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The Role of Hip Hop Music in Breaking Political Taboos in Mauritania: Written Reflection

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The Role of Hip Hop music in Breaking Political Taboos in Mauritania

Written Reflection

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1. Introduction

I'd like to examine the role that hip-hop music plays when it comes to addressing political taboos in Mauritania. There are personal and academic reasons for this choice of topic. My personal reasons lie in an extended stay in Nouakchott in 2019. At that time, I lived for three months in Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania, and visited the Adrar region as well. I learned that Mauritania is “a geographical and cultural link between the zones of North and Sub-Saharan Africa”.¹ The country is influenced by the Arab-Berber cultural area of North Africa as well as the West African cultural area of Senegal and Mali. This distinction is visible in the skin color of the different communities, but especially in language and culture. I also learned that the diversity of the society is by no means free of tensions and that within the society there is a political, economic and cultural dominance of the white Moors, i.e. the Arab-Berber community, who are also called Bidhan (arab. White) in Mauritania.² During the 2019 presidential election, I also came into contact with several political issues, like the ongoing slavery in Mauritania or police violence.

At the same time, I learned twice about the political significance of hip-hop: On the one hand, I heard a song by the rap group Ewlad LeBlad (arab: Sons of the Country), which, according to my host, had to leave Mauritania after publicly criticizing then-President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (2009-2019) on several occasions. Ewlad LeBlad, he said, was now living in Canada. Through a contact with the studio ZAZA Records, I also learned about the power of hip hop for the youth, through expression, through workshops, through dealing with political issues. ZAZA and its sister company, Assalamalekoum Records, organize West Africa's largest annual hip-hop festival, the Assalamalekoum Festival, in Nouakchott. So, my interest was piqued several times to find out how hip-hop music could break political taboos in Mauritania.

For my MA in African Studies, it was important to me to do an internship with a local organization. Through my existing contacts with ZAZA, especially with its CEO, Monza Limam Kane, I had the opportunity to do an internship in Nouakchott as part of my research and to help organize a festival. So, I lived in Nouakchott from February to April, worked for Assalamalekoum Cultures and implemented my research.

The academic reasons for this choice of topic lie in the political significance attributed to hip-hop in general and in authoritarian states in particular. The political significance of hip-hop is particularly evident in its role within authoritarian regimes. It often serves as a vehicle for dissent, providing a platform for individuals to express their grievances, challenge oppressive governments, and mobilize social and political change.

I chose the medium of a film documentary to present the results of my master's thesis. This reflection paper should be understood as complementary to it. I have structured this written

¹ Girling, Kristian. 2017. “An Arab country on the edge of the African world: Mauritania and its geopolitical position — China, the West or the rest?”, Academia. Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://www.academia.edu/33131132>, p. 1.

² I am aware of the problematic background of the word "Moors", however, it is the self-designation of the Mauritanian Arab-Berber people.

section so that the development of the research, the results, the problems, and the decisions can be placed in a larger context. Here, I would like to deal with about HipHop as a taboo breaker, then with the applied methodology, and finally explain why I made certain decisions in the form and content of the two parts of the documentary. The conclusion will be my own position in research and ethical considerations.

The documentary consists of many individual topics that relate to both the political situation in Mauritania and the significance of hip-hop in Mauritania. Therefore, at this point I will only make the observation that Mauritania as a whole has received too little scholarly attention. I would like to discuss everything else about the state of research in the individual topics.

Taboos do not exist in a vacuum. They are contextual. There are different taboos in the Netherlands than in Mauritania, different taboos in private than in public, and, last but not least, different taboos within different communities - for example, food regulations based on religion apply only to followers of that religion. Thus, in a work dealing with the breaking of a political taboo, the concept of *communication space* (Kommunikationsraum) should be included. Bock defines a communication space as follows:

"Of course, in every society, in every political system, there are norms of language use and communication that order and regulate discourse. Every participant in the discourse is aware of them, even if not always consciously. In dictatorships, however, these norms are determined unilaterally and more or less uniformly, at least for the public and official sphere; moreover, they are usually enforced repressively."³

The finding that in dictatorships (or as in the case of Mauritania today: authoritarian states), discourse is protected by repression raises the following questions for the case of Mauritania. What issues raised might constitute violations of such an "ordered discourse," and how would they need to be addressed to generate a repressive response? Where is the line? What measures do state organs resort to in order to punish perceived violations?

In my research proposal, I provided a definition for a political taboo, but added that I would only determine what political taboos mean in Mauritania during the course of the research, not beforehand. Rather than provide an exact elaborated definition, I would like to highlight elements of a political taboo that I believe are important:

- Breaking taboos affects influential circles in Mauritania.
- Breaking a taboo calls into question power relations (at the local, regional, state, and economic levels).
- Breaking a taboo has repressive consequences for the person who says it.

³ Bock, Bettina M. 2018. „Kommunikationsräume in der Diktatur zwischen Öffentlichkeit und Privatheit“ In *Formen des Sprechens, Modi des Schweigens: Sprache und Diktatur*, edited by Sarhan Dhoub, 26-48. Weilerswist [DE]: Velbrück Wissenschaft, p. 33.

- The taboo is perceived by large parts of the population or a population group as a taboo-breaking act.

2. Hip Hop

2.1 The evolution of rap music

The origins of hip-hop lie in the mid-1970s in the Bronx borough of New York. Founded by the local African American population on the east and west coasts, the "urban underclass," hip hop featured a socially critical reaction to precarious living conditions, racism and ghettoization, but despite of that, was organized in party-like events in the beginning. Those events receded in the background in the next 20 years. The so-called Golden Age of HipHop (1988-1995) was shaped by the depiction of poor living conditions ("ghetto-centrism") and the associated criticism of the "system," conveyed in rap lyrics or Graffiti.

"Through their critique of the suburbanization of public discourse, they simultaneously turn against the symbolic violence of the white majority society, [...] In the process, the stigmatization of young black men is also criticized and "respect" is demanded. By means of police, justice and prison, the systemic dimensions of their own oppression are illuminated at the same time."⁴

The hip-hop subculture originally consisted of DJing, b-boying (breakdancing), and graffiti writing in addition to rap. By the end of the '80s, however, a clear commercial dominance of rap was already apparent. Finally, the 90s were marked by great financial success and a stronger focus on gangsta rap. By the turn of the millennium, hip-hop was the most successful music genre in the United States. But the music also gained global impact beyond that. In recent years, streaming platforms have taken the place of major record labels. However, the popularity of hip-hop continues unabated.

I want to focus on rap music in this paper, as part of the hip-hop movement. On the one hand, this is because rap is the most important of all the classic hip hop elements, but on the other hand, it has also emancipated itself from them. But what is the difference between hip hop and rap? Powell defines rap in an early definition as follows: "Rap entails talking (rapping) to a rhythmic musical background. A vocalist (or vocalists, called emcee(s) tells a story while a disc jockey (DJ) provides the rhythm with either a drum machine or turntables."⁵

Rap is only one element of the classical hip hop-subculture. "Rap" specifically refers to the vocal delivery of rhythmic and rhyming lyrics, most of the time over a beat. In our interview, Hamzo Bryn also pointed out this distinction, calling himself a rapper but not a hip-hopper. In general,

⁴ Williams, Justin. 2011. "Historicizing the Breakbeat: Hip-Hop's Origins and Authenticity." *Lied und populäre Kultur / Song and Popular Culture* 56: 133-167, p. 141.

⁵ Powell, Catherine Tabb. 1991. "Rap Music: An Education with a Beat from the Street." In *The Journal of Negro Education* 60 (3), 245-259, p. 245.

he sees the influence of hip hop in Mauritania as low nowadays, but that of rappers as high. But I guess he also made this statement to draw attention to the music genre he created, Chingui-Pop.⁶ I used the term hip hop music for the documentary, which includes all rapped songs and songs sung by rap artists or other artists belonging to the hip hop scene. The distinction is more difficult in theory than in practice, as I have not encountered any artist relevant to this thesis who does not call himself a rapper and / or a hip-hop artist.

2.2. Hip hop as protest music in West Africa

In our interview Dezy Dez and Monza said that HipHop in Mauritania emerged from the US, from Senegal and from France. Dezy Dez mentioned that rap in Mauritania began with imitations of US-American rappers. This statement is supported by academic literature.⁷ Video and audio cassettes as well as vinyl records were still common means of dissemination, often distributed through diplomatic channels. The interviews show that hip hop has existed in Mauritania since the 1980s. However, it was not rap that gave rise to the other styles of hip hop, but first breakdancing, beatboxing, and only in the late 1980s rap.

Rap has political significance in several African countries. Kimminich, who has studied the political significance of hip hop in Senegal and Mali – a work that does not yet exist for Mauritanian hip hop – sees rappers in particular as taboo breakers; according to her, they have the goal of creating greater political awareness for parts of the population.⁸ In this context, she also addressed the repression of the state, which had several politically engaged rappers arrested and censored.⁹

Touré writes about the important youth movements "Y en a marre" (Senegal 2012) and "Balaya citoyen" (Burkina Faso 2013) that they were a reaction to the political, cultural and economic situation in the two countries.¹⁰ "Y en a marre" was launched in January 2011 and was an association of rappers and journalists. The aim of the movement was a protest against the government and an appeal to young people to vote. The movement succeeded in contributing to the overthrow of Abdoulaye Wade, the president.

"Y en a marre" was by no means the first movement of its kind in Senegal. As early as 2000, the Bul Faale movement, which was also supported by rap artists, succeeded in mobilizing

⁶ Cf. Documentary Part 2, 00:02:00-00:02:37.

⁷ Cf. Charry, Eric. 2012. *HipHop Africa. New African Music in a Globalizing World*. Bloomington [IN]: Indiana University Press, p. 4.

⁸ Cf. Kimminich, Eva. 2016. „Kollektive (R)Evolutionen. Rap als Medium der gesellschaftspolitischen Bewusstseinsbildung und der Resistenz im frankophonen Afrika.“ *Lied und populäre Kultur: 60/61*, 145-164, p. 149.

⁹ Cf. Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁰ Cf. Touré, Ibrahima. 2017. « Jeunesse, mobilisations sociales et citoyenneté en Afrique de l’Ouest: étude comparée des mouvements de contestation « Y’en a marre » au Sénégal et « Balai citoyen » au Burkina Faso. » *Africa Development* 42 (2): 57-82, p. 57.

society.¹¹ Rap artists were actively involved in both movements. It was the rapper Serge Bambara, for example, who helped launch the movement in Burkina Faso, alongside the reggae artist Sams'K Le Jah. Music played a major role in the dissemination of the content.

At this point, we will not go into further detail about the movements. However, it is clear that in francophone West Africa and even in Mauritania's neighboring state of Senegal, hip-hop has played a major role in social movements and that there has been cooperation between rap artists and other groups (such as activists and journalists).

3. Methodology and state of research

In the course of the research, I considered several research methods. My research is predominantly qualitative. Some originally planned quantitative elements (surveys, social media analysis) did not materialize or only to a lesser extent for various reasons. Also a planned focus group could not be realized. Nevertheless, I was able to apply various research methods and thus collect data, as will be explained in the following.

My preparation in Leiden consisted primarily of desk research. I was struck by the lack of academic literature that exists on Mauritania in general, but especially on hip-hop in Mauritania. There is still no systematic scientific research on the subject of hip-hop and the breaking of taboos in Mauritania. In fact, there are only very isolated, brief and even outdated writings on hip-hop in Mauritania in general.

Concerning hip-hop in Mauritania, the works of Martin Mourre (*Rap à Nouakchott*, 2011)¹² and Aline Tauzin (*Rap and Rappers in Nouakchott*, 2007)¹³, as well as Boulay's *Presence and International Journeys of Engaged West Saharan Singers* (2022)¹⁴, contained valuable information. Mourre's core thesis that rap in Mauritania is a way of raising awareness for young people, but in doing so cannot explicitly address political conditions, is now partly outdated, as many artists have gone into "exile" since 2011 and from there bluntly criticize the ruling system, including the group Diam Min Tekky which he mentions. Tauzin, in turn, mentions the conflicts of the Moorish rap artists, who traditionally do not have the function of musicians in their society, the griots. For these groups of people, then, rap has a political and social meaning beyond its content. "Rap breaks up that musical production hierarchy and defines a different hierarchy." As much as the phenomenon of rap's sociopolitical significance, as described by Tauzin, is a

¹¹ Cf. Dieng, Moda. 2015. « La contribution des jeunes à l'alternance politique au Sénégal: Le rôle de Bulfaale et de Y'en a marre. » *African Sociological Review* 19 (2): 75-95, p. 75.

¹² Mourre, Martin. 2011. „Rap à Nouakchott, entre langage et esthétisme : vers un remodelage du politique par la jeunesse?“ *Diversité urbaine* 10 (2): 129-140.

¹³ Tauzin, Aline. 2007. "Rap and Rappers in Nouakchott." In *Arabic in the City: Issues in dialect contact and language variation*, edited by Catherine Miller et. al., 309-324. New York: Routledge.

¹⁴ Boulay, Sébastien. 2022. "Presence and International Journeys of Engaged West Saharan Singers." In *The Global Politics of Artistic Engagement. Beyond the Arab Uprisings*, edited by Pénélope Larzillière, 153-180. Leiden / Boston: Brill Publishers.

significant insight simply by virtue of its existence in a traditional society, her article deals not with political taboos. And besides, it is already 16 years old.

There is scholarly literature that refers to the different ethnic communities in Mauritania, such as Boukhars.¹⁵ But here, too, there is a lack of more modern works. The topic of slavery is also treated in academic accounts, for example by Esseissah or Leservoisié, where Esseissah is devoted to the religious legitimation of Moorish slavery and Leservoisié to general democratization processes in Mauritania.¹⁶ N'Diaye has devoted himself to the phenomenon of the "restes" *résistants* among the Soninke, a little-noticed topic that contradicts the narrative that there are only Haratin slaves and Bidhan slave owners in Mauritania.¹⁷

Very little scholarly attention was paid to the topics of November 28, 1990, "Passif Humanitaire," and the border conflict with Senegal (1989-1991), much of it already outdated. Here, the contributions by Magistro and Parker were a particular gain, although they can already be considered contemporary testimonies and require updating.¹⁸ Diam Min Tekky also recommended the work "L'enfer d'Inal," which deals exclusively with the killing of the 28 Fulani soldiers on November 28, 1990, but is now also older than 20 years.¹⁹

The numerous journalistic contributions on hip hop and various other topics related to my research, which were definitely an enrichment, should not go unmentioned. One example is the article "A department in the museum of Wahhabism" by Pierre Daum, which explicitly names the function of hip-hop as a taboo breaker and mentions some protagonists who also played a role in my own research.²⁰

My own records from 2019 and 2021 also helped me in my preparations. But not only the records: I was able to use the contacts I had made since then, especially via Whatsapp, to deal with various research topics, such as individual rap artists. Among these contacts was the rapper and hip-hop organizer Monza Limam Kane. As part of the Intensive Methods Clinic course, my research group conducted an interview with Yero Gaynaako, a Mauritanian Fulani rap artist who lives in Leiden and who considers himself as an artist in exile. After my stay in Mauritania, I met Yero again for a video interview. The conversations were particularly fruitful because already in

¹⁵ Boukhars, Anouar. 2016. "Mauritania's Precarious Stability and Islamist Undercurrent." Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. February 11, 2016. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/11/mauritania-s-precarious-stability-and-islamistundercurrent-pub-62730>.

¹⁶ Esseissah, Khaled. 2016. "Paradise Is Under the Feet of Your Master: The Construction of the Religious Basis of Racial Slavery in the Mauritanian Arab-Berber Community." *Journal of Black Studies* 47 (1): 3-23 ; / Leservoisié, Olivier. 2011. "Démocratisation et décentralisation en Afrique. Un exemple mauritanien." *Ethnologie française* 41 (3): 443-452.

¹⁷ N'Diaye, Sidi. 2016. « Des « restes » résistants en milieu soninké: esclavage, sens de l'honneur et mécanismes d'émancipation. » In *Critique internationale* 82: 113-126.

¹⁸ Magistro, John V. 1993. "Crossing Over. Ethnicity and Transboundary Conflict in the Senegal River Valley." In *Cahier d'Études Africaines* 33, 130: 201-232; Parker, Ron. March 1991. "The Senegal-Mauritanian Conflict of 1989. A fragile equilibrium." In *The Journal of Modern African Studies* 29 (1): 155-171.

¹⁹ Sy, Mahamadou. 2000. *L'ENFER D'INAL: Mauritanie: l'horreur des camps*. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan.

²⁰ Daum, Pierre. 2019. "A department in the museum of Wahhabism". Mauritania remains stuck in the past." In *Le Monde Diplomatique*, August 09, 2019. <https://mondediplo.com/2019/08/04mauretania>.

our first conversation, Yero addressed his Fulani origins, introducing me for the first time to an ethnic perspective in Mauritanian society and rap.

During my stay, it was of particular importance for me to be able to contextualize topics. With some artists I had the chance for a preliminary discussion before the video interviews, with some not. I took notes partly during the interviews, partly afterwards. A lot of information and names were found online, so I could contextualize them later. One example: I met the well-known rap artist Hamzo Bryn by chance after a few days, because he was a friend of my host, a Swiss GIZ employee. The conversation was very open and we talked about religion, racism, the caste system and other rap artists. So it was Hamzo Bryn, who for the first time gave a different perspective on artists in exile, saying that most left because they didn't make money, not so much because of political persecution. While I was not able to bring up this topic in our interview two months later, as we agreed not to talk about any controversial topics, I was able to use it as a cue for further interviews.

Knott et. al mention as limits and challenges of interviews as a research method: *Breadth* (small, often not representative samples), *Artificial* (interview situation is not natural, answers could be influenced by that), *Replicability* (Results depend on contingent interactions), *Anonymity* (difficult to maintain), *Time-consuming* (for researchers and participants).²¹ I think that I mainly noticed the time aspect during my interviews, especially in the transcription. I also believe that individual interviews are not representative, although this impression is somewhat cancelled out when several people from a similar peer group are interviewed. The question of anonymity is certainly elementary and will be dealt with in more detail later in the thesis. Both a benefit and a problem of interview-based data collection is the personal perspective. Thus, it was not always transparent to me what common history the various interview partners had already experienced with each other and whether some answers might not only result from this relationship. Opinions do not always represent facts. In any case, however, the interviews were able to show the different sides of a Mauritanian perspective and were therefore very useful.

Schensul and LeCompte address the need for transcription: „Transcription sometimes is thought only to be the word-for-word creation of a written text from an audiotaped or videotaped account given by an informant. However, in ethnography, transcription also creates field notes.”²²

I would distinguish between two types of transcription in the context of my research. On the one hand, there are key words and names that I wrote down during or immediately after the conversations. I also summarized the events of the day in the evening at the computer. Conversations with friends online helped me to proceed and contextualize what I had experienced. This process, however, has to be distinguished from the transcription of the video interviews, which I started after my return to Germany. Due to the length of the interviews, I decided to have the

²¹ Cf. Knott, Eleanor et. al. 2022: « Interviews in the social sciences. » In *Nature Reviews Methods Primers* 73: 1-15, p. 13.

²² Schensul, Jean J. and LeCompte, Margaret D. 2012. *Essential Ethnographic Methods. A mixed Methods Approach. Second Edition*. New York et al: Altamira, p. 68-69.

English and French interviews automatically transcribed and then to go through them manually and edit them if necessary. Since I am still in contact with the interviewees, I was also able to ask follow-up questions, especially about names mentioned, so that I could start further research. In the case of the interviews on Hassaniya, I had to rely on support by my Mauritanian friends to capture the exact meaning. The transcription process was very time-consuming, but it was also a sifting of the material. Afterwards, it was much easier to classify the interviews thematically.

In addition to the desk research and interviews, there were other research methods that I attempted. As mentioned above, a focus group that I had originally planned did not materialize, in part because of the language barrier. I could have imagined a focus group in English or French, but few Mauritians speak English and many Moors, whether Bidhan or Haratin, do not speak French. Since not all Mauritians speak Hassaniya either, the inability to find a common language for a focus group highlighted this very social problem.

Another qualitative research method is the textual analysis of song lyrics, which I have used sporadically in the documentary and intend to do likewise in the course of this paper when addressing individual taboo topics. The final work turned out to be less quantitative than I had originally planned. I rejected the idea of distributing surveys in recording studios because of the politically sensitive nature of the topic. Only in the case of the death of the human rights activist Souvi Ould Cheine was I able to conduct a social media analysis (on a smaller scale), ultimately as the only quantitative element. In general, however, the use of social media was important for my work, as I was able to follow the latest developments via TikTok, Facebook and YouTube, such as protest videos after Souvi's death.

4. Decisions about the type of presentation

Why did I choose a film documentary as a presentation format?

During my African Studies MA I got to know different research and presentation methods. I practiced different formats (podcast, blog, film documentary) during the different courses and dealt with the question which would be the best format for this final thesis. For the sake of transparency, it was not the topic of hip hop in Mauritania that was decided first, but the decision to make a film documentary. On the one hand, this decision was personally based on the fact that I had experience in film and video editing through video interview projects and music videos and could see a documentary as a new challenge. However, the decision to conduct my work as visual was also accompanied by academic considerations. Ravitch argues for a greater involvement of visual storytelling in research based on four points: *Inclusion* (of a wider audience),

emotion ("Data can be humanized through visuals"), *behavior* ("Visual storytelling compels action"), and *memory*.²³

Rap music in general, when depicted in album covers or music videos e.g., has a visual component. Every music video has an idea that needs to be communicated visually. I didn't want to limit myself to describing these elements, but to integrate them into my documentary. And of course, the actual rap songs should also be part of the documentary. The interviews I had originally planned were also meant to convey an atmosphere that could not be adequately conveyed in a classical, written way. This concerned the setting, the image of the speaker and his / her way of speaking. In addition, it was possible to work with video material that I had either already collected in Mauritania in 2019 and 2021, or that I planned to collect as part of my research during my stay there in 2023: Drone footage of Nouakchott or Chinguetti, street scenes, concert footage, etc. All these were reasons that led me to the decision to present my research in a film documentary, and even more to plan it as such from the beginning, i.e. to let the documentary be both a means of research and a means of presentation.

Why did I choose THIS kind of documentary?

The US-American film critic and theorist Bill Nichols distinguishes between six documentary modes:

- Expository: "speak directly to viewer with voice over"
- Poetic: "stress visual and acoustic rhythms, patterns, and the overall form of the film"
- Observational: "look on as a social actors go about their lives as if the camera were not present"
- Participatory: "filmmaker interacts with his or her social actors, participates in shaping what happens before the camera: interviews are a prime example"
- Reflexive: "calls attention to the conventions of documentary filmmaking and sometimes of methodologies such as fieldwork for the interview"
- Performative: "emphasized the expressive quality of the filmmaker's engagement with the film's subject; addresses the audience in a vivid way"²⁴

However, Nichols also considers the blending of these modes to be a common practice. Although Nichols' model was a very early and influential one, it is still far from the only one for categorizing documentaries. Because of its clarity, however, I will draw on it for this paper.

²³ Ravitch, Sharon. 2020. "Imagining Forward: Visual Storytelling to Make Research Accessible for Practice." Methodspace. Accessed July 20, 2023. <https://www.methodspace.com/blog/imagining-forward-visual-storytelling-to-make-research-accessible-for-practice>.

²⁴ Nichols, Bill. 2010. *Introduction to Documentary. Second Edition*. Bloomington [IN]: Indiana University Press, pp. 149-155.

I knew early on that interviews would be an essential part of the research. How I ended up using the interviews depended a lot on the interviewees and the content. After I had recorded all the interviews, it became clear to me late in the transcription process that a thematically structured approach for the documentary would be much more appropriate than other approaches, such as a chronological one that would take into account the order of the interviews. In my estimation, the whole documentary consists of four of the modes listed by Nichols. *Participatory*, because I interact with my interviewees, *expository* because I felt the need to add a voice-over in order to explain the context of some issues, *observational* because I let the artists speak for themselves in their music, and finally, *performative* because – next to other examples – I actively entered the stage when I did a song with Leila Moulay.

I have made many decisions in the course of research that I would now like to explain. First, the form of the documentary:

I have divided the documentary into two parts, with the first part dealing with several topics that I see as possible taboo subjects, as well as how the state deals with them and those who speak about it. In short, the first part serves as an introduction to Mauritania, political taboos, freedom of expression and repression. The second part, in turn, deals with rap in Mauritania and its role in breaking these taboos. Special consideration is given to artists in exile.

Perhaps the most radical decision was the decision to (largely) abandon color and present the material in black and white. This can be interpreted symbolically for a country in which skin color plays such a role as in Mauritania. Potential viewers could be made aware of the issue of color in the first place. I also like the black and white visual style. However, the main reason for the decision is that the documentary was shot with four different cameras. Unfortunately, the equipment situation on site was different than previously agreed and temporarily disastrous, not all cameras or related batteries or memory cards were always available. The same was true for tripods and lighting, since everyone in the studio had access to these things. Therefore, it was necessary to resort to different cameras, which explains the different recording quality. This is not only reflected in the resolution, but also in the different coloring. I didn't want to burden myself with the color editing of these interviews in the editing process, which is why I left the subject out - and only used it consciously in the final scenes. Regarding a possible publication, I have not yet decided whether I will present the documentary in color or black and white.

Essential for the visual design of the film is the question of the respective setting of the interviews. Some interviews arose very spontaneously, such as that of the influencer Cheikh Parker at my home, others were planned for a very long time (such as Roi Hems at his home in Hanover or Yero in Leiden). Some were only possible online because of the geographical distance (Ewlad LeBlad, Adnan Abdou), others *seemed* to me only possible online (Diam Min Tekky), whereby I did not want to take the risk of postponing an interview with Diam Min Tekky for weeks only because of the background and possibly conducting it live in Belgium. Some interviews were long planned and yet spontaneous in their realization (Hamzo Bryn, Monza), which is noticeable in the lack of lighting in Monza's apartment. A major problem was often to find a suitable place where undisturbed speaking was possible AND which was visually appealing AND had a relation

to the interview partner AND in the best case was accessible without own car. Three interviews were conducted at my internship site, Assalamalekoum Cultures, with the exterior shots with Imperial working much better than the interior shots with Seniya Yarah Allah and Balla Toure in both setting and camera quality. All three interviews, however, lack a personal touch in the setting; Imperial even initially refused to enter the location due to personal issues with Monza. I interviewed the reggae group BSP, the rapper Hamzo Bryn, and the slammer Cira in their respective studios, Buzzshit and NDAT on their rooftops, and Leila Moulay and Hawa Dem in their homes. I also interviewed Dezy Dez at his house, but before his interview, we prepared the setting a bit for the first time (microphone in the hallway, cleaning up). I interviewed Mr. X on the street in front of his shoe store. While the personal reference is not directly evident here for viewers, the scenery he suggested is impressive. Based on the results, I would prioritize an appealing background in the future among all the above factors.

In general, the two parts of the documentary consist of interviews, off-camera segments with underlying video footage (shot by myself or recorded with a screen recorder), and music videos. I found the latter to be particularly important, as music videos sometimes have a strong symbolic meaning, as in the case of Diam Min Tekky's video BRULE, in which the Mauritanian flag is burned.²⁵

All these decisions concern the form of documentation, and I would like to explain the content of the decisions in detail below.

5. Explanation of the Content

5.1 Documentary Part 1

The first part of the still unnamed documentary consists of an introduction (0:00-6:12) and a conclusion (2:06:46-2:09:28); in between are the topics Diversity & Racism (6:13-25:50), November 28, 1990 (25:51-38:03), Slavery (38:04-55:55), Religion (29:59:59), Media (1:11:00-1:15:54), Social Media (1:15:55-1:23:36), Corruption (1:23:37-1:30:12), Repression and Freedom of Speech (1:30:23-1:39:49), Souvi (1:39-50-1:58:45), and personally experienced Repression (1:59:59:45). I would like to explain below why I chose this order of topics, but also why I chose the structure within each topic.

The **introduction** explains my personal connection to Mauritania and the themes of hip hop and political taboos. I focus on my first three-month stay in 2019, but use video material from 2019, 2021 and 2023. I also play parts of the song "Liberez" by the rap group Ewlad LeBlad, who now live in Canada. As mentioned in the documentary, the song has a personal meaning for me, as it

²⁵ Diam Min Tekky. 2017. "BRULE." December 9, 2017. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-4B1IATjhzs>.

was my first contact with Mauritanian hip hop. It is also a very political song. A Mauritanian friend helped me translate it from Hassaniya into English.

Ewlad LeBlad – Liberez²⁶

Lyrics Translation:

Part 1:

Oh, you criminal, you stole everything from Mauritania till there's nothing left.
Release Wedaddy and Jiddou! They said nothing but the truth,
and that is why they were sent to jail.
You're always accusing people of wrongdoing,
like Biram, Ould Yali, Ould Khada, Boubacar.
They are not thieves like you. You sold the airport and the port.
You sold the fish. You compromise people lives.
You sold SNIM.²⁷ If we reveal the truth, we become prisoners.

Refrain:

End this stageplay! Freedom, we want freedom!
Freedom for Wedaddy and Jiddou, we want freedom!
The justice is a mess. It serves nobody but the president.
End this stageplay! Freedom, we want freedom!

The song "Liberez" is a clear criticism of former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz (2009-2019) and quotes imprisoned individuals. Cheikh Jiddou and Abderrahmane Weddady are two Mauritanian bloggers who were briefly detained, Biram [Dah Abeid] is a long-time human rights activist, [Abdallahi Salem] Ould Yali is a blogger who was detained in 2018, and Boubacar [Ould Mes-saoud] is the president of SOS-Esclaves who was detained several times.²⁸

The next topic in part 1 of the documentary is **diversity and racism** (6:12-25:50). I started this topic by asking my interviewees what their native language is. The answers serve on the one hand the transparency for the viewer of the documentary, on the other hand the analysis for me. I wanted to know if a certain perspective might arise from belonging to a certain community.

²⁶ Ewlad LeBlad. 2019. "Liberez." April 2, 2019. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1EP-kKIU-JxM>.

²⁷ SNIM stands for *Société Nationale Industrielle et Minière* and is a mining company, in majority hold by the state.

²⁸ On the arrest of Ould Jiddou and Abderrahmane Weddady cf. "Mauritania jails bloggers Abderrahmane Weddady and Cheikh Ould Jiddou on false news charges." CPJ. March 28, 2019. <https://cpj.org/2019/03/mauritania-jails-bloggers-abderrahmane-weddady-and/>, on Ould Yali cf. "Mauritania: Activist Charged for Decrying Racism." Human Rights Watch. September 21, 2018. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/09/21/mauritania-activist-charged-decrying-racism>, on Biram cf. Bah, Abdoulaye and Ollivier, Alyssa. 2018. "Mauritania keeps anti-slavery activist Biram Dah Abeid in prison — and far away from parliament." Global Voices. November 12, 2018. <https://global-voices.org/2018/11/12/mauritania-keeps-anti-slavery-activist-biram-dah-abeid-in-prison-and-far-away-from-parliament>.

The question of the mother tongue seemed to me to be a way to enter into a sensitive topic like the ethnic community without greater conflicts. At the same time, most of the interviewees were shown for the first time in the documentary. Here the order in which they appear:

- Mar Ba: Rapper, Member of the rap group Diam Min Tekky, lives in Belgium since 2011.
- Yero Gaynaako: Rapper, former member of the rap group Minen Tey, has been living in Leiden since around 2016.
- Leila Moulay: Singer, lives in Nouakchott.
- Roi Hems: Rapper, former member of the rap group Force Trankil, has been living in Hanover, Germany for several years.
- Ndat: rapper and singer, lives in Nouakchott.
- Ishaq: rapper and singer, member of the rap group Ewlad LeBlad, has lived in Canada for several years.
- Seniya Yarah Allah: Human rights activist, head of an NGO for women's rights, lives in Nouakchott.
- Cheikh Parker: Influencer, lives in Nouakchott.
- Monza: former rapper, festival organizer, recording studio director, founder of Chitaari, lives in France and Nouakchott.
- Hamzo Bryn: Rapper und singer, lives in Nouakchott.
- Buzzshit: Rapper, lives in Nouakchott.
- Adnan Abdou: Student, lives for several years in Texas, USA.

I would also like to introduce those whose interviews I conducted earlier, when a standardized question of the mother tongue was not yet planned.

- Mr X: slammer, former rapper, festival organizer, founder of Chitaari, lives in Nouakchott.
- Dezy Dez, former rapper, producer, head of an online contest, Podcaster, lives in Nouakchott.
- BSP, a reggae duo originating from rap, originally from Nouadhibou, lived in Nouakchott at the beginning of the documentary.
- Imperial, rapper, lives in Nouakchott.
- Boss hmd, rapper and singer, lived in Nouakchott (now USA) at the beginning of the documentary.
- Balla Toure, human rights activist, lives in Nouakchott.

I also didn't include two interviews in the documentary, Missy Hagga, a young rapper from ZAZA Records and Cira, a poetry slammer. Both interviews seemed to me not suitable – either thematically (Cira) or concerning the information content (Missy Hagga).

As part of the diversity theme, I also inserted the passage in which Monza explains the Ethnic composition of Mauritanian society, at least in part. It seemed to me as a meaningful

introduction. I have reproduced the additional introductory passages to the society, which also refer to the other black population groups Wolof, Pulaar, Soninke and Bambara, in an audio commentary. Through the subsequent use of the song "Ileyne eynté" (Until when) by the rap/reggae duo BSP, the focus will be directed for the first time to the topic of racism.

Bsp - Ileyne eynté²⁹

Lyrics translation (Refrain):

The Black and the White must be treated equally.

Black is a synonym for poverty in Mauritania.

The Black and the White must be treated equally.

Black is a synonym for poverty in Mauritania.

In the following scene, Yero Gaynaako (10:50-11:48) answers to the open question of what is the biggest problem in Mauritania, that this would be the question of the coexistence of the different communities. He sees this question as the basis of all other problems, which is why he considers it very important. Human rights activist Seniya Yarah Allah and rappers Mar Ba (Diam Min Tekky) and Roi Hems explicitly introduce the problem of racism, while rap artist Imperial takes a contrary view on the issue (14:32-16:05), in which he argues for a definition that could be equated with apartheid. Based on this definition, he sees no racism in Mauritania because there are no separate areas for blacks and whites in the country. I chose the following excerpt from the song "Touche pas à ma nationalité" by Diam Min Tekky and Soldier Hems, both Fulani artists, because of the political problems mentioned in the song. Neither Mar Ba nor Soldier Hems reside in Mauritania presently. This is the English translation of the French and Pulaar song:

Lyrics translation (Part 1 beginning):

Never touch my nationality.

Always the same mistakes are repeated:

Slavery, coup d'état, embezzlement, deportations, arabization, becoming their tick.

To deny a citizen his nationality is a crime...³⁰

Later, the different perspectives on racism in Mauritania are described. Some see racism in blacks and whites, others connect the issue of racism with the caste system within a community. Finally, this article includes statements by Seniya and Yero regarding the origins of the attempts at Arabization made by the Mauritanian government, which date back to the presidency of Moktar Ould Daddah (1924-2003). However, it is important to note that the initial Arabization of the black population in Southern Mauritania began with a widespread Islamization in the early 18th century, as dated by de Chasse. But particularly during the reign of the military and long-

²⁹ BSP Ndb. 2019. "Ileyne eynté". January 5, 2019. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bRK0g5DtONM>.

³⁰ Soldier Hems and Diam Min Tekky. 2011. « Touche pas à ma nationalité. » September 29, 2011. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t-rquj5Rac8>.

time ruler Maawiya Ould Sid'Ahmed Taya (1984-2005), the wave of Arabization reached its peak.³¹ In 1973 Mauritania joined the Arab League, in 1994 – under Maawiya – the Arab Maghreb Union. Since 1991, Arabic has been the only official language - a disadvantage for the francophone population.

After the interview passages, I go into an off-commentary on the name Murabitun, which is originally from arab. ribāt derives, a small border fortification during the Islamic conquest of the Maghreb.³² Additionally, the Almoravid dynasty referred to itself as Murabitun. While the self-designation as Murabitun is a Moorish matter, I do not believe it pertains to the whole of the Mauritanian society. Rather, it symbolizes a connection to the Arab-Berber north. At this point it should become clear that cultural belonging is historically justified.

The second subject is the **November 28, 1990** (25:51-38:23), but in a wider context the crimes against the black population during the reign of Maawiya, the *Passif Humanitaire*. My idea in compiling the statements was to have the event summarized by my interview partners, to refute the arguments of the then government (coup attempt) and then turn to the actual causes. My interlocutors here were initially only Fulani, as well as the affected soldiers, and I also knew that Yero and Mar Ba paid special attention to the subject in their songs or in the documentary published by Diam Min Tekky.³³ Imperial, provided an opposing viewpoint and stated he lacked reliable information, also accusing Diam Min Tekky of the same.

All in all, I put the topic of November 28 directly behind the introductory topic of diversity and racism, because there is a substantive connection, which, however, has manifested itself in a concrete crime in 1990. In this way, I hope that the issue of racism will not only have a reference to the present, but also to the level of dealing with crimes from the past, to which a particular population group, the Fulani, fell victim. Through the passages of Seniya and Yero, I tried to explain the importance of the theme for the present time, that, according to Yero, society as a whole could not grow together as long as problems of the past were unresolved. However, the example of the human rights activist Balla Touré, who visited the site of the 1990 crimes in 2011, Inal, also shows that this topic is certainly the subject of debate and is not entirely taboo in the Mauritanian public.

This topic was followed by the topic of slavery (38:24-54:28), which also has a racial component, but affects another population group, the Haratin. Slavery in Mauritania is a widely recognized

³¹ Cf. Chasse, Francis de. 2014. « Vers une histoire anthropologique et sociologique de l'ethnie en Mauritanie. » In *État et société en Mauritanie*, edited by Abdel Wedoud Ould-Cheikh, 157-226. Paris: Karthala, p. 69.

³² Cf. Chabbi, Jacqueline: « Ribāt. » In *The Encyclopaedia of Islam. New Edition*. Ed. VIII, 493–506, p. 494.

³³ Diam Min Tekky. 2022. "Mauritanie : 30 ans d'impunité." November 25, 2022. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yn1RwclSmaE&t=1226s>.

issue and is featured in international media and human rights reports.³⁴ Relevant reports can also be found on YouTube.³⁵

In academia, Miers has summarized the developments of recent decades. For example, she states that the French had already banned slavery in Mauritania in 1905, as did the independence constitution of 1960. Both times, this remained ineffective, and even the Mauritanian government's declaration in 1980 that slavery had now been abolished did not reflect reality³⁶ Salem points out that the economically difficult situation of the 1970s (droughts, war against Western Sahara) alone led to an impoverishment of the Bidhan and thus to the financially enforced release of many Haratin - thus to fewer slaves - and the first abolitionist movements such as El-Hort and SOS-Esclaves emerged.³⁷

For the topic of slavery in the documentary, the conversation with Balla Touré was crucial. He emphasized the need for international pressure to combat slavery and also explained the practical difficulties of the fight against slavery, including the legal re-qualification by local courts, which can transform a case of slavery into a case of "illegal exploitation of another." Several interviewees, such as Seniya and Mr. X, have expressed that discussing slavery in public is not an issue. However, in recent years, various anti-slavery activists, including Balla Touré, have been punished. Even Biram Dah Abeid, a prominent figure in the fight against slavery, has served time in prison multiple times, most recently in 2018.³⁸ The case of Biram, however, also shows the diversity of the way in which Mauritanian government deals with political opponents. Biram is not only an abolitionist, but also a politician and ran in 2019 against the current president Mohamed Ould Ghazouani. Since I was told several times during my time in Mauritania that Biram has undergone a change since the presidency of Ghazouani, I also wanted to address this in the documentary, the criticism of former companions and sympathizers. Here I could also use the song by Ewlad LeBlad, *Huquqi al-alafa*, which means "[rights] activist for fodder".³⁹ In the song, Biram is bluntly accused of corruption and hinted at a contrast to "real" activists who were in the worst prisons in Mauritania.

³⁴ Cf. "Mauritania. Events of 2020." HRW. June 30, 2020. <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/mauritania>, "The unspeakable truth about slavery in Mauritania." The Guardian (Website). June 8, 2018. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2018/jun/08/the-unspeakable-truth-about-slavery-in-mauritania>.

³⁵ CNN. 2012. Mauritania: Slavery's last stronghold. March 19, 2012. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5yQIOPD8mNo>.

³⁶ Cf. Miers, Suzanne. 2000. "Contemporary Forms of Slavery." *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 34 (3), 714-747, p. 722.

³⁷ Cf. Salem, Zekeria Ould Ahmed. 2010. "Militants aux pieds nus: Les transformations du mouvement des Haratines de Mauritanie." In *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 44 (2), 283- 316, p. 288.

³⁸ "Mauritania: Further Information: Mauritanian anti-slavery activists released: Biram Dah Abeid and Abdellahi el Housein Mesoud." Amnesty International. January 23, 2019: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/afr38/9716/2019/en/>.

³⁹ Ewlad LeBlad. 2020. "Huquqi al-alafa." November 15, 2020. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQYQmW1Ob8E>; the title could be translated with "[rights] activist for fodder". In Hassaniya, *huquqi* is a rights activist, *alafa* is a feed bag for donkeys. It is an obvious reference to Biram's assumed greed.

Slavery in Mauritania is usually equated with Bidhan slaveholders and Haratin slaves.⁴⁰ It was important to me to point out that although this is the most dominant phenomenon, the traditional hierarchies of other parts of society, such as the Soninke, also knew slavery and social structures continue to this day in parts. For this reason, I have included the anti-slavery song of Mauritanian Soninke rappers Yimbi Kumma and Carbo, which deals with slavery among the Soninke. In terms of science, existing social inequalities have been investigated with the black groups in Mauritania.⁴¹

As so often, I noticed, in Mauritania power dynamics do not only rely on the principle of black and white.

The fourth topic dealt with in the documentary as a possible taboo topic in Mauritania is religion (54:29-1:10:48). Here the research was much more difficult, as religion has a strong unifying character for the majority of the population. Therefore, most of those who otherwise expressed themselves quite freely in the interviews were more cautious here. Adnan Abdou, a Bidhan emigrant who is now in the USA, spoke very freely about it. I got his contact through two mutual acquaintances whom I had told about my research.

Mauritania generally has a very pious society. Although in recent years I have repeatedly experienced skepticism about Islam in general or local manifestations of it in personal conversations, public criticism is life-threatening. Yero talked of the book burning of Biram, who was subsequently accused of having burned the Koran. In fact, Biram, along with six other activists, had burned the writings of several Maliki theologians in April 2012 and had been imprisoned for four months.⁴² At the time, various intellectuals had worked to eliminate the misunderstanding that it was the Koran that the activists had burned.⁴³

The case of Biram, and perhaps even more so the case of blogger Ould Mkhaitir, who was sentenced to death in 2014 for publicly criticising the religious legitimacy of slavery, show that it is above all the opinion of the public and the opinion of clerics that blame the misconduct of individuals. I share Adnan's assessment that in such situations the government acts only for opportunistic reasons.

By thematizing the case of Hamzo Bryn and Leila Moulay and their song "It started from Nouakchott" I tried to build a bridge from taboo topics to hip hop.⁴⁴ The decision of Leila Moulay not to wear a headscarf in 2013 caused a nationwide controversy. Shortly after the release of the

⁴⁰ Cf. The unspeakable truth about slavery in Mauritania.

⁴¹ Cf. N' Diaye, p. 125.

⁴² Cf. Spiegel, Justine. 2012. "Lutte contre l'esclavage en Mauritanie: Biram Ould Abeid sort de prison, le Coran à la main." Jeune Afrique. September 4, 2012: www.jeuneafrique.com/174467/politique/lutte-contre-l-esclavage-en-mauritanie-biram-ould-abeid-sort-de-prison-le-coran-la-main.

⁴³ Diagne, Oumar. 2012. "Quand Biram brûle des livres." AVOMM. Mai 4, 2012: www.avomm.com/Quand-Biram-brule-des-livres_a14895.html.

⁴⁴ Hamzo Bryn. 2020. "It started from Nouakchott (Official). September 28, 2013. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l16iNYd6EEo>.

music video, the Mauritanian online platform CRIDEM highlighted the ethnic aspect of the incident.

„Certains internautes qui soutiennent les artistes avancent comme argument principal l'hypocrisie de la « brigade morale » mauritanienne en soutenant que pourtant, leurs sœurs afro-mauritaniennes se « dévêtissent » depuis l'indépendance du pays sans qu'il n'y est jamais eu de réactions ou de polémiques. [...] Ce n'est pas parce qu'elles s'habillent ainsi qu'elles doivent être considérées comme des musulmanes de seconde zone. Le pire, c'est que ce sont des jeunes de ma génération qui soutiennent ces arguments. »⁴⁵

For me, it was astonishing that Leila herself justified her decision in the interview, among other things, with her origin and says that she was not obliged to wear a hijab, because she had Moroccan and Fulani ancestors.

I decided to show my own story with Leila after the events of 2013, as it was received similarly - albeit fortunately much less intensively - in the end. As stated in the documentary, we received very positive feedback on Youtube and TikTok in general. On Facebook, however, unknown channels with a high reach shared our song. Under a neutral positive text by Facebook user Abd Nasser Beibe, with which he shared our music video EJNEBI on Friday (24 April 2023) on Facebook, there were 317 comments as of 10.08.2023.⁴⁶ The negativity of some comments, mostly written in Hassaniya, was disproportionate to the positive rating ratio (more than 435 thumbs up, more than 84 hearts). A selection:

- Mostafa E.: Mashallah, a great talent, may God protect you all, in the fridge of the dead.
- Mohamed Yahya al M.: There is no power but with Allah. My brothers, the calamities have returned, every day, it appears alone, what is the highest priority?
- Sidahmed W.: Mashallah, beautiful talents and a model of conscious and educated young people. I ask Allah to keep you all in the refrigerator of the dead with the power out.
- Dahmoud M.: Everyone who contributed to the production of this song should be arrested and sentenced to death. What is this, brothers?

By using my own example, I wanted to show how quickly such threats can occur. For me, the statements by Adnan Abdou regarding an angry population that forces politics to act are now a little more tangible.

Following this topic, I covered **media** (1:10:49-1:15:42) and **social media** (1:15:43-1:23:25) in the documentary. The decision to put these issues before the topics of freedom of expression, corruption, Souvi and repression is mainly due to dramaturgy. If this is also a scientific documentary,

⁴⁵ Sidi Mohamed, Diagona. 2013. "La dignité des afro-mauritaniennes, l'autre débat soulevé par le clip started from Nouakchott." CRIDEM. October 8, 2013: cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=648357.

⁴⁶ Beibe, Abd Nasser. 2023. "Famous MR artist Leila Moulay returns to the art scene after a 9-year absence, this time through a foreign-themed song with German DE artist Leo De." [Status update]. April 24, 2023. Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100001464086232/search/?q=leila>.

I consider the topics of freedom of expression, corruption, repression, and Souvi to be more interesting than media and social media. The detailed discussion of human rights activist Souvi Ould Cheine's death serves as the tragic climax of the documentary. I have analyzed the role of HipHop in breaking political taboos by examining media and social media. It is essential to consider alternative approaches when addressing taboos. Regarding media freedom, I have incorporated official statistics, such as the World Press Freedom Index, to support the personal impressions of my interviewees.⁴⁷

In particular, the economic aspect, which is also important for journalists, was relevant to me, so I tried to raise awareness of a less idealistic approach to the realities of Mauritania: „When we talk about journalism in Mauritania, it's not always about the big questions of politics and society; it's also about the economic survival of the individual.”

It is also the financial independence that led me to address the phenomenon of influencers. I myself met some Mauritanian influencers and I noticed that they can live well from their popularity. Therefore, it seemed obvious to me to ask Hamzo Bryn to what extent the traditional social order is thereby questioned. However, the surveillance aspect of the state in social media should also be highlighted, since - as is still stated - numerous bloggers were arrested through opinion contributions in social media. Social media in Mauritania may be a possibility for discussion, but a "total freedom" does not exist there, as Seniya also mentioned. After the social work, I decided to briefly mention the topic of migration. By mentioning that two of my interviewees (Boss HMD, Atoumane Kane) and my cameraman Baba migrated to the USA during my stay, I wanted to illustrate the drama of the current economic situation and the associated lack of perspective. The fact that in 2023 it is mainly the USA that Mauritians travel to, and less Europe, has taken up several media.⁴⁸

In the online interview I conducted with the rap duo Diam Min Tekky (and here mainly with Mar Ba), he mentioned that unlike slavery and November 28, corruption is an issue in Mauritania to live with every day.

The subject of **corruption** is certainly a special case among the possible taboo topics in Mauritania. I myself experienced corruption when issuing visas, as there is a certain freedom for employees here. A 30-day visa costs 55 euros / 60 USD, but there is no fixed price in the local currency Ougiyia (MRU). Here it happened to me several times that the employee estimates a much higher price than the current exchange rate. Corruption, as listed in the documentary, is also a frequent topic in traffic controls. It was also mentioned to me that there is corruption on a larger scale, especially with licensing rights. Politics is not unaffected by this either. In 2010, for

⁴⁷ Cf. "Mauritania." Reporters without Borders. Press Freedom Index 2023. Accessed June 28, 2023: <https://rsf.org/en/country/mauritania>.

⁴⁸ Cf. Sow, Yero. 2023. "De la Mauritanie aux États-Unis, la périlleuse traversée de l'Amérique". Afrique xxi. April 5, 2023: afriquexxi.info/De-la-Mauritanie-aux-Etats-Unis-la-perilleuse-traversee-de-l-Amerique ; Offenhartz, Jake. 2023. "Seeking Asylum and Work, Migrants Bused Out of NYC Find Hostility." VOA. May 28, 2023: www.voanews.com/a/seeking-asylum-and-work-migrants-bused-out-of-nyc-find-hostility-7107167.html.

example, there was a deal between President Aziz and the Chinese fishing company Hongdong. Concessions to foreign companies that are actually detrimental to the Mauritanian economy are granted in return for favours to the rulers.⁴⁹ The fish stocks off the Mauritanian coast are among the richest in the world, with just under 970,000 tonnes of fish caught in 2018. Fisheries are one of Mauritania's most important economic sectors and contribute significantly to GDP.⁵⁰ The fact that former President Aziz was arrested under suspicion of corruption in March 2021 surprised many, as Aziz and the new President Ghazouani worked together for decades.⁵¹ This relationship was also often criticized in the interviews, for example by Ishaq (Ewlad LeBlad) or Roi Hems. Aziz was released after a six-month prison term.⁵²

I tried to make the part in the documentary, in which I thematize corruption, many-sided. On the one hand, I worked with the data from Transparency International to give a feeling for how the situation in Mauritania is estimated internationally (rank 130 in the Corruptions Perception Index, score 30/100). At the same time, I have built in my own experience of corruption during a traffic control, which I accidentally took up, as it is intended to illustrate how corruption functions in everyday life. It is - similar to the concert recordings of the Women Independence Festival - a coincidence, though not a happy one, which is quite significant.

The next topic is the climate of **freedom of expression and repression**. I have included this topic in order to provide an overview of the sometimes conflicting assessments of my interviewees. Overall, Mauritania has had five rulers/presidents since the fall of Maawiya in 2005, but only Aziz and Ghazouani ruled for more than two years. Comparing Maawiya, Aziz, and Ghazouani seemed important to me because by that time the documentary had already established the crimes committed under Maawiya. The responses of my interviewees were generally divided. Everyone agreed that freedom of expression was lower in Mauritania under Maawiya. Nevertheless, the ratings of Aziz and Ghazouani were different. Some did not want to comment on Ghazouani (like Monza), for example, because one could only judge his policies after they had ended. I think this is a flimsy but understandable excuse. Some (such as Mar Ba, Roi Hems) considered the state of freedom of expression similar, others considered the situation under Ghazouani worse (Balla Toure, Seniya Yarah Allah). The "*loi portant protection des symboles nationaux et incrimination des atteintes à l'autorité de l'État et à l'honneur du citoyen* », which was adopted on 9 November 2021, provides harsh penalties for those who attack national symbols, including the president". The law is very vague, which prompted several human rights

⁴⁹ Godfrey, Mark. 2020. "Mauritanian firm seeks Chinese investment despite Hong Dong investigation." Seafood Source (Website). April 29, 2020: www.seafoodsource.com/news/business-finance/mauritanian-firm-seeks-chinese-investment-despite-hong-dong-investigation.

⁵⁰ "Fishery and Aquaculture Country Profiles. Mauritania." FAO. May 26, 2020: www.fao.org/fishery/en/facp/mrt?lang=en.

⁵¹ "Former Mauritanian president Aziz in jail over corruption charges." France 24. June 23, 2021: www.france24.com/en/africa/20210622-former-mauritanian-president-aziz-in-jail-over-corruption-charges.

⁵² al-Bakkai, Mohamed. 2022. "Mauritania releases ex-president from prison." Anadolu Agency. January 9, 2022: www.aa.com.tr/en/africa/mauritania-releases-ex-president-from-prison/2468734.

organisations to criticise it.⁵³ It is generally important to me to present the diversity of opinions in Mauritania. That is why I have included the voices of Monza and Imperial in this question, as they take a more defensive stance towards restricting freedom of expression. Imperial in particular, who was also critical of the critics on the topics of racism, slavery and 28 November 1990, sees this topic as a responsibility, especially for individuals.

The most tragic event related to my stay was the **death of human rights activist Souvi Ould Cheine** in a police station in Nouakchott. Souvi was probably beaten to death by members of the police. He died on February 10, 2023, and as his friend Seniya Yarah Allah said in an interview, "at the hands of the police". The circumstances of his death caused a media frenzy and large protests. The case quickly became a national issue, and on February 11, President Ghazouani sent a delegation to Souvi's family to express his condolences. In the documentary, I deliberately constructed the situation around Souvi according to the following structure:

Who was Souvi? - How did Souvi die? - Who gave the order to kill Souvi? - Theory about General Ould Misgharou - Musical processing of Souvi's death - Social relevance of his death

It was important to me to hold myself back with information and to let the interview partners, of whom at least three (Balla Toure, Seniya Yarah Allah, Dezy Dez) knew Souvi personally, speak.

Why did I include the Souvi case in the documentary? His death was not taboo in the true sense of the word, as the wave of protests was so great that political decision-makers saw themselves on the defensive and the topic was publicly addressed. At the same time, Souvi's death was received intensively and quickly by the rap scene. The three songs featured in the documentary were all written within a week of Souvi's death. Linguistically, the song by Boss is entirely in Hassaniya, the co-operation project "Justice pour Souvi" by Dahman Pro, Imperial, Sylla, Bab Ly, Franconman, Babisco, Esgeey, Maxim, Collete, Jkaria, Badz Boy, Kals Gang und Letto Ji as well as the song „JUSTICE FOR SOUVI“ by Absen feat Guelzo, Africain Soldier, BRMX are multilingual. Mar Ba was also involved in the production of Dahman Pro, which can be proof of the involvement of artists abroad. The lyrics of the songs are restrained with direct accusations. Boss HMD sings very generally about injustice and poverty, about the lack of justice and about migration due to lack of prospects.⁵⁴ The group around Dahman Pro also laments the lack of justice and a sense of insecurity. In the part by Franconman, the topic of racism is addressed: „The death of Souvi is a threaten for me. My mother is black. I ask you to find a white man who is not safe and controlling his own future.“⁵⁵ Souvi was Hartani, the three songs are the most famous, but not

⁵³ Organisations signataires. 2021. "Loi sur la protection des symboles nationaux: une menace pour la liberté d'expression sur les réseaux sociaux en Mauritanie." Accessnow. December 2, 2021: www.accessnow.org/press-release/protection-des-symboles-nationaux-mauritanie.

⁵⁴ Boss hmd. 2023. "Justice." February 12, 2023. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D6hyar0ZXV8>.

⁵⁵ Dahman Pro Feat Imperial, Sylla, Bab Ly, Franconman, Babisco, Esgeey, Maxim, Collete. 2023. "Justice Pour Souvi." February 17, 2023. YouTube : https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cb53vQ_n5cE.

the only ones about Souvi. Many artists have released songs as far as I know from all the black communities in Mauritania. I don't know of any Bidhan artists who would have done that.

SOUVI UND SOCIAL MEDIA

That the death of Souvi reached such attention within a day can only be explained by social media. On February 10, the first videos were already found on Youtube showing spontaneous demonstrations in front of the Dar Naim 2 police station in which Souvi was killed.⁵⁶ As in the rap songs, the video creators and demonstrators demand "Justice pour Souvi". The hashtag also exists in Arabic (al-adála li-Sufi), but with less impact. The French language is dominant in the public use of Souvi, but Pulaar is also often heard in videos. I think that the use of French is a binding element among multilingual blacks in Mauritania, with the exclusion of some Haratin, which are similar to the Bidhan arabophon.

The hashtag #Justicepoursouvi flared up mainly on Tiktok and Twitter at two times in Mauritania. First, immediately after his death, whereby the intensive use of the hashtag took about a week, to a lesser extent two more weeks. According to my own observation, hashtags that have also been used in the context of Souvi are #darnaim, #mauritanie, #mauritanieMR #nouakchott #zaatar and #violencepolicieremauritanie.⁵⁷

The associated videos mainly show demonstrations, spoken comments (by Mar Ba, for example) and rap songs, partly in an artistically incorporated form such as a theatre staging. A photo of Souvi was often shared and incorporated into the videos. The photo, in turn, was also artistically edited and serves as a thumbnail for the song around Dahman Pro on YouTube. On Twitter I also found the link #BLM, both in the hashtag and content. Thus, the death of Souvi is placed in an international context.⁵⁸

The second time the hashtag #justicepoursouvi appeared was in early June in the context of the death of Oumar Diop. Diop was a young Wolof who died in a hospital in Nouakchott in late May after being arrested by police. The death of Diop has led to violent protests. Also in this case, politicians reacted to public pressure and ordered an autopsy carried out by a Moroccan coroner.⁵⁹

⁵⁶ GiraajoSN. 2023. "SOUVI OULD CHEINE ASSASSINE DANS UN COMMISSARIAT MR 🖐️ JUSTICE pour tous et partout." February 10, 2023. YouTube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rK7owsS7EVg>.

⁵⁷ Zaatar is a part of Dar Naim, Dar Naim is a district of Nouakchott, after which the police station was named.

⁵⁸ Ba, Oumar. 2023. "Des Images de George nous reviennent en tête au USA." [Status update]. February 11, 2023. Twitter: <https://twitter.com/OumarBa57030392/status/1624210967721660418>.

⁵⁹ Breuil, Léa. 2023. "Mauritanie: Oumar Diop inhumé à Nouakchott après les conclusions de l'autopsie marocaine." RFI. June 11, 2023: www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20230610-mauritanie-oumar-diop-inhumé-à-nouakchott-après-les-conclusions-de-l-autopsie-marocaine.

As I say in the documentary, the analysis of social media shows that #justicepoursouvi also re-appeared in the context of Diop's death. This assessment took place in several social media.⁶⁰ Little is known about Diop's life, he was not a well-known activist like Souvi. I therefore think that the death of Diop is more of a more ordinary case of police violence. The death of Souvi, however, has political implications because it was carried out by the local police, but as my interviewees suspect, was ordered by a higher authority. I heard for the first time in a recording studio during my internship that General Mishgarou Ould Sidi ordered the murder of Souvi. It was important for me to include this theory in the documentary, as there is no real alternative theory. It seems to me that either my Mauritanian interlocutors believe that Misgharou is the client, or they simply stop asking. But as Balla Toure notes, the original intention may not have been to kill Souvi, but to intimidate him. However, the theory about Misgharou also shows how rumors spread via social media. However, these rumors were also fed by the fact that Misgharou met with the family of Souvi, although, as far as I know, the two had no personal relationship before. The meetings are documented.⁶¹ First demands for resignation linked to the Misgharou theory came up immediately after the death of Souvi, in local media and social media.⁶²

The Souvi case takes up a lot of space in the documentary, as I think it is both important for the question of what topics can be freely discussed in Mauritania - should Misgharou at least have ordered the intimidation of Souvis, has hit a sore spot. The theme is also important, as rap has played a central role as an expression of grief and protest. I don't know of any songs that didn't originate from hip hop and that addressed Souvis' death.

The topic Souvi is followed by the description of the **personal experienced repression** of my interviewees.

The song « Ou est la justice ? » of the rapper Imperial, has received only little attention in the two years since its upload, but is thematically interesting.⁶³ The song deals with police violence. According to his own account, the rapper Imperial received threats after the release of the song, but this cannot be verified. The Imperial case is indeed interesting, as in many places he takes a more defensive attitude towards the state (racism, November 28, 1990, slavery), but apparently has made negative experiences with the state authorities himself. A completely different case is Adnan Abdou, who was politically engaged and broke his hand through police violence at a demonstration in 2016 as a very young man. The case is certainly remarkable because Adnan is

⁶⁰ Mims. 2023. "Deux mois après de l'activiste Souvi dans les mêmes circonstances. » [Status update]. June 3, 2023. Twitter: <https://twitter.com/mohamedmbodj/status/1665007839495041025>.

⁶¹ Muritania Bieyunina. 2023. "shqyqh almqtwl alsfwy wld alshyn twdh allqa' aldy tm fy mnzl almkhtar wld aghwyzy, alasbab waldwaf'e (The sister of the murdered Sufi Ould Al-Shin explains the meeting that took place in the house of Al-Mukhtar Ould Aguizi, the reasons and motives.)" March 17, 2023. YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_pwKmkvOog.

⁶² Ould Daha, Hanafi. 2023. "aqylwa msghary wld aghwyzy.!/ hnfy wld dhah (Dismiss Mesgari Weld Aguizi!)" Akbar El Yom. February 13, 2023: <https://akhbarelyom.info/?p=5488>; Nahnu Shabáb ath-thaura fí mauritánia (We are the youth of the revolution in Mauritania). January 26, 2020. Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/422698658512321/posts/591838788264973>.

⁶³ Imperial Cherghawi feat. MC one. 2023. « Oû es la justice? » YouTube. March 7, 2021. YouTube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c-kIQ4-kwBs>.

Bidhan. Balla Touré experienced several months of imprisonment, sometimes under difficult conditions. I myself list bloggers and journalists who have been arrested for raising certain issues in Mauritania, such as Mohamed Salem Kerkoub, who criticized the use of funds in the Corona struggle.⁶⁴ However, prison is not the only answer of the state. Mr X mentioned, that there are many ways to make people submissive and that artists in particular are affected by this - for example by performance bans - is one of the most important in the entire documentary. I would like to return to this in the discussion of the second part. Additionally, I would like to return to the ethical concerns I raised at the end of the first part of the documentation later in this work.

5.2 Documentary Part 2

The second part of the documentary consists of Intro (0:00-3:12) and Conclusion (1:19:42-1:28:52), Evolution of Mauritanian HipHop (3:13-10:13), Music in Mauritania (10:14-17:08), Rap & Politics in Mauritania (17:09-20:25), Artists Engaged in Exile (17:25) (25:51-1:04:16), Ethnic rap (1:04:17-1:08:08), Chitaari (1:08:06-1:10:55) und Festivals (1:10:56-1:19:41).

After the already mentioned distinction between rap and hip hop, I considered a chronological classification of the development of rap in Mauritania to be useful. I wanted to find out to what extent the political significance of hip hop has possibly changed. Therefore, I started with the basics and asked for the first hip hop artist in Mauritania. Several interviewees named Ali Waiga (today: Amenophis). Ali Waiga was a dancer and rapper. Mr. X explained to me that he divides Mauritanian hip hop music in three phases.

„In the beginning, Mauritanian hip-hop wasn't political, it was apolitical and revolutionary, and it fought against the system. Then came another generation, which had one foot in the anti-system and the other in the artistic innovation of music. The latest generation is into artistic innovation. We see very perfectionist videos, tracks that don't have the lyrical power we were talking about earlier, artists who express themselves much more through clothes than words, and I think that's a demand that's becoming more and more prevalent.”

The examples of Fulani rapper Adviser, Bidhan rapper Hamzo Bryn and other major artists such as Macsim Dady, Taleb Latimore, Authentique BD and Abda MC are largely apolitical. An exception is the song "Amin Naagima" by Authentique BD, which he raps on Pulaar. Although I could not (let) translate the late discovered song, but both the video content (police violence, demonstrations) and the Youtube accompanying text are clear: „Nous réclamons la liberté et l'égalité de tous les citoyens mauritaniens. L'accès à la santé, à l'éducation et à la justice.”⁶⁵ Here, however, the exception of modern political rap rather confirms the rule: Successful Mauritanian rap today is apolitical. Perhaps the half-sentence should be added here “*if it is not from artists in exile*”, since the music of those artists living in Europe or Canada is predominantly political. It is

⁶⁴ "Mauritanian Authorities Must Release Journalist Salem Kerboub." Media Foundation for West Africa. January 19, 2021: www.mfwa.org/mauritanian-authorities-must-release-journalist-salem-kerboub/#:~:text=The%20Media%20Foundation%20for%20West,journalist%20and%20two%20other%20bloggers.

⁶⁵ Authentique. 2023. « Amin Naagima. » February 13, 2023. YouTube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFflvMrcmKw>.

certainly a question of generations, as Mr. X pointed out. Artists in exile like Yero, Diam Min Tekky, Ewlad LeBlad are all between 35 and 45 years old today. Their songs are among the most political. They also reached and achieved many calls, but in principle produce less music today than the local artists. X not asked in which periods he classifies the three phases of rap. Personally, I would classify the second phase, which was characterized by protest and creativity, temporarily in the 2010s, and its climax with the public escape of Ewlad LeBlad 2015, while also in the following years, critical songs continued to appear and were received in Mauritania, but became less and less mainstream.

In 2019, I learned that not everyone in Mauritania wants to present themselves musically in public. While playing music together with a couchsurfer from Hong Kong and a Mauritanian guitarist, the latter asked me not to publish the spontaneously created video on Youtube. I later learned that he was not a griot and that only those Moors traditionally have the right to make music. However, I have to add that the statement in the documentary, that you often see smileys about faces of song covers, can not remain unrestricted. In fact, the impact of social media and influencers here is very severe. In 2019, I have rarely seen faces on social media, today the cover of songs or just lip syncing is very popular at TikTok. Influencers like Assya Houssein generate their main content about it - and show face.⁶⁶ In the last four years, there have been clear developments in this regard. However, it may be necessary to distinguish between self-presentation on Instagram and the acquisition of a life as a musician. My interviewees in any case pointed to the difficulties of being active as a rap musician at all, beyond all content, due to the caste system (which occurs primarily with the Moors). Boss HMD, who decided against a life as Zuwaya and a career as a musician, explains the success of his first song Bali, which received more than a million views within a year, through the public debate about this decision.⁶⁷

The second essential statement in this context is the preference of griot musicians over other musical genres by the state. It is true that griot families are particularly close to the government and often compose hymns to Mauritanian presidents.⁶⁸ It is no exaggeration to say that griots in Mauritania are system-supporting. One exception is the singer Maalouma, who was publicly critical of the system during Maawiya's presidency and supported the opposition. Even under Aziz she was active in this respect.⁶⁹ Griot musicians are a figurehead of Moorish culture. On the other hand, there are rap artists who are not supported because of their family background.

I have chosen to come to the explicit political function after this general political meaning of rap. I asked my interviewees about the **political significance of hip hop**. The statements shown in the documentary reflect the overall opinion. Everyone considers rap to be politically important

⁶⁶ Assiya Houssein (@assya23). August 14, 2023. TikTok: https://www.tiktok.com/@assya23_/video/7267163133909814533.

⁶⁷ Boss hmd. 2022. «Bali.» May 29, 2022. YouTube : <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sHDtm17kzwg>.

⁶⁸ Rim Music. 2020. "اعل سالم _جمهوري." April 22, 2020:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=22MRjzf8rtw>, Chingui Production. 2021. "فيديو كليب "موريتاني غزواني".
"أداء الفنانين :كري منت آب ، منى دندني؛ نورة سيمالي، باب حمبارة، كمب"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PKouYzZ5U4g>. August 3, 2021. Youtube:

⁶⁹ Cf. Boulay, pp. 159-160.

in Mauritania, with Dezy Dez also pointing out that rap is not only a power-critical and oppositional attitude, but there are also artists who appear on candidates' stages as part of the election struggle:

„Some people only see their income; they just want to gain money. So, when there's a municipal campaign or a presidential election, we put up tents by the roadside. We do certain events in town. They come and take part in these events. They sing for this mayor or that minister or that personality running for office. They do it, there are some of them. They get a lot of criticism, but some of them do it, without shame or anything.”

Imperial pointed out that the Mauritanian government once supported Ewlad LeBlad, as it would now support Zein Tv, so Hamzo Bryn and associated artists. In fact, in the song "Ehl Elkher 2", a collaboration between rap artists and griot singers, there is the information that the song was co-financed by the Mauritanian Ministry of Culture and the state television El-Mouritaniya.⁷⁰ The same support was given to the predecessor song, "Ehl Elkher", which means family of good. Both videos are very elaborately produced and stand out in their production quality. It is a good mood music for the presentation of a diverse and worth seeing Mauritania. The message in these state-funded or semi-state-funded songs is clear and also becomes clear in the number of passionately waved Mauritanian flags.⁷¹

Ewlad LeBlad, a rap group now living in exile, was also involved in such cooperations, although the production level was still far below today's Standards. This led to collaborations with griot singers such as Mouna Dendeny and the legend Dimi Mint Abba.⁷² Their song "El Mourabitoon" was also financed by the state-affiliated company Mauritel.⁷³

In this context, I would like to draw attention to the financial vulnerability of rap artists, even if this is discussed later in the documentary. Artists are vulnerable, and I talked to Hamzo Bryn beyond the camera. He told me that his brother Sidi is responsible for his video production. Sidi is very talented, but the financial resources are not nearly as far-reaching as in the state-funded productions. His song "Bandiya", published in 2023, was shot with by his brother using a drone and an iPhone.⁷⁴ Sometimes you see paid advertising in the music videos of successful artists like Macsim Dady or Hady Oslo.⁷⁵ Like Mr. X in the first part of the documentary said, there is

⁷⁰ Zein Tv Mauritania. 2022. "DJ DHAKER Ft GARMI, WARDA, CEEPEE, MACSIM, HAMZO/ EHL ELKHER 2." December 04, 2022. Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HmnDy8QXCoM>.

⁷¹ FFRIM TV. 2018. "Hamzo Bryn - Mourabitounes, Allez ! Feat Mouna Dendeny & Taleb Latimore." November 10, 2018. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7Hr1kFiFn3w>.

⁷² Mohamed Mahmoud. 2011. "Ewlad leblad feat Mona Dendeny." December 1, 2011: www.youtube.com/watch?v=CN1VyW3u4to; Fred Soupa. 2010. "Dimi Mint Abba (Mauritanie) (extrait de ZLIKA)." January 3, 2010. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=19aTW5llygc.

⁷³ al-Fan al-Mauritani. 2016. "Ewlad Leblad - El Mourabitoon." July 3, 2016. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=YT-EjnrRB1g.

⁷⁴ Hamzo Bryn. 2022. "Bandiya." October 26, 2022. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=4fH7N4zR7ms.

⁷⁵ Zein Tv Mauritania. 2020. "Macsim Dady - WOW (Clip Officiel)." March 4, 2020. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=cMUQTKlwl-M; Hady Oslo. 2023. "Chovou Tawari." February 19, 2022. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRD9zyn3pFU.

not only the prison as a representative measure on the part of the state, but also bans on appearances. But on an even lower level, through the failure of cooperations, through no-offers, through no-invitations, artists can get into precarious financial situations. Mauritania is a poor country. I have therefore come to the conclusion that, in evaluating the situation, one should detach oneself from the idealism of a For or Against the President, the State, the system and take on a sober, economically oriented perspective when assessing hip hop in Mauritania.

The more cooperative artists are confronted by artists who have raised their voice publicly, so-called *artistes engagés*. The rapper Skip, for example, published a call against the election of Ghazouani in 2019. In the song "Mani zarg li-Gazwani" (I will not vote for Ghazouani) he sees Ghazouani only as a reflection or puppet of former President Aziz and another military president.⁷⁶

Since several interviewees have been actively involved in the history of rap in Mauritania for decades, I asked them - similar to the question in part 1 of the documentary - about the changed situation under Maawiya, Aziz and Ghazouani, this time in dealing with critical artists. The same names were often quoted: DJ H, Roi Hems (Souffrance du Mic), B.O.B. To clarify:

Imperial said about DJ H:

„There used to be a rapper, DJ H. He was a vehement opponent against the system. Every time he had problems with the authorities, the police, etc., he was always in trouble.“

I didn't find any songs by DJ H, but I did find an interview that was published on YouTube in 2007.

He says in French: "I am 100% hardcore, I am revolutionary."

In response to the reporter's question as to why he would not rap about positive topics, the artist replied: „The problem is that here, nothing is good. [...] There is only crap in this country. [...]“

The video also shows parts of his music videos, and it is remarkable how low the level of music production is.⁷⁷ BOB (short for: Bibbé Oumminibé Balébé, les enfants du peuple) were a rap group that started with dedicated rap in 1996, left the country under Maawiya in 2000 and has lived in France since then. In their texts they dealt with various critical topics such as slavery, racism, human rights, etc. There is a song on YouTube about slavery, which was uploaded in 2009 and according to the video was already shot in France.⁷⁸ With the mentioned artists Roi Hems, I met in Hanover. We had our interview in the house of his in-laws, where he also lives.

⁷⁶ Journal Taqadoumy. 2019. "Skip - Mani zarg li-Gazwani." June 4, 2019. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=5xgVDOqdQOw.

⁷⁷ Valerian Mazataud. 2007. "DJ H - An MC in Sahara." February 16, 2007. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jwet_BPvXMA.

⁷⁸ Rap Rim. 2009. "ESCLAVAGE- Mauritanie hip hop." September 3, 2009. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=RtJf0fui8O4.

There is no doubt that he was and is a committed artist, but he makes no secret of the reasons for his move to Germany: it was his wife, there were no political reasons. On the subject of slavery, he said he would talk about it regularly in his songs, but had no sanctions to fear, even if he would travel to Mauritania every year. Unlike in the case of Roi Hems, I also spoke to three artists / artist groups who claim to have left Mauritania due to state repression.

Diam Min Tekky is perhaps like no other group the political voice of the Fulani in rap. They started as three in 1997 and according to their own statements were engaged from the beginning. Although Yero is also a committed artist who was already very critical of the government during his time in Mauritania, his departure has not received the same attention. I decided to make the different assessment of "artists in exile" a big issue. I noticed how little unity exists in the rap scene. Diam Min Tekky was already very critical in her time in Mauritania and described politicians as "politiciens". Mourre mentions state repression such as censorship of the album and several arrests.⁷⁹ Mar Ba told me about the circumstances of his departure in 2011. In contrast to Ewlad LeBlad, the exile in Belgium seems to me to have been less of an impulse reaction, but a long-term realization that the circumstances would not allow a life to continue. If Diam Min Tekky had already expressed herself politically before her departure, her songs have been given a new edge since her time in Belgium. The song BRULE, which was released in 2017, represents a general settlement with the political system in Mauritania and President Aziz. In 2017, Aziz had the Mauritanian flag and anthem changed after a referendum, Diam Min Tekky connected the new flag with Aziz and rejected it.

In the song BRULE they finally burn the flag and instead pose with the old one. In addition, they burn - at least as a visual effect - a picture showing a newspaper cut by President Aziz and his cousin, the businessman Bouamatou. In the chorus of the song it says in French:

“Burn, burn, burn this flag!
Burn this flag that doesn't represent you.
Say it, say it, we don't care
about the change of the flag and the change of the national anthem.”

The video received a lot of media attention.⁸⁰ The comments on Facebook and below the video are positive, but I have personally heard much to the contrary, for example from Dezy Dez. He says rappers have other ways to express their criticism. The flag is larger than a person to be criticized, such as the president.

If you look at the many flags in the videos of Hamzo Bryn and the burning flags of Diam Min Tekky, you can see the opposite approach to the state and its symbols. Therefore it is interesting that on the last album of Diam Min Tekky, 30 ans, a feature with Hamzo Bryn can be found,

⁷⁹ Cf. Mourre, p. 137.

⁸⁰ "LES DIAM MIN TEKKY BRÛLENT LE NOUVEAU DRAPEAU MAURITANIEN." Boolumbal. December 15, 2017: cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=705772.

without it would have harmed the latter politically. The common song *Diam* is apolitical, but nevertheless proves that there does not always have to be an either-or.

Diam Min Tekky's entry in 2022 after eleven years of absence received a lot of attention. In our interview, Mar Ba said that there were problems with entering the country:

„If Ghazouani had no problem with me, he would not have stopped me at the airport in Mauritania, he would have not taken my passport, he would have not stopped me from doing my concert. They would have not gone to arrest people who listened to my songs.”

In a video released on the night of their appearance in Mauritania, in March 2022, Mar Ba also complains about these problems.⁸¹ A planned concert in Nouakchott, which had originally been allowed, was cancelled by the authorities. This process was intensively discussed by Diam Min Tekky on social media. On March 9, they even held a press conference in Nouakchott to discuss the cancellation of the concert.⁸² Shortly afterwards they left again. The case of Diam Min Tekky is remarkable in that it shows how artists in exile can re-enter Mauritania. For a possible re-entry, all the artists in exile with whom I spoke, so Yero Gaynaako, Diam Min Tekky and Ishaq (Ewlad LeBlad) said that they would like to live in Mauritania again one day. Dezy Dez replied:

„Today we are in 2023, the government that is there has nothing to do with a problem of rappers. So, the last one was Ewlad LeBlad and it was with Aziz. BOB, I've talked about, it's the early 2000s and it was with Maawiya. It was the Maawiya government. It's been more than 23 years like that, 24 years. All this is over, everyone can come home.“

Although I have no information about a return of an Ewlad LeBlad artist, B.O.B. has given concerts in Mauritania over the years. This is understandable, as the rule of Maawiya has been over for over 15 years. Diam Min Tekky was able to enter, give a press conference and leave again despite very critical public statements about the current president Ghazouani.⁸³

About their reasons to leave Mauritania, the Yero and Diam Min Tekky each say that it was impossible for them to continue working as musicians. Both mentioned physical violence by the police, but not immediately before leaving the country. More dramatic was the situation of the third rap group, Ewlad LeBlad, which, unlike Yero and Diam Min Tekky, consists of two Hartani and a Bidhan and raps in Hassaniya. As described in the documentary, Ewlad LeBlad's escape was a publicly followed impulse response to the arrest of Hammada. Mr. X pointed out the greater importance of Ewlad LeBlad that they would speak the language of the system, Hassaniya.

⁸¹ GirlaajoSN. 2022. "Diam min Tekky à Nouakchott 10 ans après. Ils rentrent à la Maison." March 3, 2022. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=fsvgLfdjBw.

⁸² Baye Ndiaye, Babacar. 2022. "Mauritanie : Diam Min Tekky s'exprime pour la première fois depuis l'interdiction de son concert." CRIDEM. March 10, 2022 : https://cridem.org/C_Info.php?article=754620.

⁸³ For example here: [Télé Mbedda Tv. 2021. "Mar Diam Min Tekky Ghazouani est le président plus nulle." July 25, 2021. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQeUzmtUq6U.](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQeUzmtUq6U)

During their time in Mauritania, Ewlad LeBlad were also very critical, almost offensive, towards the then President Aziz. Boulay points to the song "Vabraka", which was released two months before Hammada's arrest and allegedly provoked it.⁸⁴ At the same time, they were accused of making a pact with Aziz' enemy cousin Ould Bouamatou. In this context, an offered donation of 100,000 euros is often mentioned, but without going into whether it was accepted.⁸⁵

My interview partners in Mauritania were divided about the **artists in exile**. Monza accused Ewlad LeBlad of being populist, of having no political ideas and of being untrustworthy because of her changed relationship with Aziz. Hamzo Bryn told me that all artists left the country because they didn't earn money with the music.

It is a complex subject that is perhaps impossible to penetrate, because in a rather small rap scene with over 20 years of history, the personal conflicts of the artists, who almost all know each other personally, cannot be completely analyzed. However, it remains to be noted that the artists in exile often accuse those in their homeland, such as Monza, of being adapted and cooperating with the system. In return, the accusation is that the artists are aggressive in their rhetoric, have not adhered to valid laws or want to lead a life abroad. I have deliberately given the topic of artists in exile a lot of space, because I find that in this context some questions are discussed that are relevant to my research question.

Did the artists have to flee? If so, why? What taboo did they break?

I guess the "have to" is a matter of definition. I do not believe that the life of each individual artist was threatened in Mauritania, but they were all familiar with state repression. If an artist cannot live off his art because the state makes it more difficult for him, this could be a reason to leave the country. To make matters worse, even the fewest non-political artists in Mauritania earn a lot of money. In the case of Ewlad LeBlad, their flight was linked to their conflict relationship with President Aziz.

Personally, I am convinced that the enemies of Aziz are not automatically the enemies of Ghazouani, which is made clear by the re-entry of Bouamatou in 2020. At the same time, however, the artists were critical of General Ghazouani when Aziz was still president. There are cases of bloggers who have been arrested under the National Symbols Act for speaking critically about the president. There is no guaranteed security in Mauritania for those who criticise politics. However, I do not think that the artists cannot return to Mauritania because they have expressed themselves critically in the past, but rather that they would have problems because of how they express themselves in the future. I have no opinion on the statements of some of my interviewees that the exiled artists only wanted to have a simple life abroad and therefore left. However, I know from Yero that he is now married and has children in the Netherlands. Despite all political commitment, it is understandable that the return to a life with a lower standard and

⁸⁴ Fadel TV. 2016. "Ewlad Leblad - VABRAKA." January 25, 2016. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhfhApkVKM; cf. Boulay p. 162

⁸⁵ "Le combat de Mohamed Ould Bouamatou pour la démocratie." September 15, 2019. Mauriweb: mauriweb.info/node/7350.

perhaps without one's own family seems only little convincing. Diam Min Tekky have been living in Belgium for eleven years and have built up an existence here.

Finally, what influence do artists in exile have? Diam Min Tekky (and here especially Mar Ba) regularly comment on political issues via social media. Their statements are heard at least among the Fulani in Mauritania, as Mar Ba's video on the death of Souvi shows. The documentary "Mauritanie : 30 ans d'impunité", which deals with the Passif Humanitaire and was produced by Diam Min Tekky in 2022, was well received. Yero also frequently comments on his Facebook page on questions about Mauritania and Fulani. His target audience is not exclusively Mauritanian. Ewlad LeBlad is not very active on social media. In general, I have the impression that their *raison d'être* has been greatly diminished by the change of power from Aziz to Ghazouani. They were the critics of a president who is no longer president. The last released song, which according to the logos used, was even supported by the Mauritanian state, deals with a project on youth unemployment.⁸⁶

As an artist in exile, I understand those who were or are critical of the political system in Mauritania and claim to have left the country or to have had to leave for these reasons. It is difficult to verify in detail whether the escape was necessary, especially since such a necessity would have to be defined first. But it seems to me that many of the artists could go back to Mauritania from a purely security point of view. Only, as mentioned before, what advantages would they have from leaving a home a second time in life?

I have implicitly dealt with the topic of **ethnic rap** in many parts of the documentary, but wanted to see it explicitly as a separate topic to show that the heterogeneity, coexistence and juxtaposition in Mauritanian society is also reflected in rap. In this context, Seniya Yarah Allah says:

"Hip hop is very important, it is always important. In addition, rap conveys many messages. But I think you should change the way you do hip hop, because many rappers only speak their language. There is no way for the other communities to understand the message. I think the goal of rappers should be to convey a message, but who is the addressee of the message? Not just the population, but the decision-makers who can change decisions, I mean the owners of power. [...] With a different approach, I think it would have even more impact. Because the decision-makers, as we just spoke about the inequalities, they are all Bidhan, Moors. The Moors are not going to understand what Diam Min Tekky is going to say."

Mr X confirms this imbalance and cites Hamada's arrest as an example.

In the course of my research, I got the impression that it is above all a cultural and social ignorance, which many Moors - and here especially the Bidhan - show to the non-Moorish black communities. This ignorance is also evident in rap. Many Bidhan, in my experience, did not even know Diam Min Tekky, Yero, Soldier Hems or B.O.B., but all knew Ewlad LeBlad. Only very few Moors speak Wolof, Pulaar or Soninke, but not all Wolof, Halpulaar and Soninke speak Hasaniya, albeit the majority. I think Seniya's statement that artists like Diam Min Tekky reach their

⁸⁶ RIM MEDIA SHOW. 2022. "EWLAD LEBLAD -PEJ - Official Video Clip." September 15, 2022. YouTube: www.youtube.com/watch?v=ChNaB6IFOiU.

target group, but not the policy makers, is correct. It is the phenomenon of a parallel society whose critique fizzles out, kind of getting lost in translation. Rap in Mauritania does not speak with one voice, but with several voices in several languages.

Integrating this polyphony into a project is the basic idea of **Chitaari**. Chitaari (Hassaniya: what's new?), originally *Journal rappé*, later other formats such as *Debat rappé*, is a project created by Monza and Mr. X. The project, which was originally published on YouTube and later on Facebook, had its peak in 2016-2018 and is now running very irregularly, mostly without much attention. The project provided a news platform made by artists of all Mauritanian languages, but without translation, so that only very few Mauritians could understand all parts of an episode. The quality of the rappers' contributions was also very fluctuating. Nevertheless, the production effort was very high in some episodes and for the first time an attempt was made to spread classical news via rap in several languages. Despite Monza's statement in our interview that creating awareness for him was just folklore and not his goal, I think that Chitaari's goal in the end was exactly that. The supply of information to different parts of the population in order to ultimately achieve social change.

I have listed in the documentary the reasons for including the topic of **festivals** in the documentary. The Assalamalekoum Festival is the largest rap festival in West Africa and is primarily run by Assalamalekoum Cultures, whose CEO is Monza. I know Monza since 2019 and did my internship at Assalamalekoum, where I was involved in the organization of the Women's Independence Festival. What applies to the WIF also applies to the Assalamalekoum Festival: It helps to raise international awareness of Mauritania, attracts international - sometimes more, sometimes less well-known - artists to the country and is an opportunity for young local people on stage, to try out and grow artistically; at the same time it is an experience for the visitors to be in front of the stage and to see a little of what is normal in many countries of the world, i.e. to share live music with other people. I never visited the Assalamalekoum Festival, but according to videos, the atmosphere seems similar to this year's WIF. Both WIF and Assalamalekoum tend to grow in size each year - as evidenced by the move to Mauritania's largest stadium, the Stade Olympique. On stage it is a predominantly, in front of the stage an almost exclusively black festival. I did not see any Bidhan on the videos of the Assalamalekoum Festival and live at the WIF, or at most on the side of the police. This, too, is ultimately a phenomenon of ethnic rap.

It was important for me to incorporate my experience at this year's WIF into the documentary. The similarities between the two festivals are striking: First of all, the concert night in March 2023 featured mainly rap music. There were national and international artists, in this case all female. The audience was black Mauritians, although I think the vast majority were Wolof, Pulaar and Soninke. I estimate the proportion of women at 30-40%, which is higher than at the Assalamalekoum festival.

Although the WIF has only existed for 5 years and the ASSF since 2008, I think the number of visitors to the concert is comparable, several thousand people each. Both festivals consist not only of the concert, but also of several workshops, markets and debates. The concert takes place in front of the Stade Olympique, and I was commissioned to document the entire festival on

film. In this case, I stood next to other filmmakers in the middle of the audience and filmed while a colleague flew the drone. In this context, the police repeatedly tried to control a seemingly chaotic situation by using force. As far as I could see, no one was being arrested, but people were being driven apart at a rapid pace, only to be reunited after a few moments. There was also internal security, which consisted of only a few people. The concert was interrupted several times, but not canceled. The impression I had immediately after the concert that my Mauritanian friends and colleagues and I did not share the same understanding of normality was one of the most important experiences of my stay. I did not mention the name of the festival in the documentary because I cannot estimate the impact of these very sensitive recordings on other festivals if they are published. Even without naming it, I think the festival should be easy to identify. I haven't made a final decision yet.

At the end of the second part, I wanted to see my interview partners evaluate the function of rap in breaking political taboos. I would now like to explain the commonalities and differences of the statement: Mr. X sees rap as a "social regulator", as an institution that points out which topics are considered taboos and how to deal with them. Balla Toure points out the importance of hip-hop in addressing human rights issues. He sees the strength in rap in its limitlessness and in the achievement of youth. Diam Min Tekky and Ishaq (Ewlad LeBlad) see rap not only as a message, but also as a solution to the problems. Imperial sees the role of rap not in solving problems, which only politicians can do, but in raising awareness. Seniya also sees the function of rap in raising the awareness of the population, but also repeats her statement that rap does not reach the political decision-makers. Monza sees rap as a debater, as a popularizer of taboos, and finally Dezy Dez uses the question to take a final swipe at the griots. I think that in the compilation of these answers it becomes clear how different the perception of the task of rap is. The only thing we can agree on is that rap is important in the debate about political taboos, in whatever function. In my final statement, I make it clear that there are many ways to talk about taboos. Rap can be one of them, perhaps one of the most important. In any case, I think that rap helps to generate attention in the population and to show the perspectives of others. This is opposed by the language problem in the country. But even if rap moves only the topics of the respective own community, topics can be brought out of the darkness and create an awareness of problems. However, rap alone cannot solve taboo topics.

6. The Research and the Researcher

Bolton writes of the "impossibility of objectivity," referring to the handling of research data. The through-the-mirror writing she recommends is for "self-illumination and exploration, not to create a product."⁸⁷

I would like this process to be understood on several levels. First, in a country like Mauritania, where ethnicity plays such a big role, who you talk to as a researcher is crucial. For example, in the case of Yero or Diam Min Tekky, their commitment and perception is based on their

⁸⁷ Bolton, Gillie. 2009. *Reflective Practice*. Newbury Park [CA]: SAGE Publications, p. 4.

affiliation as Fulani. Other Fulani like Monza emphasize this aspect much less, which is why I believe it is a conscious decision by them, but one that results in a particular perspective being conveyed in an interview. Ultimately, each interview only presents a subjective perspective, but in the case of Yero and Diam Min Tekky, this was obvious. So, I had to realize that it made a difference to the research results from my interviews whether I spoke to men or women, to artists or activists or journalists, to blacks or whites, to opponents or minions of the regime. The latter in particular was not always immediately recognizable. I don't think I have talked to any real supporters of the Mauritanian state, but I have talked to some who have come to terms with it and are making money with this arrangement. One should also consider that my interviewees also spoke to a person. My own role(s) in Mauritania, which I would summarize as researcher, intern, tenant, musician, tourism entrepreneur, friend, and white (non-French) European, certainly influenced my interviewees or even made the interviews possible. The example of the song with Leila, for example, also shows my different roles in Mauritania. In this case, one role helped the other. Only through the joint musical work with the ZAZA producer Charke and the singer Badoufa did I get to know Leila and her family and was ultimately able to conduct the interview. Only through Leila did I get to know an influencer, who in turn introduced me to the influencer Cheikh Parker, who in turn knew the ex-girlfriend of the rapper Adviser, so that it almost came to an interview with Adviser in the last week. It was only through my landlady that I met Hamzo Bryn and Adnan Abdou, whom she happened to know.

Ellingson emphasizes that "research stories are stories." She sees people as "storytellers and story listeners."⁸⁸ I believe that this is even more true for a film documentary than for a classical text-based scientific work. In a documentary, there are many more artistic decisions to be made. Which material do I use? Which parts of which interviews do I place in which context? How detailed do I want to work?

In the course of editing, I deliberately decided against a purely interview-based approach to the documentary because, first, some topics needed classification and, second, my own experiences can vividly portray the situation in Mauritania. My experience with everyday corruption, my experience with police violence at the WIF, and the reactions to my song with Leila Moulay, which are listed in the documentary, are testimonies. I was very lucky in some respects. It was these experiences and contacts, these linkages of roles, that made my research in Mauritania at times exhilaratingly easy. Through my work as a tourism entrepreneur, I have local partners and friends. I was also able to have important background discussions with them, and sometimes they even arranged contacts for interviews. Figuratively speaking, I have tried to cast nets in all directions. I believe that this was right and necessary, because at times the research turned out to be very challenging.

My initial planning was based on the contacts and support of Monza, my internship supervisor. However, I had to realize that he was not in Mauritania at all for the first four weeks. So I don't remember any interviews that came about directly on his initiative. At the same time, of course,

⁸⁸ Ellingson, Laura L. 2017. "Authoring. Telling a Research Story." In *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*, Thousand Oaks [CA]: SAGE Publications, p. 5.

I benefited from the work for Assalamalekoum, since there were artists or people with contacts to artists in the environment of the organization and the ZAZA Studio connected to it. Nevertheless, an important learning for me was that the state preserved in memories does not always correspond to today's reality. In 2019, ZAZA was a studio where rappers came and went every day. It therefore seemed easy to make contacts. In 2023, however, very little was recorded there and the focus was much more on organizing the WIF Festival. There were whole days when no one was in the studio.

I worked with Monza's nephew Baba during my research. He was supposed to be my cameraman but was at times much more than that, and at times less. He arranged some contacts (Cira, Buzzshit, Dezy Dez, etc.), worked as a driver and of course could always give feedback on ideas I had. In general, however, it must be said that despite Baba's personal sympathy and commitment, the cooperation was not without problems. Monza, who was in Paris during the first weeks of my internship, fired Baba for personal reasons after two weeks, and since Monza saw the documentary as a project of Assalamalekoum, I was temporarily at a loss as to how to continue the interviews. In the end, I continued with Baba. I didn't necessarily always need a cameraman, but I did need someone to control the audio and video equipment during the interviews, someone with contacts, and quite often someone with a car. Sometimes Baba - as well as other partners - did not show up on time for interviews, or in some cases did not show up at all, despite agreements in advance. This often led to delays on my part and to resentment on the part of the interviewees. For example, the interview with Dezy Dez had to be postponed for a day. After having waited for hours, I decided to meet Dezy Dez on my own. We met very late on the scheduled evening and had a casual conversation, but could not film in the dark, so I appeared again with Baba the next day. Finally, after a couple of weeks, Baba told me that he would be on vacation in Senegal but later turned out to be in the US where he plans to live from now on.

In addition, there were other problems. The camera situation already mentioned, the work in several languages, also the month of Ramadan, in which life actually stood still during the day and people spent the nights with their families. Although there were isolated invitations, for example to Leila, where I then conducted the interview with her, in general the circles were kept rather small, which made it difficult to establish contact. It was also a change for me to rarely be able to reach people during the day.

The lack of a car was a big problem for me, as public transport in Nouakchott is poorly developed and it was sometimes difficult to get a cab during Ramadan, especially shortly before the breaking of the fast, the iftar. I worked with several people over time who had cars. But I had to learn that appointments were not always kept, which caused problems especially in interview situations or during appointments. For the time of the WIF festival, I finally had a rental car provided by Assalamalekoum. This situation made me more flexible but - as the example of the corrupt traffic control shows - also more vulnerable.

Other problems were of a technical nature. The failure of an external hard drive in the last week of my stay and the weeks of repair work caused delays and financial costs. Here an important

learning for me was that every single interview, also those of the last week, must be stored immediately twice and - if WLAN is available (which was not the case at our home) - uploaded.

During my time in Mauritania, I was confronted with several experiences that influenced my research, either by making it more difficult or by giving it additional input. For example, the death of the human rights activist Souvi on February 10,⁸⁹ the outbreak of several Salafists and the resulting shutdown of the Internet,⁹⁰ as well as my experiences at the festival and at the police checkpoint were formative for my research.

These events have forced me to be flexible. I have the impression that my research was successful in the end, but it does not have much to do with the plans from the internship plan.

7. Ethical considerations

Since the police response to my 2019 street interviews, I have been aware of potential consequences for exposed individuals. Mudinga writes in this regard:

„As academic researchers working in sensitive contexts, we must avoid publishing results on sensitive topics under pressure, and we must pay attention to the consequences that sharing our documents may have. [...] Just publishing in the name of ‘truth’ and for the sake of information can – under certain conditions – be very problematic.”⁹¹

Since the beginning of my research, ethical considerations have been central to me. I wrote in the Research Proposal that there would also be a risk for those interview partners who are currently abroad, first of all for their family members living in Mauritania who are vulnerable by the state, and secondly, the duration of the “artists in exile” could be extended. But Yero and Diam Min Tekky, for example, have been public critics of the circumstances in Mauritania for years, so a publication of my documentary makes probably no difference. Ewlad LeBlad insulted presidents in their songs, wherewas they didn’t do that in our interview. Here, too, I see no further threat to these already exposed people. The situation is different with Adnan Abdou, who was an activist in Mauritania, but no public person. He is Bidhan and he criticizes religion itself, so in his statements I see much greater danger potential than in any other. Of course, there are also artists in Mauritania who have exposed themselves. Not so much the very diplomatic Monza and Dezy Dez or Hamzo Bryn, with whom I deliberately avoided all controversial topics in advance, but rather with artists such as BSP or Ndat. I think that the activists Seniya Yarah Allah and Balla Toure, who have been on this terrain of public criticism for decades, know very well what they can say.

⁸⁹ "Four jihadists escape in deadly Mauritania prison break." France 24. March 6, 2023: www.france24.com/en/africa/20230306-four-jihadists-escape-in-deadly-prison-break-in-mauritania.

⁹⁰ "Internet shutdown in Mauritania: stop the abuse, turn it on." Access now. June 1, 2023: www.access-now.org/press-release/internet-shutdown-in-mauritania-stop-the-abuse-turn-it-on.

⁹¹ Mudinga, Emery Mushagalusa. 2021. "Conducting Sensitive Research ,At Home,: A Matter of Responsibility." In *Field Research in Africa: The Ethics of Researcher Vulnerabilities*, edited by Ansoms, An et. al., 29-44. Rochester [NY]: Boydell and Brewer, p. 40.

In any case, it was not so much my time in Mauritania that was determined by ethical considerations, but the question of the publication of the documentary. I think the Mauritanian state only becomes active when there is enough public attention for the documentary, but once it does become active, it is often not fair. There are many ways of repression, I have learned that. Can I rule out that participation in the documentary will lead to temporary bans for participating artists? No. That is why I will leave the decision to each individual interviewee and discuss with them beforehand which parts I want to publish. Anonymization is also conceivable, and even though it can sometimes lead to problems in maintaining the quality of the statements in anonymized form, it would be an appropriate means, since there are enough interview partners who are not anonymized. And the safety of my interview partners is more important!

Problems can also arise beyond state repression, for example on a social level. The publication of negative statements by one artist about another can have repercussions on the relationship between the two. However, I feel that I have sufficiently addressed these possible implications by sending the interviews to my interviewees in advance and asking for their consent. You should be considerate of your interviewees on sensitive topics, but you should not patronize them. Adults make their own decisions. As long as they agree to publication, I have no further concerns in this regard, as I believe they can assess the social risk better than I can.

8. Conclusion

The objective of my research was to find out how hip hop music helps to break political taboos in Mauritania.

In order to answer this research question, I had to answer several sub-questions. First, I wanted to find out what taboos exist in Mauritania, what it means to be a taboo, what are the consequences of breaking a taboo, and what are the possibilities outside of hip hop to talk about taboos. I have found that answering these questions is not easy.

Most of the taboos identified in Part 1 of the documentation are publicly discussed, such as slavery, November 28, racism, and corruption. These issues have been the subject of public demonstrations, numerous contributions from national and international media, such as CRIDEM, and international conferences. Even though Rappers like Yero have addressed these topics, repression can still occur when discussing them. Balla Toure was incarcerated for advocating against slavery, while bloggers Jiddou and Weddady were imprisoned for exposing corruption. Most topics do not have a clear red line that could result in repression. Laws are often vaguely worded, like the 2021 National Symbols Law, and encourage arbitrariness. The convictions of bloggers and activists were all supported by weak evidence. At the same time, instances of police violence occur in Mauritania, often lacking justification and resulting in situations such as the one experienced by Souvi where officers seemed to have lost control.

Mauritania has changed considerably since Maawiya's time, with increased freedom of expression. However, as activist Seniya Yarah Allah notes, there is still “no total freedom of expression”.

While individuals can discuss most topics, they must do so carefully and be mindful of the risk of being identified by authorities. Among the listed taboos, religion holds a unique position in the Islamic Republic of Mauritania as a unifying force in the fragmented Mauritanian society. The blogger Ould Mkhaitir was sentenced to death for an opinion contribution, also in the case of Biram, parts of the population demanded his execution.

At the end of the second part of my documentary, I concluded that the perception of my interviewees regarding the role of HipHop music in Mauritania is divided. Monza expressed it accurately.

„Hip hop for me does not break taboos, Mauritanian hip-hop popularises, I speak well, popularises the taboo. [...] Rap will take that [taboo] out of there to bring it back to the street, then bring it back across the country and therefore, it does not break the taboo, but it opens the debate.”

I do not believe that hip hop music necessarily solves problems, but it can make them more relatable and comprehensible.

Rap in Mauritania cannot be considered without considering the different communities; there is not *one* rap. Not all languages receive equal recognition, even within rap music. Although there are cross-linguistic cooperations, especially within the Wolof, Pulaar and Soninke, in the vast majority of cases artists cannot reach all people due to the language barrier. In addition to the language, the location is also a decisive factor. Domestic artists are often unable to express themselves freely and frankly. However, “artists in exile” have greater freedom to speak out and continue to participate in the ongoing dialogue. In addition, tensions exist between financially vulnerable individuals who have to deal with the system and those abroad who do not understand it. Hip-hop music in Mauritania illuminates various topics not only about songs, but also about the reach of artists, concerts and projects. But it could be argued that there are also limitations in this regard.

I do not think it is impossible that in Mauritania there will be political movements such as in Senegal or Burkina Faso that are influenced by rap. For the time being, however, rap in Mauritania is still too communitarian. But if rap in Mauritania, like the society as a whole, should learn to speak with one voice and to overcome traditional boundaries, much would be possible!

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