

From Southern Russia to the Americas: Cultural Practices Examined through Genealogical and Archival Research

Ivan Enrique Carroll-Janer

Faculty of Economics, Los Andes University, Bogotá D. C., Colombia
Email: iecj@uniandes.edu.co

How to cite this paper: Carroll-Janer, I. (2026). From Southern Russia to the Americas: Cultural Practices Examined through Genealogical and Archival Research. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 14, 493-503. <https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2026.141030>

Received: December 30, 2025

Accepted: January 23, 2026

Published: January 26, 2026

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Scientific Research Publishing Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This study investigates the persistence of kinship-based social structures and endogamy among Old Colony Mennonites in Ejido Salamanca, Mexico. Using genealogical reconstruction, census data, and archival research, the author analyzes marriage patterns (including levirate and sibling exchange) and leadership lineages. The research also assesses the prevalence of strabismus and nystagmus through photographic analysis, concluding that these conditions are not directly linked to close consanguinity in this community.

Keywords

Mennonites, Old Colony Mennonites, Kinship, Endogamy, Genealogy, Sibling Exchange, Strabismus, Nystagmus, Mexico, Belice, Alvaro Obregón

1. Introduction

Ejido Salamanca is an Old Colony Mennonite community located in the municipality of Bacalar, in the southern Mexican state of Quintana Roo (18°40'45"N, 88°29'10"W; 15 m above sea level) as illustrate in **Figure 1**. According to a census conducted between 2012 and 2014 as part of this research, the community has a population of 1286 inhabitants. During this period, 307 photographs were taken of community members who were undergoing migration regularization procedures with Mexican authorities.

Many of the social, spatial, and economic patterns observed in contemporary Mennonite colonies in Mexico and South America were originally developed during the nineteenth century, when Mennonites lived in the Chortitza, Bergthal, and Molotschna colonies in southern Russia between 1788 and 1870 (Peters, 1985: p. 7). These patterns emerged partly as strategies of protection against theft and

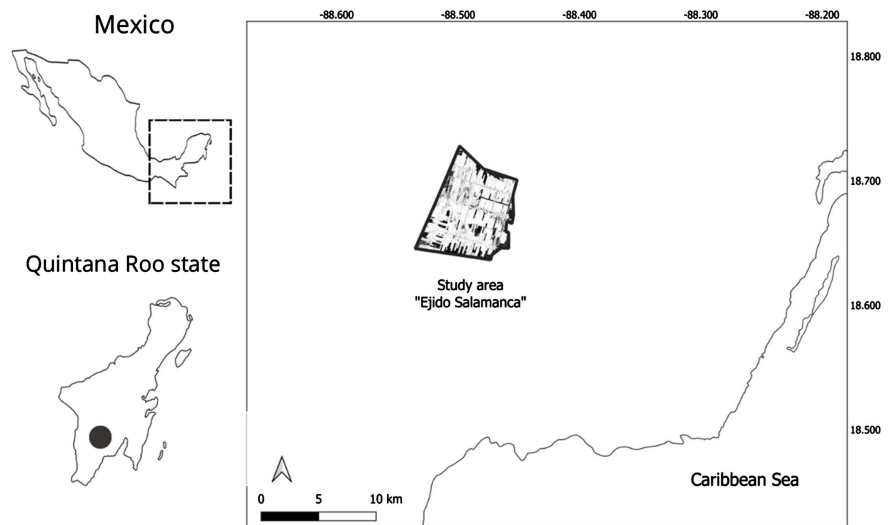


Figure 1. Map of the location of the study area. Ejido Salamanca at Quintana Roo state in Mexico.

violence, particularly from semi-independent Cossack groups that controlled much of the province of New Russia (Novorossiia) (Urry, 1989: p. 51). Settlement organization reflected these concerns: households were established along linear village layouts, with residences facing the main road and agricultural fields extending behind each dwelling.

Mennonite migration to Russia followed earlier religious persecution in Europe, particularly linked to adult baptism practices that distinguished Anabaptists from dominant Catholic institutions. In March 1788, Jacob Hoepfner, his family, and other Mennonites arrived in Russia, followed later that year by 228 families who overwintered near Dubrovna before settling near the Dnieper River (Urry, 1989: p. 11). These settlements laid the foundations for the social institutions and cultural practices that continue to characterize Old Colony Mennonite life today.

As James Urry has emphasized, understanding the Russian context is essential for interpreting the later development of Mennonite communities, both conservative and progressive (Urry, 1989: pp. 16-17). The institutions of kinship, leadership, land organization, and religious authority that emerged during this period remained remarkably resilient through subsequent migrations to Canada in the 1870s and later to Latin America.

Mennonites arrived in the province of Manitoba, Canada, from Russia during the 1870s (Plett, 2001; Taylor, 2011: p. 32). During the First World War, the Canadian government implemented policies aimed at strengthening national integration, including mandatory public education for all citizens. In this context, Mennonite communities, which maintained autonomous educational systems, came under increasing state scrutiny. On March 10, 1916, the Manitoba government enacted the School Attendance Act, which mandated English as the sole language of instruction for all children between seven and fourteen years of age. As a result, private schools were required to meet the same standards as public insti-

tutions.

Old Colony Mennonites, whose schools operated in Plautdietsch (Low German), were directly affected by these reforms. In the fall of 1918, Mennonite schools were closed for failing to comply with the new linguistic and curricular requirements (Aguilar, 2001: p. 884; Taylor, 2011: p. 33). These measures were widely perceived within Mennonite communities as a breach of the Privilegium previously granted by the Canadian government, which had guaranteed respect for their religious practices, way of life, and private educational system (Loewen, 2013: p. 5). This sense of betrayal constituted a decisive factor motivating their departure from Canada.

Mexico emerged as an alternative destination when President Álvaro Obregón agreed to grant a new Privilegium to Mennonite settlers. On March 7, 1922, a group of 215 Mennonites arrived at Valle de Bustillos in the state of Chihuahua after migrating from Manitoba. This initial movement was followed by the arrival of approximately 6000 Mennonites from Old Colony and Sommerfelder groups, originating not only from Manitoba but also from Saskatchewan. These migrants traveled across the western United States to El Paso before entering Mexico (Loewen, 2013: p. 40; Sawatzky, 1971; Schmiedehaus, 1982).

The Privilegium, or agreement between Mennonite leaders and the Mexican government, was later included in a collection of laws edited by the Secretariat of Agriculture in 1944. However, according to the government of Chihuahua, the agreement was not published in the *Diario Oficial de la Federación* “for reasons of public order and in order not to arouse jealousy among Mexican citizens” (Aboites, 1993: p. 155). A systematic review of the official gazettes published between 1921 and 1924 confirms the absence of this agreement from the federal record.

Subsequent Mennonite migrations extended to Paraguay in 1927 (Stoesz & Stackley, 2000: p. 133), Belize in 1957 (Sawatzky, 1971: p. 335), and, toward the end of the twentieth century, to Bolivia (Hedberg, 2007) and Argentina (Cañas, 2013). More recently, in 2017, approximately 300 Mennonites settled in Colombia, where they purchased 16,000 hectares of land located about 90 km from Puerto Gaitán, in the department of Meta. Satellite imagery and vegetation index analyses suggest recent land-use changes in the Salamanca area, Mexico, including a shift from forested environments toward agricultural land (Carroll-Janer & Jimenez, 2022).

In the countries where they settle, Mennonites have played a significant role due to their engagement in large-scale agriculture and their distinctive settlement patterns. Their villages are organized following the same linear spatial model developed in Russia, with houses aligned along a central axis and agricultural land extending behind each household, as illustrated in historical maps in **Figure 2** of the Molotschna Colony (Kauffman & Harder, 1975: p. 75). Satellite imagery and vegetation index analyses suggest recent land-use changes in the Salamanca area, Mexico, including a shift from forested environments toward agricultural land (Carroll-Janer & Jimenez, 2022).

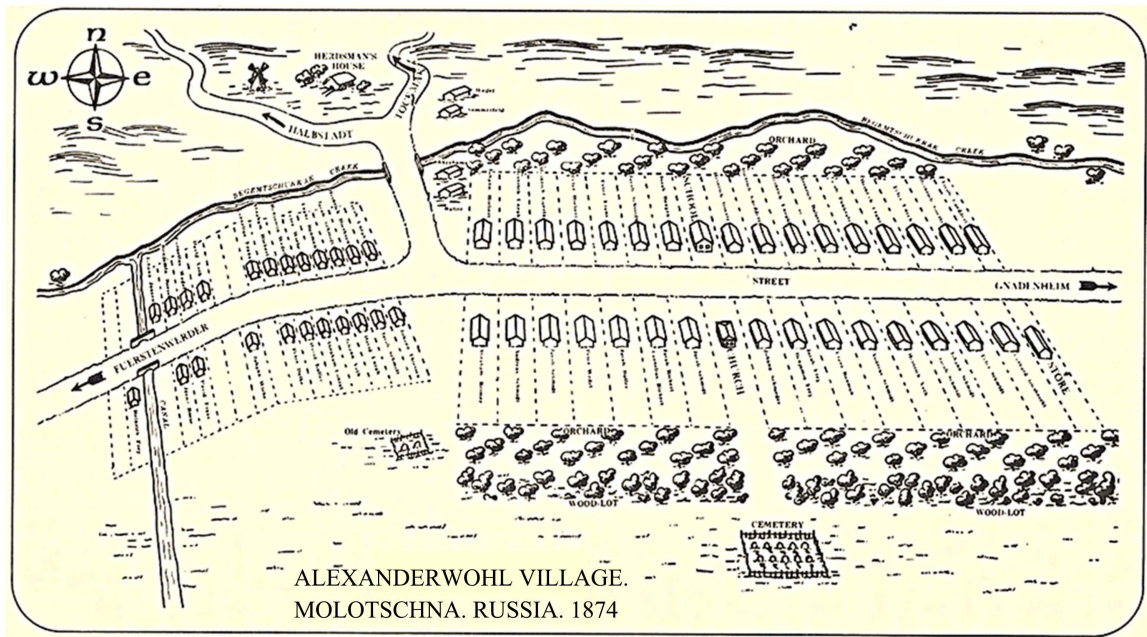


Figure 2. Map of the Molotschna Mennonite community in Russia, Alexanderwohl, 1874 (Kauffman & Harder, 1975: p. 75).

As concluded in Carroll-Janer's (2017) doctoral thesis, Mennonites have maintained a coherent set of cultural practices related to language, religion, work, and agricultural organization. These practices were consolidated during their historical settlement in Russia and have since been reproduced and adapted across different countries in the Americas. This mode of life has functioned not only as a form of territorial settlement but also as a distinctive process of land colonization, structured through a conceptual separation between culture and nature.

Another key conclusion of Carroll's thesis is that Mennonite ways of life are not detached from capitalism. On the contrary, land acquisition in host countries has positioned Mennonite communities as active economic actors who promote agricultural productivity, local markets, and regional commercial networks. A prominent example is found in the Mennonite colonies of Chihuahua, where they first arrived, which have developed into one of the most important agro-industrial corridors in Mexico.

2. Genealogy, Leadership and the Reproduction of Local Power

Genealogical analysis reveals that positions of authority within the Salamanca community are not randomly distributed but are embedded within long-standing kinship networks that extend back to the Mennonite settlements in southern Russia and later Canada. Leadership roles appear to be reproduced through family lineages that historically held religious, administrative, and economic authority.

In Salamanca, the Obervorsteher, responsible for internal governance and relations with state authorities, is Heinrich Schmitt Klassen. His role closely mirrors

historical descriptions of Mennonite leadership, particularly those associated with figures who combined economic oversight, moral authority, and political mediation. According to local accounts and archival records, the Wiebe family occupies a central place in the formation of the Old Colony church structure. Genealogical reconstruction confirms that Heinrich Schmitt Klassen's grandmother, Anna Wiebe, belongs to a lineage historically associated with ecclesiastical leadership.

Archival documentation from the Mennonite Heritage Center in Winnipeg indicates that Anna Wiebe's grandfather, Isaac Müller, known as Isaac "Kaiser" Müller, served as the first Obervorsteher of Neuhorst in the Western Manitoba Reserve. Between 1875 and 1879, Müller oversaw the consolidation of Mennonite self-sufficiency and the establishment of a stable financial base (Plett, 2001). His leadership role and reputation appear to have become symbolic capital transmitted across generations.

The Wiebe lineage also produced several Aeltester and church ministers. Johann Wiebe (1837-1905), born in Chortitza, was recognized for both ritual authority and charismatic leadership. Genealogical evidence confirms his kinship ties to Maria Müller, daughter of Isaac "Kaiser" Müller, as well as to Johann Wiebe (1886-), who became pastor of the Reinländer Church in Manitoba in 1906. These overlapping religious and administrative roles demonstrate how authority was consolidated within interconnected families

Through marriage alliances, particularly between the Wiebe, Müller, Wall, and Schmidt families, leadership networks expanded and adapted across national contexts. Anna Müller's marriage to Abram Schmidt in 1918 marked the incorporation of the Schmidt lineage into positions of influence. Over time, orthographic changes in surnames, such as the transformation from Schmidt to Schmitt in Mexico, did not disrupt genealogical continuity.

This historical pattern persists in Salamanca. Heinrich Schmitt Klassen's leadership style and economic oversight resemble descriptions of Isaac Müller's role in Manitoba. Under his administration, Salamanca has become a regional reference point for agricultural productivity in Quintana Roo, particularly in corn production per hectare. The community has diversified into soy, sorghum, and bean cultivation and established a feed-processing facility supplying regional markets. These developments illustrate how kinship-based authority continues to shape economic organization and relations with state institutions.

2.1. Marriage between Second Order Cousins

One documented case of marriage between second-order cousins was identified within the Salamanca community, indicating the occurrence of endogamous practices at this level. As illustrated in **Figure 3**, this case involves marriage between Margaretha Schmitt Friesen and Franz Schmitt Klassen. Margaretha's grandfather, Cornelius W. Schmitt, is the brother of Franz's father, making Franz the first cousin of Margaretha's father, Heinrich F. Schmitt.

As a result, Franz simultaneously occupies the social position of husband and second cousin to Margaretha. This dual relationship exemplifies the overlapping

categories that emerge in endogamous systems. While such marriages do not constitute close consanguinity, they reinforce family alliances and contribute to the consolidation of social cohesion within the community.

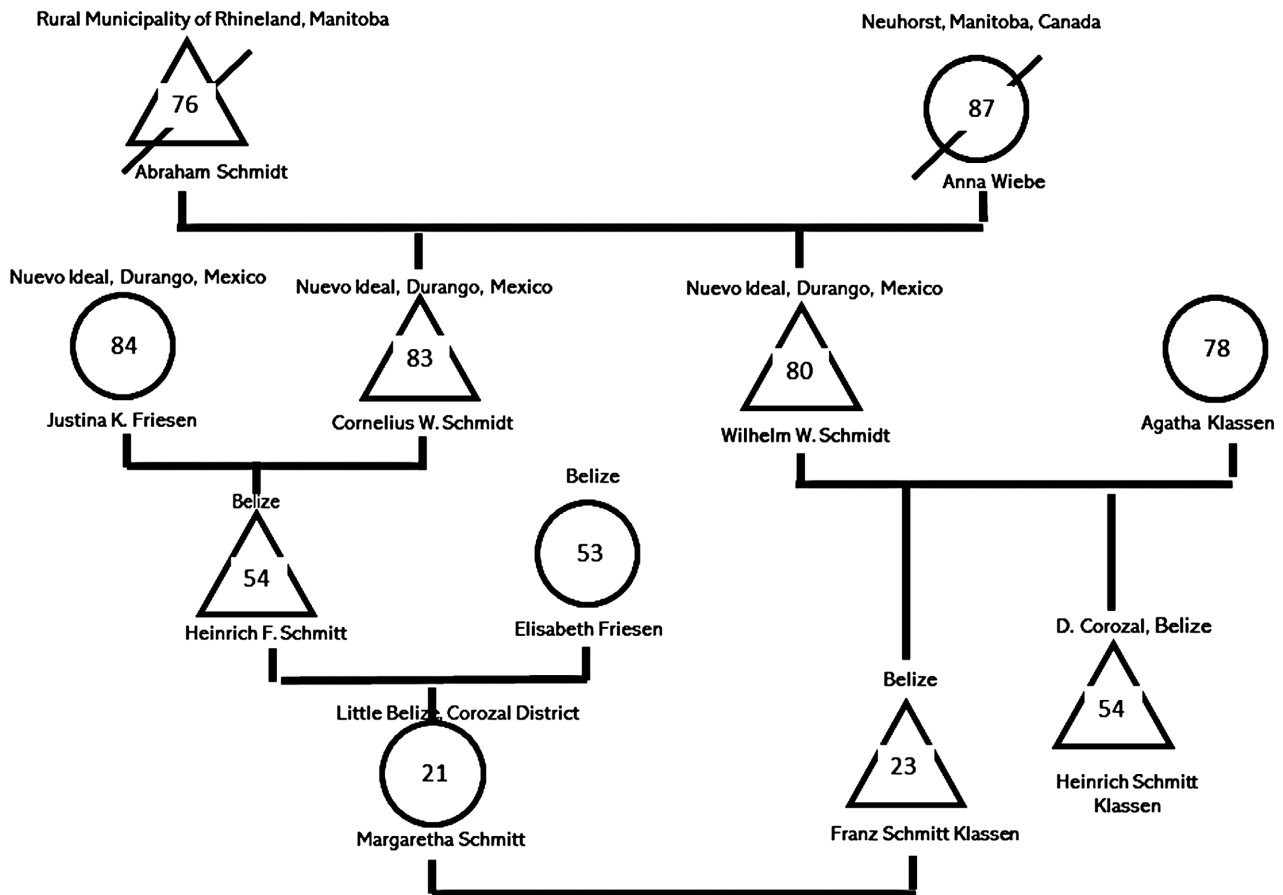


Figure 3. Cousins marriage.

2.2. Remarriage of Widows and Widowers

Among Old Colony Mennonites, marriage is conceived as a lifelong religious commitment that cannot be dissolved through divorce. Remarriage is therefore permitted only after the death of a spouse, in accordance with Anabaptist doctrine (Kauffman and Harder, 1975). In Salamanca, five cases of remarriage involving widows or widowers were documented.

- In the first case, Heinrich Schmitt married Gertruda Wiens, with whom he had eight children. After Gertruda's death at age 40, Heinrich remarried Anna Dyck, whom he brought from Campeche after negotiating the marriage with her family. Despite Anna's origins in a more progressive colony, she adapted to Old Colony norms. The children from both marriages refer to one another as siblings, and Heinrich's children from his first marriage call Anna "mother", reflecting the incorporation of new marital ties into an existing household structure.
- A second case involves Jacob Krahn, who died in 2013 at age 53, leaving 17 children from two marriages. Genealogical analysis of Krahn's ancestors indi-

cates migration trajectories from Chihuahua, Belize, and earlier settlements in Canada, demonstrating the layered mobility underlying contemporary households in Salamanca.

- Additional cases include Cornelius W. Peters, Isaak Klassen, and Herman Neufeld, each of whom remarried following the death of a spouse. In all cases, children from previous marriages were integrated into new households. Although some remarriages involved spouses sharing the same surname, genealogical reconstruction did not reveal close consanguineous ties. The analysis is described in the following **Figure 4**:

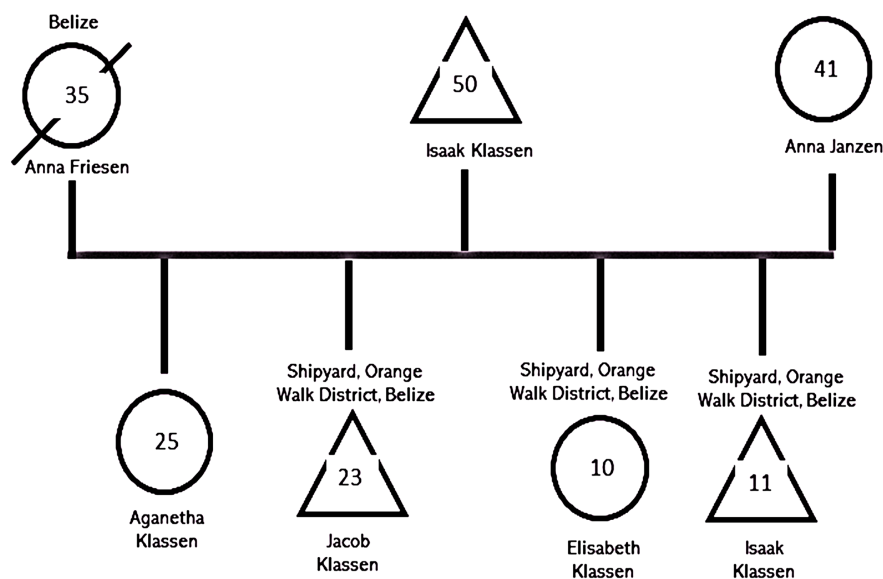


Figure 4. Widower remarriage.

These cases highlight remarriage as a mechanism for maintaining household stability, redistributing labor, and ensuring the care of children within a moral framework that prohibits divorce.

2.3. Levirate Marriage

One case of levirate marriage was identified in Salamanca. Susana Letkeman married Peter P. Nickoley, with whom she had one daughter. Following Peter's death at the age of 26, Susana remarried his brother, Cornelius Nickoley, with whom she had six additional children. This arrangement-maintained household continuity and lineage within the same affinal network.

Genealogical records indicate that both the Nickoley and Peters families trace their ancestry to southern Russia via Canada. This case demonstrates how levirate marriage functions as a culturally sanctioned solution to widowhood, reinforcing kinship obligations and social continuity.

2.4. Sibling Exchange

Sibling exchange, defined as the marriage of pairs of brothers to pairs of sisters,

represents a significant pattern in Salamanca. This form of asymmetric exchange has been documented in other Old Colony Mennonite communities (Cañas, 2013) and serves to strengthen alliances between families.

Four major cases of sibling exchange were identified. These include multiple marriages between members of the Neufeld, Martens, Friesen, Wiebe, Braun, Thiessen, Schmitt, and Blatz families. In several instances, three siblings from one family married three siblings from another, producing dense networks of reciprocal obligation.

Such exchanges reduce the number of affinal partners, intensify interfamily cooperation, and reinforce endogamous boundaries. As in other Mennonite communities, sibling exchange in Salamanca functions as a strategy of social reproduction rather than as an exception to normative marriage rules.

3. Strabismus in Salamanca

Strabismus refers to the misalignment of one eye in relation to the other. Based on the analysis of 307 frontal and profile photographs taken during the migration regularization process, four cases of strabismus were identified in the Salamanca community, representing 1.3% of the sample. In the context of a relatively small population, this finding merits cautious discussion, although the limited number of cases constrain interpretive inference. The identified cases are as follows:

- The first case involves Maria, daughter of Herman Neufeld. Maria has four siblings and one half-brother. Genealogical reconstruction indicates that her parents are not closely related.
- The second case concerns Elisabeth, who lives with her siblings Justina, Margaretha, and Johan. Her parents, Heinrich F. Schmitt and Elisabeth Friesen, do not share a close genealogical relationship.
- The third case is Anna Wieler, born on November 30, 2000, in Shipyard, Orange Walk District, Belize. Her mother, Helena Wall, was born in 1979 in the United States, and her father, Peter Wieler, was born in 1977 in Belize. Genealogical analysis shows no close kin relationship between the parents.
- The fourth case is Margaretha Redecopp, born on October 15, 2001, in Orange Walk, Belize. Her father, Franz Redecopp, was born in 1979, and her mother, Susana Guenther, was born in 1981, both in Belize. Again, no close consanguineous relationship was identified.

Across all four cases, the parents bore different surnames and belonged to distinct genealogical branches. Within the limits of the available data, no evidence of a direct association between strabismus and close consanguineous marriage was observed in the Salamanca community. This finding does not support the initial hypothesis that ocular conditions might be linked to marriages between second-order cousins or other close kin and underscores the importance of genealogical verification rather than assumption in studies of endogamy.

4. Nystagmus in Salamanca

Nystagmus is characterized by involuntary, repetitive eye movements. Among the

307 photographs analyzed, all of which were taken by the author during fieldwork and preceded by direct in situ observation of each subject, a single case of nystagmus was identified (0.3%).

This case involves Heinrich Redekop, born on October 3, 2010, in Little Belize, Corozal District, Belize. His parents are Heinrich Redekop and Eva Wieler. The couple has two additional children, Aganetha and David, neither of whom present ocular abnormalities. Genealogical analysis shows that Heinrich Redekop and Eva Wieler are not closely related, and no pattern of repeated ocular conditions appears within their extended family network.

As with strabismus, this finding suggests that nystagmus in Salamanca cannot be attributed to close consanguineous marriage. Instead, it appears an isolated case within the population studied.

5. Conclusion

This study has shown that kinship research and the construction of genealogies within communities provide crucial insights into systems of affinity, marriage rules, and social organization (Bossert et al., 2012: p. 15; Davinson, 2007: p. 168). Revisiting Tylor's classical formulation of endogamy as a "policy of isolation" (Tylor, 2012: p. 99) allows us to understand how such marital strategies have historically functioned as mechanisms of cultural continuity. In this sense, the persistence of Mennonite cultural practices across the American continent can be interpreted as the outcome of long-standing kinship institutions that actively sustain social boundaries over time.

This study demonstrates that Old Colony Mennonite communities have maintained remarkably stable cultural practices and social institutions across more than two centuries of migration, beginning in Europe, consolidating in southern Russia, and continuing through Canada, Mexico, Belize, and other parts of the Americas. While Mennonites emerged during the Reformation period and experienced repeated religious persecution, it was in Prussia and especially in southern Russia that they developed a cohesive system of kinship, settlement organization, and cultural reproduction that continues to structure their communities today.

In southern Russia, Mennonites established enduring patterns of household organization, language use, naming practices, land distribution, and educational autonomy. Plautdietsch (Low German), a primarily oral language combining German and Russian elements, has functioned as a central marker of group identity. Likewise, the repetition of given names and surnames reflects a bounded universe of kinship that reinforces internal cohesion. These practices were later reproduced during migrations to Canada and Latin America, often through negotiated agreements with state authorities granting educational and religious autonomy.

Through genealogical reconstruction and archival research, this paper has shown that kinship practices such as levirate marriage, marriage between second-order cousins, sibling exchange, and remarriage of widows and widowers function as mechanisms of social continuity rather than deviations from normative mar-

riage rules. These practices allow for the maintenance of households, redistribution of labor, and reinforcement of alliances within a morally regulated endogamous system.

Endogamy operates as a form of cultural protection that preserves Mennonite social organization while enabling economic adaptation. Contrary to interpretations that frame Old Colony Mennonites as isolated from capitalist systems, this research demonstrates that land acquisition, agricultural productivity, and market integration coexist with strong kinship-based institutions. Communities such as Salamanca illustrate how Mennonites actively contribute to regional economies while maintaining internal social boundaries.

Finally, the analysis of strabismus and nystagmus contributes to a critical reassessment of assumptions about the biological consequences of endogamy. Within the constraints of a small number of observed cases, genealogical analysis did not provide evidence of an association between these ocular conditions and close consanguineous marriages in the Salamanca community. This result underscores the methodological value of genealogy in anthropological research, particularly for differentiating cultural practice, social organization, and biological variation.

Taken together, the findings highlight kinship as a central organizing principle through which Old Colony Mennonites reproduce cultural continuity, social cohesion, and adaptive resilience across shifting historical and national contexts

Acknowledgements

This research was supported by a graduate scholarship from the National Council of Science and Technology (CONACYT), Mexico, and was conducted as part of the author's doctoral research at the National School of History and Anthropology (ENAH) in Mexico City. Additional support was provided by two research grants from the Plett Foundation of Canada in 2013 and 2014. The findings presented in this article derive from the author's doctoral research program carried out between 2012 and 2016.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

- Aboites, L. (1993). *Norte precario: Poblamiento y colonización en México, 1760-1940*. Ph.D. Thesis, El Colegio de México.
- Aguilar, J. A. (2001). *El fin de la raza cósmica: Consideraciones sobre el esplendor y decadencia del liberalismo en México*. Diana.
- Bossert, F., Sendón, P. F., & Villar, D. (2012). *El parentesco: Textos fundamentales*. Biblos.
- Cañas, L. (2013). Marrying the Brother's Wife's Sister: Marriage Patterns among Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina. *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, 31, 75-86.
- Carroll-Janer, I. (2017). *La gente que nos alimenta: Herencia, sangre y parentesco entre los menonitas de la Vieja Colonia al sur del estado de Quintana Roo en México*. Ph.D. Thesis, Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia.

- Carroll-Janer, I., & Jimenez, F. (2022). Land-Use Changes by Old Colonies Mennonites in Mexico with Sentinel 2 and Trend Earth. *European Journal of Agriculture and Food Sciences*, 4, 17-23. <https://doi.org/10.24018/ejfood.2022.4.3.498>
- Davinson, L. G. (2007). Una mirada al método genealógico y un ejemplo de su aplicación en un pueblo de Tlaxcala, México. In D. Robichaux (Ed.), *Familia y diversidad en América Latina: Estudios de caso* (pp. 167-185). CLACSO.
- Hedberg, A. S. (2007). *Outside the World: Cohesion and Deviation among Old Colony Mennonites in Bolivia*. Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis.
- Kauffman, J. H., & Harder, L. (1975). *Anabaptists: Four Centuries Later*. Herald Press.
- Loewen, R. (2013). *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006*. University of Toronto Press. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781442666726>
- Peters, J. (1985). *The Waisenam: A History of Mennonite Inheritance Custom*. Mennonite Village Museum.
- Plett, D. (2001). *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada, 1875-2000*. Crossway Publications.
- Sawatzky, H. L. (1971). *They Sought a Country: Mennonite Colonization in Mexico*. University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520338425>
- Schmiedehaus, W. (1982). *Die Altkolonier-Mennoniten in Mexiko*. CMBC Publications.
- Stoesz, E., & Stackley, M. T. (2000). *Tierra de refugio, patria adquirida: Un libro sobre los menonitas en el Chaco Central Paraguayo, 1927-1997*. Asociación Evangélica Mennonita del Paraguay.
- Taylor, L. D. (2011). Las migraciones menonitas al norte de México entre 1922 y 1940. *Cruce de Caminos*, 14, 30-45.
- Tylor, E. B. (2012). Sobre un método de investigación del desarrollo de las instituciones aplicado a las leyes del matrimonio y la descendencia. In F. Bossert, P. F. Sendón, & D. Villar (Eds.), *El parentesco: Textos fundamentales* (pp. 79-102). Biblos.
- Urry, J. (1989). *None But Saints: The Transformation of Mennonite life in Russia, 1789-1889* (2nd ed.). Pandora Press.