

Contents

<i>Foreword</i> , Catherine Wessinger	ix
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii
<i>Introduction</i>	xix
1. <i>Who Were the Members of Peoples Temple?</i>	1
2. <i>Deconstructing Jonestown</i>	14
3. <i>The Triple Erasure of Women in the Leadership of Peoples Temple</i>	32
4. <i>A Restoration of Women's Power in Peoples Temple</i>	55
5. <i>Three Groups in One</i>	74
6. <i>From Jones the Person to Jonestown the Community</i>	87
7. <i>Freedom and Loyalty, a Deadly Potion</i>	114
8. <i>Conclusion</i>	136
<i>Appendixes</i>	
A. <i>Jonestown Demographics</i>	145
B. <i>Suicide Tape Transcript</i>	147
C. <i>A Witness to Tragedy and Resurrection</i>	165
<i>References</i>	169
<i>Index</i>	175

Foreword

CATHERINE WESSINGER

Everyone knows what happened at Jonestown. In 1978, Jonestown was a compound in the jungles of Guyana where over nine hundred brainwashed Americans lived. They were members of a church named Peoples Temple led by an insane, megalomaniac messiah, Jim Jones. After an unwelcome investigative visit by Congressman Leo Ryan, news reporters, and concerned relatives, which prompted some of the residents to defect, Jonestown men opened fire on Ryan's departing party killing five people including Ryan. Then the men returned to Jonestown where they joined the other residents in drinking punch laced with cyanide and tranquilizers. Some people were injected with the deadly potion. The children were killed first. People who did not want to commit suicide were forced to do so at gunpoint. Since no sane person would follow a leader so obviously delusional as Jim Jones, we can be certain that the Jonestown residents were brainwashed zombies. Further proof that Jim Jones had a controlling, narcissistic personality is the fact that he sexually exploited the women, and some of the men. The decision to commit murder and mass suicide was made by Jim Jones alone. Jones exercised total control over his followers. Jim Jones is solely to blame for the 922 deaths in Guyana on 18 November 1978.

The Jonestown myth is at once frightening and reassuring. It is frightening because, as we are warned by anticultists, anyone can be brainwashed by an unscrupulous religious leader. It is reassuring, because the Jonestown residents were clearly not in their right minds, since they were obviously subjected to mind control by Jim Jones. We can rest assured that sane people capable of making rational choices

do not choose to kill others, their children, and themselves. Furthermore, we do not have to think about all the people of Jonestown—the 260 children, the seniors, the young people, the mature adults. The focus on laying all the blame on Jim Jones makes these people disappear. We do not have to confront them as individuals, who were committed to an ideal, and who possessed the ability to agree with and carry out the murder/suicide plan, and who also had the power to disagree and refuse to carry out those actions. Finally, we can be reassured that the residents of Jonestown were totally unlike ordinary, sane people like ourselves.

Mary McCormick Maaga asserts that the Jonestown residents are the “most intimate other,” because they were human beings possessing agency, the ability to decide right and wrong, and they shared characteristics with ourselves. By attending to the voices of the Jonestown residents, who have been ignored due to the focus on Jim Jones, Maaga has found evidence that contradicts the received myth about Jonestown. The reality of Jonestown is more complex than what anticultists and the media have led us to believe. Jonestown had both good and bad features. Its residents were active in making the decision to carry out the mass murder/suicide, especially the young college-educated white women in Jim Jones’s inner circle. Maaga questions the patriarchal assumptions that have been made about Jim Jones’s “mistresses,” and she listens to their voices. According to their testimony, through their relationships with Jim Jones, these young women found themselves empowered to actively improve the world and achieve concrete results involving social justice. These women loved Jim Jones, but they loved the cause even more. For reasons described by Maaga, the power of Jim Jones in fact declined in Peoples Temple after he left California for Jonestown. Jonestown documents demonstrate that the residents participated in making the decision to commit mass suicide if enemies threatened their collective, but the young women leaders and key men were most involved in making and facilitating that decision.

Religious commitment involves having an “ultimate concern,” a goal that is the most important thing in the world for the believers (Baird 1971, 18). People may change their ultimate goals at different points in their lives, but sometimes individuals and groups may be so committed to an ultimate concern that they are willing to kill or die for it, or to do both. Early Christian martyrs are revered for dying for

their faith, but today in America, we usually regard such people as fanatics, not as saints and heroes. The residents of Jonestown died in order to preserve their ultimate concern, their loyalty to each other as members of a socialist collective. Their ultimate concern was to preserve the unity of their community at all costs.

Although Jim Jones rejected the Bible, he articulated his teachings in the idiom of Protestant and Pentecostal Christianity. He termed his doctrine “apostolic socialism.” Peoples Temple members were attempting to live out Jesus’ injunction to love and care for the poor, the sick, and the downtrodden. Jonestown was a multiracial community committed to overcoming racism, sexism, ageism, and to helping everyone in need who came their way. They had withdrawn to Jonestown in Guyana as a refuge where they would be safe during the imminent apocalypse that would destroy the old sinful capitalist world and clear the way for communists to make a new world upholding human dignity and justice.

I have suggested that we use the term “catastrophic millennialism” for this ancient vision of the old world being violently swept away so that a collective salvation, a millennial kingdom, can be constructed (Wessinger 1997). A noteworthy feature of catastrophic millennialism is its dualism. Dualism is a perspective that divides reality into good vs. evil, us vs. them. A dualistic way of looking at the world is not only a common characteristic of “cultists,” but also of “ordinary” people.

The Jonestown residents and the anticultists who opposed them were locked in a war fed by the dualistic worldviews of the participants on both sides. The anticultists were successful in enlisting the cooperation of federal agencies and officials, the media, and thereby public opinion in their project to destroy Jonestown. This degree of “cultural opposition” (Hall 1995) happened to occur at a time when Jonestown was suffering from internal weaknesses, including some caused by Jim Jones himself.

As demonstrated by Maaga, the combination of stresses internal to Jonestown—which by themselves threatened the ultimate concern—with the pressure from external opponents, precipitated the extreme actions on 18 November 1978. Most Jonestown residents agreed that their ultimate concern was worth killing and dying for. The transcript of the last Jonestown meeting (see app. B) provides evidence of peer pressure, persuasion, psychological coercion—by the whole group, not solely by Jim Jones—but there is no evidence that physical force was

used to make people commit suicide.* As Jones said to Christine Miller, anyone could run who did not want to participate in the suicide, and some adults did. Other residents departed earlier because they knew the community had discussed and prepared for a mass suicide. The agency of adults in deciding whether they would or would not participate in the mass suicide/murder belies the brainwashing theory. Those who did kill others and/or committed suicide did so in order to preserve their ultimate concern.

Mary McCormick Maaga highlights the unheard voices of Jonestown and reveals the humanity and likeness to us of the Jonestown residents. In doing so, she elucidates the complex dynamics that produced so many deaths on that fateful day in Guyana. Let us hope that the mistakes of these fervent believers and the mistakes of their equally fervent opponents will not be repeated. Reciprocal demonization produces only violence and death, not life.

* I am saying that contrary to the media myth, we have no *evidence* that there was any physical coercion to join the mass suicide. The witnesses are dead. There is testimony of surviving witnesses of people willingly going to participate in the mass suicide. Certainly the children did not choose to die. Probably a number of elderly people did not have a choice. Dissidents in Jonestown were drugged and kept confined. These people did not choose to die. Able-bodied people could have escaped the suicide easily, and some chose to do so. My primary point here is that mass suicide could not have been carried out without the agency of the able-bodied adults.

Preface

It was two years after meeting Reverend John and Barbara Moore before I learned that their daughters, Carolyn and Annie, had died at Jonestown. In those two years I was mentored by John and Barbara into the Christian life. Christian discipleship for them included an emphasis on people marginalized by mainstream society. John preached about the Kingdom of God and the justice embodied in Jesus Christ. Barbara mirrored this message in the diverse community she created in their home by offering accommodation and hospitality to runaways, prisoners, drug addicts, and people of every nationality and ethnicity. Both were, and are, activists on the front lines of social justice. I knew that their daughters had died tragically, but I thought that it had been in a traffic accident. Because they had discussed Jonestown so publicly—John had preached the Sunday after the tragedy (see app. C) and their daughter, Becky, and her husband, Mac, had written several books on Peoples Temple—they assumed that I knew.

I was shocked to learn how Carolyn Moore Layton and Annie Moore had died because of the conflict between my experience with the Moores and what I had read about the people who died at Jonestown. No daughter of John and Barbara was likely to have been brainwashed. I knew the depth of religious commitment that they had inspired in me and wondered what it would have been like to have been raised in their home and where that might have led me: to Peoples Temple, to Jonestown, to revolutionary suicide? Everywhere I turned for information I was confronted by a portrait of Carolyn as Jim Jones's mistress and little more. I set out to disprove this one-dimensional picture of my friends' daughter. What began as a very

personal search for a deeper understanding of Carolyn has broadened to include a critique of that field of study which seeks to explain the behavior of people in new religions.

Because of my relationship with the Moores, I had the opportunity to meet Stephan Jones and Grace Stoen Jones, whose interviews with me added depth and detail to this study. On 18 November 1992 I went to the Jonestown Memorial Service at Evergreen Cemetery in Oakland, California, with John, Barbara, and Becky Moore, and Mary Sawyer, a friend of the Moores since the tragedy. I had never been to the service before, but John and Barbara go yearly. John told me that none of the "key players" show up at the service, which is organized by a consortium of black churches and people who lost relatives at Jonestown. A few reporters were milling around. CNN interviewed John and Barbara. By the time the service was scheduled to begin nearly two dozen people had arrived, mostly black. I was standing next to John when I looked at his face and saw that he was shaken. Then he said, "My God, it's Stephan." I followed his gaze and saw a tall, handsome man kneeling down next to the grave marker with a plant. He looked like Jim Jones, only taller, in better physical condition, and with a ponytail. A chill ran through me as Stephan made eye contact with John and walked toward him. They embraced, and John burst into tears, saying, "Stephan." Barbara greeted him, then he hugged Mary Sawyer, who said something to him about knowing his mother's sister. He turned to me and embraced me. John introduced me as a family friend, like one of their daughters. I said that I had written Stephan, but had not heard back. He asked at what address, and we clarified that he had moved recently. He gave me his new address and phone number and said that I could contact him.

Stephan then looked up the hill and saw Becky a little way off. Barbara started to say, "That's our daughter," but Stephan interrupted her and said, "I know, she looks just like Kimo" (the Moores' grandson by Carolyn and Jim Jones). John wept more heavily and was shaken while Barbara stood stiff and self-contained. Later, I asked her if she was okay, and she said, "I'll be okay because if I let myself start to fall apart I will never come back together again." Two white women arrived shortly after this conversation, and John told me he thought the petite one was Grace Stoen, whose son, John Victor, had been at the center of a child custody battle with Peoples Temple. During an impromptu lunch arrangement after the service I rode to the res-

restaurant with Grace, who agreed to be interviewed by me at a later date.

What follows is my offering to Jonestown scholarship and to Carolyn and Annie.

Acknowledgments

Being credited with the authorship of a book conceals an important truth—that a research project is produced by a community. This project was only feasible with the support of many people. My research at the Peoples Temple Archives of the California Historical Society during the winter of 1992 would not have been possible without the assistance of Jeffrey Barr, then library director, and the friendliness of Robert and George, who cheered me during some very long days of reading through documents. Stephan Jones gave multiple hours of interviews, which have been invaluable. I am grateful to Stephan for his time and for the offer of friendship that he and his wife, Kristi, extended to my husband, Boikanyo, and me. Grace Stoen Jones taught me a great deal about the inner workings of Peoples Temple and also how to embrace joy in the midst of grief and loss.

During the summer of 1995 I was encouraged through exhilarating and, sometimes, frustrating days of writing by the good humor and secretarial support of Yvonne McClymont and the warm collegiality of Murray MacBeath. Susan Sinclair spent several weeks during one of the hottest summers in Scottish history transcribing an audio tape of the suicide meeting. She also proofread much of my draft. Luke O'Curry spent painstaking hours collating the demographics. Throughout the two years of my tenure at the University of Stirling, my colleagues and students were unflagging in their enthusiasm for this project. Their encouragement, especially that of Jennifer Haswell, was essential to my creative process. In the past several years I have benefited greatly from the counsel and advice of Catherine Wessinger, former chair of the New Religious Movements group of the American

Academy of Religion, whose own work on new religious movements and women in religion has inspired me.

Then there are those people whose influence on one's life transcends any individual project. Karen McCarthy Brown has taught me what I know about being a scholar, including how to live in the ambiguity of what one learns and to embrace it. Bob Coote has taught me how to fan curiosity into investigative fire. Diane Du Brule Siebert has taught me how to stay sane throughout all of life's challenges, including the research and writing of this book. Her loving and ever-mirthful support of me and this project included the preparation of the manuscript for publication during an especially busy time in my life. Without Diane's help I would not have been able to balance motherhood, ministry, and my scholarly work while getting this book into print. Thank you, Diane.

I would not have undertaken an investigation of Peoples Temple without the blessing of John, Barbara, and Becky Moore. I thank them for trusting me.

Even with this abundance of technical support, practical help, encouragement, advice, and blessings I would not have been able to "live" with Peoples Temple and Jonestown in the way that I have for the past seven years without the loving and thoroughly genuine passion of my husband for me and this project. How can "thank you" sound anything but trite in reference to a man whose dedication to our creative partnership and marriage is the reason that the following book exists?

Introduction

Jonestown is more than a place in Guyana where an American religious group lived and died. Jonestown has come to symbolize the worst possible outcome of religious commitment. Since 1978, whenever there is violence in a nonmainstream religious group, such as the Branch Davidians, Solar Temple, or Heaven's Gate, comparisons are made with Peoples Temple and the deaths that occurred at Jonestown. This book grows, in part, out of my frustration with these comparisons.

Peoples Temple was an attempt by its founder and participants to create an egalitarian society in which hierarchies based upon race, class, and gender would be erased. The groups to which Peoples Temple is frequently compared had no such aspirations. The horrific end to Peoples Temple grew out of a combination of both its success and failure in creating a community based upon Christian and socialist ideals. Its success meant that the individuals who joined Peoples Temple came to see each other as family and their community as a model for addressing the racism and classism of America. Its failure was mirrored in a leadership structure that was almost exclusively white and college educated and largely female, whereas the membership was predominantly black and either skilled or unskilled laborers. For the leadership elite at Jonestown the symbolic importance of what had been created in Peoples Temple began to be more important than the individual lives involved. As pressure built from relatives, former members, politicians, and the news media for Jonestown to be disbanded, this combination of family loyalty and elitist decision making merged to create an environment in which suicide was embraced as the only option in which community, albeit in the spiritual realm, and ideological purity could be maintained.

Jonestown was a unique religious phenomenon. The decision to commit suicide was a singular response to a complex set of communal pressures. I do not believe that any universal lessons about religion or charismatic leadership can be learned from Jonestown in spite of the photos of the Jonestown dead that are televised every time a group makes a radical and deadly step in the name of religious commitment. Because of the horror that took place on 18 November 1978, much that was positive in Peoples Temple, not to mention the individual personalities who dedicated their lives to its radical understanding of society, has been erased. This book is an attempt to restore the humanity of the individuals who were a part of Peoples Temple. For this reason the details of the history, organization, and personalities of Peoples Temple are highlighted. The reward for the careful reader will be a greater understanding of why adults in the Jonestown community chose to take their lives.

For this process of reconstructing the life and times of Peoples Temple to be most effective it has been necessary to engage in the scholarly task of deconstructing many existing analyses of Jonestown. It may be tempting to skip chapter 2 in which I discuss the theories and methods that have informed scholarly and popular conclusions about Jonestown, but the voices of Peoples Temple can only be heard once the misunderstandings are left behind. Although chapter 2 is theoretically denser than any that follow, it is the foundation upon which my theory is built.

Much work remains to understand the complex religious, political, and personal dynamics at work in Peoples Temple. This book is my attempt to initiate the next wave of Jonestown scholarship.