CHAPTER 1
APPROACHING SLAVERY IN BĪẒĀN SOCIETY

THEORISING SLAVERY

"There is nothing notably peculiar about the institution of slavery" wrote Orlando Patterson (1982: VII) in his introduction to "slavery and social death", for as he argued, "it has existed from before the dawn of human society right down to the twentieth century". The present discomfort with slavery arose as late as the Enlightenment, when the universality of human rights became a concern on the European continent. Rapidly taken up by Protestant churches,[1] the abolitionist discourse expressed discomfort with the great democracies of classical antiquity having been based on the practice of slavery, and also with the fact that the first US-American presidents Thomas Jefferson[2] and George Washington had been large-scale slave holders.

While in the Americas slavery has become an integral part of history because of its still recent past, it has been all but expunged from central European public memory. Here slavery has come to mean the history of others, such as the peoples of antiquity or of the Americas, even though major European powers were in their time the backbones of the transatlantic slave trade, and for a long time the European colonial powers did little to end slavery. What indeed leads to slavery being perceived today as a peculiar institution despite the contradictory evidence forwarded by Orlando Patterson (1982), is that it seems to be the complete negation of those ideas of individual freedom and democracy which after the breakdown of socialist states have gained world-wide hegemony.[3] In this respect Karl Marx's critique of capitalist ideology is still illuminating, for it highlights exactly what makes the difference between unfreedom in feudal society (which shares some characteristics with slave-keeping societies), and the ambivalence inherent in capitalist freedom. Together with his relations of subservience, and his obligations to work for his master's benefit, the serf (and likewise the slave) who becomes the capitalist worker loses all of his moral and material rights to be sustained, and remains with nothing else to sell for a living than his labour power (cf. Marx [1867] 1983a: 183). The close relation between trust in the virtues of capitalist economy (or rather, compliance with capital-ist ideology) and the active struggle against what remained of the personalised

relations of domination such as slavery is highlighted by abolitionist dis-
courses up to the present. Focusing on the establishment of justice for
those who suffer under personal ties of dependence, the claims for a just
remuneration of work, and free labour ideology always constituted pivotal
points of abolitionist argumentation (cf. Klein 1993b: 15ff.). Karl Marx's
objection that there can be no such thing as "just wages" in capitalist society
has not entered the abolitionist discourse up to now, not even that of the
progressive former slaves' self-help organisations in today's Mauritania.

Unpaid labour emerges as one central element of a common-sense defini-
tion of slavery, but it is by far not sufficient to define slavery as a distinct
institution, for there are many forms of unfree and unpaid labour, such as e.g.
serfdom. The second major feature of slavery which raises emotions today, is
the coercive nature of slave exploitation. The slave as the property of his
master, and subjected to the will of the latter, comes to represent the most
totalitarian form of human alienation. This latter aspect, the treatment of
slaves as chattels and hence as commodities, entails a number of far-reaching
consequences. Excluded from the body of society and deprived of the social
rights of the free, the slave has no right to kinship. All of his social relations
are mediated by and at the responsibility of his master, while the slave
himself is a legal minor. Another, and decisive, specificity of slave existence
lies in the fact that coercion lies at its root, in the initial and frequently violent
act of enslavement. It is violence that lays the basis for the legal fiction of the
ownership of one human being by another and for the transformation of a
freeman into a chattel. Physical violence thus becomes transformed into legal
or institutional relations of power, giving the slave-owner the right to deprive
the slave of the essentials of self-determination (cf. Finley 1968: 307ff.;
Lovejoy 1983: 1ff.).[4]

By these characteristics, the slave becomes to some extent the antithesis of
the free. Being free, however, meant different things at different places and
times. While today freedom has come to be most closely associated with the
rights of the individual, being free in societies whose structure is based on
kinship – as bīzān society continues to be in many respects – was first of all
marked by one's inclusion in kin-relations, and hence membership of society.
At the risk of essentialising slavery, one could thus argue that the exclusion
of the slaves from kinship, which has been stressed by Claude Meillassoux
(1986: 35) in his analysis of African slavery, constitutes the core of the
dividing line between the free and the slaves.[5] The slave is an outsider,
because he has no parents in his host society, and he will remain an outsider
because he is excluded from kinship ties with the host society and is denied
social paternity with regard to his own offspring.

This dichotomy between the free person and the slave, the member of
society and the excluded, besides describing features central to the institution
of slavery, can also develop into a crucial element for the definition of social
groups, or else of society. Research on ethnic boundaries and their mainte-
nance has demonstrated that there need not be a distinct ethnic territory and

an outer limit. Rather, ethnic differentiation is articulated most strongly in all areas of inter-ethnic contact and contributes to the solidification of ethnic identities (cf. Barth 1969a; Schlee/Werner 1996a). Slaves incorporated into a society can be discerned as such a group, and discrimination against this group can be turned into a means of identification for the masters. Antithetical descriptions of slaves and masters therefore are part of a wider ideological context, aiming not only at the maintenance of slavery as an institution, but also at the maintenance of the masters' identity.[6]

For the slaves, however, these ideological conceptions of their estate had quite a number of practical results. When treated as non-kin the slave had to suffer far-reaching consequences: kin relations among slaves, though existing in biological terms, are denied their legal and social meaning. It is the master who decides on marriages of his slaves. Even if these are admitted, the ownership rights of the masters override the slaves' rights in the newly founded families. Thus in patrilineal societies slave children come to belong to the owner of their mother. And if the slaves ever have the right to own property they are not allowed to transmit it. It will be the master who has the right to inherit from his slaves.

Controversies

In a way it is paradoxical that because of the absolute rights of masters over their slaves, the material welfare of slaves can differ considerably, and this despite their common estate. History gives a long list of occupations slaves fulfilled, and by far not all of these tasks implied coercion and menial work. Slaves could be important scholars, like for example the famous Leo Africanus, who having become slave of the Pope was responsible for a net transfer of oriental knowledge to the Catholic clergy; in addition we find eunuchs in Arabian harems, counsellors of kings (also often eunuchs), leaders and soldiers of armies, concubines and, at the end of the scale peasants forced to work on the master's fields or plantations, or do work in the household. These differences in the practical living conditions of slaves have led a number of scholars to reject the notion of slavery in the scientific analysis of African societies, i.e. to avoid the impression of a uniform phenomenon the term implies. The emphasis is laid on the diversity of living conditions slaves experienced and on the fact that manumission of slaves was commonly practised in a large number of African slave-keeping societies.

The main thesis Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (1977a) advance in their theoretical approach to slavery in Africa is the rejection of the notion of property to define what they classified as a distinct, African kind of slavery (indeed considered to be so distinct that "slavery" appears only in inverted commas). Although both authors do recognise the existence of chattel slavery in Africa, they perceive the concepts of property and freedom as western-biased and not fitting the African context as a whole. Africans, according to this perspective, belong to kin-groups. This African configuration of society means that freedom comes from *belonging to* a kin group, a patron or some

powerful group, the involvement in often hierarchical social relations, and is not related to the ideal of an autonomous individual. The latter would be perceived as threatened by dangers of all kinds and not free at all. This effective lack of individual freedom expresses itself in the notion of "rights in persons" that every kin-group has over its members. In this light the categorical differences between the free and the unfree are transformed to gradual ones on the large scale of African social hierarchies. Some of the features commonly attributed only to slaves can even be applied to the so-called free, e.g. the threat of being sold into slavery. As on the one hand the free begin to resemble the slaves, on the other hand (some!) slaves become much like the free. Forced to establish some relationship with the acquired slaves, the host societies have to include them. The paradox is formulated in the following terms: "But the problem for the host society is really that of including the stranger while continuing to treat him as a stranger." (Miers/Kopytoff 1977a: 15) The concern of the African slave-keeping societies thus becomes not the exclusion of the appropriated slaves but their inclusion. This whole process is seen to be fuelled by the permanent need to enlarge one's own kin-group. Instead of slavery as an institution producing social outsiders, there is a "'slavery'-to-kinship continuum" (Miers/Kopytoff 1977a: 24).

   How far scientific perception may be shaped by its theoretical assumptions is revealed by the argumentation of Claude Meillassoux (1986), who considers the concept of "rights in persons" to be rather an outcome of modern western capitalistic thought and conceptions than African emic categories. The major argument developed by Miers and Kopytoff thus appears misconceived, resulting from the legalism, functionalism, and economism inherent in this approach. Focusing on the legal position of the individual and therefore the magnitude of its variations obscures the view of slavery as an institution. The distinction to be made is between the *estate* and the (individual) *condition* of the slave.[7] This analytical tool provides the means to tackle the fact that although slaves are considered to be chattels, for their exploitation they have to be treated as humans. One becomes a slave (and remains it) not because of the master, but because of the institutions of slavery and the structures that constitute the framework of its practice:

> La faiblesse de l'approche juridique est de considérer ici l'aliénabilité comme un attribut inhérent aux esclaves. L'aliénabilité n'est significative, pourtant, que dans le cadre des institutions qui en permettent la réalisation: la guerre de capture et le "marché aux esclaves", c'est-à-dire l'ensemble des mécanismes et des opérations par lesquelles une classe d'individus se trouve privée de personnalité sociale, transformée en cheptel, vendue comme marchandises et exploitée ou employée d'une manière qui permettra d'en recouvrir le coût, fût il de la capture ou de l'achat. (Meillassoux 1986: 11)

As an institution, slavery, according to Meillassoux, cannot result from strong but rather individual forces like the "permanent need to enlarge one's

own kin-group" envisaged by Miers and Kopytoff (1977a). The underlying paradigm of "the more, the better" is an element of modern capitalistic thought rather than of pre-modern African slave-keeping societies. But then, what else incited the existence, perpetuation and even expansion of slavery in the African context?

As an institution, i.e. a structural element of society, slavery has to be constantly reproduced. Slavery as an institution is not identical with the existence of some slaves in a society. To speak of slavery there has to be a group, a class of individuals, bound to a particular, servile estate that is reproduced as such over time (Meillassoux 1986: 35).[8] It is right here that empirical evidence enters the scene to modify the notion of reproduction of social institutions. For a number of reasons the mainly female African slave populations (like most others) were in permanent decline, and did not reproduce themselves.[9] Birth rates among slaves were far below those of the host societies and the slaves' frequently poor living conditions further negatively influenced slave demography. Manumission also contributed to diminishing the number of slaves. Nearly all African slave holding societies provided status mobility and progressive integration to the slave-strangers, for example in the course of intergenerational changes. African slavery thus – like the Atlantic slave trade that influenced the expansion and transition towards a more rigid and systematic exploitation of slaves in African slave systems[10] – created a sustained demand for new slaves that could only be satisfied from within the continent. In order to satisfy this demand and ensure a regular supply, enslavement and slave marketing had to become separate businesses in Africa (cf. Meillassoux 1986).[11]

In addition to much appreciation for offering insights on how slavery is interrelated with society and providing a framework to track conflict within slave societies, Meillassoux's approach has also received powerful criticism. Certainly the most trenchant arguments in this respect are that despite its impetus to move beyond the legalism inherent to functionalist approaches, Meillassoux's work ends up, though from a different perspective, essentialising slave estate. According to his vision the "social death" of the slaves is not perceived as an ideological construct, but as created by the slave mode of reproduction. Slaves thus, as in the work of Orlando Patterson (1982), appear as absolutely powerless and masters as almighty. The slave estate comes to represent not a legal fiction, but a social fact (cf. Glassman 1995).[12]

Nevertheless the distinction of slave estate from various slave conditions can be used as a powerful analytical tool to explore the struggles taking place between masters and slaves. Indeed this differentiation reflects the fundamental contradiction of the slave existence, namely the formal treatment of slaves as chattels, while their humanity remains the basis for exploitation (cf. Davis 1966: 31-35, 58-61; Lovejoy 1981).[13] Practices of slavery thus always take part in the social deconstruction of the slave as property. However, the notion of the slave as property is not only a legal fiction, but is an element of those practices and discourses by which masters maintain their domination

over slaves. Treating a slave as property, i.e. evoking his saleability or denouncing his kinlessness, was a means to threaten and hence to dominate slaves. Such threats had not to be overt to develop their power, but achieved this end also as a kind of a last resort for masters wishing to pull the balance of power back onto their sides. While slaves indeed in many cases managed to receive better treatment from their master and were able to reduce the range of the latter's direct control (i.e. to enhance their condition in Meillassoux's terminology), they were unable to alter the basis of the discrimination against them. Although Jonathon Glassman (1995) in his critique of Meillassoux is right when stating that better slave conditions were the result of the slaves' struggles, in his conclusion he comes close to trying too hard to define distinct, vested rights of slaves as a result of these encounters, and thus to contradict his own credo that such attempts lead attention away from the question of how slaves improved their lot.[14]

In accordance with Claude Meillassoux (1986), the present analysis takes a more radical perspective, querying the notion of distinct slaves' rights altogether. Indeed one such right which is often named is the non-saleability of slaves "born in the house", i.e. second generation slaves. In general this was true, but nevertheless such sales occurred, either as a result of a desperate situation the master was in or as a severe kind of punishment; furthermore selling slaves continued far into this century, at least in much of the western Sudan and especially at the desert edge (cf. Klein 1993c: 190 and 1983: 78; Meillassoux 1986: 125 and 1975b: 227).[15]

In the context of bīẓān slavery the notion of a slave estate as opposed to variable slave conditions is able to reflect the difference between the often ambivalent characteristics of everyday master-slave interaction and the rigid framework of Islamic jurisprudence, defining and legitimising the slaves' inferiority, and also serving as a recourse for the masters.[16] Indeed, many of the slave accounts forming the basis of this study reveal that slaves wanted and were able to achieve greater autonomy. However, both in the masters' and the slaves' perception such arrangements resulted from individual action, by either soft or generous masters, or else their counterparts, strong and demanding slaves. How much the slave estate remained a threat, despite the considerable success some slaves achieved in these struggles, can be discerned from those cases in which a slave master insisted on being the sole heir of a deceased "independent" slave (cf. the case of Brahim's father p. 62f.; such cases continue to be reported from Mauritania up to the present).[17] To all other slaves, especially all members of the slave's family, such events are a revelation of what remains the foundation their current condition is built on. Slaves indeed managed to live with a high degree of autonomy in bīẓān society, but this, their "right", depended on their actual power to defend it. Once dead, they and their power had gone, leaving their masters free to return to basics, i.e. to treat their (dead) slave as what he had always been: a slave.[18]

This short glance at the ambivalence of the slave condition in bīẓān society

shows that it remained a constant concern for those slaves eager to improve their fate. The only means to overcome the restrictions resulting from the slave estate was manumission. This latter act indeed plays a major role in Islamic jurisprudence, and hence ideology of slavery. Manumission is recommended in the Qurʾān, and in a number of distinct cases is prescribed as a religious penance.[19] Slaves could also contract for freedom for payment if they were allowed to develop their own patrimony (cf. Brunschwig 1960; Schacht 1964: 129ff.; Ibn Abî Zayd Al-Qayrawânî 1983: 141, 169, 189, 221ff.; Lewis 1990: 5ff.). By becoming a ḥarāṭīn, literally a freed slave, slaves achieved the personal rights of a freeman. They were finally able to contract marriages of their free will, and develop kin relations, but problems remained. Most African masters, and especially those practising slavery in a household context, had a marked preference for slave women. In bīẓān society, this gender bias in slavery led masters to manumit slave men much more often than women. As a consequence, ḥarāṭīn men were often unable to marry other women than slaves, the children of whom would inherit their estate from the mother and belong to the mother's master. Also when freed slave men and women married and thus were able to constitute families with all legal rights, their slave past continued to cut their descendants off from an ancestry of freemen and hence paved the way for future social discrimination.[20] This whole dilemma of slave existence is put in a nutshell by Frederick Cooper, discussing the absorption thesis of Suzanne Miers and Igor Kopytoff (1977a):

> Even where slaves were readily assimilated, they suffered a devastating cultural subordination: their loss of their ancestry. Their destruction as a people was the other side of absorption. But where the slave's distinctiveness was not a limbic state but an ideological basis for exploitation and control, it was all the more devastating. It is at this point that the absorptionist approach most clearly shows its inadequacy and most case-studies stop short. For, if African societies were inherently absorptive, there was little for slaves to do but be absorbed. (Cooper 1979: 124)

Indeed there has always been only one alternative for slaves wanting to escape the power of their masters: running away. However, this option was no easy choice for a great number of slaves. Those who had been transported over large distances faced great hardship when trying to get back, and for those who had been enslaved for quite some time, returning home became difficult because everybody there had become used to arrangements that no longer accommodated the enslaved kinsmen. Eventually all second generation slaves were for this reason almost completely deprived of this option. Nevertheless, slavery in many parts of western Africa was unpleasant enough for an exodus of great numbers of slaves from different societies shortly after colonisation by the French had begun. By far not all returned home. Many overcame the hardship to develop a new existence based on cultivation. Others entered the new economic sectors that developed in the wake of

colonisation, or, in the case of Senegal, joined the Mouride brotherhood, which offered both a social network and a new corporate identity (cf. Klein 1993c: 182ff; Roberts 1988).[21]

Slavery in the light of these arguments is revealed to be the outcome of a distinct relation of power (*Herrschaftsverhältnis*), a designation shaped by Karl Marx ([1858] 1983c: 254). As such slavery is not static, but is subject to changes resulting from transformation processes in those social and economic relations forming its basis. Indeed the power of the masters can be challenged from two sides, in both of which the configuration of power between masters and slaves becomes affected. Either from the outside, when invaders take over power from the masters, as had been the case with colonisation, or by the subordinate in society themselves. That slavery nevertheless proves so difficult to overcome from within society, as has been outlined so far, results from the many implications such a complex relation of power as slavery has (this will be a recurrent topic in the following chapters as far as bīẓān slavery is concerned). Slavery encompasses and pervades all major fields of society, from the economic to the social. It is present in all those values, attitudes and notions which constitute central elements of the slave society's culture. As such slavery cannot be reduced to an economic problem,[22] but has to be analysed in all of its meanings to society. In order to produce insights on how slavery changes and how slave emancipation progresses, the present analysis makes use of the configurational approach developed by Norbert Elias (1988 and 1990).

This theoretic device allows for the systematic examination of how relations between groups change not only as the result of the groups' direct action, but also in response to processes of spatial segregation and external challenges to given power relations as well as to other factors. These insights, which are detailed in chapter two (cf. p. 78-91), will be reflected throughout the present study by the notion of configurations of hierarchy and dependency. Wherever group interactions are concerned these will be characterised as relations of hierarchy and dependency, while interpersonal interactions involving masters and slaves will be referred to as master-slave relations.

Besides these aspects this study develops arguments dealing with two more issues needing further attention in the study of slavery. Little has been said so far about the modes of domination maintaining slavery. The major thesis in this domain remains that slave resistance in Africa was consistently weak because the slaves rarely became a homogeneous group in the way they were on the plantations of the US South. Differentiations with regard to slaves, e.g. between slaves newly acquired and other slaves or slaves of the first and second generation were indeed effective means to undercut slave solidarity. Limited attention has been paid so far in this context to questions of gender and the different treatment of slave women and men.[23] Masters not only had a means to control their slaves by their power to deny them marriages and kin relations, but also because slave women and men had different aspirations as far as their individual ascension and integration into the slave society was

concerned. While women could ascend, although still with an ambivalent status, into the masters' society by being married by a freeman or by developing quasi-kin relations with the masters' and mistress' children e.g. by establishing relations of milk-kinship, this was not an option for slave men due to the rule of female hypergamy in bīẓān society. Conversely, work offered few options for slave women to achieve a better condition, while slave men as professional herders, trade assistants and the like could achieve a great deal of autonomy and occasionally, as a reward, become manumitted.

Studying the end of slavery in terms of an inquiry into social change also raises another set of questions. Besides examining how social relations changed it has to be asked what changed and why. This implies reflecting once again on the nature of slavery. Already about two decades ago Frederick Cooper (1979: 111) hinted at this problem in his assumption that slavery in Africa has been described by anthropologists as "benign" so often only because these studies did not consider slavery as changing in time and space, but based their assumptions on systems of slavery already in decay and therefore becoming more integrative. This conclusion, which has come to be accepted among scholars of slavery (cf. Miers/Roberts 1988a: 6), is supported by the evidence raised in this study. Although the French colonists, who had started the occupation of Mauritanian territory by the turn of the 20th century, refrained largely from pursuing an abolitionist policy (cf. Acloque 1998; Ould Cheikh 1993: 188), the relations of hierarchy and dependency at the desert edge became seriously affected. Slaves gained a greater range of alternatives to their life with the masters and the latter in turn had to do more to make their slaves stay. However, this evolution, at least in the case of bīẓān society, favoured above all men. It was they who profited on a large scale from promotion to ḥarāṭīn status during this century, while slave women did not (cf. chapter four). Indeed the development of slaves' conditions seems to have been contradictory. While the end of the slave trade made slaves more precious, and especially difficult to replace, the consequences of this trend were double-edged. As masters had to fear slaves running away, they had to treat them well, but on the other hand the lack of an external slave supply also meant those masters wishing to continue slavery had to rely more heavily on the single, remaining resource for new slaves: slave women. Extended practices of manumission applied to slave men were thus accompanied by a rigidification of slave women's conditions and the meaning of slave estate. It is indeed the weakening of the masters' power that made them rely more heavily on legal principles to justify and maintain their supremacy. The response of slave societies to external forces weakening the masters and promoting the slaves therefore has to be observed with special attention, for the result of the response is likely to be highly ambivalent.

In Mauritania, it is this strengthening of the ideology of a fundamental difference between masters and slaves that lives on until today and rules much of the discourses focusing on the integration, or else the exclusion of

the sūdān from bīẓān society (cf. chapter eight). While social mobility has always existed and continues to bridge the divide between enslaved and free, it is the formally correct legitimation of the end of individual slave estate that has become a great concern to many involved. Significant numbers of slaves in Mauritania continue to strive – and pay – for formal manumission because they perceive this act still as the most effective way to demonstrate their departure from the slave estate. By this practice, however, they reproduce and maintain the dichotomy of "slave" and "free", and hence keep alive the label "slave" as a social category laden with a symbolic meaning discriminating against all those still bound to the slave estate.

Slavery and Social Hierarchy in Bīẓān Society

Making use of slaves contributes to the differentiation of society. This is most apparent in those cases where a class of masters evolved, or as was the case in many western Sudanese societies, slavery, together with the capture of and trade in slaves, allowed for the evolution of strong military and trading groups, and thus facilitated state formation. The establishment of clerical states in the western Sudan, as was the case in the course of the ǧihāds in Fuuta Jallon, Hausaland and Masina, was based on the sedentarisation of the pastoralists involved. This shift in the mode of life was considerably eased due to the exploitation of slave labour. Slavery also paved the way for another kind of social differentiation. It has been argued that the evolution of the typical West African, rural-based Islam was accompanied and facilitated by the establishment of slave farming. Islamic scholarship therefore could shift during the 16th century and continue to do so until the beginning of colonisation, from the big trading towns to religious centres in the hinterland (Levtzion 1987: 4).[24]

  In the western Sahara patterns of social differentiation resulting from the practice of slavery were less marked. Most slaves were used in households, and no plantations worked by slaves developed as has been the case around the big western Sudanese towns and within the powerful states of the area (cf. Klein 1993c: 171f.). Nevertheless, the percentage of slaves in bīẓān society was high, ranging from about a half to a quarter of the whole population or sometimes less, depending on various factors. The demographic significance of bīẓān slavery was comparable to that of neighbouring societies subjecting their slaves more rigorously to distinct productive activities, such as farming. Despite the more diffuse use of slave labour, the western Sahara also witnessed the evolution of distinct warrior groups and of an Islamic scholarship of great renown. The warrior groups, the ḥassān, lived off tributes from either clerical, i.e. zwāya tribes (ḥassāniyya/Arabic: qabīla), or groups of tributaries (znāga). These latter two groups built the productive backbone of bīẓān society and, though on a different scale (the zwāya more, the znāga less),

relied on and employed slave labour. Slaves therefore took part in the production of those values that later on became infused in the system of inter-tribal exchanges of tributes that allowed the warriors to live by and large without producing themselves. Dependent labour also contributed significantly to the wealth which allowed nomadic desert scholars to devote their lives entirely to religious learning. Unlike those scholars living in the very few trade towns of the western Sahara, who lived off trade and thus followed a common pattern of Muslim scholarship, the rural scholars were only marginally involved in trade, but lived off a large body of disciples and slaves.[25] Although slaves produced an important part of the goods appropriated by those dominant in society and hence ensured both their material and symbolic reproduction, it remains difficult to prove that slave labour, which constituted only one of several forms of dependent labour, had been most significant in this process. Though highly instructive because of the insights it opens on the connection between bīẓān slavery and economic development in the western Sahara, the thesis of Constant Hamès (1979), stating that in the context of the bīẓān trade in gum arabic (17th–19th century) a zwāya industry based on slave labour developed, can be questioned on empirical grounds (cf. Webb 1995: 98).

The present study will take up this initial interest in the relationship between bīẓān economy and slavery, and widen its perspective in order to analyse the significance of slavery and slave labour to the shape of bīẓān society and economy in different fields. The question is how slavery became so closely intertwined with bīẓān society and social hierarchy that social practices which emerged in the context of slavery are still so hard to overcome in today's Mauritania. Before engaging in this project, the patterns of bīẓān slavery have to be located in the context of the different types of slavery practised in the Sahel and western Sudan.

According to Claude Meillassoux (1975a and 1986: 87f., 117ff., 254f.) and Frederick Cooper (1979: 116), three different types of slave labour can be distinguished in African societies. Slaves were employed on plantations, where they worked under supervision in gangs for market demands; they lived in semi-autonomous villages and had to pay a more or less fixed share of their harvest to their masters, or they lived in their masters' households and replaced the labour of the masters' kinsmen.

In the western Sahara only the latter two types of slave labour occurred, although there were a few sectors in which a specialised production for market demands developed. Such cases are the salt mines and to a lesser extent date-palm cultivation. However, the most important bīẓān desert rock-salt mine at Ijil was not exploited by slaves, but a specific group of clients, the Azazir (ḥassāniyya: ʿaġzāzīr).[26] Indeed the question whether slave or free labour predominated in the Saharan salt mines, or if there was any slave labour in this sector is still controversial (cf. McDougall 1990: 248ff.; Lovejoy 1986: 115-52). In the oases, ownership of land and palm trees was not strongly centralised. The market production taking place in these

locations hardly had the character of organised plantation work, putting large numbers of slave workers under the authority of landlords, but remained within the framework of individual masters owning small plots and ruling over a small group of slaves or manumitted slaves.

Semi-autonomous villages of slaves were more common in bīẓān society, although the great majority was located in the south of bīẓān territory, where rainfed agriculture was possible. Bīẓān nomadic pastoralists, by settling their slaves in distinct communities in these areas, were able to get hold of a more or less regular supply of grain that was crucial to complement their animal-based diet.[27] However, in precolonial times warfare and raiding seem to have strongly constrained the benefit that could be obtained from these slave villages (ḥassāniyya: adwaba), many of which were not permanent settlements but were occupied only during the cultivation period. Consequently the majority of these agricultural settlements developed only after colonisation and pacification, and then became the locale of sedentarisation not only for slaves but also for manumitted and runaway slaves.

As regards slavery in bīẓān precolonial society, it can be concluded that the vast majority of slaves were employed on the level of household production. They replaced the work of freemen, or increased the work capacity of the bīẓān families. Employing slave labour could serve specific ends. Either it was used as a means to enhance the economic basis of the family production unit by enabling the further accumulation of livestock, or it helped assure subsistence production and freed the masters from manual labour. The latter thus became able to devote their energies to religious scholarship, to warfare, or simply to enjoy idleness or alternatively, the work of directing slave labour. It was the bīẓān women who became most closely associated with a lifestyle marked by inactivity. Together with obesity, this was a means to express affluence and emerged as the bīẓān ideal of femininity. Having thus outlined what places slaves occupied in bīẓān society, the following overview of bīẓān social hierarchy and social groups will complement this picture.

Status Groups and Social Strata

Sūdān

This study is concerned with the most apparent and manifest divide in bīẓān society, the one between sūdān and bīẓān, or literally between black Moors and white Moors.[28] In ḥassāniyya Arabic dialect "sūdān" has a different meaning from that in classical Arabic, where it designates black Africans, and also refers to sub-Saharan Africa as the land of the blacks (bilād as sūdān). In bīẓān society this original designation of the African outer border of Arab society has been turned into an internal one distinguishing the freemen from those having a slave past. Consequently, once it is not question of their ethnic affiliation, black Africans are not called sūdān in bīẓān society but kwār.[29] However, the division into black and white in bīẓān society is much less neat and obvious than these terms suggest. First it has to

be noted that phenotype is not a reliable indicator of social status in bīẓān society, as freemen of noble origin are frequently of dark complexion, while the reverse also occurs among sūdān. Second neither bīẓān nor sūdān are a homogeneous social and status group and additionally, several status groups fail to fit easily into either category.

While the sūdān are supposed to comprise all those members of bīẓān society who have a slave past, the composition of this group of ḥarāṭīn, who are free, and ʿabīd, i.e. slaves, can be seen as a paradox. As freemen the ḥarāṭīn – one could suggest – should be able to figure among all other free people, namely the bīẓān, and the major divide of society into free and servile hence should distinguish ḥarāṭīn and slaves rather than put them into one social category. That this is not the case reveals a good deal about the different meanings freedom can have in bīẓān society. The freedom resulting from manumission is not the same as that achieved by being born free (cf. Meillassoux 1986: 23).

> "Haratines". Le choix de ce nom qui signifie en Hassaniya "Titulaire d'une liberté acquise après la naissance" dénote du souci constant de rappeler à ces gens-là qu'ils ne peuvent pas prétendre aux honneurs dues à l'autre groupe de "Ahrar" ou libres tout court. (Ould Ahmed Meidah 1993: 9)

The ḥarāṭīn's very resemblance to the slaves according to this definition is due to the fact that they once had a slave past. Although they have become free by manumission, and hence are able to pass this status on to their children (provided that the mother is a ḥarṭāniyya and not a slave) the ḥarāṭīn are not equal because of their slave origin. To bīẓān the slave past of the ḥarāṭīn appears everlasting. Even several generations of being born free as a ḥarāṭīn are perceived as being unable to delete this past. This perspective of what being a ḥarāṭīn means is predominant in bīẓān minds, and beyond the literal meanings of "manumitted slave" the difference between masters and manumitted slave descendants has also been rationalised by folk etymologies, portraying the term to be derived from "*ḥurr ṯāni*" meaning freeman of secondary rank or "*ḥarrāṯ*" ploughman.[30] However, none of these etymologies is phonetically or semantically satisfying, and still today the origin of the word ḥarāṭīn remains unclear. More instructive is a comparison with the meanings of the term in Berber languages (of which ḥarāṭīn may be an Arabised variant), where corresponding terms refer besides the notions of slavery, manumission, dark-phenotype and half-caste to the idea of mixing blood or different races. This latter meaning has also become part of ḥassāniyya language, where ḥarṭan signifies the blending of equine races (cf. Taine-Cheikh 1989a: 95f. and 1989c: 395; Nicolas 1977; Colin 1960).

The close association of ḥarāṭīn with slaves and a slave origin in contemporary Mauritania is most prominently expressed by the use of "ḥarāṭīn" as a euphemism for both people of ḥarāṭīn status and ʿabīd (slaves). This equation is contested by those who thus feel themselves discriminated against – ḥarāṭīn

who have been manumitted for generations and ḥarāṭīn claiming to have no slave past at all.[31] These today decry the devaluation of ḥarāṭīn status brought about by the many people of slave descent, who in the anonymity of the big cities, or after moving into new areas of residence take on a new identity and claim to be ḥarāṭīn although they have not been formally manumitted. Indeed, hardly anybody continues to describe himself publicly as a slave in contemporary Mauritania, and the use of ḥarāṭīn as a euphemism hence is far from resulting from bīẓān practices alone.[32]

   In order to defy this problem, ḥarāṭīn and ʿabīd, when wishing to refer to themselves as one group, commonly use other terms than "ḥarāṭīn" which are considered to be less pejorative and also not to devaluate the meaning of ḥarāṭīn as a freeman's status. In the area of Achram-Diouk the term most frequently employed to this end was "sūdān". It is for this reason, and in order to be able to distinguish consistently between ʿabīd (slaves) and ḥarāṭīn that throughout this study the designation sūdān will be employed whenever both groups are considered as one. Sūdān, however, is not the only term used to avoid the pejorative connotation of ḥarāṭīn. There are also other words, denoting dark colour too, which are in use among sūdān in Nouakchott to refer to themselves as a distinct group: ḥaḍāra (derived from aḥḍar, dark green) and ǧal akḥal (literally black skin;[33] cf. Brhane 1997a: 59).

   As among the ḥarāṭīn, and among the ʿabīd too, a number of distinct groups are distinguished. Similarly to many other slave societies, a distinction is made between slaves closely associated with the masters as a consequence of a slave ownership lasting for generations on the one hand and slaves having no affective ties with their bīẓān overlords on the other hand. Two terms are used to refer to the former group of slaves: tilād and nānme (cf. Ould Cheikh 1993: 183). Of these two in the region of Achram-Diouk only nānme appeared to be in use. While among the bīẓān and among a few slaves who still maintain a close relationship with their masters, this term effectively bears affective connotations, the designation nānme has come to be used by a number of sūdān in quite a different way. Saying that other slaves are nānme (which is done more often with regard to women than men) is indeed a means to distinguish oneself from others supposed to be backward, and hence to stress one's own independence and autonomy from former masters.[34] A second differentiation occurs in the terminology for slaves as far as slave men or women are concerned. While the singular form for a slave man is ʿabd, the slave woman is called ḥādem[35] (cf. the story of M'Barke, p. 67-69; Ould Cheikh 1993: 183f.; Villasante-de Beauvais 1997: 615; see also note 2, chapter 3).

Bīẓān

   The notion of bīẓān has shifting meanings. As Raymond Taylor (1996: 3f., 47ff.) argues, bīẓān came to be used in the course of the 18th century by western Saharans in order to refer to themselves as distinct from the neighbouring black African ethnic groups, which by this time still appeared as

sūdān and hence conform to classical Arabic terminology.[36] However, even more than today the bīẓān at that time were a heterogeneous group. Many, at least in the Gebla region close to the river Senegal, were polyglot. For a considerable number of Gebla inhabitants the ḥassāniyya language was even not their native language, as this was still the Berber dialect of the western Sahara, the znāga language. One of today's two distinct notions of bīẓān, namely that of an ethnic group defined by its members sharing the ḥassāniyya language, underscores that ever since the 18th century a decisive transformation and homogenisation process has been taking place. Comparing past meanings with present ones provokes the query whether today's differential in the meaning of bīẓān, as either including sūdān because of their ḥassāniyya language or excluding them for not being integrated into bīẓān genealogies is a recent phenomenon or can be traced back to the origin of the notion bīẓān. While specific considerations of this issue are still lacking, it can be argued that the present dichotomy in the meaning of bīẓān does not contradict its early use as a means for expressing a distinct identity. Much like the Greek *polis*, bīẓān society was conceived by the freemen and these most naturally thought themselves to be the sole constitutive elements of society. Regarding slaves, pawns or other dependent and unfree elements as being incorporated into or associated with the freemen's society hence was not a matter to be considered. Nevertheless, this does not mean that when speaking of bīẓān, the freemen excluded the dependent strata altogether. While they were not constitutive elements of society, the dependent and unfree strata were still part of bīẓān society – with the only difference that they belonged to it much like other kinds of bīẓān patrimony. This alienated incorporation into bīẓān society became increasingly contested in the course of the 20th century. The members of the dependent and unfree strata began not only to claim their social integration, but struggled also to define their own bīẓān-ness and hence to compete with the bīẓān on symbolic grounds (cf. chapter eight).

Such a perception of bīẓān identity and status groups, or else bīẓān orders (cf. Bonte 1987a), as historical and dynamic entities is also illuminating for the issue of what makes up bīẓān social hierarchy. Classical descriptions of bīẓān society[37] differentiate three orders among the freemen. The ḥassān (warriors), the zwāya (clerics) and the znāga (tributaries). While all members of these groups shared the characteristic of having been born free, a social hierarchy did exist among the groups and also the members of the distinct orders. The ḥassān tribes (ḥassāniyya/Arabic: qabīla) were politically dominant, but accounted for only a small proportion of all bīẓān. Their counter-pole was constituted by the zwāya tribes. These were strong in numbers and also held control of most economic resources. Nevertheless many zwāya remained, despite tribal autonomy, in a dependent position towards the ḥassān to whom they had to pay tributes. The znāga were on the lower edge of the social hierarchy. They were most often closely associated with ḥassān overlords and sometimes zwāya spiritual protectors too. Znāga

tributes contributed essentially to the maintenance of the ḥassān as a group of warriors only marginally involved in productive activities, and also helped zwāya to accumulate a greater wealth.

This static representation of bīẓān society, however, coincides only marginally with the real picture and fails to reflect the dynamics by which tribes and members of the three orders continued to struggle for a relocation in the social space (cf. Ould Cheikh 1985a: 366).[38] The major rationale in this competition was the issue of leadership in bīẓān society. While military and thus political power was held by the ḥassān (who prefer the designation of ʿarab (Arab), for ḥassān bears some pejorative connotations),[39] the zwāya (often called ṭolba[40] in the eastern parts of Mauritania), by their management of the divine sphere, had a powerful means of claiming at least moral leadership. Further, by producing the vast majority of written accounts of bīẓān society, they were able to transport their perception of society and social order much more effectively than the ḥassān, who were, however, helped in this respect by the iggāwen (bards) singing the praise of their ḥassān protectors and benefactors. Despite these many practices of producing difference between ḥassān and zwāya, the nature of this divide was by far not as clear-cut as one might suppose and many descriptions of bīẓān society portray. Social mobility among the bīẓān orders occurred and indeed the "repenting" of ḥassān, and abandoning warfare and converting to an existence as zwāya (towba)[41] was almost institutionalised (cf. Bonte 1988). However not only individuals crossed the borders of the zwāya and ḥassān order but whole tribes too. The Kunta and the Ahel Sīdi Maḥmūd are only two examples of tribes or else tribal confederations difficult to classify as either ḥassān or zwāya.[42]

The characteristics outlined here make ḥassān and zwāya modes of life appear as complementary models of bīẓān virtues, the opposition to which was essential to the creation and maintenance of two distinct spheres of power in bīẓān society. While in general the ḥassān were the more powerful group,[43] the zwāya were by far not powerless. Their religious prestige allowed them to mediate conflicts, and in some cases zwāya with great spiritual authority managed to acquire an even greater influence on the supra-tribal level than leading ḥassān chiefs had (cf. Ould Cheikh 1991b; Stewart 1973). Finally the integration of both orders by some tribes further underscores the view that the distinction between zwāya and ḥassān was seen by many bīẓān less as representing a social hierarchy than as representing complementary patterns of bīẓān-ness.[44]

The case is different for the znāga, the tributary order among the bīẓān (also called laḥme).[45] On the one hand the designation znāga refers to a not very prestigious professional specialisation in livestock rearing, and on the other hand is used as a name for tribal groups or individuals that have been defeated in battle and forced into tributary relations with a more powerful tribe or personal overlord. The readiness to accept the latter unfavourable status, however, seems to have changed over time. Today designating people

as being of znāga status is even more of an offence than claiming someone is a slave. This, however, does not hinder persisting traditions telling of bīẓān tribes which once became reduced to znāga status, but later managed to regain their strength and defeat their enemies and overlords.[46] While these memories of inglorious periods of tribal history are only partially suppressed in public discourses (a fact that may be explained by the outcome of these traditions), znāga people are very keen to get rid off their status affiliation. The means to achieve this end, however, are no longer the shifting luck in warfare and concluding of alliances that once enabled tributary tribes to achieve social ascension. Today more subtle strategies are applied. The znāga, who are known for their light complexion, first of all exploit their physical appearance to underpin their bīẓān-ness. Direct inquiries about individual status among bīẓān nowadays hardly ever reveal znāga, but only ḥassān and zwāya. That the issue of znāga status nevertheless is still not banished completely from the bīẓān social topography is at least partially a result of the contestation of this social order by sūdān wishing to stress their closeness to the bīẓān by demonstrating their superiority to the znāga. Discussing the location of znāga status in a representation of social hierarchy encompassing not only the bīẓān but all groups of bīẓān society paves a way for the sūdān to enter into competition with a group which is – according to the predominant view – considered to be part of the bīẓān social universe. Claiming the znāga status to be worthless by stating that znāga are uprooted people who are no longer able to ascertain or defend publicly their genealogical ties towards their origins, is indeed a rhetoric by which sūdān place themselves above the znāga, and hence locate themselves among the bīẓān, i.e. the people of known origins (cf. chapter eight; Ruf 1998b).[47]

Professional specialisation is the distinctive criterion for a number of further groups in bīẓān society. The iggāwen are bards and musicians much like the griots in most of West Africa. This group evolved to become the praise singers of the ḥassān elites and were (and sometimes still are) rejected by zwāya adhering to a strict interpretation of Islam, which sees music accompanied by instruments as evil. Nevertheless listening to the music of the iggāwen today is a favourite pastime of most members of bīẓān society and competes well with imported music of western style.[48] The maʿalimīn, the blacksmiths of bīẓān society, constitute another distinct group. Despised for a number of reasons, such as the accusation of cowardice and their habit of living by selling the products of their work, the maʿalimīn were also feared. Their mastery of fire and iron made it seem likely that they maintained close relations with the world of the supernatural powers and spirits.

Two more groups have to be named for the sake of completeness in this overview of groups inhabiting the western Sahara: the nemādi and the imragen. The former are a group of hunters and gatherers, of whom a few still live in the interior of Mauritania. The nemādi, who used to hunt with the help of dogs, are not considered to be part of their society by the bīẓān, who disdain the nemādi lifestyle. The imragen are a people of fishermen living on

the Atlantic coast. They used to be subjected to tributary relations with the nomadic pastoralists of the interior, who also depreciate this group and its mode of living.

A Methodology of Rural Slave System Studies

Researching slavery is a complex task involving major difficulties: one serious issue for a study like the present one is the difficulty of obtaining empirical evidence pertaining to slavery. Slavery and the slave past of individuals are neither topics generating glorious accounts and traditions, nor likely to be among those experiences one would tell freely to strangers and researchers. Besides leading to a deliberate veiling of the past, the structures of slavery contribute to a distortion of memories as well. Slave experiences like enslavement are likely to become repressed and to slip out of memory once acculturation into the slave society becomes the nodal point of the enslaved. Likewise the incorporation of many slaves into the slave society at an early age meant that these children lost the memory of their origins and indeed knew nothing else but the life of a slave (cf. Miers/Roberts 1988a: 6).

  In looking for a strategy to enter into a dialogue about these sensitive issues of the past, and sometimes the present too, without introducing the topic of slavery directly, I came up with the idea of taking interviews about personal life histories as a starting point for field-research. By tape-recording the overwhelming majority of these,[49] and in general translating and transcribing them into German on the same day, great care was taken to document not only the interview but also observations and other relevant circumstances besides note-taking during the interviews. The emphasis on direct treatment of the interview data much enhanced an ongoing process of reflection which contributed significantly to uncovering new issues for research, adapting the research strategy and to revising the interview guideline. This approach soon proved to be both feasible and productive as regards coming to grips with bī-ẓān slavery. Asking about life and living conditions in the present and in the past enabled both the interviewees and me to speak about sensitive issues without – in most cases – making too explicit any personal involvement in master-slave relations that now seem offensive to many. Many of the questions arising in this context, such as personal status, were communicated as part of a subtext, or when a particularly intimate atmosphere had evolved, also directly. Taking individual life-histories and their localisation in a wider framework of circumstances such as nomadisation patterns, customs of nutrition and the like, were fruitful also in another way. This approach later on greatly eased the process of localising individual experiences in a wider context of social and economic life of bīẓān society as well as cross-checking distinct information.

  Crucial to all empirical research is the question of sampling. From the

beginning this study was meant to cover not only one community or village, but to focus on a number of villages and localities with distinct characteristics within the region of Achram-Diouk. Experiences from an earlier stay in the area significantly eased this undertaking. When I arrived to undertake this study in 1995 I already knew many settlements as well as a number of sūdān and bīẓān living in the area. The choice of interviewees was based on a number of diverse rationales. On the one hand there were distinct personalities playing a central role in social life who were interviewed for this reason. Within communities, snowball sampling, and later information from survey data, were also used as a means to find further people fitting into distinct social categories for interview. On the other hand, looking for those deprived of social power meant investigating on my own and wandering around the villages (and later, during the cultivation season, going from one field to another) to look for people displaying little evidence of being influential in society and hence easily overlooked by local informants. As the region under research covers an area of about eighty kilometres in length and fifty in width, looking up particular people (who quite often were temporarily absent) and embarking on follow-up interviews later on, meant having to be highly mobile, i.e. having access to a motorised vehicle. This I was lucky enough to have been lent by the local development project.

  The focus on interviews with individuals made it possible to seek points of view of dependents and other people and groups who have difficulties in making their voice heard in public. Consequently the majority of interviewees were sūdān, both slaves and ḥarāṭīn. Interviews with women make up about one fourth of the interviews (the total number of which is close to one hundred). Besides this perspective, the point of view of the masters had to be explored as well. Interviewees among bīẓān were chosen according to many criteria, in order to get a highly diversified sample. Members of both the ḥassān and zwāya elite had to be interviewed and special attention was paid to getting information from people central to the public life of the region, such as the local qāḍi, the local director of the school, as well as people active in local business, politics and administration. Second came the quest for bīẓān with close and ambivalent relations with both the sūdān and the bīẓān because of a split ancestry, i.e. a mother of sūdān origin and a father of bīẓān origin. Third, networks of dependent relationships were to be uncovered by interviewing former masters and their slaves in order to be able to contrast their visions of the past and of the master-slave relationship. While the two former goals could be achieved in a satisfying way, the last aim proved to be difficult. In many cases the residential dispersion of former masters and slaves, death and other factors made it impossible to get hold of the people concerned, while wherever these people still lived in close neighbourhood, information about these relationships remained effectively obscured. Nevertheless one case of specific people (a ḥarṭāni, his mother and the son of their former master) reflecting on just one shared experience could be unravelled and is presented in in the following chapter (cf. the narratives of Brahim and Zeyneb, p. 59-66).

Another aim was to conduct interviews with as little public attendance as possible in order to protect those talking about sensitive individual issues from the threat of gossip. Interviews were generally held at the residence of the interviewees, either in their homes or under their tents and during the cultivation season most often at their workplace in the fields. A few interviews with local notables were held at my own place at Debissa near Achram. While the goal of conducting interviews in an atmosphere of privacy could not be achieved by a long shot in all interviews, sensitive issues could be dealt with in the great majority. On many occasions it even seemed as if slavery, as a kind of a vanishing problem, raised fewer emotions, and hence produced less reluctance to cooperate in interviews than did topics more closely related to issues of the present, such as politics.

The individual life accounts, despite these many advantages, also proved to have characteristics making them difficult to exploit systematically. Their highly individual character gave them a kind of a monolithic nature, and pulling out sections and single phrases seemed to do a good deal injustice to this material. Indeed the topics treated in the interviews are closely interrelated, and the internal dynamic of the interviews often overruled the researcher's wish to gather data systematically or confirm evidence more precisely. Unlike the impression after a period of retrospective reflection and detailed analysis that had begun once back home (described in the following chapter, p. 50-56), the interview data during the field research seemed to be largely a mess. There were endless contradictions both within the interviews and among different interviewees asked about the same topics. And whenever I tried to remedy this situation after periods of frustration by a stronger emphasis on systematic inquiry, this incited even greater discomfort. Instead of becoming more precise and accurate, the data on distinct issues seemed to become ever more confused and contradictory rather than to condense into evidence. On such occasions it was most often the interviewees who put an end to the dilemma. Pretending a certain kind of ignorance towards endless circular questions focusing on details which seemed completely insignificant to them, the interviewees shifted the topic and hence made clear to the interviewer that time was passing and that it was limited too.

Comfort to the aching researcher's soul came from almost daily afternoon meetings with Khalifa Ould Kebab, my research assistant during all of the stay at Achram, who also did all translations from ḥassāniyya into French for me. Sipping the traditional three glasses of sweetened mint tea, which Khalifa Ould Kebab knew how to prepare in a masterly way and used to flavour with lots of fresh mint he grew for local sale, bīẓān society became less an object of confusing research but a mode of life to enjoy. It was the many discussions on these afternoons that offered me essential insights which both helped to readjust current research strategies and tactics as well as later helped greatly to develop the present analysis. Discussing with Khalifa Ould Kebab interviews and questions that had come to my mind during interview transcription was an experience crucial for increasing my insights into the

meaning of the narratives. On many occasions what first had seemed to me a contradiction thus became related by a distinct logic. These discussions and the reflective process they underwent also were an important complement to the strong reliance on translation during interviews. The ḥassāniyya dialect, despite the efforts of Khalifa Ould Kebab and many others to make me learn it,[50] still remains strange enough for me to be far from able to conduct interviews of my own. However, my knowledge of standard Arabic enabled me to engage in developing my own list of vocabulary of ḥassāniyya key terms and to develop transcriptions not only in Latin characters but in Arab ones. Together with the discussions I had on numbers of key terms with bīẓān and sūdān, this enabled me later to compare the ḥassāniyya expressions with the meanings of the corresponding roots in standard Arabic.

A smaller number of interviews with local intellectuals were held in French, but also in presence of Khalifa Ould Kebab. The subsequent discussion and reflection process, like that usually following the interviews held in ḥassāniyya, proved to be most fruitful in these circumstances too. However the number of translations the interviews later underwent in transcription was reduced considerably.

Besides the interviews focusing on life history, participant observation was an important source of insights into relations of hierarchy and dependency. Indeed body talk often revealed much of what discourses tried to deny in this domain (cf. Henley 1988). Systematic field research was undertaken especial-ly to uncover current modes of land tenure. The action of the local develop-ment project, of the GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammen-arbeit) and the SO.NA.DE.R (Société Nationale pour le Développement Rural) were also a topic of specific research among both project employees and the local population. As external support is a crucial issue for the modes of life in the Mauritanian countryside the action of the most important local Mauritanian NGO, the UCT (Union des Coopératives du Tagant), was discussed with both people of the region and a leading employee of this NGO. Finally, in order to get a grip of the demographic significance of slavery in the region of Achram-Diouk, a survey aiming to unravel the status of the leading members in all households of eleven villages and neighbour-hoods was undertaken. As this was certainly the most sensitive issue of research, data were not obtained by direct inquiry on the ground, but through a number of informants coming from the villages and neighbour-hoods (cf. chapter four, p. 129-133).

Research in the field was complemented by archival studies. In Moudjéria I was fortunate enough to have access to both the land register and the archives (henceforth: AM). The latter consisted of an old cupboard where, stowed away behind an old, apparently once confiscated gun, a number of colonial records about the region especially in the 1930s and 1940s had survived the vagaries of time. Scattered information on tribes, tribal chiefs and conflicts and finally the mental state of many administrators complemented this set of data, giving an initiation into local history according to the colonisers' point

of view. A second attempt to get hold of documents in local archives, however, failed. In Tidjikja, whence I had undertaken a trip for this reason, I was told that rains had damaged the archives (AT) which therefore were forbidden to be used until the damage had been repaired. As this reconstruction was likely to exceed not only the few days I had for my stay at Tidjikja, but also the duration of my research grant, I cancelled the undertaking. A subsequent trip to several remote locations having plaid a major role in Tagant history, however, did much to compensate for this disappointing experience. In the meantime, I learnt that the Mauritanian former regional archives (at least in theory) had all been moved to the national archives (ANM) in Nouakchott. Therefore, it is unclear whether any major documents remain in locations like Tidjikja. In the national archives, after waiting several weeks for permission for access I was lucky again. While numerous authors have mentioned that orientation in these archives is impossible, I cannot confirm these statements on the whole. Indeed the archives do seem to have been emptied of a number of documents containing sensitive information on certain personalities and tribes, or perhaps they were lost during transfer, but nevertheless there is an interesting stock of documents to be found. In my attempt to explore some of these, I was effectively helped by one old employee who seems to know most of the documents all too well, but is also probably the only person with this knowledge. While I had to choose the documents I wanted to consult from a rather ill-organised list (originally established by the French colonial administration, not Mauritanians) it was his few but pointed comments that helped me enormously to filter a few documents of great value out of heaps of insignificant material. Unfortunately, time constraints and later a computer breakdown, destroying a number of notes I had taken, did much to limit these researches. This gap was later filled to a large extent by Roger Botte, who, when we met by chance in Paris, generously offered me access to his copies of archival documents microfilmed in the late 1970s.

Finally the independent press of Mauritania, which despite the threat of censorship in many cases produces journalism of a high professional standard, was a source from which to follow ongoing discussions about national politics and naturally the issue of slavery in Mauritania.