Angels in Papua. In Memoriam Donatus Moiwend.

It is with sadness that we share the news that Donatus Moiwend, the visionary West Papuan artist, recently passed away. 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. He playfully signed his artwork “Donet,” noting that there was already a Monet, a Manet, and a Bonnet.

Moiwend was an active member of the West Papuan cultural renaissance during the late 1970s and early 1980s, which was led by the anthropologist, museum curator, and ethnomusicologist Arnold Ap. These practices 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, following protests against the Indonesian occupation of West Papua. Moiwend was also detained by the Indonesian security forces at the time but was later released. He continued to produce paintings and sculpture with political messages throughout his life, but never explicitly discussed politics, choosing instead to communicate through his art.

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.”

He believed “the role of the artist is to help us understand the fundamental nature of what we see.”

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.”

In 1967, Moiwend began work as a civil servant in the Indonesian government, based initially in Paniai, in the highlands, and moving 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” 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 exhibited his work in art exhibitions in West Papua and elsewhere in Indonesia, as well as in the Netherlands and elsewhere in Europe.

Moiwend was also 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. 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.”

Moiwend’s artistic work was also influenced by his upbringing in the Catholic Church. 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. His skills as a painter and carver are evident in many of the architectural embellishments of the cathedral.

He also constructed a rock wall and cave in a small embankment on the grounds of an orphanage run by the Sisters of St. Joseph (Kongregasi Suster Dina Santo Yoseph) in Sentani, where he lived and produced his art during the early years of his retirement. His hope was 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 sanctity.

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1 Moiwend generously allowed Stuart Kirsch to use this painting as the cover image for his book *Engaged Anthropology: Politics Beyond the Text* (University of California Press, 2018).
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.” Later in life, Moiwend became a member of the Bahai faith.

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.

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 Papua people. This was evident in his 1980 painting of St. Francis of Assisi in Papua, surrounded by indigenous animals. His painting of angels with Melanesian faces and hair are also emblematic of this relationship.

In the Cathedral of Christ the King, 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 is affixed to the crown of their heads.

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. 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 barefoot, black-skinned, and skillfully painted. His gown floats in the air and his image almost flies from the wall.

If angels “appear 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, for 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, and thereby find a path between the two.

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