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BOOK REVIEW

Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans From the Civil War to World War II*. New York: Doubleday, 2008.

Rasheed Olaniyi, *University of Ibadan*

On 25th March, 2007, the British government marked the Bicentenary of the abolition of slave trade in 1807 and their active role in the despicable human tyranny. In his speech titled, "the Historical Expression of Regrets," the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair observes that the Bicentenary offers opportunity for Britain to say how "profoundly shameful the slave trade was." Two hundred years on, the vestiges of slavery and slave trade thrives under economic inequalities. According to the UN estimates, there are 27 million slaves in the world today. They are victims of human trafficking, debt bondage, prostitution, child labor and serfdom. Women and children trafficked across borders has increased since the 1990s for the purpose of sex slavery and child labor. Among the Tuareg nomads of Niger Republic, West Africa, slavery continues to thrive as a product of inheritance rooted in traditional customs. About 800,000, 7% of the population remains in the shackles of slavery.

The discourse on the transformation of exploitation structures in the post-abolition era has continued to generate robust debate. Douglas Blackmon's *Slavery by Another Name* symbolizes this trend that tends to break historical silences, which characterized the enslavement of several black Americans from the Civil War years to World War II. Divided into three parts and seventeen chapters, *Slavery by Another Name* is one of the most captivating books that expose the heinous crime of slavery in the post-Emancipation history of the USA.

Blackmon brings into sharp focus the nexus between race, state power, the expansion of capitalism and slavery through the backdoor. Repressive legal structures were created by the state to institute an economy supplied with cheap labor. According to Blackmon, criminalization of indigent black citizens took place within the matrix of racialized judicial process and perversion of justice for the purpose of cheap labor. It marked the suppression of civil liberty and rule of law. Worst than their forerunners, victims of the neo-slavery had no capacity to preserve their destruction. They had no images, recordings and writings and, thus, lived in historical silence. Black life and economic

rights became criminalized. According to Blackmon, “An 1865 Mississippi statute required African American workers to enter into labor contracts with white farmers by January 1 of every year or risk arrest” (Blackmon, 2008:52). From 1877, many states practiced leasing of black prisoners to commercial enterprises and companies were fined \$150 per head if they allowed a prisoner to escape (Blackmon, 2008:40). Blackmon explains that black prisoners were “...routinely starved and brutalized by corporations, farmers, government officials, and small-town businessmen intent on achieving the most lucrative balance between the productivity of captive labor and the cost of sustaining them” (Blackmon, 2008:57). Since black slaves worked under ghastly conditions, there were recurring outbreaks of diseases.

Unlike most historians of slavery in America, Blackmon demonstrates that repressed legal regime and violence of the post civil war era were not after all generated by the lawless behavior of the freed slaves. Unemployment, poverty, sexuality and lifestyle among free blacks were criminalized and formed bases of enslavement in mines and factories. Under the repressive labor regime, blacks were leased from one farm or factory, labor camps and plantations to the other. The free blacks also experienced the racial violence perpetrated by the KKK and other secret white societies.

What rapidly followed anti-slavery movement of the 1810s was ‘legitimate commerce’ and colonialism in Africa. In these key periods, slavery and slave trade became more endemic and practiced in different guises. To study and understand this phenomenon, it is germane to examine it on the international scale. This comparative approach is missing in Blackmon’s *Slavery by Another Name*.

On the international scale, neo-slavery measures were used to execute the ruthless business of colonialism and expansion of capitalism in Africa. In South African mines, railroad constructions in East and West Africa, forced labor was used. In some cases, most especially in Franco-phone Africa, villages and settlements were established for liberated slaves for the purpose of cheap labor supply to the colonial state and capitalist mine owners. In Dahomey, Patrick Manning (1983) shows how repressive taxation system of French colonialism forced many Africans into the labor process in the interest of capitalism and colonial firms. Babacar Fall’s study of Senegal pointedly shows how forced labor reflected the nature of colonial intervention in the mobilization of indigenous manpower.

It was an irony of history that “*corvee*-forced labor” abolished during the French Revolution continued beyond 1946 in the French colonies. As Blackmon notes on p. 40, “Blacks could be excluded from the Enlightenment concepts that every man was granted by God individual freedom and a right to the pursuit of happiness because colonial laws codified a less-than-fully-human

status of any person carrying even a race of black or Indian blood” (Blackmon, 2008:40). To the white southerners in the post-Civil War era, the extension of liberty to the blacks was considered a violation. This underscores the relevance of Blackmon’s book to the discourses on race relations.

Blackmon’s book is elegant in the use of transdisciplinary approach. He combined historical journalism with archaeology to unearth the saga of slave labor in the 20th century America. He used alternative archives, such as oral histories, family histories, personal narratives and local historical societies when conventional archives and records concealed the exploitation of black slaves.

Blackmon offers a new challenge to historiography. He challenged historians who used official accounts that justified leasing of blacks based on criminality. Given that Blackmon is an accomplished American journalist, has the US media come of age in terms of reporting and analyzing race relations and the historical legacies of slavery? But Blackmon’s book left some holes in this regard. To what extent did media reports influence international intervention especially from the League of Nations and the Anti-Slavery and Aborigines Protection Society; and the International Labor Organisation?

What was the role of Evangelical crusade that supported anti-slavery moment in the re-enslavement of the blacks? How did the Civil Rights Movements in the USA became so pre-occupied with demanding for political equality to have abandoned the re-enslavement of the blacks? In all, *Slavery by Another Name* makes a stimulating and extra-ordinary reading. It is recommended to students interested in the study of slavery, race relations and the history of America.

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