

**SIR PETER BARTER, ROBERT BANASI,  
& EDWARD P. WOLFERS**

## **Madang Art Maniacs and the COVID-19 Pandemic in Papua New Guinea**

### **Abstract**

*Sir Peter Barter, with notes by Edward P. Wolfers, describes the creative and community work of Robert Banasi and the Madang Art Maniacs (MAM) during the COVID-19 pandemic. MAM's public art production has endeavoured to raise awareness about the pandemic and practices to promote health in Madang, the capital of Madang Province in Papua New Guinea, and in the nearby rural communities.*

**Keywords:** *Robert Banasi, public art, Madang Art Maniacs, Papua New Guinea, COVID-19 pandemic, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare*

Robert Banasi, originally from Milne Bay, has spent most of his life in Madang. Sir Peter Barter came across Robert's work several years ago when Melanesian Tourist Services (MTS) needed some commercial posters painted. Upon the outbreak of the COVID19 pandemic, they met again, and the Madang Art Maniacs (MAM)<sup>1</sup> group established by Robert indicated its willingness to raise awareness through posters prepared for the local communities, painted on black plastic using spray paint. The posters were displayed not only in the township of Madang but along the main roads in and out of town. The result was impressive; the messages in the posters were far more effective than those commercially printed because they sent a message to the people in a pictorial way and in the Tok Pisin language. It was not long before the Provincial and National Governments engaged Robert and MAM to undertake posters that have now been used throughout Madang and in other Provinces of Papua New Guinea.

In between producing posters, the MAM group under the leadership of Robert has undertaken training younger people to paint every Sunday. He has encouraged up to 100 young and eager Papua New Guineans to become artists. Robert has also accepted various commissions from business houses that include painting an entire building red and subsequent sign-writing for Coca Cola, painting the copra silos for No.1 Tea, and creating artwork at the Madang Lodge and Madang Resort depicting local fauna and flora as well as the history of Madang since colonisation. Whilst he has been paid for the commercial work, it is shared amongst the MAM Group to purchase paint and other materials, transportation, and some

food. Non-commercial works such as the COVID19 posters have been initiated by Robert and the MAM group without requesting funds.

Robert and his family live in a humble village-style house on Krangket Island, close to Madang. He has no vehicle and relies on his own legs or Public Motor Vehicles (PMVs) for transport. He has never sought fame or fortune, but, rather, he does what he does because of his desire to serve the grass roots people, and he does this gracefully, with a smile.

Robert's latest initiative is to produce public commemorations of the life of the late Grand Chief Sir Michael Thomas Somare (b. 1936). Two large-scale paintings, which are illustrated here, are in process at the time of this writing. Melanesian Tourist Services has assisted by providing art materials to complete this tribute to Papua New Guinea's founding father. The two paintings were prepared in memory and to honour the life and achievements of the late Grand Chief, who passed away on 26 February 2021. Widely mourned as "founding father of the nation," Somare was the Chief Minister who led the way to Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975, and subsequently served as Prime Minister for three further periods (1975-1980, 1982-1985, and 2002-2011) and a total of almost 17 years. He held a number of other Ministerial portfolios while serving as a Member of the National Parliament.

Media reports have speculated that, as community gatherings were held around Papua New Guinea in mourning for the passing and celebration of the life of the late Grand Chief, they might give rise to "a [COVID19] super-spreader event as people crowded together to pay respects to the country's first leader after independence."<sup>2</sup>

*Sir Peter Barter established the Melanesian Foundation in 1983, a non-profit organization that has encouraged tourists to donate funds to invest in remote communities, built health clinics in rural areas, and provided supplies to local schools. Sir Peter's political career began in 1992 when he was elected Member of Papua New Guinea's National Parliament for Madang Province and later served as Minister for Health. In 1995 he was the Governor of Madang until the Prime Minister asked him to take up the Provincial Affairs and Local-Level Government Ministry. In 2002 he was appointed Minister for Health and Bougainville Affairs, and later served as Minister for Finance, Acting Governor-General of PNG, Chair of the PNG National Events Council, Chair of the National AIDS Council, and Patron of the Institute of Medical Research. The Queen of England conferred upon Mr. Barter the O. B. E. (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) in 1997 and later awarded him the Knight Bachelor "for public service" in the 2001 New Year Honours.*

*Robert Banasi is of Madang and Milne Bay descent. Having been interested in art since the age of five, he developed his skill from primary through high to secondary school, before going on to complete a Bachelor of Art and Design at the University of Papua New Guinea (PNG). He is the founder and an active member of Madang Art Maniacs (MAM) and also has a small art business, FoxCity Designs, based in Madang. Blessed by the rich diversity of his cultural heritage, he seeks*

to capture the cultures of PNG by employing vibrant colours in abstract paintings. Banasi also serves as the Project Coordinator for the National Disability Resources and Advocacy Centre where he works to train people with disabilities to build their confidence and capabilities to take centre stage in advocating and lobbying for their rights in PNG.

Edward Wolfers is Foundation Professor Emeritus of Politics, University of Wollongong. His fields of research include politics, government, public policy, constitutional development, and international relations, decolonization, and aspects of societies, including race relations, and cultures in the Pacific, focusing on Melanesia, and Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and West Papua in particular. He is author, editor, and contributor of chapters to books, articles in journals, and papers presented to the United Nations and other international seminars as well as academic conferences. His ground-breaking book, *Race Relations and Colonial Rule in Papua New Guinea*, which was originally published in 1975, was republished by the University of Papua New Guinea Press in 2016.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the Madang Art Maniacs – MAM: Artists for Change, please visit their website (<https://mammediamadangpng.wordpress.com/2020/03/17/madang-arts-maniacs-mam/>).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Packham and Charlie Peel, “Covid’s northern exposure,” *The Australian*, March 17, 2021, p. 1.



Figure 1. Madang Art Maniacs (MAM), *Sanap 1m Long Way Lo Mi* (Stand one metre away from me), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 2. MAM, *Helpim Me, Helpim Yu, Stap Lo Haus* (Help me, Help yourself, Stay at home), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3. MAM, *Corona Virus. Wasim Han Wantaim Soap* (Corona Virus. Wash your hands with soap), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. MAM, *Mam O, Yumi Sanap Longwei na Stori. Stap Long Wei Long Ol Narapela* (Mam O. We stand at a distance and tell stories. Stay a long way from other people), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5. MAM, *Keep Your Distance. 1M. COVID-19*, 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 6. MAM. *MAMi Tok 'Tap Yongwei Yo Mi'* ([Madang Art Maniacs] say stay a long way from me), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 7. MAM, *Corona Virus. Wasim Han Wantaim Soap!* (Corona Virus. Wash your hands with soap), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 8. MAM, *Keep Your Distance. Stap Longwe Lo Oi Narapla* (Keep your distance. Stay a long way from other people), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 9. MAM, *Korona Vaires Em Ino Fani* (Corona Virus is not funny), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 10. MAM, *Toksava: Kranget Island* (Information: Kranget Island), 2021. Spray paint on black plastic. Madang, Papua New Guinea. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 11. MAM, Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare (in process), painted billboard, Bates Oval, Madang, March 2021. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 12. MAM, *Grand Chief Sir Michael Somare* (in process), painted billboard, Bates Oval, Madang, March 2021. Courtesy of the artist