

You Call that “Christian”? Language Use and Evangelism in the Music of a Mennonite Family in Mexico

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Abstract: In this article the author explores religious diversity among Mennonites in Mexico through the song practices of a single family. The Heides family left their conserving Old Colony church in the 1990s to join an Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference church in the same colony. In addition to differing theological emphases, these churches differ in what forms of music are deemed appropriate in worship. As the author observes, the family’s transition has affected their music making with regard to repertoire choices and language use. Further, their ongoing relationships with Old Colony family and community members add new layers of negotiation in their efforts to use music for evangelical ends.

On July 31, 1874, the first of what would be 8,000 Prusso-Russian Mennonites migrated to the Canadian prairies from the steppes of Russia. This pacifist religious group with roots in the sixteenth-century Anabaptist movement sought religious freedoms that involved military exemption, the opportunity to run their own schools in High German, and land upon which to establish agrarian settlements. Some of these Mennonites along with many of their descendants have come to be known as *Alte Kolonier*, or Old Colony Mennonites, so named because of their roots in the Chortitza Colony, or Old Colony, in Russia (J. Friesen 2007:77). Despite the agricultural success of Old Colony settlements in Canada, it was less than fifty years before concerns arose that their communities were becoming too closely affiliated with secular society, and, more specifically, that the Canadian government was exerting too much control over language use and education in their schools (Krahn and Ens 1989). Unwilling to sacrifice the nonconformist lifeways through which they sought to enact their faith, Old Colony church leaders began the search for a

new homeland.

While nonconformist agrarian Mennonites and the arid northern region of Spanish-Mexico seem an unlikely pairing, a number of factors led to their affiliation in the 1920s. The Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) left Mexico's northern region vulnerable to American incursion, and as a result the country's government sought ways to populate and thereby stabilize the region. In the agrarian, self-sufficient Mennonites, then president Alvaro Obregón saw a means of protecting Mexican lands; he welcomed Old Colony Mennonite settlers to the country and assured them of military exemption, religious freedom, and authority over their own schools (O. Klassen 1997; Will 1997: 56-357). These assurances brought over 7,000 German-speaking Old Colony Mennonites from the Canadian prairies to Mexico's northern region between 1922 and 1926.

While the clothing choices, language use, and lifeways of Old Colony Mennonites stand out in Spanish Mexico, and while conserving Old Colonists comprise nearly 90% of the Mennonite population in Mexico's northern states (Abram Siemens, personal communication, February 17, 2006), they are not the only Mennonites in the region.¹ During the initial migration, and in subsequent years, other churches from *Kleine Gemeinde*, *Sommerfelder*, *Reinländer*, and evangelical Mennonite denominations have established significant populations.² These denominations differ from the Old Colony not only in name, but also in the way they understand and enact their faith. So-called "progressive" evangelical Mennonites, for example, emphasize personal spirituality and assurance of salvation in their churches, a sharp contrast to Old Colonists for whom *orthopraxis* (or "correct practice") is a guiding principle.³ Such differences may not seem immediately noteworthy, but they in fact serve as a basis for diverse, and even conflicting, ideas around Mennonite language use and lifeways in Mexico's colonies.

In this paper, I challenge stereotypes of sameness among Mexico's Mennonites by exploring the song practices of a single family, the Heide family.⁴ Their story is compelling not only because they have actively participated in both Old Colony and evangelical Mennonite churches in Mexico, but because of the ongoing affiliations that family members maintain with each faith community due to overlapping church and family relationships. Drawing on interviews and conversations arising from fieldwork in Chihuahua and Durango in 2006, I describe how the family's past and present affiliations with conserving Old Colony and evangelical Mennonite churches demonstrate both musical diversity and the significance of song practice among varied Mennonite communities. I begin by taking into consideration some of the fundamental differences between Old Colony and evangelical beliefs, a framework that informs

the introduction of the Heide family and subsequent discussion of their music making. By exploring how the Heides navigate their musical choices within a context of overlapping associations, and by focusing specifically on language use, I examine the paradox of so-called “Christian” song that at once unifies and challenges family and community.

Assurance of Salvation and Orthopraxis: Contrasting Frameworks of Faith

A written document outlining the parameters of Old Colony nonconformity does not exist; however, the *oole Ordnunk* (Low German, “Old Order”) has been described by Kelly Hedges as structuring guidelines for Old Colony communities, providing “the tools and mechanisms for cultural reproduction” (1996:6). Traditionally, these tools and mechanisms have included the wearing of head coverings by women, the rejection of modern technologies, and the proscribed use of musical instruments. These guidelines are not written down, but are monitored by church leaders whose responsibility it is to maintain the *oole Ordnunk* among Old Colonists. Hedges describes the *oole Ordnunk* as

... the ‘tradition’ which, among other things, specifies inter-Mennonite and Mennonite-outsider economic and social relations; structures a colony political system divided into what the Mennonites consider secular and religious branches; provides rules regulating the adoption of technology; dictates dress and occupation norms; categorizes ethnic and other systems of identification; constructs and maintains certain institutions such as church, school, marriage patterns, a widows and orphans fund, and fire and disaster insurance schemes; and structures an ideology of language and literacy. (1996:6-7)

One of the foundational differences between Old Colony and evangelical Mennonite belief as they are understood in Mexico’s Mennonite colonies lies in the concept of “assurance of salvation”; that is to say, the subjective certainty of God’s forgiveness and acceptance.⁵ For Old Colony Mennonites, the Bible and the catechism are guides, but it is through lived experience and participation in the church that the sacrality of religion is experienced and relayed.⁶ Roland Sawatsky, exploring early twentieth-century Canadian Mennonite domestic architecture as a setting for religious expression, refers to this concept as *orthopraxis*, or “correct practice.” Contrasting it with *orthodoxy*

(“correct belief”), he suggests that throughout Mennonite history, it is the practice of discipleship that has served as a primary authority (R. Sawatsky 2006). For Old Colonists, salvation is not something that is “assured,” nor is it a point of theological focus. Instead, trust in God’s goodness and faithful living as disciples of Christ are primary. Faith is enacted in day-to-day practices of simple living, community accountability, and separation from the world. In the words of Margaret Reimer Huebner, reflecting on her Old Colony childhood in Manitoba:

After all, God was in control and they [Old Colony Mennonites] were not. It was far more important to them that they *lived* the faith than that they talked a lot about it or even that they said they were Christian. For words meant very little if the life wasn’t there. In fact, much talk about assurance of salvation bordered on claiming to know what could not be known. For as Christians we are saved in hope! (Huebner 2007:3)

For evangelical Mennonites, on the other hand, assurance of salvation is foundational to the Christian story. The daily enactment of faith is understood to grow from this assurance, rather than being valued intrinsically. Bruce Guenther writes about evangelical *Kanadier* Mennonites who returned to Canada, but his observations are equally relevant to differences in perspective between Old Colony and evangelical Mennonites in Mexico:

Regardless of how and when people entered an evangelical church, almost all testified that the discovery of God’s grace resulted in a life of “freedom and joy.” ... For those *Kanadier* Mennonites who adopted evangelicalism, “assurance of salvation” highlights a transformation in the subjective character of their religious experience: they testified that they had moved from fear, anxiety, and uncertainty towards emancipation, joy and confidence. (Guenther 2004:155-56)

Thus, what is understood as faithful adherence and community accountability for Old Colonists is seen by many evangelical Mennonites to undermine the spiritual aspects of faith. Perceived as faith based on works rather than belief in God’s grace and assurance of salvation, conserving practice is interpreted as prescribed, and not spiritually vital.⁷

Music making is described by many Mennonites as central to faith practice (regardless of denomination), and so it is perhaps not surprising that dif-

ferences between churches are amplified in song choices and music performance within their respective faith communities. For Old Colonists, certain song practices and the use of musical instruments (guitars, harmonicas, record players, and radios, to name a few) were proscribed for many years because of their affiliation with worldly influences, and the pride with which solo performance was associated. The High German term *Musik* is commonly used to refer to these practices, and is set in contrast with the unaccompanied unison *lange Wies* (Low German, “long way” or “long melody”) that is condoned by conserving church leadership and engaged in Old Colony worship. While the use of instruments in the home is no longer monitored in most communities, they are rarely heard at public events.⁸

Among evangelical Mennonites, on the other hand, musical instruments are celebrated at home and in worship, with church members citing a scriptural basis for their utilization.⁹ Evangelical churches frequently accompany congregational singing with piano, and additional instruments are added (e.g., clarinet, drum kit, guitar, flute, and violin) depending on the resources available within a specific congregation.

Describing how this fundamental difference in worldview can be played out musically within a single family, Johan Heide – currently a member of an Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference church in Ontario, Canada – describes the music making at his family gatherings in Mexico. Here, as in many evangelical circles in Mexico, the term “Christian” refers to those who have accepted assurance of salvation, and does not encompass Old Colony Mennonites:

JH: See, we were the only ones that would be singing Christian songs. And the rest of them that would hear it if we had a family gathering they weren’t Christian, and they would be very much against it what we were singing, so it wouldn’t work very well. Mostly we sang alone.

JK: Do you know what it is that they wouldn’t like about the songs?

JH: Um. [Pause]. The gospel message that came through the songs. Obviously, when you sing words, they hear words, and if you sing it clear enough they can understand it, and it was against their religion. Like totally against their religion. Their religion was to go by rules, and our songs were that we can believe in Jesus Christ and then we can be saved. And we can – our sins can be forgiven and we can have eternal life. And that’s not how it worked for them, so that’s what turned them off I guess. [Pause]. We would

be called evangelists sometimes, from them. And an evangelist is something very bad for them. So they, like, I overheard one of my uncles once say that evangelists were from the devil or whatever, so it kind of hit you, but we also knew that it wasn't quite true. Like, they didn't know what an evangelist was. They just said it. But mostly, we wouldn't sing at our gatherings much. (Johan Heide, personal communication, January 23, 2006)

It is the divergence between assurance of salvation and lived belief that makes this description of a Mennonite family gathering possible. Johan's words are perhaps unexpected, as "family music" is rarely imagined to be a divisive activity. However, during my fieldwork in Mexico, many evangelical Mennonites spoke of their Old Colony neighbours as trying to earn their way to Heaven through simple living, rather than believing in, and experiencing, the grace of God; that is, "being saved." Because of this divergence in world-view, it is not uncommon to hear evangelical Mennonites refer to Old Colony family members as "not Christian," and to see efforts by evangelical churches to "reach out" to their conserving neighbours in order to share the gospel with them.¹⁰ While cultural and familial ties connect evangelical Mennonites to their conserving family members and neighbours, an affiliation with the broader evangelical Christian movement is also welcomed, and in some instances given priority. This departure from conserving nonconformity is based on the "great commission" of Matthew 28:16-20. It is here that Jesus instructs his disciples to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (NRSV).

To this end, language use among evangelical church members has diverged sharply from that of the Old Colonists. In addition to rejecting modern technology and clothing choices, language has long functioned as one of the primary means through which Mexico's Old Colony Mennonites distinguish themselves from secular society: Low German is used in the home, while High German is the language of school and worship (Hedges 1996:15). Whereas the learning of Spanish has been stigmatized in the past for its association with secular society, it is increasingly learned and spoken by Mexico's Mennonites in the workplace. Despite its increased usage, however, fluency in Spanish remains a contentious issue among Old Colony church leaders and members. Some deem it a necessity for colony sustenance (insofar as it facilitates the employment of youth), while others see it as a serious threat to the boundaries around, and the nonconformist structure within, the colonies. For evangelical Mennonites on the other hand, tensions between High German, Low German, and Spanish are less evident. Low German is increasingly used in wor-

ship, and Spanish is taught in schools from a young age. Whereas Old Colonists perceive their vernacular Low German as “*nijch soo foadijch ‘ne Sproak*” (Low German, “not so finished a language”) and therefore not appropriate in the context of worship, evangelical Mennonites use the language for precisely the same reasons (i.e., if one’s relationship with God is personal, it follows that worship occurs in one’s mother tongue).¹¹ While workplace necessity is part of the emphasis on Spanish, evangelical Mennonites not only tolerate the language, but embrace it. Communication with Spanish Mexican populations is not seen as a threat to community cohesiveness, but rather as an opportunity for enacting the “great commission.”¹²

Of course, this description is too simple. The polarization of evangelical and Old Colony Mennonite belief and practice fails to address the complex overlap between Mennonite churches, and among families and individuals. Further, Mennonite Mexico is comprised not only of diverse Mennonite groups; many members of evangelical Mennonite churches once belonged to conserving congregations. Because of the overlapping social and geographic connections between church, family, and community in these contexts, changes to one’s church affiliation are not made without serious consideration. Still, such changes do occur, as the experience of the Heide family exemplifies. It is to their story that we now turn.

Meet the Heides

Peter and Anna Heide were born into the Old Colony church in Durango, Mexico, and it was within this community that they were married and began their family. Like many Mexican Mennonites in the 1970s, they faced uncertain financial circumstances early in their marriage, and traveled back and forth between Canada and Mexico in search of work. Peter and Anna lived a total of seven years in Canada, with five of their children born in Ontario. Transitions between Mexico and Canada were not without complication, and reconciling their life in, and travel between, two countries was not easy. While both Peter and Anna speak of family life as a gift from God, financial hardships, anxiety around issues of faith, and related difficulties in family and community life are also part of their story.

During their years of travel between Canada and Mexico, Peter and Anna, along with their fourteen children, maintained their Old Colony church affiliation. However, differences between the churches in each country, especially around issues of material simplicity (e.g., ownership of motorized vehicles), contributed to a sense of displacement upon their return to Mexico.

While the Durango colony was settled during the 1920s Canadian migration, the region's conserving churches have been less open to new developments like *Musik*, automobiles, and rubber tires, than their counterparts in Ontario. Whereas in Canada, the use of motorized vehicles was generally accepted, divergent understandings of how to interpret Mennonite *orthopraxis* in Mexico led to Peter and Anna's excommunication for owning and driving a van, and to their eventual break with the Old Colony church.¹³ After this departure (1995), Peter, Anna, and their children attended both Kleine Gemeinde and Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference (EMMC) churches in Durango, churches known to welcome excommunicated Old Colonists into their congregations.¹⁴ In the years that followed, Peter, Anna, and the children who had not yet left home became members of Durango's EMMC church.¹⁵ Others, some of whom moved to Canada to find work, also became involved in EMMC congregations. Currently, none of Peter and Anna's children are Old Colony church members.

The family's treatment around the time of their excommunication shaped their thinking, but it was not the only impetus for the decision to leave the Old Colony church. Also contributing to their ultimate departure were experiences of evangelical conversion among family members that are



Figure 1. Photo of Peter and Anna Heide's thirteen children, taken before the birth of their youngest daughter, Anna. (The photo is from the family collection and is used here with the family's permission.)

described as transforming unhealthy dynamics within their home. Peter's own conversion experience is very personal, and family members see it as formative for the entire family. Publicly sharing his narrative in Low German, Peter recounts:

So nü wea ekj en fe'beiselda Maun. Ekj deed schmeaken, ekj säd emma ekj wea nijch een Drinkja je'wast, oba miene Frü sajcht, "Daut best goanijch aula enneworden. Deedst doch aul eene Buddel de' Wääjk, hast doch bie-aun ütjedrunken." Nü bruck ekj äwahaupt kjeent. Enn ekj foll wajch, ekj wea wajch je'follen. Dee Kjinja dee denken daut, dee weeten daut, woo seeja ekj je'roart hab. Ekj wull rüt enn ekj kunn nijch. Ekj wea faust enn Saump nennjerutscht. Zemorjess, ooda zeowents, dan deed ekj seeja hielen. Wull ekj han' see sullen sinjen, enn han see foaken fe mie je'sungen. Foaken, enn daut jing seeja scheen, daut see daut deeden. Enn ekj kunn doa nijch rüt. Enn ekj ha Gott je'prachat, "Ekj wull doa rüt!"

So now I was a lost man. I smoked, I always said I hadn't been a drinker, but my wife says, "You were not always aware of everything. You drank already one bottle a week in passing." Now I don't need any at all. And I fell away, I was lost. The children, they think, they know, how much I have bawled. I wanted out, but I couldn't get out. I was firmly stuck in a swamp. Mornings, or evenings, then I cried a great deal. I wanted them [the children] to sing, and they often sang for me. Often, and that was wonderful, that they did that. And I couldn't get out. And I begged God, "I want out!"

Met eenmol dan schekjt Gott en be'jeistate Maun. Dee kjeem enn dan deed a' Henj opplajen [...] enn bäden. Enn dee deed daut. Deed hee, hee deed daut em gloowen, enn ekj naum daut em gloowen aun, enn dan wea ekj looss fonn daut. No daut, woat Gott opp eenst senn fleijcht dicht bie je'wast. Dan wea dee Kjaumpft seeja seeja schwoa. Dan ha ekj je'kjampft. Seeja. Jing ekj enn jane Stow nenn enn jan Hüs waut wie doa hauden, mookt de däa too, deed dee säajen, enn Kraump dee too, schloot dee too daut mie doa kjeene wud nenn komen. Enn dan haft een Peeta Heide, waut featian Kjinja haud je'schräajen, „Gott, ekj senn en Sinda. Ekj ha je'sinnt jääjen Himmel enn fer Die. Kaust Du mie fe'jäwen?“ Enn kjeem enn naum mie dän Kaumpft wajch.

Enn dan jingt daut enn erfellung waut doa je'schräwe steit: Hee wauscht met Sien heetet Bloot een siene Sinden wajch.

And at once God sent to me a spirit-filled man. He came and he laid his hands on me and he prayed. And he did that. He did it in faith and I took it in faith. And then I was free from that. After that, God must have been very close. The struggle was very, very difficult. And I struggled a lot. I went into the next room in the house that we had then, closed the door, said a blessing, latched it so that no one would come in. And then one Peter Heide, who had fourteen children, cried out, "God, I am a sinner. I have sinned against Heaven and before You. Can You forgive me?" And He took my struggle away. And then came into fulfillment what has been written: With His warm blood He washes one's sins away.

Aus ekj eascht foadijch wea dan wull ekj nenn'gonen mie wauschen. Doa stun de Kjinja, bie de däa, enn, ekj kaun mie fon kjeenmol be'senne daut dee mie soo aunjekjickt han aus donn. Enn lota kjeenmol, enn fer däm uck nijch. Irgend waut kunn dee aun mie seen. Oba ekj ha nijch je'froagt woat. Ekj wist je waut hinja mie wea. (March 11, 2006)

When I was finished then I wanted to go inside and wash. There stood the children, by the door, and, I can never remember them looking at me in that way. Never after, and never before. They could see something on me. But I did not ask what. I knew what was behind me.¹⁶

It is this transition – from sin to redemption – that the Heides cite as vital to the transformation of their personal and family life, with assurance of salvation as the foundation for new ways of relating to one another. For the Heides, the experience of “being saved” is not only about personal spirituality, assurance of salvation, and separation from the conserving church; it marks an abrupt move away from what they experienced as unhealthy relational patterns among family members, and has enabled the formation of a new family body. In this sense, altered points of reference have less to do with the Old Colony church left behind than with new commitments and relationships of accountability within the family unit, commitments and relationships to which they credit the grace and power of God. Family members do not discuss in detail the difficulties they faced in the years leading up to their conversion experiences. They do, however, emphasize gratitude for the gospel message and its ability to work in their lives, both as individuals and as a family.

While many of Peter and Anna's children have since moved to Canada, memories of this period in the family's life remain vivid. Notably, music is cited as the primary enabler of this change. Recalling times of singing from his youth, Peter's son Johan relates:

Most of the time, what I remember doing it, we would be about eight of us that would be at home, and we'd all just go and sing whatever songs, and, Christian songs obviously, that we had learned in school, and Christian school, and just sing, and kind of tune him [Dad, Peter Heide] out of his world. And, I don't know, it just relaxed him and in minutes he was sleeping. (Personal communication, January 23, 2006)

In this account, music is a gift offered from the children to their father. Peter's direct participation is not required for music to affect his experience. Not only do Peter's children express unity of spirit by singing to him, they transform his immediate circumstances and dissipate anxiety. In Peter's own words: "You can't believe how nice that is if the family will sing to you" (personal communication, January 25, 2006). Revisiting music's ability to affect change, Johan continues:

One thing that has brought us to where we are is Dad – and I think that's part of what worked at Dad's heart – was singing. And that's part of what changed our whole life. Because we would learn Christian songs, and Dad would like the sound of it so much that we'd have to sing them over and over. Often if Dad had a very hard time, struggling with either business or whatever, he would go lie down and we'd go and sing in his room. And in no time he'd be sleeping. And he just loved singing. And, I don't know, the songs that we sang, I guess got us thinking. And not really knowing that the music that we were singing was changing our lives. (Personal communication, January 23, 2006)

What is provocative about Johan's reflections is the way in which he perceives family singing to have transformed not only particular situations and relationships, but the family itself. For Johan, it is not individual intent, but music and the act of singing together that enabled the gospel message to work in his family. Recognition of this potential was not required for these "changes" to occur. Whether recognized by singers or not, Johan attributes to music the ability to forge both interpersonal and spiritual connections.

Music's transformative capacity – in this case its ability to “change lives” – comes through in many Heide family narratives. While unity and connection across distance are cited as important, they are described as by-products of a more fundamental transition. It is the family's conversion experiences and their acceptance of Jesus' message of salvation that are understood to make family unity and ongoing renewal possible. Given the role of music in enabling their own transformations, it is perhaps not surprising that music is the vehicle through which they now seek to share the Christian gospel.

Evangelism

PH: Woo wurscht sajen, “*die Botschaft*”? [How would one say, “*die Botschaft*”?; italics indicate High German]

JH: “Message.”

PH: There are a lot of people that take the message out of the songs when the kids are singing. So, that's my vision to do now, and the kids our vision. Try to get more people for God.

JH: Through singing. (Peter Heide and Johan Heide, personal communication, January 25, 2006)

* * *

Through our singing we've been able to reach to Old Colony pastors, like Dad can connect with them. They come and listen to the singing and then Dad and them can talk about the Word. I think God is going to use it in a lot of different ways yet, if we let Him use us. With our singing. And, I don't know, I just think that – it's a way of spreading the Word. I *know* it is. I don't *think* it is. (Johan Heide, personal communication, January 23, 2006)

* * *

The Heide family's understanding of Christian faithfulness affects more than their relations with one another. It also implicates their Old Colony neighbours. Because evangelism is inseparable from faithfulness as they have come to understand it, their commitment to this task is a central component of the music that they make. It is not enough to merely celebrate their new life in Christ; the gospel message must also be shared.¹⁷

The facilitation of Bible studies among Old Colony family members



Figure 2. *Top photo*, Siblings Johan, George, Sarah, Anna, and Trudy Heide sing at a program in Chihuahua, Mexico; *Bottom photo*, Anna and Peter Heide (front) pictured with daughters Anna and Trudy Heide at their home in Durango, Mexico (These photos were taken by the author and are used here with permission.)

and conversation with Old Colony leadership in their community has been part of this mandate. However, Christian messages delivered through song are considered by the family to be among the most meaningful and effective methods of sharing the gospel, and to this end, they have become involved in evangelical programs in Mexico's Mennonite colonies.¹⁸ These "programs," or gatherings for music and testimony, usually occur in the evening and are open to Mennonites from all denominations, bringing together people who would not normally worship together on Sunday morning:

Song is one of the best ways to connect with the Old Colony. They love music for some reason. And it's one of the ways to share the gospel through the singing that we as a family can do. I remember last Christmas we were there, through the singing we can have a Bible study with Old Colony people that don't know about Jesus. They come because they want to hear the singing, but then also we had a little bit of a Bible study, and that way the word gets spread out, and – if it weren't for the singing I think we would get very little people coming, but they love the song. They love the music. And, I think that's one of the biggest reasons why we can connect with them, and get together with them. (Johan Heide, personal communication, January 23, 2006)

Clearly, this mandate is not without controversy. Old Colonists in Mexico left Canada in the 1920s in order to maintain nonconformist community ideals, and do not proselytise. In the Old Colony church, faith is not framed around a single conversion experience and subsequent personal relationship with Jesus, but is expressed in ongoing faithfulness through community discipleship. The Heides are aware of this divergence, and in many ways account for differences in worldview when preparing evangelical programs in the colonies. For example, they are sensitive about the use of instruments in their presentation (e.g., they do not use drums, which are associated with secular song practice, or "rock 'n' roll"); their programs are held in spaces that are not directly affiliated with a particular church congregation (i.e., granaries and barns, not church sanctuaries); and they dress, in Peter's words, Old Colony: "They don't expect to see somebody dressed like me doing such things. My clothes do almost more than the singing" (personal communication, February 11, 2006). Despite the care taken by the Heides to accommodate Old Colony worldview at performance events, they remain, however, unabashed in their predominant use of Low German,

De Droom

1. Ne Nacht weins ekj ded schlupen dan dreimd ekj saiija kloa
Ekj dreimd fon Enj fon dise tit daut wort mi upenboa
Ekj sach doa Miljion Sinda doa kjeien em jebäd
De Har kjeim truerich nu de dan en dit es waut he säd.

Chore Sinda ekj kjan di goanich gu waich ekj kjan di hieso nich
Sinda ekj kjan di goanich gu waich en dein wäm du jedeint up
dise Ied.

2. De Har de kjeim en sach tom rechten mi doa dan
Ekj säd to am ekj ha je doch jeläft fe di doa dan
De Har de kjikj upem blot nup en trurich dugt met'en Kopp
He haud doa dan ne hoade räd en dit es waut he säd.

Chore

3. Ekj sach doa miene Leewe Kjinja uk äare leewe stem
Miene Fru de sach doa jinja uk Jesus gaunz met en
Jo soone wite Kjeida jesechta gaunz em Fräd
Mien kjlinet Mäagsje kjikjt nu mi en dit es waut se säd.

Daddy wi motten scheiden wi gunen aula ni em scheena Himmel nen
Doch dou wi di noch Leewen du koss nimols nich maija ons Daddy sen

4. Dan's ekj iesch kun upwakjen de Uegen gaunz fehielt
Ekj ded mi so feschrakjen dan's ekj mi kjikj doa rom
Un sach de Leewe Kjinja O jo dit es en Droom
De Leewe Fru besid mi lich en freid ekj dan up schrich.

O Har em scheena Himmel ekj weit du hast jeschekjt dien Leewa Sän
O Har please fejem mi ekj wel jiern nu senen reid wan du iesch kjemst.

Spanish, and English song repertoires. The following section explores language use, specifically the use of Low German, in the Heides' music making and reception.

Language Use

When the Heides perform, their singing is usually unaccompanied and in homophonic three- and four-part harmony. While instruments are seldom

THE DREAM

1. At night while I was sleeping, I dreamed very clearly,
I dreamed of the end of this time, it was opened up to me,
I saw millions of sinners kneeling in prayer,
The Lord came sadly to them and this is what He said:

Chorus

Sinner, I do not know you. Go away I do not know you here.
Sinner, I don't know you. Go away and serve whom you served on this earth.

2. The Lord came to judge me there and then,
I said to Him "I have lived for You" there and then,
The Lord looked at the page and sadly shook His head,
He had a difficult speech, and this is what He said:

Chorus

3. I saw my children there and also their loving voice,
My wife looked younger there too, and she was with Jesus,
With such white clothing and faces all at peace,
My little girl looked at me and this is what she said:

Daddy, we have to part, now we are all going into beautiful Heaven,
Yet we still love you, but you can never more be our father.

4. Then as I first awoke, my eyes all red from crying,
I became so alarmed as I looked around,
And saw my beloved children, "Oh yes, this is a dream,"
My dear wife lies beside me and in peace I cried out:

O Lord in Heaven, I know You have sent Your beloved son,
O Lord, please forgive me, I want to be ready now when You come.

Figure 3. *Previous page*, Low German song text for "De Droom," copied from Heide compilation binder (transcription by Heide family members); *above*, English translation by the author.

used, guitar accompaniment is common on occasions when brothers David and Isaak are involved.¹⁹ While English and Spanish compositions fill out their extensive Low German repertoire, relatively few High German texts are utilized. In many cases, family members learn and transcribe into Low German songs from recordings imported from Canada and the United States; for songs not in Low German, texts are paraphrased for listeners prior to their performance.

Because the Heides use singing to communicate a specific message to their audiences, song texts are paramount when choosing repertoire. “De Droom,” for example, (Low German, “The Dream,” see Figure 3) is one of many Low German songs sung by the family that addresses a theme of transformation through Christ. The narrator of “De Droom” is a father who loves his family, but who dreams that he will be separated from them for eternity because of his sinfulness – God “does not know him.” It is only in the final verse that the possibility of reconciliation is presented, and in the final refrain that repentance occurs. A caution to preparedness for Christ’s return is central to the text of this narrative. Despite its emphasis on judgement, however, God is not depicted as unjust or cruel. Rather, the suffering of the protagonist is rooted in his own unbelief. When he wakes, the man is not afraid of God, but thankful that it is not yet too late to accept God’s mercy.

“Conversion” and salvation in Christ are central to the Heides’ message, and thus the inclusion of Low German songs like “De Droom” in their performance repertoire seems fitting. Because Low German is the first language of most listeners, the use of a Low German song text seems equally logical; if the family desires to share a particular message, it is helpful to speak in a language that listeners understand. Or is it?

Language use among Low German speaking Mennonites has been described as diglossic by scholars like Doreen Klassen (1989). In reference to her collection of Low German songs among Manitoba Mennonites, Klassen describes diglossia as a situation in which “two varieties of a language are spoken by the same speech community” (1989:7). Citing Charles Ferguson (1959:330), she goes on to describe how the “high or prestige form” of a diglossic language is often considered to be “more beautiful, more logical, [and] better able to express important thoughts” than its “low” counterpart (1989:7). While Klassen’s research was carried out in Manitoba, the functional divisions around Mennonite High and Low German in northern Mexico have been described, as noted earlier, as using a similar framework.²⁰ Based on “the Old Colony Mennonite tendency to designate all events and practices into either an ‘everyday’ or ‘Sunday-like’ realm” during her fieldwork in northern Mexico (1996:12), Hedges describes High and Low German as *sindeosche* (Low German, “Sunday-like”) and *auldeosche* (Low German, “everyday”) languages, respectively (1996:15).

Aware of its conventional role as an *auldeosche* language, and despite experiences of disapproval in the context of their own extended family gatherings, the Heides nevertheless include Low German songs in their

programs of worship. For them, the language is a means of enhancing their evangelical message. Returning to Johan Heide's observation, "when you sing words, they hear words, and if you sing it clear enough they can understand it" (personal communication, January 23, 2006). However, as Hedges has carefully described with regard to language use, sacrality is embedded in forms of social structure for Old Colony Mennonites (i.e., the *oole Ordnung*). For conserving Old Colonists, then, a religious text is not the only ingredient that makes a song sacred. Indeed, if High German is the language of worship, and Low German the language of everyday, then their inversion in the context of an evangelical music program could be received as irreverent to Old Colony listeners.

Still, the Heides are well received when presenting programs to varied Mennonite audiences. Why is it that language choices that seem to contradict conserving worldviews nevertheless enable connections to Old Colony audiences? What is it about the Heides' music that mollifies the tensions implicit in their performances? Here, Hedges' work is again



Figure 4. On the left is pictured *De Bibel* (Low German, "The Bible"), purchased Chihuahua, Mexico. To the right is *Der Katechismus in Deutsch und Plattdeutsch* (High German, "The Catechism in German and Low German"), also purchased in Chihuahua.

informative:

Conceptions about language and society are culturally constructed and are enmeshed in issues of societal and institutional conflict and power struggles. The different uses of languages and literacies among the Old Colony Mennonites not only encode and mediate the Old Colonists' conceptions of themselves and their world... but they do so with real and direct consequences for both the community and for particular individuals. Conceptions about language and literacy are constructed and maintained, contested and defended, and sometimes changed. (1996:195).

That Low German is no longer explicitly divorced from the "sacred" realm among Old Colony Mennonites is evident in the sale of Low German Bibles in the colonies. That language comprehension in the "sacred" realm is taken seriously by some Old Colonists is evident in the presence of *Der Katechismus in Deutsch und Plattdeutsch* (High German, "The Catechism in German and Low German") in their homes (Figure 4).

The mere presence of these texts does not account for the acceptance of performance choices made by the Heides, choices that seem to contradict conserving church norms. It does, however, uncover an important and hitherto unacknowledged aspect of the Heides' music making; namely, the possibility of choice among their listeners. Hedges writes about language use and literacy, but the issues that she addresses also apply to music. While conceptions around Old Colony song and worship are encoded in specific language choices and song practices, these conceptions are socially constructed and are maintained only through the lived experiences of engaged participants. That is to say, Old Colony audience members choose to attend programs presented by the Heides, and participate in the construction of sacrality within their communities. While in some ways the song choices of the Heide family contest acceptable Old Colony practice, openness among audience members to new repertoires reflects the engagement of those audience members in encoding song with meaning. This participation may sometimes serve to maintain musical norms, but these norms may also be "contested and defended, and sometimes changed" (Hedges 1996:195). While the relative points of reference for Old Colony and evangelical Mennonite participants may differ, the choice of each individual to engage in the music event and to imbue the Heides' music with meaning is significant. It unravels not only stereotypes of uniformity among Mexico's Mennonites, but also those attempts to counter

such stereotypes by polarizing evangelical and conserving experience. Here, the recognition of individual choice within a larger community structure contests assumptions of sameness without negating the importance of relationship and community in Mexican Mennonite life.

Members of the Heide family are not the first to grapple with issues around language in their music making. Writing about the implications of language use and dialect in her work with identity and contemporary Native American music, Beverley Diamond asserts:

Whether musicians choose English or use a local Indigenous language, whether they ally with a specific region, ethnicity or class by using a particular dialect or accent, the way one speaks and sings is loaded with signification. Aboriginal musicians must decide whether to perform in English in order to reach a wider audience, or to use their native language to reflect on political, intellectual, or social issues. (2006:18)

Like the Aboriginal musicians that Diamond writes about, the way that the Heides speak and sing is “loaded with signification.” In their case, the decision to sing in a Low German dialect known to their audiences identifies them as Mennonites and allies them with those audiences. This alliance is not unqualified, however. As Hedges’ work demonstrates, language use holds social significance in the Mennonite colonies, meaning that the Heides’ divergent use of an *auldeosche* language (Low German) in the context of worship signals a potentially subversive song. Again paralleling Diamond’s example, the family’s choice does not squarely align them with a particular group or body. By making God their only explicit reference point, the Heides are able to – as Diamond has suggested of certain Native American artists – “emphasize difference and solidarity at the same time” (personal communication). Their performances demonstrate not only hybrid musical forms, but hybrid processes of engagement.

Conclusions

This exploration of Low German song demonstrates that identifying so-called “Christian” music is sometimes complex. The theological message of song texts and associations with the language in which those texts are sung affect how they are received and in what context they are appropriate. Whereas the Heides perceive their repertoire choices as pushing

theological boundaries among audience members, they are aware of how they present themselves, and concerned with how that presentation is received. This does not dispel all tensions around their performance, but it does affect their reception.

On one hand, the Heides' evangelism can be seen as an imposition on their Old Colony neighbours and family, an effort that undermines the conserving church by calling its members to an evangelical faith that emphasizes individual assurance of salvation over community discipleship. Because this message is itself a challenge to conserving audiences, the Heides' use of Low German takes on additional weight. The *auldeosche* language not only makes song texts explicit, it also disrupts the language paradigm. In talking to the Heides, however, and in watching them perform, it becomes evident that while their music making is part of an effort to proselytize, it is not motivated by a disdain for the Old Colony Mennonites around them, but by their desire to share the transformative joy of their own experiences.

By showing sensitivity in their music making (be it through dress, instrument use, or varied language and genre choices), while being honest about their beliefs and experiences, the Heides balance challenge and accommodation in relation to their listeners. They recognize that conserving audience members are not passive, but, rather, engaged participants in specific music experiences. While this does not dissolve complexities surrounding song practice as it relates to church and community relations, it provides a reminder that essentialist assumptions of uniformity cannot be countered by assumptions of discord, despite fundamentally conflicting worldviews. Tensions between conserving and evangelical Mennonites cannot be ignored; however, the polarization of "evangelical" and "conserving" does not itself provide an adequate framework for exploring the points at which these belief systems intersect. Instead, the complex network of relationships between church, family, and community must be taken into account. It is here that the paradox of "Christian" song, one that simultaneously endears and alienates, becomes most vivid. The Heides sing "Christian" songs to Old Colony Mennonite family members who derogatorily deem them "evangelists." The family recognizes the incompatibility of their Low German song repertoire with the language paradigm of Old Colony audiences, yet it is precisely this repertoire that enables connections with those audiences. Audience members do not necessarily share the evangelical ideology expressed by the Heides; still conversations are started and apparently rigid boundaries of church affiliation are diminished through musical exchange. This is not a simple "unity in diversity through music"

wherein a particular repertoire transcends cultural and theological barriers between groups. One could in fact argue that this repertoire and the evangelical nature of its sharing are constitutive of these barriers. In the music of the Heide family we encounter a song practice that is possible only through the engagement of both audience and performer, one that successfully negotiates an enactment of “Mennonite” that does not depend on assumptions of sameness nor discord. ❁

Notes

1. Fretz and Sawatzky’s membership numbers suggest a lower percentage of approximately 66% for Old Colony Mennonites in relation to Mexico’s total Mennonite population (2008:6).

2. Mexico’s Old Colony church had 17,200 members in 2006. Smaller, but nevertheless significant memberships were recorded among *Kleine Gemeinde* (2,150), *Sommerfelder* (2,043), *Reinländer* (1,350), *Conferencia Menonita de México* (697), and *Evangelical Mennonite Mission* (97) churches (Fretz and Sawatzky 2008: 6).

3. There are a number of evangelical Mennonite conferences active in northern Mexico, and it is to their member churches that my use of “evangelical Mennonites” refers. The *Conferencia Menonita de México* (CMM) was established in 1991, and is comprised of three Mennonite churches, all located in the state of Chihuahua (Quiring 2003:76). The *Evangelical Mennonite Mission Conference* (EMMC), with head offices in Canada, has also established three congregations in Mexico, two in the state of Chihuahua, and one in Durango. <http://www.emmc.ca/provisioner/article.php?ArticleID=32> (accessed March 21, 2009)

4. These stereotypes exist in both popular media and academic scholarship. Recent media accounts have emphasized sameness among Mexico’s Mennonites in order to draw out the anomaly of conservatively dressed, pacifist Mennonites involved in drug-trafficking networks that operate throughout North America (Davison 1996; Mitrovica and Bourette 2005). Academic scholarship as recent as 2004 has portrayed Mexico’s Mennonite colonies as fundamentalist, patriarchal religious communities attracted to the desert for its harsh climate and isolation, both functioning to keep community members from leaving the colonies (Bennion 2004). In each case, the diversity of Mexico’s Mennonite population is not accounted for.

5. This definition of “assurance of salvation” is based on that given by Bruce Guenther in his 2004 article, “A Road Less Traveled: The Evangelical Path of Kanadier Mennonites who returned to Canada” (156).

6. The catechism is a book that is compiled as a series of questions and answers connected to Anabaptist faith, and that outlines biblical narratives and Mennonite

beliefs. Portions are recited daily in Old Colony schools, with the entire corpus memorized by all youth wishing to be baptized into the Old Colony church.

7. For more information on tensions between Old Colony and other Mennonite groups in Mexico, see Quiring 2003; 2004.

8. Exceptions do exist however. In 2008, I was told of an Old Colony fundraising event that featured three contrasting musical acts: the first sang unaccompanied unison hymns in High German, the second performed in Spanish, and the third combined German and Spanish repertoires with guitar and drum kit (Lisa Wolf, personal communication, March 26).

9. In 1 Samuel 16, for example, David plays the lyre and finds favour with God. Other biblical references are cited from the Psalms of the Old Testament, where references to praising God with musical instruments are frequent (e.g., Psalms 81, 92, 98, 108, 144, 147, and 149).

10. The “gospel message,” “the message,” “the gospel,” and the “Christian gospel” are all terms used by evangelical Christians, and refer to the salvation, forgiveness, and redemption promised to those who believe that Jesus died for their sins and rose again.

11. Victor Carl Friesen (1988), Herman Rempel (1995), and Jack Thiessen (2003) have all made significant contributions to the field of Mennonite Low German; still, its orthography is not fixed. It is for this reason that some Mennonites refer to the language as “unfinished.”

12. In 2006, there were at least five evangelical Mennonite denominations with Spanish-Mexican presiding officers active in Mexico (Fretz and Sawatzky 2008:6), a testament to the relevance of language use as a factor in evangelical movements in Mennonite Mexico.

13. Excommunication is a form of discipline used in conserving churches to name actions that are out of keeping with church practice, and to re-establish right relationship between church members. Excommunicants are barred from fellowship with their church community, meaning they are not to worship with, eat with, or even speak to other church members until apology has been made and right relationship restored. For a lengthier discussion, see Sawatzky, 1971:315-317.

14. The Kleine Gemeinde church is seen by some as a church “in-between” Mexico’s Old Colony and evangelical churches; dress is similar to that of the Old Colonists, but the group is purported to have “more relaxed rules, and the added appeal of still appearing relatively conservative” (Quiring 2003:78).

15. At that time, five of Peter and Anna’s children (Johan, George, Sarah, Trudy, and Anna) were living at home.

16. This text is transcribed from a testimony given by Peter Heide in 2006, shared publicly at an evangelical event organized by a Mennonite family in the state of Chihuahua. The transcription is based on Rempel’s Low German-English dictionary, *Kjenn jie noch Plaut Dietsch* (1995), and, to a lesser extent, Thiessen’s *Mennonite Low German Dictionary / Mennonitisch-Platdeutsches Wörterbuch* (2003). Within the main body of the text, or when quoting published sources, I italicize

unfamiliar terms in roman type. All transcriptions and translations are mine.

17. While the family's evangelism is a clear marker of their departure from the Old Colony church, church affiliation and worship style were not their first foray into challenging Old Colony expectations. Brothers Johan and David Heide, for example, acted in *One Man's Hero* (1999), a Hollywood film about warring between Mexico and the United States, starring Tom Barringer. Johan, who was fourteen years old when he snuck onto the bus carrying extras to the film site in Durango, quickly became a translator on the set, and like many of the other Mennonites present received military training in order to fill his role as a soldier in the army. With the monies earned from this project, the Heides brought electricity to their house in Durango (Johan Heide, personal communication, January 23, 2006).

18. Because some of Peter and Anna's children live in Canada, and because Anna prefers listening to performance, the entire family does not perform in these programs. During my fieldwork, Peter organized events that involved those children who lived in Mexico: Anna, David, George, Isaak, Johan, Sarah, and Trudy.

19. David and Isaak live in Mexico but not in the same village as Peter and Anna, thus their participation in programs is limited by distance. In 2006, a number of the Heides began piano and violin lessons at the *Steinreich Bibelschule* in northern Mexico with a view to incorporating these instruments into their performances.

20. Wolfgang Moelleken has argued for a diglossic interpretation of the Mexican Mennonite case (1987, in Hedges:187).

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