



## THE FEMALE CHIEFS OF VANUATU

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### ABSTRACT

*For 126 years writers and anthropologists have stated or assumed that there were no “female chiefs” in the Republic of Vanuatu (ex-New Hebrides, in the south-west Pacific). The word “chief” is of Western origin, but is important in Vanuatu (and other Pacific nations) today, because it is a term used in the Vanuatu Constitution, laws, regulations, government programs, public policy, culture and society. Interviews and observations in 2016 revealed that in fact a limited number of female chiefs do exist, who identify themselves and are recognized as such; that some have the right to speak in village nakamals (traditional clubhouses for decision-making usually reserved for male chiefs); that many become graded chiefs via a sacred pig-killing ceremony (like men do); and that a few for a time even take on all the powers and responsibilities of male chiefs. An estimate of the number of female chiefs vs. male chiefs is undertaken. The situation on Maewo island, where many women use the title of “female cultural leader” (Notari), not “female chief,” is also explored, to update and expand on the previous Maewo research on “making Lengwasa”—the pig-killing ceremony that results in the women of that island receiving the respected title of Notari.*

**Key words:** Vanuatu, female roles, female chiefs, chiefs, Maewo island, Lengwasa

### 1. Female Roles and Chiefs in Vanuatu and the South Pacific

There have been strong and well-known female chiefs or “female headmen” documented in Polynesia, especially in Samoa, Tonga and Hawaii (Gunson, 1987) and the Society Islands (Elliston, 2000). But female chiefs are almost unknown in the anthropological literature on Melanesia. The only exceptions are one female chief and several female deputy chiefs installed on Ranongga island in the Solomons in 2005 (McDougall, 2014), and a very few female “peace chiefs” in the North and Central Mekeo areas of Papua New Guinea (Mosco, 2012).

Turning to the Republic of Vanuatu in the southwest Pacific, there is an extensive and nuanced literature, including feminist literature, on male chiefs, “jifs,” “Big Men” and female leadership roles. But this literature does not use the term “female chiefs” and does not admit or even discuss the possibility that females can serve as chiefs or headmen (Blackwood, 1981; Bothmann, 2010; Codrington, 1891; Jolly, 1989, 2012, 2014; Lindstrom, 1997; Rodman, 1973; Sahlins, 1963; Zorn, 2010). Thus this literature runs counter to the Solomons and Papua New Guinea findings and terminology of McDougall (2014) and Mosco (2012).

Surprisingly, the earliest analyst, Robert Henry Codrington (1891), in his classic *The Melanesians, Studies in Their Anthropology and Folk-Lore*, almost acknowledged the existence of female chiefs in Vanuatu. Although a missionary, Codrington has been deemed “a founding father of Melanesian anthropology” (Jolly, 1989). In his classic work he stated that:

Though women are completely excluded from the *Suqe* [male chiefly system] of the men, they have something of the sort among themselves, which is called improperly by the same name. They admit to grades of honor on payment of money and making of a feast, and so become *tavine motar*, women of distinction.

So Codrington is contending that the Vanuatu women had a graded system of honor and levels of distinction; and that this system is called exactly the same thing as the men’s chiefly system -- but is actually a completely different system. Did he miss what was right in front of him? Perhaps a “provocative...de-centered” re-reading of this classic would be instructive (Douglas, 1999).

Male chiefs in Vanuatu often rise in rank through pig-killing ceremonies, in which sacred boars with curved or spiral tusks are killed, usually with a blow to the head by a club or ax. These ceremonies are well documented (Allen, 1984; Lindstrom, 1997), continue through the present day (Cortbus, 2016; Ligo, 2016a; Ligo, 2016b), and have even been portrayed in Western fiction (albeit somewhat inaccurately) in the famous *Tales of the South Pacific* (Michener, 1947) and the subsequent film *South Pacific* (Toulmin, 2013).

These chiefly pig-killing ceremonies are so central to all of Vanuatu society and governance that there is even a sacred spiral boar’s tusk on the national flag, on the national coat of arms, and on the Order of Vanuatu.



The national flag of Vanuatu, displaying a sacred spiral pig’s tusk on the left.

On Pentecost island in Vanuatu, females reportedly had name prefixes that indicated differences in rank based on pig-killing, but this was “not connected with any organization resembling the Loli or Sukwe” [male chiefly systems] (Rivers, 1914). On Malekula island, A. B. Deacon (1934) wrote about a women’s pig-killing secret society, the “Lapas,” with “five distinct grades”... “which must be entered successively.” He said that some “men stand in awe” of these high ranking females, but these women were not described as chiefs.

On Ambae (Aoba) island, Reverend A. S. Webb (1937) stated that the male secret society of chiefs, the “hungwe,” was “definitely a man’s society,” had “many degrees,” and “the women were only permitted to share in the dancing and work of preparation and remains of the [male chiefs’] feast.” He also found that the women “had a secret society of their own,” but “so far as I could learn did not feel very enthusiastic about it,” and Webb did not characterize it as a secret society of female chiefs. Similarly, Robert B. Lane (1965) found on Pentecost island that there was a “less elaborate women’s graded society...with... three basic grades with subdivisions,” but he clearly did not consider these women to be chiefs.

Writing about the Sia Raga community of northern Pentecost island, John Patrick Taylor (2008a) came very close to identifying some female chiefs. He stated that, “women engage in the ritual slaughter of pigs,” and take on the “pig names” of their ancestors; that “males and females” have a “rank-taking system and the associated system of cultural knowledge,” that “some high ranking older women were able to enter the [male-only clubhouse], particularly those who had entered the male grade-taking system,” and that “some older women of high rank” could “take part in the male system of grades” and “take their corresponding place in the men’s clubhouse.” (Emphasis added.) All of these elements put together are tantamount to saying that those few older women were female chiefs, but Taylor never made that statement.

Similarly, Margaret Rodman (1981), writing about east Aoba (Ambae) island, found that “Aobans use the term *dure* to designate any ritual event in which a female kills pigs...By killing a tusked boar, a female becomes a full participant in one of the lower ranks of the predominantly male Aoban graded society (*hungwe*)...” (emphasis added). Rodman does not use the term “chief” for males or females. Analyzing west Aoba, Michael Allen (1981a) determined that the “Nduindui women...occasionally even kill pigs and take subsidiary grades in the *hungwe*.” (Emphasis added.)

Peter Blackwood (1981), comparing four Vanuatu societal areas, states that “rank-taking is predominantly a male domain, though in some areas women, too, are able to take grades.” He says that “unfortunately, there is [sic] little data available on women’s participation in the graded society.” He, too, does not use the word “chief” for males or females.

Margaret Jolly (2012) states that women in northern Vanuatu “have the capacity to take titles” if they accumulate enough food and valuables. She also says that some high ranking women “in the past” could enter the “gamali” – the men’s clubhouse usually reserved for men -- and eat from the appropriate graded oven location, thus showing their rank. In 2014 she stated that in northern Vanuatu “elevation in rank for both men and women was marked in rituals with body painting and the wearing of leaves...” But in neither piece does she use the words “female chiefs” to describe these women, or “chiefs” for men. Writing specifically about some villages on south Pentecost island, Jolly states (1989) that women “are excluded from the men’s house and from particular phases of political and ritual activity” but are “not therefore absent from public life.” They “may attain rank, although this is never so celebrated or consequential as it is for men.” The term “female chiefs” is not used or the concept explored.

On modern Ambae island, “women have their own island council called *Vavine bulu*, meaning women together,” and representatives attend the biannual National Council of Women. But “chiefs are always men,” and only men attend the elected Island Council of Chiefs (Bowman et al., 2009).

Male chiefs on Maewo have been described and classified by Michael Allen (1984) as “Regular Big Men,” (clearly all male) relying on “ceremonial exchange networks” and “public graded societies/secret societies,” located within “matrilineal” descent systems. Any female who touches a Maewo rural male chief’s sacred wooden image “will become sick and perhaps die” (Hume, 1986). Women and traditional female roles in Vanuatu are classified by one author (Miles, 1998) under the lowly terms of “reproductive chattel and food producers.” Another author reports on the subordination of women and even the “language of domination that facilitates and normalizes violence against women” (Mitchell, 2011). Women’s status is reduced by having to move to the husband’s village or even to a different island at marriage (Bolton, 1999b), and it was only in the early 1990s that it was officially recognized that “women have *kastom* too” (Bolton, 2003). (“*Kastom*” is the word in Bislama for “custom” or “traditional cultural values and practice.”)

Rates of violence against women in Vanuatu are very high (Bebe, 2016), with urban areas more afflicted than rural (Cox, 2007). International comparative statistics are not available (WHO 2005), and Vanuatu and most small island developing states (SIDS) are unfortunately not included in the Global Gender Gap report (World Economic Forum, 2016), but domestic violence is described as “prevalent” in Vanuatu and across the Pacific (Forster, 2011). A survey by the Vanuatu Women’s Center in 2009 found that “30 percent of young girls are abused before they are 15 years old” (Garae, 2017).

Violent acts against women and girls in Vanuatu are often resolved not by incarcerating the offender (Rodman, 1985), but by having male chiefs in each village negotiate recompense, using items of value such as mats, sacred pig tusks or pig skulls. Such settlements for crimes, land disputes, domestic violence and other causes of action constitute up to 90 percent of the civil and criminal justice system in the country (Brown, 2005; Forsyth, 2009; Lansdell, 2015; Rio, 2010).

For years the “chiefs and traditional [male] leaders” successfully opposed legislation that would shift jurisdiction over domestic violence cases from chiefs to the formal court system (Cox, 2007). However, the Family Protection Act (28/2008) was eventually passed and gazetted in 2009, and provides that chiefs and assistant chiefs (and others) may serve as “authorized persons” who have the power to issue “temporary protection orders” for women threatened with domestic violence or stalking (Articles 7 and 17). The Act makes domestic violence a criminal offense subject to court jurisdiction, but according to the Director of the Vanuatu Women’s Center, “not much has been done to prosecute offenders” (Garae, 2017).

Black magic is widely believed in and used by both sexes (Taylor, 2015), but fear of such magic often prevents women from confronting male authority (Dudding, 2010). Despite legal innovation around the time of independence (Rodman, 1985), it is clear that women are quite subservient in law and social relations.

A female ceremony that approached a traditional male graded chiefly ceremony was described in detail by Lynne Hume (1982 and 1985) as a “pig-killing ceremony” in the village of Saranangwea, on the central west coast of Maewo island (in northern Vanuatu, part of PENAMA province). In that village, male chiefs had a “*sungwe*” system of ten grades, a “*nakamal*” (male-only chiefs’ clubhouse), and sacrificed sacred pigs with circular tusks to increase their grade and prestige. Hume found that the women also sacrificed tusked sacred pigs (and sows) in a similar ceremony called the “*Lengwasa*” or “making *Lengwasa*,” but that there was no women’s *nakamal*, no female grades or signs of rank, and the ceremony was undertaken to protect very young females from the evil spirit *Notarisurahia*.

Hume found that this ceremony “affirms the separate status of women as a group,” that it “exhibits all the classic stages of a rite of initiation and is the distinctive ritualization of female status on Maewo,” and that the women involved did not claim or intend to be chiefs.



A young Notari of Maewo island. She has killed a pig in a ritual called “making Lengwasa,” but does not claim to be a “female chief,” rather she and other women on Maewo use the term Notari, meaning “female cultural leader.” (credit: Lew Toulmin)

Expanding the discussion, Margaret Strathern’s seminal work (1988) pointed out that the seemingly simple concepts of male and female in fact extend beyond the people involved, and tie into and denote cultural objects, events, patterns and sequences. Writing about southern Pentecost, Margaret Jolly (1994) argued that Kastom and the male chiefly system are vital to resisting modern influences, but are also important in fixing the role of females as subordinate and as objects of male exchanges. Bronwen Douglas (2003) described vigorous, effective, issue-oriented women’s church groups in Vanuatu which were breaking stereotypes of women’s passivity. But none of these important authors identify any women seizing the title and power of traditional chiefs or “big men.”

In current-day Vanuatu, some local elected offices are opening up to women (Van Trease, 2015). And many young women are unhappy with their roles and the traditional “aelan dres” (island dress), a “shapeless, floral print frock that Presbyterian missionaries introduced,” and rebel by taking modern jobs, being active outside the home, and wearing trousers and shorts instead of traditional island dresses (Cummings, 2013; Jolly, 2014). But none of these reports describe modern women demanding to become Kastom chiefs. Some Ni-Vanuatu men reportedly are so unhappy with the emphasis on women’s rights that they feel discriminated against, and have formed protest groups (Taylor, 2008b). Yet none of those protests are against women seizing the title of Kastom chiefs, since that is not at all an issue.

Turning to the legal domain, the word “chief” is extremely important in Vanuatu. The Constitution of Vanuatu make no provision for (or against) female chiefs, but speaks of “chiefs” or “custom chiefs” in several places, including the establishment of the National Council of Chiefs (NCC) and the NCC’s input into land law (Articles 29-32 and 76), the role of chiefs in island courts (Article 52), the requirement for having custom chiefs on local government councils (Article 83), and the power of the NCC to demand investigations by the Vanuatu Ombudsman (Article 62(1)(b); (Hill, 2010)). The NCC Organization Act (Act 13/1985) does not mention the gender of chiefs. The term “chief” is used over 100 times in the Customary Land Tribunal Act (Act 7/2001), chiefs play a key role under this Act, and land disputes are very numerous and important in Vanuatu society (as they are in most island countries). The sex of the chief is not specified in this Act.

Village chiefs may have a role in registering Kastom marriages (Marriage Act; 5/1993, Article 15). As mentioned earlier, the Family Protection Act provides that chiefs and assistant chiefs may be “authorized persons” under the Act; the legislation does not specify the sex of the chiefs or authorized persons. The Act to adopt the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (Act 3/1995) does not mention “chief,” but it does “prohibit all discrimination against women” (Article 2).

Summarizing all the academic literature, legal and public policy activity above, it would appear from over 125 years of research, beginning with Codrington in 1891, and from 37 years of legislation since independence, that there are no -- and never have been any, and likely never will be -- any “female chiefs” in Vanuatu.

Assessing the simple yes/no accuracy of that universally held assertion was the primary focus of this research. Thus the null hypothesis was that there were no female chiefs, as stated or assumed by previous research.

A secondary focus of the effort was expanding on the path-breaking research of Hume (1982 and 1985) on Maewo island.

The paper includes sections on the genesis of the study, the methodology, results re “female chiefs,” an estimate of the number of female chiefs, findings re Hume’s research on “making Lengwasa,” and conclusions.

## **2. The Genesis of the Study of Female Chiefs**

This research effort began in November 2014 when I was working in the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO), part of the Vanuatu Prime Minister’s Office, and was having a casual conversation over lunch with colleague Dalsie Baniala (now head of the Vanuatu Telecommunications and Radiocommunications Regulator’s (TRR) office, and thus one of the most senior women in the Government of Vanuatu (GoV)). She mentioned that her adopted sister was a “female chief of Maewo.” I was stunned, and contended that that was impossible, since I said that there were no female chiefs in Vanuatu or even anywhere in Melanesia.



Dalsie Baniala, now the Telecommunications and Radiocommunications Regulator of Vanuatu, was the originator of the study of female chiefs. (credit: Michael Wyrick)

That conversation led to a plan to research the female chiefs, focusing on their up-coming festival to be held on Maewo in August 2015. That festival was unfortunately postponed by a year due to Cyclone Pam, which hit Maewo and Vanuatu in March 2015. (There had been a small, similar festival in August 2014 on Maewo which generated little local and no international attention.) The August 2016 event morphed into the Maewo Women’s Cultural and Arts Festival, but “female chiefs” were still to be a major focus.

## **3. Methodology**

The primary methods of data collection were interviews and observation. Interviews were undertaken with Notari (female cultural leaders) on Maewo, self-identifying female chiefs from Pentecost, Pele and Efate islands, ordinary residents of Vanuatu, an official of the National Council of Chiefs, and male and female officials of the GoV. Observations were made of the two-day Maewo Women’s Culture and Arts Festival, which focused on the traditions, skills, games and rituals of the Notari of central Maewo, held in Kerembe village on the west coast of the island in August 2016 (Joshua, 2016). Interviewers and observers consisted of a mixed expedition team of US expatriates (including a Bislama-speaking ex-Peace Corps Volunteer) and Ni-Vanuatu (native Vanuatu). All were experienced in interviewing techniques and documentation. Interviews over four days on Maewo and over ten days on other islands were recorded via note-taking and/or recording (with permission)(Toulmin, 2016b). Most interviews were conducted completely in English (marked E2E below, where the interviewer and the interviewee both spoke English), although a few were conducted with the assistance of native-speaking Bislama to English (B2E) translators. One female member of the team also spent a week interviewing and observing women in four villages near Kerembe on Maewo (Hollingsworth, 2016).

Extensive participant observation and living in the villages and towns of the female chiefs and other female leaders over several months or years (a common anthropological technique) was not undertaken. This was deemed unnecessary (and was not practical), since the primary object of the effort was not to explore all aspects of the female chiefs in this preliminary reconnaissance, but rather to simply establish if they in fact did exist, or not -- as asserted or assumed in the scientific literature. Also, the interviewees, some of whom were living urban lives, with full time Western-style jobs, would not have welcomed a group of anthropologists living with them for months at a time. It was quite clear that interviews were the only appropriate approach.

The expedition was funded largely by the participants and was endorsed by The Explorers Club ([www.explorers.org](http://www.explorers.org)). (This Club was founded in 1904, was headed by Sir Edmund Hillary until his death, has 3000 members worldwide, and is “dedicated to the advancement of field research and exploration.” Club members’ achievements include first to the Poles, first to fly across the Atlantic solo, first solo non-stop circumnavigation in a balloon, first to the summit of Mt. Everest, first to the deepest point in the ocean, and first to the surface of the Moon.)



Female Notari and children of Maewo island, Vanuatu, with members of the Female Chiefs of Vanuatu Expedition and the flag of The Explorers Club, which endorsed the research effort.

(credit: Daniel Huang and Theresa Menders)

#### 4. Results Re “Female Chiefs”

In the beginning, the research effort results seemed to support the contention that there were no female chiefs. On August 25, 2016 the expedition team arrived in remote Kerembei village on central west Maewo, ready to interview dozens 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 interviewees were keen on the term “female chief.” They stated firmly that they were “Notari,” a local vernacular word which they translated into English as “female cultural leaders.” They felt the word “chief” must be reserved for men only.

By contrast, Dalsie Baniala contended (E2E), also firmly, that the Notari *were* “female chiefs.” (She herself was not a Notari and did not claim to be a female chief.) She said, “The Notari of Maewo go through a pig killing ceremony like the male chiefs do. They have three active grades now, and through our interviews our team has 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 did not seem right to call the women by a title that they themselves disputed in public.

Later in the festival several male chiefs in Kerembei were found who stated that there were some female chiefs on Maewo, but the male chiefs could not name the villages involved. Hence this statement was not given much weight.

Back in the capital of Port Vila, it appeared that an actual female chief had at last been located – surprisingly, a US citizen. This was a young Peace Corps Volunteer who had done such impressive work on northeast Maewo that she had been given a surprise pig-killing ceremony and a title, with only a few minutes notice to her, and no isolation ritual. (She also stated that her predecessor PCV in the same village had undertaken a pig-killing ceremony, but had to undergo ten days of isolation and Notari instruction.) In an initial interview the term “female chief” was freely used and agreed to. But within several days she emailed to state firmly that only the word “Notari” should be used for her (and her predecessor), and that she was not a female chief. Furthermore, she wanted to remain anonymous and not have any articles written about her.

So it initially appeared that no “female chiefs” were in evidence.

But then the staff of the OGCIO recommended that the expedition contact Doreen Leona of north Pentecost and Port Vila, a finance supervisor at the Vanuatu National Provident Fund (the equivalent to the US Social Security system). She was quite clear. She stated firmly (E2E):

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 Leona, a female chief from northern Pentecost island, Vanuatu, wearing her chiefly insignia, including her sacred circular pig's tusk (on her right arm) and red mat clothing. (credit: Lew Toulmin)

Doreen's 80-year-old mother Lolowei Musero Leona agreed (B2E). She stated, "My rank and Doreen's chiefly rank is 'Motari' – this is different from the Maewo word '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.



80-year-old Lolowei Musero Leona applies ritual chiefly colors to her daughter Doreen Leona. Both are chiefs of the second, Motari, rank in the three-rank northern Pentecost female chiefly system. (credit: Lew Toulmin)

More investigation led to Phoebe John, a woman from Pele island, just off the north coast of Efate. She said (B2E):

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 ‘Meserie,’ which is the highest rank in a ten-rank system of chiefs.

Phoebe John continued about her powers and tenure:

I held the rank of Meserie 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.



Phoebe John was a female chief with all the powers of a male chief, for four years on Pele island. (credit: Lew Toulmin)

Former chief Phoebe 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 contacting 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, twice held a Ministerial portfolio, and founded an institute for the study of indigenous cultures on her home island of Pentecost. She proved to be a font of knowledge on female chiefs. She stated (E2E):

There is a "women's chiefly system" that once covered almost all of Vanuatu, even places like Tanna and Malekula, where men dominate now. 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 Salvantamata. 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 for a time." She noted that in the Shepherd Group of islands (part of Vanuatu) 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."

Chief Lini also gave an interesting explanation regarding how important elements of culture can be entirely missed by scientists, economists, anthropologists and other observers. She stated that:

Western economists miss at least 80 percent of the economic activity that occurs in Vanuatu. They do not understand that the exchange of mats, tusks and other cultural goods for bride price, dowries, land settlements and dispute resolutions all constitute economic activity. In fact, if all of the Western economies and countries disappeared tomorrow, the indigenous exchange economic activity in Vanuatu could continue happily on, uninterrupted.

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 (E2E) 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 [Espiritu] Santo." She also noted the increasing importance of chiefs in delivering government programs in rural areas. She said, "Chiefs are now being asked to do more and more things, in lands, leadership, criminal justice, preventing domestic violence, and so on, and they need more training, and more of them need to be women."

Distinguished civil servant Benjamin Shing, then an official in the Prime Minister's Office, stated (in English) 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" (Toulmin 2016a).

Somewhat surprisingly, an interview with Alcita Vuti, the acting CEO of the National Council of Chiefs (the Malvatumauri), yielded this (E2E) 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 on "female chiefs" came from Dalsie Baniala, who started the research effort. She firmly concluded (E2E): "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 government programs, 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."

## **5. Estimated Number of Female Chiefs**

Table 1 below provides a preliminary, order of magnitude estimate of the current number of self-identifying female chiefs in Vanuatu, derived from the cited interviews. (Note that the main driver in this table is the result from north Pentecost; this figure should be verified via surveys and/or participant observation in future research on that island.)

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>	

This estimate of 318 can be compared to the rough estimate of 2200 male *jifs* in the entire country, provided by Chief Bongmatur Waldo in 1992, using the “rule of thumb of one *jif* per village” (Lindstrom 1997). Note however that in our team’s experience the average number of chiefs per village is likely higher than 1.0, perhaps 1.5 to 2.0 (and of course there has been a population increase since 1992). If this range and estimate is correct, then the number of male chiefs is about 3300 to 4400, plus the female chiefs, thus arriving at a very rough total of about 3600 to 4700, of which the female chiefs would therefore constitute perhaps 7 to 8 percent of the total number of chiefs. Of course the definition of “chief” and “*jif*” is highly controversial, and there is much dispute over the definition of the term and who is and is not a chief (Bolton 1999a).

## 6. Findings Re Hume’s “Making Lengwasa”

Hume’s informative and seminal dissertation (1982) and article (1985) described in detail the “Making Lengwasa” ritual in the village of Saranangwea on west central Maewo in 1981. (Recall that this ritual involved the killing of sacred pigs, in a manner somewhat similar to the pig-killing done by male chiefs during their grade promotion ceremonies, but Hume found that in that village the intent and results were different.) Hume made it clear that her description was limited to that village, and was not necessarily generalizable. No other published anthropological literature has expanded on Hume’s account. Through interviews in Kerembei village (about six kilometers south of Saranangwea) with eight Notari from that area and with one Notari from northeast Maewo, the following additional and contrasting information was obtained.

Hume states that “Lengwasa-makers are known as ‘notari’ girls.” This is true in Kerembei and apparently across most if not all of Maewo, although the word “girls” is not generally used now. The word Notari is now often capitalized and is frequently spelled “Ngotari.”

Hume states that there is a “strong sense of equality among the women” in Saranangwea and that they are not competitive, as are the men, when it comes to grade promotions. This is also true in Kerembei, where the Notari interviewed emphasized their feelings of female equality and solidarity.

However, Hume states that the “women have no distinctive signs of rank per se,” and that “Lengwasa makers have no graded hierarchy” in Saranangwea. In Kerembei, one older woman was entitled to wear a long curved black chicken feather in her hair, as a sign of her rank and respect as a senior Notari who instructed the young girls in traditional Kastom matters. Also, as noted earlier, it was established that in Kerembei there are three current grades of Notari (although there are very few members of the second and third grade), and there were three higher grades, now lost, in the past.

Hume stated that in 1981 there was “no particular time of year for holding Lengwasa.” In Kerembei and apparently throughout Maewo it is now typical to hold the Lengwasa ritual during the December-January school break.

Hume found in Saranangwea that Lengwasa entails “sacrifice of a tusked boar” and that the person officially undertaking the ceremony is “usually a very small child – [so that] some other girl or women takes her place” in the ceremony. In Kerembei, Lengwasa does involve the sacrifice of a tusked boar, but since the ceremony can take place up to age six (or occasionally even in adulthood), sometimes no substitute girl is involved. Adult women who move to Maewo (usually because they have married local

men) have the option of becoming Notari via the Lengwasa ritual, but this is not required, and they are not looked down upon if they do not.

According to Hume, the Lengwasa ritual involves the candidate staying “inside a tambu [taboo] house for ten days.” This is true in Kerembei, also. But Hume reported that the main goal of the ritual is to prevent the candidate girl from being harmed by the “devil leader...Notarisurahia” – an evil spirit. Hume also learned that Notarisurahia “lives in Naviso...(east Maewo)” and “will kill any woman who is not tambu,” and this was the origin of the protective ritual.

By contrast, interviewees in Kerembei never mentioned Notarisurahia or other evil spirit, even when pressed, but only said that “we do this because of our tradition.” (However, it may be possible that the interviewees were reluctant to say the name of the devil leader or any evil spirit, since Hume notes that simply saying the name may bring on evil results.) The Notari of Kerembei also stated (B2E) that the origin of the Lengwasa ritual was:

...back in the time when people did not have mats, only leaves to wrap around themselves. These did not cover the women well, and it became taboo to expose so much, so they decided to weave mats and cover up. To symbolize this, a pig-killing was done, to build up the confidence and self-esteem of the women.

Hume did not mention any kind of second Lengwasa ceremony. Notari interviewed in Kerembei stated that about 90 percent of women in their area (and across Maewo) become Notari, and that about 10-20 percent of those Notari go on to undertake a second Lengwasa ceremony later in life. One Notari who explained this (B2E) stated that she had done a second pig-killing at age 45 (her first was at age four) to “get a bit more respect,” although this did not qualify her for any higher grade. She also stated that:

My family group had not done a Lengwasa in a long time, and my grandparents, who had done the Lengwasa, were afraid that everyone would forget how to do it. So I did it a second time. The ritual and ceremony differ from the first to the second Lengwasa, with different songs and different pig-killing. Also, the Lengwasa differs across the four regions of Maewo.

Hume concludes by saying that because of the matrilineal society on Maewo, and the respect and recognition gained by making Lengwasa, the women of Saranangwea have “relatively high status in the community, as compared to other areas of Melanesia.” This was also reported by interviewees and observed in Kerembei, where pride in the accomplishments, knowledge and skills of the Notari was clearly present among males and females alike.

## **7. Conclusions**

This effort has determined that there are now female chiefs in Vanuatu, who assert this fact themselves and are recognized as such by various authorities and residents including male chiefs. Thus the null hypothesis (that there are no female chiefs) is disproven.

Furthermore, per Chief Lini, there may have been such chiefs for a considerable time in the past. This research effort was not able to prove or disprove that statement, but it is certainly worthy of investigation. The literature review for this effort found instances where it might have been reasonable for the authors to assert that female chiefs (or the equivalent term at the time) were present in the past.

Also, this effort found that while Hume’s description of making Lengwasa among the Notari of one village on Maewo is supported, there are significant differences just a few kilometers away. Some of these differences may be due to the passage of 35 years since Hume did her work. But it seems likely that there are and were differences across the regions of Maewo with regard to this important ceremony for female cultural leaders.

Another conclusion from this study can perhaps be drawn with regard to the scientific study of gender relations and female status in Vanuatu and other island and insular societies. It is quite surprising that in 126 years of scientific observation of Vanuatu, no other writer has ever mentioned the existence of female chiefs, or used or explored that exact term. This is especially true, since as noted previously, “female chiefs” have been identified (although very rare) in the nearby Melanesian countries of Solomons and Papua New Guinea. There are at least four possible explanations for this.

First, lack of funding for anthropological research in Vanuatu. There is always room for more research. But there have been many anthropological and linguistics studies and researchers in Vanuatu, and the Vanuatu Cultural Center (charged with cultural research) has existed since 1955.

Second, the possible emergence of self-asserting female chiefs only in recent years. This is possible, and would reflect Jolly’s (2012) assertion that graded societies are “diverse and dynamic processes of rank and power” which can change over time. But this theory would run contrary to Chief Hilda Lini’s informed assertion that female chiefs were previously widespread, and have existed since pre-historic times. And it is clear that any anthropological observer who followed her famous career should have noticed that she was

a female chief, and has been for many years, with all the titles and symbols to go with that status. Michael Allen (1981b) theorizes that the “graded society complex” may have “originated in the matrilineal islands of north Vanuatu and spread west several hundred years ago...” Although he is clearly referring to the male version of the *hungwe*, it would seem logical that the female side of the system followed the same path and timeline. Perhaps an exercise in “anthropology in the archives” (Douglas, 2001) and a “de-centered...provocative” re-reading (Douglas, 1999) of early contact documents would yield some evidence re Chief Lini’s assertion.

Third, the reluctance of Western anthropologists to become involved in modern political disputes and to use Western terms, rather than local, vernacular terminology. But the word “chief” has been very widely used in Vanuatu society and government at least since independence (Lindstrom, 1997) and perhaps before, and is thus an integral part of the culture to be studied by such anthropologists.

Fourth, the cultural blinders and assumptions of the (male and female) Western scientists themselves, who perhaps simply could not imagine the existence of female chiefs and thus did not notice them or their significance. For example, Vanuatu feminist and legal author Susan Bothmann (2010) stated that, “outsiders (anthropologists, settlers, tourists, whoever) have mis-interpreted the place of men and women in indigenous culture and have placed everything in a western patriarchal framework.” But surprisingly, even she failed to note the existence of female chiefs in Vanuatu, and asserted that it was exclusively “the ‘big men’...who got the privileges available from the dominant culture.”

The blinders explanation ties in to current thinking at the Royal Geographical Society, which is taking on as the theme of its 2017 Annual Conference the “decolonizing of geographical knowledge,” i.e., the exploration of alternate, non-Western ways of viewing the world and society. If this blinders explanation is true, then it may behoove scientists and anthropologists in Vanuatu and other similar societies to undergo some self-examination, to think carefully about their appropriate world view and its underlying assumptions, and thus to turn the scientific lens into a mirror.

Some critics might argue that these are “straw man” or semantic arguments, that professional anthropologists in Vanuatu have been studying the invention of chiefs and the intersection of new and old forms of leadership for over forty years, and that it is unclear if the argument is that this is that female chiefs have recently emerged, or existed for a very long time. I think it is obvious here that a term like “chief” and whether it can be applied to women is not a semantic matter, but rather one of Constitutional, legal, public policy and social interest; that it is indisputable from the extensive literature review that the term “female chief” has never been used before by professional anthropologists in Vanuatu, although it is now warranted; and that this preliminary research has reached no conclusion on when in history the term “female chief” could have reasonably begun to have been used. Regarding a “straw man,” this refers to a fallacious argument in which a too-simple representation of an opponent’s position is presented, in order to be easily knocked down. In fact it is clear from the literature and the resistance to use this term in Vanuatu – but not in other similar nearby countries – that this is a real argument, not a fallacious or overly simplified one.

With regard to the question of the impact of the existence of female chiefs on gender relations in Vanuatu and similar societies, the following points can be made:

First, at present the impact of the existence of female chiefs on gender relations in Vanuatu at the national level is clearly minimal. Many persons in Vanuatu, including many native Ni-Vanuatu and virtually all expats, appear to be unaware that female chiefs exist. There is little or no discussion of this remarkable phenomenon in the press, radio or on social media.

Second, there is however some impact of female chiefs at the local level in those villages and islands where they exist in sufficient numbers to play a role in society. As reported by Motari Doreen Leona, there is likely more respect for women and less domestic violence in her home area of north Pentecost, where there are many female chiefs, than in most parts of Vanuatu.

Third, since there is marginal impact now, the question becomes, “Could female chiefs have an impact in the future in Vanuatu?” Here the answer is of course speculative. But it seems clear from respondents that the role of chiefs in delivering social and government programs is expanding, that female chiefs could be a part of that expansion, that female chiefs may be officially recognized soon by the NCC, that publicity for the female chiefs could generate interest in expanding their numbers and authority, and that chiefly office could be a road to higher political office. If Chief Lini is proved to be correct in her assertion that there were many more female chiefs in the past, across a wider part of Vanuatu, then there may even be a historical basis for encouraging an increase in their numbers and geographic range.

Certainly female chiefs could play a very positive role in becoming active and respected “authorized persons” under the Family Protection Act, and investigating cases of domestic violence, issuing temporary protection orders, educating men and women about the law, and serving as role models and counselors against domestic violence.

Fourth, the question arises, “Could female chiefs have a positive impact in various nations and cultures, in and beyond Vanuatu?” As noted at the beginning of this article, female chiefs have already existed in Polynesia, and have served as leaders and role models in

that region. Any action that encourages 50 percent of the population of any country or region to reach its full potential must of necessity prove beneficial.

According to a 2012 *Harvard Business Review* study by Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman of 7280 business leaders (which focused on the West but may have relevance here), women are better leaders than men by a statistically significant amount. Women out-perform men in 12 of 16 key leadership competencies, especially “taking the initiative,” “practicing self-development,” “driving for results,” and “displaying high integrity and honesty.” So it would appear that any organization or country which encourages more female leadership could benefit markedly. With a male Vanuatu Prime Minister and 11 of 52 Members of Parliament (all male) in jail for bribery (Marango 2016), perhaps it is time to give female chiefs and leaders of Vanuatu more of a chance to take the reins of power.

In conclusion, it is obvious that this research on female chiefs in Vanuatu, and this expansion of the understanding of the Notari of Maewo, has just scratched the surface. It is trite in social science to say that “more research is warranted,” and often this is said about phenomena which have been studied to death. But in this instance, due to the counter-intuitive existence of the female chiefs, more research on these remarkable and brave women is in fact warranted -- and essential.



A young woman of Vanuatu looks to her future, as a possible leader and even female chief.  
(credit: Daniel Huang and Theresa Menders)

### **Biography**

**Llewellyn “Lew” Toulmin** is a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society ([www.rgs.org](http://www.rgs.org)) and a Fellow of The Explorers Club ([www.explorers.org](http://www.explorers.org)). He holds a B.A. in anthropology and sociology, an MPA, and a Ph.D. in public administration and public policy analysis. He has worked for the World Bank and USAID as a consultant and advisor on 50 projects in 30 less-developed countries, and traveled to 144 of the 196 countries on Earth. From 2012 to 2015 Toulmin worked as a Senior Advisor to the Chief Information Officer in the Vanuatu Prime Minister’s Office. He has led expeditions in anthropology and archaeology in Vanuatu, Thailand, Malaysia and various US states. His previous expedition in Vanuatu was documented in his report, *Expedition to Ambae, the Real Bali-h'ai: Killing Pigs, Moving Stones, Erupting Volcanoes and Crashing Planes in Vanuatu* (Silver Spring, MD: Toulmin, pp. 1-228; available upon request).

### **Acknowledgments**

Members of the expedition research effort included the author; Dalsie Baniala, Vanuatu Telecommunications and Radiocommunications Regulator; Sophie Hollingsworth of The Explorers Club -- TEC; [www.explorers.org](http://www.explorers.org)); Michael Wyrick, TEC; Daniel Huang, TEC; Theresa Menders, TEC; Corey Huber, MSc PPM student at SOAS-University of London and ex-PCV in Vanuatu; and Alfred Baniuri, Vanuatu Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry, Fisheries and Bio-Security. We are all very grateful to the Notari of Maewo and the female chiefs who agreed to be interviewed, and to the Vanuatu Office of the Government Chief Information Officer/Prime Minister’s Office (OGCIO/PMO).

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