Perspectives: An Analysis of the Historical Basis for Relations between Mennonite Settlers and the Enlhet in the Paraguayan Chaco

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This article focuses on the arrival of Mennonite immigrants in Enlhet territory in the Paraguayan Chaco, beginning in 1927. I will contrast the perceptions that immigrants and the original owners of the land formed of each other during initial encounters, and the attitudes and actions resulting from these perceptions. Using original sources, I will demonstrate that from the beginning the immigrants denied the Enlhet a role as actors and subjected them to their own interests. In contrast, accounts by Enlhet authors will show that native society conceived of relations with the new arrivals in terms of sharing and thus sought to establish a shared community with the people who began to settle their lands. When the Enlhet converted en masse to the Mennonite faith, it seemed to them that they had achieved that mutuality. However, as it was not founded on shared agency, their new way of life really meant the surrender of the possibility of shared living on equal terms. However much the Enlhet may have adapted to the settlers' ways, they continue to act very differently from them. This causes frustration among the settlers, but they are not prepared to enter into processes of dialogue with

the Enlhet to work out these frustrations. Thus, it seems impossible to redress, even minimally, the current systemic imbalance of life in the Mennonite colonies of the Paraguayan Chaco.[1]

Mennonite Immigrants and Their Perception of the Indigenous Enlhet

It is a common trope among Mennonite immigrants that when they began colonizing the central Paraguayan Chaco they arrived in an untouched land, "a wilderness of thorny forest full of unknown dangers, which they called the 'green hell'" (Friesen 1997, 80). Indeed, although the occupation of Enlhet territory was a complex undertaking, the settlers understand it in a clear and uncomplicated way: they see themselves "as pioneers of the civilization that conquered a wilderness" (Klassen 1980, 57). This assessment has become part of a discourse that also exists outside the colonies. In the German press, for example, one reads that the settlers "turned the desert into fertile soil." Similarly, in 2022, Mario Abdo Benítez, the president of Paraguay, said of the settlers that "their sacrifice and their struggle have born green shoots in fertile lands" (Última Hora 2022). Elsewhere the Paraguayan press stated that "Mennonites settled in the Paraguayan Chaco 75 years ago, a wasteland which, through faith, perseverance, and sacrifice, they have transformed into a lush, productive garden" (Verón 2002, 26).[2]

The original population, the owners of the lands settled by the immigrants, do not figure in this very common view. Harold Bender, a Mennonite Central Committee leader (who first visited the Chaco and the colonies in 1938), made this exclusion explicit when he declared in 1930 during the second Mennonite World Conference in Germany that "there exists no culture at all in that area" (Neufeld 2008, 10). To this day it is still possible to write about the immigration of the Mennonites to the Chaco without mentioning the native population. For example, Vásquez (2013), who discusses "the human geography of the Paraguayan Chaco," does not consider the aboriginal population of the region of which he writes, as though they had never existed, nor ever will.[3]

Despite this pervasive exclusion—negation—of the indigenous owners of the region they colonized, the immigrants never expressed surprise at finding a native population there. Indeed, the Canadian group that was to form Colonia Menno made sure before immigrating that the Paraguayan government guaranteed to help them in case problems with the natives should arise (Friesen 1997, 132–33; Klassen 1999, 237; Toews 2005, 108). There is thus a

contradiction between the native population's absence from the immigrants' description of the territory they colonized and the fact that they were fully aware of them. This contradiction is explained by the settlers' perception of the Enlhet not as relevant actors but as part of the inventory of the region they were appropriating. Heinrich Dürksen (1990, 99), who served for many years as mayor (*Oberschulze*) of Fernheim, makes this point explicitly:

> The small native groups which used the Chaco region as hunting grounds were barely noticeable in this interplay between natural forces; they were part of them. The map of civilization had not yet been drawn here. The Mennonites arrived in what was a virgin Gran Chaco.

That the Enlhet were seen as just another resource of the lands and at the disposal of the immigrants is made clear by Faust (1929, 186–87) only two years after the arrival of the settlers of Colonia Menno:

> About 300 native Indians of the Lengua [Enlhet] tribe are now living on the property [consisting of 55,827 hectares; p. 183]. They are very peaceable, and have proved helpful as laborers. They work nine hours for the equivalent of 37 United States cents, and are very useful for clearing land. . . . It is fairly certain that they will never offer any problems of importance.

Krieg (1934, 1439), a German biologist who visited Fernheim Colony in 1931, was even more direct when he defined them as "indigenous human material." He assumed that as such they were at the disposal of the foreign settlers "in the capacity of auxiliary manpower." The immigrants have pointed out on many occasions that their colonization project would not have been possible without the work of the native inhabitants, the Enlhet: "especially in the early years, the help of the indigenous people was vital in building the colonies" (Derksen 1988, 98; see also Dürksen 1990, 181; Klassen 1991, 297; Kleinpenning 2009, 16; Ratzlaff 2004, 118; and others). Similarly, Löwen (1994, 26, 32) remarks that the presence of indigenous groups in a particular area was an important factor in deciding whether or not to go ahead with the construction of a Mennonite settlement there.

By ignoring the Enlhet as actors and seeing them as a people locked in a "static culture . . . which satisfied its most primitive human needs and was content with that" (Klassen 1983, 127), the immigrants assumed them to be no more than people constantly moving around the area, with no future-oriented vision.[4] Even in those interactions in which they were not treated simply as a resource, the Enlhet were perceived as objects essentially subject to foreign

interests, for example, converting them or developing them, convinced that "the effort rides on the wings of God's blessings" (Stoesz 2008, 120). The settlers maintain to this day that "God sent us here to evangelize the Indians" (Stoesz 2008, 221; see also Kalisch and Unruh 2014, 529; 2020, 535).

Again, this perspective is not limited to Mennonite settler society. Kleinpenning (2009, 15), for example, argues that "[with] the arrival of the Mennonites . . . the Indians became better off, since they found work in the newly established colonies." Breiholz (2002) writes in a German newspaper of the "economic miracle of the Mennonites, whose know-how and infrastructure are of benefit also to the indigenous." In this view, the Enlhet are made beneficiaries of the dispossession they suffered: "When the Mennonites came, the Lengua [Enlhet] Indians were almost extinct. . . . [They] faced a dark future. But with the economic opportunities provided by the Mennonites in the Chaco, the future of these major groups . . . seems assured" (Redekop 1973, 315–16; see also Kalisch and Unruh 2014, 567–68; 2020, 578–79). It is interesting to consider what sort of "future" is referred to here.

The commemoration of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Neuland colony had as its motto "Honouring the past—committing to the future." During the official ceremony on June 4, 2022, settlers spoke at length of their suffering and achievements over the years of the colony, but hardly mentioned the indigenous population beyond generic references to helping their neighbours (Marketing y Comunicación Neuland 2022; N. Ortiz 2022). Their speeches signalled that their interest in the past is directed exclusively towards their own past, and their commitment to the future is exclusively to the future of colonial society. The future of native society must remain, it is understood, subject to the future of colonial society. As a result, the future that is to be "assured," as Redekop puts it, for the Enlhet can never be their own future, a future that corresponds to the needs, values, desires, and vision they feel and share in their hearts.

The Enlhet and Their Perception of the Mennonite Immigrants

Even though the Mennonites had no detailed knowledge of the native population of the unknown lands they would populate, they were not at all surprised when they encountered the Enlhet. The Enlhet, on the other hand, were unaware of the immigrants' plans to settle their territory, and the sudden appearance of the Mennonites surprised them greatly. As Haakok Metaykaok put it, "the

Mennonites appeared suddenly too; I gazed at the incredible sight of their horse-drawn carts" (Haakok Metaykaok [Pedro Cardoso] 2014, 434; 2020, 434).

In addition, the two societies about to come into contact were prepared differently for the possibility of an encounter and took radically differing approaches to it. We have seen that the settlers assumed the Enlhet to be just another resource of the land they had come to occupy and integrated them into their colonial project as a matter of course. The Enlhet starting point, meanwhile, was their conviction that by living together the two societies would engage in a shared project for the future. As Savhongvay' recounts,

> the Enlhet never imagined they could be displaced from their lands. They wanted to help the Mennonites, they thought they were going to share the land with them; that's why they never considered forcing them out. (Savhongvay' [Abram Klassen] 2014, 243; 2020, 242)

The word *nempasmoom*, used by Savhongvay' in the original of this quote, signifies simultaneously sharing, participating, and helping (Kalisch 2019). From his perspective, "helping the immigrants" and "sharing the land" are complementary manifestations of the idea of *shared living*. Coexistence for the Enlhet was based on the values of reciprocity and mutual respect, which were performed in the practice of *nengelaasekhammalhkoo* and formed the basis of a "philosophy of relations." This philosophy of relations, expressed as a deliberate decision to conserve one's own freedom combined with a clear openness towards the other (Kalisch 2005), was oriented to the continual reconstruction of social balance through mutual respect for and interaction with the other. It thus constituted an expression of socially constructed peace (Kalisch 2010, 2011). In having as its foundation an act of sharing, reciprocity necessarily involves two actors. The practice of *nengelaasekhammalhkoo* made the two actors *engmook*—relatives, allies. It was therefore a necessary condition and central mechanism for the construction of the desired social equilibrium.

Savhongvay' suggests that the Enlhet initially assumed that the foreigners were indeed responding to them under the terms of *nengelaasekhammalhkoo* and interpreted their reactions accordingly. For example, they saw their own work for the foreigners and the food they received in return as a manifestation of the sharing that builds common living space and aspires to equilibrium (Kalisch 2019; 2018, 149–50; 2022, 119–20). Enlhet attitudes such as their willingness to help immigrants in their daily work were based on their view of sharing and they offered coexistence with the

foreigners based on equilibrium, without which reciprocity is impossible. To be clear the Enlhet, who were the true owners of the land, offered the new arrivals a shared life on their lands. However, the immigrants were not aware of the significance of sharing for the Enlhet. When they gave them something, they did not do so under terms of reciprocity. They saw it as a present with no obligations, as an act of charity, as the price for something they had received, or as payment for work. A crucial misunderstanding occurred, which Kenteem describes thus:

> The Enlhet did not intend to reject the immigrants, the whites; they did not imagine that their land could be taken away from them. Instead, our fathers assumed that the immigrants would share—would help them, to use their word—with the food the Enlhet gave them. The immigrants received meat freely; the Enlhet didn't seek to put a price on a leg of venison. At first the immigrants ate the Enlhet's venison; the Enlhet and the immigrants respected one another and were attentive one to the other, equally. Today, though, the outsiders can no longer share our meat and help us eat it; they only eat their own meat. I thought the respect and mutual attentiveness would go on too, but it turned out that the immigrants weren't going to live that way. It turned out they can't participate in our things, let us share it with them [*help us*, in the Enlhet original]; they don't enter into a relationship of mutual respect, a relationship of peace. (Kenteem [Enrique Malvine], in Kalisch 2014, 34–35)

The immigrants did not understand the offer the Enlhet were making. When the Enlhet displayed eagerness to receive food and articles from the settlers, because in their eyes every interaction was a manifestation of sharing, the settlers took their actions for mendicity and an expression of material poverty. They maintained that necessity obliged the Enlhet to work for them. In reality, the immigrants had little interest in understanding the Enlhet position: they had a project of their own, which they pursued relentlessly. It was some time before the Enlhet realized that the settlers intended to rapidly appropriate their native lands and subdue them as the inhabitants. The resulting misunderstanding was disastrous: the Enlhet responded with friendship to the express intention of the settlers to subject them to their own plans and interests.

The Actions of the Immigrants

In their accounts, elder Enlhet men and women frequently describe the riches of their lands and speak consistently of a life of abundance. This is typified by Haakok Metaykaok:

> They ate *akyeyva*—rattlesnake, the *peyem* iguana, *ya'alva* and *na'sehe'* armadillos, all of which they could find in their territory. They ate the *maayet* snake, everything, honey from the *yavhan* and *peeyem* bees. And they ate the fruit of the *laapang*, the queen of the night cactus, which I'm sure you know, and the *ya'mehe'* cactus. They ate the roots of the *laapang* too, which are like manioc. At this time of year, in winter, they're very crunchy, really crunchy! We ate the roots of the *katteye*, too, which is a plant with leaves like a banana tree. Another plant we used to eat was the *mokya'ma*, a kind of wild *katteye* that grows at the edges of pools. There were lots of things to eat, fish, *yelhem* eels; and then there were water snails, *akpong*. In the dry season, the older women would set fire to *yengman*, low dry areas covered in grass. The burning showed up the *akpong* holes, then we'd go and dig them out. The Enlhet didn't have any other kinds of food, just the ones I've said. . . . The Enlhet had everything. They ate honey with a *pa'alya*, a honey-collecting net. They dissolved the honey from the *pa'alya* in water. That was food for the Enlhet, it was what made them strong. Then they would go out and look for more honey. They were thinking of the children; it was hard for the children to go without honey because they liked it so much, and the adults felt sorry for them. (Haakok Metaykaok [Pedro Cardoso], 2014, 434–35; 2020, 434–436)

The immigrants, however, expressed a radically opposing view to that of the Enlhet. As early as 1933, less than three years after the arrival of the Fernheim settlers, one of them remarked in *Mennoblatt*, a bi-weekly newspaper published in Filadelfia, that

> [the Enlhet] live only on wild roots and fruits, as they no longer dare to come for beans, sweet potatoes, and bread in the Mennonite villages, nor to go hunting in groups as they used to, in open country. They therefore often go very hungry. ("Verschiedenes" 1933)

The contrast between this article and the description given by Haakok Metaykaok reveals that its author is not writing of Enlhet reality, but of his own presuppositions about it. It claims that three years after their arrival, settler food staples were essential to the survival of the Enlhet, while in fact roots and wild fruits constituted a fundamental part of the Enlhet diet before and after the immigrants' arrival. In general, an extremely negative view of the Enlhet and their world prevailed among the immigrants, even among those of them who knew them best, the missionaries. For example, according to the principal missionary in the early decades, G. B. Giesbrecht,

> When we arrived, we were absolutely destitute ourselves, but we were rich in comparison with these brown people. What did their poverty consist of? Their clothing was poor; they barely covered their nakedness

> with a loincloth. They fed themselves with meagre fruits of the forest, snakes, lizards, and caterpillars. Their homes were miserable grass huts, and they often changed their place of residence. Worse still was their inner poverty: their darkened heart, their face turned from God, their life in ignorance of salvation through Christ, the constant destruction of unborn life and the killing of many newborns. All this marked the Lengua [Enlhet] people with the stamp of deep and appalling poverty. (G. B. Giesbrecht 1956, 66)

To this day, a negative view of the Enlhet past remains firmly entrenched among the settlers, and they show no interest in possible alternative views. Another Mennonite missionary makes this explicit in his statement that "the indigenous lived in great fear and need before the white man arrived, contrary to what many anthropologists claim" (Funk 2008, 46).

The assumption that the Enlhet lived in a state of generalized poverty quickly consolidated into the conviction among the immigrants that they should save them, or, according to the historical view, that they *did* save them. A third Mennonite missionary among the Enlhet goes further:

> The Mennonites arrived just in time for the Lengua [Enlhet] indigenous, who were threatened by extinction; they were the lifeline which allowed them to survive. (G. Giesbrecht 2000, 36)

He concludes,

> In the Chaco it was the Mennonite immigrants who came to the rescue of the Lengua natives [Enlhet]. Numerically, the Lengua were reduced to a very small group as a consequence of diseases such as smallpox, attacks by other indigenous groups, and lack of water. In the circumstances, the advance of civilization meant a new possibility for life for the Lengua. (G. Giesbrecht 2000, 132)

Again, the understanding offered by Haakok Metaykaok has a very different tone:

> Today the situation of the Enlhet is very bad, the way they live. We have nothing to eat, that's why we tell you about how it was before. The Mennonites avoid us now. . . . They don't remember that it was they who arrived in our world, that we were here already. They don't think about that. (Haakok Metaykaok [Pedro Cardoso], 2014, 442; 2020, 442)

Haakok Metaykaok expresses the shattered dream of shared life on his ancestral lands. Though he does not use the term, he is referring to the dispossession that the Enlhet suffered at the hands of the

settlers. What the settlers termed salvation, the Enlhet perceived as dispossession.[5]

The Mennonite enterprise to save the Enlhet crystallised as the missionary organization Licht den Indianern (Light to the Indians), founded in Filadelfia in 1935, five years after the arrival of the Fernheim settlers. The immigrants saw the Enlhet as both "a people who sat in darkness" (G. B. Giesbrecht 1977, 72) and as people living in abject poverty. With this dual image to guide it, the objective of Licht den Indianern was from the outset far more than a religious one; it had to serve expressly to civilize the Enlhet.

The founding of Licht den Indianern was followed by the inauguration of the mission of Ya'alve-Saanga in 1937 and the missionaries' attempts over the next two decades to gather the Enlhet there to convert them to the Mennonite faith (Kalisch and Unruh 2014, 2020; Klassen 1991; Wiens 1989). Haatkok'ay' Akpaasyam' recounts that the move towards the goal of conversion was slow:

> As more people arrived, the village of Belén [in the new mission of Ya'alve-Saanga] began to fill up. During this whole time the Enlhet were taught the word of God. Some Enlhet refused to listen; they wanted to carry on living as they always had. At night they went on dancing the *maaneng* because they couldn't get used to the new way of being and of doing things. They wouldn't keep quiet, they wanted to go on living as they had before. (Haatkok'ay' Akpaasyam' [Elsa de Bergen] 2014, 346; 2020, 346)

However, as Maangvayaam'ay' concedes, in the long run the missionaries were successful:

> His teaching was designed to domesticate us; his actions made us tame. Yes, that's it, he rendered us harmless. From then on, the Enlhet would not react fiercely when a Mennonite berated them. They had become friends of the colonists or, as we say, their *engmook*. . . . Today, the Enlhet are passive and don't offer resistance. They are Christians; they have been tamed. We are Christian like the Mennonites. (Maangvayaam'ay', in Kalisch 2021, 108)

By converting, the Enlhet felt that they and the Mennonites had become *engmook*—relatives, allies—and their hopes thus appeared to have been fulfilled. However, the supposed alliance with the settlers was not founded on mutuality. It came into being because the Enlhet had to give up the possibility of equilibrium and submit themselves to the Mennonites. Rather than an alliance, it was the establishment of the framework for a systematically unequal coexistence constructed on relations of indigenous dependency. The settlers are aware of this dependency, but do not question it; they see

it as a natural condition of Enlhet life. Stahl (1993, 37), for example, maintains that missionary work "awoke among the natives of the Chaco a feeling of dependency which in their own cultural terms was a very natural and positive thing." Once again, the Enlhet are ignored as actors, even denied such status. Instead, dependency is presented in terms of liberation. Stoesz puts forward a particularly interesting argument. He states that

> the gospel . . . liberated them from superstitions and fears that were so much a part of their [the Enlhet] traditional way of life. . . . These congregations [of native Mennonites] have their own buildings and pastors. . . . The dialogue with other Mennonites is not as one-sided as it once was and promises to become increasingly challenging. (Stoesz 2008, 127–28)

Stoesz thus maintains that unilaterality is justified by the Enlhet being "liberated from" their traditional life, a life he describes with terms filled with negative connotations, such as superstition and fear. He alludes to equilibrium where there is nothing left to exist in equilibrium, since only one option remains. The Enlhet perspective has been silenced. It has been silenced, as Haakok Metaykaok makes clear, by the settlers' habit of turning a deaf ear to Enlhet voices, of ignoring them as actors:

> Enlhet food is delicious! We used to eat all kinds of things. There was nothing we didn't eat, absolutely nothing. Now the Enlhet miss the things they used to eat. The few of them that are still alive talk about it. But they don't know how to make themselves heard. (Haakok Metaykaok [Pedro Cardoso], 2014, 434–35; 2020, 442)

Conclusions

The total absence of communication and the concomitant lack of equilibrium are a recurring theme among the Enlhet. As Ramón Ortiz states:

> We wanted to put all these things to the Mennonites, so as to put things in order, so that we really can be equal, we can all be one, as they always say, so we respect each other mutually, everyone equally, Mennonites, Paraguayans, Nivaclé, all of us who live here. I wanted to talk about these things at the big anniversary celebration that the Mennonites held. But they didn't give me the opportunity. They didn't put me on the list of speakers. They only invited me to sit on one of the trucks in the parade. That's what happened at the celebration. (R. Ortiz 2014, 430–31; 2020, 430–31)

The settlers offer a completely different assessment of the situation. They can see that despite all the changes of the last ninety years the Enlhet are still radically different from them. They are aware that they do not behave or react as the settlers think they ought to have learned to behave and react, and often speak of them using the phrase "not yet": "they can't do it yet," "they don't understand yet," "they don't know yet."

> With regard to the Lengua indigenous [Enlhet] of the Chaco, it should be pointed out that they have changed their economy, but their worldview has not yet gone through the same process of change. (G. Giesbrecht 2000, 22)

This "not yet" causes frustration among the settlers that they express frequently. Stahl (2000, 91) puts it as follows:

> We are absolutely convinced of our interpretation of Christian ethics. That is why we would be delighted to see everyone come to the same conclusions: to be honest, frugal, and hard-working. They would leave behind the error of their way of life and live purposefully. And of course we also hope that they will become evangelical Christians, because that is what God wants, and in addition, through a focus on the Bible they would bring about real improvements in the family and in society.

Even beyond the sphere of the Mennonite colonies it is seen as surprising that the indigenous communities in the surrounding areas have not achieved the same economic success as them:

> The three Mennonite cooperatives in the Chaco appear to be highly successful institutions, acting as growth poles for the region. Theoretically, they could serve as role models. Future research might investigate why Chaco Indian cooperatives have had comparatively little success despite the fact that 50% of the Indians in the region belong to Mennonite churches. (Dana and Dana, 2008, 93–94)

Outside Enlhet society it seems it is difficult to understand that the Enlhet might not wish to engage with the outsiders' proposals in the practice of their daily life. It is difficult to accept that they have a different imagination and their own vision of life. In their discourse, the Enlhet indeed do express a clear orientation towards the Mennonites. However, this discourse does not correspond with their day-to-day existence (Kalisch, 2013–2015). Rather, it reflects the fact that they no longer see any possibility for life beyond the model proposed by the settlers. Dependency has become a constitutive part of their vision of the future. In a way it also reflects an attempt to fulfil

the old dream of parity with their oppressors, by resorting to imitation of them.

Although the Enlhet continue to dream of an alliance with the settlers, and although they go to great lengths to keep that option open, in their hearts they know that such an alliance is utopian. Haakok Aamay clearly highlights the historical abyss that separates Enlhet and Mennonite societies:

> The way they lived with the Mennonites shows that the Enlhet didn't like the Mennonites' coming and staying to live on our lands. They were lands that belonged completely to the Enlhet. But they took them from us. Or, to put it another way, there was no prior discussion of any of it. (Haakok Aamay [Cornelio Froese] 2014, 499–500; 2020, 449)

Before any steps can be taken towards reconciliation that merits the name, both societies must work on this abyss, each for themselves but at the same time united in a process of increasing communication that would, in the long term, enable cooperative relations between them. The settlers, however, maintain a totally one-sided position on coexistence that makes real dialogue with the Enlhet impossible. Their firm rejection of openness towards the other rules out the possibility of mutuality between the two societies that might allow the forging of a shared future and give equal space to the Enlhet. Haakok Metaykaok sets out the state of affairs:

> We lived here first. But the Mennonites, it's as if they'd stolen the land, as if they took it from us. They stripped it of everything we used for food and threw it far away. They treated it as rubbish. It's true; they treated the forest disrespectfully. They destroyed our territory, the place we lived, where our food came from. . . .
>
> The Enlhet had a lot of places where they lived, they lived all over. . . . The Mennonites know how to keep us down. Yes, they know how to do that. . . . Why do they do it? How was it when they arrived? We didn't reject them; we were only surprised to see them. We didn't treat them badly when they came here. . . . But the Mennonites, they reject us constantly, to this day. . . .
>
> We often talk to the Mennonites, in a lot of different ways, to try to make them understand what I'm saying. We really do. But the dialogue is cut short every time by the way they speak to us so harshly. The Mennonites' words are sharp, they aren't like ours. Our words are easily weakened, and then we back away. . . . [The Enlhet] don't know how to make themselves heard. (Haakok Metaykaok [Pedro Cardoso], 2014, 438–442; 2020, 438–442)

Despite all their adverse experience, the Enlhet have not given up their aspiration to a life in equilibrium. They continue to invite the settlers to shared living:

> The Enlhet spoke kindly; it never occurred to them to kill the Mennonites. The Enlhet way is to treat others with care, not like the people who live deep in the forest, the Ayoreo—they even killed Mennonites. But we didn't. Our ancestors were well disposed towards the new arrivals, they treated them respectfully. It would be good if the Mennonites bore that in mind, if they bore in mind that they saw we were here when they came. It would be good if the Mennonites thought about that when they look at us. (Kenteem [Enrique Malvine] 2014, 455; 2020, 455–56)

However, as long as the Mennonites remain fearful of losing control over the Enlhet, it is difficult to imagine their accepting such an invitation.

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Two final quotations demonstrate how little has been learned in all the time that has passed since the first immigration, not only in the colonies of the Chaco but in other parts of the Mennonite world. In 1930, Harold Bender declared at the second Mennonite World Conference that "the most important question in this area without any culture is the survival of the German Mennonite culture" (Neufeld 2008, 10). Seventy years later, Stoesz and Stackley (1999, 1) begin their account of the Mennonites of the Paraguayan Chaco, entitled *Garden in the Wilderness*, with these words:

> When confronted by the Chaco's indigenous peoples, the instinctive response of a few was, "This is our mission, right here on our doorstep." That insight grew and sustained them. They came to understand that God intended their suffering—and everything it took to make a wilderness into a garden—for good (Genesis 50:20).

They end with the affirmation that God has blessed the settlers: "With hard work and 'manna' the wilderness became a garden. God meant it for good" (208). All three authors present history as favouring the settlers: for them, "God meant it for good." The Enlhet—and other indigenous peoples—are left out. On the baseless supposition that they have gained much, what they have lost goes unmentioned.

Notes

[1] The Enlhet perspective is given in detail in the compilations of accounts by members of the group *¡Qué hermosa es tu voz!* (Kalisch and Unruh, 2014, 2020) and *Don't Cry* (Kalisch and Unruh, 2018, 2022). The Mennonite immigrants have, for their part, published numerous notes, articles, and books over the years which allow a reconstruction of their own perspective.

[2] Similar affirmations abound in the Paraguayan press. See, for example, ABC Color (2002) and RCC (2022).

[3] Recently, le Polain de Waroux et al. (2021, 10) have described Mennonite settlement in the Chaco under the title "Pious Pioneers: The Expansion of Mennonite Colonies in Latin America," without stopping to consider the population affected by this expansion. Although they acknowledge that there may have been conflicts with Indigenous peoples during the process of expansion (14), their exclusion of the original owners of the land makes clear that they understand these conflicts as being of minor relevance, and certainly not as a "high price." In any case, it is an unacceptable omission to speak of accessible land without mentioning its owners, regardless of whether they hold legal title to it or not.

[4] This idea is not limited to the Mennonite sphere. Bernal (2013, 48) says of the "numerous, indomitable Indigenous tribes" of the Chaco:

> Their languages . . . were as anarchic as the autonomy and distribution of their ethnic groups. For this reason they lived in a state of permanent confrontation among themselves. . . . Ferocious warriors, hunters, and gatherers, they inhabited a stage of evolution which would correspond to that of the Paleolithic period, the primitiveness of which cultural relativists attempt in vain to deny.

On the mistaken idea that the Indigenous peoples of the Chaco lived in a state of constant warfare, an "Indigenous world war" (Stahl 1982, 10), see Kalisch and Unruh (2014, 509–511; 2020, 512–514).

[5] Though it has never become a very prominent idea among the immigrants, they were aware that they were taking their lands from the Enlhet. A note from the minutes of meetings of educators in Colonia Fernheim in 1933–1935 reveals this:

> The fact that the Indigenous lived near our homes, and our constant coexistence with them, caused some brothers in the colony to wonder if the time had not arrived to give them something in return for the hunting grounds of which they had been robbed. It would not take the form of money, because the settlers had none, but of bringing them the gospel, the "Good News" of the saviour of our sins. (Protokollheft für Lehrerkonferenzen 1933–1935)

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