In anthropology and related disciplines it has become common to focus on how material objects travel over distances and on the shifts of meaning they pass through when moving from one social context to another. This article takes a different approach, arguing that the focus on the movement of objects between contexts will not lead to an understanding of their meaning within any particular context. What we call the meaning of an object is defined by its position in relation to other elements in the local social and cultural setting; thus to determine the meaning of any single element it is essential that we examine this wider context. By concentrating exclusively on “things-in-motion”, we deny the ongoing, localized process by which human beings create meaning, and instead classify the objects in terms of the observer’s conceptual categories. The example of consumption and modernity among the Mekeo in Papua New Guinea serves to illustrate the continued need for a localized and holistic approach to understanding the reality of a foreign culture and comparing it to other cultures, including one’s own. The case of contemporary Mekeo consumption strategies demonstrates that economic wealth and access to global products may act to counter cultural globalisation, and serve to maintain and even strengthen long-standing local traditions. Modernity and development are perceived by the Mekeo themselves as extensions of their ancestral traditions. Nevertheless, modern forms of social interaction, including disco parties, volleyball games and feasting, are not identical to those of former times, but represent an ongoing transformation of the local social and cultural system.