Narrative provides riveting detail of Jonestown murder-suicide

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In September 1975, at the Peoples Temple on Geary Street in San Francisco, Jim Jones told members of the Planning Commission of his church that it was all right, this one time, to drink some wine. When they had emptied their cups, Father Jones informed them that he had laced the wine with poison – and there was no antidote. Forty-five minutes passed, with everyone sitting around, sobbing, staring into space or talking about dying. Jones then announced that there was no poison; he had tested their loyalty and learned they had it in them to face death unflinchingly. No one criticized him.

Three years later, in the jungles of Guyana, in South America, 909 members of Jones’ predominantly African-American Peoples Temple would die, most of them from ingesting cyanide-laced drinks, mixed in a vat of Flavor-Aid.

A complicated man

In “The Road to Jonestown,” investigative reporter Jeff Guinn, the author of books on Charles Manson, Bonnie and Clyde, and the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral, draws on FBI files and interviews with survivors and members of Jones’ family, to tell the story, in riveting detail, of the largest murder-suicide in American history.

Guinn portrays Jim Jones as a complicated man. He was, to be sure, a ruthless demagogue, a drug addict, obsessed with sex, and almost certainly deranged. Guinn demonstrates, however, that Jones was also a gifted and dynamic leader who was genuinely committed to racial and economic equality.

Unlike most demagogues, Jones did not appeal to the worst instincts of his followers. He helped integrate Indianapolis, where the Peoples Temple (an apostrophe, Jones insisted, symbolized ownership) was born. Hailed as leader

In California, “Father Jones” worked closely with George Moscone, the mayor of San Francisco, who appointed him to the city’s Housing Authority, and Willie Brown, a leader of the State Assembly, who lauded him as “a combination of Martin Luther King, Angela Davis, Albert Einstein and Chairman Mao.”

Most important, Guinn emphasizes, Peoples Temple programs fed the hungry, fought drug addiction and provided scholarships that enabled hundreds of young men and women to go to college.

Unfortunately, Guinn is less successful in capturing the lived experience of the people of Jonestown. ‘We got tired’

Virtually all of the leaders of the Temple, he points out, were White, and, apparently, there are no reliable sources to illuminate the beliefs and behavior of hundreds of African-Americans, many of them former ghetto dwellers, who followed Jones from Indianapolis to Mendocino County to San Francisco to Guyana, where in four years they built an impressive farm settlement.

In a tape recovered by authorities in Guyana after the murder-suicide, some congregants in the poison line can be heard thanking Jones for all he had done for them.

“Bring the vat with the green ‘C’ in,” Jones responds, and in a rambling monologue he declares: “Take our life from us. We laid it down. We got tired…We committed an act of revolutionary suicide protesting the conditions of an inhumane world.”

Final assessment

The assessment of Carolyn Layton, who loved Jones and was deeply committed to the Peoples Temple, however, seems much more accurate.
In “A Final Stand If Decided On,” a neatly typed document written as U.S. authorities were closing in on Jonestown, Layton wonders how future generations will interpret a mass suicide. "I don't have much illusion about that," she wrote. "I just hate to see it all go for naught."

Almost 40 years later, it has. Jonestown is remembered, if at all, as an act of madness, whose most enduring (and inaccurate) legacy may well be the catchphrase, "Don't drink the Kool-Aid," a jokey reminder to resist falling for crazy leaders.

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