoarmasaus is leugen,'" *Utrechts Nieuwsblad*, April 27, 1996.
4. Personal communication with the author by the new Turkish owner of the grill room, June 18, 2002.
5. The international folktale catalog of Uther (2004) classifies this story type as ATU 736A, *The Ring of Polykrates*.
6. "Westerpark geschokt na verkrachting," *Het Parool*, November 19, 2001; "Meer openheid in grote zedenzaken," *Het Parool*, January 8, 2003.

7. "Meisje verzon verkrachting," *NRC-Handelsblad*, November 2, 2002.
8. "Op de vlucht voor verkrachtersbende," *De Telegraaf*, September 18, 2002.
9. "Verzonden verhalen over verkrachtingen," *NRC-Handelsblad*, October 24, 2002; Loek Mulder, "Asser meisje verzint groepsverkrachting," *Algemeen Dagblad*, October 24, 2002.
10. "Ik weet niet wie mij hebben verkracht," *De Telegraaf*, October 5, 2002.
11. "Ik weet niet wie mij hebben verkracht," *De Telegraaf*, October 5, 2002.
12. "Ouders lathoeska willen snel weg uit Hoogezand," *De Telegraaf*, October 7, 2002.
13. See for instance, "Politie: geen verkrachting Hoogezand," *De Telegraaf*, October 11, 2002; "Meisje verzon verkrachtingen," *De Telegraaf*, October 12, 2002; "Vrouw altijd in de knel bij valse aangifte," *De Telegraaf*, October 14, 2002; "Meisje Hoogezand stak zelf woning in brand," *De Volkskrant*, November 8, 2002; "Straf geëist tegen meisje voor aangifte verkrachting," *Nu.nl*, February 17, 2003. For a more elaborate overview of the newspaper coverage see Meder (2004:100-06, 114).
14. "Vrouw altijd in de knel bij valse aangifte," *De Telegraaf*, October 14, 2002, and De Visser (2002).
15. For a selection of other recent cases in Dutch newspapers see Meder (2004:107-08, 114-15).
16. Wio Joustra, "Nepverhaal leidt tot offensief tegen jonge Groningse criminelen," in *De Volkskrant*, August 26, 1995; "Mishandeling kind blijkt verzonden," *NRC-Handelsblad*, August 24, 1995.
17. Stephan Sanders, "Waar gebeurd," *De Volkskrant*, September 2, 1995.
18. See Fine and Turner (2001:192) on the American situation: "Again we see, in the willingness to believe the worst of others, echoes of white racial bias and black paranoia."
19. Meanwhile, the assassination of Dutch filmmaker Theo van Gogh (November 2, 2004) and the terrorist attacks in London (July 7 and 21, 2005) can be added to the list.
20. Kanne (2004). See also Janny Groen and Lidy Nicolassen, "Nederlander ziet moslim niet staan," *De Volkskrant*, June 26, 2004; Janny Groen, "Moslim schrikt van slecht imago bij autochtonen," *De Volkskrant*, June 28, 2004; "Bang voor moslims," *De Volkskrant*, June 28, 2004; Janny Groen, "Iedereen ziet ons toch als fundamentalist," *De Volkskrant*, June 28, 2004.
21. Peter van der Hoest, "Thriller," *De Haagsche Courant*, December 17, 2002; see as a reaction Melchior Zeeman and Luuk Kortekaas, "De terreur van een hardnekkig gerucht," *De Haagsche Courant*, December 19, 2002.
22. Peter Burger commented on the legends in a paper, "De onzichtbare veldwerker; usenet als corpus voor onderzoek naar moderne sagen," Amsterdam, Meertens Instituut, 2001. Available at <http://www.meertens.knaw.nl/events/stdh2001/burger.pdf>.
23. Gijsbert Termaat, "Moslims mijden hoofdstad op Koninginnedag," *De Telegraaf*, April 23, 2004; "Dreigende aanslag nieuwste hype op internet,"

Algemeen Dagblad, May 27, 2004; "Aanslag 'broodje aap,' *Het Parool*, April 28, 2004; "Broodje aap zeurt toch nog wat na," *Het Parool*, May 1, 2004.

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