

Ittmann, Karl; Cordell, Dennis D.; Maddox, Gregory H. (Hrsg.): *The Demographics of Empire. The Colonial Order and the Creation of Knowledge*. Athens: Ohio University Press 2010. ISBN: 978-0-8214-1933-5; 299 S.

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During the first decades of the 20th century, colonial officials and missionaries throughout sub-Saharan Africa were haunted by fears of decreasing African populations. They linked population decline and underpopulation to a wide variety of causes, notably the disruptive effects of colonialism, and expressed their desire to improve both the populations' quantity and quality, in large measure to cover the expanding needs for African labour. Yet medical and moral interventions proved generally insufficient. It was not until after the Second World War that discourses of depopulation and low population densities were gradually replaced by mounting concern of uncontrolled population growth.

These are some of the key assumptions running through many of the contributions gathered by Karl Ittmann, Dennis Cordell and Gregory Maddox. Some of these general insights are, of course, not entirely new, as they are already present in the work of scholars like Megan Vaughan and Nancy Rose Hunt as well as in previous publications by some of the contributors themselves. Yet the collection, which grew out of a workshop held in Houston in 2002, now brings together ten essays providing a more systematic assessment of colonial demography and population politics in Africa.

Overall, the volume constitutes a valuable contribution to the expanding field of population politics or rather a timely corrective. This is due to the fact that it appears at a moment in which the recent debate among historians and social scientists about world population control in the 20th century runs the risk of being narrowed to post-Second World War policies against overpopulation in the so-called Third World, mainly in Asia.¹ The Demographics of Empire clearly draws a different picture. The contributions are neither (or only marginally) concerned with the spectre of neo-Malthusian

subsistence crises or with concurring policies and techniques of fertility reduction nor do they analyse the debates on international conferences or within international organisations, another focus of research in the field.²

Most of the essays, spanning the time period from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1990s, with a strong focus on the first half of the twentieth century, are firmly grounded in local (post-)colonial contexts in sub-Saharan Africa. The common thread running through them is that they all examine how colonial officials struggled to produce adequate demographic knowledge on the populations under their government and were at pains to regulate population growth and distribution. One of the collection's merits is that the essays address a wide range of issues related to these overarching questions. Meredith Turshen and Sheryl McCurdy look at how colonial officials assessed the impact of diseases on population growth and shaped policies to improve women's reproductive health. The articles by Thomas McClendon, John Cinnamon and Meshack Owino demonstrate to what extent colonial states were not only concerned with the populations' quantity and quality, but also with spatial issues of mobility, migration and distribution. Colonial policies in this domain were often contradictory, sometimes directed to circumventing or reversing migratory flows, sometimes actively promoting population displacement for the sake of control, legibility and labour recruitment schemes. Overall, the essays show how little colonial administrations at all echelons knew about the demography of the populations they were supposed to govern before the greater implication of social science from the 1940s onwards.

Raymond Gervais' and Issiaka Mandé's piece particularly emphasizes this aspect. The authors point at the apparent paradox of colonial demography in French West Africa before the Second World War: even though colonial administrations displayed great interest in the

¹ The debate was fuelled by Matthew Connelly, *Fatal Misconception. The Struggle to Control World Population*, Cambridge, Mass. 2008.

² See e.g. Alison Bashford, *Population, Geopolitics, and International Organizations in the Mid Twentieth Century*, in: *Journal of World History* 19 (2008) 3, p. 327-348.

creation of precise knowledge about African populations, „count[ing] the subjects of Empire“ (p. 89) remained largely the task of local administrators who mostly lacked the skills, the time and the zeal to conduct exact enumerations. This paradox did not only apply to French West Africa, as Karl Ittmann demonstrates for British Africa (p. 67-68).

Ittmann gives a particularly convincing account of British demographic ideas and policies with regard to Africa, from the late 19th century to 1970. Ittmann does not only show how widespread ideas of African underpopulation were gradually replaced by a new discourse of damaging overpopulation - a discourse which slowly emerged in the early 1940s and had turned hegemonic in British and European thought by the late 1960s. He also hints at converging views on Britain's metropolitan population and at the stark influence of British ideas about Africa on European 'experts'.

Such transnational perspectives could have been given more room in this collection and certainly deserve more attention in future research. One still knows little on how methods of knowledge production, demographic anxieties and (colonial) interventions circulated between metropolis and colony (and vice-versa), but also on how they travelled between colonies, empires and continents. A transnational research agenda with a global outlook would also make it possible to assess both the internal variations and the specificities of the African case, and hence to fit colonial Africa in a broader argument about demography and population politics in the 19th and 20th century.

Moreover, it is crucial to point out that there is a significant tension between the contributions I have reviewed above and the three remaining articles written by Dennis Cordell, Gregory Maddox and Patrick Manning. While the former take a constructivist and discursive approach, the latter consist in methodological and historiographical reflections on how to reconstruct African 'demographic realities'. This divergence of perspectives is not necessarily problematic. It rather reveals how the field of African historical demography, in which Cordell and Manning have been important players for the last

decades, has opened up for new approaches without understandably giving up its aim of reconstructing the demographic past or wholesale rejecting the „solidity of the numbers“ (Maddox, p. 211).

Dennis Cordell's plea to rescue historical demography from the postmodern and the postcolonial makes this point very clear. For Cordell, postmodern/postcolonial critique of both metanarratives and of the positivist use of quantitative data have challenged basic assumptions of historical demography and caused a sharp decline of historical studies on African demography since the 1990s. His answer to this challenge, however, is not to dismiss colonial enumerations as historical sources, but to integrate critical postmodern and postcolonial perspectives into demographic analyses.

If better scrutiny of the conditions under which colonial enumerations were produced leads to more caution in the use of these quantitative data, it seems like a good idea to embrace this approach. Manning's closing chapter on Africa's demographic development between 1850 and 1960 embraces this attitude, but seems to be a bridge too far. This criticism does not extend to his argument, though. Manning convincingly claims that population growth rates between 1850 and 1950 were lower than generally assumed and that, accordingly, the African population must have been considerably higher in 1850 and during the following 100 years to 1950. This argument is plausible and, as Manning acknowledges, even not entirely new. His methodologically daring reconstruction of population figures for each African country between 1850 and 1960, based on demographic assumptions for 1950 and the backwards projection of probable decennial growth rates raises more questions. Manning's decision to base his calculations solely on the population estimates for 1950, considered the most reliable of the colonial era, and to reject all prior data, is a bold, but still legitimate choice. It is a straightforward way of dealing with uncertain data, much in the vein of Cordell's appeal. By contrast, the adoption of default growth rates for the whole of Africa between 1850 and 1950, thus assuming a single demographic regime from Tunis to Cape Town, is

far more problematic. This overgeneralization neglects much evidence about „the diversity of African demography, environmental, and disease landscapes“, which led Maddox to caution against generalizing models (Maddox, p. 211). Surely, Manning’s final growth rates acknowledge local variations to the standard rate, but only due to the demographic effects of slave trading, colonial wars, epidemics, famines, migrations and changes in income, and not on environmental grounds.

Moreover, these growth rates and the resulting decennial population data, online accessible as xls-sheets, reveal further issues since they do not corroborate population decline for any African colony/country after 1900 (and only for a few in the 1880s and 1890s). That this contradicts earlier studies, is only part of the problem.³ Whether Manning’s calculations underestimate the demographic effects of colonial conquest and occupation or not, the tension between his results and the pervasive discourses of population decline in the first decades of the 20th century, extensively referred to in this collection, should at least have been addressed. Linking the different analytical threads in this collection would have backed up its internal cohesion.

Despite these critical remarks, this book remains important and highly recommendable, not only for the handful of African historical demographers, but more generally for all scholars of European colonialism in Africa and population politics worldwide. The combination of very precise case studies and larger bibliographical essays, all with copious footnotes, provides an overview over the field and turns this collection into a useful starting point for further investigations.

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³J. C. Caldwell, The Social Repercussions of Colonial Rule: Demographic Aspects, in: A. Adu Boahen (ed.), *Africa under Colonial Domination 1880-1935 (General History of Africa, vol. VII)*, London 1985, p. 458-486.