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**SPATIAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND THE REINTRODUCTION OF LOST COMMON PRACTICES OF RURAL LANDSCAPES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN APENNINES.**

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Abstract:

Coastal areas of the Mediterranean Sea have a strong relation with their hinterland. Ancient mercantile trails, connecting the Ligurian Sea with the Po plain, were used by merchandisers and travelers but also farmers and shepherds. Until the 50s, the rural landscapes of the Apennines, between Piedmont and Liguria, were characterised by grassland with herds of sheep and cows, chestnuts, small vineyards and mountain villages. Due to the merchandising and pastoring activities, the rural communities on both hillsides were in close contact with each other, which led to a common identity.

However, both hillsides have been marginalized during the last decades. Land abandonment caused a spontaneous growth of secondary vegetation that slowly occupied the agricultural land. Land management and rural practices like farming on terraces and transhumance got into oblivion, with considerable consequences for the landscapes. The valleys became dominated by shrub and woodland and empty houses, and the close link between the environment and the rural communities got lost. Nevertheless, a new tendency of young newcomers who settle down in the deserted villages, is being detected. The reason for this inflow is mainly to set up 'new' rural activities like environmental education, agricultural tourism, cheese production, etc.

The aim of this paper is to grasp the former and present relation between the landscape, its actors and their rural practices. First, the spatial transformations of the rural landscape are mapped based on cartographic interpretation and field work. The landscape changes will be analysed

using GIS, similarity and landscape metrics and landscape change trajectories. Second, we want to analyse what driving forces caused the extensification and land abandonment and unravel the consequences of these processes on their common landscape characteristics. Moreover we want to detect the reasons why young people get attracted by a marginalised area and settle down in the desolate villages. Based on interviews, we will identify if they are aware of the historical context of the area, how they include former common rural practices in their activities, and if it leads to a new local identity. This qualitative information will be linked with the spatial analysis of the transformations of the rural landscapes, to get insights into the relations between the spatial structure and rural processes in the area.

The study area is the Borbera valley (Piedmont) and the adjacent valleys of Liguria, focusing on transhumance as a local rural practice. Farmers of both sides of the Mount Antola brought their cattle up onto the highlands and met on the summer pastures. This rural practice was typical for the lower valleys of the Apennines until the late 50s in conjunction with other types of income supply, as the production of cheese, chestnut and wine. These products were once part of the local identity of these areas and are now slowly reintroduced.