

TALKING QUEER

Archive. Activism, Creative Disruptions

Hosted by Caio Simões de Araújo

EPISODE 2 - NO GENIE BACK IN THE BOTTLE: An interview with Chiké Frankie Edozien

In this episode we speak to Frankie Chiké Edozien, a scholar, journalist and author. Among other things, we discuss his book *Lives of Great Men*, which explores the stories of contemporary queer men in the African continent and in the diaspora.

In today's episode, I have the great pleasure of chatting to Chiké Frankie Edozien. Frankie is the director of New York University in Accra, and he directed the Ghana-based 'Reporting Africa' programme from 2008 to 2019. He is also a journalist who has been writing about government, health, and cultural issues for a variety of publications. He's also the author of the book "*Lives of Great Men*", published in 2017, which received a Lambda Literary Award. The book, about which we'll speak today, is an exploration of the lives of contemporary queer men and women in the African continent and in the diaspora.

Frankie, welcome to the podcast.

Thank you for having me.

Let's start by talking about the book. It is really such a fascinating narrative. To start, I'm curious to hear more about the process of making the book. Why did you decide to write the book at the time that you did? I'm also very curious to know why did you decide to write a memoir and not, say, a journalistic piece or other forms of nonfiction? Can you walk us through these choices?

Sure. Initially, what I'd wanted to do was just to collect stories about people who were like me. That means there was a very finite period I was looking at, which was contemporary Africans in today's

world. And the reason I started the reporting and the research for this was very simple. In the early 2010s, 2010 or 2011 maybe, there was this situation. I was living in Ghana for the summer. And every day, there was something about LGBTQ people on the front page of the newspapers. And it was always very pejorative. As a journalist, I noticed that it was always very one-sided. And I was just baffled as to why that particular summer, there were all of these rash of anti-LGBTQ stories. Obviously, you just can't put these things in a vacuum. So I had to look at what else was happening around us that flared this up. This was happening at the same time that there had been all these repercussions from the 'kill the gays bill' out of Uganda, as it was called at the time. And so what we saw, or at least what I noticed in these countries – Nigeria included, where I spend a lot of time and where I'm from – was this sort of heavy backlash being pushed by a certain segment of society. But what bothered me, what really sort of triggered me thinking I had to do more than just a journalistic piece of work was that the former Nigerian President Goodluck Jonathan signed the most draconian anti-LGBTQ bill on the eve of his election, which he lost. But, you know, gay people have for some time now been the constituency that it's okay for everybody to hate. But the fact is that these bills had been every so often in the Nigerian parliament, and other presidents had understood that you could not criminalise people for their existence and had left it alone. But Goodluck Jonathan was facing a re-election. I believe he could see the signs that he was going to lose. And one of the things that he did was that he signed the most draconian bill that we've seen on our continent. And, of course, there was worldwide attention to it. All of the CNNs and the newspapers, all the global media wrote about this. But one of the things that struck me as a journalist was the paucity of voices of the people that this actually affected in these stories. Yes, of course, there were one or two activists, but the actual ordinary folk, the day-to-day people who are LGBTQ or just questioning their sexuality, who were now at risk of being turned into criminals for existing, those voices were absent. I remember there was a tactic which I saw in India, when India was fighting for its own rights of everybody to be free. The LGBTQ community was always ridiculed over there as a sort of miniscule minority. Too small to make a difference. And I could see that happening here in Nigeria. But I recognised that that really was not the case. But this was what was going on in mainstream media. So I thought, if these people can't find anyone to talk to, and if this was going to be the record of our lives, at this time, I needed to do a deeper dive, more long-form work on these lives. Initially, I wasn't quite sure if I was going to do a documentary. So I started actually recording people telling me stories and then recording people I knew, in my own family and in my own words, what they remembered about me growing up and all of that stuff. And as the project came together, it was clear to me that the best I could do was to do a print project, do a book. And as I got my first draft together, I remember my literary agent saying, to me: "This is interesting, but perhaps you want to talk a little bit more about yourself, and switch the focus from this sort of non-fiction, this

deep dive look at all of these lives in today's world, to look into your own journey, and your own memories and your own memoir". And then I had a good friend of mine who at the time, I was asking advice on how to get books published, and all of that. And he said to me, "You have to kill the journalist in you for this project. Kill the journalist in you and just write your story, with your own perspective. And then let's see what happens". That was the genesis, and how *'Lives of Great Men'* came about. It is a memoir. But it's obviously heavily reported, because I talk to so many people. And I try to use my life, not just as an example, but the lives of all of these men and women that gave me the privilege of telling me their story and being frank about it. And I think that no one can say, going forward, that we don't exist in these countries, or that they can't find us to talk to, because the evidence doesn't support that.

Let's talk about the narrative now. Something that struck me as a reader, is the book's focus on love. You spent quite a lot of time writing about the difficulties, challenges and the promises of finding love as a gay man in Nigeria, in Ghana, and in other places. And I was wondering, why was this focus on love important to you?

Because I think love is at the centre of everyone's life. But when it comes to LGBTQ people, very often we're viewed through a prism of sex, and not the complete picture of our lives. So if I was going to have any success in really trying to show what our lives are like, I had to do it in a way that was complete, and a lot of our life and our actions, many of the choices we make are often emotional, and are often seeking love and seeking connection. And while the sexual part may be titillating, and it's what people grab on to, it's only a small part of our life, even though it plays a big role. I find that a lot of our lives and a lot of the things we do are reactions to love. And it's not always the love of a couple. You know, LGBTQ people around the world, not just in Africa, are experts on chosen families. When they cannot get that kind of love and support and affection from their blood families, there are other people who are ready to give it to them. And that I find it's a form of love. You know, we don't say it out loud. But it turns out that that is how we live. The people that deride us seem to be obsessed with our sex lives, but our sex lives are just our sex lives, they're not our whole lives. It's something that we do, but it's not who we are. And so, you know, I didn't consciously set out to write about love, but I wanted a complete picture. And in examining my life and the life of all the LGBTQ people I know, love is always at the centre. So that just sort of sprang up organically. It's like "aha!", of course [Laughs].

And relating to the question of love, another topic that runs through the book is the issue of marriage. You write quite a bit about the centrality of marriage, in Nigerian society and Ghanaian society. And you also write about how, because of this centrality, a lot of queer people end up

getting into heterosexual marriages. What I find interesting in the book is how you walk us through your change of mind, so to speak. You mentioned that when you were young, you tended to be quite judgemental of queer people getting married. And then as you grew older, you “got off your high horse”, as you say. This change of heart is quite interesting. How did that happen?

I think when you're younger, you tend to look at life maybe through your lived experience, and the things that affect you directly. As you get older, maybe you make space for a broader perspective. So people can be revolutionary and want change and want certain things and at the same time be understanding of when that thing doesn't come. When I was building a career, or at least trying to build a career, I was living in New York, and I was working in media. And if I met another LGBTQ African who was doing the same thing as me, but were deep in the closet, I maybe looked down on them a little bit. Because for me, you're not at home anymore. There's no one looking over your shoulder. You're in a place where practically nobody knows you. You're a stranger here. You can be as free as you want, so why do you still have to do this? That was sort of the way I looked at it when I was in my 20s. And at the time, I was just like: "Well, you know, I'm not in the closet in New York, I'm not going to come and do a closet anywhere else". Now, I made allowances for my friends in Nigeria, because as one of them very succinctly told me: "You know, it's like, we're in the same career, but I cannot get that promotion that you've just had, because I'm not married, I'm not going to be considered responsible if I don't have a wife. So this is something I must do". And I had seen many people do that for career choices. And then I had seen the pressure that families put on their children to marry and procreate. So when you bring in somebody who's trying to have a solid middle-class career, being denied promotions, and then you bring the pressure of parents and family, wanting grandchildren, I could understand why certain people would succumb. I couldn't understand people in the diaspora doing that. I was very dismissive of people who were in the diaspora, who had made a career for themselves, and returned home and conformed, because there was also that. And then I was like: "Ah, you have this great job, you've gone home to Lagos, and you also have this great job, or you've got home to Accra, you've had this great job. But when you come back, after years of being open, and out, you just bought into what society here says is the right thing for you, which is get married, have children". Of course, as I got older, I just had a little bit more compassion, because I just felt like I had to see the broader picture. And I could not be so judgemental of people who make the choices they have to make to survive. If you're going to live in our society, and you're gonna try and make a difference for yourself, it is really, really hard to be unmarried – not divorced, just unmarried – and say that your partner in life is a person of the same gender. On our continent, it's not easy. I mean, there are places where it doesn't matter. Obviously, it's a huge continent. But in a lot of these countries, it's really difficult. And so I had to sort of shift my thinking into saying: "How can I be

supportive of people like that, and just have a little bit of compassion". And so I know I'm less judgemental of that. And I think I'm a bit more understanding, as I've grown older. Wishing that that was not the case. And knowing that whenever there's somebody who's out and proud and living a life that is admirable, it spurs other people to change their ways, even if it's done in a very quiet way. Not every breakthrough happens with holding a placard and storming Parliament or having a big fight. Some breakthroughs happen because people can see people living good, authentic lives. So that's what pulled me off of my high horse [Laughs].

Let's talk about women now. That's not the main focus of the book. As the title suggests, this is a book about gay men mostly. Yet, here and there in the narrative, you do write about a few women. And that made me wonder if you would have anything else to say about the different experiences of men and women in these queer spaces you're writing about?

Well, I didn't write so much about women, lesbian women, because I know so few. And once the focus of the narrative changed to being a memoir, I had to write about people who were in my life [laughs]. So the few LGBTQ women that I knew were the ones whose perspective I wrote about, and I always felt like *'Lives of Great Men'* was sort of this "first". Well, this was the first book of its kind from our region. And I always tell people, this one book cannot do everything. Women have their own stories, and they should tell them. I told those stories of a couple of the women that were in my life, that I knew. They would very easily tell me: "of course, you and I can go out, and I'll be dancing with my girlfriend, in mostly heterosexual vibey clubs, and no one would know." And that's part of patriarchy. Men – not all men, obviously – but a good number of men believe that women are there for their entertainment. Unless a person is very clearly, outwardly presenting in a butch fashion. And even then they just think that she hasn't had them, and that if she had a man like them, she would be a good wife or good girlfriend, or whatever it is. And so my queer women friends, as few as there are, would say to me: "This is why we can go out and we can dance and we can do everything because no one even, it never crosses anyone's mind that we're together". Since my book came out, though, there have been a rash of stories about queer women from West Africa. There's one woman who wrote a memoir called *'Embrace in my Shadow- Growing up Lesbian in Nigeria'*, there has been an anthology called *'She Calls Me Woman'*, all about women's stories from Nigeria that are LGBTQI. And in various iterations: there's a married woman, some of these women are single. But these stories exist. And I think the great thing about having *'Lives of Great Men'* in print was that it spurred publishers to take a chance on some of these other stories. And my initial goal, in a way, has sort of been realised, because no one who is objective can say that we don't have this in this country, because now we're having all these narratives from various people. Men, women, older people, younger people. There's

a comfort now in being able to tell some of these stories. Conservative people, liberal people, very churchy people, very Islamic people. I mean, these stories are there, and they're finding avenues to be told, so that I think is a good thing. But no, my book does not delve in great detail about women, because I could only write about the women in my life. And I didn't do a deep dive on casting this wide net to talk to a whole bunch of lesbians because I wasn't really telling their story. Now their stories are coming out...

That's great to know. It does feel like things are changing. Thinking about change, one of the benefits of looking back at a project like this a few years down the line is that you do get a sense of the changes happening around it. In the case of the book, you can get a sense of reception and impact. 'Lives of Great Men' was obviously very well-received internationally. But I'm also curious to know: what was the reception like in Nigeria?

You know, the book has sold in Nigeria. It's done well in Nigeria. I think it could have done better if it had print editors who were bold enough to review it on its merit and not be afraid of its content. There were some print reviews that were online, but none of the major publications reviewed it. And that speaks to their fear of the content. So despite the lack of objectivity from the press, particularly print, the book has done well on radio. Many people have interviewed me on the radio. I've had readings in Nigeria, and people have showed up, out of curiosity. I've done book signings in Nigeria. I still get people till today who have managed to be able to find this book. There are people who've heard about the book, and who found my Nigerian publisher and found a way to get it. And I still get letters from people. And the thing that is the most touching, but also the most common, is people saying for the first time they see themselves in our literature, and they see themselves as complete people and not as caricatures. So overall, I will say that, of course, there are challenges. But overall, I think the book has gone beyond my expectation in Nigeria, it's done well. So I'm very proud of the way ordinary Nigerians have embraced the book.

I want to push the conversation further into the issue of change. From what you're saying, it seems like there is a growing interest in queer stories. Obviously, there is your book, and you also mentioned a few other books that are coming out. And I wonder if that indicates a certain shift, in terms of new channels for queer representation and storytelling?

Well, it indicates that people are saying "our story is our story, and we don't have to keep quiet about it". Even now, I hear about people who are trying to publish stories from very conservative parts of Nigeria. You can't put the genie back in the bottle. We are not a miniscule minority, we're a full-fledged part and parcel of the society. Now, obviously, there's a commercial side to this, where not every book is gonna sell a lot of copies. But books will be there, and they'll be available about our life. And that is

very important, because that really is the recorded history for the future. No matter the obstacles that the traditional publishers put in your way, and because they will always tell you that these books don't sell and, you know: "why do you want to do that and da da da da?" I had a publisher in Nigeria who didn't think like that. And she thought this was an important book to do. It was not a consideration for her, if people would buy it. It was an important book to do. So some of these considerations are, yes, commercial. But at the same time, I don't think that you have to be super commercially successful to make a change. So we have to believe that our stories are valid, not necessarily what the so-called gatekeepers, who may have their own bias, tell us. And when one door closes, you just keep going until you find the next one. And I'm so happy that people are telling their own stories now. Because for me, it's history, whether one person buys it, or ten people buy it, it's out there.

Since we're speaking about getting things out there, would you like to conclude by leaving a word of advice or encouragement to young queer people in Africa or elsewhere, who are struggling to find a voice, trying to get something out there? What would you say to them?

I will say that you have to just do it. And there's no time limit on it. Writing is not easy, it's hard. Producing a book that is a good quality book is hard. So if I'm even qualified to give anybody advice on this kind of stuff, I would say, just do the work, do the work. And don't be discouraged. Because if you do the work, and it takes you longer, but you're proud of what you've done, the work will speak for itself, and it will find the right place to be published. It's hard work, but doesn't mean that it should be closed to us, because people think that these stories that we want to tell are not commercially viable. No. All of our stories are valid, each and every single one of them and we have to do the work to tell them properly, and in a way that we can be proud of even years later after we finish them.

Frankie, thank you so much for joining us today. It was such a great chat.

Thank you so much.