Research Note

LDS Materials for the Study of Postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa

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Introduction

Every person who enters the LDS Church History Library in downtown Salt Lake City, Utah, is greeted with the words: “Behold, there shall be a record kept among you.”¹ This passage, emblazoned over the entrance to the open stacks in the library’s foyer, is the scriptural mandate of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) for collecting and preserving materials of historical importance, which include official church records, the personal papers, diaries, and correspondence of church members, genealogies, and also oral histories. Joseph Smith, the founder and first president of the LDS Church, believed that he had received this commandment from God to maintain records when he officially organized the church in 1830, and two years later, in 1832, Smith similarly declared that “it is the duty of the Lord’s clerk, whom he has appointed, to keep a history, and a general church record of all things that transpire in Zion.”²

While the beliefs, rituals, and practices of the Latter-day Saints (colloquially known as Mormons) may remain a mystery to many people today, they have nonetheless garnered an international reputation for their tradition of lay history.³ Mormons not only believe that families can be together in the afterlife, but also that their deceased relatives who were not baptized within the LDS Church are eligible for proxy ordinance work, as long as a genealogical connection with a living church

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¹ The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2013), 21: 1. For a thoughtful description of the physical structure of the LDS Church History Library and what this can tell us about the LDS Church, see K. Mohrman, “Queering the LDS Archive,” Radical History Review 122 (May 2015), 143–147.


³ In this brief article, I will use “Latter-day Saint” and “Mormon” interchangeably.
member can be established. For this reason, thousands of Latter-day Saints have kept diaries and produced family histories. Although, from a theological standpoint, the LDS Church is primarily interested in the names of the dead and their genealogical connections to living church members, “the unofficial but widespread attitude,” according to anthropologist Mark Leone, “is to gather as much accompanying information about one’s dead as possible. Mormons actually want a rich context in order to understand who their kinsmen were.” As Spencer Kimball, the twelfth president of the LDS Church, once stated, “as our posterity read of our life’s experiences, they, too, will come to know and love us. And in the glorious day when our families are together in the eternities, we will already be acquainted.” This has resulted in the creation of a large body of journals, correspondence, local church records, and oral histories relevant to the study of postcolonial Sub-Saharan Africa that remain underutilized by historians. These documents provide insight into not only the expansion of an American church in postcolonial Africa, but they also contain ethnographic data on a variety of topics, such as marriage practices, African childhood, and burial customs, that will be of interest to historians who are not necessarily concerned with the history of religion in Africa.

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7 Spencer W. Kimball, “President Kimball Speaks Out on Personal Journals,” Ensign (December 1980), 61.
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While some LDS records relevant to South African history predate the postcolonial period, the vast bulk of LDS manuscript and archival collections relevant to the history of Sub-Saharan Africa were produced after 1960, especially following the 1978 priesthood revelation when Mormonism spread beyond the borders of Ghana, Nigeria, and South Africa. 


located in LDS archives and special collections can be divided into four broad groups: (1) journals, (2) correspondence, (3) local church records, and (4) oral histories.  

These materials comprise both “internal” evidence produced by Africans and “external” evidence produced by Americans and Europeans. Although the missionary journals in LDS archives were largely written by American and European LDS missionaries, some of them do in fact include direct quotations from African converts whom LDS missionaries either interviewed in their efforts to prepare converts for baptism or to determine whether Africans were serious about their desire to join the LDS Church officially. Some LDS missionaries would even append letters from converts as well as newspaper and magazine articles to the relevant entries in their journals as well. While many African Latter-day Saints have served missions in their place of birth, other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the West since the 1980s, it appears that African missionaries have not systematically retained and deposited their journals into the LDS Church’s archives in the same way that


See, for example, MS 1, Marvin Reese Jones Diary, CHL; LaMar Williams Diary, Folder 1, LaMar S. Williams Papers, CHL.

See, for instance, MS 82, LaMar S. Williams Journal, 1960 December–1965 November, CHL.
American and European missionaries have. The correspondence available to Africanist researchers in LDS archives may be grouped into three broad categories: official church correspondence, letters exchanged between missionaries and potential converts, and, lastly, letters (and, in some cases, emails!) written by missionaries that describe their mission experience to their friends and family back home.

Local church records primarily consist of two types of material. The first is official documents, such as annual historical summaries compiled at both the stake and district level that “provide details on who is serving in your stake and wards and a perspective on Latter-day Saint life in your area.” These historical summaries are of mixed quality. While some of these reports just provide basic details about who was called to serve in what leadership positions and the dates on which conferences were held, other summaries provide detailed information about when a stake was founded and by whom, missionary endeavors, and the various conferences and programs that occurred during the year. Local church records also include ephemera, such as baptismal records, property leases, programs for funerals and other church events, church announcements, and newsletters.


14 Aba Nigeria Stake, Stake and District Historical Summary, 1998, LR 519367 3, Aba Nigeria Stake Annual Historical Reports, CHL. A stake is composed of five to twelve wards. On Stakes, see Stan L. Albrecht, “Stake,” in Ludlow, Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 1411–1414. A district is an administrative unit within an LDS mission. It is similar to a stake, as a district is also composed of multiple branches. On Districts, see William S. Evans, “District, District President,” in Ludlow, Encyclopedia of Mormonism, 90–391.

Africanist historians have always valued oral testimony because of the paucity of local African voices within the documentary records of international religious organizations and the colonial state. What makes the LDS Church’s archival materials different from the holdings of other foreign institutions that historians have used to write the history of Africa is the vast number of interviews that the LDS Church has conducted with African Mormons, both adult men and women. The LDS Church’s interest in collecting oral histories dates back to the creation of the LDS Historical Department in the early 1970s. In February 1972, the First Presidency charged the newly formed department to create a detailed plan of action, which included an oral history program that remains active today. While many of the earliest interviews conducted as part of the oral history program were with general authorities, missionaries, stake presidents, the presidents of auxiliary organizations, and bishops based in the United States, oral histories have become a crucial tool for documenting the history of the LDS Church in the global south, where more traditional archival records, as Africanist historians know all too well, are often lacking. Today, the LDS Church has collected more than ten thousand oral histories from all around the globe, and many of these are available to public research.

E. Dale LeBaron, president of the South African Mission during the 1978 Priesthood Revelation and later a professor at Brigham Young University, conducted the earliest African oral histories. Between 1988 and 1993, he interviewed more than 400 African Latter-day Saints from Ghana, Kenya, Mauritius, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda, Zaire (or modern-day Democratic Republic of the Congo), and Zimbabwe. In his interviews, LeBaron asked his interviewees to share their life story, and then he would more explicitly solicit information on three broad topics: (1) personal background, (2) the gospel, and (3) church service. When questioning his interviewees about their personal backgrounds, LeBaron would often ask his interlocutors to recount early memories about their family, father, and mother. He

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19 MSS 1937, African Oral History Project, LTPSC. E. Dale LeBaron edited and published a small selection of these oral histories under the title, All Are Alike unto God: Fascinating Conversion Stories of African Saints (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1990). Recordings of some of LeBaron’s African oral histories from 1988 can also be found at the LDS Church History Library. See AV 1077, African Oral History Project, 1988 May–August, CHL.

20 On E. Dale LeBaron’s oral history methodology, see, OH 1812, E. Dale LeBaron Interview: Salt Lake City Utah, 1998 August 18, CHL, 16.
also wanted to know what experiences played an important role in shaping his subjects’ lives, as well as their educational and professional trajectory. When it came to the question of the gospel, LeBaron was particularly interested in ascertaining how converts had learned about the LDS Church, what initially impressed them about its message, which of the LDS Church’s teachings had the greatest impact on their lives, and whether they had encountered any challenges in accepting the LDS Church’s teachings. If interviewees had been called to serve in a church leadership position, LeBaron would also discuss their responsibilities in this position, and any challenges they encountered during their service. While LeBaron did not conduct all of the African oral histories that are currently open to public research, other interviewers addressed many of the same topics, as these are the themes that continue to interest the LDS Church as a religious institution.21

Despite the limited scope of the African oral histories, however, these interviews nonetheless contain ethnographic information that may be of interest to Africanist historians who are not specifically interested in the history of religion in Africa. Discussions about personal background frequently include information about topics, such as marriage customs and courtship, the dynamics of growing up in a polygamous (polygynous) household, burial practices, and the cross-cultural challenges facing African adherents who spent time in the United States or Europe. These interviews also provide new data on important historical events. Nigerian interviewees, for instance, frequently recounted their experiences during the Nigerian Civil War.22 As I have been unable to examine all of the African oral histories in LDS archives, however, others must directly peruse each oral history to determine its full contents and thematic range.

These interviews with adult men and women who converted to Mormonism during the second half of the twentieth century vary in both quality and length. While some interview transcripts are less than ten pages long, other interview transcripts with African converts run more than forty pages.23 The majority of interviews, however, fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Interviews with LDS missionaries sometimes exceed more than 150 pages in length.24 One of the recurring

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21 Oral Histories: Church History Guides (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 2016), 28–29.


24 OH 692, LaMar Williams Interview: Salt Lake City, Utah, 1981, CHL.
problems with these African oral histories is the absence of a clearly defined temporal dimension. This ambiguity manifests within Mormon oral histories, because Latter-day Saints, as historian Jan Shipps has pointed out, live outside of “profane, linear, [and] historical” time. Since it is not always obvious when the events being described by the interviewee occurred, it is often helpful to corroborate the details of the African oral histories with other LDS archival materials to get a handle on the chronology.

Congolese, Ghanaian, Nigerian, and South African voices dominate the LDS Church’s collection of African oral histories. A close reading of the catalogs and findings aids of the LDS Church History Library and L. Tom Perry Special Collections in the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University has revealed that LDS archives currently hold around 190 South African oral histories, 160 Ghanaian oral histories, 130 Nigerian oral histories, and 90 Congolese oral histories. The LDS archives, however, also possess more than 70 Ugandan oral histories, 60 Kenyan oral histories, and 40 Zimbabwean oral histories. My research has also revealed the presence of more than 10 Botswanan oral histories, 10 Ivorian oral histories, 10 Malawian oral histories, 10 Namibian oral histories, 10 Swazi oral histories, 10 Tanzanian oral histories, and 10 Zambian oral histories. While I was able to identify the oral histories of dozens of Latter-day Saints from Ethiopia, Liberia, and Mozambique in the LDS Church History Library’s catalog, they are currently closed to public research and may not be used without a researcher first submitting a “Restricted Materials Request Form.” The number of African oral histories in LDS archives will likely continue to grow as the church expands across the continent.

LDS African oral histories provide an untapped opportunity to give agency to local African actors, especially women whose voices are often absent from the records of international mission churches. With these oral histories, Africanist historians can explore not only how ordinary Africans lived their lives during a period of immense social, political, and economic change, but also how they lived their religion.

Conclusion

Historians trying to write the history of postcolonial Africa are hindered by an absence of documentary materials in conventional national archives. Not only were their holdings ransacked following military coups and destroyed during the civil wars


26 These rudimentary calculations exclude closed and unprocessed oral histories.


that erupted across the African continent in the years after independence, but also many departmental and ministerial records never even made it into national archives in the first place.\textsuperscript{29} Today many departments are not even required by federal law to transfer their records to the national archive, and many civil servants actively destroy or hoard records out of fear that journalists and security forces might use the information in archival documents to damage the careers of politicians.\textsuperscript{30} The majority of African state archives are also understaffed, underfunded, and poorly managed.\textsuperscript{31} Faced with these challenges, Africanist historians must rely more heavily


on the bits and pieces of historical materials that are dispersed across the globe in unconventional archives to reconstruct Africa’s postcolonial history, and LDS materials have the potential to play an important role in supplementing the meager archival and manuscript records of the failed postcolonial state.32

32 Allman, “Phantoms of the Archives,” 120, 126, 127.