

## THE AURÈS BETWEEN 1935-1936 THROUGH THE EYES OF THÉRÈSE RIVIÈRE

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**Abstract:** This article explores the ethnographic work of French anthropologist Thérèse Rivière during her 1935–1936 expedition to the Aurès region of Algeria. Her research, conducted under the colonial context, focused on documenting the social, cultural, and economic life of the Chaoui Amazigh community. Drawing on her detailed field observations and photographs, the article highlights the significance of her contribution to the understanding of Chaoui society and reflects on the broader implications of colonial-era anthropology in shaping representations of indigenous cultures.

*Keywords:* Anthropology, Aurès, ethnographic studies, social history, Thérèse Rivière

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## 1. Introduction

The Aurès region, located in northeastern Algeria, is a historically and culturally rich area that has long served as a stronghold of resistance and a center of Amazigh heritage (Ballais, 1989). As the ancestral homeland of the Chaoui people, the Aurès is marked by its rugged mountainous terrain, relative isolation, and centuries-old systems of social organization. This challenging geography has not only preserved traditional lifeways but also reinforced communal resilience and a sense of cultural distinctiveness (Benabbas, 2010). The region has often been viewed by scholars and colonial observers alike as a bastion of indigenous autonomy, resistant to both external domination and homogenizing national narratives.

Between 1935 and 1936, French ethnographer Thérèse Rivière undertook an in-depth field study in the Aurès, producing a rare and detailed ethnographic archive. Her work offers valuable insights into the fabric of Chaoui society, including kinship structures, modes of subsistence, symbolic practices, and gender roles (Guedjiba, 2019). Particularly striking in Rivière's documentation is her emphasis on the everyday agency of women and the intricate webs of oral transmission and ritual that sustained social cohesion. Through her lens, the Aurès emerges not merely as a geographic periphery but as a complex and dynamic socio-cultural world.

Moreover, Rivière's photographic archive complements her textual accounts, offering a powerful visual anthropology that captures both the material culture and emotional atmospheres of Chaoui life (Digard, 2003). Her images do not merely illustrate ethnographic data—they participate in the construction of meaning and representation, inviting reflections on the politics of observation, gaze, and narrative authority.

This article revisits and analyzes Rivière's ethnographic legacy, not only to extract historical data but also to interrogate the interpretive frameworks and epistemological assumptions embedded in her work. It seeks to address the following questions: How did Thérèse Rivière interpret and document the Chaoui way of life? What were her most significant ethnographic observations? And how do her findings contribute to a broader understanding of Chaoui society within both its colonial context and contemporary anthropological discourse?

## 2. Literature Review

### *2.1 The Aurès in Historical and Anthropological Studies*

Scholarly interpretations of the Aurès region vary across different disciplines. Geographers such as Émile Félix Gautier and Augustin Bernard have examined the topographical and climatic conditions of the region, emphasizing its isolation and ecological significance (Gautier, 1927). These studies highlight how the region's geography shaped its inhabitants' way of life, particularly in terms of agriculture, pastoralism, and settlement patterns (Bernard, 1938). Historians, including Charles-André Julien and Stéphane Gsell, have explored the Aurès' role in resistance movements, from Numidian uprisings against Roman rule to its pivotal role in the Algerian War of Independence (Julien, 1964). These historical accounts underscore the region's strategic importance and the resilience of its people in the face of foreign domination (Gsell, 1918). Anthropological studies have focused on the social and cultural structures of the Chaoui people. Émile Masqueray (1894) was one of the first to provide a detailed ethnographic analysis of the Aurès, distinguishing between the Nememcha and Aurès Chaouis. Later, Colonna (1975) examined the sociopolitical transformations in the

region, particularly in the context of French colonial rule and post-independence developments. Recent contributions, such as those of Coquet (2019) and Benzeroual (2020), expand the historical scope of Aurès studies by integrating gendered readings and representations of Chaouia women through multiple colonial and postcolonial lenses.

## 2.2 *Thérèse Rivière's Ethnographic Work*

Thérèse Rivière conducted an extensive ethnographic study of the Aurès between 1935 and 1936 as part of a broader French anthropological mission. Her research, documented in *Aurès, Algérie* and preserved at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, remains one of the most comprehensive accounts of Chaoui society during the colonial era (Thérèse R., 1938). Rivière's work is notable for its detailed observations of Chaoui social structures, gender roles, and economic activities. She highlighted the central role of women in domestic and economic spheres, documenting their participation in agriculture, weaving, and communal rituals. Her photographic records serve as invaluable visual ethnographic material, capturing aspects of daily life, clothing, and traditional ceremonies (Thérèse R., 1939; Digard, 2003). Coquet (2019a) discusses Rivière's intimate immersion among the Ath Abderrahman Kebèche, shedding light on her unique methodological choices and the colonial gaze in visual ethnography. These insights are further enriched by Coquet and Colonna's reflections on the feminine presence and silence in the field.

## 2.3 *Critical Perspectives on Rivière's Work*

Despite the richness of Rivière's contributions, her work has been critiqued for its colonial context and potential biases. Scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1962) and Fanny Colonna (1975) have argued that many early French anthropological studies, including Rivière's, were influenced by the colonial administration's interests in controlling indigenous populations. While Rivière provided a meticulous ethnographic account, her work must be examined critically within the framework of colonial anthropology. The publication *L'Aurès de Thérèse Rivière et de Germaine Tillion* (Coquet, 2019b) provides a joint reflection on the practices of two women ethnographers in 1930s Algeria, offering important epistemological insights on their fieldwork ethics and representation. Moreover, contemporary Chaoui scholars have emphasized the need for indigenous perspectives in the study of the Aurès. They argue that while Western anthropologists provided valuable documentation, their interpretations often lacked the nuanced understanding that local historians and anthropologists could offer (Djenadi, 2008). Recent critical literature in postcolonial studies and indigenous methodologies has further emphasized the importance of decolonizing ethnographic archives and incorporating Chaoui voices (Saadi-Mokrane, 2018; Bensaâd, 2021). The Aurès region continues to be a subject of significant academic interest, with contributions from historians, geographers, and anthropologists shaping our understanding of its cultural and social complexities. Thérèse Rivière's work remains a foundational ethnographic resource, but it must be examined critically within its historical and colonial context.

(Bourdieu P., 1958). Future research should incorporate indigenous perspectives to provide a more comprehensive and nuanced portrayal of the Aurès and its people.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1 *The Historical and Anthropological Context of the Aurès During the 1930s*

The social and economic conditions in the Aurès region during the 1930s were heavily influenced by French colonial policies and global crises, particularly the Great Depression of 1929, whose effects extended to Algeria. Socially, the region experienced marginalization (Abdennacer, 2020) and colonial repression, with the French authorities implementing coercive policies aimed at controlling the indigenous population. These policies included the confiscation of agricultural lands for European settlers and the imposition of strict colonial laws on Algerians, leading to social decline and widespread poverty. Consequently, many inhabitants of the Aurès migrated to major cities or even to France in search of employment and better living conditions. Regarding cultural marginalization, education was severely restricted for the local population. The French authorities focused on promoting education in French while suppressing Arabic and indigenous cultural expressions. The region also suffered from a lack of hospitals, schools, and basic services, leading to the spread of diseases due to malnutrition and poor healthcare. French policies prioritized urban centers over rural areas, further deepening regional disparities. At the global level, the **Great Depression (1929–1939)** severely impacted Algeria, including the Aurès region, as declining demand for agricultural products led to a drop in farmers' incomes. Additionally, French settlers took control of the most fertile lands, reducing agricultural production among Algerians. The indigenous population of the Aurès relied primarily on traditional farming and livestock herding, but the shrinking of arable land and resource scarcity resulted in harsh living conditions.

Moreover, the colonial taxation **system** imposed heavy financial burdens on Algerians, exacerbating their economic hardship. Local trade declined as European settlers dominated major markets, weakening the rural economy of the Aurès. The 1930s were one of the most challenging periods for the inhabitants of the region, marked by severe economic and social deterioration due to French colonial rule and the global economic crisis. However, amid these oppressive policies, the early signs of national consciousness and resistance began to emerge, laying the groundwork for the rise of the Algerian nationalist movement (Dejeux, 1978).

#### 3.2 *Participants*

This anthropological study explores the Douar Tagmout and the Ouled Abd al-Rahman tribe in the Aurès region. On January 11, 1935, Thérèse Rivière and Germaine Tillion arrived in Arris, the colonial administrative center of the Aurès Mountains, where 57,623 inhabitants lived, including 1,400 indigenous families and 30 European settlers. Following geologist Robert Laffitte's recommendations, they first settled in Menaa before moving in April to Djebel Ahmar Khaddou's Douar Tagmout, within the Beni Melkem confederation. The arduous journey from Arris to Tagmout took 11 hours on horseback, while in June, they relocated to Kebach within the Ouled Abd al-Rahman tribe, now known as Meziraa in Biskra (**Figure 2**), Province. Rivière's research, spanning two years, focused on the semi-nomadic Ouled Abd al-Rahman, who engaged in pastoralism and subsistence farming, relying on self-produced goods. Their population of 1,000 resided in 140 houses, scattered across a vast and rugged landscape where seasonal migrations dictated their living conditions. Their dwellings included

stone-built houses, underground homes, and tents, varying according to the season. The tribe's summer and autumn settlements were at 2,000m altitudes(*Figure 4*), while winter brought them to lower elevations near Kebach's grain storage sites, and spring saw them moving to Meziraa's desert plains. Rivière meticulously documented their architecture, construction techniques(*Figure 3*), and traditional practices, including the "Hayji" ritual against evil spirits. The tribe was structured into five subgroups: Ouled Sidi Mohamed, Ouled Si Ali Moussa, Ouled Daoud, Ouled Remili, and Ouled Khelaf. Archaeological findings in Kebach suggested historical connections to Queen Kahina, while Roman-era ruins further illustrated the region's rich past. Concluding her study in April 1934, Rivière emphasized the importance of analyzing Berber-Arab populations and their adaptation to colonial rule, employing a multidisciplinary approach that incorporated geography, ethnography, and historical analysis through photography, statistics, and cinematography.

### *3.3 Procedures, Duration, and Objectives*

The scientific expedition to the Aurès lasted for 16 months between 1935 and 1936. During this period, Rivère gathered 857 items related to the Aurès, including photographs, writings, and observational notes. These materials, annotated with her comments, were later exhibited at the Musée de l'Homme on May 28, 1943, under the title *L'Aurès*, presented by Jacques Faublée was entrusted with reporting Rivère's findings after her work had been under medical supervision since August 13, 1942. This duration allowed Rivère to immerse herself in the daily life of the Berber communities inhabiting this remote mountainous region. Her primary focus was on studying their customs, beliefs, and social structures. Her journey was part of a broader research agenda on North Africa, aiming to gather extensive knowledge about indigenous populations within the context of French colonial rule.

### *3.4 Objectives*

The primary objective of Thérèse Rivère's expedition was to analyze the cultural and social identities of the region's inhabitants, who were Berber communities living in difficult-to-access mountainous terrain. Rivère was particularly interested in understanding how these communities interacted with the French colonial system. She studied the impact of colonization on cultural practices and daily rituals. Additionally, she sought to examine the social dimensions of family relationships, including social and familial arrangements, marriage customs, women's rights, and interpersonal relationships within the community.

Another key objective of her study was to document the local language and linguistic patterns used in everyday life. She also focused on religious practices and spiritual beliefs of the Berber populations. At the same time, her work aimed to enhance European understanding of Algerian societies by scientifically documenting their way of life. This reflects the colonial influence on European researchers' perspectives at the time.

## **4. Research Tools**

### *4.1 Advanced Fieldwork Methodology*

Rivière was among the pioneering researchers who adopted long-term fieldwork and direct immersion with local populations, which gave her study high scientific credibility. She employed a near-comprehensive fieldwork methodology to achieve her research goals in the Aurès. Her approach relied on direct observations and dialogues with local residents, enabling her to closely examine their daily lives and behaviors.

Her methodology was grounded in the fundamental principles of social anthropology, which was still developing as a discipline at the time.

#### *4.2 Direct Observation*

Rivière resided in local villages among the inhabitants, following a direct observation method( *Figure 5*). She meticulously recorded social patterns, religious rituals, and daily customs. This form of field interaction aimed to collect precise information on traditions and practices in an environment minimally influenced by European culture.

#### *4.3 Interviews*

She conducted interviews with local residents using the native language. These interviews included both men and women and focused on social and religious aspects of life. Some of these interviews took the form of informal inquiries designed to understand the locals' perceptions of their identity and their relationship with the colonial presence.

#### *4.4 Documentation and Writing*

Rivière carefully documented all her observations in field notebooks and diaries. She recorded intricate details of social life, from daily practices to cultural traditions. Additionally, she compiled extensive reports on the familial and economic systems in the region, along with analyses of religious and social rituals.

### **5. Results**

Thérèse Rivière's ethnographic research on the Aurès region provides a comprehensive analysis of its social(**Table 1**), cultural, and economic structures, with a particular focus on the role of women in this rural, mountainous environment. The social fabric of the Aurès is defined by strong kinship ties, where the tribe functions as the fundamental unit, fostering cohesion and solidarity. Rivière's findings, as documented between 1935 and 1936, highlight the intricate dynamics within Chaoui society, including the structured organization of the Ouled Abd al-Rahman tribe, whose subgroups engage in pastoralism, agriculture, weaving, and trade. Family relationships are deeply interwoven with economic and emotional interdependence, ensuring the transmission of traditions across generations. Culturally, the Aurès is rich in customs and rituals that mark key life stages, complemented by traditional music, folk dances, and artisanal crafts such as pottery (**Figure 1**) (Traditional Clothing of Chaoui Women (Photographic documentation showcasing the intricate designs of Chaoui garments) and weaving, which also serve as economic pillars. The economic life of the Aurès revolves around traditional activities like livestock herding and agriculture (**Table 2**) Economic Activities of Chaoui Women), with women playing a crucial role in both domestic and economic spheres(**Table 3**), Key Ethnographic Observations by Thérèse Rivière). They contribute significantly to household management, child-rearing, and handicrafts, particularly in weaving and agricultural labor. Rivière's research also documents seasonal migration patterns, housing structures (**Figure 7**) Traditional Housing in the Aurès Region), and the diverse roles women undertake in sustaining cultural continuity and economic stability. Through detailed tables and figures, her work illustrates how the Chaoui people navigate their harsh environment while maintaining a deep connection to their traditions, showcasing the dynamic interplay between social organization, gender roles, cultural practices, and economic adaptation in the Aurès during the colonial period.

## 6. Clarifying the Use of Thérèse Rivière's Works

The analysis primarily draws upon her original ethnographic materials housed at the Musée de l'Homme, including her field notes, photographic collections, and published reports from the late 1930s. These documents served as foundational primary sources, allowing for a reconstruction of her field experience and observations during her 16-month expedition. In addition, secondary sources were consulted to contextualize Rivière's contributions within broader colonial anthropology debates. Her work was not only examined for its descriptive richness but also critically assessed through postcolonial lenses that highlight the tensions inherent in colonial-era ethnography. Particular attention was given to how her photographic documentation complemented her written analysis, enhancing our understanding of the lived realities of the Chaoui people during that period.

## 7. Conclusion

Thérèse Rivière's research in the Aurès region stands as a significant contribution to the anthropological study of Amazigh culture and Chaoui society. Her collaboration with Germaine Tillion in the 1930s marked a pivotal moment in the study of North African traditional communities. Rivière meticulously documented local customs, social structures, and cultural practices, offering invaluable insights into everyday life, gender roles, and economic activities. Her ethnographic work preserved aspects of Chaoui heritage, including oral traditions, religious rituals, and artisanal crafts, while also shedding light on the environmental adaptation of the community. Furthermore, her photographic archives and detailed field studies have remained essential references for anthropologists, historians, and sociologists. This article serves as a call to reassess colonial-era studies, recognizing their academic value beyond ideological debates. While such research was often conducted within a colonial framework, it still provides a rich source of knowledge that can be critically reinterpreted and utilized. Engaging with these studies allows for a more comprehensive understanding of past societies, research methodologies, and historical transformations. Thus, rather than dismissing them, there is an urgent need to translate, analyze, and integrate these works into contemporary academic discourse, ensuring their relevance in understanding both historical and present-day dynamics of North African societies.

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Appendixes

Table 1.  
*Social Structure of the Ouled Abd al-Rahman Tribe*

Subgroup	Population Size	Primary Economic Activity
Ouled Sidi Mohamed	200	Pastoralism, Agriculture
Ouled Si Ali Moussa	180	Weaving, Trade
Ouled Daoud	220	Livestock, Farming
Ouled Remili	150	Subsistence Farming
Ouled Khelaf	250	Mixed Economy

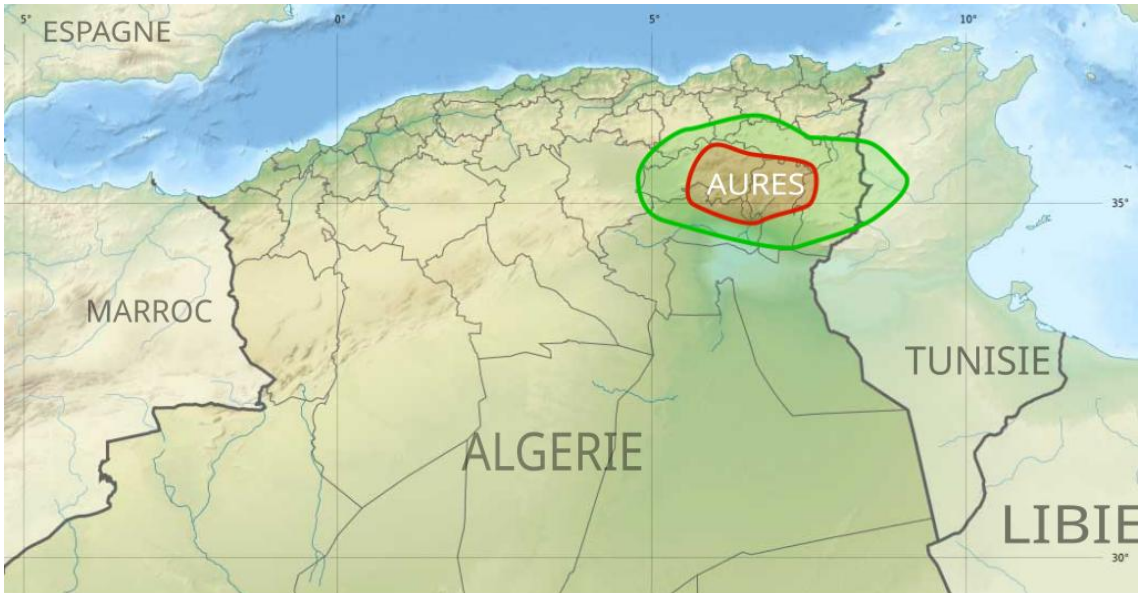
Table 2.  
*Economic Activities of Chaoui Women*

Activity	Description
Agriculture	Cultivation of wheat, barley, and figs
Weaving	Traditional wool and cotton weaving
Animal Husbandry	Care of goats and sheep for milk/wool
Rituals & Festivities	Preparation of cultural ceremonies

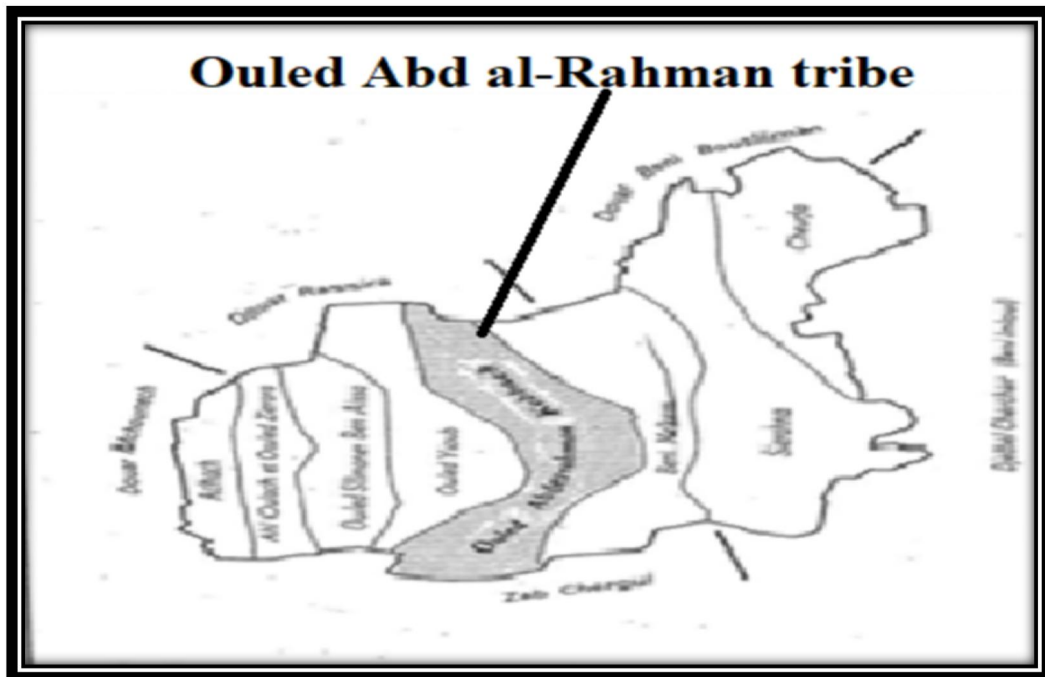
Table 3:  
*Key Ethnographic Observations by Thérèse Rivière)*

Observation Category	Key Findings
Social Organization	Strong kinship ties, patriarchal authority
Gender Roles	Women central to economy and rituals
Cultural Practices	Emphasis on oral traditions and folklore
Religious Beliefs	Presence of pre-Islamic rituals and customs

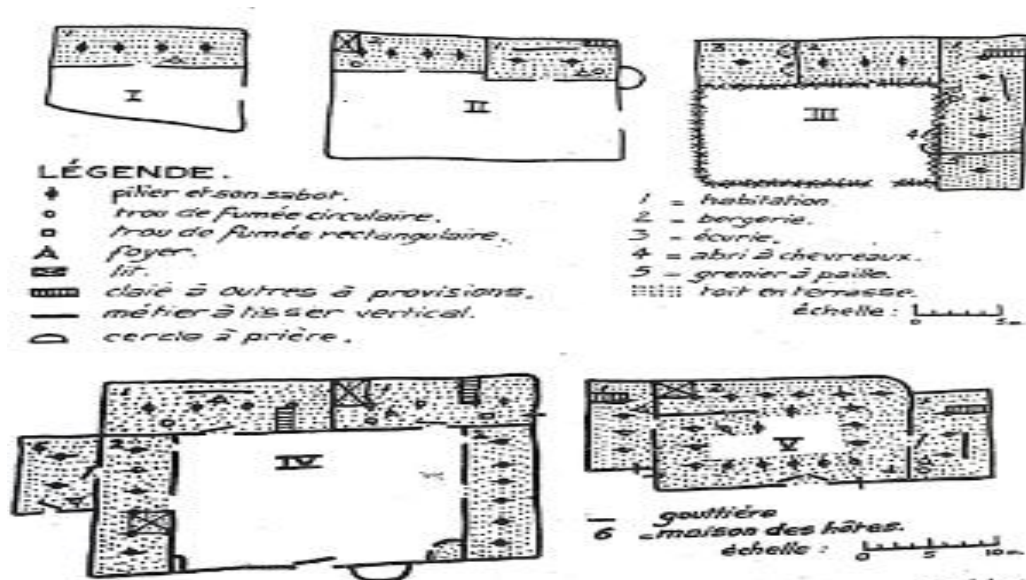
Figure 1:  
*Localisation de la région des Aurès, Algérie.*  
([https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aur%C3%A8s#/media/Fichier:Localisation\\_aures.svg](https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aur%C3%A8s#/media/Fichier:Localisation_aures.svg))



**Figure 2**  
*Ouled Abd al-Rahman tribe*

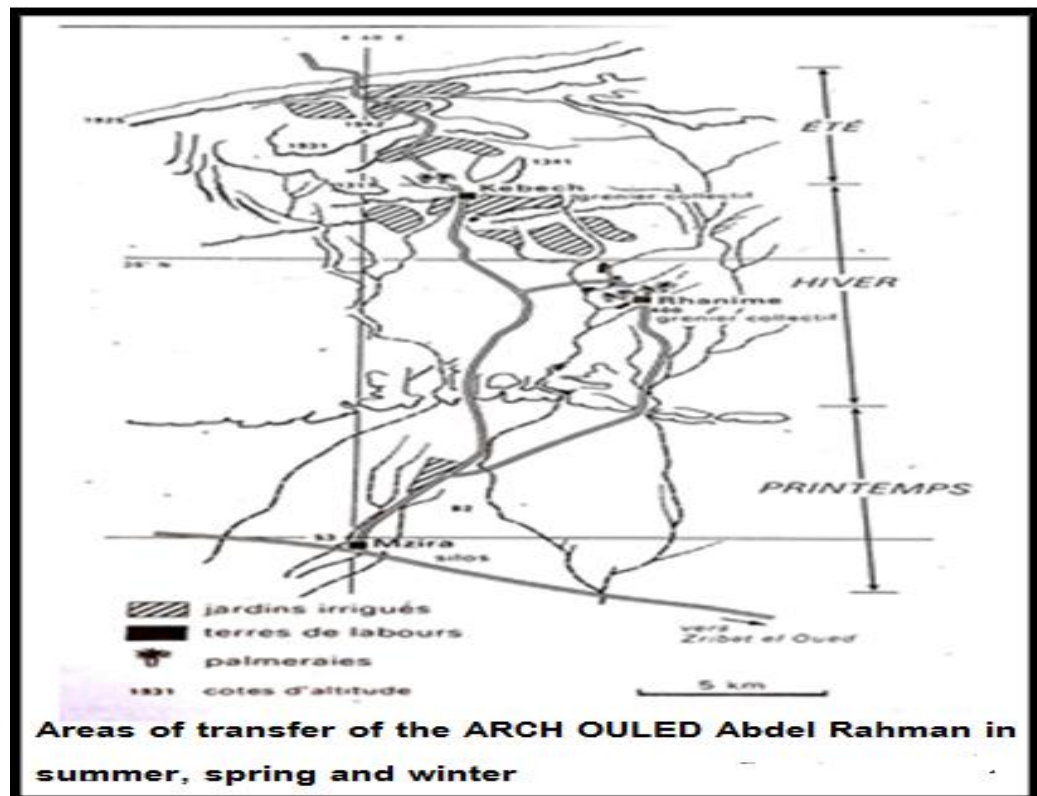


**Figure 3:**  
*Architecture, technical construction*



**Figure 4:**

*Areas of transfer of the Arch ouled abdel rahman*



**Figure 5:**

*Direct observation documentation method*





**Figure 6:**  
*Traditional Clothing of Chaoui Women*



Femme transportant du bois,  
Douar Menaâ, 19 février 1935  
© Thérèse Rivière



Femme et enfants devant un mur de pierre,  
Aurès, 1935-1936  
Paris, musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac  
© Thérèse Rivière



**Figure 7:**  
*Seasonal migration patterns, housing structures*



**Flat-roofed house** Ifakubiz, maison à terrasse



Mzira, maison souterraine  
**Mzira: Underground house**



Sammer, abri sous roche  
**Sammer: Rock shelter**



Sammer, tente polygonale  
**Sammer: Polygonal**