

Two films about Mormons in Africa

By [Margaret Blair Young](#)

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A decade ago, I was writing historical novels about black Latter-day Saints history. I was contextualizing the death of Mary Ann Adams Abel, wife of black LDS priest (ordained by Joseph Smith) Elijah Abel, and reading newspapers of the day. What stories were the people who attended Mary Ann's funeral reading? The most interesting article (for me) was one published in the *Deseret Weekly News* on December 5, 1877—a week after Mary Ann's death.

Stanley . . . has furnished the world with a complete map . . . of the Congo. . . . A fresh field is opened to missionary labor. The benighted tribes of the wilds of Africa will not long be left without the knowledge of the world's Redeemer.

“Stanley” refers to Henry Stanley. Earlier that same year, [Stanley had written](#), “This is a blood-thirsty world, and for the first time, we feel that we hate the filthy, rapacious ghouls who live here.”

Twenty years later, Joseph Conrad would be in the Congo, and would create the character of Kurtz, who writes in his journal's margin, “Exterminate all the brutes!”

In 19th-century Utah, Africa was a mystery, but the belief in humanity's divine nature apparently persuaded Mormons that even “benighted” Africans could be converted. There were already missionaries in South Africa—that mission opened in 1853—though the black population was not sought out.

The Victorian view of African blacks held them as almost a different species than whites. In LDS conversations and sermons of that day, speculations were repeated that some spirits had been “neutral” or “less valiant” in a pre-mortal life and were identified by black skin, or that they were judged according to their conduct in that other world and sent either to “advantages” if they had been faithful or to “disadvantages” if they had been less faithful. The predominant idea in the LDS Church was that “advantages” included birth into comfort and wealth.

The LDS restriction barring men of African descent from priesthood ordination, and blacks of either gender from entry into Mormon temples, seemed to make those racist speculations official doctrine.

The restrictions were overturned in 1978, but not until 2014 did the LDS Church [officially disavow](#) the folklore that blacks bore the “curse of Cain” or that they had somehow misbehaved in a pre-mortal life.

With the change in 1978, Mormon missionaries began serving in other African nations besides South Africa. At present, there are Mormon temples in Nigeria and Ghana, one in South Africa with another one planned there, and one scheduled to be built in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The past restriction does still affect black converts to the faith, once they read statements of past leaders. Nonetheless, Mormonism is a thriving religion in Africa, and Mormon art is beginning to affect that.

Today Garrett Batty premieres [his film](#) *Freetown*, about African LDS missionaries escaping a civil war in Liberia and finding refuge in Freetown, Sierra Leone. I am in the process of [making a film](#) about a culture clash between missionaries (African and Anglo) serving in the DR Congo mission. My film, *Heart of Africa*, a feature, is based on experiences of missionaries I corresponded with from 2008 to 2011, including Americans, Canadians, Congolese, and Zambians.

Past teachings come up in *Heart of Africa*, but they are not the focus. The two protagonists, one a Congolese former revolutionary and the other a naïve kid from Idaho who has never seen black people, must work together. Neither has a choice in the matter.

Following are snippets of e-mails from an Anglo missionary and from a Congolese former revolutionary—the truth behind my fiction.

Anglo:

My [Congolese] companion started saying how all us white missionaries were failures, did things wrong, didn't baptize, and how the African missionaries were real missionaries. He just kept attacking and attacking. . . . I was so angry that I wanted to attack back. And this thought started in my head: "African missionaries are bad." My mind froze. I realized that something had gone

HORRIBLY WRONG. I was starting to think like a racist. It terrified me.

One of that young man's companions had a past which would challenge his working with a white companion:

Before I joined the Church, I was in a revolutionary group. One of the purposes of this [group] was to teach us to abandon the religious system brought by white men. . . . All of this was initiated by an African ex-Catholic priest who . . . was building hate in us.

Of course, each must transcend his prejudice before they can work effectively together as equals.

Heart of Africa and *Freetown* mark the challenges we Mormons are confronting today, and the ways we are meeting the challenges. Both films will matter in the history of the Latter-day Saints movement.

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