LONGING AND BELONGING IN REAL TIME: 
HOW CHAGOSSIAN CHILDREN IN MAURITIUS IMAGINE 
THE CHAGOS ISLANDS 

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The English have taken the land from the Chagossians and made it a dependency of Mauritius. Then the English took Chagos back and the Chagossians came here. The Chagossians were unhappy. That was because their land was pulled away from them. They were not adapted to Mauritius because they did not know anybody. They did not have much money and no work. Afterwards they almost all died, two or three went to England. Because the English allowed it. And maybe they are also dead. Now the children follow this example and go to England. I will also go there …

(Jean, ten years old).¹

Jean's grandparents were born in Chagos and although he did not experience the eviction of the Chagossians from the archipelago himself, the memory and consequences of this, live on through him. This chapter concerns the (grand)children of the some 1,500 Chagossians who were relocated to Mauritius, and focuses specifically on children between the ages of nine and twelve.

The research is part of a larger cognitive anthropological study currently being carried on by the undersigned and her research collaborator, Marry Kooy, investigating perceptions of kinship and family history held by primary school children between the ages of nine and twelve (cf. Kooy 2008).² Fieldwork for this research was conducted from August 2007 until April 2008 in Port Louis (educational zone I). Methodologies consisted of participant observation, home visits, photo elicitation, 

¹ To protect the privacy of the children, their names are pseudonyms.
² I would like to thank Marry Kooy for sharing her research data and discussing this chapter extensively with me. It should be stressed, however, that I am responsible for the interpretations and conclusions of the study as presented in this chapter. We express our appreciation to the Mauritian Ministry of Education, Culture & Human Resources and the Government Teachers Union (GTU) for their assistance during the research. We are grateful to teachers, children, their families and everybody else who participated in this study.
cognitive tests, and reflexive drawing exercises in which children creatively expressed their views. In all, more than 250 drawings of pupils with different family backgrounds were collected and discussed with the children. Forty-one Chagossian children (22 girls and 19 boys) pursuing grades five and six, or forming part of the ‘repeaters class’ (pupils who failed the primary school exam) are at the heart of this chapter and represent about 90 percent of all Chagossian children attending these classes.

It should be noted that the concept of Chagossian children refers to children who claim to have at least one (great)grandparent (sometimes even parent) who dwelled in the Chagos archipelago. All children in our research identified themselves as being Chagossian despite the fact that they usually were of mixed ancestry (cf. Jeffery and Vine, this volume). We will come back to this at the end of the chapter.

The chapter begins by introducing two Chagossian girls and their ideas of kinship and Chagos. The conversation below followed one of the drawing exercises, where children were asked to draw the place where ‘the grandparents of their grandparents’ come from:

Lilli is a skinny, shy girl with a dark complexion. She has just turned twelve and is in grade six of primary school. She has been drawing with great care and seems eager to discuss her work.

Lilli: You see, this is Chagos. That is the place where my grandparents come from. It is beautiful there. The sun always shines and there are many birds in the sky. They are so free flying around. There is sugar cane, water, fruits on the trees, fish in the sea and always food on the fire. You know people cook with wood there. The houses are made of wood and have grass on the roofs. See that is me looking through the window. I am going to live in Chagos one day. You see, I am all happy there. My father is also happy. Now he is a prisoner and you know, he will be so happy to come with my mother and me to Chagos. You see, … there are no prisons in Chagos. My mother goes and gets the water and then carries it on her head. That is what my grandmother did there so mum will have to learn that as well. Oh, I guess I will have to practise that also. I have no idea how to do that.