

The Antidote to Disaffection

Social Cohesion in Flanders

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[B A R T D I R K S]

'Television' gets the blame every time. People don't have time anymore, so it's said, for a club, or for voluntary work, and worst of all: for each other. Because they don't want to miss a single episode of their favourite talk-show or soap. Yet it is precisely 'television' that for years has been rousing randomly chosen Flemish villages from their summer sleep. A few years ago the programme *Fata Morgana*, by the Flemish Radio and Television Network station VRT One, mobilised many hundreds of one village's inhabitants to carry out five fiendishly difficult projects in a single week. There were the same number of stars to be won.

Whereas producers in commercial broadcasting companies know that viewing figures go up in proportion to the number of confrontations and conflicts (between the inhabitants of the *Big Brother* house for instance), or again between the couples being tested in *Temptation Island*), *Fata Morgana* aimed specifically at fraternisation and harmony. Each programme contained two blocks of slow-motion pictures from the relevant location. You would see the inhabitants waving or giving a 'thumbs up': a married couple on a terrace, youngsters on their skateboards, a woman letting her dog out. The message was clear: this is a nice place to live.

The final result, watched by hundreds of thousands of Flemings on Sunday evenings, was to be more than pure entertainment. '*We need 'Fata Morgana' (...). It's good for democracy*', said presenter Geena Lisa at the beginning of the first season. The Flemish daily *De Standaard* enthusiastically spoke of television with a heart, maybe even a medicine against disaffection.

But did it work? Suddenly it was the turn of Kaprijke, a quiet village in Meetjesland, the rural area between Ghent and Bruges. '*I've been surprised how much enthusiasm and energy the challenge has brought out in us all*', said Jacky De Wispelaere, a youthful fifty-year-old. He was put in charge of building an aqueduct; the monster was to be fifteen metres high and forty metres long.

The initial terrified reaction of the workman from the firm of Bekaert, in Aalter, quickly turned into enthusiasm – and nights without much sleep. '*It's so easy to think: there's no life in these tiny villages, they're dead. When there was a public meeting to get more volunteers for 'Fata Morgana', it was cold and wet. But the place was packed with people and they were all very keen. You don't really understand it, but it works.*'

Fata Morgana:
'Roman' soldiers in
Kaprijke



In the end VRT viewers could see how Kaprijke had transformed itself into a Roman village. Water was running over Jacky De Wispelaere's aqueduct. Tiny Wauters had press-ganged a Roman army hundreds of soldiers strong. Patricia Coppenolle had found a hundred druids who were handing out a home-made magic potion to thousands of visitors. Under the leadership of Bram De Wulf a Gallic village had been cobbled together. And schoolchildren Marlies Van Hoecke and Ruud Wauters were even lucky enough to go to Rome and be officially told by then Prime Minister Romano Prodi that the words of Julius Caesar still held good: of all the Gauls the Belgians are the best and bravest.

Kaprijke cherished the five stars it had won so gloriously. And afterwards, so Jacky assured us, people in the Den Bolhoed café would regularly reminisce about how, one Monday morning, a TV team, a whole caravan of people, had come and turned everything upside down. 'Television' can alienate people from each other, but it can obviously also bring them together again.¹

But what has gone so wrong in a country that it takes a TV programme to bring warmth and solidarity to villages and towns? *Fata Morgana* is certainly not the only initiative dreamed up by those on high to strengthen social cohesion in Flanders. Although it is sometime hard to take those initiatives seriously. Like the attempt by Bart De Bondt, a *'bespoke-suited idealist'* working for an insurance company, to persuade Flemings to wear a red badge to let everyone know that they wouldn't mind having a chat.² Others launched the slogan *'Pay an unexpected compliment'*, a campaign that was everywhere on radio and TV for a few weeks.

And that was not all. At the Autosalon in Brussels a hundred and fifty thousand outside 'thumbs' were handed out to motorists who could stick them up as an alternative to their middle finger. Suddenly stickers appeared on buses with the message: *'I'll stop for a compliment'*. And in 2006 thousands of old people received a centrally-dispatched 'comfort letter' on St Valentine's day, clearly meant to compensate for a supposed shortage of love from children and grandchildren.

'It's important to be positive, for yourself and for other people', according to Piet Jaspaert of Boodschap Zonder Naam (Anonymous Message), a *'socially critical'* organisation that works for a society that people can live in. *'Frustration and indifference lead to cynicism and we want to reverse that trend'*.³ But without being cynical or indifferent, these seem to me to be artificially contrived remedies for decline and individualism. Surely you cannot expect the social fabric of society to improve because of frivolous campaigns and ditto TV programmes?

Sometimes a brief but intense wave of solidarity and unity does engulf the country. As happened when eighteen-year-old Bart Bonroy was stabbed to death in Ostend in February 2007, simply for refusing to give a cigarette to a drunk who accosted him. The then Flemish prime minister, Yves Leterme tried to draw a lesson from this. He asked the Flemings to *'start working towards a caring society'*. Anyone who had a suggestion could email the Christian Democrats. Leterme received nearly 1,500 reactions. There were complaints about the blurring of norms (from 30 percent of the letter-writers), about defective upbringing at home and at school (37 percent), and about criminality (16 percent). 18 percent thought society has become too obsessed with the individual. The remedies proposed followed naturally from this: financial support for non-working parents, more severe punishment for crime, and greater support for the activities of clubs and associations. This last suggestion would have received less support in the Netherlands; although huge numbers of Dutch people also belong to some club or society, there is little awareness there of how important these structures are to society. Just such local initiatives can form the cement of a caring society. Youth clubs and women's associations, for instance, trade unions and sports clubs.

A flourishing social mid-field – sociologists like to speak of *'social capital'* – would be the driving force behind social integration, behind political participation, and it is even a not-to-be-underestimated precondition for a country's economic achievements. *'It's precisely by being involved in small-scale associations that people learn to work for common interests, and gain experience in democratic decision-making'*: so says a weighty tome on the role of the mid-field in society in Flanders and the Netherlands.⁴



Flemish amateur cyclists
on a break.

It strikes me that that social capital is referred to much more frequently in Flanders – although naturally the term is seldom mentioned explicitly. Non-profit-making organisations (a term I as a Dutchman then living and working in Belgium quickly got to know) get a lot more attention in the newspapers than they do in the Netherlands. The government in Brussels is much more open-handed in subsidising the social mid-field – the Dutch ‘powers that be’ in The Hague have resorted to the cheese-slicer and sometimes even the blunt axe. From Third World shops to scouting, in Holland they have all seen their subsidies severely cut back or even disappear entirely.

The importance of social capital receives much greater recognition in Flanders than in the Netherlands. Membership of a club, be it a youth group or the local football team, is seen as effective medicine to promote tolerance. Or as a remedy against disaffection. *‘Gaining experience in democratic decision-making’* is code for: we must prevent discontented citizens from dropping out and falling prey to ‘anti-politics’. In short, from going and voting for the far-right Vlaams Belang party.

Let us hope that enough Flemings still belong to a club or association.

Fuel for today’s woman

Sadly, though, the membership figures for the KAV (Kristelijke Arbeiders Vrouwen; Christian Workers Women’s Movement) lead one to fear the worst. In less than two decades over two hundred thousand women have dropped out, leaving a current membership of one hundred and ten thousand.⁵ Campaigns to raise their image have clearly not yet succeeded in reversing the trend. Nor has the song recorded a couple of years ago by a specially formed choir of KAV ladies from Limburg in an effort to promote their movement:

*Once you are all warmed up
and you're for Pure Woman-Fire
you're in the right place here
oxygen for the community
and warmth as well for you
KAV is fuel
for the woman of today!*

*We make our voices heard,
straightforward and assertive
we fight the fight for women's rights
that's our initiative
for without giving quarter
we break through the glass ceiling
to a new view of the future*

(...)

*For security and warmth
come sit, enjoy yourself
without any check or limit
every woman here gets credit
your girl-friends you'll find here
a guarantee of pleasure
we'd not do it for less than that*

*Feminism is right out
and now gender is in
but with women on the move,
that's a new start every time
what if it's still a struggle,
for the women of the world
that gives point to our movement⁶*



But does the KAV really still provide '*fuel for the woman of today*'? A tour of the activities of a few of the nine hundred local branches does not immediately give you that contemporary feel. Courses in 'Vegetarian Cookery', 'Fiddling with Jewellery', 'Quick and Trendy Cookery' and 'Colourful Flower Arranging', day trips and cycle rides predominate. These don't strike one as being the skills needed to '*break through the glass ceiling*'. But on the other hand KAV is campaigning for more women in politics, and the organisation has argued for homosexuals and lesbians to be granted the same adoption rights as heterosexuals. It really does look as if this 1920s-style socio-cultural association is afraid of making a choice: it stands with one foot in the past and the other in the present.

'*You're looking at it the wrong way*', says Eva Brumagne, director of communications at KAV headquarters in Schaarbeek in Brussels. '*Our twin-track policy isn't ambiguous, on the contrary it's a completely deliberate choice. The cookery courses are low-level, non-threatening activities that still attract a lot of women. If you jump in too quickly with weighty social topics it's counter-productive. But in*



KAV members during a 'Quick and Trendy Cookery' course in Essen, 2007.
Photo by Gert Jochems.

a course on vegetarian cookery you can deal incidentally with the bio-industry and the fact that the enormous amount of meat we consume contributes to Third World poverty.'

Moreover, according to Brumagne, the Christian Workers Women's Movement is absolutely aware that membership of a socio-cultural association is also 'training in democracy'. That aspect is inherent in many activities without being explicitly mentioned. And the last thing the KAV wants to do is to force opinions or attitudes on its members.

'We stopped doing that at least forty years ago. The KAV's always been good at encouraging a critical approach. Of course it goes in waves. At the end of the nine-ties, when it was all about "cocooning", maybe our social involvement wasn't so much in evidence. But in a group you always learn to work together, to be critical and express your own views.'

The association is making every effort to attract new, young target groups. That is not easy, as the KAV has found. People are no longer so keen on joining things. *'Becoming a member of a club and feeling involved with it is quite different from taking out a subscription to a periodical'*, says Brumagne. *'For women, certainly, it's no longer a matter of course.'*

The reason? – a chronic lack of time. As well as looking after their families, a lot of young women are also kept very busy with their careers. *'They do need some relaxation, yes, but it has to be much more informal than before. That's why we offer flexible involvement. These days you don't actually have to be a full member to join in KAV activities. This way so-called "shoppers" (mainly young women who've no desire to become full members, some of whom also have problems with the KAV's religious affiliation), can pick and choose what appeals to them.'*



'KAV is Networking!' poster.

As a consequence of this, the association's local voluntary work is also being put on a new footing. More and more local branches are no longer run by a chairwoman and committee who control all activities and publicity from the centre. They are being replaced by teams of varying composition. Anyone who wishes to can take on tasks for a shorter or longer period. *'If someone wants to organise a one-off djembe drum course under the KAV banner, they're welcome'*, says Brumagne. *'In the past something like that mightn't have taken place, because the committee weren't keen on it. We try to respond to the wishes of members and volunteers in what we offer. That really takes a lot of thinking about.'*

The cookery courses are less 'traditional' than one might think. They too have picked up on the modern woman's lack of time. Because Mums who can prepare delicious meals that can be on the table in a jiffy have time left over for other things. *'But do you know what would really provide fuel for the modern woman?'*, I ask Eva Brumagne. *'If it wasn't the women who came along to one of your cookery courses, but their husbands.'*

For the moment that is a step too far for the KAV. *'But we do also publish clearly written cookery books. They can certainly be used by men as well.'*

One for all

There are no cookery books in use today in the playground and huts of the Chiro youth movement's branch at Achter-Olen in the Kempen. This Sunday afternoon there are at least 150 children and teenagers there. As always, this branch of Flanders' largest youth association begins the afternoon with a short game in which everyone plays together.⁷ After that the various age-groups each go their own way. The Clubbers (boys and girls of six or seven) make things and play tag, musical chairs, hide-and-seek, or peep-bo. The 'Aspis' (aspirant leaders) aged from sixteen to eighteen go off on a cycle ride, dressed in the official, but not compulsory, shorts or skirt. In their cramped room twenty-two six- and seven-year-old boys are running and shrieking so loud it makes your ears ring. Lode Bellens looks at the exuberant band with amusement. Then he decides that that's enough. He calls them to order:

'One for all...'

'All for one', comes the response from twenty-two throats.

'And what are we then?', Lode asks the children.

'Quiet!!!', they shout back.

But the spell doesn't work. The Chiro Clubbers only quiet down when Lode hands out bottles of cola and lemonade. One of the boys proudly announces a bit later that he has burped three times in a row. Lode laughs. *'Wow, today you're the champion burper!'*

The other two leaders are swotting for exams, so Lode is looking after the group on his own today. They have been playing games with balloons in the field outside, and very soon they going for a romp in the woods. Lode keeps an eye on the children who don't feel like joining in just then and after a squabble he wipes away a tear. *'Matti stamped on me, on purpose!'*

Olen is not unique in Flanders; every weekend 985 Chiro groups meet in 380 Flemish municipalities. With almost seventy-eight thousand members and a further thirteen thousand leaders Chiro is by far the largest Flemish youth movement. But scouting, with 4 umbrella organisations in Flanders, is also grow-



ing at a rate of knots. In 2005 the five associations – Chiro, VVKSM (scouts and guides), KSJ-KSA-VKSA, KLJ and FOS (scouts) – had 217,650 members between them. Holland has only two similar organisations, which are much smaller in comparison. *Scouting Nederland* and the originally Catholic *Jong Nederland* have a hundred and twenty thousand and nine thousand members respectively. They look at the Flemish youth movements with envy. Whereas Chiro receives a good 1.3 million euros (39 percent of its budget) annually from the Flemish government, in The Hague financial support for Scouting and Jong Nederland has been reduced to zero since 2006. The Dutch clubs speak of wrecking and feel they are not appreciated; at present all The Hague's money is going into sports clubs.

Unlike in Holland, Flemish scouts, guides and Chiro members do not always hide away in their playgrounds in the woods. No, every weekend you can see groups in the Grand' Place in Brussels, playing games or singing songs – something quite inconceivable on the Dam in Amsterdam. When scouting celebrated its centenary at the end of April 2007 almost a hundred thousand scouts and guides gathered in Brussels. The power to mobilise such numbers is unique in the world; at the World Jamboree in England at the end of July 'only' forty thousand scouts and guides took part – and they came from dozens of countries. To be fair, though, numbers here were constrained by the limited size of the Brownsea Island location.

Innumerable 'famous Flemings' – politicians, actors, singers – are former members of Chiro or of the scouts and guides. In Holland such membership is not automatically seen as a recommendation. On the contrary, people tend to snigger at Premier Balkenende's boy-scout past. In Flanders it is so popular that children sometimes have to join a waiting-list. Although that sometimes proves to be more of a weakness than a strength: there are always children and teenagers who want to become members, but it can be hard to find people in their twenties who are willing to lead the groups.

Chiro youth movement
in Achter-Olen.
Photo by Dierk Hendriks.

Scouts at JAMbe,
the celebration of
100 years of scouting
in Brussels on 29 April
2007.
Photo by Gert Jochems.



After a decline between 1995 and 2000, membership figures for Chiro and the scouts are now considerably higher again. And so Chiro's director, Hans Bouwen, has an optimistic message for the Christian Workers Women's Movement and the family associations that are likewise losing members. The Flemish youth clubs show that it is possible to defy demographic trends and the supposed spirit of the times. They resoundingly refute the doom scenarios that maintain that sports clubs alone have a bright future and that the age of individualism has set in for good.

'The time of out-and-out individualism is well and truly past', alleges Hans Bouwen. 'Children and adults are again seeing the value of doing things together. The youth movements provide the basis for the socio-cultural spectrum in Flanders.' Therefore, according to him, the revival of the youth movements will work through to adult organisations. *'At the moment you're still seeing numbers falling in the KAV and elsewhere, but I expect the trend to change there too. You'll notice it in the numbers of volunteers for Third World shops and Amnesty International, and in the interest in cookery classes and flower-arranging among women's organisations.'*

A bit like Switzerland

However there is also a flip-side to this general support for the local youth movement. To make a joke of it: that's where your typical Flemings are bred. Flemings who often root themselves so firmly in the village where they were born that they prefer never to leave. Who build a house there, and send their own children to the Chiro in their turn. For me, that's really a bit too clingy. Listen to what the Chiro leaders in Olen themselves have to say about it. On Sunday afternoons Leader Marlies Storms is in charge of a group of forty-eight

girls. During the week she also has a number of them in her class. *'In the school where I teach, three-quarters of the pupils belong to Chiro. Children from other schools often drop out. They're welcome, but they still feel rather isolated here.'*

Her friend Nina Van Hirtum has actually given up being a Chiro group leader after five years. For the last six weeks she has been helping out because the other group leaders have exams. *'I miss it terribly, but luckily the Chiro connection lasts a lifetime.'* Lode Bellens, the leader of Olen's six-year-old members, feels the same way. *'Chiro's a kind of social security. I became a member when I turned eight because my parents had also been members. The group leaders from my youth now have children of their own, and I lead them. So the circle's complete.'*

Friendships are forged for life here and of course that can only be a good thing. But at the same time I find the strong social bonding in Flanders suffocating. The ties formed in the socio-cultural associations seem to act as golden chains. The success of the Flemish youth movement partly explains why so many students, even the older ones, still come home every weekend and why so many of them later come back to live in the area where they were born.

'Here you're in the country but close to the big cities. Antwerp's just a thirty-minute drive', says Chiro leader Lode. *'Here you know everyone, in Antwerp you don't know anyone.'* And Chiro's national director, Hans Bouwen, has also continued to live in Olen and commutes to Antwerp to work every day. He wouldn't leave Olen for all the money in the world.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder,
The Peasants' Dance.
16th century.
Panel, 114 x 164 cm.
Kunsthistorisches
Museum, Vienna.

Of course it's not compulsory to go and live somewhere other than where you grew up. But doing so can broaden your horizons enormously. *'The social cohesion in Flanders has considerable advantages, but it also has its limitations',* admits Marc Hooghe, a political scientist from Leuven University and an expert in this field. *'It can be difficult to integrate in a village where everyone knows everyone else inside out. Flemings maintain the networks they formed in their youth, are loyal to friends they made early in life. The disadvantage is indeed that they are sometimes less open to new networks, to people they meet later in life. They remain tied to their village.'*

Distances in Flanders are small: there is no need to move away and therefore it is far too easy to stay put. *'Here you're never more than sixty kilometres from a university. So the dominant pattern is that you go back'*, says Hooghe. *'Leuven recruits from the provinces of Flemish Brabant and Limburg. That's the flip-side of social cohesion: it also makes for conformity and a lack of innovative spirit.'*

And that pattern is not breaking down; far from it. When the village pastors of West Flanders still had some influence on their parishioners every-day life, they advised schoolchildren to go to Leuven to study because it had a good Catholic university. *'That pressure's gone now'*, says Chancellor Paul Van Cauwenberge of University of Ghent. *'And so the West Flemings are now opting for the nearest university, and that's Ghent. It explains why we're growing at such a terrific rate: it's because of all the students from West Flanders who would once have gone to Leuven.'*

The Belgians are held together by *'age-old tribal bonds'*, writes Rik Vanwallegheem in his lively book *België Absurdistan* (2005). For thousands of years human beings formed part of a group of their own kind of people, made up of a hundred to a hundred and fifty individuals. These structures were shattered by the Enlightenment and the industrial revolution. But as *'one of the last tribes'* the Belgians still live *'according to the rules of the old tribal bond'*. Belgium is a *'network of little networks, and that is what has always given it its charm and significance'*.⁸ In *Belgium for Beginners* (België voor Beginnelingen, 2004) Bert Kruismans and Peter Perceval describe it as follows: *'Most of all we like to stay close to Mum, and go round there every Sunday for "pistoekes" (rolls) with the rest of the clan.'*⁹ Flanders, says Marc Hooghe, sitting in his study in the University of Leuven, is like Holland without Amsterdam or Germany without Berlin. Brussels, which is mainly French-speaking, does not really count, and that only leaves Antwerp. *'Flanders is a bit like Switzerland'*, muses Hooghe: *'It's fine if that's where you come from and if you like cheese fondue. But if you come from somewhere else, you're handicapped from the start.'*

The wonder of Flanders

But despondency is misplaced. Maybe the wonder of Flanders is above all that so many great socio-cultural associations have survived the ravages of time. At the beginning of the twentieth century they were driven mainly by the efforts of Catholic patronage and the socialist labour movement. These top-level structures have now largely disappeared, but the clubs have remained. The local groups have gained a good deal of autonomy. And that century-old heritage is still cherished in Flanders to this day.

On balance it is far better to live in a country where everyone is a bit conformist and happy to carry on living in his own village than in a society that does not care, where people have all the cohesion of so much dry sand. And for all the tales of doom Flanders is not at all like that. The statistics prove it: Flemish associations are even more flourishing than ten years ago, as figures released in mid-July 2007 clearly showed. In 1998 47.6 percent of Flemings were members of at least one association, in 2006 that figure was 53.1 percent. A respectable increase, then, of 5.5 percent.¹⁰

This increase is happening in almost every category: youth movements, sports clubs and family associations. Only the women's organisations referred

to above seem to be declining rapidly with a drop of 4.5 percent. That is a pity for clubs such as the Christian Workers Women's Movement and Child and Family (Kind en Gezin), but it does not necessarily mean that social cohesion is in danger, or that the medicine promoting tolerance is losing its effectiveness.

It's true that women (and young people) are more and more often choosing to join a sports club. Despite claims to the contrary, according to Hooghe there is no measurable difference between, say, Chiro or KAV on the one hand and a sports club on the other: *'The criticism often goes: sport's only for fun, while other socio-cultural movements encourage social engagement in their members. But studies have failed to support that distinction. In a sports club you're still part of society, you still choose to get involved, to be tolerant. It's only fitness that doesn't have that effect. That's obviously a purely individual thing.'*

All in all, social cohesion in Flanders is certainly not breaking down as fast as is often feared. Although according to Hooghe Antwerp is an exception. *'Antwerp is more of a metropolis and in terms of communal activities it's become a desert, which means a lot of older people and those with limited skills and education are becoming isolated. There's still a feeling of belonging to a particular district, but it's on a larger scale and that makes it more impersonal. The "Red girdle" of the socialist movements doesn't really exist there anymore.'*

With one's own folk in Bobbejaanland

Saturday 31 March 2007 was a red-letter day for Bobbejaanland attraction park. More than twelve thousand visitors came to the park in Lichtaart in a hundred specially chartered buses or by their own transport. At four o'clock in the afternoon they released ten thousand yellow and black balloons: the colours of Vlaams Belang, who had hired the whole park for a day.

'You don't hear anything but Dutch, and that's really very nice', one enthusiastic lady told the VRT-News camera crew about her political party's family day. An elderly lady added, with a giggle, that she found it so marvellous *'that there aren't any other nationalities'*. A third stressed that at least this event *'hasn't been paid for out of our taxes for once: this is for our own folk.'*

The cliché is becoming reality: Vlaams Belang people do not feel at home anywhere, except among their own kind. But why have they come to feel themselves outsiders? When social cohesion in Flanders was really so strong still? And surely that contributed to a tolerant society? So how can the far-right Vlaams Belang party have advanced so steadily in recent decades?

For Marc Hooghe these are not easy questions to answer: *'You've always had a fairly large group of people that clubs and associations failed to reach. The only difference is that in the past that group had no political identity and no-one to speak for them. That made it easier to act as if it didn't exist. Now that Vlaams Belang is targeting that group specifically, of course they've got an identity and a political voice. But I don't think the group itself has really got any bigger.'*

Moreover, changes in their structure mean that the clubs and associations are reaching a different public from what they used to. The large, old organisations such as the KAV were very good at addressing a relatively uneducated public. *'The new organisations are much less successful at this,'* according to Hooghe. *'You don't find ex-KAV members in a trendy fitness club. And yet those old structures were important.'*

Hooghe refers to a study published a few years ago by Professor Jaak Biliet. *'That showed that older people can be relatively ethnocentric or racist. But membership of Christian organisations still has a "braking effect" on this.'* In other words: among those of equally racist views a KAV member will still always vote Christian Democrat, while someone who does not belong to anything finds it much easier to move to the extreme right.

And there is still one section of the population that at present has little connection with the socio-cultural associations that determine the country's image: the immigrants. The cultural divide appears considerable; the way of life of new Belgians is often very different from that of the indigenous inhabitants. The youth movements appeal mainly to socially committed parents. And despite themselves that makes them somewhat elitist. Immigrant youngsters definitely do not belong to the back seat generation: they are not continually being ferried to tennis lessons, football clubs or youth movements.

Hans Bouwen from Chiro and Eva Brumagne from KAV are aware of that divide. Both clubs, however, are actively working on it. The Chiro, for instance, is making a positive effort on the multicultural side of the borough of Molenbeek in Brussels: Moroccan pupils in Dutch-speaking primary schools are being encouraged to take an interest in Chiro. They do some extra work on Sunday afternoons to learn Dutch. But membership is more loosely defined: no-one ever really knows who is going to turn up at the club premises on a Sunday. And since the mid-nineties KAV has been involved in an intercultural operation with fifteen groups in Brussels under the slogan of *'Vrouwen gaan vreemd'* ('Women and Foreign Affairs'). In 2004 more than two thousand five hundred participants from twenty nationalities were enrolled in some three hundred local activities.¹¹ *'We're working very hard on it', Brumagne assures me. 'It's a question of keeping at it, then we'll get there.'*

A small miracle

In Kaprijke, *Fata Morgana's* official five-star community in Meetjesland, Mayor Filip Gijssels is still amazed at what the five projects managed to draw out of the population. *'It's a small miracle. Young and old alike joined in. Everyone wanted to look good on telly and win those five stars. People who started as strangers got to know each other. The local caterers did a roaring trade. People were brought together unexpectedly because they had a common mission. The response in the street was like nothing we'd ever known before. Life in the village was more colourful for a while. That's something you can't put a price on.'*

But Kaprijke, which with the borough of Lembeke has six thousand souls, was certainly not at death's door before *Fata Morgana*. And according to the mayor, putting things in perspective, it hasn't really changed since the TV broadcast. *'No, it hasn't brought about any structural changes, we haven't got any new clubs, for instance. We already had at least two hundred associations all told, from sports and youth clubs to card groups. That social life is indeed vitally important. It's good for social well-being and good for preventing isolation and individualism.'* Of course, Gijssels acknowledges, even when you are safe in your own village 'out in the sticks' you have to understand that you are part of a larger whole. *'You don't only live in a village, but also in an area, a province, a country, in the world. It's up to every individual to think about how he or she will deal with that fact.'*



*Fata Morgana in
Kaprijke.*

And there you have the hidden paradox of the changing, but still flourishing life of Flemish clubs and associations: on the one hand it can open people's eyes to the rest of society and to the world, while on the other it inevitably makes the Fleming a bit too much of a homebody. ■

NOTES

1. *Fata Morgana's* invasion of in Kaprijke did not go entirely smoothly. The alderman responsible for public works felt sidelined by the organisation and tendered his resignation. 'Fata Morgana has political repercussions', *Het Nieuwsblad*, 8 August 2006.
2. There was also a (now defunct) website www.derodeknoop.be
3. Represented in the umbrella organisation Boodschap Zonder Naam are, among others, the Farmers' Union, Coca-Cola, Dexia, Electrabel, Fortabel, KBC and the National Lottery.
4. Marc Hooghe (ed.), *Sociaal kapitaal en democratie. Verenigingsleven, sociaal kapitaal en politieke cultuur*. Leuven: Acco, 2000.
5. In 1989 the KAV still had 324,850 members; in 2000 only 176,101 remained. Since then over sixty-five thousand more have dropped out: www.kav.be now speaks of a hundred and ten thousand members.
6. Translated by Tanis Guest.
7. Chiro like KAV is a Christian organisation and takes its name from the Greek letters *chi* and *ro*, the first two letters of 'Christos'. Further information can be found at www.chiro.be and on Chiro in Achter Olen at www.chiroachterolen.be.
8. Rik Vanwalleghe, *België Absurdistan. Op zoek naar de bizarre kant van België*. Tielt: Lannoo, 2005, pp. 170-171.
9. Peter Kruismans & Peter Perceval, *België voor beginnelingen*. Leuven: Van Halewyck, 2004, p.128.
10. Statistics from Marc Hooghe & Ellen Quintelier, *Lidmaatschap verenigingen 1998-2006*, commissioned by the Flemish Community, 15 July 2007.
11. See the pamphlet *Vrouwen gaan vreemd, een praktijkgids voor het werken met culturele vrouwen-groepen*. Brussels, 2005.

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