



# Expedition: Female Chiefs of Maewo Island

## Field Study: Anthropology

**Summary:** Sophie Hollingsworth carried the WINGS flag on an expedition to Maewo Island to document a tribe of female chiefs (*ngwotari*) and observe a multi-day festival featuring the women. The *ngwotari* seek to gain official status from the Vanuatu National Council of Chiefs. Hollingsworth interviewed and lived with the women to learn about their customs and ceremonies. In performing an ethnographic study, Hollingsworth's work contributes to the revitalization of indigenous knowledge to ensure that it continues to be valued and can be passed down for generations to come.

### THE EXPEDITION

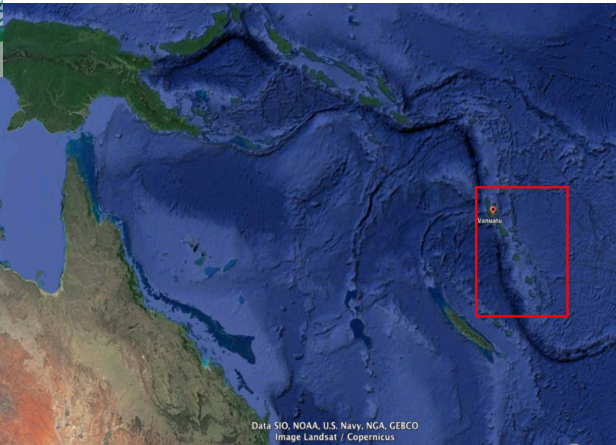
For over 100 years, anthropological literature stated or assumed there were no female chiefs in Vanuatu (formerly the New Hebrides).

Fieldwork was conducted to document the possible existence

of female chiefs on Maewo Island (formerly Aurora Island) and throughout Vanuatu. Maewo Island is matrilineal, the homeland of approximately 3,000 people, and a branch of human imagination going back to the beginning of time.



Interviews and observations conducted in August and September 2016 revealed the presumed female chiefs on Maewo Island strongly preferred the term '*ngwotari*' to 'chief.' However, there were women throughout Vanuatu who identified and were accepted as female chiefs.



Data SIO, NOAA, U.S. Navy, NGA, GEBCO  
Image Landsat / Copernicus

## WHO

Sophie Faustine  
Hollingsworth

## WHAT

To document a tribe of female chiefs on Maewo Island

## WHEN

August - September 2016

## WHERE

Maewo Island, Republic of  
Vanuatu

## WHY

To provide evidence to help determine whether the women of Maewo Island qualify for acceptance into the National Council of Chiefs of Vanuatu

With no exact translation, the vernacular term '*ng-wotari*' loosely translates to 'female custom leader' or 'chief.'

In August, the *ngwotari* of Maewo Island held the multi-day Banganvanua Arts Festival to celebrate traditional island culture. The team was invited to attend the festivities and observed the *ngwotari* engage in sand drawing, water music, bird calling, constellation naming, and days of *kastom* song and dance.

To become a *ngwotari*, women must under-take the *Lengwasa* ritual in which young girls and women are confined in a *tambu* (taboo) house for 10 days, culminating in the killing of a sacred pig. Pig killing is often a key part of male chieftdom and grade promotions in Vanuatu. To gain the *ngwotari* title a woman must possess knowledge of island history, traditional recipes, woven mat designs, preparation of *kastom* wedding and death ceremonies, traditional healing plants, water music, and relevant magic.



Following the festival, Hollingsworth had the opportunity to live with and study the everyday life of multiple *ngwotari* and the paramount male chief in the villages of Naone, Narovorovo, Navenevene, and Nagoro. As the team's research expanded beyond Maewo Island, four self-identifying female chiefs were located and interviewed in depth. The expedition team's work in documenting the commendable social practices in Vanuatu illuminates the unique culture of Maewo Island and adds invaluable knowledge to the extant research in this branch of anthropology.



### EXPEDITION GOALS

The key goals of the expedition were to:

- Locate and interview the presumed female chiefs.
- Observe and document the female chiefs' practices, powers, jurisdiction, *kastom* songs and dances.
- Compile evidence on whether or not the female chiefs of Maewo Island could qualify for membership in the National Council of Chiefs of Vanuatu.

### EXPEDITION RESULTS

This pioneering field research has led to significant discoveries that advance understanding of the role of gender norms, female chiefs, and *ngwotari* in Ni-Vanuatu society. The team met, observed, and interviewed the *ngwotari* of Maewo Island and female chiefs throughout Vanuatu. The expedition culminated in a meeting with the Malvatumaruri (National Council of Chiefs) who revealed that in the future, it was possible for female chiefs to be admitted into the Malvatumauri, with the same jurisdiction and rights as male chiefs.

Local and international media outlets were utilized to highlight the unique and endangered culture on Maewo Island. The team expresses gratitude to the people of Vanuatu for their generosity and unfailing kindness of spirit.

### CHALLENGES FACED

The greatest challenge in conducting fieldwork on Maewo Island was the role of secrecy in Ni-Vanuatu culture. Traditional knowledge in Maewo is held in high regard, and individuals must earn the rights to knowledge through certain ceremonies. For women, traditional knowledge is earned during the Making Lengwasa ritual, which involves the killing of sacred pigs and days of confinement.

Those who have not undertaken the *Lengwasa* ritual are not privy to the certain aspects of traditional knowledge.

There is a troubling fallacy that pockets of communities practicing traditional culture unconsumed by technology and globalization are somehow leftovers of a past era. Nothing could be further from the truth. They are modern men and women who continue to defend their unique way of life and prove that there are other ways of interacting with the earth.



Photo by: Huang + Menders

### ABOUT THE FLAG CARRIER

Sophie Faustine Hollingsworth holds a Bachelor's Degree in Environmental Studies from New York University and is a Fulbright Scholar. Hollingsworth founded AquaAid International, an organization working toward sustainable water security in remote regions worldwide. She is an avid sailor and at the time of certification was the youngest female to obtain a 200-ton Captains License. Currently, Hollingsworth chronicles her adventures and misadventures in the most remote reaches of the world on The Sofía Log. She is a proud member of The Royal Geographical Society and The Explorers Club, and is recipient of the 2017 New Explorer Award.



### EXPEDITION TEAM

Sophie Faustine  
Hollingsworth

Supporting Members:

Dalsie Baniala

Corey Huber

Dr. Lew Toulmin

Michael Wyrick

### CONTACT INFORMATION:

[www.thesofialog.com](http://www.thesofialog.com)



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### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

[www.wingsworldquest.org](http://www.wingsworldquest.org)

[info@wingsworldquest.org](mailto:info@wingsworldquest.org)