

Introduction

More than forty years ago, people around the world were shocked to learn of the mass murders and suicides of more than nine hundred Americans who belonged to an obscure religious group. A thousand members of Peoples Temple, based in California, had emigrated to the South American country of Guyana and settled in the remote community of Jonestown, named after their leader, Jim Jones. Residents of Jonestown believed that a group of conspirators wanted to destroy their communal village, and they saw the proof of that in the unwelcome visit of Congressman Leo J. Ryan of California. As the congressman and his party prepared to leave following the visit, gunmen acting on Jones's command attacked them at a jungle airstrip six miles from Jonestown. They killed Ryan, three journalists, and one defecting Temple member. Back in Jonestown, a well-rehearsed plan to take poison went into operation as adults murdered their children before – willingly or unwillingly – ingesting poison themselves. More than one hundred and twenty-five miles away in the capital city of Guyana, another Temple member killed her three children and herself under orders coming via shortwave radio from Jonestown. At the end of November 18, 1978, nine hundred and fourteen Temple members had perished along with Congressman Ryan and three others.

Despite its historical distance, this singular event reverberates in countless ways in the present. More than eighty nonfiction books on the topic have been published in English with dozens more in other languages. Countless articles, both scholarly and popular, have analyzed the catastrophe. Documentaries, fiction films, dramas, novels, podcasts, and blogs continue to interpret the events in a variety of factual and counterfactual ways. If anything, the story of Peoples Temple and the deaths in Jonestown is overdetermined.

It is therefore fair to ask if another work about Jonestown is necessary. This account takes up the challenge of presenting a brief yet comprehensive analysis of Peoples Temple and its attempt to create a new society in Jonestown. Public appetite for cult stories has exploded in the era of NXIVM and QAnon. Indeed, more than one moral panic has recently arisen involving fear of cults (e.g., Reichert & Richardson 2012; Krinsky 2016; Cusack 2020). Anxiety over extreme religious commitment – frequently characterized as “belonging to a cult” – often evokes the specter of violence, especially mass suicide. Thus a fresh assessment of Peoples Temple and Jonestown is needed to eradicate misconceptions and show how atypical the group was and remains.

Another reason for examining Peoples Temple anew is that documents released under the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) continue to be published, offering insights into the inner workings of the group. The vast majority

of items were not made available to the public before the turn of the twenty-first century. It was difficult to get accurate information in the middle of a mass tragedy, so factual errors plagued initial news reports. Many have been corrected thanks to reliable documents released under FOIA. Unfortunately, much of the misinformation published more than four decades ago is still being reproduced, amplified by internet memes, websites, and bloggers. This problem is exacerbated by recent oral histories in which individuals recount the experiences of forty years earlier and introduce factual errors. The problem of misremembering details, or not having information in the first place, remains a potential drawback when relying on oral accounts. People change their stories over time. FOIA documents show the messy process of reacting to a major disaster, with moment-by-moment updates and corrections. Errors remain, but they can frequently be spotted with the help of 20/20 hindsight.

Because the present Element relies on the most current scholarship regarding Peoples Temple in particular, and new religious movements in general, it has advantages lacking in the earliest eyewitness statements. Primary-source written documents such as cables, government reports, letters, audiotapes, and other items – even some news stories – frequently offer more accurate insights than recollections articulated four decades later. One of the most interesting sources acquired through FOIA is a collection of journals written by Temple member Edith Roller and discovered in Jonestown after the tragedy. Written between 1975 and 1978, these revealing diaries described experiences both mundane and extraordinary. Most importantly, they were not colored by any *ex post facto* analyses of the deaths in Jonestown. A true believer, Roller lived her life committed to social change. She provided prosaic descriptions of food she ate, classes she taught, chores she performed, and books she read. She even described at least one suicide rehearsal before she perished on November 18.

Former Temple members whose memoirs of life in the Temple have come out since the year 2000 are also challenging long-accepted narratives. Like Edith Roller, they offer rarely seen vistas on life among the rank and file (e.g., Kohl 2010), in contrast to the viewpoints of apostate leaders and critics. In addition, many survivors – both defectors who left before the end and loyalists who averted death by not being present in Jonestown on the final day – have published personal reflections in the *Alternative Considerations of Jonestown and Peoples Temple (Alternative Considerations)*, a digital archive hosted by San Diego State University. These articles and remembrances present a look inside the Temple that goes beyond headlines by presenting insights into day-to-day life within the group. All of these memoirs and reflections enlarge our understanding of what Peoples Temple was and how members functioned within it.

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Historically, the voices of Black members of Peoples Temple were erased, drowned out by more vocal and visible spokespersons (Moore 2018b). As journalist Jamilah King observed in 2018, “Jonestown is largely seen as a white catastrophe” (King 2018). This is especially problematic given the fact that almost three-quarters of those who died in Jonestown were Black and that 90 percent of Temple members in the United States were African American. But contemporary Black writers, poets, and artists are significantly extending the field of vision for understanding the importance of the Temple in US history and religious consciousness (e.g., Wagner-Wilson 2008; Gillespie 2011; Hutchinson 2015; E. Smith 2021; scott 2022). The republication of some of the earliest African American evaluations, along with new analyses, also reinscribed Black voices into the understanding of Jonestown (Moore, Pinn & Sawyer 2004; Kwayana 2016).

The first descriptions of Peoples Temple and Jonestown in the aftermath largely came from White defectors, or ex-members, who had little sympathy for and even less experience with the purposes and goals of Peoples Temple. Many were part of a group called Concerned Relatives who sought to remove family members from the Temple. The Concerned Relatives were influenced by a national anticult movement dedicated to exposing the dangers and abuses that existed in some new religions. Their voices dominated media coverage of the deaths in Jonestown and prompted reporters to frame the story of Peoples Temple as one of fraud and fakery rather than one of failed ideals and thwarted hopes. Justifiable outrage over the murder of almost four hundred young adults, teenagers, children and infants made it virtually impossible to countenance any other perspective. At the same time, the outrage paradoxically hindered sorely needed criminal investigations and scholarly analyses.

The twenty-first century has also seen greater appreciation for narratives from Guyana, the South American country in which the calamity occurred. Most Guyanese had never heard of Jonestown before the nation was rocked with news of the deaths of more than nine hundred Americans on their soil. While some contemporary opinion pieces criticized the Guyana government, few in the United States or in the international community knew of these critiques. A year after the deaths, Guyana nationalist Walter Rodney (1942–80) gave a talk at Stanford University in which he blamed the government of Guyana for the deaths in Jonestown (Rodney 1979). His talk, coupled with evaluations by additional government critics, was collected and republished by another Guyana nationalist, Eusi Kwayana (Kwayana 2016). Moreover, literary works by Guyanese authors have made Guyana, rather than the United States, the center of the Jonestown story. They tend to locate the deaths in Jonestown within a postcolonial context that has generally been ignored.

Recent interviews with Guyanese individuals who were present at the Port Kaituma airstrip or in Jonestown shortly before or after the deaths have cleared up several mysteries. For example, the first Guyana official to reach the death scene provided an initial body count of four hundred people. He based his evaluation on the fact that he was told that four hundred passports were found, rather than on an actual count (M. Johnson 2019). This preliminary guesstimate created the misapprehension that hundreds of people fled into the jungle, a mistake corrected only in the days that followed as more bodies were uncovered during the process of recovering the remains.

For more than forty years, scholars have investigated the Temple and Jonestown from myriad angles (Levi 1982b; Weightman 1984; Maaga 1998; Chidester 2003; Hall 2004; Moore 2018a). General assessments of violence occurring in new religions have also contributed to understanding the events in Jonestown (Hall 1995; Hall with Schuyler & Trinh 2000; Wessinger 2000; Moore 2011 and 2018d). A range of articles has investigated the Temple movement from the perspectives of psychology (e.g., Lasaga 1980; A. Smith 1982; Ulman & Abse 1983; Nesci 1999 and 2018), sociology (e.g., P. Johnson 1979; Hall 1988; Feltmate 2016 and 2018), and religious studies (e.g., Levi 1982a; Chidester 1988; Klippenstein 2015 and 2018; Folk 2018). All of these studies, and many more, go far beyond the immediate journalistic reports (e.g., Kilduff & Javers 1978; Krause 1978) and popular interpretations (e.g., Kerns with Wead 1979; Nugent 1979) that emerged in the weeks and months after November 1978.

Two high-quality mass-market books serve as bookends distinguished by care, attention, and in-depth research, in contrast to dozens of sensationalistic accounts. Reporter Tim Reiterman of the *San Francisco Examiner* was wounded at the Port Kaituma airstrip on November 18 as he covered Congressman Leo Ryan's visit. While the coauthored volume *Raven* starts from the premise that Jim Jones was troubled "from the very beginning" (Reiterman with Jacobs 1982: 5), it still provides a wealth of detail lacking in any prior books. Thirty-five years later, Jeff Guinn retraced Reiterman and Jacobs's footsteps in *The Road to Jonestown* (Guinn 2017). But Guinn, also a journalist, took a different approach and came up with new details that clarified the role of Jim Jones within the larger Peoples Temple movement. His focus on members, rather than just the leader, broadened popular understanding of both.

Finally, the Alternative Considerations digital archive, established in 1998, has made thousands of documents, articles, personal reflections, video reports, audiotapes and transcripts, genealogical trees, and other items publicly available for more than two decades. Hosted by Special Collections at the San Diego State University Library, it has become an essential stop for researchers, family



Figure 1 Children and young adults in Peoples Temple Redwood Valley branch, 1975. Photo by Claire Janaro. Courtesy of the Jonestown Institute

members, and others looking into the life and death of Peoples Temple. Digitization has internationalized the scope of Jonestown research and has centralized much of the information by publishing it online in a single clearing-house. (Full disclosure: The author and the author's husband, Fielding McGehee III, manage this website under the name the Jonestown Institute. Their interest in Peoples Temple stems in part from the deaths of the author's sisters Carolyn Layton and Annie Moore and Carolyn's son Kimo Prokes in Jonestown.) The California Historical Society also maintains an extensive archive of Temple documents, including thousands of photographs taken during the group's existence.

In light of these developments, a reappraisal of Peoples Temple and Jonestown is both timely and necessary. Section 1 begins with a brief history of Peoples Temple and its demise in Jonestown. It discusses the origins of the Temple in Indianapolis, Indiana, under the leadership of Jim Jones and his wife, Marceline Baldwin Jones, noting the significance of race and class. The section presents the reasons for the migration of about one hundred and forty people from Indiana to rural northern California in the mid-1960s, along with its expansion to the urban centers of San Francisco and Los Angeles. It traces the relocation of a significant portion of the group from the United States to the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, beginning in 1974 and culminating with the emigration of a thousand people in 1977 and 1978. The influence of the Concerned Relatives and the role played by US government agencies are examined before turning to the final weeks and days of the movement.

After providing this background, the Element scrutinizes the group through three different analytical lenses: religious, political, and economic. What was the Temple exactly? A religious group? A political organization? A social movement? An intentional community? A dangerous cult? To greater or lesser degrees, the answer to all of these questions is yes, but it is a yes that affirms the complex nature of Peoples Temple and its members. It was indeed a religious group with political and social ambitions that encouraged its members to lead exemplary lives of commitment. In that respect, as a high-demand group living an encapsulated existence in the jungles of a foreign country under the guidance of a charismatic leader, it looks like a stereotypical cult. But that brief description fails to do justice to the yearnings of the majority of the group's members. A closer look at particular dimensions is needed.

Section 2 surveys the varieties of religious experience in Peoples Temple. The complicated psychology and philosophy of the group's leader, Jim Jones – a White man with a strong sense of economic and social grievance – has been the mainstay of many analyses, particularly those appearing in mass media. This emphasis on the leader neglects the enormous influence of Black religion and culture upon the movement. Thus we find elements of the historic Black Church, New Thought, liberal Protestantism, and Humanism at different moments in the religious history of Peoples Temple. Yet all make up what religion scholar Anthony Pinn identifies as various modalities of Black religion (Pinn 2004).

The situation of the times shaped the political outlook of the Temple, especially in the 1970s, the subject of Section 3. While the group presented itself as a church to the world, its more radical political commitments were largely concealed. Members did participate in activities acceptable under the Christian social gospel, such as demonstrating peacefully for racial equality and

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writing letters to public officials. With the collapse of the civil rights movement in the sixties and the emergence of Black Power in the seventies, however, activists grew more militant in their demands, with the Temple no less vocal. A belief that true commitment required dying for the Cause arose among many social activists. The Cause may have been human liberation, equality, and dignity for Black activists in the United States or, in the case of Peoples Temple members, socialism and their own community. Black Panther leader Huey Newton succinctly articulated this view in the expression “revolutionary suicide” (Newton 1973). Newton meant that if one challenges an unjust system, one must face the likelihood of dying – not unrealistic given the number of assassinations of Black leaders that occurred throughout the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. With the move to Guyana, Temple members espoused an explicitly socialist and communist agenda in the hope that they would immigrate to the Soviet Union and avoid the fate of other radicals.

Section 4 explores the eminently successful economic organization of Peoples Temple across its twenty-five-year history. Beginning with profitable care homes run by Marceline Jones in Indianapolis, continuing with group homes in Redwood Valley, California, foster parenting payments, and life care income from senior citizens in San Francisco, Peoples Temple was able to mobilize not only capital but also labor in efficient ways. Peer pressure encouraged members to donate valuable real estate, jewelry, assets, and property to the group as evidence of their unwavering commitment to the Cause. Working for income-generating projects like running thrift stores, panhandling for contributions, selling the *Peoples Forum* newspaper, and operating a printing press for outside customers were just a few of the ways the Temple made money in the United States. With the move to Guyana, the group became more dependent upon the Social Security income provided by senior citizens since no one in Jonestown had an outside job. Jonestown residents ran a small store along the Kaituma River to raise funds, and members in Georgetown took to the streets to beg for money to support the agricultural mission. They came up with a variety of money-making schemes, while Temple members back in the United States were urged to collect larger offerings at church services. By marshalling unpaid labor to do all of the construction, maintenance, farm work, feeding, and more to maintain the project, the group was very successful, at least for a time. Had Jones and his leaders invested some of the millions of dollars stashed in foreign banks into day-to-day living in Jonestown, life there would have been easier.

The concluding section reflects upon the afterlives of Peoples Temple. Although the institution went into official bankruptcy by the end of 1978, with no successor organization, it nevertheless has had an ongoing life in the

public mind. Clearly interest in Peoples Temple remains high, with new books, documentaries, and literary works appearing every year, especially on the anniversary date of the Jonestown deaths. From the production of the drama *Jonestown* by an Iranian playwright, to the display of a nine-by-twelve-foot handcrafted “Jonestown Carpet” by a Canadian performance artist, to the composition of Frank Zappa’s symphonic composition “Jonestown,” Peoples Temple and its demise seem to resonate deeply with artists working in a wide variety of mediums. Section 5 explains this ongoing fascination with Peoples Temple and Jonestown.

This Element also considers the approaches that scholars have taken to assess the impact of the deaths. Researchers have analyzed the elements leading to the violence in Jonestown and conducted comparative studies of violent outbursts involving other new religions. Jonestown was a boon to anticult activists since it seemed to confirm their belief that all new religions had the potential for mass murder and suicide (Moore 2018c). Yet anticult agitation led directly to the US government’s tragic handling of the Branch Davidians at Waco in 1993, according to one scholar (Hall 1995). Pseudo-scholarly theories also continue to circulate on the Internet, despite efforts to debunk them. Thus Jonestown lives on.

One organizing principle that runs throughout this Element is that of migration – from Indiana to California to Guyana. We might even mark an earlier migration with the mass movement of African Americans from the South to the North in the early twentieth century. These different locations mark distinct eras in the ideology, program, and practices of the group. The life of any organization – and of any individual, for that matter – changes according to historical events, geographical location, and surrounding culture. Peoples Temple was no different. That is why it is imperative to clarify which period is under consideration and where. Following the typology developed by sociologist Ernst Troeltsch, religion historian Mary Maaga identified three groups within the Temple movement. There was the Indianapolis sect, the Redwood Valley new religious movement (or cult), and the Black Church of San Francisco and Los Angeles (Maaga 1998: 74–86). While there are advantages to taking this approach, it neglects the identity of Peoples Temple in Guyana, which should be characterized as a utopian communal experiment based in Humanistic thought. Therefore this Element abandons the sect-cult-church typology and adopts instead the three transformative environments in which the Temple operated: Indiana, California, and Guyana.

As differentiated from many depictions of Peoples Temple, this account also investigates the importance of race along with migration in understanding the movement. The Temple started as an intentionally integrated church in a time of

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formal and informal segregation. It deliberately cultivated Black membership throughout its existence and valorized Blackness – at least rhetorically. In reality a White hierarchy dominated the decision-making process. Nevertheless African Americans ultimately remained the heart of the movement, not only numerically but also in terms of development, accomplishment, and ideology.

Finally, the Element attempts to remove Jim Jones from the center of the Peoples Temple story. Jones has epitomized the evil cult leader, not only in popular culture but also in the scholarly literature that emphasizes the role of the charismatic leader in new religions. While it is true that the movement began and ended with him and his vision, that is only a partial truth. His wife, Marceline Jones, played an important role throughout the Temple’s history, as did the members who brought their own experiences, hopes, and aspirations to the group. Focusing on Jones ignores the dynamics between leader and disciples and neglects the significance of followers in shaping the Temple movement.

The deaths in Jonestown will always remain a warning against the dangers of ignoring individual conscience over the demands of group ideology and of disregarding ethical norms in pursuit of transcendent goals. But the lives in Peoples Temple tell another story, one to which this Element turns.

1 The Life and Death of Peoples Temple

Because of the tragic events at Jonestown, the commune’s name has come to represent everything there is to know about Peoples Temple. The reality, however, is that the social, geographical, and historical context of each location in which the Temple existed shaped its character in fundamental ways. “Evolving residential patterns (individual, enclave, communal) marked the institutional organization of Peoples Temple over its twenty-five year history” (Moore 2022b). Political issues, such as civil rights and national liberation in the United States and abroad, guided the Temple’s social activism. Indiana in the 1950s differed greatly from California in the 1960s and 1970s. Guyana – a foreign country, a distinct culture, and a new setting – presented the most challenges. The demographics of Peoples Temple evolved along the way, shifting from a majority-White institution to majority Black. This section examines the ways in which the movement changed in its various locations until its final day.

Indiana

The story of Peoples Temple began in the American Midwest with two remarkable individuals. James Warren Jones (1931–78) and Marceline Mae Baldwin

Jones (1927–78) were born and raised in Indiana. The two differed in almost every respect: social class, family upbringing, religious commitment. But they did share a concern for the underdog. They met at Reid Memorial Hospital in Richmond, Indiana, where Marceline was training to be a nurse and Jim, a high school student, worked at night as a hospital orderly. They married in 1949 in a double ceremony with Marceline’s sister Eloise, who wedded Dale Klingman.

Sources are few for Marceline despite the important role she played in the development of the Temple (see, however, Reiterman with Jacobs 1982; S. Jones 2005; Guinn 2017; Shearer 2020). A common observation, however, is that she was kind, caring, and self-sacrificing. These qualities led her into the field of nursing. She was also extremely competent, a shrewd administrator who became both an excellent breadwinner and an astute financial manager in the Temple’s early days. Jones claimed to have “built and established” a nursing home with his own money in Indianapolis (J. Jones 1977), but it was Marceline and another White woman, Esther Mueller, who turned the Jones’s home into a care facility (Guinn 2017). Marceline maintained steady administrative positions in California that supported the family. Once the group moved to Guyana, she served as an emissary between the outposts there and in the United States, a leading presence at the Jonestown health clinic, and “the compassionate heart of Peoples Temple” (Cartmell 2010). Marceline Jones was a complex figure, however, participating in faked healings (Thielmann with Merrill 1979; Harpe 2010), knowingly turning a blind eye to her husband’s sexual infidelities, and concealing the rape of a fourteen-year-old girl (e.g., Stoen 1972; FBI Audiotape Q775 1973).

In contrast to the dearth of information on Marceline, popular analyses of Jim abound, frequently portraying him in broad strokes as an evil charlatan whose apparent piety masked a vindictive and sadistic brutishness (e.g., Maguire & Dunn 1978; Mills 1979; Scheeres 2011). Accounts of cruelty to animals when he was a boy indicate a mean streak (Reiterman with Jacobs 1982; Guinn 2017), while audiotapes made in Jonestown vividly reveal Jim Jones at his most vicious and abusive.

These sources are of course at odds with the personal reflections of Jim Jones and his family. His mother, Lynetta Putnam Jones (1902/4–78), wrote brief stories about her own life in Lynn, Indiana, along with short, affectionate sketches of her son’s early life (L. Jones n.d.). Many stories that we might call “Temple lore” originated with Jim, Marceline, and Lynetta, such as his avowal to have walked out of a barber shop that discriminated against a Black man (M. Jones & L. Jones 1975). But other tales that achieved legendary status were true, such as the time he was assigned to a Black hospital ward as a patient and