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Dams and Ramparts, Cattle and Goats

Symbolic Capital and the Central Mauretanian Slaves and Häratin Struggle for Emancipation and Autonomy

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Symbolic Capital and the Central Mauritanian Slaves and Ḥarāṭīn Struggle for Emancipation and Autonomy[1]

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The case studies I present here, focus on the northern Aftout and the bordering, southern Tagant region of central Mauritania, where I have done my fieldwork in 1995/96. My main interest is to find out how the *configurations* of hierarchy and dependence in this rural area have changed over the past decades between slaves and freed slaves (called ‘abīd and ḥarāṭīn in the ḥassāniyya dialect), both of which I will refer to under the collective term of ‘sudān’ (Blacks) on the one side, and the freeborn, former slave masters, called ‘bīẓān’ (Whites).[2]

The heavy drought in 1969, together with a subsequent increase in aridity, and a rapid expansion of the country’s modern iron ore mining sector in the late 60ies and early 70ies, are major factors inducing both an economic and social upheaval within the formerly predominantly pastoral nomadic bīẓān society. This development has contributed to pave the way for the many slaves’ and freed slaves’ aspirations to increase their autonomy. Impoverished masters lost the means to sustain their slaves, while these easily managed to enter the expanding market for unskilled wage-labour force. The major consequence of this process is the sedentarization and urbanization, manifested in the exploding growth of the country’s capital, Nouakchott.

My contribution will turn away from this most spectacular aspect of evolution (the consequences of which on the formation of a ḥarāṭīn identity are thoroughly analyzed in the study of Meskerem Brhane, 1997), and I will focus instead on social change, and more

[1] This is a revised version of a paper held at the 40th annual Meeting of the African Studies Association held in Columbus, Ohio, November 13-16, 1997. I wish to thank E. Ann McDougall, Meskerem Brhane, Raymond Taylor, Kaye Moseley and the participants of our joint panel ‘Social Change and Hierarchy at the Desert’s Edge’ for their comments on the paper and fruitful discussion. I thank the Graduate School ‘Market, State, Ethnicity’ at the Sociology of Development Research Centre of the Department of Sociology, University of Bielefeld for providing a travel grant. I am grateful to Mrs. Jäger for revising this paper, and the many useful suggestions for improving my English she made.

[2] This means to employ the term bīẓān in its narrow sense. The formation of this ethnonym started in the 18th century with freeborn inhabitants of the Western Sahara, speaking various languages designating themselves as ‘bīẓān’ (cf. Taylor 1996: 3f.). While preserving this initial meaning, portraying free, i.e. noble descent, the term ever since developed to apply to all speakers of ḥassāniyya (the local Arabic dialect), hence bīẓān and sudān altogether (cf. Taine-Cheikh 1989). The more recent, second meaning can be interpreted as adaptation to a modern, ethnically rather than statuary definition of society and citizenship.

specific, on the *changing patterns of interrelation between slaves, freed slaves and by the majority former slave masters in the rural hinterland.*

I have chosen the term *configurations*, elaborated by Norbert Elias (1988; 1990), to frame my analysis of hierarchy and dependence for the following reasons: Social change in rural society is bound to face-to-face communication. Within the tribe (qabīla) and fraction (vaḫd), and to a considerable extent beyond these boundaries, most people know each other, or at least know somebody who knows. Status and origin of present day, as well as of recent generations in this context are difficult to manipulate. But, whatever the constraining power of this collective knowledge is, social change takes place, and status, or better relations of dependency constantly shift and get rearranged. A great number of the same people engage in this play to mutually reconfigure their social relations. The reallocation of the symbolic capital characterizing one's social relations, either as dependent, or as master, is focused on two distinct spheres: First an immediate level, concerning those directly involved in dependent relations, i.e. the master and his slave. And second the public, having to acknowledge the results of the individual bargaining on power.

These distinct spheres of social interaction involved in the change and redefinition of the ties of dependency created by slavery, led me to characterise it by the term 'configuration'. Master and slave depend on each other to pursue their social role. A slave leaving his master publicly deprives the latter of his mastery, but in the same moment he looses his strongest tie linking himself to the universe of the master's society, and to its resources.

Metaphorically, social hierarchy and dependence can be compared to the interrelations dancers engage in. Their motions and shifting positions throughout the dance are interdependent with the other individual dancers' motions, as well as with the structure of the dance. Second, these configurations correspond to the actors' relocation in space. Social change among former masters and slaves in the Tagant and Aftout region manifests itself on such distinct levels as personal interrelations, public audience, and regional territoriality.

In former times possession of livestock was among the bīẓān almost exclusively in the hands of the masters. Slaves, if ever, only had right to a few belongings, but not legal rights of possession. Whenever a slave died, it was his master to inherit, not his natural relatives. Within this precarious situation some slaves managed to acquire a number of

small ruminants. They either took profit from compensation for special services given in livestock by their masters, or acquired the sheep and goats themselves This could be the case if they managed to engage in some paid work for a third party, e.g. in herding other bīẓān herds, or if they could sell some millet. Cattle, which were much more expensive, and a symbol of well-being and status, only rarely were in the hands of slaves. Youba, a man of slave origin of the ḥassān (warrior) tribe of the Awlad ‘Aly Ntunva, told me how his father’s family got two cows during the big drought in 1969. A bīẓān herder had come to the well where Youba’s father watered the cattle of his wealthy master. There a cow of the stranger’s herd calved. As the cow and its calf were to weak to pursue the southward emergency migration of their herd, the bīẓān owner gave them before leaving as a gift to Youba’s father, the slave who helped him water his animals. When the master got aware of his slave having received a cow by a stranger, he immediately gave him a second one out of his own herd.

The case throws a light on how (accidental) circumstances affect the configuration of the triad master, slave, and public. Without the drought affecting his herd, the strange cattle-owner would not have donated his cow to a strange slave. The master, once his slave was given such a prestigious good had to react. Publicly he had to demonstrate, himself being no less generous than a stranger passing by. Towards his slave he had to manifest his will to treat him well, and hence maintain the slave’s devotion in a difficult situation.[3] Youba’s father, who already was an important herder hardly to replace, by starting to have not only sheep and goats but cattle too, managed to become another bit more alike his master.

Slave belongings in animals are yet revealing of master slave relations in a further dimension. From the 1950ies onwards, the erosion of slavery in Mauritania slightly began to take a new pace. An increasing number of slaves (most of them men, but some women, too) got opportunities to engage in paid work. Many of them left for the Senegalese urban centres, and came back with money to invest in animals. Those who worked at home, e.g. as paid herders for other people than for their masters were compensated in animals.

While the well-being and autonomy of these slaves increased, they still kept bound to their slave estate. Living in conditions reminding of patron-client ties, did not entangle the master-slave relation. The slave estate brought about the fundamental insecurity, that the

[3] Clare Oxby (1978: 155f.) in her study of slavery in a Tuareg community already focused on the impact generosity has on the shape of master-slave relations. According to the noble Tuareg’s ideology only noble men are generous enough to maintain slaves’ attachment to them. Former slaves, converted into free men and slave holders are denounced unable to attain this moral stance, and hence fail to be successful slave holders.

slave's use-rights in his belongings (e.g. animals), was limited by his lifetime.[4] After the slave's death, his virtual possessions returned to the master. These constraints shaped specific responses by the slave families struggling to enlarge their economic basis, and thus to strengthen the fundaments of their autonomy. The members of the slave family used to work for their own profit, and this from early childhood. Fearing the master being able to remove slave belongings arbitrarily, slaves of one and the same family developed means to resist. They marked their animals with distinct brands, and took care not to mix up animals individually acquired, i.e. to distinguish the father's animals from those of his sons'. Whenever a slave died in this constellation, his master could come and requisite only his animals, whereas the rest of the individual 'family' possession was safe.

This management of property within a family being much distinct from that of the ruling bīẓān, contributed to a double edged strategy. On the one hand, it served to maintain the maximum of the slave's belongings with respect to the actual situation. On the other hand, it aimed towards the future, where the slaves' status was probable to improve, and belongings might be converted into full legal possession. Encouraging the children to work for their proper benefit rather than the parents' and the family, meant both to speculate on, and to prepare for a future which the next generation may live beyond the slave estate.[5]

By developing this practice slaves distinguished themselves from their masters. Although the bīẓān, too, recognize and practise individual property within the (nucleus) family, thus supplying the legal framework for the slaves' practices, the individual property within a traditional bīẓān family is structured fundamentally in a different way. Leading principle here is the family's patrimony managed by and large as an entity, although belonging in many cases to different household members. The sons, interested in constituting a herd of their own and to once become independent, directly profit from their father's herd to prosper. The individual property rights they may access by gift, pre-heritage, or other means, depend on their contribution to the families' collective benefit. It is the restriction to accumulate wealth across the generations that produces different patterns of family economy, and hence of inter-familial social relations, among slaves and masters.[6]

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[4] The distinction used here between slave 'condition' and 'estate' is derived from Meillassoux (1986). It states that slaves whatever benign the condition they live might be, until manumission or flight always keep bound to the precepts of the slave estate, the total rights of their owner to dispose of them and make use of his legal rights over the slave. According to Meillassoux's definition, the essence of slavery is to be seen in his de-socialisation, manifested in the slave's exclusion from kinship.

[5] It is true, however, that most slave children continued to contribute to their families well-being. These activities did not contradict their engagement in supplementary, paid work. Most probable were these engagements among slaves already quite well off, where the children's work was neither badly needed by the masters nor their parents.

[6] It is conceivable, that patterns of family economy as practised by sudān and bīẓān may tend to converge in the future. This is due to some sudān now getting more alike the bīẓān by constituting an initial, later family property (e.g. fields), that will, up from the next generation, enter the cycle of inheritance. Many bīẓān on the other side get much like the

An analogous case of divergent structures of appropriation among slaves and masters is to be observed with regard to property rights in land. Subsequently to the big drought in the Sahel, having had its climax in Mauritania in 1969, many of the former nomadic pastoralists and nomadic agro-pastoralist bīẓān sedentarized. Having lost large parts of their herds (mainly cattle and small ruminants), and being unable to reconstitute their animal property, they fell back on the cultivation of millet. Although some bīẓān had engaged in agriculture already a long time before the drought, this activity was the domain of the sudān, the slaves (ʻabīd) and freed slaves (ḥarāṭīn). Subsequent to the drought the territories under cultivation got extended, and the cultivation intensified by the construction of small dams and ramparts. The construction of earthen dams (French: *barrages*, ḥassāniyya: lġlīg meğmūʻa), is a technique practised in the region already since the turn of the century. It enhances water retention and infiltration, and thus permits to cultivate the patches of land behind the dams analogous to the flood-driven agriculture in use along the river Senegal. While the old dams, constructed prior to the drought, entirely belonged to the bīẓān (it was their slaves to have constructed them), property rights in some of the new dams became divided among bīẓān and sudān. This development by itself reveals the slow, but increasing advancement of the former slaves in gaining recognition referring to legal rights attributed to members of the society. As the cases presented here show, this is no linear evolution, but the result of a continuous struggle for power relations. Until today many of the sudān claims over land still are contested, as demonstrated by many conflicts arising out of these constellations (cf. Bonte 1983).[7]

What remained unrecognized until today is that the organization of rights of use applied to the dams differ considerably from case to case. While some dams are in the hand of a single proprietor (most often an important ḥassān), collective property is more common. Every contributor to the construction of a dam gets hold of a share corresponding to his input. However, the size of the individual plots does not vary anarchically. In most cases

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sudān. Impoverishment deprives them of a property worth to be a greater concern for the next generation, if ever there is any. Numerous young bīẓān, too, have to gain their life on their own nowadays, and have no parents' income or patrimony to rely on, or contribute to. What distinguishes bīẓān from sudān despite these analogies is their integration into distinct networks providing access to modern resources as e.g. jobs. Here many sudān, despite a few contrary cases, still are subject to discrimination.

[7] These conflicts often take the form of conflicts between sudān. They then represent groupings put at the margins within their own tribal group, and therefore having moved to the outer limits of the tribal territory. Many of these boundaries are only vaguely defined, and conflicts with neighbouring groupings arise over the scarce resources. The sudān struggle for independence from the centre of bīẓān authority turns out into a struggle to extend the tribal territory controlled by these bīẓān. Vital to the enhancement of the sudān's options to claim property rights over land they cultivate was the introduction of a new law on land property (cf. Crousse 1983). Despite the limitations the application of these new regulations still experience in the remote areas, it set a new pace to social change. In this, the effect is

they are of equal size.[8] One exception (out of several) to this general typology is found with the dam of Leklewa, one of the few dams constructed recently and jointly by sudān and bīẓān. After a dispute on whether and how to let participate the sudān, the bīẓān made the compromise to divide the whole dam in two equal parts. As for the bīẓān half there were fewer contributors than for the sudān half, the bīẓān plots have a width of 25m, whereas the sudān ones attain only 15m (all plots have nominally the same length). Although the reason of this arrangement clearly is to be seen in the dissimilar number of bīẓān and sudān cultivators, a rather different justification was given by one of the concerned sudān. According to him the sudān community accepted the arrangement, because the larger bīẓān plots were conceived as 'family plots', while the sudān ones were seen as 'individual plots'. While among the sudān, several brothers (even unmarried ones) could, and did, engage independently in the construction of the dam and the appropriation of plots, among the bīẓān this was only imagined to be done by household chiefs. While sudān were conceived to have to sustain first of all themselves, the bīẓān were regarded as responsible of families.

The case presented here is far from representing the predominant scheme of land tenure behind dams. Nevertheless it is significant. This arrangement was conceived in the late 1970ies. Rural sedentarization by then already had become a certainty, but the conditions forming the basis of this process were still fluctuating. First of all, the scramble for agricultural land was not yet finished. Most contested were (and still are) claims on property of plots formerly under the loose authority of more than one tribal fraction.

The bīẓān and sudān living in Leklewa while they constructed the dam formed a peculiar coalition. Among the bīẓān only few had rights in agricultural land behind the dams already existing. To take part in the scramble for land remaining, they associated with some sudān of their tribal fraction, similarly deprived of property in land – but for different reasons.[9] By this, the bīẓān for the first time decided to work together with the sudān on almost equal grounds (there were no direct former slaves and masters concerned). But the past is not to leave without traces: The inequality in plot sizes results of the decision not to

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alike to the one achieved by the announcement of abolishing slavery in July 1980. Both measures in fact were conceived to complement one another by then ruling colonel Ould Haidalla.

[8] Large fields are attained by summing up several plots.

[9] The case is more pronounced with the dam of Ḍahragwadir constructed some years before the dam of Leklewa. The conflict over the construction of this dam opposed several bīẓān families poor in land against the tribal chief then still in place. The latter wanted to maintain an exclusive right of control over all the tribe's land, and hence get a large share of every new dam constructed. After many disputes involving high levels of the state authority, the chief was defeated. This initial conflict most probably is the cause why almost all bīẓān residing in Leklewa do not share in the tribe's oldest dam (built according to oral tradition around 1900, or according to Wüst (1989: 75) 1926) and vice-versa.

treat bīẓān and sudān entirely alike, i.e. to derive the size of the plots from the total number of shareholders. Rationalizing this matter of fact, the bīẓān and sudān chose to conceptualize each other as two distinct communities, each having the rights to an equal share of the whole dam.[10] This arrangement is legitimated with reference to different structures of family economy. Hence the difference looses its foundation by this very act: A whole community of sudān, composed of slaves and freed slaves, is granted full legal ownership by bīẓān competing for the same agricultural plots.

Taking up my initial concern with the changing interrelations of slaves, freed slaves and slave masters, the conclusions to be derived from the case studies presented are twofold:
The most immediate concern of slaves and former slaves is to end the de-socialisation they were subjected to by the neglect of their rights in kinship and property. For those remaining within the rural society, this goal is only to be achieved by a massive assimilationist stance. This is why open contest raises rarely.
External factors, forcing the bīẓān to cultivate alongside the sudān, and hence make them work and live much alike the sudān, together with the increasing recognition of the former slave rights to personhood seem to reinforce this tendency, and facilitate assimilation.
Second this tendency towards homogenization and recognition of equal rights is contrasted by a reassessment of difference. Into the recognition of property distinct patterns of property management are ascribed. Modern, individual property of former slaves hence is linked to their past condition, depriving them from real ownership. Core elements producing the past relations of hierarchy and dependence get transformed into present day cultural material.
Facing this new, now collective discrimination, the sudān start asserting a cohesion unknown within their former, highly individualized master-slave conditions. Confessing themselves to the ideals of an individual property rather than family patrimony is a manifold practice: It asserts the bīẓān conception of difference, and it creates a symbolic

[10] Therefore the arrangement much resembles settlements between different tribal fractions, who sometimes, too, have to share one and the same barrage. A matter able to arise many dispute, and conflict. The apparent analogies between these cases and the one described here, however, have to be treated cautiously. Different frombīẓān-bīẓān affairs and quarrels the reciprocal prejudices and discriminations, forming the difference betweensudān and bīẓān, constitute the base on which the modes of interaction among the two communities of Leklewa are shaped.
The findings I present here differ considerably from those presented by a former expatriate development expert of the Projét Achram-Diouk (cf. Wüst 1989). This study, for evident reasons, omitted to distinguish between sudān and bīẓān, and put an emphasis on the harmony manifest in the collective management by all shareholders of the dam reconstructed by the project. Although I agree, that both the project's intervention, as well as the management of the

value, to be introduced in a "lutte de classement" [*struggle on classification*] according to Bourdieu (1979: 559ff.; 1989). Individualisation of property, interiorated as the individual's pride to sustain himself by his own abilities and labour, fits neatly in the modern, capitalistic world's value system.[11] Creating a ḥarāṭīn 'work ethic' (cf. McDougall 1988: 379) thus enables to encounter declassification by introducing a new scheme of classification.

Looking at the 'ḥarāṭīn question', as it sometimes is entitled in Mauritania, from this angle provides a multi-layered perspective. While interpersonal relations of dependence resulting of master-slave relations continue to persist in the rural hinterland and elsewhere, a new stage of struggle, or to take up Elias' term, a new configuration evolves. Differences between bīẓān and sudān are continued to be produced despite an environment providing less and less distinguishing marks, hence new social categories and ascribed values have to fill the gap. This social, rather than interpersonal discrimination is the starting point for a collective process of identification - the process by which slaves, runaway slaves, manumitted slaves and other deprived people are able to amalgamate into 'ḥarāṭīn'.[12]

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dam are successful, I am unable to confirm harmony. Both in 1992 and 1995/6 tensions were manifest in Leklewa, dividing sudān and bīẓān.

[11] This is best expressed in the many characterisations of slavery in Mauritania produced by abolitionists and human rights activists. Looking at the many descriptions of lazy 'arab' masters and busy slaves, one sometimes is tempted to ask whether the bigger crime is the personal, mental and physical deprivation slaves experience, or the fact that those working do not get the supposed fair share of their labour. This way of classification again is adopted in a recent article of E. Burkett in the New York Times Magazine (October 12th 1997), otherwise remarkable for its unusually high sensitivity towards the mental and social implications of modern dependent-master relationships. The author cites a leading Mauritanian anti-slavery activist: "they [US-government officials concerned with human rights practices] decide that blacks working for the Arabs are voluntary laborers who receive their salaries as food and shelter. That's ridiculous. Show me an Arab who works for what he eats. They are operating with an absurd definition of slavery. If the want to know whether there are slaves, let them come to me. I'll take them out and introduce them to hundreds." (Burkett 1997).

[12] I follow here a definition of identity formulated by Stuart Hall (1996: 3f.; original italics): "The concept of identity deployed here is therefore not an essentialist, but a strategic and positional one. That is to say, directly contrary to what appears to be its settled semantic career, this concept of identity does *not* signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through the vicissitudes of history without change; [...] It accepts that identities are never unified and, in late modern times, increasingly fragmented and fractured; never singular but multiply constructed across different, often intersecting and antagonistic, discourses, practices and positions. They are subject to a radical historicization, and are constantly in the process of change and transformation." A second line of argumentation is raised by Günther Schlee and Karin Werner, analyzing the interrelations of ethnicity and identity: "die beinahe fetischhaft anmutenden Praktiken der symbolischen Differenzierung [gehen] auf Muster zurück, die an Konsumismus und Nationalismus anschließen. Sie werden hier als Prozesse aufgefaßt, welche Individuum und inter- bzw. transkulturelle 'Welt' miteinander verbinden. Den in diesem Prozeß entstehenden identitären Subjektpositionen entsprechen Konsum-, Stadt-, touristische, museale, mediale und andere 'Welt'-Umgebungen, in denen das neue zivilisatorische Projekt sich praktisch-ästhetisch verwirklicht und die Welt zur Repräsentation und die Repräsentation zur Welt wird." (Schlee / Werner 1996: 26).

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