

## Note on the origin of Tuaregs' sword blades

Henri LHOTE, *Notes Africaines*, 1954 pp. 9 –  
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*TRANSLATOR NOTE : While this article contains some interesting information regarding the study of the takouba, it is also filled with erroneous theories, that have long been dismissed in our days. As such, I took the liberty to add footnotes throughout the article, pointing out and correcting some of the major mistakes contained in this article, as well as clarifying some specific points. For ease of read, I also wrote in red the parts in the text relevant to some of my notes (mostly when I thought the author was making a significant error). Be aware though, that I'm not a specialist on the subject, and that I might have missed some obvious mistakes made by the author. The original footnotes were moved to the end of the article, and are numbered in roman numerals (i, ii, iii, etc ...).*

Mr Paris has recently made known two *takouba* blades that he had the opportunity to saw in Tombouctou and which both bears manufacturing marks of which he asked the origin<sup>1</sup>.

The first one he described is now part of the IFAN collections. Without holding it in my hands, I think, due to its long length, small width, and fuller running up to the point, that it isn't a *takouba* type blade, but one of an old dagger. Its steel must be very hard, not very flexible, and should have a good sonority. It is a Spanish blade. Its manufacturing mark, "B", topped with a crown, is attributed to Pedro de Velmonte (*de Belmonte*), famous craftsman from Toledo from the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Its presence in Tombouctou, in a family which said that it dated back to Djouder<sup>1</sup>, is thus not surprising and its quite likely that it came here with Djouder's Moroccans, or their successors, almost all of whom must have carried Spanish weapons.

Regarding the inscriptions written, they are certainly abbreviations of motto that only a specialized *chartiste*<sup>2</sup> could decipher, all the more since they are usually written either in Latin, or in Portuguese, or in Spanish, or Old Italian. Inscriptions on this type of blades are very common, some complete, other abridged. In 1930, I personally acquired from an *Aoullimid*<sup>3</sup> from the Gao region, a stunning *takouba* of the *taheli* type, with such a flexibility that it could compete with all the modern steel mills. It bears on one side the sentence: "SANCTISSIMO CRUCIFIGIO", and on the other: "MIN – SINAL – HES", those inscriptions being preceded by other letters, that are covered by the guard *quillon*<sup>4</sup>. A reproduction of it could be seen in *La Renaissance* (July – August 1934, p. 166). Father Dupuis Yacouba, whom I met in Tombouctou at the same time, told me that he saw one on which was written: "*Ne me sors pas sans raison, ne me rentre pas sans gloire*"<sup>5</sup>.

Those blades are highly valued by the Tuaregs, and I had to pay mine 500 francs<sup>6</sup> at the time, which is the price of a very fine camel. The price of a bad quality *takouba* was then 60 francs.

The other blade is indeed a *tazraït-ta-mellet*. The signs it bears – *temsi-n-tacouba* – *literally the fire (mark)*<sup>7</sup> of the *takouba*, are the *et'tebel*, or drum, and *ahar*, the lion.

The lion is actually, as Mr Paris' informant said, the "wolf of Passau", mark of the German armourers of Passau and Solingen, that was used from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The old and original blades carry a counter-stamp made of a star, whose branches are formed by two small lines, topped by a point. Those are sturdy blades, a little wider, but a little less flexible and

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2 Someone that studied at the *Ecole des Chartes*, a French school specialized in the study of historical texts and inscriptions.

3 I wasn't able to identify what, or whom, Henri Lhote was talking about here.

4 SIC, Lhote probably meant "the guard".

5 "Don't draw me without a reason, don't sheath me without honor"

6 Around 347\$, with inflation taken into account.

7 In Tamajak, *temse* can indeed mean "fire", but also directly "mark", so "mark of the *takouba*" would be a better translation.

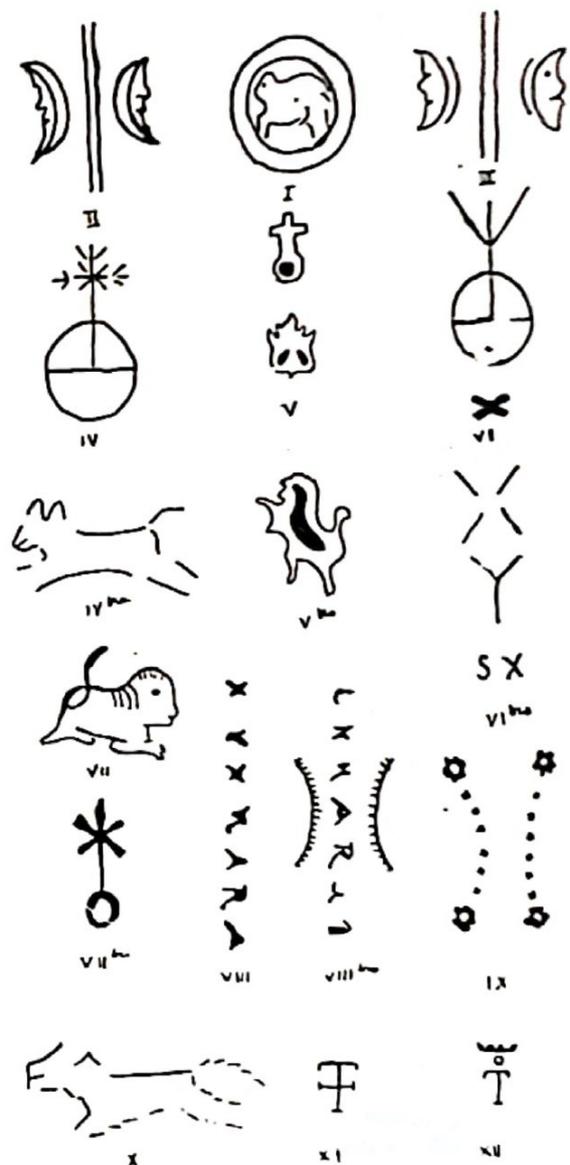
of lesser quality than the previous ones. Those are the ones that are generally the most appreciated by the Tuaregs, because their ballistic<sup>8</sup> and rigidity best suit the way they use it by stabbing<sup>9</sup>. Those are blades that have the reputation to be able to split shields in half from a single powerful strike.

This mark was often counterfeited, not only by the Tuareg craftsmen, but also by European armourers working for the contraband towards the barbary<sup>10</sup> countries. The “wolf of Passau” itself could have been an imitation of an armourer's mark from Toledo, Julian del Dey, who was, allegedly, the armourer of the famous Boadbil<sup>11</sup>. It was later recopied by the Spanish armourers, because this mark had become really popular in the Orient, as well as in the Caucasus and in India. We can henceforth see how difficult it is to identify with certainty the origin of blades carrying this mark, if it isn't supplemented with its counter-stamp<sup>12</sup>; the most we can say is that they are of European origin, and passed in Africa between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century.

As for the *Et'tebel*, or globus cruciger, it's a sign that has been written about extensively, and which was wrongly attributed for a long time to the *Grande Chartreuse*<sup>13</sup>, since the Carthusians never were blade smiths. It is a Swiss mark, whose irons were worked in Vienne (Isère)<sup>14</sup>, and were highly valued from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was also used by German armourers from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, that were probably located in Wurtemberg.

The presence of both of those distinct marks on the blade – and I have often seen them on the *takouba* of the Tuaregs – most likely indicates engravings reproduced by local craftsmen in order to add value to the blade, either regarding the quality of the steel, or for a magic purpose. The application of copper in the cavity of the engraving might be the best proof of this, since this technique isn't reported amongst European armourers. On the other hand, the discontinuous lines of the wolf are, as Morel pointed out, characteristic of indigenous engraving<sup>ii 15</sup>.

There is a lot of other marks on *takouba* that I have noted, and some of them can be found here.



8 SIC

9 Wrong, the Tuaregs never stab with the *takouba*, Lhote might be confused between the use of the *takouba* and the *telek* dagger

10 SIC

11 SIC, Julian del Rey was actually the swordsmith of Ferdinand II of Aragon circa 1470, and not of Boadbil (ruler of Granada). The Pasau wolf has nothing to do with him, but it has been supposed that Julian del Rey had a small dog (*perillo*) as one of his armourer marks.

Information courtesy of Jim McDougall.

12 I know for a fact that some Solingen / Passau blades don't have the counter-stamp described by Lhote, however, I'm not sure I've ever seen the counter-stamp he is describing.

13 French monastery

14 France

15 It is unclear what Lhote is trying to describe here, but Passau / Solingen wolf marks were most of the time comprised of separated lines, and frequently filled with brass.

I- Unknown mark. It was engraved on a nice blade of good steel, and inlaid with copper.

II and III- Genovese marks, but also done in Germany, in Solingen, by Clemens Stamm (circa 1590); in Italy, in Padua, by Pietrus Antonio Furnigano (circa 1565); in Spain, by Juan Martinez from Toledo (circa 1565) and also by Pedro de Belmonte, of which we already spoke. The Tuareg craftsmen, who call that mark *ayor*, the moon, or *télit*, have imitated it frequently.

IV- German mark from Wurtemberg from the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century, also copied by the Tuareg craftsmen. This mark has been noticed on the *takouba* of the *Amenokal* of the Hoggar, Akhamouck, and was inlaid with copper.

IV bis- Was on the same blade as IV It is the “wolf of Passau” and of Solingen, from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Was also inlaid with copper. The Tuaregs call it *ahar* (Ahaggar) or *enguerribou* (Sudan), which means lion.

V- Unknown marks, most likely of German origin. They are deeply stamped in the blade, which is usually of regular quality. Those are the *Et'tebel*, and *Adar-n-ahar* = the lion's print, or simply *aderih* = the print.

V bis- Standing lion, mark on the other side of V.

VI- Swiss mark of the globus cruciger on blades made in Vienne (Isère); sword blades highly valued from the 10<sup>th</sup> to the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is most likely a Tuareg counterfeit. The cross behind is an ancillary mark, without meaning, that we can find everywhere, equally in France, Spain, Germany, and Italy.

VI bis- Armourer's mark and monogram “SX” unidentified, in German type and style. It was on the other side of VI.

VII and VII bis- Unknown marks, most likely of German making, of same influence and period than V The two signs are present on the two sides. The *takouba*, of good quality, was a *tazraït* with a wide fuller on the first quarter of

the blade, and belonged to Mohamend ag Ouksem, from the Dag Rali (Hoggar).

VIII and VIII bis- Marks of unknown origin, that I was not able to identify yet, most likely Spanish or Genovese. Perhaps a blade made by Andrea Ferrara, the most famous armourer of Genoa.<sup>16</sup>

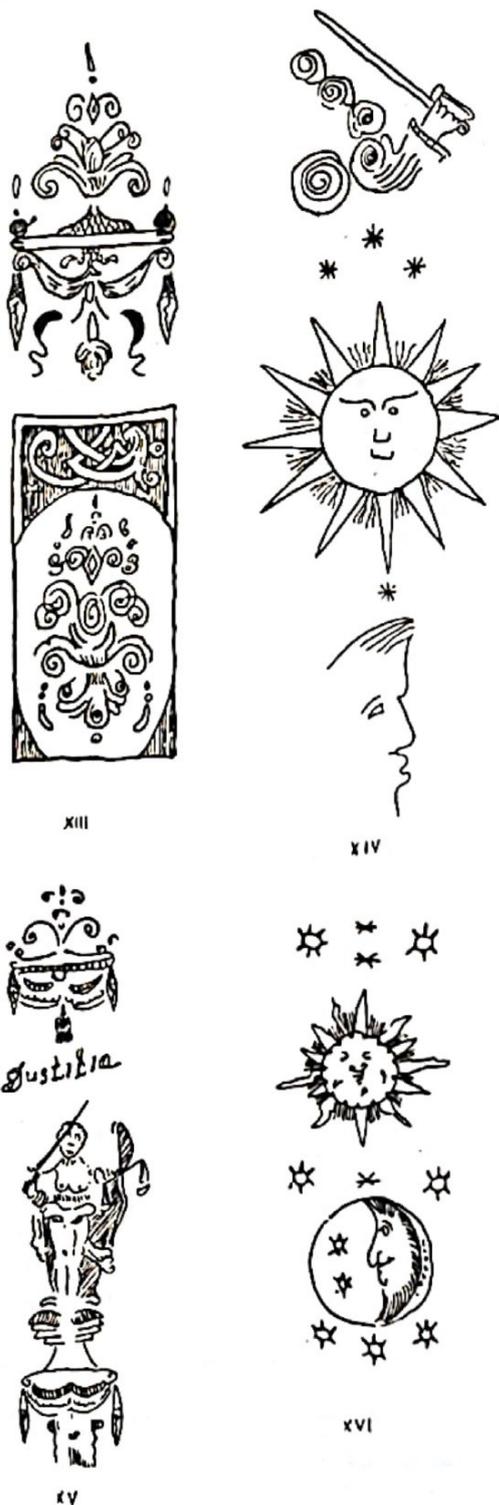
IX- Mark likely of Genovese origin, from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Observed on a *tazraït* blade with a small and thin fuller, going up to the first quarter. Borne on the two sides. The *takouba* belonged to Ouksem ag Ourar, *amrar* of the Dag Rali.

X- Marks of Passau and Solingen, copied by a Tuareg craftsman.

XI- Spanish mark from Toledo from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Monogram meaning I in T *Toledo*<sup>17</sup>, generally as a counterstamp; on an outstanding *tazraït*.

<sup>16</sup> Most likely locally made imitative inscriptions, as can be found on some Sboula, for instance.

<sup>17</sup> Unclear, hard to tell what Lhote meant here.



XII- German mark of Johannes Alich from Solingen (1580), imitating the counterstamp of Toledo.

XIII, XIV, XV, XVI- Those ornamental marks, obtained by etching, are usually done on Italian blades from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. They don't belong to anyone and have been used indiscriminately by many armourers, be they

French, Italian, or German. It is likely that the Italians started in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and that the French and Germans followed. It is only as of the second part of the 18<sup>th</sup> century that we see them appear in France, specially the sun, less frequently the crescent.

The Tuareg *takouba* is in its present form of European design<sup>18</sup>. It is indeed with Geoffroy de Bouillon that the blade with two edges converging towards the rounded tip appeared<sup>19</sup>. It has, like the *takouba*, a long tang that goes through the *quillon*<sup>20</sup> and the grip, and is riveted on top of the pommel. The sword, at that period, was 0.95 to 1 meter long, and its shape would last until the 16<sup>th</sup> century<sup>21</sup>. It is from Spain that the Africans must have discovered it<sup>22</sup>, but what we do know too, is that, as early as the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Marseille and Bordeaux were making swords that were sold on the other side of the Mediterranean Sea.

The Genovese also practiced this traffic and supplied the Moors most of the coat of mail – made in Milano – that were found in their country. A bull from the Pope Urbain V, in 1367, even forbids this trade, but we do know what those bans can really do compared to the considerable profits that the offenders drew from it. Leon the African, who visited Gao around 1513, tells us that we could see on the markets of this town European blades, whose value wasn't over 1/3 of a ducat (3.04 Francs or), that were resold for 4 ducats (58.40 Francs or), which left a nice profit to the intermediaries. From that time on, there was a traffic directly from Europe to Sudan, whose center was Tlemeen. When the Spanish occupied Oran, the harbor where the Genovese ships came in particular, it was asked to the Genovese merchant to bring their ware to Honein, which they did.

18 This idea has been disproved many times already, but let's remind here that this is not true.

19 Absolute nonsense, rounded or spatulated tips have been around since the Iron Age, and Godefroy de Bouillon, a French knight from the 11<sup>th</sup> century has nothing to do with it.

20 SIC, read « guard »

21 Wrong, swords from the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup> centuries are widely different from their counterparts of the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

22 The origins of the *takouba* are unclear, but it's way more likely that it evolved from the medieval Arab *saif*.

At the same time, the Genovese also frequented El Collo, Tunis, Ikikda (Philippeville), Bône, and Salé; the Venitians : Badis, Tunis, etc...; lastly, the Spanish had various points of support, all of which being commercial base. The Genovese, who had an important trading post in Salé, had a representative in Fez, Thomas de Marin, who lived here for 30 years, and was the main supplier of the prince of this town. Most of those dealers brought weapons that people from North Africa were seldom able to produce, and Toledo, Solingen, and the Italian armourers worked for them.

A lot of blades made after the 17<sup>th</sup> century are easy to identify. **Before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the grip was elongated so that the weapon could be held with two hands, and that is how knights were able to split helms or coat of mails<sup>23</sup>. From the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the grip shrank, because it was held with 3 fingers and the thumb, while the index came down on the quillons<sup>24</sup>.** To that end, the blade, near the guard, shouldn't be sharp, since the finger was in contact with it. This is precisely this particular and unique shape of the blade, that we find amongst the old *takouba* blades, which is thicker near the guard and has its sides rounded off. **This is also the reason why the grip of the *takouba* is short, because the tang was calculated to address a 3 fingers grip; the Tuaregs countered this shortcoming by flaring the inside of the pommel<sup>25</sup>.**

The heel of the blade often showed a concave recess where the master armourers marked their stamp. It was also at this time that the swords

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23 Lhote as obviously no idea of what he is talking about here, longswords only really started to appear during the 14<sup>th</sup> century, but there was still a lot of short one-handed swords being produce at the time, way more, even, than longswords. Also, swords weren't used to split, or shatter, or cut armour but rather, when fighting an armoured opponent, to circumvent it (aiming for the weak and unprotected spots).

24 This part is, again, not really relevant, the biggest two-handed swords ever produced were made during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and not all rapiers and sideswords were made to be used with the index over the guard.

25 No, the grip of *takouba* is short because of how the Tuaregs used it. Considering how wide the guard of *takouba* are, they easily could have made it narrower and thus get a longer grip; also note that the oldest *takouba* frequently have a brazil nut pommel that, obviously, isn't flared.

were fitted with lengthwise grooves, intended to alleviate them and make them more flexible. We also find those details amongst *takouba* blades, and we thus have two reliable markers, that determines with precision their approximate age. All *takouba*, I hasten to say, don't have those characteristics.

Thus, it wasn't necessary to search the origin of the *takouba* amongst the Celts, as Cauvet wanted to do, or amongst the Greeks, as was also supposed. We don't know when the Tuaregs adopted the *takouba*; but it is most likely at a later period, because if we refer to rock carvings and paintings, it only appears with the camel and, we must state, in reproductions way closer to the current period than to the age of the horse. We see several times horsemen with swords, but here too it is from relatively recent documents. However, texts notify several times that the Numid and Gétule populations had swords. It is most likely that they used short blades, that they must have discovered while in contact with Greeks and later the Romans, but those weapons only share a vague resemblance with the *takouba*.

It is hoped that the example of Mr Paris would be followed and that the persons living in contact with the Tuaregs would accept to send to the IFAN the surveys of the marks on *takouba* they may be able to see. Those we publish here, which are some of the most frequent ones, are far from having exhausted the topic. It is possible to survey many others, and maybe thus to create a general publication.

*Translated from French and annotated by  
Jean-Yves CHEVRE-BALEIGE*

i *Notes Africaines*, n°59, juillet 1953, pp. 84-85.

ii Dr M. H. MOREL, Essai sur l'épée des Touaregs de l'Ahaggar, *Travaux de l'Institut de Recherches Sahariennes*, T. II, 1943, p. 165.