Changing Mountain Communities

Between Certainties and Uncertainties

Tobias Boos, Daniela Salvucci,
Pier Paolo Viazzo, Roberta Clara Zanini (Eds.)

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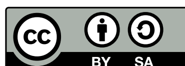

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Table of Contents

Introduction. Changing Mountain Communities
Tobias Boos, Daniela Salvucci, Pier Paolo Viazzo, Roberta Clara Zanini 1

"Much More Than Ice Blocks".
Exploring the New Intimacy of Human-Glacier Relationships in the Swiss Alps
Viviane Cretton 9

Crafting Social Change: Imagining Ecological Transition in the Alps
Gabriele Orlandi, Sofia Marconi, Elena Cardano, Domenico M. Costantini 39

Facing an Uncertain Climate: Interlinked Social, Ecological and Climate Changes
Affecting Livelihoods in the Italian Alps and Apennines
Sarah Whitaker, Elisabetta Dall'Ò 69

Conquering the Mountain Forests on the Eastern Edge of Transylvania:
Community, Resources and Redistribution
Árpád Töhötöm Szabó 101

Mountains of Change: Economy, Tourism, and Heritage in Sardinia
Domenico Branca, Franco Lai 131

"I've Never Left Castro Laboreiro": Ambiguity, Cultural Pride and
Haunted Imagery in a Northern Portuguese Mountain Community
Daniel Maciel 161

Inhabiting the Margins Nowadays: Ethnographies of Alpine Villages in Italy
Laura Bonato, Roberta Clara Zanini 197

Mapping Change in Laguna Blanca:
Rituals, Indigenous Communities, and Tourism in Andean Argentina
Tobias Boos, Daniela Salvucci 225

The Authors 263

Introduction. Changing Mountain Communities

Tobias Boos, Daniela Salvucci, Pier Paolo Viazzo, Roberta Clara Zanini

Change has been one of the main topics in the study of communities in mountain areas, at least since the 1970s (Bailey, 1971). It has often been understood in relation to modernization, as a linear and irreversible socioeconomical process, which transformed peasants into farmers and tourism managers. It has also been associated with local decline, abandonment, and depopulation. Nevertheless, ethnographic and demographic investigations conducted in Europe and elsewhere in the past few decades have revealed contradictions and variability in change-dynamics, highlighting the impact of recent migration flows, the role of new inhabitants, and the many forms of negotiation on how to live together, including different visions and even conflicts on practices of resource management, sustainability, tourism development, and heritage-making (Bender & Kanitscheider, 2012; del Mármol et al., 2016; Membretti & Viazzo, 2017; Oiry Varacca & Sallenave, 2024). Researchers have underlined the emergence of new political, cultural, and ecological awareness of mountain areas' people fighting against the environmental exploitation of their territories and ecological disasters.

In our current times, marked by multi-crises in health, politics, the global economy and above all climate change, these communities are facing multiform uncertainties while sharing at the same time the certainty of permanent and various risks. The chapters throughout this book show that certainties and uncertainties, as well as change, are often interlinked in dialectical and complex ways and that what is certain or uncertain changes over time. The chapters suggest that climate change, once regarded as only a possibility, has become a certainty, perceived and experienced in daily life. Climate change is interconnected with social, economic, and political change, which are both at the same time a certainty and an uncertainty. That social, economic, and political patterns change or have to change in order to make our activities and

life more sustainable is certain, but how exactly is not always known, and as such bears the uncertainty of awaiting the yet to come, the need to experiment and to adapt our economy and ways of life. The uncertainties coming together with the certainty of environmental, social, economic, and political change seem also to interact with the (re)construction of collective identities and the preservation and invention of traditions, in which identities and traditions provide the comfort of apparent permanence and certainty. The chapters of this volume present stories, histories, narrations, and processes of the intermingling certainties and uncertainties connected to themes such as climate change, tourism, and emotionality.

Further certainties also refer to both academic and common-sense stereotypes on mountain communities. These entail, for instance, the ineluctability of the process of abandonment and depopulation of mountain areas, as well as their supposed marginality and their assumed traditionalism and anchoring in the past. Even the existence of *close* or bounded mountain communities should be a matter of investigation and scrutiny, rather than a taken-for-granted assumption or certainty. Mountain communities, in fact, are by no means enclosed and isolated entities but are connected at regional, national, and global levels. They could face internal conflicts and contradictions, which may be boomed by frictions with external institutions and powers.

One certainty that mountain communities have to face is, as we have just noted, climate change. In a thought-provoking article on Alpine anthropology in the Anthropocene, Werner Krauß has not only remarked that the Alps are "one of the hotspots and icons of global climate change" (2018, p. 1021), but has also emphasized that humans are not the sole beings to be affected. Indeed, this realization has prompted an epistemological shift which has moved the spotlights of research towards Alpine landscapes, that are now regarded as complex assemblages of entangled elements including human, nonhuman and also more-than-human actors, geological, biological, and meteorological. It has also led to a new environmental anthropology, which is superseding the old ecological anthropology and its anthropocentric focus on the relations between primarily human populations and natural resources. The new approach now encompasses a broader range of issues, including political ecology, the study of indigenous environmental knowledge, and

multispecies ethnography. This epistemological turning point, together with the other significant changes experienced by mountain areas in the past decades, is now forcing adequate conceptual tools to be sought by anthropology and social sciences so that novel and often entangled social settings can be dealt with. All the chapters in this volume fit very well into this new theoretical framework and, when read together, highlight how new conceptual tools may offer a useful interpretative starting point for in-depth investigations.

On the one hand, relevant theoretical and methodological suggestions come from the ethnographic studies conducted in three upland communities (one in the Andes, one in North America, one in the Alps) by a multidisciplinary team led by the anthropologist Ben Orlove (Orlove et al., 2019). Their central notion of *frame*, in particular, appears to be highly effective in making sense of the divergent interpretations of the same scenario (in this case, the retreat of glaciers) that are often expressed by the actors inhabiting the highlands. Indeed, all the authors of this volume explore, albeit from different perspectives and points of view, how mountain dwellers interpret and frame their territory and the complex relationships that populate it. On the other hand, the recent "convivial turn" pivoted upon the conceptual pair conviviality/coexistence (Samanani, 2023) draws attention to the complex and heterogeneous processes that are changing the social and cultural landscape of many mountain communities. The delicate relationships between different categories of inhabitants are a common thread that guides the reader through the various chapters, which provide ethnographic accounts of a variety of situations in which friction, mere coexistence or, rather, attempts at conviviality can be detected.

The discussion that this volume aims to develop further has been inspired by a panel organized by the editors at the international congress of SIEF – International Society for Ethnology and Folklore, hosted at Masaryk University in Brno, Czech Republic, in 2023. Some of the authors of the chapters, together with other colleagues, took part in that panel. The conference was a starting point for stimulating dialogue and multifaceted reflections on the certainties and uncertainties faced by mountain communities, which led to the writing of the present volume.

Its chapters focus on the complexity of processes of change, pointing out different strategies and attitudes people adopt to cope with, resist, adapt to,

interpret, and frame ecological, socio-economic, and political transformations in mountain communities and territories. They propose several cases, especially from Europe, looking at the Alps but also at the Apennines, the Carpathians, the Laboreiro mountains in Northern Portugal, the Sardinian inner mountain area, and one from the Argentinean Andes in South America. All the chapters present empirical studies, informed by ethnographic research – even with auto-ethnographic insights (Cretton) – also when including (Boos & Salvucci; Maciel; Szabó) or even prioritizing (Branca & Lai) a historical perspective on change. Many of them propose a comparative approach, for instance between the Alps and the Apennines (Whitaker & Dall'Ò), the Italian, French, and Swiss Alps (Orlandi et al.), villages in the neighboring Italian Alpine regions of Piedmont and Aosta Valley (Bonato & Zanini), or different villages of the historical regions of Barbagia and inner Nuoro in the mountains of Sardinia (Branca & Lai).

Many of the chapters address the effects of climate change and environmental crisis in mountain regions, dealing with the emotional and symbolic reactions to the retreat of glaciers in the Swiss Alps (Cretton) or investigating perceptions and worries of local people, such as smallholder farmers, beekeepers, and hunters, but also entrepreneurs in the sector of tourism and winter sports, facing rising temperatures and the current lack of snow in winter (Whitaker & Dall'Ò). They scrutinize local expectations and social desires regarding new politics and trends toward environmental sustainability and ecological transition (Orlandi et al.) or analyze negotiations and conflicts about uses and misuses of natural resources for production (i. e., agriculture, hunting, and herding) and tourism development in both Europe (Bonato & Zanini; Branca & Lai; Maciel; Szabó) and South America (Boos & Salvucci).

Along with climate change, in fact, controversies related to tourism development in mountain areas are clearly one of the main topics of this volume, since all the chapters deal with it in one way or another. Cretton, as well as Whitaker and Dall'Ò, highlight the relevance of tourism for local economies and how concerned people are about the risk of tourism decline due to climate change. Bonato and Zanini, Orlandi et al., and Szabó underscore potential conflicts and divergencies in expectations connected to tourism management within diverse mountain communities in the Alps and the Carpathians. Maciel stresses possible ambiguities of tourism development and herit-

age-making in relation to the quest for authenticity and identity construction in a mountain village in Northern Portugal that has faced intensive emigration and depopulation processes. For their part, Boos and Salvucci underline how tourism can be perceived by local people and indigenous communities as a possible alternative to extractivism and new mining projects supported by regional governments and multinational corporations in an Andean village in Northwestern Argentina. Hopes and desires of a better future are, indeed, often associated with tourism in the frame of politics of territorial development and heritage-making (Branca & Lai; Maciel), which are often viewed as possible measures to contrast demographic and economic decline of mountain communities (see also Bonato & Zanini; Branca & Lai).

The focus on emotionality is another common thread that connects many of the chapters. Whitaker and Dall'Ò report on the feelings of uncertainty and worry expressed by the interviewees; Orlandi et al. investigate different imaginations of a suitable ecological transition; and Szabó, Bonato and Zanini and Boos and Salvucci pay attention to the diverse and contrasting social desires about the future within mountain communities. Social desires are scrutinized through a study of intimate representations and memories, such as in the case of Maciel's essay, or from theoretical and methodological perspectives that refer to the interdisciplinary field of montology, in the instance of Branca and Lai's project, or to the social-ecological system (SES) approach, in the case of Szabó's chapter. In Cretton's text, intimacy is the very methodological frame within which the author studies relations between people and glaciers through sensory ethnography.

As in Cretton's contribution, other chapters deal with relations between humans and nonhumans or other-than-humans. Beside the glaciers in Cretton's study, Whitaker and Dall'Ò describe the relation between humans and bees and Bonato and Zanini refer to the relation between deers and humans, whereas in Boos and Salvucci's piece the Pachamama-Mother Earth – a powerful more-than-human being, conceived of as the all-encompassing environment by local people – is described as taking part in a cosmopolitical arena that includes indigenous communities, ecological activists, researchers, and tourists. The volume starts with the presentation of rituals of mourning for the retreat of glaciers in Switzerland and comes full circle by ending with an ethnographic account of a ritual offering to the Pachamama organized by

indigenous communities in Northwestern Andean Argentina (Boos & Salvucci).

Although the volume is primarily intended for both experts in sociocultural mountain studies (academics, researchers) and students enrolled in courses in anthropology, geography, sociology and demography, political ecology, and history, we hope that it will prove useful also to a broader readership of people interested in upland societies and cultures and their present and future. The innovative value of the volume consists, we believe, in the fact that it collects ethnographic and empirical studies that all focus on the multi-crisis of our time (socio-economic, political, and ecological) and aim at highlighting the complexity of transformations in relation to climate change, social desires, and processes of tourism development in mountain areas. By presenting specific cases but also fostering a more comprehensive comparative perspective, the volume connects Central, Western, and Eastern Europe to the Mediterranean area, as well as to America, thereby aptly fitting into the comparative and multidisciplinary theoretical framework which has been effectively defined by Fausto Sarmiento (2020) as "montology". Finally, it is worth mentioning that it adds a new contribution to the bu,press' set of publications about mountains that already has featured titles such as *Cultures in Mountain Areas: Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Boos and Salvucci (2022), *Malinowski and the Alps – Anthropological and Historical Perspectives*, edited by Tauber and Zinn (2023), and *New Horizons for the Alps – Ethnographies, Reshaping Challenges, and Emerging More-Than-Alpine Relations*, edited by Schneider and Tauber (2024).

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“Much More Than Ice Blocks”. Exploring the New Intimacy of Human-Glacier Relationships in the Swiss Alps

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Abstract

This chapter explores the concept of *Glacial Intimacy* to examine the evolving relationships between humans and glaciers in the Swiss Alps, particularly in the canton of Valais. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and using a multi-sensory methodology, the study reveals how glaciers are more than geophysical entities; they are dynamic actors in local cultural practices, memories, and activism. By focusing on both local residents and urban climate activists, the chapter uncovers a complex interplay between personal attachments to glaciers and broader global narratives of climate change. Understanding these human-glacier relationships also sheds light on how mountain villagers are adapting and transforming in response to environmental and social shifts. Through ceremonies, rituals, funerals and everyday interactions, glaciers are seen as more-than-human beings that shape and are shaped by human experiences. The concept of Glacial Intimacy highlights the interconnectedness of these icy landscapes with belonging, memory, and the Anthropocene, urging a reconsideration of how glaciers are engaged with in both local and global contexts.

Introduction

This chapter argues that Swiss glaciers are not just geophysical formations but active participants in shaping local identities, memories, and environmental concerns. Through the concept of *Glacial Intimacy*, this study explores how

physical and emotional human relationships with glaciers are intertwined with communal practices, local livelihoods, and global environmental activism, especially within the context of glaciers' increasing disappearance due to the Anthropocene. Understanding human relationships with glaciers offers valuable insights into the broader changes and adaptations occurring in mountain communities, both in Europe and worldwide.

Glaciers are often perceived through varying lenses – for instance, some see them as symbols of climate change, while others regard them as integral parts of their environment and community. This chapter delves into human-glacier relationships focusing particularly on the canton of Valais, in Switzerland, where local inhabitants and climate activists engage with the glaciers in contrasting and sometimes overlapping ways. Through ethnographic accounts and theoretical reflections, collected and collated over the last four years, I explore how these interactions are shifting, especially in the face of accelerating glacial retreat.

My interest in the topic was sparked on Sunday September the 6th, 2020, when several citizen and climate activist groups from across Switzerland gathered to pay tribute to the Trient Glacier. This event was significant on a personal level, resonating with my own long-standing relationship with the Trient Glacier, and my positionality as an anthropologist allowed me to critically observe the intersections of personal memory, activism, and community rituals. The commemorative ceremony was supported by the Swiss Climate Alliance (which brings together 150 associations from several sectors of society) and Christian aid organizations, and Swiss scientist Jacques Dubochet, winner of the 2017 Nobel Prize in Chemistry was present, among other speakers. Notably, a Catholic priest recited a prayer for the Earth, borrowed from Pope Francis. Seeing this blend of activists, scientists, and Christians profoundly resonated with me. Maybe it was because the Trient Glacier, which is near my home in Valais, has been part of my life since childhood. I remember wondering, with an almost protective attitude, who these people who came to pay tribute to the glacier from outside the canton were. Why was a catholic priest here? Have such glacier commemorations ever taken place in the past? Were the residents of Trient (the small village of 170 inhabitants at the foot of the glacier that bears its name) involved in this event? I later discovered that the organizations behind this commemoration were two aid foundations, one

Catholic and one Protestant, aiming to raise awareness about climate justice in the global South. This tribute to Trient glacier was the second in a series of four glacier ceremonies held in Switzerland between 2019 and 2023.

As I dived deeper into the motivations behind these gatherings, it became clear that urban climate activists[1], driven by broader concerns of environmental collapse, view glaciers differently than the local inhabitants who experience them as part of their daily lives. This distinction between local inhabitants and activists highlights the variety of meanings that glaciers hold, and illustrates a tension between personal, lived experiences and broader global narratives of environmental crisis. By contrasting both perspectives, this chapter reveals the complex and multi-layered ways in which glaciers are perceived and engaged with. Interviews with Trient community members tell of a deep attachment to the glaciers that transcends scientific or environmental concerns. For these residents, the glacier is not an abstraction but a tangible part of daily life – a source of water, a marker of seasonal change, and a key element of local lifeworlds. Glaciers are more than just ice; they shape the practices, memories, and sense of belonging of those who have lived alongside them for generations. Conversely, for urban activists, glaciers stand as powerful manifestations of what is at stake in the fight against climate change.

Combining the initial observation I made at the Trient gathering with other tributes, I aim to analyze how different perceptions of glaciers – whether as sacred, economic assets, or reminders of climate collapse – reflect a diversity of human-glacier relationships that transcend simple categorizations. These diverse perceptions, often highlighted in commemorative ceremonies, embody the intersection of activism, spirituality, and science. Thus, they illustrate the complexity of the climate crisis and its deeply personal, ethical, and existential impacts on societies worldwide. To capture these intricate dynamics, I introduce the concept of Glacial Intimacy, which encapsulates the complex, more-than-human relationships that individuals, ecosystems, and communities share with glaciers. This concept emphasizes how glaciers as more-than-human entities shape human experiences, identities, and practices, while simultaneously being influenced by human actions, emotions, and global forces such as climate change.

1 The members of climate activist associations met during this research are all based in urban areas.

A Bricolage Methodology

The exploratory research presented in this chapter is based on a combination of ethnographic methods, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, and analysis of relevant documentation. This bricolage approach, which pieces together diverse forms of data, aims to capture the multi-layered and evolving relationships between humans and glaciers in the Valais region. Additionally, this research was informed by a multi-sensory methodology that allowed for a deeper understanding of how glaciers are experienced and perceived through the senses, emotions, and embodied practices. This approach draws on the work of scholars such as David Howes (1991), Paul Stoller (1997), and Sarah Pink (2015), who emphasize the importance of engaging in anthropological fieldwork with all sensory dimensions: sight, sound, touch, smell, and even taste. It also incorporates some insights from the work of Carey et al. (2016), who call for a framework in feminist glaciology that emphasizes the need for diverse and inclusive narratives, thereby integrating the emotional and cultural significance of glaciers for communities into our analysis, much like the experiences of Trient's inhabitants.

A series of formal ethnographic interviews[2] were conducted with a dozen local inhabitants of Trient village (the youngest was 20 and the eldest 73 at the time of the interviews), and with Gaëtan[3], the person in charge of the Climate Justice project in one of the two foundations that organized the demonstrations at the foot of the glaciers in Switzerland. In addition, several informal conversations with other stakeholders involved with the glaciers took place during walks and travels. These interviews offered insights into the personal and emotional significance of glaciers for those living near them, while also clarified the motivations behind the activists' tributes to glaciers. The formal interviews were semi-structured, thereby enabling participants to share their experiences and perceptions in an open-ended manner. Moreover, a walking day and outdoor round table organized at the foot of the Trient Glacier in Sep-

2 I warmly thank Jean-Charles Fellay, from the Regional Centre for the Study of Alpine Populations (CREPA) in Valais, a keen expert of the region and its inhabitants, who conducted these interviews with me. The presence of two interlocutors not only diversified the perspectives but also encouraged deeper reflections from the participants, creating a more interactive and layered dialogue.

3 All the names of the interviewees have been changed.

tember 2024[4] provided an opportunity for further reflection with various participants, including the Trient glacier mountain hut warden, a guide, students, and members of the public. This walking ethnography, inspired by Pink's (2015) ideas around sensory ethnography, created a space to engage directly with the landscape through movement and sensory perception (Ingold, 2000), which allowed participants to connect with the glacier through sight, smell, and sound. Howes (1991) and Stoller (1997) argue that anthropology must go beyond intellectual observation to include the sensuous aspects of subject study. In this research, touching, hearing, smelling and visual experiences played a role in how locals and visitors perceived the glacier as an active participant in their lives.

Of the four glacier demonstrations held in Switzerland between 2019 and 2023[5], I participated in the last one, at the foot of the Morteratsch Glacier in Les Grisons canton, in May 2023. This immersive experience, where participants engaged not only intellectually but sensorially and emotionally, was useful for capturing the embodied dimensions of human-glacier interactions. Echoing Ingold's "dwelling perspective" (2000), which emphasizes that human experience and knowledge of the environment are shaped through active, sensory engagement with it, this concept can be extended to glaciers as part of a landscape that is not passively observed but actively lived with and experienced. At Morteratsch, for instance, a pastor from the Philippines spoke, linking climate change in his country to Switzerland and urging Swiss citizens to act. A glaciologist emphasized the urgency of the situation and the possibility of mitigating it through environmental behavior change. A representative of the Protestant churches in the Grisons addressed the crowd in Romansh (one of the four Swiss national languages), reinforcing the pastor's and glaciologist's messages while highlighting the importance of creation in Christian philosophy. The commemoration also featured traditional Swiss elements, such as the Alpine horn played by three performers (two females and one male) in folkloric costumes. The speakers stood on a large rock, which served as a platform for the official part of the ceremony. Although the glacier itself

4 In collaboration with the collective « Glaciers Ardents » and the CREPA (Regional Center for the Study of Alpine Populations) whom I warmly thank.

5 Activists distinguish between 'funerals' for glaciers that glaciologists no longer consider glaciers, and 'commemorations' for glaciers that, from a scientific standpoint, are not yet deemed gone.

could not be clearly seen, one could half make out its presence in the distance, blending into the grey sky. The rugged landscape and the somber atmosphere underscored the retreat of the Morteratsch Glacier, which was the focus of the gathering (see Figure 1). Approximately 200 people participated in the event, walking through the valley left by the retreating glacier.

Figure 1 – Tribute ceremony for the Morteratsch Glacier, held at its foot on May 20, 2023. Copyright by Viviane Cretton.

The Grisons ceremony, held at Morteratsch in the Romansh-speaking region, followed a model similar to those at Pizol in the German-speaking region, Trient in the French-speaking region, and Basodino in the Italian-speaking region – each representing one of Switzerland's four linguistic regions. These events typically included a glaciologist to provide a scientific and embodied perspective, a representative from the Global South to highlight the far-reaching impacts of climate change, and a local religious figure to offer a spiritual dimension to the issues discussed. The four commemorative events consistently aligned with key political events in Switzerland, such as parliamentary

debates, elections, or referendums. For example, the Morteratsch ceremony was held just before a popular vote on June 18, 2023, regarding the Climate Act, a key measure aimed at achieving Switzerland's climate neutrality by 2050. The march at the foot of the glacier became an opportunity for participants to express their support for the vote, many carrying flags in favor of the initiative (see Figure 2).

Figure 2 – On May 20, 2023, the Morteratsch ceremony took place just ahead of the June 18,2023, popular vote on the Climate Act – a key measure aimed at achieving Switzerland's climate neutrality by 2050. The event provided an opportunity for participants to emphasize the importance of this vote. Copyright by Viviane Cretton.

Although I did not attend the earlier ceremonies, I reconstructed the funeral for the Pizol Glacier in 2019 (see Ats, 2019; Bilodeau; Jaquet & AFP, 2019; La rédaction de TF1Info, 2019; Vincent & AFP, 2019); RTS Play (2019) and the commemorative tributes for the Basodino (see Maillard Ardenti, 2021) and Trient Glaciers (see Ats, 2020; Dorsaz, 2020; Felley, 2020; Zbinden, 2020) through media coverage, telephone interviews with organizers, and participant testimonies. I supplemented this material with a targeted press review, paying

special attention to the language and images used in reports on glacier funerals (Maillé, 2021; Ouest France, 2019). Finally, my personal memories of the glacier from childhood played an important role in shaping my understanding of these events and the broader human-glacier relationship.

Touching the Glacier

I remember touching the Trient Glacier during Sunday walks with my father and brother as a child in the 1970s – an experience that has since become impossible due to the glacier's retreat. This memory of touching the glacier – feeling the cold, textured ice, observing how it shifted between smooth and rough surfaces, and playing with melting droplets – was a common experience for my generation.

This practice of physically engaging with the glacier resonates with Classen's (2012) exploration of how the sense of touch shapes human relationships with the natural world. Touching the glacier was not just a literal act. To go and touch the glacier was a way of expressing our closeness to it, both physically (it was easily accessible on foot, and we could touch it) and sensorially (its cold, hard texture was special, and some of us relished the sensation of touching it). This sensory interaction allowed people to experience the glacier in a deeply embodied way, connecting them to the landscape both physically and emotionally. This echoes Gagné's work (2024) when she describes glaciers as "vital bodies", emphasizing how human encounters with ice are sensory, emotional, and deeply relational; in alignment with the multi-sensory approach used in this study.

In 2025, the glacier's significant retreat – over 1,000 meters in the last 30 years – has made this experience impossible, transforming it into a distant memory for those who grew up with it (Figure 3). The loss of this physical connection highlights not only the glacier's disappearance but also the disconnection some of us now feel, both from the landscape and from a part of our past. This echoes the themes of nostalgia and loss described in Stoller's (1997) work on sensuous scholarship, which reminds us of how climate change alters not just landscapes, but the ways in which we relate to and experience the natural world.

Figure 3 – The Trient Glacier in August 2024. Copyright by Viviane Cretton.

The analysis I propose in this chapter also draws on existing documentation, including historical records, scientific reports, and cultural texts. These sources provide a broader context for understanding how human-glacier relationships have evolved over time and how they are framed within both local and global discourses. My thinking has solidified through an iterative process of engaging with empirical data, texts, and their meanings. Like the bricolage methodology discussed earlier, this approach required time, patience, and attention, along with a constant effort to balance personal experience with broader analytical perspectives – a process of both centring and decentring. When personal experiences resonate with urgent global issues, it can be uncomfortable to confront one’s lived realities within the framework of anthropological discourse.

With these methodological foundations in place, we can now turn to the literature on how glaciers are perceived and engaged with, starting with their role as sites of mourning and loss.

Glaciers as Sites of Mourning and Loss

Mourning for glaciers has recently become a mediatised practice in several parts of the world, including Switzerland. In September 2019, the Pizol glacier in the Swiss canton of Saint-Gall was the subject of a funeral-style ceremony to mark its death, as it had melted to the point where it no longer qualified as a glacier from a scientific perspective. Hundreds of people, many dressed in mourning attire, gathered to bid farewell to what was once a majestic natural entity. A wreath of flowers was laid, but unlike in Iceland, where a commemorative plaque was installed for the Okjökull glacier in August 2019 (L'avenir, 2019; Bayce, 2019), no permanent memorial was left at Pizol.

These public ceremonies are designed to raise awareness about climate change. Media reports frequently cover glacier funerals, reflecting a deep sense of loss and highlighting the irreversible trajectory we are on (see LCI, 2019; Bilodeau, 2019; Vincent & AFP, 2019; Ats, 2019; Jaquet & AFP, 2019; AFP, 2019). The discourse mourns not only glaciers but also the ecosystems and communities that depend on them. Combining scientific data, public mourning, and calls for policy change, glaciers are presented not just as environmental phenomena but as a powerful embodiment of the Anthropocene.

These farewell ceremonies, usually reserved for humans, reveal that glaciers hold a deep spiritual and cultural significance for many communities worldwide. In the Peruvian Andes, the Himalayas, and parts of China, glaciers are revered as sacred spaces and are often seen as the places where deities dwell (Allison, 2015). The Tlingit and Tagish peoples in the circumpolar north, for example, regard glaciers as sentient beings that require ritualistic respect (Cruikshank, 2005, 2012; Hayman et al., 2021). Similarly, in the Himalayas, glaciers are viewed as cultural landmarks and sacred entities, with their disappearance carrying significant emotional weight for local communities (Gagné, 2018). The retreat of glaciers thus represents, not only environmental loss, but also cultural and spiritual erosion, affecting both human communities and the animals that rely on these ecosystems. Gagné's work also highlights the economic implications of glacier retreat, showing how it impacts water resources, agriculture, and herding practices that depend on meltwater.

These perspectives offer alternative ontologies that challenge the Western scientific approach, but Western ontologies themselves are being reshaped by the

vanishing of glaciers. In Austria, for instance, Nöbauer (2022) discusses profound changes in the ways glaciers are perceived as they retreat. Historically viewed as awe-inspiring and dangerous, glaciers in Alpine regions were once seen as more-than-human entities with their own agency. As they melt away, this interdependent relationship is now giving way to a sense of irreversible loss. Nöbauer (2022) also explores the dependence of Austrian ski resorts on glaciers, illustrating how human activities are deeply entangled with glacial environments and how this relationship is being reevaluated in the face of climate change. Similarly, Chamel (2023a) investigates emerging "animistic" relationships with glaciers in the French Alps, where both locals and scientists are developing new modes of engagement, treating glaciers as living entities that require care. As O'Reilly (2016) highlights, sensory engagement with glaciers is not exclusive to local communities. It also extends to glaciologists, whose intimate scientific work bridges empirical knowledge and personal, sensory experience. Drawing on Philippe Descola's notion of relational ontology (2005), which challenges the traditional Western divide between nature and culture, Chamel (2023a) suggests that even within a Western, naturalistic context, glaciers are increasingly seen as possessing agency and relationality. As we see, the disappearance of glaciers extends far beyond environmental degradation, encompassing cultural, spiritual, economic, and geopolitical dimensions. The retreat of glaciers is not merely an ecological issue but one that deeply affects the underlying social and cultural fabric of the communities connected to these landscapes.

Reversing the Ritual

These communal shifts are evident not only in recent glacier funerals but also in rituals that evolved in response to glacial retreat in the past. Processions and prayers to glaciers are nothing new in Valais, and in Switzerland more broadly. According to local annals, in the 18th century, villagers near the Trient Glacier organized processions to the Orny oratory (Orny is a glacier next to the Trient Glacier) to petition the Lord for good weather during harvest season. Special processions were also held during times of drought to ask for rain (Melly, 1937). In the German-speaking part of Valais, since 1678, the Aletsch Glacier has been feared and prayed about by the people of the valley during

religious processions, to ensure that its advance and the devastating floods it caused each year would be contained. The Catholics of Fiesch, a village near the Aletsch Glacier, even took an oath to end this scourge, with the support of Pope Innocent XI. Since the 1980s, however, the glacier has been retreating, and now people appeal to God to help combat global warming and the subsequent melting of the glacier. The villagers made a special request to Pope Benedict XVI to reverse their prayer. In 2010, he granted permission to amend the "oath of disasters," allowing their prayers to address the issues of global warming, climate change, and glacier melt (see Apic, 2010,; Keystone-Ats, 2012; Blanchoud, 2010). These reversed prayers are well known to glaciologists, who often remark that in the past, people prayed for glaciers to stop advancing, whereas today, they pray for them to stop melting.

This type of glacier ritual reversal is also found in the Peruvian Andes (see Allison, 2015). The Quechua people who live near the declining glacier of Mount Ausangate traditionally cut large blocks of ice from the glacier and brought them down the mountain to share with family, friends, and livestock as part of the pilgrimage. The glacier ice is said to have magical healing properties, ensuring fertility on family farms, restoring health, and strengthening babies. In recent years, concerns over the glacier's retreat have led to changes in local custom: the ice is not to be removed, and guards are stationed at the glacier's edge to prevent anyone from taking pieces away. In 2003, strict regulations were put in place to enforce this.

Glaciers thus occupy a complex place in the human imagination. These examples show that glacial retreat is not simply a material process but has important implications for how local people understand themselves and make sense of their environment (Allison, 2015, p. 494). Indeed, major landscape changes affect the internal processes that shape human subjectivity and meaning-making (Allison, 2015, p. 501).

Glaciers as Instruments of Activism

Glaciers hold profound personal and spiritual significance for those who live near them but for many urban activists and organizations, who may not share such a close physical proximity, they also serve as powerful tools for political and environmental action. In recent years, glacier commemorations in Swit-

zerland have increasingly become sites of activism, with political agendas and environmental campaigns woven into the ceremonies. What distinguishes these recent glacier commemorations from past spiritual or religious rituals is the explicit focus on climate justice and political action. In Switzerland, the collaboration between Christian aid associations working on climate justice for countries in the Global South and various organizations addressing climate issues within Switzerland has added a new dimension to these events.
For instance, about the commemoration at the Morteratsch Glacier in May 2023, as the event was closely tied to the popular vote on the Climate Act, one of the organizers, Gaëtan, candidly acknowledged the political undertone of the event, saying: "We're a bit like urban activists invading a mountain region. In a way, we're instrumentalizing glaciers, which haven't asked us for anything, for political purposes" (interview, 28 April, 2023). This reveals a significant shift in how glaciers are framed in these events: no longer just as sacred or natural entities, but as entities leveraged to raise awareness about the pressing climate crisis. While these ceremonies may resonate with activists and environmental groups, the way glaciers are mobilized for political purposes diverges sharply with the deeper, more personal attachments that local residents have to these icy landscapes. For urban activists, glaciers serve primarily as powerful revelations of environmental degradation and climate collapse. The political nature of these events often distances them from the lived realities of local communities, who see glaciers as more than just indicators of a broader global crisis. For many local communities, glacier loss is deeply personal – embedded in memories, histories, and livelihoods. This divide between local and activist perspectives illustrates the complexity of human-glacier relationships, where glaciers embody different meanings depending on proximity and experience. This difference between local inhabitants and activist perspectives leads us to a broader reflection on glaciers as markers of the Anthropocene: glaciers, as emblems of climate change, are at the heart of contested narratives in this epoch.

Melting Glaciers, Emblematic Embodiment of the Anthropocene

Orlove et al. (2019) present the Anthropocene as a period in which glaciers are seen as icons of climate change, revealing their vulnerability to human-induced environmental shifts, particularly global warming. However, this concept of the Anthropocene is increasingly contested by social scientists. Drew and Denzin Gergan (2024), for example, explore divergent perspectives on the future of Himalayan glaciers. They argue that the Anthropocene should not be seen solely as a geological concept but as a politically charged reality that encompasses multiple scales of interaction, emotion, and power. Their critique calls for a decolonization of the Anthropocene, emphasizing the recognition of more-than-human agencies and the importance of emotional responses to environmental crises. Similarly, Gagné and Drew (2024) critique the Anthropocene's human-centric narrative, which centers human impact on the planet. They question whether this framework adequately accounts for the agencies of non-human actors, such as glaciers, animals, and ecosystems, in shaping Earth's systems. The retreat of glaciers, for example, is not only a consequence of human-induced climate change but also part of a complex web of relationships involving animals, plants, and local ecosystems. This reimagining of the Anthropocene suggests that addressing environmental challenges requires not only confronting human actions but also acknowledging the intricate interdependencies between humans, non-human species, and geophysical entities like glaciers.

Literature and empirical narratives highlight that glaciers are not merely seen as blocks of ice: they act as embodiments of both collective memory and climate change for many communities around the world. This perspective underscores the deep interconnectedness between humans and their environment, where glaciers' retreat forces livelihoods and ways of life to evolve. Indeed, glacier funerals reveal more-than-human connections, showing that glaciers are part of a broader web of interactions between human and non-human actors. They influence ecosystems and human lives by shaping weather patterns, water supplies, agriculture, and local economies. Simultaneously, they serve as a form of public engagement, drawing attention to climate change through ceremonial actions that mobilize communities. These entanglements suggest

that glaciers are not passive entities but active participants in the climate drama, both influenced by and influencing human actions.

Building on this foundation, I now turn to a closer analysis of how the concept of Glacial Intimacy unfolds in the everyday lives of local inhabitants and activists alike. Through ethnographic accounts, I will explore how personal, communal, and political engagements with glaciers reveal complex, intimate relationships – starting with local narratives and the personification of glaciers.

Glacial Intimacy: The Mood of the Glacier and Local Narratives

The Trient Glacier, like glaciers in the Himalayas, Canada, and the Andes, is more than a physical entity – it is seen as a living being that reflects emotions and moods. Charlotte, a 20-year-old high-school girl and Trient resident, describes how locals refer to the glacier as “sad” due to its rapid melting and retreat (interview, 10 May, 2023). What once was at a 15-minute walk distance from the hut café is now over than 2 hours’ hike away, and the glacier itself is largely inaccessible due to safety concerns. This shift represents not just a physical loss, but an emotional one, especially for older residents who remember when the glacier was a part of daily life. That is unfortunately not the case for Charlotte who is too young (“I never had the chance to go on the glacier or touch it”), unlike her father, 51 years old : “When he was a child, it took him five minutes on foot [from the refreshment stand] to go and touch the glacier” (interview, 10 May, 2023).

In Gagné’s (2018) ethnography from Ladakh, glaciers are similarly viewed as emotional beings, with clear skies signalling happiness and cloudy skies indicating anger. In Trient, the glacier’s changing color, from white to brown-grey, reflects its deterioration. Philippe, a teacher and member of the Trient municipal council notes the emotional impact of these changes: “It’s a joy to see these white glaciers full of snow. But to see it diminish, of course, gives you the blues” (interview, 17 June, 2023). Even bad weather, which would typically be unwelcome, is now celebrated by locals if it benefits the glacier. He explains: “We’re happy if it’s bad weather for a month because it’s good for the glacier” (interview, 17 June, 2023).

Local Narratives and Glacial Personification

In Trient, the glacier is personified and described as a “neighbor” who has witnessed generations of families grow. This anthropomorphism reflects a deeper emotional intimacy with the glacier, as local stories emphasize its presence as more than just ice. Jacques, head of operations at the hydroelectric plant in the neighboring commune, was introduced to me by several residents as the local historian of Trient. He explains that the Glacier, in a way, played a significant role in saving the valley, first through ice harvesting[6] and later through water capture by the national railway company[7]. He also describes how the glacier’s seasonal melt influenced agricultural practices and community life. For the residents, the glacier’s rhythms dictated the timing of crops and provided a protective water source during dry periods (interview, 9 May, 2023). Similarly, in Canada, elderly native women describe glaciers as sentient beings that react to human activity (Cruikshank, 2012). In Trient, stories of the glacier advancing and retreating over centuries are part of local history. Odette, aged 75, wonders if the glacier might one day advance again, just as elders in the past had observed (interview, 9 May, 2023).

The Glacier as More Than Ice

For the people of Trient, the glacier is more than a physical entity – it is a living presence intertwined with existence, cultural heritage, and environmental change. Luc, 70 years old, local councillor and beehive owner, recalls how easily the glacier could be reached during his childhood, and he remembers its distinctive shape, the *patte d’ours* (bear’s paw), which fascinated him as a child: “I can still see the bear paw and the water flowing out from under this kind of blue cavern, it was magical, I would say – the black glacier and the blue underneath – we didn’t understand why the ice was blue…” (interview,

6 The Trient Glacier was industrially exploited beginning in 1865. By the late 1880s, 10 to 15 large carts would depart daily from the Col de la Forclaz during the summer, transporting between 20 to 30 tons of ice blocks by road to Martigny. From there, one train per week would deliver the ice to major French cities such as Paris, Lyon, and Marseille. However, the invention of machines for artificial ice production caused the collapse of this glacier-based industry in 1893.

7 Since 1928, the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB/CFF) have been utilizing the water from Trient (via the Vernayaz hydroelectric plants) to provide hydroelectric power for French-speaking Switzerland and the canton of Valais.

15 May, 2023). Each inhabitant of Trient interviewed mentioned the Tine, a pocket of water that forms on the glacier during summer. It is said to burst with a tremendous detonation between July 15 and August 15. The water then disappears beneath the glacier, swelling the Trient torrent for 2 to 3 days. These floods can be significant, and in 1960, they were devastating, destroying several bridges and roads. Luc remembers:

> And there was this smell, that's what I remember, this smell of earth – it was cold, the water was freezing, and it felt like it came from the bowels of the earth. But you don't get that smell during floods like that. It was dark brown, the water was turbulent, and it was carrying rocks (interview, 15 May, 2023)

Nowadays, the Tine has become a rare occurrence. But as in Luc's deeply rooted memories, it left a strong impression on the eldest who experienced it as children. These memories now contrast with the barren rocks left behind by the retreating glacier.

The glacier's retreat has also had practical consequences. Patrick, a glassblower and one of the 4 people in charge of the Trient bisse, explains how changes in glacial meltwater have disrupted local water management, while the increased frequency of rockfalls and avalanches has created new dangers (interview, 10 May, 2023). Alicia, a farmer and Trient local councillor, describes how shrinking water supplies have affected agriculture and animal husbandry in the region (interview, 15 May, 2023). For residents like Elise – who ran the glacier refreshment stand for 40 years – the glacier is closely tied to family traditions and community events, and its loss represents the fading of both personal and collective memories (interview, 22 June, 2023).

The glacier's role in tourism has also shifted. Odette – who ran the village bistro in Trient from 1970 to 2013[8] – recounts how the glacier once drew visitors who could easily engage with it, but now, according to her, as the glacier recedes, the village's relationship to it has changed (interview, 9 May, 2023). In her words, what was once a key part of the village's identity has become increasingly distant, both physically and emotionally. This shift reflects the broader societal impacts of glacial retreat explored in research by Orlove et al. (2019) and Clivaz and Savioz (2020), which highlight the economic and cultur-

8 The village bistro no longer exists today.

al challenges faced by Alpine communities that rely on glaciers for both tourism and water resources. These studies introduce the concept of “cognitive dissonance” into this context, describing the tension between acknowledging the effects of climate change and the economic dependence on glacial landscapes. In Trient, this dissonance is evident as the community must reconcile the glacier’s visible retreat with its historical role as a vital component of both local life and tourism income.

For some, the glacier incarnates more than memories or practical resources – it holds a sacred place in the community. Alicia, 52 years old, describes it as “God, just after God,” and her son has even had the glacier tattooed on his arm, reflecting its lasting importance to their family (interview, 15 May, 2023). As Alicia touchingly shared during a walking day round table in Trient in September 2024: “Every resident of Trient has a little piece of the glacier in their heart.” This sentiment captures the deep emotional bond that the people of Trient have with the glacier, holding its enduring presence not only in the physical landscape but also in the hearts and memories of its inhabitants. As Gillespie (2017) explains in her work on human-animal relationships, empathy and intimacy often extend beyond the human world – an idea mirrored in how Trient locals engage emotionally with their glacier. For Alicia, this connection runs even deeper; her son has the glacier quite literally in his blood, with its image tattooed on his skin, permanently engraved as a marker of deep-rooted ties and heritage (see Figure 4). This tattoo, a powerful symbol of his attachment, reflects the unique way in which the glacier becomes a part of local belonging, transcending mere physical presence to shape both personal and communal connections to the place. For the people of Trient, the glacier is not just something they see or interact with; it is something they feel – emotionally and even spiritually. It is a part of their past, present, and future, woven into the fabric of their everyday lives, as Alicia’s words so eloquently convey.

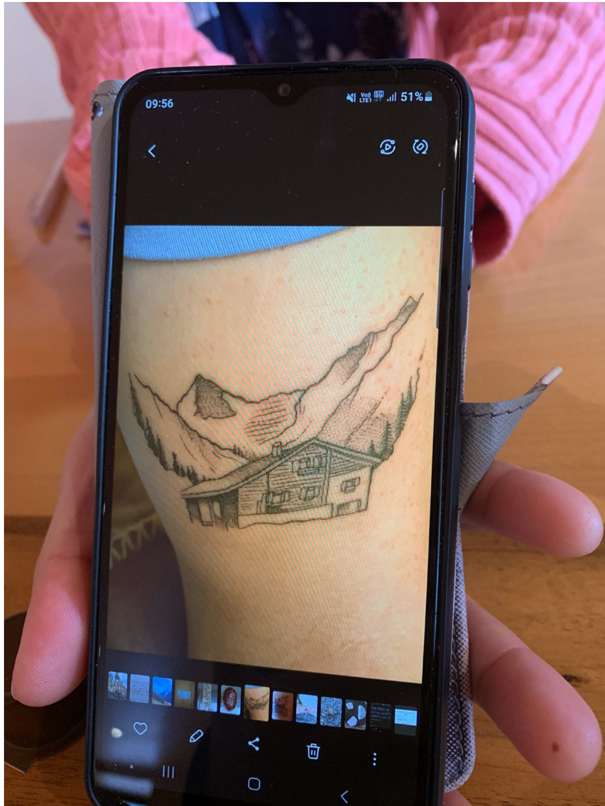

Figure 4 – After the interview, Alicia showed us the tattoo her son envisioned and got on his arm: it depicts the Trient Glacier in the background behind their house. Copyright 2023 by Viviane Cretton.

A Political Perspective: Urban Climate Activists and Glacier Commemorations

Interviews with the organizers of glacier commemorations and urban climate activists introduce an alternative perspective on glaciers, one that highlights the difference with the more personal, locally-focused views of Trient's residents. For the organizers, the ceremonies are not simply about mourning the loss of natural landmarks; they are strategically tied to political actions, such as climate protection laws in Switzerland. As Gaëtan, the activist in charge

of climate justice for a Christian aid organisation, explains, “these commemorations are not just rituals of grief; they are designed to put pressure on decision-makers, to remind them that the time for action is now” (interview, 28 April, 2023). The glacier becomes a powerful emblem of climate justice, used to mobilize support for legislative change and raise public awareness.

Roots in Urban Activism and Local Concerns

The organizers also acknowledge the predominantly urban nature of the four Glaciers demonstrations in Switzerland, including the one in Trient. As one of them notes: “Many of the attendees are not from Trient or the surrounding areas. They are urban activists who come because they understand the larger implications of glacier loss – both for Switzerland and the world” (interview, 28 April, 2023). This stands in contrast to the views of the Trient locals, who have a long-standing, practical relationship with the glacier.

While Trient’s inhabitants tend to focus on the local importance of the glacier – its impact on water supply, tourism, and its communal and personal significance – the activists bring a global justice dimension into the conversation. They emphasize the disproportionate impact of climate change on the Global South, using the visual and tangible retreat of Swiss glaciers to draw attention to global inequalities. Gaëtan highlights this distinction: “What we see here in Switzerland is alarming, but it’s nothing compared to the devastation being felt in the Global South. Our glaciers are disappearing, but entire ecosystems and communities in other parts of the world are collapsing” (interview, 28 April, 2023). This global framing juxtaposes with the more locally grounded narratives of the Trient residents, who focus on the glacier’s immediate impact on their (small) community and landscape.

Despite these contrasting positions, no overt tensions or conflicts have emerged between the inhabitants of Trient and the activist groups, particularly those aligned with climate-conscious Christian movements. Although their paths occasionally intersect during symbolic, media-oriented public events, their agendas largely evolve in parallel. The activists’ presence in Trient was brief and aimed at raising public and political awareness on a global scale, while the villagers’ relationship to the glacier is rooted in lived experience, seasonal rhythms, and everyday concerns. Outside these encounters, the lim-

ited interaction between the two groups reflects not hostility, but rather the distinct temporalities, priorities, and registers through which each engages with environmental change.

This divergence becomes particularly visible in the commemorations organized by the activists, which express the spiritual and moral frameworks underpinning their engagement. These events, often marked by public performances and religious symbolism, contrast with the more pragmatic, grounded relationship Trient residents maintain with the glacier in their daily lives. Where the activists frame the glacier as an emblem of planetary crisis and loss, demanding immediate attention, the villagers relate to it through long-term patterns of coexistence, memory, and adaptation. Rather than a simple divergence of opinion or strategy, these differing engagements point to distinct environmental imaginaries – one oriented toward global ethical responsibility and mediated action, the other grounded in a slower, place-based ecology of care.

Ceremonial Mourning and Ongoing Local Adaption

Building on the symbolic and moral dimensions of their engagement, the organizers of the Glacier tributes incorporate a spiritual element into the commemorations, inviting priests and pastors to speak about the Christian responsibility to protect nature. These ceremonies reflect a belief in environmental stewardship, resonating with Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si*, which calls for an "ecological conversion" and emphasizes humanity's duty to care for the Earth as a shared home (Francis, 2015). As Gaëtan puts it, "Protecting the glaciers is not just an environmental obligation; it's a moral duty, a part of our responsibility as caretakers of creation" (interview, 28 April, 2023). This blends spiritual significance with a message of climate action, mirroring Pope Francis' call for a renewed sense of stewardship. The *Prayer for the Earth* in *Laudato Si* invites believers to reflect on the harm inflicted on the planet and seek forgiveness, a sentiment also found in the ceremonial mourning for glaciers, which draws attention to broader environmental degradation (Francis, 2019). This echoes Chamel's (2023b) exploration of eco-spirituality, which emphasizes the reconnection with Earth and other-than-human beings through rituals, aligning with a deeper ecological awareness. Whatever the case, al-

though some Trient locals, like Alicia, express a spiritual connection to the glacier – she describes it as “God, just after God” – this spiritual framing is not as central in their day-to-day relationship with it. For most residents, the glacier is seen more pragmatically, as a crucial element of their environment rather than primarily through a spiritual or symbolic lens.

The funeral-like ceremonies organized by the activists serve as a public awareness tool, distinguishing between full funerals (such as for the Pizol Glacier, which has completely disappeared) and commemorations (for glaciers like Trient, which are still retreating but have not yet vanished). As the organizer Gaëtan explains: “These ceremonies are meant to be symbolic, to wake people up, to show them that we’re not just losing ice – we’re losing our future” (interview, 28 April, 2023). However, this concept of glacial funerals is largely absent from the daily experiences of Trient locals, who do not organize such events themselves. For them, the glacier’s retreat is part of an ongoing, evolving relationship with their landscape. Their focus remains on the practical impacts of the glacier’s retreat, such as changes in water management, agriculture and tourism, rather than its emblematic or ceremonial significance.

In sum, the urban climate activists and organizers of glacier commemorations bring a strategic and activist lens, using the glacier as an icon of global climate justice and political mobilization. This differs from the more personal, intimate connections expressed by Trient’s inhabitants, who view the glacier as part of their daily lives, heritage, and belonging. Nevertheless, these two perspectives offer valuable insights into how glaciers are perceived but also highlight the different scales at which these relationships – local and global – are experienced and understood. The juxtaposition of local perspectives with activist frameworks allowed for a nuanced understanding of how glaciers shape human morality and global environmental concerns.

Conclusion: Local Intimacies, Global Connections

Throughout this chapter, I have explored some of the multifaceted relationships between humans and glaciers, from personal connections rooted in local communities, such as those in Trient, to the broader political and activist frameworks presented by urban climate organizers. These perspectives

– whether emotional, practical, or political – are united by a recognition that glaciers are not merely passive, natural features. Instead, they are dynamic participants in a more-than-human world, where humans and non-humans are intertwined in a shared existence.

The concept of Glacial Intimacy arises from this deep engagement, encapsulating the intricate, evolving relationships between humans and glaciers, while drawing on emotional, spiritual, and ethical dimensions. This idea is not just a theoretical outcome but also a reflection of the bricolage and multi-sensory methodology that guided this research. These approaches enabled the investigation of human-glacier relationships from several angles – merging interviews, personal experiences, emotional responses, and sensory engagements with the environment. By weaving together different types of knowledge, this methodology highlights the rich, layered complexity of human-glacier interactions.

Through touching, smelling, and feeling the glacier, the research captured how glaciers evoke profound feelings of nostalgia, reverence, and grief, but also resilience. These emotions were palpable in the interviews with locals, who spoke about the loss they felt as the glacier retreated, while coping with this changing reality in their daily lives. The methodology allowed the research to move beyond abstract descriptions and engage with the sensory and emotional realities of these relationships. The spiritual dimension of Glacial Intimacy was also revealed through the embodied experiences of glacier funerals and other rituals. The inclusion of spiritual leaders in these ceremonies, as observed in the urban activist commemorations, highlighted the sacred significance that glaciers hold for many. The multi-sensory aspect of these rituals – blending sight, sound, and touch – reflects a life-like understanding of glaciers as more-than-human beings, alive and requiring respect and care. This connection between glaciers and spirituality, as expressed by figures like Alicia, illustrates how glaciers are seen as active, revered participants in human life. This view connects to Shapero's (2017) explanation of glacier oracles in Peru, where glaciers are similarly personified and integrated into local spiritual and practical worlds.

In a time when glaciers are rapidly retreating, Glacial Intimacy challenges us to rethink the ways in which we engage with these entities. It invites us to recognize glaciers as intimate partners – shaping and being shaped not only by

human actions, emotions, and practices, but also by non-humans beings and forces. This intimacy, revealed through multi-sensory engagements and the layering of diverse knowledges, evolves as glaciers melt, landscapes change, and new generations form their own engagements with these more-than-human others. Notably, both urban activists and local inhabitants contribute to these evolving relationships, albeit in different ways. While urban climate activists approach glaciers through commemorations and rituals to raise awareness of broader global issues, local inhabitants engage with the glacier as part of their daily lives and cultural heritage. These parallel forms of engagement illustrate how Glacial Intimacy can bridge both activist movements and local practices, demonstrating that intimate connections with glaciers are formed not only through proximity but also through political and emotional acts of care.

The concept of Glacial Intimacy not only captures the sensitive and embodied significance of glaciers for local communities but also challenges dominant narratives of environmental crisis by emphasizing human-environment entanglements. This framework offers a new lens for understanding how landscapes under threat compel both personal adaptation and collective action, making glaciers central to discussions of climate change, human existence, and activism in the Anthropocene. Even as the glacier retreats and physically distances itself from the community, its presence in the hearts of the residents persists. This enduring connection reflects how the Trient Glacier, like many glaciers worldwide, is a visible embodiment of change – expressing not just the environmental shifts but also the collective and emotional reconfigurations that accompany such transformations. Its retreat compels the community to reflect on their role within a broader ecological and communal system, even as the glacier continues to serve as a reminder of the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world.

This research exploration modestly contributes to bridging the human-glacier connections found in the Western world with other ontologies that recognize the deep entanglement between humans and more-than-human entities. In Western contexts, where nature is often seen as an external force to be managed or observed, this study reveals how even within this ontology, intimate connections with more-than-human entities like glaciers are not only possible but thriving. These relationships, while perhaps less collective

and more individual than those found in Indigenous cosmologies, nonetheless challenge the dominant narrative of disconnection that characterizes the Western view of nature. By focusing on the sensory, emotional, and cultural dimensions of human-glacier engagements, this emerging study opens new avenues for thinking about how landscapes, even in Western societies, are woven into the construction of human subjectivity, memory, and belonging. It also suggests that the ontological divide between the West and other societies may not be as absolute as often presumed – for even in contexts where glaciers are seen primarily as natural phenomena, they are deeply embedded in the social and emotional fabric of human life.

Ultimately, Glacial Intimacy calls for a deeper, more reciprocal engagement with the more-than-human world. The experience of Trient, though deeply local, reveals broader global connections. The community’s interdependency with its glacier illustrates how local impacts of climate change are part of an interconnected system. By documenting that intimate ties with more-than-human entities exist within the Western naturalistic framework, this research reveals how glaciers are not only witnesses of climate change but intimate partners in a shared planetary existence. By understanding this intimacy, we as humans gain insight into the global connections that bind more-than-human communities across the world.

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Crafting Social Change: Imagining Ecological Transition in the Alps

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Abstract

In the Alps, economic and ecological uncertainties, coupled with public debates and governmental policies, have rapidly propagated the idea that ecological transition represents a necessary shift for the viability of local economies and ways of life. However, propositions on how such changes should be achieved are still modest and tend to ignore the ways these discourses circulate and are understood at the ground level. Based on a comparative ethnographic research project in the Swiss, French and Italian Alps, this essay explores ecological transition as a peculiar form of desired social change within Alpine contexts. In particular, it resorts to the notions of crafting and imagining in order to explore emerging social worlds and transition-related practices, and to describe the attitudes of people supporting change in local social spaces. In dealing with local forms of cultural imagination, the essay shows how narratives of change and transition stem from meanings and memories attached to the Alpine-ness and mountain-ness of the three explored settings. Moreover, in considering the position assigned to the authors when in the field, it explores the effects ethnographic research could have when documenting crafted, going-to-be worlds.

1. Introduction: Studying Transition in the Alps

In our tumultuous and uncertain times, everybody talks about transition1. In vogue at the global level, the term is used to define a change of status, a movement from one point to another, as well as the temporal lapse in which such changes or movements take place. As such, the notion is largely used by institutional actors and by people and movements from civil society both when describing reality and advocating for changes. Since it provides us with a useful notion to provisionally escape the harsh dictates of defining the ambiguous world we live in, the vagueness of the concept can also account for its success in several domains of social life – economy, demography, politics – and, indeed, the social sciences.

It is therefore not surprising that discourses about transition are also findable in these fragile regions that, affected by climate change and by socio-economic recompositions, are experiencing change in significant manners. Among them, the Alpine area stands in a preeminent place, given that multiple of ecological, social, and technological metamorphoses make this region a compendium of the world's upheavals (Nova, 2023). Given the diverse domains in which it is invoked, as well as its semantic plasticity, the notion of transition seems a useful conceptual tool for exploring similarities and differences in the ways in which change and continuity are instantiated within the Alpine region.

Despite that, the very indefiniteness of the concept constitutes per se a serious obstacle for evaluating the nature and pace of such changes, as – by defining a condition of movement – the term lets its potential ends open. In a way, the study of practices and discourses concerning transition deserves the same careful exploration anthropologists once reserved to the ideas of "modernisation" and "development", as highlighted few years ago by the French anthropologist Pierre Le Meur (2020):

1 This essay synthesises and presents the main results of the first two years (2022–2023) of the research project "TransAlpS–Sustainable transition and applied research in Alpine territories: comparative approaches between France, Switzerland and Italy". The project was generously founded by Paris' Fondation Maison de Sciences de l'Homme (FMSH) within the "Emerging researches" financial framework and has hosted by the IDEAS, Institute of Ethnology and Social Anthropology (UMR 7307, Aix-Marseille University, CNRS) for its whole duration. Both institutions should be thanked for the valuable support we received when conducting our research.

> The term [transition] is an empty one, without content or perspective. It constitutes just a horizon, in the strict sense of the term, like a line that moves backwards as we progress between two points, the first fictitious, the other fantasised. This was already the case with the terms progress, modernisation and even development, but the notion of transition that partially replaces them accentuates this semantic turn in the direction of a movement for the sake of a movement. (p. 10, translation by the authors)

Nevertheless, semantic explorations of the ways in which transition – and more specifically ecological transition – is enunciated, interpreted and framed are not less empirically fruitful. Discursive understandings of processes of development and modernization (see, for example: Grillo, 1997) showed that such processes are often less consistent than what they tend to appear: as they involve different actors, institutions, and forms of knowledge, consciously-led forms of change mostly result from the unequal negotiation between multiple visions, voices and ideas, more than from simpler *top-down* injunctions (Grillo, 1997). Therefore, an ethnographic understanding of transition-related discourses and practices in different Alpine contexts demands a careful examination of how such discourses and practices circulate and are understood at the ground level, as well as on the manners in which such practices become embedded in the local social structures. Moreover, attention should be paid to the cultural and relational resources of people who are currently championing and promoting such forms of change within these settings, as well as to their position within the community.

By constituting highly contextual and adaptive forms of social change, practices of transition mobilise and renew social imaginaries too. During the research, affects, aspirations, and fears attached to the future emerged as relevant issues in Alpine communities experiencing climate change, demographic and economic recomposition and lack in public facilities. Strictly linked with their orientations to the future, the study of transition as a form of cultural, highly contextual practice of collective imagination, entails ethnographically documenting emerging, new social worlds and phenomena that are soon-to-be (Pink & Salazar, 2017).

When approaching ecological transition as a multivocal, situated, and negotiated process, we found the idea of crafting relevant, in particular for

describing the complex and dynamic interactions played by people, institutions, and material arrangements when co-imagining and co-creating an emergent and changing world (Burke & Spencer-Wood, 2019). Moreover, considering transition a "crafted" process allows us to grasp its voluntaristic and aspirational nature, and the peculiar meanings it gets according to the issues and the contexts in which transition-related discourse occur. At last, it stresses the step-by-step mindset people adopt whilst engaging with the obstacles and the snags constraining transition to take place.

Given this, this essay discusses cultural-sensitive and located ideas of ecological transition within the Alpine region. In particular, it explores how ideas of change are culturally imagined and crafted within three different mountain contexts, respectively located in the Swiss, French, and Italian Alps[2]. At present, the three countries all show an active commitment to promoting a transition to less energy-intensive models of society. However, these strategies differ greatly from each other, to the extent that transition may be oriented towards the development of renewables and sustainable transportation (France), to energy efficiency (Italy and Switzerland) or even the gradual exit from carbon and nuclear power (Switzerland). The selection of the three field sites should not, however, be understood as being driven by a principle of representativeness of dynamics taking place at the national level. Instead, the three cases were selected on the basis of information hinting at the existence of a diversity of ways of interpreting change and ecological transition in three similar mountainous settings, assuming that it was still possible to bring out some underlying common patterns. We chose the Airolo municipality (Swiss Alps) since there is a very vocal discourse and practices related to transition, mainly at an institutional level. This discourse is received and played out in different ways by different interest groups, resulting in different ideas and practices that might influence the future of the village. In Airolo, ecological transition certainly seems to be seen as a change that needs to be managed, an opportunity that the village must seize. The Trièves region,

2 Although the authors were all involved in the whole writing process, it should be noted that section 2.1 was specially edited by Elena Cardano (in particular the description of Airolo as an interesting case for the TransAlpS Project, pp. 5–8) and Sofia Marconi (in particular the description of the interest groups supporting change in the village, pp. 8–11), section 2.2 by Domenico Maria Costantini and section 2.3 by Gabriele Orlandi. Section 1 and 3 are the outcome of a collective discussion among the four authors.

located in the French Alps, has been a pioneering territory in regard to promoting more sustainable ways of living: there have been numerous experiments in recent decades due to cultural actors and governmental planning. Lastly, in the Grana Valley (Italian Western Alps), transition seems to occur mainly within the local agricultural sector, through a series of grassroots initiatives that interrogate the limits of the economic development models that are possible in the Alps.

Ethnographic explorations of the three localities spanned from September 2022 to March 2023. Data were mainly collected through interviews, informal meetings, as well as by participating and observing collective moments and events (meetings, festivals, etc.). Occasionally, small focus groups (about 5–10 people) also proved a significant tool for making local perspectives about transition emerge. When in the field, we monthly met online for discussing our main findings and research questions, sharing relevant literature and considering common issues and points, in order to refine a common theoretical framework and nourish our reflexion through "lateral comparisons" (Candea, 2016) between the processes and the phenomena we were progressively discovering. Once this intense, collaborative period of fieldwork research finished, short and more individual returns and/or exchanges with our informants allowed us to ensure a continuous follow-up of the processes we have first observed.

Thus, the three cases presented below describe how transition is imagined and enacted within different assemblages of people and practices in mountainous contexts. They all explore how transition embodies a peculiar form of desired social change in such Alpine settings, and present how stakeholders and interest groups are involved promoting and enacting change in such contexts. In describing the attitudes and attributes of change-supporters, namely people attempting – not always successfully – to realise forms of change in the local arena, the essay explores the values and ideas these actors attach to the future of the landscape they inhabit. We then discuss how transition is located in such settings – i.e., how it participates in defining these settings as mountainous areas – and the kind of the social and institutional mediations we, as anthropologists, have to go through when studying emergent worlds and objects in mountain communities.

2. Discourses and Practices of Transition in Three Alpine Settings

2.1 Airolo, the Swiss Case

Airolo is a mountain municipality with around 1,500 inhabitants. It is located in the upper Leventina Valley, in Italian-speaking Switzerland and is known as the village at the foot of the Gotthard, an important pass – also known as the Way of Man (Maffioletti, 1992) – which connects the canton of Ticino and the canton of Uri. The inhabitants of Airolo are closely linked to the area in which they live and to the Gotthard Pass as, historically, people, ideas and important economic activities (railway, accommodation, tourism, industry and military) have passed through it.

From an administrative point of view, the Leventina Valley is divided into a lower, middle and upper level, with Airolo and four other municipalities in the latter region. Although the Airolo area belongs to a sparsely populated valley and the number of people, activities and services has decreased significantly over time (Corti, 2016), it still has a significant number of inhabitants compared to other municipalities in the territory. More and more young people prefer to study and work in other cantons, leading to a gradual decline in the village's population. Although there are still many essential public services to which the population of Airolo has direct access – primary school, family doctors, pharmacies, post office, railway station, supermarkets – there is clearly a move away from traditional professions and skills, and not just among the younger generations, "a break in the chain of transmission of a wealth of memories and traditional knowledge from the older generations" (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014, p. 2).

In Airolo there is an organisation that keeps this chain of tradition alive and active, even if its function has changed somewhat over the years: the Patriciate. These forms of organisation emerged spontaneously throughout Western Europe from the 12th–13th centuries as village communities for the collective usership and management of fields and pastures. They remained important until the 18th century, when they were gradually combated by aggressive privatisation practices (De Moor, 2008). In Switzerland, the role of the Patriciate, together with the relations with municipal institutions – which

were introduced much later – developed in different ways in each Canton and in each Municipality. In general, a progressive loss of autonomy can be observed, which is also due to the alienation and loss of profitability of traditional activities such as Alpine farming and forestry.

The Patriciate of Airolo was founded in 1883 and is the largest in the canton of Ticino, with 8,867 hectares. In the past, it has strongly represented local interests in the municipality and was particularly representative during some land management conflicts in the 1980s, supported by a vibrant grassroots movement. Since the 1990s, however, Airolo has suffered a severe demographic slump due to the closure of several industries and the demilitarisation of the Gotthard, which has led to a decline in participation and interest in the patrician assemblies (Pedrina, 2023). Nowadays, it still coordinates the lively grazing activity, manages ten mountain pastures and employs a forestry team to look after the forests. Partly due to the agricultural utilisation of a large part of the Airolo area, tourism is modestly developed in summer; in winter, however, it flourishes, as Airolo has been an important destination for winter sports enthusiasts since the second half of the 19th century.

From the point of view of initiatives oriented towards ecological change and social justice, the municipality of Airolo is of interest in several respects. Since the foundation of the municipal power plant in 1921, new, more sustainable ways of generating energy have been shown to those responsible and the population of the village. The various municipal administrations have implemented a series of measures for energy efficiency and use of renewable energy, wherever possible. These include the construction of a municipal hydroelectric power plant and a thermal power plant that runs on wood chip and supplies the municipality's district heating network. Also worth mentioning are the municipal incentives for the installation of solar systems and the municipality's participation in the St. Gotthard wind farm. Incentives for renewable energies are provided by the Federal Government and the Canton (often in combination). The canton of Ticino, for example, promotes measures for the replacement of heating systems, the use of photovoltaics and energy optimisation at a territorial level. The Swiss Confederation, on the other hand, is committed to incentivising sustainable development at regional level.

Another issue affecting the municipality of Airolo is the achievement of the Energy City label[3] in 2020, which was recently confirmed for 2024. This

3 https://www.energiestadt.ch

is an important recognition that integrates the municipality into a network of institutions working to implement a sustainable energy and climate policy.

Another interesting initiative is the recent activation and inauguration in August 2024 of the House of Sustainability[4], an antenna of the University of Italian Switzerland that is bringing students, reflections and educational activities on environmental awareness to Airolo. In this context, there is also the Cantonal Museum of Natural History in the village, which houses a permanent exhibition and organises scientific and environmental education activities[5].

In addition to the projects mentioned above, the Casa Trosi[6] retirement home was inaugurated in Airolo in August 2023, which is intended not only as a residence for the people who will live there, but also as a place for intergenerational encounters and gatherings. Also worth mentioning is the Gotthard Park project[7], which envisages the redevelopment of the Airolo valley floor following the construction of the second Gotthard tunnel, the rubble from which will be used to almost completely cover the motorway in front of the village, thus making 22 hectares of green space available again, which will probably become a common area. And finally, participation in the Leventina Masterplan[8], a medium to long-term process involving Airolo and the municipalities of the valley from 2021, with the aim of drawing up a development plan for the valley by 2035.

Numerous social groups and interest groups are participating in these ongoing processes in Airolo, supporting change with their views on environmental and energy issues. Firstly, the ecological transition is being discussed in local politics. The mayor of Airolo and the four municipal councillors[9] elected in 2021[10] have common social features and experiences – which

4 https://casasostenibilita.usi.ch

5 Airolo and the upper Leventina Valley are considered particularly important sites for biodiversity research (Peduzzi & Peduzzi, 2022). In addition, the large number of toponyms in the Airolo area (Genasci & Genasci, 2022) testifies to the inhabitants' profound knowledge of this region.

6 https://www.comuneairolo.ch/casatrosi.jsp

7 https://www.comuneairolo.ch/parco_san_gottardo.jsp

8 https:// www.masterplanleventina.ch

9 In Swiss law, the municipality corresponds to the executive body of a district. It is headed by the mayor and its members are called municipal councillors.

10 In the most recent elections in 2024, the mayor of Airolo was confirmed, as were three

have probably both sparked their interest in politics and favoured their willingness to hold positions of responsibility in the area where they live. They all are young, have a high level of education and have already gained professional experience outside the canton (mostly in German-speaking Switzerland). A special feature of the 2021 municipal elections was that the historical era that dominated the town of Airolo for many years and in which different ideologies and political groupings led to sometimes very strong and violent social tensions has apparently come to an end.

The field research shows that the mayor and the municipal councillors promote processes of renewal in the political and social fabric of the community as well as dialogue and exchange of views on land management issues. These actors appear to have built relationships with individuals inside and outside the valley and are playing a role as catalysts for change thanks to their ability to understand the complexities that connect their community to other areas and their ability to bring together and ally different groups. The Parco San Gottardo project proves that local politicians (and not just the mayor and the municipal councillors) know how to navigate the complex territorial networks and cultivate relationships that make it possible to realise change for the community. The field research has shown that without the intervention of some brokers of the ruling class of Airolo, who are in contact with supra-municipal public actors, it would have been difficult to get this project funded by the Swiss Confederation.

The narratives related to the energy transition and the sustainable policy of the Mayor of Airolo and the four municipal councillors, mostly refer to technical principles and information on energy efficiency and waste prevention. However, thanks to the presence of a female municipal councillor, who is also president of the Airolo in Transition Association, the need to think and co-create a sustainable future in the broadest sense, i.e., including lifestyles, social ties and cultural creativity, is also present in local political debates. The common political line of the Mayor of Airolo and the four municipal councillors aims to familiarise citizens and inhabitants with the principles of energy transition and ecological change and to show them the various possibilities,

of the previously elected municipal councillors. However, the female municipal councillor, who also represents the Airolo in Transition association (which will be described later), was not confirmed for the legislative term and a man from the Centre Party took her place.

e.g., incentives, to take the first steps in this direction. To achieve these goals, the mayor of Airolo and the municipal councillors promote information, education and technical advice events. According to some of the municipal councillors interviewed, institutional communication, defined as "clear and comprehensive", helps to strengthen the good relationship with the local population and their trust in the proposed remodelling and renovation measures, which are currently mainly energy-related.

Secondly, the existence of the cultural association Airolo in Transition[11] seems to support change in the village, as it has revitalised the debate on sustainability and transitions. This association was founded in 2007 on the initiative of a number of people who live in Airolo or have a personal connection to the village. The main aim of the association is to promote cultural initiatives in the region – in particular through annual festivals – in order to stimulate reflection and planning of new ways of living in the Alpine region. Similarly to the mayor and the municipal councillors, main players in the associations are people with a high cultural and professional profile such as artists, psychiatrists and teachers.

Although this group seems to be a minority compared to the population and the prevailing political ideology of Airolo and not all sectors of the community participate in the association's events, these actors seem to have partially contributed to steering some decisions of the municipal administration towards ecological change and territorial reorganisation. The most striking example is the aforementioned St Gotthard Park project, which was conceived by the architectural office of one of the municipal councillors of Airolo and then promoted by other politicians for funding.

During the fieldwork, it emerged that a third group of actors put forward their own actions and discourses for change in relation to the ecological transition: farmers and patricians. Farmers in Airolo act in different ways that also reflect their personal perceptions of sustainability and energy transition[12]. They tend to ally themselves with the politics of the Patriciate – whose

11 http://airolointransizione.ch/associazione.html

12 For example, some farmers have used incentives to modernise buildings in order to improve energy consumption, while others do not consider this necessary. Or, some farmers have focused specifically on organic farming, while others are more inclined to invest their money and that of the Patriciate to continue farming activities, arguing for the need for new buildings or the purchase of new equipment.

power has been in the hands of the same leader for several years – on important decisions and issues of economic interest.

In general, the political line of the Patriciate in Airolo today moves between preservation and change. Preservation, because the Patriciate of Airolo is not only one of the institutions that owns most of the land in the canton of Ticino, but also the institution that is most committed to agriculture in the region. Nevertheless, the speeches at the Patriciate meetings and the interviews with some employees and patricians show that efforts are being made to renew the institution and its role and activities in the region. In particular, environmental and sports tourism seems to be a new topic (Franchi, 2020) and there is also a proposal from some patricians to make the organisation more inclusive and re-evaluate its role by extending membership to all residents of the municipality[13]. This could make it possible to promote new collective responses to the local needs of sustainable and equitable land use and strengthen the role of the Patriciate in the protection and defence of the commons (Pedrina, 2023).

Finally, in Airolo the discourses and practises of ecological change and renewal are also pursued by individual citizens, most of whom do not fit into the interest groups described above, even if some of them are actively involved in the political and associative life of the village. Their social background, age and life experiences are very heterogeneous. The concept of sustainability and ecological change of these citizens is more radical and requires a strong rethinking of our consumption and existence in the world. Despite the activism of some of these people in the territory, it seems that their ideas are not catching on and are not incisive in the political and sociocultural discourses, perhaps because Airolo is already burdened with narratives about the energy transition and ecological change.

Although a large proportion of the inhabitants of Airolo are involved in the political and socio-cultural discourses related to the energy transition and ecological change, a group of local actors has no way of influencing the power dynamics in the village. These are the inhabitants who have no citi-

13 At present, patrician status is granted to those who expressly apply for it and have been resident in the municipality for at least 10 years following authorisation by the Patrician Assembly. Farmers who own a farm in the municipality, on the other hand, are granted the right to use the Alps, even if they are not patricians.

zenship and who, although they can participate in the political and social life of the territory, seem to have little interest in it, perhaps because they cannot contribute through their vote to decisions in the political sphere of the municipality. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that during the field research it was observed that the inhabitants of Airolo without citizenship are unable or unwilling to share their opinions or ideas on issues of ecological and energy transformation, at least as it is currently taking place in the village.

2.2 Trièves, the French Case

The Trièves is a rural region in France, a vast depression surrounded to the west by the Vercors Prealps and to the south and east by the Dévoluy Prealps. It has no mountainous barrier on its northern side but is nevertheless well demarcated by the deep gorges of the river Drac. Geographically speaking, the region is located in the northern Alps, right on the border with the southern Alps. The Trièves region represents the southern part of the Isère, i.e., the county of the city of Grenoble. The area is characterised by a striking abundance of surface water, with numerous small streams flowing into the main river, the Ébron, which flows into the Drac at the Monteynard-Avignonet reservoir. Almost half of the region is forested. The rest of Trièves is predominantly an agricultural area: local agriculture is particularly lively with 220 farms on around 14,536 hectares (excluding mountain pastures) and a wide variety of production[14]. Mixed farming is widespread too. The main sectors are dairy cattle, beef sheep, dairy goats and cereals. Farms in the Trièves have increased in size in recent years. However, the number of farmers, although above the national average, has not grown accordingly. On average, each farm employs 1.5 people (Pernelet 2020, p. 8–10). With 40% of its agricultural land certified as organic, Trièves is one of the most active regions in this sector[15].

14 The average agricultural area per farm today is 66.1 hectares, but this figure is subject to strong fluctuations: between 2002 and 2018, the average farm size went from 56 hectares to 87 hectares, as the number of farms fell sharply. In the following four years, however, the number of farms rose from 180 to 220, thus producing a reduction of the average size. See also: https://agence-cohesion-territoires.gouv.fr/sites/default/files/2022-04/crte-84-38-9%20CRTE%20Tri%C3%A8ves.pdf

15 https://isere.chambres-agriculture.fr/sinformer/nos-publications/detail-de-la-publication-38/portrait-de-territoire-trieves

In Trièves, a vivid debate concerning ecology and change does exist. Connections with transition are diverse and have a certain historical depth. As early as 2004, the region's municipal organisations signed up to Agenda 21 for sustainable development. Moreover, even before Grenoble, Trièves was linked to the International Transition Network, founded in 2005 by Rob Hopkins, which contributed to the advancement of the concept of ecological transition. The approach to the Transition Network dates back to 2008[16] and is inextricably linked to Terre Vivante, the eco-centre founded in 1994 near Mens by the independent publisher of the same name[17]. In 2011, the informal group Trièves en Transition[18] became an official member of the International Transition Network[19], being the second French initiative to do so. Facts such as these allow us to understand the degree to which the region was a forerunner in anticipating discourses and visions that later proliferated nationwide. It is indeed in 2017 that, with the formation of the first Macron government and the awarding of the ministry of ecological transition to former TV host Nicolas Hulot, that the notion became prominent in the French public debate.

Since 2012, practically the entire region has been united in the Communauté de Communes du Trièves[20] (Union of municipalities of Trièves), or CCT for short, which comprises a total of 27 municipalities, of which Monestier-de-Clermont and Mens are the largest with around 1,400 inhabitants and all others have fewer than 800 inhabitants. As part of its activities, the CCT is now promoting an ecological transition strategy through dialogue. Since 2022, it has launched a seminar process that will lead to the definition of priorities and concrete actions for the next four years. Involving various associations and municipalities of the area, the seminars are divided into three working tables: the multi-stakeholder workshops, the workshops with the municipalities and, finally, those dealing with the services managed by the CCT.

Today, people speak about Trièves as a true laboratory for sustainability, where organic farming, renewable energies and reuse coexist with local cul-

16 http://www.aprespetrole.unblog.fr/qui-sommes-nous/

17 https://www.fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Terre_vivante

18 https://www.trieves.entransition.fr

19 https://www.entransition.fr/2011/04/26/trieves-en-transition-est-devenu-officiel/

20 https://www.cc-trieves.fr

ture and Alpine traditions. Through a series of projects, the CCT is committed to reducing its environmental impact and promoting greater local autonomy. With our research, we explored how Mens, the heart of southern Trièves, and other neighbouring areas are addressing these challenges through community projects, transition initiatives and the active participation of citizens.

The town of Mens, with around 1,400 inhabitants, is often referred to as the historical capital of Trièves. In addition to its history and charm, Mens is characterised by its active involvement in sustainability projects and the unique architecture of its historic centre[21]. In the context of the ecological transition, Mens is also characterised by its social commitment. Many public spaces such as the Café des Arts and the Café des Sports or Mixages and Bombyx, a public and a private social centre, have become meeting places to discuss, among other things, sustainability and ecological practices. The cafés are not only a meeting place for residents, but also a venue for cultural evenings and social initiatives that promote discussion and the exchange of ideas.

Bombyx, located in the former Mens' silk factory, houses several workshops, each dedicated to a specific activity[22]. Here it is possible to take part in workshops for screen printing, carpentry, bicycles repairing and photography or work on fabrics in the Shifumi, a couture atelier opened in 2023. Through the various craft, maintenance, repair and reuse activities, Bombyx becomes an open space where people can meet, learn and actively participate in practices that are partly from the past and look to a future of environmental sustainability.

As part of the ecological transition, there is also the government programme "Petites Villes de Demain" (Tomorrow's small towns), which was launched in 2020. This programme, which involves more than 1,600 municipalities across France, aims to support small towns in developing sustainable and innovative projects. Mens is among the towns selected for this programme, which translates into an action plan aimed at improving the quality of life of its inhabitants, reducing its environmental impact and promoting social cohesion. Several initiatives have been launched as part of "Petites

21 The historic centre is preserved by the ZPPAUP (Architectural Heritage Protection Zones).

22 https://www.usinebombyx.wordpress.com

Villes de Demain", including the energy renovation of public buildings, the promotion of sustainable mobility and the creation of a co-working space in the former Trésorerie Publique (public treasury). This space, opened in summer 2023, is now providing a shared workspace for local professionals and start-ups and promotes collaboration and innovation. One of the main objectives of the project is to improve the energy efficiency of historic buildings while preserving their architectural heritage. The redevelopment of Place de la Mairie (Town Hall Square), that is an important public square in Mens, is an example of how ecological change and urban regeneration can go hand in hand.

In recent years, the municipality of Mens' has been confronted with the lack of long-term housing. Despite the growing interest in the area, residents and newcomers have considerable difficulty finding available housing. This became apparent during the field research, where the scarcity of supply and the high turnover of seasonal rentals was a major obstacle. However, associations are being formed to address this problem, and various authorities have introduced supportive measures, such as incentives for the energy renovation of flats or the future creation of new buildings for communal living.

Debates on more sustainable practices are recurrent, as in the case of the "Switch Off the Public Lighting!" public event which took place on 7 October 2022 at the Cultural Space, in Mens. This initiative, promoted by the municipality, proposed reducing the hours of public lighting in order to reduce light pollution and save energy. The proposal to switch off street lighting from 10 pm to 6 am sparked a lively debate among residents, with issues such as public safety and the protection of biodiversity being raised. Many in the public supported the proposal and emphasised the importance of reducing pollution. Some concerns were also expressed, particularly with regard to the safety of older people who could get into difficulties without adequate lighting. In short, this type of open and participatory dialogue strongly marks social life in Trièves, where collective decisions are often the result of a direct confrontation between citizens and the administration.

Another important event was the "Faites du Vélo", a day dedicated to the promotion of sustainable mobility. The festival, organised in collaboration with several local associations, was attended by children and adults who took part in workshops and activities around the use of the bicycle as an environ-

mentally friendly means of transport. During the event, participants had the opportunity to take part in a workshop where they made customised reflective waistcoats for cyclists. This type of initiative not only promotes greater awareness of environmental issues but also strengthens the sense of community. Through practical and engaging activities, events such as "Faites du Vélo" help to create a connection between people and the environment and promote a more sustainable lifestyle.

In addition, there are places such as the Friperie Solidaire for clothing and the Recyclerie for the rest, which are concrete examples of how the circular economy and reuse can be integrated into daily life. The Recyclerie, located opposite the local landfill site, is a collection and redistribution centre for used items. Its speciality lies in the free price system, which allows everyone to take what they need and make a voluntary donation. This model encourages critical consumption and challenges the traditional consumer paradigm. The Recyclerie is not only a physical place, but also a symbol of practical ecology that is accessible to all. With these projects, Trièves shows that ecological change is not just about big technological innovations, but also about small, everyday actions that can have a significant impact on reducing waste and changing consumption habits.

One of the main associations working on the environment, sustainable development and social ties is Trièves Transitions Écologie[23] (TTE). TTE was founded to promote ecological transition through the direct participation of the population and organises seminars, workshops and public meetings to raise awareness on issues such as renewable energy, sustainable agriculture and the reduction of the ecological footprint. TTE also organise a Transition Fair, known as "Quelle Foire!" (What a fair!), which has been held annually in Mens since 2012. This event is a showcase for local initiatives in the field of sustainability, with the participation of associations, craftsmen, farmers and various professionals who share their experiences and knowledge. During the Fair, practical workshops, conferences and convivial moments (e.g., shared lunches, walking dialogues, etc.) are organised. The Fair not only serves to reflect on the ecological transition, but also to strengthen ties between communities. With events like this, TTE wants to show that the change

23 https://www.trieves-transitions-ecologie.fr

towards sustainability can emerge from the bottom up, involving everyone in building a fairer and greener future.

The Stratégie de transition écologique (Strategy for ecological transition), represents undoubtedly a key project for Trièves. It is based on four main axes: energy savings, development of local autonomy, territorial resilience and accessibility of the transition for all. These axes were defined through a participatory process involving citizens, associations, local administrations and businesses, with the agreement of the Union of municipalities of Trièves. The strategy aims to reduce energy consumption by promoting more sustainable practices, encouraging the use of renewable energies and improving the energy efficiency of buildings. The development of local autonomy focuses on the creation of self-sufficient food and energy systems. The promotion of local markets and the creation of agricultural cooperatives help to strengthen the local economy while reducing CO2 emissions associated with the transport of goods. Territorial resilience is an important issue, as the Trièves region is particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change. The strategy develops adaptation plans that include the sustainable management of water resources, the protection of biodiversity and the promotion of resilient agricultural techniques. Finally, the accessibility of the transition for all is a principle that guides all measures in the strategy. The ecological transition must not be a privilege for a few, but an opportunity for all citizens, regardless of their economic or social conditions. To this end, the CCT is committed to ensuring that the benefits of the transition, such as energy savings and air quality, are accessible to all by promoting inclusive social policies and offering support to the most vulnerable households.

Trièves is an emblematic example of how small communities can tackle the global challenges of climate change and sustainability through concrete local action. Thanks to the commitment of a public actor (the CCT), civil associations (the TTE) and the active participation of citizens, this region is becoming a model for ecological transition. Trièves is certainly a place where new inhabitants have been introducing new lifestyles and new political practices for about thirty years, but which are well integrated into an environment that existed before and has a historical depth[24] (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014).

24 Mens is home to the Musée Du Trièves, founded on a major grassroots initiative represented today by the Association des Amis du Musée, and its Fonds documentaire triévois.

The number of associations in relation to the number of inhabitants and the number of people involved in municipal working committees testify the exceptional nature of the social ferment associated with this transition. Trièves provides all the elements to understand how, within the social complexity of larger scales, there are a number of concrete and situated practices that must be taken into account when analysing the broad ecological issues that concern us all.

2.3 Grana Valley, the Italian Case

The Grana valley is a small valley in the south-western part of the Alpine arc, in the Piedmont region. It extends between 600 and 2,647 metres above sea level. Due to its location, this area is characterised by a Mediterranean-influenced mountain climate, which produces a great variety of landscapes. Being a territory of fluvial origin, the Grana valley has a *talweg* that is wide and fertile at the bottom and then narrows considerably in the middle part. Continuing upwards, however, one encounters numerous large meadows: for this reason, fields, apple orchards, chestnut, birch and beech woods, and pastures can be found within a few kilometres.

As elsewhere, agricultural numbers have shrunk, albeit to a lesser extent. A quarter of the working population of the valley still work in agriculture and/or in forestry. The only form of industry once present in the past – a small farm tool factory – has been closed for more than 30 years now. Between the 1960 and 1990, the valley was a renowned tourist destination, particularly in summer. The multi-storey hotels that stand empty in its villages, and the speeches of older people, are the most important testimonies of a "golden age", which is now over. The majority of the workers (civil servants and artisans) commutes every day to the lowlands.

With a population of about 1,300, the high portion of the valley is administratively separated into four municipalities. These communes are joined with those in the valley's lower portion into a higher entity called the Mountain Association (Unione Montana), which is made up of a council of mayors and a few officers. Both locals and local administrators frequently criticise this body, which was established in 2014 to ensure coordination between the various local initiatives and policies in small territories. They also point out

that the strong sense of parochialism in the area prevents it from making the qualitative leap necessary to establish itself as a destination for tourists as well as a place with a high standard of living. These considerations are often intertwined with the regret of seeing the younger generations leave the valley for study and work. Indeed, the demographic decline that began at the end of the 19th century has not yet stopped, although it is proceeding at a slower pace today.

Despite these negative observations, the valley also shows a certain vitality of initiatives that, more or less explicitly, seek to transform its present and future. A number of cultural associations and collectives are indeed active in this small area, dedicated to enhancing the valley's natural and cultural heritage, its history and memory and typical agricultural productions. These actions primarily take the form of events or festivals that, taking place mainly during the summer period, aim to attract tourist flows and bring new wealth to the area.

More generally, the valley has been the subject of numerous developmental efforts since the end of the 19th century. These initiatives, which sought to boost the local economy and increase agricultural revenue, were supported by provincial and regional organisations that were concerned about the emigration of people from the valley to other nations and the "backwardness" of the local agro-pastoral sector in comparison to the surrounding lowlands (Orlandi, 2023). Most of these actions were oriented towards enhancing the dairy sector, first with the creation of dairy cooperatives and later with the early institutionalisation (in 1982) of a PDO – Protected Designation of Origin label for the local cheese. This has largely contributed to the survival of Alpine livestock farming, albeit nowadays is threatened by rising prices and by the return of the wolf.

Among the consequences of these economic development policies, there has thus been a progressive "peasantisation" (Viazzo, 1989, p. 117) of the Grana valley which, from a mixed economy, has – during the second half of the 20th century – turned towards horticulture and mountain farming. This had a profound impact on the residents of the valley's perception of the future as well as their relationship with their land. Indeed, it is not unusual to hear valley residents argue that high-quality, organic mountain agriculture – often

certified – serves as the cornerstone of the local economy due to its ability to maintain the landscape and provide a living for the next generations.

It is therefore not surprising that, when it became part of the first area – at regional level – of experimentation of the National Strategy for Inner Areas (Strategia Nazionale per le Aree Interne), one of the consultation boards of this policy was dedicated precisely to the agricultural sector. Launched in 2013, this nationwide development plan aimed to improve the quality of life in peripheral, marginal areas. In order to minimise depopulation and lessen territorial disparities, specific funds were allotted to support local business as well as to enhance citizenship services (health, education, and mobility). Aiming to design interventions "on the ground", and to define intervention priorities, this National Strategy made extensive use of discussion and exchange groups between local actors, through a bottom-up approach that is becoming increasingly widespread in the world of rural development in Europe (Müller et. al., 2020).

Neo-peasants made up the bulk of the farmers that took part in the agricultural board. These farmers, who were mostly descendants of valley's inhabitants, had entered agriculture later in life, primarily for ethical reasons, and were therefore more prone to use unconventional practices and disruptive approaches. After an initial period of enthusiasm for the attention that the institutional world seemed to pay to this peripheral area of the Western Alps, many farmers turned away disappointed from the board, as it became clear that most of the interventions they felt they needed, and in particular a fruit and vegetable processing plant, could not be financed through the dedicated funds of this national development plan. Nonetheless, the table was an important opportunity to become aware that many of the farms active in the Grana valley faced the same problems on a daily basis, largely due to the small size of their mountain farms. Unable to grow due to both the conformation of the territory and the cadastral fragmentation that strongly characterises this area of the Alpine arc, farms in the Grana valley were forced to tackle higher production costs, difficulties of selling their production, as well as the uneasiness of legally hiring workforce for the periods of peak agricultural activity.

Favoured by a moment of collective reflection on their territory and an attitude to innovate, the farmers then found themselves in a position to con-

sider different production and distribution models. It was during one of these meetings that one of the last farmers to arrive in the valley proposed the creation of a network agreement (*contratto di rete*) between the farms in the valley. This juridical arrangement constitutes a tool for exchanging – without monetary movements – in predefined areas "services of an industrial, commercial, technical or technological nature or, alternatively, for jointly carrying out one or more activities related to their own businesses[25]".

By allowing the sharing of labour, agricultural machinery, but also the collective cultivation and trading, the *network agreement* immediately appeared to be a useful tool to overcome the many material constraints faced by the local agricultural sector. In Italy, the network agreement was initially created to support the recurrent crisis of the textile sector and promote its competitiveness (Cafaggi et al., 2012). It was then quickly adopted by the farmers of this Alpine valley, albeit diverted in its scope and objectives. In fact, the latter made it a tool to rethink, in a structural and long-term manner, their role as economic actors in a mountainous area, opting for the sharing of costs and workloads instead of the growth of a single farm.

Specifically, this allowed them to avoid all those financial expenditures and investments that the other members of the network agreement feel go against the characteristics of the land they live on as well as the kind of lifestyle that originated their farming practices. Because of the Alpine valley's significant water availability, mild climate, and diversity of vegetation, the majority of the area's farmers keep in high esteem the environment. There is also a general understanding that the region has managed to maintain its natural features thanks to the precise combination of depopulation and absence of an industrial sector. Conversely, the demands of the marketing industry are driving farms to expand even farther and to reduce production costs. According to them, an emphasis on growth and mechanisation would quickly put these farms in financial difficulties and, in the long run, have a detrimental effect on the environmental value of this Alpine valley, since a mountainous area cannot keep up with these modes of production. Hence, taking part in the network contract turns into a tool to challenge the prevalent agricultural patterns and look for alternative ways to live and work:

25 Art. 4 ter of Italian law no. 33 of 9 April 2009

> If I yield 10 quintals of strawberries, but I'm well paid and I'm happy with that, I don't need to yield 100 quintals of strawberries. But today it seems that if you don't have huge quantities, as a farm you can't survive. In reality, you get paid less and less for these large quantities and, in the end, it doesn't make sense to me. Nor does it make sense to have huge quantities and not reap the rewards, because the market is saturated anyway. (Interview, 1 December, 2022)

In this sense, if, in their words, agricultural practice largely benefits from this situation – allowing them to produce high quality fruit and vegetables – it should also allow them to care for and conserve, and keep under control, a territory that, deprived of human presence, would seem to be doomed to wilderness.

During our research, there were 21 companies involved in the network agreement in the Grana valley, mainly family-based farms. Fewer than half of them, favoured by their geographical location and compatibility of work patterns, regularly shared machinery and man-hours throughout the year. Others resorted to this legal instrument exclusively in the short summer period, when the workload became particularly intense. Still others had chosen to adhere to the network contract because of its vision and of their affection for the valley rather than for the provided benefits. The possibility of participating in the contract's meetings also represented an opportunity of sociability for people who, because of their professions, often experience rarified social contacts. In addition, these moments provide room for sharing ideas and discussing best practices in agriculture.

The network agreement between farms in the upper Grana valley thus represents a space in which alternative futures and new forms of social and economic aggregation are conceived and crafted. The possibility of sharing, through a diverted use of this legal instrument, work and tools becomes the basis of a form of cultural imagination that unites a long-term vision of one's own holdings, the feeling of a value of this mountain territory, and a critical perspective on extra-local economic processes. More than a tool to increase one's economic competitiveness, the network agreement participates in the local definition of good agriculture, because it is characterised by a reduced ecological footprint and is capable of conserving the valley's environmental resources. This type of economic organisation not only materially permits

agricultural practices that differ from the dominant model, but it also serves as a platfor–m for the group's collective creation of a territorial culture, a process that – as we have observed – is encouraged by the exchange of books and philosophical texts among its members.

After having originated as an unforeseen outcome of the National Strategy for Inner Areas, the network contract now represents an active attempt to generate change in the organisation of the agricultural sector in this Alpine valley, aiming at greater economic sustainability and ecological awareness. However, while elsewhere similar initiatives would probably be labelled as practices of ecological transition, here this is not the case. More generally, the term is rarely used in the local discourse. As in France, the Italian Ministry of the Environment has been renamed – in spring 2021 – the Ministry of Ecological Transition. Nevertheless, the elaboration of a National Plan for Ecological Transition the following year does not seem to have generated much interest in this area. Reminiscent of the recent deadlocks in the National Strategy for Inner Areas, many of the inhabitants of the Grana valley, and among them members of the network agreement, remain sceptical as to whether public institutions can induce long-lasting forms of transition through top-down action. This might explain why the discourses that advocate ecological transition as an imperative or, at the very least, as a desirable direction are rare in the area. On the contrary, the network agreement has been presented to us as a tool that allows farms in this valley to preserve their family and quality dimensions and thus resist the change (i.e., growth in size and fixed capital) imposed on them by large-scale agricultural markets. It cannot be excluded that this emphasis on continuity and sustainability echoes and is reinforced by other discourses that exist locally. Indeed, the tourist enhancement and promotion of the local architectural heritage contribute to reinforcing the image of a valley that is timeless – as one of the installations of the local Ecomuseum features – or in any case preserved from modernity, a fact that can also have positive repercussions in economic terms for local communities (Grasseni, 2007).

"If we want to keep things as they are, everything has to change" said the young Tancredi Falconeri in Tomasi di Lampedusa's novel *Il Gattopardo* (1958). Such a statement perfectly encapsulates the spirit of the agricultural projects that we have described here, albeit with a different attitude than the author's.

Although actively oriented towards new economic and social models, agricultural change in the Grana valley rather uses the language of heritage and environmental conservation. In fact, by blending viewpoints on single farms and mountainous areas, people make the case for the necessity of enacting specific adjustments in order to carry on with the long-standing practices of this Alpine valley. In this sense, the description of the birth of a new form of economic organisation among the farmers of this mountain area reminds us that, within the Alpine area, forms of social change that are not recognized as such might also exist.

3. Where Can Change be Imagined From?

In addressing how mountain communities in Airolo, Trièves and Grana valley tackle with ideas of change, this essay has explored how forms of cultural imagination attached to ecological transition take place in multi-scalar arenas shaped by institutional configurations, economic interests, formal and informal networks. Even more importantly, the situational approach we opted for in our research has revealed how transition-related discourses, narratives and practices are enacted by people who not only have multiple life trajectories but also stand in different positions within their own community.

Moreover, our work also showed how site-specific forms of cultural imagination are not only strongly embedded in the assets and materialities that characterise the Alpine settings we have investigated: they also mobilise plural narratives and ideas related to the Alpine-ness and mountain-ness of the localities we explored. In reflecting on the forms that ecological transition can take in the territory they inhabit; our interlocutors have shown that they bring very different perspectives on mountainous landscapes as potential *loci* of forms of directed social change.

For people in Airolo, forms of ongoing change, associated with the Alpine-ness of the area, are already clearly observable: due to climate change, winters with little snow are becoming a recurrent phenomenon in the Leventina valley. This, coupled with the memory of some extreme natural events – such as avalanches and wood fires – produces among many people the idea that life in the mountains requires a constant adaptation, a stance that, thus,

has led to the positive welcome of new and innovative practices, especially when supported by public policies enacted at the municipal or regional level.

A common understanding depicts the Trièves region as a place for experimentation, favoured in this by the low density of the region, by the vital local agricultural sector, as well as by the many and varied voluntary organisations present there. Here, the mountain-ness of the locality is mainly perceived as the necessary distance from the dominant, urban model, a condition that, in potentially allowing new and innovative lifestyles and everyday practices to be realised, frames Mens and the surrounding villages as an attractive locality.

Although they are highly involved in experimenting new economic practices, the neo-peasants involved in the network agreement of Grana valley seem reluctant to embrace a transition-related narrative. In this case, as an Alpine area, the valley is experienced as a preserved, natural space. In particular, the high environmental value people attribute to the area sustains practices of quality food production and critical perspectives on the dominant economic model. When mentioned, change takes the form of a shift in viewpoints and in the kind of culture that must underpin life there.

In addition, as our research progressed, we gradually realised that – when addressing forms of desired change – memory does matter. Narratives of transition resonate with the ways in which change-supporters situate their communities in their historical progressions. In Airolo, the ecological transition takes the form of an opportunity for further change, a necessary response to proposals, coming from other parts of Switzerland, that would enable this Alpine region to keep up the pace with the rest of the world. Quite the contrary, the Trièves seems to have been projected for years towards the new futures and is now living its effervescent heyday. Actions promoted by local institutions seem to have blurred the region's decades of depopulation and deindustrialisation and it is likely that the arrival of new inhabitants has greatly contributed to reducing the burden of the past. Lastly, in Grana valley, although there are already many forms of experimentation underway, a widespread perception portrays the area as being at the beginning of a process of revitalisation and collective thinking. Less exposed than the other two contexts to wide-scale discourses on transition, farmers in this Alpine

setting conceive change as a return to a condition of better adaptation to the environmental characteristics of the territory.

Finally, the study of emerging, going-to-be worlds also raises relevant issues linked to the positionality we, as ethnographers, have been assigned when in the field. In all three cases, the announcement of the project and of the object of our interest resulted in a mixture of enthusiasm and perplexity. While being pleased that a group of young researchers were interested in what they were trying to set up, many of our interlocutors in these Alpine contexts also quickly expressed a desire to know more about what the moving horizon of ecological transition might entail in their own context. Considered by our interlocutors as "experts" in ecological transition because we had decided to make it our object of research, we were thus confronted with the desire, expressed on several occasions, that our research project could bring new input and new ideas to these communities with respect to how to address and craft change in areas that feel peripheral. Not a few were also those, who, aware of the comparative dimension of our research, showed great interest in discovering how transition is put in place in mountain territories with characteristics and problems similar to their own.

More generally, it seems to us that the strong, albeit vague, normative dimension that the notion of ecological transition contains must be held responsible for an attitude of reflecting on change, in the awareness that there is always room for improvement with respect to the different actors with whom we were confronted. We can therefore conclude that in exploring the meanings and forms that transition takes in the Swiss, French and Italian Alps, we also contributed to those forms of cultural imagination that people relate to the idea of ecological transition. In this way, as anthropologists exploring discourses, visions and narratives related to ideas of change in mountain contexts, we become perhaps actors of the change we have decided to investigate.

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Facing an Uncertain Climate: Interlinked Social, Ecological and Climate Changes Affecting Livelihoods in the Italian Alps and Apennines

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Abstract

Mountain areas are particularly susceptible to climate change. In the Italian Alps and Apennine mountains, average temperatures have increased, the intensity and frequency of precipitation events have changed, and the timing of the seasons has shifted. These changes are intersecting with on-going social and ecological changes and are, at local scales, felt to a greater or lesser extent by local people. In mountain areas, among those most exposed to the consequences of climate and associated environmental crises are smallholder farmers, beekeepers, hunters, and all those activities that depend directly on the climate, including tourism and winter skiing. The current chapter provides three case studies of how climate, social, and ecological changes are intersecting to affect these individuals and sectors and how they are facing and confronting the challenges. The examples reveal how the impacts of climate change are compounded by on-going social and ecological changes, how the climate crisis connects diverse actors at local scales while also bringing them into contact with global processes of change, and how human and non-human actors are connected by the impact of climate change on mountain ecosystems and weather patterns.

1. Introduction

> "The seasons have changed!" (80-year-old male, beekeeper)

> "You see, at these altitudes [1300 meters] the snow is all gone long ago… flowers have already sprung up, snowdrops in the meadows, but it wasn't like this before." (55-year-old male, manager of a ski resort)

> "Everything in the Mont Blanc area is changing invisibly, the forest, the animals... they are no longer the same; even their eyes are different... chamois seem to cry". (64-year-old male, professional hunter)

> "That which has changed the most is the landscape […] because of the simple abandonment of the mountains by its inhabitants". (31-year-old female, farmer and beekeeper)

Each of the mountain residents quoted above identify climate and weather, ecological, and social changes affecting mountain areas in Italy. Temperatures have increased, the timing of the seasons has shifted, and mountain landscapes and ecology are different than they used to be (Copernicus, 2024; Monteiro & Morin, 2023). Climate, weather, and ecological changes have occurred alongside social changes, including rural and agricultural abandonment, the industrialization of mountain areas, a decline in services, and changing demographics (Dax et al., 2021; Plieninger et al., 2016; Tasser et al., 2017). The mountain residents – all dependent on the mountain environment for their livelihoods – also identify how climate, social, and ecological changes are affecting the deep interconnections between humans and the non-human in ways that have implications for the future. As they adapt to the interconnected changes they face, their ability to do so is shaped by these same changes, and by the mutual interdependence among humans, plants, and animals in mountain areas.

In this chapter, we describe how interconnected climate, social, and ecological changes are affecting those dependent on the mountain environment and climate for their livelihoods, such as smallholder farmers, livestock farmers, and hunters as well as those involved in tourism and winter skiing. We

describe the changes being observed and show how these changes intersect and may compound each other. And we show how the changes highlight and also affect the mutual interdependence among the human and the non-human in Italy's mountains. A key conceptual reference is the notion of eco-nostalgia (Albrecht, 2006; 2011; Angé & Berliner, 2014; 2020; Howe, 2020), which builds on the concept of nostalgia and extends it to encompass all experiences of ecological loss – mining extraction, nuclear accidents, water contamination, glacier melt, rising temperatures, and species extinction; all events understood as disasters that transform familiar, lived environments into estranged places. From this perspective, ecological damage renders it possible to lose the cognitive and affective anchors of a place without physically departing from it or being forced to migrate, thereby drastically reducing one's capacity for adaptation. Within cultural and social contexts, adaptation strategies emerge as complex historical processes – always negotiable and negotiated – and are shaped by the specific circumstances, opportunities, spatial settings, and temporal frameworks in which they unfold (Hulme 2009).

The chapter is organized around the experiences of individuals living in mountain areas of Italy, specifically the Alps (the Val Camonica and Valtellina in the Lombardy region and the Mont Blanc area in the Valley of Aosta) and the Apennines (Garfagnana area of the Tuscany region). We present their experiences and observations alongside the results of natural science studies that document phenological, cryospheric, and other ecological changes. We present three case studies that show how intersecting changes are affecting hunters, winter tourism operators, and people involved in agriculture, specifically beekeeping and livestock and crop farming. The first case study examines the impact of increasing average temperatures on the relationship among hunters, chamois, and the plants on which they both depend. The second case study shows how changes in the quantity, nature, and distribution of snowfall is affecting the winter tourism sector. The shifts in winter snowfall are also affecting agriculture, the focus of the final case study. The tourism and agricultural sectors are increasingly interconnected by the issue of water and its absence. Farmers and beekeepers also report changes in average temperatures, precipitation patterns and intensity, and the phenology of flora and fauna. These changes intersect with social changes to affect the survival, productivity, and profitability of farming and beekeeping in the mountains.

The case studies provide insights into how people living in the mountains are thinking about, framing, and responding to change, and how the way they do so is shaped by and shapes their relationship to the mountain environment and the non-humans with whom they share those environments. In the face of challenges to their livelihoods, mountain residents are adapting and identifying new paths forward.

2. Background

2.1 Climate Change in the Mountains

Over the course of the 20th and 21st centuries, average temperatures in mountain areas have increased faster than the global average in the northern hemisphere (Copernicus, 2024; Rogora et al., 2018; Monteiro & Morin, 2023). Higher temperatures have caused ice and snow in the mountains to melt, decreasing the albedo effect. As a result, Alpine glaciers have shrunk to their lowest levels in two thousand years; in the summer of 2023, the zero-degree isotherm broke two records, reaching 5328 meters in the Alps when on average it should be around 3500 meters (Copernicus, 2024). In a research project coordinated by Eurac Research, snow data from more than 2000 measuring stations in Italy, Austria, Slovenia, Germany, Switzerland and France was analyzed (Matiu et al., 2021). The results made it possible to reliably describe snow trends up to 2000 meters above sea level. Regional trends sometimes differ considerably, but long-term changes are similar throughout the Alpine region: below 2000 meters, the snow season has shrunk by an average of 22–34 days over the last 50 years; snow on the ground tends to occur later in winter and disappear earlier as spring approaches (Matiu et al., 2021). Similar declines in snowfall over time have been observed for the Apennine region, with the most consistent decreases at elevations below 1650 meters (Capozzi et al., 2025).

Weather patterns have changed and the frequency and intensity of extreme weather, such as flooding, storms, and droughts, has increased (Beniston & Stoffel, 2014; Bocchiola & Diolaiuti, 2010; Copernicus, 2024; CREA, 2019; Seneviratne et al., 2021). Across Italy, drought, alternating with often extreme rainfall phenomena, is putting a strain on agriculture and livestock farming

during the summer season; during the winter, this cycle affects the ski season and related local economies (Bonardo et al., 2024; FAO, 2016; Olesen et al., 2011; Van Passel et al., 2017). Increases in average temperatures and changes in precipitation are affecting mountain flora and fauna, with downstream effects on mountain residents (Rawlence, 2022). High-altitude species (both botanical and animal) are at risk of extinction, firstly because of the gradual disappearance of the environmental conditions to which they have adapted over time – for example, the disappearance of glaciers and slope erosion – and their inability to find alternative habitats, and secondly because of increased competition with other, more competitive species from lower altitudes (Dall'Ò, 2022; Gottfried et al., 2012; Rawlence, 2022; Almond et al., 2022). Many plants now germinate and flower earlier, while birds, amphibians, butterflies, and other invertebrates likewise anticipate critical reproductive stages – an acceleration that may compromise their long-term viability. Moreover, pollinators, herbivores, soil microorganisms, and parasites face indirect risks when the species on which they depend undergo temporal or spatial mismatches (Losapio et al., 2021). Such range shifts come at an ecological and physiological cost: organisms cannot ascend indefinitely. Ungulate populations in the Mont Blanc massif, for instance, have been forced into ever-narrower high-altitude refugia, and several species are predicted to face local extinction as they run out of mountain to climb (Vitasse et al. 2020). Thus, while upward shifts may buffer some effects of warming, the *Alpine ceiling* ultimately constrains their adaptive potential and portends the loss of those species that cannot persist within diminishing mountain environments.

2.2 The Impact of Climate Changes on Mountain Residents

In interviews, mountain residents referred to the same changes documented by natural science studies. They, too, reported increases in average temperatures, higher intensity storms, downpours of water with associated risks of flash flooding and landslides, longer and more intense droughts, less snow in winter, and shifts in the timing and nature of the seasons. They also outlined the downstream effects of these changes on their lives and livelihoods. They reported that higher average temperatures lead to longer agricultural seasons and allow crops to be grown at higher elevations, such as olives and

grapes. Outdoor work can be more comfortable in the winter, though less comfortable in the summer. The higher temperatures also mean that certain plants do not grow as well, that pastures may dry out earlier in the season, and that certain pests, such as the *Drosophila suzukii* fly that attacks blueberry plants, can survive in the mountains. The higher temperatures can also cause permafrost to melt creating more dangerous high elevation situations for people and animals. Higher intensity storms, flash flooding, and landslides place people and animals at risk and can damage crops, fields, and infrastructure. Longer and more frequent periods of drought in turn challenge crops and dry out pastures, reducing forage available to livestock. Less snow in the winter poses challenges for the winter tourism sector. Less snow in the winter can also mean less water in the summer. Shifts in the timing and nature of the seasons in turn affect when flowers bloom and make it more difficult to understand when crops should be planted and harvested. All of these changes affect the ecosystems on which Alpine animals and plants live and make it such that traditional ecological knowledge, or knowledge of the specific mountain environment and climate and the relationship between people, animals, plants, and weather, is becoming less reliable.

2.3 Social Changes

At the same time as climate changes are affecting mountain weather patterns and ecosystems, social changes have also fundamentally altered mountain areas in Italy. The primary changes mentioned by mountain residents include rural depopulation and the abandonment of agriculture, which accelerated in the decades after World War II as people moved to the industrialized lowlands for jobs. The valley bottoms, once the site of intensive agricultural holdings, have been progressively converted into industrial complexes and residential developments (Dax et al., 2021). As people left the mountains for jobs in factories and industry, they abandoned agricultural activities that have since slowly disappeared, with the number of farms declining by 75% between 1961 and 2010 (Spinelli & Fanfani, 2012). Rural areas have depopulated, and widespread land abandonment has followed (Dax et al., 2021; MacDonald et al., 2000; Plieninger et al., 2016). Those farmers who have remained have faced pressure to expand, industrialize, and integrate into global mar-

kets, though this has not necessarily increased the prosperity of rural areas and has placed farmers in positions of uncertainty and insecurity tied in part to a volatile global agricultural system (Dax et al., 2021; Flury et al., 2012; Nori & Farinella, 2020; Rivera et al., 2018; Whitaker, 2024).

Economic activity has increasingly shifted toward tourism; in many Alpine regions, hospitality and recreational services now account for nearly half of local incomes and employ a significant proportion of the workforce, particularly through winter-sports resorts and nature-based activities (Corrado & Gobbi, 2006; Bätzing, 2015). As small-scale farms have declined, guesthouses, guided-tour businesses, and outdoor-education providers have become the principal engines of rural livelihoods (Corrado & Gobbi, 2006). Ecological changes have followed: abandoned pastures have given way to advancing forests, altering the composition and distribution of mountain flora – key sources of forage for livestock, nectar and pollen for pollinators, and habitat for wild fauna (Bindi, 2022; Malandra et al., 2019; Tasser et al., 2024). Reforestation and deforestation, habitat destruction and fragmentation, pollution, and impactful infrastructure can exacerbate and amplify the consequences of climate change (Losapio et al., 2021).

Other social factors affecting mountain residents include economic stagnation, exacerbated by the 2008 economic crisis (Di Quirico, 2010; Storm, 2019). There has been an overall decline in the quality and quantity of services in mountain areas including healthcare, childcare, and schools, as well as veterinary and agricultural extension services for farmers. Without adequate services, mountain areas become less accessible and livable. It can be difficult for producers in mountain areas to sell products produced at the cost of their production – which is higher in the mountains – especially as production costs have increased, markets have shifted, and low-cost industrial products dominate supermarket shelves (Bentivoglio et al., 2019; Pagliacci et al., 2022). As people with a long history on the land leave the mountains or conclude their careers, memory, history, traditional knowledge, and understanding of the mountain environment go with them. Additional social changes include demographic changes such as an aging population and an increase in immigration from, for example, Eastern Europe, Africa, India, and the Middle-East (Capacci & Rinesi, 2018; Cottarelli, 2018; Nori & Farinella, 2020). Together, these social, climate, and ecological changes are shaping the environments

in which mountain residents live and work and possible futures for mountain areas.

While the broader literature on mountain areas frequently highlights processes of depopulation and abandonment, it is important to note that this is not a uniform trend across the Italian Alps and Apennines. For instance, the Aosta Valley towns of Courmayeur and Morgex – both included in this research – have not experienced population decline. On the contrary, Courmayeur, a well-known and affluent tourist resort, has seen steady population growth over the last decades, doubling its population from around 1300 in the 1950s to over 2600 today. Similarly, Morgex has benefited from its proximity to ski tourism and second-home ownership, leading to a more stable demographic trend. However, despite these differences, in both the Alpine and Apennine contexts, the agricultural and pastoral sectors – particularly small-scale, family-run farms – have faced significant socio-economic pressure.

The case studies presented here do not aim to offer a representative portrait of entire municipalities, but rather to highlight how individuals and families working in agriculture, beekeeping, livestock farming, hunting, turism and other activities closely tied to environmental conditions are experiencing and interpreting ongoing social, ecological, and climatic changes. These sectors are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and ecological degradation, and the experiences of those working in them reveal how global transformations take shape at local scales. Despite being situated in demographically and economically diverse areas, these actors share a common exposure to environmental uncertainty and a reliance on local ecosystems. In this way, the Alpine and Apennine case studies are connected by a shared focus on the transformations affecting people whose livelihoods are most deeply entangled with the natural world. Social, climate, and ecological changes are shaping the environments in which mountain residents live and work and possible futures for mountain areas.

3. The Research Sites

Study results are based on ethnographic research conducted in Garfagnana, a mountain area of the Tuscany region of the Italian Apennines, and in two locations in the Italian Alps: the Lombardy Alps (focus on the Val Camonica and Valtellina) and the Mont Blanc area in the Valley of Aosta (focus on the towns of Courmayeur [2740 inhabitants] and Morgex [2090 inhabitants]).[1]

Garfagnana is located in northwest Tuscany. It is bordered by the Apennine mountains and the Apuan Alps. The landscape is defined by forests, agricultural fields and pastures, and small towns, as well as some larger towns and industrial activity, particularly at the lower elevations. Interviews and participant observation in Garfagnana, Tuscany were conducted between July 2021 and July 2023. 34 small-scale farmers and 3 beekeepers were interviewed (28 [75.7%] men and 9 [24.3%] women; age range: 22 to 72; average age: 51). These interviews were conducted as part of a project on the impact of climate and environmental change on farmers.

The Val Camonica and the Valtellina are located in the Alps of the northern Italian Lombardy region. The valleys are marked by narrow valley bottoms and towering peaks. The landscape is also defined by a mix of agriculture and industry, housing, and towns at the lower elevations; pastures, fields, and forests at the middle elevations; and pastures, lakes, and rocky peaks at the highest elevations. Research was conducted between December 2017 and December 2018 and between June and August 2019. 44 small-scale farmers and 23 beekeepers were interviewed (26 [38.8%] women, 41 [61.2%] men; age range; 27 to 82; average age: 47). These interviews were conducted as part of a larger project on the impact of climate and environmental change on mountain farming and on farmer well-being.

The Valley of Aosta is an autonomous region in northwestern Italy. It is bordered by Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, France, to the west; by Valais, Switzerland, to the north; and by Piedmont, Italy, to the south and east. The Italian side of Mont Blanc is an area characterized by a huge variety of biodiversity, habitats, and environments. In the space of 70 years, there has been a shift

1 The work on the Apennines (Garfagnana) and the Val Camonica and Valtellina (Alps) was conducted by Sarah H. Whitaker, the work on the Valle D'Aosta and the Mont Blanc (Alps) by Elisabetta Dall'Ò.

from an economy based on grazing and mountain agriculture to a "cementing" and infrastructuring of the highlands: ski resorts, cable cars, second homes, resorts, and restaurants have largely replaced stables, Alpine pastures, crops, and forests. The research is part of a larger project on perceptions of climate change on-going since 2014. The study is based on 57 in-depth interviews with: 15 professional hunters, 16 ski instructors and mountain guides, 4 mountain hut managers, 10 small-scale farmers, 7 livestock farmers, and 5 restaurant owners. Overall, 67 % of respondents were male and 33 % female with ages ranging from 25 to 68 years, ensuring perspectives across generational and gendered lines in mountain economies. Notably, in the hunters' cohort only one of the fifteen interviewees was female.

Interviews lasted anywhere from one to five or more hours. Interviews may have begun at a table, but transitioned to, for example, the farmland or ski slopes. Participant observation involved assisting with agricultural activities, attending meetings and presentations, and touring farms, restaurants, mountain huts, and ski areas. Textual data was analyzed using a combination of inductive and deductive coding and thematic analysis (Bernard et al., 2016). All interviews were conducted in Italian.

4. Results

With these interlinked climate, social, and ecological changes in mind, in the following sections, we present case studies of how climate changes are affecting residents of mountain areas, how parallel social and ecological changes intersect with the climate changes, and how integrated human and natural systems remain despite the changes. The examples reveal how and through which practices and discourses these changes are perceived by all social actors involved, allowing us to focus on climate change on a micro scale and to reflect on what these changes could mean for the future of mountain areas. We provide three case studies showing how climate and social changes are affecting hunters, the winter tourism sector, and agriculture (beekeeping and livestock and crop farming) and the ecosystems and landscapes on which they depend. In so doing, we also show how the human and the non-human

are connected in relationships of mutual interdependence that shape adaptations and possible futures for mountain areas.

4.1 Hunting at High Elevation

During field research, it became clear that local professional hunters have a close link with the land that makes them able to grasp, on a micro scale, important aspects of the climate crisis; this connection brings the hunter into contact with global scenarios of change. Their close link to the non-human places them in the position of sentinel of change. In one of the first meetings with hunters from the Mont Blanc area, M. B., from the Courmayeur hunting district said: "we are sentinels of the territory, we are on the territory all year round."

Hunters report significant changes in the hunting season (autumn) compared to previous decades: since autumn is warmer and snow-free, the places where ungulates are shot are now located at higher altitudes. In Valdigne, the mountain community to which Courmayeur and Morgex belong, professional hunters have observed a progressive drop in the altitude of chamois in the summer months, up to the upper limit of the forest. They explain that this is a strategy adopted in recent years by the animals to find shelter and relief from the excessively high temperatures found now even at higher altitudes. But the change does not only affect animal species; the whole Alpine ecosystem is migrating to higher altitudes: plants, insects, fungi, mammals, birds, and parasites are changing their habits. One example is the fly responsible for keratoconjunctivitis, an eye infection afflicting chamois. As temperatures and the treeline have risen to higher and higher altitudes, this fly has also increased its range. Today, chamois are suffering from eye infections which cause continuous tearing in the animals. With rising temperatures, the fly is set to spread to higher and higher elevations, even above 2000 meters. In a field interview a hunter explained: "everything in the Mont Blanc area is changing invisibly, as if out of time: the seasons, the glaciers, the forest, the animals … they are no longer the same; even the chamois eyes are different ... they seem to cry".

In addition to increasing the range of the fly responsible for eye infections in the chamois, the rise in average temperatures due to ongoing cli-

mate change has shortened the growing season in the mountain areas where the chamois live. As a result, pasture grasses become depleted of nutritional properties earlier in the season, and thus do not provide suitable fodder for chamois kids at the critical time of weaning. To date, scientific studies confirm hunters' perception and suggest that temporal trends in size are an indirect result of changes in resource availability and quality brought about by climate change, which impair the ability of individuals to acquire resources and grow (Losapio et al., 2021). The higher temperatures also mean that, in order to avoid increasing their core temperature, chamois avoid feeding at warmer times of day, and do not forage enough in general.

Climate change is also affecting the wild medicinal herbs that chamois feed on, such as the génépy (*Artemisia glacialis*). The génépy grows at very high altitudes (1800 to 3200 meters) and in places that are difficult to access, such as moraines, rock cuts, and scree at the foot of glaciers. It is a favorite healing plant of the chamois, as well as of other animals. The génépy is now at risk of extinction due to global warming, and its disappearance will constitute a cultural as well as an ecological and ecosystem loss as the génépy is also used by humans to make a liqueur and for its anti-inflammatory qualities (Fassino, 2021; Pieroni & Giusti, 2009).

This example shows the relationships and connections between and among the human and the non-human in the Alps. Their futures are intertwined through climate changes that affect people, plants, and other animals alike. Hunters are on the frontlines of these changes and adapting their practices accordingly, hunting at different times of day and in new locations. They have begun to keep detailed field journals – recording freeze-thaw dates, flowering times, and ungulate corridor shifts – and to share these data with mountain ecologists in participatory monitoring programs. Some have also adopted GPS-enabled tracking collars on game to map elevation migrations in real time, while others collaborate in small reforestation and Alpine grassland restoration projects to bolster habitat resilience. The deep, affective bond hunters have with place can give rise to solastalgia – a form of existential distress provoked by environmental change (Albrecht, 2006) – as hunters witness the loss of familiar landscapes and species. Despite the adaptive capacity of plants and animals, the intensity and speed of the current climate crisis may exceed their – and their stewards' – ability to adapt. Hunters, as both

observers and participants in these shifting ecologies, thus occupy a unique role as emotional and epistemic sentinels of Alpine change.

4.2 Winter Tourism: Skiers in T-Shirts in the Middle of Winter

Starting in the 20th century, temperatures in the Mont Blanc area began to rise steadily, breaking all previous heat records, and episodes of extreme cold, became very rare, until they almost disappeared. In the last forty years only the winters of 1985 and 1991 show very cold temperature averages, and in the last thirty the climate has begun to warm again as it never had before. The progression seems unstoppable; each decade surpasses the previous one in annual thermal averages, setting the record bar a little higher. The "hottest year," the "hottest summer," the "mildest winter," are all in the first two decades of the 21st century, and 2023 holds the record for the hottest year since weather records were first taken. In January 2023, in Aosta, 22° Celsius were recorded; an anomaly, to be sure, an exceptional event, but that begs the question of what normality will be in the near future and what tools we will use to cope. While in the city people went out, in disbelief, in short sleeves, on the slopes, skiers immortalized the temperature record by posting evidence of the weather anomaly on social media. A Courmayeur ski instructor, B. B., explained how some of her clients, on those hot days, complained about the snow conditions:

> They kept saying the snow sucked, they were not having fun, they had wasted the day, they wanted a refund! They just didn't understand that at these temperatures it was already a miracle that there was snow! And then of course at 13° Celsius it becomes a slush, but they don't understand that if in January you ski without a cap and without gloves it's because there is something sick … but for them anyway the mountain is only to be used for fun; if there is no snow here they go somewhere else, while for us instructors, snow is work.

That same winter, in Dolonne, Courmayeur, one of the managers of the fun park, the slope for children and beginner skiers, said disconsolately that despite all the efforts put in, they would not make it to Easter with the ski season. Too little snow and too high operating costs to keep all the lifts open, and

even artificial snowmaking – which covers 70 percent of the entire area and is a practice that has become customary over the past 30 years – would have been impossible given such high winter temperatures and the lack of water in the reservoirs. "You see, at these altitudes [1300 meters] the snow is all gone long ago … flowers have already sprung up, snowdrops in the meadows; but it wasn't like this before ... there were meters of snow here, and now instead we close, and we reopen at Christmas" (March 26, 2022).

This example shows how the winter tourism sector is being affected by increasing average temperatures, shifts in the timing of the seasons, and declining snowfall. These changes are an inconvenience for tourists, but they are an important change for those who live in the mountains and depend on certain climate and weather conditions for their livelihoods. The consequences are different. While skiers can pursue snow elsewhere, the slope operators must face the reality of the changes, and their economic impact, directly. Moreover, the early closure of even small beginner slopes disrupts year-round employment for park staff and ripples through the local supply chain – from snow-grooming services to hospitality businesses – undermining community resilience. This reliance on a predictable snow season also shapes the social fabric of Mont Blanc area, where winter recreation has long been a cornerstone of communal identity and intergenerational traditions; its loss therefore represents not only an economic shock but a new challenge for community identity and culture.

4.3 Agriculture: Livestock Farming, Crop Farming, and Beekeeping

While agriculture in the Alps and Apennines has significantly declined in recent decades, a contingent of farmers does continue to practice smallholder agriculture in mountain areas of Italy (Dourian, 2021; Lupi et al., 2017; Milone & Ventura, 2019; Sivini & Vitale, 2023). As they do so, they face the myriad social, ecological, and climate changes outlined above and must deal with the consequences of these changes on their farming practices. While each of the changes can affect farming independently, to understand the true impact of the changes on farmers, we need to understand how the changes intersect

(EEA, 2010; MacDonald et al., 2000; NORDREGIO, 2004; Terres et al., 2015). Here, we look first at livestock and crop farming and then at beekeeping.

4.3.1 Livestock farming when the water runs out

Above, we saw how higher average temperatures and lower snowfall are affecting winter tourism. Less snow will also have an increasingly important impact on water reserves, augmenting the risk of drought in the spring and summer seasons, with immediate effects on the agricultural sector. In mountain economies, water is indispensable for pastures and for the supply of fodder, the staple food of, for example, dairy cattle, sheep, and goats. Pastures and vegetation, under conditions of water stress, accelerate maturation to the detriment of quality. They do this because their biological goal, explains Mauro Bassignana, director of the IAR, Institut Agricole Régional of the Aosta Valley, is to preserve the species, and to reproduce as quickly as possible in the event of drought. Less forage means less milk production, hence fewer dairy products, a sector of excellence for the Aosta Valley.

> While it is true that we can supplement the diet of these animals with fodder, already today, with the war in Ukraine, prices have risen a lot. I am thinking of wheat and soy ... while profit margins in this sector are minimal. In addition, if we are talking about Fontina cheese, the specifications do not allow the use of fodder that is not local ... The lack of water, especially for those who are not in areas fed by glaciers – which is another type of criticality – could be a problem in many areas of the region. (Interview 28 March, 2022)

Similarly, a cattle farmer in the Val Camonica explained how drought in the lowland areas of Italy had driven up demand for hay from northern Europe, which caused prices to increase (Schirpke et al., 2019; Whitaker, 2023a). Even as the drought resolved in Italy, prices stayed high because the drought struck northern Europe, increasing demand for Italian hay.

As we saw with the chamois, lower quality and quantity of forage can affect animal growth and health. However, the implications for livestock cannot be reduced to simple biological consequences, as farmers operate within a complex system of economic, legal, and regulatory constraints. Malnutrition is neither tolerated nor legal under current EU and Italian animal welfare leg-

islation. In response to forage shortages, many farmers already purchase supplemental feed, including high-protein fodder, sometimes from outside the region. However, these adaptations increase production costs and may affect the nutritional and organoleptic properties of the milk, potentially challenging the compliance of local products with the Fontina PDO standards (Fontina is a semi-soft, raw cow's milk cheese produced exclusively in the Aosta Valley and protected under the EU Protected Designation of Origin scheme).

To mitigate the effects of heat stress on livestock and avoid decreases in milk yield, some farms – particularly larger, more industrialized operations – have begun to adopt technological solutions such as mechanical ventilation and misting systems in their barns. These technologies, however, come at a high cost and are generally inaccessible to small-scale family farms or to Alpine pastures located at higher elevations. This disparity highlights how the impacts of climate change tend to disproportionately affect those who are already more economically vulnerable or situated in more remote areas, where access to adaptation technologies is limited. In this sense, climate-induced forage scarcity and heat stress interact not only with ecological systems, but also with broader socio-economic and political structures. The viability of high-altitude dairy production will depend as much on institutional support and adaptive capacity as on environmental conditions themselves (Dall'Ò, 2021; Hopping et al., 2016).

In this example, we see how on a local scale, the impact of an event such as the war in Ukraine or drought in a different part of the world, apparently very distant from the Alpine context, intersects with local changes to weather and climate, triggering and amplifying them. The repercussions vary by context, but certainly are more severe for those communities that find themselves living in conditions of previous vulnerability and that have fewer resources at their disposal, such as many rural mountain communities. When examined alongside the impact of less snow on winter tourism, we see how different sectors of the mountain economy become connected through climate change. It is possible that the future of both depends on the ability of the sectors to address this challenge and identify a shared path forward.

4.3.2 Crop and livestock farming as the forest advances

In both the Alps and Apennines, the consequences of species migrations towards higher altitudes driven by climate and ecological changes are being observed by mountain residents. One significant migration is that of the treeline: a natural boundary within which trees manage to survive due to precise climatic and environmental conditions (Rawlence, 2022). Since World War II, the area occupied by forests on the massif of Mont Blanc has increased by 60 percent. The treeline is now at around 2,250 meters, but could reach 3,500 meters by 2050 (Gerardi, 2019). The colonization of vegetation from the bottom up, above the forest line, and the replacement of high-altitude plant species affects the entire Alpine region from Nice to Vienna (Rawlence, 2022). When the climate changes, the treeline changes accordingly; it is among the more visible effects of climate change in the mountains (Frate et al., 2018; Noce et al., 2023). The tree-line of the Mont Blanc area contains non-human figures such as wild and farm animals, and even insects and plants, which have always played a crucial cultural role for Alpine communities; from founding myths, and legends, to mountain economies (e.g., livestock farming, milk and cheese production, beekeeping, hunting). These species are now of great importance not only because they are "perceiving and bringing" the first signs and symptoms of the "climate crisis", but also because they are anticipating it as "sentinels" (Lakoff & Keck, 2013). The abandonment of rural and agricultural areas has also facilitated the spread of forests.

Like in the Alps, in the Apennines, the distribution and nature of forests is also shifting due to social and climate changes (Bonanomi, 2020; Rogora et al., 2018; Vitali et al., 2018). As residents of Garfagnana explained, while trees, particularly chestnut and birch trees, have always grown or been cultivated at the middle and high elevations, or cultivated intentionally on more precipitous slopes less suited to crops, since the 1960s and the rural and agricultural abandonment that has occurred since then, forests have come to dominate at all but the highest elevations. Abandoned pastures and fields have filled in with trees. As a mountain resident explained, trees have "grown up right to people's doorsteps."

In line with this advancement of the forest has come an increase in the number of wild animals. A farmer explains: "At the scale of agriculture in general, all this means that now our territory has been abandoned and has been repopulated by wild animals ... now anything you want to do – even a vegetable garden – you have to put in two meters of fencing" (male, early 50s, livestock and crop farmer). The increase in the number of wild animals is tied to the presence of more suitable habitat (forests) and the decline of people working the countryside. As the forest advanced and there was less competition for space from people working the land, the numbers of wild boar, deer, roe deer, and wolves has increased (Bailly, 2021). As one farmer put it: "We don't know what to do ... these animals, nobody can stop them" (female, early 70s, livestock and crop farmer).

Farmers report widespread damage to their crops and herds. Wild boar destroy agricultural land, plowing through fences or burrowing beneath them, destroying entire fields in a short time. As a young pig farmer explains: "If there is a plant, a deer or a roe deer will eat it. If you have potatoes a wild boar will destroy everything. The first problem is this one, and then if you have livestock you will also think about the wolf." Wolves are perceived as predators who slaughter animals at pasture, sometimes even those fenced in. As a livestock farmer in Garfagnana explains: "we used to have goats but we sold them because of the wolf ... The wolf is beautiful, but for those who have animals, they give you goosebumps." Farmers in the Alps report similar problems: "That is the biggest problem for us.... the wolves are taking over everything, they get everywhere. It is risky for dogs, even pet dogs, not just hunting dogs, but they are smarter because they stay away" (interview with M. B. on 15 January, 2024, Valdigne, Mont Blanc area).

Since wolves are protected by law, farmers can defend their animals only through the use of guard dogs or fences constructed specifically to keep out wolves. This has cascading effects on animal health, farm economy, and tourism. Keeping animals fenced into a limited space all year, even if only for the night when the animals are at greatest risk, means that animals must be fed hay, an added expense for the farmer. In addition, keeping animals on the same plot of land increases their risk of exposure to parasites. Sheep and goat farmers especially reported that, as a result, they have to treat their animals for worms more frequently than they used to.

In turn, tourists and passerby complain about the presence of guard dogs which can be threatening and dangerous if improperly approached. Farmers face pressure to keep their dogs from harassing passerby, but the role of the dog is precisely this, in order to ensure the pasturing animals are safe. Alternatively, shepherds can stay with the animals when they are at pasture, but there are fewer and fewer people willing and/or able to shepherd the animals in the high, and even low, elevations. Hiking the crest of the Apennines in Garfagnana, one can sometimes still find herds of animals, often shepherded by Moroccan, Malian, or other North African shepherds, immigrants to Italy (Nori & Farinella, 2020).

This example shows how parallel climate and social changes are driving shifts in the distribution and nature of mountain flora and fauna. Increasing average temperatures and changes in precipitation combine with rural depopulation, the abandonment of agriculture, demographic changes, and economic changes to alter mountain ecosystems, with cascading effects on farmers, hunters, and other mountain residents. As mountain residents adapt to the changes, they in turn shape the mountain environment.

4.3.3 Mountain beekeeping under conditions of change

Beekeepers and bees depend on mountain ecosystems and weather patterns in ways that make them particularly susceptible to change. As an Alpine beekeeper explained, honeybees are sentinels of change, "bioindicators … a sign of the environment we are living in" (38-year-old, male), as they are highly vulnerable to alterations to the climate and to ecosystems (Cunningham et al. 2022; Taylor, 2019). Evidence from the Alps and across the world suggests that changes to weather patterns, ecosystems, and landscapes are affecting honeybee health and survival (Le Conte & Navajas, 2008; Slathia & Tripathi, 2016; Van Espen et al., 2023), which is having downstream effects on beekeepers and beekeeper productivity. Like hunters, beekeepers, attentive to the health and behavior of their bees, are "thermometers of the health of the environment" (38-year-old male). They are noticing important changes to local climates and ecosystems that are affecting their beekeeping practice.

Weather and the timing of the seasons influence bee survival, honey production, and behavior (Gerlach, 1985; Holmes, 2002; Le Conte and Navajas, 2010;

Spivak, 1992). Beekeeping depends on consistent and predictable flowering times and flowers full of nectar and pollen. It is not surprising then that the climate and ecosystem changes most cited by beekeepers are changes that affect seasonal weather and flower blooms. These include: increasing variability in the weather, temperature changes, other meteorological changes (drought, excessive rain, windstorms), and changes to the timing of the seasons and flowering times.

In particular, beekeepers feel strongly that the spring – the most important season for the production of honey – has changed, arriving early but then reverting to a cold climate. "These springs are crazier every year and make it difficult for the bees" (55-year-old, female). The spring is marked by "intense periods of cold and rain" (41-year-old, male) whereas it once was defined by warm days and cool nights. A beekeeper who has been raising bees for decades said: "It seems like a curse: every year the weather conditions during the flowering of *Robinia pseudoacacia* are adverse. Sometimes worse, other times less bad, but we see this important flowering slip away more with regrets than with satisfaction" (60-year-old, male). Cold springs trap bees in the hive and cause them to consume their food reserves rather than produce honey, also leaving them weaker when the good weather eventually returns.

Shifts in the seasons and in average temperatures also affect flowering times and quality. Increasingly frequent, intense, and unpredictable precipitation, droughts, and wind events damage blooms and can reduce nectar production (see also Scaven & Rafferty, 2013): "A normal rainfall does not damage flowers" (59-year-old, male). The timing of blooms has also shifted. Experienced beekeepers report that the timing of the blooms used to be predictable and consistent year to year, "Now, there are no more patterns. All you can do is pay more attention" (62-year-old, male). Such changes in the timing of blooms have been documented across the Alps (Busetto et al., 2010; Colombo et al., 2011), and flowers are projected to continue to bloom earlier under future climate warming scenarios (Olesen et al., 2012).

Blooms that are closer together and shorter also give bees less time to put away honey for the winter season. Spring blooms lost to cold and rainy weather only compound the problem. Beekeepers can find themselves in a difficult position as they try to balance honey production for sale with ensuring their bees have enough honey stores to survive the winter season. Many

of the beekeepers agree that: "The changes have been negative with consequences … there is reduced production of honey and an increase in mortality in the hives" (32-year-old, female). Enrico, the 80-year-old beekeeper introduced above, summarizes the impact of these changes on his beekeeping: "Beekeeping has become a lot harder than it used to be."

Importantly, beekeepers were clear that other social and environmental factors, changes, and challenges are also affecting beekeeping in important ways. The mountain climate, traditionally marked by harsh winters and mild, short summers; the precipitous terrain; diseases and pests, including ones that have recently arrived in the mountains due to globalization and climate change; lack of research on beekeeping; lack of support services, such as agricultural extension services and research on beekeeping; and complex bureaucratic requirements also pose challenges for beekeeping (Whitaker, 2023b; 2024). The abandonment of agriculture has led to the advancement of forests into what were formerly pastures and fields that used to be sources of pollen and nectar for bees. The development of the valley bottom means that there are warehouses and buildings where there was once farmland. Industrialization in the valley bottoms has increased pollution. The spraying of pesticides on fruit trees is a risk to bees. The addition of climate change exacerbates these existing challenges, rendering beekeepers and bees more vulnerable.

Beekeepers may be able to increase the strength and survival of their hives and the hives' ability to handle changes to the weather and environment by selecting for bees with particular traits. Some beekeepers choose to use a specific variety of bee because it is adapted to the mountain environment. Others select for queens possessing certain favorable characteristics, such as a calm temperament, high productivity, and resistance to harsh weather. Luisella, for example, tries to keep queen bees born and raised in the valley. After two difficult years when she lost all her hives to illness and harsh winters, she chose to raise her own queen bees and has had several successful years since. She feels that her own queens do better compared to those imported from outside of the valley that are not as well adapted to the mountain environment. Beekeepers may play an important role in selecting for bees that are adapted to the mountain environment and climate even as that environment and climate changes. In so doing, they may be able to shape

the ability of their bees to deal with the changes (see Le Conte and Navajas, 2008). Beekeepers are also adapting by paying closer attention to the timing of the seasons and the flower blooms, moving their bees to high elevation pastures to take advantage of specific blooms, checking on their hives more often, and providing supplemental food to their bees if bad weather prevents bees from leaving the hive.

In this example, we see how social changes such as agricultural and rural abandonment; ecological changes, including the disappearance of pastures and fields, the increased presence of warehouses, industry, and houses in the valley bottoms, and shifts in flora and fauna species; and climate changes, including changes to the seasons, to flowering times, and to weather patterns – independently and in the ways they intersect – are affecting bees and beekeeping. Beekeeper observations of change indicate an understanding that the environment and weather have changed, and that these changes are driven by diverse forces. The way they are responding to the changes suggests an understanding that they must adapt their practices, pay increasing attention to the environment and weather, and improvise in response to what they are observing.

5. Conclusion

Mountain residents, animals, and plants are on the frontlines of change, sentinels of what is to come. Mountain residents have noticed that the environment and climate are changing and have identified the ways they are changing, for the human and the non-human alike. The social, ecological, and climate changes observed map onto changes documented in natural science studies of change in mountain areas (see Bonardo, 2024; Dax et al., 2021; MacDonald et al., 2000; Plieninger et al., 2016; Seneviratne et al., 2021). As the case studies show, though, the way the changes affect the daily lives of people living in these areas is shaped by the specific characteristics of the places that are changing and the people, animals, and plants who live in them. To understand the impact of climate change requires understanding these local impacts and putting them into conversation with larger, global level impacts and changes.

The case studies also show how climate change and social and ecological changes are affecting those most exposed to the consequences of the global climate and environmental crisis in the Alps and Apennines: smallholder farmers, ranchers, hunters, and those involved in other activities that depend on the climate such as tourism and winter skiing. While these groups of individuals may seem to be separate in their use and understanding of the mountain environment, the examples show how the climate crisis links them all, both to each other and to the larger global context of change in which they are enmeshed. Their individual observations of change, brought together, could lead to a greater understanding of the current environment and climate that might point to paths forward for all. While there may be areas of conflict, for example in water management for a longer ski season versus a productive agricultural season, the future will require collaboration and co-operation among those dependent on a changing climate and environment for their livelihoods.

The examples also show the deep interconnections linking humans with the non-human in mountain areas and the profound mutual dependence that exists between them. The impacts of the climate crisis are inscribed in the bodies and behavior of animals, as they are in the ecosystems they, and we, inhabit. The sense of loss that many local inhabitants express in response to these visible transformations – warmer winters, retreating snowlines, animals behaving in unfamiliar ways – can be interpreted through the lens of *solastalgia*, the emotional or existential distress caused by environmental change to one's home. This place-based form of ecological grief reinforces the idea that environmental change is not only physical, but also deeply psychological and cultural.

Solutions to the climate crisis will be rooted in understanding of the ways in which climate, social, and ecological changes are interconnected at and across local and global scales. They will also require us to understand our interdependence on the non-human actors with whom we share our environments. From the water cycle to the implications of drought for grazing and winter skiing, from phenological maturation to the success of beekeeping and the survival of bees, from species migration to hunting, from temperature increases to animal diseases, and from shifts in tree distribution to the destruction of fields and the death of livestock, climate change plays out

in unique ways at local scales as it intersects with recent and on-going social and ecological changes. In the face of these challenges, mountain residents are not only observers but also agents of adaptation. Farmers experiment with crop calendars and irrigation strategies; hunters change their practices to respond to animal behavior; tourism workers adjust to shorter seasons and rising operating costs. These adaptations, while often reactive and limited by resources or geography, signal both resilience and a pressing need for support. Future pathways should strengthen this local adaptive capacity through policies that are ecologically grounded, socially just, and attentive to the specific needs and knowledge of mountain communities. Building these alliances – between humans and non-humans, between science and local knowledge, and across generations – may be one of the most effective strategies for navigating the uncertain futures of the Anthropocene.

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Conquering the Mountain Forests on the Eastern Edge of Transylvania: Community, Resources and Redistribution

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Abstract

This chapter examines the case of a village located on the eastern edge of Transylvania, deep within the pine forests of the Eastern Carpathians. Founded in the late 19th century as a logging settlement, the village experienced rapid economic and demographic growth, evolving into a melting pot of diverse ethnic groups. However, this economic boom was accompanied by setbacks, and nearly every period of prosperity in the village's history has been followed by crises. The most recent crisis occurred in the 1990s, after the collapse of socialism in Romania. Despite these challenges and a continuous decline in population, the village persists and even attracts new settlers. The chapter explores the contradictions and uncertainties of mountain life in the 21st century through the cultural-ecological frameworks of mountain studies and the findings of socialist and post-socialist anthropology. Building on previous research, it aims to apply the social-ecological system (SES) approach by investigating the interplay between natural resources and human practices and decisions.

Introduction

Szeklerland (Ținutul Secuiesc in Romanian, Székelyföld[1] in Hungarian) is commonly known as a mountainous area, although much of its territory lies in hilly or subalpine zones. Permanent settlements located at elevations above 900–1,000 m[2] in the actual mountainous regions have been documented primarily since the 19th century. The utilisation of the mountainous areas in Szeklerland mainly occurred through temporary camps, summer huts, shepherd shelters and logging camps. Some of these, such as Vărșag (Varság in Hungarian; see Bárth, 1998), became permanent settlements during the 19th century.[3] Additionally, we know of settlements that emerged at the end of the 19th or early 20th centuries but have since disappeared (Kinda, 2021). The formation of these settlements was influenced by population pressure from the originating villages and the pull factors of the available resources (land, pastures, meadows, forest areas suitable for clearing). On the other hand, their disappearance was often due to isolation and lack of modernisation (such as road networks and electrification), or due to the abolition of private property and nationalisation of communal forests and pastures during socialism.

1 The eastern part of Transylvania, inhabited mostly by Szeklers, a Hungarian subgroup. As Transylvania is a multi-ethnic region, I give the names of the settlements in Romanian and Hungarian. From the Middle Ages it was part of the Kingdom of Hungary as a voivodship, then an independent principality, then a province of the Habsburg Empire and, finally, from the Compromise (1867) until the end of World War I, it was part of Hungary as the eastern part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. After the peace treaties that ended World War I, it became part of Romania (during World War II, its northern part was reannexed to Hungary for 50 months by the Second Vienna Decision, and its status was finalised by the treaties that ended World War II).

2 Surprisingly, it is difficult to find universally valid, global criteria for defining mountainous areas, as it is mostly the local perception that perceives and names a landform as a mountain (Byers et al., 2013, p. 2–6). The highest settlement in Romania is Fundata, at 1,360 m above sea level. Retrieved 5 September 2024 from https://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fundata,_Brașov

3 The creation of the Ghimeș Valley (Gyimesek in Hungarian) is a special story, which we will not discuss in detail here for reasons of space. The area, which lies on the border between Transylvania (Hungary) and Romania, began to be populated from the 17th century onwards.

In this context, the story of Comandău (Kommandó in Hungarian)[4] in Covasna County is particularly unique. It was established during the rapid industrialisation and deforestation at the end of the 19th century. Initially operating as a logging station, it skipped the typical developmental phase of slowly transitioning from a temporary camp to a permanent settlement. Kommandó quickly turned into a developed town, described in local narratives as being in its "heyday" (e.g., with electricity and telephone services in households, and even a casino). What is most intriguing is that despite the logging and wood processing industries no longer being the primary livelihoods for the population, the settlement still exists today. Moreover, it seems that, despite all the difficulties, it will continue to exist for a long time to come. The question, of course, is: when will it re-enter a "thriving" phase? The natural resources (remoteness, mountains, forests and waters and rich and attractive natural environment) are present; however, the attitudes of social institutions and socio-political measures remain uncertain.

In this study, I analyse Kommandó's unique situation, based on ethnographic fieldwork[5] and literature. I examine how the conquest of this mountainous area, situated 1,000 m above sea level, began and developed, and whether this conquest has been completed or is still ongoing. The analysis is framed by two approaches: studies on mountainous areas and analyses that, starting from ecological perspectives, seek to study nature and society together, with a particular emphasis on political factors. Additionally, I draw inspiration from the cultural anthropology of socialism and post-socialism in Romania. An important question raised in this study is how the settlement,

4 Today's Kommandó is located in the easternmost part of the former Kingdom of Hungary, later Principality of Transylvania, then the Habsburg Empire, and then the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Today, it is part of Covasna County, and although it has changed from a border settlement to one of the most geographically central settlements in the country, it is still characterised by a strong peripheral position. Among the current developments, the village's tourism development should be highlighted, with a significant number of holiday homes, guesthouses and villas being built in the vicinity of the village. Population inflow has not stopped; rather, it has changed in character.

5 Participant observation and interviews in 2016 and the summers of 2018 and 2024. I use interview material recorded with 22 people from or originating from the commune (former and current leaders, engineers, ordinary workers). In 2018, Zsombor Csata and I conducted fieldwork in the framework of the project "Attempts of Institutionalization of Ethnic Economy among the Hungarians in Transylvania and Slovakia" (OTKA FK125276). I plan to conduct further fieldwork in the settlement, so this chapter is part of ongoing research and presents the preliminary findings.

despite its isolation and exposure to environmental elements, is considered a distinct point in broader national and global networks, with its life being shaped by economic and political regimes as much as by the often harsh and unfriendly natural environment and climate. Kommandó came into existence in this global context, and its two periods of prosperity (pre- and post-war, and socialist) can be linked to these broader contexts. Its decline and current quest for direction are similarly linked to these global frameworks.

Mountain research has a specific role in cultural anthropology. This interest is understandable given that about 12% of the world's population live in mountain areas and a further 26% live in close proximity to mountains and depend on the resources provided by mountain areas (Veteto, 2009). Furthermore, mountain areas provide essential resources (hydropower, subsoil resources, timber and non-timber products) and biodiversity; a significant proportion of the plants that play a key role in feeding human populations have been domesticated in mountain areas (Byers et al., 2013; Veteto, 2009). It is no coincidence that cultural ecological approaches in anthropology have been the most open to research on mountain areas and that cultural anthropology has been inspired by ecological approaches in its interest in this direction. However, the duality of mountain areas should also be highlighted: "Mountain people are typically *independent, innovative, resourceful, adaptive,* and *outstanding entrepreneurs*. At the same time, they include some of the *poorest*, *most remote*, and *disadvantaged* people in the world" (Byers et al., 2013, p. 6). Many of the above statements, including the dichotomy, also apply to the area under review.

The interest of anthropologists and scholars of related disciplines, and the development of related sub-domains, has led to the emergence of terms such as Alpine, Andean, Appalachian and Himalayan studies. This interest, in line with the geography and topography of the country, has led to remarkable scientific results in Romania, where cultural anthropology and ecological approaches have been inspiringly combined. Research has been carried out – just to give a few examples of the richness of the topics – on hay cultures in Maramureș (Máramaros in Hungarian; Iuga, 2016; Ivașcu et al., 2016), on the transformation and financialisation of the lives of forest-dwelling families (Vasile, 2015), on the transformation of gold extraction (Püsök, 2021) in the Apuseni Mountains, on transhumant pastoralism in the Southern Car-

pathians (Huband et al., 2010), on ecological knowledge in the Ghimeș (Babai et al., 2014; Babai & Molnár, 2016) and on the transformation of forest ownership in Vrancea (Măntescu, 2014). The latter topic and geographical area are important because they are related to Kommandó in terms of the history of logging and also because Vrancea has a special place in one of the first, still influential works on the research of forest exploitation in Romania, by Henri Stahl (1958). Access to forests and the changes of regulations (or customary laws) have been an important topic of studies in Romania from the very beginning (see for example Vasile 2008), and the issue can also be conceptualised in terms of the emergence of foreign investors and land grabbing (Ciutacu et al., 2017).

The present study continues this line of previous works by complementing or thinking beyond the social and ecological system (SES; see Gunderson et al., 2019) approach: it interrogates resources, the human community and the interaction between the two. Its particular analytical focus is on the question of structures that transcend historical periods and on paternalistic distribution in approaches to socialism and post-socialism (see Kideckel, 1993, 2004; Verdery, 1996). Drawing on the aforementioned literature, the chapter in fact addresses the question of how people who are settled here and who are almost always dependent on a central distributive institution navigate between dependence and autonomy, poverty and innovation (or control and agency). Moreover, the analysis also addresses the dynamics of the interactions between institutions, people and the environment. In this context, the study interrogates both transience and duality – even in the sense that a kind of “localness” was created within this transience.

The first part of the analysis presents the history of the village very briefly and with only the most necessary references. The second part first reviews the natural resources and access to them (paying special attention to the ambiguous access to local resources and paternalistic redistribution as long-standing local patterns), then discusses community organisation and presents both the close ties that create solidarity among the locals and the tensions between them and the newcomers. The third part finally focuses on the issue of competition for resources and also asks to what extent the complex situation of the locality can be interpreted with the “entitlement trap” approach. The chapter concludes with a summary of its findings.

Where We Are: A Short History of the Settlement[6]

On military maps from the mid-18th century, Kommandó and the surrounding territories were entirely covered by forests. In the late 18th century, in response to the increasing customs conflicts between the Habsburg and Ottoman empires, smuggling across the mountainous border regions flourished. To control this, the Austrian army established a border control station called *Kommando* or *Grenzkommando*. However, no permanent settlement formed at this time, and such a settlement only emerged with the economic boom following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise of 1867. This post-compromise period, particularly the late 19th century, brought significant economic development and radical social and legal reforms, many of which were prefigured by the Revolution of 1848. Large modernisation projects were implemented throughout the Austro-Hungarian Empire, including drainage systems, flood control measures, road and railway construction, as well as industrial development and urbanisation. These efforts required building materials, and the traditional, small-scale logging methods used to extract timber (seasonal logging, floating logs down rivers or transporting by cart) were modernised with new technologies.

This economic boom was accompanied by a legal reform and a social shift: the abolition of serfdom in 1848 made land transferable and purchasable. However, a significant portion of land, especially communal land that included forests and pastures, remained restricted. An important proportion of Transylvania's forested areas fell into this category. A new legal reform introduced private ownership to forest lands, allowing these forests to be bought and sold. At the same time, the wealthy bourgeoisie and entrepreneurial class rose, paralleled by the gradual emancipation of the Jewish population.

David Horn, a wealthy merchant of Jewish origin from Upper Hungary, saw a unique opportunity in the forests around Kommandó, despite their be-

6 In this section, and in summarising the historical data in general, I draw heavily on the interview with and also on the book of local teacher and historian Mária Szabó. I owe thanks for her valuable help! My other sources are: Álmos József: A kommandói Erdélyi Erdőipari Részvénytársaság [The Transylvanian Forest Industry Joint-Stock Company in Kommandó]. https://www.hirmondo.ro/kultura/a-kommandoi-erdelyi-erdoipari-reszvenytarsasag/ Gyula, Miholcsa: AC vs DC – The history of electric light in Transylvania until 1900. XIII. Tudomány- és Technikatörténeti Online Konferencia. 2020. https://ojs.emt.ro/TTK/issue/view/18

ing difficult to access. In 1882, he bought the rights to the area's timber from the original owner, Gyula Zathureczky, and began large-scale construction. The timber plant was inaugurated in 1889, starting in a settlement named Gyulafalva (which no longer exists but was located east of the current village and locals still remember it) in honour of the former owner. The operation was later transferred to the current settlement, where transport was facilitated by the construction of railways and funiculars. Railways extended on both sides, even reaching into what was then Romania, making the Kommandó owners active participants in the capitalisation of formerly communal forest properties in Vrancea (see Măntescu, 2014). Narrow-gauge railways were also built into the forests, connecting major logging points. At its peak, the settlement had around 200 km of railways linking logging camps with the village and the nearby town of Covasna (Kovászna in Hungarian).

Kommandó soon outgrew its temporary character: a school, library, casino and public baths were all built. The upper class even had access to a tennis court. By the time of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the settlement had gained significant appeal, attracting people from various nationalities within the empire to work as engineers, railway specialists, machine operators and labourers. Local tradition speaks of seven or eight different nationalities and about 6,000 to 7,000 workers in the village and surrounding logging camps during its peak. While the multi-national aspect is attested by surnames, available sources do not back up the large population numbers. According to reliable statistics, Kommandó had approximately 3,000 residents in 1910 (Varga, 1998). The settlement was a melting pot, blending various groups of people. In 1936, under Romanian rule, it gained the status of an independent commune. The unique technical advancements of the village were apparent from the beginning, as it already had electric lighting during the inauguration of the plant – not just in the logging station but also in residential homes.

However, Kommandó's development and prosperity were not without setbacks and crises. The founding investor, Horn, encountered financial difficulties early on and sold the company to the Groedel family from Maramureș in 1897. The timber from Kommandó had to compete on European markets in terms of both quality and price, which often led to tensions. Between the two world wars, the Groedel family also faced difficulties, but the operation ultimately survived. However, the depletion of high-quality forests

and the declining quantity of harvestable timber foreshadowed that the village's survival was at risk. For a while, the incorporation of more distant forests provided a temporary solution, allowing the plant and village to survive through state nationalisation and the establishment of socialist rule (despite the Second Vienna Award leaving most of the forested areas in Romania and temporarily closing the plant).

The plant was incorporated into the state system and placed under county administration (while the central administration of the factory was in Brașov [Brassó in Hungarian]). The decline was also hastened by centralised economic management: a regulation prevented machinery repairs from being done locally, and many items sent away for repair never returned. Despite this, the 1970s and 1980s are still remembered by locals as a "second golden age", when the workers favoured by the socialist heavy industry system received good wages and benefits and the village had a functioning institutional network that supported a liveable lifestyle. By the 1980s, the depletion of high-quality forests once again signalled a crisis, but the plant lasted until the regime change. The final blow came in 1995 when a windstorm devastated large areas of surrounding forests. According to locals, the chaotic privatisation process that followed further compounded the problem. After exactly 110 years of operation, the Kommandó plant was shut down in October 1999.

A Village and a Railroad

One of the unique aspects of Kommandó, aside from other factors, was its counterweight funicular, a marvel of engineering. This funicular was essential for overcoming the steep hillside that rose sharply over a short distance – something only achievable with railway technology. A proper road to the village was not constructed until 1969; until then, it had been served by the railway and a forest cart track leading to the nearby village of Păpăuți (Papolc in Hungarian). The funicular has since become unusable due to fire, intentional vandalism, storms, human negligence and, finally, a lack of maintenance.[7] Only a small section of the lower Kovászna railway line remains

7 See Szabó (2004), and the sources in the previous footnote.

functional, but remnants of the railway can still be seen in Kommandó in several places. As travellers ascend the mountain plateau along the road built in 1969, they can spot the old railway tracks embedded in the road's surface. The bumpy ride on the cobblestone road often follows these tracks, almost as if the journey mirrors the village's entire history, reminiscent of a Márquezian metaphor: both in memories and physical structures, elements of the village's founding era continually resurface, even though they are often no longer usable. The lack of a proper road is an important element in locals' narratives on their precarious situation (see Roseman, 1996).

Some of the buildings that were part of the former plant still stand, while others are in ruins, serving as reminders of earlier times. A few locals work in wood processing for local companies, but besides these, job opportunities are limited to small shops, bars, local businesses (e.g., a bakery) and public institutions (e.g., the mayor's office, school). Most of the village's residents live in former company-owned terraced houses (a row of joined, usually small wooden houses with shared side walls) or apartment blocks. Property ownership is rare among the locals; it could be said that nearly everything here is owned by the former company, the municipal council or the state. This has created a unique fabric of dependence on centralised distribution systems and local communal life, unlike anywhere else in the country. Perhaps the closest parallels are mining towns or former industrial cities, where the collapse of mono-industrial facilities and their markets, combined with the collapse of the socialist system, left the region struggling to find new footing (Kideckel, 2008; Püsök, 2021). The picturesque landscape and the abundance of available resources stand in stark contrast to the social reality that greets visitors.

Resources, (Paternalistic) Redistribution, Global Competition and Grey Zones

The ownership of land, and the changes in ownership, has been a central question in all social systems since ancient high cultures. Forest ownership, especially in mountainous regions where forest-covered areas dominate, is particularly important. The human history of the Kommandó forests begins at the end of the 19th century. On one side of the story, we have large estates

and the rise of capitalism, while on the other side, we have small landholders and traditional (Szekler and communal) forest management. The transformation of forest ownership rights in Szeklerland, and in the Carpathians in general, was not without conflicts and lawsuits. The history of the forest areas used by the Kommandó logging plant is also marked by disputes and legal battles. One of the characteristics of forest use, already established by the late 19th century, was that the workers employed in the forests could not gain property rights, neither in the forests nor in any other land-based ownership context, with very few exceptions. The surrounding forests are today still owned by municipalities, the state or private individuals. While the forests remain one of the most important resources, locals have limited access to them. This presents two problems: first, in ensuring that local residents have enough firewood and, second, in securing raw materials for local timber harvesting and wood processing.

Winters in Kommandó are long and cold. Although climate change has made its effects felt here as well (e.g., less snow), the heating season still lasts from the end of August to June, sometimes even into early July. This increases pressure on households, as they must secure enough firewood for nearly the entire year. The municipal council provides a certain amount of wood at regulated prices per household, but it is not enough. To maintain affordable prices for the often cash-strapped locals, the wood is not delivered fully processed. This supports a dual moral discourse maintained by local leaders: alongside the narrative of “we are responsible for the locals” and “we take care of them”, there is also an idea that everyone should work for their firewood and decide whether to pay someone to chop it or do it themselves. However, since the allocated wood is insufficient, people have to obtain wood from other sources as well. The state forestry service also supplies wood at regulated prices (in fact, the municipal council uses the state forestry prices), but locals must still find ways to acquire more wood.

The preservation of ownership structures and the retention of central ownership has created situations that maintain both paternalistic distribution discourses (characteristic of socialism) and the survival of grey zones where locals can find ways to get by. Firewood can be obtained through central distribution systems, but that alone is not enough, leading to various forms of resourcefulness:

- So how do people get wood if it doesn't come from the council?

- There are haulers.

- Yes? But where do they cut it? What do they cut?

- In the forest. Whatever they can (laughter). Everyone knows this. Everyone knows. (female, 73, 2024)[8]

Although the local forests had already been threatened with depletion between the two world wars, new forest areas were continuously brought into use to bridge the gap. During World War II, the shifting borders and the fact that much of the forested land remained in Romania posed a problem, leading to the plant's temporary closure. After the war, these obstacles were removed, but local timber processing companies still face challenges: they must compete on a market where global corporations are also present. One of the major players, a company with two large operations in Romania (one of them located about 40 km from the village), practically purchases logs at preferential prices, pushing out local companies. "Since [company name] arrived near us, it's been very hard… (…) This [company name] is wiping out smaller businesses" (male, 50, 2018).

Paradoxically, in this area rich in forests, access to raw materials remains the main issue: "The problem is more with getting logs. It's not even an issue if you have money; it's just that the prices are so high that you can't compete with [company name]. They'll take the logs instead" (male, 50, 2018).

The paternalistic behaviour of the local council follows a long-standing pattern. The workers and residents of Kommandó have essentially depended on a central, almost totalitarian distribution system since the settlement's inception. This was further reinforced by the socialist redistribution systems. Workers lived in company-owned houses, and during socialism, they barely had to pay for firewood, electricity or water. An interesting parallel is David Kideckel's observation that dependence on the central structures of the state and paternalistic structures in Romania predate socialism (Kideckel, 1993) and the way in which, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, local petty rulers (almost kings) rose to power and tied the employees of the companies that they had privatised to themselves in almost feudal systems of depend-

8 The direct quotes are taken from recorded interviews with locals. In brackets are the gender and the age of informants and the year of the interview.

ence (Humphrey, 1991). According to locals, even during the shortages of the 1980s, they received such good supplies that when they visited relatives living down in the valleys, they could bring them oil, sugar and flour.

While elsewhere in Romania the collapse of the centralised distribution systems after the regime change caused significant disruption, Kommandó preserved certain structures. One example is the centralised distribution of firewood. Another is the peculiar situation of the housing stock: although some residents managed to buy the houses that once belonged to the company (and later the commune), land registration has only been completed in a few rare cases. The unique situation in Kommandó is that while many residents own their terraced houses, the land beneath them still belongs to the municipal council. The council has taken on the slow task of registering the land, framing it within the paternalistic discourse.

The irony, and strangeness, of the situation is that while many residents struggle to obtain land registration for their homes, luxury villas, often with near-luxury amenities, have sprung up around the village and even deeper in the forests. The construction of these villas suggests that their land registration must be in order, at least theoretically. This is highlighted by the following conversation:

> - So, the guesthouses are all outside the village, right?
> - Yes, yes, yes.
> - And where did they buy the land from?
> - Good question. We'd like to know that too. That is why we don't have land registration, and probably never will... (male, 45, 2024)

Aside from timber, the forests also provide significant resources in the form of fruits and mushrooms, which are, in some sense, even more important. Historically, this was considered when the plant was closed during World War II: it was suggested that other local resources could be utilised, such as hydropower (for electricity production from a water plant), health tourism (resorts, villas and a sanatorium) or even a canning factory (see Szabó, 2004, pp. 61–63). Access to timber is restricted, both for households and wood-processing companies. In theory, though, they have free access to fruits and mushrooms. However, the situation in this area is not necessarily straightfor-

ward, and therefore it gives rise to the deflection of responsibility by both the local council and the authorities in general; there is dissatisfaction with the lack of some sort of regulation on the part of the locals and with the presence of large numbers of non-local collectors and competition between the receiving centres, which pushes prices down.

In short, the mayor's office's view is that there are indeed no jobs, but anyone who goes to the forest for a decent summer of foraging can manage. So, in a way it passes on the responsibility for the truly worrying labour market situation of the villagers. The opinion of the mayor's office is sharply contradicted by the opinion of the locals: the picking season is essentially very short, the quantity that can be picked varies from year to year, there is a lot of competition from (Roma) pickers from the valley who are exploiting the land, there is a lot of fluctuation in prices and it is virtually impossible to know how many of the mushrooms picked in the morning will sell for at noon. Moreover, the receiving centres are competing for the favour of the big buyers ("I'll give the driver, let's say, 20 leis, 30 leis, I'll put in the petrol, look, come back tomorrow" [male, 54, 2018]), and they struggle to check the quality of the goods they deliver and to avoid tricks, for example, by filtering the blueberries brought in buckets filled with water ("if there was a wooden crate, we bought a roll of foil and drilled holes in the foil, put it inside, the water flowed out of the hole, we put it on the scale, we didn't weigh the water" [male, 54, 2018]).

Having said that, it is perhaps not an exaggeration to say that the people of Kommandó lead a life of struggle, which also has its origins. Life was not easy when the factory was in operation, and in many cases even the women had to do hard manual labour. The conversations recorded here support this view in many ways: hard work, lack of work, the particular distribution of resources and getting to the nearest town from the village all test the local people. In such a situation, the analyst would expect the grey zones that promote prosperity to be strongly articulated. Moreover, while this is the case in some areas, specific dynamics in household functioning can be observed. There is no doubt that the area is not suitable for agricultural cultivation. It is also clear that people/households do not have access to land. However, at the same time, recollections also show that there was once a greater embeddedness of household production: "I'm telling you, there were 500 [pigs], over

500. Now, if we go around in the village (…), we won't get a 100" (male, 52, 2018).

People grew vegetables in backyard gardens. Many also kept cows. There was even a dairy cooperative in the village (which ceased due to a lack of clear regulations over milk quality). Now most of this is a thing of the past: "they used to produce more, but at the current prices, 50 or 60 bani, it's better to buy, you think, I put work, and the harvest is nowhere" (male, 52, 2018). The combined effect of local production conditions and global/national food prices has meant that the tradition of the somewhat self-sufficient household in the village has been almost completely eclipsed. In other words, the question can be asked whether an institution as global and trans-historical as the household (Gregory, 2009; Smith & Wallerstein, 1992) can still keep alive dynamics that might point towards greater autonomy, agency and possibly resilience (see Netting, 1993, p. 320).[9]

The establishment of the local paternalistic redistribution system dates from the end of the 19th century and the period between the two world wars. In the new settlement, where the company initiated the conquest of the forest and established the settlement itself and took care of the workers who arrived, everyone was dependent on it. Under socialism, this became even more pronounced, reinforced by the paternalistic nature of the whole system (see Kideckel, 2004). In the post-socialist period, the municipal hall took over part of the role of the former company, but with it came the neoliberal transition, in which the local people had to find their positions in a system of multiple dependencies. They are dependent on the state and its local representation (through welfare schemes, fuel subsidies, centralised land registration); they are exposed to labour market fluctuations, competition for foraged products and rapid price movements and property relations that are financialised yet caught in bureaucratic traps. In other words, in their search for a position, they have to find points of alignment with the state, the market or the specific intersection of state, market and the local world (community; Wacquant, 2012). In Kommandó, this positioning and the specific frontier situation – as

9 We know from research on workers' colonies that partial self-sufficiency was also observed elsewhere (Várkonyi-Nickel, 2017, p. 92) and that the particular dynamics of households may be influenced by occupational mentalities that often differ from those of the peasants (Paládi-Kovács, 2007, p. 196).

in other mountain regions or isolated areas – lead to the creation of an intermediate space, known and frequented by the locals and occupied by various practices. The specificity of these practices is that the narratives of the authorities and the locals describe them in fundamentally different ways: responsibility on the part of the authorities and autonomous coping on the part of the locals are central to this. Both describe the same local reality, so it is difficult to take a position on the veracity of either version. However, perhaps this is not necessary: it is through these dichotomies that the specific local nuances and dynamics of subordination and resistance can be highlighted (see Reed-Danahay, 1993; Roseman, 1996).[10]

Community: Locals and Newcomers

Visitors arriving in the village, especially those who have been to other Transylvanian villages, are often first struck by the lively traffic and bustling activity in Kommandó's centre – its busy agora. Getting from the village to the nearest town can be somewhat challenging. There is not a regular daily bus service, but the local council operates a bus route on Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays and Sundays (again highlighting the paternalism and dependencies in the village). On other days, residents must find their own means of transportation, which is both time- and fuel-intensive, not to mention the need for frequent vehicle repairs due to poor road conditions. That is why various services are available in the village, even though there were more services available during the socialist era than today. Alongside the mayor's office, there are shops, bars and restaurants. As of the summer of 2024, both medical and dental services were also operational, and the village had a pharmacy. Thus, locals handle many of their everyday tasks within the village itself. This is one reason for the visible hustle and bustle. Another reason, however, is likely related to the limited access to land and other means of production, which gives the residents more time to organise their activities in public spaces.

Although not directly part of this analysis, it is worth noting that person-

10 Both Deborah Reed-Danahay and Sharon Roseman carried out fieldwork in rural/mountain regions in Europe (France and Spain) and pointed towards the ambiguities and the interplay of top-down and bottom-up discourses. My understanding of the local practices in this intermediate space is informed by their approach and concept (and practice) of *débrouillardise* (Reed-Danahay, 1993, p. 221; Roseman, 1996, p. 837).

al transportation to and from the village has long been an issue, involving certain ambiguities. As I have mentioned earlier, until 1969, the only ways to reach the village had been by train (and funicular) or via a forest cart track leading to Papolc. Passenger transport on the railway was not always entirely legal, while the cart track was neither possible nor practical for many. Some locals recall that passenger transport did happen on the train (there are even memories of tickets being sold), but it is also well known that such transport was forbidden because using train cars, particularly on the funicular, posed significant risks. Therefore, traveling to and from the village has always been challenging, and some of the transportation occurred in grey zones of legality. Thus, locals developed certain practical knowledge of how to get to the nearest town without formal public transportation.

This local wisdom and creativity and everyday practicalities stand in sharp contrast to two phenomena: some of the new settlers, or more precisely, second-home owners, include individuals with considerable wealth. Specifically, two people who are consistently ranked high on Hungary's national wealth lists have homes in Kommandó. One of them even has a helicopter landing pad next to his house, and it is said that he arrives by helicopter. This is in stark contrast to the locals, who have to contend with poor roads. The contrast is further amplified by another factor: for "a few hiding businessmen or politicians" (male, 42, 2018), the vast forests and the mountainous terrain provide an opportunity to lead a more secluded life, away from public attention. Some locals have voiced the opinion that the prolonged delay in road repairs may stem from the differing values between locals and newcomers: the bad roads and isolation are a hindrance to locals, but for the settlers or tourists, it adds to the village's charm, becoming part of its image. In other words, it is clear that different value systems position the village's significance in different places. The meanings of remoteness are just as context dependent (Ardener, 2012) as the meanings of mountains themselves (Byers et al., 2013).

Several unavoidable questions arise: what is this community, regularly displayed in the agora (or at least part of it)? Who shapes these value systems? Ultimately, in a settlement established in the late 19th century, who is considered a local? Behind the visible activity in the village centre is an intense network of relationships. Locals do not just gather in the agora; a lively social life also takes place between the terraced houses, with neighbours visiting each

other and participating in each other's lives, especially in the summer. The use of the village centre and these neighbourly visits blur the line between public and private life. For some, even the thin walls between the terraced houses create a kind of openness: "I knock on the wall to the neighbour to tell them to be quiet because I need to sleep. The walls are so thin" (male, 74, 2024).

In many cases, they also rely on each other. As I mentioned earlier, in recent years, winters have not been as harsh, and the snowfall has not reached the levels of previous years. Nonetheless, locals still speak about snow removal in terms of reciprocity and solidarity: "Yes, yes, we had to free each other because the snow was so high that from the house... we couldn't see the shed… We just watched through the window as the men dug each other out. We hadn't even cleared one lot, and another snowstorm came" (female, 65, 2024). Elsewhere they stress solidarity: "When a big snow comes, and you can't get out of the yard, it's nice to have someone help, and I do the same for others" (male, 42, 2018).

Solidarity is not only practiced during extreme weather. In 2018, when the school tragically burned down, the people of Kommandó displayed exemplary cooperation: "It's unbelievable what happened. Miracles happened... people managed to get everything out of the classroom under the burning roof, even the impossible" (male, 42, 2018). Locals describe their community as generally helpful: "God forbid, if anything happens, the whole of Kommandó is there to help" (male, 74, 2024). In other words, helping one another is a general norm in the village: "There is strong solidarity among the people" (male, 42, 2018).

Another important aspect of community formation and solidarity is the funeral. This life-cycle event also activates support networks: "Basically, everyone goes to funerals. (…) It shows how, in such an isolated village, people come together and have to come together" (male, 42, 2018). Beyond this, the funeral as a ritual has shaped a unique "Kommandó identity". Since people's lives were so intertwined with logging, and the railway that played a crucial role in this, it was a tradition until recent times to transport the deceased on an open railway carriage, accompanied by both train whistles and church bells (Szabó 2004, p. 93).

Despite the village's relatively short history (less than 150 years), and the fact that workers came from all over the Austro-Hungarian Empire when it had been founded, an idea of being rooted, a sense of rootedness, indigeneity and belonging[11] has emerged. It is important to note that Kommandó is now primarily a Szekler settlement: many of the workers who arrived from other parts of the empire moved away, assimilated into the local Szekler majority or settled in nearby Szekler towns or villages. The presence of Romanian guest workers was more significant during socialism, but they did not settle in large numbers (workers from neighbouring Romanian counties, such as Bacău, Vrancea and Buzău, were usually weekly commuters, transported home by the company on weekends). Thus, the village has become somewhat homogeneous, even though many of today's residents arrived in the 1950s, or can trace their ancestry back to someone who moved there during the early or later socialist period in search of work.

The sense of homeliness and rootedness is thus reinforced by one's exposure to natural conditions, isolation, the solidarity that somewhat derives from it, the insight one another's lives and the rituals that are built on them. In other words, however strange it may sound, when someone says that "my roots are in Kommandó",[12] we cannot question the validity of the claim. This obviously leads to the conclusion that there are newcomers in the village. A difference of a few generations, even a generation or two, may result in perception shifts of considerable magnitude. Someone who only moved to the village in the 1990s may perceive this, as well as a somewhat dismissive attitude towards them from the "real Kommandó people": "We don't go to him because he is a newcomer, we go to the other one" (male, 50, 2018, the interviewee runs a commercial unit). The following interview sheds light on the whole situation:

- Everybody is a newcomer in Kommandó, right?
- Yes, but some people were born here.
- Does that count elsewhere?

11 Similar to what Imola Püsök, drawing on Tim Ingold's term, calls 'dwelling' (2021, p. 166).

12 Hungarian: *tősgyökeres*. It refers to someone who is a native resident of a particular place. It carries a sense of deep-rootedness and belonging, often implying that the person or their family has lived in that place for many generations.

- It sure does. The mayor's family, for example, they were born here.
- Did it work to his advantage when he was elected?
- Well, yes, 90% of the village are their relatives. (male, 50, 2018)

The issue is not only important in itself: where there are so many natural, climatic and social challenges to be met, the existence of a community of solidarity can be crucial. However, there is also a future-oriented part to the question. Since its foundation, the existence of the commune has been linked to logging and sawmilling. In the context of the repeated crisis and now almost total collapse of the logging industry, it is almost miraculous that the commune still exists. Its future is also in question, as the locals are well aware: "Kommandó is not developing, but is developing backwards, as can be seen year after year" (male, 42, 2018). In the absence of jobs, young people move temporarily or permanently. However, local reports suggest that they regularly return home (and indeed, in the summer of 2024, there were more cars with Hungarian plates on the streets). Thus, how locals plan for the future is not unimportant. Beyond the compulsion to stay in the village, two striking opinions are worth pointing out. The first is a kind of suspension of the sense of home: "I said I would never build anything here in Kommandó again, my children would never come to live or work here, and so what for" (male, 50, 2018). The second, on the contrary, confirms that there also exists a deep sense of loyalty towards Kommandó among some inhabitants: "I will not move away from here, and that I will not leave Kommandó even if I am offered a luxury house and a salary in any nice place in the world" (male, 42, 2018).

For locals, the question of whether to stay or go, in the context of the transformation of resources and the way they are accessed, is being raised, at least in cases where the families or individuals concerned can even consider this as a realistic option. This is because for many, in the absence of other options, staying is the only option: they have a home there (whatever its status) and they cannot look for work elsewhere because of their age or health. They stay and try to manage locally. This can be seen as a kind of constrained (or narrowed) agency. However, there are an increasing number of people (whom I have already mentioned because of the unsettled state of the land registers and the land) who choose Kommandó for one reason or another, who are at-

tracted by the very things that might push the locals away and who no longer see the landscape and its elements as a productive resource but consume the landscape itself as a source of recreation and leisure. Tourists, second home owners and guesthouse and villa owners belong to this category.

The history of leisure and tourism in the village, though not the same age as the village itself, dates back to early times. The Hungarian National Archives have a photo of an excursion to Kommandó in 1919 with the participation of the local aristocracy (HU-MNL-OL-P 1494-I.-4.-2.-94/149). During World War II, a skiing competition was held in the village, and plans were also made to use the village's resources for tourism (Szabó, 2004, pp. 62–63). Also at that time, villas were built around the village. Thus, although the production landscape was dominant in the dichotomy of the production versus the recreation landscape, recreation was also present. Today, however, recreation is increasingly displacing production – and foreigners and other newcomers seem to be displacing locals from the use of new resources. The question is perhaps most strikingly illuminated by the situation of the two Hungarian businessmen already mentioned. They have concessioned hunting rights (the hunting of the gentry class has always played an important role in the history of the area around Kommandó), and overall their relationship with the village is peculiar and seems to fit into the paternalistic patterns explained earlier: "for example, this [entrepreneur's name]. He used to bring an ox every time when we have Kommandó-days. And then they roast it and then everybody gets one (...), and then we'd get a slice… and we'd run and get a slice of meat (laughter)" (female, 68, 2024).

The relations (often tensions, conflicts) between locals and foreigners are a central issue in the anthropology of tourism (Glup, 2021). Perhaps it is not to be expected that these conflicts do not exist. The presence of foreigners in Transylvanian villages can be observed elsewhere, and in many cases, it is these outsiders who seem to be the ones who are successful or more successful than locals in reallocating resources (Szabó, 2013). The allocation of tourism resources, despite a long local history of leisure activities, is now taking place in the village. In the light of past experience and given the specificities of access to forest resources, the question of how locals (especially Kommandó people from simple working-class backgrounds) can participate in these processes is a logical one. With a few exceptions, they are currently

working (for minimum wages) as kitchen and cleaning staff in service units or as caretakers in larger facilities.

Competition for Resources and Mountain Traps

The first people, both temporary and then permanent settlers, were attracted to Kommandó by the abundant resources available. This idea can even be extended to the period before the village's official establishment in the 19th century, as the creation of the border station itself was related to the border as a resource. Borders, from the development of modern border control onwards and across ages (Borbély, 2022; Chelcea, 2000; Nagy, 2007), have shaped the movement and transactions of goods, placing them into different value regimes on either side of the border through differing regulations. In other words, smuggling – which involved avoiding the payment of duties – created new opportunities and made certain resources more accessible. As always with resources, the key questions are: how are they made available, who controls the flow of them and how is their distribution within the community organised?

Returning to the forest and timber, it is clear from what has already been discussed that the existence of Kommandó, a settlement built on logging and wood processing as its primary activities, has repeatedly been threatened, as forests became depleted or, in the case of changing borders (as during World War II), logging became impossible. In other words, one must pay attention to the specific dynamics and changes in resources, as well as to how access rights to these resources evolve. It is worth viewing this system as a highly complex socio-ecological system, where the abundance of resources is not an objective factor but depends on human decisions (knowledge, culture, social institutions, value regimes). In many cases, the functioning of social institutions may be just as important – if not more so – than so-called objective factors. In the history of Kommandó, ordinary people had little actual, direct access to forest timber, except through the grey zones, once again highlighting the significance of social institutions. As long as the logging plant and the overarching paternalistic central distribution system, spanning different eras, were operational, the limited access to resources was not necessarily a problem at the everyday level. In fact, perhaps paradoxically, locals look back

nostalgically at the time when the plant was in operation, even while emphasising the difficulties of the work involved (see Püsök, 2021, p. 171): "I don't mind, but during the Ceaușescu era, there was work, and we could earn a living... It was very hard, very hard work. We did heavy, difficult jobs" (female, 65, 2024, and she shows how her hands were ruined by the work).

However, as we have seen, the plant has since closed. Timber processing in the village is minimal, and obtaining raw materials is a challenge. Access to the forest's timber remains highly restricted, and the distribution of other resources is not entirely transparent. Inevitably, we must ask: what keeps people here? If we argue that people were initially attracted to Kommandó by the resources, the most natural response to the depletion of these resources – or, more precisely, the restrictions on access to them – would be to leave. We have also seen that while the village does not have a centuries-long history, the approximately 130 years of history and the successive generations, despite the frequent crises of liminality, transitions, arrivals and departures, have created a sense of belonging to Kommandó, both in terms of community and family. People also have property here, even if the full establishment of a private ownership system has not been fully realised.[13]

It may not be an exaggeration to describe the current situation in Kommandó as a "trap". People were drawn there by the forest and the promise of work. The forest still exists, but its function as a resource is limited by social institutions, and there are little to no job opportunities. The factors that were key in establishing and maintaining the village now play a much smaller role, yet the settlement still exists. This is why we cannot explain the availability of resources and access to them solely through natural and ecological factors. We must also consider the functioning of social institutions. The Irish potato famine provides an interesting parallel, directing our attention toward the concept of entitlements. Although food was available in Ireland, the potato famine affected roughly 25% of the population, leading to the death or emigration of the affected individuals (Fraser, 2003). In this interpretive framework, vulnerability is not solely, or even primarily, the result of resource availability. In his comprehensive work on poverty and famine,

13 The study asks these questions at the community and system levels, but it also takes account of the fact that beyond any systemic explanation and inertia, the dilemma of staying and moving is embedded in life-historical choices. This could be the subject of a future study.

Amartya Sen emphasised the importance of entitlements (Sen, 1981): famine occurs not just when food is scarce, but often through indirect chains of events, where people lose their entitlements in a broader sense. This is highly relevant to understanding not only access to timber (firewood and furniture wood) but also the distribution of other natural resources.

If we momentarily imagine the village as an entity managing a well-defined resource base, excluding access to timber (since the entitlements and distribution there would require mobilising other institutions and different levels of decision-making), we can highlight further trap situations. Understanding this is aided by the fact that there was a dairy cooperative operating in the village until a few years ago, but its operations became unsustainable due to fluctuations in the quality of the milk delivered and related abuses. This can be explained by the lack of some elements of the Ostromian model (Ostrom, 1990, pp. 88–102). The situation is similar regarding other resources, particularly forest fruits and mushrooms: one can point to the lack of collaboration (or inability to cooperate), the resulting internal competition and the local leadership's inability or unwillingness to regulate the situation in any meaningful way (Ostrom, 1990, pp. 88–102). Once again, we must view this situation as a complex socio-ecological system, where human and institutional decisions are just as important as the resources available.

When discussing social and ecological systems, as well as the changes that have occurred or are still taking place within these systems – driven by decisions or at least by practices – the concepts of agency, resilience and adaptation must also be incorporated into the analysis. This is particularly important in light of the earlier argument that the plant, as a total institution, and the central paternalistic distribution system created a unique dynamic for the agency of locals. For this analysis, I borrow the concept of infantilisation from studies on socialism: when a state or authority practices paternalistic government and acts on the limitation of agency[14] (see Kligman, 1998, p. 265; Mihăilescu, 2018). Yet, I do not claim that the locals are entirely without agency. Earlier, I used the term "constrained agency" to describe their situation.

14 Infantilisation, in socialist and postsocialist contexts, means that a state or authority treats its citizens as if they are incapable of independent thought or responsible decision-making. This might involve excessive control or a provision of services in a way that limits individual autonomy; it could foster dependence on the state/central planning and could discourage individual initiative.

Returning to the examples of firewood acquisition or the collection centres, the grey zones and small gestures of flexibility do open up opportunities for the kind of manoeuvrability we associate with agency (that could point to the concept of *débrouillardise*; see Reed-Danahay, 1993, p. 221; Roseman, 1996, p. 837). The residents of the terraced houses have renovated their homes almost without exception, adapting them to modern needs and tastes. This has led to a colourful streetscape that dissolves the former uniformity of the area. The same applies to the questions of resilience and adaptation. There is no doubt that the system is rigid – both at the individual level (how people adapt) and at the level of institutional decisions. However, there is also no doubt that families have survived and reproduced and that the village has existed, despite multiple and recurrent crises (i.e., it has adapted to and managed to cope with difficult situations in some way).

There is clear evidence, however, that new resources (particularly recreational resources) have come to the fore alongside the forest and its timber and other traditional forest benefits. Kommandó is also becoming increasingly touristified, but as with traditional resources, there is no consensus on the use of these resources. In many discussions, the problem of ski slopes was raised: "in order to make winter tourism viable, one would need ski slopes. At least at a minimum level…, the way it used to work" (male, 42, 2018). It is spoken of by locals as an example of under-use and poor planning. Decisions on the use of resources are generally not transparent: the lack of transparency is very often mentioned by villagers about the forest, fruit, the situation of plots, the authorisation process, the lack of paving of the road and many other problems that directly affect the local people. In addition, decisions on new resources seem to be slipping out of the hands of decision-makers. However, it is clear that there is usually competition for resources, and when access rights are unclear, when there are liminal situations or when there are peripheral situations, this competition is intensified. There is also competition for traditional resources. Tourism is also conquering the region, and what makes the whole thing particularly exciting is that in a settlement situated on the border of two former empires, yet today in the middle of the country but still in a peripheral position, a nation-building competition is taking place, which in many cases overlaps with regional culture-building. For example, a huge Szekler gate welcomes the visitors at the border of the former melting

pot, now predominantly inhabited by Hungarians (Szeklers), but an Orthodox monastery is being built on the outskirts of the village, with Maramureș[15] motifs on its imposing gate, inaugurated in 2022.

Concluding Remarks

In Szeklerland, the conquest of the mountains was marked by a temporary character. The few permanent mountain settlements (mostly settlements that grew out of temporary mountain camps and farms) established in the 19th century, including Kommandó, are an exception. Moreover, although foresting and logging played key roles in its creation and survival, local (especially ecological) conditions and global processes have always forced the locals to reposition themselves. Either the resources have changed or the social systems through which they are distributed have shifted. The competition for the exploitation of the village's new resources is not accidental: on reaching the mountain plateau, the imaginary traveller is greeted by a truly picturesque sight. The village, in the middle of a plateau surrounded by mountains, is crossed by streams. Everywhere you go, you find yourself almost immediately in pastures and then in forests. Yet, the village is a curious sight, and as a continuation of the Márquezian metaphor, it is a peculiar combination of forgetting and remembering: the railway that emerges from the road leading to the village and in many places in the village itself, the rusting roofs of the wagons that have been pulled aside, the buildings of the former factory, the contrast between the terraced houses and blockhouses and the new villas, sometimes entire estates and the colourful and confusing sight of terraced houses converted to suit modern needs and tastes. All of these elements show how difficult it is to break away from the past that created and ran the village for decades.

In the introduction, I referred to the independence and innovativeness of mountain people – as opposed to poverty, isolation and disadvantage (Byers et al., 2013). This dichotomy is also very evident in Kommandó. However, it would be presumptuous to venture to decide which of these two opposing

15 A region (in northern Transylvania) of symbolic importance for Romanian national identity.

sides predominate in this context. Perhaps such a judgment may not even be necessary: the mountain region constitutes a distinctive *locus* in which the interplay between authoritarian responsibility and autonomous coping strategies (see again: *débrouillardise*), as well as individual and communal modes of functioning, can be observed. One can perceive this as an unfinished process and/or dichotomy that is reinforced by the prevalence of the socialist structures and mentalities. Kommandó is specific not just because it became a permanent settlement but also because it features different aspects of liminality. It lies on the border of a former empire, it has no paved road and it is somehow under the impact of previous historic times. In our case, this specificity is defined by the dominant character of the total institution and central paternalistic distribution over the ages and the inadequacy or lack of rules for the use of resources, alongside the abundance of resources. It is also defined by the particular system of neighbourhood relations and solidarity that, through the thin walls of the terraced houses, encapsulates both the exposure of private life and the ethos of community formed in harsh conditions, and also the antagonism between the old Kommandó people and the newcomers.

All this creates a complex social and ecological system where issues of agency, resilience and adaptivity are understood in the context of time-varying resources and, more importantly, human choices. The forest and the mountain presented significant resistance to human control. However, at certain times they have provided a relatively good life. The conquest of the area began in the late 19th century, but almost as soon as the conquest began, difficulties arose. The founder's financial problems led to the business being sold off (human factors), then the forests were depleted relatively quickly (ecological factors). Moreover, this process of conquest was characterised by almost continuous changes and crises, including changes of power and regime, changes of borders, the depletion of forests and the inclusion of new forests, technical achievements and their collapse, storm damage and forest regeneration and the inclusion of new resources. The conquest, it seems, is still not complete. However, the very existence of the settlement and the locals' ongoing struggle for survival show that they are capable of navigating the harsh conditions. The questions remain: who will be the winner in today's competition for resources, and where does the Kommandó community stand in this competition?

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Mountains of Change: Economy, Tourism, and Heritage in Sardinia

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-economic and cultural transformations in Sardinia's mountainous regions from a historical and anthropological perspective, highlighting the shift from polyculture agriculture to intensive pastoralism and recent heritagisation and economic diversification efforts. Using historical sources and ethnographic methods, it identifies three critical phases: traditional agro-pastoralism, a decline due to migration and industrialisation, and a revival through tourism and heritage branding. Today, local initiatives aim to integrate traditions with new economic opportunities, promoting quality certifications and cultural identity, underscoring the importance of local resilience in adapting to global changes. This analysis offers insights into broader trends affecting mountain communities worldwide, where heritage and tourism are relevant strategies.

Introduction

The expression "the only constant is change," attributed to Heraclitus (Guettlein, 2024), is a fitting starting point for providing an overview of the socio-cultural, demographic, and economic changes in the inner and mountainous areas of Sardinia, a topic this chapter aims to explore. In anthropology, change is a pivotal concept for understanding the processes through which groups maintain continuity and undergo transformation – and in turn, reshape their own territories – over time, through complex and ongoing processes influenced by both external and internal factors, rather than merely a series of isolated events (Steward, 1972; McGrath & Bauman, 2012). Mountain areas, of course, have never been exempt from change or, indeed, from continuity (Mathieu, 2011; Lozny, 2013; Boos & Salvucci, 2022; Viazzo & Zanini, 2022).

These transformations are not exclusive to Sardinia, yet the island's mountainous areas, like other highland regions across the Mediterranean shaped by long-term marginality and outmigration, attempt to respond to decline by experimenting with new ways of making their territory economically and symbolically viable. Across other mountain regions of Mediterranean islands – from Corsica to Cyprus – the dynamics of change are shaped by overlapping forces: the slow retreat of traditional agricultural life, the outflow of younger generations, and shifting ways of imagining local economies and identities. In many cases, the rediscovery – or invention – of cultural and natural heritage, often linked to tourism growth, offers communities new ways to reimagine their relationship with place (San Roman Sanz et al., 2013; Zoumides et al., 2017). The Sardinian mountains provide perfect case in point of how such processes take shape within a landscape marked by long histories of interconnectedness, but also marginality, and structural modifications. Against this backdrop, this chapter asks: How have Sardinia's mountain communities reorganized their economic and cultural strategies in response to the agro-pastoral crisis, depopulation, and globalization? It argues that Sardinian highland regions have undergone a profound reconfiguration, shifting from an integrated agro-pastoral economy to a new system centred on tourism, heritage-making, and quality labels – through locally grounded reinterpretations of territorial and cultural resources.

In recent anthropological and interdisciplinary research, mountain areas – such as those of Sardinia – have increasingly been reinterpreted not as marginal or passive spaces, but as dynamic territories shaped by longstanding patterns of mobility, socio-economic negotiation, and environmental adaptation. This new approach, sometimes called montology (Branca & Haller 2020; Sarmiento 2020, Sarmiento 2022), has underlined how mountain environments are produced through a continuous interplay between ecological constraints, productive strategies, and symbolic practices. In many regions, communities have adapted by adjusting their livelihoods, rethinking traditions, and taking on new roles in response to economic, political, and environmental pressures in a relatively gradual process of transformation, where new practices emerge through modifications of existing ones. Studying mountain communities thus requires attention to structural factors – such as depopulation, infrastructure, or market access – and how people reinterpret their past, articulate a sense of belonging, and experiment with new forms of presence in the territory. So, it is not just holding onto past practices, but a creative reinterpretation in the light of present challenges, including practical adjustments – such as shifting economic activities – and symbolic reimaginings of the territory and its traditions.

The chapter is structured into four sections: first, we introduce readers to the study area, then we provide a historical overview of the socio-economic dynamics of Sardinia's mountainous regions from the 19th century to the early 1950s. Next, we discuss socio-economic and demographic changes from this period through the 1970s. Following this, we analyze recent transformations in economic and social practices. Finally, we reflect on processes of herigitisation, considering new models of territorial enhancement and the strategies adopted by mountain communities in the contemporary context.

Study Area and Methodology

Located in the Mediterranean geographical bioregion (Blasi et al., 2014), the study area includes a group of eighteen municipalities[1] in central Sardinia, primarily distributed across the historical regions[2] of the Barbagie and the inner area of Nuoro: Aritzo and Meana Sardo (Barbagia di Belvì), Austis, Fonni, Gavoi, Lodine, Mamoiada, Ollolai, Ovodda, Teti, and Tiana (Barbagia di Ollolai), Atzara, Sorgono, and Tonara (Mandrolisai), and Bitti, Nuoro, Orani, and Orune (Nuorese or Barbagia di Bitti). The average altitude of these centres is around 720 meters above sea level. The lowest town is Orani (521 m), and the highest is Fonni (1000 m). The highest mountain system in Sardinia is the Gennargentu Massif, which peaks at Punta La Marmora (1834 m).

1 The municipalities selected for this research were identified based on criteria aligned with the goals of the "InnTerr: Innovation, Inclusion & Interdisciplinary Studies for Territorial Development" project (InnTerr: Innovazione, Inclusione & studi interdisciplinari per lo sviluppo del Territorio), funded through a collaboration between the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Sassari and the Consortium for the Promotion of University Studies in Central Sardinia, based in Nuoro, under the auspices of the Regional Competence Center R.E.S.T.A.R.T. (Center for Research, Sustainable Economy, Tourism, Environment, and Territorial Revival). The project aims to promote sustainable territorial development in the Nuoro area by enhancing local heritage and adopting digital technologies to coordinate socio-economic growth initiatives, targeting a system that includes all communities and local stakeholders in an inclusive development process. The selected municipalities are those traversed by the Itinerarium Antonini, an ancient route that spanned the entire island – a central element in the project, as it represents a point of historical and cultural connection across various territories. The revitalization of this route, along with the study of associated traditional trail networks, forms the strategic focus of the research. This initiative seeks to create a network connecting elements of Nuoro's territorial capital, promoting the area as a cultural resource and a tourist attraction.

2 The historical regions of Sardinia are territories that, over the centuries, have distinguished themselves by specific cultural, social, and linguistic traits, often linked to unique geographical features and particular forms of economic organization. Their origins trace back to various historical and cultural periods of Sardinia, notably the Roman era, especially the Judicate and Spanish periods. The current territorial configuration – partly reflected in the organization of Local Action Groups (GALs) and the Landscape Areas defined in the 2006 Regional Landscape Plan – reflects a shared historical, cultural, and geographical understanding within Sardinia. In some cases, portions of a single municipality belong to two or more historical regions (for example, the enclave of Berchiddeddu in the municipality of Olbia belongs to Montacuto rather than Gallura, which covers most of the municipality). In other cases, municipalities like Samassi, Serramanna, and Serrenti have been variably assigned to either the Campidano of Cagliari or that of Sanluri. The Logudoro – absent from this particular map – was historically synonymous with the Judicate of Torres and today includes areas such as Meilogu, Sassarese, and Montacuto. For further details on the historical regions, see Brigaglia & Tola (2008) and de Tisi (n. d.), and for the history of the Sardinian Judicates, see Casula (2004).

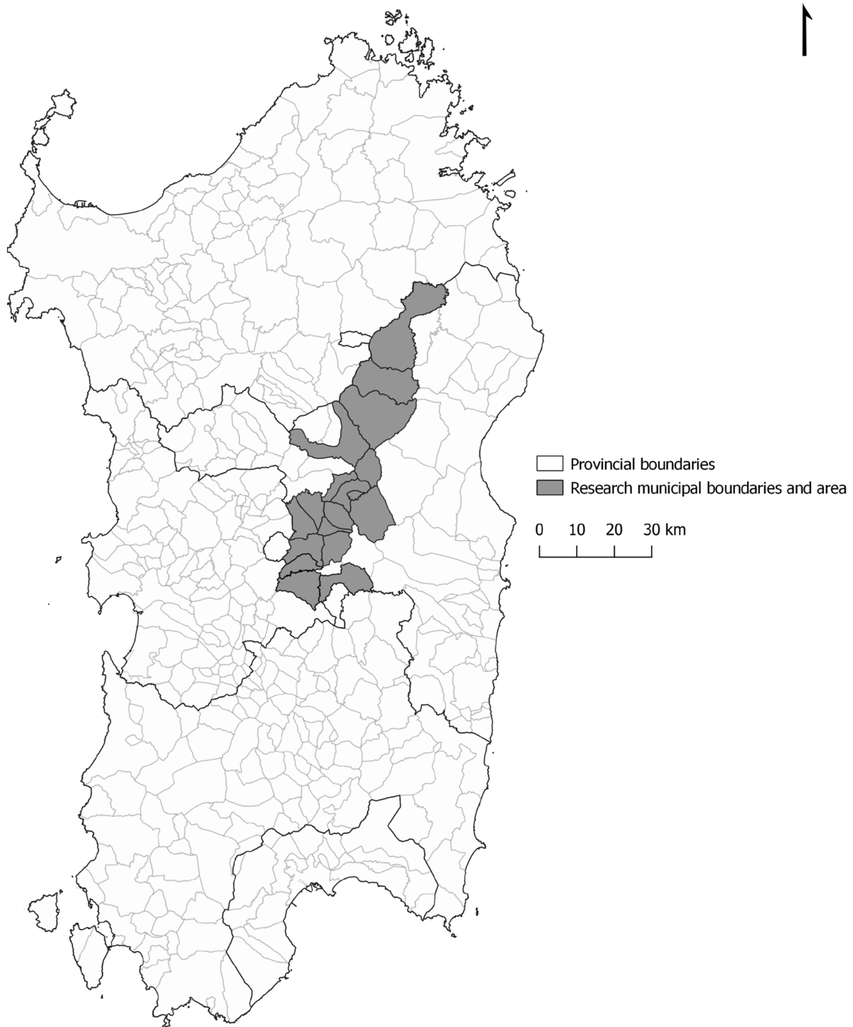

Figure 1 – Map of the Study Area and Involved Communities. Source: Sardegna Geoportale (2025), administration units: @EuroGeographics Coordinate system: EPSG:32632 - WGS 84 / UTM zone 32N, design: Domenico Branca (2025).

In the Italian context, according to the definition provided by ISTAT's Rapporto sul territorio 2020 (Franconi & Molinaro, 2020), these are municipal territories classified as mountainous and inner hill areas (collina interna), with altitudes respectively above 600/700 meters and below this range but still above 300 meters. In the past, the now-repealed Law 991/1952, "Measures in Favor of Mountainous Territories," defined a municipality as "mountainous if at least 80% of its surface area is located above 600 meters above sea level, the difference between the highest and lowest altitudes of the territory is greater than 600 meters, and the average taxable income per hectare, based on 1937–1939 prices, did not exceed 2,400 lire" (Openpolis, 2023). According to this classification, all the municipalities considered in this research were mountainous, whereas, under the current definition, seven of them (Atzara, Austis, Meana Sardo, Nuoro, Orani, Sorgono, and Teti) are now classified as inner hill areas. Nevertheless, almost all the municipalities in this study fall within the classification of so-called "inner areas,"

> [areas that] are significantly distant from centres offering essential services (education, healthcare, and mobility), rich in significant environmental and cultural resources, and highly diversified both by nature and as a result of centuries of human settlement. Approximately a quarter of the Italian population lives in these areas, which cover more than sixty per cent of the national territory and are organized into over four thousand municipalities. (Barca et al., 2014, p. 5)

According to the *Strategia Nazionale delle Aree Interne (2021–2027)* (National Strategy for Inner Areas) of the Agency for Territorial Cohesion (Agenzia per la Coesione Territoriale, 2023), 14 of the 18 municipalities analyzed here (with the exceptions of Nuoro, an urban attraction hub, and Bitti, Mamoiada, and Orune, considered belt areas) are classified as peripheral (Atzara, Austis, Gavoi, Ollolai, Orani, and Sorgono) and 8 as ultra-peripheral (Aritzo, Meana Sardo, Fonni, Lodine, Ovodda, Teti, Tiana, and Tonara)[3]. Nevertheless, in Sardinia, the label "inner areas" – though more an institutional tool than an identity marker – is generally well received by local actors, as it is associated

3 We are aware of the limitations of this type of classification; however, as it is not the focus of this contribution, we refer readers to the special issue of *Archivio di Antropologia* titled "L'invenzione delle aree interne", edited by Santoro, Copertino, and Berardi (2022).

with access to funding, policy recognition, and development opportunities and, rather than being questioned or resisted, it is often strategically adopted. Although we provide some geographical background to contextualize the field, our aim is primarily to understand how social meanings and cultural practices are reshaped in the context of territorial transformation.

Regarding methodology, this study is based on an interdisciplinary approach that combines historical research with ethnographic techniques to analyze changes in the economic, demographic, and socio-cultural dynamics of the municipalities studied. Specifically, primary historical sources and documents related to each municipality's local economy, demographic evolution, and migratory flows were examined to understand fundamental economic transformations from the 19th century to the present. We identified three main periods, each corresponding to significant economic, demographic, and socio-cultural changes in the island's history: the period between the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, characterized by a predominantly subsistence economy focused on pastoralism and small-scale agriculture (Tore, 1975); the period between the 1950s and 1970s, marked by a significant migratory wave toward urban areas, leading to demographic decline and profound transformations in the economic fabric; and the period from the 1980s to the present, which has seen the beginning of a reevaluation of cultural heritage and local productions, encouraged by regional development policies.

Additionally, selected ethnographic techniques – primarily limited participant observation – were employed in certain municipalities (e.g., Aritzo, Austis, Bitti, Fonni, and Gavoi). Some direct observations were carried out through multiple visits to several of the municipalities involved in the study between 2021 and 2024. These occasions included local festivals, public events, and informal conversations with residents and local administrators. Rather than aiming to build a systematic ethnographic account, these moments of field presence accompanied the broader historical and documentary analysis, offering grounded indications of how ongoing changes are experienced and interpreted by those living in the area. These complemented the historical and documentary analysis rather than constituting a comprehensive ethnographic fieldwork campaign. This methodological integration provides a multifaceted perspective on the economic and demographic transformations affecting the mountainous areas of central Sardinia.

A clarification is warranted regarding the sources employed in the development of this chapter. The analysis presented here draws upon a broad array of bibliographic and institutional materials, including academic literature and documents produced by agencies responsible for the governance of economic and territorial processes. While informed by a deep familiarity with the region and supported by ethnographic observation, this chapter does not rest upon a sustained or systematic ethnographic fieldwork. Ordinarily, it would be unnecessary to justify the inclusion of contributions from geography, history, demography, or sociology in an anthropological essay. Nevertheless, in the context of Sardinia's inland regions, an explicit reflection on the interdisciplinary character of this approach is deserved, particularly in light of the nature and availability of existing research. There are several reasons for this methodological choice. First, anthropological studies on Sardinia have, for the most part, favoured micro-level analyses and qualitative methods. Second, they have long concentrated on popular and material culture – an emphasis that proves advantageous in the present context. As discussed in the concluding section of this chapter, earlier research into traditional practices and material forms – once conducted through direct field engagement – now offers valuable insights for contemporary policies aimed at heritage-making and the development of cultural tourism. Third, long before anthropology turned its attention to these areas, the internal regions of Sardinia had already been the subject of sustained inquiry by human geographers, historians, and rural sociologists. Particularly noteworthy are classic community studies, which remain of foundational significance. Among these, the landmark study by Maurice Le Lannou (1979), conducted before the Second World War and first published in France in the 1940s, only became available in Italian in the late 1970s and continues to serve as a critical reference point in the field.

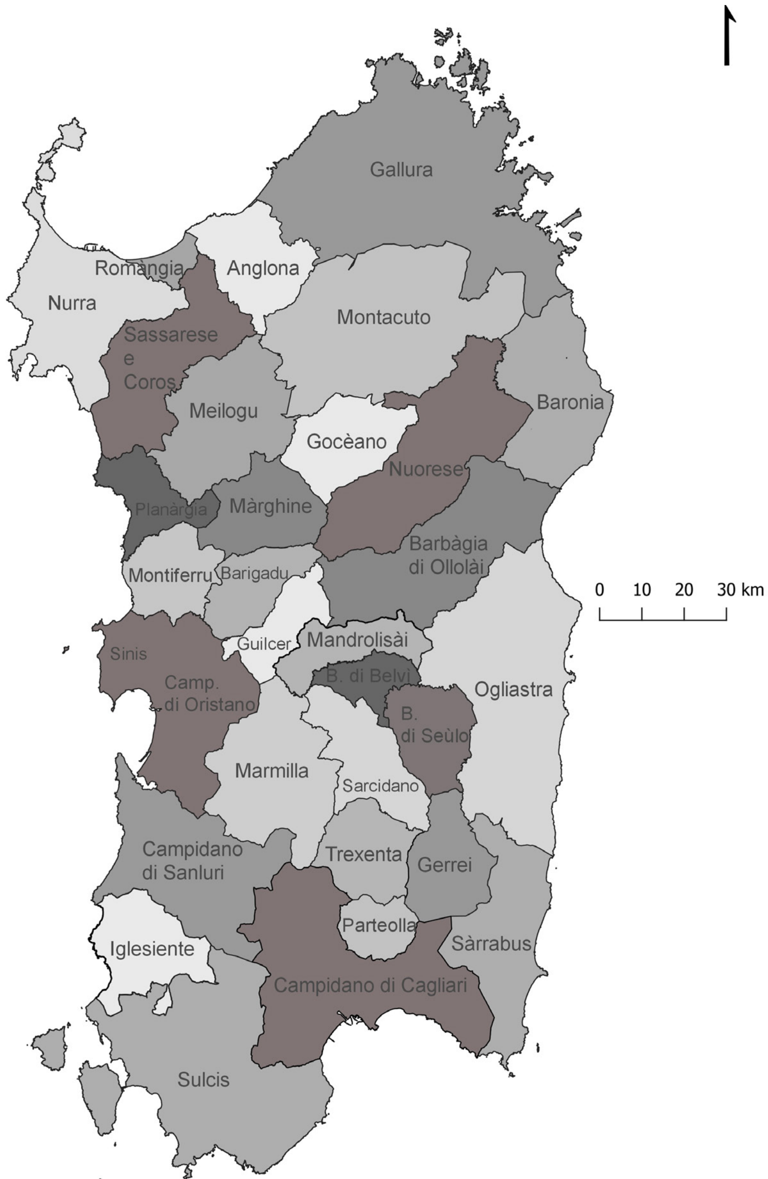

Figure 2 – Historic regions of Sardinia. Source: Sardegna Geoportale (2025), administration units: @EuroGeographics Coordinate system: EPSG:32632 - WGS 84 / UTM zone 32N, design: Domenico Branca (2025).

Poly-Cultural Economy and Transhumance

Between the 19th and early 20th centuries, Sardinia's mountainous and high-hill territories exhibited economies characterized by a "mixed" use of resources and skills. However, each village stood out for one or more productive specializations. Throughout the 1800s, local economies were primarily based on self-sufficiency (Tore, 1975). Socially, the relative scarcity of resources was intensified by far from equitable distribution, with a marked division between "the wealthy and dependent laborers" (Angioni, 1993, p. 232). Until the 1950s, the agro-pastoral model was the primary production system in the mountainous and high-hill areas of the island; a "poly-cultural" and complementary model (Meloni & Farinella, 2015) that combined, on one hand, primarily cereal-based agriculture, with crops like wheat, barley, olives, and vines, and, on the other hand, livestock farming, especially of sheep and goats, but also pigs, cattle, and horses (Ortu, 1981; Meloni, 1984; Mientjes, 2008; Meloni & Farinella, 2015).

Regarding the settlement, except for the larger town of Nuoro, population centres ranged between 100 and 2,000–3,000 inhabitants and were organized around a series of land-use "belts" (Meloni & Farinella, 2015). The first belt, generally closest to the settlement, consisted of gardens shielded by windbreaks; the second belt, featuring *tancas* enclosed by dry stone walls, was designated for fruit trees or cereal production and subject to periodic rotation; the third belt, *su sartu*, was unenclosed and devoted to extensive agriculture and grazing (Meloni & Farinella, 2015). Additionally, even lands at higher elevations were integral to the economic and territorial organization, e.g., for wood harvesting. In line with a classification established since the Middle Ages between *cultum* and *incultum* (de Santis, 2002), beyond the village itself, the territory included *sartos*, communal pastures (*sos cumonales*), lands for sowing, and a smaller or more significant portion of family-owned enclosures, used for animal grazing or cereal production. Forests were a significant component of local economies in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Besides providing firewood, they also offered hunting opportunities for game.

Most individuals were employed in pastoralism and agriculture – with skills in both occupations – and supplemented these activities with more specialized roles, such as gunsmiths and carpenters (Austis, for example), cart

drivers and woodcutters (Aritzo), shoemakers or *turronajos* (nougat makers in Mamoiada and Tonara), and artisans in general. Unlike in later periods, pastoralism and agriculture were integrated and complementary, providing both direct and indirect benefits. In the first case, these benefits were "because cultivating the land allowed the integration of natural forage stocks, which were fundamental for livestock feed; at the end of summer, when natural pasture was scarce, grains like barley, as well as stubble, vine leaves, garden foliage, and by-products (such as pears, chestnuts, and grape pomace), helped sustain the animals." In the second case, "agricultural cycle operations, such as the fall clearing and burning of Mediterranean scrub (especially stubble, rockrose, and thistles), ploughing, and the extraction of heather and arbutus roots, enhanced the soil's productivity and the quality of spontaneous grasses, while also curbing the spread of Mediterranean scrub, which hindered the movement of flocks" (Meloni & Farinella, 2015).

In agricultural terms, the primary crops across all towns – varying in extent depending on the availability of suitable land within each municipality – included wheat, barley, and fava beans, supplemented by vegetable gardens with legumes, cabbages, onions, hemp, pumpkins, tomatoes, and potatoes. Notably, American-origin crops like tomatoes and potatoes had a complex social history regarding their introduction and eventual acceptance by local farmers (Gentilcore, 2012). In the early 19th century, Vittorio Angius, referring to Ovodda, wrote that "the sowing of potatoes is spreading; the production is considerable, and the quality is no less than that of those from Fonni" (Angius, 1832–1848 [2006], p. 1146). Given that in other regions of the island (such as Àrdara), the same author stated that "potatoes are despised, and people die of hunger" (Angius, 1832–1848 [2006], p. 92), it is evident that in Ovodda, Fonni, Aritzo, and even Bitti, this crop was becoming part of the local diet. Orchards were also important, with trees such as plum, cherry, apple, chestnut, walnut, and various types of pear, as well as olives, pomegranates, and figs (for example, in Orani), along with vineyards, primarily for wine production but also, to some extent, for distillation. Complementing agriculture, local communities engaged in livestock farming with various types of animals. Besides oxen, used for agricultural work, and horses, the most commonly raised animals were cows (both "tame" and "wild"), goats, and pigs, though sheep rep-

resented the most significant numbers. Dairy production, moreover, complemented the diet of these communities.

Given the presence of rivers and streams, fishing – primarily for trout and eels – was practised in some villages, such as Lodine. Apiculture was also pursued to varying degrees depending on the context (for example, in Tonara). Textile production was notably essential and linked to the cultivation of mulberry trees, as in Mamoiada and Ollolai, known for manufacturing blankets and rugs. Knife-making and, to a lesser extent, basket weaving (such as in Ollolai) and leather and hide processing were also present. Labour division was strongly gendered, with men dedicated to production and livestock raising and women focused on household care and weaving. However, this general division had exceptions. Despite common patterns, specific specializations emerged based on the unique geographical characteristics of different areas. Specifically, in higher-altitude zones, local economies involved specializations tied to mountain products, where women were primarily responsible for gathering hazelnuts, chestnuts, or cherries. At the same time, men engaged in trade journeys or carpentry work, as was the case in Aritzo (Angius, 1832–1848 [2006]).

The territory's geographical configuration shaped local populations' socio-economic practices, especially concerning the seasonal movement of sheep and goats in winter. Transhumance – "a highly specialized form of mixed farming, practiced by the inhabitants of settled communities, technologically adjusted to a certain set of environmental conditions, which combines livestock herding with arable agriculture" (Jones, 2005, p. 359) – followed an "inverse" or "descending" model: from the higher areas, with the arrival of the first cold in autumn, herds were moved down to the plains, where temperatures were milder, and the shepherds remained there until spring (Le Lannou, 1979; Ortu 1988; Lai, 1998; Mannia, 2014; Branca, 2024). Alongside long-distance mobility, there were also shorter, local movements within single municipalities (Mori, 1975; Meloni, 1988; Ortu, 1988; Meloni & Farinella, 2015). These movements, which often kept shepherds away from the village for weeks, primarily took place in winter, allowing them to avoid the harsh climate of the higher inner areas and graze livestock on the warmer coastal plains (Angioni, 1989). For instance, taking Fonni as a central reference point among the municipalities analysed, two significant movements

can be distinguished: one toward the south and southeast, heading to the Campidano of Oristano, the Marmilla, the Campidano of Cagliari, and the Iglesiente. The other movement was toward the northwest and northeast, that is, toward Marghine and Montacuto of Ozieri on one side and the Baronie and Gallura on the other. For example, Benedetto Meloni (1988) shows that from Austis, shepherds would head either toward the plains of the Campidano of Oristano or those of the Campidano of Cagliari, even reaching the Sulcis region[4]. Transhumance also allowed the sale of surplus products; in Lodine, these included excess grains and cheese. An interesting case is that of Mamoiada, reported by Angius, who, speaking of trade, stated that "[t]he Mamoiadans sell surplus cereals, garden produce, and other fruits, various types of wooden boards, and iron, wood, and woolen goods, as well as hides and leather in Orosei, and wool in Orgosolo, Oliena, and Ogliastra" (Angius, 1832–1848 [2006], p. 853).

Economic Transition and Migration Out of the Mountains

Between the 1950s and 1970s, new economic, social, and demographic transformations impacted Sardinia's mountainous regions. In line with Meloni and Farinella (2015), the factors driving these changes were both internal and external, yet significant enough to mark a shift from a traditional agro-pastoral economy to extensive pastoralism. This change inevitably affected local communities, landscapes, and traditional land use.

As for external factors, the increase in cereal imports, combined with agricultural modernization, triggered a profound crisis in the island's cereal sector (Angioni, 1993; Meloni & Farinella, 2015). External competition and the influx of large quantities of cereal products from other markets – mainly wheat, barley, and legumes – made internal cultivation unprofitable. This phenomenon was accompanied by a reduction in cultivated agricultural land and the subsequent abandonment of fields, which encouraged the expansion

4 For further reading, see Orrù et al. (2018) that examine the relationships between Sardinian populations through the study of surname distribution, with particular attention to the role of transhumance as a possible channel of contact between the mountain communities of the Barbagia di Belvì and those of the southern Sardinian plains.

of Mediterranean scrubland and wooded areas over time that, in turn, necessitated efforts to control vegetation growth through fires, impacting the local ecosystem (Meloni & Podda, 2013). Moreover, there was significant growth in the sheep farming sector, primarily motivated by increased demand for milk to produce *pecorino romano* destined for markets outside the island (Angioni, 1993; Meloni & Farinella, 2015). Farmers and shepherds, affected by the agricultural crisis and shrinking cultivation, embraced various adaptation strategies, transitioning to sheep farming or related livestock sectors. In this sense, the Sardinian mountain production model shifted toward one based almost exclusively on sheep farming. Another change involved land use. With the decline in agriculture, municipal lands were no longer allocated for sowing, and even private properties turned toward grazing rather than cultivation. By the 1960s, about 90% of the agricultural land in inner Sardinia was devoted to pasture. Consequently, cereal and vegetable crops, including forage crops for animals, drastically decreased, contributing to the "transformation from an agro-pastoral economy to extensive pastoralism" (Meloni & Farinella, 2015). This shift implied a transition from an economic system based on the coexistence of agriculture and pastoralism to a model focused almost exclusively on sheep farming. Moreover, while the growth of extensive livestock farming led to the decline of the agricultural sector, it also resulted in stagnation in agricultural innovations as investments to improve the sector diminished. So, "the disappearance of cereal agriculture and the dominance of pastoralism are two sides of the same phenomenon" (Meloni & Farinella, 2015), a process of structural transformation that caused a gradual decline of agriculture as a pillar of the local economy.

In this period, along with external factors, several internal causes also contributed to Sardinia's traditional agro-pastoral mountain system crisis. The scarcity of arable land limited production efficiency, but it was not until the 1960s that agriculture began to be abandoned on a large scale. With the decline of traditional agricultural activities, local communities experienced an economic shift and social and cultural changes. The abandonment of agriculture reduced the available labour force for farming activities, shifting away from an integrated community model in which livestock and agriculture formed the productive core (Meloni & Farinella, 2015). In this model, reciprocity between farmers and shepherds provided economic and social sta-

bility, facilitating resource management and control over fields and pastures. As Angioni (1993) explains, “although not in the specialized and large-scale forms of the plains and hills, a coordinated exploitation of the land also existed in the mountains, balancing the needs of pastoralism with those of a more or less modest cereal and/or tree-based agriculture” (Angioni, 1993, p. 229; see also Meloni, 1984). Even in the island’s highest villages (Meloni, 1984), agriculture and livestock farming were complemented by seasonal horticulture, which in the municipal territories of Desulo, Fonni, Gavoi, and Tonara represented a critical socio-economic and cultural resource, with a marked gendered character (Angioni, 1993). As Murru Corriga (1988) notes, while livestock inheritance passed through the male line, cultivated garden plots were inherited through the female line. Of this system, which structured the local productive culture in Sardinia’s mountainous areas – generally located at a distance from inhabited centres, at lower altitudes, and near water sources – only traces remain today in place names[5] (Caltagirone, 1988). The transformation of pastoralism into a more extensive economy and the loss of agriculture’s central role led to the decline of collective land management practices (Meloni & Farinella, 2015). Additionally, these changes resulted in a scarcity of forage for animals and a decline in pasture quality. The lack of land maintenance – cleaning, ploughing, and controlled seasonal burning – increased invasive Mediterranean scrub species, such as *cistus*, which further depleted pastures, degraded the soil, and compromised its productivity (Meloni & Farinella, 2015). Moreover, intentional fires were often used as a quick method to clear overgrown vegetation and make land usable for grazing. This situation was further compounded by the massive migration phenomenon that intensified during this period, affecting mountain villages and the entire island (Meloni & Farinella, 2015).

The 1950s marked a transition period in the island’s recent demographic and socio-economic history, particularly for the municipalities examined in this research. The impact of the Italian economic miracle also reached the island, which experienced gradual industrial development starting in 1951,

5 To give a few examples: the area known as *sas argiolas* (“the threshing floors,” where wheat was threshed – *argiolas*, in Southern Sardinian, is also the name for July, not by chance), in the municipality of Lodine; *s’ortu mannu* (“the large garden”) or *Mandra ‘e Voes* (“the oxen’s enclosure”), in Mamoiada (Zirottu, 2004: 176); *inza manna* (“large vineyard”), in Bitti.

culminating in Law No. 588 of June 11, 1962, known as the *Piano di Rinascita* (Rebirth Plan). Among its numerous reforms, this plan included the establishment of petrochemical hubs in Sarroch and Portovesme in the south of the island, in Porto Torres in the northwest, and, a few years later – beginning in 1969 – the industrial centre in Ottana (Zedda, 2021).

On a demographic level, the census interval from 1951 to 1971 clearly shows a significant shift. On one hand, there was exponential growth in areas where industrial projects had been established, with a massive increase in population. For instance, Ottana's population grew by 32.88%, Sarroch by 74.44%, Porto Torres by 78%, and Portoscuso by 89.3%. Similarly, the population of provincial capitals and major coastal cities increased. In these cases, Alghero grew by 50.59%, Sassari by 52.75%, Cagliari by 61.96%, Olbia by 64.74%, and Nuoro saw an 83.11% population increase (ISTAT 2025). At the same time, the growth of coastal centres and those with industrial hubs coincided with the gradual depopulation of the island's inner and mountainous areas, including the research municipalities, which, except Nuoro, experienced a sharp population decline during this period. It is worth noting, however, that between 1951 and 1961, the population of these towns remained relatively stable; the demographic decline began with the 1961 census and continues to this day. Between 1961 and 1971, aggregated data show that the total population of the research villages decreased from 48,379 inhabitants in 1961 to 41,742 in 1971, reflecting a percentage decline of 13.72%.

Several factors lie at the heart of this phenomenon, notably emigration, the search for better job opportunities, and urbanization. During this period, emigration in Sardinia became prominent, bringing about profound socio-cultural, economic, territorial, and land-use changes. Emigration in Sardinia was multifaceted, marked by the mobility of young people, above all, but also of entire families, occurring on intra-island, national, European, and international levels, often following paths established by relatives or fellow villagers who had emigrated. Internal migrations within the island are generally headed toward coastal cities or emerging industrial hubs. Both authors have personal biographies reflecting this type of movement. For instance, the paternal family of one of the authors comes from a village in the Nuorese, an inner high-hill area. During seasonal transhumance, shepherds from the area would head toward the plains between the Baronia and Gallura, where, over

time, they acquired agricultural land. In the 1960s, with Costa Smeralda's real estate and economic development and the airport and port infrastructure in Olbia, many families from the area moved to what was then a large, rapidly growing town, seeking better jobs and educational opportunities for their children. For similar reasons, the family of the other author – originating from an inland Ogliastra village, where transhumance traditionally moved toward the Salto di Quirra and the Sarrabus – relocated to Cagliari, the island's capital and its economic, cultural, and political centre. In other cases, migration from the island's inner and mountainous areas headed toward the Italian mainland, specifically Umbria, Tuscany, and Lazio, filling economic roles vacated by local farmers and livestock breeders due to ongoing urbanization and industrialization (Solinas 1990; Meloni 1996). Similarly, the demand for labour in industrial and mining centres across Central and Western Europe led many Sardinians to emigrate to Switzerland, Germany, France, or Belgium – one of the authors, again, has family members who emigrated to Belgium – and to a lesser extent, to countries like Argentina, Australia, and the United States.

Between the 1950s and 1960s, mountain communities underwent radical transformations. Firstly, the decline of the agricultural sector in favour of extensive pastoralism reshaped the economic and social structure, marking the beginning of a phase of demographic and social depression that would impact cultural practices and the island's landscape. In this context, the Sardinian mountains experienced profound changes that, although economically driven, resulted in environmental and social transformations, establishing new socio-cultural and economic balances.

Economic Changes, Heritagisation, and Tourism

These phenomena significantly affected socio-economic, cultural, and consumption dynamics in the following years. From the 1970s onwards, the seasonal mobility of transhumance entered a period of decline, and mountain shepherds began to settle in the plains – areas traditionally reserved for cereal cultivation – establishing permanent agricultural enterprises. Once again, these changes were driven by both external and internal factors.

In demographic terms, those internal and external emigration took on structural characteristics, resulting in a 34.09% population decline between the 1971 census and the most recent data available for 2023 in the villages considered. The most significant loss occurred in Orune, with a decrease of 53.66% (ISTAT; Bachis et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the specialisation in sheep farming and the rapid development of the dairy industry contributed to transforming the role of the shepherd from a producer and manager of the entire cheese production cycle to a milk supplier for large processing plants (Meloni & Farinella, 2015). This shift led to a mono-specialisation in *Pecorino Romano*, with demand from the Italian and foreign markets, particularly the United States (Meloni & Farinella, 2015; Ruju, 2011). On a global scale, new interconnection processes are shaping a complex, interconnected landscape of ethnic, media, technological, financial, and ideological flows (Appadurai, 1996), which will inevitably have profound impacts at the local level, including in the mountainous areas of Sardinia.

Since the 1990s, the economic situation has worsened. In line with Meloni and Farinella's (2015) account, during this period,

> [a] persistent crisis has hit the dairy sector since the 1990s, driven by high volatility in global agricultural commodities and a steady price decline. At the same time, production costs (feed, electricity, or diesel) have risen, especially following the 2008 economic crisis. The crisis has worsened in recent years due to a collapse in exports to its historically crucial market, the United States. Since 2000, *Pecorino Romano* has been on a slow downward trajectory, losing market share due to competition from similar products from other European countries (France, Spain, Greece, and Romania) and its partial replacement by a locally produced cheese made partly with cow's milk.

Shepherds thus find themselves "trapped by both local conditions related to the structure of production relations and the conditions of global markets where the price of *Pecorino Romano* cheese is determined" (Pitzalis & Zerilli, 2013, p. 151).

These changes have had a significant impact on local communities and their traditional economies without, however, completely dismantling them.

On the contrary, the social and economic globalisation processes that began in the 1980s and 1990s have led – following a global trend, not limited to Sardinia – to a "rediscovery" of economic practices and specialisations, as well as traditional celebrations and, more generally, everything considered important to community identity and its connection to place. In this sense, today's local economies are closely tied to the increasingly diverse tourism industry (such as festivals like *Cortes Apertas* or traditional carnivals in Mamoiada). Processes of heritagisation – "objects and places are transformed from functional 'things' into objects to display and exhibit" (Harrison, 2012, p. 69) – and valorisation of places, objects, rituals, and practices considered heritage serve a dual purpose: both as an identity marker and as an economic resource (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998; Salemink, 2021), which is even more crucial in a context marked by depopulation (Bachis et al., 2020; Breschi, Perra & Ruiu, 2023). In addition to the broader context driving this trend, institutions at all levels play a decisive role in these dynamics. Since the 1990s, for example, the European Union has established various programmes (such as LEADER) to support and finance local, regional, and micro-regional skills and technical knowledge. This interest is linked to the idea that diverse environments, landscapes, and local economies form a foundational part of Europe's history. Thus, from this period onward, the EU began to support and promote this rediscovery or preservation (Lai, 2012). At the national, regional, and local levels, numerous programmes and funding initiatives (such as the significant role of *GALs*, or Local Action Groups) also aim to develop sustainable tourism models that draw upon the territorial capital (De Rubentis, Mastromarco & Labianca 2019) of different areas.

In the mountainous areas of Sardinia under consideration, this approach is realised through public and private initiatives to carve out a niche within the complex and crowded tourism and heritage market. One strategy, for instance, involves reducing the near-exclusive reliance on livestock farming and dairy production by diversifying income streams and supplementing traditional production with other activities that can generate additional revenue and mitigate risks associated with fluctuations in global market prices (Meloni & Farinella, 2015). In Fonni, for example, the *Parco Oasi di Donnortei* is a family-run agricultural enterprise established in the 1990s to integrate traditional sheep farming with raising "wild" species, particularly mouflons.

Over time, fallow and red deer have also been introduced on a large expanse of land within a Natura 2000 site. This economic strategy is currently complemented by hospitality, dining, and educational farm services, with a small private helipad for mountain tours (Branca & Pulino, 2025).

Territory – whose "development [is] a local/global/local process that unfolds by continuously disorganising and reorganising itself" (Ther Ríos, 2012) – is a critical term in local strategies focused on tourism and heritage. This perspective frames private initiatives like "Trekking e musica ad alta quota, 1660 m", held in 2024 in the municipality of Desulo on the Gennargentu, or the parallel "Trekking, musica e paesaggio" at Sa Stiddiosa, in the areas of Seulo and Gadoni. The heritagisation of territory – and nature (Santamarina, Vaccaro & Beltran, 2014) – is reflected in changes to the meaning of the term itself, shifting from a place of work and production to a site of leisure and the reproduction of contemporary identities and consumption (Lai, 2017). This is evident in regional and/or local projects aimed at rehabilitating traditional structures and infrastructures that, until about fifty years ago, were essential to production, such as *sos pinnetos* (*pinnetu*, singular) – traditional circular structures used by shepherds, especially in mountainous and wooded areas, built with local materials, a stone base, and a conical roof of wood and branches or foliage. These former pastoral workspaces are now transformed into refuges and landmarks along hiking routes crossing the island's mountains, alongside ancient lime or charcoal kilns and, in general, traditional trails used by woodcutters and charcoal burners, by shepherds during transhumance, and by cattle rustlers[6], as in the Tepilora Natural Regional Park (Branca, Haller & Mossa, 2023). The Regione Autonoma della Sardegna is investing considerably in these trails (Battino, Lampreu & Amaro García, 2022).

The territorial dimension extends beyond the environment to encompass the landscape's construction and (re)production, mainly through the cultural history of economic production. Another increasingly common strategy, closely tied to what María Elena García (2021) describes as "gastropolitics" in the context of Peru, is the importance of food in strategies of heritagisation and tourism promotion (Di Giovine & Brulotte, 2014; for example, Grasseni (2011) for a comparison with the Italian Alps). In this context, the approach

6 See http://www.camminotransumanza.org/ and https://www.sardegnasentieri.it/itinerari-per-tipologia/4724.

is highly diversified, including numerous types, from dining to the recognition of excellence in local products, seasonal festivals, and the branding of the mountains. National reality shows, for example, contribute to showcasing the stories and gastronomic offerings of local restaurants, drawing on folk notions such as tradition, authenticity, and innovation, which align well with discourses that can be described as "globally local." An example is an episode of the television series *4 Ristoranti* (directed by Gianni Monfredini, 2022), hosted by Alessandro Borghese, featuring several restaurants in Barbagia or certifications of wine, gastronomic, and dairy products such as IGT Barbagia / Strada del vino Cannonau, DOP and DOC Mandrolisai, or the Consorzio Tutela Formaggio Fiore Sardo DOP of Gavoi.

Moreover, strategies to include inner and mountainous areas in prestigious national and international registers also contribute to integrating these regions into the tourism and heritage markets. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) argues, "heritage and tourism are collaborative industries, heritage converting locations into destinations and tourism making them economically viable as exhibits of themselves" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, 1998, p. 151). For the municipalities analysed, examples include two UNESCO recognitions – the Canto a Tenore and the Tepilora Biosphere Reserve (Branca, Haller & Mossa, 2023), as well as the inclusion of the Mandrolisai polycultural landscape in the National Register of Rural Landscapes of Historical Interest (Regione Autonoma della Sardegna, 2018).

All of this contributes to the creation of a territorial brand which, in Sardinia's mountains, is embodied by the label *Prodotto di Montagna* (Mountain Product), an initiative by the regional agency Laore, which promotes and enhances agri-food products from mountain areas. The goal is to encourage the adoption of the quality label Prodotto di Montagna, an optional designation from the European Union intended to identify and promote products from mountain territories, bearing different meanings for consumers and producers. For consumers, it represents a certification of authenticity and quality, guaranteeing that products originate, are processed in these mountainous areas, and are often made using traditional and sustainable methods. For producers, on the other hand, the label offers a tangible opportunity to access markets that prioritise product quality and origin, enabling them to promote local production and stand out in an environment increasingly shaped by

sustainability and a growing awareness of mountain communities. As Salemink suggests, the "brand […] effectively functions as a quality certification and therefore as a brand in the global tourism industry" (Salemink, 2021, p. 5).

Discussion and conclusions

As discussed throughout this chapter, the socio-territorial transformations experienced by Sardinia's inland mountain regions must be understood as part of a complex set of interrelated trajectories – demographic, socio-economic, and environmental. These can be summarised along four main lines. First, significant migratory flows began in agriculturally specialised areas and extended to agro-pastoral zones. This phased progression, while schematic, reflects the uneven geography of economic vulnerability and opportunity within the island.

Second, the local responses to this upheaval included a gradual shift of pastoral groups from mountain areas to the plains (*Campidani*), often along historic transhumance routes. However, rather than maintaining seasonal mobility, these movements resulted in new patterns of landownership and settlement, already emerging in the early 20th century (Meloni, 1984; Murru Corriga, 1990, 1998; Lai, 1995; Ortu, 1988, 2000). It may be argued that the "original accumulation" generated by favourable dairy markets between the 19th and 20th centuries enabled pastoral families to purchase lands abandoned by emigrating farmers or following the decline of extensive cereal production. In some cases, pastoral groups successfully migrated to mainland Italy – for example, to the province of Siena – occupying land vacated by the collapse of the *mezzadria* (sharecropping) system.

A third trajectory concerns the persistent demographic decline. Local actors today are grappling with depopulation and population ageing and sustained youth outmigration. Fertility rates are now aligned with those of post-industrial regions such as Liguria. The continuing exodus of younger generations has compromised demographic renewal and the viability of essential services – schools, healthcare, banking – posing structural risks to the social fabric. Demographers have described this condition with the metaphor

of Sardinia as a “doughnut island”: an empty demographic centre surrounded by relatively populated coastal and peri-coastal areas (Breschi, Perra & Ruiu, 2023). In contrast to other European contexts where youth-led “return to the land” movements have gained some ground, these experiences remain rare and often isolated in Sardinia’s inland areas. The reduced services and economic uncertainty are among the main reasons and, as one cork worker in Gavoi remarked during an informal conversation in July 2024, many parts of the countryside today are more deserted than in the past.

Finally, in response, various local strategies have emerged. These include repositioning agri-food and craft production toward so-called “typical” and “quality” goods, often through EU-funded programmes such as LEADER. Cultural and tourism initiatives – festivals, seasonal rituals, and food fairs – have helped attract domestic and international visitors[7] (Meloni, 2020). Hiking and ecological tourism have developed around Sardinia’s numerous protected areas and historical trails, including revived transhumance routes like the Tramudas project (www.tramudas.com). Finally, local museums and ecomuseums contribute to a dense cultural landscape, positioning Sardinia among Italy’s most active internal regions regarding heritage engagement (ISTAT, 2025). These long-term processes, interpreted in their socio-territorial dimension, help contextualise the current responses of local communities, discussed below.

The complex landscape of Sardinia’s mountains, explored through an analysis of socio-economic and cultural changes, reveals a territory where community resilience has navigated the transition from polyculture agriculture to intensive pastoralism and, more recently, to initiatives in heritagisation and economic diversification. The transformations of the agro-pastoral model and demographic decline highlight the adaptive strategies of local communities, which blend traditions with the opportunities offered by tourism and global markets, mainly through the promotion of local products, her-

7 On a jazz festival as a tool for cultural, environmental, and food and wine tourism, see Meloni (2020); on traditional festivals and local fairs, see https://www.traccedisardegna.it/page/sagre-gastronomiche; www.italia-italy.org; and the Autonomous Region of Sardinia, Tourism: https://www.sardegnaturismo.it.

itagisation policies, and economic diversification initiatives, including tourism activities rooted in local identity.

These strategies reflect phenomena not limited to Sardinia but common to mountain regions globally, manifesting differently according to context. Ultimately, they demonstrate that change is not an abrupt rupture but a constant presence. At the same time, Sardinia's experience shares some traits with other mountain and island regions in the Mediterranean, such as Crete, Corsica, or parts of inland Cyprus, which have also faced rural decline and tried to rethink their development strategies. Nevertheless, what stands out in the Sardinian case is how transformation has taken shape not so much through demographic return or radical economic shifts but through gradually reworking identity, land use, and symbolic value. Change here it often unfolds through institutional frameworks, local projects, and attempts to make heritage a usable resource – yet this process is far from neutral. Decisions about what is preserved, promoted, or commodified reflect broader power dynamics shaped by funding structures, regional policy agendas, and the selective visibility of certain traditions over others. This has shaped different responses to crises that often rely less on demographic return and more on the symbolic value of heritage, and selective forms of place branding.

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“I’ve Never Left Castro Laboreiro”: Ambiguity, Cultural Pride and Haunted Imagery in a Northern Portuguese Mountain Community

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Abstract

What does it mean to be somewhere? This chapter follows the reflections and testimonies by a variety of natives from Castro Laboreiro, in northern Portugal, dubbed the castrejos. Among these *castrejos*, to be somewhere, both in space and in time, seems to carry a sense of belonging that transcends the transformations that the 20th century brought to mountain communities of the region. This sense of always being there in Castro Laboreiro, from the castrejos, is inexorably entwined with contemporary forms of economic survival and heritage-making, leading to interesting ambiguities and unending questions of truth, authenticity, legitimacy, and identity.

Festa C(r)asteja

One could sense the familiar air of a local festivity: it’s hard to find a proper spot to park your vehicle; the single local road littered with clumped up cars and a swarm of people, walking around in groups. A surprising amount of them, both young and old, appear to be specifically dressed for the celebration: the boys and the men wearing brown pants, white shirts of linen cloth (or at least resembling linen) under sleeveless jackets, and some form of hat or bonnet; the girls and the women donning long dark skirts combined with equally sombre-toned blouses, with colourful kerchiefs covering their heads and shoulders.

It would be, for anyone familiar with folk festivities in northern Portugal, a banal or at least usual sight. These are festivity clothes: you'd don them for this purpose; they're otherwise kept at home. This specific celebration is actually very small in crowd size, comparing to other major events that one could visit in the Minho province, some of which drawing volumes of people that reach hundreds of thousands.

The food vendors, a common sight in local celebrations, serve grilled pork or chicken, wine and beer, and sweets such as cotton candy or farturas. One can also spot the locally produced goods and crafts, or even the wandering salesmen bringing clothes and cheap trinkets for the children. There is also a peculiar contest that's happening in a field ahead, a competition for the best specimens of a dog breed called Castro Laboreiro.

This is the Festa Crasteja[1]. We are in Castro Laboreiro, a region in the mountains of northern Portugal, which boasts a particularly distinctive cultural identity, and has been an increasingly sought-after destination for tourists seeking the natural beauty of the mountains, and the cultural panoply that's on offer by the locals.

One of those stands belongs to Sara and Manuel, two castrejos who currently make a business out of renting refurbished old homes for short-term vacation stays. Their stand features an assortment of stuff: a few wicker carboys and baskets, an old and worn milling stone, a hung cross-shaped support that was used to store bread away from the rats, and other assorted items that evoke a sense of rurality, of handcrafting, of agriculture and animal rearing, of an old time that's gone. These objects, though, are not for sale. They are props in a show of castrejo culture, a show that the visitor is welcomed to enjoy and participate in.

Castro Laboreiro is a name that designates a town, but also a parish region that spans almost 90 km^2 in area. It's located high up in the Laboreiro mountains, fully within Portugal's Peneda-Gerês National Park. The Laboreiro mountains feature a distinctive plateau (with the same name), over which a section the northern border between Portugal and Spain is traced. The plateau's history as travel grounds for border crossers, fleeing migrants, and contrabandists, is well known regionally (Gonçalves, 1996; Gonçalves, 2008;

1 Though the normal spelling would be *castreja*, for this event the organizers insist on switching the R which refers to a common spoken variance of the word.

Gonçalves and Rodrigues, 2023; Silva, 2009; Aguiar, 2016); its prehistoric vestiges dating all the way back to 4000–5000 BC (Dordio, 1995; Lima, 1995; Lima, 1996), which include a complex array of dozens megalithic monuments and stone carvings, trace human occupation and circulation in the area for millennia.

Figure 1 – Manuel and Sara pose in front of their stand in August 2023. Photo by Sabrina Marques. Reprinted with permission.

The Laboreiro is old. And yet, is only one of the many ways in which castrejo representation, imagery, and narratives, plunge contemporaneity into the depths of ancestry. Narrative devices rooting castrejos and castrejo culture in deep Portuguese origins have been employed for a while (Domingues, 2023; Domingues & Rodrigues, 2007; Gonçalves & Domingues, 2023). Castro Laboreiro has been the subject of interest for 19th century ethnography, archaeology, and travel literature (Domingues & Rodrigues, 2007; Domingues, 2023). An interest that continued into the 20th century.

To Never Leave

This chapter seeks a reflection on a sense of belonging in a mountain community that is also gone, where what is there today is dissonant with what was before, and whose people reside in this atemporal state that's both in the historical past, but also the ever-emerging present. It focuses on Castro Laboreiro, a historical and iconographic rural region in the mountains of northern Portugal, which has undergone structurally irreversible changes during the 20th century.

We will follow the perspectives and reflections of a few castrejos with whom I have worked over the span of a few years. Testimonies that were gathered in conversation around family photographs and other audiovisual archives kept at home. We will look over some methodological considerations of this kind of work, which is the main driving force of both the kinds of data that was gathered, and also the main inspiration for the very style in which I'm writing – an attempt to blend concrete data with a more literary, story-telling style of writing that I believe was brought to me through fieldwork with castrejos, whose own conceptions come about in a story-telling kind of way.

For this purpose, I chose to focus on a dialectic between past and present, proximity and distance, being and not being. The stage is set by a disposition of heritage and tradition as elements for tourism – the main economic incentive, currently, in Castro Laboreiro. But what I will attempt to do, by approaching contrasts and ambiguities, is to break them apart, and bring about a field of belonging that seems to be very present among castrejos.

We will see that castrejos move about along these fields of belonging, as they account for their residence among brandas and inverneiras, or they express, from afar, "never leaving" their own land. How the past is enacted in the present, as pride, loss, trauma, celebration – castrejo history itself an ever-emerging contemporality, whose elements may be added and pulled at will through storytelling.

It's an incomplete work. As we will see, castrejo forms of understanding themselves and the world is itself fundamentally incomplete. It comes about. Glimpses of possibility shine through in the telling, and, hopefully, this chapter itself will resonate with that, as I leave the door ajar for considerations and discussions which I am not able to bring here. Rather, it's here, but not here. Like castrejos, who reside where they are not residing.

Images of Heritage

I arrived in Castro Laboreiro as part of an ongoing effort to seek out photographs and other audiovisual archives located in people’s homes. The goal was to gather and safeguard a potentially significant legacy of images that would otherwise run the risk of being lost or destroyed. It was, in a sense, a conservation effort, though not necessarily concerned with a preservation of a culture but, rather, to draw attention to the richness and depth of life stories which can be reached through these archives.

My first incursion was in 2014, when I conducted a survey for photographs relating to the 20th century Portuguese exodus to France. It was a limited exchange then, a few visits over the span of two months, since the goal was to reach the wider Melgaço region. Over the following years, I ended up returning to Castro Laboreiro through a few invitations to follow ongoing heritage-making efforts[2] for a particular kind of local carnival costume known as the Farrangalheiro (see Maciel, 2022) as well as to consult and reflect on the local customs of widows and their associated black clothes (Maciel, 2023).

However, my real in-depth dive into Castro Laboreiro happened with a project named “Who Are We Here?” Starting in 2018, this initiative aimed specifically to allow for personal accounts to take prominence, and for aesthetics, testimonies, and life trajectories that emerge from these archives to lead a descriptor apparatus. It was, I would say, a form of applied anthropology: working within the organization of a local film festival (MDOC - Melgaço International Film Festival[3]), for the purposes of expanding Lugar do Real, a nonprofit, online, public database[4] of photographs, films, and other audiovisual materials relating to local, popular culture and heritage. Common results from this project are recorded interviews, exhibitions, publications, roundtables, and other public installations.

“Who Are We Here?” is a nomadic initiative, moving from parish to parish within the Melgaço municipality. As of writing this chapter, I have travelled and collected photographs along four different regions in four different

2 For a discussion on heritage-making in Portugal, see Antunes (2020).

3 A reference to the project can be found on the Festival’s website, here: https://mdocfestival.pt/en/quem-somos

4 www.lugardoreal.com/fotomemoria

periods of time[5]. Towards this goal, I start with establishing a fieldwork period of at least five months in residence. The search for photograph collections begins with a local mediator, which leads me to meet people though their own network of relationships (usually, the local parish council president, the priest, a representative of a local cultural organization, or someone who's also an active participant in the project). Seeing as the Melgaço parishes are usually small in size and population density (no more than a few hundred people actively residing in each village[6]), after about one or two weeks I start to gently introduce myself into the community.

I employed a methodology that allies practical strategies of collection-building for the Lugar do Real archive with anthropological approaches to fieldwork, including extended periods of residence in the territory. This allows, on the one hand, for a deeper understanding of the photographs and other audiovisual archives gathered, including the context in which they were produced, the stories that they contain, and the personal, historical, and communal significance that they might carry (which a detached perspective could miss). On the other hand, it allows establishing close-knit relationships with locals that ensure comfort and consent with the collection process.

The time spent in fieldwork, then, is divided between periods of gathering, cataloguing and digitizing photographs, deep conversations about the local people, the stories of their lives and of the land, and participation in whatever communal event may be happening at some point. All of this information is fuel for a series of filmed interviews, in which participants talk about their photographs and trace their biographical trajectories; it also informs the design for on-site photography exhibitions that feature selected materials from personal archives; and the eventual publishing of photography books, which also feature written contributions from local authors, as well as my own brief account of my stay in the parish.

A phase of more intense immersion into people's life stories, though, hap-

5 Locations: Parada do Monte and Cubalhão (2018), Prado and Remoães (2019), Castro Laboreiro and Lamas de Mouro (2020–2023), Alvaredo (2023–ongoing).

6 The population disparity in Melgaço would be the subject of a different reflection entirely, that's too vast to include here. Due to a multiplicity of factors that range from a shortage in employment opportunities, lack of access to services such as schools and hospitals, and a history tied to migration, many Melgaço natives reside outside of the region, either abroad (France being the greatest host of Melgaço migrants), or dislocated to major Portuguese cities. As we will see, this underlies contemporary *castrejo* socialities as well.

pens while collecting the photographs. As a rule, I spend a significant time looking through albums and photograph piles, going over the stories behind them, identifying people and places, or hearing stories that are, in different degrees, associated with the pictures. The time spent going over these materials varies greatly from person to person, their availability, and openness to conversation; it also depends on the depth and size of the archive. Sometimes, this process happens in group; in rare occasions (following clear and comfortable consent), I have recorded these interactions for my own personal archive. I find that there’s a profound potential to this process, both from the perspective of recounting life stories and memories, and of talking about contemporary issues by drawing from personal narratives, mediated by pictures and documents.

This is, essentially, a way of doing photo elicitation, a form of information gathering that, according to Harper (2002; see also Auken et al. 2010), is embedded in classic forms of ethnographic methodology, but not generally assumed as such:

> … only a small number of published studies have relied on photo elicitation. It may be photo elicitation takes place informally in routine field work and that its impact is not formally realized. (…) Thus it may be the case that anthropologists often use photographs in interviews but that few of these are written up as photo elicitation studies. Anthropological studies that rely primarily on photo elicitation, however, are few and far between. (Harper, 2002, p. 15)

Forms of photo-elicitation are used in a multitude of research fields, and shift from use of pictures that are researcher-generated, participant-generated or decontextualized (Richard & Lahman, 2015), in varying degrees of experimentation and abstraction. For my research, elicitation comes about as a natural extension of the gathering and cataloguing process, as the information is gathered from photographs that are digitized from people’s personal archives – photo albums, scattered findings in drawers and boxes, hung in walls. As such, access to these materials is contingent on a continuous, trusting relationship between myself and the collection owners.

Throughout this research, I have been compiling testimonies, reflections, documents, and other materials. These include recorded interviews (audio

and video), assorted videos and photographs taken with my smartphone or camera during certain events, observational fieldnotes or other notes taken during conversations and events, and even digital interactions through social media, e-mail or phone / internet messages. This is the kind of data that I draw from in this chapter, from which emerge the themes that I'm discussing. I'll refer to things that have been said to me, or reflections by people I've talked to – these are registered, usually, on a field diary, in the form of quick notes or musings, taken during conversations around photographs or from other interactions with locals.

In the process of organizing and digesting all this information, I have also returned to the region regularly and brought my questions and doubts back to the people that I worked with. As such, the ideas that I'm presenting in this chapter (as well as the other things I've written in other avenues) have been discussed with, and scrutinized by, the people whose testimonies are featured here[7]. This return usually happens in shorter visits after the more intense fieldwork periods.

I moved to Castro Laboreiro in 2020, aiming to settle into another five months of fieldwork. It was, unfortunately, coincidental with the initial spike of what would become the Covid-19 pandemic, which meant stopping my residence after two weeks, following a national social isolation mandate (Sequeira et al., 2024). The months that followed were characterized by intense public fears of wandering strangers as super-spreaders of the disease. Adding dramatic effect, the Melgaço region was one of the few nationwide that enforced a regional quarantine (in the Parada do Monte village), following a spike that led to concerted efforts to protect the local elderly population (see Vieira et al., 2020). These conditions made it very uncomfortable for any long-term fieldwork to occur, at least during periods of higher Covid-19 casualties.

As such, instead, I decided to start tracing the whereabouts of castrejos living outside of Castro Laboreiro. I was aware of the sizeable castrejo *co*mmunity living in the city of Braga, and, taking the window of opportunity

7 Anecdotally, one issue that was particularly challenging was the one I mentioned regarding widowing customs in Castro Laboreiro, because of a particular common interpretation of women of migrant men being described as "widows for the living", since they too would dress in black, which is analogous to typical widower clothing. In discussing this idea with *castreja* women, they criticized the notion, leading me to reframe the issue entirely (Maciel, 2023).

during periods of lower pandemic restrictions, I started contacting castrejos living there and exploring the subject of "Castro at a distance", that I talk about further on in this chapter. I knew, from my previous work with Castro Laboreiro, that castrejos had a reputation for living abroad, while retaining tight-knit relationships and a proud sense of collective identity. So, during 2020 and early 2021, I was regularly talking to and interviewing a few castrejos who lived in Braga, both by visiting them in their homes, by meeting them in public spaces, or by contacting to them online.

After Covid-19 restrictions were lifted further, in 2021, I returned to Castro Laboreiro for a few weeks at a time, still under social distancing. Now, even with such limitations[8], I would resume my exploration of personal photography archives. In 2022, I came back, for an additional five months of fieldwork. In total, I spent over ten months of intermittent fieldwork in Castro Laboreiro, adding to that the many visits over the years that happened before, and the return post-fieldwork trips.

My presence would unearth photographs that put into question some common representations of castrejo aesthetics. For example, I would find old pictures of women in white shirts and confront that with the understanding that castrejas dress in dark colours or simply black (as described in Geraldes [1982]); in other cases, an old photograph of a dwelling could reveal disputed elements in the landscape. Simultaneously, this collection of pictures would rouse interest among locals for its evidential power as proof of ancestry and originality – particularly when they contained information related to customs or traditions. It would bring about discussions around what is, exactly, the proper way to talk about castrejo history; in turn, bringing light to the contentious nature of this collective storytelling.

8 In some cases, specially when someone had a suspicion of being ill, I would schedule drop-off locations for packets of photographs for me to pick up later.

Figure 2 – Unidentified group of *castrejas* heading to the Rodeiro branda festivities in the 1960's. Photo by Américo Domingues. Reprinted with permission.

These conversations evidenced a particular problem with castrejo history: while there is a robust corpus of written accounts regarding Castro Laboreiro, they often come in the form of situated observations by visiting writers and academics (Domingues, 2023). As such, I found those accounts to be disputed by castrejos, who tend to pitch in their own personal stories, or accounts passed down from parents or grandparents, as counterpoints. In this debate, I identified a fascination and interest in castrejo photographs as testimonies of "what actually happened", or, in another light, an additional element in an ongoing effort of retelling castrejo history.

Figure 3 – Parade of *castreja* women during the Festa Castreja in the 1990s. Photographer unknown, from the archive of Dulcelina Fernandes. Reprinted with permission.

This way of using photographs as documents that "verify the real", imposing certainty over the "ephemeral" "aspects of life", and operating strategically as mechanisms that confirm, contain, "fix" the past into seemingly coherent narratives, has been laid out in Bloustein (2003). The way that these processes tie back together with how narratives around heritage are integrated and put to practice through photography archives, is discussed in depth in Sterling (2019). For what I wish to discuss here, I found that castrejo culture seemed to be continuously re-enacted, re-written, and re-told, following a potentially endless dive into elements of castrejo past that may emerge[9].

This locally discussed history, therefore, carries imbued elements from written accounts and studies, documented evidence, orally transmitted stories, first-person accounts, and a knowledge of the territory and its people. It is, for me, difficult to parse these elements out, to separate accounts drawn

9 During a debate over the correct garb for castreja women, I've registered one castrejo that argued that the clothes should be "as black as possible" and "as old as we can verify", reinforcing this idea that authenticity (for him) relied deeply on documented verification, where ancestry is itself a form of validation.

from ethnographers from individual and shared sensibilities regarding castrejo heritage and identity. For that reason, I choose to follow a textual format that pivots among literary references, written testimony, data from interviews, photographs, and a learning inscribed in me over the time spent in Castro Laboreiro. This, way, I feel we can draw a little closer to ongoing forms of castrejo storytelling, even if in a manner that's flawed or incomplete.

Looking Back

19th century nation-state building saw the emergence of an aesthetic paradigm of Portuguese identity among cultural elites, marked by a shift towards a romanticized idea of "rurality" that drew from the picturesque and romantic literary traditions (Leal, 2010) to seek out, among idealized and stylized fictions of peasant lifestyles seen as closer to nature, a sense of purity and originality (Domingues, 2023).

Addressing this process, Leal (2010) follows Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett in considering the "second life" of cultural processes, by distinguishing folk culture "itself", that is, the mapping of behaviours, customs, ideas and aesthetics, however they may be, as an ongoing process of human lived interaction and experience, from the ways in which elements from that cultural pool are brought back into prominence as crystalized aspects, traces, and objects that become part of a nation's "identitarian kit" (Leal, 2010, p. 128). This kit is then one which can be readily "activated" (Silva, 2009) to tie the field of ethnography to politics of national identity, following two axes: that of an ethnogenealogy, meaning the employ of folk culture as evidence of a nation's genealogical – historical – depth; and that of folk culture itself as the essence of a nation's soul (Leal, 2010, p. 127).

The first half of the 20th century would bring about further efforts in mapping, cataloguing, and defining the different aspects of Portuguese folk culture and aesthetics – continuously reaffirming its relationship to a reigning political and ideological ruralism (Alves, 2007). These accounts were, directly and indirectly, and in varying degrees of intentionality, fundamental for the ideological grounding of Portuguese nationalism and fascism. The Es-

tado Novo (New State) regime, which lasted from 1933[10] until 1974, brought along a profoundly intentional project to map the country through an array of individualized cultural manifestations, including regionalized forms of song, dance, and clothing (Medeiros, 2003). Contemporary academics are in the process of dissecting the ideological underpinnings of these early ethnographic accounts and how they persist in the present day (see, for example, Alves [2007], Godinho [2018], Neves [2010]).

The Carnation Revolution of 1974 brought along many changes to the Portuguese cultural landscape, but, until recently, very little effective criticism towards the folklorist apparatus inherited from before (Coelho, 2020). In fact, a defence of Portuguese cultural identity that finds its legitimacy in claims of “lost in history” ancestry is still vibrant today (Medeiros, 2003; Godinho, 2018). Festivities that evoke a sense of material and immaterial heritage, alongside customs and aesthetics more or less associated with them, abound in Portugal, with a strong and widespread prevalence in the northwestern region of Minho, where a pride for cultural heritage has taken an increasingly central position, including a constant revitalization of folklore dance and music groups, a scattering of contemporary arts practices that borrow from folklorist aesthetics, and a powerful tourism-centered cultural apparatus that draws from, and feeds into, this ongoing agitation (Godinho, 2018; Silva, 2009; Antunes, 2020).

According to authors such as Paula Godinho (2018), such agitations have found footing in situated and bound festivals and festivities, where intensified forms of identity celebration meet up with focused markets around arts, crafts, and gastronomy, to the backdrop of stage and street public displays of folk and otherwise popular culture, in the form of music concerts, theatres, parades, and exhibits. This form of “festivalization” of culture (Godinho, 2018; Campos, 2021) is not a local phenomenon, and is in keeping with global trends around the celebration and promotion of culture in different countries (González, 2020; Ali-Knight, 2009; Pedregal 2008; Bendix, 2009), which in turn was already a trend noted in late 20th century (Bendix, 1989).

10 Following a military coup that took place in may 28th, 1926.

Figure 4 – *Castrejos* dance on a stage. Date is likely to be late 1980s/early 1990s. Photographer unknown, from the archive of Maria Domingues. Reprinted with permission.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that, among the residents of hard-to-reach locations such as Castro Laboreiro, a dual engagement in hospitality industry[11] (Ionel, 2016; Slattery, 2002) and folklorist cultural practices comes about as a strategy for economic survival. Old forms of living off the land no longer provide an economically sustainable lifestyle – as we will see, one could argue that they never fully did.

To draw a history of Castro Laboreiro requires a compromise with factuality. Castrejo culture and identity is deeply tied with an imagined common history that is transmitted through oral and written accounts. It's a narrative, one that conflates written first-hand testimony by academics and travelling

11 I chose the term "hospitality industry" over "tourism" here, to strategically underscore services that sustain tourism, but not just. In Castro Laboreiro, much of the industrial apparatus that supports tourism – restaurants, hotels and other kinds of lodging, tour guides through nature, public shows and markets, as well as the structural means of production and supply in labour and goods that such an apparatus requires – is also actively engaged upon, and used by, castrejos themselves. There are dynamics at play here, which Godinho (2018) explores through a reflection on the back-and-forth in these operations, from the inside-out and from the outside-in, and in this movement there's a question around the extent to which locals enmeshed in festivalization engage in a form of tourism "of themselves". I believe that "hospitality industry" is a term that better encompasses these dynamics.

writers, and information derived from late 19th century photographs and illustrations. It's fascinating to see how these accounts themselves refer to Castro Laboreiro in a quasi-mystical fashion, even when they come from highly technical sources, such as this reference found in the original standard for the controversial Castro Laboreiro dog breed, registered in 1935:

> Authors say that, in the early 18th century, along those unwalkable and stony places, there still resided semi-savage tribes, having only the obligation to pay a small tribute to the kings consisting of five hunting dogs, which shows how, in those times, the dogs were already appreciated and used in hunting due to their strong abilities. (Marques, 1935, p. 9)

An imagined historical past, combined with the description of a "semi-savage tribes" (similar accounts can be found throughout the 19th century, as Domingues [2023] pointed out), underlines both the claims to ancestry in Castro Laboreiro and a kind of deprivation and poverty that was often reported among those who resided in the particularly harsher locations of the region. Reports describe blackened, soot-covered walls in houses where the castrejos would reside during the winter, huddling against the heavy snows, sleeping in hard beds under uncomfortable, thick woolen blankets. The "savagery" of the people would often come about as an indictment on the particularly harsh conditions of living (Domingues, 2023).

Castro Laboreiro (the region) is composed of a myriad villages scattered about the mountainsides. The villages located more towards the mountaintops are called the brandas, where there are fields of rye and wheat (Domingues and Rodrigues, 2007). These are the summertime lodgings. But, for the winter, the castrejos would move away from the heavy snows, down the mountain slope to the inverneiras – the winter lodging. The "Move" (*Muda*) would happen two times per year: downwards sometime in autumn after the harvests in the brandas, upwards at the end of winter (Domingues and Rodrigues, 2007).

Figure 5 – The Campelo branda, with newer houses being build. Photographed by Oliveiros Domingues, the father of Sara Domingues, whose archive this photograph is taken from. Considering the newer houses, it is likely to have been taken during the 1960s. Reprinted with permission.

A back-and-forth that is justified by, once again, the harsh conditions of the mountain, both because of the heavy snows that would make brandas unlivable, and the demands of agriculture, where land availability, water access, and soil quality require the ingenuity of locals to extract as much resources as possible. Rye fields in the brandas, greens and potatoes in the inverneiras. Most castrejos would, then, reside along the expanse drawn between two villages – except for those who lived in halfway dwellings (dubbed "permanent brandas") or in Castro Laboreiro proper (Domingues & Rodrigues, 2007).

Both brandas and inverneiras are well kept and maintained over the year. Waterways need to be cleared, houses need to be maintained, earth needs to be tilled, crops need to be planted months in advance before you do the Move. I have observed how conversations around castrejo heritage, especially among castrejos who meet outside of Castro Laboreiro, typically start out by recounting where in the region each person is "from", which often results in the castrejos giving two names: "I am from (let's say) Portos (branda) and Curveira (inverneira)". A dual locality, or maybe an extended territory of belonging. One which links its meaning to the harshness of the land.

Roads and pathways, fields contoured with hand-built granite walls, water mills by the side of rivers and brooks, small dams, cottages for storing farming equipment and shelter from bad weather, small chapels and altars, stone bridges and paths, all fill the Castro Laboreiro region with telltale signs of intense occupation. One which is traced and crossed by a turbulence of humans, non-humans, weather, and spirits[12]. Brandas and Inverneiras dot a constellation around the center hub village of Castro Laboreiro, as focal points in this agitation. As such, they draw a cartography that’s been the subject of interest for a variety of researchers (Geraldes, 1996; Perez, 2002).

Figure 6 – Snow-covered Castro Laboreiro. Date unknown, photographed by the priest Aníbal Rodrigues at an unknown date, likely during the 1960s. From the archive of Amado Fernandes. Reprinted with permission.

Archaeologists, noting the human territorial occupation that spans millenia (Dordio, 1995), have also attempted to draw comparative parallels by looking at contemporary disposition of houses and land. Lima, particularly, took on the task of mapping out all the brandas and inverneiras (Lima, 1995) and

12 The appearance and presence of spirits of the dead is well documented in northern Portugal (see for example Pina-Cabral, 1980). Castrejo storytelling comes about also through the lens of apparitions, omens, and other spirits (Fernandes, 2023), as I will explain later.

contextualizing them among archaeological and other historical monuments (Lima, 1996). This mapping has been revisited by local authors Domingues and Rodrigues (2007), who contributed by developing a table of the most common connections between different sites – i. e., which brandas connect more frequently to which inverneiras. The preserved granite buildings have also drawn attention from architects (for example Salgado, 2014, and Sampaio, 2008).

If the moving about between brandas and inverneiras is one of the defining traces of castrejo heritage, one other is the sendoff of boys and men abroad for work. 18th century accounts[13] report waves of migrant castrejos working throughout northern Portugal as masons and labourers (Gonçalves & Rodrigues, 2023). A common reality within mountain communities in northern Portugal over the centuries, where men are often incentivized to leave while the women stay behind, caring for family, home, and land. But one that is specifically invoked as a strongly defining characteristic of castrejo identity:

> There's an astounding emigration, since from the start of the month of September, every man that's older than eight years old all the way up to old age, if able to drag himself, marches off towards [the regions of] Douro, Tráz os – Montes, Beira Alta, and other parts, not returning until Easter, which is the fatal date before which they will forcefully return. (…) The land is so deprived of men, that cadavers are taken to church by women, and before that, there's a great feast in the grievers' home for those who wish to partake, which everyone gladly does, sometimes many tens of them, which no one finds strange since it's the way of the land. (Leal, 1874, pp. 207–208)

The Laboreiro plateau, an expanse that's crossed by the border between Portugal and Spain, was a privileged border-crossing avenue for migrants (Gonçalves & Rodrigues, 2023). Castrejos themselves, from the start, were counted among the first migrants to go to France, as it was a logical progression of the custom of men to leave for work. However, the scale of 20th century migration from Portugal to France was unprecedented. Migrants being, at the

13 A famous source for these accounts are the Memórias Paroquiais (parochial memories), a collection of inquiries made across the then realm of Portugal. See: https://digitarq.arquivos.pt/details?id=4238720

time, mostly men (Gonçalves, 1996). Emigration meant an economic boost for families at home, which, coupled with the enrichment that came from other booming opportunities in clandestine crossing and contraband at the border, resulted in a vast boost in *castrejo* wealth during the second half of the 20th century (Gonçalves, 2008; Aguiar, 2016).

Since a great number of men were working abroad, the castrejas at home would – as it was reported in the past – take the responsibility of managing family life, domestic labour, and agriculture (Geraldes, 1978, 1982). "Castrejo men have always lived outside of Castro", one castrejo named Bruno once told me, to underlie the historical distinction in gender roles. A responsibility which is often portrayed as, again, an inherited pride of strong castreja women, masters of land and home[14]. An account from the 70s ethnographer Alice Geraldes would confirm as much, although cautiously advising against enthusiastic representations of a matriarchal society among castrejos:

> Castro Laboreiro provides an excellent example of a community that has been, for over half a century, at the exclusive responsibility of women who, for that reason, have gained at the eyes of men an importance that is not coherent with a subordinate status. (…) Effectively, their freedom to act is absolute, for everything that regards the governance of the family production unit, the education, and life of the children whom until adulthood do not recognise any authority that isn't the one exercised by the mother. (…) Not wanting to fall into the absurd situation of mistaking castreja society with a matriarchy, we might say that, on par with the power that women exert on several levels, they also take up the responsibility to ensure that traditional order does not deteriorate. (Geraldes, 1978, pp. 22–23)[15]

The enthusiastic defence of a quasi-matriarchal *castreja* society takes full effect in addressing the *castreja* garb, one which was also studied and documented by Alice Geraldes (Geraldes, 1982). Castreja women were often reported as dressed in almost full black: black skirt, black shirt, and a black thick wollen cape that covers her body from head all the way down to her legs. During the winter, the outfit is described to include white woollen leggings

14 This is not a singular feature of Castro Laboreiro, but of a practice in local mountain communities (Geraldes, 1982).

15 Translation by the author of this text.

for extra protection against the cold. In summertime, the thick wollen cape gives way to a dark kerchief to cover the head. The black clothes would be donned to signify the absence of men – which was described to me as being a way signal that the women are married and committed. Splashes of colour, from kershiefs, scarves, or sober-coloured shirts, would be used upon the men's return.

Figure 7 – Felisbela Pereira, the grandmother of Armandina Fernandes, in a field with her flock of sheep. Date and photographer unknown. From the archive of Armandina Fernandes. Reprinted with permission.

Black-clad women huddling from the snow are the centrepiece of castrejo iconography. It is portrayed in illustrations and photographs dating back to the 19th century. It's also the aesthetic focus of the many works of documentary film and photography done about Castro Laboreiro throughout the 20th century and until the present day[16].

16 See, for example, the first three episodes of "O Homem Montanhês (The Mountain Man)", by Ricardo Costa, filmed in the 1970s. Available at: https://arquivos.rtp.pt/programas/o-homem-montanhes/

An ever-present sense of ancient rurality which would be undercut by the contrast with the cosmopolitan life of migrants abroad. With wealth, came investment. Castrejos would fund the send-off of their children, still residing in Castro Laboreiro, to the nearby city of Braga for studying. From the 70s and 80s, recently graduated castrejos would take full advantage of the opportunities brought about by democracy. These comprise many of the castrejos I have met and interviewed. Many among them are lawyers, judges, doctors, engineers, and businessmen.

Little by little, houses were refurbished from within and converted towards comfort. The Move between brandas and inverneiras became progressively less necessary[17]. As highly educated castrejos make a living in the city, so do their children, leading to a progressive emptying of young from the region. Which has been, conversely, replaced by a growing interest from visitors, as tourist attractions such as nature hikes and canyoning, side by side with the public reenactments of castrejo folk heritage, breed a financial incentive towards hosting tourism[18]. Currently, the small town of Castro Laboreiro has three hotels and four restaurants; many old houses in the brandas and inverneiras have also converted to welcome visitors. Recently, a Portuguese online influencer bought several of them in an inverneira, as part of a millionaire project for the repurposing of abandoned homes for tourism[19].

In so many ways, the Castro Laboreiro that was is no longer there. Even the winters feel softer, now. The snow days are few, and short lasting. When it does snow, the region is swarmed by visitors. Filipe, a castrejo, told me of the many cars that would get stuck in the snows and ice due to lack of driver experience, and poorly equipped cars. The dangers that come from traffic jams

17 There is still one mother and daughter pair that still do the Move today. They do it not out of necessity, but out of tradition, and under the insistence of the mother. Their willingness to Move every year is also regularly the subject of local TV reports and interviews (see, for example: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wQ00FtZcxlE). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the same women are regularly involved in other scheduled evocation of old customs and traditions of Castro Laboreiro. I was also informed of an unrelated third person who still does the Move, but I never met them.

18 This again is in trend with broader reconfigurations of life in border and mountain communities of the region with, around, or from tourism. While I am not aware of a study that focuses the economic impact of tourism in Castro Laboreiro, Silva (2009) does broach the subject when writing about the conversion of cross-border contraband into heritage and tourism.

19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qMzCrv0_BVc

in the mountains that cut off access to emergency vehicles. In another conversation, a different castrejo was telling me about the changes in climate. He blamed climate change, and the building of a dam in Galicia, as primary catalysts for the softening of the winter. I could sense a tinge of lamentation in his voice. After all, the Move among brandas and inverneiras is over; the few women that still dress in black on an everyday basis are very old; the lands are barely tended for, cattle are rarely seen anymore. If the winters are also no longer harsh, then yet another structurally defining element of castrejo pride is gone, and there's not much of those left to witness.

Castro at a Distance

There's some history between Castro Laboreiro and the city of Braga. The wealth brought about by emigration and contraband (Gonçalves, 1996; 2008) allowed for some castrejos to invest in the city, buying nearby land and setting up profitable building companies. There's a usual saying among castrejos, which states that they essentially "built" Braga (or, rather, that they built from the small city that was, into the big city that it is today). The presence of castrejos in Braga was also an additional incentive for those residing in Castro, or abroad, to feel comfortable sending their children to study there. A common thread occurred where boys and girls would be sent to christian boarding schools[20], ensuring some form of surveillance over the children.

As a result, the relationship maps that would be drawn among neighbours, family, and close friends, were extended to Braga as well, in a manner very similar to the relatively close circuit of castrejo migration, which would guarantee that the clandestine crossing over to France would at least result in reestablishing connections with other castrejos there. As one person told me, "castrejos wander in packs." The extension of strong relational bonds, even if established at a considerable distance from the native land, manifests frequently in the form of marriages among castrejos, as well as intense degrees of in-group socialization.

20 Among the castrejos that I interviewed, the common story was to be sent either to the D. Diogo de Sousa College (for boys), or the "Colégio Teresiano" (for girls, translatable as the College of St. Theresa). Both are in Braga.

Although, among the people that I met, this keeping up with local relational bonds abroad was regularly framed within the bounds of a deep adherence to old castrejo customs. To marry among other locals, rejecting connections with foreigners[21], is boasted as part of a particular kind of stubborn adherence to tradition. It usually follows a deep connection to Castro, even if from afar, through social media groups for socializing and for advocating the defence and preservation of castrejo heritage.

In 2021, during periods where mandatory confinement was lifted, I went to Braga a few times to converse with some of these castrejos who, in a way, "live Castro at a distance". In one such visit, I came to a house on the city outskirts, after contacting a castrejo man named Armandino who had agreed to meet me. Upon entering, I was greeted by a big Castro Laboreiro dog, which immediately signalled that I had was visiting the right place. Armandino is a very successful orthodontist, and he is married to Armandina, who is a prosecutor for the Portuguese public ministry. Both are castrejos. Upon entering his house, I also was greeted by Armandino's elderly widowed mother, dressed in black, who would come over to be with her son for stretches of time.

We talked for hours about Castro Laboreiro. The strong social circle of castrejos in Braga, and those who "strayed away", turned their back, and with whom Armandino lost contact. His mother would chime in by listing old customs and beliefs – such as the sightings of spirits of those who were soon to die, called the estântegas (Fernandes, 2023), a kind of apparition that I've found retold in variations of name and context, across the region, including my own home village[22]. Stories of commonly used crops and food, the logistics behind the Move, the black clothing of women, the travelling abroad of

21 Entertainingly, castrejos sometimes refer to outsiders as *plicas*. Not one has given me an origin for the word. But the similar word *pelica* does exist in Portuguese, as a reference to a soft and kind skin (from the word *pele*, meaning skin). Pelica gloves were a kind of soft glove, made from very thin animal skin, used to handle delicate things. I wonder whether the given name *plica* (or *pelica*) to outsiders is a reference to them not wearing the rough and thick wollen covers that castrejos would wear, or a disparaging remark on outsiders being comically soft and frail, unprepared for the toughness of the Laboreiro mountains.

22 A procession of the dead, which I have known about since childhood, features the next to die at the tail end of the file of damned souls, and there are stories of those who were cursed to witness the event. Tales of such people who could sense those who were to die next abound. In Castro, the spirit is seen silently staring out a window or sitting at the front porch. Upon entering the house, the person's body would be found dead.

men… they would all flow consciously and deliberately, as these are common conversations of interest to castrejos. As Armandino made clear that the tightly bound castrejo groups in Braga would regularly discuss these subjects among themselves, it was also apparent that they were fully knowledgeable of the many written accounts that were produced about Castro over the past centuries.

The conversation extended from early afternoon until the evening. There were mentions of outsider authors – writers, reporters, ethnographers, archaeologists – that talked about the land, important milestones, famous castrejos, the historical progress and changes throughout time. Of a strong awareness of castrejo heritage not just as a matter of identity and relatedness, but as an inherited monument, a powerful edifice of aesthetic symbolism, distinguished material and immaterial heritage, and a generationally inherited collective responsibility to preserve, safeguard, and pass it all on. To not forget. To prevent its death.

Armandino's children, teenagers, were born in Braga already. The parents did, however, register them as if they were residing in Castro Laboreiro at the time, with the official place of birth counting as the branda (for the child born in summertime) or inverneira (for the one born during winter) that they would be living on, should they have stayed in their native land. Still, they lived in Braga, made their friendships and went to school there, while getting to know their parents' native land through regular visits. Or, I should say, their own native land, as they seemingly identify as castrejos as strongly as their parents do. I was told in an openly prideful tone that one of the sons (whom I didn't meet), a young adult, would regularly speak in a thick local dialect[23] – which he learned by himself and not out of habit at home, purposefully injecting localized words and idiomatic phrasing that even most castrejos would not use.

23 People who reside at the border speak a kind of mixed language that borrows words from the other side's language (and vice-versa). In the northern border between Portugal and the Spanish region of Galicia, which includes the span of the Laboreiro plateau, the many parishes that cover the administrative limits between countries is often referred to as the raia, a term that denotes the border's permeability when it comes to cultural, economic, political, and linguistic exchange between people on both sides. In Castro Laboreiro, it is also very common for locals to speak a kind of Portuguese language that's heavily inflected to a local accent and sprinkled with borrowed Galician words. For more about the raia, see the work of Paula Godinho (2017).

I had the opportunity to talk to Armandino's teenage daughter, who, like her brother, deeply identifies as castreja. She explained to me that, although her life is in Braga, she does not feel like she belongs there. That it's something to do with the way that she connects with other castrejos, how the same routine questions – "who are your parents?" "where [in Castro Laboreiro] are you from?" – inspire in her a sense of belonging and identity that she does not get outside of her native home.

At any given point, I felt, they were operating as temporarily displaced *castrejos*. Like the men from the past, who have "always lived outside of Castro Laboreiro", these contemporary descendants were never too far removed from where they belonged. As evening came, another castrejo came to visit – Américo, a man who I've met before, a prolific researcher and archivist of everything that has to do with Castro Laboreiro's history (see Domingues & Rodrigues, 2007; Gonçalves & Rodrigues, 2023), a studious agitator of *castrejo* culture, and a passionate defender of the Castro Laboreiro dog breed. I thought that I would ask both Armandino and Américo about this apparent displacement, about this condition of being castrejos at a distance.

Turning to a reflexive and serious tone, Américo responded: "I've never left Castro Laboreiro". He is not displaced. He is there, even if not technically *there*. I think back to the movements between *brandas* and *inverneiras*, to the travelling afar for labour, to emigration. Did castrejos ever leave? Could they ever leave? This sense of permanence, one that is attached to an idea of place that, although it relates to a defined administrative region, is not necessarily contained within its bounds, left me confronted with the entire historical edifice of Castro Laboreiro. The heritage, the traumatic past, and the clinging on to its preservation and survival. If Castro Laboreiro is to be gone, then there's no other place to be.

Américo's insistence of never leaving Castro contrasts with Dina's attempt to leave for good.

I've met Dina first on a café in the town of Melgaço. She was introduced to me by a mutual friend, a castrejo intermediary that was helping me get to know Castro Laboreiro and a variety of its inhabitants. Like many others, Dina doesn't live in Castro Laboreiro. She worked her whole life as a nurse in Braga, where she got her studies done as well. Dina was born in a *branda* that is, likely, one of Castro Laboreiro's most remote villages: Portos, a two-village

complex located high up at the mouth of the Laboreiro plateau. Nowadays, Portos is largely unoccupied, save for those few castrejos who still go there to maintain their homes.

Portos has a reputation for being remote and secluded, a place where the people were particularly set in their ways. The last place to open itself to the outside world, some have told me. Dina felt it as a child. She commented on how the black clothing was imposed upon her, how the old castrejo customs seemed to her as very demanding. In a manner congruent to the accounts of Alice Geraldes (1982), Dina saw her life mandated under the authority of her mother, whose decisions were absolute, and who imposed upon Dina strict adherence to gender normative roles.

Figure 8 – A group of unidentified people from Portos. Date and photographer unknown. From the archive of Dina Gonçalves. Reprinted with permission.

Like others, after reaching a certain age, Dina was given the opportunity to leave for Braga to further her studies. It was at that point, she said, that she decided to leave to never return. It was a radical transition: Dina used to be as deeply involved in castrejo cultural life as one can. However, she shed her black clothes and a demanding life that she was inheriting from a time of harsh deprivation, and she embraced urban living and relative cosmopolitan liberation.

But the years have passed, and Dina is now a defender of castrejo pride. She enthusiastically helped me go through her old family photos, over the many customs of old and the beauty of the land. I would broach the subject of traumatic history – her early refusal to don the black clothes that are typical of castreja expression. At one point, she explained to me that "after a time, you create your own sense of what it means to be castreja". Her return was one towards a Castro Laboreiro of her own, one whose significance is very personally defined. There's a game of affective distance and proximity. Somehow, a sense of belonging that requires this creative play, which shapes the very land one chooses to root oneself in. A land to live in, which is not not the land that you lived in. There, but not *there*.

Arriving in Castro but taking up the route all the way down the road, towards a viewpoint that presents a valley of scattered *inverneiras*, a curious visitor could stop by a group of humanoid metal silhouettes. The work of a local artist, the sculptures feature dark figures of head-covered and black clad women that mark the castrejo iconographic landscape. They are featureless. Unidentified, vague, as enigmatic as a dark shade on an empty field. These covered women can be found all over the small town: in photographs that decorate the few restaurants and cafés, in dolls and figurines that carry approximated replicas of the standardized garb, and in the few older women who still choose to dress accordingly on a colder day.

Figure 9 – "Capa Castreja" (Castreja cape), public sculptures by Madalena Lima in 2025. Photo by Daniel Maciel.

Figures that somehow plunge or collapse a current sense of place and time into the immemorial past, or maybe the cold and harsh atemporal mountain. They are set to evoke a time of movement against hunger, of strife against the elements, but one of prideful heritage and strength. There's a spectral quality to the blackness of clothes and to the ambiguity of being in a place that's there, but not *there*. Both in the one gesture that grasps towards sensible and structural meaning, like in the many accounts recounted by writers and castrejos in unison, and the other which remakes the land itself into a place finally worth living in.

When I found Sara in her tourism stand, she was fully donned in what would be described as typical castreja festivity clothes. These are the clothes that she regularly wears to promote her family's tourism endeavour in the Pontes *inverneira*, wherein they set up a cluster of comfortable houses. However, in previous conversations, she often expressed doubts and ambiguous feelings regarding these clothes.

When clearing one of the old houses they would rebuild and refurbish for tourism, Sara found, stuffed into a hole in a wall (possibly to stamp out the cold), a deteriorated cape. I touched it: it was harsh, tough, and thick, as one would expect from old accounts of the strong coverings that castrejos would wear to protect from the snows. These are made from a material called *burel*, which is the result of wool being boiled and beaten to an impenetrable mass by stone hammers that are powered by water mills. None of those contraptions exist today, as far as I know, in the territory surrounding Castro Laboreiro. The cape itself evoked to me a sense of age, from old mills and the bygone people who could make it.

Sara imagined that it was over one hundred years old, maybe more. She showed it to me by a stand that she and her husband Manuel set up beside their house, where other trinkets and artisan crafts that they find are stored. And she told me "look, this is the actual colour of the clothes people used to wear." A dark brown, the natural colour of the sheep the wool was sheared from. Could a people that experienced so much material deprivation afford the tinctures that are required for black capes to be dyed that way? Geraldes had her own suspicions that the truly black clothes (rather than dark shades of other colours, namely brown) were only made popular after the wealth from emigration allowed women to purchase those kinds of clothes (Geraldes, 1982).

It's hard, of course, to say for sure. It's not unreasonable either to imagine that different people would dress according to their means. But I was more interested in understanding why Sara herself would dress in ways that caused her doubt. After all, her performance of castreja identity is one that requires a claim of authenticity. At the time of this conversation, she had recently appeared on television alongside other castrejas, to promote their home in a contest for the most beautiful Portuguese village (Castro Laboreiro did not win). Some discussion was going on among those women over what and how to wear, what was said and how correct it was. Representing your community is a problematic affair, one where your every word, behaviour, worn clothes, or accessories can be picked apart, scrutinized, and criticized.

Figure 10 – Staged promotional photograph of Sara Domingues enacting a rural scene, wearing traditional castrejo black clothing. From the archive of Sara Domingues. Reprinted with permission.

For Sara, however, pushing through her own doubts regarding the authenticity of the representation she is employing is a necessity. "If I don't do it, someone else will do it for me." The ambiguity of whatever spectres may emerge when confronting the uncertainty of evoked past is collapsed in this present-day pragmatism, which requires reclaiming the authorship of one's own self-representation. She knows tourism, she knows that she can't stop

the boat from moving downriver, so, she might as well put her hands on the rudder.

After joining her in looking through some old photos, Sara produced a small pouch that's big enough to hold two portrait-sized photographs. In it, she keeps two of herself as a teenager. On the left side, somber looking, she wears a dark sweater, and her hair is straightened down. On the right, she's looking upwards, her hair is flowing, and her shirt is of a light, striped pattern. "I keep this to not forget the difference", she told me. "On the left, it's me here, in Castro Laboreiro. I was sad. On the right, it was the same year, but I was in Braga to study. It was a new world."

Figure 11 – Sara's two portraits both taken during the 1970s. Photos in booklet shared with permission. Photo by Daniel Maciel.

The difference in moods wasn't that perceptible for me. I imagine that it lies somewhere in the same spectral quality that haunts the black clad women of those sculptures from before. On the untold depths of what remained behind the land of Castro Laboreiro, which was, but no longer is as it was, although it is in ways that castrejos make it be. There, but not *there*. The trauma and strife, the pride and resistance. Heritage, whatever that may mean.

Sara would once tell me, when we were talking about the symbolic weight of the donning of black clothes, that they were an imposition, but not one that would dampen the spirit. "My mother would dress in black to work the fields, and she would sing." Dina, in her most recent reply after I told her I was in Portos, said "Portos, my cradle", adding three heart emoticons. The task of taking on a monument that's as old and as big as a mountain is not one that I envy, nor one that I imagine anyone would take lightly.

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Inhabiting the Margins Nowadays: Ethnographies of Alpine Villages in Italy

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Abstract

This chapter presents the theoretical and methodological background and the first provisional results of ethnographic investigations conducted by an anthropological team complemented by an economist and an agronomist. This research is part of a broader Italian nationwide project specifically designed to conduct in-depth ethnographic investigations in several villages in marginal areas of Italy. The piece of research on which this chapter is based will extend over a period of three years and its aim is to understand perceptions, conceptions, and practices of inhabiting in peripheral and small-scale living contexts, calling into question the notion of margin and exploring innovative processes of cultural production and sociality creation. Adopting a comparative perspective, it focuses on four communities in the Italian Western Alps, affected for decades by demographic decline and progressive reduction to marginal lands, which are now experiencing new practices for a more balanced and sustainable growth and virtuous processes of local development. It also looks with particular interest at the emergence of associations and farms that are reintroducing historically documented but almost abandoned cultivations, as a creative way of addressing the issues of living in marginal surroundings and using local environmental resources. The goal is to provide illustrations of possible responses to the processes of marginalisation, taking into consideration the limitations that these processes impose, but also the opportunities that arise from them, and observing the ways in which local communities are facing questions that have become increasingly important for the whole territory of the Alps over the last twenty years: who are the inhabitants of Alpine villages and marginal areas today? What kind of resources, networks and social and cultural capital are, or can be, produced in upland communities?

1. Introduction[1]

This chapter is based on the first outcomes of an ethnographic research conducted as part of a nationwide project named "Inhabiting the margins, nowadays. Ethnographies of villages in Italy", which involves research units from five Italian universities in a wide-ranging campaign of field investigations whose main goal is to explore the practices through which the dimension of living is interpreted in areas that display elements of marginality, at a territorial, social and economic level[2]. These ethnographic investigations are being carried out in contexts which may be very different from each other – mountain districts, island territories, coastal villages, rural areas – and aim at understanding perceptions, conceptions, and practices of inhabiting in peripheral and small-scale living contexts, calling into question the notion of *margin* and exploring innovative processes of cultural production and sociality creation.

Our research team decided to address the general issue which is at the core of project from an Alpine perspective, selecting as case studies four communities in the Italian Western Alps, a sector of the Alpine arc that has been affected for decades by demographic decline and progressive marginalisation (Bätzing, 2005), and investigating in particular the agricultural and horticultural practices activated at a local level as a creative response to these very processes of marginalisation (Clément, 2004)[3]. Adopting a comparative stance, we focused our attention on localities which are now experiencing new practices for a more balanced and sustainable growth and local development. We are looking with special interest at the emergence of associa-

1 Although this chapter is the result of shared research and common reflections, sections 1 and 6 have jointly written by the two authors, sections 3 and 5 by Laura Bonato and sections 2 and 4 by Roberta Clara Zanini.

2 The project "Abitare i margini, oggi. Etnografie di paesi in Italia" is funded by the Italian PRIN Programme (Progetti di Rilevante Interesse Nazionale – Research Projects of National Relevance). Coordinated by a research unit based at the University of Perugia, it involves four other teams from the University of Turin, the University of Siena, Sapienza University of Rome and the University of Basilicata (code 2020EXKCY7, P.I. Daniele Parbuono). The Turin unit is an interdisciplinary group that includes four anthropologists, an economist and an agronomist (Laura Bonato, Lia Zola, Roberta Clara Zanini, Nicola Martellozzo, Damiano Cortese, Sara Straffon Diáz).

3 For a more in-depth look at this topic, see the section on ancient seeds and resilient fruits "Semi antichi e frutti resilienti. Coltivazioni in area alpina e prealpina" in Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo (2/2021) https://journals.openedition.org/aam/4175.

tions and farms that are reintroducing historically documented but almost abandoned cultivations, as a way of living in these marginal surroundings and using local environmental resources. The research intends to illustrate examples of possible responses to marginality, evaluating both limits and opportunities and observing the ways in which local communities are facing questions that have become increasingly important for the whole territory of the Alps over the last twenty years: who are the inhabitants of Alpine villages and marginal areas today? What kind of resources and social and cultural capital are, or can be, produced in upland communities? How can these resources be included in economic planning and place valorisation projects?

Our team's research activities, which began in September 2022 and are still ongoing, make use of a composite methodology: the participant observation typical of anthropological research, conducted through multiple trips to the four localities, is complemented by in-depth interviews and focus groups with local community actors particularly involved in agro-agricultural recovery projects and land valorisation. Moreover, the presence in the research team of an economist and an agronomist has made it possible to carry out, in each of the study contexts, training courses aimed at understanding the doubts and necessities expressed by the inhabitants with regard to agricultural activities and to the need to imagine innovative strategies capable of facilitating the handling of the critical issues that emerge in an increasingly changing context such as the mountainous one, in terms of climate, demography and, as we shall see, with unprecedented relations between humans and non-humans.

In this chapter we will present two paths of reflection, which complement each other within the same interpretative scheme and yet require to be examined independently. On the one hand, in fact, reflecting on similarities and divergences between the four communities makes it possible to outline a broader scenario within which we will put forward some considerations on the issue of inhabiting in the Alpine area. In particular, in our argumentation we will resort to Tim Ingold's epistemologically very dense notion of inhabiting (Ingold, 2015, 2021) as an analytical tool to unravel the complex relations of negotiation, resistance, power, which connect local village communities with broader and interrelated scenarios. On the other hand, in the fourth section of this chapter we will take another path that will lead us to consider the

delicate relationship between territorial marginality, development projects and tourism, in which we will see how the sustainability of the tourist enhancement of places can only go hand in hand with approaches that pay close attention to the actual, everyday minute practices of inhabiting, which allow the populations of the highlands to move beyond the margins.

2. A Methodological Overview

As mentioned earlier, this chapter is based on research conducted as part of a larger project whose title "Inhabiting the margins, nowadays. Ethnographies of villages in Italy" contains three keywords that point to as many conceptual, theoretical and methodological axes, namely *inhabiting*, *margins* and *ethnography*, which we have decided to mention also in the title of this chapter, where they are mobilised in an Alpine context. In a perspective that explicitly refers to Tim Ingold's theoretical proposal (2021), inhabiting is here understood as a processual practice of transforming the world, through which to explore the present and imagine future scenarios. In this sense, the dimension of living, as it is construed in the project, leaves the strictly domestic spaces of the dwelling, of the house, to place itself more fully in community spaces, in the village. Relationships of neighbourliness, of care for the territory, of reciprocal attention, sometimes of conflict and friction, are some of the elements on which the research concentrates and which define what Italians call *paese*, a term which can be roughly translated into English as *village*. In Italian, however, the semantic connotation of the word *paese* refers not only to the – obviously small-scale – size of a village or small town, but also to a stronger communitarian and sentimental relationship of proximity and cultural intimacy (Herzfeld, 1997), which connects the inhabitants and relates them to both the environment and the broader spatial dimension. These are clearly complex and multifarious relations, often ambivalent and ambiguous, even more frequently characterised by elements of conflict both at the level of representations and at the level of policies, at various scales.

The need to adequately respond to this complexity, and to the challenges that arise from it, is reflected on the methodological side. Intensive ethnographic practice is proving once again an essential tool for anthropological

investigation because of its ability to grasp, in their processual becoming, the dynamics of change and uncertainties that involve the communities. It is indeed on the concept of community that we now intend to propose some reflections, since it constitutes the theoretical junction that allows us to include both the idea of village (or, better, *paese*) and the need to *practice* ethnography in a single interpretative scheme.

Community studies have been for a long time an important, possibly the dominant, approach in Alpine anthropology. Starting with the first pioneering fieldworks carried out around the middle of the 20th century by a sizeable number of scholars from British and especially American universities, and since the 1970s also by *native* anthropologists (Viazzo, 2024), this style of ethnographic enquiry that identified the village community as the privileged scenario for research, through intensive and long-term ethnographic investigations, gradually consolidated. Attention to what have been classically defined as community studies then declined during the 1990s, when research practices more inclined to the use of extensive and comparative methods of data collection began to spread. Over the last decade, however, a gradual reversal of this trend can be observed, and intensive ethnography conducted in small community settings is returning to the centre of anthropological practice (Viazzo & Zanini, 2022).

In line, therefore, with these recent developments in Alpine anthropology, the investigations conducted by our working group identified the community as an ideal setting to observe the practices of living in marginal areas. However, it is important to emphasise that while what we might call the *community dimension* remains an essential starting point, the gaze and focus of the research was not limited to the individual community, or to the individual village, to borrow the term that gives our project its name. On the contrary, we felt it necessary to take into account the relationships and processes that shape the practices of inhabiting, in order to understand how at the micro level, in the village communities, those who inhabit the highlands activate practices that respond not only to the stimuli and challenges that complex contexts such as those at high altitudes pose, but also very often to the constraints that derive from relations with the institutions.

To proceed in this direction, and with these objectives, we deemed it essential to resort to three fundamental concepts, which constitute the core of

our theoretical approach, namely those of frame, negotiation and friction. In the next sections we will see in more detail how these concepts have operationally underpinned our observations and the reflections that have resulted from them, but before proceeding further a brief outline of these notions is in order. The ethnographic focus on specific localities makes it possible to reveal the existence of different attitudes and interpretations not only about what is meant by inhabiting the mountains, but also about specific themes that our investigation allows us to highlight. What emerges, therefore, are those which are called *frames*, that is to say the different interpretative settings through which actors with different positioning or roles read the reality within which they move. The concept of frame, developed by Ben Orlove and his team (Orlove et al., 2019), has proved particularly useful as a heuristic tool. This notion was introduced to analyse perceptions and representations of climate change, and in particular of the retreat of glaciers, in three high-altitude communities in the Alps, North America and the Andes. The ethnographic investigations conducted by Orlove and his collaborators have brought to light how the interpretative frames of the *frontline communities*, the term they use to designate those communities that live immediately next to the glacier, differ quite markedly from the ways in which climate change is described, and experienced, by those who look at the mountain from afar and, not infrequently, by those who have the power to decide for the mountain and those who live there.

Reflecting on these different interpretations, on the frames with which communities relate to the marginal territories in which they live, necessarily leads one to question the complex relationship between the communities themselves and the institutional actors who, at different levels, administratively regulate the way in which the territory is managed, cared for and intervened in. Not infrequently, in fact, this relationship is opaque, often conflictual. Later in this chapter we will attempt to highlight how the concept of *frame* proves useful for understanding the misalignment that we ethnographically detected between how those who actually inhabit the mountains imagine the environment and the institutional constraints that rule and limit the practices of inhabiting.

It is at this conceptual junction that it seems to us that the notion of frame might be complemented and made stronger by resorting to a key concept,

classic not only for the anthropological tradition in general but for Alpine research in particular, namely that of *negotiation*. Seminal, in this regard, is the historical and anthropological analysis by Harriet Rosenberg in her classic book *A negotiated world* (1988), in which she showed how the inhabitants of Abriès, a French Alpine village in the Queyras, had managed, over a long historical process of continuous negotiation, change and resistance to the State, to maintain active spaces of agency, despite the strengthening of centralised power.

More recently, a new line of Alpine research has resorted to the concept of *negotiation* to analyse the effects of the demographic dynamics that are today affecting the Alpine arc, and in particular the noticeable change in the composition of local populations due to the coexistence and frequent intersection of persisting flows of emigration and consequent depopulation with inverse dynamics of a return to the mountains which is actually mostly fed by the settlement of new inhabitants. For a long time, the Alpine territory has been traversed by migratory movements, both incoming and outgoing, which have profoundly modified the composition of mountain populations, and the current demographic dynamism of the Alps is a theme on which an increasing number of anthropological studies are focusing (Viazzo & Zanini, 2022). Many of these works are now starting from a somehow generative question – whose are the Alps? – from which a cascade of related questions descend: who are Alpine communities composed of? Who are the mountain dwellers and what does it mean to inhabit the mountains? As Pier Paolo Viazzo and Andrea Membretti (2017) appositely pointed out, ethnographic investigations and anthropological reflections have shown a complex, heterogeneous, multifarious panorama, which confirms, following Rosenberg's insight, the relevance or indeed the centrality of the concept of negotiation: "the Alps are becoming once again a world to be negotiated – *between* the Alpine communities and the outside, as well as *within* the communities themselves – given the diversification that is increasingly characterizing these communities and their populations" (2017, p. 103).

However, the theoretical stance underlying both Rosenberg's (1988) and Viazzo and Membretti's (2017) works only conceives of processes of negotiation and potential conflict within communities that are played out on a human level, as it were. The ontological turn which has gained prominence

within sociocultural anthropology, though, has made it clear that the practices of inhabiting also engage human beings in relationships with other-than-human inhabitants, and these relationships seem to be particularly relevant in a context such as the Alps (Krauß, 2018). From this point of view, the conceptual framework proposed by Anna Tsing (2005, 2015) seems to us to be particularly useful for investigating the dynamics between humans and non-humans that we were able to observe in the course of our fieldwork. In particular, the concept of *friction* (2005) allows us to frame the strongly conflicting relationships which set the inhabitants of the highlands, and especially those who practice agriculture, against the wild animals that are increasingly present in the territories of our research. Indeed, it does not seem illegitimate to ask, with an eye also on this non-human presence, who the inhabitants of the mountains actually are, and envision an expanded notion of community that mitigates its anthropocentric bearing by also including the non-human inhabitants of the territory.

3. Four Villages

The literature dealing with the highlands and the processes of change that these territories are undergoing is very large and multifaceted, both in terms of the issues addressed and the disciplinary perspectives through which mountain territories are viewed (Zanini & Viazzo, 2020; Boos & Salvucci, 2022). On the international scene, the emergence of a research perspective proposing what is termed *montology* (Sarmiento, 2020), a transdisciplinary study of the highlands at a global level, which makes comparison its most obvious methodological slant, has aroused great interest.

In Italy, scientific interest in the topic of inhabiting the upland areas has grown considerably, albeit mostly from disciplinary angles that are not strictly anthropological. In recent years many studies have probed the changing conditions of habitability of territories at high altitudes and the emergence of new needs among mountain populations that are going through processes of social and demographic change. Of the foremost importance is the line of research started by the multidisciplinary working group *Riabitare l'Italia*, which, with an attentive look at territorial planning and the political dynam-

ics that derive from it, has focused on those areas of the country that experience social, economic and political marginality. They are referred to in Italian public discourse as *aree interne* (inner areas) and appropriately include a large portion of the country's mountainous areas (De Rossi, 2018; Carrosio, 2019). Moreover, comparative and interdisciplinary works have pointed out how, in mountain territories, the rarefaction of proximity services is accompanied by the process of marginalisation of the highlands and the progressive misalignment between the needs and requirements expressed by mountain dwellers and the actual responses that institutions offer to these needs (Leggero & Lorenzetti, 2024).

In our research setup, the comparative dimension, as mentioned above, constitutes the central methodological axis (Candea, 2016): it is, in fact, for comparative purposes that our research team selected as case studies four villages, all belonging to the Italian Western Alps, which share the common feature of being located in high-altitude territories but also display interesting differences. Before introducing the villages, and the valleys within which they are located, it is necessary to preliminarily stress that we have stipulated that special attention should be paid, in the comparative analysis, to the role attributed by the local community to tourism in shaping economic and development trajectories. In fact, we will see how it is precisely around this aspect, namely the centrality and the critical issues that development projects raise, that some of the reflections prompted by ethnography are articulated.

But let us now turn our attention to the four localities selected for our study, three of them (Salbertrand, Formazza and Sant'Anna di Valdieri) administratively belonging to the Piedmont Region and one, Morgex, to the Aosta Valley Region. Since Sant'Anna di Valdieri has only recently been included in our sample of localities, research in this village is still in its early stages. For this reason, in this chapter we will mainly focus on the findings of the ethnographic investigations conducted in the other three communities. We will nevertheless also briefly introduce this fourth village, so that the overall research picture can be more fully understood.

Located at an altitude of 923 m above sea level, Morgex has a definite vocation for tourism, largely explained by its proximity to Mont Blanc and to some famous resorts where both Alpine skiing and mountaineering are practised. The relevance of tourism in influencing the development trajectories of

Morgex, and indeed of the whole Valdigne, the territory to which il belongs, is clearly signalled by the village's demographic history since the mid-nineteenth century, as shown by Figure 1, which offers a synoptic picture of the demographic evolution of the three municipalities on which we focus in this chapter. Population censuses indicate a slow but progressive decline in the number of inhabitants of Morgex between 1861 (when national population censuses were taken for the first time, just after Italy's political unification) and the years immediately after World War II, when a trend reversal began, coinciding with the decades of the mass winter tourism boom: this lead to a doubling in the number of residents, which has now reached the figure of approximately 2000, with only slight downward changes in recent years. However, this area has been selected as a research setting because, in spite of the undisputed pre-eminence of the tourist sector, viticulture has been revived and expanded in recent years, even in portions of the territory at high altitude (1200 m), protected and managed through the establishment of a local consortium. In addition, the cultivation of mountain saffron, while not yet widespread and still practised at an almost amateur level, is also attracting interest.

Salbertrand, in Piedmont's Susa Valley, after experiencing a strong demographic decline, has now stabilised at around 600 inhabitants. Although it is officially located at an altitude of 1032 m above sea level, the hamlets in its territory range in altitude between 994 and 3217 metres. In addition, Salbertrand is part of a very complex valley system. Crossed by one of the main road and rail routes between Italy and France, marked in the last two decades by major conflicts and frictions over the project to build the cross-border high-speed train (Aime, 2016), the Susa Valley has found its main socio-economic horizon in mass tourism since World War II. However, the already visible effects of global warming on Alpine tourism call for reflection on how the practice of living – and working – can be modified in a context that will necessarily have to come to terms with climate changes. The investigation has therefore focused on recovery projects, often in high-altitude hamlets, of areas otherwise subject to the advance of the woods, where attempts are being made to reintroduce the cultivation of hemp and rye (Bonato, 2017). Moreover, the socio-demographic dynamism of the valley is particularly interesting since not infrequently these paths of recovery and resettlement are due to the action of new inhabitants or commuters who describe their personal and family decisions in terms of responsibility and the ethics of care.

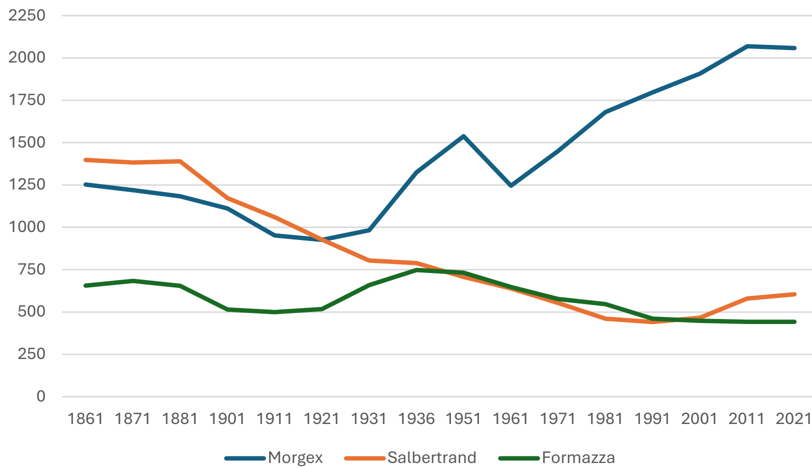

Figure 1 – Demographic evolution of the Municipalities of Morgex, Salbertrand and Formazza, 1861–2021. Authors' elaboration based on data from Italian Institute of Statistics – Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (ISTAT, National population censuses).

The third village is Formazza, in Piedmont, a high-altitude diffuse municipality with approximately 430 inhabitants on the border with Switzerland: the main hamlet is located 1280 m above sea level, but the territory reaches 3375 metres. The village is not only the northernmost municipality in Piedmont but also one of the fifteen Walser communities in the Italian Alps (Rizzi, 2015)[4]. The economic history of Formazza and its valley, quite differently from the other two localities, has not been so strongly affected by a massive inroad of Alpine tourism. On the contrary, the twentieth-century decline of agro-pastoral activities is mainly due to the economic reorientation linked to the construction of the dams and reservoirs that feed the valley's hydroelectric power stations, which are still one of the main employment outlets for valley dwellers (Cannata, 2019, 2023). Again, the economic history of this village is mirrored by its demographic evolution. The consolidation of the

4 The term *Walser* designates a large number of historically German-speaking settlements whose foundation dates back to the second half of the thirteenth century, when the high valleys at the foot of the south-eastern face of Monte Rosa, in the northernmost part of Piedmont and the adjacent Aosta Valley, as with many other high valleys in a geographical range stretching from Savoy to Vorarlberg and Tyrol, were colonised by Alemannic settlers coming from the Oberwallis (Zinsli, 1968; Mortarotti, 1979; Zanzi, Rizzi, 1988; Führer, 2002).

hydroelectric industry and, before that, the start of the construction of dams and reservoirs led to a surge in the number of residents between the 1930s and 1950s, which then declined in the following decades once the construction work was completed. Certainly, here too tourism plays a significant role, but in general we observe multi-activity practices that integrate tourism-related activities with employment in the national power company and, most importantly for our investigation, with horticultural and agricultural activities.

The landscape is dotted with small individually owned parcels where herbs, vegetables and especially potatoes are cultivated. At the same time, however, some farmers are attempting to recover the cultivation of rye, which has been abandoned over the past decades. The intention is to attempt recovery also for food and festive purposes, by planning the autumn Rye Festival, an event that is not historically attested, but nevertheless intends to refer to an imagery of rural tradition that seems attractive in a cultural tourism framework. Notwithstanding this, it is another aspect that we find most interesting about the practice of growing rye. We refer to the cultivation of this cereal, but also of spelt and buckwheat, as adjuvants in the agricultural rotation process for the subsequent sowing and cultivation of potatoes. A cultivation not useful in itself, therefore, but reinforcing for more widespread and established practices such as potato cultivation. The latter constitutes, together with horticulture, the central element of local agricultural activities and has given rise in recent years to the establishment of a consortium of local producers who have promoted the recovery of three local varieties, historically attested and currently included within a local and valley micro-economic circuit.

Finally, as we mentioned, it was recently decided to include in the research plan also the locality of Sant'Anna di Valdieri, in the upper Gesso Valley, in the Maritime Alps. A hamlet of the municipality of Valdieri, Sant'Anna (980 m above sea level) is the only settlement in the municipality to be inhabited throughout the year, although the number of permanent residents hardly reaches ten inhabitants during the winter. What makes it distinctive is its being at the centre of an ecomuseum project totally dedicated to the rye, cultivated in the past not only for food purposes but also for its use in construction. One of the territory's most interesting elements, moreover, is the pres-

ence of female entrepreneurship; in fact, many of the projects for the recovery and tourist enhancement of accommodation facilities and local activities are due to a small nucleus of women who have invested economic and personal resources with the aim of reversing the demographic trend.

4. Negotiated Worlds

The ethnographic investigations we have conducted so far have brought to light how, albeit with different nuances, in all contexts a layered set of negotiation dynamics between various actors in the territory emerges with great evidence. The picture that comes out is thus characterised by the complex relationship, ridden with friction and often unresolved, between cultivation and land management and care practices implemented at a local level by communities and/or specific groups of inhabitants and the institutional and political constraints that, at a superordinate scalar level, condition or limit these practices.

The *voids* that characterise inland and marginal areas, and mountain areas among them, are evident; however, looking at voids also means highlighting the spaces of potential creativity, the possible ways in which those who inhabit the highlands may "take advantage of emptiness" to imagine new forms of rootedness (Zanini & Viazzo, 2014). Resorting to the notion of margin, finally, leads us to include within our sphere of attention also the dimension of power. Indeed, doing ethnography *from* the margins, and not only *of* the margins, allows us to observe the unfolding of more or less resolved processes of complex negotiations involving those who inhabit the highlands.

Entering into dialogues with the inhabitants about the theme of cultivation, frequenting the fields, observing the changing and seasonal unravelling of land and field care activities, allows us to investigate the theme of the margin from multiple, interrelated perspectives: demographic, social, economic, but above all environmental, territorial and political. Applying the concept of margin to the highlands makes it possible to draw attention to complexities of Alpine territories, not only alluding to the constraints and deficits that characterise them, but on the contrary bringing to light the strategies and "frontier" relations that communities establish with the environment that hosts them and with its non-human inhabitants.

Most of the time, meeting our interlocutors *during our fieldwork* implied meeting them while they were *working in the fields*, walking alongside them in a by no means improvised wandering, following directions that for those accompanying us were on the usual paths of living, the manifestation of a space of familiar, historical, emotional and symbolic recognition. As conversations progressed, it would become increasingly clear how the social and relational dimension sustains agricultural and horticultural practice and is both its origin and outcome. Agricultural activities are conducted through collaborative practices that involve not only members of one's own family, but often also other members of the local community, within a scenario where sometimes, paradoxically, cooperation and competition coexist.

The ethnographic research conducted in Morgex showed very well how the traditional practices of territorial care and cultivation sometimes collide with the norms that institutionally regulate these activities. We refer, in particular, to the bureaucratic problems originating from the incompatibility between the locally activated ways of collectively managing the phases of vineyard cultivation and the constraints imposed by institutional rules and labour laws. As our interlocutors pointed out, problems arise in connection with what is called, in Aosta Valley, *corvée*, a local institution which would traditionally require each member of the community to provide a portion of free labour for the common management of the vines. This practice, although consolidated and historically attested in the region, is not legally framed under labour regulations, and is therefore problematic. Notwithstanding this ambiguity, all practices of reciprocity in caretaking, land maintenance, and viticulture management, which are bureaucratically informal (and thereby problematic), are very important and very strong on the local social and community level.

This aspect became particularly evident in the research carried out in Formazza, where the more explicitly amateur dimension of agricultural and horticultural activities, compared to a scenario that is more markedly oriented towards economic profitability such as that of Morgex, allows the sociality dynamics to emerge clearly. The sharing of space and time in agriculture produces a collective practice of caring for the land, in the context of which creative ways of producing and reproducing the world are experimented, sometimes in the form of *bricolage*. A *production of the world*, to use a concept dear

to Ingold (2021), that is at the same time a production of community, and in which elements of resistance can be found: an implicit resistance, very often unexpressed, but practised and *acted out* in daily life through actions of care and protection that allow one to actually stay, to activate forms of what anthropologist Vito Teti, by resurrecting and giving new life to an old Italian word, has called *restanza* (*staying* or *remaining*), to designate the attitudes of those who, in spite of difficulties, choose to stay in their homelands with proactive intents aiming at innovation and renewal (Teti, 2022).

The margins are then to be understood as privileged spaces in which to observe the practices of environmental care and territorial protection, the relations of coexistence and, as we stated before, friction (Tsing, 2005) with non-human inhabitants, and the experiences of sociality and sharing linked to the forms of cultivation. For a number of years now, the debate on the relationship between human and non-human inhabitants of the mountains has revolved around the presence of large predators such as wolves and bears, considered more or less legitimate and acceptable depending on one's point of view. In Formazza Valley, but also in Susa Valley, the human-animal relationship manifests itself in not entirely expected ways. The main protagonist of the stories told by the valley's inhabitants is not the wolf, on which much of the scientific literature and media storytelling has focused lately, but the deer, whose presence is increasingly intense in numbers.

The practice of inhabiting and cultivating, therefore, develops through a series of strategies of coexistence between humans and ungulates, which pose a major threat to agricultural activity, as they devastate gardens and fields, trample pastures and meadows, and put a strain on the local population. The landscape is indeed dotted, as we mentioned above, with fields and vegetable gardens, but it is impossible not to notice that these are all vegetable gardens with substantial metal fences, of dubious aesthetic value, but of obvious community importance, since they represent the main strategy – to be honest, not always effective – available to the inhabitants for containing the destructive action of deer. An action, indeed, that we should interpret, to borrow Anna Tsing's notion, as a *disturbance*: "disturbance is a change in environmental conditions that causes a pronounced change in an ecosystem" (2015, p. 160). The attitudes of our interlocutors towards these disturbances, however, is far from unanimous and consistent, and in particular they strik-

ingly reveal how frictions with non-humans produce effects that go beyond strictly ecological relations, to move to the level of relations with administrative and bureaucratic bodies. On the level of interspecific relations, it has been particularly interesting to observe how, in the words of our interlocutors, the destructive action of the deer is obviously represented as a source of annoyance and concern, but is also paradoxically becoming ordinary, part of a routine scenario. Tsing's words about the ordinariness of disturbances are again illuminating:

> disturbance is always in the middle of things: the term does not refer us to a harmonious state before disturbance. Disturbances follow other disturbances. Thus all landscapes are disturbed; disturbance is ordinary. But this does not limit the term. Raising the question of disturbance does not cut off discussion but opens it, allowing us to explore landscape dynamics (2015, p. 160).

When we shift our gaze from interspecific relations to the ones with institutions, though, we see how annoyance and concern give way to an *interpretative frame* fuelled by more markedly conflictual and confrontational feelings. In facts, if at a theoretical and epistemological level anthropology is moving towards an interpretative framework within which the human being is inextricably entangled with other non-human actors (Krauβ, 2018), ethnographic investigation does not cease to bring out a multiplicity of situations and representations in which the relationship and above all the coexistence between human and animal show themselves in all their complexity and, not infrequently, difficulty. To take up, as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the effective definition of *community frame* proposed by Ben Orlove and his team (2019), it seems to us that in Formazza, as well as in Salbertrand, our fieldwork – and our research in the fields – has brought out a very defined vision, shared at community level, of the difficult relationship between human and animals, often very much at odds with the legal and official frame that emerges from the directives concerning slaughter and containment practices promoted at provincial and regional level. This complexity is also due to the intertwining with the dynamics of climate change. The progressive increase in temperatures and the reduction in snow cover mean that the portions of territory in which these ungulates find refuge are ever larger, and the greater

availability of spaces where they can search for food means that the number of animals counted during the survey campaigns, promoted at provincial level to estimate the number of ungulates present in the valley and, consequently, organize controlled culling operations, is increasing.

The relationship between the institutional bodies which manage wildlife conservation, protection and control projects and the communities in the valleys where these projects operate are complex: the containment campaigns recruit local hunters for the culling of surplus specimens, bringing out elements of support and collaboration with the institutions, but the friction between those who would like more incisive campaigns and a higher number of animals culled and the directives that push in the opposite direction are very evident in the testimonies we have collected. This confirms that the Alps are increasingly and more and more evidently a place of unprecedented negotiations, revealing positions that are also very different, when not irreconcilable, within the communities and, perhaps to an even greater extent, between those who inhabit the mountains and those who instead look at or think of the mountains from afar.

It is time, now, to give an example of the discrepancy that can be found between the ways of reading the environment and its dynamics, its variations, its disruptions, activated by those who inhabit it, and the policies activated at the institutional level through recourse to external expert knowledge. From the very first conversations we had in the field on these issues, the friction between institutional positions and community frames (Orlove et al., 2019) emerged in the words and claims, sometimes quite heated and vehement, of the people we asked what it meant to live in a high-altitude context, in a *frontline community*. A brief excerpt from the field notes of one of the authors of this chapter illustrates well this tension between local and external expert knowledge, and at the same time the asymmetry of power and agency that characterises actors placed at different levels, with the locals sometimes hinting with a sort of angry resignation at the difficulty of resisting the decision-makers:

> S. accompanied me to see the *vallum*. It is an artificial structure, produced after the landslide of 2009 that had come very close to the inhabited centre, built with the landslide material with the aim of containing further landslides. As we walk, he

> tells me that there were two other, very large landslides, and it was necessary to raise the rampart further. He shows me the steel containment nets and explains that, in his opinion, they are a mistake, because they hold too much material, then when they give way, they cause a sort of explosion in which the boulders come down violently. He is very critical of the planners, engineers and geologists, because he says that they completely ignored the opinions of the locals, whereas, in his mind, they should have taken shared decisions, listening to the opinion of those who actually know that mountain and "*know how it behaves and moves*", because what the locals predicted would happen, then actually happened. Apparently, however, at the next landslide they restored the nets despite the fact that they had burst. As we walk away, he shakes his head, I don't know whether more resigned or angry (2 April 2023)[5].

These brief ethnographic notes are useful to show how the answer to the questions we referred to above – Whose mountains are they? Who are the inhabitants of the highlands? Are they only human? – are even more complex than one might have expected. This entails that fine-grained empirical evidence and deep and rigorous reflection are both required to ponder over the delicate relationships between community and resources that are so central for the future of the highlands. Local communities, once again, are the privileged places where concrete examples of responses to marginalisation processes can be operationally observed and where a relevant and yet to be discovered growth potential can be identified. It is therefore necessary to wonder how elements such as the environment, agriculture, land and landscape resources intertwine with an economic sector that constitutes a well-established asset in the Alpine space, but no less problematic for that, namely that of tourism. In the next few pages, therefore, we will try to articulate these reflections, emphasising the need for multi-scalar reasoning and development plans that, in order to promote the protection of agrarian landscapes and cultural heritages, directly involve local communities and the requests of recognition that they express.

5 All translations from Italian to English are done by the authors of the text.

5. Beyond the Margins

While the issue of resources in general has gained increasing importance in the debate on Italian inner areas since World War II, it has assumed even greater weight with regard to mountain areas. Community, heritage and landscape are the elements that intervention projects must take into account when they address decentralised, inland, marginal and abandoned areas, which present themselves as contexts for the development of new resilience strategies. For some years now there has been a growing assignment of value to these territories in terms of regeneration, repopulation, environmental care, and experimentation with new forms of living.

On several occasions one of the authors of this chapter had the opportunity to reflect on that imposing process of deterritorialization, a consequence of the exodus from the countryside and the massive flight from the fields to the industrial and urban areas that began in the 1950s, which triggered a slow but inexorable process of environmental, social and economic degradation and an inevitable and profound change in the relationship between population and territory, a rupture of the existing balances between places and those who inhabit them (Bonato, 2017, 2024; Magnaghi, 2020). Small towns began to empty out, in some cases to the point of complete abandonment, in others the decline has been partial and those who remain are mostly elderly inhabitants, unable to sustain the local economy. In order to try to reverse this process of impoverishment, a first institutional attempt was made in 2003, with the promulgation of a Bill[6] that over the years has activated many projects oriented towards the development of unused resources in the territory and the enhancement of the territory's potential, respecting the needs and characteristics of each context and above all with a view to environmental sustainability. This perspective is particularly complex "in localities [...] demographically poor and characterised by a predominantly elderly population, and even more complex [is] the affirmation and entrenchment of the drastically new behavioural models and relationships with the environment that characterise a new agency within the framework of sustainability" (Bravo, 2017, p. 39).

6 Realacci-Bocchino Law no. 1942/2003.

But it is precisely in areas that are considered marginal that it is possible to envisage re-territorialisation strategies and interventions that filter through culture, understood here both as the instrument of an incremental path, which generates stimuli and reflections that can contribute to the construction of a community aware of its own resources and capabilities, and as the recovery and reactivation of the wealth of knowledge and know-how of local tradition. This takes concrete form in the revitalisation of territorially based economies and in the growth of small business systems that enhance what comes from productive assets, which are then measured and reverberate in the culture of inhabiting.

Undoubtedly a potential generator of difficulties, frictions and even conflicts from an ethnic, identity, linguistic, economic and environmental point of view, this renewed centrality of the local compels us to rethink the role of the territory, its care and its valorisation (Magnaghi, 2020), because cultural planning must identify and make usable the common goods through a shared management between local administrators and inhabitants, so as to valorise the local heritage through generative and participatory interventions. At the same time, it must start from a judicious governance of the territory, based on the potential resources of people and places and on the enhancement of the latter, on the incisiveness of their peculiarities. It may be useful in this connection to take up the concept of iconema, proposed by Eugenio Turri (1998). An iconema or, rather, a set of iconemas, is the imprint of a territory, the distinctive features of its landscape, but also the organisational devices and the specific manners whereby social actors order themselves within it, an imprint in which the local population recognises itself and which are important for the construction of the sense of belonging and of the very meaning of landscape. A project will therefore be more fruitful to the extent that it refers to the landscape and its iconemas.

It goes without saying that culturally motivated innovation practices and creative improvement processes cannot renounce confrontation with the local population that possesses and continually produces experience of the places they inhabit. As mentioned in the third section, the community claims its role in the destiny of the territories and shows a rediscovered vocation for activism: as the enthusiasm and willingness shown towards our research have demonstrated, communities often supports joint development actions

and research projects; they join the territorial assistance network and committees for the management of environmental resources; they promote moments of sociability and protect and safeguard – sometimes even through various forms of resistance and oppositive manners – the cultural heritage. In what appears to be an unprecedented innovative attitude, the community seems to reaffirm its bond with the territory and to refer to a fundamental and involving way of bringing individuals together. Above all, it is the way of producing culture that departs from the traditional practices of its mere preservation or even valorisation: aspects of local memory, elements of everyday life and the rituality of the past are chosen, revitalised and placed at the centre of a creation of value with the precise objective of conveying through them the local specificity, of transmitting outside the community an image of the uniqueness of the local cultural landscape.

Obviously, the heterogeneity of marginal contexts does not allow the same intervention methods to be applied everywhere. In order to draw up effective projects and better orient their application, taking up the suggestion of the SNAI (National Strategy for Inner Areas), one could first of all investigate the actual possibilities of the inhabitants to fully exercise their citizenship rights and then take note of the shortages in terms of access to culture and essential services, which in fact produce the processes of marginalization of places[7]. We reiterate that it is precisely in these scenarios, in these empty spaces, that it is possible to set up appropriate territorial policies that are effectively oriented towards the real needs of the inhabitants, and that promote creative ways of dealing with a place in terms of living, doing business, using local resources and fostering a proper fruition of the environment, which represent opportunities for improved development. Theoretical reflections on the concept of emptiness, and on the processes of demographic emptying that have been followed by unexpected reversal trends, have shown how the availability of physical, social and symbolic spaces has not infrequently, and paradoxically, proved to be an essential condition for the development of new forms of settlement (Viazzo & Zanini, 2014, 2022). As stated by geographer Guglielmo Scaramellini, "how can a society plan its present and design its future without having spaces on which to rely for new perspectives,

7 www.agenziacoesione.gov.it/strategia-nazionale-aree-interne/ .

new opportunities, new uses?" (2016, p. 34). Already about twenty years ago, another geographer, Françoise Cognard (2006), had observed that the phenomenon of depopulation unexpectedly originates fertile circumstances, that might be considered as preconditions for implementing innovative practices, also favouring – thanks to the availability of demographic and social voids – repopulation and economic revival. In this interstice of cultural agency, abandonment and recuperation, impoverishment and creativity coexist in an almost paradoxical manner: as anthropologist Francesco Remotti emphasises, "creativity presupposes destructiveness: subjects would have no way of expressing creativity if sufficiently substantial lacerations did not determine an available space" (2011, p. 292).

Over the past few years, an interesting reflection has developed in the Italian public and academic discourse on the different meanings conveyed by the terms paese and borgo. Both correctly translatable with the English term village, they nevertheless express profoundly different meanings. If the semantic core of paese is, as mentioned in the preceding pages, oriented towards highlighting the dimension of cultural intimacy, liveability, and community togetherness, the rhetoric of the borgo is enjoying a considerable fortune outside the community, so to speak, and completely bypasses these aspects of actual daily liveability of the territory, conveying instead an imaginary of mere landscape amenity and tourist enjoyment. Without going into this intricate debate[8], and paying attention to the potential critical issues that arise from emphasising alleged authenticity, it is however appropriate to be aware that the potential of villages and small towns is often realised through their redevelopment and regeneration, their cultural and landscape protection and their valorisation. Fruitful cultural planning requires weighing the positive effects of development projects for the community and keeping changes and possible territorial emergencies under control by foreseeing the risks they may entail. A dangerous unknown quantity is closely linked to the fascination and often excessive attraction exercised by tourism in Alpine sites. In many cases, a possible antidote to over-tourism consists in promoting sustainable, responsible, nature-based, ecological, and alternative types

8 A well-argued critical discussion is provided by the short but incisive volume, *Contro i borghi. Il Belpaese che dimentica i paesi* (2022), edited by Filippo Barbera, Domenico Cersosimo and Antonio De Rossi.

of tourism that, in addition to not generating negative repercussions, positively affect local and natural wellbeing, the working dimension, living conditions, and pursue the active involvement of communities. But activating sustainable practices means confronting both macro-strategies at the supranational level and decisions exercised at the individual level (Sbardella, 2019). And then there is the issue related to local responsibilities. As Alessandro Simonicca has aptly pointed out in a book on the anthropology of tourism, the notion of locality cannot always be understood as a guarantee of social equity or environmental protection: some communities are "deaf to ecological problems" or simply directed towards a view of productivism that damages the surrounding environment, which means that "the cognitive and governance rudder of tourism must be continually updated and does not find any linear solutions" (2013, p. 6). The critical issues related to the implementation of sustainable tourism practices can be schematically summarised as follows: there is no guarantee that tourists who describe themselves as responsible are actually aware of what is sustainable; there is a contradiction between the message that theoretically sustainable travel experiences convey and what they actually are, short stays that do not really allow contact with local communities, except for a short period of time; who or what establishes how tourism experience can be properly enjoyed?

6. Conclusions

This lengthy reflection on the role, and prospects, of tourism in marginal mountain areas now leads us to conclude by reconsidering once again the dimensions of marginality and inhabiting as closely interconnected. If tourism orientation seems to emerge in each of the territories we have observed, albeit with different specific weights, and above all always variously interwoven with other kinds of multi-activities, we cannot fail to consider the central role of the local population in defining, and negotiating, the space and the ways in which tourism development can fit into the local scenario.

In this sense, the different trajectories observed in Morgex and in Salbertrand look very interesting. In both contexts, in fact, the tourism industry, and especially a massive orientation towards winter sports, represents the

territory's central economic asset. What differentiates the two contexts is the positioning that our interlocutors imagine for agricultural and viticultural activities. In Morgex, which is very close to prestigious resorts involved in luxury tourist practices such as Courmayeur, wine production, despite the misalignments and criticalities we have observed regarding the difficult integration of traditional collective practices into a market economy, is conceived of as an integral part of the tourist scenario, on which it feeds and of which it contributes, in turn, contributes to raise the quality.

On the contrary, the agricultural and horticultural activities we discussed with our interlocutors in Salbertrand are apparently understood as alternative economic forms, sometimes openly oppositional, to Alpine tourism. "We are islands in the middle of uncultivated land", one of our witnesses effectively reported, underlining the difficulty with which those who practice agriculture are confronted with the progressive abandonment of the territory, and with the processes of neglect that ensue. A fallow land, however, which in the words of our interlocutor appears to be the result not only of cultivation abandonment, but also, and above all, of cultural abandonment. In this sense, the recovery and the consolidation of agricultural activities take on an openly political value, as ways of making a future world, to borrow once again Ingold's phrase, in which the relationship between tourism and agricultural activities is produced not to the detriment of the latter, but in a balanced, slow, manner.

For tourism to be really sustainable, therefore, it is more than fundamental to rest on the direct involvement of communities that demonstrate to be aware of their needs, as well as of their own potential, thereby contributing to the realisation of a sustainable management of the environment and natural resources, thus favouring local development, and ensuring the effective enforceability of the rights of a citizenship that demonstrates to be truly not marginal.

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Mapping Change in Laguna Blanca: Rituals, Indigenous Communities, and Tourism in Andean Argentina

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the interconnections between rituals, indigenous communities' sociopolitical dynamics, a potential ecological crisis, and tourism development in Laguna Blanca – a highland village in the Province of Catamarca, Northwestern Andean Argentina. We present an ethnographic description of a ritual offering called *corpachada*, which is made by the villagers to *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) on 1st August every year, both in private family and public ceremonies. We are interested in tracing and building connections between the corpachada ritual and the current political, social and ecological transformation of the area; especially as regards new mining projects which have stirred conflicts within the local communities and families. Drawing on the methodologies of sociocultural anthropology and geography, we propose mapping the spatial and temporal dynamics of the different ritual offerings to understand how sociocultural change in the communities of the Biosphere Reserve Laguna Blanca is interconnected with the processes of *politicisation*, *festivalisation*, and *touristification* of the mentioned corpachada ritual. In addition, we argue that the ritual can be seen as an open *cosmopolitical* arena in which new possible strategies of alliance among indigenous communities, researchers, and even tourists, can be experimented with.

Introduction: Tracing Processes of Change in Laguna Blanca

At the end of July 2023, we travelled to Laguna Blanca, a small village of about 200 inhabitants, at around 3,300 m a.s.l., in the Andean highland (called Puna), which is the main settlement in the area of Laguna Blanca.[1] The Laguna Blanca area forms part of the municipality of Villa Vil, Department of Belén, Province of Catamarca, in Northwestern Argentina. We reached the village Laguna Blanca to carry out a short ethnographic fieldwork on the ritual offering to *Pachamama* on 1st August, called *corpachada*, a word that means "to honour" or "to invite" in Quechua. The celebration is one of the most important festivities in the Andean ritual cycle, as many anthropologists of the Andean macro-region have indicated. In August, Pachamama is said to be open and hungry (Fernández Juárez, 1996), and local communities show thanks for her gifts by feeding her with ritual offerings within a framework of reciprocity. This ritual used to be a rite performed in private by families; however, over the last few decades it has also developed into a public celebration involving not just the local community, but also political authorities and tourists. Every year it seems to attract more national and even international tourists, whereas in other Andean localities similar rituals continue to be mostly confined to the family and local community levels. This significant change in the ritual aroused our interest in asking how it relates to the sociocultural, economic, and ecological context of that village, which is part of the Laguna Blanca Biosphere Reserve. This area is particularly interesting for academics because since the beginning of the new millennium eight indigenous communities have been constituted as political entities (Delfino, 2025), and five of them have obtained recognition of their legal personality through the entry in the Argentinian National Register of Indigenous Communities. In addition, a mining project for gold extraction is currently under planning review. Therefore, mapping change in Laguna Blanca by focusing on the ritual offering can help us to ana-

1 We refer to the area of Laguna Blanca as the zone that belongs to the Municipality of Villa Vil, and that includes several villages, hamlets, and dispersed residences. In this zone, which is a large part of the southern zone of the Biosphere Reserve of Laguna Blanca, there are currently about 600 inhabitants most of whom are engaged in agriculture and livestock rearing, as well as in craftsmanship and tourism, especially within the village of Laguna Blanca. There are four main settlements in the area, which are often formed around schools: Aguas Calientes, La Angostura, Corral Blanco and Laguna Blanca (see Figure 1).

lyse sociocultural, political, and economic changes linked to ongoing processes of ethnogenesis, glocal socioeconomic frictions, and a possible ecological crisis caused by the potential future mining activities.

We will address the topic of change in Laguna Blanca by focusing on the processes of *festivalisation*, *politicisation*, and *touristification* of the ritual offering. The term festivalisation[2] refers to the transformation of a ritual into a festivity or festival (Boos, 2024), which can include a ritual part, as well as a more ludic, festive one. The concept of politicisation means not only the increasing political use of the ritual and festivity to produce community and social cohesion, as Delfino (2020) highlighted in the case of Laguna Blanca, but also that it is a potential political arena where it is possible to express conflicts in subtle ways and promote new political agendas.[3] When a formerly private ritual becomes a public event, this may imply its politicisation; meaning it has become a way to negotiate power relationships in a wider public space. This, in turn, invites questions about what kind of political configurations have changed and what is being negotiated. Finally, following the work of Picard and Robinson (2006), we use the notion of touristification to refer to processes whereby rituals or festivities are turned into touristic events. Crucially, this concept reminds us that in addition to local communities and political authorities, tourists can also play an active role in shaping festivities and the social relationships attached to them.

Recent studies of rituals and festivities that have undergone processes of festivalisation, politicisation and touristification (see, Boos, 2020) indicate that such cases provide good opportunities for analysing sociocultural change at a local level, as well as shifts in local-global power relations. The concepts of politicisation, festivalisation, and touristification, appear to be transferable to the case of Laguna Blanca and the recent touristic valorisation of the corpachada ritual.

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2 The concept of festivalisation is mostly applied in urban European contexts, where academics (Boos, 2024; Cudny, 2016) have noticed that it leads to an increase in tourism, which in turn is a driving force of festivalisation.

3 Studies of rituals and festivals show that both social cohesion (Geertz, 1973) and political conflicts are negotiated through ceremonial and festive activities by those present (Chacko, 2013; Quinn et al., 2022) and, at the same time, through media communications (Boos, 2017). The practices of personal and collective identity formation and change seem to gain momentum, especially at public events, when a wider public, e.g., in the form of tourists, partake in the festivities (Boos, 2020; Quinn et al., 2022; Sassatelli, 2011; Smith et al., eds., 2022).

Further, these dynamics must also be situated within the wider Andean context, which includes conflicts on mining projects, and other forms of economic and ecological exploitation, and indigenous communities' struggles for social rights and the recognition of their mode of life. We propose, therefore, to connect the interlinked processes of politicisation, festivalisation, and touristification with the concept of cosmopolitics as coined by Isabelle Stengers (2005) and further developed in Andean studies by anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena (2010). The concept of cosmopolitics is intended to include more-than-human relationships in sociocultural negotiation processes and provide the academic tools to capture changes in political alliances. Accordingly, this concept enables us to incorporate more-than-human actors in our analysis and to hypothesise about the current formation of strategic alliances that could determine the territorial development in the future.

Our short fieldwork in the village of Laguna Blanca was conducted in collaboration with the Interdisciplinary High Mountain Institute (Instituto Interdisciplinario Puneño) and its team, led by Prof. Daniel Delfino[4] who has been working in the area of Laguna Blanca as an archaeologist and anthropologist for more than thirty years.[5] To address the question of change in Laguna Blanca, we draw on the critical and reflexive ethnographic methodologies of sociocultural anthropology and geography; in particular, we produced ethnographic descriptions during our stay in the field, writing an ethnographic journal, complemented by interviews with locals, political authorities and tourists who participated in the rituals, photo-documentation, and the elaboration of cartographic maps. Our ethnographic fieldwork was based on participant observation as a "general framework of the inquiry" (Olivier de Sardan, 2015, p. 25), as well as on the "observation of the participation" from a reflexive point of view (Tedlock, 1991). In line with a hermeneutic, anticolonial ap-

4 We are grateful to Prof. Delfino for his academic and professional support, as well as for his friendship and hospitality. We would also like to thank Luciana Moreira, a member of Delfino's team, who assisted us in work and logistics during our short stay in Laguna Blanca in 2023. We are especially thankful to all the generous friends and people we met in Laguna Blanca, for sharing with us some of their knowledge, practices, and memories. Without their collaboration, our work would not have been possible.

5 Already in 2015, one of us did ethnographic research in Laguna Blanca on rituals and family patterns (Salvucci, 2016, 2018), at the same time working together with Delfino and his team and contributing to the production of the anthropological-territorial report for one of the local indigenous communities of the area to support the community's claim to be officially recognised by the State as an indigenous people (*pueblo originario*).

proach, we understand the ethnographic method as a way of producing systematic empirical data as interpretations based on dialogue with the participants.

In the first part of this chapter, we present the historical developments and sociocultural context of the communities of the Biosphere Reserve Laguna Blanca, highlighting the main dynamics of continuity and change connected to the area's mountain ecology and sociocultural technology of production. Doing so, we aim to situate our analysis of the corparchada in its historic and current sociopolitical context, both locally and at a wider level. In the second part, we outline Delfino's (2020) analysis of rituals in Laguna Blanca which has helped to pave the way to reconstructing the historical development of the sociopolitical context in which the corparchada is situated. Crucially, Delfino argues that rituals such as the corpachada to Pachamama on 1st August are a form of political resistance[6] (Delfino, 2020, p. 222), which serves among other things as a strategical tool for strengthening the social and political cohesion of the indigenous communities. We will connect his findings with the concepts of politicisation, festivalisation (Boos, 2024), and touristification (Picard & Robinson, 2006) of rites. In the third and fourth parts, we offer an ethnographic description of the ritual activities that take place on the eve of the corparchadas (31st July) and on the 1st of August. In the fifth section, we analyse the spatial and temporal dynamics of the ritual-festival, paying attention to how the spatial and temporal structure of the festivities changes in relation to the processes of festivalisation, politicisation and touristification. Lastly, we conclude this chapter by proposing that the corparchadas should be interpreted as a changing cosmopolitical arena, which includes researchers and tourists, too.

Inhabiting the Biosphere of Laguna Blanca: Between Continuities and Changes

Over the last thirty years, Delfino and his team have conducted extensive archaeological research in the Laguna Blanca area which they have labelled as "ethnoarchaeology" or "socially useful archaeology" (Delfino & Rodríguez,

6 All translations from Spanish to English are by the authors of this text.

1991, pp. 15ff.). This body of work demonstrates the continuous presence of human dwellings in Laguna Blanca from 5,000 BC to the present (Delfino et al., 2007). According to Delfino et al. (2015), especially from the first millennium AD the Laguna Blanca area – which corresponds roughly to the present-day zone of the Biosphere Reserve Laguna Blanca (see Figure 1) – was already well-populated due to its favourable ecological conditions. Indeed, in comparison to other parts of the Argentinian Puna, the Laguna Blanca area is relatively wet due to the extended network of aquifers and small water streams, which are fed by the nearby Nevado mountain range (see Figure 1). The local plane and dispersed dwelling pattern, according to Delfino et al. (2015, p. 393), was based on a network of interconnected villages and dispersed residences, as well as a set of exchange relationships at a regional level.

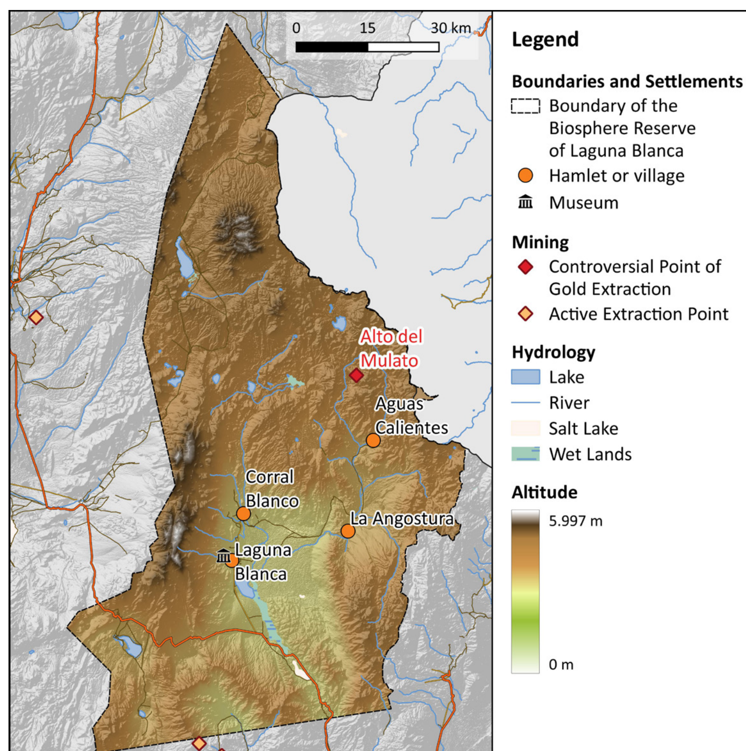

Figure 1 – Map of the Biosphere Reserve Laguna Blanca and the potential mining site. Map by Tobias Boos. Vectorial basemaps: OpenStreetMap, 2024, CC BY-SA 2.0; digital elevation model (30 m): Instituto Geográfico National de la República Argentina, 2019, free use license https://www.ign.gob.ar/descargas/tyc1.html.

According to Delfino et al. (2015, p. 394), although the Laguna Blanca area has long fallen within the territories of a number of statal regimes – including the Incan and Spanish empires, and the modern Argentinian state – from an ethnoarchaeological point of view, it is possible to draw a line of continuity in the "ways of dwelling" (Ingold, 2000) of the people who inhabited the area from around the first millennium onwards; specifically grounded in an "agro-centred communal mode of life" (Delfino et al., 2015, p. 398). Importantly, that "mode of life" entailed a material technology of production associated with rituals, myths, and a cosmology according to which the world is alive and agriculture is a form of reciprocal "rearing" among humans and non-humans, as anthropologists working in the macro-Andean area have highlighted (see, among others, Arnold, 2017, 2021; Bugallo & Tomasi, 2012; Bugallo & Vilca, 2016; de Munter, 2022).

Such a mode of production and reproduction of sociocultural life is based on Andean ecological verticality and the complementarity of different ecological floors (Murra, 1975) for accessing resources and diversifying production, integrating agriculture (especially of tubers) and pastoralism, with craftsmanship and barter (on verticality in mountain studies, see, among others Boos & Salvucci, 2022). This mode of life relies on social organisation at the level of the domestic group, as well as the "supra-domestic" level of the community, especially for the purposes of water control and political administration (Delfino et al., 2015). According to Delfino et al. (2015, pp. 410, 412), evidence for the importance of the community level in Laguna Blanca can be seen in petroglyphs found in Pantanito (Laguna Blanca), which depict people holding each other's hands to form a circle to capture vicuñas, a wild camelid (see also Yacobaccio et al., 2023 on rock paintings from the Holocene in the Atacama area, including Northwestern Argentina). Today, in the wider Andean region a practice for capturing vicuñas called *chaku* is in use which was revitalised in the 1990s.[7]

7 According to Rowe (1946, p. 217), there are two main Andean collective hunting practices – in particular of wild vicuñas – that were described by the Spanish Chroniclers of the early colonial period (namely, Bernabé Cobo, Pedro Cieza de León, and Balthasar Ramírez). One is the *chaku*, associated with the periodical public great Royal hunt organised by the Inca and involving a large number of hunters who formed an extended ring around a wide area, closing ranks into several concentric and progressively smaller circles, making the an-

According to Delfino et al. (2007), the agro-centred peasant mode of life continued during the colonial period even though the Laguna Blanca area was appropriated by colonisers and converted into latifundios (large estates) in 1687. Although Quiroga (1999, quoted in Delfino et al., 2007, p. 180) has argued that the colonial exploitation of the latifundio fostered a reorientation of the local highland economy toward extensive animal rearing – especially mules for the Potosí market – weakening the community ties and promoting dispersed residence patterns and mobility, Delfino et al. (2007) suggest that even during the eighteenth century a pre-Hispanic model of ecological complementary and integrated agropastoralism was intact. According to them, long-term historical changes in the political powers that dominated the region went hand in hand with a long-term rearticulation of the material and sociocultural mode of life of the local population.

More recent transformations and short-term changes – such as the constitution of the Biosphere Reserve in the 1980s, the activities of archaeologists since the 1990s, the reintroduction of the chaku in the late 1990s, and the establishment of the indigenous communities as political entities since the 2000s – have contributed to further rearticulating the local agropastoral model of life in the Laguna Blanca area. However, unlike in earlier times the new socio-political context favours the political empowerment of local peasant farmers and indigenous communities.

The Biosphere Reserve was established in 1982 (see Figure 1) in an area that had already been designated a Provincial Natural Park in 1979. This change has had implications for how the area's natural environment should be managed alongside the local inhabitants' way of life. The biosphere concept was instituted by UNESCO as part of its Man and Biosphere Programme (MAB) in 1974 to conserve biodiversity and cultural diversity. One of the orig-

imals converge into the smaller final human circle to capture them. The second practice, called caycu (meaning to corral), was a collective hunt, organised at a community level and based on building fences, toward which the hunters drove the animals to trap them inside. In the 1970s, in Southern Andean Peru, Custred (1979) collected oral memories according to which this last form of collective hunting was still practised in the 1920s. These two hunting techniques (*chaku* and *caycu*) enabled people to collect the animals' meat and fleeces. Wild vicuñas were sometimes killed, but more often only sheared and then released. Meet and fibre were then redistributed by the Inca or among the members of the involved communities. During Inca times, vicuña fibre was highly valued and only the nobility was entitled to wear cloths made of it as a sign of power and prestige (Murra, 1962).

inal intentions behind the establishing of the Biosphere Reserve in Laguna Blanca was to protect the vicuñas from the risk of extinction.[8] A hunting ban thus came into enforcement, leading to a rapid recovery of the animal population by the 1990s. The success of this conservation programme eventually led in 1997 to a relaxation of the level of protection due to requests and pressure from the local population. Since then, commercial use of vicuñas for wool production has been permitted, although killing of the animals is still prohibited. According to Delfino (2025, p. 242, footnote n. 6), the first "modern chaku" was organised in 1998 in Laguna Blanca as a training event to adjust the method for capturing wild vicuñas. On that occasion, a corpachada was also enacted at a collective level. However, it was not until 2002 that the chaku was instituted as a way of capturing the animals for shearing in Laguna Blanca, organised regularly by the local craftsmanship association, under the supervision of the Provincial Environmental Department (see Gonzalez Cosiorovski & Moity-Maizi, 2019)[9].

The transformation brought about by the constitution of the Biosphere Reserve and reactivation of the chaku has in more recent years been influenced by the presence and work of ethnoarchaeologists. Since 1992, Delfino and his collaborators have been carrying out research in Laguna Blanca

8 Starting from the colonial period, new hunting practices were introduced that led to a drastic decline in the wild vicuñas population across all Andean countries where these animals live (Argentina, Bolivia, Cile, Peru). According to Lichtenstein and Cowan Ros: "(B)y 1960, it was estimated that the vicuña population had dropped from its pre-colonial population of 2 million to an estimated 10,000 individuals" (Lichtenstein & Cowan Ros (2021, p. 104). Between 1967 and 1972, a new pilot plan for vicuña population recovery was promoted by the Peruvian government and two NGOs (from the USA and Germany), which led to the constitution of the Reserve of Pampa Galeras and successful revitalisation of traditional Andean techniques for capturing and shearing vicuñas (Gonzalez Cosiorovski & Moity-Maizi, 2019, pp. 65–66, 68). At the same time, during the 1970s the Andean countries approved new laws and international agreements for the protection of vicuñas, aimed at promoting conservation and sustainable ecological management. This paved the way for an extended revitalisation of traditional Andean practices (such as the chaku) for capturing and shearing vicuñas, especially since the 1990s (Lichtenstein & Bibiana, 2003; Lichtenstein & Cowan Ros, 2021).

9 Whereas in some countries the sustainable management of vicuñas is a specific right of indigenous and local communities, in Argentina (especially in the province of Catamarca) private companies that own wide estates where vicuñas live are also allowed to capture and shear the animals for profit. Vicuña fibre is very highly valued in the global market for its role in the luxury fashion industry. Despite the high prices of luxury fashion products made using vicuña fibre (see, for instance those of the Italian fashion brand Loro Piana, that belongs to the multinational holding company LVMH-Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton), local Andean communities make very little profit from this industry (Azócar & Lichtenstein, 2022, p. 22).

within the framework of what they define as a "socially useful archaeology" (Delfino & Rodriguez, 1991); that is, a form of research that serves local people's needs, claims, and desires for social justice. It led to the creation of the Museo Integral de la Reserva de Biosfera de Laguna Blanca (Integral Museum of the Biosphere Reserve of Laguna Blanca) in 1997 in the village of Laguna Blanca and to the formal institutionalisation of the Instituto Interdisciplinario Puneño (Interdisciplinary High Mountain Institute) in 2002, based at the National University of Catamarca.[10] In addition, Delfino and his team have also supported the local inhabitants by producing territorial-anthropological reports, which are required by the national government for the legal recognition of indigenous people (*pueblo originario*); a status that grants legal rights of recognised groups to the lands they dwell on. Cooperation between Delfino and his team and the local population has thus been essential for gaining legal recognition for the latter.

Gaining legal recognition as an indigenous community only became possible in Argentina following constitutional amendments made in 1994, the passing of a new law (no. 26.160) in 2006, and finally the ratification of the UN Declaration on indigenous people's rights in 2007. These legal guidelines enabled the creation and renewal of indigenous communities in Argentina. Nevertheless, they have also been criticised for their promotion of multiculturalism as they reinforce neoliberal national and international regimes based on cultural diversity and the reproduction of social inequalities (Pisani et al., 2019). Since 2009, eight indigenous communities have been formed in the Laguna Blanca area (Delfino, 2025, p. 242): Aguas Calientes in 2009, La Angostura in 2010, Corral Blanco and Laguna Blanca in 2015, Caracchi in 2016, Peñas

10 In line with Delfino and his collaborators (Delfino et al., 2012), the concept of the "integral museum" was promoted by UNESCO in 1972, aiming to "give an integral view" (Delfino et al., 2012, p. 1) of the ecological and sociocultural local environments to the inhabitants, for their own benefit, and through their participation. Therefore, the integral museum is a form of "community museum, made by the community, for the community itself" (p. 3). During our stay in 2023, two women worked at the museum: one as a museum guide and the other as a housekeeper. Apart from the exhibition, open to visitors, about the archaeological artifacts found mostly at local sites, and the anthropological development of the territory, the museum features an archaeology laboratory, a library, and a research centre including a kitchen and bedrooms, where, periodically, academics work and live. Information can be found on the website of the Museo Integral Laguna Blanca and the Instituto Interdisciplinario Puneño: https://lagunablanca.unca.edu.ar/?c=17 (last accessed on 19 November 2024).

Negras and Llastay Ñan in 2021, and Vicuña Huasi in 2023.[11] Today these communities form part of the Diaguita Nation of Belén. However, their unity has recently come under threat by new provincial mining plans.

Since 2017, the provincial government, together with a multinational enterprise,[12] has been promoting a gold mining project in the Laguna Blanca area. This has led to conflicts within and among the local indigenous communities, as some favour the project while others are against it. This seems in part due to the project's backers having tried to use backdoor negotiations with some local communities, or just the indigenous authorities, to gain permission to start mining in a hidden way. For example, there were no formal consultation meetings with local indigenous communities to provide information that would help them to make their own informed decisions on the matter (Pisani et al., 2019). As a matter of fact, there was a sudden shift between March and September 2021; initially none of the local communities had committed support to the mining project, yet by September the promoters were able to announce that half the communities had agreed to support it.[13] This sudden change of heart gives the impression that a set of divergent and disarticulated politics emerged between March and September, as differing and conflicting understandings of "nature" among local people came into play. Thus, caused by the mining project, it seems that a political arena is emerging among the people living in and interested in the area of Laguna Blanca.

11 Five of them were legally recognised: the Indigenous Community of Corral Blanco, the Indigenous Community of La Angostura, the Indigenous Community of Aguas Calientes, the Indigenous Community of Laguna Blanca, and the Indigenous Community of Carachi (Pisani et al., 2019, p. 57).

12 Millaray Mining Corporation (concessionaire) and Elevado Gold Corporation (operator). (Delfino, 2025, p. 244).

13 See the following online newspaper articles: W.A. (2021): Comunidades originarias afirman que no hay consenso para proyectos mineros, in: Página|12 vom 25.03.2021, online: https://www.pagina12.com.ar/331690-comunidades-originarias-afirman-que-no-hay-consenso-para-pro, W.A. (2021): Cacique acordò con mineras y su comunidad se dividiò, in: Página|12 vom 01.10.2021, online: https://www.pagina12.com.ar/371959-cacique-acordo-con-mineras-y-su-comunidad-se-dividio, W.A. (2022): Discrepancias por la creación del municipio indígina de Laguna Blanca, in: Página|12 vom 02.07.2022, online: https://www.pagina12.com.ar/433901-discrepancias-por-la-creacion-del-municipio-indigena-de-lagu.

De la Cadena (2010) has described the connection between mining projects and the formation of new political arenas in her extended fieldwork in the Peruvian Andes, where she has observed indigenous peoples' protests against gold mines. She highlights how in this context a special type of political arena emerges which is characterised by, first, “unusual alliances”, and second, a clash of worldviews. She suggests that when indigenous people and capitalist “extractivist” logics encounter one another, divergent “worlds” collide, which include the worlds of non-human “Earth Beings” and ancestors. De la Cadena calls the outcome of these colliding worlds – following Stengers (2005, p. 995) – a cosmopolitics:

> [A politics where] cosmos refers to the unknown constituted by these multiple, divergent worlds and to the articulation of which they would eventually be capable (Stengers 2005: 995). In creating this articulation, indigenous movements may meet those – scientists, environmentalists, feminists, egalitarian of different stripes – also committed to a different politics of nature, one that includes disagreement on the definition of nature itself. (de la Cadena, 2010, p. 346)

The power of this sociocultural clash can lead to the redefinition of political alliances or the formation of new ones. For example, traditional relationships with “Earth Beings” can be reinterpreted or expanded into political alliances, and new alliances are formed with, for example, scientists or regional and global activist movements (de la Cadena, 2010).

Political changes such as these can be observed in the Laguna Blanca area as a result of, inter alia, the establishment of the Biosphere Reserve, changes to the Argentine Constitution, and the economic desires evoked by the mining industry; all of which have generated “troubled correspondences” (de Munter & Salvucci, 2024) among people, communities, external powers, and the Andean environment. Additionally, the resulting cosmopolitical arena seems intimately linked to changes in local rituals; therefore, in the following sections we will trace the connections between changes to local rituals and social and political transformations. In addition, we will show that certain changes to the corpachada ritual, including the involvement of tourists, seem to reflect a strategy adopted by the local population to express its political claims, sometimes explicitly and sometimes more subtly, at the local, regional, and national levels.

Rituals, Indigenous Communities, and Tourism

According to Delfino (2020) and his team, indigenous rituals in Laguna Blanca have long formed part of a political strategy of resistance. Firstly, this can be seen in relation to the various statal hegemonies that have asserted control over the area, from the Incan Empire to the Spanish colonies and the modern Argentine Republic, including – we can add – the latter's current neoliberal form. Crucially, the area's local inhabitants have constantly rearticulated their practices and cosmologies in response to each new statal regime. Rituals, therefore, have helped previous practices and cosmologies to survive, persist, and to be rearticulated in new ways.

Second, Delfino's (2020) study suggests that through the process of indigenous ethnogenesis in Laguna Blanca, rituals have been, and still are, a part of the political strategy to consolidate local communities as political entities, strengthening social cohesion among their members especially in situations of crisis that could potentially disaggregate them (Delfino, 2020). In this sense, according to Delfino rituals are a "device of intensification" (Delfino, 2020, p. 226) for social relationships both within and among communities. He observes how over the past 25 years rituals have been multiplying in Laguna Blanca: some newly created, such as the *Punchau Raymi* (celebration of the winter solstice); while others have been reinvigorated on a different scale, as is the case with the public corpachada on 1st August. In this way, the indigenous ritual calendar has undergone significant renewal and change in recent decades.

In 1999, a group of inhabitants, led by the traditional healer and healthcare assistant Don L.G., started promoting the organisation of an annual public ritual offering to the Pachamama; namely the corpachada on 1st August. They suggested the village's ceremonial square as the site of the performance, where it has been carried out ever since. Since 1999, this ritual has become a collective event, which reproduces, and thereby transforms, a formerly domestic and familial ritual into a collective public one. According to Delfino (2020), the organisation of this event entailed a discussion within the local committee in charge of designing a new style for the ritual, leading to the consensual creation of a "new liturgy" (Delfino, 2020, p. 228) with both fixed elements and the possibility of variation – to be established collectively – year

by year. One aim of introducing this new collective rite was the “socialisation of the young people” (Delfino, 2020, p. 228), as a form of didactic heritagisation. At the same time, the collective corpachada has reinforced the local sense of community, playing an important role in the process of local indigenous ethnogenesis.

The new public form of the corpachada soon started to attract visitors, therefore contributing to the development of tourism in Laguna Blanca. In line with Delfino (2020), the scaling up of the ritual from the domestic to the public level has produced a set of relevant sociocultural transformations. First, the role of ritual leader has shifted from the head of the domestic group, who in many cases is a single mother, to the community leader, the cacique, who in the case of the indigenous communitiy of Laguna Blanca is also a woman. This shift has contributed to a process of empowerment of the local indigenous leadership, as well as of female leadership (Delfino, 2020). Second, the change toward a public ceremony has attracted the interest of political authorities, such as the mayor and provincial officials, who use the public ritual as a space for performing speeches. In addition, official political emblems have been incorporated into the ritual, such as the national, provincial, and local administrative flags, hymns, and symbols. According to Delfino (2020), the frequent use of governmental emblems and hymns in this respect shows how the statal, provincial and municipal officals have attempted to exert control over local communities, as well as to promote institutional hegemony by appropriating new public rituals that have gained visibility and even popularity. To counter these efforts by government representatives to appropriate the ritual, indigenous communities and their caciques have established a wide and independent ritual calendar that explicitly commemorates and valorises indigenousness (Delfino, 2020, p. 225).

New rites, which nowadays form part of the indigenous ritual calendar, are usually inspired by the wider Andean rituality that people have come to know through contacts between indigenous community leaders, both at a regional and transnational level, as well as by personal experiences and online research (Delfino, 2020). One of these “new traditions” is the Punchau Raymi, or celebration of the winter solstice and the beginning of the Andean New Year, which was organised by the caciques of the Union of People of the Diaguita Nation of the Department of Belén, and performed for the first time in

2018 through the burning of ritual offerings to the Sun (Delfino, 2020, 232f.). In summary, new collective and public rituals in Laguna Blanca have come about as a result of strategic practices of ritual multiplication and political resignification, as well as the creation of new rituals inspired by personal experiences and mediated representations – through TV, the internet, social media, etc. – of a wider Andean rituality.

The scaling up (Delfino, 2020) of the corpachada on 1st August went hand in hand with its festivalisation. Today the corpachada on 1st August is not just a single event within an annual ritual calendar; instead, it entails a series of corpachadas and other rituals that are normally performed at other times and/or locations throughout the year, as well as various other coinciding ludic gatherings. Further, it has acquired more visibility and, accordingly, a higher political profile than before. Indeed, the corpachada's organisers have managed to transform it into a so-called "festival," which, unlike private rituals, may include a collective part, but is especially characterised by recreational activities, such as concerts, dances, games, and ludic performances, as well as the sale or exchange of food, drinks, and other merchandise which are less available in the ordinary, non-festive period (see Boos, 2024).

In the case of Laguna Blanca, the festivalisation process has contributed to strengthening local community ties and even to supporting the emergence of local political indigenous groups (Delfino, 2020), while also raising the corpachada's appeal to national and international audiences – as can be seen from the growing number of visitors to the ritual from outside the village over the last decade. During our fieldwork in 2023, local visitors to the corpachada came from hamlets, such as Corral Blanco, La Angostura, and Aguas Calientes, within the extended area of Laguna Blanca. Visitors also included people with familial connections to the area living in nearby towns such as Belén and Londres, or even the provincial capital city of San Fernando del Valle de Catamarca; many of these used the occasion to visit family and friends. On the national level, tourists came from towns across Argentina's provinces, including Córdoba, Mendoza, and Buenos Aires, and during our stay even a couple from México attended the festival.

Our observations indicate that the process of festivalisation is paralleled by the rising global phenomenon that scholars have labelled as "festival touristification," or "festival tourism" (Picard & Robinson, 2006). On the one

hand, festival touristification describes a strengthening desire among tourists to seek out both "traditional" and "new" festival experiences. This phenomenon is associated with the transformation of festive activities and even the creation of new festivals, especially driven by local institutions and municipalities wishing to promote tourism development.

Although scholars from festival studies (see Quinn, 2006; Picard & Robinson, 2006) have critically highlighted the potential risks of cultural essentialisation and commodification inherent to festival tourism, they have also called for a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon, cautioning against the inclination to view festivals as exclusively organised just for the sake of tourism. For instance, Picard and Robinson (2006) argue that festivals which attract many tourists are mostly still an arena of sociocultural "creativity" that enables local people to "cope with change" and "social crisis" (p. 14). Further, they imply that tourists should be seen, in general terms, "as elements of the social system of host societies" (p. 19). In the following ethnographic descriptions, we will, therefore, not only trace the links between processes of economic, social, and political change in the context of a potential ecological crisis from the perspective of the locals but also discuss the role of tourists. We do so by describing how people in Laguna Blanca perform the corpachada and the role taken on by tourists in this ritual.

The Eve of the Corpachada: Rituals and the Party on 31st July

As mentioned above, the corpachada to Pachamama takes place every year on 1st August. However, the festivities actually begin the day before on 31st July, which can be described as the eve of the event. The eve festivities take place in the triangular space of the village square which contains the communal apacheta (see Figure 2); a mountain-like shrine consisting of piled up, white or light-coloured stones dedicated to Pachamama. At the base of the shrine, the local people dug a hole which becomes the mouth of Pachamama and a point of contact with her; this is where the ritual offering is placed and later buried. Also in the square, the community has built two small stone columns with a memorial plaque on top dedicated to Don L.G., who, as men-

tioned above, was the inventor and main promoter of the new communal form of the corpachada. He was active in the organisation of the collective event from its inception in 1999 until his death in 2021.

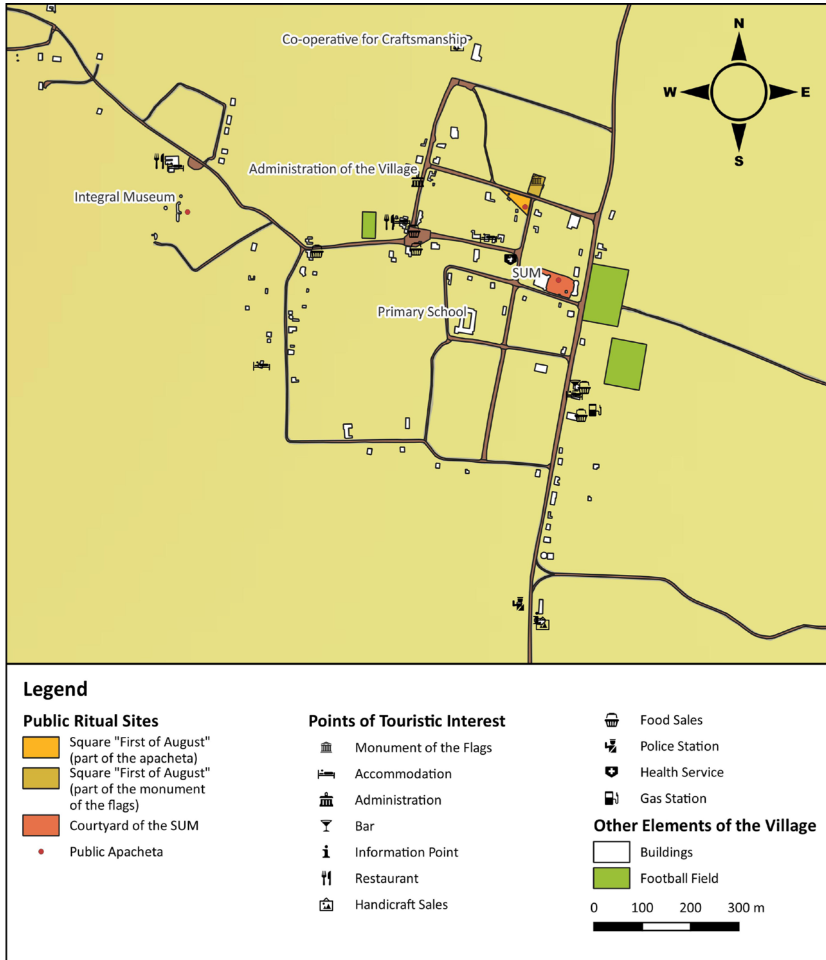

Figure 2 – Map of the village of Laguna Blanca, its main square and other important public ritual sites. Map by Tobias Boos based on interviews and observations.

On the morning of 31st July during our fieldwork, people gathered at the communal apacheta in the "Square of the First of August" to "open the Pacha"

– as one of our interview partners put it. A hole was then dug, which is the mouth of Pachamama where the ritual offering would be deposited the next day; this ritual marked the start of the festival which continued into the next day (see Figure 3). Among the participants we observed, there were: the cacique of the indigenous community of Laguna Blanca, a small group of inhabitants and organisers, the village's municipal representative, and the mayor of the municipality of Villa Vill. Further, the mayor was accompanied by an announcer hired from a local radio station to introduce the participants and provide commentary on the main acts of the event. On several occasions he also promoted the mayor's political campaign for the next municipal election. There were also tourists present, such as a woman from Buenos Aires and her children; she explained to us that she was a friend of the cacique and had been participating in the event for years. There was also a journalist from the region who filmed the whole ceremony.

Figure 3 – The *apacheta* in the main square with the "open mouth" of Pachamama. Photo by Tobias Boos.

During the "opening of the Pacha," all the participants stood around the Pachamama's mouth while two women, one of them in Andean dress,[14] tied

14 At the "opening," all the local men wear ordinary clothes – just one of them wore a hat – whereas the *cacique* and one of young woman-organisers were dressed in Andean dresses, with an Andean traditional skirt (*pollera*), woolly socks, and traditional sandals (*uyutas*). The

woollen threads, each of two colours, around the stones. This ritual practice is called *chimpear* (to tie with threads) the stones and contributes to "enact" the fertility and wealth of the Earth, as well as the herd, family and community. Then, one of the young women covered part of the apacheta with the international indigenous Andean flag, the *Wiphala*. Afterwards, all participants moved northwards from the apacheta in the square to the monument of the flags in front of the square (see Figure 2). The monument consisted of a small square with three flagpoles at the top of a small hill, which could be reached via two stone steps that frame a stone wall. Here the flag ceremony was performed, during which the officials raised first the Argentine national flag, then the flag of Laguna Blanca,[15] and lastly the Wiphala.

The second part of the eve events took place in the courtyard in front of the new Centre for Multiple Uses (SUM) (see Figure 2), which in the official festival flyer is described as "a space for the development of tourism, sport, and culture." The SUM was built by the municipality of Villa Vill southeast of the village square. It is a two-storey modern building with two octagonal towers on both sides, made up of natural stones and painted in red. Its shape and architectural style are reminiscent of a *Pucara*, a pre-Hispanic fortress (see Figure 4). Indeed, public and associative buildings built in Laguna Blanca since the 1990s have frequently been constructed in a neo-pre-Hispanic style.[16] The employment of this architectural style could be seen as an indication of the strengthened indigenous identity in Laguna Blanca that Delfino (2020) mentions. The SUM was inaugurated to serve as a festival location, but before entering it, permission had to be asked by way of enacting a corpachada, a ritual offering to Pachamama.

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cacique also wore a hat with an Andean ribbon and a little bag with the coca leaves inside, called *chuspa* in Quechua.

15 The flag of Laguna Blanca features two horizontal fields: the white one represents the mountain covered with snow, and the clear brown one stands for the fleece of the wild vicuña.

16 Examples are the Integral Museum, the Municipality Hostel, and the Co-operative for Craftsmanship.

Figure 4 – The SUM with the apacheta on the right. Photo by Tobias Boos.

When we arrived at the SUM's courtyard, we noticed that the mouth of Pachamama near the apacheta had already been opened. The cacique of Laguna Blanca asked all attendees – a group of approximately 40 people – to build a cycle around the apacheta where the corpachada was to be performed a few minutes later; the cacique of the indigenous community of Peñas Negras and his family joined in for this part of the ritual. Further eye-catching participants were a veteran of the Malvinas War, dressed in army uniform and accompanied by friends, and the boys of the local football team. Two groups of youngsters did not join the cycle but remained at the margins of the courtyard during the whole ritual.

First, the announcer introduced via microphone the local officials and honoured the mayor of Villa Vill for building the SUM, as well as for supporting the nomination of Laguna Blanca for the international competition of the world's "Best Tourism Villages". The competition was organised by the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), and Laguna Blanca was among the seven participating Argentine villages.[17] Then, the representative of the village Laguna Blanca, the mayor of Villa Vill, and the cacique of

17 See also the online newspaper *La Nación*, 15/11/2023:https://www.lanacion.com.ar/propiedades/construccion-y-diseno/desde-un-bosque-sumergido-hasta-minas-de-oro-los-siete-pueblos-argentinos-que-compiten-por-el-titulo-nid15092023/

the indigenous community of Laguna Blanca, one after the other, greeted the audience and thanked the inhabitants and everybody, especially naming the tourists, for attending the ritual. At that point, the announcer called for the caciques of the indigenous communities of Laguna Blanca and Peñas Negras to start the corpachada. One after the other, they thanked in a rather religious tone Pachamama for her gifts, especially for the everyday bread and for the "water that brings life," as they said literally. They offered alcoholic drinks and water by pouring them into the hole. Then they deposited food and solid stimulants, such as coca leaves, in Pachamama's mouth. After the performances of the caciques, the announcer called in an ordered manner all the other participants to make the offering: first, the political authorities, then the local administration staff, a schoolteacher, the tourists, the football players, and finally anyone else wishing to make the offering.

After the corpachada, all participants got the opportunity to inspect the new SUM. Then people left the scene, going back home or to watch a football match that was about to start at the nearby football field. In the afternoon, games and activities at the SUM attracted people: the young members of the association for chess of Catamarca arrived by bus and started a competition in the first-floor room; in the big hall on the ground floor, people sat in chairs, in front of the stage, waiting for the musical performances. In the courtyard, where food stands and seating had been set up, small groups of people played traditional games. From the evening until the middle of the night, local people thus came to the SUM to join the ludic part of the festival. People socialised, ate, drank, played in the yard, listened to music. In addition to the performances of traditional music and dance, more commercial pop music, such as cumbia and reggaeton, was played. In short, everybody had a lot of fun.

The Corpachadas on 1st August: Ritual Offerings at Different Scales

In the village of Laguna Blanca, people woke up at around 6 am on the first day of August. They began with a family rite of drinking an alcoholic herbal tea called *quemadillo* ("the little that burns"), burnt fragrant herbs in their

houses (chachapoma, rosemary, etc.), and tied the so-called *lloque* to their wrists, ankles and neck. The lloque is a double-coloured woollen thread – in Laguna Blanca it is usually black and white – that is spun specifically for the corpachada by rotating the spindle (*puska*) leftwards instead of rightwards. It is common for this thread to be cured in alcohol and spirits and scented with garlic and the rue herb so that it protects properly during the dangerous month of August (see Salvucci, 2015, 2016b, 2022).

It was still dark when the family members lit a fire in the yard of their houses. As one of our interlocutor told us: "we gather the bones, the bones of the meat we eat are not thrown away, they are collected. On the first of August we make a cairn and burn the bones for the Pacha, there is a strong smell of meat and bones."[18] Then people *corpacharon* – the past tense of "to host" or "to offer" – by offering to Pachamama food, drinks, alcoholic beverages, candies, coca leaves, and cigarettes – that is, whatever they thought Pachamama would appreciate. The ritual is done first in every household, which has its own apacheta in the yard; the items are placed in holes, conceived of as Pachamama's mouth, that are dug at the feet of the apacheta. As one local explained, the offering is made to thank the Pachamama for her gifts, and to ask for health and protection: "so that the Pacha does not take us, so that the Earth and the Aires do not harm us."

At around 8 am, a second corpachada is performed by the owners of hostels in the village with their guests. We were able to participate in these rituals at the hostels. At the latter, our friend, who lives and works in Belén, the nearest town in the valley, performed a corpachada in the yard of the family hostel managed by his parents. He was the successor of his grandparents, who had done the performance before him, and was assisted by his friends. Next to the apacheta, on a traditional shawl, called *aguayo*, there were several drinks, such as the traditional *ulpada*, made of toasted wheat flour and water, and also hard liquor, a bottle of wine, and a bottle of liquor of local high mountain herbs produced in Londres (Catamarca). Food was also offered, such as fried *empanadas*, boiled beans, and stew, as well as stimulants, such as coca leaves and cigarettes. The performer of the rite explained the ritual's

18 On the role of bones during ritual offerings to Pachamama, see Arnold (2022, pp. 65–70), who draws on ethnographic examples from the Northwestern Argentinean province of Jujuy provided by anthropologists Lucila Bugallo and Francisco Pazzarelli.

significance to a group of around a dozen tourists including ourselves, while being assisted by his friends who gave us a drink called *quemadillo*. They then tied a black and white, left-handed thread to our left wrist, saying that we had to cut and burn it on the last day of August to burn the bad luck.

At around 10:00 am, people started moving to the village square. The unpaved streets next to the square were now filled with vans, and the area had become crowded with around 400 participants, many of them tourists who were enthusiastically taking pictures. Additionally, a drone from the local press flew in the air to film the event. Indeed, the whole event was documented by the press, who recorded videos and interviews with attendees. One journalist came from Hualfín, another young journalist from Belén, and a middle-aged Argentine filmmaker was making a documentary which he intended to sell to an international agency, as he told us. At a later point in the festivities, we even noticed two drones filming the event at the same time.

In the square a stage had been set up next to the apacheta where the Andean band, Hilos del Viento, were playing music. The political authorities in attendance lined up right in front of the stage, with some of them dressed in their very expensive vicuña ponchos which have been a symbol of political power since Incan times (see, Murra, 1962). Further inside the square, several groups of tourists assembled to look at the officials and the band performing on stage. A few metres further away from the line of officials, young girls and boys bearing flags were preparing to perform a parade in front of everyone. The same announcer as the day before provided commentary over a loudspeaker for most of the event.

As the parade began, the girls and boys, some dressed in school uniforms and others in Andean costumes, paraded with the flags of Argentina, Laguna Blanca, and the Wiphala; they were also accompanied by two teachers and some women in Andean costumes. Then, together with the authorities, they left the square and walked to the monument, where they raised the same three flags as the day before. The announcer named the following authorities: the mayor of Villa Vil, the vice mayor, the municipal delegate, a provincial deputy, the mayor of Belén, the provincial director of the craftsmanship department, the provincial director of the social development department, the local school director, the caciques of the indigenous communities of Laguna Blanca and of Peñas Negras, and the president of the craftsmanship commit-

tee of Laguna Blanca. Afterwards, the authorities returned to the square with the apacheta, where the Andean music band played the national anthem, and most attendees joined in singing. Then an audio player was started, which replayed the anthem of Catamarca.

Next, the announcer introduced the authorities, who, one after the other, delivered speeches that all highlighted the importance of local traditions and of tourism for the wellbeing of the people of Laguna Blanca. For example, the municipal delegate, dressed in a vicuña poncho, concluded his speech by saying: "Long live Pachamama, long live Laguna Blanca, long live the tourists!" The cacique of the community of Laguna Blanca, dressed in Andean clothes, thanked the tourists and stressed that the villagers would defend their territory "to the death, to the last consequences," which very likely referred to the current conflict over mining. The mayor of Villa Vil was the last to give his public address. In their speeches, all authorities spoke in remembrance of Don L.G. and a young boy who had died recently and had been a very appreciated member of a local folk music band. After the speeches, the mayor of Villa Vil presented certificates to distinguished local people or to families who were in mourning for recently deceased community members, and then the flag bearers left. This part of the event, where political institutions and organisations got the opportunity to present themselves, we will call the "institutional" part of the ritual.

Next, the announcer proclaimed the arrival of *Coquena*, the mythological guardian of wild animals, asking the tourists to leave space for him. Coquena was personified by an inhabitant in Andean costume, wearing a poncho, woolly trousers, and goat hair slippers. He entered the scene from behind the hill of the monument, where he could not be seen by those present, as if he were coming from the "wilderness" outside the village. He carried a baby on his back and was accompanied by a boy in Andean costume and a young, ritually decorated llama. The Andean band played in the background, and the tourists closed around Coquena when he finally arrived at the square. Coquena took the microphone from the presenter and announced the arrival of Pachamama. From this point on, Coquena took on the role of the presenter commenting on the ritual activities, marking the end of the institutional part of the ritual and the start of the practical and educational part of doing and performing rituals.

Pachamama entered the scene (see Figure 5), personified by a person wearing a mask, a vicuña wool shirt and gloves, a skirt in a mountain lion skin pattern, and shoes made with armadillo armour. On the back she carried rhea feathers, in her hands a walking stick made of a rhea leg, and on her head, she wore a fox fur. This personification of Pachamama never spoke; she only danced by jumping around. Subsequently, the boys and girls from the Pachamama dance school performed a circular dance in honour of Coquena and Pachamama to the rhythm of commercial Andean music, dressed in Andean costumes and wearing feather crowns. The tourists excitedly and greedily took pictures and filmed the scene. Some tourists even started to do the offering before the offerings had officially been started and without having been asked to do so, as is customary. At that point, Coquena asked the jostling crowd to calm down, to be respectful, and to wait for their turn.

Figure 5 – The arrival of Pachamama at the public event on 1st August. Photo by Tobias Boos.

Thereafter, a series of rituals followed which are also part of the Andean ritual calendar, but normally performed at other times of the year, and were introduced when the new communal corpachada was set up more than 20 years ago. The first of these was the rutichico, where children (in their early years of life) receive their first haircut from their godfather/godmother or other rel-

atives, who also offer a present or money to the child. Coquena explained the significance of this custom to the audience.

Coquena then presented the arrival of the *tropero* (shepherd) with his herd of sheep, and a young boy assistant in a gaucho costume. The two of them performed a short play reciting typical conversations between these roles. After the play, the shepherd and his assistant invited the tourists to chimpear, that is, to tie colourful woollen threads to the animals' fleeces, after which both did the corpachada ritual. At this point, the time had come for Coquena to invite the villagers to perform the corpachada, and then, afterwards, the visitors from nearby villages and towns and, finally, all tourists and other attendees (see Figure 6). Next to the mouth of Pachamama, where the ritual offering took place, two women standing behind a table offered to tie the leftwards spun threads mentioned earlier to the left wrists of those who wanted this; many participants, especially tourists, eagerly took up this offer.

Figure 6 – A tourist, wearing a poncho, is performing the corpachada at the public event on 1st August. On the right and left visitors are taking pictures. Photo by Tobias Boos.

At around midday, after the series of rituals and corpachada had ended, people started buying food at the informal points of sale set up along the margins of the square. They ate on the spot or took the food with them to eat at home. In the meantime, local *copleros* (copla singers) performed on the stage,

followed again by the Andean band who performed a short concert (see Figure 7), whose last song, entitled *Pachamama*, was accompanied by the dancing of boys and girls from the Pachamama dance school; as this all happened, the mouth of Pachamama was covered over to bury the offerings. At the end of the ceremony, some of the authorities took pictures with the figures of Coquena and Pachamama as the village square slowly emptied out. Many local people gathered at home for a traditional family meal of baked lamb, while most of the tourists returned to their hostels in the village or homes in the valley.

Figure 7 – The Andean band Hilos del Viento is performing a song on the stage at the public event on 1st August. In the foreground, on the left side, the Pachamama is watching the stage, and on the right, we see the feather crown of a dancer. Photo by Daniela Salvucci.

The stage was immediately dismantled and carried from the square to the SUM, where the second part of the festival was set to start in the afternoon. At the same time, a small market had been set up in the courtyard of the SUM with stands selling regular consumergoods, such as cloth, sports shoes, pots, and thermos flasks. This was in preparation for the ludic part of the festival

which would continue late into the night here, many of the local inhabitants, but only a few tourists, gathered at the SUM to play Bingo and watch the dance and music performances, which were similar to the shows and games the day before.

Mapping the Changing Ritual-Festival: Temporal and Spatial Dynamics

We now propose a mapping of the spatial and temporal dynamics of the different corpachadas on 31st July and 1st August in Laguna Blanca in order to develop a better understanding of how these rituals have changed in terms of the processes of festivalisation, politicisation, and touristification. To do this, we take account first of the structure of the whole event, then of the continuum of activities during the main event on 1st August, and last of the multiplication of ritual offerings in the private and the public spheres.

As discussed above, the event in its entirety can be divided into the eve (31st July) and main ritual (1st August), recalling a double structure that scholars consider to be typical of Andean rituals and festivals (see Rivera Andía 2014). In the case of Laguna Blanca, the eve does not just mark the start of the event, but also replicates on a smaller scale the alternation between the "ritual" and "ludic" parts of the main event; hence the same structural dynamic appears to play out on both days. Thus, on 31st July and 1st August formal ceremonies take place near the apacheta: on the eve, this happens first at the apacheta in the village square and subsequently at the apacheta in the SUM courtyard; whereas on 1st August it happens only at the apacheta at the main village square. Then, on both days the formal ceremonies are followed by ludic or festive events involving games, music, and dancing that take place at the SUM.

Moreover, the eve seems to function as a welcoming event for the next day, as it provides the opportunity for the apacheta in the main village to be prepared. The importance of this step was explained to us at different times by our interlocutors, since the local people believe they must ask Pachamama for permission so that the main ritual on 1st August can occur. Since only the local authorities and tourists who were familiar with the location and festival were in attendance on the eve, this stage of the event had a more intimate

feeling to the main event, where there were many other local and regional authorities among the participants, such as provincial deputies and even the governor, who briefly came in the afternoon to greet and then left, as well as tourists from further afield. On both days, the presence of authorities and tourists concentrated mainly in the ceremonial and ritual part of the event. The ritual of 1st August can be subdivided into institutional and educational parts: the first being where the authorities give their speeches and the national and regional institutions play the main role, and the second involving presenting and explaining local and Andean rites and customs. Local people, including from other nearby villages and towns, also participated, particularly in the ludic part of the festival.

The festivalisation of the ritual seems to be more beneficial for local people than tourists. The after party is especially noteworthy, as it seems to strengthen the social bonds between the local community members at least as much as the ritual does. During the ceremony, in fact, and especially during the festive activities at the SUM, people from the village, but also from the area of Laguna Blanca, as well as those people who migrated to the towns in the valley, including those who still have family relations, friends, and even personal troops of animals in the village, gathered together, and socialised, enhancing their sense of belonging to the area of Laguna Blanca.

Regarding the main event of the corpachada on 1st August, we observed several interconnected activities and multiple ritual offerings that took place throughout the day in entangled social spaces and temporalities. There was, in fact, a continuum, rather than a dichotomy, between the private corpachada and the public one, which, through the multiplication of offerings, connected the domestic-familial offering with the domestic-touristic one, and also with the collective-touristic ceremony. It was as if the public event was gradually scaled up from the intimacy of the family towards the open social gathering of the main event.

The offering that the owners of the local hostels performed at home with their guests, at around 8 am, was a reduced corpachada which retained its two main aspects: the tying of lloques around the tourists' wrists as protective items, and the offering of goods to Pachamama. In this way, local people included their guests in the actual ritual itself, rather than just a performative version of it put on for the sake of tourists. Indeed, they performed the

ritual in a private and familial setting, while instructing them on the ritual's significance and how to participate; therefore, the tourists were in some way "educated" about local customs or "cosmopraxis" (de Munter, 2016). It seems that there were no contradictions or antagonism among the different ritual situations, as the same people, especially local people, participated in more than one ritual offering on 1st August: as family members and hosts at a household level, and as community members and hosts at a village level. In the same way in which they included their guests in the corpachada performed at home, they also included political authorities and tourists in the communal and public ritual offering, in this way facilitating the politicisation of the ritual.

To show in more detail the ways in which the ritual has been politicised, the public corpachada on 1st August can be subdivided into two main parts: first, a more institutional part; and, second, a more ritual, educational and spectacular one. As Delfino (2020, p. 228) has already suggested, the "change of scale" of the ritual from the familiar to the collective public level has promoted a process of political appropriation of the event from local and regional governmental authorities; as can be seen through the inclusion of anthems, raising of flags, and political speeches in the first formal part of the ceremony. Nevertheless, as Delfino (2020) highlights, this change of ritual scale has also supported a process of empowerment of the indigenous leadership, and even of a female indigenous leadership, as the centrality of the cacique's role in the ceremony – as described in our ethnographic account – indicates.

Nonetheless, this process of politicisation of the ritual has, we argue, not only strengthened the consolidation of community ties and the dynamic of political ethnogenesis, as suggested by Delfino (2020), but also generated a ritual political arena in which internal conflicts can be played out and new political alliances expressed. During the offering to the Pachamama at the apacheta on both days the caciques of Laguna Blanca and Peñas Negras implicitly contested the project of installing a gold mine in the area by offering water, which comes from the mountains where the mine is supposed to be established, to Pachamama and highlighted specifically the water's vital importance for life. Presumably in this practice and parts of their speeches, they referred in a subtle way to the threats of the planned mining activities on the safety of the local aquifers, water streams, and water supply.

Further, on 1st August the cacique of Laguna Blanca proclaimed in front of the audience that the people of Laguna Blanca would resist "to the death" and to the "last consequences," which could be understood as a warning for those authorities who have been negotiating the mining project. Indeed, none of the speeches alluded explicitly to political conflicts or to the mining project, but knowing the context, these practices and assertions can be interpreted as comments on current political quarrels. The public event, thus, has enhanced the political alliance among those indigenous communities that have opposed the project the strongest (Laguna Blanca and Peñas Negras), whereas the representatives of the other indigenous communities of the area of Laguna Blanca, who have been less critical toward the project, were not present at the event. During the public corpachada, moreover, the potential conflict between the local indigenous communities and the local political administration was addressed and put into the ritual political arena.

The second part of the corpachada on 1st August featured various rituals. Besides those considered typical for the day – such as the corpachada and tying of lloques to the wrists – there were also other rituals, including: the rupachico, the arrival of the tropero and his flock and the arrival of two personified mythical figures, Coquena and Pachamama, to the accompaniment of dancers and traditional music. By changing the scale of the ritual offering to the communal and public level, the ritual activities have become "spectacularised" in a way that could be interpreted as a cosmopolitical practice, due to its enabling of new alliances between the festive community and the tourists – the latter of whom were being educated in Andean customs and worldviews. Nevertheless, festival tourism and ritual touristification remains an ambiguous and contradictory process, including insensitive and even disrespectful attitudes from some visitors, exemplified by the aggressiveness of some tourists in taking photographs.

As Delfino (2020) stresses, the founders of the modern corpachada had originally aimed to use the ritual to educate the area's youth about local cosmopraxis. In this sense, it can be seen as a form of didactic heritage-making, which includes multiple levels of ritual activity as well as the incorporation of local mythological elements, including personified mythical beings. This approach, one based on ritual creativity, is connected to the fact that local people usually perform, and have been performing, rituals at a familial or

neighbourly level, in a relatively independent way; without liturgic control from part of external ritual authorities, even within the syncretic frame of local Catholicism. This ritual autonomy has thus encouraged variation and creativity at both the family and community levels. Finally, the didactic aim of the ritual-spectacle is not only directed at local youngsters but also the visitors, to whom the local cosmopraxis is explained through processes of ritual enactment.

The process of touristification of the ritual offering, we suggest, is not only connected to a general improvement of tourism in the village of Laguna Blanca, as seen from the new hostels and family restaurants that have opened over the past few years (see Figure 2). Our conversations with local people and the authorities' political speeches suggest that tourism is perceived by many inhabitants as a possible alternative to the mining project as a way of promoting sustainable economic and social development. The public corpachada on 1st August, therefore, could be understood as a cosmopolitical arena where it becomes possible to experiment with political tactics intended to form and strengthen alliances among indigenous communities and even tourists, such that could be able to resist unwelcome external pressures such as the mining project.

Conclusion: Changing Rituals as a Cosmopolitical Arena

We suggest that the recent and current trends in the Laguna Blanca area towards ritual multiplication and creativity, as well as the harnessing of rituals for political purposes, have contributed to the opening up of a new space for political discussion, negotiation, and even conflict. Rituals, therefore, work not only as an "intensification device" for social cohesion and community building, or rebuilding, within the framework of the political process of ethnicisation, or ethnogenesis; they also work as a new political arena for taking positions, questioning official power, forming new alliances, and expressing dissent within the community, among communities, and between local communities and the provincial and national governments. This arena also involves so-called "more-than-human" beings (Tsing, 2013), or "becomings" (Ingold, 2016; De Munter, 2022), in the local ecological and sociocultural relations; the most prominent examples here being Pachamama and Coquena.

In the Laguna Blanca area, a cosmopolitics-like alliance has been established between local people and social archaeologists working in the area (Delfino & Rodriguez, 1991) through the Integral Museum and the Interdisciplinary High Mountain Institute. Despite its success, in the past few years this alliance has been called into question due to conflicts that arose within and among the local indigenous communities around the new governmental mining project, which has been strongly opposed by the social archaeologists due to the damage it will inflict on the local ecology and sociocultural environment.

Additionally, over the last decade a new possible, but also intrinsically controversial, alliance between the local population and tourists has developed. By including tourists in their ritual offerings and thus sharing the local cosmopraxis with them, local people seem to be searching for alliances against the new mining project and extractivist economic model it represents; all within the backdrop of the ecological, social, and political crises that seem to be playing out across the world. Despite the ambiguities and uncertainties inherent in the processes of politicisation, festivalisation and touristification, our case study shows how the changing of a ritual can help to open up a cosmopolitical arena where participants can grapple with the issues and conflicts facing their communities, and experiment with new possible alliances to address or remedy those dynamics.

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