Preface

In 1980, slavery was abolished in Mauritania for the third time in the 20th century.[1] The issue is, however, of such longevity that it continues to attract the attention of abolitionists and human rights groups, but also of international donors and journalists up to the present day.[2] Like the vast majority of these popular perceptions the present analysis focuses exclusively on Moorish, or, in the terminology that will be adopted here, on bīẓān society. However, to equate slavery within this largest ethnic group in Mauritania with slavery in this country, as is frequently done in the media, is misleading. Similar institutions existed, and still can be traced too, among the black African ethnic groups in Mauritania as well as among most other Sahelian and West African ethnic groups. This is acknowledged and highlighted by a number of human rights groups, such as "Human Rights Watch", "Anti-Slavery International" and the Mauritanian "SOS esclaves", to name only a few.[3]

Closer to the heart of the matter are statements from pressure groups which criticise the government of Mauritania for doing at best little or else nothing at all to promote the slaves' and former slaves' emancipation and economic development, and hence for allowing slavery to continue. While these accusations cannot be compared with those against the government of Sudan, which has been accused at least for tolerating if not promoting the enslavement of women and children in the country's south by northerners, the whole issue seems outdated: after all it is more than 150 years since the abolition of slavery by France under the initiative of Viktor Schoelcher. This declaration, however, only followed similar earlier declarations concluded in 1792 in Denmark, in 1807 in Great Britain, and in 1815 at the Congress of Vienna. Today the framework of international consensus on the abolition of slavery, human rights and the rights of the individual is provided by the Universal Declaration of the Human Rights of 1948, the "Slavery Convention" of 1926, the "Forced Labour Convention" of 1930, the "Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery" of 1956, and the ILO convention nº 105 of 1957 concerning the "Abolition of Forced Labour". The various conventions not only condemn slavery and forced labour, but also call for measures to prevent these. In view of this long history of abolition, and the consensus on

this issue within the international community, the accusation of continuing to tolerate slavery hits hard. It brings into the present an institution of domination and oppression commonly thought to have long been consigned to history, and thus puts back on the agenda the question of what "slavery" means.[4]

I became involved with Mauritania, and with the problem of slavery in this country, in 1992. Besides the many fascinating aspects of bīẓān society I got to know during this first stay, I was struck by people speaking publicly and without any uneasiness of their slaves and former slaves. A little later I became acquainted with settlements inhabited exclusively by slaves and former slaves, and I realised that these people live in the worst conditions I had ever seen thus far – though I had to admit that the situation many of their masters lived in was hardly more enviable. This experience, which is first of all one of social inequality, and thus in no way particular to Mauritania, would not have raised my concern so strongly, had there not been what may be called a mental state of slavery: arrogance on the part of the former masters, the bīẓān, and subservience on the part of the sūdān, the slaves and manumitted slaves (ḥarāṭīn).

Having worked on local institutions of participation in a development project and beyond, and the sedentarisation of the bīẓān pastoral nomads while finishing my studies (cf. Ruf 1993, 1995), the wish to go to Mauritania for a further period and explore what remained of slavery persisted. A generous research grant for a Ph.D. thesis from the graduate school "Market, State, Ethnicity" at the Social Development Research Centre, which is part of the Department of Sociology at the University of Bielefeld, funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the federal state of North-Rhine Westphalia, finally provided the material means to turn this project into reality.

Almost one year of fieldwork primarily among slaves and manumitted slaves (ḥarāṭīn), but former masters, the bīẓān, too, was a rich experience providing many insights into the complex universe of hierarchy and dependency in bīẓān society. I was able to witness slaves still experiencing maltreatment by their masters, a great number of slaves and former slaves living in highly ambivalent relations with masters and former masters, and finally slaves and former slaves defying not only their former master, but the bīẓān as such. However, beyond all these differentiations, which highlight that things are indeed changing in Mauritania, I still feel anger whenever my thoughts go back to some of the experiences I had and which have to be named. There is the bitterness underlying many slave narratives telling how things used to be, and there is the memory of one particular old slave man, who, being no longer of any use, had to sit all day long outside in the courtyard, barely protected by a hut of branches from the beating desert sun, while his master, a likeable and learned man, resided in the modest house build of clay-bricks a few steps away.

This, and various other experiences which taught me what an end to slavery

can mean to those who still suffer from it made me decide that this analysis should contribute to changing this situation. Indeed, the vast majority of Mauritanians, living in one of the least developed countries of this world, need better living conditions. However, among these Mauritanians, the slaves and manumitted slaves, together with a number of other despised social groups, deserve special attention. Their deprivation resides not only in such domains as economy and welfare, but also in ongoing social discrimination, which is a result of their slave past. Change in this domain needs understanding and an open, unprejudiced debate about the nature of the past. This is, as recent cases show, a sensitive and most difficult task. Nevertheless, it is to such a future project that the present discussion would like to propose some arguments.

As far as this aim is concerned, the present study is far from all encompassing. Its intention is to unravel perspectives on bīẓān slavery that until today have remained largely ignored. Its leitmotif is that it is the points of view of the oppressed which need to be made explicit, and which have to be contrasted with those representations of the social provided by the discourses of the dominant strata.[5] Such a perspective allows one to discern what makes up lines of conflict in society and how these are maintained, shifted or overcome. Social hierarchy in the light of such an analysis is free from that certain taste of social consent that common-sense definitions of difference in society tend to suggest and which the powerful like to maintain.[6]

As a critical approach to the analysis of bīẓān society, the present work takes up a concern expressed by a long and illustrious list of social scientists. It was Karl Marx ([1846] 1983b) who stated that philosophical reasoning, which was judged to have only interpreted the world in different ways until then, should turn towards changing the world. Later this tradition lived on, among others in the works of Antonio Gramsci ([1929-35] 1971) and Frantz Fanon (1952). While the voices of these scholars continue to influence present discourses, engaging in public debate on political issues, however, still remains open to the reproach of leaving scientific territory. A most recent example for this divide is the recent debate in France concerning what has come to be the "case" of Pierre Bourdieu – as opposed to the social scientist (cf. Priester 1998).

Although I am aware that the present analysis could be vulnerable because of this impetus and its explicit premises, I prefer this more precarious status to hiding behind ritual and meaningless evocations of the ideals of scientific impartiality. The descriptions of social relations in Mauritanian society which will be developed in the subsequent chapters are laden with theory, and hence "thick descriptions" (cf. Geertz 1973). They are aimed at providing a narrative capable of changing the perceptions of the social topography of Mauritania. However, this means not engaging in unfounded polemics, but on the contrary unfolding a sound analysis enabling the reader to discern how relations of dependency, which have come to be known as slavery, evolve, how they are maintained, and what, today, brings them to an end.

This work is offered to all Mauritanians wishing to tackle the issue of slavery in their society further, as well as to scholars concerned with Mauritania, development sociologists and of course everybody interested in the study of slavery and relations of dependency. As a view from the outside, this study will, it is hoped, provide new insights, while it will undoubtedly also receive criticism for misunderstanding bīẓān society. Indeed much of Mauritania and bīẓān society still remains alien to me, but seeing this country and its people through the eyes of a stranger is not necessarily a disadvantage, nor does it systematically inhibit the acquisition of knowledge. On the contrary, strangeness to the object of study is a prerequisite to the production of knowledge. In the social sciences it is certainly one of the greatest strengths of social anthropology and ethnography to have developed systematically the productive tension resulting from strangeness to cultures observed and immersion in these cultures, regardless whether this is a subculture around the corner, or the culture of an ethnic group on the opposite side of the globe (cf. Knorr-Cetina 1991; Hirschauer/Amann 1997).

For those to whom Mauritania is alien, it has to be explained that the debate whether there is slavery, and what slavery has meant and continues to mean to members of bīẓān society, continues to go on both in the country and abroad. Periodically the issue surfaces in the independent Mauritanian press as well as among the Mauritanian emigrants, who today are linked by the newsgroup Mauritanie-Net.[7] Until today debates remain heated and highly controversial. Points of view vary from denying both the significance of slavery in the past and especially its persistence until the present to denouncing continued slavery. This controversy is reflected also by the public debate between the government and various Mauritanian NGOs, aiming to defend the rights of slaves and former slaves.[8] In January 1997, president Maouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya dealt for the first time in a public speech with the issue of slavery. Acknowledging this institution to be part of the nation's past, he altogether denied its persistence until the present. Consequently there are not remnants but only "sequels" of slavery to be witnessed in Mauritania (cf. Mauritanie Nouvelles, nº 234, 12.1.1997: 10).

The practical consequences of this kind of definition became obvious about one year later. On the 12 February 1998 five prominent Mauritanian anti-slavery activists were sentenced by a Mauritanian court to thirteen months of jail, and a 30,000 UM fine after having participated in a French television programme focusing, among other topics, on the issue of slavery in Mauritania.[9] On the 24 March the appeal of the human rights activists was refused and the sentence confirmed. However, numerous international protests and – probably more important – a meeting with a group of international donors scheduled for the next day, made the president of Mauritania, Maouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, lift the sentence (cf. L'Autre Afrique, 1.4.1998).

Witnessing these recent trends towards a more rigid handling of the issue of slavery in Mauritania by local authorities, the present study, which will be

the second one focusing on Mauritania's slaves and former slaves in only a short period (cf. Brhane 1997a,b), will provide some further substance to the debate, and thus contribute to a more thorough treatment of this serious issue. This indeed is needed, as the recent evolution has polarised opinions rather than encouraged to dialogue.

This book aims at describing the slave experience from a grassroots perspective; it wants to give the oppressed a voice, and to provide a forum where both their dignity and humiliation can be expressed. Indeed slaves resisted their masters, developed strategies to enlarge their autonomy, and much more, while still living under the threats resulting from their slave estate.

Tracking these slaves' and former slaves' experiences in quest of their point of view was done by conducting numerous individual interviews with people still bound to the slave estate and ḥarāṭīn (manumitted slaves). The locus of research was the region of Achram-Diouk, a small rural area in central Mauritania. Fieldwork consisted in many respects of learning by doing, as I failed to anticipate a number of issues sensitive to the interviewees and also because the latter had never been confronted with questions of the kind I confronted them with. Nevertheless, as will be outlined in detail later on (cf. p. 44-47, 50-57), the people of Achram-Diouk came to teach me a lot about their lives, and consequently about what it meant to have been a slave in bīẓān society, or to be still bound to this estate. While some refused to take part in my investigations, most were ready to answer my questions. Ultimately they introduced me in a subtle and tactful way, to this particular social milieu, and I have to thank them for their readiness to endure and forgive my unawareness of many of the finer and more major points of good conduct.