MITOCW | S3E8_Amah_Edoh

[MUSIC PLAYING] AMAH EDOH: The point is that these events-- they didn't end in the past.

The issue is that these events that happened centuries ago, decades ago, continue to live on today.

Their impacts continue to be felt.

SARAH HANSEN: Today on Chalk Radio, we're exploring transitional and reparative justice, and how seeking expertise from everywhere might lead to better understanding.

AMAH EDOH: The process of reparative justice is about how do we address that.

How do we address what is today?

And how do we seek justice for what's happened in the past as a means towards addressing these challenges today, and being able to move forward from them, being able to move on to something else?

SARAH HANSEN: I'm your host, Sarah Hansen.

My guest today is Professor Amah Edoh, an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and African Studies at MIT.

You may remember Amah from her episode on Chalk Radio back in season one.

We're sitting down with her again, this time to discuss her course called "Reparations for Slavery and Colonization, Contemporary Movements for Justice." The inspiration for the course came in part from the Black Lives Matter protests that took place around the world in 2020.

AMAH EDOH: What was expressed during these protests, whether in the US or in Europe-- where I have a lot of friends and collaborators, and so I was hearing echoes from both sides of the Atlantic-- was kind of a framing of contemporary racial injustice, racial discrimination, racism, as a legacy of slavery and colonialism.

And so thinking about police violence, but also thinking about housing discrimination, and also thinking about the collections that are held in European or American museums, thinking about so many aspects of our lives today, and recognizing that so many of the disparities and the injustices that were brought to the surface through these protests, and that we're surrounded by at all times, have a historical origin.

This is what was so powerful in these protests around the world, was that they were saying there's no dealing with what we recognize as a problem today without dealing or talking about what happened in the past.

And so this class was meant to take that seriously, and to say, what are the models for that?

Because reparations has been, and continues to be, an incendiary topic, or still seen as somewhat controversial.

And I think part of that stems from partial understanding about what is meant by reparations, and it's kind of a knee-jerk reaction to the idea of what reparations is.

SARAH HANSEN: If you've been on any social media site recently, Amah's statement likely feels true to you.

There do seem to be strong reactions to the idea of what reparations are.

I asked Amah how she defines or conceptualize reparations.

AMAH EDOH: It's about establishing the record, the historical record, or redressing the historical record so that the harms that have been done can be named, and then thinking about, what might justice look like.

It's one thing to learn from events that have happened in the past.

It's another to try to learn from what's happening in the moment, and put that in conversation, of course, with what's happened in the past, but to document, learn, and interrogate what's happening as it's happening was super exciting.

And the prospect of engaging students in that process, to me, was really, really powerful as an instructor.

SARAH HANSEN: Amah's interest in justice and anthropology is something that stems from her past.

She shared how growing up across Western and Southern Africa, and the United States, shaped her understanding of what it means to be Black and African in the world.

AMAH EDOH: So I was born in the US.

My parents were in graduate school in the US from Togo.

And so I had an American passport from birth.

And I was the only one in my family to have an American passport, and among my friends who were in Togo.

And I remember as young as, I don't know, five or six, feeling that having this American passport was really special, and that somehow it made me "better." It doesn't feel great to admit that, but that's the truth of it.

I felt somehow special because I had this American passport.

Why does a six-year-old have that kind of consciousness?

Where does that come from?

There was always a sense that real life happened elsewhere, that real life was happening in the US, real life was happening in Europe and all these other places.

And the goal and the idea was always to leave.

And then race comes into it, when I started paying attention to skin bleaching or even just hair straightening.

These were things that I was noticing in my environment.

Whether in Togo, it was Congolese music videos.

We listened to a lot of music from the Congo at the time.

And so I started noticing, or there was a moment where you'd start noticing, men and women who bleach their skin.

And so you could see the signs.

And then this question about why?

Why is that a thing?

And after college, I was in Zambia for a few years and...

I remember one day, I tried to actually make an experiment of it.

And I was on the minibus, and I was looking out the window.

And I was, like, let me count how many women that I see actually skin bleached, or who have evidence of skin bleaching.

And it was three out of four just doing this little ride.

So this question about what does lighter skin mean, why do people put themselves through this, given the health effects, and so on?

Questions about skin color, about race, about one's place in the world-- all of these things are part of, for me, the question of Africanness in the world.

SARAH HANSEN: Amah understands that students, too, bring their personal histories into the classroom.

She tries to create a space for sharing perspectives and honoring individual experiences.

And when discussing concepts like reparations, it becomes all the more important to do this.

AMAH EDOH: I think it's really about opening up space for sharing, for conversation, and honoring all the participants' contributions, and showing that we're building this thing together as we go and learning together.

One thing that's evolved for me over the course of the semester, even, was just trying to shift from talking about reparations to talking about reparative justice.

I think there are associations that are made with the word "reparations," and that can prompt knee-jerk reactions.

I think that emphasizing the justice side of it and the perceptual side of it, by saying "reparative justice," opens up a little bit of space.

But reparations or reparative justice, I think, can be or should be part of a transitional justice mechanism, which is really just meant to address widespread or large-scale human rights violations.

Reparative justice might be one of the many things that go into seeking justice for abuses of violations that happen on a large scale, where you can't deal with the harms that were done to people individually.

SARAH HANSEN: While material compensation is one of the most common examples of reparations, Amah explained that reparative justice isn't just limited to that.

Things such as amending our historical records, and honoring the people who've been disenfranchised by colonization and racial inequity, are just as important.

AMAH EDOH: You can have material reparations in the form of money or land or other forms of resources, and then also symbolic reparations that are, ideally, part of a healing process, a process of acknowledging that these harms were made, that they had significant impacts, and that moving forward requires actually addressing what's happened in the past.

Because oftentimes, this is a critique that's brought forward-- why do you want to reopen old wounds?

This is just going to stoke tension.

It's going to stoke conflict.

This is only just-- it happened a long time ago.

People today are not responsible for what was done centuries ago, et cetera, et cetera.

But the point is that these events didn't end in the past.

The issue is that these events that happened centuries ago, decades ago, continue to live on today.

Their impacts continue to be felt whether, it's at the level of individual bodies, or if it's at the level of societies, or in the landscape, in the literal land.

The legacies of colonialism in various parts of the world is held in the actual land, are held in people's bodies physically, psychologically, not to mention the structural disadvantage that the descendants of enslaved people or formerly colonized people continue to face.

So these issues are not past.

There's nothing that's past about them.

They're very much in the present tense.

And so the process of reparative justice is about how do we address that.

How do we address what is today, and how do we seek justice for what's happened in the past as a means towards addressing these challenges today, and being able to move forward from them, being able to move on to something else?

That's where the transitional justice angle, or frame comes in, or the language, let's say.

Like if we think about this as a transition towards something better, reparative justice needs to be part of that.

SARAH HANSEN: One of the main assignment students work on in the course is creating a case study documenting what it takes to work towards reparative justice and what challenges, arise along the way.

By compiling these studies, Amah is building up an archive within her lab, the African Futures Action Lab, which she co-founded with her colleague, Liliane Umubyeyi.

The goal of the Lab is to support unfolding movements for reparative justice across Europe, Africa, and the Americas.

Amah's course seeks to combine the expertise of different activist groups, one from Algeria and one in Belgium, with those of guest speakers by bringing them together for discussions.

These dialogues are shared in the classroom, where students can discuss them and apply them to their case studies.

AMAH EDOH: Essentially, the model for the class comes from the AFA Lab, the African Futures Action Lab, what's at the core of our mission, which is to bring together different or to connect different forms of expertise around these questions, recognizing that you have all these people who hold a lot of knowledge and expertise relevant to these struggles for justice, and for racial justice, and reparative justice, but who are not necessarily in conversations one another.

So how do we facilitate these exchanges?

And so bringing that in conversation with the classroom, and saying, how can we not only bring these different folks in conversation with one another, but how can we have that be part of the learning experience for students?

In the case of the Algeria group, it was made up of three scholars and activists who are Algerian.

They approached us because they were interested in exploring what had been done, the kinds of claims that had been brought against the French state for colonial violence broadly, and then specifically also for nuclear tests that were conducted in Algeria in the Sahara after independence.

The second group was already organized as a civil society organization, so it was a collective of Afro-descendant Belgian people that was formed in response to a commission that was set up by the Belgian state this summer to examine Belgium's colonial past in the Congo, Burundi, and Rwanda.

One of the speakers that we brought in was Anna Moyo-Kupeta, who is the Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation in South Africa.

And she's a transitional justice expert, and a lawyer, and long-time activist.

She came in to speak with the Belgian group, in particular, about how civil society can hold accountable the state commission, the role that civil society can play in transitional justice processes.

And it was a super interesting conversation, a bit intimidating, I think, in the sense that she really laid out to us how this is work that unfolds over the course of years, like the lobbying, and the advocacy work, and the sentinel work that civil society organizations have to do to hold state entities accountable.

And so it made it really concrete for the group who could then say, what are we able to do given the time and the resources that we have?

It was really important for us to have, throughout this process, to have voices that are coming from different directions.

So to have an expert from South Africa inform the process in Belgium, for instance, was really important to us.

Because again, we think about the many layers of intervention that this course, or the work that we're doing with the Lab, is meant to do, to accomplish.

It's also to highlight the fact that expertise resides everywhere.

And it's not just a North-South direction for the transfer of knowledge information, but South-South, South-North, all of it.

SARAH HANSEN: Expertise resides everywhere.

That's a powerful idea.

And it's one that shaped how Amah designed the course.

As part of the course, she shared guest speakers' videos on the MIT OpenCourseWare YouTube channel.

She invited learners from around the world to share their expertise, questions, and perspectives in the comments.

AMAH EDOH: The idea was that these comments could then be brought back into the classroom, and then we could, in the classroom, engage them and be in conversation with those comments.

And then that I could then bring it back.

How did it actually unfold?

There were a lot of comments that felt like knee-jerk reactions to "reparations" being in the title rather than the actual content of the videos.

That was different from what we had envisioned.

And so I think we had less material to work with in terms of the comments of the videos that could be brought into the classroom than what we had imagined.

But still, it was very interesting and generative to bring back the comments that we did get into the classroom.

We had some really nice discussions with students.

Because it reminded us again that these issues that we're dealing with in the class are unfolding live.

SARAH HANSEN: Amah later explained to me that in hindsight, it might have been helpful to provide more connective tissue for the YouTube audience.

After all, students attending the MIT class had access to readings and other course materials to provide context, and to frame the discussion around reparations.

YouTube learners didn't have those materials.

To fix that, Amah is currently working on sharing all of her teaching materials from the course on our MIT OpenCourseWare website.

I found Amah's reflections interesting, so I asked her to share three tips for other educators who might want to try opening their classrooms through public forums.

AMAH EDOH: I think having some degree of awareness of how your topic is seen, or will land, or what it means out in the world, but remembering what does this mean to people outside of that setting, because that has implications for the kinds of comments that you might get, and therefore, how you might frame-- how you share what you share, how you respond, and so on.

Having a great team-- I think it's absolutely a team effort.

I think working with folks who are-- again, back to the question of expertise-- who are coming in with knowledge that we can't have all the knowledge in ourselves.

So you all brought in knowledge about these educational platforms that open up onto the world and what it takes to make that possible technically.

And also, in terms of the nature of the engagement, what we can expect, how to plan for that, all that and all of it, really having to be a team effort.

And taking stock ahead of time of the range of expertise that's needed to do this, both technically, content-wise, and conceptually.

And then the third tip, I think, is not to be afraid to experiment.

I think a few months ago, we're just, like, oh, god, how is this going to work out?

We had the sense-- I think we all felt that this was a good idea, and I still think it's a good idea.

And I really hope to see it in the full-blown version of the vision.

Because I really still believe in the idea.

I still believe in the model.

I'm grateful to you all for your willingness, also, to experiment.

And I think that that's something that we were all, let's just try it.

Let's just try it and let's see what works.

And I think we really did manage to-- nothing went massively wrong.

And actually, I think some things actually went-- a lot actually went right.

And I certainly learned a lot from it.

And seeing what my students produced at the end of it, I think they got a lot from it.

Activists at the end were very grateful and also inspired by the process.

So I think it was a success in many ways.

So I think being willing to take risks, and to experiment, and to recognize that it's not going to be perfect at the first pass-- this is part of learning.

It's about making mistakes and figuring it out as you go, so you can do it better next time.

SARAH HANSEN: This is a philosophy that Amah is truly living out.

She shared some things she hopes to learn from other educators to improve how teaching and learning unfold in her classroom.

AMAH EDOH: I would love to learn more about how folks talk about a topic that's considered controversial, incendiary, in a way that draws people in-- that both does justice to the seriousness of it and that's uncompromising in terms of its sense of what needs to be done and the importance of it, without being alienating.

How do you draw folks in without compromising on the reality or your sense of why this matters and what it is?

How do you draw people in without compromising on that?

And then, relatedly, we can't underestimate the challenges of talking or interacting across areas of practice and disciplines and expertise.

We don't speak the same language.

We don't think in the same terms.

And so how folks have navigated that, because building relationships takes time.

So how do you foster space where folks can interact meaningfully when they don't have very much time to spend together?

SARAH HANSEN: This idea of bringing people from different practices and disciplines together to find expertise everywhere is part of what makes Professor Edoh's course so valuable.

It creates a wealth of perspectives that are actively reshaping how we view the conversation on race, justice, and equity around the globe.

If you're interested in adding your expertise, or to learn from others, you can find Amah's videos on our MIT OpenCourseWare YouTube site.

You'll soon find her teaching materials on our MIT OpenCourseWare website, as well.

You can find Amah's lab online at www.africanfutures.mit.edu.

Thank you so much for listening.

Until next time, signing off from Cambridge, Massachusetts, I'm your host, Sarah Hansen from MIT OpenCourseWare.

Chalk Radio's producers include myself, Brett Paci, and Dave Lishansky.

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