

## ARTICLE

# The propaganda of Italian colonial imperialism in Africa through postage stamps (1903–1941)

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## Funding information

Government of Aragon, Spain, Grant/Award Number: Research Group S05\_20D; San Jorge University

## Abstract

Italy had a colonial empire in Africa in the areas of Libya and East Africa during the first half of the 20th century. The postage stamps issued for these areas served as instruments of propaganda for that empire. This paper uses the method of quantitative content analysis to determine which themes and ideological messages appear on the postage stamps of the Italian African colonies. The results show that, although more than half of them have an attitude of respect for the life of the indigenous population or the civilizational benefit of the colonial government, with the purpose of expressing the benevolence of its power, almost a quarter reflect attitudes of domination, especially in East Africa. Overall, an image of exoticism emerges that reinforces the idea of the Italian nation as a new empire that aimed to show itself to the world as such, especially starting in the 1930s.

## KEYWORDS

Africa, colonialism, Italian imperialism, postage stamps, propaganda

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

This study presents the role of postage stamps as a propaganda tool by the Italian State during the period 1903–1941. Its analysis will reveal which messages were promoted by the State, since the State is the one who issued them, selecting their themes, designs and communicative approaches (Navarro, 2010) for its various audiences, both internal and

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external. The stamps allow for different historical, political or communicative approaches, since the images they include represent an era and refer us 'to the mental universe of the society that produces it' (García, 2010, p. 222; Reid, 1984).

The postage stamp contributes, together with the other classic types of mass media (radio, television and press), to the dissemination of a 'imagined community' in the sense indicated by Anderson (2006) and also of state propaganda. Postage stamps are called 'windows on the State' (Brunn, 2001), 'portraits of the nation' (Schwarzenbach, 1999) and 'paper ambassadors' (Altman, 1991) and are tools for nation-building and for the shaping of the collective public memory (Brunn, 2001; Raento, 2006; Raento & Brunn, 2008; Reid, 1984). The postage stamp contributes to this by ensuring the visibility of the elements of the homeland (from the point of view of the State) in everyday objects, thereby preventing citizens from forgetting who they are (or are expected to be) and where they belong (Raento, 2006). The study of postage stamps demonstrates the degree of importance given by rulers at certain points in time to the issues, groups or individuals represented in them, within the tapestry of the country's values (Limor & Tamir, 2021). Moreover, in some cases, postage stamps allow us to observe the relationship between nation and empire (Cusack, 2005).

The presentation of certain themes, linked in this case to the Italian Nation and to the construction of a new Mediterranean empire during the period of Mussolini's government, is evident in the stamps analysed. This selection defines what is considered important and what is not from the point of view of the issuer, in this case, the Italian State, through certain relevant members of its Government, including, in certain cases, Mussolini himself as we will see. The choice of subjects, of what appears most prominently on the postage stamps, is a very important element in determining the content of the message that Italy wanted to disseminate. However, the analysis would be incomplete without completely analysing the stamp, looking for the message of the metropolis that is intended to be transmitted to its different recipients (citizens, colonised and people from other countries). For this, the stamps have been observed encoding what we have called 'attitude of the metropolis'. This attitude can be graduated starting from the appearance of the colonised in total freedom, as if they had not been governed by a foreign entity. A different position in this graduation can be found in the neutrality in design, on the one hand, and the positive contributions of colonisation in the form of progress in living conditions, on the other hand. A final position would be represented by the most aggressive attitude, such as domination or oppression. Considering the stamps as suitable instruments for propaganda, their detailed analysis and codification using the method of quantitative content analysis, allows us to understand the propaganda messages of the Italian empire in Africa.

Furthermore, we cannot forget that Italy deployed its African colonial power in two very different areas: Libya and East Africa. For this reason, apart from analysing the stamps from both areas as a whole, it is especially interesting to determine if there were different characteristics in relation to both territories, because the ethnic and cultural individualities of their inhabitants, as well as the previous historical links between Italy and its colonies, were also different.

In light of all these considerations, we established the following research queries (RQ):

- RQ1** *What are the main and secondary thematic categories that are shown in the stamps of Italian colonies in Africa, and how can they be interpreted to discover propaganda messages?*
- RQ2** *What attitudes of the metropolis toward the populations it colonised are observed in them, and what vision of the Italian empire do they suggest?*
- RQ3** *What distinctions are found among the various colonial areas concerning the above issues?*

In addition, this study of postage stamps from Italian colonies in Africa during the period 1903–1941 aims to address the delayed analysis of Italian colonialism, which has been accompanied by the prolonged marginalisation of Italian post-colonial studies in intellectual circles (Zocchi, 2019). For the author, the survival of the remnants of models that determined specific subjectivities between the coloniser and the colonised facilitates their normalisation, allowing the legitimisation of racist discourses. Hence, it is useful to learn about Italy's colonial past to understand the

appearance of certain stereotypes and images, to deconstruct them (Andall, 2003), and eventually to fight against them, something towards which this research aims to contribute.

This article is structured in five sections in addition to the introduction. Firstly, there is a review of the literature, which explains the role of postage stamps as propaganda instruments, especially in the colonial sphere, in order to, secondly, provide a brief historical overview of the Italian colonies in Africa. Thirdly, the methods and design of the research are explained, and fourthly, the results obtained in the research are analysed, with a conclusion section closing the work.

## 2 | POSTAL PROPAGANDA AND ITALIAN COLONIES IN AFRICA

In this section, the propagandistic use of postage stamps, with a special focus on the colonial sphere, will be explained, and a very brief history regarding the Italian colonies on the African continent during the 20th century will be given.

### 2.1 | Propaganda through postage stamps

Propaganda is 'the deliberate, systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist' (Jowett & O'Donnel, 2006, p. 7). It is associated with control and social persuasion and involves a deliberate attempt to alter or maintain a balance of power that is advantageous to the propagandist (Pizarroso, 1999; Reig, 2004).

Postage stamps are official documents, issued by states, which serve as a means of payment for the sending of postal documents and which have an international scope. Beyond this instrumental purpose, postage stamps have other purposes, clearly communicative: (a) They represent the nation inside and outside of the country through recognisable symbols (flags, coats of arms, effigies of heads of state, etc.), and (b) they show particular aspects or moments of that country that are specifically selected (Hoyo, 2010).

There is a relationship between visual communication and the transmission of ideological messages. Raento & Brunn (2005, p.145) understand that 'when states emphasise "the visual", which includes maps, postage stamps, currency, and official Web sites, they inform and educate their own populations and those beyond about where they are, who they are, and what they are about'. Indeed, postage stamps could serve their main purpose by showing only the name of the issuing country and the postal value (what is paid to transport and deliver the envelope or package on which they are applied) in a simple and nondescript way. However, from very early on, stamps began to incorporate visual and iconic content (Hoek, 2002), increasingly as complex as the technology of processing and printing allowed (Hoyo, 2010), especially with the incorporation of so-called commemorative stamps that present some aspect, event or character that, in the opinion of the issuing State, deserves to be remembered (compared with the label 'definitive' or 'basic', with a design that is usually more aseptic, incorporating the image of the head of state or a representative symbol of the nation, such as a shield or allegory, and that is designed for the most common postage). This indicates that the stamp, from very early on (around 1920, when the commemorative stamp became widespread), began to be used by states to transmit their propaganda (Stoetzer, 1953).

The State prepares these official documents through specific agencies or committees that determine the content and design of each postal issue. Thus, it is not surprising that postage stamps, as products of the State, tend to be eminently conservative, venerating the most 'respectable' version of social reality (Altman, 1991). The cited author offers a vision of the stamp as an official product in which the issuing State shows, in a premeditated way, the perception it wants of itself and the world: 'they are both miniature art works and pieces of government propaganda: they can be used to promote sovereignty, celebrate achievements, define national, racial, religious or linguistic identity, portray messages or exhort certain behaviour' (Altman, 1991, p. 2).

Stamps can be considered one more element of the iconography of the State and its 'visual policy'. Deans & Dobson (2005, p. 3) understand that 'stamps can and should be read as texts, often with expressly political purposes or agendas which are conveyed through the images they depict'. 'Postage stamps', continue Deans & Dobson (2005, p. 6), 'emerge as vehicles for identity creation and propagation, and as mechanisms for regime legitimation. They demonstrate changing concepts of the state over time and the changing aspirations of state elites'. The postage stamp thus shows us the communicative strategies of governments, reflecting a cultural and political dimension of society where the philatelic message circulates (Hoek & Scott, 1993); so they are not neutral or unimportant parts of cultural material, but rather carriers of powerful images of the dominant state ideology (Cusack, 2005). This is a means of issuing ideology (Navarro, 2010) that, over time, begins to acquire values typical of an advertising and propaganda poster (Stoetzer, 1953). In the same vein, Satué (2011) refers to the postage stamp as a miniature poster, sharing the principles of synthesis and visual impact that define poster design. In addition, messages can be delivered subtly and unconsciously, but repetition (seeing the same postal design many times) consolidates the effectiveness of the message (Child, 2005). In this sense, the historical study of the messages of postage stamps can contribute to forming a 'public memory', understood as a set of images from the past that circulates in the 'public sphere' (Jedlowski, 2007), where citizen points of view are shared to form public opinion on a given issue.

In the context of colonial occupation, postage stamps issued by metropolises specifically for their colonies played a very important propaganda role. For Scott (2002), the images present on colonial stamps have a purpose related more to colonialist appropriation than anthropological analysis, replacing the reality of indigenous life with a mere arbitrary and symbolic image. For the cited author, the thematic categories are restricted, but abound in indigenous types, such as hunting and agriculture, flora and fauna, rituals or masks. Adedze (2004) adds to these the thematic categories of public works, villages and architecture, economic resources, local settings and archaeological sites.

The propagandistic function of the colonial stamp, with a profusion of ethnographic images, is, for Scott (2002), to attract new settlers and promote cultural and scientific prestige (in his analysis of France) and to seduce European collectors, especially young people. Another important propaganda purpose is to reinforce the image of the colonial power of the metropolis (Mwangi, 2002), favouring nationalism, something with which Adedze (2004) agrees when analysing the case of France, Cusack (2005) that of Portugal or Altman (1991) for Great Britain, albeit introducing an important nuance that must be assessed in regard to colonial stamps: that they must avoid offending the indigenous population, so they should introduce local leaders, in the issuing of stamps.

## 2.2 | The Italian colonies in Africa

The two main colonial areas of Italy in Africa during the 20th century were present-day Libya (consisting of Italian Libya, Italian Cyrenaica and Tripolitania) and Italian East Africa (consisting of the area of the same name, together with Italian Eritrea, Italian Ethiopia and Italian Somalia).

In the case of Italian Libya, after the brief Italo-Turkish war against the Ottoman Empire in 1911, Italy acquired control of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, gaining international recognition thanks to the agreements of the Treaty of Lausanne (1923). After a difficult and bloody 'pacification' in the 1920s, the two territories were unified under the name 'Libya' in 1934. During World War II, in 1943, Italy lost control of this area after its expulsion together with its German allies, although it recovered it after the end of the conflict, until the independence of the territory in 1951 (Andall & Duncan, 2005).

On the other hand, Eritrea, already within the Italian East Africa area, became an Italian colony in 1889 after the signing of the Treaty of Wuchale between Ethiopia and Italy. After the First Italo-Ethiopian War (1895–1896) and the heavy Italian defeat at the Battle of Adwa, considered by many at the time as a loss of national honour (Labranca, 2002), the seed of Italian revenge was planted, yielding its fruit after the Second Italo-Ethiopian War (1935–1936), which ended with the conquest of Abyssinia. In regard to the Somali territory, Italian penetration started in 1890 in the form of a protectorate that was consolidated with the inclusion of the Jubaland Territories in

1920 and the occupation of British Somalia in 1940. These territories, unified under the denomination 'Italian East Africa' (1936), which incorporated the conquered Abyssinia (Ethiopia), were retained until the Italian defeat at British hands in 1941, in the middle of World War II.

### 2.3 | Italian colonial imperialism and the vision of the indigenous population

In both the liberal and fascist phases of Italian colonialism, the discursive construction of a colonial 'other' was a fundamental element to legitimise (initially) Italian action as the expression of their moral responsibility to save Africans from themselves, along with the patriotic obligation to dominate them (Zocchi, 2019). Italian colonialism transformed from an initial approach that was rhetorically more respectful of the indigenous in the early 20th century, although Finaldi (2019, p. 40, quoting De Biase, 1965, p. 165) evidences the opposite by quoting the words of Antonio Baldissera, governor of Eritrea in the 1880s: 'Let's stop saying we are bringing Abyssinians civilisation. It's true; we do want to bring civilisation to Abyssinia, but not for them, for us'. This approach would become even clearer during the Mussolini government, when the indigenous populations were no longer the 'other' that had to be saved, but had to be dominated, from a manifestly imperialist discourse (Zocchi, 2019), consistent with fascist social Darwinism, where the conflict between people, nations and races was a natural process for the selection of the best with the elimination of the inferior and incompetent. Racial superiority justified the domination of the inferior and assumed the ideological sustenance of Italian (and German) imperialism (Dino, 2010).

The Italian objective, especially during the rule of Mussolini, was to obtain its own colonial space, like the other European powers, founding an empire that was an imitation of the ancient Roman Empire, as well as to increase economic production (Caprotti, 2011). Additionally, it was expected that the colonies would serve as a place for the implantation of the Italian proletariat, which was already emigrating in large numbers. It was not, therefore, a question of establishing trade relations or of bringing progress and modernisation to the colonised Africans. In fact, as was mentioned, the emigration of a good number of Italians was encouraged through demographic propaganda that was accompanied by a rejection of assimilation and 'contamination' by the African races, following the theories of anthropologists such as Lidio Cipriani, who was totally opposed to ethnic mixing. This separation resulted in legislation that, in 1937, prohibited Europeans from living in indigenous neighbourhoods in Eritrea or from using the same public transport in Somalia, and limiting the access of colonised Africans to education beyond the first 3 years of primary education. Thus, the inferiority of the African population appeared natural and undeniable (Zocchi, 2019).

The inhabitants of these occupied lands were silenced in fascist colonial discourse and were portrayed as static and sometimes invisible. Technology and the progress of the Italian metropolis were also contrasted against a nature that had to be dominated and the 'other', almost savage, indigenous population. In this sense, the use of the aeroplane and the establishment of air routes were used discursively as a significant element of fascist modernity and civilisation, as seen in the colonial stamps analysed herein. This separation between the coloniser who dominates technology and the indigenous person who lives in Nature constitutes a mechanism of separation and distinction between these two groups, emphasising the Orientalist logic of the superiority of one and the inferiority of the other (Said, 1978). This is most evident when, in the same image, a plane is juxtaposed flying over a natural place, or a camel or an indigenous person is in a static position observing the passage of a ship, which on the one hand emphasises the stereotyped exoticism of the colonised territory and on the other shows the segregated otherness of the primitive colonised, immersed in a life of technological backwardness, visually materialising the separation existing between the coloniser and the colonised (Caprotti, 2011).

These representations, supported by propaganda, only showed benevolent and positive images of the colonial project through the press, cinema and radio (and postal stamps, as we will see) and helped to build the myth that Italian colonialism was benign, a kind of exceptionalism shared with other colonialisms such as that of Portugal or Spain, which was not at all the case (Zaccaria, 2019).

### 3 | METHOD AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The sources used for this work are postal stamps issued specifically for the seven Italian colonial zones in Africa during the period 1903–1941: Italian Cyrenaica (1926–1934), Italian Libya (1921–1938), Tripolitania (1926–1938), Italian East Africa (1938–1941), Italian Eritrea (1910–1936), Italian Ethiopia (1936) and Italian Somalia (1903–1936). Hereafter, to present the results obtained more clearly, we have decided to group the data into two large colonial areas: Italian Libya (which includes the stamps of the same denomination together with those of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica) and Italian East Africa (which also includes those of that denomination plus those of Italian Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia).

In total, the corpus for this work consists of 187 stamps (including airmail issues), distributed as shown in Table 1, 110 of them corresponding to the Italian colonial area of Libya and 77 to that of Italian East Africa.

The chosen time period derives from the type of stamps selected: Only 'commemorative' stamps have been analysed, eliminating 'definitive' or 'basic' stamps, which have been ignored owing to their lack of interpretative content for the purposes of this work. Thus, the first commemorative stamps from any of these colonies were issued in 1903 (Somalia), and the last in 1941 (Italian East Africa). The second exclusion criterion concerns stamps issued for circulation in Italy itself or in other territories and in which, in philatelic terms, the name of the colonial territory is overprinted (applying wording or design elements over an already existing stamp). These have not been included either, because they were not created with the idea of circulating in those colonial areas, so the propaganda message is not specific, which is what is assessed in this work. In terms of time periods, only nine were issued before Mussolini came to power in 1922, with the remaining 178 covering the periods of fascist rule in Africa.

To answer the research questions presented in the introduction of this paper, quantitative content analysis was chosen as the research methodology for the selected postal stamps. This method revolves around statistical tools used to obtain the descriptive data of a series of variables. For Berelson (1952, p. 18), content analysis is a tool 'for the objective, systematic and quantitative description' of communicative products. Krippendorff (1980) considers it to be a way of understanding the symbolic qualities of texts in relation to broader cultural contexts and to be appropriate when working with a significant number of units of analysis. Images can also be analysed through this method, as Lutz and Collins (1993) did with a series of photographs, combining it with other methods as well, in their study on the representation of the 'other' in the *National Geographic* magazine, and which has served as an important inspiration for this research. When designing the analysis process for the postal stamps, various works were used as models, such as that of Rose (2001) and Mirzoeff (1998) for the purely visual aspects of the analysis, as well as those of Brunn (2001), Child (2005), García (2010), Gozalbes (2011), Moriente (2013), Navarro (2013), Prieto-Andrés (2021), Raento and Brunn (2005, 2008), Raento (2006), Reid (1984) and Vázquez-Miraz (2020) for the definition of all the variables to be analysed in the corpus, although in this work only part of that is presented.

From all this material, a set of variables were coded for the 187 stamps analysed. The results herein are presented as they relate to the main and secondary themes that emerge. The theme will define the essential content of the message and allowed us to establish categories that can be associated with ideological references of the issuer. For all the stamps, there is always a main thematic category, selected from the 31 categories previously established, taking into account the category with the highest relevance, whereas only in 139 stamps there is also a secondary thematic category. If there are other topics (themes) that are represented in the stamp analysed, one will be encoded

TABLE 1 Commemorative stamps from the Italian colonies in Africa (1903–1941)

	Italian Cyrenaica	Italian Libya	Tripolitania	Italian East Africa	Italian Eritrea	Italian Ethiopia	Italian Somalia	Total
No. of stamps	13	11	86	19	30	5	23	187
Percentage	7.0	5.9	46.0	10.2	16.0	2.7	12.3	100

Source: Authors' own creation.

as secondary, dismissing the others. These are the cases in which the main thematic category does not completely cover the entirety of what is expressed in the stamp. To distinguish which category is assigned as main and which as secondary, attention has been paid, in the first place, to the overall vision of the stamp and the text that sometimes is inserted in it. It is also observed if an element has a greater prominence due to its preponderance in the stamp, which will be given by the size of the figure and its position in the stamp. In this sense, the fact of being in the foreground will give this element greater weight when determining to which thematic category it belongs and whether it is main or secondary. Thus, a stamp featuring a flower or an animal would be completely covered by the main thematic category 'flora and fauna'. However, a stamp that features, for example, an indigenous person in the foreground playing a musical instrument would be in the main category of 'indigenous culture and folklore' and, as a secondary thematic category, in that of 'indigenous types'.

In addition, as the second question examined, the 'attitude of the metropolis' that derives from an overall analysis of each stamp has been codified for each of the colonies, including in one of the following variables: 'neutral or not identified', 'let's live freely', 'dominates', 'civilises', 'evangelises', 'coloniser and colonised coexist' or 'oppresses'. This analysis has made it possible to establish, to some extent, the intentionality of the issuer throughout the period and the particularities of the colonies, as well as the overall vision that remains.

## 4 | RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the main and secondary thematic categories most prevalent in each colonial area are shown, as well as the attitudes of the Italian metropolis as revealed through the State propaganda in the postal stamps analysed.

### 4.1 | Thematic categories present in the stamps of the Italian colonies in Africa

When analysing which thematic categories are present in the stamps of the Italian colonies in Africa, in Table 2, it is seen that the most frequent is 'flora and fauna' (14.4%; see Figure 1), with a weight twice as significant in the colonies grouped as Italian East Africa (19.5%) than in Libya (10.9%). This is a recurring thematic category in the colonial stamps of all metropolises, as it reflects the exoticism of colonial domains, as well as being neutral, since it does not present any type of ideological message that could upset the colonised populations.

Secondly, the main thematic category is almost as frequent as 'transport' (13.9% overall; see Figures 2 and 3, where it is a secondary thematic category, and Figure 4, as the main thematic category), with somewhat greater presence in Libya (16.4%) than in East Africa (10.4%). In this case, the emphasis is placed on the technological advance that Italy provides as a colonial power, since practically all of it is linked to the use of the Zeppelin or the plane as a link between the colonies and the metropolis and between them, especially in the framework of the new Italian empire in the 1930s.

Thirdly, the categories of 'indigenous types' (11.8% in total; see Figures 5 and 6) and 'villages and civil architecture' (11.2% in total; see Figure 7) share prominence in the presentation of the environment of the colonised, either showing their appearance and clothing, or the places in which they live. In Italian Libya, they have a greater presence (13.6% and 14.5%, respectively) than in East Africa (9.1% and 6.5%, respectively). These are issues that also come into play with the exotic and the difference, in regard first to both the external aspect and the customs of the indigenous people and second to the villages in which they live.

We can place the thematic categories of 'symbols of the State or the colony' (8% in total; Figure 8), 'agricultural economy, hunting, and fishing' (7.5%; Figure 9) and 'trade and craftsmanship' (7% in total; Figure 10) in a fourth group. In this case, the presence of State or colonial symbols is much stronger in East Africa (14.3%) than in Libya (3.6%), which also occurs in the case of stamps relating to the primary-sector economy (10.4% in East Africa and 5.5% in Libya),

TABLE 2 Main themes appearing in the stamps (number and per cent within each colonial area)

	Total of Italian Libya		Total of Italian East Africa		Total	
	N	Per cent within each colony	N	Per cent within each colony	N	Per cent in set of colonies
Flora and fauna	12	10.9	15	19.5	27	14.4
Transport	18	16.4	8	10.4	26	13.9
Indigenous types	15	13.6	7	9.1	22	11.8
Villages and civil architecture	16	14.5	5	6.5	21	11.2
Symbols of the state/colony	4	3.6	11	14.3	15	8.0
Agricultural economy, hunting and fishing	6	5.5	8	10.4	14	7.5
Trade and craftsmanship	12	10.9	1	1.3	13	7.0
Culture of the metropolis	7	6.4	4	5.2	11	5.9
Landscapes	2	1.8	8	10.4	10	5.3
Allegory	4	3.6	4	5.2	8	4.3
Indigenous culture and folklore	7	6.4	0	0.0	7	3.7
Anniversaries/events	3	2.7	2	2.6	5	2.7
Military theme	0	0.0	3	3.9	3	1.6
Public works	1	0.9	1	1.3	2	1.1
Islam	2	1.8	0	0.0	2	1.1
Local internal scenes	1	0.9	0	0.0	1	0.5

Source: Authors' own creation.



FIGURE 1 Somalia (1932). Ostrich





FIGURE 2 Eritrea (1936). Plough with oxen



FIGURE 3 Libya (1939). Aeroplane in the desert



FIGURE 4 Cyrenaica (1934). Airports



FIGURE 5 Eritrea (1933). Indigenous woman



FIGURE 6 Tripolitania (1935). Arab flute player





FIGURE 10 Tripolitania (1927). Part of the old port



FIGURE 11 Italian East Africa (1938). Statue of Caesar Augustus. '*Imperium sine fine dedi*' ['I have entrusted them with an endless empire']

Already with a representation of fewer than 12 stamps per category, note that there are references to the culture of the metropolis (5.9%; see Figure 11), landscapes (5.3%; see Figure 12), various allegories (4.3%, referring to deities of agriculture or showing an eagle that signifies the Italian empire defeating an African lion that represents the defeated Ethiopians; see Figure 13; or an allegory of victory, but after the defeat of the African lion, again, see Figure 14) or indigenous culture and folklore (3.7%; Figure 15). Teaching cultural aspects of the Italian metropolis is a sign of domination over the colonised. Sometimes, these cultural aspects that appear on the postal stamps are, for example, Roman archaeological ruins, particularly in Libya. This serves to emphasise the issuer's message of the existence of a common historical link that unites Italy with the colonised populations despite the centuries that have passed, and which 'legitimises', from the colonisers' perspective, their current dominance. Conversely, both the thematic category of 'landscapes' and that of 'indigenous culture or folklore' influence the presentation of colonial



FIGURE 12 Italian East Africa (1940). Canoe



FIGURE 13 Italian East Africa (1938). Eagle defeating lion

rule from a perspective of uniqueness and differentiation of the colonial territory and its people and customs with respect to the Italian metropolis, shown in a non-invasive way, as if observed from a window. Finally, the use of various allegories aims to promote a series of civic values or timeless concepts, such as the representation of a pagan goddess of agriculture as the protector of something valuable for the coloniser and the colonised, or the staged domination of Italy over the newly conquered territory, using culturally understandable images for both.

With a very insignificant number (less than 3%), there are thematic references to anniversaries, military themes, public works, Islam and local internal scenes. It is also noteworthy that there is no reference in the stamps to industrial economy, sports, Christianity, exploration, postal motives, illustrious characters, health, education, civic values or childhood. It is precisely this absence or scarcity of certain themes in the postal stamps that is also relevant, since it reveals what was not important for the Italian government or what it did not carry out in its colonisation stage and, therefore, cannot be shown. For example, the scarcity of stamps featuring public works or industrial economy reveals that, in the approximately 50 years of colonial rule (e.g. much less in the case of Ethiopia), investment in this aspect



FIGURE 14 Italian East Africa (1940). Statue of victory



FIGURE 15 Tripolitania (1931). Snake charmer

was not substantial. Something similar can be said about the absence of stamps on education, health, children or civic values, which suggests that these were not among the priorities of the Italian Government in the colonies, a fact that coincides with the aforementioned historical data regarding the limitation of the education of indigenous children

to a few years of schooling, or the interest in maintaining the separation between Italians and the local population, so this is something that cannot be presumed propagandistically. The almost complete lack of stamps with military themes or references to Islam (such as mosques) or Christianity can be explained by an attempt to avoid issues that would be thorny not only for the colonised populations but also for the Italian citizenry, stemming from that prevailing ideological message regarding the benevolence of the Italian colonising regime. The limited trajectory of the Italian colonisation project in both areas (especially in Ethiopia) explains why there are no mentions of explorers or illustrious characters linked to that process.

Noting the secondary thematic categories that are seen in the stamps of the Italian colonies, Table 3 presents only those that reached 5% throughout the whole of the colonies.

Note that 'transport' has an important weight (18.7% overall), especially in East Africa (32.1%), which is tripled in comparison with Libya (10.5%). The 'culture of the metropolis' is presented as a secondary thematic category in 14.4% of the stamps, although it is more evident in Libya (20.9%) than in East Africa, undoubtedly because, in the first case, archaeological ruins of Ancient Roman present in that territory are repeatedly shown. 'Villages and civil architecture' account for 12.9% of cases, although again being more prevalent in Libya (15.1%) than in East Africa (9.4%). The 'symbols of the State or the colony' are observed 9.4% of the time, with little difference between the colonial areas, while the categories of 'flora and fauna', 'landscapes' and 'allegories' have a minor presence of around 5%.

To provide a clearer picture of these results, Table 4 presents the five most widely used main and secondary thematic categories.

**TABLE 3** Secondary thematic categories appearing on the stamps (number and per cent within each colonial area)

Secondary thematic categories	Total of Italian Libya		Total of Italian East Africa		Total	
	N	Per cent within each colony	N	Per cent within each colony	N	Per cent in set of colonies
Transport	9	10.5	17	32.1	26	18.7
Culture of the metropolis	18	20.9	2	3.8	20	14.4
Villages and civil architecture	13	15.1	5	9.4	18	12.9
Symbols of the state/colony	9	10.5	4	7.5	13	9.4
Flora and fauna	6	7.0	2	3.8	8	5.8
Landscapes	4	4.7	4	7.5	8	5.8
Allegory	3	3.5	4	7.5	7	5.0

Source: Authors' own creation.

**TABLE 4** The five main and secondary thematic categories most present (per cent in the set of colonies)

Position according to presence	Main thematic category	Per cent in set of colonies	Secondary thematic category	Per cent in set of colonies
1	Flora and fauna	14.4	Transport	18.7
2	Transport	13.9	Culture of the metropolis	14.4
3	Indigenous types	11.8	Villages and civil architecture	12.9
4	Villages and civil architecture	11.2	Symbols of the state/colony	9.4
5	Symbols of the state/colony	8.0	Flora and fauna	5.8
			Landscapes	5.8

Source: Authors' own creation.

The 'transport' category appears as the most recurrent, in 32.6% of the stamps analysed, followed, in second place, by 'villages and civil architecture' (24.1%) and 'flora and fauna' in third (20.2%). The category 'symbols of the State or the colony' is fourth and contributes 17.4%, being in fifth place overall, if we look only at the ranking of the five most common thematic categories, while the category of 'culture of the metropolis' is at 14.4%, but only as a secondary thematic category.

Although not really a thematic category, it is necessary to refer to the gender representation, which has also been assessed in this study and is presented in Table 5.

We note that men, both indigenous and from the metropolis, are featured in more than twice as many stamps as women (77.6% vs. 22.4%, respectively), with this effect being more pronounced in Italian Libya (86.2% men vs. 13.8% women) than in East Africa (69% vs. 31%, respectively). If we look only at the category of indigenous people, we see that women appear eight times, as compared with men at 32 times (thus four times more). Of the eight female representations, at least two are clearly sexualised, appearing with a naked torso (see Figures 5 and 16), and to finish reflecting the global picture, not once do men and women appear together. We therefore observe a clearly masculine presentation, and even when it is feminine, it is constructed within the male gaze, undoubtedly the result of both the era and a conception of the indigenous peoples as primitive. In total, including those whose gender cannot be determined, indigenous people are represented 44 times, which constitutes 23.5% of the 187 stamps analysed.

## 4.2 | Attitudes of the metropolis towards the colonies

This variable (presented in Table 6) makes it possible to define, together with the main and secondary thematic categories, what the aim of the metropolis's propaganda is in issuing each of its postal stamps, since it presents a certain message after a joint analysis of the images and the text. The results of the table have been ordered on the basis of the attitudes most present in the seven colonial territories as a whole, grouped into two areas: Libya and East Africa.

TABLE 5 Gender distribution of the people appearing in the analysed stamps (number and %)

Colonial area	Italian Libya		Italian East Africa		Total	
	N	Per cent within each colony	N	Per cent within each colony	N	Per cent in set of colonies
Male	25	86.2	20	69.0	45	77.6
Female	4	13.8	9	31.0	13	22.4
Both	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	29	100	29	100	58	100

Source: Authors' own creation.



FIGURE 16 Tripolitania (1934). Water carriers



TABLE 6 Attitudes of the metropolis towards the colonies (number and per cent)

Attitude of the metropolis	Total of Italian Libya		Total of Italian East Africa		Total	
	N	Per cent within each colony	N	Per cent within each colony	N	Per cent in set of colonies
Let's live freely	38	34.5	19	24.7	57	30.5
Civilises	28	25.5	26	33.8	54	28.9
Dominates	21	19.1	23	29.9	44	23.5
Neutral or not identified	14	12.7	9	11.7	23	12.3
Coloniser and colonised coexist	9	8.2	0	0.0	9	4.8
Evangelises	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Oppresses	0	0.0	0	0.0	0	0.0
Total	110	100	77	100	187	100

Source: Authors' own creation.



FIGURE 17 Italian East Africa (1940). Tractors

The 'let's live freely' attitude (understood as the representation of people's life in the territory as if they were not colonised, people following its usual customs, without the presence of the effects of colonisation or symbols of the culture or the Government of the metropolis) is emphasised (30.5%; see Figure 16), which coincides with the objective of colonial propaganda from other countries. It aims to show the benevolence of Italian colonial rule, towards both the colonised populations and their own citizens as well as postal recipients (or collectors) of other countries. In the case of Libya, more than a third of its stamps (34.5%) go in this direction. In a similar vein, the second most common category is 'civilises' (28.9%), with a greater emphasis on Italian East Africa (33.8%). These are generally stamps showing the positive effects on the improvement of material conditions (see Figure 17) or infrastructure of the colonies.

In third place is the 'dominates' attitude (23.5%), more present proportionally in East Africa (29.9%; see Figures 11, 13, and 14) than in Libya (19.1%). This idea is expressed specifically through the use of symbolism of the Italian nation or its rulers (Mussolini or Victor Manuel III, as in Figure 8).

In fourth position, we find a relevant percentage (12.3%) of stamps that do not allow for the assessment of an attitude or are neutral (such as 'flora and fauna'), with similar results in both colonial areas. In addition, it is striking that only in Libya are there stamps (8.2%) where people from the Italian metropolis and the indigenous populations appear in coexistence (as in Figure 4), but none in East Africa. This shows the lack of interest in intercultural coexistence between the indigenous populations and the colonisers on the part of the Italian authorities, in accordance with the laws of segregation between the two groups, noted above.

Finally, no stamps have been found that reflect the 'evangelises' attitude, something that possibly has to do with the fact that the indigenous population was already predominantly Muslim in Libya and Somalia, and therefore very resistant to proselytism, as well as finding an already mostly Christian community in Abyssinia. Nor do stamps with the 'oppresses' attitude appear. Undoubtedly, this finding has to do with the role of the stamp as a transmitter of the positive values that the issuing country wanted to present to its different audiences (local and international), something that is also common with the stamps of the Spanish African colonies, for example (Prieto-Andrés, 2021), where the 'oppresses' attitude is neither found.

## 5 | CONCLUSIONS

The three research questions initially posed have been answered through this work. The main and secondary thematic categories most present are either neutral ('flora and fauna') or show the indigenous populations leading their lives in a seemingly autonomous way and without great interference from the Italian metropolis (indicated by the preference for themes such as agriculture, hunting or fishing), except when it comes to 'civilising' or 'improving' the life of the colonised through new transport routes with the opening of communication routes (especially by air).

This weight of the thematic category of 'transport' is remarkable. One might think that this relevance is justified by the presence of airplanes on every airmail stamp. However, if these data are compared with the same category in the analysis of another similar study about the African colonies of Spain (Prieto-Andrés, 2021), we see that the reasons may be different. Thus, in the Italian colonies, transport appears as main theme for 13.9% and 18.7% as secondary. In those of the Spanish colonies, on the contrary, this topic is only shown 2.8% of the times as main theme and 3.1% as secondary. This may be due to the interest of the Italian Government in showing the Italian air capacity and the technological achievement that the opening of new routes between the colonies and the metropolis meant at the time. Furthermore, this may be an example of imperial propaganda, as Italian technological advancement puts the emphasis on stamps made to circulate over great distances with destination to Italy and other countries.

Considering the weight of the presence of indigenous people on the stamps as an indicator of the importance given to people colonised by the metropolis in its symbology, we see that only 23.5% of the analysed stamps included indigenous. To determine if this is too much or too little, we can compare these data with the cited study about the stamps of Spanish colonies in Africa. From this comparison, it turns out that 35.8% of the latter include indigenous people. This goes in line with what was indicated by Mwangi (2002), who talked about designs (in his case of bank notes) that reflect the conquest of people, such as the French and the Belgian, as opposed to the British that show the conquest of territories. In this dichotomy, the Italian State seems to give less importance to the conquest of people than to the conquest of territories. This is an interesting idea, since it reaffirms the typical of fascism instrumentalisation of the person as a mere resource to achieve the objectives of the State.

All this emphasises exoticism regarding the external difference of the indigenous populations and their environment (with an abundance of stamps showing indigenous types, civil architecture, landscapes or folklore), which

emphasise in turn the role of Italy as owner of territories and (to a lesser extent, as we have seen) people who give relevance to their new empire, for their both internal and external audiences. To reinforce this idea of authority, 23.5% of stamps analysed show colonial rule, sometimes in a more or less subtle way, including representations of the metropolis's culture. This is seen, for example, in Figure 11, which is paradigmatic because of the inclusion of the Latin expression '*Imperium sine fine dedi*' ['I have entrusted them with an endless empire'] next to a statue of Octavian Augustus. This is what Jupiter prophesied about the Romans in *The Aeneid* (Virgilio Marón, 1986 [19 BC]: verse 279, book I), whose purpose was also propagandistic in favour of the emperor. This significance of dominance is more marked, if possible, with the presence of symbols of the Italian State or its leaders, or, already with some severity, through the use of allegories of victory or the struggle of the imperial eagle, both defeating the African lion (Figures 13 and 14). It should be noted that the precise design of the stamp shown in Figure 11, indicating in detail the elements and slogans that should be included, was established by the Italian Government (1938), by Royal Decree on March 10, based on the proposal of the Head of Government (Mussolini) who was the Prime Minister and Minister for Italian Africa in that year. This gives us an idea of the direct relationship between the messages inserted in some postage stamps and the main government leaders, as well as its propaganda importance. We cannot forget that Mussolini, before seizing power, was director of various periodicals and was perfectly aware of the power of mass communication. So, the specific design of the stamps of the colonies was decided by the Minister for the Colonies (titled Minister of Italian Africa from 1937 onwards).

In response to the third research question, some differences are observed between the colonial areas of Libya and East Africa. It seems that, in the latter area, greater weight is given to the attitude of domination and that no type of coexistence is shown between the coloniser and the colonised. This may be affected to some extent by the severity of the armed conflict that provoked the war of conquest of Ethiopia in 1936, together with the memory of the Italian defeat of 1896. Although all the data of the colonies were presented as aggregated in two areas, the only five stamps that correspond to Italian Ethiopia (which were only issued during 1936, before the East African colony was created together with Eritrea and Somalia) all show an attitude of domination. In Libya, in contrast, the indigenous populations are presented as freer to lead their lives, with less apparent interference from the Italian State, and emphasising the common aspects of the metropolis's culture by presenting archaeological ruins of the previous Roman rule, along with additional examples of civil architecture or native flora and fauna, which are neutral themes.

Regarding the academic comparison between Libya and the territories of East Africa, we have found that many works do not put them in relation, but treat them individually, except Zaccaria (2019), whose objective is precisely to study the interrelation between them, but only from a military and administrative perspective. This indicates that there is a large space for Italian post-colonial research in Africa to compare the decisions of the metropolis in each of the territories and their causes and consequences.

In short, this study of postal stamps issued by Italy for its African colonies during the first half of the 20th century has empirically drawn us towards the ideological messages that said State wanted to transmit to its internal audiences (the Italian population and the indigenous populations of the colonised territories) and external audiences (collectors and recipients of letters from these colonial areas). This approach has enabled us to connect the Italian concept of nation at that time, especially during Mussolini's fascism, which was based on the creation of a new empire in the Mediterranean, to an expansionist and aggressive approach that ended up clashing with the British Empire in Africa, with well-known consequences during World War II. Moreover, the results presented herein can support other researchers interested in this period to further examine postage stamps as sources in their post-colonial studies.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work was supported by the Department of Science, University and Society of Knowledge, from the Government of Aragon, Spain (Research Group S05\_20D), and by research grants from San Jorge University (Spain).

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**How to cite this article:** Prieto-Andrés, A., Corral García, A., & Fernández Romero, C. (2022). The propaganda of Italian colonial imperialism in Africa through postage stamps (1903–1941). *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12904>