

Rumours and contemporary legends as part of identity creation process¹

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Abstract: The article discusses how rumours and legends work together in creating national and personal identity. The subject matter is a narrative cycle centred on so-called stories of descendance. According to these stories, a number of famous people such as Harry S. Truman, Benito Mussolini, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Boriss Yeltsin, Boriss Becker, Ayrton Senna da Silva, Lady Diana, etc. are either Estonians or have Estonian ancestors. Following these stories through many different sources and material (archival texts, memories, diaries, literature, media, pop culture) we can observe how vibrant this discourse has been and is also today. We may take these stories with a grain of salt, but these legends and rumours certainly do articulate the beliefs and wishes of Estonians as well as provoke a debate about the depicted events, their credibility and interpretation.

Keywords: national identity, personal identity, rumour, urban legend

According to a generally held view, identity is a dualist concept: (1) it should express differentiation, and (2) it should express timeless values and permanence (Mathisen 1993: 37). Identity has been defined as a pattern of thought and behaviour that is connected with social interaction and deemed important by a nation. The self-identification of the nation undergoes constant changes which depend on intra- and international social relations (Aarelaid 2012). All these concepts suggest that identity should be viewed as a dynamic phenomenon closely related to historical processes.

Estonians can be characterised as having a small nation's identity. Historians in Estonia have described the small nation's identity as the most important component of Estonian identity; therefore, the power and willingness of Estonians to change their surroundings are inverted to organising their own life rather than conquering and dominating over others. Their inability to cope

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with the small nation's identity, and to be satisfied with it, also constitutes part of the Estonian identity (Karjahärm 1995: 2053; Kukk 2003: 103). Historians argue that it is much harder for the history of a non-dominant small nation to meet the expectations of national rhetoric and invent heroic figures from the past, even more so because the creators of Estonian collective memory were haunted by the concern about the lack of heroic past up to the beginning of the 20th century (Kukk 2003: 99; Tamm 2003: 63).

While sorting through the material for the anthology of contemporary legends and rumours, I had set aside a bundle of texts that in my opinion are worth special attention. Even more so because in international folklore studies – and by that I mean first and foremost the discourse and the numerous anthologies of contemporary legends and rumours published in recent decades – these texts have been a largely neglected area of study. From very early on I tagged them, in my mind, as ‘the great stories of a small nation’.

What are these texts and what do they tell us?

The stories centre on speculations that a number of world-famous celebrities are of Estonian descent. Napoleon, Vladimir Ilyich (Ulyanov) Lenin, Harry S. Truman, Lady Diana, Boris Becker, Ayrton Senna da Silva, Boris Yeltsin, Benito Mussolini, Franklin Delano Roosevelt are only a few names in the list of celebrities who have allegedly been identified as having Estonian roots. ‘The great stories’ about the possible Estonian descent of all these famous people have emerged in different periods in history. I have traced and discovered these rumours in widely different sources such as oral lore, archive texts, memoirs, diaries, treatments of history, the print media, the Internet, cinematography, television, etc.

The material first inspired the question – is it, analogously to history, a case of popular wishful identification, such as the traditional stories of descent that circulated in the 19th century, in the period of national awakening in Estonia? These tales tell, for example, how a family's lineage goes back to a Swedish soldier who had settled in Estonia or how one's great-grandfather was the illegitimate son of a German baron. Estonian oral family history contains numerous stories of wealthy ancestors of noble descent; these stories were valued and consistently passed on to younger generations. Indeed, in the early days of folklore collection, in the late 19th and early 20th century, the informants were not particularly forthcoming with information about illegitimate children, especially when it concerned themselves, and the stories have been preserved rather as

part of community or family lore. While at the end of the 19th century Swedish soldiers were not seen as conquerors and oppressors and had a positive image, German barons were equally hated and admired. Such conflicting attitudes are highly characteristic of folk tales which tell the story of the relationships of manor lords and peasants (Kalmre 2010: 182). It has been argued that one of the factors contributing to the ambiguous historical self-representation of Estonians was the dominant influence of and reliance on the Baltic German culture in rebuilding the national consciousness of Estonians (Kukk 2003: 103; Veidemann 2000: 1821). The fact is that Estonians are an agrarian nation who has never had an upper class and lack notable historical figures and heroes. The stories of descent in a way represent attempts to combine the history and culture of the Estonians and the Baltic Germans. As a result, both the problematic and discrepant attitudes towards the Baltic German gentry and the fact that the personal and national icon is nevertheless connected with the Baltic German culture came to be expressed in these folk narratives.

So, do these abovementioned texts which emphasise the Estonian descent of celebrities indeed represent the collective wishes and dreams of Estonians? What would a closer inspection of similar narratives reveal to us?

The legend and rumour paradigm

When analysing the material it becomes evident that the topic of national and personal identity construction is channelled into the language of contemporary legends and rumours, but also of the news reports, literary fiction, short stories and film narratives tackling the themes of the abovementioned folk narrative genres (see also Järv 2013, this volume).

The concept of legend is closely connected to and partially overlapping with that of rumour, but, perhaps, it involves a more elaborate plot and may display variation in details while the contents remain the same.

Differentiating between the two is possible on the basis of a clearly outlined narrative form: a legend has a fixed epic content and it contains complex narrative structures (Kalmre 2008: 29). A rumour or hearsay may also be a non-narrative opinion based on a rumour (Turner 1993: 4; see also Fine 1997: 742; Kalmre 1996: 142–144; Dégh 2001: 83–96; and several others). Both represent some kind of belief. The terms ‘contemporary legend’ or ‘urban legend’, which were adopted in folklore studies in the final decades of the past century, set the genre in the modern times and suggest that the stories may contain (in addition to traditional themes and motifs) quite contemporary themes and motifs,

and contemporary legends may acquire various forms and styles. The texts, motifs, behavioural and attitudinal patterns, interpretations, iconography and the related conceptions of these well-known narratives can be found throughout contemporary culture and media. Donna Wyckoff (1993: 2) defines contemporary legends as a mixed genre – they are “linguistic-based rumour-stories that report on ostensibly true and relatively current events” and “circulate within a community as part of an unconscious, creative, collective response to some community concern”.

In terms of rumours and legends it is not particularly the definition of genres that is important but the observation of the social process that generated them (Fine & Ellis 2010: 4). In our particular case, it is about how Estonians have portrayed themselves and expressed their wishes and ideals in these narratives during different times. All in all, these themes are based on national and personal identity creation and both legends and rumours as belief narratives are part of the social processes connected with cultural representation and its dissemination.

Kristen Møllegaard (2006: 28–29), who has analysed the contemporary discourse about the stories told by the Danish writer Hans Christian Andersen of his origin from the perspective of folk tales, has found that the emergence of oral lore in the process of defining national identity is particularly evident in paradigms that guide national self-representation.² Here it is important to remember that this phenomenon is by no means something uniquely characteristic of Estonians, or Danish, because the motif of a hero’s higher descent is probably very old and emerges in many fairy tales and myths. The same motifs have been widely cultivated in literary creation and works of modern popular culture.

Earlier examples of ‘the great stories’

A discovery of earlier examples of analogous material can only be accidental because rumours were not usually categorised as folklore and also because they had a rather short lifespan. Most likely, they can be found in personal diaries and written memoirs.

Regardless of that I discovered a fascinating story held in the Estonian Folklore Archives. In 1974, informant Villem Viirmann sent material, songs

² Kristen Møllegaard (2006) discusses in her article the discourse of contemporary tales of ancestry by Hans Christian Andersen based on several legends about the parentage of the writer. The most popular and elaborate one tells of the writer’s royal descent, representing the Danish people’s popular beliefs and desire for a higher descent.

and tales about the Russo-Japanese War³ to the archives. Among the tales there was an account of a Mihkel Pärtlis: about how he was captured by the Japanese during the Russo-Japanese War and met a Japanese general who turned out to be Estonian by birth. Thanks to this general, whose name was Ojama, all the Estonians in captivity were given special treatment, received individual service and had “maids in white dresses tending their tables”.

In his narration he reports a miraculous success story of a hardworking Estonian boy:

[Ojama] was reportedly Estonian. He had attended school in Rakvere [a town in North Estonia]. One summer his father took him along to take the manure to the fields. On the way they met the baron and the father took his hat off, while the boy went on without paying any notice to him. The baron angrily scolded the boy for not recognising the gentry and hit the boy's hat off his head. Upon that the boy took the baron's hat and threw it further away. Soon the boy was deported and banished to the Sakhalin Island. From there he could somehow flee. He built a small boat and took off to sea. A naval battle took place at the Sea of Japan at the time and the boy was captured and taken on the board of the admiral's ship. As he was a good-looking lad and could speak many languages, the admiral took him under his care. Later the boy was sent to the military school. After graduation he reportedly married the admiral's daughter.⁴

The same plot was probably more widely known at the beginning of the past century and has possibly also inspired the Estonian author Juhan Jaik. In a fantasy tale “Sisaskid” (“Nightingales”) in his collection “Võrumaa jutustused” (“Tales from Võrumaa”), published in 1924, Jaik turns the tale's protagonist Jaan into an immensely wealthy Japanese general, who, being familiar with the weaknesses of Russians, successfully fought the Russians during the war with Japan. “He's known to be enormously rich, whereas people believe that he nevertheless has not become conceited and will hopefully return to homeland before he dies” (Jaik 2008: 29).

The story of this miraculous success was certainly known by another Estonian author, August Alle, who in his review of Jaik's book presents his version of the rumour and labels the story as complete fiction, or “manor workers' babble”, as he describes it.

³ The war over control of territory, which started in 1904 between the two major countries, and where more than 7,000 Estonian soldiers and officers fought as subjects of the Russian Empire, has inspired various types of folklore.

⁴ RKM II 309, 592/4 (4) <Villem Viirmann (1974).

[The book has] *no style, no essence, or coherent emotional disposition!* He [i.e. Juhan Jaik] *sometimes tells a rather nice story, such as “Sisas-kid”, but even this story’s ending is ruined: it’s like the babble of manor workers who, during the Russo-Japanese War reportedly knew that the Japanese general of the army, marshal Oyama (Oyama=Ojamaa) was in fact a manor worker from Jõhvi [in Northeast Estonia] who had fled the country.* (Alle 1924)

Such stories were very popular immediately after World War II, when Estonians laid their hopes on the Western countries to free them from the Soviet totalitarian rule and help them restore independence. One of the most popular stories of that time tells about Harry S. Truman, a former President of the United States, being Estonian. Allegedly, some had even heard him speak Estonian on an Estonian radio programme of the Voice of America’s Estonian Service. The sound quality of this station was so poor in those days that people heard whatever they wanted to hear. This gave rise to many post-war rumors.

I met my schoolmate Kulli from Kalana village school. We were in the same class. Of course we didn’t recognise each other first. He lives near the Lehtse railway station. Told that there were many people called Truman near Lehtse. Of course people were saying that the parents of President Truman had left Lehtse for America. One girl had even written to Truman, the [alleged] son of her great-uncle, reminding him that he should not forget Estonians and should stand up for our rights.

(Extract from the diary of Jaan Roos, written in 1947, p. 65)

Jaan Roos’s diaries⁵ suggest that Truman was the heroic figure on whom the Estonians vested particular hope. Many of Truman’s promises regarding the Baltic states and the overall normalisation of the foreign political situation were mentioned in Roos’s diaries. The same 1974 diary contains an entry from June 27 about how Truman had reportedly promised to make the Baltic countries his special concern (Roos 2000: 99).

What unites all the stories described here is that they all are based on rumours that have emerged in difficult and troublesome times, more specifically,

⁵ Jaan Roos lived as a wanted anti-Communist internal refugee for nearly ten years (1945–1954). Constantly moving from one place to another in Estonia, he became a chronicler, who with great detail, broad range of view and spectacular courage recorded the attitudes of the time, information he heard from foreign radio stations, historical events (the establishment of Soviet collective farms, large-scale deportations in 1949), everyday life, and also folklore (rumours, legends, beliefs, jokes, folk songs, etc.). Roos wrote the diaries 1944–45, 1947, 1948–1949, 1951–1952 (“Läbi punase öö” (“Through the Red Night”), Vols. 1–3; see Roos 1997; 2000; 2001; 2004).

during or after the war. In the context of crisis, conflicts and catastrophes, such narratives presented in the form of news reports acquire particular weight and significance (see Kalmre 2008: 30–31) and even the most absurd scenarios could feed a nation's expectations, hopes and self-confidence. For example, before and during the Second World War, Franklin Roosevelt, who was believed to be “one of us”, was tagged as the saviour of the national pride, honour and country of the Estonians (Hinrikus 2006: 170).

In fact, not all people laid their expectations and hopes at the time with liberators from the Western world, the waiting of the mystical white ship, or the positive heroes on the front. Some rumours also expressed the Estonians' desire to be players in major world history. In 1947, Jaan Roos recorded an example from the Raasiku parish, according to which Benito Mussolini was believed to be of Estonian descent.

There used to be an Estonian by the name of Magnus Muselini who was the verger in our parish in the middle of the past century. His uncle had migrated to Italy in the past. People told that the great Italian statesman Mussolini was this uncle's direct descendant. This is what popular lore tells us. An old schoolteacher from Tapa came to the minister's house to investigate this story and was delighted to discover that there used to be a verger by the name of Muselini here. So Mussolini is of Estonian origin. (Roos 2000: 167)

‘The great stories’ in contemporary media and culture

However, not all ‘great stories’ connect Estonians with famous historical figures; many tell us about the important role that Estonians have played in historic events in general. For example, Estonian historians sometimes make use of historical fiction about the Boxer Rebellion in China⁶. As in fairy tales, the situation here is saved by the youngest and weakest brother, the Estonian.

In 1900, international military forces – troops of the Eight-Nation Alliance, including Russia and the US – entered Beijing. During this move, the Russian and US troops encountered some problems, because they could not overcome the language barrier in co-operating with each other. The Americans did find a man from their army unit who knew some Russian: he happened to be Estonian and had migrated to the States

⁶ The uprising in China which took place from 1899 to 1901 opposed foreign imperialism and Western civilization.



Figure 1. Illustrative photos about princess Diana and young Lembit.
<http://www.ohtuleht.ee/371538#.T9hGJ0qAWkc.google>.

as a citizen of Russia, but, unfortunately, could not speak any Russian. However, there's a solution to every problem. When the Russians had also found an Estonian serving in their troops, the armies of these two great powers – supreme powers in the 20th century – on the territory of another huge country communicated with each other in the Estonian language. (Jaanson 2002)

It appears that many of these 'great stories' tend to be deliberately told tall tales in which fantasy and humour add to the historical fiction. This inevitably draws attention to the narrator's person and the motivation behind the narration, because there is a reason for each such fantasy and storyteller. Even Hans Christian Andersen preferred to popularise the rumours of his blue blood by drawing a parallel between the events of the *Ugly Duckling* and his personal life. While the Danish historians have failed to find any evidence of his noble descent, the fairytale version of the famous raconteur's origin has become one of the most popular ones even in the present day (Møllegaard 2006: 34).

Yuri Lotman has described such behaviour from the point of view of cultural-psychological motivation. According to him it is about duplication of the story and its translation into the language of memory, "not, however, with the aim of putting it down for record but rather for the purpose of recreating reality in

a more acceptable form. That tendency is inseparable from the very concept of memory and, as a rule, from that which is incorrectly referred to as a subjective selection of the facts” (Lotman 2009: 127).⁷ As a folklorist I cannot but agree that the distorted reality upon which the storyteller builds his narrative reality is largely based on the devices of traditional folk narratives.

The Hungarian folklore researcher Vilmos Voigt (1999) has traced legendary characteristics in biographical narratives and has accentuated the ambiguity of truth and reality in these stories. Voigt presents a series of examples according to which the stories of Hungarian emigrants have been shaped not as much by the wish to convey the reality as by the selective memory, wishful thinking and imagination of the informants. Thus Voigt believes that autobiographical texts are replete with untruth. By approaching these texts as folk narratives he gives examples of traditional motifs and patterns in these stories. He also attempts to explain why people fantasise when recounting their life stories. Voigt agrees that lying is a particularly prominent phenomenon in biographies about the distant past, such as the stories told by emigrated Hungarians in Hungary as well as their new homeland, the United States or Canada. One of the typical fantasies in the autobiographies of the emigrants is related to their birth and descent.

People want to be members of important, wealthy, educated families, and they simply say they belong to them. People want to be known as individuals who, at home, were ardent members of noble cause (e.g. fighters for freedom, victims of repression against their religion, nation or social class), and in their life stories they suddenly present themselves as such. The fantasy of reformulating one's own life story, one's past, far from the actual moment of life-story-telling, is unimaginably great.

(Voigt 1999: 170)

A fantastic story which is more closely connected with personal identity-construction and is basically part of the same narrative cycle is known from the island of Saaremaa, off the western coast of Estonia. The story is ‘authored’ by an Estonian fisherman called Lembit whose boat was pushed away from the coast in a storm during the Soviet period, around the 1950s, and later he found himself on the coast of Sweden (see Figure 1). Sailing all the seas of the world, the man remained unmarried. When Lembit was already an old man, he visited Saaremaa after Estonia became an independent country, and in his home village recounted a story of how he became Lady Diana’s father. This fantastic story is well known in Lembit’s home village and has prompted many

⁷ Yuri Lotman illustrates this with the example of the historical figure Decabrist Dmitri Zavalishin, a liar and fantasy teller, who embellished the life that he himself perceived as dull and uninteresting with lies (Lotman 2009: 127).

discussions and laughs. The story became part of the community lore and was rarely told to people outside the community. During a folklore fieldwork in 2002, however, a female informant who was not a local, told the folklorist about the story, expressing a wish that what she said would not become publicly known.

They were in distress at the sea and this Swedish coast guard picked them up. And then this Lembit, he remained in Sweden and become a sailor. Sailed the seas, and had been in Liverpool once and there he had met a woman, had some relationship with her and then went to the sea again. Then he had come to Liverpool again after three years and had met with the woman and she had told him that she had a daughter from him, but had made a very good match. She married Earl Spencer and his daughter was called Diana.

[Laughter.]

*And then this Lembit said that if this woman didn't lie to him, Diana is his daughter. But if she lied, then she's not. That's all he knows. And if you look at this picture of Lembit, they are very similar. [Laughter.] Precisely, I'm sure. If you look at the picture, it couldn't be any other way, could it? Because Diana was an illegitimate child, wasn't she? And Spencer adopted her. Everything fits in. Lembit is living in Gotland now. [...] This is a great story really. I joked that we should throw it into the teeth of Kersna [television show *Pealtnägija*], maybe they should make a chromosome analysis. Lembit himself doesn't want people to talk about it. He doesn't want any fuss, well, think yourself, if everybody would know that the next king of England comes from this same Üüdibe village. What a shame! No lord, no earl. But, looking at this picture, I am convinced. This Lembit didn't think it out. Lembit is ill himself and he has no family. Bachelor.⁸*

The material would have remained hidden in the folklore archives available only for research, had the story not been covered in the Estonian television programme *Pealtnägija* on 3 March 2010⁹ and somewhat later by the evening

⁸ ERA MD 286.

⁹ *Pealtnägija*, 3 March 2010, <http://etv.err.ee/index.php?0557036>, last accessed in 1 June 2012. The covering of the story in national media was by no means an easy process, as Roald Johannson, one of the show's reporters, notes in his e-mail to Eda Kalmre in March 2010. This case clearly demonstrated the media pressure to publicise (and sell) the story on the one hand and the local informant's incapability to realise the problems connected with making the story public on the other. The main informant (Lembitu's first cousin) who was interviewed did not realise that her casually told story about Lembitu's alleged paternity would be included in the programme and she later called the channel, requesting that this segment of her interview would be left out (the request, of course, was not granted). See also Pauts 2010.

paper *Õhtuleht*. Being made public in Estonian media, the story prompted the largest number of viewers' response and comments of all this season's programmes (see also Pauts 2010). From a folklorist's perspective, it could be said that it was a case when story that fell into a wrong context, where its presentation and comprehension acquired a purpose that differed from the narrator's original intention. Within the village community, this "miracle story" of sensitive nature which had caused discussions, dialogue and amusement was interpreted to be about a fellow villager's relations with a noble family. The villagers respected Lembit, the story's author, as member of the community, they sympathised with his life and fate. During the Soviet period, a chance to emigrate to the Western countries was both desired and feared – desired because it was the key to the free world; feared because emigration resulted in isolation from one's homeland, friends and family, and the expectations of those who stayed behind that the leavers would succeed. It is possible that Lembit used the fantastic story as an attempt to set his past straight, make it more acceptable and interesting for the villagers. The audience in the community was quite likely to notice the weaknesses and also the beauty of the narration and, in a way, identified themselves and sympathised with the narrator. The public media inspired discussions about the truthfulness of the story, presenting arguments for and against its veracity, but the media comment sections ridiculed the story itself and criticised the tellers and journalists for their unprofessional choice to cover it in the media. After all, the story features all the elements suitable for a tabloid – the mysterious flight to the West, illicit sex, scandal, aristocracy, and ethnicity.

The following example somewhat diverges from the topic, but also tells about the self-representation of Estonians. Sometimes an alleged famous quotation may come to represent folklore – become a 'great story'. The source of the quotation or its precise wording may not be entirely clear, but everybody believes that this is how it should be and that some famous person had said it. But sometimes such quotations serve an important function in helping to develop the self-consciousness of a small nation. A good example of that is a quotation attributed to Ernest Hemingway and stressing the importance of Estonians – "in every port in the world, at least one Estonian sailor can be found". There is probably no Estonian who has not used it at some point in his life, adding that Hemingway had said so. This mock quote has been used as a favourite topic for school essays and was released to the international media in the video clip introducing Estonia during the 2002 Eurovision Song Contest held in Tallinn (see also Järv 2013: 102, this volume).

But a few years ago I started to wonder whether this quotation really corresponds with the original or whether it really does exist. I read all the books by Hemingway that have been translated into Estonian, started with those in English, and also made some inquiries. All my informants, among them professor of foreign literature, were sure that such a quotation does exist. As for the exact source, several books not translated into Estonian were mentioned. I received no correct answers. In his novel “To Have and Have Not” (1937, Chapter 24) Hemingway indeed writes about “Esthonians” found “in Southern waters”, but these are not sailors but journalists “who are waiting for a check from their last article. When it comes they will sail to another yacht basin and write another saga”.

So the quote that numerous Estonians later wishfully read and used about their self-representation in the world was not quite what Hemingway originally intended it to be.¹⁰

Today, the significance of Estonians in the world and their success in the Western countries continues to be a favourite discourse topic in the Estonian written media. The media is the most important constructor of identity, having taken over the role of folk storytellers of the past. It constructs identities in which defining oneself through others is primary – Estonians are as good as or better than other nations. The heroes that people want to be close to or related to are no longer only generals and heads of states. Famous sportsmen and pop stars are more common.

The Estonian written press, particularly the weekly *Eesti Ekspress*, often fabricates such ‘great stories’. It has published journalistic fiction about the tennis player Boris Becker and the Brazilian Formula One driver Ayrton Senna being Estonians, their parents having emigrated from Estonia (Kaalep & Kangur 2001; see also Laurisaar 2006).

The local media describes Estonians as hard-working, good-looking and talented people. Such tendency was especially prominent during the first years of independence. My colleague Guntis Pakalns, researcher of Latvian legends, claims that a myth that emigré Latvians were considered as highly valued workers and specialists abroad was created at that time, and people had a strong need to believe it. Only a few conceded that this myth was created by people who were able to come and speak about how lucky they had been. Those who were not so lucky were simply not able to come and did not want to tell their

¹⁰ According to the information included in Hellar Grabbi’s memoirs, Ernest Hemingway may have referred in his book to the Estonian travellers the Walter brothers – Kõu, Jarilo, Uku and Ahto. “The writer [Hemingway] was no doubt inspired by Ahto and Kõu’s sloop journey across the Atlantic in 1930, causing a sensation in Miami and later in New York, and the subsequent arrival of the Walter brothers in Miami.” (Grabbi 2012: 341)

story.¹¹ Usually such stories intend to emphasise the success and competitiveness of Estonians in the world.

It seems that 'great stories' in the modern written press primarily serve an entertaining function, and very few of them become part of oral lore. Some nevertheless do. A story about the former Russian President Boris Yeltsin having Estonian roots, told by an unknown hobby historian, prompted much excitement, Internet comments and oral discussions. The case was more of a lengthy historical fiction based on visual similarity between the Estonian popular singer Kalmer Tennosaar and Boris Yeltsin (Tammistu 1998). According to this story, Yeltsin was the singer's younger brother Albert. The singer's family had been deported to Siberia in 1941 and there his brother had gone missing. This piece of fiction contained a lot of details to confirm the story, it was touching and sounded plausible to Estonians who were familiar with stories about people deported to Siberia where children were indeed separated from their parents.

Five years later, Kalmer Tennosaar explained the background of this article. "Toomas Kall, an Estonian author [and the said hobby historian], had come to me and asked: what about fantasising about Yeltsin being your brother. I hesitated but he promised to let me read it first. And so he did. I read and thought that it was a nice story. But so many people took it as absolute truth. They came to me and lamented about my poor brother. From a certain angle I really look somewhat similar to Yeltsin" (Pino 2003).

When creating this legend about Tennosaar and Yeltsin, Toomas Kall used the same basic idea he had used in the script written for the movie *My Lenins* (Estinfilm 1997). In this film, a genial man Aleksander Kesküla from Estonia is laying down the course of history, helping to shape Lenin's career and the October Revolution in Russia. The same idea was also used by Loone Ots in her play "Koidula veri" ("Koidula's blood"). In this story Tsar Alexander II of Russia is presented as the lover of the Estonian poet Lydia Koidula, and the famous Estonian writer Juhan Liiv as their son. Similarly provocative and fantastic is the claim by a well-known Estonian film-maker Mark Soosaar (1999) about how Lydia Koidula was related, on her grandmother's side, with the Russian poet Alexander Pushkin. This speculation, based purely on the two poets' superficial resemblance, caught the historians' attention and triggered many objections: "Koidula's grandmother had not been born by that time, which means that Pushkin's visits to Pärnu could neither result in his blood making it into an Estonian woman's heart nor influencing her hair growth" (Tulp 1999).

¹¹ According to Guntis Pakalns, the same phenomenon is represented by stories in the Latvian yellow press about a Latvian who claimed that he had slept with Madonna (Guntis Pakalns' e-mail to Eda Kalmre from 1 of November 2003).

Another piece of historical fiction which was published by the same Estonian paper serves a similar function when it informs us that Achilles lived in Setumaa (a region in Southeast Estonia) and the Trojan War took place in Finland (Virki 2001).¹²

Conclusion

Cristina Bacchilega has noticed in her research about the contemporary applications and message of fairy tales that the tales have the power to reconstruct history and values. She has also witnessed how the magic of the genre has granted and continues to grant its creators (narrators, writers) the freedom to play with fantasy (Bacchilega 1997: 5, 24). This represents a phenomenon that blends postmodernist mocking and provocative lore tradition, history and fantasy lore, because the texts, motifs and interpretations of stories of ancestry, the iconography and conceptions based on these, can be found also in contemporary culture and media.

The Estonian literary theorist Epp Annus argues that in our times, national mythology has embraced its construed nature, so that there has never been and never will be a harmonious past, perfection or a situation where all desires are satisfied. “However, this awareness does not eliminate the need to desire something that cannot be had. Postmodernists employ national mythology, mixing desire with irony, construct new mythical spaces without denying of doing so” (Annus 2000: 92). Precisely like the writer Toomas Kall or the reporters at *Eesti Ekspress* did.

Given all the examples presented above, it should be remembered that narratives of decent form a narrative cycle that persists in the tradition, and continues to be culturally viable and functioning even today. We may not take these fantastic stories quite so seriously, but these stories shaped as legends and rumours still articulate the individual and collective aspirations and needs in certain periods of time. These varying stories, each in its own way, reveal the Estonians’ latent cultural desire for a noble origin as well as personal and national success. This is only natural, because from the functionalist viewpoint the idea of folk tales articulating people’s desires, expectations and hopes¹³ is still valid. Diane Goldstein (2004) has claimed that one of the important features of contemporary legends is that “they are told as true, factual, or plausible and

¹² The article is based on the ideas of Felice Vinci, a Italian hobby historian, author of *The Baltic Origin of Homer’s Epic Tales: The Iliad, the Odyssey and the Migration of Myth* (2006).

¹³ Cristina Bacchilega, for example, uses the concept *desire machines* (Bacchilega 1997: 7, 148).

therefore assume a level of authority; they provoke a dialogue about the narrative events, their interpretation, and their plausibility; they both articulate and influence beliefs and attitudes towards the subject matter; and they have the capability of affecting the actions and behaviour of the listening audience” (Goldstein 2004: 28).

Indeed, the majority of these traditional texts affect us one way or another and call us to express our opinion, discuss and debate, and thus inevitably have an impact on our collective consciousness.

What has to be remembered is that the tales from different sources, written and told at different times by different authors and narrators, all share the same content – these stories tell us about ourselves, about the system of concepts and values that matter to us. On the one hand the stories reflect the individual and collective desire for having a noble background, such as the nineteenth-century descent stories. On the other hand we may agree that there are two traditions existing side by side: the small tradition, which tells (mostly in oral form) the ‘village story’ which emphasises self-importance, and the tradition of telling ‘the great stories’ of a nation which spreads through various contemporary channels of media.

With these stories the Estonians try to underline their importance and equality with all the other nations but also create a sense of security based on wishful thinking, which was the function of the rumours spreading during and after wars that helped to make the world a more acceptable and hopeful place. It seems that relations with influential political figures, as well as increasingly the proximity to famous athletes or pop idols, are still a measure of personal and national success. Several stories seem to suggest that the national icon of Estonia is a fellow countryman who has recently or in the past migrated (preferably to the Western world) and made his life a success there. Thus the entire tradition no longer represents the model of wishful thinking of an individual or a smaller community, but it is a sign of the broader self-identification of a nation in the globalising world, in which we want to be popular and valued. Thus, at the beginning of the 21st century we have, in a sense, returned to the situation of the second half of the 19th century – we desire to be of nobler descent.

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