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# Passing It On

## Kinship, Temporality and Moral Personhood in Norwegian 'Hytte' Succession

**Abstract:** In this article we explore the inheritance of *hytte*, or secondary homes, in Norway. Inspired by the notion of 'kinning', we extend the notion of kinning to include various materialities and temporalities. In particular, we trace the passing on of the *hytte* ethnographically as a stretched moment, and argue that temporality adds another layer to the understanding of the *hytte* as a participant in kinning. Our material indicates a number of connections between the *hytte* as a property to be passed on and the family/kin as a reproducing unit, connections that unfold over time, decades, a lifetime or more. Through this approach, it is possible to trace processes of kinning, but also what we call 'de-kinning', involving detachment, refusals and rejection. The article shows that a focus on materials and built structures adds to the understanding of kinship in contemporary societies.

**Keywords:** de-kinning, inheritance, kinship, Norwegian *hytte*, temporality

Grandma, when you die, can we inherit the *hytte*?

Ingrid was only seven when she brought up the question about inheritance of the family cabin. Now she is eight and Lisbet, her grandmother, tells us the story with a sense of confidence and even gratitude. Far from being an insult, her granddaughter's directness about Grandma's death is a much-appreciated confirmation that they have somehow succeeded: Lisbet and her husband Egil's love for the cabin has been passed on to the third generation. This is not (or not yet) about legal inheritance. For now, the continuity that Ingrid has confirmed concerns something else. A few months later we meet Ingrid, who clearly feels at ease at the old log cabin, situated on a slope between tall fir trees, with an outhouse, a woodshed and more than thirty pairs of skis, old and new. For these three people, this particular wooden structure constitutes a place where their mutual sense of grandparent–grandchild relatedness thickens with each visit.

This article concerns the temporal and material dimensions of kinship through the lens of the *hytte*,<sup>1</sup> which is the colloquial name for a Norwegian second home, also referred to in English as cabin, cottage or summer house. The *hytte* offers a particularly rich site from which to study the making and unmaking of family and kin in contemporary Norway. Taking as our starting point that kinship is about forms and processes of relatedness that invariably thicken or thin over time, we see the *hytte* as a site where multiple forms of relatedness unfold. The fact that a *hytte* is often shared by persons





FIGURE 1. At the *hytte* (Credit Haakon Harriss)

who see themselves as kin yet occupy different households adds to the *hytte*'s potential 'to build and extend kinship beyond the here and now and to evoke or summon up relationships in the past as well as those in the future' (Carsten 2019: 138).

As Janet Carsten has noted, the affective quality of kinship 'seems to have a strong tendency to attach itself to *stuff*' (2019: 39). This includes not only substances associated with procreation, but also the artefacts of everyday life, and those passed on to kin through inheritance. Michael Lambek has cautioned that a too narrow focus on procreation as the site of kin reproduction 'risks staying too close' to contemporary constructs of so-called nuclear families and 'ideologies of individual achievement' (2011: 5). We support this and suggest that a focus on inheritance and succession that sees reproduction in a broader context is better situated to challenge the bounded notion of persons as well as possessive individualism. Anything that is shared and

exchanged or passed on within and between households, such as food, houses, land, stories and memories, as well as maintenance and care work, can be involved to a greater or lesser extent in the expression of kinship (Besky 2017; Bloch 1995; Lambek 2011; Meigs 1986; Weismantel 1995). Such relations may extend across space, such as through transnational kinship ties (see Boehm 2019). They may also extend through time, transcending the lifetime of an individual person through a process of generational succession, or passing on, making the process of inheritance what we shall refer to as a 'stretched event'.

In the article, we mobilise this notion of a stretched event to detail how cross-generational kinship networks are sustained through materials in contemporary Norway, and show how the *hytte* is implicated in the practices and maintenance of kin relations. We draw on the research project 'Materializing Kinship: Cycles of Life at the Norwegian *Hytte*',<sup>2</sup> in which we investigated how family and kin are constituted through the *hytte*. Analytically, we combine an insider's and outsider's perspective. The first author is a *hytte* owner through inheritance and grew up in Norway. The second author is British, fluent in Norwegian and a frequent guest at various *hytte* of Norwegian friends and colleagues. This combination in terms of positionality offered an implicit comparison and helped us not only to question what the first author easily took for granted but also to elicit different responses based on how our interlocutors positioned themselves differently in relation to each of us. While the second author would often be told generalising narratives about 'how Norwegians act and think', the first author's conversations quickly turned to sharing of various solutions and experiences concerning practical and moral dilemmas. Such shifts in interlocutors' interpretations of the conversation format gave us additional insights about their tacit notions about national identity and belonging, enriching both conversations and our analysis.

Based on fieldwork with *hytte* families in various parts of Norway,<sup>3</sup> we learned that a *hytte* is not merely an arena in which the family perform their day-to-day leisure activities, it is also intimately woven into people's lives, memories and senses of belonging (see also Abram 2020; Lagerqvist et al 2016). We approach each *hytte* and its biography as an analytical and methodological unit. This approach allows a systematic attention to material processes, such as decay or makeshift repair, that its owners were otherwise unlikely to draw attention to. Hence, while unavoidably eliciting the biographies of its users, it also serves as a reminder of the work that is required to sustain a *hytte* materially over time, against the effects of sun, rain and snow, as well as wear and tear. As we shall argue, such care and maintenance work are often intertwined with notions of future ownership, lending itself to our exploration of inheritance as a stretched event.

We mobilise the concept of kinning as an active process of 'incorporating persons into families of kin' (Howell 2003; see also Abram and Lien, this issue), but extend this notion to include the incorporation of persons through lifelong, reciprocal relations between persons and things, and between persons and specific places or sites. These relations are enacted through everyday practices, concerning or unfolding at the *hytte*. We also discuss how kinning sometimes falters or fails, and how the act of passing on inheritance may be anticipated by moments at the *hytte* in which the process of kinning is contested or disrupted.

## Nordic Tensions in Kinship and Succession

Studies of kinship and inheritance in Northern Europe have often focused on tensions between the nuclear family or conjugal couple (alliance), and the relations of succession between parents and children or grandchildren (descent). Such tensions concern, for example, the legal rights of inheritance of the surviving widow(er) *vis-à-vis* those of the children of the deceased from a previous marriage (de Regt 1997; Selmer 2017; see also Selmer, this issue), or the extent to which an individual is seen as morally entitled to refashion his or her life in ways that override previous kin obligations (Gullestad 1997; Marcoux 2001). Furthermore, in light of the flexibility of kinship relations, kinship measurements mobilised in negotiations of belonging can exacerbate inequalities and marginalisations within families (Thelen and Lammer 2021). These tensions can be seen as variations on a general opposition between the individual and the collective, and whether kinship and family relations are seen primarily as a matter of obligation or of individual choice (e.g. Chevalier 2002). The *hytte* represents an important site for ethnographic inquiry in relation to these tensions, as they are often understood as shared property or places where an extended kin group comes together. While a newly built *hytte* may initially serve as an extension of the home for the nuclear family (a second home), its purpose typically changes as the family expands, so that it soon becomes an extension of a multigenerational kinship unit consisting of the first owners, their adult children and their spouses, their grandchildren and so on. This extension can create a discontinuity between legal ownership (still formally with the first owners) and a sense of entitlement, or informal ownership, which may be more widely felt among near kin, and expressed through, for example, collaborative work of maintenance and care.

While the nuclear family constitutes a primary unit in Norwegian approaches to family and kin, rendering intergenerational co-residence as historic or marginal (and marked by ethnic difference),<sup>4</sup> the *hytte* is a site where such extended kin relations are not only permitted but also highly valued. This is also the case for second homes in Sweden, which are described as family places where ideally several generations spend time together. Annika Pers and colleagues (2018) note that for the older generation of Swedish second-home owners, this intergenerational co-habitation is indeed why second homes become emotionally important. As one elderly woman expressed it: 'By having children and grandchildren here, doing things here, I am getting roots here' (Pers et al 2018: 270). In what may be seen as a kind of 'kinning in reverse', the quote suggests that kin relatedness is a process that a person may nurture through their whole life. Actively engaging her own children and grandchildren allowed their interlocutor, at the age of 75, to become 'rooted'. This resonates with our findings and confirms the significance of extended kin relations in the Nordic region. It also resonates with Russian dacha, which, according to Melissa Caldwell 'evoke processes of reproduction that are both social and biological' (2011: 12). Like at the dacha, experiences at the *hytte* often cannot be separated from intimate family relationships, and senses of heritage and belonging (Caldwell 2011: 14). A *hytte*, or a dacha, is not separate from everyday relations, it is co-constitutive of everyday life (see Garvey 2008).

A solidly built and well-maintained *hytte* has a lifespan that exceeds that of its first owners. This offers an opportunity for inscribing particular values, concerns or aesthet-

ics into the material fabric that will continue to provide for future generations after the first *hytte*-owner is gone. At the same time, Norwegian inheritance is based on a principle of equality and partibility (i.e. partible inheritance; see Lien and Abram 2018). This implies that the question of who remains entitled to the *hytte* becomes increasingly fraught as the generations expand. It is precisely because it has the capacity to mobilise kin relations beyond the primary household that the *hytte* becomes a repository for the extended kin-unit and presents itself as something that several people feel entitled to through idioms of ownership. How, then, is the mutual constitution of a *hytte* and its kin group sustained across generations and over time? How is the tension between individual property holders and collective kin groups managed, and what is at stake? And what might this tell us about Norwegian senses of relatedness, personhood and kinship?

Our ethnography suggests that the *hytte* is not only perceived differently by different users, it is indeed multiple in the sense that it is enacted differently at different moments. Hence, our material suggests that the *hytte* is: (1) an economic object and source of value, (2) a place that invites specific material enactments, meanings, memories and narratives,<sup>5</sup> (3) a site where particular forms of kinning may unfold or (4) a moral person. The latter reflects *hytte*-owners' experience of the *hytte* as something that one might carry moral obligations or responsibilities towards, but also as a recipient of gifts, of care and affective concern.<sup>6</sup> These are partially overlapping enactments, which can make a *hytte* a somewhat fragile achievement, as we shall detail below.

Questions of property in anthropology tend to revolve around notions of persons and things. That is, property is often seen as relations among persons, mediated by things. However, this understanding presupposes an unproblematic distinction between persons and things that cannot be sustained. As Caroline Humphrey and Katherine Verdery (2004) have forcefully demonstrated, neither the unity of 'persons' nor the unity of 'things' can be assumed a priori. They argue that 'things may consist of assemblages of social relations rather than *antedating* those relations' (2004: 8; see also Alexander 2004), while the assumption of a personal identity as a bounded and stable identity is difficult to uphold. The case of the Norwegian *hytte* similarly questions the 'persons–things–relations' nexus underlying common Euro-American notions of property. A *hytte* can be assessed in accordance with an expected market value and can be sold and partitioned equally as a monetary value among siblings, that is, as an economic object. But the fact that the *hytte* must be sold to be equally partitioned among siblings represents a moral dilemma for many *hytte* inheritors, as it raises questions about the moral obligation to share equally between siblings, and to 'keep the *hytte* in the family' as a place of memories, a site for kinning and even as a moral person. In addition, Norwegian property law allows for statutory co-ownership (so-called *Sameie*<sup>7</sup>) by an unrestricted number of persons, allowing a sense of shared entitlement to be formalised, and thus to support the role of the *hytte* in co-constituting assemblages of kin relations across generations. This demonstrates that even while the *hytte* is legally commodified and bound by property arrangements that are fully institutionalised through the Norwegian property market, very different conceptions of the relation between persons and things may in fact co-exist. Thus, the Norwegian *hytte* adds further nuance to Humphrey and Verdery's insightful critique of the 'persons–things–relations' nexus underlying legal frameworks in Europe.



**FIGURE 2.** *Huske* (in Norwegian: swing/remember) (Credit: Haakon Harriss)

We organise our ethnographic material in relation to moments of passing on, when the relation between persons and things is most explicit, most fragile or otherwise significant. In the first section, we address the gradual thickening of kin relations through material enactments of passing on in relation to the *hytte*, what we refer to as inheritance as a stretched event. In the second section we turn to situations of rupture, dissolution or thinning of relatedness, detailing instances when the *hytte* fails to provide the anchoring site for kin relatedness, thereby illustrating both the kinning and its shadow potential of ‘de-kinning’ (see Abram and Lien, this issue). By ‘passing on’ we refer not only to the intergenerational transfer of property through inheritance, but also to the ongoing and mutual appropriation of *hytte* and its kin that takes place both before and after the legally formalised moment of transfer, for example through work of maintenance and care. In this way, we draw attention to multiple materialities and temporalities at play as kin relatedness is enacted through succession.

### **Inalienability and Moral Responsibility towards the Dead**

Hilde is an elementary school teacher and mother of three. She became the co-owner of a *hytte* named Lunden through marriage, as her husband had inherited Lunden from his father, Tore, who had died many years ago. Hilde has fond memories of her father-in-law, whom she had known since her first visit to the *hytte* when she was only 19. There was never any doubt that Lunden would be passed on to them, and the transition was a gradual process of material appropriation. Hilde laughs while she shows us all the silly knick-knacks and junk that pile up at a *hytte*, hidden in drawers and in the outdoor shed. She has spent quite a bit of time renovating, refurbishing and selecting new fabric for curtains and cushions.

One of the items that she treasures the most is the *hytte*-book. In many Norwegian *hytte* there is a custom of writing an entry in the *hyttebok* for each visit, and Lunden is no exception. The book can become a treasured *hytte* journal, often extending into several volumes and dating back several decades. Hilde points to a few entries that her father-in-law wrote shortly before he passed away. Tore had heart disease and knew that each visit might be his last. He wrote about how nice it was to visit the *hytte*. We ask Hilde to read the text out loud. ‘The drive was super, and the driver was excellent! Here at the *hytte* it’s lovely. It’s two or three years since I was here last, and it’s absolutely spick and span, neat and tidy. Thank you so much for your help, Ragnvald.’ Hilde pauses for a moment, sighs and then she continues: ‘The *hytte* is not for sale, and never will be. Love, Tore.’

As the daughter-in-law reads this sentence, her voice cracks. Tears come into her eyes, and there is a long pause before she looks up and adds ‘and we are true to that’. More than twenty years after he passed away, Tore’s intention lives on, not as an unreasonable demand on the living from an old man long gone, but as a written intention that the next generation embraces. In this way Tore’s presence in the *hytte* endures through the daughter-in-law’s felt obligations towards its maintenance and care. Lunden, which could easily fetch a decent sum of money on the property market, has become inalienable by the stroke of his pen. What is significant about this is not only the power deceased relatives may have over the living, but also the affective memories that his commandment elicits in Hilde. Lunden requires endless hours of maintenance, yet she takes on these tasks with gratitude, never questioning the legitimacy of the hold that this building has on her and on her family.

In this way, Lunden may be said to serve what Carsten refers to as a ‘vector of kinship’, with ‘heightened potential to carry associations linked to different temporalities; their emotional resonances . . . sedimented within them’ (2019: 145). This chimes with the way that domestic objects can be both the carrier of kinship and a means of immortalising the person who leaves them (Marcoux 2001). For Hilde, the obligation she has embraced is simultaneously an affective force, an ethical compass that makes the *hytte* meaningful as a place of memories and narratives, and a confirmation of wider kinship relations. We might say that Tore’s last words in the *hyttebok* co-constitutes her as *hytte*-owner and daughter-in-law simultaneously. This example suggests that the relation between persons and things is not necessarily confined to the timespan that defines a human life, or indeed that of a building. Rather, there are moments when these relations are at play long after the persons in question have ceased to exist as a material presence.

In our ethnographic material there are numerous examples of deceased ancestors whose presence at the *hytte* was felt by their loved ones. Kjersti’s late father built everything at their *hytte*, and in doing so he also built Kjersti’s self-sufficiency and her confidence in managing whatever life throws at her, whether at the *hytte* or elsewhere. His map-holder still hangs from a nail in the wall, and the force of his personality shines out from the jokey signs written on bits of wood now piled up at the back of the shelf, as well as from the clever bits of joinery he made for the small space. Now in her sixties, Kjersti is proud of her ability to maintain the *hytte* more or less on her own, and she imagines her parents watching her with appreciation when she succeeds in managing physically challenging tasks. ‘I carry them with me, one on each shoulder’, she muses.

Both of these examples show how the *hytte* can act as a physical repository of memories, where the deceased remain present through the body of the dwelling, its interiors and its surroundings. They gesture towards multiple temporalities, and that the *hytte* can evoke relatedness between the living and the dead. Hence, the *hytte* is a site where cross-generational kin relations unfold, as in the following example.

### **'I Am My Great-Grandmother': Succession and Embodied Relations**

Jeanette is the fourth-generation owner of a *hytte* near the Repparfjord River in Finnmark. The *hytte* was built in 1927 and was taken over by German troops in 1940 during their occupation of Norway. Then, in 1942, the *hytte* was literally taken apart and reassembled further east, as roadbuilding extended in this direction. In October 1944, the *hytte* was burned to the ground as part of the retreating force's scorched earth tactic that left most coastal villages in Finnmark in ruins. The building that Jeanette refers to as the *hytte* was actually rebuilt after the war, following detailed drawings to replicate the old one. Despite the dramatic character of these events, Jeanette sees this as essentially the same *hytte* that her maternal great-grandmother owned in the late 1920s.

Jeanette honours the somewhat unusual principle of inheritance through female primogeniture that her maternal ancestors had chosen and sees it as a means to ensure kin continuity. As Jeanette says, reiterating a proverb: 'A daughter is your daughter all her life; a son remains a son until he finds a wife'. As a female version of the ancient Norwegian Odel inheritance law, which gives the oldest child the first right of refusal in the inheritance of farming property,<sup>8</sup> this principle ensures a strong ancestral line and provides her children with some certainty about inheritance. Jeanette explains that her two children have always known that the daughter is the chosen inheritor of the *hytte*. This is ensured in Jeanette's will. Hence, the future relation of ownership is anticipated even decades before the actual moment when legal transfer will take place.

Jeanette talks fondly about her maternal grandmother and great-grandmother, whose presences are commemorated through the many items they owned that remain at the *hytte*: furniture, crockery and pictures. She also talks about how much it means for her cousins that they recognise things in the *hytte* when they visit. If that means the *hytte* is what she calls 'organised chaos' rather than conforming to some stylish designer image, then that doesn't matter to her. She and her husband prioritise the practical things like keeping the roof watertight, the walls painted and the contents in good repair. But more importantly, they allow the *hytte*'s stories to live on, and thus the presence of their ancestors. Every summer Jeanette organises a barbecue at the *hytte* for all the kin and family who are related through her maternal great-grandmother. Many of them have fond memories of summer holidays spent there and appreciate the opportunity to visit. In caring for family and kin, she appears to take on and to embrace the role that her great-grandmother once had. She says that everyone tells her she resembles her, she acts like her, she even looks a bit like her. At one point during our visit at her *hytte* she says: 'I am my great-grandmother'.

Her embodiment of a deceased relative is not merely a question of genetic resemblance. Rather, and more importantly, it is an act of succession through the *hytte*: it is





**FIGURE 3.** I am my great-grandmother (Credit: Haakon Harriss)

this particular place that allows Jeanette to embody her great-grandmother. Jeanette owns the *hytte*, but one might as well say that the *hytte* ‘owns’ her, directing her actions and defining her role in the broader family. She repeatedly refers to her role as that of a custodian (*stattholder*), in charge of something that shall one day be passed on.

This anticipation of future ownership sustains a sense of intergenerational unity as a moral and economic obligation, in a way that resembles Lambek’s (2011) description of kinship as constituted through a series of acts that refer to the past as well as the future. ‘Kinship’, he states, ‘is not a matter of shared substance or code, but a set of commitments, played out in practice and publicly articulated’ (2011: 3). Even if in legal terms the *hytte* belongs to Jeanette as an individual, it is already in the process of being both shared and handed over, through a sense of shared commitment expressed through kin idioms as well as practical tasks of maintenance.

In both these examples, we see indications that inheritance is not something that is revealed through a will after a family member has passed away. It can begin long before that: through social and relational commitments it can be a ‘stretched event’, even if the legal details take only a few weeks to settle.

### **Re-generating Kin Over Generations: Sites of Togetherness**

The moment of inheritance can also precede the birth of a child, or nearly so. We are at a small island, situated on a lake in South Norway together with Anne Sigrid and Ingunn, who have inherited *Lykkehi*, (literally ‘Happy-nest’) with two siblings after their parents passed away. Anne Sigrid tells us that when her oldest daughter was

expecting her first child, eight cots were purchased: one for the baby's home, one for each set of grandparents, and one for each *hytte* where the baby's respective grandparents anticipate a visit, two on the mother's side and three on the father's side. A testimony to the density of *hytte* available in some Norwegian families, the story of the eight cots is also a story of the anticipated kinning that the birth of a grandchild elicits. But if her cabins seem furnished with a view to future generations, that is not how they appear to us. The island cabin is replete with old-fashioned keepsakes, amateur paintings, cross-stitches and tapestries alongside ornaments that used to belong to her late parents. Sociologists Janet Finch and Jennifer Mason (2000) have remarked how objects help to keep memories present, and how the dead can live on through the things they leave behind, and Anne Sigrid is fully aware of this. Showing us *Lykkehi* for the first time, she anticipates our gaze and exclaims: 'It looks like a museum. Even I can see that . . .'.

The *hytte* was built by their father, a carpentry teacher, on land inherited by their mother. It always reflected *their* sense of aesthetics, but the old-fashioned look took over almost completely when their parents died, and the *hytte* became both a place for mourning and for commemoration. Anne Sigrid's sister, Ingunn, tells us how their father died quite suddenly, while their mother was in a nursing home. Just before their father's funeral, Ingunn and Anne Sigrid knew they had to go to the *hytte*. It was late November and the ice hadn't yet settled on the lake, so they could still row out to the island. Working through the things at the *hytte* was painful, but it was also liberating. Ingunn recalls:

I threw away a wall-rug. I said to my sister 'can we throw it away now?' I always thought 'that rug has got to go'. That was one of the first things I did. I said 'now I can tear down that rug because Mum is not coming back and Dad is dead.'

Emptying their parents' house became a process of choosing what would live on in the family and what would be discarded. Again, the *hytte* was foremost in their minds.

We had a box labelled '*hytte*' . . . so what happened was that the *hytte* was given new life, because we got rid of ugly, horrid old things and replaced them with newer, finer things, things that held very strong memories of our parents but that none of us really wanted to have at home. . . . So while we emptied the house, we made the *hytte* even more of a place where we looked after good memories of them because we lost them both so suddenly.

In contrast to Finch and Mason's account of the way that material things carry emotional resonance, these items' affective force is enhanced by their new location at the *hytte*, since the *hytte* itself is where their memories of their parents are most present now that their parents' house is gone. Their parents are still present at the *hytte* through their things – pictures, belongings, including the building itself, the land around it, the boats and the lake on their doorstep. It is as if their parents have begun the transformation from parents to ancestors, as a selection of their most valued belongings become associated with the *hytte* for future generations (cf. Marcoux 2001).

In all these examples we see how the *hytte* as a place enables multiple temporalities to be present and evoked. Through different items, various parts of the *hytte* and

its contents enact various relations, some to ancestors, others to children about to be born. In this way, the *hytte* has the capacity to enact relations between persons and things that extend any given person's lifetime, and thereby to anchor specific kin relations, such as between two adult sisters, thickening as a result. The case also illustrates how the passing on of this *hytte* is already anticipated as a stretched event. This does not mean that the succession is always smooth or happens in accordance with what everyone had expected. Sometimes anticipations diverge and plans are withheld, as we detail below.

### Refusal, Rejection and De-kinning: Undoing the Morality of Material

Michael Lambek proposes that succession should be seen as ambiguous, as it may be conceptualised and enacted simultaneously as a gift from the parent and as theft by the (adult) child (2011: 11). Lambek points out that reciprocity across generations is not uncomplicated by sibling rivalry. We find this approach useful in relation to the succession of the *hytte*, which is often complicated by the fact that 'Individuals . . . do not simply make use of their relationships to acquire items of property, . . . Rather, in the process of handling the transmission of property, the character and quality of those relationships is revealed, understood and remade by the participants' (Finch and Mason 2000: 2).

So far, we have mobilised ethnographic examples that relate to the thickening of kin relations. In this final section we turn the attention to situations when the lines of succession appear ambiguous or uncertain, and in relation to descendants who are not obvious future owners of the *hytte*. In this section we take the perspective of those who experience kin relations becoming inadvertently or deliberately ruptured or thinned through the process of succession.<sup>9</sup> The next story is about inheritance that turned into a major conflict, but also supports the argument that property need not actually be present or owned to have a significant role in the revelation, understanding or remaking of kin relations (see Selmer 2017).

Birgit's parents bought a plot of land and built a *hytte* when Birgit and her siblings had already left home. They did so specifically to ensure that the family would continue to have a place to meet once they retired and moved into a smaller home, hoping to create a site of togetherness. Birgit is single and spent a great deal of time there with her parents, and she and her mother took pleasure in articulating their shared aesthetic sense in interior design. After her parents died, though, a latent rift emerged between her and her siblings.

Birgit's siblings had their own families and had both acquired a *hytte* of their own, and it became clear that they were both determined to sell the family *hytte*, much to Birgit's regret. Most of the contents could be sold, but some of the items were valued heirlooms: a handmade quilt, an antique dinner service, as well as various ornaments that had to be shared out. They decided to draw lots for the various item, but Birgit most wanted the *hyttebok*. With its photographs of all the family together, skiing with friends and celebrating Easters over the years, these books were the very soul of the family that Birgit felt she could keep even after the *hytte* was gone. While Birgit pri-

oritised the *hytte* as the locus of meaning and memory, her siblings had begun to prioritise their own nuclear families over their extended family and their parents' *hytte*. This shows how the multiple enactments of *hytte* (as economic object vs site of kinning and place of memories) make it fragile, with a latent potential for disruption. The *hytte* had not only failed to keep the siblings together as kin; the violence of the arguments between them about how, when or whether the *hytte* should be sold could be understood as having actively de-kinned them, since they had ceased to visit one another, or even to talk on the phone. While the *hyttebok* held her memories of a richly kinned and loved *hytte*, it was now firmly in the past.

Conflicts focused on *hytte* can push relations from what might otherwise be amicable rubbing-along to outright rejection and ongoing resentment, as we illustrate next. Arve's parents had built a tiny wooden *hytte* by a lake close to where his father grew up, and they spent every summer holiday there. Arve's father later bought two plots of land nearby and put one plot in the name of each of his two children, Arve and his sister. In doing so, Arve's father was acting in accordance with the Norwegian expectation of sibling-equality (Døving 2020), at least in principle. Arve and his father built a large *hytte* on Arve's plot, while a smaller *hytte* was built on his sister's plot. Over the years, they shared Arve's *hytte* and used his sister's *hytte* as an annexe. The whole extended family (including Arve's parents and Arve and his sister's nuclear families) continued to share the *hytte* for nearly thirty years, although his parents generally preferred to stay at their own little lakeside *hytte*. Since the large *hytte* officially belonged to Arve, he took responsibility for the maintenance, paid the rates and the insurance, implemented improvements and so forth. Arve's wife sometimes asked him whose *hytte* it really was, and Arve found it difficult to give a clear answer. Later, though, Arve started to notice things moving without his knowledge. Some beds were removed, even a dining table, with his sister unable or unwilling to say what she had done with them. 'They just did things, but they didn't communicate them', he explained. Eventually, the stress of not knowing what he would find when he arrived at the *hytte* led Arve to take action. In an admittedly provocative move, he changed the locks, mainly, he says, to see what would happen. But what happened shocked him much more than he could have expected.

His widowed father was elderly by this stage, and Arve visited him every weekend. Yet when Arve's father died, he discovered after the funeral that his father had made a will leaving everything to Arve's sister: his apartment, his car, his savings and all his cash, and the original lakeside *hytte*, which went to the sister's children. 'All I got was a cardboard box with some tools that I'd lent him', Arve recalls. It was painful, he admitted. Arve had thought that things had settled down after 'lock-gate', so discovering that he had been written out of the will came as a brutal blow.

Norwegian law does not give an individual testamentary freedom. A minimum of two thirds of the value of the deceased's assets must be shared equally between his or her children, up to a limit of one million kroner for each inheritor, with a testament only applicable to anything beyond the limit. Arve instructed a solicitor to dispute the will. Whatever the outcome, Arve and his sister no longer share the *hytte*, and it seems unlikely they will resume contact for a very long time, if ever. Arve admits to some sense of relief that his *hytte* is now truly his own to manage as he wishes, but

has enormous regret at the way that the rift seems to have de-kinned him not only from his sister but also from his late father, whom it is now too late to ask about the apparent contradiction between his lived behaviour and the legal disinheritance. His story highlights the fragile balance between moral obligations and the management of collective property, and the continuous relationship work that must be expended to hold kin together. It also resonates with Lambek's observation that succession may be conceptualised simultaneously as gift and theft. Arve's father's 'gift' to his sister and her children is simultaneously seen as a theft from Arve, who clearly anticipated his father's 'blessing' of being recognised as inheritor with an equal share. As Lambek notes: 'The ethical tension of succession lies not only in the displacement of the parent, . . . but also in the possibility that succession may be experienced as taking something away from another sibling' (2011: 11). The case also shows that de-kinning, just like kinning, is a stretched event, making (de-)kinning and (dis-)inheritance mutually constituting processes.

But rejection can go both ways. An adult child's refusal to inherit a *hytte* can be a kind of rejection too. Back in the log cabin with Egil and Lisbet that Ingrid hopes one day to inherit, it is still Lisbet and Egil's *hytte*. While they remain legal owners, they also share it with their two sons and their families, and let them use it as often as they want to. But they are also cautious of burdening their children with their own expectations, and do not want to put any pressure on them to use it or take it over. Egil explains: 'They might prefer to have a cabin in the mountains or on the coast, and then they would feel almost forced to take over something that they actually do not want!' Egil continues with the rhetorical question: 'Why would it be important for me that our children take over a cabin that we once bought because it suited *our* needs, back then?' The thought of exerting emotional pressure is clearly at odds with how he wants to perform his role as a father, and Lisbet nods: this is absolutely for their children to



**FIGURE 4.** Withdrawal of care (Credit Simone Abram)

decide. Egil adds, with a smile and a shrug of his shoulders, that he doesn't really care who takes over, because once he is gone, he won't know anyway.

We sit in silence for a while and begin to discuss a recurrent trope in mid-twentieth-century Norwegian literature: the burden placed on the oldest son, who is expected to take over the farm, even when he experiences that as a life sentence. Pondering his stated indifference, we ask: 'But what if they decide now, that they don't want to inherit, and let you know this, while you are still living?' Egil pauses for a moment and says: 'I think I would be disappointed'.

As our conversation turns to skiing, cray-fishing and other activities the family have shared at the *hytte* over the years, Egil admits that, in fact, it means quite a lot for him that his children or grandchildren appreciate these things and that they like being at the *hytte*.

Egil: It would have been a little sad if they did not like being here. So I guess I am not indifferent about it. Because there are of course values that you see as important in life. And that those values matter for the next generations, that means something. It would have felt like some sort of rejection, I think.

Authors: What kind of rejection?

Egil: Maybe of me, or of my values, or the way we raised our kids. Of course, when they like it, it feels like a confirmation that you are good enough. One can be vulnerable to rejection in such situations. I am a little surprised at that feeling. But yes, I can feel that vulnerability.

On the one hand, there is the pleasure of seeing one's life project and set of values reflected in the younger generation. On the other hand, there is hope that one's children shall be free to make their own life choices. It is a fine balance between wanting to let go and the fear of rejection, and few *hytte* owners articulate it as honestly and explicitly as Egil. But similar ambiguities of succession can be read between the lines in other *hytte* conversations, revealing how the potential for de-kinning lies in the shadows of ongoing kinning.

## Conclusion

The problematic nature of *hytte* succession has become a key theme in many contemporary Norwegian novels, and a common topic in public discourse, not least because it represents emotionally resonant tensions around kinning and the latent potential for de-kinning. If our research had focused on family homes, we posit that its focus would have been the more immediate family – parents, children, perhaps grandchildren, although these primarily as visitors rather than cohabitants, and less on adult siblings – and inheritance would entail displacement, of things, of people and of associated memories. By focusing on the *hytte*, our work reveals not only that kinship and affective relations attach themselves to stuff, but also that they attach to places and buildings, and we have uncovered an extended sense of kinship obligations that is otherwise underemphasised in Norwegian social life. The very endurance of material exposes the temporality of these attachments, revealing the duration of kinning and de-kinning

processes. That *hytte* are in a fixed location some distance from the everyday residence enhances the opportunity for reinforcing non-household kin relations that may otherwise be negated or neglected in everyday life.

Our focus on the *hytte* also enabled us to highlight how, just as kinning is a continuous process, thickening kin relations and making them appear self-evident, it carries with it the possibility of de-kinning in the manner of a ‘shadow concept’ (Strathern 2011). Rather than inheritance being seen as a revelatory moment following the death of a parent, the passing on of *hytte* can be seen as a ‘stretched event’, extending the span of a human lifetime. Through such processes of succession, we have observed how parents may become ancestors through the medium of the *hytte* (cf. Bloch 1995) even as the descendants continue to refashion the *hytte* according to their own tastes and preferences.

Kinning and de-kinning are materialised through the sharing or partitioning of property, carried in the materials of dwellings, furnishings, mementos and everyday items, as well as through the shared meals, celebrations, activities and maintenance that a *hytte* calls for. Materiality thus extends from the objects handled and substances shared (such as food) to the place and the *hytte* itself, as it ages, is repaired or refurbished. Inheriting a *hytte* means inheriting the memories that it carries, accommodating to its physical form and returning to the *hytte* again and again. It means fulfilling relational ties of obligation, custodianship and reciprocity, or failing or refusing to do so. Seen through the lens of this multidimensional assemblage, lifelong processes of (de-)kinning and (dis-)inheritance get intertwined, offering a latent source of tension, while they also mutually constitute each other.

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## Notes

1. We choose here not to translate the term ‘hytte’ since its meaning covers a wide variety of properties. The most general term would be ‘holiday home’, covering everything from tiny wooden mountain shacks to ski-resort apartments and seafront villas.
2. Research Council Norway 2017–2020 (<https://www.sv.uio.no/sai/english/research/projects/MATKIN/>) accessed April 2023.
3. Fieldwork was carried out during 2017 and 2018. The authors visited around 25 *hytte*. Our selection criteria sought to maximise variation in terms of whether it was old or new, contested in terms of ownership or stable, and in relation to regional location within Norway. Some of these ethnographic snippets were published in Norwegian previously (Lien and Abram 2019). Written informed consent was provided by all interlocutors, in accordance with GDPR and Norwegian Research Data (NSD). In some cases pseudonyms are used, and details of stories are changed to minimise recognition. In other cases, the first names are used in agreement with the interlocutors.
4. Gullestad (1997) has shown how broader family input is systematically under-emphasised in the establishment of new households in Norway. This is elaborated by Døving (2020) concerning especially the material or practical assistance offered by grandparents.
5. See, for example, Pers and colleagues (2018) and Massey (2005).
6. We draw on Levi-Strauss’ (1983) notion of a house as a moral person, as developed by Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995), and on Marcel Mauss (1969). See also Abram and Lien (2024).
7. The Norwegian Statutory Co-ownership Act (Sameieloven, Lov om sameige [sameigelova] – Lovdata, <https://lovdata.no/dokument/NL/lov/1965-06-18-6> accessed April 2023) can be applied when two or more persons own property together, and when their respective shares are an ideal fraction of the property as a whole (rather than a specified unit, or apartment). This legal institution is sometimes chosen by *hytte* inheritors to formalise the shared ownership among kin.
8. Until 1974, Odel prioritised the son (see Abram 2020).
9. We have not traced such constellations in relation to *hytte* discussed above, which could have triggered ethical dilemmas of representation, but chose to see the other perspective through other *hytte* and families.

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## **Transmettre : Parenté, temporalité et personnalité morale dans l'héritage des « hytte » norvégiennes**

**Résumé :** Dans cet article, on étudiera l'héritage de la hytte ou maison secondaire en Norvège. On étendra la notion de « parenté » à l'inclusion de différentes matérialités ou temporalités. En particulier, on retracera de manière ethnographique la transmission par donation d'une hytte sur une période étendue et l'on défendra l'idée que cette temporalité longue ajoute une couche supplémentaire à la hytte comme participant pleinement au faire-parent. Notre matériel permet de souligner un certain nombre de connexions entre la hytte comme propriété à transmettre et la famille / parenté comme unité de reproduction. Ces connexions se déploient sur le temps long, des décennies et parfois des vies ou plus. Par cette approche, il est possible de retracer les processus de parenté, mais aussi de « de-parentage » impliquant détachement, refus et rejets. L'article montre qu'une attention au matériel et aux structures construites permet de comprendre la parenté dans les sociétés contemporaines.

**Mots-clés :** parenté, héritage, temporalité, dé-parenter, hytte norvégienne