

# Church corners cannabis market

The future of the Jamaican economy may be bound up with the fortunes of an obscure religious sect of right-wing political views, which is already a major business on the island, and is currently facing charges in America of smuggling over 100 tons of cannabis. TIM MALYON of the UK Legalise Cannabis Campaign has just returned from a visit to Jamaica.

JAMAICA IS FACING desperate economic problems which are in turn leading to escalating unemployment and social unrest, and increasing pressure for an early general election. Prime Minister Michael Manley's ruling People's National Party has refused further aid from the International Monetary Fund because of impossible cuts demanded in government spending by the Fund's bankers. So far the search for alternative remedies has been in vain but Manley might be reconsidering a remark he made in 1978 about alternative ways of earning foreign exchange.

The question of legitimate marijuana exposes me to extreme temptation. As you know, Jamaica has a balance of payments crisis and we have never been able to get the marijuana sales to pass through our bank.

Although the Jamaican authorities have been making efforts to reduce both the sale and export of marijuana, this April the *Financial Times* reported that 'a growing body of Jamaican opinion' supported moves to legalise marijuana as the annual trade was estimated to be worth \$200 million — roughly the same as the latest reported net deficit in the island's foreign reserves.

Jamaica is now undoubtedly a major world exporter of herbal cannabis. According to UN figures, 8,661,540 plants were uprooted on the island in 1978, 72 per cent total world plant seizures. Although colonially-imposed taboos against cannabis are breaking down rapidly, and increasing numbers of the middle class are using the herb, usage remains most common among the working classes. 'Given the extent of non-smoking uses, one could estimate with considerable confidence that some 60 to 70 per cent of the lower section of the rural population, men, women and children, inhale, ingest or use ganja in some form — undoubtedly one of the highest rate of marijuana use for any population in the Western world.' (Vera Rubin and Lambroe Comitas, *Ganja in Jamaica*). This same US government sponsored study reported that over 25 per cent of households in one of the island's communities, itself 'not a particularly large producer of ganja,' were openly known to be cultivating. With the exception of a few larger cultivators who were selling to the urban areas, the majority of cultivators came from the poorest levels of society.

For many people on the island, and in particular members of the Rasta movement, cannabis has an immense spiritual and symbolic significance, a significance where politics, economics and religion have become inextricably entangled during the island's struggle against political and cultural oppression. Jabulani Tafari, a leading Rastafarian, explained: 'We are calling for a spiritual, internal revolution. We see herb now as part

of that process, and Rasta being one of the principal agents in this movement.'

The extent to which marijuana has been absorbed into the mainstream of Jamaican culture is suggested by this remark from the Senior Medical Officer of Jamaica's largest psychiatric hospital, Dr Freddy Hickling, who is a supporter of the Rasta movement and advocate of a legal cannabis trade:

'Herb is for the healing of the nations', the Rastaman says, 'herb is for the healing of the nations'. Let us deal with the reality of what we are about. And the realities are Babylon, the international capitalist system, which has held us down for 400 years — that is what we about. Ganja is a sacred and holy element in this phenomenon.

Despite certain apparent similarities — such as its attitude to marijuana — the Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church is not part of the Rastafarian movement. Recently the church — which has substantial land and business interests in Jamaica — was indicted by a US Federal Grand Jury on charges involving conspiracy to import and traffic in marijuana — at least 15 tons. It is currently involved in an attempt to overthrow the whole US machinery of marijuana prohibition in its fight against the charges.

The Ethiopian Zion Coptic Church has already been accepted by the US courts as a religion, as has their use of marijuana as an essential sacrament. Building on the right guaranteed in the US Constitution's First Amendment to free exercise of religion (a right which the Native American Church enjoys today in its use of peyote) the Coptics' leading lawyer, former Attorney General and Presidential envoy to Iran, Ramsey Clark, is pushing to have all charges dismissed as unconstitutional. He is also presenting evidence to show that there is no rational basis for the present classification of marijuana as a dangerous substance with no medical uses. He hopes thereby to show that 'the statutes under which the defendant is charged are unconstitutional in that they are arbitrary and irrational and therefore deny the defendant due process of law and equal protection of the laws, in violation of the 5th amendment.'

For four days last month, a somewhat bemused judge listened to a remarkable body of evidence concerning the real effects on

health of regular smoking of high doses of marijuana. The Coptics called in two leading marijuana experts to testify to the herb's general safety: Dr Lester Grinspoon, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Harvard University and Dr Thomas Ungerliedler, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at UCLA Medical Centre, who also spoke of cannabis's possible medical uses. They called two witnesses at present receiving legal prescriptions for marijuana — one for the treatment of the side-effects of cancer chemotherapy, one for glaucoma, a relatively common eye disease which can lead to eventual blindness. The Coptics also produced the results of one of the first pieces of detailed research on a controlled group of marijuana users. Five professors had examined a group of some 30 Coptics (men, women and children, black and white) and found them a remarkably healthy group of people. Dr Brian Weiss, from the University of Miami Medical School summed up his report as follows:

Even though the numbers we examined were relatively small, I think it is extremely important to make the observation that some people, at least, can smoke marijuana in high doses for 16 hours daily for up to 50 years, without apparent psychological or physical harm.

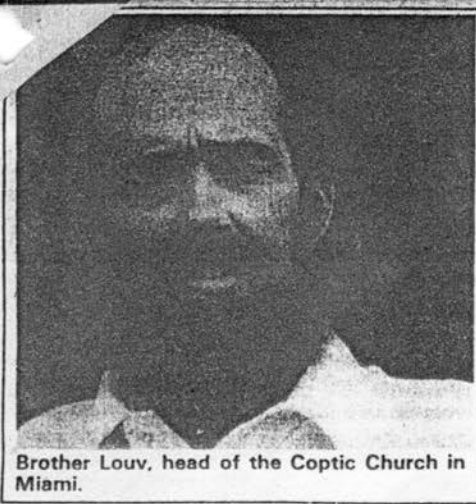
The prosecution case against the Coptics alleges that multi-ton quantities of marijuana were unloaded on six separate occasions; that Jamaican military officers were bribed to establish the location and plans of the Jamaican Coast Guard and Defence Force; that several boats and an aeroplane were bought to carry on the trade; and that the Church itself was used as a cover for the operation. If the motion to dismiss the charges succeeds — one American lawyer quoted odds of 9 to 1 against the Church winning — the cannabis trade may be opened to anyone or any bona fide church (whatever that means) which uses marijuana as a sacrament.

THE ETHIOPIAN ZION COPTIC church was founded by a black Jamaican, Louva Williams, who, — according to Dr Melanie Dreher, an expert on Jamaican religion and cannabis use, 'preached the doctrine to bretheren in his yard throughout the 1940s'. He died in 1969 and his successor,



The Coptic's \$270,000 mansion in Miami.

Tim Malyon



Tim Malyon

Brother Louv, head of the Coptic Church in Miami.

George Baker Ivy, not only saved the Church from disintegrating, but was also responsible for opening its membership to whites. After his death in 1970 leadership passed to Keith Gordon — a man who struck me in my brief meeting as worldly wise. He and two other elders, Laurrenton Dickens and Walter Wells, form the Church's spiritual leadership, although business in the US seems to be run by white members, whose names appear on papers for the US-based Zion Coptic Church Inc and Coptic Container Corporation. During the 1970s, despite only a modest growth in membership the Church's assets and influence grew 'exponentially', according to Dr Dreher.

The Church owns a \$270,000 mansion on Miami's exclusive Star Island and a small farm in Florida, but its headquarters and main operations are centred in Jamaica. It owns some 4,000 acres of land, producing a huge volume and variety of foodstuffs, some of which are sold through the Church's own supermarket, Wendy's. Coptic Containers handles large scale government and private contracts and two other companies sell vehicles and spare parts. The Church also runs a furniture business and employs in all some 1,000 people on an island where almost a third of the population have no jobs.

On their farms the Coptics have carried out huge renovation and improvement programmes, involving the construction of a lumber yard and mill, irrigation schemes, houses and roads. Their main farm lies in the Parish of St Thomas — one of the island's poorest areas. Following the closure of some of the area's largest employing organisations and the destruction of the coconut industry by yellowing disease, the Coptics are now a major employer in that part of Jamaica, and are popular with local people, including businessmen and politicians. They enjoy a reputation for paying good wages and when I visited their farm the general appearance of the surrounding neighbourhood was certainly one of comparative prosperity.

However the recent purchase of a further large estate in the area has given rise to reports of concern from small tenant farmers who felt they were being turned off their land without adequate compensation and with no prospect of alternative land or employment. Others are not fond of the Church: the Jamaican police frequently raid Coptic farms and recently uprooted five acres of mature cannabis plants; the US Drugs Enforcement Administration have expressed their displeasure and the UK Customs and Excise have just successfully

prosecuted a member of the UK Coptics for four offences of importation.

Many Rastafarians are also suspicious of the Coptic's motives and feel that the Church is usurping the true religion of Rasta. In particular, they resent the Coptics' description of them as 'rope heads'.

The Coptics do not believe in the divinity of Haile Selassie nor in the return to Africa, although they do support Africa for the Africans. I felt a strong white fundamentalist influence in their teachings on sin, confession and obedience. Although on the surface their doctrine appears similar to much in Rastafarianism, it is characterised by an oppressive intolerance foreign to the Rasta households in which I have stayed. For example, a recent edition of the Coptic's newspaper *Coptic Time* said:

The women's liberation movement does not represent liberation, it represents bondage, for they are bound by sin and destruction . . . women now want to leave their home and pursue careers, either by neglecting their own family or by forsaking altogether their greatest blessing, child bearing. This is achieved by murdering their unborn children either by birth control pills and devices or, if that fails, abortion.

While many Rastas are opposed to birth control and abortion as well as being suspicious of the women's movement, they would refrain from conducting the debate in such obsessive and intolerant terms.

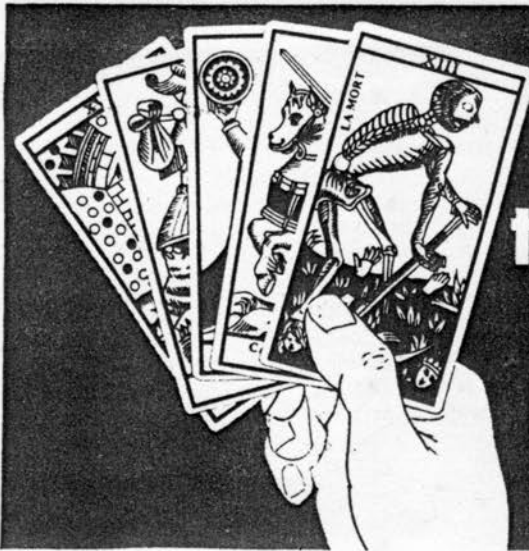
THE CHURCH publicises its beliefs and the fight to free ganja through *Coptic Time*, which is mailed free of charge to anybody in the world who asks for it: 200,000 copies are printed for Jamaica alone. A 50,000 watt

radio station, Radio Free Coptic, is apparently about to commence transmission to Jamaica, Cuba, Haiti and parts of the US. The Coptics are strongly opposed to communism and to other forms of 'political fuckery'. And while the diverse Rasta movement ('Unity is not necessarily uniformity') has been involved in the anti-colonialist and anti-class struggle, there is little evidence that the Coptics enjoy the same populist support amongst the radical black youth of Jamaica.

Dawn Rich, a regular columnist in the conservative *Daily Gleaner* recently voiced the fears of many who are in favour of the legalisation of cannabis:

Jamaican small farmers are in the process of being re-colonised by an extremely dubious Miami outfit which proposes to use an indigenous cult — Rastafarianism — as its religious cover, so that it can be free to market ganja, indeed provide a legitimate source of the commodity in the United States.

These fears are echoed by many on the left in Jamaica who repeat an accusation levelled in Dawn Rich's article that the Coptics pay high prices for bulk quantities of cannabis and are cornering the organised export market. In reply the Coptics deny trafficking and correctly point out that they have never been convicted on an organised cannabis trafficking charge. 'Our deity is not one of commerce, yet of unity, love and charity among the masses of the world', says Victor Whitely, the Church's General Secretary. However, the present economic, religious and social climate in Jamaica places cannabis and therefore the Coptics in a key position.



**Playing with  
the supernatural  
or just  
playing cards?**

Tarot cards are now as important as the Cabala, the Hermetic books, alchemy and astrology as a prime source of the European occultist tradition.

However this has not always been the case. This week Michael Dummett, Professor of Logic at the

University of Oxford, describes the true history of this ancient game in The Times Higher Education Supplement.

**Also in this week's paper:**

\*Profile of Emmanuel le Roy Ladurie and his latest book, 'Carnival', is reviewed by Christopher Hill.

\*The importance of Wyndham Lewis.



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