

The Jamaica Daily News Sunday, May 23, 1976



Kapo with crook and turban explains details of his carving to interested spectators at an exhibition held in the halls of the Hagley Park branch of the Royal Bank of Jamaica on Heroes Day last year.

'God gave me power to heal'

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daily news: May 23 1976
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By Jean Small

Mallica **KAPO** Reynolds is a self-taught painter and sculptor of Jamaica. In September of 1975, he put on a one-man exhibition at the Stony Hill Hotel. Jean Small had a conversation with him about his beginnings as a preacher and artist and heard his views on other aspects of life. While he talked he was busily at work on an unfinished painting of a scene in the Coronation Market. He talked at his home-cum-workshop-cum-tabernacle at 3 Ghandi Road.

JEAN: I'm interested in talking about so many aspects of you and your work that I'm not sure where to begin. Perhaps we could start with you, the man. Tell me about your background. Did you grow up in this area here in Kingston?

KAPO: No. I didn't grow up in Kingston. I was born in the parish of St. Catherine, a district by the name of Bynloss. When I was two years and six months old, my father removed me, my mother and my two sisters to another district by the name of Victoria. There I grew up, had my schooling at another district that is adjoining by the name of Jericho. So I was schooled at Jericho school, that is in St. Catherine, Linstead.

JEAN: Did you do any drawing at all when you were at school?

KAPO: No. No. I never loved drawing and I never loved carpentry.

JEAN: What was your interest when you were a little boy?

KAPO: My interest when I was a little boy was to plant things and watch them grow. And then after reaching the age of twelve I received the spirit.

An Arab

JEAN: How did this happen?

KAPO: Well it all came out of a dream. One night I went to bed and I dreamt I saw a man come to me and said that he wanted to walk with me and he walked with me down what you might call a grade to my father's place. He stopped underneath a wild cocoa tree — a tree that they call cocoa but is really chocolate — then he asked me if I knew who he was. I said, 'No', and he said, 'You don't know me?' and I said, 'No'. He said, 'You really don't know me?' and I said, 'No'. He said, 'Well I am Jesus.' He was dressed in a kind of khaki clothing. He wasn't black and he wasn't white but his hair was tall. He appeared more like an Arab. So he took a bottle from his pocket and anointed me from head to foot and told me that I was to go and tell my father and my mother that he was in need of them. I woke up in the morning and I told the dream to my mother. My mother told it to my father and they said that it was a good dream. In the day I got up and went to this wild cocoa tree, because the cocoa tree was really there and I was looking out to see any sign in the cocoa tree, but there was no sign. On looking through the leaves of this tree I saw the moon at a size of about six feet in diameter.

Very huge and then it came as if it fell to the north. My mother was near the river called Edwin River, so I ran down there and asked my mother if she saw the moon fall down there. My mother asked me if I was getting mad. I said, 'No, but a while ago I went to the same cocoa tree of which I told in the dream that I got the night and I saw the moon as if it fall that way.' So my mother was saying that it seemed as if something was wrong, as well as the people who were washing, because you know in those days women used

to go to the river to wash. You call it washing day. Now these women began to laugh and they called to my mother. They used to call my mother Miss Becky and they said, 'Miss Becky, your son seems to me as if he wants to get married.' Now it was a joke and my mother said, 'You'd better go home and find something to do.' She was somewhat embarrassed anyway, so I ran on home, but the night after I dreamt that I went down the same grade and I saw 72 angels in a half moon garden.

A door was to the entrance of the middle of the half moon and there was the head angel who called me and told me that there was a chair for me to sit on in the middle of the half moon garden and before the chair was a table because there were 72 tables around where all the 72 angels sat. There was a trumpet, a Bible and a lily that we call the buttercup lily, into a vase. Then she spoke to me and rested her body against me and said she is the spirit. At the time I felt as if there

was something like a magnet moving through my body, but really I was prepared as in the past (when I was not asleep) it was always my desire that I could be in the spiritual world. So she gave me the trumpet, she gave me the Bible, she gave me one vase with a buttercup lily, and a rod and said that I was to go and preach and tell the people that Jesus was in need of them. That I did and I began to preach.

JEAN: At age twelve?

KAPO: At age twelve I began to preach, and really I asked God that when I reached the age of 20 to 22 to give me something to do. I gather that a lot of people, up to 700 were following me as their leader. But in those days it was very much poor. Every Monday night the people used to give a three-pence at what was called the roll call. That was to support me. But I told them that I don't like it, that I would like to do something myself because I don't want my weight to be on their shoulder. And so one day I found myself scraping on a stone. Scraping on the stone I saw a face. The eyes and the nose wasn't there but I could see where I would put the eyes, where I could put the nose, the mouth and so on. But before that it is for you to know that I was arrested in Linstead for a face that I carved out of a piece of stick looking like a head upon a finger. This arrest came when I went into a bar and I really bought two beers, one for me and one for my friend and in paying for the beers I held the stick up and the lady screamed out.

As she screamed a crowd gathered around and the people said that I was an Obeahman; that I went to the bar to hurt the woman. So the woman phoned right away for the police and they were coming down the street. But I ran down to a place by the name of Puss Gully, then I went down to another place named Dargil Top and then to Irish Level, and from Irish Level I went on to the Vanity Fair Road and getting out to Vanity Fair Road I took the Victoria Road and ran home.

JEAN: So, in fact, you were not arrested.

KAPO: No I was not arrested that evening. But three weeks later I went to receive some people coming from Kingston to attend the memorial service of my sister, as one of my twin sisters that followed me had died a year before. Returning with the people from the railway and passing through the centre of the town I reached in front of the clock where there was one magistrate by the name of Mr. Hanna, a Syrian, who had a store. So the policemen went there and they told Mr. Hanna that they would like to loan him the policeman, Iry Pressure, his car and that he also, the magistrate, was to go along with them to my district because they believed that I am an Obeahman and that they see me practising something like Obeah

I appealed against the sentence and I won the appeal. Well I was again raided in 1951, to which a great amount of my heart was taken away, at No. 3 Crescent Road. That was in Whitfield Town, Kingston 13. I was arrested for Obeah. Four of my people were arrested. They were in jail for three days. The case for them was called up many times and they were released, but I was being searched for. Came upon a time when I felt that I should get out of my hiding because I knew that I wasn't guilty. I did and I was arrested and tried at the Half Way Tree Court. The case was changed from Obeah to vagrancy. I paid five pounds. A few weeks later a policeman came with a paper that I was to sign and with five pounds that I should take for a drink. That was sent by the Crown Prosecutor in those days.

Well, I wouldn't take the money. Someone belonging to the ranks said, 'Kapo, if you don't take the money you're forever going to be in trouble.' I said, 'O.K.' One day a policeman came back with the paper and I signed it and I took the 20 shillings and I gave it to an old lady. Then they came back a third time to raid my place. They began to take the things out, but at that time I met up with a man by the name of Thomas Lawkins from California and another one by the name of George Eaton Simpson from Ohio and they told me I was on the right thing and I wasn't to let no one get me down.

Mr. Edward Seaga at that time was a journalist. He began to write in a paper called the **Daily Express**. He took a piece of my lignum vitae carving up to the University College and sold it for me and on one of the pound notes the words, 'May God Have Mercy On Your Soul' was written in red letters. I did not take it for anything but I kept on working and today I must say that the mercy that God has got upon my soul is

not a treacherous or dangerous mercy but is a mercy of blessing.

JEAN: At this time were your parents religious at all?

KAPO: No, at that time neither my mother nor my father was a member of any church, but afterward my mother went and joined the Jericho Church. She got baptized there. My father also became religious and my sisters also were the lovers of revival as I am. And we used to walk 13 miles from Linstead to Spanish Town and from Spanish Town to Caymanas Estate and we preached there to the people that was living on the estate. Looking on the conditions the people live in today on the cane farm they are well treated, but in those days I would say that the people was living in things like mud-huts. Then this same man Mr. Simpson, Mr. Thomas Lawkins and Mr. Seaga begin to speak about it and I begin to move around and tell the people that this is not the way they should live and that the day would come when their lives would be better. To which I'm glad today to see that Jamaica is all changed because even the people who cut the cane, the people who load the cane and the people who work in the factory, they are respected and there are even rewards for them.

JEAN: What other social work do you do at this time?

KAPO: Well I must say to you that the social work that I do at this time is to let the people know that they should be one people in the world. I am trying my best to see if I can remove the feelings of complex. Inferiority complex. I would like every man on earth or in my country to know that he is just a man, but the only way that he can prove to himself that he is a man is to put his shoulder to the wheel to do something. I go as far as to go on the street and preach and tell the people that there are many empty lands and that there are many things that they can put their brain to, and that they do not have to depend on the Government of their country, but they of themselves can do something to help their Government.

JEAN: Now I know that your title is SHEPHERD. I wonder if you can tell me what this means and how one becomes a shepherd.

KAPO: Well, a shepherd simply means a leader. When you receive the Spirit and you begin to demonstrate, I mean, to preach to the people, you are called a Shepherd. But I am not only called a Shepherd, I know that I'm a Shepherd because in many cases I took up many of the burdens of the people. I bury many of their deads, I appeal for comfort for many of those that are uncomfortable and I try to direct their lives. Not to be a dictator but to be merciful and to be pleasant in my directing asking the people that they really cleave unto the love of God because God said in the first place "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy mind," and he said "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself" and I don't believe that it's only the man who lives next door is my neighbour. I

believe my neighbour is all over the world. But I try to see the people, I bury many dead, I paid for many to get out of jail, I paid many rent and things like that proving to the people that God is good and I'm not all for myself. Sometimes when I assist them I doesn't have half of what I give unto them left in my pocket.

JEAN: Where do you get the money to do all this? It must take a lot of your personal money.

KAPO: Yes it takes a lot of my personal money. I got a bus here and I go from here to Montego Bay or Port Antonio or anywhere over the island that I'm going to preach and it cost the people nothing. A few of the people may give me 50 cents or a dollar to assist me in buying gas but that can't buy half of the gas to keep us for the day.

JEAN: Do you find that people try to exploit you?

KAPO: Oh yes. I got many exploitation in my religious performances and also in my artistic career for I must tell you the truth, I do believe that if there was any other creative painter or sculptor before me I got to say I don't know. When I started to carve in Jamaica I was called "Wood and Stone" and several times in Trench Town people used to come upon me to kill me saying that I was selling out the black people to the white people that they may be laughed at. This was especially done in those days by the people who was called Rastafarians. Once they even set fire to my house. Patrols of policemen have to come and save my life. Some even believe that I was some sort of 'pimper' to the police against them that they should get in trouble. But it was not so. Men came with cutlass to take out my head, chopping from the street straight here, hurting many of my people by hitting them with stones.

Cult Group

JEAN: Because they thought you were exploiting them?

KAPO: Yes, because they thought I was exploiting them.

JEAN: Not because they thought you were an Obeahman as you said before?

KAPO: They believe the work was unholy because plenty people came and they said that in the nights they cannot sleep because they see these things leave off of my place and come to them to torment them.

JEAN: What things?

KAPO: The carvings and the paintings. I believe this was only through their vain imaginations. One day a man by the name of Flint came with a cutlass and he brandished it for about one chain and a half coming to the place where I was chopping on a post. I had to lay him low with a stone. But he never died. The women called the police and when the police saw the damage that he did coming up the lane, they told him that he could be killed because it was a threat on my life and it would only be self-defense.

JEAN: What then is the name of your

religious group?

KAPO: St. Michael Revival Tabernacle. That's the name of the church so you may still call it a group.

JEAN: I notice on one of the paper clippings you have framed in the house that it is referred to as a cult group. Do you accept that?

KAPO: Well, I'll tell you what. A cult group is not good enough because that could only be a gift, or a traditional right coming down from my forefathers but I believe that I am an apostle. I believe that I was sent by God to do this, because if I was not sent by God after I prayed to God and asked him to give me something to do, He would not have given me painting and sculpture to be un-beholden. So that's why I say that my whole life is based on my spiritual beginning.

JEAN: And this is your tabernacle, this is your workshop, this is your home.

KAPO: Yes. Every Sunday night and Monday night I really keep meetings here. I heal the sick right here. I lay my hand on the sick because God gave me the power that if I lay my hand on the sick and pray for them, all is well. That's the healing jar which has pure, clear water. After the service is started, we sing, we pray and I lecture to the people from the Bible. Right here maggots leave the body of many people. Yes, right here.

JEAN: And how do you feel when you heal someone?

KAPO: Whenever time someone is healed by you, you know that something is really taken out of you as when Christ was passing through the multitude and the woman with the 30 years issue of blood feel that if she touch him she would be healed. Then you feel the virtue leave you. In other words you feel very happy in your soul. It is as if for the two or three hours that the service may last for, you do not feel to be a natural person, I mean, of flesh and blood. You feel as though something is falling out, telepathically moving out of you. Think of the man who will preach unto the people, whether Parish Church minister, or the Baptist minister, Union or Episcopalian, and will bring the truth unto them because there are so many things today that the people are performing. But the ministers only get up in the pulpit and tell the people about sin, but they never tell them what is the dangerous sin that they must keep themselves from. The sin that they preach about is the sin about which God said "Thou shalt take unto thyself a woman and call that woman your wife." This simply means that the woman must take that man and call that man her husband. But the minister today only preaches upon sex. They don't preach about lying, they don't preach upon mischief-making, they don't preach upon news-carrying, they don't preach upon hatred, they don't preach upon malice and inferiority complex, yet in so many of the churches you go into today there are so many people who feel they are so high in flesh that they can't sit beside you and yet they say that they are servants of

God. I preach upon all those things because those are the things I believe is the head of all sin.

JEAN: Another thing that interests me is your robes and your headdress in particular. When did you start wearing it and how did you choose it?

KAPO: Well, I have chosen this by inspiration. My colours are green, blue and pink. Those are my astral colours. I'm a February born. I'm an Aquarian in other words. So my colours are blue, mild green and pink, but this madras on my head is matching up with my race of people, you see. The Ashanti. I believe to myself that when Christ was on earth, he never wore no hat, he wore a turban, he never even wore a pant, he wore something wrap around him. So I believe that putting myself in a dress that is nearest to that of the Apostles is the best and that I should wear this as my en-sign that everywhere I go everyone should know me and know the work that I perform.

Revelation

JEAN: Did you choose the style of wrapping your headtie, because it looks very much like the headtie of the Congolese married woman, with the point in front.

KAPO: I know myself a long time before there was any revelation of the freedom of the African race. In 1938 -36 -37 I used to preach to people and tell them that Africa will be free. One day all Africa will be free because there is redemption. I saw that. I even got myself a shepherd's crook. It is 6'6" tall. I said this is the height of the crook that Jesus used to use and I use the same. But the turban has two meanings. It represent my religion and it represent the depth with which I am still looking toward my mother country Africa. But when saying so, I don't believe that His Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie or any other man will ever come out of Africa and tell me that he is God, Jehovah the Creator. If he come up to be a great king, I would accept him, as David and Solomon was great kings, but they never took the title of God. There was Nebuchadnezzar who took the title of God saying that there was no other God beside him, and he was driven out in the pastures. After he repented and confessed that there was one God triumphant. He was resurrected from his animalic adoption to a human being.

JEAN: So you don't believe in going back to Africa.

KAPO: No. Africa is my forefathers' land. I was born in Jamaica. If I am to go back to Africa I got to be immigrated. I am not looking to be repatriated to Africa because the people in Africa would hardly know the race I am belonging to or my full tribe. I know that I am one of the Ashantis. I know that my people is belonging to the Ashanti race.

JEAN: How do you know that? Have you done some research to find out?

KAPO: I have not done the research, but I have the mark. My hair grows up at the two sides and points in the middle even like Christ's. Some of the African people have their hair come right around their forehead and some of them have it going up in a ball, but the Ashanti have this kind of horseshoe and you know definitely. And I think that you have got a touch of it.

JEAN: That's just what I was thinking. Now I would like to talk about your painting. You seemed to have started with sculpture.

KAPO: Yes, I was doing sculpture for about fourteen or more years before painting come upon me. For these things just come upon me right out of the blue you know. It's not that I see anybody work. I got an inspiration, and after I am inspired I just take up my brush and I try to make a sketch of what I see. I make no sketch with pencil on the wood or on the canvas or on the hard board. I just go on working straight, and I keep on working over and over and over until I've gotten the piece unto what I would like it to be.

JEAN: What kind of wood do you use most?

KAPO: My chief wood is lignum vitae which is one of our national woods.

JEAN: But if I asked you to carve me, for example, could you do that or does it have to come out of your imagination?

KAPO: Well if you ask me to carve you that is different because that is a representation. I got to get a photograph of you and I got to look upon it, look at the shape of your head, the shape of your shoulders, the shape of your eyes, the shape of your forehead and then I go carving you. But I do not know how to use a caliper, yet I will get out somebody that is you.

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Beauty

JEAN: And your painting. You have been described as a self-taught painter. Since you've started painting, have you read any books, or exposed yourself to the techniques of other painters or have you just been developing your own technique over the years?

KAPO: I prefer to do my own thing. I never try to copy. I don't think that anyone can go around Jamaica or even in Africa and say that they see anything that look the very way as my work because I do not do copying.

JEAN: No. I didn't mean copying. I meant the technique, in order to improve your own style.

KAPO: I know, I know. My work passes as the closest to African work.

JEAN: At your exhibition at Stony Hill I noticed three things both in your carvings and your paintings. I saw a very strong feeling for nature. There are always lots of plants, trees and flowers in your paintings.

KAPO: I believe in beauty. I'm talking about the beauty of the earth, I'm talking about the beauty of women. When you look upon the nude paintings that I do I always make women look beautiful. When God created the earth he looked at it and saw that it was beautiful. He looked and saw that it was good. So in the work of every artist, I do believe that the beauty of the work must first be seen through the eye of the artist before any other individual, because the artist is the individual that is creating the beauties.

JEAN: The second thing that I noticed in your painting, and you mentioned it just now, is the predominance of women. When you draw men there is a religious overtone. I am thinking of the painting of a man with wings as if he is moving upwards. I would like to know what is your feeling about women. Do they hold a particular place in your concept of life.

KAPO: Women can hold a particular place as well as men. I must tell you this, though it is a thing I should not say, women is my glory.

JEAN: I noticed too that at the revivalist meeting you held at the opening of your exhibition at Stony Hill Hotel, that the majority of the company was women. I don't remember seeing any men.

KAPO: Two men were there, but they were wearing gowns, you know. But there is something in that. The women are freer to religion or to any kind of work. The women will come in and join the church and will remain for years and years.

JEAN: Now I'm going to ask you a touchy question. I have read in novels and I have heard people talk about the shepherd and his relationship with his sheep. The relationship is suspect. What would you say about that?

KAPO: Well, I don't think there should be any suspicion there. If the shepherd is a good shepherd, he is supposed to lead his flock unfouled. I wouldn't say that probably there are not shepherds that wouldn't try to feed or prey upon their sheep but I am one that what I preach is what I live up to. And I am very glad to be the kind of person that I am. When saying so, I'm not

saying that I am pure, because I too am a lover of women, but to a point

JEAN: Are you married?

KAPO: Oh yes.

JEAN: I get that feeling about women in your paintings; that they are a source of energy, a source of fertility. The third thing that I noticed in your work, particularly in your sculpture, is the snake. I think I see the form of the snake even if it is a head of a man. Is this a particular symbol for you?

KAPO: Yes it is a particular symbol but it comes in this way. A snake represents medicine, and the snake also represent Temptation. It was the snake that tempted Eve and showed her the road of Nature, the road of sex, before even Adam had known that the woman was created for him..So I use the serpent as a symbol showing the people that temptation is always in their midst. You would never see me get out a woman as a serpent because the serpent represent the evil person that deceives.

JEAN: I notice that you have a creative workshop where people can come to work. I gather you teach art?

KAPO: Oh yes many people get the inspiration from me. But Jamaica is a place like this. As soon as a person finds he could do 1 per cent of a thing he would walk off from the master and they would be gone making something. They would walk from Kingston to Montego Bay selling them on the street. If we all stay together and manufacture we would be much stronger. But we differ. There are many who get the inspiration from me and buy a place before I was even to dream of buying a place. But I always feel to be at home, to be in my backyard living in a primitive way, carving and painting. So that is the difference.

JEAN: I was going to ask you if you intended to make it a permanent place of work and to extend it.

KAPO: Yes, it will be permanent, but I do believe that I need some sort of help, you see, because I am a one-man and I've got little from what I call the many. That is to say, I'm in the back line. Since I came back from the United States in February it's the first time I'm going to get a few sale. Nobody comes again because it was announced that my work is not for sale in Jamaica again, because, as you know, Roberta Flack became my sponsor and has taken over. But I believe I'm being spoilt with Roberta by many of my own people here, because many of my own people around me, big people, told Roberta that they don't see any useful purpose why she was standing by me because there are many other people in Jamaica that need more help than me. So that cause a kind of log across my way. So I got to work very hard now to become more popular again, because there was once upon a time when the people came to Jamaica and when they go to the Tourist Board or any hotel, the people would ask them if they are going to leave Jamaica without taking back a piece of Kapo and then they would come here and sometimes I would bring down the price just because I would like to extend Jamaica.

Great Man

JEAN: Tell me about Roberta Flack. She's such a popular and talented woman, I was hoping that you would tell me what she's like.

KAPO: She's a very nice woman. People may say that they don't hear me talking much about her again. Yes, we are still friends and we are still communicating with one another but there is some little poison that is just below there. No one would like to see you get on to someone that is very good and they keep telling the individual not to be fooling about that person or they would see what would happen. You see, well, Roberta had got a lot of that stuff and it caused her to be a little coward, yet she has done much good to me because she was the one who bought that bus outside there and give it to me. She's the one that finished paying for this place.

JEAN: How did you meet her?

KAPO: She went to the Stony Hill Hotel and saw much of my work there, so she said she must come down and see this man. She told me, 'You are a great man and I believe that you should receive some help, but I see where you are being stifled.' So she started helping me but there are many of our people here who feel that she was doing too much for me.

JEAN: But she sponsors exhibitions for you in the States?

KAPO: She sponsors exhibitions for me in the States since December 1974. One show was in Manhattan and another one was in Mid-town which was to be extended but I do believe that through discouragement it was shortened. The show was to go all around the States but I just get sacked by people who did not like me.