

## Topic 6 – From Rhetoric to Reality: Reparatory Justice for People of African Descent

### Speech by Sonita Alleyne

My name is Sonita Alleyne. In October 2019, I was elected Master of Jesus College, Cambridge. I am the first person of African descent to lead ANY Cambridge or Oxford College since their establishment in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century.

I would like to thank The UN Working Group of Experts on People of African Descent for the opportunity to give this address.

I am here to talk about this Okukor. **(slide 1 - Bronze)** This beautiful bronze is one of thousands looted by British forces in 1897 when they carried out a military attack on Benin City in the independent kingdom of Benin. It was gifted to the College in 1905 and received in the full knowledge that it had been taken as one of the “spoils of war”.

On October 27<sup>th</sup> 2021. Jesus College, Cambridge became the first institution in the world to return a Benin Bronze to the National Commission for Museums and Monuments representing Nigeria and the Oba of Benin. We held a ceremony to legally transfer the Bronze and made a public apology for this historic wrong.

During the celebration meal that evening, I invited people to say a few impromptu words. One Nigerian delegate, Edith Ekunke, spoke of how, in the mid 1970s, she had been part of an official group attempting to buy back a different Benin Bronze at auction. The attempt was unsuccessful. Her memory moved everyone in the room and illustrated how, in one day, we had moved from rhetoric to reality.

The Okukor we returned that day was a spiritual object in Benin City. An object associated with its royal family. It had been torn away from its cultural home and place of origin.

There was no transaction of money from Nigeria to Jesus College that day. Our message in handing it back was “this – belongs - to you”. For me the implication is clear: looted or displaced African objects SHOULD NOT be seen as ‘valuable’ through a narrow financial lens.

New realities change old rhetoric. Worldwide, many other institutions had been having internal conversations about what to do with their Benin Bronzes. In the UK the furthest they had reached were dialogues with Nigeria and talk of trajectories, loans and unspecified future resolutions. The concrete reality of Jesus College handing back the Okukor changed the debate instantly and forever.

A few weeks after the return, a New York gallery contacted me. It said that the action of Jesus College was the curatorial equivalent of the Berlin Wall coming down. It too wanted to return a Benin Bronze. All the arguments as to why it was impossible to hand back an object relating to another nation’s cultural and spiritual heritage had been swept away.

It’s been eighteen months since we handed back the bronze. This has given me time to reflect on the change that occurred.

The catalyst for this change was several Jesus College students of African descent, who, in 2015, started asking critical questions about the Bronze cockerel. If not for their agency, scrutiny and determination that more diverse communities bring to institutions I would not be standing here today. An object that had been standing for decades on a shelf in the College’s dining hall had become the centre of a College-wide student campaign.

The College’s reaction in 2015 was to relocate the bronze to a private secure location. Its next move was to seek a solution by joining in with other British institutions engaged in dialogue with Nigeria.

However, once asked, difficult questions do not go away. In May 2019, Jesus College set up its Legacy of Slavery Working Party (LSWP). Chaired by Dr Veronique Mottier, eight Jesus College academics are conducting a full scholarly inquiry into the College's historical links to slavery and colonial violence. The LSWP has adopted the United Nations principles of reparative justice, and Prof. Verene Shepherd, Chair of the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), is its external guide.

In November 2019, shortly after I arrived, I led a meeting with all the Fellows of the College **to listen to** the LSWP's findings on the Benin Bronze. As a result of this, I took the view that it was clear that Jesus College could not hold on to the Bronze and that we should seek to restore it to its rightful owners as soon as legally and practically possible. In the subsequent full and frank discussion of the issues every voice was heard and an overwhelming majority of the Fellowship were of a similar mind.

This process of open, honest and rigorous historical research, followed by a proper discussion of the issues is a model that many organisations are now following.

My next reflections relate to legal aspects.

British punitive forces looted the bronze in 1897. In the kingdom of Benin they sacked the territory with troops claiming "spoils of war". The LSWP unearthed that, at that time, "spoils of war" were illegal. However the letter of the law deemed "spoils" legal if taken from so-called "primitive" peoples. It was a reminder of how racist views were baked into the legislative code. It is also a reminder that we must constantly examine our present day national and international laws. We must be vigilant that they do not perpetuate prejudice through post-colonial mind-sets and I hope we build international laws on principles of respect and an understanding of every nation's culture.

For years, the restitution of disputed objects was blocked from return to Africa through the argument that African institutions could not care for them properly. I realised from the outset that simple legal transfer cuts straight through such spurious thinking. In this way, ownership can be restored quickly and the legal owners can retrieve their property at a time of their choosing. The power dynamic shifts and reparatory justice moves from rhetoric to reality.

As more museums and nations return stolen or displaced objects back to Africa, ceremonies to mark these historical moments are of real importance. **(slide 2 - group picture joyful receiving of the bronze)** Each legal transfer is an act of mending. A public and joyful act that says “this is our future”. We are putting right historical wrongs and that is a moment to celebrate. Return is not about winning or losing. It’s about new dialogues, cultural exchanges and partnerships. I think you always have to remember the past, but return is one element in resetting the foundations of a relationship based on trust, honesty and mutual respect.

It is estimated that up to 95% of Africa’s historical heritage does not currently reside on the continent of Africa but remains in museums located in former colonising powers. This culturally deprives current generations in our African nations.

As Master I am proud of the decision taken by the Fellows of Jesus College. I am proud of all the staff who worked to enable the return of the Okukor. I am proud that we pursued direct repatriation of the bronze as opposed to being stuck in old rhetoric that, at the time, was concerned with “loans” and the ability for African countries to look after their own heritage. I hope this one act focuses all nations on repairing the harm done as a result of the long-term effects of enslavement and colonial rule.

My final reflection is on what is internationally EXPECTED in these cases. In the last eighteen months institutions in the UK, such as Aberdeen University and the Horniman Museum have joined with institutions in America and national leadership from France, Belgium and Germany to return single and whole collections of Benin Bronzes. This is real action. Cambridge University is about to follow the lead set by Jesus College and is set to return 116 of the 410 bronzes it currently holds.

The tone has shifted and the time of Africa bargaining for, begging for and buying back its stolen artefacts must come to an end. The team of people in Nigeria working on the repatriation of Benin Bronzes, the National Commission for Museums and Monuments, the representatives of the Oba of Benin and their legal experts, now have the EXPECTATION that their cultural heritage should be returned. It would be good if international law could reflect that. I acknowledge and thank all those who Jesus College collaborated with in the lead up to that historic day in October 2021.

This century holds enormous challenges for our planet. The need for international problem solving has never been greater. This should involve peace, trade and lasting cooperation. To succeed nations need open conversations rooted in respect. Respect is made real when restitution and reparatory justice form the basis for lasting change and help us to build a fairer world.

As for Jesus College, the work of the LSWP continues. We know that our College, along with other Cambridge Colleges, had been invested in the South Sea Company, a major operator in the transatlantic slave trade. We acknowledge that past but know that we will be judged on the reparatory actions we take once the full findings are published.

It has been written that “the past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.” That quotation can be used to avoid interrogating history properly and failing to solve urgent contemporary problems, whose roots may be centuries old. I say “the present is our country and we have the power to do things better here.” By learning from the past and taking action in the present, we can create a better future for ourselves and future generations.

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address you.