

Embodied Mormonism: Performance, Vodou and the LDS Faith in Haiti

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IN HAITI RELIGIONS ARE RARELY UNDERSTOOD to be autonomous from one another. It is not unusual for seemingly disparate mythological systems to coexist not only across the Haitian landscape, but also within individual Haitian practice. Given Haiti's peculiar history, it is perfectly reasonable to most Haitians that they attend a Vodou ceremony on Saturday evening and a Catholic mass or Protestant sacrament on Sunday morning. In this often chaotic coexistence, "magic exists with reason, history with myth, [and] the epic sound of the bugle with that of the ritual drumbeat."¹ Thus, in Haiti, the question of culture and specifically cultural identity locates itself in the "in-between" spaces of dominant religious and cultural practices. Postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha identifies these same spaces as belonging to the "beyond" where "beyond is

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1. Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, translated by James E. Maraniss (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1996), 303.

neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past, [but] a moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion."² In other words, religious (and thus cultural) identity in Haiti emerges as a malleable, often paradoxical process susceptible to the barrage of influences that a postcolonial world affords. But what does such a reality signify for LDS missionaries who enter such a landscape and for the Haitians who investigate the Church?

Operating from Joseph Smith's 1833 edict that "every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language" (D&C 90:11), LDS missionaries have entered Haiti with the purpose of encouraging Haitians to join the Mormon Church. Despite the necessity of foreign language mastery, missionaries across the world proceed with missionary work that is remarkably uniform in practice. It matters little where the mission office is located; the mission manuals and accompanying lessons remain the same. For individuals raised in an environment where truth is absolute and religious practice is a direct reflection of that ontological position, such an approach to missionary work is hardly problematic. But for the Haitian investigator who is accustomed to piecing together parts of differing mythologies to create an often highly personalized cosmology such uniformity begs to be challenged.

Some observers have suggested that a strict conformity to the standard missionary lesson is not always desirable. For example, Spencer J. Palmer and Roger B. Keller maintain that "members of the Church must decide from a tactical point whether the evangelical mission of the Church can be accomplished more effectively by emphasizing the diabolic nature of the similarities between the gospel and the native faiths or by emphasizing the common heritage of the pre-earth life, the influence of the Light of Christ, the partially accurate deposit of faith and truth from ancient times and so forth."³

Unfortunately, this debate whether native religions are diabolic or merely imperfect is largely relegated to academic circles and has had little impact on actual missionary practice. What prevails, then, is an approach

2. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 1.

3. Spencer J. Palmer and Roger R. Keller, *Religions of the World: A Latter-day Saint View* (Provo, Utah: Scholarly Publications, BYU, 1990), 225.

to religious practice that can often neglect the contextual and cultural nuances that new members (in this case, Haitian members) of the Church bring, not only to the missionary lessons, but also to their newly chosen religious identities. In crafting their new religious identities, many Haitian Mormons ignore Mormonism's claim of absolute truth; instead, they borrow only what appeals to them and add it to already existing patterns of belief and behavior.

In this article, I examine the relationship Haitian Mormons have created with the LDS Church.⁴ Informed by notes taken in the field, I argue that Haitian Mormons simultaneously emerge as both conformist Church members enacting proper LDS behavior and as subversive performers who take from Mormonism only what they need to best craft their individual designs for living.

Mormonism Comes to Haiti

In comparison to other religions found in Haiti (Vodou, Catholicism, various Protestant denominations), the Mormon Church has existed there for a very short time. In 1977, Alexandre Mourra, a prominent Haitian businessman of Jewish-Arabic descent, wrote to the Florida Fort Lauderdale Mission president, Richard L. Millet, requesting baptism and a Book of Mormon.⁵ In July, Mourra traveled to Fort Lauderdale where he was baptized and ordained a priest. A year later, Millet and his counselors presided over a group baptism of twenty-two Haitians whom Mourra had introduced to the gospel, in Hatte-Maree, north of Port-au-Prince, on July 2, 1978.

The first four missionaries arrived in June 1980 and achieved moderate success as more French-speaking elders arrived in Haiti from the missions in Paris and Montreal. The first missionary called from Haiti,

4. This article is based on research and fieldwork completed in 1999. Although I provide some updating at the end of this article, the analysis here generally applies to the first two decades of Mormonism in Haiti and more specifically to the period of my 1995–99 visits to that country. I make no claim that expressions of Mormonism (or of any other new religion) would remain unchanged in Haiti with the passage of time and the maturing of LDS institutions there. What I offer is a Mormon illustration of a fairly common process occurring in the early years of new religions when they are imported into “exotic” settings.

5. Elizabeth VanDenBerghe, “Beginnings: A Church of One,” *Ensign*, March 1991, 37.

Fritzner Joseph, served in Puerto Rico (1981–83). On April 17, 1983, Haiti was officially dedicated “for the preaching of the Gospel and the building up of the Kingdom of God.”⁶ It became part of the newly organized West Indians Mission on June 20, 1983, under the direction of Kenneth Zabriskie, former Fort Lauderdale Florida Mission president. The Haiti Port-au-Prince Mission was created August 4, 1984, with James S. Arrigona as president.

By 1986 Haiti numbered 1,685 members of the Church and 14 branches. Of its seventy-six full-time missionaries, twenty-eight were Haitian. By 1991, the Church had grown to 3,500 members and 18 branches. Full-time missionaries numbered 140 but only 26 of them were Haitian.⁷ Although the Church was growing, it suffered many losses in 1991. Due to political instability and near-daily riots, the American elders were evacuated (the sister missionaries had been evacuated ten months earlier), and Fritzner Joseph served as acting mission president.

When foreign missionaries returned in July 1996 under the direction of Harold Bodon, missionary efforts began with renewed vigor. On September 21, 1997, Church membership had reached a level to allow the creation of the Port-au-Prince Stake, Haiti’s first, with an estimated 5,300 members. This stake included the Carrefour, Carrefour-Feuilles, Centrale, Delmas, Haut-Delmas, Martissant, and Petionville wards and the Croix-des-Bouquets and Croix-des-Missions branches.⁸ By November 1998, this number had grown to 6,000 members, with only forty-eight missionaries serving in Haiti—thirty-two (two thirds) of them Haitian.⁹

Despite these growing numbers, the LDS Church has had to face an interesting and prevailing stereotype held by many Haitians,

6. “Haitian Mission Chronology,” in *Haitian Mission Site*, retrieved June 29, 1999, from <http://www.greatbasin.net/~networth/haiti/misshist/htm>.

7. *Ibid.*

8. “Late-Breaking News,” *Haiti Mission Site*, retrieved June 29, 1999, from <http://www.greatbasin.net/~networth/hait/latest.htm>. By the end of 2003, a second stake was created in Port-au-Prince and total LDS membership in Haiti had passed 10,000.

9. Sister Miller, wife of Donald Miller, the mission president, interviewed November 10, 1998, Petionville Ward, Petionville, Haiti. Unless otherwise noted, all interviews are in my field notebooks, organized by date.

that the Church and the Central Intelligence Agency, or CIA, are one and the same. This opinion was expressed, if not believed, by the majority of Haitians I met during my fieldwork. Both Mormons and non-Mormons were aware of this belief. On only the third day of my stay in Haiti, a dear, trusted advisor who also happens to be a *houngan* (Vodou priest), when I told him that many of my informants had said the Mormon Church was connected to the CIA and asked if he had heard this claim before, responded: "Oh, yes. Those people are spreading all over my country. Damn CIA!"¹⁰

Montina Michelet, a single man now in his thirties and a budding import/export entrepreneur, had been baptized in April 1998. He confided that Mormonism was not well liked in his country. He explained that many of his neighbors told him regularly that the CIA sends agents to Haiti disguised as Mormon missionaries. In fact, many Haitians believe that to join the Mormon Church is to "sell out to the CIA."¹¹ Closer to home, Montina's grandfather, a *houngan* in Jeremie, admonished Montina every time he saw him: "Mormonism is a bad religion. Why are you going there, Montina? Mormons don't serve God, they serve the CIA."¹² When the woman who ran the guesthouse in Petionville where I stayed part of the time asked what I was researching in Haiti and I explained, she responded, "The Mormon Church is with the CIA, you know."¹³

Yet despite this widely held negative belief, Haitians are joining the LDS Church in record numbers. Further, as my fieldwork illustrates, Haitians are not merely mimicking behavior exhibited at Sunday services; rather, they are actively engaged in crafting performances that showcase a malleable understanding of Mormonism and its tenets. However, before providing examples, it is important to address the concepts of performance and critical ethnography that are central to the thesis of this article.

10. Marcel ("Papa") Wah, interviewed September 19, 1998, en route to Leogane, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

11. Montina Michelet, interviewed September 30, 1998, Petionville, Haiti.

12. *Ibid.*, October 2, 1998.

13. Name withheld (daughter-in-law of the owner of Ife Guesthouse), interviewed October 25, 1998, Petionville, Haiti.

Critical Ethnography and Performance

My analysis is guided by concepts from critical ethnography, a subdiscipline of modern cultural studies derived from classical anthropology. Basic to this perspective is the concept that the human body itself can be understood partly as an outcome of culture. The body (including the mind with its concepts and emotions) is not only physical but is a receptacle containing and expressing all the traits and products acquired from the surrounding culture. Religion is one of these products; and in Haiti, religion (including Mormonism) goes far beyond forms of spirituality to express economic institutions and values, such as social class and the aspirations for upward social mobility introduced by Western intervention.

Alternatively one might be said to wear or use the body as a "costume" on which has been inscribed language, religion, class, gender, ethnicity, and other cultural products. We see here a convergence with critical feminist theory, including Simone de Beauvoir's notion that "one is not born a woman but rather becomes one."¹⁴ Yet, in this same sense, the body is always a work in progress, never entirely finished, with the capacity to manipulate and stylize the cultural inscriptions as they are received. From this process emerges an identity that enables a person to inhabit and perform appropriately in various social categories and situations.

Performance then becomes an important concept in the analysis that follows. To some extent "an essentially contested concept" because of its variable definitions among the social sciences, the term as I use it here denotes simply the act of doing or expressing—thus, as more or less synony-

14. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, translated by E. M. Parshley (New York: Vintage, 1973), 301. See also Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," in *Feminisms*, edited by Robyn R. Warhol and Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 347-62; Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, translated by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," *Feminisms*, 860-79; Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (London: Routledge, 1985); Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by L. H. Martin et al. (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49.

mous with "physical expression."¹⁵ Performance also implies, however, comparison and interaction with an imagined ideal in the "doing." Where Mormonism is concerned, the question is: How do Haitians do Mormonism? And how do their religious performances compare to the larger backdrop of Mormon expectations? The short answer is that Haitians do Mormonism on their own terms. Yet "patterns of social performance are not . . . [entirely] . . . prescribed by the culture, but are constantly constructed, negotiated, reformed, fashioned, and organized out of scraps of 'recipe knowledge.'"¹⁶ In a practical sense, therefore, performances are socially constructed products of "recipe knowledge"—i.e., ingredients known and available to the performers. Cultural identities and their accompanying performances are individually created or pieced together such that no two are exactly alike.

Understood in this way, performance converges nicely with the concept of *bricolage*, a term widely used by French anthropologists, most notably Claude Lévi-Strauss. The performer thus becomes a *bricoleur*, "adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks. . . . His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with 'whatever is at hand,' that is to say, with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and . . . heterogeneous."¹⁷ The *bricoleur* thus becomes a master at selectively crafting a performance from various sources. What emerges is a patchwork that often does not resemble the component pieces. Such a performance also carries the potential to subvert the very culture from which it has chosen its goods.

It is important to note here that *bricolage* differs somewhat from the idea of syncretism, a term perhaps more often applied to the general process of blending two seemingly discrepant ideological sys-

15. Mary Strine, Beverly Long, and Mary Hopkins, "Research in Interpretation and Performance Studies: Trends, Issues, Priorities," *Speech Communication: Essays to Commemorate the Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Speech Communication Association*, edited by Gerald Phillips and Julia Wood (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 183.

16. Marvin Carlson, *Performance: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 49.

17. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), 17.

tems.¹⁸ Syncretism implies a more wholesale merger of entire traditions, often at the institutional level. Certainly within Haiti syncretism exists, just not in reference to Mormonism. Take, for example, the case of Catholicism in Haiti. Decreed in 1685 in the French colonial document *Le Code Noir*, Catholicism was the mandated religion of Saint Domingue (present-day Haiti). All Haitians, free and slave, were, by law, to be baptized into this religion. Haitian slaves, forced to adopt a foreign religion under penalty of death, slowly began to combine the outward symbols of Catholicism with their own West African practices of Vodou.

Vodou, long misunderstood as solely a force of black magic, originated in West Africa. As a religion, it is the worship of animistic spirits or gods, *lwas* in Haitian Creole, for the purpose of meeting the daily demands of living. There is a supreme being in Haitian Vodou recognized as *Bon Dieu*, but heavier emphasis is placed on the pantheon of lesser, more accessible deities that control nature, health, wealth, and happiness. In Haitian Vodou, gods are manifest through the spirits of ancestors and must be properly honored in ritualized ceremonies. Unlike the God of Christianity, Haitian *lwas* must be fed, cared for, and entertained. Consequently, Vodou rituals include prayers, drumming, dancing, singing, and animal sacrifice, all designed to make a spirit feel welcome. It is the presence of these various *lwas* that made it relatively easy for Haitian slaves to incorporate Catholic imagery into their worship. Because each *lwa* is understood to be a representation of humanity, it was quite easy for Haitian slaves to equate their gods with the pantheon of saints honored in the Catholic faith. Thus, Damballah, the serpent god, was visually connected to Saint Patrick; Erzulie, the love goddess, to the Virgin Mary; and Ogou, the war god, to Saint Jacques. During Vodou ceremonies, Catholic lithographs of these saints would be posted, leading French colonial masters to believe that their Haitian slaves were worshipping important figures in Catholic liturgy.

This piecing together of different mythologies to create an altogether syncretic pattern of living occurred over centuries, with the result that Vodou in contemporary Haiti cannot be practiced without the symbolic accoutrements of Catholicism and, occasionally, vice versa. In the

18. Contrast Karel Dobbelaere, "bricolage," and Hugo Meynell, "syncretism," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, edited by William H. Swatos (Walnut Creek, Calif.: AltaMira Press, 1998), 62-63, 506.

Holy Trinity Cathedral located in downtown Port-au-Prince, interior murals depict traditional Christian mythology such as the Last Supper and Resurrection alongside images of Haitian Vodou drums and animal sacrifice. Furthermore, as Andre Pierre, noted Haitian painter and Vodou priest, comments: "To be a good practitioner of Vodou, one must first be a good Catholic."¹⁹ Clearly, what began as ad hoc religious adaptation, or *bricolage*, among Haitian slaves has over time become institutionally entrenched and enacted across the country, or in other words, "syncretic."

On a much smaller scale, contemporary Haitian Mormons are shaping Mormonism to fit their individual needs. In doing so, they are engaging in the everyday expression or "performance" of cultural and religious identity. But what/how are they performing? I could begin to answer this question only by traveling to Haiti and immersing myself in the Haitian Mormon community.

In the Field

I had done preliminary fieldwork in Haiti during December 1995 and August 1997, but during the fall semester of 1998 (sixteen weeks), I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in and around Port-au-Prince, Haiti, as part of my dissertation research.²⁰ I attended Mormon services primarily in the Petionville Ward (Petionville is a small town just north of Port-au-Prince), but also in other wards and branches near Port-au-Prince. I was welcomed into the Petionville Ward with open arms by nearly every Haitian Mormon I met. Regarding my participation in the surrounding areas of Port-au-Prince, I conversed with Church leaders and participated in Church activities with my new friends. Some of them were eager and willing to discuss their lives with me. Others gave me only a glimpse. It is largely through the eyes of these people that I came to understand how Mormonism is performed in Haiti.

I tried very carefully to approach my work in the field from the perspective of grounded theory. To be sure, I went to Haiti with a general no-

19. Andre Pierre, interviewed at his home, Croix-des-Missions, Haiti, August 23, 1997.

20. Jennifer Huss Basquiat, "Between Eternal Truth and Local Culture: Performing Mormonism in Haiti" (Ph.D. diss., Claremont Graduate School, January 2001).

tion of what I wished to study for my Ph.D. dissertation; but as with many issues pertaining to Haiti, what one wishes to see is not always what is borne out in reality. In hindsight, I went to Haiti intent on studying the now-ridiculous notion that people would openly practice Vodou alongside Mormonism—i.e., that I would see the same kind of syncretic blending of religious symbolism that Catholicism and Vodou have shared over centuries. I discovered the reality of Mormon practice and the simultaneous allegiance to Vodou by some to be a far subtler endeavor.

Over the course of my study of Haiti and its religious complexities—which I now understand as a lifelong passion—I have often been asked, “Why did you choose Haiti?” The truest answer, despite its seeming triteness, is that I didn’t choose Haiti. It chose me. Although I had little interest in current affairs as a teenager, a news program about the exile of “Baby Doc” Duvalier that I saw at age fifteen imprinted itself on my memory. Nearly ten years later, I jumped at the opportunity to serve as an international election monitor in Haiti’s 1995 presidential elections. As soon as I stepped off the plane, I fell in love with Haiti and planned future trips. Most people experience culture shock when they go abroad. For me, culture shock occurs when I return to the United States. For reasons I cannot rationally explain, I feel as if I am at home when I am in Haiti. A Vodou priest I met at a ceremony told me it was because I have the soul of a *mambo*, or Vodou priestess, a story that remains close to my heart. It seemed inevitable to choose Haiti for my master’s thesis and I could not pass up the opportunity to continue research in Haiti for my doctorate, especially when I learned that the LDS Church had recently started missionary work there. That is how Haiti “chose” me.

When I first visited Petionville Ward, I was besieged by Haitian Mormons who wanted to talk to me. Where had I come from? Why was I here? Would I be interested in talking about Utah? Given that I was a white woman from the United States who had appeared seemingly out of nowhere in a Haitian Mormon ward, the assumption was made that I was from Utah. This was not wholly incorrect. When the Haitian Mormons whom I met discovered that I had been born in Utah, they began a willingly reciprocal relationship with me in which we both invariably took on the simultaneous roles of ethnographer and informant. The fact that I hadn’t participated in Church services or activities for years despite being born and raised in the LDS faith didn’t enter into our conversations. Whether I committed a lie of omission is difficult to ascertain. I always

answered questions faithfully and honestly, but I felt that it was inappropriate to question the newfound faith of Haitian Mormons who had found a way to make Mormonism fit into their lives. They could make Mormonism work. I could not. Nevertheless, I began a series of conversations with several members of the Petionville Ward.

The interviews that I conducted were sometimes highly formal but more often consisted simply of engaging in conversation during Church activities and weekly meetings. The formal interviews all followed the same basic format with questions as follows:

When were you baptized?

Why did you want to become Mormon?

Is your family Mormon also?

Is it difficult to be the only member in your family? (if applicable)

What is the most difficult part of Mormonism for you?

What is the thing you like best about the Mormon Church?

Is it difficult to be Haitian and also Mormon?

What do you think about Vodou?

The answers to these questions often served as a sort of template for future conversations. In all, I conducted roughly twenty-five interviews with Petionville Ward members. However, it should not be overlooked that, in addition to these formal interviews which often took place over lunch at a local café or at the guesthouse where I was staying, I also conducted much of my field work through participant observation in a variety of milieux. I tried to immerse myself in as many activities as possible, ranging from structured Church meetings to recreational activities to completely unstructured chance encounters on the streets of Petionville. Many of the informants who participated in formal interviews also spent many additional (and unstructured) hours talking with me.²¹

Given that I wanted as varied and illustrative a sample of Haitian Mormonism as possible, it was also important for me to interview local Church leaders to understand how Mormonism was being presented to

21. For a good review of the nature, objectives, and complexities in ethnographic field methods, see Carol A. B. Warren, "Ethnography," in *Encyclopedia of Sociology*, edited by Edgar F. Borgatta and Rhonda J. V. Montgomery, 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2000), 852-56, esp. p. 855. The validity and usefulness of ethnographic methodology do not depend on surveys or interviews with large representative samples of a given population.

Haitian investigators. I conducted formal interviews with two missionaries serving in Haiti (one from Canada, the other from France) and Donald Miller, the mission president, also from Canada. To round out this picture, I also conducted several interviews with local Haitian missionaries and local ward leaders. In addition to attending services and participating in activities in Petionville, I attended several functions at the stake center in Port-au-Prince.

My research is by no means exhaustive. Indeed, no ethnographic account, by definition, "can ever be complete."²² Given that literacy rates in Haiti are only about 50 percent, much of Haitian experience relies by necessity, not on the written word, but on "embodied" understanding. An "embodied" understanding has implications beyond such standard social science concepts as socialization, internalization, and identity construction. As I use "embodied/embodiment" here, the terms emphasize the physical adaptation and expression of Mormonism, thus stressing the important difference between the usual American expressions of Mormonism, which depend upon intellectualizing and rationalizing a text, and the Haitian dependence upon such "bodily" expressions as ceremonies, memorized and retold narratives, joking, weeping, and the like. Mormonism in the United States has all of that too, but not nearly as much as in Haiti.

Even in the comparatively wealthy area of Petionville where more Haitians understand French than anywhere else in the country, some of my informants could still not read the written material provided to them by the Church. Subsequently, much of my ethnographic work in Haiti revolved around an embodied understanding—and thus "performance"—of Mormonism, not on the specific understanding of scripture. Obviously, the standard missionary challenge to read the Book of Mormon and learn the truth it contains falls flat in a country where half the people cannot read.

Embodied Haitian Mormonism

The cultural performances of Haitian Mormons are not merely the regurgitation of Mormon missionary lessons, scriptures, and other textual scripts. Given that "people negotiate meaning in face-to-face interactions

22. Paul Bohannan and Dirk van der Elst, *Asking and Listening: Ethnography as Personal Adaptation* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1998), 26.

... as embodied social beings"²³ and not necessarily in compliance with the printed page, how do Haitians Mormons *do* their recently acquired faith? In this section, I illustrate the ways in which Haitian Mormons engage in an "embodied" practice of Mormonism, discuss the impacts these embodied performances have on the Haitian Mormon community, and argue that Haitian Mormons are shaping themselves through the use of definitional ceremonies and personalized cosmologies, emerging neither as purely Haitians nor as purely Mormons, but as something uniquely different.

Joseph Smith and the First Vision

Those familiar with Mormonism's approach to missionary work know that missionary lessons during the late 1990s were presented in an explicitly structured and formatted method. Missionaries were trained to introduce certain concepts at certain times without regard for what might be their investigators' specific interests. The goal of such a pedagogical approach was to explain the acceptable interpretation of scripture and its connection to larger Mormon ideology. However, this lofty goal was often not the only one to be reached. Many Haitian Mormons came to understand the Mormon Church, not through the sterile presentation of Mormon scripture, but through their own embodied understanding of it.

Take, for example, the presentation of what were then the first and fourth missionary lessons, which focused on Joseph Smith's emergence as a modern prophet and the textual product of his calling—the Book of Mormon. The ultimate goal of these lessons was to have the investigator understand the Book of Mormon as scripture and accept Smith's role. The missionaries first explained that, in answer to Smith's prayer, God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared and instructed him not to join any existing church. The Angel Moroni later appeared in response to his prayer for guidance and instructed him to unearth gold plates that recounted the story of ancient peoples in the Americas. This explanation gave considerable attention to the narrative of how Smith received the angelic message, uncovered the plates, translated them, and produced a written text that is the foundation of Mormon belief. For Haitian Mormons

23. M. Jackson, *Paths Toward a Clearing: Radical Empiricism and Ethnographic Inquiry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 184.

and potential members who can read and follow along in their scriptures, such a textual explanation of Smith—or the fact that the text takes center stage—is not problematic. However, Haitian members and investigators who cannot follow along in their texts are often moved by something more physical and existential: the unexamined role of the body in both Joseph Smith's First Vision and the coming forth of the Book of Mormon.

Alex Lamoricie, baptized in 1995, saw Joseph Smith's visions in a remarkably different way than they are initially presented. While the missionaries emphasize the finished product (the Book of Mormon), many Haitian members emphasize their identity with Joseph Smith's experience. To Alex, "Joseph Smith is like me. He came from humble beginnings and was a simple man. He was not an intellect."²⁴ Alex's emotional and visceral connection to Smith, not the text, is an important distinction because it bypasses the written word in favor of shared bodily experience.

By their own admission, Haitians certainly understand the experience that stems from being poor and uneducated. To share such humble beginnings with the founding prophet of the Mormon Church is, for many Haitians, a reminder that God does not require worldly goods as a prerequisite before showing favor to them. Moreover, casting Smith as one of their own allows many Haitians to see the Mormon Church as the product of humble beginnings and not as the corporate empire it has become. Such a realization suggests that even the poorest and uneducated of Haitians is important in the eyes of God. To a population that has been historically debased and undervalued, such recognition is certainly a welcome change. Perhaps this is why Alex proclaims Joseph Smith to be his "favorite thing about the Mormon Church."²⁵

Haitians identify not only with Smith's humble social station but also with his experience as seer. Smith's First Vision occurred when he asked God which church he should join. God the Father and Jesus Christ appeared to Smith and instructed him to join none of the denominations available to him. The missionaries I interviewed reported that Haitians

24. Alex Lamoricie, interviewed November 19, 1998, Ife Guesthouse, Petionville, Haiti.

25. Alex Lamoricie, interviewed November 16, 1998, Ife Guesthouse, Petionville, Haiti.

readily accept present-day revelation through visions. Elder Vigliotti, a French elder who had almost finished his service, described what typically happens when he taught this concept to Haitian investigators:

You know, when you say he [Joseph Smith] had a vision, . . . what do you think about that? They say "Well, that's all right, that's good. My friends just saw God and Jesus Christ last night." In their baptism interview when I ask them "How do you know the Church is true?" they say, "I got a vision." I say, "Do you want to share your vision with me?" and they explain that somebody just came to them and said, "You need to go to this church," or appeared to them holding the Book of Mormon or just crazy things that never happen to us.²⁶

Elder Vigliotti's account illustrates two significant points. First, Haitian investigators often claim to have made their baptism decision based on an embodied experience, not because of the text's veracity. Second, the missionary characterized having a vision as "crazy," even though Mormonism teaches that Joseph Smith had not one but many visions. Also implicit in this statement is an aura of moral superiority. For Elder Vigliotti these visions are suspect, not because they occur, but because they occur to Haitians and not to "us." Unspoken, but clear enough, is the bias that doctrinal certitude can bring. As a missionary who has been taught that spiritual confirmations come only in an authorized way, is he not a more reliable judge of an authentic vision from the Lord? He does not consider the possibility that the nonliterate Haitian investigator may be better prepared, not only to receive such a vision, but also to have the intelligence to both trust and expect that such a vivid bodily experience will occur.

Living Mormon History

This analysis should not imply that Haitian Mormons are ignorant of Mormon text; ironically, they often know the scriptural stories and characters better than their Western counterparts. Nevertheless, in Haiti what was originally formal scripture becomes oral history with historical Mormon characters becoming ancestral embodiments of contemporary Haitians. During one of my first sacrament meetings in the field, each of the speakers made clear references to Joseph Smith, Brigham Young, and other Mormon prophets. They didn't read such references from a book or

26. Elder Vigliotti, interviewed at the mission office, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, October 27, 1998. President Miller arranged these interviews. Audiocassettes and transcribed notes in my possession.

from notes they had written, but instead referred to these figures as though they were personal ancestors.²⁷

Casting historical Mormon figures in an ancestor's role occurs frequently among Haitian members. Alex states: "When I was called to go on a mission, I didn't want to face it. Then I remembered Jonah and I knew if he could do it then I could too. We can learn a lot from our prophets. For me, Alma is important because he is like a father to me. My own father is dead so I learn from Alma."²⁸ Thus, Alex draws personal applications for his own life from the lives of these prophets, regardless of individual cultural differences. Montina uses Brigham Young in much the same way: "Brigham Young was like me because he, too, was looking for the perfect place to call home. I think of Mormonism and I think 'This is the place.'"²⁹ In addition, Neal, a young father of three and recent convert to Mormonism, states, "Now I am like Joseph Smith. I have a testimony."³⁰

Andrise, the most recent Petionville convert to the Mormon Church during my stay in Haiti, also illustrates this desire to incorporate historical figures into daily life. Unable to read any language, Andrise has memorized nearly all of the hymns that are regularly sung during Sunday services. Her favorite is "Joseph Smith's First Prayer," she says, because she relates to a poor, uneducated farmboy.³¹

Such a characteristic indicates the process of *bricolage* in which Haitian Mormons piece together aspects of Church history that help to explain themselves (or at least their new history). Barbara Myerhoff, in her work with a community of elderly Jews in Southern California, notes that religious communities often take up "odds and ends, fragments offered up by chance of the environment—almost anything will do," incorporat-

27. Sacrament meeting notes, September 20, 1998, Petionville Ward.

28. Lamoriciere, interviewed November 19, 1998.

29. Michelet, interviewed October 2, 1998, Ife Guesthouse, Petionville, Haiti.

30. Neal (last name withheld), interviewed November 28, 1998, Moulin sur Mer, Haiti.

31. Andrise (last name withheld), interviewed November 1, 1998, after sacrament meeting at the Petionville Ward.

ing them "into a tale . . . to explain themselves and their world."³² By crafting personal histories that include historical Mormon figures, Haitian Mormons are in a very real way reinventing their cultural identities by casting themselves as active players in a historical tradition that, before baptism, seemed far removed from Haitian experience.

Treating historical Mormon stories and figures as part of a larger oral tradition is a marked departure from the way these same accounts are understood in the West.³³ This departure calls attention to the particular way in which Haitian Mormons make Mormon history their own. Here Mormon scriptures and stories are not simply read and forgotten, only to be textually referenced again when memory fades. Many of the Mormon fold in Haiti cannot read, and even literate members in Petionville opt for a more embodied, and thus personal, understanding of Mormonism. Doctrinal details matter little to Haitian Mormons; rather, it is the personal adaptation of these stories to their individual lives that carry real authority. For Haitian Mormons these stories are not about distant characters. They are the tales of personal, living ancestors, ancestors to be proud of and ancestors to emulate.

Definitional Ceremonies

Mormons, no matter in what corner of the world they practice, work hard to cultivate a strong sense of local, regional, and global community. In Haiti this reality acquires special significance because, for many Haitian members, the people they regularly see at Church meetings and activities constitute a shared sense of family that is often lacking in Haitian society at large. Unlike the continents of South America and Africa where nuclear or extended families often convert together, in Haiti the majority of Church members are young, single men. Donald Miller, the mission president, comments: "The ages of the people joining the Church are very

32. Barbara Myerhoff, *Number Our Days* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 10.

33. Here I mean the ontological West, which gives primacy to the written rather than the spoken word. From this perspective, Haiti is "non-western," since, even though Haitians achieve the same goal of "likening all scriptures unto us" (1 Ne. 19:23), they do so almost exclusively through the oral tradition and are not bound to the sterility of the printed page. Another characteristic of an oral culture is that it is inescapably communal, while much scripture study by Western Mormons is individual.

reflective of the country. We have a lot of young men, of young adults, which is a surprise to me. In most developing areas of the Church, the women join the Church and their families follow; but here there's lots of men joining the Church. The reflection of who is joining the Church follows the demographics of the country. There are very few normal families functioning in the country."³⁴

Despite the ethnocentric tone apparent in Miller's understanding of what constitutes "normal," comparatively fewer families in Haiti have traditional nuclear or even extended family structures. Thus, new members in Haiti most often make the decision to be baptized on their own, without familial support. Montina remarks that "at my baptism, only the missionaries came."³⁵

Billy, Sandy, Andrise, Jimmy, Charles, and Alex had virtually the same experience.³⁶ All of these new Haitian Mormons made the decision to join the Church alone and without family support. Given the often direct disapproval these members feel from both friends and family members, constructing a safe homeplace where members can define (and redefine) their newfound religious identities assumes the utmost importance.

For Haitian Mormons, this homeplace is constructed within the framework of definitional ceremonies which, simply put, are ways for people to develop "their collective identity, their interpretation of the world, themselves, and their values."³⁷ Through these ceremonies, Haitian Mormons "renew their commitment to their belief, their ties to each other, and clarify their understanding of their identity by having once more performed it."³⁸ For the Haitian Mormons I observed, this process began at the most local of levels, the Petionville Ward itself.

Fast and Testimony Meeting

On the first Sunday of each month, sacrament meeting becomes fast and testimony meeting. Instead of the regular program consisting of

34. President Donald Miller, interviewed October 21, 1998, mission office, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

35. Michelet, interviewed October 14, 1998.

36. See "Sacrament Meeting Notes," September 1–December 1, 1998, Petionville Ward.

37. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, 32.

38. *Ibid.*, 150.

speakers who have been previously assigned and thus have had time to prepare, the only speakers during fast and testimony meeting are members of the congregation who spontaneously volunteer remarks. During this time, most of those who speak share their personal stories of experiences and insights that have strengthened their belief. Given this type of self-disclosure, this meeting is usually fraught with emotion, with members both weeping and laughing within a matter of moments.

This type of meeting carries specific significance in Haiti. Nonliterate members who are not often requested to present talks during sacrament meeting regularly have an opportunity to speak. Because the sharing of testimonies is purely an oral and often emotional activity, it is the body that takes center stage. Unlike assigned speakers, speakers at fast and testimony meeting are not expected to refer to scripture or consult notes; rather, they are expected to share how they feel. Due to this emphasis on bodily emotions rather than calculated thoughts, Haitian Mormons clamor for a chance to tell their stories. This is a marked difference from my twenty years of attending testimony meetings in southern California wards where it was very common for several minutes to pass in silence between speakers. In Haiti, however, the bishop of the Petionville Ward had to interrupt the flow of testimonies because he saw the long line behind the podium and knew that, given the time restraints of the meeting, no one else could possibly be heard. Moreover, on Fast Sundays Haitian Mormons packed the Petionville building, filling every pew, something that did not occur at any other time during my project.

Through the personal disclosure that occurs during a fast and testimony meeting, the Haitian Mormon community grows closer and community ties are strengthened. Although many members may have joined the Church on their own without family approval, these meetings serve to bond together what can be seen as disparate members. In a very real way, members of the Petionville Ward can be seen (and learn to see each other) as family.

Another significant characteristic of fast and testimony meeting at the Petionville Ward in Haiti is the language that is spoken during the service. Although scriptures, manuals, and hymnbooks are all printed in French, it is largely Haitian Creole that is spoken during Mormon services. Given Haiti's social and economic disparities among its own people, this reality bears further investigation. Only educated citizens in Haiti have been taught to read and understand the French language. Con-

versely, everyone can speak and understand Haitian Creole. Instead of privileging the text, Haitian Mormons are privileging the spoken and understood word. Performances that are spoken (not merely read) by individual members and subsequently heard by the larger congregation are trusted over the printed page. Truth is found not in the rigid, fixed form of scripture; rather, it is discovered in the embodied performances of both personal and collective narratives.

During the two fast and testimony meetings I attended in Petionville, many Petionville members spoke of their personal struggle to abstain from both food and drink until evening. One member commented, "When I first started to fast I originally thought 'I can't do it,' but I prayed to Heavenly Father and was able to succeed. Sacrifice is important. We need it to grow closer to God."³⁹

Another common theme was expressing belief in Mormon teachings and leaders. Nearly half of the Petionville members who volunteered to share their testimony made specific reference to Joseph Smith. Nearly all who mentioned Smith also expressed profuse gratitude to him for having the desire to know the truth. One member went as far as to say, "If it were not for Joseph Smith and his belief and trust in God, I would be lost today." Others echoed this sentiment, asserting that the Mormon Church was the best church on earth because of its apparent lack of hypocrisy. Further, underlying virtually every speaker's words was the concept of faith in all things because "through faith, we can overcome anything."

Family Home Evening

Customarily in the LDS community, family home evening occurs on Monday night in the homes of individual members. Monday night is chosen because, churchwide, no official meetings are scheduled for that evening. Traditionally, as depicted in both illustrations and texts of official Church publications, *family* means a nuclear family consisting of a priesthood holder/father, child-rearer/mother, and several children. While there are no formal guidelines that dictate what should occur at family home evenings, a generally accepted practice is for the family to have some sort of spiritual lesson or discussion, often drawn from a manual or resource book designed for that purpose, followed by a more secular

39. "Fast and Testimony Meeting Notes," November 1, 1998, Petionville Ward. The following reports of testimonies are from these notes.

activity. Family home evening does not typically include other members of the ward and is almost always conducted in the family's home.

In Haiti family home evening is practiced much differently. Given that few members of the Petionville Ward are members of a traditional family, let alone a traditional Mormon family, Church leaders have encouraged holding the *Soirée de Famille* (family night) at the meetinghouse. At this ward-sponsored family home evening, all who are interested are invited to attend. I observed weekly family home evening meetings in November 1998. These gatherings were held on Tuesday night, allowing both the mood and attire of the Haitian members to be more casual than during Sunday meetings. For many of them, family home evening does not have a "family" component but is just another means of connecting with others who share both beliefs and experiences.

The four *soirées* that I observed followed a standard format: an opening hymn, an opening prayer, a spiritual lesson, a closing prayer, and an informal activity. Lesson topics ranged from "following gospel principles," to "obedience in the Lord," to "managing family finances."⁴⁰ Sunday lessons were typically delivered in a lecture format, with those attending seated in rows and being expected to quietly absorb the message. In contrast, at family home evening, discussion and dialogue occurred, facilitated by chairs arranged in a circle. Interruptions were not only common; they were welcomed and seen as a necessary tool to move the discussion along. During most of my experience at family home evenings, nearly everyone who attended participated by either posing a specific question or making a comment. Clearly, the Haitian members who attended these meetings came to participate in community, not just to fulfill a religious obligation.

Once the formal portion of the evening was concluded the secular activity began, most often a simple social hour. Haitian members became even more relaxed and began to share interesting and humorous experiences that had occurred during the previous week. One practice in particular that seemed to occur after every family home evening lesson was telling jokes. The atmosphere became almost rowdy in comparison to the more decorous behavior during the lesson. Members egged each other on to tell stories and jokes, and the storytellers themselves stood in the center of the circle for their performance. These performances ranged from simple stories to jokes to spiritual riddles. On one occasion, Brother Viellard,

40. "Soirée de Famille Notes," November 1998, Petionville Ward.

a ward member, stumped the group with a spiritual riddle that asked Haitian members to answer his question with the correct scriptural reference. Even though he offered 10 gourde (roughly 55 cents U.S.) to the person who could answer correctly, no one in the audience could meet the challenge (presumably because not every member present could read).⁴¹ Still the atmosphere remained jovial.

More common than the occasional challenge thrown out by Brother Viellard was telling jokes. During this process, one member would tell a joke and then invite someone else to tell another. The pace of this process was furious, no one was exempt from the challenge (even me), and I never saw anyone refuse to participate. The joke-telling session certainly created a close-knit atmosphere for those who chose to actively participate. During my month of observations, one joke was requested by name at every social function, an unusual fact that reminded the participants that leaving Haiti's hardships was a fantasy, though a common one. At all four family home evenings I attended, someone during the social hour would ask Sandy, age nineteen and the Petionville Ward clerk, to tell his joke about the American flag. The joke goes something like this:

A young Haitian man goes to the American consulate in preparation to receive his American visa. He is asked a barrage of questions regarding American culture and history. He answers every question correctly and is feeling really good. Then the last question comes: "What are the colors of the American flag?" He pulls open his waistband and looks at his underwear which is a replica of the American flag. "Red, white and blue," he proudly says and receives his visa. He goes home and tells his friend all about his adventure. His friend, who is going for his visa the next day, asks if the questions are very difficult. "Not too bad," replies his friend, "but here, you better wear these," at which time he takes off his underwear and hands them to his friend. The next day the friend is being interrogated and doing well in all his answers. Then the last question is asked, "What are the colors of the American flag?" The friend begins to panic until he remembers his underwear. Then he peers down at his open waistband and proudly answers, "100 percent cotton!"⁴²

While this joke is arguably not very funny, its content is more significant than the possible humor embedded within it, particularly be-

41. *Ibid.*, November 10, 1998.

42. *Ibid.*, November 24, 1998.

cause it serves to further bind the community together. It achieves this end in two significant respects; first, this joke places the immediate community in the here and now, juxtaposed against those seeking to leave Haiti; and second, it shows Haitians who are seeking an American visa as not particularly bright. In the former, the telling (and retelling) of this joke allows Haitian Mormons to "reiterate their collective and personal identities, to arouse great emotion and energy, which is then redirected toward some commonalities, some deep symbols, and stable stated norms."⁴³ Because this joke is so commonly requested by Haitian Mormons in Petionville, it serves as a ritual, a definitional ceremony of sorts, that inevitably reminds each member that he or she belongs to a stable community that seeks not to leave Haiti, but to stay and share kinship. By casting Haitians who seek American visas as apparently lacking intelligence, this joke manages to pass judgment on others while simultaneously praising the immediate community created by Haitian Mormons in Petionville.

General Conference

If Sunday Church meetings and weekly get-togethers like family home evening represent definitional ceremonies that occur within the local framework of the Petionville Ward, then the semi-annual general conference exemplifies the creation of a global homeplace in which local identity merges with a universal identity. By attending the satellite broadcast of conference, Haitian Mormons participate in a definitional ceremony that connects them to Mormons across the world, beyond those within their immediate community.

Like every other Mormon stake worldwide, the stake center in Port-au-Prince (which houses the Centrale Ward) has a satellite dish over which it receives official transmissions, among the most important of which are general conferences. Port-au-Prince Stake receives this conference in English, French, and Haitian Creole. To foster greater understanding, the transmission is beamed into separate language rooms. The smallest of the rooms is set aside for English speakers consisting primarily of missionaries, mission authorities, and visiting English-speaking members. The largest room is the chapel, containing at least thirty full-length pews; here Haitian Creole speakers gather, with French speakers in an-

43. Myerhoff, *Number Our Days*, 185.

other room. In front of each of the rooms is either a large television set or movie screen on which the transmission images appear. Both the Haitian Creole and French language rooms have the translations piped in over a loudspeaker system in coordination with the speaker on the screen, while the English room receives the direct feed.

During the October 1998 general conference, which I observed, Haitian members of the Church turned out en masse. All of the rooms were filled to capacity and often overflowing, with the exception of the less crowded room for English speakers. Since this is arguably the only time Haitian members have a direct link to the prophet, such attendance is not surprising. Montana states, "When I see the prophet on television it is like he is here in Haiti. If we believe in him then we will see miracles."⁴⁴ Indeed, President Gordon B. Hinckley's appearance in Haiti (through the medium of television) reminds many Haitians that they are part of a global community. Regardless of what may happen daily in Haiti, each Haitian Mormon can boast of a greater connection to the outside world. Because many Haitian Mormons believe they are "Mormon first, Haitian second," this link to something larger than themselves and seemingly as far away as Salt Lake City carries particular significance. In the realm of Mormonism, not only are they treated as part of a larger community, they *belong*.

Not to be overlooked is the fact that general conference is an oral event. Scriptures are not required for the members and text is not framed as primary, even though the scriptures that the speakers quote are frequently posted on the screen. In addition, because the messages of the General Authorities receive simultaneous translation, they appear to be speaking directly to Haitian members. Hearing Mormon doctrine from Church leaders in Haiti's native tongue is an experience that many members do not readily forget. Montana continues, "When I hear President Hinckley speaking in Creole my heart is full. It is like he is speaking directly to me."⁴⁵ With the Mormon prophet seeming to actually speak in Haitian Creole, the image of solidarity is firmly created and the benefits of belonging to a global community become further entrenched. In this room, Haitian Mormons are not exiles living on the borders of Mormon

44. Montana Michelet, interviewed October 4, 1998, before and after the general conference broadcast, Port-au-Prince Stake Center.

45. *Ibid.*

experience; rather they are full-fledged members of the Church, worthy of the prophet's attention.

Personal Cosmologies and Mormon Vodouists

As these various activities and practices witness, it becomes obvious that embodied Mormonism can not only negotiate a small space in which it can be performed by Haitian Mormons, but it can also thrive through its own process of both redefining and reinventing itself. Furthermore, embodied Mormonism provides another benefit to its Haitian members: the ability to create personal cosmologies within the general framework of Mormonism. Simply argued, Haitian Mormons, acting as *bricoleurs*, lift patches of Mormonism's tapestry and sew these individual scraps together with other experiences to produce something personal and unique to the user. What is perhaps most remarkable is that they have found space within the practice of Mormonism to do so.

Despite the Mormon Church's heavy reliance on text, mission authorities in Haiti, at least while I was there, had no formal policy outlining opposition to the practice of Vodou. This apparent tolerance is in stark contrast to the policies of most other Protestant churches and missionary efforts in Haiti. Still, the question remains: If a person chooses to join the Mormon Church, then why does the issue of Vodou matter? Simply put, because Haitians, Mormon or not, still practice it.

Vodou has long been misunderstood as the practice of black magic. This belief is incorrect, even though supplying a correct definition is not the focus of this article. Vodou enjoys a significant place in the annals of Haitian history. Given its close ties to the fight for Haitian independence and the subsequent nation it helped to create, Vodou is very much a cultural and political influence. Although some may shrug off its importance and deny their personal participation, to be Haitian is, to some extent, to be a practitioner of Vodou.

Haitian Mormons, despite their faith in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, often find themselves seeking the help and guidance of a *houngan* or Vodou priest. This reliance on more than one cosmology is not seen as oppositional, but complementary, again illustrating the skill many Haitians have in piecing together seemingly incongruous material. Elder Christensen, Elder Vigliotti's companion, bemoaned the fact that Haitian Mormons "have no problem understanding that the Church is the only true church, but [claim] that there are just other true churches,

too. You can ask them if they believe this is the only true church and they say 'yes.' But then you ask them if other churches are true and they say 'yes.' It doesn't make a lot of sense."⁴⁶ What makes little sense to Mormon missionaries makes perfect sense to many Haitian members. Why would a person rely on only one religious system or cosmology when multiple mythologies are available, especially when one of the possibilities is the culturally significant practice of Vodou?

Even as a Haitian Mormon, Montina is adamant that "tous les Haitiens practiquent Vodou (all Haitians practice Vodou)."⁴⁷ I followed up promptly:

Jennifer: Even Haitian Mormons?

Montina (after a lengthy pause): Oh mon Dieu! Do you really want me to tell you the truth?

Jennifer: Yes.

Montina: Do you really want to know?

Jennifer: Yes.

Montina: Yes, all Haitians practice Vodou, even Mormons. This happens because the *houngans* were the first doctors, and it was the *houngans* that cured the sick. Then with the occupation of the American troops came Western medicine. But now when a person gets sick they go back to their country, their culture. But if you ask someone if they practice Vodou, of course, they're going to say no because it's seen as a bad thing, but the culture is Vodou and they are practicing it, even if they won't admit it.

Jennifer: So do you practice Vodou, Montina?

Montina: Me? No, no, no, I don't practice it; but if I say I don't practice Vodou, I'm lying because I'm Haitian and every Haitian practices.

Jennifer: So are you going to the Guede Fête [the November Vodou feast held in celebration of Guede, the Haitian god of the dead]?

46. Elder Christensen, interviewed September 27, 1998, mission office, Port-au-Prince.

47. Montina Michelet, interviewed October 7, 1998, Ife Guesthouse, Petionville, Haiti.

Montina (smiling): For my research, I have a custom to go.⁴⁸

Despite Montina's claim that he practices Vodou simply to satisfy research interests, he certainly illustrates the common Haitian behavior of simultaneously denying and supporting Vodou. The significance of this realization is not that Haitians practice Vodou, but that they practice it in conjunction with other religious traditions—in Montina's case, Mormonism. As one Haitian member states, "I believe in the gospel, not in religion."⁴⁹ Remarkably, it is the surprisingly quiet stance of the mission policy regarding Vodou that makes room for Haitians to practice it if they so desire.

Not only do mission leaders in Haiti lack a written policy regarding Vodou, they also lack a clearly articulated oral policy. Elder Vigliotti stated, "We know Vodou is here, but we don't talk about it. I can tell you that I know members of the Church who as soon as they have a problem they just go to a *houngan*, but we don't confront them."⁵⁰ Elder Christensen agreed. Similarly, the mission president told me, "We know it occurs and the people believe, but we don't openly address the issue."⁵¹ When pressed to answer if the Mormon Church has essentially adopted a "don't ask, don't tell" policy regarding its Haitian members and the practice of Vodou, Miller admitted, "Yes, that would be correct."

The presence of Vodou in conjunction with the LDS faith provides particularly strong evidence of the religious *bricolage* that occurs among Haitian Mormons. During my stay in Haiti, several members of the Petionville Ward alluded to their own beliefs and practices in Vodou. They kept altars for Vodou worship in their homes consisting of small spaces devoted to particular *lwas*, upon which they would place the *lwas*'s favorite foods, colors, images, and even monetary offerings. The members might attend Saturday evening Vodou ceremonies in which particular *lwas* were courted and of which possession was a desired outcome. They might also consult with neighborhood *houngans* for spiritual or secular guidance as well as for homeopathic remedies for common ail-

48. Ibid.

49. Name withheld, interviewed October 25, 1998, Petionville Ward.

50. Elder Vigliotti, interviewed September 27, 1998.

51. President Donald Miller, interviewed October 21, 1998, mission office, Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

ments. Typically, these Haitian Mormons maintained that their allegiance to Vodou did not undercut their faith in the Mormon Church.⁵² They professed a strong belief in Mormonism and saw the inclusion of Vodou, not as oppositional, but as complementary. In terms of shaping their own cosmologies, Haitian Mormons select ideas and beliefs from both Mormonism and Vodou to create what they consider a better design for living.

Because Mormonism is a lived religion and not merely experienced on Sunday through scriptural references, Haitian members of the Church, like Mormons elsewhere, can carve out space in which the text is cast in a role secondary to the body. Through the construction of definitional ceremonies and acting as *bricoleurs*, Haitian Mormons can create for themselves culturally appropriate visions of Mormonism, even though some elements may be in opposition to Church authorities' desires.

Conclusion

The foregoing discussion generates questions for further exploration. To what extent are the experiences of Haitian Mormons unique to Haiti? Don't other countries and cultures, particularly those with illiterate societies, adapt their practice of Mormonism in similar ways? Even more important, how much *bricolage* can and will Church leaders tolerate before they classify such behavior as incompatible with Church doctrine and membership? Without some assertion of formal Church control over the accumulating *bricolage*, it might eventually lead to an institutionalized syncretism between the two.

While Haitian Mormons are certainly carving out unique performative spaces in regard to their religious and cultural identity, to what extent is their performance unique to Mormonism? In other words, is the way Haitians do their Mormonism similar to Mormon practices in other developing nations? Undeniably, similarities will exist across national boundaries. Indeed, individuals everywhere act as *bricoleurs*, piecing together personal religious tapestries that best suit their particular needs. Further, it follows that actual Mormon practice and doctrine will

52. Each of the members I spoke to regarding Vodou (with the notable exception of Montina) asked that I not use their names. See field notes, September-December 1998, Petionville and Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

bend to some degree, allowing small pockets of indigenous Mormonism to flourish, whether those communities are found in Haiti or in any other developing nation. Most notable is the subtle way that *family* is re-defined to encompass a larger community in which Mormon nuclear families are rare.

Mormonism's adaptability to embodied experience has practical application in other Caribbean, South American, and African nations in which formal education is neither guaranteed nor practical. I imagine it would be quite common to see Joseph Smith and his First Vision emerge as popular and recognizable icons for Mormons who find a poor, uneducated farmboy a familiar figure. Unfortunately, there has been scant anthropological work on this subject. Further, in these same societies in which oral tradition is favored over the written word, the bodily performance of Mormonism would understandably follow. In short, it is not the experience of embodied Mormonism and its performance that makes Haitian Mormonism unique.

What remains exceptional about the Haitian experience is its mingling of Mormonism and Vodou, a religious practice that is inextricably embedded in the national character, yet which still carries the stigma of illegitimacy. For most Haitians, to be Haitian is to practice Vodou. Given that Mormonism lacks a clear and enforced policy regarding the practice of this religion, many Haitian Mormons have incorporated their new faith into their preexisting cultural identities as vodouists. It cannot be denied that Mormonism, in part, allows for this creation. Such a reality raises the question: How creative will Mormon leaders allow their Haitian members to be? Since Mormonism, much like Catholicism before it, is a religion attempting to exert centralized control over doctrine and practice, how far can Haitian *bricoleurs* alter the practice of Mormonism before Church leaders brand their behavior heretical? From my professional perspective, for Mormonism to thrive in Haiti, a continued "don't ask, don't tell" policy seems most productive. Perhaps such an approach sounds irresponsible; but if history teaches any lesson, Vodou cannot (and should not) be entirely erased, nor can Haitian Mormons readily become Vodou-free any more than American Mormons can be made entirely free of the pagan-influenced celebrations of Halloween, Christmas trees, Santa Claus, the Easter Bunny, or even astrology.

In 1685, under French colonial law, King Louis XIV ordered that missionaries be "sent to St. Domingue [colonial Haiti], to inspire faith in

the true God in the Africans, to take away their old idolatry, and to make them persevering until death in the Christian religion."⁵³ Further, this desire insinuated itself into colonial life with the inception of the *Code Noir*, a document requiring every Haitian to be baptized Catholic, thus ensuring Catholicism's place as the only legal and socially recognized religion in Haiti. Yet, as expected, Haitians continued to practice Vodou, using the symbols and accoutrements of Catholicism to cloak their behavior.

Understandably, the Vatican was not pleased with this syncretic blending and, after Haiti emerged as a sovereign nation in 1804, sought to reaffirm its power by instituting the Concordat of 1860. This document branded the practice of Vodou as illegal and appointed an archbishop to oversee renewed missionary efforts in Haiti. Both clergy and government officials set to work to rebuild the Catholic empire, in part, by policing and punishing the practice of Vodou. However, the most notorious attempt of the Catholic Church to rid Haiti forever of Vodou and simultaneously to bring Haitian Catholicism back in line with Vatican doctrine came in 1941 with *Operation Nettoyage* (Operation Cleanup). It consisted of "burning and destroying hundreds of *ounfos* [Vodou temples] and ritual paraphernalia throughout the country."⁵⁴

At the height of this campaign, the Church imposed an oath upon its members, which required them to "renounce their superstitious practices," to abandon the practice of "feeding" and coercing ancestral spirits, and promise "to renew their baptismal vows," be fruitful members of the church, and to raise their children exclusively according to the strict teachings of the Catholic Church.⁵⁵ Because the entire nation was Catholic, everyone was required to take this oath. Several bloody incidents of resistance followed until the Catholic Church, under advisement from Hai-

53. Michel Laguerre, "The Place of Voodoo in the Social Structure of Haiti," *Caribbean Quarterly* 19, no. 2 (1973): 38.

54. Leslie Desmangles, *The Faces of the Gods: Vodou and Roman Catholicism in Haiti* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 52.

55. Laennec Hurbon, *Dieu dans le Vaudou Haitien* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Editions Henri Deschamps, 1987), 21. See also A. Slosage, *A la Recherche d'une Pastorale Haitienne* (Port-au Prince, Haiti: Imprimerie d'Etat, 1967); J. M. Salgado, *Le Culte Africain du Vodou et les Baptistes en Haiti* (Rome: Université Pontificale de Propaganda Fide, 1963), and C. E. Peters, *La Croix contre l'Asson* (Port-au-Prince, Haiti: Imprimerie Telhomme, 1960).

tian president Elie Lescot, abandoned the campaign, leaving Vodou to be forever entangled in Catholicism. Moreover, since the 1980s, with a worldwide explosion in Protestant conversion,

the [Catholic] Church has begun to experiment with accepting culturally diverse innovations of the High Mass[;] for example, throughout Latin America, the Church has endorsed initiatives of the part of the black clergy to perform "Afro Masses" which incorporate elements of Afro-derived dances, music, instruments, dress cosmologies and food. In Haiti, the Church publicly praises Voodoo artists and even employs them. The same drums that are played during Voodoo ceremonies are now permitted in some parish churches.⁵⁶

Certainly the Mormon Church has approached missionary work in Haiti in a much different fashion. First, it entered the Haitian landscape at a time when freedom of religion was guaranteed to all Haitian citizens.⁵⁷ Then on April 4, 2003, then-Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide issued a decree granting Vodou the status of an officially recognized state religion.⁵⁸ It is in this environment of unprecedented religious freedom that Haitian Mormons have chosen and continue to choose to become Mormon.⁵⁹ Second, as I have illustrated previously, the Mormon Church lacks a clearly articulated or enforced policy against Vodou. The assumption seems to be that Haitian members of the Church

56. Doris Chernik, "Introduction to the Republic of Haiti," in *Orphans International Haiti*, copyright 2001, revised February 20, 2004, retrieved February 28, 2004, from <http://www.internationalorphans.org/Haiti-republic>.

57. This freedom existed informally under Jean-Claude Duvalier (Baby Doc) until 1986 but was formalized by inclusion in the Haitian Constitution in 1987.

58. Carol J. Williams, "Haitians Hail the 'President of Voodoo,'" *Los Angeles Times*, August 3, 2003, A1.

59. According to "Haiti," *Cumorah Project International LDS Database*, retrieved February 28, 2004, from http://www.cumorah.com/cgi-bin/db.cgi?view_records=View%2Brecords&Country=Haiti, Haiti has slightly more than 10,000 members with a projected annual growth rate of 11.58 percent. On September 7, 2003, the Port-au-Prince Haiti North Stake was created by Elder H. Aldridge Gillespie of the Seventy. "Second Haitian Stake Organized," *Haiti Port-au-Prince Mission News*, retrieved February 28, 2004, from <http://www.mission.net/haiti/port-au-prince/news>.

“simply know better.”⁶⁰ However, given the widely held Mormon belief that although “the ‘symbolic vehicles’ of the various world religions ‘can provide valid functions and services’ for those who believe in them, in order to conform to ‘the celestial order of things’ members must in time be adapted to meet the principles of truth,”⁶¹ the Catholic experience in Haiti may be a cautionary tale. Some Haitian Mormons will always practice Vodou.⁶² That is *their* “celestial order of things.”

Given the understood presence of Vodou in Haitian cultural identity, it seems to be in the Church’s best interest to understand the religion of the Haitians they wish to convert. Certainly much effort is given to studying foreign languages so that missionaries can more clearly communicate with those interested in Mormonism, but should all effort end there? Indeed, Joseph Smith argued that “every man shall hear the fulness of the gospel in his own tongue, and in his own language,” but what does such a statement imply? Palmer and Keller offer an interpretation that could remarkably strengthen how the Church conducts missionary work: “There may be a key here that draws a distinction between a ‘tongue’ (language) and a ‘language’ (way of thinking, religion). The non-Christian nations of the earth are to be taught in their own tongues in the context of their own ways of expression and thought. But in order to be fully prepared to carry the gospel message effectively to all nations,

60. Donald Miller, interviewed October 21, 1998.

61. Palmer and Keller, *Religions of the World*, 222.

62. Perhaps one reason for the historical syncretism of Haitian religious practice has been Haiti’s isolation from ecclesiastical governing forces. The Catholic Church has adopted a “hands-off” approach to Haiti since the 1685 *Code Noir* (even then it was France that demanded baptisms), and the Mormon Church seems to be developing the same methodology if only rhetorically. The evacuation of foreign missionaries in the wake of the 1991 political turbulence makes it seem likely that the cultural vacuum thus created furthered the opportunity for home-grown religion and *bricolage* to develop. See Sam Penrod, “LDS Missionaries Pulled Out of Haiti” in *KSL.com News on Demand*, February 23, 2004, retrieved February 28, 2004, from <http://tv.ksl.com/index.php?sid=76882&nid=5&template>.

we must first study and learn both the 'tongues' and the religions of these peoples."⁶³

However accurate this interpretation might be (and I find it significant), the prevailing belief among Church leaders holds that exposure to foreign religious practice may erode the faith of young men and women serving abroad. Elder Christensen explained, with Elder Vigliotti's non-verbal confirmation, that they were instructed during their weeks of language training at the Missionary Training Center, "Just don't get into it [Vodou] and don't try to figure out what it is."⁶⁴ Miller confirmed a policy of avoiding any discussion of, or interest in, Vodou: "When missionaries become involved in diabolical things, Satan has power over the missionaries. So it [Vodou] is off limits."⁶⁵ Such a characterization of Vodou as satanic seems unnecessary and incorrect, not only historically but also because it could foster an attitude of superiority and moral repugnance ill-suited for religious conversion.

However, it cannot be overlooked that the possible erosion of faith may be of some concern simply because many religions have similarities in both doctrine and practice that can often surprise the uninitiated. Even within the seemingly odd pairing of Mormonism and Vodou, similarities exist. In fact, by virtue of its emphasis upon testimony and other gifts of the Spirit, Mormonism seems to have more in common with Vodou than any other Christian religion.⁶⁶

However, Church leaders should have more confidence in the strength of their missionaries' faith. They should realize that missionaries who understand the current faith of the Haitians they wish to convert are not being seduced by "satanic" practices; rather, they are building a bridge of mutual respect that can only foster greater interest in the Church. Vodou and Mormonism do not need to be at odds with one another. Many Haitian Mormons see them as complementary and not at all oppositional. Perhaps Montana, one of the most faithful Mormons I en-

63. Palmer and Keller, *Religions of the World*, 10.

64. Elder Christensen, interviewed September 27, 1998.

65. Miller, interviewed, October 21, 1998.

66. Although not the purpose of this article, marked similarities between Vodou and Mormonism include the recognition of a female and married deity, the possibility that practitioners can reach godhood, and the understanding that religion is a living, breathing process that can be changed by revelation.

countered during my stay in Haiti, says it best: "Me, I'm a Mormon and I love Mormonism, but I also respect the culture of my people. We must not forget that Vodou is a good thing."⁶⁷ What remains to be seen is whether the Mormon Church can reconcile itself to this fact.

67. Michelet, interviewed October 2, 1998.