



Older adult Cubans moving to the Canary Islands (Spain): Migrants' strategies in later life

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ABSTRACT

The research on migration to Spain of Cuban citizens in later life proposes to overcome the lack of academic knowledge from these analytical perspectives: migrations of older adult people beyond the issue of lifestyle mobility; the transnational diasporic nexus favoring migrations; and the Cuban community residing abroad, outside the United States of America. The combination of these elements in this case study shows the agency of older adult Cuban citizens who move to the Canary Islands, trying to achieve a greater level of material well-being and taking advantage of the diasporic ties between the Canary Islands and Cuba; but this is a process that brings out, simultaneously, feelings of dislocation and nostalgia in the stage of old age. The development of a mixed methodology and the focus on the life course of migrants offer an opportunity to reflect on the cultural and social construction of ageing in migration studies. Consequently, this research allows a deepening of knowledge on human mobility from the perspective of ageing in a counter-diasporic migration, showing the relationship between emigration and life cycle and demonstrating the strength and spirit of achievement of those individuals who decide to emigrate despite their advanced age.

Introduction

For emigrants born in Cuba, Spain is the second most common country of destination in the world after the United States (USA) (Aja, Rodríguez, Orosa, & Albizu-Campos, 2017). This immigration flow has acquired an increasing dimension since the turn of the century and unlike what happens with other streams of immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean, it has maintained an upward trend with very little variation. The global financial crisis brought in Spain a negative net migration rate during the period 2012–2014 (Domínguez-Mujica, López de Lera, Ortega-Rivera and Pérez-Caramés, 2020), while the COVID-19 pandemic caused a strong offset of the subsequent recovery during the period 2015–2019. Nevertheless, throughout these critic stages, Cuban inflows showed a lower inflection. The search for a solid interpretation of this trend leads to a diversity of arguments, the transnational diasporic linkages, which rest on the former emigration of Spaniards to Cuba, playing a prominent role.

From the end of the XIX century the Caribbean economy, in full productive expansion, demanded skilled workers to farm sugar cane, for the commercialization of sugar and for the start-up of different types of business and services. The former emigration of Spaniards to Cuba

satisfied this labor demand and for this reason, after a century of history, the main Spanish region receiving Cuban immigration is the Canary Islands. Therefore, the long and close historical connections between the Canary Islands and Cuba have created a different diasporic context to that of the USA and other Spanish regions (Ascanio-Sánchez & García-Cuesta, 2017; O'Reilly-Herrera, 2007).

These relationships explain why the settlement provinces of the former Canarian emigrants still constitute the birthplace of many of the Cuban immigrants today living in the archipelago (Rodríguez-Rodríguez, Domínguez-Mujica, & Santana-Rivero, 2020). The Spanish legislation conferring preferential access to citizenship to the natives of former colonies and to descendants of those Spaniards who lost their nationality through exile, has been crucial in the process. In this way, Canarian origin has become a practical 'vehicle' that has allowed them to overcome difficulties in the migration process.

The recovery of the Spanish citizenship of their ancestors has opened the doors to the acquisition of the Spanish passport, as well as to different types of aid, subsidies, and benefits. To this factor must be added the strengthening of networks of social, economic, political, and cultural exchanges between Cubans staying on and outside the island, feeding the migratory system itself and reinforcing bonds between

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people with a shared history. These transnational practices cross ideological divides and build strong Cuban kinship ties, extended over territories, markets and states (Duany, 2007). Therefore, from a symbolic point of view, Cuba's relationship with the Canary Islands has enormous significance, since it reveals shared cultural habits and common residential preferences with respect to those of the Canarian population itself.

Besides, from a sociodemographic point of view, the Cuban community in the Canary Islands has a differentiated profile with respect to other groups of immigrants from the same geographical area, the Caribbean. The proportion of those over 55 years of age in 2020 exceeded 30% of the total number of Cuban immigrants, while in the rest of the communities of Central America and South America this group only reached 20% (INEb, 2021).

It should be remembered that the Canary Islands have been one of the tourist destinations that has attracted an important group of non-working immigrants in later life from Northern and Western Europe, most of them being described as retirement migrants or lifestyle migrants. However, this term cannot be given to the older adult Cuban citizens residing in this region. Their motivations, socio-professional profile, work situation, family and community ties, and their well-being expectations are different from those lifestyle migrants because they are conditioned by a low level of economic income at the time of their departure. Therefore, this community presents great diversity and does not conform a homogeneous group. This renews mainstream research on migrations as the traditional pull factors of greater economic opportunity in the receiving country are not cited as drivers of migration among the older adult people (Sadarangani & Jun, 2015). Furthermore, except for studies on lifestyle migrations, the mobility of the older adult has been left in the shadows, the attention of researchers being focused on the young or early and middle-aged adults who move abroad to improve their life-chances.

As mentioned by King et al. (2017, 185), "The *problematique* of ageing migrants remains marginal in both migration studies and social gerontology", especially regarding economic migrants in later life. Warnes and colleagues (Warnes, Friedrich, Kellaheer, & Torres, 2004; Warnes & Williams, 2006) already defended the need to study the people who migrate in their 50s and 60s, however, those who move for reasons of job search or to receive a pension continue to be an overlooked group within the typology of older migrants, as most research focuses on lifestyle migrants, as we point out below, or on older people who migrated long ago and age in the host country (Ciobanu & Hunter, 2017). Studies on labor migration at later age (Boccagni & Ambrosini, 2012; Nazareno, Parrenas, & Fan, 2014) are the exception.

The recent publication by Bastia, Lulle, and King (2022) on older people and ageing in the framework of migration reflects on the role those older adults play in remittance sending; on the developmental implications of ageing diasporas; and on their return, all of them perspectives that complement the research developed. However, they move away from the main focus of this study: people who decide to migrate at an advanced age, assessing their ability to integrate late into the labor market of the host society or in search of social benefit. Consequently, the study developed regarding the recent emigration from Cuba to the Canary Islands offers a view that combines the transnational counter-diasporic migrations with the perspective of the life cycle of migrants, contributing to increased attention to the migration motivations in later life, beyond the issue of lifestyle and retirement migration and to understanding the processes of ageing and migration as entangled paths. In this way, this research opens a new perspective of analysis in the field of migration in later life, challenging the conventional view of older migrants as inactive and vulnerable. It highlights the initiative of those facing emigration at a later age, taking advantage of their professional and family background with the same strength and decisiveness as if they were still young.

This shaped the formulation of the scientific questions guiding the research: Is the search for economic well-being in old age the factor that

determines the migration of Cubans at a later age? Is this a differentiated and uncommon pattern compared to that of other emigrants in the course of their lives? These questions inform the following hypothesis: the emigration of Cubans in later life is due to the strength of the diasporic links that make it possible to get over homeland economic difficulties through mobility strategies, while it reveals a different social and cultural construction of the concept of ageing.

To confirm this hypothesis the research raises the following objectives: i) to set this case study in the framework of the ageing-migration nexus and in the counter diasporic-migrations; ii) to defend the suitability of empirical research based on the combination of quantitative and qualitative information to overcome the concept of ageing and replace it with that of the lifecycle; iii) to analyze the homeland and hostland legal regulations favoring migrations in later life from Cuba to Spain; iv) to characterize population flows and communities of Cubans living in Spain and, in particular, in the Canary Islands; v) to inquire about the motivations that have prompted Cubans to leave their country and their decision to select the Canary Islands as a destination; and vi) to delve into their well-being expectations and their dreams for the future. In a global world where mobility lies on close transnational linkages, the migration from Cuba to the Canary Islands reinforces the idea of the complexity of migrating at a later age.

Framework of the research

Later life migrations: The nexus between ageing and migration

The literature on older adult migration began to develop during the last decades of the 20th century while the mobility paradigm gained ground both in the USA and in the European Union (Sheller & Urry, 2006). Most of the published research addressed the issue of the named retirement or lifestyle migrations (Williams & Hall, 2000) with special attention to the receiving countries. The emergence of these investigations was such that Walters documented 232 articles between January 1990 and December 2000 in the USA and Canada alone (Walters, 2002). Research on lifestyle migrants in coastal areas of southern European countries like Spain also acquired great weight and produced a large volume of publications (Rodríguez, Casado-Díaz, & Huber, 2005).

This type of mobility has been identified as a *stricto sensu* mixture of migration flows and residential tourism, because of the interaction between travel, leisure, and migration (Cohen, Duncan, & Thulemark, 2013). Therefore, when the process of "ageing out of place" is analyzed, the limits between tourism and migration become blurred (Parreño-Castellano & Domínguez-Mujica, 2016) and they place us in the swampy ground of the delimitation of migrations for economic reasons from those other migrations related with the search for well-being in later life, challenging traditional beliefs that older people are unadaptable and unwilling to move (Wilson, 2000).

From an economic perspective in the field of migration and ageing, studies focusing on the return migrants and on those who grow old in the countries of destination have prevailed, as mentioned above. To this literature must be added the retirement migrants and those who follow their children's earlier migrations. Nevertheless, the labor migrants in later life have only recently started to come to the attention of researchers, allowing the understanding of the "processes of ageing and migration as *entwined trajectories* which unfold with specific results in different times and spaces" (King et al., 2017, 182).

In the research, it becomes even more difficult to classify Cuban citizens residing in the Canary Islands in any of those categories, since there is overlap. For this reason, it is convenient to refer to the factors conditioning the emigration of Cuban citizens in later life to the Canary Islands. These are political (emigration and immigration policies); familial (requirements of households in Cuba and the Canary Islands); individual (anticipation of ageing in poverty); financial (opportunities brought out with retirement); and, above all, transnational in nature.

This premise lets us untangle the mentioned intertwined pathways of older adult Cuban migrants and recognize a different social and cultural construction of ageing.

The counter-diasporic migrations

The second and third generation return processes have received a great deal of academic attention. Some scholars have defined them as diasporic-return (Olsson & King, 2014), others as counter-diasporic migration or as ancestral return migration (Pelliccia, 2017). These investigations have emphasized the richness and variety of this type of human mobility, which is accompanied by images, information, contact networks, as well as an upward social mobility, impossible to dissociate from the migratory fact itself. In this way, Faist indicated that the term diaspora “is a result of constantly changing socio-political boundaries and transactions across and within such boundaries, which constitute (situational) identities” (Faist, 2010, 1668). Along this same line of thought, King and Christou (2011) argue that the counter-diasporic migrations favor complex, ambiguous and emotional views of home, belonging and identity.

As said by Tsuda (2010), these migrations are also conditioned by the differences in the socioeconomic level of countries, so that the ethnic return occurs, generally, from less developed countries to more economically prosperous ancestral homelands in search of work, higher income, and a better standard of living. Nonetheless, when faced with economic pressures, the diasporic migrants return to parent homelands instead of migrating to other countries because of ethnocultural affinity they feel toward the places of ancestral origin.

Last, but not least, this return migration cannot be interpreted if the strategic value of the legislation is not considered. An important number of norms confer preferential immigration rights to citizens from former Spanish colonies and their own diasporic descendants. It is a regulatory framework that facilitates mobility and has an impact on the consolidation of solid contact networks, not only those which are personal and group (family and community) networks, but also in state-sponsored activities such as Cooperation Programs, private investment in banking and tourism and other sectors of economic activity. Even though these political and economic initiatives were not conceived as migration policies, they have created a coming and going mobility, strengthening old migration geographies (Avila-Tàpies & Domínguez-Mujica, 2015). This institutional basis also encourages migrants to use the advantages provided by obtaining Spanish citizenship as a preliminary step to re-migrate to other countries, especially to the USA (Sosa & Pérez-Díaz, 2018), when the final objective is to settle in the latter or meet there with family or friends.

The legal framework fueling migration

Spanish norms favoring Cuban immigration

The evolution of immigration flows from Cuba to the Canary Islands reflects the impact of the institutional framework that regulates these movements, in such a way that some normative modifications allow the intensity of subsequent migration to be interpreted. We refer to the next legislative provisions in the Spanish legal system.

First, the modification of the Civil Code that was carried out in 1990 (BOE (Boletín Oficial del Estado), 1990, Law 18/1990, of December 17, on the reform of the Civil Code in matters of nationality). In article 22, it institutes that one year of residence in Spain will be enough for access to citizenship, in the case of a person born outside of Spain to a father or mother, who were originally Spanish.

Second, to the modification of the Civil Code that was performed in 2002 (BOE (Boletín Oficial del Estado), 2002, Law 36/2002, of October 8, modifying the Civil Code in matters of nationality) establishing a dispensation from the requirement of legal residence of one year to recover Spanish citizenship (article 26 and first additional provision).

Third, the so-called Historical Memory Law or, in Cuba, the so-called Law of the Grandchildren (BOE (Boletín Oficial del Estado), 2007, Law 52/2007, of December 26, which recognizes and extends rights and establishes measures in favor of those who suffered persecution or violence during the civil war and the dictatorship). Explicitly, its seventh additional provision, indicates that “the acquisition by option of the Spanish nationality of origin is permitted to people whose father or mother was initially Spanish and the grandchildren of those who lost or had to renounce Spanish nationality because of exile”.

These last provisions are in addition to preceding norms granting an ethnocultural preference to citizens from former colonies. Foreigners who legally and continuously have lived in Spain for ten years have the right to acquire Spanish nationality (art. 22 CC) but, in the case of citizens from Central and South American countries, Andorra, the Philippines, Equatorial Guinea, Portugal, and for descendants of Sephardic Jews, this naturalization by residence is faster (only two years). This rule, which dates to the period of the Second Spanish Republic, is founded on the idea of a common culture based on special ties between Spain and the countries with which it shares a historical or colonial past (Finotelli & La Barbera, 2018). This preferential legislation shows that “there is an intrinsic inclination in modern nation states to select newcomers in light of their proximity to the particular ancestry” (Joppke, 2005, ix).

Finally, legal provisions on social aid, particularly beneficial for people who have immigrated after the recovery of Spanish citizenship and, fundamentally for the older adult, have also had an important influence. We refer to the so-called old age assistance pension for returned Spaniards of origin, a type of aid granted to Spaniards not born in Spain who prove a period of residence in the country of eight years, prior to applying for this benefit. Other specific subsidies for emigrants are the active insertion income for returned emigrants, and the aid for those emigrants who, over 52 years of age, were registered as job seekers in Spain. In both cases, the treatment of returnee is given to those of Spanish citizenship abroad, even if they were not born in Spain.

Cuban norms regarding emigration, citizenship/residence, and retirement

Although Cuba was a country of immigration until the middle of the 20th century, Urrutia-Barroso de (1997) points out that since the 19th century, at certain times of economic crisis, there was emigration from Cuba to the USA, Spain, and some regions of the Caribbean. After the revolution (1959), there was a legal migration flow, mainly to the USA, but this pattern of mobility showed significant changes in the eighties, when this legal movement was interrupted.

Starting in 1989, when the Cuban economy went into recession after the fall of the ‘Iron Curtain’, the so-called ‘special period’ led to the greatest economic crisis, up to the time of the 2020 pandemic. Consequently, Cuba adopted different measures that had implications for emigration, summarized by Cobas-Cobiella (2017) as: i) the selective granting of residence permits abroad (for having married foreigners or for artistic performances), although those who lived in the USA were excepted; ii) the reduction of the age limit for temporary trips abroad; iii) the extension of the permit for temporary stay outside of Cuba from six to eleven months; and iv) the multiplication of contacts and exchanges between people living in Cuba and abroad, by consenting entry into the country to those who had left it legally (for example, Spaniards with Cuban roots).

As a result of these modifications, there was a significant flow of Cuban exits with temporary visas, especially to Spain, Russia, Germany, and Mexico. In the first case for reasons of blood, and, in the rest, for the relations built up by some Cuban citizens with the countries in which

they studied, such as the former USSR, the former East Germany or Mexico. Many of them used family and acquaintance relationships to get a letter of invitation¹ (a requirement to leave Cuba).

An important advance in immigration legislation took place years later, when Decree Law No. 305 of October 16, 2012, amending the Regulation of the Migration Law of July 19, 1978, was promulgated (*Gaceta Oficial de la República de Cuba, 2012*). The cancellation of the permit to enter or exit the national territory is one of the most outstanding changes as well as the possibility for those who stay abroad to request their legal residence, framing them in the category of returnees. At the same time, Cubans who have dual citizenship –Spanish and Cuban– enjoy certain privileges in immigration matters, given that they can leave the country for Spain without hindrance, especially if they are already retired. In this respect, many Cubans ceased their work activity at the age of 55 (women) and 60 (men), in application of Cuba's Social Security regulations (Law number 24 of 1979) (*ILO, 1979*). Subsequently, this law was modified (Law number 105 of 2009) (*MINJUS, 2009*), raising the retirement age by five years in each case, although for those self-employed workers over 50 years of age, greater freedom was established. In summary, Cuban legislation has been a complementary factor in promoting emigration to Spain for the older adult population.

Study methods: The combination of quantitative and qualitative data

From a neoclassical perspective, migrations have been interpreted by the differences in wages and returns between origin and destination (macroeconomic interpretation) or according to the chances of success estimated by the migrants (microeconomic interpretation). Meanwhile, the lived experiences of migrants and their individual outcomes can be better approached from grounded theory, particularly suitable for disentangling complex interlinking within migration practices (*Sheridan & Storch, 2009*). For this reason, migration studies have evolved from a structural position toward one oriented to the processes and interactions between individuals. From this approach, the family environment and the feelings and emotions of migrants gain value. To incorporate both analytical perspectives, this research combines information from i) the National Institute of Statistics (INE); ii) a survey designed and carried out to this study's purpose; and iii) semi-structured in-depth interviews with Cubans at a later age dwelling in the Canary Islands.

The information provided by the Spanish statistical sources

Statistical analysis of the municipal registers from the INE provides data on the stock of population born in Cuba by sex, age, place of Spanish residence, and citizenship, as well as on flows of arrivals and departures.

The survey

Given that the research had objectives beyond that which could be undertaken with the official sources, a survey between September 2020 and March 2021 was carried out. This survey contained 44 questions and tried to collect not only demographic information but also the opinions of interviewees, the motivations, and their feelings about the migration they had undergone, as well as their expectations for the future.

To conduct the survey, a quota sampling of the population born in Cuba over 20 years of age and residing in the Canary Islands in 2020 was implemented. The survey was launched through social networks, email, and through a snowball procedure from multiple contacts, the respondents having been selected according to gender and age group, to

meet the sampling requirements. The sample characteristics are shown in [Table 1](#).

For the calculation of the sample size, Eq. (1) was used.

$$n = NZ\alpha/22pqd2(N - 1) + Z\alpha/22pq \quad (1)$$

n constitutes the sample size; N is the size of the known population; $Z\alpha/2$ is the percentile of the normal distribution for the confidence level α ; d the level of precision; p the probability of success that the respondent correctly completes the questionnaire; and $q=1-p$ the failure rate. The values used were population size, 95% confidence level, a precision of 0.05%, and 0.9% success rate. The sample size corresponding to these values was 381 questionnaires distributed throughout the archipelago.

After applying Pearson's Chi-square tests, the dependent variables related to the age of migrants showed an asymptotic significance of <0.05 , for 95% confidence. Further, the survey represented a first step for the qualitative research, providing information on different profiles of immigrants and pointing the way to select interviewees who came to the Canary Islands after turning 55.

The in-depth semi structured interviews

With the aim of delving into the life courses of Cuban immigrants at a later age in the Canary Islands, we also collected biographical sketches of fifteen individuals. The selection criteria were guided by the attributes of age (Cubans immigrated to Spain after being 55); sex (a slightly higher proportion of women); the existence of Spanish ascendants (most of them); educational level; and active status, in addition to the year of arrival.

These in-depth semi structured interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed from a thematic perspective. With this aim, a process of categorization was carried out considering the research questions and the theoretical-empirical background ([Table 2](#)).

The sociodemographic profile of the older adult Cubans in the Canary Islands

The Canary Islands register the largest flows of Cuban citizens arriving in Spain and this has been the case for several decades. Added to this circumstance is the fact that more women than men immigrate and the ratio of those over 55 years of age is greater than the same group coming from Latin American and the Caribbean countries. ([Fig. 1](#)).

Taking these characteristics into account, the sociodemographic profile of this community in the Canary Islands is of no surprise. According to Spanish statistical sources, there are 115 women coming from Cuba for every 100 men, a ratio that rises to 123.4 per 100 among those over 55 years of age, most of whom have Spanish citizenship. This is a pattern which characterizes the Cubans who have lived in Spain since the 1990s (*González-Yanci & Aguilera-Arilla, 2002*) and has been corroborated by the survey conducted. The rate diminishes over time, given the succession of generations who are increasingly distant from the emigration of their ancestors. This information leads us to consider what other significance can be given to the role of age in the migrations from Cuba to the Canary Islands. In the field work conducted, the reasons why respondents chose the Canary Islands as the place of emigration vary along with age groups. The Chi-square test indicates that, in older adult people, the fact of having Canarian ancestors predominates, as well as the conditions of a climate that they consider to be like that of Cuba; however, among the youngest, the motivations are more wide-ranging and the presence of friends or relatives who were already living in the archipelago is more important. In other words, the bond with the ancestral homeland is stronger for older adults, who perceive it in terms of affective relations (*Berg, 2009*), while the younger generations are drawn by the Cuban community dwelling in the Canary Islands. This demonstrates a solidly rooted community.

Moreover, the older adults indicate that they have not experienced changes in their customs due to their staying in the Canary Islands

¹ This document was essential to leave Cuba to any country, and required the payment of fees, according to Law 1312/76, Migration Law, repealed by Resolution 87/07, of April 23, 2007.

Table 1
Results of the survey sample.

Age groups	Sex (%)		Arrival to the Canary Islands Average year	Canarian ancestors Yes	Education level (%)			Work Activity Yes
	Women	Men			Primary	Secondary	Tertiary	
20–30	20.8	17.2	2015	53.4	5.9	75.0	19.1	80.2
31–40	20.8	18.4	2011	46.7	2.9	62.3	34.8	88.0
41–50	25.1	21.3	2009	59.6	6.2	56.8	37.0	86.5
51–60	18.3	31.0	2009	57.6	5.6	58.9	35.6	76.1
>61	15.0	12.1	2004	66.7	8.0	62.0	30.0	59.6

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 2
Issues and categories.

Issues	Categories
Reasons for emigrating to the Canary Islands	
Life projects	Economic precariousness in Cuba Searching for a personal and family life change Expectations for employment (legal or irregular) or social benefits in the Canary Islands despite age Diasporic family reunification following the children’s or spouse’s earlier migration Potential support from the transnational Cuban community
The legacy of the former migration from the Canary Islands to Cuba	Ancestral migration and family linkages Ethnocultural affinity
Citizenship	Meaning attributed to Cuban nationality/residency Meaning attributed to Spanish nationality Strategy for obtaining Spanish nationality Assessment and perception of national belonging
Age and life course	
Economic income, family, ageing and migration	Income in later life in the Canary Islands Subsidies and social aid Homes and forms of coexistence Labor activity expectations Retirement expectations Expectations of ageing in the family or alone in the Canary Islands Expectations of returning to Cuba or re-emigrating
Identity regarding homeland and hostland	
Feelings of belonging	Feeling of belonging to Cuba Feeling of belonging to Spain Nostalgia
Relationships with Cuba and other Cuban diasporic communities	Commitments to left-behind family members and acquaintances Commitments to family members in other countries Intensity, frequency, and reasons for visiting Cuba
Integration experiences vs. discrimination	Successful integration experiences Experiences of prejudice

Source: Own elaboration.

because they maintain their Cuban lifestyle. They also state that they have not needed to do things differently or to modify their understanding of the world. They remain faithful to a Cuban origin that they reinforce with transnational practices, and this is not contradictory to the fact that they are the largest group of Cuban immigrants with Spanish citizenship. They live without apparent contradictions between homeland and hostland or, better yet, show much clearer hybrid modes of life than in the case of younger immigrants. For this reason, they maintain a closer linkage with Cuba: they communicate with their friends more frequently, they visit the country more than other younger

immigrants and, even though many have lost their ancestors, they send remittances or some goods to relatives and friends.

This is revealed in the following quotes: “I still have my brother there [in Cuba], whom I must help. Although he has a daughter in Miami, he has other offspring there with him, in Cuba, and I assist them [...] sending medicines and other things they need there” (Mateo,¹ a 77-year-old man). “I am working supporting myself [...] and the support that I can give my family in Cuba right now is rather sentimental, although I always help them with medicines and something that can be sent for food, but not all that I would like and not everything they need” (Odalís, 58-year-old woman).

Motivations of migrants: the search for well-being in old age and family reasons

Both survey respondents and interviewees note economic factors as the main reasons for their decision to emigrate; in addition to those of a family nature, the Cuban structural economic situation is a real factor triggering emigration.

After the 1959 revolution, and the construction of a centralized state-sponsored economy, Cuba fell into a profound economic crisis from 1990, following the disintegration of the USSR. Despite the economy regaining some stability after 1993/1994, the living conditions continued to be precarious for most Cubans and the economic emigration at the turn of the century gained importance.

With Raul Castro’s accession to the presidency, the country witnessed a far-reaching process of economic reform. The government expanded the private and cooperative sectors, passed a new foreign investment law, and restructured most of its old debt (Torres, 2016). However, the economic situation did not improve, and alternative sources of income acquired great significance, especially, money transfers from abroad, and private market activities (informal or legalized self-employment and small-scale businesses) (Hansing & Hoffmann, 2019). Finally, with the COVID-19 pandemic, the economy contracted sharply due to the collapse of international tourism, the drop in emigrant remittances (Hoffmann, 2021) and the lockdown measures preventing the mobility of Cubans who used to buy goods in other Latin American countries for retail trade, all of which exacerbated social unrest.

From the point of view of the Spanish economy, it is possible to consider the opportunities for Cuban emigrants in the Canary Islands to contribute to the labor market. According to the 2011 Census, 85.7% of workers were employed in the service sector, 6.4% in the building sector, 4.5% in industry and 3.3% in agriculture. In general, this distribution is not distant from the labor structure of the Canarians themselves, although there is a lesser importance of those in the secondary sector and a slight predominance of services in the case of Cuban workers. Hospitality, health, and personal services related to care of people, especially in the case of women, are the main activities.

One might wonder if the job occupations provided by these data can

² The interview fragments incorporated into the study are referenced using a pseudonym of the interviewee.

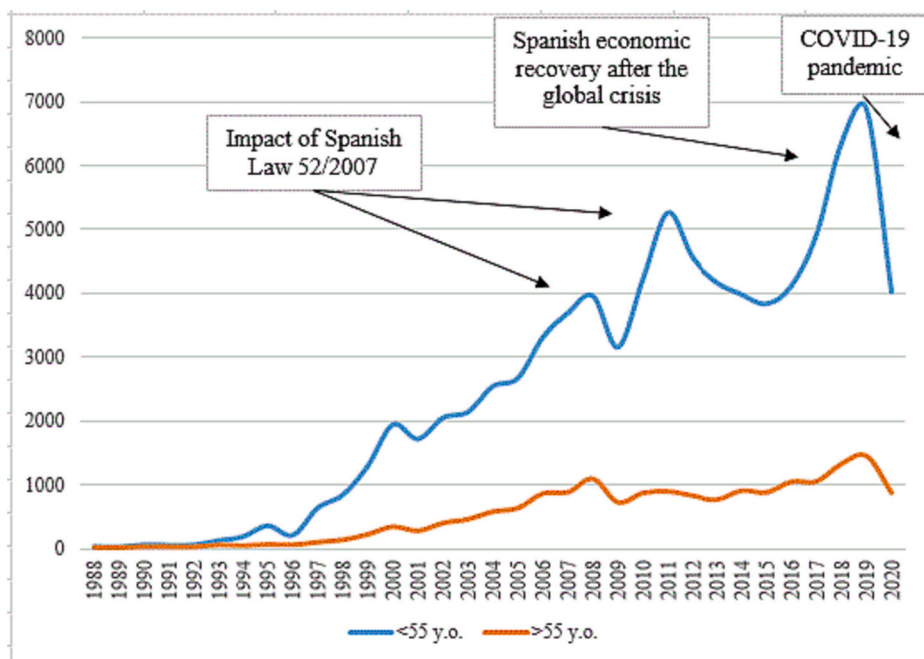


Fig. 1. Evolution of the immigration flows of the population born in Cuba. Source: Residential Variation Statistics. (INEa (National Statistics Institute), 2021).

Law 52/2007, of December 26, for the recovery of Spanish citizenship had a great impact on the reduction of immigration flows in 2009. This recovery had to be processed at the Spanish Embassy in La Havana as of December 27, 2008, with the deadline ending in August 2011. This circumstance led to a reduction in departures in 2009, and an increase in arrivals to Cuba, especially of older people. Departures were to resume in 2010 and 2011

be deemed a labor attraction factor for older adult Cuban migrants. It is necessary to consider that of the 52 surveyed Cubans over sixty years of age, 59.6% are working, while 21.2% of them indicate that their relationship with economic activity is that of pensioner/retiree, and 19.2% are unemployed, most of them waiting to get a pension. Therefore, the nonworking population in this segment reaches 40.4%, a low figure, if we consider the referred age range. This is a sign of the employment possibilities that even at an advanced age they have, or they think they have, as is also demonstrated by the fact that four of the respondents over 60 years of age indicate that they are unemployed but seeking a job. The opportunities of finding economic resources at their later age has been an incentive for emigration, but generally as employees, and not as entrepreneurs, because of their low level of economic income at the time of their arrival. This is an important difference with respect to the immigrants in later age coming from the developed European countries whose reasons for moving to Spain are a combination of the search for a paradise and the start-up of small businesses (Domínguez-Mujica & Parreño-Castellano, 2014).

Cuban workers who remain active in the formal economy at advanced ages are in a wide range of activities, among which those related to health stand out. Cuban employees at all ages in the health sector are numerous, as indicated by Mateo:

I prepared a letter at the age of 62 [2006] asking for my release and permission to visit my children who were living here. I had already been working in Cuba for 37 years and I was at retirement age [...] When I arrived in Gran Canaria I began to work in a private clinic, and I still do [...] (Mateo², 77-year-old man).

These words contrast with the disappointment reported by immigrants whose expectations were not met, typically because they have not found work as legal employees in the private sector. Many of them have had to settle for low-skilled jobs – often activities such as care for the older adult, domestic service, or agriculture and gardening – or to collect social assistance benefits. For example:

I was working at a National Hospital in Havana, as an intensive care nurse, and I came to the Canary Islands when I was 58 years old, three years after retirement, when they gave me the release to emigrate [...] I came happy and had many expectations of finding work. However, I have felt discriminated against for being older and I only get work as a

house cleaner (Marilyn, 71-year-old woman).

I was not doing badly in Cuba, but the situation in the country was not good. However, here the work issue has not been easy at all, because of the age at which I arrived here and not having been able to homologate my studies [...]. But now, at the present time, I am legally hired as a domestic worker (Odalís, 58-year-old woman).

It is not possible to deduce whether their hope of finding work or pension or assistance in Spain were more important in their decision to emigrate, or whether the fact that they had retired in Cuba prevailed, as revealed by Agustín: “I was the manager of a cattle cooperative in Cuba and at 59 I retired due to a spinal problem. As I was already Spanish, I asked for consular discharge [...] I always knew that here I could benefit from aid and doing my odd jobs in agriculture” (Agustín, 75-year-old man).

There were also those who followed their children’s earlier migrations. For example:

I came here alone, in my 80s, to live with my daughters and my grandson, who had previously emigrated. Here I feel good because they take care of me. At my age, I plan to get some social assistance, although I must wait until I have Spanish nationality to apply for it (Rosa, 84-year-old woman).

Others were the pioneering emigrants of their families, as revealed by Luisa and Juan:

I emigrated alone at 56 and I brought my daughter three years later, and a month ago my mother, whose Spanish nationality I recovered and allowed me to come here looking for a better life” (Luisa, 62-year-old woman).

In 1998 my Canarian family visited Cuba and encouraged me to regain my father’s Spanish citizenship [...] Once I retired in Cuba, after turning 58, I emigrated and settled permanently in the Canary Islands [...] One of my children came with me, and a year later my wife and my other son (Juan, 75-year-old-man).

As shown, one of the most important characteristics of these migrants is their ability “to drag” family. References to the family

commitments are continuous because the older adult migrants who live in the Canary Islands have either been promoters of the family reunification – mainly if they have Spanish citizenship – or were regrouped themselves by their already settled children, especially when they did not have Spanish nationality, thus revealing strong family linkages in both circumstances.

At home or abroad, or some transnational mix?

Transnational diasporic experiences are very present in the conversations with immigrants, because of what Berg identifies as “continuities and disjunctures” in the life cycle (Berg, 2011, 23). Most of the stories of interviewees demonstrate a very strong bond and commitment to homeland and hostland, in such a way that immigrants can live in two countries simultaneously, as the words of Dolores and Agustín indicate:

I feel nostalgia for my country and my family, but I feel like a Canarian-Cuban because my father always instilled in us love for the Canary Islands (Dolores, 81-year-old woman).

The situation in Cuba is very bad, but if I, can, I'll stay in both places. I go to Cuba every year, because my wife lives there, my other daughter and two grandchildren [...] In Gran Canaria I am in paradise, I have never felt discriminated against, but in Cuba I feel very good, very comfortable too... My heart is divided by the two islands (Agustín, 75-year-old man).

However, sometimes these links between homeland and hostland are colored by feelings of dislocation:

I am neither from here nor from there and I am not going to return to Cuba unless the situation changes there a lot. In that case I can go to live for periods of time, with what they pay me here (Marilyn, 71-year-old woman).

My life has changed here, and I have achieved a well-being that I never had before in Cuba, but I still hope to return to my homeland (Guillermo, 66-year-old man).

Furthermore, it is also possible to interpret these diasporic links in a broad context that exceeds the relationships between Cuba and the Canary Islands, since the references to the contacts between the Cuban community in the USA and Spain are continuous, as noted by Eckstein and Berg (2015) as well as Mateo, Rosa and Dolores: “I go to the United States almost every year, almost always for Thanksgiving, to get the whole family together, because my daughter now lives in Miami. Another sister of mine lives in Tampa, my son also lives in the United States, and I also have several cousins there” (Mateo, age man); “Not only do I have family here and in Cuba, I also have a sister and nephews living in the United States” (Rosa, age woman); “I have a sister living with her family in the United States and a friend who was my partner and helps me” (Dolores, 81-year-old woman).

Conclusions: The opportunity provided by the migration policies in later life for Cuban citizens

Cuban emigration to the Canary Islands in later life offers a broader perspective of the relationship between emigration and life cycle, demonstrating the strength and spirit of achievement of those individuals who decide to emigrate, despite their advanced age.

The examples analyzed show that these people think about their future as an older person in a country whose economic situation they deem unfavorable, and they weigh different options for improvement, as if they were young people or adults.

To dodge the difficulties inherent to Cuban emigration regulations, they use different strategies to be able to leave the country; at the same time, they strengthen their ties with the family members and friends

they leave behind, maintaining their feet on both islands. Among those strategies are retirement itself, contacts with family members abroad, family reunification and the recovery of the Spanish nationality of their ancestors. As they arrive from a former colony, the preferential acquisition of Spanish citizenship over other foreigners also plays an important role.

These multiple factors make it possible to identify a varied typology of older adult Cubans, from those of the winners who have been able to meet their expectations to those who anxiously await social assistance. The hopes for greater well-being are not always met or are not as easy to achieve as they had planned. However, Spanish social assistance, other family already settled in the Canary Islands, a solid community of Cubans in the archipelago itself or in countries like the United States (i. e., Cuban diaspora) are their motivations. These circumstances make them undertake the emigration and promise them the necessary support to settle down, at least after their arrival in the Canary Islands in a first stage.

Ethnocultural affinity and feelings of common identity also help to make the migration decision-making process easier. This affinity is reinforced by a shared language and by a Cuban lexical variant that preserves a significant number of voices typical of the Canary Islands (Fasla Fernández, 2007–2008), as well as by a common sound cadence when speaking from both insular spaces. To all this must be added a similarity of customs, and even climate, as identified by the Cuban residents surveyed and interviewed. These sentiments surface in conversations with these expatriates when they state that they feel good in the Canary Islands, they do not intend to re-emigrate and they will continue visiting their country, as long as their financial resources allow them. They still have family and friends in Cuba that they try to help, they preserve their Cuban residency and sometimes keep properties on the island.

Finally, they do not discuss future projects. Their thoughts revolve around immediacy and the present. They don't reflect beyond what they are doing at the time they are interviewed, with the sole exception of trying to get government benefits/welfare.

Beyond lifestyle migrations or return migrations, this case study demonstrates a new nexus between migration and ageing, two clearly intertwined processes that become a learning lesson, a new approach to mobility in later age. Those migrants who take advantage of their life course (the status conferred by their ancestors and their career paths) manage to overcome the limitations of age by integrating into the labor market or demanding social benefits in the search for immediate welfare, which opens new horizons for further research in relation to emigration at an advanced age and the active role of some migrants. This type of mobility will probably increase in older societies with scarce resources, as is the case of Cuba, and therefore deserves special attention.

The limitations inherent to this research could be overcome with a future longitudinal investigation, looking over an extended period, that could allow confirmation of the results obtained and guide more informed migration policies. In any case, it is shown that Cuban citizens moving to Spain in later life are a good example of active emigration. Despite their age, or precisely because of this, migrants show a personal will to fight for better living conditions, to overcome their economic difficulties without renouncing their origins, their homeland. They make use of strong transnational ties, which help to consolidate and to promote the feedback on the migration system between Cuba and the diasporic spaces. Importantly, this case study allows us to reflect on – and perhaps disrupt – the cultural and social construction of ageing in migration studies.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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