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Mormon Missionary Makeup Tutorials: Bodily Expressions of Cosmic Ideas

By Alexa Himonas

*Written for Jonathon Stockdale's class
The Body in Comparative Religions, spring 2016*

In an evening of religion research, I come across the following make-up advice: “Blush adds color to your cheeks and helps define your cheekbones. To apply, smile naturally and dust the blush brush on the apples of your cheeks. Then blend a little more color up near your hairline and back down again.”¹ I did not find this quote from a “study break” tab opened to various make-up blogs, but from the official site of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS Church). The advice is for female missionaries from the LDS Church, and is listed with other topics: suggested hair styles for women, accessories for men, and guidelines for all aspects of bodily adornment. Presented with these specific guidelines, as official representatives of the LDS Church, missionary bodies provide an excellent case study to analyze Mary Douglas’ idea that “ideas about the cosmos are expressed through the medium of the body.”² To examine how this idea is applied to missionary bodies, I will first analyze Talal Asad’s work, “Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body.” I will then apply Asad’s theory and Douglas’ quote to the bodies of missionaries from the LDS Church. My argument is that applying Douglas’ quote to missionary bodies through Asad’s theory allows for analysis that moves beyond a mind/body dualism that often exists in symbolic interpretations of bodies, and reveals a gendered theology and historical tensions between assimilation and exclusion in the LDS Church.

¹Missionary, Makeup Styles, Step 2: Powder/Blush, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://missionary.lds.org/clothing/sister/grooming/demo/skin?lang=eng>.

² Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Explorations in Cosmology* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982 [1970]).

Douglas' idea about the body as a vehicle for expressing ideas often leads to interpretations of bodies as purely symbolic, suggesting a clear divide between the mind and body. Asad argues for anthropology to move away from the symbolism suggested by Douglas's quote, but his work, "Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body," may provide a framework allowing for deeper interpretations of symbolism. Asad argues that the body should be seen as "self-developable" instead of as a "passive recipient of 'cultural imprints.'"³ The body is not just a silent product of culture, but is both "a technical object, and at the same time technical means,"⁴ a tool working *with* the human mind. Asad gives an example of a piano player, whose body should be analyzed through the way their "*practiced hands* remember and play the music being performed."⁵ Following Mauss, this is what Asad would call an apt behavior, and it is these embodied behaviors that Asad calls attention to. This gives some opportunities for cultural assessment that is not discussed by most other anthropologists. While some bodies are better or more practiced at different skills, like piano, the way a society values and supports these skills speaks to important cultural ideas about the cosmos. Although analyzing embodied behaviors as symbols can lend support to, or provide an example of Douglas's thesis, it is somewhat of a misappropriation of Asad's argument, as he wants to move away from these symbolic interpretations.

Asad's argument provides more agency for individuals in a culture as well as many other theories that view the body as symbolic. Bodies are seen as teachable, they are products not only of culture but of what has been experienced and taught to the body. The symbols on the body are

³ Talal Asad, "Remarks on the Anthropology of the Body," in *Religion and the Body*, Sarah Coakley, editor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 47.

⁴ Ibid. 47.

⁵ Ibid. 47.

important, but what is done with bodies matters as well.⁶ Ideas about the cosmos can still be taken from these embodied actions, as the learned behaviors and cultivated aptitudes of a given person in a culture reveal a cultural cosmology. Asad also argues for a “‘mindful body’ that will replace the Cartesian dualisms,”⁷ providing an opportunity for deeper analysis. The analysis Asad argues for, getting beyond dualism and studies the practiced body, can provide an even deeper understanding of a culture’s cosmological structure by not only analyzing bodily symbols, but also by analyzing the practiced body and mental motivations for those bodily practices. Thus cultures can be better understood by analyzing the body and its interaction with the mind.

The clothing and other bodily adornments worn by the missionaries of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints provide an excellent case study for analyzing the ways in which bodies reflect ideas about the world and deeply held beliefs. Part of what makes this a fascinating case study are the guidelines the LDS Church provides for missionary dress and grooming on the official LDS Church website.⁸ Analyzing rules regarding the body that are written down by the institutional church may seem like ideas about the cosmos are being expressed through Church officials and not through the body, as the body is simply following rules. However, it is important to note that in other examples where the body is seen as expressing ideas about the cosmos, rules not written down can still be in place. Having written rules about bodily adornments of missionaries does not lessen the cultural meaning behind those rules.

Additionally, Mormon missionaries began proselytizing fairly quickly after the founding of the

⁶ Ibid. 50.

⁷ Ibid. 45.

⁸ “Missionary Dress and Grooming,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/callings/missionary/dress-grooming?lang=eng>.

Church in the 1800s.⁹ By the time guidelines for missionary clothing were written down, there was already a cultural standard for missionary clothing, which then influenced the written standards. This relationship should not be seen as a top down enforcement, but a cultural process reflecting dynamic LDS ideas about the world. For this study, I will focus on what the current missionary guidelines state, and what these guidelines reflect about the LDS cosmos.

One of the most striking aspects of missionary dress guidelines are the differences between men and women. Both are given guidelines to maintain conservative and modest clothing and other decorations, but guidelines for the women are much more detailed. Women are told “[t]he style, color, and length of your hair should be attractive and easy to manage” and that, “clothing should be attractive,”¹⁰ as well. No mention of attractive clothing or hair is given to the men. Guidelines for dress include specifics on shirt, skirt, and even earring length (nothing dangling more than one inch below the ear). This is also where the step-by-step makeup tutorial can be found. The site emphasizes traditional feminine dress and appearance both implicitly, and explicitly.¹¹ This gendered clothing may seem normal for a conservative religion in America, but it is these bodily adornments that separate men and women reveal deep LDS doctrine and thoughts about the world. A video on the page with general guidelines for female missionaries states, “you are literally a spirit daughter of Heavenly Parents with a divine nature and an eternal destiny.”¹² This eternal destiny, however, is gendered, one is only able to achieve salvation

⁹ Linda King Newell and Valeen Tippetts Avery, *Mormon Enigma: Emma Hale Smith*, (Champaign, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

¹⁰ “General Guidelines: Sisters Dress and Grooming,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://missionary.lds.org/clothing/sister/guidelines?lang=eng>.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² “Modesty is Always in Fashion,” The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://missionary.lds.org/clothing/sister/guidelines/video/modesty?lang=eng>.

within one's given gender role. Not only is one's gender eternal,¹³ but marriage between a male and female is required to enter the highest level of heaven.¹⁴ The gendered adornments for male and female missionaries reflects far more than a Western cultural norm. They reflect ideas essential to LDS theology about one's purpose in life and the path to eternal salvation.

The gendered differences in bodily decorations provide an example of Douglas' thesis, but this analysis alone is incomplete. Above all, the LDS website focuses on conservative dress, for both men and women. Asad's request to view practiced and experienced bodies is helpful in understanding this as the guideline for conservative dress reflects and LDS practice of assimilating into mainstream conservative American culture. While being "practiced" at fitting into a culture is different than Asad's example of a pianist, the transformation from an outside religion to one that exemplifies mainstream American culture is and has been a long process, a process requiring the practice of its members.¹⁵ Thus, the missionaries wearing conservative clothing reveal ideas about how the cosmos works, but these ideas come from the teachable bodies that changed to be accepted by the dominant culture. This practice shows a great deal about LDS history, about the tensions between assimilation, marginalization, issues between church and state, and more cosmic tensions between obedience and agency that exist in LDS theology. This analysis of practiced bodies is important to understanding LDS history, and the history of a culture is essential to understanding current ideas about the cosmos. Asad calls for recognition of a self-developed body, and this provides an example of bodies that have self-

¹³ "The Family: A Proclamation to the World," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/topics/family-proclamation?lang=eng>.

¹⁴ "Marriage," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, <https://www.lds.org/topics/marriage?lang=eng>.

¹⁵ Claudia L. Bushman, "Contemporary Mormonism: Latter-day Saints in Modern America" Westport: Praeger Publishers, 2006).

developed to reflect mainstream American conservative ideas, as well as a historical tension with mainstream America.

Analysis of the bodily adornments of LDS missionaries, as Douglas says, gives insights into the LDS, “cosmos,” but it also highlights problems with a purely symbolic application of this thesis, exemplified in Turner. Asad’s criticism of this thesis and method can be used to take it further by integrating even more aspects of the body than a purely symbolic interpretation would.

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