Kinning in the Imagination: Perceptions of Kinship and Family History among Chagossian Children in Mauritius

Sandra J.T.M. Evers

Introduction

This chapter discusses how Chagossian children attending primary school in Port Louis, Mauritius, reflect on their kinship and family history in relation to their imagination of the place where their ancestors come from. The expulsion

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1 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 the research identified themselves as being Chagossian despite the fact that they usually were of mixed ancestry. The concept of Chagossian children does not include the ‘children’ of the first generation Chagossians, who are now often grown-up. In Mauritius this group is conceptually included in the term Zanfan Chagossien. In the context of the primary schools, however, it was usually employed to refer to children in the school and not their parent(s). The children having an ancestral link with Chagos called themselves just Chagossian (Chagossien).
of their (grand)parents from the Chagos archipelago resulted from secret negotiations between the American and British governments, when Chagos formed part of British colonial Mauritius. When the Mauritians came to negotiate their independence in 1965, the British demanded surrender of the Chagos islands territory in exchange for a three million pound indemnity. This transaction allowed the British to make Diego Garcia (the largest of the Chagos islands) available to the United States. The US then established a military base on Diego Garcia. As the US desired a military base ‘without civilians’, the transaction triggered the forced clearance of the entire population of approximately 2,000 people to the Seychelles (also a British colony at the time) and Mauritius, where the majority of about 1,500 Chagossians were relocated (Marimootoo 1997; Vine 2006, 137, 161, 167).

Jean,² ten years old, reflected on this eviction as follows:

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…

Since the forced expulsion from the Chagos archipelago, Chagossians have been engaged in a campaign advocating their right of return, largely driven by high profile litigation brought before the British Courts. However, due to the length of their exile, the displaced generation may never see the day of their long awaited homecoming, particularly in view of the 22 October 2008 judgment of the House of Lords which struck down the ‘right of return’ principle as not ‘feasible’.

Our research addresses how Chagossian children imagine Chagos and Chagossians dwelling overseas; specifically, we focus on the role of children in constructing the ‘imagined community’ of Chagossians in diaspora. Such an

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² To protect the privacy of the children, their names are pseudonyms.