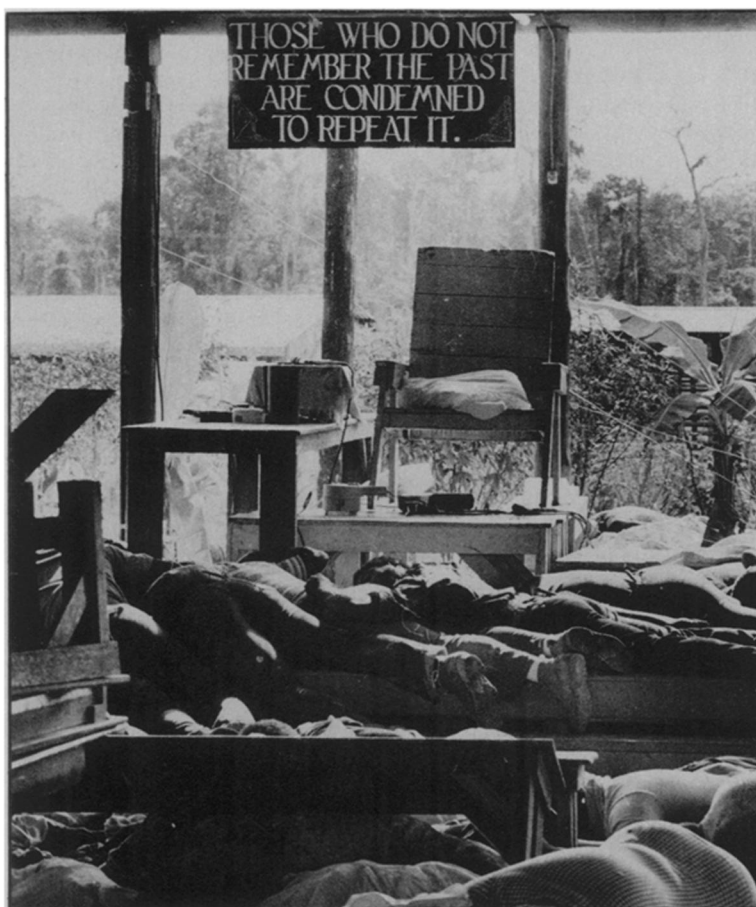


Jim Jones: The Deadly Hypnotist



Frank Johnston/Washington Post

Behavioral scientists perform a "psychological autopsy" of last year's mass suicide in Guyana

BY JOEL GREENBERG

For Dad's Eyes Only: If you were to die tonight of a natural death and your wishes were to follow the leader who you appoint, I would give my life as I would for you at any moment for the cause... I would proceed on my own to subdue as many enemies I could get hold of... also killing myself.

—Cliff G.

As the world was to learn in the fall of 1978, the sentiments expressed by People's Temple member Cliff G. in his letter to "dad"—leader Jim Jones—were not those of just one isolated, radical devotee of Jones's cult in Guyana. Indeed, it is now clear that many of the more than 900 mass suicide victims at Jonestown participated willingly, with a common bond of fanatical devotion that was incomprehensible to outsiders. One temple member recently was quoted as saying: "Had I been in Jonestown on Nov. 18, 1978, I would have been the first in line to take the poison, if I had been so honored."

In the year since that grisly slaughter in the forest-shrouded commune, behavioral scientists have been conducting their own "psychological autopsies" on the forces that would ultimately drive members of an entire community to knowingly drink grape punch laced with lethal amounts of cyanide. If the results of such studies have not yet produced definitive explanations, they have begun to shed light on Jones's awesome power and control over his "flock." And in the end, it was this very twisted and primitive idea of power that dictated the downfall of Jonestown and its "father."

The cloistered, no-escape world of the Guyana compound was but the final phase of a calculated series of steps designed by

Jones to achieve what University of Miami psychologist José I. Lasaga describes as "mass hypnosis at a social level... a unique process of group regression that led to a full acceptance of the leader's delusional system."

That process, analyzed in a symposium earlier this year at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, began with careful selection of Jones's followers. "They were people who were highly dissatisfied with the American way of life," says Lasaga, "either because of personal and family frustrations, or because of social frustrations—like racial discrimination—or because of political idealism—people longing for a more just form of social organization."

But it is one thing to identify unhappy and dissatisfied persons, and another to convince them that the solutions to their worries lie in one man: Jim Jones. According to some psychologists, Jones often began this task by creating an air of deception that might have been envied even by the CIA (which, coincidentally, Jones frequently singled out to his followers as a potent enemy of the People's Temple). "The recruitment was very sophisticated... Jones was a modern master of deception," says Margaret Thaler Singer, a clinical psychologist at the University of California in San Francisco.

From interviews with Jonestown survivors and temple defectors, Singer detailed various recruitment scenarios: A potential recruit who seemed "impressionable" was investigated first by Jones's emissaries, who would rummage through the person's garbage can and report on discarded letters, food preferences and other clues. In some instances, two temple members would visit the home of a prospective recruit. While one member initiated conversation, the other would ask to use the bathroom, where he or she would copy names of doctors and types of medications off pill bottles. Temple members also would phone a recruit's relatives and, under the pretense of conducting a survey, gather vital information such as date and place of birth and years of residence in California, where the church was located.

Armed with such information (it was frequently taped to the inside of his lectern), Jones would demonstrate his "magical powers" at the next lecture attended by the recruit. In a typical lecture, Jones might preach that he "sensed the presence" of a woman about 45 years of age who had diabetes and was under the care of a Dr. Johnson. The listening woman, of course, would be "deeply impressed," according to Singer.

Convinced of their leader's "divine" powers, new members usually would faithfully submit to what Lasaga describes as the "basic techniques of political control" employed by Jones:

- Control of his followers' property and income. As mandated by the temple, all personal property and social security checks were to be turned over to Jones — rendering the followers fully dependent on him as a provider. . . "like a child in relation to his father," Lasaga says. Indeed, many referred to Jones as "Dad."

- Weakening of family ties. "Jones tried to weaken the relationship between husband and wife, and he was personally involved in a large number of extramarital affairs," Lasaga notes. But Jones's quest to "become the most important love object in the whole community" went beyond that. His sexual partners — both women and men — were often forced to stand before the community and testify to Jones's sexual prowess. In one instance, Jones forced Larry Layton (who was later to be charged with the murder of Congressman Leo Ryan and four others) to submit to a homosexual act in the presence of a woman with whom Layton was romantically involved; Jones also broke up another of Layton's romances by simply taking the woman away from him. "Larry's sister, Deborah, remembers how she watched her brother's mental condition deteriorate as he became more and more caught up in the almost hypnotic-like spell cast over him by the charismatic Jim Jones," reports Richard Barrett Ulman, assistant professor of psychiatry at the New York Medical College.

- Institution of a sociopolitical caste

system. A strict power pyramid consisted of Jones at the top, from where he oversaw a planning commission, and enforcement guards, or "angels." "The common people were absolutely powerless," Lasaga says.

- The no-escape society. Most members came to believe that leaving Jonestown was out of the question. The reasons were both geographic (isolation in a dense jungle) and political — escape was equated with treason and subject to severe punishment. According to Ulman, Jones warned black temple members that if they ventured into the outside world, they would be herded into concentration camps. "He convinced white members that they were under CIA investigation and would be tracked down, tortured, imprisoned and killed if they did not go along with his dictates," reports Ulman.

- Control over verbal expression.

Jim Jones (right) makes one of his first appearances as head of the People's Temple in Jonestown, Guyana, during a faith healing service in 1974. His often long-winded sermons frequently were marked by ridicule of disobedient members before the group.



"Overt criticism was harshly punished, and a zealous spy network reported all expressions of dissent to Jones," Lasaga says. "In this type of society most people behave like little children who do not dare express their feelings because of their fear of a terribly punitive father, and this means there is no room for external dissent."

- Cognitive and emotional control of the mind. This aspect of Jones's character permeated the entire community of Jonestown. Ultimately it set the stage for one of the most astonishing instances of mass suicide in history. "There was a process of continuous indoctrination carried out by Jones," notes Lasaga. "On the other hand . . . no outside sources of information were available to the community except those which had received his explicit approval. Let us emphasize the tremendous psychological power of these techniques."

Such indoctrinations took place for hours each day both through powerful loudspeakers and lengthy, exhausting speeches by Jones. Members were frequently interrogated in front of the others about their political ideas — which invariably led to expressions of identification with their leader. "This caused in many cases a problem of cognitive dissonance [a state of tension caused by conflict between one's attitudes and behaviors]," Lasaga says, "and it is highly probable that

sooner or later those who internally disagreed tried to persuade themselves that what they were forced to say was not completely false."

Lasaga and others have compared Jones's methods with those of a hypnotist. Several researchers have conceptualized hypnosis "as an interpersonal process in which the hypnotist requires the subject to close all his channels of communication with the external world except one: the voice of the hypnotist," according to Lasaga. "Since there are no other channels available to check the truth of the hypnotist's statements, his or her voice becomes a substitute for reality. . . . It is mass hypnosis at a social level."

The group meetings at Jonestown, he says, were "a frightful emotional experience" that went far beyond the mass contagion of most evangelistic services.

Jones's nonstop diatribes were always woven around "the Truth." But his speeches were frequently punctuated with the public humiliation of individuals; sometimes, according to investigators, he would have certain members remove their clothes in front of the group and participate in bizarre boxing matches — often pitting an elderly person against a strong, young man. Paddle-beatings were used on breakers of the strict rules.

But the most haunting of rituals, reflecting Jones's preoccupation with death, were the suicide rehearsals. During so-called "white nights," about 50 rifle-toting members would go from cabin to cabin to round up members as sirens blared. As described by Deborah Layton (according to Ulman): "A mass meeting would ensue. Frequently . . . we would be told that the jungle was swarming with mercenaries and that death could be expected at any minute . . . we were informed that our situation had become hopeless and that the only course of action open to us was a mass suicide for the glory of socialism. We were told that we would be tortured by mercenaries if we were taken alive. Everyone, including the children, was told to line up. As we passed through the lines, we were given a small glass of red liquid to drink. We were told that the liquid con-

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ever, Kentucky researchers recently offered a hormonal explanation for the excess of Down's offspring born to considerably younger and older mothers. (SN: 8/18/79, p. 117). Perhaps such an explanation will eventually be extended to extremely young and old fathers as well.

An equally critical question, of course, is whether parental age is the sole cause of Down's, or whether other factors might also contribute. Here, too, researchers are in the dark. But since Abroms and Bennett did not find a high correlation between parental age and Down's, they suspect that other factors than parental age may be just as, if not even more, important culprits. Or, as Abroms puts it, "What are the effects of ionizing radiation? What are the effects of certain drugs? What are the effects of diet? We don't know."

Even with these questions unanswered, though, the above findings have some practical implications. For one, mothers of Down's children should no longer berate themselves for being the sole contributors to their children's disorders. So advises Lewis B. Holmes, a geneticist with the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. For another, genetic counseling to prevent Down's, which is currently directed to older mothers, should also be extended to older fathers and to much younger mothers and fathers, contend Abroms and Bennett. □

... Jonestown

tained poison and that we would die within 45 minutes. We all did as we were told."

As well as the group's vulnerability, what Jones played upon — and what finally turned such rehearsals into the real thing — was the "self-hatred" of not only his followers but of himself. As one member wrote, "Dear Dad and Savior—I have many times been so disgusted with myself... I hate being old I hate it... I know you are the truth and the way... I hope I die before I ever betray you." Such letters, says Ulman, "suggest that whatever agony was in these people's lives before they joined the People's Temple was not merely mirrored in Jonestown but rather shaped by Jones so as to give their pain and anguish the seeming virtue of self-sacrifice and ennoblement."

As for their leader himself, Jones's own self-hatred was evident in his constant need for omnipotence, to be loved by everyone and to be everyone's "best" lover. "Everyone had to say he [Jones] was the only true heterosexual man in the world... to compensate for his feelings of inferiority," Lasaga says. "He was bisexual, but he 'hated' homosexuals — as he demonstrated by punishing them. Therefore, he hated himself... there was tremendous cognitive dissonance."

To help cope with his own internal

struggles — and those of his followers — Jones turned to drugs. "He was a very heavy user of amphetamines," says Singer. And to temple members, Jones dispensed vast amounts of Quaaludes, Demerol, Valium, morphine and Thorazine to control behavior, according to the researchers. These all appeared to contribute to the community's steady withdrawal from reality and to the final tragedy.

In such an atmosphere, says Ulman, "a pathological, collective regression may take place whereby the leader and followers become partners in a form of group decompensation. In a sense they are victims of each other... [Jones] stripped the group of the ability to fight for their lives, [and] their acquiescence and adulation probably contributed to his weakening hold on reality."

What most group members sought, Ulman says, was "to magically merge with their idealized omnipotent leader in hopes of overcoming their lack of a positive self-image and correspondingly healthy self-esteem. Unfortunately, the price they paid was total masochistic surrender to Jim Jones."

To Lasaga, "Jonestown was a mini-totalitarian state ruled by the primitive mind of a paranoiac." Jones had to be "reassured every day that people would die for him." The mass suicide, he adds, was the ultimate "orgasm of power." □

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