

## Article

# A Divine Rebellion: Indigenous Sacraments among Global “Lamanites”

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**Abstract:** This essay engages with some of the experiences and metaphysics of Indigenous peoples who are members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism/LDS/the Church) by responding to their structural construction as “Lamanites”. Lamanites have been interpreted within Mormonism to be ancestors of various global Indigenous peoples of the “Americas” and “Polynesia”. This essay reveals how contemporary Indigenous agency by presumed descendants of the Lamanites, who embrace both an Indigenous and a Mormon identity, shifts the cosmology of the Church. Interpretations of *The Book of Mormon* that empower contemporary Indigenous agency paradoxically materialize a divinely inspired cultural rebellion within the Church itself. However, this tension that is mediated by Lamanites in the Church is not framed as an exclusive response to the Church itself but, rather, to a larger global hegemony of coloniality to which the Church is subject. These Lamanite worldviews can be understood as a process of restoring ancestral Indigenous sacraments (rituals) through Mormon paradigms, which are found and nurtured in the cracks and fissures of both the material and ontological infrastructure of Mormonism’s dominant paradigm. When Indigenous Mormons assert autonomous authorship of their own cosmogony and metaphysics, the Church beliefs of restoring a ‘primitive Christian church’ and ‘becoming Gods’ is creatively transformed into a more relevant and liberating possibility here and now.

**Keywords:** Indigeneity; ritual; decoloniality; theology; Mormon; Lamanite; race



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## 1. Introduction

This essay is a critical and reflexive undertaking that draws from ethnographic research as an Indigenous person raised, and still within, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormonism/LDS/the Church). This project is influenced by many voices but ultimately is my personal response to the following questions: (1) How does coloniality work through the dominant global paradigm of Mormonism? and (2) what results in the fractures of globalization and Mormonism for Indigenous peoples in the Church who have been conflated together in their construction as “Lamanites”? This is a project of theorizing possibilities that exist for some of these Indigenous Mormons, albeit not a universal or exhaustive declaration. This is certainly not the only option, and many Indigenous peoples are choosing to depart from the Church altogether, while others willingly assimilate into it or choose to participate at varying degrees. This essay works through existing Indigenous Mormon paradigms that broaden possibilities for those who do not wish to depart from it or who cannot because the echoes of their experience in the Church will always remain with them. This essay is thus focused on research, experience, and observations with those who remain, or choose and desire to remain, in the Church. Yet, by not abandoning or rejecting their Indigeneity, these “Lamanites” begin to decenter the mainstream cultural flattening of globalization and how it manifests in the Church. These Indigenous Mormons shift the cosmology of a hegemonic global Mormon paradigm through “divine rebellion”, which reimagines Mormonism to better serve “the Lamanite”. I utilize the tensions between the

seemingly fixed yet fluid identities of being Mormon and Indigenous and their ensnared worldviews as starting points to theorize existing Indigenous Mormon metaphysics.

### 1.1. Introduction: Coloniality, the Church, and Mormonism

My use of the Church and Mormonism in this essay is interchangeable and for the sake of convenience of not having to continuously spell out the entire official name of the Church. I am also doing so in reference to the mainstream and most dominant image, structure, and culture that emanates out of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I refer to the hegemonic globalizing paradigm of Mormonism as the particular dominant reality of the specific socio-cultural expressions within the global Church that reproduces larger systems and ideologies of power, which begin and extend beyond the Church's cultural and institutional boundaries. One such example is coloniality, which several scholars have worked to explain as the matrix of power that has emerged and been imposed globally through conquest since Columbus through several lines of power, such as race, gender, and capitalism (Lugones 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007, 2008; Mignolo 2007; Quijano 2000; Wynter 2003). However, coloniality extends beyond Western colonial administration's boundaries of political economy and identifies long-standing patterns of colonial power materially and ontologically that continue to exist in culture, "common sense", knowledge, and in the global divisions of labor that are both racialized and gendered (Lugones 2007; Maldonado-Torres 2007). Mormonism is subject to these larger paradigms of global hegemonic spiritual and ontological occupation that is derived from coloniality and the modern projects it identifies, including the "enlightenment" of Western modernity, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, racism, anthropocentrism, ableism, and heteropatriarchy, to which my use of the term coloniality refers. It is the specific expression of the Church that reveals coloniality that I refer to as the dominant Mormon paradigm, because, certainly, there is much more than the mainstream hegemonic face of the Church; there are "less actives", invisible nuances in practice, and divergent members, as well as rebellious Indigenous Mormons. Yet, how can this larger social and political power be accounted for within Mormonism's unique expressions of such?

Mormonism has been critically explored by various different Indigenous peoples who are from or now living in the territories within and beyond the settler-colonial nation states of the United States (US) and New Zealand (NZ). They have pointed out racist and colonial legacies within the Church, and some have also pointed to often overlooked sites of Indigenous subversiveness and agency within the Church (Aikau 2012; Baca 2008; Benally 2017; Boxer 2009; Colvin and Brooks 2018; Colvin 2017; King 2019; Murphy 1999; Niumeitolu 2019; 'Ulu'ave-Hafoka 2017). Aikau (2012) suggests, after interrogating what seemed to be an irreconcilable tension between political ethnic identities and Mormon affiliation, that the Church can also be an unexpected ally of Indigenous cultural regeneration. While there are complex formations that play out between constantly fluctuating boundaries of identity and belief, I maintain focus on the tension between them within an ongoing context of global power relations and their particular manifestations through Mormon paradigms. To clarify this approach, I draw a metaphor from the Church's missionary resource *Preach My Gospel* lesson 1, which teaches that a universal apostasy occurred after Christ's crucifixion, which required a restoration via Joseph Smith. In this lesson, missionaries are instructed that teaching the "great apostasy" in contrast to a restoration has the effect of a diamond displayed on black velvet, appearing even more brilliant than if there were no contrasting element. Likewise, drawing from Indigenous Mormon tensions highlighted by Indigenous intellectuals, I position a direct and unreconciling critique of global power relations as they are manifested through hegemonic Mormon paradigms. This is in order for the brilliance of Indigenous creativity and agency to vividly shine in contrast.

### 1.2. Introduction: The Lamanite

The Church as an institution through its canonical text, *The Book of Mormon*, and as a people and religious culture who believe and follow it, have constructed an identity known as “Lamanites”. This term has generally been used as a fluctuating and expanding label for Indigenous peoples or descendants of Indigenous peoples of the “Americas” and “Polynesia” (Johnson 1975). However, it is important to note that of these vast and diverse regions that have been conflated under this category, there are divisions within the paradigms of the Church regarding who is or was a “Lamanite”. Particularly in the case of “Polynesians”, there has been more ambiguity historically, as they have also been labelled as “Nephites” (the lineage of Lehi’s righteous sons in *The Book of Mormon*) (Aikau 2012). For example, I recall moments in my youth with a few Polynesian friends who would claim that they were descendants of Nephites rather than Lamanites but that, because my genealogy was Amerindian, I was undeniably a Lamanite. At times, I experienced these categories being assigned based on one’s self-perception or the perception others had of them, or from a patriarchal blessing (a blessing available to members of the Church that declare a lineage to a tribe of Israel), based on one’s behavior (obedient vs. rebellious) or even because of how dark or light one’s skin color was. I have been using quotes to refer to “Lamanite” for these reasons, in order to demonstrate that it is a contested and controversial category for some members of the Church, but also especially for Indigenous peoples who may also be conflated with the term outside of the Church. Likewise, I have for “Nephite”, “Polynesian”, and “Americas” for similar reasons, to demonstrate their contested use and meaning to name or identify people or places. Henceforward though, my use of the term Lamanite(s) and the like without quotes is for convenience, having stated its contested meaning and significance. In this essay, I use Lamanite(s) as a metaphor for Indigenous peoples of the Americas and Polynesia who are Mormon, albeit as a starting point, to give room for how this identity may expand beyond this geographic, racial, and cultural scope.

Hidden beneath the social construction of Indigenous peoples within Mormonism’s dominant paradigm lies a conscious or unconscious subversive Lamanite spirituality. This spirituality utilizes blind spots in the dominant Mormon paradigm of rigidity and ethnic homogeneity, which lacks an ability to deal with the complexity of Indigenous cultural plurality and mobility. So, while it is important to refer to peoples with the terminology they use to refer to themselves, I use Indigenous as a “term of convenience” to refer to a large group of similarly different people across the globe that share some general cultural values, such as place-based and communal lifeways and a political identity that contests Western colonization and empire (Gordon-Smith 2015). Indigenous is also a debated, contested, and complex term and idea that can refer to legal, racial, and cultural boundaries of colonized peoples in specific places. Indigenous or Indigeneity for me in this paper is larger than a legal definition, however, and must better account for incredibly diverse global realities. Indigeneity points to living ancestral connections that serve as portals beyond the paradigm of coloniality through original people’s ancestral memories of being “human” (Hernandez 2019), whether they are still in a site of creation or have been displaced or have become mobile from that site while still maintaining an Indigenous consciousness and way of being and doing.

My aim in this essay is to reveal how dominant global paradigms of Mormonism are ruptured when Indigenous agency and subversive action recalibrate Church doctrine and teachings into Indigenized theology, philosophy, and metaphysics that better serve the Lamanite *now*, rather than in the hereafter. Lamanites are constructed as descendants of Israel who paradoxically can claim an ancestral authority within Mormonism as “chosen people”, yet who are also in need of “saving from false traditions” inherited from ancestors (Aikau 2012). A critically conscious Lamanite identity in practice can overtly and covertly contest a dominant global spiritual occupation of euroamericentric cultural hegemony as it appears within the Church. A decolonial and Indigenous Zion (divine place or condition) that responds to the Lamanite identity and condition is hastened in the reconceptualizations

of Church beliefs that lead to restorations of ancestral sacraments. These are found in Indigenous meaning making of Mormon teachings, such as restoring a “primitive church and becoming Gods”, which will be explored at the end of this essay. In this essay I use God(s) to refer to a highly potent deity or plurality of supernatural beings, versus god to refer to contested ideas of deity or to supernatural beings that may not necessarily be considered as potent as God(s).

### 1.3. Introduction: Positionality and Outline

My auto-ethnographic insights in this essay draw from a lifetime in the church as Winak, a descendant of highland Mayan peoples (K'iche', Kaqchikel, Tz'utujil, Mam), as well as having Afro, Jewish, Arab, and European lineages. I have also been meaningfully engaged and in relation with Tongan and Oceanic communities for most of my life. I was raised in the west-side shadows of the global Mormon center of Salt Lake City and, through this experience, made relationships with Indigenous peoples of the Moana (Pacific Ocean), Turtle Island, and Abya Yala (North and South America). Additionally, I have now lived in Aotearoa-New Zealand for over six years and also draw from other Lamanite voices with which I have come into relation through travels and research over the years. However, because many diverse ancestral and creole Indigenous traditions are still controversial in our contemporary societies, including their own unique marginalization within Mormonism, I maintain the anonymity of their identities and locations. My interpretation and rendering may also be uncomfortable for some of them as well, who may read it and disagree, or even feel it is too explicitly naming the tensions or practices that I observe to exist. Additionally, while I prefer the abovementioned identities for myself, as a current member of the Church with a complex ontological relationship to it and with many relationships within and through it, this essay is also an exercise in naming and understanding a Lamanite identity that better reflects my experiences, observations, and curiosities.

This essay continues with a review of some of the literature that reveals Indigenous Mormon tensions with power dynamics in the mainstream paradigm of the Church, followed by an exploration of the role of “divine rebelliousness” in the construction of Lamanite identity. This is a blind spot in dominant Mormon paradigms that reveals an incomplete hegemony, where Indigenous epistemic disobedience nurtures Indigenous theological possibilities. Epistemic disobedience shifts the cosmology of the Church in the blind spots where they flourish (Mignolo 2009). Lamanites can draw from belonging to a chosen lineage to claim authority within the Church even if it is not recognized. Lamanites may also find empowerment to confront tensions in the Church from the teachings of *The Book of Mormon* prophet “Samuel the Lamanite”, which can reinforce a sense of righteousness in rejecting the cultural hegemony within dominant Mormon paradigms. Finally, by negotiating these tensions and plural identities, a burgeoning decolonial Indigenous Mormon theology is produced through a Lamanite lens. The traditional Mormon teachings of restoring a “primitive church and becoming Gods” converts into empowered traditions of revitalized or recreated ancestral sacraments. This occurs through the rupturing of a dominant globalizing Mormon paradigm through enacting and animating Indigenous worldviews and temporalities.

## 2. Indigenous Mormon Tensions

The worst sinners according to Jesus are not the harlots and publicans but the religious leaders with their insistence on proper dress and grooming and their careful observance of all the rules and their precious concern for status symbols and their strict legality and their pious patriotism . . . An aggressive and self-righteous bigotry is the best defense against an uneasy conscience.

—Hugh Nibley (as quoted in England 1990)

Indigenous Mormon tensions are found at the imaginary boundaries of the dominant aesthetics of Mormonism, which are reflected in Nibley's critique of it in the quote above; yet, that does not encompass the totality of the Mormon experience but, rather,

a mainstream hegemonic globalizing paradigm of Mormonism. An invisible norm in modern capitalist racialized colonial society is expressed in Mormonism under a different name, “gospel culture”, where it is imagined as a divine standard that is separate from its identifiable worldly location (Benally 2017; Reeve 2015). Modern Western imperial projects that attempt to eradicate “others” take on the expression of gospel culture within dominant Mormon paradigms. Māori scholar Gina Colvin (2017) has critiqued this practice as it is perpetuated in the idea of a “gospel culture”, which she identifies as white capitalist colonial patriarchy, disguised under this term. Colvin (2017) argues that gospel culture as used in Mormon discourse is a Western capture of Mormonism that perpetuates eurocentric norms of “racialized, class-based, privatized capital” that are framed as universally objective and neutral in comparison to “other non-western” realities (p. 63). She critiques that even though most members of the Church reside outside of the Utah-based headquarters, the Church leadership remains essentially the same as it has always been, maintaining its familiar white image and practice of disciplining individuals and groups instead of pursuing structural transformation. Colvin points out that it is predominantly outward looking and not reflexive, where the other is gazed upon, surveyed to ensure it measures up to the assumed divine standard of western/gospel culture. It is a transaction-based relationship that commodifies faith and normalizes white prosperity as a blessing from god rather than a result of racial and colonial violence through theft of land, people, and labor, which continues to be at the expense of oppressed and dehumanized others. Colvin explains that for these reasons gospel culture is not innocent, it is paternalistic, demeaning, and willfully evasive to historical and contemporary power dynamics. It is identifiable “when Māori women are asked to surrender their mana [honor/authority] to white, male US church authorities, US curriculum, and systems that cause Māori people to culturally disappear” (p. 59). It is also “when Māori are made to feel self-conscious or worried for participating in the rites and customs of their people” (p. 59). Colvin adds that, for Indigenous peoples, gospel culture rests on the paradox that

The best it can offer, as currently constituted, is a cultural prosthetic and some temporary redemption and lift for those suffering a loss because of colonization or class inequality. However, gospel culture, as presently understood, will not change the system that got people there in the first place (p. 60).

Colvin concludes that although there is a gospel, there is a multitude of cultures within it, hoping that humility and courage can lead to a greater openness that allows those diverse cultures to exist on their own terms. This means a Zion that does not adhere to being universally measured by the white Utah Mormon standard and its language, clothing, music, worldview, and manner of worship.

An Indigenous Mormon relation of mine who is currently living outside of their ancestral homelands and in an ethnic-based congregation once shared, “they don’t even see us.” As we discussed this further, they commented, “we get away with a lot because of this, but the day one of us gets disciplined [by the church] for being Indigenous [and engaging in our rituals and worldviews] is the day we are no longer invisible.” Diné intellectual Moroni Benally (2017) explains that, for Indigenous Mormons, there are many stories of

Church leaders acting with impunity in order to ensure the social structure of the Church (a structure built and maintained through a politics of whiteness) remains firmly locked . . . Any deviation, through the use of Indigenous spirituality to enhance their views of a gospel doctrine, is repudiated . . . The biopolitical power of the Church attempts to structure and dictate what is and is not culturally appropriate. For example, Church leaders swiftly reprimand Indigenous people for attending native ceremonies, yet participating in these ceremonies expands their understanding of the central core doctrines of eternal connectedness or family (pp. 75–76).

Mormonism inherits Western modernity’s conflict and tension that is full of disdain and fear towards anything “pre-Christian and non-white” (modern Anglocentric/European



/Western). For example, joining a different Christian church is seen as a potential disciplinary issue; however, despite stigmas against pre-Christian Indigenous spirituality, it is often dismissed in a racist manner as “Black/dark magic”. Not only does Mormonism in these instances espouse anti-Black racist language in associating Black and dark with “evil”, but it also does not understand Indigenous worldviews as legitimate world religions, philosophies, or spiritual traditions. This is not to say that these words adequately capture the various Indigenous words and concepts that reflect a variety of differently specific embodiments and realities of being Indigenous, but that “religion, philosophy, spirituality” are often starting points in English to begin to understand them. Therefore, participating in Indigenous metaphysics and worldviews is not structurally potential grounds for discipline at the global level of the Church because they are often relegated to being “only cultural and other” and not a threat to, nor a contestation of the assumed universal truth of Christianity. Yet, in local settings, when lay clergy and congregations are organized or made up of a large specific group of Indigenous peoples, it is not uncommon for some of these practices to be identified and disciplined, despite their lack of canonical or global policy precedence to be so. These disciplined practices are not clearly or specifically mentioned in the euroamericentric context and point of reference to the Church’s canon, so when they are targeted, it is through bias of interpretation at local levels that are not standardized global practices.

Religion is not and never has been apolitical, and much of its power comes from its political identity at the global level and its interpretation at a local level. Thus, a belief in *The Book of Mormon*, for example, as a literal history of ancient America is absolutely political in its implications for both the interpretation and justification of our present-day practice and interpretation of our social, cultural, and political realities and historical genealogy. This has direct consequences on contemporary engagement with and treatment and perspectives of Indigenous peoples generally and Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island and Abya Yala specifically. Hence, Mormonism expresses specific socio-cultural nuances, expressions, and systems that perpetuate, reflect, or model larger structures of power beyond the Church’s boundaries, such as white normativity (supremacy, euroamericentrism), racism, colonialism, imperialism, capitalism, ableism, and heteropatriarchy. Lamanites in the Church provide a necessary and different option as living Indigenous Mormons who “speak from the dust” of unreconciled pasts that lead towards a Zion (material and ontological liberation of the oppressed through a Mormon lens) that must be realized here and now.

### 3. Epistemic Disobedience and Subversive Spiritualities

In this section, I explore how subversive spiritualities exist within the Church despite attempts to erase them. Epistemic disobedience is a borrowed concept from academia that I am inviting into this project to give language to Lamanite subversions that shift the dominant cosmology of the church. [Mignolo \(2009\)](#) speaks of the Western academic canon when he suggests that in order to find decolonial options, we must de-link from the dominant geographies of reason. He argues that those who have ceased attempts to claim recognition or inclusion are “engaging in epistemic disobedience and de-linking from the magic of the western idea of modernity, ideals of humanity and promises of economic growth and financial prosperity” (prosperity doctrines) (p. 3). He adds that “cosmology” is a super frame or governing worldview, which in

The history of knowledge-making in modern Western history from the Renaissance on will have, then, theology and philosophy-science as the two cosmological frames, competing with each other at one level, but collaborating with each other when the matter is to disqualify forms of knowledge beyond these two frames (p. 6).

He concludes that those who assert their subjectivity in using tools that may have originally been used to objectify or subalternize them, transform the purpose of the tools in this process. This results in de-linking towards decoloniality by shifting the “geography of reason” or the dominant cosmology to serve the subaltern instead (p. 14). The category

of being or ontology in Western philosophy is problematic in that it has not included the “primitive/racialized/colonized others” that must also be remade through decoloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2007; Richardson 2012). Only when racialized/colonized others are not excluded from “being” does a larger ontological shift occur. So, what do these theoretical positions look like or mean in a Mormon context?

Lamanites are objects that are created in Mormon paradigms and are likewise in need of saving from themselves because they have inherited “corrupted traditions of their fathers”. I propose, however, that an active Lamanite subjectivity shifts the cosmology and reason of dominant global Mormon frames. When Lamanites speak for themselves, they are no longer obeying those who seek to universally and exclusively control their identity and genealogy but, instead, use Mormonism for their needs and purposes as Indigenous peoples (Murphy 2019). For example, in a conversation with a fellow Lamanite a few years ago, the topic of regular scripture study came up. This relation shared with me that they maintained the regiment and discipline of regular scripture study having been socialized in the Church to do so. However, they had come to realize that, while many years had passed doing so, they had come to know less about their own Indigenous knowledge. This person decided to keep the habit but shift the topic of study and then began to study the “sacred texts” of their ancestors instead, which included their ancestral stories, songs, rituals, manner of prayer, and even written texts. There are several others who, in similar fashion, have used practices that they learned in the Church, but reclaimed their purpose and, in doing so, expanded their worldviews and understandings (Tecun and Siu’ulua 2020).

In another conversation, some fellow Lamanites shared that the Church was a good step for people who had forgotten their ancestral ways; it offered people structure for prayer and study, giving them community and ritual. They added, however, that this is the severing point for the Indigenous peoples who already have this, with one sharing that “we don’t need organized religion to have order.” In fact, because the Church structure often severs Indigenous peoples from already-living practices, those who I focus on in this paper are those who have not abandoned them or have returned to them. Mormonism’s lack of ability to deal with these holistic and complex Indigenous ontologies is a blind spot where Lamanite theologies flourish. While the Lamanite identity has been both elevated in being named and chosen, it is also an oppressed one in needing to be saved (Aikau 2012). A Mormon paradox for Indigenous peoples is found in the negotiation of being chosen yet inheritors of false traditions of Lamanite fathers as per *The Book of Mormon* (e.g., Indigenous cultural practices perceived or explicitly identified as being in opposition to the Church’s teachings/culture).

The subversive spiritualities found through epistemic disobedience to dominant Mormon paradigms are found in what Benally (2017) argued is a “passive non-compliance”, a key mode of resistance and simultaneous act of faith for Indigenous peoples in the Church. Benally explains that

The problem is that the Utah Church believes that their interpretations and stories of the Church are widely shared by diverse communities, that baptism into the Church is an agreement of sorts that the way that Utah thinks about the faith is the way everyone should think about the faith, regardless of their race, ethnicity, and language. But this is simply not so. Our socialization is not incidental to how we experience and interpret faith, it is central. Those of us in the borderlands have been told repeatedly over the years to be Mormon before anything else. This places a terrible burden on us to become something we are not and can never be. The best we can do is pretend when Mormon missionaries and General Authorities come by to survey the cultural perimeters (p. 62).

Benally goes on to explain that many Indigenous folks still engage and participate in their own rituals and ceremonies because they expand Mormon meanings. He concludes that it would benefit the Church to have a more nuanced understanding of how Indigenous worldviews can complement and complete their theology rather than rejecting and reconfiguring them.

The language I use and the manner in which I have framed this analysis is likely both unsettling and problematic for some, and so, I must also address some of the coded ways in which Lamanites do this consciously or subconsciously. However, I do so carefully with the purpose of signaling to the Indigenous realms of Mormonism that exist beyond its current ontological limits and not as a document of surveillance of the Mormon periphery. Lamanites do not often refer to Indigenous spirituality or metaphysics explicitly; instead, they may refer to it simply as culture (e.g., because they are not recognized as legitimate worldviews or used as strategic subversions). This is a blind spot where one can exist as an Indigenous Mormon person outside of a dominant Mormon paradigm. Sometimes, Lamanites do this knowingly, but many times, in my experience, it is subversive even to themselves. Indigeneity may be present in any location, be it captured in church, state, or school settings, but it is still often hidden because of colonial attempts at erasure. [Shore \(2014\)](#) adds an important insight to consider, however, in the possibilities of bringing forth such hidden histories and knowledge that have been suppressed by ideologies of inferiority (e.g., relegated as “heathen/pagan”). He says of Indigenous Sāmoan religion and cosmology that

The traditional landscape of pre-Christian institutions like the pantheon of gods and demons, forms of worship or pre-Christian Samoan cosmology can be altered in a couple of generations and yet still leave behind strong echoes of the buried concepts that originally supported them (p. 132).

The echoes of past practices and worldviews often remain in shapeshifted forms or, through syncretism, merged with foreign-introduced expressions and beliefs.

There is an old poster that I remember seeing in the seminary building of my youth that read “Popularity: It’s overrated. Sometimes the crowd is just plain wrong.” The poster is supposed to be set in ancient America yet has what appears to me to be a European castle wall with Roman-looking soldiers firing their arrows at Samuel the Lamanite (who I will discuss later in this paper) who is preaching to them. Rethinking the binary logic within a dominant Mormon paradigm that points to that which is outside of the church as what is popular, from the lens of a Lamanite, this poster’s message applies to its makers instead, referring to mainstream Mormonism. The dominant global Mormon paradigm is what is visibly popular in the Church, be its ideology, iconography, language, sound, leadership, or membership. By shifting the cosmology through epistemic disobedience, pointing to the original colonizing intent of dominant Mormon propaganda, the counsel becomes relevant to the Lamanite, as the popular crowd is revealed to be the dominant expressions of Mormonism itself.

[Colvin \(2017\)](#) offers an example of epistemically disobedient ruptures in dominant Mormon paradigms from a Māori perspective, explaining that

When missionaries said, ‘Look to the life of Jesus as your exemplar,’

Pākehā [New Zealander of European descent] said, ‘Jesus was kind to everyone; I should be kind too.’

Māori said, ‘Jesus was a brown, indigenous person who was colonized like me. His politics were radical and beautiful and compassionately fierce. I should do what he did so that I’m not captured by colonial oppression like Jerusalem’s religious elites’ (p. 62).

His Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi Efi of Sāmoa has proposed that ancient religious culture is worthwhile and worth remembering and taking pride in. He believes that the religion of Sāmoa’s forebears was also invested with wisdom and divinity, stating, “I cannot bring myself to believe that my Christian God, a loving God, didn’t speak or connect with my people for all those 3000-odd years before Christianity came to Samoa” ([Tui Atua 2014](#), p. 58). In this same spirit, Lamanite spiritualities that exist in the subversive peripheries of the margins of Mormonism are nurtured and expand as they shift towards an Indigenous cosmology that says, “the Gods and traditions of our ancestors are no more



corrupt or false than yours, and are imbued with the same origins of inspiration as any other people.”

#### 4. Lessons from Samuel the Lamanite

The Book of Mormon functions as both a tool of invasion and replacement, but also, strangely, as an instrument of resistance against the Church itself.

—Moroni [Benally](#) (2017, p. 74)

If the popular crowd is the global forms of power (symbolic Babylon) that are expressed uniquely within Mormonism, then disobedience and rebellion to Babylon’s system is a liberating and necessary move towards Zion. In shifting the cosmology through epistemic disobedience, it is as if to accept and lay claim to the legacy of Lamanite rebelliousness and flip it. From a contemporary Lamanite perspective, rebelliousness and disobedience decenter the dominant Mormon center of globalization and euroamericentric hegemony. The 1879 version of *The Book of Mormon* referred to “one mighty among them” that would come who was identified as an “Indian prophet” in the footnotes for 2 Nephi 3:24. The prophet Samuel the Lamanite in *The Book of Mormon* offers a critically relevant story when it pivots towards the living reality of Indigenous peoples in the Church. Through critique of dominant Mormon paradigms and respecting one’s own ancestral sacred texts, many American Indian Mormons have demonstrated a nuanced Indigenous experience in the Church ([Baca](#) 2018; [Boxer](#) 2018; [Murphy](#) 2018, 2019). [Macdonald](#) (2019) explains how cosmogony is used by many anthropologists to explain how Indigenous people creatively and critically reconcile their origins from both ancestral cosmologies and Christianity. Macdonald emphasizes, however, that despite ancestral cosmologies surviving Christianity, they do so having been transformed through “diabolisation,” which is to say that they are subordinated in a hierarchy of values where Christian benevolence reigns supreme over “evil” traditions. Mormon theology fuels this in its own way as it relates to Indigenous peoples with a rhetoric that Lamanites are “fallen” because of the “false traditions of their fathers.” Yet, here lies a paradox when Indigenous peoples who are also Mormon rebel against this narrative of their ancestors and instead have an unapologetic empowered view of their traditions. Samuel the Lamanite being used as a metaphor for contemporary Indigenous Mormons thus becomes a theological basis for an identity that is in opposition to the Church yet divinely supported to be so.

In *The Book of Mormon*, Samuel the Lamanite appears to preach to the Nephites who descend from the “fair skinned obedient” sons of Lehi. This story is made relevant in our day by asking, who are the Nephites in this setting? The Nephites were the industrial people, a non-coincidental parallel to 19th-century white US settler society. In *The Book of Mormon*, Nephites are those with the “truth” and the “official” records; in fact, at the time of Samuel the Lamanite, they also had a “head of their church,” a prophet named after the original Nephi. The Nephites can be symbolically interpreted as the mainstream members and leaders of the Church, yet they were being preached to by an outside dark skinned Lamanite messenger from the Gods. Samuel the Lamanite rebukes them for their riches and calls them to repent, while also prophesying using astronomical symbols. The text suggests that there is more than one prophet at a time, and they could be antagonistic to one another because one preached to the other and the mainstream prophet ignored it. This becomes of paramount importance for the Lamanite because the prophet Nephi was complicit in not only ignoring Samuel the Lamanite’s message, but also to the attempts of the Nephites to kill him by shooting arrows and stones at him—but to no avail. When Samuel the Lamanite completed his prophesying and preaching, he disappeared and was not heard of again in *The Book of Mormon* text until, according to its chronology, a resurrected Jesus Christ is claimed to have appeared years later. The dialogue between Christ, Nephi, and “ancient American” disciples in the text goes as follows. Jesus says that he had commanded Samuel to teach what he did and asked them if they were not aware of it, to which they respond that yes, Samuel had done so and his words were fulfilled. Then in 3 Nephi 11:11 of *The Book of Mormon*, Christ says “How be it that ye have not written this thing”, and then, verse

13 states “Jesus commanded that it should be written”. The members (Nephites) and the leaders (Nephi) heard Samuel’s words, witnessed their fulfillment, and willfully did not write this record until they were commanded by Jesus to do so.

Samuel the Lamanite is found in the many Indigenous Mormons who use extra-canonical texts to add to an expanding worldview, which includes the oral, carved, painted, woven, tattooed, and written sacred stories of the ancestors of the Americas and Polynesia. Samuel the Lamanite is found in the Indigenous rituals that are practiced and maintained albeit veiled as culture by Mormons who fulfill multiple spiritual responsibilities across worldviews, which I will discuss further later in this essay. Samuel the Lamanite is found in the Indigenous Mormons who shift the temporality of dominant Mormon paradigms, which say they must wait for their reward in heaven while they suffer now. Instead, these Indigenous Mormons practice disobedience to the construction of time that says there is a linear end point for your “mansions above”, which is a point of exploitation for dark-skinned Lamanites to not rise up against “white and delightful” gentiles who benefit from this power relationship. A Lamanite perspective is divinely supported not only through lessons from the prophet outside of the mainstream like Samuel the Lamanite, but also through prophecies of rising up and vexing racialized colonial society (gentiles) and reclaiming lands of inheritance (#landback; Doctrine and Covenants 87:4–5; Book of Mormon, 3 Nephi). Lamanites who practice rebellion to the globalizing center of Mormonism do not wait for a linear point in time that is not determined by them; they make the time of their liberation now. For example, they take the gospel into their own hands as they continue to maintain or reconnect with their Indigenous rituals. Lamanites use both the material and social infrastructure of the Church for their own purposes, realizing a sense of urgency that no longer requires waiting for permission from “men”. A global Lamanite perspective that puts this into action ruptures attempts to control and discipline Indigeneity, collapsing the margins that are invisibly and subversively also in the center. While there are many in the margins who seek recognition, such as being tokenized for their assimilation, the disobedient Lamanite does not, thus opening up a paradigm of Indigenous Mormonism.

## 5. Restoring a Primitive Church and Becoming Gods

In shifting the cosmology through a Lamanite lens, the Lamanite characteristics from *The Book of Mormon* of being “dark skinned, non-industrial, murmuring, lazy, and disobedient” become praiseworthy traits because they are in relation to an oppressive power dynamic and system. Just as the outlaw can become a hero when contesting an unjust law, so does the Lamanite become empowered by rejecting the control and power of Mormonism’s dominant paradigm. Mormonism has constructed Indigenous racialized others in its midst and within particular geographic regions as Lamanites; yet, by reconstructing the Lamanite as a metaphor for those people, the “gospel culture” can be transformed into Indigenous knowledge and culture. The Indigenous peoples I have encountered and related with over the years who make these claims are practicing an epistemic disobedience to the original construct of being a Lamanite. Instead, they remember their culture and ancestry as the truth they must follow and thus adopt Mormon language such as “gospel” at times to do so subversively. This is a demonstration of an unapologetic Indigenous identity that is also Mormon, which also has an empowered view of the traditions of one’s ancestors, mothers, and fathers to recreate the meaning of Mormon rhetoric. This reversal is an active niche within groups of Lamanites, where a decentered Mormonism takes place and an Indigenous theology emerges despite globalizing attempts otherwise. The remainder of this essay will explore two ideas that are practiced in doing so. The first is the remaking of the use of the “Primitive Church” within Mormon rhetoric, and the other, an Indigenous interpretation of the Mormon doctrine of “becoming Gods”.

The Mormon narrative of restoring the “primitive church of Christ” refers to an imagined pre-Christian, Christian organization at the time of Jesus. Whereas here I suggest that in order to reflect an Indigenous Mormonism that I have already observed being

practiced by some Lamanites, this is better expressed with the play on words of “primitive”. While “primitive” is a problematic word and concept that has been used as a derogatory and dehumanizing term for Indigenous and racialized others in racist colonial societies, I suggest that the meaning can also be flipped in a Lamanite context, taking ownership of the term, such as the use of Lamanite throughout this paper. This is similar to what other groups have done in taking derogatory terms and flipping their use and meaning within the context and exclusive use of their communities. This of course is not without controversy or conflict; but for the sake of exploring possibilities, my question in this line of inquiry is the following: What can it mean to be a “born again primitive” or restore a “primitive church” in Indigenous Mormonism? What happens when one shifts the notion of primitive from its derogatory use in colonial societies yet along the lines of its Mormon use to claim a restored primitive Christianity? Instead, this can be used to look towards original teachings and new creations of Indigenous traditions. If the claims of *The Book of Mormon* are at the very least believed to be true, be it interpreted literally or metaphorically, Christ visited ancient people in the Americas and elsewhere. I will argue here that Christ is a metaphor for radical love and knowledge, among other things, and that Christ in this sense was present everywhere, thus among those considered to be the ancestors of today’s Lamanites. The narrative of Lamanites being preserved yet fallen because of the “false traditions of their fathers” is thus contested and transformed within Mormon paradigms. This act questions and challenges the internal messengers of Mormonism who have said and continue to say, “we are going to tell you who you and your ancestors are, and what your place within this world is”. Lamanite’s challenge this sentiment by instead saying that, “our traditions are also praiseworthy and not any more corrupt than yours”, asserting that Lamanites know who they are without the colonial baggage of Mormon cultural reconfiguration.

If restoring the “Primitive Church” can come to mean revitalizing and sustaining living Indigenous knowledges and their “goodness”—knowledge, lessons on peace, conflict resolution, ecological sustainability, relational ethics, and more—then, what is required is a restoration of ancestral sacraments beyond any one group’s exclusive constructs. Indigenous ritual knowledge, for example, where the authority lies in specific Indigenous communities and their ritual lineages (or however they organize ceremonies and protocol), finds a potential similarity to Mormon temple ceremonies when it comes to having restrictions and requirements by not just being open to anyone at any time. They are also subject to protocols of preparation and authority, however, that is specifically determined by context and community in order to administer them. Indigenous sacred sites would also need to be protected and supported according to Lamanite authorities for the restoration of a “Primitive Church” to be fulfilled. While the issue of territory reveals different relationships to place, what I have witnessed by the specific Lamanite consciousness to which I refer in this essay is different kinds of diverse peoples who identify as Indigenous at a global, regional, creole, and local level who have mobilized in support of local Indigenous peoples where they reside. The broad category of Lamanites who in these settings support those who are culturally elders in place (local Indigenous peoples) whether directly or through global solidarity from afar, are the examples to which I am pointing as a lead towards restoring a “Primitive Church” that upholds sacred sites.

There is another transformation that occurs through the formation of Indigenous theology that ruptures globalizing Mormonism, which is based in another Mormon belief that one day you can become a god. Drawing from different Indigenous rituals in which I have participated or observed over the years and across different countries and continents, one thing has been prominent in my view and that is the active role one can take in some rituals that move you beyond proxy mediations. For example, as a Mormon, one can go to participate in the weekly ordinance of the sacrament, which is symbolically taking on the sacrifice of a deity (Jesus Christ) within the pantheon of Mormon gods (e.g., Heavenly Father, Holy Ghost, angels, etc.) through ritual cannibalism. The sacrament (ritual cannibalism) is a sacred weekly ordinance where one can align themselves with the sacrifice of

Jesus Christ that was made on their behalf in proxy for oneself. This is done through the emblems of Christ's blood and body that have a redeemable quality to renew baptismal covenants (commitments made during baptism) when one consumes them symbolically as they are presented as sanctified and set apart bread and water. By shifting to Indigenous perspectives, a useful quote to think about comes from the public anthropologist Wade Davis (2003), who stated that "what makes Voodoo so interesting is that it's the living relationship between the living and the dead . . . That's why the Voodooists like to say 'you white people go to church and speak about God. We dance in the temple and become God'." Similar to the voodoo acolyte within Vodou, which is an Afro-diasporic and ancestral religion and Indigenous worldview, Lamanite traditions have similar Indigenous customs where one becomes God now. For example, in both my ancestral traditions as W̱inak (Mayan) and among living people of the Moana (Oceania), where I reside and do much of my academic work, there is an idea and practice of embodying ancestors through names. For example, chiefly persons in both of those contexts carry ancestral titles and authorities and thus become the ancestor themselves when taking upon this new name. Ancestral names or titles are often performed in rituals by standing in for the ancestor within, representing them now and being them in that moment, a proxy that makes one the ancestor/God themselves instead of God acting in proxy for you.

This interpretation of what it might mean to become a god from an Indigenous Mormon lens is the moment where modern time and space is collapsed, and therefore, you are the past and the future in the present. Thus, you are the God of tomorrow connected with the God of yesterday in the present moment. Instead of a symbolic medium or intermediary, you yourself are the potential God. This is what Joseph Campbell (1988) referred to as the eternal principle (present), which can take place now in the transcendent moments of rituals. Indigenous concepts of time are what expand the possible interpretation and meaning of the doctrine of becoming gods. Māhina (2010) and Ka'ili (2017) explain that people of the Moana "walk backwards into the future", a stark contrast to modern colonial capitalist time. Indigenous rituals that have been relegated as cultural identities rather than robust and complex religions or worldviews in and of themselves are often about collapsing time through creative process. One recognizes the God within themselves from whom they descend and the potential God in others. In some Indigenous rituals, one metaphorically dies and is resurrected, while in others, one physically goes through sacrifices that can cause bleeding or excruciating pain, and by overcoming this, one becomes God now, for a moment. The significance is in its present occurrence and temporal-spatial transcendence through liminality, rather than the future potential of becoming a God that is hoped to take place (Turner 1969).

There is a critique of worldly time found within Indigenous rituals because one's potential as God can no longer exist in some future point in linear time. When one is forced into a linear temporal paradigm, one is exploitable by some who act as if they are god and yet do not recognize or see the divine in you. The mantra of subjugation is, "suffer your tribulations now, suffer your trials, you'll be rewarded later on"; meanwhile, those who say it are often privileged or hope to be, despite the price of exploitation. By challenging this notion through Indigenous rituals and Indigenous time, the Lamanites who remember and practice the restoration of ancestral sacraments learn to say no to being put behind. If the eternal present is now and we walk backwards into the future, there is no exclusive linear time, and the reward and liberation can happen here and now. Lamanites who engage in multiple ontologies and worldviews find complementarity and expansive possibilities of "gospel truths" and experiences, and by doing so and remaining engaged in Mormonism, they shift the cosmology of the gospel and reclaim their place. The question turns to the Nephites of today: Will they once again continue to shoot at Samuel the Lamanite and ignore their teachings and warnings?

## 6. Conclusions

The euroamericanism and coloniality expressed through a dominant global Mormon paradigm is argued to have blind spots where subversive spiritualities exist and an Indigenous Mormonism is nurtured. A globalizing Mormonism is ruptured by Indigenous agency, which shifts the purpose and function of the Church for local communities where Indigenous interpretations and purposes can emerge. The Mormon lineage of Lehi provides ancestral authority for Lamanites who are constructed as chosen descendants of *The Book of Mormon* who can contest the Western spiritual occupation of a Zion that better serves the Lamanite. By reconstructing the Lamanite as a metaphor of Indigeneity and through Indigenous critique of Mormon experience, an empowered identity of accepting rebellious attributes of the Lamanite ruptures Mormonism's dominant paradigm. Rebelliousness becomes necessary for the global body of the Church if it hopes to dismantle oppressive powers and overcome the reproduction of larger global power dynamics within. Through autonomous assertions of interpretation and divine authority and rebellion, a return to a "Primitive Church" can take on new meanings, as can "becoming Gods", where it can be materialized in the present by and for Indigenous Mormon peoples through their own rituals.

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