

DRUM RHYTHMS AND GOLDEN SCRIPTURES: REASONS FOR MORMON CONVERSION WITHIN HAITI'S CULTURE OF VODOU

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At first glance, it may be difficult to see a relationship between Haitian Vodou and Mormonism.¹ How could Mormonism, which established and upheld racist policies and doctrines, be associated with a religion born out of Black power?² Connections between Haitian Vodou and

1. Throughout this paper, I will regularly use the terms “Mormon” or “LDS” interchangeably to describe the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

2. For the Latter-day Saint take on their racist past, see “Race and the Priesthood,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>. Mormon leaders have too often downplayed their devastating and problematic relationship with racial doctrine, policies, and practices. For an example of Mormon racist doctrine of the mid-twentieth century see John J. Stewart, *Mormonism and the Negro* (Orem, Utah: Bookmark Division of Community Press Publishing, 1960). This work will be discussed at great length in the essay. For recent scholarly work on Mormonism and racism, see Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and the Problem of Racial Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). For notable scholarly works relating to Mormonism and race, see Newell G. Bringhurst and Darron T. Smith, eds., *Black and Mormon* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004); W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Max Perry Mueller, *Race and the Making of the Mormon People* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017). For scholarship on Haitian Vodou and Black power, see Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley:

Mormonism, however, are worth investigating because thousands of people living in Haiti have been converting to Mormonism since the official opening of an LDS Haitian mission in 1983.³ This article shows that Haitians are not attracted to Mormonism simply because converting often means access to social mobility but also because tremendous and paradoxical similarities exist between the two religions despite their differences.⁴

In 2020, the LDS Church tallied 24,192 Latter-day Saints in Haiti.⁵ Conversion among Haitians, which only started in the 1980s, is relatively

University of California Press, 2001); Michael Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006); Claudine Michel and Patrick Bellegarde-Smith, eds., *Vodou in Haitian Life and Culture: Invisible Powers* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

3. Trent Toone, "A Beautiful Day' in Haiti: Early Converts Reflect on Church Growth, Temple Announcement," *Deseret News*, July 2, 2015, <https://www.deseret.com/2015/7/2/20567752/a-beautiful-day-in-haiti-early-converts-reflect-on-church-growth-temple-announcement>; "Haiti: Chronology," *Global Histories*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/global-histories/haiti/ht-chronology?lang=eng>. Even though Mormon missionaries started to preach in Haiti in 1980, the LDS Church officially announced the opening of the Haitian Mormon mission and dedicated the country to missionary work on April 17, 1983.

4. This paper is based on interdisciplinary research. Much of the information relating to Haitian Vodou comes from published anthropological, historical, and literary studies from scholars of Haitian Vodou. Information regarding Mormonism is mostly from published primary sources from Mormon archives, the LDS Church's websites, news outlets, as well as recent secondary sources pertaining to Mormon studies. For this paper, I also rely on an interview with a Haitian convert to Mormonism, an interview with a returned missionary from Haiti, conversations with numerous Haitian-born citizens, and an observation of the Fet Gede, an important Vodou ceremony, in 2020.

5. "Facts and Statistics: Haiti," *Newsroom*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics/country/haiti>.

new in Mormon history.⁶ Within two months after the foundation of the Church on April 6, 1830, the Mormon gospel spread through missionary work within the United States.⁷ Seven years later, on June 1, 1837, the prophet and founder of the Church, Joseph Smith Jr., decided to send missionaries overseas. He announced to one of his fervent followers, Heber C. Kimball, that God told him, “Let my servant Heber go to England and proclaim my gospel.”⁸ One month later, Kimball left North America to preach in Preston, England.⁹ Kimball’s missionary efforts brought over two thousand converts from the British laboring classes to the Mormon fold. This success fueled Smith’s desire to build an international Mormon community.¹⁰

However, it took 143 years after Kimball’s British mission for Mormon missionaries to start preaching in Haiti. The LDS Church’s policies on race were the main reason it took so long. Originally, Smith did not put racial restrictions on priesthood ordination, and Black individuals, such as Elijah Abel, were “ordained to the priesthood during

6. “Facts and Statistics: United States” *Newsroom*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <http://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics/country/united-states>.

7. Ryan Combs, “The History of Missionary Work and the Early Mormon Missionaries Database,” June 28, 2018, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/the-history-of-missionary-work-and-the-early-mormon-missionaries-database?lang=eng>.

8. Heber C. Kimball, “Synopsis of the History of Heber Chase Kimball,” *Deseret News*, Apr. 14, 1858.

9. “Lesson 15: The First Mission to Great Britain,” in *Latter-day Saint History: 1815–1846 Teacher Material* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/latter-day-saint-history-1815-1846-teacher-material/lesson-15?lang=eng>.

10. “First Mission to Great Britain.”

Joseph Smith's lifetime."¹¹ Unfortunately, after Smith's death, his successor, Brigham Young, imposed racial policies within the Mormon community. He announced in 1852 that men of African descent could no longer receive the priesthood. Young further restricted all Black members from participating in temple rituals. These decisions prevented Black members from going through the fundamental Mormon ritual of sealing that has the purpose of joining "a man and a woman and their children for eternity," creating "family relationships that will endure after death."¹² Hence, Latter-day Saints of African descent were denied spiritual privileges on Earth and in the afterlife. From the pulpit, Young recited racist rhetoric backing his priesthood and temple ban by claiming that "the negro," whom he called the seed of Canaan, "should serve" the white population.¹³

A racist culture grew stronger within the Mormon community for the next 126 years. In the 1950s and 1960s, Brigham Young University's vice president and head of the Church Educational System, William E. Berrett, openly embraced Young's discriminatory policies. Berrett taught that during the premortal life, God punished those who sided with Satan with a black body. He argued that "Men are not equal when entering this life" and "We were not equal in the pre-earth life and will

11. "Elijah Able," *Church History Topics*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/history/topics/elijah-able?lang=eng>.

12. "Sealing," *Newsroom*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/sealing>.

13. "History of Brigham Young," entry dated Jan. 5, 1852, Church Historian's Office Records Collection, LDS Church Archives; also quoted in Nathaniel R. Ricks, "A Peculiar Place for the Peculiar Institution: Slavery and Sovereignty in Early Territorial Utah" (master's thesis, Brigham Young University, 2007), 114; see also Joanna Brooks, "The Possessive Investment in Rightness: White Supremacy and the Mormon Movement," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 45–82.

not be equal in the eternities.”¹⁴ According to Berrett, a black body was a reminder of one’s transgression in heaven before being born. One of Berrett’s essays, “The Church and the Negroid People,” was even published as a supplementary essay in the second edition of Utah State University professor John Stewart’s book titled *Mormonism and the Negro* “to provide needed historical information to the many teachers in the educational system of the church.”¹⁵ Although Stewart’s book and Berrett’s essay were not published by the LDS Church, they were highly circulated within the Church Educational System and fed doctrinal racism.

The priesthood ban and temple exclusion were lifted in 1978 by LDS Church president Spencer W. Kimball 126 years after Young enchained racism into Mormonism. Kimball announced that all worthy male Latter-day Saints, regardless of their race, could again receive the priesthood, and all worthy members could enter Mormon temples and perform sacred rituals.¹⁶ This decision changed the religious status of thousands of Latter-day Saints of African descent throughout the world and finally enabled the opening of missionary work to Haiti.

Not only would Blackness have impacted Haitian Church membership until 1978, but also discrimination toward Vodou cultures was flagrant in Mormon publications. One example of this discrimination comes from a 1991 article published in the official Church magazine the *Ensign* that uses racist stereotypes and terminology claiming that Haitians need to overcome “voodoo” in order to “fully” convert to Mormonism. In this article, Haitian Vodou is described as a satanic religion

14. William E. Berrett, “The Church and the Negroid People,” in Stewart, *Mormonism and the Negro*, 28–30. Berrett’s essay is not in Stewart’s first edition of *Mormonism and the Negro* but first appears in the second edition (also published in 1960) and is included in every subsequent edition.

15. Stewart, foreword to *Mormonism and the Negro*.

16. “Race and the Priesthood.”

focused on “spirit possession, curses, and blood sacrifice.”¹⁷ Why would people in Haiti join the LDS Church when their membership requires the abandonment of former religious practices that are entrenched in their cultural identity, history, and society?

Religious Representation of Social Mobility

The wealth of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is visible through its financial support programs and its humanitarian efforts, specifically in impoverished countries such as Haiti. Mormon leader Dallin H. Oaks claims that on average the Church spends “\$40 million on welfare, humanitarian and other LDS Church-sponsored projects” annually, without support from the US government.¹⁸ When facing financial troubles, Latter-day Saints are encouraged to reach out to their bishop.¹⁹ Managing director of the bishops’ storehouse (a commodity resource center for LDS members in need of food and other basic amenities) Steven Peterson explains that “the idea of caring for those in need” is “a scriptural mandate.”²⁰ The Church’s financial programs and humanitarian efforts are available to its members and to

17. Elizabeth VanDenBerghe and Jed VanDenBerghe, “Haitian Saints See Hope in the Gospel,” *Ensign*, Mar. 1991, <https://abn.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1991/03/haitian-saints-see-hope-in-the-gospel>. For more information on the term “Voodoo,” see Kate Ramsey, *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 9–21.

18. Morgan Jones, “LDS Church Welfare, Humanitarian Efforts Average \$40 Million Per Year, Apostle Says,” *Deseret News*, July 12, 2016, <https://www.deseret.com/2016/7/12/20591934/lds-church-welfare-humanitarian-efforts-average-40-million-per-year-apostle-says>.

19. However, members are encouraged to reach out to friends and family members first before asking for financial help from the Church.

20. “Mormon Welfare Program,” *Religion and Ethics Newsweekly*, PBS, June 24, 2016, <https://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/2016/06/24/mormon-welfare-program/31091/>.

nonmembers worldwide and promote an image of institutional wealth and self-reliance.

For many Haitians, converting to Mormonism is associated with coming in closer contact with American culture and the opportunities of social mobility connected to it. The LDS Church was founded in the United States and is headquartered in the state of Utah. From 1978 to 2018, 77 percent of General Authorities within the Mormon community were US citizens. Since 2018, nationality diversity among LDS leaders has grown, going from 16 percent of General Authorities born outside the United States in 1978 to 40 percent in 2018. Despite this increase of international presence in the leadership of the Church, most of the leaders remain US citizens.²¹ It is, therefore, common to associate Mormonism with the United States.

D. Michael Quinn's research on the wealth and corporate power of Mormonism shows that the LDS Church's hierarchy is modeled after an American business structure that he describes as "a formal, stratified hierarchy of officers with church-wide jurisdiction."²² Because of this configuration, the current LDS Church has been referred to as "corporate Mormonism," which not only describes the Church's American businesslike structure but also the outward appearance of General Authorities and male missionaries, who must dress according to the Church's dress code.²³ Their outfits look similar to the Hollywood image of the American professional. These men travel the world, no matter the climate or customs of the country, in dark-colored suits,

21. Scott Taylor, "Number of International General Authorities Has Quadrupled in Past 40 Years," *Church News*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 5, 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/number-of-international-general-authorities-has-quadrupled-in-past-40-years?lang=eng>.

22. D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Wealth and Corporate Power* (Salt Lake City: Signature Books, 2017), 2.

23. Quinn, *Mormon Hierarchy*, 49.

white button-down collared shirts, ties, and dress shoes—a wardrobe associated with businesslike matters.

During my high school years in France, my friends and I often crossed paths with Mormon missionaries. Knowing me from church, they would ask me about my day. Some of my friends who were not familiar with Mormonism would often ask: “Are your friends American secret agents?” To them, missionaries looked like characters from Barry Sonnenfeld’s movie *Men in Black* (1997) rather than volunteer preachers. Anthropologist Jennifer Huss Basquiat also stumbled upon some American stereotypes while doing field research in Haiti. She writes that “the LDS Church has had to face interesting and prevailing stereotypes held by many Haitians, [including] that the Church and the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, are one and the same.” Basquiat mentions that this was a common idea among “the majority of Haitians” she interviewed.²⁴ These two examples illustrate that in countries other than the United States, LDS leaders’ and male missionaries’ dress and appearance is disconnected from their religious work and instead reflects an American professional stereotype.

I had the opportunity to discuss the relationship between the United States and social mobility in an interview I conducted with Mathew Gérard, a Haitian Mormon convert living in the United States. When I questioned him about the origin of his American first name, he answered that his father picked it “because like many Haitians, he loved things American.”²⁵ I asked if this admiration for the United States was common among Haitians. Gérard replied that “most Haitians are fascinated with America because of the socioeconomic possibilities this country can provide them.”²⁶

24. Jennifer Huss Basquiat, “Embodied Mormonism: Performance, Vodou and the LDS Faith in Haiti,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 4 (Spring 2004): 5.

25. Mathew Gérard, interview with author, Jan. 4, 2021.

26. Mathew Gérard, interview with author, Jan. 4, 2021.

The data on the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) website illustrates Gérard's comment by showing that the "United States is the top global destination for Haitian migrants."²⁷ In 2018, Haitian immigrants in the United States reached 687,000, making them "the fourth-largest foreign-born group from the Caribbean" in the country.²⁸ Gérard used the French term "terre d'asile" (land of refuge) to describe what the US represents for countless Haitians. This idealization is further illustrated by the MPI website's statistics showing that most Haitian immigrants find employment in service, sales, office occupation, production, and transportation in the United States. Haitians can earn the minimum wage, and 26 percent of them can afford health insurance. Even though Haitian immigrants often fall into the low-income category in the United States, many of them are able to send money to family members in Haiti. The employment opportunities and transfer of dollars reinforce the Haitian concept of the United States as a land of opportunity and motivates more Haitians to immigrate there.

The LDS Church in Haiti reflects this idea of American wealth and social mobility, especially through its architecture. Gérard explained that the Church is well-regarded in Haiti. Mormon programs air on the radio, positive articles on Mormonism are frequently published in local newspapers, and the Church's humanitarian work is well-received in the country. However, what seems to make Mormonism most noticeable in Haiti are the luxurious meetinghouses and the Port-au-Prince Temple. Those religious spaces are earthquake-resistant and built with expensive material, unlike most buildings in Haiti that are "not durable" and do not follow any building codes.²⁹

27. Kira Olsen-Medina and Jeanne Batalova, "Haitian Immigrants in the United States," Migration Policy Institute, Aug. 12, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/haitian-immigrants-united-states-2018>.

28. Olsen-Medina and Batalova, "Haitian Immigrants."

29. Kelley C. Eaton, "Housing Crisis in Haiti Post 2010 Earthquake," (master's thesis, Clark University, 2017), 1, https://commons.clarku.edu/idce_masters_papers/145.

During Haiti's devastating earthquake in January 2010, most Mormon constructions suffered little to no damage. On his 2013 visit to Haiti, Utah-born LDS General Authority Neil L. Andersen explained that the Church's meetinghouses became shelters for those who lost their homes in the earthquake. The Petionville LDS bishop, Harry Mardy, reported that "600 people—some members of L'Église de Jésus-Christ des Saints des Derniers Jours (LDS Church), some not—call the meetinghouse grounds home."³⁰ Andersen expressed joy concerning the help the Church provided to the Haitian people in a video clip posted on the Church's *Newsroom* website. He is filmed in a spacious meetinghouse with high ceilings, freshly painted walls, and uses a microphone and a smart board while addressing the Haitian congregation.³¹ The luxury, cleanliness, and technology of Mormon buildings in Haiti make it difficult to believe that they stand in one of the poorest countries in the Caribbean. The meetinghouses and the temple's luxurious appearance, the modern plumbing, electricity, internet access, air conditioning, and other amenities are generally available only to the wealthiest Haitians. These amenities support the image of a prosperous America and advertise a lifestyle that countless Haitians do not have access to. Hence, for many Haitians, converting to Mormonism can be seen as coming in closer contact with the wealth of the United States.

Embodied Phenomenon

One of the only scholars who has written about Haitian Vodou and Mormonism together, Jennifer Huss Basquiat, noticed that many

30. Dennis Romboy, "LDS Relief: Tent Village Surrounds Mormon Meetinghouse in Haiti," *Deseret News*, Jan. 29, 2010, <https://www.deseret.com/2010/1/29/20367582/lds-relief-tent-village-surrounds-mormon-meetinghouse-in-haiti>.

31. Church Newsroom, "April 2013 World Report: Elder Neil L. Andersen Marks Church's 30-Year Anniversary in Haiti," YouTube video, 3:13, Apr. 12, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVTNlIG6-yQ&list=ULmo5eL8FlbSc&index=603>.

Haitian converts were particularly drawn to Joseph Smith's story because they could relate to his mystical experiences and personal background.³² This interest in Smith differs from non-Haitian conversion stories that usually focus on the miraculous translation of the Book of Mormon. Smith's life story is full of magic and supernatural events. He saw and conversed with God and Jesus Christ, was attacked by Satan, had visions of angels, and was given magical tools to translate a book made of gold.³³ Smith's First Vision is easily accepted as truth by Haitians because mystical visitations and interactions with the divine are common among the population. Basquiat makes note of these paranormal events while interviewing Elder Vigliotti, an LDS missionary preaching in Haiti. Vigliotti explains that when he tells the story of Smith's encounter with God to Haitians interested in the Church, they are not surprised, nor do they find it strange. Vigliotti quotes several Haitian investigators who told him that their friends "just saw God and Jesus Christ last night."³⁴ Mystical experiences are part of Haitian culture, and Smith's story fits right into it.

Basquiat uses another interview with Alex Lamoricie, a Haitian Mormon convert, to illustrate the social connections that exist between Haitians and Smith. Lamoricie explains that what struck him about Smith's story was his humble background as a poor farmer. Countless Haitians can relate to Smith's financial struggles. Indeed, a large percentage of the population in Haiti lives in poverty and experiences the difficulties of farming. Haiti is one of the poorest countries in the Caribbean. In 2012, it was reported that "six million Haitians lived below the

32. Basquiat, "Embodied Mormonism," 13–14.

33. "How Did Joseph Smith Translate the Book of Mormon?," *Liahona*, Apr. 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/liahona/2020/04/youth/what-do-you-say-when-your-friends-dont-believe-that-things-like-the-first-vision-could-happen/how-did-joseph-smith-translate-the-book-of-mormon?lang=eng>.

34. Basquiat, "Embodied Mormonism," 15.

poverty line on less than US \$2.41 per day, and more than 2.5 million fell below the extreme poverty line.”³⁵ Haitians make personal connections with Smith through their common economic trials.

Lamoriecie additionally noticed that Smith “was not an intellect.”³⁶ Like Smith, Lamoriecie did not receive a formal education and had trouble reading and writing. This part of Smith’s background is reflected in the literacy rate in Haiti, where “un alphabétisme achevé handicape socialement environ 8,5 personnes sur 10” [illiteracy socially handicaps about 8.5 individuals out of 10].³⁷ Basquiat calls this shared phenomenon of educational and economic circumstances an “embodied understanding” of Mormonism because Haitians see themselves in Smith. However, Basquiat’s concept of “embodied understanding” is not limited only to Smith’s background story but also extends to Mormonism’s collective history of suffering, the practice of spirit possession, and an emphasis on ancestors that apply to Haitian Mormons regardless of their upbringing or education.

A Common History of Suffering

Vodou is a religion with branches from many parts of the world, particularly from Western Africa. Vodou arrived in Saint-Domingue (present-day Haiti) with African slaves and evolved into Haitian Vodou, a product of the resolute human spirit that found joy and hope in spirituality among the hellish realities of slavery. Haitian Vodou is a combination of an array of African myths and traditions brought to the Caribbean during European colonization, when over 800,000 Africans of various cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds were removed from their native land, shipped to Haiti, and forced into labor

35. “Haiti: Nutrition Profile,” USAID, Feb. 4, 2022, <https://www.usaid.gov/nutrition/countries/haiti-profile-2022/>.

36. Basquiat, “Embodied Mormonism,” 14.

37. Fridolin Saint-Louis, *Le Vodou haïtien: reflet d’une société bloquée* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000), 97.

on plantations.³⁸ The slave system in Saint-Domingue under the control of the French “was regarded as one of the harshest in the Americas, with high levels of both mortality and violence.”³⁹

Spirituality became a source of support and a coping mechanism to these oppressed peoples. As Haitian-born anthropologist Leslie Desmangles shows in *The Faces of the Gods*, slaves secretly interacted with each other, grouping together according to their native language and common cultural backgrounds to call on their gods for comfort and strength. They organized themselves, shared their religious knowledge from diverse African spiritual traditions, and created a common religion, Haitian Vodou, which is still at the core of Haitian culture today.⁴⁰

In *Le Vodou haïtien: reflet d'une société bloquée*, Fridolin Saint-Louis deepens the argument that Haitian Vodou emerged from the enslaved populations' need for spirituality to survive the conditions of slavery. He argues that the desire to incorporate religious traditions into their daily life also illustrates how the enslaved people held on to their African identities. Haitian Vodou became an expression of cultural identity and quickly transformed into a powerful tool in the hands of those practicing it. Saint-Louis writes that Vodou in Haiti “s'affirma aussi comme l'expression culturelle la plus profonde des résistances” [also asserted itself as the deepest cultural expression of resistance].⁴¹ Haitian Vodou was a way for African slaves to conserve and express their culture in a European colonial world.⁴²

As C. L. R. James demonstrates in *The Black Jacobins*, Haitian Vodou was indeed a “medium of conspiracy” against slavery and a form

38. “Haiti (Saint-Domingue),” Slavery and Remembrance, <http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0111/>.

39. C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L'Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938; repr., New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 9–11.

40. Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 35.

41. Saint-Louis, “Préface,” in *Le Vodou haïtien*.

42. Desmangles, *Faces of the Gods*, 23.

of resistance against oppression.⁴³ Runaway slaves called maroons hid in the mountains and created their own communities. Their leaders were Vodou priests (ougan) and priestesses (mambo), who united their community through spirituality and encouraged their followers to fight against the colonizers. During rituals, maroon ougans and manbos called on the lwa (Vodou gods) for protection and strength to defeat the colonists. Haitian Vodou fueled the maroons' desire for revenge and mentally and spiritually prepared them before each attack against their oppressors.⁴⁴ The drums that accompanied Vodou rituals became a symbol of destruction for the European colonists who could hear them echo in the mountains before a maroon raid.

The ougan Dutty Boukman represents this image of powerful maroon religious leaders who led communities of runaway slaves to fight for freedom. On August 22, 1791, Boukman directed a Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman where "he stimulated his followers by a prayer spoken in creole," a common language created by the enslaved that is still spoken today in Haiti. Boukman told his listeners that the lwa saw their suffering and were willing to help them "revenge their wrongs."⁴⁵ The Bois Caïman ceremony is considered an important event in the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution even though Boukman was ultimately defeated and beheaded by the colonists. Bois Caïman is one of the many religious events showing that Haitian Vodou connected spirituality to rebellion against tyrannical authorities.

Haitian Vodou has continued to evolve by incorporating elements from other faiths into its religious traditions. This phenomenon of fusing different religious traditions is referred to by scholars as syncretism. Haitians do not see any conflicts in practicing more than one religion at a time. As the Haitian saying goes, Haiti is "70 percent

43. James, *Black Jacobins*, 86.

44. Desmangles, *Faces of the Gods*, 31, 40.

45. James, *Black Jacobins*, 87.

Catholic, 30 percent Protestant, and 100 percent Vodou.”⁴⁶ Desmangles explains that Haitians, Vodouisants and non-Vodouisants alike, “feel the need to participate” and claim “their allegiance” to other mainstream religions in their country but still have strong desires to serve the lwa and act according to their Vodou culture. Joining other faiths enables Haitians to worship Christian Saints and God while serving the lwa. This common practice helps create additional connections with the divine and expand the Haitian people’s religious traditions.

Desmangles describes the nature of this syncretism as a symbiotic religious relationship between Haitian Vodou and Christianity. He explains that by incorporating elements of other faiths into Haitian Vodou traditions, a juxtaposition of beliefs is created in space and time to “constitute the whole of Vodou.”⁴⁷ Therefore, Haitians are not restricted to the practices, beliefs, and traditions of one religion only. This cultural and religious flexibility eases the conversion of many Haitians to Mormonism.

The persecutions of the Mormon community cannot be compared to the violence of slavery in Haiti. However, the way African slaves in Haiti and Latter-day Saints reinforced their religious traditions through communal suffering and used spirituality to resist oppression are commonalities that both religions share. The collective history of Mormon suffering is regularly preached at church and is part of the curriculum in LDS seminaries. This suffering starts with Joseph Smith Jr. even before the founding of the LDS Church.⁴⁸ In 1820, in Palmyra, New

46. Kim Wall and Caterina Clerici, “Vodou is Elusive and Endangered, But It Remains the Soul of Haitian People,” *The Guardian*, Nov. 7, 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/07/vodou-haiti-endangered-faith-soul-of-haitian-people/>.

47. Desmangles, *Faces of the Gods*, 7–8.

48. Joseph Smith Jr.’s mystical experience is referred to as the “First Vision.” It is taught to individuals showing interest in Mormonism and to members of all ages attending church meetings. For a detailed historical analysis of Mormon memory surrounding the First Vision, see Steven C. Harper, *First Vision: Memory and Mormon Origins* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019).

York, Smith experienced “great uneasiness” to find God’s true church.⁴⁹ He entered a grove of trees to pray God in hopes of receiving an answer on which church he should join. His answer came in the form of a vision, commonly referred to by Mormons as the First Vision. Smith’s stroll into the woods marked the beginning of his troubles. According to Smith, God appeared, ordered him to restore his “true” church, and called him as a prophet.⁵⁰ The news of Smith’s mystical experience generated animosity against him and he soon became a target of violence. In *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling*, historian Richard Bushman mentions that on one occasion a mob “meant to castrate” Smith, but the doctor’s “heart failed him, and he refused to operate.”⁵¹ Smith’s followers also became subject to brutality. They were publicly mocked, tarred and feathered, and received death threats. The suffering that came because of Smith’s visions only increased as Mormonism grew.⁵²

The quintessential example of Mormon persecution came at the hands of Missouri’s government in the 1830s. Smith planned to build a New Jerusalem, or Zion, on American soil, where his followers could “dedicate their time, talents, and wealth to the establishment and building up of God’s kingdom.”⁵³ Smith chose Missouri as the place for communal gathering. As Mormons flooded into the state, they became the target of violence.⁵⁴ Some Mormons started to fight back, but the

49. Joseph Smith—History 1:7.

50. Joseph Smith—History 1:19.

51. Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 179.

52. Joseph Smith—History 1:21–23.

53. “Consecrate, Law of Consecration,” Guide to the Scriptures, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/consecrate-law-of-consecration?lang=eng>.

54. “Peace and Violence among 19th-Century Latter-day Saints,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/peace-and-violence-among-19th-century-latter-day-saints?lang=eng>.

government sided with non-Mormon Missourians. On October 27, 1838, Missouri governor Lilburn W. Boggs declared that “Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary.”⁵⁵ With this order, violence against Latter-day Saints increased.⁵⁶ On October 31, 1838, Smith surrendered to state authorities, hoping his arrest would end the persecutions of his people and prevent the Church’s ultimate destruction.⁵⁷ Soon after Smith was taken into custody, the Latter-day Saints fled across the Mississippi River hoping to find refuge in Illinois.

Once Smith escaped from the Missouri authorities, he moved his people to settle in Nauvoo, Illinois. The Mormon community continued to grow, and persecution followed. Much of the Mormon persecution in Illinois, however, was due to rumors about Smith’s personal sex life. In July 1843, Smith received orders from God to practice plural marriage, or polygamy. In *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870*, historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich explains that within three years after the start of polygamy, Smith “was sealed to more than two dozen women” who swore secrecy on their union to protect the prophet from harmful reactions to this practice.⁵⁸ Scandals relating to Smith’s sexual practices caused deep unrest both within and outside the Mormon community, which eventually led to his assassination.⁵⁹ Disgruntled Mormons fuming over the issue of plural marriage published a newspaper, *The Nauvoo*

55. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 356.

56. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 367.

57. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 366.

58. Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835–1870* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), xi–xii.

59. The mainstream Mormon historical narrative often downplays the role of polygamy in Smith’s death and claims that his assassination was proof of continual religious persecution.

Expositor, which uncovered the secret of polygamy in Nauvoo.⁶⁰ Soon after the paper was printed, Smith ordered and assisted in the destruction of the newspaper's press, which resulted in his arrest for "inciting riots."⁶¹ Within twenty-four hours of detention, Smith was murdered by vigilantes who broke into Carthage Jail.⁶²

After Smith's death, Mormons again turned to spirituality for strength and guidance for survival, not unlike enslaved Africans in Saint-Domingue. This spiritual tenacity helped the religious community move forward and rebuild their Zion in the American West, away from the oppression of the US government. Marilène Phipps, a Haitian Mormon convert, recognizes the past suffering that Haitians and Latter-day Saints share when she writes in her memoir that "it is not just Haitians who bear a hard legacy" but that "Mormons also have a troubling history of bloodshed."⁶³

The images and stories of persecuted Latter-day Saints on the verge of extermination are so important in Mormon collective memory that Church members reenact their nineteenth-century westward exodus every year. The Mormon pioneer trek has become a "cultural ritual" with the goal to give participants "a small taste of what it was like for Mormon pioneers to push a handcart to Utah."⁶⁴ Participants dress up

60. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 538–39.

61. "Lesson 26: The Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith," in *Latter-day Saint History: 1815–1846 Teacher Material* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2018), available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/latter-day-saint-history-1815-1846-teacher-material/lesson-26?lang=eng>.

62. Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 538–39.

63. Marilène Phipps, *Unseen Worlds: Adventures at the Crossroads of Vodou Spirits and Latter-day Saints* (Minneapolis: Calumet Editions, 2018), 229.

64. Melvin Bashore, "Op-ed: Ever Wondered Where the Mormon Youth Trek Phenomenon Came From?," *Deseret News*, Apr. 6, 2018, <https://www.deseret.com/2018/4/6/20642916/op-ed-ever-wondered-where-the-mormon-youth-trek-phenomenon-came-from/>.

like pioneers, bring a few toiletries, camp, and eat outside. Remembering the early Latter-day Saints' sacrifices is an important part of institutional Mormon collective memory. These stories and rituals encourage Latter-day Saints to understand that Mormonism gave their predecessors the strength necessary to endure governmental oppression and survive as a community.

These examples of suffering show that, like many Haitians, Mormons consider themselves an oppressed people. The early Latter-day Saints were harassed by mobs and governmental authorities, their possessions were stolen and destroyed, and their prophet was murdered. Like African slaves in Haiti, Mormons used spirituality as a coping mechanism to endure their suffering, rebel against the government, and create their own religious culture and identity. Despite their differences, this history of communal suffering and spiritual strength ties Mormonism to Haitian Vodou, as do other religious beliefs and practices.

Spirit Possession

The confirmation ritual, which occurs shortly after Latter-day Saint baptism, symbolizes the reception of the Holy Ghost, or the Spirit, into one's body.⁶⁵ This ritual consists of a blessing given by a male member of the priesthood who places his hands upon the head of a newly baptized person and "confirms" this individual as a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The priesthood holder uses the specific ritual words: "receive the Holy Ghost," ordering the person to allow the Spirit to enter their body.⁶⁶ LDS apostle David A. Bednar calls the confirmation ritual the moment where a member of the Church

65. 2 Nephi 31:13.

66. "Baptism and Confirmation," Priesthood Ordinances and Blessings, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/priesthood-ordinances-and-blessings/baptism-and-confirmation?lang=eng>.

receives the “companionship of the Spirit.”⁶⁷ Through this ritual of confirmation, the baptized body becomes a host for the Spirit.

For Mormons, receiving the Holy Ghost in one’s body is a sacred honor and divine gift because, according to Bednar, its “communication to our spirit carries far more certainty than any communication we can receive through our natural senses.”⁶⁸ Mormons often use expressions such as being “guided,” “pushed,” or “moved” by the Spirit to refer to their mystical encounters with this supernatural being. In several ways, the confirmation ritual and the reception of the Spirit parallel the scholarly definition of spirit possession. Religious scholar Pieter F. Craffert defines spirit possession as “a central feature in the emergence and growth of most religious traditions,” characterized by a sudden change in a person’s behavior that is controlled by an external and supernatural power.⁶⁹ Even though twenty-first-century Latter-day Saints almost exclusively use the term “possession” in the context of the work of the devil, they, however, experience spirit possession through the reception of the Holy Ghost into their body.

In mainstream Mormonism, the idea of possession is most visible in accounts of casting out malevolent spirits such as Newel Knight’s story. In 1830, Knight’s wife fetched Joseph Smith to rescue her husband. When the prophet arrived at the Knight’s home, Newel’s body was “distorted and twisted” and “tossed about most fearfully.” Smith caught Knight by the hand and cast the devil out of him through the

67. “The Baptism of Fire,” Media Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2012-08-1520-the-baptism-of-fire?lang=eng>.

68. “Holy Ghost,” Gospel Topics, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/holy-ghost?lang=eng>.

69. Pieter F. Craffert, “Spirit Possession in Jesus Research: Insights from the Anthropological Study of Possession,” *Religion and Theology* 25, nos. 1–2 (2018): 111–29.

power of the priesthood.⁷⁰ This event is often referred to as “the first miracle of the Church” and is used to illustrate how the priesthood can deliver mortals from satanic possession.

Mormons, however, resist using the term “possession.” Religious studies scholar Stephen Taysom argues that in Mormon doctrine, certain terms such as “possession” are considered fraught because they are “closely associated with the specific Roman Catholic ritual” of exorcism from which Latter-day Saints want to disassociate themselves.⁷¹ Even though twenty-first-century Mormonism refrains from using the term “possession” when referring to contact with the Spirit, Latter-day Saints experience possession because of the doctrinal centrality of the Holy Ghost, whom they receive in their body after baptism. The story of Knight and many other similar encounters in the history of Mormonism have shaped how Latter-day Saints negatively view spirit possession.

Vodouisants, like Mormons, experience what religious scholars call “spirit possession” but likewise do not use the term “possession” to describe their experiences. Literary scholar Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken has noted that in Haitian Kreyòl there is no translatable word for possession; Vodouisants instead use the Kreyòl expression “monte chwal” (ridden horse) to describe encounters with supernatural beings.⁷² In Haitian Vodou, it is said that the lwa “ride” ritual participants. The

70. “History of Joseph Smith,” *Times and Seasons* 4, Dec. 15, 1842, 39–41; also located in Dan Vogel, ed., *History of Joseph Smith and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: A Source- and Text-Critical Edition* 1 (Salt Lake City: The Smith-Pettit Foundation, 2015), 65.

71. Stephen Taysom, “‘Satan Mourns Naked upon the Earth’: Locating Mormon Possession and Exorcism Rituals in the American Religious Landscape, 1830–1977,” *Religion and American Culture* 27, no. 1 (2017): 57.

72. Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, *Spirit Possession in French, Haitian, and Vodou Thought: An Intellectual History* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2014), 2.

word “chwal” (horse) illustrates how a participant’s body falls under the complete control of a lwa, like riders control a horse.⁷³

A visible physical transition often announces the start of possession in Vodou ceremonies. Anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown, in her study of Haitian Vodou in Brooklyn, New York, noticed that when the mambo (Haitian Vodou priestess) Alourdes experienced possession, her body “shuddered and jerked.” These movements are understood as the embodiment of the fight between a lwa and the *gwo bonanj* (a person’s consciousness and personality), which, as Brown explains, “is sent to wander” while possession lasts.⁷⁴ Once the *gwo bonanj* gives in, the spirit’s personality is transferred into an individual’s body. This is a phenomenon I also noticed during the November 2020 virtual Fet Gede organized by mambo Sabine in Boston, Massachusetts.⁷⁵ One participant fell to the floor during a ritual dance. His head started to move side to side as his mouth opened and closed. He then stood up, looking disoriented. His body language and attitude were visibly different than before. He glanced at the other participants with a confidence he did not radiate earlier and mumbled a few words while rolling his hips sensually. He then smiled at the audience, and the lwa who “rode” him asked for food and a drink. Once possession ended, the dancer’s body dropped to the floor once more, announcing the departure of the spirit. Participants who become “monte cheval” experience a powerful connection with the divine, one that is considered a sacred honor by the entire Vodou community.

Mormons today might be shocked at the vibrant spiritual practices of Haitian Vodou. However, Latter-day Saints also have a long history of ecstatic spirit possession. In their article “‘The Tongue of Angels’:

73. *Chwal* is the Haitian Kreyòl word originally from the French word “cheval” meaning “horse” in English.

74. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 61.

75. The November 2020 Fet Gede was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. A Zoom link was emailed to those wanting to watch the ceremony.

Glossolalia among Mormonism's Founders," Dan Vogel and Scott C. Dunn explain that when nineteenth-century Mormons felt the Spirit, they often gained the ability to speak in tongues, commonly referred to as "glossolalia."⁷⁶ This phenomenon happened during church meetings, which, like in Haitian Vodou rituals, included prayers and songs to call in the Spirit. Nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints wrote that "the outward manifestation of the spirit reception usually entailed fainting, convulsing, barking, or tongues," and as Vogel and Dunn show, those events were not "an isolated or infrequent occurrence but rather a widespread, persistent, and integral feature of early Mormon religious experience."⁷⁷

In Haitian Vodou and Mormonism, spirit possession also involves the delivery of important messages. In Haitian Vodou, spirits give advice, warnings, and reprimands and answer Vodouisants' questions. During the birthday celebration of the lwa Azaka, Karen McCarthy Brown explains that Maggie, a ritual participant, was reprimanded for not welcoming him properly. As a result, Azaka threatened to leave the ceremony without delivering the messages participants were eager to hear. Maggie pleaded with Azaka, explaining that she was sick and desperately needed his advice to help heal her body. Azaka agreed to answer her questions, but under the condition that she changed her attitude toward him by showing excitement about his visit in the world of the living.⁷⁸ Once Maggie obeyed the lwa, Azaka granted her wish and delivered the message she was hoping to receive.

In Mormonism, interactions with the Spirit, likewise, involve the delivery of messages. The transmission of those messages has, however, evolved significantly since the 1830s. In the mid-1800s, glossolalia

76. Dan Vogel and Scott C. Dunn, "'The Tongue of Angels': Glossolalia among Mormonism's Founders," *Journal of Mormon History* 19, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 1–34.

77. Vogel and Dunn, "Tongue of Angels," 2–10.

78. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 61–62.

among Latter-day Saints was considered a divine gift and required an interpreter to translate the words of the Spirit coming out of the mouth of the individual being possessed. The translated words were considered sacred among the Mormon community. It was, and still is, taught that like the Haitian Vodou lwa, the Spirit uses its divine power to pass on warnings, advice, and instructions that are commonly called revelations. Those revelations are essential to the organization of the Church, as well as the well-being of its members.

Unfortunately, some messages received during episodes of glossolalia generated tension within the Mormon community. LDS leaders interpreted them as “a challenge to Smith’s charismatic powers.”⁷⁹ Vogel and Dunn show that on several occasions, Church authorities claimed that the messages received came from the devil because they contradicted Church policies. Consequently, revelations coming from individuals other than LDS leaders were closely monitored and sometimes censored because they were judged as a threat to the well-being of the Mormon community. Eventually, glossolalia became prohibited, and members holding on to the practice were reprimanded by their religious leaders. By the early twentieth century, glossolalia came to be considered a strange practice that incited doctrinal derision among the Mormon community.⁸⁰

Even though glossolalia is highly discouraged in twenty-first-century Mormonism and rarely discussed in church meetings, the reception of the Spirit in one’s body and the messages it delivers are still an active component in modern Mormon doctrine. Larry Y. Wilson’s Conference talk “Take the Holy Spirit as your Guide” illustrates the importance of the Spirit’s messages. Wilson tells the story of Ensign Frank Blair, an American naval officer who saved his ship from sinking because he listened and obeyed the Spirit’s messages. Blair claimed that

79. Vogel and Dunn, “Tongue of Angels,” 16.

80. Vogel and Dunn, “Tongue of Angels,” 34.

“the Holy Ghost whispered [in his ear] that he needed to walk around the ship . . . to gather more information.”⁸¹ This advice was followed by an additional message that led Blair to keep the ship’s remaining engine running long enough to outlast a dangerous storm. Blair’s lifesaving mystical experience is one of many demonstrating the Spirit’s power to “guide” those in need of its help.

A Mormon’s relationship with the Spirit is similar to a Vodouisant’s relationship with the lwa. The Spirit and the lwa have the power to enter in communication, through possession, with mortals seeking their divine guidance. These mystical encounters are praised by the ones experiencing them. They feel privileged to be able to interact with sacred beings and value the messages given to them. The Mormon interpretation of the Spirit shows that, like in Haitian Vodou, invisible divine beings can inhabit bodies, influence individuals, and protect them from dangerous situations. Hence, in both religions, spirit possession experiences are sacred phenomena. This commonality facilitates the conversion process to Mormonism for many Haitians immersed in Haitian Vodou culture.

Ancestors and the Dead

Another commonality shared between Haitian Vodou and Mormonism that facilitates conversion is a deep respect and reverence for the dead. In both religions, death is not considered an end to life but a continuity of life in a world connected to the one of the living. In Mormonism, the distance between the mortals and the dead is described as a thin veil that “separates the seen from the unseen.”⁸² Mormon prophet Brigham

81. Larry Y. Wilson, “Take the Holy Spirit as Your Guide,” Apr. 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/04/take-the-holy-spirit-as-your-guide?lang=eng>.

82. Ezra Taft Benson, “Life Is Eternal,” Apr. 1971, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1971/04/life-is-eternal?lang=eng>.

Young expanded this doctrinal point by saying that “the spirit world is not far away. Sometimes the veil between this life and the life beyond becomes very thin.” Hence, this proximity facilitates communication between the two worlds.⁸³

Heavenly beings have played a central role since Mormonism’s founding. This notion is best illustrated by the angel Moroni’s visitations to Joseph Smith. Moroni is a resurrected being who during his mortal life was a prophet in the Americas and one of the authors of the gold plates Smith procured in the 1820s. Moroni was sent by God as “a resurrected being to reveal” the location of the gold plates and commanded Smith to translate them into what became known as the Book of Mormon, a foundational text in Mormonism alongside the Bible.⁸⁴

Once Smith finished translating the plates, he returned them to Moroni. LDS authorities claim that the gold plates are no longer on earth because they “would cause men to attempt to use them to obtain money, or personal notoriety.”⁸⁵ From 1823 until his assassination, Smith regularly met with the angel Moroni.⁸⁶ LDS authority Glen L. Rudd said in his talk “The Angel Moroni” that this ancient prophet met with Smith about twenty-two times and has continued to visit with

83. Brigham Young, June 22, 1856, *Journal of Discourses*, 3:367–69.

84. “Moroni, Son of Mormon,” Guide to the Scriptures, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/moroni-son-of-mormon?lang=eng>. The LDS Church’s belief in the validity of the Book of Mormon is the major difference between Mormonism and other Christian religions.

85. Monte S. Nyman, “Why Were the Book of Mormon Gold Plates Not Placed in a Museum So That People Might Know Joseph Smith Had Them?,” *Ensign*, Dec. 1986, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/1986/12/i-have-a-question/why-were-the-book-of-mormon-gold-plates-not-placed-in-a-museum?lang=eng>.

86. “Moroni, Son of Mormon.”

other Mormon prophets.⁸⁷ Mormon doctrine teaches that prophets are “seers.” Since the twentieth century, however, Latter-day Saints prophets have stopped mentioning their interactions with angels, God, and Jesus Christ—though rumors continue to circulate that leaders still communicate with heavenly beings.⁸⁸ Smith was not only visited by the angel Moroni. He also documented his conversations with John the Baptist and the apostles Peter, James, and John. These repeated mystical encounters have been used as evidence for Mormons that life continues after death and that communication between mortals and the dead is possible.

Deep and meaningful relationships with deceased individuals also exist in Haitian Vodou. Karen McCarthy Brown explains that the root of Vodou is a tripartite of “the ancestors, the land, and the spirits.”⁸⁹ Staying connected to these three components is foundational for Haitians. Brown emphasizes the importance of ancestors in Haitian Vodou when she writes about the mambo Alourdes’s comments regarding her late mother’s visitations. The women’s strong relationship was not impacted by death. Alourdes explains that even though her mother, Philomise, does not have a body of flesh and bone anymore, her spirit continues to help her in her daily life. One of Philomise’s frequent ways of interacting with Alourdes is through her dreams. She visits Alourdes and gives her answers to problems she cannot solve by herself.⁹⁰ Thus, even

87. Glen L. Rudd, “The Angel Moroni” (devotional address, Brigham Young University–Idaho, Rexburg, Idaho, Mar. 11, 2003), https://www2.byui.edu/Presentations/transcripts/devotionals/2003_03_11_rudd.htm.

88. “Prophet,” Guide to the Scriptures, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/prophet?lang=eng>.

89. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 371.

90. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 245.

though Philomise died, she remains an active component of Alourdes's life. These examples demonstrate that in both religions, physical death does not prevent communication between mortals and the dead.

Keeping in touch with the dead is a fundamental belief and practice of Haitian Vodou and Mormonism. The Church's website states that Mormons believe that families can be together forever.⁹¹ To put this belief into practice, the Church created in 1894 the Genealogical Society of Utah, which gave members access to birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, and census records. This program, now renamed FamilySearch, gives Mormons the ability to search for their ancestors' names and download and upload pictures and other relevant documents giving details about the life of the deceased.⁹² When using the FamilySearch program, Latter-day Saints contribute to a historical web that uncovers their ancestors' past and creates a connection between the deceased and the living.

FamilySearch also gives members access to the Church's records to check whether their ancestors were Latter-day Saints. According to LDS doctrine, one can only reach salvation if baptized into the Church. Baptizing ancestors is part of the Church's mission, which consists of "proclaiming the gospel, perfecting the saints, and redeeming the dead."⁹³ For this reason, a temple ritual exists with the purpose of baptizing by proxy those who either refused to join the Church while alive

91. "Genealogy," *Newsroom*, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/topic/genealogy>.

92. "Archives—FamilySearch.Org," FamilySearch, <https://www.familysearch.org/en/info/archive>.

93. "Three-Fold Mission of the Church," Church History, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/event/three-fold-mission-of-church?lang=eng>.

or were unable to do so.⁹⁴ Through this temple ritual, Latter-day Saints act as saviors for their ancestors and give them access to salvation they would not be granted otherwise.

In the process of doing genealogical research, Mormons are encouraged to share their family history at religious gatherings. The last time my daughter participated in an LDS youth meeting for young women, the children were asked to share stories about their ancestors. Some told stories about family members who were heroes in the American Civil War and others proudly said they were direct descendants of the first Mormons to settle in Utah. Mormons take pride in their family history.

This focus on strong family connections is likewise deeply present in Haitian Vodou. Brown claims that remembering ancestors and revering them is essential for Haitian families because “their anxiety centers on the possibility that their history might become lifeless or be forgotten.”⁹⁵ Ancestors’ stories must be told frequently not only so family members can remember their lineage but also to help future generations find guidance in their ancestors’ past. By doing so, Brown explains that the “lineage is a chain, each generation a link” that persists over time and strengthens families.⁹⁶ The research tools and data the LDS Church puts at its members’ disposal and its family-focused doctrine enable Haitian converts to create additional ancestral connections with the support of a religious organization with the financial means to give them free access to the technology necessary for genealogical work.

94. Baptism for the dead requires the participation of four individuals: two people stand in a baptismal font. One recites the baptismal prayer using the deceased’s name, and the other acts as a proxy for the deceased person. After the prayer is recited, the proxy is immersed in water. The two other people ensure the ritual is done correctly. See “Baptisms for the Dead,” Gospel Topics, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/baptisms-for-the-dead?lang=eng>.

95. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 19.

96. Brown, *Mama Lola*, 286.

Conclusion

Mormon doctrine, practices, and beliefs pave the way for conversion among the Haitian people because of the similarities Mormonism shares with Haitian Vodou. While these two religions emerged from distant geographical locations, have distinct racial histories, and differ in many other ways, their fundamental beliefs relating to rebelling against oppressive government, persisting in religious practices, and maintaining strong relationships with the dead cross paths. Even though, according to Mathew Gérard, Haitian Mormon converts are not all Vodou initiates, Haiti's culture remains immersed in Vodou and has shaped the Haitian people's understanding of the world. Gérard explains that Haitians believe that the world they live in is enchanted.⁹⁷ They grow up in an environment where the supernatural is part of reality and where life is manipulated by their ancestors and Vodou spirits called *lwa*. The world of the living and the world of the dead depend on each other to maintain a balance in the universe. Mormonism offers Haitians an additional way to reinforce those beliefs and create stronger connection with the divine.

A meaningful relationship with the supernatural is found in Mormonism through its teachings of the physical proximity between mortal life and the spirit world. The interaction between these two spaces and their closeness are illustrated by numerous accounts of Latter-day Saints' mystical experiences such as visitations and spirit possession. Mormonism offers Haitians a religious world that is in constant communication with the supernatural through its teachings of the Holy Ghost, whose spiritual powers range from whispering in someone's ear to possessing an individual's body.

The Mormon doctrine on eternal families also enables Haitians to track down and stay in contact with their ancestors and family history through the LDS Church's genealogy program and temple rituals. These programs and ceremonies have the purpose of redeeming the

97. Mathew Gérard, interview with author.

dead and maintaining everlasting relationships with deceased individuals. Mormon doctrine echoes many parts of the cultural and religious practices of Haitian society. This mystical context and family-focused doctrine resonate with countless Haitians willing to hear the Mormon gospel.

Mormonism additionally exposes Haitians to an American culture and business model that they often see as a path to social mobility they otherwise do not have access to in their country. The male missionaries' attire, the visits of American LDS leaders, and the luxurious meetinghouses and temples all contribute to an image of institutional American wealth. This image reinforces the Haitian concept of social mobility linked to the United States, a country that Haitians believe can guarantee them financial stability.

However, conversion to Mormonism does not come without compromise for those whose culture and society are immersed in Vodou. The LDS Church expects a full conversion and dedication to the doctrine from all its members along with the abandonment of traditions that do not "fit" Mormon beliefs and practices. For Haitian converts it often means effacing their cultural identity by "overcoming Voodoo," a short-sighted and misguided expression born of racist ideas regarding Haitian Vodou.⁹⁸ Haitians who choose to join the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints should continue to embrace, not erase, their rich history and culture that has shaped their society and led them to Mormonism.

98. VanDenBerghe and VanDenBerghe, "Haitian Saints See Hope in the Gospel."

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