

O GHETTO UTOPIA

"I BELIEVE THAT JESUS, THE BLACK MESSIAH, WAS A REVOLUTIONARY LEADER, SENT BY GOD TO REBUILD THE BLACK NATION ISRAEL AND TO LIBERATE BLACK PEOPLE FROM POWERLESSNESS AND FROM THE OPPRESSION, BRUTALITY, AND EXPLOITATION OF THE WHITE GENTILE WORLD."



Shrine of the Black Madonna, side altar.



Shrine of the Black Madonna, 5317 Martin Luther King Boulevard.

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“We’re building a nation. And when you come forward here to join this church, you’re coming into a nation,” preaches the Reverend Albert B. Cleage, better known as Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman, founder and holy patriarch of the Shrine of the Black Madonna. “We have to train our own young men. We have to take some young black nationalists and militants and send them to school to learn how to pastor this church when I get too old to stand up here. We have to train people. That’s a part of being a nation — thinking about tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. We must plan for a thousand years. . . . We start out buying property right here in this neighborhood where we are. . . . We’ll buy and we’ll never sell.”¹

The shrine has been doing just that along a half-mile stretch of Martin Luther King Boulevard between Griggs Road and Old Spanish Trail. Since the first properties were purchased in 1977, the scattered parcels of the Shrine’s campus now encompass ten buildings, including three refurbished apartment complexes (another complex awaits renovation); several colonial revival houses being used as meditation and retreat centers; and an extensive bookstore with the best collection of black authors in Houston and room after huge room (its building was once a bowling alley) of African imports for sale. The same building functions as a cultural center, offering programs for both church members and the general public. The Shrine also operates a medical clinic, day-care center, job training center, and recreation center on its growing campus.

At the center of all this real estate is the sanctuary itself. A former United Church of Christ, the very conventional red brick building with a tall, thin white steeple and a columned, pedimented entrance has an aura of southern conservative pretension that clashes, in splendid irony, with the institution it houses: the Shrine of the Black Madonna No. 10 of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church.

Many churches are extensive land-owners. What the Shrine is doing with its property is what sets it apart from its neighborhood and, indeed, the whole city. In these buildings, the Shrine of the Black Madonna has created a communal village of about 200 people — with shared meals, communal child-rearing, a largely barter-based economic structure, and a prescribed system of spiritual and educational development — a ghetto

utopian experiment that is going into its 20th year.

In Detroit, where the Shrine was founded by Cleage/Jaramogi in 1953, the church’s beneficial social effects are widely recognized. As former Detroit mayor Coleman Young said, addressing the Houston Shrine in 1987 on its tenth anniversary: “The Shrine has been essential to the ability of the city of Detroit to survive in some stormy times.”²

The Shrine’s Pan African philosophy, called Black Christian Nationalism, is based on a revisionist belief that Jesus was black. Its creed states, *I believe that Jesus, the Black Messiah, was a revolutionary leader, sent by God to rebuild the Black Nation Israel and to liberate Black people from powerlessness and from the oppression, brutality, and exploitation of the white gentile world.* The Black Madonna, a focal point in the Pan African church, is a symbol of the honor that should be given to all black women, especially mothers.³

In this mostly African American area of Houston, where the per capita income is about half that of Harris County and unemployment is more than twice as high,⁴ the Shrine has set itself the urgent mission of liberating black people, both from the oppressive racial status quo of America and from the psychological trap of their own world view. “Jaramogi tied himself to [Marcus] Garvey’s vision of a new world, the necessity for black people to define and control our own human destiny,” says Shrine spokesman Bishop Olu Ufum.⁵

“Years ago we did what most churches do — soup kitchens, co-ops,” explains the Houston Shrine’s Cardinal Mbiyu Kamau Ifoma Chui, “and then we came to the realization that we’d be doing this forever unless we came up with our own system. . . . Part of our ministry and our mission is to create a Christian community in the ghetto in which we live. . . . We’ve created an urban enclave as a model that we can live together, that we can create community. You can go all over Houston and not find a community like this one.”

Utopian communities have a ragged history. Once the ideals they are founded upon are no longer the vogue, many atrophy and wither — the fate of most of the sixties communes, as well as their 19th-century predecessors. Others scarcely get off the ground because their founders are visionary but impractical — such as Bronson Alcott’s Fruitlands, too loopy even for the dreamer Thoreau. And other

utopian blueprints remain pregnant and hopeful on the drawing board: B. F. Skinner’s behaviorist Walden Two (realized, at least in theory, in the Virginia intentional community Twin Oaks), Aldous Huxley’s *Island*, or the original, Sir Thomas More’s Utopia. More coined the word *utopia* for his imaginary place from the Greek *ou*, ‘not,’ and *topos*, ‘a place’ — nowhere. It is a lively diversion to dream up utopias, quite another matter to make them fly; and a feat indeed to create a community that endures. The Shrine of the Black Madonna has survived and thrived in Houston for 20 years with a naturalness and easy order that seems born of grace.

The Shrine is located in one of the many vast undefined areas of Houston, those “no there there” zones whose low-density amalgamations of light industrial, residential, and commercial use don’t quite coalesce. Although Griggs Road was one of the principal arterial routes to downtown Houston before Interstate 45 opened, and nearby Palm Center was a thriving shopping center in the fifties, the area has deteriorated. The 1995 Palm Center Master Plan noted that the absence of land-use controls permitted property in the area to be “converted to any use regardless of the long-term impact on the neighborhoods. Stone crushing plants, open storage areas of road and bridge beams and every other imaginable use occurred, all to the detriment of the residential homesteads.”⁶

A mile south down Martin Luther King Boulevard from the University of Houston’s southeastern edge, the Shrine backs up to the modest residential area of MacGregor Park Estates; upscale Riverside Terrace is just west and across Old Spanish Trail. The pleasantly wooded MacGregor Park and the Brays Bayou are nearby. But just as close are the warehouses and loading docks of Produce Row, the center of much of the city’s wholesale produce activity. Although community developers point with pride to the tentative entrance of chains such as the Kelsey-Seybold Clinic and AutoParts USA, much more prominent are the more congenial, if less glossy, neighborhood-based businesses — fish markets, driving schools, nail parlors, psychic readers — scattered along Griggs, M.L.K., and the picturesque O.S.T. in aged shopping strips with fading signs.

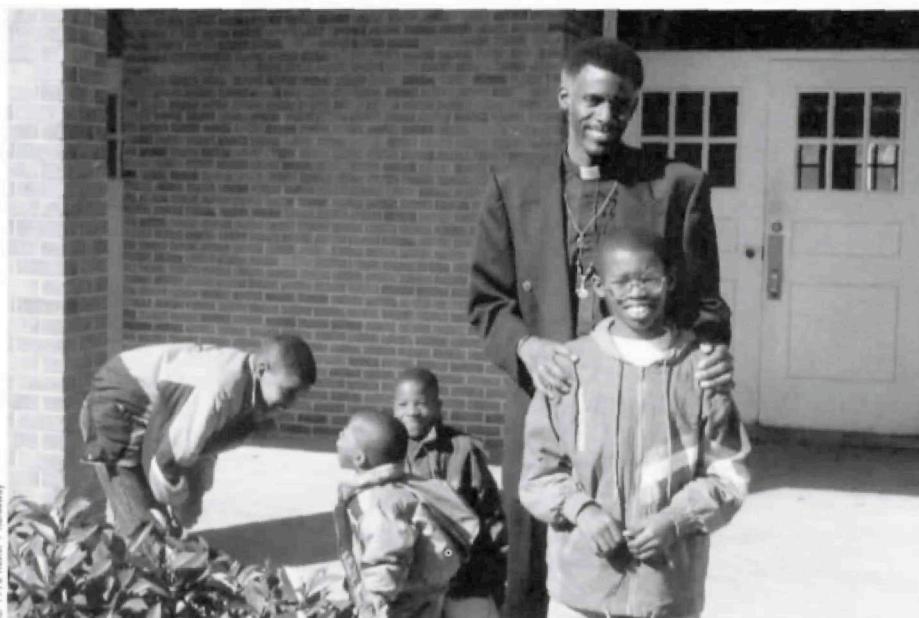
Churches abound, some in improvised

quarters such as former gas stations and drugstores, others in quite well-to-do accommodations. Also in abundance is a friendly mixture of evocatively named bars (Club Happy, with zydeco dancing; Mocombo Lounge; Evening Shadows; Club Decoco; Brown Sugar) and beauty parlors (Nation’s Creative Cuts, with a large streetside mural of Dr. Martin Luther King; the Nail Trap; Alma Jo’s Beauty Spa; and Anointed Hair).

After weeks of leaving unanswered messages at the Shrine, I finally got a call from Cardinal Mbiyu, who left his name as the Reverend Moore, which I later learned was his “slave name.” The tall and lanky Mbiyu’s many responsibilities include handling Shrine publications and running the activities program for 30 or so teens who live at the Shrine. He is one of the five-person Assembly of Cardinals (two of whom are women) that manages the Houston Shrine. As a full-time church staffer, he is not paid, but his housing, food, and other needs are provided by the church. Mbiyu’s confident affability makes him a natural leader. He teaches a class on “black reality in America” intelligently and without pedantry, only occasionally rising to fiery rhetoric to emphasize a point: “White America wishes that blacks would just go away and stop taking up so much air and food and we can get back to our Norman Rockwell America and be happy.” He answered all questions about the Shrine and its philosophy thoughtfully and without reserve.

Originally a United Church of Christ minister, Jaramogi split with his home denomination in 1953 to found his own church, based on Black Christian Nationalism. He dreamed of making the church not just a house of worship, but a vehicle for social change. By the early 1970s, he was ready to push his vision further and expanded the Shrine to other cities; it was during this expansion that the Shrine began seriously exploring communalism, in emulation of the early Christian church. Groups of 40 to 60 members moved to Atlanta and later Houston to serve as the nucleus of new centers. The Shrine also formed college cadres on campuses across Michigan and elsewhere, which drew members to the larger Shrine communities.

Led by Jaramogi, Shrine leaders studied every communal structure they could find, from early Biblical communities to the Israeli kibbutzes. Mbiyu recalls his



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Cardinal Mbiyu with children from the congregation.

student days in Atlanta: "We went through a lot of experimental stages, lots of time talking and discussing what could go right and what could go wrong, looking into every possible situation. How do we make the whole urban cadre work? How to financially maintain the whole thing, how many cooks, how much food, how many people does it take to work full-time for the church, and how many people need to live in the world?"

The system they developed seems to be working well. Of the Houston Shrine's 500 to 600 active members, about 200 live on the Shrine campus. Residents are not charged rent but pay a moderate maintenance fee. About 40 members constitute the full-time staff. No one is paid — work at the Shrine is voluntary, a system called "service economics" — but, like Mbiyu, staff members have their needs met and do not pay for housing or meals. The medical clinic is even staffed by volunteer doctors and nurses from the church community.

A macrobiotic dinner is served in one of the two communal dining halls every night, prepared by the volunteer cooking staff of five. In the early 1980s the Shrine began to explore diet as part of the spiritual discipline, serving no red meat and few dairy products. A typical dinner might consist of two kinds of soup, beans cooked with or without meat, eggplant casserole, rice, spinach, fresh salad, and cinnamon rolls, for which members pay \$3.50. A convivial family atmosphere prevails, with children running about and adults catching up on each other's days.

Raising the money to keep the whole community running extends beyond the typical church collection. Members are "voluntarily taxed" at either \$20 or \$40 a month, depending on their income from "out in the world." In addition, missionaries spend weekends soliciting funds. The Shrine manages its resources wisely and, amazingly, has been able to meet the needs of its community and continue an aggressive property acquisition program. For the past 15 years the church has also been investing in a rural community project called Beulah Land — 5,000 acres in South Carolina, not far from the Atlanta

Shrine, on which they hope to grow their own food and move closer to becoming a self-reliant system. Several young missionaries are in agriculture school to serve this end. A full medical facility and an elderly-care facility are planned for Beulah Land. The majority of the members of the nationwide community are still in their twenties, thirties, and early forties, but such long-range planning is part of Jaramogi's directive to "plan for a thousand years."

Although the financial commitment may not be great, the time commitment required from Shrine members is hearty. Monday night is "orientation," when the whole church organization comes together as a body politic; in Tuesday night "devotionals" members study the spiritual disciplines in small groups; on Wednesday night (the only evening open to the public) a study class focuses on black history and education; Saturday is a communal workday for tending the church property. Attendance at all of these activities is expected, and members sign in at the door. In addition, most members take on volunteer assignments such as cooking, security (a 24-hour watch is kept at the Shrine), staging an educational event (the Shrine is a major participant in both Kwanzaa and Black History Month), maintenance, community outreach, office work, or youth activities. As Bishop Olu says of Black Christian Nationalism, "It's not simply a social program. It's not just a community development issue — it's a way of life."⁷ Indeed.

Raising children has probably bollixed intentional communities more than any other issue. At the Shrine, the children are central; rather than an energy drain or constant source of educational perplexity, they seem to be the germ out of which the rest of the structure evolves. "In the beginning, we spent a lot of time talking about the youth," says Cardinal Mbiyu. The Shrine's child-rearing system is roughly based on that of the Israeli kibbutz: after age two, children live together during the week with others their age in groups of six or seven, supervised by a rotating squad of adult care-

takers, and spend weekends with their parents. About 20 Shrine staff members are responsible for the children's program, which cares for 50 to 60 resident kids. Neighborhood children also participate in the Shrine's after-school and summer-school programs. "I can see that's it's very beneficial," Aminata Ojore, a long-time shrine member, says, "even for children who have problems, or where parents are having problems. They're very well loved, and they know they can go to anyone. They go skating, swimming, they play volleyball, they do things that most adults couldn't keep up with. We've got some big, strong, spirited kids. Their whole demeanor is different. They're outspoken. It's very encouraging." Aminata's only child, now 15, has been raised his whole life within the shrine's system — a particular boon when Aminata divorced several years ago and became a single parent.

As part of their effort to promote unity, all Shrine communities adhere to certain rules and principles. Members wear red and black at Shrine functions, red to symbolize the blood and sacrifice of black people, black to symbolize the oneness of black people everywhere. There is a decorative sameness to the interiors of each Shrine: red carpet, high ceilings, lots of wood. There's also a Black Christian Nationalist code that promotes cleanliness and honesty and has restrictions against such things as drug use and promiscuity.

Some of the Shrine codes and beliefs are questionable and even disturbing: the rejection of nonviolence, for example, or the strictures against speaking or publishing anything contrary to Black Christian Nationalism. It is difficult for the outsider to penetrate very deeply into the Shrine of the Black Madonna. The church has codes against talking too freely with outsiders, and is separatist by its very founding philosophy. Visitors are not permitted at any of the community's group gatherings or devotionals, other than the class that is open to the public, and must be approved by a security guard before entering the church residential areas or offices. I had to get permission through an executive committee just to eat dinner in the community dining hall, and then an official spokesman was required to be present.

Black Christian Nationalist dicta such as "All members of BCN are required to be constantly on the alert to prevent infiltration by the enemy" sound paranoid until one remembers that black national-

ists have indeed been subjected to fairly regular and systematic infiltration by government intelligence agents. Despite some potentially alarming philosophies and a fairly guarded system, at the end of the day the Shrine's thoughtful, socially redemptive vision and its lucid spirit are inspiring.

On a recent Sunday, the service at the Shrine began with a mesmerizing and hopeful chant of "yes, yes, yes" that gained momentum and intensity while in the pulpit a woman minister sought the presence of the spirit in swelling invocation. A man's deep voice sounded out behind me, rich in sensuous abandon. Many cried, including the stout, reserved woman at my side.

The worship was filled with song, performed by the choir without sheet music, even though the harmonies are complex and the verses extensive. The rituals are a mixture of African, charismatic Baptist, and Catholic traditions. Instead of the Latin cross, the Coptic cross (ankh) is used. The church trappings are also part traditional Christian, part African. A huge African Christ and an African Madonna and Child are painted at the front of the church, their torsos spanning the wall of the sanctuary from floor to ceiling, looking down on the congregation. On a side wall is a heroically scaled mural of Jaramogi, his gaze over the church he founded lofty and somewhat wry. The man himself sits quietly to the side of the dais.

One might suspect Jaramogi of being a cult hero, but there is evidence that he has worked to prevent this by emphasizing the acquisition of education and analytical skills and by pushing his flock to share the leadership. "Most people, out of ignorance, relate communalism with cults," Cardinal Mbiyu observes. "Cults have hero worship — which is totally the opposite of communalism. In communal structure there is no God-person; it's a group-centered leadership." Aminata concurs: "Jaramogi doesn't want us to make any fuss over him. . . . He is able to inspire people to want to awaken the divinity within. He teaches us that we're capable of doing whatever we conceive of."

Jaramogi moved to Houston in 1984. Now in his eighties, he teaches only occasionally but continues to work with instructors and ministers. He coordinates the Assembly of Cardinals, the local



Shrine of the Black Madonna, interior.

governing body, as well as the College of Cardinals, which consists of all the Cardinals nationwide. Jaramogi keeps in close touch with the large congregations in Detroit and Atlanta. But more and more, his emphasis is on training the leadership that will succeed him. "He taught many of our classes," Mbiyu says, "and then after a while he started saying, 'You guys have to do this teaching.' The test of leadership is in creating new leaders. No matter how great a job you do as a leader, if you can't create leaders to take over after you're gone, it won't work." With this intelligent regard for the future and the remarkable commitment on the part of the members of the Shrine of the Black Madonna, the nation Jaramogi dreams of is on its way. ■



Mural of Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman, founder of the Shrine of the Black Madonna, inside the church.

1 Albert B. Cleage, *The Black Messiah*, "A Sense of Urgency," (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1989), pp. 29-30.

2 "Detroit Mayor Praises Houston Church," *Houston Chronicle*, June 15, 1987, p. 2.

3 Norma Martin, "A Woman of Substance: Black Madonna, Centuries-old Heritage," and Cecile S. Holmes, "The Black Madonna Transcends the Past to the Present," *Houston Chronicle*, April 29, 1995, pp. 1E, 3E.

4 Centurian Consulting Group, Roberta E. Burroughs and Associates, and CDS Research, Inc., *Master Plan, Palm Center, Houston, Texas* (Business and Technology Center, Houston Small Business Development Corporation, July 1995), pp. 13-16. The master plan's study area, a tract of approximately 10.2 square miles that contains the Shrine of the Black Madonna complex, is 65.9 percent African American, as opposed to 17.2 percent in Harris County; has a per capita income of \$9,281, versus \$17,714 for the county; and has a 10.8 percent unemployment rate, versus the county's 4.9 percent.

5 "Black Christian Nationalism: Cardinal Olu Onaduko Ufum Speaks on the Gospel of Liberation," *Gaither Reporter*, June 30, 1994, Houston Public Library database.

6 Centurian Consulting Group *et al.*, p. 11

7 "Black Christian Nationalism."



Shrine of the Black Madonna, bookstore and cultural center, 5309 Martin Luther King Boulevard.