

Drinking the Kool-Aid

The Cultural Transformation of a Tragedy

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ABSTRACT: The expression “drinking the Kool-Aid” has entered the American idiom with little reference to its origins in the Jonestown tragedy of 18 November 1978. Instead, people are using Jonestown—the event—and Kool-Aid—the phrase—to signify a number of contradictory meanings and values. This is because those who died in Jonestown were ritually excluded from cultural consideration. The more traumatic the original incident, the more likely memory of that event will be forgotten or repressed. The author identifies the ways Kool-Aid and Jonestown are used in the news and on the Internet, and catalogues four main groups of uses: cult disasters, including 9/11; political uses; entertainment; and business uses. The categories of cult disasters and politics use Jonestown references negatively, thereby indicating a tenuous connection with the origins of the concepts. The entertainment and business worlds, however, use the references both negatively and positively, thus revealing dissociation and amnesia about the reality of Jonestown.

Shortly after the suicide missions conducted by members of al-Qaida on 11 September 2001, reporters as well as the general public compared Osama bin Laden to Jim Jones, and al-Qaida to Jonestown. The comparison of the two events and the two leaders was almost inevitable because elements of religious fanaticism, suicide, and murder played a role in both. Jones was the charismatic leader of Peoples Temple, an interracial religious movement that immigrated to Guyana, South America, in the late 1970s. On 18 November 1978, members of the agricultural project, called Jonestown, apparently killed the senior citizens and children of the community before ingesting a mixture of

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cyanide and fruit punch. Since then, Jonestown and Jim Jones have entered American discourse as code for the dangers of cults and cult leaders. For example, at least one columnist compared the 1978 tape recording documenting the process of dying in Jonestown with bin Laden's "confession" of his own crimes in 2001.¹

Other symbols from November 1978 have also entered the national vocabulary. To understand these symbols it is first necessary to note that the people in Jonestown apparently lined up at a galvanized metal tub that contained potassium cyanide, tranquilizers, and a British knock-off of Kool-Aid called Flav-R-Aid. Since that time, however, the association of Kool-Aid with Jonestown, and with suicide, has become fixed in popular understanding of the event. Thus, references to Kool-Aid, drinking the Kool-Aid, and lining up at the vat, also point to Jonestown. These references are not uniformly negative. On the contrary, they describe the positive qualities of corporate loyalty or team spirit. For example, when Michael Jordan, a former Chicago Bulls basketball player who in 2002 played for a competing team, returned to his former home to attend a Chicago Bears football game, he was said to be willing to drink "Bears' Kool-Aid."² This meant that Jordan was willing to set aside basketball rivalries in support of the home team at a football game.

This essay looks at how various elements of Jonestown have become contemporary metaphors for several different—and sometimes quite contradictory—meanings in American life.³ These metaphors encompass loyalty and pride, as well as danger and death. They developed because Jonestown represents a tabooed moment of the past. The trauma led to ritual exclusion of the Jonestown dead from American life and thought, and consequently to repression of and dissociation from the tragedy. Although some of the current references to Jonestown or Kool-Aid note their historical antecedent, many do not include any such indication, further distancing the metaphors from their source. This seems particularly clear in corporate uses of Jonestown metaphors, where the symbols have assumed positive, rather than negative, valences. Such transformations indicate how completely Jonestown has been repressed in American culture.

I will approach the subject by looking first at the rituals of exclusion that led to the repression and dissociation of cultural memories about Jonestown. I will explain the methodology I used, and then discuss the four categories of data identified: cult disasters, including 9/11; political uses; entertainment; and business uses.

MEMORY AND EXCLUSION

David Chidester argued that the treatment of the bodies from Jonestown characterized "rituals of exclusion."⁴ From initial United States government efforts to have the bodies buried in Guyana, to its transport-

ing them to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware, 3000 miles from most deceased members' relatives in California, to the rejection by people in Delaware—the victims, or perpetrators, of Jonestown were ritually excluded from United States society. “Generally, Americans came to terms with the event by dismissing the people of Jonestown as not sane, not Christian, and not American, thereby reinforcing normative psychological, religious, and political boundaries around a legitimate human identity in America.”⁵ The Jonestown dead had no names, no graves, and no memorials, according to Chidester. Although the religious community of San Francisco enacted rituals of inclusion, by obtaining funding to transport and bury the victims in California, the mood of the rest of the country, and particularly the state of Delaware, was definitely exclusionary. Chidester identifies three reasons for this: first, dread of contamination and anxiety about health and hygiene because of the advanced decomposition of the bodies; second, concern for public safety given the nature of the deaths and the fear that relatives or weirdos might flock to the site of a mass grave; and third, apprehension that Peoples Temple somehow presented a spiritual danger.⁶ Because the people of Jonestown violated American norms—by rejecting American norms in the first place,⁷ and by committing murder and suicide—United States society failed to perform the usual integrating rituals that accompany death.

The initial exclusion, in fact, has led to cultural amnesia about Jonestown. Exclusion, coupled with the age of many people now using Jonestown metaphors, who have no historical memory from 1978, means that people have forgotten the source of the language they are using. According to Mieke Bal, cultural memory “signifies that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an individual or social one.”⁸ She says that traumatic memory encompasses events that cannot successfully be integrated into society. As a result, memories are either repressed—that is, apparently forgotten—or are dissociated—that is, channeled into directions disconnected from the trauma. An example of the repression of Jonestown is the failure to memorialize those who died by erecting a monument listing their names.⁹ An example of dissociation is the use of the Kool-Aid metaphor, divorced from any reference to its origin in Jonestown. The headline on an article about mindless enthusiasm for technology stocks—“Did the Analysts Drink the Kool-Aid Too?”—presupposed that readers of an online business journal understood the reference to Kool-Aid, as there was no further explanation of the term.¹⁰

In summary, rituals of exclusion enacted within a year of the deaths alienated United States society from what was already culturally taboo: murder, especially of innocents, and suicide. The traumatic nature of the violation of these taboos resulted in cultural amnesia about the facts and particulars of Jonestown. Memories were either repressed, as by the failure to investigate the deaths or to memorialize those who died; or

were dissociated into widely divergent directions. It is these dissociated memories to which I now turn.

THE METHODOLOGY EMPLOYED

I first heard the expression “drink the Kool-Aid” in a 2002 radio account on Enron, the bankrupt energy company. This phrase referred to the willingness of Enron executives to accept uncritically what they saw happening at the company. The references to Kool-Aid prompted me to conduct Lexis-Nexis and Internet searches on a number of variables: Kool-Aid; drink the Kool-Aid, drank the Kool-Aid, with variant spellings; vat of Kool-Aid; Jonestown; Jim Jones; and pairs of variables, such as Jonestown and Waco, or Jim Jones and David Koresh.

I found over 2,000 references to Kool-Aid alone. Less than half the citations indicated fruit punch in its normal sense. The data that emerged can be classified into four distinct categories: 1) cult disasters, including 9/11; 2) politics; 3) entertainment; and 4) business in general, and high technology companies in particular. The categories of cult disasters and politics used Jonestown references negatively, with the sole exception being gangs or gang members calling themselves Kool-Aid.¹¹ The entertainment and business worlds, however, used the references both negatively and positively. This would indicate that cult disasters and politics maintain some, though tenuous, connection with the original historical referent, while business and entertainment uses reveal dissociation and amnesia.

CULT DISASTERS AND POLITICS

Finding references to Jonestown and Jim Jones linked to other cult disasters was to be expected. There were thus many intersections between Jim Jones and various cult leaders. More surprising, however, were the connections between Jim Jones and Osama bin Laden, with eighteen Lexis-Nexis references. The Leo J. Ryan Foundation, the anticult successor to the Cult Awareness Network, quickly made the connection between terrorism and cults at its national conference in October 2001. One speaker was scheduled to talk about “the similarities between cults and terrorist cells,” while another planned “to explain what goes through the minds of terrorists and suicide bombers.”¹²

A letter to the editors of the *Los Angeles Times* noted that bin Laden and al-Qaida were no more Muslim than other cults were Christian. “Like bin Laden, the Rev. Jim Jones and David Koresh considered themselves religious fundamentalists but led their followers down destructive and suicidal paths. The media referred to them as cult leaders, not Christian.”¹³ A reader of the *Seattle Times* took the same stance when writing, “I don’t know why no one has referred to bin Laden and the Taliban

as religious cult leaders. Like Jim Jones, they lead their people to suicide through sadistic means.”¹⁴

A number of columnists and reporters did make the comparison, however. The most extensive came from Don Lattin, *San Francisco Chronicle* religion writer. Lattin wrote that “one way to understand the cult of bin Laden is to look back on the horrors of Jonestown.”¹⁵ His column examined the words of Muhammad Atta, one of the leaders of the 11 September 2001 attacks, and of Jim Jones in light of their statements on martyrdom and death. He concluded by reminding the reader that “these acts are often carried out—not by mindless zombies—but by sincere ideological converts.”

Politicians continue to understand Jim Jones and Jonestown negatively as well, and see them as dangerous and deadly. Senator John Kerry (Democrat, Massachusetts) compared bin Laden to Jim Jones when he was confronting anti-war protesters in 2001.¹⁶ A less current, and more bizarre, political reference was made in 1997 when someone noticed exhausted legislators and staff members in the Albany, New York, state-house. They said it “looked like Jonestown—with everybody lying on the floor or sleeping on their computers.”¹⁷ The reporter wondered how far the analogy should go: “Whether [the exhausted staff] were also sorry souls following demented leaders to tragic ignominy is for history to decide.”

Many political or labor leaders employed Jonestown or Kool-Aid as a metaphor for economic or political suicide. The earliest such example came from Lane Kirkland, President of the AFL-CIO in 1982. He denounced President Reagan’s policies as “Jonestown economics,” which featured a budget that “administers Kool-Aid to the poor, the deprived and the unemployed.”¹⁸

A reference to Jonestown as political suicide occurred just after Reagan’s re-election in 1984. In this case, however, Clarence M. Pendleton, chair of the Commission on Civil Rights, charged that black leaders led black constituents into a “political Jonestown” by encouraging them to vote Democratic.¹⁹ In 1995, United States Senator Kent Conrad (Democrat, North Dakota) suggested that American farmers would be committing economic suicide if they accepted reduced farm subsidies. Conrad likened the political deal offered to farmers with drinking Kool-Aid, thinking it was going to be a refreshing drink, “but you don’t wake up.”²⁰

A final example of the use of Jonestown as synonymous with political suicide came during California’s energy crisis in 2001. When the House Appropriations Committee voted along party lines to reject rate caps, California Democrat Nancy Pelosi of San Francisco claimed that Republicans were “lining up to drink Kool-Aid.”²¹ She was alluding to the political damage Republicans had done to themselves by rejecting a popular measure.

It can be seen that while cult disaster references read Jonestown on a literal level, its use in politics has assumed more figurative meanings. These metaphors range from political or economic suicide, to shooting one's self in the foot, to sugarcoating a bitter pill. Though somewhat remote, these meanings still maintain a fragile connection to the original event. The metaphors generated in the business and entertainment worlds, however, have repressed the narrative referent to Jonestown, and are thus dissociated from the original trauma.

ENTERTAINMENT AND BUSINESS

The extent of the dissociation of cultural references from Jonestown can be seen in the fact that Jonestown or Kool-Aid frequently function positively in corporate and entertainment discourse. Fans of the Sci-Fi Channel's "Invisible Man" send the star of the series packets of Kool-Aid, which restore his super powers when they are weakened. Underground film director John Waters bought the Jonestown death tape because he thought his record collection needed it. References to Jonestown abound in sports, the media, and popular fiction.²²

Perhaps the most bizarre appropriation of Jonestown is the garage punk band, the Brian Jonestown Massacre. The group has a sort of retro-1960s sound, especially in the "Ballad of Jim Jones," which one reviewer called "Dylan-esque."²³ Anton Newcombe established the band in 1989 or 1990, and according to his publicist, "Newcombe's fixation on the late Rolling Stones guitarist Brian Jones—along with the Jonestown mass suicide in Guyana, the band's spiritual mascot—is no joke."²⁴

Though Newcombe and others seem to capitalize on the horror of Jonestown, they still see it as horror, and market it as horror. This orientation is quite different from that of the corporate appropriation, or creation, of the metaphor "drink the Kool-Aid." The expression has been around for quite awhile, and seems to have arisen as part of the vocabulary of technology companies. The website logophilia.com provided a definition of "drink the Kool-Aid" in 1998: "drink the Kool-Aid, verb. To become a firm believer in something; to accept an argument or philosophy whole-heartedly."²⁵

This commitment may be understood either positively or pejoratively. Pejoratively, it means blindly jumping onto the bandwagon, to use another metaphor. So, for instance, a critic of the Perl computer programming language described supporters of Perl as an "ugly mob" that claimed that "Perl is the way and the light, man, so drink the kool-aid and ascend to programmer heaven."²⁶ When a news director arrived at KDKA-TV in Pittsburgh, he said he poured out the vat of Kool-Aid.²⁷ Al Blinke said that new employees had been discouraged from working hard in the newsroom. "[P]eople would tell them to drink the Kool-Aid and get in line."

But more often than not, “drinking the Kool-Aid” exemplifies support and loyalty rather than dysfunction. An Internet editorial titled “Will They Drink the Kool-Aid?” describes the advantageous lesson of inspiring employees to accept the vision of an effective corporate leader:

In an offhand reference to the power of Bill Gates and his vision, one of the water cooler phrases at Microsoft is “He drank the Kool-Aid.” The message is that the power of Gates’ vision and his view of how Microsoft products are helping make a better world have resulted in very committed followers of his dream for the company and its mission.²⁸

Another Internet editorial goes further in an article headlined: “Oracle: ‘Drink the Kool-Aid’ for e-success.”²⁹ The editorial argues that Oracle Corporation, a software company, needs a dictator. That “strong dictator” exists in Larry Ellison, Oracle chair, who is forcing Oracle staff to drink the Kool-Aid. Finally, another tech website I visited featured an image of the smiling Kool-Aid pitcher. The site reviewed MPEG-4, a program for producing computer animation. The reviewer raved about the new program and bragged that “yes, I drank the Kool-Aid.”³⁰

Dissociation from the trauma of Jonestown seems complete in these examples.

CONCLUSIONS

The events of 18 November 1978 in Jonestown were so horrifying that United States society has been unable to integrate them into constructive discourse about religion and religious violence. Jonestown has been purged from cultural memory because it does not “cohere” with institutional thinking about either religion or human nature.³¹ What happens when we forget, however, is that the trauma returns to affect the present. This can be seen in micro-events, such as the individual suicides or dysfunctional behavior of returning Peoples Temple members who escaped the deaths in Jonestown, and in macro-events such as the assault on the Branch Davidians, in which a faulty analysis of the group came from willfully repressing its differences from the Peoples Temple.³² This kind of repression results from the rituals of exclusion that Chidester identified.

When Jonestown is not actually repressed, however, it emerges loosed from its moorings in the dissociated expression “drinking the Kool-Aid.” While the Kool-Aid symbol has variable meanings, it has lost its signification of horror. Indeed, it has become downright praiseworthy in some cases. This transformation is extremely interesting, because it inverts the events of 1978 and converts them into something positive. The loyalty which Peoples Temple members had to each other and their cause seemed to lead them to accept death rather than betrayal of their

commune. In 1978, this loyalty was criticized and characterized as fanaticism, brainwashing, or mind control. Today, however, loyalty to a corporation is a virtue, to be promoted by a charismatic CEO, and embraced by committed employees. Loyalty is team spirit, cooperation, and commitment, all qualities that we endorse.

The only explanation for this radical shift in meaning—from Kool-Aid as deadly to Kool-Aid as desirable—is the incredible distancing from Jonestown that has occurred over the last twenty-five years. Though our society cannot speak of this taboo subject, the subject nevertheless continues to speak to us. It emerges in a twisted dissociation from reality and history. It lives on in metaphor and figure even as it is repressed from consciousness.

Thus we see how Jonestown has crossed the border from conscious to unconscious memory, from history to figure, and from tragedy to comedy. The event looms on the other side of consciousness, for it is too terrifying to face directly. Nevertheless it slips over the border between history and imagination, because its presence continues to demand acknowledgement.

ENDNOTES

¹ Michael Sneed, "News Special," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 14 December 2001.

² Jay Mariotti, "Bear Hug from MJ," *Chicago Sun-Times*, 19 January 2002, Sports.

³ This paper was first presented at the American Academy of Religion, Western Region, at St. Mary's College of California, 26 March 2002.

⁴ David Chidester, "Rituals of Exclusion and the Jonestown Dead," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 4 (1988): 681-702. See also David Chidester, *Salvation and Suicide: An Interpretation of the Peoples Temple and Jonestown* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

⁵ Chidester, "Rituals of Exclusion," 700.

⁶ Chidester, "Rituals of Exclusion," 687-89.

⁷ They had abandoned what they saw as a racist society and had chosen a comparatively harsher, but more egalitarian, lifestyle in the jungles of Guyana.

⁸ Mieke Bal, "Introduction," in *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present*, ed. Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spitzer (Hanover N.H.: University Press of New England, 1999), vii.

⁹ Bishop Jynona Norwood, a pastor in Southern California, has attempted to raise money for a memorial wall for two decades. See the "Jones-Town Memorial Project," <<http://www.jones-town.org>>, accessed 3 April 2003.

¹⁰ Adam Lashinsky, "Did the Analysts Drink the Kool-Aid Too?" *Business 2.0*, 21 August 2001, <<http://www.business2.com/articles/mag/0,1640,16565,FF.html>>.

¹¹ A Crip gang member named Sederick "Koolaid" Scott was arrested following a broadcast of Fox-TV's "America's Most Wanted." Members of an Atlanta youth gang called the "Koolaid gang" were arrested in connection with the robbery of a supermarket. Daniel

Cerone, "Vidbits: Today's News, Tomorrow's Television," *Los Angeles Times*, 19 August 1990, TV Times; and Bernadette Burden, "Law and Order," *Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 25 March 1994, Local News.

¹² Michael Sangiacomo, "Conference on Cults Adds Terrorism Focus," *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 26 October 2001, Metro.

¹³ Suzanne Smith, letter to the editor, *Los Angeles Times*, 29 September 2001, California.

¹⁴ Pat Gunderson, letter to editor, *Seattle Times*, 3 October 2001, Opinion.

¹⁵ Don Lattin, "Chilling Parallels to the Rev. Jim Jones," *San Francisco Chronicle*, 30 September 2001, News.

¹⁶ Doug Hanchett, "War on Terrorism: Kerry, Peaceniks Face Off over War in Afghanistan," *Boston Herald*, 21 October 2001, News.

¹⁷ Paul Vitello, "Sorry Spectacle in Albany," *New York Newsday*, 5 August 1997, News.

¹⁸ Seth S. King, "Kirkland Attacks Reagan Economics," *New York Times*, 17 February 1982, Section A.

¹⁹ Dorothy Gilliam, "Reassessing Black Politics," *Washington Post*, 26 November 1984, Metro.

²⁰ David C. Breeder, "Specter of Economic Suicide Raised in Talk of Subsidy Cuts," *Omaha World Herald*, 8 February 1995, News.

²¹ Associated Press, "GOP Defeats Bid for Energy Caps," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 15 June 2001, News.

²² America's participation in World Cup Soccer Quarterfinals, for example, elicited a comment that compared soccer fans to followers of Jim Jones or David Koresh, in Ed Graney, "Not the American Sports Fan's Cup of Tea," *San Diego Union-Tribune*, 29 June 2002, Sports. An episode of "South Park" (6 February 2002) featured a mass suicide in the reflecting pool at the Washington Monument to protest a group's denial of tax-exempt status. *Plain Brown Wrapper*, by Karen Grigsby Bates (New York: Avon Books, 2001), includes a reporter noting that when he had "covered Jonestown for the *Trib*, it was a hundred times worse than this—*several* hundred times worse," 25.

²³ Sara Scribner, "Out of Their Heads," *Los Angeles New Times*, <<http://www.newtimesla.com/issues/1999-08-12/music.html>>, accessed 7 March 2002, but offline 3 April 2003.

²⁴ Scribner, "Out of Their Heads."

²⁵ "Drink the Kool-Aid," 9 April 2002, <<http://www.logophilia.com/WordSpy/drinktheKool-Aid.asp>>.

²⁶ "Drink the Kool-Aid."

²⁷ "KDKA's Blinks Beefs up Breaking-News Coverage," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, 25 October 2001, Arts and Entertainment.

²⁸ Douglas Gehrman, "Will They Drink the Kool-Aid?" August 2000, <<http://www.bridgecons.com/ViewfromtheBridgeAugust2000.htm>>.

²⁹ Susan M. Menke, "Oracle: 'Drink the Kool-Aid' for e-success," <http://www.gcn.com/vol20_no9/inbrief/4071-1.html>, *Government Computer News* 20, no. 9 (30 April 2001).

³⁰ "The Business," 4 March 2002, <<http://www.brushstroke.tv/week52.html>>.

³¹ Mary Douglas, *How Institutions Think* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1986), 90, on coherence as a factor in remembering and forgetting.

³² See James D. Tabor and Eugene V. Gallagher, *Why Waco? Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 165-66.