

The Celestial City: “Mormonism” and American Identity in Post-Independence Nigeria

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Abstract: This article uses the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in post-independence Nigeria to examine the transition from individuated agents of religious exchange to integration into global corporate religiosity. Early Latter-day Saint adherents saw Mormonism as a mechanism by which they could acquire access to monetary resources from a financially stable Western patronage, despite political animosity due to Mormonism's racist policies and sectional tumult during the Nigeria-Biafra war. Drawing on oral and archival records, this article highlights how Mormonism as an American-based faith was able to be "translated" to meet the exigencies of indigenous adherents.

Résumé : Cet article utilise l'Église Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Ikeja) après l'indépendance du Nigéria pour examiner la transition d'agents d'échanges religieux individualisés vers l'intégration institutionnelle dans la religiosité globale. Les premiers adeptes de Latter-day Saints considéraient le mormonisme comme un mécanisme leur permettant d'accéder aux ressources monétaires d'un patronage occidental financièrement stable et cela malgré une animosité politique ressortant d'une politique raciste du mormonisme et d'un tumulte sectoriel né de la guerre entre le Nigéria et le Biafra. Cet article s'appuie sur des archives verbales et écrites pour souligner comment le mormonisme, en tant que religion américaine, a pu être "traduit" pour répondre aux exigences des fidèles autochtones.

Resumo: O presente artigo recorre à análise da Igreja de Jesus Cristo dos Santos do Último Dia na Nigéria pós-independência para compreender a transição entre um modelo baseado em agentes individuais de intercâmbio religioso e uma religiosidade

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corporativa global. Os primeiros seguidores dos Santos do Último Dia viram na religião mórmon um mecanismo através do qual poderiam aceder a recursos monetários assegurados patrocinadores ocidentais financeiramente estáveis, relevando a animosidade política gerada pelas políticas racistas dos mórmones, bem como os tumultos entre facções que surgiram durante a guerra entre a Nigéria e o Biafra. Partindo de registros orais e de arquivo, este artigo explica de que modo a religião mórmon – um credo de origem norte-americana – pôde ser “traduzida” para ir ao encontro das necessidades dos fiéis indígenas.

Keywords: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Mormonism; Nigeria; Christianity

In January 1989, standing in the crisp winter air of Logan, Utah, Umuelem Enyiogugu native Anthony Obinna posed for a photo with his wife Fidelia in front of the Logan temple of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints [LDS church]. Far from their home in *ala Igbo* [Igboland], the Obinnas believed that the Logan structure served as a gathering place for them and their ancestors—where members in good standing could engage in ritual communion, binding together *ndi ogbo* [generations] through a ritualized ascent to and exemplification of deity.

In Aba, Nigeria, another LDS temple, constructed in 2005, stands behind a thick wall and a small army of security personnel. Hewn from foreign granite but carved by indigenous hands, the temple reveals the influence of Latter-day Saint infrastructure on the landscape of eastern Nigeria. The temple’s construction was challenging for even building-savvy LDS contractors. For instance, Church contractors needed a road to transport materials, but the dirt path was impassible for the heavy machinery. The solution: the LDS Church built the road themselves and donated it to the Aba State Government (Figure 1).

The temple stands in contrast to the rest of Aba’s bustling market scene. Presenting an image of Western architectural strength and visual aesthetic—including landscaped turf nearby, intricate interior carvings, and a fully-outfitted housing complex with filtered water fountains—the Aba temple complex situates itself as a community and identity apart from the remainder of the city. Unlike standard LDS chapels, Latter-day Saint temples such as the one in Aba are not accessible to the majority of the public; ecclesiastical regulations stipulate that those participating in temple rituals accept certain tenets of the Latter-day Saints and follow a strict code of health and sexual discretion—abstinence for unmarried members and fidelity for married members. One local ecclesiastical official observed with a smile: “Only God could build a temple in Aba.”¹ To date, LDS structures in Igboland are frequently described as *ulo ũka ndi ocha*: the white people’s church.

The temple structure represents the apex of the LDS experience. Yet, the idea of a Latter-day Saint temple in Nigeria came not from corporate-suited men in Utah but from the voices of Nigerians themselves. Drawing on oral

Figure 1. The Aba Latter-day Saint Temple. By Intellectual Reserve, Inc., The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.



history and archival records from eastern Nigeria, this article argues for the institutionalization of “Mormonism by rumor”: the re-appropriation of an American faith not through missiological expansion but through indigenously-driven, informal networks. In a similar vein, Adam Ewing has explored such themes in his analysis of how the Watchtower Society spread rumors in Rhodesia, Uganda, and Kenya that Marcus Garvey, the Jamaican pan-African activist in the United States, would be a world savior for black peoples (Ewing 2014). Nigerian Latter-day Saint conversion also reflects a spread of American identity through informal channels. For Nigerian Latter-day Saint proselytes, their faith reflected a fractal of meanings: affiliation with a wealthy American partner and the aspiration to sovereignty from a vexed Nigerian sociocultural milieu.

Christianity and “Mormonism” as a New Religious Tradition

First, a point of nomenclature: this article often uses the term “Mormonism,” given the label’s historical relevance against the Nigerian context. The historically-preferred title for this faith is “the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,” a title representative of how faith members generally self-identify both in Nigerian and American contexts. Also, to protect privacy, some interview respondents have been anonymized.

Recent scholarship has shown how the rise of the LDS church in Africa redefined American racial identity and has been the subject of a book chapter

and two articles by the author (Stevenson 2014a:ch. 4, 7; Stevenson 2014b; Hurlbut 2018). This scholarship has brought to light voices challenging the perception that African-ness and Latter-day Saint identity are fundamentally incompatible; yet, much of this work leaves unanalyzed the *deux ex Mormonæ*: the driving force undergirding indigenous African Latter-day Saint affiliation.

Founded by an antebellum New York visionary, Joseph Smith, the Latter-day Saint faith was born and bred in rural America on the cusp of urbanization, with the Erie Canal practically cutting through Joseph Smith's backyard. Steeped in promises of visions, ancient narratives, and ancestral lines lost to time, Joseph Smith's faith appealed to communities transitioning from agrarian life to industrialization—and it claimed aspirations to incorporating Africa: “They call us to deliver/their land from error's chain,” an early hymn by Smith's first—and only legally-recognized—wife, Emma, enjoined; “Where Afric's sunny fountains/Roll down their golden sand” (Smith 1835).²

Due to fears of miscegenation and attendant shifts in Latter-day Saint exegesis vis-à-vis racial construction, from 1847 to 1978, official LDS practice held that individuals of African descent could not receive temple ordinances or priesthood office, both of which carried soteriological weight in Mormon theology; these ordinances established what Joseph Smith described as a “welding link” with an individual's kindred dead. In their absence, the ruptures separating generations would endure, leaving individuals alienated and alone in the post-mortal world (see Bringham 1981; Stevenson 2014a; Reeve 2015; Mueller 2018). In 1978, Latter-day Saint church president Spencer W. Kimball lifted the restriction on persons of African descent receiving these rituals and opened up sub-Saharan Africa to sustained missionary efforts. Kimball's change not only indicated a shift in American LDS attitudes, but it also revealed geopolitical shifts; as Jan Shipps observed, the lifting of the restriction “has to do not with America so much as with the world” (1978:761).

That a once-regional religious movement could spread throughout the globe matches the best theorizing on “glocality”: the inter-penetration of global systems with local identities (Robertson 2005). Matthew Ojo argues that in the era of global capital and information transfer, even localized movements have the capacity to “transcend their restricted local origins” (2011). As of January 2019, Latter-day Saints in Nigeria numbered approximately 164,000; this represents a fraction of a percentage of the Nigerian population, yet the otherwise skeptical Phillip Jenkins considers Nigeria to be “quite a success story” (Jenkins 2009:16). Moreover, the majority of LDS members in sub-Saharan Africa are rooted in Anglophone countries, such as Ghana, South Africa, and Nigeria—though recent surges in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cote D'Ivoire are notable (Figure 2).³ However, these patterns of global exchange, Frederick Cooper warns, are neither truly *global* nor are they genuinely *uniform* (Cooper 2001) (emphasis author's).

The rise of an American faith in a West African context *sans* missionaries was not unique. In 1960s Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah had observed a “veritable riptide of religious sects, the overwhelming majority of them American”

Figure 2. A current map of LDS congregations in Africa. Courtesy of maps.ids.org and Google Maps.



(1965:274). C.A.O. Essien founded the Church of Christ in Calabar after establishing a correspondence with an American counterpart in Tennessee. The Philadelphia-based Faith Tabernacle similarly grew throughout West Africa via the proliferation of its pamphlets in Nigeria and the Gold Coast (Hackett 1989:102; Mohr 2011). “Mormonism,” to be sure, had resonated poorly even in the ostensibly tolerant British empire. In 1910, missionaries faced the looming threat of expulsion from mainland Britain, and the practice of polygamy conveyed to the British images of exactly what colonial mission elites wanted to stamp out among Nigerian indigenes. Imagining “Mormons” to be akin to African human traffickers and slave traders, only the intervention of Home Secretary Winston Churchill allowed missionaries to continue proselytizing in mainland Britain (Beeley 1914). In its colonies, too, the British Government denied certificates of incorporation to churches perceived to pose a threat to stability. In 1939, the Resident of Owerri denied official sanction to a Nigerian congregation of the Philadelphia-based Faith Tabernacle on the grounds that “their teaching is liable to become subversive of authority and to result in outbreaks of religious hysteria.”⁴ In Itu, the Government cited “native law and custom” in justifying prosecution of the “Spirit Movements”—a religious expression where followers “shake and dance and become excited”; the Calabar Resident’s Office accused the movement of “going around torturing men and women to make them confess their sins,” which, in some instances, led to their death.⁵ “Mormonism” was no less feared.

In the meantime, the Latter-day Saint origin story enjoyed a kind of indigenous resonance in Nigeria, in lore if not in person. The tensions

between mission and indigenous Christianity had proliferated since the mid-nineteenth-century (see Ajayi 1965; Ayandele 1966; Ekechi 1972; Peel 2003; Sanneh 1989; Walls 1996). But some outlets of the Nigerian press had received word of a distant group of “enlightened” and “civilized” European-descended Christians practicing polygamy, flourishing, and resisting the influence of an oppressive regime. In an 1897 *Lagos Weekly Record* [LWR] editorial, these “Mormons” were cited as evidence of the “enlightened” character of polygamy. Beginning in 1890, Latter-day Saints claimed to have abandoned polygamy—but word leaked that it had continued, with some measure of official sanction. *LWR* celebrated Latter-day Saint resilience: “As far as we understand,” the paper observed, “there are no black Mormons... If it is impossible to suppress that view of marriage among a highly cultivated people” who had “adopt[ed] it from conviction,” why “should it be supposed that it is either possible or useful to suppress it among a people born to it?” (*Lagos Weekly Record*:5). The *Lagos Standard* celebrated “Mormon” wealth as an indication of their success: a “highly civilized” people with “great bankers,” “large Churches, [and] fine schools Railways and so forth.” (*Lagos Standard*:7). “Mormons” served as a symbol of resilience to an encroaching colonial power, offering a hopeful path to Christian modernity that allowed indigenous Nigerians to retain their local institutions.

Sometimes inquirers initiated contact through official channels—only to find Latter-day Saint racial dogma discouraged it. In 1950, Reverend M.D. Opara, a renowned cleric and committed Nigerian nationalist from Mbieri, Imo State, began his tour of America in hopes of finding a faith community to serve as his patrons—as well as providing access to resources for infrastructure-building and collective narrative-making. As head of what he called the Zion Mission, disaffected with local Catholic and Seventh-Day Adventist mission Christianity, Opara bemoaned that they had “an arduous work to do in this country, [but] we lack almost everything... we are paddling the Lord’s Canoe under hardships.” He wrote a friend that “the work that I am now shouldering is beyond my endurance and skill.” Opara aspired to provide universal education; as one supporter observed, he “never liked the African [to be] rated a second-class citizen anywhere” (*Dictionary of African Christian Biography*). Felix Ekechi (2010) has observed that Opara saw his Christianity as a facilitator for the making of the “infrastructures of modernity,” important not only as a means of personal transformation or even social liberation, but also for institutional and social self-reliance. In a similar vein, Derek Peterson has conceptualized Christian conversion in East Africa as an example of “the infrastructure of cosmopolitanism” (Peterson 2012).

While visiting New York City, Reverend Opara called on Glen Lund, a twenty-year-old Latter-day Saint missionary born and raised in Utah. Opara believed that in Lund he had met a white American treated something like his own people had been treated: disenchanting, alienated, but resilient and committed to institution-building. Lund felt ill-equipped to understand even the most rudimentary of sociopolitical realities of West African, or, for that matter, African-American, life. When Lund saw Opara, he felt “somewhat

surprised to learn that he was a Negro.” The thought of his Church in Africa had struck him as absurd. The Latter-day Saint faith had, ostensibly, aspired to spread the gospel to “all the world”—but Africa was not part of Lund’s world. Lund reported that Opara “was very receptive to the things we told him and said that the religion of his people was very much similar to ours.” Opara hoped to “find some religion that would be more suitable for his people.” Lund dismissed Opara’s overtures. When Opara asked if he could establish a Latter-day Saint congregation among his 10,000 strong congregation, Lund considered his blackness a non-starter: “We [Lund and his missionary companion] of course had to tell [Opara] he could not because he didn’t have the priesthood authority.” Moreover, Opara “being a descendant of Cain... couldn’t hold it [priesthood].” Lund believed that Opara accepted the young man’s observation and was “very understanding.”

That Opara saw in the Latter-day Saint faith the potential for the making of a Nigerian religious independence movement while Lund dismissed him as “a descendant of Cain” reveals the competing and contesting impulses within Mormonism for the shaping of a religious collective identity. He “told [Opara] to investigate the church further on his own and then write us if he was sure the things we had told him were true.” If Opara sought them out, Lund “would then refer his letter to the First Presidency.”⁶ Lund later became an ear/nose/threat specialist based in Salt Lake City, graduating from the University of Utah, never to see African soil. Opara became a leading figure in the Eastern Nigeria House of Assembly and strident critic of British colonial neglect.

From the early 1950s through the 1980s, Latter-day Saint congregations flooded Salt Lake City with similar correspondence and established themselves throughout Eastern Nigeria from Calabar to Owerri with no LDS missionary presence; many, for that matter, had no relationship with Latter-day Saint sacred texts.⁷ Awash with the fiasco of Obafemi Awolowo’s imprisonment, the scandal of Nnamdi Azikiwe’s African Continental Bank, the violence of the 1959 election in the Middle Belt, and the suspicion of British efforts to stack election results to favor the Northern People’s Congress, the majority of eastern Nigerians possessed little faith in the Nigerian nation-state or its political elite. Prospects for affiliation with an American religious institution, apparently wealthy, seemed to offer what the institutions in front of them could not.

David Eka, a mid-level manager for ExxonMobil and the first stake president in Aba [roughly the equivalent of a diocese], saw these affiliation efforts as the mechanization of religious networks for economic gain: “The early influx of the Church,” he told an interviewer, “was just a question of what we can get from the Americans.” One proselyte in Abak identified with whatever mission came to the area: “If it was the Church of the Lord he would put a signpost of the Church of the Lord, did his business with them, and they would get out. If it was the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, when the missionaries came, he would put that up.”⁸ “Mormonism” was but one small channel of the trans-Atlantic marketplace.

Latter-day Saint church leaders responded to the proselytes’ interest with questions. In the early years, the First Presidency “questioned whether or not

they are really sincere in their desires to become members of the Church and are truly converted to the truths of the Gospel.” Perhaps, the First Presidency suspected, “they merely wished to become affiliated with an American church in order that they might thereby be the recipients of help in the way of contributions or otherwise.”⁹ Timothy Udoh, an early proselyte, had acknowledged to Church leaders that “what we really want from you is to give us aid financially.”¹⁰

Nigerian proselytes had some reason to be hopeful. Brigham Young University issued occasional scholarships to Nigerian converts, such as Oscar Udoh, prompting the Nigerian population at BYU to often exceed the university’s African-American population throughout the 1960s.¹¹ J.C. Uko, a former Church member-turned-evangelical Christian, urged Nigerian Latter-day Saints to forsake the faith and to spurn the scholarships offered by BYU: “Do not be deceived with university scholarships and other material wealth. You cannot mortgage your eternal life for earthly riches and momentary [sic] thrills.” Ironically, Uko also attempted to turn ex-Mormonism into a profession, hoping that Ed Decker, a prominent Church critic and activist in Oregon, would fund his ministry.¹² By the late 1980s, BYU scholarship recipients had “passed through that ministry” and were “not even involved in the Church.”¹³

A postal worker, Charles Agu, who had picked up Latter-day Saint literature from roaming expatriates and variant sects of the Latter-day Saint tradition, saw the American faith as the next stage in Nigeria’s national actualization: “Now that they have independence every one is growing financially, educationally, etc. But they believe they should grow spiritually.”¹⁴ Agu established a small group and bookshop in Aba, hoping to be integrated into the American church. For many, American religion meant American wealth. When an American missionary, Rachel Mabey, arrived in Nigeria in 1978, she “learned of a man who had registered the name [of the LDS Church] with the government of Nigeria which makes for complications.” The man “ha [d] been collecting money”—verboten for a faith administered almost exclusively through volunteer efforts.¹⁵

The Rise of the Nigeria Latter-day Saint Mission

In 1960, Glen Fisher, an LDS mission president in South Africa, visited a handful of groups to assess their fidelity—and was tasked with reporting his assessment to headquarters.¹⁶ Fisher offered a positive report and prompted a follow-up visit by American missionary officials. The following year, Lamar S. Williams, a Missionary Department official, along with Marvin Jones, a “fragile” and “rather protected” Pat Boone-loving nineteen-year-old missionary, traveled to Nigeria to assess the “sincerity” of the Nigerian converts.¹⁷ Williams’s and Jones’s 1961 trip initiated the commencement of a years-long campaign on both the Nigerians’s and Williams’s part to integrate the indigenous groups into the American church. Agu lauded the pair for “liv [ing] in huts” and for going “without food and water for many days and shar [ing] in the poverty of the people.”¹⁸ Yet, the priesthood and temple

restrictions loomed over all discussions. Before Williams's arrival, he had "not discussed with them the fact that they cannot hold the Priesthood," for "if these people are really sincere... they are deserving of personal representation and explanation so that there would be no misunderstanding on this delicate subject."¹⁹

Williams asked one group in Ibesit Okoro "whether all the Saints with their leaders will agree to be under the control of a white missionary?" The proselytes promised their willingness to be "controlled," urging for Williams and Jones to "give us [an] agreement paper to sign, regarding to the question of controlling." Williams declined, assuring them that "your words are enough." The clerk, Moses Inyang, underscored his response, suggesting either that Williams had emphasized it or that Inyang found particular value in his comment.

They regaled the American missionaries with stories of healings and "shout intervals."²⁰ When Williams asked the group "whether all the Saints had come for the sake of the money," proselyte and former Salvation Army adherent, Harry Akpan, responded "that we do not, but we just ask all these things as a son or daughter should be fed by parents till she/he becomes a full grown person."²¹ One convert assured the pair that "there was another church from America that wanted us to join with them and we refused because it did not harmonize with the teachings of the New Testament."²²

Jones wavered between awe and skepticism: "These people have faith like I have very seldom seen," he mused, observing a twelve-year-old girl bring her own six-foot bench to the meeting. On another day, he wondered:

The people seem to be much more interested in financial help then [sic] anything else-I'm beginning to believe that is the reason why the Chief & the others are so willing to accept our teachings & the fact that they can't hold the priesthood. They all say what we are teaching them is very reasonable & acceptable but this could be to get help. It is so hard to tell what their underlying motives are. Sincerity or the want of finance.²³

Williams and Jones made for an awkward duo in the Nigerian mission field. While the LDS Church had long developed linkages throughout Latin America (rooted in large part to its belief in the chosen-ness of Amerindian ethnicities), the LDS Church could claim virtually no Africa area experts nor Africa linguistic knowledge. In spite of the rich LDS missiological and linguistic tradition in Latin America, Pacifica, and Europe, the Church had no equivalents to Samuel Crowthers, Hope Waddells, or Mary Slessors in Africa to herald as missionary predecessors in Africa; the only mission in sub-Saharan Africa had been the South Africa mission. Its on-the-ground contacts tended to be USAID workers like Richard Johnson in Lagos, Nigeria and businessmen like Mars Candy executive, Merrill J. Bateman. Williams never would forget how strange he felt navigating Nigeria, where there was "not another white man anywhere within forty miles." Williams felt little confidence that his English lessons resonated with the locals: "You had no way of

Figure 3. Lamar S. Williams and Bryce Wright with Nigerian proselytes, October 1965. Courtesy of *LDS Living*.



knowing except just by the Spirit and the way you felt.” He found himself “continually in a situation that was frustrating.”²⁴

Later, when McKay asked Williams to identify potential missionary candidates, Williams discouraged using young men and women—the stock-in-trade of the Latter-day Saint missionary force. He considered the whole of Nigeria to be a site of moral peril and dangerous to Latter-day Saint youth:

It would be a mistake to have two young nineteen-year-old boys over there with conditions the way they are, the situation of young children running around without clothing on and so forth. It’s quite primitive. It’s a dangerous situation, where it takes a lot of wisdom. You have to live very close to the Lord. Not that they wouldn’t, but with the mere custom of no public restrooms, and so on, with people relieving themselves right out in the open, there would be an exposure to immorality (Figure 3).²⁵

Williams had seen firsthand how the Nigerian landscape unsettled his young traveling companion. When a proselyte living in Abak urged them to come from Port Harcourt to see his congregation, Jones “sh[ook] his head no, no, no”; he “didn’t want to go back out in that jungle for anyone.”²⁶ Williams hoped that someday, indigenous missionaries could “go out into the villages, being accustomed to the way of life in their own country, and they can proselyte among their own people in their own language.”²⁷

Williams also faced the looming obstacle of the LDS Church's priesthood and temple restrictions on peoples of African descent. As most of Western Judeo-Christian exegesis held, Williams believed that Nigerian converts were naïve descendants of Cain: "sincere people who were willing to learn, who needed the gospel, who had been deprived of the gospel for 6,000 years, from the time that Cain killed Abel." During a meeting in Aba, Marvin Jones observed that the local *eze* and another man departed. Another said that the lack of priesthood office "will be a serious problem... So we feel that the problem of the skin will cause difficulty in getting members of dark skin to come in because of discrimination." Chief Akab[u]eze would not have it. He "wanted to know who started it." Why, he asked, "should one be under the rule of other?" "Some believe that God should not be prejudic[e]d," he declared, and asked "why not a prophet in Africa?" At the very least, they concurred, "it will be up to the people to decide... all members must be equal in all things." Akabueze concluded that "the Church would have to be forced to give them the pries[thood]" because of the "pressure of the member[s] of black skin." The Church would "have to have [a] revelation" (Figure 3).²⁸

Without validating the chief's concerns openly, Williams concurred; he became convinced that Nigerians' faithfulness would help to dismantle the priesthood restriction, acknowledging in his journal: "I don't know how we can keep the Church and eventually the priesthood from them."²⁹ Nigerian Christians challenged their very Christianity; one day, a Nigerian man stopped Jones and said that Nigerians "need to come to America and teach you Christianity." Jones confided to his girlfriend, Dorothy Buckley: "I think that maybe he's right."³⁰ In 1966, a Latter-day Saint expatriate in Nigeria, Sonia Johnson, questioned the soundness of the restriction, following "a complicated thought process" born of "living among negroes, in a land composed of little else." She began to "ponder the question much more often and much more seriously than ever before." She acknowledged to her parents that the restriction "just doesn't make sense to me."³¹

Yet, President McKay felt Williams had been "a little over-enthusiastic" in his Africa work and "may not use the best judgment."³² The American Church was ready to integrate the Nigerians into the ecclesiastical structure—but primarily through the context of "development" projects rather than proselytizing. Church President David O. McKay believed that the newly-established mission would be educational and infrastructure-driven, much as Opara had been hoping to find over a decade earlier: "We shall help them build their meetinghouses and these meetinghouses will soon be used as schools in helping their children to read."³³ Agu agreed with McKay's vision: the Church could build schools and other institutions of learning, as the Church Missionary Society, Roman Catholics, and Methodists had done throughout the Niger Delta region since the late nineteenth century.³⁴ When world champion Latter-day Saint boxer Gene Fullmer fought Aba native Dick Tiger in Ibadan in 1962, he hoped that the match would provide positive publicity for his Church (*Times-Picayune*:7). Before the pair's departure from Nigeria, Williams urged Obot to continue onward, acting as Latter-day

Saints without authority: “Now you continue on just like you’re doing,” he recalled telling Obot, “because I couldn’t make any promises.”³⁵

Subsequent American missionaries called to Nigeria tended to be financially stable, middle-aged white married couples. None had substantial experience in any region of the African continent; some hailed from towns with a population of less than a thousand in rural Utah. In 1961, the First Presidency named Urban G. and Florence Bench; Walter and Nellie Atwood; Forrest and Ethel Goodrich; and Grant and Amie Graff as missionaries to Nigeria. The husbands’ professions were, respectively, a mason, an agriculturalist, a tractor mechanic, and a postmaster. Nellie Atwood had served as the Daughters of Utah Pioneers secretary, and Ethel Goodrich had served as a 4-H leader in rural Tridell, Utah; she and her husband had hosted a Greek agricultural exchange student a decade earlier (*Vernal Express*:1). Mission president Sylvester Cooper, a tattooed, Southern military veteran, joked: “If my mama knew that I was going to Africa she would turn over in her grave and scream.” He had “never touched a Black person in my life.” His sincerity convinced his white missionary colleagues; a fellow missionary remembered watching as he “hug[ed] and lov[ed] and play[ed] with the Africans, totally loving it. They weren’t pretending. They weren’t just saying, ‘Well, the Lord’s put us here. Guess we better try and enjoy it.’”³⁶

The missionaries’ ill-preparation—and as well as the body of the Church’s generally—for navigating a newly-sovereign “black African” country became quickly apparent. In 1960, John J. Stewart, a well-known LDS professor of communications in Logan, Utah, had written a work of apologia defending the exclusion of individuals of African descent from temple rituals and priesthood office. Citing a conventional Latter-day Saint racial exegesis that black people had been sub-par performers in pre-mortality, Stewart maintained that peoples of African descent had been less than valiant prior to birth; their very existence, he concluded, was evidence of God’s mercy, since “God would allow those spirits who were less worthy in the spirit world to partake of a mortal body” (Stewart 1960). Stewart’s racial dogmas, while bluntly articulated, fit comfortably within mainstream Latter-day Saint exegesis.

Ambrose Chukwu, an Igbo graduate student then studying at California Polytechnic University, was the kind of up-and-coming Nigerian who might be interested in Mormonism’s teachings and tradition on the material aspects of salvation and collective self-reliance. He visited an LDS church in San Luis Obispo, where a community of like-minded Nigerian graduate students were interested in adopting the American faith. Chukwu asked the congregational leader (called a bishop) why Mormons were not proselytizing in sub-Saharan Africa; after all, Christian missionaries from every other denomination were proselytizing—and had been for generations. The bishop offered no good news for the young man: his reply, he warned, “would wound [Chukwu’s] feelings.” “The Negro,” Chukwu reported his saying, is “cursed by God and this makes him unworthy to hold the office of a priest or elder in our church” (*Nigerian Outlook* March 5, 1963:3). The bishop handed Stewart’s book to Chukwu, hoping that it would explain everything.

The Stewart text explained a great deal—and left Chukwu in a rage. He sent a letter to Nigeria’s official newspaper for the Eastern Region, *Nigerian Outlook*, calling Latter-day Saints “religious madmen” who “have no right to go under the name Christian.” The government ought not “grant them freedom and passage to tell us in our own homes that even the most eminent and saintly ‘Negro’ is... inferior even to the least admirable white person” (*Nigerian Outlook* March 5, 1963:3). The *Outlook*’s editorial labeled the Church as “Evil Saints” and called upon John F. Kennedy to “ban this anti-Negro organisation that preaches heretic doctrines.” Chukwu warned that the Church’s “‘cautious and guarded’ approach” to missionary efforts in Nigeria “should make Nigerians ‘cautious and guarded,’” warning that “the Mormons preach love and equality of the white race only... Mormonism is godlessness.” He advised any government—and especially Nigeria’s—“to check the growth of godlessness in her society.” Within a month, the Nigerian government had canceled all Latter-day Saint missionary visas.

Charles Agu, aided by Anie Dick Obot, a wealthy landowner near Calabar, was quick to respond that the Church celebrated corporate *prosperity* and *self-reliance*. When Williams visited Obot during 1961, Obot offered the Church a tract of land of several thousand acres, food, livestock, and a wicker chair—all of which he offered to Williams for the development of the Church in Nigeria. Obot claimed—likely with some exaggeration—41 congregations and 7,000 members.³⁷ They emphasized that through Mormonism, “problems like hunger and want can be solved and man’s status in life can be elevated and made Godlike, creative, resourceful, holy, and happy” (*Nigerian Outlook* June 26, 1963:5). Obot and Agu suggested that the LDS faith could transform its adherents, including their material circumstances. Mass evangelical baptism campaigns accelerated in all regions.

American Latter-day Saints could not attribute the official resistance to animosity against American religious groups. By 1966, over 1,500 (mostly Irish) missionaries lived in Eastern Nigeria, the vast majority of them affiliated with foreign groups such as the Holy Ghost Fathers (O’Sullivan 2012). In 1960, Oral Roberts, whose ministry had long enjoyed integrated services, led a healing mission to Lagos. Billy Graham’s revival in Lagos, Nigeria, rallied 25,000 to the message of American charismatic evangelism, where he emphasized the proximity of Jesus’s birth to Africa and the role of an African man in assisting with carrying the cross (Finstuen & Wacker 2017). In March 1975, the American Pentecostal, T.L. Osborn, known for his sunglasses, moustache, and thick ties, launched a massive rally in Enugu.³⁸ Throughout the North, Christian and Islamic mass evangelization campaigns produced high drama spectacles. Sardauna engaged in mass conversion campaigns among the Maguzawa communities, where converts, according to one missionary, publicly “cast their idols and fetishes and charms into a fire” (Shankar 2014). Similarly, the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, also descending from the Joseph Smith tradition, experienced no similar difficulties in entering the country.

Williams reached out to the Eastern Region's Premier office, emphasizing that "all of our groups in Nigeria have Negroes as their leaders," and more importantly, that Church leadership "do[es] not intend to alter this situation." He "request[ed] a minimum of representatives from our church headquarters here in Salt Lake City to insure sufficient training of Nigerians who will at all times be expected to be the leaders of our religious and social activities." The missionary couples, he assured the Premier, "are coming to render assistance in educating and better organizing our groups already established in various areas of Nigeria."³⁹

That one lone Igbo student could convince the government to cut off foreign proselytizing efforts highlights exactly how *little* control the American church enjoyed in the newly-independent nation-state. Indeed, Williams had now ceded important symbolic ground: he acknowledged the legitimacy of the indigenous Latter-day Saint groups, even as they enjoyed no official affiliation with the LDS Church. The Nigerian converts situated themselves in a global version of the LDS faith; during one visit, a group in Akwa Ibom greeted Williams in song:

Go and preach to all the nations
Was our Lord's command, Lo
Will be with you to guide your footsteps on your way
Onward then your banners fly

Williams and President N. Eldon Tanner visited in 1964, promising that the senior missionaries would "help [Nigerians] at least promote agricultural skills" and that the Church was "not a political body." Williams assured the Premier's office that the Church "do[es] not believe in racial discrimination and [is] working for the day when the members in Nigeria will have all the blessings we enjoy."⁴⁰

But other Church "men on the ground" warned of looming conflict. Conflicts over visa access were likely the product of sectionalism long-staked to centralize national power disproportionately in the hands of Northern region officials—who considered "Latter-day Saint" identity as a cheap ploy for favor and access with wealthy Americans. James Larkin, a recent convert to the faith and an American publicity consultant handling the federal regime's public relations, told McKay that the new converts were part of a political party "playing the least role in the federal government."⁴¹ The Abubakr Balewa regime weaponized the Church's vulnerability in Nigeria, requesting a large cash deposit to ensure that the missionaries would not become settlers. The week following, the Balewa regime imposed additional restrictions, requiring religious cooperation and to some extent, association, with other Christian churches.

Complicating matters further, the NAACP in Utah had advocated for the Nigerians to be integrated into the Church with full priesthood access. Apostle Harold B. Lee agreed with Williams in one regard: the Nigeria mission would set a precedent for black priesthood access. Elder Gordon

B. Hinckley warned that the Nigeria mission may complicate Church affairs in apartheid South Africa. Apostle Mark E. Petersen, an ardent advocate for racial segregation, urged leadership to “proceed no further with this program.” McKay finally acknowledged: “I think the time has not yet come to go into Nigeria” and ordered Williams recalled.⁴² Miffed, Williams asked Thorpe Isaacson, one of McKay’s top hands, when “the Church [had] start [ed] running away from problems”; Isaacson rejoined that “there’s no use asking for them.”⁴³ The mission was tabled indefinitely.

In the Church’s absence, the congregations fended for themselves. In a 1965 interview with *Time* magazine on the Latter-day Saints’ aborted missionary efforts, Obot echoed the advice Williams gave him: “Nigerian priests will run their own branch. This is their creation, and they are in their own country” (*Time*:72). In Aba, Charles Agu and his “small band” quarreled over the vitality of their church. The Aba Saints considered themselves to be “the nucleus of the Church”—despite their lack of priesthood office. The group was flailing: “the lack of organized leadership,” they claimed, had “led to the non-growth of the Church.” How could they expand without a “dynamic leader” whose “duty was to lead others through personal examples”? Agu had lost all confidence in the group: “Show more concern in living as practical LDS,” he rejoined, “not just assembling [sic] every Sunday and waiting for the coming of the missionaries without any change from your old standards.”⁴⁴

The Nigeria-Biafra war (1967–1970) eliminated most of Nigeria’s Latter-day Saint proselytes. A wave of Igbo refugees fled to the Eastern region, setting the stage for five states to declare their independence from the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Williams recalled that during the war, “we lost a lot of these groups. They disintegrated, and they fell apart... All we would do later was go back and kind of bring the pieces back together again.”⁴⁵ Sampson Ukpogon, a Rivers State resident, traversed the area by bicycle maintaining a network of twenty-seven small Latter-day Saint congregations for the duration of the war. David Eka, while an Akwa Ibom native, allied with Biafra: “I lived with [Ibors]” and “fought with them... suffered with them. I showed them zeal, because I had believed that somebody had wronged us.”⁴⁶ Senen Asianya attempted to use his Church affiliation to procure support for the Biafran cause, urging “my brothers and sisters of the *Mormon* world to join the band of good Samaritans” in providing relief for Biafran refugees [emphasis added].⁴⁷ Williams attributed the Biafran conflict to Satanic machinations: “For 6,000 years Lucifer ruled supreme in the dark continent of Africa.” When missionaries “made an attempt to intrude in his territory, then everything broke loose, culminating in a great war.”⁴⁸ “Chioma,” an Umuelem resident, worked for the Red Cross at St. Michael’s school and saw shooting every day: “*tum tum tum tum*.”⁴⁹ The conflict evoked bitter memories; “Ngozi” remembered that it was “an evil time... hunger killed people.” When youth “spoke of *gbam gbam gbam gbam* [an onomatopoeic sound for war],” she told them: “*o dighi mma* [it is not good].” Their words were “evil speech” (*okwu joro njo; okwu joro njo*).

The Obinnas

The war crippled the Latter-day Saint community—not only in deaths but also with regard to internal cohesiveness. Mennie Udorn, a pre-war proselyte in Abak, wrote of her husband, a “founder” of the Church—killed by Biafra soldiers. Although wartime violence displaced her family, they managed to find their way back in 1972; during her absence, she wrote, “the few members who came back safely started the organisation again.” Leery of the existing organization, she considered them to be religious hustlers: “They are not to be trusted, they can change to other groups, then write as a true organization.” She kept them at arm’s length, because she hoped to “remain independently in the name of THE REAL CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER DAYS.”⁵⁰ Similar issues plagued the Church in Ghana, where a violent *coup de church* left a woman injured when she refused to affiliate with the self-installed church leadership (Stevenson 2015).

As other groups jostled for access to American Mormon affiliation, Anthony Obinna, a schoolteacher from Umuelem Enyiogugu, did not initially appear to be different. Raised amidst indigenous religious practices in Umuelem Enyiogugu, worshipping *Chukwu* and *Ani*, he observed later that he grew up in “primitive times”; his community “detested Western education and hated anyone who talked to them about sending their children to school.” They were “afraid of white men and never wanted to appear before them or go near them.”

As a child, Obinna almost certainly had heard about the killing of a Dr. Rogers Stewart, an British doctor who lost his way in Ahiara. When Stewart arrived in Ahiara, he was, according to one elder, “the first white man” to appear. Accounts differ as to what social norms he violated: some say he wandered into Okonkwo Hall, a hall devoted to the members of a secret society—“bitterly forbidden” to *ndi ocha* (“white people,” which could also be rendered to connote: “lepers,” depending on the inflection used in pronouncing “ocha.”), and others recalled that he was misperceived to be a ghost. In response to his death at the hands of the natives, British forces retaliated by sending H.M. Douglas, a hardened and aggressive military administrator, to launch a war against the villages of the area, including Obinna’s village of Enyiogugu. Douglas sued for a peace agreement, but when the village soldiers arrived, his men seized them and massacred the peace delegation, leaving few survivors—and ending *Ogu Stewart* [the war of Stewart]. “The people of Mbaise did not like the coming of the white man,” one Ahiara resident concluded.⁵¹ Only when his father met a British man and found himself unable to understand him did he permit Anthony to go to school. “I was very fortunate,” Obinna recalled, “and little did I think how much God had in store for me” (Obinna 1980).⁵² Obinna converted to Catholicism, attended Wolsey Hall through correspondence course, and in 1965, was transferred to Calabar.

That same day, Obinna began to have a series of visions in which he read *Pilgrim’s Progress* and concluded: “We are living in the city of destruction” and

“must seek for the celestial city.”⁵³ Then, Obinna saw “one of the most beautiful buildings I had ever seen before.” A messenger told Obinna that this building was “not meant for everybody.” The man then “showed himself in a crucified form on the cross...his appearance looked like that of Christ.”⁵⁴ Obinna “started reading the story [*Pilgrim’s Progress*] for quite a long time, reading it and reading it...until daybreak.”⁵⁵

Surrounded by violence in his home of Umuelem, Obinna discovered an article in the April 1958 *Reader’s Digest*: “The Mormon Church: A Complete Way of Life” (which he later misidentified as: “March of the Mormons”). An artistic rendering of the Salt Lake City temple struck him as identical to the structure he had seen in his vision. Obinna began to imagine Salt Lake City as a safe haven from a Nigeria falling apart at the seams before his eyes. Obinna’s faith was not local but trans-Atlantic. Adewole Ogunmokun, a Port Harcourt visionary, read a Mormon-related article in the April issue of *Reader’s Digest*. He “became transformed and for a number of days,” Ogunmokun “dreamt dreams of various degrees about the Mormon Church” and had “even worshipped in the Great Temple with thousands of other Brethren” (Allen 1991). Notably, only American print culture could normalize “Mormon” in Nigerian English discourse; in oral culture, it still carried the dark connotations of an *ekwensu*-worshipping sect. Isabel Hofmeyr argues that Africans lived in a “para-literate world not dissimilar to that inhabited by Bunyan,” one in which documents, tomes, and certificates took on a dramatic center stage. “Literacy becomes a source of divine energy accessed and controlled by those with prophetic talents” (Hofmeyr 2003) (Figure 4).

A sizable body of scholarship has categorized dreaming practices as challenges to ecclesiastical authority. Following the influenza outbreak in western Nigeria, *Aladura* [Christian groups incorporating indigenous practices] drew on dreams and visions to challenge the *status quo* and establish their authority. In 1918, Joseph Shadare received a vision to establish the Precious Stone Society within the Anglican Church, claiming to heal victims of the influenza pandemic; in 1922, they broke with the Anglicans over infant baptism and joined the Faith Tabernacle. Joseph Babalola, a Faith Tabernacle healer and Shadare adherent, heard a voice calling him to use the “water of life” also for healing and rejected the mission churches for their commitment to using Western medication in preference to the healing water. In 1925, Moses Tunolashé (“Baba Aladura”) and Abiodun Akinsowon (“Captain Abiodun”) established the Eternal Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim which, like the Faith Tabernacle, placed an emphasis on charismatic healing (Anderson 2013:130–31).

Obinna’s visions thus reveal a kind of American-centered “Afropolitanism”: what Achille Mbembe, Chielozone Eze, and Derek Peterson conceptualize as malleable, Afro-centered knowledge production systems untethered to land, skin tone, or an essentialized indigeness (Mbembe 2002; Eze 2014) (Figure 5). Obinna’s engagement with the *Reader’s Digest* article occurred against the backdrop of the violence and starvation of the Nigeria-Biafra conflict. Obinna interpreted his *present* milieu to be the “city

Figure 4. The Salt Lake City Temple, April 1958 *Reader's Digest*. Anthony Obinna saw this article as validation for his vision. Courtesy of the Look Collection at the Library of Congress.

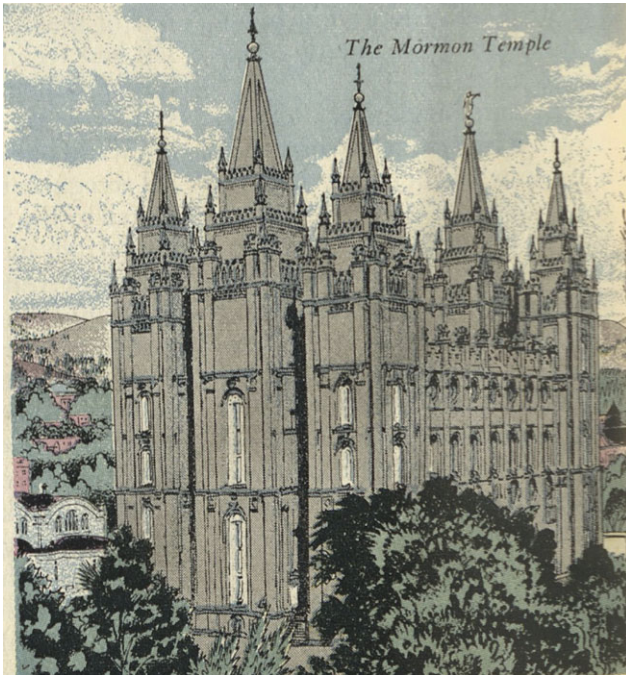


Figure 5. Anthony Obinna and his congregation following a church service in his compound, 1971. Courtesy of LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.



of destruction” while he envisioned Utah as the “celestial city” (Peterson 2012:ch.2). Once the Biafran forces had surrendered to federal troops, the Nigerian federal government offered little assistance to the Eastern region’s efforts to recuperate from the war, compelling Igbo survivors to innovate on their own terms. “Uzo” felt the Latter-day Saint church services on Obinna’s front porch were distinct from others because Obinna “*mara Chineke* [knew God]” and had “*muo Chineke* [the spirit of God]”; he compared Obinna to Joseph Smith.⁵⁶ Faced with the “city of destruction,” Obinna’s family emphasized the preaching of the gospel through bicycles, celebrated the crossing of geopolitical frontiers, and promoted membership in a supra-national faith community.

At the close of the war, Obinna began to correspond with Church leadership in Utah and would continue doing so for the next seven years. Adopting “Mormonism” put the Obinna family at odds with the local community. “Ebere” recalls students mocking them in song: “*Ekwensu hapu gi! Ekwensu hapu gi!*” (The devil depart from you)—reflective of the frequent oral conflation of “Mormon” with “Mammon” in Nigeria’s spoken English; Asianya made a similar conflation when exposed to the Latter-day Saint sacred text, the Book of Mormon. Obinna’s great-grandchildren use the *ekwensu* chant in play to the present day.⁵⁷ “Ebere’s” present husband, who shall be identified as “Nnamdi,” persecuted the Obinna family as a youth, explaining, “We did not want to have anything in common with them.” He changed his views once the American missionaries came.⁵⁸

Obinna’s vision evoked a kind of material theo-politics, rooted in an embrace of Americana. Obinna’s vision highlighted the possibilities that many Nigerians perceived with independence. Frederick Cooper has argued that political sovereignty “gave African leaders the possibility of shopping around for multiple patrons overseas” (Cooper 2008:180). Obinna’s dreaming taught him to ally himself with winners, institutions he believed capable of shaping a new social order. Politicians such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, a proud graduate of Lincoln and Howard Universities, drew upon the support of Michigan State University [MSU] in establishing the University of Nigeria, Nsukka [UNN]; Glen Taggart, MSU’s dean of international programs and a prominent LDS educator, served as UNN’s second vice-chancellor. Obinna’s vision resonated well with a nation-state seeking to re-shape its alliances, whether geo-political or theological. Whereas Wole Soyinka in *The Interpreters* and Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* and *Man of the People* eschewed national identity outright or rejected the ruling political elite, respectively, Obinna’s visions celebrated *winners*: whether through infrastructure or in political conflict. In 1979, Obinna joined the National Party of Nigeria; one relative believed he had done so because of a vision showing him that it would be the reigning political party in Nigeria.⁵⁹

Obinna attributed the Church’s success in part to its American-sponsored physical structures: “When the missionaries came with their building program,” residents were struck at how a Church could spend “so many thousands of naira” for “a very few people... we were happy indeed.”⁶⁰ Obinna

held that American structures afforded him legitimacy unattainable otherwise. The Latter-day Saint faith represented America at its best, Obinna believed; pure religion, Obinna told one interviewer, is “what makes America great, in the true sense of it.”⁶¹ Honorable Williams, an ecclesiastically-appointed congregation historian in Ikot Eyo, celebrated his affiliation with American spiritual identity and the well-furnished nature of the church structures: “We believe that America is the leader in the whole world... so when people say that this is an American church, we are happy to associate with the Americans.” Most churches are nothing more than “mud houses”; air conditioning and structural soundness invited proselytes to “come and see.”⁶² They were building their own kind of “celestial” infrastructure in Nigeria.

Anthony Obinna’s quest for integration into this American religion’s “celestial city” empire did not indicate a willingness to surrender his indigenously identity, but rather, reflected a commitment to inclusion in what he had assumed was a faith community that, as Lamin Sanneh has observed, refused to embrace its own potential. One of Obinna’s relatives, “Emeka” recounts one occasion when Anthony was teaching a class. He asked his brothers to bring a broom; while a person could break the broom into many pieces, Obinna taught, “only as one can you be the whole.”⁶³ Obinna expressed frustration at the American Church leadership’s slow pace; he chastised the Church’s First Presidency: “Your long silence about the establishment of the Church in Nigeria is very much embarrassing [sic].” He questioned whether “this [is] a Christian religion at all?” Christianity, he insisted, endeavored to spread throughout the world—and no less in Africa. In his later years, he bemoaned later that “nobody told me, and I never knew that Africans were not in this Church, that the Church was meant for the whites only.”⁶⁴ He promised Church leaders that he would practice autonomously, if necessary: “The Spirit of God calls us to abide by this church and there is nothing to keep us out.”⁶⁵ A proselyte from Calabar urged haste: “Most of them compared your visit to the Second Coming of Christ. Sir, the ball is now in your court, so don’t waste time.”⁶⁶

Early American church leadership in Nigeria considered themselves, not indigenous leadership, to be the stewards of the Latter-day Saint tradition. The first district president in Lagos, Roger Curtis, a Scottish manager for the Lagos Refuse Disposal Board, found himself frustrated at Nigerians’ efforts to establish the LDS Church: “The majority of blacks have a long way to go.” He considered the Church to represent a stabilizing institution for the newly-independent Nigeria: “Nigeria needs the church more than the Church needs Nigeria.”⁶⁷ Nigerian proselytes were constructed as, at most, willing recipients; one of the first Latter-day Saint missionaries, Rachel Mabey, could sense “the Lord guiding us....[W]e see his hand in leading us to these people & preparing them.”⁶⁸ In 1980, Dr. Alexander B. Morrison, a noted Latter-day Saint humanitarian researcher and ecclesiastical leader, celebrated that the Latter-day Saint faith “drives away the shadows of error and superstition which have long lain over the ‘dark continent’ and those ancient lands and peoples” (Morrison 1987).

Figure 6. Anthony and Fidelia Obinna near the Logan, Utah Latter-day Saint Temple, 1989. Courtesy of LDS Church History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.



Morrison celebrated *European-descended* missionaries and expatriates in Africa, testifying “they are not there by chance” but were “placed on the frontiers of the Church by divine providence” (Morrison 1987).

Obinna’s narrative seemed to provide a usable history for a faith community trying to demonstrate its compatibility with African experiences: the story of an African man waiting, patiently, for incorporation into the American faith. Rendell Mabey romanticized Obinna; an entire chapter of his mission memoir is devoted to “Meeting Obinna,” including a remarkable story of locating a one-armed man who “caught the name of Anthony

Obinna” and directed the Americans where they could find him “back [in] the ‘Bush’” of Umuelem. In 1980, the LDS Church’s official magazine, *Ensign*, used Obinna’s story to herald the rise of the Church in “black Africa”: “Voice from Nigeria.” (Obinna 1980).⁶⁹ David Eka heralded Obinna as “faithful and steadfast right from the beginning.”⁷⁰ Western education, Eka observed, “helped [Obinna] to know exactly what he was looking for.”⁷¹ Obinna sought the same for his children and requested assistance from the missionaries in sending his sons, Vitalis and Bonaventure, to Latter-day Saint colleges in Idaho and Utah.⁷²

Obinna imagined his membership in the faith as a process of spatial collapse between Nigeria and America; he urged American church members to “remember us in their prayers... we are now brothers and sisters, and we are no longer far from them.”⁷³ The following year, Anthony and Fidelia Obinna received their temple rituals in the Logan, Utah, temple—within walking distance of John Stewart’s office (Figure 6).

Conclusion

The presence of the Aba LDS Temple represents the establishment of the “indigenous” Latter-day Saint tradition in Eastern Nigeria: the materialization of Obinna’s dreams about access to Latter-day Saint infrastructure, both spiritual and material. Obinna embraced Latter-day Saint religious infrastructure as emblematic of the ultimate manifestation of American spirituality. Yet, Anthony Obinna’s spiritual journey from Nigeria to America and the establishment of the elaborate temple in the heart of Igboland illustrates layered identities in contemporary Nigerian life. For Nigerian Latter-day Saints, the United States serves as more than a geographic or cultural expression; it serves as the cradle for a spiritual regeneration in a desperate post-independence world.

Nigerian Latter-day Saints reveal how an American faith community dogged by racist rhetoric and praxis can serve as a vehicle for the expression of indigenous solidarity for the very people whom that racism Otherized as ill-equipped for the full burdens of religious discipleship. Almost nothing about the prospects for a Nigerian mission seemed promising. For Nigerian Latter-day Saint proselytes, their faith reflected an interlocking *jenga* structure of meanings: affiliation with a wealthy American partner, independence from colonial mission churches, and the ultimate manifestation of sovereignty from the vexed Nigerian milieu.

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Notes

1. Interview with Francis Nmeribe, August 18, 2018, in Latter-day Saint Mission Home/Nmeribe residence.
2. By the mid-nineteenth-century, Latter-day Saints were practicing polygamy under a near-theocracy in the Intermountain West. See Daynes, 2001; and Barringer-Gordon, 2002.
3. Membership data available through www.mormonnewsroom.org.
4. District Office, Memo to the Head Resident, June 29, 1938, ABADIST 14/1/602, Enugu Federal Archives, Enugu, Nigeria.
5. Resident's Office, Memo to Adam E. Duke, of the Calabar Efik Council, November 25, 1931, CALPROF 19/1/382, EF.
6. Glen Lund Diary, December 4, 1950. LDS Church History Archives.
7. Honesty Ekong, Letter to Lamar Williams, Date Not Recorded, in Lamar Williams, Memo to Gordon B. Hinckley (MS 6258), LDS Church History Archives.
8. David Eka, Interview with E. Dale LeBarron, Box 1, fd. 10, 45, June 5, 1988. E. Dale LeBarron Oral History Collection, Perry Special Collections. (Hereafter Eka Oral History).
9. First Presidency (David O. McKay, J. Reuben Clark, Henry D. Moyle), Letter to Glen Fisher, March 21, 1960, cited in Anonymous, 2014.
10. Timothy Udoh, Letter to Lamar Williams, August 26, 1960. Lamar S. Williams Papers, LDS Church History Archives.
11. Eka, Oral History: 47.
12. J.C. Ukoha, Letter to Ed Decker, August 2, 1989. Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University.
13. J.C. Ukoha, Letter to Ed Decker, August 2, 1989. Merrill-Cazier Library, Utah State University.
14. Marvin Jones Diary, October 23, 1961. LDS Church History Archives.
15. Rachel Mabey journal, November 26, 1979. LDS Church History Archives.
16. First Presidency Letter to Glen Fisher, March 21, 1960. Glen Fisher Correspondence, LDS Church History Archives.
17. Lamar Williams Oral History, with Gordon Irving, May 6, 1981, 6. Transcript in LDS Church History Archives. (Hereafter Williams Oral History).
18. Charles Agu, Welcome Address, December 1962. Lamar Williams Papers, LDS Church History Archives.
19. Lamar Williams, Letter to First Presidency, May 3, 1961. Lamar Williams Papers, LDS Church History Archives.
20. Minutes, kept by Moses Inyang, Ibesit Okoro, October 22, 1961. LDS Church History Archives.
21. Minutes, kept by Moses Inyang, Ibesit Okoro, October 22, 1961. LDS Church History Archives.
22. Jones Diary, October 18, 1961.
23. Jones Diary, October 24, 1961.

24. Williams Oral History: 18.
25. Williams Oral History: 81.
26. Williams Oral History: 11.
27. Williams Oral History: 82.
28. Marvin Jones Journal, October 25, 1961.
29. Lamar Williams Journal, October 29, 1961.
30. Marvin Jones to Dorothy Buckley, October 28, 1961. Marvin Jones Papers, LDS Church History Archives.
31. Sonia Johnson to Harrises, March 24, 1966. Sonia Johnson Papers, University of Utah Special Collections.
32. David O. McKay Diary, April 22, 1965, cited in Prince 2005: 90.
33. David O. McKay Diary, October 11, 1962, cited in Prince 2005: 85.
34. Constitution and Bye-laws of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Aba: Charles Agu, 1969.)
35. Williams Oral History: 12.
36. Mary Ellen Edmunds, Interview with Brian Reeves. Summer 1992:147. LDS Church History Library.
37. Williams Oral History: 2.
38. "T.L. Osborn Crusade—Enugu," *The Renaissance* [Enugu], March 2, 1975, 8–9; "Marvelous! Stupendous!" *The Renaissance* [Enugu], March 9, 1975, 1.
39. Lamar Williams to I.A. Emeludamu, July 23, 1963. In Edwin Cannon Papers, LDS Church History Archives.
40. Senen Asianya Fireside, August 3, 1966, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Transcript in LDS Church History Archives.
41. Prince 2005: 91.
42. David O. McKay Diary, June 23, 1965, in Prince 2005: 91.
43. Williams Oral History: 20.
44. LDS Church in Aba, Letter to First Presidency, January 24, 1966; Charles Agu, Letter to LDS Church at Aba, ca. February 10, 1966. LDS Church History Archives.
45. Williams Oral History: 22.
46. Eka Oral History: 31.
47. Senen Asianya to Mary Cain, February 1, 1969. LDS Church History Archives.
48. Williams Oral History: 21.
49. "Chioma" interview with author, July 3, 2016 and October 17, 2018 at LDS Chapel in Mbaise.
50. Mennie Udom, Letter to to 1st presidency, December 14, 1976, Edwin Cannon Papers, Box 1, fd. 1, LDS Church History Library.
51. Mr. Ekeanyanwu, interview with Abii Dennis Ugochuwku (in "British Colonial Administration in Mbaise" thesis).
52. This article, which draws from various Obinna letters, was compiled from a variety of sources for explicitly devotional purposes. However, its contents can be independently corroborated
53. Anthony Obinna, Interview with E. Dale LeBaron, June 4, 1988:5. Perry Special Collections, Brigham Young University. (Hereafter Anthony Obinna Interview).
54. Anthony Obinna, Interview with E. Dale LeBaron, June 4, 1988: 14.
55. Anthony Obinna, Interview with E. Dale LeBaron, June 4, 1988: 5.
56. "Uzo" interview with author, July 3, 2016 in LDS Chapel in Mbaise, Nigeria.
57. Observation, December 15, 2018, at Obinna *ezi na ulo*.
58. Interview with "Ebere" and "Nnamdi," July 10, 2016, at the Aba LDS Temple Housing Complex.

59. Albert Obinna Interview, October 2018, at Obinna family compound, Mbaise, Nigeria.
60. Anthony Obinna Interview: 31.
61. Anthony Obinna Interview: 11.
62. Honorable Williams, interview with author, August 19, 2018. Ikot Eyo Latter-day Saint Chapel.
63. "Uzo," Interview with author, July 3, 2016 in LDS Chapel in Mbaise, Nigeria. 64: Anthony Obinna interview: 7–8.
64. Anthony Obinna Interview: 7–8.
65. Anthony Obinna, Letter to the Council of the Twelve, September 28, 1978. Edwin Cannon Correspondence, LDS Church History Archives.
66. Likely E.D. Ukwat, Letter to Edwin Cannon, September 23, 1978, Edwin Cannon Correspondence, LDS Church History Library. While no name is listed, the same Calabar address on the letter is attributed to Ukwat in another letter.
67. Roger Curtis, Interview with E. Dale LeBaron, September 5, 1979: 10. E. Dale LeBaron Oral History Collection, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library (HBLI).
68. Rachel Mabey Journal, November 26, 1978. LDS Church History Archives.
69. Rachel Mabey Journal, November 18, 1978. LDS Church History Archives.
70. Eka Oral History: 47.
71. Eka Oral History: 47.
72. Anthony Obinna, Letter to Cannons, January 15, 1980, Edwin Cannon Correspondence, LDS Church History Library.
73. Anthony Obinna Interview: 44.