

Article

The “Conversion” of Anthony Obinna to Mormonism: Elective Affinities, Socio-Economic Factors, and Religious Change in Postcolonial Southeastern Nigeria

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Abstract: This article analyzes the “conversion” of Anthony Uzodimma Obinna, an Igbo schoolteacher from the town of Aboh Mbaise in Imo State, and his extended family to Mormonism in southeastern Nigeria between the 1960s and the 1980s, from a historical perspective. I argue that the transition of Anthony Obinna and his family away from Catholicism to Mormonism can be explained by both the elective affinities that existed between Mormonism and indigenous Igbo culture, and socio-economic factors as well. This article bases its conclusions on a close reading of oral histories, personal papers, and correspondence housed at the LDS Church History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah and L. Tom Perry Special Collections at Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

Keywords: Mormonism; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Anthony Obinna; religious conversion; southeastern Nigeria

1. Introduction: The Official Story of Anthony Obinna

This article analyzes the “conversion” of Anthony Uzodimma Obinna, an Igbo schoolteacher from the town of Aboh Mbaise in Imo State in the southeastern part of Nigeria, and his extended family to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church) between the 1960s and the 1980s.¹ Offering a social explanation of religious change that complicates the official narratives of Anthony Obinna’s “conversion,” I argue that the movement of Anthony Obinna and his family away from Catholicism to Mormonism can be explained by both the elective affinities that existed between Mormonism and indigenous Igbo culture, and socio-economic factors as well. This article bases its conclusions on a close reading of oral histories, personal papers, and correspondence housed at the LDS Church History Library in Salt Lake City, Utah and L. Tom Perry Special Collections at the Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah.

According to official narratives, Obinna’s “conversion” hinged on a series of revelatory dreams that he experienced between 1965 and 1967.² The story of Obinna’s dreams have been recounted in various levels of detail in official church publications, Obinna’s autobiography and oral histories,

¹ On the expansion of Mormonism in West Africa, see (Allen 1991; Hurlbut 2018, 2019a, 2020; Stevenson 2014, 2015).

² For references to Nigerian engagement with LDS Church during the 1940s and the 1950s, see “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Bassey Daniel Udoh, Ikot Ebo, State of Akwa Ibom, Nigeria, 28 May 1988,” p. 4, Box 12, Folder 9, MSS 1937, African Oral History Project, L. Tom Perry Special Collections, Harold B. Lee Library, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah (hereafter LTPSC); OH 692, LaMar S. Williams Interview: Salt Lake City, Utah, 1981, pp. 2, 51, Church History Library, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah (hereafter CHL); Williams, Letter to Emelumadu, 23 July 1963, Box 1, Folder 1, MSS 21299, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, 1963–1986, CHL. See also (Allen 1991, p. 212; Hurlbut 2018, p. 1; Hurlbut 2015, p. 1).

and the following reconstruction is a composite of all these various accounts (Obinna 1980).³ Obinna reported that he had his first revelatory dream on the same day that he was transferred to teach at a school in Itu in the Calabar Province of Nigeria's Eastern Region, in November 1965.⁴ In this dream, a tall man in white shorts who carried both a walking stick in his right hand and a pillow on top of his head appeared, walked up to Obinna, and asked him whether he was familiar with the teachings of Christianity and the story of Christian and Christiana as recounted in John Bunyan's novel *Pilgrim's Progress* (Obinna 1980).⁵ Obinna responded to the unnamed man that he was familiar with their story, but that he had forgotten the details since it had been such a long time since he had read the novel (Obinna 1980).⁶ The man with the walking stick then told Obinna to re-read the novel, and knocked the pillow onto Obinna's head. Once he had transferred the pillow to Obinna's head, a crucified Jesus Christ appeared in the dream and the unnamed man disappeared.⁷ When Obinna woke up the following morning, he went to his personal library and removed *Pilgrim's Progress* from the shelf. Obinna opened up the book to a random page where, he stated, he read the words: "We are living in the city of destruction. I must seek for the celestial city," a statement which does not appear anywhere in Bunyan's book.⁸ Obinna asked friends and family members about this passage, but they could not decipher the meaning of the words he read.⁹ However, a few months later, Obinna stated that the unnamed man appeared in his dreams again, and he took Obinna to the "most beautiful building" and showed him the interior of the building, and told him that "this is a holy place, a place of worship. Only selected people go in there. It is not meant for everybody."¹⁰ After seeing the beautiful building in his dreams, Obinna stood among "priests" in his dreams each night.¹¹ A couple of years later, during the Nigerian Civil War, Obinna picked up an offprint of an old edition of *Reader's Digest* that had somehow made its way into southeastern Nigeria, and discovered an article on the Mormons, titled "the March of the Mormons," which contained an image of the LDS Temple—the building that Obinna said that he had seen in his dreams (Obinna 1980).¹² Once the Nigerian Civil War ended and the blockade was lifted, Obinna began a trans-Atlantic correspondence with the church, and he repeatedly asked for church literature and missionaries to be sent to his community in southeastern

³ See, for instance, "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," pp. 4–6, 14–18, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Raymond Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," pp. 3–4, Box 11, Folder 6, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; "Video of Anthony and Fidelia Obinna: Their Trip to the Logan Temple and Surrounding Events," pp. 12–13, Box 11, Folder 2, African Oral History Project, LTPSC. Anthony Obinna, "No Toil Nor Labour Fear, We Shall Not Shun the Fight": The Auto Biography of Anthony Uzodimma Obinna, Box 1, Folder 10, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL.

⁴ "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 4, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Fidelia Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 1, Box 11, Folder 4, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; Anthony Obinna, "No Toil Nor Labour Fear, We Shall Not Shun the Fight," Box 1, Folder 10, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL.

⁵ Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 4, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; "No Toil Nor Labour Fear, We Shall Not Shun the Fight," p. 2, Box 1, Folder 10, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL.

⁶ Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 5, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; Anthony Obinna, "No Toil Nor Labour Fear, We Shall Not Shun the Fight," p. 2, Box 1, Folder 10, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL.

⁷ "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 14, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; Anthony Obinna, "No Toil Nor Labour Fear, We Shall Not Shun the Fight," p. 2, Box 1, Folder 10, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL.

⁸ "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 4, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC. This quote could be a paraphrase of a recurring statement from Christian that occurs at multiple points throughout the book: "I am come from the City of Destruction, and am going to Mount Zion" (Bunyan 1678, p. 14).

⁹ "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 5, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 6.

¹¹ Anthony Obinna, "No Toil Nor Labour Fear, We Shall Not Shun the Fight," p. 2, Box 1, Folder 10, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL.

¹² Ibid., p. 3; "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 5, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

Nigeria (LeBaron 1996, p. 85). He and his family practiced their new faith on their own terms using the literature they received from their correspondents in Salt Lake City, until President Kimball had his revelation on the priesthood in 1978, and sent LDS missionaries Edwin Q. Cannon and Rendell N. Mabey to establish officially the church in Nigeria. They baptized Obinna and many of his family members on November 21, 1978, and then called many of them to serve as leaders in the newly formed Aboh Branch (Mabey and Allred 1984, p. 47).¹³

While this account of Obinna's journey to Mormonism roots his decision to join the LDS Church in the dreams he claimed to experience, and this story continues to be promoted by faithful Latter-day Saints (e.g., Kline 2019), the narrative is problematic from a historical perspective for at least four reasons. First, the various accounts on which I have based the above reconstruction of Obinna's "conversion" were all recorded in the 1980s—years after Obinna had officially joined the LDS Church—and so they cannot be considered reliable accounts of his "conversion." To the best of my knowledge, no contemporaneous accounts of Obinna's dream experiences survive. Second, all existing records of his dreams were produced for the official church. Obinna published his autobiography in *Ensign*, an LDS periodical, and E. Dale LeBaron, a former president of the LDS South Africa Mission, conducted the oral histories which contain accounts of Obinna's dreams as part of an African oral history program that he spearheaded for the LDS Church during the 1980s.¹⁴ Thus, it is very possible that Obinna sought to describe his "conversion" to Mormonism in a manner that would be palatable to church officials. Third, Obinna's dreams include details about LDS practices that Obinna could not have known before becoming a Latter-day Saint. Obinna, for example, could not have known that LDS temples were restricted to those who have temple recommends or certification, or that those who enter the temple to perform ordinances wear "white, complete white" for every ceremony.¹⁵ Fourth, the dreams contain some Mormon tropes. Obinna, for instance, was guided by a messenger in his dreams just as Joseph Smith was guided by Moroni in his early visions (Taylor 2019, p. 48). Given these issues with the official narrative of Anthony Obinna's "conversion," I provide an alternative social explanation that offers another window onto these historical events and archival sources.

2. Elective Affinities and Religious Change in Southeastern Nigeria

Max Weber popularized the term "elective affinity" in his sociological works on religion. Although Weber never defined the term in his published works, the Marxist sociologist Michael Löwy has argued that an elective affinity "is a process through which two cultural forms, who have certain analogies, intimate kinships or meaning affinities, enter in a relationship of reciprocal attraction and influence" (Löwy 2014, p. 103). The concept of an elective affinity, as defined by Löwy, is useful for explaining why Anthony Obinna was drawn to the LDS Church. An analysis of archival evidence suggests that Anthony Obinna joined the LDS Church because of elective affinities that existed between Mormonism and indigenous Igbo culture, including an attraction between (1) indigenous and Mormon practices of dreaming and prophecy, and between (2) indigenous cultural associations and the LDS Church.

2.1. Dreaming and Prophecy in Southeastern Nigeria

Many of Obinna's family members and acquaintances took his experiences seriously. After he experienced his first dream, Obinna reported that he went to his priest and asked him "how Christ could appear to somebody in a dream."¹⁶ The priest told him that if it were a legitimate vision, he would find out in time: "if it is anything, that it must come to be."¹⁷ Obinna's wife, Fidelia, recalled that

¹³ "Imo State District, Aboh Branch Priesthood Ordinations," Box 1, Folder 4, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL.

¹⁴ On E. Dale LeBaron's African oral history program, see (Hurlbut 2019b).

¹⁵ "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaise, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 15, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

when Obinna began to experience his dreams, she “believed, and followed him.”¹⁸ When Raymond, Anthony’s brother, learned about the dreams, he similarly told Anthony that “[w]e will follow you and do the same thing you are doing.”¹⁹ Not everyone proved to be as accepting as Obinna’s family members. Those acquaintances who doubted the authenticity of Obinna’s visions, however, did so because they thought that Obinna was simply looking for an excuse to join a church that would “yield him money” to improve his socio-economic status, not because they doubted that some Nigerians had the gifts of prophecy.²⁰

These reactions to Obinna’s experiences should not surprise those who are familiar with the religious history of southeastern Nigeria. While Anthony Obinna, his family members and the church leaders frequently switched between describing Obinna’s experiences as “dreams,” “visions,” “prophecy,” and “revelation” in their interviews, both dreaming and prophesy have a historical precedent in southeastern Nigeria.²¹ Archaeologist Ray (1992) has concluded that dreaming has played a strategic political/religious function since at least the turn of the 20th century. Drawing on the interviews of colonial anthropologists with local kings and candidates for kingships, Ray observed that rival aspirants for “offices ranging from that of the periodic bearer of the ‘medicine’ bundle (*Onumonu*) which constitutes a manifestation of a local deity, through the chief earth-priest of certain Igbo towns, to the sacred king of the Umueri Igbo”, used dreams to legitimate their claims between the early 1900s and 1990s (Ray 1992, p. 55). In these formulaic dreams, the dreamer is visited by a messenger, usually “the previous incumbent of the office or a manifestation of the spirit to the service of whom the office is devoted,” who places “the symbols of the office in the hands of the dreamer” (Ray 1992, p. 67). The similarities between Obinna’s own dreams and context and those analyzed by Ray are striking. Not only did Obinna’s dreams contain important Mormon symbols, but he was also visited by someone representing Jesus Christ. In addition, these dreams served as a supernatural justification for Obinna’s decision to leave the Catholic Church and found his own “Mormon” church.²²

Prophecy has also played a central role in the daily life of southeastern Nigeria, as far back as scholars can document Nigerian history, in the form of oracles (Manfredi 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2017). In the precolonial period, dozens of oracles performed important social, political and legal functions in the southeast. These oracles were not prophetic in the common sense of the word, but rather these oracles spoke with “ostensive detachment”, by channeling the voice of the ancestors who laid down what worked in the past in order to guide human action in the future (Boyer 2020). The “most influential and widespread” oracle in precolonial Igboland was the “Long Juju” oracle of the Aro Chukwu (Ottenberg 1958, p. 299). The agents of the “Long Juju” frequently resolved disputes and cases involving witchcraft, theft, murder, sorcery, weak crop yields, illness and infertility (Ottenberg 1958, pp. 302–304). While the “Long Juju” oracle was the most prominent oracle in southeastern Nigeria, it was not the only oracle in the region. Indeed, anthropologist Victor Uchendu has observed

¹⁸ “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Fidelia Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 1, Box 11, Folder 4, African Oral History Project, LTPSC. See also “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Stella Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 1, Box 11, Folder 7, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

¹⁹ “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Raymond Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” pp. 3–4, Box 11, Folder 6, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

²⁰ “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Stella Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 3, Box 11, Folder 7, African Oral History Project, LTPSC. See also “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 23, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

²¹ “Video of Anthony and Fidelia Obinna: Their Trip to the Logan Temple and Surrounding Events,” p. 12, Box 11, Folder 2, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; Interview “Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Fidelia Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 1, Box 11, Folder 4, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Francis Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” pp. 1, 5, 6, Box 11, Folder 5, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Raymond Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 3, Box 11, Folder 6, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Stella Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 1, Box 11, Folder 7, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

²² Latter-day Saints also believe that divine revelation can be communicated to humans through dreams. See, for instance, (Jenkins 2011; Woodger et al. 2019).

that the number of oracles in Igboland “is enormous” (Uchendu 1965, p. 101). During the colonial period, oracles were also documented at Awka, Umunoha, Awgu, Ozuzu Obunka and Eha-Emufu, Enugu and Ezira (Forde and Jones 1950, p. 26; Ottenberg 1958, p. 308). While the British made their best effort to destroy indigenous oracles, with varying levels of success, following the establishment of colonial rule (Afigbo 1971, pp. 8, 13; Ellis 2008, p. 449; Kalu 1977, p. 79; Ottenberg 1958, p. 308), some oracles have persisted to the present day. The most prominent contemporary oracle is the Okija shrine in Anambra State, where Theodore Orji, the former governor of Abia State, famously took an oath in his underwear to repay his political godfather from state coffers (Ellis 2008, p. 447).

While the importance of oracles in southeastern Nigeria diminished following the establishment of colonialism, prophetic churches multiplied throughout the region over the course of the 20th century.²³ The first Christian prophetic movement in the southeast, the Garrick Braide movement, emerged in 1915 after Bishop James Johnson forced the catechist Garrick Braide out of the Niger Delta Pastorate Church, an indigenous Anglican offshoot, because Johnson believed that Braide’s status as a religious prophet threatened to undermine the authority of the church, and he objected to the fact that Braide practiced faith-healing (Ludwig 1993, p. 296). The late 1920s similarly saw the emergence of a Sprit movement in the Ibibio-speaking region that practiced “visioning, prophecy, dreaming and speaking in tongues” (Pratten 2007, p. 54), which eventually congregated around the leadership of Michael Ukpog Udo, Richneal Ekit and Akpan Udofia at the Oberri Okaime Church (Abasiattai 1989; Jones 1989; Pratten 2007). Today, the Oberri Okaime Church remains famous for Medefaidrin, the sacred Ibibio script allegedly revealed to Ukpog and Udofia by the Holy Spirit which they used to reduce the Ibibio language to writing (Adams 1947; Hau 1961). In historical hindsight, the emergence of indigenous movements in the region, dedicated to showcasing the powers of the Spirit, was probably inevitable, as most Nigerians in the early 20th century belonged to Protestant churches that taught their members to interpret the Bible for themselves (Moller 1968, p. 232). Between the 1930s and 1960s, dozens of local prophets continued to establish churches, such as the Spiritual Church of the Lord (Amadi 1982), the Brotherhood of the Cross and Star (Amadi 1982; Mbon 1986a; Mbon 1986b; Mbon 1992) and the Eternal Sacred Order of Cherubim and Serafim (Moller 1968) in the southeast, outside of the control of colonial mission churches. Dozens of Pentecostal prayer houses also blossomed throughout the region in the late 1960s, as the peoples of southeastern Nigeria struggled to cope with the devastating effects of the Nigerian Civil War on their daily lives (Burgess 2008; Daly 2017; Nwaka 2013). The appeal of these churches to Nigerians is obvious. Local prophets provided Nigerians with accessible solutions (i.e., prayer and ritual bodily discipline) to everyday problems, frequently at no cost to the person seeking the services of the prophet (Amadi 1982, pp. 28–31; Mbon 1986a, p. 56).

The emergence of an Igbo schoolteacher as the prophet of a small indigenous church in the early 1970s fits neatly within the longer history of prophetic revival movements in southeastern Nigeria. While the sources agree that Obinna received his first vision in 1965, the rest of his visions occurred sometime between 1967 and 1971, during the Nigerian Civil War.²⁴ It does not seem like too much of a leap to speculate that Obinna’s later visionary experiences were a direct response to the “apocalypse” that many Igbo men and women experienced during the catastrophic war, and that Obinna perceived Mormonism as an alternative and more effective way to remedy the insecurity he experienced during the blockade, as opposed to the other religious movements present in southeastern Nigeria. After receiving what he believed were legitimate visions, it was necessary for Obinna to abandon the Catholic Church, since the historical mission churches did not endorse the practice of prophecy. Like other local prophets who came before him, Obinna established his new church on his own property (Amadi 1982, p. 217; Mbon 1986a, p. 58). Here, he and his followers, composed mostly

²³ For a bibliography of secondary literature on the history of Christianity in Nigeria, see (Hurlbut 2017).

²⁴ Raymond Obinna, [Untitled Document], Folder 1, MS 26912, Obinna Family Papers, 1984–2006, CHL. Albert Obinna, Anthony’s brother, also stated in a recent interview that Anthony’s dreams began to reoccur during the Nigerian Civil War (Kline 2019).

of his family members, worshipped with LDS literature that their interlocutors at church headquarters in Salt Lake City mailed to them, from 1971 until October 1978, when the LDS Church officially opened Nigeria to missionary work following President Kimball's revelation on the priesthood (LDS Church 2013, Official Declaration 2).²⁵ In the LDS Church, Anthony Obinna and his family members found an international mission church that did not shun the gifts of prophecy, but rather was led by a "prophet, seer, and revelator", and his apostles (LDS Church 2013, Section 21: 1; see also Jenkins 2009, p. 11). The LDS Church was a prophetic Western mission church that provided Obinna and his followers with access to the religious practices that many Nigerians had actively embraced for decades, but in the form of a religious institution that possessed greater "Christian respectability" than they could find in any indigenous Pentecostal churches or prayer houses (Daly 2017).²⁶ In short, Nigerian engagement with Mormonism can be viewed in part as a result of a shared affinity for dreaming and prophecy in both Mormon and Igbo culture.

2.2. *Purchasing Culture and Social Prestige in Southeastern Nigeria*

Anthony Obinna's acquisition of Mormonism structurally mirrored how the peoples of southeastern Nigeria had acquired and diffused dozens of indigenous cultural associations since at least the arrival of the Europeans in the 1600s. Anthropologist Ute Röschenthaler has demonstrated that cultural associations could be "disseminated [in southeastern Nigeria] by complex transactions of knowledge and use rights in the intellectual property" (Röschenthaler 2004, p. 242). This is a process that Röschenthaler describes as "purchasing culture" in her 2011 monograph. These institutions were exchanged among regional communities in order to solve specific problems, such as combatting witchcraft or protecting goats from predatory leopards, to build and strengthen relationships with neighboring communities, to forge trade alliances, and to establish spheres of influence during the era of the slave trade and colonialism (Röschenthaler 2004, pp. 242–43, 64; see also Röschenthaler 2011, chp. 4). To acquire an association, community members had to be initiated into the association they were "purchasing." This required, as Röschenthaler has observed, learning "the performance of the society's dances and songs, how to fill the posts, initiate new members, employ them for its aims, as well as to manipulate the objects and supply them with power or agency—in short the knowledge necessary to operate the entire association successfully" (Röschenthaler 2004, p. 266; see also Röschenthaler 2011, chp. 7). Once a community had done this, it earned the right to use and sell the association to other communities for its own gain.

The history of Mormonism, which is, at its core, an initiatory cultural association, in Aboh Mbaïse conforms to the pattern of associational expansion described in Röschenthaler's research. The evidence suggests that Obinna (and other Nigerians) may have perceived Mormonism to be a convenient way to forge a relationship with America in the dynamic postcolonial environment. When Nigerians achieved their political independence, they turned towards the LDS Church (and other American churches) with hope for what the future might bring. In the post-Second World War environment, there was much to be gained from allying oneself with the United States and its institutions. E.I. Okpon, a member of the unofficial "Church of Jesus of Christ of Latter-day Saints" in Uyo, a town in the Efik-speaking region of southeastern Nigeria, wrote to LaMar S. Williams (an employee of the LDS Church's Missionary Department who had been tasked with corresponding with Nigerians) in October that "At this age when Nigeria is attaining Independence, we hope to make it a blessed country—here, we pray for true

²⁵ "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaïse, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 9, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC; "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Raymond Obinna, Aboh Mbaïse, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 4, Box 11, Folder 6, African Oral History Project, LTPSC. See also "Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Stella Obinna, Aboh Mbaïse, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," p. 1, Box 11, Folder 7, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

²⁶ In his oral history, Raymond Obinna, Anthony Obinna's brother, also suggested that he experienced visions and had the ability to heal people through prayer ("Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Raymond Obinna, Aboh Mbaïse, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988," pp. 8–9, Box 11, Folder 6, African Oral History Project, LTPSC).

religion.”²⁷ Williams heard similar comments in 1962: “As a young Independent country our spiritual growth can in no way take a secondary place viz a viz the yearnings for economic, social and mental developments.”²⁸ Anthony Obinna expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote to the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles on September 28, 1978 and begged the Quorum to establish officially the church in Nigeria: “[t]his church if it is established in Nigeria will work wonders.”²⁹ Just as Nigerians bought and sold indigenous cultural agencies as a way to cope with the social transformations that accompanied the trans-Atlantic slave trade and the onset of colonialism, Obinna adapted this indigenous survival strategy to the postcolonial and post-Nigerian Civil War context, by appealing to the LDS Church for affiliation and support.

In her monograph, Röschenenthaler shows that cultural associations and their positions could be owned by individual families. Between 1971 and 1978, Obinna led the unofficial LDS church to the best of his ability using the LDS literature that LDS missionaries, like LaMar Williams, sent to him, and the Obinna family established an intellectual monopoly on Mormon faith in Aboh Mbaize.³⁰ The initial members the unofficial church were Obinna, his wife and his four brothers, and the church was colloquially known throughout the village as “Obinna’s Church.” When the Aboh Branch was officially organized on 21 November 1978, LDS missionaries Rendell Mabey and Edwin Cannon called Obinnas to fill all of the leadership positions in the branch.³¹ Mabey and Cannon called Anthony Obinna to serve as the branch president; Fidelia as relief society president; Francis as Anthony’s first counselor; and Raymond as Anthony’s second counselor.³² By calling Anthony and Fidelia to serve as presidents, they unknowing acceded to the tradition of filling familial associational positions with “the eldest male or female member” (Röschenenthaler 2011, p. 404). When Anthony Obinna was released from the branch presidency in 1983, Raymond Obinna, the eldest Obinna after Anthony, took up the position and served as branch president until March 1990, which continued the local tradition of giving associational positions to the eldest members of the family.³³

Röschenenthaler indicates in her monograph that “acquiring membership in associations contributed to the status of an individual in his or her village” (Röschenenthaler 2011, p. 403). The Obinnas approached their acquisition of Mormonism with this knowledge in mind. When Raymond, for instance, heard about Anthony’s dream, he told Anthony that “this will be a good dream for our family.”³⁴ Over the long term, the acquisition of Mormonism certainly bestowed social prestige on the Obinnas within in the Latter-day Saint community. In 1988, for instance, Francis Obinna, Anthony’s brother, referred to his brother as “the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in West Africa.”³⁵ The preface to Obinna’s brief autobiography, published in the LDS periodical *Ensign* the same year, referred to Anthony Obinna and his wife, Fidelia, as “the first black members of the Church in West Africa” (Obinna 1980).³⁶ In a welcome address for Gordon Hinckley, the 15th president of the LDS Church, during his visit to

²⁷ Okpon, Letter to Williams, 12 October 1960, Folder 2, LaMar S. Williams Papers, CHL.

²⁸ “Welcome Address Presented to Elder Williams and Apostle Tanner of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Salt Lake City Utah on the Occasion of Their Second Missionary Journey to the Group at Aba, Eastern Nigeria, December 1962,” Folder 8, LaMar S. Williams Papers, CHL.

²⁹ Obinna, Letter to the Council of Twelve, 28 September 1978, Box 1, Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ “Imo State District, Aboh Branch Priesthood Ordinations,” Box 1, Folder 4, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL; “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 32, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

³² Raymond Obinna, [Untitled Document], Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

³³ Ibid.; “A Short Note to the African West Area President (President and Sister Snow) By Elder Raymond I. Obinna on His First Visit to the Obinna Family on the 7th of Sept. 2005,” Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

³⁴ Raymond Obinna, [Untitled Document], Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

³⁵ “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Francis Obinna, Aboh Mbaize, Imo State, Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 1, Box 11, Folder 5, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

³⁶ The LDS Church has bestowed the status of “first member” of the church in West Africa on Anthony Obinna, because he was technically the first Nigerian to be baptized into the LDS Church in Nigeria (Mabey and Allred 1984). The title is a misnomer, however. Many Nigerians had embraced the teachings of the LDS Church and organized unofficial Mormon congregations long before Obinna came across the article in *Reader’s Digest*.

southeastern Nigeria for the dedication of the temple in Aba, Raymond, Francis, Vincent, and Albert Obinna referred to the Obinna family as “the pioneer members of the church in Nigeria.”³⁷ Today, it is certainly impossible to read about the global history of the LDS Church without the appearance of the Obinna name (e.g., [Claremont Graduate University 2019](#); [Stevenson 2014](#)).

The Obinna family’s embrace of Mormonism did not just garner them a special status within the global Mormon community; it also bestowed social prestige on them within the broader Igbo community of Imo State. In the early 1980s, the Obinnas drew on their transnational Mormon network to establish “small scale experimental farms” in Aboh Mbaise, where “families are taught modern agricultural methods,” such as soil development using fertilizers tailored to the soil’s specific chemical composition.³⁸ The farm attracted the attention of Ike Nwachukwu, the military governor of Imo State, who paid a visit on 3 July 1984 as part of a government effort to “encourage organizations and private individuals that embark upon meaningful agricultural ventures to assist the government realise its objective in this direction.”³⁹ While it is unclear from archival documentation whether or not the LDS farm at Aboh Mbaise was ultimately a success, the visit of Nwachukwu nevertheless burnished the reputation and social prestige of the Obinnas and their congregation, who he “commended for their effort and urged them not to relent.”⁴⁰

The creation of an experimental farm highlights how the Obinnas attempted to use Mormonism to provide solutions to everyday problems in postcolonial Nigeria, just as Nigerians, for example, had historically purchased the cult agency Obasijom to counteract witchcraft ([Röschenthaler 2004](#), p. 242). The Obinnas tried to use their affiliation with the LDS Church to make unproductive farms productive. This was not the only local problem that the Obinnas endeavored to use Mormonism to solve. Archival records also indicate that Obinna’s congregation wanted to improve medical services in southeastern Nigeria. *The Nigerian Statesman*, for instance, reported on 9 June 1984 that LDS adherents would “embark upon health care delivery projects in the country.”⁴¹ By 19 July 1984, it appears that the Aboh Mbaise Branch had received approval from the local government to open up a health clinic in Enyiogugu.⁴² However, it does not seem that this local healthcare endeavor was ever a major success, because, on 7 September 2005, Raymond Obinna, Francis Obinna and Albert Obinna asked the President of the West Africa Mission for “a cottage hospital to remedy the health situation of our people, which is a very vital problem within us.”⁴³ The problems that afflicted southeastern Nigerian communities following their political independence were the same problems that confronted these communities at the turn of the 21st century, and Nigerians still saw “purchasable” initiatory cultural organizations as the one of the most effective ways to address these everyday problems.

“The greatest aspiration” of the peoples of southeastern Nigeria, Röschenthaler has argued, “was to become the chief of one’s own Ekpe” ([Röschenthaler 2011](#), p. 406), the predominant initiatory society

³⁷ “A Welcome Address Presented by the Obinnas’ Family The Pioneer Members of the Church in Nigeria to the Prophet President Gordon B. Hinckley on His Official Visit to Nigeria for the Dedication of Aba Nigeria Temple,” Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

³⁸ “A Welcome Address to the Military Governor of Imo State Brigadier Ike Nwachukwu on the Occasion of his visit to Umuelem Enyiogugu Experimental Farm of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Nigeria,” Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL. See also Emeka Ohaneche, “Religious Sect to Embark on Agric, Health-Care Delivery,” *Nigerian Statesman*, 9 June 1984, 12, Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL: “A small experimental farm has also been started near the Aboh Mbaise building to train famers in that area in more effective farming methods.”

³⁹ “A Welcome Address to the Military Governor of Imo State Brigadier Ike Nwachukwu on the Occasion of his visit to Umuelem Enyiogugu Experimental Farm of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Nigeria,” Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL; Njoku, Letter to Brooks, 8 June 1974, Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL; Obinna, Letter to [?], 25 June 1984, Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

⁴⁰ “Gov Visits Private Farm,” Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

⁴¹ Emeka Ohaneche, “Religious Sect to Embark on Agric, Health-Care Delivery,” *Nigerian Statesman*, 9 June 1984, 12, Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

⁴² “An Address Presented to the Sole Administrator, Aboh-Mbaise Local Government by the People of Enyiogugu on Thursday, 9 July 1984 at Enyiogugu Central School,” Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

⁴³ Raymond Obinna, Francis Obinna, and Albert Obinna, “A Welcome Address to the Area West Africa President (President and Sister Snow) by the Obinna Family,” 7 September 2005, Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

in southeastern Nigeria. When Anthony Obinna's acquisition of Mormonism is viewed against the Ekpe precedent, the expansion of Mormonism in the southeast conforms to a generalized, centuries-old pattern, by which exotic and prestigious ritual goods have diffused throughout the region. In short, this section has shown that Mormonism expanded in the Ekpe areas not by coincidence, but rather due to structural affinities.

3. Socio-Economic Factors and Religious Change in Southeastern Nigeria

Historians have documented that the peoples of southeastern Nigeria failed to reap any rewards from their "incorporation into the new world economy" following the establishment of colonialism (Ifeka-Moller 1974, pp. 61, 65). This state of affairs was the byproduct of the region's historical and enduring relationship with resource extraction. Since Europeans arrived on the shores of the Bight of Biafra, economic activity in the region has focused on the extraction of local commodities for the global economy. Prior to the onset of colonialism, slave traders extracted human resources from the region (Harris 1942; Northrup 1976, 1979; Nwokeji 2010; Oriji 1986). Following the abolition of the slave trade, economic activity in the region shifted towards the extraction of palm oil, which the British relied on to lubricate the machinery of the industrial revolution (Martin 1988). Since Nigeria achieved its political independence, foreign companies have focused on drilling for "black gold" in the Oil Rivers of the Niger Delta, at a heavy cost to the local environment (Kashi and Watts 2008). This extractive economy incentivized both colonial and postcolonial politicians not to develop the southeastern part of the country. In the absence of meaningful economic development, sufficient material resources and abundant opportunities to access the sources of secular power, the peoples of southeastern Nigeria used religious organizations to facilitate socio-economic mobility and access to resources. As Marxist historian Caroline Ifeka-Moller has convincingly argued, religious change in southeastern Nigeria was facilitated by "the search for some kind of power on the part of people who would not otherwise control significant material resources" (Ifeka-Moller 1974, p. 65).

Anthony Obinna and his congregants believed that their membership in the LDS Church would provide them with access to resources and opportunities that were not accessible to them in indigenous prophetic churches or established mission churches. The magazine offprints about the church, produced in the 1950s, that Nigerians digested during the 1960s indicated as much. In the 1950s, the American media depicted the Latter-day Saints as a "model minority" (Chen and Yorgason 1999). One article, for instance, published in *Reader's Digest* in 1958, described the church in the following manner: "It is a self-reliant society, which distributes the bounty of all its people to any member in need. Mormons do not believe in government doles. A chain of farms, storehouses and granaries keeps on hand—together with what is stored by each family—enough food and clothing to supply every Mormon for a full year. There are opportunities for education equal to one's aptitude and a job worthy of one's ability" (Spence 1958, p. 185). For Nigerians worried about their sense of security during wartime, the LDS Church, as described by the American media, offered a sense of security, opportunity, and access to resources that were not controlled by entrenched patronage networks or the Nigerian government. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Nigerians bombarded the LDS Church (and other American religious organizations, such as the Mennonite Church) with requests for economic relief and religious support (Hurlbut 2020, pp. 44–47; Yoder 2016, pp. 243–46, 257; Yoder 2013, p. 138).

The assumptions that Nigerians made about the LDS Church were not entirely wrong. Some tangible socio-economic and material benefits accompanied the Obinnas' acquisition of Mormonism. First, they gained access to resources that facilitated their ability to practice their new religion. LaMar Williams and other interlocutors at church headquarters in Salt Lake City, for instance, regularly

sent Mormon literature, periodicals and scriptures to the Obinnas.⁴⁴ They not only gained access to religious resources, but also modern technologies. On their experimental farm, for example, the Obinnas deployed cutting-edge agricultural machinery, such as tilling machines, that they had acquired with the assistance of Elliot Brooks, an American LDS missionary based in Owerri, who had the connections and ability to import agricultural equipment from America.⁴⁵ Membership in the LDS Church also provided the Obinnas with the opportunity to pursue advanced education in the United States. Vitalois and Bonaventure Obinna, two sons of Anthony Obinna, for instance, were able to use their connections with the LDS Church to gain admission to Ricks College, a junior college in Rexburg, Idaho, owned by the LDS Church, which transitioned into a four year college and was renamed Brigham Young University, Idaho, in 2001.⁴⁶ After two years at Ricks College, Vitalois went to Utah State University to study business.⁴⁷ Bonaventure followed his brother to Utah State University, and eventually went on to study at Idaho State University.⁴⁸ As these examples demonstrate, by joining the LDS Church, the Obinna family adapted a long-standing regional survival strategy, for achieving socio-economic mobility, to the changing realities of the postcolonial world.

4. Conclusions: Making Sense of Religious Change in Postcolonial Southeastern Nigeria

By placing the story of Anthony Obinna and his family within its larger cultural and historical context, this article offers an alternative social explanation to an important episode in Mormon history. While one historian has argued that the expansion of Mormonism in West Africa, particularly Ghana, is a story that “has the elements of a modern legend, tracing a triumphalist history” (Stevenson 2015, p. 222), this article shows that there was nothing exceptional about Mormon expansion in southeastern Nigeria. Nigerian engagement with Mormonism in Aboh Mbaise, as the example of the Obinna family demonstrates, conformed to broader regional patterns of religious engagement and cultural exchange.

This article also makes two contributions to the literature on religious change in Africa. First, this article rejects the idea that the process of “conversion” entails the replacement of one psychological state by another (cf. Nock 1933, p. 7). The example of Anthony Obinna shows that Nigerians were drawn to the LDS Church because of the elective affinities that existed between indigenous Igbo culture and Mormonism, and that they wanted to make the smallest possible departure from their indigenous culture. Second, this article demonstrates that the emphasis anthropologists and historians of religion have recently placed on the importance of rupture and discontinuity in the process of religious change is overstated (Bruner 2017; Engelke 2004; van de Kamp 2016; Robbins 2004). Outside of a Pentecostal context, cultural endurance and continuity play an important role in shaping not only processes of religious change, but also our understanding of religious “conversion”.

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⁴⁴ Obinna, Letter to Council of Twelve, 28 September 1978, Box 1, Folder 1, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL; Obinna, Letter to Cannon, 10 November 1978, Box 1, Folder, Edwin Q. Cannon Papers, CHL; “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaise, Imo State Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 22, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

⁴⁵ “Gov Visits Private Farm,” Folder 1, Obinna Family Papers, CHL.

⁴⁶ “Interview Between Dale LeBaron and Anthony U. Obinna, Aboh Mbaise, Imo State Nigeria, 4 June 1988,” p. 12, Box 11, Folder 3, African Oral History Project, LTPSC.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 12.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 12.

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