

INTRODUCTION: SPECIAL ISSUE ON THE CANARY ISLANDS

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The Canary Islands: an introduction

The Canary Islands are one of Spain's so-called 'autonomous communities', regions with a substantial degree of autonomy over domestic matters. They are also classified as an outermost region of the European Union. With a surface area of 7500 square kilometres and 2.1 million inhabitants, the islands are one of Spain's smaller regions (with 4% of the country's population) but have one of its highest population densities (284 inhabitants per square kilometre). The archipelago is located off Africa's western coast, near the coasts of south Morocco and the territories affected by the Sahrawi conflict. The islands are well differentiated and are commonly grouped into the central islands (Gran Canaria and Tenerife), the minor eastern islands (Lanzarote, Fuerteventura and several small islands) and the minor western islands (La Gomera, La Palma and El Hierro), a grouping premised on positional with demo-economic criteria.

The history of the Canaries is marked by the 'conquest' carried out by the Kingdom of Castile in the 15th Century, a process that saw prolonged and violent conflicts with the islands' native inhabitants, who were probably North African in origin. This conquest transformed the proprietary structure of the means of production and created an institutional framework underpinned by the islands' integration into Spain, although with certain caveats that allowed their insertion in international markets as a small, open economy supported by two basic pillars: agricultural production for export and commerce, the latter especially relying on the links between European territories and the overseas possessions on the American continent. The islands' historical journey transitioned between single crop farming (sugar, *Dactylopius coccus* [woodlice], wine, bananas and tomatoes) and special tax and commercial arrangements (in the form of its so-called *puertos francos* [free ports]).

The economy of the Canaries currently revolves around tourism, with about 10 million tourists visiting the islands each year, the vast majority of them from Europe. Farming and manufacturing activities contribute very little to the economy. The low level of production diversity and self-supply are of concern due to the vulnerability and external dependence of the economy. The islands continue to enjoy a specific institutional framework within both Spain (a specific Economic and Fiscal Regime and a Special Canaries Zone to lure foreign investments) and the European Union, as evidenced by its status as an Outermost Region of the European Union and the exceptions this status provides with respect to the institutional agreements of the single European market.

In the cultural and political arena, the society of the Canaries displays a sense of belonging to southern Europe but with overtones of identifying traits and the presence of social movements that, although of limited importance, underscore the Canaries' unique identity and local calls for greater independence from Spain. Contributing to this

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is a relatively disadvantaged standing in comparison with other Spanish regions with a per capita GDP below the national average, higher levels of poverty and extremely high unemployment rates. A moderate nationalistic sentiment, accentuated by local financial interests, has materialised in a coalition party of nationalistic political parties (Coalición Canaria), which has played a role as the dominant force in every regional government over the past twenty years. The further fragmentation in the region among islands of varying importance and specialisations has set the stage for political conflicts among the islands, especially between the two largest ones (Gran Canaria and Tenerife), a conflict commonly known as the *pleito insular* [insular dispute]. The effects of the economic extroversion on everyday culture are evident in the multiculturalism that stems from immigration and from the constant presence of tourists throughout much of the territory. The Canaries is a top international tourism destination that is highly interconnected with territories on the mainland, and thus should not be thought of as an isolated bastion of local cultures.

II. Related research centres and activities

The Canary Islands have two public universities: The University of La Laguna on Tenerife and the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. They have a combined student body of over 40,000, many of them from within the region itself. The two universities offer a broad range of degrees in both the experimental and social sciences. In the area of the social sciences, those schools with the most graduates are Law, Economics and Business, Psychology and Education.

The online services of the public universities' libraries provide the easiest method for accessing the results of the scientific and informational output of local researchers. The University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria features a repository that contains the entire output of its researchers² and maintains the Digital Archives of the Canaries.³ In the case of the University of La Laguna, also available in addition to the library's general catalogue⁴ is the historical bibliographical heritage⁵ and the University's own publications, including journals.⁶

Particularly noteworthy as regards to the social sciences and those topics that are of particular interest to *Shima* journal readers is the research in the field of Social and Cultural Anthropology carried out by the School of Political and Social Sciences of the University of La Laguna and by its counterpart at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria and its Department of Psychology and Sociology. An introduction to cultural anthropology in the Canaries can be found in Quesada (nd: online). Researchers interested in statistical data have available to them the services of the Instituto Canario de Estadística⁷ and the annual reports of the Economic and Social Council of the Canaries.⁸

III. Contributions to this special issue

The five contributions to this special issue on the Canary Islands involve various topics. Two of the papers focus on the implications of an event that has strongly affected the recent history of the archipelago: migrations and their contribution to the social spaces that link the Canaries to their African neighbours. The third delves into the causes and possible solutions for the low and dwindling self-supply of food, a topic of growing

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concern in the islands. The other two submissions deal with issues involving cultural identity, considering the influence that tourist extroversion has on cultural representations and revealing the stance of certain local artists in the fluid landscape of autochthonous identities.

León and Godenau focus their efforts on the transnational activities of Moroccan migrants living in the Canaries. The quantitative and qualitative fieldwork conducted by the Tenerife Immigration Observatory in the south of Morocco and in the Canaries offers first-hand information on the transnational strategies of Moroccan family units. Their findings point to the existence of an incipient social transnational field whose ties focus primarily on the financial support provided by the migrants to their family members in their area of origin. A large part of the remittances and funds taken during these immigrants' annual visit to their home towns are used to provide for their families, with only minor amounts going to invest in businesses and in developing the town. Despite the effectively 'sealed' border resulting from restrictive EU and Spanish immigration policies, the 'bottom-up' transnationality employed by Moroccans shows reactive strategies that combine illegal maritime migration and subsequent regularisations of their status with ties to their places of origin.

The article by López-Reillo is also devoted to analysing the consequences of migratory mobility between Africa and the Canaries. She focuses her attention on a specific group: underage African migrants who reached the Canaries illegally by sea and who, for legal reasons in the receiving country, were institutionalised in detention centres following their interception. López-Reillo presents the findings of the extensive fieldwork she conducted with these individuals and with the managers of the detention centres. Notable among her conclusions is the changing labelling process that results from the transition from illegal immigrant to sheltered minor and then once more to illegal immigrant. During the first transition the youths must readjust their migratory and life goals insofar as these affect their emotional, educational and social realities. They become teenagers who try to integrate into their host society by relating with their peers and taking part in educational, social and leisure activities. Turning eighteen, however, sees them once more returned to the realm of illegality with all the negative consequences that entail.

The paper by Godenau and Nuez delves into the causes and possible solutions for the decreasing and worryingly low self-supply of food. Their analysis reveals that local food production has not been able to keep up with the expansion of the demand driven by growing demographics and tourism. The authors provide statistical estimates of the levels of food self-supply by product types and detect a pronounced dependence on the importation of cereals, meat and dairy products. The institutional framework of the food market and the policies associated with the Canaries' integration into the European Union have not been able to reverse the slowing trend in farming activities and, unlike in other outermost regions in the EU, a large part of European subsidies has gone to the commercial-import sector and not to local producers.

MacLeod's contribution focuses on the island of La Gomera and analyses the influence of tourism on the representation of a cultural group and on the place associated with that group. The author presents the concept of 'cultural realignment', a concept that groups both cultural representation and cultural interpretation and commodification. Through his field work on the island, MacLeod has detected cultural changes in La Gomera that are characterised by their increasing alignment with the foreign tourism market and the intentional transformations triggered by both public and private agents.

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This cultural manipulation creates discourse for an audience that is preconceived through the selection and presentation of targeted information about the island's history and its cultural heritage. Despite this, the paper also reveals deviations in this promotional discourse both from tourists who visit the island for reasons different from those advertised and from the local population who regret and distance themselves from the commodification of their cultural heritage.

Lomanno's text delves into the ethnographic analysis of Afro-Canary fusion music, interpreting it as a manifestation of an effort to transcend the discourse of island isolation through a critical reappropriation of cartographic, historiographical and acoustic technologies, thus allowing artists to find their place on the map. The author interprets the myth of the island of St. Brendan as an essential element of the cultural identity of the Canaries, noting how it signifies a fluid discursive realm onto which Canarians are continually re/mapping autochthonous conceptions of identity. The example of the music-poetry-prose of the *Canciones de San Borondón* ['Songs of St. Brendan'] is used to show how Afro-Canarian musicians improvise and identify through the conceptual space of St. Brendan.

End Notes:

¹ Guest editor of special *Shima* issue on the Canary Islands.

² acceda.ulpgc.es/

³ mdc.ulpgc.es/

⁴ www.bbtck.ull.es/view/institucional/bbtck/Inicio/es

⁵ www.ull.es/view/institucional/bbtck/Patrimonio_Bibliografico_Lacunense/es

⁶ publica.webs.ull.es/publicaciones/serie/publicaciones-institucionales/

⁷ www.gobiernodecanarias.org/istac/

⁸ www.cescanarias.org

Bibliography:

Quesada, Garcia (nd) *Cultura, antropología y etnografía en Canarias* ['Culture, anthropology and ethnography in the Canaries'], Asociación Canaria de Antropología, online at: www.gobiernodecanarias.org/educacion/culturacanaria/antrop/antropo.htm – accessed July 2013