Sorrow, Sadness, and Impoveryment: The Lives of Chagossians in Mauritius

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In this chapter we detail the challenging social, economic and political conditions that confronted the displaced islanders upon their arrival in Mauritius, the main site of exile. Many Chagossians describe being treated as a people apart, feeling excluded from mainstream life and never feeling ‘at home’ in Mauritius. Part of this sense of exclusion stems from the history surrounding the founding of Mauritius: the bargain in which the ‘father of the nation,’ Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, gave up the Chagos archipelago in exchange for independence (see Chan Low, this volume). As one young man of Chagossian parentage explained to Jeffery, “Mauritius got independence because it sold my mother’s land.” Many Chagossians therefore feel ambivalent about Mauritian nationhood, which was won at the expense of the excision of Chagos from Mauritius, the uprooting of the Chagos islanders from Chagos, and forced relocation to Mauritius and the Seychelles.

Offering insights into the effects of displacement on those displaced, Elizabeth Colson (1989) has described how home and a familiar environment can offer a refuge that is often central to people’s sense of self and identity. Destroying that home or removing people from their home is then likely to precipitate material and psychological suffering such as disorientation and insecurity (Ibid.). While there is no automatic correlation between loss of home and psychological or emotional disorder amongst displaced people (see Malkki 1995a, 1995b), many Chagossians have reported suffering from homesickness and alienation as a result of their forced displacement from Chagos and relocation to Mauritius. Many have also described feelings of shame in exile deriving from material poverty, experiences of discrimination, the fragmentation of Chagossian community life that came with the dispersal of the community between and within Mauritius and the Seychelles, and subsequently,

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1 Vine’s following chapter shows that many of these problems also confronted Chagossians in Seychelles.
the loss of some forms of cultural expression and self-identification. As a result, many Chagos islanders and their descendants were either raised with little sense of Chagossian history and culture or felt the need to conceal their Chagossian identity in the face of ethnic discrimination and negative stereotyping.²

According to Thayder Scudder, being moved against one's will is to suffer a “terrible defeat,” since “it is hard to imagine a more dramatic way to illustrate impotence than to forcibly eject people from a preferred habitat against their will” (Scudder 1973, 51). Colson likewise suggests that forced displacement leads to increased dependence and an awareness amongst displaced people of this increased dependence. Forced displacement, she notes, is a clear demonstration to a group of people that they have lost control over their own destiny and are powerless (Colson 1971; Colson 1989). Grappling with these issues, some Chagossians have asked why the displacement was allowed to take place, why Chagossians were victimised, and why they cannot live in their native land. Others have internalised blame for the displacement, questioning how they could have allowed themselves to be uprooted, and asking why they did not resist and protest more vigorously to prevent it from happening.

Michael Cernea has demonstrated that “the core content of unmitigated forced displacement is economic and social uprooting” (Cernea 1997, 1572). His model shows how displacement is likely to result in “massive loss and destruction of assets, including loss of life; unemployment, sudden drop in welfare and standards of living; prolonged uprooting, alienation and social disarticulation; cultural and identity loss; severe long-term stress and psychological effects; political disempowerment,” and other damage (Cernea 2004, 13).

It is thus clear that displaced Chagos islanders suffered as a direct result of their forced uprooting from the Chagos archipelago. Displaced islanders lost their land, houses and other property, as well as their jobs and access to shared resources such as the sea, coconut palms and other edible flora, beaches, and ancestral graveyards. Social networks, village ties and cultural practices of sharing and socialising (such as the weekly

² Many of Jeffery’s interviewees reported that this situation started to change in light of the sense of self-worth that members of the community derived from Olivier Bancoult’s successful judicial review in the London Divisional Court in 2000 and the awarding of UK citizenship in 2002 (see Jeffery 2006a, 49).
segadancing parties) were ruptured through the dispersal of the community in exile. Islanders’ mental and physical health suffered from the stressful and traumatic experiences of displacement, relocation and ongoing dislocation from a society where they and their ancestors had lived and worked for generations. By 1975 alone, there had been at least eleven suicides among the Chagossian community, as well as other deaths by miscarriage or exposure and susceptibility to diseases that were uncommon in Chagos, such as influenza and diphtheria (Comité Ilois Organisation Fraternelle n.d., 2–3; Madeley 1985, 5–6; Walker 1986, 14).

Displaced Chagos islanders tend to describe their lives in exile in terms of sagrin, tristes and mizer: sorrow, sadness and impoverishment. Social scientists, journalists, human rights researchers, and government officials have found similar explanations in their documentations of how the islanders were marginalised and impoverished by their forced displacement, later suffering an array of economic, social, cultural, physical, and psychological harm (e.g. Siophe 1975; Prosser 1976; Botte 1980; Sylva 1981; Madeley 1985; Dræbel 1997; Anyangwe 2001; Vine et al. 2005; Vine 2009). These findings are not surprising, as evidenced in the work of scholars such as Cernea, Colson and Scudder. Forced displacement of human populations is a widespread global phenomenon, with approximately 31.7 million people currently classified as refugees as a result of events as disparate as large-scale infrastructural projects, environmental disasters and warfare.3 Research aggregating findings from hundreds of cases of forced displacement worldwide has shown that, in the absence of adequate preventative measures, forced displacement is likely to result in chronic impoverishment in exile (Cernea 2000, 12).

In this chapter, we show how the displacement and lack of a resettlement programme combined with demographic constraints, economic challenges and ethnic tensions in Mauritius (before and after independence in 1968) contributed to and shaped the marginalisation of Chagossians. In our analysis, we focus on poor housing, unemployment and underemployment, ethnic discrimination, and socio-psychological marginalisation. These indicators can be attributed to three factors. First, Chagos islanders in Mauritius suffered from overcrowded living conditions in poor quality houses, living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods with associated educational and social problems. Second, they

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3 http://www.unhcr.org/basics.html
were marginalised economically by the obsolescence of their skills in Mauritius, where they experienced high rates of unemployment, underemployment and low wages. Third, they were marginalised socially as the targets of ethnic stereotypes and discrimination.

Despite these and other hardships, however, Chagossians—like other displaced peoples—have not been passive in the face of forced displacement and hardship. Ever since the first Chagos islanders were stranded in Mauritius when prevented from returning to Chagos, the islanders have protested against their exile and impoverishment. As we detail in the conclusion to this chapter, Chagossians have campaigned—via petitions, demonstrations, hunger strikes, and legal action—for the right to return to their homeland and proper compensation for their suffering.

**Economy and Ethnicity in Colonial and Postcolonial Mauritius**

To understand the Chagossians’ experiences in Mauritius, we first introduce the historical and contemporary Mauritian context. Like many of the islands in the western Indian Ocean—including Réunion, the Seychelles and the Chagos archipelago—Mauritius was by all accounts uninhabited prior to European colonial expansion in the region from the 16th century onwards (Allen 1999, 9; Barnwell and Toussaint 1949, 1–2). Portuguese traders used Mauritius as a stopping place between the Cape and India from 1511 onwards, but did not establish a permanent settlement (Barnwell and Toussaint 1949, 3; Toussaint 1966, 110). The Dutch East India Company (VOC) used Mauritius as a stopping place between Europe and East Asia from 1598 onwards and claimed the island in 1638 (naming it after the ruling prince Maurice van Nassau). They introduced sugar cane, finding the crop resilient and well suited to the rainy and windy climate (Barnwell and Toussaint 1949, 32–33; Benedict 1965, 10; Simmons 1982, 7–8). However, they abandoned Mauritius in 1710 due to the difficulties of maintaining the small settlement (Allen 1999, 9; Barnwell and Toussaint 1949, 34–37).

The French soon colonised Mauritius (which they renamed Ile de France) in 1715 and established a permanent settlement on the island in 1721, experimenting with coffee, cotton, indigo, and spices (Allen 1999, 9; Barnwell and Toussaint 1949, 41, 43; Toussaint 1966, 272). The British captured Mauritius in 1810 during the Napoleonic wars and, realising the military significance of its natural harbours, acquired permanent
control of the island and its dependencies (including the Seychelles and Chagos, but not Réunion, which remained French territory) in the 1814 Treaty of Paris (Allen 1999, 11; Barnwell and Toussaint 1949, 123, 125; Benedict 1965, 13). The British again favoured sugarcane, and by the 1830s, sugar accounted for 85 percent of the value of exports from Mauritius (Allen 1999, 11–12, 28; Barnwell and Toussaint 1949, 55, 131; chapter XIV Carter 1995, 13–14; Simmons 1982, 8).

French colonial administrators and plantation owners initially populated Mauritius and its dependencies with enslaved labourers from West Africa, but the French and their British successors later depended on enslaved people from coastal East Africa and Madagascar. During the period 1670–1848 as a whole, approximately 53 percent of the enslaved labourers brought by European colonists into Mauritius were from East Africa, 39.9 percent were from Madagascar, 6.8 percent were from South Asia, and 0.3 percent were from West Africa (Allen 2004, 37). Britain abolished its slave trade in 1807 and emancipated enslaved people in Mauritius in 1835, compensating slave owners financially and replacing slavery with an apprenticeship scheme entitling former slave owners to continued labour for a maximum of six years (Barnwell and Toussaint 1949, chapter XV; Vaughan 2005, chapter 10). When this unpopular scheme was abandoned after only four years, many ex-apprentices rejected the employment contracts offered by their former owners, and left the plantations for towns and coastal areas, where most turned to non-agricultural manual labour or fishing (Allen 1999, 15–16; Carter 1995, 19; Vaughan 2005, 267).

In the years before emancipation, British colonists started to recruit indentured labour from British India. Plantation owners supported indenture as a way to keep labour costs low following emancipation, arguing that indentured labourers would work for lower wages and for longer hours than apprentices or ex-apprentices and could be more easily dismissed after the harvest season (Carter 1995, 16–17). During the 1840s the rate of immigration from India increased dramatically such that Indian immigrants comprised one-third of the population of Mauritius by 1846 and two-thirds by 1871 (Allen 1999, 17; Benedict 1965, 17; Carter 1995, 271). Having largely replaced African labourers

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4 European contractors recruited smaller numbers of labourers in China from 1860 onwards, and by 1952 3 percent of the Mauritian population was of Chinese descent (Central Statistics Office 2003a, 15–16; Ly-Tio-Fane Pineo 1985, 22–24).
on the sugarcane plantations, Indian labourers began to gain an economic foothold in Mauritius with the help of two colonial land reforms in the 19th century that allowed them to leave the plantations and buy small plots of farmland beginning around 1875. Freed from indenture and aided by transnational capital flows brought by Indian traders and merchants, many small landholding Indians established themselves as lower middle class planters, which became a stepping stone to other entrepreneurial activities and increased Indo-Mauritian economic and political prominence in Mauritius (see e.g., Teelock 2001, 294–304).

European colonial administrators and plantation owners in Mauritius thus created a population with diverse ancestral origins and a society in which ancestral, ethnic, religious and class affiliations became central to political and economic life. The term ‘Creole,’ which originally referred to all those who had been born in the colony, gradually came to refer only to those of African or mixed ancestry (Benedict 1965, 14; Vaughan 2005, 2–3, 272). In this chapter, we use ‘Creole’ in its wider sense of mixed ancestry, and we specify ‘Afro-Creole’ when referring particularly to darker-skinned Creoles of primarily African ancestry (cf. Boswell 2006, 46–47; Eisenlohr 2006, 282n.56). In 1962 and 1972, when census enumerators were instructed to ask respondents to assign themselves to a particular ‘community,’ the categories offered were ‘Hindu’ and ‘Muslim’ (both of Indian origin), ‘Sino-Mauritian’ (of Chinese origin), and the residual ‘General Population’ (all others, that is, ‘Creoles’ and ‘Franco-Mauritians’). These censuses reported that the Mauritian population comprised approximately 50 percent Hindus, 16 percent Muslim, 31 percent General Population, and 3 percent Sino-Mauritians (Central Statistics Office 2003a, 16).5

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5 In the 1983 census, the practice of classifying respondents according to ethnic or religious affiliation was discontinued in the hope of reducing ethnic conflict (Dinan 2002, 81), although the census continued to record citizens’ names, religious background, and ‘ancestral language.’ At the turn of the century, the Central Statistics Office extrapolated from these data to estimate that the Mauritian population had remained fairly constant, comprising 66 percent Indo-Mauritians (Hindus and Muslims forming approximately 52 percent and 14 percent of the total population respectively), 31 percent General Population (Creoles and Franco-Mauritians forming approximately 29 percent and 2 percent of the total population respectively), and 3 percent Sino-Mauritians (Central Statistics Office 2000, 2; see also Eriksen 1998, 183).
In February 1999, however, there were four days of inter-ethnic violence across Mauritius, sparked by the suspicious death in custody of Kaya, a popular Afro-Creole seggae (Kreol-language Sega music crossed with reggae) singer, who had been arrested for use of marijuana following his participation in an event campaigning for the legalisation of marijuana. Seeing the incident in ethnic terms and blaming Kaya's death on the Hindu-dominated police force, Creoles attacked police stations and Hindus retaliated by burning houses owned by Creoles. The riots resulted in the deaths of at least four civilians and one police officer, over one hundred people injured, the loss of fifty homes, and the imposition of a state of emergency (Carroll and Carroll 2000, 139; see also Chateau 60–67; Simmons 1982; see Chan Low, this volume). In 1965, the debate about independence sparked riots between Creoles and Hindus (Simmons 1982, 161–163). Following negotiations with the UK government, general elections were held in 1967 and won by an Indo-Mauritian dominated pro-independence coalition, which paved the way for independence in 1968; however, 44 percent of the electorate had voted for an anti-independence coalition comprising of Franco-Mauritian planters, urban Creoles and Sino-Mauritians (Eriksen 1998, 10, 151–152). In 1968, major inter-ethnic rioting broke out in the north of Port Louis between Creoles and Muslims (many of whom had campaigned together for the same political candidates before the election) over control of the constituency and growing unemployment, resulting in over 25 deaths, hundreds injured, thousands fleeing their homes, and the declaration of a state of emergency (Selvon 2001, 394; Eriksen 1998, 151–152; Simmons 1982, 186–188). After 1968, however, there was no major inter-ethnic violence for the next 30 years.6

By the end of the colonial period, employment patterns reflected an ethnic and religious division of labour that has continued since independence (Benedict 1965, 25–28). Franco-Mauritians still own most of the large plantations and sugarcane factories, Sino-Mauritians are over-represented in business, Hindus are over-represented in politics, Hindus and Muslims are over-represented in agriculture, and Creoles are over-represented in non-agricultural manual labour (Eriksen 1998, 64, 110, 118; Mauritius Research Council 1999, 30; Salverda 2004; Simmons 1982, 10–11). “At the bottom of the socio-economic scale,” noted the Mauritius Research Council, are “Hindu plantations workers, Muslims working in petty jobs within the informal sector, and Black Creole factory workers, dockers, and fishermen” (Mauritius Research Council 1999, 30).

After independence, successive Mauritian governments sought to transform the Mauritian economy. Since the 18th century, the Mauritian economy...
economy had been dominated by sugarcane production, and by the 20th century, Mauritius was the epitome of a mono-crop economy, dependent on the fluctuations of the sugar market and the decisions of British colonial rulers. With one of the highest population growth rates in the world and unemployment running at over 20 percent, Mauritius at independence was considered by British experts to be a Malthusian disaster in the making that would soon lack the resources to feed and support its population (Bowman 1991, 112–113). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, however, successive post-independence Mauritian governments diversified the Mauritian economy by developing the textiles industry (which quickly became and remains today the single largest employer and exporter), tea and tobacco for export, large-scale fishing, tourism, and offshore finance (Benedict 1965, 5–7; Bowman 1991, 122–137; Eriksen 1998, 19; Central Statistics Office 2003b; Bunwaree-Ramharai et al. 1997). Unemployment fell sharply during the late 1980s, and by the early 1990s Mauritius was being hailed as the African post-colonial multiethnic political and economic success story (see Bowman 1991, 137–140; Eriksen 1998, 13).

Contrary to this conventional narrative, however, and despite the significant decreases in unemployment as a result of the growth in the textiles and tourist industries in particular, unemployment and underemployment have remained problems. For many of the poorest Mauritians, and especially Afro-Creoles, securing stable employment has proved difficult (Lau Thī Keng 1997). Even at the height of employment growth in Mauritius, in 1986, more than 30 percent of the labour force was working in the informal sector (Lamusse 2001, 41). In the late 1990s, the Mauritian economy slowed and unemployment rose annually from 5.1 percent in 1995 to over 10 percent in the early 2000s, falling again to 8.5 percent in 2007 (Central Statistics Office 2003a; Central Statistics Office 2008). Recent attempts to continue the diversification process have focussed on the development of a cyber city (Tolnay 2007).

**Housing, Education, and Employment**

These particular social, economic and political difficulties in Mauritius had negative impacts on Chagossians’ arrival in Mauritius during the 1960s and early 1970s by creating several barriers to accommodation, employment and social integration. By the time of arrival in Mauritius,
the country in general and the capital Port Louis in particular were suffering from a severe shortage of housing as a result of high population growth and devastating impacts (especially on the poor) of recent cyclones, notably cyclone Carol in 1960 (Titmuss and Abel-Smith 1968, 7).

Most Chagos islanders were thus homeless upon arrival in Mauritius, and had to seek accommodation, for which they had to pay, a situation unlike that in Chagos. Chagossian families who had left Chagos to visit Mauritius in the early or mid-1960s (not knowing until later that they would be unable to return) often stayed with their extended families and other acquaintances who lived in the already crowded neighbourhoods of Port Louis and neighbouring environs: Cassis near the docks, Petite Rivière to the south-west and Roche Bois to the northeast of the city. Others had no one to accommodate them in Mauritius and sought cheap accommodation in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.

In May 1973, the last 125 Chagossians to be deported from Peros Banhos on the cargo ship Nordvær refused to disembark on the quayside in Port Louis, demanding that they be returned to the Chagos archipelago or be offered compensation and housing. Eventually, after almost a week on board, the Mauritian government offered accommodation in the Dockers’ Flats in Baie du Tombeau or in government housing in Cité la Cure, two disadvantaged neighbourhoods to the north of Port Louis (Le Mauricien 1973; L’Express 1973). Chagossian families recall the unsanitary and dilapidated state of the accommodation, much of which lacked running water and glass in the windows.

With no resettlement programmes in place, nor any immediate compensation or assistance in finding employment, all sources agree that they faced severe socio-economic difficulties throughout the subsequent decades. In a report for the UK government, Russell Prosser noted in 1976 that housing was the main problem for relocated Chagossians who were, as he noted, “living in deplorable conditions” (Prosser 1976, 6).

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7 Cyclones Alix and Carol struck in 1960, and cyclone Jenny struck in 1962. According to the Mauritius Meteorological Services (http://metservice.intnet.mu/wcygen.htm), Carol is still the most damaging cyclone on record. Cyclone Carol decimated crops, killed 42 people, and destroyed 40,000 houses, leaving thousands homeless. As a result of the destruction caused by cyclone Carol, the Central Housing Association set up the Cyclone Housing Scheme, which built 14,000 subsidised houses (of which 6,000 were on urban housing estates) between 1961 and 1970. Cyclone Gervaise destroyed 13,000 houses in 1975, and the government commissioned another 10,000 subsidised homes built between 1975 and 1980.
A Mauritian social worker, Françoise Botte, wrote in 1980 that unemployment and underemployment, lack of understanding of money, under-education, and housing problems had led to alcoholism, gambling, prostitution, and stealing (Botte 1980, chapter 9). A 1981 report by Hervé Sylva likewise concluded that the main problems for Chagossians were poor housing and unemployment, and indicated that poverty had given rise to problems such as alcoholism, gambling and crime (Sylva 1981). In a 1985 report for Minority Rights Group, the investigative journalist John Madeley described the Chagossians as living in “abject poverty” and noted that housing and unemployment remained major problems (Madeley 1985, 3, 10–11). Iain Walker devoted one chapter of his 1986 anthropological report on the Chagossians in Mauritius to a discussion of unemployment, underemployment and poor housing (Walker 1986, chapter 3).

This precarious economic situation in Mauritius prior to the mid-1970s (Bowman 1991, 112–113) had particular implications for Chagossians’ attempts to enter the Mauritian labour market. Documentary evidence shows that British government officials predicted that the islanders would have difficulties integrating into the Mauritian economy because of the already high levels of unemployment and because of the Chagossians’ lack of experience in the sugar industry. For example, in 1969, the high commissioner to Mauritius, Arthur Wooller, sent a telegram to inform the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) that the Mauritian government was reluctant to accept the Chagos islanders because Mauritius already faced 20 percent unemployment, and the influx of 250 Chagossian families would increase pressure on social services. He suggested that the Chagos islanders would be faced with the “near impossibility of finding suitable employment” because they were trained only in the copra industry, which was absent in Mauritius.8 A letter to the FCO from the BIOT commissioner, High Norman Walker, reinforced this viewpoint. While coloured by its racialised view of the islanders, the letter reflects some of the difficulties they faced:

> It is important when dealing with the problem of the Ilois [islanders] from Chagos to appreciate what type of people they are. They are extremely unsophisticated, illiterate, untrainable and unsuitable for any work other

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8 Quoted in Chagos Islanders v Attorney General and Her Majesty's British Indian Ocean Territory Commissioner [2004]. London: High Court of Justice, Queens Bench Division. CO/3775/98: Appendix paragraph 221.
than the simplest labour tasks on a copra plantation. This is not altogether surprising as they have spent all their lives on remote islands.9

Chagossians likewise criticised the British authorities for sending them to Mauritius at a time of acute job shortages, which compounded their existing problems such as their lack of experience in the sugar industry and effective networks that could be mobilised in search for employment (Botte 1980; Sylva 1981; Walker 1986).

Chagossians also found themselves at a disadvantage in the education system. In contrast to the relatively high levels of education in Mauritius, almost all islanders who were adults when they left Chagos were not literate (given the late introduction of education in Chagos). In 1975, only two percent of Chagossian adults could read “a little” (Siophe 1975, 115–116). Most of those who left Chagos as children had only limited exposure to formal education given the closing of some of the islands’ schools as early as 1967 and the interruption and curtailment of schooling caused by the displacement. Upon arrival in Mauritius, some children were not admitted to schools; others had to go to work to support their families, and by 1975, 27 percent of school-age Chagossian children were not in school (Siophe 1975, 118–119). Most of those who successfully completed primary school did not go on to secondary school, both due to the cost (secondary schooling did not become free in Mauritius until 1976) and the fact that sending children to work instead provided additional financial support for the family.

Those Chagossian children who did attend school in Mauritius found themselves structurally disadvantaged in other ways. Living for the most part in the poorest areas around Port Louis, they attended schools which struggled to recruit and retain good teachers and had difficult learning environments (Dræbel 1997, Bunwaree 1998). Many of those who attended school said they experienced discrimination and verbal abuse from teachers and classmates. In turn, as a result of their limited educational background, Chagossian jobseekers generally found themselves in competition with Mauritians who were likely to have received better quality and more formal education (see Bunwaree 1998).

In addition, some of the skills Chagossians brought with them from Chagos were rendered economically useless in Mauritius. For example,

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marine carpentry and boat building were of little commercial use where wood-based boat construction had become largely obsolete. Chagossians’ fishing skills were relatively more usable, and fishing has remained an important source of employment for Chagossians. Unsurprisingly, given their general lack of formal education and the obsolescence of their skills in Mauritius as well as the ethnic discrimination they faced (discussed below), many Chagossians described having significant difficulties finding employment. Shortly after arrival in Mauritius, almost half depended in whole or in part on income not derived from work: public welfare, family and friends, loans from moneylenders, and other sources (Vine et al. 2005, 114). A series of surveys likewise indicates that the Chagossian community has suffered disproportionately from chronic underemployment and unemployment, with a significant proportion of Chagossian men and women remaining underemployed and unemployed, respectively, to this day (Siophe 1975; Botte 1980; Sylva 1981; Vine et al. 2005, 116–119; Jeffery 2006a, 50–53).

Thus at a time when the Mauritian economy was expanding and diversifying, Chagossians found themselves structurally disadvantaged in ways that inhibited them from benefiting from the wider macroeconomic prosperity. Conventional and idealised impressions of the economic boom in Mauritius—such as the claim that Mauritius achieved full employment by the late 1980s—overlook these structural disparities that have prevented certain sectors of the population from benefiting fully. This chapter shows that even when the Mauritian economy took off, Chagossians remained disadvantaged in the Mauritian job market due to their lack of formal education and absence of demand for their skills.

**Double Discrimination**

However, the structural marginalisation encountered by Chagossians in Mauritius was a result not only of lack of education and skills, but also due to complex, pre-existing lines of ethnic stratification in Mauritius and Chagossians’ lack of effective local networks that could otherwise be mobilised in the search for employment. As we have seen, Mauritius has a long history of ethnic classification and stratification dating back to the introduction of enslaved African peoples in the colony. On arrival in Mauritius, Chagossians were slotted into the ethnic hierarchy as a marginalised subset of the already marginalised Afro-Creole category, and
faced discrimination in a stratified society of limited socio-economic mobility (see Boswell 2006, 46–47; Eriksen 1998, 51). Chagossians thus report suffering from overlapping forms of discrimination—against Afro-Creoles in general and against Chagossians in particular—which created significant barriers to their economic advancement and social inclusion.

When times were particularly hard, Chagossians observed that Mauritian employers (like employers elsewhere) had a general preference for hiring local experienced workers rather than outsiders with whom they had no connections. During his research among Chagossians in Mauritius in the mid-1980s, Walker noted that many of those Chagossians who managed to gain employment on arrival in Mauritius were later disadvantaged by “last in, first out” policies implemented by Mauritian employers during economic downturns (Walker 1986, 33). When talking about their problems in obtaining employment, Chagossians likewise described to us two main forms of discrimination: firstly, employers’ preference for employing members of their own family, ethnic or religious group, and secondly, discrimination against applicants of African descent in general and against Chagossians in particular.

Like other Afro-Creoles in Mauritius, Chagossians routinely described the archetypal employer in Mauritius as a member of the Hindu majority who would discriminate in favour of Hindu interests. Following independence, Hindu-Mauritians controlled many sectors of Mauritian society, including government, the civil service, and public sector employment. Many Afro-Creoles (Chagossians and Mauritians alike) reported that if a Hindu and a non-Hindu applied for the same job, a Hindu employer would give the job to the Hindu even if the non-Hindu was better qualified (see also Eriksen 1998, 62–67; Mauritius Research Council 1999, 10, 60). Chagossian interviewees told Jeffery that they believed it to be ‘normal’ or ‘natural’ for employers to discriminate in favour of employing members of their own ‘community,’ ethnic or religious group.

Additionally, employers were seen by Chagossians as discriminatory towards members of other communities, for whom they held negative stereotypes stemming from a history of slavery, racial categorisation and ethnic discrimination. However, many Chagossians reported that some Mauritians of Indian, Chinese or European descent unevenly stereotype and discriminate against people of primarily African descent. Eriksen has suggested that many non-Creoles stereotype Creoles as
“lazy, careless” and “merry” (Eriksen 1998, 54), and Boswell has reported that non-Creoles perceive darker-skinned Creoles as “lazy, atavistic and present-oriented” (Boswell 2002, 2). According to Dev Virahsawmy, co-founder of the Mauritian Militant Movement—a left-wing political party established in 1969 to oppose the ethnic, religious and caste-based political parties that had triumphed en route to independence—Mauritius is characterised by institutional racism up to government level, and many Indo-Mauritians see Afro-Creoles as inherently less employable than other ethnic groups (see also Asgarally 1997). Concurring with this analysis, many Afro-Creoles (Chagossians and Mauritians alike) recount that stereotyping and discrimination make it difficult for them to find jobs and force them to accept employment below their training or ability, meaning they are less likely to be promoted up the hierarchy and pay scale.10

Most Chagossians are of primarily African descent (or mixed African, South Asian and European descent) and as such they are physiognomically indistinguishable from Mauritian Afro-Creoles. The problem for Chagossians on arrival in Mauritius was that, as one of Jeffery’s interviewees put it, “we are too dark, our hair is short-short.” In the ethno-religious hierarchy of Mauritians, Chagossians are generally thought to occupy a subset of Afro-Creoles known as ti-kreol (literally, ‘small Creole’), who tend to be the most marginalised, having low-status and low-paid jobs (Eriksen 1986, 59; cf. Boswell 2006, 46–47).

Discrimination against Afro-Creoles in general was thus compounded by discrimination specifically against Chagossians—who were identifiable by their accents, dress and place of birth listed on identification cards. During the early years in Mauritius, the collective name Ilois (islanders) became a strong insult, reflecting assumptions that Chagossians were uncivilised and uneducated. As a retired Chagossian woman explained to Jeffery:

It was difficult when we came here to look for work. Why? [Mauritians said:] “The Ilois [islanders] don’t know how to read. Don’t pay attention to them. They’re savages.” That’s not easy. When we came to Mauritius we came to a foreign country. How to adapt? We’re humans too, so instead of treating us in that way, they could have welcomed us, but instead they were

10 For an interesting comparison of the emergence of stereotypical, racialised discourses about peoples of African and Indian descent in Trinidad, another island nation with strikingly similar historical and demographic conditions, see Munasinghe 2001.
mostly bad. … They said “the Ilois have left their islands and come to take all the work here.” For getting work it was the same: when they knew that you are Ilois it was difficult, and they wouldn’t give you work except as a housemaid. So many people were mistreated. Dogs are treated better in Mauritius than we are.

Several researchers have supported these claims of discrimination, showing how Chagossians suffered discrimination in their searches for employment and in the low salaries they received (Botte 1980, 38–39; Walker 1986, 21–22; Dræbel 1997, 36). In a recent survey of more than 320 Chagossians led by Vine, half of respondents from the first generation and one-third of respondents from the second generation reported suffering job or other discrimination as a Chagossian; nearly two-thirds of respondents from the first generation and almost half of the second generation reported that they had been a victim of verbal abuse (Vine et al. 2005, 125).

A Chagossian woman in her early forties recalled that when a group of Chagossians were moved into the Dockers’ Flats in Baie du Tombeau in 1973, a local Mauritian resident exclaimed that “the Zulus are coming to Mauritius to eat us!” She went on to tell Jeffery that “we were treated very inhumanely, we weren’t treated like humans. They [Mauritians] mistreated Chagossians” (see Jeffery 2006a). Characterisations of the Chagossians as (foreign) Zulus highlights the fact that discrimination stemmed both from their stigmatised African origins and from their outsider status. The 190 Chagossian workers sampled in Jeffery’s survey of Chagossian-headed households in and around Port Louis were over-represented at the bottom end of the employment spectrum, with the vast majority in low-wage, low-status and/or insecure jobs, and very small percentage (compared to national averages) in the service industries and the skilled professions (Jeffery 2006a, 52–53). In this sample, Chagossian men worked in the largest numbers as construction workers, followed by lorry helpers, fishermen, dock workers, carpenters and factory workers, while women worked in the largest numbers as factory workers, followed by housemaids, shop helpers and cleaners. Thus Chagossians are now often employed in archetypal urban Afro-Creole working class jobs. As such, we can see how their disadvantages in terms of education and skills were likely compounded by their ethnic and geographic alignment with an already marginalised sector of Mauritian society and the double discrimination they faced as both Afro-Creoles and Chagossians.
A tradition of protest first began among the Chagossians in 1968 as soon as the first islanders were prevented from returning to Chagos and left stranded in Mauritius. In 1971, when the administrator of the BIOT announced that Diego Garcia would be closed and all its inhabitants displaced, islanders protested against being made to leave their “own country” (Todd 1971). In 1973, as we have seen, the last Chagossians to arrive in Mauritius refused to disembark until the Mauritian government offered assistance. In 1975, Chagos islanders petitioned the UK and US governments, citing the failed promise made by British officials in Chagos that the islanders would receive compensation and resettlement assistance on arrival in Mauritius. The petition detailed “at least 40 persons” who had “died through sorrow, poverty and lack of food and care” in exile, and asked the UK government to urge the Mauritian government to provide land, housing and jobs, or else return them to their islands (Saminaden et al. 1975). This petition, along with numerous subsequent pleas to the governments of the UK, the USA, Mauritius, and the Seychelles, went unheeded.

Women have played a central role in the mobilisation of the Chagossian community. In 1978, the islanders finally received some compensation after Chagossian women protested continuously for several months around Port Louis. The money came from £650,000 the UK government paid the Mauritian government in 1972 to compensate the displaced islanders, but which had not yet been distributed. Eligible Chagossians received cash payments of Rs7,590 (approximately £650 at the time) for adults and between Rs1,100 and Rs1,500 for children aged 18 and under (de l’Estrac 1983, 3–5; Madeley 1985, 7). Many families (including all of the Chagossians in the Seychelles) received no money. Even for those who received the payments, the money proved “hopelessly inadequate” (Madeley 1985, 7). It paid off some debts incurred since their arrival but generally was insufficient to purchase land or a house or to significantly improve one’s life.

Six months later, a group of eight Chagossian women started a three-week hunger strike to protest their conditions. After living with their families under tarpaulin sheets for two months—following the destruction of their rented shacks in a cyclone and their eviction by the Mauritian government from emergency accommodation—the protesters distributed flyers reading: “Give us a house; if not, return us to...
our country, Diego” (Le Mauricien 1978). Later that year, four Chagossians were jailed for resisting the police when Mauritian authorities tore down their shacks (Madeley 1985, 7). Both protests yielded few concrete results but added to mounting awareness of the Chagossians’ plight and mobilised political support from the left-wing Mauritian Militant Movement (MMM), which had advocated on behalf of the islanders after their initial arrival in Mauritius.

In 1979, with the assistance of the MMM, a group of Chagossians engaged a British lawyer, Bernard Sheridan, to negotiate with the UK government for additional compensation. Sheridan was already suing the UK government on behalf of Michel Vincatassin, a Chagossian man who charged that he had been forcibly removed from his ancestral homeland. British officials reportedly offered to pay an additional £1.25 million if Vincatassin would drop his case and Chagossian recipients would sign deeds “in full and final settlement,” waiving “all our claims and rights (if any) of whatsoever nature to return to the British Indian Ocean Territory” (Ibid., 6, 8, 15). Sheridan visited Mauritius to offer the deal of money in exchange for renunciation forms. Initially some impoverished Chagossians, who were not literate and did not know English, signed or thumb-printed these English-language forms. When other Chagossian leaders and MMM activists heard the terms of the deal, they halted the process, and Sheridan returned to the UK.

A support group of Chagossians and Mauritians (many MMM members) wrote to Sheridan that the Chagossians who had signed or thumb-printed the forms had done so without “alternative legal advice” and “as a mere formality” to obtain the compensation rather than out of agreement with the conditions (see Madeley 1985, 8). No money was disbursed.

Soon after, Chagossians demonstrated in the streets of Port Louis again, launching more hunger strikes and their largest protests yet in 1980 and 1981. Led again by women who repeatedly faced police intimidation, violence and arrest, hundreds of Chagossians marched to the British High Commission, protested in front of government offices, and slept on the pavement in the Mauritian capital. Chagossians again demanded the right to return to Chagos as well as immediate compensation, decent housing, and jobs. A broad coalition of Mauritian political groups—including Lalit (a Trotskyite subgroup of the MMM that eventually separated from the MMM in 1982)—supported the Chagossians under the rallying cry of “Rann Nu Diego!” (“Give Us Back Diego!”), which united the Chagossian struggle with the desire of some Mauritians
to return Chagos to Mauritian sovereignty and to close the military base in Diego Garcia (Le Mauricien 1981; Lalit 2002, 113–117; Vine and Jeffery 2008).

After an eighteen-day hunger strike and violent clashes that included the arrest of eight women activists—six Chagossians and two members of Lalit—the Mauritian prime minister, Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, left for London to meet the British prime minister, Margaret Thatcher. The two governments agreed to hold talks with the inclusion of Chagossian representatives. After two rounds of negotiations, the UK government agreed to provide £4 million in compensation, with the Mauritian government contributing land it valued at £1 million. In exchange, Chagossians were required to sign or thumbprint renunciation forms to protect the UK government from further claims for compensation or the right to return (Madeley 1985, Appendix 2). Many Chagossians have subsequently disputed the legality of these forms and their knowledge of their contents, which were again written in English.

Money totalling around Rs55,000 (less than £4,000 at the time) for each adult, including land plots and houses, was distributed slowly between 1982 and 1985 (Madeley 1985, 10–11). Over one hundred Chagossian-headed households moved to Pointe aux Sables and Baie du Tombeau to live in the purpose-built housing estates called Cités Ilois or to build on land in the allocated Morcellements Ilois. Living conditions improved for many Chagossians after they received compensation, in particular for those who received houses or land (rather than money alone), but much of the money was again used to pay off debts and purchase consumption items in an increasingly materialistic Mauritian society. Chagossian families continued to suffer from disproportionately low rates of unemployment and underemployment, poverty and poor housing. Recent data suggests that the Chagossian community has continued to remain poor relative to others in Mauritius (Anyanywe 2001; Dræbel 1997; Vine et al. 2005).

In the wake of the 1982 compensation agreement, many Chagossians felt that their interests had not been well represented by some of their Mauritian spokespeople. Prominent Chagossian leaders and former hunger strikers Charlesia Alexis and Aurélie Lisette Talate, along with Olivier Bancoul (the eighteen-year-old son of Rita Elysée, another Chagossian leader), soon created the first solely Chagossian support organisation, the Chagos Refugees Group (CRG). The CRG pressed for the right to return and additional compensation throughout the 1980s
Another Chagossian organisation, the Chagossian Social Committee (CSC), established in the mid-1990s by Fernand Mandarin and his Mauritian barrister Hervé Lassemillante, eventually took on a leadership role. The CSC considered lodging a case for compensation in the British courts, but concluded that this would acknowledge UK sovereignty over Chagos, thus damaging the Mauritian government’s claim to the islands. The CSC instead pursued out-of-court negotiations with the UK, US and Mauritian governments for compensation and the right to return. The CSC popularised the collective noun *Chagossian* (to indicate their link to the particular territory of the Chagos archipelago) rather than *Ilois* (a generic term meaning islander, which had become increasingly derogatory), and gained recognition for Chagossians as an indigenous people before the UN in 1997. However, the CSC’s negotiations made little other tangible progress towards compensation and the right of return. In the late 1990s the British legal team Sheridans approached the CRG, and in 2000 they won a judicial review establishing that the depopulation of Chagos had been unlawful, after which the CRG again became the dominant Chagossian group.

Since 2000, the Chagossian struggle has experienced mixed fortunes. On the downside, the islanders lost a compensation case against the UK government in 2003 (see Allen, this volume). In 2004, the UK government effectively overruled the 2000 Divisional Court decision by imposing a new immigration ordinance preventing Chagossians from entering Chagos. After Chagossian groups won two unanimous victories overturning the new immigration ordinance in the Divisional Court in 2006 and the Court of Appeal in 2007, the UK government won its final appeal in Britain’s highest court, the House of Lords, in 2008, reinstating the ban and quashing the islanders’ right of return (see Allen, this volume).

On the upside, Chagossians and their second-generation descendants were awarded full UK citizenship in 2002, since when over one thousand people have migrated to the UK (see Jeffery, this volume). Several Chagossian groups have persuaded the UK government to organise trips to Chagos since 2000 (see Johannessen, this volume) and are gaining increasing awareness and political support for their cause, leaving them hopeful about the prospects of an upcoming case in the European Court of Human Rights that will effectively appeal the House of Lords ruling against the right of return (see Tong, this volume).
Conclusion: Marginalisation and Mobilisation in Mauritius

In this chapter, we have shown how Chagossians have suffered from many of the socio-economic and socio-psychological effects commonly found among victims of forced displacement. We have shown how the general effects of displacement were compounded by the particular conditions that confronted them in Mauritius. First, as explained at the outset, many Chagossians have felt excluded from Mauritian nationhood, which they perceive to have come at the expense of their own dispossession and disempowerment. Second, at the time of the displacement, Mauritius was experiencing high population growth, severe housing shortages, and high unemployment, all of which hampered Chagossians in their search for houses, jobs and other resources. Third, coming from the coconut plantations in Chagos, Chagossians lacked formal education, relevant skills and contacts in the sugarcane industry, which dominated the Mauritian economy at the time. Fourth, in an economy dominated by Mauritians of European and Asian descent, Chagossians also experienced racial stereotyping and ethnic discrimination against Afro-Creoles in general and Chagossians in particular, which served to further hamper their socio-economic advancement.

In other words, local structural features—including geopolitical changes, demographic constraints, economic challenges, ethnic discrimination and social stratification—exacerbated, perpetuated and compounded the socio-economic and socio-psychological consequences of forced displacement. In response to their forcible uprooting and hardships they have faced in exile, however, Chagos islanders in Mauritius have mobilised to campaign for adequate compensation and the right to return to Chagos. While their 2008 defeat in the House of Lords was a profound disappointment, their struggle for justice and better lives continues.
Bernadette Dugas is Chagossian, born in Diego Garcia in 1956 to Seychellois parents who moved to this island for work. Bernadette herself was not deported as part of the expulsion process—she moved to the Seychelles in 1958—, however, she encountered many of the difficulties other Chagossians faced in the Seychelles and witnessed the experience of those deported after 1971. Today she is vice chairman of the Chagos Committee (Seychelles), which represents Chagossians in the Seychelles.

Bernadette recalls some late memories of Chagos:

“Life was as in paradise, they used to tell us. Food was plentiful and everybody on the island was uncle, aunty, grandma, and grandpa. It was very difficult to know who is really your relative.

I remember the day my mother’s adopted parents arrived in Seychelles in 1972 on one of the last boatloads of Chagossians. This was a very sad day. When they arrived, they didn’t bring anything with them—only a suitcase of clothes. I still remember it to this day. It was around five o’clock in the afternoon, and we all sat together and cried. We cried for the loss of Diego and for the way we were treated as well.

The next day they went to town to see Mr. Paul Moulinie, who used to run the plantations in Chagos, and when they returned home they were more sad because Mr. Moulinie no longer had money for them.

During the night, after dinner, they told us how they were refused medicines and food, and how their pet dogs were gassed in the calorifer copra sheds. It was a British man, Mr. John Todd, who gave the orders to gas our pet dogs and now, today, British people are talking about protection for their pet dogs.

When Chagossians were deported to Seychelles, they had nowhere to live. Some were forced to live in houses built on stilts. Some lived with other families. Some were placed in jail cells to live for weeks. The misery and the suffering was unbearable. Some Chagossian children were able to go to school, while some were not accepted. The Seychellois children fought with the Chagossian children. We were treated like aliens, like we didn’t belong anywhere. Many Seychellois men left their Chagossian wives with small children; these women didn’t know where
to go because they didn’t have family in the Seychelles. Why do our Seychellois in-laws hate us? I remember one Chagossian whose in-laws sent her away because she was having problems with her husband and she was pregnant. She slept in a ditch with old galvanized sheets over her. It was very horrible to live and grow up in this kind of life.

Young Chagossian girls were raped because they begged for food or money. Every morning before I left the house for school, my mother told me never to ask men for money or anything because she was scared of me being raped. It was better to go look under fruit trees to eat mangoes scavenged by rats than to ask for anything from anybody.

From an early age in the Seychelles, I always thought, why do Seychellois people call the Chagossians, “Anara,” a word meaning that we were the lowest of the low, like outsiders and savages? Why do they call us “Ilwa” [literally, islander, but pronounced derisively], saying the word as if we are below them? I heard Chagossian women saying that their Seychellois husbands or companions loved them when they were in Chagos, but when in Seychelles, they were treated like slaves. There were rapes, and sometimes their husbands or companions forced them to sleep with someone else to have money for food.

Now as I am writing this, it is as if I am rewinding a cassette of my past. Why should our life be so cruel? What have we done to deserve this? Are we not children of God as well?”