

Demographic Changes and Matrimonial Strategies of a Val Cenischia Community Between 19th and 20th Centuries

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Introduction

This work analyzes the changes in the demographic and biodemographic structures in Venaus (the Cenischia Valley, Province of Turin) between the 19th and 20th centuries, and also analyzes the strategies to which local populations resorted in dealing with incidental events and changing environmental circumstances. This study underlying outlook, which seeks to understand how biology, culture, society and environment meet and interact with each other in order to generate a population demographic path, is illustrated by matrimonial behavior, which is the core aspect of this study.

Materials and Methods

Venaus is in the Cenischia Valley, a small alpine valley through which the Dora Riparia River (the left-hand tributary of the Po) flows. The built-up area is at an altitude of 604 m, and its spatial pattern is evidence of the deep co-evolutionary process between the community and the alpine environment (Viazzo, 2001).

In order to study the evolution of the Venaus population, the sources included the data of the town registry office: 2218 birth certificates, 2146 death certificates and 565 marriage certificates belonging to the period 1866-1935 were reviewed and digitalized.

Results

The population trends are shown in Fig. 1 (source: ISTAT): when the Kingdom of Italy was established, Venaus had about 1,500 inhabitants. Subsequently, like many mountain communities, from the last two decades of the 19th century on, Venaus underwent strong depopulation which came to a standstill during the First World War, after which the residents stably numbered from 900 to 1,000 for the rest of the 20th century (Winter, 2005).

The development of events (Fig. 2) also reflects the trend of all communities which underwent a demographic

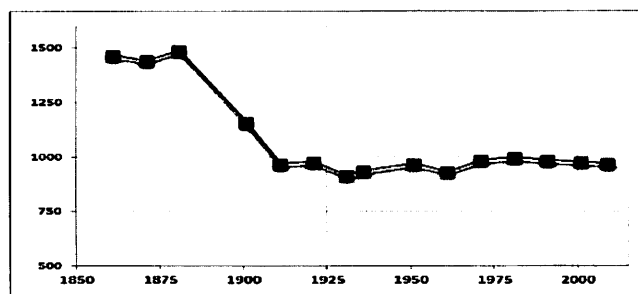


Fig. 1. Trend of resident population in Venaus (1861-2009).

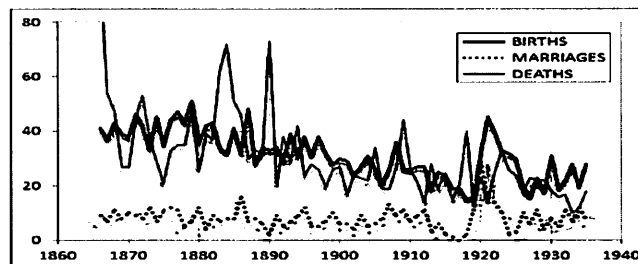


Fig. 2. Demographic events in Venaus (1866-1935).

transition from the last two decades of the 19th century on, with large fluctuations mostly due to circumstances which caused exceptionally high mortality. Food crises (1866), a cholera epidemic (1883-84) and the infamous Spanish flu pandemic (1918) could likely account for certain peaks in mortality rates (Bourgeois-Pichat, 1951).

The child mortality rate, which is a valued indicator of the degree of social and health development a population has achieved, declines considerably over the two centuries (Fig. 3, solid line), in line with the overall national trend. However, the data show a sudden rise between 1876

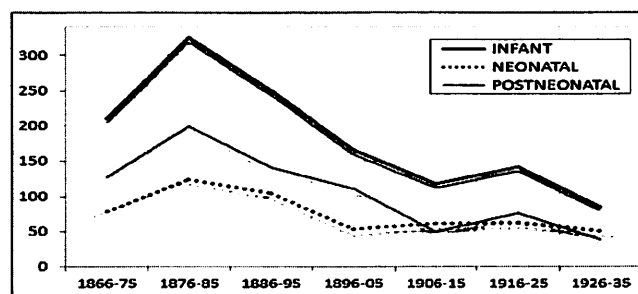


Fig. 3. Trend of infant mortality components in Venaus.

and 1885 because of the death of many infants which were abandoned to the "Ospizio di carità" (the Foundling Hospital) in Susa and then put to Venaus wet-nurses for a small consideration. Paid wet nursing can be regarded as indicative of a deep-rooted condition of poverty, widespread throughout the area in the late 19th century. The decline in child mortality affects all its components, but the fall in the post-neonatal component is the most significant (Fig. 3, thin line), in connection with the lower impact of exogenous factors, showing a clear improvement in living conditions from the first decades of the 20th century.

Weddings vary from 6.3 to 9.2 per year (ten-year averages), with very variable marriage rates, from 5.4 ‰ to 8.9 ‰. Yearly fluctuations are rather pronounced (Fig. 3, dotted line): some years show very few weddings (1890, 1902, 1913, 1915-18 and the two-year period 1924-25) while 1886, 1907, and particularly 1920 (with 29 marriages!) show a boom, to compensate for the wartime marriage rate drop.

Wedding seasonality depends on the farm work cycle, thus highlighting the basically rural character of the Venaus economy: marriage frequency decreases in summer and early autumn months, when farm work increases (Fig. 4).

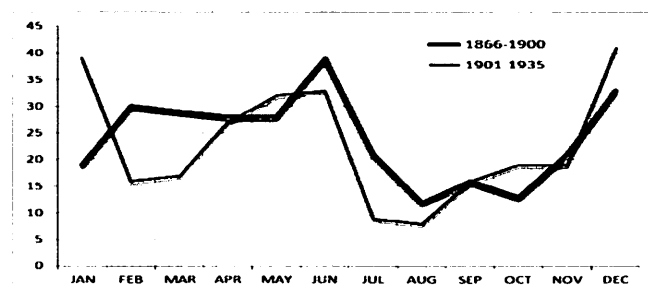


Fig. 4. Seasonality of marriages in Venaus.

During the 30 years after Italian unification, marriages mostly involve native people: for approximately 70% of the couples, bride and bridegroom are both from Venaus, while for the remaining 30 percent, at least one of them is from elsewhere

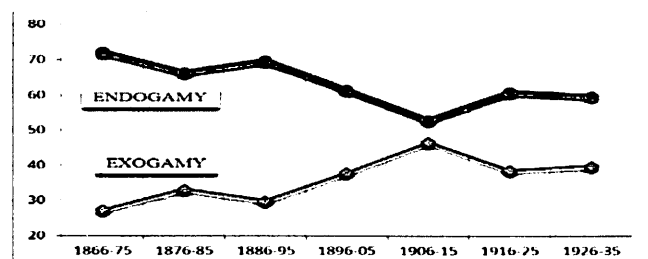


Fig. 5. Percentages of endogamy and exogamy in Venaus.

(Fig. 5). In the late 19th century the impact of emigration is felt and, due to the decreasing population, the marriage catchment area expands beyond the municipal territory: at the end of the first decade of the 20th century, exogamic and endogamic marriages are almost even. In the years after the First World War, the situation tends to settle, with bride and bridegroom both from Venaus in 60% of couples.

The marriage network dramatically changes over time: in the first decade, 70% of newly-weds are from the Susa Valley, 20% from the rest of Piedmont, and 10% from other Italian regions, while afterwards spouses from France and later from America (mainly Pennsylvania) become more and more numerous: a kind of back current endogamy, even though it is not clear whether the newly-wed couples permanently stay in Venaus or go back to France or overseas, after their weddings.

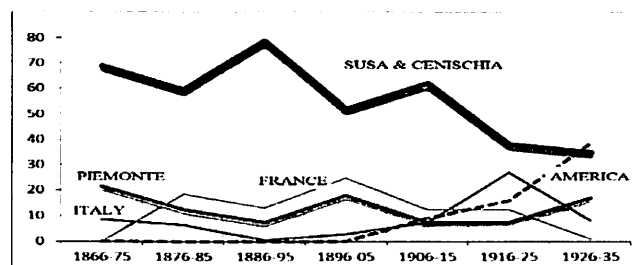


Fig. 6. Birth place of spouses.

Discussion

Analyzing Venaus birth, death and wedding certificates between 1866 and 1935 entailed comparing different data which, by complementing each other, highlighted how behavior – when manifested under the impact of environmental conditions and cultural values – can affect the demographic and genetic structure of the population. By controlling the marriage rate, the Venaus people were able to proactively respond to some contingent events which challenged the balance they achieved through an intense co-evolutionary process with the mountain environment. However, comparing the two centuries, there was a difference in the resilience in dealing with mortality crises and the emigration phenomenon depending on different social and economic conditions: in the 19th century, the social and economic, hygiene and health conditions of the community were poor, as evidenced by the practice of wet nursing and the epidemics. In the 20th century, a major improvement in living conditions enabled the people to react vigorously to the mortality crisis caused by the First World War and the Spanish flu epidemic, by increasing marriage and birth rates. Emigration harshly impacted the Venaus matrimonial structure, making the network escalate to above the national level, even if – in fact – many people involved were from the Susa and Cenischia Valleys.

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