Chapter 2, Estate Inheritance in the Italian Alps

John W. Cole

University of Massachusetts - Amherst
domestic units today is 62. In Romance-speaking Tret there are a total of 50 landed holdings, none so small that it cannot provide a meaningful portion of a family's support and many have had little change in composition for several generations. In the Tyrolean villages some holdings have been divided and others have detached parcels either through sale or transfer by inheritance to secondary heirs. Thus new holdings have been created: traditional homesteads rarely contain all of the land they did in earlier generations. And in each generation in Tret some heirs have been disinherited. Out of every group of siblings one, or a few, of all of the potential heirs have managed to consolidate control of enough land to keep their holding economically viable while others relinquished their claims or were somehow excluded from their share of the inheritance. Obviously, then, other factors than the ideology of inheritance must be operating which affect the transmission of property. That is, the ideology of inheritance is not the only factor to be considered in the actual inheritance process (case studies of the history of estate transmission for representative holdings in St. Felix and Tret are provided in Appendix I).

THE REALITIES OF LIFE

In dealing with the inheritance of rights to property, ethnographic reports have usually limited themselves to descriptions of ideologies, to statements of who should stand in the position of heir and of what is to become of the disinherited. Discussions of
the mechanics and sociology of inheritance have been generally lacking. Occasionally it is noted that exceptions occur, that individuals other than those indicated by ideology often in fact succeed to office or inherit a significant share of the heritable goods, but, except to take note of mechanisms to bypass the mentally and physically unfit, attempts to deal systematically with these exceptions are rare (c.f., Gray, 1964).

In the Upper Nonsberg, both of the inheritance ideologies are honored more in the breach than in the practice. In St. Felix the eldest son rarely inherits the entire undivided holding and in Tret all siblings do not share equally in the inheritance of the entire family holding. In St. Felix holdings are from time to time divided, or parcels of land are detached; often it is not the eldest son who inherits all or the bulk of the estate but instead a younger brother, and at times all sons have been passed over in favor of a daughter. In Tret, where there is strong feeling that all offspring should share equally in the division of the land, it is more usual for one or several heirs to inherit the bulk of the property while most of the other brothers and sisters either receive only a token settlement or nothing at all (see Appendix II).

Certain aspects of life in the Upper Nonsberg make the literal translation of either inheritance ideology into practice virtually impossible (Cole, 1969b):

(1) The subsistence-based economy of the Upper Nonsberg put a premium on the possession of land. Without some sort of a
claim to support from the land it was not possible for individuals to remain in the villages.

(2) Each generation more individuals have been born in the villages than the local economy could support as adults.

(3) Careers outside of the area, in the surrounding Region, were uncertain and rarely could offer material and social rewards equal to those provided by a village holding.

These facts of life are plainly obvious to every villager, as are these consequences: (1) only a percentage of those born in either village will be able to remain there as adults (Table 1); (2) those who succeed to a holding, or marry a landholder, will have the best prospects while those who must seek careers in the Region will have an uncertain life before them. Under these conditions everyone would like to remain on the land with his own row to hoe and, at least potentially, every member of a sibling set is a competitor to every other for their parents' land. Each generation must be sorted into heirs and disinherited, the inheritance process being as much concerned with denying land to some as in securing it for others. Life strategies collide over the matter of land, and the father with land to dispense can no more ignore the wishes of his maturing sons than they the will of their father. Pressures thus generated in the interplay of strategies act upon the way in which property is inherited and can, as we shall see, either fortify or modify the use of inheritance ideology.
TABLE 1

LIFE SITUATIONS OF VILLAGERS BORN BETWEEN 1800 AND 1930 WHO SURVIVED TWENTY OR MORE YEARS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Tret</th>
<th>St. Felix</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>123 (34.4%)</td>
<td>60 (17.5%)</td>
<td>151 (37.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>191 (53.3%)</td>
<td>248 (72.5%)</td>
<td>139 (34.75%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>44 (12.3%)</td>
<td>34 (10.0%)</td>
<td>110 (27.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>358 (100%)</td>
<td>342 (100%)</td>
<td>400 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Remained in village and married.
- Left the village for good after some time in a fringe relationship.
- Remained in the village as a permanent resident, or in a fringe relationship.

Totals
As a result of the pressure emanating from the realities of village life, holdings tend to be confined within a relatively narrow range of sizes: excluding forestland, over 85 percent of all of the holdings within the two villages fall between 0.5 and 10.0 hectares. This narrow range contrasts with the Trentino-Alto Adige as a whole where holding size varies from smaller than one-half hectare to giants which run into hundreds of hectares (Schreiber, 1948). Where a holding becomes too small to support a man and his family bankruptcy is inevitable. Very small holdings are either combined into larger ones capable of supporting a domestic unit, or are incorporated by existing viable holdings. Where they are large enough to support more than a single domestic unit, landless siblings press for division in order to be able to obtain the material basis which will enable them to create their own domestic unit. As a result of these pressures almost all of today's holdings are of a size sufficient for the support of a single domestic unit but too small for further division into viable fragments. Often enough holdings were divided just too far -- the division produced two or more holdings which were obviously small but large enough to tempt one to try to make a go of it. Three possibilities resulted from such divisions: (1) a man might survive if able to supplement his farm income by engaging in a trade or craft; (2) he might earn money to buy more land by working outside the village, or through a fortunate marriage to a landholding woman enlarge his holding sufficiently so that the year-in, year-out support of his family became
less uncertain; or (3) he could fail, and lose his holding. The lack of availability of alternatives to landownership reinforced this ecological conspiracy to keep holdings from endless fragmentation. Had it been possible, as in the lower reaches of the Nonsberg and in the Trentino at large, to supplement income from the land through craft industries and other alternatives, to the point where land operation became secondary, then holdings could have been divided into meaninglessly small bundles, as they in fact have been in much of the Trentino (Schreiber, 1948). But on the mountainside such supplements and alternatives have been much more limited. The subsistence economy could not support full-time specialists, so that even such indispensable members of society as the blacksmith and the carpenter had to supplement their trade income through the operation of a holding. Even the stone masons of Tret could not count on enough income from their trade to support themselves full-time. Thus there was a constant tendency in the villages to prevent undue fragmentation of the holdings and those that were of marginal size were continually being consolidated into larger holdings.

THE RELATIVE AGE FACTOR

The actual transmission of property rights and the kinds of social relationships likely to develop among male siblings and between them and their father is conditioned by how great an age difference exists between each of the brothers and their father. Other things being equal, the greater the age difference between