Chapter 8
The Difference in Identity

The Politics of Ḥarāṭīn Identity

Relations of dependency, as they are experienced by the great majority of sūdān, are far from uniform. It is a major characteristic of master-slave relations that they produce a great diversity of conditions which the dependents experience despite being bound to a uniform estate. Men and women still bound to the slave estate, manumitted slaves, slaves who gained autonomy by leaving their masters, and ḥarāṭīn who claim never to have been bound to the slave estate, today live in a great variety of conditions. Many continue to experience social and economic discrimination, while a few have been able to make a career, and have become part of the bīẓān establishment.[1]

Major aspects of this diversity in relations of dependency have been analysed so far. Biographical narratives illuminated how highly diverse, and often ambiguous personal experiences have shaped particular perceptions of bīẓān society, and of discrimination against sūdān. Gender in this context was revealed to be a major category providing an analytical tool to unravel different configurations of hierarchy and dependency. Further fields which manifest the varying levels of dependency and social differentiation, including not only the sūdān, but numbers of dependent bīẓān too, are the division of labour and land tenure. In the following, the focus will shift from the analysis of distinct configurations of dependency to practices of group formation and identification within these contexts. In a number of case studies it will be explored how sūdān describe themselves, and how they are perceived by bīẓān. As the fundamental question for the sūdān is to overcome their stigma as social outsiders, or at least as descendants of these, their discourses and practices are marked by a fundamental ambivalence. Either they stress difference between sūdān and bīẓān, and portray the *sūdān as distinct from the bīẓān*, or they depict *sūdān* as members of bīẓān society, and thus *as being bīẓān*. In a second step, the analysis will show that these two discourses, despite their inherent antagonism, are used more or less simultaneously by sūdān to locate themselves in the social space. Depending on the context of these discursive practices of identification, sūdān either stress difference from, or identity with the bīẓān. The sūdān, or ḥarāṭīn identity (as the political activists prefer to call it) is thus revealed to be deeply

contradictory and fragmented. This contradictory consciousness, however, appears less to be so once "being bīẓān" or "being ḥarāṭīn" are understood as relational categories. Rather than describing an essence of being, these identifications describe what one considers oneself to be vis-à-vis specific environments.

Ḥarāṭīn Identity in the National Context

While the social topography of the dependent strata of bīẓān society, as has been revealed by the lines of analysis already elaborated, varies considerably, and proves to be at the basis of a number of internal cleavages, the relevance of these characteristics is downplayed by discourses which depict the sūdān as one homogeneous group. Their shared experience of uniform social and economic deprivation is considered to create a distinct group solidarity of the oppressed, which will result in a common, then ḥarāṭīn identity. These discourses, elaborating an ideal of sūdān being, are developed by political activists of this stratum. Their aim is to raise awareness of being discriminated against among the sūdān, and thus to incite them to struggle for their emancipation, the end of bīẓān predominance, and equal rights. Most prominent in this respect remained for a long time the organisation El Hor (Arabic: al-ḥurr; free, noble, freeborn; Wehr 1976: 165), which was founded in 1974, and since 1978 has fought in public for the cause of the ḥarāṭīn,[2] who are no longer to feel inferior, but become self-confident (cf. El Hor 1993; Mercer 1982: 31ff.).

> El Hor also wants to be, from now on, characteristic of a completely new society, where the word Haratine will be worn with pride, like a standard, and will no longer be synonymous with a bad destiny, to be endured with fatalism. (El Hor 1993: 3; author's translation)

The unity of the sūdān is to be achieved under the banner of a common identity. The term ḥarāṭīn therefore has to be freed from its pejorative connotations, and instead become the symbol of the new society in which all sūdān have united, and thus put an end to their social discrimination. This project for a new ḥarāṭīn identity clearly aims to transform the meanings the term "ḥarāṭīn" has been ascribed by the dominant bīẓān discourse (i.e. either "freed slave", or euphemistically "all slaves and ḥarāṭīn"). In this attempt the counter-hegemonic discourses, however, differ considerably. The majority tries to build a bridge from the past into the future by reference to ethnic categories. Either the origin of the ḥarāṭīn among the black African ethnic groups is stressed, and the ḥarāṭīn thus are considered to have to go back to their roots, instead of remaining within bīẓān society,[3] or, as is the more influential, and current position of El Hor, they form a distinct social entity, which is neither entirely bīẓān nor black African,[4] but an original synthesis of both cultures. Lastly, a third major stance portrays the ḥarāṭīn as completely assimilated into bīẓān society. They are considered to be Arab by birth, and hence Arab forever. Being a part of the bīẓān universe the ḥarāṭīn

therefore will have to struggle for equal rights within this framework, and have nothing to gain but only to lose beyond it (Interview with Boïdel Ould Homeïd in: Mauritanie Nouvelles, nº 28, 18.8.1992: 6f.; Brhane 1997a: 242ff.).

Despite their contradictions over the issue of what the ḥarāṭīn are to become, all political leaders claiming to speak in the name of the ḥarāṭīn assume that these constitute a distinct group that can be discerned by a set of distinguishing marks. According to El Hor this is manifest in several domains:

> The specificity of the haratin thus is manifested by their Hassaniya language which they speak despite their black colour, by their folklore, their games and leisure. (El Hor 1993: 11; author's translation)

The cultural boundary thus drawn makes references to both history and cultural practices. The ḥarāṭīn are part of the bīẓān because they speak their language, the ḥassāniyya Arab dialect. However, they are different from the bīẓān because they speak ḥassāniyya only as a consequence of their assimilation to bīẓān society, which is a consequence of their slave past. This different historical background is also responsible for a set of cultural practices the ḥarāṭīn do not share with the bīẓān, namely folklore, games and leisure.

While this discourse on ḥarāṭīn cultural features and practices conforms well to the exigencies Fredrik Barth (1969a: 14f) revealed to be crucial to the maintenance of ethnic boundaries, it remains an open question what significance the project of a distinct ḥarāṭīn identity has gained. Meskerem Brhane (1997a) most recently evaluated this question in the urban context of Nouakchott, and ascertained that there still is no uniform ḥarāṭīn identity. Instead ḥarāṭīn, i.e. sūdān, tend by appealing to distinct strategies (e.g. patri-centred versus matri-centred narratives) to locate themselves either within, or outside bīẓān society. This distinction, described as one of "radical ḥarāṭīn" versus "conservative ḥarāṭīn", structures social life in major domains. Ḥarāṭīn of the two distinct categories not only have different perceptions of their history, but also practise different patterns of social relations.[5] They furthermore oppose each other on the political scene, where the ḥarāṭīn have become a significant factor in the process of democratisation.[6]

When the City Goes Rural

The rural hinterland, of which the region of Achram-Diouk is to be considered a part, has for a long time been closely related to the urban centres. Bīẓān society, despite the recent sedentarisation, is still highly mobile. Seasonal migration between towns and the rural areas seems in many respects to have replaced former nomadic mobility (cf. Ruf 1995) and now means that the city and its ideas go rural. Major news in bīẓān society continue to spread quickly, despite various limitations experienced, especially by the most heavily deprived populations, in this respect.[7] The counter-hegemonic discourses, created by ḥarāṭīn elites located above all in the modern sector, thus did not remain limited to the cities, but spread over the

whole country, and became effective even in the most remote locations. Or, as a ḥassān told me with regard to the sūdān of his tribe living in a nearby adabay:

> It was in 1976 that the sūdān in . . . stopped paying half of their harvest. . . . This was because a part of the ḥarāṭīn went to Nouakchott. Every time they went there, they heard that there are no more slaves, and that all people are equal. Once back at the adabay, these sūdān started to tell all the others about what they had heard. So each time one sūdāni came back from Nouakchott, he started to change [the attitude of] all the other sūdān there in the adabay. (Interview ḥassān, 9.12.1995)

Discourse and action, however, do not have to correspond as neatly as the ḥassān interviewee assumes to have been the case here. In many cases, the configurations of dependency on land grants outlined in the previous chapter leave the sūdān little room to publicly reject bīẓān exploitation. Instead resistance in this context is a more subtle process, and counter-hegemonic discourses remain restricted to the backstage or what James C. Scott (1990) has called "hidden transcripts".[8] A selective reading and narration of the past is a powerful means to interpret the present and make sense of it. Ḥarāṭīn, seeking to develop a historic background for their we-group, develop accounts of the past that make it possible to portray today's ḥarāṭīn as free and independent. As this in the context of bīẓān society implies developing genealogical accounts, the ḥarāṭīn, who lack precisely this means of reference to the past, face a major challenge to their project (cf. Brhane 1997a: 101ff.). Besides developing a number of mythical accounts aimed at compensating for the lack of a genealogical representation of their past, sūdān and bīẓān make use of many more discursive and other practices to articulate social group identity in the context of bīẓān society. These different modes for the production of meaning, based on expressions of identity and difference, will be analysed in the context of several case studies from the region of Achram-Diouk.

Marking Difference, Marking Identity

The Two Brothers: Narrating Difference by Allegories

Invoking the past to speak about the present is but one option to fuel processes of identity formation. Narratives of the past in this respect, especially whenever they portray mythical accounts, intersect with allegories. Smadar Lavie (1990: 29ff.) has recently shown the central place which allegories, and with them an allegorical mode of reasoning, have in the process of identity formation among Mzeini Bedouins. This argument, developed for the context of how the Mzeini remember and construct their history and identity in a context of oppression threatening in some respects

their very existence, namely Israeli and Egyptian rule, applies well to the case of the sūdān. Both projects of identity formation have to make sense of a present that still is marked by the social and economic turmoil of the recent past. While among the Mzeina, the distant past and the genealogical charts of their tribes and ancestors seem to have lost much of their significance for the production of Bedouin sense in a rapidly changing social and economic environment, the sūdān are perturbed by their lack of such a past. The following narrative highlights the sūdān concern with this deprivation. It was presented to me by a Badeyn (cf. his narrative p. 57-59) in a moment of deep relaxation one late afternoon, after we had had lunch together, he had milked his goats, and all glasses of tea had been drunk:

> There once was a bīẓān from this region [northern Aftout/southern Tagant]. He probably was a ḥassān. He had stolen his wife from the Bambara at the river Senegal. Here, on the Tagant, he made this woman his slave, in order to make her his wife and marry her. With this woman, the man had several children.
>
> One day two of his sons went on a journey. One of them was of light complexion, because he had had a bīẓān mother, the other one was of dark complexion, because he descended from that stolen Bambara woman. The two brothers[9] went together to the town of Atar in the Adrar. Having arrived there, the light-skinned brother went onto the market and sold his dark-skinned brother as a slave. The latter did not know anything about the ambitions of his brother. The light-skinned brother arranged with the new slave master that he should tell the dark-skinned brother only fifteen days later about his fate. Until then, they should only act as if the light-skinned brother had gone on a short journey, and would come back soon.
>
> Meanwhile the treacherous brother left with all of the money he got from selling his brother into slavery, and travelled back home to the Tagant. There the mother of the dark-skinned brother saw him return with his pockets full of money, but without her son. She immediately realised what had happened, and started to scold the returned brother in the presence of all people. Therefore the father came to know about the story, and indeed there were many indicators speaking against the light-skinned brother. The latter denied all reproaches against him, and insisted on his version of the events, stating that his dark-skinned brother had remained of his own will in the Adrar. Finally, the family decided to take all of the money they found on the light-skinned brother, and to travel to the Adrar to investigate what had become of the missing brother.
>
> The latter in the meantime had been informed about his fate, and he had accepted it with the words "If I am to be your slave, then I will follow you".
>
> The people from the Tagant reached the Adrar about two months after the sale had been concluded. After a while they managed to meet people telling them that they had bought a slave about two or three months ago. However, there was no trace to be found of the dark-skinned son. This

> was because he had become a shepherd, and remained all time out in the bush with the animals. When he returned to the camp one evening, his voice was immediately recognised by members of his family present there. The latter then took all the money they had found with the light-skinned brother, and gave it back to the master of their brother, thus buying the latter's freedom, and revealing the treachery of the light-skinned brother. Badeyn, 23.12.1995)

At first sight this narrative seems to tell little more than that sūdān always have to beware of the bīẓān proneness to treachery towards them, and of their unconditional brutality. In this respect the narrative accounts for little more than a radical ḥarāṭīn perspective, according to which the dividing line between bīẓān and sūdān is the one separating slave raiders from the enslaved, ore else evil from good. However, this is not all the story is about. It is indeed about a bīẓān (by his patrilineal descent) who becomes subject to treatment as a slave due to his maternal descent from a slave woman, from whom he inherited his dark complexion. But being a full-fledged bīẓān, he cannot become the victim of anybody, only of his brother. The latter in turn does not need to feel much concern for his half-brother, because they both have different mothers. While on the one hand, the story is about the discrimination against a bīẓān because of his slave mother, it is also about the segmentational structure of conflict within bīẓān patrilineages. These do not necessarily arise along the division of sūdān versus bīẓān uterine ties, but such a configuration is likely to create unity of a distinct kind among bīẓān kin of different, but nevertheless bīẓān affiliation on the mother's side (cf. the case of the ʿamīr of Tagant, Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar, p. 105-108). The attitude of the dark-skinned brother once he becomes aware of his new condition is also striking. Rather than oppose it, he submits to his new master, and becomes a shepherd living with the animals in the bush – a kind of life that is a synonym for backwardness and ignorance in bīẓān society. It takes his mother, for whom the status of her son is the materialisation of her own rise from slave estate to the legal wife of a bīẓān, to make the bīẓān aware of what had happened, and to free the enslaved son. Indeed falsely enslaved freemen, which is a recurring pattern in narratives concerning slavery, never directly oppose their estate. Their freeborn status is revealed only on occasions in which the circumstances account for their true identity.[10] Overt resistance in this constellation for a true bīẓān would mean violating the rules of good conduct, and subverting the foundations of social hierarchy by giving a bad example to all other slaves.

The tale of the bīẓān who sold his brother thus serves not only ḥarāṭīn propaganda, but also opens up insights into the complex universe of bīẓān social relations. In the last instance it is the slave woman who gains most. She, due to her slave origin, was able to transgress exactly those boundaries of social conduct the bīẓān were unable to cross. It was she alone who could blame the treacherous bīẓān for having sold his brother, and make her

husband look for his lost son. Finally she not only gets her son back, but also strengthens her own, and her children's position in the competition with those members of the family who are of bīẓān descent on their mother's side.

Taken as an allegory, the story of the two brothers says much more than simply that the sūdān have to fear bīẓān dishonesty and racism.[11] Like the narrative of Badeyn (cf. p. 57-59), it is instructive on the most sensitive issue of whether sūdān can become bīẓān or not. The matter remains full of ambivalence for the sūdān. Indeed, there are avenues to becoming bīẓān in legal status, but these are strained by the jealousy and overt disregard such an enhancement of individual status may produce among fully-fledged bīẓān. The sticky nature of a sūdān past is also revealed by a number of narratives in which bīẓān who had a sūdān mother continued to express their sympathy with the sūdān. A slave woman from the Ahel Swayd Aḥmed (Interview 21.12.1995), who lives at Daber on the Tagant, told me how in 1969, at the height of the drought, she was given jewellery by two bīẓān women of the emiral family. These women, who lived in Néma, where the slave woman had travelled to in order to get some medical treatment, were so generous because they themselves had a former slave mother, she said. Surely the most prominent defender of the slaves was the former ʿamīr of Tagant, Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar, whose mother too had been a slave. Within the ḥella, the emiral camp, he was recounted to have had not only absolute authority, but to have owned everything. Sūdān who had lived at the ḥella were unanimous about one point: although they had served different bīẓān, they had had only one master, the ʿamīr of Tagant. Several sūdān also reported that Abderrahmane was aware of the risks his protégés would encounter once he was gone. On his deathbed he therefore ordered his sons not to change the slaves' condition, and to prevent the bīẓān of the ḥella from appropriating slaves who had so far been under his authority individually. While these narratives surely are part of the glorification of the old ʿamīr, who was also reported to have shown little mercy as a slave master himself,[12] the enthusiasm of many sūdān for this personality does not stop at this point. It is marked even among sūdān of tribes other than the emiral Ahel Swayd Aḥmed.[13]

Slave Behaviour as Expression of Good and Evil

Masters and slaves were meant to occupy distinct spheres in bīẓān society. This not only concerned the locality and the distinct character of their respective work (cf. chapter five), but also opposing behavioural patterns. According to the bīẓān perspective, slaves represented the uncivilised world, and in this respect naturally were the counter-model to the bīẓān, who were supposed to represent refinement and civilisation.[14] The mastery of distinct behavioural patterns and emotion management are a basic means for the production of difference, and the legitimation for the assumption of a superior position in society (cf. Elias 1988, 1990). Out of everyday practices of discriminating social strata develop links between behaviour, psychological disposition and the legitimation of social inequality in society. These

provide a fruitful domain for the analysis of master-slave relationships, as a recurrent pattern in the ideology of slavery shows; the portrayal of the slave as a minor, who needs to be socially and physically controlled by the masters. Rather than take up the discussion whether this conception of slavery makes of it an "institution of marginality" (Miers/Kopytoff 1977a), or excludes slaves from society (Meillassoux 1986), the focus here will be on how difference and hierarchy were to be produced among slaves and masters in bīẓān society.[15]

The most striking insights into the opposing characteristics of bīẓān and slave personalities as conceived by the master's ideology, are given by narratives about slaves. First of all slave women are portrayed as unable to act of their own will, and even worse, they are not even able to develop one they could stick to. The tale of Vneyde (cf. Tauzin 1993: 71ff.), a slave woman who always swore not to do what her masters asked her, but nevertheless always ended up doing it, illuminates well this concept of a slave mentality – one that, albeit with less vigour, is applied to slave men too (cf. Tauzin 1989b: 86). According to the masters, the slave needs somebody to direct and guide his actions. together they constitute a complementary couple: while the master is unable to bear the hardship of manual labour, he is able to direct the actions of the slave, who himself is able to bear any hardships, but cannot plan his actions. While in the domain of work this distinction helped more to legitimise and maintain a division of labour between working slaves and non-working masters,[16] than take the shape of a symbiosis like the one between the blind and the lame, the non-sociability of the slaves which it expresses is fundamental to the bīẓān ideology of slavery. The perception of the slave as the incarnation of the uncivilised being, or else the antithesis of one's own identity, has so deeply impregnated bīẓān thought that major elements of this distinction are still present today.[17] Discussing the issue of illegitimate children with a young ḥassān woman of about eighteen, attending high school, and quite ambitious to emancipate herself by becoming a professional, and getting a qualified job of her own, in this respect was quite a revelation. Having an illegitimate child, it emerged, had completely different meanings to bīẓān and slave women. While for the former, it meant losing their power, and running the risk of not getting a husband corresponding to their status, illegitimate children were described as being no real nuisance to slave women, because these were ignorant of the laws and values, and thus had no consciousness of the social implications of their action (Interview ḥassān woman, 10.9.1995).[18] How much this view is shaped by the masters' ideology and negates the sentiments of slave women can be discerned from the accounts of slave women who were forced to have their children illegitimately, because their masters denied them the right to enter into marriages (cf. the narrative of M'Barke p. 68; Interview ḫādem, 6.2.1996).[19] Discrimination against slaves and ḥarāṭīn does not stop at this point. Until today, they are excluded from leading prayers in the mosques, and from performing other duties symbolising moral integrity and leadership.[20]

Most sūdān nowadays are well aware of these prejudices about sūdān, i.e. about the slaves' and slave descendants' modes of behaviour and their supposed ignorance. In former times, slave women used to perform a particular kind of folk song, while pounding millet. Accompanying the monotonous rhythm of millet-pounding, they sang songs mocking their masters, and especially the mistresses present at their work. The contents of these songs showed little concern about vulgarity, as the following verses show:

> Vous êtes témoins, je ne la blâme pas
> La chienne, je ne la blâme pas
> Son honneur est son cou
> Elle qui attache serré le sac de mil
> Elle qui cache tout sous la natte
> Et qui boit à même l'outre
> (Tauzin 1989b: 79)

Not to react when publicly called a bitch, a designation which is one of the strongest offences not only in Arab-Islamic culture, required a good deal of emotion management on the part of the bīẓān mistress. In turn, however, bīẓān success in this domain meant taking part in the reciprocal manifestation of distinct cultures, of distinct involvement in civilisation, and hence in reproducing social hierarchy. Today, at least in the region of Achram-Diouk, the sūdān women have become reluctant on the topic of these songs.[21] Not only has this genre almost died out because there hardly are any more women pounding millet in mortars, and the number of slave women who still do this work in front of their mistresses is even smaller still, but also the sūdān women no longer want to perform this kind of song. Raising the topic made everybody feel quite uncomfortable and embarrassed.[22]

A different case is that of another genre of distinct sūdān culture, a variety of spirituals and blues performed by sūdān women, and called meddh. These songs, which praise the prophet Muhammad, are perceived as laudable by the bīẓān. Even some rigorous interpreters of Māliki Islam, like the local qāḍi at Achram, Ahmed Ould Aly (Interview 24.12.1995), have the highest esteem for this music because unlike the genres performed by the iggāwen, it consists only of vocals, and is not accompanied by instruments, which this branch of Islam considers to be evil. While in the region of Achram-Diouk there were not many performances of meddh, it was ardently performed by the sūdān living at Daber on the Tagant.[23] Well-arranged sessions, and a veritable art of meddh, has developed in those quarters of Nouakchott inhabited primarily by sūdān. Meddh has also become integrated into the political agitation for the ḥarāṭīn cause. New texts, inspired by the little red book of Mao, and calling for ḥarāṭīn freedom, were superimposed on the classical songs (cf. Brhane 1997a: 245, 255; Houssein Ould Mahand in: Al-Bayane nº 64, 10.3.1993: 9; Interview ḥarṭāni, 23.12.1995).[24]

Putting an End to Ignorance

The most serious and far-reaching means for the maintenance of bīẓān hegemony within society was their knowledge of Islam. As long as the bīẓān were able to mediate all of the spiritual world, and sūdān at best were attributed the ability to manage the forces of evil, it went without saying that no sūdān could become the equal of a bīẓān. On the contrary, this very relationship, and the central role the practice and knowledge of Islam has in bīẓān society for the generation of symbolic capital (cf. Bourdieu 1987: 205ff.), soon made the acquisition of religious knowledge one of the most important fields on which sūdān struggled for social recognition. The issue of this struggle was the more sensitive, as the boundary between the learned and the ignorant never did coincide with the one separating bīẓān from sūdān. Decrying the ignorance of pastoralists or cultivators living out in the bush[25] is as much a means to ascertain inner-bīẓān social hierarchy between those who are aware of religious obligations and those who are not, as it is a means to discriminate against sūdān. In view of these inner-bīẓān contradictions, gaining some knowledge of Islam meant for the sūdān – and here one has to speak of sūdān men to be precise[26] – becoming at least equal if not superior to a number of bīẓān. From the 1950s on, a small number of sūdān boys was able to receive Qur'ānic instruction, and thus to learn not only about religion but to read and write Arabic too.[27] The implications this had for sūdān boys, such as e.g. the seasonal interruption of learning by agricultural work, and the need for the sūdān family to be already quite well off, is revealed by the narrative of Brahim (cf. p. 59-66). In a later interview I asked Brahim about his motivation to engage so deeply in Islamic scholarship:

> *Author:* Why did you attend the Qur'ānic school [maḥaẓra], and what did this have to do with the matter of ignorance?
> *Brahim:* I wanted to know my religion, and the maḥaẓra was the way to learn something about it, to get out of the unawareness. Today one can also go to school, this is now just as good. In those times, the issue was to know what the prayer means, to stop resigning oneself with the situation. Today one needs also to know reading and writing whenever one wants a good job, otherwise one will always remain a day labourer. In those days many people were ignorant, but only the sūdān were so profoundly ignorant that they did not even know how to get out of this situation. And the bīẓān always kept all the knowledge for themselves. I never saw a bīẓān ask a sūdān whether he would like to learn something. The sūdān were ignorant, the bīẓān knew this very well, this was the way the bīẓān then were able to oppress the sūdān.

The arguments of Brahim show that opposing bīẓān dominance does not mean rejecting bīẓān culture on the whole. The critique raised by Brahim goes right to the heart of the matter, the exploitation of religious knowledge for the maintenance of oppression. Rather than spread religious learning, as they should have done to obey the precepts of Islam among all, and especially

among their slaves, many bīẓān did withhold their knowledge, and did not even let the sūdān know the meaning of the prayers.[28] Brahim, however, does not stop at this point, but criticises the sūdān themselves too. He blames them for another kind of ignorance, the one of not knowing how to escape from ignorance. This implies that Brahim perceives the sūdān of these times as not conscious of their social and religious deprivation, and thus as complying with the masters' prejudice against slaves as beings unaware of Islam and disregarding its precepts.[29] This discourse is central to the definition of distinct ḥarāṭīn characteristics, and hence to the definition of central elements marking "ḥarāṭīn-ness". Brahim not only draws a boundary between the oppressive bīẓān and the deprived sūdān, but also one distinguishing ignorant, and hence passive and submissive sūdān, from sūdān (or rather ḥarāṭīn) dedicated to knowledge, and aware of the modern world. Ignorance in this discourse becomes differentiated into simple ignorance caused by the circumstances, and for which the individual concerned therefore cannot be blamed, and "ignorance of ignorance", meaning the lack of interest in becoming aware, and feeling responsible for one's own fate. While this distinction remains contradictory, for either one is ignorant, and thus does not know about his state of deprivation, or not, it is central to the outline of a new mode of life, based on the will to base life on one's own means, i.e. on manual labour. The ḥarāṭīn consider themselves, and to some extent are considered by a number of bīẓān too, to be the protagonists of this attitude towards the difficulties of life in rural and urban Mauritania,.

Their knowledge of work and gaining a living from it enables the sūdān to avoid the modern side of ignorance, but it does not save them from the risk of betraying ignorance in the second domain, i.e. vis-à-vis religious practices. While still slaves, the sūdān did not pay the zakāt, the tithe for the poor prescribed by Islam as one of the five duties of every Muslim. This was because anyone bound to the slave estate did not exist socially, and thus did not have to comply with social obligations. While the masters should have taken over this responsibility, many seem to have neglected this aspect of their obligations.[30] Beginning to pay the zakāt thus had two distinct meanings for slaves. This moment not only demarcated a definite change in the master-slave relation, but also the coming into existence of the slave as a social being performing the same ritual practices as the bīẓān. While paying zakāt thus on the one hand becomes an instrument of demonstrating independence,[31] many sūdān still feel uncomfortable about it. They fear not knowing well enough the prescriptions defining how to pay zakāt (cf. note 159, chapter 7), and thus failing to achieve the full range of symbolic capital this practice is able to produce. Disseminating knowledge about the zakāt therefore is subject to many discussions among sūdān, especially at the time of harvest. Sūdān intellectuals then are expected to disseminate their knowledge, and to enable their fellow sūdān to face the bīẓān challenge in this domain.

Practising the payment of zakāt is also significant of how the sūdān redefine

their relationship with the bīẓān in a second way. The major question arising when sūdān start paying the zakāt is who will benefit from these donations. It is commonly argued that manumitted slaves become the clients of their former masters (cf. Ould Mohamed 1988: 50; Villasante-de Beauvais 1991: 188). As a consequence of the manumission both enter a relation of walā' (patronage). The former master thus becomes walī, or mawla, the "legal guardian" (Schacht 1964: 120) of his former slave, who thus becomes mawla too, while the term then means freedman or client (cf. Pipes 1979; Ibn Abî Zayd al-Qayrawânî 1983: 229). The relations with former masters, today, are more likely to be defined by sūdān in categories of nearness, or by disavowing them altogether, than in the legal categories of walā', which indeed most sūdān (like most bīẓān) ignore. A major manifestation of the current state of these relations is the issue whether the former master is looked upon as being close enough to become the beneficiary of the sūdān zakāt payments. In this domain sūdān attitudes are controversial. Some continue to maintain good relations with their former (or, sometimes, formally at least, current) masters and therefore pay them zakāt, while others insist on giving zakāt only to the needy in their vicinity, be they bīẓān or sūdān; and again other sūdān stress that they have put an end to all relations with bīẓān and now give all their zakāt and further charity only to sūdān. These practices in fact do not contradict the logic of walā', for this relation is described as analogous to relations created by filiation, and does not create distinct rights, especially not in respect to property. The manumitted slave therefore is not obliged to contribute materially to the patrimony of his former master, as a fatwā of Šayḫ Sidyya al-Kabīr (1775-1868), one of the most illustrious religious and political figures in precolonial bīẓān society, who lived in the Gebla concludes (cf. Ould Mohamed 1988: 64f.).

The controversy among sūdān concerning the modes of paying zakāt outlined here throws a light on some unorthodox interpretations of this tithe, which according to the Qur'ān is supposed to benefit only the poor. In the history of bīẓān society, the term zakāt, however, has frequently been employed synonymously with other terms designating taxes like e.g. gabeẓ, and thus came to be used as a means of expressing and defining relations of patronage.[32] Therefore the issue of whether the beneficiaries of zakāt payments necessarily have to be poor remained disputed among zwāya scholars, despite the clear-cut definition provided by the Qur'ān (cf. Oßwald 1993: 104f, 115f., 120f.).[33] This intermingling of zakāt payments with tributes and levies means that until today receiving benefits declared to be zakāt involves no stigma for the beneficiary, but rather expresses some close social relation. This also allows for different interpretations of the nature of such payments, which thus can be declared zakāt by the sūdān, while former masters perceive them as remnants of tributes, or may perceive themselves as trustees who manage the zakāt payment for a third party.[34] The question whether one favours a close affiliate as beneficiary of one's zakāt payment, or a poor person regardless of his affiliation, thus proves to be the expression of a

deliberate choice how to shape the relationships with former masters and one's own community. Each position can be legitimised, as long as the opposition between a rigid interpretation of Islam and one stressing local customs is maintained.[35]

The Ḥarāṭīn "Work Ethic"

Many aspects of the specifics of sūdān work have already been outlined previously (cf. chapter five). This analysis has revealed the importance of hard, manual work in the life of most slaves and ḥarāṭīn. Today this former marker of low social status has been turned into symbol of a new, a modern attitude. Sūdān demonstrate pride when telling that they live from the work of their own hands, and portray these as being the sole source of wealth:

> *BOS:* The most wealthy were the ḥarāṭīn.
> *Author:* Oh really, how did they become so?
> *BOS:* The ḥarāṭīn, they are the most wealthy because they worked with their own hands, and they had the fields. The ḥassān and the maʿalimīn, they all depended on them [the ḥarāṭīn]. They [the ḥarāṭīn] were the ones who made everything.
> (Interview Brahim Ould Soueilim, ḥarṭāni, 26.8.1995)

This new ḥarāṭīn self-confidence, which has become reinforced by the revaluation of manual labour in recent times, makes for a ḥarāṭīn "work ethic" (a terminology introduced by Ann McDougall 1988: 379), which can be summed up in the motto that there is nothing a ḥarṭāni cannot do.[36] The sūdān claim to have always done all the work, and especially the hardest. They also continue to cultivate, and to work in the new industries, i.e. to (re-) produce the material world of bīẓān society today.[37] This image of the sūdān as universal worker is maintained by the bīẓān too. There is no problem in turning a sūdān cultivator who never in his life tended animals in only a few weeks into a highly skilled herdsman (Interview Mohammed Sid'Ahmed, zwāya, 12.9.1995). Likewise the bīẓān now engage in a discourse valuing manual labour and personal responsibility for one's fate. According to Abderrahmane Ould Ahmed (zwāya, Interview 13.7.1995), there are now several kinds of ignorance. One who knows the Qur'ān of course cannot be accused of ignorance, but today, anyone who does not know how to make a living by his own efforts and who has no occupation must be regarded as ignorant. A similar view is held by Hamoud Ould Amar (Interview 4.11.1995), a member of the ḥassān nobility who classifies the ḥarāṭīn (i.e. sūdān) into two opposite groups: either they now are among the best, thus sometimes even superior to all other strata in contemporary bīẓān society, or they continue to behave like the slaves by doing stupid things, stealing and the like.

The esteem manual labour and production is now gaining among all strata of bīẓān society is a result of the changing social and economic conditions. Indeed manual labour has become an ever more important means for gaining

a living not only for the sūdān but for many bīẓān too. More significant, however, is the influence of a discourse of modernity and development that is specific to countries which like Mauritania rate among the least developed of the world. Development cooperation now for years has been calling for the participation and the commitment of the "target groups", and no longer wants to strengthen passivity and dependency. The people of Achram-Diouk, and most Mauritanians as well, are well aware of these expectations of the international community of donors, be they state-funded or NGOs. While the discourse on the new value system, based on the appreciation of manual work, thus proves to be a response to Mauritania's dependency on foreign aid, it cannot be reduced to this single factor. For the sūdān struggling for their emancipation, the ideology of self-reliance, reinforced by the spread of capitalist culture and wage labour in the course of globalisation, has opened up a field in which they are able to take part in the production of common sense and hence to compete successfully for social power with the bīẓān (cf. Bourdieu 1985: 729).[38]

The Politics of Cattle and Goats

Religious learning and manual labour are by far not the only fields on which sūdān pursue their quest for symbolic capital, which despite all achievements, continues to take place on unequal grounds. Further arenas for the production of difference between bīẓān and sūdān were the possession and control of land (which was the subject of the previous chapter), and the ownership of livestock. This latter issue, for the bīẓān originally were a pastoral nomadic people, is burdened with especially strong emotions, and was laden with high symbolic value.[39] The possession of livestock, and within this domain especially of large animals like cattle, camels and horses, symbolised (and continues to do so)[40] welfare and status. Consequently livestock in former times was concentrated almost exclusively in the hands of the bīẓān masters. Slaves, within the restrictions resulting from their estate, in a few cases managed to acquire a number of small ruminants. They either profited from compensation for special services given in livestock by their masters, or acquired sheep and goats themselves This latter option had become frequent when the wage labour sector expanded after the Second World War, and bīẓān began more often to pay in animals for the herding and watering of their livestock. Finally the reinvestment of surplus millet was another means for sūdān to accumulate animals (cf. p. 184-190).

Cattle, which were much more expensive, and a symbol of affluence and status, were only rarely in the hands of slaves. Youba (Interview 22.1.1996), a man of slave origin of the ḥassān tribe of the Awlād ʿAlī Ntūnva, told me how his father's family got two cows during the big drought in 1969. While Youba's father watered the cattle of his master, a bīẓān herder approached with his herd of cattle. While resting, one of the stranger's cows calved. However, the cow and its calf were too weak to pursue the southward emergency migration of their herd. The bīẓān therefore gave them both as a

gift to Youba's father, the slave who had helped him water his animals. After the animals' return to the camp in the evening, the master of Youba's father became aware that his slave had been given a cow and a calf by a stranger just passing by. He then went to Youba's father and immediately gave him another cow as present.

The case throws a light on the very specific tie between a bīẓān master and a slave who had played already an important role in the management and maintenance of the animal wealth of the former. Youba's father was already well off among the slaves. His family owned quite a number of small ruminants. Getting a cow, however, meant considerably more than just getting an animal of great value (about the value of ten to fifteen goats prior to the drought). Getting a cow meant possession of an animal species which until then had been reserved for the master, and thus entering a sphere of symbolic representation that until then had been occupied solely by the bīẓān master. Confronted with this accidental turmoil in the well-established hierarchy of symbolic goods, the master had to react and to save his face, i.e. he had to manifest his leadership in the management of symbolic goods. This he achieved by one of the most powerful means to acquire prestige, generosity.[41] The bīẓān master's giving his slave a cow was a significant gesture not only on material grounds, because it acknowledged the slave's right to possess an animal species otherwise owned by bīẓān only. Nevertheless, as all post-hoc actions, this one too was hardly able to disguise its hasty and reactive character. Today the slave's son, who at the time of this event was about six years old, still vividly remembers this moment, and makes of it a central argument underscoring his family's very close contact with the bīẓān and hence their likeness with the bīẓān. However, becoming more like the bīẓān within this social matrix remained an individual experience, which above all became employed by Youba to underline his family's difference from the other sūdān in their camp.

Cultivation and Pastoralism, Adabay and Vrīg

Like the drought, several other external factors fuelled social change in bīẓān society, and opened up spaces for a redefinition of what it meant to be sūdān or bīẓān. While in the preceding case, the sūdān family had managed to become a little bit more like their bīẓān master's, changing circumstances also made it possible to stress difference between bīẓān and sūdān. The intensification of agricultural production throughout this century, which had been promoted by the colonial administration ever since it was established, enhanced differentiation between agriculturists and pastoralists in Mauritania. This meant increasing the gap between sūdān as cultivators, and bīẓān, together with numbers of their sūdān dependents, as nomadic or transhumant pastoralists. Although this dichotomy had been well established in bīẓān society for centuries, the new structuration of space resulting from the pacification of the Mauritanian territory, and the policy of free access to pasture, increased these differences, which are significant to the representa-

tion of the self. Those sūdān living in the adwaba continued to live on their own in almost sedentary camps for large parts of the year, while the bīẓān were engaged in herding and trading often far away from these spots. Part of this process was an increased professional specialisation of many sūdān. They now were able to develop a larger knowledge of millet cultivation than in the times when this activity occurred only occasionally, and the rhythm of work was dominated by the needs of the livestock. In the south of the Tagant, as well as large parts of the Assaba, the expansion of date palm cultivation opened up another path to a non-pastoral, professional specialisation (cf. p. 161-165, 205f., 221-226).[42] Though the segregation of work among bīẓān and sūdān is less marked in the case of date palm cultivation than it is for millet cultivation, and a number of bīẓān had effectively been engaged in caring for date palms established in a few locations on the Tagant for centuries, there is no doubt that the most profound knowledge of date palm cultivation lay with the long-established sūdān populations of the oasis. This intensification of several branches of agricultural production soon after colonisation affected lifestyles too. The adwaba, as the camps of the sūdān cultivators are called, and which are by and large immobile, became a means of reference by which sūdān were able to distinguish themselves from the bīẓān supposed to live in nomadic camps (ḥassāniyya: pl. vargān; sing. vrīg), and vice versa. The antagonistic relationship between the two concepts is revealed by the following interview statements:[43]

> On the plateau there are people who are not fixed, i.e. who have constructed until now, but they have fixed points where to they always go. . . . Adabay, that is a camp of sūdān, there are only sūdān, if it is composed of bīẓān, you will say vrīg [camp]. (Interview Mohamed A. Ould Khalil, zwāya, 1.8.98)

> Adabay means a camp that remains in one place for a long time, it may stay at one place for even more than one year. . . . We went to the adabay when we started to cultivate. Once the harvest was over, the adabay dissipated, and everybody went back to the [bīẓān] camps. (Interview Boye Mint Abeide, ḥarṭāniyya, 10.1.1996)

> There always was a camp of sūdān, an adabay. It is in Wād Lġnem. There were sūdān who always stayed with us [in the bīẓān camp], and others who were in their own camp. Adabay, that means an aṣl [origin] of the sūdān. When someone searches for a sūdān, then he will go there, because it is their aṣl [origin]. We visited these sūdān every year at the time of the harvest. (Interview Yahya Ould Heime, ḥassān, 9.12.1995)

The accounts illuminate that there is nothing like a clear-cut opposition between the vrīg, the nomadic camp, and the adabay, the location of sūdān residence. Rather the contradictory characteristics are developed within the limitations resulting from the background of mobile agro-pastoral produc-

tion in an arid environment, shared by bīẓān and sūdān alike. Mobility and immobility could formerly be, and still can be found among both sūdān and bīẓān. Many bīẓān nomadic pastoralists had quite restricted areas of nomadisation, which they left rarely. Others were transhumant, and consequently engaged in major seasonal migrations only twice a year, while they remained rather immobile throughout the rest of the year.[44] The adwaba in the northern Aftout and on the Tagant in turn greatly resembled the bīẓān camps, because they were (and many still are today) composed of tents.[45] Like the bīẓān, the sūdān shifted their camp to new locations when the pollution of the current emplacement had become too annoying. An interrelation between these distinct spheres was assured by many of the sūdān living not permanently in the adabay, but in the vrīg as well for a part of the year. Finally not all sūdān moved into an adabay, for many remained in the vrīg, and close to the bīẓān throughout the year, and did not even have knowledge of cultivation, but only of livestock rearing.

These analogies reveal how patterns of life in the adwaba and vargān resemble each other despite the opposition suggested by the concepts of adabay and vrīg. Rather than represent and describe the situation on the ground, or the degree of mobility, these concepts aim to construct difference between what are considered to be sūdān and bīẓān characteristics. At the heart of this opposition lies the reference to distinct professional specialisation, agriculture and pastoralism respectively, to which are attributed different modes of residential mobility, conceptions of space, and patterns of life-style.[46] The location of the sūdān camps depends largely on the location of their agricultural work, i.e. the major cultivating areas. These plots in fact are much less subject to annual variation than are the pastures frequented by the bīẓān pastoralists. As the sūdān become identified with the location of their fields, they acquire the attribute of immobility and sedentarity, while the bīẓān, associated with the needs of their animals, are perceived as mobile. This opposition is stressed by another assumption: although many adwaba in the centre and the north of Mauritania did not persist throughout the year, but were constituted only during the cultivation cycle, they nevertheless are attributed characteristics of permanency. This results in the qualification of adabay as an origin of sūdān proposed by interviewee Yahya Ould Heime (cf. above). The adwaba, by their association with ideally annually exploited agricultural sites, become transcendent localities, independent of their actual state, which may vary considerably. Though effectively shifting their location every year (admittedly within a restricted range), and often composed of tents, the adwaba are not perceived as having this characteristic, but as fixed locations. They are referred to by the name of the agricultural site its inhabitants exploit (e.g. Daber, Wād Lġnem, etc.). Like in the processes of trans-local identity formation observed among Lebanese migrants in West Africa (cf. Peleikis 1998), the adabay thus during a part of the year are maintained as virtual entities, serving as a means of identification to both bīẓān and sūdān,

and thus providing the sūdān with what they so fundamentally lack: a location of origin.

While the means by which sūdān camps are identified is the association with a locality, the reference to bīẓān camps is derived from genealogy and kinship, and refers to persons. A camp thus is referred to by the name of its leading member as "vrīg ahel Sīdi". Whenever the reference is beyond the level of personal acquaintance, the mode of identification shifts to a more general level, such as the fraction's or the tribe's name.[47] This is the case although, like the adwaba, many bīẓān camps can be found almost every year at the same series of places, e.g. wells, springs, pastures etc. The association of bīẓān communities with a genealogical reference common to camps does not apply to permanent settlements like villages and cities. These, like the adwaba, become identified with a locality.[48] Genealogical terms may be added, whenever the reference to a place fails to be unanimous. This is the case with the two separate neighbouring villages of Wassaʿa. These are distinguished by an appendix to the villages' name marking the different fractional affiliation of the sūdān residents, who either belong to the Tarkoz Awlād Tīkī, or the Tarkoz Awlād Sīd Aḥmed. Similar cases can be found among bīẓān villages too, but there appendixes may also distinguish villages or neighbourhoods inhabited by bīẓān of only different factions of one and the same tribal group.[49] These factions, revealing internal cleavages that may lead into a more complete separation into two distinct branches or fractions, most often differentiated by colour attributes such as the "whites", the "green" and the "blacks".[50]

As a key to these distinct modes of either personal or topographical reference to inhabited localities, appears the need for a universal mark of reference, the logic of which is revealed to be deeply impregnated in pastoral-nomadic concepts of space (cf. Schlee 1992). Neither the adabay, with its constantly changing inhabitants of low status, many of whom were not even considered members of bīẓān society by the bīẓān nobility, nor the village or town, which in many respects shares the negative characteristics of the adabay, complies with the need to provide for common, personalised references.[51] This is clearly different in the case of the camp, where the fluctuation of members does not affect the mark of reference, the name of one family which constitutes the core of the camp. This personalisation of references to localities is experiencing a resurgence in the modern, urban context. While in Nouakchott and other Mauritanian towns street names have hardly ever been used (not even for postal services), streets are distinguished by reference to well-known people living there (cf. Taine-Cheikh 1998: 81, note 11).

Sūdān Hard Talk

Beyond sociostructural changes opening new arenas for the production of cultural difference, a number of past experiences, alive and well in the collective memory of the sūdān, account for their difference from the bīẓān. These elements of a collective history of the sūdān concern the experience of

major deprivations resulting from their social status, and of major advances which brought to an end many of the most direct and coercive relations of dependency.

One recurrent element in sūdān descriptions of the past is the ḥassāniyya term istʿammār, which literally means "the times in which the people could be obliged". Thus being widely applicable to different conditions of oppression, the term has come to mean different things to sūdān and bīẓān. For the latter istʿammār is a synonym for colonisation, which is remembered as having been the time when the French had all rights, and everybody, bīẓān and sūdān alike, had to obey their orders.[52] The sūdān are well aware of this meaning of istʿammār, but subvert it into one blaming the internal colonisation of bīẓān society, i.e. the systematic oppression of the sūdān by the bīẓān. Istʿammār then comes to describe the state of mind of somebody "who takes the others like the goats, like a part of a herd which he wants to sell" (Daouda Ould Haroun, ʿabd, 19.12.1995), or "people who come and start to compel other people to give them animals or other things" (Interview Moisse Ould Emine, ʿabd, 10.2.1996), or simply to force people to work for somebody else. On a second level of meaning, istʿammār stands for a past where there were no rights for the sūdān – the time of slavery[53]:

> *GOEK:* It was Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar [the old ʿamīr of Tagant] who decided what he wanted to leave with the cultivator. First it was him to make his choice and take [of the harvest] what he wanted, then it was the turn of the cultivator and his family. . . .
> *Author:* Was there a distinct name for this system of giving a share of the harvest?
> *GOEK:* No, this had no proper name, this was not gabeẓ, and not ʿašūr, this simply implied work, istʿammār. This was the time of istʿammār, then the ʿamīr decided [all alone]. If he wanted, he could take all of the harvest. (Interview Ghalim Ould El Kheir, ʿabd, 17.12.1995)

Speaking of istʿammār as of a past that no longer exists, raises the question when this time of oppression ended. Over this issue there is no consensus among the sūdān. For most of them, the times of istʿammār are long-gone, or at least never concerned them personally, but only other sūdān. However, this past is not so far away, for it can be remembered that Abderrahmane Ould Bakkar, who was just reported above to have been practising istʿammār died only in 1982. Consequently, the proposition of a ḥarāṭīn that istʿammār ended with the independence of Mauritania raised much laughter among several other sūdān present at the interview. In an ensuing lively debate everybody came to agree that it was most probable that istʿammār had ended with the rule of colonel Ould Haidalla in the early 1980s, a time by which also numerous other traditional levies were no longer recognised (Interview 12.12.1995).

The reign of colonel Ould Haidalla has in two more respects become a synonym for sūdān emancipation. Under his rule slavery in Mauritania was

abolished for the third time during the 20th century on 5 July 1980, and it was Ould Haidalla himself who made this decision public another time on the 5 July 1983 in a speech broadcast by the national radio (cf. Mauritanie Nouvelles 1997, nº 235: 8). Among sūdān the colonel became famous for saying on this occasion that all Mauritanians were equal, that black and white were the same, that everybody should look on each other as brothers, and ask for permission before taking others' belongings. A message that put simply meant that the time had come to stop treating others as slaves and inferiors (Interview M'Barke Mint Lebeid, ḥarṭāniyya, 22.10.1995; cf. the narrative of Brahim, p. 59-66).[54] Besides initiating the land reform and strengthening the sūdān's rights to land ownership, Ould Haidalla also created the "Structures d'Éducation des Masses" (SEM). This nation-wide institution was designed to replace the old unitary party, which had been dissolved by the military regime after the coup against president Mokhtar Ould Daddah in 1978. The very peculiar thing about the SEM was that they were supposed to represent all Mauritanians and structured according to a military model. Every ten families were to elect a "chief of the ten" (or "cell"), ten of these chiefs were to elect among themselves a "chief of the one hundred" (or "quarter") and so on up to regional and the national level, where four executive secretaries were placed. These represented the different domains in which the SEM would intervene for the promotion of the living conditions and the development of modern attitudes: orientation, organisation, economy and culture, Islamic morality and social action (cf. Marchesin 1992: 186).[55]

These benefits of the era of colonel Ould Haidalla do not prevent Mauritanians from remembering it as the most severe period in the history of independent Mauritania until today. Indeed the regime under Ould Haidalla was famous for the introduction of the penal code of the šarī'a, and the practice of executing punishments in public. This raised strong disapproval, for all this meant a radical shift away from the traditions of Islamic jurisprudence prevailing in Mauritania, which constitute a major element of zwāya identity (cf. Ould Cheikh 1991b; Oßwald 1993: 62ff.).[56] The regime also reinforced the secret services, and thus created fear of prosecution due to false accusation and denunciation. In sum, the times of Ould Haidalla are remembered as having been a time of conspiracy and unmeasured brutality by the executive (Interview Sidi Ould Salim, ḥarṭāni, 30.1.1996).

To this extent both sūdān and bīẓān agree about the nature of Ould Haidalla's policies. A significant difference in their respective conclusions arises over the issue whether the SEM had a democratic character. For bīẓān, it goes without saying that the SEM had nothing to do with democracy, for this period only began with the first free communal elections, and the establishment of multi-partyism under the rule of later president Ould Taya from 1989 on (Ould Cheikh 1994b: 32ff.; Interview Mohamed A. Ould Khalil, zwāya, 1.8.1995).[57] Sūdān on the contrary describe the introduction of the SEM as the first arrival of democracy in Mauritania (Interview M'Barke Mint Lebeid, ḥarṭāniyya, 22.10.1995; cf. the narrative of Zeyneb,

p. 66). Indeed this rather rigidly structured institution was implemented in many regions in a way that for the first time came to introduce the principle of "one man, one vote". Sūdān thus had equal rights along with bīẓān, and were elected to represent their communities, for in communities with a large majority of sūdān, such as the adwaba, it was sūdān who became the representatives of the SEM. While on the regional and national level, the SEM still remained marked by the tribal fragmentation of political power (cf. Marchesin 1992: 187f.), they nevertheless portrayed a different ideal, and sometimes even managed to curtail the influence of the traditional elites.[58] This was largely anticipated by the sūdān, and made them sympathise with this project, while interest in the institution remained mitigated among the bīẓān.[59]

Being a Part or Being Apart?

The preceding accounts describe sūdān first of all as different from the bīẓān, thus fitting in many respects into the image propagated by the ḥarāṭīn activists, such as the leaders of El Hor, and the more recent political party "Action pour le Changement" (AC), of the ḥarāṭīn as a distinct "ethnic" group. The tendency of sūdān to describe themselves as different from the bīẓān is strongest in accounts portraying the past as a time of injustice and oppression, marked by bīẓān neglecting their commitment to Islamic precepts, being treacherous and racist, and many other misdemeanours. Consequently it could be expected that on the basis of these many experiences of deprivation and disregard, the sūdān would find it difficult to identify themselves with the bīẓān. Nevertheless, this is the case. In many of these accounts the individual sūdān's claim to being part of the bīẓān appears included as a subtext in the radical discourse decrying bīẓān oppression. This profound ambivalence in most sūdān discourses is created by several means. First of all talking about bīẓān oppression is portrayed as talking about the past, i.e. relations of dependency which no longer exist in this configuration. Whenever the context of the events thus described does not allow recourse to this strategy, because most recent cases of what can be defined as istʿammār are concerned, a second strategy comes to the fore. The experience of istʿammār in any case is denied to have been a personal experience. It only was, and maybe continues to be part of the experience of other sūdān. Suffering from istʿammār in this perspective is an experience above all which the sūdān concerned have to be blamed for. Rather than being portrayed as social structures allowing for the oppression of whole groups, the relations of dependency resulting from the practice of slavery are delineated as individual ties, in which the individual sūdān has a large responsibility for whether he lives under oppression or free like the bīẓān. Istʿammār from this point of view becomes the result of ignorance, which both sūdān and bīẓān do not challenge (Interview Daouda Ould Haroun, ʿabd, 19.12.1995).

While the major lines of this argumentation can already be derived from the preceding strains of analysis, all focusing on different fields for the production of difference and sameness, a few further case studies exploring sūdān attempts to locate themselves in the bīẓān universe are needed to fully grasp the present line of argumentation. A second step then will develop a synthesis able to explain the frequent parallelism of marking difference (which is most pronounced in the case of processes of segregation such as described above; p. 267-270), sūdān efforts to become like the bīẓān through the appropriation of symbolic goods (cf. p. 266f.), and the mastery of corresponding cultural practices (cf. p. 259-265).

Significations of Black and White

Asked about what constitutes the difference between sūdān and bīẓān, terms which are literally translated into "blacks" and "whites" by the francophone inhabitants of Mauritania, interviewees from both groups in the region of Achram-Diouk most often respond by saying that both are just the same. As it is a paradox to refer to two different entities, i.e. the "blacks" and the "whites", only to claim their sameness, these statements are complemented by the remark that the only difference is colour, but differences in colour are of no significance. Indeed, phenotype is one of the least reliable criteria for discerning bīẓān and sūdān. While in the present all seem to have become the same, differences among bīẓān and sūdān are manifest once the focus shifts to the past. Here perceptions of what marks difference between bīẓān and sūdān start to follow a distinct logic, depending on the speaker's affiliation.

> The sūdān are like the bīẓān, this is all the same, there is no separation between the two, there is no reason to do so. In former times everything was mixed. We were all together, made our tea together, ate together, slept together under one tent, *but everybody knew his status.* (Interview Abdel Wedoud Ould Mamma, ḥassān, 31.10.1995; author's emphasis)

> We visited them [the sūdān] every year, at the time of harvest. Then every [bīẓān] family went there [to the adabay] to visit her family of sūdān, who gave them half of their harvest. And the bīẓān too, helped him [the sūdān], with goats, clothing, tea. . . . Today this no longer exists, *now everybody does his own work*. (Interview Yahya Ould Heime, ḥassān, 9.12.1995; author's emphasis)

Both bīẓān narrators stress that the sameness they attribute to bīẓān and sūdān resulted from their close interaction. Either they did everything together, or at least they had a more or less mutual relationship, in which complementary agricultural and pastoral products were exchanged. The changes which have occurred ever since seem to be minor, but nevertheless are made responsible for a new kind of difference. In the first case the sūdān may continue to live quite close to the bīẓān, but the basis on which the bīẓān

allowed them to be like themselves – the proper knowledge of one's status, and thus of difference – has crumbled away. The same forgetfulness has struck the sūdān of the second example. They no longer remember what related them to the bīẓān, and how they came to interact so closely with them. While the accounts reveal that in effect the sūdān became more like the bīẓān, i.e. more independent, they deny that this increased their "bīẓān-ness". Although the old distinctions and the paternalistic framework are no longer in place, the bīẓān continue to portray the sūdān as still being as much like the bīẓān as they ever had been. This demonstration of a half-hearted and complacent generosity of bīẓān towards their sūdān brethren reveals that describing themselves as a true part of the bīẓān is a major challenge for the sūdān, and has to take place in a narrow framework.

There is a wide range of discourses of sūdān in the region of Achram-Diouk on the previously stated likeness between them and the bīẓān. Sūdān and bīẓān are supposed to be alike because everybody knows his place in society, because there is no difference between the two but the phenotype, which has been created by Allah, because both cultivate, and finally because all Muslims are alike, and therefore there is no difference between ḥassān, zwāya, and all other status groups in bīẓān society. Some sūdān, however, when elucidating their point of view on my request, switched their discourse on this occasion. Instead of describing further patterns of sameness, they started to depict patterns of difference. The difference between bīẓān and sūdā n, which before had been described as non-existent, then turned out to be the difference between oppressors and oppressed (istʿammār), between bīẓān feeling superior, and sūdān feeling inferior, both united only in their ignorance.

How is it possible to make sense of these contradictions? James C. Scott (1990) suggests differentiating discourses of the oppressed into public and hidden transcripts: those destined to reproduce the point of view of the dominant people, and those speaking at face value, where both the thoughts and the knowledge of the dominated about power relations resurge, and account for resistance. Indeed many interviewees might have wondered what interest lay behind a great many of the absurd questions they had to answer. And despite my all-sūdān research team, many sūdān interviewees are likely to have felt unsure what kind of discourse this nasrāni (the common term for Christians in Mauritania, designating them as the people from Nazareth) wanted to get. Therefore they shifted the emphasis of their accounts whenever they had new assumptions about the state of mind of the researcher. Tempting though this approach is, and admitting that it focuses on the observation of discourses in different settings, it will be dismissed here. Taking up the interpretative framework distinguishing public and hidden discourses would lead into the dilemma of what interviewees were actually displaying: their mastery of the dominant discourse or their "false consciousness" (a term falsely ascribed to Karl Marx), or perhaps fitted neither category. In line with the criticism of Susan Gal (1995: 409), according to

which Scott "develops a notion of the natural (precultural, presemiotic) interacting self that is at odds with recent understandings about the role of linguistic ideologies and cultural conceptions in the production of self and emotion", the accounts will be seen as spontaneous utterances of a contradictory consciousness, which were created by a very unusual and dynamic conversation between the researcher, his assistant and the interviewees.[60] This mode of interaction, to a large extent alien to the local context, by raising different issues supposed to be interrelated, and thus actively shaping associations between topics, created a distinct framework within which the interviewees not only developed meaning, but also came to reflect on these meanings, and portray different and contradictory understandings of their social relations and practices.

These expressions of contradictory consciousness, the portrayal of both consent and resistance to dominant discourses, will be interpreted here from a point of view located in the tradition of Marxist approaches to a theory of consciousness (cf. Marx [1846] 1983b, especially p. 5-7 "Theses on Feuerbach"; Leontjew 1982), and concepts of hegemony building on the work of Antonio Gramsci ([1929-35] 1971). Social supremacy in this perspective manifests "itself in two forms: 'domination', which is realized through the coercive organs of the state, and 'intellectual and moral leadership', which is objectified in and exercised through the institutions of civil society, the ensemble of educational, religious and associational institutions. This latter form of supremacy constitutes hegemony." (Femia 1975: 30) Precolonial bīẓān society (as well as in many respects colonial and postcolonial Mauritanian society), fails to provide the multitude of institutionalised arenas of the production of consent which are essential to the constitution of a civil society, for which Gramsci developed his concept of hegemony (cf. Lewis 1992: 281). Nevertheless, besides coercion slave societies, and here especially those practising mainly household slavery such as the bīẓān, had to produce a modicum of social consent, and an ideology where there was a place for the slaves, and on which the slaves could rely to make – at least partially – sense of the world they lived in. Jonathon Glassman (1991, 1995), concerned with the analysis of slave resistance on the Swahili coast, gave an outline of how this relationship between the ideology of the oppressor and its partial incorporation by the oppressed could be configured:

> The quest for rebellious slave consciousness must therefore begin not with the depiction of a seamless ideology of domination that was uniformly rejected by slave rebels but with an understanding of the incoherent cultural idioms in which slaves and masters defined differing visions of the bonds that tied them. (Glassman1991: 288)

Drawing the attention back to the two bīẓān accounts introducing this chapter, it has to be noticed that their definition of the relationship between bīẓān and sūdān focused on the decay of what for them marks the decay of their practice, while simultaneously upholding the major assumption that the

sūdān are part of the bīẓān, because there is no difference between the two. By this statement, the bīẓān (much like the sūdān statements) blend both a discourse of paternalism and a discourse of domination. Both sūdān and bīẓān indicate that their ideological universe is not closed and coherent, but is composed of several and sometimes contradictory ideological strains.[61] The narratives and practices of identification presented so far show a great variety of means by which sūdān produce identity with and difference from the bīẓān. They reveal that there is no clear-cut opposition between sūdān seeking integration into bīẓān society and those rejecting it. Contrary to what Meskerem Brhane (1997a) concludes, the dominant mode of identification among sūdān in the perspective developed here is not marked by a dichotomising tendency which leads sūdān to either identify with the bīẓān, or with what is supposed to be ḥarāṭīn. Not only are the sūdān discourses full of ambiguities, but the bīẓān ones too. This, however, is not the reflection of a so-called "false consciousness", but of the lived experience of contradictory social relations, which underlies the formation of individual consciousness, a relationship Karl Marx ([1846] 1983b: 6) summed up in his sixth thesis on Feuerbach: "Aber das menschliche Wesen ist kein dem einzelnen Individuum inwohnendes Abstraktum. In seiner Wirklichkeit ist es das ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse."[62]

Now taking up again the question to what extent the sūdān become integrated into present bīẓān society, and how both bīẓān and sūdān rationalise these attributions of difference and sameness, the outlined theoretical framework will be employed as a foil for the analysis of a distinct discursive practice. Accounts of one's origins are central not only to the definition of being bīẓān, but to localising oneself in the bīẓān social universe as well. Comparing slaves and former slaves' accounts of their genealogies with those of bīẓān means engaging in a battle on uneven ground. It is well known, and has already been outlined, that most sūdān lack the means of producing the same kind of lengthy genealogical charts as do – at least some – bīẓān. The sūdān also lack written chronicles and other means accounting for a glorious past in the same way as the bīẓān do. Meskerem Brhane (1997a: 101-161) brought to light how sūdān bypass these pitfalls. They subvert the bīẓān mode of referring to the past by putting mythical narratives of their collective origin in the place of the genealogical references telling of individual and tribal bīẓān origins. These insights open up the floor for an evaluation less interested in the plausibility of the individual account than the distinct modes by which origins are expressed by different actors.

Talking about what one is in bīẓān society, a member of a distinct tribe, a zwāya or ḥassān, an Arab etc., means talking about the past. This does not imply that each claim to being this or that will automatically be underpinned by a chronicle of the past. Rather the past becomes part of the present. Being a Legwāṭiṭ, i.e. a member of the Legwāṭiṭ tribe, implies that one's father had been so, as well as his father, and so on. In everyday discursive practice, however, these distinctions frequently collapse, and one and the same person

comes to be referred to as either father or grandfather, and narrators blend themselves with their ancestors. Indeed there is no need to maintain this distinction, for what one actually claims to be is considered to be the invariable essence of past generations' social being. Social position, in this perspective, has a primordial character, and cannot be changed (cf. Brhane 1997a: 105f.). It is this mode of producing social status affiliation that allows the maintenance of a rigid classification in a society with a considerable social mobility. Whenever in narratives of the past, present status can be intermingled with statuses of the past, and when present practices can be relayed to the past by confounding actors of the present with those of the past, then the present engages in shaping the past. Lively and controversial discussions of family histories (cf. Brhane 1997a: 105) thus reflect the ongoing process by which the past is made to match up with the present and its needs. These ambiguities in the genealogical imagination mean that a profound knowledge of one's family history (be it contested or not) remains the most crucial cultural material. New emphases added to bīẓān narratives of origins have to be subtle not to endanger their legitimacy, and in turn can only be apprehended on the basis of a knowledge extending from the present to the past.[63]

Talking about origins, however, implies more than just family history and individual social status. The links created by filiation, which make up the core of family genealogies, are the same which link the individual to those social bodies providing group solidarity, i.e. the tribes, virtual communities of awlād ʿamm (descendants of father-brothers).[64] Further patrilineal filiation links the individual, and by shared ancestors whole groups, to Arab origins, and from there back to the descendants of the prophet Muhammad. According to this ideology, already analysed by Ibn Khaldun, the famous 14th century North African scholar and pioneer of modern social sciences, common ancestry is a necessary element of group solidarity, but does not by itself create it. What it needs is the development of an esprit de corps, the ʿaṣabiya, which will only become fully effective if it takes into account common ancestry, and makes of it a means of identification (cf. Hamès 1987: 111; Ibn Khaldun 1992: 78f.).[65] The notion of origin in the context of Arab societies, as this short overview reveals, is closely intertwined with the notion of sharing ancestors. These multiple dimensions of what makes up an origin are revealed by the Arab term nasab. Used by Ibn Khaldun to designate those relations by blood essential to the development of a common identity, and thus as the complement of the ʿaṣabiya, nasab is commonly translated as filiation or genealogy (cf. Bonte/Conte 1991: 39; Conte 1987). However, like many Arab terms, this one too has a multitude of readings. According to Hans Wehr (1976: 959) these are lineage, descent, origin and kinship.

This multi-dimensionality of notions like nasab and ʿaṣabiya means that they can be employed with quite different meanings in different contexts. The notion of ʿaṣabiya thus came to signify several distinct levels of solidarity in the discourses of bīẓān and sūdān in the region of Achram-Diouk. Building upon a basic meaning of "tendon", ʿaṣabiya was designated as being

that which holds something tightly together.[66] Thus it could mean solidarity on varying levels, ranging from unions, or else diyya (blood-money) paying groups at tribal (or infra or supra-tribal) level,[67] or it meant a group of patrilineal affiliates comprising between five or six generations (sometimes more), and thus sharing reciprocal rights of inheritance.[68] The meaning of the term nasab in the local context shifted slightly away from the common translation too. It thus came to designate first of all "status", i.e. the quality of belonging to a distinct and recognised family (literally a "great tent"). This does not contradict the inherent idea of nasab meaning to relate oneself to the past through genealogical ties, but relays this reference onto a collective level, i.e. the status a whole group has achieved. However, the question of one's nasab did not lead interviewees to describe their individual affiliation to these status groups, but raised only discourses in which the interviewees claimed to be a part of those groups they considered to make up their status identity.

Distinct family genealogies, in turn, were not directly associated with matters of status or nobility, but described as representing the interviewees' ʿaṣabiya. The gap between these two modes of referring to the past by individual filiation was meant to be closed by a third notion, that of aṣl. Also incorporating a whole universe of divergent meanings in standard Arabic (root, trunk (of a tree), origin, source, cause, reason, descent, lineage, stock foundation; Wehr 1976), it was meant to represent a personal origin (Khalifa Ould Kebab), but also has the notion of genealogical and ethnic origin (cf. Taine-Cheikh 1988: 21). In fact the differentiation between nasab and aṣl rarely did work out, and some interviewees (both bīẓān and sūdān) used nasab and aṣl interchangeably.[69] It thus can be assumed that both terms, though with different emphasis, represent the two meanings inherent also to the English notion of origin, namely ancestry and parentage on the one hand, and origin, source, inception and root on the other hand (cf. Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 1997).

Already this short outline of three terms central to the understanding of tribal identity formation reveals that their proper use needs a very good command of Arabic. This the sūdān are most likely not to have, and it was among sūdān (though there are probably numbers of bīẓān too) that I encountered interviewees checking what was meant by asking about "aṣl" (ḥassāniyya: aṣelan šenhu?). Nevertheless with many interviewees, the issue of "origins" could be discussed, and the statements they made in this context revealed some differences between sūdān and bīẓān in their respective reasoning about who had been one's ascendants and of whom one is part today. According to one of the most elaborate bīẓān statements the origin of most tribes in the region of Achram-Diouk is among the Qurayš, the tribe of the prophet (cf. Busse 1989: 17f.), to whom most local tribes are supposed to be linked by the fraction of the Bani Umayat (the IdawʿĪš are designated as tracing their link via Bou Bakkar ben Amar, the Almoravid leader to Ḥimyar, and thus to the Qurayš).[70] All awlād ʿamm, i.e. all members of the (bīẓān) tribes – according to this view – are considered to have an Arab aṣl (origin)

and to share the same forebears (ḥassāniyya: nasabu wāḥid ; i.e. one genealogy). Both ḥassān and zwāya thus are equal from the point of view of their common Arab forefathers, and the difference among them arose only from their choice of different occupations (warrior versus religious scholar; Interview Bettarmo Ould Cheikh, zwāya, 8.2.1996).[71] While this account reproduces to a significant extent the common myth about the foundation of bīẓān society, according to which the once united society became divided into different statuses according to their respective occupations, it excludes all groups which are not ḥassān or zwāya. Thus neither the znāga nor the ḥarāṭīn, both of whom are seen as constituting the workers of traditional bīẓān society, are classified as having Arab antecedants. Mythical narratives of the origin of the division of bīẓān society into three different status groups were more generous in this respect. Pierre Amilhat (1937: 45) reported local traditions of the Tagant, according to which it was the Almoravid leader Bou Bakkar ben Amar who took the initiative of dividing his followers into noble warriors, clerics, and those people charged with working. The division between all major groups, including the workers, according to this account, thus was by work, and not by distinct ethnic origin.[72]

The notion of origin, which in the broadest sense implied claiming Arab ancestry, generally was detailed by bīẓān by referring to their tribal affiliation. This identity marker was designed in most cases to tell as much about one's status (aṣl) as one's ancestry (nasab), and thus revealed yet one more time the close interrelationship between these two notions. This insight was put in nutshell by a ḥassān intellectual (Interview Sid Mohamed Oud Dey, 27.8.1995) by stating "The tribe is the origin."[73] This point of view, the bīẓān practice of locating one's origin within the tribe, is not shared by sūdān. For them – and here the interviewed sūdān were quite unanimous – their origin is from the kwār, the black African ethnic groups. This origin, as one ḥarāṭīn interviewee noted, may not be considered a good origin, but at least one respected as such. For sūdān it thus is better to have a kwār origin than none (Interview Brahim Ould Soueilim, 26.8.1995). A second point peculiar to sūdān origins is that they usually trace decent by the matrilineage. Thus one slave woman reported her mother to have been from the Awlād Mbarek, where she had come to as a kūri, i.e. as a member of a black African ethnic group (Interview Moime Mint El Abd, 26.12.1995). Claiming the inheritance of an independent status is also said by many sūdān to have been passed on to them by their mothers and not their fathers. This applies to sūdān claiming to have had ḥarāṭīn ancestors for generations, as well as sūdān who deny the legitimacy of their slave estate. In the former case, a ḥarṭāni claimed that his mothers had all been ḥarāṭīn, while he did not want to affirm this status for all of his forefathers, who thus were ejected from the family genealogy.[74] The legitimacy of a freeman's status was additionally underscored by describing one of his foremothers as having been a znāga woman.[75] These, though socially despised too, were at least known to have definitely no links with servile estate. The construction of origins by a descendant of a slave woman

who had adopted parts of the ḥarāṭīn political discourse was different. To him his grandmother had been a Bambara, an origin he assumed to apply to all sūdān in the region of Achram Diouk. As a kūri,[76] he argued, this woman had been free, and therefore all of her descendants were free too (Interview Bekkai Ould Elemine, 20.12.1995).[77] The lack of a definition of origins in tribal terms applies even to those sūdān who claim most forcefully to have no slave past, the ḥarāṭīn of the Ahel Swayd Aḥmed. For one of them, as well as another sūdān, their origin was among the ḥarāṭīn, i.e. among the free people. This distinct status, however, was not stressed to mark difference from the bīẓān, but from sūdān supposed to be tent-slaves (nānme),[78] and hence to display the corresponding behavioural patterns.[79]

The almost demonstrative location of their origin among the black African ethnic groups, and here almost always among the Bambara, seems to contradict the point of view held by most sūdān that there is no difference between them and the bīẓān other than their different phenotype. However, that sūdān think of themselves as being bīẓān, while they are well aware that their origin is alien to this society, only reflects once again their very condition. They are acculturated to bīẓān society, and thus constitute a part of it, but can still be recognised and referred to as a group apart, which is distinct from the bīẓān (among other factors) by origin. This insight is rationalised by Brahim, whom we know to have contracted manumission for himself and parts of his family with his former master, and to have attended bīẓān teaching of the Qur'ān.

> *Author:* Did you pay for your manumission?
> *Brahim:* Yes I did, I paid only the zakāt and the vaṭra,[80] this means what is comprised by what one calls walā' [clientage/patronage; cf. p. 264].
> *Author:* Do you still pay it?
> *Brahim:* Yes.
> *Author:* And you agreed about this matter with your master?
> *Brahim:* Yes, completely. You know, we now have become the same, we now are aṣabi, we share the same ʿaṣabiya [close solidarity among people having a common ancestor],[81] he manumitted the whole family, and I was the first among them.
> *Author:* And what is your origin [aṣl]?
> *Brahim:* aṣelak? My aṣl [origin] is only ḥarāṭīn. What do you mean by this? I know very well that I have been a slave, but now I am free. But the origin, any slave has a father and a mother, so this is one origin.[82] Look, what is important to me is that I am Mauritanian. What has been before does not interest me. That I once was a slave, that I remained a slave until I became manumitted, and that I now am a free man like everybody else. If I want to investigate my origin scrupulously, then I will perhaps be able to find a kūri, and be a kūri.[83] But [instead of] a kūri, I prefer to be a bīẓān. I know very well that my origin comes from the kwār, but the only thing important to me is to be a bīẓān, to be free.
> *Author:* Can't you get a bīẓān origin?

> *Brahim:* The difference is only the colour, this is of no importance. I am like the bīẓān. I ask you. Am I kūri? Am I a šarīv? These often are black [of black phenotype]. The colour is not important, you can also see light-coloured slaves.

The past that takes the shape of "origins" – this is made obvious by Brahim's narrative – is of little interest to former slaves who wish to integrate themselves into bīẓān society. Indeed, they, like everybody else in bīẓān society, assume the origin of the overwhelming majority of sūdān to be among the black African ethnic groups. But the ties to these societies are cut off for the sūdān, and they shall remain so, because going back to these roots has no advantage for the individual sūdān. This does not mean that sūdān generally are not interested in the question where they come from. One sūdān interviewee told me his father had managed to find out his ancestors among the kwār, to have gone there and been welcomed. Nevertheless he returned to the Tagant, for it was the place his family lived, and he found it to be his home (Interview Bekkai Ould Elemine, ḥarāṭīn, 20.12.1995). That slaves, now, after generations of acculturation to bīẓān society, are aware of making a choice about where they want to belong to is revealed by another case. Having talked about her (female) ancestors, of whom she knew quite a lot, a sūdān woman concluded that these, her origins, were of no interest to her, for all that mattered now was to be a Lʿaweysyāt, i.e. a member of the tribe she had been affiliated to through her slave past (Interview Moime Mint El Abd, ʿabd, 26.12.1995).

Talking about one's origin, i.e. talking about one's genealogy, is an ambiguous issue for sūdān. It is important for them because it demonstrates their ability to master idioms central to bīẓān culture and society, it proves that slave descendants and subordinated groups are able to express themselves in the language of the superiors. Adopting the masters' language, however, also means absorbing some of the ideas it is designed to communicate (cf. Glassman 1991: 312; 1995). Speaking of their origins thus is for the sūdān also an experience and reinforcement of their exclusion from bīẓān society. The outcome of these discourses reveals itself to be of no use for sūdān, other than to distinguish themselves from the bīẓān. In this respect the sūdān living in the region of Achram-Diouk seem to have made their choice long ago: they want to take part in bīẓān society, and their struggle focuses on getting equal rights, and becoming like the bīẓān. This unanimous will for integration, which contradicts in some respects the conclusions on ḥarāṭīn identity formation drawn by Meskerem Brhane (1997a, b),[84] does not mean the same to all sūdān. By far not all of them are interested in becoming as closely associated with the bīẓān as Brahim is. Many want to gain autonomy, and live at a distance from the bīẓān. Therefore, besides the production of similarity between bīẓān and sūdān, there is room for marking difference. While social evolution is starting to blur major social differentiations such as the distinctions between zwāya, ḥassān and znāga, and environmental and

economic developments mean that the vast majority of rural residents are subject to and live in almost the same desperate conditions, there is also a new social space for the articulation of difference between sūdān and bīẓān opening up. As has been shown, especially with regard to the development of a "ḥarāṭīn work ethic" (cf. p. 265f.), these struggles for differentiation are taking a new shape. Rather than opposing bīẓān and sūdān within a hierarchical order, these new demarcations represent a challenge to the definition not only of what it means to be a bīẓān, but what it means to be a good, i.e. non-ignorant and modern member not only of bīẓān, but Mauritanian society.