

1. Description

1.1 Name(s) of society, language, and language family: Mekeo , Austronesian language family, Papua New Guinea (1)

1.2 ISO code (3 letter code from ethnologue.com): Mek (1)

1.3 Location (latitude/longitude): Central Province of Papua New Guinea (1) 9° 15' 25" South , 147° 12' 0" East (2)

1.4 Brief history: The Mekeo people are believed to have inhabited their current territory for over 2,000 years, and have divided themselves into 4 different tribes within their territory. The Mekeo used to be a war-like society, and as a result in 1890 Catholic missionaries came to the island and attempted to “tame” the people and convince them to leave their war-like ways behind. As a result of the European influence, the people were significantly affected by European disease and several epidemics swept through the area. It is estimated that 80% of the population died throughout various epidemics in the late 1800's. In 1906, the Australian government took control of the people, and they were mistreated. They were used as a labor source to carry supplies for the Australian army through the mountainous island. They were also forced to plant cash crops instead of their food crops. In World War II, the Allied forces used the people and as a result, the Mekeo actually gained a lot of access to education, and now possess very high literacy rates (3).

1.5 Influence of missionaries/schools/governments/powerful neighbors: The Catholic missionaries were able to stop most of the violent warfare between the Mekeo people and neighboring tribes, but they were unsuccessful at converting the people to Christianity. As a result of the Allied forces use of the area in World War II, the island became pretty developed in the following years, but the people chose to remain true to their traditional societies and beliefs (3).

1.6 Ecology (natural environment): The Mekeo territory is primarily grassland with nearby forest, river, and swamp habitats. The villages are located between two rivers, which is a major source of conflict. The island experiences a monsoon climate, where there are two distinctive seasons; a wet season and a dry season (3).

1.7 Population size, mean village size, home range size, density: Before the epidemics wiped out much of the population, estimates were believed to be around 20,000 speakers. Now there are approximately 8,500 speakers. At the time of peak population, the villages were very densely populated with more than 1,000 people living in each village. Now, it is estimated that 100-500 people live in each village. There are 4 main tribes of Mekeo people, and they do not tend to travel outside of Mekeo territory as to avoid conflict with neighboring tribes (3).

2. Economy

2.1 Main carbohydrate staple(s): The main sources of the carbohydrates are sweet potatoes, taro, coconuts, plantains, yams, bread-fruit, and sugarcane (3).

2.2 Main protein-lipid sources: The main protein-lipid sources are wild pigs, wallabies, cassowaries, birds, and fish (3).

2.3 Weapons: Bow and arrow, blowguns?: The Mekeo have used bow and arrows in both hunting game animals and in war battles with enemy tribes (4).

2.4 Food storage: Not found.

2.5 Sexual division of production: Men perform the more difficult tasks in the forest, including cutting and clearing pathways whereas women perform easier clearing, planting, and harvesting. Only men are allowed to hunt, but everyone is allowed to fish. Women are the primary cooks, and child caretakers. Sorcery is very big in Mekeo society, and young men devote much of their time to sorcery rather than manual labor (3). In the past, men were “destined” to either the peace section of society or the war section of society. If a man was placed into the war section, he trained as an adolescent and became a warrior. If he was put into the peace section, he performed duties similar to the men of today (4).

2.6 Land tenure: Land is owned by clan groups. Every person, both male and female has right to certain pieces of land. There is a “peace chief” who distributes land, but they must get approval from the whole community in order to do so. Rights to land are determined by father’s status and home. Interestingly, members of other clans are allowed to garden in other clan’s land, but are not allowed to plant permanent tree crops (3).

2.7 Ceramics: There was not much found on ceramics, other than the fact that almost all pieces of artwork contain highly rigid , geometric designs (3).

2.8 Specified (prescribed or proscribed) sharing patterns: Sharing is highly emphasized within kin groups, especially between children (3).

2.9 Food taboos: Unmarried men living in the men’s houses are not allowed to drink water or coconut milk that has not been boiled. Also, unmarried men may not eat ripe bananas or fish. Women may not eat bananas ever, and may not eat kangaroo or cassowary a year after childbirth. No young children are ever allowed to eat eel.

2.10 Canoes/watercraft? Some evidence for use in possible trade (3).

3. Anthropometry

3.1 Mean adult height (m and f): Not found

3.2 Mean adult weight (m and f): Not found

4. Life History, mating, marriage

4.1 Age at menarche (f): Around age 13 (5).

4.2 Age at first birth (m and f): Male- 18-20, Female- 16-18 (5).

4.3 Completed family size (m and f): Not found.

4.4 Inter-birth-interval (f): Approximately 2-3 years (5).

4.5 Age first marriage (m and f): Male – 18, female -16 (5).

4.6 Proportion of marriages ending in divorce: Because of the strong Catholic missionary presence, not many divorces are recognized within the community, unless there is evidence of domestic violence. Also, in the past, there were very high bride service prices paid between families, so not many marriages were allowed to end in divorce (3).

4.7 Percent marriages polygynous, percent males married polygynously: Also because of the strong Catholic missionary presence, polygynous marriage is not formally recognized. A small percentage of males have multiple wives, but they are not publically recognized within the community (3). Prior to the missionary effect, polygyny was widely practiced, and today is usually only practiced by the richest of men in the community (5).

4.8 Bride purchase (price), bride service, dowry?: Most couples choose to elope, and as a result there is no form of bride service or dowry at the time of marriage. Instead, the ceremonial exchange of pigs between in-laws occurs after a baby is born (3). Another source indicates that brides are commonly purchased with pigs and dogs. Not doing so is thought to be dishonorable (5).

4.9 Inheritance patterns: Virtually everything is passed down within the community in a patrilineal fashion. There is a huge advantage for the eldest son, as he is the primary beneficiary of the father's wealth. Women can gain personal wealth through their possession of special clay pots, and these pots are usually passed down to daughters or given to sisters. Very personal items are not passed down at all, rather they are burned at the time of death and buried with the owner (3).

4.10 Parent-offspring interactions and conflict: Parents are not terribly involved in the lives of their children. The mothers do care for their offspring, but children are commonly put out to play with their peers, as to minimize interference with their parent's work. This could be seen as a technique to avoid or squelch conflict. In adults, it is considered very dishonorable to publicly fight or quarrel with a mother or father, so this conflict is not commonly seen (5).

4.11 Homosexual activities, social attitudes towards homosexuals: Also because of the heavy Catholic missionary influence, homosexuality is looked down upon, and there is not evidence of public homosexual activity. If homosexuality became public, it is believed they would be subject to public ridicule (3).

4.12 Pattern of exogamy (endogamy): Males are not allowed to marry any female in the same clan as his, and no female is that is related to him by means of his father's line of kin, no matter how distant (5).

4.13 What is the belief of the role of males in conception; is paternity partible? Are these "other fathers" recognized? Other fathers are usually recognized by the community, unless the mother is unmarried. Ironically, even with the semi-negative attitude towards female adultery, children born to other men are still publicly recognized (5).

4.14 What is the belief of the mother's role in procreation exactly? (e.g., "receptacle in which fetus grows"): Not explicitly found, but pregnant mothers are given special treatment in the community, and undergo certain taboos indicating that the people view pregnancy as important, and value the mother herself (5).

4.15 Is conception believed to be an incremental process (i.e., semen builds up over time)? No, there is no evidence of such a belief. The people expect conception after one sexual encounter (5).

4.16 Occurrence of sexual coercion, rape: It used to be especially common for bachelor men to undergo several rituals and taboos in a long process of wooing a married woman. They try many techniques to seduce a married woman and get her to leave her husband behind. Instances of rape were not found (5).

4.17 Preferential category for spouse (e.g., cross cousin): Anyone outside of the clan and husband's father's lineage (5).

4.18 Do females enjoy sexual freedoms? Yes, extramarital affairs happen often, and some of them are quite public. There has been conflict between the Christian influence and traditional practice, but at the time of one particular study, extramarital affairs were quite common and approved by society (5).

4.19 Evidence of giving gifts to extramarital partners or extramarital offspring: Yes, there is a ritualized process for bachelor men to court married women, part of which involves the gift giving of nuts and tobacco (5).

4.20 If mother dies, whose raises children? Grandparents and aunts commonly live in the same house as the mother, and are likely to care for children in such a case (3).

4.21 Adult sex ratio: number of adult males divided by number of (reproductive) females: Not found.

4.22 Evidence for couvades: Not found.

4.23 Different distinctions for potential fathers (e.g., lesser/younger vs. major/older): Age is not as much of an indicator of social status in Mekeo society as wealth is. The wealthier a potential father is, the more recognition he receives, and the more likely he is to be recognized as the biological father of a child, whether this is true or not (5).

4.24 Kin avoidance and respect? Parents are highly respected, and children are taught this principle at a young age (5).

4.24 Joking relationships? Joking relationships occur between people of similar ages within the clan, but never between a young and an old person. Joking between the young and old would be considered disrespectful and dishonorable on the part of the young person (5).

4.25 Patterns of descent (e.g., bilateral, matrilineal) for certain rights, names or associations: Patrilineal (4).

4.26 Incest avoidance rules: Males are not allowed to marry any female in the same clan as his, and no female is that is related to him by mean's of his father's line of kin, no matter how distant (5).

4.27 Is there a formal marriage ceremony? Yes, the daughter to be married is brought to her husband's house where they are both placed on a mat and sit back to back. There is a performance aspect to it, where the bride pretends to be reluctant for a while, then lights a cigar, which she gives to her husband. The husband smokes the cigar and they proclaim their marriage in front of their family, and they become married. A feast usually follows (5).

4.28 In what way(s) does one get a name, change their name, and obtain another name? Not found

4.29 Is marriage usually (or preferred to be) within community or outside community? (m/f difference?) Marriages are preferred to be within community yet not within their own clan or with a female who descended from their father's lineage (5).

4.30 Are marriages arranged? Who arranges (e.g., parents, close kin)? Yes, the chief and kin members consider different bride price offers and evaluate the social status of the potential husband. Once the family and chief have decided who will marry, the ceremony occurs (5).

4.31 Evidence for conflict of interest over who marries who: Not found.

Warfare/homicide

4.14 Percent adult (male) deaths due to warfare: In the past, the percent was fairly significant, as the Mekeo used to be a war-like society with constant battle and raids. Now, war has diminished, and the percentage has definitely decreased, although there are still a few raids between enemy societies that end in homicide (5).

4.15 Outgroup vs ingroup cause of violent death: Not found.

4.16 Reported causes of in-group and out-group killing: In-group violence is very rare now, because of the government control and missionary influence (5).

4.17 Number, diversity and relationship with neighboring societies (external relations): Neighboring societies do not commonly interact, except to trade, because of a long past of conflict and warfare (3).

4.18 Cannibalism? No.

5. Socio-Political organization and interaction

5.1 Mean local residential (village) group size: 100- 500 people (3).

5.2 Mobility pattern: (seasonality): People tend to stay localized in one spot within their territorial boundaries (3).

5.3 Political system: (chiefs, clans etc, wealth or status classes): There are “peace chiefs” and “sorcery chiefs” at the head of the each clan. They are given their power through patrilineal lineage, and are the most important people in a community. Interestingly, people are subject to the rules imposed by their mother’s and spouse’s chiefs as well as their own (3).

5.4 Post marital residence: After marriage, a husband, wife, and children live in the house. After a bachelor son is married, he moves back into the home with his parents (after living in a men’s house) with his wife. It is also common for aunts and uncles to live in the same house (3).

5.5 Territoriality? (defined boundaries, active defense): There are very defined boundaries within Mekeo society. The different clans have separate areas, and the borders between different societies are rarely crossed. There is much evidence of active defense systems in the past, during times of heavy warfare between the societies. But, as warfare has died out over time, so has the need for an active defense system (3).

5.6 Social interaction divisions ? (age and sex): There is no limit of interaction via age or sex, but it is considered best to interact primarily with people of similar ages to oneself. There is no evidence for limited interaction between sexes (5).

5.7 Special friendships/joking relationships: Not found.

5.8 Village and house organization: The villages are divided up into many groupings of house, in which many kin members live. If kin members do not live in the same house, they usually live within a close range to their other family members (3).

5.9 Specialized village structures (mens’ houses): Young bachelor men are taken away from their parent’s house and live in a men’s house until marriage. This is thought to be a spiritual process of becoming a man, and for training in sorcery (3).

5.10 Sleep in hammocks or on ground or elsewhere? Not found.

5.11 Social organization, clans, moieties, lineages, etc: There is evidence that the society used to be divided (and may still be) between a peace chief headed clan, and a war chief headed clan. The peace section includes a sorcerer, whereas the war section includes a battle sorcerer. It is believed that each chief and sorcerer had different duties. The peace chief’s job is to protect the people from attack, disease, and bad spirits, whereas the war chief’s job is to create black magic against the clan’s enemies (4). Each clan has a clan badge, which is a particular plant or animal that they identify with and regard highly (5).

5.12 Trade: There is lots of trade within the society, and exchange for goods is common. Sometimes trade crosses territorial borders, but usually only to gain very valuable items (3).

5.13 Indications of social hierarchies? The main source of social hierarchy appears to be wealth. The more pigs/dogs or property a man owns, the more highly he is regarded by society. Age also plays some role, as elders have much more status than young people (3).

6. Ritual/Ceremony/Religion (RCR)

6.0 Time allocation to RCR: Sorcery is very important in Mekeo society, and rituals are said to be performed on a regular basis. Young men spend years practicing love magic rituals rather than being “productive” members of society, because sorcery is so important to them (3).

6.1 Specialization (shamans and medicine): The chiefs of the clan are also the primary sorcerers. They are believed to possess such magical abilities because they have supposedly descended from the great ancestor, Akaisa. These sorcerers control all sect of magic including love magic, healing magic, and black magic (3).

6.2 Stimulants: There has been several descriptions of the Mekeo people using herbal substances to treat disorders and as parts of religious rituals.

6.3 Passage rituals (birth, death, puberty, seasonal): At death, there is a large ceremony in which the person is buried and the family grieves the loss. The grief period lasts for several months until another ceremony in which there is a feast and celebration, and the “cloud” of grief is lifted off of them by the sorcerer (3). After a child is born, all of the neighbors come out and sing outside the house all night, and the next day, the father slaughters a pig and has a feast for the mother and singers (5). Once a boy hits puberty and starts to wear his perineal band, there is a feast and celebration (5).

6.4 Other rituals:

- 6.5 Myths (Creation): There is a special ancestor named Akaisa whom which all the clan members are believed to descend from. Because of the heavy Catholic influence, the people have been taught Christian beliefs of Creation involving God and Jesus. As a result of this Christian influence, Akaisa is sometimes treated as a “Jesus-like” figure, and the indigenous and cultural beliefs are morphed. There are “bush spirits” that are believed to cause disturbances in the wildlife and cause human sickness and death (3).
- 6.6 Cultural material (art, music, games): Magic spells are chanted in a song-like form to the beat of a drum, and music is used in certain ceremonies (3).
- 6.7 Sex differences in RCR: The men are the only people allowed to perform religious rituals and magic. The women are allowed to partake in the ceremony, but the men are the ones leading the ceremony and “performing” the magic. The women wear different adornment during the ceremonies than the men (3).
- 6.8 Missionary effect: It is a little unclear, but there was definitely a strong Christian influence on the Mekeo people. The people are believed to have incorporated some Christian beliefs into their traditional indigenous practices. Overall, Christianity was rejected by the people, but the missionaries did have some effect (3).
- 6.9 RCR revival: Not found
- 6.10 Death and afterlife beliefs: Death is believed to because primarily by spiritual reasons and the family of the dead person is supposed to achieve a secret revenge to avenge the death. Dead people are believed to return to their ancestors, and the bodies are degraded upon death. Hair and other body parts are given to family members for use in sorcery (3).
- 6.11 Taboo of naming dead people? Not found
- 6.12 Is there teknonymy? Not found
- 6.13 Briefly describe religion (animism, ancestor worship, deism, magic, totems etc.): The religion is primarily a form of ancestor worship, with Akaisa being the ultimate ancestor and “Jesus-like” figure of the religion. Akaisa determines everything about life, in conjunction with other spirits. Sorcery is used to appease Akaisa and to bring good spirits and ward off bad spirits for the people (3).

7. Adornment

- 7.1 Body paint: Young men commonly paint themselves, especially for different occasions. The most common colors used are red, yellow and black (5).
- 7.2 Piercings: Both men and women have several piercings in their ears and usually have the septum in their nose pierced as well (5).
- 7.3 Haircut: Not found
- 7.4 Scarification: Young girls are tattooed throughout their childhood. After they are fully tattooed, there is a celebratory feast, and the girl is considered a woman and allowed to be married (5). Young girls are also burned in small circular patches up and down their arms to produce a spotted look on their arms (5).
- 7.5 Adornment (beads, feathers, lip plates, etc.): Feathers are commonly worn by males during rituals for courting women, and in the past during times of warfare (5).
- 7.6 Ceremonial/Ritual adornment: Women wear special petticoats made with leaves from a special kind of tree that have been painted black for rituals. Men paint their faces completely black during mourning rituals, and red during other ceremonies (5).
- 7.7 Sex differences in adornment: Women are said to wear grass petticoats during their daily gardening and fishing activities (5)
- 7.8 Missionary effect: Not found
- 7.9 Cultural revival in adornment: Not found

8. Kinship systems

- 8.1 Sibling classification system: Not much evidence found, but cousins are referred to as brothers and sisters to the same degree that biological brothers and sisters are (5).
- 8.2 Sororate, levirate: Not found.
- 8.3 Other notable kinship typology, especially cross-cousin (MBD/FZD) typology (Crow/Hawaiian/Omaha etc.): The Mekeo tend to follow a Hawaiian-type system in which aunts and uncles are referred to as mother’s and father’s as well as the biological parents (5).

9. Other interesting cultural features (list them):

1. Bachelors and widowers are not allowed to walk through public space during daylight hours unless it is during a ceremony or a dance (5).

Numbered references

1. http://www.ethnologue.com/14/show_language.asp?code=MEK
2. <http://www.mindat.org/maps.php?id=145984>
3. <http://www.everyculture.com/Oceania/Mekeo.html>
4. Bergendorff, Steen. "Contextual Translation -- Concepts And Practices Among The Mekeo Of Papua New Guinea." *Oceania* 79.3 (2009): 225-237. Academic Search Elite. Web. 8 May 2012.
5. Williamson, R.W. "Some Unrecorded Customs of the Mekeo People of British New Guinea." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Ireland and Great Britain* 43 (1913): 268-90. Print.
- 6.