

## CHAPTER 2

### CHANGING CONFIGURATIONS OF HIERARCHY AND DEPENDENCY

Coming to grips with an empirically based analysis of present day social life in the region of Achram-Diouk meant engaging in a process needing both empathy and distance towards the subject of the study, as well as the people I came to know and the experiences I had. To reflect how the arguments of this book were developed, three perspectives on the empirical data and analytical reasoning are presented. This triad is introduced by methodological considerations based on theoretical assumptions, the fieldwork carried out, and the strategies implemented to transform field data into the final text. Life histories of *sūdān* and *bīzān* reveal contrasting experiences of slavery. The historical dimension which these narratives offer opens insights into the evolution of webs of (inter-)dependency between *sūdān* and *bīzān*. This makes it possible to discern the *sūdān*'s complex struggles for increased autonomy, as well as the dynamics of the *bīzān* society's transformation in recent decades, the latter aspect being a major concern of the *bīzān* narratives. Finally, these life-stories are successively examined to develop the different meanings of "getting free" in the context of the rural *bīzān* society under study.

These changing patterns of hierarchy and dependency carved out of the life histories are presented as different *configurations*, a term introduced by Norbert Elias (1990: XIII, XX, IL, LXVIII<sup>f</sup>.) in the attempt to systematise his approach to "social change" – a term he vehemently rejected.<sup>1</sup> Configurations, or Figurations, meaning "webs of interdependency built by people" (Elias 1990: LXVIII, author's translation), are best illustrated by the metaphor of dance. While dancing different kinds of dances, people perform a plurality of relations, thus being interdependent. What the theory aims at is to link structural and individualistic approaches and to demonstrate the need for a holistic view. While the individual and the individual's disposition are essential to the constitution of a corpus of dancers, the dance itself, i.e. the performed interdependency, cannot be reduced to the action of the individual dancer. Both a structural and an individualistic perspective are needed to fully determine social significance. To Elias it is fundamental that the individual dancer is always a visible element in a play that can only be interpreted in relation to its non-individual, specific setting. The dancer both performs and reveals the interdependency he is bound to. Humans engage in

relationships that are animated by an inherent dynamic. The evolution of (social) configurations is neither the result of planned action nor of mere change, it is structured along its own characteristics. An appropriate understanding of processes of social change thus has to trace their genesis (cf. Elias 1990: LXVIII, X).

Elias' theorising does not stop at this point. He embarks on enlarging his theoretical outline into one of a general process of civilisation, or to use a term a little less laden with teleological implications: a global theory of social development. The key concept advanced is a sort of correlation between the development of human mental structures and the evolution of social configurations. This Elias tries to prove through abundant historical studies, discovering analogies between the historical development of the human psychological structures towards self-control and an increasing civilisation and pacification of social structures. This attempt has been denounced by Anthony Giddens (1992: 295ff.) as being a "homology". The argument goes to the core, as it calls into question the mutual transposition of psychological and sociological analysis by pointing out its methodological weakness. Elias' theory for this reason will paradoxically always remain contested on the very feature supposed to be its greatest strength – the integration of intense empirical studies in history into sociological reasoning. A deconstructive reading reveals the interpretations Elias extracts from his historic material to be bound much too closely to his interpretative framework, which is suspicious of teleological determinism (for a prominent elaboration of this argument, evoking the question of a change in human mental constitution over the centuries, cf. Duerr 1988).

Leaving out these potential flaws, the questions and the general orientation of the empirical approach laid out by Norbert Elias are still a tempting incentive to the interpretation of processes of social change and development. Here the configuration approach will be related to the permanent redefinition of the status of both the dependent and the free people in the rural area of Achram-Diouk. The actual processes of social change there, together with their various settings, cannot be explained without an accurate understanding of past developments and the heterogeneity of the individual's experience of dependency.

### **Methodological Considerations<sup>2</sup>**

Why present the same empirical data through different perspectives? One of the merits of recent self-reflexive and post-modern sociology is that it has put a question mark over uniformity in scientific writing and thus makes a plea for multivocality and plurality of styles. The enforced quest for new forms of textual representation of scientific reasoning was generated by critics of the misrepresentations or the "white patches" produced by traditional approaches. Emerging feminist research has made a major contribution to the development of these arguments.

In Anthropology one main concern of criticism was to give a voice to the

other. Two early approaches in this respect are from Marjorie Shostak (1983) and Camille Lacoste-Dujardin (1977). Both focus on the life of a single woman, to offer insight into the life of women in an alien society. The subjectivity involved is not denied, but rather put to use to work out the process of research. The informants are no longer anonymously subsumed under the authority of the anthropologist, but are given space for their own articulation. Once the anthropologist's knowledge is contextualised, it becomes vulnerable to enhanced critiques. James Clifford (1986: 109) notes: "The new tendencies to name and quote informants more fully and to introduce personal elements into the text is altering ethnography's discursive strategy and mode of authority. Much of our knowledge about other cultures must now be seen as contingent, the problematic outcome of intersubjective dialogue, translation and projection." It is precisely the contingency of knowledge resulting from the intersubjective and fragmentary character of fieldwork that post-modern writing wants to reveal by turning from representation to evocation (cf. Tyler 1986: 130f.). The chapter at hand acknowledges this challenge by presenting empirical data and evidence through different perspectives. However, this is not identical to the project of polyphony:

We better understand the ethnographic context as one of cooperative story making that, in one of its ideal forms, would result in a polyphonic text, none of whose participants would have the final word in the form of a framing story or encompassing synthesis – a discourse on the discourse. (Tyler 1986: 126)

Despite these objections, the following texts are all considered to be framed. Tyler rightly stresses the (omni-)presence of relations of domination in the reproduction of the other's discourse. Interpretative practices are already included in the generation of the original dialogue (cf. Tyler 1986: 127). This impregnation of any of the discourses with the author's work and ambition is hardly ever to be eliminated, as the perspectives presented cannot escape the total control of the author, and because polyphony is not a matter of stylistic devices: "Dialogic texts can be just as staged and controlled as experiential or interpretive texts. The mode offers no textual guarantees." (Rabinow 1986: 246)

The following biographic life accounts, their interpretations and the following systematic elaboration of distinct configurations of social hierarchy and dependency, are not supposed to constitute another cornerstone of stylistic devices. On the contrary, much more obviously it relates to a classical arrangement of different levels of data aggregation, a shift from supposedly "soft" to "hard" scientific reasoning, from description to analysis – with a strong emphasis on analysis. The post-modern challenge consists precisely in enforcing a re-reading of this classification. Not only does presenting biographic accounts in such a prominent place add a facet otherwise difficult to integrate into system-oriented analysis. These narratives

present an integrated, though not hermetic set of individual interpretations. They present life-stories that organise events, contexts and meanings according to individual patterns, and thus reveal in which situations social structures interfere with individual action, and how everyday life produces contradictions to challenge social settings. This is described from the individual's experience and according to his enunciation. For this reason, the biographic accounts provide two perspectives: they evoke typical traits of social hierarchy and its transformation as well as the distortions and deficits of the typologies and ideal type social categorisation involved. Therefore the different sections within this chapter and the following chapters are not only to be seen as a stepwise initiation into *bīzān* society's webs of social hierarchy and dependency, but as distinct complementary analytic perspectives, each trying to get a grip on the same topic as well as evoking different spheres of imagination.

In fact the interrelations between the different chapters of this book are much closer than a first hand classification along different levels of reference to field data and other sources and references might suggest. All result from the same fieldwork and set of data. Their writing included mutual reassessment and reasoning, thus the chapters cannot be conceived as totally independent of each other. Although the interview representations were not changed after their initial elaboration, later editing would have been possible and provided a powerful means of evoking meaning. But the question of interpretation has to be put more radically, for it is still tempting to draw a border between data presentation and interpretation and thus associate the biographic account with authenticity and the systematic analysis with interpretation. However, the contours of this distinction are blurred. Any description portraying meaning assumes and incorporates interpretation, as has best been demonstrated by Clifford Geertz (1973) in his reasoning on "thick description". The biographic narratives tape-recorded in the field are descriptions of life histories produced in response to the request of a stranger. In this respect the (biographic) interview reveals a prominent characteristic inherent in fieldwork. Engaging in a process of understanding ("*verstehen*") implies permanent shifting between different interdependent perspectives of reasoning (fact, context and meaning; cf. Clifford 1988: 16f.). Conducting an interview requires the maintenance of mutual understanding (or at least recognition), assumed through mutual interpretation.<sup>3</sup> Each interview is a co-construct of the interviewer and the interviewee along interpretative patterns of the specific interview, as well as of the interviewer's evolving interpretative scheme throughout the fieldwork. By their very nature, these accounts are not authentic emic discourses tapped by the anthropologist.<sup>4</sup> On the contrary, the case studies presented here are descriptions most obviously resulting from interpretative action on two distinct levels. They were developed from specific contexts of reasoning in the field in Mauritania, i.e. from the immediate historicity of field research, and later in Germany selected and edited to present stories telling of social change and stratification

in the region of Achram-Diouk. As the edition of these somewhat co-authored narratives marked the beginning of the systematic written elaboration of this book, a cross-reading of the different chapters is revealing of the development of the interpretative framework and its ties with people's personal experiences as expressed in the life-stories.

### **Writing Biographies**

Carving a biographical life narrative out of dialogic interviews, consisting of a constant flux and re-flux between questions and answers (sometimes also a question-question-question-answer scheme is more suited to describe the situation) already raises in itself important questions of textual representation. How to put a text that originated in a spontaneous, topic-shifting dialogue on biographic subjects into an easy-to-read monologic narrative, accurately centred on the topics most crucial to the study presented? Most commonly biographic narratives take the form of a monologue. Although introductions can make the reader aware of the existence of interviewers and later transcription and translation, these factors and processes are invisible in the narrative (cf. for examples Cross/Barker 1992; Olivier de Sardan 1976). The reader is confronted with individuals obviously intrinsically motivated to present their life and other narratives in either a chronological order or focused on key events. The biographic narrative seems addressed directly to an audience the imagined narrator most probably does not know. If not impossible, this rarely is the case (Richardson 1990: 130). The interviewer and the editor become an indiscernible part of the final product, the textual account. Performed as such the genre is a lure to the reader, trapping him into imagined representation. The "I" the reader is confronted with is not the single self-narrator it is in an authentic autobiography, but a co-authored I. What at first seems to be first hand, descriptive narration, is in fact the outcome of complex interactive and interpretative work. The naturalistic look then is a feature added by the almighty author in the background.<sup>5</sup> There are attempts to deal with these shortcomings of textualised biographic information. Two strategies are to be distinguished. Strategies of involving the intersubjectivity of fieldwork and those aiming to give most accurate representation of the emic discourse by employing highly articulated translation. Intersubjectivity as the constituent and driving force of the narrative is best worked out in biographies of individuals (e.g. Lacoste-Dujardin 1977; Shostak 1983). A different strategy is developed by Smadar Lavie (1990). She elaborates allegories of Mzeini Bedouin life by a typified collage of interviews conducted during thirteen years of field research. The implications of intersubjectivity are integrated and expressed through polyphony, here put into the form of dialogic text. The argument also has a further dimension, as it tries to display the making of these dialogues, and thus makes a bit more transparent the excluded "middle" of text and fieldwork (cf. Agar 1990: 73).

I wanted to engage my voice with the voices of Mzeini men and women, while avoiding the poetically powerful exoticizations typical of Western multivocal depictions of Other worlds . . . I also wanted the text to be written in such a way that it could be translated back into Arabic, its language of origin, and be read by those about whom it was written.

The solution was to transcribe, whenever appropriate to my purpose, a polyphony of voices, including my own, directly out of the raw material of my diary-style fieldnotes . . . I chose to transcribe very strictly, as theater-script-like polyphonic dialogues . . . I accompanied these lines by stage directions straight from my diary. (Lavie 1990: 36)

Stating the author's deep concern with intersubjectivity up to the final text is a major concern of this writing, but this strategy has a second outcome: to produce a strong appeal to the reader, to accept the author's ability to write the other's narrative. Thus it accomplishes a most classical element of anthropological writing: the establishment of the anthropologist's authority. This double bind is most obvious with Smadar Lavie when citing one of her interviewees: "Comparing my work to the other ethnographies, the old man said, 'All these people write about us, about what they think we are, except one – the one that just writes us, exactly as we talk, and laugh, and gesture [with our hands], just as we are.'" (Lavie 1990: 37) This passage, as well as many others throughout the book, recall the experiential mode of ethnographic authority criticised recently (cf. Clifford 1988: 16f.; Rabinow 1986: 245). Camille Lacoste-Dujardin presents a similar confirmation of her work, although with a slight self-doubting undertone: "Il approuve mon projet. Quand plus tard, je lui transmettrai les premiers résultats de mon travail, il me décernera ce précieux compliment: 'C'est tout à fait ça! Comment avez-vous fait? . . .'" (Lacoste-Dujardin 1977: 37) These statements most directly show that the need for the anthropologist's authority to write the Other is not altered by the choice of textual representation (cf. Clifford 1988: 15f.; Geertz 1988: 4f.). What is changed indeed, is the author's concern with making his aspirations at least partially visible to the reader.

There is no standardisation of the methodology, the use, and presentation of life stories. Nevertheless two main trends can be identified, one focusing upon the "symbolic in social life and meaning in individual lives" and a second, considering "interviewees as informants – in ethnographic fashion. The aim is to get accurate descriptions of the interviewees' life trajectories in social contexts, in order to uncover the patterns of social relations and the special processes that shaped them." (Bertaux/Kohli 1984: 215)

The narratives presented here are best associated with the latter approach. Carrying out interviews focusing on the interviewee's life history was conceived as a means of both introducing the topic of slavery and social dependency, and of providing data for a general contextual framework. Indeed, the concern with the interview's biographic foundation grew throughout the fieldwork. A topical, and a chronological, event-oriented interview-guideline was developed and constantly revised. Included in this

ongoing process of refinement was a constant shift in topics in the main focus, much resembling the saturation that marks off the point where new cases merely confirm the validity of former findings (cf. Bertaux/Kohli 1984: 226). However, this I only came to uncover back home while reflecting on how to come to grips with my data. Insofar, all narratives have a strong emphasis on questions of social hierarchy and dependency – as far as these topics could be unearthed – and are marked by a fragmentary character, due both to the historicity of the research and the eventuality of the interviewees' remaining mute for various reasons.

Reading and re-reading interview transcripts in a quest for hidden meanings, I realised that most interviews told a story. This was unexpected for me, for most of the interview settings opposed arrangements to facilitate personalised narration. The topical focus and the initial concept of the biographic interview as a means to unravel webs of dependency as well, rather hindered the unfolding of a fragile, not previously conceived narrative. Finally, many problems had occurred in collecting biographic data, which forced me to the provisional conclusion that my chronological, key-event driven concept of life history was strange to the overwhelming majority of rural Mauritians. This hypothesis is strengthened by the exceptions to the rule: it was no problem to ask openly for a life account when speaking to local intellectuals, i.e. secondary school trained people, and some ḥarāṭīn “organic” intellectuals in the Gramscian use of the term (cf. Gramsci [1929-35] 1971: 3, 6).<sup>6</sup> In fact, these ḥarāṭīn were among the few to have participated in either traditional Qurʾān education or modern-type schooling. Nevertheless the narratives produced, especially by school trained interview partners, took the character much more of a curriculum vitae than of a rich life-story. What follows is a somewhat paradoxical conclusion, the narratives produced during the interviews have a hybrid character. They reveal the individual's life through the medium of external incentives, the result of a complex co-operation. It is this, right from the beginning, most obvious co-constructive character of the biographic texts that hindered me in treating them as emic, auto-biography-like narratives.

Somewhat caught fast between these restrictions on authenticity, further increased through (in the most cases), various stages of translation, and a fragmented but on the whole highly instructive content, I had to choose an option for the presentation of these data. What the biographic data, taken as life-stories, were able to narrate was the diversity of life experiences people of different social strata, but all originating from the same small rural region, had gone through, and how differently they both perceived and were coping with their actual situation. To present the stories, somewhat cramped in the transcripts, I chose to take the plunge of interpretation and shape out of the interview dialogues more or less monologic biographic narratives (cf. Richardson 1992).

The texts presented are all based exclusively on interview transcripts and field notes. They are fictive, as they perform a collage of the interviewees'

statements resulting in a monologue revealing interviewer-induced key topics and comprising elements of dramatisation as a result of the editing and collage process, driven by the fieldnotes and memory. These devices are not applied monolithically, and the narratives differ with regard to the degree of their implementation. Some narratives, or some of their sub-paragraphs present only slightly edited transcript material, while others result from intensive use of collage techniques and textual rearrangement. In addition the monologic structure of the text is interrupted in several cases. The single-person/single event focus in one case is split up. Several narratives of interviewees who are closely interrelated are synchronised and thus present to the reader an imaginary communication. Also – if found necessary – the original dialogue of the interview is brought back into the account, e.g. when a sudden, unexpected shift in topic, in the mood or something else which was directly related to questioning occurs. This especially is true to the narrative of M'Barke, an old slave woman (ḥādem). One question in an already difficult interview setting proved to be most offensive. Although I am personally still ashamed of unknowingly disrespecting the old woman's sentiments, the crisis provoked in the interview proved to be most instructive to the anthropologist. In fact, much as in a crisis experiment (cf. Garfinkel 1967), the old woman's insults revealed the extreme sensitivity of matters of legal descent among slaves, and thus former slaves – a matter much obscured among the younger generation, busily engaged in “forgetting” these aspects of family history.

Finally, the texture of the narratives presented, despite editing and collage, will not deny their origin in various interview settings, the main aspects being highlighted in introductory remarks. The interviewees' identities, and some names of places, are changed in an attempt to protect the informants' privacy. Unfortunately, up to today the narratives presented have not been approved by those they are supposed to represent. Nevertheless I hope to show them to the interviewees on a later occasion. For the moment all I can do is to thank all persons involved in my interviews for their will to co-operate and the trust – I wish to affirm once more – they expressed towards me.

## CONTRASTING LIFE STORIES

The stories presented have been chosen to create an insight into the diversity of life experiences I encountered. In this respect they aim to give an impression of the region's life stories as a whole. The stories also present typical aspects, although the individual cases presented are rather experiences at the margin of the rural society. As so often, typical or stereotyped images are best revealed in an atypical setting. And as the stories presented are based on authentic, individual accounts, they are not ideal-types, and there is no aspiration to create any. What instead is intended, is to trace cross-cutting

patterns and ties characterising and relating those involved in the configuration of hierarchy and dependency.

The first narrative presents the story of *Badeyn*, who discovered his slave origin only at the age of fifteen. Having formerly been fully integrated into the household of his mother's master, he then started a career typical for the many *ḥarāḥīn* who created independence through their own work. *Brahim*, another *ḥarṭāni*, is a sort of organic intellectual. He attended traditional religious education of his own will to cope with what he called "ignorance" among the *ḥarāḥīn* and slaves, hence he experiences being at the margins of his own community. He has to cope with the contradictions between his own (and his family's) aspiration to emancipation and his commitment to traditional *bīzān* ideology. *Brahim*'s story is occasionally backed up by narratives of *Zeyneb* (his mother) and in one case *Moustava* (the son of both *Brahim*'s and *Zeyneb*'s former master), both providing contrasting perspectives of *Brahim*'s narrative. *M'Barke*'s story is of a completely different kind. The old slave woman evokes most impressively the woman slave's condition, clearly distinct from the men's. *Valha* is a member of the tributary, *znāga* stratum of *bīzān* society. This status nowadays is hardly ever admitted publicly, for it is conceived of as being even more dishonourable than *ḥarāḥīn* or slave status. The narrative gives a very interesting perspective of *bīzān* women's everyday life, as neither *Valha*'s family, nor anybody in their camp ever had slaves. It is just one example that pastoral life was to a certain degree independent of slave labour and its inputs. Two more narratives reveal the *bīzān* perspective. *Tourad* is a true intellectual in the term's western sense. He is a teacher, fully bilingual in French and classical Arabic, took part in the country's early seventies leftist student movements, and is now engaged in local tribal politics. His life-story exemplifies much of the *bīzān* intellectuals' attitudes. A commitment to a western type of modernity is paired with a fundamental, western-like misconception of their own society. *Tourad*'s identity is split, as his father was of noble *zwāya* origin, while his mother is of *ḥarāḥīn*-status (probably of slave origin and manumitted to engage in a legal marriage). *Youba* finally faces similar identity problems induced by his split origin of a noble *ḥassān* father and a *ḥarṭāniyya* mother, but the outcome of his social positioning is different: he chose to integrate in a *ḥarāḥīn* community. His life is characterised by long wage labour migration, indeed much of it would resemble that of other *ḥarāḥīn*, were it not for some decisive differences.

## Sūdān

### *Badeyn*

*Badeyn*'s narrative refers to the grey zones of slave dependency in a generalised household slavery context. It reveals two contradicting principles, both ruling the master-slave-relationship. First comes a sentiment of nearness, and in many cases affection, resulting from the close co-residence in a household, or else tent. This aspect is most immediate to the individual level.

Second comes the social division into free and unfree, in this case as the difference between affiliated and associated parenthood. This is how social texture forms the basis of individual types of dependency. Badeyn lived successively in contradicting status positions: noble origin, slave descent, and a sort of self-attained freedom and independence. Although this life-history confirms the normative power of the hierarchical value system, it also reveals contradictions in it resulting from everyday life practices. Here it becomes apparent what weaknesses an approach based solely on an elaboration of the dominant ideology would have. Domination depends on the knowledge needed to create and maintain (cultural) distinctions, but this monopoly of knowledge can be disrupted: Badeyn lived a noble's life until recognition of his origins was enforced by a third party, and he was thus excluded from this kind of existence. The text presents a major episode of the interview along with detailing, chronologically organised information.

*Badeyn:* I was born in S. It was a bīzān family who brought me up, without father or mother. In the 60s, there was an epidemic in S., it's called Mahamrou. At that time I was two years old, perhaps three years, because I just had a little sister. That year, the people tell, it got the whole of S., perhaps one hundred people were killed by the epidemic, my father, my mother, my sister and more. For six months I couldn't see anything, because there was something coming out of my eyes.

There was that bīzān family, it was them who took my family as slaves, they brought me up. When I was young, I thought that family is mine, that it is my own family. I believe, the man is my father, the woman my mother. It continued like that until I was fifteen. I thought they were my parents. I knew nothing. Only while having fun with the children out in the street I got to know – it was the children who taught me about my parents.

I ran home, there was my [adoptive] mother sitting and weeping till the end. I tell you, after that I entered my second class in school. That was still in S. I did school until my fourth year, the CFD exams, then the woman [the adoptive mother] divorced and another man married her. At that moment my studies were wrecked. It was him who destroyed them, he was a bīzān without any colour, he had something he should be saved of, he started treating me as a black.<sup>7</sup> And my youth did not understand of what use studies are.

I left S. with them and continued another two years in that situation. I did all construction for them. Finally, I went to the mother, I treated her as mother, I told her I have been happy with everything she did for me in those days, but that now I am no longer happy, that I want to go where I am able to live. She would be my mother as long as she would be in need of me and I would be her son. But she being like that, I'd leave. When I went off she ran behind me. It wasn't her who had changed, it's only the man, it is him who decides, not her.

I visited a military camp. There they needed a washer, I started to do the job. After a while I left and started as herdsman for the camels of a friend of mine, also from my tribe [a bīzān]. Later I went to town and worked as washer once

again. At the same time I built bricks for the construction of houses and was an apprentice<sup>8</sup> to a baker. I also worked as day-labourer loading and unloading trucks, and I built wells.

After some time I came back to the Tamourt en-Naaj and married for the first time. The SO.NA.DER had started the first development project there. In one year I earned enough money to rest for a whole year, 240,000 UM! I organised myself to go on with the money, then the SO.NA.DER left, they moved to Achram. I managed to find a šarīv, for whom I washed the clothes some time ago. So I had a friend there, who was chief of the garage there. That was how I came here. I did the job until the first wave of discharges occurred. I was the first on the list to be fired. It was because the first, here people say, is the one who has two arms, i.e. the one who has two brothers. With him it won't be like that, he who has the brothers is right. One won't be able to put him off.

I started to work on the fields, to grow some millet. The harvest was good. After that half a year I went back to the SO.NA.DER and they employed me until now.

During my first time here I travelled every month to S. in order to visit my family. After two years I wanted to change that situation, and get her to move with me to Achram. But she was what one nowadays would call a slave. I went and asked her parents to give consent to my wish, they agreed that she moved. It was her masters who refused. I kept on with this situation for another year, and looking for a solution in S. Later I married here in Achram for a second time. Here I have five children, in S. are two from my first marriage. Every two to three months I send money to their mother for the children there.

Here I have bought some fields. In total I have five fields now. Some of them are behind a dam, the others behind a small dam. Every year I work the fields together with my wife. I also have some goats, all in all about 40, I do not like to have sheep, they are too stupid! Goats are much more intelligent and much less complicated than sheep. I also have one cow. For some years I also worked as baker here in A., but now I find it too tiring to get up so early and do my job in the garage afterwards.

### *Brahim and Zeyneb*

Brahim's narrative is characterised by being both very typical and untypical of slave/ḥarāṭīn biographies of the region. Again, as in Badeyn's narrative, a tension is obvious between the well-defined "indissoluble" origin, i.e. the slave estate defined through birth, and on the other hand an achieved social knowledge, which put into practice contests the status-defined role set. The ambivalence of Brahim's situation is evident: through personal effort he gained certified religious knowledge<sup>9</sup> that enables him to respond to the hegemonic discourse of social hierarchy and thus to surmount the boundaries drawn for him by social structures. A second outcome of the knowledge gained through traditional learning is the at least partial adoption of the social hierarchy's framework, whose effect is to cement Brahim's original low status.

It should also be observed that Brahim's excellent memory – and his mother's too – constituted a never-ending stock of topics for discussion (and the generation of questions) for me. The following compilation, however, stands out, for it contrasts several points of view on a substantially commonly lived and deeply intertwined experience, as expressed by people of close relationship: Brahim, Zeyneb, his mother, and Moustava, her (or else his) *zwāya* master's son. Of special interest are the different perceptions Brahim and Zeyneb have of the process of their successive liberation.

*Brahim:* I was born about 1956 in the Oued El Abiod, near the well Kharge. I was with my parents, the herds of goats and cattle, there was nobody else with us. We had some date-palms too, it was my father and some of his brothers who planted them when I was very small. The name of the well was Kharge, because it was so effectively hidden by the trees and bushes, one had to look carefully to find it, so dense was the vegetation at that place. I stayed with my family and at the same time I attended Qurʾān lessons. I herded the goats and worked the fields and at the same time went to the Qurʾān school. During summer I stayed with the master [of the Qurʾān school], during the rainy and the cold season I went home and herded the goats. The master [of the Qurʾān school] was of another tribe, he was of the *Awlād ʿAlī*, who are not part of the *Taḡākānet*.

While we were at the well of Kharge, the two camps were always close to each other. During the rainy season and winter, we then moved to Liwa, where we had the fields. It lies to the west of here, some of the people here and I myself still have fields over there. Every family has a small dam of its own and every member of the family cultivates and makes his own field.

There were a lot of *bīzān* with the [Qurʾān] master, they passed a lot of time in that activity. In fact, I was the only *sūdān* there.

*Author:* How did that come?

*Brahim:* Well, I was the third son in my family, at that time we were nearly rich, so I was not really obliged to work. But I was bothered by the ignorance [of the *sūdān*], I did not want to stay without learning. That's the reason why I looked for a task, the possibility to study. I found that man [the Qurʾān master] and asked him if he would accept me to study with him and he agreed. With him I learned the alphabet and started the Qurʾān. When the rainy season came, he went off to look for pasture for his livestock. I looked out for another [Qurʾān] teacher. He gave me a book, by that time I already could read and started to write. With another master I found two more books dealing with questions of prayer and *zakāt*,<sup>10</sup> the *šarīʿa*. Every time the [Qurʾān] masters left with their livestock for the south I stayed there at Kharge; I did my studies always only half a year, during the dry season, the rest of the year I worked on the fields. I spent six years with the first master, from 1970-76, and another two with the second one. You know, once you are able to read and write, studying becomes less complicated, because then you can continue the work on your own and afterwards ask somebody to correct your mistakes.

There were a lot of students with the [first Qurʾān] master, he lived in a camp

of about 60 tents and had about 90 to 100 students. His wife gave lessons too, everything concerning the women and girls was her duty. While the camp of the master was near to the well of my parents, I could walk home every evening, but when they left for more distant places, we had to stay with them. We did not bring our own food with us, I never saw that with the students coming from other camps. We helped the master's family with its work. He had about 60 goats, 30 cows and 3 camels. Everybody helped to water the herds or to milk them. My family also gave the master sometimes 10 mūd<sup>1</sup> of millet while the harvest was going on.

We left the place of Kharge in 1982, there were only some palm-trees left, growing only a small amount of dates. All the people who once came to that well left it to come here when the new well was constructed. We too wanted to approach the new dam here, that was constructed in 1978<sup>12</sup> for the first time. We hoped to cultivate a lot of millet here.

I am the only one of my brothers still here. The first left in 1982 for Nouakchott, in 1986 he went to the Arab Emirates to work there as a policeman, two more brothers are traders in Nouakchott, the younger one left here in 1993, the older one in 1989, then there is one of my brothers who is now taxi-driver in Nouakchott and one who is with the National Guard there. Two of my sisters are married and live here in the village. Three of my brothers' wives live here as well, two of them live at Nouakchott.

I prefer staying here instead of going to Nouakchott. Here I have my own millet, my own field, my own work, here I have something to do, and I have food enough to eat. In Nouakchott everything is related to work. Relying on my animals there, I would survive for only one month, I couldn't let them graze there, for there is no pasture. I would be obliged to buy them fodder, and I can't afford that. I would be obliged to sell them and live off the money. After a short while the whole money would be eaten up, and I would remain with nothing! Then all those goods, being cheaper in Nouakchott than here, won't make any sense to me. No, without getting a job you can't live in Nouakchott. I never stayed there for long.

### **Experiencing the 1969 Drought**

*Brahim:* I remember 1960-65 there was a drought, that was a time without millet, but the animals were only slightly affected. 1966 was a good year, 1967 ran short of pasture at the end, 1968 again was without problems, and in 1969 finally, there was nothing at all. At that time we had two herds of small stock<sup>13</sup>, 270 sheep and 100 goats and another 60 cows. After the drought there remained only three cows. The goats were the least affected, they remained with a number of 50. Altogether we had about 100 small ruminants left when the drought was over. We didn't start a big movement with our animals during the drought. We stayed at Khaoulete, that is near, about 30 km to the east. When the pasture was finished we came back, but not to the well, there were too many people there at the time. We chose another well in order to get clean water for the animals.

After the drought, we responded to the death of the animals by increasing the number of our fields.

*Zeyneb (mother):* It was my husband who had some animals. . . .

I think there were about 60-100 small ruminants and about 10 cows with my husband. After the heavy drought [1969] he lost nearly everything. He remained with 3 cows and in 1970 he died.

Our master lost a lot of his animals too. That's why we kept together and didn't move around that year.

I then stayed with my children, until today. We continued to cultivate our fields. We had our work. I did not return to the master, why should I? The master, when he comes and asks for something, we will give it to him. He has got nothing to give us. In those days he had something, and I didn't, he gave me what I needed. In that time he didn't ask me to give him anything. I continued to cultivate with my children, we had good harvests. When he came, we gave him a part of our millet. And we continued eating our millet and buying animals of it.

*Moustava (master's son):* Before the drought, there were already a lot of diseases diminishing the number of my father's animals. These years were not terrible, it just killed some animals every time. At the beginning of the drought in 1969, my family was left with 30 cows, no other animals remained with us. At the end of the drought all cows were finished. We lost all animals.

As there was nothing left, I went off to look for work. I mounted a truck and went to Boghé, where I found a job as manager of a boutique [shop]. There were people of the Legwāṭit, they were big traders, it was them to give me the work. And I continued to work for them for about six or seven years. They paid me 4,000 UM, every time I got money I sent it home to my family. They never augmented the salary, they even wanted to lower it, because there was a lot of people looking for work. Nevertheless I accepted the situation, I was even fortunate, for they had trust in me, otherwise they never would have paid as much as 4,000 UM.

### **Brahim's Father's Life and Death**

*Brahim:* In 1970 my father died. He had worked to get the animals, every time he had a lot of millet he sold some to buy animals with the money. He also had a second job, herding. Every two months and ten days he had the right to receive one goat. He had done that work for several families since his early youth, so he had got a lot of animals. Then he had another job, he watered the animals, that is the only work I saw my father do. I never saw him herding, I only heard of him doing that sort of work.

Each time someone wanted to sell a female goat or sheep for slaughter, we exchanged one of our male animals with him. So we could manage to get the herd grow faster.<sup>14</sup> I don't remember exactly what size were the parts of my father and my brothers in our herd, but every one of us had his own animals, with his own brand. My father didn't give some of his animals to us, we were

paid for our work of herding other people's animals. When after my father's death his master came to pick up his animals, he took all of my father's, but left those of my brothers and me. At that time, my father also gave him a part of the harvest, but this was not fixed, the fields were not fixed to one place and neither was the contribution.

*Zeyneb (Brahim's mother):* Already at the time of the presidency of Mokhtar Ould Daddah the *sūdān* lived in *adwaba* [sedentary camps composed only of *sūdān*]. I remember we paid the *ʿašūr*<sup>15</sup>. The animals we had were our own, they didn't come from our master, but from our own work, my husband's, my children's and my own work on the fields, and herding of other people's animals.

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. For some time after the marriage, I continued to work for my master. My husband had fields. And we continued like that, moving around with my masters, until they didn't need us any longer. Then we settled with my husband's family, near their fields. We had no masters! He was a *sāyib* [slave who wasn't guarded]. His master didn't need him, and if he did, he came to him and asked.

When my husband died, his master came and took off two of the three cows that remained with us after the drought, and some of the small ruminants too! He told us that my husband had been his *ḥarṭānī*,<sup>16</sup> and therefore he had the right to take my husband's animals. Yes, he was right about that point, he did not want to be unfair to us, he was even kind with us, as he didn't take all the animals that were left with us. This is part of the *šarīʿa*, it is a Mauritanian habit. This did no harm to us. I am not saying anything, I only tell you because you don't know the habits of Mauritania.

### Seeking Manumission

*Author:* The white family you told me you belonged to, are they still around here?

*Brahim:* Yes, they live in Leqraye and in Kdân, that is between Ghabbra and Foum Gleita, there are a lot of Legwāṭiṭ there [a *zwāya* tribe], one of them [of the family] is a municipal counsellor and a trader. We are almost like brothers to him. . . . Yes, it is possible that they do help us when we are in need, that's true for all of them, that's mutual, I help them, they help me. . . . Once I received a *darrāʿa* [men's traditional dress] worth 2,500 UM from them. I helped them with the construction of a small dam [French: *diguette*] once, I went to the project in order to get them some assistance in the construction. I also sent them [the family] 125 *mūd* of millet,<sup>17</sup> that was at the time of harvest, and it constituted my whole harvest that year. I did that several times, it is part of our mutual relations. I also herd his cows, if we have pasture around here whereas he has not and comes and asks me to do so. He is my comrade, and every time I go to Leqraye I visit him and stay with him, as he is the only one I know there.

*Author:* The last times you occasionally mentioned that Ould Haidalla [leader of the military regime 1980-84] announced the end of slavery on the radio. I am still

confused about the question when he held this speech, do you remember the year?

*Brahim:* I remember well the time of Haidalla, normally you would speak of two years related to Haidalla, first the year he came into office, second the one he was pushed out. His announcement concerning the end of slavery, that was at the end of his first year in office, the beginning of the second.<sup>18</sup> In this announcement he proclaimed a deadline. It meant that anyone having a slave had to prove the slave's origin, i.e. he had to provide proofs. If he failed to do so, then the slave no longer was his slave. He had to enumerate the slave's fathers up to the tenth father. If he only could trace about four or five fathers, then the slave was no longer a slave.

*Author:* Did Haidalla say that in the radio?

*Brahim:* No, that is a question of jurisprudence, that belongs to the domain of the qāḍī [judge]. That was the time Haidalla introduced the šarī'a . . . he was very severe about everything he did, everything he ordered had to be executed. . . . His announcement concerning the liberation of the slaves was on the radio, but he didn't speak of slaves or anything like that, he just said that all people were equal, that there would be no-one to oblige another [to do something]. All people, the white and the black are equal, they are like brothers. He did not speak of ḥarāṭīn or slaves, he just said Mauritania should be a country of equals, where all people work together and don't oblige one another [to do anything]. That was also the time of problems between the bīzān and the sūdān, because the bīzān wanted to force the sūdān to come back to them. If the bīzān went to see a judge, the judge would send them back, he would let the sūdān be totally free. This happened after the announcement of Haidalla in the radio. Before it wasn't like that, but after I never again saw a white beating a slave or a sūdān. Before, I saw that frequently with the sūdān of A. [village nearby], they are not like the other sūdān. . . .

Slavery is something which has officially come from Allah, which has always existed in the times ever. I know very well the difference between a freed person and a slave. The announcement Haidalla made, that was of a general sort, but I, I know what I know, I didn't trust that announcement. What I wanted was something official, a public declaration, because they [the government] also can say that they will undo their decision. I wanted manumission directly from my master. I found him here, so we went directly to the qāḍī. There were also some others, i.e. there are others belonging to the master, who were not my brothers, but of other families. They were already manumitted before the announcement. After the announcement, I went to the master too. I followed him and told him that there has been an announcement, that there are no more slaves in Mauritania, and that everybody has heard of this message on the radio. You have slaves, I told him, but you know very well that they won't be of any use to you, that they won't work for you. Thus there is no need to say that you have slaves. At that point he accepted [my argument]. First he liberated me, and later he made a written manumission for the whole family. There were two copies of the manumission act. One for the master and one for the family. It was

him [the master] who made a further copy for himself, for one never knows what will be in future. If there is only a manumission contract with me, perhaps his [the master's] sons would think that there are still slaves. If the contract is only with me, it is less clear than with a copy [being with the master]. Today we are like brothers, if one sees us together, he would think we are father and son.

*Zeyneb (Brahim's mother):* When I was small I lived with the bīzān. The master and my mother [she only remembers little of her mother, whom she considers not to have worked much], my brothers and my sisters. We had a tent beneath the master's tent. The master had one son, and we lived with him, we were one family, black and white. That was the time when there were only few fields and everybody in the camp had animals. They were neither rich nor poor, they had cows and goats. In that time there weren't many fields, and herders and cultivators could stay together [in one camp] and the owners of the herds could watch them. I didn't dress at that time [i.e. she was under the age of seven].

I did the work of pounding millet, fetched water and also herded goats, there were a lot of animals. Herding was unusual for girls, but the men all had to work on the fields. My mother didn't herd. Cultivating the fields behind the small dams started by the time I had children, then it increased one by one.

In this time the camps of the sūdān and of the bīzān were [already] separated. The adwaba was the camp of the sūdān, the sūdān always remained near the fields, whereas the bīzān moved around with the herds to get good pasture. This continued until the harvest, then the bīzān came to take their share of millet. When everything was distributed the bīzān left and the sūdān remained.

For some years, until I had four or five children, I kept with the master during summer, I fetched water. Whenever the rain started I left for the fields. When I didn't want to carry on like that, I fortunately had my daughters. All of them did one year with the master, one after the other they went to him, to do him his work. Before, I had shared the work for the master with my sister, one period of the summer it was her turn, the other mine. This continued until we had children. It was the sons, who were the first to leave him [the master], they couldn't bear the work with him, they kept with the adwaba or they went off to work. He [the master] wasn't in need of them, they left him when he couldn't resolve their problems any longer. That's why they left in order to look for work and give something to the master, if they didn't it didn't matter. If they came back from their work, they only came to the adwaba [not to the master], they were already married men. In order to marry, they properly asked [the master], and he did them their marriage.<sup>19</sup>

Our master was a very good man, he was very kind to us, he didn't make us work for somebody else, he only took what was left behind us, he gave us clothes and shoes, he always did things that pleased us, and he was full with animals [i.e. rich in animals]. People came to stay with him and drink milk. We kept with him until the times when the animals were diminishing and finally all had disappeared. The master kept with us like a family member, every time he was in need of something, we gave it to him. We always kept in relation to him

until last year, when he died, he was already old. There is his son who comes after him now, he is like our brother, he drank of my milk when he was small. He frequently visits us when he is in need of something. Nowadays we only give him the zakāt, but if he has no millet we also give him some more. And he too, if he has got something he will give it to us.

We left the master in 1969. It was because he had lost his animals. He no longer had the means to sustain us, and we too did not have any means. The separation between us took place because I was the mother of a family, I had a tent of my own and my children, and I worked for myself. They [the master] also had their work of their own. The only thing shared between us were the fields. We take a part and they take a part of the harvest. Nowadays, we only give him the zakāt.

During the drought [1969] we lost a lot of our animals as well. But we remained on good terms with the master. This continued until the time of the first democracy in Mauritania in 1982, that was the SEM [Structures d'Éducation des Masses; cf. p. 272f.] at that time. With this, we found ourselves in two opposing camps. It was just politics that divided us. At that time, I already had my own tent. Since 1960 I have had my own tent, my husband, my children, and we just gave him a part of our harvest. Since 1983 we have been freed, we no longer belong to him.

*Author:* How did that come about?

*Zeyneb:* In 1983 there was a presidential decree, it was transmitted over the radio [cf. note 18, this chapter]. The president said, all should see each other as brother, if one would like to get something from somebody, he should ask for it. What was the property of the slaves should remain their property. Our master had already manumitted four men before that decree. These were two of my sons and two of my sister's sons. All the others he only manumitted after the decree. It was us who asked him for manumission after the presidential decree. We asked either for paid or unpaid manumission. We sent Brahim to go and speak with him about our manumission. The master then manumitted us for free, we didn't have to pay. He made us an official document on a paper. He did that for every member of my family. Then we made another document concerning the whole family. That one today is with Brahim.

Today the master's son comes to us when he is in need of something, but we have stopped working for him. But if he is in need of millet, he will receive something from us. We give him the zakāt, and if he is in need, we will give him more than that. If he has millet of his own, we will just give him the zakāt. He sometimes gives us some of his dates.

### *M'Barke*

My introduction to M'Barke resulted from a favour to a *zwāya* interviewee. His wish for a lift to Khouba, a place some 35 km to the south, offered the opportunity to visit a place of very recent sedentarisation. In the middle of May the spot was nearly deserted. The sun was beating on the barren, stony plain, temperature in the shade was around 45°C. Besides some distant *zwāya*

tents near to a few bushes, the camp was composed of some of the most miserable *sūdān* tents I had ever seen anywhere in the zone. Desperately seeking a *sūdān* interview and always under the attentive eyes of my *bīzān* hosts, we ended up under the tent of M'Barke. She was a very old slave woman (*ḥādem*), hard of hearing and almost blind. My research assistant, Khalifa Ould Kebab, was uncomfortable about starting an interview with her, as he classified her among the "complicated persons", i.e. people reacting at best unpredictably to a stranger's questions. I for my part felt uncomfortable as well. The village's appearance was depressing, the most bitter poverty was obvious in every corner. Except for two tattered chickens, no signs of animal property were to be seen, and the few *sūdān* around, above all the children, were visibly suffering from malnutrition. Even the tent we were sitting under was so small that, small a group as we were, we hardly managed to shelter from the midday sun. Interviewing M'Barke was an experience of learning from one's own mistakes – and at the expense of the interviewee. The occasion of severe dissonance was created by asking a question employed numerous times before without problems. However, changing circumstances may change experience. To ask an old woman who had lived a slave's life about her marriage can be an insult in that these people often were not allowed to contract legal marriages. Legal exclusion from parenthood, however, does not mean exclusion from parenthood-like practices amongst the master's family: indeed a boy of about seventeen from the master's family joined the interview to see and hear what was going on. Sitting close to the old blind woman, he could not escape being intensely caressed by her, although this embarrassed him severely. He nevertheless had to respect someone who had participated in bringing him up.

*M'Barke*: I was born in a place called Twueyle, which is near Djonâba. That was in the year of the first banknote, it also was the year of the diseases.<sup>20</sup> Khalil [her *zwāya* master] is older than me, I drank of his mother's milk when it was nearly finished, it was just before his mother stopped breast-feeding him. I am not of this place, I am not of the people of Khouba, I am a *ḥartāniyya* for the Ahel D. of the Tmoddek and they are backed by Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar [the former *ʿamīr* of Tagant], that Allah may welcome him in paradise. I've been to the east until Khouba belongs to the Tmoddek. Then we came here to watch the place for the people wanting to make their fields here. We stayed here, me, my children and my brother. We came here in the year of the battle between the Tmoddek, those born in that year now are already grown up [this means an age of about 20 years, probably the event took place in about 1974]. In those days we were always in the east, we kept close to the *ʿamīr* Abderrahmane, sometimes we went up the Tagant. We cultivate the fields near Achram and Chelkhet Arkham, for everybody who knows the Tmoddek, knows them in these places.

The Tmoddek are based on livestock, they have no fixed place, they are always found where there is good pasture. Ouneije, Djonâba, Asmaʿa, all these places are for the Tmoddek, they belong to them. When I was young the

Tmoddek had all sorts of animals, goats, sheep, cattle, some male camels too, camels were only used for transport. There were a lot of donkeys too. And there were maḥazra [Qurʾānic schools] as the Tmoddek were zwāya, they did not make war, they were defended by Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar.

I only remember my mother, we were all with my mother with our masters. There were three brothers to me and two sisters. I worked with my mother, who fetched water, pounded millet and gathered ʿaz<sup>21</sup> [wild grains suited for food]. She also gathered another sort of grain that was found on trees [eyzin].<sup>22</sup> You had to lay it into water for five or six days before it was ready to be eaten. All this has stopped now, there is no eyzin any more. It was tiring, it took much time to prepare food with it, and it smelled bad. It also provoked a disease called igwindi, you started coughing, and there was no milk to cure the pain.

My mother pounded the millet three times a day, there was breakfast, lunch and dinner. We prepared bāsi, ʿaiš and couscous with the millet. Millet was eaten three times a day, but all of it was not a lot of millet, for we had milk. Today we pound the millet only once a day, in the afternoon.

When I was young, I worked a lot, fetched water from the well, watered the cows, cultivated the fields in order to get my millet, gathered grains from the trees, pounded millet, I am a sūdān woman. The work of watering was during the dry season, then we were near Achram. It was up to us, the women to do that work, we watered a lot. We watered the cattle, the goats and sheep, the donkeys, we pounded the millet, we cooked, prepared the couscous, herded the goats if there was no shepherd, all that work we did in one single day. For sure, I was a nānmiyye [tent-slave woman]. The times I worked like that are long ago, I worked until I got faint, I have sons and daughters to do that work now. All that work I did for Allah.

*Author/Research Assistant:* When did you marry? [M'Barke ignores the question]

*Author/Research Assistant:* [louder, as M'Barke was hard of hearing] When did you marry? [Now most people around start giggling, this is when M'Barke gets angry]

*M'Barke:* When did I marry? It takes a long time you ask too much. What will that be about? You don't know and I don't know. You are impolite. You ask for things that nobody ever asks for. I told you I am mad, I just know ten and ten. And you will get headaches of asking all your questions. You [two, author and research assistant] are young, I told you, you are young. The youth has its time. You now are writing, and I don't know what you are writing. The young women stay with their parents until they marry, or they get a child without marrying. I am tired of telling, my tongue is tired, I told everything I know.

[Once M'Barke had denounced our failure to meet the very special conditions of respect applying to slave women, our awkward silence made the situation gradually ease off. The peculiar hierarchy of two young men intrusively asking questions of an old woman considering herself deserving of more respect, but not disposing of the means to achieve this position in discourse, was re-established.]

My first child was born during the drought when the people had nothing to wear [1942-43]. One of my sons is in Nouadhibou, he is a mason, until some years ago he always sent some money to me, but that has stopped nowadays.

All other children keep here all the time. We have our fields around here. We have fields behind dams and also behind the small dams [constructed two years ago by the project]. We have been here for a long time, but in the time we cultivated the fields with our masters, the fields were not here. The fields here in Khouba were initiated by us, we were three [sūdān] families. Only later all the others came here to join us, they came one by one. There have been people from the L'aweysiāt who had come here to cultivate fields, some from the Idewāš and the Tāgāt too. But the Tmoddek always destroyed these fields [the dams]. All this was only done by the sūdān of the Tāgāt and the Idewāš. We will stay here now. Every time one of them comes to make a field, we will send him back and destroy his field. We will stay here forever. The people you see here already have a well [constructed by an NGO]. We came here in the time the old man who just went away was still young [a man of about 60-70 years, who just had withdrawn from the conversation]. In that time, the only problem here was that of water. There was no water here, only thirst. Every day we had to make long walks with the donkeys, to fetch water from Djonāba. It was us who proposed the well here, and Ahmed [a Tmoddek zwāya], he works in Nouakchott, he got the well for us. He is an important person and works in an institute. We want to have a big village here, we want to become a centre. The well isn't carrying much water, it should be deepened.

We don't have any sheep or goats, some of the people here have one or two, these often are mniḥa [a loan in animals restricted to the usufruct] by zwāya people. We'd rather like to have goats, but we lack the means to acquire them, you will help us. If we have a good harvest, we get more millet than necessary for eating. Then we can buy animals. This is possible, but it is not my concern.

## Znāga

### *Valha*

Valha is a woman of znāga origin born around 1960. Until some years ago, she lived in a highly mobile camp specialised in the rearing of goats and sheep on the Tagant. This camp experienced slow but continuous decay through the ongoing drought conditions, which degraded the pastoral resources. Valha now lives alone with her very old father and her twelve-year-old son in S. She mainly lives off the money her husband, working as petty trader and night watchman in Nouadhibou, sends to her. She runs some petty trading activities and is engaged in some of the economic activities of the local women's co-operative. In addition she cultivates a small garden where she grows vegetables for her own consumption and sometimes for sale.

*Valha:* I was born in a place near Kiffa in a region named Saba, it was in a camp. I don't have any sisters, but four brothers. My mother died early, when I had reached the age of about twelve years. My father is still living, he is very old now, and stays with me in my house.

In my youth I had a lot of duties, I fetched water for my family with the

donkeys, pounded millet, went to the Qurʾān school, spun wool, tanned hides. The wool was spun only for ourselves, we made the tents out of the wool. To make a layer of woollen cloth, you have to take a wooden stick, one just like a pen, and turn it in your fingers to make a yarn out of the wool that you twist with the other hand's fingers. Before you can start to spin the yarn, you have to beat the wool with some wooden sticks. Spinning is done by several women at a time. During one day, a woman can spin between three and five rolls of yarn, each weighing about one kilo. To weave a layer of woollen tent cloth of ten meters [50 cm wide], you have to use about 7 kilos of yarn. The weaving was done by a weaver and paid for. The women just spun the yarn.

Fetching water was sometimes easy, sometimes tiring. It depended on the camp being near to or distant from a well. The camp moved from one place to another, sometimes it did so after ten days, or just after one night, and sometimes it only moved once a month. At the age of seven I started pounding millet. My mother was a bit lazy, she then stopped preparing meals. Every day I pounded two kilos of millet, it took me two to three hours of work, afterwards I prepared the couscous. My mother spun wool and tanned hides, she also went to the market places in Tidjikja and Moudjéria to sell goats and buy clothes, millet, and tea. No, it wasn't my father who sold the animals, I think he never was good at commerce, he didn't know the prices or didn't know the places to go to for trading.

I don't remember exactly when I attended Qurʾān school, I remember well how once the master beat me, because I didn't learn my lesson. I finished two parts of the Qurʾān [two out of sixty hizb]. Today I can read, but I don't write. At the time I was very interested in the [Qurʾān] school, but I had a lot of work to do. It was my father who encouraged me to go there, but my mother opposed him, she thought it would prevent me from drinking enough milk to grow fat.<sup>23</sup> Today getting big is no longer important for young girls, but then it was an obligation. Now I can read, but I don't write. I haven't gone far in my studies.

My father was always out with the animals, led them to pasture, milked them. He did this work together with his sons. We had about 200 goats and sheep, sometimes the herd grew in numbers, sometimes it diminished. I heard my father tell he had once cultivated fields, but I never saw him doing that work.

Previous to the big drought in 1969 we had 400 goats and sheep, of which only 30 sheep and 60 goats remained one year later. 1970 was a good year and we gained 100 new animals. With these 200 animals we left the Tagant in 1971 for the south, it was the first time we left the Tagant. That year my mother was already dead. She never left the Tagant. There was no fodder to be found there in that year. We stayed five months near Barkéwol before returning to the Tagant. Some years later we stopped going back to the Tagant and kept in the Aftout, for it made no sense to go up the Tagant when we knew it hadn't rained there. In 1986 we went further south than Barkéwol, we went to Sélibabi [most southern town of Mauritania] to find pasture for the animals.

Our camp was on the Tagant, we are people of the Tagant. We used to make

long migrations from the Oued el Abiod<sup>24</sup> on the Tagant to the Assaba. The number of tents in the camp always changed. It happened that there were up to twenty tents, but often there were between eight and ten. There were just these tents, all the people there were my parents, they were my mother's sisters.

It happened that we had *sūdān* with our camp. This was during the dry season. It was always the same two families of *ḥarātīn* who came with us, in order to fetch water and pound millet for the whole camp. They came from the south and were not of our tribe. They were just looking for work. We paid them according to the amount of millet pounded, for example one *mūd* of millet per day was paid with 1,000 UM per month. Fetching water was included in this salary. The *ḥarātīn* families were big, and all of them pounded millet, very tiring work if you do it the whole day. We were between five and six tents in the camp during that time, otherwise two families of *ḥarātīn* wouldn't have been enough to do all that work of pounding and fetching water. This arrangement started when we met the *sūdān* families on our way to the south in the beginning of the hot, dry season. They always came to the same well near Fom Gleita where we met. The *sūdān* didn't move around as we did, they either cultivated their fields or kept close to the well. This arrangement with the *sūdān* families started in about 1980.

I got married at the age of fifteen, it was the son of my father's brother [*wuld ʿamm*, patrilineal cousin]. He came from Nouadhibou on that occasion, where he already was engaged in commerce. They didn't ask me, I was still small at the time. After the marriage I kept in the camp with my parents, and he went back to Nouadhibou and sent money. I never left the tent of my parents, for my husband didn't want me to live with his father's tent. He was in discord with his father, because of the second marriage the father had entered into with a woman my husband disapproved of. His father came here regularly, once a year he visited me, in order to get some money and I gave it to him. You always give money to the parents, even if they are not poor. A short time ago he came here with his wife, on that occasion he died. Later his wife came again, and I gave her money too.

I came here to Achram in 1988. My father was ill and we looked for a treatment here in the health station. Later he didn't want to return to the camp, he felt too old to move around all the time. So we stayed here. By that time two of my brothers had already left our camp. In 1970 the first of my brothers left and went to town, the second followed him in 1984. Today only one of my brothers is still herding animals. Two of them now are traders and one is a fisherman. When I left the camp and came here in 1988, there were only three tents left with the camp. I took 40-50 goats and sheep with me. I lost nearly all these animals during the drought in 1992. Today I have 12 goats again. It is a long time ago, we distributed our father's herd among us. Normally this happened with the marriage. The father decided on the share each child was given on that occasion.

My husband was in Achram already from 1983 on. He was engaged in trade

here. But in 1993 his commerce worsened and he left again for Nouadhibou. After one year he came back for two months, then he left again. He sends money regularly, about every two months. He also sends me cassettes, so I can get news from him. All this he sends me by people we know well.

The time I lived in the camp I liked being there. Nowadays I know life in the village. Before I just knew life in a camp and couldn't imagine what life in a village was like. Today I live well here. I wouldn't return to the camp nowadays. Once, a long time ago, my husband asked me to accompany him to Nouadhibou, but I refused. I have never been there, and I don't know the city. I've heard life is difficult there: the food is very expensive and a lot of poor people come and beg for money or food. But actually I'm thinking about moving there again . . . Here I am running a small shop. All the merchandise is with me in my house. I buy everything I sell from a trader in Achram, he gives me the merchandise on credit. When I get money sent by my husband, I go to his shop and pay my debts. The profit I make out of trading is just enough to buy something to eat. I don't want to get more out of it. I also work in the shop of the women's co-operative. This happens about once a year. The last time it was my turn, I worked for one month in the shop and my share of the profit was 10,000 UM. I never worked in the fields, I have a small garden to cultivate vegetables for my family and for sale. Last year I sold for 2,000 UM, but this year I stopped selling, as I didn't want to. This year I grew tomatoes, onions and carrots.

## Bīzān

### *Tourad*

As a school teacher Tourad is one of the major intellectuals of the region. He went through what can now be considered a classical career in the public sector. Although born in a still predominantly nomadic Mauritania, he spent nearly his whole life in towns and villages. Having been educated almost exclusively in French, he now mainly teaches Arabic to his pupils. While in the early 1970s he adhered to the leftist movements in Mauritania, he later converted to what he calls "tribal politics". As a son of one of the region's most famous religious learned men, he is of noble origin. With regard to this last point, however, the situation is in fact somewhat complex. The father successively entered into several marriages, and Tourad was born of his father's late liaison with a ḥarṭāniyya, a freed slave woman. His mother in those days was adored for her beauty, and married several times as well. Today she and her present husband, a ḥarṭāni, live together with Tourad and his family. Having to care for his mother, Tourad, is constantly forced to confront his split descent in daily life.

*Tourad:* I was born in D. in a camp . . . on a hill, but I have lived my whole life in the city. I was born in a camp where my mother was, but my father was in town. It was in 1954 and I never went to live in the bush. In 1969 I went to the collège in T., I was fifteen at the time, until 1971 I was a pupil there. With the national

strike [of the leftist students movement] that year, I was expelled from school, as all participants in the strike were. That marked the end of my formal studies and in the beginning of 1972 I was back in [his natal town].

The strike had two objectives, first we wanted a rise in the state's scholarships and that all pupils should be boarders, i.e. should live in the school's dormitory. Second there were objectives related to the MND [Mouvement National Démocratique] that concerned the nation. The pupils everywhere represented the spearhead of the movement. We wanted an Arabisation of the schools and a higher quality of education. I for example, I didn't learn Arabic at school, in T. we only had French teachers, and there was only one hour of Arabic a day. Thus we only had five to six hours of Arabic a week, all the rest was in French. The movement demanded that the French teachers be sent back home, we wanted a real Arabisation, to make Arabic the official language in the primary and secondary schools. Therefore we exerted pressure on the government and tried to convince the population of our goals.

At that time there was a dialogue between the leaders of the movement [MND] and the government, it was Mariam Daddah, the president's wife, who built up serious contacts to some young leaders of the movement. This resulted in the liaison between the government and the movement that split the latter. It took eight to nine months to take place and finally there was a majority within the movement to join Ould Daddah [Mokhtar Ould Daddah, Mauritania's first president after independence]. It was said the party should be exploited for the sake of the country, but in reality the people have been corrupted. There still are these two [political] factions nowadays. Those who were with Ould Daddah are closely tied to Morocco, the former minority now is with the UFD [main opposition party, Union des Forces Démocratiques]. Finally there is a third fraction, composed of people like me, who left politics. I left politics in 1974, ever since I have been affiliated to local politics, tribal politics. . . .

After spending some time in [towns] B. and C. I went to Nouakchott to take an exam<sup>25</sup>. I became a teacher. The first two years I was in towns in the interior and near the river [Senegal], during this time I acquired the Arabic certificate. Ever since I have been Arabic teacher, I am bilingual. Most of the time I teach Arabic. Until some years ago I was transferred to a lot of places, mainly on the Tagant. Every two to three years I went to a new place. Bilingual teachers were in great demand, because with them you can economise by not having to employ two teachers, a French speaking and an Arabic speaking one. . . .

*Author:* Did you never live under a tent?

*Tourad:* In my youth I never lived under a tent. But since I have been living here in Achram, I regularly go out to the bush during winter. We spend four to five months under the tent. We take some cows and goats with us. I have started this habit since I have had my own family, since I married a second time in 1982. You have to know, in the bush you can save a lot of money! There are a lot of advantages in being there, for you can avoid many of the problems you have in town. There is not the problem of bread, as there is no bread there, there is much less the problem of meat, because sometimes there is meat to buy and

sometimes not, also you won't buy all these little things for the children, etc. All this saves an awful lot of money. How long we stay out there is defined by the amount of rain. One therefore could say our life is divided into two parts. But our life is not that of most people here, I think it even is an exception that a family lives like that. Normally you will find those people who always live in the town and those people always living in the bush. In order to be able to switch between the two modes you have to have animals. Those without animals can't live like that.

*Research assistant:* [present in the interview held in French] But there are also people living out in the bush in order to cultivate!

*Tourad:* That is the bush of the cultivators! We are not like that, the people here make the bush of the fields without having animals, that's feasible. It's even widespread, as all people here are cultivators.

*Author:* But you are solely engaged in animals?

*Tourad:* We only are engaged in animals, most commonly we do not exploit the fields. We have other people, we have parents who care for the fields, so the problem is not imposed on us. Whenever the winter season is coming, we go off to the bush and leave the question of the fields to our family. It's my mother who is always here, she occupies herself with the fields. She does this work on her own. If there is a profit with the millet, I will take a part of the millet and she will too. In fact, she worked in order to get millet, and it is my field she works on as well, the land is my property. Thus it is quite usual that she will give me a part of the harvest. . . .

*Author:* Your father, did he live under the tent?

*Tourad:* Yes, he lived under the tent for a long time, he lived there until he reached the age of thirty or forty years. Until he became qāḍī [an official qāḍī paid by the state] in A., he had always lived in this region. Until some time ago he had everything, sheep, goats, even camels, houses, date palms, everything. But all these things were gone before he died. First there was the drought, that decimated the animals, then successively the problems began. The houses were sold, the palm-trees too, and so on, until there remained nothing. I got nothing from his estate, there was not a sou left when he died [in 1971, after ten years of retirement from his office]. But for us Muslims this is good, a truly religious man often does not leave material goods.

*Author:* And in your youth you didn't herd the animals of your father?

*Tourad:* No, no, it was the time of slavery, of course! There were women and men to care for the animals in those times, this was not the job of the big chiefs.

*Author:* And do you remember any number of slaves with your father?

*Tourad:* At that time I had hardly come to exist, I was a child, I knew nothing of it, I didn't occupy myself with it. There are people who do the work, people who stay with my father in his family, they do everything, there are the ones who take care of the camels, others take care of the cows and so on. All that relates to these people didn't interest me. Why should I care about them? Care about the fate of people occupied with herding animals that don't exist anymore? These

people don't exist anymore and neither do these animals, the father [Tourad's father] doesn't exist anymore, so all this is of no interest.

### *Youba*

Youba is a son of one of the 'amīr Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar's brothers, who being themselves of noble origin by father *and* mother, in the first decades of French colonisation had opposed their ḥarṭāniyya-born brother's ambitions towards the emirate (cf. p. 105-108). Youba, equally well born by a ḥarṭāniyya, was less lucky than the famous 'amīr. Today he is not with the rich and influential people of noble origin, but lives, after returning from a long cycle of wage labour migration, in simple circumstances amidst the sūdān in A., one of the villages inhabited almost exclusively by sūdān.

*Youba*: I was born in M. in 1949. My mother, an . . . was there because her mother was from M. and the mother's husband . . . was already dead at that time. My father here is from the Ahel Swayd Aḥmed. He married my mother here, I was the only one to be born in M., all my other brothers and sisters were born here. Today only we children, like my brothers and me remain. Father and mother are dead.

At the age of seven I went to school. I passed the CFD and went up to the fourth class. Then I left school, and went to Nouakchott and started working there. After some years there I came back here. Ever since I am here, I have been in this village, I built this house, I built some dams, I cultivate this soil, that's my occupation.

At the age of seven there were about 16 tents in my father's camp. During the rainy season we were on the Tagant, wandering around Daber, Kehmeit, Bourraga and Achram [a second Achram on the Tagant]. During the dry season we were down in the Aftout, most often the camps then were near Garaouel [a permanent source]. All tents in the camp were of ḥassān, there were no ma'ālimin and no zwāya, but there were servants.<sup>26</sup>

*Author*: So did you count the servants within the 16 tents you mentioned?

*Youba*: Yes I did, one counts the tents of the servants, these are tents, there are people living in there, one counts them.<sup>27</sup>

*Author*: Yes, sometimes there are people who don't count them, who tell that they are just one family, together with their servants.

*Youba*: They are just a family as everybody's. Look, if a servant has houses here, and if you then start to count those houses, then do you count the servant's houses or not?

The servants pounded the millet and they also fetched the water from the wells or sources. They did this work with the help of donkeys. At this time, the camps were always near the water places, they did all the work. They also herded my father's animals. He had two herds of goats and sheep. Each one with more than 200 animals, most of them were sheep, both black sheep and white sheep. These herds were herded by two servants. They were not paid, they were ours. My father had about 120 cows, too, and 6 horses and 4 or

5 camels, all of them males, they were just for riding. These herds were not much work, even milking wasn't, as during the rainy season [major lactation period] many of the females were given as *mniḥa*<sup>28</sup> to poor people. There were also *ḥubs*<sup>29</sup>, not many, only with a few people. All this is finished nowadays. All these loans were for the poor people. You have to know them before giving a loan, and if you don't, you can ask somebody who knows about them. He will tell you everything.

Our family had four servants and four women. Each of them being together with a woman had a tent of his own. There were three such tents with us. In the whole camp there were five tents with servants. The *ḥassān* had thirteen tents. There were *ḥassān* without servants as well, and sometimes our servants worked for them too. Some of the *ḥassān* were poor, some only had two or three cows, and a few goats and sheep, say 30-40. About five families had nothing at all, another five were modestly poor, with only few animals, the rest were better off.

I passed my time at school in A. They had a kitchen and a house where the children attending school lived and could eat. School lasted from October till June. My father came to visit me and give me some money. I was his only son to go to school, I had brothers bigger than me, but they didn't go to school. There are also brothers of my mother, and sisters too. At that time somebody who had many animals didn't like to send his children to school. The one who took me to school was the *'amīr*, Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar [it was the *'amīr*'s duty to recruit the children for school]. He came to my father to ask for me, then my father gave me to him. He didn't come a second time, my father was a brother of Abderrahmane. My brothers kept beneath the tent all the time, they did not attend the school run by the state, they had their education with some *zwāya*. They learnt one quarter or half of the *Qur'ān*. They also rode camels and horses, they did nothing but ride them, they never herded animals. There were other people to do that, one of them is called Dedoud, another Messaoud, another Ahmed, and one Laghlave. This is the one who is still here [with me].

My father always had these big herds, from time to time he sold some animals to somebody who took them to Senegal in order to sell them there and bring back tea, cloth and clothes. In those times these transactions were profitable. In the past money wasn't like it is today, in former times you could buy a cow for only one *Ougiya* [UM].<sup>30</sup> We didn't suffer shortage, we had a good life. The first time we experienced shortage was 20 years ago, it was during the big drought [1969]. Out of all the animals only 100 goats and sheep remained, together with four cows, one horse and one camel. They all died. We stayed here in the *Aftout* throughout the whole year. Yes, there were people moving to the south in quest of pasture, and there were those staying here. At that time we didn't have anything to move with, with those animals remaining we couldn't move any more. My father was always here, in the *Aftout* and on the *Tagant*, he never left this area. He has a lot of dams here and on the *Tagant*, the animals always found pasture around here. The only reason why all the animals died was the drought, the animals got diseases and died. There are a lot of diseases . . . After the

drought we increased cultivating the fields. So we found a lot of millet. Everybody did so, the shepherds too, they now are cultivators. My father died much later, in 1979.

*Author:* So when did you leave for Nouakchott?

*Youba:* The time I left, Nouakchott still was very small, my mother was married by another man . . . [a famous journalist at radio Mauritania, member of another ḥassān tribe], so I started a training at the radio in 1962. I left the job after eight months, there was no remuneration with it and no hope that my situation there would change. In 1963 I joined the army, we earned 300 UM per month, but we got food and accommodation for free. Two years and three months later I left and started work as timekeeper with SACER, the company building the road between Nouakchott and Rosso. Later I did another seven months with the SNIM in Nouakchott, until Haidalla took their house.<sup>31</sup> This happened about 1980 or 1981, then I came here. In fact I didn't spend the years of the drought here. Everything I know about the drought comes from my brothers. They told me what happened.

In the city I found some money, but not much. Here it is better, much better, one can find much more. There one finds nothing, there is nothing, there are a lot of bandits around there nowadays. They don't get work, they just steal, they eat the theft. Here everything is calm. If somebody is working he will be better off here than in Nouakchott. You know, all these Mauritians that were in Dakar, ever since they returned, there is nothing left to get in Nouakchott. Before it was always possible to get something, this now has stopped completely.<sup>32</sup>

I have a lot of plots here, dams and small dams. There are six on the Tagant and seven or eight around here. All the plots we have are for our tent [ḥaima], the family of A.M., I own them together with my brothers, some of whom are in Nouakchott now. It happens that they come and cultivate here. We own a quarter of the A. dam, which measures about 1,000 metres width to 1,000 metres length, eight mūd of seeds are needed to cultivate it, and the yield can be as much as 4-5,000 mūd.<sup>33</sup> And there still are other plots, Amriche, Aoudach, Asma'ā, Jreif. Some of these are exclusively for our family. We normally lend plots from them [to people needing land for cultivation], Amriche for example is shared among thirty families cultivating there, and there are other plots like that. We are not paid for lending them to all the people asking for them. The habit of lending plots in return for a part of the harvest is only practised by the Leḡwāreb [a neighbouring zwāya tribe]. We don't do that, we just give. The Leḡwāreb, if they lack the facilities to cultivate, they have to get somebody to do the work in their place. In order to do so, they provide him with the necessary seeds, and he will later share the harvest with them.

My harvests usually are between 200 and 300 mūd, it's just enough to eat of during the year. I can't afford to buy more animals, although I would like to. I have two sheep and two goats. My eldest son, who is now seventeen, doesn't cultivate with me, he is in Nouakchott.

## EXPLORING THE CHANGE

### The Paradox of Manumission

The biographic narratives reveal the image of a highly diversified, often contradictory social landscape, where status positions are achieved and maintained by making use of various sets of social practices and values. With regard to the slaves struggling for enhanced autonomy and to gain social recognition, the fundamental difference, as explored by Claude Meillassoux (1986: 11), between the individual condition a slave experiences and his estate is obvious. The game of ending slavery from the slave's perspective is about successively cementing practised condition into statutory definition (cf. Glassman 1991: 289).<sup>34</sup> This is a paradoxical project as such, because the condition always symbolises the individual's relationship to the slave estate, even if this might be vanishing over time. This ambivalence, which is fundamental to any slave condition, reveals that the whole process of social ascension is precarious for slaves. It is only possible through the tacit consent of all people involved, and therefore is always open to reversal. In this regard, it is true, there can be no real freeing of slaves, manumission merely represents a new condition constructed on the foundations of the slave estate (cf. Meillassoux 1986: 121f.). The practice of a public, focused taboo as regards the former slave's origin that is at the core of either legalised or self-attained manumission, finds itself subverted by the persistent knowledge of the event, i.e. the true origin. The notion of *ḥarātīn*, which has come to mean "manumitted slave" in the Mauritanian context, is the best evidence of this (cf. p. 39). Although the former slave receives the legal rights of a free man, the reference to his former estate, his slave origin, is a public matter. Claude Meillassoux is perfectly right when stating that real freeing of slaves needs a complete anonymity, the complete deletion of the slave's past and origin:

Parmi les populations que j'ai étudiées, les véritables affranchis, c'est-à-dire les esclaves ayant récupéré toutes les prérogatives et l'honneur des francs, on ne peut les nommer, ne même admettre qu'on les connaît comme tels, sans leur faire perdre aussitôt le bénéfice de la franchise dont l'objet est précisément d'effacer à jamais le stigmate originel de la capture ou de la naissance servile. De telles familles existent. (Meillassoux 1986: 122)

The fatal determination which the slave estate entails is evident. To one of slave descent, any social status will in effect be a slave's condition. The act of manumission, the legal attainment of a free man's rights bears a fatal double bind: without knowledge about the personal dependency, the slave estate, there can be no such socially powerful act as manumission. Manumission thus always manifests what it is supposed to end, the knowledge and control of origins, and the power of those possessing it. Of course, knowledge of origins as a matter of power and control will vanish in time, or rather in the course of generations, but as long as social categories such as *ḥarātīn* do

prevail, there is only a shift from specific, personalised to abstract, social knowledge of descent. Nevertheless today's struggle for social ascension and integration is real and ongoing, thus some ways out of the impasse have to develop. Neither demographic change nor the instruments of legal manumission can keep up to the pace set by social change (cf. chapter eight).

As much as the fundamental category of estate is needed to apprehend the circularities of slavery and manumission, any attempt at understanding the institution whilst neglecting the dynamics of the slave's condition must fail. Being a slave follows the logic of a perverted dialectic of estate and condition. There can be no slave estate (and use of slaves) if in practice the humanity of the slave were not recognised, i.e. if there were not a slave's condition partially neglecting the inhuman logic of the estate, associating the slave with a legal commodity (cf. Meillassoux 1986: 9f.; Finley 1968: 308). This condition, on the contrary, could not be upheld without the master's permanent option to withdraw from practising condition and to apply estate. This is only one aspect of the condition-estate relationship, one which does not consider temporal and spatial evolution. Maintaining slavery and thus the slave estate requires the maintenance of the hegemony of the social system. The initial violence of the slave appropriation has to be transformed into structures of domination, preserving the slave estate through the social control of space in time.

Most probably the change in the topology of social dependence during this century has been the most determining threat to slavery. Colonisation ended the territorial and political hegemony of the masters and thus called into question the founding element of the structural violence needed to maintain the slave estate. If a slave had the option to go where nobody knew him, then unlike manumission truly liberation took place. This logic provided the decisive incentive for some West African slave populations to leave their masters shortly after colonisation had become effective (cf. Klein 1988 and 1993c, Roberts 1988; Cooper 1979: 118).<sup>35</sup> Besides this fundamental, abrupt end to the slave estate, change was induced on a small scale level. Colonial forces, especially in Mauritania, were far from exercising an evenly distributed control of the local territory. Far more their power ripped strategic patches of territory out of the indigenous people's control. Thus the master's web of social control was infected by white patches of an anomic type, inflicted by the colonists. It was first in the few nuclei of modern (colonial) urban areas where the control of the other's origin failed to work properly, due to the lack of reliable references induced by increasing anonymity. The process would not have been possible, however, without offering a material basis the new existence could be based on. Wage labour performed this function (cf. Roberts 1988).<sup>36</sup> With these patches becoming more and more numerous and consolidated, leaving the territory of slavery did not even have to be permanent. Shifting between the different spheres of social hegemony became possible, with a new, free-type status achieved in the new social context, and the individual backed with the means to defend it even on

hostile ground. The pertinence of this new topology of dependency is the real threat to slavery, for it challenges its framework, or in the terms proposed by Patterson, its outer dialectic:

There is an inner dialectic, by which the basic forces of slavery are revealed: master against slave; power against powerlessness; alienation against disalienation; social death against social life; honour against dishonour. This inner dialectic, however, works itself out as part of a wider, outer dialectic: that of the dynamics of the relationship between slavery, seen as a single process, and the total complex of processes which we call society or the social formation. It is this outer dialectic which, in the last analysis, determines the outcome of the struggle within the inner dialectic. It determines, for example, whether master or slave wins; whether powerlessness is what it appears to be or something else. (Patterson 1979: 47)

In the internal logic of the slave estate, there has never been space for systematic counter-power from the slaves. Although there always was slave resistance, the better conditions achievable for the slave depended on the master's grace. Manumission thus, according to Islamic jurisprudence, was conceived as "a pious act that was good for the master's soul" (Patterson 1982: 227). Honour in the unchallenged master-slave relation thus always has to be on the master's side.<sup>37</sup> The slave as the "social outsider" (Finley 1968: 308) is by no means considered to contest the master's honour, hence this fact has to be enacted in interaction in order to constantly reproduce the structures of social representation. The case has strong analogies to the play of honour and shame in the North African Kabyle society as instructively described by Pierre Bourdieu. This play is a deeply relational one and to step out of the relation, i.e. end it by force, is to stop performing honourably, hence to dishonour oneself. Handling insults by a social outsider under these circumstances is a tricky matter, for one who is honourable has to ignore any actions an *amabbul*, an impudent, shameless man undertakes – annoying as they may be. Responding publicly would mean the noble's acknowledging an inferior's ability to insult him, hence making responsible for his action someone conceived as principally irresponsible for his own behaviour. To solve conflict, or better to get rid of harassment, the noble can appeal for mediation by a third party, e.g. by a relative of the *amabbul* (cf. Bourdieu 1972: 15ff.). The most important aspect of behaving honourably in the Kabyle society thus is to maintain the public fiction of the non-provocative character of any *amabbul* action, to maintain as distinct the spheres of social life.

Many aspects of this interplay between deviant and honourable behaviour can be traced within the master-slave relation. The production of honour for the master depends on the reproduction of the social dichotomy of honour and ignorance, of master and slave behaviour. This relation is found at the basis of the fictive paternalistic ties between the two parties, which define the

slave as a legal minor, and the master as being responsible for him (cf. Ould Cheikh 1993: 182). To a considerable extent this fiction works. The slave has no honour to lose when offending anybody, he thus can even enact his social opposition to the master by speaking of the unspeakable, e.g. publicly referring to matters of sexuality (cf. Tausin 1989b). Conflict with another party raised by a slave is handled much like those involving an *amabbul*. The slave, the legal minor, is irresponsible, hence his master, obliged to watch the slave, has to compensate for the damage. This legal rule, in fact very much resembling an owner's responsibility for damage inflicted by his livestock, could be made work to the advantage of slaves. There are several narratives, especially from Mauritanian colonial administrators, that slaves adopted the habit of changing masters by cutting or biting off a piece of their hoped-for new master's ear. Their old masters thus were obliged to hand over the slave in compensation to the mutilated individual.<sup>38</sup> The slave's non-honour, hence the non-responsibility of his behaviour is most clearly demonstrated here; the mutilated *bizān* is not supposed to inflict any punishment on the slave who has injured him, but is to be given justice by the slave master (cf. Ould Mohamed 1988: 57).<sup>39</sup> This interplay of honour and shame could be juggled successfully, as long as the triangulation of the relations between nobles and slaves worked out. But the slave is an outsider of a different kind than the *amabbul*. While the latter will always remain part of the society, this is not necessarily the case for the slave, nor is it always necessarily his wish.

A slave running away from his master explodes the paternalistic framework which at this very moment is revealed to depend on the master's ability to watch his slave. It is not the master's individual honour the fleeing slave thus challenges, as he can be compared to animals getting lost, but he does threaten the slave society's paternalistic ideology. Individually, a master could ignore a slave's flight despite the economic loss this might entail, but such a decision hardly results from individual reasoning. The masters' reactions have to meet the exigencies of coping with the undermining of slave control resulting from the slave's ultimate disobedience. Dealing with deviant behaviour such as slave flight is not a matter that produces honour, it is simply beyond the fictive social ties of paternalism and hence beyond the spheres of honour. Getting a slave back means re-entering the grounds of honour and re-establishing the master-slave relationship which is the precondition for the production of symbolic goods like honour. Nevertheless, catching an escaped slave and forcing him back ultimately dismantles the relations of power poorly veiled by the paternalistic practices following the initial violence of slave raid and trade. Slave punishments too were designed to maintain the system in moments of latent crisis of the masters' hegemony. Individual loss experienced by the masters through the mutilation or killing of slaves was not enough to enable slaves to publicly demonstrate some sort of power. There are reports of slaves being mistreated, and most brutal punishments were inflicted on slaves who had tried to escape. One such practice is reported by an old slave recaptured after an attempt at flight from

his host Rgaybāt tribe. Back with his masters, he was mounted on a camel not watered for a long time, and his legs bound together beneath the animal. The camel was watered, and its expanding belly dislocated the slave man's hip joints, hence disabling him for the rest of his life (cf. Caratini 1989: 102).<sup>40</sup>

Whenever the outer dialectics made the master-slave relation change to a degree that meant that masters had less power to threaten fleeing or otherwise disobedient slaves, the slaves' power in bargaining about their condition grew considerably. This is why, though there was no consistent colonial anti-slavery policy (in some regards, colonial policy was indeed reactionary),<sup>41</sup> colonisation brought a new pace to changes in slave conditions. While during colonial conquest many French commanders had behaved much like indigenous conquerors,<sup>42</sup> colonial administrators following them frequently developed a taste for enmeshing themselves in the game of local tribal politics (cf. Féral 1993). In the eyes of the colonised this made the new rulers appear to be nothing but new masters superimposed on the old ones during the initial years of colonisation. They also introduced a new "master's lifestyle" – but not necessarily one more desirable for the dependents. This new style can be seen at its most imaginative in the term "esclave du commandant". Such was the common designation for people living in the "villages de liberté", installed by the French during their conquest of the western Sudan as early as 1849 to attract dependent people, and build up an unfree labour-force (cf. De Chassey 1984: 92; Ould Cheikh 1993: 187).<sup>43</sup> More significant to the change in master-slave relations were the French military posts, introducing a new element into the rather limited *bīzān* urban sector, and hence rapidly restructuring the topography of urban settlements (cf. Ruf 1995: 138f.). These urban nuclei provided new patterns of social life, which, based largely on wage labour, provided slaves with a real alternative to their previous state of life, or at least the model of one.<sup>44</sup>

Under these circumstances masters had to cope with a double contestation of their power. Colonisation called into question both the slave condition and the foundations of the slave estate. While coercion as a medium of maintaining the master-slave relation on the individual level might have worked for a long time due to the limited extent of colonial power, it broke down as a general means of upholding slavery, once many slaves lived in areas where it was relatively easy to withdraw from the direct control of their masters, an opportunity obviously used in the Tagant region (going by the complaints of local notables; cf. note 35, this chapter) and the south-western zones of the colony (cf. De Chassey 1984: 93f.). As only a limited number of slaves absconded, those continuing to stay near their masters, or at least maintaining relations with them, probably had good reasons to do so. Economically, leaving meant taking considerable risks. Wage labour opportunities emerged in relevant numbers only after the independence of Mauritania. Until then the bulk of opportunities of working for money was located in the cities and the plantation sector of Senegal.<sup>45</sup> Seasonal migration patterns of both slaves and *ḥarāṭīn* give a hint that instead of an abrupt

interruption of ties with the masters, many preferred their slow and mutual change.<sup>46</sup> To comprehend this option, the discussion of the relations of honour between slave and master has to be taken up again.

While the slave was unable to challenge the master's honourable position within the master-slave relationship, the slave's existence was the precondition for unfolding the space for honour manifested in the distinct lifestyles of slaves and masters. A slave staying close to a master now became ever more a deliberate choice, and as a consequence slaves had the means to bargain about their condition. Symbolically maintained, the master-slave relation gradually transforms itself into an affair of mutual interest. Here it is the paternalistic ideology surrounding with slavery that provides a whole stock of representations, including a configuration where strong slaves confront weak masters but do not abandon the interplay of honour within the master-slave relationship. Involving the slave in the relationship, admitting him into a role as actor means acknowledging him some honour, recognising him socially. This practice marks the breakdown of a rigid distinction between master-slave relations on the one hand, and patron-client ties on the other (cf. Patterson 1979: 36). Increasing slave autonomy within the dominant ideological framework up to the point of being accorded manumission, i.e. a status transformed from that of slave, (*ʿabd*), into manumitted slave, (*ḥarṭāni*), is revealing in this regard. Although it might result from an inverted power relationship between slave and master, the act of manumission is able to maintain the fiction of the master as the dominant actor, the one providing the most honourable action. Direct submission is replaced by relations of patronage and guidance, *walāʾ* (cf. Patterson 1982: 241ff.). These relations can be enacted publicly to the honour of both, slave and master, whereas the struggles leading to status transformation are of no public concern, and no matter of honour.<sup>47</sup>

These tracks channelling changes in the master-slave relation enacted within the paternalist ideologies framework are one fundamental reason why the formerly uncertain practice of social taboo on social relations of dependence is condensing more and more into a real "culture of amnesia", creating a sort of mutual muteness aimed at respecting each others' honour.<sup>48</sup> Achieving such consent on keeping silence on matters of status, and especially relations between estate and condition, in fact means joining an accelerated process of subversive status transformation. To be sure, the step is gradual, for in private most will go on knowing about their own, and many others' slaves, but already the manner of speaking of these in public is changing, and the empathy of the interests involved is dwindling. It is much like a Mauritanian proverb, used by my research assistant, Khalifa Ould Kebab, to characterise the ambivalence in master-slave relationships in the face of the slave's flight: "Don't try to get back someone fallen into a torrent." There is no way to withhold a slave who has decided to leave; instead one must prevent any such decision, for otherwise one would also be swept away by the stream, i.e. experience another defeat. This of course is a *ḥarṭāni's* view. But it refers

clearly to the mutual character of the consensus on keeping public silence on the subject of former master-slave relationships. Again Khalifa Ould Kebab: “If for example you see a white family now paying some *sūdān* to work on their fields and they didn’t do that before, this will mean that they don’t have *sūdān* any longer, i.e. their *sūdān* aren’t with them any longer. You know this, because otherwise they wouldn’t have paid somebody for the work. If ever they have somebody to do this work for them without payment, they wouldn’t choose to give away their money like that.” Changing status, or rather changing the individual master-slave relationship, is not a public concern; it will always have to remain a private affair, for otherwise it would not work within the framework of honour. In the context of rural life and most close face-to-face relationships privacy in fact is a lure. Changing the master-slave relationship privately under such conditions does not mean that nobody will know what is going on, but that there will be an unspoken agreement not to allude to the subject publicly. Again it becomes evident that changing the slave condition is not the locus of collective action, but rather is a matter of individual bargaining on relations of power and honour.

### Getting Free

When *Badeyn* left his adoptive *bīzān* mother, he did so upon his individual decision, for he had no option of regaining his former condition of being treated like a free-born child. This surely was not the result of a changed attitude of his fictive *bīzān* mother, to whom he still has an emotional attachment, and who cried about the fact *Badeyn* had learned of his origin. Neither was it a consequence of the adoptive mother’s new husband behaving like a “*bīzān* without colour”, i.e. behaving “whiter” than most other *bīzān*. It was rather due to the impasse *Badeyn* himself now had to face in local society. Individually his condition perhaps could have changed for the better with passing time and new constellations in the coming at home, but socially and in his own mind, he never would have had a chance to escape an existence as a mere slave child, having no legal, i.e. parental ties with his host family.<sup>49</sup> What else was there for an ambitious young man to do, than rely on what most probably is at the core of *ḥarāṭīn* identity, and what Ann McDougall (1988: 379) called the *ḥarāṭīn* “work ethic”? In fact, in most of my conversations with *ḥarāṭīn* work was a major topic, but then it was in many of the conversations with *bīzān* as well. What differed was the emphasis laid on the subject and the work-related topics stressed (see chapter five).

*Badeyn* leaves his mother with virtually nothing in his hands – and nothing but uncertainty ahead. To go out and look for a job to rely on is an astonishing biographic pattern if evoked by a member of a society in which the corollary of social security first and foremost is achieved through family and affiliate networks. Neither were available to *Badeyn*. He had no parents to rely on (they all died in the epidemic when he was a small child), nor had he direct access to affiliates, e.g. closely associated members of his tribe, for he had to leave his masters, i.e. the supporters of his tribal affiliation, without

approval. Although this cannot be proven empirically, he presumably really had nothing else to rely on, than to sell his labour power to gain his – now independent – living. The self-made *ḥartāni* at this moment of personal history thus bears startling resemblance to the Marxian proletarian who is defined by being free both of means of production, and free to sell his labour power (cf. Marx [1867] 1983a: 182f.). The difference is that he had not been deprived of his property in means of production, for a slave never had this, but at best precarious rights of use over land and animals.

Of course, again I have to note, this case is at the margins of the master-slave relationship, but only in that it reveals the most extreme edge of what the basic configuration of a self-manumitted slave's condition is. Badeyn is well aware of his deprivation, he remarks that he was without any “arms” to support him when fired for the first time from his job as a mechanic at the local development project. Later, when the project was gradually closing down after the expatriate experts had left, again the question was raised of who of the 65 employees would have to leave first. Again he presented the image to me of being without “arms” in the project to help him (the *šariv*<sup>50</sup> who once helped him to get a job had moved to another place a long time before). Already foreseeing my next question he reiterated that in this locality he was completely alone, for he had no family to rely on. Affiliate support was weak because he had married into a foreign tribe, thus lacking nearly any local support except for solidarity from a small *ḥarātīn* community among which there were many members of his own tribal origin. At the time I doubted that he would be among the first dismissed, for I knew him to be a well trained mechanic; but as often was the case, he was right, not me.

It was always work which determined Badeyn's life – for the good and the bad. Getting a particular job offered access to specific resources, among those the creation of new affiliations, thus reversing the pattern revealed in some *bīzān* narratives (cf. Moustava's job in a Boghé shop and Youba's first job at Radio Mauritania). The first stage in the long and multi-faceted working life of Badeyn marked the break with all his former relations. Working as a washer in an army camp was wage labour without any allusion to traditional bonds. Away from his home area, Badeyn had time to grow out of his former condition, perhaps a prerequisite for his later return as a camel herdsman for a “friend of his”, who in fact is one of the major *bīzān* of Badeyn's tribe. Discussing the various aspects of different jobs was a never-ending topic with Badeyn, who turned out to be a sort of practical labour encyclopaedia. The narrative in fact represents only a part of his knowledge. Building a well in different soils, herding camels or goats, healing men and animals by traditional means, cultivating any sort of local plants, constructing clay houses, baking the *bīzān* type of French baguette, or repairing a four-wheel-drive Mercedes, Badeyn had at least one answer to any kind of question, hardly any kind of work existed, apparently, he had not yet mastered.

The way in which the commitment and necessity to work is decisive in a *ḥartāni*'s life becomes most evident in the history of Badeyn's first marriage.

Having had some good time working for the SO.NA.DE.R (Mauritania's national company for rural development) in his natal region, he married a slave woman. Problems arose when the company closed down its local operation and moved to Achram, some 60 km to the south (linked to the place by a, then partially very sandy, and hence difficult track of 100 km). Having both gained some experience on the job, and being in need of a new remunerated job, Badeyn decided to leave for Achram. By chance he found that a *šarīf* for whom he once had washed clothes was the leader of the project garage. Having one "arm" at the right time at the right place turned out to be helpful also for Badeyn. While on the job side, thanks to his self-elected, work-mediated affiliation with some *bīzān* nobility he was lucky, this turned out to be fatal to his small, young family. After living for some years as a sort of monthly weekend commuter, he wanted to get his wife to move with him to his work-place, Achram. This most normal aspiration failed due to the woman's slave estate. It was not up to the woman's parents (whom Badeyn had asked first, thus enacting *bīzān* customs to the full) to give consent to the project, but her masters, whom he had asked second. As long as she stayed close to her masters, Badeyn's wife could live under conditions much like those of formally manumitted *ḥarāṭīn*, but her masters' attitude changed when threatened by a slave willing to leave with her husband for a place 60 km as the crow flies south, and out of their tribal territory. Direct control of the slave, profit from work delegated to her, and control of her children, legally property of the masters, in this case would have been seriously weakened. And when the passing of a couple of years' time had not changed the masters' mind, Badeyn had to found a new family, marrying a true *ḥarṭāniyya* of the local Ahel Swayd Aḥmed tribe.

Getting free in Brahim's case reveals both similarities and contrasts to Badeyn's case. Brahim grew up in a slave family, thus he took on his mother's status and belonged to the mother's master. His father continued to belong to his own master. Neither of the *zwāya* masters were bad; they let the slaves marry and left them on their own much of the time (an attitude by no means shared by all *bīzān*, as can be seen in the narrative of M'Barke). As his family was relatively well off, Brahim even had time for traditional education during summer. This is remarkable, for his father died as early as 1970, i.e. before Brahim began his learning. Later, after colonel Ould Haidalla's announcement of suppressing slavery, the master formally manumitted the whole family – on their request – by a written contract, and without claiming compensation.<sup>51</sup>

It is Brahim's mother, Zeyneb, who alters this image: things have not always been so harmonious, for her master's family was in need of slave labour for a long time, but above all female slave labour. In the course of her life Zeyneb managed step by step to change the scope of obligations towards the master. First, after marrying, she could limit work in the master's household to the summer season, while during the rainy season and winter, she cultivated with her family. In the summer the master's family was most in

need of support, because fetching water was hard work, with water-places often distant from a camp moving in quest of ever-rarer pastures. Milk at this time of the year also was running out, so that dishes prepared with millet became much more important to the pastoralists' diet, hence demanding much (female) work of pounding and preparation. Finally Zeyneb's personal involvement in the master's household work ended with her having daughters old enough to be sent to the master to replace her. Only then was she able to stay with her husband all year long in the adabay, the sedentary camp of the sūdān located near the fields, still contributing to the master's income by sharing the harvest with him.

The career of the slave men differed significantly: they left the master much earlier for such spurious reasons as "not being able to bear the work with the master any longer".<sup>52</sup> They were primarily engaged in cultivating the fields, and apart from sharing their harvest with the master, interest in *male slave labour* seems to have been low when compared to *female slave labour*. This might be specific to the case under discussion, for the master's herd obviously had already declined before the severe drought in 1969 decisively decimated its numbers, which in turn reduced the amount of predominantly male tasks of watering and milking animals, especially large animals. Therefore it can be argued that agricultural revenues had gained in importance to the master's household, even before the long drought challenged the region's pastoral production system. At any rate agriculture, together with the gathering of wild plants, was an important asset to the subsistence of the slaves themselves, and hence helped to keep the costs of slavery low. As a consequence of the decline of pastoral productivity, the master's son preferred work as an employee, a shop manager for one of the well-off members of his tribe, to reconstituting the father's herd. While the master's son left the rural area to work for a wage, Brahim's family continued and even increased their agro-pastoral activities – and continued to share their harvest with the master's family.<sup>53</sup> In addition Brahim, his father and his brothers had started doing paid work for some other bīzān to their own benefit. Herding, following a widespread rule, was paid for with one goat every two months and ten days, and watering small stock and cattle was remunerated in animals as well. As these were respected as a slave's individual belongings (until the slave's death), these activities demonstrated the limitations of the slave men's commitment to the master's income. Times apparently were not too bad. The family, though lacking a father, was able to constitute some herds and hence some wealth by their own work. Brahim, the youngest of all of his mother's sons, was free to leave during summer for his Qur'ān studies.

Although there seems to have been no clearly defined rule about sharing external revenues with the master, to state that the masters never profited from their male slaves working on a wage labour or otherwise remunerated basis, would be to ignore the characteristics of the master-slave relationship. This is revealed in the passage concerned with those sūdān already working abroad. Should they come home, they were supposed to give something to

their master, but according to Zeyneb it didn't matter if they did not meet this exigency. Brahim in a way reinforces this impression when describing the flux and reflux of goods between his master and himself. The master provides merchandise like the *darrā'a*, the traditional men's dress mentioned earlier, while the slave/former slave provides millet when he harvests; helps cultivating the master's fields, herding animals and in this case even negotiates assistance from the project for the construction of a small dam. Whereas the slave contributes to the master's undertakings by means of his labour power and its outcomes, in certain situations the latter provides goods acquired by market exchanges. In view of the different attitudes expressed by slaves with regard to sharing harvests and wage labour benefits or animal possession, however, another reason for this pattern can be advanced. The output of harvests is much easier to measure and control than individual property in money or animals.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout their lives, Brahim's family was engaged in increasing their independence from the master and his family. The first and major medium of performing autonomy was to increase spatial and symbolic segregation. The increasing affluence of *sūdān* to the *adwaba* (sedentary settlements of slaves and *ḥarāṭīn*) marked their at least seasonal physical separation from the master's family and camp. Residing sedentarily near the fields meant furthermore a lifestyle distinct from the master's. Although this difference manifested itself gradually, for both nomadic camps and *adwaba* in those days (some still now) lived under the same type of tents, bred animals and occasionally moved around, the ascriptive features associated with both camps and *adwaba* reveal a difference in the conception of these spheres of *bīzān* and *sūdān*. The latter are immobile, always bound to their fields, while the former are mobile, and follow their animals' needs for good pasture. Getting out of the camp thus meant taking a part in shaping this dualistic representation of the *sūdān* as cultivators and of the *bīzān* as pastoralists, despite the fact that many *sūdān* worked as dependent or hired herders and a number of poor *bīzān* already to a considerable extent engaged in agriculture (cf. p. 267-270).<sup>55</sup>

While separation in space was a major medium of increasing independence in the case of Brahim's family, the aim was not to disrupt these ties, but rather to alter them gently. Their action fits most neatly into the concept of aspiring to enhancement of estate by means of a step-by-step improvement in their conditions (cf. Glassman 1991: 289). Therefore their strategy in terms of space is not to move out of the range of control of their master, as Badeyn did, but to move to a well-known place at its borders. However, Brahim's relative independence from his childhood on, is not to be misinterpreted as the family being independent of their master's will as a whole. Zeyneb's narrative reveals very clearly the hardships slave women had to face when trying to increase their independence. As the master already was a kind one, he let his woman slave marry "officially", i.e. she was allowed to enact some ceremony and he respected the marriage and accepted that it entailed some

change in the practice of slave labour.<sup>56</sup> Zeyneb's commitment to the master's household's work from this event on was limited to the dry hot season and she had the right to live together with her husband under her own tent, and hence to constitute a proper family residence effective at least for some parts of the year. It was a most important achievement to be able to live an honourable life, i.e. close to the ideal presented by the masters.<sup>57</sup> This arrangement, which also served to reduce the costs of maintaining a whole slave family throughout the year, could only be changed further in Zeyneb's interest by having her daughters replace her. Although Zeyneb's condition changed, her estate could not be improved. She was still personally in charge of providing the labour power claimed by the master. Nevertheless, this configuration marks a breaking point in the balance between slave condition and estate, for it now is the mother who mediates the master's access to her children. As a reminder, one of Zeyneb's major arguments why she stopped living with the master was the existence of her children: "I then stayed with my children, until today. We continued to work our fields. We had our work. I did not return to the master, why should I?". This type of downsizing control over the slave women's offspring via the formation of a nuclear family might have happened in earlier generations too, but with the installation of the segregated patterns of mobility, reinforced by an increased economic autonomy through cultivation and breeding of small stock, and on the other hand the decline of the master's economic resources, the slave families' potential to withdraw their children from the master's exigencies grew considerably.

The importance of not confusing slave condition and estate becomes evident with the incident accompanying the death of Brahim's father. Directly after he had died, the master appeared to get back the father's animals, part of the master's legal property, as he is the inheritor of his slave's belongings. There are different aspects to be considered in this action. The master might have been in a difficult economic situation forcing him to take this action, for Brahim's father died in 1970, i.e. directly after (perhaps in consequence of) the heavy drought. Had the master not been in severe need of reconstituting his own stock of animals, perhaps he would not have relied as heavily on his dead slave's animals. A second idea is less speculative. None of those concerned really wondered or complained about the master's intervention, for all declare it was his right to do so. There is no obligation of the father's master to sustain his male slave's family, because these are the property of the wife's master (cf. Abd el Wahed 1931: 297). Once the father had died, his master no longer had any sort of relation with this family. So if there ever was one, now there was then no longer any question of bothering about disturbed relations towards this slave family, nor of bothering about their survival in a difficult economic situation – this was the task of the slave wife's master.<sup>58</sup>

Treating a slave man merely as a slave, i.e. as a slave "who is not guarded" does not mean giving up the prerogatives resulting from the slave estate; they

are just postponed. Regression from condition to estate could be enacted at any time, e.g. in the case of the master in need or entering into conflict with his slave. The pursuit of this logic reveals another fundamental crux of any *benign slave condition*: it is individual up to the point that it depends on the very relation of a (living) master and a (living) slave. What else but the slave's death could better symbolise both the end of the slave's struggle for better conditions and the end of the master's obligation to meet these individual exigencies?<sup>59</sup> Thus acting as Brahim's father's master did not offend anybody. This is why nobody bothers about the event, there is no respect to be expected for the dead non-person the slave is. Brahim's family was always aware of the threat resulting from the precarious legal situation their property was exposed to. Rather unusually for a pastoral society, Brahim claims that from his youth on, every member of the family had his own animals, marked by separate brands. This is nothing less than the attempt to construct a niche in the de-socialising framework provided by the denial of kinship, and thus legal personhood, to slaves. Even a marriage, concluded and publicly celebrated with the two masters' consent, does not imply any of the common social or legal rights free people attain by this contract (cf. Abd el Wahed 1931: 294-98; Meillassoux 1986: 128ff.). A slave marriage is not only bound to the masters' consent as its prerequisite (the masters replace the missing legal parents), but to its continuation. The due slave marriage is valid until revocation by one of the masters (see also the failure of Badeyn's first marriage). Herein lies the fundamental difference between marriage among free and unfree. For the former the first marriage is a means to step out of the parents' household and patrimony, i.e. to leave this sphere of control (cf. Tauzin 1984a: 89), but for the latter it is nothing more than a reallocation and reconfirmation of their relation of dependency towards the master.<sup>60</sup>

While in everyday practice slave families attained a condition enabling them to maintain patterns of family life much like those of their *bīzān* masters, they could not completely reproduce the household-economic model these were based on. Instead of building a family patrimony, the slave families were forced to manage their rights to belongings individually on a level not experienced among free *bīzān*. Among slaves living under conditions like Brahim's family's, goods were gained individually and – at least legally – had to be treated alike. Inner-familiar co-operation was drastically constrained by the fear of the master being able to take goods arbitrarily. In case things would come to the worst, the situation had to be handled to the family's advantage. The clear-cut dispersal of belongings among the individual members of the family, which resulted from the individualistic mode of their appropriation, was manifested through the application of distinct brands to the animals. This measure fitted neatly into a strategy aimed at securing the family's belongings as well as possible. The many limitations arising from the slaves' legal situation threatened above all the assets of dead slaves. Whereas this intra-familial organisation of belongings could diminish the risk of collective expropriation, it cemented the constraints on collective accumula-

tion as well. Because slaves were denied social parenthood, their kin had no rights in heritage. It was the masters who were the legal guardians of their slaves and thus had the right to appropriate their dead slaves' belongings (cf. Teffahi 1948: 13f.). This is why Brahim takes so much care to explain that he never got animals from his father, but earned all of them on his own. The logic of accumulation in a household economy based on redistributive arrangements between the generations is thus turned upside down in the context of slave families struggling for enhanced autonomy. Rather than have the young work as long as possible for the joint patrimony, and eventually give them a share (cf. Caratini 1989: 54), the slave elders are interested in seeing the young accumulate on their own as early as possible, while they resign control of these resources themselves. Although this most refined version of economic slave existence might be untypical, it is revealing of the main direction the attempts of slaves took when trying to fix spheres of autonomy within the legal framework of *bīzān* slavery.<sup>61</sup>

An analysis of symbols serves to stress this aspect. *Bīzān* mark their animals only with a tribal sign. Within *bīzān* families property is organised individually as well, but these distinctions are not revealed through the use of distinct brands; branding furthermore is reserved for the big animals which wander around without constant observation (cf. Caratini 1989: 52, 96ff.). The logic behind this differentiation in symbolism is evident. Free people's property in animals is threatened by the outer world, i.e. animals have to be identifiable on objective grounds if lost or stolen. The tribal brand informs potential thieves whose revenge they will have to fear, or more simply facilitates inquiry after lost animals. Only very rich families thus have their own brand in addition to the tribal marks (e.g. different branches of the emiral family). Within the *bīzān* family, and usually within the unit of nomadisation, the animals are known individually by their many characteristics, hence there is no need to introduce a symbolism of property on this level.<sup>62</sup> The case of slave families owning animals is different, as revealed by Brahim. They are unable to defend themselves or their belongings directly against intrusion from the outer world. Due to their estate they are legal minors. In any case of conflict exceeding the narrow boundaries of their camp, they have to rely on their masters to be defended in the tribal context, and be able to negotiate conflicts. The slaves' animals, whenever necessary, thus bear first and foremost the brand of their masters' tribal affiliation. The power to manage conflicts with the outer, intertribal world could only be achieved by this appeal to the masters' symbolism. Those brands slaves occasionally introduced on their own are of an altogether distinct character. They are located in the interior of privacy, not the outer social world. They distinguish family-members, not tribes and fractions. These brands therefore symbolise both the slaves' subsumption under the symbolic world of their masters, and the range of their social actions, effectively limited to self-enacting a further variety of the masters' conception of their estate relegating them to be social outsiders.

