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Drinking the Kool-Aid: Misconceptions of the Jonestown Tragedy

The phrase “drinking the Kool-Aid” is an idiom referring to someone blindly believing or following things that are obviously not true. This term comes from the 1978 tragedy of “Jonestown,” or People’s Temple. Despite its connotation with blind allegiance, that is not what happened in the case of the people lost in the Jonestown Massacre. These people were taken on a long road, some all the way from a simple store-front church in the Indianapolis slums to an isolated compound in the middle of the Guyana Jungle. There are mainly misconstruing details about People’s Temple and its history, and the incident that happened at Jonestown was not just a revolutionary suicide, but a murder-suicide, as shown through the targeting of vulnerable people, the preaching of political ideals, and Jones forcing his congregation to only fear the world.

James “Jim” Warren Jones, the ringmaster of everything that happened, had been troubled since the beginning. Since his life began in the small town of Crete, Indiana, he had a way of speaking to people. He was noted to attend churches of many denominations, and after doing so, he would push his fellow classmates at school into listening to him preach. Jones had a way of manipulating the people around him, being a very charismatic person, and knowing just how to grab the attention of people around him. He reveled in having people listen to him, to think that they needed him and that he was the answer they were looking for. This strategy of making people believe they needed his help was what got him his start.

While it's a jump in his long journey of trying to draw in a crowd, he eventually had established his first real congregation titled “Community Unity,” settled in the poorer part of Indianapolis. The largest contributing factor to the success of Jim Jones and what would eventually become the Peoples Temple were the people he targeted. The demographic of Community Unity was majority Black and other racial minorities.

While Jones did make a lot of significant changes for poor Black communities in Indianapolis, he used these good deeds to keep those people loyal to him, making himself relevant in their lives in more ways than just being their reverend. Regardless, Jones had many ideas of how to help people. He wanted a soup kitchen that would feed anyone and everyone who was hungry, he had dreams of a community clothing bank, and even free child care (Guinn). He knew that the crowds he drew in, primarily poor African Americans and other marginalized peoples, needed these things. However, he was careful to ignore solutions that would involve outsiders of the church in fear of his control over his congregation slipping: “Jones had no intention of proposing solutions that required participation from outsiders that might threaten his personal control” (Guinn). Jones needed all eyes on him all the time. This need for attention was not hidden and was quickly apparent in services. Jones spoke harshly to his congregants when they were distracted or not intently focused on his sermon, “There was another tone as well—that of the petulant, egotistical man impatient with the inattentive, pleased when he had the audience firmly in his control” (Reiterman). Jones was confident in the power he had over these people. Jones wasn’t worried with how his tone would make the people feel, often verbally mocking them,

“‘You ready to go home?’ he would shout at one point, mockingly secure in his own power. ‘Too bad!’” (Guinn). He felt strongly that he had the audience in his control and that he alone had the power.

Because of the start in Indiana and the church set up, People’s Temple is commonly cited as a cult rooted in religion. Even though most, if not all, of the followers were religious, that was not Jones’s purpose. While Jones did in fact get his start by preaching at events and in small storefront churches, he was posing. At heart, Jones was a socialist. He strived to spread socialism to his congregants and supported the USSR. Jones utilized the heavy spiritualism of African Americans in Indianapolis to lure them into a group where he could preach about socialist views, while equating it to God’s plan. Even though this is what he wanted, it’s not what he got. Jones could get thousands of people to come listen to his sermons, but his socialist views did not get a good response. He was disappointed in the fact that even though he had the attention of so many people, they weren’t interested in his true doctrine. In his own words, Jones explains, “I could get the crowds together, but I couldn’t get them politicized” (Guinn). Eventually, Jones further strayed from his original concept of integrating his views with traditional Methodist religion. At his church in Redwood Valley, California, he outwardly tried to pull his followers into his political beliefs and encouraged them to be aware of socialist issues and doctrine. He used a large majority of his resources to inform his people about these beliefs in hopes to get them on his side: “Jones provided political education in his sermons, in the church newspaper and in the guest speaker programs” (Reiterman). Overall, Jones was very strong in his beliefs of socialism and equality. While he did start preaching methodist beliefs to pop-up crowds, Jones attended every church as a child and was known to pick and choose. His facade of Methodism was simply a front for what he truly wanted, a community where socialism ruled.

At this point, after facing scrutiny from people in California, Jones wished to escape and create the community he craved. Therefore, Jones moved his people to the socialist country of Guyana to carry out this dream. While Jones acted as if the People Temple settlement was a utopia, eventually letters sent back to family by members of the temple revealed abuse and neglect. Among these issues were Jones’s problems with the United States government. He often fearmongered his congregants against the government, telling them that they would take their weapons and destroy their home. Jones had planned his people for a ‘revolutionary suicide’ if the government were to come for them and “ruin” their utopia, but in reality, many members were not on board with this plan. Worried family members of temple members led to a group of U.S government members to come and visit Jonestown. While some may have been very enthusiastic about Jonestown and their life there, Jones knew deep down that some really wished to leave. The day before the tragedy at Jonestown struck, Congressman Leo Ryan, his aide, and many reporters visited Jonestown alongside concerned family members.

Despite push against it from Jones, they were granted entry. While watching a ceremony in the main pavilion, many who wanted to leave Jonestown sneaked notes to visiting reports in a cry for help—even though they knew what could happen if Jones figured it out, “Off-camera, a few members slipped the reporter’s notes, asking for help. ‘It just confirmed what we had feared,’ said Speier” (Mohamed). These “defectors” wanted nothing more than to escape and go home, but for many, it was not their fate. When the Congressman, reporters, and defectors had left, loyal Jonestown members stormed the port in which the planes were waiting and shot.

Congressman Ryan, three reporters including a camera man, and many Jonestown defectors were killed. Others fled, were extremely injured, or played dead. After Jones heard this news, he knew that soon the U.S Government would be after him. This event solidified his decision; they must carry out the suicide. On Nov. 18, 1978, U.S Army planes would fly over Guyana and witness ~900 bodies piled out of the pavilion in the middle of Jonestown. After this tragedy, media news spread of a mass suicide, but it was never an act of self-righteousness—it was their only option. There are many account from survivors and eye-witnesses that attest to the fact some, if not most, of the members of People Temple were coerced or forced into suicide: “Some consumed poison under duress, others by force; retired general David Netterville, who helped lead the investigation and retrieval effort in the aftermath, attests to seeing bodies with forcible injections of cyanide” (Mohamed). There are witnesses of many people being forcibly injected with cyanide and children having it poured down their throats. Additionally, there are some who claim that people were instructed to shoot those that tried to run off into the surrounding jungle, leaving some with no choice but death. Jackie Speier, Congressman Leo Ryan’s aide and survivor of the shooting at Port Kaituma, denounces the claims that it was a suicide, stating, “I hate the references that somehow, they did this voluntarily, that there was suicide – it wasn’t. They were murdered.”

There is proof to say that some Jonestown members may of wanted to commit a revolutionary suicide, but there is significant evidence to show that many people felt and were pressured to their deaths or weren’t even given the choice to act on it upon themselves. The People’s Temple was extremely well documented, and of the events that happened on November 18th, a 44-minute tape entitled the “Death Tape” exists of Jim Jones coercing his followers to suicide, as well as some protests to the act. One instance of this is Cristine Miller, a devoted follower to Jones. On the tape, Miller pleads with him to consider the possibility of fleeing to the Soviet Union. She asks Jones, “Is it too late for Russia?” Jones responds in a ramble: “Here’s why it’s too late for Russia. They killed. They started to kill. That’s why it makes it too late for Russia. Otherwise I’d said, ‘Russia, you bet your life.’ But it’s too late. I can’t control these people. They’re out there.” Jones is referring to his decision to send armed men to kill the Congressman and defectors, a decision he made which has now ultimately doomed his congregation. He knows he will lose his power, and this suicide is his last bit of control. In his addled state, Jones goes on, “It’s never been done before you say? It’s been done by every tribe in history, every tribe facing annihilation. All the Indians in the Amazon are doing it now. They refuse to bring any babies into the world. They kill every child that comes into the world, because they don’t want to live in this kind of a world.” Jones begs his followers to be silent, and accept that they have to die, “So be patient, be patient ... death is ... I tell you I don’t care how many screams you hear, I don’t care how many anguished cries ... death is a million times preferable to ten more days of this life” (Jones). His attitude towards the people in this tape is nothing short of nauseating, and this tape contains the last things heard from most of the people who lost their lives at Jonestown.

In conclusion, facts and feelings conflicting with established views of certain acts can often fight with each other. Even though the stigma around cults and mass suicides is high, the events at Jonestown were that of a murder-suicide, and not just a blind following of belief. These people yearned for community and put their trust into a man who only wanted to use them for his own political ideals. They are victims who suffered years of mental and physical abuse at the hands of Jones, just to be forced to their deaths. If the phrase “drinking the kool-aid” is ever used in the

context of blind following, consider for a moment about the horrors that people just searching for equality had to face and the manipulation they fell victim to.

Works Cited

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