

## The Tailenders:

Filmed in the Solomon Islands, Mexico, India, and the United States, *The Tailenders* explores the connections between missionary activity and global capitalism. *The Tailenders* examines a missionary organization's use of ultra-low-tech audio devices to evangelize indigenous communities facing crises caused by global economic forces.

Joy Ridderhoff founded Gospel Recordings in 1939 in Los Angeles. She remembered how crowds had gathered around gramophones in the Honduran villages where she had worked as a missionary, and decided that rather than compete with this medium, she would use it to preach. The organization that she founded has now produced audio recordings of Bible stories in over 5,000 languages, and aims to record in every language on earth. They distribute these recordings along with hand-wind players in regions with limited access to electricity and media. The Bible stories played by the missionaries are sometimes the first encounter community members have had with recorded sound, and, even more frequently, the first time they have heard their own language recorded. Gospel Recordings calls their target audience "the Tailenders" because they are the last to be reached by global evangelism.

The missionaries target communities in crisis because they have found that displaced and desperate people are especially receptive to the evangelical recordings. When uprooted from one's home, as in the case of Mexican migrant workers, the sound of one's own language is a comfort. And the audio players are appealing media gadgets. Audiences who might not otherwise be interested in the missionaries' message will listen to the recordings. *The Tailenders* focuses on how the media objects and messages introduced by the missionaries play a role in larger socioeconomic transformations, such as the move away from subsistence economies toward cash economies based on agricultural and industrial labor.

The film raises questions about how people who receive the recordings understand them. Gospel Recording's project is premised on a belief in the transparency of language to transmit a divinely inspired message. But because the missionaries don't speak the languages, they must enlist bilingual native speakers as translators. There is ample opportunity for mistakes, selectivity, and resistance in the translation. The film explores how meaning changes as it crosses language and culture.