

‘Hakani’ and paving a road to hell

Over 100,000 people have seen the YouTube trailer for the film, ‘Hakani’, which is the cornerstone of a campaign supposedly opposing Indian infanticide in Brazil. Stephen Corry explains why it’s more complicated than that and why Survival International is against it.

You object to the film ‘Hakani’. Why?

Stephen Corry: It’s faked. It puts together footage from many different Indian tribes and uses trick photography to make its point. It wasn’t filmed in an Indian community, the earth covering the children’s faces is actually chocolate cake, and the Indians in the film were paid as actors.

The filmmakers say it’s a re-enactment, not a fake. How do you respond?

Stephen Corry: It’s presented as entirely real. The opening title of the complete film reads, ‘A true story’, and only at the very end is the viewer told it’s a re-enactment. The trailer, which has been seen by far more people, doesn’t mention it at all. If it were broadcast here, that would be mandatory.

We don’t believe it’s real. The story is that because a storm blew some thatch off an Indian house, an ‘elder’, fearing evil spirits ordered two children to be killed. One was rescued by her brother and taken to a mission. Meanwhile, back at the tribe, another child is supposedly killed because he or she is ‘possessed’.

If it happened as portrayed, it’s an extraordinary isolated case. After decades of working in Amazonia, we know of no Indian peoples where parents are told to kill their children. It just doesn’t happen.

Who made the film?

Stephen Corry: It was directed by David Cunningham, who is accused of ‘a fictitious rewriting of history’ in another film. He’s the son of the founder of the American evangelical organisation, Youth with a Mission, called JOCUM in Brazil. It’s one of the largest in the world. There is no mention on the trailer, or on its website, who produced it.

If you search the site more deeply, it says the scenes were faked, but nothing about who is behind it. You’re invited to give money to

UNKF, but you aren’t told what the initials mean (it’s part of the mission). The evangelical involvement is not mentioned at all. Even if you download the full film, the credits are unreadable, so you can’t tell who is behind it.

Why do you think this is?

Stephen Corry: Evangelical missionaries have hidden their work for decades, particularly in places like South America which have a strong Roman Catholic background. Youth with a Mission has been banned from some parts of Brazil, but remains there illegally.

But the film opposes infanticide, isn’t that good?

Stephen Corry: Infanticide is wrong, but we need to understand the background to see why these missionaries’ campaign is so dangerous. It’s also important to understand about infanticide itself, which goes on all over the world.

OK, let’s look at that first. Isn’t it wrong to kill children?

Stephen Corry: Of course it is. Amazon Indians love their babies: to suggest they don’t is racist. Amazonian infanticide is rare. When it does happen, it almost always follows the same pattern: it is the mother’s decision and isn’t taken lightly. It’s made privately and secretly and is often thought shameful, certainly tragic.

Women usually give birth in the forest interior, alone or with only one or two other women. If a baby is born severely deformed and so unlikely to survive – and sometimes for other reasons as well – it might not be brought back to the house, but left to die, even killed.

Babies are not really considered members of society, in a way they are not properly human, until they’ve been ‘recognised’, often through naming, for example. That’s the same in many societies, including our own until very recently.

How can you compare leaving babies to die with our society?

Stephen Corry: It's terrible, but actually similar things happen here. Many babies born severely deformed in hospitals are made comfortable, but not fed. It happened to a relative of a friend of mine. The official medical notes just said, 'All care given', and the baby was allowed to die. The awful decision not to try and keep the baby alive is made, quietly and privately, by the parents and medical staff.

Obviously, like everything else, such practices are open to abuse, but the last thing anyone wants at that moment of agonising decision is for fundamentalists to barge in imposing their beliefs – no sensible society would allow that.

Just as terminally ill people may be helped along their way, allowing sick babies to die is never 'official' and would be hidden. Obviously, what counts as severely deformed in Amazonia is different to here, but the principle, the human tragedy, the despair and feelings of guilt and shame are the same. They are bound to be: Indians are people too. As I say, they love their babies as much as we do.

I'm not defending infanticide: I am outlining the facts. Things might be different if these fundamentalists actually did believe one Bible teaching: that only those free of sin themselves should cast stones at others – 'sinners' maybe – who are trying to cope with life's tragedies. But of course the nature of fundamentalism is to select which teachings to believe and which to reject.

The film claims Indian infanticide is widespread.

Stephen Corry: Most experts don't believe that. No one can say it's happened once or a hundred times in a year, though some pretend they can. It can't be corroborated: research carried out on infanticide in Europe and North America is difficult to corroborate too, but has produced shocking results.

As I say, most Indian experts, at least those not driven to evangelise, believe it's rare and fading away, and that's what most Indians say. We believe it has not happened in many tribes for years.

Let's be clear, you aren't denying that some babies are killed in Amazonia?

Stephen Corry: Of course not. Babies are killed all over the world. As well as the medically 'sanctioned' deaths I've mentioned, it's also little-known that, for example, you're more likely to be killed here (ie. the UK) in your first year of life than at any other time. In the USA, it's thought that nearly a million babies are mistreated annually, and that no less than 20% die as a result.

Actually, in the US, it has been legal to allow disabled babies to be 'denied care' since 1986, something which the Anglican Church has also accepted more recently. In the Netherlands, researchers think about 10-20 babies each year are allowed to die after birth. In the US, the comparable figure is reckoned to be about 85 babies. The more one is aware of these figures, the more one wonders why the missionaries have picked on Brazilian Indians. For example, in the UK, one in ten of all child deaths is thought to be infanticide.

Barbaric practices of one sort or another – including allowing medieval levels of inequality which lead to immense suffering and death – are alive and well all over the world, no more in the Amazon than in the USA or UK. South American Indians I've met think that how we treat our old people is horrible.

So why oppose the film if it's just trying to stop this kind of thing?

Stephen Corry: The film and its message are harmful. They focus on what they claim happens routinely in Indian communities, but it doesn't. It incites feelings of hatred against Indians. Look at the comments on the YouTube site, things like, 'So get rid of these native tribes. They suck', and, 'Those amazon mother f---ers burrying (sic) little kids, kill them all'. The filmmakers should be ashamed of all the harm this film is doing to the people they are trying to help.

It's propaganda to bolster the evangelical campaign for a very dangerous principle, the so-called Muwaji law, which has been presented to the Brazilian Congress.

What's that?

The Muwaji law focuses on what it calls 'traditional practices' and says what the state and citizens *must* do about them. It says that if anyone *thinks* there is a risk of 'harmful traditional practices', they must report it. If

they don't, they are liable to imprisonment. The authorities *must* intervene and remove the children and/or their parents. All this because someone, anyone, a missionary for example, claims there is some risk.

UPDATE

Following this criticism from Survival and others, in 2011 a Brazilian commission drew up an amended version of the draft law which cut the requirement for enforced child removals. However, there is still a powerful lobby in Brazil pressing to put it back in the draft. At the time of writing, it is not known which version, if any, will become law.

Isn't any law against killing children a just one?

Stephen Corry: It's already illegal in Brazil to kill children: there is no need for new legislation. Tens of thousands more non-Indian Brazilian children are abused and killed than Indian children. Physical abuse is tragically not uncommon in some frontier areas and is regarded by the Indians as atrocious and unthinkable.

About 2 to 6 children are murdered in just one city, Rio, not every year, but each day! Add the estimate for children who die from lack of food, medical care and hygiene, and annually many thousands of Brazilian babies never see their first birthday.

A moment's thought will show how this law could bring catastrophic social breakdown, with neighbour spying on neighbour, families split and lives destroyed. Local authorities are bound to err on the side of caution, and wade in, especially if they risk imprisonment themselves if they don't act. All manner of petty neighbourhood disputes risk escalating into appalling and irreversible action. Far from leading to less violence against children, it is more likely to induce *more*, as the state removes even tiny children from their parents and societies.

Suppose, for example, some disgruntled community member, or local missionary, reported his thoughts that everyone in a village knew about a risk of infanticide but hadn't gone to the authorities. Under the proposed law, everyone except him should be imprisoned! It's a law fostering witch-hunts.

Are such extremes likely?

Stephen Corry: Yes. Look at what happened in Australia for decades, right up until the 1970s, with Aboriginal children taken from their parents to get them away from their supposedly harmful culture, a policy often managed by missionaries. Such good intentions pave the road to hell: it resulted in generations of Aborigines suffering appalling social dislocation, leaving a legacy of catastrophically high levels of imprisonment, alcoholism, domestic violence, suicide and so on. The policy, which can now be seen to be self-righteously criminal, is brilliantly portrayed in the film, 'Rabbit-proof fence'.

The Muwaji law rolls Brazil back centuries, to a time when the 'heathen' natives were attacked and destroyed by colonists relying on a religious belief which justified their own barbarism. Far from helping Brazilian Indian children, the law could really hurt them.

Haven't the evangelical missionaries thought of this?

Stephen Corry: Most humane people would be astonished at the extremism shown by some evangelical missionaries. Some of them think that everyone who doesn't share their beliefs is ensnared by the devil, even if they are other Christian missionaries! Some believe it doesn't matter if people die from their actions, because they are condemned to eternal damnation anyway, and one soul 'saved', makes other deaths worthwhile. Some missionaries are less interested in the welfare of the living than in the afterlife.

Indians *have* died, for example in Paraguay by being hunted to bring them into mission life. One such contact expedition, organised by missionaries and resulting in death, can be heard in Survival's film, 'Uncontacted tribes'. This, by the way, is not a re-enactment but entirely real, recorded at the time it happened and completely unedited.

What would you say to those who might claim you are anti-missionary?

Stephen Corry: It's not true. We, and I personally, have worked with countless missionaries. The best do an enormous amount for indigenous peoples, and stand in the very forefront of protecting them and their rights; the worst do great harm. Exactly the same can be said of anthropologists, conservationists, or anyone else for that matter.

What about those who say that Survival has criticised missionary organisations?

Stephen Corry: We've criticised organisations of all kinds, it's part of our job, but we've also worked hand-in-hand with many others. About ten years ago, a senior member of a very large mission organisation personally told me that our critiques published in the 1970s had stimulated change for the better within his organisation.

Of course, the evangelical movement is extremely powerful, and embedded in some sectors of US politics and foreign policy. It tends to view all criticism as 'communist' or 'anti-American', both of which are thought to be, literally, devilish. This faction is not at all impressed by arguments which rely on what actually happens, least of all by principles about human rights, which are viewed as deeply suspect or to be manipulated for their own agenda.

What makes you right and them wrong?

Stephen Corry: The answer to that is in the effects on indigenous people's lives and their ability to live well, today and tomorrow, and how we can really help them. Indians in Brazil are not damaged from a lack of laws condemning infanticide, which is already, rightly, illegal. Their problem is that their lands are being invaded by ranchers, loggers and miners and stolen from them, bringing terrible suffering and death. Those who want to help should devote their energies to opposing this, not in supporting a flawed law which is likely to harm Indian children more than help them.

Make no mistake: Indians will be hurt by this campaign. People are being taught to hate Indians, even wish them dead. You can't blame the viewer for their hostility: few could watch 'Hakani' without being angry with the Indians.

That's why we oppose it. If the filmmakers say that wasn't the intention, it just shows their irresponsibility. Anyone could have predicted how viewers would react to the scenes they've faked. To allow such sentiments to force through a law to divide Indian families would be tragic beyond parody.
