

# “The Woodland Must Be Cultivated as a Field” – Conversations About the Changing Natural Environment in Vinigo di Cadore (Belluno, Italy)

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on how the Vinighesi (inhabitants of Vinigo di Cadore) perceive and engage with their changing environment. Their primary focus is on the woodland and its management, highlighting the contribution of human activities that made the forest a vibrant living space in the past. However, they also acknowledge that today it is in a state of neglect and no longer a resource for the Vinigo people. Instead, it has become a source of anxiety as the forest encroaches upon the village. They point to changes that are mainly due to human activities, such as depopulation, changing livelihood practices and a different approach to forest management that has led to a lack of care for their environment. The combination of these elements has created a discontinuity in what they perceive as a strong past relationship between people and their territory – particularly the forest – which once allowed the environment to be maintained in a healthy state. Vinighesi assert that this relationship must be restored.

## Introduction

In the last days of January 2014 Vinigo di Cadore (Belluno, Italy) woke up under a thick blanket of snow. A major unexpected storm had brought a heavy snow, blocking not only the two roads embracing the village but also the paved road with its steep slope and sharp turns connecting the villages of Vinigo and of Peaio with the rest of the region of Cadore. The village remained in the dark, without electricity for 48 hours and it was impossible to use mobile phones. In short, the snow blocked all communications, isolating the village. Among the causes of the blackout was the falling of several trees onto the power lines due to an exceptionally heavy load of snowfall.

The weather emergency had affected all of the Belluno Dolomites and the adjoining villages of the Belluno province. "Record snowfall, the black-out returns" ("*Neve da record, torna il black out*") headlined the front page of the daily local newspaper *Corriere delle Alpi* on February 1st and *Il Gazzettino* on the same day titled its front page "Northeast, snow and water bomb" ("*Nordest, bomba di neve e acqua*"). One had to go back to the 1970s to find any such quantities of snow.

It may seem unusual to begin this contribution, centred on the theme of woodlands with this vignette, but it is precisely by extrapolating such exceptional events from the "post-card" imagery we often associate with these high lands, that we can understand how extreme weather events are today experienced in this Alpine area. What struck me at that time was to realize that prior to those days in early 2014, when snow had overwhelmed us with its colour and depth, monopolizing our conversations, the narratives shared by the men and women interviewed had concentrated on other aspects of the natural world, particularly the woodland and the uncultivated fields. Vinigo's previously prevailing green-oriented perspective had, albeit temporarily, shifted to white.

During the period of fieldwork in Vinigo (2013–2016) people spoke in general of an increase in the temperature which has made these extreme winter events something associated only to the past.<sup>1</sup> Many interlocutors recalled family memories of very cold and snowy winters, experienced during the first part of the last century when some hamlets suffered true isolation as they were blocked by layers of snow a few meters high, lasting sometimes even for weeks. However, some elderly men mentioned the year 1940, when on Christmas Eve a section of Vinigo was destroyed by fire, a reminder that, as it was a snowless Christmas, it was even more difficult to extinguish the fire.

Going back to 2014 and the powerful images of those first days of intense snowfall, when men shovelled snow off the rooftops because it was wet and very heavy, and would have jeopardized the tightness of the roofs. Further, it was difficult to shovel the snow around the houses because people did not know where to pile it. Most inhabitants stayed at home, and those houses not equipped with wood-burning fireplace became very cold places.

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1 I want to thank the people of Vinigo for sharing their knowledge and experience about their past and present-day life. Many thanks go to Stefano, Maria, Lino, and especially to Giuliana and Marilena with whom the conversation continues to stay alive through the years.

A couple of days later, the thick white blanket of snow covering the two main streets was interrupted only by some traces of wild animals coming out of the woods in search of food during the night, mixed with a few tracks of snow tires. The snowfall kept all of us in some kind of isolation and thus it proved to be an opportunity to get closer to the daily life of the people who dwell in this village, numbering just a little over a hundred.<sup>2</sup>

Vinigo was indeed isolated, but it was an exceptional occasion. This vignette further highlights the long-standing issue of the management of woodlands and the infrastructure "maintenance" of the mountains. It also allows me to introduce the perspective adopted in this contribution by tuning into several scholars' plea for greater critical attention to the Alps and to narratives surrounding their "remoteness". I am referring to the reflection proposed by, among others, Pier Paolo Viazzo some twenty years ago, in which he revisits Edward Ardener's concept of remoteness, a concept that extends beyond the actual geographic distance of a location; a location, in fact, can be geographically close yet constructed as "distant". In his 1980s essays Ardener employs this concept when discussing the locations chosen by anthropologists to carry out their research. Their remoteness legitimizes these sites as field locations or, in the words of Gupta and Ferguson, makes them fields "more equal than others"(1997, p. 13), referring to what the two anthropologists call the "hierarchy of purity of field sites" (p. 12). Returning to the mountains, they are "almost by convention remote areas" (in Viazzo, 2003).

I aim to critically examine not just the concept of isolation and remoteness itself, but primarily the perspective that treats it as a backward projection, thereby overlooking historical, demographic, social, and economic transformations that have impacted mountain regions, which in turn risk to solidify the stereotypes of both mountain and plain. In this context, I find Mondher Kilani's case study of the Lower Valais particularly relevant. While the literature from the eighteenth century helps prevent external observers from becoming trapped into a narrative that portrays these lands and their inhabitants as victims of a harsh and hostile environment, the narrative shifts from the mid-nineteenth century onward. This shift is marked by a deterministic view of nature and progress, which leads to the interpretation of these areas

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2 The residents of Vinigo at the time of the research were 115 evenly divided between males (58) and females (57).

as inhabited by a “primitive” humanity, resulting in a perspective that has been altered into “a *long durée* backwardness” (Viazzo, 2003, p. 176)<sup>3</sup>.

I find that a critical analysis of the concept of remoteness lends itself well in the case of Vinigo. For people living in neighboring villages and small towns Vinigo conjures images of an isolated place. However, for the Vinigo people, though they are aware of the demographic decline that has affected their place, the presence of an increasingly elderly population and the slow closure of all the economic activities that in the past attracted people from outside, other images are associated with their place. Thus, the notion of remoteness as perceived from the outside does not correspond to the Vinighesi’s view of themselves and their place, even if they, like so many others mountain areas, complain of being left alone by “the State”. For example, in December 2013 the grocery store in the village closed, an activity that also functioned as a meeting place, where people went to chat, where they could leave small things to return to other locals. Maria, who had come back to Vinigo after years spent with her family in Germany, her two children grown up, continued to keep the store open in a space owned by her family, complaining that the state did not give any help to these small businesses in mountainous places, but on the contrary it continued to tighten taxes and burden bureaucratic paperwork, and so she made the decision to close the business at the end of 2013, leaving the village devoid of shared spaces, except for the church.

Contrary to the current stereotyped view of Vinigo as a remote area, its inhabitants are proudly aware of the high level of literacy in the village, as in the rest of Cadore, since the second half of the XIX century. Both boys and girls went to primary school which, as a woman commented, was “ahead of the school of the plain” (see also Piseri, 2012). The fact that both boys and girls attended primary school, and that the local education system was considered advanced compared to that of the plains challenges the notion of re-

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3 Lorenzo Migliorati in his contribution to the volume *Mountains and Hybrid Territories between Urbanity and Rurality* (2022) also asks whether “it is possible to look at the Alpine space beyond the clichés with which it is often accompanied?” (2022, p. 220), and one of the two stereotypes he refers to is that of the “isolated, distant, inaccessible Highlands” (p. 221). In the introduction to the same volume, Luigi Lorenzetti and Roberto Leggero (2022) emphasize the interconnection between urban and rural contexts, a phenomenon that also affects mountain contexts, and in this framework, they reflect on the concepts of permeability and contamination.

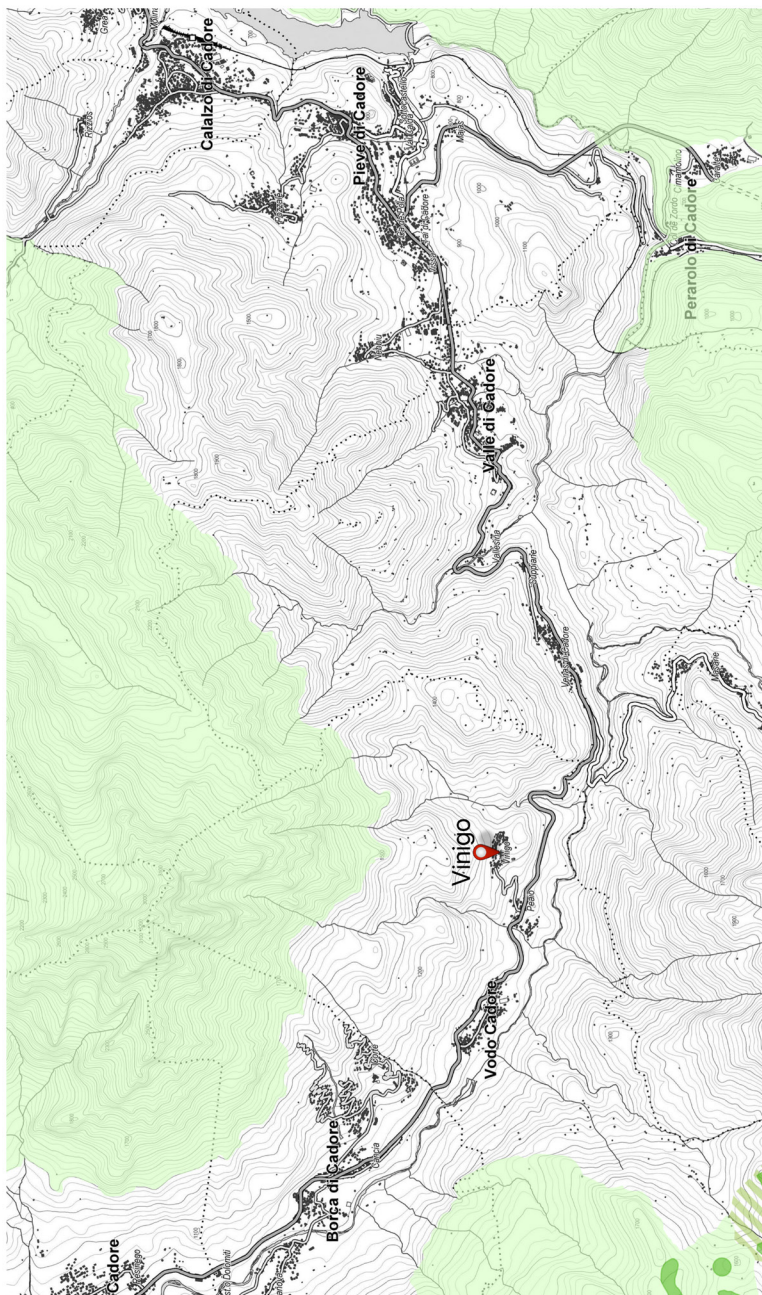


Figure 1 – Map of Vinigo and surroundings. webGIS of the Province of Belluno. Piano Territoriale di Coordinamento Provinciale, adapted, [www. https://webgis.provincia.belluno.it/index.php/view/map?repository=mappe&project=ptcp\\_app](https://webgis.provincia.belluno.it/index.php/view/map?repository=mappe&project=ptcp_app) Italian Open Data License

moteness by showcasing the area's proactive approach to literacy.<sup>4</sup> The elementary school opened in Vinigo in the second half of the XIX century with 60 students. From 1928/29 a new building hosted the school; the number of children attending it – around fifty – remained fairly constant from the 1930s to the 1950s, then numbers started to decline: from 35 enrolled in 1956 to only five in 1975, the school's last year of operation. (Marchioni and Pivarotto, 2022).<sup>5</sup> The presence of *colonie di vacanza* holiday camps in Vinigo in the summer time during the 1950s and 1960s also challenges the perception of the community as isolated and remote.<sup>6</sup> The arrival of young people from Veneto and beyond, often from the cities, not only provided a source of income for hosting families but also fostered interaction between the residents and the guests ("Parents came to visit their children and then they used to come back bringing their friends" recalls one of the interviewees) (see also Bonato and Viazzo, 2013).

Vinighesi, as local people are called, though they present depopulation as one of their main problems, assert their distinctiveness when they recount their ancient history while at the same time joking about their geographical location. They foreground their old and rich past when they owned distant pastures (see below) and point out the nickname used by nearby villages, who call them "dogs from Vinigo" (*i ciànes de Vinigo*), which refers to the role of guardians of the territory historically played by them (De Ghetto, 2009, p. 48). At the same time, they point out that until the 1970s/1980s those who relied on the bus to reach larger villages had to walk down to Peaio to catch it on the state road of Alemagna, the only road connecting with the rest of Cadore;<sup>7</sup> on the return trip they recalled the bus driver announcing the upcoming stop for those who needed to reach Vinigo by foot, "For Vinigo. You

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4 This echoes what Viazzo (1990) has discussed concerning literacy in the Alpine societies (pp. 184–188). The higher level of literacy may have been linked to the importance of seasonal migration; it was a skill needed by both men who migrated and women who remained in Vinigo to take care of all the agro-pastoral and domestic activities.

5 For a more general overview, see Piseri (2012).

6 In Vinigo it is a shared memory, yet no one can say exactly who organized these colonies. Later in the 1970s they remember a summer camp organized for several years by a priest.

7 Until 1964 had operated the Dolomites train, which was inaugurated in 1921 and had a station in Peaio. First the train and later the bus were used daily by students to travel to school, both middle and high school, as well as by workers.



change here: Eagle service”, an ironic way to refer to the steep slope of the road reaching Vinigo.

Keeping in mind also the risk of highlighting the remoteness of a place to make it more exotic, in this essay I aim to move away from this externally perceived imagery in considering the material collected in Vinigo, because only in this way can the notion of “negligence” of the environment around the village expressed by Vinighesi be read not as a nostalgic way of anchoring oneself in the past, but instead as a way to give voice to a more balanced way of relating to the environment, one that leverages a living sociality and shared handed-down knowledge, and which fosters a more sustainable coexistence between humans and the environment, ultimately contributing to a more sustainable future. Ingold’s perspective on how human beings relate to their environment (Ingold, 2000) and the call from Lorenzetto and Leggero (2022) to address the intricate connections with places by activating a “greater ability to read the complex relationships between the territory and who populates it” (p. 13) allow for a deeper understanding of how Vinighesi engage with their surroundings.

The metaphors used by people from Vinigo to speak of the area around Vinigo in the past – woodlands and meadows – are quite revealing. The sense of a place cared for looms large. This involves considering the notion of “care” (Tronto, 1993) with an emphasis on interconnection and interdependency (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017).

From this perspective, I will refer back to the conversations engaged in while in Vinigo to present the stories behind the vivid images local people relate about their natural environment, how they prioritize and express their concerns for the perceived changes in the landscape.<sup>8</sup> In doing so, although they speak of the changes in the landscape they do not view the natural en-

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8 The main ethnographic research in Vinigo was conducted between October 2013 and July 2015 as part of a larger project “Cultural Models of Nature Across Cultures: Space, Causality, and Primary Food Producers” funded by NSF (National Science Foundation). Nine scholars participating in the project presented and discussed their research during a workshop at the University of Verona in March 2015 (the written contributions in: Bennardo ed., 2019). Data were collected by Elisa Bellato and me while Iolanda Da Deppo transcribed the recorded (Ladin) material and Miro Marchi worked on data visualization. The analysis of the data owes much to long conversations I had with Giovanni Bennardo while he was a visiting scholar at the University of Verona. My last short fieldwork in Vinigo was in May 2016 before the Vaia storm of October 2018 which strongly affected parts of the Eastern Alps.

vironment as threatening per se, changes are instead perceived as being brought about by a different engagement between people and their environment. Older Vinighesi state that people must tend the woodland to keep it healthy, and that a healthy woodland benefits people.

Before addressing these issues, I introduce the research area by presenting some hallmarks to better contextualize it; first I focus on past mobility as outmigration is one of the most recurring challenges faced by Vinigo, then I deal with an important institution of Cadore: *the Rules [le Regole]*.

## The Field Site: Vinego Paés Laden in the Belluno Mountain Province

“Belluno represents the exciting crossroads between Alpine and Mediterranean cultures. The only entirely mountainous province in the Veneto region, Belluno is launching major initiatives throughout Italy to preserve Alpine its identity and traditions. Through new ideas and initiatives, Belluno – ‘Alpine City of the Year 1999’ – wants to develop, as a city and province, sustainable projects to stop depopulation and increase the survivability of mountain provinces in Italy and Europe.”<sup>9</sup> With this motivation Belluno was chosen as “Alpine City” in 1999 (<https://www.cittaalpina.org/town/belluno/>).<sup>10</sup>

The province of Belluno is one of the Italian provinces which are home to the Dolomitic Ladin. “Ladin” is a conventional label dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which became more widely used during the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, embracing the dialects spoken in the area and later the people who spoke them (Guglielmi, 2003). In the Province of Belluno, thanks to the legislation on historical linguistic minorities (Law 482/1999), several municipalities (Cadore, Comelico, Agordino, upper Val Cordevole and Val di Zoldo) have been

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9 “Belluno rappresenta l’emozionante crocevia tra la cultura alpina e quella mediterranea. Unica provincia montana del Veneto, Belluno sta avviando importanti iniziative in tutta Italia per preservare l’identità e le tradizioni alpine. Attraverso nuove idee e iniziative, Belluno - ‘Città alpina dell’anno 1999’ - desidera sviluppare, come città e provincia, progetti sostenibili per fermare lo spopolamento e aumentare la capacità di sopravvivenza delle province montane in Italia e in Europa.”

10 This decision was taken by an international jury chosen within the framework of the Alpine Town of the Year Association, a membership body that pursues the goals of the Alpine Convention (<https://www.cittaalpina.org/associazione/>).



recognized as Ladin. Among the different groups composing Dolomite Ladin, one is represented by Cadore Ladin.

Vinigo not only is one of the oldest settlements in the Cadore area at an elevation of 1,025 m (3,363 feet), but it is also one of the oldest ladin settlements in the area (Vinego Paés Laden),<sup>11</sup> with its origins going back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century (Collodo, 1987, p. 363). Both Vinigo and Peaio belong to the municipality of Vodo di Cadore, in the Boite Valley. The village lies between two creeks – to the west the Rudàn and to the east the Ruiniàn – both originating in the Antelao (the second highest peak in the Dolomites, 3,234 m.), north of the village. Contrary to the Ruiniàn, the former is perceived by local people as a water way that causes damage; for example, in August 2015 after heavy rain the stream caused a landslide. It is a tributary of the Boite, a tributary of the Piave river, flowing entirely in the Veneto Region. Though less elevated than the Antelao, the other imposing mountain, (to the west) is the Pelmo, 3,168 m., locally named “the throne of God” (*el caregon del Padreterno*), which, as several inhabitants point out, can be seen in all its “majesty and beauty” from Vinigo.



Figure 2 – Mount Pelmo (3,168m) seen from Vinigo, November 2014. Copyright 2014 by A. Paini.

11 For a description of the village of Vinigo and its central cultivated area, see Paini (2019).

## *Gelatieri* (ice-cream makers), not *Gelatai* (ice-cream sellers)

As most of the mountain area of the province of Belluno, Vinigo experienced different forms of emigration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In some cases, the emigration was due to seasonal movements, in others – particularly between the two world wars and afterwards – migration became permanent, directed to other European countries (in particular to Germany, Holland and the former Czechoslovakia), to the United States and to Argentina. Migrants left in search of work and a better life, they worked in factories, in mines and as *gelatieri*. In February, often on the 11<sup>th</sup>, they were remembered in a special feast celebrated in Vinigo (Marchioni and Piviroto 2002, p. 151).

Today, people in Vinigo eagerly emphasize the difference between ice-cream makers (*gelatieri*) and ice-cream sellers (*gelatai*), the latter a common name in Italy for people selling ice-cream. They did not leave to make a living by selling ice cream, but they were ice cream makers and made their living out of this expertise. The complex issue of emigration is recounted not only in terms of despair, hunger, and leaving one's homeland in search of a better future, but by foregrounding the skills they brought with them. They thus express pride in their ability to contribute specific competence to their migration project. They moved in search of a better life not only to improve their economic situation, but as they were keen to underline, they were also taking their skills to the host country. This narrative is inscribed in the groove traced by Viazzo (1989/1990) in his reinterpretation of Alpine societies, which challenges certain established preconceptions of these societies as closed and backward.

Furthermore, those who had moved to live in a European country, in time starting their own ice cream shop, would return home during the winter closure of the ice cream business between October and February/March, keeping alive their ties with Vinigo.

The archival data I consulted in the town hall in Vodo di Cadore shows that in the early 1900s Vinigo had 177 heads of families.<sup>12</sup> The situation in Vinigo with its current population of 115 residents and the decline to below 100 during wintertime highlights the significant impact of depopulation.

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12 *Registro della popolazione 1896–1902.*

Unlike other areas of the Italian Alps that are experiencing a resurgence or stagnation, Vinigo at the time of the research appeared to be facing a unique challenge. The absence of a 'return to the mountains' suggests that the village was not benefiting from the trends observed in some western Alpine localities. (Porcellana, Fassio, Viazzo e Zanini, 2016).

Other forms of seasonal movements were the itinerant economic activities such as coppersmiths (*calderai*) and glaziers (*vetrai*), an essential source of income until the 1960s and 1970s, though the main source of livelihood in those years still came from agriculture, breeding and the sale of timber. These itinerant crafts meant that on the one hand young and adult men were often away from the village for long periods of time. On the other hand, they were exposed to new ideas, crops and other items which they brought back to Vinigo. I take care to consider together both temporary migrations that will become permanent ones and these seasonal movements because in both cases Vinighesi speaking about them emphasize the relevance of taking one's professional expertise elsewhere and the more or less prolonged absence from home.

From the late 1960s manufacturers of eyewear (*occhialerie*) opened in Cadore,<sup>13</sup> providing a stable source of income for many families in Vinigo. However, this new economic activity failed to reverse the depopulation trend. Of the three taverns and one family restaurant operating in Vinigo in the 1960s, none survive.<sup>14</sup> Eyewear factories were a breath of fresh air for the local economy; they were located mainly in Venas, Pieve, and Calalzo, places at a short distance from Vinigo that allowed its inhabitants working there to commute.<sup>15</sup> But within twenty years or so, companies began moving to Longarone, which was too far away for daily commuting. And the people of Vinigo chose to move to live in other areas of Cadore or further away and young people after obtaining their high school or University degree decided not to return to live as there were no economic attractions. Even being a ski instructor in Cortina d'Ampezzo started to lose its appeal, as Mario, one of the in-

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13 Still today, the main production facilities are in the Belluno area, the so-called Italian "eyewear district" (*distretto dell'occhialeria*).

14 La Locanda dal Gobbo and the family restaurant operated from 1957 till 1985 (Riccarda, July 3rd, 2015).

15 In the 1960s the eyewear factories even offered people the possibility to work from home, assembling glasses, as Giuliana and her sister Angelina recalled.

terlocutors from Vinigo,<sup>16</sup> explains. “Those who are local have a job all year round and also have the license of ski instructor, yet no longer do it because it is no longer affordable.” He explains that in the past the ski instructors were carpenters, plumbers who alternated this work with that of the winter ski instructor. And this alternation “guaranteed a comfortable life,” adding “the ski instructors were professionals who had to know the environment. Nowadays there are more people who do it, even young people who come from outside and only stay for the season.”

## Land-use Management

“If there were no *Regole*, the environment in Cadore would have been devastated” said Mario, a *regoliere* himself, to open our conversation on the subject of land-use management.<sup>17</sup> In fact, the *Regola* (the Rule) is a very important local institution, a traditional communal way of ruling community life and of managing land, woodland and the natural resources which goes back to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. For centuries the people of Cadore have operated in strict compliance with both private and collective property rules. In the past, there were two rules in which Vinigo participated: the Big Rule (*La Regola Grande*) which included Vinigo, Peaio, Vodo and Cancia, and the Small Rule (*La Regola Piccola*) of Vinigo and Peaio. According to Belli (2007), during the centuries of its existence only two *Regole*, one of which was that of Peaio-Vinigo, dissolved the communal property by dividing it per capita (p. 21). None of the inhabitants of Vinigo can remember when this reorganization of land management took place, though Belli dates the breakup to the time of the Lombard Venetian (1816–1866).

Historians Giuseppe Richebuono (1962), Silvana Collodo (1987) and Giandomenico Zanderigo Rosolo (2012) report on a document of 1226 which relates

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16 I negotiated the terms of confidentiality with the research interlocutors. Several of them are happy to find themselves named (first name) in the written pages after several years passed since the field research.

17 As a contemporary example of the importance of land management capacity by the Rules, it was pointed out the rejection by the majority of San Vito Regolieri of the ski resort project on Mount Pelmo proposed by the municipal administration (Mario, January, 30th, 2014); for a more detailed analysis, see Corrado and Porcella (2012).

that the *regolieri* of Vinigo, members of the *regole*, who at the time owned the high-altitude pastureland of Lerosa, had donated a parcel of this land for building a small church dedicated to wayfarers. On the occasion of the church consecration, the *regolieri* made it clear to both religious and civil authorities who had come to participate in the ceremony, that they should stay within and not cross the well-defined boundaries of the donated pasture. In another document dated 1289, the *regolieri* of Vinigo made a list of the people who had the right to access the mountain specifying that “only these, and not others, can access the mountains” (“*isti sunt consortes munti et alii non*”) (Zanderigo Rosolo, 2012, p. 34) *consortes* (literally share-holders) referring to the people who had rights to access the mountains as distinguished from mere residents.

As early as in 1338 the area called Cadore was administratively divided in 27 *Regole* and politically in ten constituencies, called *Centenari* that made up the *Magnifica Comunità* (Magnificent Community) of Cadore.<sup>18</sup> At the time its territory was roughly divided and managed into three parts: a private one that included the houses, vegetable gardens and meadow plots close to the dwellings; a second part which included high-altitude grazing estates (*le monti*) used for sheep grazing; and the third and largest part of forests, “exclusive and undivided property of the people of Cadore” (Belli, 2007, p. 20). Today, these communal properties are characterized by being inalienable, but it was not always the case. In the early 1400s the *Regola* of Vinigo-Peaiò was forced to sell the high-altitude pastures of Lerosa as well as other pastures<sup>19</sup> in order to pay back the money needed to free villagers who had been made prisoners while defending (along with other men from nearby villages) the castle of Botestagno under attack by the soldiers of the Archduke of Austria. The soldiers had to retreat, but their captain managed to take some of Vinigo’s men as prisoners to Brunico. The money needed to free them was granted by the Ampezzo people of the Rule of Larieto, whose high-altitude pastures bordered those of the Vinigo people. To repay this debt, a few years later (1415) the Vinighesi sold them these pastures. Although the loss of pas-

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18 Vinigo was part of the Centenaro of Venas.

19 In July 2015, an exhibition on the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the passage of these lands from Vinigo to Ampezzo was inaugurated at Ciasa de ra Regoles, Cortina d’Ampezzo (mail July 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2015, secretary Regole d’Ampezzo).

tures was bitterly criticized, nevertheless it was ratified by the Cadore parliament, which later adopted an absolute ban on the alienation of high-altitude pastures valid for all of Cadore (Giacomel, 2008).

In 1420 Cadore was incorporated by Venice and this led to an increase in the value of the forests, as timber was in great demand in Venice. From this loomed the danger of indiscriminate exploitation of the forest resource, and so it was decided to transfer the ownership of the forests hitherto belonging to all the males of Cadore to the *Regole*, to prevent single individuals from plundering the forest resource. “The formula used was that of *vizzazione*, understood as the imposition of a conservation bond on a given forest [*vizza*], requested by the *regola* closest to that forest and authorized by the Pieve parliament [*maggior consiglio*]” (Belli, 2007, p. 23).

Belli explains that the *vizza* (a term connected to the Longobard practices of prohibiting, for example, cutting forest protecting a landslide escarpment) was a ban imposed on grazing and on cutting down of woodlands for conservation purposes. It permitted putting something off-limits in order to preserve the natural resource. In this practice, I found echoes of the concept of *tapu* as practiced by various indigenous people in Oceania. *Tapu* encompasses both sacredness and prohibition, reflecting a profound respect for certain places and practices (Keesing, 1985) but has also an “ecological meaning” (Favole, 2015, p. 97). In many indigenous cultures, *tapu* can dictate the use of natural resources, ensuring that certain areas are preserved, and that species are not overexploited. By recognizing and adhering to *tapu*, communities can foster sustainable practices. This ecological aspect emphasizes the importance of maintaining balance within ecosystems.

The *Regole* had the capacity to manage the natural resources of Cadore in a sustainable way, to use a contemporary expression. To limit the exploitation of a given natural resource to maintain or improve its availability, the forests of Cadore had passed into the patrimony of the *Regole*, removed from speculation and entrusted to their responsible management.

The assembly of *regolieri* defined the boundaries of the area to which the restrictions applied, the time frame (five, ten or more years), and delimited it with clearly visible signs. They drew up a notarized document to present to the *maggior consiglio*. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, there were almost no free forests in Cadore, where a citizen could harvest wood at will (Belli 2007).



Management of the territory by the *Regole* continued until the Napoleonic period, when the *Regole* were suppressed and their assets passed to the new municipalities, which were mapped on these old constituencies. However, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the *Regole* management system was revived. With the transfer of administrative functions regarding civic uses from the State to the Regions, the Veneto Region enacted the regional law on civic uses in July 1994, which includes the recognition of the *Regole*.<sup>20</sup> In contrast to the *Regola Piccola* Peaio-Vinigo, the *Regola Grande dei Monti di Vodo* was acknowledged in 2007 and was able to recover 95% of its pre-Napoleonic pastures and forests, with the remainder retained by the municipality. It is important to differentiate between civic use lands and *Regole*. On the one hand, the former consists of “land for agro-sylvo-pastoral use, inalienable, indivisible and non-usucaptable, on which essential rights of enjoyment are exercised (grazing, herbage, woodland, etc.) by the entire community residing in the reference territory. This collectivity is defined as open, in that individuals who establish their own residence in a municipality or hamlet, in which there are civic-use lands become by right part of the collectivity entitled to exercise the particular rights of enjoyment over the same lands” (Regione del Veneto, Direzione Turismo, 2016, p. 6; translation by the author). On the other hand, “the ancient *regolieri* heritages are configured as collective lands for agro-sylvo-pastoral use, inalienable, indivisible and non-usucaptable, owned by a closed collectivity. This closed collectivity is identifiable with the family nuclei or family-foci descending from the ancient families originally settled in the territory of reference.” (ibid., translation by the author).

The *regolieri* used to be only men. Nowadays, if there are no male descendants, a woman originating from a *regolieri* family, and married to a *regoliere*, can also become a member according to the Rules of Ampezzo, the example always referred to in Vinigo. In April 2016, 416 members of the Rules' Assembly voted yes, 18 votes less than the required quorum, on the proposition that a woman could become and remain a *regoliere* also if married to a non *regoliere*. Concerning this issue, the *Ciasa de ra Regoles* (the *Regole d'Ampezzo's* Newsletter) in May 2023 reported on the case of a *regoliere* who had asked to be removed from the *Regole* land registries (*catasto*) in which he was included,

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20 *Norme in materia di usi civici*, Veneto Regional Law n.31, 22 July 1994.

justifying his choice by gender discrimination in the transmission of land registry rights to male children only. Interestingly, the *Regola* responded that it was not possible to de-list a *regoliere* by his request since this would preclude the transmission of rights to the next generation (Ciasa de ra Regoles, 2023, p. 5).



Figure 3 – Vinigo surrounded by woodlands, May 2016. Copyright 2016 by A. Paini.

## Talking About the Woodlands and the Fields

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Vinigo was entirely surrounded by meadows. Cultivated plots dotted a landscape that is still very much alive in both men and women's narratives and to which photos of the time attest. They show a settlement surrounded by plots of various shades, ordered, recognizable; wheat, rye, corn, potatoes, barley, and hemp were grown in the fields bordering the village while those further away were used for pasture. People from Vinigo emphasized that every family had animals – cows, goats

and pigs – though only a few families, “the wealthier ones”, owned one or two horses, as Mario points out. The local activities which shaped the livelihood of Vinighesi were well synthesized by another man, *stalla e bosco* (stable and woodland). The daily lives of adults and children (after school) revolved around these activities. While acknowledging the loss of cultivated land, Vinighesi underscore that the woodland is encroaching on the village, pressing into their living space. Not only is the woodland expanding but it has also become denser – “so thick”, as Riccarda and others underline. “Woodlands were historically important as a very valuable resource: they provided woods for building houses, heating kitchens making tools and sleds; they were used for hunting, for collecting produce from the *sottobosco* (undergrowth).” (Paini, 2019, p. 184)

Daniela Perco (2002) points out that literature concerning the Italian Alps emphasizes the salience of woodland in this region. The anthropologist examines how local communities in the Dolomite areas “experience the gradual encroachment of woodlands, a phenomenon that has arisen following the decline of agro-sylvo-pastoral activities.” (2002, p. 319). Particularly relevant to this essay are Perco’s insights into the pertinent contrast in perceptions of the woodland: for urban citizens, it represents “uncontaminated nature”, where the concept of wildness “is valued”. In contrast, for woodsmen or farmers the encroachment of the woodland signifies “a loss of value”, thus the “dichotomy between cultivated/domesticated woodland and abandoned/wild woodland assumes diametrically opposite meanings.” (ibid., p. 322). Ethnographic research conducted in Vinigo reveals similar attitudes toward the woodland, illustrating how the local community navigate and interpret its relationship with the natural environment. These differing perspectives underscore the complex interplay between cultural values, economic realities and environmental changes in shaping human interactions with the woodland.

Also, Mauro Varotto’s discussion on “spontaneous reforestation” and the transformations linked to the loss of agricultural activities in high lands, stress the risk of “uncritically capturing the return to wilderness scenarios” (2000, p. 511) without recognizing the relevance of the integration between woodlands and dwelling. He emphasizes the importance of critically evaluating the return to wilderness scenarios, cautioning against an uncritical acceptance of these transformations. Varotto points out that while reforesta-

tion can be beneficial, it is essential to consider the significance of integrating forest ecosystems with human habitation. This integration is crucial for sustainable land management, ensuring that both natural and human communities can thrive together. His insights encourage a balanced approach that considers ecological, social, and economic factors in the context of land-use management. And indeed when local people say that the “woodland must be cultivated like a field” they are referring to an idea of human intervention which domesticated the woodland, but not in a detrimental way for the environment, but which instead gives shape to a landscape which is natural and cultural at the same time, where people recognize themselves and the work of their ancestors, while at the same time they feel being positively acknowledged by the different components of the woodlands. We can speak of an awareness of co-agency between humans and non-humans (Descola, 2013), of forms of being in tune with the woodlands that today seem lost.

Today, fields are no longer cultivated in Vinigo, and stables are empty. The loss of agricultural land also represents a loss of collective memory, of sociability and shared knowledge about their environment, as local people kept telling us, referring to their experience and to the oral memory passed down from one generation to the next. Most people no longer have a memory of the boundaries between plots. The knowledge of boundaries was transmitted orally by older people to the younger one. Ettore recalls, “When you were cutting the grass you also knew where the boundaries were; now we no longer know where the boundaries are”. As a set of functions and marks imprinted on the environment was lost, such as wooden stakes and the furrows, “The boundaries between one meadow and the other, you just saw them” (Marilena), so too it is the empirical knowledge that went along with it. Only Lino claims that he knows “quite well everything about this area because I was the last one who mowed the meadows, even up in Sadorno in summer. I know the small pieces of land, so the borders ... I remember them and even when someone must go to find a place, they come to ask me.”

Vinighesi associate these different spaces (meadows, hayfields and so on)<sup>21</sup> with memories of their personal experiences as well, which on the contrary are still much alive. Their ways of telling stories bring to the fore the

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21 Locally called *ciampe*, *pràs*, *vàres*, *bosche* (cultivated fields, meadows, hayfields, woodlands).

relevance for them of feelings and of the sense of smell. Marilena explains that “the hay has a memory for me that the cultivated fields do not.” The scent of hay brings back memories of her mother who carried the hay, and as she puts it the “going back and forth from the barn to the lawns with the sled was something she took in her stride.” These sensations have been evocative of the past, summoning memories. A few, like Lino, acknowledge it still being a part of his present-day life, “If I am in the middle of the woodland, I sense the air, the smell of things”. A connection between memory and the scents of the elements of their landscape which has been pointed out by Perco: “What is crystallized in the memory is the smell of berries, herbs, mushrooms that is largely similar to the flavor (the scent of strawberries is also the flavor of strawberries)” (2013, p. 241). And this shows the emotional involvement and attachment of local people with their territory. As well as it reminds us of In-gold’s discussions on skills as “the capabilities of action and perception” of humans “situated in a rich structured environment” (2000, p. 5).

This loss of cultivated land around Vinigo contrasts with the central area of the village – locally called *pias* – which is traditionally divided in privately owned plots for the cultivation of a variety of cabbage (*capùze*)<sup>22</sup> which seems to have found here favourable soil and weather conditions and is considered in Vinigo as its most prestigious product.<sup>23</sup> This area situated in the centre of the village, is still cultivated and lately the individual parcels have been fenced to keep out wild animals, mainly deer, searching for food. In the past, people from Vinigo kept these cabbages for consumption at home and exchanged some of them with people from other communities. Though today some of them sell the cabbages to friends, others still donate them. As one of our female interlocutors explains, they are “too precious” (“*troppo preziosi*”) to be sold. While acknowledging the loss of cultivated land, Vinighesi underscore that the woodland is encroaching upon the village. Not only is the woodland expanding but it has become denser, “so thick”, as several interlocutors underline.

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22 *Brassica oleracea L. varietà capitata* (Turrin, 2009; Sanson, 2013, pp. 210–213). For a more detailed description of this central area, see Paini (2019).

23 “In the mountains of Belluno, the cultivation of cabbage and leafy vegetables in general compared to other crops such as cereals, legumes or potatoes has always been marginal, despite their considerable dietary importance, although still always present ... Only in certain areas, for a variety of socio-cultural and pedo-climatic reasons, has cabbage been able to establish itself as a leading crop.” (Sanson, 2013).





Figure 4 – Cabbages ready to be collected in the central area of Vinigo, October 2014.  
Copyright 2014 by A. Painsi.

The loss of cultivated land around Vinigo is often portrayed by local people stressing that the woodland is “eating up everything”. The ever-increasing wild woodland is not only encroaching on the village but is also changing the micro-climate and raising the level of humidity. Though the woodland is increasing, Lino details that “some traditional salient species such as the larch, are disappearing” (Painsi, 2019, p. 178)<sup>24</sup>. Today, in fact, the woods are managed by the Forestry Corps (*Forestale*),<sup>25</sup> and to cut down a plant, one must first obtain permission. He comments very critically: “they [the *Forestale*] do not authorize you to cut the fir trees down.” Lino provides an explanation: the fir trees have taken over and are always full of needles and, unlike larches that allow water and light to pass and grow a little underneath grass, “the rain

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24 This change in the composition of woodland around Vinigo makes one think about the alarm raised recently about the bark beetle afflicting and killing forests in the Eastern Alps, affecting mostly fir trees (<https://www.montagna.tv/> consulted 14 October 2022; see also Nardi, Finozzi, and Battisti (2022).

25 The Forest Corps was reorganized nationally in 2019.



struggles to arrive because it is like a roof and it falls out and underneath the trees everything turns red. ... Nothing grows. And if you go and cut a fir tree, you get a fine. Because we should cut these mountains of fir trees to give the possibility to the wood to regenerate.” Lino harshly criticizes the *Forestale* or their lack of awareness of the changes taking place, in contrast to his experience and that of other Vinighesi.

The main effects of environmental changes on and for the inhabitants of Vinigo can be seen in the loss of what local people call “mixed woodland” (another way of naming biodiversity), the increased risk of hydrogeological disruption in as much as fields are no longer cultivated and their essential role in stabilizing and consolidating the slopes is lost,<sup>26</sup> not to mention the danger of fires; all these are acknowledged consequences of these management practices. Vinighesi rarely name biodiversity, although when they underline the importance of a mixed woodland (*bosco misto*) made up of different types of vegetation and of different species of trees, bushes, and grass – which they consider the best woodland because only in this way is the forest alive and healthy and can provide different kinds of livelihood resources – they are indirectly referring to biodiversity<sup>27</sup>.

Although people and their environment are perceived by Vinighesi as two distinct forms of agency, still they are strongly interconnected. A common underlying thread running through most of the interviews, that people must tend to the woodland to keep it healthy, because a healthy woodland benefits them. People from Vinigo therefore consider that social wrongs (in this case loss of care) are registered in the environment. During a nature walk, Flavio stated, “A woodland must be cleaned up; otherwise, the following year there will be no firewood.” He maintained that a neglected woodland can have devastating effects.<sup>28</sup> As Maria puts it, “the woodland eats everything” (“*il bosco si mangia tutto*”), meaning that the woodland will take over, a concern that

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26 For sure this can also be said of woodland.

27 For the great biodiversity of the Alps compared to the rest of the European continent, see Varotto and Castiglione (2012). Very interesting studies on Eastern Alpine areas have been carried out after the storm Vaia, a catastrophic event that has affected parts of this Alpine territory in 2018, and they point out the failure of the mainstream practices of woodland management. For the Val di Femme, see Martellozzo (2022).

28 I recall that woodland, which used to belong to the *Regola Piccola*, thus common property, has been divided into private properties, so everyone today collects firewood in his/her own places.

also reveals some level of anxiety about the future. Similar forms of anxiety are found in all those areas of Veneto where the woodland is taking over because the fields are no longer cultivated, the grass is no longer mowed, and the woods no longer maintained. I am thinking, for example, to an ongoing ethnographic research in Val Borago (Verona), where the inhabitants are advocating for better woodland maintenance through targeted but necessary cutting operations. They argue that the excessive growth of the woodland is not a healthy form of ecology, rather, they point out that this has harmful effects on the territory and fails to protect it. The concept of safeguarding is always associated with maintenance. Residents recall that when the land was actively cultivated, there was daily interaction with it. However, now that this significant interaction has diminished, the woods are creating disorder and imbalance. As Ingold highlights: "Ways of acting in the environment are also ways of perceiving it" (2000, p. 9). Environmental but also relational imbalances also show us ways of relating between humans and non-humans that collide with institutional planning interventions.

People in Vinigo strongly believe that woodland should be kept in order and not left to go wild. Woodland – which includes trees, bushes, animals, human activities and weather (see Paini, 2019) – emerges as a highly valued multifaceted element of their environment. Thus its neglect is associated with a loss of value on the part of the Vinighesi themselves.

Vinighesi claim that the phenomenon of woodland encroachment of formerly grassland areas, that is often viewed positively by scientists asserting that it can help balance the phenomenon of deforestation, has only negative consequence locally. Woodland is expanding but losing quality, which causes a loss of biodiversity and results in increased moisture; moreover, its thickness has led to a significant increase in the deer population, as they inhabit the dense forest and have replaced roes who instead prefer clearings. Deer tends to come closer to the village and, at night, enter the central area cultivated with cabbages in search of food. To protect their crops, residents have recently resorted to fencing individual plots in this area.

## The Importance of Taking Care

The idea of a landscape that has not been taken care of, that has been neglected, looms large in the narratives collected. In recalling how in the past local people related to the resources of the forest, Rino presented a very dense metaphor, by referring to the woodland being treated as a kitchen. "The kitchen refers both to a place that was kept clean and where nothing went to waste. A place that required looking after." (Paini, 2019, p. 179). I recall that in the past the kitchen was the only room of the house heated in winter, thus a central living space. The relevant role of the heated kitchen in Vinighesi past daily life is something well attested to in several interviews collected during the field research. As Lino foregrounds, "If you had little food in the kitchen you could survive, but if you could not heat the kitchen you would die".

The sense of a well-kept place is also associated by some female interlocutors with the aesthetics of the place, of "spectacular" fields as Gianna says, "The fields were spectacular. Flowers everywhere. The flowers disappeared when they stopped cutting the grass". She continues by stressing that "In some places where they started cutting [the grass] again, the flowers came back." If some components of the environment are not present anymore, nevertheless their disappearance is considered reversible if what they consider positive action is taken by humans. The image of an orderly and pleasant landscape in these narratives is associated with the image of a cultivated land and of an orderly woodland, which in the past was an essential livelihood resource for the people.

Some of my interlocutors point to the importance of a viewpoint ("the fields were spectacular") others instead stress a different sensibility, an "ear-point" (Feld, 1996, p. 95) as Fantino who points out that in the woodlands there was once "more noise" compared to today. Lino instead foregrounds the smell: "If I am in the middle of the woods. I sense the air, the smell of things, I feel ... I feel at home." The sense of a place cared for looms large. This involves exploring the notion of *care* with an emphasis on interconnection and interdependency, following Puig de la Bellacasa's analysis (2017). She considers that "care is not about fusion; it can be about the right distance", care is "a concrete work of maintenance, with ethical and affective implications" (2017, p. 5). Care for the people of Vinigo relates to "everything

that we do to maintain, continue and repair 'our world' so that we can live in it as well as possible" (Tronto 1993, p.103).

Sandro Piermattei in his research on the Sibillini Mountains reports similar considerations by elderly shepherds and farmers, who recognize a loss in cultivated land and thus a loss in biodiversity. His interlocutors reflect on their youth by emphasizing an image of greater harmony which "tends to correspond to a similarly pleasant and orderly landscape." (2012, p. 111). As he puts it, "the mountains were cultivated and worked by everyone as if they were an artifact" (Piermattei, 2012, p. 116).

In both cases the image of a well-tended and pleasant landscape in the past run through the ethnographic material; in the case of Vinigo I prefer to emphasize the different metaphors that elderly local people used to account for their relationship with the territory. These metaphors are very effective and quite revealing, though feelings connected to these memories are not the same for everyone. "Woodlands have an emotional significance for the human community, which cannot be ignored ... each interviewee remembered a meadow, a footpath, or a grove to which she/he was particularly attached." (Martellozzo, 2022, p. 149).

For some Vinighesi the memory of the landscape of the past brings back the memory of tactile feelings as fields were perceived as textiles, as Gianna recalls, "everything was well-kept, the woodlands were well-kept. We, the children, went around in our home-made soft-soled shoes". And, she adds, "The meadows were like velvet". Another strong metaphor that points to a tactile sensation in perceiving the environment by associating the land to the feel of a fine textile. Corrado and Porcellana, dealing with how inhabitants of Cadore perceive "their mountain", state "it is also and above all through emotional ties and passion for a place that one realizes the care and development of the place itself" (2012, p. 79).

## Conclusion: Feelings, Scents, and Interactions

This chapter wants to draw an image of a dynamic Alpine place, where people situated themselves in their rich ancient history. The reading that has long accompanied the imaginary of the mountain (Breda, 2013) does not correspond to the vision that the people of Vinigo have and express of their place. They have found memories of their past, yet these memories do not convey nostalgia for a lost past, neither are they painful memories, but they condense a rich experience made of sociability and a dense relationship with the environment, of a "place of life" (Breda, 2013, p. 55). Vinighesi's perception of the past daily life of the village brings back memories of long hours of hard work for the women and the men, though mitigated by images of softness, care, good tastes, closeness, and solidarity among people. In recovering images from the past interaction with the environment, all five senses are activated: sight (the fields were wonderful), taste (flavours), smell (the scent of hay, feeling the air), hearing (sound/silence), touch (the meadows were like velvet).

By shifting the focus from a nostalgic view of neglect to a more nuanced understanding of the community's relationship with its environments, I want to highlight the importance of sociality and shared knowledge in fostering a sustainable coexistence. My interlocutors consider that in the past people and the environment had a crucial relationship. In regard to the environment, what emerges is that the long-held sense of caring, of responsibility has increasingly waned, and that the resulting neglect of the land has produced an unbalanced relationship with the environment, particularly the woodlands, which are now taking over. So, what had been seen as a positive relationship between the woodland and humans now tends to change towards one in which anxiety about the future perceives the woodland as becoming somewhat more hostile toward the inhabitants of Vinigo, bringing into question the habitability of the territory of Vinigo.

While the current management of the woodlands around Vinigo does not fall under the Rules, this institution has regulated forest management for centuries.<sup>29</sup> The *Regole's* approach to managing forest heritage continues to be presented as a method of management attentive to the health of the forest in contrast to the current contested management practices. In fact, the current forest model has favoured the development of conifers with high trunks

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<sup>29</sup> On the re-articulations of the forest heritage and on the forestry models that have been put on place through time in Val di Fiemme, see Martellozzo (2020).

of the same age, driven by economic value, which has led to a more fragile woodland, as evidenced by the devastation caused by the storm Vaia in 2018. This highlighted the vulnerabilities inherent in monoculture forestry practice. In the aftermath of Vaia, there is a growing debate around rethinking the imposed silvicultural model, leaning towards one that aligns more closely with the viable “mixed woodland” proposed by the people of Vinigo.

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