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Urban Legends: Why on Earth?

Have you ever heard about The Vanishing Hitchhiker? What about the game Bloody Mary? Chances are that if we were in a classroom, you would now be excitedly raising your hand to tell me about how you know about that stuff, or have even played Bloody Mary before. How do I know these things? Because they’re everywhere! Stories like these have been going around from one person to another, mostly orally, and rarely having any evidence to support their authenticity. And just because they so happen to involve fairly recent elements, they have been called contemporary legends, or, most commonly, urban legends. And although some legends are at least partially based on real events, most of them seem to have been created as entertaining fiction. But why do such stories exist? What is it that prompts a person to create one. And, finally, what is it that draws people to them? My goal is to analyze the purpose of urban legends, their importance in society, as well as their effect on individuals, through investigating a specific example: The mystery of the *S.S. Ourang Medan*.

In what is perhaps the most detailed urban legend in existence, a terrifying ocean mystery is present. The story goes that sometime in the 1940’s, two American vessels patrolling the Straits of Malacca, along with several British and Dutch outposts on shore, received a Morse code message from the freighter *Ourang Medan*. It read:*"S.O.S. from Ourang Medan \* \* \* We float. All officers, including the captain dead. Lying in chartroom and bridge. Possibly whole crew dead.”* The distress call was followed by a series of confusing dots and lines of Morse code. Sometime later, two chilling words came through very clearly: “I die”. Arriving at the scene, the crew of an American ship witnessed a horrific sight: At their respective posts lay the bodies of the freighter’s crew. Faces contorted in unimaginable terror, mouths frozen in a never ending scream, eyes wide open. They looked as if they were frightened to death by something, and their arms, outstretched, looked like they were attempting to grab something in front of them, or, perhaps, fend off an invisible enemy. Even the ship’s dog had its teeth clenched together, in either a final expression of anger or agony. Sitting in a chair, in the radio room, was the vessel’s radio operator, his finger still on the telegraph needle. They saw no external injuries on any of the bodies. Furthermore, despite the temperature being over 100 degrees Fahrenheit outside of the vessel, the crew could feel cold chills in her interior. Some sources claim the cold was present across the entire vessel, while others point to freezing temperature in one of her cargo holds. Despite being confused and terrified, the American crew decided to tow the doomed ship to port for further investigation. But as soon as a line was attached to her, a cloud of smoke began rising from one of the *Ourang Medan’s* cargo holds (Presumably the cold one). The fire spread incredibly fast, and right after the crew unattached the tow line, the *S.S. Ourang Medan* exploded with such force that she was thrown out of the water for several seconds. After this, she sank, taking all of her deadly secrets to the bottom of the ocean. (The Philadelphia Experiment from A to Z)

The first time the account of the tragedy received any significant public attention was on the 9th of May, 1952, when a report from the United States Coast Guard appeared in *Proceedings of the Merchant Marine Counsel.* It states the story almost exactly as told above, adding only that the ship “*was found adrift approximately 50 miles from her Indicated position.”* (The Philadelphia Experiment from A to Z). However, there is one extremely strange detail. The report refers to the incident as having occurred in the month of February, 1948. But that was just the tip of the iceberg. When official investigations began, no mention of a vessel under the name *Ourang Medan* could be found in any register. Even *Lloyd’s Register of Ships*, perhaps the most credible source of vessel documentation in the world, made no reference to her. There are no insurance claims, crew records, maritime logs, or shipbuilding documents for a ship of that name. What is even more puzzling is that no possible relatives of the crew ever inquired about the disappearance of their loved ones. And what do we tend to call incidents we have little explanation or information about? That’s right. Urban legends. But if the story was a work of nautical fiction, who on this Earth would be bogus enough to create a tell tale about a ship full of corpses? And why?

According to LiveScience, “Urban legends are an important part of popular culture…offering insight into our fears and state of society. They’re also good fun.” (Whipps.) You might be thinking, “Okay. Some love themselves a good *Shining*-type fright story. But what in bananas does a story of a scary ship tell us about society?!”. First things first, we all know the ocean is a terrifying place. We also know that we, humans, sometimes have a strange fascination with all things scary. In the 1940’s, when most deep sea exploration technology was considered science fiction, nothing terrified (and awed) people more than a mysterious happening on the open ocean. But stories like these are not created merely as entertainment.

The same website states that urban legends often tend to have a cautionary character. According to *LiveScience*, “*Most urban legends tend to offer a moral lesson… that is always interpreted differently depending on the individual. The lessons don't necessarily have to be of the deep, meaning-of-life, variety,…”* (Whipps). Consider, for example, the popular urban legend known as “The Hook”, in which a teenage, unmarried couple is making out in their car, and, after hearing on the radio about a killer on the loose with a prosthetic hook for a hand. This is followed by a screeching sound outside of their car. Terrified, the girl asks her boyfriend to take her home. After an argument, he agrees, and they get there safely. However, getting out of their car, they see a hook, covered in blood, hanging on the door. (Brunvard, 199). This tale sure looks like a warning to abstain from all sorts of premarital sexual intimacy, and, as Jan Harold Brunvard mentions in his *Encyclopedia of Urban Legends*, “a dramatic example of the reason for parental concern for their children, an expression of fear of the handicapped, or a depiction of the danger possible from a rampaging antisocial person.” (Brunvard, 201). At one point, he even mentions some researchers who see the hook as a metaphor for castration. So, a lot of urban legends actually have a moral lesson, and a description of society. But what about the *Ourang Medan*? In order to answer this question, we are going to dig much deeper into her story, and maybe, just maybe, discover the truth behind it.

As stated before, the disaster started getting attention in the 1950’s, and that is when a hurricane of theories started swirling around it. These ranged from paranormal phenomena, to sea creatures, to carbon dioxide poisoning, to pirate attacks, and all the way to the good old “aliens did it” theory. The latter even seems to be supported by subsequent reports, claiming the crew of the rescue ship saw strange lights around the doomed vessel. In the time period 2002-2003, the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency declassified and released two hand-written letters. One of them, but evidently not the first, was written by C.H. Marck Jr. C.H. of Scottsdale, Arizona, to someone whose name remains classified to this day. Dated December 5th, 1959, it once again tells the story of the ill-fated freighter, stating February, 1948, as the official date of the incident. The letter appears to blame mysterious “fiery spheres” for the tragedy, and then goes on to state: “I feel sure that the S.S. Ourang Medan tragedy holds the answer to many of these airplane accidents, and unsolved mysteries of the sea.” (The Philadelphia Experiment from A to Z).

If the CIA is interested in such a topic, there could be only two explanations for this: It either was an actual incident that did occur, or it was a hoax whose creator deserves an award. However, what can be taken most seriously is the research by American author and historian Roy Bainton, who put forward a theory far more believable than any other before him.Bainton had been trying to hunt down the mystery vessel for decades, ever since he heard about it from a crewmember of a ship he once traveled on. All the years of rigorous research had yielded nothing, and he was ready to label the tale an elaborate hoax. It was at that time when he received a photocopy of the 32-page booklet *Das Totenschiffin in der Sudsee* (*The Death Ship of the South Seas*), from a certain Professor Theodor Siersdorfer, of Essen, Germany. The booklet was written by a man named Otto Mielke in 1954. It stated incredible details, including the vessel’s route, technical characteristics, and even her captain’s name. But the most intriguing detail was the explanation Mielke had given for the deaths of her crew. According to the book, the *Ourang Medan* was smuggling a load of potassium cyanide and nitroglycerin, for the manufacturing of deadly chemical weapons. As these substances were illegal at the time, they simply would not have been allowed on board had someone listed them in the cargo manifest. For this reason, the small, unsuspicious freighter had been chosen, and had been intentionally avoiding authorities on her journey. Unfortunately, a leak of the substances caused them to react with seawater, producing extremely toxic fumes that killed the crew. The illegal nature of the ship’s mission would explain her absence from records.

Although the content of the book was never confirmed to be factual, Mielke wrote with a clarity and authority that it seemed like he had spoken to someone from the rescue party. He even indicated the names of the two American vessels coming to the aid of the *Ourang Medan*: The *Silver Star* and the *City of Baltimore*. But the real confusion was just beginning (Awfultrue.com) For one, the ship that allegedly found the *Ourang Medan*, the *Silver Star*, did exist, but then again, not in a usual way. She was renamed two times, and had been the *Silver Star* for only a year. (The Philadelphia Experiment from A to Z). Doing a Google search, I found that a ship named the *City of Baltimore* went down in 1937. This being the only vessel of that name I found information about, I believe this steamer could not have possibly come to the *Medan’s* assistance. I contacted Mr. Bainton via email to ask if he was aware of this fact, as he never mentions it in his research, and nor do others. He replied saying that after three decades of fruitless searches, he now thinks the story is a hoax.

So, I’ve told you about the ship, the vessels that rescued her, and the booklet of some random dude. But where is the moral lesson? Where is the description of society? Well, the more we analyze it, the farther away from truth it seems. We do, however, start to notice an interesting picture: There is war. Countries use a bunch of terrifying new weapons, many of them top secret to this day. After the war, people have their sleep disturbed by the fear of what happens next. And the lesson we learn? Quite obvious: Don’t smuggle stuff! But we must be careful here. If this never happened, the creator of this story knew exactly what cords to strike.

In a study by Manchester Metropolitan University in Manchester, U.K., 222 subjects were chosen to assess their belief in urban legends and paranormal phenomena by undergoing several tests. These included the Urban Legends Questionnaire (ULQ), the R-PBS, the Schizotypical Personality Questionnaire Brief, SPQ-B. Counterbalancing scale order was rotated to control for order effects. Seven urban legends were contained in the ULQ, and were followed by a series of questions. The stories were presented in the same way news are presented today (Newspaper article, email, warning, etc). The first of these questions asked if the subjects had heard the story before. And, if the answer was “Yes”, how many times they had heard it, and where. The second question inquired whether they believed other U.K. residents had heard of the story. The third asked them whether they believed the story was true. The fourth inquired whether they considered the tale frightening, and the final question asked if they thought the story had an extraordinary nature. All of the questions had a rating from 1 to 7. The scores for this test were ranging from 7 to 49, with the highest score indicating the highest belief in the credibility of the story.

As for the R-PBS testing conducted on subjects, it was a test with 26 paranormal belief subjects, including spiritualism, witchcraft, traditional religious beliefs, superstitions, psi, unusual life forms, superstition, and precognition. In this survey, participants were instructed to rate statements, such as “Witches do exist” or “There is a devil” from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree). (Dagnall, Denovan, Drinkwater, Parker and Clough) Concluding the experiment, researchers found out that scale of belief in urban legends and the paranormal is influenced by a person’s schizotypy, or their psychological characteristics, and the way they experience or perceive certain things. Therefore, the creator of the *Ourang Medan* story knew that some people are more affected than others. Their goal was one: Make people believe it, however absurd it was. But as we shall soon see, the tale wasn’t always that dark, and its origins date to much earlier than previously thought.

On December 29th, 2015, a blogger released newly discovered articles reporting the Ourang Medan tragedy, dated November 21st and 22nd, 1940! They were written by a certain Silvio Scherli of Trieste, Italy. And their content, as said, changed everything we ever knew. There is no description of terrified faces and frozen bodies. Lights and voices are never mentioned. What’s more, the location of the incident is indicated as being the Solomon Islands, as opposed to the Marshal Islands in 1948, and only later, the Strait of Malacca. But before trying to find an explanation, take a look at the S.O.S. messages as reported in the 1940 publication. The first message stated: *“*SOS from the steamship Ourang Medan. Beg ships with shortwave wireless get touch doctor. Urgent.*”* The second was a slight update: *“*Probable second officer dead. Other members crew also killed. Disregard medical consultation. SOS urgent assistance warship.*”* The final, an incomplete one, said: “Crew has…”

No scary “I die” message or unintelligible Morse code. No names of rescue ships mentioned. Instead, the ship requests a doctor and a battleship. (*The Skittish Library*) And so, again, urban legend territory. What did we have in 1940? World War II! So, if we’re going to make a great story, we’re going to get warships involved! But who wants to think about warships in 1948? The war is over! Make the story more gothic horror instead! Also, in the 1948 version, the story was supposedly told to the journalist by a missionary, who heard it from a crewmember of the *Ourang Medan* shipwrecked on an island, after which the latter died. In 1940, however, a crewmember of the ship that rescued the *Ourang Medan* told the story directly to Silvio Scherli. (*The Skittish Library*) That is no different from other urban legends. According to the *LiveScience* article, “Usually passed on by [word of mouth](https://www.livescience.com/772-lie.html) or—more commonly today—in e-mail form, they often invoke the famous "it happened to friend of a friend" (or FOAF) clause that makes finding the original source of the story virtually impossible.” (Whipps).

This story is therefore the perfect example of how an urban legend can evolve, losing and gaining “facts” as time passes. For example, issue #45 of the French newspaper *Sept Jours,* dated “September 7th, 1941”, claims the incident occurred on November 13th, 1939. According to that article, the ship that came to *Ourang Medan’s* rescue was a torpedo boat, which it referred to as “*torpilleur americaine No. 716*”. But there had never been so many torpedo boats in the U.S. Navy. All other ships with such numbers were either built before or after the alleged date. (*Bermuda Triangle Central*) And again, the social situation is extremely evident in this version. During a war, you would mostly expect a warship to come to aid to a ship in distress. But how much do urban legends terrify people, and why?

A May, 2008 article in *Psychological Reports* tells of a study in which 62 subjects (84% female, 65% Caucasian) were tasked with reading 15 urban legends, with 3 of them claiming to have taken place locally. They were then tasked with rating each tale, how realistic it was, how much it scared them, and how likely it was for them to tell it to someone. The results showed that people were more likely to pass on the story if they were familiar with it. However, they would also be more willing to retell it if their fear and believability factors were high. (*PubMed, Psychological Reports*). If the story of the *Ourang Medan* is a hoax, its distributors knew these factors all too well.

After conducting extensive research into contemporary legends, it can be concluded that their existence has multiple reasons behind it. Aside from just being fun, they teach us valuable life lessons. They are also great testaments to the social state and historical details of their time period. Through reading them, people can learn about the lives of their ancestors. Their fears, their worries, their habits, and their values. And those things can inspire tons of media. Why? Because, no matter how terrifying something is, we cannot let go of it. And that, my friend, is the catalyst of all urban legends.

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