

St. Peters Catholic Church- Ekeya: The cradle of Catholicism in Akwa Ibom State



With the flow of time, since year dot that generations of people lived here, the monastery, cathedral and the ancient popular spiritual habitat has placed their stamp on nature and cultural activities of Ekeya. Favored by nature with a mild climate, protected from the wild winds, a manageable size with the river providing an ideal means of transportation and trade to early dwellers. This colonial history and footprint is yet to be gazetted by government at all levels and even the hierarchy of the Catholic church itself.

Around 1904, the first Catholic nomads arrived Akwa Ibom State soil along the steep slopes from the ancient capital city of Calabar to introduce the inhabitants to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They stopped the killing of twins too like Mary Slessor also did in most parts of the then Cross River State. What a renaissance of a colonial footprint it has turned out for history to reckon.



Witness to this ancient history of a community-based church is an exceptional architecture and an 11cm high limestone monument to savor this historic piece of relics. **It was only within years that St. Peter's Catholic Church gave birth to St. Mark's Catholic Church, Oron and St. Paul's Catholic Church, Amamong and St. Joseph Catholic Church, Anua- Uyo were the hospital replicated after the early day's missionaries journeyed.** The church structure finally completed

in 1905 was acknowledged worldwide as the existing statuette and remains a stone sculpture in the modern Akwa Ibom state. A replica can be admired in the Vatican and the English Westminster models, where they have original natural historical lineage.

Following the chaos of the emigration of nations, **it was this piece of monastery that shaped the economic and cultural life of Ekeya and by extension the entire Catholic community in Akwa Ibom State.** By the end of the 20th century, almost 3 quarters of the vineyards were owned by the church. **At a time, it became a center point for other monasteries within the suburbs. Its winegrowing, fishing exploration and trade flourished with woods and seafoods transported by barge to Europe and in return other goods arrived in Ekeya.**

Beyond the spiritual, special pathways were created on the riverbanks, laying sea routes to water resources and trade ways. **Many world monasteries did not survive the reforms of the 18th century secularization, but the mendicant order monasteries of later dates like St. Peter's Catholic Church did.** It survived the times. The hardships and the betrayals. Unaffected on the other hand, St. Peter's Catholic Church, Ekeya displayed natural history in the old town.



This supposedly living world cultural heritage connects on exemplary revitalization of an old town with an old-time religion. **As I strolled across the lawns, I got lost in thoughts, dolling out accolades through its medieval lanes, romantic arcades, convivial cafes and spiritually seduced into a secluded tavern gardens that helps one stroll and pass the time.**

On its vantage account of fantastic positioning high on a cliff hill that creates a magnificent view of the Atlantic House (MarthaShaw) building along Calabar Marina, the abbey of the eastern end impresses with its monumental imperial stairs and the frescoes of saints like troweled dust plasters. **The building itself wears a true treasure for festive moods and occasions as if her bonnet is made-out of brocade and tips formed by hand.** If in the past, church structures are used to underscore social status, **the St. Peter's church in Ekeya is likened as magnificently constructed during Baroque era by the best architects of their time.** That edifice even with the failures of maintenance still make their mark on the cliff and is **a much-visited cultural center with regular exhibitions and music festivals pre independence.**

Even the caricature museum like Krantz biting contemporary satire, images from the deepest depths of the Catholic soul. It forces the observer into a confrontation with questions

concerning aesthetics and modern art. Great scripts and sensual thrilling worship theatre with a unique atmosphere of the cliff and lowland forests. All ingredients may guarantee a fascinating day after day. **Both traditionally and contemporary are united here, offering impressive settings of worship session cultures. Centered in a picturesque renaissance building.** The First. The most renowned work of art from two centuries.

Please excuse my emotions. Since time immemorial, the St. Peter's Catholic Church Ekeya has inspired painters and thinkers. Photographers and film makers would love its enchanting river valley. That is the essence and QED of rural tourism, captured in a house of worship. Ancient as it is, archaic as it may look, its modern accents are set by the cultural action of individuals of today. **The 19th century Catholic missionaries discovered Ekeya in Akwa Ibom State that is the genesis of the movement. History is kind. Man is unfortunately unkind to history.**

What fascinated the early Catholics as I tried to subsume as an undercover agent, strapping my emotional self in a submarine kind of thought line? What would have reduced me into a mere kindergarten of ancient history books? **What fascinated them was the intense atmosphere of Ekeya and its peoples. The old houses and courtyards of old, the narrow lanes and slow-paced deliberate scene of daily life.** Here, the artists in the mission were among their own kind, creating for the 'High Society' experience a replica of space and pace elsewhere.



St. Peter's Catholic Church Ekeya. A museum displays of traditional costumes from the west. Leaving those footprints in the sands of time. That should be the place of TV footages location today. Rolling out todays and future films. Host high ranking religious festivals and musical rituals that provides an annual rendezvous. **With an open-air theatre production, St. Peter's Catholic Church traditionally was built to act as a magnet for the public.**

The drive of The Catholic Mission around the world represents and is an example of such contemporary cultural activities of the art mile, but not the case in St. Peters Catholic Church, Ekeya. If only its were an individual, I will address the drive a failure. **You have not only failed Ekeya here, but you failed this early arrival of Catholic nomads and their mission. Allowing such an edifice swallowed up by gully erosion is a shame.** You wasted a place designed in accordance



with plans of a national art form. The relics that conjured images of the 19th and 20th centuries that Nigeria should have been known. **Betraying the ones upon a time monastery. That is the story of St. Peter's Catholic Church in Ekeya.**

Today we witness changes to this house of honour and fame. **Changes to its true story and identity. Deliberate changes that has de-phased it caricature, satire and critical graphics of the upper floor and windows.**



It is time to rescue Ekeya from the menace of this aggressive gullies that could have the edifice consumed. An eyewitness says it could take less than three years for this first administrative structure to disappear. From a demise caused by societal neglect. Yes, the entire space of Ekeya. A community that use to be a simple, just stand still, jaw-dropping, observe and enjoy. Anyone travelling to Ekeya will continually be impressed by the perfection of the countryside. **By the extraordinary blend of cultivated nature and lusciously growing wilderness is now threatened by huge gullies swallowing up its character and form. Battering a landscape of the onetime rurality that was flowing with sensory pleasure.**

A walk to the Convent School complex, an extension of the Church Mission established and named by the colonial visits as once natures' gift to mankind reveals the level of decay. **A countryside of old once characterized by an interaction between gardens of every kind. Reminding us of the Abbey Gardens in Melk and Gottweig, laid out with exacting details. Place of peace and tranquility. Artfully arranged Convent School vineyards and sun-caressed**

primitive hilly terraces, supported by the typical flower walls. Fertile fruit gardens, where the famous apricot and their likes grew. In April, a perfumed white sea of flowers and everywhere the outdoor dining and an invitation to where birds fester and linger for a while.



A beauty to behold is rapidly degrading. **Changing cycle paths and hiking trails that connects the most beautiful market spots, farmland and attractions. Looking deeper into the lowlands view from atop hips provide an exciting perspective. That winding valley in getting wild and untamed. Swallowing up residents and public buildings. Becoming wider deathtraps ravine, turning the steep terraces of the winepress destination into a standstill couloir.**



Let us stand up for Ekeya, a destination that once stood still for humankind at some point in the middle ages with many surprises in store. Every step of the rustic wine tavern, traditional cozy palm wine bars, with elegant cuisines displayed at exquisitely gourmet restaurants. It is a great refuge which invites peace and still contemplation and one which promises a wealth of delicious moments. **Ekeya community, her experience makes the rural community a real paradise for bon vivant and fans of the native fineries and fine arts.**

Written by

Hilerus Edet

Writer, Public Commentator and Rural Tourism Consultant