Between two minds:
The Duality of Dysphoria and Euphoria in Revival Thanksgiving Tables

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Abstract

Though the system of colonisation was designed to police and oppress Black expressive forms, for centuries Africans and people of African descent have continued to perform spiritual ceremonies of power, justice and healing in which rituals are enacted not only to reclaim, restore and repair, but also to challenge, disrupt and contest. Such ceremonies, one of which is referred to as Thanksgiving Tables by Revivalists, are grounded within the African-Jamaican religious landscape. The hosting of Thanksgiving Tables is a practice carried on by members of the Revival religion, which emerged in Jamaica during the early 1860s. Thanksgiving Tables are complex communal ceremonies which exist on a plane between the spiritual and the material, the imagined and the real, the sacred and the secular. Through a cultural lens, this article explores Thanksgiving Tables as ritual ceremonies in which euphoria and dysphoria are in constant discourse.

On the one hand, the euphoric atmosphere of Thanksgiving Tables is characterised by lively speeches, opulent dress, energetic singing, expressive dancing, spiritual manifestations, feasting, pageantry, celebration, community and entertainment. These ceremonies are held to mark major life events and achievements, such as birthdays, business success, recovery from an accident or near-death experiences (such as critical illnesses), the birth of a child, a victory or deliverance from a physical or spiritual condition, or the return of a devotee from a journey in the Spirit world.

For Revivalists, Thanksgiving Tables create an atmosphere of gratitude and spiritual upliftment. The ecstatic experiences associated with Thanksgiving Tables provide Revivalists with much-needed respite from the harsh realities of everyday life, offering a sanctuary in which hope and joy are cultivated. Such euphoric moments not only reinforce communal bonds but also serve as a path towards holistic healing. On the other hand, Thanksgiving Tables are also steeped in narratives of dysphoria, reflecting the challenges experienced by devotees due to the ideological legacies of colonialism. Though many Revivalists who host Thanksgiving Tables express pride, assuredness and jubilation, the community still grapples with issues of identity conflict, feelings of religious inferiority/discrimination, marginalisation, and economic instability, as lingering effects of colonialism. These challenges are manifested in their journey towards religious acceptance and in their demand for legitimacy within mainstream society. Thanksgiving Tables therefore create a space for confronting the realities of the colonial past but also provide a platform for Revivalists to reveal and celebrate their history, heritage and identity in profound ways. Thanksgiving Tables therefore illustrate the interplay between euphoria and dysphoria, where joy and suffering coexist to provide a holistic view of the African-Jamaican religious experience. Building on the works of Dave Gosse, Clinton Hutton, and Sonjah Stanley Niaah, this study presents insights into the ways marginalised communities express their spirituality in the face of socio-historical challenges, underscoring the importance of cultural identity in shaping psychological well-being. Drawing on ethnographic methodologies, this article uses a range of data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and content analysis, to provide an in-depth exploration into the duality of dysphoria and euphoria in Revival Thanksgiving Tables.

Introduction

The concepts of euphoria and dysphoria have long been studied within the context of religion, psychiatry, gender studies, clinical psychology, behavioural neuroscience, pharmacology, sociology and anthropology. In religious studies, it has been argued that euphoria and dysphoria serve functional roles within sacred rites and ceremonies, such as rites of passage, rites of exchange and communion, rites of affliction, and political rites, for instance the coronation of a divine king or the instalment of the Pope, as well as in religious festivals involving feasting and fasting (Russell, Dunbar and Gobet 2011: 147 and 153). In the context of this study, euphoria refers to positive emotions such as jubilation, joy, love, belonging, cama-

raderie, and happiness; while dysphoria evokes negative emotions: for example, uncertainty, ambivalence, mistrust, scepticism, unhappiness, anxiety and fear.

Though such a line of enquiry is pertinent to this article, I do not wish to advance a narrative on the cognitive role of religion, nor to focus on the emotive functions of religion. Instead, I explore the discourse between euphoria and dysphoria by employing a cultural studies perspective to understand the relation between culture and power in Thanksgiving Tables. In so doing, I discuss the extent to which sacred celebrations are performed by devotees of the Revival religion to achieve a degree of agency within colonial and post-colonial Jamaica. Applying the interdisciplinary approach of cultural studies, this article examines the process of moving between the creative imagination, memory, reality and experience of Revivalists, to understand the duality of dysphoria and euphoria in Thanksgiving Tables.

A reading of sacred celebrations by African-Jamaicans must be rooted in the historical context of enslavement and colonialism. Such an approach is necessary in order to properly comprehend the interplay between euphoria and dysphoria within Thanksgiving Tables. Not only did the African presence always pose a threat to the institution of slavery, the African, despite the everyday realities of torture, mutilation, emotional abuse, discrimination, prejudice, sexual assault, emotional assault, bullying and terrorism, found the capacity and will to celebrate. At the core of African celebrations was the conviction of the efficacy of ancestral Spirits—entities through which enslaved Africans derived their power to act and become. Ritual celebrations therefore became a space for, or an avenue of, temporary escape from the harsh realities of plantation life. The ancestors of enslaved Africans provided them with relief from the grief that was characteristic of enslavement.

In theorising festivals, rituals and celebrations, the discipline of cultural studies is often criticised for the ways it has privileged writings on popular culture, at the expense of attention to the sacred. Against this background, I suggest that there is great intellectual advantage to be gained from advancing scholarship on the role of the Spirit as an agent of power within African-derived spirituality. Thus, I am proposing here that African-derived celebrations of the sacred should not be seen as mere entertainment, but rather as an active space suitable for the '...making of a radical political order...' (Hutton 2016: 13). This radical political order within the consciousness of African-Jamaicans played a critical role in the fight for freedom from slavery, and in the achievement of emancipation, as well as the post-emancipation context. For example, Clinton Hutton investigated the significant role African spirituality played in the staging of the 1865 Morant Bay Rebellion,[1] during which participants in the rebellion swore oaths as part of African religious rituals with the aim of empowering themselves and ensuring the rebellion's success (Hutton 2015: 13; Heuman 1994: xiv). Another example of the connection between African-derived celebrations of the sacred and the 'making of a radical political order' was made in the 1898 Obeah Act, whose framers had in mind the events of the 1760 Tacky Rebellion.[2] The act made illegal the practice of an African-derived religious tradition in Jamaica called Obeah.

1 *The Morant Bay Rebellion broke out in Jamaica on 11 October 1865 under the leadership of a Jamaican Baptist Deacon, Paul Bogle. During the rebellion, several hundred African-Jamaicans marched into Morant Bay, the capital of St. Thomas, to protest against the 'continued political, social and economic domination of the whites' (Heuman, 1994, pp. xvii), which was reflected in an unjust legal system, poor education, strict vagrancy laws, lack of access to land due to high prices and the very low wages paid to Blacks working on sugar plantations during the post-emancipation period.*

The place of West African-derived religions, such as Obeah, in anti-slavery uprisings cannot be underestimated. At times these practices appeared to have been erased, but in fact they were only temporarily hidden to ensure their survival. One such practice was Myalism,[3] which was first identified in the 1760 Tacky Rebellion, among individuals who were mostly from the Akan tribe. Records revealed that, before the rebellion, its leader Tacky, took part in rituals of blood sacrifice as a way of gaining strength and approval from the ancestral Spirits. This was similar to Curtin's account of the 'sacrificing of some fowls' (Curtin 1955: 170) which was commonplace in Myal ceremonies.

Realising Africans' engagement in ritual practices that invoked ancestral Spirits before entering into wars against their oppressors, legislative frameworks were crafted to suppress and eliminate African religious traditions. Across the British territories, laws were essentially weaponised by the enslavers to implicate and eliminate expressions of African spirituality. In Jamaica, seventy-two years before the Tacky Rebellion, the law on the 'Customs of the Islands Prohibition on Drums and Horns' was passed in 1688 (amended in 1717), and this was followed by the 'Act to Remedy the Evils Arising from Irregular Assemblies of Slaves' of 1760 (Stanley Niaah 2023: 196–197). By rendering illegal the very heartbeat of enslaved Africans' celebrations—drumming—these laws sought to prohibit African forms of expression. Though the main aim of the 1760 law, which was implemented shortly after the Tacky Rebellion, was to suppress future uprisings against the system of enslavement, it also hindered the wide-scale congregation of enslaved Africans for celebratory events unless sanctioned by the enslaver.

Legislation banning African creative expression, ritual performances and celebrations, reflected a complex struggle for power. James Scott's idea of 'transcripts' (public and hidden) in his seminal work, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, offers an important entry point for articulating the conflicted binary relationship between domination and resistance in the context of African sacred celebrations. In his book, Scott uses the term 'public transcript' to describe the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate (Scott 1990: 2). In this display of unequal power relations between coloniser and subordinate, a public hegemonic transcript and an 'offstage' or 'backstage discourse', outside of the surveillance of the powerful, were created simultaneously. The term 'hidden transcripts' refers to discourse that takes place offstage, beyond the direct observation of power-holders (Scott 1990: 4). Hidden transcripts consist of those offstage speeches/utterances, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript (Scott 1990: 4–5). Importantly, in cultivating hidden transcripts, actors exercise a kind of 'temporary hegemony' (Scott 1990: 84). This, of course, is where the subordinate gets the opportunity to assert their agency within their own marginalised spaces. The concept of hidden transcripts can be applied to the offstage processes, beliefs, rituals, performances and

2 *The 1760 Tacky Rebellion, which started in St. Mary parish, is named after its leader, a Coromantee chief who was kidnapped from Africa and enslaved in Jamaica (Black 1983: 64). This rebellion sought to challenge the system of slavery and achieve an independent Black nation.*

3 *Myalism was a Jamaican folk religion that existed during the 18th century before the Great Revival. It is believed by some scholars of Revivalism that Myalism was syncretised with the Great Revival of the 1860s and formed the Revival religion.*

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practices around Revival celebrations that contest, contradict, or resist the legislative efforts of the oppressors. Through the lens of hidden transcripts, I therefore examine Thanksgiving Tables as 'nocturnal gatherings' within which the Spirit, interpretation, memory and the creative imagination exist simultaneously.

Clinton Hutton has discussed one hidden transcript that was employed by enslaved Africans. This hidden transcript was revealed at night during secret entertainment gatherings wherein the wearing of costumes, music, storytelling, games, and dance were important channels through which agency was achieved (Hutton 2007: 131). For enslaved Africans, nocturnal gatherings were social spaces where they could communicate with their deities and the Spirits of their ancestors, while simultaneously liberating themselves from the daily horrors of colonialism and slavery. Despite the laws that were passed to restrict and police bodily expressions involving movement and sound, Africans resisted and found agency in meeting secretly at night, outside of the purview of the oppressor. Nocturnal gatherings on plantations were a key feature of resistance to chattel slavery, providing the freedom for enslaved Africans to carry out their sacred rituals and ceremonies.

Within Revivalism, celebratory rituals facilitate, for devotees, a process of unlearning, redefining and rescripting of the colonial public transcript that categorises African festivals, ritual performances and celebrations as barbaric, uncivilised, superstitious, dangerous, noisy, ignorant and foolish. Moreover, Thanksgiving Tables reveal a relationship between Spirit and the community engaging in what I refer to as 'expressions of protest' that continue to challenge dominant discourses of power around African religious celebrations in Jamaica. In challenging colonial discourses about African-Jamaican celebratory rituals, one must take into account the methods of improvisation and innovation, and the continuous process of negotiation, which are critical for reasonings around resistance, justice, power, healing, liberation, and decolonisation.

African-Jamaican religious celebrations are complex creative ceremonies, existing not only in spaces between the spiritual and the material, the sacred and the secular, but also between the imagined and the real. Knowledge of theories of space is important for an understanding of Thanksgiving Tables as social-communal events which occur on the margins of society and which are the product of the creative imagination of Revivalists. Postmodern scholars such as Michel Foucault (1986), Edward Soja (1996) and Michel de Certeau (1984) have revolutionised the ways in which cultural studies thinkers explore the 'relationships of time and space and the politics of space' (Stanley Niaah 2010: 30). These post-colonial writers have articulated innovative ways of approaching spatial theory and applying spatial taxonomies. These 'spatial taxonomies' are frames of thinking, such as *Thirdspace*, migration, hybridity, liminality, marginality, interstitial spaces and spaces of resistance; all are considered postmodern and post-colonial conceptions of social space. Stanley Niaah made it clear, after Soja, that in this postmodern and post-colonial theorisation of space, there has been a 'spatial turn' in which space can no longer be defined as

a 'passive void': new spatial imaginings include a reading of active social-communal space (Stanley Niaah 2010: 30). Equally, space is not interpreted as a 'homogeneous mass' but as a concept characterised by heterogeneity and multiplicity (van der Leeuw 1963: 393). Henri Lefebvre's (1991) 'triadic division' of the mental, physical, and social space is crucial to how we think about and perceive African-Jamaican religious celebrations. Applying Lefebvre's triad to Thanksgiving Tables, I acknowledge the interconnectedness of the three domains in understanding the complexities of African-Jamaican religious celebrations and ceremonial spaces. Furthermore, in this analysis, I include Soja's understanding of *Thirdspace*, which he developed from Lefebvre's ideas. *Thirdspace*, Soja argued, exists in the field of human spatiality as not only physical, mental, and social but simultaneously real and imagined, concrete and abstract, as well as material and metaphorical (Soja 1996: 65).

Extending Soja's analysis of mental space, Hutton analyses the creative ethos of the African diaspora by examining one verse in a song found in Julius Lester's work, *To Be A Slave*. This verse was repeated by enslaved Africans in the United States of America, *'Got one mind for the Boss to see; Got another mind for what I know is me'*. Theoretically advancing a discussion of the creative imagination deployed in celebratory spaces within the African diaspora, Hutton juxtaposes this song with a Jamaican aphorism, *'Plie fuul fi kech wiz'* (Playing [pretending to be] the fool to catch [trap] the wise), (Hutton, 2007, pp. 128).

The creative imagination as a product of the African-Jamaican mindscape is expressed through what Barry Chevannes (2001) refers to as 'an open-ended adventure of imagination'. It is within this cognitive power Revivalists imagine and reimagine themselves in sacred ceremonial spaces. Rex Nettleford's writing on the 'battle for space', as a Caribbean phenomenon, argues that the 'mind and imagination—creative intellect and artistic creation—have been major ingredients in the Caribbean's battle for space' (Nettleford 1993: 83). Nettleford's understanding as a Caribbean spatial theorist is that the region's political struggle, from enslavement to the present, began within the inner space (mental) or the hidden transcript, which was then manifested within the creative expressions of celebratory spaces. Importantly, he reminds us that the capacity to define oneself is the basis and substance of power (Nettleford 1993: 82). Within this ongoing battle for space between the dominated and the dominating, there is always the power to find meaning in African-Jamaican religious celebrations, such as Thanksgiving Tables.

The analysis above has made clear that despite the colonial legislation enacted to police, limit and prohibit Black celebrations, ritual performances movement, and sounds—which were the basis of euphoria among enslaved Africans—Africans resisted by creating spaces of power, both real and imagined, to resist the oppression they faced. Today, African-Jamaicans continue to perform public celebratory rituals, in the form of rites of passage, pilgrimages and Thanksgivings, to honour and celebrate their ancestry, history and experiences. Since emancipation in 1838, there has been a resurgence of African-derived rituals, traditions and practices, despite the

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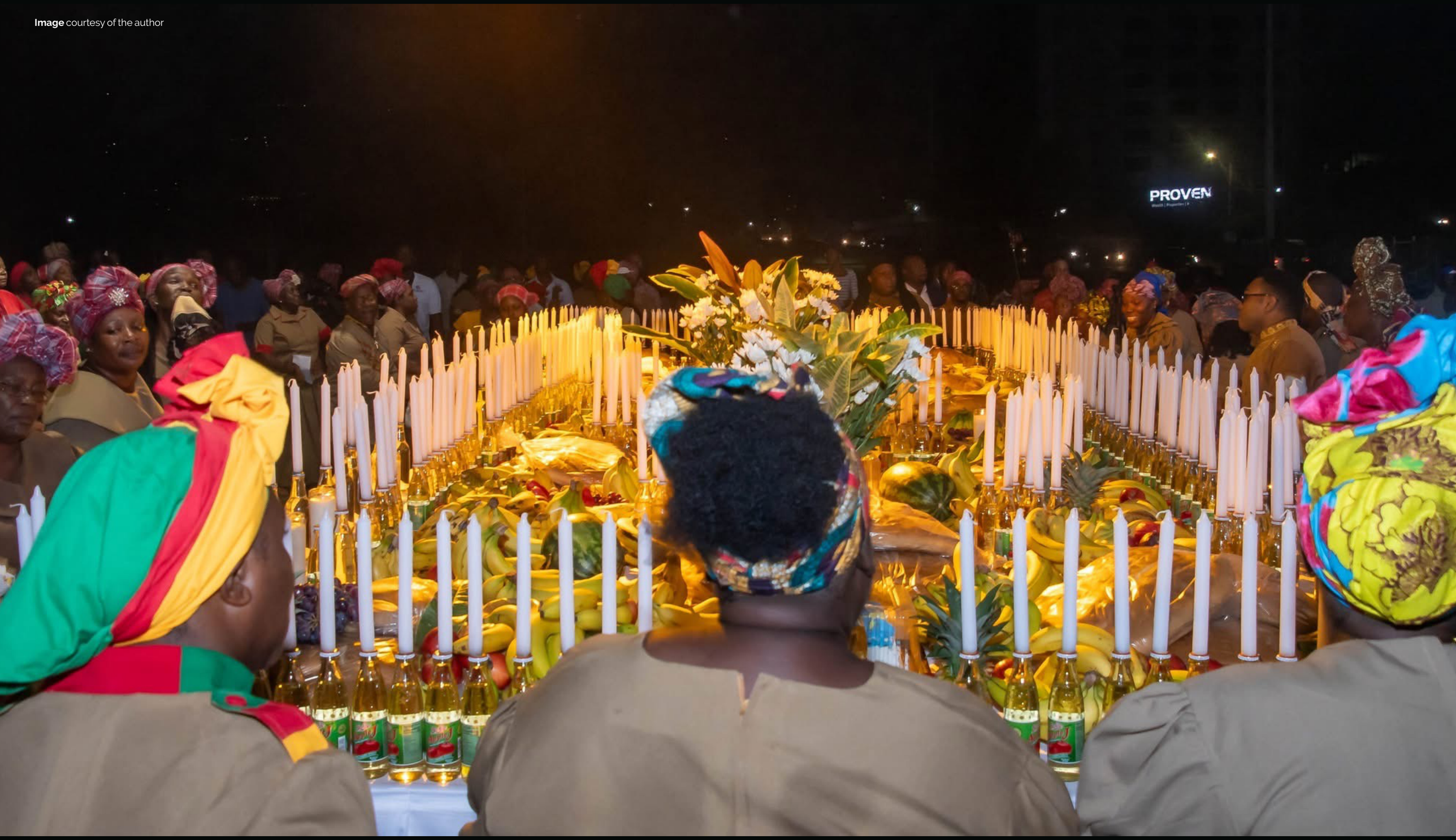


existence of colonial legislation. Advancing Scott's (1990) works on hidden transcripts, Hutton (2007) has added another dimension, 'unhidden transcripts', to account for the sounds, festivals, pilgrimages, rituals and practices that still exist on the margins of society, and which hold a significant place within the socio-political landscape of Jamaica.

A History of Jamaica's Revivalism

Revivalism is a postmodern African-Jamaican religion that emerged on the island between 1860 and 1861. Twenty-two years after emancipation in 1838, Jamaica's Revivalism emerged in the context of a renewed scepticism towards British colonialism and domination, and a desire for Jamaicans to construct alternative identities/realities outside of the frameworks of their oppressors. The Revivalism that emerged among African-Jamaicans surfaced with a kind of revisionist philosophy and intertextuality that not only sought to reclaim their identity and heritage as Africans but also incorporated the spirituality of other belief systems, such as Orthodox Christian theology and, later, the spiritual beliefs of East Indians who came to Jamaica between 1845 and 1917. This intertextuality among religious and cultural groups formed a complex and inclusive folk religion that not only emphasises the inseparability between Spirit and the material, but also the importance of maintaining communities through the hosting of celebratory events.

The emergence of Revivalism in Jamaica has been traced in the seminal writings of Philip Curtin, Edward Seaga, Barry Chevannes, Martha Beckwith, Joseph Moore, Maria Robinson-Smith and George Simpson. Beckwith and others have made the claim that an African-Jamaican spirituality was being observed long before the emergence of Revivalism.[4] Beckwith further claimed that, 'The Revivalists are said to date from the Great Revival of 1860, under the influence of the religious enthusiasm of that period, but they appear in reality a great deal earlier…' (Beckwith 1969: 158). In fact, Orlando Patterson asserted that Christianity was of no real significance until the last three or so decades of slavery (Patterson 1969: 182). Before the formal indoctrination of the enslaved by Christian missionaries, West African spirituality and practices had long been rooted in the consciousness of Black men and women. Within this consciousness, West African spiritual beliefs informed the everyday life of the enslaved, including their strategies of resistance and rituals of worship and celebration, which included the wearing of vibrant colours, soulful singing, hand clapping, magnetic drumming, cheerful dancing blended with stomping and magnetic chanting, groaning and humming.

During the period of enslavement, the primary aim of planters in the British West Indies was to extract the maximum amount of profit from a cheap, reliable and constant workforce. Thus, little attention was paid to the possibility of Christianising enslaved Africans until 1754, when the Moravian Church sent missionaries to the island. According to George Simpson, planters in the West Indies opposed the preaching of the Christian gospel as they believed that it would open the minds of the enslaved to ideas of revolt and freedom (Simpson 1956: 334). The Moravian Church was established in the 1820s (Curtin 1955: 32), Methodism arrived in 1789, while Baptists came in two groups: the more orthodox, which originated in Europe, and Black Baptists, who had their headquarters in the United States. They all sought to indoctrinate the enslaved people in their own ways. Of the Baptist preachers who came to Jamaica, those about whom we know the most are George Lisle, who arrived in Kingston in 1782 from Georgia, during the American Revolutionary War (1775–1783), and George Lewis, an African-born man who was enslaved in the state of Virginia and later became a leader in the Native Baptist movement. Lisle's doctrine supported Christian orthodox teaching while Lewis' religious principles remained steeped in his African identity (Robinson-Smith 2018: 23). Certainly, African-Jamaicans gravitated towards the teachings of Lewis as a means to nurture their African spirituality.

4 *The Great Revival of the 19th Century was a period of widespread spiritual awakening and renewal which began in parts of Europe (1857–1859), then crossed the Atlantic to the United States of America and Jamaica between 1860 and 1861 (Stead 1905: 5). This period of spiritual renaissance was characterised by mass repentance, with people becoming conscious of their immorality and seeking refuge in the church. During the Great Revival, in the 1860s, Jamaica saw a significant increase in its church-going population.*

The cosmology of Revivalism rests on a continuum, a continuum that is syncretic in nature but indigenous in origin. The Revival pantheon consists of the Triune Christian God (God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit), heavenly Spirits (archangels, angels and saints), earthbound Spirits (prophets and apostles from the Bible and the fallen angels from heaven) and ground Spirits (all human dead except those mentioned in the Bible) (Seaga 2015: 362). God the Father is the creator and ruler of the universe; he is never present at religious or church services, and does not dance at such ceremonies, but always stays in the high heavens (Moore 1964: 79). God the Father does not deal directly in the affairs of people. God the Son, Jesus Christ, plays a prominent role in rituals such as communion. Pictures of him and his crucifixion are found in some Revival churches. He is referred to in songs, especially those from Sankey's collection (Chevannes 2001: 5). God the Father and God the Son are not usually embodied through Spirit manifestation, unlike the Holy Spirit and the other categories of Spirits represented in the Revival pantheon. The pantheon within Jamaica's Revivalism informed the structure of the religion, from its iconography to its rituals of celebration. Though the Revival pantheon is presented as a whole, not all categories of spirits are engaged and entertained by all Revivalists.

Methodology and ethical considerations

The methodology applied in this study incorporated ethnographic fieldwork, participant observation and content analysis. Firstly, Thanksgiving Tables are occasional (sometimes annual) events in the ritual calendar of Revivalists. Therefore, the gathering of information from 'content-rich' participants was dependent on whether these events were being hosted during the research period. The collection of ethnographic data for this research was carried out in Jamaica between January and November 2022, January–February 2023, and January 2024, in the parishes of Kingston and St. Andrew, Westmoreland, St. James and Manchester. During these visits, I conducted in-person semi-structured interviews with hosts of Thanksgiving Tables. Primary interviews were conducted before the celebratory events to gain a general understanding of Thanksgiving Tables. After attending Thanksgiving Tables with the interviewees, secondary follow-up interviews were conducted to (1) confirm what was said in the interviews and (2) to gain a

deeper understanding by seeking clarification on what was observed during the celebrations. Some of these follow-up interviews were conducted via Zoom or WhatsApp calls. During the follow-up interviews, particular moments of the ceremonies captured in photographs or videos were shown to the Thanksgiver and then discussed, to obtain additional context.

A total of 15 hosts of Thanksgiving Tables were interviewed. Interviewees were informed of their right to withdraw at any time and that their information would be treated with confidentiality. In addition to semi-structured interviews, I engaged in participant observation where I not only attended Thanksgiving Tables but was also involved in the preparatory rituals, such as washing fruits and other items displayed on the table, assisting in 'setting' tables and constructing ritual clothing for the event. I also participated in ceremonial performances which gave me a deeper understanding of Thanksgiving Tables.

To add to the information and insights provided by the respondents, I employed content analysis, involving examining videos and images of Thanksgiving Tables posted on YouTube and Facebook by Revivalists.

As a practitioner of the Revival religion for over ten years, I was conscious of researcher bias. To mitigate this bias and ensure integrity in this study, I employed various measures. First, before going into the field to collect data, I had a colleague conduct a personal interview with me, as a way of identifying and monitoring any biases, and identifying the information I already knew about Thanksgiving Tables. Secondly, I conducted an extensive literature review to gain an understanding of what other scholars —such as Edward Seaga, Maria Robinson-Smith and, in a more detailed manner, Clinton Hutton—had written about Thanksgiving Tables. After the peer interview and literature review, I compared the information I had gained from them with the data I had gathered in the field, including my review of photographs and videos on YouTube and WhatsApp.

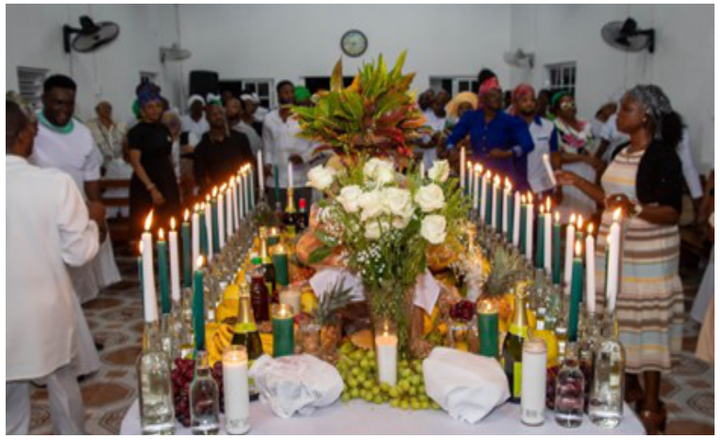
Furthermore, there was the matter of confidentiality and the need to respect the wishes of the respondents by excluding particular information that was intended to remain private. Therefore, to protect the integrity of the research process, information presented in this research was reviewed by the respondents for their approval.

Contextualising Revival Thanksgiving Tables

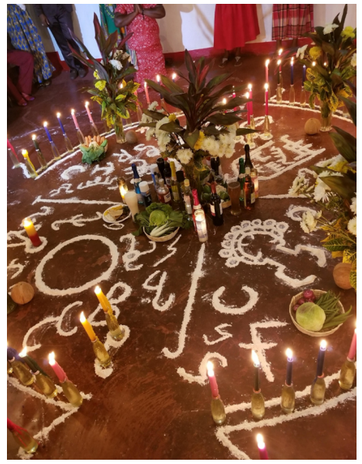
The history of the emergence of Thanksgiving Tables in Revivalism is obscure. Thanksgiving Tables, also referred to as 'Table' by Revivalists, are public celebrations characterised by elaborate rituals and displays of dress and food that facilitate social bonding, in a context of worship. Thanksgiving Tables involve singing, dancing, drumming and Spirit manifestation, thereby contributing to intense feelings of euphoria. Thanksgiving Tables are generally communal events that attract devotees, researchers and well-wishers from across Jamaica and the diaspora. The events are held at Revival sites across the island in both rural and urban spaces. I will use 'Table' to refer to the ceremony and 'table' in lower cases when describing the physical ritual table itself.

Revival tables are sometimes temporary objects put together using sheet(s) of plywood lain across an upright strut. After the table is erected, it is then consecrated and dressed using a multiplicity of items. Revival tables have been described by Moore as altars that are set with uniquely arranged emblems, both manmade and natural (Moore 1964: 73). Revival tables are either 'set' based on a vision revealed by a Spirit in a dream or based on an individual's memory, creative imagination and aiming to arrange a table that is inviting and aesthetically pleasing to the Spirit. The items presented on a table may include a Bible and bread baked in various forms, such as the cross, a Bible, or doves. Revival tables sometimes bear cakes and puddings, as well as carbonated beverages, including cream soda,[5] and alcoholic beverages, such as white rum, champagne, and wine. Tables may also be arranged with flowers, such as crotons, the dragon blood plant (Cordyline) and other medicinal herbs. Candles are essential to the setting of Revival tables and are of various purposes, colours and sizes. Cooked foods, grains/nuts, fruits (usually bananas, grapes, oranges, grapefruits, melons and pineapples) are also presented on Revival tables. Revival tables are assembled in the form of a circle, a cross (a four-pole table) or a rectangle, while some are even set on the ground. Tables are set depending on the purpose and occasion.

5 *During an interview with Archbishop Donovan Morgan, a Revival leader in Jamaica, he described cream soda as 'sweet water'. Jamaican cream soda is an iconic emblem of the Revival religion and is presented on many altars in Revival churches. Due to the 'sweetness' of this beverage, it is believed to attract Spirits to ritual spaces, in the same way perfumes do. The primary purpose of this carbonated beverage within the Revival community is not for drinking but as an effective tool during Spirit possession, to perform rituals of healing, consecration, deliverance and /or 'clearance'.*



Images courtesy of Andre Grange. Revival Thanksgiving attended by the author, featuring a rectangular table. Spanish Town, St. Catherine, 2024.



Images courtesy of Andre Grange. *Left:* Revival Thanksgiving, table shaped in the form of a cross. England. Facebook, 2022. *Right:* Revival Thanksgiving featuring a ground table. Kingston, 2019.

The event itself is generally referred to as 'Table' by devotees because the focus of the entire ceremony is the carefully arranged table. Revival tables are the nucleus of the ceremony and the centre from which meanings relating to the self and the community are derived. Thanksgiving Tables are held for specific purposes; during them, 'thanks' is given to God and major life achievements are recognised. This includes the recognition of birthdays, business successes, recovery from an accident or other near-death experiences, such as critical illnesses, '…the birth of a child, [to celebrate] a victory or deliverance from something' (Robinson-Smith 2018: 72), the return of a devotee from a journey in the Spirit world, or the successful completing of an educational journey. 'Memorial Tables' are held in honour of those who have departed this life. Thanksgiving Tables are also held for the purpose of spiritual upliftment. Some Tables are referred to as Crowning Duties in which candidates are crowned and conferred with royal titles such as kings, queens, princesses and princes. Other Tables are referred to as Duty Tables. These are held to communicate with ancestral Spirits, who are requested to carry out particular tasks on someone's behalf. The person for whom the Duty Table is held may be a devotee or an outsider, who is making a request from the Spirit. As the name 'Duty' suggests, these are events commissioned by a Spirit for a specific purpose and must be held at a specific time of the year. Unlike Thanksgiving Tables, Duty Tables involve strict observances. If these are not performed properly, this may have consequences for the one whom the order was given.

Though a distinction is made between Thanksgiving Tables and Duty Tables by Revivalists, the celebratory events attended for this study were all referred to as Thanksgiving Tables. Therefore, the arguments presented in this article refer to the duality of dysphoria and euphoria in Thanks-giving Tables.

Thanksgiving Tables and Duty Tables, may last over multiple days, and generally occur at night time. However, some Thanksgiving Tables are held during the day. As indicated above, traditional night gatherings were engaged in by enslaved Africans who convened at secret meetings to perform sacred rituals in the dark while their enslavers slept. Nights were also used to plan revolts against the oppressive institution of slavery. In other cases, nights were used for leisure/community bonding through engagement in storytelling rituals involving stories relating to duppies, mythical creatures, and Anansi—the West African god that was transported to Jamaica in the memory of the enslaved. For some Tables, the night is significant in regard to connecting with the ancestral Spirit world. It is believed by some devotees, and held as a general belief in Jamaican folk philosophy, that at night—specifically the hours after midnight—particular Spirits hover. Most Tables generally begin between 8:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. and may continue until dawn.

Preparations for Tables begin weeks in advance. On the eve of the Table, special preparations are made. For the Tables I observed, the preparatory rituals included preparing ritual garments, cooking special foods for the table, dressing/consecrating the table and, in some cases, sacrificing a goat, after which the meat was cooked and shared among devotees, either before or after the ceremony.

The festivities of Thanksgiving Tables last from one to four nights. The duration of the ceremony depends on the tradition of the particular group involved, instructions given by the Spirit and/or the purpose for which the event is being held. Traditionally, a four-night Table is held from Sunday night to Wednesday night, with each night having a specific theme.

Nowadays, the theme of the Thanksgiving Table is communicated to the Revival community in three main ways: through social media platforms (such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp) (circulation of electronic flyers); through invitation letters; word of mouth; and through the type of colours selected for the event. Thanksgiving Tables are important events within the ritual calendar of Revivalists, but not all Revival groups across the island practice this ritual.

Between two minds: dysphoria among Revivalists

As indicated earlier, legislative efforts by colonial authorities historically sought to police, limit and prohibit the practice of African religious expressions in Jamaica. However, this was not only done through legal means, but also by intentionally spreading propaganda, in order to marginalise African-Jamaican religions. Dave Gosse has aptly opined, in his book *Alexander Bedward, the Prophet of August Town: Race, Religion and Colonialism*, that:

'A by-product of… colonialism is the dissemination of lies and propaganda by the colonial state and its allies as an important measure in maintaining colonial rule… the language of the powerful ruling elite usually becomes the normal discourse in society…'. (Gosse 2022: pp. 1)

As a result of these lies and propaganda, African rituals, festivals and sacred performances have been categorised as barbaric, uncivilised, evil, superstitious, heathen/paganistic, ignorant, dangerous, foolishness, witchcraft, Obeah/Black Magic and a source of moral deterioration. African-derived

Image courtesy of the author

expressive forms were considered to constitute a breakdown of good conscience and family life within society. Perhaps the most deleterious of such lies was the attempt to connect the practice of Revivalism with lunacy/madness. This was evident in the late 1800s to mid-1930s, when there were calls by mainstream Christian churches, community associations and parochial boards (parish councils), in newspaper articles in the *Daily Gleaner*, for appropriate legislation to suppress the practice of Revivalism on the grounds that it contributed to lunacy. Though medical professionals disregarded such connections, the Governor of Westmorland, Dr. J.W.N. Hudson, proposed in the Jamaican Parliament the 1931 Revivalism and Shakerism Prohibition Bill. Similarly, on 9 July 1930, the police inspector for Westmoreland, based at the Jamaica Constabulary Headquarters in Kingston, reported in minutes addressed to the Colonial Secretary that:

'...Revivalism is a growing nuisance in Westmoreland. The practices carried out at the meetings of these people consist essentially of shouting, dancing, clapping of hands and the swaying of their bodies to the rhythm of a beating drum. This has the effect of making those who participate more and more hysterical till they either fall down exhausted or become to all intents or purposes temporary lunatics and for the time being lose all self-control and sense of direction. Many of those of a weaker mentality become permanently insane...'. (Hudson 1930)

In an 1899 article titled, 'Revivalism and lunacy: Is lunacy increasing?', published in the *Daily Gleaner*, Dr. Plaxton, a psychiatrist at the mental hospital in Kingston, responded to the question of whether the women in the asylum were victims of Revivalism. He stated:

'That was a mistaken view... [However], the masses of Jamaica have nothing to do to occupy their leisure except religious exercises. They do not for the most part read seriously, nor have they as a rule, any of those intellectual hobbies and recreations which the masses of England and continental countries enjoy. [Religion] is their pastime and their only mental pabulum. When therefore the mind gives way, whether from hereditary or other causes, the readiest form in which their insanity is expressed is in religious exercises. They know nothing else. They are incapable of involving new ideas; and so, they indulge to a moderate extent in that with which they are familiar—religion. Revivalism is an effect of insanity and not a cause'. (The Daily Gleaner 1899: 4-5)

Aside from Dr. Plaxton's prejudicial and misconceived view, what is clear is his indication that Revivalism had an important place in the everyday lives of Revivalists. The statement also provides a frame within which to understand colonial perceptions of African-Jamaicans post-emancipation. Insanity among Revivalists was never medically proven but was nevertheless used as a social and political weapon in attempting to erase the African-derived religious practice. In the consciousness of the colonial oppressors, this move was necessary as Revivalism, being a growing religio-political movement, posed a great threat to the British social order. This history of societal marginalisation still plagues the Revival community today, causing dysphoria due to religious discrimination. As a practitioner of the Revival religion, I have observed and experienced a kind of internalised dysphoria, which I argue is an effect of British colonialism, which has institutionalised discrimination against African-Jamaican religious celebrations. This internalised dysphoria was quite evident among devotees at Thanksgiving Tables that I attended.

Although Thanksgiving Tables are a signature event within the ritual calendar of Revivalism, there remains a strong sense of ambivalence towards them among the wider Revival community, as not all Revival groups host Thanksgiving Tables. This ambivalence is evident in Revivalists' desire to maintain the traditions of Christian Orthodoxy while also remaining authentic to their African rituals and beliefs. The literature on Revivalism tells us that the cosmological structure of the religion is represented within two branches: *60 Zion* and *61 Revival*. It is understood that *60 Zion* is the more Christianised form of the two, with an emphasis on entertaining the Triune Christian God as well as other celestial beings, while *61 Revival* is the branch that retains African ritual practices, such animal sacrifice, the belief in ancestral veneration and the invoking of earthbound Spirits. Edward Seaga (2015) has categorised some Revivalists as twofold: meaning, they manifest as both *60 Zion* and *61 Revival*. Though Seaga's essay has merit in providing an understanding of Revival's cosmological structure, there is a reluctance among devotees in regard to identifying as just *61 Revival* or both. Concerning *61 Revival* and twofold, there is a general feeling of mistrust, suspicion and apprehension towards persons practising African rituals, such as ancestral veneration, animal sacrifice or even hosting Kumina ceremonies,[6] as a preparatory ritual for Tables. Consequently, Duty Tables are generally met with suspicion and are often masked as Thanksgiving Tables, which are usually held by the *60 Zion* community.

In an interview with Bishop Brown (pseudonym), a Revival leader who regularly hosts Thanksgiving Tables, the Bishop stated: 'We have our own identity but in order to be recognised we merge Christianity with our African practices'. Bishop Brown's statement provides an understanding that there is a struggle among Revivalists to define themselves, in that they are also striving to be identified as Christians while simultaneously maintaining their African spirituality, which, in Bishop Brown's opinion, contradicts particular teachings of the Bible. In Bishop Brown's reasoning, 'A Christian cannot be someone who maintains their African ritualistic practices based on what our ancestors have done. Jesus Christ and the prophets in the Bible never keep Thanksgiving Tables'.

Revivalists that were interviewed explained that although Thanksgiving Tables are well attended and even supported by Revivalists who do not believe in hosting Tables, there remain strong opinions that Tables, especially Duty Tables, are 'ungodly' or even, in a more extreme view, 'evil'. As a result of this, some respondents on occasion referred to a Duty Table as a Thanksgiving Table because of the stigma associated with the former. It is apparent that the colonial propaganda mentioned earlier has not only found its way into the institutions of post-colonial Jamaica, but has also been imprinted

6 *The Kumina religion, which originated in the Congo-Angola region of Central Africa, was brought to Jamaica by African indentured labourers after emancipation in 1838. Kumina ceremonies are rituals performed by African-Jamaicans to honour their ancestors and to celebrate significant events, such as the birth of a child, as a memorial, to heal someone or even to celebrate a marriage. Kumina ceremonies are characterised by ritual singing, feasting, complex drumming, distinctive dance movements and divination (Lewin 2000: 215; Schuler 1980: 70; Hall 2024: 30).*

on the minds of African-Jamaicans who are, on the one hand, proud of their heritage, but, on the other, are also struggling to understand and define themselves outside of a system that has for over 300 years denied them their identity.

Thus, I ask the question how Revivalists as a community can reconcile what I refer to as a case of profound internalised dysphoria, where there remains a struggle for self-definition, as they fluctuate between being Christians and practising the ways of their ancestors. Though this existential question remains unanswered, African-Jamaicans have always had to deploy strategies to preserve their identity. This strategy was mentioned earlier in this article, where I discussed how African-Jamaicans continue to 'Plie fuul fi kech wiz' (Play [pretend to be] the fool to catch [trap] the wise), by having one mind the boss can see while simultaneously having a mind that is truly who they are. I argue therefore that Thanksgiving Tables and Duty Tables—being fundamentally African in character—provide the space within which Revivalists manifest the mind that they know is theirs, thereby reclaiming and celebrating their identity as descendants of Africans, which creates a strong sense of euphoria.

'A yah suh nice!': euphoria in Revival Thanksgiving Tables

For devotees, Thanksgiving Tables offer a sense of euphoria through an experience of deep spiritual fulfilment and purpose which is often achieved through tables presenting themes of gratitude, celebration, community, entertainment and healing. The Thanksgiving Tables I attended also provided devotees with feelings of excitement, jubilation, joy and happiness; some described the experience as a 'feel-good moment' in which Revivalists enter into fellowship with each other and with visitors from surrounding communities. Within Thanksgiving Tables, a resounding emphasis is placed on the celebration of life and the importance of being alive. Through 'Memorial Tables', death is also acknowledged, but it is treated with great jubilation. It is quite interesting that the euphoric emo-tions and feelings outlined above are realised through the embodied practice of dressing. Dressing for men, women and children plays an essential role in expressing gratitude for and celebration of one's cultural identity, but also is the embodiment of community. The ritual of dressing up is seen as a means of entertainment and as a way of achieving psychological healing.

For many, dressing up and worshipping is one of the primary ways the feeling of euphoria is achieved at Thanksgiving Tables. Tables are celebratory events in which Revivalists 'dress up' to establish community and to achieve uniformity in worship. A celebratory aesthetic is involved in the performance of dress identities at Thanksgiving Tables. This celebratory aesthetic is used to justify the elaborate ways in which devotees dress. These celebrations require devotees to be adorned in their 'Sunday best'. Thanksgiving Tables are sacred events which involve pomp and pageantry, a grand display of elegance and creativity in dress performance. Thanksgiving Tables provide an avenue for African-Jamaicans to express themselves through dress in unique and profound ways.

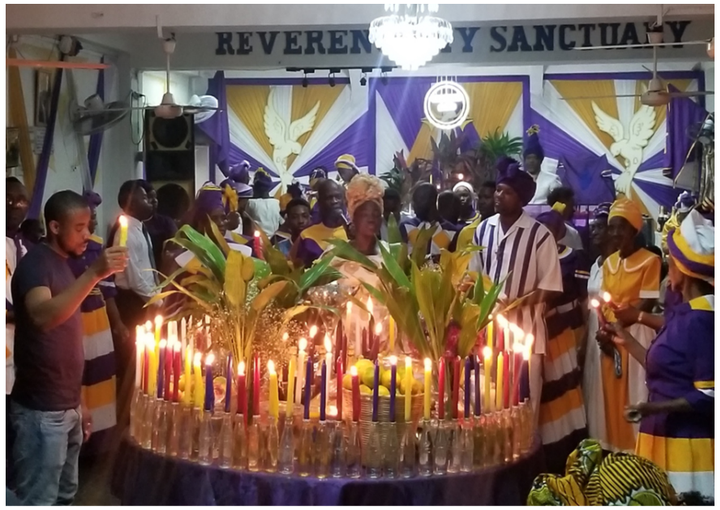
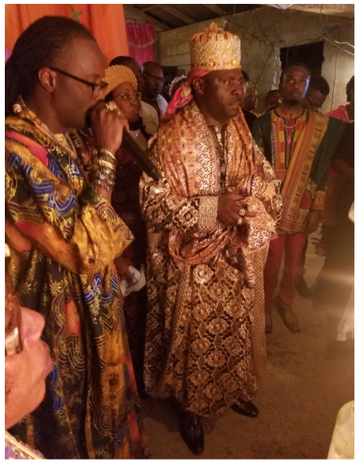


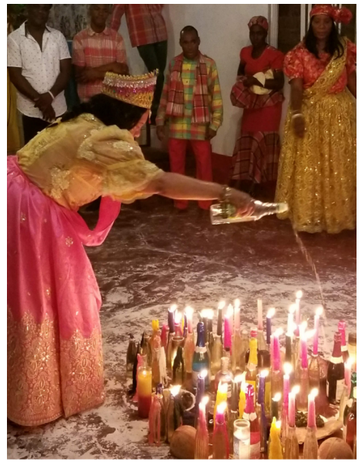
Image courtesy of Andre Grange. Revivalists gather in united worship at a Thanksgiving Table in Kingston, 2022. Photo shows a circular table.

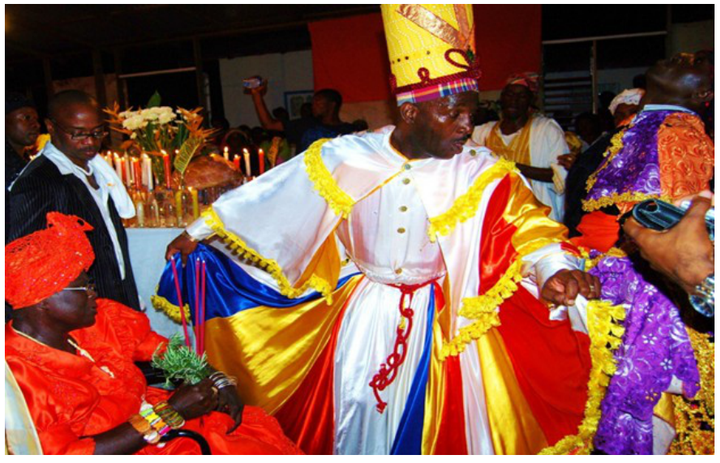
Additionally, Thanksgiving Tables occasionally require the most opulent of attire that is in sync with the theme or the code for the occasion. Regardless of the theme of the Table, Revivalists engage in ritualistic fancy dressing to express their identities. Within these settings, a sense of pride, humility and grace is revealed in the many forms of Revival attire. In an interview, one respondent confidently articulated, '...despite the ridicule and what people want to say about us, I am bold in my attire, there is no fear, I walk with my head high'. I observed in my fieldwork that the majority of the men and women who were opulently dressed at Thanksgiving Tables were from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This is indicative of the fact that men and women within performative spaces across the African diaspora use dress as a means to negotiate their social status in society, regardless of their economic positioning. Thanksgiving Tables are events that provide an opportunity for Revivalists to 'dress up' in complex assemblages that intersect between the spiritual and the material, the imagined and the real, the sacred and the secular.

The notion of community created by dress is important as it instils a sense of purpose and identity in those who attend Thanksgiving Tables. In this regard, community is essential as it not only creates a space for Revivalists to identify and connect with each other through dress but it also offers a space for the enactment of otherwise marginalised identities within Jamaica's religious landscape. The concept of community extends beyond the borders of rural and urban Jamaica. The community also includes believers and supporters who journey from countries such as Trinidad and Tobago, the United States of America, Canada, Panama, England, Ghana and Nigeria to be a part of Thanksgiving Table ceremonies. Similar to dancehall events, Thanksgiving Tables are regarded as a space where local and international members of the religion can "link up", and as a time for cultural and spiritual rejuvenation and communal bonding. The performance of dress identities in Revival Tables offered a space to examine the dressed self as a site of fascination and adoration for the onlooker—a site in which fantasy, creativity, innovation, memory and imagination remain in dialogue.

Dressing up is a source of healing for Revivalists. Here, I do not emphasise the practice of using clothing in healing rituals, but instead briefly discuss the psychological impact of Revivalists dressing for Thanksgiving Tables as a way to regain selfhood and deal with the trauma of colonialism. Dressing up or reclaiming an ancestral lineage through adornment is a form of therapy: it provides healing to African descendants who have been subjected to colonial narratives that oppress, discriminate against and marginalise Black expressive forms. Enslaved and freed Africans have both used clothing as a way not only to perform religious healing but also to reclaim their pride in a context in which they have been denied basic human rights. Revivalists dress as a king or queen (as is the case during Table rituals) as a strategy to autonomously regain their humanity which has been stripped away. I argue here that dress as an expressive art form is a platform to articulate meanings in sacred rituals and ceremonies, and in fact this became therapy for African-Jamaicans. Dressing up for Thanksgiving Tables creates euphoric experiences for Revivalists, thereby fostering hope and resilience in a society where modes of dress continue to be policed based on the principles of British social order.







Images courtesy of Andre Grange. *Left:* Revivalist Prince of the River Nation in Montego Bay. *Right:* Revivalist Princess of the Indian Nation in Kingston (right), 2019.

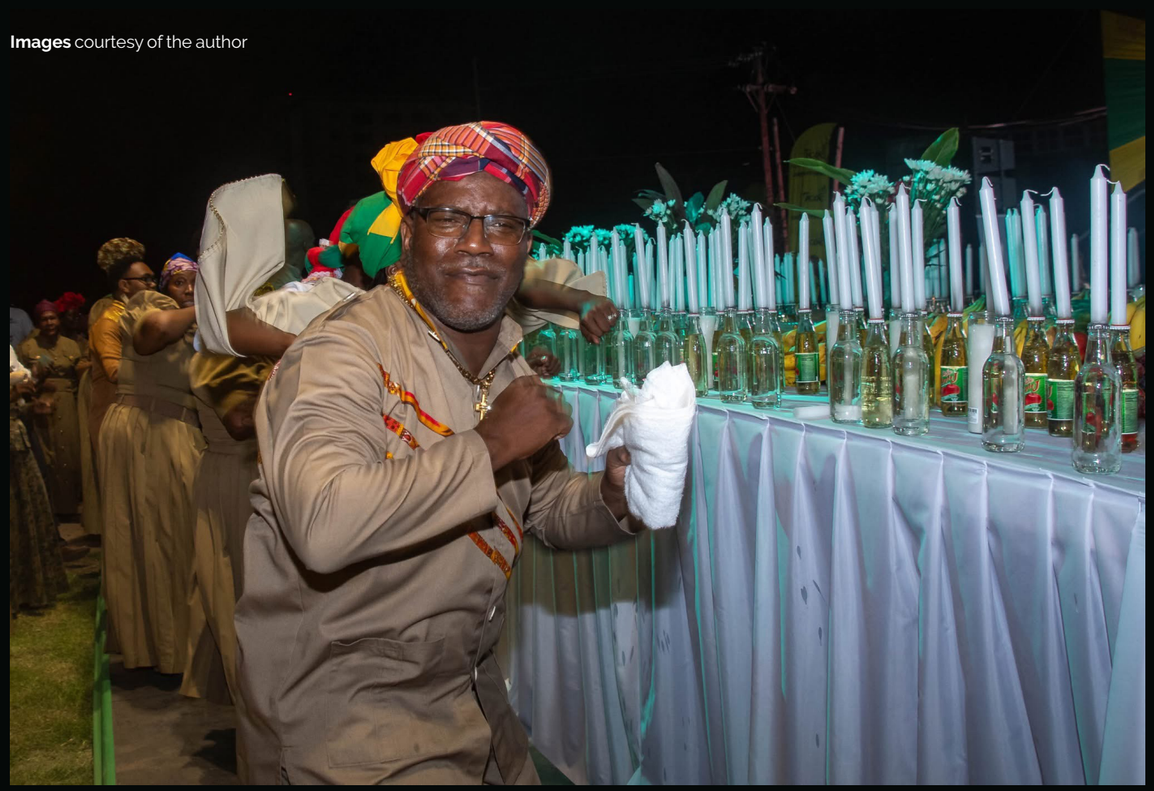
Image courtesy of Clinton Hutton. *Bottom:* Revivalist in royal attire at Thanksgiving Table.

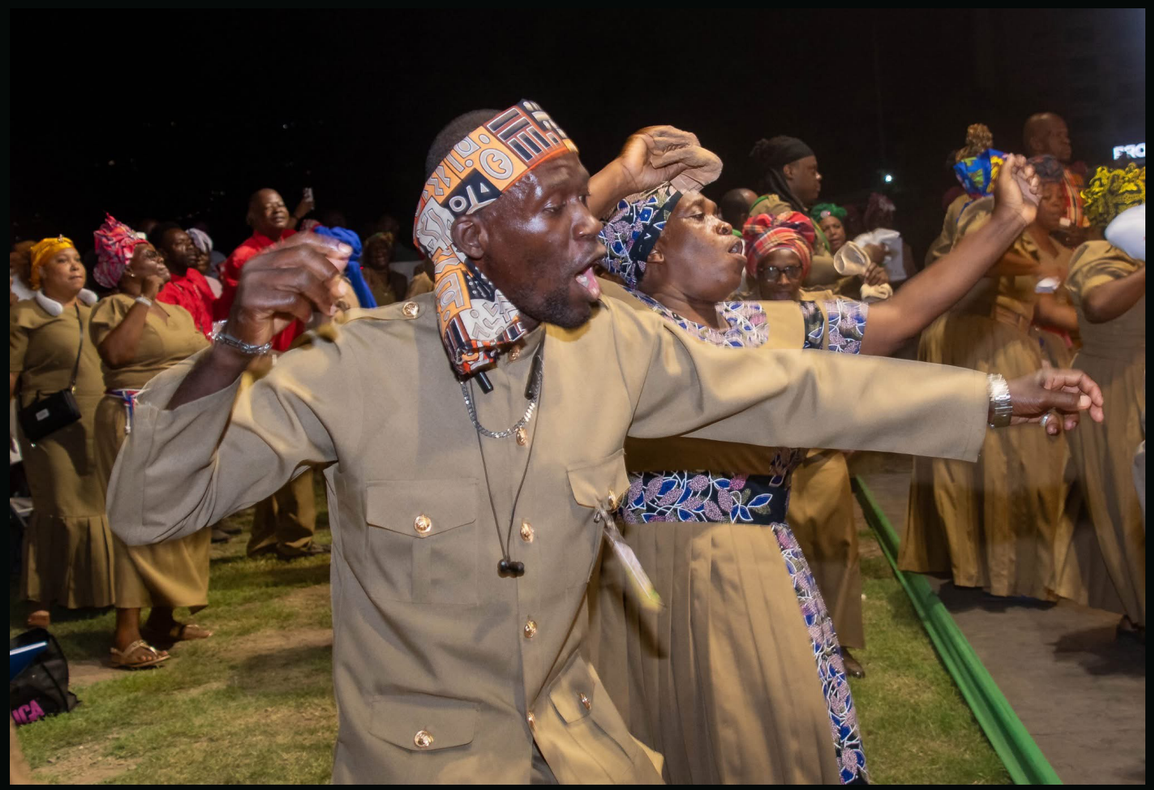
Conclusion

This article has presented the view that although African-Jamaican religious festivals, ceremonies and ritual perfor-mances, specifically Thanksgiving Tables, have been historically marginalised and oppressed through legislation and propaganda, these expressions of celebration, pride and community have nevertheless survived over a long period. What Thanksgiving Tables represent is a space of belonging for Revivalists and visitors alike, where they can attend, participate and escape the pressures of everyday life, as they provide a theatre, a stage for individuals to imagine themselves beyond the confines of coloniality—and to become. However, in this process of becoming, Revival Tables are also spaces of confrontation and struggle between conflicting identities, where devotees fluctuate between who they are and whom they are forced to be. Tables are also a process whereby, in that temporary moment of becoming, Revivalists struggle to free themselves of the colonial stereotypes that have been used to describe the very practices of their ancestors.

The view among some Revivalists that events honouring African ancestors, such as Duty Tables, are 'evil' and 'ungodly' is evidence of internalised dysphoria. The aim of this cultural studies research has not been to provide the answer to address this internalised dysphoria but to raise awareness by presenting the ongoing duality of dysphoria and euphoria experienced at Thanksgiving Tables, which I argue, has been shaped by enslavement and colonial propaganda. This have over the years contributed to the development of an apparent internalised conflict within the African-Jamaican psyche. It must be understood therefore, that for Revivalists to overcome this internalised dysphoria, we must begin to acknowledge and address the colonial undertones that force us to exist between two minds.

Images courtesy of the author





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