Chapter 9
Where Do They Go To?

The end of slavery in Mauritania – as this analysis shows – has not yet been accomplished, and the master-slave relations of dependency have proved to be of a longevity which is intriguing in itself. However, those patterns and practices of slavery that still persist do not account for the continuation of an archaic social order in Mauritania. Any such assertion misses the point about social change in this country, and – perhaps even more important – shows a lack of respect for those it professes to speak for, namely former slaves and slaves. These are not just passive victims of their brutal masters, but take an active part in shaping the master-slave relations. In focusing on these relations, this book has, it is hoped, succeeded in elucidating major aspects of the many more or less subtle differentiations characterising the slave condition and allowing to discriminate against both slaves and freed slaves.

  In this respect it could be shown that relations of domination were not uniform, but differed in many respects. Gender and patterns of work appeared to be among the most significant variables in this respect. To own slave women was until recently – and in some cases continues to be – more important to bīẓān masters and mistresses than to possess slave men. Work far from the tent of the masters, which most often was men's work, allowed for greater liberties than work close to the tent, which was considered to be the women's domain. While slave men were able to acquire skills in their respective occupations which gave them a distinct value as labourers, slave women performed their tasks under the direct observation and guidance of the mistresses. Historic evolution too accounts for changes in the nature of bīẓān slavery. Although historical accounts of the situation of slaves in former centuries are few, it can be assumed that slavery had been well established in the pastoral nomadic western Sahara for centuries. Within this household slavery, slaves to a great extent performed almost the same tasks, and did a great deal of the work that until recently marked life in rural Mauritania. They worked as household maids, herders, and cultivators. Nevertheless bīẓān slavery changed its shape throughout the centuries. As extrapolations on the development of the different slave trades both within and beyond of sub-Saharan Africa suggest, the number of slaves in bīẓān society rose considerably in the course of the 19th century. This evolution allowed the bīẓān to deepen and extend complementary patterns of production within their

society, namely pastoralism and agriculture, which were linked by master-slave relations.

Slaves and ḥarāṭīn did experience major social deprivation, among which the exclusion from parentage, and often from major social practices like marriages, were the hardest to bear. Slaves were very well conscious of this situation and they offered resistance. Taking resistance as an analytical category, however, is an ambivalent issue. Any such project is at risk of over-interpreting the actions of the subordinated, or of narrowing the focus of what is understood as resistance in such a way that the often subtle expressions of slaves and ḥarāṭīn would hardly fall into this category (cf. Rubin 1995).[1] Slave resistance as such therefore is not the issue of this discussion. Rather it has tried to unravel how the different constituents of bīẓān society placed themselves in different configurations of hierarchy and dependency. For the slaves and ḥarāṭīn, the issue of these different configurations was symbolised by their struggle for a place in bīẓān society. Both discourses and practices producing social spaces and attributing them to different social strata have been analysed. This undertaking involved a number of different levels, such as individual biographic narratives, the question of land tenure, and discourses on sūdān identity with and difference from bīẓān society. Based on interpretations of the theory of hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci ([1929-35] 1971), it could be revealed that there are no homogeneous interpretations of their world by the subservient strata in bīẓān society. The vast majority of their attitudes continue to express both their wish for integration into bīẓān society and their knowledge (and to some extent their wish too) to be different from the bīẓān.

By this characterisation of what sūdān identify with, the present analysis contrasts with the conclusions drawn with regard to processes of ḥarāṭīn identity formation in Nouakchott by Meskerem Brhane (1997a,b). According to the latter, ḥarāṭīn develop a number of different attitudes of what it means to be ḥarāṭīn. The range of these identities ranges from identifying being ḥarāṭīn with being bīẓān up to defining both groups as antagonistic. In the perspective developed in the preceding chapter, these ḥarāṭīn identifications can be understood as further differentiating, and even accentuating the logic which produces jointly both difference and identity among bīẓān and sūdān. Much of this issue concerns how to determine bīẓān-ness and ḥarāṭīn-ness. In the present work a great emphasis has been laid on the point that sūdān struggle to *become like the bīẓān, but not to become bīẓān*. This argument was underscored by the sūdān's knowledge of their black African origins, and their knowledge of the implication this has for possible claims of a different origin being accepted by other sūdān and bīẓān. Certainly the strongest argument raised by Meskerem Brhane (1997a: 101ff.) is the existence of mythical narratives which are shared by bīẓān and sūdān and tell of a non-slave origin of either all ḥarāṭīn or of a distinct group of ḥarāṭīn. Claiming that there are ḥarāṭīn without a slave past, however, is a topic encountered also in the region of Achram-Diouk (the case of the ḥarāṭīn of

the Ahel Swayd Aḥmed). Beyond the deconstruction of this supposedly better status with regard to major domains like e.g. land tenure (cf. p. 236-241), all claims for a distinct ḥarāṭīn status are simply a variation on how sūdān struggle for better status ascription within the complementary differential bīẓān-sūdān. As to their nature, the discourses of a free ancestor differ only slightly from those portrayed in the preceding chapter.[2] These blamed slavery for having no origin, and underlined the illegitimate nature of this institution, which was supposed to result from the enslavement of free kwār (i.e. members of black African ethnic groups).[3] But while sūdān claiming a kwār ancestry face few problems in getting their position to be recognised as legitimate, those ḥarāṭīn who individually want to trace an ancestry among the unrightfully enslaved bīẓān will remain subject to suspicion from either sūdān or bīẓān. To effectively change sides, and thus live a new identity is a matter of acquiring consent on this issue not only among the bīẓān but among the sūdān too.[4] The former indeed in some cases were willing to integrate sūdān, i.e. to make bīẓān out of them. In such cases they were also ready to provide the necessary ideological background (like e.g. an origin which could be traced to a znāga woman), but on occasion they could also withdraw this support.[5] The sūdān, however, were unlikely to forget as quickly as that about the past of these suddenly "whitened blacks", and they perhaps are even less so today,[6] when sūdān discourses are gaining a greater public than they had done in former times.[7] The sticky nature of a slave past is even felt by people who emerged from the sūdān, and whose career enabled them to be accepted as equals by bīẓān on probably the ultimate level, namely by marrying a bīẓān women. Lastly, the most limiting factor to becoming bīẓān may not even result from social control by either bīẓān or sūdān, but is likely to arise from the internalisation of a deep concern about this issue which many of those sūdān who have effectively managed to rise to the highest ranks of society seem unable to overcome (cf. McDougall 1988: 384; Meskerem Brhane, personal communication).

When insisting so penetratingly on the longevity and indelibility of a real or assumed slave past, one is at great risk of essentialising social categories, and attributing to them a primordial and immutable nature. Indeed the present argumentation may be perceived as one stating in essence that one who has once been a slave will always be recognised as such. This is neither the case, nor the argument developed here. Rather the point is that the nature of one's origins continues to be a decisive element, marking sameness and difference, inclusion and exclusion in the discourses on identity in bīẓān society. Processes of identification, which here are understood as a set of practices, rely on this cultural material of the past to produce those differences that shape the boundaries constituting the imagined "identity". Identity formation as a differentiation between "us" and "them" is thus not an autonomous process, but results from interaction not only within the symbolic borders, but across these (cf. Hall 1996; Schlee 1994b). Taking up Norbert Elias' (1990) notion of social configurations, changing patterns of identification

take place in a social context where the shift of one position affects the relations of all others. Changing social identity means challenging given configurations of social power. Thus shifting from a ḥarāṭīn identity to a bīẓān one involves both the ḥarāṭīn we-group and the bīẓān we-group, and demands that both achieve consent on the new configuration. Shifting among identities, which like "bīẓān" and "ḥarāṭīn" are representations of a hierarchical order, means engaging in the mutual redefinition of these categories. For the bīẓān, the very act of accepting the inclusion of – this here is taken for granted – people known before as ḥarāṭīn or ʿabīd means redrawing exactly that boundary which defines bīẓān first of all as non-ḥarāṭīn and non-ʿabīd. Maintaining the fiction of this boundary being impermeable thus is constitutive of both bīẓān and ḥarāṭīn identities.

   Processes of identity formation by status groups within a sharply stratified society, where until recently the range of hierarchy not only differentiated members of the society, but extended to discrimination against many of its constituting elements as non-social beings, comprise both typical elements of identification processes and distinct features. In the perspective of the current analysis, the issue of identification among sūdān, i.e. ḥarāṭīn and ʿabīd, has emerged less as one of shifting between either a bīẓān or a ḥarāṭīn identity, like those switches observed with regard to ethnic identities (cf. Schlee 1989), but as engaged in redefining these essentially social categories. Processes of identification for sūdān have a major goal; they aim at their constitution as social beings and at economic promotion. Therefore members of the subordinate strata have developed two major strategies. Either they stress the *difference in identity* of the ḥarāṭīn vis-à-vis the bīẓān, meaning that though different in origin, the ḥarāṭīn as a result of acculturation have become like the bīẓān and thus have to share equal rights, or they express *identity in difference*, which means that as a distinct ethnic or better we-group, the ḥarāṭīn are equal members of Mauritanian society, and in this respect have to be granted rights of participation by the dominating bīẓān. Both concepts in effect are like two sides of the same coin. Both serve as legitimation for claiming more or less radically the participation in the power of a distinct group, called the ḥarāṭīn, which effectively comprises a variety of subordinated groups (subsumed under the designation sūdān throughout this book). Though the first discourse puts great emphasis on describing how the ḥarāṭīn are like the bīẓān, and effectively leads some of its proponents to describe themselves first of all as bīẓān, it does not question the distinction between bīẓān and ḥarāṭīn (or else sūdān). Rather it acknowledges it as the basis for an integration of ḥarāṭīn into bīẓān society, which grants them rights to participation and economic resources. This political project, like the second one, adds a new facet to the meaning of bīẓān identity. According to the first concept of difference in identity, being bīẓān comes to mean two different things. Either only those who have bīẓān ancestors appear as bīẓān, or all people sharing the ḥassāniyya language and bīẓān cultural practices. While the first definition proposes a closed mode of membership, where belonging

to the bīẓān can hardly be extended beyond those people linked by blood, the latter perspective embraces an open mode. A modern, cultural definition of bīẓān as an ethnic group fits into this latter scheme in so far as it leaves room for the assimilation of strangers.[8] The sūdān can achieve advantages from this antagonism whenever they juxtapose both perspectives, and become able to switch between their social inclusion and exclusion. A different strategy is pursued by the concept of identity in difference. Within this framework genealogical affiliation is acknowledged to be the single hallmark of being bīẓān, and the sūdān appear as a distinct group, which can no longer be incorporated by the bīẓān.[9] The objective in both models, however, remains the same. Activists of both discursive strains seek participation and benefits within the bīẓān dominated Mauritanian society on the basis of what then becomes positive discrimination with regard to "ḥarāṭīn" (for a discussion of such patterns of identification refer to Schlee 1996).

This general orientation of the sūdān towards an integration into bīẓān society is to a large extent the result of the generations of acculturation both ḥarāṭīn and ʿabīd living today in Mauritania have as their historical and cultural background. Recently this trend – manifest already in the first years of independent Mauritania – became heavily intensified. Under the rule of Mauritania's first president, Mokhtar Ould Daddah, power in the state had been distributed between the bīẓān elite and the elites of the different black African ethnic groups, the Halpulaar'en, Soninké and Wolof, according to a more or less fixed quota.[10] The military regimes, and later on president Maouya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya, changed this system. The access some ḥarāṭīn were granted to high positions in the government were achieved to the disadvantage of the representation in power of the black African ethnic groups (cf. Brhane 1997a: 314; Ould Cheikh 1994a: 34).

The most decisive turn towards an "ethnic" bipolarity in Mauritania, and the discrimination against the black African ethnic groups occurred in 1989, when about 200 members of black African ethnic groups were killed in the course of bloody riots on "Black Tuesday". These riots had been triggered off by an incident in the Senegal river valley among Mauritanian and Senegalese members of black African ethnic groups. The conflict escalated quickly. A number of bīẓān shops in some Senegalese towns were looted and a few days later bloody riots, targeting all supposed "Senegalese", and hence black Africans, started in the Mauritanian towns and in the Senegal river valley.[11] In Senegal it was in turn the bīẓān minority which became increasingly the target of violence articulated in ethnic terms. In an international airlift 100,000 so-called Senegalese living in Mauritania and 100,000 bīẓān living in Senegal were repatriated. In addition in the Senegal river valley another estimated 100,000 Mauritanian black Africans were forced to leave the country. The governments of both countries, rather than seeking mediation, joined in the conflict and in early January 1990 were close to declaring war. International mediation under the aegis of the secretary general of the United Nations (UN), Boutros Boutros-Ghali, and the president of the Organisation

of African Unity (OAU), Hosni Mubarak, finally succeeded in preventing a further escalation of the conflict and re-establishing negotiations. A decisive step towards regular relations between both countries was taken on 18 July 1991, with the decision to resume diplomatic relations between both countries and to reopen the borders (cf. Magistro 1993: 203ff.; Clausen 1994b: 249ff.).[12] As in riots before, e.g. in 1966 on the occasion of demonstrations sparked off by black African pupils, "ḥarāṭīn" built up street gangs chasing, beating and killing black Africans (cf. De Chassey 1984: 392ff.; Baduel 1989: 26f.).[13]

How far the balance of power has shifted further to the detriment of the different black African groups, and in favour of the bīẓān ensemble, now probably composed more tightly than ever of all strata of this society, may be understood from the growing number of members of the low strata of the black African ethnic groups who now claim descent from ḥarāṭīn who had once been enslaved by black Africans (cf. Brhane 1997a: 321). This trend is also one towards the Arabisation of Mauritanian society, which had its onset already shortly after independence, when a shift to Arabic was promoted to the detriment of French (and the languages of the black African ethnic groups) in the educational system. A number of compromises on the issue turned out to have been concluded mainly to appease the black African communities, rather than grant them a stronger recognition of their languages. Since 1992 the Arabisation of major branches of the education system[14] and of parts of the administration increased further. As not only French-educated, but also black Africans trained in Arabic countries are discriminated against, tensions between the two ethnic groups continue to be fuelled (cf. Taine-Cheikh 1994: 147f.; Sall 1999 : 92f.). At present this trend towards a confrontation in ethnic terms seems to have passed its climax. In April 1999 a reform, the outcome of which will have to be watched carefully, was launched, reinstalling French as Mauritania's standard language for the instruction of mathematics and natural sciences.[15]

In the light of these events it is no wonder that in mid 1995 a number of Fulbe Aynaabe[16] founded an association called "Association Nationale de l'Amitié et du Retour aux Origines" (ANARO), supposed to propagate the truth about Fulbe origins, meant to be their supposed Arab origin (the Fulbe Aynaabe are part of the Halpulaar'en, a designation for all speakers of the Pulaar language). In late 1995 the ANARO made more explicit their point of view by publishing a document dismissing all of the many visions of Fulbe origins contradicting their claim for an Arab origin of the Fulbe. While the undertaking is still highly controversial within the Mauritanian Halpulaar'en community,[17] this recent step forward by one (minor) faction deeply involved in both Arab and Islamic culture clearly indicates that disintegration is becoming a concern for this largest black African ethnic group in Mauritania. Like numbers of leaders of the political opposition, who in this period opted to change sides and joined the party in power (PRDS)[18], the members of the Fulbe Aynaabe in question opted for rallying, in ethnic terms, round

the bīẓān controlling the power in place (cf. Le Calame, n° 120, 26.12.1995: 5; and n° 123, 13.1.1996: 3; Sall 1999).

While the general direction of where Mauritania is heading to is thus outlined, the question of how the sūdān, i.e. the ḥarāṭīn and ˁabīd, will take part in this process remains open. Here parallels can be seen with the case of the Sudan, where slavery was alive and well up to this century too. There the vigorous Sudanese nationalism provided a basis on which slave emancipation and integration into society developed faster than in Mauritania. Nevertheless, descendants of slaves long remained a stigmatised group, marked by distinct cultural and religious practices. The former slaves practices of a self-demarcation from the dominant and enslaving Arabs that developed as a response to this continued social discrimination went into a significant decline, and their meanings became partially reinterpreted when the country's north-south conflict was intensified. The growing emphasis laid on the difference between the Arab-Islamic north and the Christian-Animist black African south paved the way for an homogenisation of the northerners in terms of shared cultural values, and hence the integration and assimilation of the slave descendants (cf. Makris 1996; Sikainga 1996).[19]

In the rural areas of Mauritania, there actually seems to be no real impediment to the resurgence of tribes as territorial and political entities. However, as has been demonstrated, this process is far from reproducing the past. Though still alive, the relations of power between bīẓān and sūdān are in a process of transformation. While difference continues to be marked in several domains, this appears also to provide the basis for a stronger integration of the sūdān into bīẓān society, and the attribution of more autonomy to the former subservient strata. Thus, as could be witnessed at Achram, even those sūdān who are among the most fervent propagators of the ḥarāṭīn cause, are able to engage in violent conflicts, opposing "their" tribe to another one.[20] Another indicator for the continuation of this kind of due integration into bīẓān society as clients comes from the fact that many sūdān who have not yet received an official manumission by their masters still continue to pay for the formal act of their liberation. Prices vary, and in quite a few cases may have a more or less symbolic value, but those cases where sūdān have to pay considerable sums are still frequent. As recently as 1993 three brothers agreed to build a house for their master, corresponding to a value of about 100,000 UM (approximately US$750 at that time), and in turn received contracted manumission in the presence of a qāḍi and several witnesses. A sūdān woman received manumission in compensation for working for one year without payment as a housemaid, labour that was worth a sum of 24-36,000 UM, for her freedom alone.[21]

Another factor which will have a decisive influence on the shape of the future bīẓān and Mauritanian society, and especially for the future of collective action by the sūdān, is the evolution of Islam.[22] Like most other predominantly Muslim societies, Mauritania is witnessing a strengthening of Islamist groups and discourses at present. This issue was merely glanced at in

the present analysis, for this would have meant embarking on a subject worth its own extensive evaluation (on this topic refer to Stone 1994, forthcoming; Boubrik 1998, 1999). Islam in Mauritania, which has long been shaped by the traditions of zwāya scholarship, is currently undergoing major changes, among them a secularisation of religious knowledge and learning. Although there are numbers of dispossessed bīẓān who profit from this evolution, the turn towards a less hierarchical version of Islam above all works in favour of the sūdān. Islamist interpretations, denouncing the unfitting behaviour of the powerful, and proclaiming salvation to come from the individual's efforts to comply with practices they believe to be demanded of a good Muslim, are undoubtedly opening up one of the most important arenas for the development of a distinct identity, uniting the disadvantaged (both sūdān and bīẓān) against the Mauritanian establishment. However, until now, and especially in the rural context, the grip of the traditional religious elite remains tight.

In summer 1995 an Islamist activist was transferred to work at the development project at Debissa near Achram. Soon after having arrived there, religious life in the very small village was thrown into turmoil. A mosque was installed in a small building, and – and this is still revolutionary in rural Mauritania – a muezzin, amplifying his voice with a megaphone, started calling the believers to prayer on a regular basis. Among sūdān, and here above all among those already concerned with behaving as a good Muslim, the new mosque became a point of great attraction, and hours were spent there in the evening after the prayer, taking part in long discussions.[23] A short time later, a number of activists arrived from Nouakchott, and started to disseminate their view of Islam on a greater scale in different villages. However, after some weeks, the megaphone remained mute for a while, only to reappear on an irregular basis, and then used by a group of young men. Among the sūdān, the initial euphoria had subsided considerably in the meantime. Asked why they no longer attended the mosque they answered that it was no longer a place for serious men to go to, because now it had become occupied by children "kidding around". In fact, much more had changed. The propagators of the Islamist cause, driven in from Nouakchott, had put the visitors to the mosque under a lot of pressure to join the long recitations of propaganda they added to the evening prayer. Work at home, like the milking of animals, thus had been postponed, probably causing annoyance among the women, who saw their men abstaining from their duties. A little later the cultivation season began, and almost all sūdān moved out of the village to live under the tent close to their fields. While going to the mosque to pray had meant no great effort as long as it demanded only a few hundred metres' walk, it became a considerable time-constraint on cultivation and pastoral activities when for this end more than just a couple of kilometres had to be crossed by foot. However, this practical problem, of which the Islamist activist was aware, was but one element which eased the process of raising reservations towards this new practice of Islam. Soon after the appearance of the Islamist activists on the local scene, several important

marabouts from the Tagant made a visit to Achram, and obviously called the deviants to order.[24]

These last remarks reveal but two aspects which set the question of the emancipation of former slaves in a wider context, allowing comparative perspectives to develop. Indeed in recent times interest has grown not only in the Mauritanian ḥarāṭīn and ʿabīd (cf. Villasante-de Beauvais/Brhane/Ruf forthcoming; Bonte 1998b), but also in other slave and former slave groups within the societies of the Sahelian band and in Africa. At present, besides the work of Makris (1996) and Sikainga (1996) on the emancipation of slaves and former slaves in Sudan, a number of studies on different Tuareg communities (cf. Waibel 1998), on former slaves of the Fulbe in northern Benin (cf. Hardung 1998 and forthcoming) and on the current situation of slaves and former slaves of the Tuareg, the bīẓān and the Fulbe (cf. Botte 1999) focus on this issue. A broad scope of case studies, reconsidering the issue of slavery not only in the context of African societies is provided by Botte (2000). New studies focusing on the impact of colonial rule on systems of slavery (Klein 1998) have also been developed in the field of the history of slavery in Africa and provide a number of case studies from West, North and East Africa (cf. Klein/Miers 1999). This growing scholarly attention, of which the present book is a part, is to be welcomed, as the issue of persisting relations of hierarchy and dependency is an important factor shaping the present and future of many African societies.