



Colonial Propaganda In The Belgian Congo Through Postage Stamps (1894–1960): A Quantitative Content Analysis

Antonio Prieto-Andrés¹ , Cayetano Fernández-Romero² , María Luisa Sierra-Huedo³

Article History:

Received: 30-01-2025

Revision: 09-04-2025

Accepted: 12-04-2025

Publication: 01-06-2025

Cite this article as:

Prieto-Andrés, Fernández-Romero, Sierra-Huedo. (2025). Colonial Propaganda In The Belgian Congo Through Postage Stamps (1894–1960): A Quantitative Content Analysis. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 25(2),01-17. doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v25i2.1084

©2025 by author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License.

Corresponding Author:

Antonio Prieto-Andrés

Faculty of Communication and Social Sciences, San Jorge University, Zaragoza, Spain. Email: aprieto@usj.es

Abstract: Despite extensive scholarship on colonial propaganda, the use of postage stamps as tools of imperial messaging remains underexplored. This study aims to examine how Belgium employed postage stamps to construct and disseminate propagandistic narratives about its African colony, the Belgian Congo. Using quantitative content analysis, the research analyses a corpus of 149 stamps issued between 1894 and 1960, tracing how visual themes evolved across different phases of colonisation. The results indicate that Belgium adapted its messages throughout the different phases of colonisation, from the exoticism of the landscape and the primitivism of the native person, to highlighting the supposed civilising benefits. The native person appears on postage stamps as being preferably male, vulnerable and dependent, exotic in his semi-nudity, who must be cared for like a child, but at the same time useful to the metropolis as a labour force. Analysing the general vision that the Belgian metropolis wants to show of itself through postage stamps, two-thirds of the stamps show neutrality or that the native person lives in freedom, as if colonisation did not exist, thanks to the profusion of images of animals, plants and landscapes, or to showing the native people carrying out their ancestral activities. This study may be of interest in the fields of the history of Belgian colonialism, communication, political propaganda, and the representation of the other, whether ethnically or culturally different. To this end, it uses postage stamps issued for the Belgian Congo as historical documentary sources, implying a novel approach, not only in the type of source chosen, but also in the method used to extract data from them.

Keywords: Belgian Congo, Colonial Propaganda, Postage Stamps, Visual Representation, Indigenous Imagery, Colonialism, Imperialism, Colonial Discourse

1. Introduction

The approach to Belgian colonial history is typically constructed from two antagonistic perspectives. The first presents a narrative of civilisation and development of the Congo and its inhabitants by the Belgians, initially under the guidance of King Leopold II. From this viewpoint, during nearly 80 years of colonial presence (1885–1960), the Congo—previously plagued by a hostile natural environment, tribal wars, and slave traders—was transformed into a prosperous land equipped with modern infrastructure, roads and railways, hospitals, and schools. The relationship between coloniser and colonised is depicted as paternalistic. In contrast, the opposing perspective portrays Belgian colonialism as a systematic violation of the human rights of the native population, conducted for the benefit first of an unscrupulous king and later of the specific interests of government, business, and the Church (Licata & Klein, 2010).

In recent years, debate over Belgium’s colonial past has resurfaced, notably following Adam Hochschild’s critical account (Hochschild, 1999), which described the Leopoldian period as genocidal and sparked a national dialogue with both support and opposition. Hochschild’s work was not the only one to denounce the events of this period (Marchal & Delathuy, 1996; Vangroenweghe, 2010).

Historians have argued that the Belgians were “reluctant imperialists” in the Congo. Unlike other colonial powers, Belgium has yet to conduct a thorough and detached analysis of its colonial past. Nonetheless, there appears to be a growing consensus on the need for a new approach to this historical period, one grounded in historical evidence and distanced from Manichaeic interpretations (Ewans, 2003; Stanard, 2013). A significant milestone in this ongoing reflection was the Belgian Parliamentary Commission on the Colonial Past, established to scrutinise Belgium’s colonial history and its contemporary repercussions. A review of the historians’ work on this commission over two years produced several significant conclusions: (1) the political context significantly shapes the historiography of Belgian colonialism; (2) there is an inherent tension between public and academic expectations of “historical

¹ Faculty of Communication and Social Sciences, San Jorge University, Zaragoza, Spain

² Faculty of Communication and Social Sciences, San Jorge University, Zaragoza, Spain

³ Faculty of Communication and Social Sciences, San Jorge University, Zaragoza, Spain

truth”; and (3) colonial archives are fundamentally limited and biased (Mathys & Van Beurden, 2023).

Recent studies continue to explore new angles, shedding light on aspects of Belgian colonialism that have been insufficiently examined, such as violence (Henriet, Lauro, & Juste, 2023) or the role of cinema as both a tool of colonial legitimation and propaganda and a reflection of the tensions and perceptions of colonised societies (Ramos, 2020).

One increasingly significant historical source is the postage stamps issued by state administrations throughout different historical periods. These artefacts offer insights into the messages that authorities intended to convey to various audiences—domestic citizens, national and international collectors, and, in colonial contexts, the native populations who encountered them. Given their strong visual symbolism, stamps were accessible even to those who were not literate in the official languages of the metropole. In response to the need for continued critical analysis of Belgian colonialism and its enduring effects, our study offers a contribution grounded in the examination of a comprehensive set of historical and communicative sources—namely, the postage stamps issued by the Belgian government for the Congo.

Using a quantitative content analysis methodology based on variables that capture themes, representations, and messages, this study seeks to offer new insights into the types of narratives and concepts conveyed in each historical period of the Belgian Congo, as reflected on its postage stamps. In doing so, we aim to address an underexplored dimension of this historical era. Additionally, the study highlights the differences in representation between native and Belgian figures.

2. Literature Review

2.1. A Brief History Of The Belgian Congo

This section presents a brief history of the Belgian Congo, emphasising the different aspects of propaganda, and then explains the value of postage stamps as sources for the historical and communicative analysis of this propaganda.

2.1.1. The Congo Free State under Leopold II (1885–1908)

In July 1885, following the Berlin Conference, the territory that today corresponds to the Democratic Republic of the Congo came under the control of the Belgian sovereign Leopold II, who declared it the “État Indépendant du Congo” (EIC), commonly referred to as the “Congo Free State” (CFS). It was strictly the personal possession of King Leopold and not subject to the Belgian State. As such, it was not, strictly speaking, a colony but a state, with the peculiar circumstance that while Leopold was a constitutional monarch with limited powers in Belgium, he became an absolute sovereign in the Congo.

Leopoldian imperialism was strongly economically motivated. The profits he anticipated were not intended for the development of the CFS but were instead channelled into his personal accounts and those of the companies that supported him, primarily through the exploitation of ivory and, most notably, rubber for tyre production. Rubber tapping was an extremely arduous task (see [Figure 1](#)). The local population was forced to deliver baskets of rubber regularly, under a regime of terror (Van Reybrouck, 2019).



Figure 1: 1924. Native person rubber tapping⁴.

Moreover, Leopold had pledged to put an end to the Swahili–Arab slave trade from Zanzibar on the East African coast, in an attempt to improve the international image of his regime in the Congo. However, in practice, there was little distinction between the life of a Central African house slave in the Arabian Peninsula and that of a *boy* (servant) in the residence of a European official in the Congo. Between 1891 and 1894, the Congolese *Force Publique* launched the so-called Arab campaigns against the East African slavers (see [Figure 2](#)).

⁴ © bpost (Belgian Poste) for all the stamps presented in this work. The descriptions used to label the stamps are obtained from Kloetzel (2008).



Figure 2: 1947. Enslaved persons and Arab guards.

From 1900 onwards, clearer reports of atrocities began to emerge. Roger Casement, the British consul in Boma, produced a damning report in 1904. A year after its publication, King Leopold was forced to send an independent international commission of inquiry to the Congo (Van Reybrouck, 2019). Mounting international and domestic pressure eventually led to the transfer of the territory to the Belgian state in 1908, whereupon it was renamed the Belgian Congo.

2.1.2. The first stage of Belgian rule over the Congo: 1908–1945

Classical historiography often offers the following explanation: the atrocities of the Congo Free State persisted until 1908, but once Belgium assumed control of the administration, everything settled, and the history of Belgian colonisation of the CFS became an episode of peace and tranquillity (Van Reybrouck, 2019).

The Belgian regime did not engage meaningfully with the Congolese population but instead turned its focus to science, promoting what was termed “scientific colonisation” (*colonisation scientifique*) (Falcucci, 2021). This included the involvement of doctors interested in tropical medicine. Another important scientific group was that of ethnographers, who concentrated on the tangible aspects of local cultures—such as baskets and masks (see [Figure 3](#)), canoes and drums, the shape of spears, or the size of skulls (see [Figure 4](#)).



Figure 3: 1948. Ngadimuashi female mask. Congolese mask in the Museum of Tervuren (Belgium).



Figure 4: 1924. Ubangi man.

High-quality diamonds were soon discovered, along with veins of copper, gold, and uranium—particularly in the Katanga region—which replaced the greatly diminished income from rubber (Van Reybrouck, 2019). In the agricultural sector, palm oil—used in soap production—was the most labour-intensive crop and was cultivated through forced recruitment. Thousands of Congolese were made to climb palm tree trunks using traditional methods to cut the fruit bunches (see [Figure 5](#)). During the interwar period, the system of forced cultivation introduced during World War I became widespread.



Figure 5: 1896. Native person climbing oil palms.



Figure 6: 1930. Dispensary service.

Missionary control extended over the spiritual lives of the Congolese people. The number of missionaries, who held a monopoly on education, tripled between 1908 and 1920, rising from 500 to 1,500. They also established schools and hospitals (see [Figure 6](#)) in remote areas.

The Congo underwent rapid industrialisation, marked by the expansion of railway lines (see [Figure 7](#)) between 1922 and 1931. However, the stock market crash of 1929 caused a global economic slowdown, decreasing demand for raw materials. As a result, Congolese mining—the cornerstone of the colonial economy—came to a halt. To offset this decline, the Belgian authorities approved an increase in income tax, which had an additional advantage: it heightened the need for cash.



Figure 7: 1948. 50th anniversary of railway service in the Congo.



Figure 8: 1920. Wharf on the Congo River.

Consequently, Congolese people were left with no option but to seek wage labour (see [Figure 8](#)), a situation the authorities believed would not only generate more state revenue but also produce a “civilizing” effect and increase control over a population that was beginning to show signs of resistance. Within four years, tax revenues increased sixfold (Van Reybrouck, 2019).

The interests of Belgian companies, the colonial administration, and the missionaries were aligned: industry wanted obedient and loyal workers, the regime sought to prevent further revolts, and the Church aimed to deliver pure souls to the afterlife—requiring the cultivation of disciplined citizens in the present (Van Reybrouck, 2019).

From the coloniser’s perspective, Africans were still seen as children in terms of civilisation. They could not be left to develop independently; their progress had to be closely supervised. “Dominer pour servir” [Dominate to serve]—serve whom, one might ask?—was the motto of then-Governor General Pierre Ryckmans (1934–1946). Formally, there was no slavery, but a servility prevailed that bore a strong resemblance to it. The colonial regime was benevolent, but only insofar as everyone remained in their assigned place. The masses were directed under the watchful, smiling gaze of the colonial trinity, but those who stepped out of line were punished without mercy (Van Reybrouck, 2019).

2.1.3. The final period of the Belgian Congo (1946–1960)

After the war, there was a shift in the mentality of Belgian colonisation, which became more focused on the development of the territory. The colonisers continued to refer to the Congo as “the tenth province of Belgium” in an effort to replace past condescension with a more egalitarian approach. Another attempt at rapprochement was the concept of a “Belgian-Congolese community.” From 1949, an ambitious ten-year plan aimed to provide the Congo with modern infrastructure across all sectors, and the European population in the territory increased.

For the Congolese population, however, there was very little change. The essential reforms that were meant to grant greater rights—particularly in terms of participation and legal and social status—failed to materialise. In practice, there was no evidence of a genuine alliance between Whites and Blacks. The colonial trinity—business, colonial administration, and the Church—continued to rely heavily on the slow and gradual education of the masses.

A new social caste emerged: the so-called *évolués* (always men), a term they themselves had adopted. They aspired to live in the European manner, admired all things Belgian, and praised the perceived benefits of colonisation. While men received education and engaged in professional work, women remained uneducated and excluded from paid employment.

In 1955, King Baudouin made a significant visit to the Belgian Congo. At that time, Belgian colonialism operated on the principle of “gradualism.” The Congo was expected to transition from its so-called primitive origins to modernity in incremental steps. By then, it was one of the most urbanised, proletarianised, and educated colonies in Africa.

However, 1958 proved to be a turning point, coinciding with the Brussels Universal Exposition. Hundreds of Congolese were invited to stay in Belgium for several months. During the exposition, many *évolués* were approached by Belgian politicians and trade union leaders from across the political spectrum. The event helped to raise political consciousness. In early 1959, serious riots broke out, during which the police and army killed many Congolese. Eventually, it was agreed that the Belgian Congo would gain independence on 30 June 1960.

One aspect that distinguishes Belgian colonialism is that very few Belgians relocated to the Congo (especially in the early decades), and very few Congolese had access to education in the metropole. Leopold II deliberately segregated both groups—keeping the colony isolated from external influences and shielding Belgians from what were considered the “dangerous” Congolese. This policy continued even after the transfer of colonial administration to the Belgian state.

2.2. Belgian Imperial Propaganda Related To The Congo

Propaganda is defined as “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'Donnell, 2011, p. 7). It is associated with control and social persuasion, involving a deliberate attempt to alter or maintain a balance of power advantageous to the propagandist (Pizarroso, 1999).

In the final years of the CFS, King Leopold II attempted to defend himself against international accusations by engaging in counterpropaganda (Ewans, 2003). The aim was to spread disinformation to discredit reports of atrocities in the Congo, thereby confusing—if not convincing—government officials, reformers, and the British and American public, and delaying intervention by their governments (Clay, 2021).

After World War II, propaganda became a key element of Belgian colonial administration. Its objective was to justify and sustain a long-term Belgian presence in the Congo. The narrative shifted from imperialism to “responsible colonialism,” enabling colonial powers—particularly Belgium—to promote the idea that they were preparing their subjects for eventual self-government (Wigley, 2015). Belgian pro-imperial propaganda highlighted the benefits of European technology, urbanisation, industrial development, and social welfare, contrasting these with the perceived primitivism of the Congo. It also emphasised the more picturesque elements of indigenous people (see [Figure 9](#)) and the natural landscape. In this respect, Belgian imperialism shared common features with British, French, and Italian imperialism, including similar visual and rhetorical tropes (Stanard, 2013; Verhoeven & Payrhuber, 2019).

During the 1950s, tourism from the metropole to the colony was actively promoted (see [Figure 10](#)), presenting the Congo as an orderly, accessible, and well-organised territory with high-quality roads and hotels. Promotional materials often showcased the region’s biological diversity (see [Figure 11](#)) and scenic beauty, while rarely depicting urban areas. As we will see, this preference for idealised and selective imagery was also reflected in the themes chosen for the Congo’s postage stamps.

Several studies have examined the role of images in constructing the “Other” and in visualising the colonised in relation to the Belgian Congo. These analyses highlight how visual materials aligned with colonial political interests and reinforced the deterministic goals of colonial discourse—namely, the creation of hierarchical, differentiated landscapes and ethnic representations between colonisers and the colonised (Cornet et al., 2012; Vints, 1984). Postage stamps serve as a compelling example of this phenomenon, as will be demonstrated in this paper.



Figure 9: 1942. Congolese woman.



Figure 10: 1955. V International Congress on African Tourism.



Figure 11: 1959. White rhinoceros.

2.3. Postage Stamps As Instruments Of Government Propaganda

Postage stamps are part of the culture and visual history of a state (Brunn, 2022), and as state-issued products, “they reflect and represent what a government wants others to know and ‘see’ about its territory, its people, its histories, its accomplishments, and its identity” (Brunn, 2022, p. 3). Their analysis allows us to uncover the messages promoted by the state, which selects their themes, designs, and communicative approaches for various internal and external audiences (Jeffery, 2006; Reid, 1984).

The postage stamp is a means of communication that, alongside traditional mass media (radio, television, and press), contributes to the dissemination of an “imagined community” (Anderson, 2006) and serves as a vehicle of state propaganda. Stamps have been described as “windows of the state” (Brunn, 2000), “portraits of the nation” (Schwarzenbach, 1999), and “paper ambassadors” (Altman, 1991). They function as instruments for national construction and the shaping of collective public memory. By making elements of the nation (as defined by the state) visible on everyday objects, stamps help reinforce a shared identity and prevent citizens from forgetting who they are—or who they are expected to be—and where they belong (Raento, 2006).

These official documents are produced by the state through designated agencies or committees that determine the content and design of each issue. They are miniature works of art and tools of government propaganda, used to define racial, religious, or linguistic identities and to convey messages or encourage specific behaviours (Altman, 1991). Far from being neutral or trivial cultural artefacts, stamps carry powerful images of the dominant state ideology (Cusack, 2005). Over time, they acquire characteristics similar to those of advertising and propaganda posters (Stoetzer, 1953), functioning as instruments of “visual nationalism” (Brunn, 2022). Nikolaus Pevsner even described them as “a piece of national advertising more widely circulated than any other” (Jeffery, 2006, p. 46; Pevsner, 1940).

In the context of colonial occupation, stamps issued by metropolises specifically for their colonies played a significant propagandistic role. The imagery on colonial stamps served more to assert colonial appropriation than to provide anthropological insight—often reducing indigenous life to arbitrary and symbolic representations. Themes were limited, typically focusing on indigenous figures, hunting and agriculture, local flora and fauna, rituals, or masks (Scott, 2003), along with depictions of public works, urban and architectural scenes, economic resources, landscapes, and archaeological sites (Adedze, 2004).

The propagandistic function of colonial stamps—with their abundance of ethnographic imagery—was to attract settlers, promote cultural and scientific prestige, and appeal to European collectors, especially the youth (Scott, 2003). Another key objective was to reinforce the colonial power and foster nationalism (Adedze, 2004; Altman, 1991; Cusack, 2005).

In light of the elements presented in this theoretical framework, it is evident that Belgian imperialism warrants further study using new approaches and underexplored historical sources such as postage stamps. This research seeks to identify the particularities and recurring patterns in colonial representation, especially regarding differences in the portrayal of native and metropolitan populations. Moreover, by comparing the Belgian case with other colonial powers in Africa—such as Spain and Italy—this study offers a novel and valuable perspective, grounded in related scholarly work.

3. Research Questions

This study, which analyses Belgian colonial propaganda through the information conveyed by postage stamps issued in its African colony, aims to contribute to understanding the official vision of colonial authorities toward the colonised, as well as the image they intended to project to their own citizens and the international community. Based on this objective, we propose the following research questions (RQ):

- **RQ1:** What are the primary and secondary themes depicted on the stamps of the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo, and how can these be interpreted to reveal propagandistic messages?
- **RQ2:** How is the native person represented? What activities are they shown performing, and what image of the native individual do these depictions convey?
- **RQ3:** What attitudes of the metropolis toward the colonised population are reflected in the stamps, and what perspective on Belgian imperialism do these portrayals offer in comparison with other minor colonial powers in Africa, such as Italy and Spain?

4. Methodology

Based on the objective of this study, we aim to highlight postage stamps as historical sources that are relevant from both political and communicative perspectives. The goal is to interpret the intentions of the Belgian metropole regarding the portrayal of its colonial policy in the Congo, as well as its perception of the Congolese people—particularly as revealed through differences in the representation of natives and Belgians.

4.1. Research Design

To answer the research questions posed above, quantitative content analysis was selected as the research methodology for examining the chosen postage stamps. This method relies on statistical tools to obtain descriptive data for a set of variables. It enables the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of communicative products (Berelson, 1952), and offers a means of understanding the symbolic characteristics of texts or images within broader cultural contexts (Krippendorff, 2018). This approach can also be effectively applied to image analysis (Lutz & Collins, 1993).

The design of the postage stamp analysis was informed initially by studies focused on the visual aspects of stamps (Mirzoeff, 1998), and was later expanded through research on the political messaging embedded in postage stamps. These combined insights guided the definition of the variables used for analysing the stamp corpus (Brunn, 2000; Child, 2005; Cravioto, 2011; Raento & Brunn, 2005).

4.2. Data Collection Methods

The sources for this study consist of postage stamps issued by Belgium for the Congo Free State and the Belgian Congo. The final corpus includes 149 stamps issued between 1894 and 1960. This time frame corresponds to the type of stamps selected: only commemorative stamps have been analysed, while definitive or basic stamps—those featuring only the effigy of the Head of State or the national coat of arms—have been excluded due to their lack of interpretive value for the purposes of this study.

The 149 stamps are grouped into three chronological periods:

1. **1894–1908:** the period of the “Congo Free State” (10 stamps);
2. **1909–1945:** the period from the transfer of administration to the Belgian government until the end of World War II (68 stamps);
3. **1946–1960:** the post-war period leading up to independence (71 stamps).

The decision to separate the latter two periods is based on the desire to examine whether significant shifts occurred in the messages disseminated by the Belgian government through its colonial stamps—both in comparison to the period under King Leopold II and in light of the new ideological currents that emerged after World War II. These post-war ideologies increasingly emphasised human dignity and rights, shifting the global discourse away from colonial survival and management. This was particularly relevant following the establishment of the United Nations, which exerted significant pressure on Belgium as a colonial power.

Stamps that were duplicated across different time periods due to overprinting—where text or design elements were added to existing stamps, usually to update their postal value—were also excluded from the analysis.

4.3. Data Analysis Process

From the source material, a set of variables was coded from the 149 postage stamps analysed. This section presents the results related to the main and secondary themes depicted in those stamps. The subject matter defines the essential content of each message and has enabled the establishment of thematic categories that can be associated with the ideological preferences of the issuing authority.

Each stamp includes a main theme, while only 78 also feature a secondary theme. In these cases, the primary thematic category does not fully encompass all the content expressed in the stamp. For instance, a stamp depicting a flower or animal would be classified under the main theme “flora and fauna.” However, a stamp showing an indigenous person in the foreground playing a musical instrument would be assigned the main theme “Indigenous culture and folklore,” with “Indigenous types” as a secondary theme. The presence of native or European individuals—differentiated by gender—as well as the activities they are engaged in and the manner in which they are portrayed, was also carefully observed.

Additionally, a third analytical category examined was the “attitude of the metropolis,” derived from an overall analysis of each postage stamp issued for the colony. Stamps were coded into one of the following categories: “neutral or not identified,” “let them live freely,” “dominates,” “civilises,” “evangelises,” “coloniser and colonised coexist,” or “oppresses.” These variables were developed based on a synthesis of literature on the iconographic representation of native populations in colonial contexts, selectively cited in the “Research Design” section due to space constraints. This analysis considered not only what is depicted on the stamps but also what is omitted—since both inclusions and exclusions determine what is considered significant (Dietz & Kabamba, 2022). This approach has allowed for the identification of the issuer’s intent over the entire period studied, while also revealing the particularities of the colony and the overarching vision projected. A comparative analysis using the same variables was conducted with similar studies on colonial stamps from Spanish and Italian African territories.

4.4. Validity And Reliability In Content Analysis

Verifying the plausibility of the interpretation and the trustworthiness of the findings, the researchers engaged in discussions about the study’s results, methodology, and its strengths and limitations. They included direct quotes and supporting evidence to substantiate their interpretations and conclusions. According to Krippendorff (2004), Oleinik et al. (2014), and Aslam et al. (2023), these practices help readers assess the validity and reliability of a study’s findings. Nevertheless, the ultimate responsibility for evaluating the reliability of qualitative results rests with the reader (Matthes & Kohring, 2008).

In instances where data were sourced primarily from documented materials, the research ensured that identifiable data were systematically collected from each sample during the preparation phase. The researcher also remained committed to truthful and transparent data analysis (Alyaqoub et al., 2024).

5. Results

This section presents the most prevalent main and secondary thematic categories across each colonial period, the representation of native individuals, and the attitudes of the metropolis as reflected in the analysed postage stamps—as a form of state propaganda.

5.1. Thematic Categories Present In The Stamps Of The Belgian Colony

An analysis of the themes most frequently employed by the Belgian colonial administration reveals that, across the entire period from 1894 to 1960, *flora and fauna* is the most common main theme (31.5%), followed by *indigenous types* (12.1%) and *landscapes* (9.4%). *Landscapes* also appear prominently as a secondary theme, accounting for 7.7% of the total. **Table 1** displays the eight most frequent main and secondary themes found in the postage stamps. *Indigenous culture and folklore* are also noteworthy, appearing as a main theme in 7.4% of cases and as a secondary theme in 6.4%. Among secondary themes, the most prominent are *commerce and crafts* and *anniversaries and events* (each at 14.1%), followed by *transport* (10.3%) and *children* (9%).

Table 1: Main and secondary topics most present by period (N and %)

		1894–1908		1909–1945		1946–1960		Total	
		N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Main theme	Flora and fauna	1	10	11	16.2	35	49.3	47	31.5
	Indigenous types	1	10	17	25	0	0	18	12.1
	Landscapes	3	30	10	14.7	1	1.4	14	9.4
	Indigenous culture and folklore	1	10	3	4.4	7	9.9	11	7.4
	Distinguished persons	0	0	4	5.9	7	9.9	11	7.4
	Health	0	0	7	10.3	3	4.2	10	6.7
	Villages and civil architecture	1	10	5	7.4	0	0	6	4
	State/colony symbols	0	0	1	1.5	5	7	6	4
Secondary theme	Trade and crafts	0	0	4	11.1	7	19.4	11	14.1
	Selected anniversaries/events	0	0	3	8.3	8	22.2	11	14.1
	Transportation	2	33.3	6	16.7	0	0	8	10.3
	Childhood	0	0	7	19.4	0	0	7	9
	Landscapes	1	16.7	1	2.8	4	11.1	6	7.7
	Agricultural economy, hunting and fishing	1	16.7	5	13.9	0	0	6	7.7
	Indigenous culture and folklore	1	16.7	3	8.3	1	2.8	5	6.4
	Education	0	0	0	0	5	13.9	5	6.4

Source: Author creation.

Flora and fauna, together with landscapes, appear to reflect the metropole’s intent to showcase the natural diversity of the Congolese colony. This is a recurring motif in colonial stamps, as noted in the literature review. Similarly recurrent is the notable presence of the category *indigenous types* (Figure 12), which, alongside *native culture and folklore* (Figure 13) and *villages and civil architecture* (Figure 14), highlights the aesthetic and cultural specificities of native populations within their environments. These representations are framed within a discourse of primitivism and exoticism, as perceived through the colonial gaze of the Belgian issuer.

By contrast, the imprint of the Belgian metropole on the native population and the colony's infrastructure appears to have a significantly smaller presence in the stamps analysed. This influence is generally observable in themes related to health, education, childhood, and transport, all linked to the Belgian "civilising mission," or in economic themes such as trade and rural development, where native people are typically portrayed as protagonists operating within their traditional settings.



Figure 12: 1931. Mangbetu chief.



Figure 13: 1931. Musicians from Lake Leopold II, now called Lake Mai-Ndombe.



Figure 14: 1932. Uele hut.

During the *Congo Free State* period—one of the three chronological stages in this analysis—*landscapes* dominate as the main theme (30%) (Figure 15), while *transportation* emerges as the most frequent secondary theme (33.3%). In the subsequent period, which features the highest representation of native individuals, the Belgian metropole increasingly emphasised *indigenous types* (25%) (Figure 16). This aligns with the colonialist scientism that characterised this phase, which sought to classify native populations ethnographically, albeit often through artificial and reductive categories.

Moreover, the prominent appearance of *flora and fauna* (16.2%) and *landscapes* (14.7%) as main themes, in combination with *indigenous types*, reinforces the performative dimension of Belgian imperialism. These choices serve to display, to both domestic and international audiences, the wide array of living beings—both human and non-human—as well as the geographical richness of the territory under Belgian control. Additionally, themes such as *health* (10.3%) as a main subject and *children* (19.4%), *transport* (16.7%), and *agriculture, hunting, and fishing* (13.9%) as secondary themes contribute to promoting the supposed civilising benefits brought by the colonial regime—albeit with relatively less emphasis compared to cultural and environmental motifs.



Figure 15: 1894. Inkissi Falls.



Figure 16: 1931. Woman preparing cassava.

In the final period after 1945, *flora and fauna* gained near-majority prominence (49.3%) among main themes, followed by *native culture* and *distinguished persons* (each at 9.9%). Meanwhile, *selected anniversaries* (22.2%, Figure 17), *trade and crafts* (19.4%), and *education* (13.9%, Figure 18) are the most frequent secondary themes. The overwhelming focus on flora and fauna in this period suggests a strategic move toward more neutral and non-confrontational representations. At the same time, it reflects a deliberate emphasis on the exotic, non-human elements of the colony, which were considered culturally safe yet visually compelling for Belgian audiences.

This thematic shift coincides with the broader global context of mounting pressure for decolonisation in Africa. Therefore, while overtly political or hierarchical imagery was increasingly avoided, connections between the colony and the metropole were still maintained—particularly through representations of distinguished individuals (all European) and commemorations of Belgian historical events.

The following section explores the representation of native individuals—an aspect that is essential for understanding the colonial construction of the "Other," as reflected in the visual narratives disseminated through the Belgian Congo's postage stamps.



Figure 17: 1960. Olympics. Javelin thrower.



Figure 18: 1930. Native Congolese students.

5.2. The Representation of The Congolese Native

Only 72 stamps depict a native person, representing slightly less than half of the 149 stamps that comprise the corpus. Among these, 65.3% feature only men, 20.8% only women, and 13.9% show individuals of both sexes.

A closer examination reveals that 55 of these stamps portray anonymous individuals—those not distinguished by identifiable names or surnames. Within this group, the representation of the native Congolese man overwhelmingly predominates (54.5%, [Figure 19](#)), followed by depictions of native Congolese women (20%, [Figure 20](#)), and mixed groups of Congolese and Belgians (16.4%). Other combinations are marginal. Notably, there are no portrayals of elderly individuals, Belgian children, or diverse Belgian groups differentiated by both gender and age.

Table 2: Distribution by gender and age group of anonymous persons appearing on the analysed stamps (N and %).

Group	N	%
Native Congolese man	30	54.5
Native Congolese woman	11	20
Mixed groups (native people and Belgians)	9	16.4
Belgian man	2	3.6
Native Congolese child	1	1.8
Diverse group (native people)	1	1.8
Belgian woman	1	1.8
Total	55	100

Source: Author creation



Figure 19: 1924. Native Congolese man making palm oil.



Figure 20: 1923. Native Congolese woman making pottery.

The type of activity in which the native person is engaged was also coded—52 stamps in total, after excluding three stamps that independently depict Belgian citizens. The results (see [Table 3](#)) show that native individuals most frequently appear either working or observing (36.5% each). The third most common posture involves rest, play, or leisure (23.1%). Only one stamp shows a native individual in a learning context ([Figure 18](#)), and none depict them in religious or ritual acts, whether Christian or traditional.

The portrayal of native individuals at work is intended to underscore their utility and contribution to the metropole. However, when they are shown in a more passive or contemplative state, it is important to remember that stamp imagery often functions like a still photograph, posing its subjects in static, staged positions. This

tendency is especially evident in depictions of Belgians, who are shown in passive postures 66.7% of the time (Figure 21), and only portrayed working in 26.7% of cases.

Table 3: Type of activity of native people (N and %)

Activity	N	%
Working	19	36.5
Observing	19	36.5
Resting, playing, dancing or playing an instrument	12	23.1
Learning	1	1.9
Neutral or not identified	1	1.9
Praying or in ritual activity	0	0
Total	52	100

Source: Author creation.



Figure 21: 1936. Queen Astrid with Congolese children.

Furthermore, in only 23.1% of the stamps does the native individual make direct eye contact with the viewer; in contrast, 75% look away. This reinforces their depiction as depersonalised figures or scenic elements, lacking agency or the ability to establish a visual connection with the observer.

The attire of native individuals was also analysed. Results indicate that 59.6% appear naked or barely clothed, 21.2% wear traditional native clothing, and only 19.2% are dressed in Western-style attire.

Thus, the in-depth analysis reveals that the typical portrayal of a native person on colonial stamps is that of a solitary male, either working or observing his surroundings, generally avoiding eye contact with the viewer. He is typically framed within a narrative of primitivism, as suggested by his naked or semi-naked state.

5.3. Attitudes Of The Metropolis Towards Its Colony

This variable (presented in Table 4) allows for the definition of, together with the main and secondary themes, the propagandistic intention of the metropolis when issuing each of its postage stamps, since it reveals a certain message after a joint analysis of the images and text. The results of the table have been ordered according to the attitudes most present throughout the period.

Table 4: Attitudes of the metropolis towards the colony by period (number and %)

Attitude of the metropolis	1894–1908		1909–1945		1946–1960		Total	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Neutral or not identified	3	30	19	27.9	36	50.7	58	38.9
Let's live freely	5	50	28	41.2	8	11.3	41	27.5
Civilises	2	20	12	17.6	14	19.7	28	18.8
Dominates	0	0	8	11.8	11	15.5	19	12.8
Evangelises	0	0	0	0	2	2.8	2	1.3
Coloniser and colonised coexist	0	0	1	1.5	0	0	1	0.7
Oppresses	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	10	100	68	100	71	100	149	100

Source: Author creation.

Regarding the perceived “attitude of the metropolis,” the most frequent is a *neutral or unidentifiable* stance (38.9%), often connected to ideologically light themes such as flora and fauna. This is a common characteristic in the design of colonial stamps, as will be discussed in the comparison with the Spanish and Italian cases. The second most frequent attitude is *let the colonised live freely* (27.5%), as it presents natives in their natural environments, seemingly untouched by colonial influence. Here, the stamp acts as a visual window into an idealised version of

native life, of colonial control over the lives of the colonised—is also notably present. Finally, the attitude of dominance (12.8%, [Figure 22](#)), which reflects the prevalence of the metropolis over the lives of the colonised people, is also not negligible.



Figure 22: 1958. Belgium's annexation of Congo, 50th anniversary (1908–1958). Kings of Belgium.



Figure 23: 1959. Madonna and child.



Figure 24: 1930. Missionary and child.

It is remarkable that the attitude of evangelisation (1.3%, two stamps, [Figure 23](#)) has so little weight for the Belgian government issuing the stamps, since Christian missionaries had a very relevant presence and role throughout the entire period of the colonisation of the territory and its people

Equally notable is that only one stamp suggests any form of coexistence between coloniser and colonised, defined as shared experiences or equal interaction ([Figure 24](#)). Moreover, those stamps that depict the coloniser caring for native individuals have been categorised under the civilises label rather than coexistence.

Finally, it is worth noting that no stamp explicitly portrays the oppression of native people by the colonial authorities. This absence is consistent with colonial philately more broadly, as stamps are designed to present the most favourable image of the issuing authority—in this case, Belgium. The goal is to maintain a positive representation for all audiences, including Belgian citizens, the colonised population, and international recipients or collectors of these stamps.

When examining the differences across periods, in the initial phase of the Congo Free State, the dominant attitude reflected in the stamps is that of allowing the native population to *live freely* (50%), without interference from the colonisers. This is further reinforced by *neutral* portrayals (30%). In this early stage, there are minimal indications of the so-called *civilising* benefits of Belgian colonisation (20%).

In the subsequent period (1909–1945), which aimed to distance itself from the brutal practices of the earlier phase, the theme of *freedom* continued to be emphasised (41.2%), accompanied by a significant number of *neutral* messages (27.9%). At the same time, the discourse surrounding the *civilising* mission of the metropole persisted (17.6%). The concept of *possession* began to emerge (11.8%), though it was scarcely counterbalanced by a single stamp depicting *coexistence* between coloniser and colonised—an unsurprising rarity, given the consistent colonial policy of segregation throughout the existence of the Belgian Congo.

Following World War II, the stamps of the Belgian Congo increasingly featured *neutral* imagery (50.7%), followed by depictions highlighting the purportedly beneficial effects of colonisation (19.3%). However, there is also a noticeable rise in representations of *possession* and *dominance* (15.5%), aligning with Belgium's determination to maintain control over its Congolese colony until its reluctant and abrupt decolonisation. Conversely, representations of native people *living freely* (11.3%) diminished, reflecting a changing social context, particularly the growing significance of urban migration. By the mid-twentieth century, it was no longer feasible to portray an idealised image of the native person in a bucolic, untouched environment. It is in this final phase that the only two references to *evangelisation* appear (2.8%), albeit very belatedly.

To further interpret these findings, the attitude of the metropole was cross-referenced with the main themes represented on the stamps ([Table 5](#)). For clarity, the intersections involving *oppression* (absent from all stamps) and *coexistence* (represented by only one stamp) have been excluded from the table.

When the metropole's attitude is classified as *neutral or not identified*, it is primarily because the stamp's main theme is *flora and fauna* (81%) or *landscapes* (17.2%). When depicting the native person as *living freely*, the stamps most frequently focus on *indigenous types* (43.9%) or on *native culture and folklore* (17.2%). The theme of *possession* typically arises in stamps featuring distinguished persons (usually the Belgian Head of State) or symbols of the state or colony, emphasising the colony's dependence on and subordination to the metropole. The civilising attitude, meanwhile, is most closely associated with stamps featuring health (35.7%) and distinguished persons (10.7%) as the main theme, subjects linked to supposed improvements in the lives of the

colonised. Finally, the attitude of evangelisation appears only when distinguished religious figures are the primary subject.

Table 5: Attitude of the metropolis towards the colony according to the main themes most present on the postage stamps (%).

Attitude of the metropolis		Evangelises (%)	Civilises (%)	Dominates (%)	Let them live freely (%)	Neutral or not identified (%)	Total (N/%)
Main theme	Flora and fauna	0	0	0	0	81	47 31.5%
	Indigenous types	0	0	0	43.9	0	18 12.1%
	Landscapes	0	0	0	9.8	17.2	14 9.4%
	Indigenous culture and folklore	0	0	0	26.8	0	11 7.4%
	Distinguished persons	50	10.7	31.6	0	1.7	11 7.4%
	Health	0	35.7	0	0	0	10 6.7%
	Villages and civil architecture	0	7.1	0	9.8	0	6 4%
	State/colony symbols	0	0	31.6	0	0	6 4%

Source: Author creation.

To determine the distinctive characteristics of Belgian attitudes toward its African colony, a comparison has been made with other philatelic studies that used the same methodology to analyse postage stamps from other African colonial contexts—specifically those of Spain (Prieto-Andrés, 2021) and Italy (Prieto-Andrés et al., 2022), which, like Belgium, were considered minor colonial powers (Table 6).

Table 6: Comparison of the attitudes of the Belgian, Spanish, and Italian metropolises towards their African colonies (N and %)

Attitude of the metropolis	Belgian Congo (1894–1960)		Spanish colonies (1924–1975)		Italian colonies (1903–1941)	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Neutral or not identified	58	38.9	254	38.1	23	12.3
Let them live freely	41	27.5	218	32.7	57	30.5
Civilises	28	18.8	78	11.7	54	28.9
Dominates	19	12.8	87	13.0	44	23.5
Evangelises	2	1.3	22	3.3	0	0
Coloniser and colonised coexist	1	0.7	8	1.2	9	4.8
Oppresses	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	149	100	667	100	187	100

Source: Author creation.

In this regard, the Belgian case resembles that of Spain, governed by the Franco dictatorship from 1936 onwards and throughout much of the analysed period (1924–1975)—in its propagandistic representation through stamps. Both emphasise *neutrality* (38.9% in the Belgian case vs. 38.1% in the Spanish case) and *letting the colonised live freely* (27.5% vs. 32.7%, respectively). In contrast, the *civilising* mission, which represents the third most frequent attitude in Belgian stamps (18.8%), is considerably less prominent in Spanish colonial philately (11.7%). This suggests that Belgium placed greater emphasis on promoting its civilising efforts. The attitude of *possession* appears with similar frequency in both countries (12.8% in Belgium and 13% in Spain).

When comparing the Belgian case with that of Italy—specifically during the period 1903–1941, which was heavily influenced by Mussolini’s Fascist regime from 1922 onwards—the Italian colonial stamps most frequently reflect an attitude of *letting the colonised live freely* (30.5%), followed closely by the *civilising* narrative (28.9%). However, the theme of *possession* is also strongly present (23.5%), while *neutrality* appears less often (12.3%).

Thus, although this comparison involves the propagandistic messaging of a democratic regime (Belgium) and two authoritarian ones (Spain and Italy), it is nonetheless revealing—if not entirely surprising—that in terms of colonial representation, the differences lie mainly in the thematic emphasis. Specifically, the Belgian and Italian cases give greater prominence to the civilising role of the metropole, while the Italian stamps portray colonial domination more explicitly. Conversely, the Spanish and Belgian cases display more restrained narratives of possession and domination.

6. Discussion

At the outset of this study, the first research question (RQ1) asked what the most recurrent themes were in the set of postage stamps issued by Belgium for its African colony, and what propagandistic messages these themes conveyed. As the results demonstrate, the dominant themes were designed primarily to show Belgian citizens—who were the primary recipients of postal services—the exoticism and diversity of the colonised population, particularly through depictions of *indigenous types*, as well as the richness of the landscape and the flora and fauna

of the Congo. This visual narrative aligns with similar patterns observed in the colonial stamps of other minor European powers, such as Italy and Spain, where such themes were also prevalent.

The stamps reflect the evolving perceptions of colonisation over time. From 1946 onward, there was a discernible shift toward emphasising more neutral themes (e.g., flora and fauna) or those that highlighted the supposed civilising effects of the Belgian presence in the Congo. However, in addition to what is depicted, attention must also be paid to what is conspicuously absent. For instance, although extractive activities such as mining and the exploitation of raw materials were central to Belgian colonial interests, they are scarcely represented. While a few stamps illustrate the collection of palm oil or rubber, representations of mining or industrial labour are notably rare. The deliberate omission of such imagery suggests an attempt to present a sanitized and uncontroversial image of colonial life—one that would neither offend Belgian citizens, nor alienate the colonised population (who, despite widespread illiteracy, could still interpret visual messages), nor provoke criticism from the international community.

Regarding the second research question (RQ2), which concerns the representation of native Congolese people, they appear on only one-third of the postage stamps. When they do, the portrayal is often highly stereotyped: approximately half of these depictions show male figures, minimally clothed, engaged in work or passive observation. Nudity plays a central role in reinforcing the image of the non-Westerner, often under the pretext of scientific realism. Notably, this portrayal remains remarkably consistent throughout the 70-year period analysed, indicating a persistent view of the Congolese as primitive and unchanging—figures more connected to nature than to culture (Lutz & Collins, 1993).

Although the native person is shown working, they are also depicted as having time to rest or enjoy their surroundings, creating an ambivalent portrayal: they are neither presented as industrious nor idle. However, this representation does not correspond with the lived reality of most Congolese, who were subject to harsh exploitation and forced labour to produce the raw materials desired by the Belgian metropole. Moreover, children and the elderly are scarcely depicted, which may reflect Western media preferences for youthful beauty and productivity, while marginalising the elderly. The native Congolese woman, when represented, is framed through a Western lens that often reduces her to an object of beauty. This portrayal, as noted by Lutz and Collins (1993), reflects intersecting racial and gender subordination, where being both Black and female intensifies marginalisation.

Equally striking is the absence of the *évolué*—the Westernised, educated Congolese individual who could have served as a symbol of the success of the Belgian civilising mission. Their omission may be due to their relatively small number or perhaps to a lack of awareness (or intentional disregard) on the part of the Belgian authorities responsible for stamp issuance.

The near-complete absence of depictions showing equal coexistence between colonisers and colonised is also significant. Only one stamp presents such a scenario, which is consistent with the long-standing Belgian policy of segregation. In sum, Congolese individuals are never portrayed as autonomous subjects capable of influencing the course of their society. Rather, the stamps reinforce the Belgian civilising narrative, a pattern also noted by Dietz and Kabamba (2022) in their analysis of Congolese stamps from 1950 to 1971.

Postage stamps, therefore, served not only as instruments of communication but also as tools for projecting the Belgian imperial vision to a range of target audiences. In doing so, they communicated a unidirectional message about the Belgian perspective on the Congolese people—one shaped by deep-seated prejudices and stereotypes.

With regard to the third research question (RQ3), which sought to identify the dominant attitude of the metropole toward the colony as reflected in the stamps, the findings indicate that the majority (66.4%) conveyed either a *neutral* tone or depicted the native population as living freely—suggesting, misleadingly, that colonisation was either non-existent or benign. This illusion is reinforced through the frequent depiction of animals, plants, and landscapes, or of native individuals engaged in traditional activities, often half-naked or in ethnic dress—characteristics commonly coded under the philatelic category of *indigenous types*.

Although the *civilising mission* appears less frequently (18.8%), it remains a notable component of the messaging, highlighting education, healthcare, and infrastructure as perceived benefits of colonial rule. However, in the final years of the colony's existence, stamps increasingly affirm the ideas of *possession* and *dominance* (15.5% of the period's stamps), reinforcing Belgium's claim over the territory amid growing international and local pressures for independence.

Equally telling is the near-complete absence of stamps depicting *evangelisation*, despite the central role Christian missionaries played throughout the colonial era. The influence of religious actors on colonial governance was substantial, yet their visibility in official philatelic material was minimal. This absence may reflect a strategic choice to avoid potentially contentious themes or a reluctance to highlight the entanglement of Church and colonial state.

7. Conclusion

As stated at the outset of this paper, classical Belgian historiography has often portrayed the country as a somewhat passive actor in its colonial past, characterised by so-called *reluctant imperialism*. However, the data presented in

this study, along with the comparative analysis involving two other minor colonial powers in Africa—Italy and Spain—suggests that the overarching propagandistic messages conveyed through Belgian postage stamps are broadly consistent with those of other colonial regimes. While each colonial context has its particularities, the similarities in visual rhetoric and thematic choices call into question the validity of the *reluctant imperialist* narrative. Therefore, it may be necessary to reconsider this traditional interpretation and place Belgian colonialism on a more equal footing with the actions of other European powers, such as France and the United Kingdom, albeit with appropriate contextual distinctions.

In summary, this study has demonstrated the types of propagandistic messages the Belgian government sought to disseminate about its Congolese colony through widely circulated official documents—namely, postage stamps. These visual artefacts offer valuable insights into the ways the colonising state attempted to construct and communicate its imperial narrative to both domestic and international audiences. Moreover, the analysis contributes to a broader understanding of the disjuncture between the lived realities of the colonised and the representations produced and disseminated by the colonisers. In doing so, this study also positions Belgian colonial propaganda within the wider framework of European colonial practices in Africa.

8. Limitations

This study is subject to the inherent limitations of quantitative content analysis. While it effectively identifies the presence or absence of selected variables, it does not fully capture the deeper symbolic or cultural meanings embedded within the visual representations. These limitations could be addressed in future research through the application of qualitative or semiotic methodologies, which would allow for a more nuanced interpretation of the iconographic elements featured on the postage stamps. Such approaches would deepen the understanding of the representational strategies employed and provide further insight into the cultural and ideological dimensions of colonial propaganda.

Acknowledgement Statement: The stamps shown in this work are the intellectual property (©) of “bpost” (Belgian Post) and are presented with its authorization and according to their specifications. We are very grateful for all the facilities provided by the legal representatives of the entity. Also, we would like to thank José Miguel Aguado Bachiller for his advice as a philatelic expert.

Conflicts of interest: The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Authors' contribution statements: Antonio Prieto-Andrés, as the first author, was instrumental in the conceptualisation and methodology design of the study. He conducted the investigation, wrote the original draft, managed project administration, and secured funding for the research. Additionally, he contributed to the writing, review, and editing of the manuscript. Cayetano Fernández-Romero, the second author, was responsible for formal analysis and further investigation. He participated in writing the original draft and in the review, editing and formatting process. María Luisa Sierra-Huedo, the third author, made significant contributions to the methodology and formal analysis validation. She managed the software and data curation aspects of the research and was involved in the investigation and writing processes.

Funding statements: This work was partially funded by the Department of Science, University and Society of Knowledge, from the Government of Aragón (Spain) (Research Group S05_23R) and by San Jorge University, Zaragoza, Spain.

Data availability statement: Data is available at request. Please contact the corresponding author for any additional information on data access or usage.

Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author(s) and contributor(s) and do not necessarily reflect JICC's or editors' official policy or position. All liability for harm done to individuals or property as a result of any ideas, methods, instructions, or products mentioned in the content is expressly disclaimed.

References

- Adedze, A. (2004). Commemorating the chief: The politics of postage stamps in West Africa. *African Arts*, 37(2), 68–75. <https://doi.org/10.1162/afar.2004.37.2.68>
- Altman, D. (1991). *Paper ambassadors: The politics of stamps*. Angus & Robertson.
- Alyaqoub, R., Alsharairi, A., & Aslam, M. Z. (2024). Elaboration of underpinning methods and data analysis process of directed qualitative content analysis for communication studies. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 24(2), 108–116. <https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v24i2.573>
- Anderson, B. R. O. (2006). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Rev. ed.). Verso.
- Aslam, M. Z., Yusof, N., & Ahmad, M. K. (2023). Elements of spiritual leadership and its relations to leadership communication in Imran Khan's speeches at international forums. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 23(3), 56–67. <https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v23i3.250>
- Berelson, B. (1952). *Content analysis in communication research*. Free Press.

- Brunn, S. D. (2000). Stamps as iconography: Celebrating the independence of new European and Central Asian states. *GeoJournal*, 52(4), 315–323. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1014307914500>
- Brunn, S. D. (2022). *Stamps, nationalism and political transition* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003048886>
- Child, J. (2005). The politics and semiotics of the smallest icons of popular culture: Latin American postage stamps. *Latin American Research Review*, 40(1), 108–137. <https://doi.org/10.1353/lar.2005.0003>
- Clay, D. (2021). "David vs Goliath": The Congo Free State propaganda war, 1890–1909. *The International History Review*, 43(3), 457–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07075332.2020.1814841>
- Cornet, A., Gillet, F., & Ryckmans, F. (2012). *Congo Belgique (1955–1965): Entre propagande et réalité*. La Renaissance du livre.
- Cravioto, E. G. (2011). El protectorado español de Marruecos (1912–1956) en las imágenes de los sellos de correos. *Miscelánea de Estudios Árabes y Hebraicos. Sección Árabe-Islam*, 60, 153–174.
- Cusack, I. (2005). Tiny transmitters of nationalist and colonial ideology: The postage stamps of Portugal and its empire. *Nations and Nationalism*, 11(4), 591–612. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2005.00221.x>
- Dietz, T., & Kabamba, P. (2022). Imaging political turmoil through postage stamps in the heart of Africa: Congo/Zaire 1950–1971 from colonialism to national identity. In S. D. Brunn (Ed.), *Stamps, nationalism and political transition* (pp. 131–152). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003048886-7>
- Ewans, M. (2003). Belgium and the colonial experience. *Journal of Contemporary European Studies*, 11(2), 167–180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1460846032000164609>
- Falcucci, B. (2021). Visualizing colonial power: Museum exhibitions and the promotion of imperialism in France, Belgium, and Italy. *Nuncius*, 36(3), 676–722. <https://doi.org/10.1163/18253911-03603004>
- Henriet, B., Lauro, A., & Juste, R. (2023). Archives of military courts in colonial Congo: New sources for the history of violence and agency in Central Africa. *History in Africa*, 50, 259–274. <https://doi.org/10.1017/hia.2023.9>
- Hochschild, A. (1999). *King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror, and Heroism in Colonial Africa* (1st Mariner Books ed.). Houghton Mifflin.
- Jeffery, K. (2006). Crown, communication and the colonial post: Stamps, the monarchy and the British Empire. *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 34(1), 45–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03086530500411290>
- Jowett, G. S., & O'Donnell, V. J. (2011). *Propaganda & persuasion*. SAGE Publications.
- Kloetzel, J. E. (2008). *Scott 2009 standard postage stamp catalogue* (165th ed.). Scott Pub. Co.
- Krippendorff, K. (2004). Reliability in content analysis: Some common misconceptions and recommendations. *Human Communication Research*, 30(3), 411–433. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.2004.tb00738.x>
- Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology* (3rd ed.). SAGE Publications. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071878781>
- Licata, L., & Klein, O. (2010). Holocaust or benevolent paternalism? Intergenerational comparisons on collective memories and emotions about Belgium's colonial past. *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 4(1), Article 1. <https://doi.org/10.4119/ijcv-2814>
- Lutz, C. A., & Collins, J. L. (1993). *Reading National Geographic*. University of Chicago Press.
- Marchal, J., & Delathuy, A. M. (1996). *E. D. Morel contre Léopold II: L'histoire du Congo, 1900–1910*. L'Harmattan.
- Mathys, G., & Van Beurden, S. (2023). History by commission? The Belgian colonial past and the limits of history in the public eye. *The Journal of African History*, 64(3), 334–343. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853723000683>
- Matthes, J., & Kohring, M. (2008). The content analysis of media frames: Toward improving reliability and validity. *Journal of Communication*, 58(2), 258–279. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2008.00384.x>
- Mirzoeff, N. (Ed.). (1998). *The visual culture reader*. Routledge.
- Oleinik, A., Popova, I., Kirdina, S., & Shatalova, T. (2014). On the choice of measures of reliability and validity in the content-analysis of texts. *Quality & Quantity*, 48(5), 2703–2718. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-013-9919-0>
- Pevsner, N. (1940, May 4). Style in stamps: A century of postal design. *Country Life*.
- Pizarroso, A. (1999). La historia de la propaganda: Una aproximación metodológica. *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 4, Article 4. <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/HICS/article/view/HICS9999110145A>
- Prieto-Andrés, A. (2021). La propaganda a través de los sellos postales de las colonias españolas en África (1924–1975). *Historia y Comunicación Social*, 26(1), 79–94. <https://doi.org/10.5209/hics.75702>
- 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*, nana.12904. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12904>
- Raento, P. (2006). Communicating geopolitics through postage stamps: The case of Finland. *Geopolitics*, 11(4), 601–629. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650040600890750>
- Raento, P., & Brunn, S. D. (2005). Visualizing Finland: Postage stamps as political messengers. *Geografiska Annaler: Series B, Human Geography*, 87(2), 145–163. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0435-3684.2005.00188.x>

- Ramos, A. (2020). Portuguese and Belgian colonial cinema: The filmography of two small big countries in Africa. *Cahiers d'études Africaines*, 239, 555–583. <https://doi.org/10.4000/etudesafricaines.31643>
- Reid, D. M. (1984). The symbolism of postage stamps: A source for the historian. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 19(2), 223–249. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002200948401900204>
- Schwarzenbach, A. (1999). *Portraits of the nation: Stamps, coins, and banknotes in Belgium and Switzerland, 1880–1945*. Peter Lang.
- Scott, D. (2003). L'image ethnographique: Le timbre-poste colonial français africain de 1920 à 1950. *Protée*, 30(2), 45–54. <https://doi.org/10.7202/006730ar>
- Stanard, M. G. (2013). Apprendre à aimer un fantôme: Propagande pro-impériale, mémoire de Léopold II et culture coloniale en Belgique (1880–1960). In A. Lorin (Ed.), *Nouvelle histoire des colonisations européennes (XIXe–XXe siècles)* (pp. 53–64). Presses Universitaires de France. <https://doi.org/10.3917/puf.lorin.2013.01.0053>
- Stoetzer, O. C. (1953). *Postage stamps as propaganda*. Public Affairs Press.
- Van Reybrouck, D. (2019). *Congo*. Penguin Random House Grupo Editorial España.
- Vangroenweghe, D. (2010). *Du sang sur les lianes: Léopold II et son Congo* (Rev. ed.). Aden.
- Verhoeven, G., & Payrhuber, N. (2019). "Les pèlerins de la saison sèche": Colonial tourism in the Belgian Congo, 1945–60. *Journal of Contemporary History*, 54(3), 573–593. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022009418761215>
- Vints, L. (1984). *Kongo made in Belgium: Beeld van een kolonie in film en propaganda*. Kritik. <https://www.biblio.com/book/kongo-made-belgium-beeld-van-een/d/1405886176>
- Wigley, A. (2015). Against the wind: The role of Belgian colonial tourism marketing in resisting pressure to decolonise from Africa. *Journal of Tourism History*, 7(3), 193–209. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1755182X.2015.1089950>

About the Author(s).

Dr. Antonio Prieto-Andrés has a PhD in Communication. He is currently a Full Professor and researcher in the Faculty of Communication and Social Sciences at San Jorge University (Spain). He belongs to the Immigration, Cross-Cultural Communication and Human Development research group, from which he makes his scientific contributions in relation to the communicative, social, and political aspects of immigration and cross-cultural communication.

Dr. Cayetano Fernández Romero has a PhD in History. He is currently a Full Professor at the Faculty of Communication and Social Sciences at San Jorge University (Spain). He teaches History of Political European Thought and Sociology. His projects and research are focused on the analysis of migratory processes, specifically regarding the configuration of social representations of migration in media and their effects on social and political areas.

Dr. María Luisa Sierra has a PhD in Education from the University of Minnesota, USA. She is currently a Full Professor and researcher in the Faculty of Communication and Social Sciences at San Jorge University (Spain). She teaches Education and Intercultural Communication in Communication Studies and the Degree in Translation & Intercultural Communication. His projects and research are focused on internationalization at home, intercultural education, and adaptation processes.