Mendi

ETHNONYMS: Angal, Anganen, Nenbi, Wola

Orientation

Identification. "Mendi" refers to the people of the Mendi valley. In precolonial times, Mendi had no collective name for themselves; nowadays, they still speak a variate of languages and dialects, and Mendi Valley clans have active sociopolitical relationships of long standing with peoples living elsewhere (e.g., in Talulu, Tambu, Kandsop, the Lai Valley, and Kagua).

Location. The Mendi Valley is located at 6° to 6°30' S and 143°35' to 143°45' E, in the Mendi Subprovince of the Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea. Flanked to the east by Mount Gihwae and to the west by limestone ridges separating it from the Lai Valley, the Mendi is about 40 kilometers long and V-shaped. Most Mendi live north of Mendi town (the provincial government center, altitude about 1,620 meters above sea level). The topography of the valley is fairly rugged; gardens are planted up to about 2,400 meters above sea level. There is a large bauxite area in the far northeast around Lake Esekei. The valley receives about 280 centimeters of rain per year with only a slight wet/dry seasonal contrast. Approximate average daily temperature range from 7° to 24°C, with high-altitude areas regularly experiencing mild to severe crop-damaging frosts.

Demography. The first government census was conducted in 1956, but no figures are available before patrol reports dated 1959–1960 and 1961. Based on these reports, anthropologists estimate the Mendi population of the late 1950s to be about 24,000. At the time of the 1976 government census, some 28,500 people lived as the Mendi Valley. Population density is moderate by Highlands standards, and Mendi are not land-short.

Linguistic Affiliation. Mendi call their language "Angal Heng" (meaning "true words-talk," or normal speech). Dialects or closely related variants are spoken in the Lai Valley and by Wola people living in the Wa (Wage) to the west, as well as by people living in the Nabis to the southwest and south, where Angal Heng and Kewa intersect in the speech of the Angagen, called "Mage"—about 5,000 speakers in all. These languages have been classified as the Mendi-Pole Subfamily which, together with Wini, Kewa, Huli, Enga, and some others, belong to the West-Central Family (together 330,000 speakers). However, in the northeastern Mendi Valley, people speak primarily Imbangong (or Awa)—a language that is mostly heard in Talulu Subprovince to Mendi's east (and which, as a dialect of Hagen, belongs to the Central Family of languages spoken in the Western Highlands and Chimbu Provinces). These Imbangong speakers are technically "Mendi"; they belong to Mendi Valley tribes and intermarry with other Mendi. Generally, in the Mendi area as elsewhere in Papua New Guinea, there is no necessary relationship between language and cultural identity. That is, those who consider themselves to have a common culture may speak quite different languages; conversely, people speaking the same language may have distinct cultures.

History and Cultural Relations

Under Australian rule, Mendi became administrative headquaters for the Southern Highlands (then "District") in 1950–1951. Like most of the rest of the province, Mendi remains one of the least economically developed parts of Papua New Guinea, having been a significant site neither of exportation nor of locally run, market-oriented enterprises until recently. The colonial history of the province, from the 1950s through independence in 1975, was dominated instead by government administration and missionaries. However, soon after independence the province inaugurated a large World Bank–funded integrated rural development project. That project, together with the recent discovery of mineral resources, will undoubtedly have important repercussions. Of course, Mendi "history" predates the colonial period. While some Mendi groups view themselves as autochthonous, others claim to have immigrated from the valley from the north and northeast five or more generations ago. Mendi oral traditions record shifting group alliances and expanding populations.

Settlements

Despite a partial confluence of names, government "census units" (with populations mostly between 200 and 800) do not correspond with indigenous localities (with perhaps 20–100 residents). Each locality (tu, meaning "ground"), is associated with an individual clan (or subclan) section, and is socially centered around a clearing (kemal) where meetings and collective events are held. Strictly speaking, there are no villages. Residences are dispersed within clan territories, their fences separating community footpaths and clearings from garden areas. Farmsteads usually include an oval men's house, a long women's house (in which the family's pigs are also stalled at night), and other buildings (e.g., a menstrual seclusion hut). New-style houses have sleeping compartments for both men and women.

Economy:

Subsistence and Commercial Activities. About 50 percent of garden produce is fed to hendra of domesticated pigs, which are treated as "wealth" and are central to everyday and ceremonial gift exchanges. Sweet potatoes, which are both the human staple and pig fodder, are planted in mulched 3-meter diameter mounds, located in fenced garden plots, and harvested daily, year-round. Gardens are commonly kept in production continuously for thirty years or more; individual mounds may be fallowed for a few months between harvesting and replanting. Greens and sugarcane are planted in and around the sweet potato gardens, as are a wide variety of European vegetables (which may be consumed locally or, more often, off er market sales). Especially since the mid-1970s, Mendi have experimented with coffee production, small-scale cattle projects, and other marketing endeavors. Mendi also run small retail stores and transportation companies, as well as seeking employment in town and farther afield.

Industrial Arts. People produce many of their own tools, and also rework items of Western manufacture into their tool kit. The two most important raw tools are wooden digging sticks or spades (used for clearing and planting gardens) and
steel axes (for clearing forest and preparing house-building and fencing materials). Women turn fiber into twine for mak- ing apparel and net bags. People also make other containers, culinary implements, and hunting equipment.

Trade. While their social field has expanded enormously in the last generation, even in precolonial times Mendi traded regularly with peoples living outside the valley. Women and men walked for one or five days northwards to Karoep to obtain salt (used for trade and consumption) from their distant ma- tri-lineage kin. Kanep high country was also a source of pig- breeding stock. For these things, Mendi exchanged southern products like pearl shells and lipioso tree oil (used for gifts and adornment), which they obtained from creef owners in Erave, Kagua, and Lake Kutubu. Mendi used to be key con- ducts for the movement of pearl shells from the south coast northwards into the highlands.

Division of Labor. Gender and age are the key dimen- sions. Men do all work (like forest clearing and fence mak- ing); women do most of the everyday gardening (planting, weeding, harvesting) and pig care. Individuals control the dis- position of the food they plant, so women are responsible for most everyday cooking and hospitality. While there are no strong taboos on crossing these conventional lines, men ap- pear to do women’s work more frequently than vice versa. Clan events are strongly gendered: men alone are responsible for collective feast making (bothering pigs, cooking pork and vegetables, and providing sugarcane and exotic refreshments like beer and store-bought meat) as well as parade perfor- mances, wealth exchanges, and oratory.

Land Tenure. Men usually reside and garden in their fa- ther’s locality; however, they may maintain active use rights to gardens in their mother’s place as well whether or not they relocate there. Most women continue to garden in their natal- clan territory after they marry. Insofar as “place” partially de- fines “clanship, clan retain inalienable control over both gar- den and facet lands; nonclanmembers may gain temporary use rights but may not make long-term claims on the land (for example, by planting trees). Follow land (or the unused land of declining groups) may be claimed by any member of the local clan.

Kinship

Kin Groups and Descent. There are no descent groups and genealogies are shallow. Common social identity is con- stituted in terms as much of locality and food sharing as of ancestry. As elsewhere in the highlands, Mendi favor affilia- tion with their father’s clan, but strong substantive connec- tions are recognized on the mother’s side as well. Both rela- tions are actively acknowledged and negotiated in gift exchanges. The term “clan” is used here in the interest of consistency with the published ethnography of Mendi and its neigh- bors. In this somewhat unconventional usage, a “clan” is not a “descent group” (i.e., a kin group whose membership is based on a descent rule); however, it corresponds with such descent-based groups functionally (see below, “Social Orga- nization”). Mendi employ idioms of brotherhood and patri- lineal ancestry rhetorically in calls for group unity, but they do not use them to talk about membership criteria. Even the rationale for affiliation with one’s father’s group is not ex- plained as a genealogical principle. In Mendi clans nowadays, the rights and status of nonagnatic “sister’s sons” are indis- tinguishable from those of agnostic members.

Kinship Terminology. Mendi kinship terminology is a version of the Onahabe type, insofar as father’s brother’s son and father’s brother’s daughter are equated with brother and sister and distinguished from father’s sister’s son or daughter, mother’s brother’s son or daughter, and mother’s sister’s son or daughter (who are all referred to by a single term).

Marriage and Family

Marriage. Young people have considerable control over whom they will marry. They generally practice clan exogamy and tend to intermarry with members of neighboring, allied clans. Marriage ceremonies also discourage lineage “broth- ers” from marrying lineage “sisters,” which diversifies lineage members’ exchange partnerships. Weddings involve an ex- tended exchange of wealth between the bride’s and groom’s kin networks, with bride moving from the groom’s to the bride’s. These prestations are frequent pretexts for initiating exchange (norm) partnerships, a key Mendi social relation- ship. Postmarital residence is usually virilocal, and polygamy is not uncommon. Divorce can be initiated by the husband or wife, but it may require the return of wedding wealth. Di- vorced women often take their young children with them, and they are welcomed back into their natal clans.

Domestic Unit. Household size and composition vary. Most include a husband and at least one wife, their children, and often also an elderly widowed parent or an unmarried or divorced sibling of the husband or wife. Persons occasionally live alone.

Inheritance. Fathers are expected to redistribute gardens to their children, and both parents pass on specialized (ritual or gendered) knowledge to them. Parents help sons with bride-wealth payments.

Socialization. While women and older girls do most of the child care, Mendi men also look after small children. Men not infrequently encourage their 5- and 4-year-old sons to acco- mpany them to the hope that the latter will develop a sense of loyalty. Children may nurse at will, and they often do so past the age of 3. While both mothers and fathers are affectionate and indulgent with their children, they readily use force to discipline them. For their part, children frequently “talk back” to and strike their parents (a trait adults sometimes even encourage). If they feel unfairly treated at home, they may move in temporarily with other relatives (who readily ac- cept them). Young people are encouraged to participate in gift exchange. Mendi are unusual among highlanders for not practicing initiation. Many children attend local community schools; some go on past the sixth year to residential mission or government high schools in Mendi towns or elsewhere in the Southern Highlands; and a few have postsecondary educations.

Sociopolitical Organization

Social Organization. Individuals usually identify them- selves with the named clan and subclan (sen ema and sen kum, meaning “large family” and “small family,” respectively) of their father; while this social identity is defined by birth, it can be renegotiated by continued residence in a place and
“brotherly” cooperation in clan events. Clanship is a relationship of shared responsibility: for example, for collective defense, for making contributions to clan-sponsored pretensions, and for giving unsolicited aid in small-scale wealth distributions at times of marriage and death. Its counterpart to their clan obligations, over the course of their lives individuals also create networks of exchange (twen) partnerships with affines, maternal kin, and other nonclan members, on whom they depend to the extent of their social recognitions (e.g., pigs, pearl shells, money). A person’s external exchange partnerships constitute the source of his or her personal autonomy and power within the clan. The structures of interclan alliances and individual exchange partnerships only partially correspond with one another. While clanship is predominately a relation among men, twen partnerships can also be constructed between women and men and among women. Local groups are generally known by both a place and a clan name (e.g., Sekeere Melsen). In these local clan sections have close socio-political relations both with other sections of the same clan living in different localities (e.g., Molonanda Melsen)—whether or not they are contiguous—and with neighboring sections of different clans belonging to the same tribal alliance. Among members of one tribal alliance of clans, contiguity creates stronger relations of cooperation than does common clanship.

Political Organization. There are no formal councils or elected positions. Leadership is achieved by consistently exemplary contributions to clan wealth distribution and by an outspoken, active interest in shaping clan policy through private persuasion and public oratory. Political participation in interclan wealth distributions—whether by big men (of kora) or ordinary men—depends at least as much upon having created a personal exchange partnership network as it does on having a large, productive household and direct access to female labor. Women are excluded from clan policy making. Whereas nonagricultural status may have disadvantaged men (e.g., preventing them from becoming big men) in the past, it no longer does. While there is no political organization encompassing the Mendi Valley as a whole, territorially contiguous clans offer themselves as entrails into named tribes of up to about 1,500 members. Neighboring tribes— comprising perhaps 3,000 people—who support one another in warfare and exchange, may refer to one another as “brothers” and link names (e.g., Sunp and Sulfol becoming Sunp-Sool).

Social Control. There are moral restrictions on blood-letting within the clan and, to a lesser extent, between clans. It is thought that ancestral spirits (emom) will mete out justice in cases of interclan violence. A strong moral emphasis on reciprocity—reinforced by fear concerning jealousy induced sorcery and witchcraft—encourages people to participate in the exchange of wealth.

Conflict. Prior to colonial rule, Mendi tribes and clans were constantly war and peace partners. After 1950, local warfare was suppressed as a main means by which the Australian administration established its authority. However while bow-and-arrow warfare did decline, conflict continues to this day under the rubric of sorcery (tom). That is, Mendi consider most deaths (except those among infants and the aged) to be politically motivated; they insist that collectivities accept responsibility for death by making public wealth compensation (malek) to the group of the deceased.

Religion and Expressive Culture

Religious Beliefs. Mendi revere their ancestors, who are thought to have an influence on the affairs of the living. Additionally, prior to the 1970s, Mendi participated in fertility cults meant to ensure human and clan. The rationale for several of the most important cults is contained in legends that make reference to male and female agents whose actions are believed to have shaped the landscape and given human their present-day form. Several Christian missions—notably Catholic and United Church—were influential in Mendi as of the 1970s and 1980s; however, their influence was at least as much socioeconomic and political as it was spiritual.

Religious Practitioners. In former times, men with special knowledge (sometimes acquired from their fathers) acted as fertility cult leaders. Nowadays some men have reputations as sorcery exorcists (tomasku), and a few women and men own spells and procedures for curingills or for attracting wealth and/or spouses. Exorcists and cures receive small payments.

Ceremonies. Public ceremonialism now centers around occasions for wealth exchange marriage, death, and the strengthening of political alliances.

Arts. Body decoration and feather-headdress-bedecked wig—both worn mostly by men during public clan events—are the most notable visual arts nowadays. Clan parade formations and chants are striking performances. Public oratory is prominent on metaphor and theatrical gesture; it is subject to formal (not just substantive) evaluation. While their tunes are repetitive, the counting and mumming songs men and women sing involve poetic improvisations. Women crochet decorative net bags using local and imported thread, even the patterns evolved in planting gardens may have an aesthetic dimension.

Medicine. Sorcery exorcism and other curing procedures employ forest resources (leaves, bark) as well as a range of imported substances. In precolonial times, autopsies were performed to determine cause of death, and surgery was undertaken to extract arrows. Nowadays, rural aid posts, staffed by local medical orderlies, link communities with the provincial hospital in Mendi town. However, there are a host of conditions (including pregnancy and childbirth) for which Mendi are reluctant to use these services.

Death and Afterlife. Deaths are heralded by yodeling cries related from locality to locality. During the mourning period a feast (komenda) is prepared, gifts are given to solicit mortuary donations (koma), which are often made to the deceased’s maternal relatives, and community discussion centers around determining the cause. The body is usually interred in the local group’s cemetery to keep the deceased’s spirit (tom) around to watch over the living. In precolonial times, the skulls of ancestors were kept in special houses where pigs were killed when family members were ill. See also Poi, Kewa
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**Mimika**

ETHNONYM: Kamoro

**Orientation**

**Identification.** The Mimika people are named after the Mimika River in the central district of Irian Jaya Province of Indonesia (formerly, Netherlands, or Dutch, New Guinea). "Kamoro" means "living person" as opposed to "ghost." There is no native name for the area, but at winana, "real human beings," they contrast themselves with "not-real per-
sons" such as the adjacent Amat and Kapuakhu.

**Location.** The area is located between 4° and 6° S and 134°59' to 136°19' E, bounded by the Utakwa River in the east and the shores of Erna Bay in the west. The people in-
habit the lowlands traversed by some sixty swamp and moun-
tain rivers and creeks. The southeast monsoons bring rains that last from June to mid-September, but wet and dry sea-
sons are not clearly demarcated.

**Demography.** A population of approximately 8,600 (1995) lives in about thirty villages. Since 1961, Indonesian migrants have also settled in the area.

**Linguistic Affiliation.** The Kamoro language, of which six to eight dialects have been identified, is a member of the Amat-Kamoro Family of Non-Austronesian languages.

**History and Cultural Relations**

Oral traditions trace the origins of the Mimika people to con-
flct over sago groves among four local groups living at the
lowlands east of the Utakwa River. An invasion by a people to the south-
west triggered a chain reaction among other groups in the
area moving to the west. Linguistic evidence does point to a
generic relationship (gene of Mimika), and Sen anti, far to the northeast on the north coast of Irian Jaya, thus suggesting a possible prehistoric northeast-southwest
migration. Historical contacts with foreigners began perhaps as
early as a.d. 1600, with Chinese, Indonesian, and Dutch trad-
iers entering the area from the west via Erna Bay. In the early
twentieth century, while the area was under Dutch adminis-
tration, Ceramese Islamic traders appointed nominal local
representatives (sadja) in western Mimika, leading to a rush
for ironware, textiles, earrings, and beads in exchange for
sago, local foods, and slaves. In general, attitudes towards
foreigners passed through several stages: enmity and cautious
rapprochement; goodwill inspired by a strong desire for West-
ern commodities; disappointment and passive resistance to
interference with a seminomadic way of life; and, finally, fol-
lowing Japanese occupation during World War II, consis-
tence and resignation to the strangers’ permanent presence.
The entire Mimika population has now been baptized, but
due to a paucity of marketable resources, economic develop-
ment has been slow.

**Settlements**

The largest population concentration is found in the central and eastern regions, where villages range from about 60 to
400 inhabitants. In the past people lived in tiny dispersed
temporary dwellings scattered around semi-permanent long-
house settlements, and everyday life still consists of moving
up and down between sago groves upstream and fishing
grounds downstream. The traditional longhouse pattern is
still followed in the temporary settlements for sago produc-
tion, fishing, and foraging, but in the villages people have
adapted separate family dwellings introduced by missionaries
and the Dutch administration.

**Economy**

**Subsistence and Commercial Activities.** In order of im-
portance, major subsistence activities are: sago making; forag-
ing; fishing; some slash-and-burn gardening of tobacco, ba-
nanas, and tubers (especially in upstream settlements); and
hunting. Coconut palms are grown in all villages, but cash
cropping is of minor importance. Industrial art is limited and
controlled by Indonesian merchants. It concerns the supply of
tin for the local mill and some ironwood for export pur-
poses. Cash earnings are mainly dependent on migrant labor
outside the district in urban centers. Up-to-date and reliable
information is not available. Food production was part of a
cycle of extensive and shorter ceremonies, but this rhythm
has been interfered with by duties connected with govern-
ment administration. Many villagers leave for the sago and
fishing grounds on Mondays and return to the villages on Sat-
urdays in order to attend church services. A substantial
amount of work has to be done for the village, the school, and
for payment of taxes. Timber provides some cash earnings,
but migrant labor in urban centers is economically more im-