**PUBLICATION: Cultural Climate**

**HEAD: Going Down With The Islands**

**SELL:** *At a glance the many island nations in the pacific are paradisiacal: the temperatures are warm, the communities are bursting with culture and the sea is at your doorstep. Too close to your doorstep. The islands are sinking; being submerged by the very waters that are integral to their traditions. Despite this, the I-Kiribati and Tuvaluan people are resilient in their mindset of sticking with their atoll homes as the sea level rises - as* ***Harry Robinson*** *discovered.*

**COPY:**

**"What kind of ancestor do I want to be?"** Baniti Semilota asked herself, pondering in her home overlooking the Pacific Ocean. All homes overlook the Pacific Ocean in Kiribati.

“Our elders and ancestors have always said, ‘whatever happens, we’ll go with Kiribati if we sink’,” she added, “most people want to be remembered as the kind of elders who persisted for real change to try and stop that from happening.”

Ancestors in Kiribati, and the other Pacific nations, are more than merely 'the people who came before'. They are the storied foundations keeping each island afloat, with their teachings and traditions etched into the minds of the I-Kiribati people. Their spirits are manifested into each grain of sand on all of the nation’s 33 picturesque islands - islands that are merely four metres from being pulled under the deep-cobalt ocean waters by climate change.

The 22-year-old has become a beacon for Kiribati’s youthful population; the generation staring the encroaching tidal abyss with anxious ruminations of the fate of the islands. Baniti attended COP27 as a guest speaker and leads the *Tungaru Youth Action*, a group that particularly tries to raise awareness of climate change among the remote and disconnected ‘outer islands’ of Kiribati. She claims she’s just the person who stepped up to lead, but at the heart of it she is a proud I-Kiribati who is yearning for her nation’s future.

“It’s like a home that is being taken away from you,” she said, preemptively grieving the loss of her culture, “it’s very sad to even think of those memories and traditions sinking with the islands, you feel like you have no sense of identity.”

One island; Marakei, is revered around Kiribati as “women’s island” and is said to be guarded by four ancient female spirits. Each new visitor must complete ‘*te katabenin’* - a journey around the island - and leave offerings at aged shrines. Ancestral customs are embedded into each island, just as many I-Kiribati intend to embed themselves in the islands as climate change gives them reason after reason to leave.

“This is our country and we should fight to stay here longer,” Baniti added, “to migrate to another country? I can just never imagine it.”

The ‘resilience’ mindset championed by the current government, however, is a path of much resistance; and it’s no wonder why many skilled young people are migrating for more auspicious pastures. Saltwater intrusion from the violating sea is even contaminating the fresh groundwater reserves used for sustenance farming and household needs - which are left unreplenished and desolate as equator-lying Kiribati is currently surviving its third-worst drought on record.

Atoll islands are devoid of all surface water like lakes and rivers, so are reliant on rainwater. Last year, the I-Kiribati people didn’t experience rainfall for seven months, whilst the limited water in their humble hand-dug wells became briny.

“We shower in salty water and fetch our drinking water from far distances, just like other countries do during drought,” admitted South Tarawa local Ruth Cross, “we are tightly bound by the fabric of our culture to help each other get by.” The irony is piercing and deadly: rising water dominates the landscape, yet none of it is drinkable.

Furthermore, coastal erosion whittles away at what sacred land the communities have left. Betio Island resident Anterea Bereia sombrely declared: “Driving through the island is very sad. You can literally see how much the shoreline is washed away by waves.”

At high tide, invading seawater blockades the only main road in all of Kiribati; severing the link between Betio and the capital of Tarawa. He added: “We should be afraid of climate change, we need to be scared of what’s coming.”

A thousand kilometres south-west in Tuvalu, Minister for Foreign Affairs Simon Kofe addressed an assembly of world leaders over video link; his shins poignantly submerged in seawater and his lectern driven into the pasty limestone sand. “We cannot wait for speeches when the sea is rising,” he proclaimed, “we must take bold action today to secure tomorrow.”

Simon’s weighty message, given at COP26, still correlates with Tuvalu’s resilient mindset on inevitable climate consequences. The country is much smaller than their former colonial partner Kiribati - with Tuvalu being the fourth smallest sovereign nation in the world - but the heart of the 11,000 Tuvaluans dwarfs their miniscule stature. The Pacific island nations see themselves as “big ocean states” rather than small island states, and they hold their heads as such despite struggling with the problem that their ocean homes are collapsing in on themselves.

“We do not have to be victims,” assured Minister Kofe in his friendly-yet-critical demeanour, “the Pacific region is not standing helplessly while we are impacted by climate change and sea level rise.

“We are fighting, and we will never stop fighting.”

Tuvaluans and I-Kiribati are told in adolescence to grow up to be “warriors” to save their country, and Simon is doing so by pushing through legislation that preserves Tuvalu’s sovereignty as a big ocean state. He said: “My country stands against relocation as a solution to the climate crisis. Tuvalu is a sovereign country, and its population has the right to live, develop, and prosper on its own land.

“The sea is our home. Even if the land disappears, we expect the sea to remain, and to be recognized internationally, as our home.

“Protecting our statehood and maritime boundaries now is one way we can ensure our future as a nation. We would be devastated were our maritime zones and our sea to be compromised.”

The devastation mentioned by Minister Kofe would also be that of dire human consequences. According to the *Tuvalu Fisheries Department*, a Tuvaluan consumes half-a-kilo of fish a day; with it being the only crucial food item that the country doesn't import. Coral bleaching caused by climate change, combined with the deadly partnership of human-based pollution, has made fish scarce and forced fishermen further afield to catch their haul. Tuvalu now only makes bilateral trade deals with governments that recognise these current maritime borders, as allowing these fishing zones to shrink would be akin to sitting back and watching the country drown and starve.

However, Tuvaluans aren’t limited to a pen when it comes to warrior-like fighting for their future; they are also wielding hi-tech, sand-dredging swords that they are using to reclaim what is rightfully theirs. Metal sand-sucking behemoths can be spotted in Funafuti, the country’s atoll capital whose thin strips of land encircle the colossal Te Namo Lagoon - the machines’ long arms clawing back sediment from the ocean’s greedy grasp and using it to replenish the atoll. Funafuti is already so submerged that 40% of its central district is below sea level at the government’s highest tide measurements.

Amidst his sober political proclamations, Minister Kofe confessed: “When you live on thin strips of islands and can see the lagoon on one side and the ocean on the other, climate change and sea level rise become very real.”

“The Pacific islands are adapting to impacts of sea level rises at the moment,” responded Peter Sinclair, Water Resources Adviser at the *Pacific Community*; the region’s principal international science and development organisation, “how they will adapt as levels increase though, no one really knows.”

Peter has been working on water resources in the Pacific for over a decade and a half and has seen the brunt that the islands have had to endure. “They have it tough in Kiribati especially,” he conceded.

“After 18 months of low rainfall the groundwater storage starts to thin out. There’s not enough water for the needs of the community, they often don’t have water piped to them everyday.”

Kiribati is currently looking to deploy a new desalination project in place to supplement around 3 million more litres of clean water into their system, but Peter admitted that this is a long process. Until there’s a solution, people are left drinking salty water and sourcing their own resources from groundwater wells.

Whilst dry temperatures are causing living problems now, Pacific islanders are warned that climate change may bring more catastrophic impacts in the form of biblical weather. “What appears to likely be the biggest threat is the storm surges in the next 50 to 100 years,” Peter explained.

“During a high-tide event, storm surge waves can ‘overtop’ the islands,” he added, “where, in bigger events, people are left wading through water and the sea is just rolling in - almost like a tsunami.

“It’s when it gets to that point where you can’t maintain infrastructure, there will be less capacity within the community to stay and people will just go, ‘this is too hard,’ and leave.”

As a cataclysmic fate may beckon over the ocean horizon however, many young islanders - those fighting on the frontlines of the climate crisis - are intent on rewriting the ending of their nations’ ancient history books.

“It looks like we are going to be evicted because of the actions of other countries,” Baniti concluded, with the prophetic sound of waves besieging the coastline near her home.

“Whatever happens to Kiribati we’ll try to find ways to be resilient. As the Honourable Minister Simon Kofe says, who wants to leave their home?”

With one closing remark, the young climate champion echoed the feelings of an ocean: “The climate crisis is a human rights crisis, and this is shown across all Pacific islands.”

**Harry Robinson**

**Word count: 1559**

**Interviews:**

**Baniti Semilota, Leader of *Tungaru Youth Action* - interview conducted 5th January 2023**

**Hon. Simon Kofe, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Tuvalu - interview conducted 28th December 2022**

**Peter Sinclair, Water Resources Advisor at the *Pacific Community* - interview conducted 10th January 2023**

**Ruth Cross, South Tarawa local - interview conducted 9th January 2023**

**Timii Timii, Betio local - interview conducted 13th January**

**Anterea Bereira, Betio local - interview conducted 13th January**

**Titaake Atamwakin, Butaritari local - interview conducted 13th January**

**Tebaiti Redfern, Teaoraereke local - interview conducted 15th January 2023**