

The Mennonites of Altai: Marriage Structures and Cultural Transmission

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As this audience is predominantly constituted by members of disciplines other than anthropology or ethnology, I would like begin with some preliminary remarks that will hopefully clarify some of the terms and concepts that I intend to use. But even before that, I would like to provide some biographic details that will outline the context of the research project that serves as the basis of this presentation.

I visited the Mennonites of Slavgorod and Khabary districts of the Altai region for the first time thirty years ago, in 1980. At that time, I was working at a medical demography department of one of the institutes of the Siberian Branch of the Academy of Medical Sciences. The institute carried out a diversified and comprehensive research program across Siberia, the Far North and the Far East. The budget allocated for field research was so large that it permitted year-round field research if one so desired. Employees of the institute had extensive and strong ties not only within the Academy of Medical Sciences, but also with the institutes and scholars of the Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk, Moscow and Leningrad. Precisely those relations played

a rather unusual part in the fate of the research project that I wanted to pursue back in the 1980s. At the institute there was also a department of medical genetics that at the time was engaged in research of the genetic health of indigenous peoples of Siberia and in particular of Gornyi Altai. At that time, geneticists preferred to study relatively isolated communities. Those specific research objects which were called, often without sufficient ground, “populations,” were isolated not so much geographically, but rather socially or culturally, i.e. people from these groups preferred to find partners among people of the same culture, language or faith. Such marriage preferences within the community in population genetics and anthropology are usually called “endogamous.” Endogamy is seldom absolute. Usually this is a set of the so called “marriage circles” (otherwise known as “demes,” or “circles of marriage isolation”), and the level of endogamy rarely constitutes more than seventy to eighty percent of people within each such circle, although together they make up a population structure with a higher overall endogamy level. The subdivision of such a system into a number of predominantly endogamous “demes” is called “population marriage structure” in population genetics or simply “population structure.” A study of the Mennonite population structure became the main object of my research at that time.

But why Mennonites? The choice had been determined by a number of accidental contingencies. The Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR launched a joint Soviet-American project on the study of longevity. In its framework, a field research was carried out by a team of Soviet anthropologists in Abkhazia and Azerbaijan, whereas American scholars studied Mennonites in Kansas. As far as I remember, the project was led by Michael Crawford, who at the time headed the Department of Biological Anthropology at the University of Kansas, and Vera Rubin, Director of the Institute of the Study of Man in New York (Crawford 1998, Rubin 1981). Valerii Pavlovich Alekseev, my future supervisor and academician (at that time he was still a correspondent member of the Academy of Sciences) also took part in the project. It was with him that I discussed my project on the study of Altai Mennonites. At that time few people knew about this group. I knew from friends from their midst that because of persecution and ongoing pressure on “sectarians” Mennonite communities remained “closed,” and that an outsider would encounter what seemed insurmountable difficulties in conducting research. After a few reconnaissance trips made for the purpose of identifying villages with a predominantly Mennonite population, I entered into an agreement with Barnaul Medical Institute to allow me to conduct a summer internship of medical students of Mennonite origin, and then supervised the work of small groups of two to three students in their native villages who collected

data for my research. I was interested in the population structure and genetic health situation in Mennonite villages; hence the students collected data regarding marriages, births and deaths that could easily be accessed in village soviets. During house-to-house interviewing (I visited mostly elderly people), I drew genealogical trees, and gradually collected genealogical information that in the subsequent four years of research covered approximately five generations of practically all village residents.¹ While gathering genealogical data, I also collected some basic facts on settlement history. The only set of questions which I consciously excluded from my interviews were questions concerning faith and religion, as I was perfectly aware that such topics were very sensitive, and the information collected on those issues could attract the attention of not necessarily academic interests.

Altai Mennonites at that time represented a rather specific community. Outsiders considered them Germans and even local historians could not tell exactly which, out of the large number of German villages in the western part of the Altai region, were Mennonite and which were settled predominantly by German colonists. In order to reconstruct the history of Slavgorod settlement as well as Mennonite history in general, I had to rely on fragmented data from various sources and books in half a dozen languages (at that time I could read English and German, but my research required me to learn to read Dutch, French, Polish and Ukrainian historical works). In addition I had a list of Mennonite family names, in total more than 350 names, of those who came to Russia from Western Prussia at the time of Catherine the Great and in subsequent emigration waves. When I worked at Barnaul archives and read collective farm documentation, that list allowed me to identify villages established by Mennonites. Later I compared my list with other data and they turned out to be fully congruent.

The Mennonite settlement history in the western Altai is as follows. In 1906-12 the so-called Barnaul colony (later Slavgorod colony) that became the largest Mennonite settlement in the USSR, was established in Kulunda steppe. Residents of former daughter colonies (Orlovo-Zagradovka, Ufa, Samarkand and Orenburg) who sent delegates to inspect the land that was opened for settlement in 1906, took part in its establishment. The majority of Mennonite settlers were distributed among fifty nine newly established villages of the Kulunda steppe, where the government allotted about 60,000 dessiatins (65,400 hectares) of land. The settlers received gratis a small travel allowance, were exempt from taxation for five years and from state duties for three years, and received a loan of 160 rubles. In spite of these incentives, life in the new location was difficult, mainly because of its remote location isolated from railroads, river ports, and state forestries (the closest ports, Pavlodar and Kamen'-na-Obi' were 240 kilometers away,

and the nearest forest, a hundred kilometers away), and the absence of flour mills, repair workshops, etc. In 1910 the settlement of Slavgorod gained the status of a town and the colony got its new name of Slavgorod colony. In 1916 the railway reached Slavgorod.

Initially Mennonite villages were united in one volost (county) with a center in the village of Orloff (later Orlovo); in 1916 another volost was established with a center in Chortitza (Khortitsa). In 1907 the colony was comprised of thirty six villages. In 1906 the first so-called "frontier settlement," Gliadni, located 120 kilometers from Slavgorod, was established. It consisted of four villages: Lichtfelde, Ebenfeld, Ivanovka and Sluchainoye. In 1910 three other Mennonite villages, Fernheim, Sergeyevka and Gnadenthal, with thirty eight homesteads each, were established forty five kilometers away from Slavgorod. In 1912 another frontier settlement consisting of four villages, Nikolayevka, Silberfeld (later Serebropol), Khorosheye and Saratov, was established thirty five kilometres to the south of Slavgorod. The same year, 110 kilometres from Slavgorod, another Mennonite settlement appeared under the name of Pashnya which consisted of five villages: Grigor'yevka, Morkovka, Anan'yevka, Ekaterinovka and Zhelanovka. The last such settlement in Altai was Chayachiy colony consisting of three villages: Nikolayevka, Alekseyevka and Tat'yanovka. Thus the Mennonite settlement system in Slavgorod district had been formed by 1912 and groups that arrived later settled in existing villages.

In terms of religious denominations and congregations, the Slavgorod Mennonite colony was subdivided into five congregations in the case of Kirchliche Mennonites: Orlovskiy congregation with six villages; Grünfeld with five villages; Reinfeld with eight villages; Kleefeld with eight villages and Markovskiy with six villages. Mennonite Brethren resided in Schoenwiese, Schoenthal, Alexandrovka, Gnadenheim and Grishkovka (former Alexanderfeld). Mennonite Brethren villages were not united in congregations. By 1917 small numbers of Mennonite Brethren settled in the villages of Fernheim and Saratov, in the colonies of Pashnya, Svistunovo, Chayachiy, Gliadni and in the town of Slavgorod. In 1913 according to the *Mennonitisches Lexikon*, nine Mennonite congregations in Altai comprised 10,416 people (Bd. I: S. 126). As of December 1921, 14,890 Mennonites lived in the Slavgorod Mennonite colony. By the time of this research in the early 1980s, the Mennonite population in western Altai had quadrupled.

The analysis of marriage structure requires a rather complicated methodology. A researcher should have complete information on all contracted marriages for a period of twenty to twenty five years (the approximate length of a generation) for a group of villages which is relatively isolated from the surrounding population. Isolating factors might be *geographic*—the lack of roads, the presence of large rivers

or mountain ridges and valleys separating one population from all others—as well as *social*—preference of contracting marriages among fellow believers or between the speakers of the same language and people sharing the same culture, with similar education level, social strata, etc. In genetics and anthropology such “mating within” is most often called “assortative mating.” Deme boundary mapping (or the mapping of marriage circles into which every population is subdivided) and isolating barriers are required not only of population geneticists or epidemiologists. Such data are of substantial interest to linguists and in particular for dialectologists, as they permit a better understanding of the social conditionality of linguistic geography. Such data are also of interest to anthropologists as they point to a new direction of research of rituals and traditions and of their spatial distribution patterns.

I will omit the technical description of the methods of marriage structure analysis since it will require more time than is allotted for the presentation (I refer the interested readers to my publications describing marriage structures of Altai Mennonites: Sokolovsky 1986; 1987; 1989a; 1989b; 1989c; 1989d; 1996); and the methods of population structures analysis (2004) as well as to the works by anthropologists and geneticists detailing population analysis methods (Bunak 1980; Fix 1979; Romney 1971; Strauss and Romney 1982.) I will only briefly dwell on the results that concern Mennonite villages in Altai.

Alongside the collection of genealogical data collected during several field visits, I made copies of all the registrations of marriages which took place in Mennonite villages in the former Blagoveshchenskiy, Slavgorodskiy and Khabarskiy districts of the Altai region that were filed with the district archive of the Civil Acts Registry Office (ZAGS) for the twenty years that preceded the starting year of the research, i.e. for the period of 1963-82. Altogether 3,413 marriage partners were registered representing 171 family names or surnames; in 1,163 marriages (2,326 marriage partners) both spouses were Mennonite. The twenty year period was taken because geneticists and demographers consider it to be the minimal length of a generation. The analysis of marriage exchange among ten villages of Khabarskiy raion revealed that up to 80% of marriages took place within four marriage circles, each of which included residents of four to seven neighboring villages. In some cases, marriages between geographically neighboring villages of different marriage circles were completely absent as, for example, between the residents of neighboring villages of Chertezh and Nikol'skiy, which formerly belonged to different congregations and at the time of research also to different village soviets. Such cases of the complete absence of marriages (or the existence of very weak marriage exchange) between residents of neighboring villages were common. They reveal the presence of isolating barriers within the Mennonite

community: the presence of marital structures, of population subdivisions, and its disintegration into a number of semi-isolated marriage circles or demes.

What are mechanisms for the formation of such marriage circles? This question demands consideration of another important concept in the analysis of social structures, the so-called social transmission or social *cumatoids* (from Greek κύμα, meaning *wave*), the term introduced by Russian philosopher Mikhail A. Rozov (2008). Russian anthropologist Sergey A. Arutyunov designated intergenerational cultural reproduction as “diachronic info-ties” (1989, 21). The use of the wave metaphor for the description of a tradition transfer seems very apt, especially for those who have some idea of the physics of wave dissemination. The essential similarity between tradition and wave is that during the wave dissemination the particles of substance do not move together with the wave but oscillate near their positions of balance or move along closed trajectories predetermined by the wave. Rozov writes that society “as a whole is very much wave-like as it permanently reproduces itself from generation to generation in the form of a complex program of human behavior but each time on new [human] material” (2008, 39).

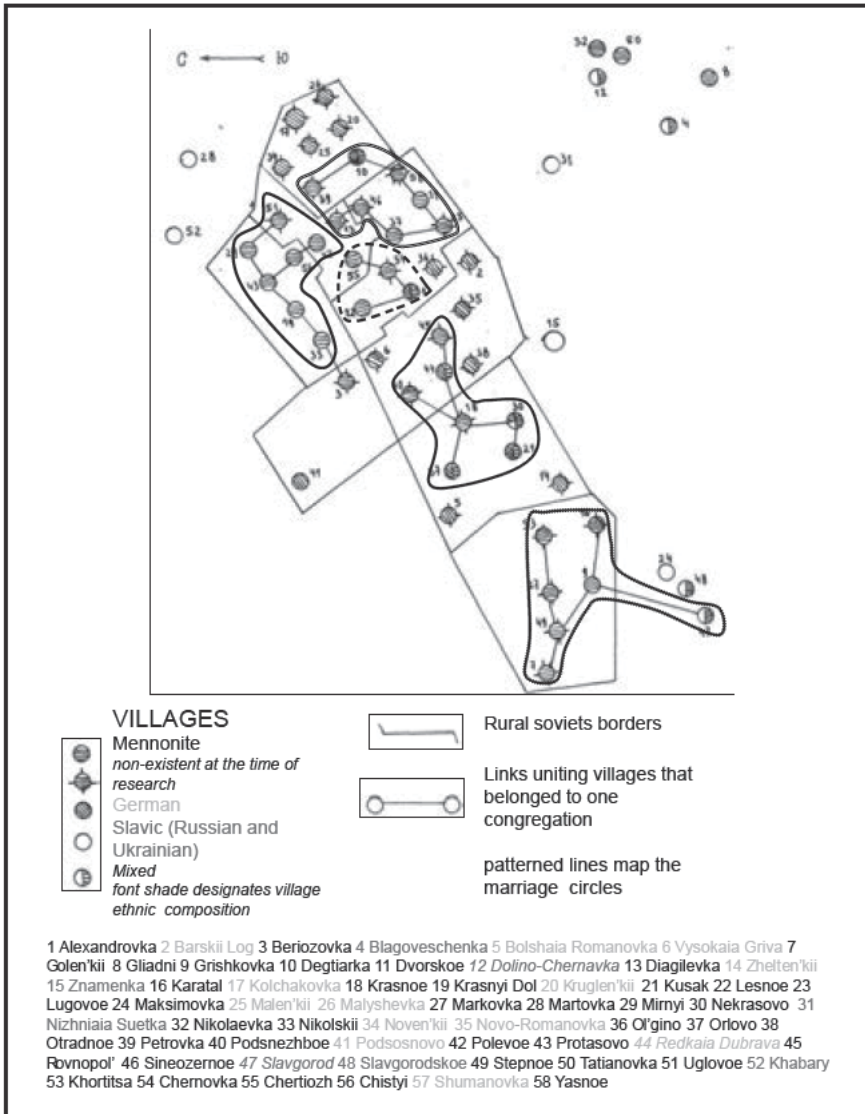
Let us come back to our discussion of marital migration in Mennonite villages. Of what interest are such population structures for historians, anthropologists and linguists besides that deme boundaries coincide with local dialect geography? The coincidence is not surprising as a dialect (unlike a written or literary language that is reproduced by mass media, book publishing, etc.) lives and is reproduced in the family or, more accurately, in groups of families tied by kinship and common residence in neighboring villages. It is obvious that a mechanism of dialect reproduction is not only everyday communication of its speakers but also demographic reproduction of a given group of families that comprise residents of several villages and that in its turn is secured by marital preferences, i.e. preferential selection of a marital partner among “their own people.” It is amazing that the boundaries of such population units, subdividing them into a number of relatively independent marital circles, are rather stable in time. I managed to discover the traces of former congregational structures in the contemporary (at the time of research) system of marital preferences many years after the destruction of church life due to the persecution for faith. The reason for this, in my opinion, is that besides common mechanisms of preservation and transfer of traditional culture—family, school, professional and friends communication circles—a special role among Mennonites was played by the *believers' congregation*. A congregation of people of faith (*Gemeinde*) was considered in Mennonite theology as the only guarantee for saving the soul, and it required isolation from

the sinful external world. Hence, the principle of marrying fellow believers that belong to the same Mennonite denomination, or, even better to the same congregation. S. D. Bondar' already in the early years of the twentieth century (1916, 130) noticed the endogamy of Mennonite congregations.

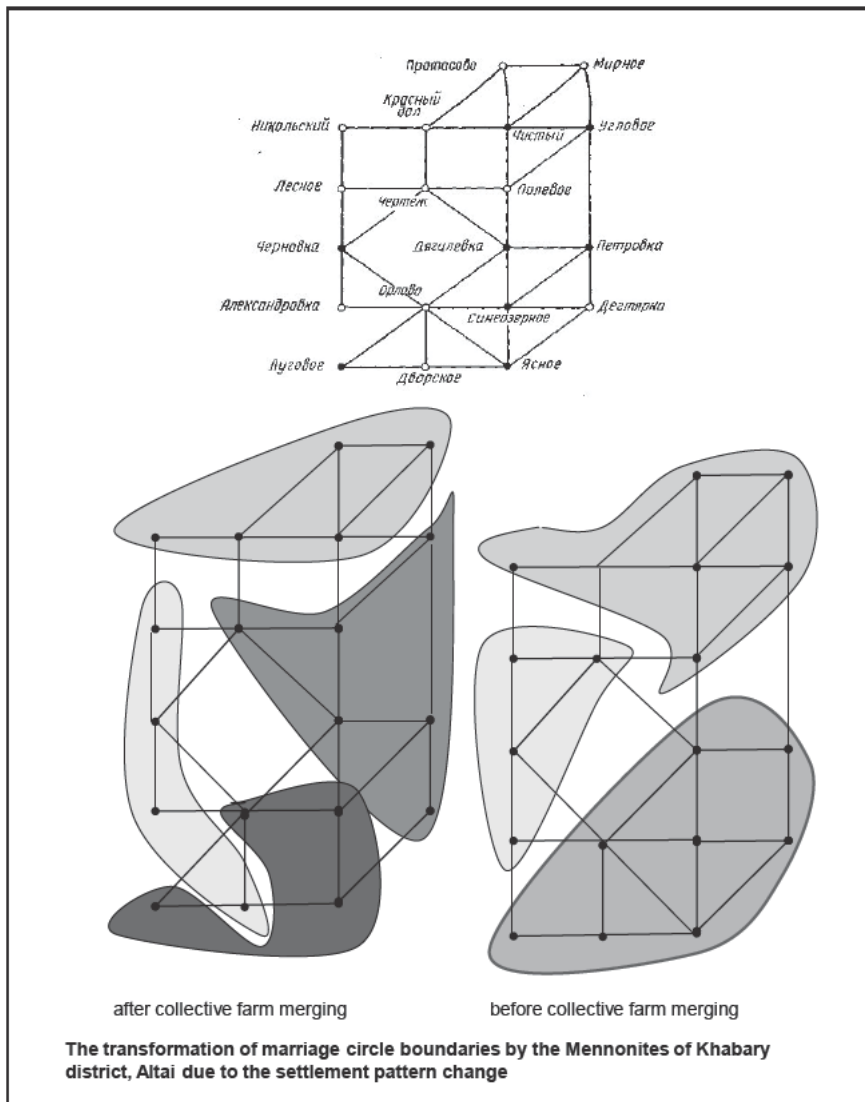
By the early 1980s, former congregations that existed in the Slavgorod colony had disintegrated. Some Mennonites joined Baptists, and their former division into Kirchliche and Brüderliche became a thing of the past. Two waves of collective farm merging in the first half of the 1950s and second half of the 1960s changed the existing settlement system and made it difficult for researchers to differentiate the descendants from various smaller villages born already in the merged and enlarged rural settlements. It seemed that nothing remained of former congregational subdivisions and those specific language and culture variations which were characteristic of those local communities. But the local population could still distinguish the natives from different villages judging by appearance and manner of speaking even without knowing people personally (Bunak 1980, 252). When I finally managed to map out deme boundaries and local isolating barriers (see Graphs 1 and 2), I was surprised to discover the high degree of their correspondence with formerly existing congregational borders. I have already mentioned the absence of marriages between neighboring villages which belonged to different congregations. Cultural transmission and social practices appeared to be stronger than social cataclysms that rocked local communities. Finally only emigration led to the loss of stability of the local Mennonite subcultures that existed in the western Altai.

Translated by Olga Shmakina

Graph 1. Ethnic composition, marriage circles and congregation boundaries of the Mennonites of Altai



Graph 2. Settlement pattern change and marriage structure transformation of the Mennonites in Altai (Khabary district only, 1963-1982)



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Notes

¹ I deposited these materials into the Mennonite Library and Archives, Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas (Sokolovsky, Sergey MLA.MS.320).