

# THE HUNGRY TIDE

SHWETA KISHORE

The argument about climate change has become a struggle between competing voices: those that deny its existence, those that accept the scientific evidence and those that seek to differentiate between human and non-human causes of climate change. In *The Hungry Tide*, Tom Zubrycki peels away layers of obfuscation to reveal an urgent story of people facing the terror of climate change on their doorstep. As rising sea levels swallow parts of the Pacific island of Kiribati, the citizens fight to protect their homes. Their daily efforts form some of the most compelling images within the film; indeed, they are some of the most powerful images of the effects of climate change yet committed to film. Alongside this desperate story, Zubrycki's documentary engages with the wider problem of climate change, developing a reasoned and humanistic argument about its effects. While the film is primarily concerned with Kiribati, Zubrycki situates the narrative within a context of global power disparities that often result in the marginalisation of small nations.

In its opening sequence, the film outlines the scale and complexity of the problem in Kiribati. Residents face the onslaught of rising tides and frequent storms that swallow their lands, submerging previously fertile grounds and damaging homes. Images of homes stranded within flooded lands, household belongings floating away to sea and children playing in flooded yards have a nightmarish, apocalyptic quality.

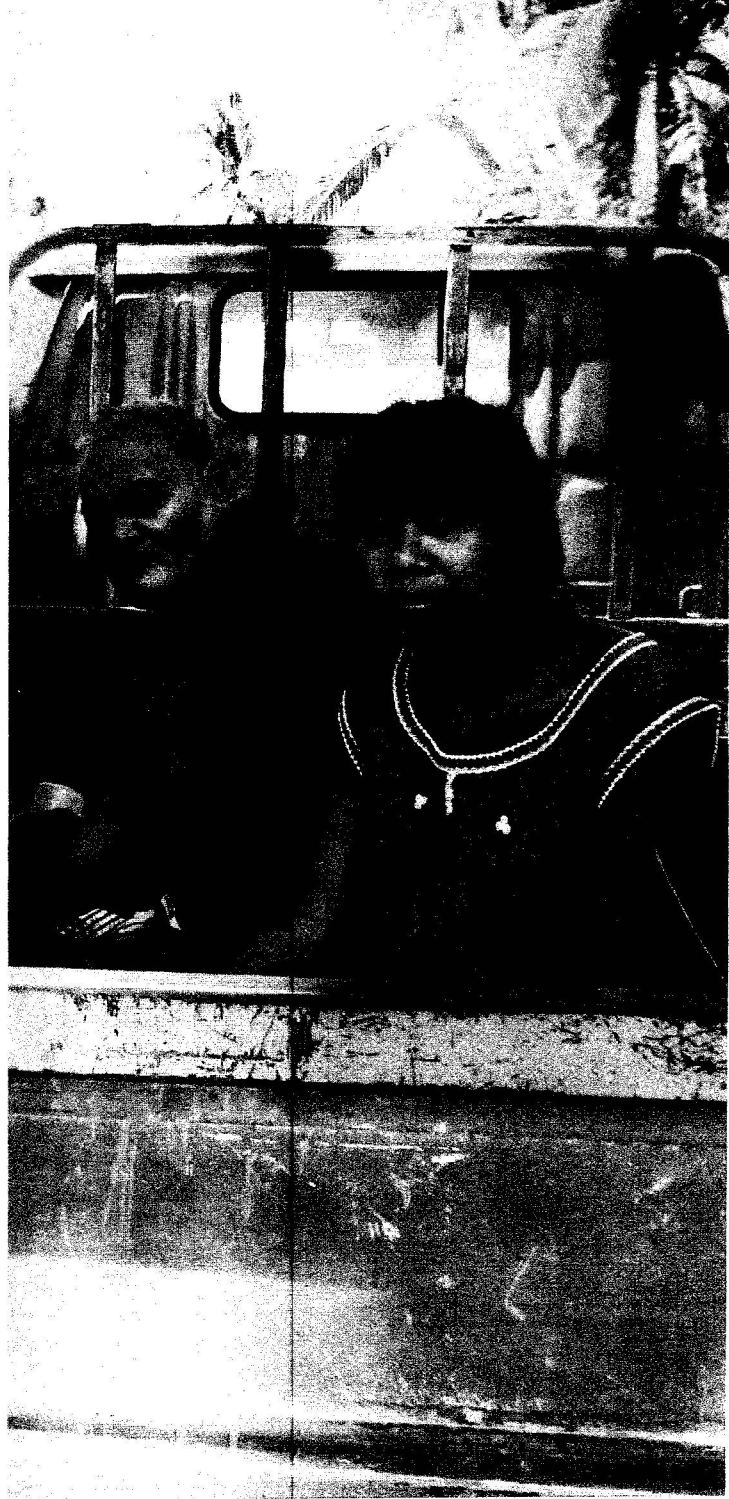
Yet the challenges are not merely physical; Zubrycki also highlights the loss of the intangibles, such as

histories and cultures that are vitally linked to the land itself, and thus lost as the land disappears. Images of folk cultural activities that are a part of community life are being filmed by the film's subject, Maria Tiimon, who explains that 'this will be one of the things wiped out from our culture, which is so precious to the people of Kiribati'. The ominous sense of loss and foreboding is woven through the film. This attention to the loss of cultures and history, as entire nations are submerged by rising sea levels, is absent from popular discourse in Australia. *The Hungry Tide* attempts to shift away from the exclusive focus on

the economic effects of global warming to examine other aspects that are of equal if not greater significance.

Zubrycki is adept at showing sympathetic protagonists situated within complex situations; previous features *Billal* (1996) and *Molly & Mobarak* (2003) both feature central characters whose lives intersect with the political concerns at the heart of the films. In *The Hungry Tide*, Maria is engaging on multiple levels: a Sydney resident, she represents a human face of Kiribati that is accessible and familiar to Australian audiences as she takes us on a journey to her home and





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lack the necessary funds to remain. Maria herself doubles up as a dancer to enact the cultural component of their presentation. Zubrycki questions the ability of such forums to achieve democratic global negotiation and resolution.

The film also foreshadows climate change's future consequences. Kiribati President Anote Tong is presented as an articulate, measured man who has accepted the fate of his nation. He speaks of re-skilling his people to prepare them for relocation overseas. But Zubrycki investigates the suggestion that relocation is an effective resolution for climate change refugees, travelling with Maria to western Victoria, where men from Kiribati have arrived with their families to pick almonds as seasonal workers. At first, overjoyed with

er culture. As a climate change late from Kiribati, she has both essional and a personal stake in sue. The narrative also dwells on notional conflict arising from her as an immigrant, as she wants a part of her family environment pati while also balancing the ods of life in Australia.

gn Timon, Maria's father, the film ts a condemnation of industri- nations as the source of global

**WISE FROM ABOVE LEFT: MARIA TIMON ER FAMILY IN BERU; WATER RISES AT NIKORA VILLAGE; TEBEKENIKORA; THE PROVIDES LIMITED PROTECTION**

warming, the immediate price of which is paid by the low-lying Pacific Islands that have barely contributed to emis- sions. The camera dwells on domestic life unfolding in large, open, outdoor spaces; the lifestyle of the residents is in harmony with the natural en- vironment of the islands. Zubrycki extends this notion of global injustice to include larger issues of global inequality and power imbalances. In a charged sequence with Maria at the Copenhagen Climate Conference, the Kiribati delegation discovers that their nation is not even depicted on the world map on display, and their delegation is depleted because they



their wages, they are relatively happy, but when Maria returns during winter it is a different story. The mood is sombre; the men are cold, isolated and have little work. A telling exchange occurs when Maria addresses the group: 'The President encouraged the idea of you interacting with real Australians, has that happened?' The men answer that 'The only time we meet real Australians is on the road.' The separation between the seasonal fruit pickers and the Australian residents is an ominous portent of future life as a climate change refugee.

It is through Maria's eyes that the film introduces the complex challenges faced by the island residents, as Maria travels to attend her mother's funeral in her hometown. Maria emerges as a nuanced character – vulnerable when faced with domestic adversity such as parental illness and family upheaval, but resolute when presenting Kiribati's case for justice and decisive action in the international arena. This portrayal of Maria's vulnerability has much in common with Zubrycki's previous films, where moments of happiness,



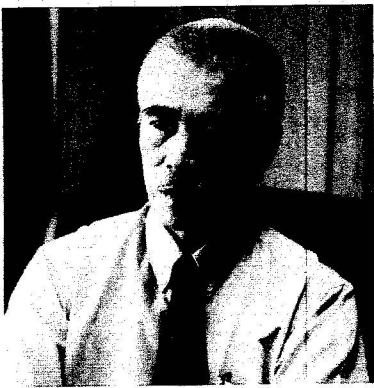
exasperation and reflection are all revealed with a deft, understated approach. Maria is at once a 'host' who leads the viewer into the story as well as the 'subject' that engages actively with the theme.

Zubrycki often uses the family to explore the tensions within the narrative while also evoking the intersection between the family and the documentary's broader themes. It is a highly effective device. Family repeatedly emerges as an active character within Zubrycki's films, whether in the complex relationship between Lyn, Molly

**THE HUNGRY TIDE**  
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**DIRECTOR:**  
 TOM ZUBRYCKI  
**RUNNING TIME:** 90 MINS

and Mobarak in *Molly & Mobarak*, or the effects of Billal's condition on his immediate and extended family in *Billal*. *The Hungry Tide* is no different, and Maria's family are central in providing a sense of her world. They also create a deeper engagement with the film's subject as their lives unfold on screen. The sadness of Tiimon – in failing health, helpless in his wheelchair, watching the sea devour the lands he knows – creates powerful moments where the audience engages with him as Maria's father, but also as an elderly Kiribati resident witnessing this familiar landscape being washed away.

Attempts by documentarians to portray complex themes accessibly often unwittingly result in flattened portrayals of people, places and events, which can obstruct identification with the film itself. But Zubrycki deliberately subverts the stereotypes present in popular media through a considered approach to imagery and character. In an interview about his documentary style and philosophy in the context of *Molly & Mobarak*, Zubrycki commented,



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*I think that as a documentarian you have the responsibility to give people an understanding about an issue that is quite different and separate from an understanding that may be taken from the printed word, television and radio. It's a form that subverts other media to the extent that it can awaken people, it can sharpen their awareness, rouse their interest and maybe shock them to action.<sup>1</sup>*

Kiribati is often portrayed as a tropical Pacific island paradise, and the film begins with aerial long shots and wide shots depicting the stunning landscape of the region. Instead of reinforcing this stereotypical imagery, however, the sequence concludes with shots of dead palm trees and streets flooded by the rising ocean. Pacific Islanders are also often subject to stereotyping, represented as fun-loving, simple people living care-free lives. But Zubrycki depicts his characters complete with the tensions and conflicts that exist in their everyday lives. Maria's brother Bonibato, for instance, works as a watchman to support his wife and eight children. His meagre income is a source of stress and Bonibato deals with it by drinking heavily. Arguments between Maria and Bonibato illustrate the tension that exists within this household, undermining any sense that they live in paradise.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: DANCERS; PRESIDENT ANOTE TONG; MARIA WITH HER FATHER, TIMON; EROSION IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY EVIDENT IN BERU

This faith in the quality of documentary to present perspectives often absent from popular media is crucial to Zubrycki's approach, rooted in dissent at a time when discussion seems to be dominated by populist rhetoric and partisan politics. His sensitive handling of the issue of climate change and human rights in the Pacific renders *The Hungry Tide* a highly successful film.

*Shweta Kishore is a documentary filmmaker, film critic and teacher of media studies.*

**More information:**

[www.thehungrytide.com.au](http://www.thehungrytide.com.au)

**Endnote**

<sup>1</sup> Bec Barry, "MOLLY & MOBARAK" — an article for IF magazine by Bec Barry, <<http://www.tomzubrycki.com/pdfs/M&M%20-%20IF%20Magazine%20Article.pdf>>, accessed 10 July 2011.