

# ELIZABETH OYANGE

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

people, IP, copyright, intellectual property, Kenya, women, law, patents, university, lawyer, advocacy, licence, teaching, challenging, copyright office

## SPEAKERS

Elizabeth Oyange, Betty Kankam-Boadu

### **Elizabeth Oyange** 00:00

I believe that knowledge is meant to be shared, and life is so much easier when we have access to information when we need it, particularly in research.

### **Betty Kankam-Boadu** 00:12

Hello, and welcome to Inspiring Open, candid conversations with influential women whose careers and open ethos have pushed the boundaries of what it means to build community and succeed as a collective. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu, a journalist and women's rights advocate. Join me as I explore the fascinating backstories behind Africa's most tenacious female personalities. Inspiring Open is a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women, a project of Wiki In Africa. Be inspired, be challenged, be bold!

### **Betty Kankam-Boadu** 00:52

Elizabeth Oyange is our guest today. Her path into the world of intellectual property started when she unexpectedly landed a job with the BBC in London working with a Global Brands and Licensing department. She later came back to Kenya to train to be a lawyer, but still effortlessly gravitated towards IP specialising in copyright. She's passionate about intellectual properties intersection with traditional knowledge, culture, and technology. She is currently the copyright specialist at Aga Khan University Global East Africa, where she oversees the university's copyright matters, intellectual property training and consultation. She's also a certified Patent Agent. Let's delve right into the conversation.

On this podcast, we like to start from the very beginning. Can you tell us about your background, and by background, I mean, your childhood where you grew up, and the kind of upbringing you had?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 01:51

I grew up, we were... we are still five children. Growing up was very interesting. I was born and raised in Nairobi. I had a great childhood. My mom was a teacher, and my father was a diplomat. During the holiday, she would pack all five of us, and we would go visit him wherever he was. It was good most of the time. Dad would not be around, so he'd take maybe two holidays a year and either come or we go see him. But apart from that, it was great. We went to good schools, and I enjoyed it. I had a very good childhood, I have to say.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 02:33

What values were you taught as a child that you still hold on to?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 02:37

Definitely honesty. My father hated liars. He is a very calm person, and because he had military training, he would know how to extract truth. And once he discovered that you're telling a lie, he would break your heart into pieces. Honesty, was something that we were taught from a very, very young age, and it's still something I hold dearly. I cannot stand liars, and I cannot stand lying. I think this is one of the most important attributes anyone can have. Honesty, and then loyalty as well.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 03:13

Honesty really ties with your profession, then, because when a client comes to you, you want the truth, you don't want any lies. Anyway, so even though you don't necessarily practice law in your current role, you are a trained lawyer, right?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 03:33

Yes, yes. Professionally qualified as an Advocate of the High Court of Kenya. So, yes, for the last four years, five years, I have been qualified. Yes.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 03:46

Did you always want to be a lawyer?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 03:50

Of course, being young, I mean, your career aspirations change. Initially, I wanted to be an air hostess, because I wanted to just travel. I felt like the roles that air hostesses do is just so awesome, because they get to see the world. And that was my aspiration until I reached about 16. In school, I immediately dropped all the sciences, because I just loved reading. I loved English

literature. So based on that, the only other career that I could do, where there was a good amount of reading would have to be law. And so essentially, I was allowed to pick my own course, and based on what I did for my A-Levels, that course just led me to law.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 04:37

How would you describe being a Lawyer in Kenya as a woman?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 04:44

I don't know if a woman lawyer is the word for it. But I don't know. I believe people get drawn to you for the strength of your services. And what goes around, if you're an effective performer, and so whether you're a woman or a man, it should just be based on the kind of service you provide. Although, I acknowledge that we still live in a patriarchal society, both in politics and business. Most people, particularly in Kenya would think, if they have a case, they'll probably look for a male lawyer first before going to a woman. But for the most part, the work that I've done actually has been referred to me by other women. I've actually never had work referred to me by a man. I guess, in a sense, being a woman lawyer in Kenya depends on women to send you work, and your network as well. If you do end up building a network to include both, then depending on your network, then you get that kind of work sent to you.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 05:48

You worked with the BBC. Tell me how you ended up there, and what that experience was like?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 05:55

It's very interesting. I graduated from my Masters in Law in 2008. And that was just smack in the middle of the great recession. And here, I was sending out CVs, and I'm watching the news, and just senior executives being fired, people just leaving offices with boxes when the banks collapsed. I didn't really expect much when I was applying. In fact, I didn't hear back from many, but I just applied anyway. At the time, we had a one-year-old daughter, Melina. I just said, you know what, I'm just going to do this. I set myself out to aim very high. I made countless applications. I got 15 interviews. So by the time I was going for the 16th one, I was like, that's it, I'm done, this isn't going to happen, I'm just going to go back to Kenya. The same day that I went for that 16th interview, they called me back the same day and they offered me the job. So that's how I got my first break. And that's how I landed at the BBC offices in London. And at the time I was working at the Children's Global Brands and Licensing Department. This actually shaped my career, because they were dealing a lot with licensing of the assets for programmes and also issues to do with intellectual property. And so that's how I got my start in the area of IP. I was with them for about one and a half

years. And then I came back, only because I wanted to now pursue my qualifications as an advocate. I came back to do the training in Kenya.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 07:35**

Tell me about how the transition was like coming back from the UK and trying to get your feet back into the law profession in Kenya? Was that a smooth transition?

**Elizabeth Oyange 07:49**

When we came back in 2012, you needed to apply to get the Advocate Training Programme at the Kenya School of Law. You needed to have 16 mandatory core units, – 16 mandatory modules that you will have done at university within your degree – for you to qualify to get into Kenya School of Law. When I came back, they sent a letter, after applying they sent a letter telling me I was missing four. And it turned out later that there was actually a group of us, a group of people who had been denied entry into that course because they had done their degree abroad, and they came back, and they were missing a couple, one or two or even six modules. When I came back, it was challenging, because I felt like that was the end. Like that's it. I'm never going to go in. How am I going to do these extra units? And I remember I went around to at least four universities trying to ask them to please, please, can you just offer us those extra courses? And they were like, no, we don't offer external courses. We only offer full degrees, like the full three years. And finally, I went to this one university called Riara, and I just put in my case with one professor there, I think he was called Eric. And I told him, this is the situation, is there a way you can offer at least some of these missing modules? And lo and behold, they agreed.

That's how me and 25 other students who had been locked out got into fill in the missing units. That took about three months. But then after that, we were like, yes! Finally, we have all our units. Now we can finally go and train and be lawyers. We go and we drop these applications and Kenya School of Law comes back with another letter. And they're like, actually, you need to now go back and you need to equate your qualifications. Your qualifications in the UK, do they equate to the Kenyan ones? I'm like, okay, this is another challenge. We went to KNEC, which is the exam board, and we showed them the letter and we were like, can you equate for us our degrees and our education? Whatever we did for A-Levels because it was GCSE and equate it to the Kenyan equivalent. And KNEC was like, nope we don't do this. We've not done this since 2009. We were like, now what happens because NEC doesn't do this and Kenya School of Law needs this. It felt like they were just trying to block. They were just trying to block as many people from getting into the course. I think at that point I felt this is it, my career, in law is finished. I need to think about what to do now. But the following month, surprisingly, I don't know what happened between then, but

they did allow us now to be able to get in with the extra units that we'd done. So that was a challenge. It tested me. I wasn't so sure I'd be doing law. But sometimes one institution can hold the power. It can hold the power to your career, no matter what you do. There will always be these blocks.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 10:55**

It's similar here in Ghana. There's always this rift between students who want to get into the Ghana law School and the General Legal Counsel. And you can tell the grip the General Legal Counsel has on legal education. It's almost as if it's a cult.

**Elizabeth Oyange 11:13**

Oh yes, for sure. I mean, the number of complaints that come out of the Law school. Before the exam is to be done by the Law school. Now they've been passed on to the Council of Liberal Education. But before that, there were complaints that they failed people purposefully. Because when you repeat, then you have to pay more. And so after repeating and you pay to repeat, you pass. There were always these questions about you know, how they want to block certain people or a certain number every year from passing. I guess that's just Africa? I don't know.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 11:49**

Yeah. The BBC introduced you to this world of intellectual property and Licencing and all that. How did things unfold from there?

**Elizabeth Oyange 12:00**

Coming back to Kenya, I knew that even after doing the training as an advocate, I wanted to specialise in the area of intellectual property. I went and I looked around for maybe law firms specialising in it, and I couldn't find any specific law firm dealing with that area. I ended up at a university that had a research centre for Intellectual Property and Technology. And I approached that professor and I made a passionate plea, and I ended up doing a stint at that centre. And so that was actually very eye-opening. The professor there was a chemist, and he used to specialise in patents. He was very good at patent work. After doing that stint, I knew for sure that I'd be doing IP, particularly focused in patents at the time. And that's how I've resolved to continue really.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu 13:05**

Now you work with Agha Khan University as a copyright specialist. How did you land that job too?

**Elizabeth Oyange 13:13**

It was a game of chance, really. In 2016, I did this course called CopyrightX. It was a course that was offered online at the time by Harvard Law School. I did that course. And then, shortly after finishing that course, I hadn't had a chance to apply to any law firm, because I was still trying to find an opportunity in IP. I saw the advertisements for that in the newspaper, and I was like, oh wow, it's like this job is built for me. Because here I am, I've just done my CopyrightX course, got my certificate, and now this job is looking for someone to do copyright. So that's how I ended up with Agha Khan University. It's just like, I don't know, maybe it was destiny. I never did intend to go into a law firm. After working in that research centre, I loved working in academia. I wanted a position that would allow me not only to do research, but also to teach. And that is what I do in my present role here at Aga Khan.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 14:12

Can you delve a bit deeper into your role as a copyright specialist?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 14:16

At the moment I manage the Copyright Office, which sits in the office of the University Librarian. The Copyright Office caters to all our global jurisdictions in East Africa. We have a campus in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, another campus in Pakistan, and in London as well. What we do is we train and consult on corporate matters. We run workshops, both on copyright, on predatory journals, and publishing practices. We offer document clearances and requests for permission of use. We train on intellectual property. And most recently, we have just started, last month, running the CopyrightX IP course in conjunction with the Harvard Law School. I just love teaching anything to do with IP. And I feel like I am where I am meant to be.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 15:11

That's good to know. I mean, if you are, where you're meant to be, what it means is that you only give your best and it doesn't even become like a job. It becomes something you enjoy every single day. Now Liz, take us into the world of intellectual property, explaining in simplest form, what that is?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 15:32

Generally, when we're trying to teach IP, we have to break it into three. My speciality now is only copyright. So copyright is an area of IP that deals with creative works. Anything that's written, painted, drawn, recorded comes under copyright. Then there's area of patents, which is more on the invention. Anything that is invented within science or technology, patents are granted. It's like a certificate that's granted by the government, and it can only last for 20 years. In as much as I'm

passionate about patents, that's not what I do now. What I'm majorly do now is on copyrights. Although I have the skills, I have been trained by most of the World Intellectual Property, the WIPO courses on patent and patent drafting. Majority of my work right now is only focused on the copyright aspects. And I feel I should mention, although I said that I don't do legal work, for the moment, I'm actually knee-deep in legal work. The Legal Officer, she went on maternity leave, so I'm sort of covering the Legal Office at the moment. I can never seem to run away from law. It always seems to find me. I am covering the commercial aspect of law for the University at the moment. Which is enjoyable, I enjoy law. There's great research. But my foot is largely in the corporate space of IP.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 17:02

Do you find a lot of women in the IP industry in Kenya, for instance?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 17:07

In Kenya, women in the IP field? We're not that many. Many you go now into the specialised areas like copyright. No, we're not that many. When you go now further into IP and go in to the patent field? No, we are not. In terms of IP, I'm not sure. Most women I think in law prefer to do the other areas of law. Maybe the commercial law. It's more lucrative, maybe. There's more work there. But when you look at IP in Kenya, you don't find that many women. I know a handful of women doing IP, but I can't say one who just specialises in copyright or one who just specialises in patents. Maybe there's a need for advocacy, particularly for women who are doing law. And there are so many opportunities now that are coming up in terms of IP. When we look at artificial intelligence, and things like technology, these are areas that are very much IP based. I think there's the need for advocacy for girls, more girls, and more women to get into IP just because technology is the future. And IP Law is a very good course to those aspects as well.

**Elizabeth Oyange** 18:39

I don't think the people who get into IP, get in just by fluke. I think they were exposed to IP in one form or another. So maybe they were working in the entertainment industry, and they saw some gaps, or they were working with artists or music, and they just saw some gaps in the law, and that led them to IP. I think opportunity leads people into this field, and also exposure. If you work in an organisation and you see issues to do with IP, then you tend to want to work in that field. Opportunity and exposure definitely are factors that might lead people into this field. But I don't think any lawyer who's just come out of law school will be thinking IP is for me if they've never done any IP work and they've never been exposed to it.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 19:34

Let's talk about the Open Movement now, and specifically Creative Commons. When did you come to know about Creative Commons?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 19:42

I've been involved with Creative Commons since around 2013, when I was at the centre for IP at the university. So yes, I did know about them from around 2013. At the time there was a public league. The system of CP has changed now, but at the time, there were two leagues. There was a legal league, which was a law institution. And then there was a public league, which could be any other organisation. That university was a public league, and that professor allowed me to take over the advocacy matters for the university in terms of CP staff. I was speaking at conferences, about the various licences and how people could benefit from using openly licenced works, and accessing what others have published with the licences.

**Elizabeth Oyange** 20:37

I believe that knowledge is meant to be shared. And life is so much easier when we have access to information when we need it, particularly in research. My office does a lot of clearances and permissions and we see a lot of limitations for works. Some works require you to subscribe, so you pay a fee before you can access it. And some authors who publish and then come back to try and use their work later, but then they find out that they can't actually use the work, they have to go back to the publisher, and request for permission. So definitely the area of open access is important. When we do our copyright training, that's one of the aspects we always touch on, to ensure everyone understands the benefits of open access publishing, not only for the institution but also for them as the people who own this work. This has benefited us in Aga Khan University. We have an Institutional Repository called eCommons, and we just upload documents. As soon as you see the licence is a Creative Commons licence, we don't have to worry about going now to the publisher to ask for permissions, and we don't have to worry about copyright infringement. We just upload the document as per the licencing conditions. So definitely, Open Access is pretty much at the core of what we do at the Copyright Office.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 21:53

Where in your career, have you found say, support? And how has that been helpful?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 22:02

I remember when I was first starting out, the first thing I googled was women in intellectual property. I think there was a publication at the time that used to highlight the top 50 or 100, women in IP, but

those women were based in countries like the US and Europe. Nothing in Africa. I just looked at what do these women do and why they're on this list and how can I get on this list? Your mentors just become the people that you read in the magazines, but you never actually talk to. And then another thing that I found helpful was to attend conferences. There are a lot of virtual conferences going on to do with IP, and I just attend those. And after those sessions, then you network. Networking builds your circle of people in the industry. Also there are various opportunities with Creative Commons to network. They've had conferences in different countries for the past couple of years before COVID. And those conferences were amazing, because you meet like-minded people, particularly those who also work in the fields of IP.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 23:15

What parts of your work do you find most rewarding? And what parts do you find complicated?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 23:27

The most rewarding part of my job is the teaching. I like teaching, I like sharing. I think in things to do with protection of property and knowing when to use somebody else's work, knowing when to get protection: these are very interesting areas for me, and these are things that I get to do constantly. For me, the teaching aspect is definitely a bonus.

The most challenging? I think finding the time to do research. I think the last time I wrote a paper was in 2018. I'm not so proud about it, but I wish I had more time to actually publish more. The challenging thing is to find the time to do effective research and publish more information in that area.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 24:24

How is the copyright department at Aga Khan different today from when you joined?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 24:29

When I first came in there was so much contact, so much requests, email requests for training, requests for workshops, request for, "Can I use this? Why can't I use this?" But since having this position, we've done so much advocacy that we don't hear as much, so we don't get requests. Everything is uploaded on our website. Whenever people need resources, they know where to find information. I'd like to think we've done enough in terms of making people aware of how copyright works. We've done an intellectual property boot camp just to sort of teach people about certain aspects of IP. And that was not just for AKU, that was also open to the public. I'd like to think there's more knowledge internally with regards to copyright and some aspects of intellectual property.

Because you see the results, based on the data that we get in terms of the work that we do during the year. The contract has been less, which is a good sign, because people now sort of know how copyright works and where to get that information.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 24:29

You have a little one, and I'm curious, how do you find a fair balance between being a mother and the responsibilities that come with it, and the work you do, such that no area is lacking?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 25:50

Interesting question. Over the last year, we had fun. And so that's been very interesting. Especially during the pandemic. Luckily, for us, we were able to do majority, or some days, remotely. Managing a young family and work at the same time, it takes a lot. But I believe I have a very good support network. My husband is very hands-on. We have been able to do it based on our schedule. I can say, so far, so good.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 26:32

What experiences have really inspired you to keep going no matter what?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 26:38

I think it's always that thing of wanting to always know more and wanting to always keep up. And I'm very aware now that right now there are young people in school, there're young people in colleges and universities, and they're coming, and they're coming hard. You have to be updated, you have to be updated with the current areas. Things like coding, these are the trends now. This is what the young people are doing. And if you're just sitting there in your comfort zone, these people will come and they will take over. My motivation is the youth. The youth are coming, and we should be able to do what they do, and even better. Because the ways of working are changing. Careers are changing. I think the young people really keep me on my feet, and I want to be able to understand what they understand. We used to say, the people who sit in government offices, we used to laugh, in fact, that if they can't use computers. They don't know what email is. And this is us now. We're now the old ones, and the kids are looking at us and they're coming. We have to be prepared, we always have to read, keep updated with the trends so that we remain relevant, even if the kids are coming with all their knowledge and all their coding, we need to be prepared. I'm always trying to learn. Learning is never-ending. I'm always trying to learn all the things as well, because I think it's going to be relevant, and it's useful now.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 28:06

That's true. And have you ever hit rock bottom? And how did you pick yourself back up?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 28:17

Funny, you should mention that. My first year at university was really tough. I've left my continent. I'm in a new place. I'm all alone. I don't have family. It's just you and you're supposed to be there for three years. I went through some mind-boggling stuff, I was actually severely depressed those first two years. And I had to take time out of school because it was just affecting my performance. I can safely say that I pulled through that episode, because by that time, I had met my now husband. And he was there. He was there. Family was there. I used to be on the phone almost every day, talking to my brothers and just trying to get that support. And when I was finally ready to come back, I did my final year. There is this gap in my education that I don't like to bring up because those are really dark times. But that episode, I really appreciate it. It made me really strong. And my husband knows I don't cry, rarely, because I feel like I walked on molten lava. And I just toughened up as a person. People take it lightly, things to do with the mind. These are not things that you take lightly. People go through things, and I am very aware now, especially in this society, when people say that they're depressed, it's kind of brushed off. Nobody really knows how to deal with it. And then you just find people dealing with it in the wrong own way. So yeah, I did. I did hit rock bottom. But that is how I guess I've toughened up and that that's how I rose.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 29:54

Yeah, and it's always such a great story. Because we're going to fall. We will definitely fall. At any point in our lives. But we should always find a reason to get back up. And I'm glad you were able to get back up and now you have the life that you have now. How are you inspiring the next generation of IP professionals, especially girls?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 30:20

I'd like to think I'm inspiring. I'm not sure that I'm doing enough advocacy about it at the moment. For now at the Copyright Office, there's one lady who works with me, called Esther. I'd like to think that I do enough to inspire her. I'm always challenging her to think far and think outside the box. In terms of the future, yes, I will definitely like to do more work in terms of advocacy for IP, particularly for young girls in schools. This is maybe something that I need to put on my bucket list, starting this year.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 30:55

Is there anything you would do differently in your life when you look back?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 31:00

Well, I think maybe straight after high school, I might have taken one year or two years to work before going to school. I think I would have been more mature and more grounded, particularly with the independence part. But apart from that, life is a whirlwind. And those experiences shape you. I wouldn't change. There have been some very good parts. There have been some quite messy parts. But I'm glad considering these are learning experiences and that's what builds personality. So apart from that, I'm perfectly happy. I would live myself again. I'd live it over again.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 31:39

What is the most important thing you are focusing on this year?

**Elizabeth Oyange** 31:43

Firstly, with regards to this role, the very first thing that I'm focusing on is to successfully finish the CopyrightX training course. We have about 21 participants this year. It's a toll-free course that we're teaching, and at the end of that course, then they get a certificate. I'd like to be able to get at least 100% pass rate for that, for this year. And then secondly, I would like to focus, there's a patent drafting course that's been offered for the first time. I'll be very pleased if I was part of that. It's an eight-month course being offered by WIPO. I'd be very, very excited if I could do that because it means that my skill in the patent field can be enhanced. And then thirdly, sleep. It's been a year of having a newborn and sleep is lacking. I need sleep, so I would like to get sleep this year.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 32:41

I wish you more sleep this year.

**Elizabeth Oyange** 32:43

Thank you.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 32:47

Sleep is so... I feel it's so underrated.

**Elizabeth Oyange** 32:50

Underrated, yes.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 32:51

But it's so important.

**Elizabeth Oyange** 32:53

You don't know that you're missing it until you don't have it.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 32:55

Until you don't have it.

**Elizabeth Oyange** 32:56

You don't think about it until you can't.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 32:57

It's true. That's very, very true. Well, Liz, it's been such a wonderful time with you here. And it was such a pleasure talking to you.

**Elizabeth Oyange** 33:02

Thank you so much. You're such a lovely interviewer.

**Betty Kankam-Boadu** 33:10

Elizabeth Oyange is the Copyright Specialist at Aga Khan University Global East Africa.

Thank you for listening to Inspiring Open, a podcast series from Wiki Loves Women. This first series of Inspiring Open was funded through the International Relief Fund for organisations in culture and education 2021, an initiative of the German Federal Foreign Office, the Goethe Institute and other partners; and an annual grant from the Wikimedia Foundation. If you enjoyed today's show, subscribe on Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to your podcasts so you never miss an episode. Feel free to share, rate and review us. We appreciate the support. You can also tag us in your posts. We are @WikiLovesWomen on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. I'll leave you with the words of Ntozake Shange. "Sisterhood is important because we are all we have to stand on. We have to stand near and by each other, pray for one another and share the joys and the difficulties that women face in the world today. If we don't talk about it amongst ourselves, then we are made silent by the patriarchy. And that serves us no purpose. Until next time, look after yourselves and your sisters. And remember, be inspired, be challenged, be bold. I am Betty Kankam-Boadu and you've been listening to Wiki Loves Women, Inspiring Open.