

# **Marrying the Brother's Wife's Sister: Marriage Patterns among Old Colony Mennonites in Argentina**

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## **1. Introduction**

The objective of this article is to assess the existence and analyse the consequences of a particular type of marriage pattern in a Mennonite Colony. For this, I apply an approach to the study of a complex kinship system that stems from studies of elementary systems. That is, considering the kinship network of a whole population as the unit of study instead of concentrating on households or individual genealogies. I demonstrate the widespread existence of a marriage pattern characterised by two siblings marrying with two siblings (sibling or sister exchange within anthropological parlance), or in other words, marrying one's sibling's spouse's sibling. I would like to clarify from the start that this article does *not* concern itself with the *causes* of this pattern, but with its consequences (particularly on effects on land redistribution, and the marriage possibilities of the following generation). The main argument is that the marriage pattern in question does not lead towards the consolidation of land, but tends to equalise the distribution of wealth. Furthermore, when taking into account unwritten rules on marriage within the colony, this pattern produces the unintended consequence of opening up marriage opportunities to the following generation.

This article is based on fieldwork in the Old Colony Mennonite colony La Nueva Esperanza in Argentina (for further details on this colony see Cañas Bottos, 2005, 2008a). The main economic activities are agriculture and dairy cattle breeding. A shift in the last years has exchanged the production of wheat for cattle feed and the keeping of dairy cows, which are manually milked twice a day by the members of each household. During my stay in the colony, the principal source of income for most families came from the sale of milk to the three local Mennonite cheese factories that transform it into mozzarella base paste, which in turn is sold to mozzarella factories in Buenos Aires, Santa Rosa and Bahía Blanca. Although every single household in the colony produces milk and also has its own vegetable and fruit garden, some individuals specialise in a complementary trade such as carpentry, silo building, light metalworking, engine repairing, food and combustible retailing, bee-keeping, and butchering. None of these specialisations, nor being appointed member of the political and religious structures frees any single household from farming. Furthermore, farming is considered by the Mennonites themselves as the most appropriate profession for a Christian.

Families from Old Colony Mennonite colonies from Mexico and Bolivia founded La Nueva Esperanza in 1986. The migratory process involved not only the finding of “suitable land” but also of “suitable political conditions”. The money to buy the land was raised within different Mennonite colonies in Mexico and Bolivia, complemented with a bank credit. It is impossible for a non-Mennonite to acquire land inside the colony. Individual land property is only recognised by the colony and not by the State, since the whole of the land belongs to a non-profit organisation created by the Mennonites for such a purpose. Some land was left as colony property for the building of schools, churches and for the use of families who did not have the necessary resources to buy their own. In each one of the nine linear villages in which the colony is divided, a five hectare plot was “reserved” for these cases. Not all the economic contributors moved into the colony. There seem to be four main, but not exclusive reasons for buying land in a colony without prospects of immediate migration (roughly 5 percent of the total land in La Nueva Esperanza falls in this situation): 1) “For the children” in case there is not enough in the same colony; 2) “for security” in case of economical, political or natural changes that might affect the continuity of the colony; 3) to help in the consolidation of a communal project; and 4) as an investment, since the land value will raise if the settlement is successful (see Cañas Bottos, 2008a) for further details of the dynamics of the process of expansion and settlement) and (Cañas Bottos, 2008b) for an analysis of their trans-statal relations. The creation of new colonies is usually done on “marginal” land, first because the

price is lower, and second because of the search for geographically “isolated” places in order to fulfil the religious value of being “separate from the world”.

The relationship with land in European peasant communities, and more generally with unequally distributed access to necessary resources, is often taken as an important, and in most cases indispensable, aspect for the explanation of various aspects of kinship such as marriage strategies and the usage of fictive kinship (Bourdieu, 1976; Brandes, 1975; O'Neill, 1984; Pitt-Rivers, 1971). This is so because access (and non-access) to the necessary resources is usually directed by kinship, and therefore securing (and also denying) such an access involves strategies for the establishment, maintenance and severing of kinship ties. Inheritance and marriage can be seen as mediating between the biological continuity of household and that of material and symbolic property (such as continuity of name, or continuity in the association between name and a particular plot of land, etc.).

More concretely, in the cases with larger gaps between rich and poor, and high and low status families, there is a tendency not only to practice impartible inheritance, but also to exert a higher control on marriage strategies within the subgroups. These practices are usually complemented by a higher degree of heir control (through processes of i.e. bastardy, and adoption). All of these are aimed towards the consolidation of the inheritance, and the maintenance of the status of the family. Generally, it seems that higher status families are the ones who tend to put these strategies into practice. In addition, fictive kinship ties seem to flourish as a response to the closed marriage patterns of higher status families (which prevent establishment “real” kinship ties) in highly differentiated communities, in order to secure access to resources distributed based on kinship relations. In an opposite way, in more egalitarian communities, fictive kinship ties are less prominent, and relinking (that is the duplication of relations between them, of which this marriage pattern is a form of) of families is limited (Collard, 1997; Miner, 1939). Some questions arise from all this. Do differences in land ownership produce the formation of subgroups with high inter-marriage rates in order to consolidate property within the colony? And concomitantly, what are the consequences of this particular marriage pattern on land distribution?

## **2. Kinship rules and norms in La Nueva Esperanza**

In the colony, whenever anybody was talking about someone whom I have not met before, they would immediately start tracing genealogical links from someone I knew. It also became clear that the Mennonites took for granted that the whole population was linked

through genealogical ties. Persons were thought of not only as individuals, but also as nodes in kinship networks. One day when Peter, a twenty year old Mennonite, told me about the preparations for his marriage with his girlfriend. I had not met her before, and mentioned that she was his brother's wife's sister. It is this particular type of marriage, to a sibling's spouse's sibling (GEG) that I will focus on here<sup>1</sup>. This type of marriage can take two forms: either two brothers marrying two sisters, or direct sister exchange where a brother and a sister marry a sister and a brother. Throughout I will be calling "symmetrical GEG" when a brother and a sister marry a sister and a brother (from the perspective of the system, each family contributes with one man and one woman), and "asymmetrical" when a pair of brothers marry a pair of sisters (as from the perspective of the system one family contributes two males and the other two females). It should be noted that although I have been unable to elicit a specific term in Low German for denoting these marriages, they do however recognize the offspring that result from such marriage pairs (that is, bilateral cousins) as "little brothers" or "little sisters".

During my fieldwork I repeatedly brought the issue of their apparent preference towards marrying the GEG, but although I was unable to elicit a rule behind it, they did recognize some of its features. For example, the security component in making a paramount decision: "If someone sees that his brother's marriage is good, then he will look for a wife in the same house". A different informant, with good sociological acumen replied: "That is an easy question. After a marriage the families start to get together more often, mutual visiting, eating at each other's place, mutual help, so they have more contact with the girls from that family". Our dataset confirms this insight, as the average interval of 34 months between the first and second marriage of the GEG form, which is more than enough time, by Mennonite standards, to start courting from scratch, baptising, and marrying.

Significantly the GEG marriages, at La Nueva Esperanza present us with a marriage norm which apparently has no rules that account for its appearance. I want to stress here the difference between rules and norms. The former refer to the local ways of expressing preferences, values and also includes the more legalistic ways of directing modes of conduct and thought, the jural level of analysis (Barnard & Good, 1984), while the latter refer to observed social patterns and statistical regularities that do not depend on the locals own perception of them. Furthermore, rules should not be confused with descriptions or generalisations of actual practices nor should they be considered solely as verbalised principles since they also exist in practice without the need of verbalisation. Our aim, thus, is

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article I follow Parkin's, type 1 (1997: 9) and Barnard & Good's (Barnard & Good, 1984) type A for abbreviation of kinship terms: G=sibling ,S=son, E=spouse.

to understand a marriage pattern (which exists as a norm) but for which the colony members do not have an explicit set of rules or values that might account for its occurrence. Or more simply, to explore a norm that does not stem from following a rule.

Before starting the analysis of the dataset, it is necessary to review some of the Old Colony Mennonite kinship rules. One of the most important aspects is the impossibility of dissolving the marital link except in the event of death of one of the spouses. In cases of widowhood, a new marriage is permitted, and it does not take long before this happens.

The rules that define the pool of potential marriageable persons are the following. On the one hand there is an exogamic rule based on a prohibition of incest that extends to cousins in first degree. On the other hand, there is an endogamic rule that prohibits marrying someone who does not hold the same faith. On a first instance this means that the spouse should belong to one of the colonies that belong to the Old Colony, and marriage with non-Mennonites is highly discouraged. In practice, whenever an Old Colony church colony is not geographically close (in Argentina the closest colony to La Nueva Esperanza is in the Province of Santiago del Estero, some 1200 kilometers away) mate selection tends to be limited to the colony. On the other hand, marriage outside the external limits of the church involves the change of religious affiliation of one of the partners. However, neither the records of the Registro Civil de Guatraché (hereafter RC) nor my fieldwork in the colony provided a single case of “mixed” marriage since the establishment of the colony in Argentina. One of my informants stated that there was no prohibition towards marrying out of the colony, but that it was highly discouraged because the tensions that were bound to occur due to the different religions and lifestyles. Nevertheless, the possibilities of socialisation with non-Mennonites are extremely reduced. This is not only because of the geographical distance, but because potential means of transportation are purposely reduced. The ownership of cars, bicycles, motorbikes, and pick-up trucks is forbidden to the inhabitants of the colony. The main means of transportation is the buggy, a four-wheeled roofed horse drawn vehicle. Tractors are allowed, but rubber tires are replaced by steel ones in order to avoid being used as a means of transport for going to town.

Regarding genealogical linkages, on the one hand a person’s position in the intersection of two families is explicitly recognised in his or her name by the usage of paternal and maternal patronyms. On the other, patrilineal and matrilineal kin are not differentiated from each other in kinship terminology.

Regarding inheritance, the ideal form is partible division of property, with complete gender and ordinal equality and any pre-mortem giving generally takes the form of dowry

and dower at the time of marriage (see also Loewen, 1995). Nevertheless, in practice some variations occur due to the type of goods to be divided as well as due to the timing of the different marriages. Land is only given if there is (actually or potentially) the possibility of giving equal shares to all the children (as the economic situation might change between the time of the different marriages). The total size of the plots of land received from both sides of the new marriage in La Nueva Esperanza never seem to be less than 13 hectares. Usually land is not given immediately, and if it is, the newlyweds still need to build their own house and barn. This means that it is common for a new couple to live for some time with the parents of one of the spouses. There does not seem to be a preference for either of the two families of orientation. Usually the choice is made by taking into account other factors such as the need to keep or acquire a male and female pair of hands in a particular household, and availability of space newlyweds are usually assigned one room until they are able to procure their own house.

Besides land, cattle are the other main component of a dower/dowry. Each new couple receives two dairy cows from each set of parents. During their period of residence with one set of their parents, the cows are fed and kept with those of the previous generation, but the product of the sale of the milk to the cheese factory belongs to the new couple. Other household items such as crockery, cutlery, furniture, and tools are received by the new couple from close relatives and friends.

Land and cattle are considered by the Mennonites as the bare, and sufficient, minimum for starting a new family. Therefore, as in several other peasant societies that practice partible inheritance, the main objective is the equipment of the new marriage with all the capital goods necessary to establish them as a new productive (and reproductive) unit. Furthermore, the period of residence with the parents allows the young couple to start accumulating not only because of their new independent income (from both milk and labour) but also by reducing their cost of living which is covered by their host family.

Inheritance is also put into practice post-mortem. If both spouses die, property is divided equally among all the children, but in the case of death of one of the parents, no inheritance payment occurs until the widow/widower decides to re-marry. In these cases, half of the patrimony is assigned to the surviving spouse and the other half equally divided among all the children. Usually the partition takes place in a monetarised way. Property is auctioned (from land to crockery), and if any of the members of the family want to keep anything, he or she has to bid for it. Auctions are open also to non-Mennonites, but only Mennonites can bid for the real estate. For the children who are underaged, their share of inheritance is

administered by the colony, held in trust by the Waisenamt, which pays him/her a fixed interest, and is loaned to other members of the colony.

My fieldwork was not constrained to the boundaries of the colony, but included also the town of Guatraché. I interviewed different people with whom Mennonites have interaction: government personnel such as policemen, the judge of peace, the director of the public hospital, the treasurer of the city council, teachers, and engineers from the INTA (National Institute of Agricultural Technology) as well as grocers, veterinarians and members of the local rural association, among others. I also spent considerable time at the RC the government-run office where births, marriages and deaths are registered, spending long days copying the records referring to the Mennonites.

The majority of the dataset used comes from the records of the RC. The remainder was collected in the colony in the form of genealogies. Each one of these sources provided different types of information and its consolidation into one single picture was not without problems.

A common feature of all registers in the Registro Civil is the inclusion of the number of each individual passport's or "Documento Nacional de Identidad" (National Document of Identity, DNI) mentioned as well as the date of registration and the actual date of the event mentioned. This last one excludes marriages since in Argentine law the date of registration is considered as the legal date of marriage. Birth registers include given and surnames of the newborn as well as those of his/her parents. Marriage records sometimes include the place and date of birth of spouses (if aged less than 21), the name of the spouse's parents and of two witnesses. Death registers include also the place and date of birth and in some occasions the names of parents and/or children as well as the cause of death.

The first step taken was to copy all the records that involved Mennonite individuals. The second step was to consolidate the fragmented information of each individual. In the third step I organised all the data into nuclear families and printed it out in individual file cards. Eventually my dataset included information on 1095 persons, although around 50 individuals were not included in their church records (either because they had never lived in La Nueva Esperanza or were dead by the time it was made) this meant that out of a total population of 1270 individuals, 82.28% were represented.

If we take into account the whole dataset, then marriages conforming with the type GEG amount to 11.5 percent, but if we restrict it to the families for which have sufficient data to evaluate it (that is knowing the families of origin of the two spouses), then it rises to 26%, a considerable, and I claim, significant number. Chantal Collard, using a similar method in a

Québécois community with a high rate of endogamy at the level of the village, considers significant and characterises as “very high” the 8% level of marriages conforming to this pattern (1997: 135). The same calculations can be done on a subset of marriages, namely those that took place in Argentina (in order to discriminate between marriages happening before migrating to Argentina with those that happened in La Nueva Esperanza). Out of 85 marriages held in La Nueva Esperanza, 18 follow the GEG pattern which accounts for 22% of this subset.

Let us now look at the relationship between marriages and land distribution. Data on land distribution come from an unpublished map prepared by INDEC (National Institute for Statistics and Census) which a member of the colony gave me. This map shows the areas of each single landholding together with the name of the head of household. Since the names only include given and patronym, it became impossible to link it univocally to other data. Moreover, many plots of land were not being worked or fenced nor inhabited since they belonged to Mennonites residing in Bolivia and Mexico. Since the map was done in 1990 land distribution was outdated due to the processes of fragmentation (caused by inheritance) and consolidation (caused by households acquiring more lands). I therefore used the map in several interviews to update new divisions and internal movement. Eventually I was able to aggregate the data on family names and obtain the average landholding size for each one of the surnames. Although the differences within each surname are masked in this way, it nevertheless has the advantage (besides being the only feasible way of doing the calculations with the available data) of helping to solve the problem of comparing households that are in a different stage of their developmental cycle (see Archetti & Stollen 1974). For example, a household may appear as a very large one in comparison with others if the census was done before the division that occurs when its offspring marry and land is divided. By taking into account family names, these problems are overcome, at least partially, since the households appear under the male’s family name.

I restrict the marriages to those that had occurred since the foundation of the colony since I want to understand the current factors affecting marriage patterns. In addition, this decision does not seem to have a negative effect since due to the process of establishment of La Nueva Esperanza economical differences of origins were transmitted from the previous situation in Mexico and Bolivia. I have also calculated the average number of hectares for each family name. An intermediate step towards testing the hypothesis of land as the main reason for the marriage strategies can be taken through testing of the existence of isogamy or

anisogamy, that is of a tendency towards marriage between spouses of similar or different status (in this case status measured by landholding size).

The result is that males tended to marry into families with a higher number of hectares. The absolute accumulated difference was 15.5 ha, which gives a meagre average difference in favour of the males of 0.6 ha per marriage which is too small a value to conclude the existence of economically directed gendered anisogamy. By itself this figure does not say much (besides sustaining the presence of isogamy) since such a value could be hiding two very different and opposed realities: either marriages occur within clusters of similar sized landholdings or spouses could come from the opposite ends of the economic spectrum. Indeed there are 21 marriages between families where both spouses come from families with higher than average landholding size, 46 where one of the spouses has more than average than the other, and 19 where both spouses come from patronyms owning less than average land. Therefore just over half of marriages are done across this average landholding threshold, and there are as many marriages between the better off on the one hand and the worse off on the other.

This means that we should reject the hypotheses of marriage as a strategy for the consolidation of landholdings, the perpetuation of economic differences and therefore the existence of a “closure” to marriage due to such differences. But the previous takes into account the result of all marriages. Does the marriage with the GEG changes the situation? It does but in a sociologically unexpected way. When looking at GEG marriages we find that the distribution of marriages across the average landholding line is different. There are 7 marriages between those above the line, 11 where one of the spouses is above and the other below the threshold, and *not a single pair* where both are below the threshold. What this shows is that marriage with the GEG does not seem to be part of a strategy for land consolidation. However this does not mean that land related considerations are irrelevant. On the contrary, although a first marriage between families where both are below the average landholding threshold does happen with regularity, a second marriage relinking these two families (providing closure to the GEG pattern) is something that does *not* happen. This means that land is indeed part of the equation when choosing a spouse, however, it is not in the search for its accumulation, but the avoidance of generating too many couples without potential access to it, at least via inheritance.

Lets now look at some structural characteristics of this marriage pattern. One of the most important structural consequences of marriage with the GEG is that opens up marriage possibilities for the following generation. With fixed rules against marriage to non-

Mennonites (that is, a strict endogamic boundary), the only way to increase the pool of potential spouses within a single colony is by reducing the extension of the exogamic unit, that is, reducing the absolute numbers of with whom it marriage is forbidden. This does not mean to change the rule, but to “produce” fewer people that would qualify as “unmarriageable”. Indeed, each new marriage with a GEG reduces the number of potential cousins for the following generation by doubling the links between the two families instead of incorporating new ones. If one follows the genealogy of “little brothers” or “little sisters” one finds that they share all their grandparents (first cousins normally share only one set of grandparents) as they are cousins through the siblings of both of their parents. More concretely, if we take a conservative number of six offspring per marriage, that means that each individual will have as first cousins, the offspring of ten marriages (five matrilineal and five patrilineal). That means thirty individuals in the colony become unmarriageable (if we assume for the example equal male-female ratios). However when marriage with GEG occurs, it reduces the number of couples producing unmarriageable individuals to nine, hence in this case reducing the pool of unmarriageable individuals to twenty seven. Therefore, by reducing the number of potential first cousins for the following generation, the potential size of the exogamic unit is reduced thereby increasing the pool of marriageable individuals. Nevertheless, however enlightening this unintended and (for the Mennonites, unrecognized) consequence is, it cannot be considered the effective cause of such a pattern because, first, it is logically and chronologically posterior and, second, the community members do not recognise this as a consequence and therefore do not consciously aim to achieve it.

Another structural consequence has to do with migration patterns. First it should be noted that asymmetrical type of GEG is probabilistically less likely to occur than the symmetrical type. Let me explain with another hypothetical case of six offspring per family with equal gender distribution viz. two families with three daughters and three sons each. First a son of one family marries the daughter of the other. This leaves two sons and three daughters in family (a) and two daughters and three sons in family (b). In order to have a symmetrical GEG pair, we need a new marriage between a daughter from family (a) and a son from family (b). The probabilities of rounds of marriage are equal as the first round we chose one male out of three from family (a) and one female out of three from family (b), in the second round we choose one female out of three from family (a) and one male out of three from family (b). Wife givers and wife takers are swapped from one marriage to the next. However to obtain an asymmetrical pair, the second round of marriages need to select a spouse of the same sex as the first round, but now this number has been reduced, in both

cases from three to two. Now, this probabilistic expectation is overly fulfilled in the marriages held in Argentina (where the symmetrical doubles the asymmetrical). If we remove those marriages held in Argentina from the dataset, the residual contains marriages that were held prior to their immigration. That is, pairs that migrated (either simultaneously or successively) as already formed households. However, we find that both types of pairs are equally represented whereas we should expect a difference in favour of the symmetrical. What explains this difference? What has happened to these hypothetically missing couples? Assuming that the marriage practices in La Nueva Esperanza are representative of the Old Colony worldwide, the answer is that they did not migrate. The dataset shows that asymmetrical GEG pairs of couples are more likely to migrate together than their symmetrical counterparts. The difficulties which people experience from not having close kin nearby in the new settlement, and the lack of kinspeople beyond their nuclear families within the colony is a source of constant concern. This is reflected in the numerous visits undertaken to Mexico and Bolivia to see members of their families. This is almost automatically solved when two couples of the GEG type migrate jointly (and especially of the asymmetrical type, when two brothers marry with two sisters). In short it confirms that when two brothers marry two sisters, they are more likely to migrate together than when a brother-sister pair marries a sister-brother pair. Highly marked gender based cleavages in socialisation might account for the stronger bonds between same sex siblings than those between different sex ones which turns into this observed migratory preference.

### **3. Conclusions**

In this article I have shown that there is a regular pattern regarding spouse selection within the Mennonite colony (marriage with the GEG) for which there is no preferential rule to account for its occurrence. One of the structural consequences of marriage with the GEG is that raises the pool of marriageable individuals for the following generation by reducing the number of cousins for the following generation. It also points out to an interesting finding that would require further research, that asymmetrical pairs of GEG marriages tend to migrate together. In addition, marriage and inheritance practices are not directed towards the consolidation of the patrimony or the generation of structurally endogamous subgroupings. In fact there is an avoidance of duplication of linkages between families with less than average size landholding, thus avoiding the generation of new marriages which would inherit from both sides less than average land. These findings are

compatible with other ethnographic studies of European peasant kinship systems which lack strong internal differentiation as well as displaying ideologies of equality.

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