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# Socio-Demographic Changes and Transmission of Tangible and Intangible Resources: Ethnographic Glimpses From the Western Italian Alps

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The theoretical reflections put forward in this article originate from our participation in the research project LIMINAL (*Linguistic Minorities in the Alps. Ethnicity, Languages and Demographic Processes*, 2013-15), funded by the University of Turin. Fassio's fieldwork in the Pellice Valley was made possible by a grant from the project CLAPie (*Cultures and Languages of Alpine Piedmont*, 2011-14), also funded by the University of Turin, whereas Zanini's ethnography in Macugnaga was supported by the Interreg project E.CH.I. (*Italo-Swiss Ethnographies for the Valorisation of Intangible Heritage*, 2009-2012 – [www.echi-interreg.eu](http://www.echi-interreg.eu)). Although this article is the outcome of close collaborative work, the introductory section has been authored by Viazzo, the second and third sections respectively by Fassio and Zanini, and the concluding remarks by Porcellana.

## Introduction

- 1 In the wake of the pioneering work of such scholars as Fourny (1994), Bätzing (2003) and Perlik (2006), the literature on current socio-demographic changes in the Alps has

grown considerably in the last few years. In particular, a spate of studies have shown that after a long period of depopulation clear signs of a “return to the mountains” are detectable in many parts of the Alpine area (Dematteis, 2011; Steinicke *et al.*, 2011; Bender and Kanitscheider, 2012; Bartaletti, 2013; Dematteis, Corrado and Di Gioia, 2014; Viazzo and Zanini, 2014). Indeed, it has even been suggested that the trend reversal currently witnessed, and the above-average population growth in the Alps during the post-war period more generally, might signal a transition from the modernizing industrial society of the twentieth century to a post-industrial and post-modern era (Mathieu, 2015). These changes raise several delicate questions of interest not only to the scholarly community, but also to planners and local administrators. One set of crucial and still largely unexplored issues concerns the processes and mechanisms by which both tangible and intangible local resources are transmitted in Alpine areas undergoing such social-demographic change.

- 2 This article approaches these issues from an anthropological perspective. It has been widely held by socio-cultural anthropologists that humans derive substances from the physical environment that are transformed symbolically into “natural resources” and are then used to produce energy and possibly economic goods (Bennett, 1976, p. 43). In the heyday of ecological anthropology, during the 1970s and 1980s, the Alps became a favorite ground for testing hypotheses about the relations between environment, cultural attitudes and local social and economic structures. Considerable attention was thus directed to: the rights whereby individuals, families and collective bodies were granted or denied access to natural resources; the inheritance processes that passed on ownership of the means of production (stables, barns, farming tools, etc.) enabling mountain farmers to exploit these resources; and to the functioning of social regulatory mechanisms which helped mountain communities accommodate demographic growth within a framework of limited but renewable natural resources such as high mountain pasture or forest (Netting, 1981, pp. 58-63). More recently, anthropological interest moved first towards “tangible cultural heritage”, i.e. buildings, objects or sites with historical and cultural value, and then – especially following the approval of the UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage<sup>1</sup> – towards some of the broad domains where intangible cultural heritage is likely to manifest, such as rituals and festive events, traditional craftsmanship, and knowledge and practices concerning nature (Arizpe and Amescua, 2013).
- 3 It is no wonder that in the past decade socio-cultural anthropologists have increasingly devoted empirical research and theoretical reflection to the effects of demographic change on the transmission of intangible cultural heritage. Especially in the Alps, where questions of cultural identity are often sensitive, just who should be entitled to learn about, transmit, promote or valorize local cultures may be a matter of delicate social negotiation and possibly tension between autochthonous and immigrant sectors of the population. Nevertheless, it is becoming apparent that one of the paradoxes of Alpine repopulation is that in many cases cultural continuity – be it the transmission of local craftsmanship or the survival and revamping of a ritual – is made possible only by the demographic discontinuity brought about by the arrival of “new highlanders”, who quite often are more eager than locals to promote the traditions for which they are disputable and sometimes disputed heirs (Viazzo, 2012a). Less attention, however, has been paid to the extent to which the transmission of cultural heritage is intertwined with, and constrained by, the transmission of tangible economic resources. In this

regard, we will argue that greater scrutiny needs to be placed on familial and communal structures so as to ascertain the roles of family and community as channels of transmission not only of naturalistic, agro-pastoral or artisanal knowledge, but also of tangible assets – such as land, buildings and rights to private and collective resources – which are essential to ensure that traditional crafts, trades and economic activities are recovered and preserved, or novel ones are experimented. On the other hand, we will also briefly consider the possibility of tapping intangible cultural heritage for economic purposes, ultimately turning these at least in part into tangible resources.

4 We will concentrate here on two cases: the upper Pellice Valley, in the western Piedmontese Alps, and Macugnaga, a settlement of Walser origin at the foot of Monte Rosa in the north-eastern Piedmontese Alps. They have been selected primarily because of their distinct economic trajectories: the two municipalities of Bobbio Pellice and Villar Pellice provide an example of continuity in the use of local resources, particularly through mountain pastoralism, which remains one of the pillars of their economy and culture; in Macugnaga, on the other hand, the abrupt closure of mines in the early 1960s, coupled with a decline of agro-pastoral activities, marked a major discontinuity and precipitated an economic crisis, the solution for which was sought in rapid and wholesale conversion to tourist development. The contrast is apparent in data on the occupational structure in the three municipalities drawn from the Italian national census of 2011, summarized in Table 1: the proportion of those employed in agriculture and livestock farming looks much higher in Villar Pellice and Bobbio Pellice, compared to Macugnaga, and the difference is even greater if only men are considered (30.1% in Bobbio compared to 18.5 in Villar and just 4.6% in Macugnaga). No less striking are the statistics on livestock farming recorded by the 2010 national census of agriculture: there were 524 head of cattle and 1846 sheep and goats in Bobbio Pellice; 515 and 1233, respectively in Villar; and a mere 56 and 126, respectively, in Macugnaga<sup>2</sup>.

5 **Table 1. Occupational structure in Bobbio Pellice, Villar Pellice and Macugnaga, 2011**

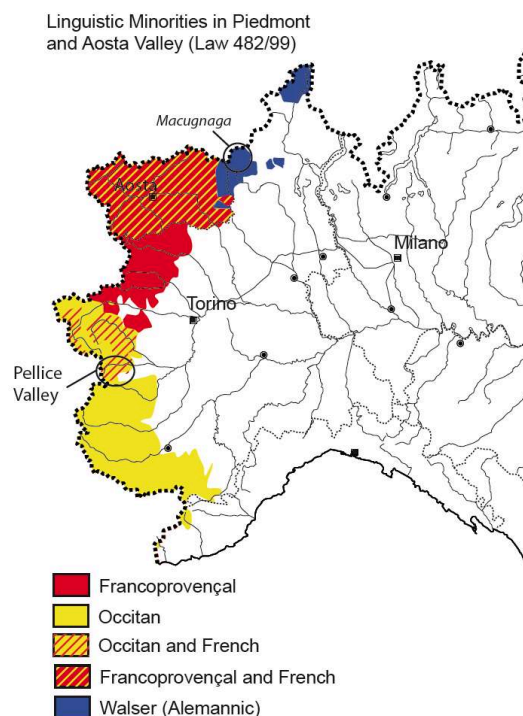
Sector	Bobbio Pellice		Villar Pellice		Macugnaga	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Agriculture and livestock farming	48	22.33	59	13.69	11	3.84
Industry	51	23.72	156	36.19	66	23.08
Trade, hotels and restaurants	42	19.53	69	16.01	98	34.27
Other	74	34.42	147	34.11	111	38.81
Total	215	100	431	100	286	100

Source: ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica), 14° Censimento della popolazione e delle abitazioni – Occupati per sezioni di attività economica (<http://dati-censimentopopolazione.istat.it/Index.aspx#>).

6 It should nevertheless be noted that Bobbio, Villar and Macugnaga have several features in common. One commonality is that historically each has been inhabited by

ethno-linguistic minorities, and this is largely still true at present: Macugnaga was founded in the second half of the thirteenth century by German-speaking colonists coming from the Oberwallis, while Bobbio and Villar Pellice are both Occitan-speaking<sup>3</sup>. As such, all three municipalities have recently received official recognition as alloglot communities under a law promulgated in 1999 to protect “historical linguistic minorities” in Italy<sup>4</sup>. For our purposes, however, a more significant common trait is that over the last few decades they have *not* experienced any significant increase in their population.

Map 1. Linguistic minorities in piedmont and aosta valley



- 7 In the Western Alps especially, recent research has focused on localities which had suffered massive depopulation but are now showing signs of recovery. An exemplary case, which has repeatedly made headlines in Italian national newspapers, is the municipality of Ostana, in the upper Po Valley, whose population had fallen from 1,200 in the early twentieth century to a mere 5 year-long residents in 1985. Since then, the number of inhabitants has gradually increased, now exceeding 80-90 residents, still modest in absolute terms, but emblematic of the trend reversal observed in many other mountain municipalities and a tribute to the tailor-made incentives patiently devised by local administrators to meet the exigencies and aspirations of individuals or small groups interested in moving to Ostana and becoming “new highlanders” (Viazzo, 2012b, p. 30). A quick look at Table 2 is sufficient to realize that the demographic trajectories of the municipalities examined in this article have been quite different. Unlike Ostana, neither Bobbio and Villar nor Macugnaga were (or are) on the verge of total abandonment; over the last thirty years their populations have indeed been contracting, but at a fairly slow rate<sup>5</sup>. Thus, they provide two counter-instances which may prove useful reminders that the contemporary demography of the Alps is marked not only by cases of recovery from near extinction, but also by a less spectacular and

yet widespread tendency toward stabilization, signifying departures from the demographic collapse endured by many parts of the Alpine crescent during much of the twentieth century<sup>6</sup>.

8 **Table 2. Population of Bobbio Pellice, Villar Pellice and Macugnaga, 1861-2011**

<i>Census year</i>	<b>Bobbio Pellice</b>		<b>Villar Pellice</b>		<b>Macugnaga</b>	
	<i>Population</i>	<i>Index</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Index</i>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Index</i>
1861	1675	100	2417	100	664	100
1871	1556	92,9	2139	88,5	603	90,8
1881	1613	96,3	2175	90,0	617	92,9
1901	1500	89,6	1888	78,1	798	120,2
1911	1438	85,9	1817	75,2	769	115,8
1921	1371	81,9	1791	74,1	610	91,9
1931	1249	74,6	1743	72,1	640	96,4
1936	1225	73,1	1620	67,0	696	104,8
1951	1108	66,1	1471	60,9	997	150,2
1961	922	55,0	1304	54,0	820	123,5
1971	794	47,4	1252	51,8	766	115,4
1981	674	40,2	1219	50,4	706	106,3
1991	608	36,3	1207	49,9	626	94,3
2001	598	35,7	1187	49,1	651	98,0
2011	566	33,8	1120	46,3	601	90,5

9 Source: ISTAT (Istituto Nazionale di Statistica), Censimenti della popolazione ([www.dati.istat.it](http://www.dati.istat.it)).

10 A closer inspection of Table 2 indicates, however, that while Bobbio and Villar went through a gradual if unbroken decline before approaching stabilization, Macugnaga's demographic history has been punctuated by severe fluctuations, these mostly connected to the varying fortunes of the mining industry. Population grew markedly between 1881 and 1901, and again even more between 1931 and 1951, but these two peaks were each followed by sudden decreases in the number of inhabitants. Historical evidence going back to the mid-eighteenth century reveals that in 1759 the parish books listed a total of 653 "souls", a figure which is uncannily similar to those recorded in 1901 and again in 2001. Although the intensification of mining activities in the early

1760s spurred immigration and demographic growth—in 1786 Macugnaga counted 802 parishioners—the mining boom was short-lived, and thirty years later the population had already dropped to just over 600 inhabitants (Viazzo, 2009, pp. 78-82).

- 11 These figures are a clear demonstration of the usefulness and indeed necessity of adopting a long-term diachronic perspective in order to pinpoint continuities and discontinuities in economic and demographic dynamics. This article however will mainly draw on evidence collected through ethnographic fieldwork. Investigations were conducted as parts of two separate and differently oriented research projects. Research in Bobbio and Villar, in the high Pellice Valley, was primarily concerned with mountain farming, and relied on extensive interviews supplemented with participant observation. Interviews there were used to reconstruct the multigenerational stories of most of the families currently exploiting the Alps for pasture; investigate property and land use rights; study the management of mountain pastures; and assess the transmission of economic assets and technical skills both inside and outside families and the local community (Fassio *et al.*, 2014). Research in Macugnaga, on the other hand, relied principally on intensive and prolonged participant observation, exploring the complex dynamics of memory, belonging, and identity in a settlement of Walser origin which has long experienced waves of immigration that have deeply altered the composition of its population (Zanini, 2013). Because of these differences in methods and focus, the data are not fully comparable and fail in instances to address some aspects of the issues discussed in this article. Nevertheless, as hinted above, several commonalities and contrasts do emerge, encouraging comparison between the cases and, indirectly, with other localities in the Alpine region.

## Families, local policies and access to resources in the pastoral economy of the Pellice Valley

- 12 The territories of Bobbio Pellice (732 m) and Villar Pellice (664 m) lie at the top of one of the three Waldensian Valleys—the Pellice, Germanasca, and Chisone of Western Piedmont—so-called because they are inhabited by a mixed population of Catholics and Waldenses, a religious group which originated in the south of France around 1170 through the preaching of Peter Waldo. Whereas during the course of the twentieth century towns located in the middle and lower valley, such as Torre Pellice and Luserna San Giovanni, witnessed the early development of a textile industry and later of stone quarrying, attracting labor from within and outside the valley, Bobbio and Villar are invariably described, both by locals and in official sources<sup>7</sup>, as municipalities with economies still relying on mountain agriculture and especially pastoralism. This is generally taken as an unmistakable sign of continuity with a traditional past. To assess whether, to what extent, and in what sense this assumption is correct, we fortunately can rely on two censuses of pastoral families and their animals taken exactly one hundred years apart, in 1914 and in 2013<sup>8</sup>.
- 13 The first interesting finding to emerge in comparing the two censuses is that, in the intervening century, the fall in the number of humans appears to have been almost perfectly matched by the decline in the animal population: if the aggregate number of the inhabitants of Bobbio and Villar dropped by 48.2% (3,255 people in 1911, only 1,686 in 2011), the total number of cattle, sheep and goats hosted by the 13 summer pastures (alps) in the two territories fell from 11,578 in 1914 to only 5,692 in 2013 (-50.8%). These

figures however hide a more complex process of change. A closer look at the two censuses reveals that such a decline was solely due to the sharp decrease in the population of sheep and goats (-58%), whereas the number of cattle rose by nearly 40%; even more striking, the number of families using the alps dramatically plunged by over 90%, from 210 families in 1914 to just 18 families one century later (Fassio *et al.*, 2014, pp. 338-339).

- 14 These simple statistics invite some considerations. On the one hand, they indicate that a greatly diminished number of families is nevertheless capable of exploiting almost the whole extent of pastoral resources within the two municipalities. This is an example of how even small-scale “repopulation”, or a mere stabilization in the numbers of those employed in strategically important economic sectors, may suffice to guarantee a sustainable balance between population and resources<sup>9</sup>. On the other hand, they are suggestive of profound transformations. In 1914 each family possessed on average 4 head of cattle and some 50 sheep and goats, and it was customary for two, three or more related families exploiting the same alp to join forces: in the early twentieth century (Roletto, 1918, p. 93) and up to the 1960s each household would offer one of its members to form a group of herders (*partia*) charged with the dual task of tending the animals and processing the dairy products. Today, the few families significantly engaged in pastoralism have to cope with much larger numbers of animals and must themselves supply the required labor or recruit it from outside.
- 15 Detailed ethnographic research has allowed us to reconstruct the multigenerational stories of 15 of the 18 families that exploit the alps of the upper Pellice Valley and to collect fine-grained information on their size, structure and work organization<sup>10</sup>. If by “family” we mean a set of kin by blood or marriage (or cohabitational relationship) living under the same roof, then we find that the families engaged in pastoralism have a mean size of 3.87, which is significantly larger than the values of 1.84 and 2.05 estimated respectively for Bobbio and Villar (ISTAT, 2013) and reflects a high frequency among pastoral families (6 out of 15) of three- or even four-generation households. Both size and structure clearly set pastoral families apart from other households and point to significant functional continuities with an agro-pastoral past in which large and structurally complex households were better adjusted than nuclear families to cope with the conflicting demands on household time and labor arising from the need to synchronize agricultural and pastoral work and exploit spatially separate resources. The shift from a mountain farming system mostly oriented towards self-sufficiency, as it was in 1914, to a market-oriented pastoralism which nonetheless cannot afford heavy reliance on salaried labor, has actually made large households even more necessary today than they were a century ago (Fassio *et al.*, 2014).
- 16 The role of grandparents in these multigenerational households deserves special attention. Thanks to our detailed reconstruction of family histories, in both Bobbio and Villar we have come across several cases of a return to pastoralism by young local men and women whose parents had abandoned it for jobs in industry or the tertiary sector. The transmission of the essential professional knowledge needed to embark upon pastoralism is thus largely ensured through a generational bridge connecting grandparents to their grandchildren and, interestingly, also to the few “new highlanders” who have entered local families through marriage. Contrary to the popular image of mountain pastoralism revitalized by young new migrants from the cities resurrecting old ways of livelihood neglected by the local populations, we found



that in the upper Pellice Valley the large majority of young pastoralists are of local descent, and the reasons are not hard to see. The first reason is that, beyond the importance of such intangible assets as traditional professional skills and relevant knowledge of the environment, it is tangible assets like farms, lands or stables that really prove decisive, as these can only be used by family members and are mostly passed down through inheritance. Joining pastoral households by marrying the sons or daughters of middle-aged couples, and thus gaining access to crucial resources, is virtually the only way open to outsiders who are willing or wish to engage in pastoralism<sup>11</sup>.

- 17 This is also due to another factor which militates against outsiders, namely exclusivist rights over collective resources. Although the Italian Alps share a common institutional setting, municipal policies vary according to local debates and compromises, and these local variations may significantly affect the ways pastoralism is practiced. The Waldensian Valleys provide an instructive example. In these valleys, municipalities are the owners of the upper zone of alpine pasture, while most buildings at middle altitudes are privately owned. Dairy farmers rent the communal pastures from the municipality, tenancy agreements last several years, and residents (basically the members of local families) have rights of preemption. This system allowed the consolidation and above all the maintenance of alpine pastures even when the exodus from the mountains was at its highest: most of the expense of building roads or bringing structures up to standard was incurred by the municipalities to benefit local communities. In the past few decades the policies favored by the municipal councils of Bobbio and Villar have departed markedly from those enacted in the Chisone and Germanasca Valleys, the other Waldensian Valleys: their emphasis on residents' preemption rights<sup>12</sup> explains why in the upper Pellice Valley livestock farming continues to be practiced only by local families – or by “new highlanders” who have married into these families. This exclusivist orientation greatly contributes to preventing, or severely hindering, the integration of herders and shepherds from outside, often suspected of practicing an intensive and rash exploitation of lands to which they have no ties.

## Long-term immigration, occupational crises and the economic potential of culture in Macugnaga

- 18 Located at the top of the Anzasca Valley in northern Piedmont, near the Swiss border, Macugnaga (1327 m) is one of the German-speaking villages – usually designated by the term *Walser* – which occupy the high valleys at the foot of the south-eastern face of Monte Rosa. The foundation of these settlements dates back to the second half of the thirteenth century, when these areas, as with many other high valleys in a geographical range stretching from Savoy to Vorarlberg and Tyrol, were colonized by Alemannic settlers coming from the Oberwallis. Macugnaga recently received official recognition as a Walser community under a law promulgated in 1999 to protect “historical linguistic minorities” in Italy. This encourages and entitles the municipality and local associations to take measures or promote initiatives aimed at upholding the Walser linguistic and cultural heritage. It should be noted that legal recognition came at a time when the old Alemannic language was spoken only by a shrinking number of mostly elderly people: a socio-linguistic census conducted in 1996 reckoned that only 86 out of

630 inhabitants could speak it, just 13.7% of the population (Di Paolo, 1999, pp. 207-210). Such a decline can be ascribed in part to the modernizing forces that, during the second half of the twentieth century, undermined local dialects all over Italy. In Macugnaga however the vitality of the old German language had been previously eroded by waves of immigration spurred by the demand for skilled labor in the mining industry: in 1901 the proportion of German speakers was already quite low, only 339 out of 798 inhabitants (42.5%), well below the levels found in the other Walser settlements south of Monte Rosa (Zanini, Viazzo and Fassio, 2014, pp. 138-144).

- 19 Although mining played a major role in the economy of Macugnaga since its inception in the mid-eighteenth century, for a long time immigrants and locals lived economically, linguistically and spatially segregated lives. Most immigrants resided in Pestarena and Borca, the two large lower hamlets close to the mines, whereas the families of ancient local descent inhabited their ancestral homes in the upper hamlets and retained an agro-pastoral economy supported by seasonal migration. Social exchange was limited and intermarriage very rare (Cerri and Zanni, 2006, pp. 48-61). Already in the second half of the nineteenth century, however, and increasingly during the course of the twentieth, these occupational and social barriers weakened as a growing number of local men started to work in the mines, and mixed marriages became more common. The whole community was therefore severely hit when mining productivity began to fall after the end of the Second World War, and especially when, after a serious accident caused the death of four workers, management found an excuse to close the mines for good, on February 13, 1961.
- 20 This traumatic event is still remembered as a radical and painful break with two centuries of mining history, a major turning-point which imposed a sudden conversion to a tourism based economy. Macugnaga was actually in a favorable position to develop a tourist industry, partly because its slopes were suited to alpine skiing, but also because the village had long been a classic mountaineering resort, thanks to its privileged location right at the foot of the imposing east side of Monte Rosa. Although virtually all of Macugnaga's diminished population was either directly or indirectly affected by this rapid conversion to tourism, which superseded not only mining but also mountain farming, both the crisis of 1961 and the subsequent economic changes were nonetheless experienced differently by the various sectors of the community: for those who had been employed in the mines, the new jobs created by tourism allowed them to survive and stay in Macugnaga, where they were joined by a new labor force from outside, in part commuting daily from the lower Anzasca Valley; on the other hand, those who had been marginally involved with mining—or not involved at all—were offered an opportunity for profit they would have taken even if mining had not come to a precipitous end. Indeed, tourism development bestowed much greater economic benefits upon the upper hamlets, where the families of older local descent possessed their houses and their lands, as it was in these parts of the municipal territory that ski-lifts, hotels and second homes for tourists were built.
- 21 Since the 1980s, however, tourism entered a crisis as Macugnaga's ski area failed to keep up with the changing demands of modern alpine skiing, as it is divided into two sectors which cannot be linked and is too small to be competitive with medium- and large-sized winter ski resorts. A series of attempts by the municipality to create a lift connecting the area with Zermatt was unsuccessful, and Macugnaga's rather poor accessibility did the rest (Bartaletti, 2003, p. 36). This reversal in the development of

the tourism industry is reflected in the closure of many hotels, a considerable decrease in overnight stays, and a contained but not negligible decline in population: as shown in Table 1, the number of residents, which had plunged by 25% between 1951 and 1981, has been on a gentle but persistent downward trend ever since<sup>13</sup>.

- 22 Even if the capital needed to ignite it had come largely from outside, tourist development in its early phases crucially depended on tangible resources that were mainly in the hands of local families. Until then, the array of resources available to the people of Macugnaga ensuring their livelihood had been solely natural: fields, meadows and pastures for mountain farming, goldfields for mining, suitable slopes for skiing, and the majestic east side of Monte Rosa for mountaineering. When the viability of the dominant model of winter tourism, mostly based on skiing, was itself put in jeopardy by economic, climatic and also cultural changes, a new phase opened; the growing popularity of cultural tourism provided Macugnaga with a new potential asset.
- 23 After the end of the Second World War, many efforts were made to further the shared knowledge and self-awareness of the Walser settlements of the Alps, to support their language and culture, and to promote their visibility toward the outside world. The main impetus came from the *Internationale Vereinigung für Walsertum* (International Union for Walser Culture), founded in 1962 in Wallis, the homeland of the Walser. It was instrumental in organizing meetings whose primary aim was to bolster solidarity between groups coming from both the Walser colonies and the Walliser homeland (Führer, 2002, pp. 147-201). The task of creating a common ethnic consciousness was very difficult, given the high degree of geographical and historical fragmentation among the Walser. Yet, the achievements of the *Vereinigung* were considerable and had an impact on most Walser colonies. Local associations were founded (partly as branches of the *Vereinigung*) and revivalist activities became a prominent feature of village social life. The 1999 law eventually gave an institutional basis to this process, by guaranteeing not only formal recognition for linguistic minorities but also economic support to these activities.
- 24 Unexpectedly, the crisis of winter-sport tourism and the emergence of cultural tourism as a possible or even desirable alternative has turned Macugnaga's Walser cultural heritage into a potential economic resource<sup>14</sup>. This has prompted a complex debate. Although Macugnaga may have attracted fewer "new highlanders" in the past few decades than other mountain villages<sup>15</sup>, the present composition of its population bears the marks of a long history of immigration. The first contested issue thus concerns who should be entitled to exploit the local Walser heritage as an economic resource. It should be noted that the criterion used by the 1999 law is *residence* in a municipality included in the long list of recognized "historical linguistic communities", rather than descent or linguistic competence. It therefore favors what Steinicke and colleagues (2011) define as "diffuse ethnicity". Nonetheless, most of those who can boast Walser surnames and can speak the old language are far from happy that Walser identity and memory may be appropriated either by the "new highlanders" who have recently been attracted by tourist development or by the "old new highlanders" whose forebears came to Macugnaga to work in the mines.
- 25 But even among the "true" Walser, opinions differ, generating opposing stances that fit closely within the anthropological notions of *introversion* and *extraversion* (Bayart, 2000; Bellagamba, 2009). In Macugnaga, at one end of the continuum, we find the more conservative attitudes of those who favor introversive approaches (i.e. directed

exclusively toward the members of the group), and who therefore feel deeply offended by the very idea of “selling” or “staging” their cultural heritage to capture tourists and their money. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who favor more extraverted approaches, directed toward communication with the outside and to those who do not belong to the group. These individuals are convinced that forms of valorization involving tourists may not only be an aid to economic development, but also—and no less importantly—be one of the only ways to preserve a large portion of Macugnaga’s Walser heritage, which otherwise may be doomed to ossify or utterly disappear (Zanini, 2013).

## Conclusions

- 26 An interest in the relationships between resources, population and social structures has long been one of the trademarks of several branches of Alpine studies. Recent anthropological work on cultural heritage has directed attention to a large set of intangibles assets, ranging from religious and secular festivals to artisanal skills and, not least, traditional practices in the management of agro-pastoral resources. This has been a useful move as it has also contributed to a rethinking of the very notion of resource by showing how intangible heritage can readily become an economic resource, for example when a dance or a whole festival is performed to entertain tourists, or when traditional know-how enhances the desirability and market value of dairy products. Indeed, the ambition to engage in high-quality “cultural” production of commodities—to combine culture and profit—is assumed to have been one of the main driving forces behind mountain repopulation.
- 27 However, there are reasons to believe that an exclusive focus on intangible heritage may lead us astray. The example of the two municipalities in the upper Pellice Valley reminds us that tangible resources remain all-important, yet access to them is not open to everybody, and that both social-structural constraints and municipal policies may prove decisive in shaping and directing local processes. This case study also shows how difficult it may be to disentangle continuity from discontinuity. A long-term historical perspective reveals that while one can speak of basic continuity in that pastures, meadows and other local pastoral resources continue to be fully exploited, there is on the other hand discontinuity if we consider the number of families involved and the transition of agro-pastoral activities from autarky one century ago to the present-day market orientation. However, if we look at productive units we see that the family remains the hub of the system – paradoxically, even more today than in the past.
- 28 Another danger arises from a tendency to almost take it for granted that the fate of intangible cultural heritage, when it possesses sufficient potential, is invariably to turn into tangible, economic resources. The case of Macugnaga suggests that things may be more delicate and complex, and provides support to the arguments of anthropologists who contend that the commoditization of local tradition does not necessarily destroy the meanings of rituals and cultural products, although it may change them or add new meanings to older ones (Cohen, 1988; Daniel, 1996). The very survival of a tradition may depend on its being “staged” to the benefit of and shared with tourists. Nevertheless, the fear that culture may be “sold by the pound” (Greenwood, 1977) persists in many quarters, especially among those who have exclusivist and “introverted” attitudes towards what they trust to be their own cultural patrimony.

- 29 Finally, we can note again that both the upper Pellice Valley and Macugnaga depart from the pattern exemplified by localities which suffered massive depopulation but are now showing signs of recovery. This would seem to imply that some theoretical arguments that have been recently advanced regarding this pattern of depopulation and repopulation—for instance that advantages may derive from “emptiness” (Cognard, 2006; Viazzo and Zanini, 2014)—can hardly apply to either Bobbio and Villar Pellice or to Macugnaga. Some thought should be given, however, to the possibility that even in localities that have retained a significant population, economic changes may produce “empty spaces” which are perceived, especially by younger generations, either newcomers or of local descent, as opportunities for creating new ways to valorize local knowledge and traditions.

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## NOTES

1. The full text of the UNESCO Convention, signed in Paris on 17 October 2003, is available at [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=17716&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=17716&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html).
2. These data on livestock farming are drawn from the 6<sup>th</sup> Agricultural Census carried out by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (<http://dati-censimentoagricoltura.istat.it/Index.aspx> – last accessed on 5 March 2016).
3. It should also be noted that Bobbio and Villar Pellice host a mixed but predominantly Protestant (Waldensian) population: as such, they may be characterized as being part not only of a linguistic, but also of a religious minority.
4. *Legge 482/99, Norme in materia di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche*. This law applies to 1,171 “historical linguistic communities” in the country. An anthropological analysis of its implications is provided by Porcellana (2007, pp. 37-56); see also Steinicke *et al.* (2011). In

Piedmont, as shown by Map 1, all linguistic minorities are located in the upland belt near the French and Swiss borders: the map portrays all the municipalities in Piedmont and the Aosta Valley that have been recognized as “historical linguistic communities” and follows their administrative boundaries. We are grateful to Matteo Rivoira, Chief Editor of ALI (*Atlante Linguistico Italiano*) at the University of Turin, who has kindly drawn this map for us.

5. In the decade 2001-2010 net migration was actually positive, if only marginally, in both Bobbio and Villar Pellice, which implies that population decline was caused by a negative natural balance of births and deaths: immigrants outnumbered emigrants by 12 individuals in Bobbio, and by 33 in Villar (net migration rates may thus be estimated in the range of 21‰ for Bobbio and 29‰ for Villar). In Macugnaga, on the other hand, the inter-census loss of 50 inhabitants was due in equal measure to negative net migration (-26) and to an excess of deaths over births (-24).

6. This is one of the points emphasized by the Alpine Convention’s *Fifth Report on the State of the Alps* (2015), which provides a broad and systematic picture of ongoing demographic trends in the whole Alpine area.

7. See for example the technical report (*Relazione Tecnico-illustrativa*, Archivio Comunale di Bobbio Pellice, 14 novembre 2007, *faldone* 11/3), which emphasizes the economic role played in Bobbio Pellice by the primary sector and especially pastoralism, supplemented by a form of tourism typical of mountain localities lacking ski facilities. This report is analyzed by Genre (2015, pp. 14-16).

8. Figures for 1914 are provided by Roletto (1918): this census is remarkably detailed, in that it furnishes disaggregated data on the number of families exploiting the summer pastures as well as on the number of cattle, sheep and goats for each of the 13 alps in the territories of Bobbio and Villar. We would like to point out that during our research we had no access to municipal surveys (assuming they exist) offering comparable data. An *ad hoc* “census” was therefore taken in 2013 by one of us during her fieldwork in the upper Pellice Valley by collecting systematic information kindly provided by the local veterinary service (ASL TO3, *Servizi veterinari*, Val Pellice), which appeared to be the most reliable local authority we could consult. It will be noted that the total number we arrived at in 2013 for cattle (1182) is quite close to the one recorded by the 2010 Agricultural Census (1039), whereas the number of sheep and goats is considerably higher (4510 compared to 3079 in 2010). Such an increase reflects a renewed interest in raising small ruminants, especially among young people and their families, who are now breeding sheep and goats in less favourable areas which had been previously abandoned, and who are encouraged in producing meat and dairy products because of their growing commercial value. During the winter months cattle are stabled in Bobbio and Villar, while sheep and goats are partly fed in byres either in Bobbio and Villar or in other localities of the middle and lower Pellice Valley, or partly in the adjacent lowlands in such places as Bricherasio and Cavour, where they are stabled in rented farmhouses.

9. It also illustrates the point made by Varotto (2003, pp. 104-105) that even very severe population decline does not necessarily translate into abandonment or environmental degradation.

10. On the pastoral families of the upper Pellice Valley, see Fassio *et al.* (2014). In this section we have largely drawn on that paper.

11. It seems no accident that the only pastoral family consisting entirely of “new highlanders” is a small household possessing just 40 goats and running a holiday farm.

12. See for example the regulations on the use and ownership of high mountain pasture buildings (*Regolamento baite alpeggi comunali*), approved by the municipal council of Bobbio Pellice on 16 July 1992 and still in force, and the subsequent regulations on the management of the pastures themselves (*Regolamento alpeggi*), approved on 26 May 1993. Both documents are preserved in the municipal archives of Bobbio Pellice.



13. The economic and demographic history of Macugnaga over the past century is quite reminiscent of that of La Thuile, in the Aosta Valley, which was the subject of a detailed historical and anthropological study by Sibilla (2004). Mining started later in La Thuile than in Macugnaga, but it experienced considerable expansion in the first half of the twentieth century: between 1927 and 1947 the number of workers employed in the anthracite coal mines increased from 234 to 1154, and the local population reached a peak of 1339 inhabitants in 1951 (Sibilla, 2004, pp. 203-223). However, when mining came to an end in 1966, the population suddenly halved to just 657 in 1971. The growth of tourism ensured a modest recovery and then a certain degree of stability: over the past decades the total resident population has hovered between 708 inhabitants in 1981 and 776 in 2011.

14. Interest in processes of formation and transmission of cultural heritage has been no less intense in the Waldensian Valleys (Jalla, 2009). There, however, the primarily religious dimensions of this heritage have hindered its blatant commoditization for touristic purposes. The Waldensian Valleys are instead witnessing, and to a much larger extent than the Walser colonies, a growth of “genealogical tourism”, consisting of return visits to the homeland of their ancestors by members of the large Waldesian diaspora (Gosso, 2015).

15. Di Gioia (2014, p. 51) has produced a map which depicts the relative levels of immigration for all the municipalities in the Italian Alps, using a simple but useful benchmark calculated as the ratio between the number of those who have settled in a municipality (“immigrants”) in the years 2009-2011 and the number of residents in that municipality as registered by the 2011 census. The map identifies five categories of migration, depicted using a scale of colors. Based on figures provided by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (<http://demo.istat.it/>), Macugnaga had 44 immigrants (36 from other Italian municipalities, 8 from abroad), giving it a ratio of 0.073. This placed Macugnaga in the second lowest (0.054-0.078) of the five categories identified by Di Gioia. The values are slightly higher in Villar Pellice (0.088) and in Bobbio Pellice (0.099). The foreign resident population in Macugnaga is also very low (1.83% on 31 December 2011), and again slightly higher in Villar (2.14) and Bobbio (3.18%), compared to an average of 7.87% in the Italian Alps and 9.47 in the Alps as a whole (Alpine Convention, 2015, p. 24; see also Di Gioia, 2014, p. 56).

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## ABSTRACTS

This article looks at the transmission of tangible and intangible resources from an anthropological perspective and presents two case-studies that provide both interesting commonalities and significant contrasts: the Occitan-speaking (and predominantly Waldensian) upper Pellice Valley, in the western Piedmontese Alps, and Macugnaga, a Walser settlement in the north-eastern Piedmontese Alps. Both localities host linguistic minorities and, demographically, have not suffered massive depopulation. Economically they differ since mountain pastoralism continues to be one of the pillars of economy and culture in the upper Pellice Valley, whereas Macugnaga has converted to tourism. We argue that the current focus on intangible heritage should not obscure the role of tangible assets – such as land, buildings and rights to private and collective resources – which are often essential to ensure that traditional craftsmanship is rescued and preserved. It should also not be taken for granted that the fate of intangible cultural heritage, when it possesses adequate potential, is invariably to turn into tangible, economic resources. Ethnographic research shows that this process may be hindered or

mitigated as a results of negotiation between opposite views on the commoditization of cultural heritage. It also suggests that the very survival of a tradition may depend on its being “staged” to the benefit of, and shared with, tourists.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** Alpine anthropology, Western Italian Alps, tangible and intangible resources, socio-demographic changes, ethnographic method

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