Introduction

Studying the end of slavery means studying social change. In the case of the bīẓān society of Mauritania, i.e. the Moors, who are the focus here, this process of transformation constitutes a challenge in many domains. It affects social structures as well as patterns of identification in the former slave society and underlies changes in the economy. While some societies managed to leave relations of slavery behind quickly, this process is one of long duration in the case of the bīẓān society. Struggles between new and old, between relations of dependency embedded in the slave system and social relations no longer moulded in this framework have now been going on for decades. However, while this process only began to take shape slowly after the French colonisation of Mauritania at the start of the 20th century, the transformation of bīẓān society evolved at a faster pace since the 1970s. During this decade the country was first hit by the beginning of the Sahelian drought cycle. Later Mauritania occupied a part of the former Spanish Western Sahara; the subsequent war with the POLISARIO liberation movement, which was soon lost, led into a long period of political and economic instability.[1]

In the course of this fundamental restructuring of bīẓān society all major sectors of social and economic life were affected. Undoubtedly the most striking and visible change has been the sedentarisation of the vast majority of the former pastoral nomadic population and the rapid emergence of the capital Nouakchott as the biggest city in the country, today home to about one third of the national population. This rapid and profound transition also challenged relations of hierarchy and dependency. Where masters lost the means to sustain even themselves, they also lost all means to maintain others in a state of dependence. Where new economic opportunities which no longer unequivocally favoured the former masters evolved, subordination to them lost much of its meaning.[2] This recent turmoil in bīẓān society, however, helps the observer and researcher to investigate the change of social relations, for periods of accelerated transition make social relations transparent: they are discussed and contested publicly, taboos are broken, social norms and values questioned. In this respect, periods of crisis also provide information about the past when the present lines of conflict were already in place, but had not yet surfaced as a result of relations of domination still

remaining largely unquestioned.[3] Moments of crisis thus are moments in which the past becomes rationalised, and is remembered and expressed in new terms, for what is no longer self-evident needs explanation. These newly emerging discourses, far from simply representing the past, instead interpret it in order to speak about the present and the future. As such they are a crucial source in unravelling the past of subservient strata such as slaves and manumitted slaves. By discerning why and at which point relations of domination stop working, the researcher is able to see more clearly how they functioned in the past. This means dealing much more profoundly with one of the most crucial questions emerging in the context of a sociological approach to slavery, the question of *how is slavery possible*.

The present study aims to specify these questions and to suggest answers by analysing slavery in bīẓān society from different perspectives. Besides a discussion of theories of slavery and hence a definition of the problem in question, this means engaging in exploring the meaning of slavery in different contexts. Naturally descriptions of slavery differ depending on whether they are provided by masters or slaves, but they also differ among slaves because experiences are varied. The significance of slavery in bīẓān society, which gradually changed into a social institution legitimated and regulated by precepts of Islamic jurisprudence, as well as slavery in other societies, cannot be understood properly without an understanding of its history. It is this perspective that makes it possible to discern how and in which domains of society slavery was practised and what kind of ambiguous interrelation evolved between the shape of society and the practice of slavery. Finally, as this study aims to reflect on the end of slavery in contemporary bīẓān society, those processes and articulations marking and fuelling change have to be highlighted. These can be found both in past and present trends of social and economic change as well as in discourses which reinterpret the past in order to give the present a new shape.

Throughout the following chapters arguments will be developed throwing light not only on what slavery in bīẓān society meant in different phases of history, but also on how it was perceived by the different social strata, and among these above all by the slaves and manumitted slaves themselves. Besides a factual reconstruction of the slave past in bīẓān society and of its – quite vigorous – remnants in the present, these arguments are able to give insights on how the divide between masters and slaves was upheld and reproduced. Stating that for some decades now there has been a great change going on in master-slave relations, changes that even go so far as to result in their dissolution, does not imply that in former times these relations were static. Individual slaves' conditions always resulted in struggles over where to set the limits of a slave's freedom of action. Although the relation of power between masters and slaves tended to be biased drastically in favour of the former, coercion as a means of rule was complemented by negotiation, and slaves had means to resist and to oppose their masters' will.[4]

A Note on Terminology

Before presenting an overview of this book, an initial outline of the terminology of social hierarchy in bīẓān society has to be given. Moorish society is divided essentially into two major groups – *bīẓān* and *sūdān* – but these notions may refer to different people in different contexts. Bīẓān refers either to all freemen, i.e. only freeborn people, or to all speakers of the ḥassāniyya language, and thus includes all constituents of bīẓān society besides the freeborn, namely the slaves and manumitted slaves. To make transparent this distinction, the idea of a bīẓān ethnic community constituted by a shared language and culture will be expressed by the term *bīẓān society* in the following, while the designation *bīẓān* will only refer to the status group of freeborn people. Slaves and freed slaves as a group also sharing some features will appear under the emic designation of *sūdān*. However, the sūdān are far from constituting a uniform group. They are essentially divided into ʿabīd (Arabic: slaves; sing. ʿabd) and ḥarāṭīn (Arabic, sing. ḥarṭāni). The latter term is commonly described as meaning freed slave or freemen of secondary rank. As many members of this social group lay great emphasis on their claim not to have a slave ancestry, the notion of ḥarāṭīn will be used to comprise all these meanings, which in fact all describe the idea of a group of freemen which is distinct from the bīẓān, and discriminated against in some respects. A detailed exploration of bīẓān social hierarchy, taking up these definitions, will be given in chapter one, p. 38-44.

This Study

Theoretical reflections on the ambiguities inherent in the master-slave relation and on the implications the practice of slavery has on the shape of society will introduce central arguments of the present study in chapter one. In a discussion of major theoretical contributions to the study of slavery in Africa, the case of bīẓān slavery in Mauritania will serve as a foil against which theoretical approaches to slavery may be critically evaluated. By synthesising the arguments thus developed, the theoretical devices underlying the present study will be outlined. These insights will be used to discuss social hierarchy and conflicting interpretations of bīẓān social order. The chapter's final section will reflect on the methods of field research that were used to gather data among residents of the region of Achram-Diouk in central Mauritania. As living in slavery is an experience of personal alienation and in many respects of the annihilation of individual personhood, inquiring into this aspect of people's life means embarking on the most sensitive topics of individual life histories. Enhancing one's individual status in these circumstances has much to do with deleting and reconstructing the past. Because slavery is nothing glorious to remember, neither for the former slaves nor

their masters today, it does not become part of great public traditions and narratives. Instead it remains incorporated into tales of the past. There it figures as a subtext which can be deciphered and which is needed to apprehend fully how society worked. Despite all these problems individual accounts of life histories developed by biographic interviewing turned out to deal both directly and indirectly with the issue of slavery. The personalised character of this information was of great value. Individual data could be contextualised and related to information derived from other sources, but also be checked for internal consistency. Besides these analytical characteristics the narratives are a rich source of information because they gave those who had experienced slavery the option of describing their life in words of their own.[5]

Chapter two is devoted to the development of this narrative strain of argumentation. Based on a number of life histories, arguments will be raised which open the way for the evaluation of what slavery meant in rural Mauritania and what it continues to mean in the present. A discussion of how to bridge the gap lying between individual experiences and individual case-studies on the one hand and an analysis of slavery on the other introduces this approach, which has a prominent place in the context of this study. While most chapters are arranged in a systematic order, putting the emphasis on different topics and subjecting all kinds of empirical evidence to systematic questioning, this chapter has its own perspective. Rather than isolating out interview fragments, major parts of interviews are arranged into narratives, each of which deals with different perceptions of slavery and social hierarchy in bīẓān society, thus laying the basis for further discussion. Two narratives by slaves who managed to gain autonomy, though by very different means and starting from very different conditions, introduce this section. The second narrative is complemented by and contrasted with passages from two further life histories, that of the interviewee's mother and of the former master's son. The story of an old slave woman who continues to have strong affective ties to her masters but nevertheless manages to give expression to her experiences of humiliation deepens the insights on the different meanings of having been and being a slave. Shifting sides from the sūdān to the bīẓān, in order to get the outside view of slavery, a woman of tributary (znāga) status reveals some aspects of how female identity and a subordinate position in society shape individual aspirations. The circle is closed by two narratives from bīẓān men, who because of their mother having been of slave or manumitted slave status have come to live across the lines of status segregation. Major aspects of the relations of dependency and hierarchy surfacing in the narratives are worked into an initial synthesis of the different meanings slavery and ending slavery has for different members of bīẓān society. This outline of arguments will carve out from the narratives major insights into the working and ending of slavery in bīẓān society.

Certainly one of the greatest strengths of the life history narratives is that they highlight the relationship between gender and distinct practices of

slavery. Chapter three takes up this issue and further investigates the distinct position of slave women in bīẓān society. Indeed the experiences of slave women are marked by a strong ambivalence. They often lived closest to the masters, and were able to escape the slave estate and become incorporated into the freemen by marrying a freeborn man (an act that needed their formal manumission). This intimate relationship with the masters offered slave women a number of advantages with regard to status enhancement compared to slave men. However, being so closely intertwined with the masters also had distinct disadvantages. In addition to the integration of slave women into the society of the masters, manifested in distinct institutions such as milk-kinship, concubinage, secret marriage and marriage, slave women remained in a dependent position unlike that of free bīẓān women. Their avenue into the society of the freemen was paved by men. This made them experience resistance from free women who saw their power and bargaining abilities in marital relations threatened by the competition of slave women who would depend absolutely on the men.

A crucial aspect of the gender differential in bīẓān slavery is whether this phenomenon is of demographic significance. In order to explore this dimension, chapter four undertakes an evaluation of the African slave trades. Recent studies have underscored earlier evidence that the inner-African trade in slaves, as well as the slave trade to the Islamic world of North Africa and the Near East, transported markedly more women than men, while the opposite was the case in the trade of slaves across the Atlantic. Although sources that make it possible to assess directly the gender specifics or detailed figures of bīẓān slave imports are lacking, a number of sources indicate a bīẓān preference for slave women. When the trade in slaves came to an end at the beginning of this century, this interest in slave women persisted and might even have increased, as slave women then had become the only source of new slaves. While empirical evidence for the precolonial era is lacking, data from colonial records shows slave and manumitted slave women clearly outnumbering slave and manumitted slave men, and hence make a strong argument for the hypothesis. Further evidence is raised by survey studies conducted in eleven villages and neighbourhoods. These highlight that today the majority of those who remain bound to formal slave status in the area of Achram-Diouk are women, whereas formal manumission according to the precepts of Islamic jurisprudence remains to a large extent the privilege of former slave men.

Chapter five is concerned with another aspect of the gender differential in bīẓān slavery: the issue of a gender division of slave labour. As the life histories, and here again above all those of the slave women show, slaves could expect little respect for their gender identity in matters of the tasks they were assigned to. De-socialising and de-gendering slaves was a means to increase the difference between slaves and masters, and thus to maintain the latter's domination. Nevertheless slaves in bīẓān society were not subjected without differentiation to all kinds of labour. When the assignment of labour to slaves

revealed some of the patterns it had among the freemen, this was only partially a result of successful slave struggles. These differentials reflected to a large extent attitudes of the mistresses and masters, who did not want to have men of any status disrupt the privacy of the women's spheres, namely the tent and the camp. While occasionally slave men had to do housework or other tasks with a feminine connotation they were mostly supposed to remain at the periphery of the camp or beyond this boundary, in the bush. Slave women, on the contrary, were made more versatile workers. They could be assigned both work within the sphere of female privacy and beyond it. Nevertheless portraying slaves as having done all work misses the point. As the analyses of work in different sectors show, free members of bīẓān society participated in many productive activities, though with different emphasis. This partly resulted from numbers of bīẓān being too poor to own slaves themselves or owning too few to give up all work, but also from a social ranking of tasks that allowed bīẓān (men more than women) to do certain kinds of work without experiencing social discrimination while other kinds were perceived as dishonourable. Work thus was a social field in which status could be both expressed and achieved. While freemen could be forced from material need to perform tasks conflicting with their ideals of good conduct, slaves, and among these above all men, by being assigned jobs associated with the qualities of freemen, could manage to enhance their condition.

Currently persisting patterns of slavery in Mauritania are hard to understand and explain without considering the history of slavery and slave emancipation in this country. While the analysis of slave work in bīẓān society in chapter five has to strike a balance between the description of basic and hence persisting characteristics of slave work on the one hand and changes in the character and domains of slave work in the course of history on the other, chapter six is engaged explicitly with the history of bīẓān economy. The evaluation of the impact of trade on the economy of precolonial bīẓān society shows the desert pastoralists to have been involved in commercial transactions of a significant volume for centuries and to have adapted rapidly to changing market conditions. Certainly the most decisive change in the environment of the bīẓān economy was marked by the start of French colonisation, which coincided with the rapid decline of the trade in bīẓān gum arabic at the beginning of the 20th century. The subsequent shift to meat production for the rapidly emerging markets in the French colony of Senegal had a strong impact on bīẓān society and by restructuring the pastoral economy also affected the relations between masters and slaves. By creating new economic opportunities, above all for manual labourers, colonial rule opened up new opportunities which profited primarily slave men wishing to increase their economic autonomy. While the basic elements of this new configuration of master-slave relations were already laid out during the first decades of colonisation, economic diversification by wage labour and migration of slaves expanded rapidly after the Second World War.

The start of the still ongoing drought cycle in the Sahel in the early 1970s was the most decisive blow to bīẓān society, which until then had been portrayed as unchanged and somewhat archaic by many observers. Migration for work – until then almost exclusively a slaves' and former slaves' affair – suddenly became a necessity common for most freemen too. While the pastoral sector went into a deep crisis, efforts for the cultivation of subsistence crops, namely millet, were strongly increased. The result of this economic restructuring and drawback severely affected the configuration of master-slave relations, and transformed lifestyles. The bīẓān of Mauritania in only a few decades changed from a predominantly pastoral nomadic people into a sedentary people.

Chapter seven is dedicated to one of the most pertinent issues of continuing relations of dependency in Mauritania, the question of land tenure. Up to the present people with a slave past continue to suffer from their foremothers' and forefathers' exclusion from the ownership of land. Although the Mauritanian government issued new legislation on land ownership, designed to enhance the situation of the many landless making their living by something akin to sharecropping in 1983, the effects of this law, as well as later supplements, remain limited until today. Land tenure in most parts of Mauritania continues to be structured by customary arrangements strongly influenced by Islamic jurisprudence of the Māliki school. Starting from an overview of the legal framework of land tenure in the western Sahara and later Mauritania, the focus of this chapter turns to a number of case studies revealing how land tenure effectively changed in the course of this century as a response to colonial rule, changing relations of power within bīẓān society, and finally changing patterns of land-use. Hence it is shown how the ḥassān, the warriors of bīẓān society, who had previously held only political power, managed to achieve the proprietorship of land in the region of Achram-Diouk. Of vital importance to these acts of appropriation was the construction of small and large dams, an activity that was favoured by the colonial administration, which also developed a land register. From the 1970s on land tenure became an even more crucial question as a result of the drought cycle and the conversion of many former pastoralists to agriculture. Being the owners of the land, impoverished bīẓān masters started to claim increased duties from their cultivating dependents. In some cases land used by former slaves and slaves was even claimed back by its bīẓān owners. In this context distinct arrangements regulating access to land and between landless cultivators and land owners developed and will be analysed. While some of these new relations expressed the maintenance of old relations of dependency others mark an increased autonomy of slaves and former slaves. Finally the control of land is not only an issue of dyadic master-slave relations but also a highly political one, involving collective tribally organised use-rights, discussed both with regard to their significance for the relations of dependency and for the articulation of local politics.

Leaving the complex of historical, material and legal factors contributing to

the ongoing discrimination against people of slave past in bīẓān society, chapter eight embarks on an evaluation of the consequences of this power differential for the shape of Mauritanian society and politics. In an introductory section the politics of a distinct ḥarāṭīn, i.e. slave and former slave identity as opposed to that of the bīẓān masters and former masters is discussed. Here again the focus is on the situation in the rural hinterland, where lines of conflict and discourses are revealed to be strongly influenced by those developed in the cities. The presentation and analysis of distinct discourses and practices related to the production of identity and difference between bīẓān and sūdān, i.e. former masters and slaves and former slaves, makes it possible to further differentiate this argument. The struggle for emancipation of the dependent strata of bīẓān society results in members of this group stressing both their difference from and identity with their former bīẓān masters. This conclusion highlights yet again the ambiguity of slave condition, and demonstrates how patterns of social discrimination that have emerged in the course of slavery continue to shape the present. Finally it will be argued that the contradictions manifest in the slaves' and former slaves' discourses on identity reveal no false consciousness. Rather they bring to the fore how the contradictory nature of slave condition, which meant being both included in and excluded from society, continues to shape present day attitudes.

Today the process of emancipation of the servile strata of bīẓān society is still going on and it seems likely it will gain in significance. However, as will be argued in the concluding chapter nine, the aspirations of the former slaves and slaves means they are likely to further stress their identity with, and not their difference from the bīẓān, i.e. the former masters. This is not only the case in the rural areas, where face-to-face interactions and persisting knowledge of individual people's status and past make it difficult to struggle for dissociation from the society of the former masters. Indeed, the configuration of political power on the national level today leaves little room for other options. As has been shown for the case of the Sudan, the most beneficial choice for former slaves is to side with their former masters, wherever these control the vast majority of political and economic resources.