Local Worlds and Global Objects

This paper is about “custom” and “modernity”, about locality and globality in Ambonwari village, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. Both “custom” and “modernity” are not static and ready-made, simply to be used or applied, but are reproduced, reconstituted and reinterpreted in action where they find their continuity. Just as it is the case with names, kin terms, social roles in different rituals, and so on, Ambonwari “custom”, with its emphasis on repetition and formalised practices, enables that the past moves into the future while the future moves into the past. In other words “custom” becomes “modern” while “modernity” becomes “customary”. A case study revolves around a new outboard motor which suddenly unbuckled from the canoe during a test trip, and sank into a creek. In order to recover the lost motor Ambonwari took different actions, performed minor rituals, and tried to explain recent dreams and past relationships between people and spirits. It was the actual absence of the motor that rendered the world present in a particular way. It became clear that young men did not properly “introduce” the outboard motor to the community of people and spirits. Only when the motor, following a special ritual, received its name, it was allowed to begin its relationship with the clan and the village ancestors who were and are held responsible for both “custom” and “modernisation”. Therefore, we could say that while Ambonwari became motorised, their outboard motors became Ambonwarified.