

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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## **Romney: Another Person Adrift in Their Culture**

**Nafsi ya Jamii**

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It is **not possible** to separate any sane human from his/her culture.  
Let's start there.

Human cultures, to varying degrees, have similar dynamics and structures. Language structural and sound similarities are just one example of such cultural dynamics arising out of similar human mental processes and guttural physiology. In many other ways, other aspects of culture are also tied to individual human development and social relations. When groups meet, their cultures interact, sometimes borrowing or appropriating elements (memes) and sometimes rejecting and conflicting over the same. Because of the spread of people of European heritage (speakers of the Indo-European language phylum) around the world, the English language is heavily loaded with appropriated words and redefined or falsely defined terminology from non-European languages. And non-European peoples have, by choice or otherwise, experienced sharp changes to their cultures because of those contacts. [For an understanding of the whys and wherefores of that cross-cultural contact dynamic, I would refer you to the text that popularized an agreed upon academic understanding: *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* by Jared Diamond. The premise of Diamond and many others is that the spread of Western European culture around the world is not a result of the superiority of that culture over others!]

Our cultures shape us more than we, as individuals, shape or consciously use our cultures. And more often than not, our cultures shape our day-to-day more than we know, just as fish are oblivious of the water in which they swim. Mitt Romney is a good example of a person adrift in their culture.

IMHO (In My Humble/Honest Opinion), Mitt's cultural milieu derives from three major sources: affluence in the US Western regional context, elitist corporatism, and Mormonism [also know as The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS)]. The first two sources are more broadly shared and more broadly understood because more of us experience the memes promulgated by these sources. "Manifest destiny," "city on a hill," "exceptionalism," intense, unbalanced individualism, and that "**those who have, deserve to have**" are some of the memes that flow from the cultures of affluence and elitist corporatism. Mormonism, however, presents a cultural stream that is much less known, experienced, and understood. However, it should be said, that obedience to "authority" is a general human meme that is emphasized by most cultures to some degree. Let's explore Mormon culture in regards to black people, Mitt Romney, and the campaign.

Mormonism is a relatively recent religion founded in the 1820s. It is older than the Moonies but much younger than other Protestant Judeo-Christian sects from which it separated. Black folks and slavery issues impacted the early historical development of Mormonism as slavery did almost every human activity in the US at that time. "From the beginning, black people have been members of Mormon congregations, though there were varying degrees and forms of discrimination against blacks." When the Mormons reached Missouri their founder, Joseph Smith, "upheld the laws regarding slaves and slaveholders, but remained abolitionist in his (personal) actions and doctrines." Like many persecuted groups do, Mormons did not openly fight the general community wrongs even though they recognized them. "After the Mormons were expelled from Missouri, Smith took an increasingly strong anti-slavery position, and a few black men were ordained to the LDS priesthood."

Subsequent leaders of LDS succumbed to the racists sentiments of the time. In 1835, the LDS Church issued an official statement indicating that because the United States government allowed slavery, the Church would not "interfere with bond-servants, neither preach the gospel to, nor baptize them contrary to the will and wish of their masters, nor meddle with or influence them in the least to cause them to be dissatisfied with their situations in this life, thereby jeopardizing

the lives of men." (D&C Section 134:12). Mormons joined that twisted teaching from the Bible which was rampant at the time (most prominent among Baptist) and that was later used by Christian believers in South Africa and many places and eras, that blacks carried the mark and the curse of Cain for killing his brother Abel and lying to God. This became the justification for denying LDS priesthood (this Priesthood is excluded from all females). And all manner of discrimination.

Exclusion from priesthood relegated blacks to a lesser "heaven." This false Biblical justification for elitism and discrimination melded well with the cultural meme of "**those who have, deserve to have.**" Under great political pressure after the Civil Rights struggles, on June 8, 1978, LDS President, Spencer W. Kimball, emerged from the "Upper Room" of the LDS Temple, and claimed that God had removed the curse. From that point on, all worthy black men could now receive the Priesthood. It is estimated that between 500,000 and 1,000,000 LDS Church members are of African descent worldwide. Yet blacks see in Romney's posture, tone, and utterances a significant residue of this past Mormon cultural disdain. He stands at near **zero** support in the black community.

Sue Emmitt, the great, great grand daughter of Brigham Young, the first Governor of Utah and the LDS leader that followed Joseph Smith, opines that the LDS Church leadership prefers to let old doctrines fade away quietly rather than address them directly. Older Mormons continue to quietly harbor outmoded ideas. Ms. Emmitt states, "I'm looking forward to the day when more Mormons will say out loud: We were wrong." Unlike Quakers, another persecuted group, Mormons are not known for "plain" speech. Obfuscation may have developed as a cultural survival tactic. It would explain how Mitt Romney comes by obfuscation and dissimulation so easily. Romney was a bishop of the LDS. Ms. Emmitt calls this "a position where everyone defers to you. What a bishop says goes. People come to them to receive blessings." Romney was also state president, she says, which means he presided over several congregations, and at that point bishops deferred to him.

Obedience to authority is a very strong meme among Mormons. Mormon leaders are habituated to having their commands and understandings believed and followed without question. This would explain Romney's obvious (from his posture and demeanor) befuddlement at being challenged. If the leaders change and say something different from what they said before, Mormons question that very, very little. Unfortunately for Mitt, most residents of the US

do have a problem with etch-a-sketch leadership. About outright lying Ms. Emmitt said, "This kind of thing has sadly been a part of the church from the very beginning. Some modern apostles actually taught that it is not always the best thing to tell the truth if it interferes with preaching gospel." Knowing the cultural and social psychological history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints tells one a lot about the behavior of one of its most prominent adherents who has been soaked in that culture.

Foundational culture is not determinative but it is instructive. Ms. Sue Emmitt, despite her birth in the most prominent family of the LDS, found enough prospective and changed her fate drastically. Jon Huntsman, also a Mormon and a presidential candidate presents a very different presence. All outcomes in human development and in every phenomenon of nature result from multiple if not an infinite number of causes. Therefore, in truth, one can not accurately point to a single or just a few causal chains to explain who we are or why we do what we do. But our cultural histories in which we develop and swim do inform who we are. That is as true of Barack Obama as it is of Mitt Romney or you or me.

*[Note: Nafsi ya Jamii is the Swahili phrase that translates in English to "The Soul Community"]*

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