

Counting Subjects

Demography and Empire

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In 1977, Ian Pool, writing about the challenges of historical demography in Africa, noted,

African historical demography may depart significantly from classical historical demography. . . . The African historical demographer will probably be forced to build upon the existing methodology and perhaps may have to create his own new tools. In this we would be merely following what is becoming almost a tradition in African studies and is certainly typical of the two parent disciplines of history and demography.¹

This statement still holds true more than a quarter century later. The challenge facing scholars interested in the historical demography of Africa remains the need to balance defensible demographic analysis with the effort to reflect the complexities of African history. The broader reproduction of any society is a combination of births, deaths, and migrations related to strategies that individuals and social groups adopt to reproduce themselves in different eras and contexts. Reproduction is thus both biological and profoundly social. Moreover, it changes through time. Such social reproduction requires reproducing labor for the work of society on a day-to-day basis, as well as reproducing people from one generation to the next. These strategies are all intertwined with and grow out of specific patterns

of economic activity and social organization. They are also influenced by political systems, values, and other cultural constructs. These strictly demographic factors and broader societal factors combine to shape a “demographic regime.”²

Beginning in the 1960s, European historical demographers contended that Western Europe possessed a unique traditional regime, characterized by late age of marriage, low rates of birth outside marriage, and relatively slow growth—factors that, taken together, distinguished it from other regions of the world. In recent years, scholars have rejected this generalization because subsequent research has brought to light a diversity of population patterns even among the Western European societies whose study gave rise to the theory.³ African historical demographers have also begun to highlight the diversity of African demographic regimes in recent years, as they have debated issues such as the impact of the transatlantic slave trade; the size of African populations in the modern era; and the degree to which Africa possessed, now or in the past, a unitary demographic regime characterized by low population densities, high birthrates, and high levels of mortality from endemic diseases such as malaria.⁴

Orthodox demographic thought predicted that in the later twentieth century, African societies would experience declining fertility, a change predicted by the theory of the demographic transition. Indeed, in a few places across the continent, fertility did decline slightly in the 1990s—but not everywhere, not uniformly, and not for the same reasons.⁵ Based on the experience of a small number of European societies in the modern era, initial formulations of the paradigm of the demographic transition posited that high levels of mortality characterized all societies in the past, accompanied by correspondingly high levels of fertility to assure survival. The resulting population increase was slow. Early in the modern era, transition theory contends, the provision of better housing, less-contaminated water, and broader public health measures promoted declines in mortality. However, fertility levels, maintained by social custom and belief, remained high, resulting in dramatic increases in population. Only later did fertility drop to levels closer to replacement, thus producing the “modern” demographic regime of low mortality and low fertility. The contributions to this volume dispute the facile assumption that “traditional” societies, whether in Africa, Europe, or anywhere else, exhibited a single demographic regime characterized by high fertility and high mortality.⁶

Using existing historical sources, the essays in this book reconstruct the demographic regimes of African societies within the contexts of the colonial states that circumscribed them. The sources for colonial population data, like all historical sources, are incomplete and imperfect in various ways. These essays acknowledge these limitations but nonetheless aim at producing well-founded analyses to help us understand the roles that demographic theory, practice, and policy played in the governance of colonial states in Africa. They demonstrate that African societies existed in a diversity of demographic contexts and displayed varied demographic regimes, hence underscoring the need to turn to new kinds of evidence and fresh perspectives to reconstruct those circumstances at the local and regional levels.

The essays in this collection are implicitly and explicitly comparative. Each author writes about a different part of the continent but is aware of the connections between regions and of the need to consider both European and African patterns to arrive at new syntheses about the demographic history of colonial empires in Africa. This implicitly comparative approach extends beyond the numbers to consider how colonial regimes apprehended the demographic regimes of societies that they administered and how they produced the demographic data on which they based policy and action. Colonial representations of population constituted part of the larger discourse of power and control central to the exercise of authority. Colonial practices of counting and then mobilizing people were also integral to the assertion of hegemony. At the same time, by taking the colonizers' understandings of their own metropolitan populations into consideration, many of the authors also demonstrate how Europeans projected their own conceptions of population and population dynamics and their own fears of dramatic demographic change onto the people of their empires—the non-European “Others.” Before turning to the essays themselves, we will locate our essays within larger historical and theoretical contexts.

In his seminal work on nationalism, Benedict Anderson noted the critical importance of the colonial census in enumerating and targeting colonial subjects. The generation of the types of knowledge embodied in a census was not untested, though. The new discipline of demography initially provided a means of bringing uniformity to masses of inconsistently collected and contradictory data in Europe. Later, demographic methods served to document, trace, forecast, and, one could say, routinize the reproduction of colonial populations abroad. In the colonial context, demography served as one of the tools that defined the colonial subject as an Other subjugated to European control and European agendas for “improvement.”⁷ Anderson focused on quantification in Southeast Asia, but his insights may be applied to other parts of the colonial world. The essays here on Africa and the British and French empires by historians and social scientists examine the multifaceted nature of the demography of empire in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. They raise three related questions. First, how have historians and demographers understood the concept of population in the colonial world? Second, what were African demographic realities, and how did they channel the development of colonial systems of power on the continent? And third, how did metropolitan and colonial demographies interact in this period, both ideologically and physically?

To reconstruct what Anderson referred to as the “grammar” that guided the deployment of the classificatory and quantitative schemes of the various colonial states in different periods, we will first examine the history of the relationship between demography and state power since the rise of the population sciences in Europe in the eighteenth century. This history brings together ideas about population, the development of quantitative techniques, and the use of demographic data by the state. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, most observers argued

that a large and growing population was proof of a prosperous and well-ordered society.⁸ According to these “*populationniste*” theorists, the duty of the ruler and the state lay in encouraging population growth by securing peace and prosperity.⁹ Yet, as the work of Frederick Whelen and others on eighteenth-century population thought in Europe reveals, these same observers believed that contemporary peoples were less numerous than in the past, and they feared imminent demographic decline.¹⁰ Building on the ideas of writers such as Montesquieu, eighteenth-century population discourse focused on the reasons for this dire state of affairs, arguing for social, political, and economic changes to forestall demographic collapse.¹¹ Such arguments offered implicit, and occasionally explicit, political judgments of the merits of governments and the potential for human progress over the long term. At the same time, through the development of statistics and what the British referred to as “political arithmetic,” statisticians, officials, and governments devised more sophisticated quantitative techniques to improve their knowledge of population sizes and trends.¹² Such efforts laid the foundation for the modern census and also documented the new reality of population growth that became an important concern for nineteenth-century demography.

The publication of Thomas Malthus’s *Essay on Population* in 1799 signaled a sea change in demographic thought. His model of population dynamics, which proposed that populations tend to grow toward the limit of subsistence, brought new perspectives and approaches to the analysis of poverty and economic progress in the early nineteenth century. For Malthus, population growth was a major force in a larger providential universe in which a need to counter increasing pressure on the supply of subsistence items afforded people the incentive for moral and physical improvement, thus promoting progress. For these “natural laws” to function, the state needed to remain on the sidelines. Malthusian thought was folded into political economy—a human representation of the law of diminishing returns.¹³ The quantitative evidence of population growth recorded by the “modern,” periodic censuses introduced in Europe and North America at the beginning of the nineteenth century reinforced and lent credibility to the commonsense conclusions of observers who witnessed the dramatic growth of urban populations at the time. The causal links proposed between population expansion, the growth of poverty, and potential social disorder transformed demography into drama—more than an abstract science of numbers.¹⁴ As part of its duties, the state assumed the responsibility to measure and quantify the “social body”—part of a larger reimagining and reshaping of government in the new era of liberal and democratic politics.¹⁵

By the end of the nineteenth century, however, classical Malthusianism was on the wane. In Europe, the end of widespread subsistence crises and dramatic advances in industrial productivity laid to rest the specter of a Malthusian problem of “overpopulation.”¹⁶ Instead, new demographic anxieties emerged. Many observers now feared the impact of falling birthrates, which in France helped trigger the rise of a natalist movement that would receive official sanction.¹⁷ In other countries, falling fertility rates—particularly among the upper classes—fueled concerns

about shifts in the racial and class composition of society. In England, the eugenics movement argued that the higher fertility of the poor would inevitably lead to the decline of the nation, as the “less fit” made up an ever larger proportion of the population.¹⁸ These new demographic worries helped justify the expansion of state welfare provisions and intervention to address the problem.¹⁹

New demographic tools in the form of probability theory and mechanical aids to tabulation and calculation produced more accurate data and laid the groundwork for modern demographic analysis.²⁰ Later, this connection between the growth of state power and the elaboration of demographic analysis found sinister expression in the emergence of the totalitarian states of the twentieth century. The histories of Italy, Germany, and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century underscore how ideological constructions may shape the design of quantitative measures and also bend demographic analysis to serve the state.²¹ The ultimate expression of this trend may be found in the complicity of some demographers whose quantitative analyses assisted the perpetration of the Holocaust.²²

However, more recent thought and research on these topics has grown out of inquiry into the growth of the welfare state, on the one hand, and, on the other, new initiatives to conceptualize the relationship between state and society—embodied most notably in the work of Michel Foucault.²³ Foucault proposed an all-encompassing biopolitics. In his analytical framework, demography functioned as a technology of power, measuring, classifying, and ordering the population to foster state control at the meso level of the family and the micro level of the individual. Foucault’s oeuvre opened an avenue for other scholars to reconsider and re-present the relationship between state exercises in quantitative measurement exemplified by the census—usually presented to the public as objective, empirical knowledge—and the visible and invisible political and institutional forces and agenda behind their use. Some scholars believe that Foucault exaggerated his representation of the state as a monolith possessed of an insatiable appetite for power and knowledge—an overemphasis that perhaps grew out of the influence of the French state’s ideology of hypercentralization on Foucault himself.²⁴ Notwithstanding these reservations, it is clear that European states with widely differing structures and systems expanded the quantitative investigation of their populations during this period, imposing more uniform schemes of classification. And yet, though all of these states were, broadly speaking, liberal capitalist regimes, they exhibited considerable differences in how and why they collected information. In each country, social groups pushing for the elaboration of demographic analyses competed to promote their agendas, lobbying the state to incorporate them in its programs. In looking at this range of state policy and action, it is important to distinguish between left-of-center welfare reformers and ardent racists and eugenicists. The history of such initiatives in Great Britain offers an instructive example.²⁵

When we turn toward the colonial world, other difficulties emerge. Foucault’s work focused primarily upon Europe and did not acknowledge colonial empires and race as central features of modernity.²⁶ Indeed, his model of state power is

not appropriate for the complicated stories of Europe's colonial possessions. The fragmented and contradictory nature of what may be termed "the modern demographic project" becomes clearer through examination of the use of quantitative measures by the colonial state. For the colonial powers, the alien and radically heterogeneous nature of their possessions made them opaque and more in need of study. Beyond enumeration, a desire for mapping led to a preoccupation with the thorny issues of race and ethnicity, which assumed far greater significance in the colonial state than in the metropole.²⁷ However, the conceptual and empirical bases for quantitative grids incorporating race and ethnicity remained elusive, leading to the deliberate restriction, compression, and simplification of differences and ambiguities. As Anderson pointed out, Europeans constructed categories from their own frames of reference and experiences for colonial societies, categories that often did not take into consideration those used by the colonized themselves.²⁸

This reification of race and ethnicity represented only one distortion in the quantitative explorations of the colonial state. The lack of financial and human resources was another equally debilitating handicap. Faced with a far more complex and difficult technical and cultural enterprise, colonial states had to make do with much smaller budgets than their metropolitan counterparts. Last but not least, the emphasis on welfare prevalent in discussions of European demography played only a minor role in the calculations of colonial states—at least before World War II. For most of their histories, the colonial states pursued demographic policies and practices aimed at military control, tax collection, extraction of resources, and labor recruitment.²⁹ In the colonies, the collection of quantitative data for these ends revealed the interests of the colonial states more nakedly. Ironically, then, given Foucault's neglect of the colonies, the implications of the inquisitorial state that he and his fellow travelers mapped out are most apparent in the colonial context.³⁰

Early research on the quantitative dimensions of the colonial state focused on British India, where the British state both subsumed existing systems of data collection from the Mughal Empire and devised its own techniques for studying the population.³¹ Bernard Cohen's work on the census in British India underscored the fact that data collection, far from being a neutral act, helped construct understandings of caste by both colonizer and colonized.³² Later scholars have documented the ways in which quantitative assessments of the colonial state created new "facts" on the ground. Many of these studies built on Edward Said's theorization of Orientalism and associated work in Indology, arguing that the colonial practice of imagining and counting categories provoked an indigenous response that led Indians themselves to privilege religious identity within Indian modernity.³³

However, several recent studies challenge the idea that specifically European forms of enumeration created these identities in their totality, insisting instead that methods of counting communities used by the British in India were adopted from practices in earlier, precolonial states. This research maintains that such approaches to enumeration reflected existing, albeit fluid, identities and relationships and were not simply the products of the imposition of Western constructions.³⁴

More attention is now being directed to how indigenous groups understood their identities outside the realm of state power and how they attempted to transform colonial understandings into forms of resistance. Despite these caveats, however, most scholars still agree that the colonial project in India underwent an important shift in the later nineteenth century, becoming more comprehensive and intrusive. This change reflected the creation of a “new” colonial state in the wake of the Rebellion of 1857 and the further thrust of the state into new arenas, such as public health and education.³⁵

In Africa, too, demography was a colonial creation, even though African populations had prior histories. In the long term, climate change, disease, the development of food production systems, and the expansion of long-distance trade all shaped African population. Migration, within and out of sub-Saharan Africa, altered the demographic profiles of African societies. Beginning in the 1500s of the current era, forced migration in the form of the slave trade from western Africa took millions of Africans into the Atlantic world. The trade left a lasting mark on populations in the New World while impacting populations in Africa in diverse ways as well.³⁶ Finally, the intensification of commerce during the early modern era brought a greater mobility of people, goods, and diseases in the Indian Ocean as well as the Atlantic; the nineteenth century witnessed an increase in the number of people from Africa enslaved in the Indian Ocean world.³⁷

Despite little concrete knowledge of African demographic regimes, Europeans arrived with presuppositions about Africa’s population drawn from a variety of sources. The work of eighteenth-century students of political arithmetic, the writings of early explorers, and Malthus’s publications portrayed Africa as underpopulated as a result of warfare, insecurity of property, slavery, polygamy, and prolonged breast-feeding.³⁸ Arguments emphasizing insecurity and slavery served to justify European conquest. In the early years of European colonization, the violence and upheaval of conquest as well as the lack of administrators and resources overshadowed the collection and analysis of demographic data about newly vanquished populations. For the most part, European colonial regimes made do with rudimentary estimates compiled by local colonial administrators, indigenous agents of the colonial regimes, and outside observers. Limited attention was given to technical assessments of the accuracy or consistency of information or how it was gathered. Only in the 1920s and 1930s did European colonial authorities attempt to refine the enumeration of their subjects and apply demographic methods by then common in the metropole to the analysis of colonial populations.³⁹

Nowhere were the limitations of colonial demography more apparent than in Africa. Catholic parish registers recording births, deaths, and marriages appeared shortly after the earliest Portuguese contacts with the kingdom of Kongo in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Portuguese censuses of Luanda and other settlements in Angola followed.⁴⁰ Other initiatives specifically intended to enumerate colonial populations were common in the later modern period.⁴¹ However, the first modern censuses and sample surveys in Africa south of the Sahara date

only from the 1940s for the Portuguese colonies and from the 1950s for the others.⁴² In part, this late arrival of the modern demographic state derived from widespread violence and flight associated with initial colonial conquests after 1885, as well as the subsequent imposition of the Pax Europa. The creation of the colonial state and the infrastructures required to sustain it also requisitioned African wealth and labor, which made people exceedingly reticent about coming into contact with authorities or accurately reporting the size of their families and communities.

Different regions of Africa, of course, had different demographic histories. In the first few decades of the nineteenth century, for example, West African societies continued to suffer the ravages of the Atlantic slave trade, which was then about to enter a clandestine and violent final phase that did not trail off until the 1880s. Only after 1850 did West African populations begin to recover from two centuries of very slow growth and population loss. Central and East Africa, by contrast, experienced more pronounced losses from the continued export of people into the Indian Ocean trading network right up to 1900.⁴³ In southern Africa, the spread of white settlers into the interior in the first couple of decades of the nineteenth century provoked a chain reaction of violence and migration, upending societies from today's eastern South Africa all the way north to what is now Tanzania. In Central, East, and southern Africa, these bouts of violence, social dislocation, and migration fueled dramatic rises in the incidence and prevalence of disease among people and their livestock.⁴⁴

European campaigns of conquest magnified these demographic disruptions, provoked massive movements of population across the continent, and brought high levels of mortality.⁴⁵ Many Africans resisted initial conquest. In some cases, superior European arms overwhelmed them rather quickly, although costs in lives remained high. In other cases, notably among decentralized societies, conquest translated into drawn-out military expeditions that imposed European authority village by village, accompanied by very high levels of mortality and even higher levels of flight. A final indignity came with the spread of rinderpest in the central, eastern, and southern parts of the continent after 1888. The disease came with cattle that the Italian army brought to Eritrea during their hapless attempt to conquer Ethiopia. It destroyed herds across the continent, caused severe food shortages, and promoted the spread of the tsetse fly and the sleeping sickness that it carried.⁴⁶ As a result, the continent and its societies entered the colonial era in tumult.

The need for labor in a variety of forms shaped the demographic agendas of colonial regimes. European schemes to count and classify African populations and analyze results were far from perfect, and many were policies and practices devised for colonies elsewhere. But beyond simple enumeration, the perpetual search for labor, including a growing need for migrant labor, led colonial states to try to alter the demographic regimes of African populations—in particular, fertility levels, patterns of illness and disease, and social organization.⁴⁷ In the French colonies, the labor project in general and forced recruitment in particular led the colonial state to undertake measures to ensure the flow of workers and to deal with the

consequences of such policies domestically and internationally.⁴⁸ However, British and French authorities in the interwar years also initiated natalist policies that reflected a common European belief that the fundamental causes of the labor shortage were inadequate fertility, poor maternal care, and flight.⁴⁹

These measures underscore the critical differences in the ways that the state functioned in the metropole and the colonies. Despite the claims of Foucault and others about the all-encompassing power of the state in Europe, only in the colonial setting, especially in Africa, could the state deploy its powers with little restraint. The forced recruitment and removal of people, intervention in agricultural and pastoral practices, and imposition of health and sanitary regimes encountered few of the legal barriers imposed by civil society in Europe.⁵⁰ Property rights, legal norms, and civil liberties in Europe, although hardly impregnable defenses, provided metropolitan citizens far more protection than colonial subjects had. In Africa and elsewhere in the colonial world and despite resistance, “natives” were more acted upon and more often subjected to demands for change and “development.” Between the world wars and into the 1950s, proponents claimed that “modernized” colonialism brought the benefits of development. Yet the development imperative led the colonial state to mobilize increasingly against its subjects in order to achieve its objectives—which, in turn, destabilized colonial societies.⁵¹

Still, the colonial state was not a Leviathan free to do whatever it wished.⁵² By the interwar period, the African colonial state, although more stable and in greater control, indeed faced limits. One limit was material—the sheer scale of the task and the extremely limited resources allocated to accomplish it. This constraint became more formidable in the Depression of the 1930s, characterized by drastic drops in the prices for raw materials. As revenues dried up, ambitious development schemes remained on the drawing board or were reduced to pilot projects with limited impact. European powers also reduced the numbers of colonial administrators and the size of their administrations. These reduced colonial bureaucracies did little more than hold the line while waiting for the return of better times.⁵³ Even World War II, which brought a sudden ramping up of state activity and intervention, failed to change these circumstances dramatically.

Political barriers were equally daunting. The growing criticism of colonial practice by reformist officials, academics, missionaries, and political activists in Europe reduced the African colonial state’s range of action. Exposés of poor living conditions, extreme exploitation, failed experiments, and the formulation of more African-centered alternatives undercut the rationale for authoritarian systems.⁵⁴ African responses to new state demands also undermined them. Whether through direct resistance or evasion, Africans seized agency, responding in their own ways to the demands they faced. Some accommodated themselves and sought to maximize their interests; others fled beyond the reach of the state. Some migrated to the new colonial cities, where control proved more elusive.⁵⁵ Still others organized social and political movements that challenged the legitimacy of the state’s demand for information and power.⁵⁶ In these circumstances, the quantitative

project, whether defined in terms of data collection or the use of that information to exert control, remained fragmented and incomplete.

Many of the forms and projects of the colonial state survived into the postcolonial era. In the historical and social science literature, debates over the failures of postcolonial states in Africa often focus on the relationship between these “new” states and their late colonial antecedents.⁵⁷ The prolongation into the independence era of development projects and policies designed to confiscate wealth do indeed suggest that the independent African state is primarily developmentalist, concerned more than anything else with control over fragmented local populations, amassing wealth, and acceleration of economic change.⁵⁸ Like their counterparts in the colonial era, contemporary rulers have been most attentive to the demands of the developed world and international institutions—focusing attention on demographic trends deemed important by their international patrons. In addition, these regimes have usually concentrated on urban populations to the exclusion of citizens living in rural areas.⁵⁹ In the demographic arena, this externalized focus initially led to greater efforts at improved data collection and the expansion of family planning programs but only later, if ever, to social programs aimed at rural areas or the broader health of the people.⁶⁰

In Africa, the independence era has, according to one school of thought, brought crisis after crisis. The “Afro-pessimists” of the 1980s and 1990s argued that conflicts within and between states, as well as manipulation from beyond the continent, have given rise to a large number of “failed” or “hollow” states.⁶¹ Countries such as Ethiopia, Sudan, Somalia, and the Sahel region of West Africa have suffered repeated food shortages and famine brought on by climatic variation, rapacious regimes, and political instability. Beginning in the 1980s and 1990s, the HIV/AIDS epidemic resulted in much higher mortality in eastern and southern Africa—wiping out the gains made in life expectancy since independence.⁶² Other observers have called for nuance, pointing out that such problems do not plague all parts of Africa. Even in regions racked by conflict, communities have found ways to reproduce themselves and create space for renewal. The need to understand such local dynamics further complicates efforts to develop general demographic models for Africa.

The ten essays in this book reexamine how these understandings evolved and suggest new ways in which historians and others might reconstruct the demographic history of Africa in the modern era. Taken together, the chapters ahead cover the period from the late eighteenth century through the postcolonial era. For the most part, they assess the experience of regions under British and French control in the colonial era. New theoretical approaches, new evidence, and the slow accumulation of detailed historical studies of different regions have enhanced our knowledge of Africa’s population history. *The Demographics of Empire* opens with three overviews that probe the intellectual history and the production of knowledge about African demography and argue for new theories and methods.

Dennis Cordell’s chapter engages the literature on the historical demography of colonial Africa and South Asia in an effort to understand why research and

publication plummeted in the 1990s. He suggests that the decline in research may well be attributed to postmodern and postcolonial approaches to the social sciences in general and fields such as historical demography that privilege quantitative data in particular. Preoccupied with analysis of how knowledge is produced and used to project power, Cordell contends, postmodern and postcolonial scholarship called into question the objectivity of historical sources. To be sure, these issues were by no means new to historians or demographers, whose analyses routinely contend with imperfect data. However, many postmodern and postcolonial studies became mired in their often legitimate criticism, failing to suggest any way forward—any way “to know” anything at all. Without explicitly voicing such a conclusion, they left the impression that the past was not knowable. Cordell suggests that these new perspectives in African studies in the 1980s and 1990s probably discouraged research in African historical demography and social science history in general. Later in the chapter, however, he reviews recent research that incorporates postmodern and postcolonial perspectives but moves beyond the simple rejection of historical sources to reassess their value and usefulness with greater nuance. The chapter also considers new work in historical population studies in Africa that does not adopt the perspectives of either postmodernism or postcolonialism.

Karl Ittmann’s essay takes as its theme the question of how theory and history shaped British views of African population in the modern era and how these views affected colonial policies. Ittmann reviews the literature of African population and places it within the larger context of an evolving discourse of imperial population. This discourse linked British ideas of domestic population with those of the larger world and the empire in particular. For the British, Africa represented a place where “nature has continued to dominate man,” leaving African populations unable to control their reproduction.⁶³ In the initial stage of British rule, this fundamental belief led to a focus on underpopulation and policies designed to bolster health and reproduction as well as improve the supply of labor. From the 1940s on, however, officials and demographers began to raise concerns about accelerating population growth and its possible impact upon plans for economic and social development. Ironically, as British rule ended, it was fear of overpopulation that dominated demographic discourse and served as the rationale for the creation of international family planning programs built upon existing British institutions and expertise.

Raymond Gervais and Issiaka Mandé’s essay examines the construction of demographic knowledge and systems of data collection in French West Africa in the years prior to 1946. The authors demonstrate that despite ministerial directives in 1904, 1909, and 1921 imposing the collection of uniform categories of demographic data, a lack of training, paltry resources, and extraordinarily unrealistic expectations about the technical capacities of colonial administrations at all levels made it impossible to meet metropolitan demands. For local administrators, the annual census tours of their districts were much more important as symbols of their authority than as realistic exercises in collecting demographic information.

The limitations of expertise and resources were often masked by a language of power emanating from the center that made it impossible for administrators to question unreasonable expectations without putting their careers in jeopardy. Rather, they felt compelled to respond with obfuscation and numbers that they knew were incomplete and inaccurate. By the 1930s, these initiatives become more realistic, but World War II then delayed their implementation.

Thomas McClendon examines the invention and transmission of conventional wisdom about the history of population in South Africa. In his essay, he also explores the debate over the size and composition of the African population of the new British colony of Natal in southern Africa in the early nineteenth century, as well as efforts by officials and settlers to measure and track that population. Some observers believed that many Africans in Natal were immigrants who had entered the territory in large numbers to take advantage of the security that British rule provided in the wake of Shake Zulu's *mfecane*. This belief led officials to classify and attempt to remove many Africans in order to limit their claims to land and resources in a territory now open to British settlement. As a corollary, the colony's secretary of native affairs, Theophilus Shepstone, set up a network of "native reserves" to confine African settlement. McClendon demonstrates that contemporary officials and later generations of historians accepted this view of Natal's population despite the lack of accurate estimates of the precolonial population or postsettlement censuses. Precolonial population also figured in the debate over whether the *mfecane* was, in fact, a historical myth used to rationalize the expansion of European power. McClendon concludes by discussing how the debate over depopulation and indigeneity in the nineteenth century prefigured debates over similar issues in apartheid and postapartheid South Africa.

In "Counting and Recounting," John Cinnamon juxtaposes two sets of perspectives that two groups of people—the French and the locals—adopted in efforts to comprehend migration and depopulation in what is today called Gabon. Focusing first on the Minkébé forest in the north in the early decades of the twentieth century, Cinnamon presents oral accounts collected since 1990 that remember these demographic events in qualitative ways as stories of personal and group conflict, flight, and eventual return. He contrasts these local understandings of events and environment with the early French colonial gaze, which was quantitative, producing numerical estimates and analyses preoccupied with labor, mortality, and production. Yet the essay goes beyond these conventional dichotomies of African/European and qualitative/quantitative to explore variant narratives within each community. Broadening his view to encompass all of Gabon and neighboring French colonies, Cinnamon then explores the different French assessments of the region's demographic fortunes. Man-on-the-spot assessments now preserved in the colonial archives differ in important ways from those of colonial social scientists written over the same period. Cinnamon demonstrates in a convincing and empirical way the importance of pursuing variant African and French visions in order to arrive at multiple, global understandings of

demographic changes in the equatorial forest and what they meant—to all who lived them.

The demographic conceptions of officials and their impact upon policy also constitute the central theme of Meshack Owino's examination of the Kenya labor corps, known as the Pioneer Corps, during World War II. Owino shows how officials persisted in their belief that the western provinces of Kenya possessed virtually unlimited "reserves" of labor that could be mobilized for the war effort. These beliefs, which dated back to the early days of the protectorate, had played a crucial role in the founding of the Carrier Corps in East Africa during World War I, with disastrous results for local people. This debacle, however, failed to dissuade officials from mounting an analogous effort before World War II. Men such as S. H. Fazan confidently proceeded with the creation of the new unit, the Pioneer Corps, despite difficulties in recruiting that stemmed from Kenyans' painful memories of the earlier experience.

Sheryl McCurdy discusses European views of health and maternity in the trading center of Ujiji on the shores of Lake Tanganyika. She combines colonial and mission archival records with oral history to reconstruct the experiences of African women before and after the colonial conquest. She argues that the population of Ujiji had long been transitory in many respects, with coastal traders, slaves, and local rural dwellers mingling in the town. The disruptions of the early colonial era further caused instability for individuals in the town. European observers, both missionaries and German and British colonial officials, blamed low fertility and high infant mortality on lax morals. McCurdy shows that town dwellers had created fluid sets of relationships in the face of the constant disruption of town life in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. She notes: "Together, the culture of divorce, remarriage, and alternate relationships, as well as the effects of sexually transmitted infection, smallpox, malaria, tuberculosis, cholera, influenza, typhoid fever, and anemia, created an environment where couples were less likely to conceive. And even among those who did conceive, the rates of miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant and child mortality were extremely high." McCurdy concludes by pointing out that concerns of Europeans about the perceived demographic crisis of Ujiji/Kigoma find their echoes in contemporary debates about the causes and effects of the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

Gregory Maddox addresses another central theme in the demographic history of Africa—the assumed relationships between environment, health, and population growth that observers argue determine the structure and size of the continent's populations. Drawing on evidence from East Africa about interactions between people and their physical and biological environments, Maddox argues that they must be read in a more flexible and nuanced fashion. In particular, he investigates how new work on the history of disease, especially malaria, challenges the widely held view that Africans lacked the ability to control their exposure to disease. In place of neo-Malthusian models, Maddox asserts the need to see how environmental homeostasis and equilibrium situations arose in part from African

patterns of land use and settlement. These practices were severely disrupted by intensified commerce—especially the Indian Ocean slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—and the Western colonial intervention that followed. The fallout included increased violence, mobility, and overwhelming epidemics among people and animals. Finally, Maddox turns to mortality and population in the postwar and postcolonial eras. Although acknowledging the importance of health initiatives since 1945, he identifies fertility-driven population growth and the uncertain impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic as new factors that lie outside the traditional paradigm. Maddox concludes by calling for greater collaboration between historians and scientists in studying the history of African environments and health.

The following chapter by Meredith Turshen explores how colonial government policies on reproduction and sexuality affected women in British, Belgian, and French colonies in Africa primarily in the decades between the two world wars. Turshen adopts a gender perspective, which focuses attention on how relations between women and men, both European and African, affected women's lives. Her analysis seeks to avoid arguments of economic determinism while at the same time acknowledging the real material interests that influenced the colonial policies that had the greatest impact on women. After all, research to date underscores the fact that questions related to labor and its reproduction—from day to day and generation to generation—were the primary demographic policy concerns of all colonial regimes most of the time. However, Turshen shows that this primary concern about the reproduction of labor affected women in ways that were indirect as well as direct and unintended as well as intended. The impact could also be quite nuanced on occasion. To illustrate these points, the chapter explores three major themes: the imposition of statutory law, the creation of customary law, and how both shaped family law and policies; direct interventions to shape population growth by providing or withholding maternity and birth control services; and the impacts on women of disease dispersion and environmental disruption. The chapter concludes with discussions of several specific areas of colonial policy that had major demographic consequences.

Patrick Manning's essay sets out to formulate new estimates for African population over the period 1750 to 1950. Dissatisfied with the existing scenarios, many of which are based on thin evidence, Manning begins his reconstruction with the first reasonably accurate estimates of African population in 1950 and 1960 and works backward. As part of this method, he turns to existing colonial records, filling gaps in vital rates with estimates for nineteenth-century India. The analysis takes into account the different regions of Africa, assessing variations in their demographic regimes and their experiences of slavery and colonialism. Manning proposes continental population totals for 1930 (180 million) and 1850 (150 million) that are substantially higher than previous estimates. He suggests that we need to revise our overall understanding of African demographic history because these numbers imply a much larger population in 1700, given the impact of the

slave trade on the continent and lower growth rates for the period 1850 to 1950. His conclusions suggest that the modern era represents a break with older patterns of slower growth. Manning also proposes a corrective to the conventional portrayal of Africa as a continent that remained “underpopulated” well into the nineteenth century.

Taken together, these essays comprise the latest installment in efforts to understand the histories of population in Africa that stretch back to the late 1970s. *The Demographics of Empire* follows published proceedings from seminal conferences on African historical demography convened at the Centre of African Studies at the University of Edinburgh in 1977 and 1981, as well as issues of *Cahiers d'Études Africaines* and *Annales de Démographie Historique* devoted to the same theme in 1987. This volume is perhaps even more a direct descendant of the more focused essay collections edited by Dennis Cordell and Joel Gregory in 1987 and Bruce Fetter in 1990.⁶⁴ We hope this latest collective intellectual effort will stimulate other scholars to follow in what has become a persistent, if low-profile, mission to understand more fully African populations in what the revered English historical demographer Peter Laslett called “past time.”⁶⁵

Notes

1. D. Ian Pool, “A Framework for the Analysis of West African Demography,” in *African Historical Demography: Proceedings of a Seminar Held in the Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh, 29th and 30th April 1977*, ed. Christopher Fyfe and David McMaster (Edinburgh: African Studies Centre, University of Edinburgh, 1977), 57.

2. For a more thorough discussion of the demographic regime, see Dennis D. Cordell, Joel W. Gregory, and Victor Piché, “African Historical Demography: The Search for a Theoretical Framework,” in *African Population and Capitalism: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Dennis D. Cordell and Joel W. Gregory, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 14–32.

3. Jean-Claude Chesnais, *La transition démographique: Étapes, formes, implications économiques—Étude de séries temporelles, 1720–1984, relatives à 67 pays* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1986); John Knodel, *Demographic Behavior in the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

4. See C. C. Wrigley, “Population in African History,” *Journal of African History* 20, no. 1 (1979): 127–31; John Iliffe, “The Origins of African Population Growth,” *Journal of African History* 30, no. 1 (1989): 165–69; Thomas Spear, “Africa’s Population History,” *Journal of African History* 37, no. 3 (1996): 479–85.

5. Thérèse Locoh and Véronique Hertrich, eds., *The Onset of Fertility Transition in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Liège, Belgium: International Union for the Scientific Study of Population, 1994). See also Population Council, *The Unfinished Transition* (New York: Population Council, 1996).

6. For a nuanced statement of this theme, see John Iliffe, *The African Poor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

7. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991), 163–70.

8. For seventeenth-century England, see Mildred Campbell, “‘Of People Either Too Few or Too Many’: The Conflict of Opinion on Population and Its Relation to