

Are the Korowai really an, “Ancient tribe on the brink of being wiped out by Christian missionaries?”:

(A response by a missionary working among the Korowai):

Photographer Maxim Russkikh, a tourist for 15 days to the region, made the stunning claim in an online article published by the Metro News in the UK on October 22, 2018 that “An ancient tribe that knows little of the world outside their rainforest home is close to being wiped out by Christian missionaries.”

To my knowledge Mr Russkikh does not speak any Indonesian or Korowai and was not able to substantially interview any of the Korowai.

I have lived among the Korowai people for 12 years. We’ve helped open schools and health clinics, and have personally nursed dozens of Korowai back from the brink of death. Both my wife and I are registered nurses, and week after week there would be a long line of people waiting to see us for help with fevers and wounds and other health issues.

We have lived there long enough to know that visitors to the area don’t understand the language and can’t interpret what is happening from what they observe in a short few days.

I remember one American visitor who declared, after spending 3 or 4 nights in a Korowai hut with two brothers, “They are so peaceful and live in such harmony with their surroundings.” This is the standard Western trope of the “noble savage.” But when the visitor was informed that these two brothers had both been involved in a tribal killing and were murderers, his face turned pale and he grew silent. “Them?” Yes, them. Tourists see what they want to see. And even if the tourist is a journalist, two weeks in a place does not make one a subject matter expert on that place.

Who am I?

My wife and I are both American nurses and I am a Protestant pastor. I was invited to dwell among the Korowai by both the Papuan indigenous church body, GIDI (The Evangelical Church of Indonesia) as well as the Korowai themselves.

I believe the Korowai should be represented as they really are, a people who desire outside contact and goods.

After 12 years of living among the Korowai people and suffering dengue and malaria 23 times while trying to serve them out of love, I am presently in Malaysia seeking medical treatment. Imagine my surprise when I opened the news, only to find I am responsible for genocide!

Despite the fact that we’ve helped open schools and health clinics, and have personally nursed dozens and dozens of Korowai back from the brink of death, and despite the fact that I was invited in to live among the Korowai by the Korowai and the Papuans themselves, I am apparently a destroyer of their civilization and an architect of genocide.

Here is the website: [https://metro.co.uk/.../ancient-tribe-on-the-brink-of-being.../...](https://metro.co.uk/.../ancient-tribe-on-the-brink-of-being.../)

Another variation of the same material appears in another equally sensationalistic article, “FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL: Ancient jungle tribe of super-strong hunters close to being wiped out by Christian missionaries”. The article continues, “A photographer who journeyed to remote West Papua, Indonesia

believes the Korowai people [are] 'disappearing day by day' and has called for greater protection to be given to the vulnerable tribe." This article was published on the same date as the article appearing in the Sun, apparently from the same source material.

A RESPONSE:

I must attempt a gentle response to these articles and to Mr. Russkikh for two reasons: (1) First, the writer is naïve and doesn't understand the realities of the Korowai people, and (2) because of the latest news of the young missionary John Allen Chau being killed trying to make contact with the isolated North Sentinelese.

All of my work is transparent. I have no hidden agendas. I am open to critique and if I am truly doing something harmful to the Korowai I sincerely want to stop and correct my actions. I do not want to cause any harm to any of the Papuan people, whom I love. I only want the best for them.

Below I'd like to focus on several areas of my concern about this article:

First, I notice the credentials of the author of this article as being a tourist.

Mr Russkikh became an astute cultural expert on the Korowai people in a mere 15 days before publishing his very certain conclusions all over the world. I've lived almost that many years in Papua and I feel I am only beginning to humbly learn about the culture.

How many actual Korowai did Mr Russkikh interview? In what language did he interview them?

Let me just be real here: Tourists often do more harm than good. While we hosted a delightful Russian lady last year, Olga, we've also had some very ugly experiences with several tourists from Eastern Europe. There was one man, Davor, who was so rude to the locals that they desired to leave him behind and even chased him into a local hut and tried to chop down his door with an ax to get at him. I thought this was excessive until I saw the bossy way in which he treated the Korowai. Another tourist asked me where the nearest airstrip was to an "uncontacted" tribe...What? Doesn't a completed airstrip signify some previous contact? Not to him. Another tourist got off the plane and looked around, disappointed, "Where are all the naked natives?"

Another tourist railed on and on at me about missionaries destroying local culture and I later found out that he was paying his local porters in cigarettes and candy mostly without sharing any food or medicine with them. That is not really helping the people. That very same week that I trekked hours through hours of swamp to reach a critically sick Korowai man, this Eastern European man had trekked for his own personal eco-adventure and had paid everyone in tobacco.

Tuberculosis is rampant in this region and many of the people already endure a chronic cough. They need nutrition, not smokes.

Sometimes the tourists take photographs of the local peoples (often posed) and these photos are then sold online Who is ruining the culture again? Who are the ones exploiting the Korowai? I've never heard of even a fraction of the profits from these photographs making it back to the Korowai to help them socially. What schools have Mr. Russkikh funded among the Korowai? What schooling has he paid for the children? I assume that he, instead, was paid for his photographs published in these tabloids.

Some tourists both want to denigrate the well-intentioned efforts of the missionary as if we are destroying the local cultures, even as they distribute addicting tobacco and even as they profit off their “primitiveness” through photographs. I would argue that tourists of the likes of Mr Russkikh have done more damage to the Papuans than any missionary ever has.

Do the photographs that Mr. Russkikh took really represent how the Korowai live?

Mr. Russkikh displayed many stunning photographs of the Korowai. The only problem is, those photographs do not represent how the Korowai actually live. It is almost a fraud.

The people photographed are ALL...100%....in their traditional dress. That almost never happens. My strong suspicion is that the photographer urged the people to get naked for better photographs and “cleaned up” the scenery to hide any modern goods or clothes, or the tribe did so on his behalf. This is very common.

Exclusively displaying the Korowai only in their traditional dress now that so many have transitioned to manufactured shirts and shorts is akin to me traveling to Russia and asking Russian citizens to dress like 19th Century Russian peasants for photographic reasons. *“Please Babushka, smile as you cook your potatoes over the cookfire! And please hide your cell phones.”* While this makes for interesting photographs, journalists need to focus less on sensationalism and more on reality.

Mr Russkikh’s photographs were not realistic.

The media uniformly reports on the Korowai in this similar hyper-sensationalistic manner that either bashes missionaries, exalts the “noble savage” myth, or exploits the Korowai in a way which seems to portray them in a “human zoo” setting. The Korowai are almost never portrayed as humans who are aspiring to do better in life and who hope and dream (and also maneuver and scheme...often by tricking tourists) to advance in life, just like us. Tired tropes of the tribe being “Stone Age” or “primitive” or “ancient” or “super-strong” infect just about every media article on the Korowai and dehumanizes the Korowai by portraying them as a world apart from us. They are people, just like you and me.

Recently the media has begun to be more honest about such lies and tactics. The BBC recently got busted for filming the Korowai building houses....houses that the Korowai did not build to live in, but houses which were only built because the foreigners wanted them to build them, native treehouses manufactured for television.

Here is that article:

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/.../bbcs-human-planet-fakery-row.../>



Here is what the BBC was forced to admit:

“Viewers of the BBC’s Human Planet marvelled at the ingenuity of Papua New Guinea’s Korowai people as they built a tree house high above the ground for a tribal family to use as their new home.

The episode of the acclaimed documentary series proceeded to show the family moving into the tree house and setting up home there, 140 feet up amid the tall canopy of the rainforest.

But it has now emerged that the entire sequence was staged for the cameras, plunging the BBC into a new row over fake programmes.

RIGHT: Average Korowai treehouse length is displayed in the two photographs above, compared with the extra-tall treehouses made specifically for the tourists (from the Daily Mail, (18 Feb, 2015).. People regularly live in the former, but only inhabit the latter when needed for the sake of performance for the tourists.



The corporation admitted that a sequence filmed for an episode of Human Planet in 2011 misled viewers by giving the impression the tallest tree houses built by the Korowai people were used as homes.”

In fact the families live in tree houses built much closer to the ground, leaving the higher ones for ritual purposes, or simply meeting places for the tribe’s teenagers.

The programme also failed to make it clear to viewers that the particular tree house filmed for that episode had been erected for the benefit of the cameras.”

And even more recently, a short documentary was filmed, *My Year in the Tribe*, where the author came to realize the artificial nature in which the tribe interacts with tourists. Here is the link and a short selection:

<https://www.spectator.co.uk/.../jaw-dropping-my-year-with-th.../>

“Only later that evening did we get the first sign that not everything was as it seemed when Markus’s family demonstrated an unexpected knowledge of how Millard’s smartphone worked. The second came the following day, as Markus led a two-hour jungle trek to meet his nearest neighbours, and at one point stopped to chop theatrically at a tree with his rudimentary axe. Asked by Millard why he was doing that, he looked distinctly puzzled by the need for the question. ‘For the filming,’ he replied, in the patient tone of a man explaining something obvious to a good-hearted simpleton.

Even so, the penny didn’t really drop until the two men reached their destination, where another Korowai family were sitting naked in a treehouse. Initially, these neighbours gamely tried to pretend this was how they passed an average day. But once they realized that this particular day might go unpaid, the truth started to emerge. ‘This is not our home,’ pointed out a family member. ‘These houses were commissioned by Canadians for filming.’ ‘I was told we should be here with our clothes off,’ added one of the two wives.

Her husband, meanwhile, helpfully laid out the business plan of which this was a crucial part. 'I lie around until there are guests,' he told Millard. 'And then I get naked and they photograph me.' He also provided a handy price list, ranging from £5 for a basic photo to £50 for the full insect-grub hunt. And with that, Markus also broke the fourth wall, admitting that he lived in Mabul but had come to the jungle when he heard that Millard was the latest westerner keen to see the authentic Korowai way of life. 'If you've enjoyed being here,' he unambiguously went on, 'you pay me well.'

Faced with the awkward fact that he was in something between a Potemkin village and a theme park, Millard reacted with an understandable mix of gloom, embarrassment and existential crisis. Not only did he now realize that the Korowai have built an economy on 'selling brand Korowai to rich tourists and TV crews', but he also acknowledged that this was because of people like him. 'Look around you, mate,' he told himself in one especially bitter moment. 'You made this.'"

The media has been propagating a false view of the Korowai for years.

They are infatuated with the "primitive" and are downright disappointed to see the Korowai advance. Let me ask you directly: why should you be so mad that the Korowai are wearing modern clothes? They are the ones who asked for them. The Korowai themselves have appealed to Papuan churches and these local indigenous Papuan church members have answered. Many Papuan churches (NOT: NOT Americans, but fellow Papuans) have donated their own clothes to send to the Korowai. Why? Because the Korowai ASKED for them.

Dear tourist, the Korowai try to please you by acting the part. But the media is finally waking up to the fact that the Korowai are no longer uncontacted. Western tropes of the noble savage die hard and so the media searches for a scapegoat. It must be the missionaries behind this! What a shame the Korowai now have some modern clothes and know the taste of rice and noodles, and understand how a cell phone works.

How dare we missionaries ruin this pristine culture by showing them technological advances. We modern people may benefit from cell phones and canned food and flashlights and fiberglass boats...we modern people may buy a new smartphone every time a new model comes out...we modern people may have desired trains and then cars and then jets as they were made available to us by technology...but what a SHAME if the Korowai desire such things themselves and strive to buy them. Do you realize your own hypocrisy!

Right: A man from the jungle (the older man in the middle) with his young child bride. His clan-members stand at either side. This mix of old and new, traditional and modern clothes, typifies the Korowai today. Please also note that we are attempting to end the practice of child-marriage in this region. If this be cultural "genocide" – so be it, we want to see it gone.



In fact, it is ironic that so many of the Korowai play "dress up" (by "dressing down") and they play the "naked primitive tribesman" for the tourists, precisely so that they can earn a little cash and go buy these culture-ruining items with the profits made from your tourist trips. As Western tourists are bemoaning clothed native peoples and searching for those "uncontacted tribes" who are still unclothed, they are encountering those who are unclothed precisely as part of a scheme to profit off the tourists and gain cash...in part, to buy new clothes. You've been played!

The media swarms to the sensational and ignores how the Korowai actually live. That is not my fault; but yours.

As a person who lives in the region, let me tell you plainly: the photographs that Mr Russkikh is showing to the world are not a representative model of how most of the Korowai live today, nor how they have lived for at least a decade. It is artificial, maybe even staged, and I would like Mr Russkikh to answer for that. It is simply poor reporting, the false promotion of a romantic ideal that does not exist. Nor does this ideal exist among any of the Papuan tribes – almost all of them always mix and match traditional and modern culture as soon as they can, and seek it out, and ask for it. Why? Because they are people like you and I, and they desire easier lives.

Below I have attached photographs of representative Korowai treehouses, in contrast to the ones on BBC. Notice they are much lower off the ground than those portrayed falsely by the BBC.

Do the missionaries believe that the tribe is primitive? Do the missionaries enter unwanted into remote regions in Papua?

Mr Russkikh has no problem calling the Korowai primitive. Other media reporters call the Korowai “Stone-Age.” As a missionary I have rejected all such derogatory phrases for the Korowai. They are humans just like us, and they have desires and agency to act upon their desires. This has led them to petition the government for help. This has caused them to ask for missionaries.

Again, I was invited in at the invitation of the Korowai, by both the Papuan indigenous church body, GIDI (The Evangelical Church of Indonesia) as well as the Korowai themselves. In fact, when another missionary family moved into the region to our east the two neighboring tribes almost had a tribal war because both tribes wanted the missionary family so badly.

So it is a blatant lie for any reporter to say that missionaries are unwanted in the interior of Papua. Before I picked the Korowai I surveyed several other remote areas in the Wapoga and Mamberamo regions and to a tribe, every single tribe strongly pleaded with me to move into their region. They all wanted help. I have never entered any region unwanted and undesired. I am trying as best I can to follow local desires and to meet the needs of the people.

Are the Korowai an ancient tribe?

I don't believe the Korowai are very ancient. The Sumerians and Amorites...well, those are ancient tribes. I believe the Korowai are several hundred years old. They've split and fragmented from other groups to their south and don't even have a large body of songs of their own but borrow most of their songs from the Citak further south. They have no musical instrument except the mouth-harp and a few drums, but even these are not common-place like further south. I believe tribes such as the Korowai are actually newer and more recent than larger and more dominant peoples. They've fled more dominant groups in generations past and found a patch of land so remote and isolated that they finally made it their home.

Are the Korowai uncontacted?

No, the Korowai have been contacted for years. Mr Russkikh did not do anything daring or new; he merely followed the route that hundreds have followed before him to get a glimpse of the Korowai people.

A note about media sensationalism:

The Sun ironically wrote the following, "Since the Korowai people were first discovered in 1974 they have been the subject of much media scrutiny, including from BBC documentary makers who were forced to admit that the "traditional" settlement on their programme had actually been created by them." The irony is that the Sun then used the photographs which were obviously staged for Mr. Russkikh.

To the Sun News I would like to ask, why do such a good job of mentioning the repugnant sensationalism of the BBC, but a mere inch below that admission you then print more sensationalistic photographs of the Korowai?

Who are the bigger threat?

Isn't it ironic that the reporter does not want people to enter the Korowai region and presumably wants them to be preserved in some form of "human zoo" without any cultural change (and all this without asking the Korowai themselves), but yet almost every tourist that I know has gifted the Korowai with outside trade items? What is the most common gift tourists give to the Korowai? Is it penicillin to help their health? Vitamins, perhaps? Maybe fish hooks or fishnets to help them procure food?

No, it is cigarettes.

I have met tourists who have badmouthed the missionaries for giving clothes to tribal peoples, but who then pay their porters in cigarettes. And they do all this without even the slightest feeling of hypocrisy or irony. They are blind to it.

If tourists want to truly preserve the Korowai, they need to stop coming.

Are the Korowai helpless victims or "super-strong hunters?"

Mr. Russkikh and similar reporters cannot have it both ways. In one breath they describe the Korowai as passive victims of the missionaries. In the very next breath they describe them as "super-strong hunters". Which is it?

In some articles, the false trope of the Korowai as "super-strong hunters" is employed. In others the trope of the tribe as passive and weak victims of modernity is played. Which trope are we employing? You cannot have both at once.

In reality, the Korowai are not very strong at all. Some young men are remarkably athletic, during their early years...when they are not suffering frequent bouts of malaria. Most just struggle to survive. There are very few old Korowai people. Most die before their 40s. Certainly, their hunting prowess and ability to hike through long stretches of jungle is commendable. But on many, if not most days, the men are not out vigorously working but are lying about resting in their huts, often trying to recover from tropical disease. Korowai life is a life full of pain, deprivation, illness, death, malnutrition, and hardship. They want a better life. They have invited outsiders in due to this hope of a better life and they are doing all they can to tap into the conveniences they see in the modern world.

Are the Korowai being forced to build villages against their wills?

It is true that every government and church program to help the Korowai has included village formation. At the same time, however, we have encouraged them to keep at least a partial residence in the treehouse clusters and to keep planting crops of sago, pandanus and bananas around these jungle treehouses.

At present the Korowai spend about half their time in villages and half their time in the jungle treehouses. A good amount of time is also spent gathering for grub feasts, or going upriver to look for gold, for there is a gold boom in the region and outsiders are entering and taking advantage of the Korowai by stealing their gold.

Also many readers may be surprised that a number of new villages have been created solely by the Korowai themselves as a means of attracting new government and church aid.

I suspect that all of what Mr Russkiksh said was true about hiking for hours and coming across empty houses. I do the same when I trek village to village for medical work. Korowai build longhouses for sago feasts and then occupy them briefly and then leave them abandoned. This week in Burukmahkot only about 5 families are left in the village due to a sago feast in the jungle. The Korowai are semi-nomadic. They travel often. It is not the missionaries' fault; it is their normal lifestyle. Most Korowai now have two huts, a jungle hut and a hut in a village. If half of their residences are empty, this does not mean they are going extinct.

Are the Korowai being wiped out?

Hardly.

Many who would have normally died have been saved with medicines provided by the church and missionaries. Through the appeals of the church and missionaries the government has also taken on a more active role and are also helping more than ever among the Korowai. Never before have I seen so many fat healthy babies among the Korowai as I have these past 3 years.

One problem we have been having is that many of the youth are no longer content to stay in the village and, since they've heard of the outside world, they want to walk out of the region to outside villages for jobs and educational opportunities. They are often then cheated, or they indulge in the evils of the modern world such as miras (strong alcohol) or prostitutes, and some have become addicted to tobacco and have brought sexually transmitted diseases back to their families. To prevent this among the children we've started a school on location in the Korowai and have incorporated knowledge of farming and raising chickens to the curriculum. The Papuan Christian evangelists that work alongside me have also attempted time and again to teach the Korowai how to farm more effectively, with moderate success. And during the construction of all schools and other buildings we've tried our best to pick out capable Korowai men to teach them how to use the chainsaw and to do basic construction, even when this adds to our budget, wastes materials and adds costs to our buildings. We believe in training the Korowai to be skilled and independent.



Right: Photographs of the schoolkids undergoing training on proper hygiene and tooth cleaning, as well as some of the sick patients we have treated in this region.

In order to try to focus on what is true about the article, I do acknowledge that all over Papua those youth who live in the interior often “disappear” from interior tribes. This is not because they are being killed off or something intentionally nefarious. It is because the lure of the towns is too great for them. They want to see the world and so they trek out of their isolated hamlets and go visit the towns. There they can see things not available to them. In the past, before our airstrip was finished, for example, some youth would hike out 4-5 days to the West to see their first car in Dekai and would come back and tell the others. “It’s like an airplane, but it goes on the ground!” was their method of explanation since they had seen airplanes before ever seeing a single automobile.



“There are thought to be only 2,000 Korowai left...”

The article bemoans the fact that there are thought to be only 2,000 Korowai left.

The Korowai are actually about 3,500 to 4000 souls and this amount has stayed stable or has increased since our missionary presence. They are not dying off. In fact, we have more infants and babies born and healthy than ever before! We’ve done immunization programs, opened up medical clinics, delivered meds and supplemental food to the hungry and have taught basic hygiene to the people. The missionaries are contributing to a population increase.



Are their lives being “endangered” by missionaries?

What is objectionable that we missionaries are trying to eliminate?

The past cannibalism? Should we preserve that? The clan warfare and witch-killings? Should that have been preserved? We are trying to end child-marriages; should we try to preserve 8 year old girls being forcibly taken and given to 40 year old men? The occasional infanticide of unwanted children? Should that be preserved? Illiteracy and rampant disease; should we preserve those things?



Are men and women of equal station?



One of the articles on the Korowai claims that, "women have equal station in society." But this is patently false and an evidence of the ineptitude of the reporter. The reporter would have discovered this was not true had he done more than spent 15 days in the entire region.

Women are often victims of domestic violence. Some men add a second wife, and this almost always creates domestic tension. Young girls are exchanged for trade goods as young as 7,8,9 and enter their future husband's house, men often in their 30's and 40's. Yes, child marriage still exists in the Korowai region. How could the reporters claim that men and women are of equal station if young girls are essentially treated as trade-goods? And why are missionaries evil for wanting to eliminate child marriage?



Are we forcefully destroying the Korowai culture?

We are certainly glad to see cannibalism and the frequent homicide disappear. In the past, the men often regularly threatened one another and me. I am glad that era has come to an end and there is now greater peace. In the past most of the kids just stared at me from the doorframes of their huts.

Now we have group games of tag and soccer of sometimes 100 at a time in my yard. In the past they feared suanggi (witches) but now one of their favorite kids' games is "Suanggi tag", which demonstrates that their old fears have disappeared, becoming the mocking names of their childhood games.

We are also in the process of ending their occasional infanticide, wife-beating, and child marriage. We'd also like to see the end of near universal illiteracy and the high rates of child mortality.

Again, we desire to preserve all the is good about Korowai culture - their language, housing, knowledge of the jungle, body of mythology - these all must be retained.

We are, indeed, forcefully trying to end the practice of Korowai child-brides. The Church has, indeed, essentially ended witch-killings and tribal warfare. We are, indeed, trying to end the occasional infanticide which is still practiced by some Korowai. But we are trying to preserve everything good about the culture.



--

"But what about the pathogens?"

With the death of the missionary John Allen Chau many internet critics said that he endangered the health of the tribe by his mere presence. So what about the pathogens the tribe could have been exposed to?

The Korowai have been trading with nearby tribes for years. Outsiders (including tourists and reporters) have penetrated the region in years past as well. And they usually have never brought medicine to the people. Many Korowai have also trekked out to town. We have seen colds and flus and measles spread throughout Papuan tribes, and have done our best to stop the spread.

But we have not endangered the Korowai due to our foreign pathogens anymore than Mr Russkih the reporter has done.

A PROPOSAL:

I have a proposal for Mr Russkikh:

If Mr. Russkikh is so concerned about the actual welfare of the Korowai and not merely concerned with getting more likes on Instagram by posting sensationalistic pics of naked natives that do not reflect their present-day reality, I have a proposal for him.

Why not come long-term? If we are truly wiping them out, why not give toward their healthcare? Help us establish a central hospital in Danowage. Other villages have no teachers or health workers. Is education a good or an evil thing? Why not help us send teachers? If you oppose their education and desire them to remain illiterate, then how about nurses? Send us nurses or money to place nurses in the most remote clan areas.

Instead of 15 whole days among the Korowai, why not come for 3-4 months and interview the Korowai themselves? You can stay in my home as my guest. See the work for yourself so you can better evaluate our work. We can trek together to actual occupied houses instead of the deserted clusters of the abandoned sagu feast houses. You can eat and sleep with the Korowai and spend some time among them and ask them yourself about all the good and bad things happening in their land. We have nothing to hide; we welcome your presence and we strive to do all things transparently. Come be our guests.

CONCLUSION

We love the Korowai people. We regularly meet with the Korowai as a community and write their concerns and often deliver them to the government. We believe in preserving their voice and autonomy. We've helped arrange teachers and healthcare workers to this region before the government ever took initiative to do so. We've tried our best to introduce nutritious crops and livestock like chickens to each post, and also medicines, and supplemental foods during times of flood or drought. I've spent approximately 1/3 of a million towards medical and educational needs to help prevent needless deaths from malaria and tuberculosis in my region and we've housed sick Korowai in my home for months at a time. We are doing our best to curb the high rate of illiteracy and encourage the Korowai to preserve their language and songs.

While I love the Lord Jesus and I come to help bless the Korowai because of the great blessings first given to me from God, we have never tied our work in with any obligation to profess faith in Christianity. We help people because they need help. People must be free always to choose or reject our faith; there is no coercion.

Thank you,

Pastor Trevor Johnson

