FROM THE BIRTH OF THE ILOIS TO THE “FOOTPRINT OF FREEDOM”: A HISTORY OF CHAGOS AND THE CHAGOSSIANS

David Vine

Ernestine Marie Joseph Jacques, born Diego Garcia
Joseph and Pauline Pona, born Peros Banhos
Michel Levillain, born Mozambique
Prudence Levillain, born Madagascar
Lindor Courtois, born India
Theophile Le Leger, born Mauritius
Anastasie Legère, born Three Brothers
[Permits to Transport 1828.]¹

These are among the first-known slave names² and birthplaces of some of the initial inhabitants of the Chagos archipelago—the ancestors of the people known today as the Chagossians.³ In 1783, enslaved peoples from Africa became the first settlers in Chagos, brought to the middle of the Indian Ocean by Franco-Mauritians to work on the archipelago’s largest island, Diego Garcia. More enslaved Africans followed, forced to work on expanding plantations in Chagos. After the abolition of slavery, they were later joined by indentured labourers from India, as well as by a few with European and Chinese ancestry. Over nearly two hundred years, until the expulsion of the entire population, this diverse mixture of peoples, religions, and traditions merged to create a distinct society in Chagos.

¹ See also MA: IA 32; IG 59; IG 112/5052, 5117, 5353, 5355, 5448.
² Some of the surnames are significant in that, while common, they are the same as those of families last born in Chagos. Cf. Gutman (1976, 185–201) on naming practices during slavery reflecting the maintenance of kinship ties among African Americans.
³ This chapter draws upon David Vine, Island of Shame: The Secret History of the US Military Base on Diego Garcia (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009) and Vine 2006a. Thank you to the following individuals and groups for their help in the research and writing that resulted in this chapter: Chagos Refugees Group, Chagos Committee (Seychelles), Kamarad de Resers, Olivier Bancoult, Lisette Aurélie Talate, Janette Alexis, Bernadette Dugasse, Laura Jeffery, Philip Harvey, S. Wojciech Sokolowski, Shirley Lindenbaum, and Satinder Ragobur. Thanks especially to Sandra Evers and Marry Kooy for their comments and tireless assistance in revising the chapter. The research found in this and my other chapters in this volume was initiated in 2001 after lawyers representing the Chagossians asked me to serve as an expert witness in their lawsuits. I have not and have never been employed by these lawyers. The US lawyers reimbursed most formal research expenses during 2001–2002 and 2004.
Working on coconut plantations, surrounded by a setting of white sand beaches and fertile green vegetation, the ancestors of today's Chagossians built a society that by the 20th century included numerous villages complete with hospitals, roads, churches, and schools. The people, who were initially known as ‘the Ilois,’ began to speak their own language, Chagos Creole, and grew to a population of about 1,500–2,000 inhabitants. In purely material terms, life was far from luxurious. However, Chagossians generally needed little, controlled their own lives, and enjoyed practically universal employment. In exchange for their labour, Chagossians received regular salaries in cash and food, housing and land, and a range of other social benefits. In 1961, Mauritian colonial governor Robert Scott remarked that the main village on Diego Garcia had the “look of a French coastal village miraculously transferred whole to this shore” (Scott 1976 [1961], 242).

Today, the quaint image of a French hamlet on the coast has changed considerably. The only people living in Chagos are military personnel and civilian contractors working on the billion-dollar US military base on Diego Garcia. The Chagossians have been left in exile, to live a life of impoverishment mostly in Mauritius and the Seychelles.

This chapter tells the history of the Chagossians, from the initial settlement and development of their society in Chagos to the destruction of their way of life through forced expulsion. The chapter provides the context in which the expulsion, the military base, and the Chagossians’ lives in exile must be understood.

In writing this narrative, there were relatively few historical sources upon which to draw. The best and only complete histories of Chagos come from two British administrators who governed the islands: former governor of colonial Mauritius Sir Robert Scott’s Limuria: The Lesser Dependencies of Mauritius (1976 [1961]) and former commissioner of the British Indian Ocean Territory Richard Edis’s Peak of Limuria (2004 [1993]). A handful of other sources are also particularly useful (Dussercle 1934; Ly-Tio-Fane and S. Rajabalee 1986; Walker 1986; 1993; Stoddart and Taylor 1971; Bulpin 1958).

This history builds upon these sources with the help of archival research in the Mauritius Archives, the Seychelles Archives, the UK Public Records Office (National Archives), and the US National Archives.

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4 The name Chagossian is generally preferred today and will be used in this chapter except when quoting others and discussing the use of the name Ilois.
While the prevalence of sources and authors in the historical record are colonial, Chagossians were also an important source of historical information; however, it is important to note that the perspectives and voices of prior generations have gone largely unrecorded. To address this gap, Chagossians’ memories of Chagos and the expulsion were recorded during ethnographic research and interviews between 2001 and 2004. Interviews with former US government officials conducted mostly in 2004 and 2005 helped provide additional details about the creation of the base and the eviction process. Given the limitations of the available sources, however, this history, like any, must be understood as a partial one.

Imperial Competition in the Indian Ocean

“A great number of vessels might anchor there in safety,” remarked a French Lieutenant named La Fontaine, who led the first naval survey of Diego Garcia’s lagoon in 1769 (Scott 1976 [1961], 68). For the first time, the imperial powers of the 18th century—England and France—were beginning to grasp the strategic significance of Diego Garcia as a naval base at the centre of the Indian Ocean.

Although there was no human habitation in Chagos before the 18th century, the islands were likely known by the seagoing people of several trading and imperial powers, including the Malays, Arabs, and likely the Indians and Chinese. Still there is no conclusive evidence to prove anyone visiting Chagos prior to the arrival of 16th century Portuguese visitors, who provided the name Chagos (originally, Chagas or ‘the wounds of Christ’ (Toussaint 1966, 110). Scott (1976 [1961], 34) suggests that most of the islands of Chagos were probably first sighted and recorded on maps in 1512 by Pedro Mascarenhas. By the end of the century, the Portuguese had mapped all of the islands of the archipelago and the rest of what would become known as the Lesser Dependencies of Mauritius, from which Chagos was governed. However, in general, the Portuguese remained ‘indifferent’ to the islands, using them only as markers on their trade routes to the Indies (Scott 1976 [1961], 35).

Imperial competition over the spice trade in the Indian Ocean led the Dutch to initially claim and settle Mauritius in 1598. After four failed settlement attempts, the Dutch had abandoned the island by 1710. This left the Indian Ocean open to France and England. The two competed for the islands in the western Indian Ocean throughout the 18th century.
as strategic bases to control shipping routes to India (Scott 1976 [1961], 42–3, 48–50; Teelock 2001, 16–17). After occupying Ile Bourbon (today’s Réunion Island) in 1642, the French replaced the Dutch with a successful permanent settlement on Mauritius (which they renamed Ile de France) beginning in 1721. The French later settled nearby Rodrigues and, by 1742, the Seychelles (Scarr 1999, 5).

As in the Caribbean (Stein 1979, 9) France soon shifted its focus from military to commercial interests. French settlers built societies on the islands around enslaved labour and, particularly in Mauritius, the cultivation of sugar cane. At first, the French Company of the Indies tried to import enslaved people from the same West African sources supplying the Caribbean colonies. Soon though the Company developed a new slave trade to import enslaved labourers from Madagascar and the area of Africa known then as Mozambique (a larger stretch of the southeast African coast than the country occupies today) (Teelock 2001, 104–105; Stein 1979, 119). Indian Ocean historian Larry Bowman writes that French settlement in Mauritius produced “a sharply differentiated society with extremes of wealth and poverty and an elite deeply committed to and dependent upon slavery” (1991, 13).

For most of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Chagos islands served only as a safe haven and provisioning stop for ships gradually more familiar with its waters (Orian 1958, 129; Scott 1976 [1961], 76). As the 18th century progressed, competition between the French and English increased in Europe, spilling over into a fight for naval and thus economic control of the Indian Ocean. Centrally located Chagos became an obvious military and economic target for the imperial powers.


Settlement in Chagos

On 17 February, 1783, the French colonial government in Mauritius granted influential local plantation owner Pierre Marie Le Normand the first concession to found a settlement on Diego Garcia (Couve 1783).
According to Mauritian historians Ly-Tio-Fane and Rajabalee, Le Normand received his concession (in exchange for taxes on future coconut oil production) “and immediately prepared his voyage to Diego Garcia” (1986, 91–92). Le Normand took with him twenty-two enslaved people, who became the island's first inhabitants (Ly-Tio-Fane and Rajabalee 1986, 91–92; Walker 1993, 563; Scott 1976 [1961], 20; d’Unienville n.d.).

Unaware of Le Normand’s arrival, just three years later, the British East India Company launched a settlement party from Bombay to create a provisioning plantation on Diego Garcia. Surprised to find the French settlement, which they disparaged as “a dozen huts of the meanest appearance,” the British party did not flinch, and on 4 May 1786, “took formal possession of the island of Diego Garcia and all its dependencies in the name of His Majesty King George the Third” (Edis 2004 [1993], 30–31).

Unable to resist the newcomers, Le Normand left for Mauritius to report the British arrival. When France’s Vicompte de Souillac learned of the British landing, he sent a letter of protest to the British Council in Bombay and the frigate Minerve to reclaim the archipelago (Ibid., 31; Scott 1976 [1961], 75; Walker 1993, 562). To prevent an international incident, the British sent departure instructions to its landing party. Upon its arrival in Diego, the Minerve found the British settlement abandoned (“Diégo Garcia”; Scott 1976 [1961], 20).

With a diplomatic incident averted, France continued to control Chagos. Monsieur Danquet soon established a new fishing settlement on Diego Garcia (“Diégo Garcia”; Walker 1993, 563). Four more coconut plantations followed, established by Franco-Mauritians Lapotaire, Didier, and the brothers Cayeux (Ly-Tio-Fane and Rajabalee 1986, 92; d’Unienville n.d.).

Like the societies in Mauritius and the Seychelles, and in other island colonies, life in Chagos revolved around the use of enslaved people to exploit natural resources—in this case, primarily coconuts. By 1808, there were one hundred enslaved people working under Lapotaire alone, who proved the most successful of the owners, building a copra processing plant for oil extraction in 1793 (Walker 1993, 563). By 1813, there were similar numbers of enslaved workers in Peros Banhos, shortly after

5 Documents in the Mauritius Archives are difficult to decipher, with the name perhaps spelled “Dauguet” (Scott 1976 [1961]) or “Danguet” (Walker 1986).
the Mauritian colonial government granted an 1813 *jouissance*, or concession, to create a coconut plantation there (Ibid., 563). Other plantations were similarly established under other owners at Six Iles [Six Islands] in 1808 and at Trois Frères, Ile d’Aigle [Eagle Islands], and Salomon Islands in 1813. Along with Mauritius’s other dependencies Agalega and Rodrigues, Chagos was soon known as one of the Oil Islands—so named for cultivating the dried flesh of the coconut, called copra, to make coconut oil.

A Climate for Coconuts and a Growing Society: Environmental Conditions in Chagos

The islands in Chagos had, in the words of a 20th century agriculturalist, “a climate ideally suited to the cultivation of coconuts” (Lucie-Smith 1959, 6). Vegetation is particularly dense on Diego Garcia because of high rainfall and almost unvaryingly high temperatures, conditions also found in the other islands. And unlike the cyclones (hurricanes) that frequently tear across Mauritius and can damage sugar cane crops, Chagos is in the part of the Indian Ocean where cyclones form and is thus commonly free from harm. Coconut palms grow to as high as 125 feet and produce nuts year round for potential harvest (Orian 1958, 129).

All of Chagos’s islands are coral (rather than volcanic rock) atolls and extremely low-lying; the highest elevation is 15 metres above sea level on Diego Garcia, a V-shaped island surrounding a large lagoon with 30 square kilometres (12 square miles) of land area (Walker 1993, 561; Scott 1976 [1961], 16). Fishing opportunities are abundant (commercial fishing companies still fish the waters under special agreements with the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)). Describing conditions on Diego Garcia, which many call idyllic, one agricultural observer writes, “The atoll is covered with luxuriant vegetation of bright green colour and is fringed by pure white sandy beaches” (Orian 1958, 129).

A Transfer of Power and Life from Slavery to Indenture

French power in the Indian Ocean crumbled during the Napoleonic Wars at the turn of the 19th century. The British first seized control of

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6 Other than in the cultivation of coconuts, the natural environment played another important role in Chagos’s history: From around 1792 until the 1830s, Diego Garcia
the Seychelles in 1794 and Mauritius in 1810. France formally ceded Mauritius, including Chagos and the other islands that France had controlled as dependencies of Mauritius (as well as most of its other island possessions worldwide) to Great Britain in 1814’s Treaty of Paris.

Unlike most instances of British colonial rule, however, Mauritius under the British retained its French laws, language, religion, and customs (including enslaving people of African ancestry). Bowman (1991, 17–18) notes, “Mauritius became formally British but remained very French.” British oversight in Mauritius and even more so in the isolated dependencies like Chagos was weak at best. The British sent the first government agent to investigate conditions in Chagos between 1824 and 1829 (Scott 1976 [1961], 128) but otherwise simply encouraged the production of oil in Chagos to supply the Mauritian market (Ly-Tio-Fane and Rajabalee 1986, 92–93).

Slavery thus remained the defining feature of life in Chagos from Le Normand’s initial settlement to the abolition of slavery in Mauritius and its dependencies in 1835. Enslaved labourers built the archipelago’s infrastructure, produced its wealth (mostly in coconut oil), and formed the overwhelming majority of inhabitants. While most enslaved people in Chagos arrived from Mauritius, some are likely to have arrived from the Seychelles (Scott 1976 [1961], 112, 119) and perhaps even on slaving ships direct from Madagascar and the Mozambique coast of Africa (Peerthum and Peerthum 2002). Some enslaved people would have been born in Mauritius and perhaps the Seychelles, but most were probably born in Africa (Scott 1976 [1961], 2).

Colonial Parliamentary papers from 1826 (below) provide a picture of the population, including the nature of the islands as absolute slave plantation societies. It is important to note the significant gender imbalance in the islands, which continued through an 1832 census enumerating almost twice as many enslaved males as enslaved females (Commissioners of Compensation 1835). Although the gender ratio had generally equalized by the mid-20th century, the relatively small number of women in earlier decades may have increased their desirability and thus their power, which may help to explain the significant power and authority Chagossian women exercised in exile.

served as quarantine for lepers given its isolation, climate, and abundant supply of turtle meat (thought to cure leprosy). Contrary to the predictions of some that this would produce a sickly population, Scott found “there has, however, been no such genetic quirk. … Physically, the people of Diego Garcia are not different from the inhabitants of the other Dependencies” (Scott 1976 [1961], 256–257, 299; see also Ly-Tio-Fane and Rajabalee 1986, 92).
An 1828 letter from plantation owners in the Lesser Dependencies to the colonial government in Mauritius reveals important aspects of daily life for enslaved people (despite the letter most likely being an attempt to cover up an illegal slave trade in the dependencies, portraying the enslaved as “happy and content” and receiving treatment of “the greatest gentleness”). According to the letter, the enslaved labour worked “from sunrise to sunset for six days a week” under the supervision of overseers. Outside their regular workdays, each enslaved person had the ability to make a small savings of money and to have a petite plantation, a small kitchen garden to grow food and raise animals (Lapotaire et al. 1828, 13). Significantly, these small plots marked the beginnings of formal Chagossian land tenure, which continued until the expulsion. Scott confirms that, by law, slave owners were required to provide basic food rations, clothing, housing, and medical care, and that “slaves were usually supplied with various vegetables … [and] encouraged to rear small livestock … either by way of incentives to good work or to place on the slaves themselves as much as possible of the onus of providing a balanced diet” (1976 [1961], 99, 104–105, 149).

The Plantation System

Society in Chagos had little in common with the islands of the Maldives and Sri Lanka several hundred miles away and shared much more with societies thousands of miles away in the Americas, from southern Brazil to the islands of the Caribbean and north to the southern states of the USA. What connected these disparate places (as well as Natal, Zanzibar,

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7 There were also 35 male lepers and 7 female lepers, though their ethnicities were not identified (Commissioners of Compensation 1835). Records for Six Iles indicate a Mr. Duperrel of Mauritius established on the islands without being granted a title and accompanied by some enslaved people (“avec quelques noirs”).
a history of chagos and the chagossians

Fiji, Queensland, Mauritius, the Seychelles, Réunion, and others) was the plantation system, also known as the “plantation complex” (see Mintz 1971, 17–46; 1974; Curtin 1990; Craton 1997).

With the plantation system of agriculture well established in the sugar fields of Mauritius by the end of the 18th century, Franco-Mauritian entrepreneurs applied the same technology in Chagos. Like societies from Bahia to Barbados and Baltimore, Chagos had a mostly enslaved labour force working in an agriculture-based economy organized around capitalist plantations supplying specialized products (in this case, copra and other coconut products) to distant markets (Curtin 1990, 11–13; Mintz 1974, 46).

Unlike most other plantation societies, however, the majority of the copra harvest was not produced for European markets but was instead for the Mauritian market. The islands were thus a dependent part of the Mauritian sugar cane economy, which was itself a dependent part of the French and later British economies. In other words, Chagos was a colony of a colony, a dependency of a dependency: Chagos helped meet Mauritius’ coconut oil needs and in doing so kept the Mauritian monocrop sugar industry satisfying Europe’s growing sweet tooth.

From the workers’ perspective, however, the plantations were, like others, “as much a factory as a farm,” employing the “factory-like organization of agricultural labour into large-scale, highly coordinated enterprises” (Mintz 1974, 52, 54). While some of the work was agricultural in nature, much of it required the repetitive manual processing of hundreds of coconuts a day by women, men, and children in what was essentially an outdoor factory area at the centre of each plantation. Still, as in the Caribbean, most of the work was performed on a ‘task’ basis, generally allowing labourers to control the pace and rhythm of their work. Plantation owners—who mostly lived far away in Mauritius—probably viewed the relatively less onerous task system as the best way to maintain discipline and prevent greatly feared slave revolts, given Chagos’ isolation and the tiny number of Europeans on the islands. For the same reasons, authority over work regimens was carefully—and at times brutally—controlled, helping to shape a rigid colour-based plantation hierarchy mirroring that of the French Caribbean. In Mauritius and the Seychelles, these same fears made ‘domestic discipline,’ armed militias, and police the backbone of society (see Eccles 1998, 172–74; Miles 1986, 32–4; Scarr 1998).

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8 This was the case in the isolated Out Islands of the Bahamas where similar conditions prevailed (see H. Johnson 1996, 50).
Plantation owners came from the grand blanc—literally ‘big white’—ruling class and ran the settlements essentially as patriarchal private estates. “For all practical purposes,” explains former Governor Scott, power “was normally delegated to the manager on the spot, the administrateur,” who was usually a relative or member of the petit blanc—literally ‘little white’—class, running the plantation from the master’s house, the grand case (Scott 1976 [1961], 136; Craton 1997, 3; Eccles 1998, 172).

Petit blanc, ‘mulatto’ sub-managers and other staff helped run the islands, recruited to Chagos and rewarded with better salaries, housing and other privileges rarely extended to labourers. The sub-managers in turn delivered daily work orders and controlled the workers through a group of commandeurs—overseers—primarily of African descent, who were given some privileges and, after emancipation, were paid higher wages.

Despite the constraints on their lives, some labourers achieved a degree of upward mobility by becoming artisans and performing other specialized tasks. The vast majority of the population remained general labourers of African descent at the bottom of the work and status hierarchy in a system that, as elsewhere, became engrained in the social order.

Emancipation and the Continuation of the Plantation System

Slavery was abolished in Mauritius and its dependencies in 1835. After emancipation, a period of apprenticeship continued for about four years. As in the Caribbean (Craton 1997, 380–381), the daily routine of plantation life during and after the apprenticeship period changed according to the dictates of each island’s administrator. On some islands, like Diego Garcia, life and the conditions from slavery apparently changed little. On others, daily work tasks were reduced in accordance with the stipulations of the official Assistant Protector of Slaves in Mauritius, who was charged with ensuring that slavery-like conditions did not persist (Scott 1976 [1961], 140–141).

In short, life in Chagos after emancipation was part of a continuum (cf. Craton 1997, 358) with the pre-emancipation era rather than a revolutionary departure. While the quantity and demands of work lessened over time in favour of labourers, the plantation complex continued. In 1949, a visiting representative of the Mauritian Labour Office commented
on the generally “patriarchal” labour relations between management and labour in Chagos, “dating back to what I imagine would be the slave days.” He continued, “[b]y this I do not imply any oppression but rather a system of benevolent rule with privileges and no rights” (Meyer 1949, 1).

The most significant post-emancipation change likely came in the quality of labour relations. The years following emancipation in Mauritius were marked by the rapid departure of enslaved Africans from the Mauritian sugar plantations (e.g., Scarr 1998; Teelock 1998). Unlike in Mauritius, demographic data from Chagos suggests that there was no such migration. To explain this lack of emigration from Chagos, one must again consider that the newly freed Africans, and the Indian indentured labourers who joined them, massively outnumbered the plantation management of mostly European descent, in a setting of enormous isolation. For management, this demographic imbalance and the lack of a militia or police force as in Mauritius and the Seychelles made the threat of an uncontrollable labour revolt real (several examples exist, including, as we shall see, the 1856 murder of an administrator). These facts, combined with the relatively comfortable work benefits and light workload increasingly enjoyed by Chagossians, suggest that despite the continuation of the plantation complex after emancipation, the general nature of labour relations probably improved significantly in favour of labourers, although exceptions of brutality and harsh treatment remained through to the mid-20th century. In general, however, it appears that Chagossians gradually struck what (for a plantation society) was a relatively good work bargain.

Indenture and the Introduction of Indian Labour

While some of those previously enslaved on sugar plantations in Mauritius appear to have immigrated to work on Diego Garcia and other Mauritian dependencies (Carter and d’Unienville 2001, 57), the major population change in the post-emancipation period came when plantation owners began importing indentured labourers from India (while Indians were arriving on a much larger scale to work the Mauritian sugar cane fields). The extent and rate at which Indian labour was introduced in Chagos is unclear. A visiting magistrate’s report from 1880 indicates there were about 10 Indians in all of Chagos, a figure almost certainly too low (according to sources like Ackroyd 1880, 11). Some, on
the other hand, claim a figure of 40 percent Indian descent by the 1960s (Botte 1980; Walker 1986).

Regardless of the precise figures, which are likely somewhere in the middle, it is clear that Indians began living and working in Chagos on a permanent basis around the time of emancipation. Just one example is found in an 1861 census that recorded a household featuring a domestic servant born in Madras working for a woman from France (Büehmüller and Büehmüller 1861).

There is also evidence that some, including Mauritian Governor Higginson, believed Indian labour was being introduced illegally into Chagos and the other dependencies (Labouchere 1857a). The 1856 murder of an administrator in Six Iles, Mr. Hugon, supports the charge. Four Indians were eventually captured and tried for Hugon’s murder. In their trial, the four claimed that they had been kidnapped from Cochin and made to work in Six Iles against their will. Though a visiting police magistrate from Mauritius doubted the story in 1880 (Ackroyd 1880, 8), historian Bulpin supports it, insisting that labour was recruited to Six Iles by Captain Alexander Gerard and Captain Romain Rodriguez, “who kidnapped them by the simple means of employing casual labourers to load their ship in the East [Indies], and on the last day simply sailing away with these unfortunates still on board” (Bulpin 1958, 314).

An 1859 commission investigating the killing found that “most of the [Chagos] island estates were well run according to the standards of the day,” but on Six Iles, “the labourers were set to drudgery with no reply to any complaints except the liberal use of the lash” (Ibid.). Manager Hugon was “particularly hated” (Ibid.). He was known to use what was reported as his belt (Ibid.) or a 4 foot long by 1½ inch wide length of rope (Labouchere 1857b) to inflict ‘treatment’ on his labourers (Bulpin 1958, 314).

Apparently, when Hugon went to inspect workers on Lubine Island in August 1856, he struck his “headsman … and was immediately attacked and killed by the labourers” (Labouchere 1857b). A knife-wielding man apparently cut Hugon’s throat with such force that he almost completely severed his own hand (Bulpin 1958, 314). In the aftermath, the workers seized control of a ship, only to be captured and tried for the murder (Labouchere 1957b). Two were convicted but received only “eighteen months for manslaughter” which was, given the racial attitudes at the time, “a caustic judgment on the management of the Atoll” (Scott 1976 [1961], 263).
A Growing ‘Sense of Proprietorship’: Life in the Second Half of the 19th Century

The murder of Hugon and the working conditions leading to his death seem to have been an exception rather than the norm after emancipation. By the middle of the 19th century, Bulpin says Diego Garcia and Peros Banhos “were prosperous estates” (1958, 28). In 1865, the colonial government in Mauritius ended the *jouissance* system and most of the Franco-Mauritian plantation owners purchased their land outright from the government. Wages for labourers around 1860 were the equivalent of 10 shillings a month, a dollop of rum, and a “twist of tobacco if times were good.” Rations, which were treated as part of wages, totalled 11–14 pounds a week of what was usually rice (Ibid., 314).

Two decades later, the wage structure on Diego Garcia revealed a detailed labour hierarchy in increasingly complicated island societies: Wages were 16 shillings a month for ordinary male coconut labourers and 12 a month for women. Some women working in domestic or supervisory jobs received more. As Scott explains, “Millmen were paid eighteen and twenty shillings a month and were on a slightly higher level than rat-catchers, stablemen, gardeners, maize planters, toddy-makers and pig- and fowl-keepers … The next grade comprised the blacksmiths, carpenters and assistant carpenters, coopers, and junior overseers, who drew between twenty and thirty-two shillings monthly” (1976 [1961], 162). In addition to rations, ripe coconuts were freely available upon request. Management often paid bonuses in the form of tobacco, rum, toddy (fermented coconut milk) and, for some, coconut oil. Anyone could use boats and nets for fishing. Many labourers still kept gardens and raised animals.

Laws issued for the Lesser Dependencies in 1877 (and strengthened in 1904) established regulations for working conditions on the islands and the provision of basic services. Work on Sundays “was strictly limited” and management was required to provide housing of minimum set dimensions, adequate provisions in a company store, a hospital infirmary, and a jail for short incarcerations (Scott 1976 [1961], 160–161). Soon after the passage of these laws, the manager at East Point “introduced the system of allowing labourers to build their own [wood-framed, thatched-roof] houses, if they so opted, the management providing all the materials.” The system proved a success, creating “quite superior dwellings and a sense of proprietorship” (Scott 1976 [1961], 162–165). It continued, according to Chagossians and others, until the expulsion.
To provide labourers with protection from any continuation of slavery-like conditions, the 1877 laws also required labourers to work under three-year renewable contracts. Oral contracts seem to have always been the norm, however, for people born on the islands. Scott notes that, “in the later years of the 19th century, the number of labourers in the islands under oral contracts (which were not applicable to imported labour) came to exceed the number under written contracts (which applied to resident as well as imported labour)” (1976 [1961], 23–24).

By 1880, the population of Chagos as a whole had risen to approximately 760. The Salomon group experienced the largest population increase, becoming one of the three primary settlements in Chagos. As during slavery, the disproportion of men to women was, for the time being, still significant (Ackroyd 1880, 11).

Table 2: Chagos Population, 1880.
Chagos Archipelago “Approximate Population,” 1880

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Diego Garcia</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>87</td>
<td>400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peros Banhos</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salomon</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eagle Islands</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Six Iles</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAGOS TOTAL, 1880: 760

[Source: Ackroyd 1880, 12.]

Work was still conducted on a task basis. Labour started early in the morning, around sunrise, and continued until a worker finished a task, generally until 2 pm or later, although sometimes it was as early as 11 am if a labourer worked quickly. Men generally picked and husked 500–550 coconuts a day, leaving the small nut within the coconut. Women generally broke these nuts and removed the flesh from 1,200–1,500 coconuts a day. Others worked cutting grass, collecting palm fronds, and running the oil mill (Scott 1976 [1961], 163–164).

Turning coconuts into oil began once the nuts had been collected, husked, and their flesh removed. The flesh of the coconut was dried in the sun, producing copra. Workers next crushed the copra in an oil mill, generally at the centre of each plantation. Donkeys turned a large crank
to crush the copra, yielding oil and leftover solids known as *poonac*, which became livestock feed for export and local use (Ackroyd 1880, 11; Scott 1976 [1961], 163–164). This process remained largely unchanged until the closing of the plantations. Drying was later accomplished with oven-heated, enclosed drying sheds, while most of the copra was transported to modern factories in Mauritius for more efficient processing. The donkey-powered island mills remained in order to produce small quantities of oil for local use.

Although the harvesting and export of the coconut—in all its forms, even husks—dominated life in Chagos, several other economic activities were important to the islands. Honey, guano (bird manure), timber, ship building, pigs, salt fish, maize and some vegetable crops, wooden toys, model boats, and brooms and brushes made from coconut palms were all products developed for export and local use. Guano in particular became an increasingly important export for the Mauritian sugar cane fields in the 20th century, making up one-third of Diego's exports by 1957 (Scott 1976 [1961], 253; Warner n.d.).

The most significant departure from coconut exploitation came in 1882 when two companies established coaling stations on Diego Garcia in hope of creating major refuelling ports for steamer lines crossing the Indian Ocean. For an archipelago that was cut off from the rest of the world except for transport ships from Mauritius visiting two or three times per year, this was a potentially transformative change. The companies leased two of the three islets at the entrance to Diego Garcia's lagoon for the stations. They imported Somali, Mauritian, Chinese, English, Greek, and Italian labourers, skilled tradesworkers, and artisans to set up the operations (Edis 2004 [1993], 49). However, the imported labour proved to be an ongoing problem for the peace of the islands, leading to a small revolt by the newcomers (put down when the manager at Pointe de l’Est brandished a revolver) and the creation of a government police post at Mini-Mini in 1885 (Edis 2004 [1993], 49). Passengers on the steamships were also troublesome. Eventually, they were barred from disembarking while ships took on coal to prevent the introduction of disease and other troubles, including the “promiscuous plundering of coconuts” (Scott 1976 [1961], 174).

In 1888, the coaling stations closed due to financial failures (see Ibid., 169–178; Dupont 1883, 2–5). As a result, Diego Garcia “revert[ed] to its one stable industry, the production of coconut oil” (Scott 1976 [1961], 178).
Growing Villages in the Indian Ocean: Chagos in the 20th Century

By the turn of the 20th century, society in Chagos appears to have been well established. Chagos Creole, a language related to varieties in Mauritius and the Seychelles and based on a predominantly French vocabulary and Bantu grammar and structure, emerged among the islanders (Papen 1978; Holm 1989, 403–404). People born in Chagos became collectively known by the Creole name *Ilois* (or *Ilwa*).9

Again, conditions varied to some extent from island to island. The “Mauritius Almanac for 1915” describes Diego Garcia as the most important Oil Island, with 1913 coconut oil exports totalling 344,197 litres and total island exports reaching Rs 60,257. Diego’s population in 1911 was 517 (315 male, 202 female). There were six villages and several other isolated houses as well as two hospital infirmaries (Walter 1914, A52).

Peros Banhos, with its 27 islands encircling a large lagoon, was inhabited by people primarily born in Peros Banhos and “priding themselves on being natives of Peros Banhos” (Scott 1976 [1961], 282; Rousset 1939, 13–14). From his ethnographic work in the 1980s, anthropologist Iain Walker describes how in the 20th century, the group’s capital, Ile du Coin, developed into “a neat little village arranged around a semicircular village green, roads radiating outwards into the ‘suburbs’” (1993, 571). Scott writes, “Most of the residents work on coconut extraction … and all may, if they please, go monthly to the Ile du Coin for shopping and a dance” (1976 [1961], 283).

Scott’s detailed description of Ile du Coin is helpful and evocative:

The residential quarter in the village consisted of reasonably large cottages of palm matting on timber frames, with thatched roofs supported on massive, white-painted palm trunks. There was one broad main road, pleasantly broken by large shady trees, with cottages on either side. … The people of Ile du Coin were exceptionally proud of their homes. The gardens usually contained an arrangement of flower-beds and a vegetable patch, almost always planted with pumpkins and loofahs trained over rough trellis-work, with a few tomato plants and some greens. [1976 (1961), 285]

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9 It is unclear when this name first developed, but the Catholic priest Father Dussercle used the term as early as his report from a 1933–1934 mission (1934, 9). Madeley says that the term “has been used since the nineteenth century” (1985, n. 5). Although he provides no evidence to support this claim, it seems likely that Madeley is correct and that the term was in use well before Dussercle’s arrival, probably dating to the 19th century.
As 19th century census records show, the expansion of settlement and economic exploitation of the Salomon (also 'Salamon') group developed relatively late compared with that of the other Chagos groups. Until ownership in Chagos was consolidated under one company in 1934, there was effectively no coordination between Salomon and the Diego and Peros groups, which until that point were owned by separate companies. Salomon's population remained relatively small, with only 160 people reported in the group's 11 islands in 1913. Unlike the other islands, Salomon had a large timber industry for export and for Chagos's well-known boat building industry based there. As in Peros Banhos, five or six of the islands supported permanent villages, with people typically visiting the 'model village' in the Boddam Island capital once a month for their pay, shopping, and relaxation (Scott 1976 [1961], 271; Walker 1993, 572).

Along the northwest side of the Great Chagos Bank, Trois Frères and Ile d'Aigle were settled shortly after the granting of a concession for Trois Frères in 1813. The difficulty of navigating in the dangerous waters and winds of the area seems to have limited their settlement (Scott 1976 [1961], 265). Trois Frères was permanently inhabited for a short period in the 19th century and then only until 1935. Ile d'Aigle "must have come to be regarded by its inhabitants," says Scott, "as a real home," with a "carefully tended" cemetery and evocatively named places like Love Apple Crossing, Ceylon Square, and Frigates' Pool (Ibid., 266–67). In 1932, the successful island was inexplicably closed by its owners, only to be reopened unsuccessfully in each of the next two years. The owners of the islands transferred the inhabitants to Six Iles.

Six Iles (also known as Egmont Islands, and which actually includes a seventh unnamed island) had a more troubled history than Eagle. After the awarding of a jouissance in 1808, Six Iles experienced periods of poor management, brief abandonment during the mid-19th century, and the killing of the manager Hugon. After 1861, Six Iles went from being "little more than a labour camp" to, within ten years, a home to "families occupying the six large islands" (Scott 1976 [1961], 264). Temporary labour continued to arrive in the islands during times of prosperity and the islands seem to have been thriving by the 1930s. A rapid and somewhat mysterious decline followed. In 1935, the islands...

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10 Dussercle described it as having become, at this period, a "little Babylon," in which the inhabitants "lived in an exceedingly Bohemian manner," and the copra was left to rot (Scott 1976 [1961], 264). I have been unable to find additional details about Dussercle's salacious description.
were closed and its inhabitants, along with those of Ile d’Aigle and perhaps Trois Frères, were transferred to Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos, Salomon, and, in smaller numbers, to Mauritius (see Ibid., 260–68; Walker 1993, 572; Dalais 1935, 1–2).

Growing Global Connections: Chagos before the Expulsion

By the mid-20th century, Chagos had moved from being relatively isolated to having increasing connections with Mauritius, other islands in the Indian Ocean, and the rest of the world. In 1941, the islands changed hands when a single company, Diego Ltd., consolidated ownership of the islands, controlling Chagos and the Agalega Islands, as well as the transport line serving the islands and a coconut oil processing plant in Mauritius (Scott 1956, 2; Lucie-Smith 1959, 1–2).

During World War II, Diego Garcia became a small landing strip for Royal Air Force reconnaissance aircraft and a base for a small contingent of Indian Army troops. After the war, the troops went home, leaving behind a wrecked Catalina seaplane that became a favorite playground for children. (Edis 2004 [1993].)

By the 1960s, steam ships from Mauritius and the Seychelles were stopping in Chagos four or more times a year. Copra and coconut oil exports were sold in Mauritius and the Seychelles and through them in Europe, South Africa, India, and Israel. Wireless communications at local meteorological stations connected the main islands with Mauritius and the Seychelles. Short wave radios allowed reception of broadcasts from at least as far as the Seychelles and Sri Lanka (Todd 1969; Dalais 1935, 18).

The Mauritian colonial government began showing increasing interest in the welfare of Chagos’s inhabitants and its economy. Specialists sent by the government investigated health and agricultural conditions in particular. With the help of their reports and suggestions, the government established crèches in each island group, schools, and a regular garbage and refuse removal system reported to be better than that in rural Mauritius (Lavoipierre 1953, 5; Darlow 1953; Scott 1956, 7).

The architecture of island life remained similar; Chagossians’ houses were generally laid out in rows along roads leading to a village green and the administrative centre of each plantation. Surrounding the green there were workshops, small oil mills, drying sheds for the copra, artisan workshops, company offices, recreation grounds, a cemetery, and a
church or chapel (in each of the three main settlements after the introduction of Catholicism in the late 19th century). Small dirt roads traversed the main islands and there were a handful of motorbikes, trucks, jeeps, and tractors. Water came from wells and rain catchment tanks.

Everyone in Chagos who wanted to work had a job on the plantations and pensions upon retirement. The vast majority of Chagossians still worked as labourers harvesting and processing coconuts into copra and coconut oil. A few male labourers rose to become foremen and commandeurs, organizing the labourers and delivering work instructions from the management (a few women were also commandeurs). Other men became artisans working as blacksmiths, bakers, carpenters, masons, mechanics, and in other specialized positions.

On each main island, a male administrator or manager seen as ‘white’ or as a light-skinned Creole still represented the companies that owned the islands. The companies also employed several other people of European, Indian, Chinese, or some mixed descent, who were considered ‘staff.’ Like the administrator and unlike most labourers, staff members generally worked for a matter of years before returning to their permanent homes in Mauritius or the Seychelles. Staff positions included accountants, assistant managers, clerks, engineers, nurses, midwives, and teachers. A few people from the labourer class worked privately as domestic and childcare workers for members of the staff.

Wages for labourers remained small and were generally credited to a worker’s account on a monthly basis. Male labourers earned more than two hundred percent of female labourers’ wages. Artisans, foremen, and overseers (almost all male) earned as much as six hundred percent of what female labourers earned and those in staff positions earned considerably more. Workers received rations of food that included rice or flour, coconut oil, salt, lentils, fish, wine, and occasionally vegetables and pork (Todd 1969). In addition to this base salary, labourers often worked overtime, paid in cash. Most still opted to build their own houses with construction materials provided as part of their work benefits. Staff members, and some artisans, foremen, and commandeurs received

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11 The following description of working and living conditions comes from many sources including interviews and conversations with Chagossians and other plantation employees. See also, Scott 1976 [1961]; Walker 1986, 1993; the reports of John R. Todd; and a series of magistrate reports on Chagos dating to the 19th century.
additional benefits including larger houses and better housing materials (Scott 1976 [1961]).

Work benefits for labourers also included firewood, government crèches and schools, pensions, regular vacations—promne—with free passage to Mauritius, burial services, health care, and medicines. After the day’s work was completed, Chagossians would often work overtime, tend to their gardens and animals, fish, or hunt for other seafood, including red snapper, tuna, and other fish, crab, prawns, crayfish, lobster, octopus, sea cucumber, and turtles. Fish in particular was an important part of Chagossians’ diets, as were coconuts. Workers often shared their catch with neighbours or sold it, sometimes with surplus crops and animals, to the plantation company for cash. The plantations operated company stores where workers bought clothing, tools, and other household items.

After the end of a half-day of work on Saturdays, Chagossians generally gathered in each island group for a sega that would last into the early morning hours. Although the long-standing popular institution, featuring singing, playing, and dancing to sega music, is found on islands throughout the southwest Indian Ocean, Chagos and most other islands had their own distinctive sega traditions. In Chagos, segas were an occasion for entire island communities to gather. On Saturday nights, everyone met around a bonfire in a clearing. Under the moon and stars, drummers on the goat-hide-covered ravanne would start tapping out a slow, rhythmic beat. Others would begin singing, dancing and joining in on accordions, triangles and other percussion and string instruments. For those who sang, the sega allowed islanders to sing traditional songs or their own originals, which were often improvised. Most segas followed a call-and-response pattern with soloists singing verses supported by dancers, musicians and onlookers who joined in on a chorus, providing frequent shouts, whistles and outbursts of encouragement. In Chagos, segas were filled with themes of love, jealousy, separation, and loss (see Jeffery 2007). Much as in the blues and other musical traditions, the sega was an important mode of expression and a way to share hardships and gain support from the community.

“French Coastal Villages”

When, after World War II, Scott compared Diego Garcia’s capital East Point to a French coastal village, he described the view as follows: “The architecture, the touches of old-fashioned ostentation in the château and
its relation to the church; the disposition of trees and flowering shrubs across the ample green; the neighbourly way in which white-washed stores, factories and workshops, shingled and thatched cottages, cluster round the green; the lamp standards along the roads and the parked motor-lorries: all contribute towards giving the village this quality” (1976 [1961], 242). Clearly charmed by the islands, Scott explained that “[t]he association of East Point with a synthesis of small French villages, visited or seen on canvas, was strengthened by the warm welcome of the islanders” (Ibid.). “Funny little places! Indeed they are. But how lovely!” Scott’s predecessor and governor, Sir Hilary Blood, remarked, “[c]oco-nut palms against the bluest of skies … emerald-green, purple, orange, all the rich colours of the world, follow each other across the warm sea,” glowed Sir Hilary. “Its beauty is infinite” (Blood 1957, 522).

A Warning

In 1962, the islands again changed hands, purchased by a conglomerate, Chagos-Agalega Ltd. The company included both Seychellois and Mauritian ownership, under the major Mauritian corporation, Rogers and Co., Ltd., and the Seychellois holding company Moulinie & Co., led by businessperson Paul Moulinie.

Around the same time, Chagossians saw the introduction of a more flexible labour supply revolving around single male labourers from the Seychelles (Scott 1976 [1961], 181) as well as the “drift” of permanent inhabitants from Chagos to Mauritius, drawn by the allure of Mauritius’ “pavements and shop-windows, the cinemas and football matches, the diversity of food and occupation” (Ibid.). While Scott compared the movement to the migration of people in Great Britain from villages to cities after World War I, he emphasized, “it is still only a drift” (1976 [1961], 184, 24).

Scott ends his 1961 book with a sympathetic if paternalistic and colonialist description of the Chagossians (and the people of the other Lesser Dependencies). In it, one hears a foreboding warning from Scott who, as Governor of Mauritius, may well have known about developing Anglo-American plans to realize French Lieutenant La Fontaine’s original vision for Diego Garcia.

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12 Scott meant his description to apply also to the people of the other Lesser Dependencies like Agalega.
It must also be recognized, however, that ignorance of the way of life of the islanders might open the way to attempts to jerk them too rapidly into more highly organized forms of society, before they are ready. They have never been hurried. Their environment has probably inoculated them with an intolerance towards hurry. … This is far from being a plea to make the Lesser Dependencies a kind of nature reserve for the preservation of the anachronistic. It is, however, very definitely a plea for full understanding of the islanders’ unique condition, in order to ensure that all that is wholesome and expansive in the island societies is preserved. [Scott 1976 (1961), 293.]

The Base and the Expulsion

In the late 1950s, two centuries after La Fontaine’s survey, the US Navy identified Diego Garcia as a prime base location for deploying US military forces into the Indian Ocean and surrounding regions, from southern Africa to the Persian Gulf and Southeast Asia. In 1960, the Navy initiated secret conversations with the British Government about creating a base on the island. US officials proposed that the British Government detach the atoll and the rest of Chagos from colonial Mauritius as well as three island groups from colonial Seychelles to create a new colony that would provide locations for the creation of military bases in the Indian Ocean (Bezboruah 1977, 58; Bandjunis 2001, 1–3; Palmer 1992, 95; Ryan 1984, 133). The two governments settled on a plan to create a new colony solely for military use (despite United Nations declarations against the dismantling of colonies during decolonisation). They would call Britain’s last created colony the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT).

During secret 1964 talks in London, State Department representatives insisted on an additional condition: the United States must have “exclusive control” of the islands “without local inhabitants” (US Embassy London 1964, 1–2). British officials agreed to carry out the necessary removals.

The British began by pressuring Mauritian representatives during independence negotiations in 1965 to give up the islands of Chagos (part of colonial Mauritius since before the start of British rule in 1814) in exchange for Mauritian independence (see Marimootoo 1997; chapter by Jocelyn Chan Low in this book).

The decision to detach the islands for the BIOT was not announced publicly. On 8 November 1965, the British Government invoked an archaic royal prerogative of the Queen to pass laws without Parliamentary
approval, quietly creating the BIOT, complete with its own colonial flag, crest, stamps, and official administrator.

More than a month after the fact, the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 2066 noting its “deep concern” over actions taken by Great Britain “to detach certain islands from the Territory of Mauritius for the purpose of establishing a military base.” Citing the UN prohibition on disturbing the territorial integrity of non-self governing territories, the General Assembly asked Britain “to take no action which would dismember the Territory of Mauritius and violate its territorial integrity” (United Nations 1965). The resolution made no mention of the Chagossians, and the General Assembly has never again taken up the matter.

The governments finalized the deal with a 30 December 1966 exchange of notes, effectively creating a treaty but circumventing Congressional and Parliamentary oversight. A separate secret agreement provided for $14 million in undisclosed US payments to deport the Chagossians and give the United States access to Diego Garcia for a 50-year term and the possibility of a 20-year extension (United Kingdom 1966; FRUS 2000, 97; Kitchen 1965, 1–3; “British Indian Ocean Territory” 1966, 2).

With the financial and diplomatic details assured, the British government proceeded to purchase all of Chagos from Chagos-Agalega Ltd. for £660,000, and then sign a contract with Paul Moulinie’s firm Moulinie & Co. to manage the plantations on the government’s behalf. British officials soon began the removal process. On the government’s orders, beginning in 1968, islanders leaving Chagos for vacations or medical treatment on the island of Mauritius were barred from returning to Chagos and left about 2,000 kilometres from their homes. Since the creation of the BIOT in 1965, the British had restricted the quantity of supplies going to the island and, since the sale of the islands, the ability of Moulinie & Co. to make basic capital repairs. This meant that conditions in the islands steadily deteriorated (see Todd 1969) and, by the turn of the decade, more Chagossians were leaving as food, medicines, and other basic supplies dwindled.

All the while, UK officials settled on a policy of, as one wrote, “maintaining the fiction” to the international community that the Chagossians were transient contract workers with no connection to the islands (Aust 1970). British and US officials meanwhile acknowledged in secret communications that Chagossians could trace their heritage in Chagos back several generations (e.g., Todd 1969; US Congress, House, 1975, 41, 79). Any question about the islanders’ being transients was well settled by
the British Divisional Court in its November 2000 ruling (Queen v. Secretary of State ex parte Bancoult 2000): “[t]hey were an indigenous people,” the court found, “[t]hey were born there, as were one or both of their parents, in many cases one or more of their grandparents, in some cases (it is said) one or more of their great-grandparents. Some may perhaps have traced an earlier indigenous ancestry” (Queen v. Secretary of State ex parte Bancoult 2000, para. 1).

Still, in 1971, as the US Navy began construction work on Diego Garcia and ordered the British to complete the removals, the official narrative was that Chagossians were transients. When some naval personnel expressed concern about the deportations, the Navy’s highest-ranking officer, Admiral Elmo Zumwalt, had a three-word response: “Absolutely must go” (Cochrane 1971).

And so, British agents and US soldiers began by herding the Chagossians’ pet dogs into sealed copra sheds where they gassed and burned them in front of their owners (see Vine 2009; Moulinie 1999). Through the rest of 1971, British agents forced the islanders to board overcrowded cargo ships, emptying Diego Garcia completely. Some were deported to Mauritius and the Seychelles; others were sent to Peros Banhos and Salomon. By May 1973, those remaining in Peros and Salomon had been rounded up and left on the docks in Mauritius and the Seychelles. The expulsion was complete (see Vine 2009).

The ‘Footprint of Freedom’

“Welcome to the Footprint of Freedom,” says the sign on Diego Garcia. Today, at any given time, 3,000–5,000 US troops and civilian support staff live on the island. Since the expulsion, Diego Garcia has grown into what many consider the most important US military installation outside the United States. While the island is far from other landmasses, it lies 6,000 nautical miles closer to the Persian Gulf than the East Coast of the United States and within strategic distance from Africa and the Middle East to South Asia and Russia, Southeast Asia and China.

Originally, the Pentagon sold Diego Garcia to Congress as an “austere” communications facility. As its planners had always envisioned (Vine 2009, 96, 103, 121), however, it soon expanded dramatically. It was pressed into service almost immediately as a base for reconnaissance planes in the 1973 Israeli-Arab war. In the years that followed, the base played a central role in the first large-scale thrust of US military
strength into the Middle East. After the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, Presidents Carter and Reagan developed a “Rapid Deployment Force” (RDF) at bases in the region to respond to future threats to US and western oil supplies. As a main hub for the RDF, Diego Garcia saw the “most dramatic build-up of any location since the Vietnam War” (GlobalSecurity.org 2006).

Subsequently, the RDF transformed into the US Central Command (CENTCOM), which came to lead three wars in Iraq and Afghanistan directly related to securing US and western oil supplies and maintaining the regional and global dominance of the United States (see e.g., Johnson 2004; Harvey 2003; Klare 2004; Smith 2005). Diego Garcia played a critical role in each war. During the first Gulf War, 18 prepositioned ships, loaded with weaponry and supplies to outfit thousands of marines massing in Saudi Arabia, were sent from Diego Garcia’s lagoon, which also served as a launch pad for long-range bombers attacking Iraqi forces (Desch 1993, 152–53).

Following the 11 September 2001 attacks on the United States, the base has assumed even more importance in the eyes of military officials. Within weeks of September 11, the Pentagon added 2,000 Air Force personnel at a new 30-acre housing facility called “Camp Justice.” In the 2001 war, B-1, B-2, and B-52 bomber flights originating in Diego Garcia dropped more ordnance on Afghanistan than from any other base (GlobalSecurity.org 2006). Leading up to the invasion of Iraq, weaponry and supplies prepositioned in the lagoon were again among the first to arrive at staging areas near Iraq’s borders. Bombers from the island ultimately helped launch the Bush administration’s war, which has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis and thousands of US troops (see e.g., National Public Radio 2010).

Since not long after the Bush administration declared a ‘war on terror,’ many suspected the island was a clandestine CIA ‘black site’ for high-profile detainees—the base has long been off limits to reporters, the Red Cross, and all other international observers, and is far more secretive than Guantánamo Bay. For more than six years, US and UK officials adamantly denied the allegations. In 2008, British Foreign Secretary David Miliband announced that “[c]ontrary to earlier explicit assurances that Diego Garcia has not been used for rendition flights, recent US investigations have now revealed two occasions, both in 2002, when this had in fact occurred” (Democracy Now 2008). A representative for Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said Rice called Miliband to express regret over the “administrative error.”
Within days, however, UN special investigator Manfred Novak announced new evidence that others had been imprisoned on the island (United Press International 2008). Just months later, the British human rights group Reprieve and the Spanish newspaper *El País* reported that the United States may have held large numbers of detainees on secret prison ships in Diego Garcia’s lagoon or in its surrounding waters. Later, *Time* and *Guardian* articles indicated that as many as 10 detainees were held on or around the island from 2002 until as late as 2006 (Reprieve 2008, 2009, 2; Hollander 2008, Campbell and Norton-Taylor 2008; Sullivan 2008, A16; Cobain and Norton-Taylor 2007).

**Displacement after Displacement**

More than two centuries ago, the first ancestors of today’s Chagossians—people like Ernestine Jacques, Joseph and Pauline Pona, and Lindor Courtois—were brought against their will to Diego Garcia and the other islands of the Chagos archipelago. Over time and despite the traumas of slavery and indenture, these enslaved individuals and the indentured and free labourers who followed them created a new and distinct society in Chagos, only to have it uprooted once more. Indeed, the Chagossians are a people twice displaced—once as enslaved and indentured labourers taken to work in Chagos by parts of the French and British empires, and once expelled from Chagos to Mauritius and the Seychelles at the behest of a US empire.

As we will see in later chapters, despite the impoverishment caused by the expulsion, Chagossians have struggled to rebuild their lives and campaigned for the right to return to their homeland. “Our ancestors were slaves on those islands,” Chagossians wrote in a 1975 petition to the British and US governments, “but we know that we are the heirs of those islands” (Saminaden, Vencatassen, and Ramdass 1975).

Nearly four decades later, Chagossians are saying much the same thing, as they are still barred from returning to their home. “We are reclaiming our rights, our rights like every other human being who lives on the Earth has rights,” Louis Olivier Bancoult, president of the Chagos Refugees Group, told me in a 2004 interview, “I was born on that land. My umbilical cord is buried on that land. I have a right to live on that land. It cannot be that a foreigner profits from all my wealth, profits from my sea, profits from my beaches, profits from my coconuts, profits from it all, while I’m left with nothing.”
CLEMENT SIATOUS:
CHAGOSSIAN ARTIST IN EXILE

His name is Clement Siatous. He has lived in exile from his home in the Chagos archipelago for over forty years. Born on the island of Peros Banhos 17 February 1947, he and his mother, along with his brother and sister, moved to Diego Garcia when he was eleven years old. In 1965, when his mother fell ill, the family left their home in Diego Garcia to receive care for Clement's mother in Mauritius. The family was never allowed to return to Diego Garcia; their homeland had been turned into a military base.

Back in Peros Banhos, Clement enjoyed playing with his friends. He loved making things with his hands. He made kites for himself and his friends which they flew in the warm island breezes. He made kites out of any material he could find: often old newspapers. He also found he had a natural talent for sketching. Clement's fondest memories are of studying and sketching the nature of Diego Garcia. On Sundays, when the Chagossian community would gather, he and his family enjoyed fish and breadfruit. On these occasions he would help prepare coffee and clean fish.

Recalling these rich memories, Clement says to me, “I had a wonderful childhood.” I remember my father singing. He wrote his own songs and told us stories, just like our ancestors, who were born on Peros Banhos as well, did before.”

Self taught, only having completed primary education and some general night courses, Clement now finds his strength and inspiration in his memories of nature and life in Chagos: “I draw from memory every detail that I can recall of the beauty which I miss.” He describes his artistic style as “self imagination.” Then he remarks, with sparkling eyes surrounded by age lines of time, “When I am painting, I think of my mother working in the plantation. Often I am sad. But Chagos inspires me to think of nature and living colours.”

His third floor studio lies in an old section of Mauritian capital, Port Louis, and opens onto a narrow street which captures a block of sunlight. Outside of his studio full of canvases and paint, another room is alive with sewing machines, scraps of materials and hats which he has been working on to bring in extra money. He looks around, contemplating
his paintings, the scenes of plantation life, and says, “I regret that my mother is not alive to see my work.” He lost his father early on, and his mother died in Mauritius in 1973. “We faced hard years,” he mentions. His family, children and grandchildren have all settled in the UK and France. “I would like to be in the UK, close to my family,” he says. “When I can raise the money, I will go there.” He also looks forward to going back to Peros Banhos someday: “I want to go visit and commemorate my ancestors and put flowers on their graves. My mother taught me to do this when I was a boy, and I have never forgotten it.”

Meanwhile, he will teach art to the younger generations. “I want to give back to the Chagossian community and I want to make people around the world understand more of Chagos through my work. It is a place. Chagos exists. We islanders should be together and we should respect each other.” Clement paints with the fire of the memory of a world that still “exists.” Everyday, through his art, he shares the light of living in Chagos: home and hope still burning.

By Valerie van Haltern