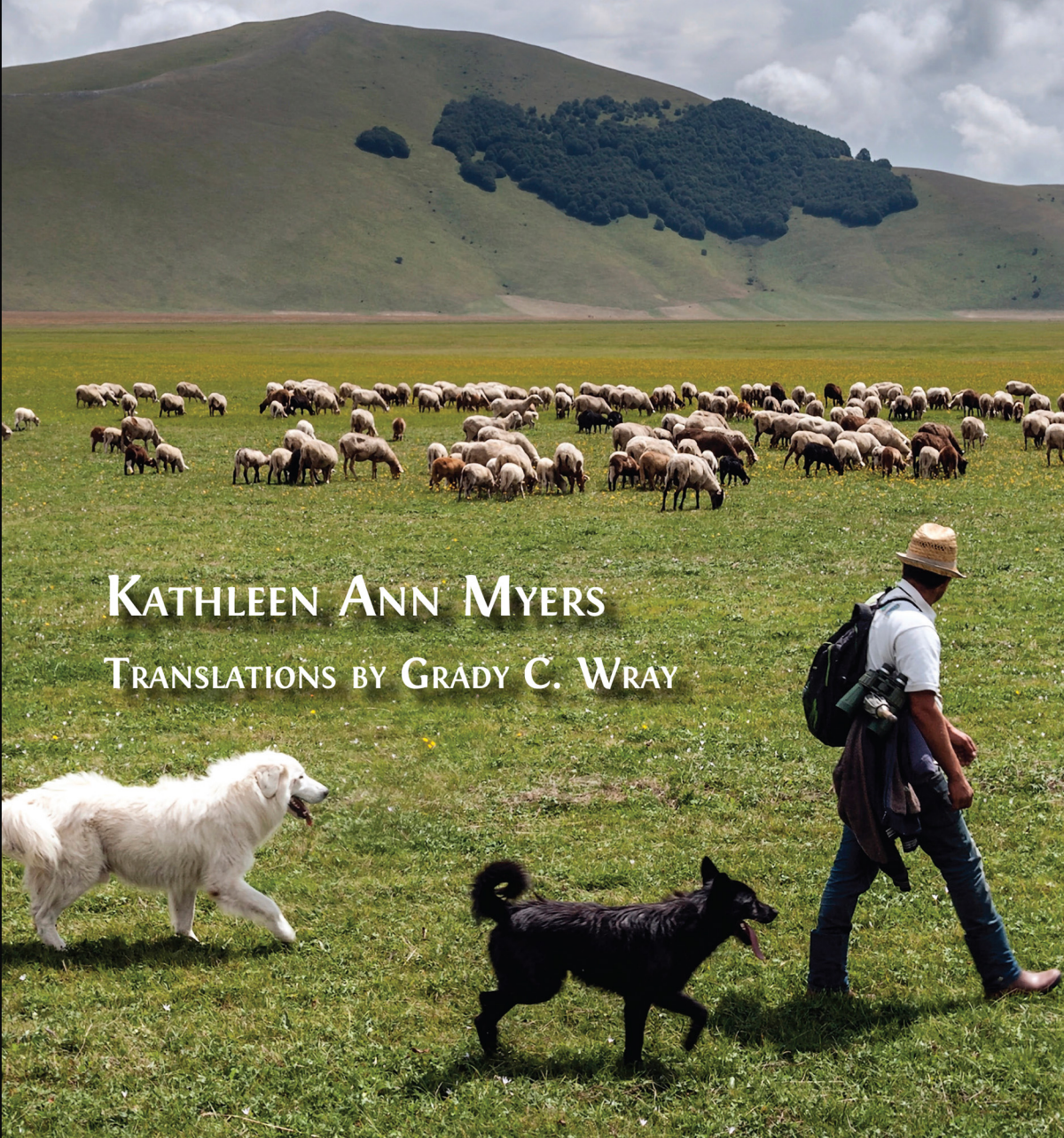


# A COUNTRY OF SHEPHERDS

## CULTURAL STORIES OF A CHANGING MEDITERRANEAN LANDSCAPE

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TRANSLATIONS BY GRADY C. WRAY





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## 2. Teacher of Tradition: Pepe Millán and Family (Zahara de la Sierra, Parque Natural Sierra de Grazalema, Cádiz)

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That's why I've collaborated with a variety of people... because you can see what's written down, or your grandchild or your great grandchild can see it. These rural traditions aren't written down, and that's what we're losing.

Pepe Millán

My idea is for all of us to change how we do things; to get rid of the middlemen and make direct sales to the consumer.

Rita Millán Luna

### Overview

Chapter 1, on Juan Vázquez Morán, illustrates how transhumance in many cases is transitioning over time to an extensive grazing model in which shepherds own their livestock and family members look to other ways to develop markets for their products. In this chapter, we meet the livestock professional (*ganadero*) Pepe Millán, who first took up shepherding in the 1960's out of economic necessity. Today, he owns his own farm, grazes his animals on common land within the nature reserve (*parque natural*), and teaches his vocation to others. Pepe and his family raise goats and sheep native to Cádiz, and their story showcases how an integrated landscape, people, and animals can lead to a successful livelihood, even in a region not well suited to agriculture.

As I get to know Pepe, I realize that he understands his animals to a profound extent and wants to share his passion with everyone around him. A dedicated shepherd, he believes in the old ways — the same methods for success that got him to where he is now. Disapproving of young people who don't have a connection with the land or even any understanding of where their food comes from, he laments: "it's not like it used to be." This observation has served as a catalyst for Pepe to share widely his traditional knowledge of pastoralism. He is devoted to maintaining the genetic purity of species native to his region, breeds developed over centuries to adapt to the steep, rocky landscape. He raises *Payoya* dairy goats (considered endangered), as well as *Merina de Grazalema* sheep on his farm nestled into the boundaries of the Parque Natural Sierra de Grazalema. For Pepe, the land, native breeds, and his own native knowledge of the mountainous pasturelands are inextricable. Animal varieties bred for the region, good shepherd dogs, and a shepherd with intimate knowledge of the ravines and outcroppings of the landscape fit together like a puzzle.

Pepe's dedication to and hope for the future has recently brought him wider recognition and a second chance to fulfill an early dream to be a teacher. For nearly a decade, Pepe has mentored students at the *Escuela de Pastores de Andalucía*, teaching new entrepreneurs and shepherds at the school crucial skills for the profession. He has also collaborated with the University of Seville on a documentary, which caught the attention of the celebrity TV show *Volando voy*. Recognition for his work as a mentor and teacher helps to buoy Pepe's sense of a mission with his work. In the case that follows, we watch Pepe in action as a master shepherd-*ganadero* and hear about his mentoring. We also glimpse the life of his daughter, Rita, who is working on the farm during our visit and reveals the struggles ahead for someone of her generation.

## The Visit: Guardians of Tradition and Ecosystems

A well-published scholar-activist in the extensive grazing movement, Dr. Yolanda Mena, encouraged me to call Pepe. On my first try, he is out in the pastures, and the signal keeps dropping. I call again in the evening when he is back home. Like Juan Vázquez, he immediately



extends an invitation to visit him at the farm. On the appointed day, María del Mar and I leave Seville, once again at dawn, this time heading to the Sierra de Grazalema in the Province of Cádiz. As we turn onto a road that narrows and winds through the Sierra and around one final deep curve, Zahara de la Sierra comes almost magically into view. A car full of English tourists has pulled over to photograph the white-washed village tucked into the shade of a commanding outcropping. A fourteenth-century frontier fortress perches on top of the highest peak. Verdant grass speckled with the reds, purples, and yellows of April poppies, lupine, and mustard line the shore of El Gastor, the deep blue reservoir at its base. We pass a shepherd herding a few dozen sheep on the side of the road, leave the lane that climbs into the picturesque historic town center, and turn onto the gravel road that leads into the Sierra de Grazalema's Natural Park, an area recognized as an important biosphere reserve by UNESCO. The road narrows further and begins to bottom out from the abundant spring rains, so we tuck our car into a niche carved into the limestone outcropping and walk the rest of the way. Following a trail through oak groves, olive groves, and the brushlands of Mediterranean riverbank forests in Cádiz's Garganta Verde, we easily hike the last kilometer to the Millán farm, which stands out on a rocky plateau in between the limestone ravines and riverbanks.

The busy daily morning work routine is in full swing when we arrive. The family raises 350 *Payoya* goats for their milk and 250 *Merina de Grazalema* sheep that also must be milked and put to pasture. But there is a bit of drama this morning: when the border collies return with the family's goats, ten are missing. While Pepe's wife, Isabel, and their two adult children begin moving goats into stalls equipped with machines for milking, Pepe swiftly grabs his shepherd's staff, whip, and binoculars. He whistles for his dogs and heads back over the mountain to bring back the missing goats. It is a rigorous hike through the *monte mediterráneo*, a deep and rocky terrain filled with brushlands of carob, wild olive, and lentisk trees and bushes. But even at 57, Pepe still has strong, fast legs.



Fig. 2.2 Pepe Millán (2019) and his farm in the Parque Natural Sierra de Grazalema (2019).

Later, when the wayward goats have been brought back and milked, Pepe and Isabel funnel them through a series of gates into the barn; the only sound is the clank-clunk of metal gates being opened and closed. Then Pepe, stationed by the barn door opening to the pastures, begins rapping a series of patterned signals with his staff against the metal barn door and adds a few verbal commands. Like Juan, Pepe is fluent in a rapidly disappearing language of communication with his dogs, sheep, and goats. Observing him in action is akin to watching an accomplished artist perform a highly choreographed event.

Isabel, who is positioned in the back barn, begins nudging goats toward the door, silently fanning them with the traditional, large, and palm-shaped fan woven out of reeds. The air fills with a chorus of *cencerros*, the variety of bells worn by certain individual goats that aid the shepherd in determining, simply by the sounds, where the herd is located — and even in moving them about with the aid of well-trained dogs. We are witnessing a traditional practice essential to the shepherd's livelihood, finely tuned over centuries and still performed daily. Movements, sounds, and smells permeate the scene. This is an art form that a camera can hardly capture.

When the last goat is out, Isabel returns to the kitchen, and Pepe follows the goats, moving easily through the boulder-studded path to his lookout post. He picks up a sturdy branch — now turned into a walking cane — and hands it to us as we follow him to a perch overlooking the deep ravine to the stream below. He points to a smooth deep rock wedged into the steep hillside and invites us with a good-natured joke: “Go ahead and sit in the rocker. You’ll be more comfortable there.” He leans easily on his staff, surveying his land and the Parque Natural as he begins his story about becoming a shepherd. Suddenly, he emits a long, loud clear whistle that echoes back from the hills across the valley and shouts: “Dale! Dale!” (C’mon!). A series of a short, a couple long, and one very long “hidooo” follow. Then, a moment of silence. A second loud-yet-whisper-toned whistle and another command: “Pst! Oye! Candela! Come here! That’s right!” We hear a bark from below but see no dog. “Go!” Pepe listens again. The chorus-like song of the goats’ *cencerro* bells leaving the barn is now a distant murmur. “Hear that?” Pepe asks. A raspy, muted bell faintly sounds. With his experienced ear, Pepe can tell that the lead goat has not reached the river about a kilometer away. Four more distinct whistles and several more commands. Silence again. Another whistle. Another silence. We hear nothing, but Pepe insists: “Hear the little tinkling bell?” That sound signals that the last goat has reached its destination, where the herd will graze the rest of the day and spend the night until milking time tomorrow morning. In a poetic language, Pepe compares the sounds of these traditional bells to the strings of a guitar: each has its own distinct sound.

Most people see the specialized *cencerro* bells on the goats and sheep, and they don’t have any idea what they are. If you pay a little attention, you’ll hear two kinds of *cencerros*, one’s a little bigger and one’s smaller. Did you hear that *cencerro*? It’s the one the goat’s wearing. Did you hear the deeper, raspier one? And the little, tiny one? Right now, they’re all up in the corner, you can barely hear them. Did you hear the bigger sound? It’s like a guitar string. Each one has its own sound. The *cencerro* bells are telling me where the animals are and where they’re going. And, in the mornings, when I head out for the sheep, I hear the *cencerros*, and I know each one is going to a certain place. And then something happens: the sheep’s bell sounds a certain way, the goats’ another, and the cows’ have even another sound because sheep eat and move one way, and goats eat and move another.

Without moving from his command post overlooking the valley, Pepe has orchestrated the movement of 350 goats as they make their way down the ravine. The intricate call-and-response ritual and joint effort of shepherd, dogs, and goats takes less than twenty minutes. One dog returns briefly, and Pepe nods, "Look at this one. He's tired. He's worked hard this morning." He explains the difference between moving sheep and goats, as well as the all-important natural surroundings:

Sheep are easier to herd in the open field. But then, here, inside the barn, goats are easier to herd than sheep. With sheep, if you tell them "Go," they might go in, but then one sheep will try, and you'll see it can't get through. So, you'll try to grab it, but it won't like that. Then the others will want to get by and go in, and that's when you'll have real chaos on your hands. The only way to herd them is with dogs.

The *Payoya* goats, he explains with pride:

are native to the Sierra de Grazalema; they are adapted to this terrain, raised in this area. They fend for themselves very well. The Sierra requires skills that don't come easy to everyone. The land will condition you and the animals. I grew up in the Sierra, and I've learned about all its special bends, ravines..., all the things that will trip you up. If you're not familiar with the Sierra, it won't let you make a living from doing this.

We realize we have been privileged to witness an ancient practice that happens every day, 365 days a year, shifting only as the seasons change. Now, with the goats in place, Pepe can settle in again, more comfortable leaning on his staff than sitting on the rocker he has offered us. Before returning to his story, however, Pepe insists that he is not the "protagonist." He wants to tell us his story so this way of life, this knowledge is not lost. "That's why I've collaborated with a variety of people... because you can see what's written down, or your grandchild or your great grandchild can see it. But these rural traditions aren't written down, and that's what we're losing." He is part of a millennia-long tradition of pastoralism that has molded and preserved the biodiversity of this natural area, which includes the engendered *abies pinsapo*, a rare Spanish fir that has survived here since prehistoric times. Shepherds are now being called "environmental forest rangers," he reports, suggesting an expansion of stewardship to include not only fauna but flora. At heart, Pepe sees himself as a caretaker for the legacy of this ancient practice and rural landscapes. He doesn't want to see it lost.



Pepe's entire life story is literally visible from this strategic vantage point. He points out a house on a hill facing us, some five kilometers away as the crow flies, but over an hour away along the Sierra's winding roads. "That's where I began," he says plainly. Raised by a single mother and his maternal grandmother in the 1960s, Pepe grew up knowing the threat of hunger and how his grandmother's goat (and the high nutritional value of its milk) kept his belly full.

I was raised without a father, and I was left on my own like a ball thrown out on the field. It's not like it is now. When I grew up, if they saw you doing something wrong, they'd slap you first and ask questions later. I lived with my mother, but it wasn't like it is now. First off, there was no food. So, when you wanted to earn money to buy food, you had to work for it and spend more hours than are on a clock earning it. When I was a boy, I was in a country school that's back behind that hill. Do you remember that man that was out there with the sheep? Well, that man's son and I went to the country school. And at eight years old I knew how to multiply and divide, but now I can't even remember how to do all that. They gave me a scholarship.

If I'd gone away to school, I would've had to pay, and my mother said no. So, I couldn't go. There was just no way. If my father had been there, I would've been able to depend on both of them for support. The economy might not have been that good, but maybe something else would have happened because some people from my generation did go away to school. Not many, but some went to get an education. Not to be lawyers and such, but they went to teaching schools and became teachers.

After I turned eight, I didn't go anywhere else. I grew up here, in that house [he points to the house in the distance]. Ever since I was a boy, a little boy, I've always been around animals. I even fed from a goat like a kid! That's the truth 'cause I like milk. Back in those days, we didn't have yogurt; we didn't have a lot of things. So, at least I had my belly full, although it was just milk. But it was goat's milk, and they've shown it to be one of the best foods there is.

I learned to love goats 'cause of my mother's mother, my *abuela*. She had a goat. She died with a goat in her bed that was keeping her warm. She loved living in the country, and I keep that tradition alive because of my *abuela*. I've got cousins who've retired and others who've already passed on. They worked with livestock. I've got a brother who worked with livestock when he was a child, and a nephew too, but not now.

Pepe recalls his upbringing with a mixture of fond nostalgia and clear-eyed acknowledgement of the poverty-stricken reality of rural Andalusia

during his youth. Then, he repeats a message we have heard from many shepherds: others have left the profession because it is relentless, requires great personal sacrifices, and is still largely unprofitable. He notes that few family members or friends have chosen to continue as farmers.

Here's the thing. Either you like it, or you don't. Let's just say, you can like it a little, but to be here where we are, you have to really like it. If not, forget it. This is 365 days a year, 24 hours a day, one day after another, one year after another. Me, thirty years ago I was selling sheep for more than they sell them today. I've stayed with it because I've liked it ever since I was a boy, and I had the dream of having my own herd of goats.

For Pepe, though, both economic necessity and his love for his vocation have kept him at this work. Every time he has left shepherding — for mandatory military service and, later, for work in France and Switzerland because jobs in Spain were scarce — he has returned to start from scratch again with just two goats. Each time he slowly rebuilt his herd, always looking out for new opportunities. He explains that after decades of foiled attempts to keep make a living, he was able to secure a loan, buy his own herd, and graze it on land he had rights to.

When I did my military service, I already had sixty of my own goats. You started your service when you were older back then. I was twenty-one. I came back when I was twenty-two. I was in for longer than most, eighteen months in total. After that, I worked a couple of years, and I had to sell the goats when I went away. I kept two goats. And when I got married, one of those bad spells hit like this economic crisis that stopped people cold. I went to France and Switzerland because there was no work. Finally, over there at the foot of Prado de Rey [he points to a house], some land with goats became available. So, I picked up and went. And over in that house, there was a man who helped me take care of the two goats while I was working outside of the country. Once I returned, I'd spend the weekends working with him, after I had gotten seven or eight goats. I was on a farm for four years, working with a herd of goats. Then I looked for a place to share half with someone because I said to myself: "I'm running this farm that's not mine." After that, I spent the next thirteen years sharing half of what I earned.

I got a loan to buy a herd of goats, and I went to another farm. Then things with the owner began to get complicated. So, I put the goats up for sale. I had a big herd. At first, I had 600. Then, I sold 200 and kept 400. I said to myself: "400's a lot," so if anyone had wanted to buy 200 of the

goats I still had, I would've sold them and kept the last 200. And that's how things stayed.

Often, Pepe's attempts to establish his own farm were foiled by greedy employers, an all-too-familiar theme we heard earlier from Juan Vázquez. Many landowners do not respect the shepherds who care for the proprietor's animals alongside their own, nor do they offer fair prices for grazing rights on their land. Here, Pepe tells us of a landowner who demanded payment of half of Pepe's goats in exchange for grazing them on his land. While Pepe describes the often-contentious relationships between farm owners and workers, he also sees himself as fortunate. His entrepreneurial skill as a shepherd and the community's high regard for him, as well as his family's contributions, have helped him turn adversity into opportunity more than once. Shortly after the abrupt change in the contract with the landowner, another local shepherd who was retiring sold his 70-hectare farm on the edge of the Parque Natural to Pepe. With the help of a local banker, Pepe invested his life savings into the land and went deeply into debt to establish his own goat farm, where he has now been for nearly twenty years. He recalls the events leading up to his big decision — and the heavy interest rate he was charged.

I couldn't come to an agreement with the owner. So, I told a cousin of mine who came through here, and my cousin told the owner I was interested. I said to myself, "Pepe, don't do something crazy, but if you can get a reasonable deal, go ahead. Give it your all." And that's why I'm here. I had the dream, and I worked hard too, but someone threw me a lifeline. We got this place going for four million pesetas, my hard work, and my wife's. And two children.

It would be like you sitting right there and asking right now, listen, you want this jacket? You've got to give me 1,000 Euros. But then you say, I don't have it right now. Well, then, I'll have you sign this paper that states that tomorrow, the day after, whenever, you'll pay me. That's just how it happened. That man knew me, and I had done him favors without asking for anything in return.

Despite being charged an exorbitant interest rate of 18%, Pepe still feels lucky: in many places such a large loan would never have been offered. Banks normally consider the risk too great with a livestock farmer who has no guaranteed income or equity. With the loan and family's hard work, they now own a house in nearby Zahara de la Sierra while still

spending days, especially in the busy spring season, on the farm. But the steep interest rate on the mortgage weighs heavily on their profits and constricts the family's dreams of expanding the business or taking vacations. The ever-increasing cost of "middlemen" impacts the bottom line for the family, as he comments wryly: "There are a ton of people who make a living off of what we pay." Prices for meat have hardly kept pace with inflation, and a family now needs at least 200 goats and government subsidies to make a basic living.

I came here fifteen years ago. I used to sell young goats for 500 pesetas, which is three euros now. And I've got a few young goats that I still have to sell. Very few, but now they'll only pay two and a half. You see, I sell to you, you sell to some other woman, and that woman sells it to the consumer. And when it gets to the consumer, that's where the real money comes from. So, you have to be happy with half, otherwise the consumer won't have it, and I won't get paid. There's a family here in Zahara that's been waiting all their life, wanting a little herd of goats. For example, in town, they had a corral; and with thirty or fifty goats, the family could get by. Now they'll need at least 200, and they have to be good goats. Not to mention how much land they'll need for 200 goats. You've got to get subsidies. If they don't give you subsidies, forget it. There are a ton of people who make a living off of what we pay.

In addition to paying for the farm building and land that he owns (along with the bank, as he never fails to add), Pepe rents land in the public pasturelands from the Andalusian authorities. Every five years an auction is held, and a point system determines, at least in part, the outcome. Pepe is ranked highly because he earns points for living onsite and raising the highly prized native *Payoya* goats and *Merina de Grazalema* sheep. In the end, however, he says with resignation, money usually wins out, but now there is a new, bittersweet new reality: fewer people want to use the land for shepherding because there are fewer shepherds, and so there is less competition. The number of bidders has dropped dramatically in the last five years.

Economic constraints frame every aspect of the Millán family operation, starting with his family's inability to pay room and board so that Pepe could study to become a teacher, and later to pay for the needs of his own growing family. Both financial hardships kept him in shepherding as a career, but "it's cost me a lot," he repeats several times. Later, when we talk to Pepe's wife, Isabel, she quietly but firmly states:

"I don't like working with animals. I do it to support Pepe. I wasn't raised like this. I was raised in town. I was an orphan living with my aunt and uncle," an orphan without family resources. After Rita and Pepe married and unemployment was still rampant in Andalusia, they decided to begin a farm life together so that Pepe would not have to work abroad.

In the early 2000s, as the economy began to improve in southern Spain, both of Rita and Pepe's children left the farm to work in Andalusia's booming construction market — one as a construction worker and the other as an administrator. But with the 2008 global economic crisis, the industry came to a screeching halt and remained stagnant for nearly a decade thereafter. While Pepe still hopes that his children will be able to carry on the family legacy, he sees the challenges that continue to arise. People want and expect more now than when he grew up, when poverty was widespread, and it was enough just to "eat and that was it." Despite his established herd of goats and flock of sheep, land, buildings, and access to the public pasturelands, he repeats the common phrase we have heard from other shepherds: "It's just not worth it." Increasingly strict and costly government regulations mix with the tantalizing promise of new sources of aid, but obtaining this support is often difficult for a working farmer with little time or money to hire professionals to help understand and apply for these subsidies. In particular, he laments the challenges that his daughter faces when contemplating how to make a future for herself in extensive grazing.

It would be a good solution of course, but you have to get everything together, and the government gives you a world of trouble. There's not a lot of work, so for people who want something, the government will first tell you they'll give you the money; that there's money reserved for new entrepreneurs; and who knows what else, etcetera. But, when they get involved, they just give you the run-around: "This has to go here; now you have to do that; you have to come here." My daughter's been in the middle of doing the never-ending paperwork for quite some time now. If things go well, she'll be able to spend a year and a half with no problems, maybe two years, doing something half-way legal and without worries. But then, sometimes, when you have almost everything ready, they'll say, "No, this doesn't work; you can't do that because who knows why." It's sad because she likes working with animals. She gets it. You have to understand it, and she likes it. She has the dream that she can work for herself. That's why she's hung in there.



Things are much harder now than when he began, and people have lent him money simply because they knew him and the cheeses he sold:

Man, it's difficult on two fronts: they won't give you a loan now unless you have ten times more money than what they're going to give you. If she had started when we came here fifteen years ago, it would be different.

### *Ganadero and Teacher*

But rather than delve further into the difficult reality of his profession and his struggles to help his children, Pepe now refocuses the conversation. From the same vantage point where we can see the rustic farmhouse where he was born, Pepe points to another farm that tells a different story, a story of Pepe as a teacher (though not as the public-school teacher he once thought he might be). For the last several years, a young shepherd has lived on this farm. Pepe mentored the aspiring shepherd, teaching him the art of listening to the *cencerro* bells, milking, training dogs, sanitary regulations, reading the pasturelands' temperament, and, critically, helping him gain access to land to graze his animals. Today, the young man is making a living raising livestock like his teacher. Pepe is quietly proud of his work, and there is now someone to carry on the tradition who lives just across the valley.

Pepe's work as a mentor has grown steadily since he first signed up in 2010 for the local-government initiative to pair well-established shepherds like him with students in their then newly formed *Escuela de Pastores* (Shepherd School). He speaks now with both pride and conviction, comparing the importance of teaching a new generation of shepherds to teaching people how to drive:

This way of life is getting lost. It's like getting your driver's license. If someone doesn't teach you how to drive, you'll never learn. You can watch cars go by all day long, but you won't learn that way.... People need to see the benefit in the sacrifice. It's very nice. You get here, and you say, "This is really nice."

I go there [to the *Escuela de Pastores*] when they call me. I give a talk on whatever they ask, and then, I bring them up here too. In fact, I'm the one who's had the most students every year since the first class came through.

Every year. Since the school began, they've come here every year. There are some who want to have an *explotación* [a herd large enough to attract subsidies]. I see a future for some, yes, but not for others because some just come to spend a little time here, like they're going on a field trip or to the disco. On the whole, the percentage of students I work with is more positive than negative. In fact, right now there's a student who's working up there in the *monte*.

Every spring he lectures on goat farming at the school — as well as his specialty, the art of *cencerro* bells — and then hosts students-in-residence at the farm, mentoring them for several weeks of hands-on training. Although he sees a future in some trainees, he also recalls the first one he hosted, who spent two months as an intern with his family and treated the time like “he was going to the disco.” With more interest among youth today — and more rigorous screening by the program leaders — recent applicants have been very good, he remarks. Both he and the students have benefitted from rebalancing the time spent between classroom theory and on-the-job practice. His current mentee is from Madrid, and even though he admits she was “a little lost” in her first week, things are going well because “she really wants to do what she's doing.”

Even as he describes the hardship of his profession, Pepe exudes a clarity of purpose and commitment that are reflected in the urgency he feels to continue to teach others. This drive to teach does not only cover the training of new shepherds but also the raising of general awareness surrounding the environmental and nutritional impact of land use, animals, and food sources. The *ganadero*-teacher acknowledges that he keeps going because of an ignorance he perceives in city folk.

Someone who's studying in Seville graduates; they're 24 or 25 years old and don't have a family working in a rural area. They like the idea of country life. They've even seen goats or sheep as they are herded down the droving routes, but they don't have any idea about what these animals are really like. The goats go by, and they don't know if they're wearing a *cencerro* bell or why they're wearing it, or if the udders have milk or not; if some goats are bigger or smaller. They have no idea. That's for sure. They're not going to value this. It's something that practically no one knows about.

He spends hours that he can scarcely afford to talk to people, even a curious “*norteamericana*” (North American woman) as they liked to call me, and educate them about traditional shepherding practices. Last week, for example, Dr. Yolanda Mena came to the farm with her students to learn about the Millán family operation and the high nutritional value of goat’s milk. Pepe was surprised at how little young people, even these educated university students, know about their food sources, farming life, and the countryside in general.

The main objective is for people to learn what we do. I’ve been surprised to find out that a ten- or twelve-year-old child comes here and doesn’t know that goats give milk. This child thought cheese came directly from the big *supermercado* [supermarket]. You’re at the University of Seville. You know Yolanda Mena .... Well, she has been here, and she was even here when the goats were about to give birth, during the birthing season when we get new offspring. She just said she wanted to come sometime; she gave me a date; and she came. She was here on a Saturday or a Sunday, and she went back excited about what she had seen and eager to explain it to her class. And you know, we’re not talking about children anymore. These people are eighteen years old or older. We’re talking about men and women.

Pepe continues to broaden his educational reach through mass media. Several years ago, he allowed a filming crew to make a documentary that featured his work and conveyed the high nutritional value of goat’s milk, *La buena leche* (2015). Co-sponsored by the Andalusian local government and the University of Seville, it showcases the family’s daily routines and explains the ecological and nutritional benefits of the Millán family’s traditional method of raising goats. Years later, he reached a much broader audience when he was invited to participate in the popular TV series *Volando voy* (2018). He joined the show’s celebrity host Jesús Calleja and journalist Mercedes Milá not for the notoriety but, rather, to draw attention to climate change and “raise people’s awareness about the small collective acts they can do to help preserve the environment.” The episode focuses on the Parque Natural de la Sierra de Grazalema where Pepe’s family works, focusing on the threats to the ancient *pinsapo* fir trees. The show highlights the importance that Pepe’s extensive grazing plays in the ecosystem. His animals clean the pasturelands of underbrush,

fertilize it, and make it easier for the rare Spanish fir to thrive. As Pepe interacts with the media stars, his keen sense of humor enlivens a lesson: as he shows the host how to milk a goat, he has him begin by first practicing on Pepe's fingers! His playful personality and inspirational teaching reached thousands of viewers. As Mar and I learn about the delicate ecosystem of the pasturelands, we see a parallel between the endangered *pinsapo* of the Sierra de Grazalema and Pepe's own guardianship of the land — both are vestiges of the past, and both need our support to survive.

They need to know what they're eating and where it comes from. It's like the chicken you buy from the rotisserie shop. It can be raised in a month, a month and a half, and it's ready to eat. But for one of these chickens running around here, the little bitty ones, it'll take a year at least before you can make chicken stew. For the chicken to grow to the size you'll need, it'll take even more time for you to make a more-or-less good chicken stew. You'll need a year.

Now Pepe turns the tables on our interview, with one of his characteristic teaching moments. He asks us: "If you had to move goats, how would you do it?" Luckily, his mobile phone rings before we can answer, and we are off the hook. The organizers for this year's *Escuela de Pastores* are calling to schedule a lecture on *cencerro* bells and to send another set of interns to the farm. Pepe's dedication to his art and desire to pass it along make him in high demand in the emerging world of new pastoralism training.

It is time for the mid-day meal, and we head back to the farmhouse. As we first pass through the milking barn, Pepe points to the array of traditional *cencerro* bells hanging there and rings the loudest, then the softest. We get one last audiovisual lesson on the artful mechanics of what we witnessed from the hilltop. One last look at the pasturelands we leave behind makes it obvious that no machine could clear this rugged land as well as his herd, and no shepherd, no matter how fit, could climb it as often as needed to graze the animals and still bring them back for milking. The bells and dogs — and the knowledge of how to use them — are crucial (and this, of course, is the answer to his earlier quiz question).



Fig. 2.3 All hands on deck as Pepe and his family work together at milking time (2019).

## In Between the Changing World of Pastoralism: Rita Soledad Millán Luna

My idea is for all of us to change how we do things; to get rid of the middlemen and make direct sales to the consumer.

Rita Soledad Millán Luna

Although Pepe has good access to the rocky pastures of the mountain, use of the public lands comes often with regulations that restrict many possibilities for making a good living and limits his ability to bring his daughter Rita on board to expand into the popular *Payoyo* cheesemaking business. So, while he is rounding up the wayward goats, his daughter Rita invites us into the farmhouse to tell her own story. As a woman in her thirties, she adds another perspective to this case study. Rita makes clear that she loves working with animals, a love learned early as she worked alongside her father. She recalls a childhood filled with time outside, animals, and never needing anything. She smiles as she recalls how her father even built them a pool. And yet, there were “other things.” They never had a vacation, and she grew up being keenly aware



of how cruel society, and especially school children, could be in the face of stereotypes about the children of shepherds.

Well, I remember a nice childhood. The thing about living in the country is that it demands 24-hour-a-day, 365-days-a-year dedication. If you want to have fun, you have to have it in the country. Right now, we're not living here. We're here all day and go to our house in town to sleep. But before, until I was sixteen, we did live in the country, in the real country, the real rural country. Not here. On the other land. We've been here for fifteen years. The other land is on the road from Zahara to Prado del Rey. There we really were in the middle of nowhere.

You see, I like animals, so when I was going to school and I'd come back from doing my homework and everything, I'd go out to be with the animals. We always had to help our parents, that's for sure. And also, that's probably why we know how to do so many things these days.

But, yes, it was good. It's just that there are many things that aren't easy to do. I remember my childhood as very happy. Country life can really be enriching. I don't doubt that, but there are other things that aren't so good, and kids can be cruel. They make fun of you because you come from the country. I haven't had problems, but it's true that kids are very cruel. The truth is that I never had problems because I always really loved living in the country. I had all the animals I wanted. I didn't have any problems. Maybe the other kids couldn't have a dog at home, but I had seven in the country, and cats, and rabbits. But that's because I really like animals. So yes, it was good, I'm happy.

Then there's this, for example, my friends would finish school in the summer, and they'd go to the pool and do other summer activities. I couldn't go. My dad made us a little pool so we could play and such, but it's not the same, and it keeps you from having certain things. You have many other things, and they're very rewarding, but you don't live like the rest of society lives or like children live nowadays. It deprives you of other things. Especially when you're a girl. Later, when you're more mature and conscious about things, you start having your own personality, and you don't really care. But especially when you're a kid, it can be difficult. Yes, children can really be cruel.

Clear-headed and articulate, Rita explains that working as a *ganadero* or *ganadera* was neither her nor her brother's dream. She had left to study and got a job helping to run an office, where she worked for eight years. The job vanished with the economic crisis, and she could hardly pay rent, so she had no choice but to return to the family business. She clearly states, "I went to school so I could have a day off," but in fact

she spent most of her weekends and holidays returning to the farm to lend a hand.

I'd ask to take my vacation time when there was more work to do here. So, I didn't completely cut ties. My parents have lived their entire lives here. When the whole country got into this crisis and everything went upside down, I said, "Look, instead of being away from home and not in the best of conditions, I'll go back home. I'll have more than enough work, and it's work that I like." I'm trying to get ahead and continue what my parents have done for so many years.

She is searching for ways to incorporate shepherding into a new life for herself. She first tried to open a cheese shop, but government restrictions curtailed that enterprise. Her story illustrates the often-conflicting policies about extensive grazing. On the one hand, individuals can apply for funds to clear, fertilize, and promote biodiversity on public lands, but, on the other, they are prevented from pursuing opportunities for expansion and renovation. A growing family can rarely all stay in the family business. After nearly six often-frustrating years back on the farm, Rita took on an administrative position in a farm association that promotes the native *Payoya* goat species that her family raises. Her goal of building something for herself, of doing creative and meaningful work, and of amplifying the work that her father set in place could only be done by working away from the farm for a few years. Clearly a *ganadera* cannot afford a middle-class lifestyle without supplemental income.

Rita takes us into a 30m × 25m × 8m cement building attached to the barn and milking areas. Furnished in a rustic, practical, and appealing way, this spacious building is set up for a family of four to use as a base of operations on the rocky pasturelands for up to twelve hours a day. Red gingham sink skirts brighten the kitchen corner, and the open cupboards are stocked with spices and preserves. A rustic pine dining set holds places for four, and a comfortable grey sofa floats in the middle of the room, separating the kitchen from the facing wall in which a corner stone fireplace still holds embers from the early-morning fire. Cast iron pots hang on the hearth. Rita's younger brother, nearly hidden in the shadow of the chimney, sits on a stool, quietly listening to his sister.

As we talk, Rita unwraps a checked cloth to reveal a perfectly round white *Payoya* goat cheese. The firm rind surrounds a semi-soft, rich, and tangy cheese. Her voice now bubbles with enthusiasm for the first time as she recites her recipe, which mixes *Payoya* goat milk with *Merina de Grazelema* sheep milk for added richness. In a lively lilt, Rita talks about her hope of developing new markets and revenue by publicizing her gift for making savory goat cheeses on the internet. Rita sums up what would be needed to make a decent living in pastoralism: pacing production of meat, which doesn't keep as long as cheese, and establishing direct sales with no middleman.

The market for meat, lamb, as well as goat, is down. So, the costs are much higher than just production costs. It's very hard. You have to be on the lookout for subsidies; you have to make sure the animal is fed for enough time in the country; you have to consider many different alternatives so you can meet your bottom line and then some. And even then, it's very, very hard.

One option, which also is my idea, is for all of us to change how we do things; to get rid of the middlemen and make direct sales to the consumer. So yes, then you can make a profit. If not, it's very, very, very hard. It depends on feed prices, if you have a good year. It depends on many, many things, and then, on what they want to pay you.

Nowadays you have to work with the internet. It's easiest, and apart from being easy, it the most economical and fastest as far as costs and many other things. The problem we have in Andalusia and in Cádiz is that we're not aware of what we have. The clients who come from other places tend to understand things better and can be better clients than the ones from around here. So, when you think about selling both meat and cheese, you have to keep that in mind, because the whole online thing is very important.

Also, the products are perishable, and how do you deal with that? Meat is more complicated because, right now, we only have one birthing area for both sheep and goats. So, we have all the births at once because the market we have now demands that. Since we sell wholesale, we have to produce many at one time. If we were the point of final sale, it would be different. We'd have to change how we manage the animals. Instead of having everything all at once, we'd have to always have product ready to sell. We'd have to stagger the breeding and everything else so that you could have meat every two months for market. Your clients need to know that they can buy every two or three months. If you make things clear from the beginning, then there's no problem.

That is, if you're organized. With cheese, you have a little larger margin of time for production because there are different cheeses. Some are aged; some are fresh. With all the different kinds of cheeses, you can play around a bit.

My idea is to plan out how I can arrange to sell meat directly to the consumer because we can't sell milk, cheese, or meat directly. I need to figure out how to do direct sales so that if you came here and you wanted a liter of milk or a lamb or whatever, I'd be able to sell it to you. So, I'm looking into how I can manage all that.

Soon Rita's eyes cloud again with concern about the future. Disillusionment seeps back into her voice as she outlines the hurdles to opening a cheese shop. For one thing, situated in the Parque Natural, the farm must be managed in accord with strict regulations. The family must rely on a generator for electricity as solar panels are prohibited. In addition to needing a better power source, she explains, they would also need a better water source but are not allowed to dig a well. Thus, in order to set up a business, Rita would need to rent a place in town and bring it up to standards that would meet sanitary requirements. In town, however, construction is also limited because of the historic designation given to the downtown area. Echoing not only her father but also other people we have interviewed on all sides of extensive grazing, the situation boils down to a bureaucratic challenge that can easily overwhelm individuals and families working on a relatively small scale.

I reflect on the irony of the French, who buy raw sheep and goat milk from Andalusia to make their world-class cheeses yet whose laws require public institutions serving food to purchase a certain percentage of it from local, organic farmers. As in many parts of the world, people in Spain either cannot afford or are not willing to pay the real cost of good organic milks, meats, and cheeses. If the government changed its regulations, shepherd-farmers might be able to stay in business. As a woman deciding her future, Rita's bottom line is the time-investment. She repeats, "I went to school so I could have a day off," but, now, what she wants is to have her own place and to be able to enjoy it. In slower times, she and her brother could "take turns," but even with all four of them working, there is not enough income to sustain three separate households.

As a young farmer-entrepreneur like her father was, Rita is always looking for ways to move forward. She is tempted by the government subventions offered for new ventures in farming, but she also sees how they are a sensitive subject for her family and often a double-edged sword. Subsidies look attractive, but they can sink you further into debt as you try to meet all the criteria, and they sometimes take up to one year to be approved and released. The system favors people who already have money and time to invest in the lengthy, costly application and certification process.

The subject of aid is a little delicate. I've learned from the people I work with and others who've shared their experiences with me that it's better to come up with something on your own without any governmental start-up funds. If later you ask for it, fine, but you can't count on it in advance because it changes with the wind. It may or may not happen. There are times when you ask for some start-up, and then, you have to meet certain requirements that end up costing you even more with the assistance than if you didn't request it. There are a lot of factors. This whole topic of aid is a long story. If you can do it without it, all the better. If I can meet all the requirements, fantastic, right? But I don't plan to start out with aid.

As Pepe's wife Isabel begins preparing the family meal, we say goodbye and hike the kilometer back out, taking a last look at the farm as we close the gate to the Parque Natural. We drive another kilometer, and the fairytale image of Zahara de la Sierra comes into view again. Signs point to the historic downtown area with access to shopping and restaurants as well as cycling and hiking routes. I recall Rita's disgust that the famous commercial brand *Queso Payoyo* is in fact not made with 100% milk from *Payoya* goats. A local cheese shop offering the family's authentic local cheese would have a ready-made market for times when the town swells by the thousands in high tourist season.





Fig. 2.4 A Family portrait, Sierra de Grazalema (2019).

## Conclusions and Update

Soon after our interview, we learned that Rita took an outside job working for a collective, the Asociación de Criadores de la Raza Caprina Payoya, which helps protect and promote the native goat species the family raises. The daunting reality of regulations and start-up funding had delayed Rita's dream of opening a cheese shop. When we check back with Pepe in fall 2021, however, Rita was back working at the farm and developing local production of cheeses — though mostly by special order, as we saw in Chapter 1 with Juan's family. He also reveals that his own mother worked as a goat herder (*cabrista*) and goat cheese-maker herself as he tells us that Rita has inherited the "gift" for working with the farm animals and producing good cheeses. Nevertheless, and although government regulations eased during the global pandemic,

opening a larger cheese shop is still out of reach for her. Instead, Rita dedicates her energies and employs the new skills she acquired in her administrative post to help the family. She learned her way around government forms and regulations and has now applied successfully for CAP farm subsidies. Pepe tells us with a smile that he is very happy with this new division of labor. His daughter is now the family administrator, doing all the paperwork to keep funding and regulations in order.

With Rita back on the farm full-time, Pepe reports that he decided to sell nearly half of his Merino sheep and keep his prize *Payoya* goats. "I'm getting too old for this rough terrain." He admits that his once-strong legs are aging and the deep ravines are more challenging to climb daily. As we talk just a year and a half into the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, he describes the frightening spring months of 2020. Like Juan Vázquez, Pepe experienced a huge drop in income with plummeting milk and meat prices when the initial global shock paralyzed markets. Fortunately, in Pepe's case, it was a relatively short time before he was recognized as an "essential worker" and enjoyed new respect and a freedom few others had in town. He describes how the local guards stopped everyone, asking for their papers and fining anyone who was moving illegally through town during lockdown. When the same officials saw Pepe, however, they gratefully waved him on through, thanking him for providing milk and meat for the community. If only briefly, the pandemic showed the world that shepherds are truly essential in times of global crisis.

Pepe and his family represent resilience and dedication over the decades of challenges. The shepherd acknowledges that, although he loves working with animals and being his own boss, he might not have chosen this lifepath if he had been born into another socio-economic class. Still, he took what he was given, educated himself on the art of shepherding, and built a business out of it. He has helped to protect a native species and ecosystem, as well as created his own legacy both with the farm itself and with his teaching and mentoring of the younger generation. Pepe had been able to become a successful farmer because of the economic and social structures in place decades ago, when banks still took a chance on small-scale farmers, albeit at a steep cost, and before government subsidies were offered. He is an entrepreneur who has taken great risks to reap modest gains for himself and his family,

but he has achieved much larger gains for the surrounding environment and the sustainability of food systems in Andalusia.

We meet Pepe Millán one last time at an outdoor café in May 2022 to show him a draft of the book and get his blessing for publication. As Pepe tries to place us among the dozens of researchers and students that have worked with him, he says it looks good. He then recalls a good-humored and instructive story about one university-trained collaborator. Pepe roguishly asked him: “How many years did you study to learn your trade, to be able to work in the country?” To the collaborator’s response of “eight years,” Pepe laughed and added “Well, I’ve studied all my life. And I wasn’t taught by a professor or a father, only by watching. You have to watch nature and learn from it. My daughter Rita has that gift too.” Pepe chuckles again recalling the man’s response: “Well, you got me on that one!” *Ganaderos* like Pepe are natural scientists whose curiosity, patience, and natural intelligence allow them to observe and learn from the complex patterns found in nature. Although his cell phone keeps ringing now, as people at the farm contact him to help with a delivery, he cannot resist a final hands-on lesson. Positioning his finger as though it was the tail of a goat, he demonstrates how in pregnant goats there is a certain point that he can feel to see if the offspring will be male or female. He concludes: “You can study all you want, but you have to watch and learn.”

The era in which Pepe could start with two goats and find a local banker willing to gamble on a shepherd with nothing but a good reputation has long passed. Rita wants to make her own contribution through cheesemaking but is still battling roadblocks. Pepe’s son still helps with the farm operation, but he also must supplement his income at different times of the year with construction or harvesting local crops like olives. The family continues to sustain what they have built, but it is unclear how much longer this can last. The fundamental question remains: Who will take over for Pepe when he retires, and can it succeed without the support of a whole family system?

In 2018, Pepe confessed “the future looks a bit dark to me,” but, in 2022, he is guardedly optimistic. Rita’s success in taking advantage of subsidies and new guidelines as well as her willingness to take over part of the family business offer hope. Having hiked some of his land, I wonder more broadly: if no one grazes animals on the land, what

will happen to the health of this unique biosphere reserve with its endangered *pinsapo* and fauna, as well as the tourism that protects Zahara from depopulation? The next few years will be telling. In fact, as I later find out, Pepe was featured in the closing session at the *Escuela de Pastores* 2022, “What is the Future of Extensive Grazing?” His story reveals his determination to work hard and invest fully in his career with the hope of passing his knowledge, and perhaps his farm, onto the next generation. I am left with his own words, which he has repeated often “That’s why I’ve collaborated with a variety of people... because you can see what’s written down, or your grandchild or your great grandchild can see it. These rural traditions aren’t written down, and that’s what we’re losing”. Pepe continues interviewing with people like me to ensure this way of life gets passed along.



Fig. 3.1 A view of the barn and sheep in Sierra de Cardena y Montoro (2018).