

Herigitisation, tourism and depopulation: Economies of Sardinian mountain towns*

Domenico Branca, Franco Lai
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences,
University of Sassari, Italy

INTRODUCTION

Nature-based tourism and processes of herigitisation are well-established subjects of study within the social sciences. A literature review on this topic reveals that a substantial portion focuses on mountainous areas, particularly regions with a historically established tourist tradition, such as the Alps, the Pyrenees, or, more recently, the Andes. However, researchers have paid less attention to Mediterranean mountains, such as those in Sardinia, which are currently experiencing a revival as they transition from places of labour to leisure and nature-based tourism with a cultural dimension. Specifically, with the development of nature-based tourism, these mountains and their communities attract numerous visitors and sports enthusiasts interested in hiking, local products, and cultural traditions. This reflects the current interest in environmental awareness, the climate crisis, and the local cultural heritage. At the same time, mountainous communities in Sardinia face serious depopulation issues, a process that dates back to the 1960s and has brought about profound changes in these territories. By employing a methodology that combines historical research and ethnographic techniques, this study aims to outline a concise cultural history of local economies from the 19th century to the present day, focusing on three significant cases: Aritzo, Fonni, and Mamoiada.

METHODOLOGY

This paper presents the preliminary results of the ongoing research within the *InnTerr* project of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Sassari, aimed at mapping the tourism and heritage resources of 18 municipalities in the mountainous areas of Sardinia. It also aims to study the changes in local economies from the 19th century to the present. The research adopts a methodology that combines historical research and ethnographic techniques. In terms of data collection, the research involved the review of primary sources related to the local economy, demographic evolution, and migration patterns in the selected municipalities to understand the significant economic changes in the areas under study. Three main periods have been identified: the 19th century, characterized by a subsistence-oriented economy (Tore, 1975); the second half of the

* This paper was prepared for presentation at the Panel Envi04: Changing communities in mountain areas between certainties and uncertainties, SIEF2023, 16th Congress “Living Uncertainty” conference held on Brno, Czech Republic: 7-10 June 2023.

20th century, marked by significant migration and a progressive demographic decline; and the 1970s-1980s as a period of cultural heritage recovery and local production. In addition, various ethnographic techniques have been employed, particularly in the village of Aritzo, including participant observation during carnival celebrations and informal conversations with residents. Due to the number of municipalities involved in the project, three representative cases have been selected: Aritzo, Fonni, and Mamoiada, chosen for their economic, tourist, and local food production significance.

NATURE-BASED TOURISM, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND DEPOPULATION

Nature-based tourism, also known as nature-oriented tourism or ecotourism (Simonicca, 1997), refers to tourism that focuses on experiencing and interacting with the natural environment. It has emerged as a relevant research topic within cultural anthropology and social sciences since the 1980s (Stronza, 2001). This form of tourism distinguishes itself from mass tourism as it emphasizes sustainable tourism experiences, including the consumption of local food and wine products and an interest in cultural traditions and nature. However, ecotourism has been incorporated into the broader spectrum of tourist attractions, activities, service quality, products, and pricing (Buckley, 2016). Nature-based tourism often aligns with the principles of the so-called slow movements, which promote a conscious and contextually aware experience of time and space (Wearing et al., 2012). A key aspect of nature-based tourism is its connection to the utilization of cultural heritage (or, more precisely, processes of valorizing specific elements, practices, or productions, i.e., herigitization phenomena—Palumbo, 2003) as a means to preserve the memory of the past and, importantly, generate economic opportunities, often in response to socio-economic crises, such as depopulation scenarios.

RESULTS

A. Aritzo

Located in the historical region of Barbagia di Belvì, at an altitude of approximately 800 meters at the foot of Gennargentu Mountain Range, Aritzo currently has 1184 inhabitants, a significantly lower number compared to the approximately 2500 recorded in 1961 (ISTAT). Since then, the population in this town has undergone a considerable decline.

During the Spanish era, Aritzo was an important centre that based its economy on local production and regional trade. Due to its geographic and climatic characteristics, the local economy relied on mountainous productions, including the notable industry of *neviere* (snow storage structures) and ice production, which has been active since the 17th century (Filigheddu et al., 1991). Agrosilvopastoral exploitation, particularly the cultivation of chestnuts, hazelnuts, and

walnuts at various altitudes, played a significant role. According to Angius, the gathering of these products was carried out by women. Additionally, forestry activities and wood-related craftsmanship were prominent (Angius, 1832-1848 [2006]; Maxia, 2003; Pantaleoni and Fiori, 2006).

Until the second half of the 20th century, transhumance—practised between autumn and spring—led shepherds towards the coastal areas of the island, particularly the regions of Monreale, Sulcis, and Campidano di Cagliari. Simultaneously, the people of Aritzo ventured north towards Goceano and Gallura to trade timber and other mountain products (Angius, 1832-1848 [2006]; Le Lannou, 1979; Ortu, 1988).

Between the late 19th and the first half of the 20th century, Aritzo became a renowned destination for mountain tourism, primarily attracting visitors from Cagliari and abroad. After the 1960s, Aritzo, like most villages in the inland areas, experienced significant socio-cultural and economic changes. A considerable population decline was one of the most significant transformations, as people migrated to traditional transhumance regions or industrial hubs in northern Italy and abroad. Traditional productions, such as snow-related activities, vanished, but a local product called *carapigna*, a lemon sorbet, survived and can be enjoyed at various festivals and events on the island. Since 1972, the *Sagra della Castagna* (Chestnut Festival) has been celebrated in October, and significant celebrations related to the annual cycle, such as Sant'Antonio and Carnival (with the traditional *Mumutzones* mask), as well as more recent events like “Autunno in Barbagia,” have emerged. Several museums tell the region's history, including the *Ecomuseo della Montagna Sarda* (Ecomuseum of the Sardinian Mountains).

Compared to the past, tourism in Aritzo has lost relevance, and many of the town's hotels either no longer operate or have been repurposed as reception centres for migrants. Conversations with residents in January and February 2023 revealed a widespread perception of danger in this situation and structural problems during winter, as experienced this year due to heavy snowfall, which caused power outages in the town for several hours.

B. Fonni

Fonni, the highest town in Sardinia, located at 1000 meters in the Barbagia di Ollolai region, with over 3600 inhabitants, is one of the main centres in the Barbagia area. Similar to the previous case of Aritzo, the population had progressively decreased since the 1961 census (when it had over 5000 inhabitants) (ISTAT).

During the 19th and early 20th centuries, the economy of Fonni was primarily based on sheep and goat farming (including dairy production), pig farming, and to a lesser extent, cattle farming. Agricultural production was also significant, particularly wheat, fava beans, and barley. Horticulture

played an important role (Fonni was one of the first Sardinian towns to cultivate potatoes) and fruit trees, especially walnuts, hazelnuts, and cherries. Women in the town were engaged in weaving, and their substantial production was traded, along with horticultural products and livestock, particularly during the transhumance period, which extended towards Barigadu and the Campidano of Oristano and Cagliari (Angius 1832-1848 [2006]; Murru Corrigan 1990).

Similarly to Aritzo, Fonni also underwent significant socio-cultural and economic changes after the 1960s. Currently, in addition to its agro-pastoral vocation and cultivation of chestnuts, vineyards, orchards, and olive groves according to the altitude of different areas, Fonni is known for its confectionery products, which is important at the regional level. Due to its geographical and climatic characteristics, winter tourism has been a significant source of income for the town for several years. Together with the neighbouring municipalities of Dèsolo and Villagrande Strisàili, Fonni shares the Bruncu Spina Ski Resort, which, along with the carnival celebrations (featuring *Sos Urthos* and *Sos Buttudos* as traditional masks) and the implementation of a hiking network, positions Fonni as one of the most important tourist destinations on the island.

C. Mamoiada

Located slightly lower than the other two towns, still within the region of Barbagia di Ollolai, Mamoiada reaches an elevation of 643 meters. In this case, the town has also experienced a demographic decline, with the population decreasing from approximately 3200 inhabitants according to the 1961 census to the current 2560. However, probably due to its proximity to Nuoro, the rate of population loss is lower compared to the other two cases.

Historically, Mamoiada's economy did not differ substantially from Fonni's, although with some peculiarities, particularly in apiculture. Local products were mainly traded towards the eastern coast of Baronia and Barbagia. Interestingly, according to sources, wine production was considered limited and poor quality (Angius 1832-1848 [2006]).

This aspect is significant because the contemporary economy is based not only on agricultural and livestock production but especially on viticulture, with products of remarkable quality and distribution locally and internationally. In addition, tourism, primarily cultural and related to ethnographic heritage, has gained importance for several years, thanks to the carnival. The masks of *Mamuthones* and *Issohadores* represent, in Sardinia, almost a synonym for traditional carnival, and related to this is the *Museo delle Maschere Mediterranee di Mamoiada* (Museum of Mediterranean Masks of Mamoiada), one of the most important traditional mask museums in Europe. However, the importance of the Mamoiada carnival and *Autunno in Barbagia* is causing what has been defined as an overtourism phenomenon (Milano et al., 2019: 1), although concentrated during a few days (L'Unione Sarda, 2022).

Mamoiada is starting to witness the emergence of a type of food and wine tourism that connects the knowledge of the territory with local productions through visits to vineyards and tastings of local products.

DISCUSSION

Based on this framework, it is possible to propose a preliminary periodization of the socio-historical and economic dynamics common to most mountain villages in Sardinia, exemplified by the cases of Aritzo, Fonni, and Mamoiada.

In the 19th century, local economies were mainly based on subsistence farming and agro-pastoral production, taking advantage of local geographic and climatic features, such as the *neviere* in Aritzo. However, transhumance practices and trade relations facilitated regional exchange, consumption and social connections, creating interconnections between distant places.

The first half of the 20th century it had marked a period of significant socio-cultural and economic changes, particularly from the 1950s onwards, when the phenomenon of emigration to the coastal areas of the island, industrial cities in northern Italy, and northern Europe led to ongoing depopulation and significant demographic decline.

From the 1970s and 1980s, in line with other European and global contexts, local cultural heritage has been revived by rediscovering carnivals and traditional productions increasingly oriented towards the global market. In this regard, it is noteworthy that some historical productions of the area, such as *sa carapigna* or *torrone* (nougat), have transformed artisanal to entrepreneurial dimensions. This process has involved some families that have taken a significant step forward regarding business size, product quality, and marketing strategies, as in the case of the Pruneddu family in nearby Tonara. Some economists have previously recognized this area as a “sweet and bread district.” This recognition reflects the presence of a geographical concentration of producers and economic activities related to the production of sweets and bakery products in the region.

In addition, there has been a rediscovery of the Sardinian mountains, mainly through nature-based tourism and trekking, which is interested in local productions and the area’s cultural heritage.

However, despite efforts to valorize cultural heritage and implement tourism strategies, depopulation remains a strongly present phenomenon.

CONCLUSIONS

The rediscovery of Sardinia’s mountain areas as tourist destinations based on nature, local gastronomic and artisanal productions, and ethnographic tourism represents a relatively recent but active phenomenon. This new tourism offering responds to growing demand from a type of tourist interested in sustainable experiences, outdoor tourism, local products, and cultural traditions.

However, despite the interest and development of these tourism activities, the villages in the inland areas of Sardinia continue to face a severe depopulation problem. This phenomenon originated in the 1960s and still poses a significant challenge to local communities and mountain regions' economic and social sustainability.

REFERENCES

- Angius, V. 1832-1848 [2006]. *Città e villaggi della Sardegna dell'Ottocento*, 3 volumi (edited by L. Carta). Nuoro: Ilisso.
- Buckley, R. 2016. "Ecotourism." In J. Jafari, H. Xiao, eds. *Encyclopedia of Tourism* (pp. 284–285). London: Routledge.
- Filigheddu, F., L. Gasperini, P. Marcialis. 1991. La carapigna, granita di Aritzo: primi risultati di una ricerca etnografica. *Studi Sardi* XXIX: 466–517.
- Le Lannou, M. 1979. *Pastori e contadini di Sardegna*. Cagliari: Edizioni Della Torre.
- L'Unione Sarda. 2022. "Folla impressionante a Mamoiada, il sindaco: 'Grazie, ma non c'è più posto: non venite'." November 6, 2022. <https://onx.la/3b340>
- Maxia, A. 2003. *Dal villaggio alla selva. L'umanizzazione dello spazio in una comunità agro-silvo-pastorale della Sardegna*. Aritzo: Quaderni del Museo Etnografico di Aritzo.
- Milano, C., M. Novelli, J. M. Cheer. 2019. "Overtourism and tourismphobia: A journey through four decades of tourism development, planning and local concerns." *Tourism Planning & Development* 16(4): 353–357. DOI: 10.1080/21568316.2019.1599604
- Murru Corrìga, Giannetta. 1990. *Dalla montagna ai Campidani. Famiglia e mutamento in una comunità di pastori*. Sassari: EDES
- Ortu G. G. 1988. "La transumanza nella storia della Sardegna." *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome. Moyen-Age, Temps Modernes* 100(2): 821–838.
- Palumbo, B. 2003. *L'UNESCO e il campanile. Antropologia, politica e beni culturali in Sicilia orientale*. Roma: Meltemi.
- Pantaleoni, R. A., M. Fiori. 2006. "Nocciole in Sardegna." *Sardegna Agricoltura* XXXVII(6): 16–18.
- Simonicca, A. 1997. *Antropologia del turismo. Strategie di ricerca e contesti etnografici*. Roma: Carocci.
- Stronza, A. 2001. "Anthropology of Tourism: Forging New Ground for Ecotourism and Other Alternatives." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30: 261–283. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.anthro.30.1.261>
- Tore, G. 1975. "Ricerche sull'alimentazione e sul consumo alimentare nella Sardegna del XVIII e XIX secolo." *Mélanges de l'École Française de Rome* 87(2): 597–615.
- Wearing, S., M. Wearing, M. McDonald. 2012. "Slow'n down the town to let the nature grow: Ecotourism, social justice and sustainability." In S. Fullagar, K. Markwell, E. Wilson, eds. *Slow tourism: Experiences and mobilities* (pp. 36–50). Bristol: Channel View Publications.