

The search for the elusive female chiefs of Vanuatu



FOR over 100 years, researchers, writers and anthropologists have agreed that there are no female chiefs in Vanuatu or even Melanesia. Writing in 1914, William Rivers stated in his *History of Melanesian Society* that on Pentecost, females had prefixes to their names indicating differences in rank, but he firmly stated that this was "not connected with any organization resembling the Sukwe" – the male chiefly system. And this was the closest that women came to chiefly status. His analysis has prevailed, down to the present.

So I was quite shocked when over pizza at Nambawan Café a couple of years ago, my friend (and now the Vanuatu Telecom Regulator) Dalsie Baniata casually mentioned that her sister on Maewo was a "female chief." I said, "That is not possible – there are none!"

And so the search for the elusive female chiefs of Vanuatu began.

We agreed to launch an Expedition, sanctioned by the famous Explorers Club in New York, to interview and document the female chiefs of Maewo. Dalsie would organize an island festival for the women of the island, featuring their culture, traditions, ceremonies and promotions. I would bring in and lead a team of researchers, to undertake the analysis. The festival was scheduled for August 2015.

Then Cyclone Pam hit, in March 2015. The festival was postponed to August 2016, and morphed into more of an all-island event focused on women's arts and traditional practices. But the female chiefs of Maewo would still be a key part of the festival.



On August 25, 2016 our Explorers Club team arrived in Kerembei village on central west Maewo, ready to interview dozens or even scores of female chiefs, previously unknown to science. But there were two immediate problems. First, the women were rather shy about being interviewed. Second, none of the few who agreed to be interviewed were keen on the term "female chief." They stated firmly that they were "Notari," a local vernacular word which they translated as "female cultural leaders." They felt the term "chief" must be reserved for men only.

Dalsie contended, also firmly, that the Notari were female chiefs. She said, "The Notari of Maewo go through a pig killing ceremony like the male chiefs do. They have three active grades now, and we have just found new, previously unknown evidence that there were three higher grades used in the past for women chiefs, that have now been lost." She added, "Often the Notari will call

themselves 'female chiefs' in private, but in public they do not want to offend the male chiefs by using that word."

But somehow it didn't seem quite right to call the women by a title that they themselves disputed in public.

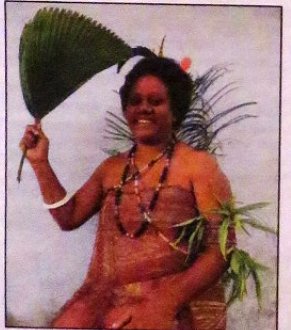


Later in the festival Theresa Menders and I found several male chiefs in Kerembei who stated that there were "female chiefs" on Maewo, but they could not name the villages involved.

Back in Port Vila, we thought we had located an actual "female chief" – amazingly, a US citizen! This was a remarkable young Peace Corps Volunteer who had done such terrific work on Maewo that she had been given a pig-killing ceremony and a title. In an initial interview the term "female chief" was freely used. But within several days she emailed to state firmly that only the word "Notari" should be used for her, and that she was not a "female chief." Furthermore, she wanted to remain anonymous and not have any articles written about her.

Oh, dear. No "female chiefs" who would agree to that term. Nothing to show for our Expedition. Maybe William Rivers was right in his firm statement, 102 years ago.

Luckily, the staff of the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer came through. They recalled that Doreen Leona of Pentecost and Port Vila, an employee of the VNPf and a former colleague, was a female chief. I immediately called her.



Doreen was quite clear. She said, "I am a female chief, with chiefly insignia including the circular pig's tusk of the pig I killed. About 25 percent or more of the women of northern Pentecost have chiefly rank. We do not have jurisdiction over civil, criminal or land disputes, but we do instruct young people in custom and traditional matters. And I think that the fact that women of north Pentecost are recognized and respected as female custom chiefs by men, means that the rate of domestic violence against women is lower there than elsewhere."

Doreen's 80-year-old mother Lolowei Musero Leona agreed. She said, "My rank and Doreen's chiefly rank is 'Notari' – this is different from the Maewo term 'Notari.'" She added, "On north Pentecost we have

three active ranks of female chiefs that perform the pig-killing ceremony: Mwei (the lowest), Motari (second) and Sal (the highest). The male chiefs in the area also use these same three ranks as the first tier of their system. Then above those three ranks, the men have five additional grades that women cannot earn. These are (starting at the lowest): Tari, Livus, Fera, Bofudolua, and Vera. My husband, brother and father all achieved the Bofudolua level, for which they had to kill 100 pigs."



More investigation led our team to Phoebe John, a strong woman from Pele island just off the north coast of Efate. She said, "For four years I was a female chief of my village of Piliura, with all the powers of a male chief. This came about because my husband was the village chief, but he died in 2010. I was given the sacred mat that was used as a shroud under his body as a symbol of my new authority and rank. But I did not kill a pig in this ceremony. His rank and mine was 'Messerie,' which is the highest rank in a ten-rank system of chiefs."

Phoebe John continued, "I held the rank for four years, during which time I negotiated as a chief on a fishing dispute we had with a nearby village. Of course as chief I worked closely with the male assistant chief, and with the village council of men, women and youth. But I was the chief. Then in 2014, when my nephew-in-law was ready to take on the title and role, I gave him my title and powers, and he killed a pig to symbolize his new status as chief of the village. Now I have no official title, but I am consulted sometimes because of my experience and because I am respected."

Former chief John estimated that there are "five to ten other women serving now as chiefs in Pele, Nguna or Efate islands, with all the powers of male chiefs, because like me, they have inherited the rank from their deceased husbands. They will typically serve as full chiefs for two to seven years before passing on their titles."

Several sources suggested that the team interview Hilda Lini, the distinguished sister of Reverend Walter Lini, one of the founders of Vanuatu and the country's first Prime Minister. She served for eleven years in Parliament, was a Minister twice, and founded an institute for the study of indigenous cultures on her home island of Pentecost. She proved to be a fountain of knowledge on female chiefs.

She stated, "There is a 'women's chiefly system' that once covered almost all of Vanuatu, even places like Tanna and Malekula, where men dominate now." She said that, "I have been involved in about 15 different pig-killing ceremonies in my lifetime, and have ten chiefly titles and ranks, in addition to my highest rank and title of Saivantamata. As a result I am probably the highest ranking female chief in the country, especially in terms of rituals. In 2009 we had a very large ceremony to declare our 'custom economic independence,' and we killed 360 sacred pigs tied to 360 separate sacred rocks. I killed ten pigs myself in

that ritual, and was the only female among dozens of male chiefs."



Lini noted that, "I have earned and paid for the right to speak in chiefs' nakamals, the chiefly house usually reserved for men, and I am involved with decision-making in custom and other matters at all levels, including the highest. I wear two circular pig's tusks, and other insignia, as a symbol of my status as a female chief."

Chief Lini added, "Most female chiefs do not undertake administrative functions, although there are exceptions like the women chiefs in Pele and Efate who take on all the powers of male chiefs." She noted that in the Shepherd Group of Islands there is an "Association of Women Chiefs" that uses that name, and female chiefs are strong in Ambae and Tangoa. She had found that, "In south Pentecost there are seven non-Christianized villages, and there the female chiefs earn and take on their husband's chiefly rank, as the men are promoted up their chiefly ladder."

Additional proofs that "female chiefs" exist came from discussions with the Director of the government's Women's Affairs Department, Dorosday Kenneth Watson, who stated that, "There are no female chiefs in my village on Malekula, but there are women chiefs in PENAMA province, especially Pentecost and Ambae, and in the Big Bay region and in Lele village on Santo." Distinguished civil servant Benjamin Shing stated in an email that, "There are lots of female chiefs in Vanuatu, especially in PENAMA province... In other provinces, they are called Tabu (holy) women."

And surprisingly, an interview with the acting CEO of the National Council of Chiefs (the Malvatamari), Alicia Vuti, yielded this statement: "There are currently no female chiefs on the old and incomplete list of chiefs that the NCC has. But we are compiling a new list, and if the area councils recommend that women be recognized as chiefs, and the women are given proper custom chiefly names and titles, they may well be certified as such at the national level by the NCC. And it is possible that in the future there will be female chiefs with all the rights, powers and jurisdiction of male chiefs." He noted that, "In my home area of northwest Ambae, there are now female chiefs. They have two ranks, not four like the men, and have somewhat limited powers." The last word should go to Dalsie Baniata, who started the search. She firmly stated: "The word 'chief' is originally a Western word. But it is a major mistake to ignore that word just because of its source. 'Chief' is used today in Vanuatu as a term of power, in custom matters, and it is even used in our laws, regulations and Constitution. So it is important that we women assert our position in society, by saying that we can become chiefs — and that some women already are female chiefs of Vanuatu."

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