



SOCIETY

You have to keep hoping

Ende der 60er-Jahre wurden die Bewohner des Chagos-Archipels, einer winzigen Inselgruppe im Indischen Ozean, zwangsumgesiedelt, um Platz für eine Militärbasis zu schaffen. LORRAINE MALLINDER berichtet vom Kampf der Chagossianer um späte Gerechtigkeit und das Recht auf Rückkehr.

ADVANCED



When Isnard talks about his childhood on the Salomon Islands, his eyes shine. He spent his early childhood on the atoll, part of the highly contested Chagos Archipelago in the middle of the Indian Ocean.

He and his brothers and sisters played on beaches of white sand and green palms, fishing in the sparkling ocean, gathering around the fire in the evenings to the beat of the goat skin drum. It was a simple life, almost identical to generations of his ancestors.

So, imagine the horror of having that precious birthright stolen away, never to be returned. This is what happened to Isnard and his family in the late 1960s, when the British cleared the Chagos Archipelago, forcing out around 2,000 islanders – or Îlois, as they are known – to make way for a US military base.

Isnard's father wanted to bring their livestock, but they were allowed to pack only a few items of clothing and possessions into bags before being herded on to cargo ships like cattle. Their beloved dogs were gassed and burned.

The family was sent thousands of kilometres away, to Mauritius. Stranded on the dirty docks of Port Louis, the traumatized islanders ended up living in corrugated-iron shanty towns on the outskirts of the capital without water or electricity.

Not welcome

As a Mauritian, I can confirm that my country was not kind to the Chagossians. They suffered extreme discrimination, making it difficult to get work. Isnard's parents found odd jobs, but others weren't so lucky. Some fell into alcoholism and drug addiction. There are stories of people committing suicide or simply dying of what Chagossians call *sagren* – sadness.

Meanwhile, Diego Garcia, the archipelago's main island, leased to the US, was turned into a high-tech military base for missions to Afghanistan and Iraq. It is a tragic irony that, while the Îlois died in their hellish slums, the Americans named Diego Garcia the "Footprint of Freedom".

In exchange, Britain got a discount on nuclear missiles.

archipelago

[,ɑ:kɪ'peləgəʊ]
- Inselgruppe

beloved

[bi'lʌvɪd]
- heißgeliebt

cargo ship

- Frachtschiff

contested

- umkämpft

corrugated iron

[,kɒrə'geɪtɪd 'aɪən]
- Wellblech

herd

- treiben

livestock

- Vieh

Mauritius

[mə'ri:ʃəs]
- (wg. Aussprache)

odd jobs

- Gelegenheitsarbeiten

outskirts

- Vororte

precious

['preʃəs]
- kostbar

shanty town

- Barackensiedlung

sparkling

- glitzernd

stranded

- gestrandet



Chagossians who live in Mauritius have had to make their homes in corrugated-iron shacks

And Mauritius received £4 million – not a huge amount for giving up all claims to sovereignty over the strategically placed archipelago. It was the price of winning its own freedom during independence negotiations with Britain in the mid-1960s.

A decade on from what *The Washington Post* called “an act of mass kidnapping”, the Chagossians, who had effectively been sacrificed for everyone else’s relative gains, eventually received compensation of less than \$5,000 each. There has been more compensation from Britain since, notably a £40 million fund – though, inexplicably, only a tiny amount has been released in the years since it was set up.

A new home in Britain?

Over the years, the Îlois have battled hard to get back their homeland. Led by a former electrician called Olivier Bancoult, they have taken their fight to international courts. They won a landmark victory at the UK High Court in 2000, which ruled that the expulsion had been illegal, however, that judgement was then quashed in the wake of

the terror attacks of 9/11, in the interests of national security.

In 2002, in a new twist, Britain allowed Chagossians to apply for citizenship. These days, around 3,000 Chagossians live in the town of Crawley in Sussex, which happens to be close to Gatwick airport, where their planes landed.

The citizenship law proved controversial, allowing only Chagossians born before 1983 to apply, meaning that parents and grandparents were separated from their children and grandchildren. However, in March this year, the UK suddenly announced a change in the law, enabling everyone to apply free of charge over the coming five years.

Most Chagossians I spoke to in Mauritius will happily move to Britain, as they believe their children will have a better future there. Ignace Ramsamy, 82, who was born on Diego Garcia, already has children in Britain. “We’ve suffered so much in Mauritius,” he says. “My kids have been able to build a life in England.”

The timing of Britain’s sudden show of goodwill is interesting. In recent

expulsion [ɪkˈspʌljən]
 ► Vertreibung

goodwill
 ► Wohlwollen, guter Wille

in the wake of
 ► im Gefolge von

inexplicably
 [ɪnɪkˈsplɪkəbli]
 ► unerklärlicherweise

landmark
 ► bahnbrechend

notably [ˈnəʊtəbli]
 ► insbesondere

quash [kwɒʃ]
 ► verwerfen

sacrifice [ˈsækrɪfaɪs]
 ► opfern

years, Mauritius has itself been fighting to get the Chagos Archipelago back, winning a major victory last year at the UN maritime court, which ruled that Britain has no sovereignty over the islands.

The court also criticized Britain for ignoring an earlier ruling by the International Court of Justice, backed by the UN General Assembly. Essentially, the former colonial power should have handed back the archipelago in December 2019.

Britain has repeatedly said it will give the islands back when they are no longer needed for military purposes. Its current lease with the US runs out in 2036.

Strategically important

Geopolitically, with both Britain and the US wanting to counter Chinese power in the region, there's a lot at stake.

Mauritius, a small nation balancing the interests of greater powers, happens to have close relations with China, which is interested in deposits of rare earth minerals on the seabed, according to Gareth Price, a senior research fellow at London-based think tank Chatham House.

In February this year, Mauritius sent a clear message to Britain, with an expedition by boat to the islands, which included a number of native-born Chagossians, high-profile journalists from outlets like *The Guardian* and the BBC, and Jagdish Koonjul, the Mauritian ambassador to the UN.

The trip, which saw Mauritius plant its flag on Chagossian soil, was seen as a victory for a plucky small nation, which now enjoys the support of most of the international community at the UN.

In the middle of all this, many Chagossians feel uneasy, caught in a game of political football between Britain and Mauritius, neither of whom they particularly trust.

Mauritius is walking a fine line, having said that the Îlois would be able to return home once it is in charge. At the same time, it has promised that it will

continue to lease the islands to the US – potentially a massive earner for the small nation. What happens if the US insists that the islands remain unpopulated?

Many Chagossians living in Mauritius were distressed and saddened to see the Chagossians on the recent boat trip helping to plant the Mauritian flag and singing the Mauritian national anthem. “They should have put up the Chagossian flag. How could they sing the Mauritian national anthem?” says Ramsamy. “I’m not a Mauritian. I was born on Diego Garcia and I’m a Chagossian.”

A new generation

As native-born Chagossians get older, time is running out and many are losing patience. But, Geraldine Baptiste, 23, a poet, believes that Chagossians will ultimately survive through their culture.

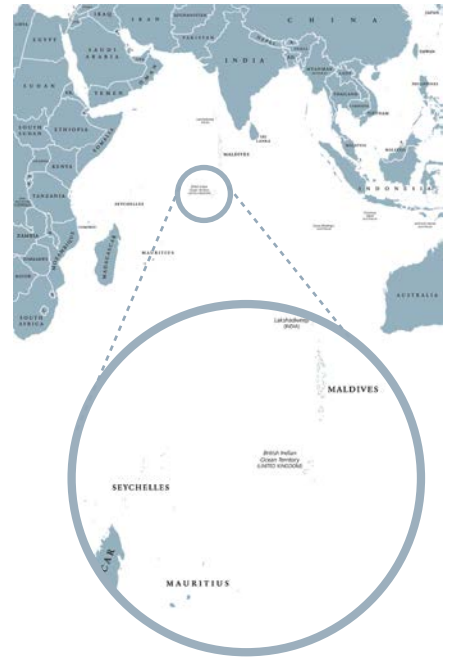
When she was younger, she would hear her grandfather talking about how he'd been dumped in Mauritius. “When we were little, we didn't understand, but slowly we realized that he came from another land and that he'd been forced to leave,” she says.

It wasn't until she was at university that the full impact of her heritage hit home. She had read the critically acclaimed 2005 novel *Silence of the Chagos* by Mauritian journalist Shenaz Patel, which recounts the exiled islanders' experiences.

“It's as if they'd been ripped from their mother's breast,” says Baptiste. “For them, the land was their mother, nurturing and feeding them. Then one day, they were told to pack their bags and leave.”

Her grandparents kept the flame alive through stories, culture and food – typical dishes such as *serraz pwason* (coconut fish curry) and local brews like *kalou* (made with grain) and *baka* (coconut based).

Baptiste has chosen to continue the struggle through her poetry. “Through my poems, I describe my roots and how we feel as a people,” she says.



The Chagos Archipelago: about 1,600 kilometres from the southern tip of India in the Indian Ocean

acclaimed • gefeiert, bejubelt	recount • erzählen
distressed • verzweifelt, erschüttert	ripped • entrissen
dump • abladen	soil • Erde
heritage ['herɪtɪdʒ] • Erbe	stake: be at • auf dem Spiel stehen
hit home • ankommen	ultimately ['ʌltɪmətli] • letztendlich
national anthem [ˌnæʃənəl 'æntθəm] • Nationalhymne	uneasy • unbehaglich, unwohl
nurture ['nɜːtʃə] • nähren	walk a fine line • sich auf einem schmalen Grat bewegen
plucky • mutig, tapfer	



From top left: exiled leader Olivier Bancoult; second-generation Chagossians Vijay Goyaram (left) and Sunil Goyaram with native-born Chagossian Ignace Ramsamy; third-generation Chagossian Ornella Goyaram

The extract below is from Baptiste’s poem “Granpapa” in both **Chagossian Creole** and English.

Granpapa
Sertin soufrans difisil eskplike
Mem si li nou esay bliye
Li reste dan pli profond nou leker

Kan granpapa rakonte
Larm roule dan so lizie
Li ti dir mwa ‘mo tifi’
Mo pann diman sa
Zot finn tir mwa laba
Papa, mama
Pann kapav fer nanye
Kriye, plore
Sa pann retourn mwa lor mo zil
Isi mo senti mwa en ekzil
Mo perdi mo paradi
Kot lavi ti zoli

Grandpapa
Some pain can’t be explained
Even when we try to forget
It lingers deep in our heart

When Grandpapa remembers
Tears spring to his eyes
My little girl, he said
I didn’t ask for that
They dragged us away
Me, mum and dad
Screaming, crying, helpless
Never to return to our island
Here, I’m an exile
My paradise
The good life
Lost

In Roche Bois, I meet Ornella Goyaram, a 17-year-old who has her sights set on leaving Mauritius. First, she will go to Britain. But eventually, she wants to go home. “I’d like my people to get their islands back,” she says. “Lots of people are losing hope. But you have to keep hoping.”

- drag**
• zerren
- linger**
• verweilen, bleiben
- sights: set one’s ~ on sth.**
• etw. anvisieren

INFO TO GO
Chagossian Creole is a French Creole language. It belongs to the family of the Bourbonnais Creole languages spoken in the western Indian Ocean and includes words taken from Asian and African languages.