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Pastoral and Peasant Family Systems in Mountain Environments: Comparative Evidence from the Italian Alps

Pier Paolo Viazzo

Pastoral economies, mountain environment and family forms in cross-cultural perspective

It is widely assumed in the anthropological, historical and geographical literature that pastoral or agro-pastoral modes of agrarian production tend to be strongly associated with a prevalence of extended family forms. A pioneering paper by anthropologists Meyer F. Nimkoff and Russell Middleton (1960) was apparently the first study to signal the existence and the strength of this association in a broad cross-cultural perspective. Using the statistical information assembled in Murdock's World Ethnographic Sample, they analysed the relations between family forms and subsistence patterns in 549 societies from all over the world and found that the extended family prevailed in nearly nine out of ten societies characterised by simultaneous engagement in both agricultural and pastoral activities – a significantly higher proportion (88.9% compared to only 54.4%) than in societies where agriculture was dominant and animal husbandry either absent or unimportant.

Subsequent studies have tried to specify, mostly in functional terms, the ecological and organisational factors that may account for such a prevalence (see e.g. Vincze, 1980; Viazzo, 1989: 225–257; Balikçi, 1990: 309; Goody, 1990: 430–439; Kaser, 1994; 1996). An especially strong relationship has been suggested to exist between nomadic sheep pastoralism, sometimes practised in conjunction with agricultural activities, and various kinds of extended or joint family household. These studies have also pointed out that causal links between pastoralism and “complex” forms of family organisation are especially visible in mountain areas, where animal husbandry and agriculture are most likely to be combined in order to reduce risk and increase the production from otherwise limited habitats.

Highland pastoralism and joint families in the Balkans: a model for comparative testing

The most explicit and articulated arguments suggesting a strong association between mountain environments, pastoral economies and the prevalence of joint family households is perhaps to be found in the rich literature on family forms in the Balkans (see e.g. Mosely, 1976 [1943]: 31; Campbell, 1964: 8; Filipović, 1976 [1971]; Mitterauer, 1980: 67–69; Stoianovich, 1980: 199–200; Goody, 1990: 430–

439; Todorova, 1993: 153–154; Kaser, 1994: 94–95; Kaser, Halpern, 1997: 64). These studies have paid special attention to the nomadic form of herding that is most commonly associated with Balkan (and more generally European) highland pastoralism, namely transhumance, which “typically involves the seasonal shift of subsidiary herds between major climatic and ecological zones, from permanent lowland winter habitations to huts and camps in summer mountain pastures or away from mountain villages to more mild winter coastal pastures” (Galaty, Johnson, 1990: 22).

The functional need for a “joint family organisation” was classically stated by John Campbell (1964: 8) in his influential study of the transhumant Sarakatsani shepherds of the Zagori area in the Pindus mountains of Epirus: “The family group [whether in its elementary or extended form] is normally unable to manage the flocks without some assistance from outside and, in these circumstances, two, three or more families related by kinship or marriage, associate to form ‘a company’ (*παρέα*) or stani (*στάνη*), which for functional reasons must include at least four adult males and generally numbers between 15 and 50 persons of all ages”. This has been elaborated by Karl Kaser (1994), who distinguishes between functional needs during the summer period and during the winter and extends Campbell’s model to the whole of Balkan pastoral society. With respect to summer pasturing, Kaser (1994: 51) notes that “the larger working units were organized by groups of usually kin-related households. This was necessary because on the mountains animals required large grazing areas which involved a great deal of work. It was impossible, or at least inefficient, for the goatherds and shepherds to look after only their own flocks. To take care of a small flock of 200 sheep took the work of four shepherds, who ideally would have been of different ages, between 15 and 50”. Things were different in the winter months. Since the pastures in the plains could not be used as extensively as the summer pastures in the mountains, the large pastoral working unit was dissolved and families took care of their flocks individually. Nevertheless, Kaser (1994: 51–52) maintains that “it seems logical to assume that joint family household residence was also optimal in the winter season”. He believes that nuclear families consisting of a married couple and two children could hardly manage to take care of their large flocks: “The lower limit of labour required was four active adult shepherds and a young goatherd. It made sense to stick together and form joint households”.

For our purposes, a few points emerging from the literature on Balkan pastoralism and family organisation are worth noticing. The first point is that the term “joint family” is given several different, if somehow related, meanings. Basically, it may be used to designate: (a) the “larger pastoral unit” described by Campbell for the Sarakatsani, which is made up of two, three or more families related by kinship or

marriage and can number up to 50 members; (b) proper joint family households, namely domestic groups in which two or more married brothers live and work together; and (c) "joint" family households in a looser sense, a variety of Peter Laslett's "complex" family households as opposed to nuclear families (Laslett, 1972: 28–32). The second point is that since joint families are seen to be a distinguishing feature of pastoral groups, and pastoral economies are seen to be typical of mountain areas, joint family organisation is consequently taken to be a distinguishing feature of upland pastoral populations and, more generally, of mountain societies. Finally, a marked contrast is posited to exist between upland and lowland family forms; since upland societies are regarded to be quintessentially pastoral, this entails that a homologous contrast is expected to exist between pastoral and peasant groups.

The outcome of the interrelation of this set of ecological constraints, economic factors and allegedly contrasting features in domestic organisation has been formalised by Kaser (1996: 384), who outlines a Balkan "upland type" characterised, among other things, by large, patrilocal, highly "complex" households, by the presence of very few servants and by a pastoral economy. Although he warns that "pastoralism alone cannot sufficiently explain the existence of a specific household and family form" (Kaser, 1994: 64), mountain pastoralism is nevertheless assumed to be the "delimiting factor" (or "frame") of the Balkan joint family.

It is evident that this "upland type" shares some central features with Laslett's "Model East", the set of tendencies in domestic group organisation which the founder of the Cambridge Group identified for Eastern Europe (Laslett, 1983: 526–527). Little is said, however, on marriage age and more generally on nuptiality. Moreover, Kaser contends that "the Balkan joint family came into being independently from other East European joint-family-household organizations". His argument is that "it has a particular and specific historical origin and is based on a cultural pattern related to a pastoral economy [...] Its structure was defined by the pastoral mode of agrarian production" (Kaser, 1994: 45–46). The Balkan joint family, he adds, "was originally an institution of nomads. The institution provided on the one hand the appropriate pastoral division of labour and on the other hand, to a certain extent, security [...] Thus the mountain ranges of the Dinaric and northern Pindus were the reservoir of the Balkan joint family. In waves of migration over centuries this pattern was transported from the high mountain ranges to neighbouring plain regions where the conditions for its survival were generally less favourable" (Kaser, 1994: 64–65).

It goes without saying that this model is not intended to apply apodictically to all pastoral societies. Nevertheless, by bringing out a set of logical and ecological connections, it provides a useful basis for investigation and testing both in the Balkan area itself and in other contexts.

Contrasting subcommunities: shepherds and peasants in Zagori

Kaser (1994: 45) has remarked that, while the anthropologists who have worked on the Balkan family have mainly concentrated on the mechanics of domestic and social organisation, historians have been more concerned with studying the origins and development of the joint family household. It seems also fair to add that anthropologists, especially those trained in the American or British tradition, have tended to work intensively on single communities, whereas historians have investigated larger areas and broader spatial patterns. A third and partly intermediate approach is offered by historical or historical-demographic studies focused on individual communities. One such study has been carried out by Roxane Caftanzoglou (1994; 1997; 1998) and focuses on Syrrako, a Vlach village in the Zagori district of Epirus.

What makes this study especially useful is, first of all, the fact that it is concerned with a mountain village inhabited by a mixed population of peasants and shepherds. It is important to note that the village community selected by Caftanzoglou for her study was "ethnically" homogenous, all inhabitants being Vlach, and yet divided in two broad socio-economic groups: on the one hand peasant families who stayed in the village throughout the year; on the other, transhumant pastoralists who moved seasonally between the summer pastures above the village and their winter quarters in the lowlands. This provides a very favourable setting to test some of the propositions and expectations of the "Balkan model". Another merit of Caftanzoglou's work is that she is able to produce the quantitative information which is needed to reconstruct the household formation patterns of both peasants and shepherds. Using census data from a relatively recent period (1898–1929), she provides evidence on a wide range of variables, including the size and structure of households, age at marriage, and the number of servants.

Schematically, Caftanzoglou's most relevant findings can be summarised as follows:

- the larger and structurally more complex households are found among the transhumant shepherds, while the peasants lived in smaller and simpler households (1994: 83; 1997: 413–414);
- peasants also tended to marry less and at a later age than the shepherds (1994: 88);
- servants were either very rare or utterly absent in both groups (1994: 90; 1997: 413–414).

These findings indicate that the household formation pattern detected in the pastoral sector of Syrrako's population complied with the three basic formation rules common to what John Hajnal (1983) has termed "joint household systems". They also

corroborate, as Caftanzoglou herself underlines, “the relation between pastoralism and complex patrilineal domestic structures observed by Campbell” (1994: 83). Her convincing conclusion is that the evidence from Syrrako, where within an ethnically homogenous society we find different patterns of household organisation, makes “a particularly compelling case-study, in that it warns against generalizing on the basis of ‘ethnic’ composition [...] in family history, as in other fields of social study, ethnic identity should not be allowed to obscure internal socio-cultural differentiation” (Caftanzoglou, 1997: 412).

The recent eclipse of a classic theme in Alpine studies: the study of transhumant pastoralism

One of the reasons why Caftanzoglou’s studies immediately captured my attention when they were published was, if I may include a personal note, that their findings tallied very neatly with the results of some work Dionigi Albera and myself had done a few years earlier on the domestic arrangements of sedentary peasants and transhumant shepherds in Sambuco, a high-altitude village in the Italian Maritime Alps, and also with what could be expected to emerge from research I was about to start on Roaschia, another settlement in the Italian Maritime Alps with a mixed population of peasants and pastoralists. The outcome of this second piece of research has been, as we shall see, rather surprising. However, before turning to a summary presentation of the results yielded by the two studies of Sambuco and Roaschia, it may be helpful to point out that in the last two or three decades studies devoted to transhumant pastoralism in the Alpine crescent have apparently become rare and increasingly marginal to the central concerns of anthropological and historical research on this area. Indeed, it seems appropriate to speak of an unexpected, and hopefully temporary, “eclipse” of one of the most classic themes in the realm of Alpine studies.

There are probably several reasons accounting for such a decline and marginalisation of the study of transhumant pastoralism in the Alps. In my view, as I have tried to argue elsewhere (Viazzo, 2001: 352–353), one reason is the central role that the notion of *Alpwirtschaft* has been granted in the ecosystemic/neo-malthusian models worked out in Alpine studies during the 1980s (Netting, 1981; Viazzo, 1989) and widely adopted in the 1990s (cf. Mathieu, 1998: 109–113; Viazzo, 2000). To be sure, most scholars are ready to agree that labels such as transhumance and *Alpwirtschaft* (or nomadism and seminomadism, for that matter) should not be reified and seen as clearly distinguishable practices, since differences very often turn out to be a matter of degree rather than of kind. Nevertheless, the fact remains that the notion of *Alpwirtschaft*, especially in the elegant, if rigid, definition proposed by John Frödin (1940: xiv–xxi), fits very well with the emphasis placed by neo-malthu-

sian models on ecosystemic closure, equilibrium and self-regulation. The consequence has been that little “theoretical space” has been left to transhumant pastoralism, which is associated with openness, long-term movement, contacts between the mountains and the plains. Another reason may have been the widespread (and, no doubt, largely justified) tendency to present transhumant sheep-herding as a typically Mediterranean practice (see e.g. Duclos, Pitte, 1994: 14–15; Duclos, 1998: 15). This has probably contributed to harden the contrast between a Mediterranean region characterised by transhumant pastoralism and an Alpine region characterised by the short-distance movements of herders and animals (mainly cattle) within the territorial boundaries of local communities.

The question is complex. There are reasons to believe that sheep have not been ousted by cows on mere theoretical grounds. The evidence recently assembled and discussed by Jon Mathieu (1998: 50–59; 2001) suggests that between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century sheep were actually replaced by cows in most Alpine regions. In some areas, however, sheep-herding and transhumance retained their importance, and theoretical blinkers should not distract scholars from paying them the attention they deserve. One such area is the Italian side of the Maritime Alps, a region which – to judge from the two studies I have conducted personally – also provides a favourable setting to test more general notions about the relationships between mountain environments, pastoral economies and household formation patterns.

Contrasting communities: shepherds and peasants in two villages of the Italian Maritime Alps

Sambuco is a high-altitude community located in the upper half of the Valle Stura di Demonte, on the Piedmontese side of the Maritime Alps. The presence of transhumant pastoralists was already attested in 1753, when the royal superintendent, Count Brandizzo, reported that the local population consisted of approximately 1,300 inhabitants, and that there were “40 shepherds, or more, who move their flocks to the plains of Piedmont during the winter”¹. This report offers only scanty and very rough pieces of information about domestic groups, suggesting a mean household size possibly close to 6 members². In this respect, a much more valuable document is an enumeration of inhabitants of Sambuco in 1816³. Besides grouping the inhabitants by household, this enumeration also indicates the age and marital status of

1 Ignazio Nicolis conte di Brandizzo, *Relazione di ogni Città e Terra posta nella provincia di Cuneo (17 febbraio 1753)*, MS, Biblioteca Reale di Torino, *Storia Patria* 855, p. 215.

2 Brandizzo, *Relazione di ogni Città e Terra*, p. 209.

3 *Sambuco. Stato di popolazione 1816 per il sale*, Sambuco Municipal Archive.

Table 1. Nuptiality levels in Alagna (1788) and Sambuco (1816)

	Alagna	Sambuco
Singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) ^a		
Men	27.1	26.8
Woman	25.1	26.7
Celibate aged 50+ (%)		
Men	9.9	9.3
Woman	20.5	13.0
<i>Im</i> (Index of proportion married) ^a	0.509	0.543

^a For clarifications on SMAM and *Im* see notes 4 and 5 respectively.

Source: Viazzo, Albera 1990: 469.

each individual in the population, thereby allowing an estimate of the levels of nuptiality.

In 1816 Sambuco numbered 1,275 people and 250 households, with a mean household size of 5.1 and a proportion of "complex" households exceeding 40%: using the Cambridge Group typology (Hammel, Laslett, 1974), 19.6% of all households could be classified as "extended", and another 23.3% as "multiple". This is a definitely high proportion, and so is the proportion (8.8%) of "joint family households", the subset of multiple family households formed by domestic groups in which at least two married siblings, usually brothers, lived together (Viazzo, Albera, 1990: 470). By way of comparison, on the basis of a 1788 census we can calculate that in Alagna, the Walser colony in the Sesia Valley I have studied in detail, extended and multiple households together accounted for 37.2% of all domestic groups, and joint family household for only 3% of the total (Viazzo, 1989: 231, 240). Although these differences cannot be belittled, they are not enormous either – all the more so since these statistics are liable to undergo substantial variations from one census to another owing to the small size of the village communities (in 1760 the proportion of joint family households in Alagna was 6.4%). Interestingly, the levels of nuptiality which can be estimated for Sambuco in 1816 are comparable to those found in Alagna, as shown by Table 1.

If nuptiality and household composition are taken as primary diagnostic features, the levels estimated for Sambuco in 1816 look fairly unexceptional, as they fall within the range of values that define the Alpine type of household formation pattern characterised by the coexistence of relatively low nuptiality with high proportions of complex family households (Viazzo, 1989: 229–244; Viazzo, Albera, 1990: 465–471). The whole picture changes, however, if data are disaggregated and the presence of transhumant shepherds in the population of Sambuco is taken into

Table 2. Mean household size (MHS) and proportion of joint families by animal wealth in Sambuco, 1816

<i>N sheep</i>	<i>Household features</i>		
	MHS	% joint	N
0-4	3.8	0.0	88
5-9	4.7	4.0	50
10-19	5.2	9.6	52
20-49	6.5	16.7	36
50+	10.7	57.1	14
All	5.1	8.8	250

Source: Viazzo, Albera 1990: 470.

account. Although the enumeration provides no direct information on the occupations of the people of Sambuco, the number of sheep (and other animals) owned by the various families is clearly specified and can be used as a proxy to identify the shepherds' families and sort them out from the peasants' households. In 1816, over two-thirds of the 3,694 sheep recorded in the census belonged to the minority of households who possessed 20 sheep or more. This minority accounted for about one-fifth of all households and can be assumed to have been made up of transhumant shepherds.

Our analysis (Viazzo, Albera, 1990: 470) has revealed that the size of the family flock was smoothly correlated to the size and composition of the household, and among those who can be considered professional shepherds (as opposed to the rest of their fellow villagers, who were most likely engaged in a combination of agricultural and pastoral activities), the proportion of joint families was exceedingly high (see Table 2). It is also remarkable that if we use 20 sheep as a cut-off point, we can identify two subpopulations marked, among other things, by strikingly different patterns of nuptiality. The families possessing fewer than 20 sheep formed a subpopulation displaying low levels of nuptiality similar to those found in many other Alpine communities. The members of what we may call the shepherds' subpopulation, on the other hand, married earlier than their fellow villagers and among their ranks celibacy and widowhood were exceedingly rare: the estimated "singulate mean age at marriage" (SMAM)⁴ was 24.1 years for the women belonging to the shepherds subpopulation, compared to 28.1 for the other women. The existence of this cleavage is perhaps even more strikingly, and robustly, demonstrated by the vast difference

4 The singulate mean age at marriage (SMAM) is an estimate of the mean age at first marriage derived from the proportion of each age group not yet married as shown by a census. It was first proposed by Hajnal (1953).

in the values of the Princeton index of proportion married (I_m): 0.710 for the women belonging to the shepherds' families, only 0.472 for the rest of the population (Viazzo, Albera, 1990: 470, 478)⁵.

This pattern is strongly reminiscent of Caftanzoglou's findings for Syrrako and corroborates, again in a quasi-experimental setting, the theoretical prediction that pastoral economies should be associated with a joint family system and early marriage (especially for women). It seemed justified to expect an analogous pattern to emerge from the ethnographic and historical-demographic study of Roaschia, another community in the Piedmontese Maritime Alps, which I conducted along with my colleagues Marco Aime and Stefano Allovio⁶ – all the more so since Caftanzoglou's characterisation of social life in Syrrako, a community marked like Roaschia by a "complementary but antagonistic coexistence" of peasants and transhumant shepherds (Caftanzoglou, 1994: 80), was strikingly similar to the picture we had gathered from our informants (Aime, 1997).

Like Sambuco, Roaschia has long been perceived by the inhabitants of the Piedmontese lowlands as the place of origin of a large number of the transhumant shepherds who swarmed to the plains of the Po Valley at the onset of the winter season. Roaschia was actually widely known as *il posto dei pastori*, "the place of the shepherds", and in many parts of Piedmont the term *ruaschin*, which designates the inhabitants of the village, became the equivalent of "shepherd". The central importance of pastoralism was emphasised in 1753 by Count Brandizzo, who reported that "the occupation to which the inhabitants of this place are given is that of shepherds; they take their flocks to the plains of Piedmont to be fed on hay in the autumn and winter months, whereas in the summer they pasture them in their own territory"⁷. However, the population of Roaschia has never been made up entirely of shepherds. Rather, the specialisation of a part of its inhabitants in transhumant pastoralism has given rise to the formation of two subcommunities separated by an occupational and social boundary: the shepherds and the peasants, who can be described (as in Syrrako) as the village's permanent inhabitants. Like many other settlements in the Alps, after the Second World War Roaschia has undergone drastic economic changes and, even more remarkably, has experienced

5 The I_m index, also known as "Princeton index of proportion married", is part of a set of interrelated indices devised by Ansley Coale in 1965 to show how close the fertility being measured comes to a theoretical maximum. For a definition of I_m see Coale (1967, 1969) and Smith (1982: 495). To appreciate the gap between the two values estimated for the two subpopulations in Sambuco, it may be useful to note that in European historical contexts it is customary to separate high from low I_m s by a dividing line at approximately 0.550 (Coale, Treadway, 1986: 48–52), and that the values estimated by the Princeton European Fertility Project for Alpine provinces and districts around 1870 fell almost without exception below this threshold, ranging approximately between 0.300 and 0.550 (Viazzo, 1989: 87–93).

6 Research in Roaschia, carried out in various spells between 1995 and 2002, has been mainly supported by a grant ("ex-60%") from the University of Turin.

7 Brandizzo, *Relazione di ogni Città e Terra*, p. 268.

a massive demographic decline. The local population has fallen from nearly 3,000 inhabitants in the first years of the twentieth century to less than one hundred today, and the traditional agricultural and pastoral activities are no longer practised. Nevertheless, the ageing inhabitants of present-day Roaschia still classify themselves as either peasants or shepherds, and insist that in the past the boundary was very rarely crossed: the two subcommunities are said to have been largely endogamous, occupationally segregated, and separated by different worldviews and deep-seated rivalries.

Whereas in Sambuco peasants and shepherds are not explicitly designated as such either in the enumeration of 1816 or in later local sources (Luciano, 1999), starting from the 1860s in Roaschia both the censuses and the parish registers distinguish very clearly, almost fastidiously, between *contadini* (peasants) and *pastori* (pastoralists) or *pecorai* (shepherds). Using these labels to draw a statistical boundary that identifies two distinct subpopulations is of course a delicate task⁸. Let us consider marriage, for example. Our informants are adamant that in the past the two groups were strictly endogamous and that “mixed” marriages did not meet social approval and were quite exceptional. An elderly peasant woman mentioned the case of one of her cousins, also born of a peasant family but married to a shepherd: “Every time she returned to the village, she walked crestfallen because she was ashamed to be seen with the sheep!” (Aime, 1997: 88). For his part, a shepherd who was in his seventies at the time of our research told us that when he married, “Me and my wife were already shepherds; we didn’t choose our trade, it came from the ancestors”. However, an inspection of the marriage registers shows that, although an endogamous tendency is actually detectable, exogamous marriages across the occupational boundary did nevertheless occur and could even be fairly frequent in certain periods (Aime, Allovio, Viazzo, 2001: 137–143). This is just one indication that the social membranes surrounding the two groups were more permeable than most of our informants would at first be ready to admit. Nevertheless, taking the occupation of the household head as the defining criterion of what might be called two “statistical subpopulations” seems to be, at least for some purposes, quite legitimate in the light of our ethnographic evidence. And once the data provided by the local censuses are disaggregated in this way, a number of interesting (and surprising) findings emerge.

One surprising finding concerns nuptiality and, more specifically, age at marriage. On the basis of a relatively late census of 1951, we have estimated singulate mean ages at marriage of 27.7 and 22.4 years for the men and women listed in households headed by shepherds as compared to 28.7 and 24.4 respectively in the peasant

8 On censuses, classification, and the dangers of pigeon-holing people into ethnic, language or occupational categories, see Kertzer, Arel (2002).

Table 3. Female median age at marriage by occupation in Roaschia, 1871–1910

	Shepherdesses		Peasant women	
	Age	N	Age	N
1871–1880	19.5	55	20.6	111
1881–1890	20.0	54	19.9	99
1891–1900	20.1	41	21.5	146
1900–1910	20.5	66	20.4	119
1871–1910	20.1	216	20.7	475

Source: Aime, Allovio, Viazzo 2001: 158.

subpopulation. The impression that nuptiality was more restricted among the peasants is confirmed by the values of the Princeton index I_m : 0.699 for women living in peasant households as against 0.774 for those listed in shepherding households. In some ways these figures, and these contrasts, resemble those found in Sambuco and would seem, therefore, to corroborate the general hypothesis that in pastoral populations marriage should be earlier and more frequent than in peasant populations. However, the nuptiality of peasant women was much higher in Roaschia during the first half of the twentieth century ($I_m = 0.699$) than in early nineteenth century Sambuco ($I_m = 0.472$). An analysis of Roaschia's marriage registers suggests that such a difference is not simply a matter of chronological distance. As shown by Table 3, already in the second half of the nineteenth century shepherdesses actually married earlier than women from peasant families, but the difference was slight. What is more important is that both married at a very young age indeed, at least by Alpine standards – and there is no reason to believe that things were much different in the first half of the nineteenth century, when age at marriage was apparently even lower (Aime, Allovio, Viazzo, 2001: 155).

This is not to say that there was virtually no difference in the nuptiality patterns of the peasant and shepherding sectors of Roaschia's population. One striking result of our analysis of the 1951 census is that the 78 women aged 30 years or older listed in households headed by shepherds were all married. In the peasant households we find, on the other hand, that 8% of the women in the same age group were unmarried. The difference is even more striking when we turn to men: nearly one-quarter of all peasants aged 35 years or more were unmarried (28 out of 115, or 24.3%); in sharp contrast, no shepherd in the same age group was still a celibate. Higher celibacy rates among men than among women are fairly typical of the Alpine area towards the middle of the twentieth century, owing to the decline of previous patterns of male emigration combined with the propensity for women to leave in greater numbers

Table 4. Household size by occupation of head in Roaschia, 1951

Occupation	N households	N people	MHS	Range	% people
Peasant	122	401	3.29	1–8	40.4
Shepherd	101	420	4.16	1–9	42.3
Housewife	42	48	1.14	1–3	4.8
Other	43	123	2.86	1–7	12.4
All	308	992	3.22	1–9	99.9

Source: Roaschia Communal Archives, Historical Section, XII, 98 (*IX Censimento generale della popolazione: fogli di famiglia e di convivenza*).

than men (Viazzo, 1989: 85). Nevertheless, it is remarkable that in Roaschia permanent celibacy was to be found only among the peasants. As a more detailed discussion of the 1951 census would show, such differentials in celibacy rates left their marks in the composition of households. In other respects, however, differences have proved to be less pronounced than we expected.

We were especially curious to see what “hard evidence” such as census listings could tell us about the size and structure of the shepherds’ households. Both the logical reasoning underlying the models outlined in the first sections of this paper and the empirical findings reported for comparable communities like Sambuco and Syrrako, and more generally for European and non-European pastoral societies, led us to expect the shepherds’ households in Roaschia to be larger and more complex than those of their fellow villagers engaged in agriculture or other activities. On the other hand, our informants in the village had assured us that in the past, when sheep-herding was still thriving, the transhumant units typically consisted, both in the winter and in the summer months, of nuclear families formed by the shepherd, his wife and their children (Aime, Allovio, 1998: 57). The data on household size gleaned from the 1951 census would seem at first to corroborate the general model and conform with its expectations. Table 4 shows that the shepherds’ households, though not very large in absolute terms, were nevertheless considerably larger than those headed by peasants, and the difference becomes even greater if the households headed by “housewives” (*casalinghe*) are added, as they should (Aime, Allovio, Viazzo, 2001: 165), to those headed by peasants.

When we examine household structure and composition, however, things prove to be quite different (Table 5). Whereas peasant households exhibit a distribution that is close to patterns found at earlier dates in many other Alpine localities (over 20% of “complex households”, numerous cases of stem family arrangements, and even one joint family), the shepherds lived overwhelmingly in simple-family households. The larger size of their household depended primarily, as a more detailed

Table 5. Household composition^a by occupation of head in Roaschia, 1951

	<i>Peasant</i>		<i>Shepherd</i>		<i>Housewife</i>		<i>Other</i>		<i>All</i>	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	19	15.6	0	0.0	36	85.7	11	25.6	66	21.4
2	1	0.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	3	7.0	4	1.3
3	74	60.6	97	96.0	4	9.5	23	53.4	198	64.3
4	15	12.3	1	1.0	0	0.0	2	4.7	18	5.8
5	10	8.2	2	2.0	0	0.0	2	4.7	14	4.5
Indet.	3	2.5	1	1.0	2	4.8	2	4.7	8	2.6
Total	122	100.0	101	100.0	42	100.0	43	100.1	308	99.9
4+5	25	20.5	3	3.0	0	0.0	4	9.3	32	10.4
Joint	1	0.8	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0	1	0.3

^a Cambridge Group typology (Hammel, Laslett, 1974).

Source: see Table 4.

analysis of the evidence would show, on their higher fertility. This finding counters the widespread assumptions we have mentioned several times, but sits well with what our informants told us about the prevalence of nuclear families among the shepherds.

Yet, the exceedingly high proportion of nuclear families displayed by the shepherds of Roaschia in 1951 should not be taken as unambiguous proof that their marriages were neolocal. In fact, the census demonstrates that multiple-family households did exist among the shepherds. There were only two of them, though, and in both cases they had been formed very recently: in one of these two families, the bride was just 20; in the other, the daughter-in-law was 22 and had given birth to her first child only months before. These data are consistent with the oral testimonies we have collected, according to which newly-married couples would stay with the husband's parents for about one year, and then start a household and a transhumant life of their own. It would therefore seem that in mid-twentieth century Roaschia patrilocal marriages may have been frequent, or possibly the norm, but multiple households were almost invisible in the census because the time spent by the young married couple with the husband's family was very short. We may wonder, however, whether this was a pattern of long standing or a fairly recent development. Some answers come from a listing of Roaschia's inhabitants compiled forty years before.

Compared to the 1951 census, the 1911 Population Register is in several ways an inferior document. Some ambiguities in the specification of kinship relations to the household head generate a likely overestimation of the proportion of multiple families (type 5 in the Cambridge Group classification scheme) at the expenses of

Table 6. Household size by occupation of head in Roaschia, 1911

Occupation	N households	N people	MHS	Range	% people
Peasant	306	1,513	4.94	1-13	55.6
Shepherd	148	896	6.05	1-13	33.0
Other	66	310	4.70	1-11	11.4
All	520	2,719	5.23	1-13	100.0

Source: Roaschia Communal Archives, Historical Section, *Registro della popolazione* (1911).

Table 7. Household composition^a by occupation of head in Roaschia, 1911

	Peasant		Shepherd		Other		All	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
1	15	4.9	5	3.4	2	3.0	22	4.2
2	6	2.0	0	0.0	7	10.6	13	2.5
3	214	69.9	116	78.4	44	66.7	374	71.9
4	21	6.9	4	2.7	3	4.5	28	5.4
5	50	16.3	23	15.5	10	15.2	83	16.0
Total	306	100.0	148	100.0	66	100.0	520	100.0
4+5	71	23.2	27	18.2	13	19.7	111	21.3
Joint	4	1.3	5	3.4	0	0.0	9	1.7

^a Cambridge Group typology (Hammel, Laslett, 1974).

Source: see Table 6.

extended families (type 4). For all that, the 1911 listing provides a wealth of useful information. It shows first of all, as we can see from Table 6, that the total population of Roaschia was far larger than forty years later, and the relative weight of the shepherding subpopulation definitely smaller. It also shows that the domestic groups of the shepherds were much bigger than forty years later as well as much bigger than those of the peasants: the mean household size was 6.05 compared to 4.94 for peasants and 4.70 for the occupationally heterogeneous rest of the population (shopkeepers, millers, masons, bakers, shoemakers, etc.).

However, a quick look at household composition by type and occupation (Table 7) immediately reveals that already in 1911 the larger size of the shepherds' families could not be attributed to greater structural complexity. It is nonetheless interesting to discover that the proportion of complex households headed by shepherds was considerably higher than in 1951. It is especially tantalising to discover that five of these complex households were large joint families: they included two or three married brothers and on average they numbered over ten members. It is tempting to surmise

that the 1911 Population Register captures the shepherding population of Roaschia in a phase of transition, from family forms like the ones documented for early nineteenth century Sambuco, where shepherds lived in gigantic joint families, to the simple forms preserved in the local memory and attested in the 1951 census.

Be that as it may, the case of Roaschia in the period spanned by the two censuses of 1911 and 1951 presents us with the intriguing coexistence of two different but equally unexpected and puzzling social and demographic configurations. If we consider the peasants, we see that their families betray a household formation pattern that conforms fairly well to the “agro-pastoral” Alpine model except – but it is a very important exception – for a low age at marriage especially for women. If we turn to the shepherds, on the other hand, we find that they married early and that permanent celibacy was virtually absent (as predicted by the “pastoral model”), but their households were overwhelmingly nuclear and, particularly towards the mid-twentieth century, quite small. The contrast with a seemingly similar community like Sambuco turns out to be very marked indeed.

As far as the shepherds are concerned, the massive prevalence of nuclear families inevitably raises a basic question: how could a married couple with children manage to take care of substantial flocks which in 1951 still numbered an average of at least 100–120 sheep? The answer most probably resided in a transfer of child labour from the peasant families to the shepherds. The presence of servants in Roaschia, or more precisely of young “servant shepherds” locally known as *famji* or *garsoun*, has left only faint traces in the written sources, and is only grudgingly acknowledged by the old peasants. However, as we have tried to demonstrate elsewhere (Aime, Allovio, Viazzo, 2001: 170–198; Viazzo, Aime, Allovio, 2005: 396–403), there are good reasons to believe that a large proportion, possibly most, of the peasants’ children aged 14 to 20 years were “given” by their parents to the shepherds to help them either during the summer period or, quite often, all year long. This solution to the functional problems so prominently discussed by the literature on mountain pastoralism may have been a relatively recent development, as hinted by the declining complexity of the shepherds’ households between 1911 and 1951. Its viability is certainly also related to the rather anomalous characteristics of the particular form of transhumance practised by the shepherds of Roaschia, which can be ascribed to the comparatively rare type of transhumance termed “double” by Anne-Marie Brisebarre (1978: 52) in her study of pastoralism in the Cévennes⁹. Nevertheless, the docu-

⁹ Since Roaschia lacks large expanses of high-altitude pastures, during the summer only a couple of shepherds could keep their flocks on home-ground. All the others left their wives and their younger children in the village and moved to rented pastures in other communes on the Piedmontese side of the Western Alps. (Some of these places could be quite distant from Roaschia.) They engaged in this “summer transhumance” in the company of their mature or at least adolescent sons and, if necessary, of hired servants recruited from peasant families.

mented presence of servants in Roaschia prompts a reconsideration of the importance of the institution of service in the Western Alps, where its role has probably been neglected (cf. Aime, Allovio, Viazzo, 2001: 177–182; Viazzo, Aime, Allovio, 2005: 391–395). It also suggests that crossing the social and occupational boundary which divided the peasants of Roaschia from the shepherds was quite a common experience for the peasants' sons, and that the interdependence between the two subcommunities was stronger than either the shepherds or, especially, the peasants are now prepared to admit.

Concluding remarks and a few open questions

I hope that what has been here reported in some detail about two communities in the Italian Maritime Alps will offer useful material and raise a few meaningful questions for comparison. The evidence from Roaschia, in particular, warns that geographical proximity and even considerable similarities in the occupational make-up of the population may ultimately prove deceptive, or at least insufficient to warrant the use of broad models (such as the "pastoral model") in order to advance rapid explanations of specific issues by referring to general assumptions.

Besides shedding doubts on the general validity of the "pastoral model", the strange case of Roaschia also raises questions concerning the characteristics, functional mechanics and ultimate roots of Alpine demographic systems. The high levels of nuptiality found in this village, and especially the unusually low age at marriage for both men and especially women, are a sign of the presence in Roaschia of a high-pressure demographic regime. It should be noticed that early marriage and relatively high birth and death rates have been detected in other parts of the Maritime Alps, including one of Roaschia's neighbouring communities, Entracque (Viazzo, Albera, 1986: 203; Viazzo, 1989: 197–201). Since Entracque is also known to have been a community in which transhumant pastoralism played a significant part, it is tempting to surmise that early marriage and the related high-pressure demographic regime were causally traceable to the weight of the pastoral component in the population – a demographic implication of the pastoral model. The early marriage of Roaschia's peasant women blurs the attractive neatness of this hypothesis.

An alternative hypothesis might consist in invoking the presence of "Mediterranean" traits in the Maritime Alps. This would plausibly account for some of the demographic anomalies displayed by the Western Alps, and especially by its southernmost segment, compared to the rest of the crescent¹⁰. But there are still surprises

10 Local systems of joint family formations, often coupled with patterns of early marriage and relatively high-pressure demographic regimes, have been found more frequently in the south-western sectors of the Alpine crescent than in the rest of Alps. Such a combination is intriguingly close to Laslett's

in store. While Entracque shared with Roaschia high levels of nuptiality and most likely a demographic regime which departed significantly from the "Alpine model", recent research on Valdieri, another of Roaschia's neighbouring villages (Reginato, Costa, 1999: 183; Del Panta, Reginato, Scalone, 2002: 15–18), has revealed that the demography of this community was characterised by some of the lowest birth, marriage and death rates in the whole of the Piedmontese Alps – the very epitome of the Alpine model! Along with other cases of adjacent, apparently similar and yet demographically contrasting Alpine communities brought to light by recent research (Viazzo, 2005: 22–25), the differences between and within Sambuco and Roaschia and between Roaschia and a neighbouring village like Valdieri raise intriguing questions of both substance and method and call for more studies adopting micro-analytical tools and combining historical, demographic and anthropological approaches.

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- "Mediterranean" or "Southern" set of tendencies in domestic group organisation (Laslett, 1983: 526–527), and the possibility that marriage practices and household composition in the Maritime Alps may have been affected by Mediterranean cultural and legal influences is clearly worth exploring. A cultural explanation along these lines would be in keeping with Anne-Lise Head-König's contention that the pattern of earlier marriage displayed by Ticino vis-à-vis the other Swiss Alpine cantons in the second half of the nineteenth century should be ascribed to "l'influence incontestable d'une culture méridionale" (Head-König, 1996: 368).

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