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“We don’t want to be sent back and forth all the time”: ethnographic encounters with displacement, migration, and Britain beyond the British Isles

Laura Jeffery

Abstract This article draws on ethnographic research with the Chagos islanders from the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean, a case study which offers an exceptional opportunity to interrogate forced displacement, onward migration, and prospective return in the context of the long historical legacy and wide geographical arc of British colonialism. The case study generates interconnected arguments relating firstly to the contribution of ethnography to the interdisciplinary study of displacement and migration, and secondly to the geographical, thematic, and temporal scope of the anthropology of Britain. Firstly, long-term ethnographic engagement with a displaced community unsettles typologies of compulsion and choice by revealing the complexities of displaced people’s changing reflections on their own experiences over the course of lifetimes marked by displacement and migration. Secondly, this history of British colonial and postcolonial displacement, migration, and citizenship is a reminder that the anthropology of life in contemporary Britain is not confined geographically to the British Isles or temporally to the twenty-first century.

Keywords anthropology of displacement, migration studies, Chagos islanders, British Indian Ocean Territory, British Overseas Territories

Compulsion and choice in displacement and migration

Longstanding debates in social theory concern structure and agency (see Giddens 1984): that is, “the extent to which humans have free will and can act according to their wishes, and the extent, on the other hand, to which humans are constrained by social ‘things’, society or social institutions for example” (O’Reilly, 2012: 14). The interdisciplinary study of displacement and migration lends itself particularly well to these debates. Structural constraint and human agency respectively might be assumed to characterise forced displacement and voluntary migration respectively (see Bakewell, 2010: 1690), as is evident in the clash of political cultures in the UK between those who refer to the ‘refugee crisis’ and those who refer to the ‘migrant crisis’ in the Mediterranean. But it is clear that displaced people and migrants alike exercise some agency within structural constraints (Bakewell, 2010: 1695).

Scholars have long debated the value of attempts to distinguish types of human movement according to whether they are relatively ‘voluntary’, which tends to imply economic migration, or relatively ‘forced’, which tends to refer to political exodus (cf. Richmond, 1994; Turton, 2003; Van Hear, 1998). Anthony Richmond (1994: 61) devised a continuum from proactive migration (for example, retirees and returnees) to reactive migration (for example, war victims and slaves), although he recognised that categorisation might not always be so clear-cut:

Between the two extremes of proactive and reactive migrants are a large proportion of people crossing state boundaries who combine characteristics, responding to economic, social and political pressures over which they have little control, but exercising a limited degree of choice of the selection of destinations and the timing of their movements.

Agreeing that most migration entails a combination of compulsion and choice, Nick Van Hear (1998: 42) has elaborated that:

Economic migrants make choices, but they do so within constraints. For example, what is the balance of force and choice for the supposed 'voluntary', economic migrant who 'chooses' to seek work in her country's capital or abroad, but whose child would otherwise die if she does not earn money to pay for medical treatment? Forced migrants likewise make choices, within a narrower range of possibilities. But even in the most dire circumstances, there is still some choice, since some may choose to stay and suffer starvation or violence rather than leave their homes.

Adapting Richmond's continuum, Van Hear proposed a continuum from 'choice' or 'more options' to 'little choice' or 'few options' (Van Hear, 1998: 42-45). At the 'choice' or 'more options' extreme are tourists, visitors, students, professional transients, and business travellers. In the middle, implying more balance in the blend of choice and compulsion, are economic or labour migrants, rural-to-urban migrants, anticipatory refugees, and people induced to move. At the 'little choice' or 'few options' extreme are refugees, expellees, internally displaced people, and those displaced by development projects or disasters.

Critiquing the distinction implicit in Richmond's terms 'proactive' and 'reactive' between people with and without agency, David Turton (2003: 8-9) has argued that:

even at the most 'reactive' or 'involuntary' end of Richmond's continuum, people probably have a lot more choice than we might think – or that these models allow us to think. They may have choices, for example, not only about whether but also about when, where, how and with whom to move – choices which cannot be encompassed by continua of this kind... while we should be interested in the factors that limit choice and the ways in which individuals, households and groups make decisions in the light of those limiting factors, we should not lump people together into categories, according to the extent of choice open to them... we have to understand the point of view and experiences of the people making the decision to move, and/or where to move. We have to emphasise their embeddedness in a particular social, political and historical situation.

In an attempt to reconcile Richmond and Van Hear's conceptual frameworks with Turton's plea (2003: 9-11) that scholars should consider migrants and displaced people as 'purposive actors', this article explores questions of compulsion and choice ethnographically. How do people conceptualise compulsion and choice in their own and others' lives? And how do their reflections on their experiences of displacement and migration change over time? This article complicates neat typologies through ethnographic attention to the complexities of displaced people's changing reflections on their own experiences of compulsion and choice during lives marked by forced displacement and onward migration. Finally, what implications do changing interpretations of compulsion and choice have for the politics of victimhood and claims for restitution? This article emphasises the continuing relevance of British colonialism in debates about citizenship, belonging, rights, and postcolonial restitution in the context of preoccupations with migration into Britain today.

An anthropology of Britain beyond the British Isles

The Chagos Archipelago was unpopulated prior to European expansion in the Indian Ocean from the late eighteenth century onwards, whereupon it was administered as a dependency of colonial Mauritius. French and later British colonists populated the islands, first with enslaved labourers, mostly from East Africa and Madagascar via Mauritius, and later with contract workers, mostly from India via Mauritius. In 1965, as part of negotiations leading to Mauritian independence in 1968, the UK government excised the Chagos Archipelago from colonial Mauritius to form part of the new British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). In 1966 the UK made the Chagos Archipelago available to the US for defence purposes, and since 1971 the largest Chagos island, Diego Garcia, has been the site of a major US overseas military base (Vine, 2009). Successive Mauritian governments have claimed sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago since 1980, but the UK government's response is that Chagos will be returned to Mauritian sovereignty only when it is no longer required for defence purposes.

The population of Chagos rose steadily throughout the nineteenth century and hovered around a thousand over the first half of the twentieth century (Gifford & Dunne, 2014: 39-40), but the population size and composition was relatively fluid and is difficult to calculate accurately for several reasons. Chagos islanders would often spend extended periods of time with friends and family living on other islands in the western Indian Ocean, from where some decided not to return to Chagos at all, while others from Mauritius or Seychelles took up new work contracts on Chagos (Gifford & Dunne, 2014: 39-40). Additionally, since medical facilities on Chagos were limited, expectant mothers would often travel to give birth in Mauritius before returning to Chagos, and so the birth rate on Chagos does not accurately reflect a demographic trajectory (Gifford & Dunne, 2014: 41). Following the establishment of BIOT in 1965, and particularly from 1967 onwards, the UK government orchestrated the depopulation of the Chagos Archipelago: first by preventing the return of islanders who had gone on trips to Mauritius and Seychelles, and later by restricting supplies, winding down work on the coconut plantations, and finally coercing the remaining islanders onto crowded ships. By 1973, between 1,328 and 1,522 Chagos islanders had been relocated to Mauritius, and 232 to Seychelles (Gifford & Dunne, 2014: 46).

There could thus be said to be three broad patterns: first, those who left of their own volition prior to the depopulation and had no intention of returning; second, those who left of their own volition prior to the depopulation or when supplies and work became scarce and had intended to return but were prevented from doing so; and third, those who were forcibly removed from Chagos islands between 1971 and 1973. The proportion that might fall into each aforementioned category is politically highly charged. From the UK government's perspective it would be preferable to assign as many people as possible to the first category in order to claim that the depopulation of Chagos was almost a natural process. From the perspective of the Chagossian struggle it could be beneficial to classify as many as possible into the third category in order to raise awareness of the cause and increase the numbers eligible for recompense. At the same time, however, Chagossians often also distinguish amongst themselves according to a continuum of suffering: those forcibly displaced are deemed to

have suffered most, and those prevented from returning are deemed to have suffered more than those who had no intention of returning to Chagos.

When registering Chagos islanders resettled in Mauritius, the Mauritian government did not seek to distinguish people according to the date or reason for their departure from Chagos. In 1972, the Mauritian government recorded 1,483 Chagos islanders, and in 1982 the Mauritian government issued identification cards to 1,344 people born on Chagos (the decrease reflects deaths of Chagos islanders in Mauritius; there were of course no more births on Chagos by this time). The UK government accepted these figures when awarding limited compensation to Chagos islanders in Mauritius (but not Seychelles) in 1972 and in 1982 (Gifford & Dunne, 2014: 45-46). Most Chagos islanders became Mauritian citizens upon their arrival in Mauritius, although many of those in Seychelles later had to pay to become naturalised Seychelles citizens.

Chagossian groups have long campaigned for compensation and the right of return to Chagos. The UK government awarded full UK citizenship to Chagos islanders and most of their second-generation descendants under the British Overseas Territories Act 2002. However, at that stage the UK government controversially reduced the numbers of those eligible for UK citizenship by distinguishing between those deemed to have left voluntarily and those deemed to have been forcibly displaced, determining that those second-generation Chagossians who had been born outwith Chagos prior to 26 April 1969 would not be eligible for UK citizenship because their parents had left Chagos prior to the UK government's 'policy of exclusion' from Chagos (Jeffery, 2011: 97).

Since 2002, over two thousand members of the extended Chagossian community – comprising Chagos islanders, their spouses, and their descendants – have used their UK citizenship to migrate to the UK, where most have settled in or near Crawley (West Sussex), Greater Manchester, or Greater London. The largest concentration of Chagossians – comprising several hundred Chagos islanders and several thousand of their descendants – lives in Mauritius. This article draws on extended periods of ethnographic fieldwork with the dispersed Chagossian communities in Mauritius and the UK since 2002. It also draws on interviews, focus groups, conferences, and the transcripts of public consultations relating to the UK government's 2013–2016 review of its policy on resettlement of Chagos.

This history of British colonial and postcolonial displacement, migration, and citizenship is a reminder that the anthropology of life in contemporary Britain is not confined geographically to the British Isles or temporally to the twenty-first century. As Rudyard Kipling asked in his 1891 poem "The English Flag", "And what should they know of England who only England know?" (Kipling, 1899: 111). This multi-sited case study is a reminder that the anthropology of Britain must be alert to the long historical legacy and wide geographical arc of British colonialism, which over the past half-century has resulted in the dispersal of these particular UK citizens between and within the Indian Ocean island republics of Mauritius and Seychelles and towns and cities within the island of Great Britain itself.

**"We embarked voluntarily – after six months without food or milk":
marginalisation, forced displacement, and impoverishment**

Every year, tens of millions of people globally are displaced against their wishes as a result of development projects, conservation projects, civil unrest, and armed conflict. Indeed, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, an estimated average of over fifteen million people per year were displaced as a result of development projects alone (Cernea, 2008: 20). Relocation is most successful if it is well planned in advance and involves people in the decision-making processes about what forms resettlement should take, and yet such advance planning and community engagement is rare (de Wet, 2006; Turton, 2003). With regard to displacement planned for development, conservation, or military activities, 'voluntary' agreements to move and/or comprehensive compensation packages may be offered with the intention that "those suffering displacement are left 'no worse off' as a result of protected area creation" (Agrawal & Redford, 2009: 6). But the benefits accruing to the national citizenry, regional population, or humankind generally are usually at the expense of an already marginalised minority (Cernea, 2000: 11-14; Chatty & Colchester, 2002; McDowell, 1996; Turton, 2003). Voluntary agreements may not be possible where people do not want to leave the place they consider home (Schmidt-Soltau & Brockington, 2007), and a focus on compensation packages ignores the fact that – in addition to economic impoverishment – forced displacement also has negative social and cultural impacts (Cernea, 2000; Cernea, 2008). Challenges facing those displaced include community dispersal, dislocation from familiar home environments, reduced access to productive resources, and lack of control over decisions about where and how to live (Colson, 1989: 13; de Wet, 2006: 5). Drastically reduced autonomy over lives and livelihoods often results in chronic impoverishment, disaggregated by Michael Cernea in terms of landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, marginalisation, food insecurity, increased morbidity, loss of access to common property resources, and community disarticulation (Cernea, 2000).

These conclusions certainly resonate with the experiences of the displaced Chagos islanders. Social scientists, government officials, and journalists have documented how the already marginal Chagos islanders were further impoverished by their forced displacement, suffering an array of economic, social, cultural, physical, and psychological harms (Botte, 1980; Dræbel, 1997; Jeffery, 2011; Madeley, 1985; Prosser, 1976; Sylva, 1981; Vine, 2009; Walker, 1986). No resettlement programmes were put in place in Mauritius or Seychelles. Displaced islanders lost their land, houses, and other property; their jobs; their access to shared resources such as fish and seafood, coconut palms, and other edible plants and animals (Jeffery & Rotter, 2016); and their access to common property such as the sea, beaches, and ancestral graveyards. Social networks, village ties, and cultural practices of sharing and socialising were ruptured through the dispersal of the community in Mauritius and Seychelles. Islanders' mental and physical health suffered from the stressful and traumatic experiences of displacement, relocation, and dislocation from a society where they and their ancestors had lived and worked for several generations. This culminated in significant numbers of deaths by suicide, miscarriage, and exposure to and susceptibility to diseases that were not common in Chagos, such as influenza and diphtheria (Madeley, 1985: 5-6; Walker, 1986: 20). Chagos islanders' repeated descriptions of their lives in terms of *sagrin*, *tristes*, and *mizer* – sorrow, sadness, and impoverishment – thus captures their material, social, and psychological

suffering as a result of their forced displacement and dislocation. Members of the Chagossian community commonly self-identify as an uprooted people [*en lepep derasine*] living in exile [*exil*] from its natal homeland [*later natal*].

During a conversation with Chagos islanders in Mauritius in 2011, a group of Chagossian women in their sixties, seventies, and eighties debated amongst themselves – unprompted by me – about the degree of compulsion and choice in the final deportations from the Chagos Archipelago in 1973. Lisette, who was born in 1941, recalled how the director of the company running the coconut plantations had told the islanders in 1971 that Diego Garcia had been ‘sold’ and that they could move instead to the main island on one of two other atolls in the Chagos Archipelago: Boddam Island in the Salomon Atoll, which was depopulated in 1972, or Ile du Coin in the Peros Banhos Atoll, which was eventually depopulated in 1973. Another woman, Celeste, who was born in 1940, said that she had been in Mauritius nursing her sick children at the time. When two of her children had died, she had sought a return passage to Chagos, but was told that there were none. Eventually her parents arrived in Mauritius, which is how she learned that Chagos had been ‘closed’. Celeste declared that if she had been there, “they wouldn’t have put me on the boat”. Two other women who had been on the boat’s final voyage from Ile du Coin in the Peros Banhos Atoll to Seychelles and Mauritius in 1973, reacted strongly, with Lisette retorting:

We embarked voluntarily – after six months without food or milk. We were walking around almost naked. You don’t know: you say you wouldn’t have embarked, but we were waiting for the boat. My child was ill; what could I do? There was no medicine in the hospital, and my child was weak. People who were in Mauritius don’t know this. [Do you think] I shouldn’t have embarked when the boat came? ... Lots of people say they wouldn’t have come if they had been on Diego, but what about your children?

Lisette’s mention of embarking ‘voluntarily’ – after six months without food, milk, cloth, or medicines – at first glance echoes Van Hear’s comment about choices made within constraints. The lack of resources and the impending forcible removal of the remaining islanders demonstrates, however, that there was no realistic opportunity to remain on or return to Chagos, thus situating the Chagos islanders at the ‘little choice’ or ‘few options’ end of Van Hear’s (1998) continuum, regardless of when and why they left the islands.

Making distinctions between types of human movement – forced versus voluntary – has been of great significance to Chagos islanders in Mauritius. Chagossians often drew my attention to the differences in the relative significance of displacement and migration for the various peoples who came to comprise the Mauritian population. Mauritius was unpopulated prior to European colonial settlement in the Indian Ocean, and all of the early settlers had migrated or been displaced from their native lands in Asia, Africa, and Europe. Thus all Mauritians are descended from ancestors who experienced relocation. Mauritian politicians routinely attempted to conflate the historical displacement of Mauritians’ ancestors with the Chagos islanders’ first-hand experiences of displacement. At the unveiling of a monument in 2003 to commemorate the displacement of the Chagos islanders, for instance, a Mauritian government

minister declared: ‘uprooting is the history of our country: slavery, indentured labour, and this more recent uprooting [of the Chagossians]’.

Many Chagossians, however, emphasised the distinctions between the displacements that led to the populating of Mauritius and the displacement that depopulated the Chagos Archipelago. Confronting the idea that any Mauritian might claim that “we’re all uprooted here”, Manfred, who was born on Boddam Island in the Salomon Atoll, replied: “no, that’s not true, because they were born here, but we were born over there”. Similarly, Madeleine, who was born in the late 1960s and was a young girl when her family was forcibly removed from Ile du Coin in 1973, remarked that there was a significant difference because “it wasn’t just my ancestors who were uprooted: I myself was uprooted, so I feel it more”. Pauline, also born on Ile du Coin in the late 1960s, pointed out that, in contrast to the historical displacements of slavery and indenture – during which only certain proportions of the local populations were uprooted – in this case “the entire Chagossian people were uprooted”. Thus they rejected the notion that their displacement was just another example of the population movements that populated Mauritius, because the Chagossian case has two differentiating features: firstly, it occurred during living memory and formed part of lived experience, and secondly, it affected the entire population of Chagos. Moreover, Chagossians also distinguished themselves from more recent migrants within the Republic of Mauritius, such as those migrating from Rodrigues to the main island of Mauritius, who they typically characterised as ‘voluntary’ or ‘economic’ migrants seeking to escape challenges such as unemployment, lack of opportunities, and poverty in Rodrigues.

“We had to re-uproot ourselves”: onward migration as a logical solution to marginalisation and impoverishment

In 2002, the British Overseas Territories Act reclassified the British Dependent Territories (BDTs) as British Overseas Territories (BOTs) and awarded full UK citizenship to citizens of such territories. Islanders born on Chagos when it was a dependency of the British colony of Mauritius, who were eligible for BDT citizenship under the British Nationality Act 1981, thus became eligible for full UK citizenship through their place of birth. In response to a campaign by Chagossian groups and British politicians, the UK government also introduced a supplementary section to provide for the transmission of UK citizenship to Chagos islanders’ second-generation children born outwith Chagos (see Jeffery, 2011: 96). Chagossians have faced considerable hardships in Mauritius and Seychelles, and most feel at best ambivalent towards their host states, where they feel marginalised and excluded from full national membership and participation. Emigration was seen as a potential solution to problems such as discrimination, marginalisation, impoverishment, and unemployment. In this context, it is not surprising that over two thousand members of the extended Chagossian community are estimated to have migrated to the UK.

Distinctions between forced displacement and voluntary migration remained central in discussions about onward migration to the UK. Christophe and Lucette are a Chagossian couple who were in their twenties when they left Chagos in the 1960s. In Mauritius, Christophe worked as a fisherman, while Lucette had been a housewife and had looked after their six children. In 2003, when they were in

their sixties, Christophe and Lucette moved to Crawley in West Sussex. When I asked why they had come to the UK, Christophe responded: “We had to re-root [*re-derasine*] ourselves. Why? Because we didn’t receive a place [in Mauritius] for us to live the same as we lived there [in Chagos]”. Bruno, the son of a Chagossian father forcibly relocated to Mauritius, was in his forties when he left his family in Mauritius and moved to the UK in 2005. Bruno immediately critiqued the assumption of choice in my line of questioning and downplayed his own decision-making capacity in the migration, although he mentions his own thought processes a few sentences later:

LJ: Can you tell me how you decided to come to the UK?

Bruno: I didn’t decide to come. I came by obligation. I’m a descendant of the Chagossian community, with a British passport, and life was difficult in my country [Mauritius]. As a British citizen, I thought I could change my life, improve my life. I saved money, sold things to buy the ticket.

While seeing onward migration as an ‘obligation’ rather than a choice, Bruno clearly felt that making use of his eligibility for UK citizenship was a logical solution to the problems he faced in Mauritius.

This suggestion that coming to the UK was a matter of ‘obligation’ rather than choice was not uniformly accepted amongst migrants from Mauritius. Claude and Nina, a couple in their forties of mixed Chagossian and Mauritian parentage, moved to Crawley with their children in 2004. One day, Claude complained to assembled friends that, “I miss my island. Sometimes I remember [Mauritius], the same as the old people say they miss their islands”. A mutual friend (also from Mauritius) shook his head, retorting that, “it was your choice to come, whereas they didn’t have any choice: they were uprooted”. On a separate occasion, a native Chagos islander recounted at a community meeting in Crawley how the UK government “took people from Diego and put them on Salomon and Peros, and then took people from Salomon and Peros and took them to Mauritius”. A younger woman who had been born in Mauritius to Chagossian parents added “and then they took people from Mauritius and brought them here”, but the Chagossian elders disagreed with her, saying “no, no, people must understand that coming to the UK is a personal decision, not forced”. Thus those forcibly displaced from Chagos took issue with an attempt by someone born outwith Chagos to conflate the community’s initial collective experience of forced displacement from Chagos with subsequent individual experiences of onward migration to the UK.

Nevertheless, Chagossians tended not to see the option of onward ‘voluntary’ or ‘economic’ migration to the UK in isolation from the community’s earlier forced displacement. Rather, they saw the awarding of UK citizenship as a victory of their struggle, and onward migration as a potentially positive outcome of the community’s previous negative experiences. For some, this history means that the UK government has greater obligations towards the Chagossian community than it does towards others. Chagossian demands to the UK government include Chagossians being prioritised for Housing Benefit or Council Housing on the grounds that they were once made homeless by the UK government. Moreover, the link with the original forced displacement is made explicit in the argument that Chagossians should be eligible for Income Support or the State Pension

regardless of previous contributions and place of residence: that is, even if the recipient continued to live in Mauritius or Seychelles and had never made National Insurance contributions in the UK. As the Chagossian activist Fernand Mandarin put it, the Chagos islanders lived and worked on a UK territory, and many would have continued to do so had it not been for the UK government's decision to 'uproot' them and relocate them to Mauritius and Seychelles, both of which were also British colonies. And the UK government subsequently awarded UK citizenship to the Chagossians in recognition of their connection with a British territory. Thus Mandarin argued that it is unfair to require these British citizens with longstanding connections to a British territory to 're-uproot' themselves and relocate their families to the UK in order to become eligible for UK state benefits.

“Maybe it will be the same thing like they have done in the past: whether you like it or not you are going back”: the myth of return and its discontents

Migrants and refugees often express a desire one day to return to their former homes or homelands. Indeed, since 1990 'voluntary repatriation' has been the UNHCR's preferred 'durable solution' to the 'refugee problem' (Allen, 1996; Allen & Morsink, 1994; Black & Koser, 1999), with over 25 million refugees returning to their home countries in the past twenty years (Long, 2013). Implementing 'return', however, is fraught with challenges, especially when home societies have been transformed through natural disasters, environmental changes, economic crises, political upheaval, or armed conflict (Allen, 1996; Black, 2002; Black & Koser, 1999; Jansen, 2010; Long & Oxfeld, 2004; Rogge, 1994; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). In protracted situations, repatriation may incorporate children born in exile, for whom 'return' does not simply mean 'going home' (Allen, 1996; Cornish, Peltzer, & MacLachlan, 1999; Hammond, 2004; Rogge, 1994; Markowitz & Stefansson, 2004). Moreover, the reality of returning somewhere lacking infrastructural development or requiring post-conflict reconstruction may not appeal to potential returnees from across the generations concerned that their educational ambitions, employment strategies, or healthcare needs will not be met (Jansen, 2010; Gardner, 2002). In any case, the home or homeland will never be exactly the same as the place left behind, which raises the challenge of planning for a sustainable return that will appeal to prospective returnees.

In the context of remote islands that have undergone depopulation in response to environmental challenges or population pressures, governments often view depopulation as permanent, and discourage return because of the high costs of providing infrastructure to remote locations (Connell, 2012: 137-139; Kothari, 2014). And in the context of processes of urbanisation – in which small and remote islands anyway tend to experience out-migration to larger metropolises – the number of people seeking to return to smaller islands tends to be limited in practice (Connell, 2013: 174-184). So the challenges remain: how to recompense displaced people such that they do not remain chronically impoverished and marginalised wherever they live, and whether and how to plan for and facilitate resettlement for those who do wish to return?

It may be difficult to distinguish between ‘settlers’ (who intend to remain in their new country of residence) and ‘sojourners’ (who plan to return to their home country) because they commonly share a ‘myth of return’ (Watson, 1977: 5). Migrants may oscillate between seeing themselves as temporary ‘sojourners’ and recognising that they no longer felt ‘at home’ in their ‘homeland’ and had therefore become permanent ‘settlers’ abroad (see, for example, Chamberlain, 1997: 70-90; Gardner, 2002: 93; Olwig, 1999: 73). But a ‘myth of return’ should be interpreted not necessarily as a ‘real’ or ‘actual’ return to a homeland, but rather as a worldview that sustains migrants and their descendants through difficult and uncertain times in exile (see Al-Rasheed, 1994: 201; Bascom, 1998: 146-169). The ‘myth of return’ may therefore be better conceptualised – in Roger Zetter’s phrase – as a ‘myth of home’ which serves to reinforce political claims for redress, sustain a sense of continuity in contexts of uncertainty, and reinforce bonds and sustain collective identity in exile (Zetter, 1999: 6; see also Jansen & Löfving, 2009: 14).

Chagos islanders continue to express an overwhelming sense of loss and ongoing suffering as a result of their experience of forced displacement, and Chagossian groups have campaigned for compensation and the right of return to Chagos. In 2000, the High Court declared the depopulation of the Chagos Archipelago unlawful, but in 2004 the UK government introduced immigration restrictions to prevent the Chagossians from returning. In 2013, the UK government launched a review of its policy on resettlement, and officials from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) consulted Chagossians in Mauritius, Crawley, and Manchester. (The FCO officials did not visit Seychelles.) During the consultations in the UK – but not in Mauritius – several people from the younger generations voiced concerns that the UK government might rescind their UK citizenship and send them to Chagos against their wishes. At the FCO consultation in Crawley, a woman of Chagossian descent insisted: “We don’t want to be sent back and forth all the time. We’re humans”. At the FCO consultation in Manchester, one participant asked:

If those who were born there decide that they want to resettle on the island and the younger generation don’t want to, what’s going to happen to the younger ones? Will they be still British or will they have to follow their parents and go back to the island?

Despite the protestations of the FCO official that “This process isn’t about making anyone do anything or go somewhere”, participants continued to raise this concern several times during the remainder of the consultation:

Woman of Chagossian parentage: They have been displaced from Diego Garcia to Mauritius, displaced from Mauritius to here, and from here Now after forty years they want to do a feasibility study, they want to send people back? It will not be the same.

FCO official: Can I be clear? I don’t think this is about sending people anywhere. It’s about the feasibility of people who –

Woman of Chagossian parentage: If the feasibility was done and then they decided ‘okay, now we want to send them back because it’s okay for them to be on their island, we want to send them back’, maybe it will be the same

thing like they have done in the past: whether you like it or not you are going back.

FCO official: I do believe that the world is a different place to how it was forty years ago and the kinds of decisions that were taken then would not be taken now. I do believe that.

In the light of the long history of vulnerability to decisions taken unilaterally by the UK government without consultation with the Chagossian community, it is perhaps not surprising that so many participants from the younger generations were concerned that the UK government could revoke their UK citizenship and unilaterally uproot them from their place of residence.

“It would have been better to have removed us from the islands and brought us straight here”: an imagined alternative history of relocation with the benefit of hindsight

From the perspective of the Chagossian struggle, the bottom line is that the UK government was wrong to depopulate the Chagos Archipelago at all, although Chagossians also identify the key mistakes made by the various administrations involved: the UK government failed to make proper arrangements for the relocated community, and the governments of Mauritius and Seychelles failed to provide appropriate employment, adequate accommodation, and land equivalent to that left behind. Challenges in Mauritius and Seychelles explain why so many Chagossians emigrated once they were awarded UK citizenship. When I started working with Chagossians and their descendants in Crawley, I noticed that their perspectives on the original policy of displacement and relocation had begun to change. People still complained about the lack of planning by the UK government and the poor reception that greeted them on arrival in Mauritius and Seychelles. Lorraine, a woman of Chagossian parentage, suggested that planning and reception were key:

From the start if they wanted those islands, the government could have treated those people like human beings, make those places ready, have a boat, if they had some of those things, the Chagossians wouldn't have raised their heads. The eviction was done in the wrong way, that's why people are in revolt today. Those who witnessed the eviction or wanted to return, that was hard, so I don't blame the Mauritian government, I blame the British government. The British government washed their hands. If they had got what they needed it wouldn't be like this today. If it was prepared – either Mauritius or the UK, they get the choice – then today I would have said 'yes, you were evicted, but the government gave you what you needed', but all they had was their sandals: family of ten, one mattress, sleeping for five days [on the ship].

As this quote indicates, however, Lorraine had started to take for granted the decision to depopulate the islands. Other people now suggested that the original problem of relocation would have been alleviated had the UK government brought the Chagos islanders directly to the UK rather than sending them instead to Mauritius or Seychelles. As Lucette put it, “it would have been better to have removed us from the islands and brought us straight here”. At the FCO consultation in Manchester, too, people suggested that the displaced Chagossians

should have been relocated directly to the UK and immediately given UK citizenship:

Young man of Chagossian descent: Back then, they didn't give people British citizenship. Instead actually, they sent people to Mauritius instead of Britain. Maybe if people had the opportunity to come here a long time ago, our lives would be different now. Were we already British back then?

Young woman of Chagossian descent: We don't really understand why forty years ago, instead of being sent to the UK, people were sent to Mauritius. And then in 2002, after we've been given British citizenship and passports which allowed us to come here, now we are asked to go back to our islands. We don't really get it, what's going on.

Thus Chagossians in the UK continued to voice complaints about poor planning, but protested less about the depopulation of Chagos per se. This seems to be a pragmatic approach relating to the prevailing social, economic, and political conditions in the three countries at the time. The fact of forced displacement itself had become less significant than the conditions which confronted them in their host countries, which they felt could have been avoided either if the relocation had been better planned or, increasingly, if they had been brought straight to the relatively prosperous UK rather than to turbulent late-colonial Mauritius and Seychelles. Crucially, rather than lamenting the compulsion of the forced displacement and their lack of agency in choosing where to relocate, some people now voiced the opinion that it could and should have been better managed. Whereas the young people cited in the previous section feared that the UK government would once again demonstrate its power over them, here people criticised the UK government for its poor management and its negative lived consequences for them and their families.

A 'victim diaspora' and the politics of victimhood

Collectively, the Chagossian community exhibits the characteristics highlighted in William Safran's definition of diaspora: 1) dispersal from a homeland to two or more host regions; 2) retention of a collective memory about the homeland; 3) a sense of alienation from the host societies; 4) a myth of return to the ancestral homeland; 5) commitment to the restoration of the homeland; 6) collective identification defined by this continuing relationship with the homeland (Safran, 1991: 83; see also Clifford, 1994: 304-305; Van Hear, 1998: 5-6). These definitions of diaspora, however, perhaps do not sufficiently capture that compulsion may be a key element for identification as a diaspora (cf. Van Hear, 1998: 5). In *Global Diasporas*, Robin Cohen identified two archetypal characteristics of what he described as 'victim diasporas': "*the traumatic dispersal from an original homeland and the salience of the homeland in the collective memory of a forcibly dispersed group*" (2008: 3; italics in original), characteristics which also clearly apply to the forcibly displaced and geographically dispersed Chagossian community still struggling for restitution. But the question which remains unresolved is that of the politics of victimhood: that is, to understand how self-identification as a 'victim diaspora' is productive in terms of the community's struggle for restitution in the form of compensation and the right of return to Chagos. The Chagossian community can be understood as "a group whose identity is formed from what they have lost or how they suffer"

(Keeler, 2007: 172). The practice of continually referring back to the original forced displacement sustains self-identification and identification by others as members of a victimised community that continues to experience suffering and thus to deserve restitution.

Following Chagossian campaigns for compensation and the right of return to Chagos, the UK government awarded limited financial compensation to Chagossians in Mauritius (but not Seychelles) in 1972 and 1982, land (contributed by the Mauritian government) and houses in Mauritius in the mid-1980s, eligibility for UK citizenship for all Chagos islanders and most of their second generation descendants since 2002, and short visits to Chagos annually since 2006. If such recompense had been experienced collectively as sufficient redress for the loss and suffering caused by the forced displacement and poorly planned relocation, then there would be no need to continue to campaign for further restitution. Instead, drawing attention to ongoing suffering keeps the struggle for restitution alive. Proposals for restitution include a range of options that would appeal unevenly across the increasingly extended and dispersed community: further financial compensation, preferential access to UK welfare benefits, enhanced eligibility for UK citizenship, more frequent return visits, and resettlement of Chagos. Many Chagossians feel that the campaign should continue to focus on the right of return, while many others believe that the campaign should shift its focus towards other forms of recompense. Not surprisingly, Chagossians hold a wide range of opinions regarding the scale and scope of return. And, in this highly politically charged context, it is unclear how many seek resettlement itself as opposed to the opportunity for more frequent and longer return visits.

To an outside observer, it could appear as though Chagossians have proceeded along the continuum from forced displacement to economic migration, and that any future resettlement of Chagos would take the form of triumphant return to the homeland. From the perspective of many Chagossians themselves, however, onward migration to the UK should be seen within the context of marginalisation and impoverishment in their host countries, as a logical solution to the hardships of living in Mauritius and Seychelles. And debates about the feasibility of resettlement of Chagos highlight concerns – concentrated amongst the younger generations in the UK – that members of the extended Chagossian community could have their UK citizenship revoked and could be ‘sent back’ to Chagos against their will. At the same time, however, an imagined alternative history in which the Chagos islanders would have been relocated directly to the UK instead of Mauritius or Seychelles indicates a belief that the misfortune was not a result of lack of control over their own lives but a question of poor government management. Subjective experiences revealed via long-term ethnography across multiple sites highlight both the tensions in classifying migration according to a proactive/reactive continuum and the dilemmas in attributing agency to people for whom the success of their political struggles relies on them being recognised as victims and thus (relatively) lacking in agency (cf. Bakewell, 2010: 1690).

To be clear, I am not arguing that the onward migration to the UK lacks agency – or even that Chagossians feel that onward migration lacks agency – but rather that it is clearly experienced, in Richmond’s (1994) terminology, as reactive in the sense that UK citizenship is seen as an opportunity to escape Mauritius or

Seychelles. And the key point about the concerns about prospective return migration is that many Chagossians – quite understandably, given their history of forced displacement – fear that the choices they have made about where to live could once again be overturned by the UK government compelling them to live somewhere else. This resonates with the work of Elizabeth Colson (1971; 1989) who highlighted that a particularly disempowering aspect of forced displacement is the loss of control about where and how one lives. The emergence of a retrospective argument that the UK government should have done a better job at the relocation (gradually supplanting the more long-standing argument that the UK government should not have depopulated Chagos or should have consulted the community) implies, I suggest, the internalisation of disempowerment. Building on Colson, I argue that disempowerment through forced displacement evidently has repercussions that continue to haunt successive generations of the extended community over the course of many decades. This article has been concerned with how people conceptualise compulsion and choice in their own and others' migratory trajectories, and to what political effect, but it is clear by extension that such disempowerment also has implications for how people act upon the other choices and constraints presented to them throughout their lives.

Conclusions

In this article I have sought to reconcile the conceptual approach of migration studies scholars such as Richmond and Van Hear and the ethnographic approach of anthropologists of displacement such as Turton and Colson. I have shown how an ethnographic perspective can enrich abstract classificatory frameworks, which tend to elide complexities such as serial relocations and the repercussions of forced displacement that persist throughout lifetimes and across generations. Displaced people and migrants themselves reflect upon their experiences of choice and compulsion, and their changing reflections during the course of lives marked by displacement and migration demonstrate that individuals might not consistently interpret a particular displacement or migration as either forced or voluntary, reactive or proactive. Rather, at different stages of their lives, and for complex reasons – such as the politics of victimhood – they might instead highlight either their own victimhood or their own agency respectively. The politics of victimhood amongst this dispersed community of British citizens from a controversial British Overseas Territory emphasises that the anthropology of Britain cannot be geographically confined to the British Isles and underscores the continuing resonance of British colonialism in contentious debates about migration, citizenship, belonging, rights, and restitution in Britain today.

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