

# PIONEER DAY

Tinesha Capri Zandamela

“Tinesha, we found your relative’s headstone,” reads the email subject line. And then, a few days later: “Tinesha, your 4th great-grandmother was born in Finland.” From details of pioneer companies to the stories of my ancestors who were part of the early church, I have no shortage of information about my white pioneer ancestors.

I remember one particular message from FamilySearch that I was excited about. The subject: “Tinesha, discover your name’s meaning and origin.” I clicked eagerly to discover details about my name, including its popularity and its meaning. Unsurprisingly, the system could not find any names that matched mine, except for a few matches for my middle name in the United States.

I had another option to discover something about my name, but I “uncovered” what I already knew: my name is Mozambican. And while there are no emails from FamilySearch about my Mozambican ancestors, I would argue that my dad *did* cross the plains as a pioneer—as the only member of his family to join the Church. The LDS Church Archives report my father as “the first missionary from Swaziland, Paulo Cipriano Zandamela, a Mozambican, [who] served in the Pennsylvania Philadelphia Mission from 1989 to 1991.”<sup>1</sup>

Pioneer Day in Utah, the state where I was born and currently reside, is a celebration that commemorates the pioneers who used wagons and handcarts to cross the plains to Utah. Each year, I realize that those events are there to commemorate only one side of my family—the side

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1. “Country information: Swaziland,” *Church News*, updated Feb. 1, 2010, <https://www.thechurchnews.com/archive/2010-02-01/country-information-swaziland-34988>

that already has a monopoly on nearly all of the discussions we have in the Church about the pioneers. But the Church is made up of people from many different heritages and backgrounds, and all of them have their pioneers, and all of their stories form a vital part of the Mormon pioneer heritage.



The first time I landed in Mozambique I was twenty-two years old. It felt like a dream. I was overwhelmed by the opportunity to be in a country that I had been deeply connected to throughout my life. When you drive through the streets of Maputo, it's a blur of color.

While I was in Mozambique, I attended the LDS ward one Sunday. On my way to the church building, I heard the sounds of other worshippers at other churches. Some services made such powerful sounds that the car I rode in vibrated when we were stopped next to them.

They say LDS church services are the same everywhere, and I tend to agree. I am a lifelong Latter-day Saint who grew up on the West Coast of the United States, so the silence of that particular ward's sacrament meeting should not have shocked me. I had attended church services in other countries, and it had never been uncomfortable. This time it was. The contrast seemed so stark. A newcomer even asked if this was it—could it be that all we did at our church was sing songs that are played like funeral dirges, then sit and listen to other people speak for three hours?

Yes. This is what I was used to. Silence as a synonym for reverence. But I know that, for many people, dance and song are cultural. The music and the loud church services were important to them. It is how they worshipped. Their reverence did not mean silence. It was then that I wondered to myself if these cultural elements were incompatible with being a member of the Church of Jesus Christ as it exists today.



I learned about Mozambique growing up, of course. I communicated with family members on my dad's side when I was young—usually by letter or landline phone. As technology became easier to use, international messaging applications became the quickest way to reach out, and it helped to have the internet on my phone to overcome language barriers. When I was primary-school age, I learned a traditional Mozambican dance to perform at a talent show, and I wore a capulana, which is a type a sarong worn in Mozambique. Capulanas existed in many shades and colors in my home. I knew the geography and history of the country. I listened to traditional music and was no stranger to soccer, rice, and sweet potatoes. I have always tried to learn and embrace my heritage while also being an active member of the Church.

Of course, culture does not just manifest itself in the physical. While I learned many things growing up from my Mozambican father, I found one particular belief deeply life changing during a difficult time. It was a belief that my dad had learned from his father, that his father had learned from his parents, and so on: The belief that our ancestors are always watching over us, cheering us on when we do the right thing, supporting us, and staying with us as we go through life.

When my brother passed away unexpectedly, he was fifteen. I was twenty-three. It was a shock, and I found myself being consoled frequently by Church members with the promise that I would see my little brother again.

Now, while I believed I would see him again, I also clung to the knowledge that those who die still support us in this life. I do not believe that my ancestors, and those who have passed on before me, are just sitting around waiting for my return. They support me as a *living* being, as long as I try to do the right thing. I do not think my brother is sitting up above me and looking down all the time. I think those who pass on can aid the living if they so choose. They cannot change circumstances

or alter reality, but they can help us find answers. It was this specific and culturally rooted belief that helped bring me much-needed peace alongside the knowledge that I would see my brother again after this life.



The second time I went to Mozambique I was twenty-five. It was a longer trip this time, and I felt more comfortable with what had previously been a complete unknown. This time, I knew the answer to my previous question about whether or not cultural beliefs are incompatible with my faith: no, they are not. They often seem incompatible because leaders who espouse the idea that Western culture is superior have defined other cultural beliefs as less valid. However, the gospel itself is not incompatible with clapping during worship or feeling connected to our ancestors via other ways than just trek and online family history.

Maputo was hot, as usual. The palm trees, the ocean, the coconuts, the history—this country that westerners view as only being poor was so much more than its GDP.

During a drive through the countryside, I found myself full of unexplainable excitement. This was my first experience outside of Maputo and its suburbs. At some point, I drifted off to sleep, and I suddenly awoke when I was informed that we had stopped in Zandamela.

Stepping out of the car felt holy and sacred. Zandamela was not just a town that shares my name. As I got to see the place where my family came from—where *I came from*—I realized this was the completion of something I had been waiting for my whole life—an opportunity to fully meld my pioneer ancestries together. That day in Zandamela was more than a visit or a photo-taking opportunity. It was my first Pioneer Day.