

An Investigation into the Tragedy of the Peoples Temple in Jonestown

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Abstract

On November 18, 1978, over 900 people from Jonestown died by ingesting cyanide laced Kool-Aid, marking this day as the largest mass suicide to ever occur in modern history. Jim Jones, a charismatic and manipulative leader, recruited people of lower socioeconomic status and used them for personal gain. While members of the Peoples Temple described Jonestown as a utopia, evidence has portrayed how their behaviours reflect a counter-culture. The adversities experienced by members of the Peoples Temple is conclusive: Jonestown strongly resembled the characteristics of a cult. Social, psychological, and cultural ramifications following this mysterious tragedy of the Jonestown massacre are examined.

Keywords: cultural psychology, counseling, cults

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The story of Jonestown has captivated many who have learned of this mass suicide. On November 18, 1978, over 900 people from Jonestown died by ingesting cyanide-laced Kool-Aid, marking this day as the largest mass suicide to ever occur in modern history (Howard, 2017). Hundreds of audio recordings were released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), revealing several accounts made by members of the Peoples Temple in Guyana. Over 40 years later, The Attention Span Recovery Project (Howard, 2017) investigated the events leading up to the mysterious tragedy in their podcast. While members of the Peoples Temple described Jonestown as a utopia, evidence has portrayed how their behaviours reflect a counter-culture – an ideology which deviates from mainstream value systems and is supported by a significantly powerful minority group (Whiteley, 2015). The Jonestown massacre revealed significant social, psychological, and cultural factors resembling characteristics of a cult. This paper seeks to further examine how this mysterious cult led to this tragedy.

Cults are defined by social constructs but vary with regards to behavioural factors including but not limited to one's occupation, religious beliefs, or academic research (Petherick, 2017). Haworth (1997) clarifies that all cults can be classified with the following characteristics: the leader is self-appointed; members are recruited, indoctrinated, and retained using psychological coercion; the cult is formed by an elitist totalitarian society; the cult should follow the notion that the end justifies the means; and wealth does not benefit their society. Undoubtedly, these characteristics can be attributed to the Peoples Temple of Jonestown.

In their podcast, The Attention Span Recovery Project (Howard, 2017) describes how the series of events leading up to the massacre were led by Jim Jones, who was believed to be the father of the cult. Jones was perceived by the general public as a conspirator and fascist, who strongly exemplified Haworth's (2017) first point about cult leaders being self-appointed. His behaviours were arguably questionable. His strong communist beliefs were reflected in his efforts to develop anti-capitalist communities and he gained a significant amount of attention by attending many civil rights demonstrations. Furthermore, obtaining an influential role in religious settings allowed Jones to preach his radical ideas without being blacklisted. Gradually, Jones' work with social services granted him access to resources to recruit followers and prepare for the massacre (Howard, 2017). These attempts to seek social approval were successful, which allowed him to establish himself as an influential leader to his followers.

Jones preached about communism and equality, although his charisma easily shifted others' perceptions of him as a leader. As described by Haworth (1997), members of a cult are often recruited via psychological coercion. The podcast explains how Jones immediately convinced people of his psychic abilities, claiming that he could cure diseases like cancer, which would release as a mass from the body; however, Jones' wife would be in the audience with raw chicken liver hidden for Jones to 'extract' as the cancerous mass. Meanwhile, actors pretended to heal from his blessings (Howard, 2017). Additionally, Jones used invasive means to recruit his members, such as going through garbage to obtain personal information and spying on families.

Notably, one of the most strategic methods of recruitment involved contacting families from impoverished communities, where Jones convinced them that their children had been molested and abused. Members of the Peoples Temple also signed over their property and their own children using bogus papers. Jones even extended this behaviour to arranging marriages, micromanaging families, and having many sexual relationships with men and women in the Peoples Temple. He advocated that "life outside of Peoples Temple is hell... the only safe place is with father" (Howard, 2017). As a result, members developed a clear sense of belief perseverance (i.e., maintaining prior beliefs despite the knowledge of contradictory information; Anderson et al., 1980; Anderson & Lindsay, 1998; Slusher & Anderson, 1996) in favour of Jones' power and abilities. His coercive recruitment schemes are evidently reflective of Haworth's (1997) second characteristic of cults. As observed with Jones' followers, individuals who are coerced by external social forces are limited in their freedom and decision-making, and this dangerous influence led over 900 people to drink a lethal substance.

While these members constructed their own utopian reality using radical social concepts, there is no ambiguity in the fact that members had a severely restricted freedom of choice. The podcast highlights the failure of maintaining a sufficient lifestyle in the deserted promise land of Jonestown in Guyana (Howard, 2017). Many perceived Jonestown as a socialist system with hospitals, clinics, schooling, and agriculture, although this socio-cultural concept masked the torture inflicted upon members of the Peoples Temple. Resources were scarce, the food contained mysterious chemicals, and members were working long hours in harsh working conditions. Members who disobeyed the rules of Jonestown were punished through several means (e.g., oppression, isolation, public beatings).

Theoretically, these harsh punishments support past research on ostracism and social exclusion, which involves protecting a group from potential threats (Hales et al., 2017; Kurzban & Leary, 2001). Personal items such as passports were immediately confiscated, and no member of the Peoples Temple was permitted to send or receive any messages. Moreover, members of a group are more likely to be ostracised if they are viewed as a burden to the group (e.g., Wesselmann et al., 2013; Wirth et al., 2015) or disagree with other members (Hales et al., 2016). Likewise, Jonestown members who complained about their work were forced to work longer hours. Children who tried to escape were submersed into water for long periods of time, while others were trapped in an underground box (Howard, 2017). Despite these abusive conditions, people outside Guyana were unaware of their family members' living conditions due to misinformation from the media (Howard, 2017).

Jones' actions reflect Haworth's (1997) third and fourth characteristics of a cult, where he enforced stringent regulations for the betterment of his totalitarian society and implemented the notion that the end justifies the means. Jones was fearful of being exposed for his actions and therefore implemented strict punishment for anyone who attempted to speak against the Peoples Temple. This extends to the 45-minute long death-tape recording the mass suicide and Jones' rants, where members were compelled to drink the laced Kool-Aid as they were surrounded by armed men (Howard, 2017). Ultimately, the end justified the means for Jones' final act to facilitate a mass-suicide, but this had a devastating cost.

The adversities experienced by members of the Peoples Temple establish conclusively that Jonestown was a cult. Jim Jones, a charismatic and manipulative leader, recruited people of lower socioeconomic status and used them for personal gain. Haworth's (1997) characteristics of a cult strongly reflect the social, psychological, and cultural implications leading up to the massacre, as outlined by the podcast. The phrase "Drink the Kool-Aid" has generated great interest among many people, as it signifies a deeper meaning. Given the considerable amount of evidence of Jonestown demonstrating cult-like characteristics, the behaviours of this group do not reflect the mainstream religious philosophy; therefore, Jonestown is a counter-culture. As an authoritarian leader, Jones used emotional manipulation to recruit members, transferred financial assets to his name, enforced rigid rules that were seldom questioned, and had control over his members by isolating them in a jungle. Following

the mass-suicide, corpses were left out in the jungle for days (Howard, 2017). The current debate is whether this tragedy should be considered a mass suicide or a mass murder.

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