

An Ambonwari Woman Beyond the Vision in a Sepik Community

Abstract of thesis written in 2008 (Mag. Phil. study) for the Department of Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna, Austria

This diploma thesis, with its accompanying visual material, is based on three periods of fieldwork in Ambonwari village, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. The first of these was conducted in 2005, the second in 2007, and the third in 2008. The traditional lifestyle of the villagers has been challenged in the new millennium by their enthusiastic reception of a Catholic charismatic movement, by their growing interest in education and trade (rubber, cocoa, sago flour), and by increasing migrations of young men seeking work in towns. It was in this changing social environment, in which many traditional institutions were abandoned and moral values questioned, that I focused my ethnography on the lives of Ambonwari women. My research methodology incorporates data collected through participant observation, interviews and discussions, as well as material recorded on video and still camera. I do not attempt to bridge the written via the visual or *vice versa* as they both stand for themselves on similar levels of complexity. Besides women's practices, which I was able to observe and discuss with them, I was particularly interested in women's life histories and their views about the consequences that the current social and cultural changes have on their lives. Regardless of their common *habitus* every woman lives her own distinctive life. I try to show how conflict between individual agency and social agency often puts an Ambonwari woman under extreme pressure of social demands, restrictions, and expectations. For a married woman everything is so much easier than for a single mother or a widow. The life of a widow is especially hard: first, because of the low status which the Ambonwari community imposes upon her, and second, because her wellbeing mainly depends on the presence and willingness to help of sons and daughter's husbands. If they are not around, then she is a 'poor woman'. A similar hardship is faced by single mothers, those who take care of so called 'outside' children. Their number seems to be increasing. Of one hundred and twenty-nine women living in the village sixteen are widows and twenty-one have 'outside' children. Augustina Awsay's family, in which one can observe the lives of a widow and her two adult daughters, both single mothers, provides a thread

connecting my chapters. The life story of Augustina Awsay which reappears throughout my writing can be seen as a synecdoche for Ambonwari social life and their cosmology. My main objective has been to show that it is not only large-scale male initiation rituals and first menstruation rituals that have been affected by all the changes taking place in the village, but also other social institutions, such as the role of the 'mother of the village', for example. Changes in practices associated with kinship relations and marriage have had the most profound effect on women.

The subtitle of my thesis, 'Beyond the Vision', has several meanings. First, it shows how idealized social and cultural expectations (to be a good wife and mother) are often restraining, especially when a woman is faced with a specific social reality. In such a case she needs to go beyond the common vision and adjust to a particular situation. Second, it refers to the internalization of people's visual perception, how the world that is seen is continually (re)thought and processed by a person. Third, it reminds us that visual perception and expression comprise just one domain of human existence, while the other principal one, which can be obtained only through the oral-aural medium, can reveal unseen feelings and thoughts.