

Exploring the paradoxical national projection in small and secluded island realities: The case of the Canary Islands

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Abstract

This study explores the paradox of nationalism in small insular communities isolated in seas, particularly oceans. Despite their distinct identity, unique history, exclusive connection between people and territory, and strong association between local symbology and landscape, these communities often resist attaining national status, perceiving it as a precursor to statehood. This paradox manifests as an internal conflict between embracing and rejecting a national image. Historically, this resistance has prevailed, subtly shaping the political and social development of such islands.

The Canary Islands serve as a prime example of this dynamic. While the archipelago is not currently pursuing nationhood, it presents a unique case for studying nationalism within these insular contexts, with evidence of this paradox in both historical and recent times. Therefore, this article argues for maintaining the scope of nationalism studies within these insular contexts, regardless of whether the communities have become nations. More specifically, this article demonstrates that owing to their interaction with paradox, it can be very beneficial to analyse such insular contexts using established theories that focus on explaining the nation-formation process.

Keywords

Canary Islands

mentalism

ethnosymbolism

Guanches

Spanish transition

1. Introduction

The type of human community found on small islands or in archipelagos composed of small islands that form a clearly defined maritime-terrestrial space, isolated in seas and especially in oceans, presents a paradox regarding the nationalist phenomenon. While certain qualities generally typical of this type of community overlap with qualities present in a vast

number of communities defined as nations, other factors such as smallness, isolation, and fragmentation could lead its inhabitants to reject a hypothetical national status.

The geographic characteristics of these insular regions play a decisive role in fostering a sense of national representation. The remoteness and territorial separation from traditional continental power centers have historically granted these territories a degree of administrative or political autonomy, either through decisions by central authorities or grassroots movements within island societies. Additionally, the geographic and temporal isolation of these maritime territories has led to the development of unique cultures. This isolation has also shaped distinct historical trajectories within relatively unchanged physical settings. The combination of political autonomy, cultural distinctiveness, a history shaped by isolation and external interactions, and the symbiotic relationship between population and landscape cultivated over centuries, has drawn these insular spaces into the nationalist imaginary. These island spaces project a national identity outward, while internally, various potential pathways emerge as possible catalysts for fostering a collective national consciousness.

At the same time, however, this territorial reality may also hinder the widespread adoption of national consciousness. The potential for these insular spaces to adopt a state form—viewed as a natural progression in nationhood—may be perceived as a threat by some islanders. These individuals may believe that the dependency, small size, and isolation of their territories necessitate the protection of a continental state in a global system perceived as hostile. Economic concerns, particularly, contribute to this insecurity. Territorial and natural resource constraints often render these islands highly dependent on imports. As a result, integration into a large, economically dynamic state is viewed as essential, based on the premise that larger markets tend to be more efficient than smaller ones. One example is trade, where joining a larger state would at least ensure access to a stable internal market.

Security concerns are highly relevant in this context. Resistance to national consciousness would likely stem from the vulnerability of these islands, which have historically faced external aggressions from state and non-state actors. The geopolitical importance of many insular territories intensifies this sense of threat. Additionally, as many islands have recently become hotspots for climate change impacts, feelings of fragility among their inhabitants have intensified.

Another perceived risk involves cultural elements. Many islanders view integration with a particular continental state as a path to a superior culture. Severing sovereignty ties may imply rejecting that culture in favor of one associated with the geographical region of the islands, which might be perceived as inferior. This sentiment is especially pronounced in island regions distant from continental centers of power.

This type of situations translates into a paradox manifested in each island body, primarily through an internal dialogue of confrontation between trends, whether endogenous/exogenous or conscious/unconscious, to develop and construct a national image of the island or archipelago versus hostile inclinations towards the former, which strive to dismantle and undermine that image.

Although such a paradox often ends up tipping the balance in favour of a majority rejection among those island societies of a national aspiration taken to its ultimate consequences (Baldacchino, 2006; Hepburn, 2010; Olausson, 2007: 99; Royle, 2001: 223), this paradox has constituted a shaping element of the political and social development of these islands and archipelagos, revealing the significant and particular role that the nationalist paradigm, in general, has played in those societies since its global consolidation.

It is foreseeable that such an existential—in national terms—paradox, affecting these island entities could finally be impacting them in areas such as identity, sovereignty, or the very cohesion of their populations, the latter being of great importance in archipelagos in particular.

Similarly, while the attainment of nation status by a community—following the instillation of national consciousness among a majority of its members—implies progression to a new stage, the opposite condition, in which many of these insular entities presumably find themselves, essentially means they are positioned, due to the paradox, midway between two paths leading to opposite destinations. One path is certain and well-known, ultimately leading to nation status. The other, more uncertain path, remains to be forged and will likely result in a different outcome for each case. In this structural impasse, either path may be undertaken or even abandoned over time in favour of the opposite one. Nevertheless, the most probable scenario is that only the definitive realisation of the national path could resolve this impasse.

A structural phenomenon of such a long duration as this paradox, suggests treating the impact of nationalism on these insular scenarios with a global perspective that goes beyond merely studying specific manifestations. Therefore, integrating the analysis of these insular entities into the field of nationalism studies, an analysis that should then be guided by the most influential theories and currents within that academic branch, is of great interest. More specifically, theoretical models that focus on explaining how nations emerge and the variables involved in that process have great potential to generate new knowledge about these insular bodies.

However, this general perspective and endeavour has rarely been adopted. This is largely because many of these islands or archipelagos have not been configured as nations or do not exhibit significant popular movements pushing towards a national goal. Consequently, they have not attracted the attention of most academics interested in nationalism, who often believe these cases are not suitable for analysis with nationalist theories, given that they do not integrate into the catalogue of national realities. Research on the Canary Islands within the social sciences attests to this significant deficit, which this article aims to address.

2. The case of the Canary Islands

The choice of the Canary Islands is due to some relevant factors that made it of great interest to analyse this archipelago on the basis of the arguments set out in the paper. The Canary Islands is an isolated archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean where the member islands, which form a coherent maritime-terrestrial space, are the product of the same geological phenomenon. Moreover, this archipelago has been exposed to the phenomenon of nationalism since nearly its inception. According to the narratives of some of the most influential authors, the islands, located in the mid-Atlantic, were geographically positioned at an intersection between several communities conceived as the first in history to develop a national consciousness, situated on the Atlantic side of Europe or America, depending on the author (Anderson, 1991; Greenfeld, 1992; Hearn, 2009). Despite this discrepancy, these authors concur in identifying the Atlantic as the axis of the first intercontinental transfer of nationalist ideas in history. In this context, the Canary archipelago would have acted as an exceptional witness and a casual participant, serving as a demographic bridge between both continents with a stopover in the middle, since its integration into the Crown of Castile at the end of the 15th century. Precisely, its inclusion within the Spanish State also adds interest to the case, as we are dealing with a state in which its status as a nation has been severely questioned from within its borders over the past century. Finally, it should be noted that, at present, this archipelago does not exhibit clear signs of popular willingness to transition to a national form.

The Canary Islands, located in the Atlantic region of Macaronesia, comprise one of Spain's 17 autonomous communities. This region, consisting of five mid-Atlantic archipelagos including the Azores, Madeira, Cape Verde, and the Savage Islands, has traditionally been recognised as a distinct biogeographic unit. Among these, only the Canary Islands were inhabited by a native population during the mediaeval kingdoms. The Canary Islands were historically pivotal in the origins of imperialism, serving as the model for the subsequent European colonisation of America (Crosby, 1984). Regarding history, culture, and geography, the archipelago is unique among the regions of Spain. Since 1983, the Canary Islands, as an autonomous community, have had their own government and parliament.

Most scholars who have published studies on the nationalist phenomenon and its relation to the Canary Islands are natives of the islands themselves. Most of these studies have focused on the impact of nationalism on the archipelago through historiography (Carballo, 2010; De Paz-Sánchez, 2007; Garí-Montllor, 1992; Hernández Bravo, 1992; Hernández González, 2008; García-Lázaro, 2018; López & Ramos, 2010; Pomares & Pérez, 2017). In the field of political science, most analyses have been confined to subfields such as voting behaviour (Corujo et al., 2019) and studies of political parties (Báez, 2014; Hernández Bravo, 1999; Luis León, 2015; Pomares, 2018). Most of these studies either focus on specific manifestations of the nationalist phenomenon in the islands, omitting a general perspective, or do not make use in their analyses of resources specific to the field of study of nationalism, mainly neglecting its most influential theoretical bodies. More importantly, to date, neither the field of historiography nor that of political science studies has provided research wherein the key theoretical approaches explaining the nation-formation process take a central and pivotal role in the analysis.

The failure to employ these theoretical approaches to the Canary Islands has likely hindered a more profound comprehension of the changes and dynamics shaped by the paradox triggered by the nationalist paradigm in this archipelago, be it through direct or indirect influences. Many accounts remain superficial, leaning towards description rather than analysis and primarily focusing on concrete actors or historical manifestations. This latter approach overlooks crucial structural factors unique to the archipelago, impeding the evaluation of their historical evolution and interaction with the paradox.

This study aims to fill this gap. Rather than conducting an exhaustive review of the recent history of the Canary Islands, the objective is to explore the possibilities that theories never applied before can offer in understanding the past and present of this Atlantic archipelago and, by extension, other similar island spaces.

To achieve this, the article focuses on two historical moments that, according to the proposed framework, are understood to be pivotal in the history of the Canary Islands, primarily because the effects of the aforementioned paradox would have been felt most strongly. These moments are, first, the first half of the 19th century, marked by the significant events of the Napoleonic occupation of the Iberian Peninsula and the emancipation of the Spanish-American colonies, and second, the nationalist awakening that occurred in the islands during the 1970s.

A reinterpretation is then undertaken based on classical approaches that elaborate on the emergence and construction of national realities and their underlying mechanisms. This involves selecting approaches that assign significant prominence to the factors and variables of the archipelago that are decisive in the unfolding of the paradox in the two examined crossroad episodes.

The exercise of testing those two historical moments of the Canary Islands with seminal scholarly works explaining why and how nations appear has proved to be fruitful in understanding some of the current political dynamics in the archipelago, especially since the Spanish transition. This study validates the necessity of studying nations and

nationalism to understand historical trends with broad societal impacts and provides valuable insights into the political and social realities of even non-national communities in the most isolated and smallest places on the globe.

3. The mentalist theory of nationalism

Within the cluster of seminal theories that expressly address the nation formation process, the mentalist perspective appears to be one of the most well-equipped for elucidating the impact of the existential paradox on the archipelago during the first half of the 19th century.

The mentalist theory resulted from multiple works by author Liah Greenfeld, in which she addresses the phenomenon of nationalism. Greenfeld's work has profoundly influenced the field and stands out for its originality.

In Greenfeld's reasoning, the idea of equality, implicit in the new cultural reality that emerged after the expansion of nationalism, plays a fundamental role. The author defines the nation as a sovereign and inclusive community with a membership unaffected by class and status divisions—therefore, equal. The nation becomes the natural object of political loyalty and solidarity among its members (Greenfeld, 2016: 11).

Emphasising the idea of equality, which follows from the concept of nationhood, Greenfeld highlights how each member of the community, thus interpreted, takes part in its superior elite quality (1992: 6). Consequently, a national population is perceived as fundamentally homogeneous (essentially a community of equals) and only superficially divided along lines of status, class, or locality (Greenfeld, 2006: 70).

In its narrative, the main cause underlying the appearance of a nation is a state of *anomie* that collectively affects a dominant or influential group (Greenfeld, 1992: 16). This group seeks to actively transform the entire community into a nation as the most reliable way to overcome this anxiety. Ultimately, the advent of a nation occurs when an influential group successfully spreads the national idea to the rest of the community. According to mentalists, the odds of a nation emerging depend on the grade of success of those groups in diffusing the nationalist dogma in the entire population.

The crucial role attributed by Greenfeld to influential groups in realising the nationalist project provides a highly fitting theoretical foundation for our case study, considering the vital significance of local elites in the Canary Islands during the 19th century. The history of that century in the archipelago is chiefly a sequence of episodes of instability and unrest sparked by these groups. Consequently, certain dynamics were established that would eventually become ingrained in the political culture of the islands and a significant portion of its citizens.

More specifically, this study focuses on the process described by Greenfeld concerning the encounters and interactions between elites and influential groups from both sides when a national community (mainland Spain) conveys the national idea to a non-national community (the Canary Islands)

4. The Canary Islands in the first half of the 19th century: from authority vacuum to the colonial agreement

Nationalism arrived in the Canary Islands through mainland Spain; it followed the pattern described by Greenfeld, whereby nationalism generally spread via interaction between societies imbued with the nationalist idea and societies that did not. The Spanish nation emerged during the first decade of the 19th century when the Iberian Peninsula was

occupied by Napoleon's forces (Álvarez Junco, 2013: 308; Eastwood, 2006: 23; Jacobson, 2006). In the historical context of mainland Spain's collapse, its outermost colonies began to question their relationships with the metropolis. Nationalism again became the general answer in Spanish America, influenced by nationalist ideas from Spain and France (Eastwood, 2006). However, the Canary Islands were not exposed to the same nationalist catalysts.

An important takeaway from Spain's crisis of legitimacy was how the island's elites would have started to conceive the archipelago: the notion of fragility and external dependence of the islands was embraced by that group as a strong determinant to be considered. Thus, all the approaches discussed within the *Junta Suprema de Canarias*—a government body set up in Tenerife in July 1808 as a reaction to the power vacuum—when analysing the possible scenarios that could affect the archipelago, invariably ended with assuming the need to seal close ties with a continental power as a non-negotiable requisite for the future viability of the islands. In its meetings, a variety of options for the political future of the islands were studied in the face of the uncertain news from the peninsula. Among those scenarios was integration into the United States or Brazil, or even the option of independence under a British protectorate (Hernández González, 2005).

Following mentalist theory, during the 19th century, significant obstacles existed to conceiving a Canary Islands nation. Most importantly, the dominant and most influential groups of the archipelago were torn by a bitter dispute that confronted the two most powerful islands, Tenerife and Gran Canaria (Garí-Montllor, 2019; Guimerá, 1970; Yanes, 1994). For instance, in the latter, the *Cabildo General Permanente* opposed the *Junta Suprema* and did not recognise its legitimacy over the whole archipelago. Paradoxically, these groups were by far the most predisposed to display some kind of archipelagic cohesion and solidarity, as they would demonstrate consistently when engaged in commercial and fiscal negotiations with the central state.

Another factor was the high preference expressed by these influential groups for maintaining close sovereignty links with a mainland state, and if possible, a world power (Hernández González, 2005). Furthermore, these groups enjoyed both high status and material wealth disproportionately above the average for the ordinary inhabitants of the islands, who were generally poverty-stricken. These particular circumstances made it difficult for these groups to experience a state of anomie, primarily when, in 1852, they were granted concessions and benefits in the commercial sphere by the Spanish state, which would increase their gains and power. Some authors refer to these concessions as the result of a 'colonial agreement' (Alemán, 2008; Suárez, 2017: 15). The pact led to a win-win situation in which the islander oligarchy boosted its internal position of privilege while keeping the islands under the protection of a mainland power, whereas the Spanish state managed to curb further territorial damages after its traumatic losses in America. The reality experienced in the islands at that time stood far removed from the objectives set forth at the Congress of Panama in 1826, where Latin American emancipatory leaders had placed on the agenda the decolonisation of the Canary Islands, among other territories.

Territorial fragmentation was an enormous handicap for the articulation of social groups that could include inhabitants of more than one island. Only the most powerful groups, with conflicting interests within the islands but sharing common interests abroad, were able to save the dispersed geography of the islands.

This helps explain why, given the disinterest of the local elites in developing a national project for the islands, the first manifestations of Canary Islands nationalism emerged in Latin America, within the colonies of islander immigrants. As milestones, it is worth highlighting the publication of the magazine *El Guanche* in Caracas, starting in 1897, with Secundino Delgado as its head (considered by many as the father of Canary Islands nationalism) and the founding of the Canary Islands Nationalist Party in Havana in 1924.

5. The nationalist awakening of the 1970's

The end of Franco's dictatorship led to the Spanish transition to democracy, which began in late 1975. This period marks a significant episode in the history of the Canary Islands, as it witnessed the emergence of the first popular nationalist movement within the archipelago. This movement involved a substantial portion of the archipelago's population (Estévez, 2019: 35; Garí-Montllor, 2015: 59; Hernández Bravo, 1999). For the first time in history, political nationalism found representation in the islands and state institutions. It was political parties on the socialist and self-determinist left that capitalised on the movement electorally. Their most notable triumph came after the 1979 local elections when the *Unión del Pueblo Canario* (UPC) party won the mayor's office in Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, the most populous city in the archipelago.

This popular nationalist expression was preceded by the movement, *Canarias Libre*, formed during the 1960s. With a communist substratum, this movement opposed dictatorship from an anti-colonialist stance. *Canarias Libre* had a short lifespan because of the severe backlash inflicted by the Francoist regime. From the ashes of this movement, led by Antonio Cubillo, the *Movimiento por la Autodeterminación e Independencia del Archipiélago Canario* (Movement for the Independence and Self-determination of the Canarian Archipelago), or MPAIAC, emerged as a pro-independence group that was actively committed to the decolonisation of the islands.

The MPAIAC engaged in a violent campaign against the Spanish state for two years, from 1976 to 1978, and became a major factor in the destabilisation of the relationship between the islands and the state. However, its main success was in the diplomacy arena after it convinced many African leaders of the island's Africanity. In April 1978, the Spanish secret service attempted to assassinate Cubillo. He survived but had to use a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Two months later, the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) declared that the Canary Islands were African and, therefore, had to be decolonised. The main proof of the assertion was the refusal of the Spanish State to let an OUA delegation visit the islands; it was deduced that the Spanish authorities were trying to conceal the Africanity of the archipelago (Utrera, 1996: 288).

6. The ethnic dimension and the ethnosymbolist approach

To achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the historical developments that took place in the archipelago during the 1970s, it is crucial to go beyond the mentalist framework and, consequently, to explore other perspectives within the field of nationalism studies that expressly unpack the nation-formation process. Importantly, in that decade, a nationalist movement with popular support emerged within the Canary Islands for the first time in history.

The movement was closely related to an ethnic component of the islanders that underwent a process of revivification and exaltation. Given this context, it seemed more convenient to turn to theoretical perspectives in which the element of ethnic identity was positioned at the core of their narratives. Thus, the nationalist movement of the 1970s is examined using the ethnosymbolist theoretical approach, with particular emphasis on the work of Anthony Smith, a prominent figure in this academic perspective.

Smith defends the existence of ethnic roots and foundations in modern nations (1988). For him, many nations find their origins in pre-national communities, where the ethnic component already played a crucial role in fostering cohesion and identity. Smith proposed the concept of *ethnie* as those collective cultural units that precede the modern national units, thus establishing a continuity that modernist currents hasten to deny.

The author defines an *ethnie* as a named and self-defined community whose members possess a myth of common ancestry, shared memories, one or more elements of common culture (including a link with a territory), and a measure of solidarity, at least among the upper strata (2009: 27).

Smith gives capital importance to the cultural forms related to the feelings, attitudes, and perceptions that are—in turn—expressed and codified in myths, memories, values, and symbols. According to him, this conglomerate forms the essence of ethnicity (1988: 15). It is upon this essence that attention should be directed to comprehend the distinctive qualities and enduring nature of an *ethnie*.

When defining a nation in ethnosymbolist terms, Smith refers to communities whose members cultivate shared symbols, myths, memories, values, and traditions; inhabit and are attached to a historic territory; create and disseminate a distinctive public culture; and observe shared customs and standard laws (2009: 49). This definition suggests not only a sense of uniqueness but also a collective commitment to regularly preserve it.

Contrary to most modernist accounts, ethnosymbolists contend that the masses also assume a protagonist role during the formation of a nation. Intellectuals, professionals, artists, aristocrats, and bureaucrats develop an indispensable function throughout the process. However, it is the agency and reciprocity of the general population towards the national project exposed by those elites that are ultimately responsible for transforming the ethnic community into a nation. Here, the interactions between influential groups and the rest of the population are crucial (Smith, 2009: 31).

In general, ethnosymbolism holds considerable potential when applied to small, isolated insular or multi-insular spaces that have undergone colonization by external political entities. These entities either imposed themselves on societies already inhabiting the islands or, in cases where the islands were uninhabited, introduced and consolidated an ethnically distinct population from that of the colonizing power. The first group includes islands such as Hawaii, New Caledonia, Rapa Nui, the Ryukyu Islands and the Canary Islands, while the second includes Bermuda, the U.S. Virgin Islands, Cape Verde, Guadeloupe, and the Cocos Islands.

The potential of ethnosymbolism lies in its capacity as a theoretical instrument offering an alternative perspective for identifying and analyzing social dynamics related to nationalism within these insular spaces. Its strengths are most apparent when applied to their study within a historical context spanning from the early twentieth century to the present. The relevance of ethnosymbolism during this period corresponds to the increasing importance of ethnic and linguistic identities in nationalist movements, beginning in the interwar years. Throughout the century, these identities remained significant, culminating in the final decades of the twentieth century with a trend toward the fragmentation of political entities along ethno-linguistic lines (Hobsbawm, 1992: 170–171). Additionally, in the case of these insular spaces, the profound influence and global impact of decolonization processes, peaking in the mid-twentieth century, further support the use of an ethnosymbolist perspective. It is likely that activists and nationalists in these spaces align with or follow the behavioral patterns described by ethnosymbolist theory, as they seek to reconnect the present with a distant past, challenging official narratives established by colonial structures.

Ethnosymbolism provides valuable insight into the factors influencing the success or failure of nationalist movements in these insular spaces, due to characteristics unique to these regions. The isolation, remoteness, and small, often closed nature of these island societies have facilitated the long-term preservation of myths, symbols, values, memories, and traditions. Ethnosymbolists identify these elements as crucial in a society's evolution from an ethnic group to a national community, regardless of whether this transition is fully realized.

Another internal dynamic specific to these spaces underscores the utility of an ethnosymbolist perspective. Unlike modernist theories, which emphasize the central role of elites in nation-building, ethnosymbolism highlights the decisive role of the broader population. This perspective is essential for studying island spaces, as local elites often face structural obstacles hindering their leadership in nation-building efforts, and island residents frequently engage in discussions about potential national aspirations due to the visible and tangible nature of influencing factors.

In some instances, island elites are systematically dependent on metropolitan elites for economic or political support. In other cases, particularly in small archipelagos, elite groups lack cohesion or are in conflict due to their distribution across different islands.

Adopting a perspective that considers the agency of the general population is, therefore, particularly valuable in the context of these insular spaces. Issues central to the deliberative process of national identity formation promote public debate, in which many islanders feel empowered to participate and contribute. These issues are prominent in daily life, as the insular environment constantly underscores its distinctive nature, territory, and geography.

By adhering to Smith's theoretical approach, we can gain fresh understanding of the popular nationalist awakening that occurred in the Canary Islands during the 1970s. Certainly, this movement was not led by elites or any influential group on the islands. On the contrary, the old elites, which had traditionally been in control of the political and economic spheres, were wary of nationalist impulses.

These influential groups had been involved in a bitter confrontation with the state apparatus in the early 1970s. Faced with the intensity of economic and political claims, the dictatorship was obliged to yield to some of the island's elite's aspirations (Bergasa & González, 1995: 189), promulgating for this purpose a specific law in 1972 for the archipelago, which eventually seemed to satisfy most of those demands.

The explanation behind the popular nationalist outbreak should be explored in the conglomerate of myths, symbols, traditions, values, and memories that were historically transmitted across successive generations of islanders.

To achieve this, the study focuses on the Guanche element, the pre-Hispanic indigenous population of the islands. This historical component of the Canary Islands people becomes crucial when applying the ethnosymbolist approach. Indeed, it is mostly the Guanche heritage that permits labelling the Canary Islands people as an *ethnie*, meeting all the requirements attached to the concept by Smith: common ancestry, shared history, distinctive common culture, link with a territory, and a sense of solidarity.

7. The pre-Hispanic indigenous population of the Canaries: The Guanches

The closest time frame to our era proposed within academia for the beginning of the settlement of the Canary Islands by the Guanches corresponds to the 2nd century AD. Despite their Amazigh origins, which scientists associate with the northern region of mainland Africa, it remains unclear how and why they arrived at the archipelago. What appears evident now is that they embarked on the journey to establish themselves in a new territory, as they travelled with animals and seeds.

The European conquest played out throughout the 15th century, constituting a protracted process. The final phase was marked by considerable violence, as indigenous factions on the islands of Tenerife, La Palma, and Gran Canaria strongly

resisted the invasion. Castilian troops eventually gained control of the archipelago in 1496. The emerging colonial society comprised Europeans, primarily Castilians, and Portuguese, alongside the indigenous population, the latter presumed to be in smaller numbers, particularly among men. In 1504, eight years after the conquest ended, the inquisitor of the Canary Islands diocese estimated the existence of 1200 indigenous families in the entire archipelago. Equally, he noticed that there were also many mixed families because with the conquerors came very few women (Aznar, 2009). Five hundred years after that report, recent studies employing the mitochondrial DNA genome reconstruction technique corroborate the persistence of aboriginal maternal contributions and the enduring presence of their genetic markers in the contemporary Canary Island population, averaging levels between 50% and 60% of those analysed (Fregel et al., 2019; García-Olivares et al., 2023; Rodríguez-Varela et al., 2017).

The defeat of the Guanches resulted in the obliteration of most of their culture, institutions, and way of life, compelling an adaptation to the new reality imposed by foreigners. The archipelago was then on its way to full integration into the European context. Within a few generations, the new Canarians, a product of the mix between Europeans and indigenous people, began to take pride in their islands not as colonies but as a part of Europe (Crosby, 1986: 100).

Soon after the collapse, the new era of the Guanche was inaugurated, extending to the present day. Throughout this period, the Guanche figure was envisioned, re-examined, symbolically constructed, or even politically utilised. The transmission and reinterpretation of the memories and cultural legacy of the pre-Hispanic world have significant importance for these purposes.

From an ethnosymbolist perspective, the arrival of the Enlightenment in the Canary Islands implied a turning point and a subsequent increase in the interest in the indigenous world. The ecclesiastic José Viera y Clavijo (1731–1813) was the most relevant figure of the movement in the archipelago and was primarily responsible for the rediscovery of the Guanches. He published a comprehensive history of the Canary Islands, including content devoted to the Guanche people. His view aligned with Rousseau's concept of the noble savage.

Another intellectual from the clergy, Graciliano Afonso (1775–1861), was pivotal in boosting interest in the Guanches. He was the first author to suggest that the conquest of the Canary Islands was a crime committed against innocent people. His outlook would greatly influence many authors, most of whom were integrated into the Regionalist School of La Laguna. In this literary school of poetry, developed during the last quarter of the 19th century, the Guanches were idealised. Graciliano Afonso appears as a true nationalist from the ethnosymbolist perspective. Shaping the idea of nationhood in Afonso's intellectual undertaking involved recovering history and linking it to the present—that is, finding the true beginnings of the archipelago's history with all the attendant myths (Becerra, 2006: 890).

These and other figures acted as rediscoverers, selectors, and re-interpreters of the symbolic and cultural elements related to the Guanches. Thus, the second half of the 19th century saw a climate of vindication of the Guanche culture, exaltation of its values, and the emergence of a substantial volume of research dealing with the indigenous people by archaeologists, ethnologists, and historians (Carballo, 2010: 98; Garí-Montllor, 1992: 58).

Historian and jurist Manuel de Ossuna (1845–1921) inserted the indigenous spectrum into a political theory text for the first time in history. In his seminal work, *El Regionalismo en las Islas Canarias*, the author defends the existence of the Canary Islands' regional identity. For Ossuna (1916), island regionalism was an organic manifestation with precedents in the Guanche tradition.

Despite the interest in the indigenous sphere from intellectuals, scientists, and professionals, the interaction between them and the rest of the population was difficult. Some of the main hindrances could be attributed to a scattered population living in eight poorly interconnected islands, underdevelopment, and deficient general education that hit much of the archipelago's society, and the sharp confrontation between the two dominating islands led by their respective elites that most of the time attracted the attention and loyalty of ordinary citizens.

8. The nationalist movement's evolution within the paradox context

Smith argued that not every *ethnie* would attain a nation's status throughout its existence (2009). According to Smith, being an *ethnie* was not a guarantee of automatically acquiring a nation's condition. He mentioned factors such as historical accidents and the intervention of human agency as indispensable components for further development towards political nationhood (2009: 58).

The popular movement of the 1970s benefited from a specific context that was propitious for raising nationalist consciousness among many of the archipelago's inhabitants. The movement peaked during the first half of the 1980s but stagnated and never accomplished its goal of building a nation. However, according to the analysis here, this period in the history of the islands should be regarded as significant, marking the closest that the archipelago had ever been to transformation into a nation.

Around the mid-1970s, three activating factors created a favourable social and political context:

- The islanders' low level of attachment to the Spanish nation as a result of 40 years of an authoritarian regime and Spain's irrelevant position among Western powers.
- Nationalistic effervescence experienced among the peripheral territories of Spain spearheaded by Catalonia and the Basque Country.
- The international economic crisis of the 1970s, which directly affected the fragile and extroverted Canary Islands economy (Estévez, 2019: 34)

It is also necessary to consider the opposite effects of these hindrances:

- In 1964, the Canary Islands division of the Spanish Radio and Television Corporation (RTVE) commenced broadcasting. This division enjoyed considerable autonomy. Creating and broadcasting programs exclusively with Canary Islands content was an effective way of connecting and bringing the islanders closer despite geographical barriers.
- Deactivation of the inter-island confrontation after 40 years of dictatorship in which the economic and political elites of the two main islands did not find room for rivalry.
- The opening of the university in the 1970s to students not predominately from the nobility or bourgeois strata (Negrín, 2005).

All these factors allowed fluent interaction between revivalists and the rest of the population. The latter paid attention to the former with a focus and interest never before seen in the archipelago. For the first time in history, the pre-existing traditions, memories, and symbolism that, according to Smith, would depict the archipelago's people as an *ethnie*, circulated vigorously and with a high level of acceptance among the islanders.

The Guanche component then acquired huge prominence. The popular movement was heavily impregnated with indigenous elements, as was the case with the anti-colonialist movement of Cubillo. These two movements found inspiration in the historical and cultural legacy of the Guanches, which had circulated among the islands since the beginning of the 19th century. Nevertheless, adopting an ethnosymbolist perspective, it would be more accurate to interpret the movement led by Cubillo as a deviation within the broader trajectory of the Canarian *ethnie*, just when the latter was approaching a critical juncture following the theoretical framework proposed by Smith. Two aspects support this assertion: the decisive personalist influence within the anti-colonialist movement and its strategic use of the indigenous element, inspired by the continental-scale liberationist phenomenon occurring in mainland Africa at the archipelago's doorstep.

From the second half of the 1970s, the archipelago experienced an indigenous boom led by sectors traditionally devoted to rediscovering, selecting, and reinterpreting the cultural attributes attached to an *ethnie*. This reinterpretation did not emerge out of nowhere; rather, it marked another episode in a long evolutionary process. For instance, since the first half of the 20th century, the substantial amount of artistic and literary works on how the figure of the Guanche was approached is a notorious novelty. This novelty involves a transposition of the physical and moral attributes of the Guanche, conflating the indigenous figure of the past with the contemporary rural peasantry (Rámirez & Atoche, 2020).

Additionally, as a backdrop, the potential contribution to this climax made by the publication and resonance of academic works in the preceding decades should not be overlooked. Within these studies, authors from various disciplines, including anthropology and historiography, had been arguing for the considerable weight of the Guanche element in the biological composition of the 20th-century Canarian population (Falkenburger, 1942; Fischer, 1930; Fusté, 1959; Rösing, 1967; Schwidetzky, 1975; Serra, 1953; Wölfel, 1930).

The Guanches gained force within the Canary Island society; for instance, newborns began to be registered with indigenous names (Garí-Montllor, 2019: 27). Successful folk music groups introduced memories and cultural motifs of the Guanche into their repertoire. It was also possible to detect the symbolic elevation of the indigenous population in popular manifestations that were frequently instigated or backed by activist intellectuals and artists. Among these manifestations, we find the following: citizens' protests denouncing the state of neglect of some indigenous archaeological sites and the controversy that followed the First Congress of Canary Islands Poetry held in 1976, after one of the presenters defended the feasibility of reconstructing the Guanche language or the claiming to turn the popular party of *La Rama*, celebrated every August in the village of Agaete, into a national festivity owing to its allegedly Guanche origins.

The manifesto of El Hierro would perfectly embody this symbiosis among artists, intellectuals, and ordinary citizens. The manifesto was read during the inauguration of a sculpture on El Hierro Island in 1976, with many island inhabitants in attendance. In the manifesto, some of the most prominent artists of the islands proclaimed their African heritage and the singularity of the Canary Islands' culture, in part because of that connection with Africa, which they asserted was not just geographical. The manifesto commenced by mentioning the *pintadera*, archaeological artefacts identified as stamps created by the indigenous Canary Islanders: "The *pintadera* and Canarian graphics are representative symbols of our identity. We assert that they have been a permanent stimulus for Canarian art".

Two books stood out in accomplishing the task of spreading interest in and identification with the Guanches. *Natura y Cultura de las Islas Canarias*, published in 1977 and written by various authors, is a collection of general knowledge about the islands on a wide range of subjects, clearly designed to be a didactic tool. The book comprehensively addresses the Guanche topic and states that many indigenous people survived the conquest, being the largest contingent in the new

colonial era. The second book, *Psicología del hombre canario*, published in 1980 and written by theologian Manuel Alemán, analyses the psychology of the inhabitants of the islands. The author argues that to understand the Canary Islands people of today, we should look at the past and regard its history as a continuum that includes the pre-Hispanic era. According to Alemán, the current population of the islands owed not only a cultural or biological legacy to the Guanches but also a psychological one. He proposed the integration of Guanche culture into modern society. For the author, integration would involve taking past values and revalidating them in new, broader, and deeper structures (1980: 54). Both books had an enormous impact on the islands and were easily found on bookshelves in private houses or school libraries.

These publications reflected the didactical effort and educative aim of their authors that targeted the local population, whereas the presentation of the manifesto of El Hierro in the Frankfurt Book Fair of 1976 is proof of the eagerness of its promoters to show an international audience the uniqueness of the Canary Islands people.

The Guanche figure was reinterpreted and adapted to the ideological demands of nationalism. The task of highlighting the indigenous dimension and its biological persistence in the current society alludes to interethnic solidarity, a symbiotic relationship with the islands' nature, a fight for maintaining independence and the way of life, and other aspects traditionally related to the Guanche world, for mobilisation.

Such a rediscovery of the indigenous world entailed a message of vindication of the unique and remote origin of the people of the Canary Islands, expressing their individuality and their ancestral, uninterrupted connection with the territory.

However, this popular manifestation was short-lived. During the second half of the 1980s, the movement began to languish and finally mutated into a collective sentiment mainly restricted to the folklore sphere and disassociated from popular political expression. The entire development process can be described as a nation-formation process that was abruptly aborted. Initially, many islanders were eager to embrace, with a political intention, the diverse pieces of a collective identity that were available in historical records, academic works, the discourse of activists, and the symbolism that permeated the creations of many artists. Nonetheless, most of the population that had empowered this identity to the stage of almost planting the seed of nation formation suddenly dropped their initial aspirations a decade later.

The main factor underlying this sequence of events was probably the real prospect of the Canary Islands becoming a nation within the geopolitical context of that era and its unintended consequences. As Luis León points out, there was a brief moment in the mid-1970s when the Canary Islands' link with Spain and Europe became weak and tenuous (2015: 286).

Generally, aspects such as smallness, isolation, and fragility have always been deemed significant obstacles, preventing a few oceanic islands from seriously considering the prospect of becoming sovereign entities (Baldacchino, 2006; Smith, 1988: 154). However, there were complications in the Canary Islands in the 1970s. The popular movement that agitated the islands incited alarmism among many islanders. The Guanches became one of the components of islander identity that obstructed the path to the nation's status. There was a general perception—easy to justify after Morocco seized the Spanish Sahara in 1975—that the conversion to a nation of an archipelago, with an important Amazigh identity substratum and located just 62 miles east of the African coast, would eventually imply its attraction towards the orbit of the African nation-state system or the risk of being absorbed by one of them (González, 1999; Sagasetta, 1977). Cubillo and minority sectors of the island's political class nurtured this perception during the Spanish transition. In this sense, the impact of the June 1981 visit of Edem Kdjo (the Secretary-General of the OAU) on the archipelago should be regarded as critical. The leader travelled to the islands to evaluate the Africanity of the society.

The process of nationalist agitation was abruptly interrupted due to primarily exogenous factors, causing the Guanche, for the islanders, to no longer serve as an element of identity but instead transform it into a potential source of geopolitical disruption.

Equally, the possible foundation of an archipelagic nation, conceivable as the precursor to the state form, in the Eurocentric perception of many islanders would not only cut off the islands from the notion of high culture and Westernness represented by Spain, but from a more pragmatic view, could also frustrate the options to enter the European Economic Community; options that started to become clear at the end of the 1970s. Finally, the MPAIAC's armed violence on behalf of the Canary Islands nation would have dissuaded many islanders from further engaging with the nationalist project. Note that the archipelago had not experienced any war episodes in a protracted manner since the European conquest was carried out 500 years ago. To make matters worse, the MPAIAC was unwittingly linked to the deadliest accident in civil aviation history, which occurred in March of 1977. On this tragic day, two jumbo jets collided head-on at Tenerife airport after both were diverted to the island owing to the bombing of a flower shop by the MPAIAC at the archipelago's other major airport in Gran Canaria.

9. Interpretation through ethnosymbolism

The adoption of an ethnosymbolist approach offers an alternative perspective on recent historical events in the Canary Islands and can provide innovative insights into addressing controversial topics or revealing overlooked developments. Ethnosymbolism challenges the perception of Cubillo as the foremost representative figure of the 1970s popular movement, contrary to prevalent assertions in academic, journalistic, and media accounts. Cubillo's message was largely rejected by his contemporaries (El Eco de Canarias, 1978: 4). After returning from exile in Algiers in 1985, Cubillo founded the political party *Congreso Nacional de Canarias*, which performed poorly in the 1987 regional elections, garnering only 8,769 votes across the entire archipelago, amounting to 1.32% of the total votes.

The long-running process experienced in the archipelago of cultivating, redesigning, and spreading the more permanent cultural attributes stressed by ethnosymbolism should be examined to gain a more precise understanding. Thus, if ethnosymbolist logic is applied, it would be more accurate to establish TV presenter Nanino Díaz Cutillas as the most representative public figure of the popular movement. He was the host of the TV programme *Tenderete*, which began airing in 1971 and became popular among the islanders to the extent that the dictatorship decided to cancel it two years later because they thought it promoted the Canary Islands' nationalism. The programme consisted of performing, retrieving, and disseminating folk music from the islands and Latin America. No doubt, 'Nanino' was well aware of the power of TV, and years later, he resumed his relationship with the medium, creating programmes in which he took the role of an ethnologist in fieldwork looking for direct sources of folk expressions (*El pueblo Canta*, 1976–77) or exploring villages to show their cultural, ethnographic, and natural heritage to the audience (*Canarias Viva*, 1981–1983).

In the *longue-durée* implied by the ethnosymbolist approach, the interferences of Cubillism are a mere drop in the ocean. In general, the overrepresentation and inflation of Cubillo have led to a problematic understanding of the impact of nationalism on the recent history of the islands. Using an ethnosymbolist approach can reverse this situation and shift attention to other important aspects that have hitherto gone unnoticed:

Canary Island society was a *no man's land* after the sudden interruption of the nation formation process that crystallised in the 1970s. While most of the population rejected nationhood for the archipelago, many Canarians became aware of their uniqueness as a people beyond their insularity and remoteness.

The island elites and traditional groups, successors to those who held a prominent role in the 19th century, would have benefitted from this backdrop of identity collapse. Stemming from a privileged position of influence combined with a disinterest in the nationalist project, these elites would have been capable of setting their political agenda as the focal point of concern for a substantial portion of the population. All of this was enveloped in a nationalist discourse that remained largely verbal and had minimal manifestation in political action. The political party *Colición Canaria* is the ultimate expression of this dynamic. While it defines itself as a nationalist party, it has never shown a clear willingness to implement a nation-building agenda on the islands, despite having held the presidency of the islands for 26 years in a row (Déniz, 2004: 29; Luis León, 2015: 314). Likewise, the party has maintained a lukewarm stance towards the Guanche world. This has been evident, for instance, in its failure as a ruling party to promote indigenous knowledge in schools or develop the indigenous universe's potential as a tourist attraction. It has also been reflected in the party's reluctance to adopt Guanche symbology.

The native nationalist left, the main catalyst of that popular movement, also seemed to have suffered the consequences of the sudden interruption in the process of implementing a popular national conscience. Thinking that discarding the national path would drag its main political actors down with it is logical, and it seemed to be the case, as the end of the process practically coincided with the end of the most prominent political party, the UPC. This left has since been confined to just one of the eight islands. Furthermore, it has renounced speaking openly about self-determinism for years and has adopted part of the agenda of the traditional elites.

Equally, the ethnosymbolist approach supplies us with a coherent explanation of the myth about the Guanches' extinction after the conquest, which has permeated most of the Canary Islands society since the late 1980s. The popular rejection and pushing aside of the indigenous world that followed the Guanche Spring was not led by interested elites, nor was a plan designed and implemented through the media or textbooks. Following the ethnosymbolist pattern—closer to a bottom-up approach—that several years ago had placed the archipelago on the road to nationhood, the visualisation of the nation's crystallisation in real terms mobilised many islanders not only to remove themselves from that path but also to ignore and deny what was likely the most crucial element of the Canary Islands' identity for making possible that conversion, that is, the Guanche, owing to its uniqueness, long-lasting territorial attachment, and propitious geopolitical context. A perception took hold among a significant portion of the population: that a national transformation of the islands based on the indigenous element would set the islands on a path towards statehood that was likely to lead to the political orbit of mainland Africa. A natural response among many islanders was to embrace the idea of the complete extinction of the Guanche people during the conquest and aftermath as a proportionate reaction to the insistent claims made during the transition, which defended the Guanche origin of most of the archipelago's population.

10. Discussion and conclusion

An original aspect of this paper, which can be framed within the scope of nationalism studies, is its selection of a community as a unit of analysis that has not yet achieved the status of a nation. Even today, the prospects of the Canary Islands becoming a nation are quite low. However, the research outcomes reveal the explanatory potential of some of the most relevant theories that expressly deal with the nation formation process in the context of the Canary Islands.

On the basis of the results obtained, we assert that the nation formation process is not merely a stage through which communities that define themselves as a nation or nation-state must pass. This article provides a new perspective, in which the nation formation process in some communities constitutes an indefinite stage, akin to a work in progress that never fully consolidates. It then assumes the form of a latent structural component, which, under certain circumstances,

is temporarily activated and can subsequently have a major impact on the socio-political development of the community in question.

Small islands and archipelagos, scattered and isolated by seas and particularly oceans, are likely overrepresented in this case study, largely due to a paradox that both stimulates and rejects the potential commitment to a national project.

Regardless of the internal dynamics or disruptive events that may arise within these insular spaces, global forces today continue to express this paradox, driving them in two opposing directions. Factors such as the expansion of territorial decentralization policies, the push for sustainable development in fragile areas, local resistance to globalization perceived as fostering a homogenizing cultural model, the recent rise of decolonial narratives in academic and leftist circles, and the anticipation of imminent advances in deep-sea exploration as a potential source of wealth—all may contribute to fostering a broader popular embrace of nationalist pathways within these territories.

Conversely, episodes of escalating regional violence highlight the critical role played by state blocs or influential states—often with extensive territories and large populations—in shaping such developments. The involvement of these global actors often serves as a warning of the vulnerabilities confronting these insular territories. Additionally, the perception of these islands as economically fragile, overly dependent on external resources, or economically unviable will hinder any popular drive toward national realization. Finally, the emerging climate crisis and the particular vulnerability of these insular spaces to its effects may present a significant obstacle to the widespread establishment of a national consciousness within these territories.

This paradox is expected to continue influencing the political, social, and institutional development of these insular spaces, as long as nationalism remains the prevailing paradigm through which the global order and its perpetuation are understood.

To fully understand these unique island communities, we recommend a systematic examination of their present and past realities, considering the dominant theories that address the nation-formation process.

The case of the Canary Islands confirms this proposition. As anticipated in many non-national island contexts grappling with the paradox outlined here, applying established theoretical frameworks that explain the nation-formation process yields significant insights. Notably, this approach underscores a remarkable episode in the recent history of the Canary Islands: the emergence in the 1970s of a process of popular national awareness that was abruptly aborted. The significance of this period lies in the events that transpired, the manner in which they unfolded, and their consequences, providing a valuable foundation for understanding ongoing dynamics within the archipelago's society. These dynamics include controversies about the inclusion of the Canary Islands' content in school curricula, taboos against secessionist discourse and its historical manifestations, uncertainties surrounding the archipelago's identity, the Guanche legacy being stripped of political symbolism, the popular and institutional embedment of a 'light' nationalism, and the consistent electoral challenges faced by left-leaning nationalist parties in the region.

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