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 their 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. 

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

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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).