

Understanding Jonestown

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Historical Paper

Paper Length: 2,019 Words

The 1960s and 1970s were a bleak and uncertain time for many. During these decades, both the Civil Rights movement and the Women's Liberation movement were transpiring. Overall, this period was a difficult time for people everywhere. During the 1970s, Jim Jones' church, Peoples Temple, was a momentous accomplishment for welcoming all genders, races, and ages, yet this is where the triumph ends. In addition to his instability, and the members' mindless compliance, the criticisms and the political powers of outsiders ignited the tragedy of mass suicide. This remains a cautionary tale for everyday life, as it could very much occur again.

Introduction into Jim Jones' Life

Jim Warren Jones was born on May 31, 1931, to James Thurman Jones and Lynetta Putnam Jones in Crete, Indiana. When he was born, his mother was working as a factory worker, while his dad was in a poor state of health due to his exposure to poisonous gasses during World War I. Growing up, he became more and more cognizant of the distinctions between his life and that of other children around him. It can be said that he was somewhat neglected during his youth as a result of his mother having to work all day leaving him with no one to care for him, and his father barely spending any time with him because of his involvement in the Ku Klux Klan, a white supremacist group.

His first encounter with religion came from his neighbor, Myrtle Kennedy, who cared for him during his childhood. Myrtle, being part of the Nazarene church at the time would often take young Jim to church with her. Although Jim's foundation for religion started in the Nazarene

church, he didn't limit himself to just these services. "A neighbor said that Jim could go to any church he wanted, and he went to all of them – especially the Pentecostal services."¹

Jim Jones was a peculiar child, even in his youth. In his early years, he displayed an idiosyncratic hankering for power and outright strange behavior. While most other kids his age obsessed over basketball, he obsessed over the bible. During the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he read about the war and important figures such as Joseph Stalin and Karl Marx. Out of all the people he read about, he became captivated by Hitler due to his personality and power.

When Jim was a Junior in high school, his father gave him a BB gun. Normally, he would have paid no heed to the gun, but one fine day when him and his friend, Don, were in the loft of his house, he grabbed the gun and shot Don directly in the stomach. "Don, being shirtless at the time, pulled out the bronze BB, which was embedded in his skin, and held it in his hand. A sick smile came over Jim's face."² He took delight in seeing his friend in pain. Due to his parents' divorce in 1945, an ashamed Jim was forced to move with his mother to Richmond, Virginia, where he finished the rest of his high school education.

¹ Steele, Rachel. "Tragedy of 1978: Massacre at Jonestown." Alternate Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, edited by Fielding M. Mcghee, Rebecca Moore, 28 February 2014, jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=33226. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

² Steele, Rachel. "Tragedy of 1978: Massacre at Jonestown." Alternate Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, edited by Fielding M. Mcghee, Rebecca Moore, 28 February 2014, jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=33226. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

In Richmond, Virginia, Jim worked in an orderly hospital, where he met his future wife Marceline. The two eventually got married on June 12, 1949, and then moved to Indianapolis, Indiana. It was the move to Indiana which caused the development of Jim's two main concerns; racial integration and socialism. In 1954 after working at the Laurel Street Tabernacle for a few years, he quit his job as a pastor over issues about race.

Wings of Deliverance

In 1955, he founded the Wings of Deliverance church which would soon come to be known as Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church. Jim moved Peoples Temple from Indiana to Redwood Valley, California because of the strong feelings of racism that was housed in Indiana. It was in Redwood Valley that Peoples Temple built their church building, their administrative building, was where they set up a care center for senior citizens and mentally challenged youth.

People Joined Peoples Temple because of Jones' dedication to racial equality and interracial integration. Former member, Bob Houston said he joined the church because it did not "suffer from the reactionary malaise that was typical of institutions in the country"³ "He was very charismatic and attracted people who were feeling vulnerable or disenfranchised for whatever reason."⁴ Some people thought of Peoples temple as a utopian society where they could just live

³ Silva, Logan. "The Civil Rights Movement in Mendocino County, California? Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, and the Civil Rights Movement Reconsidered." *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, 19 Oct. 2018, jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=33222. Accessed 11 Jan. 2019.

⁴ O'Shea, Teri Buford. "Drinking the Kool-Aid: A Survivor Remembers Jim Jones." Interview by Jennie Rothenberg Gritz. *The Atlantic*, edited by Anna Bross, 18 Nov. 2011, www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/11/drinking-the-kool-aid-a-survivor-remembers-jim-jones/248723/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.

and be themselves while others, mostly Christians, viewed the temple as more of a normal church where one either gives help or receives it.

Another reason the members' joined the church was that they wanted to connect with the community around them. The church built schools, housing, a health clinic, a kitchen, and cleared fields and harvested crops. Peoples Temple provided a safe haven for people who felt that they were being discriminated against or that they were social outcasts at that point in their lives. Peoples Temple attracted people from all over whether they were rich or poor; black, white, or Jewish; male or female. It was a place where everyone could stand together united as one.

Peoples Temple expanded to San Francisco in 1972. "The church was most effective there because of how highly visible it was in political views."⁵ They built another church in the Fillmore district which was a very poor black community. Jones used passages from the bible to preach the gospel of racial equality in a conscious effort to convert the members to the cause of interracial integration.

While we're talking about Peoples Temple and the members' reasons for their support and involvement in the church, it's important to examine if the fascination that surrounded

⁵ Steele, Rachel. "Tragedy of 1978: Massacre at Jonestown." Alternate Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, edited by Fielding M. Mcghee, Rebecca Moore, 28 February 2014, jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=33226. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

Peoples Temple came from how different the church was as to how churches were generalized based off the norms at the time. It's substantial to analyze whether this new way of thinking was part of that fascination that drew people to the church.

One can say Peoples Temple and Jim Jones went against what was normal at the time if the fact that in a time of racial unrest, Jones intentionally set out to create a church for everyone out there is considered. The norm that was set in place for churches back then was to go to a church, listen to the teaching about how Jesus loves us all, take it to heart, and then the members' remind you there are always people willing to help. Although Peoples Temple was like that, Jim Jones instilled this sort of fear in the members, which possibly hindered the members contact to the outside world considering the fact that he said that there's no one on the outside there who can help you, they are all against you and that if you stay, you will have people who actually love you.

Peoples Temple Agricultural Project

If the idea of starting a settlement in the middle of nowhere, in a foreign country, and on a foreign continent sounds insane, that's because it is. However, if this idea hadn't crossed the minds of important figures in our history such as Christopher Columbus, the man credited with the discovery of America, America, as we know it today, could potentially not exist. Even so, the idea is still unbelievable. It is unfathomable to think about how Jim Jones managed to inveigle his followers into starting the Peoples Temple Agricultural Project, also known as Jonestown. One way Jones went about this can be traced back to his way of doing pretty much everything.

The way he used his charm, his speeches; the tone he used, the word choices. "And he groomed himself well. Sometimes, in public when he was talking to people, he would even run a comb through his shiny black hair."⁶ He capitalized on the members' hatred of the people in charge at the time and the way the country was being run.

Since it is important to understand how he lured his followers into building this settlement, it's also just as important to understand why they couldn't leave. One vital reason the members' couldn't leave was that they were in the middle of nowhere. The only way they could leave was to run into the jungle and even then the animals in the jungle would have most likely killed them. "I learned after the massacre that he drugged people on the outpost there to keep them from trying to leave, to keep them from trying to dissent, to control them in different ways, all unbeknownst to the masses."⁷

Although his goal was to create a utopian community where everyone could be free, "At the same time, he was very paranoid. He could not accept the fact that one person would leave him, ever. He had us all sign papers -- Jim called them compromises. They were blank sheets of paper or typed sheets of paper that he'd cover up while we signed our name. He had something he could blackmail all of us with. One guy tried to leave and Jim said he'd use his paper against him so he'd never see his children again. So he came back. The thing was, too, that Jim would

⁶ Steele, Rachel. "Tragedy of 1978: Massacre at Jonestown." Alternate Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple, edited by Fielding M. Mcghee, Rebecca Moore, 28 February 2014, jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=33226. Accessed 18 Dec. 2018.

⁷ O'Shea, Teri Buford. "Drinking the Kool-Aid: A Survivor Remembers Jim Jones." Interview by Jennie Rothenberg Gritz. The Atlantic, edited by Anna Bross, 18 Nov. 2011, www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/11/drinking-the-kool-aid-a-survivor-remembers-jim-jones/248723/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.

not let children off the compound. So if you were going to leave, you were leaving your child. There was no way of getting a child out of Jonestown."⁸

Pretty soon all of the paranoia and fear slowly developed into the most underrated event in our history, the Jonestown Massacre. It was November 18, 1978, Jones gathered the people of Jonestown together and told them of the shooting that had taken the life of Rep. Leo Ryan and a few others at the Port Kaituma airstrip in Guyana. He claimed that had he let Rep. Leo Ryan go back, that he would have started telling lies about what was going happening at the settlement.

He went on to propose that the people of Jonestown commit what he called "revolutionary suicide". Many people valued their lives and didn't want it to be taken away but Jones reassured them that they would die in dignity. He ordered the staff to mix a solution of flavor aid laced with cyanide and had the people line up. The children were injected with the poison and they were told to line up with their families. Even though the poison was supposed to kill quickly, it took a painstaking 5 minutes to kill the consumer. Jim Jones died of a gunshot to the head in what was most likely suicide. "The dead bodies surrounding a vat of poison would be splashed across newspapers across the world the next day."⁹

⁸ O'Shea, Teri Buford. "Drinking the Kool-Aid: A Survivor Remembers Jim Jones." Interview by Jennie Rothenberg Gritz. *The Atlantic*, edited by Anna Bross, 18 Nov. 2011, www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/11/drinking-the-kool-aid-a-survivor-remembers-jim-jones/248723/. Accessed 15 Jan. 2019.

⁹ Silva, Logan. "The Civil Rights Movement in Mendocino County, California? Jim Jones, Peoples Temple, and the Civil Rights Movement Reconsidered." *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, 19 Oct. 2018, jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=33222. Accessed 11 Jan. 2019.

Was this a triumph or a tragedy? It's pretty easy to see this as a huge tragedy but, just because we don't perceive it as a triumph doesn't mean it wasn't one. To the members, they saw this as a way to save the lives of their children and the people they loved. This would be considered a triumph to them.

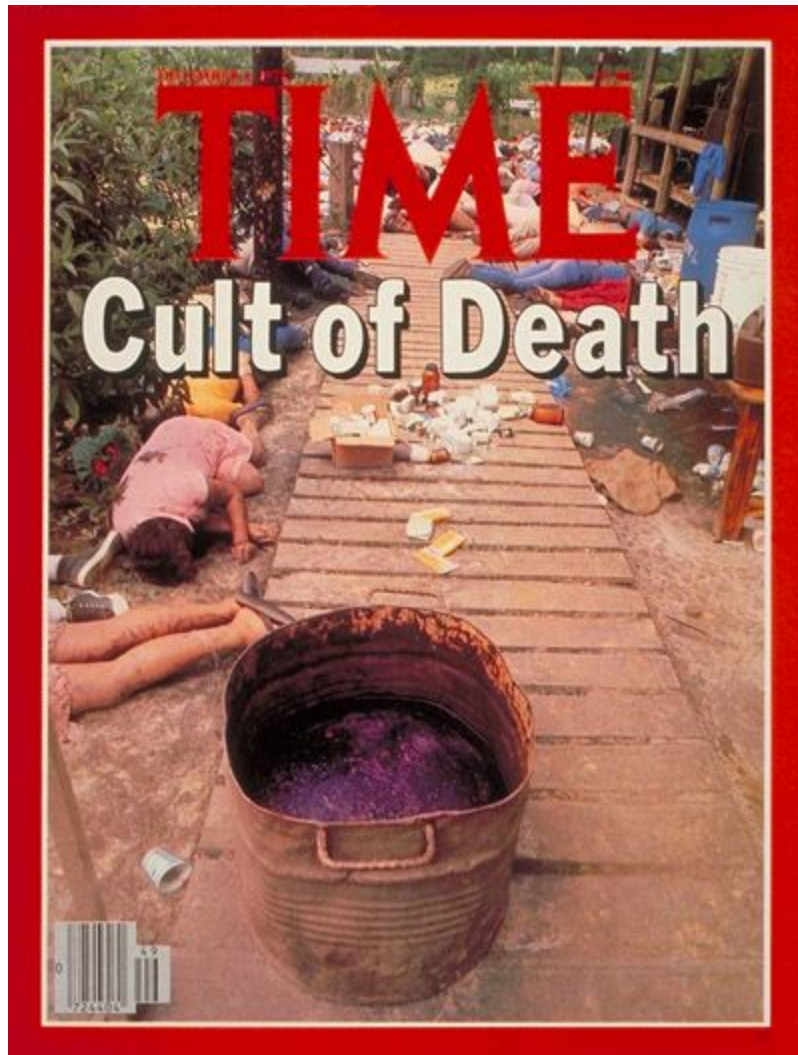
Importance and Relevance

Although Jonestown has been preserved in our minds as an establishment built under the guidance of American cult leader, Jim Jones, what affected the way Jonestown is immortalized in our minds? All of this can be traced back to how the media presented this topic to the public. From Time Magazine's "Cult of Death" to The Guardian's " Apocalyptic Cult", the media presented Jonestown as a church turned cult and in a way, they were right. "Fear is the tool of cults and dictatorships. It does not matter if it is the Left holding up Torture as the greatest fear or if it is the right holding up Terrorism as the greatest fear. Only a cult or a dictatorship rule people with fear."¹⁰

While reading through all of this, one could contemplate the Jonestown relevance and importance to today's society. In our society, there can be so much going on that it can be easy to skip over things like this and not give it any attention. The fact that this could very much happen again is a terrifying thought to even fathom.

¹⁰ Wise, David Parker. "Mind Control and Torture, Or, Mass Murderers, Megalomaniacs, and Fear Mongers." *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown & Peoples Temple*, 8 Mar. 2014, jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=31954. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.

Appendix



Kennerly, David Hume. Time: Cult of Death. 4 Dec. 1978. Time Magazine, img.timeinc.net/time/magazine/archive/covers/1978/1101781204_400.jpg.

Accessed 17 Apr. 2019.

This is the cover of time magazine December 4, 1978 magazine

Annotated Bibliography:

Secondary Sources:

Moore, Rebecca, compiler. *The Jonestown Letters Correspondence of the Moore Family 1970-1985*. E-book, Edwin Mellen Press, 1986.

Rebecca Moore compiled letters she received from her family in Jonestown and letters the other members' sent to their families.

A Sympathetic History of Jonestown. E-book, Edwin Mellen Press, 1985.

This secondary source is a pdf version of a book written by Rebecca Moore. This book explains her family(sister, brother in law's) involvement in the Jonestown and Peoples temple. It gives insight on what her family members found so compelling about Jonestown and why they stayed.

Osherew, Neal. "Making Sense of the Nonsensical: An Analysis of Jonestown." *Guyana News and Information*, 29 march 2017, www.guyana.org/features/jonestown.html. Accessed 7 Dec. 2018.

This source goes into more details about the story behind Peoples Temple and how the Jonestown tragedy occurred.

Kennerly, David Hume. Time: Cult of Death. 4 Dec. 1978. Time Magazine,
img.timeinc.net/time/magazine/archive/covers/1978/1101781204_400.jpg.

Accessed 17 Apr. 2019.

This source gave me a picture of a Time Magazine cover that called Jonestown the cult of death.

It helped me in making an appendix and clarifying what a cult is and the idealism behind a cult.

Primary Sources:

O'Shea, Teri Buford. "Drinking the Kool-Aid: A Survivor Remembers Jim Jones."

Interview by Jennie Rothenberg Gritz. *The Atlantic*, edited by Anna Bross, 18

Nov. 2011, www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/11/

[drinking-the-kool-aid-a-survivor-remembers-jim-jones/248723/](http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2011/11/drinking-the-kool-aid-a-survivor-remembers-jim-jones/248723/). Accessed 15

Jan. 2019.

This website had an interview with Ms. Teri Buford O'Shea, a survivor of Jonestown who fled the establishment three weeks before it's members committed suicide. In this article, Ms O'Shea states that the triumph/ good parts of Jonestown wasn't Jim Jones. It was the people he attracted and how different and hard working all of the people were. She also shed some information on how Jones lured these people in and how he managed to keep them there.

Reiterman, Tim. "Exclusive: Eyewitness Account of Massacre." *AP News*, Associative Press, 14 Nov. 2018, www.apnews.com/eda81af2599d485ab09eb39d72754ade. Accessed 11 Jan. 2019. Interview.

In this interview, Tim Reiterman, a former reporter for the San Francisco Examiner, recounts the deadly ambush at Port Kaituma airstrip. He gives his best guess as to why he thinks the ambush happened. He states that Jim Jones was the type of man who went to great extents to keep the

events happening within Jonestown secret, and since Jones felt like the press weren't being fooled by the staged set-up he planned, He decided to take matters into his own hands.

Port Kaituma Airstrip. 18 Nov. 1978. *AP News*, www.apnews.com/

[eda81af2599d485ab09eb39d72754ade/gallery/media:fccc860158904200b71c293f494a693a](https://www.apnews.com/eda81af2599d485ab09eb39d72754ade/gallery/media:fccc860158904200b71c293f494a693a).

Accessed 24 Jan. 2019.

This is a picture of the Port Kaituma airstrip on November 18, 1978. In the photo, you can see five bodies one of which belongs to Rep. Leo Joseph Ryan Jr..

"Resolution of the Community." Tmp file, 9 Nov. 1978.

This is a petition signed by the members of Jonestown with the hope of blocking/topping Leo Ryan from coming to Jonestown.

Ryan, Leo Joseph, Jr. Telegram to James Warren Jones. 1978.

This is a telegram sent to Jim Jones from Leo Ryan expressing his and a bunch of the Jonestown members family concerns and asking to visit the settlement.

Wise, David Parker. "Mind Control and Torture, Or, Mass Murderers,

Megalomaniacs, and Fear Mongers." *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown &*

Peoples Temple, 8 Mar. 2014, jonestown.sdsu.edu/?page_id=31954. Accessed 18 Jan. 2019.

This article examines everything we know about Jonestown and the aspects and idealisms of a cult, then compares both to get an answer as to what Jonestown really is.