



## The Biography of Notable Figures of Oulad Sidi Hammou Belhaj in the City of Touat (993H-1110H)

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### **Abstract:**

*The region of Touat played a distinctive role in cultural interaction through a group of scholars produced by this city. Among the most renowned figures of the region, we find the notables of the tribe of Oulad Sidi Hammou Belhaj, who settled there after the death of their father, a merchant who left them an inheritance in the area. They moved there and settled, starting from the Kunta zawiya.*

*This tribe was formed and its influence on the Touati society began to grow due to its authority, as it produced many scholars who had a great impact on the city in a historical sequence that continues to this day.*

**Keywords:** *City of Touat, Sidi Hammou Belhaj, the Sahara Desert, scholars, zawiya, tribe.*

## **La Biographie des personnalités notables de Oulad Sidi Hammou Belhaj dans la ville de Touat (993H-1110H)**

### **Résumé :**

*La région de Touat a joué un rôle singulier dans les échanges culturels grâce à un groupe d'érudits issus de cette cité. Parmi les figures les plus illustres de la région figurent les notables de la tribu d'Oulad Sidi Hammou Belhaj, qui s'y installèrent après la mort de leur père, un marchand qui leur légua des terres. Ils s'établirent à partir de la zawiya de Kunta.*

*Cette tribu, forte de son autorité, exerça une influence croissante sur la société touatine, donnant naissance à de nombreux érudits qui marquèrent profondément la ville, une influence qui se poursuit encore aujourd'hui.*

**Mots-clés :** *Ville de Touat, Sidi Hammou Belhaj, désert du Sahara, érudits, zawiya, tribu.*



## **Introduction:**

The region of Touat is considered one of the deeply rooted areas in the Sahara Desert, having played a major role in scientific and cultural communication, as well as in establishing cultural ties among Maghrebi Islamic centers. Being a significant crossroads for commercial caravans coming from both the north and the south, and serving as a gathering point for pilgrims traveling from southern Morocco, Touat became a hub of cultural and intellectual exchange. These caravans and delegations were often accompanied by cultural and scholarly activities, represented by scholars who either came with the traders or were themselves engaged in trade. In addition to this, they contributed to spreading Islam and knowledge across the Sahara. The region of Touat thus received wide attention from scholars and jurists, to the point that it became a well-known intellectual center with a reputation that spread throughout the Islamic world.

Among the notable scholars of this region, the distinguished figures of the noble tribe of Oulad Sidi Hammou Belhaj represent a rich subject in biographical and historical works. Its founder grew up in the city of Tafilalet, which was one of the important urban centers of Morocco and a major commercial hub. He entered Touat as a merchant for the first time in the year 993H through the village of Ariane Er-Ras (Al-'Ayashi Abu Salim, 1977), and remained both a traveling merchant across all the ksour (fortified villages) of Touat and a teacher of the Qur'an and the Sunnah throughout his stay in its markets.

After his death in 1044H, his eldest son, Moulay Amhammed, settled in the Kunta Zawiya, where he was warmly received by the great scholar Sidi Ahmed Ar-Ruqadi. Finding his stay there agreeable, he wrote to his brothers, calling them to join him in order to receive their share of their father's legacy (inheritance). Each of them, upon arrival at the zawiya, also found life there suitable, with the exception of one. This marked the beginning of the presence of the Oulad Sidi Hammou Belhaj in Touat.

Thus, this tribe gradually took shape, becoming an integral part of the Touati society, influencing and guiding it through their authority in knowledge, social status, wealth, and power. Moreover, they were endowed by God with a continuous historical presence in the region, beginning with their first ancestor who arrived in Touat as an itinerant merchant and reformist scholar in the 10th century (Hijri), and continuing with an influential role up to the present day.

### 1. Geography of the Touat Region

The Touat region lies in the western part of the Sahara Desert to which it belongs, located in the southwest of Algeria. It is composed of three main units:

#### **Tinerkouk (Gourara)** (*Belil, Rachid, 2008*):

SiTouated in the northern part of the region, it extends from **Tablkozah** in the north to **Sebaa** in the south, covering a distance of about **270 km**, with **Timimoun** as its capital. This area contains nearly fifty ksour (fortified villages).

#### **Central Touat:**

It is bordered to the north by the **Grand Western Erg**, **Erg Er-Rawi**, and the **Gourara region**. To the west, it is bounded



by **Oued Massoud**, to the southwest by **Erg Chach**, and to the east by the **Tademait Plateau**.

### **Tidikelt:**

A vast area located between the **Ahaggar** and **Tinerkouk**, characterized by widespread palm groves and the presence of foggaras (traditional underground irrigation systems) (*Belalem, n.d.*).

Astronomically, the Touat region is situated between longitudes 2.3° and 3.2° west of Greenwich, and between latitudes 26.7° and 28.5° north of the equator (Boujemaa, 2009).

### **1. The Lineage of the Oulad Sidi Hammou Belhaj Family**

The lineage of this family goes back to Sidi Hammou, known as Ibn al-Hajj, son of Moulay al-Hassan, son of Moulay Mohammed, son of Moulay Abdallah, son of Moulay Mohammed, son of Moulay Ali al-Sharif, son of Moulay al-Hassan, son of Moulay Mohammed, son of Moulay al-Hassan, son of Moulay Qasim, son of Moulay Mohammed, son of Moulay Abu al-Qasim, son of Moulay Mohammed, son of Moulay al-Hassan, son of Moulay Abdallah, son of Moulay Abu Mohammed, son of Moulay Arafah, son of Moulay al-Hassan, son of Moulay Abu Bakr, son of Moulay Ali, son of Moulay al-Hassan, son of Moulay Ahmed, son of Moulay Ahmed, son of Moulay Ismail, son of Moulay al-Qasim, son of Moulay Mohammed al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, son of Abdallah al-Kamil, son of al-Hassan al-Muthanna, son of al-Hassan al-Sibt, son of Ali ibn Abi Talib and Fatima al-Zahra (may Allah be pleased with them).

“Ibn al-Hajj” is a *kunya* (epithet) and not a link in the genealogy, as stated in the book “*Manh al-Rabb al-Ghafour lima Ahmalahu Sahib Fath al-Shukour*” (Moulay, 2015). By this lineage, the family attained *al-nasab al-sharif* (noble descent) and carried the title “Moulay” as a mark of their affiliation with Ahl al-Bayt.

Sidi Hammou Belhaj grew up in the city of Tafilalt, one of Morocco’s great centers of knowledge, learning, and culture, as well as a major commercial hub of the Far Maghreb. He memorized the Qur’an under the guidance of his father, Moulay al-Hassan, who was renowned at the time for his knowledge and piety. He excelled in Qur’anic and Hadith sciences, surpassing his peers, to the extent that his father, out of admiration, shortened his name from *Mohammed* to *Hammou* as a sign of honor and affection. He relied on him to undertake the noble family’s responsibilities in Tafilalt, where he also learned the principles of trade (Moulay A., 2016).

## **2. The Circumstances Surrounding the Arrival and Settlement of the Family in the Touat Region**

Sidi Hammou was a merchant, an educator, and a scholar in the sciences of the Qur’an and the Sunnah. He first entered Touat in the year 1040H. There he developed a strong relationship with Sidi Mohammed ibn Saleh, famously known as ‘Aliyan al-Ras. He hosted him, conversed with him, and discovered the man’s knowledge, piety, and devoutness. This bond led to Sidi Hammou’s great admiration for Touat. In the year 1062H, in Timbuktu, the noble Sharif Hammou Belhaj passed away, leaving behind great wealth (Jaafar, 2016).



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Hammou Belhaj had taken one of his nine sons, Moulay Abd al-Rahman, with him to Timbuktu. Both of them contracted the plague in the city, and they died and were buried in its cemetery (Moulay A., 2016). He then sent his friend to call for his sons. The first to arrive was Moulay Mohammed, who admired Touat just as his father had. He stayed as a guest of Sheikh al-Ruqadi al-Kunti, and later his brothers joined him, thus forming the nucleus of the 'Alawi community in Touat. Their descendants spread toward Walata and its surroundings, after being preceded, joined, or followed by other 'Alawis from Tafilalt and the vicinity of Sijilmasa.

Regarding the entry and settlement of this noble 'Alawi family specifically in Central Touat, Dr. Ahmed Jaafari notes:

"Sheikh Moulay Ahmed al-Idrisi states that the noble Sharif Sidi Hammou Belhaj first entered from Tafilalt to Timbuktu as a merchant in the year 1040H. His commercial journeys there continued, and it was there that he passed away. In light of his scholarly and social reputation, the city's ruler immediately sent a messenger to the Sharif's family in Tafilalt, requesting their presence to collect his wealth." Moulay Mohammed, son of Sharif Sidi Hammou Belhaj, was appointed by his brothers for this mission (Jaafar, 2016).

### **3. Introducing the Sons of Sidi Hammou Belhaj in the Ksour of Touat (Adouai, Adghagh,...)**

Sidi Hammou Belhaj left behind nine sons, one of whom died with him as previously mentioned. The remaining are:

### **3.1. Moulay Mohammed al-Hajj**

He was the eldest son, born in Tafilalt in 1020H. He grew up under the care of his father, memorized the Qur'an at his hands, and mastered the sciences of Islamic law. He excelled in Hadith and Tafsir under the scholars of his era. He completed his Shari'a studies with the venerable scholar Sidi Ahmed al-Ruqadi. He entered the Kunta Zawiya in Touat at the beginning of 1045H, where he found a welcoming host in the Sheikh of the zawiya, Sidi Ahmed al-Ruqadi, who, recognizing his piety and knowledge, entrusted him with teaching Islamic sciences to the students. He married his daughter Aisha and later succeeded him in leading the zawiya and raising his children. He passed away on the morning of the 5th of Ramadan in the year 1001H. He is the forefather of the Shurafa of the Kunta Zawiya, Aghram Amlal, some of the Shurafa of Bouali, Tawraren, Taberkant, Admer, Lahmar, Timimoun, and several of the Shurafa of Mauritania. His descendants are also found in Oran, Tunisia, and France (Moulay A., 2016).

### **3.2. Moulay Abd al-Malik**

Born in 1022H in Tafilalt, he entered Touat in mid-Dhu al-Qi'da of 1045H and settled in the Kunta Zawiya. He later moved to the village of Takhrif, where he established a residence for his descendants. He passed away in Rajab of 1088H. He is the ancestor of the Shurafa of Takhrif and has descendants in Adgha, Bouda, Tsabit, Fnoughel, as well as in Tunisia (Jaafar, 2016).

### **3.3. Moulay Abd al-Karim**

Born in Tafilalt in 1024H, he memorized the Qur'an with his father and studied jurisprudence and Sunnah. He



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entered Touat in mid-Dhu al-Qi'da of 1045H with his brother Moulay Abd al-Malik. He first stayed in the Kunta Zawiya, then moved to Titawin al-Shurafa in the tribe of Anjemir, where he built his well-known qasbah, still standing today. Late in life, after being angered by one of his sons, he returned to the zawiya. He died on 1 Dhu al-Hijja, 1095H, leaving descendants who populated Titawin al-Shurafa, Qasr al-Mastour, and the village of al-Mahfoud Adgha (Moulay A., 2016).

### **3.4. Moulay al-Zin**

Son of Hammou Belhaj from his second wife and the first of her children, born in Tafilalt on 1 Dhu al-Hijja, 1026H. He memorized the Qur'an with his father and excelled in Tafsir, Hadith, and Fiqh. He was also an expert in trade routes. He entered Touat in mid-Muharram 1045H and settled in the Kunta Zawiya the same year. On his way back to Tafilalt, he stopped in Wadgha, where the Haddajin still reside today. He married a woman there, leaving her pregnant, and continued his journey. She bore him a son who was named after him. He died on 1 Sha'ban, 1098H. This branch is considered one of the strongest of the descendants of Sidi Hammou Belhaj in blessing, knowledge, and piety. He is the forefather of the Shurafa of Moulay Abdallah al-Ruqani in Ruqan, Ouled, Ain Salah, all the villages of Touat, Hoggar, and many African countries. He is also the ancestor of the Shurafa of Wadgha in Fnoughel and has descendants in Tafilalt. Among his most famous descendants are Moulay Abd al-Ruqani and his son Moulay Abd al-Malik (Jaafar, 2016).

### **3.5. Moulay Abd al-Qadir**

Born on 1 Dhu al-Qi'da, 1028H, he entered the Kunta Zawiya with his brother Moulay al-Zin in mid-Safar 1045H. He was hosted by his brother Moulay Mohammed and the pious saint Sidi Ahmed al-Ruqadi. He settled there, building a large house and a khalwa (retreat) for worship. He later asked his eldest son to move to the village of **Adouai**, which became the largest settlement of the descendants of Sidi Hammou Belhaj. He died in Dhu al-Hijja, 1094H (Moulay A., 2016).

### **3.6. Moulay al-Sharif**

Born on the 4th or 5th of Dhu al-Qi'da, 1030H, in Tafilalt from Sidi Mohammed al-Hajj's second wife. He memorized the Qur'an under his father and studied religious sciences under the scholars of his time. He entered the Kunta Zawiya in Muharram 1045H, where he married a woman from the Ruqadi family and fathered many children. He traveled frequently between Touat and Tafilalt. Later, he moved outside the zawiya, purchased vast lands between Wadi Tarbez, Bazajlu al-'Arab, and Adror, and built a grand qasr, the ruins of which still remain. He died in Safar, 1098H, at the age of 63 (Jaafar, 2016).

### **3.7. Moulay Abdallah**

Born in mid-Ramadan, 1032H, in Tafilalt from the second wife. He memorized the Qur'an with his father and worked in farming, supervising hospitality for guests during his father's absences on trade journeys. He entered the Kunta Zawiya with his brother Sheikh Moulay in Muharram 1045H. He later moved to Wadi Bouali, where he purchased large lands and orchards in Qasr Bazqadad. He built the



famous Qasbah of the 'Abdallawin and Qasbah Makhlouf. His descendants remain today in the Kunta Zawiya, Bouali, Titawin al-Shurafa, and Algiers. He passed away in mid-Shawwal, 1095H, in Bouali (Moulay A., 2016).

### **3.8. Moulay Ahmed**

Born at the end of Ramadan, 1033H, in Tafilalt. He memorized the Qur'an under his father and was especially cherished by his mother. Known for his wisdom, even at a young age, his father often sent him to resolve disputes among tribes such as Doui Menia, Barabish, and Ghananma. He was devoted to the Qadiriyya and Tayyibiyya Wazzaniyya Sufi orders. He entered the Kunta Zawiya with his brother Moulay Abdallah in Muharram 1045H. He later purchased an oasis called Brish. He died in Ramadan 1108H (Jaafar, 2016).

### **3.9. Moulay Abd al-Rahman**

The youngest son, born in Dhu al-Hijja, 1034H, in Tafilalt from the second wife. He memorized the Qur'an with his brother Moulay Mohammed. He died in 1044H from fever or plague, alongside his father, in Timbuktu, at less than 10 years old (Moulay A., 2016).

## **4. The Relationship of the Descendants of Si Hamu Belhaj with Certain Families in the Region**

The descendants of Si Hamu Belhaj established strong relations with the Reqaqda family. The Reqaqda trace their lineage back to Sheikh Sidi Mohammed Al-Ruqad, son of Sheikh Sidi Ahmed Al-Firm, son of Sheikh Sidi Amr Al-Sheikh, son of Sheikh Sidi Ahmed Al-Bakkay Boudemaa.

The Reqaqda distinguished themselves in a manner unmatched by other scholarly households. Sheikh Sidi Al-Mukhtar Al-Kunti, in his book *Al-Minna fi I'tiqad Ahl al-Sunna*, states:

“Sheikh Sidi Ahmed, son of Sheikh Sidi Mohammed Al-Ruqad, was among the greatest saints in knowledge and piety. He often used to say in his prostration: *“My Lord, grant me from Yourself a good offspring. Indeed, You are the Hearer of supplication”* (Āl ‘Imrān: 38).. God answered his supplication, and his progeny multiplied into seven sons, each of them pious scholars and noble saints, from whom spread knowledge and wisdom.” (Al-Amin, 2022).

These relations were manifested in the following:

#### 4.1. Apprenticeship

Many students attended the Ruqadiyya or Kunti zawiya, among them the descendants of Sidi Hamu Belhaj, whose apprenticeship continued across successive generations until today. They can be classified as follows:

- **The First Generation:** The earliest to arrive was Moulay Amhammed ibn Sidi Hamu Belhaj, around the year 1045 H, as mentioned earlier. He studied under Sheikh Sidi Ahmed Al-Ruqad, from whom he received authorizations to teach. After the Sheikh’s passing, he assumed responsibility for teaching students at the zawiya and providing for them. He was among its most distinguished scholars, producing numerous writings in various disciplines such as jurisprudence, grammar, and morphology. One of his most renowned works is *Sharh Muqaddimat al-Akhḍari* (Moulay A., 2016).



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- **The Second Generation:** This generation was represented by Moulay Ali Belhaj Al-Sharif, who studied under his grandfather Sidi Ahmed Al-Ruqad and completed his studies under his father, Moulay Amhammed Al-Haj. He earned recognition for his knowledge and sainthood.
- **The Third Generation:** Among this generation were the sons of Moulay Ali Belhaj, particularly his eldest son Moulay Hassan, and the son of his son Moulay Al-Sharif ibn Mohammed Al-Haj ibn Moulay Ali Belhaj Al-Bou'laoui. Also notable was the eminent scholar Abdallah Al-Ruqani ibn Ali ibn Al-Zein, who was raised and educated at the zawiya and surpassed his peers in knowledge, practice, and conduct.
- **The Fourth Generation:** This began with the renowned scholar Sidi Mohammed Al-Mahdi, who consolidated the foundations of the Aulad Si Hamu Belhaj clan. He benefited from the knowledge and guidance of Sidi Ali ibn Hanini, who prayed for his knowledge and righteousness. Whenever his father left the zawiya, he would entrust him with leading the clan in his absence.
- **The Fifth Generation:** Among them was the eminent scholar Sidi Al-Mukhtar ibn Al-Mustafa, under whom studied Moulay Ismail, his son Sidi Mohammed, and his second son Moulay Ali, who later became the clan's leader after his brother. He was responsible for renewing the library of Sidi Al-Mukhtar in the Great House, to which he brought many manuscripts from Morocco, including: *Sahih Muslim*, two copies of *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, *Tanbih al-Ghafilin*, *Bustan al-'Arifin*, *Nuzhat*

*al-Majalis fi al-Wa'z* along with *Taharat al-Qulub*, two copies of *Al-Zurqani*, two copies of *Al-Kharshi 'ala Khalil*, *Abu al-Hasan 'ala al-Risala*, and *Al-Miyara al-Kubra*.

- **The Sixth Generation:** This generation was marked by Haj Amhammed Al-Kunti, considered one of the greatest scholars of Touat. He renewed the zawiya and the school, leaving them thriving and full of life. Among those who studied under him from the descendants of Sidi Hamu Belhaj were: Moulay Ahmed ibn Moulay Ali Belhaj, Sidi Mohammed ibn Sidi Moulay Al-Tihami, and his brother Moulay Abdallah.

#### 4.2. Marriage Alliances

Marriage was one of the manifestations of the relationship between the Ruqāqida and the family of Sidi Hammou Belhaj. Moulay Amhammed, son of Sidi Hammou Belhaj, married the daughter of his shaykh, Sidi Ahmed Al-Ruqād, named Aisha. After him, his brother Moulay Abdelkader married her sister, Aqida. Likewise, his other brothers—Moulay Abdelmalek, Moulay Abdallah, Moulay Ahmed, Moulay Abdelkarim, and Moulay Al-Sharif—also married women from this family. Thus, it becomes clear that all the sons of Sidi Hammou who had come as guests and studied under the founder of the Ruqādiyya Zawiya married women from the Ruqād lineage. Consequently, the first generation of the noble descendants of the Sidi Hammou Belhaj family were maternally related to the Banu Ruqād.



## 5. The Role of Shaykh "Moulay Ahmed Al-Brishi" in the Cultural Exchange Between the Cities of "Touat" and "Azawad"

He is Moulay Ahmed bin Abdallah Al-Brishi, originally from Qasr Brish near Ruqan, belonging to the noble tribe of Oulad Sidi Hammou Belhaj. He lived during the 13th Hijri century. He began his life in Qasr Aqabli, where he studied under Shaykh Hamza Al-Filani in Sahil, before moving to the Malian Desert, where he married a second time to a woman from Azawad. He resided near the scholars of the Kunta tribe and studied under Shaykh Bai bin Omar Al-Kunti and Shaykh Muhammad bin Badi Al-Kunti.

He had a passion for copying manuscripts of the Kunta scholars and transferred numerous manuscripts from Touat to the Malian Desert, thus serving as a bridge for cultural exchange between the cities of Touat and Azawad. He was also instrumental in bringing Muhammad bin Ab Al-Mazmari's poetic rendition of *Al-Ajrumiyya* into the hands of Shaykh Muhammad bin Badi, who then composed an appropriate commentary titled *Muqaddim Al-'Ay Al-Masrum 'ala Nazm Bin Ab Lil-Ajrum* (Ahmed, 2016).

Moulay Ahmed Al-Brishi also played prominent social roles in the Malian Desert. His home became a center for the safekeeping of trusts and deposits, and he was known for resolving disputes that arose among tribes regarding wells and grazing areas (Moulay A., 2016).

## Conclusion

During the medieval period, the region of Touat was a place of settlement for scholars who flocked to it and played a significant role in the flourishing of the scientific movement in the region. They disseminated knowledge and held high positions in the country. Students of knowledge from various lands directed their attention to Touat, the jewel of the desert at that time, which served as a hub connecting the North with the South and the East with the West. Various cultures and peoples mingled there while preserving their authenticity and simple desert environment.

Many families emerged prominently, including the family of Sidi Hammou Belhaj, who left behind righteous descendants that settled in Touat and its surroundings, spreading knowledge and culture throughout these deserts. This enabled them to attain a distinguished status among the local population. Over the years, this family, thanks to the standing of its members, actively participated in all aspects of life, and their noble lineage spread throughout entire Qusur Touat, extending even to Mauritania and some neighboring countries.

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