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CTH events

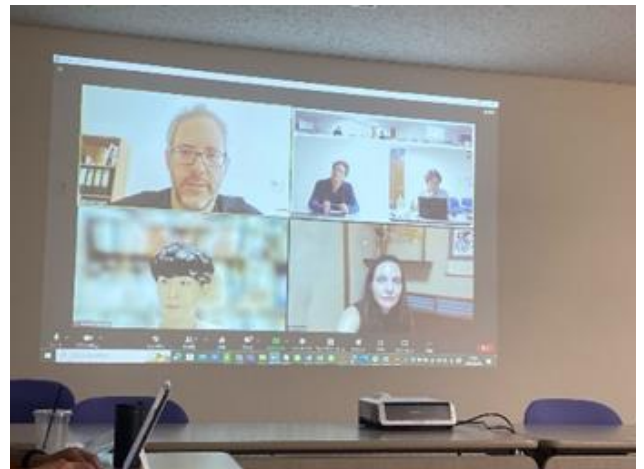
**Meeting Dr Samuël Coghe,
the Author of *Population Politics in the Tropics:
Demography, Health and Transimperialism in
Colonial Angola***

A report by Tomoki Yamada*

On 28 June 2022, the Center for Transimperial History (CTH) held the very first session of its ‘Meet the Author Series’. The session, which took place in a hybrid format (mixed personal/online), attracted approximately twenty participants from around the world. The invited ‘author’ was Dr Samuël Coghe, who participated online from the Freie Universität Berlin. With Dr Coghe, the participants discussed his newly published book, *Population Politics in the Tropics: Demography, Health and Transimperialism in Colonial Angola* (Cambridge University Press, 2022). This book examines the emergence and persistence of

depopulation fears in Portuguese Angola between 1890 and 1945, and how these fears were intertwined with the medical and spatial policies which aimed to grasp, maintain, increase and ‘improve’ the indigenous African population. As its title suggests, the book shows how Portugal’s population politics in Angola had a ‘transimperial’ dimension characterised by a sharp awareness of other empires’ colonialisms in Africa. This is one of the reasons why CTH invited Dr Coghe, who is one of the members of the Transimperial History Blog, a Germany-based research forum of which CTH is a partner.

The session kicked off with a presentation by Dr Coghe himself, summarising the central arguments



of his monograph. Firstly, he explained that the idea of ‘depopulation’ evolved in colonial Angola in the late 19th century, prevailing in the same way as in other African colonies until the 1940s and even thereafter. According to him, Portuguese anxieties over depopulation emerged in the wake of the sleeping sickness epidemic in Angola in the late 1890s. These anxieties were constantly reiterated through the publication of numerous reports, which gradually

shifted the focus from rampant epidemic mortality to the perceived causes of depopulation—namely, endemic diseases, natality problems and cross-border migration. The depopulation fears, Dr Coghe pointed out, were somewhat alleviated between 1945 and 1975, but they remained deep-rooted. Unlike in many other parts of Africa and Asia, the fears about depopulation were never replaced by those about overpopulation.

Secondly, Dr Coghe illustrated the ambivalent role of demographic science in the production, circulation and deployment of colonial knowledge. Population discourse and policies, he argued, were inevitably conditioned by the availability of demographic data, including those gleaned through population registration and oral interviews conducted by medical doctors. Despite the paucity and crudeness of demographic evidence, imperial actors often overstated the threat of depopulation, capitalising on what little data they garnered to pursue their own agendas. It was this (mis-)use of demographic knowledge that propelled the discourse of depopulation in the early 20th-century Portuguese empire.

Thirdly, Dr Coghe talked about multifarious policies formulated and implemented by imperial actors to stem what they regarded as a tide of depopulation. These policies included the response to sleeping sickness, the introduction of preventive social medicine, the attempt to reduce infant mortality and

improve maternal health, and the effort to control cross-border emigration. According to Dr Coghe, these policies were promoted, implemented, accommodated and even contested by a wide array of persons and groups—not just Portuguese and Africans but Europeans from other empires.

Last but not least, Dr Coghe explained that these policies and debates on depopulation did not evolve within the Portuguese empire alone: they unfolded in and through intimate interactions between Portugal and several other European nations operating in Africa. The condition of Angola under the Portuguese colonial rule attracted a great deal of attention from medical practitioners who were German, French, British and so forth. Simultaneously, Portuguese actors often relied on these experts for their ideas and experiences. Dr Coghe argued that these imperial actors from various colonising nations were engaged in mutual comparison. They often cooperated with one

another in sharing relevant information and practices. Meanwhile, they claimed—as often—the superiority of one's own empire's colonialism over that of others. Dr Coghe showed how these interactions had led to the kinds of phenomena and knowledge hitherto unknown to historians, as they had long tended to treat different empires and colonies separately.

Following his presentation, Dr Coghe and the participants engaged in a lively discussion about his thought-provoking research. In particular, as his book

... [M]uch of the discussion centred around how the interactive relations amongst different empires influenced the production and circulation of colonial knowledge in the case of Portuguese colonial rule in Angola. ... Such an intensive discussion, as well as his trailblazing book, would surely serve as food for thought necessary for the further growth of transimperial history as an emerging field of historical research.

pertained to the idea of ‘transimperial’, much of the discussion centred around how the interactive relations amongst different empires influenced the production and circulation of colonial knowledge in the case of Portuguese colonial rule in Angola. Questions were also asked about the extent to which and how the

be read as setting a fine example of how scholars can write colonial histories in new ways by adopting a transimperial perspective. Placing as it does the Portuguese empire firmly in relation to other empires, the book persuasively challenges the reductionist view, whether positive or negative, that the Portuguese empire was ‘exceptional’, which, according to him, is still prevalent in historiography today.

*Tomoki Yamada, a PhD student at Kyoto University and a member of CTH

Meet the Author Series — CTH

Title
Population Politics in the Tropics: Demography, Health and Transimperialism in Colonial Angola (Cambridge University Press, 2022)

Date
13:00–14:00 (Berlin time),
Tuesday 28 June 2022

Venue
Zoom
(Registration required. Click on the QR code below)

Description
Population Politics in the Tropics explores colonial population policies in Angola between 1870 and 1945 from a transimperial perspective. Using a wide array of previously unused sources and multilingual archival research, Samuel Coghe sheds new light on the history of colonial Angola, showing how population policies were conceived, implemented and contested. He analyses why, how and with what effects doctors, administrators, missionaries and other colonial actors tried to grasp and quantify demographic change and ‘improve’ the health conditions, reproductive regimes and migration patterns of Angola’s ‘native’ population. Coghe argues that these interventions were inextricably linked to pervasive fears of depopulation and underpopulation, but also shaped by processes of inter-imperial competition, borrowing and competition. In doing so, his fresh analysis of demography, health and migration in colonial Angola also challenges common ideas of Portuguese colonial exceptionalism.

Author
Samuel Coghe is a Postdoctoral Research Fellow of the German Research Foundation of the Global History Department of the Free University of Berlin. Prior to that, he was a Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Giessen and the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science and an Interim Professor of African History at Humboldt University Berlin. Coghe has extensively worked on the history of colonial rule in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Angola. His historical research has explored the relationship between colonialism and science (especially medicine, demography and veterinary science) in Lusophone and Francophone Africa, employing transimperial and global approaches. His current research deals with the commodification of cattle in colonial Africa with attention to economic, environmental and commodity history.

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transimperial approach shaped Dr Coghe’s research design and about his use of the two seemingly similar but subtly different terms: ‘transimperial’ and ‘interimperial’. Such an intensive discussion, as well as his trailblazing book, would surely serve as food for thought necessary for the further growth of transimperial history as an emerging field of historical research.

Population Politics in the Tropics is not narrowly about Angola. With its emphasis on its relation to other African colonies in the Portuguese empire and those in other empires, Dr Coghe’s book can

New works by CTH members

May 2022

Yoshihiro Yakushige, ‘Nyūshoku-gata shokuminchishugi to yūtopia—Kagawa Toyohiko to ‘Manshūkoku’ [Settler Colonialism and Utopia: Toyohiko Kagawa and ‘the State of Manchuria’], *Fukuin to sekai*, vol. 77, no. 5, 2022, pp. 24–9.

Nadin Heé, ‘Transimperial Opportunities? Transcending the Nation in Imperial Formations’, *Comparativ*, vol. 31, no. 5–6, 2022, pp. 631–639.

June 2022

Eiichirō Azuma, *Teikoku no furontia wo motomete —nihonjin no kantaiheiyō idō to nyūshoku-sha shokuminchishugi*, translated by Mariko Ijima, Yūko Kon’no, Ayako Sahara and Yōko Tsukuda (Nagoyadaigakushuppankai, 2022) [A Japanese translation of *In Search of Our Frontier: Japanese America and Settler Colonialism in the Construction of Japan’s Borderless Empire* (University of California Press, 2019)]

Conference participation

Nadin Heé and Daniel Hedinger participated as speakers in the Pierre du Bois Annual Conference 2022, ‘Modern Transimperial and Interimperial Histories: Forms, Questions, Prospects’ (The Graduate Institute Geneva, 12–14 May 2022). Heé gave a presentation entitled ‘Materiality, Space, and Time in Transimperial Histories’, and Hedinger presented his paper entitled ‘The Second World War: A Transimperial History?’ on 12 and 13 May, respectively. A report of the conference is available [here](#).

Partnership

- Transimperial History Blog: Critical Histories of Empire (for more information, click [here](#))
- The Working Group on Trans/Anti-Imperialism (World History Center, University of Pittsburgh) (for more information, click [here](#).)

Visitors to CTH

- 10 June 2022 Professor Makoto Yoshida (Faculty of Global Liberal Studies, Nanzan University)
- 23 June 2022 Professor Eiichiro Azuma (Professor of History and Asian American Studies, University of Pennsylvania)

What is ‘transimperial history’?

‘Transimperial history’ is an emerging field of research dealing with the histories of modern empires and of resistance thereto as well as the influence of both on

the post-imperial world. While this approach always takes multiple empires as its object of research, its purpose is not to write their comparative histories. It is not that transimperial history first treats different empires in isolation from one another and then compares them later. Rather, it focuses on how both those who practiced colonialism in various empires and those who opposed them engaged in acts of comparison through shifting relations of cooperation and competition with one another. By looking at a range of relevant phenomena such as cross-border circulations of knowledge on (anti-)colonialism or global flows of people and goods, it foregrounds instances where historical relations of mutual influence and interaction unfolded across different empires.

On CTH

On 1 May 2022, the Center for Transimperial History (CTH) started as one of the official research centers of Doshisha University, Kyoto, Japan. Between 2022 and 2026, CTH will be run in conjunction with a JSPS grant project, ‘The theory and practice of trans-imperial history: towards an open-ended framework of research’ (JSPS Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research (B), Project Number 22H00690).

From the editors

We are glad that CTH successfully started on 1 May 2022. We thank all those who have offered such generous support.

Satoshi Mizutani & Tomoki Yamada
Editors, *CTH Newsletter*