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The colonial library and its discontents

Archaeology, museums and education in the Canary Islands

A. José Farrujia de la Rosa*

University of La Laguna, San Cristóbal de La Laguna

Abstract

This paper examines, focusing on the Indigenous period, how colonial epistemologies have shaped archaeology, museum display, and formal education in the Canary Islands, asking how coordinated legal, institutional, and pedagogical reforms can disrupt this "colonial library." Drawing on a documentary corpus and a purposive sample of textbooks, the study uses thematic document analysis to identify recurrent narrative frames that marginalize Indigenous perspectives. Framed by decolonial theory and the concept of the colonial library, the paper analyses museological and curricular mechanisms of reification and presents the educational project *Memorias Guanches* package as a school based intervention for primary and secondary students, and as a practical example of decolonial pedagogy, that aligns classroom activities with heritage governance instruments and museum practices. Findings point to persistent Eurocentric framings, but also to institutional openings (legal reform, exhibition revisions). The article concludes with a discussion of future tasks.

Keywords

Colonialism, archaeology, education, museums, indigenous heritage

1 Introduction: The imperative of decolonizing historical narratives

The imperative to critically examine the historical narratives that shape our understanding of the past has gained increasing recognition across various academic disciplines, particularly within archaeology and education (Hodder, 2012; Ebbitt, 2021). Central to this endeavour is the acknowledgment that science, including archaeology, operates within a specific political and historical context, making it neither objective nor politically neutral. This understanding is especially crucial when dealing with societies that have experienced colonialism, where the interpretation and communication of the past have often been influenced by power imbalances and the imposition of dominant cultural perspectives (Quijano, 2000).

Archaeology, as a discipline, is deeply intertwined with the construction and dissemination of historical narratives. As such, it can either perpetuate or challenge existing power structures. Dictatorial regimes have frequently exploited archaeology to serve their ideological and nationalistic agendas, selectively interpreting the past to legitimize their political dominance and

* **Contact:** A. José Farrujia de la Rosa afarruji@ull.edu.es
University of La Laguna, Faculty of Education, San Cristóbal de La Laguna, Spain

promote myths of national unity. This manipulation of history is particularly evident in colonial and postcolonial contexts, where archaeological narratives have been shaped to serve the interests of colonizers, often at the expense of marginalized Indigenous communities and alternative historical interpretations (Kehoe, 2008).

Historical education, while serving as a cornerstone of cultural and national identity, has often been instrumentalized to manipulate perceptions of the past. Through selective narratives and the omission or emphasis of specific events, educational systems have shaped collective memory to align with political, ideological, or social objectives. Such manipulation not only distorts historical accuracy but also frames past events in ways that legitimize contemporary power structures or suppress alternative perspectives. This phenomenon underscores the need for critical approaches to historical study, fostering an awareness of how historical narratives are constructed and the motivations behind them (Apple, 2004).

The Canary Islands provide a compelling case study for examining the complex interplay between colonialism, archaeology, education, and the communication of the past. The archipelago's Indigenous culture, of Amazigh origin, and present in the islands since the beginning of the first millennium BC (Atoche & Arco, 2023), underwent profound changes as a result of the European conquest in the 15th century. This historical encounter led to cultural erasure, the imposition of new social and economic systems, and the marginalization of Indigenous knowledge and practices (Farrujia, 2021).

Historically positioned as a strategic gateway between Europe, Africa, and the Americas, the archipelago played a pivotal role in the early phases of European imperial expansion. The Castilian conquest, initiated in the 15th century, did not merely entail the military subjugation of the Indigenous peoples but also introduced a long-lasting regime of cultural domination and epistemological violence that persists today in the ways the past is remembered, represented, and institutionalized.

This paper aims to analyse how the Indigenous past of the Canary Islands has been constructed and communicated through archaeology, museums, and education, with a specific focus on the period spanning from the late 19th century through Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975). It will also explore decolonial and critical proposals that question the colonial perspectives that have dominated the interpretation of this past. In contemporary times, these decolonial narratives has been challenged by critical heritage studies and decolonial thought. Scholars such as Achille Mbembe (2001), Walter Mignolo (2011) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) argue that decolonization involves not only recovering subaltern histories but also dismantling the epistemic frameworks that have legitimized colonialism. Within the Canarian context, these critiques intersect with growing calls to reconfigure museum practices, heritage interpretation, and educational curricula in ways that acknowledge Indigenous agency, cultural continuity, and the violence of colonial erasure.

I deploy the concepts of 'colonial library' (Mbembe, 2001; Taylor, 2003; Stoler, 2009; Mignolo, 2011) and 'decolonizing methodologies' (Kovach, 2009; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Smith, 2012) as complementary heuristics: the colonial library diagnoses the institutional, classificatory and representational mechanisms that produced epistemic marginalization; decolonizing methodologies provide epistemic and methodological principles for re centering Indigenous perspectives in research and pedagogy. Framing the study in this combined register clarifies both the structural critique and the normative commitments that underpin the project *Memorias guanches* (Guanche Memories)[1]. By connecting the 'colonial library' to concrete mechanisms—museum classification, legal nomenclature, textbook framing and pedagogical practices—this paper contributes a mid range analytical framework that links macro theory (coloniality) to institutional practice in a small island context.

By critically examining the historical narratives that have shaped our understanding of the Canary Islands' Indigenous heritage, this study seeks to explore strategies to break through established patterns in dealing with colonialism, amplifying marginalized voices, and questioning conventional approaches to historical learning. Ultimately, the study advocates for a more inclusive and critically engaged approach to the past—one that moves beyond romanticized or exoticized portrayals of Indigenous heritage and instead centers questions of power, representation, and historical accountability. In doing so, it aligns with the journal's emphasis on postcolonial and decolonial perspectives in history education and historical culture, contributing to a broader dialogue on the urgent need for decolonizing historical narratives and promoting more inclusive and equitable representations of the past.

1 "Guanche" is the ethnonym for the first Indigenous inhabitants of the island of Tenerife. The educational project is freely accessible and is available at https://proyectodidacticomemoriasguanches.com/

This manuscript, therefore, advances three interrelated claims. First, that the representation of the Indigenous past of the Canary Islands has been persistently structured by colonial epistemologies—what this paper frames as the "colonial library"—which link archaeological practice, museum display and curricular production into a coherent system that marginalizes Indigenous perspectives. Second, that this systemic erasure remains visible in twentieth century and contemporary institutions (particularly during the late-19th century and the Franco period) and continues to shape public memory. Third, that targeted decolonial interventions in museum governance and school curricula can disrupt these patterns if they combine legal reform, community participation and pedagogical redesign. The research gap addressed here is the absence of an integrated analysis that connects archaeological production, museology and formal education in the Canarian case and that examines how a concrete educational initiative (*Memorias Guanches*) intervenes within that system.

This paper therefore proceeds in three tightly connected steps: first, a historical overview establishes how archaeological knowledge and nationalist politics contributed to the colonial library; second, two empirical sections examine how museums and formal education operationalize those narratives through display logic and curricular choices; third, the project *Memorias Guanches* is analysed as an intervention that links museum reform, legal change and classroom practice. Each section returns explicitly to the central research question: how can coordinated legal, institutional and pedagogical reforms disrupt the colonial library in the Canary Islands?

2 Methodology

This paper asks (1) how colonial epistemologies shaped archaeological and museological representations of the Canarian Indigenous past; (2) how formal education reproduced or resisted these narratives; and (3) in what ways the materials within the project *Memorias Guanches* intervene in that system. These guiding questions frame sampling, coding and interpretation.

This study adopts a critical-historical, document-analytic and interpretive approach aimed at tracing how archaeological knowledge, museum practice and formal curricula have co-produced colonial narratives in the Canary Islands. The primary corpus consists of three interrelated source sets: (1) published archaeological reports and exhibition texts produced in the Canary Islands from the late nineteenth century to the present; (2) legal material, including Law 11/2019 (and its enacted amendments); and (3) educational materials, specifically a purposive sample of history and social-science textbooks used in compulsory education, together with the pedagogical resources prepared for *Memorias Guanches*.

2.1 Sampling and data treatment

Archaeological materials were selected to represent major institutional actors (El Museo Canario, Museo Arqueológico de Tenerife) and to cover the period of intense narrative formation (late 19th century through to the Franco era) as well as contemporary institutional statements and exhibition catalogues (Farrujia, 2014).

Legal and administrative documents were chosen for their relevance to heritage classification, museum governance and the management of human remains (notably the drafting and final text of Law 11/2019 and the text of the amendments referenced in the manuscript) (Farrujia, 2020).

Textbook sampling followed a purposive logic and the study also examined the curricula in Social Sciences (Primary) and Geography and History (Secondary). The corpus includes 36 titles used in the Canary Islands during the LOMCE regulatory period (Ley Orgánica para la Mejora de la Calidad Educativa, LOMCE; 2013–2020; Organic Law for the Improvement of Educational Quality) and corresponds to the corpus analysed in Farrujia et al. (2022a). Of these, 24 titles are primary-level textbooks and 12 are secondary-level textbooks used in 2º and 4º of the Educación Secundaria Obligatoria (ESO), the school years in which the Indigenous period is addressed in the curriculum. Two coders independently coded all materials using a 12-category frame (categories included: conquest framing; objectification; agency; absence of Indigenous languages; chronological placement; visual rhetoric; captioning practices; contextualisation; racial typologies; gender representation; local content presence; pedagogical objectives) (Farrujia et al., 2022a, 2022b). Pedagogical materials for *Memorias Guanches* (short stories, teacher guides, session plans) were examined as the project stands at the time of writing.

2.2 Analytic procedures

All documents were read and coded thematically to identify recurring narrative frames (for example: conquest as new beginning; Indigenous culture as static), classificatory practices (treatment of human remains; objectification of artefacts), and institutional decisions (exhibition choices; legal categorizations) that contribute to epistemic marginalisation. Coding combined deductive categories derived from the decolonial and museum-studies literature (e.g., reification, colonial library, participatory governance) with inductive categories emerging from the corpus (Farrujia, 2014; Farrujia, 2020).

Textbook and pedagogical material analysis emphasised content (which topics are present/absent), framing (how events and artefacts are contextualised), and visual rhetoric (image captions, use of artefacts as illustration) (Farrujia et al., 2022a). Museum materials were analysed for display logic, labelling practices (Farrujia, 2014). Legal documents were read to map formal definitions, classifications and procedural mechanisms relevant to sensitive heritage (Farrujia, 2020).

Comparative contextualisation used secondary literature on museum decolonisation and Indigenous pedagogy (selected cases from New Zealand and South Africa) to help interpret local patterns within transnational debates about restitution, reburial, interpretive authority and curricular reform.

2.3 Ethical considerations

Given the sensitive nature of human remains and Indigenous heritage, the study prioritises respectful language and relies on publicly available institutional and legal documents. No new fieldwork involving human subjects or handling of human remains was undertaken for the present study.

2.4 Status of *Memorias Guanches* in the study and closing note on evaluation

Memorias Guanches was developed by the Department of Didactics of the Social Sciences at the University of La Laguna and made available to schools by the Municipal Department of Cultural Heritage (Concejalía de Patrimonio Cultural) as a curricular and didactic resource. The municipal brief requested dissemination, not formal impact assessment; accordingly, the materials were distributed to all schools in the municipality, but no external, funder-mandated evaluation was commissioned at that time. The study therefore analyses the *Memorias Guanches* materials as provided (content, pedagogical design and alignment with decolonial aims). Future systematic outcome data (pre/post measures, classroom observations, teacher interviews) could be implemented in future research to assess the pedagogical impact.

3 The colonial construction of indigenous identity in the Canary Islands: a historical overview

In this paper, the Canary Islands' archaeological, museological and educational practices are read through a decolonial lens that foregrounds the "colonial library" of knowledge production and the process of reification. This framework clarifies how scholarly taxonomies, exhibition practices and curricular choices are mutually reinforcing mechanisms of epistemic marginalisation. The historical overview that follows traces the emergence of these mechanisms; the museum and education sections specify how they operationalise exclusion in display and pedagogy; and the project *Memorias Guanches* exemplifies a pedagogical response designed to reconfigure these relations.

The colonial encounter in the Canary Islands, commencing in the 14th century with initial European contact, set in motion a series of events that would profoundly alter the archipelago's social, cultural, and political landscape (Rumeu, 2006; Lobo 2012). As European powers began to assert their influence, various hypotheses emerged in an attempt to explain the presence of settlers on these Atlantic islands. However, the construction of knowledge about this pre-conquest world was severely hindered by the absence of Indigenous chronicles, leaving European ethnohistorical written sources as the primary, albeit biased, source of information about the ancient Canarians. These sources, originating from an external, Western, non-Indigenous perspective, inevitably shaped the understanding of the archipelago's past, often marginalizing Indigenous voices and perspectives (Farrujia, 2014).

The undervaluation of Indigenous knowledge led to a process of cultural ethnocide, resulting in the progressive loss of traditional practices, beliefs, and ways of life. While the Indigenous population survived on the islands, the process of crossbreeding and assimilation further contributed to the erosion of distinct cultural markers. European colonizers, lacking a tradition of listening to the 'other,' sought to assimilate the Indigenous population, leading to the suppression of Indigenous languages, customs, and spiritual beliefs (Farrujia & Martín, 2024). Today, the absence of ethnically or culturally differentiated Indigenous groups on the islands stands as a stark reminder of the profound impact of colonialism on the archipelago's cultural heritage, despite genetic studies confirming the presence of an Indigenous human component, reaching as high as 49% in La Gomera (Fregel et al., 2019).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the Canary Islands became entangled in the broader context of European imperialism and the colonial division of Africa. The archipelago's geostrategic location in relation to Africa and its potential for expansion throughout the South Atlantic region made it a focal point in the imperialist ambitions of countries such as France and Germany. This geopolitical significance led to the involvement of French and German academics in archaeological studies of Canarian prehistory, further shaping the interpretation of the islands' past (Ortiz, 2016).

French scholars, driven by French ambitions in the Canary Islands, developed a Frenchified view of the Canarian Indigenous people, attempting to justify French interventionism in the archipelago. Linking the first settlers of the Canary Islands to the Cro-Magnon race and the Celts, they sought to establish a historical connection between the islands and European civilization. In contrast, German scholars associated the settlement of the Canary Islands with the Aryan race and the Indo-European world, reflecting the prevailing racial and cultural ideologies of the time. The influence of unilineal evolutionism on these scholars led them to draw forced archaeological comparisons between the Indigenous period of the Canary Islands and French or German archaeological contexts, further distorting the understanding of the archipelago's unique cultural heritage (Farrujia, 2014).

These practices aligned with broader trends in 19th and 20th century imperial archaeology, where colonized subjects were systematically objectified and their cultures represented through hierarchical models of development (Trigger, 2006). The representation of the Canarian Indigenous culture followed a similar trajectory to that of other Indigenous groups in Africa, Oceania, and the Americas: valorised for its "authenticity" yet stripped of agency and presented as disconnected from the present. In this sense, Canarian archaeology operated within what Mbembe (2001) refers to as the "colonial library"—a system of knowledge production that frames colonized peoples as static and legible only through the categories of the colonizer.

During Francisco Franco's dictatorship (1939–1975), archaeology was strategically mobilized to reinforce the regime's narrative of a unified and timeless Spanish nation. Rather than functioning solely as an academic discipline, archaeological research became intertwined with state ideology, serving to legitimize Spain's political and territorial aspirations (Quero, 2002). Scholars aligned with the regime promoted the notion that the Indigenous peoples of the Canary Islands shared deep historical ties with North African populations located in areas that had fallen under Spanish colonial rule. This claim formed the basis of what Francoist scholars termed an "Archaeology of the Empire," a framework designed to assert the existence of a long-standing Hispano-African cultural sphere stretching back to prehistory (Farrujia, 2014).

The political purpose behind this narrative was clear: it sought to provide historical justification for Spain's continued presence in the Sahara and to reinforce the idea of an inherently Iberian —or broadly Hispanic— identity extending beyond the Peninsula. Archaeological interpretations were thus shaped to align with the geopolitical interests of the dictatorship, presenting the archipelago as an integral component of a historical unity between Spain and North Africa (Farrujia, 2014).

This ideological instrumentalization of archaeology relied heavily on the theoretical foundations of cultural historicism, the dominant paradigm during those decades. Combined with a deeply conservative and Catholic anthropological outlook (Gracia, 2009), cultural historicism encouraged models based on expansive cultural circles and assumptions of prehistoric homogeneity. Such frameworks made it easier to establish artificial parallels between ancient Canarian societies and European or North African cultural traditions, producing narratives that conveniently supported the regime's identity politics.

Although contemporary research leaves little doubt about the Amazigh origins of the Canary Islands' Indigenous population (Ramos, 2014), Franco-era interpretations consistently emphasized European or Hispanic connections. These selective readings generated multiple, often contradictory, versions of the archipelago's past—each shaped by the political needs of the mo-

ment. As a result, Francoist archaeology played a crucial role in constructing Eurocentric representations of Canarian history, influencing not only academic discourse but also the stories told in museums and educational settings.

4 Museums as spaces of colonial memory representation: reifying the canarian indigenous people

Museums, as institutions dedicated to the preservation, study, and exhibition of cultural and historical artefacts, play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of the past. Far from being neutral spaces of preservation and education, these institutions have historically reproduced the ideological frameworks of colonialism—selecting, classifying, and displaying artefacts in ways that reinforce Eurocentric visions of history, culture, and identity (Bennett, 2004; Rassool, 2015). Museums are not neutral spaces; they are often implicated in power dynamics and can serve to reinforce colonial ideologies (Macdonald, 2022). In the case of the Canary Islands, the development of museums and their representation of the Indigenous past have been significantly influenced by colonial power relations and Eurocentric perspectives (Farrujia, 2020)[2].

The development of archaeological collections in the Canary Islands must be situated within the broader museological landscape of the nineteenth century, when European nations expanded and institutionalized the display of material culture from peoples categorized as "primitive" or prehistoric. Although the earliest antiquarian collections in the Western world date back to the sixteenth century, it was not until the late nineteenth century that museums became central arenas for assembling, classifying, and exhibiting the material remains of non-European societies (Bennett, 2013). This period saw the consolidation of curatorial models that reflected the imperial and scientific ambitions of competing European powers.

In the Canary Islands, these trends materialized early. The first documented exhibitions of Indigenous human remains and artifacts appeared in 1840 at the Museo Casilda in Tacoronte (Tenerife), followed shortly by displays within the scientific societies that emerged later in the century—such as the Gabinete Científico in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, El Museo Canario in Las Palmas, and La Cosmológica in La Palma. The museological frameworks developed in these institutions were shaped by European intellectual currents and would remain remarkably stable into the twenty-first century (Farrujia, 2020).

A key factor behind this continuity was the strong influence of the French museological tradition. The model adopted in the Canary Islands at the end of the nineteenth century mirrored prevailing French approaches to classification and display, which prioritized typology, chronology, and racialized interpretive schemes (Ortiz, 2016). The French interpretive model exemplified broader imperial archaeological practices described by Trigger (2006), in which colonized peoples were placed within hierarchical schemes of human development. In the Canary Islands, such frameworks simultaneously celebrated the "authenticity" of Indigenous culture while disconnecting it from contemporary society, relegating it to a timeless and exoticized past. This dynamic illustrates what Mbembe (2001) later conceptualized as the "colonial library": a system of knowledge production that renders colonized subjects legible only through the classificatory and epistemic categories imposed by colonial powers.

Following the private initiatives of the 19th century led by scientific societies and cabinets established by the bourgeois intellectuals of the Canary Islands, the Franco regime took control in 1939, centralizing the administration of museums, expanding archaeological fieldwork, and reinforcing nationalist ideology. Museums became the primary medium for disseminating this knowledge. Exhibits featured the *xaxos* or embalmed bodies, alongside artifacts such as pottery, lithic tools, and bone artefacts, which were framed as both Neolithic and European in origin. This intervention by the Spanish government introduced its own interpretation of history, establishing institutional structures and an administrative framework. The Franco regime's approach to the Indigenous Canarian past was marked by a relationship of unequal domination. The archaeology of the archipelago was shaped by the scientific narratives propagated by Francoist intellectuals, who recontextualized the remains of the ancient Canarians within a Hispanicized framework.

2 Museums, as Western European institutions, emerged within specific historical and epistemic frameworks. Many Indigenous cultures and nations do not traditionally maintain museums and may view the exhibition of certain objects —especially human remains— outside of their cultural and ceremonial contexts as inappropriate or alien to their heritage practices (Lonetree, 2012; Macdonald, 2022).

The museological narratives developed in the Canary Islands have often served to reify the Indigenous people, presenting them as static, primitive, and disconnected from the present. The exhibition of embalmed remains and artefacts in glass cases, without adequate contextualization or sensitivity, has contributed to the objectification and dehumanization of the Indigenous people. This reification is deeply rooted in colonial power dynamics, where Indigenous cultures are often treated as objects of study and display, rather than as living, dynamic societies with their own histories and perspectives (Rassool, 2015).

5 Questioning colonial narratives through indigenous heritage and museum practices

In the 21st century, even as evolutionism has faced both widespread adoption and subsequent critique, practices such as the commercialization of collections, cultural historicism, colonial policies, and traditional museological narratives remain entrenched (Ortiz, 2016). The *xaxos* or embalmed bodies of the ancient Canarians continue to feature prominently in the glass showcases of archaeological museums, while also being utilized in contemporary art installations, as previously discussed (Farrujia, 2020). This enduring situation resonates with Theodor Adorno's (2008) observations on museums, which he metaphorically describes as mausoleums, repositories of lifeless and static objects that are presented as consumer goods representing the nation.

Discussions about the objectification of Indigenous peoples in museums and archaeological practice can be better understood through the conceptual lens of reification, a notion rooted in Marxist thought and later reworked by Georg Lukács and Axel Honneth. Marx first described how capitalist systems transform human relations into relations between things, obscuring the social and historical processes that produce them. Lukács expanded this idea, arguing that reification occurs when people and their lived realities are treated as fixed, object-like entities, stripped of agency and reduced to mere data points within institutional classifications (García, 2022).

This theoretical tradition illuminates the dynamics at play when Indigenous human remains are handled as museum artifacts. Lukács' analysis stresses how objects acquire a seemingly autonomous status, overshadowing the human stories and relationships embedded within them. In the context of archaeological collections, this results in ancestral remains being approached not as individuals with social and cultural significance but as typological specimens that serve scientific or curatorial aims.

Axel Honneth later reframed reification as a failure of recognition, introducing an affective and relational dimension to the concept. For Honneth (2005), reification arises when the basic empathetic and ethical relationships that ground human understanding are forgotten. Once recognition is suspended, the world becomes populated by detached objects rather than interconnected subjects. Applying this perspective to museum practice reveals how the treatment of Indigenous remains as neutral scientific material contributes to their dehumanization: their ties to specific communities, territories, and histories are dissolved, and they enter classificatory systems that prioritize knowledge production over human dignity.

Anthropologists and critical heritage scholars have highlighted that such processes are not merely technical or curatorial; they are deeply rooted in colonial epistemologies. Museums have historically reorganized Indigenous bodies and belongings into categories such as "anthropological," "ethnographic," or "archaeological," generating what Alvarado (2008) terms a "colonial hierarchy." Through this hierarchy, the remains of colonized peoples become subject to institutional ownership, national heritage laws, and even market dynamics. Reification, in this sense, is not only a philosophical concept but also a lived political condition reproduced in exhibition design, legal classification, and heritage governance (Carina, 2020).

Understanding reification through the combined insights of Marx, Lukács, and Honneth helps expose how the transformation of Indigenous ancestors into museum objects perpetuates colonial forms of knowledge and authority. It underscores the need to move beyond purely scientific or aesthetic justifications for display and toward frameworks that foreground recognition, relationality, and the ethical responsibilities owed to descendant communities.

To address this issue in the Canary Islands, amendments proposed by the undersigned (Farrujia, 2020) were made to the draft of Law 11/2019 on Cultural Heritage of the Canary Islands, which was enacted on April 25, 2019[3]. Debates around the treatment of Indigenous human re-

3 The full text of Law 11/2019 on Cultural Heritage of the Canary Islands is available at the following link: https://www.boe.es/buscar/act.php?id=BOE-A-2019-8707

mains in the Canary Islands entered a new phase with the drafting and approval of Law 11/2019 on Cultural Heritage of the Canary Islands. The original bill contained a controversial provision—Article 87—which placed human skeletal remains and material artifacts within the same legal category. By subsuming both under the umbrella of "material culture", the draft law reproduced long-standing colonial logics that regarded human bodies as collectible objects comparable to ceramics or tools.

This approach was challenged during the legislative process, leading to the introduction of Amendment 121, which fundamentally reshaped Article 87. The amendment created a dedicated legal category for human remains, formally separating them from archaeological artifacts. Under the revised article, human remains are now recognized as sensitive heritage, whose management requires specific safeguards grounded in respect for dignity and cross-cultural ethical norms. The text also incorporates explicit provisions for repatriation and mandates the conservation of burial sites after excavation, ensuring that skeletal material is not treated as disposable once scientific study has been completed (Farrujia, 2020).

A second modification, Amendment 122, targeted the domain of museum governance. Inserted into Article 110, it established a mechanism through which members of the public may request the removal of items from museum displays if deemed culturally offensive or ethically inappropriate. This reform opens a channel for communities—particularly descendant—to challenge the continued exhibition of ancestral remains. It also encourages more dialogical relations between museums and society by recognizing that public sensibilities, cultural rights, and heritage ethics must shape curatorial decisions.

Law 11/2019 thus marked the first attempt within the Spanish legal system to build a dedicated framework for the management of human remains as a distinct category of heritage. While the legislation represents a significant step forward, its implementation has been uneven. Despite the law's emphasis on dignity and sensitivity, Indigenous remains continue to appear in museum displays, revealing the persistence of institutional inertia and the lingering influence of colonial heritage practices. The effectiveness of the reforms ultimately depends on political will, the involvement of heritage professionals, and the active participation of the communities most directly affected.

Comparative experiences elsewhere—such as repatriation practices under NAGPRA in the United States (Fine-Dare, 2002) or Māori-led protocols in Aotearoa/New Zealand (Smith, 2012)—demonstrate that meaningful change requires sustained collaboration between museums and descendant groups (Henare, 2005). In South Africa, agency has been exercised by named cultural communities and nations—e.g., Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho Tswana and San—whose leadership has informed restitution, reburial and community curation processes and heritage interpretation (Rassool, 2015)[4]. These cases demonstrate that meaningful change is possible when institutions are willing to confront their histories and share authority with those whose heritage they claim to represent.

In this regard, Law 11/2019 lays an important foundation, but its transformative potential can only be realized if the legal provisions translate into tangible shifts in practice, interpretation, and institutional accountability.

Nevertheless, some signs of change can be observed in the Canary Islands, albeit limited and uneven. The *Museo Arqueológico de Tenerife*, for example, has begun to revise certain aspects of its permanent exhibitions, introducing more contextual information and questioning older racial typologies, although the Indigenous anthropological remains are still exhibited, even after the recent decolonial policies developed in 2025 in the National Spanish Museums (Molina, 2025). Collaborative projects involving local scholars and cultural associations have pushed for a more inclusive heritage narrative that recognizes the diversity and resilience of Indigenous legacies (Santana, 2018; Serrano et al., 2023; Farrujia, 2023). Nonetheless, institutional inertia and political sensitivities continue to hamper deeper transformations.

To decolonize museums in the Canary Islands, it is essential to move beyond the reification of the Indigenous people and create more inclusive and participatory spaces. This requires a critical re-evaluation of existing museological narratives, addressing issues of representation, repatriation, and community engagement (Lonetree, 2012). By transforming museums into spaces of dialogue, learning, and cultural exchange, it is possible to challenge colonial legacies and promote a more equitable and respectful understanding of the Canary Islands' Indigenous heritage.

4 The proposal developed in New Zealand would not fit the context of the Canary Islands, as the process of ethnocide carried out since the 15th century in the archipelago has resulted in the absence of a distinct indigenous ethnic group today.

6 Education as a site of colonial reproduction: the silencing of the indigenous world

Education, as a fundamental institution for the transmission of knowledge and values, plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective identities. However, educational systems can also serve as sites of colonial reproduction, perpetuating dominant cultural perspectives and marginalizing the histories and experiences of Indigenous peoples. In the case of the Canary Islands, the educational system has historically contributed to the silencing of the Indigenous world, reinforcing colonial ideologies and perpetuating Eurocentric biases (Karboune, 2022).

The narrative promoted by museums has fostered a 'museum culture' regarding the Indigenous world, leading to the objectification of the Indigenous Canary Islanders. However, what has occurred within the realm of education? The following analysis highlights how Spanish educational policies have historically overlooked the inclusion of Canarian perspectives and, more specifically, Indigenous heritage, which has been insufficiently incorporated into curricula since the 19th century.

Following the implementation of the Moyano Law in 1857, a nationwide education system was established in Spain. This system was initially tailored to the needs of the social elite. In the Canary Islands, the curriculum lacked content specifically addressing the archipelago's unique context. Instead, education prioritized the assimilation of Canarian society into a centralized Spanish identity, fostering patriotism. Within this framework, Juan de la Puerta Canseco's *Descripción Geográfica de las Islas Canarias* (Geographical Description of the Canary Islands), published in 1861, became part of Canarian educational materials by Royal Order on November 1, 1863 (Karboune, 2022).

Nevertheless, the educational landscape shifted significantly under Franco's dictatorship, starting in 1939, as a centralized model excluded regional content. Across Spain, the curriculum was heavily influenced by Catholic values and a strong emphasis on the Spanish language (Corchón et al., 2013). Despite this homogenizing tendency, isolated efforts emerged, such as Luis Diego Cuscoy's 1942 initiative in Tenerife. He created the school booklet *Leyendo Islas: Método completo de lectura* (Reading Islands: A Comprehensive Reading Method), designed to teach children literacy using vocabulary, place names, and cultural references from the Canary Islands (Karboune, 2022).

The centralized educational model persisted until the enactment of the General Education Law in 1970, which introduced the possibility of incorporating regional specificities into education. However, this change was only applied to the final two years of primary education (seventh and eighth grades) through the Order issued on June 30, 1977 (Karboune, 2022).

In the Canary Islands, the inclusion of local content was mostly symbolic. It was thanks to the efforts of educators—especially the Canarian Movement for Pedagogical Renewal Tamonante during the 1977–78 academic year—that a meaningful integration of Canarian topics began. Drawing inspiration from Célestin Freinet's pedagogical principles, this movement organized summer workshops to prepare teachers in incorporating regional content (Ferraz, 2017). Within this context, the publication of *Natura y Cultura de las Islas Canarias* (Nature and Culture of the Canary Islands) in 1977, directed by Pedro Hernández, marked a notable step. Nevertheless, its representation of the Indigenous world largely reflected Franco-era archaeological narratives, presenting a Neolithic Indigenous past with connections to Hispanic influences (Farrujia, 2014).

After the Franco regime ended and the Spanish Constitution was ratified in 1978, the country transitioned into a decentralized system comprising 17 autonomous communities, including the Canary Islands. This newfound administrative decentralization began to affect education after decades of strict centralism. The *Ley Orgánica de Ordenación General del Sistema Educativo* (Organic Law on the General Organization of the Education System), approved in 1990, granted autonomous regions the ability to develop 45% of their curriculum in areas with a regional language and 35% in other areas, including the Canary Islands (Turienzo, 2020). To support the incorporation of regional content, the *Programa Contenidos Canarios* (Canarian Contents Program) was established in 1993 to train teachers and facilitate the integration of Canarian subjects into classrooms, continuing until 2003.

Considering the historical background and the legal measures enacted in Spain, how have these influenced the representation of the Indigenous Canary Islands within education? Currently, while the curriculum does address the Indigenous world of the Canary Islands, it is primarily presented through textbooks, which remain the cornerstone of the educational system. Research

(Farrujia et al., 2022a) highlights the limited inclusion of Canarian content in these materials, in compulsory education, falling short of the quotas set by educational laws. Furthermore, the depiction of the Indigenous world often adopts a Eurocentric lens. Although the African origins of the settlers are acknowledged, Africa's role is reduced to a mere geographical fact, with its cultural contributions to the Indigenous Canary Islands neither appreciated nor explored. In essence, identity markers are framed in ways that exclude the influence of Amazigh culture on the archipelago.

This Eurocentric view is not confined to the Canary Islands but extends to other regions and topics both within Spain and abroad (Paredes, 2012). Additionally, the portrayal of Indigenous Canarian heritage often involves comparisons with major Western cultural accomplishments. For instance, textbooks frequently highlight ceramic artefacts from islands like Gran Canaria and La Palma, emphasizing their intricate decoration and aesthetic appeal. This approach establishes a direct connection between heritage and visual value. As a result, the methodology and focus underpinning these textbooks shapes the selection of cultural materials and heritage assets (Farrujia et al., 2022a).

One significant issue is the lack of archaeological context given to heritage objects in textbooks. These items are often presented without accompanying explanations or captions, reducing them to mere illustrations. This approach resembles how material culture is displayed in museums, where archaeological artefacts are frequently exhibited in glass cases as static, "lifeless" objects (Ruiz, 2009).

Additionally, textbooks tend to reinforce "terminal narratives" that highlight the extinction of Indigenous cultures and underscore the dominance of the conquerors. This storytelling framework, rooted in Canarian historiography since the Franco era, still permeates the teaching of social sciences and history. The conquest of the Canary Islands is typically portrayed as the start of a new historical chapter in which the Indigenous presence vanishes entirely. This narrative overlooks the cultural fusion resulting from the conquest and colonization—an essential aspect of Canarian identity. By neglecting this perspective, textbooks hinder students' ability to fully appreciate the region's cultural heritage, limiting their understanding of its rich and complex legacy (Farrujia et al., 2022a).

The educational system in the Canary Islands has historically contributed to the silencing of Indigenous voices and perspectives, reinforcing colonial ideologies and perpetuating Eurocentric biases. The curriculum has often prioritized Spanish history and culture, marginalizing the history and cultural contributions of the Indigenous people. Textbooks have often presented a biased and incomplete picture of the archipelago's past, perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing colonial narratives. As a result, many students in the Canary Islands have grown up with a limited understanding of their own Indigenous heritage, disconnected from their cultural roots.

Textbook analysis reveals, therefore, a complementary dynamic in schools. Legal provisions permitting regional content have not been translated into substantive curricular change because textbooks continue to prioritize conquest narratives and to present material culture as isolated illustrations rather than as evidence of living traditions. This curricular form—combining symbolic inclusion (selected images) with substantive omission (lack of social, economic or cultural context)—functions to classify Indigenous heritage as a relic and thereby reproduces the very epistemic hierarchies that the museological field sustains (Lonetree, 2012).

To decolonize education in the Canary Islands, it is essential to challenge these colonial legacies and create more inclusive and equitable learning environments. This requires a critical re-evaluation of the curriculum, incorporating Indigenous historical contents from a decolonial perspective, and promoting critical thinking. By transforming education into a space of empowerment and cultural affirmation, it is possible to challenge colonial legacies and foster a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Canary Islands' Indigenous heritage.

7 *Memorias Guanches*: a decolonial educational project

In response to the challenges outlined above, the Department of Didactics of the Social Sciences at the University of La Laguna has developed the educational project *Memorias Guanches* from a critical and decolonial perspective. This project, funded by the Department of Historical Heritage of the City Council of La Laguna, targets primary and secondary school students, aiming to deepen their understanding of the Indigenous world of the Canary Islands. It does so through a collection of short stories that, while literary in nature, are rooted in archaeological, documentary, and ethno-historical sources. The focus is specifically on the period of interaction between the Indigenous population and the conquerors after Tenerife's conquest in 1496.

As noted above, the project materials were made available to schools as a curricular and didactic resource at the request of the funding municipal body, which did not commission a formal impact evaluation; consequently, no systematic outcome data on student learning or classroom implementation were collected as part of that dissemination. The initiative was financed by the municipal administration in office at the time. However, following the change in political leadership within that specific department after the municipal elections on 28 May 2023, this second phase has not been commissioned to date.

7.1 Project description and status

Memorias Guanches is an applied pedagogical initiative that exists as a curricular package composed of: (1) a corpus of 18 short stories grounded in archaeological, documentary and ethnohistorical sources; (2) teacher guides with contents, activities, learning objectives and session plans; and (3) community-link activity templates for site visits.

The Municipal Historical Archive (Archivo Histórico Municipal) was included as one of the key community-link sites, designed especially for secondary-level students, as it preserves documentary collections dating back to the 16th century. The archive holds the Cabildo of Tenerife's agreements and ordinances, which document the measures imposed on Indigenous groups who resisted integration—such as refusing to settle in colonial villages or to adopt the newly imposed Christian faith, amongst others. Complementing these archival sources, the Memorias Guanches literary texts incorporate information drawn from wills, notarial protocols, and other legal documents, thereby attesting to the participation of Indigenous individuals in everyday social and economic life from the 16th century. Taken together, the archival records and the literary materials provide students with a direct encounter with primary sources that illuminate both Indigenous agency and the coercive mechanisms through which the colonial order was consolidated.

7.2 Concrete classroom activities

To illustrate, classroom sequences engage students through the following steps—structured across several sessions and detailed on the project webpage—following the same overall framework in both primary and secondary education, albeit with the corresponding curricular, didactic and cognitive adaptations for each level:

Activation phase

- A brief introductory activity activates prior knowledge and frames the topic before reading and field work; activities include quick prompts, a timeline review, and a map orientation to situate the unit.

Text and object work

- Guided reading of a historically anchored short stories that foregrounds Guanche daily life.
- Object based enquiry using local museum images where students hypothesize material function and social meaning; these activities promote textual and visual analysis within the classroom session.

Spatial localisation and contextualisation

- A targeted classroom task locates the story's Indigenous characters on contemporary maps, distinguishing urban and rural settings according to each case (for example, Indigenous people who continued living apart from the new settler towns, or those who became incorporated into emerging urban centers such as La Laguna).
- This mapping work prepares students for the field element by linking characters to specific landscapes, streets and historical sites associated with Indigenous presence and post-conquest transformations.

Field walk

- A guided field walk through sectors of the historic center of La Laguna traces spaces historically inhabited or repurposed after the conquest. Teachers and students narrate and critically examine processes of ethnocide and acculturation that transformed Indigenous lifeways, linking streets, buildings and place names to episodes of dispossession, cultural suppression and continuity. The walk includes structured stops (the Historical Archive just for secondary-level students) with short contextual comments, archival images or map overlays, and prompts for reflective note taking to ensure difficult themes (violence, loss, assimilation) are addressed with historical accuracy and pedagogical sensitivity.

Follow up and assessment (in class)

- A reflective writing task, completed at school after the field visit, connects local heritage to questions of identity and power.
- The sequence culminates in a collaborative final product: the class divides into small groups, each selecting and developing a distinct Indigenous character. One member records a first person performance while peers support writing, rehearsal and staging; groups are encouraged to ensure gender balance so both male and female perspectives are represented. Groups jointly compose a first person short narrative, rehearse and interpret the monologue, and produce an audiovisual recording of the performance.

These structured activities are designed to move learners from passive reception to critical inquiry, to foster collective perspective taking and empathy, and to model heritage practices grounded in collaboration between educators and municipal archival staff.

7.3 Goals and objectives of the educational project

The educational project and its activities are designed to help students explore the enduring Guanche heritage that has survived to the present day. This is conveyed through various forms of tangible, intangible, and immovable cultural heritages featured in the narratives. The project also incorporates colonial heritage, placing special emphasis on the historic centre of La Laguna, recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1999. Central to the project's approach is a historical perspective grounded in diversity, which highlights the contributions of both men and women. This fosters a value-based education that moves beyond androcentric interpretations of history.

The portrayal of the natural environment is of central importance, since the Indigenous world cannot be fully understood without acknowledging its profound ties to mountains, water, the sky, and other essential resources. In this sense, Indigenous heritage emerges as a crucial educational theme, with the environment functioning as an indispensable framework for interpreting the cultural accomplishments of its people.

Incorporating a decolonial perspective into the project is essential for moving beyond conventional Eurocentric narratives. By critically examining the history of the conquest and emphasizing the agency of Indigenous peoples, the project aims to challenge the enduring depiction of the Guanche as passive victims of colonization. Instead, it underscores their resilience and capacity for adaptation, acknowledging their active role in shaping their own history and cultural identity. In doing so, the project repositions Indigenous peoples as contributors to the rich cultural diversity of the Canary Islands, rather than mere subjects of historical events. This approach supports the broader educational objective of fostering critical thinking and advancing a more inclusive view of the past, breaking away from oversimplified or one-dimensional interpretations.

Additionally, the project underscores the value of heritage not only as a means of exploring the past but also as a catalyst for fostering collective memory. Within the framework of the project, heritage is conceived as a dynamic and evolving process, encompassing the continual reinterpretation and contextualization of historical narratives. Through the activities included in the project, students are encouraged to view heritage as a participatory and negotiated experience, where diverse perspectives on history intersect, enriching their understanding of the present. This approach strengthens students' connection to their heritage, empowering them to take active roles in cultural preservation and to champion the importance of cultural diversity within their communities (UNESCO, 2021).

The project stands out for its capacity to link formal education with the active collaboration of municipal archival staff. By integrating local heritage and given the fragmentary and mediated nature of Indigenous sources, the project develops narratives on the Indigenous past rather than purporting to reproduce 'narratives from' it. In this sense, the project helps students cultivate a sense of local and cultural identity while linking it to broader global Indigenous struggles. Additionally, the use of literature as the core educational medium enriches the learning process by fostering empathy and emotional engagement (Cremin et al., 2014). This comprehensive approach not only deepens students' academic understanding but also encourages them to critically reflect on contemporary issues like colonialism, cultural appropriation, and identity within their own context.

Employing literature as a foundation for educational initiatives is particularly valuable for several reasons: its capacity to innovate traditional teaching methods, its effectiveness in developing competencies and foundational skills in alternative ways, and its ability to complement textbooks while inspiring students' creativity and imagination (Cremin et al., 2014). By presenting historical and cultural content in a dynamic and relatable literary form, students are better equipped to internalize and engage with complex historical topics. Moreover, literature serves as a bridge for interdisciplinary learning, merging subjects like history, social studies, literature, and environmental education into a cohesive educational experience. This fusion of analytical thinking, emotional connection, and intellectual challenge enables the project to offer a richer and more diverse learning environment for students (Drake & Burns, 2004).

8 Conclusions: echoing indigenous heritage in the 21st century

This paper has shown how the colonial library, inscribed in archaeological practice, museum classification and curricular and didactic production, continues to shape Canarian public memory, a dynamic that resonates with comparable processes of colonial knowledge production and memory formation in other regions of the world. It further argues that legal reform (Law 11/2019), institutional shifts in museums, and community centered pedagogies can constitute a coordinated pathway to decolonization only if accompanied by sustained political commitment and empirical evaluation.

Given that this study relies predominantly on documentary evidence and that data on implementation is uneven, claims regarding learning outcomes should be regarded as provisional and subject to empirical verification. Robust evidence will need classroom experiments, follow-up studies with students over time, museum ethnography, and policy analysis to link reforms such as Law 11/2019 to actual institutional change. Future research should prioritize systematic classroom trials, stakeholder interviews (museum and archive professionals, teachers, community groups) and long term monitoring of restitution and reinterpretation processes to assess whether these combined measures achieve durable epistemic change.

Decolonizing the communication of the past in the Canary Islands, therefore, is an ongoing process that requires a sustained commitment from researchers, educators, policymakers, and community members. Museums should adopt participatory governance protocols that include local scholars and cultural associations in decisions concerning display, interpretation and repatriation. Education authorities should mandate curricular modules that integrate contextualised local heritage materials and provide teacher training on decolonial pedagogies, accompanied by textbook review protocols that move beyond tokenistic inclusion. Policymakers should operationalise Law 11/2019 through binding museum standards, transparent restitution procedures and funding for community-led heritage projects, coupled with monitoring mechanisms to assess institutional change.

The narratives presented in Canary Islands museums and schools, as argued, are shaped by political and colonial legacies that continue to frame Indigenous history as static and marginal. Archaeological practice, museum classification, and curricular choices have reproduced Eurocentric perspectives that valorise colonial narratives while sidelining Indigenous agency and continuity.

This reductive framing often reduces Guanche artefacts to curiosities or decorative objects, detached from the social contexts that gave them meaning. As a result, public and academic understandings frequently overlook the complexity of Indigenous lifeways and their ongoing influence on contemporary Canarian society through processes of cultural intermingling.

Correcting this requires a shift from aesthetic or ahistorical display toward interpretive frameworks that treat material culture and archaeological remains as evidence of lived, dynamic societies. Inclusive, decolonial approaches in both museum curation and school curricula can foreground Indigenous agency, reveal processes of dispossession and resilience, and situate local histories within broader transregional connections.

Policy and educational interventions are complementary routes to change: legal reform (for example, the revision of the Canary Islands Cultural Heritage Law) must be matched by pedagogical innovation (for example, the creation of decolonial educational programmes) so that institutional practices and classroom experiences mutually reinforce more nuanced narratives.

Reassessing presentation, interpretation, and teaching practices will help dismantle entrenched Eurocentric assumptions and foster richer, more empathetic public memories that recognise the past and present contributions of Indigenous peoples in the Canary Islands and beyond. By challenging colonial legacies, promoting Indigenous perspectives, and fostering critical thinking, it is possible to create a more equitable and inclusive understanding of the archipelago's rich and complex history. In the 21st century, reclaiming Indigenous heritage is not only a matter of historical accuracy but also a vital step towards building a more just and sustainable future for all.

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Ethical statement

This study adheres strictly to ethical research standards. As it did not involve human participants, issues of anonymity and consent were not applicable. The research processes were conducted responsibly, ensuring compliance with all relevant ethical and legal guidelines.

ORCID iD

A. José Farrujia de la Rosa https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3035-5905

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