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ISSN: 0230-6831

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St. John’s College
Belize City, Belize
Belizean Studies
Volume 28, No. 1, April, 2006

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Introduction
When entering the Old Colony Mennonite community of Shipyard, in the North of Belize, one feels thrown back in time at least a hundred and fifty years. People in traditional attire, men in black overalls and Panama hats, women in thick, high-necked, dark dresses, complete with head scarf and straw hat, drive around with horse and buggy. At night many houses are lit with kerosene lamps rather than electric light bulbs.

The Old Colony Mennonites (or Aaltoloner how they call themselves) adhere to a strict regulative order based on the Bible and the system of the Ordnung (Redekop 1969; Kraybill and Bowman 2001), a set of rules and regulations handed down from generation to generation, which is controlled and enforced by a group of ministers (Prediger), the leaders and judges of the community in both secular and spiritual matters (Redekop 1969).

The Mennonites in Belize can be easily distinguished from their non-Mennonite neighbors by their religion, their appearance (not only their white phenotypic characteristics but also their way of dressing), their language (Low-German) and their way of living. Being born and brought up in a Mennonite community makes the individual part of a strict community, in which almost every aspect of life, from the naming of children, to the use of modern technology, to personal appearance and lifestyle is regulated.

To some in Shipyard this all-encompassing community and social system became too rigid and not plausible anymore. They searched for new answers and therefore formed a Bible Study group in order to read and discuss the Bible together. This challenged the authority of the ministers who used to be the sole interpreters of the Holy Book. The Bible Study group got warning after warning but refused to stop their disobedient behavior. Because of this they were excommunicated and then put under the ban which meant that they are shunned by even close family members and friends. In order to overcome the hardships of making a living in a hostile environment they started to form a “community of outcasts” within the settlement.

But what is the definition of a community. There are many definitions of community in Western theory, showing how important this concept is to most human beings. Mason defined community in the following way: community is “a group of people who share a range of values, a way of life, identify with the group and its participants and recognize each other as members of that group” (Mason 2000: 21). Members of a group have something in common with each other that distinguishes them significantly from the members of
other groups (Cohen 1985). Community is "largely a matter of sentiment and conceptualization" (Cohen 1986: 7). Community is both thought and felt. Communities are "ways in which people mark out their immediate and intimate social identities, those boundaries of their social lives, which demarcate most powerfully and meaningfully their sense of similarity to and difference from other people" (Cohen 1986: 1). People of the same community generally share many things, a body of knowledge, culture, for example language, lifestyle, religion, values and morals. No matter what is taken as the denominator of difference, may it be language, religion or something else, people experience themselves and are experienced by others as different. Those who are within the boundaries of a community belong; those who are outside do not. "Boundaries are mental constructs which condense symbolically their bearer's social theories of similarity and difference" and "the symbolism of community speaks to both: those outside and those inside" (Cohen 1986: 17). Communities generally are concerned with the purity of their group. They attempt to set up rules and regulations and try to rid themselves from possible dissenters, villains or other impure subjects. This again has to do with ideas about the boundaries of the group and to define who belongs and who does not. These ideas about boundaries and categories of belonging are often articulated in the language of purity. Those who are seen as outsiders are often described as impure, carrying possible dangers for those inside the group.

One of the facets of marking who belongs and who does not is the sharing of food (Wiessner 1996). Or as Baumgarten puts it:

"A person or group expresses crucial aspects of their identity and of their relationship to other components of society through the regulations which govern behavior in accepting processed food from others. [...] Those with whom one eats are friends, and those with whom one refuses to eat marked as foes. Food regulations, therefore, provide an insight into those a group considers insiders versus those ranked as outsiders. Hence, they have a crucial role in the construction of self-identity" (1998: 127-28).

In this article we want to focus on the sharing of food to explain more about the processes of inclusion and exclusion in the process of community forming among the Mennonites of Shipyard and their ideas about purity.

**Mennonite History: From Flanders to the New World**

Today there are over a million Mennonites scattered throughout the world (Driedger 2000). They are descendants of a "religiosocial rebellion" (Redekop 1989: 6) that took place in Europe during the sixteenth century. The Anabaptists, as the Mennonites were originally called emerged in the Swiss Jura, during a time of great turmoil, a time of social as well as religious rebellions. They radicalized the already very radical reformation in Zurich and from there spread rapidly across Europe (Germany, Austria, and The Netherlands) (Dyck 1993; Kraybill and Bowman 2001; Wenger 1992). Right from the beginning the Anabaptist movement, embraced in so many different places all over Europe, was very diverse,
covering a wide range of different ideas and opinions (Urry 1989: 34).

There were some principles, stated in the Glaubensbekenntnis (Mennonite Articles of Faith), however, that were recognized by all groups. One of them was the rejection of infant baptism and the necessity for the conscious confession of faith before one could be baptized and become part of the community, being the most important identification group for the individual. Mennonites, as we shall refer to them from now on, were organized not in Kirchen (in the sense of established churches) but in Gemeinden (congregations or communities) in which faith and life were united (Redekop 1989).

Among the Mennonites the concept of community (Gemeinde) has been very important and powerful from the beginning of the Anabaptist movement onwards. Franklin Littell quotes: "Now then, the 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. This independence of men gives life and salvation a new meaning. 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 in Redekop 1989: 131).

One has of course to bear in mind that these idealistic words mainly refer to those who belong to the same "brotherhood of believers" (Bruderschaft) and not universally all Christians. Especially among the Old Colony members are expected to submit their individuality to the group. The Mennonite community provides "the context for individuals and families to live and interact together so that the norms become entrenched. Furthermore, the community provides the basis for the economic, political, and social activity which allows for the emergence and perpetuation of the Mennonite congregation as well as its expansion" (Redekop 1989: 132). The Mennonite community is an almost all-encompassing concept, regulating the practical as well as the spiritual life of its members.

Even though the community principle was very strong it could not prevent several splits and schisms within the Anabaptist movement that occurred from the beginning onwards. One of the earliest schisms was the breaking-away of the Amish from the movement in 1693. The dispute concentrated mainly on the proper practice of the Holy Communion and the treatment of the excommunicated people. Jacob Amman, the founder of the Amish, argued that sinful people should not only be excluded from the Holy Communion but also shunned in normal social relations (Kraybill 1989: 6). Today the Old Colony Mennonites, "who are a product of a schism over issues like the proper way of singing in church and the education of children that took place Canada in the 1870s" (Redekop 1969: 10), follow this idea of complete shunning as well.

Redekop identifies a whole history of schisms and calls this phenomenon the "Mennonite disease" (1989: 60). He outlines various reasons for these developments that plagued the movement right from the beginning: the absence of central leadership, the simultaneous emergence of the movement in different places and henceforth problems of differing contexts, distance and lack of communication, lack of trained
theologians and differences over the application of the central doctrines of the Christian faith. Here one can see that recent developments in Shipyard have their roots in a long-going process of splits and schisms among the Anabaptist movement.

Another central idea states that Mennonites should live outside the 'world' and refrain from all 'worldly' things that might lead them away from the true faith and distract them from God. "One of the Mennonites strongest beliefs is their separation from society. Referring to the Bible, they state that they are to be 'strangers' and 'pilgrims' in the world. This implies that all their activities should result in better service to their God" (Roessingh and Boersma 2003:3). Living away from the world and its earthly seductions (nonconformity to the world) are together with the ideas of Gelassenheit (submission to the will of God) and Demut (humility) the most important principles that should guide the life of a Mennonite who is expected to subordinate their individuality to the community through baptism "The 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).

Even though from the beginning on there were Mennonites living in cities, the ideal has always been to live a simple and hard-working life in an agricultural community away from the seductions of the 'world'. "But this is the kingdom of all humility in which not the outward adorning of the body but the inward adorning of the spirit is desired and sought with great zeal and diligence" (Bender 1944: 95). Other principles Mennonites adhere to were the total separation of church and state, strict pacifism, the refusal to swear oaths, and the standing on the authority of the Scriptures alone in matters of faith as well as action (Redekop 1989).

All these ideas, especially about adult baptism and the separation of church and state, which profoundly challenged the existing authorities, did not really help to make the Mennonites very popular among the ruling churches or sovereigns of Europe. Hence, both, Protestants and Catholics, persecuted Mennonites in large numbers, leading them to either go underground, which only promoted their sectarian character or to seek other, safer places to live, leading to migrations of whole communities away from the burning stakes. This persecution led them first to Polish-Prussia and then Russia, where they settled in large Colonies (Dyck 1993; Kroeker 2005; Loewen 1993, 2001; Plett 1999). In Russia the Mennonites developed from a religious sect into an ethnic group, different from their Russian neighbors, emphasizing their German and Dutch origins. "Settlement in large, exclusive, self-regulating 'colonies' with a relatively unsophisticated and linguistically, culturally and ethnically different Umwelt have proven most capable of long term survival under these conditions the Mennonites established cultural solidarity and a distinct folk identity" (Sawatzky 1971: 2). The name Old Colony derives from this period as the Chortitza colony in southern Russia became "the oldest or first colony of the Mennonites in Russia" (Quiring 2003: 7)

When threatened to be included into the Russian administrative and military system, more traditional Mennonites migrated to Canada. The way the Old Colony Mennonites distinguished themselves from
other Mennonite groups in Canada developed as the result over quarrels about Bible school, the proper way of singing and acceptance of the Canadian school system (Loewen 1990; Redekop 1969). Those who refused to send their children to public schools packed their bags again and moved to Mexico. However, after being faced with the threat of being incorporated into the Mexican social security system some sought a new haven where they could live according to their own rules and belief. This was found in British Honduras with which an agreement was settled in 1957 leading to the migration of some Mennonite groups (Altkolonier, Sommerfelder, Kleine Gemeinde) to this British colony (Everitt 1983). The Mennonites were granted freedom to administer their own colonies and exemption from military service in exchange for producing foodstuffs for the local market and for export (Sawatzky, 1971). After some initial hardships and difficulties of adapting to the unfamiliar tropical climate of British Honduras their settlements expanded into large agricultural communities which have, with their products, a significant share within the internal local market (Driedger 1958; Roessingh & Schoonderwoerd 2005).

**Setting and Research Methods**

The country that the Mennonites entered at the time was British Honduras. In 1964, this British colony received the right to an internal self-government and in 1973 the name of the country was changed into Belize (Roessingh, 2001). On 21 September 1981 the country became independent. Nowadays, with an area of 22,965 km² and 232,111 inhabitants, Belize is one of the smallest and most under-populated countries in Central America (Central Statistical Office, 2000). The country has a multi-ethnic population consisting of Mestizos, Creoles, Garifuna, Maya’s, Chinese, East Indian and Lebanese, among others. According to the census 3.6% of Belize’s inhabitants are Mennonites, which comes down to 8276 people. However, the 2000 census indicates that there are 9497 religious Mennonites (4.1%) in this multi-religious country (Central Statistical Office, 2000). The difference between the percentages of ethnic and religious Mennonites is at least something that requires an explanation. In practice Mennonite identity turns out to be a dual concept (Roessingh and Boersma, 2003). The religious identity is based on the way they interpret and use the Christian belief to fulfill their life. This indicates that some people from other ethnic groups have turned to Anabaptism as religion but are still not accepted as ethnic Mennonites. So there is a difference between Mennonites by religion and Mennonites by ethnicity. Mennonite ethnic identity is based on their common descent, their shared language, their “white” phenotypic features, their Anabaptist religion, their shared cultural and social repertoires, their common life style and some shared principles like the Gelassenheit (the submission to God), the system of the Ordnung (set of common rules and discipline) and an ideology to live “separated from the world” (Roessingh and Boersma 2003: 3).

Due to this last principle Mennonites of Shipyard do not fully take part in the wider social system of the country: the Shipyard Mennonites still communicate in Low-German, they send their children to their own schools, they refuse military duty, they do not vote, they generally regulate problems that only affect the community among
Making it difficult for young couples to find their own property. One solution was a split of the Old Colony community in the 1970s, when many moved to the new community of Little Belize and another way of combating land shortage was the founding of Indian Creek in the Orange Walk district as a place for the young to live.

Research was conducted during a four-month period from January to May 2004. The research was done within the community. One of the researchers lived with an excommunicated family for the whole period. Data was collected through participant observation, informal conversations and semi-structured in-depth interviews. Because of being an outsider it was possible to conduct interviews with both groups: the Old Colony and excommunicated.

Prior to this research a list of topics has been formulated in order to structure the process of data gathering in the field. During the research period these topics have been constantly specified and extended according to the findings, to be able to obtain the maximum amount of information. During and after the research the findings have been related to theoretical literature in order to get deeper analytic insights.

Most interviews were conducted in a mixture of languages. Internally the Mennonites communicate in their own language: Low-German. They all have to learn High-German, the language of the church, in school, though. Those who have more outside contacts (generally the men and more progressive members of the community) speak some English or Spanish, the local vernaculars. Most of the interviews were conducted in German. Some of the
findings of this research are presented in this article to illustrate some of the theoretical ideas outlined above.

**Friction in Shipyard**
As already described above the Old Colony Mennonites of Shipyard adhere to a strict system of the *Ordnung*, a set of rules that regulates almost every aspect of their lives, from the way people have to be dressed, to the use of modern technology, down to the naming of children. The compliance with these unwritten rules is watched over by the ministers and an eldest who will address anyone who does not obey. If the disobedient does not change his or her behavior he might be punished by excommunication (exclusion from the Holy Communion) or even be put under the ban, which then means he or she has to be shunned by even close family members and friends.

As shown above among the Mennonites the concept of community (*Gemeinde*) has been very powerful from the beginning onwards (Redekop 1989). So therefore to the people in Shipyard being part of a community was of central importance as well. They continuously spoke of the necessity for fellowship (*Gemeinschaft*) and brotherhood (*Bruderschaft*). The analogy told by a young girl might be used as an example: “We are supposed to be part of a fellowship. One person here did say he can be a Christian at home. The minister invited him to visit and there was a fire burning. He took a piece of burning wood and put it aside. He did not have to explain anything. The person understood and came to church again.”

However, to some of the laymen in Shipyard this strict system of the *Ordnung* started to lose its credibility. They felt their freedom was curtailed by rules about rubber tires and wrist watches. They also were not satisfied with the way Sunday service was held anymore. In an Old Colony church laymen do not participate actively in the service, except for silent prayer and singing together. The minister recites a pre-written sermon based on Bible verses and personal interpretation while the congregation listens. Sitting there passively, listening to the minister did not give them the spiritual satisfaction they searched for and they felt that within this system they could not live according to their belief.

One of the dissenters remembers: “I always had problems with the Old Colony, their beliefs did not go deep enough for me, I wanted to learn more about Jesus and to study the Bible more extensively. There was nobody to talk about these things; I felt really alone, nobody was there. I wanted to have fellowship so I went to the ministers to talk about my problem and about Jesus but they were not interested. They told me it is not necessary for the 'low' people to know about these things, it is enough for them to come to church and listen. But I wanted more.”

He found some men with similar ideas and together they started a Bible Study group. They were all not satisfied with the Old Colony church anymore, so they started reading the Bible together. For the first few months it was rather unorganized, they met one evening here, another there. Then they decided it might be better to meet at a certain evening every week always in a different house. They did that twice on Tuesday, but then some members of Old Colony church came there; they just watched not saying anything. Shortly after that, Holy Communion was served in church. One woman remembers that day very well: “We
were in church to receive the Holy Communion but the minister said all those who study the Bible together, should take their hands back, they will not receive communion. Those people who go to the ranch (term for neighboring 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.”

When the ministers started criticizing them, many people got afraid and left. Even the core of the group promised twice that they would put an end to studying the Bible together, but whenever they got together they could not help but talking about Jesus so they came together again. After two years the ministers had enough and one after the other was put under the ban.

Many others were excommunicated because they refused to shun their close family members, as one father explains: “I was always different. Few people came to visit me and then they wanted me to stop seeing my sons. They could not take that away from me as well.” There were more like him: “They wanted me to stay away from my sons. Not be in contact with them anymore. I could not do that. They did nothing wrong. I could not stay away from my sons.”

Today it is around twenty families that live under the ban. This means a life of many hardships and grievances. Many lost their jobs in for example the feeding mill or the slaughter house and have to seek work outside the community. Others, for example the electrician or the doctor lost many of their clients as Old Colony refuse to use their services anymore and even prevent local Belizean people to employ them. But not only making money became hard for the outcasts, spending it within the community got tricky as well. They are not served in the local stores, the feeding mill or the slaughter house and have to travel the long way to Orange Walk to restock on necessities.

Additional to these daily hardships comes the grief of losing one’s personal contacts and networks as they are shunned even by close family members and friends. One informant recalled the day her mother died, which happened around a year ago. She went there to visit her already very sick mother, who criticized her during the whole time of her visit. She told her mother: “Mother you told me the best way you could but I have to go on.” Her mother sent her away, not willing to speak to her anymore. In the afternoon the mother died. However, nobody told our informant about the death of her mother. Her brothers and sisters drove by her house on the way to the funeral without telling her. She said she felt very bad about that.

Another informant remembered how it was after his excommunication: “In the beginning it was very hard. I did not expect it to be that hard. Already the next day people turned their heads away and looked at me as if I was the devil. In the beginning I cried a lot.”

One way of excluding former community members is the refusal to share a meal with them. In some cases outcasts can still visit their relatives but are denied a meal or even presence in the same room when food is being served. We will turn to the important symbolic value of sharing food in the following paragraph.

The Symbolic Value of Food
Food and the consumption of it is a very important to Mennonite life. In an agricultural community as Shipyaryd the
people produce their food themselves rather than go and buy it in the supermarket. Their day is very much organized around the meals: breakfast shortly after getting up in the morning, a rather early lunch (among the Old Colony Mennonites already at ten thirty, at other houses at half past eleven), then often a Vasper at three and an early dinner between five and six thirty, depending if they milk the cows before or after the meal. As most still make their living from agriculture a great deal of the lives of men is concentrated on producing food for their own consumption and the market. Women spend almost their entire day with preparing food, cooking, baking, serving meals and cleaning up afterwards. They are always concerned with food, wanting to know what we eat, if we like their food and if they for example want to point out that parents are not treating their children correctly this is normally done in terms of food: either that they are not giving their children enough to eat or that they give them low quality food.

There was no event where there would be no food, as an account of one lady about a bridal shower proves:” Unfortunately it was very unorganized. Only a few people showed up and they did not have presents for her. I felt very sorry for her.” “Was there no food?” “Of course there was food, there is always food with the Mennonites.” Every social event, like the ladies meeting or the biweekly youth gathering ended with a Vasper. At special events, like a wedding or a funeral there was always an abundance of sandwiches, cakes and cookies women spending hours and even days in the kitchen preparing it.

Therefore refusing to share a meal is a strong indicator of exclusion and of specific symbolic value among the Mennonites.

Some Old Colony Mennonites still visit their banned relatives but would never share a meal with them.

We now want to describe the Toopkomst (reunion) on Easter Sunday to outline some of the important aspects of the role of sharing food in defining who is part of the community and who is not. Traditionally all relatives gather at the place of one family member at one of the three holy days of Easter (Sunday, Monday or Tuesday). It is a very important social event, putting a lot of work on the lady of the house. At the Smith's (all names in this article are fictive) house the family gathered on Easter Sunday. All sons and daughters with their spouses and children would attend; meaning around fifty five hungry stomachs had to be filled. All children would join, all except one: the oldest daughter, who is living with her husband and eleven children in Indian Creek, would yet again not join the reunion as her husband being a faithful Old Colony Mennonite refused to visit his in-laws and denied his wife any contact with her banned parents as well. Mrs. Smith did not really show it and rather made jokes about the fact that she has seen neither her daughter nor most of her grand children for five years but one could see how hard it was for her.

Mrs. Smith and one of her daughters in law started preparing food already a day in advance baking bread, buns and cakes and making mus (dried fruit cooked in water with lots of sugar and jelly). In the morning of Easter Sunday they cut some ten chickens in pieces to be cooked together with some onions, peppers, garlic and recado (hot bean paste) until all became a thick red stew. More f
Chicken would be cooked with noodles to make soup and buckets full of rice and beans were prepared, as well as pots full of mashed potatoes, which would be eaten together with Schmandwat (cream cooked together with lard to make a filling sauce). All food, even the sweet mus would be served and eaten together at the same time.

They could not fit all the people into the main house so we brought out tables and plastic chairs to the storehouse where we put together one long gala table and a smaller one to the side of it. One after the other the children and grandchildren arrived. Two of the daughters go to the Old Colony church as their husbands (the brothers Brown) are still with the old faith. They, however, do not shun their father in law, Hans, or their brother in law, John, who got excommunicated three years ago for driving a tractor with rubber tires (which is forbidden within the Old Colony church, one is allowed to drive a tractor but only when the tractor has iron wheels) and therefore John and his wife and children moved to Blue Creek because he could not work in Shipyards anymore. So all men sat down together on plastic chairs to chat while the women were setting the table and bringing the food from the main building, it was that much that they had to use a rack-wagon. The children were running around playing, inquiring regularly when they would get their Easter treats.

After some hurrying back and forth with the rack-wagon and laying out forks and plates everyone was called to join at the table. Hans, the head of the house sat at the head of the gala table and he called John, his son, to sit next to him. Everybody sat down, the children mostly on the stairs as there was not enough room at the table. John's wife and her children were sitting at the small extra Table. But where were the Brown brothers? They had disappeared. Hans called them; now realizing that he had made a mistake by allowing John to sit next to him at the big table. The Brown brothers would never sit and share food with John. Therefore he had to move to the small table where his wife, who knew the usual procedure of having to eat at a separate table, had already filled his plate.

Now, finally the Brown brothers came back and took their seats at the table. All bowed their heads for prayer fifty five mouths joined in the same words to praise the Lord.

After that they could start eating. Whenever somebody had finished his meal he bowed his head in silent prayer, left the table to make room for those who had not eaten yet and went to wash his hands. After everybody was well-fed the women cleaned the dishes and the table while the men were sitting together for some chatting again. Now the Brown brothers had no problem to sit together with John for some conversation. In the afternoon, at the Vasper, consisting of sandwiches, cookies, cakes and coffee the same procedure of separate tables had to be followed again.

An interesting point was that the Brown brothers would eat together with Hans, their father in law, who was excommunicated 30 years ago also over the issue of putting rubber tires on his tractor, but not with John who was guilty of the same disobedience. They could not really explain why they did that except that they were probably so used to Hans being excommunicated, they have never known him differently, that they did not care so much about him anymore, while with John the excommunication happened only three years ago. They had no problem with him personally but their belief denied them to
Food and the Community: The Role of Sharing...

share food with him, therefore each year at Christmas and Easter two different tables had to be prepared.

We think this episode illustrates the role of sharing or not sharing food very well, telling us a lot of processes of inclusion and exclusion among the Mennonites. Food is more than a necessity to nourish the body and to survive. Being that important to humans a lot of implications, ideas, morals and rituals are tied to the consumption of food. Most if not all meals, from a pick-nick to a formal dinner, follow some kind of ritual. This become especially apparent during a festive meal, like a reunion for Easter: one chooses who is invited, special food will be served, and generally one puts more attention into the presentation of the food than on other occasions. Generally those invited know the code of conduct connected to the festive sharing of food and behave accordingly. So the sharing of food becomes something very important to a group in defining who is in and who is out.

Food and Community: a Conclusion.
Food and the consumption of it is very important to the Mennonites. One account of a Mennonite woman named Louis Siemens outlined in Epp might prove the point:

"The children of Israel had their manna. The French carry long, crusty loaves under their arms. The Swedish have given us limpa. Thanks to the Russians, we have rye bread. The Mexicans enjoy their tortillas. As Mennonites from Russia we have our bread, Zwieback. In my childhood blur, I confused the Saturday ritual of baking Zwieback with the holy sacraments of the church; baptism, communion, and marriage. Didn't every important function have its ever-present Zwieback? After a bit of maturing, I was able to separate Zwieback from the plan of salvation, but for many years the gospel and the Saturday baking blended into one" (Epp, 1977: 36).

This account shows how a child blurred Zwieback with the bread of the Holy Communion. A daily foodstuff became a "holy good" and something essentially Mennonite in her head. Even though the Mennonites have adapted to the local "cuisine" of rice, beans and tortillas, they are still proud of their "German" way of cooking. They use their traditional dishes, like Nudelsuppe, Schmandvat or Mus as a way to differentiate themselves from the wider Belizean society.

But also within the community food and the sharing of a meal are used to differentiate between those who belong and those who do not. Even though Hans and John were not banned due to the issue of the Bible study described above but due to the fact that they put rubber tires on their tractors the example of the reunion at Easter is very speaking about the way the Old Colony Mennonites use food as a way to create boundaries between themselves and those whom they consider outcasts.

"Every religious system must deal in some way or another with problems posed by the issue of purity in the process of defining itself. [...] And since food and eating are so commonly entangled in the specification of purity not only what is pure, but also, and in relation to food, who is pure it is quite easy to construct puzzles in which purity, food, and religious belief
are intertwined” (Mintz, 1991: 104). Among the Mennonites of Shipyard we clearly have a puzzle of inclusion and exclusion, ideas about purity, religious belief and food. “The incorporation of a substance within one’s body metaphorically expresses the incorporation of others within one’s sphere of interaction. [...] Consumption then, [...], are acts imbued with meaning, serving as powerful experiential symbols of social interaction” (Ilossifides, 1991: 6). Those whom we consider as pure and as part of our group are the ones we share food with.

The absence of the eldest daughter and her family and the refusal of the Brown brothers to eat with their brother in law were strong statements of whom they consider as worth eating with. However, their refusal to share food with certain members of the family flows from their Old Colony religious beliefs which state that one is not supposed to eat with those who live under the ban. These ideas about shunning are part of their moral world, deeply embodied by their hearts and minds and even though performed consciously to make a statement, the underlying mechanisms of convincing them that they are acting on a “true and righteous” moral basis go very probably unrecognized. The Old Colony Mennonites have a very strong belief in the Ordnung; how things should be done and how the world should function.

However, those who do not submit to the Ordnung and act differently are persecuted with excommunication and the ban. By excluding and shunning offenders the community tries to purify itself from behavioral defilement. “[...] ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, about and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created” (Douglas, 2002: 5). By the total exclusion of those who threaten the order the Old Colony church tries to keep their system intact. Those who do not conform are seen as a danger to the purity of the community and are therefore banned from regular contact and participation in community activities. Refusal of sharing food, which comes that dangerously close to the body, is one major aspect of this behavior of cleansing the community. The symbolic exclusion of John, by putting a distance between him and the Brown brothers by seating him on another table, helped the two brothers to act according to deeply embodied religious ideas of right and wrong, belonging and non-belonging, purity and defilement.

Even though the situation seemed almost comical the exclusion of John is used as a symbolic “slap on the hand” for his disobedient behavior. Every Easter and Christmas he is confronted with his wrongdoing. One could almost speak of a sort of standard ritual that is followed ever since John was put under the ban and the family engages in a kind of “ritualistic dance” around the rules. The Brown brothers actually break the rules by accepting food from their excommunicated father-in-law but they make up for it by demonstratively expelling their brother-in-law from the table and the rest of the family plays along. This “ritualistic dance” around the dinner table keeps the peace: if John would insist to sit with the rest of the family chances are high that the Brown brothers would forbid their wives contact with their relatives as is the case with the oldest daughter.
Normally through the sharing of food at special occasions family ties are strengthened and the unity of the family is celebrated. Therefore the obviously rejecting behavior of some family members towards others is making a strong statement of exclusion of those considered part of one's group. We have described above that the sharing of food is more than a mere act of consumption of nutritious products together. These are strong signs of whom we accept as member of our group and therefore a person worthy to share food and those whom we regard as strangers who carry the danger of pollution.

The Mennonites of Shipyard see themselves as members of one group in every aspect of life. However, some of them did not accept the high demands of the group anymore. By studying the Bible together or putting rubber tires on their tractors they challenged the Ordnung that keeps the group together. Therefore they got punished and were put under the ban, a highly elaborated form of exclusion. This exclusion becomes extremely visible when it is time for lunch. Even if they communicate under other circumstances, sharing a meal is absolutely impossible between Old Colony Mennonites and outcasts. Food and the sharing of it are used to output a barrier between those who belong and those who don't and is also used as a way to punish those who are seen as disobedient. Sharing a meal becomes symbolic for being part of the community and by refusing to eat with those outside, the Old Colony Mennonites tries to keep their group pure and free of dangerous, disintegrative influences.

References


