Chapter 5
Gender and Status in the Topography of Work

Gendered Labour

Work is most prominent in the narratives of Zeyneb, a ḥarṭāniyya of slave origin, and M'Barke, still bound to slave estate (cf. p. 62-69). The sūdān women work in the master's household, and they work on the fields. They do all kinds of work: work which is "not normal" for women, because conceived as being – according to bīẓān categories – men's work, and typical female work. They herded goats, watered animals, cultivated and pounded millet, prepared food, collected wild plants, breast-fed the mistress' children, and much more. All this work M'Barke claims to have done "in one day", i.e. to have worked without interruption. Very much the same image is transmitted by a number of bīẓān oral traditions on slavery. These stories tell the fate of slave women, almost crushed by the load of work their masters oblige them to do (cf. Tauzin 1993: 71ff., 1989b). What goes almost unrecognised is the gender bias of these stories: there are none presented at any rate telling of male slaves working under conditions similar to those of female slaves.[1] These observations hint at another domain of gender-specific conditions of slavery. The question is: to what extent did gender and status differentiation shape the topography of work?

Broaching the topic with the broad intention of tracing gender distinctions within bīẓān slavery, one has to be aware of several limitations any such attempt necessarily faces. The historical depth of available empirical data is limited. Besides the life-stories at the core of this study, there are only a few sources speaking of slaves and slave occupations in former times. Women's work, either free or slave women's, in these sources (as in many others) very often remains neglected, if not obscured. Nevertheless some statements and accounts give a general idea of the primary occupations and the (work-) places of slave women and slave men in historical times. Wherever appropriate to illustrate contrasts, those activities which were predominantly assigned to slaves are compared to those of free people, hence illuminating the division of male and female labour and spaces, as well as the social connotations of distinct kinds of work.

The question whether there were practices of a gender division of labour not only among free members of bīẓān society, but among slaves too, is

crucial for an understanding of the relations of domination, and therefore will be analysed in detail throughout the present chapter. Slaves by their estate had their sociality negated and as virtual non-members of society had no right to be treated in accordance with the gendered patterns in use among the free.[2] As a consequence, the practice of a strict gender division of labour not only for the free, but for the slaves too, would open up for the latter a social field – gendered patterns of work – on which to act as social beings like the free. Conversely, the denial of respect for the gender attributes of particular tasks is a means by which masters could force slaves to enact their own de-gendering, or else de-socialisation, and thus highlight and reproduce the fundamental difference between masters and slaves. One might now argue that the practice of slavery, especially in a household context like in bīẓān society, never succeeded in being a total institution, and that therefore the exclusion of slaves from society remained largely part of the masters' legal fiction of this institution. I share this point of view (which can equally well be held with regard to plantation slavery), but would like to reframe it. Slaves were well aware of the de-socialisation they experienced when performing tasks not complying with the patterns of the gender division of labour in use among the free (cf. the bitterness M'Barke expresses when telling she had to herd animals, i.e. to do typical male work; cf. p. 68). The location of slave work in the right gender domain thus becomes an open ground for dispute defining the master-slave power relation, and the slave's ascension to a condition more respectful of his sociality. The thesis explored here moves beyond stating the development of a distinct kind of gender division of labour among slaves. The argument put forward instead is that the master-slave relations slave women and men experienced through their work were structured differently. Slave women and men, for a number of reasons, were effectively assigned different spheres of (sometimes overlapping) duties. These distinct experiences, and the resulting different social relations with their masters, meant that slave women and men resided not only in different locations of the social and symbolic world, but also assigned them different locations on the territorial topography of the slaveholding society.[3]

Discerning the gender characteristics of work, and especially of slave work, is crucial to an understanding of slavery not only in bīẓān society. The much greater demand for slave women as opposed to slave men observed in West African and Arab Muslim societies, and the primarily female slave population witnessed among the bīẓān (cf. chapter four), raises the question whether these gendered patterns of slavery had any distinct impact on the work performed by slaves in bīẓān society as well. It goes without saying that the import of slaves, i.e. of slave labour, transforms the social organisation of work in the enslaving society. Masters and mistresses may withdraw from manual work, and shift to other occupations, or have more leisure.[4] Introducing slavery, ending slavery, ups and downs in slave supply and the size of slave populations, as well as other economic factors affect the distribution of work among members of different social strata and gender attributes of

work. Patterns of slave labour, as well as those of the free members of society, are not fixed categories, but are dynamic and change over time. Response to new conditions, as will be shown, was often quick. Enslaving societies in this respect were not static. The bīẓān, as well as other Sahelian slave holders, knew very well how to profit from their slaves, and increase their number for this end. However they also managed to face the decline in slave supply that was inflicted on them by the French colonisation of the Mauritanian territory at the beginning of the 20th century.[5]

The following paragraphs examine labour within bīẓān society from two different angles. First the major lines structuring the gender division of labour among both bīẓān and slaves are developed. In a second step this analysis is detailed by sector-oriented studies of work, elucidating where slaves and other dependent strata were put to productive work in bīẓān society, and how other social strata were related to these tasks.[6] Although this section of the present chapter will focus mainly on the "visible" work beyond the household, which is generally represented as male work, women – above all slave women – appear working in these sectors too. They make up an important part of the workers in the agricultural and pastoral sector. Finally the interpenetration of different ideologies, of a gender division of labour, and of labour segregation by social hierarchy is analysed.

Slave Women's and Free Women's Labour

Elucidating female slave work is a difficult task, for much of it remains in the obscurity of the many duties of household-labour.[7] Historical eye-witness accounts, little interested in any kind of women's work, at best neglected to pay much attention to the issue. And, until recently, the social sciences took much the same attitude.[8] Contemporary interviews face the problem that verbalising the supposedly self-evident, but in fact manifold and complex tasks daily household labour consists of, is difficult both for the interviewee and the still unknowing interviewer. Therefore only limited means exist to explore past work. An ethnographic approach to labour first of all relies on (participant) observation, and thus refers to the present (cf. Beck 1988: 23f). In the context of dismantling slave work in the household, which – although remnants persist – by and large is an outdated phenomenon in Mauritania, further restrictions arise from the slave interviewees' interest in limiting the representation of their recently surmounted humiliation as regards work, as well as the master interviewees' interest in downplaying their personal involvement in practices of slavery. Besides remaining silent on the topic, two major distortions appear in the narratives, idealisation and denunciation of past master-slave relations. Despite these limitations some major female slave tasks can be traced.

Probably the first account providing some details on the life of slaves in bīẓān society comes from Saugnier, a Frenchman shipwrecked on the western Saharan coast in January 1784. He noticed free women had to serve their husbands, but in effect rarely did so, as most had a black slave woman

relieving them of this duty. The slaves' condition was far from good. While working in the household, the slave women were constantly ordered around by their mistresses (cf. Saugnier [1792] in Saugnier/Brisson 1969: 88, 94f.).

René Caillié (1830), who made his five month long trip to the Brakna bīẓān in 1824, started in Podor, a French trade post ("escale") on the northern bank of the river Senegal. He headed north-east for several days, until he met a camp of slaves of the ʿamīr of Brakna. These slaves, living together in families, cultivated millet and were headed and supervised by an old zwāya. To honour his host, this chief commanded that Caillié be given some "sanglé", a porridge prepared from pounded millet and water called ʿaiš in ḥassāniyya. Who prepared the dish is not mentioned by Caillié, but probably it was done by a sūdān woman. However, it was another circumstance that attracted the attention of the young Frenchman: the whole slave camp lacked the milk that among freeborn had to accompany ʿaiš.[9] One of the slaves Caillié met at this occasion was a woman of Wolof origin. She told him in her native language – which Caillié spoke well – that the rich bīẓān sent slaves each year to sow and cultivate millet.[10] Once the harvest was finished, they would return to the camps of their masters. Visiting the fields, Caillié saw the slaves weeding with hoes, a technique he supposed to be one of bad cultivators, for it only turned the ground superficially (cf. Caillié 1830 53f.). While Caillié failed to detail whether specific tasks were carried out by men or women, the account is important, for it proves that already in the first half of the 19th century slaves were living as couples in seasonal adwaba, and jointly cultivated millet on plots flooded by the rain. The presence of a slave woman aware of her Wolof origin suggests that these slaves perpetuated, or at least profited from their ancestral customs of cultivation (cf. Caillié 1830: 58, 85f., 95ff.).[11]

The measures necessary to fatten the young bīẓāniyyāt to make them conform to the bīẓān model of female beauty was often conveyed to slave women. Being charged with the task of fattening these girls meant the slaves were, exceptionally, put in a position of considerable authority, and they forced the young bīẓān girls to drink enormous amounts of milk and other foodstuffs using all means at their disposal. They pinched their victims until they bled, beat them and worse. Less unusual, and hence less noteworthy was the slave women's contribution to work in the household, e.g. the churning of butter in a goat-skin (cf. Caillié 1830: 99ff.; Meyer 1959: 53; Interview Benne Mint Ahmed, ḥassān, 29.10.1995). It was the slave women's duty too to fetch water for their masters' requirements, as well as for the animals remaining for various reasons in the camp. This often collectively performed walk to a well or pool of rainwater had a light-hearted quality, encouraging the unwatched slave women to enjoy their temporary liberty by singing and dancing together (cf. Caillié 1830: 168).

Most of the tasks described in the historic accounts reappear in the contemporary life-stories of women of slave origin I gathered in the region of Achram-Diouk. Their primary occupation – at least for a period of life – was

with the masters' household. As best portrayed by M'Barke, the focus of the slave women's duty was to relieve the mistresses of all menial and repetitive tasks. Therefore slave women had to pound millet and prepare meals, fetch water, care for young and sick animals remaining within the camp, spin and weave wool, and so forth. The amount of work entailed in many of these tasks varied throughout the seasons. Consumption of millet was drastically reduced, if not stopped completely during the various animals' main lactation period (cf. Caillié 1830: 100f., Oxby 1978: 153). While the amount of millet pounded diminished, the processing of milk increased, e.g. zebde (butter), or šnīn (sour milk mixed with water) had to be prepared. The hardship of fetching water too was determined by the season's being dry or wet. How much time had to be spent collecting firewood also depended on a variety of factors. The more arid the region the masters' camp was in, the more difficult it was to get hold of the necessary amount of wood suited to being burnt near the tents and for cooking. Different cooking habits, too, influenced the distribution of tasks within the household. While in historic accounts some pastoral nomadic bīẓān living in the north are described as eating only once a day (cf. Saugnier [1792] in Saugnier/Brisson 1969: 124), this austerity was more easily overcome where climatic conditions were more favourable, and agro-pastoral production and trade more developed (cf. Vincent 1860: 486).

During the 20th century the avenue of newly emerging patterns of pastoral production and consumption led to further change. The rise of rice from a luxury side dish to a major staple food is but one example of this evolution. Rice, in the cities nowadays mainly prepared for lunch, has the advantage of needing no pounding and being much quicker in preparation (cf. Ould Cheikh/Bonte 1982: 34ff.; Ruf 1995: 136ff.). While seasonal variation could reduce the amount of slave women's work, the need for female support never stopped, and could always be extended by transferring work formerly done by the mistresses to the slave women. This is why some tasks in different reports are presented either as female or slave tasks (e.g. taking down and setting up the tents; cf. Saugnier [1792] in Saugnier/Brisson 1969: 83: 143; Bourrel 1861: 529). To meet the mistresses' expectations, and relieve them permanently of all kinds of undesired manual work, the slave women had to keep close to their tents all day long. They left only if in charge of a specific duty outside the camp. The slave women's ability to withdraw from the tent could be diminished by the imposition of specific tasks like nursing and watching the mistress' children, which needed her permanent presence.[12]

Another complex of slave women's work is independent of a direct commitment to the masters, but related to their own physical reproduction. Although it is one of the masters' main duties to feed their slaves (cf. Schacht 1964: 128; Lewis 1990: 6ff.), this obligation in a number of cases was met only partially. René Caillié (1830: 84f.) tells of an old slave woman who procured him porridge in exchange for some of the milk she had from a cow her masters had given her to live off. However, as Caillié does not fail to remark, the masters had taken care to choose a very bad animal. Slave women

regularly collected ʿaz, a wild grain used as a substitute for millet, but consumed regularly only by slaves. The masters preferred millet porridge (cf. Bourrel 1861: 41f.; Caillié 1830: 58, 85).[13] It might have been that the slaves' knowledge of substitute food provided by wild plants and roots was much more developed than the masters'. Saugnier reports that he was only able to cope with his permanent hunger by using a part of his time out in the bush herding to look for this kind of food, and eventually secretly barbecue a sheep he took from his master's herd (cf. Saugnier/Brisson [1792] 1969: 38). Much later the Dahoméan human rights activist Louis Hunkanrin (sentenced to detention in the 1930s in Tidjikja and other Mauritanian towns) made the failure of the slave masters to feed and clothe their slaves one of the most prominent of his many complaints concerning the persistence of slavery in Mauritania (cf. Hunkanrin 1964: 33, 36).[14]

Slave women leaving their masters' camp to cultivate millet or dates along with slave men, and often together with their children, left the narrow circle of chiefly reproductive work[15] in the household and camp, and became involved in the production of material goods directly benefiting their masters' income. For these reasons the female slaves' contribution to work beyond the ideological boundary of feminine work is discussed alongside the description of agricultural labour in the section on agricultural labour (cf. p. 158-161).

Giving an impression of the free women's occupation, proves difficult because the ideal of noble femininity propagates inactivity. This ideal, however, is a relative measure which can only be defined in terms of a comparison to the range of activities someone is abstaining from, and compared to a sort of social average. A look at the most important female slave tasks reveals, however, that not all tasks arising in the context of household work in like manner have to be omitted for the sake of noble femininity. Tasks like collecting firewood, fetching water, pounding millet etc., are less compatible with a noble's life than e.g. spinning and weaving, often performed in female groups. This becomes apparent in the following accounts:

> When I was young my only work consisted of showing the sūdān to make tents and how to work with the wool. Of course then it was only the sūdān who did this work. There were some bīẓāniyyāt doing this work too, but I never shared this occupation. I only made some mats. (Interview Loughaye Mint Driss, zwāya, 18.9.1995)[16]

> To prepare the food there were slaves; in those times there were a lot of slaves, every family had one, they brought the water and did much other work . . . There was a slave to assist our mother with the upbringing of the children. (Interview Benne Mint Ahmed, ḥassān, 29.10.1995)

> In those days I always remained sitting. It's no good for me to work with my hands. I come from a family where this is unusual, therefore it would be no good if I would be the only one to work with the hands. . . . My daughter too does not pound millet. At least as long as I stayed with her.

> Actually I don't know if she works, because she is not here. She lives in the city now. Normally there she must have a maid to do the work. . . . Working on the fields is no good to me, but my husband and sons work there.[17] . . . I don't need to do other work like sewing [leather] pillows or weaving mats. We have money to buy these goods. (Interview Khaite Mint Mohamed, ḥassān, 21.10.1995)

When bīẓāniyyāt, i.e. freeborn women, had to face situations constraining the amount of slave labour at their disposal, the hierarchy inherent to female labour became obvious. One such case is reported from a Rgaybāt household, still living together with its slaves in the 1980s. The tent, residing in the Zemmour region on the northern edge of today's Mauritania in February, consisted of a couple of already somewhat advanced age, one young slave man, two slave women, a slave girl of about eight and a slave baby. The married sons of the family had migrated to the cities, and worked as traders. All the slaves were occupied with herding, although the amount of livestock was modest. The young man left the camp every morning with the 20 camels, the two women herded the 30 sheep divided into two small herds, and the girl took care of the 10 goats. The chief of the family decided every morning where to graze the animals throughout the day. His wife, assisted by a young relative of her husband's, prepared the food – even for the slaves (cf. Caratini 1989: 101). Rather than accept Sophie Caratini's interpretation, stating this configuration of master and slave occupations to reveal the end of slave practices among the Rgaybāt, I suggest the case illuminates how free women manage to sustain difference between themselves and the slave women. The locus of this battle – in fact reflecting much of the changing circumstances master-slave relations are nowadays subjected to – is both the nature and the location of work. The free women stick to the camp and even remain within the tent, while the slave women go to the pasture. Hence they refrain from joining in herding, a practice which the Rgaybāt are denounced for, and which makes them the targets of mockery from other bīẓān (cf. Caratini 1989: 95).

The tent is the domain of the bīẓāniyyāt. It is their possession, and they have the know-how, as well as the responsibility to manufacture and repair it. Localising isolated, female spots distinct from the vast entity of the outside world assigned to the men produces a gendered map of space. Distinguishing the tent's shade from the brightness of the outside world reminds one greatly of the practices producing shifting boundaries of gendered spaces analysed by Pierre Bourdieu (1972: 45-69) in his ethnographic study of the North African Kabyle house. Homologous distinctions are reproduced on different levels. Once the focus is on the house itself, the front is the locality of the men, and the back belongs to the women. In addition many of the house's elements and utensils are either attributed to the women's or the men's world. But the situation is inverted when the focus changes, and the house is set in relation to its environment. During the day, the house becomes the sole

domain of the women. The men have to avoid going in, in order not to give rise to suspicion. This dichotomy is one of private and public life, day and night, fire and water. Through the shifting boundary, the house represents ambivalence, it is both female and hybrid, female-male.

Identifying social spaces and associating them with distinct material localities emerges as an ambivalent project. Stating the tent to be the locality of the women and the outer world to be the men's is both right and wrong. It would be neglecting the nature of social organisation to classify such distinctions as invariable and static. To have the boundary shift between private and public, between the male and the female spaces, is essential to make this distinction work. Both domains are interdependent, and constituted from their opposition to each other. Complete separation, ending the encounter producing difference, would make the distinction senseless. A shifting boundary has also been localised by Sophie Caratini (1989: 111ff.) in her interpretation of the symbolic meanings of the bīẓān tent. The frontier of in and out, male and female, represented by light and darkness, can shift from distinguishing the exterior and the interior of the tent to distinguishing its front and back. This is the case when visitors are received in the daytime, and hence the distinction of outside/inside is incorporated into the tent's small universe. While during daylight privacy is compressed either into the tent or its back, once the night has fallen, it expands to the tent's surroundings.

The darkness of the night is also important in another way. In its shelter the young women and men can gather and have fun without offending the rules of social conduct. The night also is used to resolve dilemmas: when young couples do not constitute their own tent immediately after marriage, the woman continues to live with her parents. As the man by bīẓān customs is advised not to meet his father-in-law, he would hardly ever have an opportunity to meet his spouse. This absurd scenario is circumvented by the woman installing her bed at some distance to her parent's tent. Once the night has come, she will leave the tent and spend the night with her husband, until he leaves at sunrise.[18]

Slaves living in a small tent, and not in the master's, were not unconditionally allowed entrance into the privacy of the master's tent. They are only allowed to enter the tent and step on the mats if the man was outside, and their duty located within the tent (Caratini 1989: 111ff.). Getting into the tent, and even more so being accorded a place within it, was a major step forward in a slave's struggle to be treated like the free – and distinguish themselves from slaves not granted these privileges.[19] Getting into the tent first of all was a slave woman's concern. Its success was bound to the patterns of integration analysed above as slave woman-free woman relations (cf. chapter three). Establishing intimacy and maintaining it among slave women and free women necessitated allowing for close co-residence. Slave women nursing their mistresses' children, and hence establishing milk kinship, had to enter the tent to be able to do so. When replacing the free women's reproductive labour, the slave women had to follow a time schedule largely independ-

ent of their master's will. Slave women thus were not only able to obtain the free women's confidence, and to learn much about what it meant to behave like a noblewoman, but achieved rights to locate themselves within the core locality of femininity.[20]

Facing the subversive side-effects of entrusting slave women with a wide range of female tasks, and having them reside most closely, the bīẓāniyyāt had to rely on other means to produce difference between themselves and the slave women. As revealed by the case of the Rgaybāt family above, attributing different kinds of work also serves to establish difference between slaves and masters. Just like the shifting boundary of male and female spaces, distinguishing slave from noble work is the outcome of a relational undertaking. A noblewoman who has all her slave women go out and herd, will not be compromised by herself working in the household. A different case is that of a noblewoman like Loughaye Mint Driss (cf. above, p. 144), who abstained almost completely from working herself, but reproduced her supremacy by her knowledge of the tasks enabling her to instruct and supervise the slaves.

Besides these relational modes of defining noble and slave work, some fixed patterns of honourable or dishonouring work evolved. Pounding millet is the most prominent task incompatible with living a noblewoman's life. Consequently avoiding pounding plays a major role in today's struggles for status enhancement. The narrative of Valha (cf. p. 69-72), a woman of znāga status, is intriguing on this point. While the znāga women, who in this case lived without support from slave women, did everything considered to be women's work, from cooking to fetching water, they later managed at least to delegate the tiring pounding and fetching water. During the dry season the camp was joined by some ḥarāṭīn families. The women of these engaged in pounding the znāga families' millet for payment. As pounding was a female task, but the payment of the ḥarṭāniyyāt had to be effected in cash generated by the men's trade in livestock, introducing this new division of labour manifested a new definition of gender relations among free men and women. Pounding millet is today even more a symbol of inferior status as contracts applying to household maids make obvious. These are paid fairly poorly on a monthly basis (about 2-4,000 UM in the region of Achram-Diouk), and get food and accommodation. Despite comprising all other work in the household throughout the whole day, the contracts generally exclude the pounding of millet. If it is to be included, another 2,000 UM have to be paid (Interview Khaite Mint Mohamed, ḥassān, 21.10.1995). However, money seems not to be the sole objective in this arrangement, as many maids refuse to pound at all.[21] Facing these problems, and with the modern, motor-driven mills proving to be cheaper than rarely available manual pounding,[22] most people nowadays eat ground millet – despite the many negative features attributed to it.[23]

Slave Men's and Free Men's Labour

Slave men, as already revealed in the life-stories, had a variety of jobs. Most prominent were cultivation of millet, date-palms, and herding. As the different bīẓān groupings' commitment to these distinct branches of production varied, the major duties of slave men differed too.[24] With the bīẓān being either pastoralists or agro-pastoralists, or even traders, the slave men's occupations could vary between herding, a seasonal combination of herding and cultivation, just cultivation, work in the caravan trade, and other jobs. The following paragraphs explore the slave men's work and elucidate how these correspond to their respective social, ecological and economic context.

The accounts of the involuntary shipwrecked 18th and 19th century visitors to the western Sahara provide a concurring image of male slave labour. Therefore, male slaves' most important occupation in the northern region of bīẓān territory was herding. Without any delay and almost without apprenticeship they had to leave the camp with either sheep and goats, or else camels, lead them to pasture, guard them throughout the day, and get back to the camp by sunset. Poor bīẓān possessing no slaves sent their own children with the herds. One difference was made between the free and the slaves: while the former got breakfast, the latter had to leave the camp with an empty belly. However, also adult free men would herd, as Saugnier recounts in an earlier passage of his narrative (cf. Saugnier/Brisson [1792] 1969: 34, 37, 89). Sometimes the bīẓān took precautions with regard to their newly acquired and inexperienced slave herders. Alexander Scott, shipwrecked in 1810 and held in captivity for six years, had to herd sheep and goats. On the job he was accompanied, advised and supervised by one of his masters' three daughters (cf. Scott [1821] in Barbier 1985: 81f.). Follie, after having been sold and resold several times, entered service of a rich man, who started treating him much better than his predecessors and led him to his small village in what is now south Morocco, north of the Oued Drâa. While Follie described his job as herding camels, his account seems rather to be of someone guarding some newly sown plots from being invaded by the surrounding camels. These, untypically for grazing camels which are at their happiest roaming over vast pastures, were hobbled and thus unable to move far (cf. Follie [1785] in Barbier 1984: 76ff.). Besides herding, however, the slave men also had to join in a number of domestic tasks. The number of duties and the lack of relief from endless work, combined with poor feeding made Brisson complain to his master about his misery: "I make faggots, I churn butter, I tend the flocks, I pull up roots, I prepare camel's hair for your wife to spin, I till the earth, I do everything in a word that you require of me." (Brisson [1792] in Saugnier/Brisson 1969: 437)

A different impression of male slave duties is given by René Caillié (1830: 98ff.). Among the Brakna he saw camels primarily herded by ḥarāṭīn or znāga, and only rarely entrusted to slaves. The latter were rather responsible for leading the cattle to pasture, and for driving them back to the camp in the evening. Late at night, around 10 p.m., they had to milk them under the

supervision of the bīẓān. Children, either free or slave, are not mentioned as working. Agricultural labour, according to Caillié, absorbed a considerable number of male slaves. This is largely due to the location of his stay. Unlike the shipwrecked men, Caillié's trip led him to places within the šemāma, the southern Mauritanian area with major agricultural potential on the border of the Senegal river. To the north-east of his starting point Podor, he visited places like Aleg, where the cultivation of millet was common on the large plots inundated by rain (e.g. seasonal lake of Aleg). Additionally, he travelled during the cultivation period, and thus experienced the season with the fewest demands on herding labour, but the largest exigencies upon agriculture. Besides cultivation, the collection of gum arabic was a slave task too. Beginning in mid December, slaves were sent to form a small camp near the gum-trees and start the harvest. Again supervised by some zwāya, the slaves had to work all day and were equipped only with a leather bag containing some water, and a second one to receive the gum. Getting back at sunset, they had the milk of one cow provided by their masters for food; the supervising zwāya had the milk of two cows and some millet. The supervisor was paid by having the right to the yield of every sixth day of harvest. Sometimes impoverished znāga joined the work. These had to pay half of their harvest in order to get the concession to collect gum (cf. Caillié 1830: 133ff.).[25]

Even more pronounced is the report of Aḥmad al-Amīn aš-Šinqītī (whose name was transcribed as Ahmed Lamine Ech Chenguiti by his translator). In the late nineteenth century Trarza, gum was harvested by slaves, sent out for this purpose by their masters who had come to the regions with dense stands of gum-trees. Should a slave fail to deliver the amount of gum desired by his master, he risked getting a sound thrashing. The collection of gum was not restricted to the Trarza region, but took place in all southerly regions from the east to the west (Ech Chenguiti 1953: 116f.). Much the same was observed by the midshipman Bourrel (1861: 522f.) who travelled from Podor to the Tagant in 1860, hence revisiting some of the places already described by Caillié. He noticed the zwāya sent their slaves to collect gum arabic, and later exchange it at the "escale" for guinée cloth and even millet. From this trade, as well as their numerous herds and the cultivation of millet, he assumed the zwāya had developed a level of affluence unknown to their ḥassān fellows. In the zwāya camps millet never lacked, and milk was drunk more than once a day. This industry was possible due to large numbers of badly treated slaves. Among the ḥassān on the contrary, slaves could achieve some respect from their masters and even rise to be considered as counsellors.[26]

Another important, above all male slave occupation was the cultivation of date palm groves, numerous in the Adrar and Tagant. With the objective of expanding this activity, slaves were imported in large numbers.[27] Most of these slaves brought to the capital of the Tagant, Tidjikja, were renowned for being of Bambara origin (cf. Ech Chenguiti 1953: 138).

Domains of Work

Herding Labour

Given that many noble bīẓān withdrew themselves from any direct implication in the daily obligations of herding, and many of their slaves had an important share of their work-time assigned to tasks other than herding, the question arises how and by whom the pastoral sector was run. One report from the early 1950s is highly instructive on the social organisation of pastoral labour in bīẓān society. Abdallahi Ould Cheikh Sidiya, the successor of the great marabout Cheikh Sidiya (Šayḫ Sidyya), at that time owned 500 camels, 500 cattle, 2,000 sheep, some donkeys and a few horses. These animals represented about one third of all his tribe's animals. The camels, divided into eight herds (two constituted of lactating she-camels, the remaining six designated for stockbreeding), were guarded by families of specialised herders, who had passed on their skills from father to son. They were paid by the right to use one she-camel out of every ten guarded, one young male camel and two pieces of guinée cloth, paid every year, and some use-right in milk. The camel herders, though to some degree autonomous, were supervised by a chief herder, responsible for the general management, veterinary care, castration, the general orientation of pasture allocation and many other related concerns. Most of the camels were herded far from the camp of Abdallahi, who had to remain immobile due to his many political and religious obligations. The cattle, divided into ten herds, were guarded by black shepherds, either slave and ḥarāṭīn. The cattle were normally watered at the same well as the camp of Abdallahi, or another one nearby. These herders too were supervised by a chief herder, but were remunerated only by the right to use a third of the cows' milk. While selling milk is dishonourable to noble bīẓān, the herders were allowed to produce and sell butter to raise their profit. This was considered legitimate, because the profit was meant to arise from the labour-input and not from the milk. The sheep and goats were guarded by bīẓān who originated from the šayḫ's tribal confederation and were his tlāmīḍ (religious disciples). These shepherds, again supervised by a chief, but unlike the camel shepherds revocable, were remunerated with half of the milking sheep designated to meet the main camp's needs,[28] half of the wool, butter and hides produced. These goods – often subject to dispute – were distributed by the marabout himself to avoid quarrelling. The ʿamīr of Trarza, Ahmed Ould Deid, living in much more modest material conditions, hence following the precepts of ḥassān morality, owned 100 camels, 50 cattle and two herds, i.e. about 400 sheep and goats. These animals were guarded by shepherds subject to about the same conditions as those of šayḫ Abdallahi. In contrast to the famous zwāya, the ʿamīr received numerous lactating animals as mniḥa, i.e. loans of use-rights (cf. Dubié 1953: 138ff., 173).

This pattern of a limited contribution of slave labour to pastoral production, is contrasted by the presence of men from other dependent strata in this sector (cf. Bonte 1998a: 3f.). This division of labour appeared to be predomi-

nant in the Tagant region too. During the 1950s and 1960s Weddou Ould Jiddou (Interview zwāya 17.4.1995) managed several huge herds, and was heavily engaged in the region's trade in animals to the Senegalese markets of Louga and Dakar. Nowadays he still manages the region's largest herd of cattle, consisting mainly not of his own, but of animals he took into his care for payment. Weddou Ould Jiddou stated he had had only one slave herder during the better times, but six paid ones for his sheep and goats, and another two paid herders for the cattle. A fact he much regretted, because as he said, with a twinkle in his eyes, the slave was more profitable than the paid herders, but unfortunately slaves had already been much too expensive to buy.[29]

On various occasions the marked social differentiation among bīẓān pastoralists has been stressed. Variation is such that estimates relating to average pastoral households and their economic assets contain no evidence (cf. Ould Cheikh 1990: 71). My own findings confirm the statement that there hardly ever was anything like a "standard" type of pastoral household and herd. Rather there were large disparities in wealth within each camp, met by a number of redistributive practices, and involving relations of dependency and clientage. Some approximate estimation of a securely self-sustaining pastoral household derived from the interview information might advance a number of 10-40 cows and one herd of small stock, i.e. 100-200 animals.[30]

In his narrative, Youba reported his father to have been the biggest animal-owner in his camp. Before the big drought he had two herds of sheep and goats, approximating to about 400 animals, 120 cattle, 6 male horses and 4 or 5 male camels. Of the approximately overall thirteen ḥassān tents in the camp, five were reported to have been extremely poor and another five to have had only modest possessions, i.e. about two or three cows and between 30 and 40 goats and sheep. The remaining three families, among them Youba's father's, were the better off. This uneven distribution of possession was reflected in the number of slaves possessed as well. Only a few ḥassān in the camp owned slaves, or at least had them live within the camp. It was again Youba's father who owned the largest number of slaves: three slave tents, i.e. slave families belonged to him (cf. p. 76). The emphasis Youba put on the issue of the slaves constituting tents, i.e. true families, besides proving his sensitivity on the matter can also be interpreted as a hint at a distinct slave condition in this mainly pastoral context. Male slaves, given major jobs which like herding involved a high personal responsibility, were often treated differently from those held closest to the slave estate. A master wanting his male slave to be pleased and grateful e.g. could buy him a slave woman to marry (cf. Brhane 1997b: 26; Oxby 1978: 196). In doing this, he could secure himself both the slave's gratitude, and his offspring.[31] Once confidence was established between the master and his slave, the latter could be entrusted with a major part of the care for the animals with much less risk than an unruly slave renowned for his voracity for meat.[32]

Trust is a major factor in the organisation of pastoral labour. This is true if

herding is organised within the nuclear family, and is even more important if work is executed by slaves or hired herders. One major means to secure the herder's devotion to the herd owner's interest is to have him participate in the gain acquired through herd growth. While members of the family as co-owners and potential heirs more or less naturally fall into this category, a similar commitment can be obtained from strange herders. Regular payment and irregular incentives in animals help the herder constitute his own herd – among his master's or contractor's herd. Herding both together is a fairly certain way to have the herder do his work properly. Trust however cannot persist without continuous confirmation (cf. Beck 1988: 390ff.; Spittler 1983: 67). This applies to all herders, either relatives and strangers. Herding is a complex task involving much decision-making, and therefore easily becomes the object of divergent opinions and quarrelling. Furthermore, different animal species require a different intensity of guarding and care, and hence have different requirements in terms of ad-hoc decision-making and personal qualifications of the herders. Finally, the herd-owner can practice a large variety of controls, ranging from delegating as few strategic decisions as possible, to leaving the herder almost a free hand.[33] All these distinct levels of differentiation are revealed in the large bīẓān herd-owners' practices in organising herd labour.

Cattle

In the case of Abdallahi, cited above, only the cattle were assigned for herding to either slaves or ḥarāṭīn. Herding cattle among the bīẓān – as unanimously stated by all my informants – except in very few cases never implied any other work than watering and milking.[34] The cattle are supposed to leave in the morning for the pasture, graze, and come back at dusk. Cattle have a definite sense of orientation and easily locate appropriate grazing grounds. Milking takes place late, about two hours after sunset. Only calves were known to have been herded in order to accustom them to pasture and protect them from wild animals (Interview Messaoud Ould Soueide, ʿabd, 17.12.1995). The guarding of full-grown cattle only happened in the case of danger from wild animals, or severe drought and the cattle being very weak (Interview Boueibou Ould Amar, ḥarṭāni, 1.11.1995).[35] They then were at high risk of getting stuck and dying in the clayey mud that develops with the first rains of the rainy season. Responsibility and decision-making by the herders within this type of herding is almost null. The most prominent and hardest work – watering and milking – is easy for the master to control and hence can be given to any slave no matter what his motivation. Watering, except in the cold season (January-February) is needed every day, and requires about 27 litres per day per animal during the dry season in the Tagant region (cf. Toupet 1977: 236). If open water sources were lacking, it was the herders' duty to dig the well needed to water the cattle (cf. Ould Hamidoun 1952: 57). This most menial work however, with the increasing scarcity of slave labour due to flight, liberation and migration, could be

passed on to a specialised labourer, paid per watered animal on a monthly basis (Interview Laghlave Ould Mahmoud, ḥarṭāni, 13.4.1995). Pastoral management in these constellations remained solely the masters' or the owners' responsibility, but the decisions these made with regard to pastoral nomadic movements were framed by the more or less limited mobility of the watering labour.

Whatever the relative ease of cattle rearing, circumstances could entail the division of cattle herds and the use of herders far away from the owner's camp. While in former times this seems to have rarely been the case and only been used by people poor in cattle or labour power,[36] sedentarised life nowadays produces the urgent need to send cattle to distant pastures, and keep only some lactating cows within the vicinity of the village. This job is nowadays done for a number of the bigger herd owners who originate from the traditional nobility by some of their former slaves living in adwaba on the Tagant. Payment is due in cash in the case of a herder caring for a large number of cattle, probably composed of animals from various owners.[37] In the case of cows sent for care to former slaves now living in adwaba, payment is more likely to be embedded in the various, more or less reciprocal exchanges taking place between former masters and slaves.[38]

Camels

Caring for camels bears characteristics almost the opposite of those of cattle rearing. Camels are extremely mobile. Rather than following a lead animal, and exhibiting a distinct sense of customary attachment to their habitat, as cattle do, camels behave much more like wild animals, and display a highly individualistic spirit. Being both a browsing and grazing species, camels nevertheless tend to favour fodder from shrubs and bushes, which they are able to browse on despite their many thorns. In order to browse on these plants, highly dispersed in the Saharan and Sahelo-Saharian zone, the camels scatter around the pastureland, and do not keep together in a herd. These animal preferences put the camel-herder into the dilemma of either allowing optimum grazing conditions for the herd, at the risk of losing animals, or on the contrary applying a strategy of maximum security against loss, but reducing the quantity and quality of the grazing.[39] Camel herders thus have to strike a balance between the divergent interests – and regularly set out to trace lost animals (cf. Beck 1988: 223; Spittler 1983: 51ff.).

A major qualification of a herder able to maintain and increase a camel herd, besides knowledge of the condition of often remote pastures, wells etc., is his ability to read tracks and get back the lost animals.[40] Once the owner does not move around with the herd himself, the herder far away for weeks or months is in a position of high responsibility. His decisions amount to a strategy which in turn is decisive to the fate of the herd. The pastoral management system developed by Abdallahi (cf. above) is revealing of this constellation. All his camel herders are employed on an irrevocable basis and inherit this occupation, hence their familiarity with all aspects of camel care

from childhood on is assumed; and since trust is not enough to ensure that the system works, having a chief supervisor replaces control by the owner. The degree of involvement in camel-herding here becomes a major factor determining the organisation of herding. If only a few camels are owned, these are likely to be herded for remuneration by specialised herders. Only when camel-breeding becomes the major activity, does the development and appropriation of the knowledge needed become a real concern. Once the exigencies of labour input exceed the potential provided within the family, strange, but qualified herders have to be acquired rapidly.[41] These differences explain the overall limited contribution of slaves to camel herding, as well as the few cases where they did engage in this activity. Slave men among the camel-holding branches of the Rgaybāt were rarely sent to herd camels far distant from the camp; they much more often had to herd the animals which were kept in the vicinity of the camp and returned there every night. If ever, only second generation slaves, enjoying a high level of trust from their masters, and having given proof of their knowledge, were employed to go off on their own with a camel herd. This occupation represented the peak of a slave man's career, putting him ahead of those slaves only allowed to leave the camp within the distance of a day's walk.[42] Once performing such a responsible task, otherwise performed by a dependent, but free herder, e.g. a znāga or ruined ḥassān, a slave became difficult to replace (cf. Caratini 1989: 120). The case throws light on the fact that ascension of slave men to sensitive tasks was possible, but on the whole remained limited. Slave men in this configuration had to compete with other qualified herders, more suited to entering into a trustful, patron-client relationship with the herd owner (Borricand 1948: 89f.). As a temporary help, or to guard animals near the camp slaves, as the most universal workers, could be employed without difficulties. Then even slave women could be assigned to herd camels (cf. Basset 1913: 656).

In regions such as the southern Tagant and Aftout cattle, as well as sheep and goats, constituted the most important stock due to the region's infestation with flies transmitting tabūrit (*Trypanosomiasis*), a disease similar to the sleeping sickness affecting camels (cf. Ech Chenguiti: 1953: 131; Toupet 1958: 81, Interview Mahmoud Ould Mnih, znāga, 4.2.1996). Here slave men too could achieve the position of a highly recognised and trusted herder, but the nature of cattle and small ruminant herd labour made them less indispensable than among camel pastoralists. Pastoral specialisation constrained both masters and slaves. One small, in those times still exclusively pastoral grouping of the Awlād ʿAlī Ntūnva ḥassān specialised mainly in cattle rearing, started diversification of its livestock in camels in the 1950s. This new strategy however did not alter the group's organisation of pastoral labour. This mainly was performed by a few strongly attached slave families and some znāga clients, while provision with millet was the duty of slaves living in the tribe's adabay. Rather than taking any risk by starting to herd themselves, the ḥassān entrusted the newly acquired camels to some specialised

herders of an alien tribal group (Interview Maʿarouf Ould Eleyatt, ḥassān, 26.3.1995). Other bīẓān pastoralists organised diversification according to the same pattern. A znāga grouping of the Kunta Awlād Sīdi al-Wāvi, rich in sheep bred for sale on the meat markets of Senegal before the big drought, had the large number of camels in their possession[43] herded by a small specialised group of five to six families of the same tribal confederation, called Ahel Lbil (people of the camels). The possessors claimed to hardly ever have seen their animals. The remuneration for herding consisted of one young camel per year (normally a two year old male) and of course the use of the camels' milk (Interview Mohamed Ould Abass, znāga, 5.12.1995).

Today camel husbandry, both within the region of Achram-Diouk and by local owners, is of minor importance. Most big herds are owned by rich traders or other successful participants in the market economy, some of whom are ḥarāṭīn.[44] These herds represent capital investments and are led by paid herders. As these are the only ones to move around with the animals, and sometimes there is support from a four wheel drive car, the herds are highly mobile. They move around all of Mauritania, but are concentrated to a large extent in the country's south. If there is a lack of pasture, they also easily cross the national borders, hence pursuing strategies at the core of nomadic pastoralism since time immemorial, but now professionalised and in contrast to the shrinking range of mobility the few remaining pastoral nomadic households are able to maintain (cf. RIM 1986: 9f.). While in former times payment for herds larger than 30 animals in most cases was due in form of the traditional young male camel, nowadays monetary remuneration is prevalent.[45] This capital investment type of herding needs to employ already highly qualified herders, and hence opens up a specific labour market. In my personal experience, most of these herders are of znāga origin, but there are pauperised ḥassān and zwāya too (cf. Bonte 1998a: 3f.), as well as ḥarāṭīn or not formally manumitted slaves, now working to their own benefit.[46] The case of close-range camel herding, as practised by a few bīẓān within the region of Achram-Diouk, is different. Here even complete novices to camel herding are employed, and therefore are submitted to an apprenticeship led by the experienced owner and chief herder. While the routine work in this constellation is done by the paid herders, exceptional tasks, like looking for animals lost for a longer time and transferring animals to distant pastures in times of drought still are executed under the direct guidance of a skilled family member (Interview Mohamed Sid'Ahmed, zwāya, 12.9.1995).

Sheep and Goats

Sheep and goats are considered in bīẓān society to be much the same, an attitude revealed by the use of the generic term "lġnem" (best translated as small ruminants, or else small stock; cf. Pierret 1948: 118) subsuming any composition of the two species in one herd. Although sheep and goats have different characteristics – goats are browsing and sheep grazing animals – they often are kept together and led to pasture in one and the same herd.[47] In

the past, however, many pastoralists specialised in either black or white sheep (nʿāj), while goats were less frequently kept. The white, or white and black spotted "fulani" sheep is a good meat producer and primarily was bred for sale to the meat markets of Senegal. The black, long-haired sheep provided the raw material for the traditional woollen tents, and was a better milk-producer. Goats (lmāʿiz), most of which are of "Sahelian" race, are lighter than sheep (cf. Ould Cheikh 1990: 70). With the ongoing drought the emphasis on sheep was reduced, and the breeding of goats was intensified.[48] Goats are more robust and less susceptible than sheep, and especially cope better with the heavy impact droughts have on grazing pasture. Their range of activity is larger than that of sheep (ability to climb up shrubs), they browse on even the woody parts of plants, and they manage to digest a much larger variety of vegetation residues, up to artificial cellulose products like cardboard.[49] Goats also need less attention, for if the worst happens they manage to get back at dawn on their own. In a nutshell, goats are considered more intelligent than sheep.

Herding small stock needs constant attention and surveillance. The herds, consisting of up to 200 animals, are large, and a single sheep or goat is easily lost. Jackals are a considerable threat; they might track lost animals, or approach the herd without being noticed and kill one or several animals. Another danger comes from bad water, which a good herder should be able to spot (cf. note 52, this chapter), and herbs and plants harmful or poisonous to the animals.[50] Sometimes the negative effects depend on the season, e.g. tigengilit (*Indigofera Senegalensis*), if grazed on when in blossom, provokes severe and frequently deadly inflation to the small ruminants' digestive organs.[51] Animal prosperity too depends on some curative practices. Several times a year sheep and goats have to be provided with salt. In the region of Achram-Diouk several natural salt deposits are within reach of a one or two days' march. Salt cures were most often applied once at the end of the rainy season and another time at the end of the dry cold season, before temperatures rose. A third, facultative salt cure could be applied at the beginning of the rainy season when animals were not watered from wells but surface water of minor quality. The treatment is supposed to minimise the risk of infection by diseases (Interview Sidi Ould Salim, ḥarṭāni, 12.4.1995).

Despite the considerable responsibilities a herder has to bear, herding small ruminants is considered above all children's work. Almost any member of bīẓān society, either bīẓān or sūdān, is able to claim to once have herded sheep and goats in his youth. This episode in life ends with the engagement in a more specialised activity. Ḥarāṭīn and slaves most commonly shifted to cultivation after having participated for the first time in the Ramadan, the religious month of daytime fasting, while the bīẓān ended their most often temporally limited careers in herding by taking up one or several professional occupations. Herding small ruminants is well suited to child labourers, because it is separated from the more heavy work of watering.[52] This duty is delegated to some adult, then often responsible for the watering of several

herds of sheep and goats and perhaps some cattle or camels (cf. the narrative of Brahim, p. 59-66), as well as for their milking (cf. Ould Hamidoun 1952: 58). Herding small ruminants however was not limited to children. As the case of Abdallahi shows (cf. p. 150), free adult people too could engage in this activity (and sometimes make use of either child or slave labour). Like all livestock, small stock required professional care to develop to their best. This could be provided by either skilled free or slave adults, qualification being not necessarily related to status. The big drought in 1969 decimated the over 20 large herds of small stock in the possession of the ʿamīr Abderrahmane. Having to secure and later reconstitute his animal belongings, he put two of his most professional herders, a bīẓān and a slave man, in charge to set out with the remaining animals on an emergency migration to the Assaba. There they stayed until the next rainy season started (Interview Mbarek Ould Koueriye, ʿabd, 21.12.1995).

Free people herding were generally rewarded for their services. Confiding a herd to a poor member of the tribe or other affiliates was a means to let these people earn a part of their living, and enabled owners of large herds – besides other strategies such as loans of use-rights – to accumulate animal capital beyond the limits set by their own labour resources. Different arrangements were made with regard to the different animal species. While herding cattle, according to the accounts gathered in the area of Achram-Diouk, rarely was a concern to the local pastoralists, and hence did not raise the question of defining remuneration, the watering of cattle demanded a good deal of labour during the dry season. With the rapid expansion of a wage labour sector in the cities after the Second World War, attracting many men of servile origin, this task became increasingly remunerated. Some more or less fixed tariffs applied to the herding of sheep and goats. In the minimum case the herder of a complete herd (between 100 and 200 head, rarely more) received one young, most often male animal every two months and ten days. If herding was done by an adult, the payment could be raised up to a ewe with a lamb and an additional piece of guinée cloth. Occasionally gifts were given as incentive to good herders. Milk, as reported in the region of Achram-Diouk, was free to the herder, while in other circumstances different arrangements were possible (cf. p. 150, the case of Abdallahi's herds). Slaves, although remaining unpaid for their work, in some cases profited from gifts in animals, provided by their masters as a sort of encouragement to work (Interview Laghlave Ould Mahmoud, ḥarṭāni, 13.4.1995).

Sedentarisation in villages and small rural towns has brought about a considerable change in herding practices. As individuals nowadays rarely own enough animals to make up a herd, most animals are sent out with some village herder, paid 20 UM a month per goat or sheep. As the job is full-time, and the earnings low (with a herd of 100 animals about US$12.50 per month), the herders are often children or teenagers. Almost anybody obliged to confide his few, but consequently the more precious animals to these herders

only has complaints about this arrangement. The herders are accused of not caring about the animals, which get lost and frequently eat harmful plants.

Cultivation

The perhaps earliest, but still one of the best descriptions of the cultivation of millet in the southern part of the western Sahara is given by René Caillié (1830: 117ff.). On his trip from Podor to the area around Aleg, he observed slaves and znāga set out in November to start sowing. Cultivation took place on plots formerly flooded either by rain or the river Senegal. Slaves originating from one camp also kept together in one community while cultivating. All fields were clearly demarcated, and the harvests kept apart. Cultivating techniques were simple, and apply in much the same manner today. A large, sharpened wooden picket is used to dig holes of about 12-15 cm depth. These are filled with a few grains of millet, before the hole is again covered with sand or earth. Once the seedling emerges, the surroundings of the plants are weeded by the hoe, to facilitate the growth of the millet plants. However, this often is the only supplemental activity, and frequently weeds continue to grow between the rows. Once the millet spikes are out, the most wearying period in the cultivation cycle begins. From dawn till dusk cultivators stay in the fields to shoo away a myriad of birds by shouting, clapping and throwing stones and pieces of dry clay with a sling.[53] During the night watching continues to save the plants from the ravages of wild animals and livestock. Harvest finally takes place in May.[54] The men cut off the spikes and throw them onto the ground, from where they are collected and sorted according to maturity onto different heaps. After some days of drying the men thresh the spikes with a wooden stick, and the grains are winnowed. For this the grain is sprinkled onto the swept ground, so that the wind can blow away the light residual debris. Grain is stored either by putting it into leather sacks, taking it along with the camp and selling the surplus as described by Caillié, or by building a granary of dried clay bricks, or by storing it underground. In the latter case a hole was dug in the ground, the millet put in, and everything covered with earth. This method of storage was best suited to hide cereals away from enemies and animals.[55]

While the major cultivation techniques remain almost unchanged until today, the practice of agriculture has expanded considerably during this century, and especially after the big drought. René Caillié (1830: 118) reported that the cultivating slaves he met on the formerly submerged banks of the river Senegal, favoured "poor" soils, bare of primary vegetation, because this saved them from initially clearing the land (an observation leading him to accuse the natives of laziness). Nowadays most fields not totally submerged by flooding first have to be cleared and prepared for cultivation with the hoe.[56] Sowing is prepared by the picket, and in sandy soils the hoe is used to dig small holes for the seeds. Besides weeding, hoeing in between the rows of millet plants also serves to break up the surface of the clay soil, and thus minimises evaporation. Once the seed-bearing spikes are

out, cultivators move to their field (or one of them if they cultivate several fields). These are often distant from the villages (up to 5-15 km, sometimes even more), but temporarily living in a tent or hut near the fields greatly facilitates guarding plants from nightly destruction by livestock, and the chasing of birds.[57] Finally, the spikes are cut with a knife and threshed with a simple wooden stick.

What has changed in the course of the century have been improvements in the use of rainfall. The construction of large dams (French: *barrages*) across some of the slightly inclined seasonal watercourses made possible the artificial flooding of large areas of cultivable land.[58] After at least two weeks of flooding following the last rainfall (usually in October or November), the dams are opened, either by digging a hole in them, or – with modern type dams – opening a concrete outflow. Sowing and the subsequent tasks follow the pattern described by Caillié. The large dams enhance the security of local crop production, because their large areas of influx minimise some of the risk induced by the highly uneven territorial distribution of rainfall in the northern Sahel (cf. Wüst 1989: 87). Later this century, after the big drought, this technique of flooding was complemented by the construction of small dams (French: *diguettes*). These constructions, known throughout the Sahel as a medium to increase water retention of agricultural soils and reduce water run-off erosion (cf. Rochette 1989), represent an improvement of rainfed agriculture. They are constructed and owned individually, whereas the majority of large dams are constructed, maintained, and owned collectively by up to hundreds of participants. The agricultural cycle behind the small dams begins earlier than behind the large dams. Once the inundated surface starts to dry up, sowing begins. This can be as early as in July. For the crop to grow well, further rain is needed. While the harvesting of fields behind large dams takes place at the end of January and February, millet grown behind small dams in rainfed farming can already be harvested in December. Another technique of sowing in rainfed farming, now only rarely applied in the Aftout and Tagant region, but more common in the more humid south of Mauritania (e.g. around Kaédi), is to sow already before the first rains. This technique depends crucially on the soil being sandy, and above all on the right amount and timing of rain, for an inundation of more than 24 hours will kill the young shoot. Subsequent longer periods without new rain have the same effect (Interview Sidi Ould Salim, ḥarṭāni, 12.4.1995).

A recent change transforming farming practices is the increasing number of cultivators. While in former times only slaves, ḥarāṭīn and some znāga were reported to have cultivated, nowadays many bīẓān cultivate too. This is a major consequence of their impoverishment, manifested by their loss of animal capital during the big drought in 1969 (cf. chapter six). What persists, despite economically induced compulsion to have similar living conditions and work, is the different degree of identification with agricultural labour. Sūdān identify themselves foremost as cultivators, while bīẓān – although nowadays presenting themselves as cultivators too – often stress the limits of

their engagement in agricultural labour in a quest to redraw cultural boundaries maintaining the difference between sūdān and bīẓān (cf. chapter eight). For this reason, the description of agricultural work presented here is derived from its ideal-type as presented by the sūdān.

Cultivation nowadays is both men's and women's work, and children of course make an important contribution too. Nevertheless, subtle distinctions aim to maintain gendered domains of work. Ideally, digging holes for the seeds is done by a man followed by his wife, sowing two or three grains[59] into each hole before closing it with a kick of her heel. Some tasks, especially the construction of large dams and small dams, harvesting and threshing, and less often weeding, are presented as male tasks (cf. Toupet 1977: 265f.). In daily practice, however, this proves to be something of a patriarchal, male ideology. Almost all tasks nowadays are performed by women too. Often there are only women working on the fields, a situation clearly brought about by the impact of male migration. Only tasks requiring a considerable labour power, like the construction of large dams, weeding, and especially harvesting and threshing, are performed principally by men. Friends or else paid labourers undertake to do the work in one or a few days, thus profiting from their joint forces. Women in these circumstances are responsible for preparing meals and tea. If a woman is the head of a household, e.g. because her husband has migrated or died, a son of hers or a brother most probably organises this work, while the woman herself is responsible for organising and most of the continuous work.[60] Menial work, requiring less quick and concerted action, such as e.g. the initial clearing of the fields, is done by men and women together.[61] It becomes evident that the gender division of agricultural labour, as primarily performed by the sūdān, is much less driven by the alleged heaviness of the work, than social conceptions governing the availability and organisation of work. Women work alongside their husband and family on the fields, but do not join in the event-driven, collective work-sessions that remain a male domain (the case of course is different for exclusively female productive associations and gatherings, and nowadays female co-operatives).

The main staple cultivated is millet in its variant species. While azraʿa is the generic term applying to all varieties of millet, a large range of varieties is distinguished according to the appreciation of taste and maturation time. Millet with small grains (mutri; *Pennisetum typhoideum*) is mainly cultivated in the Senegal river area and the southern regions, but rarely in the Tagant region. The most appreciated variety of sorghum (azraʿa), to be distinguished by its larger grains, is called taqalīt (*Sorghum gambicum*). It has a maturation period of five months and needs the least amount of water or inundation of all varieties. Other, faster growing varieties with about three months until maturity are bišna (*Sorghum cernuum*), and a species of "white" taqalīt, called ašweyṭra taqalīt. Other crops cultivated are several varieties of melons, called vundi in ḥassāniyya (distinguished according to colour and the edibility of the grains), which are fast-growing and do not demand as much

labour input as millet and sorghum. Apart from these there is a variety of beans (adlagān; *Vigna siniensis*) best known under the French name "niébé" throughout West Africa (cf. Toupet 1977: 259).[62]

Pheniculture

Pheniculture in Mauritania on its present scale has largely been shaped by recent evolution. Despite the vast majority of the country being located in a Saharan climate, only a limited number of oases are older than a century. The cradle and nucleus of bīẓān pheniculture is without doubt the Adrar region in the north of today's Mauritania. Here wild palm trees, or more probably palm trees which had not been cultivated, antedate the formation of traditional bīẓān society, which started in the 11th century and took a decisive turn in the 15th century (cf. McDougall 1985a: 16ff.; Oßwald 1986: 251ff.; Ruf 1995: 102ff.). Some outlines of the history of the Adrar emirate, drawn up by Pierre Bonte (1985a,b),[63] suggest that in this area a mainly agriculturist group with only limited involvement in pastoralism and now called Bafūr subsisted and used to collect fruits from the wild palm trees. The major region of these activities seems to have been in the south and south-west of the Adrar mountains – those regions nowadays having the biggest date-palm oases. Independent of these centres of agri- and pheniculture there were several much smaller oases specialising in the trans-Saharan caravan trade. The oldest and most famous one is Awdaghust, conquered by the Almoravid movement in 1054-55, but abandoned for the first time already during the 15th century (most probably for reasons of insufficient water supply; McDougall 1985a: 10ff.).[64] Old oases in the Adrar are Abwer, founded during the 8th century but now abandoned, Ouadâne (12th century) and Chinguetti (13th century), both of which nowadays are in a steep decline. From the 15th century on the patterns of Adrar settlement changed. The formerly independent Bafūr came under the hegemony of expanding local zwāya and ḥassān tribes, of which the zwāya acquired the property rights in land, and hence established their dominance. Cultivation and pheniculture expanded from that time on, and became integrated with caravaning activities and pastoralism into a local, diversified economy during the 17th century. However, a significant increase in production was only achieved as late as from the middle of the 19th century onwards, a period by which large numbers of slaves had been imported in order to plant and maintain the vast majority of date-palm groves the Adrar still is famous for (cf. Ech Chenguiti 1953: 119, 138).

Unlike the Adrar, date-palm cultivation in the Tagant seems to have been from the beginning closely associated with the formation of trade-towns. Tradition says the first Tagant date-palm grove was established at Talmeust (Talmust) as early as about 1450, or according to other traditions in the first half of the 16th century by the Kunta (Du Puigaudeau 1993: 76). This tribal confederation acquired control of the desert salt mine at Ijil in 1766/67 and subsequently developed a huge trade network including several towns on the Tagant.[65] Among these is Rachid. Situated some 40 km north-west of Tid-

jikja, the town is located on the slopes of an imposing valley densely planted with palm trees. Its foundation may have taken place as early as 1564 (cf. Dubié 1953: 198), but is more likely to have taken place either in 1722/23 or 1765. Kasr el Barka, another Kunta settlement and date-palm grove, was founded even earlier in 1689/90, hence marking the influence the Kunta tribe had during this period on the development of Tagant urbanism and trade, as well as their commitment to date-palm plantation and agriculture. Tidjikja, today capital of the Tagant district, was founded in 1660 or 1667. It is populated by members of the Idawʿalī whose ancestors had emigrated from Chinguetti in the Adrar after some inner-tribal conflict. Palm shoots they had taken along their journey formed the nucleus of the important palm groves of the wād Tidjikja (cf. Amilhat 1937: 63, 116; McDougall 1987: 47ff., 1990: 249ff.; Ould Khalifa 1991: 393; Webb 1995: 51).

Tîchît might date from the 8th century as well, but more probable is the year 1153-54 presented in the Tîchît chronicle (cf. Jacques-Meunié 1961: 58). The town, although lying some 200 km to the east of Tidjikja, and hence on the northern edge of the Aouker, is commonly subsumed among the Tagant oases. Being a major market in the trans-Saharan trade, its date-palm groves always remained secondary, due to environmental restraints. Nowadays shrinking water resources are leading to an increasing salinisation of groundwater (cf. McDougall 1990: 250; Du Puigaudeau 1993: 204).[66] Other pre-colonial attempts to spread date-palm cultivation from the Adrar, such as e.g. the attempt to introduce date palms in the Trarza, failed (cf. Vincent 1860: 450; Webb 1984: 144). A new era of date palm cultivation began under French colonial rule. From the 1920s on strong incentives were given to create new plantations. The following decades consequently witnessed the rapid expansion of date-palm cultivation in the Adrar and Tagant, as well as its introduction to the Assaba (cf. Tables 7 and 8). However successful in quantitative terms this policy was, it was hardly able to induce sustainable growth to the taste of the administrators for two reasons: first despite some material incentives, many plantations resulted from direct coercion by the colonial administrators (cf. Féral 1983: 121; Ould Khalifa 1991: 706ff.), a fact which probably goes far to explain the often mitigated interest many bīẓān had in the maintenance of these date-palm groves. Second, creating new plantations meant increasing the demand for manual labour – by and large provided by the dependent strata. These, however, were hardly willing to endure an ever increasing load of work while at the same time recognising new opportunities of emancipation (cf. Ould Khalifa 1991: 778ff.).

Associating date-palm cultivation with the cultivation of millet is possible, and most fascinating because both are counter-seasonal activities. While the main millet cultivation activities in rainfed farming take place from July until late February, caring for the date-palms, with the exception of producing and planting new shoots, happens between March and July (cf. Du Puigaudeau 1993: 80f.; Toupet 1962). However, as much as this association might represent an ideal use of the scarce agricultural resources at the desert-edge,

the hardship this agricultural cycle bears for the labourers is obvious. Adding further obligations to their duties was hardly possible. The extent of agricultural diversification by gardening and the cultivation of wheat and rye in the shade of the date-palms, common in other intensive-use oases, remained rather restricted in the Tagant oases.[67] While competition for labour resources among the different sectors of agriculture was minor, intensive date-palm cultivation indeed conflicted with the needs of pastoral production. A bīẓān proverb from the Tamourt en-Naaj puts the case as follows: a good ḥarṭāni can care for either 50 palm-trees, or 50 camels (cf. Grosser/Ibra Bra 1979: 37). The crucial point here is that the water needs of both animals and palm-trees are highest at the same time. Pastoral production and pheniculture therefore complement each other on the basis of specialisation into different branches of production rather than integration into a single mode of exploitation of the natural resources at the desert's edge. However, an association of date-palm cultivation with pastoral production was possible on the premise of minimising labour input. The necessity of watering date-palm trees, which surely is the most constant, time-consuming and tiring work in the context of pheniculture, is much disputed. In the Tamourt en-Naaj, the most fertile valley on the Tagant, all the sūdān I asked stated with confidence that they never watered the date-palms except in the very first year – and thus contradicted the above-mentioned saying provided by a bīẓān from the local notability. Research on date-palm productivity under irrigation by a motor pump, carried out by a SO.NA.DE.R employee in the early 1980s, however, proved a considerable increase in date output as well as enhanced quality (Interview Abdallahi Ould Briké, zwāya, 9.4.1995).[68] With what intensity date-palms are put to use therefore is likely to have always depended on their owners' main economic interest. Ḥarāṭīn and slaves associated with or belonging to highly nomadic masters, who only owned a handful of trees, might have kept their presence in the date-palm groves to a strict minimum. Rich bīẓān, owning both palm trees and animals, as well as having a large amount of dependent labour, could engage in both sectors. Their sūdān specialised either in a combination of pheniculture, farming and gardening, or else herding or a combination of herding and millet farming.[69] Those sūdān involved in the oasis sector and living almost permanently in the towns could establish much more stable communities than their fellows associated with bīẓān following a nomadic lifestyle.[70] Like the sūdān regularly cultivating millet, those in the oases were able to develop and maintain a thorough knowledge of cultivation techniques. This location of agricultural know-how among the sūdān is universally agreed upon by observers in the first half of the century (cf. Féral 1983: 271ff.; Du Puigaudeau 1993: 81ff.).

Little is known about the living conditions of the slave population in the western Saharan oases. However, the events reported from 19th century Tidjikja, Atar and Oujeft, where the local notability wavered between killing their slaves for supposed witchcraft, and the need to sustain the labour force crucial to maintaining and running the already expanding oasis system, reveal

that bīẓān dominance was contested (cf. Ech Chenguiti 1953: 138). The reason why witchcraft was not similarly detected and prosecuted in pastoral nomadic groupings seems to be that bīẓān action in the oases was concerted, and focused on the goal of getting rid of the threat by the magical forces supposed to be located within the slave population. This polarisation effectively led the bīẓān to perceive their slaves as a social entity.[71] The problem seems to have been precisely that danger from slaves became more difficult to identify with individual slaves once these formed large communities. Looking for deviant behaviour likely to be an indicator of possession was much easier in the small pastoral groupings with intense master-slave relationships.[72] The emergence of the nucleus of group formation where bīẓān no longer cared about dominating their individual slaves, but about maintaining the community's domination is reflected by the collective action the zwāya of Tidjikja undertook to get rid of the problem. Rather than relying on their own spiritual forces, a remedy which should have been at hand for the Idawʿalī, renowned for their spiritual authority, the bīẓān residents of Tidjikja preferred to undertake an attempt at cross-cultural mediation. Counter-magic, performed by a Sudanese magician, was supposed to outweigh bīẓān Islamic spiritual authority among a group of slaves hard to assimilate. A second glimpse of evidence is the occurrence of distinct social groups associated with date-palm work. The ʿaġzāzīr or ḥumriyīn are date-palm cultivators in Tidjikja.[73]

> La catégorie des haratin de Tijigja n'est pas homogène. Les Idaw ʿAli y distinguent en effet les houmriyin (terme qui signifie rouge, à mi-chemin entre le blanc et le noir) intégrés au clan, à la fraction et à la tribu depuis Abwayr et Tabelbalet, donc avant la fondation de Shinqiti.[74] Ces clients ont de ce fait une considération légèrement supérieure aux haratin, sans que rien d'autre de particulier ne les en distingue vraiment. Il reste vrai qu'ils ont le teint légèrement cuivré et moins foncé que les abid ("esclaves") et les haratin ("affranchis") qui ont, eux, le teint franchement noir. (Ould Khalifa 1991: 281)

The difference in resemblance in the relation between ḥumriyīn and ḥarāṭīn, subtly constructed by Abdallahi Ould Khalifa for the ḥumriyīn of his natal town Tidjikja, is much the same Odette Du Puigaudeau (1993) enunciates in her description of the ʿaġzāzīr she observed in the same oasis during the late 1930s. The ḥumriyīn are like the ḥarāṭīn, for they experience similar relations of dependence and perform much the same occupations, but nevertheless enjoy higher esteem. This is expressed by their closer, though not unlimited integration into the tribal structures dating back some 800 years. Finally the ideological reconstruction of social hierarchy is confirmed by reference to immobile ethnic categories. The ḥumriyīn are of "reddish" phenotype, a characterisation placing them right in the middle of the scale of nobility, ranging from black to white.[75] Leaving aside for the moment the ideological implications of this interweaving of status and origin, the case of the

ḥumriyīn and of the ʿaġzāzīr provides evidence of a group of date-palm cultivators whose origin is no longer traced back directly to slave ancestry. A considerable share of the wealth a number of bīẓān obtained from their date-palm groves therefore did not rely on slave labour, but was mediated through tributary, or else patron-client relationships with partially autonomous cultivators (cf. Moussa/Ould Maouloud 1997).[76] These labourers, although always remaining highly dependent upon a bīẓān aristocracy, which for a long time was able to safeguard its exclusive ownership in land,[77] were probably the first to develop a mainly sedentary, agricultural lifestyle and communities of their own. Once colonial administration had started to slightly shift the balance of power among bīẓān and sūdān, many of the slaves and ḥarāṭīn chose to move to villages they had constructed in the vicinity of the date-palm groves (cf. Dubost 1924: 464).

Caravan Trade

From the very first documents describing the western Sahara, trade is reported to be a major activity in the region. The famous Muslim traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa on his journey from February 1352 until December 1353 visited the desert salt mine at Taġāzā, apparently a most miserable place with no trees, a mosque built of rock-salt slabs and roofs made of camel skins. There slaves of the Masūfa dug for the salt, two slabs of which were loaded on each camel and transported to Oualâta. Already at Taġāzā salt could be exchanged for gold, but the exchange rate was much more advantageous at Mālī, another 24 days' march for an energetic traveller (cf. Levtzion/Hopkins 1981: 282ff.). Centuries later, probably in the course of the 18th century, a new trade pattern supplanted this barter of salt for gold. Instead of north-African traders residing on both shores of the Sahara and constituting distinct "white" communities, Saharans themselves engaged in trade and exchanged Saharan salt for grain from the Sudan. Historian James Webb (1995: 52ff.) argues that this shift results from ecological degradation within the western Sahara, the southward movement of which he named the "desert frontier", confronting the Saharans with an increasing demand for grain. Consequently the volume of Saharan salt export to the Sudan increased, and the emphasis of trade shifted from salt for gold to salt for grain.[78] While an increase in the exchanges of salt for grain is probable in this era, it would be misleading to ignore the pastoralists' involvement in such exchanges from the very beginning of their occupational specialisation. Dependence on trade and other means of exchange is a common pattern found among pastoral nomadic societies, who are all obliged to complement their high-protein, milk-based diet with carbohydrates. Hence besides the trade of salt for gold, which the North African Arab sources were most interested in, there were probably various relations of exchange including salt among desert pastoralists and sub-Saharan agriculturalists (cf. Bollig/Casimir 1993: 543.; McDougall 1983; Ruf 1995: 64f.).

While the barter of salt for grain fell rapidly into decline in the western

Sahara after colonisation early this century,[79] up to the present day within the central Sahara, some Tuareg groups rely on organising caravans, exchanging mainly salt for grain in the south (cf. Ritter 1986; Spittler 1989a, 1989b). Organising caravans for long-distance trade with large amounts of heavy-weight freight commodities, such as slabs of desert rock-salt and millet from the western Sudan, depends crucially on access to means of transportation. Within the Sahara, and even far into the Sahel, the camel is the first choice among local animals of burden.[80] Work related to caravan trade thus is devoted to two distinct sectors. First the breeding and maintaining of a large number of transport camels, and second all tasks related to forming and maintaining the caravan itself. On the trans-Saharan tracks sometimes not only watering-points but grazing were lacking as well. Consequently, the caravaners had to cut the fodder needed throughout the journey in advance.[81] Once on the way, the animals had to be packed and unpacked every morning and evening, while during the day they had to be led. The number of workers needed for these tasks depended on the difficulty of the terrain. Estimates for the 19th century advance a number of four or five camels per man. As the camels moved around during the night while grazing, they had to be looked for, and driven together each morning. Occasional watering, too, was a task requiring much labour. Further, firewood had to be collected, and meals to be prepared. During the 19th century all this was slave work (cf. McDougall 1985b: 102, 108; 1992: 73f.).

Travelling in a caravan did not necessarily mean riding on camels. Slaves accompanied the caravan on foot, and only in a situation of extreme difficulty were they allowed to mount (cf. Panet 1968: 104ff.). But enduring the hardship of walking from sunrise till sunset is not restricted to people of low social status. Riding camels are precious. Taking them along on a caravan journey already means exposing them to great fatigue and risk. In order to preserve their precious animals' condition, many caravaners used to walk the entire day, or to restrict riding to a part of the day or else to special purposes such as scouting (indeed these patterns of caravan travel still are applied by the few caravaners remaining; cf. Asher 1993). Women – except slave women naturally – who used to travel with caravans only as passengers of a kind, were rarely forced to walk (cf. Panet 1968: 104ff.).

The management of the caravan trade was highly diversified. The large caravans, often consisting of several hundred camels, travelling between the salt mines and the trade-towns, were composed of a multitude of individual caravaners. Members of a whole variety of tribes as well as major traders and poor nomads with no more than two camels walked side by side. While participation in the trade generally was open to a wide range of Saharans, continuous engagement on a large scale necessitated control of various resources: camels, pastoralists, caravaners, and trade managers. The latter became crucially important when many merchants became sedentary in the course of economic expansion in the 19th century. The Haidara family was famous for its big trade business run by several brothers and having its

pivotal point in Tîchît. These had their slaves not only do all work related to camel breeding, oasis cultivation, loading and unloading, but also assigned some of the most experienced in the business the responsibility of trade agents. These slaves were entrusted with the management of salt transport and trade, both in the Sahara and the Sahel. With their business developing well, the family settled a number of slaves in Banamba, where they had to farm and look after their master's business the whole year round (cf. McDougall 1985b: 111 and 1992: 75).[82]

Participation in the caravan trade increased the slaves' chances of enhancing their status and condition. By travelling and working with the pack camels the slaves could acquire a lot of skills, training them to eventually undertake caravaning without supervision. With providing transportation services, i.e. pack camels and caravan workers, becoming a distinct business among the bīẓān, a supply of reliable and trained labourers was crucial for the system to run. Once travelling by camel caravan, slaves frequently got opportunities to do some small scale business to their own profit.[83] Much like the qualified herders, and other, similar workers, the slave caravaners seem to have been rewarded for their services by manumission. Possible arrangements were contracts allowing the slaves to buy their freedom, manumission as a reward for special services, or contracted as linked to the death of the master (cf. McDougall 1985b: 108ff.; Coquery-Vidrovitch/Lovejoy 1985: 17f.). The latter case was observed by Mungo Park ([1799] 1969: 179). On his travels at the end of the 18th century he met a Bambara who had been the slave of a bīẓān. Having travelled along much of the central Saharan trade routes on behalf of his master, he converted to Islam and became manumitted upon the death of the latter at Djenné. He then successfully established himself as a trader of salt and guinée cloth.

The present description proves the caravan trade, and especially the trade of salt for grain, and later of salt for slaves, to have been a complex economic activity, dynamically tying together a whole variety of economic sectors: pastoral pack-animal production and salt-mining in the Saharan zone, agricultural grain production in the Sahelian zone, and the maintenance of an inter-regional network of traders.[84] Acquiring labour was crucial for the traders to run the system and expand (cf. McDougall 1992: 72). In pre-colonial Saharan society the only labour-force meeting these needs was dependent labour. It remained the only means to exploit and control labour dispersed among, and moving in between so many locations from a single place. These conditions of work, in turn, shaped a specific variety of dependence, one implying much reciprocity. With the dependent workers often living or being far away from their masters, direct and brutal coercion could not work as a means of control. More subtle strategies had to be used. Slaves managing and supervising trade activities at their masters' place were both a means to cope with the need to be present at different places at the same time, and to install a hierarchy among slaves. Nothing is known about the relations of first rank slaves and those at the bottom of the scale, but the attraction of

ascension is very likely to have sustained the masters' hegemony. Those slaves residing far from their masters' control, as well as from his means to secure them, had to be granted some autonomy, and an economic means to subsist, or even the opportunity to accumulate wealth. This tendency of at least a considerable part of slave use within the Saharan trade to resemble patron-client ties more than master-slave relations is confirmed by another, specific socio-economic structure of production evolving in the western Sahara. Influential religious personalities attracted disciples, the tlāmīḍ. These people, to a large part of modest, or dependent status, most often engaged in productive activities profiting the šayḫ, who in turn provided protection and assistance in case of need. Associating oneself with the šayḫ meant being associated with his baraka, the divine benediction, and thus elevated one's own social standing. In the central Sahara, the use of tlāmīḍ to conduct caravan trade is already reported from the late 17th century of a Kunta merchant family.[85] By the 19th century this practice became widespread along the southern Saharan border. No longer only trade, but pastoral production and agriculture, too, came to be subsumed under these – like slavery – "supra-tribal" relations of social and economic dependency (cf. McDougall 1985b: 106f.; Stewart 1973: 112ff.).[86]

Slaves of the Court

Just as slave men could ascend to highly responsible tasks, and later gain manumission within the caravan trade, a few slaves became the trustees of the ḥassān elite, or at least held positions of considerable esteem.[87] Among the Ahel Swayd Aḥmed, an old slave woman of the family of the former ʿamīr of Tagant keeps and plays the ṭbal up to the present day.[88] This big drum once was beaten to lead the warriors in battle and to organise life in the camp, as well as on important occasions and festivities. Playing this highly important instrument was not restricted to slaves and ḥarāṭīn. The iggāwen, the musicians within bīẓān society, used to play it in their performances too, and it was up to them to accompany and encourage the warriors in battle with music (cf. Guignard 1975: 172ff.). However, slave women from the main camp of the deceased ʿamīr Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar, the ḥella, vividly remember themselves playing the ṭbal, and accompanying it with solo and group singing on many occasions like marriages or the reception of visitors. These women played the big drum in a peculiar mode only a few were capable of (Interview Doueige Mint Dvih, ʿabd 21.12.1995).[89]

Ḥarāṭīn, and on some occasions slave men too, could become the trustees of ḥassān chiefs, or even an ʿamīr. One very prominent case is that of Abdi Ould Embarek. This former slave of a subtribe of the IdawʿAlī of Tidjikja was a close associate of the ʿamīr of Tagant, Bakkar Ould Soueid Ahmed. As his "right arm", or in other terms his factotum, he was responsible for collecting the coutumes the French paid for the trade in gum arabic on the Senegal river, the tributes of various dependent tribes in the Gorgol, Brakna and Tagant, as well the tributes his own tribe, the IdawʿAlī of Tidjikja, had to

pay to the ʿamīr (cf. Ould Khalifa 1991: 581, Frèrejean 1995: 314). Having represented the enemy and oppressor within his own tribe, Abdi Ould Embarek changed sides once the French started their invasion of the Tagant. Now associating his fate with that of the French, his aim became to weaken and defeat the ʿamīr Bakkar, and to gain an influential position in IdawʿAlī politics. Several years later he succeeded in this attempt, and the French, who had rewarded him with one fifth of the former IdawʿĪš date palm grove in Tidjikja, named him general chief of the various local tribal fractions of the IdawʿAlī. For a long time Abdi remained vital to French local policy and economy. He provided knowledge of the conflicts and contradictions raging among the IdawʿAlī, helped the French exploit these, and was able to supply many of the vital goods they needed to maintain their staff (cf. Ould Khalifa 1991: 581, 648ff.).

French documents on Abdi and events related to him are almost mute on the issue of his status. Only Commandant Frèrejean (1995: 285, 314), who together with Xavier Coppolani led the invasion of the Tagant and who became one of the first to cooperate with Abdi, gives a few sketchy remarks. According to his view, which was probably strongly influenced by his other bīẓān counsellors, Abdi Ould Embarek was "l'affranchi de Bakar", i.e. Bakkar's manumitted slave. However, it remains unclear whether Abdi had formally gained ḥarāṭīn status prior to his services to the ʿamīr of Tagant, or had been manumitted by the latter. The colonial documents I was able to consult provide no direct evidence on the issue. Wherever they refer to Abdi Ould Embarek as a "haratine" or "affranchi" this is as likely to be the common euphemism the French administrators used to employ for slave as to reflect Abdi's true status.[90] Nevertheless, the background leading to Abdi's association with the former ʿamīr of Tagant hints at him already being a ḥarṭāni. Apparently his brother had been murdered by alien tribesmen, thus forcing Abdi to seek protection from the ʿamīr (cf. Ould Khalifa 1991: 595) – a step hardly conceivable for a slave.

The issue of a dependent of slave origin gaining so much power indeed entered into the discourse of those factions predominantly originating from the tribe's notability opposing Abdi in his office. In a letter from a council of IdawʿAlī notables held in 1938, concerning the opposition the signatories express towards Youba Ould Abdi, the son of Abdi Ould Embarek who then held the office of general chief,[91] one major argument is the inappropriate origin of the latter. Besides being accused of collecting illicit dues, he is considered to be the son of a former slave (cf. Ould Khalifa 1991: 693). This statement, rather than being taken as a reliable assessment of Abi Ould Embarek's status, is highly instructive of how the idea of a more or less distant slave ancestry underlying the concept of ḥarāṭīn can be exploited by bīẓān as a means to secure their symbolic supremacy.

Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar, the last official ʿamīr of Tagant, who died on the 19 September 1982, was renowned for having several ḥarāṭīn entrusted with responsible tasks in his vicinity, and also for having ḥarāṭīn among his

counsellors (cf. Toupet 1977: 179). These people were feared, for they were free to do almost anything they liked without risking punishment or losing protection from the ʿamīr. Other members of ḥassān tribes used to have a ḥarāṭīn entourage too. Abdel Wedoud Ould Mamma (Interview 31.10.1995, ḥassān), of a prominent lineage of the Lʿaweysyāt, passed most of his time before entering the colonial army in the company of three ḥarāṭīn renowned for being good shots and hunters. Abdel Wedoud Ould Mama described these ḥarāṭīn as having a special status. Ḥarāṭīn, he explained to me, was just their name, they were not the ḥarāṭīn of somebody or the ḥarāṭīn of a tribe, but a group living like the Lʿaweysyāt throughout the year in the Aftout close to the Tagant plateau.

Gender, Status and the Locus of Work

Male slave labour in the various accounts emerges as being significantly different from female slave labour. Slave women were compelled primarily to work in the household. Besides a variety of tasks they had to fulfil under the direct auspices of their mistress or master, they frequently had to work outside the camp as well. Slave men – although they could also be given any task – were habitually entrusted with distinct, and often multiple, specialised tasks, some of which relied upon the slave's ability to act responsibly and take decisions in the master's place. Contrary to what might be assumed of a pastoral society, the slave men were not solely, and in many areas not even primarily put to work in the pastoral sector and to relieve their masters of work as herders. Many were employed as cultivators of millet fields and date-palm groves, as well diggers, collectors of gum arabic, and in many other capacities. A few slave men even rose to become assistants in the caravan trade or advisors to ḥassān chiefs.

There are many differences slave women and men experienced in the domain of work. These result from a complex interpenetration and interaction between two distinct and contradicting ideologies: the gender division of labour applying to bīẓān society, and the use of de-socialised and hence de-sexualised slave labour within this society. As has been revealed in the preceding paragraphs, and is summarised in Illustration 1, labour is a major field where gender relations between bīẓān women and men articulate. Both genders are associated with distinct tasks, which in turn are located in specific localities. While women's work is related to the tent, or at least the camp, men's work leads to areas beyond these boundaries. Many of the tasks fit neatly into this scheme of "in" and "out": women process milk, they spin and weave within the tent, while trading and herding often require the men to leave the tent and camp for long trips.[92] Albeit that the production of difference is most obvious in the occupation of distinct locations, it is not restricted to this field, but applies to the modes of interaction between the

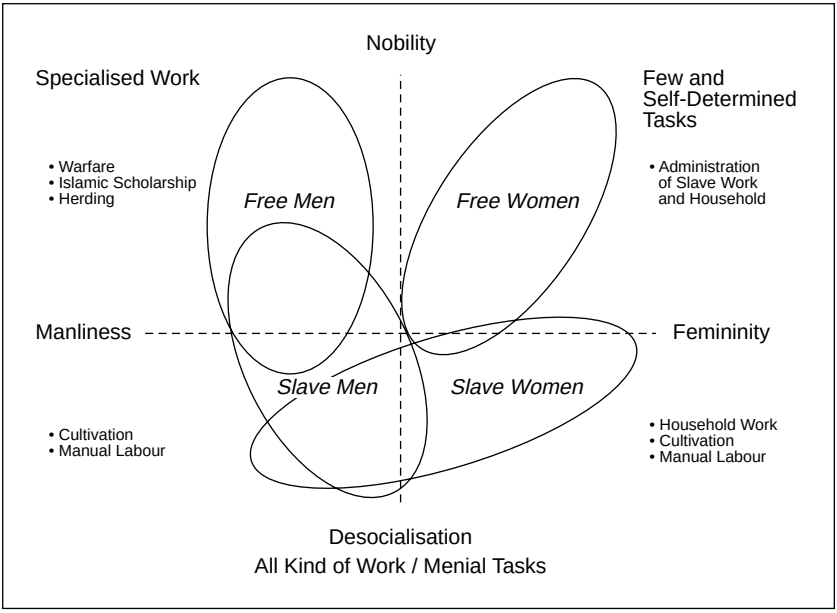
sexes too. This is the more important, as several male occupations evolving in bīẓān society have less clear-cut characteristics, and simply are not located entirely in the exterior. Qur'ān masters used to live and teach, i.e. to work within the camp (though sometimes they had a separate tent). The male ḥassān elite, having a much less steady pattern of life and work, besides hunting, coercing tributes and waging war, passed a considerable amount of time within the camp as well. Different occupations closely connected to the individual's rank within the social hierarchy thus demanded different modes of articulating gender relations. Much like the articulations of a bourgeoisie (cf. Bourdieu 1979), or as in the process of feudalisation,[93] the symbolic world of gender differentiation among the bīẓān nobility was directed towards the enhancement and refinement of its signifiers (cf. Elias 1988, 1990).

Women struggled to develop their femininity in patterns of a complex mix, involving ideals of inactivity and obesity, and the practice of a few, most often collectively performed tasks requiring only minimal physical input (cf. p. 144f.). While the top ranks concurred in the most refined expression of their standing, quite a few women failed to meet these standards. Having to share in more or less numerous tasks conflicting with the ideal-type of femininity out of economic need, they had to re-shape and adapt their modes of producing and expressing femininity. Women of modest origin or wealth, who like Valha (cf. p. 69-72) had to pound millet, care for animals, and much more, were women largely lacking feminine appeal, according to dominant categories. Consequently they found it hard to acquire many of those highly prized female qualities, such as e.g. seductiveness, which – again noblewomen – considered to develop from the ideals of feminine beauty. Far from representing female submission to male dominance, women's discourses portray these qualities as essential to the maintenance of female influence and control over men (cf. Tauzin 1984b: 100ff.; Simard 1996: 113). Femininity itself by these mechanisms becomes directly linked to affluence on two distinct levels: access to food and servile female labour. Women able to transform these goods into symbols of femininity demonstrated their power in gender relations beyond the field of symbolic representation. Physically embodying a considerable amount of the group's capital, these women demonstrated their ability to maintain control of and access to these resources.

Slave women in this social configuration became a crucial element, not only because they purveyed the basis on which an inactive and obese ideal of noble femininity could develop, but because the control over slave women became a substantial element in the struggle over the shape of bīẓān gender relations. This interference of female slavery with social relations among bīẓān, and hence the symbolic reproduction of society, is a major clue to understanding both the importance of female slavery in the past, and the issues of today's gender relations.[94]

Slave men did not interfere with gender relations among bīẓān as slave

Illustration 1: Gender and Status Implications of Work



women did. One reason for this is the different structuration of what might be called manliness in bīẓān society with regard to the bīẓān ideal of femininity.[95] Looking at male ḥassān, zwāya, znāga, ḥarāṭīn, and ʿabīd, their difference is marked first of all by segregated professional characteristics that do not correspond to a rank of manliness, or male attributes. Rather than unfolding a unifying ideal portraying what virtues make for a real bīẓān man, these stereotypes remain moulded into the framework of distinct status group identities closely linked to professional specialisation. Behaving in a "manly" way therefore comes to mean distinct things to ḥassān, zwāya and znāga. Ḥassān ideals of manliness are distinct from zwāya manliness, and again are distinct from znāga manliness.[96] Although some general consensus about basic male virtues exists, e.g. male cowardice is ridiculed,[97] and a man of a "great tent", i.e. of a good family, should be generous rather than stingy, the pivotal point of reference for men is less manliness than honour, symbolised by status, and success in meeting the exigencies of good conduct inherent to statutory affiliation. Therefore either small and big ḥassān or zwāya or else good and bad herders were distinguished (cf. Marchesin 1992: 36), but not more or less manly ones. Hence, a ḥassān beaten, and therefore forced to resign from his status and to become zwāya was affected in the first place by the devaluation of his ḥassān ideals of conduct, disregarded in the zwāya host community he then had to adapt to.[98] Slave men in this configuration were in a rather ambivalent position. With regard to work, the quality

of their masculinity was not, or only slightly affected. Unlike slave women, slave men experienced no systematic devaluation of their gender identity.[99] Although they could, and sometimes effectively were assigned tasks contradicting their gender identity (cf. Klein/Robertson 1983: 10; Brisson [1792] in Saugnier/Brisson 1969: 437), the greater part of male slave labour fitted into the segregated scheme of male occupations, and therefore slave men could refer to their work as a means of producing and reproducing their male identity.[100]

The patterns of everyday interaction among men of various statuses supported this process too. Men of all strata, whenever eating together, share and used to share the same dish, which is separate from the women's.[101] Although social hierarchy enters this field of cross-hierarchical interaction whenever service is needed, e.g. meat has to be cut, hands rinsed with water for washing and the like, its relational character permits the maintenance of the image of integration. In any situation the one in the group of lowest standing and age has to do the job, regardless of whether he might be a young noble or a slave youngster.

Differences in dress are less marked among men than among women of different social strata as well. Already Bourrel (1861: 23) noticed in the mid 19th century slave women wearing clothes more suited to work than the bīẓāniyyāt's melhava, a large veil consisting of five to six metres of guinée cloth. Among men, the today common darrāʿa then still was a luxury item only a few could afford. Instead a more modest and narrower garment was worn – obviously without significant differentiation between slave and free men. Analogous differences are prevalent until the present day. As any visitor to the country quickly realises, outward appearance and clothing is one of the most misleading indicators of a man's social status and origin. The difference in the significance clothing has in the production of social differentiation between men and women, however, does not result so much in an opposition of diversity and uniformity, although such differences still occur among bīẓān and sūdān women. More important is that women have to wear the melhava (veil) correctly, i.e. it has to cover the hair (but not the face), the whole body, and reach close to the ankles.[102] This, however, is almost impossible while working manually, e.g. in the fields. While work and clothing were important in constituting and representing the difference between noble or slave women in former times, distinct occupations and individual affluence continue to influence distinguishing patterns of dress among women of different status until the present day. An analogous preoccupation with devout dressing cannot be confirmed for men of differing status. Although also not ideal for manual work because of its wide shape, the darrāʿa can be tightened with a belt, or in the company of men even be taken off to save it from damage. Again women working manually found it more difficult to meet the gendered ideals of good conduct than men who additionally profited from working frequently in gender-segregated locations, where much less restrictive clothing customs applied.[103]

This male slave self-confidence, however, faced negation within a distinct field of social interaction. The bīẓān rule of female hypergamy brought about a fundamental difference between slave women and men. While the former could be married by free men, slave men were most definitely excluded from alliances with women other than of their own status. While slave women, consistent with the conception of a patriarchal society, could be assigned certain seductive qualities competing with those of the bīẓāniyyāt by the free men, slave men simply did not enter into any such consideration or competition. While the slave women's struggle for re-socialisation was intertwined with the struggle for reconstitution of their gender identity (a prerequisite to subsequent recognition as concubine, milk-mother etc.; cf. p. 94-105), and hence operated in the field of work as well as the symbolic world of gender identity, the locus of the slave men's struggle to reduce de-socialisation was exclusively focused on work. Indeed, the slave men experienced a deep paradox. While being able to meet the exigencies of gender symbolism much better than slave women, they found themselves excluded to the utmost in the field of practising gender relations. A slave man, properly speaking, could never gain the social rights of paternity. The de-socialising impetus of slave estate, which de facto denied kinship ties to slaves turned the patriarchal conception of descent upside-down, and hence inflicted the most serious blow to the slave men. Slave children were to live with their mother, at least until a certain age, but there was no consideration whatsoever of the slave father. While slave men were deprived of the recognition of fatherhood, slave women were recognised as biological mothers of their children.[104] Social motherhood, in as far as it meant granting them rights in their children, was more or less definitely denied to them, but could be gained in another field: milk-motherhood. Milk-kinship ties transferred the affective relations established through parenthood-analogous practices into a legal framework. Although dismissing the material obligations arising from real parenthood, milk-kinship produced analogous social rules of respect – one major concern of slaves' struggle for recognition as social beings (cf. p. 94-99).[105]

Slave men, to gain social paternity, had not only to be manumitted themselves, but had to marry a free woman, e.g. a ḥarṭāniyya, too. This configuration of master, slave and gender relations is the pivotal point in many ḥarāṭīn and slave narratives. It is manifest in statements like "any ḥarṭāni who marries a slave woman would be a fool, for he never would gain paternity over his children" (Khalifa Ould Kebab), and the grievance expressed by M'Barke (cf. p. 66-69). However constraining these implications of slave ideology were, it would be to depict a rather leaden portrait of bīẓān slavery if reduced to these specific moments. Mobility, and in this case above all spatial mobility, was a means to cope with these adversities. If slave women were unable to separate from their masters, slave men who desired to share their lives had to move – at least temporarily. A proverb from the Tuareg (a pastoral-nomadic group of the central Sahara, sharing quite a lot of characteristics of the bīẓān) is quite instructive on the matter: "whoever has a slave

woman has a slave man" (Oxby 1978: 197).[106] Tuareg masters, too, preferred to give strange slave men who joined their slave women an extra portion of food (for they otherwise would have relied on that of the woman), and have them do some odd jobs in return. Slave men of high esteem, e.g. good herders, experienced different treatment. Rather than let them engage in affairs which might have led them to leave their master and join their slave spouse's master, these valuable slaves were advised to form engagements with slave women by their master. The latter thus could choose an ideal spouse, one highly likely to always live within the same camp as the master – and his slave (cf. Oxby 1978: 193ff.).[107]

Drawing on and highlighting the gender differentials implied in the use of slave labour among the bīẓān provides a clue to a comprehensive understanding of some major social relations tying slaves into society, while nevertheless rejecting their social integration. Different modes of making use of female and male slave labour, resulting from the masters' need not to challenge their own conception of a gender-segregated society, are fundamental to an explanation of different modes of slave control. Slave men, more likely to be far from the camp, could not easily be put to work effectively and closely watched at the same time. Within such a configuration of the master-slave relationship, the use of coercive means, i.e. hurting slaves, tended to be a last resort to restore authority. Slave women on the contrary experienced control most of the day, and there are numerous descriptions of bīẓāniyyāt terrorising their slave women. This polarised image is useful in challenging a much too undifferentiated portrayal of slave conditions, and in opening up a perspective which introduces gender relations and the structuration of space into the study of slavery. Transforming the gendered patterns of slavery revealed so far into a new stereotype, however, would deprive this approach of its very qualities, and would be misleading. Such an attempt would mean neglecting the many in-betweens of master-slave relations highlighted by this analysis of slave work. There were slave men doing women's work and vice-versa (cf. Klein/Robertson 1983: 10; Brisson [1792] in Saugnier/Brisson 1969: 437), and some social institutions, such as milk-kinship provided a means to overcome the restrictions on interaction between non-kin of the opposite sex, such as slave men and mistresses (cf. Cleaveland 1995: 46). Perpetuating a static image, furthermore, means disregarding the dynamics of slavery as relations of dependency evolving within society, as well as transforming it. Besides being present in the demographic evolution of bīẓān slavery these dynamics are also manifest in the evolution of the bīẓān economy, focused on in the following.