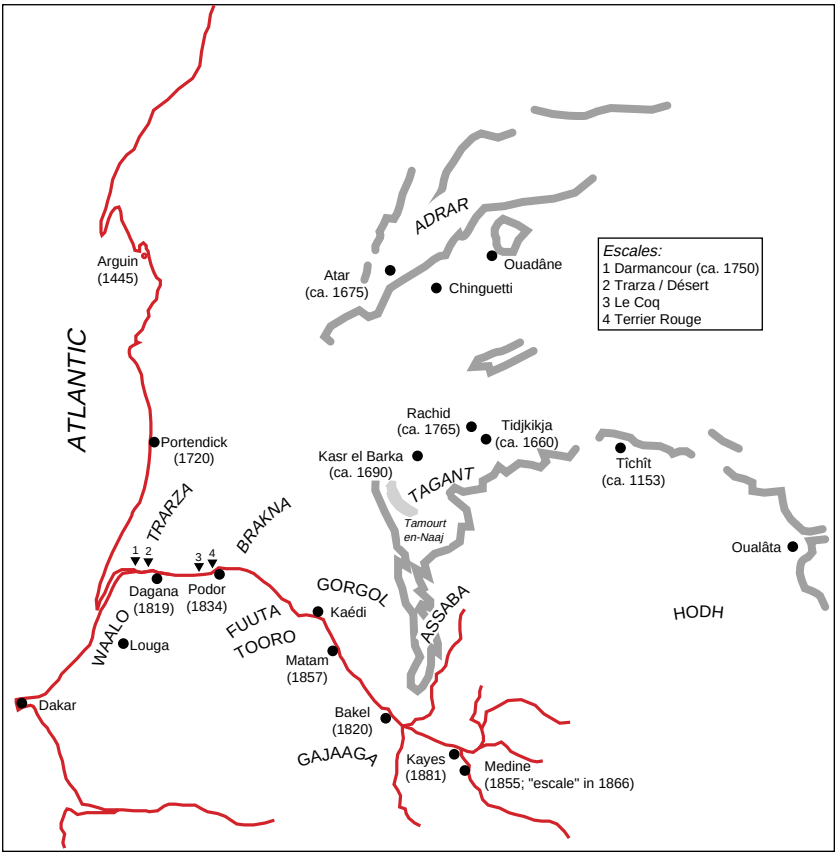
# Chapter 6
# The Historical Dynamics of Bīẓān Economy

The bīẓān economy has evolved significantly in the course of history, and these changes were decisive to the development of distinct configurations of master-slave relations. Fundamental to much of the economic process in the western Sahara were the trans-Saharan trade and the trade along the desert edge. Based on the exchange of complementary products, these trades established and maintained links between the pastoral and agricultural populations. The configuration of these patterns of exchange and commerce was affected significantly by the arrival of European merchants on the West African coast. First came the Portuguese, who during the 15th century established a trade post at Arguin on the west Saharan coast near today's Nouadhibou. The trade in gum arabic in the Senegal River basin from the 17th century on grew to what was almost a commercial boom. The 19th century finally saw a general increase of marketing and trade throughout the whole western Sudan and the Sahara, and witnessed the evolution of complex interrelations between different trade sectors and trade networks (cf. McDougall 1985). Colonial expansion, which had started in the western Sudan by the middle of the 19th century, and reached the territory of today's Mauritania by the turn of the 20th century, brought about the decline of several branches of trade and production, but also created new opportunities. While social and economic change during the early decades of colonisation was slow, it nevertheless seriously undermined the relations of production that had developed in the course of the 19th century. This evolution was a crucial step towards the quicker and more drastic changes in both economy and social relations that started in the 1950s, and took a decisive turn in the wake of the big drought of the 1970s, which introduced a period of increased aridity lasting until the present.

## Gum and Guinée

Throughout the centuries, the economy in the western Sahara underwent many transformations. While it here is of minor importance whether these changes occurred in response to an increasingly arid environment (cf. Webb

*Map 2:* Western Sahara and Senegal River Valley in the 19th Century




1995), or rather followed a socio-economic rationale (cf. Ruf 1995), it is important to remember the magnitude of these changes, and how deeply they influenced bīẓān society, and consequently bīẓān relations of hierarchy and dependency.

Trade had always played an important role in the economy of the western Sahara, but for many centuries, the pastoral nomadic inhabitants of the area played only a minor role in the most prominent trade in the area, the trans-Saharan trade. During its heyday, described by Arab authors like Ibn Ḥawqal (writing in 378/988), and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (writing in 756/1355), the trade across the Sahara indeed much resembled trade across the sea (cf. Ibn Ḥawqal and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa in Levtzion/Hopkins 1981: 43ff.; 279ff.). There were commercial towns lying on each shore, linked by camel caravans coming and going. This metaphorical representation of the Sahara lives on. In Arabic sāḥil has the meaning of "seashore", and the designation Sahel, used today for the arid

stretch of savannah below the Sahara, is derived from this term.[1] In the trade towns south of the Sahara North African traders lived in "white" communities. Together with their counterparts north of the desert they managed a considerable share of the Sudanese kingdoms' trade across the desert. The Saharans in between had no active role in this business, which focused on the exchange of Sudanese gold, slaves and a number of other items for luxury commodities of North African origin and desert salt. The nomadic pastoralists were not the entrepreneurs of the trade, but provided caravan transport facilities, and occasionally profited from raiding.[2] The development of trade in the western Sahara, meeting the demands of the internal markets, and no longer centred on the external markets, took a decisive turn upwards by the mid 15th century.[3] An east-west axis of trade across the western Sahara emerged, linking the Portuguese trade post at Arguin via the Adrar and Tîchît with Oualâta and Timbuktu in the east. Along this route new poles of urbanity, small trade towns bearing the nuclei of Islamic scholarship developed, and more and more the western Saharans themselves became involved in the management of the trade business that before had been the domain of North African migrants (cf. Oßwald 1986: 251ff.).[4]

Why the shift in trade occurred and the North African trade communities disappeared is difficult to ascertain on the basis of the few existing historical records. As regards the western Sahara and the westernmost trans-Saharan trade routes, the evolution is likely to have been a consequence of the competition from the Portuguese. These pursued an offensive strategy to develop their trade at Arguin and to break the monopoly of the North African traders. To achieve this goal, they either bought typical North African goods on the Moroccan shore and transported them to Arguin, or else manufactured and sold substitutes for these commodities.[5] Later, with the expansion of the Portuguese trade system along the West African coast, another factor influencing the nature of the trans-Saharan trade came into play. The establishment of a factory in Sao Jorge da Mina (Guinea) in 1471 laid the basis for diverting a part of the Sudanese gold to the south. Consequently, with the production of gold in the Sudan remaining constant, and with the trade of the new Portuguese establishments expanding rapidly, less and less gold entered the Saharan and trans-Saharan market. Both this competition and the decline of the Sudanese gold supply to the north are likely to have engendered the withdrawal of the North African traders primarily interested in gold. Yet another major event fits neatly into this scheme of interpretation: in 1590 troops of the Saʿdid rulers of Morocco – after several earlier attempts had failed – conquered Timbuktu, the most famous trade town of the western Sudan, and centre of the gold trade. The Saʿdid attempt to develop direct control over the gold trade, and to tap the Sudanese gold resources directly, however, failed. Neither the gold mines, located much further south, could be conquered, nor the decline of the trans-Saharan trade on the western routes be stopped. Rather the conquest of Timbuktu accelerated the process of dilapidation already under way by

destroying the local political structures of the Songȧi empire. The remnants of the conquerors, soon cut off from their Moroccan homeland, were unable to establish a regional territorial hegemony (cf. Oßwald 1986: 188ff.; Ruf 1995: 98ff.).

A major commodity traded along the desert edge and within the Sahara at these times was cotton cloth. Formed into bundles of varying size, it was a prime currency along the desert edge, and within the Sahara, as well as in the Sudan.[6] Other currencies were rock salt from the desert, and, though less important, cowrie shells, in use throughout West Africa as well. Cloth entered the western Saharan inner market from many directions. One origin was North Africa, another one the European trade posts at the coast, and finally, and for a long time most important, the western Sudan. Many parts of the Sahel were well suited for cotton cultivation. Spinning and weaving are good counter-seasonal activities to agriculture, and are mentioned for the Sudan from the 8th century onwards.[7] Cloth of all these different origins was traded simultaneously in Tîchît, the trade town which for a long time was the pivotal point of the bīẓān salt trade (cf. Hopkins 1973: 48, 68ff.; Oßwald 1986: 379f.).

The home market of the western Sahara got a decisive boost in the second half of the 17th century when gum arabic (after it had first reached the European markets during the 16th century) began to be needed in large quantities by the emerging European textile industry.[8] Exports of this exudate of acacia trees growing wild in the southern parts of the western Sahara were shipped mainly by the French and the British.[9] Their trade registers reveal that exports of gum arabic almost doubled between the early 18th century and the 1780s. They doubled again during the decade of the 1830s, and thus reached an amount of 2,000 tons per year (cf. Webb 1995: 100ff.). The export of gum arabic was directly linked to the import of guinée cloth. The bīẓān rarely bartered their gum with the Europeans for any other commodity than indigo-dyed cloth of Indian origin, called "guinée", usually measuring 1 m in width and 16.5 m in length (cf. Cleaveland 1995: 163). Substitute products from Europe were rejected by the bīẓān traders and consumers, and achieved a significant share in the market only by the end of the 19th century. The marked bīẓān preferences for guinée of Indian origin was a bane to the traders in Saint-Louis. It took one or two years to receive deliveries from India, and orders therefore had to be made on quite uncertain estimates of future gum harvests. As the harvests could fall far below the estimates, or exceed them greatly, the ratio of guinée on the market and the gum available hardly ever matched and made prices vary strongly. These variations increased the risk traders had to cope with in this otherwise profitable trade (cf. Webb 1995: 124).

A proper knowledge of the trade in gum arabic is crucial to an understanding of the economic development of the western Sahara, not only because this product dominated virtually all commercial activities of the French colony at Saint-Louis by the 1830s, but also because this resource was almost com-

pletely under the control of the bīẓān, who had begun to exploit it as a high value export commodity by then. The trade took place at different entrepôts, called "escales", on the river Senegal. There traitants, as the African intermediaries were called, awaited the bīẓān with guinée cloth they had received on commission from the French merchants based in Saint-Louis. Most of the cloth was bartered for gum arabic, and the majority of transactions took place during the time of the "grande traite" lasting from the first of January or February until the end of July (cf. Ould Ahmedou, M.S. 1990: 8ff.; Webb 1995: 119). This trade proved to be quite profitable not only to the European traders and traitants, but to the bīẓān too. In 1718, the value of one metric ton of gum arabic was 2.63 pieces of guinée (equivalent to an index of 100). This ratio moved more or less steadily up until it reached its climax at a rate of 70.61 pieces of guinée per metric ton of gum in 1838 (index 2,397), and then started to decline (cf. Table 6).

As a consequence of this development in the terms of trade, clothing made of guinée became less and less expensive in the western Sahara. There the market responded by an ever-increasing demand: the quantity of guinée imported to Senegambia, of which the largest part (83.1 percent) was destined for the trade with the bīẓān, rose in index numbers from 100 in 1718 to 339 in 1735, and reached 110,373 in 1838, i.e. during the year when the terms of barter were at their climax (cf. Curtin 1975a: 316, 321).[10] This evolution was in no way forced upon the bīẓān; on the contrary, it was their demand for cloth that dominated the market: when in the 1740s the bīẓān gained control over the regional trade in grain with the French at Saint-Louis, they forced the latter to pay with cloth, and nothing else. Whenever foreign traders did not meet the expectations of the bīẓān, the latter demonstrated their power by switching either to other traders, e.g. the English or the Dutch on the coast, or by temporarily withdrawing their gum from the market altogether (cf. Webb 1995: 114). Only later, from the 1830s on, i.e. when gum prices were at their highest, did the bīẓān develop a demand for grain in exchange for their gum. This trend continued for the rest of the 19th century. Demand for grain in the lower Senegal valley rapidly exceeded local production, and grain had to be imported from the upper river (cf. Hanson 1990: 207ff.; Webb 1995: 118f.).[11]

Unlike the desert salt mines, the exploitation of which was localised and easy to put under centralised control, the low-density acacia forests were scattered over a vast belt stretching from the Gebla to the southern areas of the Aftout and Hodh. Ownership of these territories, and hence control over access to pasture and other resources, were held and controlled by the zwāya tribes, whereas the ḥassān only held use-rights as well as rights in tribute and allegiance based on their military and political dominance (cf. p. 201f.). The client groups, who were not necessarily of znāga status, but could have rather diverse origins, also needed access to pastoral resources. Their relations of dependency were often multilateral. They frequently included not only ḥassān overlords but both zwāya and ḥassān superiors (and often several of

*Table 6:* Estimated Net Barter Terms of Trade, 1718-1849
(Value of One Metric Ton of Gum Arabic Expressed in Pieces of Guinée Cloths)

| | Guinées | Index |
|---|---|---|
| 1718 | 2.63 | 100 |
| 1723 | 4.85 | 184 |
| 1739 | 6.03 | 229 |
| 1745 | 3.44 | 131 |
| 1776 | 14.30 | 544 |
| 1783 | 27.98 | 1,069 |
| 1788 | 31.88 | 1,212 |
| 1823-27 | 51.50 | 1,958 |
| 1830 | 41.12 | 1,563 |
| 1833 | 63.05 | 2,397 |
| 1839 | 70.61 | 2,685 |
| 1849 | 50.25 | 11,911 |

Webb (1995: 114)[12]


them), as well as ties to Fulbe and Wolof leaders on the left bank of the Senegal valley, all of which secured access to land and protection. These multiple relations of dependency, however, did not necessarily weaken the position of the dependents. During the 19th century some of these groups attained a significant size, and accumulated considerable wealth. Aware of their power, they managed to exploit conflict between the different branches of the ḥassān nobility, and notably the different factions within the emiral lineages, in order to strengthen their own position and minimise tributes (cf. Taylor 1996: 149ff.).

Compared to these inherent weaknesses of ḥassān power, the zwāya control of land seems to have been much more solid. René Caillié (1830: 149ff.) reported that znāga who wanted to collect gum on zwāya land had to pay half of their harvest as a tax. Though znāga occasionally made use of this opportunity, their overall commitment to gum harvesting and trade seems to have been limited. Rather than selling gum, they were described as selling milk and other agro-pastoral products at the escales. The organisation of the trade was definitely in the hands of the zwāya; they managed the caravans bringing the gum to the escales, and they negotiated the barter of gum for guinées and other commodities. This monopoly enabled them to channel a large part of the gum sold to the escales through their own hands. Besides the trade in gum at the escales, a small local trade with gum persisted. Not all collectors were able to move to the escales themselves, and hence sold their gum to merchants passing by on their way to the escales, or sent it there with

a trustee. The ḥassān role in the trade was limited to the provision of security during the months of the river trade – an activity for which they demanded and received "coutumes", annually negotiated taxes paid by the European traders. Despite the gum being a widely accessible resource in the Gebla and other southern parts of the western Sahara the gum business became centralised to the profit of the zwāya. Their control over local resources and trade networks enabled them to manage the majority of the trade in gum, and hence (besides the coutumes paid to the ḥassān) to control most of the guinée cloth, as well as of the other import products flowing into the western Sahara.

The influence this development of a zwāya industry had on bīẓān society was first emphasised by Constant Hamès (1979). According to his argument, the rise in gum trade led to the commodification of bīẓān economy, and laid the basis for a new mode of production, the proto-industrial production of gum arabic by slaves. While the number of slaves traded, and entering the western Sahara grew, the profits from trade and taxes in the gum economy facilitated the development and consolidation of the zwāya and ḥassān social dichotomy. Ever since this argument was elaborated, the question whether the increased production of gum arabic was made possible by a growing body of servile labourers remains contested. James Webb (1995: 98) argues on the basis of a calculation of the effective need of labour force for the harvest of gum arabic, that there was virtually no need for further slave workers.[13] Other scholars, however, stress the role the gum economy had for the enlargement of the servile strata among the bīẓān (cf. Hanson 1992: 111; McDougall 1995: 228f.). As far as an increased production of gum depended on the control of a greater number of dependents, acquiring more slaves had an economic rationale for the individual wanting to have a larger share in the gum trade. In turn, profits from the gum trade could be invested in many ways, one of them being the purchase of slaves.

In the second half of the 19th century the volume of the gum trade remained high, and new acacia forests in the east became more easily accessible to the European traders and their representatives when an escale was opened farther upriver at Medine in 1866 (cf. Hanson 1996: 68ff.). This evolution helped compensate for an incipient decline in productivity of the acacia forests located to the north of the lower and middle Senegal valley. This evolution was largely due to over-harvesting in response to the economic incentives raised by the gum boom. The acacia trees were weakened by the many wounds inflicted on them to increase the exudation of gum arabic, and hence became more vulnerable to environmental stress. Increased herd sizes as an outcome of increased wealth, and pastoralists staying longer in the vicinity of the groves, put further strain on the trees. The dying of many acacia trees – which in this perspective is rather the outcome of human agency than of climatic change – reduced the protective cover of the soil, and thus created a vicious circle already leading to desertification during the 19th century (cf. Hanson 1992: 111).[14] In the early 20th century, the gum production in the

western Sahara, as well as the world market prices, quickly fell into a decline. The role of the world's most important supplier of gum arabic was taken over from the western Sahara by the Sudan. There extensive plantations of acacia trees had been put to production (cf. Webb 1985: 150).

## The Colonial Challenge to Pastoral Economy

### Marketing Meat

The start of the 20th century brought major changes to the desert-side economy. While income from the trade in gum decreased rapidly, new requirements developed, and those already established – namely the demand for cloth – persisted.[15] By the end of the 19th century, the importation of green tea from Morocco had started, and seen a splendid success.[16] To complement this drink, which soon became the bīẓān's favourite, lots of sugar had to be imported too.[17] Colonisation brought about another heavy burden for the bīẓān. Colonial taxes were introduced, and had to be paid in cash. In order to adapt its imposition to the local, pastoral-nomadic context in Mauritania, no capitation (the standard colonial tax in the territories of French West Africa) was imposed. Instead the major tax was levied in cash per animal. As tribes and fractions were taxed collectively through the intermediary of their chiefs, and the administrators relied on estimates when calculating the number of animals to be imposed, there was considerable room for manoeuvre to be exploited by both parties. Colonial administrators could reward closely allied tribes and punish more or less dissident ones, while tribal chiefs could try to downplay the numbers of their tribes' livestock, but also profit from their position and tax some people more severe than others. By calling this tax zekat, the French alluded to the Islamic tithe for the poor (zakāt). Agricultural production initially was taxed too, but this levy, called ʿašūr and supposed to make up one tenth of the harvest, was suppressed in 1940 (cf. Toupet 1959: 103; De Chassey 1984: 70f.).[18]

The main question emanating from this obvious gap between income and expenditures is: how was it filled? Besides the declining benefits from the gum trade, the main resource that could either be directly turned into cash or bartered by the Saharans was livestock. A shift in the nature of trade and export from the Sahara took place with the rapid evolution of a meat market in Senegal in the early 20th century, centred around Louga. Mauritanian meat at this time began to feed directly the rapidly growing population of the Senegalese cities and the prospering peanut-basin, where production for the world market had started by 1848.[19] This evolution transformed Senegalese society considerably.[20] Migrants, among whom were many former slaves, were attracted from various regions of West Africa, as well as from the Senegal valley which lost ever more of its former prosperity. The peanut boom caused the locus of the export trade to shift to the south, and the

construction of the Thiès-Kayes railway (1907-23) further reduced what remained of the trade on the Senegal river.

These various factors meant that grain production in the valley became less profitable, and that less grain was marketed locally. The little grain still traded, for the peasants had to pay the capitation too, was now often sold to the south where the Senegalese peanut basin was. Additionally the people of the valley started seasonal and permanent migration into the peanut basin area, thus further weakening the potential of local agricultural production. The consequence was the region's increasing dependency on imported foodstuffs like rice, which was paid for with cash income generated by migration.[21] Within this changing economic framework, which had taken pace by the turn of the 20th century, the pastoralists of the desert edge were better off than the cultivators: the terms of trade involving animals versus grain and import products developed over long periods to the advantage of animal production (cf. Ould Cheikh/Bonte 1982; Delaunay 1984: 63ff.).[22]

The evolution of these new patterns of production and consumption was not immediate.[23] The transformation of the Senegal valley into a reservoir for a migrant labour force, largely accomplished by the early 1920s, was catalysed by several major events. A famine occurred in 1904-05, and a second one in 1913-14. As the regional agricultural production in the valley was already weakened, the effects of the famine were especially severe. The years from 1905-08 witnessed slaves leaving their masters in various parts of West Africa. The most prominent case is that of the Banamba slave exodus, where an approximated 20,000 slaves left their masters (cf. Roberts 1988: 288ff.). In the central and upper Senegal valley, relations of dependency were less abruptly challenged and few slaves left their masters. The years following the first famine until the famine in 1913-14 did not lead to a recovery, but brought further deterioration of the environmental conditions. The valley experienced a slow, but continuous decline of its population. Migration, both seasonal and permanent, became common for free-born, slaves and ex-slaves. This trend was dramatically strengthened by the famine of 1913-14, which was even more severe than the one of 1904-05.[24] Although many slaves seem to have stayed with their masters, the relations of dependency were drastically challenged. Many masters were no longer able to fulfil the most basic of their obligations, that of feeding the slaves. As a consequence, these received permission to care for themselves, to migrate, or cultivate on their own. When in 1914 the French began recruiting for the First World War, this was another option for slaves to escape famine and dependency. Among those enlisted, men of servile estate made up at least 75 percent.[25] Those who survived the butchery on the European battlegrounds were rarely ready to accept further relations of dependency at home. Often having acquired specific skills, and speaking French, they had good chances of entering the colonial administration. Needless to say, these veterans also brought with them new concepts of society, of liberty, equality, fraternity, challenging both traditional and colonial authority (cf. Clark 1994: 61ff.).[26]

The most immediate repercussions of the evolution in Senegal and the river valley were felt in southern Mauritania, as the French had come to call their new possession by the turn of the 20th century.[27] The Senegal river never had the character of a linear frontier. Populations from both sides had shifted from the left bank to the right bank of the river and vice versa in the course of history (cf. Leservoisier 1994a: 129; Schmitz 1996). Difference among the ethnic groups living along the river was constituted in the course of interaction, and through complementary relations of exchange. The interpenetration of the different ethnic groups, as well as the shift of ethnic affiliation some groups performed, reveal that the river valley was (and still is) an arena for the articulation of a complex social entity, and cannot be apprehended through dichotomous categories. This explains why those bīẓān who were most closely integrated into the economy of the valley and its society were more severely affected by the region's decline than the large majority of bīẓān, who mainly lived off their pastoral resources. These groups, which in the course of the 19th century and its heyday of trade had developed an increasing demand for an external grain supply, now had to face the stagnation and later decline of the grain surpluses marketed in the valley.[28] The pacification of the Mauritanian territory by the colonial forces was a crucial prerequisite for the bīẓān pastoralists to respond to this situation. Slaves and ḥarāṭīn were sent in increasing numbers to fertile areas in order to cultivate grain for their masters and patrons (cf. p. 223-225). While in former times warfare and raiding had often rendered such attempts unprofitable, they now were essential to the achievement of two goals: providing supplementary grain, and establishing ownership-rights in fertile land. The latter point became the more important in the south. Fulbe agriculturalists and pastoralists, who had been pushed southwards and across the river by the bīẓān during the 19th century, started from the end of that century on a remigration that lasted until the 1960s.[29] They took advantage of the weakening of the bīẓān influence on the right bank at the end of the 19th century, and especially after the installation of the colony.[30] This remigration led to the revival of ancient territorial claims, conflicting with more recent use-rights of bīẓān, who meanwhile had occupied these areas.[31] These conflicts over land were a matter involving the colonial authorities, who directed their attention, besides inquiring into the historical legitimacy, especially towards signs of effective land-use (cf. Leservoisier 1994a: 69ff.; Schmitz 1990a; Santoir 1993).[32]

The pacification of the Mauritanian territory (at least of its southern parts, for resistance in the north continued until the 1930s), also had an impact on the development of new patterns of pastoral production. The increased security from raids helped the bīẓān pastoralists to respond to the growing demand for meat from the Senegalese markets and to produce and export more and more animals. The number of cattle in the bīẓān herds rose, as beef was especially highly valorised in Senegal. However, within Mauritania, cattle rearing is limited to the south of the country, with the southern Tagant constituting the northern boundary of the cattle zone. Changes in the

composition of the herds in response to market incentives thus required a spatial reorganisation of the bīẓān nomadic pastoralists too.

Another element decisive to this development was colonial policy, which introduced the principle of free access to pasture for all herders. Deliberately negating all tribal use-rights, and seeking to minimise the grip some important tribes had on the natural resources, this policy was a means for the colonial administration to demonstrate its power. On the ground, however, this policy never came to be fully effective, for the French wanted to associate tribal authorities with low-level colonial administration, and in many respects relied heavily on these intermediaries.[33] Nevertheless, the proclaimed ideal, and the few steps toward it, gave many herders, and especially those of the dependent strata, greater opportunities to shift their regions of nomadisation. Ever since colonisation Mauritania had witnessed the southward migration of various tribal groups formerly established in the north. Though such migrations had occurred throughout the history of the western Sahara, they now became more generalised, as this evolution was closely intertwined with decisive and long-lasting economical and political changes. With the shift of their area of nomadisation the pastoralists from the north converted step-by-step from camel to cattle rearing, which was better adapted to the wetter climate and the animal diseases in the south.[34] Increased security from raiding enabled the pastoralists to reduce the size of their camps and to build satellite camps. Sending out only a few herders with animals of one species rather than concentrating all livestock species together in one camp gave a greater flexibility to respond to the animals' needs. By this strategy, as well as an overall concentration on less mobile cattle rearing, the main camps' area of nomadisation was considerably contracted (cf. Toupet 1977: 300f.; Bonte 1987b: 204; Borricand 1948: 90ff.).[35]

Much of this new trade in meat and import products remained under the control of some specialised zwāya tribal groups residing in the few bīẓān trade towns. They could profit from their long-established relations of patronage to acquire animals and other commodities from the pastoral production of their dependents at favourable conditions. The expansion of trade, however, did not only strengthen the old commercial elite, but confronted these strata with profound changes in the structure of trade – a challenge which by far not all bīẓān of this group could meet. The changing economic environment weakened old bonds of hierarchy and dependency, and the trading business became accessible to people from lower social strata too. Animals were traded on any scale, and as it was a long way from e.g. the Tagant to Louga, often several intermediaries were involved. The common practice of delayed payment and credit in trade with animals, which by some clever arrangements circumvented the Islamic prohibition of interest and usury, further increased the opportunities individuals of modest personal wealth had to enter the trade. Many started on this basis to assemble a number of animals directly from the pastoralists, and to pay them with the revenues from their trip to the south.[36] The story of Hammodi, a ḥarṭāni

from the Adrar "who made it" is but one case of how some of today's great Mauritanian fortunes were generated in commercial activities, often centred around the marketing of meat, and in close contact with the interests of the colonial administration (cf. D'Hont 1986: 157; McDougall 1988: 369ff.; Ould Cheikh/Bonte 1982; Ould Khalifa 1991: 815ff.).[37]

Bīẓān herders had one major objective in marketing their animals. It was a means to acquire grain, and was able to complement the other major export commodities of the western Sahara: salt and gum arabic. But direct bartering of animals for grain was limited by the cultivators' lack of interest in livestock rearing. Direct inter-ethnic exchange between agriculturalists and pastoralists therefore more often centred around the barter of complementary products, such as milk and manure for grain, as the case of Fulbe pastoralists in central Mali shows (cf. De Bruijn/Van Dijk 1995). While such exchange systems were practised by transhumant bīẓān of the Hodh (cf. Roberts 1987: 47), they were less practicable for those bīẓān of the interior whose areas of nomadisation or transhumance were too far from the Senegal valley to allow for longer periods of residence in the south. In this case, as in the traditional caravan trade of salt for grain,[38] the commercial transaction had to take place in a centralised place and within a short space of time. This type of trade was made possible with the stocking of grain (millet) in major trade towns along the valley. All types of traders, French commercial houses, traitants from Saint-Louis, and "Moroccan" Awlād Bū Sba, bought grain directly from the peasants, who in turn thus had a means to acquire import products and cash. Credit was frequently granted by the traders, and enabled them to hold down producer prices and increase profits (cf. Ould Cheikh/Bonte 1982: 41). Additionally the traders were able by this means to channel a considerable part of the region's marketable surplus grain into their stocks immediately after the harvest, thus effectively reducing the amount of grain pastoralists could directly barter for with the cultivators.

For the pastoralists the town-based traders had the decisive advantage of providing all the commodities they needed (grain, import products, money) in one place. With the presence of a market for livestock to serve the Senegalese demand, the monetisation of exchange developed quickly. Animals were turned into money, which then was exchanged for millet, cloth, tea, sugar, and other commodities.[39] These exchanges involved different traders, for the meat and the grain business were operated separately, a division eased by the flexibility of monetised commercial transactions. The individual pastoralist, wishing to turn his male animals destined for slaughter into grain and other commodities, thus had to engage in a series of subsequent transactions with different traders (Interview Bettarmo Ould Cheikh, zwāya, 8.2.1996; Benne Mint Ahmed, ḥassān, 29.10.1995). Pastoralists well acquainted with the valley also used to buy the grain they needed in cash directly from the peasants, and thus avoided contributing to the profits of the grain traders (Interview Sid Mohamed Ould Efatt, zwāya, 15.2.1996). Direct bartering of pastoralists with cultivators did occur too, but was of minor importance in the Senegal

valley, where the monetisation of commercial transactions expanded rapidly.[40] The dominating position the trade in this area had, together with the practical reasons outlined, relegated barter persisting in the remote areas to minor importance.[41]

Besides this diffuse and small-scale export of animals, which covered only a part of the trajectory to the markets of Senegal, there were well-organised large-scale exports too. Weddou Ould Jiddou, a zwāya (Interview 17.4.1995) of the Tmoddek reported how before 1969 he used to travel twice a year to Louga, an undertaking he started in 1946 (the year of the election of Horma Ould Babana as representative of the Mauritanian colony to the French national assembly). Together with five or six companions Weddou Ould Jiddou led between two and three hundred small ruminants from the Tagant via Kaédi, where they crossed the Senegal river, to Louga. There a bīẓān butcher and trader[42] was ready to buy all the animals. The money gained by the considerable price differential between the Tagant (about 200 to 250 UM per animal) and the Louga market (about 500 to 700 UM per animal)[43] was partly converted into import products, namely clothing and tea, resold at home for further profit.[44] Three camels were necessary to transport these goods back home, where they were stocked under the tent, and quickly sold and exchanged.

The second case highlights the different objectives the marketing of animals had. The long-distance direct trade with Senegal first of all sought to maximise the profits generated by the large price differentials for animals between the Mauritanian interior and the Senegalese markets. This benefit could be further boosted by the import of commodities like tea and cloth, the terms of trade for which were much more favourable near the Senegalese coast than in Mauritania. Specialising in this trading activity meant adapting to the animals' needs on the journey (i.e. keeping them in good condition), as well as returning home quickly, in order to increase the frequency of the transactions. The transport of bulky and heavy commodities, such as millet or sugar, contradicted this major objective. They could be obtained at low prices in the Senegal valley, already half way home from the Senegalese meat market at Louga, and therefore remained excluded from the activities of large scale traders such as Weddou Ould Jiddou.[45] Additionally, transporting these goods necessitated a great many transport animals, which in turn would have further burdened the already difficult transfer of large herds to the Senegalese markets. The pastoralists in turn profited from the traders frequenting their camps by getting a means to procure cash and commodities without having to displace themselves (Interview Sidi Mohamed Ould Dey, ḥassān, 27.8.1995).

Whenever animals had to be exchanged for grain, small, decentralised caravans left the Tagant and northern Aftout to go to the nearby market at Kaédi. These caravans were accompanied by the animals (pack-oxen, camels, and donkeys) necessary to transport the grain back home. They were constituted on an occasional basis, and rarely comprised the same people in

subsequent years. Often just one member of a family, accompanied by a slave, left to get the desired commodities. Modest amounts of tea and cloth, as well as money, could be obtained in Moudjéria or Kiffa[46], as well as the other small towns where meat was needed to feed the colonial staff and the inhabitants of the small towns (Interview Isselmou Ould Sidi, zwāya, 8.4.1995). The lack of grain in these locations, together with the less favourable terms of trade, however, meant this opportunity was not very attractive to the pastoralists.

## Wage Labour and Migration

### The Impact of Colonial Rule on Labour and Migration

Colonisation introduced a new kind of labour into bīẓān society, namely wage labour. Within the Mauritanian borders the administrative staff, as elsewhere, needed a large body of people to perform menial tasks. The administration and its members offered jobs for personal servants, washers, cooks, shepherds and many others. While skilled jobs, like interpreting, were more often given to bīẓān, the menial jobs were performed primarily by sūdān men, most of whom were still bound to the slave estate, but many of whom managed to enhance their legal status and became ḥarāṭīn (cf. McDougall 1988: 376, note 26; Ould Khalifa 1991: 284; Moussa/Ould Maouloud 1997). To some extent, colonisation meant job opportunities for sūdān women too, as many tasks involved basic household-work. That sūdān women were less able to profit from these opportunities with respect to increasing their personal autonomy, resulted from the gendered structures of domination in bīẓān society. Sūdān women engaged in paid work were often "hired out" for these purposes by their masters, and the revenue directly benefited the latter without altering the woman's relations of dependency, or allowing her to benefit materially. Besides prostitution, which is reported from the colonial cities,[47] and the occurrence of which increased considerably during periods of drought and economic depression, slave women had another more promising option to enhance their social condition: they could become the wife of a Senegalese tirailleur or even a French administrator. The latter were not allowed to be accompanied by their family during the first decades of the French rule on Mauritanian territory and therefore frequently contracted marriages called "à la mode du pays" for the duration of their stay.[48] Some of these colonial officials, but by far not the majority, did acknowledge the offspring of these relations. The children thus could profit from an allowance paid by the colony. The administrators' former slave spouses in general were manumitted by their temporary husbands' paying an indemnity to the bīẓān slave masters. Often endowed with some property, they were in a strong position when contracting a second marriage (cf. Ould Khalifa 1991: 803f.; Meyer 1959: 90; Hunkanrin 1964).

The outcome of slave women's liaisons with Senegalese tirailleurs was less evident. Frequently the bīẓān gave proof of their canniness in judicial regulations, and managed not to free their slave women married to a tirailleur. Once the latter were posted to a new location, the bīẓān claimed their slave women back, thus putting the colonial administration, which had guaranteed to maintain the bīẓān property rights towards their slaves, in a delicate situation. Reports from Senegal, whence many of the tirailleurs returned after retiring from service in the army, revealed another threat. Back home, the sūdān women were often treated like slaves by their husbands. Originating from black African ethnic groups to whom slavery was in no way alien, the former tirailleurs saw no rationale to treat the sūdān women better than other strangers of such minor status (cf. McDougall 1988: 370f.).

Migration to the colonial towns made up only a small part of the total migration of sūdān seeking employment. In the administrative centres, some of which were newly established, while others were located in old bīẓān towns such as Tidjikja or Atar, the number of jobs remained limited.[49] Much greater opportunities were offered by the Senegal valley, the Senegalese towns, and parts of southern Mauritania, like the Gorgol region. Already in the first decades of the century, a southward migrational movement of sūdān men, both of seasonal and permanent character, developed in Mauritania. In Dagana, on the left bank of the Senegal, the colonial administrators commented already in 1925 on the influx of numerous sūdān, as a response to their mistreatment by brutal bīẓān masters. The latter, however, were often able to get them back under their control by making an appeal to the colonial law apparatus, claiming fraudulent accusations (cf. Delaunay 1984: 72).

In 1936, when control in the south of the Mauritanian colony had been well established for decades, and came to be achieved in the north as well, Capitaine Gilles, in a report on the Aftout of Kiffa, described how seasonal wage labour migration was a fixed element in the life of many sūdān men. In one case from Barkéol el Abiod, the family of a sūdān man living in an adabay of the Aftout was expected to obtain a harvest of about 800 kg of millet, an amount already representing the maximum for a single cultivator in a year with medium rainfall. The sūdān in the adabay in question owed one half of this harvest, as well as hospitality to their bīẓān patrons, when these resided near the adabay for about one month. As a result of these obligations, the family remained with about 350 kg when the bīẓān left after their yearly visit subsequent to the harvest. From this amount the cultivators had to pay the colonial tax on agricultural production, the ʿašūr. Calculated at one tenth of the harvest, the tax withdrew another 80 kg from the remaining millet. The ḥarāṭīn family thus had to pay the whole amount of the colonial tax, i.e. for their own and for their patron's share, from its own half of the harvest! The 270 kg of millet remaining were just enough to meet the family's needs for about half a year. As these sūdān were largely independent of their bīẓān patrons, and received only sporadic gifts like animals or cloth, the need for a substantial amount of supplemental income is evident. In many other cases,

the conditions were even less favourable for the sūdān. They were threatened in various ways, e.g. by unexpected claims from bīẓān, or unjustified requisitions tribal or fractional chiefs made when collecting taxes and levies either for the colonial administration or for tribal affairs.[50]

The document of Capitaine Gilles reveals how early those sūdān who had remained in the Aftout had become integrated into a new mode of production dominated by a seasonal alternation of agricultural and most often wage labour activities, whereas livestock-rearing was of minor importance. As the sūdān's conditions of life were hardly enviable, many left permanently for the south, leaving behind their feeble use-rights in land, and a colonial administration fearing a deterioration in the net agricultural production. Already in 1921, the counsel of Tagant notables expressed his concern about slaves leaving their masters, and asked the commandant de cercle, Anselme Dubost, to lend support to masters wishing to dispose of their slaves in the same way they had for generations. The answer was somewhat tempered for fear of abolitionist pressure from France, as Dubost declared that the colony did not consider any of its inhabitants slaves. However, to comfort the slave masters, the commandant added that nobody was permitted to leave the region, nor the tribe and fraction, as long as the people concerned were not mistreated.[51]

Another case is documented for the 1940s, when about 100 slaves of the Tarkoz in the district of Moudjéria were reported to have fled to the Gorgol area. The bīẓān masters submitted their problem to the local French administrator, but the latter only promised to inform his counterpart in the Gorgol district on the occasion of a future visit there.[52] Over the years the situation did not change considerably. Still in 1953, the council of the notables of Tagant complained about the lack of labour power, i.e. the continued drain of people towards the south, and sought remedies from the administration. However, times had changed a bit, and the response of the commandant de cercle remained terse. Whilst acknowledging the described fact of labour emigration and the problems emanating from this kind of depopulation, he did not console the bīẓān by promising help. Instead he recommended, that the bīẓān enhance the living conditions of the workers, and claimed himself to have already given a good example and raised wages.[53]

## The Dawn of a New Era: from Colonialism to Independence

Interview data illuminates the background and the motivation of both seasonal and permanent migration from about 1950 on. Until independence, almost all commercial activities of Mauritania were focused on the south, namely the Senegal valley and the Senegalese cities, and on a smaller scale Mali in the east. Wage labour employment opportunities on Mauritanian territory had been almost inexistent besides the few jobs found in the small administrative towns. All this changed rapidly when the construction of the country's capital Nouakchott, and of the mining industry at Zouérat, created a large demand for workers in the early 1960s. Until then the sūdān of the

Aftout had continued to migrate in large numbers seasonally into Senegal. As Ahmed Ould Aimar (ḥarāṭīn, Interview 29.3.1995) put it: "When the fields were over, the people here [the sūdān in the Aftout] wanted to go and gain something else. In these times Nouakchott did not yet exist." One typical job in Dakar was to transport and sell water carried around on the head in large canisters of 20 litres. Other frequent jobs performed seasonally by sūdān in Senegal were occupations such as butcher, shop-assistant, or work with a trader of livestock. Often the sūdān relied on bīẓān permanently installed in Senegal, and with whom they shared tribal or fractional affiliation. This was especially the case for the many sūdān who found jobs in the numerous bīẓān shops established in the Senegalese towns until the ethnic conflict involving Senegal and Mauritania in 1989 (cf. p. 283f.).

Today, however, most of the sūdān interviewees are cautious on the topic of assistance they received from bīẓān. Many claim to have found work on their own, and some indicated the fact that they did not work for bīẓān, but for Senegalese.[54] Those sūdān who were a little bit better off, or able to raise loans, could engage in petty trade. While many of those who succeeded stopped going back home to cultivate, and established themselves permanently, some sūdān of the Aftout developed seasonal petty trading. During the dry season they left the area and headed to Kiffa, or further south-east to Mali, in order to buy peanuts, to be resold in small quantities on the way home. The money needed to start this transaction came from the marketing of millet, and the profit was expected to cover the costs of clothing (Interviews Sidi Ould Salim, ḥarṭāni, 25.7.1995; Ahmed Ould Breik, ḥarṭāni, 11.4.1995; Ahmed Ould Aimar, ḥarṭāni, 29.3.1995).

Migration of sūdān women did occur too, but was more limited in frequency and in range then men's. In the interviews I conducted with sūdān, the migration of sūdān women, then working as household maids in the cities, appeared only after the big drought in 1969. Reports from the valley, however, mention that sūdān couples used to migrate there even before. The men helped at the harvest,[55] and the women pounded millet and did handicrafts. The local Haalpulaar population was able to pay for these services thanks to their cash income generated by migrant labour (cf. Schmitz 1993: 611). A quite similar case of rural-rural migration, over relatively short distances, is mentioned in the narrative of Valha, who describes how her family was helped to pound millet and do other tasks by sūdān families, who joined the pastoralists once the harvest was over (cf. the narrative of Valha p. 69-72).

Permanent migration of sūdān had two major reasons. Some seasonal migrants were able to succeed abroad, and decided to stop returning home to cultivate every year, when this was no longer profitable or would have endangered the permanent employment they had found. Others just preferred life in the cities, and therefore did not go back. Often the reason for this decision was the relations of dependency the sūdān had to endure in their area of origin. Moime Mint El Abd (ḫādem, Interview 26.12.1995), had a

(slave) father who was known for being an unruly and violent man, one who did not submit to the will of his masters and was rude to other people as well. Having achieved a considerable degree of liberty himself, he was unable to bear the mistreatment and beatings his wife experienced at the hands of her masters. He ran away when Moime still was a baby. Others ran away when they were adolescents, because – as Yarba Ould Emine (ḥarṭāni, Interview 1.4.1995) told me – they could no longer bear the subservience of their parents and the domination of the bīẓān masters.

The 1960s brought about the rapid expansion of employment opportunities. French policy towards and within the colonies changed considerably after the Second World War, and became oriented towards the development of Mauritanian economy and infrastructure. Additionally, natural resources, like the iron ore deposits at the Kediet ej Jill, were explored, and later mined by international investors.[56] Rosso, situated on the Mauritanian bank of the Senegal valley, was a major transit town for Mauritanians wanting to go to Dakar. When Nouakchott and the mining industry of the north began to emerge, the flow of migrants passing through the small city began to split up into one part heading to the north, and one part to Senegal in the south. Much of the money the seasonal migrants earned was funnelled back into the rural areas. There it was invested in animals, or, as many of the then still young migrants admit, just squandered. These examples incited many other youngsters to go and try their luck too. As they rarely found support for such plans at home, the young men, many of whom were still boys, often left in secret not only their masters, but their parents too.

### The Impact of Drought

The heavy drought of 1969 ultimately increased migration, which now more than ever became a crucial necessity. The period of prolonged droughts paralysed the rural and especially the pastoral economy. Bīẓān masters were often no longer able to support their dependents; feeding them was an especial problem. When the drought decimated the herds, work in the pastoral sector became rare. This did not only affect unpaid slave workers. In the course of the increasing migration and successful emancipation of the sūdān, many tasks, like the watering of cattle or the herding of sheep and goats had started to be remunerated. While in the golden times of livestock exports, some of these jobs had been quite well paid,[57] the consequences of the drought put these rural workers, whose emancipation had weakened their ties with their former bīẓān masters and patrons, most immediately into a difficult situation.[58]

While the animals of most bīẓān were already badly affected, and died in large numbers, the situation was even worse among the cultivating sūdān, a large number of whom had invested in animals during the good years of the 1950s and 1960s. The reasons for this difference are multiple. Committed to cultivation and migrant labour, many though not all sūdān were less mobile than most bīẓān.[59] Consequently their livestock, even in years of good

rainfall, experienced more deprivations than the bīẓān's. The sūdān animals were less well tended because labour was scarce, since it was already invested in cultivation, migration, and work for the patrons. When the drought cycle started these already physically more weakened animals became the first and most numerous victims. The effects of the 1969 drought on the livestock on the Tagant and in the Aftout were disastrous. Many pastoralists of these regions used to nomadise only within a quite restricted area of about 50 to 80 km. During the drought, most of these pastoralists just remained at one location, near a well, or in a valley. Of the former pastoralists now sedentarised in the region of Achram-Diouk, amazingly few reported having undertaken emergency trips, e.g. towards the south, to save their animals.[60] Many explained their immobility by the arguments that the drought was omnipresent in Mauritania, and that therefore there had not been any alternative for them. Additionally emigration was described as being risky in itself. Many of the pastoralists who had migrated southwards with their animals, so my informants claimed, lost even more animals than those who remained in one place. A more successful strategy to cope with the drought was only developed by two interviewees, both of whom were resolute, and experienced pastoralists. They migrated with their sheep and goats, as well as camels, far to the north into the Tiris region, where they reached Zouérat and Aoussard in the former Spanish Western Sahara (thus crossing a distance of about 750 km as the crow flies!). This expedition helped them to maintain a large enough part of their herd to continue their pastoralist mode of life when the drought was over.[61]

The consequences of increased aridity and massive sedentarisation after 1969 successively put an end to the region's export of livestock from the Tagant and northern Aftout. Only towards the mining towns of the north, where prices were especially high, and the distance to cross for the Tagant herders was comparatively short, did the marketing of meat persist. Today sheep and goats brought along from the Hodh on the hoof or by truck are even cheaper than those of local production. The overall rapid decline of local pastoral production forced an unprecedented number of bīẓān and sūdān, both in desperate need of money, to migrate towards the cities. The rural area needed cash, and the cities were the only location where it could be obtained. Both young bīẓān and sūdān left to look for assistance from rich and influential affiliates in the city, and opportunities to gain some money. It is from this time on that many bīẓān life histories begin to include periods of migration purely to work in the cities.

> The men, a large part of the men left [in 1969]. They went to Ivory Coast, Senegal, sometimes Nouakchott. They went where they could find work. . . . Sūdān and bīẓān left, the young ones and the old. . . . They engaged in trade, they opened up shops [small retail trade]. This is what they did in all places, nothing but trade. This is what I heard. I do not know what the people really did there, I just heard what they wanted to do there. How-

> ever, people who did not know how to trade had to look for work instead. (Interview Laghlave Ould Mahmoud, ḥarṭāni, 13.4.1995)

In many cases the outcome of "doing business" was quite modest. Only a few succeeded and became part of the large bīẓān trade community spanning all of West Africa, and even parts of central Africa. The overwhelming majority of migrants, however, was employed as badly paid assistants in shops, established a small retail trade on the basis of credit, or engaged in smuggling (especially between the former Spanish Western Sahara and Mauritania). While the number of bīẓān in these non-manual jobs still was higher than that of sūdān, quite a lot of bīẓān (though most often of modest origin), stopped submitting to status obligations forbidding them manual work, and started to work e.g. in construction (Interview Abderrahmane Ould Ali, zwāya, 13.7.1995). New job opportunities arose when the state invested in a national infrastructure, such as the "road of hope", which was built from 1975 on, and now links the capital Nouakchott directly with Néma in the country's east. Though a number of sūdān still relied on patronage from influential bīẓān in order to get jobs, the latter were far from able to help all sūdān, nor could they satisfy the demands of the many bīẓān who were in a comparable situation.

As a result of this flooding of the formal job market, the extraction of shells from the dunes at the coast near Nouakchott became a fixed point in many urban migration careers. This business, which certainly is among the most menial one can imagine, is essential for construction in Nouakchott. As there is no gravel in the capital's sandy environment, it has been replaced by shells. Exploiting the dunes is free to everybody, and serves as transitional occupation until better jobs are found. Interests in the rural sector in the meantime often were (and still are) safeguarded by collective strategies. When several members of a family migrate, one other member (quite often the youngest brother), is put in charge of maintaining all claims over land.[62] While some migrants are accompanied by their families, more frequently the men leave alone. Women, children and elderly people remain in the villages and wait for the migrants' yearly visits and their assistance in cultivation.

### Migration Patterns: from Running Away to Getting Back Home

Material need, together with the rapid growth of the urban centres and the emergence of better transport facilities, paved the way for increased migration not only of men but of women too. These no longer migrated only in the company of their husband or of a male member of their family, but also on their own. This certainly was further eased by nearly every family having relatives living in one of the few Mauritanian cities worth migrating to. There new job opportunities for women developed. Besides work as housemaids, the dye of cloth[63] and the preparation of couscous became among others major underclass urban women's occupations (Interview Ghalim Ould El Kheir, ḥarṭāni 17.12.1995). What here remains unspoken, but is nevertheless a

matter of fact documented since colonial times, is an increase of prostitution. Formerly especially marked in times of economic depression and drought,[64] it has now become a widespread phenomenon.

In the course of this evolution, which deeply transformed the modes of life and production in the rural areas, public acts of slave emancipation and slave flight became more and more frequent. In 1974, a slave woman of one of the region's important ḥassān families ran away. One night she took all her belongings, and together with her children, slipped away to the nearby track (the tarred road now passing by had not yet been constructed). She caught a taxi that brought her and her children directly to Nouakchott. The master, after having learnt of the flight, followed his slave in another taxi, and traced her in the city. After negotiating with the woman, he was able to return back home with one son, destined to herd the sheep and goats. However, the agreement did not last for long. Several days after he had been brought back to the master's small village, the slave boy managed to escape, and left for Nouakchott in a taxi as well. Ever after, the relations between the slave family and the master were ruptured. The slave woman continued for some years to live in Nouakchott until she became ill. Seeking medical advice in a hospital, she was told to go back to her natal region, there she was supposed to recover from her ailment. The woman returned, but her stay in the vicinity of her former master did not last. Assisted by some relatives she left her home region once again and went to Nouadhibou, where she finally died (Interview ḥassān, 9.12.1995).

Another slave woman was forced to follow her mistress, a member of a family descended from one of the Tagant ʿamīrs, when the latter married and left with her husband for a town in the east. There she had to serve her mistress, and do the housework. During a visit to the Tagant, the slave woman's brother saw his sister working very hard, and the mistress mistreating and beating her. He persuaded his sister to flee, and together with other sūdān helped her to get to Moudjéria on a donkey. There she took a taxi to Nouakchott, from where she never returned (Interview ḥarṭāni, 19.12.1995).

These two stories of slave women who escaped from their masters might at first sight be anticipated as proofs of the persistence of slavery in Mauritania, and for this reason may be welcomed by modern abolitionists on the one hand, and condemned and doubted by those who deny the relevance of relations of dependency resulting from master-slave relations for contemporary Mauritania's social topography on the other hand. Besides the factual authenticity, which for the basic statements of both stories has to be taken for given, both stories are above all stories about the changing relations of dependency, about slaves physically and symbolically breaking out of their domination by the masters. The stories thus reveal how the end of slavery comes about, and not how slavery persists. As the power of the masters fails to encompass the big cities, but is still present in the rural areas, the slave women have to migrate permanently to enter an environment where they are free of direct, personal domination. The reasons for this migration distinguis-

hes them from the many other (permanent) migrants entering the cities. Though in view of the decline of the rural sector few migrants ever have the chance to return back home,[65] the slaves who have absconded are by and large unable even to dream of returning home, be it only for a temporary visit, for this would mean re-entering the sphere of domination, being forced to re-negotiate the relations of dependency, and locate oneself in a local society where one's personal history is well known. Leaving the rural world, though it has been disrupted in the course of the droughts, increased aridity and desertification, imposes, in addition to all material problems, great mental stress. People, the bīẓān and sūdān alike, get ill from the cities, and the remedy recommended unanimously – by medical professionals and common sense – is a return to one's region of origin. There, for the sūdān the cure for their pains is obtained e.g. by a diet consisting first of all of dishes of millet.[66] Others stress the positive effects of fresh milk, and the green pastures during the rainy season,[67] and thus affirm the conception deeply rooted in bīẓān society that illness results from an unbalanced food-intake (cf. Ould Ahmedou, E.G. 1990: 95ff.).[68]

Besides its profound psychological rationale, there is another bit of truth in the link constructed between food, health and the rural area, as medical observations confirm. Despite the many difficulties of the rural sector, nutrition there is still better, i.e. of higher nutritive value, than the typical underclass urban food. Medical surveys in Mauritania proved child nutrition in the most remote areas to be far better than that of small cities, and especially of the great urban slums, where the rate of severe malnutrition was highest. These results are due to the fact that food is scarce both for poor urban and rural populations, but access to high protein, vitamin etc. foodstuffs like milk, meat and sometimes garden products is much better in the rural areas than in the cities, where hungry children are given French baguettes, and sweets (Guy Rousseau, GTZ Achram, personal communication).[69]