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Peer reviewed

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Angels in West Papua. In Memoriam Donatus Moiwend

Abstract

Obituary for Donatus Moiwend, West Papuan artist.

Keywords: *Pacific Art, Donatus Moiwend, West Papua*



Figure 1. Donatus Moiwend. Undated photograph by Rosa Moyuend

It is with great sadness that we share the news that Donatus Moiwend, the visionary West Papuan artist, passed away in 2018 (Fig. 1).¹ Donatus Stefanus Moulo Moyuend was born in Merauke around the end of World War II. He was a member of the Maklew clan, a sub-group of the Malind Anim (formerly written as Marind Anim). Moiwend was a largely self-taught artist who painted in a variety of styles. He also produced sculpture, adorned churches with his work, and even expressed his artistic vision in the landscape. Noting that there was already a Monet, a Manet, and a Bonnet, he playfully signed his artwork “Donet.”



Figure 2. Sculpture in Donatus Moiwend's workshop in Sentani, West Papua (Indonesia). This carving from tree roots refers to the controversial family planning campaign conducted by the Indonesian government, which promoted two children per family. Photograph by Stuart Kirsch, 2014

Moiwend was an active member of the West Papuan cultural renaissance during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was led by anthropologist, museum curator, and ethnomusicologist Arnold Ap. Their activities included the revitalization of West Papuan folk music, dance, material culture, and design. The movement ended abruptly after Ap's arrest and death at the hands of the state in April 1984 in response to protests against the Indonesian occupation of West Papua.² Moiwend was also detained by the Indonesian security forces at that time but was later released. He continued to produce paintings and sculpture with political messages, although he never explicitly discussed politics, choosing instead to communicate through his art (Fig. 2).

Moiwend once described his approach to art in the following terms: "I see a lot (*lihat banyak*), listen a lot (*dengar banyak*), read a lot (*baca banyak*), then do a lot (*berbuat banyak*)."

He added, “This is also my approach to life.” Many of Moiwend’s works reflect his close observation of nature. For example, one of his paintings was inspired by a puddle teeming with tadpoles, all kicking and shoving each other out of the way. It reminded him of the friction and strife inherent in politics, especially the behavior of politicians, so he titled it *Politics* (Fig. 3).³ He believed “the role of the artist is to help us understand the fundamental nature of what we see.”



Figure 3. Donatus Moiwend, *Politics*. Photograph by Stuart Kirsch, 2014

In 1967, Moiwend began work as a civil servant in the Indonesian government, based initially in Paniai, in the highlands, and moved to the capital of Jayapura in 1981. In 1979, he received an apprenticeship to study painting in Bali under the Dutch-born Indonesian artist Adrianus “Arie” Wilhelmus Smit, whose other pupils were associated with what became known as the “Young artists’ style” in Indonesia. In the mid-1980s, Moiwend received further artistic training in Bogor, Java. A civil servant until his retirement in 2004, Moiwend shared his work in art exhibitions in West Papua and elsewhere in Indonesia, as well as in the Netherlands and other European countries. In 2015, he helped to establish, develop the curriculum for, and teach art to students at the Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia di Tanah Papua (Arts Institute ISBI Tanah Papua), in Waena, a sub-district of Jayapura.



Figure 4. Donatus Moiwend, unfinished work with Asmat iconography, from his *Leaves* series. Photograph by Stuart Kirsch, 2014

Moiwend was deeply influenced by West Papuan art, especially images and designs from his own Malind Anim culture; Asmat iconography, which he learned about while posted near Agats; and Sentani motifs, given that he spent much of his adult life in Jayapura (Fig. 4). He actively promoted West Papuan artists and traditions in local and regional art classes, exhibitions, and competitions. He noted, “Art has a role to play in helping Papuan youth develop their capabilities. It can also point out things that disturb us.”



Figure 5. Donatus Moiwend, Untitled (Grove of Trees). This painting refers to the New Testament verses Matthew 7:17–20, which refer to good and bad trees, and how one will recognize them by the fruit they bear. The inscription in the lower left corner invokes Matthew 23:13–14, which refers to those who will be saved when the end comes. Photograph by Stuart Kirsch, 2014

Moiwend's upbringing in the Catholic Church also influenced his art (Fig. 5). Many of his major works were commissioned for churches built by the Franciscan Order (OFM) in Papua, with which he had a longstanding partnership. He painted church walls in Port Numbay (Humboldt Bay), in Keerom, Pegunungan, Bintang, and elsewhere in West Papua, including the Cathedral of Christ the King in Jayapura, which unfortunately is no longer standing. His skills as a painter and carver are still evident in many of the architectural embellishments of a cathedral erected on the grounds of an orphanage run by the Sisters of St. Joseph (Kongregasi Suster Dina Santo Yoseph) in Sentani, where he lived and had an art studio during the early years of his retirement (Fig. 6). He also constructed a rock wall and cave in a small embankment beside the church in the hope that people would come to pray at the Grotto of Maria and the surrounding gardens, which he planted and maintained, providing them with an experience of spiritual peace, reflection, and sanctuary.



Figure 6. Donatus Moiwend, Adam and Eve and the tree of knowledge, painted on the exterior of the chapel at the Children's Orphanage of Putri Kerahiman in Sentani, where Moiwend had his workshop. Photograph by Stuart Kirsch, 2014

He observed, “Through my art, I hope that people can encounter something of God, the spirit of life that pervades all things. Some people preach in the church but my art is my sermons. All of creation has to be treated with reverence. I use art as a voice to speak to others, but I also try to open myself to the deeper nature of being which speaks through my art.” Moiwend’s views on divinity were influenced by his membership since the 1980s in the Bahá’í faith, which teaches the value of all religions, as well as the equality of all peoples.

Moiwend believed in the universal truth of the divine, but his art simultaneously conveyed a powerful sense of belonging and place in the Land of Papua (Tanah Papua), the spiritual home of the West Papuan people. This was evident in his 1980 painting of St. Francis of Assisi in Papua, surrounded by indigenous flora and fauna, including a cassowary, a marsupial, and a number of colorful birds endemic to the region, which bears a resemblance to Henri Rousseau’s *The Dream*. His paintings of angels with Melanesian faces and hair are also emblematic of this relationship.

In the paintings by Moiwend in the now-demolished Cathedral of Christ the King in Jayapura, the Archangel Gabriel blows his trumpet and the Archangel Michael summons a choir of heavenly angels. The angels hover on the balcony wall above the congregation as they enter the cathedral, and all are West Papuan. That they are angels is apparent from their ornate wings. That they are West Papuan is evident from their black skin color and dark curly hair, as well as their tailfeathers from the Greater Bird of Paradise. The angels wear white tunics with broad red collars fringed with golden tassels, reminiscent of the red tunics worn for dancing and feasting on Biak Island. An image of the morning star, a powerful symbol of decolonization in West Papua, is affixed to the crown of their heads.⁴



Figure 7. Donatus Moiwend, Archangel Michael on the interior of the Cathedral of Christ the King, Jayapura. Photograph by Michael Cookson, 2001. From Michael Cookson, *Batik Irian: Imprints of Indonesian Papua*, PhD thesis (Australian National University, 2008), 312

The Archangel Michael holds aloft and plays a Malind Anim hourglass drum, or *tifa*, decorated with motifs from the Asmat and the Malind Anim at the top and base of the drum (Fig. 7). For Moiwend, the *tifa* was the most important instrument in West Papua because it allowed Papuans to communicate to each other through the language of music. Like all of the other angels depicted in the church, Michael is skillfully painted. His gown floats in the air and his image appears to fly off the walls of the church.

If there are angels in Papua, Moiwend once opined, “surely they will appear in clothes as beautiful as the bird of paradise and as radiant as the realm of nature in Papua.” He noted that when he began “painting angels with Melanesian faces, many people were confused, even angry. But as Papuans, we have our own religious . . . stories and beliefs, . . . [including] beings like angels. Why not black angels?”

And that, perhaps, is how we ought to remember Donatus Stefanus Moulo Moyuend himself: hovering over Tanah Papua, playing a Malind Anim *tifa*, while the Archangel Gabriel’s trumpet sounds the call for transformation, heralding a better life and future for the people of West Papua. For Moiwend devoted his life to helping Papuans learn about and express their own cultures and traditions, with the aim of forging a path between the two.

Mike Cookson completed his PhD on political and social change in Indonesian Papua at the Australian National University in Canberra and has worked extensively in academic collaborations with universities in Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, and the Pacific Islands.

Stuart Kirsch teaches anthropology at the University of Michigan. He has worked with West Papuan refugees living in Papua New Guinea since the 1980s. He is the author of several essays on West Papua and its borderlands, including “Rumour and Other Narratives of Political Violence in West Papua” and “Ethnographic Representation and the Politics of Violence in West Papua,” which appeared in the journal Critique of Anthropology in 2002 and 2010.

Jason MacLeod is a community organizer, educator, and researcher based in Australia and the cofounder of Make West Papua Safe. He is the author of Merdeka and the Morning Star: Civil Resistance in West Papua (Queensland University Press, 2015).

Notes

¹ This obituary originally appeared in several online forums in 2018 as “Angels in Papua. In Memoriam Donatus Moiwend” and in Bahasa Indonesia as “Malaikat-Malaikat di Papua. Mengenang Donatus Moiwend” (trans. Nisa Azam). It is based on interviews with Moiwend conducted by Mike Cookson, Stuart Kirsch, and Jason Macleod in 2006, 2014, and 2016. The authors are grateful to Donatus Moiwend’s daughter Rosa Moyuend for sharing her many insights into her father’s work and for her family’s permission to reproduce the images in

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² Diana Glazebrook, “Teaching Performance Art is Like Sharpening the Blade of a Knife,” *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 5, no. 1 (2004), 1–14,

<https://doi.org/10.1080/1444221042000201724>.

³ Moiwend generously allowed Stuart Kirsch to reproduce another version of this painting as the cover image for his book *Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text* (University of California Press, 2018).

⁴ Camellia Webb-Gannon, *Morning Star Rising: The Politics of Decolonization in West Papua* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2021).