

BREAKING THE MOULD: Priests unlike Others

A Lecture in Honour of

Rev. Fr. Professor Joseph Kenny, O.P. (1936-2013)

by

Patricia Oyelola

**On the Occasion of the
85th Anniversary of The Nigerian Field
1931-2016**

The double-pronged steeple of the Dominican Chapel stabbing the sky has become such a familiar landmark in Ibadan that we forget the revolution it represents in Christian art in Nigeria and the man who was partly responsible for this revolution—Rev. Fr. Kevin Carroll, SMA (1918-1993). Father Kevin and our own Father Joe have many things in common. Both are of Irish descent, they entered the priesthood in their 20s and served in northern and southern Nigeria. Guided by the teaching and needs of the Church, each man went on to make his unique contribution to life in Nigeria for which they developed a deep and abiding love and respect.

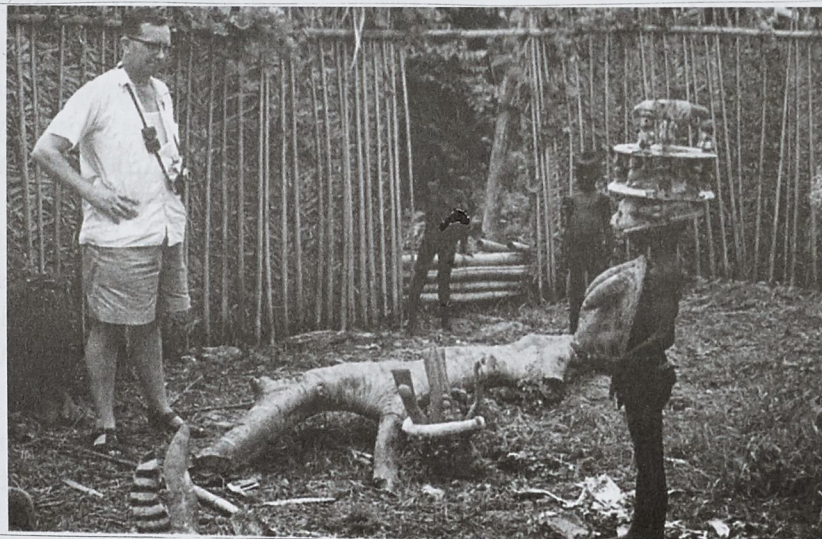
Father Joe undertook postgraduate studies in Arabic and Islam and was active nationally and internationally in inter-faith dialogue, aided by his proficiency in languages. He translated the psalms into Hausa and preached in Arabic regularly at a Lebanese church in Lagos. Father Kevin, who acquired complete fluency in Yoruba as well as proficiency in Hausa, Tiv and Kamperi, was chosen by Rev. 'Doctor' Patrick Kelly, the Irish Provincial of the Society of African Missions, to head the Oye-Ekiti workshop project in 1946, in pursuit of the inculturation policy of the Catholic Church. Both men were intellectuals: Father Joe, becoming Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Ibadan in 1994, lists 230 publications in his CV. Father Kevin wrote books on Yoruba religious carving and Nigerian architecture, the former work recognised as a benchmark by historians of African art.

Father Joe's interest in the Nigerian environment led him to become a member of the Nigerian Field Society where he held at various times the posts of Ibadan branch

treasurer and national secretary. Not only did he typeset the journal for many years, he crucially stepped into the breach when we lost two editors in rapid succession and kept the publication afloat. Father Kevin, through his interest and patronage, boosted



Fr. Kenny discussing the preparation of the Nigerian Field with Pat Oyelola, the former editor



Rev. Fr. Kevin Carroll S.M.A. conducting field work in Ketu Dahomey, (now Benin Republic) in 1964
photo courtesy John Picton & NCMM

the careers of several Nigerian artists, including Lamidi Fakeye (1925-2009) and Bruce Onobrakpeya (b.1932). He transformed the character of church art, music and ecclesiastical dress. Nigeria finally claimed these two remarkable men as her own, giving Father Kevin a final resting place at Oke Are and Father Joe, here at the Dominican Community, Samonda, Ibadan.

But what was the inculturation policy of the Catholic Church and how was it implemented in Nigeria? To understand this we must go back in history to 19th century missionary enterprise in Nigeria. Most of the early Christian missionaries were European, differing from the local population in colour, language and dress and bringing along with them a load of foreign cultural baggage, including art, architecture and music. Samuel Ajayi-Crowther (later bishop) was an exception in some respects. He realised the crucial role of language in evangelisation and produced in 1852 his *Grammar and Vocabulary of the Yoruba Language*.

The attitude of missionaries towards indigenous culture was usually intolerant and hostile, the result of misunderstanding and ignorance. This led to the wholesale destruction of carved objects regarded as "idols", an activity in which Christian converts often enthusiastically participated. This iconoclasm has continued into the 21st century with extremist Christian sects not only destroying objects of cultural significance but also physically assaulting their custodians (see *The Guardian*, May 18th 2002: "Rage against the gods").

Some modern zealots, however, temper their pious rage with commercial opportunism, not destroying the "idols" but carting them off to sell (*The Guardian*, 2002) on extremely lucrative enterprise. Such "idols" command high prices on the international art market; being appreciated as outstanding examples of the carver's art.

Evangelism was accompanied by health-care and education. The institutions established by Christian missionaries were distinguished by excellent standards and the devotion of their personnel, whether secular or religious. It is to the credit of the founding fathers that several of these institutions are still flourishing today, for example, St. Gregory's College, Lagos, founded in 1881 and the Sacred Heart Hospital, Abeokuta, established in the late 19th century.

African converts, particularly the *Saro* (returnees from slavery who had come back to Nigeria through Sierra Leone) adopted the dress and other elements of culture of the white missionaries. The Presbyterian missionary in Calabar, Hope Waddell admits in 1863 to using clothes sent from England to attract children to the mission

school but says that care must be taken to avoid the impression that this was a form of bribery! Meanwhile groups of pious ladies in England were sewing the voluminous, all-concealing up-to-the-neck, down-to-the-ankle gowns known as “Mother Hubbards” (see Lyndersay: 2011). These garments were not related to any form of indigenous clothing but were inspired by English ideas of decorum and decency.

Biobaku writes of the mid 19th century in Abeokuta as a “period of joyous imitation of the white man”. Leading chiefs sent their sons to live with the missionaries and young men took English surnames Chief Ogunbona himself delighted in the appellation *Agboke t’oyinbo* (a man who lives upstairs like a white man). He was the first to build a storey-house in Abeokuta.

Church music and art were all imported from Europe by the missionaries. The title of the CMS hymn-book: *The Hymnal Companion* gave rise to an amusing deliberate mis-translation into Yoruba: *Imu nla ko pa’nia* (a big nose does not kill a person)! Hymns were accompanied by harmonium, (a key-board wind instrument with pedals operated by the player). Whilst CMS churches were relatively unembellished, Catholic churches were adorned with images and pictures designed to appeal to an European aesthetic which often romanticised representations of Jesus and his Mother.

The Catholic Church began to question the Eurocentric attitude of the missionaries, which devalued and underestimated the life and culture of non-European converts. Under Pope Pius XI (1922-39) the Church began to appreciate non-European, including African, art and to de-colonise its structure in countries outside Europe. In 1926 the first six local Chinese bishops were consecrated.

A prime mover in this new interest of the Church in the art and culture of non-European peoples was Archbishop Celso Costantini (1877-1958). He began to shape the theology of “inculturation” which “proposed that the church should encourage Christianity to flourish within the local culture (and notably its artistic expression) rather than imposing European culture while spreading the Gospel”. (Bridger: 2012).

This message resonated within the ears, heart and mind of the Rev. Dr. Patrick “Doc” Kelly, a member of the Society of African Missions (SMA) which staffed schools and churches in Nigeria and other Anglophone colonial territories in West Africa. Founded by Bishop Melchoir de Brésillac in the 1850s, the society emphasised the importance of understanding and respecting the culture of the peoples served by the

SMA Father Patrick had taught in several SMA schools in Nigeria in the 1940s which mainly turned out students who provided clerical labour for British commercial interests and the colonial bureaucracy. This he heartily resented believing that this kind of education was not geared towards the needs of the local people. So Doc Kelly, who in 1946 had been elected religious superior of the Irish province of the SMA, presented the society with a radical proposal for a new type of educational institution sited in a rural setting far away from cosmopolitan cities like Lagos and Ibadan: Oye-Ekiti. The project was to start with an arts' workshop which would serve as a demonstration centre and eventually develop into a full-fledged vocational college. To run the pilot Oye-Ekiti scheme, Doc Kelly recruited two young SMA priests, Rev. Fr. Sean Mahoney (1920-2001) and Rev. Fr. Kevin Carroll (1918-1993), who both had artistic and technical skills and were not bound by the 'narrow' Eurocentric mind-set of older missionaries.

Kevin Carroll joined the SMA as a young seminarian and was ordained priest in 1942. He was sent to teach arts and crafts in a Catholic teacher-training college in the then Gold Coast where he observed local wood-carving and kente weaving techniques. Sean Mahoney too had an interest in and aptitude for art. As part of their preparation for directing the Oye-Ekiti project, the two young priests took an intensive short course in religious art in London, taking the opportunity to study the African holdings of the British Museum and to observe contemporary liturgical art production, including vestment design. The Yoruba as a whole are renowned for their highly developed, vigorous sculptural tradition.

Oye-Ekiti in particular is situated in an area rich in artistic talent which has been documented by John Picton, Emeritus Professor of African Art, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London and Dr. Roslyn Walker, former director of the National Museum of African Art, Washington D.C. The sculptors created architectural elements such as doors and veranda posts for chiefly dwellings, statuary for shrines and religious festivals, ceremonial drums for royalty and the *orisha* and containers for the apparatus used in the Ifa divination system. Weaving on both the vertical (female) and horizontal (male) looms also flourished in Ekitiland, textile arts being a key component of Yoruba culture. The intricate art of creating designs in beads on the head gear of oba had leading exponents in Efon-Alaye Ekiti project had indeed fallen on fertile ground.

Doc Kelly's mandate to Fr. Sean and Fr. Kevin was to "establish a centre to study, among other things, the adaptation of African crafts to Christian uses and to

experiment in this field". Christianity had reached Ekiti in the late 19th century, but when Fr. Sean and Fr. Kevin arrived there in 1947, there were still many orisha worshippers in the community as well as Christians and Muslims. Fr. Kevin, through extensive observation and research, identified three sculptors of exceptional skill: Areogun (obit.1954) Bandele, his son, and Lamidi Fakeye © 1925-2009)—of these, Areogun was an Ogun worshipper, Bandele was a Catholic and Lamidi was a Muslim. How was it possible for a non-Christian carver to create works for use in a place of Christian worship? After examining many examples of pre-Christian Yoruba sculpture, Fr. Kevin came to the conclusion that Yoruba carving was a profoundly humanistic art, reflecting the everyday life of the people and significant events in the life of the community. A door, for example, could show women pounding yam, warriors on horse-back with their captives and a stranger riding a bicycle, all with coiffure and costume carefully rendered. The super structure of a gelede mask could carry images of black-smiths, tattooers, leather-workers, potters, weavers, dyers, hunters, traders, all inhabitants of the everyday world of the Yoruba (Drewal: 1983). In other words, there was nothing fundamentally un-Christian in the work of non-Christian carvers. However, there remained the problem of specific events in the Bible to be illustrated by the carvers for the edification of the faithful, just as the artists of mediaeval Europe had created works for the education of the non-literate congregations and the beautification of the churches.

Fr. Kevin explained how the Oye-Ekiti project worked: "I narrate the stories, answer the carvers' questions, discuss technical details and help them to improve their interpretation by frequent repetition of the same themes" (Carroll: 1966).

The result was an art illustrating Biblical events executed in an identifiable Yoruba style learnt by the carvers who had all been trained through the apprenticeship system. Men and women weavers, bead-workers and leather-workers were also engaged by the Oye- Ekiti project to produce ornamental cloths for church fabrics and beaded veils for the tabernacle. Images of the three Kings who came to present gifts to the infant Jesus, displayed at Christmas, manifest artistry in a variety of media: wood, fabric, beads and leather.



Areogun



Bandele, son of Areogun

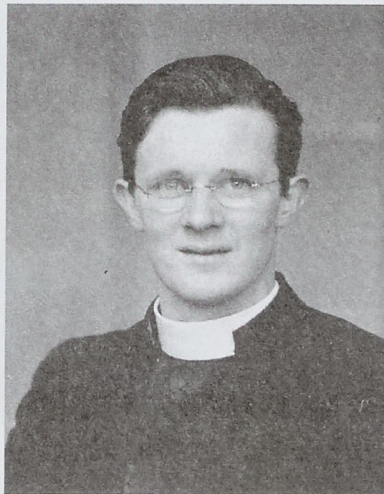


Lamidi Fakeye

[All photographs courtesy Nicolas Bridger]



Rev Fr. Kevin Carroll
S.M.A.



Rev Fr. Sean Mahoney
S.M.A



Rev. Fr. Patrick "Doc" Kelly
S.M.A.

[all photographs courtesy Kevin Carroll SMA]

What was the reaction of the local Catholic community to this radical Yorubianisation of church art? They did not like it! For them, the Yoruba-style images recalled the old pre-Christian carvings, so vehemently attacked by the old missionaries. Yoruba beadwork and textiles did not evoke such hostility, however, and were accepted as fitting embellishments for church interiors and for priestly vestments. Similarly the adaptation of Christian hymns to local Yoruba linguistic and musical forms, the result of a life-long collaboration between Fr. Kevin and Joseph Ojo, was absorbed into Catholic worship.

Meanwhile, reactions to the Oye-Ekiti experiment from the wider Catholic community in Europe and North America were positive and enthusiastic, resulting in orders for art pieces from the Oye-Ekiti workshop artists. The idea of indigenous Christian art was in tune with the era of African independence from colonial rule and the civil rights struggle. Africanist art scholars in England and America saw the Oye-Ekiti experiment as a successful attempt to re-invigorate Yoruba traditional sculpture.

As Bridger states: "Both this Christian genre and its closely related genre of Yoruba neo-traditional carving were significant elements in the construction of cultural autonomy and the re-assertion of nationalism and ethnicity through the continuities of traditional Yoruba culture before and during Nigerian liberation and independence".

Doc Kelly, the founder and mentor of the Oye-Ekiti experiment, was not renewed as leader of the Irish Province of the Society of African Missions in 1952. Some members of the SMA complained that Doc Kelly spent too much time in Africa and not enough time on administration at the SMA headquarters in Ireland. By 1954, the newly installed provincial superior ordered the Oye-Ekiti workshop to be closed on the grounds that it was no longer financially viable.

This did not mean the end of the Church's 'inculturation' policy, however. Fr. Kevin and Fr. Sean were re-deployed but continued to collaborate with the two leading carvers from the Oye-Ekiti project: Bandele and Lamidi Fakeye, providing them a steady flow of commissions for church doors, baptismal fonts, screens, statuary, crucifixes and devotional pieces. Lamidi's fame spread internationally and by the 1960s he was visiting France, Britain and the United States for lecture-demonstration tours at many universities and museums. In 1978, he was given an appointment at the Department of Fine Art, Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, where he worked and taught until his retirement.

Father Kevin became increasingly involved in church design after the closure of the Oye-Ekiti experiment. Major projects with which he was involved were the Catholic Chapel of the University of Ibadan (1954) and St. Paul's Church, Ebute Meta (1956-1962). Fr. Kevin gave Bruce Onobrakpeya, then an art teacher at St. Gregory's College, Lagos, a major commission for a series of 14 large paintings of the Stations of the Cross for the interior of St. Paul's. This led to other commissions, boosting the career of 'Papa Bruce', now known internationally as Nigeria's master print-maker.

From 1977-1982, Father Kevin was involved in the design and building of two chapels in Papiri and Guffanti in northern Kwara State. The interior wall decoration was inspired by the geometric designs of the Kamberi people and executed by a local artist, Enugu Kagbaar! Other design elements were influenced by Hausa and Nupe sources. Fr. Kevin had a breadth of artistic vision that transcended the early Yoruba experiment of the Oye-Ekiti project and sought to be relevant to the area in which he was called upon to work. He was frequently asked to advise and guide priests in the execution of Nigerian design projects for church interiors, but found he could only handle a fraction of the work that was wanted. As he remarked wryly: "It is fortunate that one Mission Society made a serious initiative in this field".

Fr. Kevin wrote two major books on Nigerian art: *Yoruba Religious Carving* (1967) and *Architectures of Nigeria* (1992), as well as many articles. His fieldwork which extended over more than four decades endowed his work with an authority unequalled by scholars who made only brief forays into the field. Indeed, he was often consulted by them. John Picton, Emeritus Professor of African Art of the University of London and Fr. Kevin's life-long friend, pays tribute to his "complete command of Yoruba" and his advice that he (Picton) should take an interest in all aspects of and developments in Nigerian art practice if he were to have any hope of understanding anything. John Picton's subsequent career and extensive publications on carving, textiles, painting, print-making, fashion and photography show that he took Fr. Kevin's advice to heart.

The buildings of the Dominican Community at Samonda to which Fr. Kenny belonged are a prime example of the inculturation theology propounded by Bishop Melchoir de Bresillac in the 1850s, elaborated on by Archbishop Celso Costantini (1877-1958) and put into practice by Fr. Kevin Carroll from 1946 until his death in 1993. However, the artist who designed the buildings at Samonda, Demas Nwoko (b. 1935) differed in training, exposure and ethnicity from the neo-traditional artists with whom Fr. Kevin worked in Oye-Ekiti. Demas was a member of the first group

of Nigerian artists to be trained in a tertiary institution in Nigeria: the Zaria branch of the Nigerian College of Arts, Science and Technology, later to become Ahmadu Bello University.

The art students, including men such as Uche Okeke (1936-2016) Bruce Onobrakpeya (b. 1932) and Yusuf Grillo (b. 1934) who later became icons of modern Nigerian art, felt dissatisfied with the type of instruction they received in Zaria which emphasised European art history and techniques, although they remained on good terms with their lecturers. Under the leadership of Uche Okeke they formed "The Zaria Art Society" which met to discuss the nature of modern Nigerian art and came up with the theory of 'Natural Synthesis'. In the words of Uche Okeke himself (1960):

Our new society calls for a synthesis of old and new, of functional art and art for its own sake. That the greatest works of art ever fashioned by men were for their religious beliefs go [sic] a long way to prove that functionality could constitute the base line of most rewarding creative experience.

The choice of Demas Nwoko, whose designs are always based on African philosophical as well as functional considerations, is in harmony with the character of the Dominicans, distinguished by their intellectual prowess. The initial commission was for a carved altar-piece for the chapel, which Demas executed in geometric Aniocha-Igbo style. The interior of the chapel, also designed by Demas, is distinguished by mighty carved wooden columns which still bear the marks of the carver's tools, linking man and material in the service of God. The geometric decoration on the chapel doors connects them stylistically with the altar. In the refectory area, sun-breakers were cast in cement in moulds of natural bamboo



The Dominican Chapel, Samonda, Ibadan

which endow them with an organic quality, referencing the plants in the adjacent garden.

Inculturation is also evident in other forms of art practice. The textile artist, Anne Salubi and Margaret Onabolu Areo, inspired and encouraged by Fr. Kevin, created chasubles, altar cloths, altar backdrops and vestments using *aso oke* and batik (Geteloma: 2005). Influenced by the secular practice of wearing *ankara* (African print textiles) emblazoned with the image of a deceased elder, the Catholic Church commissioned a factory print to commemorate the beatification of Father Tansi by Pope John Paul II in 1998, bearing an image of the pontiff with Father Tansi and other symbolic designs. This fabric was worn by both lay persons and religious orders, creating a sense of identity and unity. Many Catholic Church societies now have their own *ankara* worn by their members as a badge of solidarity.

Father Kevin and Father Joe were two of a kind, both priests living under the rule of their respective orders, the Society of African Missions established in 1856 and St. Dominic in 1215. Their work was guided by the teaching and the needs of the Church but each man made his own individual contribution which made an impact on Nigeria. Father Kevin, through his appreciation and encouragement of Nigerian art forms for Christian uses, paved the way for changes which are now accepted as normal practice e.g., the use of local languages for hymns and prayers; drums for the accompaniment of hymns; locally produced textiles for vestments and altar cloths, church doors embellished with carving.

Father Joe, in response to the call of the Church for inter-faith dialogue, undertook post-graduate studies in Arabic and Islam so that his contribution might be built on a foundation of thorough knowledge and respect and direct communication. The fact that he could quote from the Koran as readily as he could from the Bible earned him the nickname 'Alhaji Joe' and the admiration of the Muslim community.

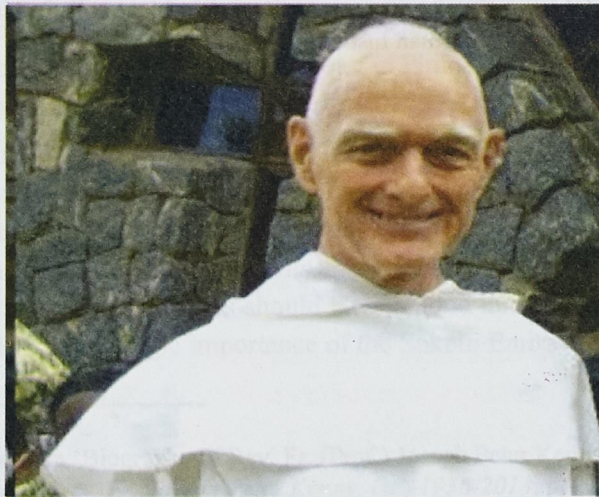
Joe was endowed with many talents and involved in activities reflecting a wide range of interests. An accomplished pianist, he was a valued member of the Music Circle. He was a polyglot and no one knew exactly how many languages he could read and speak. His interest in the world of nature made Joe an enthusiastic member of the Ibadan branch of the Nigerian Field Society since the 1980s. He was instrumental in establishing 40 active bee hives producing honey to raise funds for the Dominican community and he also planted and nurtured fruit trees on the grounds. He became, at various times, treasurer of the Ibadan branch of the Nigerian Field Society and national secretary. He was also of inestimable assistance to the journal of the society, established in July 1931 and still published today. He typeset

the journal for many years and when the society lost the services of two editors in rapid succession, Fr. Kenny stepped into the breach and kept the journal afloat.

He was conversant with all the latest developments in computer technology and adopted a new technique—‘mirror imaging’—which speeds up production and reduces costs. Joe’s immense contributions to the life of the Nigerian Field Society and its journal were always made with great good humour, without any fuss.

Everyone thought Joe had nine lives! He survived a car accident, a moped accident, a severe electric shock, the implantation and subsequent removal of a pace-maker and two armed robberies. When one of the robbers told Joe to lie face downwards, he refused and when threatened with death, replied confidently: “Go ahead and shoot. I will be going to heaven, you will go to hell.” He lived to tell the tale!

Joe was an American but his devotion to Nigeria led him to take Nigerian citizenship of which he was very proud. He had expressed the wish to die in Nigeria but this was not to be. However, his body was returned to the Dominican Community here in Samonda where he was buried on February 28th 2013. His funeral was attended by hundreds of people, both lay and religious. As his body was lowered into the grave, guns boomed in homage to a great man. Small in stature but mighty in compassion and intellect, with an Irish twinkle in his eye, Joe Kenny is unforgettable. *May light perpetual continue to shine upon him. Amen.*



Rev Fr. (Professor) Joseph Peter Kenny, OP (1936- 2013).

Suggested Reading

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