James Steen

**RP7**

Prior to the events of November 18, 1978, was Jamestown a utopia or a dystopia?

Through my research on Jamestown, one inconsistency I’ve come across frequently is the varying perspectives of those living within the community. Why, if this commune was so oppressive, did the people within not seek to rise up? Why, when opportunities to escape, such as the Concerned Relatives initiative, did the people opt to stay? And why, if Jamestown was an unsettled community as first hand accounts suggest, did 907 people agree to die, seemingly by their own will?

One such answer is the idea that an unfairly negative perception of The People’s Temple arose as the result of the mass suicide which overlooked its honest intentions. David Chidester suggests in his book, *Salvation and suicide : Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*, that “Perspectives on the Jonestown even consistently discounted the possibility that the Peoples Temple has been a genuine religious movement.” Indeed, the history of the commune suggests that its teachings of acceptance and a new way of life drew many to join its ranks prior to the Guyana relocation. This seems undeniable as evidenced by the temple’s massive expansion in the early 1970s, when “membership rose to between three thousand and five thousand members.” (Chidester, 8) So was Jonestown a pure religious movement, corrupted throughout its tenure?

Evidence suggest that outside criticism played a substantial role in such a corruption, as Jones appeared to become increasingly paranoid of these “attacks” on his church. In 1973, after 8 high ranking members of the church defected, Jones "first raised the possibility of collective suicide as a strategy for avoiding attacks on the movement," according to a Jonestown resident. (Chidester, 8) According to one former church member, during a 1977 commemoration for suicides at the Golden Gate Bridge, Jones was quoted saying "I have been in a suicidal mood myself today so I have personal empathy for what we are doing here today.” While the degree of outside criticism was likely exaggerated in Jones’s mind, it is easy to imagine significant public backlash towards a socialist movement during the Cold War era, much of which likely contributed to a deterioration the reverend’s mental health. The exodus into Guyana was in fact spurned by a New West exposé which suggested that the temple should be investigated for "certain financial misdealings, coercive practices, alleged beatings of members" and questionable involvement in politics. (Chidester, 10)

Returning to the question of whether Jonestown was a utopia or dystopia with this in mind, evidence seems to suggest that the commune could be considered a utopia well into 1977. Chidester states that Jones set up "an impressive communal village" in which "Most residents seemed happy with their new life.” (10) Thus, it is possible to surmise that Jonestown began as a Utopia, which slowly descended into dystopian society with the deterioration of Jim Jones’s mental health as a result of an inability to cope with outside criticism.

Chidester, David. 1988. *Salvation and suicide: an interpretation of Jim Jones, the Peoples Temple, and Jonestown*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

“I pledge that I have neither received nor given any unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.

James David Steen.”