

# Storytelling a story about regional stories as a key for regional development

Dated: March 2015

Author: Jan Van den Berghe (SPK)

Representing: Flemish Land Agency (VLM)

## Summary

This Policy Paper is about storytelling as a central theme in the Rural Alliances project, which is supported by the EU's Interreg IVB North West Europe programme.

Rural Alliances is about tackling the changing demographics in rural areas and the consequences for the people living in those areas. Most rural regions in the project suffer from population decrease; just a few show an increase.

The aims of the project are to find solutions to the problems arising from demographic change. Different regions try to break the circle of fewer services and possibilities, followed by fewer inhabitants, by fewer services, by... Of course, solutions need to be found in social and economic development.

But, as said, some regions have increasing numbers of inhabitants. There, we see a loss of rural character and identity. Other solutions need to be found. Keywords are identity, authenticity, social networking...

Whatever the demographic problem is, the fact is that it causes a change in the characteristics of the rurality of a region. The question is: is rurality an important factor in attractiveness for people to live in a rural region and, if so, how can a region strengthen itself by working on that rural character?

So, probably there is more to it than just the social and economic situation!

But if so, how can we define rural attractiveness? What is the secret that makes people want to live in a rural area, even if the economic opportunities in urban areas are much better? And how can we stimulate that attractiveness? Maybe *storytelling* is part of the solution?

## Background

For example: can a stone, a megalithic tomb, be an answer?

Carrowkeel<sup>[1]</sup> (Sligo County, Ireland) is the site of an archeological park, called Carrowmore Megalithic Complex. It is part of a regional complex and is one of the largest and most important tomb parks in Ireland. Carrowkeel dates from 3,700 – 2,900 BC. The park has a little museum, which presents the history and background of the site.

In the museum, there is one information board which is different. It shows a photograph with a Carrowmore tomb in front, Knocknarea mountain (another important site) behind and the following text: 'Creating Identity'.

That image is so interesting: it relates burial objects which are several thousand years old to modern identity. Does it refer to the stones, or the passage tombs? Are the megalithic monuments more than "only" stones?

## Issues/Problems

### 1. About the pros and cons of storytelling.

What is a megalithic tomb? It is a single stone or complex of stones, moved and manipulated by humans and used to bury the dead. Mostly, the tombs are impressive and big. And it is old, very old. Burial complexes are called *megalithic* if they were built between 5,000 and 1,500 BC. And most important: even though they were unused for thousands years, they survived through time and could count on a certain respect.

What do these tombs tell us about the *identity* of Ireland? The stones of course say nothing. They are a *part* of storytelling, maybe even a central part.

In storytelling, people try to link values found in history or the landscape to the modern living community. The megalithic tombs do a great job: mysterious, old, with a strong relation to the landscape, it is difficult to believe how they were built and how they survived - really very Irish.

So, in the best of worlds, storytelling can create an identity, an attractiveness for a region and its inhabitants. Even more, it can be an attraction for outsiders who want to see and feel that identity.

But of course, stories are not innocent. Let's have a look at Knocknarea mountain. On the top of the mountain, there is a big megalithic tomb where Queen Maeve would be buried. But who is Queen Maeve? She is maybe a legend, maybe a historical warrior queen who lived about 50 BC. The stories about her are spectacular with a lot of violence and treachery.

Is this the kind of *identity* that we want?

We should not forget to mention that the tomb on Knocknarea dates from about 2,000 BC and is much older than the (maybe) historical Queen Maeve!

So, storytelling can create different types of identity and attractiveness. This is important to our vision of identity.

<sup>[1]</sup> After the Rural Alliance Partner Meeting in Mayo in June 2014, I stayed in Ireland and visited Carrowmore.

## 2. Storytelling and identity.

Identity is subject to important discussions. We don't want to replay the discussion, or take a position in the discussion. But, for a storyteller, it is important to realise that the choices you make in the stories you tell and the way you do it, can contribute to a certain vision of identity.

Let's go back to our megalithic tombs.

One of the main questions concerning identity is about its stability. Is identity stable over decades, centuries? Or is it very unstable and does it change permanently through time and place? Our tombs create an interesting point of view on the subject. The fact that they are very old should make them interesting as a creator of a stable identity. But is that so? Is it a coincidence that the doubt about the grave of Queen Maeve comes together with the loss of glorification of violence? Even the scientific interpretation of some signs on the tombs changes: formerly there was a much stronger relation to religion than today.

Another element is the need for historical accuracy in storytelling. Here the discussion on historical criticism is at stake: how we arrive at the 'correct interpretation' of historical facts. Certainly in relation to identity-building, this is very important. Some historians would say that the identity question always *creates* a common "build story" of the history. It is the community that decides what the interpretation of the history is. Other historians put forward a more rational and empirical point of view. And again our Queen Maeve arrives. Is she more a legend, a story with a point of view on heroism, than a real historical person? And does she still have a place in the actual identity of the region or is she just an interesting case in the evolution of identity through time and place?

## 3. The de Merode case.

De Merode is a region in the province of Antwerp in Flanders (Belgium). It is a very interesting region when we consider identity as a factor of attractiveness because de Merode, as a region, is only ten years old. Because of the sale of a large area of land, the government decided to create a rural development project, called de Merode (named after the ancient noble family who reigned for centuries over the region and who were the former owners of the sold land). So, one of the aims of the rural development project was to create a certain feeling of commonality, where de Merode is a common *brand* of the inhabitants. *Rural Alliances* partner VLM (the Flemish Land Agency) provided resources to do that.

The project uses two techniques to do so:

- The organisation of about 50 heritage events: varied groups organise very different events with one common element: de Merode. Some events were aimed at a wide audience, others were very specialised and could only reach small groups.
- The publication of a heritage book: involving different heritage holders and other people concerned about de Merode, VLM produced a heritage book for a broad public so they could learn more about the heritage values in their own region.

Common to both techniques is a broad approach to heritage. Of course the big *visible* heritage (the abbeys, the castles etc.) are used, but we used much more: natural heritage, little stories, modern art as a reinterpretation of historical facts and so on.

### Issues/Problems: 3. The de Merode case (continued)

This was an important choice in the creation of a new identity: a broad approach gives answers to two dilemmas of identity-building through storytelling: stability / instability and subjectivity / objectivity in history. The broader the approach, the better the chance that the answers to those questions will be nuanced.

Did it work? That is difficult to say, because of a lack of research. But we see signs of a growing “de Merode-feeling” in the region and its inhabitants.

## Recommendations

Storytelling is timeless, but is certainly the subject of a revival at the moment. It is at least an additional element in the attractiveness of a region, in addition to socio-economic elements. It is important to realize that storytelling is always part of the creation of identity. Because the creation of identity is not “innocent”, storytelling has to be done in a proper way. A broad approach in storytelling, not only in techniques but also in subjects, is probably the best way to work on good storytelling.

Some other things to bear in mind, arising from our transnational discussions on this topic are:

- Storytelling today can go faster, by the use of social media
- Ask lots of people to tell their own story
- There can be many variations in a storyline – so a consensus may need to be reached
- Storytelling is subjective not objective; and politics can have an influence
- Community facilitation helps with “ownership” and buy-in; who tells the story?
- Stories need honesty, passion and clear vision – but not fantasy and fairy tales
- Storytelling can help branding and marketing for regions, for local businesses etc.
- Storytelling can help us to react to globalisation; we tell our story.
- There should be a sense of where is the story leading?
- Ideally, storytelling emphasises identity and has an ambassadorial role

## Author

Jan Van den Berghe (SPK)

## Contact Details

Goele Vercammen

VLAAMSE LANDMAATSCHAPPIJ - SAMEN INVESTEREN IN DE OPEN RUIMTE  
dienst projectrealisatie, VLM Regio Oost ((Antwerpen – Limburg – Vlaams-Brabant)  
vestiging Herentals, Cardijnlaan 1 – 2200 Herentals – Flanders, Belgium  
T (0032-014) 25 83 89 | E [goele.vercammen@vlm.be](mailto:goele.vercammen@vlm.be)

This policy recommendation paper has been jointly produced as part of the Rural Alliances project, involving twelve partners from Wales, Ireland, France, Germany, Netherlands and Belgium. The project is co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund through the Interreg IVB North West Europe Programme, to promote strong and prosperous communities.