

2-2023

Oi Woman Blong Wota (The Women of the Water)

Sandy Sur

Leweton Cultural Village, sandylsur@gmail.com

Ashley Burgess

Griffith University, a.burgess@griffith.edu.au

Maeve McKenna

Independent filmmaker, maeve@pixelfury.com.au

Catherine Grant

Griffith University, catherine.grant@griffith.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/wmt>



Part of the [Ethnomusicology Commons](#), and the [Pacific Islands Languages and Societies Commons](#)

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Recommended Citation

Sur, Sandy; Burgess, Ashley; McKenna, Maeve; and Grant, Catherine (2023) "Oi Woman Blong Wota (The Women of the Water)," *World Music Textbook*: Vol. 4, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25035/wmt.2023.002>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/wmt/vol4/iss1/2>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](#).

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at ScholarWorks@BGSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in World Music Textbook by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@BGSU.

Oh Oi Woman Blong Wota (The Women of the Water)

Sandy SUR | Leweton Cultural Village

Ashley Burgess | Griffith University

Maeve McKenna | Independent filmmaker

Catherine Grant | Griffith University

Abstract: The women of Leweton have been performing Water Music for international audiences since the founding of the Leweton Cultural Village in 2008, and have been practising this tradition for as long as they remember.

Keywords: activism, heritage, sustainability, Pacific

The online version of this chapter includes all embedded content and is available at <https://worldmusictextbook.org/sur-2023>.

Etétung: Vanuatu Women's Water Music

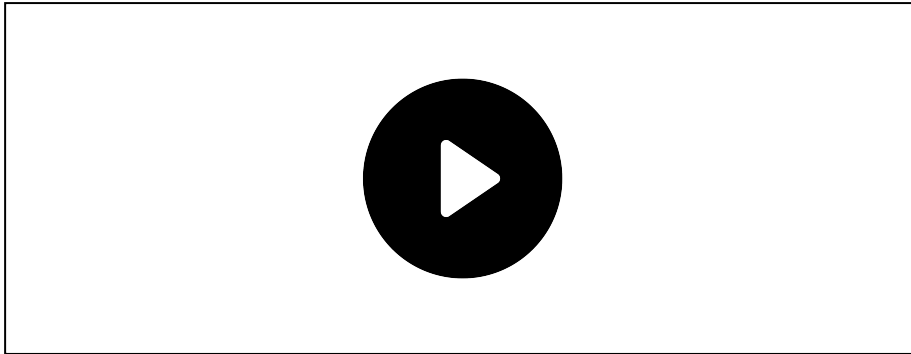
In the village of Leweton on the tropical island of Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu, a community is rallying together to revitalise and share its cultural and environmental knowledge across generations. Its people come from the smaller, more remote northern islands of Merelava and Gaua, two of the 83 islands in the archipelago that comprises the Pacific nation of Vanuatu. Over time, these people relocated to Leweton, partly to access education, employment, healthcare and other services available on Espiritu Santo, but also as a result of the difficulties the rapidly changing climate presented to lives and livelihoods (Hayward 2014, Grant 2019).

Throughout Vanuatu, the climate crisis is wreaking environmental havoc. Cyclones in 2015 and 2020 were the two strongest ever recorded in the nation, each leaving a good proportion of the population in need of humanitarian assistance (United Nations Children's Fund 2016, World Vision 2020). Natural disasters like these are increasing in frequency and severity due to the climate crisis (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2021). They threaten traditional ways of life in Vanuatu and disrupt time-honoured cultural practices.

The Leweton community recognises, however, that the treasured cultural practices of their home islands are a way of both understanding and responding to changes in the climate. One such practice is *Etétung*, known in English as



Figure 1: Destruction caused by Cyclone Harold to Leweton village near Luganville on the island of Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu. Photo: Sandy Sur, 9 April 2020. Used with permission.



Video Example 1. Women and girls of Leweton village perform *Etětung* in the coastal shallows near Leweton, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, 17 November 2017. Video: Ashley Burgess. Visit [the website](#) to view video examples.

the Vanuatu Women’s Water Music. *Etětung* is a sonically and visually striking performance tradition with deep interconnections to the natural world. Standing in a circle or semi-circle in waist-deep water, the women rhythmically slap the surface of the water using a variety of hand techniques that create a surprising diversity of sounds. These sounds reflect those in the natural local environment—the call of a particular species of bird; an oncoming cyclone; or waves over the reef at low tide (Dick 2014).

Contemporary *Etětung* performances often comprise a handful of “pieces” each lasting a minute or two, resulting in a diverse set of around five or ten minutes (though this depends on performance context and function). Typically, each piece features a distinct rhythm (or set of rhythms) accompanied by a simple chanted or intoned melodic phrase. Video 1 shows the women and girls of Leweton performing one such piece in the coastal shallows near their village; with their words, they call for rain, and (in the words) the rain comes.

In performance, *Etětung* becomes a message passing through the air and water, simultaneously reflecting and shaping the space around it. For the Leweton community, *Etětung* is an ‘acoustemology:’ a sonic way of knowing and interacting with the natural world, and a means to strengthen and celebrate the deep relationship between nature and culture (Feld 2012). In the words of cultural leader Sandy Sur:

The sound weaves through the ocean and the land, weaving our stories as it goes. Our stories are told through the water like a book [...] When the women are performing the Water Music, they’re telling us our story through nature. (Interview with Catherine Grant, November 2017)

An act of deep resilience, *Etětung* is a medium that allows the people of Leweton to collaboratively acknowledge, reflect on, and respond to the envi-

ronmental and climate changes they are experiencing. Performer Cecelia Lolonun says,

The sounds of Water Music are still the same, but the meaning of Water Music is different now, because of climate change. Water gives us the sounds of things that are happening now [...] Climate change changes everything about nature and us. We have to keep on teaching traditional ways of looking after things. If we keep these ways strong, we can keep our nature alive. (Interview with Catherine Grant, November 2017)

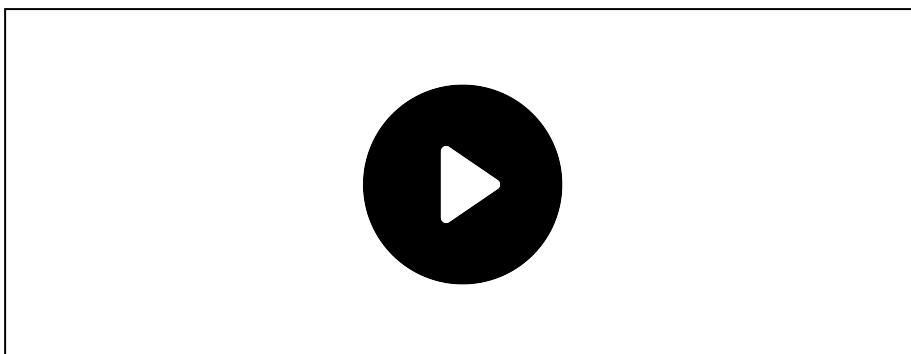
Etëtung is also a way for Leweton villagers to share their cultural and environmental knowledge with tourists, and to educate them about the local impacts of environmental and climate change. From nearby Luganville port, a popular stop for cruise ships, tourists make the short trip to Leweton to participate in the activities of Leweton Cultural Village, an initiative Sandy Sur founded in the mid-2000s to support local livelihoods and “kastom” (traditional or heritage) cultural practices. *Etëtung* is the signature cultural practice that the villagers showcase for tourists.

In recent years, as the international profile of *Etëtung* has grown, the women of Leweton have been invited to perform around the world (Dick 2014; Hayward 2014). In this way, *Etëtung* has enabled their participation in global climate discussions. The women proudly showcase their unique cultural practice as a way to generate wider awareness about the ramifications of climate change for Indigenous and island communities around the world (Grant 2019). In an era where calls for urgent climate action are often accused of being hyperbolic, *Etëtung* is a strikingly unique and powerful way to educate and rally for climate action.

The Film

The following film (Video 2) is an outcome of long-term and ongoing partnerships between three Brisbane-based Australian creative arts researchers—documentary filmmaker Ashley Burgess, director Maeve McKenna, and music researcher Catherine Grant – and the members of the Leweton community, including our primary contact and co-author Leweton cultural leader Sandy Sur. Catherine Grant had previously collaborated with Sandy and the women of Leweton on a project that explored the relationship of *Etëtung* to issues of climate justice (2017-2018, reported in Grant 2019).

The film was recorded in 2019 during Ashley’s and Maeve’s trip to Leweton, during which they were leading an international study abroad tour for students at their university. Ashley and Maeve consulted with community members in advance about the topic and content of the film. Most of those they consulted considered *Etëtung* to be a defining part of their village identity and an important part of their culture, and wanted to celebrate and share its deeper meaning.



Video Example 2. Ol Woman Blong Wota (The Women of the Water) [Short film]. Producer: Ashley Burgess. Director: Maeve McKenna. Filmed at Leweton, Espiritu Santo, Vanuatu, January 2019. Visit [the website](#) to view video examples.

All three of us Australian researchers (Ashley, Maeve, and Catherine) continue our collaboration with Sandy Sur and the people of Leweton at the time of writing (late 2022). According to Sandy, research, creative, and educational collaborations like these leverage the efforts of the Leweton community. They help the story of Leweton's cultural and natural richness reach a wide international audience. They help people learn about how meaningful and important these interconnections are for the people of Leweton. They also help other people understand how deeply water, nature, and *etuxebtung-vanuatu-womens-water-music* are interconnected, not only for Indigenous peoples in Vanuatu, but for everyone around the world.

Additional Materials

Acknowledgements

Ashley Burgess and Maeve McKenna's 2019 field trip to Leweton on which this film was made was funded by a grant of the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan. Catherine Grant's field trip in 2017 was funded by a research grant from Griffith University. The authors wish to thank all members of the Leweton community for sharing their unique cultural practices and knowledge with the wider world. The women performers who feature in this film are Denilla Frazer, Melinda Frazer, Jerolyn Frazer, Beverley Frazer, Cecilia Tingris, Cicilia Wari, Marie Sur, Sonrin Sur, Trisha Sur, and Margaret Tingris.

Discussion Questions

1. Apart from cyclones, what other challenges might the climate crisis be generating for the people of small-island communities like Leweton?

What impacts might those challenges be having on water, reefs, land, food, tourism, health, housing, employment, cultural practices, and other aspects of life?

2. The video uses the phrase “Water is life.” What could this mean for the people of Leweton? What social and cultural functions of water does this idea suggest for the Leweton community?
3. *Etétung* is a gendered practice. From the video, what roles might *Etétung* play in the lives of women and girls of Leweton?
4. To what extent might *Etétung* help the people of Leweton advocate for local, national, and international environmental or climate action? What are some of the possibilities of drawing on *Etétung* as a cultural resource in this way? What are some limitations? Are there any risks involved for the community?
5. Can you think of any other music genres, especially near where you live, that carry environmental knowledge, or that play a role in advocating for environmental care or action? What roles are they playing, and how?
6. The video represents a collaboration between people from the Leweton community and “outsider” researchers. What might have been some advantages and challenges of such a collaboration for the community? What about for the researchers? How might the challenges be overcome?

Recommended Reading

- Dick, Thomas. 2014. “Vanuatu Water Music and the Mwerlap Diaspora: Music, Migration, Tradition, and Tourism”. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 10(4): 392–407.
- Grant, Catherine. 2019. “Climate Justice and Cultural Sustainability: The Case of Etétung (Vanuatu Women’s Water Music).” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 20(1): 42-56.
- Hayward, P. 2014. “Sounding the Aquapelago: The Cultural-Environmental Context of Ni-Vanuatu Women’s Liquid Percussion Performance.” *Perfect Beat* 15(2): 113.

Digital Resources

- Cole, Tim (director), Sur, Sandy (story), Wavales, Hilda (story), Leweton Cultural Group (performers). 2014. *Vanuatu Women’s Water Music* [film]. Port Vila: Further Arts. Available on Kanopy database.

Works Cited

- Dick, Thomas. 2014. “Vanuatu Water Music and the Mwerlap Diaspora: Music,

- Migration, Tradition, and Tourism". *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 10(4): 392–407.
- Feld, Steven. 2012. *Sound and Sentiment*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Grant, Catherine. 2019. "Climate Justice and Cultural Sustainability: The Case of Etétung (Vanuatu Women's Water Music)." *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 20(1): 42-56.
- Hayward, Philip. 2014. "Sounding the Aquapelago: The Cultural-Environmental Context of ni-Vanuatu Women's Liquid Percussion Performance." *Perfect Beat* 15(2): 113-127.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. 2021. "AR6 Climate Change 2021: The Physical Science Basis." *Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar6/wg1/>.
- United Nations Children's Fund. 2016. "Cyclone Pam: One Year On." *Relief Web*. 12 March. <https://reliefweb.int/report/vanuatu/unicef-fast-facts-cyclone-pam-one-year-march-2016>.
- World Vision. 2020. "Cyclone Harold Leaves 160,000 Homeless: CAT II Disaster Declared." *World Vision*. 11 April. <https://www.worldvision.com.au/media-centre/resource/cyclone-harold-leaves-160-000-homeless-cat-ii-disaster-declared>.