

Women's Work and Anthropology: Altering Social Hierarchy in Mauritania and the Ethics of Research

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Abstract: As a discipline, anthropology and its grounding in long-term fieldwork provides an opportunity to study how people alter their lives and larger social structures on a daily basis. Slavery was legally abolished in Mauritania in 1981 and, despite continued discrimination, Ḥarāṭīn women harness their work to create meaningful lives for themselves. Drawing upon twelve months of ethnographic research, this article argues that women use their labor and earnings to assert their power, claim improved social rank, and shift societal values that inform the hierarchy. Through these processes, they challenge, alter, and sometimes reproduce the broader social hierarchy and their positions within it. While anthropology can lead to meaningful insights, this article also explores ethical challenges that arose during this research, including the impact of the researcher on events, the question of who such research ultimately benefits, and the difficulty of obtaining truly informed consent. It is imperative that researchers, teachers, students, and readers prioritize engaging with these issues to help make the discipline and its practitioners more just.

Keywords: Social Hierarchy, Slavery, Mauritania, Anthropology, Research Ethics.

Slavery was legally abolished in Mauritania in 1981. Despite changes in their status, today people who were formerly enslaved and their descendants (Ḥarāṭīn) continue to face discrimination in the social, political, and economic realms.¹ Some of these challenges endure because Ḥarāṭīn are marked as members of this category. First, they share a language (Ḥassāniya) and other cultural aspects, including dress and diet, with the Bīzān, their former masters who have long dominated the country economically and politically. Second, many Ḥarāṭīn are of black African descent, unlike the Bīzān who claim Arab or Berber descent.² Bīzān and Ḥarāṭīn society has also long been characterized

1. While the term “Ḥarāṭīn” can have negative connotations in Mauritania and elsewhere see Chouki El Hamel, *Black Morocco: A History of Slavery, Race, and Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Catherine Ann Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018), I choose to employ it because it is the most common way that my interlocutors referred to themselves. I discuss the term more in depth later in this article. Also note that I follow the system of the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* when transliterating Hassaniya for this manuscript.

2. While this description is generally true for Ḥarāṭīn, in reality this category is more complex. For example, some Ḥarāṭīn claim that they or their descendants were never enslaved, others owned slaves themselves, and skin color does not always neatly map onto social category in Mauritania due to centuries of intermixing and fluidity between groups, see Meskerem Brhane, “Narratives of the Past, Politics of the Present: Identity, Subordination and the Ḥarāṭīns of Mauritania,” (PhD diss., University of

by a social hierarchy, in which freeborn Bīzān occupy higher positions than lower-status people like the Ḥarāṭīn.³ Despite the barriers they continue to face due to their social rank, today many Ḥarāṭīn women work outside of their homes and have significant influence on their families and communities.

In my anthropological research, I have sought to better understand how Ḥarāṭīn women are navigating their social and economic conditions. My project focuses on a series of questions: What does it mean to be a slave descendant in the country that most recently abolished slavery in the world? How are female slave descendants navigating their social positions and asserting social worth, while disadvantaged by their genealogy and gender? How are Ḥarāṭīn women building meaningful lives for themselves and what is the role of their work in these processes? How does the neoliberal moment, which puts increasing economic pressure on individuals, impact women's constraints and opportunities?

Past scholarship on Mauritanian Ḥarāṭīn has largely focused on men, perhaps due to their greater visibility in public life and assumptions about women's positions due to enduring patriarchy. This work has analyzed the influence of male political and religious leaders as well as antislavery activists on Ḥarāṭīn social positions⁴ and the impact of Ḥarāṭīn attempts to claim land or adopt new economic roles.⁵ These studies are important in helping us understand how Ḥarāṭīn attempt to improve their social

Chicago), 1997, 57-58; E. Ann McDougall, Meskerem Brhane, and Urs Peter Ruf, "Legacy of Slavery; Promise of Democracy: Mauritania in the 21st Century," in *Globalizing Africa*, ed. Malinda Smith, 67-88 (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2003); Urs Peter Ruf, *Ending Slavery. Hierarchy, Dependency and Gender*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1999), 40, note 3. Also note that while slavery was officially abolished in the early 1980s, in reality it had been diminishing long before this.

3. Note other ethnic groups, including the Halpulaar, Wolof, and Soninke, also inhabit Mauritania. These groups have their own hierarchies and histories of slavery that in some ways are similar to those of Bīzān society.

4. Olivier Leservoiesier, "Les hrātīn et le Fuuta Tooro, xix-xx siècle: Entre émancipation et dépendance," in *Groupes serviles au sahara: Approche comparative à partir du cas des Arabophones de Mauritanie*, ed. Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais, 146-67 (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000); Zekeria Ould Ahmed Salem, "Bare-Foot Activists: Transformations in the Ḥarāṭīn Movement in Mauritania," in *Movers and Shakers: Social Movements in Africa*, eds. Stephen Ellis and Ineke van Kessel, 156-77 (Leiden: Brill, 2009); idem., *Prêcher dans le désert: Islam politique et changement social en Mauritanie* (Paris: Karthala, 2013); Baba Ould Jiddou, "La communauté Ḥarāṭīn," *L'Ouest saharien* 4 (2004): 159-82; El-Arby Ould Saleck, *Les Haratins: Le paysage politique mauritanien* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2003 [2000]); Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais, *Parenté et politique en Mauritanie: Essai d'Anthropologie historique* (Montreal: L'Harmattan, 1998).

5. Leservoiesier, "Les hrātīn et le Fuuta Tooro;" E. Ann McDougall, "A Topsy-Turvy World: Slaves and Freed Slaves in the Mauritanian Adrar, 1910-1950," in *The End of Slavery in Africa*, eds. Suzanne Miers and Richard L. Roberts (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988); Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh, "L'évolution de l'esclavage dans la société maure," in *Nomades et commandant: Administration et sociétés nomades dans l'ancienne AOF*, ed. Edmond Bernus, Pierre Boilley, Jean Clauzel, and Jean-Louis Triaud (Paris: Karthala, 1993); Ruf, *Ending Slavery*.

positions, but they overlook women's important contributions to Ḥarāṭīn life.⁶ Examining women's roles in these processes is essential to understanding contemporary Ḥarāṭīn experiences as well as how women alter the broader social hierarchy in Mauritania. My research in Kankossa, a southern town in Eastern Mauritania, explores how Ḥarāṭīn women assert their social worth in a variety of ways, including by claiming social values that would have formerly been monopolized by elites and by shifting the underpinnings of social rank. Through these processes, women challenge, alter, and sometimes reproduce the broader social hierarchy and their positions within it.

Throughout the article, I will also analyze how cultural anthropology provides important insights into how everyday people negotiate social hierarchy. Anthropology's emphasis on long-term fieldwork and its major method of participant observation made it possible for me to observe and experience daily life as it unfolded during my twelve months of research, although my positionality as a white, never-married, female, U.S citizen certainly impacted these processes, as I will explore below.⁷ Since social status is a sensitive issue that people are sometimes uncomfortable discussing directly, this approach allowed me to witness how women negotiate social rank on a daily basis. Such processes are not neat, but rather highlight the complexities of people's social identities, their shifting positions in their larger communities, and the challenges of achieving their aspirations.

However, despite its advantages, ethical issues related to cultural anthropology and its methods endure. These include the impact of the researcher on events, the difficulty of obtaining truly informed consent, and the question of who such research ultimately benefits. It is imperative that researchers, teachers, students, and readers prioritize engaging with these issues to make the discipline and its practitioners more just. In this article, I explore such concerns together with my research findings to illustrate how the two are intertwined. Doing so not only furthers such considerations in the field more broadly, but also helps readers better interpret my results.

6. Important exceptions including Ruf, *Ending Slavery* and Brhane, "Narratives of the Past, Politics of the Present," as well as E. Ann McDougall, "Hidden in Plain Sight: Haratine in Nouakchott's 'Niche-Settlements,'" *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, 2 (2015): 251-79; idem., "Concubinage as Forced Marriage? Colonial *Jawari*, Contemporary *Hartaniyya*, and Marriage in Mauritania," in *Marriage by Force? Contestation over Consent and Coercion in Africa*, eds. Annie Bunting, Benjamin N. Lawrance, and Richard L. Roberts, (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2016). There is also rich scholarship on Bīzān women and their contributions to Mauritanian society, including Gisèle Simard, *Petites commerçantes de Mauritanie: Voiles, perles et henné* (Paris: Karthala, 1996); Aline Tauzin, *Figures du féminin dans la société maure (Mauritanie)* (Paris: Karthala, 2001).

7. My research took place between 2008 and 2011, with the bulk of the time occurring between 2010 and 2011.

Insights into Social Hierarchy and the Anthropologist's Influence on Research

During my research, insights into how women were asserting social value often happened at unexpected moments. An example of this occurred on a warm evening in Kankossa when I sat on a thin mattress with Toutou and Brahime, a middle-aged Ḥarāḩīn married couple, watching television and chatting after dinner. Toutou had been busy that day selling produce in the market and dyeing cloth, two lucrative businesses that she ran herself with the help of her teenage daughters. Tonight she was more preoccupied than usual because she was preparing to attend an extravagant Bīzān wedding in a town a few hours south of Kankossa.

I asked about the wedding and she explained that she was going to “carry the *ṣaḩāq* (bridewealth),” the money and goods that the groom’s family presents to the bride’s. Since it was clear I did not understand what it meant to “carry” these goods, the two explained that this task did not mean literally carrying this often-large amount gifts. Instead, Toutou would be charged with keeping track of them and their eventual distribution to friends and family, as is common in the region with bridewealth. Toutou emphasized that the person who carries the *ṣaḩāq* is often a friend of the groom’s mother and that she herself would be given some of the bridewealth (both cash and gifts) to thank her for her role in this important process.

The conversation, up until now, occurred in Ḥassāniya, the dialect of Arabic that is widely spoken in Mauritania. At this point, Brahime broke in and, in French, a language that Toutou does not speak well, noted that it was often the “castes” who carry the *ṣaḩāq*. He then went on to explain that by “castes” he meant either *mu'allimīn* (artisans), *īggāwen* (praise singers), or Ḥarāḩīn. These groups all occupy lower-status positions in the Bīzān hierarchy and are thus considered to be of low social rank.

Toutou interrupted his explanation and, clearly annoyed, asked, “are you telling her that I am the groom’s mother’s Ḥarṩānīyya?”⁸ “Ḥarṩānī” is sometimes employed as a euphemism for slave. Toutou’s irritated tone signaled that, in her eyes, this was clearly not her status.

Brahime quickly backtracked by explaining that today status is not important in choosing who will perform this role. Instead, people primarily evaluate a person’s organizational abilities as these are essential to successfully completing the task. He also explained that a woman’s wealth is a crucial

8. Ḥarṩānīyya is the feminine singular form of Ḥarṩānī.

factor in her selection. Since participating in a wedding engenders or deepens this woman's connection with the groom's family, they may call on her for support if they experience financial hardship in the future. Her financial standing thus provides them with a measure of security.

I start with this exchange, which I explore in more depth elsewhere,⁹ because it demonstrates the impact women are having on how social status is constituted in Mauritania. Toutou's anger related to Brahime's implication that she was Ḥarāṭīyya. The exact etymology of "Ḥarāṭīn" is unknown, but possible Arabic derivations suggest that the term's meaning reflects the groups' history with slavery. For example, one possible derivation, *ḥurr thānī*, can be translated as "free person of a second class" or "a person who has become free."¹⁰ In the twenty-first century, this term retains connotations with slavery and is sometimes even used as a euphemism for "slave."¹¹ This derogatory connotation means that the context in which the term is uttered, and by whom, impacts its meaning. While Toutou frequently referred to herself as Ḥarāṭīyya, her husband's use of the term in the context of carrying the ṣaḍāq angered her since it could imply that Toutou is the groom's mother's slave or, at the very least, her dependent. After all, many Ḥarāṭīn did historically maintain semi-dependent relationships with their former masters.¹² The fact that the groom's mother is Bīzān heightens the chance that the relationship could be interpreted in a hierarchical way. Below I will further explore this exchange and how it provides insight into a variety of ways that Ḥarāṭīn understand social status.

Analysis of this event also demonstrates how anthropology is a useful avenue for studying these topics. Cultural anthropology's major method of participant observation encourages researchers to follow people throughout their lives, watching and participating in their daily activities and asking questions as they arise. Women's conceptions of status and how they attempted to maneuver within the social hierarchy often emerged not during in-depth interviews, but as they joked in the market, bartered with customers,

9. Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*.

10. For more discussion of possible derivations of this term, including from Berber, see Catherine Taine-Cheikh, "La Mauritanie en noir et blanc: Petite promenade linguistique en hassāniyya," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 54, 1 (1989): 90-105; McDougall, "Hidden in Plain Sight," 253; El Hamel, *Black Morocco* for a discussion of the term's use in the Moroccan context. Ould Cheikh, "L'évolution de l'esclavage dans la société maure," 183.

11. Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*, 176.

12. Benedetta Rossi, "African Post-Slavery: A History of the Future," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies* 48, 2 (2015): 303-24; Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais, "Hiérarchies statutaires et conflits fonciers dans l'Assaba contemporain (Mauritanie). Rupture ou continuité?," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 59, 1 (1991): 194.

or participated in conversations like Toutou and Brahime's. As my own knowledge of these issues and Ḥassāniya improved, I was able to ascertain increasing levels of nuance, which led to deeper understanding.

This exchange also illustrates how anthropologists affect the world around them. While I may have hoped to fade into the background to observe life as it truly unfolds, the impact of my presence on events is undeniable. Toutou's annoyance at her husband was partly because he was speaking in French, a language that she did not know well, but which he often insisted on using with me (despite the fact that I asked him not to). His use of French meant that Toutou could not be certain that she understood what was said. Similarly, the fact that I was an outsider and a non-native Ḥassāniya speaker likely heightened her anxiety about how I would interpret Brahime's words because I was not as familiar with people's social rank as someone from her own community would be.

As I reflect on this exchange almost a decade after it occurred, I am struck by how much it reveals about how Toutou wants to be viewed by particular others: as someone of respectable social rank. This includes myself, but also the imagined audience who she knew my research might reach. This does not mean that interactions like this one are not insightful, but they do illustrate the limits of our knowledge. For example, we cannot know how Toutou talked about her role in this wedding when I was not present. While she was proud of what she saw as her improved social status, it is possible that she strategically played up a dependent role in the presence of the bride's mother, in the hopes of garnering more resources from this activity. People's actions are always shaped by context, and so it is important that anthropologists be transparent about how they influence events around them. This practice allows readers to better interpret their data and helps them imagine how life might have unfolded differently had the researcher not been present.

Ḥarāṭīn Women Claiming Valued Identities and Who Benefits from Anthropology

Toutou's anger and Brahime's response suggests how Toutou understands her own identity and position in her community. First, she makes it clear that she does not consider herself to be a slave or even a disadvantaged slave descendant. She and Brahime then support this contention by asserting her social worth; they emphasize that she was selected to carry the bridewealth because she can claim attributes that would have formerly been reserved for elites.

In the past, the social hierarchy was grounded in ascribed factors like genealogy, with people being born into their social positions, although

in reality individuals might move between social strata over the course of their lives.¹³ Elites also reinforced their social rank by cultivating a variety of achieved attributes, including adhering to a code of honor, supporting dependents, practicing generosity, and garnering wealth and respect.¹⁴ Today, Ḥarāṭīn women assert their social rank and value by claiming attributes like these themselves. For example, Brahime noted that the person who is selected to carry the ṣaḍāq is now generally a wealthy person. Like many of the women with whom I worked in Kankossa, Toutou was an entrepreneur. Along with her businesses, she earned money by participating in a community gardening project, striving to capitalize off of NGO initiatives, and renting out housewares, which she collectively owned with friends. Beyond helping to support her family, she used her earnings to invest in her and her family's futures by expanding her businesses, investing in land, and supporting her children's educations. While in the past elite status was partly based upon the accumulation of wealth, it was difficult for slaves to accrue assets and, if they did, these were often controlled by their masters.¹⁵ Toutou's wealth thus makes visible her improved social standing and she and Brahime contend that her selection to carry the ṣaḍāq shows that it is recognized by others.

Like most other women in her community, Toutou also employed her earnings in a variety of ways that helped her cultivate valued attributes. She invested in her relationships by giving gifts at family ceremonies and helping friends and relatives financially in times of need. Through such processes she increased her social capital and expanded her social networks, which also help provide security in leaner times since people would ideally return her gifts with increment in the future. By sharing her earnings with others, she also demonstrated her generosity, a valued quality in this context.

Furthermore, Toutou cultivated her own form of dependents by giving charity and granting credit in the market to her poorer counterparts. At times she even directly supported others, such as when Toutou hired a teenage girl, Lala, as a domestic worker. When I asked her about the decision to employ

13. McDougall, "A Topsy-Turvy World;" Ann McDougall, "Living the Legacy of Slavery: Between Discourse and Reality," *Cahiers d'études africaines* 45, 179/180 (2005): 957-86; Villasante-de Beauvais, *Parenté et politique en Mauritanie*.

14. For an overview of Bīzān social organization, see Pierre Bonte, "L'ordre' de la tradition. Évolution des hiérarchies statutaires dans la société maure contemporaine," *Mauritanie: Entre arabité et africanité* 54 (1989): 118-29; Francisco Freire, "Saharan Migrant Camel Herders: Znāga Social Status and the Global Age," *Journal of Modern African Studies* 52, 3 (2014): 425-46, and Abdel Wedoud Ould Cheikh and Yahya Ould Al-Barra, "Il faut qu'une terre soit ouverte ou fermée: Du statut des biens fonciers collectifs dans la société maure," *Revue du monde musulman et de la Méditerranée* 79, 1 (1996): 157-80.

15. Ould Cheikh, "L'évolution de l'esclavage dans la société maure;" Ruf, *Ending Slavery*, 90.

Lala, Toutou explained that Lala's family had asked her to take in their daughter because they needed the financial support. While Lala's salary was small (as is common for domestic workers in Kankossa), that she received room and board helped, as did the used clothing and food Toutou would occasionally send to her family. Such actions demonstrated Toutou's generosity, and her ability to support a domestic worker also made her wealth and social rank visible to others.¹⁶ Her emphasizing that the family had asked for her help also highlights how others are aware of her ability to do so. For Toutou, her status in the community was not marked by her slave descent, but rather by the wealth she had amassed, the generosity she practiced, the dependents she helped support, and the respect that practices like these allowed her to garner. She thus demonstrates her improved social worth by claiming attributes that formerly would have been associated with elites.

Toutou also asserts her social standing when she calls the Bīzān woman a "friend," thus implying a more equal relationship than would have been the norm between Bīzān and Ḥarāṭīn in the past. Brahime takes this even further when he notes that people often seek out wealthy individuals to help carry the ṣaḍāq, especially someone who they are confident will be able to help them in the future in the case of financial hardship. He thus not only implies that Toutou is this family's equal, but that at some point they may become partially dependent on her. Such claims reinforce a social hierarchy in which better off individuals care for dependents, but they also subvert Ḥarāṭīn's (and Bīzān's) positions within it by suggesting that today Ḥarāṭīn may support Bīzān. In some cases, then, Ḥarāṭīn women are not remaking the underpinnings of hierarchy, but are rather harnessing existing structures to demonstrate their own social worth.

This maneuvering is reflected in the terminology that women employ to refer to themselves. When I began conducting interviews with Ḥarāṭīn women to collect their life histories as well as paying attention to how they referred to themselves in everyday speech, I was surprised that many did not refer to themselves as Ḥarāṭīn at all, but rather as Khazarīn. This term, which is also employed elsewhere in the country, comes from a root that refers to colors that are dark (blue, green, dark brown), but not black.¹⁷ While the term is employed in a variety of ways in Kankossa,¹⁸ women and men primarily use it to refer to slave descendants who have been freed for a long period and

16. Note that it is common for middle-class families to hire domestic workers in Mauritania. For more discussion on ideas surrounding domestic workers and Ḥarāṭīn views on this kind of labor see Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*, 70.

17. Catherine Taine-Cheikh, "La Mauritanie en noir et blanc," 102.

18. Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*, 48-49.

who can also claim other valued qualities, including wealth, education, and respect in their communities. As one man explained, Khazarīn means Ḥarāṭīn who “came to have money. They had respect. Society came to valorize them. Some of them themselves even had slaves living with them. Because he has money, he has all of that. It became that he had a value in his tribe, a value in his family... That’s the meaning of Khazarīn.” This understanding of the term, then, emphasizes that it refers to some slave descendants who have improved their social positions, a fact that is recognized by broader society.

The usage of this term is significant because it suggests that slave descendants are rejecting ascribed attributes like genealogy as an underpinning of hierarchy and are instead claiming achieved attributes as essential to social standing. Like Toutou and Brahime, it suggests that qualities like wealth and respectability that would have formerly been monopolized by elites are central to slave descendants’ valued personhood. However, such efforts to assert Ḥarāṭīn status also maintain and reinforce the hierarchical system by continuing to suggest that some groups (Khazarīn) fall above others (Ḥarāṭīn). Furthermore, since this term literally implies dark, but not black, skin, it also suggests that social “blackness” is still deplored.

Anthropology helped me get at nuances like these, illuminating the complex ways that women understood themselves and their social positions. By cultivating relationships with women over time through long-term ethnographic research, I was able to avoid seeing their experiences as uniform and better understand particular women’s constraints and privileges. For example, not all Ḥarāṭīn women have the equal ability to cultivate the kind of valued attributes that Toutou did. Toutou’s age and the fact that she had teenage daughters whose labor she could draw on to help at home and with her businesses, as well as a husband with steady employment, meant that she had more free time and economic capital than many of her poorer or younger counterparts. She was able to leverage this time and money to help build relationships, conduct generous acts, and participate in family ceremonies where social rank is displayed.¹⁹ Women’s generational positions and socioeconomic classes thus impact their abilities to maneuver, illustrating how it is important to not see slave descent as women’s only salient attribute.²⁰ Understanding particular women’s situations helped me get a better sense of the complexity of Ḥarāṭīn women’s social positions and who had the power to alter them.

19. Catherine Ann Wiley, “Making People Bigger: Wedding Exchange and the Creation of Social Value in Rural Mauritania,” *Africa Today* 62, 3 (2016): 49-70.

20. Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*, 106-10.

As an anthropologist, I also sometimes became part of women's attempts to assert status. During my research I struggled over the question of who would benefit from my work. Women seemed excited to have their lives and stories shared more broadly, but they also understood that they would see little immediate benefit from this work other than the pleasure that may come from interacting with an active listener and learner who was deeply interested in their lives. I hoped my findings would eventually reach policy makers and development workers who might be able to use them to create more just and equitable projects and policies. This could help some people, but likely would not directly impact Kankossa's residents.

Mauritanians often asked me about the financial benefits of my research. One day when I was explaining the non-lucrative nature of academic publishing, one man turned to me and said, "But this work will help you get a job, right?" It has, and my publications based on that research helped me get tenure, which can ensure long-term employment. Since the end of my research year, I have visited my interlocutors in Kankossa, bringing them gifts (and cash) as is common practice there when family or friends return from elsewhere and I have occasionally sent money through friends who were visiting Mauritania. Nevertheless, the financial benefit to me far surpasses theirs. Researchers must be explicit about these issues during research, consider ways through which they can benefit their interlocutors, and not underemphasize their own gains from research.

However, as my research progressed, I also gradually became aware that some women were incorporating me into their networks in ways that helped them assert their social rank. This is not to say that women did not care about me and my friendship (or I them), but that, regardless of affective ties, my presence meant that I was also part of status maneuvering. Many women were aware that knowing me could benefit them in some ways, including the social capital of having an American friend as well as my serving as a comparatively wealthy member of their social networks. Toutou, for example, instructed me on whose family ceremonies, including weddings and naming ceremonies, to attend. She also suggested the appropriate size of my financial contributions at these events, which ultimately reflected on her. My close connection to her and my relative helplessness in this context (as compared to other adults) meant that I too was a dependent of sorts and thus helped her demonstrate her generosity. So while my concerns about who benefits materially from anthropological research were legitimate, my interlocutors also successfully incorporated me into their attempts to assert their social worth. While it is crucial to keep questions of benefit at the forefront of research, it is also

important not to underestimate interlocutors' agency and ability to ensure that researchers help them achieve their goals.

Shifting the Foundations of Social Status and Considering the Anthropologist's Work

Cultural anthropology's colonial foundation means that the discipline historically problematically believed that "outsiders" could gain "insider" status. In my own project design I tried to avoid this assumption as well as imposing my own research agenda on others. Instead, I worked to privilege the voices of my collaborators by allowing them to guide my research, including its focus. In the early stages of my work, I planned to explore the *malahfa*, the veil that many Mauritanian women wear, and its connections to gender, religion, social status, and women's national identities. However, when I asked Ḥarāṭīn women what they thought I should study, they universally said work. I ultimately shifted my long-term research topic since labor clearly had meaning and importance to them.

Given changes in Mauritania's economy in recent decades, earning an income is indeed an essential part of life for most Ḥarāṭīn women (and many Bīzān women). These changes are due to a variety of factors including drought, locust invasions, the 2008 global economic crisis, and a growing demand for imported goods.²¹ Decades of structural adjustment programs and neoliberal policies have also taken their toll on this region. Introduced in the 1980s and 1990s, these were intended to stimulate the economy by privatizing enterprises and diminishing the public sector. However, in reality they led to increasing poverty, a growing gap between the rich and poor, and rising unemployment.²² These challenges, along with the government's growing inability to care for its citizens' most basic needs, pushed many men to migrate elsewhere for work, leaving women behind as heads of household. In 2008, 44 percent of heads of household in Kankossa were women.²³ While, ideally, migrants send remittances home, in reality they are often unable to meet their families' needs. Likewise, rising inflation and growing consumer desire mean that even households that include men with steady employment

21. A major drought in the late 1960s and early 1970s devastated the region's economy and significantly shifted social organization, see Jean-Robert Pitte, "La sécheresse en Mauritanie," *Annales de Géographie* 84, 466 (1975): 641-64; Mohameden Ould-Mey, *Global Restructuring and Peripheral States: The Carrot and the Stick in Mauritania* (Lanham, MD: Littlefield Adams Books, 1996). Since many slaveowners could no longer support their dependents, large numbers of slaves gained freedom and entered the wage economy during this period.

22. Ould-Mey, *Global Restructuring and Peripheral States*.

23. Mohamed Chouaib Fall, *Rapport: Etude de base pour l'ADP de Kankossa*. World Vision Mauritanie ADP Kankossa, 2008.

must also often rely on women's incomes. Laboring outside of the home is thus a necessity for many women in order to support their families.

Despite the necessity of earning an income, that Ḥarāṭīn women emphasized their work to me is interesting, partly because historically manual labor was associated with lower-status individuals. In the precolonial and colonial periods, work was a way through which social rank was articulated.²⁴ For example, lower status was marked by people's dependence on others; unlike elites, slaves and lower-status individuals did not work for themselves.²⁵ People of varying social ranks performed different kinds of work, with lower-status individuals participating in manual labor, work that was seen as dirty and which elites avoided. Conversely, elite women's social rank was delineated by their avoidance of work. This practice made visible their families' financial resources since it meant that they had others to work for them.²⁶ While, in reality, Bīzān women have long participated in productive labor, including organizing and financing caravans;²⁷ serving as healers, midwives, and Qur'anic guides;²⁸ and producing household items,²⁹ these activities did not involve physical labor.

Women's interest in labor illustrates its importance to their livelihoods, but it also reflects the fact that they harness their participation in work to assert social rank. While conducting labor was formerly associated with lower-status individuals, today Ḥarāṭīn women suggest that working is a sign of being a modern, respectable person. They boast of the value of their labor, considering participating in it an important way to generate and make visible social worth under contemporary capitalism. They thus attempt to rework the value of attributes and activities that would have formerly been associated with lower-status individuals.

During my research, market traders frequently emphasized the value of their work, with one noting that:

24. Ruf, *Ending Slavery*; Villasante-de Beauvais, "Hiérarchies statutaires et conflits fonciers."

25. Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais, "La Question des hiérarchies sociales et des groupes serviles chez les bidān de mauritanie," in *Groupes serviles au Sahara: Approche comparative à partir du cas des arabophones de Mauritanie*, ed. Mariella Villasante-de Beauvais (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2000), 289.

26. Céline Lesourd, *Femmes d'affaires de Mauritanie* (Paris: Karthala, 2014); Tazuin, *Figures du féminin*.

27. Ghislaine Lydon, *On Trans-Saharan Trails: Islamic Law, Trade Networks, and Cross-Cultural Exchange in Western Africa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

28. Britta Frede, "Following in the Steps of 'Ā'isha: Ḥassāniyya-Speaking Tijānī Women as Spiritual Guides (Muqaddamāt) and Teaching Islamic Scholars (Limrābutāt) in Mauritania," *Islamic Africa* 5, 2 (2014): 225-73.

29. Odette du Puigaudeau, *Barefoot through Mauretania*. Translated by Geoffrey Sainsbury (Kilkerran, Scotland: Hardinge Simpole Publishing, 2010 [1937]).

“A person can't only be sitting and looking. If a [market table's] goods don't sell, a person does something different. A lot of people only like to sit; that's not good. A person who doesn't find something here, do something there. If you don't get something here, do something there. If you don't get something there, do something elsewhere. That is what's good.”

Here this woman emphasizes the importance of working, a sentiment that other traders also echoed. They described how work keeps them healthy and strong, gives them the money they need to conduct pious acts like charity, and allows them to provide their children with important opportunities.³⁰ They thus emphasize work's positive qualities and strive to disassociate it from lower social rank. In doing so, women attempt to rework the underpinnings of social hierarchy by claiming activities and attributes that would have formerly been considered lower status as important parts of modern life. Furthermore, by emphasizing their engagement in a variety of entrepreneurial enterprises, Ḥarāḩīn women also demonstrate that they work for themselves and thus are no longer dependent on Bīzān. Such activities thus also serve as an important way through which they draw attention to their free status.

The value of work is also highlighted in Brahime's contention that Toutou was selected to carry the ṣaḩāq partly because of her wealth. Since her money comes from her businesses, this suggests that others are aware of her successful entrepreneurial ventures. Although Toutou is by no means rich, she was one of the more successful vegetable sellers in the market and her work as a dyer also brought in significant income. Both pursuits are considered “dirty” work, frequently leading to stained clothing and involving activities that slaves would have conducted in the past (e.g. cutting up vegetables) and thus can be associated with slave labor. However, like many of her Ḥarāḩīn counterparts, Toutou highlights the value of her labor, saying “It is necessary for a woman to always work. If not, children won't have what they need. [If I work] my children will eat good food. They will drink good drinks. They will wear shoes and nice clothes.” Her work is an important pursuit because it allows her to give her children good lives, along with some sartorial markers of status.

Ḥarāḩīn women further emphasize the importance of work by mocking Bīzān women for their lack of engagement in it, painting them as lazy prima donnas.³¹ As one woman explained when I asked why Bīzān women do not

30. Wiley, *Work, Social Status, and Gender in Post-slavery Mauritania*, 67-70.

31. Katherine Ann Wiley, “Joking Market Women: Critiquing and Negotiating Gender and Social Hierarchy in Kankossa, Mauritania,” *Africa* 84, 1 (2014): 101-18.

sell vegetables in Kankossa's market, "they say it is hard. They can't do it... We are stronger than them [laughing]. We are healthier than them. They are weak. They don't support heat. They don't support work. Thanks be to God, we support heat and all of that." Here she critiques Bīzān for what she sees as their helplessness and highlights the value of qualities like health, strength, and industriousness. By critiquing women who avoid labor, she and others suggest that such practices are outdated. In the process, they create new criteria that signify social difference and hierarchy, implying that working hard no longer indexes low social status, but rather their social worth.

In their work to revalue their labor, women also utilize broader ideologies. For example, women draw on neoliberal values, including their emphasis on hard work and personal responsibility, to assert the value of their labor. These values were evident in government policies and ideologies as well as NGO programs that targeted women in the 1980s and 1990s.³² Kankossa women remembered specific visits during this period from officials promoting such ideals. One woman told me that government officials had told Kankossa residents that "women must get up. Women must get up and work. The woman should support her house; the woman should do something for her children. If her man leaves, she can do something herself." When they quote speeches like this, women legitimize the importance of participating in labor as well as industriousness and independence as valued qualities. By drawing on and adopting these neoliberal values, women further their project to claim qualities that would have formerly been associated with lower social status as valued qualities that are essential to modern life. Their use of these values suggests the importance of paying attention to how neoliberal policies and other aspects of globalization are interpreted locally and how some people may take advantage of aspects of them to improve their lives and assert agency. This example also illustrates that even if women employ these values, they do not necessarily adopt many aspects of neoliberal ideology. For example, instead of favoring individualism, they continue to nurture their social networks partly by redistributing their earnings throughout them.

Women's attempts to understand my own life also highlighted their valuing of work. For example, the fact that I was thirty-two years old, but had never been married was baffling to my interlocutors since marriage in one's teens is common for women in Mauritania. Likewise, marriage and motherhood are viewed as extremely desirable. I quickly learned that women

32. Ruf, *Ending Slavery*, 266; Simard, *Petites commerçantes de Mauritanie*, 89.

did not accept my insistence that I was single because I had not yet met the right person. They were more convinced when I explained that my marital status was also connected to my desire to pursue a career and my concern that early marriage could limit my employment possibilities. This explanation made sense to them partly because it highlighted the importance of labor for women. It thus again illustrates how paying attention to women's reactions to my presence helped illuminate their own values. This example also suggests that women emphasized the importance of their own work partly because they knew that work was something that I valued. Again, participant observation happens in interaction and, like it or not, anthropologists impact their findings.

I welcomed women's focus on my work partly because another challenge of participant observation is that it often does not actually look like work. As I sat with my interlocutors day after day while they sold tomatoes, attended naming ceremonies, and drank tea with friends, at times I faded into the landscape, becoming to some extent just another community member (albeit a strange one). When conducting participant observation, I only occasionally jotted down notes in public, and I wrote up the bulk of my fieldnotes alone in the room I rented at quiet times of the day. There were thus few markers to remind people of my work.

My situation was further complicated by the fact that, while my skin color, sartorial choices, accent, never-been-married status, and U.S. citizenship clearly marked me as "other," I had lived in Kankossa a decade earlier as a Peace Corps Volunteer teaching English at the high school. This meant that my activities were even more obscured than they might have been otherwise since many people assumed that I had returned to teach again (and I did offer an English class for women). Despite my frequent reminders that I was here in a different capacity, my former experience in the community meant that many people made other assumptions.

The fact that my research was not always obvious to others calls into question my ability to obtain truly informed consent. While I talked with all my interlocutors about my research and they agreed to participate, did Toutou and Brahime really understand that I might analyze this particular conversation in my book and later in this article? This is especially challenging in a long-term project because, since anthropologists may collect hundreds or even thousands of pages of field notes, they rarely know what events and happenings they will ultimately include in their published work. This makes it difficult to confirm with people whether they agree to have a particular conversation later appear in writing. I also knew that a small research budget

and the distance between my home in the United States and Mauritania would make it difficult to return to do any data analysis together.

I dealt with the challenge of my work not being fully transparent by reminding people of my research whenever I had the opportunity: when someone asked me what I was doing, when I met new people, when I asked someone to explain what had just happened, and so on. As I studied Ḥassāniya more deeply (a language that I had learned earlier in the Peace Corps, but which I worked to improve during my research), I honed the way that I explained my research in ways that made sense locally. When I realized that many people had not heard of anthropology (we face a similar issue in the United States), I explained that it was similar to sociology, a discipline that was more common in this context. When I realized that many of my interlocutors were not familiar with academic journals, I started explaining that I hoped to write a book about women's lives and work. While I made progress throughout my time of making my research goals clear, that this remained an issue speaks to the importance of collecting ongoing consent and reminding interlocutors about one's research activities over time.

Conclusion

Ḥarāṭīn women thus assert their improved social rank in a variety of ways. On the one hand, they claim valued attributes that would have formerly been monopolized by elites. On the other hand, they revalue attributes that would have been associated with lower status in the past, claiming their worth and importance today. Women thus challenge the underpinnings of hierarchy and do important work in improving theirs and their families' social positions.

I am glad that anthropology helped me better understand the complex ways through which women assert, alter, and sometimes reinforce their social positions and how they challenge the broader social hierarchy in the process. I would not have been able to study this topic in the same way with another discipline. I have always found conducting anthropology humbling and research has taught me a lot about people's generosity and intelligence. It has also reminded me of how my own culture and activities often appear strange to others, but how humans (including myself) can reach across cultural differences to build understanding and friendships.

I have also always found conducting anthropology stressful and anxiety-producing, largely because of the inevitable messy ethical challenges, including the extent that researchers impact events, who benefits from such endeavors, and how to obtain informed consent. As practitioners, we must keep issues like these in mind throughout all stages of the research, analysis,

and dissemination of data in order to make our discipline more just. Making such considerations more explicit in our writing, thinking, and teaching can help readers interpret our findings, better expose the complexity of this discipline, and protect interlocutors from harm.

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عمل المرأة والأنثروبولوجيا: تحولات الهرم الاجتماعي في موريتانيا وأخلاقيات البحث

ملخص: كتخصص علمي قائم الذات، توفر الأنثروبولوجيا وأسسها في العمل الميداني طويل الأمد فرصة لدراسة كيفية تغيير الناس لحياتهم والبنى الاجتماعية الكبرى على أساس يومي. لقد تم إلغاء العبودية قانونياً في موريتانيا سنة 1981، وعلى الرغم من التمييز المستمر بين السكان، تسخر النساء الحراطين عملهن لخلق حياة ذات معنى لأنفسهن. واستناداً إلى عمل ميداني استغرق اثني عشر شهراً من البحث الإثنوغرافي، تحاول هذه المقالة التشديد على حرص النساء على استخدام عملهن ومكاسبهن لتأكيد قوتهن، والمطالبة بتحسين مكانتهن الاجتماعية، مع محاولة تغيير القيم المجتمعية التي تتحكم في التسلسل الهرمي المجتمعي. ومن خلال هذه العمليات، يحاول الاتحاد فيما بينهن بغية تحقيق التغيير، فأفلحن أحياناً في إعادة إنتاج التسلسل الهرمي الاجتماعي بمفهومه الأوسع وتعزيز مواقفهم بداخله. وبينما يمكن أن تؤدي الأنثروبولوجيا إلى رؤى ذات

مغزى، فإن هذه المقالة تستكشف أيضًا التحديات الأخلاقية التي نشأت خلال إنجاز هذا البحث، بما في ذلك تأثير الباحث على الأحداث، ومحاولة تحديد هوية المستفيد من هذا البحث في النهاية، مع صعوبة الحصول على مساعدة توافقية ومستنيرة حقًا. ومن الضروري أن يعطي الباحثون والمعلمون والطلاب والقراء الأولوية للتعامل مع هذه القضايا للمساعدة على إضفاء خاصية العدالة والحق على مادة الأنثروبولوجيا والمنشغلين بالبحث فيها اعتمادًا على أدواتها ومناهجها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التسلسل الهرمي الاجتماعي، العبودية، موريتانيا، الأنثروبولوجيا، أخلاقيات البحث.

Travail des femmes et anthropologie: modifier la hiérarchie sociale en Mauritanie et l'éthique de la recherche

Résumé: En tant que discipline, l'anthropologie et son ancrage dans un travail de terrain à long terme offrent une occasion d'étudier comment les gens modifient leur vie et leurs structures sociales plus larges au quotidien. L'esclavage a été légalement aboli en Mauritanie en 1981 et, malgré la discrimination persistante, les femmes Ḥarāṭīn mettent leur travail au service de leur propre vie. S'appuyant sur douze mois de recherche ethnographique, cet article soutient que les femmes utilisent leur travail et leurs revenus pour affirmer leur pouvoir, revendiquer un rang social amélioré et changer les valeurs sociétales qui informent la hiérarchie. À travers ces processus, ils remettent en question, modifient et parfois reproduisent la hiérarchie sociale plus large et leurs positions en son sein. Bien que l'anthropologie puisse conduire à des idées significatives, cet article explore également les défis éthiques qui se sont posés au cours de cette recherche, y compris l'impact du chercheur sur les événements, la question de savoir à qui cette recherche profite en fin de compte et la difficulté d'obtenir un consentement vraiment éclairé. Il est impératif que les chercheurs, les enseignants, les étudiants et les lecteurs accordent la priorité à ces questions pour aider à rendre la discipline et ses praticiens plus justes.

Mots-clés: Hiérarchie sociale, esclavage, Mauritanie, anthropologie, éthique de la recherche.