

Tidikelt in Foreign Sources: Louis Voinot's Tidikelt as a Model

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Abstract

Tidikelt is one of the three major regions of Adrar Province, alongside Touat and Gourara. It is distinguished by its ancient history, rich cultural heritage, and diverse social composition, in addition to its economic prosperity and commercial importance. Among the foreign scholars who significantly contributed to documenting the history of the region is the French researcher Louis Voinot, author of *Le Tidikelt*, who visited the area at the end of the nineteenth century. This paper aims to present an analytical reading of Voinot's work, which is divided into three principal sections. The first examines the geographical characteristics of Tidikelt, including its geographical and astronomical location, climate, agriculture, and population. The second addresses the historical dimension by providing a concise overview of the history and origins of the principal settlements of Tidikelt, such as In Salah, Aoulef, Aqbli, In Ghar, and others, as well as the earliest tribes that settled in the region. It also discusses the first European attempts to explore Tidikelt. The third section is devoted to the customs and traditions of the region, including hospitality, marriage ceremonies, and the celebration of religious occasions. The book concludes with several valuable appendices.

Keywords: Tidikelt, Louis Voinot, In Salah, Aougrou (Aqbli), Aoulef, In Ghar.

Introduction

Tidikelt is one of the three regions constituting Adrar Province, together with Touat and Gourara. The region is renowned for its ancient history, cultural richness, social diversity, economic vitality, and strategic commercial position. However, anyone studying its history is immediately confronted with the scarcity of historical sources, particularly for the period preceding the nineteenth century (thirteenth century AH). Much of the region's history survives only in oral traditions interwoven with myths and legends transmitted by local inhabitants.

This situation was confirmed by the French scholar Louis Voinot, author of *Tidikelt*, who visited the region at the end of the nineteenth century. He wrote:

"It is impossible to reconstruct the history of Tidikelt because of the severe lack of both local and foreign historical sources. Even Hamza ibn al-Hajj Ahmad al-Qiblawi, the only educated

man in the region during the nineteenth century, was unable to provide accurate information about his hometown of Aqbli, let alone the other settlements." (Voinot, n.d, p. 56)

Accordingly, this paper seeks to highlight this important work and provide an analytical reading of it as a contribution to introducing the region through foreign writings. It addresses the following questions: What are the geographical characteristics of Tidikelt? What was the tribal structure of Tidikelt society during the nineteenth century? What were the conditions of the region before and after French colonial domination?

Tidikelt: A Geographical and Human Overview

Origin of the Name and Formation

The word Tidikelt is of Amazigh origin and consists of two elements: Tidi, meaning "hand," and Kelt (or Doukelt), meaning "low land." Consequently, the term Tidikelt literally signifies "the palm of the hand." This designation metaphorically refers to the geographical configuration of the region, a vast depression resembling the palm of a hand, which also explains the relative proximity of groundwater to the surface. The name Tidikelt may also refer to plains devoid of water that resemble the palm of a hand. Another opinion attributes the name to the mountain range surrounding the region, extending from approximately 30 km northeast of Aoulef toward Libya. It is also noteworthy that a region in the Niger Desert, north and south of Ben Agret, bears the same name, Tidikelt. (Belalam, p. 72)

Tidikelt comprises several major districts, the most important of which are In Salah, Iqsaten, Foggarat Ez-Zoua, In Ghar, Tit, Aqbli, Aoulef, Timokten, and Ain Belbel, in addition to more than forty-five fortified villages (ksour). (Ibrahim, 2009, p. 453)

The region is divided into two parts:

Eastern Tidikelt, whose capital is In Salah, now administratively affiliated with Tamanrasset Province, and comprising the municipalities of In Salah, In Ghar, and Foggarat Ez-Zoua. (Azzoug, 2008–2009, p. 10)

Western Tidikelt, whose capital is Aoulef, currently belonging to Adrar Province, and including the municipalities of Tit, Aqbli, Aoulef, and Timokten. (Abdelmajid, 2006, p. 22)

Historically, both regions belonged to Ouargla Province.

Astronomical and Geographical Location and Physical Features

Astronomically, Tidikelt lies between 25° and 30° north latitude and 1° west to 6° east longitude, (Ibrahim, 2009, p. 453) at an average elevation of approximately 290 meters above sea level.

Geographically, it is situated in the heart of the Algerian Sahara in southern Algeria. (Hilmi, 1968, p. 59) It is bounded to the east by the Tinghert Plateau in Illizi Province; to the northeast by the Great Eastern Erg and the district of Hassi Messaoud; to the north by El Meniaa District; to the northwest by the Great Western Erg and Timimoun District; to the west by the Touat region; and to the south by the Ahnet Mountains and the Mouydir Highlands. (Bouyeh, 2015, p. 23)

Tidikelt lies approximately 1,278 km south of Algiers, at an elevation of about 283 meters above sea level, (Voinot, n.d, p. 11) and covers a total area of approximately 101,763 km². The region also contains a vast erg extending for nearly 250 km.

Owing to its strategic location, Tidikelt occupied a position of great importance. It served as the principal link between Algeria and the African countries, while also connecting the various regions of Algeria—from the northern areas toward Touat and the Hoggar, and from the regions of Saoura and Gourara to the land of Azger. Consequently, the major caravan routes extended across Tidikelt, making it an important center for barter trade. Caravans traveling from Tlemcen to Timbuktu in Western Sudan, and from Tafilalt to Ghadames and Ghat, crossed the territory of Tidikelt. (Amira, 2005, p. 84) Likewise, pilgrimage caravans regularly stopped at Ain Salah, particularly those departing from Sijilmasa and Marrakesh. (Bouyeh, 2015, p. 25)

About the Author: Louis Voinot

Louis Voinot was born in Lyon in 1869. He voluntarily enlisted in the French Army in 1888 at his own request and was sent to Algeria in 1898, where he spent his entire military service in the Tidikelt region. On 29 December 1899, a confrontation occurred between the soldiers of the Flamand Military Mission and the defenders of the oases at Ain Salah. Voinot handled the situation diplomatically, compelling the French forces to advance toward Touat instead of penetrating Ain Salah. He was wounded during a fierce battle in 1900 and was subsequently awarded the Legion of Honour, bearing the following inscription: "Commander Voinot: 13 years of service, three campaigns, one wound; distinguished and courageous under Arab attacks."

In 1902, he was transferred to the Saharan military post in Tidikelt, from where he extensively explored the various regions of the Sahara.

In September 1906, he was transferred to the Arab Bureau in Maghnia and participated in military operations against the Beni Snassen from October to December 1907.

He was later promoted from commander to head of the Arab Bureau in Oujda. Subsequently, he returned to Alsace and then Lorraine. In 1925, he moved to Marrakesh, where he remained until his retirement in 1930.

He devoted many years of his life to the study of the Sahara and Morocco, earning recognition for the accuracy of his information and the scholarly nature of his writings.

He passed away on 20 July 1960, leaving behind numerous works on Saharan literature and military experience.

Contents of the Book

This study is divided into three main sections. The first examines the geographical characteristics of the region. The second discusses its historical background, while the third is devoted to the customs and traditions of the inhabitants. The following pages provide a brief overview of each section.

Section One: Geographical Observations

The Geographical and Astronomical Location of Tidikelt:

Tidikelt is located between the Tadmait Plateau to the south and Oued Garit to the north. Astronomically, it lies between 26°30' and 27°30' North latitude, and between 0°30' East and 1°30' West longitude. The region extends for approximately 250 km in length and 50 km in width.

Climate:

The climate of Tidikelt is characterized by hot summers and cold winters, with average temperatures ranging between 25°C and 45°C. Strong and often violent winds frequently sweep across the region, carrying large quantities of sand and posing a serious threat to humans, animals, and vegetation. Despite the scarcity of rainfall, the area is distinguished by the abundance of groundwater, particularly in the Ghaba region, where the average depth of wells does not exceed 12 meters. The area stretching between Akabli, Tit, In Ghar, and Keddiet El-Barka is known for its high-quality groundwater, whereas the area between In Salah and In Ghar possesses the largest quantity of groundwater.

Agriculture:

The principal agricultural activity in the region is the cultivation of date palms, including varieties such as Tengour, Tegazi, Tazerzay, and others of both high and medium quality. Louis Voinot provides statistical data on the number of palm trees throughout Tidikelt. For example, In Salah contains approximately 90,000 palm trees, while Arab Oulef has 80,166 palm trees. Timokten contains 13,060 palm trees, among other localities. Regarding the foggaras (traditional underground irrigation channels), Louis Voinot states that Tidikelt contains 125 foggaras, of which 51 are no longer functioning. In addition, the region possesses numerous independent wells with high water discharge.

Population:

According to Louis Voinot, the population of Tidikelt at the end of the nineteenth century was estimated at 8,830 inhabitants, including 5,200 Whites and 3,630 Haratin. The number of men capable of bearing arms was estimated at 2,081.

Oases and Ksour:

Louis Voinot divides the Tidikelt region into twelve districts or settlement groups, arranged from east to west as follows: Foggarat Ez-Zoua, Foggarat El-Arab, Iqestan, Hassi El-Hadjar, Es-Sahla El-Fouqania, Es-Sahla Et-Tahtania, Miliana, In Salah, In Ghar, Tit, Akabli, and their associated oases. He provides a concise description of each district, highlighting its importance and the oases that comprise it. According to Voinot, In Salah and Oulef were the most significant settlements in the region, whereas Hassi El-Hadjar was of lesser importance. Miliana, on the other hand, was regarded as the poorest district.

Section Two: An Overview of the Region's History

Louis Voinot attempts to provide a concise overview of the history and origins of the principal settlements of Tidikelt, the earliest tribes that settled there, and the first European attempts to explore the region. Accordingly, the following presents a brief account of each of these topics.

1. The Origins and History of Some Settlements in Tidikelt

Ain Salah was founded during the thirteenth century by a slave named Salih. According to local oral traditions, it is considered the oldest settlement in Tidikelt. Nevertheless, a long-standing debate persists between the inhabitants of Azzi and Ouled Bahmou regarding which community is the oldest in the region. Louis Voinot favors the claim of the people of Azzi on the basis of several historical considerations. (Voinot, n.d, p. 50)

The district of Aoulef emerged after Akabli and before Tit, having been established by the people of Azzi. The first ksar (fortified village) built there was Echarf, founded by the

marabouts of Timokten. As for Aoulef Echourfa, it was established by a branch of the Ouled Ismail tribe that migrated from Morocco. Meanwhile, Akhnous was founded by Moulay Ahmed ibn Moulay Abdallah ibn Hiba, who also came from Morocco and lived during the sixteenth century.

According to Louis Voinot, In Ghar has a long and rich history. However, obtaining accurate information is difficult because many individuals concerned with preserving local history were killed during the Battle of El Faqira in 1900. Nevertheless, local traditions maintain that the Ouled Khalifa, who migrated from Morocco, were the first to settle in the region. They were divided into two branches: Ouled Mohamed Bid (the Whites) and Ouled Ahmed Ben Jelloul Sud (the Blacks). Frequent conflicts and disputes arose between these two groups, at times escalating into violent confrontations. (Voinot, n.d, p. 51)

2. The First European Attempts to Explore Tidikelt

According to Louis Voinot, the English Major Gordon was the first European to enter Tidikelt, specifically Ain Salah, arriving from Ghadames (Libya) in mid-December 1825. He departed on 10 January 1826, heading toward Timbuktu via Akabli, and was locally known by the title "Er-Raïs" (the Chief).

He was followed by the German explorer Gerhard Rohlfs, who reached Timokten on 12 September 1864, having traveled from Tafilalt in Morocco through the Saoura Valley and Touat, while claiming to be a Turkish physician. The following day, he proceeded to Ksar El Djedid in Arab Aoulef, where he was welcomed by the sheikh of the Ouled Zenane tribe. On 15 September, he arrived at Tit, leaving before sunrise the next day for Ain Cheikh and Ksar El Kouhoul in In Ghar. On 17 September, shortly before dawn, he reached Ain Salah, where he was received at Ksar Bagouda by El Hadj Abdelkader. He remained there for approximately one and a half months, hoping to continue his journey to Timbuktu, but various circumstances prevented him from doing so.

Later, Soleillet arrived at Miliana in In Ghar from El Meniaa, where he stayed from 6 to 7 March 1874. He eventually retraced his steps after sensing hostility from El Hadj Abdelkader Bagouda, who refused to receive him. These explorers recorded a considerable amount of valuable information concerning the geography, history, customs, and traditions of Tidikelt. (Voinot, n.d, p. 61)

3. Tidikelt under French Colonial Rule

In the third part of the second section, Louis Voinot discusses the situation in Tidikelt on the eve of French colonial occupation. At the end of 1899, the inhabitants of Ain Salah learned that a French expedition led by Flamand was moving through Tidikelt. In response, the tribes of Ain Salah, under the leadership of the Ouled Bagouda, decided to confront the French forces, compelling them to halt at the area of Hassi Menguer.

He then discusses the major battles and heroic confrontations fought by the inhabitants against the French, including the Battles of Iqistan, Al-Daghamsha, and Aïngr. After a prolonged period of fighting and resistance, and following the French occupation of the region, the Tuareg urged the inhabitants to flee and join them, abandoning their homeland. However, their call received no favorable response.

Section Three: Social Organization, Customs, and Traditions

In this section, Louis Voinot examines the social organization of the inhabitants of Tidikelt, their customs and traditions, as well as the manner in which they celebrated their social and religious occasions. The following are some of the most significant aspects.

The Population of Tidikelt:

According to Louis Voinot, the population of Tidikelt was divided into two principal groups: the Whites, who were themselves divided into Arabs and Berbers, and the Blacks. Among the Arabs were the Sharifs, who had migrated from Morocco and claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) through his daughter Fatimah. Most Arabs were engaged in trade, whereas the Blacks belonged to the lower social stratum and were primarily occupied with agriculture and livestock breeding.

The Status of Women:

According to Louis Voinot, women in Tidikelt enjoyed a certain degree of influence over their husbands, although the husband remained the head of the household. Women were not required to wear the veil, and their occupations varied according to their social status. Women from poorer families carried out various forms of manual labor, including domestic work and the cultivation of gardens, while women from wealthier families were served by male and female servants who attended to their needs. Overall, the condition of women in Tidikelt does not appear to have differed significantly from that of women in other Saharan regions.

Hospitality:

Hospitality was one of the most deeply rooted virtues among the inhabitants of Tidikelt. All visitors to the region were warmly received and generously hosted, even when their stay extended for one or two months on average. Among the Zoua, there also existed a guest storehouse, a storage facility dedicated to preserving foodstuffs, vegetables, and fruits for the reception of guests. (Voinot, n.d, p. 66)

Marriage

The Tidikelt society followed Islamic teachings in concluding marriage contracts and tended to simplify and facilitate the conditions of marriage. The ṣadāq (bridal gift) generally consisted of a woolen cloak (ḥawli ṣūf), the garment worn by women when leaving the house; a mattress made of sheep's wool resembling a traditional blanket; silver jewelry (adbālīz), including silver ornaments or bracelets worn on the wrists; and silk-embroidered footwear. As for the dowry, its value varied from one district to another and according to social class. Among the white population, it generally ranged from fifty (50) to five hundred (500) francs, whereas among the Black population it ranged from five (5) to fifteen (15) francs, paid either in cash or in kind. After the bride had been adorned by the women, the wedding procession would set out, led by the family's friends, amid the sound of gunfire and the ululations of women. If the bride's family was wealthy, a traditional musical performance known as the Nūbah would also accompany the celebration.

Childbirth

According to Tidikelt tradition, when a woman went into labor, she would summon the wallādah (traditional midwife) to assist with the delivery. Following the birth, relatives and neighbors would gather to congratulate the parents by saying "Mabrouk" ("Congratulations").

Seven days later, the 'Aqīqah, locally known as al-Sabū' ("the seventh-day celebration"), would be held. Relatives and neighbors were invited to attend a feast, which usually featured couscous. On this occasion, the family consulted respected elders to choose an appropriate name for the newborn. If the child was a boy, the most common names were Muhammad, Ahmed, Abdelkader, and Abdullah. If the child was a girl, she was most often named Fatimah, Aisha, or Khadijah, as these names were believed to be among the most beloved to God. In some cases, the child's name reflected the time or circumstances of birth. For example, a child born on Friday would be named Boujemaa, while one born on the day of Eid would be named El Aid, and so forth.

Kohl was then applied to the infant's eyes and eyebrows in the belief that this would ensure dark, beautiful eyes and eyebrows in adulthood. Certain types of incense were burned, and amulets, locally known as *hijāb*, were tied around the child's wrists and neck to protect against the evil eye. The newborn was also given beneficial medicinal herbs, such as wormwood, believed to promote good health. During the first months of life, in addition to breast milk, the infant's diet consisted mainly of date flour and goat's milk. After reaching the age of two, the child was weaned and began eating cooked date flour prepared with butter. (Voinot, n.d, p. 111)

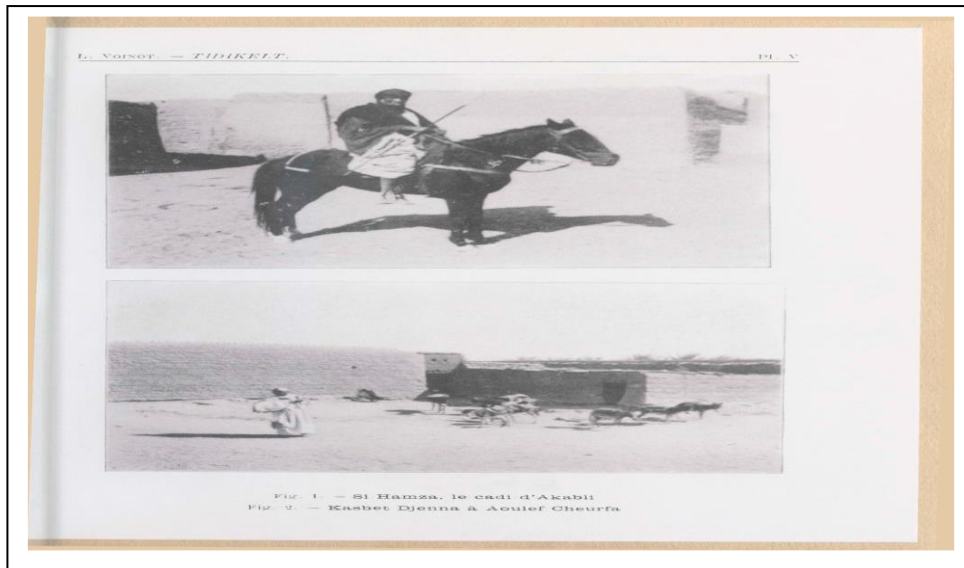
Conclusion

From the foregoing study, it can be concluded that Le Tidikelt is one of the most important foreign sources on the history of the Tidikelt region. In this work, Louis Voinot provides a comprehensive overview of the region's geography, history, customs and traditions, its most prominent scholars, its economic conditions, and its commercial importance. His work is distinguished by the richness and diversity of its ideas, the accuracy of its information, and the depth of its analysis. These qualities stem from the many years he spent in the region at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, during which he interacted closely with the local population and traveled extensively among its fortified settlements (*ksour*) and oases. This period was particularly significant in the region's history, as it marked the earliest stages of French colonial domination. It is therefore unsurprising that this book is regarded as the foremost source on the history and conditions of the Tidikelt region at the end of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, it remains in need of further analytical and critical study.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Photograph of Sheikh Hamza Al-Qiblawi, from Tidikelt by Louis Voinot, p. 182.

Appendix 2: Photograph of the Kasbah of Al-Jannah in Ouled (Oulf) Al-Shurfa, from Tidikelt by Louis Voinot, p. 182.



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