Community and Schism among the Old Colony Mennonites of Belize: A Case Study

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Introduction

In northern Belize, formerly British Honduras, lies the *Altkolonier* (Old Colony) Mennonite colony of Shipyard.[1] Here the Mennonites form a distinct group within the wider Belizean society because of their appearance, language, religion, and lifestyle. At first glimpse Shipyard may seem like a coherent community, frozen in time, but a closer look reveals that things are quite different from what they appear.

The formerly uniform community is showing cracks. A group of people have started to meet to study the Bible, and have begun doubting the old system within which they were living. The old ways do not seem plausible anymore. In order to contain the damage and to keep the rest of the community in line, the preachers have excommunicated members of the Bible Study group, banning them from being a part of community life.[2] This

means that they, the "outcasts," face a life of hardship, as they are shunned by even close family members, and do not receive any assistance from former friends or neighbours. To cope with this situation, they have formed a new group within the colony, one that provides mutual support and gives new meaning to their lives. This has worked quite well for some time, but before too long this new group also began splitting into different sub-groups.

In this article,[3] I focus on the circumstances and social tools that have kept the *Altkolonier* colony in Belize from becoming part of the wider society for such a long time, and, indeed, how members have kept the community intact. I analyze the process of both schism and schism containment. I analyze the process of dissent, from initial doubts about the "plausibility" (Berger, 1969) of the system adhered to by the Old Colony, to the creation of an alternative community of belief within the community of practice. I argue that the slow fracturing of the former goes hand in hand with the development of the latter. I also study the strategies of conflict containment deployed by the Old Colony authorities to prevent the spread of unorthodox ideas and practices, and to maintain opposition against social and economic progress (Kraybill and Olshan, 1994).

I begin with a short overview of the history and setting of the colony, and then describe how the Old Colony community has remained distinct from the wider Belizean society for more than fifty years. Then I move on to the processes of doubt, conflict, excommunication and hardships surrounding the schism of one group within the community, and describe the mechanisms the dissenters used to form a new community. Despite their initial unity, they later split into two different groups (Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church [EMMC] and the Local Church), sharing daily life together but not worshipping communally. In the remainder of the article, I present an analysis of these processes of community formation and schism in Shipyard.

Shipyard Colony: History and Setting

The Mennonite community in Belize began in 1958 by Low German-speaking Mennonite migrants from Mexico, where the government had threatened to include them in a new social security system, the *Seguro Social*, and where Mennonite colonies had begun facing a significant land shortage. The Mennonites found the opportunity of new, farmable land in neighbouring British Honduras. In order to achieve independence from the British

Empire, British Honduras needed farmers to produce food, and the Mennonites were the perfect candidates for the job. George Verde, a local Belizean politician who still remembers these times, told me: "The Mennonites promised to become farmers and to share their knowledge. They did not need modern machinery. They also presented themselves to be a good Christian community, peaceful and very devoted."

In the end, the Mennonites delivered on their promises. They introduced mid-latitude commercial agriculture and produced corn, rice, poultry, eggs and dairy products for the local market (Woods, Perry and Steagall, 1997, 70). Today, it is said that every fried chicken and every drop of milk consumed in Belize comes from one of the Mennonite colonies. This success was built on humble beginnings, as Verde remembers: "In 1960 we had never heard about Mennonites before. They seemed like the poor banished children of Eve – you know what I mean – like poor people, they were pushed around. We felt pity for them. We were surprised that we could help, because we were poor ourselves."

The Mennonites' beginning years in Belize was very difficult. They had to clear the lush, thick rainforest and start farming in unknown conditions, as Johan, one Shipyard Mennonite remembers:

> In the beginning it was very hard, we knew nothing. My parents brought three pounds of butter but it all melted away in the sun [he finds that very funny]. In Mexico we used to breed cattle and make cheese, but these *Belizeños* they do not eat cheese so we had to do something else. We knew nothing, we came from a dry land, everything was different here. Then the rainy season started and we had to harvest the beans when they were still green, otherwise they would have rotted away. Also with corn – none of the varieties we knew wanted to grow. Everything just drowned.

Today, some 8,000 Mennonites live in Belize. The colonies can be differentiated by their adaptation to the modern world. On the very traditional end of the spectrum one finds the Barton Creek settlements, in which inhabitants adhere to an almost Amish-like brand of Anabaptism. Blue Creek and Spanish Lookout are the two most progressive colonies – they use modern tools (even their own airplanes) and farming techniques, dress in modern clothes and engage in leisure activities such as swimming and team sports. In between one can find the two largest colonies: Little Belize and Shipyard, the colony where this six-month research was conducted.

Shipyard, stretching over an area of 17,083 acres, consists of twenty-six different villages. Each village is led by a *Schulze*, who

is elected for two years, and each has its own school – the villages form little independent entities within the colony. By the turn of the twenty-first century there were some 2,500 inhabitants (not counting the people living under the ban), and numbers were rising, leading to a notorious shortage of land and making it difficult for young couples to find their own property.

When entering the colony, I could immediately tell that I had left regular Belizean village life. Stretched out over a vast terrain was a flat plain dotted with small hills, with houses lying scattered between fields of sorghum, beans, corn, and grazing land for cattle and sheep. Dusty streets cut through the land and connected the individual villages. Small pathways led to individual homesteads. They had similar appearances: they were one or two story wooden or aluminum buildings, most painted light blue, each graced by a few flower pots and a swing on the porch. Everything was neat, clean and orderly.

On first appearance, Shipyard seemed like a timeless and homogenous community. The place fulfilled every nostalgic wish of a modern-world person longing for the 'good old times.' First impressions might be misleading, however, for just under the surface was a disunity, one that showed itself to me on that first day. Under the neatness and orderliness, a silent revolution was going on among the *Stillen im Lande.*[4]

Keeping up Community among the Old Colony Mennonites

That disunity related to an Anabaptist principle rooted in Mennonite community. This was the necessity of the conscious confession of faith before one could be baptized and become part of the community. This community, or congregation, was the most important group with which any individual identified: it was a *Kirche* (in the sense of an established state church) but also a *Gemeinde* (a congregation or community) in which faith and life were united (Redekop, 1989). It is as Franklin H. Littell, the noted Anabaptist historian writes:

> [T]he central idea of Anabaptism, the real dynamite in the age of reformation, as I see it, was this, that one cannot find salvation without caring for his brother, that this "brother" actually matters in the personal life. […] It is not "faith alone" which matters (for which faith no church would be needed) but it is brotherhood, this intimate caring for each other, as it was commanded to the disciples of Christ as the way to God's kingdom (Littell, qtd. in Redekop, 1989, 131).

Community life among traditional Mennonites, like the *Altkolonier*, is guided by a strict set of rules and regulations: the *Ordnung*. One of its central teachings directs members to live outside the "world" and renounce all "worldly" things that might lead away from the true faith. Living away from the world and its earthly seductions (or practicing nonconformity to the world), together with the ideas of *Gelassenheit* (submission to the will of God) and *Demut* (humility), are the most important principles in the life of a Mennonite, who is expected to subordinate their individuality to the community through baptism. As James Urry notes, "[t]he whole system was bound firmly by a set of rules defined through the interpretation of God's will made manifest through his word in the Bible" (Urry 1983, 242).

This strict system of *Ordnung* also applies in Shipyard where many modern tools like state-provided electricity, automobiles, tractors with rubber tires, watches, radios, and televisions are prohibited. These "laws" help to form a distinct community by setting members apart from the surrounding groups. The rules also include a dress code, as well as regulations about the way houses are built, leisure time, and even affect the naming of children.[5] Many of these rules are not laws in the strict sense of the word, but rather codes of living and conduct handed down from parents to children.

For the Old Colony Mennonites, this "narrow pathway," as they call it, is the only true way to salvation and therefore most of them choose to follow the footsteps of their parents and adhere to this strict way of life. This strong belief in tradition, custom, and order, makes this community possible; in this system, belief and custom, or religion and tradition, become one intertwined unit. As Lorenzo Cañás Bottos writes, "Old Colony Mennonites [are] required to control their bodies in order to save their souls, quench their individuality for the sake of the community and refrain from engaging with the world (or doing so in a regulated context)" (Cañás Bottos 2008, 193).

Of course, the lifestyle in Shipyard has changed since its early years, and adaptations to the rules have occurred.[6] In general, however, the Shipyard colony has maintained the same lifestyle and *Ordnung* for more than fifty years. I was curious, then, as to why the two initial settlements in Belize – Shipyard and Blue Creek – had developed so differently. The explanation I got from the Mennonites had nothing to do with belief or religious devotion, but simply with the terrain and the possibilities of working the land. While Shipyard is almost flat, Blue Creek is hilly, making it all but impossible to farm there with tractors on steel wheels; even though

the Mennonites emphasize the importance of being a "true believer," they are also very practical people. Soon the ones who preached adherence to old rules and steel wheels were a minority and moved to Shipyard; here land could be successfully farmed with the old method of steel wheels.[7]

Using these traditional tools and methods, the Mennonites managed to make a living in Belize. This commitment gave young Mennonites little reason to believe the grass was greener on the other side. Most people in Belize are better off than many in the neighbouring countries, but they can still be considered rather poor. Mennonites are the ones who produce the most in Belize, and therefore enjoy considerable, relative wealth. So why jeopardize these possibilities by changing things and moving out of the colony? This pragmatic view is strengthened by the general Mennonite idea in Belize that they are superior to their *Creole* and *Mestizo* neighbours. They are white and adherents of the true and righteous belief – so stepping out of their own group and becoming part of a group that is seen as inferior is not desirable at all.

This feeling of superiority is unfortunately often combined with a relative lack of education. The *Altkolonier* children go to school only for a minimum number of years and are generally taught by young men, usually no better trained than their pupils. Reading, writing and a little math are seen as sufficient to survive in the agrarian world of the colony. Curiosity, general knowledge, or assertiveness are not encouraged. I heard the old adage, "*Wir beugen Ihnen den Ruecken wenn sie jung sind,*"[8] more than once as a description of the local way of education. Having their own schools has always been of great importance to the Mennonites.

From a very young age, the children learn that their individual will and desires must be subordinated to the group and that rules and regulations must be followed. As a result, many people live in some kind of fear of the preachers and even their neighbours, who could inform on them. The whole system is enforced by Sunday sermons warning eternal damnation for breaking the *Ordnung* and by watchful eyes and gossip among neighbours. For example, an interview I conducted with a woman whose father and brother had been excommunicated and who, herself, was suspected of sharing their ideas, was interrupted by two sisters-in-law who arrived shortly after I did, presumably checking to see what we were talking about. In another instance, after I visited a very old woman one evening, a story ran through the village that this 82-year old lady, who could hardly take care of herself, had a secret lover from town who had visited her at night!

Most Old Colony Mennonites truly believe in their all-encompassing system and willingly adhere to it. However, despite the threat of excommunication and being put under the ban,[9] a severe form of social punishment in a group to which being part of a community is not only a material but also a divine blessing, a small group of Mennonites in Shipyard have overcome this fear and begun challenging the system. Of course, despite their emphasis on community, the history of the Mennonites is full of internal splits. Historically, the "brotherhood of believers" has very often been entangled in a struggle over the right doctrine, ways of interpreting the scripture, and the proper way of living. As Calvin Redekop states, "the great coherence initiated by the 'utopian movement' has constantly faced the shattering of unity when it has been expressed and institutionalized in actual community life" (1989, 65). Recent developments in Shipyard, then, have their roots in a long, ongoing process of divisions among the Mennonites.[10]

Starting to Doubt the System: Excommunication and Attached Hardships

One severe way of breaking the rules of the *Ordnung* is by using modern technology. This is often a reason for being banned. Another way of getting into trouble is by challenging the authority of the preachers. The group of dissenters on which this article focuses is an example of the latter. Almost simultaneously, around the year 2000, a few men in Shipyard started to question Old Colony ways. One had seen some violence perpetrated against a young man by the preachers (an act, he said, that violated the Anabaptist teaching on pacifism), and another had heard the same sermon from one of the preachers just once too often to believe the preaching was really heart-felt.[11] Dissatisfied with the way things were in Shipyard, the men decided to look for answers together and formed a Bible Study group. By studying the Bible together they came to the conclusion that many of the rules had no basis in the scripture, but were rather man-made.

The story of Adam,[12] one of a group of men[13] who had been excommunicated for forming a Bible Study group, tells part of this account. For the first few months, the Bible Study meetings were very disorganized, meeting one evening here, another there. Then the members decided it might be better to meet on a certain evening every week, though always in a different house. This act, of course, did not go unnoticed and soon some Old Colonists came to the meeting, where they just watched, not saying anything. Shortly

after this event, Communion was served in Old Colony church. Sarah, Adam's wife, remembers that day very well:

> We were in church to receive the…Communion but [then] the preacher said 'all those who study the Bible together, [shall] take their hands back, they will not receive communion.' Those people who go to the neighbouring non-Mennonite village, to watch TV and drink, but who are willing to change, will get it, but those who study the Bible won't. I was shocked.

This situation went on for almost two years, as the *Altkolonier* preachers repeatedly insisted the Bible Study should end. Although some members of the study group became afraid and left, the core continued.

Adam was soon called to the *Notkirche* (an emergency church meeting) and asked to ask for forgiveness. He recalls that the *Ältester* (church bishop) became very angry with him, telling him that he should give up the Bible Study. Adam refused and left the church. The next day, August 20, 2000, he was told that he and another man were excommunicated. They were only the first; all the members of the Bible Study group were later put under the ban as well. Others were banned because they refused to shun their excommunicated children or other family members. Soon a group of almost twenty families were seeking to survive in Shipyard under the difficult conditions of excommunication.

Usually people who were threatened by the ban or already shunned packed their bags and moved away to a more progressive colony. This was what the Old Colony preachers had hoped to achieve this time as well – that the troublemakers would either repent or leave, allowing the community to revert to the status quo. The Old Colony leaders did not want to have this quarrelling and conflict in their community, and hoped to restore peace by "casting out" what they saw as the disobedient and subversive members. This attempt failed, however, as the outcasts stubbornly decided to stay. "I worked twenty-six years for them," Peter told me, "I delivered two thousand babies and now they want me to go? They told me: we give you one last chance. We will not excommunicate you if you go somewhere else. But I do not want to go somewhere else, this is my home."

Most families decided to stay, but this decision brought them a great deal of hardship. Many lost their jobs or could not sell their products in Shipyard anymore. Some sought work in the neighbouring colony of Blue Creek, meaning that they had to spend a lot of money on gasoline for the journey back and forth. Spending was just as difficult for the outcasts as earning, for they were

refused service in their colony's shops and therefore had to go either to Orange Walk[14] or Blue Creek to stock up on supplies. Another facet of being shunned was the negative attitude they had to face every day: some people reported having stones thrown on the roofs of their houses, sometimes children were called "pigs" in the street, and often people turned their heads when the outcasts drove by.

All these things were difficult, but the hardest part of being banned was the disruption to relationships with friends and family. Sarah, for example, told me about the day her mother died. Nobody told her about the death. Her brothers and sisters drove by her house on the way to the funeral without telling her, making her feel very bad. Tina, whose husband had been banned for three years, told me that his mother did not even come to visit them when they had their first child. When they went to his parents' to present the baby, the grandparents hid in the back of the house, pretending not to be in. Tina's brother-in-law told his children that Mexicans live in that house, concealing the fact that it was actually their own uncle who lived there.

These were some of the difficulties the excommunicated people of Shipyard faced. Those who remained in the Old Colony church, however, reported suffering as well. Many of them regretted the tension and conflict that had arisen within the colony, and the decision to ban such a large group of dissenters did not come easily to the preachers – even though they were still sure they acted correctly.

Not surprisingly, the reason for disobedience was seen differently by either side: the *Altkolonier* saw the behaviour of the disobedient as a direct affront towards their belief and way of living. "*Sie haben den Bund gebrochen, sie waren ungehorsam*,"[15] was the general answer I got when inquiring after the reasons for the banning. In the eyes of the Old Colony, the outcasts had broken the sacred promise they had made to the community and God at their baptism. They had strayed from the true path of life, the narrow and thorny way, and begun searching for an easier life and material goods. "*Es hat ihnen an den Ohren gejuckt*," they suggested, and "*sie wollten keine Zäune mehr*."[16]

The outcasts, however, challenged the necessity of a unifying hegemony in the colony. Their challenge, they argued, ran along the lines of ideology and highlighted their belief that the true faith had been lost in a matrix of man-made rules and traditions. Theirs was the real belief in God and Jesus, they argued, for they only needed to read and discuss the Bible, the holy book. They saw no need for the old rules and regulations, the old meaning of the

narrow pathway, in order to be true Christians. As one of the outcasts put it, "*Sie glauben das Evangelium ist nicht genug. Sie muessen noch etwas dazugeben*."[17] For the outcasts, the decision to continue the Bible Study was not an easy one and it changed their lives in a far-reaching way. To cope with the difficult situation, they reached for new social mechanisms to form a new community, in the very midst of the *Altkolonier*.

Mechanisms of Community Formation

Who were these people who started challenging the system? Shipyard was organized into different villages that together made up the colony. It had no real *centre ville* or main plaza, but village number ten, or in their words, "Camp Ten" – the one with the feeding mill, a big shop, a church and school – could be seen as the most busy, and therefore the center of the colony. Due to its businesses, it was also the one most exposed to the outside world. Most of the dissenters were from Camp Ten and did not own land to farm, but made a living either working outside the colony or as unlicensed doctors, electricians or carpenters – all well respected vocations, even if they brought you into close contact with the world and did not meet the complete Mennonite ideal of a man farming his own land.

Another similarity among those attending the original Bible Study group was that most were men in their thirties. They were the first ones placed under the ban. The second group facing the ban tended to be older Old Colonist parents, those who refused to stop having contact with their banned children. Also, the majority of the men were from two large family clans and therefore related to each other. The excommunicated members who were not part of these two family clans had often been in trouble with the Old Colony church before, mainly for excessive drinking.

To help them come to terms with their social ostracism, the outcasts turned towards each other and used new methods to form a new community.[18] Take, for example, the slaughtering of a cow or a pig. The outcasts could not buy meat in the shops anymore, so they had to slaughter their own animals. Very often friends and other family members came to help with the demanding work of cutting up the meat in the tropical heat, and as quickly as possible. They also helped each other out with other products, like gasoline and food.

An easy way to see who belonged to which group was in patterns of *Spazieren*: visiting neighbours in the evening or on a Sunday

afternoon. During these friendly meetings, daily business was discussed and it was also a chance for gossip. *Altkolonier* were not allowed to visit people living under the ban, except if they were trying to convince them to repent. This meant that the outcasts stayed within their own circle. During these visits, the outcasts offered supported to each other, countering unpleasant things that had been done to one of them by the *Altkolonier*. These encounters gave comfort, but also strengthened the feeling of shared grief and of being treated in an unfair way: when one Old Colony woman shouted "pigs" at some outcast children, it took but a short while before all of the shunned families knew about the incident.

The outcasts also worked together and supported each other in times of special grief or joy, such as funerals or weddings. When young Abraham died in a motorcycle accident, for example, the outcasts all gathered in the house of his parents to sing and grieve together. The living room was full of mourners, singing under flickering neon lights, weeping and sharing their feelings and memories with the group. The next day some helped to prepare the room and the body for the wake, and brought food for the grieving family. Some *Altkolonier* briefly stopped by to have a look at the dead body but kept themselves apart from the outcasts, even though some of them were close family members. They were also absent at the funeral held in the new church, thus reinforcing the feeling of separation among the outcasts.

Other community-creating mechanisms were new social institutions and a new approach to education. The outcasts built a small school and engaged a teacher from Canada. Two reasons governed this decision: first, the outcasts' children had been denied entrance to Old Colony schools, and second, the outcasts could challenge the Old Colony system even more effectively by keeping the education of their children in their own hands. The outcasts also viewed the Old Colony education as insufficient and too traditional for their children. So they worked with books used in other private Christian schools in the United States and Canada, with classes in English, rather than in High German. This meant that from the very start the children internalized different ways of thinking and believing than their *Altkolonier* neighbours. Other new organizations and institutions included the Monday singing school, a monthly women's meeting, and a bi-weekly youth group that brought together young people from Blue Creek and Shipyard to play volleyball and to sing. On a social level the new community thrived, but what about on the level of belief?

Further Schisms: Belief versus Practice

As described above, the outcasts were connected by a shared history, as well as by common experiences and memories. They all identified the Bible Study group as the starting point of their common destiny and all held the memories of the early years of the Bible Study in high esteem. One of the outcasts remembered: "We were so blessed with the Bible Study. At that time the Lord called a few men at the same time, He had a plan for them and for Shipyard. We were drawn to each other – that was so great." Those who came together to study the Bible thought of themselves as having seen the light in the darkness. When more and more families were banned they had to face the hardships of being shunned together, further reinforcing the idea of being a community of shared fate.

This unity came to an end, however, as parts of the group joined different churches. Some families affiliated themselves with the Evangelical Mennonite Mission Church (EMMC) that had emerged in Canada in the 1930s. The EMMC provided them with some money for the new church and school, and sent a preacher from Canada to lead the group. The building of a new church and the connection to the EMMC was very controversial from the beginning; as Adam told me, "*Sie hätten mit der Kirche warten sollen, es war zu schnell, nur zwei Personen wollten die Kirche.*"[19] Other families joined the Local Church, which is an evangelical, non-Mennonite church founded in China and adhering to the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. This church had been growing fast in Belize, and its missionaries were able to convert some of the banned people from Shipyard (some people from other Mennonite colonies joined the movement as well).

The split happened mainly along family lines with two extended families at the centre of the dispute. Members of one of them tended to join the Local Church, while members of the other affiliated themselves with the EMMC: two families, still undecided, went back and forth between the two churches. The rift could be seen as a sort of power struggle between the first two family clans. Both were trying to take the lead within the original Bible Study group, and when neither could convince the group as a whole, they started two different meetings.

Each of the two outcast groups blamed the other for being responsible for the split. Both thought the others made their decisions too quickly, maybe in reaction to the shock of the excommunication. One person told me his point of view about the Local Church: "You know, if you take away the pressure from people some go too far, they do not know where to stop." Similarly,

a member of the Local Church expressed her ideas about the EMMC church: "*Manche Leute gehen einfach von einer Kirche in die andere, das finde ich nicht gut. Man muss zuerst prüfen.*"[20] Both sides saw the decisions of the other as being made too hastily and without enough consideration of the consequences, and both blamed each other for damaging the image of the outcasts and therefore scaring away possible new members.

All bemoaned the loss of unity among them and looked back at the beginning years of the Bible Study with nostalgia. The friction was about belief, Sunday worship, and religious affiliation, not about daily practices of mutual help, social institutions, or visiting (even though they are starting to be affected as well). They all said that they got along very well in daily life; they just could not worship together or talk about issues of belief. One of the women told me: "We have social contacts but we do not worship together." The different denominations came together in church only for funerals and weddings.

Many said that their community was better now than it had been amongst the Old Colony, but only the "worldly" part of it, and most of them regretted that very much. One outcast spoke about the cost of social division from his parents-in-law:

> *Ich besuche meine Schwiegereltern aber ich kann zu ihnen nicht über Jesus sprechen. Sie wollen das nicht hören und haben eine andere Meinung. Ich kann nur über weltliche Dinge mit ihnen sprechen – über* Pick-Ups *und die Ernte. Ich mag das, aber man sollte im Glauben Gemeinschaft haben, das ist wichtig. Aber das geht nicht mit ihnen.*[21]

The father-in-law's version of that same situation was a rather different one: "*Er kommt uns besuchen aber wir können dann nicht vom Glauben sprechen und wenn dann will nur er seine Meinung geben.*"[22]

Among the outcasts, the all-encompassing Mennonite principle of community had fractured: now a separated community, one of daily practice and one of worship, ensued.

The Story of Schism in Shipyard: Old Strategies, New Challenges

Theoretically, Old Colony Mennonites offer their members an all-encompassing "concept of life" in the form of a hegemonic system. Being part of an *Altkolonier* community means giving up a lot of personal freedom and following a strict code of rules and regulations. It also means living in an autocratic system with a

strong, traditional leadership. The traditional leadership relies on the "*Alltagsglauben an die Heiligkeit von jeher geltender Traditionen und die Legimität der durch sie zur Autorität berufenen*"[23] (Weber 1972, 124).

Dean Kelley states that strict churches are successful in attracting and retaining an active and committed membership because they demand complete loyalty, unwavering belief, and rigid adherence to a distinctive lifestyle (Kelley in Iannaccone, 1994). They proclaim an exclusive truth and demand adherence to a distinct faith, morality and lifestyle different to that offered by the surrounding society. The Old Colony of Shipyard fits this description – their exclusive system might not be built to attract people from outside, but it works very well at keeping people born into the colony inside the colony.

There can even be an agreed-upon way to be disobedient, as Anna Sofia Hedberg found among the Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia: "As long as disobedience is 'correctly' performed, deviation does not challenge the community and its quest for salvation. [...] This means even in disobeying the *Ordnung*, the members validate it" (2007, 181). The same happened in Shipyard. Sarah, as we heard before, was shocked that people who had been drinking secretly in the village would not be punished, but that the ones who studied the Bible would. Those who secretly used a phone, hid a watch in a pocket, or only every now and then snuck off for a drink, were proving that they knew they were doing something wrong, as they were doing all that was possible to hide it. Through this behaviour, they actually re-enforced the power of the rules and the preachers. By openly studying the Bible and showing no remorse, however, the outcasts of Shipyard openly challenged the system.

Among the *Altkolonier,* dissenters are punished by exclusion from this all-encompassing community. Donald Kraybill describes similar processes among the Amish of Lancaster County and argues that this form of punishment and even division makes sense: "By extracting the progressives, the *Old Order Amish* were able to tighten their grip on traditional practices – the ban on electricity, cars, and tractors – because they no longer had to placate liberal agitators" (1989, 22-23). Also, the shunning of the progressives provided negative examples for the rest of the community.

The Old Colony preachers of Shipyard tried to use the same strategy. This way had worked in the past; those living under the ban usually repented or moved away, thereby freeing the group from further conflict. This time, however, the old strategy seemed to have failed, as the outcasts seemed emboldened by being placed outside the community's system of rules. As Cañás Bottos points

out, once "the apostates are already excluded, no further action can be taken against them, and nothing prevents them from maintaining social relationships amongst themselves" (2009, 116). In Shipyard, once a whole group was excluded, they started to form a separate community within the colony, hoping to attract more followers.

Why then did the "concept for life in the faith" no longer make sense for some of the members of Shipyard? The social reality has to be plausible for those who live in it. The plausibility structure, constituted by a social network of similar believers, social interaction, ritual participation, and social experiences (Berger in Redekop and Steiner, 1988, 157), has to be intact in order for people to remain committed to the group. As Berger argues, the "social world intends to be taken for granted as far as possible," and seeks for the individual to see it as inevitable, part of the "universal order of things" (Berger 1969, 24). In the case of Shipyard, this plausibility structure began to break down for some members of the community. As we have seen above, they did not want to be part of the strict system anymore and followed their own ideologies and beliefs. By doing so, they were set free from the old system but were also set free to follow whomever they wanted. Once the plausibility of the structure of religion, in the manner of an all-encompassing principle, was doubted and ultimately cast aside, there was room for another way of living. The community was split into a community of practice and everyday life, and a community of worship and belief.

Many of the outcasts I spoke to argued along these lines: they were not satisfied with the *Altkolonier* way of believing anymore. Harry, one of the outcasts, provides a good example: "Their beliefs did not go deep enough for me. I wanted to learn more about Jesus but there was nobody to talk about these things," he said. "The preachers said lay-people should not keep themselves busy with these things and many others in the colony were not even true believers. They just went to church on Sunday but did not really know anything about Jesus." By studying the Bible, some started to doubt the system of the *Ordnung* altogether. "These rules might have been suitable 150 years ago but things have changed," another one of the outcasts, Peter, explained, adding, "[i]t says nothing in the Bible about rubber tires." Many stated they could not cope with the situation anymore and would rather face the hardship of living under the ban than continue under those conditions. Many saw their excommunication almost as a liberation: "*Estaba un golpe muy duro, pero tambien como una cadena cortada,*" one said to me.[24] "*Er hat mir erzählt dass wenn ich Jesus annehme bin ich*

gerettet. Ich war so glücklich," said another. "*Ich war so froh als mein Omptje ausgeschlossen wurde – endlich war ich frei.*"[25]

The Belizean Mennonite emphasis on the importance of rules as well as belief has to do with notions about authenticity (Linnekin, 1992). Both the *Altkolonier* and the outcasts argued that they followed the true and authentic way. The *Altkolonier* focused on the importance of the *Ordnung* and doing things "*wie du es von deinen Eltern gelernt hast.*"[26] The excommunicated argued that this is superficial behaviour and learned culture rather than true belief, and that only through true belief in Jesus could one find heaven's gate. People were arguing that it was their personal belief and ideology and their personal relationship with Jesus that should lead to salvation, and not a narrow, prescribed system of rules and daily practices. The emphasis on individualized faith, however, opened the door to schism after schism among the outcasts. They still cherished and needed community, but reconciliation of the community of practice and the community of worship among them seemed far away.

Calvin Redekop's account of schisms in the Mennonite context offers a useful way to understand the developments in Shipyard. According to Redekop, "schism does not occur simply because of disagreements over orthodoxy and faith, but involves instead a mixture of disagreements over belief on the one hand and various social factors on the other, with the latter deriving from the cultural backgrounds, experience of oppression, and lack of intercommunication among groups" (1989, 57). He identifies a number of stages that lead to schism: at first, it may be about minority-host society relationships, as secular, modern values start to infiltrate the value system. Then problems adjusting to the changing times begin, as questions about what is eternal truth, or which things could change, start being asked. In the third stage, different factions are formed, mainly associated with family structures and politics (267-68). Redekop uses an "ideological conflict model" to explain the Mennonite society's tendency to schism. "This model assumes conflict between an ideologically constituted religio-ethnic group attempting to retain its identity while at the same time being bombarded by competing systems of ideas which purport to explain or interpret the beliefs better than did the old interpretations," he writes. "The conflict can be seen as an attempt to conceptualize or verbalize the poorly articulated belief system [...] obtained earlier in the face of new options" (272).

So was the schism in Shipyard based on ideology or on social forces? Drawing on Redekop's insight regarding the "shattering of the utopian movement by the reality of community life" (1989, 65),

it is evident that many social factors must be taken into account in Shipyard. As shown above, many of the original Bible Study group members were men in their late twenties and early thirties, who had already been friends before. It was important that most of them lived in the same village (Camp Ten), as secrecy was necessary and distances are long between the different camps. It was not only personal choice that influenced the individual decisions to continue to study the Bible and therefore to face the ban. These decisions were influenced by the members' social relationships, such as friends and family, and by outside groups who offered material help and a new ideology that was not too far removed from their original beliefs.

Alternative models of community were offered by two more progressive Mennonite colonies, Blue Creek and Spanish Lookout,[27] each of which were in a better position economically than Shipyard and offered a less restricted way of living. Another important outside influence came from other churches, like the EMMC, and even non-Mennonite churches, like the Local Church, which heard about the conflict in Shipyard and offered their support. Jokingly, one of the outcasts told me, "At some point even the Barton Creekers[28] showed up to pick up the pieces and to convince us to [join] them."

It is also worth remembering that most of the outcasts were not farmers, the "ideal" profession in the *Altkolonier* view. Rather, they were electricians, mechanics, paid workers, and even doctors. Some of them lived on the margins of society already, while others were quite wealthy, so differences in wealth between the Old Colony and the outcasts were not the reason for defection. It seems it was more related to the fact that many of the dissenters had a lot of outside contacts due to their employment, and that many of them could speak English or Spanish.[29] They saw that different ways of living and believing were possible, and were also not satisfied with the autocratic leadership within the Colony. Like one preacher visiting from the United States expressed it: "The first ten years after migrating somewhere are so hard that people have to work together, the next ten everybody is happy due to the new prosperity, then ten years of declining belief and then it takes almost a final ten years until a new group is formed." His thoughts could be used for Shipyard as well, as the dissenters were almost all young men who were born in Belize and had no memory of the difficult formative years. As a result, they experienced the strict rules as a burden, rather than as the necessity they had been during the great hardships of the colonizing years.

So, even though underlying social reasons contributed tremendously to the schism, according to the outcasts' own narrative they formed a new community in which they could live according to their renewed faith. They stressed the old Anabaptist principle that they are a "brotherhood of faith" (Redekop, 1989), rather than a community formed by birth, and accused the *Altkolonier* of being a culture rather than a religion. In emphasizing the principle of voluntarism, however, they may also have ensured that their new community would itself be fragile. As Zuckerman notes, "extreme volunteerism in religious affiliation heightens the likelihood of divisiveness […] because when affiliates of a congregation join in a decidedly cost/benefit manner, they are more likely to make sure the congregation meets their individual demands" (1999, 235).

Over time, a similar instability was revealed within the original Bible Study group. Redekop states that schisms among the Anabaptists have generally taken place when the "utopian ideas" have been institutionalized in community life, as people start quarrelling over issues of proper belief and behaviour, and underlying power struggles become visible. After coming out of Shipyard's highly autocratic system, some of the Bible Study members were no longer willing to submit to new leadership. This conflict centered especially on two men, each of whom wanted to take over the leadership of the Bible Study group. The outside influences of other congregations further accelerated the internal differences, causing the group to split further. These new groups continue to see themselves as communities of believers as they still work together in daily life, but they do not worship together.

Conclusion

Many studies on schism and defection have focused either on people's personal and psychological reasons for leaving a religious community, or have based themselves in a macro-level of study, explaining great schisms. My aim was to present and analyze why some of the Mennonites in Shipyard chose to leave the Old Colony community even in the face of dire consequences. Those who have been put under the ban experienced great hardship when trying to make a daily living in a hostile surrounding community, so they used different mechanisms – including shared memory, rituals, mutual help, education of children, and new social organizations – to build a new community of "outcasts."

It is generally the case among Mennonites that those who are not willing to adapt to the forces of modernization pack their bags and move away, but this normally happens after a phase of internal disputes about adaptation to new circumstances. In Shipyard, a similar process was taking place. After the hardships of the beginning years, when working together in the community was essential to survival, came a period of relative prosperity in which people started to realize the challenges of communal living. The demands of the community became too much for some, and they chose to dissent. Others tried to modernize their way of living and belief, and began to question the traditional authorities. For these community members, the institutionalized, established form of Sunday sermons and the rules of the *Ordnung* were not plausible anymore, and together they rebelled against both the religious doctrines and institutions of the established community. Even though the initial unity of the Bible Study group later fell apart, the dissenters still consider themselves as one community opposed to the *Altkolonier*. They view themselves as a community of belief, rather than by birth.

Even though this article focuses on a marginal group in a marginal country, I think one can learn something from the Mennonites of Shipyard when it comes to religious schisms on a community level. The split in Shipyard happened for two reasons, but the only one that is argued about openly is the issue of belief. I do think that the conflict over doctrine was a primary reason for the rift between *Altkolonier* and outcasts, as well as between the Local Church and the EMMC. In addition to differing ideologies and a loss of faith in the plausibility of the system, however, more practical forces were at work as well: power struggles, unhappiness with an autocratic system, outside influences, and personal affiliation played major roles as well. In order to understand how and why these kinds of schisms take place on a community level, then, one should consider both ideological and practical reasons. They are very often intertwined and cannot be separated easily, for even though people might generally argue along ideological lines, there might be other, more practical reasons for quarrels and rifts. In saying this, it is critical to note that issues of belief are of great importance to religious people, and so the significance of ideology should not be minimized.

In Shipyard, the question that remains is whether this small group of outcasts will be able to survive within the colony, or if they will be finally forced to pack their bags and leave. Will more and more people, dissatisfied with the Old Colony system of rules and belief, join the dissenters? Or will the strain of attempting to live

outside the system be too great for those who have been excommunicated? The community of Shipyard seems so timeless and quiet from the outside, but it is living through a time of great turmoil. It is difficult to say which direction it will go in, and further research will need to be done in future years to see if the modernizers or the traditionalists will have won the battle.

Epilogue: Old Colony Still Strong

This article is the result of many months of field research conducted in 2004 among the Mennonites of Shipyard. I returned to Shipyard for some time in 2010 and the situation had not changed a great deal, although quite a few of the excommunicated families had left the colony. Some had gone to nearby Blue Creek, others as far as Canada. Still, there was a small group that continued to survive in Shipyard. More people had been excommunicated and had joined the outcast group, but the faction had not grown considerably; apparently, even six years after the initial break, the power and ideology of the *Altkolonier* was strong and plausible enough to maintain the loyalty of the majority. It seemed that the new and more modern ideas of the dissenters had not bloomed and grown in Shipyard, even though seeds might have been planted in some minds.

In 2010 the vast majority of the community still adhered to the old ideas, and Shipyard was far from becoming another Blue Creek. Several factors remained. The dissenters had quickly splintered into different groups, taking away much of the momentum and appeal of the initial Bible Study group. Also, the new communities had become significantly involved with the outside world, something generally eyed with suspicion by traditional Mennonites. And, certainly, it did not help that some of the members of the group had already been outcasts (for example, alcoholics) before they were excommunicated for studying the Bible. The preachers were able to use these negative examples and developments to keep the other community members in line. Then, too, those thinking of joining the Bible Study group may have been dissuaded by seeing the hardships endured by those who had left. Building on Hedberg, who argues that the way of "secretive" dissent among Old Colony actually feeds into the system, I would argue that the Old Colony Mennonites of Shipyard were able to use this open dissent to keep the rest of the flock more cohesive. The leaders have managed to use the schisms as a form of "schism containment," discouraging

possible dissenters with the "negative community" example of the split Bible Study group.

One wonders for how long the *Altkolonier* will manage to keep the majority of the community of Shipyard together. If the challenges of the last century were the cars, state schools, and inclusion in state social systems, I think the big challenge of this century will be the unstoppable intrusion of the world into their lives by means of the internet. New and provocative ideas about how to live and what to believe will soon be available to colony members via tiny, easy-to-hide mobile phones. At the moment, however, the *Altkolonier* community and beliefs still stand their ground in facing the challenges of the modern world.

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Notes

1 *Altkolonier* is the name the group uses to refer to itself and the one that is best known among other Mennonite groups in Belize. However, in the literature they are normally better known as Old Colony Mennonites. In this article I will use both names alternatively.

2 The Bible study group was started around 2000 and the first members of the group were excommunicated in 2001.

3 Based on six months of field research in 2004 and a brief return in 2010.

4 "the quiet in the land."

5 There is a rather complicated system of naming the children after grandparents, parents and other relatives, leading to a very small variety of first names, confusing more outsiders than the occasional anthropologist.

6 These codes and rules are not that unchanging and "eternal," as many Old Colony Mennonites might want to present them. Rather, they adapt to circumstances and change over time. The wife of a *Schulze* told me, for example, that in her youth buttons were seen as worldly and only hooks were allowed to close women's dresses. This gradually changed and now they use buttons instead of hooks and nobody would think it wrong. She herself was completely aware of this process but still held the importance of rules and traditions as the highest good of the community.

7 In Blue Creek the same mechanisms were in play when the Mennonites decided to adapt and start farming with tractors (even though they have steel wheels) – they realized that farming just with horses was no longer economically sustainable.

8 "We bend their backs when they are still young."

9 Excommunication means one is no longer allowed to receive Communion, while the ban means being shunned completely from all social relationships.

10 Other researchers, like Hedberg (2007) or Cañás Bottos (2008), have found similar mechanisms and processes in Mennonite colonies in Bolivia and Argentina.

11 There is no way for laymen to participate actively during church services. The preacher reads a prepared text in which Bible quotes and his own opinions are mixed together in High German while the congregation listens. Sermons are often passed down for generations from one preacher to the next.

12 All names are changed by the author.

13 There are only two women who are currently officially banned – women are generally not put under the ban as their husbands are seen as being responsible if rules are not followed properly. Even when not officially banned, however, the wives of excommunicated men are usually treated the same way as their husbands, and so experience the hardships of shunning as intensely as their husbands do.

14 Orange Walk is the capital of the district where Shipyard is situated.

15 "They have broken the agreement, they have been disobedient."

16 "They had itchy feet (direct translation: they had itchy ears) and they did not want any fences anymore."

[17] "They think the scripture is not enough. They need to add their own ideas."

[18] My description of the ways this new group formed a community is not meant to imply that the Old Colony did not use the same mechanisms of sharing and exchange in order to help each other and to keep up their own community. What I want to point out is that the outcasts now had to use these mechanisms solely among their own group in order to both survive and form a new community.

[19] "They should have waited with the church. It was too fast, only two people wanted the church."

[20] "Some people just go from one church to the next, I do not think that is good. One has to put things to the test first."

[21] "I visit my parents-in-law but I cannot talk about Jesus with them. They do not want to hear that and have a different opinion. I can only talk about worldly things with them – about pick-ups and the harvest. I like that but one should have fellowship of faith, that is important. But that is not possible with them."

[22] "He comes to visit but then we cannot speak about our belief and when we do he only wants to give his opinion."

[23] "The everyday trust in the holiness of everlasting traditions and the legitimacy of those who are seen as the authority through these traditions" (end translation). Even though the Old Colony leadership has some features of the legal form of leadership described by Weber, I would argue that even though the preachers are chosen by the community, they resemble rather the traditional form of leadership.

[24] "It was a big blow but also as if a chain had been cut."

[25] "He told me that if I accept Jesus I will be saved. I was so happy. I was glad when my husband got excommunicated – finally I was free."

[26] "As you learned it from your parents."

[27] As shown above, originally it was the differences in landscape that led Blue Creek to become more modern. Over the years, their use of modern technology has made Blue Creek and Spanish Lookout more economically successful than their more traditional neighbours.

[28] The people of Barton Creek are the most conservative and strict of all Mennonites in Belize. They broke away because they saw the economic success of the Mennonites as leading them too far away from their spiritual purity.

[29] English and Spanish are the two main languages spoken in Belize.