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**K. B Amihere (2015) | Spoke for Freedom: History and Politics of the Ghana Press. Published by DigiBooks Ghana Limited, Gh100.00**

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### Synopsis:

I spoke for freedom: history and politics of the Ghana press, is a book that recounts the professional journey of an accomplished media luminary who has worked in all aspects of the media space in Ghana. The author, Ambassador Kabral Blay Amihere, is a Ghanaian statesman and Diplomat who has been working for most of his working life as a journalist; reporter, editor, publisher, teacher, manager since the 1970s. He also served as Ghana's High Commissioner to Sierra Leon and later Ghana's Ambassador to Cote d'Ivoire from 2001-2005 and 2006-2009 respectively. The book is a collection of his experiences presented in speeches at various functions. The book is divided into seven sections, which deals with different issues and themes in the journalistic life of a young professional in Ghana. These sections, however different, are intertwined in the

core and central theme of the journey during his media practice.

The opening section sets the work in the context of the ongoing struggle for a free press atmosphere in Ghana. He recounts the journey of the press in Ghana in terms of its regulations and standards of practice. Again, in subsequent sections, Kabral Blay Amihere demonstrates how the 1992 constitution was promulgated giving raise to the state-owned media and the media's relationship with the society which is very critical. Other issues discussed in the book are in relation to the guiding ethics of the profession, the role of the constitutional body, the National Media Commission (NMC) that checks the media operation and the policies that were to guide the practice. Though not clearly stated and utilized, the writer draws views from some mass media theories that in a way

guides the media and its operations. Subsequent sections in the book highlight the contribution of the media to national development.

In chapter one, Kabral Blay discusses the issues of the history of the press in Ghana and highly presents this text in presentations he delivered to different groups and associations or institutions in his capacity as either the chairman of the National Media Commission (NMC) or the Ghana Journalist Association's journalist of the year. In his presentations which are aptly presented, he raises various concerns about the struggles he encountered in his journalistic practice. He speaks of his first encounter after school when he was asked if he was a trained Journalist. Kabral believes and presents that everyone can work as a journalist provided he gets to be trained under a journalist. However, I dissent with the writer on his view of allowing one to learn on the job to become a journalist and not trained in a journalism classroom. This principle, I believe has caused the many unprofessional standards in the field of practice today. Journalism is a sacred profession that must be held in very high esteem because practitioners are presented with strong duty to protect the nation and indeed the public purse.

Kabral Blay also talks about the repression system that seeks to silence media practitioners. This is still the case in this time and age. There are several cases of media abuse or attacks on journalists who have reported on state issues. A few instances include Caleb Kudalor and Zoe Abu Baido, both of Citi FM/TV and the National Security. There are many more of which have led to the

death of media practitioners such as Ahmed Suale who worked with the Tigre Eye Investigative firm run by Anas Aremeyaw Anas. Though this system is hostile, there are many media outlets that have sprung up in the last three decades after the 1992. With the aid of the new media, the proliferation of media outlets has become so enormous and uncontrollable.

Kabral Blay lashes out in section A of the book how the General Kutu Acheampong's government enacted a licensing regime in 1973 to regulate the newspaper industry. He disagrees with the decision to license the publication of newspapers. I, however, believe that the regime must not be condemned in its entirety. I say this because; the media is the worst offender when it comes to circulating pornographic and other hostile content. At that time, the P&P newspaper which was set up purposely for sharing nude content was established. For such newspaper, the law was very timely to bring back a certain sense of professional and ethical standard to what was available for consumption.

The writer compares the media space in Nigeria to that of Ghana in a manner that is not genuine. The freedom and independence of the media across borders must always be contextual and not generalized. The contextuality of the discussions is necessary because of the varied cultures that will either allow or disallow certain media contents. Currently in Ghana, the issues of homosexuality and their way of life is highly prohibited and so no media outlet or agency is allowed to show or share anything that is or could be attributed to

such condemnable act by both religion and tradition.

The repeal of the criminal libel law by President John Agyekum Kuffour is one thing that many media practitioners continue to remember him for. The criminal libel law was a repressive law that sought to silence very outspoken journalist who worked to criticize the government to put them on their toes. However, I think that the media must be regulated to reduce the high levels of insensitivity and unprofessionalism of some practitioners. In my opinion, the law was very appropriate because the media sometimes over step its boundary by publishing hate content that is likely to throw the nation off line the genocide in Rwanda. During the 2012 election petition, the media was admonished to carry balanced reports of the process that will promote national unity at the end of it all. Even though there were little casualties that went against the standard set for media practitioners, the wrath of the court streamlined the playing field.

Kabral Blay tries to rationalize the powers of the court in section B of the book. He argues that the court and for that matter, Judges are to be respected and allowed to conduct their work without prejudice. This view appears to create the impression that judges are without blemish and are untouchable. Just as the public officials are openly criticized when their actions go against laid down rules, judges should be criticized if they work contrary to the tenets of their profession and the laws of nature and society. The judges in my opinion are also ordinary people who must not be seen as 'gods' or 'saints' without blemish. Contempt of court

should not be on the basis of making comments of matters before the court but comments that openly are derogatory towards judges is what should be placed as contempt. I also hold the view that the punishment for contempt of court should be more civil and not criminal (Fine not Prison). Prison sentences seem more deterring to others than fines but I however believe that the fine will be more deterring since no one wants to spend money on unbudgeted situations. With the prison sentence, it will end and the culprit will go back to their daily activities and perhaps their same finances.

Kabral tries to justify the complementary role of the National Media commission in the appointment of members to the board of the various state owned media entities. He indicates that the NMC in consultation with the president and Minister for information, nominate and appoint members to the boards of the various state owned media (Times Cooperation, GBC, GNA, Graphic Communications). However, I think that this is not the right as most of the members of the board are largely political figures without media background. I strongly believe that this role projected by Kabral is not apt since the National Media Commission in my opinion is a toothless dog that has failed in performing its duty as a regulatory institution. The Commission is only left to perform other function usually for the cameras and for people to think that the commission is in control.

The media plays a very critical role in shaping society as is always said, the media mirrors society, impact your world as the CNN has as its mantra. The social

change effort of the media is one of its unattended parts. This aspect of the media is what should be advocated by all for all practitioners to focus on. Kabral tries to connect the relationship between the media and democracy hence the efforts of the media towards democracy. In the past almost 3 decades in Ghana, the media has been a major contributor to the peaceful democracy we enjoy in Ghana. However, the peaceful democracy that is been enjoyed is likely to end if the ownership of media continues to travel on political lines. Kabral suggests some solutions for the continuous enjoyment of the peace as a democratic nation; depoliticizing the media is critical in this quest for sustained peace. The NMC should be supported to both politically and professionally to perform its job to seeing to the smooth running of the media space in Ghana. These two recommendations are very critical and once it is implemented, we can be sure of a peaceful nation always.

Kabral Blay also argues that, any media practitioner who fails to acknowledge history can only achieve very little in their career. Kabral draws the relevance of the study of history to the practice of journalism. Every journalistic question must be preceded by what has been the effort in the past, its influence on the future and the present realities. I would say this is very critical hence must be echoed in the training of journalist. The effects of history to this profession is unwavering hence must be revered and taken and acted upon with all seriousness.

In section E, Kabral talks about the media space becoming an avenue for insults for politician while highlighting the basis for

a formidable media space devoid of these insults. He indicates that, the NMC which is supposed to be clothed with all the powers to streamline the media space to be off the canker of insults, however the NMC has been reduced to nothing but a mere statutory institution. The call by Kabral to all editors, host of media programmes and media owners is a sham. It is not possible because most of these media owners and host of programmes are usually celebrities who have had limited or no training at all to regulate show to be devoid of hate speech on their channels. This can only be solved if the media space and owners will begin to hire very qualified personnel to man the affairs of their programmes.

Again in this chapter, Kabral Blay speaks of the necessity for all media practitioners to take serious the ethics of the profession. This can only be achieved if we allow professionals and professionals alone to be the facilitators of courses of Media ethics in our training institutions. These professionals could be either lawyers or police officers who have deep knowledge of the law and other aspects that boarder on media practice and standards. The effort to move away from the culture of silence as emphasized by Kabral is something we should be worried about. Ghana has not moved from the era of the culture of silence completely because it is still subtly imposed by state agencies especially those in government. In recent times there have been several signs of the attacks on journalist and media practitioners.

Kabral Blay assesses the role of the Ghanaian media in terms of its effects on the democracy that has been enjoyed

since the promulgation of the 1992 constitution of Ghana. The views presented by Blay indicate a double position on the issue of the media's contribution. I however think that, the media in Ghana has played a very huge role in the growth and development of the Ghana. The media in Ghana has always opened the opportunity to many to contribute their views to national growth be it major or minor. We must continue to admonish journalist and other media practitioners never to slumber on the job or give in to unethical standards to compromise their enormous contribution to the development of this still growing democracy.

The view of many including Kabral that the media ought to be allowed to regulate itself is flawed in my view. This is very much impossible as one of the main targets of the media is commercialization (Advertising) as it is the only way the media finances itself. There is the need for the NMC to be well resourced to regulate and check the standards that must be upheld. I will like to advance the view that the media cannot regulate or check itself. Just like the media is termed the fourth estate of the realm, checking the other three arms

of the state machinery, the media too must be regulated or checked also.

The role of the National Media Commission extensively elaborated by Kabral is of very serious essence as it will create so much awareness of the media regulatory institution. I, however, think that the National Media Commission has allowed the National Communication Authority to over shadow its operation and duties as the main regulator of the media in Ghana. It is time the roles of these two regulatory institutions are distinguished to avoid the redundant replication of each other's duties.

As a young Development Communication professional myself from this part of the world, Africa; Ghana, I am challenged by the views and wisdom shared by Kabral Blay to replicate similar efforts of working to achieve media freedom in my dear country. All in all, I Spoke for Freedom is indeed a remarkable and outstanding work if not for nothing at all, for the fact that it recounts the constant efforts made by several people in the fight for press freedom in our dear country and also brings to bear several experiences that can help inspire and retain the narrative in our country about press freedom.