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Estate Inheritance in the Italian Alps (Introduction)

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ESTATE INHERITANCE IN THE ITALIAN ALPS

by

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INTRODUCTION

At the northern end of the Val di Non the valley floor rises up to form the base of mountain ridges which separate it from the neighboring Ulten and Etsch valleys (Figure 1). Here lie a number of small villages sharing an ecological situation which sets them apart from other villages in the vicinity. The outstanding feature of this situation is altitude: the villages all lie above the zone in which the principal commercial cultigens of the surrounding valleys can be grown. This, combined with remote location, has kept the area marginal to economic forces emanating from the lowlands and has set the inhabitants of these villages to gain as much as possible of their living directly from their land. The traditional economy of the area is based on mixed mountain agriculture, supplemented by the practice of various crafts and exploitation of timber drawn from the surrounding forests. In its subsistence orientation and marginal involvement with the market, the area presents an interesting contrast to the countryside to both the north and south where production, whether based on similar patterns of mixed mountain agriculture, viniculture, or orchardry, is oriented toward the market (Schreiber, 1948; Wopfner, 1951-60; Altenstetter, 1968; Cole, 1969b, 1970:134-35).

While the area constitutes a single ecological zone and contrasts in its economic patterns with surrounding lowlands, the solutions to other problems of life are not identical from village to village. Communities here can be divided into two
FIGURE 1

REGION TRENTINO-ALTO ADIGE

The Italian Region Trentino-Alto Adige (South Tyrol) showing the location of the Upper Val di Non (hatched area).
groups on the basis of the different languages they speak and of their differing cultural traditions. Four of the villages constitute "die Deutschgegend am Nonsberg", the German Nonsberg, and were settled from across the mountains to the north. In these villages variants of German Tyrolese are spoken, and cultural affinities are to the north to the German-speaking Tyrol. In the other villages of the valley live people who speak an ancient romance language, Nones, in the context of family and village, but who today use Italian in contacts with the wider world. Here cultural affinities are to the south, to the Italian Trentino.

In straddling the frontier between areas of German and Italian culture, the Upper Val di Non reproduces in miniature the contrasts between the two provinces Trentino and South Tyrol which together constitute a semi-autonomous region of the Republic of Italy. A part of the old Austrian Crownland of Tyrol, the region was ceded to Italy in 1918 at the time of the dismantling of the Austro-Hungarian Empire following its defeat in World War I. The problems surrounding the incorporation of around a quarter million German-speaking Tyrolese into the Italian polity and economy have been considerable (c.f. Rusinow, 1969; Huter, 1965) and have produced political and cultural dissonance within the Val di Non as well as within the region as a whole (Wolf, 1962).

In common with other culture frontier zones, each linguistic group has its own version of every place name. Thus the "Val di Non" (or "Anaunia") of the Nones and Italian speaker is called the
"Nonsberg" in German. For the South Tyrol, many German-speakers prefer "Südtirol", although (or because) it is politically charged and conjures up pro-Austrian sentiments. The official Italian designation is "Alto Adige", for which "Tiroler Etschland" and "Provinz Bozen" are acceptable German renderings and have some currency in everyday usage.

It was Eric Wolf's interest in problems of dissonance in cultural frontier zones which resulted in the first study of villages in the Upper Val di Non in 1960 (Wolf, 1962). This was followed by a second visit to the area by Wolf in the summer of 1963. Meanwhile, I had undertaken graduate studies in Anthropology at the University of Michigan and had gravitated from an initial interest in Oceania to a concentration on peasant cultures. My involvement in the study of the Upper Nonsberg began in the fall of 1964 while I was reading on peasant economic systems under Wolf's direction.

As I was interested in conducting a field study of peasant cultural ecology and socioeconomic organization, Dr. Wolf suggested the Upper Val di Non as a possibility. Such a study would complement his earlier study which had emphasized ideology and social organization. Demographic and social data he had collected would provide a "running start" in such a study and entry into the villages would be greatly facilitated because, as a friend of Wolf's, I would not be arriving as a total stranger. Furthermore, I already had some knowledge of German and of life in the German and Austrian Alps, having spent several months traveling there some years before.
The reasons for accepting the suggestion were very appealing, and I enthusiastically set to work preparing for the study.

I arrived in the Upper Nonsberg in September 1965 with my wife and two young daughters and we remained in the field until the end of February 1967. During the period I worked mainly in two adjacent villages, Nones /Italian-speaking Tret (1,162 meters a.s.l.; population 238) and German-speaking St. Felix (1,256 meters a.s.l.; population 335). Numerous excursions were also made to other nearby villages, the town of Fondo, and the cities of Bozen, Meran and Trent. In addition two months were spent in Rome.

The first three months of the study were devoted to developing my linguistic ability, to gaining a working knowledge of the culture and to becoming acquainted with the villagers. This was achieved by working intensively with a limited number of informants (several from each village) and through informal interviews with many other people. The most important results of this phase of the study were the completion of a census of all of the households in the two villages and a calendar of economic, social and ceremonial activities. On the basis of this information I drew up an interview schedule which I then used as a guide in intensive interviews of individual households. Throughout the winter, a season during which there is a minimum of work for the villagers to do, I directed most of my effort to these interviews. I completed interviews with sixty-one families, thirty-two in Tret and twenty-nine in St. Felix. These varied from a single sitting of a few hours with a retired farmer to several cases where I returned on five different days for a total
of more than twenty-five hours of interviewing. Most of the inter-
views, however, were completed in two sittings of four to five hours
each.

As the snow began to disappear from the mountainside in March
and the tempo of life in the villages accelerated as the agricultural
cycle got under way, I entered the third phase of the study. While I
continued to carry out an occasional household interview, from April
through November of 1966 I mainly divided my time between detailed
observation of economic activities engaged in by villagers and work
in the archives in Fondo and Meran, especially the deeds registry
offices.

December and January were spent in Rome where I gathered
relevant data from available census material and reviewed my field
notes for holes. The month of February was spent back in the villages
collecting information that the review in Rome had revealed was missing.
My family and I then returned to the United States. Finally, both
Eric Wolf and I returned to the villages during the summer of 1969.

My Ph.D. dissertation (Cole, 1969a), based on this field study,
was completed in April 1969: this essay is excerpted, with modifica-
tions, from the dissertation. In addition, several articles based on
different aspects of the total study have appeared (Wolf, 1962; Cole,
1969b, 1970) and a final monograph on the area is in preparation
(Wolf and Cole, n.d.).

My original participation in the study was made possible by a
research grant from the National Science Foundation, supplemented by
two grants-in-aid from the University of Michigan Mediterranean Project.
The summer 1969 research was supported by a travel grant from the University of Michigan Project and by a grant-in-aid of research from Wayne State University. For this financial support I am deeply grateful. I am especially indebted to Eric Wolf for suggesting the Val di Non to me in the first place, for allowing me the use of field notes that he made there in 1961 and 1963, and for guidance and encouragement throughout the entire period of the study.

As work in the villages progressed, the importance of understanding the process whereby the family estate is transmitted from one generation to the next became increasingly evident. The social standing of a man within his community is predicated upon the nature of his relationship to the resources from which he derives his living. The man who manages his own resources is eligible for the highest social, political and ceremonial honors the village can bestow, and within his own domestic unit he stands as dominant in relation to its other members. Those who are dependent upon the resources managed by another cannot reasonably expect to receive village honors and have to be content with a subordinate, dependent status within their own domestic group.

Obviously, social and property rights are not static. As individuals proceed through life the nature of their relationship to each other and to productive resources changes. A child shares with his siblings subordination to his father and dependence upon his management of the family estate. As he matures he may stand as heir-apparent to his father, and thus dominant in relationship to
his siblings. Still later, he may in fact succeed to management of the estate, take a wife and begin a family. Thereafter, all who remain dependent on the holding, whether sibling or parent, will be subject to his decisions. As manager of his own estate he will have emerged into what Fortes has called the "politico-jural" sphere: he will be responsible for the conduct of the membership of his domestic unit in the community and eligible for such honors as it has to bestow (1958). On the other hand, he may share management of the resources of the domestic unit with a co-heir, remain at home dependent on a brother who has succeeded to management, or desert the village entirely. In time the new manager will in like fashion be replaced by his own heir or heirs. Thus, a cyclical process can be identified in which social relations and property relations are continually in a state of interdependent development.

However, the developmental cycle of social and property relations within the domestic unit does not proceed in a vacuum. The various domestic units within the community interact with one another, influencing each other's developmental cycle. Moreover, the resulting network of social relations is subject to multiple outside forces emanating from the ecological setting, the market and the state.

THE IDEOLOGY OF INHERITANCE

In making the calculations necessary to the management of his holding, the peasant's mind is occupied with the daily routine and