Chapter 3
Slave Women

Tent Slaves and Female Slave Affection

The true and profound emotional affection the relationship of slave women with their masters can be laden with, is obvious both in the narrative of Zeyneb and of M'Barke. M'Barke's commitment to her master's family led her to introduce herself already indirectly, by the reference to her master and his status: "I am not of the people of Khouba, I am a ḥarṭāniyya for the Ahel D. of the Tmoddek and they are backed by Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar [the former ʿamīr of Tagant]." M'Barke presenting herself as a ḥarṭāniyya for her master's family leaves no doubt that she still is a slave woman, a ḫādem. Her commitment to the masters' fate seems perfect, as she adopts the euphemism commonly used among modern-time masters when speaking of those still regarded as their slaves, rather than claiming to be a free ḥarṭāniyya, as almost all interviewees did in their introduction. M'Barke virtually seems to have no words of her own;[1] having lived such a long time in the universe of her masters she adopted their phraseology in trying to cope with the change in her own situation.

Formally this uniform image is confirmed with her saying later: "For sure, I was a nānmiyye[2] [tent slave woman]." Rather than being a confession the statement conveys pride. Not all slaves were tent slaves, not all slaves were so close to their masters as these. Probably life was much better under such conditions than being completely at the margins. But M'Barke's pride in having been a nānmiyye is located also in another sphere. Being a tent slave means being different from her masters. She was a sūdāniyya, a slave woman because she was obliged to do all sorts of work all day long; this marks the difference between her and her masters. Speaking of her work, she remembers her own life, not her master's. A decisive break in her life as nānmiyye appears with her stopping work, hence at the times she became faint, later blind and had her children replace her. Her work was the obligation of her life, which she devotes to Allah. No masters can interfere with this retrospective interpretation, can deprive her of her own definition of honourable devotion contrasting with the masters' attitude. Although never leaving the framework of her deep commitment towards her masters, and never opposing her masters, M'Barke is neither able nor willing to withhold the ambiva-

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lence of her condition when conceptualising her own life in her account. This certainly is due to the many dishonouring experiences in her life, the most prominent of which is her being denied marriage, fundamentally negating her social personhood.[3] Presenting herself as being a ḥarṭāniyya "for" the Ahel D. is revealing, her sociality is bound to her allocation within the master's family, but paradoxically this is precisely the place where she is inflicted with social deprivation. Affection and deprivation are inseparable and come part and parcel from the masters. The ambiguity of affection and rejection, of inclusion and exclusion hence is the fundamental experience of living this configuration of master-slave relations.

Slave-Master Milk Kinship

M'Barke's engagement with the master's family, stated in her initial presentation to the strange visitor, is much more than putative. She is of the same age as Khalil, her master, and as a baby M'Barke drank of Khalil's milk, i.e. she was suckled by his mother, and thus became his milk-sister. Zeyneb's case differs slightly, but is characterised by the same mechanisms of integration. She too was committed to doing reproductive work for her master, thus freeing the master's wife from the most menial work. Although she does not identify herself with her master to the extent M'Barke does, the master still is the major category of reference: "Yes, I am like them [her masters], I married after they married. My husband sometimes stayed with me and my masters, sometimes we also went to his masters. We were always together and never separated." This is a revelation as it marks just what it is supposed to hide, the precarious character of her condition of being like the masters. Despite not being able to be equal to the masters, she knows very well *how to be like* them, or more precisely, how to be like the mistress whom she serves and observes throughout the day. The aim of her life thus is clear: to adopt some of the most significant aspects of a noblewoman's behaviour. The most prominent of these, and undoubtedly one of the most visible, is the withdrawal from specific tasks. This habit of achieving the status of a "big" woman, i.e. a woman of elder status, is not unique to Zeyneb, for already her mother, she tells, did not work much, she merely fetched water and stayed near the fields. This probably was the case at the time Zeyneb and her sisters reached the age at which they could replace her mother's work for the masters. Although she stresses the ambivalence in the relations to her master's family by enumerating many of his good sides as well as the problems remaining for her own family, it is clear that there are complex, affective ties towards the master's family. There has been and still is an intimate relationship between the two, and there are ties manifest, crosscutting the fundamental hierarchy between the freeborn noble master and his slave. Both Zeyneb and M'Barke gave accounts of their relations with their

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master's family in terms of milk-parenthood. Zeyneb suckled her master's son, thus becoming his milk-mother, and M'Barke was suckled by her present master's mother, and therefore is his milk-sister and her milk-daughter.

Getting parents by milk is strongly reminiscent of the fictive integration of slaves through the masters' paternalist ideology, expressed by labelling slaves as children and legal minors, but the differences are crucial. Milk-parenthood is a tie actively established out of consent between two women. In the cases at hand, it implies on the one hand a freeborn noblewoman and on the other her slave woman. Unlike transferring existing social categories into a different context, i.e. using kinship terminology to hint at slaves and masters, milk-parenthood is contracted intentionally, and the reciprocal legal rights involved are known, and even more important, controlled by the women involved. The great import of this institution will become apparent from the following overview of the legal aspects and the definition of milk parenthood.

Milk-kinship, riḍāʿa or raḍāʿa, as it is called in classical Arabic (rzāʿa in ḥassāniyya),[4] is common among all social strata, either bīẓān and sūdān, and until today frequently practised throughout Mauritania. It is established by a woman breast-feeding another woman's infant. The relationship thus established between the two children is rationalised by Islamic jurisprudence as a shared (milk-)descent from the same father, i.e. the woman's husband at the time of breast-feeding. This is because women's milk is considered to be caused by the men's fluids, a point of view which clearly superimposes patriarchal conceptions of parenthood onto this female-controlled resource of parental ties.[5] Milk-kinship entails marriage restrictions analogous to blood-kinship. Having once drunk from the same woman's breast results in being considered as milk brothers and sisters, and having the woman as milk-mother. These relations are the most intimate within the framework of milk parenthood, which also considers more distant levels of parenthood (cf. Héritier-Augé 1994). Legally the institution's range varies according to the interpretations provided by different schools of jurisprudence. The Risāla elucidating the māliki school of jurisprudence, the one prevailing in North and West Africa, defines marriage restrictions due to milk-parenthood, either with regard to the offspring of the breast-feeding woman and her husband:

> Sont prohibées pour vous . . . vos mères qui vous ont allaitées et vos sœurs de lait . . . Quand une femme allaite un nourrisson [étranger], les filles de cette femme et les filles de son époux, nées avant ou après, deviennent les sœurs du nourrisson. Mais il est permis au frère par le sang de ce dernier, d'épouser les filles de cette nourrice. (Ibn Abî Zayd Al-Qayrawânî 1983: 179, 193)

The restrictive aspect of milk brother- or sisterhood is obvious in the ḥassāniyya terminology: a brother or sister by milk is called meḥrem (sing.), i.e. forbidden to marry, or relative of a degree prohibiting marriage (cf. Taine-Cheikh 1990: 89, 110; Taine-Cheikh 1989c: 400ff.).[6] Besides its legal implica-

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tions of marriage restriction, the institution is important to the practice of social life. Being related by milk offers girls and boys the opportunity to communicate with members of the other sex, of different social status, and of the same age in public as intimately as with brothers and sisters of their own blood.[7] An important asset in a gender segregated society, laying especially severe restrictions on public communication between young men and women who are potential spouses. A problematic aspect of the institution is that not all relations of milk-parenthood might be known when a marriage is concluded. The consequence is relationships entered into which only later, through a third party's testimony, will turn out to be incestuous, and then have immediately to be dissolved (cf. Héritier-Augé 1994: 157). These cases can lead to serious mental stress, hard to cope with.[8] Another point is that intensive practice of joint breast-feeding over several generations within small communities could lead to marriage restrictions being so numerous, that milk-kinship turned out to be a social nuisance (cf. Cleaveland 1995: 47).

To my knowledge little has been published on the topic of milk-parenthood and the most detailed studies available focus on the impact the institution has on marriage prescriptions practised by the Saudi-Arabian urban population, among whom the institution is described as vanishing (cf. Altorki 1980; Héritier-Augé 1994: 149). Occasionally the topic surfaces in local studies providing further insights such as the sensitive discussion of the emotional dimension of milk kinship by Carol Delaney (1991: 157f.). Until today dependent drawa woman continue to breast-feed children of the dominant šurva in the Moroccan deep south. This unidirectional flow of milk continues to create intimate and enduring bonds between families cross-cutting social hierarchy (cf. Ensel 1998: 80-87). With regard to Mauritania Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh (1993: 186) highlights that the complex and ambiguous sentimental ties ancient slaves had to their masters were often strengthened by milk parenthood, as well as shared affiliation to an age-set, ʿasr. Timothy Cleaveland, in a study on Oualâta, cites an informant who asserted that milk-kinship during the 19th century was important in facilitating social access between non-kin males and females, including the slaves often living in the same (urban) household (cf. Cleaveland 1995: 46). Ann McDougall (1988: 378) provides indirect evidence when stating that for slave women in the Adrar "Even in the late 1940s, their best options were still the 'traditional' ones: becoming a favored concubine, family wet nurse, or in rare cases, the wife of a noble or a well-off hartani." This type of slave woman's involvement in the master's household is also reported by Poulet (1904: 11, cited in Martín 1991: 44), a former French administrator in Mauritania. He mentions that in early colonial times, bīẓān women rarely breast-fed their children, but took a wet-nurse among their husband's slaves. The practice is common and carried on even until recent times,[9] but its frequency seems to be diminishing. Throughout the 24 interviews I carried out with sūdān and bīẓān women, Zeyneb was the only one to tell of a slave nursing a noblewoman's child. There are multiple explanations for this phenomenon. First

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there might be a lack of intimacy, hindering the women from telling of this experience. Although this is possible, various other reasons might be more feasible. Both bīẓān and sūdān tend to limit the extent of interrelations and intimacy with each other admitted to in their accounts, and hence are both likely to obscure such sorts of slave contributions to the master's household. As revealed in the previous chapter, increasing autonomy on a large scale was linked to increasing spatial segregation. Legally married slave women attained this level of autonomy often following the birth of a child. Co-residence during the period of breast-feeding, a prerequisite to establishing milk-kinship, thus became more seldom, or from the opposite angle, more easy to avoid than before.[10]

Understanding the practices and strategies related to milk-kinship between masters and slaves is difficult, due to the lack of direct empirical evidence. Conclusions can only be drawn from the transposition of the general characteristics of milk-kinship into the context of a master-slave and more specifically mistress-slave women relationship. Probably one of the best descriptions of social practices related to milk-kinship is presented by Édouard Conte (1991: 74). Milk-kinship in the beginning of Islam, as it transpires in reports from the prophet Muhammad's surroundings, had a profoundly ambivalent character. It either served to extend matrimonial alliances or aimed to hinder them, depending upon its association with sanguine or elective parenthood. The more complementary than contrasting character these two different strategies of alliance have, becomes evident in the light of bīẓān practices. Matrimonial relations were often rather unstable in bīẓān society, divorce and re-marriage were – and still are – frequent and not socially disregarded. Under these conditions especially women had to seek security within a stable support group. This was provided above all by their own family, to which they returned in case of divorce, but solidarity could also be found within the circle of milk-kinship (cf. Cleaveland 1995: 47),[11] which was more stable than the unsteady matrimonial alliances. It was the mothers who decided which relations of milk-kinship were established, and hence it was they who had the power to prevent specific matrimonial alliances of their children. Besides intentionally precluding later marriages, milk-kinship was most frequent among close kin and people living in great intimacy, and therefore also restricted options to pursue close-range matrimonial alliances, such as e.g. the preferential marriage with the patrilateral parallel cousin (cf. Héritier 1994: 316f.).

With regard to slaves, milk-kinship might have been treated less rigorously than among noble families. Discerning the vertical extension of milk-kinship, including the ties to the breast-feeding woman's husband, is a rather complex matter (cf. Altorki 1980). How bīẓān treated these relations with regard to their slaves, living at best within precarious marital relations, and with slave men who by definition were unable to fulfil the social role of a genitor, is an interesting question I am unfortunately unable to elucidate neither on the grounds of Islamic jurisprudence, nor on the basis of empirical data. In social

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practice, the lack of the male element might have been less important, and rather strengthened the character of milk-kinship as an exclusive form of female alliance implying milk-sisters, milk-brothers and milk-mothers but no milk-fathers. This degree of relation also is the one unanimously presented as implying the right to treat non-kin publicly as intimately as one's own kin (Interview Ahmed Ould Aly, qāḍi 24.12.1995, cf. note 7, this chapter). Milk-kinship between masters and slaves as a means to facilitate everyday interaction within the intimate space of a tent might be one aspect of the complex. But given the fact that the possible intimacy is an outcome more or less remote in time, implying more the children of opposite sex than their parents, it seems to be at best a secondary issue.[12] More important is the intimacy relations of milk-kinship establish between two women, in this case a noble and a slave woman. Becoming the ally of her mistress, much like other noblewomen involved in milk-kinship is a means for a slave woman to become more equal. Breast-feeding and establishing a – although secondary – legal parental relation is to act socially like the mistresses. It means leaving the framework of the slave existence as eternal non-kin and social outsider, and hence achieving social ascension. This is the major outcome of a slave woman's relationship with her noble milk-daughters and -sons. These bīẓān members of the master's family have to treat their slave milk-mother with respect, much like a kin-mother, and to respect rules of social intercourse with regard to their slave milk-sisters and -brothers as well. Becoming a parent by milk does not mean stepping out of slavery, although it does provide the chance of improving one's condition decisively. One achieves individual respect and the right to enact recognised social relation, otherwise withheld from slaves. However, as the case of M'Barke shows, these achievements did not necessarily coincide with the end of all aspects of social deprivation resulting from the slave estate.[13]

There are two distinct contexts explaining this transformation of the master-slave relationship. As shown in the different slave narratives affective ties – although remaining ambiguous – developed frequently between slaves and masters. This affection could result, if not in manumission, in the master wanting to have his slave treated with respect by his successors. Revealing in this respect are stipulations concerning slaves to be found in bīẓān last wills. In one such case a mistress was reported to have assigned her six slaves the status of a ḥubs, a pious endowment that brought about a legal state of indivisibility bound to various regulations of usage (Interview Abderrahmane Ould Ahmed, zwāya, 13.7.1995). This decision forced the woman's four inheriting children at least not to sell off single members of this slave family but to keep their ownership collectively bound to it. The spirit of indivisibility resulting from their status as ḥubs, however, did not prevent the slaves from being assigned to work for individual heirs, and hence from being separated at least from time to time. The relevance these kinds of post-mortem arrangements had in changing the status of slaves is also highlighted by the numerous regulations Islamic jurisprudence developed on the topic of

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post-mortem and contracted manumission (cf. Ibn Abî Zayd Al-Qayrawânî 1983: 221ff.).

Quite a different aim could be achieved through the practice of mistress-slave woman milk-kinship ties, once matrimonial relations between male masters and female slave offspring are in focus. Noblewomen letting their infants be nursed by their slaves, or themselves nursing their slaves' children, induced both close social ties and matrimonial prohibitions, a highly ambivalent result: the slaves are recognised as equals in a distinct sphere of social relations, for they are prohibited from marrying in the same way as free people could, but this similarity only applies to female slaves. The interdiction on female hypogamy in bīẓān marital relations prohibits women from marrying men of lower social rank. Although nowadays occurring in a few cases, a marriage of a bīẓāniyya with an ʿabd still is socially most inconceivable and has far-reaching consequences (cf. Bonte 1987a: 64; Villasante-de Beauvais 1995: 657f., 666). For a bīẓān woman realising such a liaison this step will mean changing sides and opting for living among the sūdān. It was far more likely for the bīẓān men to enter into a marital relations with slaves. Within a rather limited range, milk-kinship established by noblewomen with their women slaves was able to preclude such alliances, as either marital or sexual relations of the milk siblings became incestuous.[14] Extended relations of milk-kinship between masters and slaves, besides creating intimate bonds, also strengthened segregation between the social strata in the second generation. Bīẓān women wishing to preclude their sons from marital relations with particular slaves, had, in the establishment of relations of milk-kinship, a means to expand their control well beyond the first marriage, concluded under the parents' auspices, and most likely to fulfil the norms and values of preferential marriage providing equal status through matri- and patrilateral ties (cf. Villasante-de Beauvais 1995: 678f.).[15]

Establishing milk-kin ties between masters and slaves in this perspective becomes more a move in the game of handling gender relations within bīẓān society. Slaves, either female or male, had to pursue alliances with their masters in order to enhance their condition within the slave estate. Slave women had two options, albeit opposing ones laden with ambivalence. Either they became the slave master's favoured slave and a sort of concubine, and hence sought support from a free man, or they allied themselves with the mistress, became a wet-nurse, and entered the female world of alliances the bīẓān women mediated by milk-kinship.[16]

Concubinage

Concubinage in its common sense is a vaguely defined term, bearing pejorative connotations. Primarily it denotes a more or less fixed extra-marital (sexual) relationship between two people of different sexes. The subject

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has a long history; it is dealt with at some length by ancient Greek and Roman law and even before. Concubinage was a means to circumvent problems resulting from misalliances especially between free people and slaves. Islamic jurisprudence, while giving the slave master the right to share his woman slave's bed, later took up this last point. Concubinage was in this context regarded as a distinct legal status, lower than that of married women, which could be attributed to slave women (cf. Abd el Wahed 1931: 296ff.).[17] Sexual intercourse, however, did not of itself create a relation of concubinage (although it could in specific circumstances).[18] If as a result of a sexual relationship a freeborn man and a slave woman a child was born and recognised by the master to be his, the slave woman was assigned the status of *umm walad*, mother of a (free man's) child. This status gave her well defined rights clearly superior to those achieved by concubine status. Though still a slave, the woman through this act attained a legal status providing her with significant rights. She is no longer to be sold, and the master is bound to renounce making profit out of her, or exploiting her in any other way. Furthermore she, as well as all her children not originating from the master, had to be manumitted by the time of the master's death. On the other hand, the latter got the right to enjoy her, and to claim all his rights towards her children. These remained – following their mother – bound to the slave estate until manumission became due with the death of the master (cf. Ibn Abî Zayd Al-Qayrawânî 1983: 225ff.; Abd el Wahed 1931: 301f.; Fisher/Fisher 1970: 99f.).

In theory this seems quite nice, but there were numerous circumstances by which the obligations resulting from concubinage could be avoided. The most important obstacle to obtaining the status of umm walad was getting the master to acknowledge his paternity. Although slave women were in no legal position to dispute their master's testimony, the question under which circumstances a denied paternity will be accepted or not constitutes an issue analysed in detail by the Māliki school of Islamic law (cf. Ibn Abî Zayd Al-Qayrawânî 1983: 227). The masters' obligation to recognise his offspring from concubinage was more or less a question of morality. Denying the fact simply meant that you owned your own children as slaves or at least, that you had nothing against them living as your slaves. The extent to which the question was tainted with hypocrisy becomes even more apparent in the blatant gender bias in the attribution of the status of umm walad. Everything was fine if the child was a boy, but if it was a girl, both mother and child remained slaves (cf. Abd el Wahed 1931: 256ff.; Lovejoy 1983: 216; Lovejoy 1990: 180f.).[19]

With regard to bīẓān society the question of concubinage is a controversial one. Some authors deny the institution existed, while others advance the opposite view (cf. e.g. De Chassey 1977: 82). The problem with these statements is the lack of underlying empirical studies, and hence the little they tell about what kind of relations existed between bīẓān masters and their slave women. One definite case of concubinage, reported from an ancient

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urban centre in the Adrar in the first half of the 20th century, however, increases insights into bīẓān practices of concubinage. There a notable bought from some Rgaybāt a slave woman who had been kidnapped in the Trarza, to install her as his concubine in the town of Ouadâne (cf. McDougall 1988: 368f.). What seems at first glance a typical case of concubinage is hardly an indicator of practices of concubinage in bīẓān society. The social as well as economic milieu of the few small Adrar trade towns differed in many respects from life in bīẓān pastoral nomadic society. The bīẓān trader who bought the slave woman and wanted her to become his concubine in his second residence thus reproduced a pattern of slavery more common among the Saharan urban trading communities than among the overwhelming majority of the pastoral nomadic bīẓān.[20] Besides this singular and atypical case, another argument for the significance of concubinage in bīẓān society can be developed from the lack of distinct phenotypes for bīẓān and sūdān. Being black is neither a characteristic unique to slaves and their descendants, nor does it denote inferior status. Many noble bīẓān are black, a most prominent example being the former ʿamīr of Tagant, Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar. Some tribes, such as the Šurva of Oualâta and Néma, are as black as their Bambara neighbours (cf. Miské 1970: 111).[21] More detailed, due to its recognition of the aforementioned arbitrary attribution of the status of umm walad, is the position of James Webb, focusing on the historical period from 1600 to 1900:

> Many female slaves were the concubines of their owners. The male progeny of these master-slave unions were Bidan, if the union was legitimized by freeing the slave woman as usually seems to have been the case; female offspring had slave status. (Webb 1984: 159)[22]

Compared to this conviction, the almost opposite view held by Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh is somewhat startling, and the contradiction thus raised needs further exploration:

> Soulignons encore que la société nomade maure, ignorant généralement la polygamie, n'a guère connu l'usage d'esclaves concubines et l'emploi des eunuques dans la garde des harems, et n'a donc jamais, semble-t'il, pratiqué la castration sur ses serviteurs. (Ould Cheikh 1986: 55)

Another statement that fits in this second line of argumentation is made by René Caillié, an early 19th century French traveller, who lived for about five months, disguised as a scholar seeking Islamic education, among the Brakna bīẓān. In his later fascinating eye-witness report Caillié (1830: 128f.) portrays the bīẓāniyyāt, the bīẓān women, as proud and powerful, and – apparently without having noticed any exception to this rule – concludes that they would never allow their husbands to have a concubine besides them.[23] A more or less public practice of concubinage hence seems less to be bound to the existence of the institution as such, than to the balance of power implied in the society's gender relations. An argument stressed by observations made

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by Aline Tauzin (1989b: 77), who depicts the bīẓāniyyāt as being most concerned about possible relations between their husbands and the slave women. Therefore the bīẓāniyyāt watched the attitude of the slave women towards their children – a slave child enjoying better treatment from his mother than his siblings might indicate the noble, but obscured origin of his father. Although practised, institutionalised concubinage was socially inconceivable; the bīẓāniyyāt's concern about their husbands extra-marital sexual relations reveals adultery to have been a real concern, no matter what status the women implicated had. This becomes evident from the consequences such an affair could have: a wife becoming aware of her husband committing adultery had the right to – and often did – leave him to return to her parents.[24] A husband wanting his wife to come back hence had to present her numerous gifts in order to calm down her anger, and bring her around (cf. Tauzin 1984a: 89). The question whether concubinage between masters and slaves existed therefore has to be reformulated. As an institution, following the precepts of Islamic jurisprudence and paralleling a marital relation, concubinage, or the attribution of the more far-reaching status of umm walad was very likely to have been marginal in bīẓān pastoral nomadic society.[25] There was no consensus on the institution among bīẓān women and men. As it had already been the case in pre-Islamic times, concubinage – or here more precisely the attribution of the status of an umm walad to a slave woman – remained a kind of a last resort saving masters from the pain of having a child of theirs be a slave. However, only boys tended to evoke this sort of mental anguish that would entail bīẓān masters to claim fatherhood.

The various institutions of concubinage, now understood in a wider sense, designating varying forms of legitimised extra-marital sexual relations as they were handled in many Sahelian rural societies (cf. Meillassoux 1986: 135; Olivier de Sardan 1983: 141), were a solution to a specific problem of free men in slave-holding societies: namely how to manage sexual relations between free men and slave women. Its application was a matter of specific circumstances, and – much like the concubines of royal and other courts (cf. Meillassoux 1986: 191ff.) – likely to be a matter of social standing.[26] Disputing the frequency of bīẓān concubinage therefore provides no direct means to apprehend the impact of sexual interrelations among masters and their female slaves, but rather the number of these to be kept in secrecy, or resolved by this or other means compatible to the social framework. One major bīẓān solution to the problem was successive marriage, resulting in the complete liberation of the slave woman and her children:[27]

> *Question:* Mais est-ce que le maître peut avoir des relations sexuelles avec sa ẖādem [slave woman]?
> *Answer:* Oui, bien sûr, il peut coucher avec elle et avoir même des enfants; mais il ne le reconnaîtra jamais, car pour cela il faut qu'ils soient mariés. Par exemple, si le maître est marié et que la ẖādem habite avec eux dans la maison, ils peuvent avoir des rapports sexuels, mais toujours en cachette

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> de l'épouse. Si la ẖādem a des enfants, il peut considérer que ce sont ses enfants à lui mais il ne le reconnaîtra jamais parce qu'il n'y a pas eu de mariage légal; il va dire que sa ẖādem a couché avec un autre. Alors, si le propriétaire n'épouse pas sa ẖādem, ses enfants seront en même temps ses ʿabīd et ils seront même hérités par ses fils légitimes. Le mieux dans ces cas c'est qu'il l'épouse, après l'avoir affranchie bien sûr; comme ça les enfants de sa femme ḥarṭāniyya auront les mêmes droits que les autres. (Interview with Bullah Mint Zenvūr, bīẓāniyya (ḥassān), Kaédi 8/9 October 1991; cited in Villasante-de Beauvais 1995: 670)

The central role attributed to marriage for the legitimation of sexual relations between the male masters and female slaves apparent in this statement by a bīẓān woman is reflected in bīẓān terminology as well, but there are some ambiguities that have to be highlighted. Marriage could mean different things depending on whether it concerned free or slave women. This becomes apparent once the different meanings of the term ǧāriyye are explored. According to a contemporary bīẓān interpretation, a ǧāriyye appears to be a slave woman who has formally recognised sexual relations with her master, despite the latter being married (cf. Brhane 1997a: 73f. and personal correspondence 2.12.1997). In this light, the ǧāriyye appears to be nothing more than a concubine whose "lower than married women" status fits neatly into the framework drawn by legal orthodoxy, which allows the men polygamous relations and thus contradicts the monogamous practices resulting from the bīẓān gender relations described by Bullah Mint Zenvūr (cf. Interview above). More traditional meanings, probably less influenced by contemporary re-evaluation and codification of Islamic jurisprudence, however, attribute a different significance to ǧāriyye. According to Catherine Taine-Cheikh (1989b: 312, 346) the term designates a concubine, a slave spouse, a slave woman married by her master, and thus refers to a whole range of ascending statuses slave women could achieve and had to struggle for when seeking social promotion by becoming a ǧāriyye. The goal slave women entering such relations had was clear. They did not want to remain concubines, but to be married by a bīẓān man. This is also stressed by the meaning of the verbal derivative ǧowre, meaning "marrying one's slave".[28]

The emphasis sūdān women laid on marriage as prerequisite for establishing ǧāriyye is further accentuated by the ḥarṭāniyyāt and ẖedmān (slave women) terminology relating to the issue. Rather than using their masters' term, they prefer to speak of being a šedūni, i.e. "being married by the masters", which is used explicitly in the plural (personal correspondence with Meskerem Brhane 2.12.1997). While the conditions stated by the marriage contracts in these circumstances could differ from those concluded among bīẓān (and hence discriminated against the slave women, as can be seen below), the terminology strongly suggests that marriage was the central institution slave women aspired to in order to achieve full social recognition of their master-slave (concubine) relationship. Marrying in this context, however,

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meant different things to bīẓān men and slave women. As Bullah Mint Zenvūr (cf. interview above) stressed, a man manumitted and married a slave woman because of his concern for the fate of his children resulting from this liaison. For the slave woman, becoming a ǧāriyye meant less marrying a single bīẓān man, and establishing an individual, lasting relationship, than ultimately leaving the slave estate by merging into the circles of the powerful in bīẓān society.[29]

Notwithstanding that the framework outlined so far makes it possible to recognise and legalise sexual relations between masters and slave women, it remains subject to the bīẓān practice of monogamy. At any time, and with very few exceptions, there can be only one legitimate spouse, irrespective of the woman's initial status. Establishing a new relationship, might – as in the case of concubinage – precede the end of an existing marital relation, and thus have to be done in secret. Secrecy, however, is not an issue in sexual relations between male master and slave women only. It is just as much a feature of the extra-marital sexual relations of men and women of any status; and these are, as I will limit myself to suggesting, quite probable to occur in any society.

Only very recently has attention been drawn to an institution peculiar to bīẓān interpretation of Islamic jurisprudence, revealing both of the bīẓān will to respect social norms and of problems arising from this will which are only resolved by a sort of legal safety valve applicable to sexual relations parallel to the primary legal framework. Sarriye[30] means a "secret, clandestine marriage", derived from the original meaning of "secrecy, confidence" in standard Arabic (cf. Wehr 1976: 404). It is concluded much like a regular marriage, as it involves two testators and a qāḍi, who will compose a written testimony of the act, but differs in its secrecy. The aim of the ceremony is to preserve honour, and hence to avoid illegitimate children resulting from the secret sexual relations. Sarriye by these means can resolve various problems arising, among others, from the fact that emotional affinities are of minor importance within the framework of preferential marriage patterns. Sarriye can also bridge divergence in status or age of the spouses, and can help men to handle monogamy a bit more "flexibly". Nevertheless the institution does not definitely challenge the bīẓān practices with regard to marital relations. In the case of a secret spouse becoming pregnant by her secret husband, the latter can divorce his present wife, and turn the secret marriage into an official one (cf. Villasante-de Beauvais 1995: 681ff.). This setting, in which the principle of successive marriage succeeds in superseding all institutions paralleling marriage whenever the issue of legitimate offspring is concerned,[31] fits again neatly the scenario of the liberation of master-slave woman offspring, as outlined by Bullah Mint Zenvūr (cf. interview above). Rather than by attributing the legal status of a concubine to the slave woman, the master will legitimate his future children by manumitting the slave woman, and marrying her.[32]

Much like the arbitrary role men take in the attribution of institutional concubinage, sarriye is revealed to be a means used by men to deceive their

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spouses, and to enter the fields of polygamy. While the men gain within sarriye, the women engaging in it offend the women's consensus to uphold monogamy, a commitment which also has a prominent place in the oral marriage contract (cf. Ould Ahmedou 1994: 121f.; see also note 24, this chapter). This female consensus has developed from shared interests. Bīẓāniyyāt have to defend and manifest their status and power within the bīẓān gender relations and matrimonial alliances. To this closed circle, a ḥarṭāniyya offered sarriye by a bīẓān man is an outsider and will remain unable to enter the net of solidarity developed by the community of bīẓān women. Nevertheless, being legally married provided an important step in social ascension to a slave woman, for besides her being manumitted together with her children, the latter would follow the status of their father. The essence of the bīẓāniyyāt statement that a woman concerned with matters of status depending on marital relations first of all has to consider the fate of her children, rather than her own (Interview with Bullah Mint Zenvūr, cited in: Villasante-de Beauvais 1995: 671), reveals the impact strategic considerations have on the establishment of matrimonial alliances no matter whether sūdān or bīẓān are concerned. Ḫedmān (slave women; sing. ḫādem) and ḥarṭāniyyāt therefore are likely to have subjugated themselves more often to sarriye, ǧāriyye and other similar inherently risky relations with bīẓān than the bīẓāniyyāt, the free women, who had much more to lose than to win from such alliances (cf. Tauzin 1989b: 89).

Status and Split Origin

All legitimate children of a bīẓān men follow his status irrespective of the mother's. This patrilineal structure of parenthood is the precondition for such institutions as concubinage, and on a larger scale, the incorporation of dependent and slave women into the free and noble strata of society. While formally there is nothing to distinguish siblings with the same father but different mothers, in practice the knowledge of both paternal and maternal descent was a latent issue in any discourse on nobility, and hence remained preserved.[33] This becomes most evident in situations where descendants of mothers of different status but with one and the same father enter into competition. A competition frequent among brothers of different mothers, especially within the ḥassān tribes, and their emiral lineage (cf. Interview with Bullah Mint Zenvūr in: Villasante-de Beauvais 1995: 671).[34] A prominent case of this type of factionalism is the rise of the last ʿamīr of Tagant, Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar. He is famous for having been totally black and born of a slave woman, made ḥarṭāniyya on the occasion of her marriage.[35] Following the death of his father, Bakkar Ould Soueid Ahmed, in a battle against French invaders, rivalry broke out between the different aspirants to the office of ʿamīr of the IdawʿĪš Abakak tribal confederation, and lasted for

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more than a decade. The situation might have been complicated by the more than fifty sons Bakkar had during the ninety to one hundred years of his life (sons were listed to me each with his full name!). Finally, the strife crystallised around some main competitors with Abderrahmane and a few supporters on the one side and several of his brethren of noble origin united on the other.[36] Numerous are the narratives displaying the force and intelligence Abderrahmane was endowed with, and which made him resist and lastly defeat his treacherous rivals:

> In those days Abderrahmane [Ould Bakkar] was pursued by his brothers. These aimed to kill him because they wanted to take his place, they wanted to hinder him from becoming mightier than themselves, or perhaps they did it because of his inferior origin.
>
> One day they called upon him to come and see them. Abderrahmane at that moment was somewhere in the bush, together with his wife. When he heard of his brothers calling him for a visit, he knew they were calling him because they wanted to kill him on that occasion. His wife told him he would be killed by his brothers if he went to see them as they wanted. Abderrahmane didn't know what to do. He was unable not to go, for it were his brothers who called him, and going there was impossible because it meant being killed. Finally Abderrahmane went to the place indicated by his brothers. On his way he saw a she-camel whose young camel had managed to tear off the bag covering his mother's udder, and was suckling. Abderrahmane set out completely calmly to fix the bag back in its correct position, and hinder the young camel from further suckling and hence wasting his mother's milk. During this operation he had been observed by his brothers, who were already waiting for him. Abderrahmane's conduct raised a dispute between them. When Dey [Ould Bakkar] saw Abderrahmane, who was fully conscious of being under the acute threat of being killed within the next few minutes, take his time to care for a stranger's she-camel, he told his brothers that Abderrahmane was a good fellow, and therefore they could not kill him on that occasion. Finally he convinced all his brothers of his opinion, even Ely [Ould Bakkar], who was most opposed to Abderrahmane (Interview Mohamed Ould Mbarek, ḥarṭāni, by Khalifa Ould Kebab 17.1.1996).

There are many legendary narratives like this one, telling of the brave ʿamīr managing again and again to escape the assaults led by his hostile brothers. Many aspects of the story seem symptomatic of the battle the young Abderrahmane striving for his father's office had to fight. As a ḥassān, a warrior, he had to prove his courage to assert his status (cf. Ould Cheikh 1985a: 368), but this was not enough. An ʿamīr had to behave honourably, even if this might lead to his peril. Facing the dilemma his brothers had put him in, he therefore chose the combination of honour and death over life in the dishonour of not having responded to the call of his noble brothers. What makes him finally defeat his enemies is his deep commitment to a lifestyle different from his brothers'. To accept or not the date set by his brothers was carefully consid-

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ered by Abderrahmane, who took into consideration his wife's opinion. Naturally he opted for the obligations of honourable behaviour. Later, already facing his death, his action develops without hesitation or uncertainty. Caring for a stranger's animal, and daily ration of milk, is depicted as being self-evident for Abderrahmane. Confronting his brothers with this peculiar type of honour puts them in disarray. They had agreed on killing their brother in an ambush, on unequal grounds but in a fight between warriors. Now facing a most cool-minded warrior, selflessly attending to a herd-animal's problem in a moment of extreme personal danger, the setting changes. They not only have to kill a simple warrior, but one displaying the virtues of a true leader, one who cares for other people's goods and shows his selfless bravery in a moment of severe danger. Though controversy over the issue arises among the noble brothers, Dey Ould Bakkar is successful, and manages to postpone the assassination, overruling Ely Ould Bakkar,[37] who, neglecting the honour angle, simply wants to get rid of the rival.

While the noble brothers engage in treachery and risk sliding into dishonourable behaviour, Abderrahmane gives proof of his cool mind, and above all of his abilities. Quite unusually for a person of high office and the most noble descent,[38] he is uniformly presented by bīẓān and ḥarāṭīn as the greatest worker possible. There is no job he is not reported to have managed to the highest perfection. He could cultivate, hoe the fields, milk, handle all kinds of animals, etc. He was the fastest runner, the best rider, the best shot, the best hunter, able to feed a whole camp with game etc. Obviously not all these stories about the labour qualifications were invention, for Abderrahmane once had herded sheep and goats for a bīẓān called Haime. Later he often made a joke of it when meeting the noble, but now poor, Haime by asking him for his shepherd's payment (Interview Khattar, zwāya, 12.10.1995). Last but not least Abderrahmane is presented as being highly intelligent. By this virtue he was able to outwit his many enemies numerous times. One story presents Abderrahmane, together with his wife and small baby, again in an ambush, first noticed by the wife. Abderrahmane invents a ruse to get out of the mess: he tells his wife to take his gun in his place, and give him the baby. With the child in his arms and without a weapon he then approaches the ambush where his hostile brothers again postpone the assassination. They cannot shoot at him while he is not carrying his weapon, and they risk killing not only him, but the baby too (Interview Mohamed Ould Mbarek, ḥarṭāni, by Khalifa Ould Kebab 17.1.1996). The double blood-price to pay and the feud hence risked, meant much too much trouble to allow the situation to be exploited. Behaving completely unconventionally, and offending the rules of bīẓān emotional management, once more saved Abderrahmane from death. A father, whether sūdān or bīẓān, should never show affection for his children, neither by taking them in his arms, nor by other means.

The mythical accounts of the ʿamīr's life and struggle portray a person outclassing everybody by his unique combination of physical and intellectual skills, which is believed to result from the blending of bīẓān and sūdān

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virtues. Children of a bīẓān father and a sūdān mother (who will be a ḥarṭāniyya, if she is legally married), are thought to gain in physical strength over their siblings of pure bīẓān origin. "Normally he [the son of a ḥarṭāniyya and a bīẓān] will be solid, his eye is red, every time he looks at something, he looks right at it, just like one has to look, without hesitation. He will be harder then the other who has a ḥassān father and mother." (Interview Khaite Mint Mohamed, ḥassān, 21.10.1995) A ḥarṭāni of the Ahel Swayd Aḥmed had an even more dramatic characterisation: "Such a son will never be among the mediocre, he will always tend to the extremes. Either he is of the best people you can imagine, or he is one of the worst. Both are possible." (Interview Ely Ould El Abd, ḥarṭāni, 5.2.1996)[39] Despite these advantages, the union of bīẓān and sūdān has its risks, for it will be the father who is responsible for teaching the children to meet the exigencies of their parental status. The ḥarṭāniyya mother is considered to be too weak to be able to lead her children, especially to control her sons in the way her noble husband is able to do. While primary education of boys and girls is a uniquely female affair in bīẓān society, the slave woman who has ascended to nobility obviously still is recognised and blamed for her lack of sociability.

The life-stories of Tourad and Youba, two bīẓān with a ḥarṭāniyya mother, reveal many of the cleavages that have to be bridged in order to transform inherited status from the father into living a noble's life.[40] Tourad had a considerable amount of success. To a large extent he has made his life on his own. From his childhood on, he was committed to modernity, for apart from being born in the camp of his mother, he never lived under a tent. Only recently has he started to go to the bush, not to engage in pastoralism or cultivation, but to find relief from life in town. His well-known and highly reputed zwāya father does not appear to have lent him a hand in his career. Though Tourad obviously never lacked the material means to pursue his school studies, there is no situation in which his father is reported to have intervened in his career. As such this is not an exceptional constellation. Among prominent clerics it was an obligation to leave the family and take up studies with prominent religious teachers. This lifestyle reflects the devotion of the student to his studies, but also the problems he faces in trying to study effectively when constantly interrupted by his own family's multiple needs. Besides, the father was quite old. He died as early as 1971, and therefore could hardly intervene during the most turbulent years of his son's biography. What raises some doubts about this being the single reason for Tourad keeping rather mute on the subject of his father, is his emotional outbreak at the end of his narrative. He does not want to speak of the former times, i.e. those times he lived with his father, his animals and his slaves. For Tourad all this has gone, the father's property had vanished, the father is dead, all this past is remote and of no significance to him and his life. This turn in his narrative also raises further doubts about the causes of the mysterious disappearance of his father's large inheritance, and Tourad's proclaimed pride about this chance to lead a more humble and ascetic life. There are plenty of

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accounts of quarrels about inheritance. In most cases sons still young at the death of their father are cheated by their paternal uncles. Analogous patterns of conflict over inheritance might have arisen between brothers having different mothers, much like the case of the ʿamīr Abderrahmane. Being young and of less noble origin (and far away for studies) in the case of Tourad might have been a major reason for being unable to take part in the game of pre-inheritance and inheritance.

Today, though a school-teacher, involved in local politics, and a highly respected person, Tourad lives somewhat apart, at the very margin of the town, together with his mother and her ḥarṭāni husband. Their relations are at best ambiguous, and the distinction Tourad draws between himself and his mother is marked. Portraying his seasonal, leisurely migration to the bush in order to drink fresh sheep milk during the rainy season, he refers to living under a tent as the way of life of the pastoralists. To him at first sight, there are no other people out there under tents, and there is no legitimate reason for there to be so. It is the objection by the research assistant, Khalifa Ould Kebab, a ḥarṭāni, that many people leave the cities and villages to live under a tent near their remote fields, that brings Tourad back to the realities of present day life, and the recognition that this is a the lifestyle of most rural sūdān, among them his own mother. The distinction made between "us" and "them" is manifest. When Tourad and his family leave for the bush to enjoy life in the vicinity of well-fed, lactating animals[41], there are just others working in the fields: "we have other people . . . parents who care for the fields . . . we go off to the bush and leave the question of the fields to our family. It's my mother". The ambiguity of performing a bīẓān master's and a family-member's discourse in parallel when speaking of his closest relatives is striking. Behind the progressive attitude (naturally Tourad insists on always including the number of sūdān tents in the total amount of tents in his former camp) surfaces a struggle for personal identity based on the notion of a cleavage between sūdān and bīẓān. As such, the mother becomes somebody "other", a special and distinct branch of the family. This rationalisation of family relations into master-slave or patron-client relations is manifest in the arrangement held between son and mother with regard to the joint exploitation of the fields. Tourad stresses that he is the proprietor of the land, and in effect his own mother, together with her new husband, appear to be working almost as his sharecroppers. If there is a surplus, both give Tourad a part of the harvest. These conditions are just the same as those practised among the local bīẓān landowners and sharecropping sūdān. Although Tourad, by living together with his mother, shows his responsibility for her, and hence is far from obscuring his maternal origin, he is at pains to demonstrate that he is of another kind than her, and has developed into a full-blooded bīẓān.

Youba's actual situation and his career are of quite another kind. He lives in an almost exclusively sūdān village. There are no material signs to distinguish him from his ḥarāṭīn neighbours. His house, though one of the better off, is much like those around it; there are no signs of any luxury, or at least

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affluence within the household.[42] His biography reads much like a ḥarāṭīn one. After some basic school education, Youba leaves for the big city to enter the wage labour market. Finally, tired of this life, he returns to the hinterland, builds a house and starts to cultivate. Nevertheless Youba is no ḥarṭāni; after all, going to school and passing the CFD-exam was a rarity in his times. The problem here is that Youba did not attend school of his own free will, but was the one of his fathers' sons who had to go when the ʿamīr came to recruit children for the French school. While he, as the eldest son of his mother, went to this kind of boarding school, his elder, more noble brothers continued their leisurely life filled out with camel riding and little Qurʾān education.[43] After school, and still in the prosperous years before the big drought, there seems to have been no good place for Youba beneath his father's tent. Rather than staying, he prefers to leave and start some unpaid practical training at the national radio station, an opportunity mediated by his mother, who had married an influential journalist there. Some months later, having given up hope of the job being paid, he prefers to enlist with the army as a simple soldier. Later, after leaving the armed services, he profits from his schooling when looking for jobs. He is able to work as a checker and hence can avoid the most menial tasks, which are above all performed by sūdān. Despite this small success, the city does not provide him with more than a modest living. Youba decides to go back and start cultivating. In building his house among ḥarāṭīn belonging to his father's tribe,[44] he decides to affiliate neither with his bīẓān parents by the father, nor is there any tie left with his mother, who now lives far away with a new husband.

Among the ḥarāṭīn Youba stands out for two reasons. He still has one of his father's former slaves with him. And despite all his efforts to appear a good cultivator, Youba can hardly hide the fact that Laghlave, the slave sitting besides him, is the backbone of his personal agricultural commitment. Unlike any ḥarāṭīn, Youba – as an heir of his father's belongings – has a share in the rights to many fertile plots behind dams his father once registered with the colonial administration, and which now form part of the collective property of the ẖaima (ḥassāniyya: tent), i.e. the emiral family. Therefore Youba is among those deciding about the distribution of plots, but has no individual ownership rights that would allow him e.g. to sell a plot.

Though representing contrasting life-stories rather than similar ones, Youba and Tourad have much in common. Both lack social ties, i.e. ancestry through their mother. The case of the "successful" Tourad with his "unsuccessful" mother, and Youba with quite the opposite constellation of winning and losing, shows mothers and sons living a life detached from each other. Tourad's mother becomes a ḥarṭāniyya and enters client-like relations with her son (who nevertheless acts like one and consequently supports her). Youba's mother, devoted to and successful in her life as a highly esteemed spouse, is much too involved in her new affiliation to give her son any more significant support after the aborted attempt at the national radio. Both mothers live a life determined by the status of their present husbands.[45] For

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their sons, who inherited a noble status from their fathers, they are unable to provide uncles and aunts corresponding to status so they remain segregated from the father's family.[46] Divorce, as can be concluded in the case of Badeyn, the slave without knowing it, had most serious consequences for support that depended on the affection of one woman (in this case the adoptive mother). Slave women who ascend to the status of ḥarṭāniyyāt through being married by a bīẓān, and later choose to return to their natal milieu, endanger rather than help their sons in the struggle to fill out the status inherited from the father. Such mothers, when entering a subsequent new marriage with another freeborn man, are very likely to have to leave behind the past of their former marriage, including their sons. These in turn, if they want to assert their bīẓān status, have to keep a distance from their mother, for their alliances too are in the present, and are self-attained. This constellation might throw a light on the prominent place the wife of Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar takes in the two narratives presented. In the settings described, she is the only person whom he can entirely trust and rely on.

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