

Why Milking Machines?: Cohesion and Contestation of Old Colony Mennonite Tradition

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I had been told that generator-operated milking machines were allowed on Swift Colony in Bolivia, but not on Riva Palacios Colony. On Riva Palacios, all cows are milked by hand. I took note of this difference in part because the two colonies are so similar. They border each other and so they share a landscape and a topography. The settlement pattern of their villages and the architectural style of their buildings too are shared. To outward appearances, these colonies are indistinguishable. And their similarity extends beyond physical appearances; they also share a history and a culture. Both colonies were established in 1967 by Old Colony Mennonites from Cuauhtémoc, Mexico, who were concerned about the growing use of technology on colonies there. In an effort to keep themselves from the encroaching world, represented for them by the growing presence of vehicles and rubber-tired tractors on Mexico colonies, these Mennonites relocated to Bolivia, where they implemented a more rigorous interpretation of separation from the world than was developing on colonies in Mexico.

I asked Agatha, who lived on Riva Palacios, why the difference between the two colonies when it came to milking methods.¹ She did

not answer my question (i.e., she did not explain the reason for the difference), but she did have an opinion about it: Sunday is a holy day and work is to be kept to a bare minimum. Milking machines reduce the amount of work that is required in milking a herd of dairy cows. Given that the *Lierdienst*² is concerned about the amount of work colony residents do on Sunday, the most obvious conclusion, in Agatha's opinion, is that milking machines should be allowed on Riva Palacios to reduce the amount of Sunday work.

"[D]ifference," writes anthropologist Tim Ingold, "is a function of involvement with others in a continuous social process."³ Such are the differences that Agatha pointed out to me – the difference between Riva Palacios' and Swift's rulings when it comes to milking machines and her own variance with the teaching of the *Lierdienst*. This paper is about the complexity of difference that exists on Mennonite colonies in Latin America, differences between colony residents, differences between colonies, and the differences that Old Colony Mennonites establish to ensure that they will remain separate and different from the world.

But the differences exposed in my opening anecdote are not only social, they are at their core religious. How cows are milked on Riva Palacios is obviously religious in that the religious leadership of the colony ruled on it, and in that Agatha felt it that would have a direct bearing on the quality of life on Sunday, an important marker of religious time on Mennonite colonies. But I will also argue in this article that differences (whether the difference over milking machines or others) are part and parcel of religious meaning making for Old Colony Mennonites. Talal Asad observes that "if an anthropologist seeks to understand religion by placing it conceptually in its social context, then the way in which that social context is described must affect the understanding of religion."⁴ My opening anecdote would indicate that difference is at the heart of how I understand the Old Colony social context, and it follows that in this article I will look at various manifestations of difference among Old Colony Mennonites as it pertains to formation of religious life for Old Colony Mennonites.

Ethnographic Context

In 2009 I spent two months in Latin America – one month each in Mexico and Bolivia – as a member of a SSHRC-funded research team. My assignment was to spend a month in each country gathering oral history data on "horse and buggy" colonies.⁵ These are colonies, for the most part Old Colony, that maintain the strictest interpretation of the biblical injunction to be separate from the world. The most identifiable

manifestations of their interpretation are the use of *Pietsfoateja* for transportation and the rejection of state-supplied electricity.⁶

In Mexico I spent one month on Sabinal, a small colony situated northeast of Nuevo Casas Grandes in northwestern Chihuahua. Mennonites from the Cuauhtémoc colonies first established a colony in this area in 1958 as part of their ongoing effort to address land shortage.⁷ By 2009, there were fourteen colonies in the Nuevo Casas Grandes area.⁸

Sabinal's history differs from its neighboring colonies' in that it was not founded by Cuauhtémoc-area Mennonites but by Old Colony Mennonites from Durango Colony in Durango state. Land shortage has been a perennial issue on Durango Colony and this was one consideration in the formation of Sabinal. But more importantly, Durango Colony was modernizing, i.e., vehicles were becoming common, state-supplied electricity was allowed on the colony, and evangelical forms of Christianity were increasing in influence on the colony. A portion of the colony was wary of these changes, and these Mennonites looked for land elsewhere where they could re-establish what they believed to be a faithful interpretation of separation from the world. One group decided on the Casas Grandes area, and in the late 1980s land was purchased and people began moving to Sabinal. At that time, several other colonies in the Nuevo Casas Grandes area shared Sabinal's commitment to a radical form of separation from the world, eschewing electricity and vehicles. All these other colonies have since adopted a less rigorous interpretation of being separate from the world, allowing electricity and vehicles in large measure because of the prohibitive cost of irrigating in a desert environment using diesel-fueled generators. The change other colonies have made has left Sabinal isolated ecclesiastically. It is also physically isolated (by design, however) and remains a small, struggling colony. It has only seven villages – an eighth one having never been settled – and is barely viable economically.⁹

In Bolivia I carried out my research on three colonies that, like Sabinal, remain anti-modern: Riva Palacios, Swift, and Sommerfeld. In comparison to Sabinal, these colonies are well established and all of them have established daughter colonies in Bolivia. They all originated from Mennonite colonies in the Cuauhtémoc area in Mexico and were founded in the 1960s in response to increasing modernization on the Mexico colonies.¹⁰ These three colonies, clustered together, are located approximately sixty kilometers from Santa Cruz. Of the three, Riva Palacios is the biggest; Sommerfeld and Swift are much smaller in comparison. Riva Palacios and Swift are Old Colony; Sommerfeld is Sommerfelder.¹¹

While my data for this paper is taken from field research I conducted in Latin America, my paper is also informed by the more than

five years I have spent in Canada (Ontario and Alberta) carrying out research among Mennonites who have migrated to Canada mostly from Mexico. The majority of these migrating Mennonites are Old Colony.¹² For the most part, these migrating Mennonites are not as traditional as the Mennonites of Sabinal and the Bolivian colonies I visited, but I have learned much about Old Colony religious and colony life from the many Old Colony Mennonites I have interacted with in Canada.¹³ While their stories do not appear on these pages, this article is much richer for my interaction with them.

Theoretical Considerations

Ingold provocatively asks, “why ... should an emphasis on difference imply discontinuity?”¹⁴ Not only is difference to be expected in the web of relationships that characterizes Mennonite colonies in Latin America, difference is an integral component of Old Colony social and religious life. It is this difference that is present in the intersubjectivity of colony life that ensures that Old Colony religious life is dynamic. The description that sociologists Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor provide of life on housing estates in Norwich, England that were the focus of their study, is equally apt for how I approach Mennonite colony life in Latin America in this article: “lines and divisions – social as well as spatial – are blurred, shifting and profoundly relational.”¹⁵

However, Old Colony Mennonites (and other Mennonites similar to them like the Sommerfelder) are more often noted for their conformity and uniformity than for their diversity and difference. They value tradition, and as such they are seen to be conservers not innovators.¹⁶ This is not an incorrect characterization; my comments about difference turn on this characterization. However, too often such characterization has resulted in descriptions of Old Colony Mennonites as static, and worse, as stagnated. According to Kelly Hedges in her study of linguistic controversies that existed in the mid-twentieth century on northern Mexico Mennonite colonies, a previous generation of scholars has been most concerned to characterize Old Colony religion as marked by an adherence to a static tradition against which modernizing elements (those calling for greater and faster change) push for change.¹⁷ In such a characterization, the only dynamic aspect of Old Colony life is resistance to it. In contrast, Hedges argues that such a view obscures the dynamic reality of what is required to maintain conformity and faithful adherence to tradition on the part of Old Colony Mennonites; Old Colony life is dynamic (and at times conflicted) *because* tradition is being conserved. She argues, “[t]he defense of particular pronunciations and writing styles [the controversies she examines] is significant

not as an example of the ‘conservatives’ [sic] blind hold on to ‘tradition’ but as evidence that the maintenance of the ideology of language and the *oole Ordunk*¹⁸ is a process requiring constant attention and effort.”¹⁹ While I am not concerned here about the specific linguistic argument Hedges is making, I am interested in her insight into how tradition – the *oole Ordunk* – is maintained through “constant ... effort” which according to her is a process in which practices are challenged, defended, altered and maintained.

Anna Sofia Hedberg's study of Durango Colony in Bolivia²⁰ also identifies difference – she writes of deviation – as imperative for social cohesion.²¹ She examines how rules are broken on a Mennonite colony and how this affects social cohesion and the goal colony residents share of eternal salvation:

Rules are thus being disobeyed also without necessarily being deprived of their meaning. Moreover, as misdemeanours follow a specific form, I find it apt to conclude that while being violated, the rules are simultaneously being confirmed, since rules *de facto* cannot exist if no one breaks them. ... I would say that breaking the rules is also an active engagement of the rules. Thus, disobedience is actually enacting and manifesting the rules.

Not unlike Hedges, she concludes, “it apparently takes great effort to be part of the project.”²²

Talal Asad, in his discussion of religious tradition, describes in more theoretical and formal terms the process that exists in tradition that Hedges and Hedberg demonstrate empirically about Old Colony Mennonites, when he calls into question the assumption that

[a]rgument is generally represented as a symptom of “the tradition in crisis,” on the assumption that “normal tradition ...” excludes reasoning just as it requires unthinking conformity. ... Reason and argument are *necessarily* involved in traditional practice whenever people have to be taught about the point and proper performance of that practice, and whenever the teaching meets with doubt, indifference, or lack of understanding²³ (emphasis mine).

For Asad, the “argumentation” that is inherent in tradition is also about power, “for the process of arguing, of using force of reason, at once presupposes and responds to the fact of resistance. Power and resistance, are thus intrinsic to the development and exercise of any traditional practice.”²⁴ In other words, to maintain the constancy of

tradition requires ongoing persuasion, resistance, contestation, and adaptation on the part of all parties involved (e.g. in this article I discuss the dynamics between Old Colony religious leadership and laity, tensions between village neighbors, and inter-colony tensions).

Although not writing about Old Colony Mennonites – his subject is Islam – Asad uncannily describes the articulating relationship between a dynamic tradition and social life for Old Colony Mennonites:

The coherence that each party finds, or fails to find, in that tradition will depend on their particular historical position. In other words, there clearly is not, nor can there be, such a thing as a universally acceptable account of a living tradition. Any representation of tradition is contestable. What shape that contestation takes, if it occurs, will be determined not only by the powers and knowledges each side deploys, but by the collective life they aspire to – or to whose survival they are quite indifferent.²⁵

William Garriott and Kevin Lewis O'Neill echo Asad's assertion that "any representation of tradition is contestable" in their article, "Who is a Christian?" According to these two anthropologists, the perennial question within Christian communities is, as their article title demonstrates, "Who is a Christian?" "Setting the terms for determining what and who counts as a Christian has been an incessant preoccupation of Christians and Christianity ... since its inception," they argue.²⁶ Anthropologists should take seriously this facet of Christian communities "through which Christians and Christianity emerge – 'Christianity' itself, like 'culture' more generally, always being an 'emergent phenomenon.'"²⁷

Old Colony Mennonites are, without doubt, "incessantly preoccupied" with this question of who is a Christian. To the extent that Old Colony Mennonites are concerned to be faithful to the *Ordnung* and to the tradition in which they were formed, they are asking after the definition of "Christian." This is, of course, not their terminology. Old Colony Mennonites are concerned to give a faithful expression to the biblical injunction to be in the world but not of it in a radical interpretation. Nor does it imply that an Old Colony Mennonite formulation of Christianity is necessarily exclusive, though it can be. The purpose of my inquiry, i.e., to ask after difference among Old Colony Mennonites, is to ask how and why Old Colony Mennonites evaluate and establish who is Christian as they seek to be faithful to tradition.

Intra-colony and inter-colony differences are important considerations if Old Colony Mennonite religious life is to be seen as dynamic rather than static. In the past, it has been too easy for scholars to facilely accept the Old Colony formulation that they are separate from

the world as *the* defining characteristic of Old Colony Mennonites. In effect, this was seen as the only difference that mattered and as a result, Old Colony Mennonites were described as uniform and most often static vis-à-vis society around them. It is in stepping away from the external boundary of Mennonite colonies as the category of inquiry that we can see, to paraphrase Garriott and O'Neill, that "Old Colony Christianity itself ... [is] always an emergent phenomenon."²⁸ That is to say that Old Colony Mennonites are not confined to a static tradition, but are always asking and re-asking "what is it to be Christian?" Or in other words, "why be an Old Colony Mennonite?"

Religion scholar Robert Orsi fleshes out the dynamic nature of religion that Garriott and O'Neill refer to and that Hedges and Hedberg ably analyze. "Religion," Orsi writes, "comes into being in an ongoing, dynamic relationship with the realities of everyday life." Religion is not a prescribed structure into which everyday life is made to fit. It is using those structures – church, beliefs, and rituals, for example – in tandem with everyday life to make meaning. For Orsi, religion is an active, engaged process. It is "how particular people, in particular places and time, live in, with, through, and against the religious idioms available to them in culture."²⁹ It is instructive to ask how Old Colony Mennonites establish their identity as a colony and in the face of other Mennonite groups and colonies that do not share their interpretation. I do not mean only at the ecclesiastical level but in the interaction between colony neighbors, in the movement between colonies, in the conversations that members of one colony will have about another colony, in the fraternal relationships that are forged between like-minded colonies, in the struggles for power that exist on colonies, and in family, friendship, and business connections that exist between members of differing colonies. Understanding Old Colony religious life in this manner is not straightforward to be sure. Instead, it is to focus on the "ongoing, messy, and often ambiguous remaking of meaning," as Mittermaier does in her study of Egyptian Islamic dream culture.³⁰ I turn now to such an examination of Old Colony religious life, the "contestation" that Asad describes as inherent to tradition and the "effort" that Hedges and Hedberg write about and that is required to maintain the cohesion of colony life for which Old Colony Mennonites strive.

Difference On/Differences Between Mennonite Colonies

I began this paper with an anecdote about milking machines, and how two colonies that share a commitment to a radical rejection of the world nevertheless differ on the details of that rejection. Agatha,

in her assessment of Riva Palacios' ruling against the use of milking machines, exposed the seeming arbitrariness of boundary maintenance for Old Colony Mennonites. The use, or non-use, of milking machines has little to do with a colony's ability to remain separate from the world. Swift Colony, which allows milking machines, is no nearer to capitulating to the lure of technology than Riva Palacios is with its stricter ruling. What is most important in remaining separate from the world is that rulings exist. Without them, a colony's conformity would be in jeopardy. But what rulings such as Riva Palacios' prohibition of milking machines do is establish a distinction *between* colonies. When so much of culture, religion, and history is shared, the distinctiveness of each colony is preserved in minute differences. This distinction is important for the self-identity of the colony (even if members scoff at it) as a social and religious entity that can, and at times must, be differentiated from other colonies.

Milking machines, or the prohibition of milking machines, contribute to the formation of religious life on Riva Palacios through colony identity, but how individuals interact with that ruling also contributes to the vitality of Old Colony tradition. By expressing her frustration about the prohibition of milking machines, Agatha was not calling into question the Old Colony commitment to remain separate from the world. In fact, her contestation depended on Riva Palacios' and Swift's shared commitment to a radical rejection of the world. But Agatha was pitting two knowledges against each other to her advantage. One was her colony's commitment to separation from the world, and the other was the commitment to a quality of (religious) life, expressed in a Sunday that is distinct from other working days. Agatha was deftly pointing out that a contradiction existed and exposing the fact that the *Lierdienst* was, de facto, giving a preference to one knowledge over the other. In the opinion of at least one colony resident, that preference should not be assumed. Agatha, in her contestation, was, in a manner of speaking, demanding an accounting for this preference.

Opinions about rulings – whether colony residents agree with the rulings, are neutral towards them, or contest them like Agatha did – indicate that tradition is not static, but requires “effort” on the part of colony residents. As Asad writes, “... even where traditional practices appear to the anthropologist to be imitative of what has gone before, it will be the practitioners' conceptions of what is *apt performance*, and of how the past is related to present practices, that will be crucial for tradition, not the apparent repetition of an old form”³¹ (emphasis original).

Even though Agatha chafed under the ruling of the *Lierdienst*, her family abided by the ruling and kept their frustration to verbal complaints amongst themselves and their friends. Twice a day her

husband and older children spent an hour in the barn milking cows. But underneath the outward conformity was a tussle between compliance and contestation that imbued the diurnal task of milking with vibrant religious meaning making.

Agatha's contestation was a very active one; she wanted the ruling changed but complied with it nevertheless. But there were times on the colonies I visited when rulings were summarily ignored. The wife of an *Oom* calmly said, as she was connecting a battery for a light bulb, "we're not supposed to have these lights." This immediately struck me as odd. If an *Oom* could openly violate a ruling without fear of reprisal, the ruling served little purpose in terms of affecting behavior.

On another colony, at the end of his sermon, the *Oom* reminded the congregants that they were supposed to use horses and wagons to bring in their harvest. The *Lierdienst* had discussed the lamentable fact that this practice had fallen into disuse and it wanted people to return to it. I was as puzzled by this admonition as I was by the *Oom's* wife's casual statement that battery-operated lights were not allowed. On all of the four colonies I visited, I never once saw anyone work their fields with horses; tractors were everywhere. Why would colony farmers return to a practice that is inefficient and cumbersome when they are already accustomed to the efficiency of tractors? The *Lierdienst* knew as well as anyone else that its admonition would go unheeded.

On the drive home from church I asked my host, Wilhelm Giesbrecht, why the *Oom* had brought up this matter. Wilhelm explained to me that the *Lierdienst* did not want the old ways to disappear; it wanted the next generation to be familiar with farming with animals and that is why the *Oom* brought the matter up in the sermon. It was evident from my host's nonchalant, even derisive reply to my question about the *Oom's* admonition, that he had no intention of following the ruling and neither would any other farmer.

I see in Wilhelm's response to the *Oom's* sermon the contestation of power that Asad writes about as being intrinsic to tradition. Wilhelm's derisive response contained a level of disrespect for the *Lierdienst*. It was as if he was saying, "One is not really supposed to challenge the *Lierdienst* but sometimes they ask for it." When a ruling is laid out as unambiguously as the *Oom* did, lines are firmly drawn between tradition and innovation. Tradition is aligned with the *Lierdienst*, and change is aligned with the laity. In reality, the line between tradition and innovation is not usually drawn so starkly; laity, too, wants tradition maintained. But admonitions like the *Oom's* lay bare the inherent tension within tradition, between conserving and changing. Stated more positively, rulings such as the *Oom* delivered in his sermon leave no doubt that change to the tradition has taken place but that the colony has not disintegrated as a result (regardless of what the *Oom* may have

intimated). Colony residents are simultaneously assured that tradition is being cared for and upheld, guaranteed and protected, and reminded that change takes place. The *Lierdienst* is the guardian of tradition for Old Colony Mennonites; it preserves and protects tradition and therefore it is not surprising that it represents the most conservative element on a colony. Its reminders, even if futile, keep tradition at the center of religious life. The *Lierdienst* is the tether that keeps Old Colony Mennonites inextricably bound to tradition. But while the *Lierdienst* maintains tradition, it cannot contain it.

Until now I have been describing the contestation of official rulings as I have looked at religious meaning making. I turn now to two religious rituals – funerals and mutual aid – to examine how social dynamics on Mennonite colonies and the tensions that exist in these relationships are given expression through ritualized activity. Justina Whieler is a *Wauscha*³² on a colony in Bolivia. She was originally from a colony in northern Mexico where she was also the village *Wauscha*. When she and her family moved to Bolivia twenty years ago, she kept quiet about her years of experience as a *Wauscha* in Mexico. She knew that on the Bolivian colony, a body was prepared and dressed somewhat differently from how she was used to doing it in Mexico. She did not want to be exposed to the judgment of her neighbors were she to prepare a body differently – as she inevitably would – from their convention. Justina knew firsthand the significance of minute differences between colonies that I discussed earlier. Eventually, of course, people found out and she once again took up the role of *Wauscha*. Accepting this responsibility has meant that Justina could not take any criticism to heart and she has long ago learned to shrug off the criticisms. But she still had her ear keenly tuned to them, for she knows that people will talk about how she prepares bodies. At a recent funeral for a woman (not one whose body she had prepared), she overheard other women exclaiming in dismay that the white sheet which was folded around the body had been folded as if for a man. This pettiness – that is how Justina identified it – frustrated her. But this noticing of minute differences, however frustrating it may be to some colony members, is indicative that difference – even small differences – are important for colony residents. It is not only religious leadership that has a hand in maintaining tradition. The laity, as I have already argued, has a vested interest in it as well, though the avenues available to the laity to ensure that tradition is maintained vary from the *Lierdienst*'s. Attention to conforming details, and the expectation that custom will be respected, often conveyed through gossip, is a powerful force in the maintenance of conformity, as evinced by Justina's hesitancy to begin undertaking in Bolivia. It takes a strong willed woman (or man) to challenge the subtle force of gossip. But Justina is not the only *Wauscha* to go her

own way. The undertaker of the woman's body mentioned above also strayed from custom, even if only by adjusting how a sheet was folded around a body. Other adjustments have also been made in the past. Justina pointed out to me that women's bodies are now dressed with a white cap, for example, rather than with the black lace cap they would have worn in life, as they used to be.

Similar negotiations of tradition can be traced in the practice of mutual aid on the colonies. Mrs. Siemens, for example, had recently had surgery and now the village had implemented a *Satel* for her. A *Satel* is a circular bill that colony villages use to announce or regulate village activity. In this instance, the *Satel* was sent throughout the village and each household was expected to sign on to provide one meal for the Siemens family. When the schedule was complete, the *Satel* was delivered to the Siemens so that they would know what to expect. For two weeks, the mid-day and evening meals would be provided for the Siemens family by their neighbors. A few months earlier, Mrs. Siemens had initiated a *Satel* for the former *Vorsteher*³³ of the colony and his wife who was chronically ill. The former *Vorsteher* had torn up the *Satel* and announced that he did not need assistance from the village. Now, chaffing from the charity she was receiving – she was not in a position to tear up her *Satel* – Mrs. Siemens took her own form of revenge by initiating another *Satel* for the former *Vorsteher* and his wife. Her brashness was enabled by the fact that she was the aunt of the sick woman. In part, Mrs. Siemens was motivated by a desire to relieve the daughters of the sick woman from the relentless obligation of caring for their sick mother. But she was also well aware that she would be stepping on the toes of her nephew, which only strengthened her resolve. As she told me, “He has lots of money and goes to the city all the time. He can buy all kinds of good food for his sick wife.” In other words, he really does not need a *Satel*. Several days later, when I was at the Neudorfs, they had just received the *Satel* for the former *Vorsteher*. There was considerable consternation expressed on the part of Mrs. Neudorf, who did not know that her good friend had initiated the *Satel*. What was she supposed to prepare for the former *Vorsteher* and his wife? In other words, how could she make something good enough for him?

Jonathan Z. Smith provides a helpful analysis of the function of rituals that explains the dynamics of the *Satel* for this Old Colony village. “Ritual is,” according to Smith, “first and foremost, a mode of paying attention.” In so far as the *Satel* is a ritualized activity, it brought to the fore for the Siemens family some of the tensions within village life and their own social and economic position in the village. But it also gave Mrs. Siemens the latitude to make the social structure that exists in her village messy for the former *Vorsteher* and other

villagers, because it exposed the social hierarchy that exists. Smith goes on to say that

[r]itual is a means of performing the way things ought to be in conscious tension to the way things are in such a way that this ritualized perfection is recollected in the ordinary, uncontrolled, course of things. Ritual relies for its power on the fact that it is concerned with quite ordinary activities, that what it describes and displays is, in principle, possible for every occurrence of these acts. But it relies, as well, for its power on the fact that, in actuality, such possibilities cannot be realized. ... Ritual gains its force where incongruency is perceived.³⁴

In the context of colony village life, the *Satel* is the ideal of egalitarian mutual aid, but in reality, as Mrs. Siemens' various *Satels* demonstrate, it exposes village hierarchy and social tensions within the village.

I have already examined inter-colony relationships to some extent in my discussion of milking machines, and I would now like to return to inter-colony dynamics and examine both difference and solidarity that colony boundaries create. I chatted with a young woman from El Valle Colony in northern Mexico about my visit to Sabinal. El Valle is a prosperous, progressive colony, comprised of Old Colony Mennonites who have joined more evangelical type Mennonite churches. Houses on this colony are built Canadian style, and streets laid out in a grid and not in traditional village patterns. The Kleine Gemeinde church (one of the evangelical Mennonite churches on the colony) looks very much like a Canadian-style evangelical church. Most noticeable was a large cross suspended above the outside door. This young woman was fluent in English. She was intrigued that I would go to Sabinal, as if it was some foreign and fearful place. She was incredulous when I assured her that Sabinal residents had been hospitable and welcomed me. She was sure they would be wary of – and probably hostile to – outsiders. Sabinal residents are aware of the prejudice that exists about them among other Mennonites: that they are bound to dead tradition; and that they shut themselves off to all outsiders. Sabinal residents feel this prejudice when they spend the day in Nuevo Casas Grandes on business (as Mennonites from all neighboring colonies do). Their appearance marks them as coming from Sabinal, and they feel belittled and judged for this.

The refusal to “capitulate” to the lure of modernization, as their neighboring colonies have, isolates Sabinal. The prohibition against the use of electricity is the flashpoint for Sabinal residents, because without it they are dependent on diesel-run generators to power their irrigation systems, which substantially increases their farming costs.

Sabinal's resistance to residents owning vehicles is another flashpoint. Its insistence that it will not allow modernization of this kind (electricity and vehicles) ensures that the cost of farming is prohibitive, and farming is barely sustainable. To ease this crisis, some Sabinal residents advocate for allowing electricity but not vehicles. However, the proponents of this compromise know that it would only be a matter of time before vehicles would be used on the colony. Other colonies in the area attempted this compromise and inevitably residents started using vehicles.

Sabinal's conflicted relationship with its neighboring colonies evinces the limits of its insistence to remain radically traditional. Even though Sabinal may condemn neighboring colonies for modernizing, their "capitulation" to modernity exists as the specter of Sabinal's potential failure to survive its rigorous traditional project in a desert climate that is ill suited to agriculture. This heightens the urgency for Sabinal to maintain its cohesion and distinctiveness from other colonies.

On one of the Sundays I attended church on Sabinal, the *Eltesta* of the Durango Colony in Bolivia, who was paying a pastoral visit to Sabinal, preached the sermon.³⁵ In the sermon, he tearfully recounted the events on Durango Colony in Paraguay (the parent colony of the Bolivia Durango) that led to the formation of the Bolivia colony where he was now *Eltesta*. He described how during one of his extended absences while still a member of the Paraguay colony, members of the Paraguayan colony had brought electricity onto the colony in direct violation of church teaching. This was a personal rejection of him as leader, but also a rejection of God's teachings. The only alternative for himself and others who wished to remain faithful, was to establish a colony in Bolivia that would continue to resist modernization.

In addition to this recounting of history, his sermon also included a lengthy accounting of ill members and people who had died on his Bolivian colony. He mentioned their names and provided a description of their illnesses. He then turned to ill Sabinal residents whom he had visited or heard about and likewise recounted how they were suffering. His recounting of history heightened the isolation of Durango in Bolivia, and by extension, Sabinal's – they were of the very faithful few who had remained true – and the litany of suffering saints that Durango and Sabinal shared, brought these two isolated communities together in solidarity in the face of other Mennonite colonies who had abandoned God's call to eschew the world. The *Eltesta's* sermon reminded Sabinal residents of the vital bond between the two colonies that was their spiritual force.

The impact of the *Eltesta's* sermon was obvious at the noon meal that I shared with the extended Martens family. They agreed with the

Eltesta's condemnation of the Paraguayan Durango for abandoning the right path, and discussed the list of sick and dying, commenting on who these people were, who they were related to on Sabinal, what their illnesses were, etc. Around the dinner table, the Martens family was extending the influence of the *Eltesta's* words as they strengthened ties and connections in their isolated world.

I have illustrated, through the various examples I have laid out, that difference is ubiquitous among Old Colony Mennonites. As much as difference is a function of boundary, it exists within boundaries and alongside them as well. It strengthens boundaries as well as challenges them. I have argued that it is counterproductive to view Old Colony Mennonites as homogenous, as a single category. As they ask after questions of self-identity, difference regularly plays a role. Whether in the minutia of how a sheet is folded around a body at a funeral, whether it is as two colonies look to each other for support amidst self-imposed isolation, whether it is on the question of whether or not to allow milking machines, or whether it is in the face of scornful misunderstanding, Old Colony Mennonites employ the tension inherent to tradition to make meaningful religious lives.

Notes

- ¹ In my efforts to protect the identity of the Old Colony Mennonites I write about in this article, I use pseudonyms throughout. There are also times when I am deliberately vague about which colony I am writing about for the same reason.
- ² The elected, ordained, religious leadership of a colony comprised of the *Eltesta* (lead minister/spiritual head of a colony), *Ooms* (ministers) and deacon(s).
- ³ Tim Ingold, "The Art of Translation in a Continuous World," in *Beyond Boundaries: Understanding, Translation and Anthropological Discourse*, ed. Gísli Pálsson (Oxford, Providence RI: Berg, 1993), 227.
- ⁴ Talal Asad, "The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam," Occasional Papers Series, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (Washington: Georgetown University, 1986), 11.
- ⁵ So called because horse-drawn vehicles are used by residents of these colonies for transportation. The vehicle used most commonly is a *Pietsfoatich* [horse-drawn vehicle], an enclosed wagon.
- ⁶ There are many varieties of Old Colony Mennonites, including Old Colony Mennonites who do not live on colonies (those who live in Canada and the United States). While Old Colony groups vary tremendously in how they interpret their commitment to be separate from the world, this commitment is central to all Old Colony churches. In the section "Ethnographic Context", I describe in greater detail the groups of Old Colony Mennonites on Latin American colonies from which I draw the empirical data for this article. These groups are the most radical in their interpretation of separation from the world. However, it is also the case that much of what this article is about could also be said about most Old Colony Mennonite groups regardless of how progressive they are. For a comprehensive, though dated study of Old Colony Mennonites, see Calvin W. Redekop, *Old Colony Mennonites: The Dilemmas of Ethnic Life* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1969).

- See also Cornelius Krahn and H. Leonard Sawatzky. "Old Colony Mennonites." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. 1990. Web. 4 November 2012. <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/O533ME.html>.
- ⁷ Harry Leonard Sawatzky, *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1971), 175.
- ⁸ Tina Letkeman, Map of Nuevo Casas Grandes colonies, 2008.
- ⁹ Since my visit to Sabinal, the colony has purchased land in the state of Quintana Roo. It is expected that farming will be more viable in the tropical environment as opposed to the northern desert where Sabinal is located.
- ¹⁰ Harold S. Bender, Martin W. Friesen, Menno Ediger, Isbrand Hiebert and Gerald Mumaw. "Bolivia." *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online*. March 2010. Web. 25 May 2012. <http://www.gameo.org/encyclopedia/contents/B665.html>. Sawatzky (*They Sought a Country*, 189-91) is correct in describing the move to Bolivia to be about land shortage, but entirely fails to mention that it was also the result of growing modernization on Mexico colonies.
- ¹¹ In this article I address only Old Colony religious life. Although these two groups share many traits, there are some important theological and social differences between Old Colony and Sommerfelder Mennonites that made me decide to limit my comments to Old Colony Mennonites.
- ¹² See William Janzen, "Welcoming the Returning 'Kanadier' Mennonites from Mexico," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 11-24, for a description of this group of Mennonites and issues facing them.
- ¹³ See for example, Kerry L. Fast, "Religion, Pain, and the Body: Agency in the Life of an Old Colony Woman." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 103-30.
- ¹⁴ Ingold, 226.
- ¹⁵ Ben Rogaly and Becky Taylor, *Moving Histories of Class and Community: Identity, Place and Belonging in Contemporary England* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011), 6.
- ¹⁶ John J. Friesen, "Old Colony Theology, Ecclesiology and Experience of Church in Manitoba." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 131-44; Judith Klassen, "Encoding Song: Faithful Defiance in Mexican Mennonite Music Making." (PhD dissertation, Memorial University, 2008).
- ¹⁷ See Kelly Hedges, "'Plautdietsch' and 'Huuchdietsch' in Chihuahua: Language, Literacy, and Identity Among the Old Colony Mennonites in Northern Mexico." (PhD Dissertation, Yale University, 1996), 298-331. Hedges is referring to scholars such as Mennonite historian Harold S. Bender, linguist Wolfgang W. Moelleken, geographer H. Leonard Sawatzky, and sociologist Calvin W. Redekop, among others.
- ¹⁸ Hedges, "Plautdietsch" 6-7, defines the *oole Ordnuck* (Low German for "old order") as "a way of doing things and a way of thinking they [Old Colony Mennonites] believed had been most successful in the past for maintaining their separation and apartness from the *Welt* and the *Weltmensch*, the 'world' and the 'worldly person'. Though unwritten and uncodified, ... the *oole Ordnuck* provides the tools and mechanisms for cultural reproduction. ... [T]he *oole Ordnuck* is the 'tradition' which ... specifies inter-Mennonite and Mennonite-outsider economic and social relations; structures a colony political system divided into what the Mennonites consider secular and religious branches; provides rules regulating the adoption of technology; dictates dress and occupation norms; categorizes ethnic and other systems of identification; constructs and maintains certain institutions such as church, school, marriage patterns, a widows and orphans fund, and fire and disaster insurance schemes; and structures an ideology of language and literacy." Elsewhere in this article I refer to this as the *Ordnung*, which is the German equivalent.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

- ²⁰ This colony came into being as the result of a schism in the Durango Colony in Paraguay, which is a daughter colony of the Durango Colony in Mexico I referred to earlier. Later in this article, I discuss the Durango Colony, Bolivia, and its relationship to Sabinal.
- ²¹ An alternative view is taken by Lorenzo Cañas Bottos, in *Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina and Bolivia: Nation Making, Religious Conflict and Imagination of the Future* (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2008), 169-331. Bottos examines the dynamics of a colony when members become engaged with evangelical forms of Christianity that seriously threaten the cohesion of social and religious colony life. See also Bruce Guenther, "The Road Less Traveled: The Evangelical Path of Kanadier Mennonites Who Returned to Canada," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 22 (2004): 145-166. The growing appeal of evangelicalism among Old Colony Mennonites is an important reminder that difference and change for Old Colony Mennonites has many facets. I am addressing but a narrow swath of difference among Old Colony Mennonites in this article. Elsewhere I examine the more dramatic change of conversion to evangelicalism among Old Colony Mennonites. See Kerry L. Fast, "Migration and Conversion: Old Colony Mennonites in Ontario," Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, Wilfrid Laurier University, May 28, 2012.
- ²² Anna Sofia Hedberg, *Outside the World: Cohesion and Deviation Among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2007), 222.
- ²³ Asad, 16.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 17.
- ²⁶ William Garriott and Kevin Lewis O'Neill, "Who is a Christian? Toward a Dialogic Approach in the Anthropology of Christianity." *Anthropological Theory* 8, no. 4 (2008): 387.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 388.
- ²⁸ Ibid.
- ²⁹ Robert A. Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion," in *Lived Religion in America: Towards a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 7.
- ³⁰ Amira Mittermaier, *Dreams That Matter: Egyptian Landscapes of the Imagination* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2011), 183.
- ³¹ Asad, 15.
- ³² *Wauscha* literally means "one who washes." It is the designation given to women who wash and prepare bodies for burial.
- ³³ A *Vorsteher* is the civic leader of a colony and responsible for all colony-wide matters, including legal and economic.
- ³⁴ Jonathan Z. Smith, "The Bare Facts of Ritual." *History of Religions* 20, no.1/2 (August-November, 1980): 125.
- ³⁵ Durango Colony in Bolivia, also a *Pietsfoatich* colony, is one of the few colonies with which Sabinal has fraternal relations.