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# Who Were the Members of Peoples Temple?

In contemporary religious studies there is "before Jonestown" and "after Jonestown." The deaths of more than nine hundred people in a jungle commune, the vast majority of whom died by ingesting a cyanide-laced beverage, signaled the end of an era of relative religious tolerance in America and the beginning of a time of cynicism, paranoia, and fear about nonmainstream religions, variously referred to as cults, sects, alternate religions or new religious movements. Although Sun Myung Moon's Unification Church had been much in the news and the courts before November 1978, the widespread belief in new religions as irredeemably dangerous was not a feature of Western culture until Jonestown. Jonestown has become a watchword for the madness of charismatic leadership, the vulnerability of religious devotees, and the dangers of experimenting with religion outside the mainstream American religious institutions. Even those scholars and commentators who defend the right of people to choose nonmainstream religious groups generally accept the portrait of Peoples Temple as an example of the danger of too great a commitment to religious ideology as embodied in the person of a charismatic leader. The tragedy of Jim Jones and Peoples Temple, for even the most tolerant observer, demonstrates the proclivity for bizarre and dangerous behavior that most (if not all) new religions possess.

I elucidate the historical and sociological particularities of Peoples Temple and Jonestown to undercut the simplistic way in which "Jonestown" has been used to bring other nonmainstream religions into question. Before 1978 the Peoples Temple was not featured in the anticult literature; for the remainder of the 1970s and well into the

1980s it was difficult to find a page, let alone an issue, of a magazine or newsletter published by the anticult lobby that did not contain at least one (frequently several) references to the mass suicide/murder (Barker 1986, 330). By understanding Peoples Temple and the sociological dynamics that contributed toward its tragic end, one gains an appreciation for the power of religious ideology, political commitment, and the alchemy of love, loyalty, and rebellion that is intrinsic to communal living situations. My goal in this study is *not* to develop a universal theory about the potential for violence within new religions but to make the violence that occurred in this particular religious group more understandable.

In 1954 Jim Jones rented a building in Indianapolis and began his own church—Community Unity—after a frustrating experience as a student pastor at the Somerset Southside Methodist Church. His primary reason for leaving the Methodist Church was a dispute with the leadership over interracial worship (Hall 1987, 17). Jones and Marceline Baldwin, who were married in 1949, bought a building in 1955 and moved the newly named Wings of Deliverance Church there. Later that year the name was changed to the Peoples Temple Full Gospel Church, an affiliate of the Disciples of Christ denomination. In 1961 Jim Jones received his bachelor's degree in education from Butler University and was appointed to the Human Rights Commission in Indianapolis. After several years of intensive ministry in Indianapolis, Jones and his family traveled to Brazil where they stayed until 1963. When they returned from their travels, Jones announced to his congregation that his family would be moving to Redwood Valley, California. He encouraged the members of Peoples Temple to relocate with him. His choice of Redwood Valley was based upon a January 1962 *Esquire Magazine* list of the safest places to be in the event of a nuclear war. In 1964 Jones was ordained a minister in the Disciples of Christ denomination.

In the summer of 1965 Jones and Peoples Temple moved to Redwood Valley, California, with approximately 70 members of the Indiana sect. Numbers vary as to how many traveled with Jones from Indiana. No official membership records were kept by Peoples Temple at the time of the move to California, so scholars have estimated anywhere from 40 to 140, based on the number of Hoosiers who ended up at Jonestown; it was probably about 70, because few members were gained in Redwood Valley between their arrival and the first official membership records in California. By 1966 the Temple had 86 mem-

bers and by 1967, 106, according to Disciples of Christ membership records (Moore 1985, 112). Beginning in 1968 a new type of member began to join Peoples Temple: young, educated, white. In 1969, after several years of meeting in rented buildings, Peoples Temple was able to build a church of their own in Redwood Valley, which the group named Happy Acres. The number of members grew exponentially once Peoples Temple expanded its ministry to the urban blacks of San Francisco and Los Angeles, opening churches in 1970 and 1972, respectively.

In 1972 a baby was born, John Victor Stoen, whose paternity would be at the center of the maelstrom that would lead Congressman Leo Ryan to investigate the community Peoples Temple had established in Guyana, South America. The year 1972 was also when the first critical stories came out in the press, most notably those by Reverend Lester Kinsolving published in the *San Francisco Examiner.* In these articles Kinsolving ridiculed claims by members that Jones was able to raise people from the dead and pointed out the presence of armed guards at Temple services. Peoples Temple responded by flooding the *Examiner* with letters of complaint against Kinsolving and by picketing outside the newspaper's office with accusations that the newspaper was against religion. The significance of these articles lay not so much in the reaction provoked from Peoples Temple as in the encouragement and public platform they gave to disaffected members and others opposed to the Temple (Hall 1987, 114–15).

The transition to Guyana began in 1974 when a small group of Peoples Temple members rented a house in Georgetown and as "pioneers" began clearing the land. By 1975 fifty people were stationed at "Jonestown" and most of the rest of the Temple had relocated from Redwood Valley to San Francisco. For the next two years Peoples Temple was deeply involved in San Francisco political activities, and the group was instrumental in electing George Moscone to the office of mayor. As demonstrated in the Kinsolving conflict, Peoples Temple was always able to mobilize large numbers of people for any cause the Temple leaders identified as significant. In return Jim Jones was appointed to the San Francisco Housing Authority.

By May 1977 there were still only about fifty members of Peoples Temple at Jonestown, but by the following September that number had leaped to more than one thousand residents. Jones relocated to Jonestown in July 1977, apparently in response to a damaging *New West Magazine* exposé based upon interviews with former members

that alleged physical, sexual, and financial abuse within the movement. From summer 1977 until November 1978 there were increasingly vitriolic exchanges between the residents of Jonestown and a group—Concerned Relatives—which was attempting to expose Peoples Temple and Jones as a dangerous "cult." Concerned Relatives included family members of residents of Jonestown and former members. Jeannie and Al Mills (a.k.a. Deanna and Elmer Mertle), former members of Peoples Temple who defected in October 1975, and their Human Freedom Center were at the heart of the Concerned Relatives organization. Later, Steve Katsaris, the father of inner circle member Maria Katsaris, became very active in Concerned Relatives. Particularly vehement in his opposition to Jones and Jonestown was Timothy Oliver Stoen, whose love and devotion to Jones while a member had turned to hate after leaving the movement in June 1977. He and his former wife, Grace Stoen, initiated legal action to gain custody of their son, John Victor, who lived at Jonestown.

By September 1977 the tension and stress at Jonestown was mounting as a result of the combination of a large dependent population—more than half of the residents at Jonestown were either children or senior citizens (see appendix A, table 1)—and the stress of reacting to the legal actions and negative media coverage initiated by Concerned Relatives. As fear, paranoia, and hopelessness gained ascendancy at Jonestown, the plan for "revolutionary suicide"—an idea that had been spoken about and practiced as a ritual of loyalty within the leadership circle of Peoples Temple since 1973—began to take shape.

Congressman Leo Ryan, well known for his attraction to political issues that would draw media attention, was courted by Concerned Relatives to become their champion in their duel with Peoples Temple. Ryan had spent a day as a teacher in Watts in the 1960s and a day as an inmate at Folsom prison; both were portrayed by him as investigations into conditions and both had received widespread and favorable news coverage. Ryan had already heard of Peoples Temple through a constituent, Robert Houston, who first registered concern with the congressman about the involvement of his son in spring 1977. In October 1978, several months after Debbie Layton Blakey's high-profile defection and accusations of potential suicide at Jonestown, Ryan wrote to the chair of the International Relations Committee of the United States Congress to ask official permission to go to Jonestown.

The details of the events that led to the deaths of nearly one thousand people seem banal enough, yet they conceal a complexity that is the focus of this study. On 1 November 1978 Congressman Leo Ryan sent a letter to Reverend Jim Jones requesting a visit to Jonestown. A petition signed by the residents of Jonestown who objected to the visit was delivered to Ryan on 9 November. Nevertheless, the Ryan delegation left from New York on Tuesday, 14 November, destination Georgetown, Guyana. Ryan's delegation included two congressional staff members, two reporters, and a news photographer from San Francisco, four journalists from NBC, including a camera crew, a freelance writer, and fourteen members of the Concerned Relatives group, including Grace and Tim Stoen. On 16 November, Congressman Ryan called Jonestown a "prison" before actually seeing it. The next day the two Peoples Temple lawyers, Mark Lane and Charles Garry, met with Ryan and later that day persuaded Jim Jones to let Ryan and a delegation come to Jonestown. By 4:30 P.M. on Friday, 17 November, Congressman Ryan, his assistant, Jackie Speier, all eight news representatives, and four members of Concerned Relatives arrived with Lane and Garry at Jonestown. They were met at the gate by Marceline Jones, Jim Jones's wife, and given a formal tour, entertainment, and a meal. At 11:00 P.M. that night a note was handed to Don Harris, the NBC correspondent, reading: "Vernon Gosney and Monica Bagby. Please help us get out of Jonestown" (Reiterman and Jacobs 1982, 503).

The next day, Saturday, 18 November, Ryan completed his planned interviews, and Harris disclosed to Jim Jones that some people wanted to leave. Another fourteen people came forward and asked to leave with the Ryan delegation, most of them from two families who had been longtime members of the Temple, the Parks and the Bogues. Then a knife attack on Ryan by Temple member Don Sly left only a superficial wound but had a chilling effect on the delegation and community. Larry Layton, former husband of Carolyn Moore Layton and brother of Temple defector Debbie Layton Blakey, claimed he wanted to defect with the other sixteen and joined them on the truck that was leaving for the Port Kaituma airstrip. While the delegation and defectors attempted to board the planes, several men who had followed the delegation on trucks from Jonestown opened fire. Shortly thereafter, around 6:00 P.M., the suicides at Jonestown began.

There were 923 deaths directly related to the events in Guyana on 18 November 1978. Five people were shot to death at the Port

Kaituma airstrip who were part of Congressman Leo Ryan's returning entourage: Ryan; 3 journalists, including NBC correspondent Don Harris, his cameraman Bob Brown, and *San Francisco Examiner* photographer Greg Robinson; and Patty Parks, a member of a family that had been part of Peoples Temple since its Indiana days who had decided to leave Jonestown with Ryan. Ten people were wounded at the airstrip. There were 911 poisonings at Jonestown, 260 of them children. Because autopsies were not widely performed on the Jonestown dead, it is not known how many ingested the cyanide laced Fla-Vor-Aid, how many were injected, nor indeed, whether some died of gunshot wounds or other causes. Only 7 bodies were autopsied of the 917 Peoples Temple dead: Carolyn Moore Layton, Ann Elizabeth Moore, Jim Jones, Dr. Larry Schacht, Maria Katsaris, Richard Castillo, and Violet Dillard (Moore 1988). What is known for certain is that there were two obvious deaths from gunshot wounds: Jim Jones and Annie Moore, a nurse at Jonestown whose sister, Carolyn Moore Layton, was in the leadership of Peoples Temple. David Chidester states that 3 were shot at Jonestown although he offers no proof of the identity of the third person (Chidester 1988b, 161). Jonathan Smith asserts that 4 died of gunshot wounds and that 70 individuals "showed puncture wounds which suggest that they were injected with poison" although there are no autopsy results to substantiate this claim (J. Z. Smith 1982, 108). In Georgetown, Guyana, Sharon Amos, a Temple loyalist from the early California days, slit her own throat and those of her 3 children. Four months after the deaths of the 922, Temple inner-circle member Mike Prokes shot himself in the head after calling a press conference at which he released a forty-page document, attempting to clarify the mission of the religious movement and to explain the decision of Peoples Temple to commit "revolutionary suicide."

Eighty-five people survived the suicide-murders of 18 November, including Hyacinth Thrash, a seventy-six year-old member who slept through the entire event. Several families and individuals escaped into the jungle and the members of the Jonestown basketball team, including two of Jim and Marceline Jones's sons, were in Georgetown playing in a tournament against the local Guyanese team.

Jonestown as a physical site was a miracle of construction and dedication, a fact that is not widely appreciated when one only sees it in photographs with dead bodies strewn about. A total of 3,824 acres was leased from the Guyanese government for the "Peoples Temple

Agricultural Mission." Three hundred of those acres were cleared by fewer than fifty colonists using the clear-cut and burn method. Stephan Jones, the only biological son of Jim and Marceline Jones, went to Guyana in February 1977 and was part of the group that created the town where jungle once reigned. Half of the people who built Jonestown were urban California youths sent to Jonestown because they had disciplinary problems, and half were "tough Midwestern blue-collar workers who knew how to use their hands" (Wright 1993, 67). In an interview with me Stephan Jones spoke of the pride that the pioneers had in the construction of Jonestown. Many of these urban youths had never built anything before in their lives, and simply seeing the town become a reality was motivation enough for the group to work sixteen or eighteen hours a day. There was freedom in Jonestown in those days, Jones reminisced besides self-imposed discipline. The pioneers worked long hours and ate frugal food, but they got to decide themselves when the workday ended and what they would do with their limited free time. This freedom changed once Jim Jones and his leadership team arrived and "began systematizing the work, monopolizing all the free time, and speaking on the loudspeaker system all the time" (Stephan G. Jones interview, 11 Dec. 1992). Stephan Jones and the other pioneers especially resented the well-educated elite who introduced committees that "second-guessed" the work of the manual laborers (Reiterman 1982, 348).

The pioneers built sixty cottages designed to house eight people each, and five single-sex dorms. After the influx of immigrants in the summer and fall of 1977, these residences were filled beyond capacity. They also constructed a communal kitchen and pantry, drying sheds for food, an infirmary and drug dispensary, an office and radio room, a laundry area, two school buildings, and a nursery and preschool. A large open-sided pavilion was constructed so that the entire town would have a place to gather for meals, community meetings (called the Peoples Rally or Peoples Forum), entertainment and worship. Finally, two large cabins were constructed for the use of Jim Jones and his leadership circle.

Life at Jonestown after the fall of 1977 was difficult. The mission had not been designed to provide for such numbers. Every adult had a bed, but some children had to share. Like most communes, the settlement was developed with an emphasis on public space. Individual privacy was not a priority at Jonestown nor was free time (Hall 1987, 235–36). A typical day at Jonestown was filled with work, meetings,

and public gatherings. Everyone who was able-bodied had a job at Jonestown, most working in agriculture, teaching, healthcare, or providing the daily needs of the community by preparing meals and washing up. The young went to school daily, and the elderly did not have to work at all although many did help with food preparation and gardening. Jones spent many hours of each day broadcasting news and commentary from his cabin over the Jonestown public address system. He was assisted in managing the community by a core group of leaders who coordinated committees and departments covering every aspect of life (236–37).

In the evenings Peoples Rallies were held in which socialist ideals were discussed and disciplinary problems were "brought up." Punishment for those who were not contributing enough to the life of the community usually involved assignment to work crews that cleaned the latrines or did other heavy and disagreeable work (Hall 1987, 240). These public meetings were also the forum for creating consensus within the community and for Jones to convey a sense of the special importance of the enterprise in which they were engaged. Occasionally, educational exercises were practiced in which people were asked to write about their understanding of socialist ideology and about their willingness to sacrifice for the survival of Jonestown.

The theology of Peoples Temple was a mix of the ethical teachings of Jesus with the social critique of Marx. Jones called this blend *apostolic socialism*. Of particular importance to Peoples Temple was Matt. 25:35–40, which was printed on their stationery and pamphlets. This passage reads in part: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. . . . Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me." Care for the marginalized in society, especially blacks and the elderly, was a central mandate of this theology as was communal living. Jones pointed out that the early followers of Jesus had lived communally, as stated in Acts 2:44–45: "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." Apocalypticism and reincarnation were also threads in the Peoples Temple theology. Jones believed the end of the world would come about either through nuclear war or a fascist takeover (Moore 1985,

157). It was his fear of nuclear war that caused Jones to choose California as the site for the first Peoples Temple relocation. Guyana was to be the Promised Land of security and peace away from the corrupting influence of American society and the persecution of opponents. For Peoples Temple destruction of their community, if not the world, always loomed on the horizon. It is not clear whether Jones's belief in reincarnation was widely shared. A number of people from Indiana had joined from the spiritualist tradition, but most members of Peoples Temple were from mainstream Christian backgrounds. Carolyn Moore Layton informed her family in the early 1970s that Jim Jones and she were the reincarnation of Vladimir Lenin and his mistress (Moore 1986, 62). At the suicide meeting reincarnation was raised by both Jim Jones and Jim McElvane as each attempted to calm people once the dying had begun (see app. B).

Who were the Peoples Temple members who left America to move to Jonestown, Guyana? The demographics paint a portrait of a religious movement attempting to break down the barriers of age, race, and class. Three hundred forty of the nearly one thousand residents were nineteen years of age or under; nearly one hundred fifty people were sixty-six years or older, (see app. A, table 1.) Roughly half of the residents of Jonestown were dependent on the rest of the community as a result of youth or age (Moore 1985, 113). Jonestown was populated with representatives from thirty-nine of America's fifty states (Smith 1982, 108). Between 70 and 80 percent of the residents of Jonestown were black. Weightman represents the more liberal estimate of black population with 80 percent, whereas Reiterman estimates that 70 percent of Jonestown residents were black, 25 percent white, with the rest "a smattering of mulatto, Hispanic, American Indian and Asian" (Weightman 1983, 82; Reiterman 1982, 346). Nearly two-thirds of the residents were women (Reiterman 1982, 346). In the most thorough consideration of the race, age, and gender demographics to date Archie Smith points out that just fewer than one-half of the population of Jonestown were black women, most of them (14 percent) sixty-six years or older. His numbers demonstrate clearly the race and gender composition of the Peoples Temple community in Guyana: 49 percent black women; 22 percent black men; 14 percent white women; 10 percent white men (A. Smith 1982, figs. 1 and 2).

Why these people left California to live in a jungle commune in Guyana is a question with a variety of answers, depending upon which

"kind" of member one is querying. Three groups were coexisting within Peoples Temple by the time it moved to Jonestown: the original members from Indiana (mostly white); the young, educated white members who joined after Peoples Temple relocated to Redwood Valley; and the members who joined once the ministry of Peoples Temple expanded into San Francisco and Los Angeles—elderly black women, women (mostly black) with children, and young black males. The organizational dynamics this combination of groups created are addressed in chapter 5. The mostly female leadership of Jonestown was drawn primarily from the California white professional group with important support from the Indiana members. The rank and file were almost exclusively urban blacks of all ages and both genders.

Most of what has been written about the members of Peoples Temple who moved to Jonestown and died there has focused on the utopian dreams of the white members who joined in the early California years and the socioeconomic needs of the blacks who became members during the Peoples Temple urban expansion. But this "white utopianism—black deprivation" split is not completely accurate and could be interpreted as both racist and classist, as Stanley Hauerwas has pointed out:

> One of the most disturbing aspects of reactions to Jonestown is the inherent racism and class prejudice implied. The assumption is that if these people had just been better educated and well off they would not have fallen for this kind of cheap and trashy religion. There is no empirical or moral basis, however, for such an assumption. (Levi, 1982, 191 n. 10)

In fact, a great deal of utopian desire motivated the urban blacks to follow Peoples Temple to the "Promised Land." Several months after the suicides, a black woman member who had not gone to Jonestown noted that Peoples Temple "provided the atmosphere of love, trust and social concern that she found lacking in other black institutions" (Chidester 1988b, 44). The journalist Lawrence Wright suggested that it was more the belief in the "promise of racial equality" than in food, shelter, and economic security that motivated the black senior citizens to join Peoples Temple and then move to Jonestown. These were people who had internalized Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement during the 1920s; almost half of the elderly residents

of Jonestown had already migrated once from the American South to California in search of a more just society.

> The foundation of his [Jones's] ministry was a promise of racial equality. His followers had grown up in a racist society and suffered economic injustice, and, whether they came from a tenant farm in Mississippi or a cotton mill in Georgia, they had not found redemption in California. Jones made them believe that they could create it themselves—that they could make their own Paradise. (Wright 1993, 69)

This is not to say that there were not some black members who were attracted into Peoples Temple membership by economic and security considerations. Perhaps this is, in fact, a false dichotomy. It may only be Western assumptions about the nature of religion and philosophy that force a split between utopian ideology and economic considerations. After the suicides, Debbie Touchette, a young black woman whose father Archie Ijames had served as associate pastor with Jim Jones in Indiana, told Rebecca Moore: "My family lived on scraps from the garbage cans behind the A&P and Kroger's in Indianapolis. I was raised in Peoples Temple. No one will ever make me think that social change is brainwashing. Peoples Temple was really helping people" (Moore 1985, 78).

Elderly people who had lived in poverty and loneliness in San Francisco and Los Angeles were provided with superior health care and community through their affiliation with Peoples Temple. Most of the older adults (fifty-one to sixty-five years of age) and seniors (sixty-six and older), who made up one quarter of the population of Jonestown, joined Peoples Temple after 1970 when the Temple's ministry expanded into urban California. Of the older adults, nearly one-half (51 of 104) indicated a health problem on the forms they filled out for the Peoples Temple leadership in preparation for moving to Jonestown. Nearly 60 percent (85 of 146) of the seniors indicated a health problem. At Jonestown they were able to contribute to the life of the community according to their physical capabilities. As Reverend John Moore wrote after he and his wife, Barbara, visited Jonestown in May 1978: "I know of no retirement home which provides better food and health care and a more wholesome environment. They are part of a community with babies and children as well as of young people and adults. This fact is a two way street, benefiting the young

as well as the old" (Moore 1985, 194). Stephan Jones emphasized this latter point as the primary attraction for everyone who was a member of Peoples Temple, no matter what her or his race, gender, class or educational attainments: the need for "a sense of belonging" (Jones interview, 25 May 1993).

I am not suggesting that the experience in Peoples Temple was the same for the educated whites and for the urban blacks. In fact, I argue quite the opposite in the chapters to come. What I am suggesting is that the difference between these two groups was not so much what motivated them to join Peoples Temple in the first place as were two factors that would contribute centrally to the events of November 1978: first, what each identified as the significance of the group once the pressure increased at Jonestown and second, the difference in their economic and social abilities to leave Jonestown. "Marginalization" in mainstream society for the white elite at Jonestown was exclusively affiliative. Once one of them chose to return to the middle class (or higher) lifestyle from which she or he came, then the marginalization that came with belonging to a religious group committed to racial integration would end. This was not the case for the majority of Jonestown residents, who would return to the United States only to face a continuation of racism, ageism, and classism. The significant defections from Jonestown that drove the decision to commit suicide were from the California leadership circle and the Indiana founding members. The black members of Peoples Temple did not have much to return to in urban California nor did they have the economic resources with which to make the transition once they had thrown in their lot with Jones and the Temple.

Thus, I have focused on the particularities of the people involved in Peoples Temple and, later in the analysis, on the specific people who defected at various times. It is not possible to understand what happened at Jonestown without "knowing" the people. As Mary Sawyer, who worked with members of Peoples Temple as an assistant to California Lieutenant Governor Mervyn Dymally, pointed out, "The trauma of Jonestown has vastly more meaning when the victims are known as real people who laughed and cried and worked and loved and dreamed great dreams" (Sawyer 1981). The failure of scholars to look more deeply than "70–80 percent black" or "two-thirds women" means that at some level the discipline of sociology of religion is subscribing to the belief that the commitment of these people to a new religious movement makes them somehow generic and inter-

changeable. Whereas scholars of new religions offer critiques of the "brainwashing theory" of Margaret Singer, in fact, much of what is written in the field shares an unspoken assumption with Singer that "we" are in our "right" minds and would never join such a group except from the safety of a participant-observation vantage point.