

Mountain farmers, woodcutters and dairymaids

– where have they gone?

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We are witnessing a change that's historically very remarkable. In my view, between the Neolithic Age, 5000 years ago, when humans became sedentary and began to farm, and World War Two, there weren't as many changes in our area as there have been since World War Two, especially in the 1950s and 1960s, as the ancient mountain farming culture has gradually come to an end. The ancient farmers were people who knew how to work hard. They also didn't easily accept subordination to any kind of constraint. They dealt with the rigors of nature. They lived basically self-sufficient lives and had their own special pride (without funding from the EU).

Today, it is often felt that the decline of the ancient farming culture has been a painful experience. Features of this ancient mountain farming culture included woodcutters and dairymaids. The woodcutters cut down trees during the summer and used horses to transport the heavy logs down to the valleys. The woodcutters were well-versed in old knowledge, such as how to skillfully build log cabins and how to communicate over long distances (without mobile phones).

The woodcutters were joined by the dairymaids. These, too, had ancient forms of knowledge in order to deal with the cattle, which they milked on the alpine pastures. It was worth the difficulty for many young farmers' daughters to work as dairymaids in alpine pastures. As dairymaids, they spent their time all by themselves, from the early summer, when the cattle was driven up to the alpine pastures, to the fall, when it was driven back down again to the valleys. They lived far away from their native farmhouses, where they had to obey the farmers. The saying, "In the alpine pasture, there is neither rooster nor watchdog" refers to the freedom the dairymaids enjoyed on the pastures – and also the freedom of the woodcutters and the poachers who found shelter with the dairymaids.

There are still alpine pastures, but no longer in the classic sense of the term. In most cases, there are only young cattle up there. Milking isn't performed as it used to be. The excellent alpine milk, which used to be offered to hikers for good money, is now often brought up from the valley by tractor. The true dairymaid is sometimes replaced by a retiree (as was the case with a good friend of mine, who worked as a dairyman), driving up with his Range Rover, taking care of the young cattle. These dairymen don't need to know how to milk cows. One of their most important tasks is to decorate the cattle for the traditional ceremony of driving them down.

The alpine farmer has become a specialist in breeding cattle and producing milk. Therefore, the farmers are under the utmost pressure, which burdens them significantly. In the following sentences, written by an older gentleman descending from farmers to me, this change is shown in a perhaps romantic but very emphatic way: "However much mountain farmers put stress on animals in earlier times, whether as working animals or for food, the farmers made sure to respect all creatures. This was expressed in the fact that all the animals had to be taken care of before the humans could sit down at the table to eat or relax."

Without funding, alpine pastures would have become overgrown by now, because they are no longer needed. Supposedly, the cost of bringing one cow up to an alpine pasture is higher than the income of most Africans. This shows the great paradox of the mountain farming culture: without funding from the EU, our mountain farming culture would become impoverished.

It is, however, still important to remember the old woodcutters and dairymaids, whose great knowledge in dealing with wood and cattle deserve to be respected.