



# Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine

101-3 (2013)  
Jeune recherche alpine

---

Roberta Clara Zanini

## **Dynamics of the population and dynamics of the memory of an alpine community on the border**

---

### **Avertissement**

Le contenu de ce site relève de la législation française sur la propriété intellectuelle et est la propriété exclusive de l'éditeur.

Les œuvres figurant sur ce site peuvent être consultées et reproduites sur un support papier ou numérique sous réserve qu'elles soient strictement réservées à un usage soit personnel, soit scientifique ou pédagogique excluant toute exploitation commerciale. La reproduction devra obligatoirement mentionner l'éditeur, le nom de la revue, l'auteur et la référence du document.

Toute autre reproduction est interdite sauf accord préalable de l'éditeur, en dehors des cas prévus par la législation en vigueur en France.

**revues.org**

Revues.org est un portail de revues en sciences humaines et sociales développé par le Cléo, Centre pour l'édition électronique ouverte (CNRS, EHESS, UP, UAPV).

---

### Référence électronique

Roberta Clara Zanini, « Dynamics of the population and dynamics of the memory of an alpine community on the border », *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* [En ligne], 101-3 | 2013, mis en ligne le 02 avril 2014, consulté le 07 avril 2014. URL : <http://rga.revues.org/2254> ; DOI : 10.4000/rga.2254

Éditeur : Association pour la diffusion de la recherche alpine  
<http://rga.revues.org>  
<http://www.revues.org>

Document accessible en ligne sur :  
<http://rga.revues.org/2254>

Document généré automatiquement le 07 avril 2014.

© Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine

**Roberta Clara Zanini**

# **Dynamics of the population and dynamics of the memory of an alpine community on the border**

1 En

2 In this contribution I intend to present the results of a research conducted within the framework of a research doctorate in Anthropological Sciences at the University of Turin<sup>1</sup>; the field investigation, of which the main results will be presented, was done between April and November 2011 within – and thanks to the support of – a European research project, the Cross-Border Cooperation Operational Programme Italy-Switzerland “E.C.H.I. Italian Swiss ethnographies for the enhancement of intangible cultural heritage”, which involves the regions of Piedmont, Valle d’Aosta and Lombardy, the autonomous province of Bolzano and the cantons of Ticino, Valais and Graubünden in the Swiss Confederation. The choice of area where the field research should be conducted was settled on Macugnaga, a Piedmont municipality of about 600 inhabitants, located against the eastern slope of Monte Rosa, and thus situated along the border between Italy and Switzerland, at the head of Valle Anzasca, a side branch of the Ossola territory.

## **For an anthropology of the alpine repopulation<sup>2</sup>**

3 The objective of that research was to tackle through ethnographic investigation and its subsequent anthropological reflection, the theme of recent changes in the composition of the population in the alpine area, which only recently, and in a very limited manner, was taken into consideration in an anthropological context<sup>3</sup>. The intention was to verify how the dynamics of depopulation, repopulation and change are expressed in the population of a high altitude town that, due to its historical-cultural characteristics, appeared to be potentially interesting even under the profile of transmission, management and valorisation of the intangible cultural heritage. Therefore, this work was borne out of a twofold and simultaneous need to investigate, which determined the need to integrate under a single investigational outline two independent subjects, those of demographic and heritage dynamics. The consolidation of these two fields into a single overview of meaning allowed the identification – precisely within the dialectic between the two subjects and in their deep interrelationships – of the interpretive keys necessary to better understand both phenomena, and subsequently render a densely anthropological description of their structures.

4 In particular, the changes in the composition of the local population were the key with which to analyse the processes of managing the cultural heritage and the local historical memory. In fact, from an anthropological point of view, the repercussions that the phenomena of depopulation and repopulation had on the processes of managing the cultural heritage and the transmission of the historical memory appear very interesting. Therefore, there is an increasingly overwhelming need to wonder who has the right and the possibility of offering themselves as “carriers” of the memory and to be in charge of its transmission and valorisation. The question “who do the Alps belong to?” began to increasingly involve planners and administrators, up to the political institutions that, at a supranational level, manage the alpine territory and its development prospects (Morandini and Reolon, 2010; Varotto and Castiglioni, 2012).

5 Within contexts characterised by phenomena of intense demographic decline, the arrival of new inhabitants can not infrequently stop the outflow, with significant repercussions, even from the point of view of conservation and transmission of memory and the intangible cultural heritage of a community. At times, it is precisely the new arrivals who manage to take care of the transmission paths with greater effort, acting as relief where there is a lack of mountain

dwellers “by birth” willing to do so (Viazzo, 2012a, 2012b). However, these manifestations are not without issues: isn't merely at an academic and institutional level that one wonders who the Alps belong to, and by extension who does their memory belong to, but similar questions also arise at the local level, within the communities themselves. The demonstrations of participation and the claims of belonging, property and possession then become a privileged symbolic field, and by studying it, anthropology can contribute to rendering a multifaceted framework of the dynamics of population and memory, allowing their complex characteristics to be highlighted.

## From a game of scales to intensive ethnography

- 6 The integration into a single theoretical and analytical perspective of two different research subjects gave rise to the need to identify a theoretical and methodological framework that could adequately respond to research needs. It was therefore necessary to adopt an interdisciplinary perspective that resorted to theoretical proposals that came from different disciplines. While memory and its transmission is one of the classic themes of anthropology<sup>4</sup>, the same cannot be said of the more recent changes in the composition of the alpine population: the studies that concern the dynamics of alpine repopulation are in fact almost entirely due to disciplines such as human geography, demographics, land planning and zoning<sup>5</sup>.
- 7 From an analysis of the available literature on this subject, beginning with the monumental work of the German geographer Werner Bätzing (2005), a fairly variegated framework emerges that not only makes it impossible to generalise in unambiguous terms the traits of a territory as vast as the alpine one, but which, on the contrary, shows the existence of demographic dynamics that differ greatly between each other, from both a diachronic point of view and a synchronic one. The western Italian alpine arc, in particular, appears to be characterised by significant and pronounced depopulation processes. However, more recent investigations have shown the spread of a phenomenon in the opposite direction, one of immigration and repopulation, which, while it is not yet sufficient to restore the demographic equilibrium of the territory, nonetheless signals a progressive trend reversal (Bätzing, 2005; Tappeiner, Borsdorf and Tasser, 2008; Steinicke, 2011). In fact, there are increasing cases of towns whose demographic decline was contained or halted by the arrival of new residents, on whose socio-economic and cultural characteristics were focussed the main theoretical contributions completed under disciplines such as demographics and human geography.
- 8 These investigations were mainly made at an extensive and synoptic level, on rather broad and comparable portions of alpine territory. In spite of the doubtlessly useful outlook offered by an overview on the entire alpine arc and its dynamics, it seemed necessary to go along an alternative path that – through the methodological tools typical of anthropology – allowed a better understanding of the data offered by the reconstruction on a macro level as proposed by demographers and geographers. We could consider this movement, which starts from the macro level of demographic and statistical reconstruction to attain the “ground level” of ethnography, to be one of those that the historian Jacques Revel (2006) calls “a game of scales”. In fact, the study of depopulation and repopulation could certainly draw essential material and information from investigations made at the macro level, but at the same time, in order to offer a valid description of these processes, a sensible reduction in scale is necessary. From this point of view, the ethnographic investigation proves to be a particularly useful tool to explore the phenomenon at a smaller scale. In fact, the ground level analysis of a single community could contribute not only to the reconsideration and reformulation of conceptual categories borrowed from other disciplines, but also and especially to highlight the particularities of the individual ethnographic case that could prove important in offering a more detailed view of the general framework. In addition, it is thus possible to observe development factors – or, on the contrary, non-development factors – that would otherwise remain invisible. While resorting to large numbers, for a macro perspective, is necessary and effective in offering an overall view, it is not enough to explain the differences: while these are highlighted, it is often not possible to place them in context.
- 9 In the case presented here, the research was conducted using the intensive method of the classical type, based on participant observation. The continuous presence on the

field throughout the duration of the research allowed the collection of documentary and observational material, the completion of interviews and the active participation in community life, particularly summer events, where the element of memory transmission is most prevalent. We shall see in the conclusion how the research done at a micro scale in Macugnaga could be useful in better understanding a few aspects highlighted by the pan-alpine representation ensured by geographic-demographic studies made at the macro scale.

10 The study of depopulation and repopulation phenomena and especially on changes in the composition of the population in the alpine area allows political-cultural questions to arise that are very interesting for anthropology. The increasing number of new inhabitants in the Alps raises the question of who could legitimately call themselves “mountain dwellers” and how these dynamics of belonging and possession manifest themselves. Among the themes that increasingly command the attention of anthropologists, there is surely that of the memory transmission of a community, and it is precisely on this aspect that the connection between two different thematic units that constitute the bones of this work is structured.

11 In particular, three main questions were identified concerning the subject of memory, its structure and its management at a local level that constituted the investigational outline used during research. It seemed significant to wonder what is the content intended for transmission, to whom such a body of meaning refers to, and, lastly, to whom is the narrative directed that results from the maieutic path of recovery and construction of memory. Concerning this last aspect, the concepts of *introversion* and *extraversion* were found to be a particularly interesting analytical tool. Resorting to a formulation proposed by Jean-François Bayart (2000) and taken up again by Alice Bellagamba (2009), it is possible to place within the continuum separating extraversion and introversion, the different memory management practices used within a community. It thus becomes possible to distinguish between introversive approaches, directed toward the members of the community themselves, and created specifically for them, and greatly extraversive approaches, targeted toward communication to the outside and those who do not belong to the group, to the valorisation of and resorting to memory as a factor of economic development.

## Macugnaga: a border community, a community of borders

12 The reasons that led to choosing this town are connected to its historical particularities, which have had significant repercussions on both its demographic dynamics, past and present, and its cultural connotations. At various points in its history, Macugnaga was affected by migratory movements that have significantly changed the structure of the population, beginning with the very first settlement, which occurred during the Middle Ages, by German-speaking populations from the Saas valley in Switzerland<sup>6</sup>.

13 While Macugnaga, even pursuant to Law No. 482/1999<sup>7</sup> could be seen as a Walser community, its history and memory do not end with the Walser settlement. In fact, the medieval settlement was followed in modern times and up to the mid 20th century, by waves of immigration due to the presence of local gold mines<sup>8</sup>. The closure of the mine brought a sudden decrease in the population and made a radical economic conversion necessary, a conversion towards tourism with mountaineering and mountain sports and which, with the flow of personnel for tourism accommodation, caused further additions to the population.

14 These early and intense phenomena of immigration have obviously “contaminated” the original Walser core. To understand the context of Macugnaga, it is necessary to resort to the concept of *border*, intended according to three meanings. Not only is the village close to the national border between Italy and Switzerland, it is also a “border” community in the linguistic-cultural sense, distinguishing the German area from the Romance one. Lastly, the different immigration phases determined the rise of intra-community cultural and social borders, which can be observed by studying the practices of memory management<sup>9</sup>.

15 This “familiarity” with the changes in the composition of the population has had profound consequences from two points of view. The historic heritage of the different immigration movements gave rise to an obvious – and in some ways unusual – coexistence of different memories and cultural goods that could be capitalised on, which coalesce into different

instances of recognition. It thus became interesting to verify how the management dynamics of these memories were structured, and to whom the strategies of conservation and valorisation were directed. In addition, these historical, social and economic characteristics have effectively preserved Macugnaga from the demographic collapse that became instead familiar in numerous other towns in the western alpine arc, and which consequently ensured that not even “rebirth” phenomena were found, such as those witnessed in some municipalities in the western Alps (Viazzo, 2012b). Despite the fact that the number of inhabitants has decreased slightly during the past few years<sup>10</sup>, there is a certain substantial stability, which however conceals, as shall be later seen, interesting phenomena of dynamic population replacement.

## Living in the mountains

- 16 From the investigation made in Macugnaga, it was found that, faced with a certain number of people leaving the mountains, there are however important cases of neo-settlement observed<sup>11</sup>. A complex picture emerged, which required a careful reconsideration of the conceptual categories usually used in investigating phenomena of new alpine settlements, and which led me to reflect on what it means to “live in the mountains” and who, consequently, could be called a “mountain dweller”.
- 17 The strong tourism connotation of the context of Macugnaga, which mostly developed from the 1960s, ensured that its population is particularly used to the presence of holiday-makers, who, especially in the past, even spent rather long periods in Macugnaga during the year. It is precisely to these “part-time” examples in the town that very often the current cases of neo-settlement are due: in fact, often, those who decide to move to Macugnaga are those who used to frequently visit the town and its inhabitants. It is almost always young people who came to visit Macugnaga since their childhood, becoming accustomed to its surroundings and becoming at the same time familiar faces to the inhabitants of the town. While this familiarity does not directly translate into complete assimilation devoid of distinctions, in these cases, to speak of “new” inhabitants seems oversimplified and potentially misleading. This is even truer if we think that often, as clearly seen in the interviews, it is these very people who do not consider themselves new inhabitants and who do not present themselves as such: “I spent every summer here since I was a child, it was only natural I would move here” (S.B., 19/07/2011); “I always said I would come live here, I always said so, even before. You know those dreams you have as a girl, where you say 'that's my house, that's the one I want'” I.N. 20/06/2011).
- 18 The composition of the population in this town is therefore variable and characterised by the simultaneous presence of people who express different, varying ways of living in the mountains, with modulations and intermediate gradations between the two polar opposites constituted by the “old inhabitants” and the very recent settlers. In fact, a few part-time figures can be identified in the town: on the one hand are long-term holiday-makers who became familiar and comfortable with the area and its inhabitants; on the other, are the native Macugnaga people who, due to work or studies, spend rather long periods of time outside the community.
- 19 If we shift our focus from the merely administrative datum of the legal residence, toward those who, in various ways, spend their lives or part of their lives in Macugnaga, we can thus see that “living” in the mountains has more to do with the sense of belonging, familiarity, identity – of oneself and others – of awareness and knowledge of the area, of acquired and recognised customs. The in-depth interviews and the attendance made possible by my continuous presence in the field, have helped to show how numerous informants underscore this aspect: “See, you're from Macugnaga when you feel you're home here. Because there are those who perhaps on paper live in Milan, were born and bred in Milan, but are a part of us, because they always come here, and if you ask them, they'll tell you that, deep down, they feel they are from Macugnaga” (D.D., 21/05/2011); “This is my home, even though I'm not always here” (C.P., 22/07/2011). Living in a place is therefore being used to that place, in varying and various ways and intensity.
- 20 In a context of this type, the dynamics of belonging and its acknowledgement manifest themselves mainly through the mechanisms of participation to community activities. We have

seen how we increasingly ask ourselves what role the new inhabitants have in local dynamics, and especially how to answer the question: “Who do the Alps belong to? Who are the mountain dwellers?” In light of the findings from the ethnographic research, it can be highlighted how the theme around which the thoughts that spring from these questions can be formulated, is precisely that of *participation*, intended as the qualitatively most significant expression of belonging. “Inhabitants” are those who show and especially assert their own belonging, as we shall more closely see in the next chapter, through active and proactive participation. One of the contexts in which this aspect becomes more evident are the practices in connection with the management and valorisation of local historical memory.

## Memories of what? Of whom? And for whom?

- 21 We have highlighted how in Macugnaga it is possible to identify a multitude of memories, all potentially spendable in the practices of valorisation. Nonetheless, a complex mosaic of representations emerges that refer to the past and present of the community, and the simultaneous presence of different selections of cultural and symbolic content ensures that these representations do not always coincide. Field investigation was therefore conducted in order to answer three questions in connection with the local dynamics of memory management: the memory of what? The memory of whom? The memory for whom?
- 22 Three primary thematic and symbolic cores have been identified, that refer to different aspects of the history of Macugnaga: its Walser origins, its mining past, and the memory in connection with the practice of mountaineering. Around these three cores of meaning, the paths of promotion and valorisation of the local cultural heritage are structured, that follow two different directions and involve different components of the local population. In fact, there are simultaneous processes of introversion and extraversion of memory. These two modes are not mutually exclusive, but could be considered as the two extremes of the *continuum* along which the different cultural activities of the community are placed.

## The Walser memory

- 23 For a long time, the symbolical component most often resorted to in Macugnaga, as both a distinctive identity element, and as a tool that could be used to promote the territory, is the Walser element. The ethnographic investigation, accomplished by collecting interviews and by participating in events where the Walser element is predominant (patron saint festivities, traditional fairs, religious processions connected to the liturgical calendar), allowed the identification of a multitude of facets and modes denoting the existence of different ways to interpret and subsequently use the particular aspect of the town’s historical memory<sup>12</sup>.
- 24 The feature differentiating these multiple modes of representation is dependent on how more or less restrictive is the definition of Walser. Observations and interviews have shown in particular a deep, and at times opposed, intra-community reflection on who can legitimately call themselves Walser and could therefore be in charge of and transmit this cultural heritage. It was found that a part of the community sees itself according to a rigidly philological and genealogical approach, based on which only those who are direct descendants of the core of medieval settlers can boast of the Walser label. Therefore, it is the sense of belonging to a community that is transmitted, defined territorially, linguistically and culturally. However, within the same community, a more flexible position is beginning to emerge, according to which the criterion establishing belonging is not *exclusively* constituted by family origins. On the contrary, what allows the license to belong be granted would rather be the *conscious* practice of virtuous and proactive forms of “living in the mountains”. The emergence of this greater flexibility ensured that recently, while there is still some resistance, there has been contemplation of the possibility that the outsiders who are established in Macugnaga could participate in the dynamics of memory transmission, if they show a true desire to actively operate in the well-being of the community. To echo the words of an informant: “A person who settles here and participates at various levels of the community is more Walser than those who have three-quarter Walser blood but remain on the sidelines to watch the decline” (M.S., 10/08/2011).

25 These two different modes give rise to as many different practices of memory management, which can be interpreted by using – as previously mentioned – the conceptual pair of introversion and extraversion. A more introversive approach can be seen in the activities of recovery and transmission of memory and the linguistic heritage done at the intra-community level, of which the local associations are in charge, with the objective, to echo the words of someone I spoke with, of “remembering, maintaining and preserving tradition” (R.P., 25/05/2011). In contrast, examples of greater extraversion can be found in those occasions where the Walser element is used as a tool of tourism promotion, as is the case in the important fair of local craftsmanship held yearly in July.

### The mining memory

26 While in the case of the Walser memory, management is, in spite of the facets highlighted, almost exclusively internal to the community, for the mining past there is a shared management, involving not only the actors residing in the municipality of Macugnaga, but also those who come from the entire valley and municipalities from the valley floor, who have a history of even very long periods of intense visits to the town. The memory of such an economically and humanly important past is currently kept alive by the Association Sons of the Mine. The groundwork investigation, the participation to the commemorative occasions organised by the association, and the interviews made, have helped highlight that the main objective of the association is to raise awareness in the community itself, in order to give life to a past that has long remained in the background compared with the Walser memory, one which is more economically spendable in promoting tourism.

27 It seems particularly interesting that many of those who belong to the association, particularly the younger ones, do not reside in Macugnaga, but are instead habitual visitors to the town, and who through their direct participation to the association’s activities underline their connection with the places that were central to the history of their own family. The activities conducted within the association thus present both a work of promoting and outsourcing the memory, and simultaneously a tool that allows the retrieval of a familiar, private, *introversive* dimension of the memory. One of the interviewees said that these activities allowed him to rediscover, “through the collection of photographs and descents into the tunnels, a connection with my family’s memory” (D.C., 30/08/2011).

28 This maieutic approach is however beginning to become parallel to a commitment where there is a clearer extraversive element. In fact, there are communication and promotion paths prepared during fairs and events in the local territory, through the creation of publications and audiovisual materials.

### The mountaineering memory

29 While they do not entirely overlap, the Walser and mining memories nonetheless manage to coexist and be placed within a shared overview of meaning. The substrate – which is simultaneously physical and symbolic – within which they are placed, is the constant reference to the mountain, intended both in the general sense as a natural environment, and in particular as Monte Rosa. The alpine history of this town, and consequently the memory that remains alive, is inextricably linked to the majestic eastern façade of Monte Rosa, and the events that occurred there which involved the main pioneers of mountaineering.

30 Reference to this shared, connective memory, physically translates into the organisation of community activities involving the environment and the territory, for example the tracing of paths or the maintenance of camps in which participate not only those who live permanently in Macugnaga, independently from “residence seniority”, but often even those who have been to the area for a long enough time that they have gained rooted and solid relationships of familiarity with both the area and its inhabitants, as demonstrated by how belonging to the community is eminently manifest through the dynamics of participation.

31 The great pervasiveness of the memory connected to the mountain in the local imagination ensures that the activities to protect the environment take the form of practices that allow the community to reflect, introversively, on its own connection with the territory and the role

of the mountain in defining the identity of the community itself. At the same time, because of the importance of alpine sports in the local economy, a large part of tourism promotion activities, which are clearly extraversive, concentrate precisely on environmental, landscape and territorial specifics of the town.

## Conclusion

- 32 The profile of the population observed in Macugnaga gives rise to the hypothesis on the existence of a social-demographic development model that differs from other *patterns* that can be identified, at a greater scale, as much in the western as in the eastern alpine arc. The specific historical and economic events that have characterised Macugnaga have in fact prevented the town from being hit by the dramatic depopulation events that have instead characterised a good part of the western Alps. This relative demographic stability for the town ensured that the arrival of new inhabitants did not have as much of a radical impact as, for example, that experienced in the Cuneo Alps. However, Macugnaga also differs from the communities in the eastern Alps, especially the German-speaking slope (Bender and Kanitscheider, 2012), where a widespread demographic content comes with more sharply defined borders and criteria for belonging that are distinctly more rigid, and which reduce not only the demographic weight of the new residents but the political one as well, limiting the margins of cultural entrepreneurship. On the contrary, in Macugnaga, the historical familiarity with immigration has ensured that the case of neo-settlement is grafted onto a context that is already dynamic, giving rise to new processes of negotiating belonging and to redefine and discuss the characteristics that determine recognition and allocation.
- 33 The case study presented here thus proves to be doubly useful. On the methodological front it shows the advantages of ethnographic exploration, allowing the contextualisation and explanation of those phenomena that statistics and demographic sources are limited to finding. In addition, it allows a social-demographic model to be identified that is different and intermediate to the polar ones that dominate literature, contributing to the specialisation of the study of neo-settlement of the alpine arc.

---

## Bibliographie

- BÄTZING W., 2005.– *Le Alpi. Una regione unica al centro dell'Europa*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino (ed. orig. München, Verlag C. H. Beck oHG, 2003).
- BAYART J-F., 2000.– « Africa in the World : a history of extraversion », *African Affairs*, n°99-395, pp. 217-267.
- BEISSMAN M., LÖFFLER R., WALDER J., STEINICKE, E., 2012.– « Neue demographische Prozesse und deren Konsequenzen in den italienischen Alpen », in Varotto M., Castiglioni B. (eds.), *Di chi sono le Alpi ? Appartenenze politiche, economiche e culturali nel mondo alpino contemporaneo*, Padova University Press, Padova, pp. 230-239.
- BELLAGAMBA A., 2009.– «After abolition : metaphors of slavery in the political history of the Gambia », in Rossi B. (ed.), *Reconfiguring slavery. West African trajectories*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, pp. 63-84.
- Bender O., Kanitscheider S., 2012.– « New immigration into the European Alps : emerging research issues », *Mountain Research and Development*, n° 32, pp. 235-241.
- BERLINER D., 2005.– « The abuses of memory : reflections on the memory boom in anthropology », *Anthropological Quarterly*, n°78, pp. 197-211.
- BERTAMINI, T., 2005.– *Storia di Macugnaga*, Ed. Parrocchia di Macugnaga, Macugnaga.
- BLOCH M., 1998.– « Memoria autobiografica e memoria storica del passato più remoto », in Borutti S., Fabietti U. (eds.), *Fra antropologia e storia*, Mursia, Milano, pp. 40-55.
- BORSODORF A., 2009.– « Amenity migration in rural mountain areas », *Die Erde*, n°140, pp. 225-228.
- CAPPELLETTO F., 2003.– « Long-term memory of extreme events : from autobiography to history », *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, n°9, pp. 241-260.
- CERRI R., ZANNI A., 2008.– *L'oro del Rosa. Le miniere aurifere tra Ossola e Valsesia nel Settecento*, Zeisciu Centro Studi, Magenta.



CORRADO F. (ed.), 2010.– *Ri-abitare le Alpi. Nuovi abitanti e politiche di sviluppo*, Eidon Edizioni, Genova.

DEMATTEIS G. (ed.), 2011.– *Montanari per scelta. Indizi di rinascita nella montagna piemontese*, FrancoAngeli, Milano.

FOURNY M.C., 1994.– « Nouveaux habitants dans un pays de moyenne montagne », *Études rurales*, n°134-135, pp. 83-95.

MOSS L.A.G. (ed.), 2006.– *The amenity migrants : seeking and sustaining mountains and their cultures*, CAB International, Wallingford.

Perlik M., 2006.– *The specifics of amenity migration in the European Alps*, in Moss L.A.G. (ed.), *The amenity migrants : seeking and sustaining mountains and their cultures*, CAB International, Wallingford pp. 215-231.

REVEL J. (ed.), 2006.– *Giochi di scala. La microstoria alla prova dell'esperienza*, Viella, Roma.

STEINICKE E., 2011.– *Italian Alps : demographic change*, rapporto presentato all'Alpine Space Forum *Coping with demographic change – shaping policies*, Innsbruck, 22-23 febbraio.

Tappeiner U., Borsdorf A., Tasser E. (eds.), 2008.– *Alpenatlas. Society, Economy, Environment*, Spektrum Akademischer Verlag & Springer, Heidelberg.

VAROTTO M., 2003.– « Problemi di spopolamento nelle Alpi italiane : le tendenze recenti (1991-2001) », in Varotto M., Psenner R. (eds.), *Spopolamento montano : cause ed effetti*, Rete Montagna, Fondazione Giovanni Angelini e Universität Innsbruck, Belluno-Innsbruck, pp. 103-117.

VAROTTO M., CASTIGLIONI B. (eds.), 2012.– *Di chi sono le Alpi ? Appartenenze politiche, economiche e culturali nel mondo alpino contemporaneo*, Padova University Press, Padova.

VIAZZO P.P., 2012a.– « Paradossi alpini, vecchi e nuovi : ripensare il rapporto tra demografia e mutamento culturale », in Varotto M., Castiglioni B. (eds.), *Di chi sono le Alpi ? Appartenenze politiche, economiche e culturali nel mondo alpino contemporaneo*, Padova University Press, Padova, pp. 182-192.

VIAZZO P.P., 2012b.– « Demographic change in the Alpine space. Key challenges for the future », in Maurer O., Wyrzens H.K. (eds.), *Demographic challenges in the Alpine space. The search for transnational answers*, Freie Universität Bozen, Bolzano, pp. 25-32.

VIAZZO P.P., FASSIO G., 2012.– « Borders et frontières : définitions théoriques et expérience subjective d'un concept à géométrie variable. La perception de la frontière franco-italienne chez les Italiens de Grenoble », *Migrations Societé*, vol. 24, n°140, pp. 255-264.

ZANINI R., 2010.– « Per un'antropologia del ripopolamento alpino », in Corrado F., Porcellana V. (eds.) *Alpi e ricerca. Proposte e progetti per i territori alpini*, FrancoAngeli, Milano, pp. 122-132.

---

## Notes

1 Graduate School of Human Sciences, specialisation in Anthropological Sciences.

2 The seed of these reflections was first expressed in a previous work of mine, whose title is echoed here (Zanini, 2010).

3 In particular, please refer to the works of Pier Paolo Viazzo (2012a, 2012b).

4 For a general framework, please refer to the works of Bloch (1998), Cappelletto (2003) and Berliner (2005).

5 The scientific literature that dealt with the phenomena of alpine depopulation and repopulation is very vast. The reflections proposed by Fourny (1994), Varotto (2003), and Bätzing (2005) - who first focussed on the phenomena of depopulation and subsequently on the trend reversal that transformed the alpine arc from an area in constant demographic decline to a varied area with significant growth phenomena - were followed by many studies, almost always penned by demographers and geographers, who began to reflect on what were the characteristics of these episodes of demographic regrowth in the alpine region, and who were the neolocals to whom it was due. In particular, please refer to the contributions of Perlik (2006), who explores the alpine case within a broader analysis of the phenomenon of *amenity migration* (Moss, 2006), and Borsdorf (2009). For an in-depth study on the Italian context, please refer to the works of Corrado (2010), Dematteis (2011), Steinicke (2011), and Beissman, Löffler, Walder, Steinicke (2012). For a synoptic view of the demographic dynamics that involve the entire alpine arc, based on an effective presentation of the most recent literature, please refer to the contribution of Bender and Kanitscheider (2012). Instead, anthropological studies on the effects of the changes that occurred in the composition of alpine populations are almost completely lacking, particularly on the dynamics of management and transmission of memory: for a primary outline, please refer to Viazzo (2012a).

6 The first documents that show the presence of populations of Alemannic origin in the territory of Valle Anzasca, date back to the mid-thirteenth century, and the migrations from Valais toward Macugnaga through the Monte Moro Pass occurred up to the 16th century, to then restart, in a different form and in an economic context now conditioned by the presence of mining industry, in the 18th and 19th centuries. For a more in depth study on the Walser colonisation of the Macugnaga territory, please refer to the works of Bertamini (2005), and Rizzi, Zanzi and Valsesia (2006).

7 “Norme in materia di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche [Rules on the protection of historical linguistic minorities]”.

8 During the initial period, specialised skilled workers came mainly from the Tyrolean region and some areas in Piedmont; subsequently, between the 19th and the 20th centuries, there was a significant demographic increase, a consequence of the presence of miners from every part of Italy. On Macugnaga’s mining history, please refer to the works by Cerri and Zanni (2008).

9 It is worth remembering here that not only is the concept of border at the centre of a broad theoretical debate in the anthropological context, which has been ongoing for the past few decades (Viazzo and Fassio, 2010), but that this debate has also been made fertile and intricate at the same time by the polysemy of key words. In particular, the Italian word *confine* unites two different meanings within the same word, which in other languages, English for instance, remain distinct. In English, the word *confine* can be translated both with *boundary*, a word that mainly refers to the social-cultural and symbolic dimensions, and with *border* which has a distinctly more political-administrative connotation closer to the Italian word *frontiera*. In the case of Macugnaga, both connotations are important, symbolical and political-administrative. In fact, in its history, Macugnaga was strongly conditioned by the presence of the political border separating Italy and Switzerland, which, especially after the creation of nation states, caused the normal commercial exchanges that for centuries had been practised across the alpine passes to turn into operations of contraband. However, of greater importance are the cultural and symbolical borders that came to be due to the presence of population cores of different cultural, linguistic and professional origin. A peek into these borders is given by the presence of different ways of interpreting Macugnaga’s past, which translate into multiple memories that coexist in the local context and which can be found, as shall be seen, through ethnographic investigation.

10 Census surveys recorded 626 residents in 1991, 651 in 2001 and 613 in 2011.

11 During the decade between 2001 and 2010, the official demographic sources recorded 196 cancellations from the municipal registers, counterbalanced by 170 new registrations.

12 In a community of around 600 inhabitants there are two Walser associations and one museum, also connected to the Walser culture.

---

### *Pour citer cet article*

#### Référence électronique

Roberta Clara Zanini, « Dynamics of the population and dynamics of the memory of an alpine community on the border », *Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine* [En ligne], 101-3 | 2013, mis en ligne le 02 avril 2014, consulté le 07 avril 2014. URL : <http://rga.revues.org/2254> ; DOI : 10.4000/rga.2254

---

### *À propos de l’auteur*

**Roberta Clara Zanini**  
University of Turin,  
[robertaclara.zanini@unito.it](mailto:robertaclara.zanini@unito.it)

---

### *Droits d’auteur*

© Journal of Alpine Research | Revue de géographie alpine

---

### *Résumé*

The aim of this contribution is to correlate the demographic dynamics that can be observed in the Alps area, with those of management, transmission and valorisation of the local historical memory; in particular, this work focuses on the Piedmont town of Macugnaga, where

an ethnographic research was conducted. Moving from the main theoretical, demographic and geographic proposals that concern the phenomena of repopulation of the alpine area, and from anthropological reflections on the subject of memory, there arose the need for a dialogue between the two perspectives and to adopt a multi-level method that would integrate the macro approach of demographic reconstructions with the “ground level” approach of ethnography. The increasing number of new inhabitants in the Alps raises the question of who could legitimately call themselves “mountain dwellers” and how these dynamics of belonging manifest themselves. One of the most significant ways in which belonging to the community is expressed, is through the participation in the management and transmission of the local historical memory. It will be shown how in this case study, the history of the community, characterised by early immigration movements, gave rise to the coexistence of different transmissible memories that concern different aspects of the local history. In addition, the current composition of the population is characterised by the simultaneous presence of people who express different and varied ways of living in the mountains.

### ***Entrées d'index***

***Keywords*** : Piedmont Alps, repopulation, memory, belonging, participation

### ***Notes de la rédaction***

This article is the winner of the YARA – Young Alpine Research Award organised by the *Journal Alpine Research* | *Revue de géographie alpine*. It is thus published in the latest issue of the Journal at the occasion of its 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.