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### Drum Rhythms and Golden Scriptures: Reasons for Mormon Conversion within Haiti's Culture of Vodou

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**Drum Rhythms and Golden Scriptures: Reasons for Mormon Conversion  
within Haiti's Culture of Vodou**

by

Catherine S. Freeman

A Senior Thesis

Submitted to the department of Religious Studies

Trinity College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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## Table of Contents

Introduction: _____	3
Common History of Suffering: _____	7
Spirit Possession and Communication with the Dead: _____	19
Ancestors: _____	27
Religious Representation of Social Mobility: _____	31
Conclusion: _____	38
Bibliography: _____	40

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## Introduction

While seated at the dining room table, grandpa told me one of his many stories. This time, he shared with me his first encounter with Vodou. My interest was piqued. While his was serving a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormon Church or LDS Church), he and his companion often heard drums and unfamiliar singing coming in through their apartment windows. Intrigued by what he called “strange and loud noises,” the two men went outside to investigate. They realized the drums and voices echoed from the forest no more than a mile from their apartment. Their curiosity pushed them to enter the woods to follow the drums. But their fear got the best of them. After a few minutes, they both agreed it was safer to stop searching and go home. As they walked back to their apartment, they wondered what was happening in those woods. They had heard rumors from other missionaries of Vodou ceremonies in the region. Grandpa and his Mormon colleague could not stop wondering if they were hearing a distant Vodou ceremony. But no matter how strange or unfamiliar Vodou may seem to Mormons, I argue that it is far more similar that they might think.

At first glance, it may be difficult to see a relationship between Haitian Vodou and Mormonism. How could Haitian Vodou, which emerged from the collective trauma of slavery,<sup>1</sup> share similarities with a religion founded in the United States by a white fourteen-year-old boy from New York? Or how could Mormonism, which established racist policies against its own members be associated with Haitian Vodou, a religion born out of Black power?<sup>2</sup> Even with

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<sup>1</sup> For notable examples of trauma and the slave trade see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (New York: Verso, 1993); for examples of ways Haitian Vodou as a religion has grown and changed because of slave trade and French colonization see Leslie G. Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> “Race and the Priesthood,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 15, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>. Karen McCarthy Brown, *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Michael Largey, *Vodou Nation: Haitian Art Music and Cultural Nationalism* (University of Chicago Press, 2006).

these complications, I contend that connections between these two religions are worth investigating because thousands of Haitians, whose cultural and religious background are rooted in Vodou, have been converting to Mormonism since the opening of a LDS Haitian mission in 1980.<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, I will show that Haitians connect to Mormonism because for many of them, converting means opening a door to social mobility. As I will show, this conversion is made easier due to the tremendous and paradoxical similarities between the two religions.

Haitian membership in the Mormon Church has been increasing for the last forty years.<sup>4</sup> In 2020, the LDS Church records tallied 24,192 Haitians within its worldwide congregation.<sup>5</sup> Conversion among Haitians is relatively new in Mormon history. The LDS Church was founded in America on April 6, 1830, by Joseph Smith Jr. in Fayette, New York, who claimed God asked him to restore his true church. As early as June 1830, Smith and his followers began to spread the Mormon gospel through missionary work within the United States.<sup>6</sup> In 1837, Smith received a revelation from God to expand missionary work overseas. On the first of June of the same year, Smith told Heber C. Kimball, a faithful member, that “the Spirit of the Lord has whispered to me, ‘Let my servant Heber go to England and proclaim my gospel.’”<sup>7</sup> One month later, Kimball crossed the Atlantic to proselytize the Mormon gospel in Preston, England.<sup>8</sup> His missionary

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<sup>3</sup> 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>.

<sup>4</sup> “Statistics and Church Facts | Total Church Membership,” newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org, accessed November 21, 2019, <http://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics/country/united-states>.

<sup>5</sup> “Facts and Statistics,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on November 29, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/facts-and-statistics/country/haiti>.

<sup>6</sup> “The History of Missionary Work and the Early Mormon Missionaries Database,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on November 29, 2020, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/blog/the-history-of-missionary-work-and-the-early-mormon-missionaries-database?lang=eng>.

<sup>7</sup> Heber C. Kimball, “Synopsis of the History of Heber Chase Kimball,” *Deseret News* (Salt Lake City, Utah), Apr. 14, 1858.

<sup>8</sup> “Lesson 15: The First Mission to Great Britain,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 17, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/latter-day-saint-history-1815-1846-teacher-material/lesson-15?lang=eng>.

efforts brought over 2,000 new converts from the British laboring class who were willing to move to America and meet their new prophet. This success fueled Smith's desire to send more missionaries overseas in hopes of building an international Mormon community.<sup>9</sup>

Today the Mormon Church has missions in more than 160 countries.<sup>10</sup> Over one million Mormon missionaries have served a full-time mission and 67,000 are currently serving in three hundred and ninety-nine LDS missions worldwide.<sup>11</sup> However, it took 150 years after the foundation of the Church, and 143 years after Kimball's British mission for Mormon missionaries to set foot in Haiti. Opening a religious mission in a foreign country involves negotiations with, and sometimes opposition, from local governments. These international negotiations were not the main reason why it took so long for a Mormon mission to open in Haiti. It was directly linked to the LDS Church's policies on race. Originally, Smith allowed priesthood ordinations of all male members, regardless of race. Indeed, Elijah Abel, a twenty-two-year-old African American man converted to Mormonism after hearing the missionaries' message in Ohio. In January 1836, Abel became the first Black member to be "given the priesthood." In the Mormon Church, the priesthood is considered "the power and authority that God gives to man." Receiving priesthood power does not require educational training but only male members can be considered "priesthood holders."<sup>12</sup> The member needs to be least twelve years old and have the

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<sup>9</sup> "The First Mission to Great Britain," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on November 30, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/latter-day-saint-history-1815-1846-teacher-material/lesson-15?lang=eng>

<sup>10</sup> "Church Growing in More than 160 Countries," The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed April 19, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2005/01/news-of-the-church/church-growing-in-more-than-160-countries?lang=eng>.

<sup>11</sup> "Missionary Program," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on November 29, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/topic/missionary-program>

<sup>12</sup> "Priesthood," Jesus-Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on April 19, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/priesthood?lang=eng>.

approval of an LDS leader.<sup>13</sup> Once an individual fulfills these requirements, it is said that he is ready to “receive the priesthood.” He is then ordained through a blessing ritual. Unfortunately, these requirements changed after Smith’s murder in 1844. His successor, Brigham Young, announced in 1852 that all male members of African descent were no longer allowed to receive the priesthood. Young also stated that Black members could no longer enter temples and participate in rituals.<sup>14</sup> From the pulpit, Young spewed his racist rhetoric backing his priesthood and temple ban, echoing prominent pro-slavery arguments, claiming that “the negro,” who Young referred to as the seed of Canaan, “should serve” the white population that he called “the seed of Abraham.”<sup>15</sup> Overnight, Abel found himself treated as a second-class Mormon and denied access to the temple he helped build.<sup>16</sup> In June 1978, this discriminatory policy, known as “The Priesthood Ban and Temple Exclusion,” was lifted by the twelfth president of the LDS Church, Spencer W. Kimball, 126 years after Young enchainned racism into official Church policy. Kimball announced that God had revealed to him that all worthy male members of the Church, regardless of their race, could receive the priesthood; and all worthy members could now enter Mormon temples.<sup>17</sup> This decision changed the religious status of thousands of Blacks LDS members throughout the world.

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<sup>13</sup> Matthew Bowman, “Priest to Profit: How the Mormon Church Teaches Priesthood Holders to Lead,” *Washington Post*, May 14, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/priest-to-profit-how-the-mormon-church-teaches-priesthood-holders-to-lead/2012/05/13/gIQAsYocNU\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/priest-to-profit-how-the-mormon-church-teaches-priesthood-holders-to-lead/2012/05/13/gIQAsYocNU_story.html).

<sup>14</sup> “Race and the Priesthood,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed on December 1, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

<sup>15</sup> “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 a Peculiar Institution: Slavery in Early Territorial Utah” (master’s thesis, Brigham Young University 2007), 114; also see 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.

<sup>16</sup> “Elijah Abel,” Century of Black Mormons, accessed on December 1, 2020, <https://exhibits.lib.utah.edu/s/century-of-black-mormons/page/able-elijah#c=0&m=0&s=0&cv=0&xywh=-461%2C-74%2C2398%2C1462>.

<sup>17</sup> “Race and the Priesthood,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on December 8, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

Mormonism's racist past is well known among Latter-day Saints and non-members alike. It is why it seems reasonable to wonder why Haitians join the Mormon Church knowing that their Blackness would have impacted their membership until 1978. Why would Haitians, whose culture is entrenched in Vodou, a religion created as a coping mechanism against racial oppression, become Mormons; especially knowing that the Church demands religious exclusivity no matter its members' cultural backgrounds? LDS leaders check regularly on members' dedication to follow all God's commandments through a system of interviews. Sinners can lose religious privileges such as attending and participating in temple ceremonies, taking the communion, and in extreme cases, excommunication.<sup>18</sup> But Vodou is more than a religion: it is a culture and a way of life in Haiti. This means that Haitians who convert to Mormonism often need to abandon their cultural identity to accept the gospel of the Latter-day Saints.

### **A Common History of Suffering**

Researcher Jennifer Huss Basquiat has noticed that many Haitians loved Joseph Smith's story because they could relate to his spiritual and everyday life experiences.<sup>19</sup> Basquiat explained that this interest in Smith's life differs from non-Haitian conversion stories who usually focus on the miraculous translation of the Book of Mormon. Smith's life story is full of magic and mystical experiences. He saw God and Jesus Christ, had visions of angels, and was given a book made of gold (referred to as the golden plates) and magical tools to translate it.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> These types of "punishments" are linked to the members' worthiness. LDS bishops conduct one on one interviews to check on their members' worthiness. If some of them admit to having transgressed a commandment, they must go through a process of forgiveness and show their bishop that they are willing to repent. During this time, they regularly meet with their bishop who gives them spiritual support. Once the bishop judges that the member is worthy again, this person can get back all the religious privileges previously taken away.

<sup>19</sup> Basquiat, Jennifer, "Embodied Mormonism: Performance, Vodou and the LDS Faith in Haiti," *Dialogue, A Journal of Mormon Thought* 37, no. 4 (2004): 13–14.

<sup>20</sup> "How Did Joseph Smith Translate the Book of Mormon?," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed April 19, 2021, <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>.



Basquiat uses her interviews with Alex Lamoricie, a Mormon convert, to illustrate the connections that exist between Haitians and Smith's experiences. Lamoricie explains that what struck him with Smith's story was not the golden plates, nor was it the astonishing translation of these plates, but rather his humble personal background. Lamoricie connected with Smith's upbringing as a struggling farmer. The prophet came from a family who struggled to own and work land, as well as produce enough to put food on the table. Countless Haitians can relate to Smith's poverty. Indeed, many Haitians live in poverty and know too well the difficulties of farming. Haiti is known to be the poorest countries in the Caribbean with an estimate of "6 million Haitians [who] live below the poverty line on less than US \$2.41 per day" and "more than 2.5 million fall below the extreme poverty line of US \$1.23 per day."<sup>21</sup> Haitians can make a personal connection with Smith because of their common financial trials.

Lamoricie additionally noticed that Smith "was not an intellect."<sup>22</sup> Like Smith, Lamoricie did not receive a formal education and had trouble reading and writing. This part of Smith's story is reflected in the literacy rate of the average Haitian, where it was estimated with

un taux national de 89 % et 90% en milieux ruraux. Concrètement, un analphabétisme achevé handicape socialement environ 8,5 personnes sur 10. [A national rate of 89% and 90% in rural areas. Concretely, an illiteracy which socially handicaps about 8.5 individuals out of 10.]<sup>23</sup>

Haitians see themselves in Smith.<sup>24</sup> Basquiat calls this shared phenomenon an "embodied understanding" of Mormonism because they see a poor boy whose family's financial situation prevented him from attending school and who depended on the land to survive. Like many Haitians, Smith was economically oppressed. However, this embodied view is not limited to the prophet's personal background. It also extends to Mormonism's history of suffering and

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<sup>21</sup> "Emergency Relief, Haiti," UNICEF USA, accessed on December 3, 2020, <https://www.unicefusa.org/mission/emergencies/haiti>

<sup>22</sup> Basquiat, "Embodied Mormonism," 14.

<sup>23</sup> Fridolin Saint-Louis, *Le Vodou Haïtien : Reflet d'une Société Bloquée* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2000), 97.

<sup>24</sup> Basquiat, "Embodied Mormonism," 14.

government oppression and applies to all Haitian Mormons regardless of their upbringing or education.

Haitian Vodou is the product of the terror, torture, and forced labor experienced by the enslaved population in Haiti. These experiences merged with an array of African myths and traditions that were imported to Saint Domingue during French colonization.<sup>25</sup> Between 1697 and 1803, about 800,000 Africans with various cultural, religious, and linguistic backgrounds were violently removed from their native land, shipped to Haiti, and forced into labor on sugar, coffee, cotton, and indigo plantations.<sup>26</sup> Catholic missionaries described Saint Domingue as the “Babylon of the New World.”<sup>27</sup> They wrote how French colonists “were quick-tempered and imperious, and when ‘their sex drives stirred,’ they took whatever slave servants pleased them.”<sup>28</sup> This description exposes the sexual violence enslaved folks endured in addition to the extensive labor they were forced to produce daily. These sudden changes of geographical location, social environment, and abuses ravaged the bodies and minds of the enslaved and called for a fast adaptation to their horrific living conditions. Spirituality became a source of relief and support. As Leslie Desmangles aptly shows in *The Faces of the Gods* enslaved Haitians secretly interacted with each other, often grouping together according to their native language and common cultural backgrounds to talk about their suffering and call on their gods for strength to endure their misery. Within these groups, they organized themselves and shared their religious

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<sup>25</sup> C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963), 9-11.

<sup>26</sup> “Haiti (Saint-Domingue),” *Slavery and Remembrance a Guide to Sites, Museums, and Memory*, accessed on December 2, 2020, <http://slaveryandremembrance.org/articles/article/?id=A0111#:~:text=The%20slave%20system%20in%20Saint,Africans%20carried%20to%20North%20America>).

<sup>27</sup> F. Girod-Chantrons, *Voyage d’un suisse dans différentes colonies d’Amérique* (Neuchâtel, 1785). Located in Desmangles, “Faces of the Gods,” 23.

<sup>28</sup> P.A. Cabon, *Mgr Alexis Jean-Marie Guilloux, deuxième archevêque de Port-au-Prince* (Port-au-Prince : Grand Séminaire Théologique d’Haïti Saint Jacques, Archevêché de Port-au-Prince, 1929). Located in Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods*, 23.

knowledge from various African spiritual traditions to create a common religion that enabled them to revere and pray to their gods, which “kept them from falling into despair.”<sup>29</sup> The following lyrics illustrate the slaves’ need for their gods:

Si se pate bon Ginen sa-a  
Nou tout ta peri déjà...  
If it were not for the Guinea Iwa [Vodou gods]  
We would all have perished already.<sup>30</sup>

As this song illustrates, Haitian Vodou became a coping mechanism and a source of comfort for the slaves. The French colonists’ aggressive behavior enhanced the religious practices of enslaved Haitians and resulted in the creation of Haitian Vodou, which became the core of Haitian culture.

In *Le Vodou haïtien, Reflet d’une société bloquée*, Fridolin Saint-Louis deepens the argument that Haitian Vodou emerged from the need of enslaved populations to turn to spirituality to survive the extreme conditions of slavery in Saint Domingue. He argues that the desire to incorporate religious traditions into their daily life also illustrates how the enslaved held on to their African identities. Saint-Louis explains that Haitian Vodou was an expression of African cultural identity which quickly became a powerful tool in the hands of those practicing it. He writes :

Dès le départ, le vodou a été la religion des opprimés. Non seulement, il fut une forme d’auto-protection des esclaves, en référence de leurs origines africaines, mais il s’affirma aussi comme l’expression culturelle la plus profonde des résistances. [From the beginning, Vodou has been the religion of the oppressed. Not only, it was a form of auto-protection for the slaves, referring to their African origins, but it also asserted the deepest cultural expression of resistance.]<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Desmangles, 35.

<sup>30</sup> Claudine Michel, “Vodou in Haiti: Way of Life and Mode of Survival,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 8, no. 1 (2002): 98–109.

<sup>31</sup> Fridolin. *Le Vodou Haïtien*, Préface.

Hence, Haitian Vodou was a way for African slaves to conserve their culture and express it in a colonial world which suppressed their identity and forced on them French culture and Christianity.<sup>32</sup>

Enslaved Africans created a spiritual umbrella which enabled them to stay connected to their motherland, but also empowered them to fight against an oppressive colonial society. As C.L.R James explains in *The Black Jacobins*, Haitian Vodou was a “medium of conspiracy” against slavery and colonialism, and became a form of resistance against oppression.<sup>33</sup> Slave rebellions and the 1791 revolution, which led the country’s independence, illustrate the slaves’ determination to fight for freedom. Runaway slaves called maroons fled deep into the mountains and created hidden communities. James describes the maroons as “those whose boldness of spirit found slavery intolerable and refused to evade it by committing suicide, would fly to the woods and mountains and form bands of free men.”<sup>34</sup> The maroons “symbolize[d] the longing of enslaved people for freedom,” independence, and liberation from the hands of the white colonists. The leaders of these hidden villages were Vodou priests (ougan), or priestesses (manbo), whose role consisted of protecting and uniting their community through Vodou rituals. These powerful religious figures led their village dwellers into ceremonial dances, group prayers, and ritual possessions. Those religious practices brought a sense of solidarity within the community and leaders gained authority and power among their followers. Mackandal is an example of those powerful leaders. He was an eloquent orator, known to be fearless and strong. James explains that Mackandal “persuaded his followers that he was immortal and exercised

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<sup>32</sup> Desmangles, 23.

<sup>33</sup> Cyril Lionel Robert James, *Les Jacobins Noirs: Toussaint Louverture et la Révolution de Saint-Domingue* (Amsterdam : Editions Amsterdam/Multitudes, 2017), 86.

<sup>34</sup> James, 20.

such a hold over them that they considered it an honour to serve him on their knees.”<sup>35</sup> Maroons were also warriors who regularly attacked plantations and made plots to exterminate white settlers. They set plantations on fire, attempted to poison drinking water, and convinced other slaves to run away with them.<sup>36</sup> Vodou played an important role in mentally preparing maroons before their attacks. Each raid first began with a Vodou ritual to ask the lwa for protection and strength to defeat their people’s enslavers. The lyrics of a ritual song read:

Eh! Eh! Bomba! Heu! Heu!  
Canga, bafio té!  
Canga, mouné de lé!  
Canga, do ki la!  
Canga, li!

We swear to destroy the whites and all that they possess; let us die rather than fail to keep this vow.<sup>37</sup>

Those religious practices fueled the maroons’ desire for justice and revenge and gave them confidence to realize their plans. The drums, which accompanied those fight songs, came to index the destruction of the white population in Saint-Domingue, who would hear drums echo deep into the mountains before an attack. This type of song gave a new aspect to Haitian Vodou: one that connected spirituality to rebellion against tyrannical authorities.

The persecutions of the Mormon community cannot be compared to slavery in Haiti. But the way African slaves and Latter-day Saints reinforced their religious traditions through communal suffering and used spirituality to endure and resist oppression are communalities that both religions share. Marilène Phipps, a Haitian Mormon convert, recognizes this common suffering when she writes in her memoir that “with great emotion that it is not just Haitians who bear a hard legacy ... but that Mormons also have a troubling history of bloodshed.” Phipps

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<sup>35</sup> James, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Desmangles, 31, 40.

<sup>37</sup> James, *Les Jacobins noirs*, 18.

refers to the stories of Mormon pioneers who were violently forced from their settlements and crossed the Great Plains in hopes of building a religious kingdom away from the oppression of the American government.<sup>38</sup> The image of persecuted Latter-day Saints at the verge of extermination is an important component of Mormon history and collective memory that is regularly taught during religious meetings and reenacted every summer by Later-day Saints all over the world.<sup>39</sup> The Mormon Pioneer Trek has become a “cultural ritual” and consists of leaving the comfort of home “for a few days to get a small taste of what it was like for Mormon pioneers to push a handcart to Utah.”<sup>40</sup> Participants who are mostly teens and a handful of chaperones, can only bring a few items with them such as toiletries and bug spray. They dress up like pioneers, camp and eat outside no matter the weather. Remembering the first Later-day Saints and the sacrifices they had to do is an important part of Mormon collective memory that LDS authorities want members to be proud of and take example from because spirituality gave the pioneers the strength necessary to endure oppression.

The history of Mormon suffering started as early as 1820 in Palmyra, New York, when Joseph Smith prayed to God in hopes of receiving guidance to find his “true church.” Smith was experiencing “great uneasiness” in finding a church that was in line with his interpretation of the Bible.<sup>41</sup> He found himself stuck between his desire to belong to a religion and his understanding that the doctrines taught in other American protestant denominations contradicted themselves.

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<sup>38</sup> Marilène, Phipps, *Unseen Worlds, Adventures at the Crossroads of Vodou Spirits and Latter-day Saints* (Minneapolis: Calumet Edition, 2019), 229.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Smith Jr.’s mystical experience is titled “The First Vision.” It is taught to all individuals showing interest in Mormonism and to members of all ages attending Sunday 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).

<sup>40</sup> Maeliv Bashore, “Op-Ed: Ever Wondered Where the Mormon Youth Trek Phenomenon Came From?,” *Deseret News*, April 6, 2018, <https://www.deseret.com/2018/4/6/20642916/op-ed-ever-wondered-where-the-mormon-youth-trek-phenomenon-came-from>.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Smith Jr., *Joseph Smith History*, (Salt Lake City, Utah: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1999), verse 7.

He explained that “The Presbyterians were most decided against the Baptists and the Methodists, used all the powers of both reason and sophistry to prove their errors.”<sup>42</sup> Smith decided to follow the advice of the apostle James which reads that “*If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him*”<sup>43</sup> This Bible verse became Smith’s main tool to conduct his spiritual quest.

Smith’s trek in the woods marked the beginning of his troubles. He writes that after starting his prayer, God appeared to him and told him he had been chosen to restore his true church because the others “were all wrong.”<sup>44</sup> During this mystical conversation, Smith learned that he had been chosen to be God’s new prophet. Smith’s story spread quickly after he shared his spiritual experience with others. To his surprise, his vision generated great animosity against him and his family. He noticed that for the first time, most of the religious authorities he knew agreed on one thing: he came from the devil and they needed to stop him from telling his mystical experience and finding people who would believe him. For them, Smith was a threat to Christianity in America, and he did not realize his heavenly vision was controversial because it meant that revelations did not stop with the death of the apostles, and God preferred talking to an illiterate, poor, religiously untrained teenager, instead of the experienced religious authorities in Palmyra, New York. Soon after the news of his mystical experience spread, Smith became the target of violence. He was publicly mocked, insulted, and received death threats on a regular basis. On several occurrences, he was tarred and feathered, choked, and beaten. Once, he even had acid thrown in his mouth.<sup>45</sup> In *Joseph Smith, Rough Stone Rolling*, Richard Bushman

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<sup>42</sup> Smith, *Joseph Smith History*, verse 9.

<sup>43</sup> Smith, *Joseph Smith History*, verse 11.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, *Joseph Smith History*, verse 19.

<sup>45</sup> “Lesson 21: Joseph Smith Is Tarred and Feathered,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 19, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/manual/primary-5/lesson-21?lang=eng>.

mentions that on one occasion a mob dragged Smith out of his house in the middle of the night and “meant to castrate” him. But the doctor’s “heart failed him, and he refuse to operate”<sup>46</sup> The hostile and life-threatening reactions Smith received after telling he had conversed with God generated in him a sense of mistrust toward others.<sup>47</sup>

Smith’s first vision, however, is not mocked or doubted by Haitians because mystical visitations are common among the Haitian population. Basquiat makes note of these paranormal events when she interviews LDS missionary, Elder Vigliotti, with whom she discussed Haitian conversion. Vigliotti explains that when he tells the story of Smith’s encounter with God to Haitians, 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” or they “got a vision” and were told they “need[ed] to go to this church.”<sup>48</sup> Mystical experiences are part of Haitian Vodou culture and Smith’s story fits right into it and creates a connection between Haitians and the American Mormon prophet.

After Smith officially established his church in April 1830, he continued to experience persecution. The quintessential example of Mormon persecution came at the hands of Missouri’s government in the 1830s. Smith wanted to create a New Jerusalem, or Zion, on American soil to gather his believers together. To attain this goal, Smith claimed that God revealed to him that all members of the Church should “voluntarily dedicate their time, talents, and wealth to the establishment and building up of God’s kingdom.”<sup>49</sup> This revelation was titled the Law of Consecration. It enabled Smith to accumulate a significant amount of wealth from members’

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<sup>46</sup> Richard Lyman Bushman, *Joseph Smith: Rough Stone Rolling* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2005), 179.

<sup>47</sup> Smith, *Joseph Smith History*, verse 21-23.

<sup>48</sup> Basquiat, “Embodied Mormonism,” 15.

<sup>49</sup> “Consecrate, Law of Consecration,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 19, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/consecrate-law-of-consecration?lang=eng>.



donations which was intended for the building of Zion. Once Smith had the necessary funds to buy land, he first explored the idea of Zion in the state of Missouri. Unfortunately, his excessive purchase of land and the increasing number of Mormons immigrating into the state threatened the political power of other Missourian settlers. Furthermore, the LDS community followed Smith's directions above those of local government, which troubled outsiders. As a result, hatred against Mormons grew stronger and they became the target of violence. Like Smith, many Latter-day Saints received death threats, were beaten, tarred and feathered, and publicly mocked. Their properties were damaged, and their animals killed or stolen.<sup>50</sup> Smith pleaded with state and federal officials for help but without any success. Mormons concluded that the American government had completely abandoned them, and local government had chosen to persecute them. Therefore, they felt forced to fight against organized mobs and found themselves at war with their Missourian oppressors. The situation degraded and on October 27, 1838, Missouri governor, Lilburn W. Boggs, declared that all "Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary."<sup>51</sup> With this extermination order, the Missouri government officials publicly joined the side of anti-Mormon mobs. Persecution against Latter-day Saints increased to the point that in October 1838, "Marauders were attacking outlying farms, molesting women, whipping men, and killing animals."<sup>52</sup> Many Latter-day Saints lost their homes and several of their children were shot in the head in middle of the streets. Smith could not take his followers' suffering any longer and on October 31, he surrendered to Missouri government authorities in hopes of ending the persecution of his people.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> "Peace and Violence among 19th Century Latter-Day Saints," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 19, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/peace-and-violence-among-19th-century-latter-day-saints?lang=eng>.

<sup>51</sup> Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 356.

<sup>52</sup> Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 367.

<sup>53</sup> Bushman, *Rough Stone Rolling*, 366.

As a result of the violence they experienced in Missouri, Mormons fled across the Mississippi river to find refuge in the state of Illinois. Soon after, Smith escaped from Missourian authorities and came back to lead his people. There, he decided, once again, to build his Zion in the town of Nauvoo, Illinois. D. Michael Quinn, explains that on the February 8, 1841 Smith was appointed the position of Trustee-in-Trust, “the only office with an entirely financial function” in the Church, and was “vested with ‘plenary powers as sole Trustee in Trust to receive, acquire, manage, or convey property, real, personal, or mixed, for the sole use and benefit of said Church.’”<sup>54</sup> This financial appointment gave Smith full power over the finances of the Church and the building of Zion in Nauvoo, Illinois. However, the extreme violence continued in Nauvoo and Smith’s religious utopia did not flourish according to plan.

Scandals relating to Smith’s sexual practices in the community caused deep unrest and eventually lead to his assassination. In July 1843, Smith received a revelation from God instructing him to practice a new celestial law called the “New and Everlasting Covenant,” often referred to as plural marriage or polygamy. This revelation was preached as a way to unify, through the bound of spiritual marriage, all worthy members of the Church and made a clear distinction between secular marriage and religious marriage. Smith declared that only marital unions administered through the power of the Mormon priesthood were valid in the eyes of God. These spiritual unions, also called “sealings” remained secret among the few members practicing them but later became openly acknowledged practice after 1852 in the LDS Church. Smith was the first in the Mormon community to be sealed to a second woman. 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 revelation on polygamy, Smith “was

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<sup>54</sup> D. Michael Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Wealth & Corporate Power* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books, 2017), 4.

sealed to more than two dozen women.” They all swore secrecy on their spiritual union in order to protect the prophet from outsiders’ reaction to this practice.<sup>55</sup> The secret practice of polygamy eventually caught up to Smith. A band of disgruntled Mormons over the issue of plural marriage published a newspaper, *The Nauvoo Expositor*, portraying Smith as an immoral and distrustful religious leader. After reading an article from this newspaper uncovering the secret of polygamy practiced in Nauvoo, the prophet ordered the destruction of its printing press.<sup>56</sup> Soon after Smith assisted in destroying *The Nauvoo Expositor*’s press, he was arrested for “the charge of inciting riots” by Illinois authorities and taken 22 miles away from Nauvoo to the Carthage jail.<sup>57</sup> Fearing for his life, Smith contacted local law enforcement and federal authorities. However, they did not react fast enough to ensure his legal rights and protection. Within twenty-four hours of detention, Smith was murdered by a mob who took over the building and shot him to death while he attempted to escape through the second-floor window.<sup>58</sup>

The Mormon community interpreted Smith’s assassination as the ultimate proof that the American government was an unjust institution and an oppressive political authority they needed to resist. Instead of abandoning their religious beliefs and practices, as their oppressors hoped for, the Mormons turned to spirituality for strength and relied on God’s guidance and protection for survival, not unlike enslaved Africans in Saint Domingue. Latter-day Saints held on to their religious beliefs and their Mormon identity to cope with the chaos of Smith’s murder. This spiritual tenacity helped the community move forward and rebuild Zion away from the American government’s control, in a location today known as Utah. There, the Mormons asserted political

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<sup>55</sup> Laurel Ulrich Thatcher, *A House Full of Females: Plural Marriage and Women’s Rights in Early Mormonism, 1835-1870*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2018), xi-xii.

<sup>56</sup> Bushman, 538-539.

<sup>57</sup> “Lesson 26: The Martyrdom of Joseph and Hyrum Smith,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed March 8, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/latter-day-saint-history-1815-1846-teacher-material/lesson-26?lang=eng>.

<sup>58</sup> Bushman, 538-539.

control over a large portion of the American West, in an area that historians have aptly called “the great basin kingdom.” There, the Mormons built Salt Lake City which stands today as the headquarters of the LDS Church.<sup>59</sup>

These examples of suffering and persecution show that, like many Haitians, the Mormons consider themselves an oppressed people. They were harassed by mobs, their possessions were stolen or destroyed, their prophet was murdered, and they had to fight against repressive governmental authorities to survive and keep practicing their religion. Even though this religious community was violently forced out twice of their Zion, like African slaves in Haiti, the Mormons used their religious beliefs and practices as a coping mechanism to endure their suffering, overcome trials, move forward, and create their own religious culture. They did not abandon their religious practices as their oppressors hoped for. Instead, Mormons held on to Smith’s teachings and revelations to build a stronger community away from their oppressors. It is this specific past of communal suffering and spiritual strength that ties Mormonism to Haitian Vodou.

### **Spirit Possession and Communication with the Dead**

Spirit possession is common practice among Latter-day Saints and Vodouisants and is regularly experienced during rituals. In both religions, spirits are considered sacred beings and have the power to interact with individuals in the world of the living. Mormons and Vodouisants are encouraged to enter in contact with the spirits as often as they can. In this section, I analyze spirit possession and spirit possession-like experiences in both religions, as well as how possession has evolved in Mormonism overtime.

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<sup>59</sup> Leonard J. Arrington, *Great Basin Kingdom* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1958).

In *Mama Lola, A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, anthropologist Karen McCarthy Brown gives an excellent description of the word *Vodou* when she writes:

The Fon word *vodun* is the source of the name currently given to Haitian Vodou. The name Vodou is applied by outsiders to the whole of Haitian traditional religion. In Haiti, however, the term *vodou* more commonly refers to a particular drum rhythm. The religion is usually referred to with a verb rather than a noun; Haitians talk of “serving the spirits.”<sup>60</sup>

This definition clarifies that serving the spirits is at the heart of Vodou. For Vodouisants, spirits control the lives of humans and are responsible for the good and bad events of life. Therefore, spirits must be respected, but also feared. They want to be acknowledged for their actions, recognized for their power, listened to, and thanked. Vodou rituals serve this specific purpose. They are a way to directly enter in the presence of the spirits and give them the attention they desire. During those rituals, spirits are invited through lengthy prayers, dances, drum rhythms, and altar tables ornamented with objects, foods, and drinks they enjoy consuming and sharing with rituals participants throughout their visits. Paying attention to these details is essential in making the spirits feel welcomed and let them experience the pleasures of the world of the living.

Spirits make their presence known similarly in Haitian Vodou and Mormonism. In Haitian Vodou, it is said that spirits ride ritual participants. The word *chwal* (horse) is used to describe how a spirit (lwa) mounts a devotee in dancing possession.<sup>61</sup> Like a horse, a participant’s body serves as a mount for spirits who have the ability to entirely control it. There is often a visible physical transition that announces the start of possession. Brown notices when Alourdes experienced possession, her body “shuddered and jerked.” These movements show the fight between the spirit and the *gwo bonanj* (the person’s consciousness and personality) who, as

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<sup>60</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 273.

<sup>61</sup> *Chwal* is the Kreyol word for the French word *cheval*, which translates to horse in English.

Brown explains, “is sent to wander” while possession lasts.<sup>62</sup> Once the *gwo bonanj* gives in, the spirit’s personality, physical attitudes, and voice are transferred into the possessed body. This is a phenomenon I also noticed during the Fete Gede organized by Manbo Sabine in November 2020.<sup>63</sup> During one of the ritual dances, a dancer suddenly fell to the floor, shaking violently. His head moved side to side while his mouth opened and closed. After his body stopped moving, he slowly stood up looking disoriented. The dancer’s body language was clearly different than before. He glanced at us with a confidence and pride he did not radiate earlier. He mumbled a few words and walked towards the audience rolling his hips vigorously side to side repetitively and sensually. Some participants yelled “Bonsoir Baron Samdi” to get his attention. He smiled at them while dancing and asked for food. Baron Samdi rode the dancer for a short time before, once more, the dancer’s body dropped to the floor. Two women carried the exhausted man on a chair and gave him some water to recuperate from possession. Brown also notices similar behavioral and personality changes when she describes Alourdes’ possession of Azaka. Alourdes’ voice turned into Azaka’s high-pitched tone when he addressed his audience.<sup>64</sup> These examples demonstrate how spirits use the participants’ bodies to physically become part of the world of the living.

In Mormonism, experiences we might call spirit possession are experienced through the Holy Ghost, also called the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit. Since 1830, Mormon baptism is accompanied by two necessary rituals: the baptism by full immersion in water and the confirmation ritual. The full immersion of the body “is symbolic of the death of a person’s sinful

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<sup>62</sup> Brown, 61.

<sup>63</sup> The November 2020 Fete Gede was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic that did not allow me to attend the ceremony in person. Instead, Zoom links were emailed to those wanting to watch the ceremony. “Virtual” participants were able to send messages via the Zoom chat box to communicate with manbo Sabine.

<sup>64</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 61.

life and the rebirth into a spiritual life.”<sup>65</sup> Once baptized, the body is purified in God’s eyes. The confirmation ritual, commonly referred to as the “baptism of fire” in the Book of Mormon, symbolizes the reception of the Holy Ghost in one’s body.<sup>66</sup> LDS Church authority, David A. Bednar compared this ritual of confirmation to a “purification of the soul.” He explains that the baptism of fire “refines our soul as if by fire” to become completely “spotless ” and worthy to receive the “companionship of the Spirit.”<sup>67</sup> In Mormon theology, the Spirit is an important divine character because, as Bednar clarifies, “his communication to our spirit carries far more certainty than any communication we can receive through our natural senses.”<sup>68</sup> The Spirit is a sacred being with the ability to enter the body and mind of individuals like the Vodou lwa.

Mormons often use the term “being guided by the Spirit” to describe their mystical encounter with the Holy Ghost. They also refer to a sensation of warmth in the chest and excitement. In their article “‘The Tongue of Angels’: Glossolalia among Mormonism’s Founders,” Dan Vogel and Scott C. Dunn explain that when nineteenth-century Latter-day Saints received the Spirit, they gained the ability to speak in tongues, or practice glossolalia.<sup>69</sup> This phenomenon often happened during religious meetings involving scripture readings, and like in Vodou rituals, lengthy prayers and singing. Latter-day Saints explained that “the Holy Ghost attend[ed] their ministrations of the ordinances” and “the outward manifestation of the spirit reception usually entailed fainting, convulsing, barking, or tongues.”<sup>70</sup> Those written

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<sup>65</sup> “Baptism,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/baptism?lang=eng>.

<sup>66</sup> “2 Nephi 31: 10’16,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/bofm/2-ne/31?lang=eng>.

<sup>67</sup> “The Baptism of Fire,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/media/video/2012-08-1520-the-baptism-of-fire?lang=eng>.

<sup>68</sup> “Holy Ghost,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints. Accessed of January 1, 2021. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/holy-ghost?lang=eng>.

<sup>69</sup> 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, 2.

<sup>70</sup> Vogel and Dunn, “‘The Tongue of Angels,’” 3.

remnants of nineteenth-century Mormon meetings describe the visible effects of possession by the Spirit which resemble those of Vodou rituals Brown mentioned and the ones I witnessed in November 2020.

Possession also involves the delivery of a message in Haitian Vodou and Mormonism, and participants must be attentive to the spirits' comments. In Haitian Vodou, spirits give advice, warnings, and reprimand devotees for behaviors which do not please them. But it is also a time for participants to ask questions and receive answers. Brown explains that for Azaka's birthday celebration, Alourdes' daughter, Maggie, was the first one he chose to address. Azaka started by reprimanding her for not offering him better food and threatened to leave the ceremony. Maggie pleaded with him and said she was sick and hoped he could heal her. Azaka finally agreed to assist Maggie only if she did what he asked of her.<sup>71</sup> Azaka's behavior reflects the need for spirits to feel valued by their Vodou community. Hence, Maggie found herself in a situation where she was obligated to plead with a lwa in exchange for instructions on what to do to heal her body.

Like Vodou spirits, for Mormons the Holy Ghost is considered a divine messenger. The interaction with the Spirit and the reception of its messages have evolved significantly since the 1830s. Vogel and Dunn explore the spiritual manifestations of glossolalia, known as "speaking in tongues," and xenoglossia among mid-nineteenth century Mormon communities.<sup>72</sup> In the 1830s, xenoglossia was described as the ability to speak a foreign language without being familiar with it, while glossolalia was understood as speaking the divine or "pure Adamic language."<sup>73</sup> Vogel and Dunn analyze the phenomenon of glossolalia in depth throughout their

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<sup>71</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 61-62.

<sup>72</sup> Vogel and Dunn, "The Tongue of Angels," 2.

<sup>73</sup> Vogel and Dunn, "The Tongue of Angels," 9.



article, but do not use, once, the term possession to describe it. Until recently, scholars of Mormonism have not used terms such as “possession” to explain the manifestations of the Holy Spirit. Religious Studies scholar Stephen Taysom argues that the use of certain words in Mormonism such as possession are considered fraught “because, since the Middle Ages” they are “closely associated with the specific Roman Catholic ritual” that LDS Church leaders want to disassociate from.<sup>74</sup> Glossolalia, nevertheless, is an effect of possession, and as Vogel and Dunn explain, was not “an isolated or infrequent occurrence but rather a widespread persistent, and integral feature of early Mormon religious experience.”<sup>75</sup> Even though twenty-first century Mormonism has distanced itself from using the term possession when referring to experiencing the presence of the Spirit, Taysom clarifies that “the practice still exists, but it has dropped from official discourse.”<sup>76</sup>

In Mormonism, spirit possession also involves the transmission of a message. Like the Iwa, the Spirit is a divine messenger. In the mid-1800 glossolalia among Latter-day Saints was considered a divine gift and required an interpreter to translate the message that was given during possession. The translated words were considered sacred because they were believed to come directly from the Spirit. It was and still is taught that like the Iwa, the Spirit uses its power to pass on warnings, give advice and instructions that are commonly called revelations. Those revelations can target the entire LDS congregation, or be specific to a small group, or even a single individual. Unfortunately, the ability for every Latter-day Saints to share the messages they were given during spirit possession generated tension within the religious community. LDS

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<sup>74</sup> 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: A Journal of Interpretation* 27, no. 1 (2017): 57.

<sup>75</sup> Vogel and Dunn, “‘The Tongue of Angels,’” 10.

<sup>76</sup> Taysom, “‘Satan Mourns Naked upon the Earth,’” 58.

authorities had mixed opinions regarding those revelations, and they often interpreted them as “a challenge to Smith’s charismatic powers.”<sup>77</sup> Vogel and Dunn explain that on several occasions Church leaders claimed messages came from the devil and contradicted Church policies. Consequently, revelations coming from members other than LDS authorities, such as the prophet or the apostles, were closely monitored and at times censured. Eventually, glossolalia became prohibited and members holding on to the practice were reprimanded by Church leaders. By the early twentieth century, glossolalia came to be considered an old and strange practice among Mormons that incited confusion and doctrinal derision.<sup>78</sup>

Even though glossolalia is no longer practiced and highly discouraged in twenty-first century Mormonism, the Spirit and the reception of its presence in one’s body is still an active component in modern doctrine. Latter-day Saints are encouraged to seek the Spirit’s companionship and follow its instructions when it communicates with them. Sermons in LDS general conferences often focus on the importance of maintaining a close relationship with this divine being.<sup>79</sup> In his talk “Take the Holy Spirit as your Guide,” Larry Y. Wilson tells the story of Ensign Frank Blair, an American Navy officer, who saved his ship and crew after listening to the Spirit’s voice. Blair claimed that after praying “the Holy Ghost whispered that he needed to walk around the ship and observe to gather more information.”<sup>80</sup> This advice was followed by an additional message that eventually led the ship to keep its remaining engine running long enough

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<sup>77</sup> Vogel and Dunn, “The Tongue of Angels,” 16.

<sup>78</sup> Vogel and Dunn, “The Tongue of Angels,” 34.

<sup>79</sup> The LDS general conference takes place twice a year during the months of April and October. It is a two-day event where the Church leaders speak to the worldwide LDS congregation. It is organized in four two-hour sessions. The general conference is streamed live as well as recorded so every LDS member or non-members can watch it for free on <http://lds.org> no matter the time zone. The sessions are translated in one hundred different languages and are later published in the Church monthly magazine called *The Liahona*. Every general conference take place in Salt Lake City, Utah, in the LDS Church’s conference center.

<sup>80</sup> Larry Y. Wilson, “Take the Holy Spirit as your Guide,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, talk given April 2018, accessed on December 28, 2020. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2018/04/take-the-holy-spirit-as-your-guide?lang=eng>

to outlast the storm. Wilson uses this story as an example to show the Spirit's ability to communicate with Latter-day Saints and save lives. In this story the Spirit manifested itself through a clear voice that Blair heard and promptly obeyed. Blair's experience is one of the countless examples that LDS authorities use to illustrate the power of the Spirit and its willingness to communicate with those seeking its guidance.

Wilson also focuses his talk on the way Blair needed to deserve the presence of the Spirit in order to receive its guidance. He states, "sometimes we can't hear heaven's signal because we are not worthy," because obedience is "the way to achieve clear communication."<sup>81</sup> If members are not worthy of the Spirit, it will not interact with them. Like in Brown's example of Maggie's reprimands from Azaka during his birthday Vodou ceremony, the lwa threatened to leave because of his disappointment with the quality of food on the altar.<sup>82</sup> This shows that the Spirit, like the lwa, only communicates with those who properly prepare themselves to receive its companionship. In the Mormon context, if members want to have a relationship with the Spirit, they must follow the Church's recommendations, pray, attend religious meetings, and ideally, perform sacred rituals in the temple. Following these guidelines make individuals spiritually worthy to interact with the Spirit. Only then, the Spirit will be willing to enter their body and mind, answer their questions, and protect them "from physical and spiritual danger."<sup>83</sup>

The relationship with the Spirit which Mormon doctrine promotes is similar to Vodouisants' relationship with the lwa. The Spirit and the lwa are considered divine beings with the power to enter in communication, through possession, with individuals seeking their guidance and support. Those mystical encounters are praised by the persons experiencing them.

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<sup>81</sup> Wilson, "Take the Holy Spirit as your Guide."

<sup>82</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 61-62

<sup>83</sup> "Holy Ghost," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed on April 3, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/holy-ghost?lang=eng>.

They feel privileged to be able to interact with sacred beings and value the messages given to them by the lwa or the Spirit. The Mormon interpretation of the Spirit and the way it is taught to act on worthy members shows that, like in Vodou, invisible divine beings have the capacity and power to inhabit bodies, influence individuals, guide them, and protect them in the world of the living, which encourages them to seek its companionship. Hence, in both religions, spirits are active agents in the lives of those who properly seek to interact with them, and because of their powers, the Spirit and the lwa become sacred tools for those seeking divine assistance.

### **Ancestors**

Another commonality shared between Vodou and Mormonism is a strong relationship with the dead. In both religions, death is not conceptualized as an end to life. Instead, it is understood as a new beginning, or a continuity of life in a world connected to the one of the living. In Mormonism, the distance between the living and the dead is taught to be as thin as a veil that “separates the seen from the unseen.”<sup>84</sup> Mormon prophet Brigham Young, expanded on this doctrinal point by saying:

The spirit world is not far away. Sometimes the veil between this life and the life beyond becomes very thin. Our loved ones who have passed on are not far from us. [...] If the Lord would permit it, and it was His will that it should be done, you could see the spirits that have departed from this world, as plainly as you now see bodies with your natural eyes.<sup>85</sup>

Young’s comments on the spirit world imply that it is located on earth. This proximity between the two worlds facilitates the communication between mortals and those who have passed on.

Heavenly beings have played a central role since Mormonism’s founding. This notion is best illustrated by the angel Moroni’s visitations to Smith. Moroni is a resurrected being, who during his mortal life was a prophet in the Americas and one of the multiple authors of the

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<sup>84</sup> Ezra Taft Benson, “Life is Eternal,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on December 29, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/1971/04/life-is-eternal?lang=eng>.

<sup>85</sup> Brigham Young, *Journal of Discourses* 3 (Liverpool: Orson Pratt, 42 Islington), 367-369.

golden plates which Smith procured in the 1820s. The angel Moroni appeared to Smith and guided him to find the golden plates buried under a hill in Palmyra, New York. The angel Moroni, who was sent by God as “a resurrected being to reveal” the location of the golden plates, also commanded Smith to translate them into what became known as the Book of Mormon.<sup>86</sup> The Book of Mormon became a foundational text in the LDS religion alongside the Bible. The LDS Church’s belief in the validity of the Book of Mormon is the major difference between Mormonism and various protestant sectarian groups.

Once Smith finished translating the plates in the 1820s, he returned them to the angel Moroni. LDS authorities have argued that the golden plates are no longer on earth because “the Lord obviously knew that the presence of the plates would cause men to attempt to use them to obtain money, or personal notoriety.”<sup>87</sup> From 1823 until his assassination, Smith regularly met with the angel Moroni.<sup>88</sup> 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 other Mormon prophets.<sup>89</sup> Mormon doctrine teaches that prophets are “seers,” implying that they have visions and receive visitations from heavenly beings. Since the twentieth century, however, Mormon prophets have stopped mentioning their interactions with angels, God, and Jesus Christ.<sup>90</sup> Although within Mormon culture, rumors continue to circulate that LDS leaders still

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<sup>86</sup> “Moroni, Son of Mormon,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/moroni-son-of-mormon?lang=eng>.

<sup>87</sup> “Why Were the Book of Mormon Gold Plates Not Placed in a Museum?,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed April 21, 2021, <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>.

<sup>88</sup> “Moroni, Son of Mormon,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed on December 29, 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/moroni-son-of-mormon?lang=eng>.

<sup>89</sup> Glen L. Rudd, “The Angle Moroni,” speech at Brigham Young University-Idaho, March 11, 2003, accessed on 12/28/2020, [https://www2.byui.edu/Presentations/transcripts/devotionals/2003\\_03\\_11\\_rudd.htm#:~:text=And%20it's%20been%20written%20that,Joseph%20that%20we%20know%20of](https://www2.byui.edu/Presentations/transcripts/devotionals/2003_03_11_rudd.htm#:~:text=And%20it's%20been%20written%20that,Joseph%20that%20we%20know%20of).

<sup>90</sup> “Prophet,” Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/scriptures/gs/prophet?lang=eng>.

communicate with heavenly beings. Smith was not only visited by the angel Moroni but also documented that he conversed with New Testament prophets such as 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.

Deep and meaningful relationships with the dead also exists in Haitian Vodou. Brown explains that the root of Vodou is a tripartite of “the ancestors, the land, and the spirits.”<sup>91</sup> Staying connected to these three components is primordial for Haitians. Brown emphasizes the importance of ancestors in Haitian Vodou by using Alourdes’ comments about her late mother’s visitations. The women’s strong relationship was not impacted by death. Alourdes told Brown that even though her mother, Philomise, does not have a body of flesh and bones anymore she still takes care of her from the world of the dead. One of Philomise’s most common ways of interacting with Alourdes is through her dreams. There, she gives her daughter answers to problems she cannot solve for herself or others.<sup>92</sup> Thus, even though Philomise passed way, she is still an active part of Alourdes’ life. Like Smith, Alourdes can see and converse with deceased individuals which demonstrates that in both religions, physical death does not prevent communication between mortals and the dead.

Keeping in touch with the dead is an important component of Vodou and Mormonism. For example, the LDS website states that Mormons “believe families can be together after this life. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen relationships with all family members, both those who are alive and those who have died.”<sup>93</sup> To put this doctrinal teaching in practice, the LDS Church created in 1894 a program named Genealogical Society of Utah, which gave members access to

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<sup>91</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 371.

<sup>92</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 245.

<sup>93</sup> “Genealogy,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints Newsroom, accessed on December 29, 2020, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/topic/genealogy>.

birth and death certificates, marriage licenses, and census records. This program, now renamed Family Search, gives Latter-day Saints the ability to search for their ancestors' names and learn about their past through digitalized documents. It also gives members access to the LDS records to check whether their ancestors are baptized in the Mormon Church. If individuals died before joining the LDS Church, living family members have the possibility to baptize them by proxy.<sup>94</sup> Baptizing ancestors is part of the three-fold mission of the LDS Church which consists of proclaiming the gospel, perfecting the saints, and redeeming the dead.<sup>95</sup> LDS doctrine teaches that to reach salvation, one must be a Mormon. For this reason, the Church put in place a temple ritual to baptize those who were not baptized into the Church while alive and enables Latter-day Saints to act as saviors for their ancestors. Doing so gives deceased individuals access to the salvation they would not be granted otherwise.

In the process of doing genealogical research, LDS members learn about their ancestors' past and are encouraged by Church authorities to share their family history during religious gatherings. The last time my daughter participated in an LDS meeting for the youth, the group she was in was asked to share stories about their ancestors. Some kids told stories about their great great grandparents who were heroes in the Civil War, others explained how their ancestors personally knew the prophet Joseph Smith, and some more said that their ancestors were the first

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<sup>94</sup> Baptism for the dead takes place in Mormon temples. It consists of the participation of four individuals. Two of them stand in a baptismal font full of lukewarm water. One male priesthood holder recites the baptismal prayer using the name of the deceased person. The other person in the water can be a male or female of a minimum age of 12 and acts as a proxy for the deceased person. Once the words of the prayer are recited, the proxy is completely immersed in water. Two other male priesthood holders sit close to the baptismal font to act as witnesses and oversee the ceremony according to the instructions given by the Church. Once the ritual of baptism is performed, LDS members have the option to act as proxies for two other rituals available to the dead: the endowments which consist of blessing the body and receiving the holy garment of Adam and Eve, and the sealings which entails spiritually marrying couples and uniting children to their parents. These rituals are considered essential to enter the kingdom of God after physical death. See "Baptisms for the Dead," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on April 23, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics/baptisms-for-the-dead?lang=eng>.

<sup>95</sup> "The Three-Fold Mission of the Church," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, accessed on December 30, 2020, <https://history.churchofjesuschrist.org/event/three-fold-mission-of-church?lang=eng>.

Mormons to settle in Utah. The children were excited about their stories and proud of their ancestors' accomplishments. This focus on family history is also present in Vodou. Brown explains 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" if not told often.<sup>96</sup> Ancestors' names and life stories must be told frequently for people to remember their lineage, but also to help future generations find guidance, pride, and strength in their family history. Families rely on their ancestors' past experiences to know where they come from and which path to follow. By doing so, Brown explains that the "lineage is a chain, each generation a link" that persists over time and strengthens families.<sup>97</sup> The research tools and data the LDS Church puts at its members' disposition and its family focused doctrine enable Haitian converts to create additional connections with their ancestors with the full support of a religious organization which has the financial means to give them free access to the technology necessary for genealogical work.

### **Religious Representation of Social Mobility**

For many Haitians, converting to Mormonism is often associated with coming in closer contact with American culture and the opportunities of social mobility connected to it. The LDS Church was born in the United States, its headquarters are in Salt Lake City, Utah, and between 1978 and 2018 77% of the Mormon general authorities were citizens of the United States. Since 2018, diversity among general authorities has grown from 23% to 40%. Despite this significant increase of international presence in the leadership of the Church, the majority of its leaders

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<sup>96</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 19.

<sup>97</sup> Brown, *Mama Lola*, 286.



remain U.S. citizens.<sup>98</sup> This is why it is common for members and non-members to associate the LDS Church with the United-States. Therefore, becoming a Latter-day Saint can be seen as a connection to the United States' social and economic status.

D. Michael Quinn's research on the wealth and corporate power of Mormonism shows that the LDS Church's high hierarchy (general authorities, twelve apostles, and the first presidency) is modeled after an American business model, what Quinn calls "a formal, stratified hierarchy of officers with church-wide jurisdiction." In this system, corporate Church leaders are remunerated according to their religious status.<sup>99</sup> Quinn also explains that in the late 1880s, many Church leaders "regarded this stratified salary system as an indication of personal merit."<sup>100</sup> Because of this structure, the Mormon Church has been referred to as "corporate Mormonism."<sup>101</sup>

This business image does not only rely on the structure of the LDS Church. It is also illustrated by the appearance of its leaders and especially Latter-day Saints male missionaries. To serve an LDS mission, all candidates must send an application to the Church headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah. Each missionary applicant must show their religious worthiness, as well as their physical, emotional, and mental ability to serve. Church leaders review applications and decide where candidates are the most needed. Those who qualify are sent to one of the eleven LDS Missionary Training Centers (MTC) where they learn conversion techniques, memorize lesson plans to teach the gospel, and go through a fast-learning language program if required.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> "Number of International General Authorities Has Quadrupled in Past 40 Years - Church News and Events," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed April 21, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/church/news/number-of-international-general-authorities-has-quadrupled-in-past-40-years?lang=eng>.

<sup>99</sup> Quinn, *The Mormon Hierarchy: Wealth & Corporate Power*, 2.

<sup>100</sup> Quinn, 11.

<sup>101</sup> Quinn, 49.

<sup>102</sup> "Missionary Training Centers," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed February 24, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/callings/missionary/missionary-training-centers?lang=eng>.

Missionaries are expected to dress according to the Church dress code.<sup>103</sup> Their clothing choice fits into the Hollywood image of the American professional. Male missionaries walk the streets of cities, towns, and villages all over the world, no matter the climate or customs of the country in dark colored suits, white button collared shirts, ties, and dressed shoes. During my high school years in France, my friends and I used to take the tramway downtown and would often cross path with Mormon missionaries. They recognized me from Sunday church services and would always greet me and asked me about my day. My friends who were not familiar with my religion, would often ask me: “who are your American secret agent friends?” They also made the comment that they looked like Barry Sonnenfeld’s 1997 *Men in Black* movie characters. To them, the LDS missionaries did not appear to be volunteer preachers, but instead American secret agents. Basquiat also stumbled upon this type of 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, that the Church and the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, are one and the same.” She explains this idea was common among “the majority of Haitians” she interviewed.<sup>104</sup> These two examples illustrate that in many countries, poor or rich, the male LDS missionary’s appearance is disconnected from their religious work and reflects American professional class stereotypes.

I had the opportunity to discuss the relationship between America and social mobility in an interview with Mathew Gérard, a Haitian Mormon convert currently living in the United States. When I questioned him about the origin of his American first name, he answered that his

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<sup>103</sup> Missionary Training Centers, or MTC, are found all over the world. Mission candidates are usually sent to the training center closest to the area where they are called to serve. The time spent at the MTC depends on whether missionaries need to learn a new language and get used to all the Church’s missionary rules. See “Missionary Training Centers,” the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on April 23, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/callings/missionary/missionary-training-centers?lang=eng>.

<sup>104</sup> Basquiat, “Embodied Mormonism,” 5.

father picked it “because like many Haitians, he loved things American.”<sup>105</sup> I asked if this love for the United States was particular of his father or if it was a common feeling among Haitians. He replied that “most Haitians are fascinated with America because of the socio-economic possibilities this country can provide them.” For many Haitians, the United States is a land of opportunity because they think it can offer them the possibility to escape the extreme poverty and political oppression of Haiti. The Migration Policy Institute (MPI) website shows that the “United States is the top global destination for Haitian migrants.”<sup>106</sup> In 2018, the number of Haitian immigrants in the United-States reached 687,000, making them “the fourth-largest foreign-born group from the Caribbean in the United States.”<sup>107</sup> This data illustrates what Gérard explained about the common Haitian concept of the United States. He used the French term “Terre d’asile” which translates into “land of refuge” to describe what the country represents for Haitians. For them America symbolizes financial stability and opportunities. This idealization is further illustrated by the MPI website’s statistics which shows that most Haitians immigrants find employment in the United States. They are hired in service, sales, office occupation, as well as production and transportation. Haitians can earn the minimum wage and twenty-six percent of them have health insurance. Even though many Haitian immigrants fall into the low-income category of population in the United States and still struggle financially, a lot of them are able to earn enough to send money home to support family members struggling in Haiti. This reinforces the Haitian concept of the United-States as a land of opportunity and encourages more of them to move to the United States each year.

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<sup>105</sup> Freeman, Catherine, interview with Mathew Gerard, January 4, 2021.

<sup>106</sup> Kira Olsen-Medina and Jeanne Batalova, “Haitian Immigrants in the United States,” migrationpolicy.org, accessed on August 11, 2020, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/haitian-immigrants-united-states-2018>.

<sup>107</sup> Batalova and Olsen-Medina, “Haitian Immigrants.”

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Martha Kelehan describe the Haitians' desire to flee their country in their article titled "The Children of the Sea: Uncovering Images of the Botpippel Experience in Caribbean Art and Literature." Paravisini-Gebert and Kelehan define the Botpippel as "the Kreyol rendering of the term used to designate the undocumented Haitian immigrants who began attempting the treacherous voyage to the United States around 1972."<sup>108</sup> When unable to obtain an American visa, Haitians sail from the coasts of Haiti on makeshift boats to escape "repressive political conditions, ecological devastation, and economic stagnation at home for freedom and opportunity abroad."<sup>109</sup> They hope their embarkation will take them safely to Florida, 700 miles away, without sinking or being caught by the U.S. Coast Guard known to violently escort illegal immigrants to Guantanamo or repatriate them. The Botpippel story is a part of Gérard's past. His father left Haiti on a boat and "for a long time, we lived with the thought that the makeshift boat he had embarked on had never made it. Little did he or I know that thirty-six years later I would locate him in Florida."<sup>110</sup> Gérard's father also hoped to find a stable financial future in the United-States. The determination of Haitians to risk their lives crossing the Caribbean Sea illustrates their understanding that the United States will provide them with what their own government cannot give them.

The LDS Church in Haiti reflects the idea of American wealth and social mobility through its missionary's appearance, as discussed before, but also through its architectural presence. During our interview, Gérard explained that the Mormon Church is positively seen in Haiti especially through the media. Mormon programs are often aired on the radio and television,

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<sup>108</sup> Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Martha Daisy Kelehan, "The "Children of the Sea": Uncovering Images of the *Botpippel* Experience in the Caribbean Art and Litterature," in *Displacements and Transformations in Caribbean Cultures*, eds., Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert and Ivette Romero-Cesareo (Gainesville: Florida University Press, 2008), 127.

<sup>109</sup> Paravisini-Gebert and Kelehan, "The 'Children of the Sea,'" 126.

<sup>110</sup> "The Mormon Migration Project: Carter Charles, Port-au-Prince," Claremont Graduate University, accessed on January 7, 2021, <https://research.cgu.edu/mormonism-migration-project/people/carter/>.

and positive articles about the Church are regularly published in local newspapers. However, what seems to make Mormonism most noticeable in Haiti is the Church's luxurious buildings such as the meeting houses and the Port-au-Prince temple. Gérard explained that the LDS Church's wealth is visible through its large earthquake resistant buildings constructed with expensive material, unlike most construction in Haiti. Kelley C. Eaton describes in her thesis titled "Housing Crisis in Haiti post 2010 Earthquake" that most buildings in Haiti are "not durable" and built without any "building codes and regulations."<sup>111</sup> During the January 12, 2010 earthquake which caused a tremendous amount of destruction and death in Haiti, Mormon buildings did not collapse. On his 2013 visit in Haiti, Neil L. Andersen, an American LDS general authority, explained that the Church's meetinghouses became shelters for those who lost their homes during the earthquake. Local Mormon leaders opened the doors of meeting houses to members and non-members in need of a safe space. The Petionville LDS bishop, Harry Mardy, reported that "600 people — some members of L'Eglise de Jesus Christ des Saints des Derniers Jours (LDS Church), some not — call the meetinghouse grounds home."<sup>112</sup> Andersen expressed his joy concerning the help the Church provided to the Haitians on the *Church Newsroom* website in a short video clip, where he is filmed talking in a Mormon chapel with large clean windows, high ceilings, and freshly painted walls. A microphone and a smart board are at his disposition while he addresses the congregation.<sup>113</sup> The luxury of the construction and the technology in the building makes it difficult to believe that it is built in one of the poorest

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<sup>111</sup> Kelley C. Eaton, "Housing Crisis in Haiti Post 2010 Earthquake," (master's thesis, Clark University, 2017), 1, accessed on April 21, 2021, [https://commons.clarku.edu/idce\\_masters\\_papers/145](https://commons.clarku.edu/idce_masters_papers/145).

<sup>112</sup> Dennis Romboy, "LDS Relief: Tent Village Surrounds Mormon Meetinghouse in Haiti," *Deseret News*, January 29, 2010, <https://www.deseret.com/2010/1/29/20367582/lds-relief-tent-village-surrounds-mormon-meetinghouse-in-haiti>.

<sup>113</sup> "April 2013 World Report: Elder Neil L. Andersen Marks Church's 30-Year Anniversary in Haiti," Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Church Newsroom, April 12, 2013, video, 3:33, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bVTNIIIG6-yQ&list=ULmo5eL8F1bSc&index=603>.

countries in the Caribbean. Entering a Mormon building can seem like stepping into another world for many Haitians. One they associate with the United States because of its running water, modern plumbing, electricity, internet, air conditioning, and other luxuries that are only available to the wealthiest Haitians.<sup>114</sup>

Gérard explains that because of all these amenities, the LDS Church meeting houses in Haiti also become social spaces for Mormons and non-Mormons. Students go there after school to have access to high-speed internet and study in rooms with comfortable furniture and proper lighting. Others gather there to take advantage of the air conditioning during hot days or use the basketball courts which most LDS meetinghouses have at the back of the chapel. All these amenities transform these religious spaces into social spaces and support the image of a rich and prosperous America.

The presence of the LDS Church in Haiti, through the male missionaries' professional appearance and the luxurious religious buildings advertise a lifestyle that countless Haitians envy. The LDS Church is viewed as a successful American religious organization around the world which can provide for its members and non-members, a safe, reliable, and modern space to worship and socialize. By becoming Latter-day Saints, Haitians have the opportunity to

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<sup>114</sup> Not all LDS buildings are open to non-members. Mormon temples are only accessible to those who have a temple recommend. A temple recommend stands as a proof of members' worthiness to enter sacred places and perform sacred rituals. Members who do not have a temple recommend are encouraged to better obey God's commandments in order to qualify to receive such document. A temple recommend is piece of paper small enough to be stored in a wallet. The member's names, date of birth, membership number, expiration date, as well as two signatures from LDS authorities are written on it. When members enter a temple lobby, they are asked at the front desk to show their temple recommend. If they do not have it with them, or if it is expired, they are not allowed to go further into the building. Member needs to renew their temple recommend every two years through a series of interviews with Church leaders who "check" members' worthiness. If members are judged worthy to enter Mormon temples after the interviews, there are given a new temple recommend. See "Personal Worthiness," The Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-Day Saints, accessed on April 23, 2021, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/topics/missionary-preparation/personal-worthiness?lang=eng>.

socially and religiously come closer in contact with American culture that the LDS Church consciously or unconsciously advertises.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout my research, I attempt to show that Mormon doctrine, practices, and beliefs pave the way for conversion among Haitians because of the similarities Mormonism shares with Haitian Vodou. While these two religions come from different geographical locations and racial histories, many of their ideas and concepts of the world in relation to suffering, the dead, and the divine, cross paths. Even though according to Gérard, many Haitian Mormon converts are not Vodou initiates, their society and culture remain immersed in Vodou and has shaped their way of thinking and understanding of the world. Gérard explains that Haitians believe that the world they live in is enchanted.<sup>115</sup> They evolve in an environment where the supernatural is part of reality. They believe their everyday life is influenced and manipulated by their ancestors, as well as by divine and malevolent spirits. The world of the living and the world of the dead depend on each other to maintain a balance in the universe and Mormonism offers Haitians an additional way to reinforce those practices and beliefs.

This enchanted side of life and relationship with the supernatural is found in Mormonism through the teachings of the physical proximity between mortal life and the spirit world. The interaction between these two spaces and the close distance which separates them, are illustrated by countless accounts of Latter-day Saints' mystical experiences, such as visions, 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, or the Spirit, whose spiritual powers range from whispering in someone's ear to possessing an individual.

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<sup>115</sup> Catherine Freeman, Interview with Mathew Gérard.

Furthermore, the notion of eternal families enables Haitians to maintain and nourish their relationships with their ancestors through the LDS Church free genealogy program and the temple rituals for the dead which purposes are to redeem the dead and create eternal relationships with ancestors. 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 and get baptized into the LDS Church.

Mormonism also exposes Haitians to an American culture and business model that they often understand as a possible accessibility to social mobility. The attire of male missionaries, the regular visits of LDS general authorities of American nationality, and the luxurious meetinghouses and Mormon temples all transpire an image of wealth. This image reinforces the Haitians concept of social mobility linked to the United States, a country, they believe, can guarantee them and their family with the financial stability, and social mobility they do not have access to in Haiti. Overall, Mormonism offers more than an extension of religious beliefs and practices to the Haitian population. It also reinforces the Haitian social concept of the United States and their idea of an American Dream.



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