**Territory, Islandness and the Secessionist Imaginary: why do very small communities favour autonomy over integration?**

**Abstract**

Small communities should have the most to gain from integration but the average size of the state is shrinking as island nationalism creates new, and very small, states out of former colonies, and federalised or autonomous territories. ‘Islandness’, as a proxy for territory, is employed as a resource to justify secession but mainstream studies subordinate this factor in accounts that privilege ethnic, religious, linguistic or economic drivers of identity. This article adds to a small body of work that foregrounds territory. Drawing on an in-depth case study of Barbuda’s (population 1,600) attempt to secede from Antigua, it demonstrates how nationalists employ different meanings of territory—legal, cultural and political—to make the case for secession in the absence of factors commonly theorised to drive identify formation. Barbudan secessionism therefore problematises mainstream theory. It concludes by arguing that paying greater attention to how territory acts as a resource in the nationalist imaginary allows us to re-examine long-standing studies and cases in new and penetrating light.

**Keywords:** nationalism; secession; territory; islands; small states; Barbuda

**Introduction**

On 6 September 2017 Hurricane Irma tore across the Caribbean and completely flattened the island of Barbuda. The resident population of 1600 was immediately evacuated. Shortly after, an article in the *Antigua Observer* outlined that Prime Minister Gaston Browne intended to make changes, which have since been enacted, to the 2007 *Barbuda Land Act*. He declared that:

The new land ownership system would help development and pave the way for Barbudans to get mortgages to rebuild their homes and get insurance to protect them when the next disaster hits. Historically, Barbudans have constructed their homes incrementally and relied on savings rather than bank financing. Few if any have insurance following a negative experience after the last major storm, Hurricane Luis in 1995, when a fraudulent provider failed to make good on claims. (Scruggs 2017)

By contrast, Barbudans, some of whom returned to the island in 2018, felt that the national government was deliberately and opportunistically obstructing the recovery effort, including delaying the restoration of electricity and running water, to discourage the entire community from returning home (Faiola 2018).

The hospital is a mess, looks like it was bombed out and that was a deliberate act. The doctor's quarters, still not fixed. The post office, non-existent. Banking facilities, with the exception of a machine, non-existent. Police station, non-existent ... If it was left up to us, the Barbudans, we would have nearly finished, by ourselves. (interview with Barbudan activist, 2018)

The government’s short-term goal, they claim, was to make returning home as unattractive as possible in service of the longer term aim of selling communally held land to private investors who could then develop tourist resorts—a form of ‘disaster capitalism’ (Gould and Lewis 2018). The perception that the government is exploiting the disaster to pursue land reform has stoked longstanding animosity between these two island communities and rekindled the desire, seemingly dormant since the *2007 Barbuda Land Act*, for separation.

This disagreement over who owns the land on Barbuda, and the purposes to which it should be put, is centuries old. According to Lowenthal and Clarke (1980), Barbudans have long resented neighbouring Antigua and many have stridently campaigned against what they call ‘Antiguan colonialism’. Their efforts have resulted in Barbuda enjoying considerable self-governing autonomy. In the aftermath of Irma, the Barbuda Council are insisting that further changes to governance arrangements must occur “by any means necessary”.

As one activist argued:

My father … said to me, “This [island] is the only thing that we have”. He said, “my son, protect it with your life”, and I told him “I will Dad, I will” ... There is no place on earth that they could exchange me for Barbuda. (interview with activist from Barbuda, 2018)

When asked whether an independent sovereign state of Barbuda would be economically viable he echoed the response of fellow activists:

Yes, we can. Where there is a will there's a way ... We can survive, we can survive ... if we have to eat grass we'll do it.

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Small states and territories would appear to have the most to gain from integration within larger states or regional bodies; they rarely have the military capacity to defend themselves and struggle to develop the administrative capacity to meet the demands of modern statehood, either at home or abroad (Maass 2017). And yet, since the end of the Second World War the average size of the state has shrunk despite substantial growth in the total global population (Lake and O’Mahony 2004). The main reason is the creation of new states. The United Nations had 51 members in 1945. Today it has 193. This pattern has recently been termed ‘the age of secession’ (Griffiths 2016). Many of these new states are small; more than 100 have populations of less than 10 million while 39 have populations of less than 1 million. This trend may continue, both because all 17 of the remaining countries on the UN decolonization list have populations of 500,000 or less, but also because of ongoing secessionist movements in larger states. Secessionism is especially pronounced among small islands (Baldacchino and Hepburn 2012); 15 of the 17 countries on the UN decolonisation list are small islands while independence movements by island territories are common in recently decolonised nations (e.g. the potential ‘Balkanisation’ of Indonesia or Bougainville’s desire to secede from Papua New Guinea). But the most acute examples of this trend are islands like Barbuda (population 1,600) that is seeking to secede from already tiny states (the population of Antigua is 80,000).

Barbuda is one example of this broader trend in which small islands seek greater political autonomy despite the fact that their economic and strategic interests would appear to be better served by integration, either in regional communities of small states or with larger neighbours (Baldacchino and Hepburn 2012). In the Caribbean, Anguilla (population 6,000) officially separated from St Kitts and Nevis in 1980 after a long running dispute while a 1998 referendum saw Nevis (population, 11,000) fall just short of the required majority to separate from St Kitts (population, 40,000). Likewise, Tobago (population 60,000) has sought to separate from Trinidad (population 1.3 million). In the Pacific, the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM, population 105,000) has faced a series of separatist movements, the most recent of which is an attempt by the State of Chuuk to become independent. FSM was created in 1986 after Marshall Islands (population 60,000) and Palau (population 20,000) split off from the United States Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands to form new states. The most successful Pacific example, however, is the sovereign state of Tuvalu (population 10,000) which voted to decolonise separately to Kiribati (population 115,000) in 1978.

Secessionist movements in these micro-polities raise important questions about the territorial basis of contemporary nationalism. Existing theories and studies of nationalism recognise that a sense of belonging to a particular territory is central to nationalist discourse. But, they generally see territory as subordinate to ethnic, religious, linguistic or economic drivers of identity (for review see O’Leary 1997; Hearn 2006; Özkirimli 2017). Many Caribbean seperatist movements do not to have these well-theorised points of differentiation: the majority of the population are the descendants of African slaves; there are no major religious or linguistic cleavages; and each breakaway group has to consider the prospect of increased economic hardship should they secede.[[1]](#endnote-1) Indeed, for many, the viability of a (very) small political unit renders any move towards independent statehood absurd. This sentiment is captured by Lowenthal and Clarke (1980), advisers to the Barbudan delegation at Antigua and Barbuda’s independence negotiations:

What could be more absurd than a demand by 1,200 islanders for administrative severance from their closest neighbour … Resource-poor, lacking expertise, commercially dependent on trade with Antigua, Barbuda would seem to have the worst case imaginable … To humour this small, deluded population in any way would seem quixotic folly.

In the absence of ethnic, religious, linguistic or economic drivers of identity the primary discursive resource that secessionists draw on is ‘islandness’; the invocation of a distinct and geographically separate relationship with their land. As LaFlamme (1983) observed decades ago, a common feature of virtually all ‘archipelago states’ is that the component islands are much poorer than the main island and the inevitable consequence of this disparity is centrifugal tendencies and island nationalism. To be sure, while island communities openly espouse independence, many simply desire greater autonomy (Baldacchino and Hepburn 2012); some activists admitted Barbuda would prefer to revert to being an Overseas Territory of the UK rather than gain full independence. And, like separatist movements everywhere, island nationalists only rarely succeed. These caveats aside, the important conceptual point is that in the absence of other well theorised factors, ‘islandness’ serves as a proxy for how territory can function as a resource for the nationalist imaginary. Indeed, given there is little else to differentiate these island communities from each other, territory is *sine qua non* of such a narrative. By examining how territory acts as a resource in the nationalist imaginary this article makes the following contributions:

* Conceptually: it adds to the small literature in secession and nationalism studies which argues that territory should be afforded greater prominence in mainstream accounts (e.g. Penrose 2002; Etherington 2010; Kelle 2017). This is especially true in extreme cases, like small islands, in which other well theorised factors are absent but foregrounding territory can also shed new and penetrating light on well-studied cases too. Brexit, for example, has many drivers but a distinct sense of ‘islandness’ is surely one of them. To make the link between secession and islandness this article draws on scholarship by political geographers seeking to theorise territory amidst globalisation (i.e. Agnew 1994; Brenner 1999; Williams 2008; Eldon 2009; Shah 2012);
* Methodologically: it extends these studies by providing an in-depth historical case study that highlights how a breakaway movement employs the distinctiveness of their territory to legitimise claims to secession in the absence of other, well theorised, factors; and
* Empirically: it explores the multiple meanings of territory across time and in doing so adds to the evidentiary base of secession studies by drawing together primary interviews with senior political leaders and civil servants, substantial archival material and available secondary sources.

To substantiate these claims the article is structured as follows. Next I discuss the treatment of territory in the literature on nationalism and secession. I find that while primordialist accounts foreground it as a factor, more recently it has been subordinated in favour of explanations that focus on ethnicity, religion, language or economy. To give territory greater prominence, I draw on the small body of work in political science that does take this factor seriously (e.g. Penrose 2002; Etherington 2010; Kelle 2017) and augment it with scholarship by political geographers and a discussion of ‘islandness’ found in the nascent island studies literature. I then discuss the case selection and data I used to substantiate this argument empirically. In doing so I justify why Barbuda (population 1,600), as the most extreme example of this phenomenon, is an especially revealing case. The body of the article presents an analysis of secessionist sentiment in Barbuda, highlighting how the relationship between the people and their land has been the primary discursive means by which the desire for independence has been articulated. I conclude by returning to the central argument of the article: that we should pay more attention to territory in our accounts of nationalism and secession, most obviously when seeking to explain small islands but also because it has the potential to shed new and penetrating light on well-studied cases too.

**Nationalism and Territory**

Attempts at small island secession are hard to explain using existing theory. This was not always the case. Primordialists saw nations as a natural bonding of people and territory (for review see O’Leary 1997; Hearn 2006; Özkirimli 2017) and so could account for why a group of people would be prepared to forgo material benefits in order to retain sovereign attachment to a ‘homeland’. Herder (1968 [1784]: 10), for example, argued:

it is obvious why all sensual people, fashioned to their country, are so much attached to the soil, and so inseparable from it. The constitution of their body, their way of life, the pleasure and occupations to which they have become accustomed from their infancy, and the whole circle of their ideas, are climatic. Deprive them of their country, you deprive them of everything.

This view of the bond between people and place as ‘natural’ is common to much contemporary nationalist discourse (see Etherington 2010: 326-331), albeit it has become increasingly discredited within the academy. Modernists argued that the primordial view only made sense when studying pre-industrial societies. By contrast, their functionalist accounts situated nationalism in successive waves of modernization (e.g. Gellner 1983, Anderson 1983 and Hobsbawm 1990). Nationalist rhetoric about the significance of a ‘homeland’ was therefore necessarily ‘imagined’; people did not and indeed could not experience the same intimate attachment to an entire country in the way that a pre-modern was bound to their village, valley or borough. The invocation of a territorial ‘homeland’ was thus primarily an attempt to legitimate material ownership of state borders. Any emotional attachment this generated was thus subservient to the material drivers of nationalism. Later assessments of these seminal works rejected the modernist emphasis on economic development in favour of an ethno-symbolic account of nationalism (e.g. Smith 1998). But, while Smith (1996) and others are sympathetic to the claim that territory is symbolically important, it remains subservient to the role of ethnicity in their explanation. More recent constructivist scholarship acknowledges the varieties of nationalism and the socially constructed nature of all nationalist movements (for review see Özkirimli 2017). By arguing that there is no single cause of nationalism, these accounts have the potential to incorporate territory into their explanations. But they have rarely been applied to this purpose.

In sum, with the exception of the widely discredited primordialist tradition, the different strands of mainstream nationalism scholarship acknowledge that a sense of belonging to a specific territory is central to nationalist discourse, but subordinate it to the causal claim that ethnic, religious, linguistic or economic factors drive identity formation.

The literature on secession makes similar assumptions. Territory is explicitly part of Coggins’ (2011) criteria for secession, and indeed nearly all studies assume secession as taking place in a specific territory. Likewise, a key characteristic of secession is that it violates the principle of ‘territorial integrity’ as enshrined in international law, and this assumption is central to most international relations scholarship in this and related theorising about territorial disputes (Kolers 2009; Moore 2015). But beyond that the literature on secession tends to highlight a similar list of motivations: ethnic, linguistic or religious differences, or perceived economic injustice. In the case of the latter, economic cost benefit analysis weighs the efficiencies of large state size against the costs of heterogenous preferences (e.g. Madies et al 2018). Secession should therefore only occur when economies of scale are unimportant but the costs of heterogeneity are high. Secessionist studies also add to this well-known list: the institutional setting in which the secessionist movement takes place, the power of the movement vis a vis the state, its degree of administrative autonomy, and the international response (Coggins 2011; Griffiths 2016; 2017; Siroky and Cuffe 2015). But, in virtually all cases, territory remains subordinate.

There are exceptions to the mainstream neglect of territory. Penrose (2002) differentiates between material and emotional attachment to territory. She argues that modernist accounts of nationalism favoured the former while priomordialist accounts favoured the latter. She advocates for a combining both perspectives to reinsert territoriality into the study of nationalism. Similarly, Etherington (2010) argues that the factors commonly said to explain nationalism only mediate the key relationship that is central to all nationalist accounts—between people and place. In this view, the preoccupation of nationalist scholars with ethnic, religious, linguistic or economic drivers of identity formation obscures more than it reveals. Most recently, Kelle (2017) finds that symbolic attachments to territory are strongly predictive of demands for self-determination in sub-national units. Kelle (2017) argues that symbolic territory has four distinct features:

1. Political features, including dominance of historical kingdoms and lost autonomy;
2. Religious features, including the presence of sacred sites;
3. Cultural features, including the lifestyle the land provides for; and
4. Legal features, including land rights, dispossession and resettlement.

These scholars tend to draw heavily on thinking by political geographer Anssi Paasi in particular about the social construction of space. Penrose (2002: 280), for example cites Paasi’s (1995:42) claim that ‘boundaries may be simultaneously historical, natural, cultural, political, economic or symbolic phenomena and each of these dimensions may be exploited in diverging ways in the construction of territoriality’. Likewise, Etherington (2010: 325) draws on Paasi’s (1996: 3) conceptualisation of national territory as ‘historical products—not merely in their physical materiality but also in their socio-cultural meanings’. This conception of territory as socially constructed is distinct from the primordialist emphasis on a natural ‘homeland’ outlined above.

Paasi’s work is just one example of political scientists and international relations scholars being challenged by political geographers about their conceptualisation (or lack thereof) of territory. Most notably Agnew (1994) argued that conceptualising the world as the exclusively domain of nation states with an assumed territory made the discipline blind to globalising dynamics. This has led to a sharp debate about the extent to which globalisation can be conceived of as a process of deterritorialisation (e.g. Agnew 2009; Brenner 1999; Williams 2008; Elden 2009; Shah 2012). However, as Elden (2009) argues, recognition of the ‘territorial trap’ increases rather than decreases the centrality of territory because it foregrounds the social construction of a factor assumed to be static. Indeed, the claim to a distinct relationship with their land could be interpreted as a Barbudan protest against neo-liberal globalization (although it is rarely couched in these terms by secessionists themselves). We should therefore be asking questions about how territory is constituted in contemporary political discourse.

This paper takes up this challenge by seeking to show how territory functions as a resource in the nationalist imaginary and in doing so underpins secessionist claims and the trend towards smaller and smaller states. It follows authors such as Penrose, Etherington and Kelle who boldly state that symbolic meaning and emotional attachment to territory matters. The problem that each of these authors confronts is demonstrating this empirically. Kelle’s (2017) regression analysis of self-determination movements, which is based on 256 observations, comes closest. But, while quantitative analysis provides a general pattern that establishes the salience of symbolic territory, it offers less detail about *how* territory operates as a resource in the secessionist imaginary. Specifically, we do not know how it develops and gathers salience over *time*. This paper fills this gap by way of an in-depth study of an extreme case in which none of the explanations championed in mainstream accounts are present.

**Islandness and Secession**

One of the reasons that studies of nationalism and secession have downplayed the importance of territory in their explanations is that, like much of political science, they tend to be wedded to the study of large (and usually rich) states (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). This was particularly true of modernists (for review see O’Leary 1997). More recently, the evidentiary base has expanded beyond Europe and North America (for a review see Özkirimli 2017) but a group of countries—small states—have nevertheless remained neglected. Coggins’ (2011) criteria for secession only includes movements that lay claim to more than 100 km2 of territory, for example. This is unfortunate, both because it means secessionist movements on islands like Anguilla (91 km2), Nevis (93 km2) and Tuvalu (26 km2) are excluded, despite being interesting in their own right, but also because we can often identify and analyse the mechanisms at work in any social or political phenomena more starkly in small scale units. In this sense small states are ‘laboratories’ (Payne and Sutton 2001) for social science; they are of a similar size to a town or borough and can thus be studied with the same intimacy, but they also have to fulfil the obligations and responsibilities of statehood in much the same way as larger countries.

Of the Caribbean and Pacific examples of secession mentioned in the introduction, the Pacific cases can be more easily approximated within existing explanations as in each instance cultural and linguistic differences can and have been combined with territorial claims to legitimate secession. But, with the partial exception of Tobago, most Caribbean cases, whose populations are largely made up of the descendants of African slaves, are ethnically, linguistically and religiously homogenous. The other way a small territory might justify secession is if they had significant wealth, usually in minerals, that would underwrite their viability as an independent entity. But Barbuda is currently a net recipient of Antiguan funds with no known mineral wealth. In which case, all of the usual factors—ethnic, linguistic, religious and economic—are absent but secessionist movements persist and in Barbuda have gained strength, albeit on Nevis and Tobago they have become somewhat dormant in recent years due to concessions made by central governments.

Each of these cases consist of countries with two main islands, one smaller, and one larger. The perception is that the larger dominates and exploits the smaller. And it is on the basis of this distinctly territorial characteristic that claims to secession are constructed. As Sir Ronald Sanders, formerly Antigua and Barbuda’s most senior diplomat, argues (2018: 86-87):

in each case, the secessionists claimed ‘distinct communities’, expressed their dissatisfaction with being governed from ‘another island’, and demanded more autonomy even though objective analysis showed that the tiny islands could not pay for themselves ... In Barbuda’s case, it contributes less than 1 per cent of the GDP of Antigua and Barbuda and the local government is entirely dependent for all its financing on the Central government ... Despite this, the atavistic disposition for distinctiveness as a community and the objection to being governed from outside—even by a government in whose election they participate and which pays for their existence—is likely to continue …

Territory is typically defined as the demarcation of land on political grounds (Kolers 2009; Moore 2015). That is, a territory is enacted when a piece of land becomes the subject of a claim to political authority. Islands are often said to be the most distinctive example of ‘naturally’ occurring territories. Penrose (2002: 280), for example, argues that ‘islands are frequently viewed as discrete geographical entities because the boundaries of the land are clearly marked by water’. This distinct boundary both enacts and reinforces the symbolic distinction between islanders and mainlanders or continentals, while at the same time reinforcing a sense of possession or political control over the island territory. Islanders thus come to see themselves as the natural custodians of that territory. In this sense their ‘islandness’ and the emotional attachment it implies serves as an ideal proxy to investigate how territory operates as a resource in the nationalist imaginary.

Island studies scholars define ‘islands’ as geographic spaces that are isolated from metropolitan centres due to distinct obstacles—typically sea, but also mountains, rainforests, or deserts—that render them relatively insular and inaccessible (Baldacchino 2004; Lowenthal 2007). They therefore tend to be on the periphery of historical processes that affect other states— many never industrialised and often decolonised later than, say, African states due to a perception that independence was unviable—but they are not immune. Indeed, as we are currently witnessing with climate change, they often experience the most acute effects of global processes but have limited capacity to respond or alter their condition. In this sense, while they share affinities with regional separatist movements in large states (e.g. Keating 1985), the added perception of geographic separation makes them distinct.

**Data and Methods**

To substantiate the argument that we should pay greater attention to the way territory functions as a resource in the nationalist imaginary this article provides an in-depth historical case study of Barbuda’s (population 1600) attempt to secede from Antigua. If secession were successful Barbuda would become one of the smallest sovereign states on earth. In examining this case I do not aim to prove that territory matters—as it is the only point of differentiation between Antigua and Barbuda, this is a given—but instead show *how* it can act as a resource in the nationalist imaginary, including its different legal, cultural and political meanings. The use of the term ‘imaginary’ alludes to the fact that I follow the constructivist conceptualisation of territory as outlined by scholars like Agnew, Paasi, Elden and so forth, and therefore do not see the relationship between territory and secession as deterministic. Clearly, there are numerous island populations that exist on the periphery of larger states that do not seek secession. I cannot and do not aim to show why some seek secession and some do not with the empirical material presented here (but see Kelle 2017). Rather, my more modest yet fundamental aim is to demonstrate that in cases where an island population seeks secession their sense of a distinctive relationship with their land can serve to legitimise this claim to create a distinct territory in the absence of other well-theorised factors.

To make this case I draw on 12 primary interviews with political actors, substantial archival research and secondary literature. Interviews were conducted in Antigua and Barbuda in mid-2018. I employ quotes where possible but in most instances supress the identity of interviewees. This is especially important in small communities where politics is intensely personalised (Corbett and Veenendaal 2018). Archival material was drawn from the UK National Archives in London. Foreign and Commonwealth Office files cover the period from associated statehood to independence in particular.

The analysis follows the interpretive method of ‘abduction’ (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012: 46-49); I moved back and forth between deskwork and fieldwork, seeking a holistic answer to the research puzzle: how secession is justified when the state is so small it appears unviable. Thus, questions were not resolved in individual interviews or documents but rather findings will rest on patterned responses. Themes became meaningful when they either emerged across different sources or varied considerably between them. Following convention, this type of analysis does not aim to deduce law-like generalizations but rather to infer an explanation for the research puzzle based on deep immersion in multiple forms of data (Boswell et al 2019).

**Island Secessionism: The Case of Barbuda**

To structure the case material, I use Kelle’s (2017) distinction between key features of symbolic territory— legal, cultural and political. The aim is to show how ‘islandness’ as a proxy for territory serves as the *sine qua non* of secessionist claims.

*Territory as Lawful Possession*

The legal aspects of territory, as outlined by Kelle (2017), largely revolve around land rights, including dispossession and resettlement, both of which are significant for Barbuda. From 1684 the 160 km2 island was leased from the Crown to the Codrington family who used it to raise livestock and harvest timber and charcoal to provision their Antiguan sugar plantations (the two islands are around 60 kilometres apart). The island became a dependency of Antigua in 1860, albeit it remained leased to the Codringtons and others until 1898 when the population became Crown tenants. According to the Antiguan state, and several court rulings, when the Codrington lease ended, the island of Barbuda returned to Crown ownership. Thus, when Antigua and Barbuda assumed independence in 1981, ownership of Barbuda passed from the Crown to the new government, forming a unitary state. The alternative claim, made by successive generations of Barbudan separatists, is that the Codringtons bequeathed the island to the population of former slaves.

When Caribbean decolonisation began in earnest in the 1960s, Antigua and Barbuda were considered, along with the other Leeward Islands of St Kitts- Nevis-Anguilla and Montserrat, too small in population, land and resources, to make viable independent states. Antigua and Barbuda thus became an Associated State of the United Kingdom. In effect this meant it had full autonomy over domestic affairs but external affairs and defence were largely managed by the UK, providing time for their economies to grow and assume the demands of full statehood (Thomas 1987).

In the decade following the advent of associated statehood, international norms about state viability shifted and so by the late 1970s the prospect of making Antigua and Barbuda, which had a population of 65,000 in 1970, an independent state had become less radical (precedents included Grenada, St Lucia, St Vincent and Dominica in the Caribbean). Impending independence exacerbated tensions between Antigua and Barbuda. The Barbudan preference was an arrangement similar to nearby Anguilla which controversially revolted against St Kitts and Nevis in the late 1960s, briefly declared itself an independent republic, until British authority was restored in 1971 (it officially became a British Crown Colony, now Overseas Territory, in 1980). The UK’s Foreign and Commonwealth Office was opposed to this option for Barbuda—indeed the Anguilla experience appears to have hardened their view about the creation of micro-polities (cf. Lowenthal and Clarke 1980). Barbuda sent delegations to the UN to try to prevent the acceptance of the two-island nation to the organisation. In their appeal to the UN they argued:

Under the former slave master … at least our bellies were full… Under British colonialism we were neglected; but at least when our people made representations they were listened to and some effort was made to accede to our demands. The land was ours and there was minimal interference with our way of life. Under Antiguan colonialism, the neglect remains, our bellies have become empty, suppression and repression have added to our unhappy lot (cited in Lowenthal and Clarke 1980, p. 301).

Representations were also made to the US and Canada to see if Barbuda could obtain a special territorial relationship with either of those countries (Minahan 2002). In part these representations were possible because immigration, primarily to Antigua, New York or Leicester, England, saw many young Barbudans leave but retain a strong connection with the island (Sir Thomas Hilbourne Frank, Chairman of the Barbuda Council from 1979 to 1985 and from 1989 to 1997, and Barbuda's sole member of the House of Representatives of Antigua and Barbuda between 1989 and 2004, principally resided in Leicester).

At the 1980 Antigua and Barbuda election both major parties campaigned for early independence, with the Antigua Labour Party (ALP) emerging victorious over the Progressive Labour Movement (PLM). The sole seat on the island of Barbuda was held by an independent, Eric Burton, who campaigned for separatism and won two-thirds of the Barbudan vote. After the election a motion was passed in the Antigua House of Representatives requesting the British Government convene a constitutional conference in accordance with Section 10(2) of the *West Indies Act 1967*. The Antigua Constitutional Conference, which was held at Lancaster House in London, was attended by members of the ALP, PLM, the MP for Barbuda and the Chairman of the Barbuda Council. Nearly half of the plenary sessions were devoted to the future status of Barbuda.

Antigua sought to retain Barbuda as part of a unitary state of Antigua and Barbuda. Premier and later Prime Minister of Antigua and Barbuda, V.C. Bird, argued that despite the cost to Antiguans,

my Government will seek to unify the people of Antigua and Barbuda. We fully intend to be even-handed and fair in the development of all persons in our unitary State: we are, after all, one people with one culture; one history and with one destiny. This perception of discord between Antigua and Barbuda does not exist on the Antiguan side; we do not accept that there is any distinction between Antiguans and Barbudans. But, this is an internal matter which we have to resolve among ourselves … I can only assure you that my Government will continue to be sympathetic and constructive in matters related to Barbuda (Report of the Antigua Constitutional Conference, 1980, p. 34).

Barbuda, by contrast, sought separation. Speaking in 1978, Burton argued that

the time has arrived when we should part company. We must of necessity continue to hold on to our mother country: Great Britain. As unlike Antigua, we are not nearly ready to take such a giant step; nor do we think it is fair to Antigua that we should be saddling a new struggling nation with our own problems which are many; and which will, without doubt hamper her and her people in their move toward economic and social self-sufficiency (cited in Lowenthal and Clarke, 1980, p. 298).

In London, Burton, as head of the Barbuda delegation, further declared that

We the representatives of Barbuda have been sent here by our people to seek separation from the administrative control of Antigua, to which we have been joined by Her Majesty’s Government by an Order in Council in the Isle of Wight on August 1st, 1860.

History shows that the consent of the people of Barbuda for this measure was then sought and refused. History also shows that at no other time were the wishes of the people of Barbuda sought to approve of this relationship of master and servant imposed upon them by a well-meaning but imperial nation …

the people of Barbuda have gone to the ballot box on three occasions and rejected the continuance of this relationship, with all the legal and constitutional means in their power, the Government of Antigua continues to ignore their known desires for a separate future and are making a last supreme effort with Her Majesty’s Government’s assistance, to continue our enslavement, and to keep us in a state of servitude for ever (Report of the Antigua Constitutional Conference, 1980, p. 25).

Britain’s view, outlined by then Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, Peter Carrington, was that

I am satisfied that the interest of the Barbudans are more than adequately protected in the Legislation enacted by the Antiguan Parliament and by the provisions of the new Constitution and that there are no grounds on which we should accede to their request for a separate status. In any event, the West Indies Act of 1967 provides that separation can only be affected at the request and with the consent of the Antiguan Government.

Should the Barbudans seek to take matters into their own hands before Independence and seek to secede either peacefully or violently the Antiguan Government may be expected to respond appropriately. The maintenance of law and order within the State including Barbuda is their responsibility and not ours. (Cabinet Memorandum, Defence and Overseas Policy Committee, 5 June 1981)

Ultimately, the conference was unable to reach an agreement over the future of Barbuda, with both sides instead approving an independent British adviser to consider special financial provisions between the central government and Barbuda after independence. On the basis of Frank Essex’s subsequent report, and the implementation of further devolution, the British government made it known it was satisfied that the constitutional framework guarded against Barbudan fears (official correspondence, NA FCO44/2283 and FCO44/2290). The Barbudans, now calling themselves the Barbuda People’s Movement, published a declaration in early 1981 that they would establish a lawful separate territory should Antigua become independent, and continued to push for an Anguilla-type solution. But, the British government remained resolutely of the view that this option was not on the table and that under the *West Indies Act 1967* they could not legally declare separation without Antiguan consent.

*Territory as Cultural Practice*

Despite being stymied by the British government’s decision to support Antigua and the legal arrangements contained in the *West Indies Act 1967*, Barbudans have continued to press their territorial claims on what Kelle (2017) terms ‘cultural’ grounds; that their lifestyle is built around their unique relationship with the land. Because land is such a scarce commodity, disputes about tenure are common in small island communities (Ballard 2013). Specifically, Barbudan separatists highlight a disjuncture between the legal status of the island as Crown Land and centuries old social practices of free occupancy and communal land tenure (Potter and Sluyter 2010). The argument is that because successive generations of Codringtons were absentee landowners, a small, self-reliant slave population had considerable autonomy over how they organised community life. This argument is supported by Colonial Office records that reveal how after emancipation in 1834, Barbudans were notorious for their claim that they should be able to hunt, harvest wood and raise livestock on a communal basis across the entire island (Lowenthal and Clarke 1980: 296).

This cultural practice was reinforced by a 1904 *Barbuda Ordinanc*e, which remained in place until independence, that left the land beyond the confines of the main village—Codrington—accessible to all Barbudans, effectively ensuring that the custom of free occupancy and communal tenure continued even if it was never enshrined in law. In the lead-up to independence, Lowenthal and Clarke (1980: 298), who advised the Barbudans throughout their negotiations with the United Kingdom and Antigua, describe the situation as follows:

Thus, Barbudan history reveals how the islanders, through communal tenacity, have over time acquired the entire island to which their slave forebears were transported. To this day, except for the strip of land where Coco Point Hotel is sited, not a square mile of Barbudan land has been leased or sold.

Barbuda thus opposed the move to associated statehood and lobbied the British government on the grounds that they feared their culture and lifestyle would be destroyed if administered by Antigua. Specifically, they were concerned the island would become a tourist destination with private land ownership and casinos (and a high crime rate) (Minahan 2002).

In recognition of Barbudan concerns, in 1976 the Antigua Government introduced the *Barbuda Local Government Act* under which the Barbuda Council was established. The Council was given wide ranging powers and financial responsibilities, with the promise that they would be enhanced after independence. However, dissatisfaction with the practice of devolution meant that many Barbudans remained staunchly opposed to their inclusion in any new state with Antigua and they continued to contest the legal claim that the two islands should be governed together right up until independence on the grounds that it would threaten their way of life.

Despite the failure of the Barbudan delegation to the Lancaster House conference to secure a legal status separate from Antigua, the island remained in the international news because of its system of communal land tenure and successive attempts by private individuals to undermine it. In 1982 a consortium that included several notorious characters attempted to buy half of the island to establish a sovereign state called “New Aragon”, which would have been managed by 400 knights. In 1989 two American businessmen wanted to build a zoo on Antigua and planned to export llamas to the United States to subsidise it. The government decided the llamas could be quarantined on Barbuda but the population, who already resented the American businessmen and their cement company who bought sand from the island, blockaded the barges with the animals onboard. In the late 1990s Unicorn Development Limited allegedly received government approval to build a hotel on Barbuda, but the islanders opposed the project. Many of these cases ended up in court and each time the Barbudans maintained that private land ownership was contra to cultural practices passed down by their ancestors over centuries.

*Territory as a Political Autonomy*

The final argument for secession is made on what Kelle (2017) calls ‘political’ grounds. As we saw, the claim that Codrington absenteeism allowed Barbuda to develop a unique system of land tenure underscores the argument that the two islands are culturally distinct. But, this historical narrative can also be mobilised in service of an argument that being jointly administered with Antigua, either as a colony or as part of a unitary state, has resulted in the loss of political autonomy relative to that earlier period. Due to ongoing tensions between the islands, the political status of Barbuda was revisited by the Commonwealth in the late 1990s. The resulting review (Benn and Bienvenu 2000) was undertaken in accordance with a provision in the constitution that there would be a follow-up assessment of the relationship after independence, albeit Barbudans were given guarantees at the Lancaster Conference that this assessment would have been undertaken much sooner (see documents for the Antigua Constitutional Conference, Dec 1980, NA FC44/2174), as one Barbudan activist recounted:

The British Government forced us [into independence with Antigua], and they tricked us to say that, okay we're putting you on a three-year trial. [But] nothing ever happened. We had to go to the United Nations twice to get the United Nations to tell the Commonwealth to come down here. The agreement that was put together [in 1980] the government never lived up to it. But they're trying everything in the book to get this land. (interview with activist from Barbuda, 2018)

The review concluded that the Barbuda Council had been granted wide powers for a community of its size but these powers were difficult to realise given financial and human resource constraints. Most of the review’s recommendations therefore focused on these issues rather than the legal status of the island, including the creation of a Joint Consultative Committee and revised financial arrangements. But, for many Barbudans, the recommendations of the 2000 review were only partially implemented.

Frustrated by the Commonwealth, the Barbudans sought a political solution. In 1999 the death of V.C. Bird, who had been Prime Minister since independence, was a catalyst for change in Antiguan politics. His son Lester took over as Prime Minister but the opposition United Progressive Party (UPP) was reenergised and would eventually win the 2004 election under the leadership of Baldwin Spencer. In the lead-up to that election, Spencer and the UPP, promised to recognise the unique place of Barbuda if they won. The campaign on Barbuda was split between the UPP-aligned Barbuda People’s Movement (BPM) and the ALP-aligned Barbuda People’s Movement for Change (BPMC). ALP critics argued the UPP pandered to the Barbudans in a cynical attempt to win votes for the BPM.

Cynical or not, the UPP ostensibly sought to make good on its promise. The BPM MP for Barbuda, Trevor Walker, was appointed as a Minister of State in the Office of the Prime Minister. A follow-up review was undertaken by the same Commonwealth team. It found little reason to depart from the major recommendations made in its previous report. But, most significantly, the UPP delivered the *2007 Barbuda Land Act*, namely

An Act to confirm that all land in Barbuda is owned in common by the people of Barbuda, to provide for the administration and development control of land in Barbuda, to provide for the confirmation or otherwise of certain leases of land in Barbuda, and for incidental and connected purposes.

In effect, the Act sought to resolve the land issue and further extend the Barbuda Council’s already considerable powers. It was not quite the federal arrangement that nearby Nevis has with St Kitts (Griffiths 2002; Veenendaal 2013), but it was welcomed by the Barbudans nonetheless. Spencer, who declared in parliament that the legislation meant ‘we are settling this issue once and for all’, described his rationale for introducing the Act as

We tried during our tenure to develop a good relationship … I think we'd reached a point where there were certain givens in terms of how we would relate. Because at least we recognised quite early that although we are quote unquote a unitary state, there are in fact cultural and important behavioural differences between the two islands and that those things tend to drive the process in terms of how you relate to one another. It's not a question of saying, well look it's one state so whatever is applicable in Antigua should automatically be up there, you have to take certain cultural and other developments over time ... We had recognised [the land issue] and sought to bring some degree of finality and clear understanding on the question of ownership of land on Barbuda. (Interview with former Prime Minister Baldwin Spencer)

In 2014 the ALP returned to office under the leadership of Gaston Browne. Shortly after taking office he signed off on a memorandum of agreement for a $1 billion resort to be built on Barbuda. The population only found out about the plan via a leaked document. Later in 2014 Browne appointed US actor Robert De Niro as a special economic envoy and signed a $250m memorandum of agreement with him and Australian billionaire James Packer to purchase the K-Club, a hotel on Barbuda which closed in 2004, as well as additional land (140 acres in addition to the 251-acre footprint of the existing K Club site). In return for redeveloping the resort and the Barbuda airport the De Niro-Packer consortium would not have to pay tax for 25 years. The redevelopment of the resort was submitted to a vote in 2015, where Barbudans were asked to stand in line and then write their name under a yes or no column depending on their opinions. The result was 206 in favour 176 against. However, doubts were raised that the ballot should have been secret as in regular elections, and that voters were intimidated as a result (Antigua Observer, 3 March 2015). The plan also attracted considerable international media attention (e.g. articles in UK papers *The Guardian* on 27 November 2015 and *Daily Mail* on 28 December 2016). Many Barbudans claimed they were not opposed to the redevelopment of the K-Club but rather the acquisition of additional land.

In 2016 (passed in 2017) the Government sought to amend the *2007 Barbuda Land Act* to increase the maximum number of years that a lease can be granted from 50 to 99. On 24 February 2018, months after Hurricane Irma led to the complete evacuation of Barbuda and five days after the Government lost a high court case brought by two Barbudans protesting against amendments to the *2007 Barbuda Land Act* designed to facilitate the 391-acre De Niro-Packer scheme, Browne called a snap election, which he won. Barbudans who had returned home had to travel to Antigua to vote. When they did they voted overwhelmingly to replace veteran politician and sitting ALP member, Arthur Nibbs, with long-time BPM activist Trevor Walker. The ALP also lost control of the Barbuda Council. This was interpreted as a clear signal of Barbudan dis-satisfaction with the government handling of the disaster response and the perceived threat to their land.

Later in 2018 the Browne Government moved to abolish the *2007 Barbuda Land Act*. His government’s justification for this move (see statements to parliament recorded in Hansard 28 December 2017 and 2 January 2018) was that:

1. The *2007 Barbuda Land Act* was made on the basis of a false legal premise;
2. Re-building Barbuda after Hurricane Irma required funds that an already indebted government did not have;
3. Barbuda was a net-recipient of Antiguan funds and should therefore contribute more to the overall development of the nation;
4. The Barbudan drain on Antiguan resources has been exacerbated by Hurricane Irma; and
5. The *2007 Barbuda Land Act* created two classes of citizens in a unitary state, which was unconstitutional.

As a result of Browne’s decision, members of the Barbuda Council argue that they have a mandate to push for greater self-governing autonomy. This might include a federal arrangement like Nevis or full independent statehood. Indeed, they have drafted legislation along the lines of the St Kitts and Nevis model. But they are also fully aware that constitutional change has proven extremely difficult in the independent Caribbean (Bishop 2011) and in their case is unlikely to succeed. Legally, they would have to convince two-thirds of Antiguans to see Barbuda as a burden that they would be better off without. To gain that majority they would also need the support of both political parties. This is unlikely given the economic potential of the island to Antigua were they able to enforce private property rights. Alternatives include appealing to the UK Privy Council on the grounds that the initial 1981 constitution was made under false premises. Neither course seems viable in the short-term.

**Conclusion**

Caribbean waterways have linked Europe with Latin America, Spain with Philippines, New England with California. They have divided Caribbean countries, shore from shore, and island from island (Sherlock 1956 cited in Lowenthal and Clarke 1980: 294).

Small islands face a precarious economic and environmental future (Connell 2013). In such circumstances we might expect that they would seek further integration, either in communities of small states or with larger states, in order to ensure survival and increase their standard of living. The Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS), which the state of Antigua and Barbuda is a constituent member, is an example of this type of integration, and interviewees stated that they expected an independent Barbuda to remain part of the OECS. But it is also the exception that proves the more common rule that when faced with a choice between integrating to increase capacity and separating to gain autonomy, small island communities will choose the latter. Entrenched fear of island neighbours as competitors has been a central feature of 20th Century Caribbean politics. Fear that the wealthier would have to support the weaker triggered the collapse of the West Indies Federation in the 1950s and 1960s. By contrast, the smallest islands fear the domination of their more powerful neighbours. Revolution on Anguilla is a case in point. St Kitts and Nevis eventually consented to this separation but within decades would face a democratic secessionist movement from Nevis, which narrowly missed the two-thirds majority required to make the latter an independent state (Nisbett 2004). Antigua seems even less amenable to losing Barbuda and so the prospects of secession succeeding in the immediate future is slim. The strength of feeling, however, and the tensions exacerbated by Hurricane Irma, the evacuation of Barbuda, and the ongoing recovery effort, speak to the relevance of islandness as a proxy for cultural, legal and political meanings of territory in the secessionist imaginary.

Historically this shift towards smaller and smaller states can be partially explained by the decolonisation of these island territories. This trend may continue if the remaining countries on the UN decolonisation list achieve independence. Barbuda is an acute example of this trend because it is a small island seeking to secede from another recently independent small island. But, it is not unique. Islandness as a proxy for territory is rarely employed to explain secession. Rather, the focus tends to be on either economic, ethnic, linguistic or religious differences as the basis for these movements. This blind spot has numerous consequences in practice, including the FCO’s assumption that Barbudans would come to accept the benefits of being one part of the unitary state of Antigua and Barbuda. Their assumption follows the well-worn logic that when faced with a choice between integration and autonomy, small communities will inevitably choose the former to realise economic advantages. The only possible exception in this rationalist account are those small territories with substantial mineral wealth. This case problematises that assumption. Some separatists concede their main aim is to become a British Overseas Territory again, thus supporting the economic arguments for integration, albeit with a larger metropolitan power rather than a small developing state. But when pressed they maintain that as this option appears unavailable, independence is better than the status quo. In which case, we can conclude that the logic of integration does not necessarily hold if the larger part of the unitary state is a small island with a developing economy rather than a metropolitan power. Indeed, one explanation for why these secessionist movements regularly arise, both in the Caribbean and other small island developing states, is that local political actors perceive little material difference in being a component territory of a small state or a very small independent state. In which case, the economic costs of secession are actually relatively low even if, from the outside, the viability of what would be one of the world’s smallest state entity appears marginal at best.

Given the shortcomings of existing theorising, this article has foregrounded how ‘islandness’—they are physically distinct from other territories by virtue of a clearly demarcated border and are thus relatively insular and inaccessible—serves as a proxy for territory and demonstrated how it can function as a resource in the nationalist imaginary. In the Barbuda case, political, cultural and legal arguments about access to land are the essence of secessionist claims. But, as Kelle (2017) illustrates, appeals to symbolic territory and ‘sacred ground’ can also be made on religious grounds, with Jerusalem perhaps the most poignant global example. In which case, while islands are an extreme example of the way territory can function as a resource in the nationalist imaginary, there is no reason to assume that this factor does not combine with other well theorised causes, be they economic, ethnic, religious or linguistic, to drive nationalist identity formation. Indeed, as Etherington (2010) illustrates, nationalists have always foregrounded territory in their rhetoric, but scholars tend to subordinate it nonetheless. This article has sought to rectify this situation. Paying greater attention to how territory acts as a resource in the nationalist imaginary can allow us to re-examine long-standing studies and cases in new and penetrating light. We do not have to return to a primordialist understanding of nationalism to do so; constructivist accounts are well equipped to account for territory, they are just rarely employed to that end. By studying nationalism and secession on small islands we can learn something about larger states too.

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1. Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname are partial exceptions due to ethnic cleavages. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)