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# Tuwāt And Its Role In The Trans-Saharan Caravan Trade (Functions And Implications)

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## Abstract:

Tuwat, one of the desert cities, has played an important economic and commercial role in modern times. Its central location between the coasts of Morocco and sub-Saharan Africa has positioned it as an indispensable hub for caravan trade, especially in light of the diminishing importance of traditional routes. The aim of this study is therefore to highlight the factors that have contributed to its emergence and its impact on trans-Saharan trade in general, with a particular focus on Sudan and Tuwat.

**Keywords:** Tuwat, Caravan Trade, Desert Trade Routes, Timbuktu.

## Introduction:

Tuwat lies in the south-west of Algeria, along the coast of the African Sahara. It consists of a collection of palaces that form a crescent from Tinkorarin to Tidikelt. Geographically, Tamanrasset's location did not prevent it from playing numerous commercial and cultural roles, which led many explorers and historians to praise it and seek various ways to reach it. During the Middle Ages, Tuwat served as a commercial and cultural centre, a gateway and a link between Islamic and Arab culture at its most developed in the Sahara and Sudan. Given its history and location, one wonders how it acquired such a prestigious status, overshadowing an important aspect of Algerian culture. It has not received the attention and study it deserves from many specialists and historians due to its deviation from the official documentation of the period.

This research aims to answer the following questions:

1. How did Tuwat acquire its cultural and civilisational status?
2. What were its commercial roles?
3. What factors contributed to its subsequent decline?

## 1. Factors contributing to the acquisition of Tuwat's commercial and civilisational status:

**A. Geographical location:** Tuwat<sup>1</sup> is located in the heart of the African Sahara, and despite its harsh nature and difficulty of access, the Tuwat people have integrated with

the environment, adapting their livelihoods and economic activities to its demands. Its location, halfway between the coasts of Morocco and the markets of Sudan, made it an essential stop for any caravan travelling from the remotest parts of Morocco or northern Algeria towards Sudan, given its central position between these centres<sup>2</sup>.

If we compare its location with that of other cities in the Maghreb desert, we can see that Tuwat occupied an important central position, which enabled its inhabitants to play a commercial role and to act as a cultural link between these cities, from Tuwat to Ghadames, Tafilalt, Timbuktu, Gao and Bornu, among others. Mohammed bin Abdul Karim Al-Bakrawi Al-Tamantit described it as follows: "Tuwat is a desert at the highest point of Morocco, with palm trees, trees and springs. It is thirteen days south and west of Sigilmassa, twenty days from the beginning of the Sudan, twenty days from Ghadames and ten days east of the Zab region. It is about a week's journey from the Ouled Issa region to the lands of Abid al-Shaykh. It had two hundred palaces in the eleventh century, with Buda, Timi and Tamantit being the most prominent"<sup>3</sup>.

**B. Stability and security:** Undoubtedly, Tuwat's remote location in the Sahara, far from the centres of influence and power in the Maghreb, made it secluded and isolated from the various disturbances, raids and instability experienced by the cities of northern Morocco. This factor also led to the diversion of the trade caravans that used to pass through Tafilalt, Walata and Taroudant to the trade route between Timbuktu, Tuwat and Fez<sup>4</sup>. Ibn Khaldun said of this route: "It was neglected when the Bedouins of the Sous region changed their route. They abandoned it and took the road to the lands of Sudan, passing through the upper part of Tamantet."<sup>5</sup><sup>6</sup> It is known that Tamarrasset neither shelters oppressors nor prevents those seeking refuge, and it has served as a refuge for many tribes displaced by wars and the search for security and stability.

**C. Cultural centre:** Tuwat was and still is a centre of knowledge and culture in the Sahara. In the 18th century, it experienced a scientific and cultural renaissance that transcended the boundaries of the region and the southern Sahara. This scientific renaissance contributed to the flourishing of the book trade and the copying of religious and literary works. Tuwat became a destination for merchants who acquired rare books in exchange for goods from Sudan, especially given the high demand for the latter. Tuwat continues to attract students from Sudan to this day, and we find that the educational system in Sudan adopted the curriculum and teaching methods used in Tuwat<sup>7</sup>. The influence extended beyond teaching methods to similarities in the celebration of religious holidays and family customs and traditions. Tuwat is also one of the main bases for the spread and expansion of Sufi paths (tariqas). El-Maghili<sup>8</sup> brought the Qadiriyya Sufi order with him on his journey to Sudan, and so did the Kunta family, who followed El-Maghili's approach to strengthening the Qadiriyya path.

**D. Gathering place for pilgrims:** Tuwat serves as a centre and gathering place for pilgrims coming from southern Morocco and Mauritania. Al-Ayashi mentioned in the context of his journey that he arrived at the first labour camp in Tuwat, where pilgrims

gather to trade, as the price of gold and dates in Tuwat is cheaper than in other Maghreb countries. He explains: "...and there are many kinds of dates, and we found that dates were cheap there... The reason for our stay in this country at that time is that many pilgrims, when the exchange rate of gold in Tafilalt<sup>9</sup> became high, postponed their exchange to Tuwat, because gold is cheaper there"<sup>10</sup>. In addition to the stability of the first labour camp in Tuwat as a gathering place for Moroccan and Mauritanian pilgrims, the towns of Ighbil<sup>11</sup> and In Salah<sup>12</sup>, to the south-east of Tuwat, are important stops for Moroccan and Sudanese pilgrims on their way to the land of Hajj (Mecca).

**H. No sultan has authority over it:** This means that Tuwat's geographical location and independence from Ottoman and Saadian rule made it a thriving market for goods, free from the taxes and burdensome regulations that often burdened traders in other centres and regions. Similar areas of loose governance were often mentioned, and their situation was similar to that of the Chinguetti regions and other desert towns.

**W. The role of the Jews:** Historians disagree on the date of the Jews' arrival in Tuwat, and they also differ on their control of the Saharan trade. Similarly, El-Maghili and the jurist El-Asnawi had different views on their expulsion, the destruction of their synagogue and their role. Some see their role as positive, contributing to the development of markets and trade through their historical association with these professions. They argue that their expulsion by El-Maghili had a negative impact on the commercial status of the region. Others, however, believe that their role had a negative impact on trade in the region and that theft and lawlessness increased because the passage of caravans through the desert and their interaction with Jews provided a legitimate outlet for these activities. Al-Mur mentioned a document, a letter from the Diwan of Barnu to the merchants of Tamanrasset, in which they complained about the shortage of goods and the failure of the Tuwat trading caravans to reach the land of Barnu as they once did, and pleaded for the return of the Tuwat merchants to their homeland.

## **2- The commercial importance of Touat in historical sources:**

Touat merchants played a prominent and early role in Saharan trade, both within Touat and beyond. One such testimony comes from the Genoese merchant Antonio Malfante, who arrived in Touat in 1447 AD/850 AD and stayed there for two years. He stated that his host in Touat was a wealthy Moroccan merchant who had lived in Sudan for 14 years and claimed to have amassed a fortune of up to one hundred thousand dinars, the equivalent of about 425 kilograms of gold<sup>13</sup>. Malfante also claimed that during his stay in Touat he had seen a caravan arrive from Ceuta laden with copper. In addition, the regions of Gazoula and Sous were known to trade their copper on both the Touat and Sudanese markets<sup>14</sup>.

Among the historians and geographers who have discussed the role of Touat in trade and wealth accumulation is Hassan Al-Wazzan in his book "Description of Africa". In his account of his visit to Tinkorarin during his passage through Touat in 917 AH/1511 CE, he described its inhabitants as wealthy and noted that they exported their goods

extensively to Sudan. He also mentioned that in Touat, Berber caravans met with traders from Sudan and that important markets were established there<sup>15</sup>. Al-Wazzan also noted during his visit to Timbuktu that the city was divided into districts, with each district inhabited by merchants from different countries frequented by the Sudanese caravans. There were separate districts for Ghadames merchants and districts for Touat merchants<sup>16</sup>.

Some historical sources mention that the number of Touat merchants in the Azawad region exceeded 500, while the number of merchants from Fes and Tafilalt was twenty (20), and the number of merchants from Tripoli did not exceed seven (7). These figures perhaps indicate the extent of the commercial links between Touat and Sudan, and the influence these traders had in facilitating such interactions<sup>17</sup>.

The Moroccan jurist Abu Salim Al-Ayashi visited Touat several times on his way to perform the Hajj pilgrimage. In his travelogue, "Ma' Al-Mawaid" (The Water of the Tables), he described Touat: "The reason for our stay in this land at this time is that many pilgrims, when the cost of spending gold in Tafilalt became high, redirected their expenses to Touat because gold is cheaper there. Food prices, such as grain and dates, are also lower. This town is a meeting point for caravans coming from Timbuktu and the Akidaz lands on the outskirts of Sudan, and it contains many goods and commodities that are brought from there, such as horses, clothes, silk, and when the caravans arrive, there is a bustling market"<sup>18</sup>.

The German explorer Heinrich Barth also mentioned Touat in his travels through North and Central Africa, reaching Timbuktu in the second half of the 19th century. He witnessed a caravan from Touat leaving Timbuktu in October 1853<sup>19</sup>.

**3- The trade routes that passed through Touat:** Touat had an important position on the trade routes that ran from north to south and from east to west. The caravans passed through most of the markets and urban centres in the heart of the desert, depending on their direction. Journeys to and from Touat took several months, no less than a whole season, and sometimes several seasons<sup>20</sup>. Among the most important of these routes, we find

### **3-1 Heading south:**

- **Touat to Timbuktu:** This route starts from Tamanrasset towards Reggan, then Hassi Messaoud, Bir El-Ahmar, Tindouf and finally Timbuktu<sup>21</sup>. This route is still used today.

- **Touat to Gao:** It starts from Aqbil in Touat, passes through Maraken, Walata, Tinzawat, Al-Burj, Tassalit, Akakus, Inafif, Tabarasset, Tanagar and finally reaches Gao<sup>22</sup>.

- **Touat to Timbuktu via Aqbil:** This route became popular and flourished, especially after the decline of the previous routes. It is mentioned in several sources. The route starts from Aqbil and the second stop is Tin Tini, followed by Walata. Then it crosses the Tinzawat desert, the third stop is Inganan, and after six stages the caravan reaches Lambruk station. The fifth station is Al-Mamoun, three stages after that is Bou Djebiha,

followed by Arwan after three stages. Then comes Wagozane station, and after three more stages the caravan reaches Timbuktu<sup>23</sup>.

- **From Ain Salah to Timbuktu:** One of the main stops is Ain Salah, then In-Guezzam, Tidikelt, Al-Shibli, Timadinen and from there to the Tinzwat desert, Lambruk, Al-Mamoun, Bou Djebiha and finally Timbuktu. The total number of stages on this route is approximately thirty-three<sup>24</sup>.

**3.2 Towards the north:** We note that the duration of the caravans varies according to the distance. A caravan from Constantine to Touat takes 48 days, while a caravan from Tlemcen to Ain Salah takes 32 days. The journey from Tlemcen to Walata and Timbuktu takes 72 days, and from Fez to Touat 39 days<sup>25</sup>.

- Touat-Igli-Figuig-Ain Sefra-M'sila-Oran

- Touat-Aqbil-Ain Salah-Medea-M'sila-Mezghena-Constantine-Algiers. At Mezghena it intersects with the Ouargla route, then passes through Touggourt, Biskra, Batna, Constantine.

### **3-3 Towards the west:**

- Touat-Igli-Oued Drâa-Meknes-Fez.

- Touat-Igli-Figuig-Sijilmassa-Tafilalt-Fez.

- Touat-Tabelbala-Kasba Tadla-Oued Drâa-Marrakech.

### **3-4 Towards the east:**

- Touat-Arselmen-Zaribat Lamhada-Lamasakham-Tenghen-Ghadames-Tripoli-Benghazi.

- Touat-Agasten-Ghazaouet-Masoud-Arselmen. Here it intersects with the first route to Ghames<sup>26</sup>.

- Touat-Tinjikan-Imsahr-Garyes-Amguida-Intaoussen-Khalgham-Tarhsit-Arknira-Eidou-Fayoum-Ghat-fezzan.

It should be noted that Touat is located roughly between four cities that developed in the Saharan trade: Ghadames to the east, Timbuktu to the south, Fes to the west and Algiers to the north<sup>27</sup>.

## **4- Markets and goods:**

Touat was famous for its many markets, the most important of which, as mentioned by historians, were Tamanrasset, which remained the capital of the region for a long time, and Bouda, mentioned by Ibn Battuta<sup>28</sup>. There were also the markets of Tikerarine, Ain Salah, Aqbil, Timi and Tassabite, mentioned by Al-Ayashi. The Ougarta market was one of the later ones. With regard to Timimoun, it is often said that "each street in Timimoun is dedicated to a group of merchants or craftsmen. In one of them you will find all the butchers and butter sellers, known as the butter market. Shoemakers and saddlers gather in another street called the Saddlers' Market. The Jellaba Market is for wool and clothing merchants, and the Tobacco Market is for tobacco merchants. In the slave market, slaves and goods imported from Sudan are sold, and gold dust or gold soil is sold at a weight of one hundred mithqals and two hundred duroos per pound"<sup>29</sup>.

On the subject of goods, Al-Ayashi mentions that Touat had a wide variety of goods, such as horses, clothes and silk. Moroccan pilgrims used to buy all the dates and gold they needed in Touat because the prices were lower than in Morocco. In addition, the exchange rate was based on the mithqal, with twenty-four mithqals equal to one moud<sup>30</sup>.

Oskar Lenz mentions that Tuat caravans in Timbuktu used to bring dates and tobacco and return with gold, slaves, ostrich feathers and ivory<sup>31</sup>. Rohlfs states that Tuat caravans from western Sudan usually returned with some 600 to 1,700 slaves, about fifty pounds of gold dust (tibar), and quantities of ostrich feathers and ivory. Imports from neighbouring markets to the north included perfumes, cloth, gunpowder and manuscripts<sup>32</sup>.

**5- Factors of decline:** The continued economic and commercial importance of the city of Touat has been influenced by a number of factors, including economic, geographical, political and security. Any decline in the level of trade can be attributed to the above factors.

**A. Economic and geographical factors:** One of the most important geographical and economic factors affecting the commercial centre of Touat was the movement of European geographical discoveries, which led to the diversion of trade routes and the revival of the coastal route at the expense of other Saharan trade routes and their activities. This transition from caravans and camels to massive merchant ships had a shrinking effect on trade through the traditional routes, which in turn affected the markets of the entire Maghreb region. In addition, taxes and tariffs on goods imported into Touat and then transported to the markets of the northern Moroccan towns increased significantly. The impact of the Saadian campaign in the Sudan region and the control exercised by Moroccan merchants over various markets in Timbuktu should also be mentioned, albeit only partially.

Finally, we must not overlook the Portuguese discoveries in the New World and their impact on world trade, particularly the large quantities of gold imported from Brazil, which had a major negative impact on the trade of the Maghreb-Saharan caravans<sup>33</sup>.

**B. Political and security factors:**

The fact that Touat was not subject to any external authority (submission rather than allegiance) undoubtedly had an impact on the existence of a free market for trade, away from the onerous levies and taxes that burdened merchants and often forced them to abandon their trade. However, this security and commercial stability was often challenged by external threats, such as the campaigns launched by the Saadian dynasty against the regions of Touat and Tinqourtarine (1583-1587 AD), which affected the state of the Touat trading markets in Timimoun, Aqbil, Tabelbala and Tassabite. There were also occasional raids on the trade caravans, especially along the southern route between Touat and Timbuktu.

**Conclusion:**

We can draw the following conclusions from this research:

- The geographical location of Touat in the middle of the desert, equidistant from the north, south, east and west, contributed to its acquisition of this commercial status.

- The fact that the Touat were not subject to any external authority gave them an economic and commercial importance, which resulted from the almost complete absence of the dues and taxes that often burdened merchants.
- Touat became a commercial link between the trading centres in the north (Maghreb), south (Timbuktu and Gao), east (Ghadames and Ouargla) and west (Tafilalt and Fez).
- The size, affordability and diversity of its markets made it a destination for traders from different regions and countries.
- Touat was famous for hosting several markets, including Timimoun, Aqbil, Ougarta, Tassabite and others.
- Like other desert trading centres, Touat was affected by the global trade movement across the Atlantic Ocean, but this did not affect its continuity, as many contemporary historians have testified.
- The commercial importance of Touat made it a coveted target for various states and dynasties, especially the Ottoman Empire and the Saadian Dynasty.

## Footnotes

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1- Touat is the name given to the geographical region of the Adrar province in the south-west of Algeria. Historians and scholars disagree on the origin of the name, whether it is Arabic or Amazigh. However, many have favoured the latter origin. In terms of urbanisation, Touat consists of a collection of more than 300 palaces that extend in a crescent shape from north to south. It comprises three main areas: Tinqurarain, Central Touat and Tidikelt. Touat is mentioned in many Arab and foreign sources and was visited by many Arab and European explorers. It reached the height of its civilisation and scientific achievements in the 18th century AD.

2- Ahmed Al-Hamdi: "Tamantit: The city in the society of palaces and its scientific and commercial role in the 9th century AH/15th century CE." *Journal of Humanities, University of Oran*, Vol. 6-7, July 2014-January 2015, p. 53.

3- Muhammad ibn Abd al-Karim Al-Bukhari, "The Pearl of Pens in the News of Morocco after Islam", manuscript in the Al-Matarfa Library, Adrar, p. 06.

4- Ahmed Mauloud Ould Eideh, "The Great Desert: Cities and Palaces", vol. 2, Dar Al-Ma'arif, 2009, p. 20.

5- Tamanhit, also spelled Tamantit, was founded in 472 AD, according to Tawat. The Jews settled there in 517 AD. The descendants of Sidi Al-Bakri arrived and settled there in 900 AH / 1495 AD. It was the capital of the Tawat region during its cultural renaissance and played an important role in the Saharan trade since the interruption of the western route (Sijilmasa - Oudaghist - Ghana) and its shift to the east, making Tamanhit one of its main stations.

6- Ibn Khaldun, "The Muqaddimah", vol. 7, Beirut, 1978, p. 118.

7- Mubarak Jaafari, "Azawad: A Historical, Social and Economic Study", 1st edition, Dar Al-Kitab Al-Arabi, Algeria, 2021, p. 367.

8- Al-Maghili, from the Maghila tribe near Tlemcen in Algeria, his exact date of birth is disputed, but he died in 909 AH / 1503 AD. He emigrated from North-West Africa, unhappy with the political and social conditions there, and settled in Tuat. He fought against the Jews there and then moved to Kano (present-day Nigeria) where he contacted the prince and wrote him a letter advising him on the principles of politics and leadership.

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He then moved to Gao where he met the scholar Muhammad al-Kabir and answered a series of questions known as "The Questions of Al-Isqiya and the Answers of Al-Maghili". Al-Maghili enjoyed a high status in Sudan, where he was titled Imam. He left behind more than twenty works, mostly on language, jurisprudence and Sufism. Reference: Abdelkader Zebadia, "Arab civilisation and European influence in sub-Saharan West Africa", National Book Foundation, Algeria, 2005, pp. 155-154.

<sup>9</sup>- Tafilalet: One of the famous regions in southern Morocco, consisting of several districts and palaces, with its ancient capital at Sijilmasa. See: As-Siddiq ibn al-Arabi, "The Book of Morocco", 3rd edition, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, 1984, p. 80.

<sup>10</sup>- Abi Salim Al-Ayashi: "The Ayashi Journey (Ma' al-Mawaid)", edited by Saeed Al-Fadhli and Sulaiman Al-Qurashi, 1st edition, Dar Al-Sweidi Publishing and Distribution, UAE, 2006, vol. 1, p. 79.

<sup>11</sup>- Akbli: Located in the Tidikelt region (Oulaf, now Ain Salah), founded by Sheikh Sidi Muhammad Abi Naama in 1137 AH. During his reign, it became a pilgrimage destination for pilgrims from Chinguetti, Wlat, Tafilalet and the Sudan regions, as well as a flourishing station for caravans coming from Tripoli, Ghadames and the Sudan regions. Sheikh Sidi Abou Naama left behind a rich manuscript collection of some 500 manuscripts, which is preserved by one of his descendants. See: Yahya Ould Sidi Ahmed, "Diwan of the Great Desert: The Kantian School", Dar Al-Ma'arif, Algeria, 2009, p. 30.

<sup>12</sup>- Ain Salah: The origin of its name is debated between Arabic and Amazigh, as is the spelling between Ain and Aïn. It was founded before the 13th century AD, according to the book "Tidikelt: Legend and History" by French orientalist Meur and Raffalli. It was founded by Sidi Belqasim ibn Al-Hajj Muhammad, the grandson of Sidi Mubarak Al-Ambari, the founder of the Murabitun and Dghamsha palaces.

<sup>13</sup>- Niani et al.: "General History of Africa", Volume Four (Africa from the Twelfth to the Sixteenth Century), UNESCO, Catholic Press, Beirut, 1988, p. 671.

<sup>14</sup>- Reference: Ahmed Al-Hamdi, the previous source, p. 55.

<sup>15</sup>- Hassan ibn Muhammad Al-Wazzan: "Description of Africa, Volume 2", translated by Mohamed Hadji and Mohamed Al-Akhder, 2nd edition, Dar al-Gharb al-Islami, Beirut, Lebanon, 1983, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup>- Hassan Al-Wazzan, *ibid*, p. 109.

<sup>17</sup>- Saleh Bouselim: "The Region of Tuat and Its Role in the Trans-Saharan Caravan Trade during the 12th-13th Centuries AH / 18th-19th Centuries AD," 1st edition, Publications of the Research Center for Islamic Sciences and Civilization, Laghouat, 2019, p. 178.

<sup>18</sup>- Abi Salam Al-Ayashi: "Liqaat al-Faraid min Ma' al-Mawa'id: Summary of the Ayashi Journey, 1661-1663 AD", prepared by Sulaiman Al-Qurashi, Publications of Dar Al-Tawhidi, 2012, p. 22.

<sup>19</sup>- Henri Barth (1821-1865). "Voyage et découvertes dans l'Afrique septentrionale et centrale pendant les années 1849 à 1855", Paris, 1863, vol. 4, p. 109.

<sup>20</sup>- Yahya Bouaziz: "History of Islamic West Africa from the beginning of the sixteenth century to the beginning of the twentieth century", Dar Al-Basair for Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 2009, p. 44.

<sup>21</sup>- Mohamed Houtia: "Tuat and the Caravan Trade", in "The Caravan Route", Publications of the National Centre for Research in Prehistoric and Anthropological Sciences and History, Ammar Qurfi Printing Press, Batna, Algeria, 2001, p. 35.

<sup>22</sup>- *Ibid*, p. 36.

<sup>23</sup>- Mubarak Jaafari: Articles and research on the history and heritage of the Tawat region, Dar Al-Kitaab Al-Arabi, Algeria, 2016, p. 70.

<sup>24</sup>- Same, p. 71.



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- 25- Yahya Bouaziz: Same, p. 45.
- 26- Hussein Jajoua: The role of the Ghadamis in the trade between Tripoli and central and western Sudan during 1850-1881, thesis supervised by Abdelkader Zabadia, University of Algiers, 1981, p. 52.
- 27- Mubarak Jaafari: The same source, page 73.
- 28- Ibn Battuta: "The Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling", vol. 2, Dar Kawkab Al-Ilm for Publishing, Algeria, 2016, p. 564.
- 29- Eugène Daumas, "The Great Desert: Itinerary of a Caravan from the Sahara to the Kingdom of Haoussa", Paris, 1985, p. 325.
- 30- Al-Ayashi: same reference, p. 23.
- 31- 1- O. Lenz, "Journey to Timbuktu in Morocco, the Sahara and the Sudan", translated by Pierre Lehautcourt, vol. 2, Paris 1986, p. 322.
- 32- Gerhard Rohlfs, "Travels and Explorations in the Sahara", translated by Jacques Debetz, vol. 1, Editions Karthala, Paris 2001, p. 221.
- 33- Bouffier, "Gold and Trade in the Maghreb", translated by Zahir Riad, Anglo-Egyptian Library, Cairo 1968, p. 302.