

Representatie & Culturele Identiteit

Media & Cultuur

Werkgroep: Nieuwe Media

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***PREMtime: At home in the Netherlands***

**Identity, minorities, and our nation as an imagined community**

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## 1 Introduction

On June 1<sup>st</sup> 2005 the Dutch came out in force to vote against the European constitution. The citizens of the Netherlands formed a unity, determined to preserve national identity against the increasing power of the European Union. Our nation united in a way only seen when the national soccer team plays, on the queen's birthday, or when we crowd around a media event like *Open het Dorp*, *Slachtoffers Tsunami*, or other fund raising marathons. But behind this veil of unity- the strong, collective identity -there is division, which can be seen weekly, sometimes daily, in media reports of conflicts between several groups within the population or of conflicts between citizens and the government.

Examples of these conflicts are the arson and demolition of several mosques and threats to the Islamic community in the Netherlands after the murder of Theo van Gogh in November 2004. After throwing a Molotov cocktail into a mosque, a small group of adolescents from Venray were apprehended by the police. But this incident was just the beginning: the “Lonsdale Youth”, as they are referred to because of their dress code, consisting mainly of *Lonsdale* brand clothing, caused more scandals when they picked fights with groups of people with a Moroccan background. Prem Radhakishun visited both groups from Venray with his television program *PREMtime*, giving both the opportunity to speak freely to a nationwide audience.<sup>1</sup>

This paper analyses how different minority groups within the Dutch population create their own ‘virtual home’<sup>2</sup> and their own Netherlands as an ‘imagined community’<sup>3</sup>. Several examples are scrutinized, including the ‘Lonsdale incident’ mentioned above and others that have appeared in episodes of the television program *PREMtime*. This is done by first describing the position of enunciation<sup>4</sup> of Prem Radhakishun in the second section. Several minorities and the way they present themselves in *PREMtime* are discussed in section three, with emphasis on the manner in which they see the Netherlands as their ‘home’. Section four concentrates on how *PREMtime*, being a national television programme, contributes to the feeling of unity that shapes the Netherlands as ‘imagined community’.

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<sup>1</sup> *PREMtime* 48, 4 January 2005: <http://cgi.omroep.nl/cgi-bin/streams?tv/nps/premtime/bb.20050104.rm?start=00:00>

<sup>2</sup> Morley, 2001

<sup>3</sup> Anderson, 1983

<sup>4</sup> Hall, 1994

## 2 Prem Radhakishun

Practices of representation always implicate the positions from which we speak or write – the positions of *enunciation*. [...] We all write and speak from a particular place and time, from a history and a culture which is specific. What we say is always ‘in context’, *positioned*.<sup>5</sup>

This quote from Stuart Hall is a suitable starting point for describing Prem Radhakishun's position of enunciation. Who speaks? Who is the man behind *PREMtime*?

Prem Shivram Shaw Radhakishun was born on February 4th 1962 in Surinam. That year, his parents of Indian descent started a radio station called ‘Radika’, and it is because of this that Prem came in contact with media and the making of media at an early age. Prem moved from his beloved, multi-cultural Suriname to the Netherlands, requesting political asylum in January 1983, when in December 1982 the pro-democratic radio station is literally destroyed by soldiers of Bouterse’s army. From 1983 to 1984, Prem worked for the Amsterdam illegal-radiostation-for-the-Surinam-people ‘Kankantrie’, and through this work, becomes involved with other (illegal) radio stations, establishing himself in Amsterdam and as a member of the Amsterdam community. According to Prem, this work stimulated his integration. In September 1984, Prem began studying law at the Vrije Universiteit and graduated in 1989, taking oath as a lawyer in 1990. In addition to this he has followed a course called ‘Television Making’ at Migranten Televisie Amsterdam (he also worked there until 1994), is a PVDA (Worker's Party) candidate for the Provinciale Staten, writes columns for several Dutch newspapers (including Amsterdam's *Het Parool*) and, since 2003, has made the television programme *PREMtime* for the NPS on Dutch national television.<sup>6</sup>

Prem Radhakishun is a highly educated immigrant and an influential intellectual because of his voice in national media. One can draw parallels between his background and the *présences* outlined by Stuart Hall in his discussion of Caribbean identity. First of all there is the *présence* Indienne (similar to Hall’s *présence* Africaine, site of the repressed, the unspoken, cultural identity); being the son of Indian parents, raised in a Hindu community in Surinam, makes Prem Radhakishun part of an ethnic minority in the Netherlands. Second there is what I call *présence* Etrang enne (Hall’s *présence* Am ricaine in Surinam; in the Netherlands: nothing in common, therefore united, cultural difference, hybridity); Prem is part of the larger group immigrants in the Netherlands, the group that collectively seen by native

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<sup>5</sup> Hall, 1994: p. 392

<sup>6</sup> <http://beeldvorming.net/pradhakishun.pdf>, 9 June 2005

Dutch people as “the Other”. Finally, there is the *présence Européenne*. (Black Skin, White Mask.) Prem completed his education in the Netherlands and, through his performances on Dutch national television, is a Dutch celebrity with famous white friends and colleagues. In an article in the magazine for the Dutch Journalism Association (Nederlandse Vereniging voor Journalisten, NVJ) Prem writes that acquiring this position, being in the mainstream, was a goal in his life in order to tell his story to the world.<sup>7</sup> He will however, never deny his roots. He is also very aware of, in Said’s Oriental sense, his ‘otherness’<sup>8</sup> (people still see him as immigrant, not as native, ‘authentic’ Dutch person) when he appears in talk shows or expresses his opinion in columns. Aside from being what the Dutch call ‘knuffel allochtoon’ (which means something like ‘huggable immigrant’), he is an intellectual, a ‘blabbermouth’...

### 3 Imagined Community

The concept ‘nation’ is described by Benedict Anderson as ‘[...] an imagined political community – and imagined both as inherently limited and sovereign.’<sup>9</sup> Anderson uses ‘imagined’ not meaning ‘made up’, a nation *is* something real, but meaning ‘imaginary’ as a feeling of solidarity, even though you, as a citizen, are not acquainted with all the other citizens of the nation. The nation is ‘limited’, according to Anderson, because even the biggest nation has borders with other nations, and is imagined as a community due to a deeply rooted feeling of ‘horizontal comradeship’, even though there is inequality and exploitation.

However, as David Morley writes in his article ‘Belongings: Place, Space and Identity in a Mediated World’<sup>10</sup>, this nation as an imagined community is under attack, so to speak, by globalisation and its side effects like changes in communication and physical mobility. ‘In an increasingly insecure world, people search for safety in ideas of community’.<sup>11</sup>

Populations in the Netherlands are afraid of the existence of the Other and the prospect of the diminishing of their identity in an increasing European union. Because of this, they create new, smaller borders, which is what Morley calls ‘reterritorialization’: the process in which borders, in different shapes and sizes, become stronger instead of weaker in spite of, or because of, globalisation.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://beeldvorming.net/pradhakishun.pdf>, 9 juni 2005

<sup>8</sup> Said, 1994

<sup>9</sup> Anderson, 1983: p.6

<sup>10</sup> Morley, 2001

<sup>11</sup> Quote taken from a paraphrase of Z.Bauman by Morley in Morley, 2001: p. 431

### 3.1 Race

This can be seen in the aforementioned Lonsdale-affair. Because of this fear for the Other, people create an imagined community on the basis of a common characteristic, which is in this case white skin. They resist, rebel to the Other on the basis of race, thereby referring to (even though not consciously) the thoughts of Comte de Gobineau, who thinks that race should be pure of blood, that white is superior, above yellow, and yellow above black. The utopia of these Lonsdale teens is a white Holland, and eventually a white world. (This thought contradicts Anderson's idea that there are no people on this planet that dreams of a day when all of humanity is a unity.) The Lonsdale youth see the Netherlands as an imagined community on the basis of race and ethnic descent.<sup>12</sup>

### 3.2 Passport

Another group of people (from the same Netherlands) shown in *PREMtime* is the Turkish community. One problem they face is that unemployment rates are rising, due to the deterioration of the economy. This causes great disbelief and mistrust of the government, especially amongst untrained, uneducated groups of people from Turkish descent. One item in *PREMtime* is dedicated to this subject.<sup>13</sup> In this item a man originating from Turkey, and owner of a Dutch passport and the Dutch nationality, is allowed to give his thoughts on this matter. He speaks Turkish, because he is unable to speak Dutch, even though he has been living and working in the Netherlands for quite a long time. The man tells the camera that he cannot find a decent job, because the much cheaper Polish workers have 'taken over' the market. This is another example of reterritorialization; Europe is becoming larger, more open, therefore creating the possibility for the Polish to work in the Netherlands. Because this is not in the interest of the Turkish man, he wants to create new borders around his Netherlands as an imagined community on the basis of his passport, the Dutch identity. He tells Prem that the government should take care of its citizens, the people with a Dutch passport, first and then the Others.

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<sup>12</sup> It must be said that in this case I've lumped all kids with Lonsdale clothes together. In reality it is only a small group of people within this Lonsdale group that has right-extremist thoughts. This small group can however sometimes find support and sympathy within the larger group. This can lead to dangerous situations, like the earlier mentioned Molotov-cocktail incident.

<sup>13</sup> *PREMtime* 49, 11 January 2005: <http://cgi.omroep.nl/cgi-bin/streams?tv/nps/premtime/bb.20050111.rm?start=07:20>

### 3.3 Restorative Nostalgia

Another point of view concerning the Netherlands as an imagined community, is held by the Molukkers. The community was in the spotlight in March 2004, when they demonstrated against the assignment of a house to a non-Mollukan family. The Mollukkers sought the right to assign houses to families, rather than have the government do so. The government reacted very clearly: it is not an option to have ethnic enclaves in the Netherlands. For the state this contradicts the whole idea of integration. For this occasion *PREMtime*<sup>14</sup> went to a neighbourhood in Moordrecht, where a group of Mollukans hold on to a legal agreement they had with the Dutch government. The Molukkan people fear that when they give up those small enclaves, their neighbourhoods, their whole community will fall apart, and eventually the Molukkan identity will disappear. This is another example of 'reterritorialization'. In this case, the reterritorialization happens with what Sujata Moorti in her article 'Desperately Seeking an Identity' calls 'restorative nostalgia', a trans-national reconstruction of a lost home by means of truth claims.<sup>15</sup> This nostalgia is complemented by a feeling of loss, truth and a-historicism. Now, a third generation Molukkan people live in the Netherlands, who have never been to their 'homeland', but still think of that land as their true home. This backward glance contradicts the aims of the Dutch government. The Molukkan people want to remember this page of Dutch history, while the Dutch government would rather forget about it, under the cloak of 'progress' and the 'integrated multicultural imagined community: the Netherlands'.

### 4 *PREMtime* & Symbolic Home

Morley (2001) writes that the national unity can be seen as a 'symbolic home' that is (partially) constructed by television. But this public sphere, created by television programmes and broadcasts, is not a 'home' to everybody. Groups of people are excluded by religion, class, gender or ethnicity. They don't feel 'at home' in this public sphere, at most they feel tolerated as the Other.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> *PREMtime* 36, 6 April 2004: <http://cgi.omroep.nl/cgi-bin/streams?tv/nps/premtime/bb.20040406.rm?start=00:48>

<sup>15</sup> Moorti, 2003: p. 359

<sup>16</sup> Morley, 2001: p. 436-437

Prem Radhakishun, with his *PREMtime*, tries to give these Others a voice. He wants to show that Morley's 'realm of the far' exists not only virtually (via the media) in the phantasmagoric households, but that it is really *there*. By bringing groups of people with different backgrounds together, Prem attempts to start a conversation, a discourse. In first instance this is to get the parties involved, closer to one another, while through his national TV programme, he hopes to get the viewers to think and talk about these conflicts in Dutch society. In his attempt to do so, he tries to be as objective in his representation of people as possible. But he does not always succeed in this attempt. In a column on the website that is part of his TV show, Prem writes that one of the nice aspects of *PREMtime* is the fact that he travels through the Netherlands, talking to ordinary people.

Een van de leuke aspecten aan *PREMtime* is dat ik heel Nederland door trek en met de gewone mensen mag spreken. Dat is een verrijking. Vanuit de krant, radio of televisie krijg je de werkelijkheid gefilterd uit de ogen van 1 journalist te zien. Als je zelf op pad gaat zie je veel meer. Het is net als kijken naar een voetbalwedstrijd op TV. Je ziet alleen de actie om de bal heen. In het stadion kan je zien hoe de verdediging staat, welke posities wie bekleedt, wie slim rent en wie dom. Kortom het grotere plaatje zie je het best in de werkelijkheid.

In this quote Prem writes that on television, the viewer gets to see reality through the eyes of one journalist. He compares this to watching a soccer match on TV or 'live' in the arena. On TV you get to see the action around the ball, but in the arena you can see the position of each player, the defence, who plays smart and who doesn't. In short, Prem writes, you can only see the big picture in reality, not on television.

What he forgets to write here, is that the viewers of his *PREMtime* also see a filtered version of reality made by a journalist. The way that dialogues are cut, music is added<sup>17</sup>, and people are being represented in *PREMtime* is contributing to the 'colouring' of the items. Sometimes it is hard for Prem not to speak his own mind, thereby making his position of enunciation explicit to the viewer. But even when he doesn't explicitly shows his position of enunciation, it is still a major aspect to the colouring of the items in his show.

However, this filtered vision on reality does suit a purpose. Following Morley's thoughts, Prem Radhakishun thinks it is necessary to scorn the idea of the imagined

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<sup>17</sup> In *PREMtime* 61, there is an item on violence and racism in Limburg. This item starts with the idyllic music by Rowen Heze. A voice-over (by Prem) tells the audience that for a very long time songs like these are made in the lovely town America, near Venray. However, the voice explains, some people in America enjoy listening to other music. (And then a thick wall of hardcore-house music is being thrown into the living room of the viewer, accompanied with images of young people doing something that looks like a primitive, tribal rain dance.): <http://cgi.omroep.nl/cgi-bin/streams?/tv/nps/premtime/bb.20050417.rm?start=01:10>

community based on the fear of alterity, the Other, and create a ‘community in difference’<sup>18</sup> which acknowledges the importance of a discourse that underlines undeniable differences. Prem propagates a more open, porous public sphere in which the idea of living together with the Other, now and in the future, is accepted and the Netherlands becomes a strong, solid imagined community in which a diversity of people feel at home.

## Conclusion

Imagined communities exist on different levels, with different motives and interests. The common denominator in all these imagined communities is the fear of the Other. An example can be found in the unification of Europe, as its members try to create a unity of power that is strong enough to compete with the United States and the emerging world powers in Asia. But with this process of unification, thereby opening up the (internal) borders, and the ever increasing globalisation, new borders are created and raised. The referendum on the European constitution made the Netherlands as an imagined community clearly visible, even though the motives to vote massively against this constitution are probably highly diverse. Within the Netherlands there are smaller communities that create borders because of the fear that the Other will corrode their identity. It is these ‘smaller’ borders that *PREMtime* tries to make explicit, visible, and therefore a subject of discussion, hoping to diminish the fear of the Other and creating a ‘community in difference’. In contrast to many other ‘media-creators’, who put emphasis on the differences in the Netherlands, *PREMtime* tries to overcome these differences, wants to bring groups of people together, and in doing so make our country a horizontal imagined community.

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<sup>18</sup> Morley, 2001: p. 441

## Literature

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