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The Royal Geographical Society  
London, England  
August 31, 2017

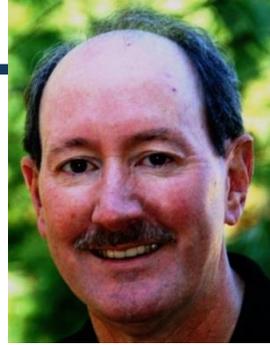
# The Elusive Female Chiefs of Vanuatu

Lew Toulmin, Ph.D., F.R.G.S.  
The Explorers Club



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# Llewellyn “Lew” Toulmin, Ph.D.



**Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society & Fellow of The Explorers Club**



**Worked in Vanuatu Prime Minister's Office for three years**



**Led anthropological and archaeological expeditions, and searches for missing aircraft, persons, plantations and towns**



**Ph.D. in public administration & economics**



**Traveled to 144 of the 196 countries on Earth**

# Topics:



**Vanuatu - What's That?**



**Notari - Who's That?**



**Female Chiefs - Where Are They?**



**Huh?**

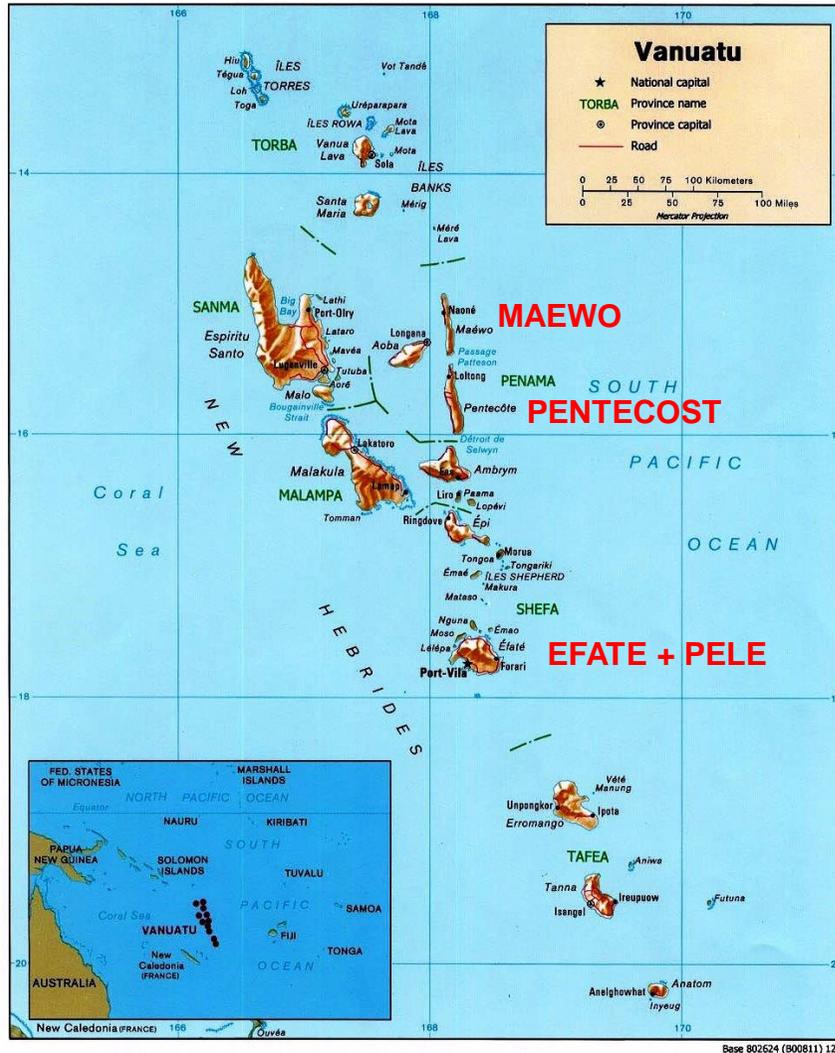


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# Vanuatu - What's That?

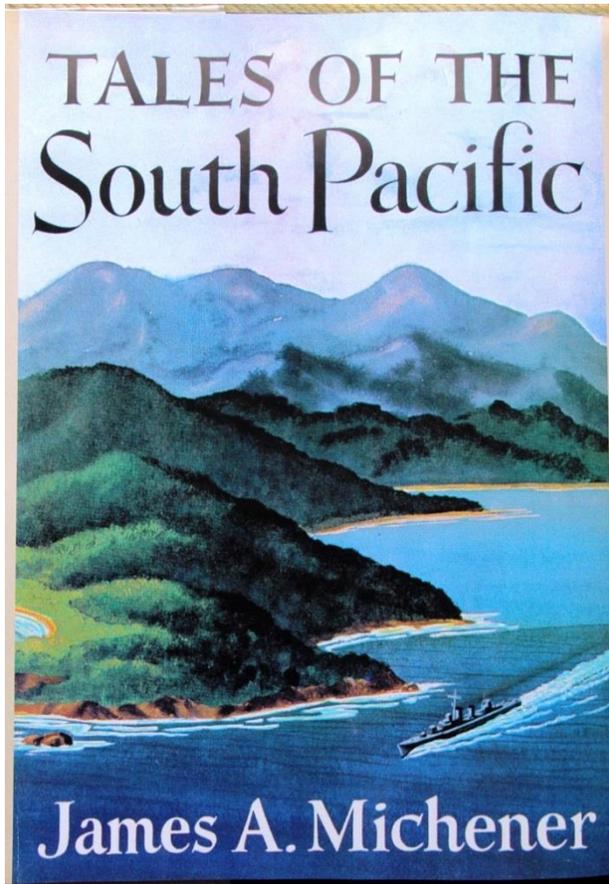
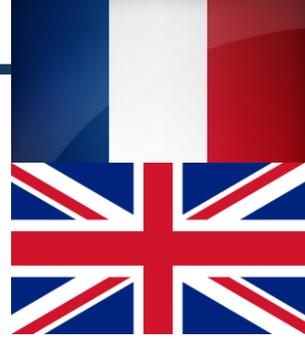


# Vanuatu is a country in the SW Pacific, with 83 volcanic islands and 250,000 friendly people

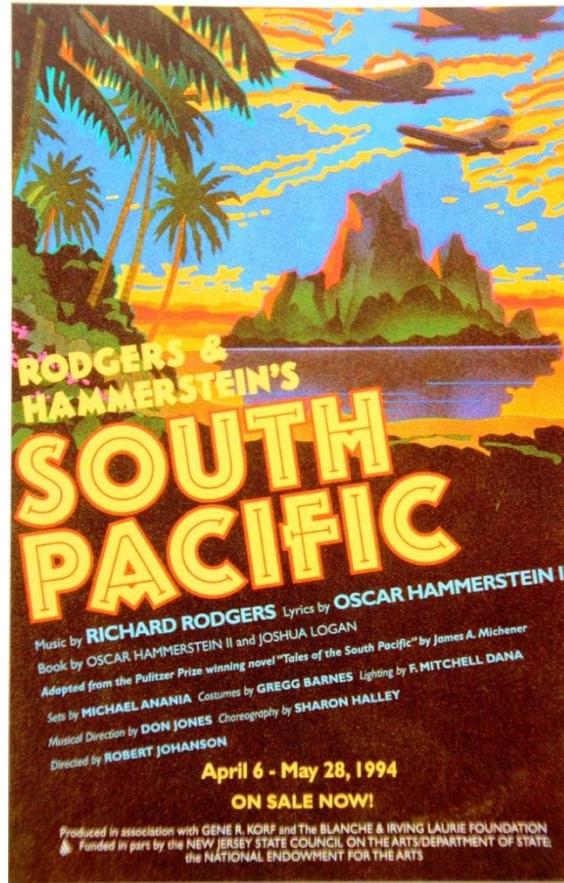


The Female Chiefs of Vanuatu

Previously the New Hebrides, Vanuatu was the setting for *South Pacific*, and got independence in 1980 from Britain and France



BOOK



PLAY



MOVIE

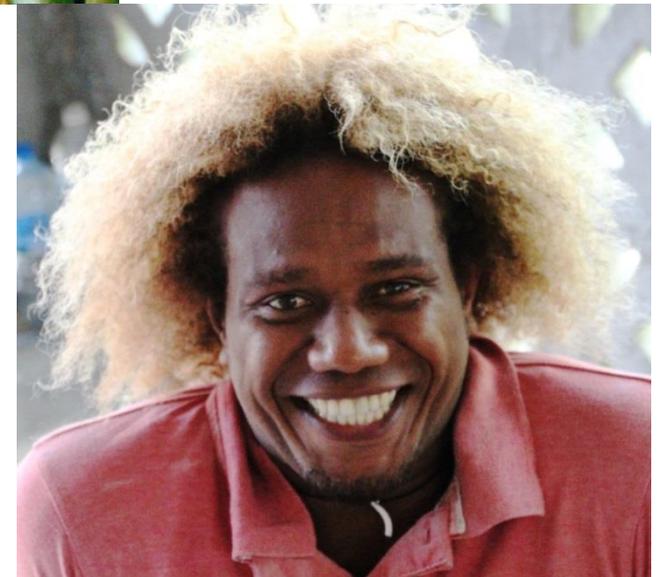
# Vanuatu is famous for volcanos, beaches, and especially land-diving...



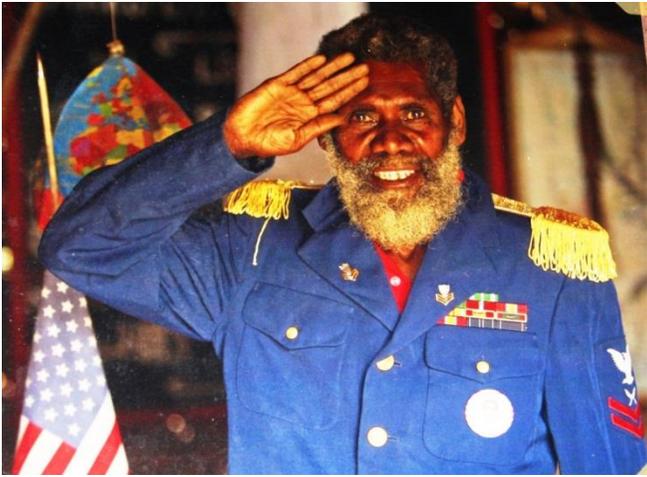
...which inspired bungee jumping!



# The best wreck dive in the world, beautiful people, and exciting culture



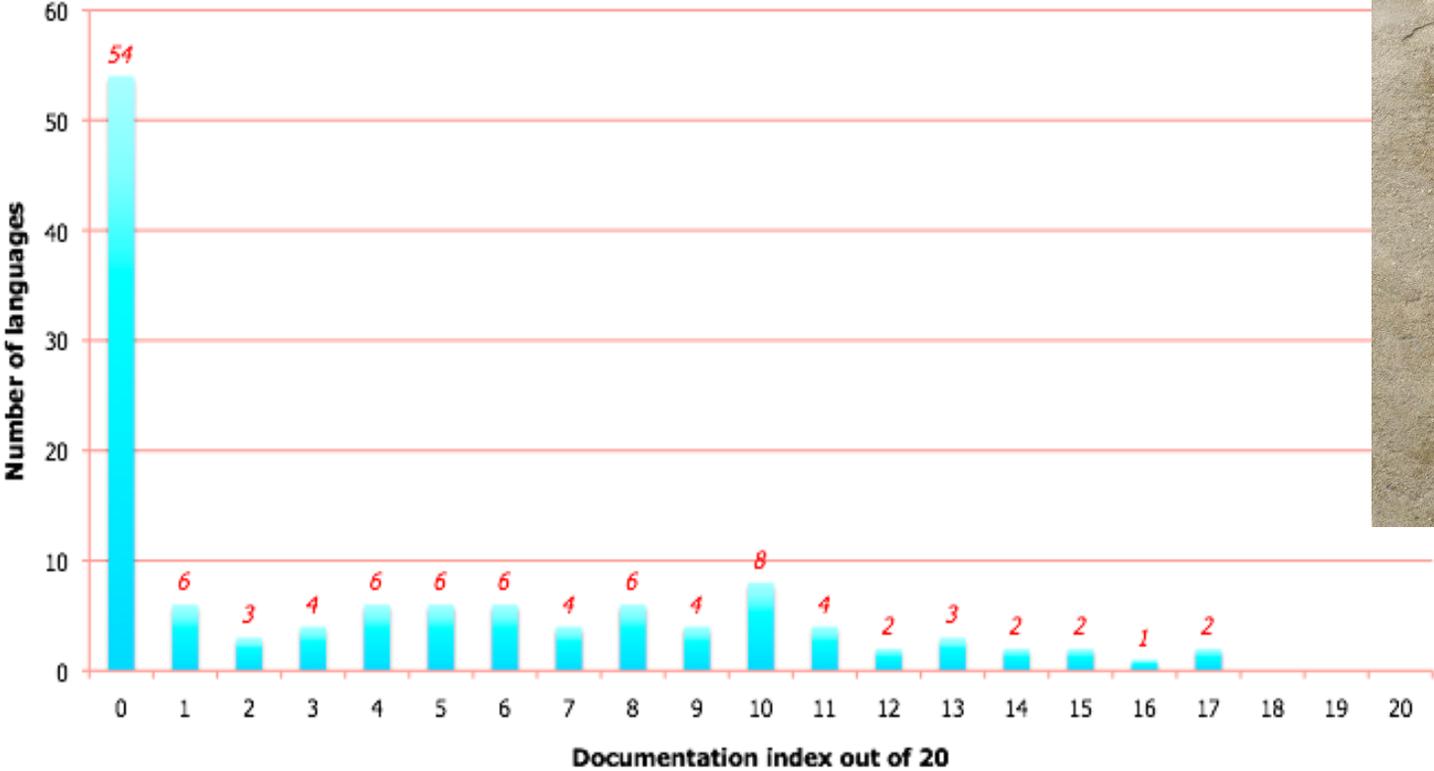
# A tribe that worships Prince Philip as a god -- another that salutes the US and USMC flags



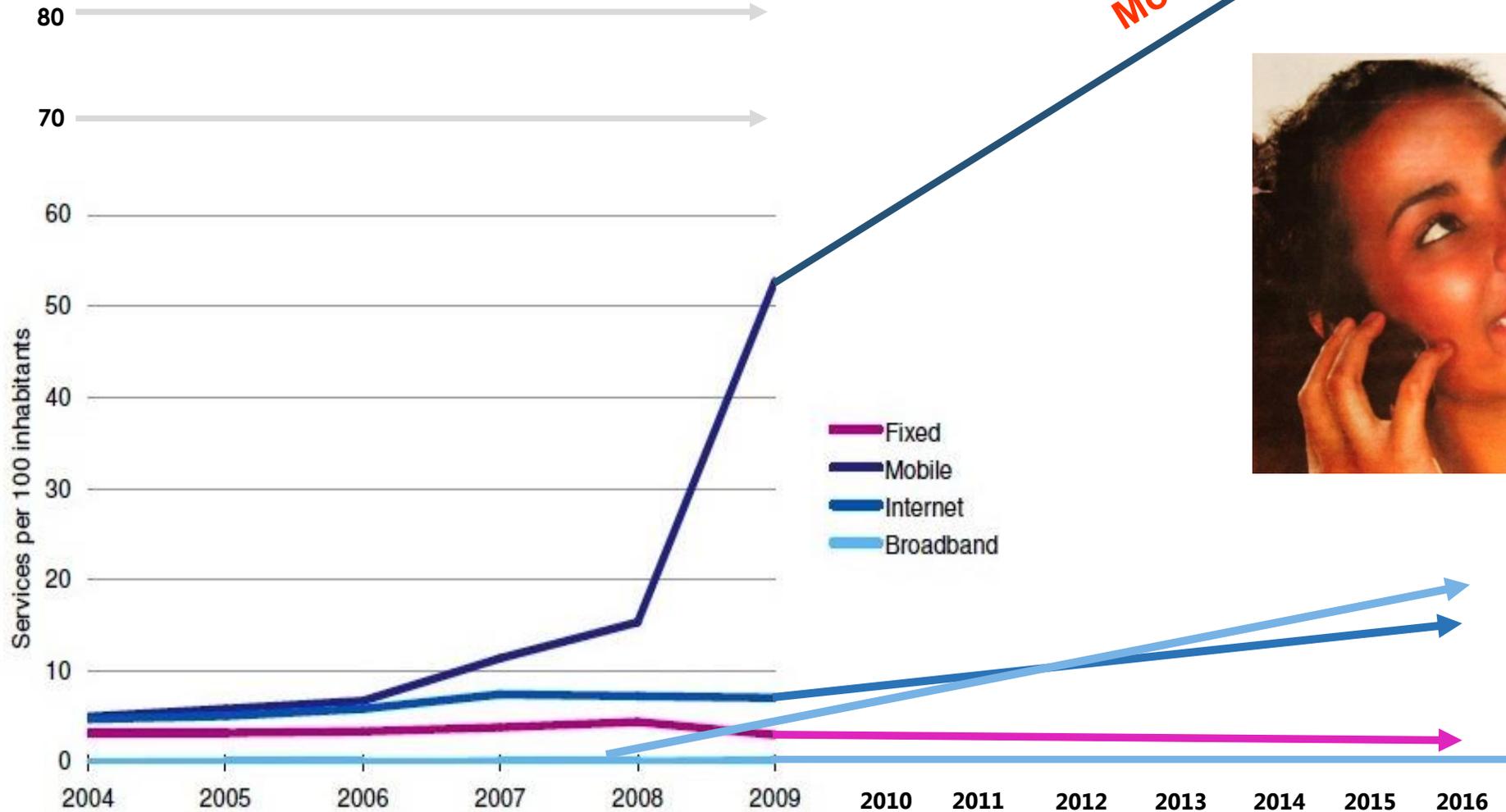
The Female Chiefs of Vanuatu

With 123 languages, this is the most linguistically dense country on Earth -- but only 3% are fairly well documented

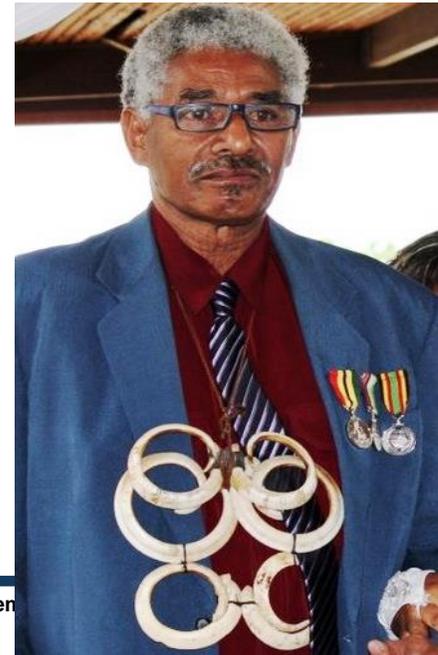
Documentation index, Vanuatu languages



# Mobile phone household penetration has increased dramatically to 94%+



Vanuatu is dominated by male chiefs, who rise in rank by killing sacred pigs with circular tusks



Domestic violence rates very high --  
no female members of Parliament --  
women's social status is quite low



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## The Cost of Violence in the Home

July 18, 2016



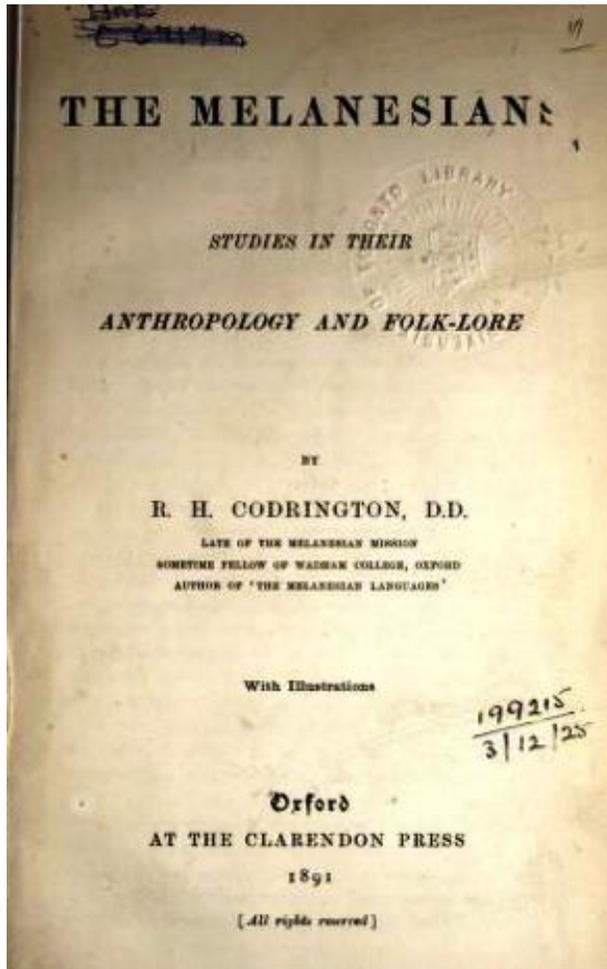
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## Notari - Who's That?



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For 126 years anthropologists have stated or assumed that there are no female chiefs in Vanuatu

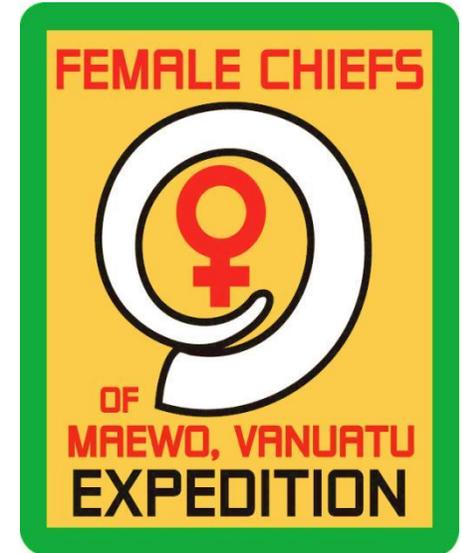
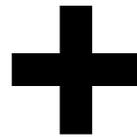


**Codrington  
in 1891:**

**“Women are  
completely  
excluded from  
the *Suge* of the  
men...”**



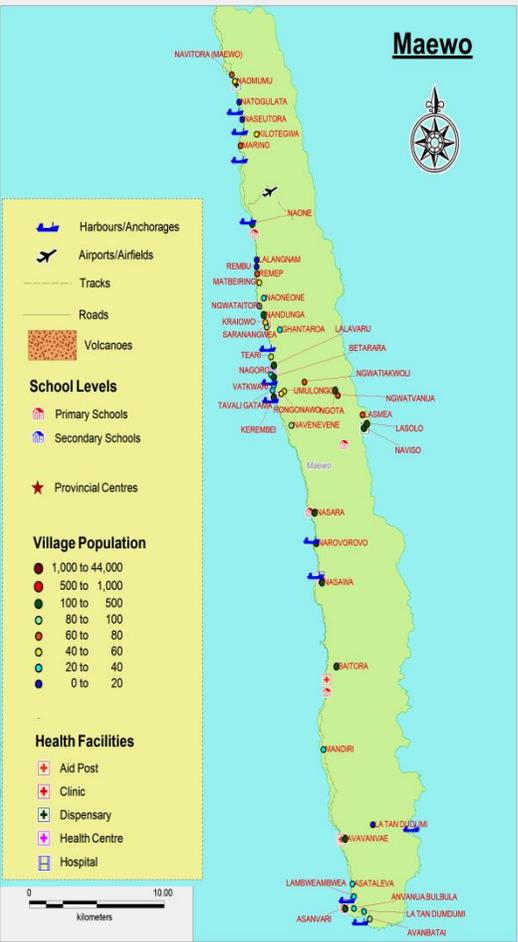
# The Expedition started with a surprising lunch



Dalsie Baniala, now the Telecom Regulator of Vanuatu, half-sister of Elvina (right)

Elvina Roling Baniala Toa, A Female Chief (?) of Maewo island

# Our team arrived on Maewo 8/2016 to observe the Women's Festival and interview female chiefs



# We documented the Maewo Women's Cultural Festival



Traditional water fights



Famous  
"water music"



Bird dances

Learning dances



Sand  
painting

# The Festival emphasized traditions



Women in traditional pandanus leaf garments



Males opened and closed the Festival



Cooking  
w/ hot rocks

Food prep.  
w/ bamboo  
knife



## We learned new things about women's initiation & island traditions...



The pig-killing initiation ceremony “making Lengwasa” varies across the island



There are 3 grades of female leader, with 3 grades now lost



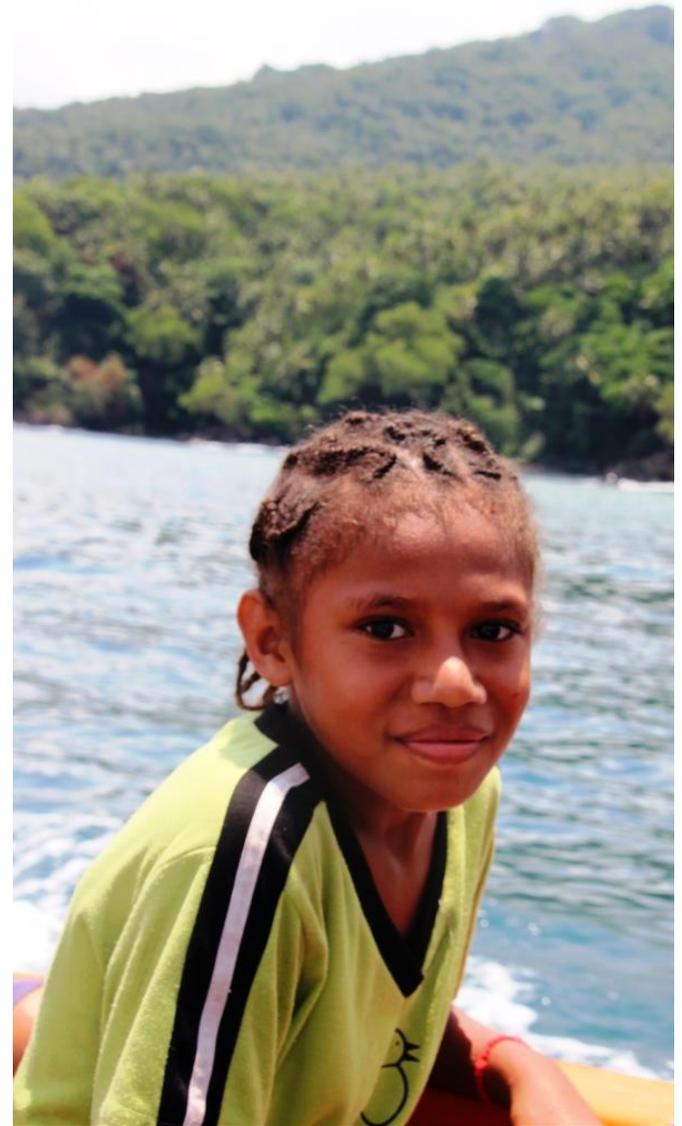
10-20% re-do Lengwasa later in life



Avoiding an evil spirit is not always the main reason for making Lengwasa



About 60% of island traditional culture has been lost





# Capt. Sophie Hollingsworth documented via watercolors



S. Hollingsworth



S. Hollingsworth

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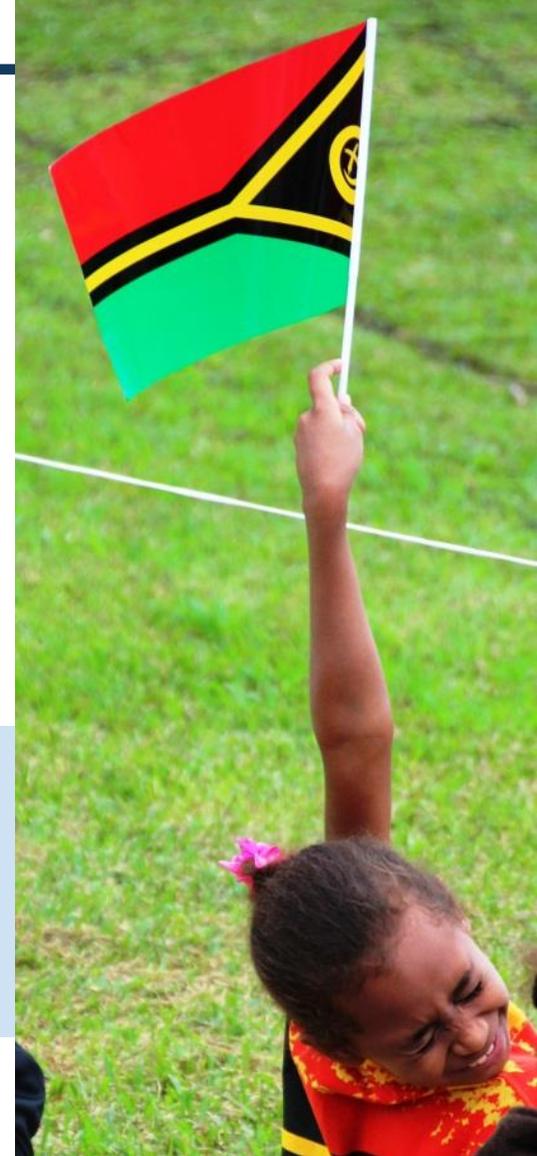
**BUT -- there was a problem...**



**...the Maewo women refused to be called "chiefs" - they preferred "Notari"**

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## Female Chiefs - Where are They?



Doreen Leona and her mother, from Pentecost island, ARE female chiefs



**Phoebe John was a chief on Pele island for four years, the only chief in her village, and...**



**...she had all the powers and rights of a male chief!**

## Hilda Lini: most senior female chief



Eleven chiefly titles



M.P. for 11 years, was Minister twice



Founded institute for the study of local barter economics and ethnology; sister of founder of Vanuatu



Won two international peace prizes



Recognized as a chief by male chiefs



Can speak in the chiefs' "nakamals"



## Chief Lini said:



**Killed ~25 sacred pigs in 15 ceremonies**



**Female chiefs have existed since pre-history**



**There is an “Association of Female Chiefs” in the Shepherd’s Group of NW Vanuatu**



**Six non-Christian villages in S Pentecost have female chiefs**



**N Pentecost has the most female chiefs**

## Other key leaders agreed that female chiefs exist



P.M.'s office: "There are female chiefs, esp. in Pentecost island and PENAMA province"



Women's Affairs Dept.: "There are women chiefs on Ambae, Pentecost and Espiritu Santo"



National Council of Chiefs: "No female chiefs on current list, but when updated there may be. Female chiefs are on Ambae, with limited powers."



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CONSEIL NATIONAL DES CHEFS

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PORT VILA

TEL: (678) 22474 / (678) 25278 FAX: (678) 25292  
EMAIL: malvatumaui@vanuatu.com.vu

REPUBLIC OF VANUATU REPUBLIQUE DE VANUATU

# We estimated the total number of female chiefs...

Table 1: Location and Current Estimated Number of Female Chiefs of Vanuatu

Province/Island	Est. Number of Female Chiefs	Source of Estimate
PENAMA/Pentecost – North	250	Lini interview; D. Leona interview
PENAMA/Pentecost – South	14	Lini interview
PENAMA/Maewo	0	Notari interviews on Maewo
PENAMA/Ambae	20	Lini interview; Vuti interview
MALAMPA	0	Shing email; Lini interview
SANMA	10	Lini interview; Watson interview
SHEFA	24	John interview; Lini interview
TAFEA	0	Shing email
TORBA	0	Shing email
<b>ESTIMATED TOTAL</b>	<b>318</b>	



...at perhaps 7% of all chiefs

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## Conclusions:



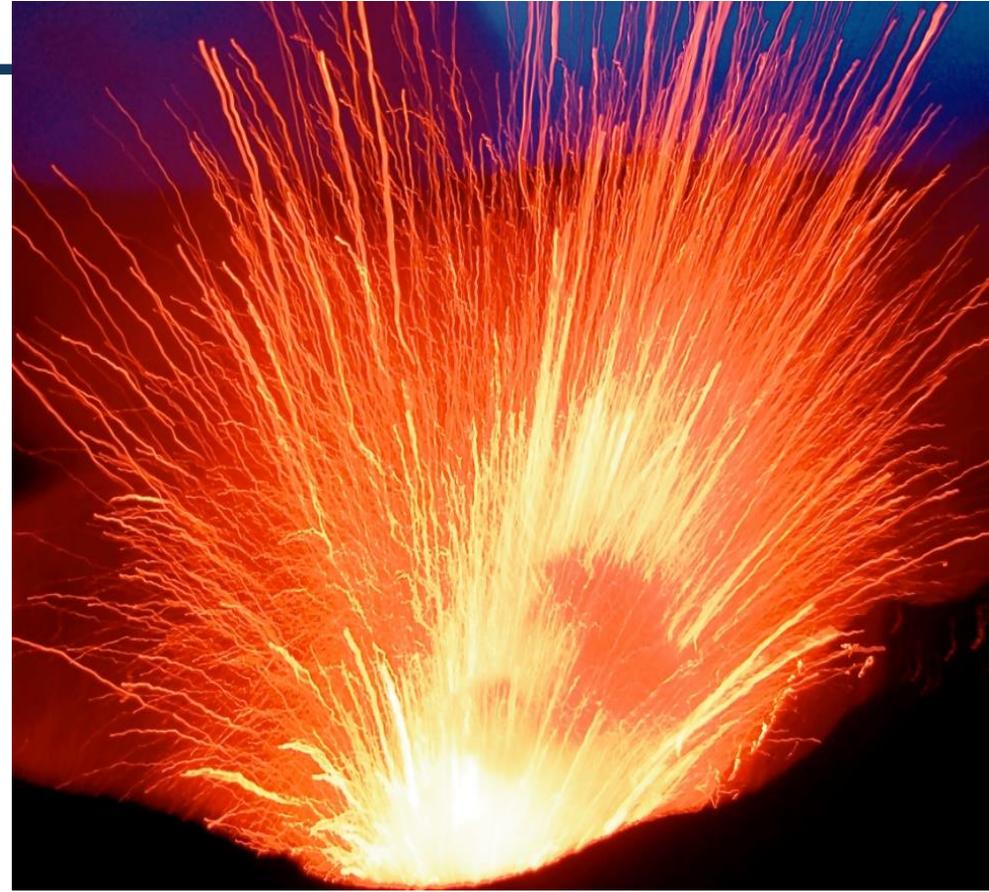
There are female chiefs now in Vanuatu; and they may have existed since pre-historic times



This is a huge paradigm shift from previous thought



Even though “chief” is a Western term, it is used in the Constitution, law, regulations, programs and society



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**Huh?**



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# “Huh?” -- How were these female chiefs missed?

**Female chiefs recently emerged?**

**Colonial and post-colonial info blinders prevented male researchers from noticing?**

**Lack of anthropological funding and research?**

**Blinders even on the female anthropologists and writers?**



**Why is this discovery getting pushback?**

**For more information:**

**[www.themosttraveled.com](http://www.themosttraveled.com)**

**[LewToulmin@aol.com](mailto:LewToulmin@aol.com)**

**@styxcabin**

**Silver Spring, Maryland USA**

- **Academic pieces**
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- **Searches for missing a/c etc.**

## **Adventures with One of the Most Traveled Men on Earth**



## **Vanuatu Mon Amour**

Tank Yu Tumas!



QUESTIONS?

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Page 16: Huang/Menders

Page 17: Bird dances & trad. water dance: Michael Wyrick; water music &  
learning dances: Huang/Menders

Page 18: Males, cooking, and food prep.: Huang/Menders; Women in  
procession: Capt. Sophie Hollingsworth

Various pages: all drawings/watercolors by Capt. Sophie Hollingsworth

