

LOLA SHONEYIN TRANSCRIPT

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

books, women, festivals, literary festival, Aké Festival, Lola Shoneyin, Nigeria, write, writing, sex, Africa, authors, children, writers, homosexuality, polygamy, readers

SPEAKERS

Lola Shoneyin, Betty Kankam-Boadu

Lola Shoneyin 00:00

We're less inclined and slower to judge and to condemn when we have a decent idea of the culture of the people, the thinking of the people. And there's no better avenue, there's no better route to achieving this than through the books authored by people within that culture.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 00:27

Hello, and welcome to Inspiring Open, candid conversations with influential women who have made an impact in Africa. We're talking about their personal, educational and career journeys, the choices they have made along the way, and what they have gained by setting aside their doubts in a world where women's voices and opinions often go unheard and unacknowledged. Inspiring Open is a space to explore the value of sisterhood, and how networks of sharing and openness can create waves of change. 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.

My guest today is Lola Shoneyin. Lola didn't see writing as a special skill growing up. She thought everybody could write and so she started to write. Fast forward, Lola is now an award-winning author and poet. Some of her works include three books of poems, three children's books, and her highly acclaimed novel, [The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives](#), which was nominated for the Orange Prize for Fiction in 2011, and went on to win the Pen Awards. In 2020, it was announced that the book would be a Netflix production. She's also the founder of Book Buzz Foundation, organisers of the Ake Arts and Book Festival, one of the most important literary festivals on the African continent. Lola runs Ouide Books, a publishing house and one of the most vibrant

bookstores for eclectic readers in Nigeria. She is blind to obstacles and believes she can do anything she sets her mind to. And it's evident in her career trajectory. Let's dive straight into it with Lola.

Can you tell us about your childhood, and the kind of upbringing your parents gave you?

Lola Shoneyin 02:39

I think, as I've grown older, and as I've grown older and look back on my childhood, I think it was one of extreme happiness and joy, but also at times one of extreme pain and sadness and humiliation. I grew up in the kind of family where a raucous laughter was very much a part of our lives. We laughed at one another. We laughed at our circumstances. We laughed, sometimes, at the people we loved. We were a happy family. We joked around. But also, there were difficult aspects of it. And there were very traumatic aspects of it. Because as children, we were also exposed to a lot of individuals who pretended to help us simply because they'd been invited into our lives by my mom who rejects the notion that things just happen. Everything happened for a reason. And a lot of the time, she wanted to know that reason. And this led to, like I said before, being exposed to people, I think, who took advantage of the family, took advantage of our innocence as children. So, when I look back, and when I think back at those times, I realised that it was a very mixed childhood. Although there is some inherited trauma, there are also several memories of joy, of happiness, of contentment, of friendship and of love. So that's the best way I think that I would summarise my upbringing.

I had a few very difficult events that happened to me. I was sexually abused. When I was three years old, I think it's like it is for most people, it's something that you carry around for the rest of your life, especially when you have reached the point when you know how to forgive yourself. Which sounds strange, but sometimes that is the most important element of being able to overcome the very negative emotions and the very self-destructive feelings that one gets over the years. And the way that one punishes oneself for having been exposed to that at an age where it shouldn't have happened at all.

Yeah, so grateful, extremely grateful that my life has been a life of words, has been a life of access to writing, to books, which gave me escapism when I was young. I learned to read very quickly. And I learned a new how to disappear into books. And I loved that. And luckily, I went to a school where I had to read every afternoon for 45 minutes. It was compulsory. I went to a school where if you did your work quickly and finished, your teacher would read books to you, which totally made me fall in love with being read to. So, till today, I enjoy being ready to be immensely. I seize every opportunity to read to children and to read to even adults, because there's just something so life-affirming about

that process. I'm very lucky that very early on, I made the link between writer and book. A lot of people don't remember this about Prince Charles, who came to visit the prep schools in Edinburgh at the time, but he wrote this book called 'The Old Man of Lochnagar' and we all got a signed copy.

Lola Shoneyin 07:33

So, that connection between book, written word, and the person behind the words was very real to me. And I, therefore, thought it was normal. And it was something that most people did. So yes, that's, I guess, what I can say about my childhood.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 07:51

But for the abuse, it sounds like you had an incredible childhood. And I'm so sorry about the abuse. I'm so sorry that you had to go through that. And knowing that you experienced sexual abuse, my mind just took me to the rape scene in your book, *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives*. The scene was so vivid, it felt like the reader was experiencing it.

Lola Shoneyin 08:16

But it's important to let you know that that wasn't my experience. But it was the experience of a woman, who has now died, who was very close to me. She relayed it to me, she told me exactly how it happened. And I internalised it. And then I wrote about it. And it was one of the ways that I wanted to honour her and record it. Record that event. I thought it was important for people to know that this sort of thing actually happens. And that story of that specific situation, yeah.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 08:58

What did you study in school? And did you know at that point, obviously, from your love of books, and how you practically grew up in a reading culture, did you know at that point that author was ever going to be in the cards for you in the future?

Lola Shoneyin 09:19

Look, I thought writing was something everyone did. I didn't think it was particularly special. So, I was always writing, always recording always doing diary entries. And because I was somewhat melancholic, writing, again, was just another means of escapism for me. Even these days I sometimes I am, not uncomfortable, but I feel slightly fraudulent when I describe myself as an author because I am writing but I'm also doing several other things. I'm also a publisher. I'm also a bookstore owner. I also work in a bank, even though I'm not a banker. I also work within the film industry. So, I don't know if calling me a writer is completely accurate. It's part of the many things that I do. And I feel very lucky to have that privilege.

So, I studied literature in school to answer your question, and I absolutely loved university in Nigeria, I loved the experience. And I consider myself very lucky to have had lecturers like Wole Ayodele, who really pushed me and who didn't let me get complacent about whatever gifts or capabilities that I had. They made me work, they encouraged me to work hard, and I'm eternally grateful for that.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 11:08

So after school, what was the first job you took on?

Lola Shoneyin 11:15

My first paying job was working with a literary journal called [Glendora Review](#) as their marketing officer. So the year before that same publication, I was the poet of the publication. They published a picture of me along with some of my poems, which was a huge thing for a young woman. I started working for them and the job involved, I used to do office to office, talk to everybody I know who enjoyed the literary world or literary endeavours or literary things, and try to get them to subscribe so that this beautiful publication could go on living. That was my first job. Before that, I have to say that from 1994/95, I was already getting friendly with the members of the [Association of Nigerian Authors](#). We had a branch in Ibadan, which is where I grew up. And I used to rub shoulders with people like [Miss Mabel Segun](#), who is over 90 now, [Professor Femi Osofisan](#), Professor [indistinct] Odia Ofeimun, [Harry Garuba](#), Ogaga Ifowodo, [indistinct 12:50], Remi Raji. There's a long list of poets and writers that I would meet up with at the monthly events, and that I learned so much from. Just being in their midst just made such a big difference to giving me the confidence that I needed at that age, but also learning from them. Many of them would pull me aside and say, "Oh, that poem, why don't you try this? Why don't you do this?" Things like that. So that was my life at that time, and that's how I became confident enough so that such by the time I was 23 years old. I entered my book of poems, unpublished, was shortlisted for an Association of Nigerian Authors National Prize. I think the two other shortlisted authors, Remi Raji and Gucci, O'Toole Yuka, I think they couldn't be less than maybe 15 years older than me. I was just 22/23 at the time, and I had these much older men and I didn't win the prize, but it was wonderful. It was a real boost. It was a real confidence booster for a young girl. And it made me even more fearless. But more than that, it helped me realise that I could do it. And I just never looked back.

I also by then at founded my own publishing house. I was inspired by the Women's Press in the US at the time, you may not know it, but it was a they published these books where their logo was an iron with a little cord. It was very interesting to me and I thought this is amazing. If these people the Women's Press, if I could just publish women, nobody's ever done that. And I think that means we

could find ways to promote women's voices. So that was my thinking at the time. And I called it Oval Onion. That was the name of the publishing house, because an oval onion kind of looks like a womb. Yeah, well, that was that.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 15:30

Interesting. Obviously, you said that growing up, you didn't think that writing was such a big deal, and that you thought everybody wrote because you would write all the time. But I reckon at some point, something must have clicked or you realised that you could go commercial with your writing.

Lola Shoneyin 15:51

That has strictly never really crossed my mind. A lot of the things that I do in my life are just because I know that I can do them. And I'm just waiting for the rest of the world to catch up with that knowledge that it can be done. I dare myself a lot. I often say that I have obstacle blindness, a lot of the things that seem to stop other people from achieving their goals or going for the things they want, I don't see those things. When they're there, I strictly see them as things to work through. They are not to be an encumbrance. They are not to be an obstacle. If I can't get through it, I will get over it. But I will get to my goal. And that's always been my mindset. So when I wanted to write Baba Segi, that was my third attempt at writing a novel. I'd written Fertility Nails I've written Harlot. I couldn't find a publisher. There was this story and I wrote it, and I knew I could write it. So I don't know, it wasn't so much, oh, I've got to write the novel. It was more this is something I know I can do. And I am going to do it. The time feels right. For me, it didn't even feel like... after that novel, I didn't even really feel the pressure of a second novel. Because I just don't put my... I put myself under pressure. And it's one thing I've learnt as I've got older, I just reject pressure put on me by other external pressure, because I don't cope well with it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 17:59

I mean, the two books that you wrote that were not published, are you ever going to publish them?

Lola Shoneyin 18:05

I don't know. I doubt it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 18:10

I wonder how that must have felt. You wrote two novels, hoping to get them published. And a publisher says no, and then the stories just go into-

Lola Shoneyin 18:23

Not quite. Not quite like that. The first one Fertility Nails I would describe as juvenilia. It's just early writing that deserves to go into the bin. Harlots, my agent loved. My agent thought we could sell it, for sure. And boy did she try. She took that novel everywhere. And everybody rejected it. When we couldn't find a publisher. My agent, Jessica Willard, was very much on my side. And desperately, like I was, hoping to get a publisher and we couldn't get one. And then she was like, "You know what? I've tried everything. Let's start again. Is there anything else? What do you think, blah. I know you've got talent, I know you can do this. You've just got to hit the right note." And she said, "Is there any other idea that you have for a novel?" And I said, "Well, there's an idea I have for a play, but not a novel?" And she said, Oh, forget plays. Plays don't sell." And then she said, "Anyway, tell me the story." And I told it to her. And she said, "That's your next book. Now go and write it." And the rest is history.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 19:43

And what do you think made that difference? What was so special at that time, because you said that Harlots was a fantastic book as well. What was special about The Secret Lives of Baba Segi's Wives that even your agent knew that it would sell at that point.

Lola Shoneyin 19:58

I think it's an important story. A very important story for Africa. And I think Jessica could sense that. The fact that that story needed to be written at all is just testament to how there're lots of people, especially, on the African continent, who are still pondering over if there's such a thing as male infertility, for instance. As you know, it's often always the woman's fault. That's what is generally believed. And I think this book, Baba Segi pokes a bit of a hole in that. But beyond that, it also reinforces one of my beliefs, which is that it's not the sperm donor that's necessarily the father of a child. It's the person who nurtures, who protects, and who raises. So which are just little elements of my personal beliefs. But I think also, perhaps because she realised that the book also addresses a few taboo topics, one big, homosexuality, another being Christianity. You hear a lot of stuff about Islam and fundamentalist thinking, and perhaps knows enough about the dangers of Christianity in the southwest, western parts of Nigeria. And, of course, conversations around depression, and why people take the wrong decisions often when they're depressed.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 21:52

Yeah, and I mean, I found it very, very interesting, because I thought the way a myriad of serious themes that were brought to bear in the book in a very humorous way as well. One thing that also drew my attention, and you just mentioned, was the part about homosexuality. Yeah, Segi and I think that tomato seller, and how she fantasises about the tomatoes and how she's making all this

money and wanting to splurge it on the tomato seller. And I found that to be daring, even though you did not really explore that story that much. But I thought it was daring of you, particularly for the kind of people you write for. You proudly say that your audience is African. You write for the African audience.

Lola Shoneyin 22:47

Absolutely, I write for the African audience. Those are the people I see in my mind's eye as my potential readers. That particular character Iya Segi, and that particular story was important to me, because people were already saying bizarre things like homosexuality is a Western construct. Homosexuality is unAfrican. Homosexuality... And I just thought, what is wrong with... Why are you locking yourself into a corner and covering yourself with honey and inviting bees, because that's what it sounds like when you come up with that kind of or you try to push that kind of premise. When everybody knows homosexuality and gender has to do with humanity. It's got nothing to do with... It's not particular or peculiar to a particular race, or peoples. So, what I was doing there, very specifically was, here's this woman who has never had any contact with the West, never travelled abroad, never met a white person, yet has these impulses. So, the point there being that it's from within, as opposed to being a phenomenon that arises in response to an external influence. That was the point of that. It wasn't really the homosexuality. It was more that question about the origin story that I wanted to address, because once you've addressed that, then the rest is easy to navigate.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 24:43

And then also, obviously, the issue of polygamy. I know your stance on polygamy from watching your interviews and all that, because when I looked at the characters, the women, I found out that none of them really wanted to go into that marriage in the first place. They found the marriage as an escape. In some way, I do agree with you on your stance on polygamy, because in the first place, I'm sure a lot of these women who probably engage in it, it will probably not be a first option for them.

Lola Shoneyin 25:16

Well, exactly. And that's the ... I've moved a little of my stance. Not on polygamy, but on women agreeing to join polygamous households. The biggest thing for me about feminism, the most important elements of feminism for me, as an individual and as an African woman is opportunity and choice. It's the one thing that is in short supply for women. So, you've got to ask yourself that, as a woman, and bearing in mind that polygamy is most common in the rural areas where people are less skilled, where people are often less educated, where it's less likely for women to be financially independent, and stuff like that. So, if you bear all that in mind, you've got to ask yourself that,

should those women in polygamous homes, should they have been given, or had they been given certain opportunities to be educated, to delay marriage to go and work and get a PhD, to go and apprentice and become a tailor, to go and try to learn how to fry plantain and cook, fry plantain in the marketplace and have a stall and have ownership of their own money, had they had those opportunities, would they have taken those ones over being married? But also choice. The fact is, a lot of women don't have a choice in the matter. That's not their first choice.

I was talking to a lovely, lovely young lady on Saturday, and she was telling me, she's 24 years old, and she was saying to me, "I don't even think I want to get married. And I don't know how to broach that conversation with my parents." And she's bright. She's an engineer, making a lot of money working for a foreign company whilst being here. And I thought, wow, how far have we come that a young woman is even able to voice that? In my time, even if I had that thought, or if I was that way inclined, or my thinking was going in that direction, I wouldn't even have probably had the courage to say it. Of course, my thinking wasn't like that. I was in love with love. And I was in love with babies. So, I always knew I was going to have lots of children. I have four. I always knew that. I enjoyed the high and the emotion and the security that I believe that love brings. Or that love brought to you. So that wasn't my mindset. But I'm just saying that even if it were, I wouldn't have been able to voice it so confidently.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 28:50

Yeah, my friend, Nana Ama tells me a lot that she thinks that the whole institution of marriage should be demystified. So that it should be okay if a woman says it is not for me. And even childbearing, if a woman says that this is not for me, it should be okay. And for women who want it, it should also be okay for them to want it that bad.

Lola Shoneyin 29:12

Yeah, exactly. Exactly. But that's what I'm saying about opportunity and choice. We should be in a position to make those choices. But the honest truth is that we're really not. We're still very heavily driven and dictated to by what society thinks is appropriate, or what society thinks it's right.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 29:39

And Lola, I also love the way you unapologetically wrote about sex in your book. And I listened to one of your interviews where you said, you used fuck, like 12 times and your husband drew your attention to it, to reduce it. Yeah. But anytime you would describe the sex scenes whether it is Iya, Tope or Iya Femi, the sex scenes they were having, you would go into such details and you will you kind of describe how the women were enjoying the sex.

Lola Shoneyin 30:15

Well, exactly. That was the whole point. I wanted to show that you could have ... it was possible to have bad sex and that it didn't have to be acceptable or accepted. That was really the whole point. So the sex with the different wives, and if you can tell a lot from the words that I use, or the adjectives that I use to, or the adverbs to describe the sorts of sex that they're having. So from pummelling to pumping to pounding, and then in other circumstances, I would use a different set of words like caressing, like, throbbing, different ones. And the whole idea is to bring awareness to the fact that sex isn't just sex, and that sex can be painful, sex can be damaging, sex can be traumatising, sex can be pleasant, sex can be healing and sex can be joyful. And it's important for even women to reject bad sex if it's not giving them the sort of pleasure that it ought to. When two people are engaged in an act, it's very one sided when one is only receiving, and circumstances and tradition make it such that that person is unable to fully express themselves, because they are expected to behave as receivers, to behave in a certain way. Such a person is not free. But of course, a lot of the time, men who see themselves as the givers and as the individuals who provide the sexual pleasure, they can do it with as many people as they want, as many times as they want, as many women as they want, even legally within polygamy. So, sex then becomes a metaphor for freedom. And in a way, one can also say that the manner in which you engage with sex is almost synonymous with how much freedom you perceive yourself as having as an individual within these very conservative societies.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 33:07

Yeah, that's true. And Lola, when you set out to write this book, I mean, obviously you knew was going to be successful, but did you anticipate this level of success that, how many years later, it's what everybody still talks about? It's a book so many people still love. It's a book that people enjoy. This big thing of art the book has become?

Lola Shoneyin 33:33

Thank you so much. To be honest, I expected it to have a more explosive entrance to the market, which it absolutely didn't. And I remember my husband telling me that this book is going to be a slow burn. And I was annoyed because I was like, why? Who wants a slow burn of a book? You want your book to hit the shelves or for everybody to be talking about it. But it has worked out exactly as he said. Which means it has just continued to gather fans and readers all over the world. Even now, 11 years after it was published. It just amazes me, that book clubs still feature it and select it as the book of the month, 11 years after it was published. It's a huge honour and such as such a wonderful, wonderful, wonderful thing. So, I'm not complaining at all. I think it's a story that resonates with a lot of people. I think it's also a story that people love because this book and, you

know, deliberately is on the commercial end of literary fiction. So it's also quite an accessible book. And that's always been my dream, to read books that are accessible, and that people can read and love.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 35:09

Indeed. And Lola, how would you say this book changed your life or even the trajectory of your career?

Lola Shoneyin 35:17

In the sense that I was able to achieve something that I set out to do, absolutely. Has it changed it in any other significant way? I guess it must open certain doors for me. It has allowed me to travel. It has put me in a category of successful writers, which I'm very pleased about, because I like to be seen as being successful in the goals that I have that I set for myself, and then the aims that I have. So yeah, that's what I can say. I'm neither seduced nor impressed by fame. I don't hanker for it. I don't seek it. I don't revel in it. I don't need it. So that aspect of it is just inconsequential.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 36:25

I will talk about, of course, the famous Aké Festival. But I think you are into other projects that are equally of great importance. And one of those projects, I don't know if you still you still have it is the right to read project.

Lola Shoneyin 36:42

Right to Write.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 36:43

Oh, Right to Write. Sorry. So Right to Write project. I find that projects very interesting because of the places you were targeting and how you wanted to publish these many books and take it to children of different ages to also have the experience of reading. Because I think reading, in as much as it is a necessity, it's also it's a privilege. It's a luxury if you ask me, because in our part of the world, not many people can afford books. And that's a fact. You know, yes. When I read about this project, I thought it was such a beautiful thing. Can you tell us more about it?

Lola Shoneyin 37:26

We won the bid from the EU, over €2-million. But then, because the way the EU operates for a project of that magnitude, you have to have a partner in a European country. And just before we were preparing to start working on the last phase, that company we were working with went

bankrupt. So, we suddenly found ourselves in a situation where we started searching for other partners. So that project was put on hold until this year. So, we're back again in the research phase. And I'm just so delighted that so many agencies, so many international agencies who are seeking to help Nigerian children, and children and other parts of West Africa, are waking up to the fact that these readers, classroom readers, fiction books, picture books, are just as important as textbooks. And that one's education, I guess, is incomplete without a child being able to disappear into a picture book, and expand their own imagination. I think that's so important. So, the project is taking another form. And it's something that I'm very excited about getting into this year. We're gearing up for a project that focuses on Northern Nigerian children, but also ensuring that there's representation in the books that we're also developing a wonderful crop of writers from that part of the country, from that part of our country, but also illustrators. I'm very interested in the idea of creating illustrations as well, which is in itself, a very rare talent. There's a big difference between being an illustrator and being an artist. I'm glad that elements of the project are being revived. And the hope is that the funding will be there for me to be able to achieve this. When I couldn't continue with the project, out of sheer frustration, I decided that I was going to write six books. The name of the series is Northern Lights, and the whole idea was that I was going to write six children's books, all set in different states in Northern Nigeria, but with characters who are children, who are vibrant, and who are doing things that children should be able to do. When I couldn't move forward with it as a project, I started doing it within my own personal capacity. And we've just finished the second book in the series.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 40:53

Well, I'm happy that you get to go back to work on it this year, because I really think it's such an important project. And it's so needed. And I really wish you all the best. And I hope this time it really takes off. Why do you think books are so expensive, particularly in our part of the world?

Lola Shoneyin 41:11

Well, it's an imported technology. So that's going to come with its costs. But I also feel that people haven't always been smart about our relationship with paper, and how to ensure that we have paper mills that actually are alive and thriving, so we're not in a position where we're having to import paper, which is what is happening in a lot of African countries. Some African countries don't even have paper mills. Nigeria used to have three paper mills, and now we have a big fat zero. And the way that we'd be able to combat that is to take all duty off books. What this means is that if you're trying to import paper into the country, you can pay duty that's anything from 5% to 20%, depending on whether you're importing reels or sheets, but if you're importing books, then there's no duty. It's free. What you find is that sometimes, a lot of the time or most of the time, it's cheaper to buy books that have been produced outside the country than the books that we've produced in Nigeria itself.

However, it's a big bugbear of mine and I have been working with printers in Nigeria for the last eight years, on principal, Ouida books, books published by the publishing house that I run are printed in Nigeria. It's the only way that we can grow. It's the only way that we can control the cost and keep our prices down.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 43:11

I think you also have this app, One Read Up.

Lola Shoneyin 43:14

Yes.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 43:18

I think the last time I heard you speak about it, it was just like, you mentioned that it was three months old then. So I'm sure by now is probably getting to a year.

Lola Shoneyin 43:27

Getting to almost two years now. And that app was introduced, just another one of my ideas of I'm a bookseller and I kept thinking to myself, well, everybody has a phone, but not everybody can afford Kindle and Audible. What can we do on this African continent to also ensure not only that people are reading and have access to books, or to ensure that they're reading books written by other Africans? I'm one of those people who believes that the reason why wars and different things, the horrible things can happen sometimes, conflict, has got a lot to do with a lack of understanding of the other. We have a lot of xenophobia in different parts of Africa. Again, it's a lack of understanding. And I remember travelling with Zakes Mda one day, on the way to the airport from a festival in South Africa, and he said to me, "Look, when I was young and the Biafra war was going on, the whole of the black South African educated elite was supporting Biafra." And I said, "Really? Why?" And I thought that was really interesting. And he said, "Well, because we all read Things Fall Apart. And that simply shows you the impact and the power of our stories and how we get to understand how the other is thinking. We're less inclined and slower to judge and to condemn, when we have a decent idea of the culture of the people, the thinking of the people, and there's no better avenue, there's no better route to achieving this, than through the books authored by people within that culture.

So, for me, that was what One Read was about, to feature authors from all over Africa from South Africa, to Zimbabwe, to Kenya, to Senegal, to Nigeria to Ghana. And a dream we have now, which we're developing, is to have a Francophone version. So that again, when you click on the app, you

can choose which language you want to read in. And the dream also is to have more and more books in indigenous languages on the app as well, as we grow and move on.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 46:07

Lola, now we can talk about Aké festival. It's taken a whole big life of its own. And it's now indisputably, the biggest literary festival in Africa. Congratulations on that. You get that a lot. But again, congratulations. How did this idea come about?

Lola Shoneyin 46:31

Thank you so much, Aké the festival came about simply as me, one, being slightly embarrassed that we didn't have a festival of that magnitude in black Africa. And secondly, because the more I moved around talking about my own book, the more I realised the importance, and how precious it is for writers to be able to come together. That's what gives birth to other initiatives. So, with KABAFEST, the first Literary Festival in northern Nigeria, started five/six years ago. Now we have eight different festivals. It's like one in every state in northern Nigeria. We have more in northern Nigeria than we even have in southern Nigeria, and this is supposed to be the part where you have a higher number of educated individuals. One thing that's really important to me is being able to show people what they can do. What they can do through my own behaviour, showing people what's possible. And that's why I'm one of those people... I'm eternally grateful that I'm a woman, because whatever type of woman that I am, I am the type of woman that shows other women what can be done, and sometimes what should be done. So I went into it with relative fearlessness, with the attitude of if you build it, they will come. I went with that to the World Bank. We got a nice big grant. We got a grant from Miles Moreland Foundation. And that's how we started because money is very important in these projects. But one ingredient that was critical to me was excellence. I wasn't just going to have a festival that some people would say, "Oh, this happened." No, I wanted a festival that was world class. That events started on time. That was beautifully... the programming was beautiful. And I brought all my life experience to bear. I was a teacher for many, many years, rose to the position of deputy principal, did a lot of work around timetabling, so I knew exactly what was needed. And it was just a question of bringing together the right team to work with me because obviously, I couldn't do everything. And to delegate and to make sure that they understood and valued my position on our pursuit of excellence.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 49:17

I think I would also probably add that what you're doing with Aké Festival connects to something you mentioned in the beginning of the conversation about when you saw Prince Charles, when you read the book, and then you connected it to the author, I think for Aké Festival, it's also a chance for a lot of readers to meet authors and engage with them. Would you say that that was also a foundation?

Lola Shoneyin 49:47

Absolutely. I think it's a beautiful thing for somebody to produce a work, whether it's art, whether it's writing, and then for individuals who have consumed it to have access to the creator, and to be able to ask them questions. I think there's just something amazing about it. It's why book festivals have been successful outside Africa, Edinburgh Festival, Cheltenham Festival, there's something very attractive about coming in contact with the creator of a work of art, and being able to interact with them. And I wanted that for my people.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 50:31

Yeah, it's such a beautiful thing that you're doing, particularly for the younger generation of writers and readers. Maybe you haven't thought about that in that way. But I feel it's your way of giving back, because you mentioned in Ibadan, you know, you go for these monthly meetings with poets and all that who will critique your work, they kind of poured something into you and I feel through Aké Festival, you're also pouring into other young artists all over the world.

Lola Shoneyin 51:04

That is a goal. The goal is that something will germinate with some of these projects and spaces that I create, that if there are people who feel that they want to write, they can come in contact with others who have gone on that journey. And it just makes the possibilities and the potential a lot more achievable.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 51:29

I know you're fearless, you're such a go-getter. And of course, Aké Festival has become this beautiful thing, but it has not been without challenges.

Lola Shoneyin 51:40

The biggest challenge for any festival, especially when you're thinking about how to sustain it is always financial. The fact that the world generally pretends to value arts and the arts. But, when push comes to shove, you find especially in these parts, that it's just not priority. So I think that's a big part of ... that would be, I think one of the biggest problems. Sometimes getting companies, getting government to believe in the goals, and to see the value of what you're bringing. So that's something. And that's a challenge that we keep in the early stages was huge. But I think the bigger you get, and the more the better known, and the more the reputation is developed better, you will find that those institutions, the funders, will come to you instead of the other way around. So that's really been amazing. In terms of other problems, I can't really think of any other one. Because

whatever they are, I don't see them as problems. And I wouldn't see them as problems because they're surmountable, you, you find a way around it. That is life. That is life. And it applies to everything. Very, very rarely will anything just be smooth sailing. So I don't expect it to be. I'm ready for the challenges.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 53:32

I love that. And I even forgot, you mentioned from the beginning that you don't see obstacles, you are blind to obstacles

Lola Shoneyin 53:39

I feel like that because people tell me when they say, "Didn't you notice this?" I'm like, "Yes, so? You get over it, you work, you sort it out, you confront it, you destroy it.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 53:57

Aké Festival, it's big. When you think of going to the next level with this big thing. What do you think about?

Lola Shoneyin 54:06

I'm imagining somebody else younger taking it to those places that perhaps I don't even have any hope or any ambition of reaching. I've been the director for 10 years, and it's very likely that I will bow out after this next one.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 54:30

Wow. I know you're married to a medical doctor. And he's the son of Wole Soyinka.

Lola Shoneyin 54:44

Yep.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 54:54

I wonder how you met?

Lola Shoneyin 54:45

Yes, we met when he came to Nigeria after he'd been on exile. With all the Shoyinka they obviously had to escape the political persecution for their activism against the successive military governments and the atrocities that they were committing. So, Olaokun came and I told this father, that I like his son's beetroot lips. That's how I said. He thought it was funny and relayed it to his son.

But by then his son and I had started communicating via email. Email was... it's a rather romantic story. For six months, we wrote to each other two three times a day. And it wasn't like now that your email comes to you. In those days, you have to go and collect a dot matrix printout of the email. It took some dedication. But here we are. Today, we've been married 23 years. We have, between us, we like to say we have between us together, we have seven children. He had children before he met me. And I had one also before I met him, and we have another three children of our own. We're very close-knit family. He's an excellent, excellent human being. Allows me to have the freedom that we need. Understands my need for space. So we live in the same estate, but we don't live in the same flat because I decided to move out. I needed more space of my own and I could no longer ... I found it increasingly difficult to share my spaces and the kind of incredible man that he is, he understood that. And I think we're better friends even now than we've ever been.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 56:55

Has any of your children caught the art bug or writing bug? Your children come from writing royalty?

Lola Shoneyin 57:05

Absolutely. Both my daughters are writing. My second daughter especially sends me a poem nearly every day. She's also written a beautiful children's book in rhyming couplets. My older daughter wants to write a novel. My son has started and stopped and started and stopped. My first son. The only person who's not writing is my younger son. It's just not his thing.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 57:39

Probably not yet.

Lola Shoneyin 57:42

Everybody can take whatever path that they want. I'm not... I just want people to be happy. Do whatever makes you happy. I'm not asking anybody to be like me or follow my footsteps. My life has not been easy. But one thing I know is that if any of my children do want to write, I will definitely be there to give them all the support and encouragement that is available to me.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 58:07

That's great. And Lola, this will be my final question. What do you hope your writing and all the work you do in the art does for women in Nigeria, in particular, and then the whole society as well?

Lola Shoneyin 58:23

I hope that it shows what can be done and encourages others to pursue the same and to do things a hundred times better.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 58:34

Thank you so much, Lola. It's been a pleasure having you on this podcast. You know, thank you so much for being so gracious with your time.

Lola Shoneyin 58:44

Thanks a lot. Lovely sorts you.

Betty Kankam-Boadu 58:47

Lola Shoneyin is many things including a poet, author, and publisher. 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.