

Rastafarians seek benefits of cannabis legalization

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(From left) Mosiyah Tafari and Binghi Neal take a break from drumming and chanting as Ras Jabo (right) holds frankincense during an event in Columbus, Ohio, on November 2. (AP Photo/Luis Andres Henao)

Mosiyah Tafari banged on drums and chanted psalms with other Rastafarians in a ballroom where the smoke of frankincense mixed with the fragrant smell of cannabis—a substance his faith deems sacred.

The ceremony in Columbus, Ohio, marked the 91st anniversary of the coronation of the late Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie I, whom Rastafarians worship as their savior. For hours, the group played traditional Nyabinghi music for its most

important holy day.

“Cannabis is something that puts you in contact with the spiritual aspect of life in the physical body,” said Tafari, a member of the Columbus-based Rastafari Coalition, which organized the event. “It’s important for Rastafari because we follow the traditions of the scriptures and we see that cannabis is good.”

For Rastafarians, the ritualistic smoking of cannabis brings them closer to the divine. But for decades, many have been incarcerated because of their use of the drug. As public opinion and policy continue to shift in the United States and across the world toward legalization of cannabis for both medical and recreational purposes, Rastafarians are clamoring for broader relaxation to curtail persecution and ensure freedom of worship.

“In this system, they’re very focused on, ‘Oh, we can make a lot of money, we can sell these medicinal cards, we can sell this ganja,’ but what of the people who have been persecuted? What of the people who have been sent to jail, imprisoned, even killed?” said Ras Nyah, a music producer from the US Virgin Islands and a Rastafari Coalition member.

The Rastafari faith is rooted in 1930s Jamaica, where it grew as a Black response to White colonial oppression. Its beliefs are a melding of Old Testament teachings and a desire to return to Africa. Rastafari followers believe the use of cannabis is directed in biblical passages and that the “holy herb” induces a meditative state. The faithful smoke it as a sacrament in chalice pipes or cigarettes called spliffs, add it to vegetarian stews, and place it in fires as a burnt offering.

Ganja, as cannabis is known in Jamaica, has a long history in that country, and its arrival predates the Rastafari faith. Indentured servants from India brought the plant to the island in the 19th century, and it gained popularity as a medicinal herb.

It began to gain wider acceptance in the 1970s when Rastafari and reggae culture were popularized through music icons Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, two of the faith’s most famous exponents. Tosh’s 1976 hit “Legalize It” remains a rallying cry for those pushing to make cannabis legal.

The so-called war on drugs declared by President Richard Nixon more than five decades ago prompted a rise in anti-possession laws with stricter sentencing. But now, as cannabis becomes a lucrative, legal business, US-based Rastafarians want

to make sure that those harmed by prohibition receive some restitution.

“Maybe take some of those finances, those many millions and billions and trillions of dollars, and invest them back into brothers and sisters who have been incarcerated over a long period of time,” Tafari said.

While cannabis remains illegal at the federal level in the United States, lawmakers from Oregon to New York have passed a raft of legislation legalizing it at the state level.

In Jamaica, authorities gave the green light to a regulated medical cannabis industry and decriminalized possession of small amounts of weed in 2015. The country also recognized the sacramental rights of Rastafarians to their sacred plant.

Jamaicans are now allowed up to five plants per household for personal use only. But this has not stopped run-ins with police, said Jahlani Niaah, a lecturer in cultural and Rastafari studies at Jamaica’s University of the West Indies.

“Rastafari have had various challenges where they’ve had herbs confiscated and disappeared in police custody and continue to be abused in relation to claiming a sacramental right,” he said. “There’s really a slip between the pen and the practice.”

Jamaican minister of justice Delroy Chuck said in a statement that “instances of perceived discrimination are unfortunate” but the government continues to facilitate equality and inclusion in the legal regime.

Other Jamaican Rastafarians are concerned that they have been left out of the burgeoning business.

When the Jamaican government launched a program in 2017 aimed at helping “traditional” ganja farmers transition into the legal industry, Ras Iyah V, a Rastafari advocate and former member of Jamaica’s Cannabis Licensing Authority, was hopeful that it could help the Rastafari community.

But today he is “very disappointed in terms of how it is going. The vast majority of our ganja farmers are not able to participate because they don’t have any land.”

Setting up a one-acre cannabis farm following the guidelines established by Jamaican law can cost thousands of dollars, he said.

“The cannabis industry has now been taken out of the hands of Rastafari and the traditional ganja farmers and placed in the hands of rich people,” he said. “It makes us very bitter because we don’t see any justice in that.” —Associated Press