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Faith under Fire: Reactions, Reform and the Revolutionary Explosion of Jamaica's 1831 Baptist War

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the 1831 Baptist War emerged from a longer revolutionary process rooted in sustained cultural resistance among enslaved Jamaicans. It investigates whether colonial reaction and reform, particularly the legal and social repression of enslaved religious practices, ended or intensified revolutionary movements. This paper argues that the Baptist War was not an isolated revolt but the culmination of a long-term cultural revolution in which enslaved people transformed African spiritual traditions and Christian institutions into systems of organization, moral authority, and resistance.

The study draws on both primary and secondary sources to analyze the relationship between colonial repression and enslaved adaptation. Primary sources include colonial legislation regulating slave gatherings, missionary writings such as those of Henry Bleby, and journals kept by Jamaican planters. These are combined with historical scholarship, including the work of Mary Reckord, to examine how African-derived practices such as Obeah and communal worship survived under surveillance and prohibition. These sources reveal that colonial authorities often interpreted enslaved religious gatherings as threats to plantation order, responding with restrictive laws and punishments.

Rather than suppressing resistance, however, colonial reactions helped reshape it. Efforts to eradicate African spirituality forced these traditions to merge with Christianity, producing new religious movements such as the Native Baptist community. This cultural transformation created networks of communication and leadership that enabled figures like Samuel Sharpe to mobilize enslaved communities. By reframing the Baptist War as the culmination of sustained cultural revolution, this study highlights how spiritual belief and cultural adaptation were central to resistance and contributed to the collapse of slavery in the British Empire.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Two nights after Christmas of 1831, the fires of rebellion spread across the hilly Jamaican landscape, with both literal and proverbial flames leaping from plantation to plantation. This fiery outbreak marked the beginning of the largest and most decisive slave uprising in the British Caribbean: the Baptist War of 1831. Although records and studies of the event state that the original call was for a peaceful general strike, slave riots soon erupted into a storm of violence that swept across Western Jamaica. Hundreds of plantations were left in ruin, and the revolution struck terror into the heart of the colonial order and the so-called plantocracy. Henry Bleby (1809–1882), a Wesleyan missionary who was a first-hand witness to the rebellion, wrote later in his account that "the heavens were lighted up by the burning properties in all directions."[1]

What followed the rebellion was a brutal and swift suppression by the British Empire. However, the uprising proved to be the final blow against slavery in British Jamaica, and indeed the whole of the British Caribbean.[2] The unprecedented scale and coordination of the revolt marked a watershed moment in the long road to emancipation, hastening slavery's end within the British Empire.[3] Resistance had existed in Jamaica since the island's conquest in 1655, and over time, these recurring challenges to slavery evolved, producing moments of coordinated resistance.[4] The 1831 rebellion represented the culmination of long struggles against inhumane exploitation. In this sense, the Baptist War marked a decisive turning point within a broader revolutionary movement that sought to overturn the social foundations of slavery.

This revolutionary explosion did not emerge in isolation. In the decades preceding 1831, colonial authorities increasingly perceived African-derived ritual traditions and independent Black congregations as potential threats to stability and cracked down on what they perceived to be heretical indigenous practices. The British response took the form of legal restrictions, missionary discipline, and efforts at religious reform. These were measures intended to regulate the everyday lives of the enslaved. This essay argues that this reactionary crackdown instigated by the colonial authorities did not eliminate these religious practices; instead, they pressured cult traditions, such as Myalism, to adapt within Christian structures, where forms of organization and leadership persisted within new "Christian" contexts. In other words, I argue the African ritual inheritance survived to shape and animate the biggest struggle for emancipation in the British Caribbean.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

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[1] Henry Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery* (Hamilton, Adams, and Co, 1853), 8.
[2] Mary Turner, "Chapter Six: The Baptist War," in *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 148-178
[3] Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaka: Cornell University Press, 1982), 291-321.
[4] Orlando Patterson, *The Sociology of Slavery: Black Society in Jamaica, 1655-1838* (London: Polity Press, 2022), 266–273

A substantial body of scholarship has sought to explain the forces that shaped resistance within Jamaican slave society, situating the island within broader frameworks of Atlantic colonial governance and racial hierarchy. Jamaica's colonial trajectory began in 1655, when the British seized the island from Spanish control during the Anglo-Spanish War (1654–1660), after which it was rapidly incorporated and integrated into Britain's transatlantic slave economy. Its fertile land and strategic location facilitated the expansion of sugar plantations, driving an increasing demand for enslaved labor and producing a society defined by extreme racial stratification and systemic violence.[5] Within this context, historians have long emphasized the structural brutality of plantation life, arguing that the intensity of exploitation cultivated a persistent culture of resistance among the enslaved population.

Such academic tendencies have led to an argument that Jamaican resistance reflected the economic exploitation of the enslaved. In this view, the rebellion was cast as a structural and inevitable result of class struggle in the modern imperialist economy. Scholars such as Abigail Bakan, for example, have argued that resistance on the island should be understood as a direct response to British colonial state capitalism, in which enslaved Africans confronted a system designed to extract maximum labor at minimum cost under conditions of coercion.[6] This perspective is reinforced by contemporary and later accounts that describe the plantation regime as one of relentless labor, routine violence, and systematic discipline, where punishment was not exceptional but integral to the maintenance of order.[7] The emphasis on the economic dimension is further supported by studies that link the decline of Jamaican slavery to global market shifts, including falling sugar prices and increased competition from colonies such as Brazil and Cuba. Indeed, late seventeenth or early eighteenth documents, including William Beckford's account into the agricultural economy of Jamaica, acknowledge the growing importance of sugarcane as a commodity.[8] In this vein, revolts such as the Baptist War are viewed as products of deteriorating material conditions and intensifying exploitation, part of a broader continuum of resistance within the British Caribbean.[9] This structural approach certainly provides a clean and linear view of why conflicts such as the Baptist War may emerge. However, these scholarly approaches, often deaf to local contexts and particularities that shape a conflict, provide a limited explanation for the agency of local actors in the face of structural conditions.

To illuminate the historical significance of agents in Jamaica, some scholars examined the role of ideology, religion, and Enlightenment thought, paying much attention to the influence of missionaries and humanitarianists in shaping both resistance and abolition. It is due to those studies that the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 is often attributed to the broader diffusion of Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality, especially to the efforts of British abolitionists such as William Wilberforce (1759-1833),

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[5] Susan D Amussen, *Caribbean Exchange: Slavery and the Transformation of English Society, 1640-1700* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 73-106.

[6] Abigail B Bakan, *Ideology & Class Conflict in Jamaica: The Politics of Rebellion*. (McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990).

[7] Thomas R. Day, "Jamaican Revolts in British Press and Politics, 1760-1865," (MA. Thesis. Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019), 48-49.

[8] William Beckford, *A Descriptive Account of the Island of Jamaica: With Remarks Upon the Cultivation of the Sugar-Cane*, Volume 2 (London, T. and J. Egerton, 1790), 35.

[9] Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), 293-94 and 336-37.

Olaudah Equiano (d. 1797), or Thomas Clarkson (1760-1846). Within Jamaica, to be sure, Protestant missionaries—Baptists, Moravians, and Methodists—played a significant role in spreading Christianity, literacy, and new forms of social organization among enslaved populations.[10] Historians, such as Haruki Inagaki and Mary Turner, have noted that missionary activity not only influenced enslaved communities but also shaped metropolitan opinion, particularly following the backlash against missionaries after the 1831 rebellion, which helped galvanize support for abolition in Britain.[11] At the same time, the paradoxical role of missionary education and literacy, introduced as a tool of colonial control, became a means for enslaved individuals such as Samuel Sharpe, an enslaved Baptist deacon turned rebel figurehead, to articulate claims to freedom and organize resistance.[12]

The attention to the activities and campaigns of protestant missionaries in Jamaica extended toward the spread of education and literacy: the vehicles of Christian "civilization." In spite of varying degrees of opposition by the planters, the missions continued to report that they were able to increase the number of Christian schools and improve literacy. Olwyn Mary Blouet argues that many enslaved individuals pursued education precisely because they recognized its connection to rights, empowerment, and the possibility of liberation.[13] On the other hand, scholars such as Rebecca Schneider highlight the paradoxical role of literacy, demonstrating how figures like Samuel Sharpe, himself a literate Baptist deacon, used missionary education to organize resistance, transforming a tool of colonial control into a means of rebellion.[14] Sharpe was able to make good use of this missionary education and the rising conversion rates of slaves to covertly grow his movement and networks under the pretense of Christian practice. In essence, he was able to incorporate certain covert meetings within what would be considered innocuous Christian custom.[15]

Although they have convincingly placed Jamaican history under the global context, these materialist or Eurocentric interpretations remain problematic especially when a serious reflection is cast upon the nature of the colonial archive—a common source that those academic approaches rely heavily on. Historians such as David Geggus have emphasized the complex interplay between internal dynamics and external influences in shaping rebellion, urging scholars to move beyond reductive explanations.[16] At the same

[10] Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood, The Demerara Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), xv. Da Costa provides an analysis of missionary movements across the island and their impact on the rebellion, taking the Demerara Rebellion as the main case study, but also mentioning the Baptist War. She discusses the missions' main objective of civilizing the island and the course of action they took to do so, including by using literacy and education.

[11] Haruki Inagaki, "Humanitarianism and Law in Early Nineteenth Century British Jamaica," *Historical Studies of the Western World* 2 (2023), 45.

[12] Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries,* 65 and 148-78; Rachel Elam, "Jamaican Christian Missions: Their Influence in the Jamaican Slave Rebellion of 1831-32 and the End of Slavery," *Historia* 14 (2005), 101-105; Robert Gordon Haigh, "Dissenting Missionaries, Public Opinion and the Campaign Against British Colonial Slavery, 1831-1834" (MA thesis: Sheffield Hallam University, 2019), 45-71.

[13] Olwyn Mary Blouet, "Slavery and Freedom in the British West Indies, 1823-33: The Role of Education" *History of Education Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (1990), 636-39.

[14] Rebecca Schneider, "Black Literacy and Resistance in Jamaica." *Social and Economic Studies* 67, no. 1 (2018), 49–65.

[15] Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 124

[16] David Geggus, "The Enigma of Jamaica in the 1790s: New Light on the Causes of Slave Rebellions," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1987), 274.

time, scholars like Anna Johnston argue that missionary texts must be read critically as products of empire, reflecting efforts to reinforce colonial authority rather than neutral descriptions of enslaved life.[17] Powered by Enlightenment ideals, thus, writings from the bona fides of those evangelists often create a body of discourses in which the triumph of rationality or intellectual maturity over the uncivilized Africanness has taken Jamaican communities closer to a modern world. In this narrativity, the indigenous traditions of African origin are viewed as an object to be overcome. Therefore, the role of African traditions among the Jamaican enslaved in the revolutionary movements has been overshadowed by global or Eurocentric interpretations.

III. METHODOLOGY

Drawing on theoretical insights from Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, this essay takes the approach that emphasizes hybridity, subaltern agency, and the instability of colonial discourse.[18] Recent studies on Jamaican oral tradition and cultural practice are particularly insightful, as they reinterpret those less-documented, superstructural realms, long dismissed as marginal, as sites of meaning-making through which enslaved communities constructed identity and articulated resistance.[19]Although it sometimes privileges discourse over the material and organizational dimensions of cultural practice, this framework successfully critiques the biases of colonial sources.

With the postcolonial criticism in mind, this study adopts a critical methodology in its use of primary sources, many of which originate from colonial archives that did not concern themselves with preserving the voices of the enslaved. Missionary writings, planter journals, legal records, and travel accounts are treated not as transparent descriptions of Afro-Jamaican life, but as texts embedded within projects of colonial governance and cultural control. Rather than reading these sources at face value, this essay attends to contradictions, anxieties, and moments of misinterpretation within them. By juxtaposing these sources with insights from oral traditions, religious practices, and later ethnographic and historical interpretations, the study reconstructs Afro-Jamaican agency in a context where it is otherwise obscured. This methodological approach acknowledges the limitations of the archive while still using it as a site through which suppressed forms of knowledge and resistance can be partially recovered.

Building on these historiographical traditions, this study argues that Afro-Jamaican spiritual systems such as Obeah and Myalism must be understood not merely as cultural expressions but as integrated systems of

[17] Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8-9 and 17.
[18] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 22-26; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Poststructuralism, Marginality, Postcoloniality and Value," in *Literary Theory Today,* Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan, eds. (London, 1990), 228; Gyan Prakash, "Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism," *The American Historical Review* 99, no.5 (1994), 1476.
[19] Elizabeth McIsaac, "Oral Narratives as a Site of Resistance: Indigenous Knowledge, Colonialism, and Western Discourse," in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World,* George J. Sefa Dei et al., eds. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 89-101; Roger Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983); Emily Zobel Marshall, "This is not a Fairy Tale: Anansi and the Web of Narrative Power," in *The Fairy Tale World*, Andrew Teverson, ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), 14-15.

knowledge, authority, and organization. Practices such as Myalism, often mischaracterized by colonial observers as superstition or witchcraft, in fact functioned as communal and restorative systems rooted in African cosmology, structured around ritual, leadership, and collective participation.[20] The frequent conflation of Myalism with Obeah within colonial discourse further reflects a broader pattern of epistemic reduction, in which African-derived practices were stripped of their complexity and recast as threats to colonial order.[21] By foregrounding these dynamics, this paper moves beyond existing frameworks to argue that resistance in Jamaica cannot be fully understood without recognizing the central role of religious epistemologies as foundations of collective identity and revolutionary capacity.

IV. REFORM AND REACTION: MISSIONARY CHRISTIANITY AND COLONIAL ANXIETY

In discussing the Baptist War, scholars have often framed the path to abolition as the result of complex interactions between enslaved resistance, colonial governance, and reform movements originating in Britain.[22] Much of contemporary historiography emphasizes European intervention, including humanitarian campaigns and missionary movements both within Europe and within the colonies themselves.[23] These missionaries pursued the goal of "civilizing" the island and converting the enslaved to Christianity.[24] Samuel Sharpe (1801–1832), an enslaved Jamaican Baptist deacon, was raised within this environment and has frequently been portrayed as evidence of the unmistakable Christian influence on the enslaved. However, it was ultimately Sharpe who led the slaves during the 1831 Baptist War, and whom colonial authorities correctly singled out as the principal leader behind both the social movement and the armed rebellions of 1831, a contradiction that complicates narratives attributing the emancipation movements primarily to European reform.

Sharpe had not originally intended for the rebellion to escalate as it had. He had originally planned a coordinated general, peaceful strike, advocating for Sundays off for prayer, livable wages, and better working conditions, among other things.[25] The escalation of this strike into a large-scale uprising, however, suggests that forces beyond the leader's stated intentions were at work. Identifying the participants who rallied behind Sharpe provides a first point of entry. According to Bleby, many slaves

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[20] Monica Schuler, "Myalism and the African Religious Tradition in Jamaica," *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link*, Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin W. Knight, eds.(Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). Reprint in *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy: a Student Reader,* Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd, eds. (Kingston, Jamaica: Randle, 1991), 295-96.

[21] Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 76-77.

[22] David Geggus, "The Enigma of Jamaica in the 1790s: New Light on the Causes of Slave Rebellions," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 44, no. 2 (1987), 274. Haruki Inagaki, "Humanitarianism and Law in Early Nineteenth Century British Jamaica," *Historical Studies of the Western World* 2 (2023), 37-38. Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

[23] Joseph Basile, "Ending the 'Inhumane Traffic': The Role of Humanitarianism in the British Abolition Movement" (Temple University, 2013), 6-7. Rachel Elam, "Jamaican Christian Missions: Their Influence in the Jamaican Slave Rebellion of 1831-32 and the End of Slavery" Historia 14, no 8 (April 2005), 101

[24] Emilia Viotti da Costa, *Crowns of Glory, Tears of Blood, The Demerara Rebellion of 1823* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), xv.

[25] Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery,*124

"had never seen a white Baptist minister" and therefore identified themselves as "Baptists" under any sort of preacher.[26] These congregations were therefore not extensions of mission churches. Rather, they served as locally rooted religious communities led by colored, often enslaved, Jamaican ministers. Contemporaries and later historians have referred to these groups broadly as "Native Baptists" or "Black Baptists." As the term suggests, the Native Baptist Church denoted religious formations that emerged locally and exercised internal leadership and unique interpretive authority, even while operating under the broad banner of Protestant Christianity.[27] It was through these religious communities that collective action mobilized, enabling a movement framed in reform to later assume a revolutionary character.

Missionaries and planters alike responded to these congregations with suspicion and hostility. Protestant missionaries, whose goal was to reinforce colonial norms, and planters, who had economic and social interests in maintaining stability, routinely described these congregations as corrupted or superstitious.[28] Baptist missionary John Clark (1802–1879) lamented that African-led practices within his denomination featured heavy superstitions not followed by traditional Christians.[29] Reverend F. A. Cox (1783–1853) dismissed them as intermingled with many falsehoods and, again, superstitions.[30]

One nineteenth century scholar William James Gardner's account shines further light on the common perspective that the British had towards the new "Native Baptism." While establishing the view that the "superstitious and immoral" Afro-Jamaican ringleaders were responsible for the excessive violence witnessed during the 1831 rebellion, Gardner described the Native Baptist communities as follows:

> "With a few exceptions, native Baptist churches became associations of men and women who, in too many cases, mingled the belief and even practice of Myalism with religious observances, and who perverted and corrupted what they retained of these; among the sensuality was almost unrestrained. Their leaders or 'daddies,' as a class were overbearing, tyrannical, and lascivious, and united the authority of the slave-driver with the darkest forms of spiritual despotism. Of Scriptural teaching there was little. Simple facts were so perverted, that they would have been ridiculous had they not been blasphemous."[31]

Gardner presents Myalist features as contaminants to the orthodox, white-administered Baptist faith. These included superstitious acts of Myal origin, unrestrained sensual qualities, and the despotic

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[26] Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery,*132

[27] Noel Leo Erskine, *Black Missionary in an Age of Enlightenment: The Life and Times of George Liele* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2024), 5.

[28] Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 8-9 and 17.

[29] John Clark, *Memories of Baptist Missionaries in Jamaica, Including A Sketch of Labours of Early Religious Instructors in Jamaica* (London: Yates and Alexander, 1869), 13

[30] Francis A. Cox, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society from 1792–1842*, Volume 2. (London: T. Ward, 1842), 181. See also Abigail B. Bakan, *Ideology and Class Conflict in Jamaica: The Politics of Rebellion* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), 51

[31] William James Gardner, *A History of Jamaica From its Discovery by Christopher Columbus to the Present Time; Including An Account of its Trade and Agriculture; Sketches of the Manners, Habits, and Customs of all Classes of its Inhabitants; and A Narrative of the Progress of Religion and Education on the Island* (London: Elliot Stock, 1873), 345.

authority exercised by the ringleaders within the Baptist circles. Given the centrality of the dance in Myal rituals, it is not implausible that the practice and sensuality of Myalism that Gardner condemned—and which he attributed to the 1831 "fanatic" violence—may have involved elements of the Myal dance, one of the most famous and openly African types of rituals discussed by colonial authorities and planters alike.

These judgements, however, reveal more about colonial anxiety rather than theological departures. What missionaries condemned as superstition more accurately reflected the persistence of African-derived ritual practices operating within Christian forms. Colonial discourse thus serves as evidence of reactionary measures: the anxiety provoked by Black religious communities signaled a growing rupture in colonial authority.

V. CRIMINALIZING RITUAL: LAW, SUPPRESSION, AND THE LIMITS OF REFORM

By this point, the British colonial state had spent decades attempting to regulate, if not eradicate, African spirituality. The plantocracy viewed these African-derived ritual systems, most notably Obeah and Myal, as direct threats to the island's order. Obeah was generally perceived as a form of malevolent sorcery associated with personal harm or vengeance, while Myal was understood as a more communal "shadow-catching" practice concerned with healing or protection.[32] Colonial observers, however, frequently collapsed these distinct traditions into a single category of witchcraft. Moreover, "Obeah" became a catch-all term for slave practices or African rituals.[33]

Colonial anxieties regarding the spread of rituals had been reinforced by earlier observers. Hans Sloane (1660–1753), an Irish physician and naturalist who had visited the island in the late 1600s, remarked on the rituals' potential to incite rebellion.[34] Later missionaries, who displayed hostility toward the Native Baptist Church aired similar concerns, characterizing aspects of worship as derivatives of cults and superstitions associated with past rebellions.[35]

Negative reactions and colonial ignorance is evident in contemporary and later writings. In his journal, for example, Matthew Gregory Lewis, a slaveowner in Jamaica (1775–1818) writes that "the 'myal dance' [was] intended to remove any doubt of the chief Obeah-man's supernatural powers."[36] Lewis mischaracterized a Myal ceremony as confirmation of Obeah power. Similar misrepresentations appear even in later, academic texts. Jesuit missionary A. J. Emerick's (1856 ~ 1931) "Woodstock Text" holds

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[32] Joseph J. Williams, *Voodoos and Obeahs: Phases of West India Witchcraft* (Lincoln MacVeagh and S. J. Dial Press, 1932), 154-155

[33] Diana Paton, *The Cultural Politics of Obeah: Religion, Colonialism and Modernity in the Caribbean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 76-77. Diana Paton demonstrates that colonial authorities framed Obeah as criminal not merely out of superstition, but as a strategy to suppress alternative systems of authority within enslaved communities, reinforcing the link between spiritual practice and political control.

[34] Hans Sloane. *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica* (London: Printed by B. M. for the author, 1707), page L.

[35] Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean*, 37.

[36] Matthew Gregory Lewis, *Journal of a West India Proprietor: Kept During a Residence In the Island of Jamaica* (London: John Murray, 1845), 354-355

that Obeahmen and Myalmen undertook the same forms of shadow stealing or cursing.[37] For the enslaved, however, these traditions remained distinct, even oppositional, even though both belonged to a moral and spiritual world beyond the reach of the colonial authority. This misunderstanding reduced cultural complexity amidst enslaved populations' beliefs into dangerous threats against the existing social, religious order.

Colonial anxiety over Afro-Jamaican religious practices produced a series of increasingly aggressive legal prohibitions. The House of Assembly in 1788, the formal legislature of the colony dominated by the wealthy white planter class, was spooked by violent uprisings such as Tacky's Revolt (1760–61), which was led by, among other social leaders, a variety of Obeah-men and priests. Tacky's Revolt and the British response to it revealed the depth of colonial fear by explicitly criminalizing "the practice of obeah" alongside "irregular assemblies of slaves" and the possession of "arms and ammunition" by slaves.[38] This moment can be understood as a calculated attempt to dismantle an alternative system of authority. Other texts discuss how Obeah had long functioned as a religio-political epistemology, a way of organizing knowledge, leadership, and communal belonging among the enslaved. Its practitioners were not merely feared sorcerers but figures who mediated healing, spiritual insight, and social cohesion.[39] The legal codification of Obeah as criminal thus reflects what can be termed an act of epistemic suppression, in which colonial authorities sought to delegitimize and fragment a system of knowledge that enabled both collective identity and coordinated resistance.[40]

This legal campaign reached its apex when the Jamaican Assembly passed the 1826 Slave Law, a statute that framed religious reform as a preventative response to unrest. Clause III instructed slave owners to "endeavour the instruction of their slaves in the principles of the Christian religion," reflecting the colonial belief that a "civilized" faith would displace the subterranean power of Myalism or Obeahism. Yet the statute remained fundamentally punitive. Although it offered limited protections to the enslaved, such as restrictions on the separation of families during sales (Clause V) and a conditional right to personal property (Clause XV), these concessions were explicitly subordinated to the maintenance of "due order and subordination."[41] The 1826 Act thus illustrates, on the one hand, what colonial authorities tried to exclude from Afro-Jamaicans everyday life, including religious practices of African origin, and, on the other hand, how colonial authorities sought to stabilize the slave system by recasting the strategic loosening of repression wrapped within the language of sociopolitical reform.

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[37] Abraham J. Emerick, *Jamaica Mialism*, Woodstock, 1916, p. 39 ff.
[38] "An Act to repeal an Act, intitled, "An Act to repeal several Acts, and Clauses of Acts, respecting Slaves, and for the better Order and Government of Slaves, and for other Purposes:" And also to repeal the several Acts, and Clauses of Acts, which were repealed by the Act intitled as aforesaid; and for consolidating and bringing into one Act the several Laws relating to Slaves, and for giving them further Protection and Security; for altering the Mode of Trial of Slaves charged with capital Offences; and for other Purposes." Laws of Enslavement and Freedom in the Anglo-Atlantic World, University of New Brunswick
[39] Orlando Patterson highlights how enslaved populations developed alternative social institutions that these laws sought to suppress.
[40] "An Act in furtherance of the Provisions of the Abolition Laws within this Island." Laws of Enslavement and Freedom in the Anglo-Atlantic World, University of New Brunswick
[41] "An Act to alter and amend the Slave Laws of this island." Laws of Enslavement and Freedom in the Anglo-Atlantic World, University of New Brunswick

VI. ADAPTATION AND MOBILIZATION: NATIVE BAPTISTS AND REVOLUTIONARY CAPACITY

As the rebellion of 1831 approached, the ineffectiveness of these measures became increasingly evident. Criminalization failed to eradicate these practices; instead, ritual traditions reshaped the conditions under which they endured. In particular, elements of Myalism adapted and, under sustained pressure, merged with Baptist Christianity. With continued pressure by the British authorities and the slaves' own masters, Myalism and other ritualistic practices soon saw a sharp, marked decline, but many practitioners and converts co-opted Christian symbols and conventional worship formulations, merging their traditional rituals, practices, and values. By the time Samuel Sharpe began organizing his strike, decades of legislative efforts ultimately failed to eliminate Obeah and Myal. Ironically, colonial repression helped redirect Myal into Native Baptist churches, where older forms of collective discipline and communal authority continued to thrive. Sanctified by the Bible and partially masked by Christian hierarchy, the adapted Myal elements contributed to the readiness with which collective resistance could be mobilized.

The Native Baptist Church developed in ways that facilitated the incorporation of African religious practices, particularly those associated with Myalism. As Turner argues, enslaved Jamaicans adapted Protestant teachings "for their own ends," reshaping Christianity to reflect African moral and ritual logics.[42] Similarly, Noel Erskine contends that Afro-Jamaicans interpreted Christian ideas in ways that resonated with "their own practices and stories back home in Africa."[43] This insight is deepened by illustrating how such reinterpretations operated; African-derived systems like Obeah did not disappear but instead absorbed and reframed Christian rituals. The fact that Moravian missionaries were at one point identified as Obeah practitioners underscores this dynamic: enslaved people were not passively receiving Christianity, but actively situating it within familiar structures of spiritual authority. In this light, the spread of Christianity in Jamaica must be understood not as a linear civilizing process, but as a contested and hybrid transformation, in which Afro-Jamaican actors retained intellectual agency by reshaping imposed beliefs into tools for meaning-making, cohesion, and, ultimately, resistance.[44]

Authority within these churches was concentrated in select leaders, often referred to as "daddies," echoing a system of hierarchy closely resembling African cult traditions.[45] Another essential feature of Myalism, night meetings, ostensibly conducted for Baptist worship, provided opportunities to coordinate and spread information with one another. Henry Bleby noted how these meetings, under the guise of church activity, became meetings for planning the strikes.[46]

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[42] Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 59.
[43] Erskine, *Black Missionary in an Age of Enslavement*, 91.
[44] Katharine Gerbner, *Archival Irruptions: Constructing Religion and Criminalizing Obeah in Eighteenth-Century Jamaica*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2025), 17-37.
[45] Vincent Brown, "Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society." *Slavery & Abolition* (2003), 43-44.
[46] Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery*, 122-124.

Missionary observers frequently commented that the authority of these leaders far exceeded their Methodist or Baptist counterparts in Britain. Bernard Martin (1788–1860), a hostile contemporary, mockingly described Samuel Sharpe as "Daddy Ruler General," a phrase which, however mocking or ironic, exposes the fusion of religious leadership and political authority within these communities.[47] Although historian Robert Stewart traces the class system partly to the influence of certain Christian missions, its Jamaican manifestation was far more certain.[48] As Mary Reckord observes, the title "Daddy" carried both spiritual and political weight, allowing leaders to discipline members, convene congregations, and command loyalty.[49]

This authority closely parallels Myalist leadership, in which ritual specialists, treated with reverence, mediated between social and spiritual worlds, managed collective energy, and sanctified oaths of loyalty. Within Native Baptist communities, those leaders occupied comparable positions. Although a Christian deacon, Sharpe also functioned as a religious leader for the rebels, consecrating resistance through communal trust.[50] During the Baptist War, Sharpe's role as leader reflected this dual function. Daddies exercised religious leadership while providing moral justification for collective action.[51] Contemporary accounts indicate that, following public religious service, smaller inner circles would remain, surrounding the leader, for secret rituals involving Bible-based oath-taking, prayers for deliverance, and pledges of unity. Disdainful missionaries openly denounced Native Baptist leaders as Christianized pagans, or Obeahmen.[52]

The Baptist "ticket" system provides further evidence of how Myal practices adapted within Christian structures. Tickets were tokens of Christian membership that enslaved congregants used to verify their standing within the church. Introduced by missionaries as an administrative tool to regulate church membership, tickets gradually acquired far deeper meanings among the enslaved congregants. George Liele (c.1750–1828), considered the patriarch of the Native Baptist Movement, popularized the ticket system during his time in Jamaica.[53] Thus, a practical method for recording attendance and piety evolved into a tangible emblem of salvation and protection, comparable to the charms or protective "fetishes" employed in Myalist rituals which were believed to safeguard the owner.

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[47] Bernard Martin Sr. *Jamaica as it was, as it is, and as it may be: Comprising Interesting Topics for Absent Proprietors, Merchants &c., and Valuable Hints to Persons Intending to Emigrate to the Island: Also an Authentic Narrative of the Negro Insurrection in 1831; with a Faithful Detail of the Manners, Customs and Habits of the Colonists, and a Description of the Country, Climate, Productions, &c., Including an Abridgment of the Slave Law* (London: T. Hurst, 1835), 257.
[48] Robert J. Stewart, *Religion and Society in Post-Emancipation Jamaica* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 124.
[49] Mary Reckord, "The Jamaica Slave Rebellion of 1831," *Past & Present* (1968), 113.
[50] Monica Schuler, "Myalism and the African Religious Tradition in Jamaica," *Africa and the Caribbean: The Legacies of a Link*, Margaret E. Crahan and Franklin W. Knight, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). Reprint in *Caribbean Slave Society and Economy: a Student Reader,* Hilary Beckles and Verene Shepherd, eds. (Kingston, Jamaica: Randle, 1991), 295-96.
[51] Rebecca Schneider, "Black Literacy and Resistance in Jamaica." *Social and Economic Studies* 67, no. 1 (2018), 57-58
[52] Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries*, 79
[53] Erskine, *Black Missionary in an Age of Enlightenment*, 89.

Whereas the enslaved bought a magical talisman from an Obeah practitioner to inflict vengeance, Myal charms were commonly understood as protective objects to repel evil and misfortune.[54] Oftentimes these charms held influence in the hands of ritual priests, demonstrating their "supernatural," or "superstitious," power.[55] Missionary John Clark observed that the tickets were regarded with "superstitious reverence" and treated as "passports to heaven."[56] Reverend F. A. Cox similarly noted that tickets were highly valued and sometimes obtained through payment, indicating their integration into a ritual economy. When viewed through African cosmology, these tickets functioned much like ritualistic charms, a material sign of spiritual protection and moral legitimacy.[57] Taken together, these accounts suggest that Afro-Jamaican Baptists reinterpreted the ticket's material symbolism through two complementary frameworks: the African worldview that treated physical tokens as vessels of spiritual forces and a ritual economy involving purchase of the magical spells.

Colonial observers occasionally reported, often without elaboration, that these tokens were treated as talismans, kept hidden on the body and used during oath ceremonies. One of the clearest illustrations of this perception appears in a little-examined episode recorded by Henry Bleby, which sheds light on how such tickets were understood in 1831, during the repression that followed the Baptist War. In recounting the martial law after the Baptist War, Bleby described the punishment of several enslaved men accused of rebellious activity. Among them was Robert Lamont, a slave "connected with the Wesleyan-Methodist Society at Falmouth," against whom no direct evidence of participating in the 1831 revolt could be produced. However, when a ticket was discovered in his residence, it was deemed sufficient proof of his dangerous intent, and Lamont was sentenced to five hundred lashings of "great severity," and life imprisonment with hard labor.[58]

There is no way to determine whether Lamont's professed innocence (*i.e.* his non-participation in the 1831 revolt) represents historical truth or dramatization on Bleby's part, but the passage nonetheless communicates crucial insights into how the ticket system, and indeed other practices, were perceived. The mere possession of the ticket served as grounds for arrest and punishment, indicating that such objects had become markers of political suspicion. More revealing, however, is the inversion of meaning that Bleby's language exposes. Although the ticket was to signify Christian membership, Bleby's rhetorics illustrate the opposite perception: Phrases such as "concerning the law of his God" or "evil-disposed and dangerous person" that Bleby employed suggest that, in the colonial reactionary gestures, a token of Christian faith had become equivalent to a charm or talisman associated with the island's deviant superstitions.[59] In this way, the ticket, originally a tool of Christian reform, was recast as proof of subversion. In this moment, a reformist instrument of Christian discipline became, through colonial reaction, evidence of revolutionary threat.

[54] John Shipman, "Thoughts upon the Present State of Religion among the Negroes of Jamaica", 1820, MS vol. 2, 12-13

[55] Brown, "Spiritual Terror and Sacred Authority in Jamaican Slave Society.", 43-44.

[56] John Clark et al., *The Voice of Jubilee: A Narrative of the Baptist Mission, Jamaica, from Its Commencement; with biographical notices of its fathers and founders.* (London: J. Snow, 1865): 122-23

[57] F.A. Cox, *History of the Baptist Missionary Society*, 17.

[58] Bleby, *Death Struggles of Slavery,* 88.

[59] *ibid.*

VII. DISCUSSION

As David Geggus previously suggests, the Baptist War provides a crucial lens through which to understand the intersection of culture, religion, resistance, and colonial power within the Atlantic world. This essay builds on that insight by arguing that the uprising cannot be explained solely through economic decline or external ideological influence. Instead, it demonstrates that Afro-Jamaican belief systems and cultural practices formed the foundation through which enslaved people interpreted oppression and organized resistance, making the revolt the culmination of long-term processes of cultural and intellectual transformation.

The significance of the Baptist War lies in how it challenges interpretations of resistance that privilege material conditions or overt violence alone. While structural pressures shaped the context of revolt, they do not fully explain its scale or coherence. This study shows that religious and cultural systems provided frameworks for solidarity, communication, and moral authority, enabling resistance to persist across generations. In this sense, resistance was not merely reactive, but sustained through shared epistemologies that gave meaning and direction to collective action.

At the same time, the uprising had broader imperial consequences, contributing to the passage of the 1833 Slavery Abolition Act. However, this essay reframes that process by emphasizing how colonial reactions to Afro-Jamaican cultural resistance—through repression, legislation, and surveillance—exposed the fragility of the slave system. Attempts to suppress spiritual practices often intensified resistance, revealing that cultural control was central to colonial authority and that its failure accelerated the destabilization of slavery.

Finally, this study highlights how enslaved Jamaicans transformed religious practice into systems of organization and leadership. Movements such as the Native Baptist Church illustrate how African spiritual traditions were reshaped within Christian institutions, producing hybrid forms of authority that enabled coordination and resistance. Rather than disappearing under repression, these traditions evolved, demonstrating that cultural adaptation was itself a form of resistance. By foregrounding these dynamics, this essay contributes to Caribbean historiography by showing that resistance was rooted not only in material struggle, but in enduring systems of belief that sustained both survival and revolution.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The Baptist War of 1831, when studied more thoroughly, can be seen as the culmination of a longer process shaped by colonial reaction and inadvertent consequence. British efforts to suppress African religious practices, through legal bans, surveillance, and missionary reform, constituted a reaction to this latent power. These measures were framed as reform from the colonial standpoint, designed to impose order and moral improvement. Yet repression only drove traditions underground, where it adapted and reemerged within Native Baptist communities.

This dynamic transformed reform into reaction and reaction into a fuel of revolution. Religious tools intended to discipline enslaved populations, missionary oversight, church structures, and material tokens such as tickets, were reinterpreted and recast as evidence of subversion. By the time the Baptist War erupted, Native Baptist communities, through the integration of Myalist traditions into Christianity, had prepared alternative systems of legitimacy, discipline, and collective power that directly challenged colonial rule.

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