How cult leaders keep you chained to them

Mémoire

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Allan Rodrigues

Directeur: Dennis Wezenberg

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How cult leaders keep you chained to them

1. Introduction

Most people have heard of the horrific stories shared by former cult members, and you have also wondered how those people didn't realize all the terrible things being done to them. Most people also often assume that people who end up in cults are people who just aren't that smart or lack critical thinking. However, is this really the case? And if not, then what are the factors that play in not noticing or being seemingly ignorant of the dangers posed in those cults? And what makes it so hard to leave a cult once you have entered one? What role does religion play in the indoctrination of people, and should we be more careful with the power religion holds over people?

Additionally, cult leaders are often described as charismatic but what kind of charisma is needed to be able to brainwash and create your own society? What goal do cult leaders have when doing these horrible things? Is it just narcissism? How much of what they say, do they believe in? How much religion and belief are necessary to fully indoctrinate someone into a cult and should we reassess the importance of religion in our society?

I will be trying to answer all these questions in this essay as well as explore the role society plays when talking about cults. I suppose that one of the biggest factors that play in being safe from cults is your environment and having a good support system. I also believe intelligence doesn’t play that big a role and that anyone can be manipulated with enough time.

2. What is a cult?

Cults are often shrouded in mystery and most people often associate cults with something dangerous. However, cults are usually simply considered a relatively small group of people that worship or are devoted to one leader, philosophy or deity. The idea that cults are something to fear comes from the fact that in the past decades there have been many cults with controversial goals. These cults often ended in mass suicides or in finding out that the cult leaders were abusing their fellow cultists. Therefore, nowadays when people imagine a cult, they imagine a group of outsiders worshipping an evil god and taking part in questionable activities. In the past though, cults were a common thing and weren't considered dubious at all. In ancient Rome, it was common for cults to be integrated into normal society and open for anyone to enter. They weren't something to fear or be careful about. In ancient Greece, there were many mystery cults so to speak, these were cults that often dealt with topics such as death and afterlife, with their rites being kept secret. These cults were not feared, but the gods they worshipped were. Cults played a key role in society and influenced those in power. Like the Cult of Isis in Rome, with those who payed for construction and decoration of the Temple being granted roles like town councilor. So, I would consider cults to be something normal and even important for the populus back then. Notably for people in Ancient Mediterranean who worshipped gods in their respective cults but also allowed for the worship of gods not part of their pantheon to be continued in cults (Cult of Isis for example). As mentioned, however, cults are often seen as in conflict or outside societal norms nowadays and this also seems to be the only difference between cult and religion. But is this the only difference?

2.1. Difference between cult and religion

Various scholars and experts argue for the idea that every religion started as a joke before being accepted by society and then turning into a religion or a church. This goes back to the point that cults are just religions that are at odds with society. One new example of this idea is the Seventh-Day Adventist Church. They started as a doomsday cult in the 19th century. A doomsday cult being a cult that believes they know the date of the end of the world. They had believed that on the 22 October 1844, that Jesus Christ would come back and after the failure of the prophecy, the cult got disbanded but reformed in 1863. The main difference the church has, is in what they believe happens after death. Contrary to other Christian churches, the Seventh-Day Adventist Church believes that humans remain unconscious after death and wait for the return of Christ. When they were disbanded, they fought to be recognized as a real church and got that recognition. This shows that a former cult can become a religion if society recognizes them as such.

Despite that, some scholars define cults as something with some or all these malicious characteristics: A religious group, a leader who is charismatic and has almost or complete control over his followers, an apocalyptic vision (doomsday cult), isolation from the rest of society, a strong spiritual belief, often a belief of "transcending", strict rules and rough punishments for followers who break these rules. We can clearly state that with this definition cults are defined as something dangerous or malicious.

I would use a definition that uses the two previous ones as a blueprint; cults are religious groups that are not accepted or recognized by society, because of all the evil characteristics they have. I will be talking about groups with leaders who operate in ways that cause harm to their followers and who also often did not care about their followers. Therefore, in this essay when referring to cults, I will be talking about religious groups that are not accepted by society because of all the heinous and terrible characteristics they show and the danger their leaders poses to society.

2.2. Prominent cults

Cults have always been around, but they got popular around the 1960s and early 19070s with horrific stories about the abuse the followers of these cults endured. But what made those decades such a breeding ground for cults. Most scholars agree that during that time, many ideas and cultural exchanges happened which might have led to the proliferation of cults. With people from different cultures bringing characteristics from different religions or spiritual beliefs and mixing them with the beliefs of other cultures, making new beliefs that evolved with time. Another factor was the popularity boost hallucinogenic drugs, like LSD and marihuana. People would be more susceptible to believing and even creating new beliefs because of the effects of these drugs as well as due to the lack of understanding of them. These 2 factors are possibly what led to the popularity of cults during that time and to the downward spiral of more and more scandalous cults with more extreme cult leaders. One of the first known cults was the League for Spiritual Discovery (LSD), which as the name implies, had to do with the drug LSD. The leader of this group was the American psychologist Thimothy Leary who, with his college Richard Alpert, tested the effects of LSD and other psychedelics on student volunteers in Harvard. His "church" was in New York, and he envisioned a network of psychedelic churches all around the world and for the legalization of LSD and other hallucinogenic. His dream would however end in 1966 when the whole League got raided by the police and they found out that not only were they taking illicit drugs but also housing sex parties. Sex and pleasure were popular in cults with either the whole cult taking part of them or just the cult leader having sex with the followers he wanted. One of those cults was the Manson Family. The cult, led by Charles Manson and with mostly female members, partook in heavy drug use and in a lot of group sex. The members saw

Manson as Jesus Christ and followed his every command. One of these commands being killing to induce a race war, which would lead to the Family ruling the world in the end. These killings were done to mostly Hollywood elites, because, according to members, Manson wanted to shock the world but there could also be the possibility that these murders were revenge killings, since Manson always got rejected when trying to land recording contracts. Whatever the real reason, Manson had such control over his followers that he didn't need to be the one killing but could simply order his followers to do such. Here we see how much control the cult leaders can have over his followers.

In the 70s, cults became more and more psychotic and violent. Jim Jones Peoples Temple being one of them. The Peoples Temple pulled from Christianity and Communism and was also for racial equality, forging strong ties with the left. On the surface they seemed to be a group that fought for equal rights and for positive change. However, this was definitely not the case. The church had many black members that Jones had brainwashed to thinking that if they ever left the church, that they would be thrown in concentration camps and killed. He didn’t help African Americans, instead he made the tensions between black and white Americans stronger and spread fearmongering as a form of control.

He also often humiliated, beat and blackmailed other members as forms to dehumanize them and brain wash them. It came to the point where most members had signed over most of their possessions to the church and were also isolated from their family and friends. Then in 1977 Jones moved with over 900 members to Jonestown, his own compound that he had been building for 3 or 4 years, in Guyana. There the abuse continued.

He would continue the previous abuse of beating and humiliating his followers and would also have them now working for him as his slaves. He would imprison or even have members executed for not doing what he commanded. He showed absolute control over every one of his followers.

The cult ended tragically on the18. November 1978, when after thinking that they would be found out, Jones called up all his members and ordered them to kill the U.S congressman Leo Ryan, who was sent to the cult to investigate it. Ryan affirmed he would give a positive review of the compound but Jones already paranoid for a while didn't believe him and demanded his followers to kill Ryan. Five people got shot and killed, with eleven hurt. That same night Jones asked all his members to commit suicide by drinking laced Kool-Aid. The cult had already planned and practiced all of it, so everyone knew what to do. First children and babies got injected with laced syringes. Then the adults drank the beverage. Over 900 people died that night.

The cult itself was much more complicated and deserves a whole deep dive itself, but the horrors mentioned above show the dangers of a cult.

2.3. Effects of being in a cult

There are many dangers when being part of a cult or growing up in a cult, as well as long lasting effects that come once a survivor leaves the cult. People who join cults are often people who are in a difficult phase of their lives. People who already feel alone or lost, people who are grieving, or even people who are having mental crises.

Joining a cult makes those feelings of loneliness or helplessness go away for a while, which is why it's hard for people to leave a cult. The problem though, is that those feelings didn't disappear but instead have been hidden by the cult. Which is why leaving a cult can break a person's mind. In serious cases, the victim must come to terms with the fact that their whole belief system wasn't what they thought to be and was only a way to keep them in check and under the leader's control. This control the cult leaders exerts on his followers strips them from their individuality and can make it hard for them to navigate the basics of independent life. A cult survivor has to deal with the fact that their beliefs and the person who they trusted full-heartedly was only using them. This can lead to a feeling of guilt and shame, manifesting because the person blames themselves for not noticing the dangers before. As well as more practical symptoms like anxiety, depression, dissociation and mental breakdowns. This breakdown and feelings of shame can also affect the person's self-worth, making them question whether they deserve love and care. The feelings of loneliness will also most likely come back, worse than before. Leaving a cult can bring a profound sense of loss. Former members often mourn the friendships and community they once relied on, even as they struggle to rebuild their lives. Reintegrating into society and reconnecting with family can be overwhelming, and practical challenges—like finding a job, securing housing, and accessing mental health care can make the transition even harder, exacerbating existing psychological struggles.

Furthermore, cult members include children who have lived their whole lives in the cult and who show more severe symptoms after being forced to leave the cult. Children who grow up in a cult grow up in a more restrictive environment that often prohibits contact with non-members or not being allowed to question authority. Once they leave this restrictive environment, the children can experience an identity crisis or panic attacks because they have no anchor for their sense of self other than the cult. It can be difficult for children to accept or wrap their minds around the fact that the place and community they've lived in is something bad and dangerous for them. This realization brings with it the same symptoms or feelings an adult would have once they leave the cult, but possibly in a much more severe way. They could also be very distrusting and refuse to accept the idea of them being part of

a cult, depending on how much they have been brainwashed. Whoever they are, the immediate search for appropriate psychological counsel and possible friends or connection outside of the cult.be a priority. Psychological counsel addresses the psychological effects of the cult and connections to relief the feelings of loneliness they are bound to experience once they leave the cult.

Let’s follow up with the defining trait that makes a cult: the cult leader.

3. Cult leaders

Cult leaders prey on vulnerable people and get them to join their cause by convincing them that they are someone trustworthy. They usually don't start by charming random people in bars or on the street. Instead, a cult leader often manipulates people they're already close to or those they have had time to befriend. They can start as ordinary but charismatic individuals who slowly and carefully introduce ideas of a higher truth or a deeper understanding of life. At first, these ideas seem and sound innocent, and the leader's charisma is often enough to convince someone to listen.

3.1. History and past

It would be easy to ignore the past of cult leaders or even serial killers and just say that they are psychopaths who are simply evil and there's no excuse for their crimes. An excuse for their behavior is the last thing I'm trying to give, still I believe that their hate and violence comes from something that deeply affected them in their past. Not an excuse, but an explanation for why and how it could help us help people who are in similar situations.

Cult leaders often show signs of having a tough childhood, probably experiencing things such as abuse, neglect and rejection. Children who grow up like this, feel like abuse and violence is how you treat people and is the only way to have power, something they lacked in their childhood. This can create a compulsive need to get power and be in a position of dominance, so they don't have to face the same things they did in their childhood.

Whereas others might develop feelings of being unimportant or invisible, and overcompensating for these feelings by developing a narcissistic personality, the cult becomes a structure where they are not only visible, but central.

They are often unaware of these emotional scars and try to hide them — not only from others, but also from themselves. They set impossibly high standards and avoid showing any weakness. The devotion of their followers becomes a coping mechanism: if others believe in them, they don't have to confront their own brokenness. But over time, even small insults or failures begin to chip away at this carefully built image. Their old fears resurface, slowly at first, until they overwhelm them — breaking the mask entirely and leading to desperation, paranoia, and ultimately destructive behavior.

Their traumatic past doesn't excuse what they become, but it does help explain it — and it reminds us that monsters are rarely born; more often, they're made. Of course, there are a few cases where bad people are born bad. Psychopaths who are born without empathy and care for others. But that's another discussion and it is also very complex.

These past traumas often shape the personality traits and disorders that define their leadership style.

3.2. Personality

According to a dissertation by Jennifer Henderson from Walden University (2023), cult leaders can typically be categorized into three types: the narcissist, the martyr, or the egomaniac. Although most leaders are a mixture of these traits, they often display one more strongly than the others. When cult leaders undergo psychological evaluation, they are frequently diagnosed using the DSM-5, the official handbook for mental illness diagnosis, and are often found to have personality disorders. These disorders help further define the three types of cult leaders, as outlined below.

3.2.1. Narcissist Personality Disorder

Some cult leaders see themselves as superior to their followers, often perceiving themselves as grandiose, divine, or "chosen." In extreme cases, they may genuinely believe their own doctrines, even to the point of justifying abusive behavior as necessary for a greater good. These severe cases are sometimes associated with other conditions such as schizophrenia or delusions of grandeur.

More commonly, however, cult leaders with NPD simply exhibit a strong sense of entitlement. They believe they deserve admiration and special treatment, often disregarding the feelings and rights of others. Their inflated self-importance allows them to manipulate followers easily, using their confidence to project authority. Followers—who may already suffer from low self-esteem—are drawn to this perceived certainty and accept poor treatment, believing it to be justified by the leader’s supposed superiority.

Narcissistic tendencies are therefore a defining feature of many cult leaders, driving their exploitation of followers and reinforcing the psychological dynamics of abuse. These leaders typically embody the "narcissist" type or, in delusional cases, the "martyr" type who believes in a divine mission.

This explains why cult leaders often have narcissistic tendencies. These tendencies make it so they can’t empathize with others, because they see themselves as superior. This results in them being abusive and exploiting their followers, who themselves lack the confidence and self-esteem to see themselves on the same level as their leader and so accept their poor treatment.

3.2.2. Antisocial Personality Disorder (ASPD)

The DSM-5 describes ASPD as someone who has blatant disregard for the rights of others as well as impulsiveness and willingness to take risks. ASPD also shows many signs of aggression, manipulation and deceit.

This disorder is commonly seen in destructive cults and in cult leaders who have no real goal or objectives. They create cults because they get easily bored and use people as pawns to entertain themselves. People with this disorder who form cults often use religion as a basis for their cult, because it is easy for them to invent new prophecies or rules to the religion to keep the cult moving. Their goal is to entertain themselves and see how far they can take their followers by manipulating them. They are often aware of their behavior but are physically incapable of sensing remorse. These cults often end in horrific incidents, like the Jonestown Massacre, because they are so impredicative.

Cult leaders who have ASPD show signs of narcissism but are more closely related to egocentric types

3.2.3. Paranoid Personality Disorder/Personality Traits (PPD)

Like the name suggests, this disorder or personality trait has to do with feeling of distrust and paranoia surrounding other people. These fears are often unjustified and have no real source. With this disorder, the leader manipulates their followers using fear.

They make it sound like the person themselves is in danger and can only be saved by joining the cult or the traits can come later in the cult's life. As cults grow and become more visible, their leaders often become increasingly paranoid. First, their manipulation and control tactics work comfortably in small, tight-knit groups where outsiders pose little threat. However, as their influence spreads and more people become aware of the group's existence, the leader faces a growing fear of exposure, opposition, and loss of control.

This happens due to the fact that the leader's identity is often completely fused with the cult’s success. Any threat to the group’s stability feels like a threat to their very existence. A cult leader is often conscious that their whole cult and power is built on fragile ground, that being lies, exaggerations, and manipulation. They might not want to admit it and so this fear leaks out as intense paranoia.

They might claim that the media, family or government are after their group for devious reasons. To prevent infiltration or exposure, the leader may increasingly cut off members from outside contact, banning news, controlling communications, or relocating the group to more isolated areas.

This disorder/trait often is result of an event or the popularity of the cult and can therefore be present in all 3 types of cult leader.

3.2.4. Charisma

Charisma is often the first thing that draws followers in. Cult leaders don't always need to be physically impressive or even likable in a traditional sense, but they command attention. This charisma can take many forms: confidence that borders on arrogance, emotionally stirring speeches, intense eye contact, or simply a way of speaking that makes followers feel uniquely seen and understood. Psychologically, this charm is often a mask, it hides narcissistic traits, manipulative tendencies, or unresolved trauma. What matters is the effect: it disarms skepticism and builds initial trust.

Cult leaders with high levels of charisma often use it to frame themselves as either divinely chosen or uniquely qualified to lead. They make followers feel as though they've found someone who finally has the answers. This seductive quality is especially effective on individuals going through emotional turmoil, grief, or identity crises — people already seeking certainty and connection. Charisma fills the emotional void while slipping in ideological control under the radar

Cult leaders are frequently described as charismatic, authoritarian figures. Their charisma plays a crucial role in attracting and maintaining followers, with narcissistic traits often forming the psychological foundation of their authority. Although other disorders may also be present, NPD is particularly prominent.

The survival of a cult depends heavily on the leader-follower relationship. Cult leaders cultivate unhealthy dependency through demands for submission and obedience, fostering blind devotion. Followers' obsession, combined with fear of punishment or external threats, traps them within the cult's control.

Many cult leaders, consciously or not, convince others that they deserve admiration and devotion—either by portraying themselves as messianic figures with a higher purpose or by projecting overwhelming narcissistic confidence. Fear and isolation are then used to maintain control. While leaders with ASPD may lead less structured and more chaotic cults, the most notorious cases involve leaders with a blend of disorders. Regardless of their exact pathology, all shared an extraordinary, manipulative charisma.

3.3. Goals

Cult leaders don’t necessarily share the same goals every time, but it is usually tied to an egocentric goal, this could be a need for attention, wealth, power or even just to entertain themselves or a mix of all of them.

For narcissists, the cult has the benefit of working like a mirror that always reflects devotion and admiration. Their followers worship them, which just strengthens their belief of being perfect. Whilst, for leaders with more antisocial traits, they prefer using their cult as an environment where they can have fun and enjoy themselves. They push their followers to their extreme, manipulate and use them just to have fun and test their capabilities. A playground without the risk of being caught and if a plaything breaks, they succeeded in their goal and will simply search for another toy.

What we can say for sure, however, is that the ideology or religion they are trying to sell, isn't really what they care about. It is just a means to an end. They might preach selflessness and being the best version of yourself, but those teachings are in strong contrast to what they actually believe or practice. Goals like "saving humanity," "achieving enlightenment," or "transcending the system" are usually cloaked versions of personal ambition, masked by grand narrative.

Finally, we can draw the portrait of cult leaders as someone whose past influences their personality. Their behavior is a result of those personality traits with a mixture of proficiency in charisma and manipulation. They deal with the pain from their past by getting followers to fill the void they have left or distracting them from the emptiness it brings with it.

4. Language and Manipulation

A crucial part of a cult leader's strategy lies not just in their actions, but in the way they speak. Language becomes one of their most powerful tools — carefully crafted to manipulate emotions, obscure logic, and create an illusion of deeper truth. They use clever linguistic strategies to lead their followers into a complete state of submission.

4.1. Love Bombing

They use language that makes them sound relatable and trustworthy to get that first opening. Because like the linguist Amanda Montell says in her book: "You can't convince someone to believe something without a glimmer of willingness. But, once the willingness is there, language becomes key". Once they have the slightest bit of attention, they can start planting seeds for manipulation. This process, called love bombing, often begins by making the recruit feel special and deeply valued. For example, the group might throw a welcome party, treating the victim's presence as if it were the most important thing in the world. This feeling of welcomeness makes them feel special and since they probably come from a situation where they don't get this feeling that often, they will naturally be more open to what the group has to say. As well as more inclined to return to another meeting since they will want to feel that way once more and probably won't get it in their usual social circle.

This love bombing is therefore critical in getting the victim to lower their guard and open to what the cult wants from them. After the victim gets used to his place in the cult and sees himself as part of the group, the love bombing will slowly stop because the victim reaffirms his self-worth and love by being part of the group. The love bombing might come back if the leader notices the victim's faith begin to crack. For instance, by making the victim be a "chosen one" or a key part of a prophecy. This reinvigorates their faith, seeing that humans love being seen as necessary or more important.

4.2. Babble Hypothesis

Another strategy or concept that plays in their favor, is the babble hypothesis, which states that people who talk a lot or are constantly speaking and getting attention often get seen or placed in leadership positions. What this means, is that a cult leader does not necessarily need to say profound things that affect the people deeply. Instead, they tend to talk a lot, and this simple act of using words in volume can have a profound subconscious impact on how they are perceived.

4.3. Us vs Them

One critical strategy cult leaders use is the concept of "Us vs Them." This usually is expressed by specifically using words that separate the group from the outside world. The common use of “us” and “them” pronouns serve to divide society and secretly instilling the idea that the victim is part of the group. Repeatedly using “us” or “we” strengthens the idea that the group is close and tightly knit, a comfortable and safe place, while referring to the outside as “them” to alienate and place them in opposition to the group. This makes the whole group see themselves as a unit that knows the answers and is in the right all the time, while “they” are simply misinformed or wrong. The pronouns also make it easy to address and belittle the ones outside the group and uplifting the ones part of the group.

The use of “us” is subconsciously inviting the victim to stay in the comfort of the cult, because they don't see the outside as an escape but as opposition. The rest of the world is unsafe and if they leave, they will be alone once again. The reason why this is critical in the process of “brainwashing” for an individual is, because the first problem humans had to overcome was “Me vs Us”. I.e. only thinking about yourself and your survival and instead realizing the benefits of being in a group and thinking about the group's survival. After this, comes “Us vs Them”, which should be solved by realizing that humanity isn't divided in multiple groups but is 1 single group which everyone is part of, and that is where many humans still struggle with. Cults weaponize this idea by making the group, “us”, be the good guys and all the rest of humanity, “them”, as the enemy. The most classical line they can use is: “You wouldn’t leave because you’re one of “us” [complimentary] not one of “them” [derogatory] right?”

4.4. Thought termination

Thought termination is vital for keeping the group complacent and preventing questioning of the group’s ideology The term, coined in the early 1960s by psychologist Robert Jay Lifton, describes:” a stock expression that’s easily memorized, easily repeated and aimed at shutting down questioning or independent thought or analysis,”, which is to say it is a sentence that is used to end the conversation as quickly as possible and to avoid having to answer a question or admit one is wrong. Phrases like, “It is what it is” or “It’s all in God’s plan” are examples of thought termination cliches. These phrases make it seem futile to continue discussing or questioning something because nothing will change what's happening or that it’s something outside of our comprehension respectively. They also end the conversation, which prevents the leader from having to answer every question and stops the followers from searching for more information.

People can be attracted to cults for wanting to better themselves, make more money or to become more enlightened and these desires make it easier to turn a blind eye to real complaints or danger. "If it seems like everyone else thinks the same, it becomes harder to voice objections and be subject to social exclusion.", says, senior lecturer in religious studies at the Open University, Dr Suzanne Newcombe. This calls back to the idea of wanting to stay in the group and not be an outsider.

4.5. Gaslighting

Gaslighting is a key psychological weapon used by cult leaders to destabilize their followers' sense of reality. By consistently denying, minimizing, or twisting events, leaders make individuals question their own memories, instincts, and perceptions. Over time, the victim learns not to trust their own mind, instead relying more heavily on the leader or group for "the real truth." This process isolates the follower internally, leaving them vulnerable to suggestions and unable to form independent judgments. Even clear signs of manipulation or abuse can be dismissed or rationalized under the influence of gaslighting, making it a crucial tool for long-term control.

4.6. Warping reality

In addition to distorting memory and perception, cult leaders actively reframe reality itself. Ordinary experiences are reinterpreted through the group's belief system in a way that alters their meaning entirely. Acts of cruelty may be reframed as lessons in humility; suffering can be portrayed as a necessary step toward enlightenment. By controlling the narrative around events, leaders manipulate emotional responses — what should cause anger, or fear instead triggers gratitude or guilt. This steady reshaping of interpretation ensures that followers stay aligned with the cult's worldview, even as it drifts further from any recognizable reality.

The power of cults lies not in brute force, but in the subtle, calculated use of psychological techniques. Language becomes the primary weapon, carefully used to manipulate emotions and obscure critical thinking. Through love bombing, cults create the illusion of unconditional acceptance, while the "Us vs Them" narrative isolates followers from the outside world. Thought-terminating clichés shut down questioning before it can begin, trapping individuals in a closed system of belief. Meanwhile, gaslighting and the constant reframing of reality break down personal autonomy, making members doubt their own perceptions and trust only the group. Together, these methods form an intricate web of control — one that is difficult to recognize from within and even harder to escape.

The following chapter will be focused on victims and what their usual characteristics are and why they don't recognize, or better don't want to accept their situation.

5. Victims

Cult leaders seek people who are in difficult situations, specific kinds of people who are easier to manipulate, control, and ultimately exploit.

5.1. Mindset

5.1.1. Stockholm Syndrome

Stockholm syndrome is a psychological phenomenon where victims develop a bond with their captor or abuser. This occurs in cults when members are isolated, controlled, and subjected to cycles of reward and fear. Over time, victims begin to see their leader not as a threat, but as a protector, justifying harmful actions as necessary discipline or care. The emotional attachment is so strong that even in the face of abuse, members find it incredibly difficult to recognize the manipulation or escape.

5.1.2. People with past traumas

Many cult victims come from abusive households, dysfunctional families, or have a history of neglect. They often lack healthy relationship models and can be drawn to a charismatic figure who presents themselves as nurturing or protective.

5.1.3. People with low self-esteem

Victims who doubt their worth or competence may be particularly drawn to the validation and certainty a cult provides. Cult leaders first boost their confidence, then gradually erode it to foster dependence. They become eager to please, avoid conflict, and submit to authority figures to maintain belonging.

5.1.4. People who are alone

People who lack a strong social support system are easy victims for cult members because they lack people who can rescue them from the cult. They don't have anyone else, so they will do anything to maintain belonging to the group.

5.2. Dehumanization and stripping their individuality

After getting his victims, it is typical for cult leaders to strip away their individuality and culture. Making them be fully part of the cult. They make them wear the same clothes, change names, keep them separate to avoid the proliferation of ideas. By eliminating their previous identities, leaders create a more compliant and homogeneous group. Dehumanization follows, with members no longer viewing themselves as individuals worthy of dignity or autonomy, making them more susceptible to the leader's control.

5.3. Frog in the water concept

The "frog in the water" concept is a metaphor used to explain how people can become gradually desensitized to harmful or abusive situations. If you put a frog in boiling water, it will jump out immediately. But if you place it in cool water and slowly heat it, the frog won't notice the danger until it's too late. This is just a metaphor and doesn not happen in real life, but it does show why people tend to not notice the signs of a cult until it is too late.

The leader first asks for small sacrifices, separating from family, giving up possessions, and trusting in the group's teachings. Prophecies may fail, but the leader offers flimsy explanations that plant the seed of belief: everything has a reason, and there is always an explanation. This teaches them to always excuse the actions of their leaders, then before they know it, they are excusing and partaking in gruesome activities because they slowly learned and got used to accepting all the actions have explanations for them; be them that they are a prophet who talks to God, the government and society are out to get them or simply believing the leader is incapable of making mistakes because they are perfect.

It is important to emphasize that these people would be able to recognize the situation being bad from a mile away, they don't because they are sitting in it and the water got hotter and hotter very slowly, they don't think of jumping out and getting help.

For the following chapter I will be exploring and comparing a cult, which encapsulates most of the horrible things mentioned until now.

6. Ant Hill Kids

The cult I will analyze and talk about is the Ant Hill Kids, the most infamous Canadian cult in the late 70s. We will explore the leader Roch Thériault's, past, behavior and ability to manipulate. How did he transform from catholic boy who loved to read into a 7th Day Adventist who then formed his own brutal cult. The crimes he committed in name of his cult were numerous and included the likes of sexual abuse, castration, torture, and even murdering his followers, who weren't all adults.

I will be also exploring the victims of the cult. Why they joined the cult and why they didn't leave Roch once his prophecy didn't get fulfilled. Why did they stay after Roch tortured their children? Why did they stay after witnessing all of the horrors he performed on his followers?

6.1. Roch Thériault

Roch Thériault had had apparently a rough childhood, with his parents, especially father, physically abusing the young boy and even kicking him out at the age of 14. His father would often kick and punch him all over his body and often for no reason at all. He recounted to one of his wives, that once at the age of 7 his father punched him in the stomach leaving him on the ground, laying in pain for almost an hour. He also used this alleged abuse as an excuse during his court session and even in letters to the family of his victims.

Or that's at least the story he made his followers and even psychiatrists believe. According to friends, family and neighbors, he led a quite normal life. Thats a clear example of him manipulating people and making them empathize with him to excuse his horrible behavior. This shows us already what kind of person he really was.

6.1.1. Real Past

Born in 1947 in Saint-Épiphane, Quebec, Roch was raised a devout Catholic and was always a charismatic and smart child. However, he would often use this strength to manipulate and evade trouble. His father often caught him smoking cigarettes and skipping school, yet he would often find a way for the blame to fall on his siblings or other people in his circle. He would later drop out in the 7th grade, apparently due to boredom and a strong hate for authority and the school system. Furthermore, around that time his father noticed his manipulative tendencies and would sometimes punish him physically, but not as horrible or as often as Roch would tell people.

Without school, Roch would become self-taught and focus on religious texts, especially the Old Testament, which his father would regularly talk about with him and even support his studies. Further making the tale of the alcoholic and violent father seem farfetched. He was

particularly obsessed with themes of punishment, obedience and end of world prophecies. His obsession with it would grow until in the mid 70s he converted to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, a Christian denomination that emphasizes healthy living, the Sabbath, and end-times prophecy. Roch would become quite infamous in the church, thanks to his high charisma and often extreme interpretation of religious texts. He began slowly gathering followers and preaching his teachings to them. At first his preachings were quite public, with him spreading his beliefs in cafes, religious meetings and with word of mouth, while also retelling his exaggerated past. His followers were mostly young and vulnerable people who would get hooked by his confidence and passion.

This would all escalate until in 1978, he would get excommunicated from the church. His teaching was becoming more and more extreme and bizarre; he would encourage a strict lifestyle, avoiding smoking, drinking, processed foods and sexual activity as well as claiming he was chosen by God and that the only way to heaven was by following him. Another bizarre change he promoted was the distrust of medicine and science. He would claim that only faith could heal the sick, as well as certain people God would choose to give the ability to. Him being one of those people.

Even with his excommunication, he maintained his loyal followers and began to call himself a prophet and started calling himself "Moïse" (French for "Moses"). Hand-picked by God and that going against him would be the same as going against God himself.

He took his followers, as well as people he had talked to at bars and cafes, to a remote area in the Gaspé Peninsula, Quebec, which he would call “Eternal Mountain”. He would also start spreading the idea of the world ending in February of 1979, which was how he managed to convince his followers to come with him. He double down on his claim of being the chosen prophet by God and that to survive the ending of the world they would have to follow his command. When February 1979 came and went without incident, Thériault’s prediction obviously failed but instead of losing followers, he doubled down. He blamed the delay on God changing the timeline due to the group's spiritual progress or disobedience, a classic cult tactic known as “spiritual rationalization.” This helped maintain control, as followers were made to feel responsible for the delay, reinforcing their need to obey him even more strictly

That would be the start of his cult: The Ant Hill Kids. The name came to him after watching his followers working hard on building the commune he compared them to ants working in an ant hill for himself, the queen.

He positioned the group as a self-sufficient spiritual community, but in reality, it was already becoming a tightly controlled cult. At this stage, open violence hadn't yet begun but the seeds of control and abuse were already deeply planted.

6.1.2. Early tactics

Once the Ant Hill Kids commune was fully established, Roch Thériault's leadership transformed into something far darker and more destructive. His followers, most of whom were women, became his spiritual wives, some willingly at first, others coerced over time and he eventually fathered over 20 children with them.

However, to maintain absolute control, Thériault enforced a relentless daily routine. Followers were made to work constantly, chopping wood, building, and farming from sunrise to nightfall, often with minimal food or rest. This constant exhaustion wasn't accidental; it was strategic. By keeping his followers physically drained and mentally disoriented, he ensured they would be too tired to question his authority or resist his increasingly bizarre and violent commands.

As time went on, his god-complex intensified, and Thériault began performing grotesque medical procedures, still posing as being gifted the gift of healing by God. This delusion came to a horrifying end when this recklessness and arrogance, resulted in the death of Samuel Giguère, a two-year-old boy. Samuel complained to Roch about having trouble urinating, without any medical training, he used scissors, a knife, and ethanol to operate and cut open the boy's reproductive organ. What happened next is still not really known. The boy either died during the pseudo-operation, to which Roch manipulated the mentally deficient Guy Veer into confessing to the crime. Or after the surgery, the child Samuel didnt stop crying, to which Roch demanded Guy to discipline Samuel, who then accidently killed the two-year old. Either way, Roch then decided to punish Guy by castrating him, who then died from his injuries. In both cases it shows Roch's total control over his followers as well as his complete disregard for human life and willingness to sacrifice his followers to maintain his image.

This fits almost perfectly with NPD as well as certain traits of ASPD. He does his best to upkeep his image and sees himself as all-knowing and all capable, considering himself a healer even though he has no training at all in medicine. He also didn't seem to show remorse for the death of Samuel and later Guy Veer, instead immediate worrying on how to get away with it and not ruin his image. Nor did he learn his lesson, which resulted in Guy's death. His impulsiveness and lack of empathy are definite signs of ASPD.

6.1.3. Worsening of the situation

After this tragic event, Roch moved with his whole group to a new compound next to Bird River in Ontario in 1984. The cult now was made of 40 followers, including the children he had with his various wives. At this point in the cult's history, he began to order his followers to wear matching tunics, not being allowed to communicate at all with other members and not having any sexual contact with anyone unless Roch gave his permission. These are tactics to dehumanize and isolate the members. The tunics were meant to strip away their individuality and not being allowed to communicate with each other, making it so the people aren't able to share the opinions and depend fully on Roch. It is also a clear sign of his authority needing to be respected so as not to break his ego.

At this stage some people wanted to leave the cult, mostly fearing for the safety of their children. To which Roch would get violently drunk and beat them as punishment for losing faith. At first, he would beat them with a belt, then later he started using a hammer and then finally developing a standard procedure: Tying the member to the ceiling or wall, pluck all their hair out, beath them up and then have Roch defecate on them.

The other followers would help Roch with his punishment, which involved fighting bare handed, amputating fingers of other members to prove their loyalty, fearing that they could get punished if they didn't do so, others were still totally loyal to Roch and believed his every word, while some were just exhausted and incapable of going against his orders. No matter what reason they had, they were all clearly brainwashed, either by fear, obsession and devotion or just apathetic to their situation.

Another important thing to realize is that all this happened over a couple of years, in which Roch would also have his good days. That is where the problem lies. What happens in any abuse situation is something called the honeymoon phase. What that means is that Roch maintained his amazing charisma and charm, making it so his members would see him as this figure who was nice and caring but just had some bad days sometimes. Someone who knows better because they talk to God. That's how they saw the situation. For an outsider looking in, however, we can easily see that Roch would get violently drunk and demand his followers to commit horrible acts to prove their loyalty while abusing them and using them as his playthings, then apologizing and waiting for enough time to pass so he can do it again. But that is not how they saw it. That is, as mentioned before, how cult leaders generally convince their followers to serve and stay with them.

This kept going until 1987, when an unknown female member of the cult left their 2 months old baby outside in a blizzard with hope that they would not have to endure a life in the cult. That is quite possibly the strangest action that could have taken place. Since, leaving her baby outside proves that she in some part didn't agree with Roch's actions and didn't want

anyone else to go through what she must go through every day. Yet she herself didn't leave the cult. Something in her was still chained to Roch's power.

Sadly, the baby passed away and its corpse got found by someone, who then reported it to the police, who then initiated a real investigation into the Ant Hill Kids. However, being registered as a church, the police couldn't lead a proper investigation into the cult itself and had to resort to just saving the children because that would count as children's welfare. The police managed to get the children out of the cult leaving just, with Roch, 2 men and 8 women.

This is where the cult becomes truly violent, and Roch's mask begins to fail.

6.1.4. Final stages of the cult and the aftermath

Afte the children got taken away, Roch's descent to brutal authoritarian became worse. He would do many more horrific surgeries and operations, under the guise of purification rituals. These included castrations, burning off and inserting various objects in genitalia.

Roch's worst and most brutal action occurred in 1988, with Solange Boilard. Solange complained about stomach pains and begged Roch to let her seek medical attention. However, Roch refused and offered to heal her himself with the help of God. What followed was one of the most brutal and disturbing examples of his so-called medical practices.

Thériault performed a makeshift surgery on her without anesthesia. He inserted a plastic tube into her rectum to supposedly relieve gas and then performed a crude operation using a knife, bare hands, and other unsanitary tools. Solange didn't die immediately though; she suffered all night long and died later in the morning in complete agony. This murder wasn't enough for Roch, and he said it was his job to "resurrect" her, with the help of ritual. This ritual consisted of removing her uterus, drilling a hole in her skull and have himself and the other males of the cult perform acts of necrophilia to the body. Naturally the ritual did not result in her resurrection and so Roch decided to remove one of her ribs and use it as a necklace, as to symbolize how Eve came from the rib of Adam and now the rib got returned.

At this point, we can assume that most of his followers were experiencing extreme Stockholm Syndrome, but the loyalties of some members began to waver after the horrific actions Roch did with Solange. One of those members was Gabrielle Lavallée, who would play a pivotal role in bringing Roch to justice. Gabrielle was very intelligent, which made her a priority target for Roch's abuse, since he couldn't let her realize the situation she was in and convince the others to leave. Over time, he inflicted escalating punishments on her as part of his twisted cycle of domination. Leaving her too weak to fight back.

But after all that happened, she decided to run away in July of 1989. Her attempt would get stopped by Roch, who caught her and proceeded to punish her. He used a blowtorch to burn parts of her body, pulled out several of her teeth with pliers. In another act of pure sadism, he cut off part of her breast and eventually used a chainsaw to amputate her entire arm in a so-called “surgery” he claimed was necessary to heal an infection. He did all this without any anesthesia and with complete disregard for her pain.

Despite all the torture she endured, she didn't die. And a month later, in August of 1989, she attempted another escape, this time managing to get to a hospital. She didn't quite manage to tell the hospital staff what had happened, however. A part of her was still clinging to the cult and she gave an excuse for her injuries and claimed Roch had to amputate her arm because she had suffered an accident. The hospital staff did not belief her and called the police. They later managed to get her to confess and help them bring Roch to justice.

The police arrested Roch on accounts of assault and took him to prison. After he left, almost all of the members began to turn on him and revealed to the police the bodies of all his victims and tales of what he would do. This resulted in him being sentenced to life in jail with the possibility of parole. However, not all his followers turned their backs on him, some of the women still visited him in jail and that is how he managed to father 4 more children, which goes to show, how much control and power he had over some of them.

In jail, his face of being a mystical prophet would crumble, and he would show that he truly didn't believe what he preached and that all of it was just a way to prove his talents and charisma. For in jail, he would be caught trying to sell poems and drawings of his on a website called “murderauction.com”, a website that sells authentic material used or in relation to serial killers, as well as recounting his actions and how he managed to get his followers to commit brutal actions, to his cellmates.

This would also result in his end, when on February 26, 2011, his cellmate Matthew MacDonald killed him with a shiv. MacDonald got fed up with Roch telling all his stories and killed him with a stab in the neck, he then proceeded to take the shiv to the guards and confess his action.

Roch Thériault exemplifies nearly every trait commonly associated with destructive cult leaders: charisma used as a weapon, manipulation through fabricated narratives, spiritual rationalization of abuse, and the systematic breakdown of his followers’ autonomy. Like many cult leaders, he isolated his followers physically, emotionally, and psychologically cutting them off from the outside world, from each other, and even from their own identities. He utilized fear, forced labor, humiliation, and cycles of abuse and false redemption to maintain control, drawing on traits associated with narcissistic and antisocial personality

disorders. Ultimately, Thériault's leadership was not grounded in belief or divinity but in a calculated exploitation of vulnerable people for his own gratification, perfectly mirroring the archetype of a cult leader gone monstrously unchecked.

6.2. Victim stories

The story of the Ant Hill Kids is not just about Roch Thériault's descent into madness and sadism, it is also the tragic story of the victims who followed him. These individuals, mostly young women and children were lured in by promises of salvation, community, and a new way of life. Many came from broken homes or unstable backgrounds, making them easy targets for Roch's manipulative charm and grandiose promises. Over time, their identities were stripped away, replaced with a forced loyalty to a man who saw them as tools for his delusions of divinity.

Roch's earliest followers were drawn to his passion, confidence, and promises of a pure life free from corruption. At first, he preached wellness, abstinence, and self-sufficiency values that resonated with people disillusioned by society. But slowly, that belief system morphed into something horrifying. His followers were renamed, given matching clothing, denied medical care, forced into hard labor, and isolated from the outside world. These methods broke their spirits and made them increasingly dependent on Roch, both psychologically and physically.

Some followers still obeyed out of true belief, convinced Roch was a prophet. Others obeyed out of fear. The daily punishments, the threat of public humiliation, and the terrifying possibility of severe bodily harm kept them compliant. Over time, the lines between belief and survival blurred.

Roch Thériault's victims were, overwhelmingly, vulnerable individuals searching for meaning, connection, or healing. Many of them were women in their twenties and thirties who came from difficult upbringings broken families, histories of abuse, low self-esteem, or experiences with neglect and poverty. These were not weak people, but they were wounded. And that's what made them ideal targets for someone like Roch.

Roch didn't choose his victims because they were broken; he *broke* them. He chose people who were searching for something: meaning, healing, love, purpose. And then he gave it to them in exchange for obedience. Once they trusted him, he reversed the dynamic. Their pain became his fuel. Their devotion became his power.

Some stayed because they believed in him. Others stayed because they had nowhere else to go. But in every case, Roch engineered a world where leaving felt impossible and where survival often depended on submission.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, cult leaders don't just take control; they *craft illusions* and pull people into them. From the moment of first contact, they use charisma like a lure: a magnetic charm that feels like certainty, safety, even love. They speak with confidence, offer answers to pain, and wrap manipulation in the language of healing. It's not just what they say, but *how* they say it; with intensity, conviction, and the kind of focus that makes people feel seen for the first time.

They exploit wounds: trauma, loneliness, low self-worth. They present themselves as saviors, offering love, belonging, or purpose. But these gifts come at a cost. One by one, the victim's choices, connections, and identity are stripped away and replaced with dependence. That's the chain slow, silent, and psychological.

The cult leader's mind operates like that of a skilled predator. They seek power, obedience, and complete loyalty, often believing they are special, chosen, or above human morality. To them, people are tools, and love is leverage. They distort spiritual truths or emotional needs to reshape reality itself, making it so the only truth that exists is *their* truth.

Victims are not passive; they are people in pain who genuinely believe they are healing. Through Stockholm syndrome, love becomes fused with fear. Dehumanization follows, uniforms, new names, isolation from outsiders all meant to erase the self and replace it with something the leader owns. Doubt is demonized, questioning is punished, and the idea that "everything happens for a reason" is weaponized to explain away abuse and failed prophecies.

Like the frog in slowly boiling water, members rarely see the danger until they're already deep in it. Most clearly seen with the lady who preferred to let her baby in a cold blizzard outside instead of having to face Roch but was incapable of leaving herself.

So how do cult leaders keep you chained? By convincing you there were never chains at all. That staying is your choice, that obedience is love, that suffering is growth. They don't need walls or guards, just your belief. Once they have that, they don't have to keep you in. You'll keep yourself in even when the door is wide open.

I also feel like my hypothesis, of intelligence not playing a role in victims, to be proven true. Someone who is smart could just as easily fall victim to a cult leader as anyone else, because the role intelligence plays is minimal and not as important as having a good social circle or people to remind them of their worth.

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