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Note:

This is a first draft of my paper. Due to my excessive interest in the topic, I had to cut many things short, and so, it may seem like I wrote it very vaguely. I also did not use all of my sources. I intend to use them in subsequent drafts.

“Have you heard that story?”: All you need to know about urban legends

This last summer, a friend of a friend of an uncle of mine went on vacation to Mexico, and found an abandoned chihuahua by her hotel pool. She could not find the owner of such a lovely creature, and so, she decided to take it to her American home. But once there, she noticed something strange: The dog never barked. The good thing about that is she was spared the complains of neighbors, and did not get annoyed herself at night. But whenever she took her chihuahua out for a walk, the neighbors’ pets would often stay away from it, as it would bite, or even kill them. This brought further concern, and she decided to take her precious friend to a veterinarian, to look into the sudden aggression problem, and figure out why it rarely made any sound. The doctor carefully examined the creature, and, looking absolutely surprised, asked her where she got it from. When she told him the story, he exclaimed: “Ma’am, what you have here is not a chihuahua at all! It is just a massive water rat!” Okay, ill give you ten minutes to digest that plot twist. When you’re done, come back and read more.

Welcome back, my friend. So, have you ever heard this story before? You may have. Even if the details were different. Like, say, the woman was in Peru instead of Mexico, and her new pet squeaked instead of barking. Stories like this one have been told and retold numerous times, no matter if they can be a total lie or a massive exaggeration. Everyone always claims they happened to some distant friend or relative of theirs, but they never mention any names. Being so mysterious and questionable, these tales have acquired a legendary status, and are therefore known as urban legends, contemporary legends, or contemporary myths. Despite some of them being obviously impossible, we humans still love them, and retell them as if they were some holy truth. But why the obsession?

According to an article in 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). “Wait!”, you might be asking, “A glance into society? I didn’t even see any lessons in the rat-dog story you just told me!” Well, for one, we have not analyzed it yet. But if we look just a tiny bit deeper, we will witness some patterns: A woman comes to have fun in a foreign country, and picks up an animal she thinks is a dog, to take with her to her own country (the U.S.). The animal starts behaving oddly, and upon examination, comes the shocking reveal. What do we know from this about our society? Many of us simply adore cute little puppies, and are always willing to keep one. But we are also annoyed when these puppies start barking. We are desiring our own convenience to a degree where we close our eyes to abnormalities (such as the “dog” not barking), and just go with them. We also have a truckload of stereotypes. The woman’s pet is brought from Mexico, a country far, far away from our own home. This country has things that don’t, or at least *we* don’t, apply to our country. The woman couldn’t find the rat in New York, L.A., Kentucky, or Wisconsin. It has to be a foreign pet. Because, you know, Mexico has all sorts of disturbing things: Dirt, poverty, crime. It also has horrifying, mutated, pet-killing rats the size of dogs, that we, unsuspecting tourists, can bring home. At home, such a crazy thing would never happen! When we find out about the rat, we are supposed to be screaming and shaking our heads at how unsanitary things are in Mexico. Even if it is not obvious, this particular tale seems to be trying to embed such messages into our subconsciousness. It warns us about being careful when traveling and taking things from abroad. That, of course, can be a good message. But deeper lies a more subtle meaning. It could, in a sense, be called a xenophobic message. And even though at the time when this story was conceived, its lesson would be totally acceptable, we can be sure that if someone were to come up with something similar today, their efforts would have backfired harshly.

As said before, the origins of urban legends are greatly ambiguous. That is because they go around from one mouth to another, just like gossip does around a small town. (Whipps). However, it almost never bothers us when a story does not have any verification. On the contrary, it intrigues our brains and hearts, yearning to learn more. Mikel J. Koven, a University of Wales folklorist, states that "Life is so much more interesting with [monsters](https://www.livescience.com/26341-loch-ness-monster.html) in it. It's the same with these legends. They're just good stories.” (Quoted by Whipps). The LiveScience article also stated that “Urban legends are also good indicators of what's going on in current society,”(Whipps), quoting Koven’s explanation that "By looking at what's implied in a story, we get an insight into the fears of a group in society,” (Quoted by Whipps), as happens in the story we discussed, entitled “The Mexican Pet”. But aside from being entertaining and educating us, do urban legends hold any truth in themselves?

One of the most terrifying mysteries of the sea is the story of the *S.S. Ourang Medan*. It also is, perhaps, the most detailed urban legends ever conceived. The story goes that in June 1947 (by other sources February 1948, by others November 1940, by still others November 13th, 1939, and yet still others, 1952), three 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”*

Having received the message, all vessels involved immediately altered course and sped to the aid of the vessel in peril. The source of the signal was determined by triangulation. Several more attempts at communication were made, only to be answered by silence. Eventually, after hours of searching, the *Ourang Medan* was found by one of the American vessels. Having received no response to their shouts through the megaphone, or any other signals for the matter, the American crew decided to investigate. Launching two lifeboats, several sailors, with an officer in charge, came aboard. What they saw made their blood freeze within their veins: 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 scared to death, 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. Entering the radio room, the already horrified American sailors witnessed a chilling sight: Sitting in a chair was the vessel’s radio operator, his finger still on the telegraph needle. The rescue party found no external injuries on any of the bodies, which made the situation even more terrifying. 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 one where the unexplainable cold was coming from). 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.

When first encountering the tale, I was terrified of even reading it, until I realized that the incident was never confirmed. For one, no kind of records for a vessel called the *Ourang Medan* were ever found. She is not listed even in the *Lloyd’s Register of Marine and Shipping*, a list containing all Dutch ships in existence. The American vessel that supposedly came to the rescue was later claimed to be called the *Silver Star*. A ship bearing this name really did exist, but was sailing under a completely different name on a completely different route at the supposed time of the incident. Her logs mentioned nothing of such a rescue ever taking place. The huge difference in dates of occurrence also throws some people off. The location of the incident has been changed multiple times. Despite this, there are multiple theories about what exactly happened, ranging from carbon monoxide poisoning to alien and paranormal attacks. But the theory that seems to be most prevalent is one claiming that the vessel was utilized for the transportation of dangerous substances, or even chemical weapons. Everyone turns their attention to facts like the fire in the cargo hold, the inexplicable cold, and other such things, claiming the government of several countries initiated a coverup of these events, in order to hide a failed smuggling operation. However, the social messages are evident even in this story: In a time where people were terrified of warfare, and even more terrified of the ocean, a combination of these two elements would create an excellent horror story. Elements of the story were altered through the years to make it more appealing and meaningful to society. And even if there was a coverup, the fact that the story was repeated for at least 12 years and each time presented as new is suspicious, as one would think authorities would not let it to be made known again. But even in this dead end, the conspiracy theorist will always find their way out. Given that with each retelling of the incident, several facts were altered or added, they might claim the aim of the authorities would be to further confuse the public. Either way, after at least eighty years of investigation, the origin of the *Ourang Medan* story still remains a harrowing mystery.

Urban legends have fascinated us through the years and generations. They are morality stories and social reports. Some of them might even serve as historical testimonies. No matter how impossible or ridiculous they may be, almost everyone is always glad to hear them. Urban legends can be our funniest pals on a boring bus ride, or our worst nightmares on a cold, stormy night. No matter how we perceive them, they will remain here, reminding us that at a certain time in history, something inspired them.

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