

## Revival Zion

### An Afro-Christian Religion in Jamaica

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**Abstract.** — Meant as an ethnography of the Afro-Christian religion Revival Zion, this paper also addresses the question of the role of Revivalism in contemporary Jamaican society and culture. Widely practiced in many rural areas of Jamaica as well as in the urban ghettos of Kingston, Revival Zion seems to be not only a form of accommodation to harsh living conditions, but also a way of resisting and, at times, of actively opposing cultural and social oppression. [*Jamaica, Afro-Caribbean religions, nativistic movements, religion and society, syncretism*]

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"W'en drum knock onda water bottom  
de sound mus come a tap"  
(Jamaican Saying; Watson 1991: 193)

#### 1. Introduction:

##### Afro-Jamaican Religious Variety

Afro-Jamaican religions have been conventionally classified on a continuum from a more "European" to a markedly "African" end, that is from Revival Zion,<sup>1</sup> regarded as the most "Christianized," to the least Christian Kumina (Moore 1953: 1f.). However, although convenient from a taxonomic point of view, the definition of "African" in this context is not convincing. Even the least "European" Afro-Jamaican religions, such as Kumina, do not share many traits with their African equivalents. In fact, the former are clearly the result of cultural processes that took place in the New World and that completely altered the alchemy of the systems of religious beliefs (Raboteau 1978: 4). This might account also for the lack of a truly African pantheon in Afro-Jamaican religions, the only exception being the "Fish" or "Mermaid," the water spirit of Revival Zion (Beckwith 1929: 101f.; Patterson 1969: 205) that bears resemblances with Oshun, the riverine deity worshipped in the Trinidadian *orisha* religion (Warner Lewis 1991: 85), and with

Ezili, the water goddess of Haitian *vodou* (Desmangles 1992: 143).

Kumina, conventionally perceived as the "African" end of the continuum, is a secretive cult practiced mainly in the rural areas of St. Thomas and St. Catherine parishes. Although Kumina was thought to have developed at the time of slavery (Patterson 1969: 201), most anthropologists nowadays believe that this religion originated in Jamaica only after the arrival of indentured laborers from Central Africa (mainly Kikongo) during the second half of the 19th century. Presently, Kumina practitioners, who define themselves as the "African people," still use Kikongo language for ritual purposes (Bilby and Bunseki 1983: 65-93). Kumina ceremonies are held on specific occasions like a death, a disease, or a thanksgiving to the spirits (Simpson 1980: 166). The rituals share a number of traits with other Afro-American religions like the use of ceremonial drums, the sacrifice of an animal (usually a goat), and spirit possession. However, although Kumina is defined as the least Christianized among Afro-Jamaican religions, it seems that a syncretism is going on with the Christian Revival Zion. Whereas Kumina spirits occasionally manifest themselves at Revival services, Christian angels are taking on a role in Kumina cosmology, and, in Spanish Town, "tables" are laid in a Revival fashion for Kumina rituals (Ryman 1984: 123).

Based on a fieldwork that took place in 1992, the ethnographic material presented in this paper is meant to contribute to the study of Revivalism in contemporary Jamaica. Revival Zion is the result of a syncretism of Baptism and a Jamaican Afro-Creole religion called "Myal." From Baptism, Revival Zion derived mainly the literal approach to the biblical doctrine, to which it added Afro-Creole elements like spirit possession, the emphasis on

1 Also called simply Revival: although Moore reports Revival Zion and Revival as separate religions, it seems, also on the basis of Simpson 1956: 342, that no such distinction exists.