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Anya Schiffrin (Editor) with George Lugalambi, *African Muckraking: 75 Years of Investigative Journalism from Africa*. Publisher: Jacana Media, 2017. 348 pp. ASIN: B077Z79P57.

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The inclusion of “Muckraking” in the title of this book is a wise and strategic choice. The word is a distinctly American journalistic descriptor that traces its roots to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. At first it was a pejorative label meant to compare the work of journalists to the toil of farmhands who slung farm waste (or “muck”) for a living. Thereafter, the term became repurposed (with brio and defiance) to describe the responsibility of investigative reporters, editors, and publishers who take significant risks to expose the abuse and corruption of power, whether political, corporate, or institutional—the muck of unchecked power, in other words.

However, there is a tendency to assume that muckraking, as a function and obligation of modern journalism, became an American cultural export to the ‘Global North,’ not far beyond that. For that reason, many readers, even those in the profession and in the academe, may find “African Muckraking” an odd phrase to conjure with.

Anya Schiffrin, the book’s editor and a faculty member at Columbia University, confronts the skepticism in her informative introduction. “For the public in both Africa and in the Global North, however, the essential work of African journalists is seldom recognized,” Schiffrin writes. This is particularly true in Western climes, in which the great risks and work of “African journalists are unknown, often because of a sneaking assumption that good journalism simply doesn’t originate in Africa.”

The book is comprised of more than 40 advocacy essays and investigative pieces categorized into seven distinct areas of concern for Africa. The use of this taxonomy gives the text a particular relevance for African nations confronting internal corruption, external exploitation, unrepresentational governance, local superstitions, and underdevelopment of basic services and infrastructure. The seven areas include independence, democracy, health and the environment, corruption, mining, women, and human rights. The pieces generate a range of responses, from anger to heartache, but the ultimate prevailing sentiment is hope, as reporters in the region take narrative control and native insight in reporting on complex stories that often require indigenous awareness. In other words, there is no parachute reporting.

The timespan of the gathered stories is unexpectedly broad, ranging from the early 20th century to contemporary times. Sol Plaatje in 1916, for example, writes about a 1913 legislative act, conceived and approved of by a white majority governance. The Land Act, in the single stroke of a pen, stripped land rights away from black farmers and sharecroppers. The Act then calculated a division of farming rights in South Africa with a bizarre calculus. Seven percent of the land was allocated to Africans, who comprised the overwhelming majority of South Africa's population. Such a discriminatory practice forced poor farmers and sharecroppers to serve as laborers for established commercial farms owned almost entirely by whites. The narrative reveals not just debilitating legislation of the past but an apathy among civilized nations who perhaps saw such laws as the norm. If Africa is where bad things are supposed to happen to Africans, legislation like this fits suitably under the established systems.

Additionally, the text also includes more contemporary pieces like that of the acclaimed Richard Magma. This book contains his narration in the *Guardian* newspaper of the horrific story of a father in Tanzania who sold his albino son for 6,000 dollars and helped assailants cut and maim his son in a witchcraft ritual. The child survived but is permanently scarred. In fact, he is among a sizeable demographic of albino victims who fall prey to a superstition that albinos (and their body parts) hold magical powers. Magma, an award winning journalist, had the access, interior insight, and skill to tell this compelling narrative.

A strength of the volume is the manner in which it was curated. The stories included in this collection were obviously carefully chosen. Africa, of course, is made up of dozens of countries, each with laws greatly varying from one another. While some laws address press rights, some are draconian. When reading the volume, one cannot but help but admire the courage of a cadre of investigative reporters who have not received the recognition they deserve.

Thus, the activism in *African Muckraking* is hard to ignore. The introduction makes sure of that. But the heavy work of dispelling myth—just one of the many misconceptions of the great continent—falls on the shoulders of the dozens of carefully collected narratives and reportage gathered in the anthology.

The book, by all appearances, is poised to challenge, if not alter perceptions and perhaps inspire journalism students. But that conceit can only make sense if the book enters the inner sanctum of pedagogical logic and university journalism classrooms. In part, my reception of the book and approach with this review are informed by a personal conviction for the need to expand the horizons of journalism curricula and even pedagogy. This is especially critical when teaching American-based journalism in a non-Western context. Journalism is not a “fixed idea,” a field that accepts a narrow ideation. In other words, journalism is a “cultural construct,” as University of Maryland journalism scholar Ray E. Hiebert once remarked. It is a profession “practiced

differently in each country.”[1] The principle sounds rather simple and even anticipated, but it could use more emphasis.

Schiffirin would likely agree, for “this book provides important evidence that the reporting exists, that it matters and continues to matter – and that it deserves recognition in Africa and the world.”

Cited Work

[1]. R. E. Hiebert, “Synthesis Essay Rethinking Comparative Journalism Studies,” *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 89, no. 3 (2012): 518–21, p. 518.

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