LEGACY OF A MENNONITE STATE
Settlers’ colonialism still shapes German-speaking communities of Paraguay

By Ben Goossen
For Mennonite World Review

BENFELD, Paraguay — Rain woke me in the night. The roar on the tin roof drowned out the frogs, if any were still singing. Only the thrashing of palm leaves across the downpour. In the morning, I learned that schools were canceled. It was too muddy to drive.

I was staying last month in an outpost village of Menno Colony, a 90-year-old German-language Mennonite settlement in the center of Paraguay’s rural Gran Chaco. Comprising 60 percent of the country’s land, the Chaco holds just 2 percent of its population. A five-hour bus ride from the capital, Asunción, took me along half-maintained roads through miles of low-lying bush, natural clearings broken by bottle trees and stands of hardwood quebracho. “Rain days” have been common this year. With wet El Niño conditions, schoolchildren in Menno Colony are used to attending Saturday make-up lessons. Life is orderly for the Chaco’s 15,000 white, “ethnic” Mennonites. They take pride in the high standards of their educational institutions as well as their farms, industry and churches. Residents identify efficiency as a key wellspring of their wealth. Indeed, they earn an average of $42,000 a year — 10 times the Paraguayan per capita income.

I was lucky to be hosted by the intrepid Uwe Friesen, head of the Paraguayan Mennonite Historical Society and owner of a mud-ready pickup. With school buses off the usually bone-dry dirt roads, we motored our way through deep muck, passing green cattle pastures and ripening orchards, eventually arriving in the administrative center of Loma Plata. Friesen gave me a tour. He showed me the town’s museum and archive, its large milk-bottling plant and a string of beautiful brick churches. I learned about the settlement’s collective land-holding and financial system, its Cooperativa. Menno is a “colony” in no idle sense. Like two other Mennonite settlements in the Chaco, plus another two in the country’s more populous eastern region, it forms a self-contained administrative unit. In addition to cultural and infrastructural public works, from radio programs to trash removal, the Cooperativa and related institutions formally own all colony

German-speaking Mennonites attend Sunday worship at a village church in Paraguay’s Gran Chaco.

This is a vibrant world, alive with flowering trees and Bible studies, volleyball tournaments and miniature ostriches.

See Paraguay, page 13
In Paraguay, colonists are still a people apart

Continued from page 1

land. Members pay dues to ensure prosperity in a region where the national government has limited oversight. A ledger system allows monitary exchanges to occur without cash. One local described Memo as a “state within a state.”

A land with no culture?

This is not a novel characterization. Although few remember it today, Paraguay was once the site of a global Zoraster-like movement. “We envisioned a future Memnonite state,” U.S. church leader and Memnonite Central Committee representative Harold S. Bender informed the second World Memnonite Confer-

ence in 1930, referring to international efforts to relocate more than 100,000 colonists from the Soviet Union. “A particular advantage of the Paraguayan Chaco,” he exclaimed, “is the fact that no culture exists there. There is no culture that the Memnonites, with their German culture, will disappear into a foreign culture.”

Though Bender’s words sound strange, even fantastic, today, they would have resonated with tens of thousands of Memnonites scattered across three continents during the interwar years. In the wake of the First World War, global Anabaptism seemed under attack. Congregations in North America faced accusations of communist nonsenses, nonresistance was illegal across most of Europe, and in Stalin’s Soviet Union, church leaders were threatened by the existence of the world’s largest Memnonite population. Where could persecuted Memnonites find a homeland?

Memnonite nationalism

Growing up in Kansas, among the descendants of Russian Memnonites who immigrated to the United States after the Russian Revolution of 1917, I was exposed to the idea of an independent nation. My great-grandfather had come to America from Russia, and I was told stories about his experiences. I was taught about the history of the Memnonites and their struggles for independence.

Images of white colonists as resourceful pioneers — not only in Paraguay but also across Asia, Africa, and the Americas — have long provided smoke screens for less-than-ideal relations with minority peoples of color. Like Bender’s description of the Chaco as empty of culture, these tropes can justify or even obscure indigenous peoples’ existence altogether.

Segregated, unequal

In the Gran Chaco, people of color — whom “ethnic” Memnonites usually refer to as “Paraguayanos” or “Indios” — are divided, with those who attend Anabaptist churches having a particular advantage. When they attend Anabaptist churches, they are often segregated from the rest of the population. This segregation continues to this day in Paraguay.

Segregation is a common practice in countries where indigenous peoples are the majority or in places where they have been systematically excluded from political and economic power. In Paraguay, the indigenous population is disadvantaged in many ways, including access to education, healthcare, and other basic services. This segregation is not only a result of historical and cultural factors, but it also reflects the ongoing influence of colonialism and racism.

A monument commemorates the founding of Fernheim Colony in 1930 by Memnonites from Russia. More than 1,000 had fled to Germany and hoped to immigrate to Canada. When Canada refused to admit them, Memnonite Central Committee helped the group settle in Paraguay.

Images of white colonists as resourceful pioneers — not only in Paraguay but also across Asia, Africa, and the Americas — have long provided smoke screens for less-than-ideal relations with minority peoples of color. Like Bender’s description of the Chaco as empty of culture, these tropes can justify or even obscure indigenous peoples’ existence altogether.}

Here, too, there is a “we.”

At some point, I realized that my thoughts reflected an unhealthy attraction, a desire for community grounded not only in Christian fellowship but also in racial homogeneity. I am not the first traveler to the Chaco to describe the colonists’ alienation contrast to the area’s poverty, nor the first to associate their residents with the bounty of the natural world. Images of white colonists as resourceful pioneers — not only in Paraguay but also across Asia, Africa, and the Americas — have long provided smoke screens for less-than-ideal relations with minority peoples of color. Like Bender’s description of the Chaco as empty of culture, these tropes can justify or even obscure indigenous peoples’ existence altogether.