

Valka-Mir Foundation Cultural Profile: The Kumdi Community of the Western Highlands

The United States of Kumdi

A Cultural Portrait of the Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea

IDENTITY & LANDSCAPE

Location Western Highlands, Kwinga Mamna

Mountainous terrain, characterized by a **cold climate**, high rainfall, and exceptionally **fertile, green soil**.

Distinctive Features

- **Language:** Melpa (primarily oral tradition).
- **Appearance:** Sharp noses and distinct light-skinned complexions.
- **Community:** Known as "Kumdistes" or the "United States of Kumdi."

SOCIAL FABRIC & JUSTICE

Patrilineal Society

A male-centered structure where leadership is held by men. Women often face high dependency and limited influence in decision-making processes.

Conflict Resolution

#LandDisputes

#VillageChiefs

#PigsAndMoney

Tribal fights, often triggered by land or minor disagreements, are resolved through **negotiations by chiefs** involving compensation in pigs or money.

"I am a very proud Highlander... it has built me into the person I am today."

#Anthropology #PNG_Highlands #CulturalIdentity

This document provides a comprehensive overview of the research findings regarding the Kumdi people of Papua New Guinea. It details their unique environmental context, social hierarchies, and the traditional mechanisms used to maintain peace within the Highlands region.

Geographic and Environmental Context

The research focuses on the Kwinga Mamna village, situated in the Western Highlands province. The physical environment is described as a mountainous, cold, and high-rainfall area characterized by exceptionally fertile soil and lush greenery.

The community identifies as the **Kumdi**, often colloquially and proudly referred to by locals as the "United States of Kumdi." While the community consists of seven distinct councils, they maintain a unified identity, with individuals sometimes referred to informally as "Kumdistes".

Community Identity & Environment

 **Location:** Highlands Region, PNG (Kwinga Mamna)

 **Climate:** Cold, rainy, and fertile mountainous terrain

 **Language:** Melpa (Primarily Oral)

 **Identity:** Kumdi (7 Councils)

Identity and Linguistic Characteristics

The Kumdi people possess distinct physical traits that differentiate them from other groups in the Highlands, most notably a tendency toward sharp noses and a lighter skin complexion. Their indigenous tongue is the **Melpa language** (Melpa topless). While the language is a vibrant part of daily life and oral communication, there are no definitive records of a written form.

Social Structure and Gender Roles

The community adheres to a strict **patrilineal society**, a structure that remains highly effective and influential in modern times. Social dynamics are a blend of socio-centric cooperation and individualistic (ego-centric) tendencies, depending on the person.

However, the patrilineal mindset deeply influences gender roles:

- **Leadership:** Men are viewed as the primary leaders and decision-makers.
- **Gender Bias:** Women's opinions are frequently dismissed or undervalued in community discussions.

Dependency: There is a strong cultural expectation for women to be 100% dependent on their husbands rather than acting as equal partners.

Conflict Dynamics and Resolution

Tribal conflicts have evolved significantly over time. In the past, disputes were primarily driven by land and were considered highly detrimental to the community. In contemporary times, conflicts usually arise from minor personal disagreements. While these can escalate quickly, they are generally resolved with more speed than in the past.

Conflict & Justice System

When disputes occur, the **Village Chiefs** mediate the resolution process. Peace is typically "bought" or restored through the exchange of specific assets:



Money



Food



Pigs

The impact of conflict is most severely felt in transportation. Since the village has only one road for entry and exit, any conflict effectively cuts off the community, impacting the movement of elders, women, and children. Justice is served through traditional mediation where village chiefs collect money, food, and pigs to settle grievances.

Key Data

- **Administrative Units:** 7 Councils within the Kumdi group.
- **Resolution Assets:** Money, Food, and Pigs (Traditional currency for peace).
- **Infrastructure Constraint:** Single-access road (One way in, one way out).

Conclusion

The Kumdi community maintains a strong sense of cultural identity and safety. Despite the challenges of a rigid patrilineal system and the logistical vulnerabilities caused by tribal friction, the residents express deep pride in their heritage. The efficiency of local leaders in resolving disputes ensures that the community remains a safe environment where traditional values continue to shape the personal growth of its members.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. So our research is based on the Highlands region of Papua New Guinea, and we have a total of 13 questions. The first question, where are you from? State your home province and your local village name.

Interviewee I'm from Western Highlands. The village is called Kwinga Mamna.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Thank you. Um, where is your place located? You describe your physical environment.

Interviewee The physical environment is, um, (clicks tongue) and cold. Um, it's very green, I would say.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee Yeah, it's very green everywhere. Fertile soil. Um, the climate is always cold. Yeah, and it rains a lot.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Is it on the coast, or it's on the mountain, or?

Interviewee On the mountains.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Thank you. Um, question number three, what do you call or refer to your ethnic group or community?

Interviewee Okay. The place, the whole p- place is called, um, Kumdi.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee Kumdi, and there's like seven councils. But then all together, they c- like, they call us ... They call themselves the United States of Kumdi.

Valka-Mir Foundation (laughs)

Interviewee Individually, you could refer to them as Kumdistes, but that's not, um, official.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay.

Interviewee Mm-hmm.

Valka-Mir Foundation Thank you. On the next question, can you describe the physical, um, appearance of your people that distinguishes them from the rest of the Highlands region and the rest of the country as a whole?

Interviewee Oh, wow. Um, (snorts) well, most of the features from, I mean, about the Highlanders are the same, huh?

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee But I could say like one, a distinct, two distinct features of, features of, um, my people would be, um, they have ... They tend to have very sharp nose.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee And, uh, light-skinned.

Valka-Mir Foundation Very light-skinned.

Interviewee Not like very, but there's like a distinct sort of color.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay.

Interviewee Complexion, I think, sorry, rather.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Thank you. Um, what is your indigenous language, and is it oral or written?

Interviewee Indigenous language, um, so, uh, what we normally speak is called, uh, Melpa. Melpa topless, Melpa language. I'm not sure if there are, like, records of it written or not, but orally, yes. Yeah, we speak it.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Um, the next question, what type of sociological structure do you practice? Is it patrilineal or matrilineal society, and how effective is it?

Interviewee Uh, it's patrilineal. It's been like that for many years.

Valka-Mir Foundation So is it still effective until today?

Interviewee It is. Very much so.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Um, is your community socio-centric or ego-centric? Meaning that does your community work together as a community to achieve something, or they only care about themselves and have an, um, individualistic mentality?

Interviewee Well, I would say that depends on, like, different individuals of the community, yeah. There are some people who, who enjoy working together-

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee ... to achieve, you know, peace and all that. And then there are some people who, who do things that are, um, self-centered.

Valka-Mir Foundation Self-centered.

Interviewee That only benefits them and feeds their ego.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Okay, thank you. Um, how do you tr- how do your traditions, culture, or social roles influence people's thoughts and actions?

Interviewee Hmm. Tradition, so I'll refer back to question six, huh?

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee Coming from a patrilineal society, most of what we do is influenced by that thought, by that, um, mentality at the back of our minds, huh.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee We lean towards the males. We see them as like our leaders.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee And like the downside of it is that, um, most people from that community, they don't really value women's opinions. Like mostly they d- dismiss them, huh. They listen to only the male's view, so that's how it affects our culture.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee Most of our cultures are centered around males. Males as the leaders. Also our social roles, thoughts, and actions also, women tend to, um, highly depend on men. Women from the Highlands, like from our place, they tend to highly depend on men because of that background, huh.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay.

Interviewee Most of them don't ... Um, they don't believe-

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee ... that they should help their husband, but because of their patrilineal mindset, um, they believe that they should be 100% dependent on their husbands, rather than like helping them, huh.

Valka-Mir Foundation Uh-huh.

Interviewee Yeah.

Valka-Mir Foundation Wow. Thank you. Um, question nine, what are the root causes of tribal fights? Can you describe what happen during tribal fights in your community?

Interviewee Hmm. Okay. So, um, I'll answer it in, um, two different contexts. The first one is, um, in the past, they fought. The root causes of tribal fights were, um, mostly over land disputes. They were like, um, I'd say they were small disagreements, but tribal fights were mostly, mostly, um, more, more effective-

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee ... I would say more, more ... Not, not effective, more, more detrimental, more damaging to the communities, huh.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee So most of it was over land disputes.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay.

Interviewee But in today's, um, today's time, the, um ... It's not really about land disputes, but, um, maybe minor things. Minor things such as, um, small disagreements between two people or, yeah, two people can mostly, like, lead to-It escalates very quickly.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee Escalates very quickly, but then they solve it, solve it in timeline very quickly as well, so yeah.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Thank you. Um, question number ten, how does tribal fight, tribal fights affect your daily life in the community, and how does it affect elders, women, and children?

Interviewee Okay, so mostly it affects, um, transportation.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee Like, um, it affects, yeah, transportation. Like everyone needs the roads to travel on.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee So, um, we have only one way in and one way out from the village, so when, when two, two tribes are fighting or, yeah, when- when there is a conflict, it affects everyone, 'cause everyone... no one uses the road, so yeah, it affects all women and children-

Valka-Mir Foundation Children.

Interviewee ... and elders, everyone in the community.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Thank you. Question number 11, how is conflict resolved when justice is served within your community? Are there any traditional ways of solving issues, and if there is, can you give a bis- brief descrip- description on how it's done?

Interviewee Okay, so I'm not sure how they did it, like, in the olden days, older days, but, like now, today, uh, most of these, um, conflicts are solved through mania.

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee So, mostly, um, men or... yeah, men from the village, they, um, they call, call upon, like, each other as, like, village chiefs, huh-

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee ... to get together, to get together to solve these things. And mostly these chiefs, they don't, they don't come alone, huh. They, they have, like, uh, discussions with their own members from their village, and then they collect, like, money or, you know, food-

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee ... pigs mostly to solve conflicts.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay, thank you. We have two last questions. Question number 12, how do you currently feel safe, feel in your community? How safe do you currently feel in your community?

Interviewee Oh, it's very safe. I f- I don't feel threatened or anything. It's very safe. Conflicts, conflicts happen, huh? But then, they, the leaders, they- they know how to con- they know how to solve these things, so they don't let it last for that long-

Valka-Mir Foundation Mm-hmm.

Interviewee ... to make us, I don't know, to cause drama or anything like that. It's safe. Very safe.

Valka-Mir Foundation Okay. Thank you. The last question, how do you feel about yourself being an islander, a Islander? How do you feel?

Interviewee Oh, I am a very proud Islander. I would say, like coming from that community, I, um, for my community, um, it has instilled values and, you know, culture, things I very much appreciate, has built me into the person that I am today, so yeah, I'm... Say I'm proud.

Valka-Mir Foundation Thank you so much.

Interviewee You're welcome.