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Mennonites and Mammonites...
in Paraguay.
by Graeme Wood
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Asunción
Something's strange about Sunday-morning service at Raíces, the biggest Mennonite church in Paraguay's capital city. The pastor leads worship in Spanish, not the traditional German. A girl in the congregation wears spaghetti straps and has a dragon tattoo on her shoulder. Those electric guitars don't seem very traditional, either. Why are two guys in the back pew packing heat?

This progressive Mennonite congregation has departed in more ways than these from the customs of their forebears. Mennonites have lived in Paraguay since the 1920s, mostly in the miserably hot Chaco, a region that was barely inhabited before they arrived, and indeed barely inhabited today. For the first 70 years, they kept to themselves and preserved the pacifist and isolationist ways that characterize the sect everywhere. But now they're at the center of one of the strangest phenomena in South American politics, a saga of corruption and faith that has left these world-renouncing Anabaptists in control, for a time, of the highest worldly offices in Paraguay--and wondering whether their newfound power is a blessing or curse.

Raíces ("Roots") is the center of this transformation. It is just like any other Mennonite church, explains Horst Bergen, 41, the affable pastor who chatted with me after the service: It emphasizes peace, family values, and a righteous life. It is not traditionalist, and the members don't dress in antiquated garb. But its congregation that morning consisted mostly of converts, rather than German-speaking descendants of the Mennonites who came to Paraguay, like Bergen's own grandparents, in the first half of the 20th century. Today's Raíces community has a few converts from other Protestant sects, as well as many ex-Catholics (some bearing tattoos, and a more liberal attitude to church music) drawn by the message of peace and love on which the church is built. The spirit of peace and love, Bergen says, is why the men in the back are so discreet about their sidearms, and why they've been asked not to brandish machine-guns in the church's quiet suburban neighborhood.

The armed men are there to protect Nicanor Duarte Frutos, president of the Republic of Paraguay and a Raíces churchgoer for over a decade. Nicanor isn't a Mennonite--like 99 percent of Paraguayans, he is nominally Catholic--but his wife Gloria converted to Mennonitism in the mid-1990s. The details of her conversion remain obscure: What's known is that she sought treatment for an unspecified but serious condition at a Mennonite hospital in the Chaco, and when she left, she had become convinced that her problems related less to her body than to her soul. Adult baptism, the only kind Mennonites recognize, soon followed, and she began dragging her husband to church, even after he won the presidency in 2003. Sycophants and opportunists eased into the pews to get near him. In what some see as an effort to win the ear of the woman who has the ear of the president, a few may have taken the Mennonite plunge themselves.

The very presence of a Mennonite church in Asunción--much less one that counts Paraguay's elite as its patrons--is improbable. The Mennonites' isolation in the Chaco was deliberate. In the 1920s, the Paraguayan state invited them into the Chaco with the understanding that they would stay there, living what promised to be a difficult and hardscrabble life in one of South America's least inviting regions. The Chaco comprises 60 percent of Paraguay's land, but close to zero percent of its population. It has little water, and even Indians had more or less given it up as too parched to inhabit. The Paraguayan leaders, though, saw an upside to its colonization: Their settlers bolstered Paraguay's claim to the region in any future dispute with Bolivia.

Both countries, the only landlocked states in South America, were feeling uneasy about their economic prospects and considered the Chaco their own--in the fervent (and, as it turns out, misguided) hope that it had oil. The Mennonites were totally unaware of their being enlisted as pawns in this rivalry. When it finally erupted into the Chaco War of 1932-35, Paraguay prevailed, in part because its supply lines were shorter with Mennonite agriculture already in place. After the war, however, even with their agricultural skills, which would have been better suited to Canada or the Ukraine, the Mennonites barely managed to rise above subsistence in the poor region.

Over the next few decades, a few clever innovations improved their fortunes. The introduction of buffalo grass allowed them to soak up and retain water more effectively, and brought a change in focus from farming to ranching. In the 1960s, a road connected the Chaco to Asunción; previously, it had taken up to a month to get from farm to market and back. By the 1980s, the Mennonites were the beef and dairy kings of Paraguay, and their massive, modern cooperatives in the Chaco inspired awe in the many Paraguayans who had assumed survival was barely possible there, and then only in austere, Essene primitivism.

Now the Mennonites were rich, and they started sending their sons to Asunción to be educated and fashioned into the doctors and lawyers of the Chaco. Schools and churches popped up in the capital to accommodate them. When Gloria, Nicanor's wife, sought medical treatment, the hospital in Filadelfia, the Mennonites' largest town, was an obvious choice; the region's prosperity and isolation guaranteed a high standard of care and privacy. Paraguayans have pointed out that the hospital is the country's best for psychiatric conditions, in part because the Mennonites' inbreeding had given its doctors extra experience with deranged and mentally challenged patients.

By all accounts, Gloria's embrace of Mennonitism began the wave of political involvement that has turned the Mennonites into the consiglieri of Paraguay's elite. They began embarking on political forays, first locally and then nationally. Orlando Penner, one of the country's best-known Mennonites, took a Senate seat after a career as a race-car driver ("the Mennonite Michael Schumacher"). When Nicanor took office in 2003, the affiliation of the seemingly incorruptible Mennonite businessmen with the first lady made them natural picks for high appointments. Carlos Wiens, a Mennonite doctor, became the director of public health. Carlos Walde became minister for modernization and liaison to the IMF and World Bank, and Ferdinand Bergen (brother of Pastor Horst, and husband of Gloria's best friend Lucy) became minister of industry and commerce. Bergen and Walde are among Paraguay's richest citizens.

Nicanor was not the Mennonites' ideal candidate. He had no particular reputation for probity, either in public or private life, and certainly did not meet the standards of a people who, in some of their communities, consider cell phones a gateway to Hell. But Paraguayan politics was still emerging from its 35-year captivity under the dictatorship of Alfredo Stroessner, who permitted no politics whatsoever. After Stroessner was deposed in 1989, the presidency had consisted of an endless string of coup attempts, impeachment proceedings, and political murder. Paraguayan politics had been a dirty bath for years, and the Mennonites thought they could be the bar of soap in its tub.

"There was suspicion," admits Gerard Ratzliff, a Mennonite historian in Asunción. "It is not part of the Mennonite tradition to enter politics. Some said it would bring the Mennonites down." For centuries, the Mennonite movement had prized its separation from the world. Had they spent decades bringing water to the dry dirt of the Chaco, only to return to the center of earthly power when the buffalo grass finally sprouted?

Horst Bergen says the church began looking outward because it saw an evangelical opportunity. The Mennonites could win souls for Christ as well as anyone. "The Mennonite principle always was that we live in the world, but we try to maintain a difference from the world," he says. "And now the more modern groups, they think, we have to make a difference in the world."

Ratzliff acknowledges that Mennonites have long differed about what part of "the world" they need to shun--all of it, or just the sinful part. But in the end he is more pragmatic. The politicians, he says, won because the Mennonites had no choice. "What I heard quite often at the beginning is that if we don't take part in the administration of the Chaco, then others will. And it will be worse."

Orlando Penner took his senate seat, and Heinrich Ratzliff, the historian's brother, won a spot in parliament. Non-Mennonite observers sneered at their power, and some suspected them of plots. "Who is that gringo?" Paraguayans asked. One Paraguayan politician told me the Mennonites were the target of anti-Semitic-style conspiracy theories: "Here we have another small sect that will come and take over the country, just like the Jews dominated the world." Paraguay had become the place where the Mennonite meets the Mammonite.

But where some saw a sinister cabal of Anabaptists, -others saw a sinister cabal of Anabaptists that might have them as members. At this height of Mennonite glory, Catholics joined the church in droves. "The converts went there and they were baptized, in an immersion baptism," says Diego Abente Brun, a Paraguayan politician now in Washington. "Some say they were converted, but many were trying to be close to where the politics is." Horst Bergen recalls a few incidents in which ambitious churchgoers tried to slip a curriculum vitae to Nicanor or Gloria. He says the First Couple rebuffed them, and that the church has been steadfast in its efforts to treat its high-profile attendees like any other congregants.

In time, the Mennonites proved morally fallible, too--and not only by the standards of their own church. Orlando Penner, the race-car driver, drank and womanized; eventually he exiled himself to a Mennonite community in Manitoba for moral purification. (There's a motto the Manitoba Tourism Council won't be promoting soon: "Mennonites Come Here to Clean Up Their Act.")

Others behaved badly, too--"worse than a liberated Russian," said one Paraguayan who consults for Mennonite industries. Peter Siemens, a Chaco bigwig, departed from power amid accusations of embezzlement. A Mennonite vice minister for taxation resigned in disgrace, amid accusations of having falsified a credential he hadn't needed for his job anyway. Carlos Walde, the modernization minister, had taken office flaunting his character, and ostentatiously vowing he would take no salary. Within a year, *Ultima Hora*, Paraguay's leading newspaper, broke news of his company's having received a lucrative contract to supply powdered milk to the education ministry. Some viewed the contract with suspicion, since the primary business of the company, Chacomer, was importing and exporting auto parts. "You wanted to be like a nun," said one opposition senator, "but you are like a whore." Walde resigned two months ago.

Ferdinand Bergen left power, too, ostensibly because the dirty politics of an election year, in which Nicanor faced heated criticism for using his presidential office to campaign for his favored successor Blanca Ovelar, clashed with his pious sensibilities. But opponents of Nicanor said the taint of the president's increasingly dubious government had touched Bergen too, and the attention was unwelcome. Bergen has, in any case, endorsed Ovelar.

Nicanor's presence at Raíces no longer seems wholly welcome, if it ever was. As his presidency enters its final weeks--elections later this month will choose a successor--officials at Raíces seem reluctant to claim him as one of their own, and more than slightly embarrassed that a member of the congregation stands accused of flagrant abuse of power.

"The church was very much disappointed," Gerard Ratzliff says. "He just attacks so vilely. He put himself forward as candidate for party chief. That is not allowed by the constitution, not as the president. He should be impeached, *realmente*."

None of the candidates for the next presidency has close ties to Raíces, and nearly everyone seems to regard retirement from direct political activity as a good thing for the Mennonites. "The moment they [get into politics], they start getting involved in things that end up being very bad," Diego Abente says. "They think, 'We should stay here, take care of our own affairs, and have our own one deputy. Don't go there, it is too dirty, too noisy, and if you go there you end up like Penner.'" Temporarily, at least, they'll be forced into the retreat from politics that their predecessors had urged to begin with.

But the economic entanglements remain, and to retreat from politics might require them to curtail the astonishing economic boom that financed the Mennonite ascent to power in Asunción less than a decade ago. Their commercial habits are too ingrained, and the Paraguayan appetite for their milk and yogurt too powerful, for easy reversal now. The seal is broken. "They are family men," Abente says, perhaps channeling the early Mennonite fathers. "But the more they have to deal with a corrupt place, the more they corrupt themselves."

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