International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 09, Issue: 06 November - December 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

ROCK ART IN BORKOU-ENNEDI-TIBESTI: MEMORY AND MEMORIES

NANGKARA CLISON
Archaeologist
University of Doba

https://doi.org/10.37602/IJSSMR.2026.9605

ABSTRACT

Ancestors left traces on rock faces in northern Chad (Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti) and in the Guéra mountains. These consist of rock engravings and paintings created by people who lived there in the past. Most Chadians are unaware that rock art constitutes their heritage—a legacy bequeathed by their ancestors. Any human creation should be regarded as heritage and valued accordingly. The aim of this paper is to present Chad's rock art as an ancestral legacy worthy of protection and preservation—not only for future generations but also as a shared memory for all Chadians. Methodologically, we conducted four field missions between 2011 and 2012 to verify the actual existence of this rare heritage and to attempt to interpret the messages the ancestors left to their descendants through this art. The fieldwork supplemented earlier information provided in archaeological writings. These three regions (Borkou, Ennedi, and Tibesti) feature rock art that Chadians are increasingly recognizing as their own heritage, thanks to awareness-raising campaigns conducted by authorities at various levels.

Keywords: rock art, ancestors, heritage recognition, memories, Chad.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti massif, geographically located in the north of Chad, is an area with the richest archaeological and cultural evidence. In this area marked by rocky reliefs, the aridity of the water, rock shelters and ancient communication routes, the populations of the past have left many traces of their activities, their beliefs and their relationship with the environment. Among these testimonies, rock art occupies an important special place.

This art constitutes a memory, a set of memories, lived or transmitted, that an individual or a community keeps of the past. Therefore, the study of the rock art of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti raises two major questions: How do these traces participate in the construction of a collective memory? How can this heritage be preserved and enhanced in the face of natural and anthropogenic threats? This article proposes to analyze this cultural heritage from the perspective of collective memory and memories, taking into account archaeological data, local testimonies and the heritage dimensions of these figurative representations.

This cultural heritage is not only a major source of knowledge of ancient societies but also a living heritage that contributes to the transmission of history, the enhancement of Chadian heritage and the strengthening of cultural identity.

 Copyright © The Author, 2026

International Journal of Social Sciences and Management Review

Volume: 09, Issue: 06 November - December 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

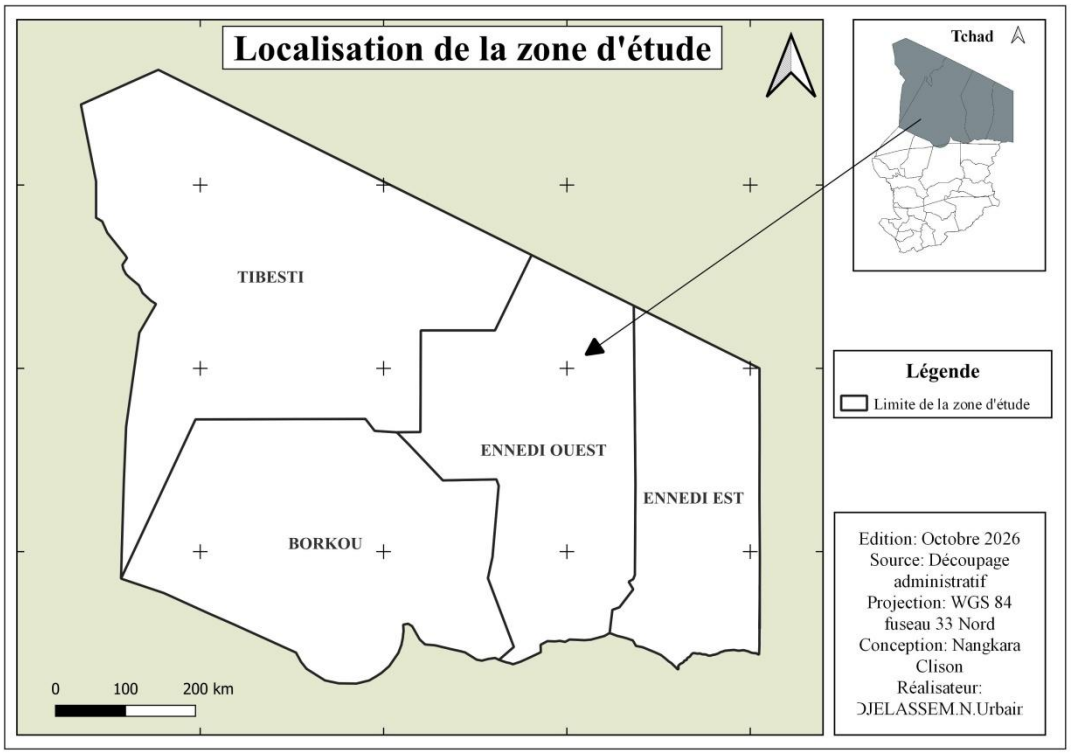


Figure 1: Location map of the search area

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The study of the rock art of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti is based on a methodological approach that takes into account archaeological data, written sources on memory, the memory of rock art and field missions from 2011 to 2014. This multidisciplinary approach is in line with recent methodological orientations in African archaeology, which favours the articulation between material data, environmental context and local historical memory in order to reconstruct the dynamics of rock art in a more complete way (Stahl, 2013).

The collection of archaeological data is based on systematic pedestrian surveys associated with the various field missions from 2011 to 2014 with the following institutions:

- Chadian Tourism Office (OTT) for the inventory of natural and cultural properties of Chad;
- African Trust of Rock Art (TARA) in the context of a study on rock art in Africa;
- Ecole Supérieure de Tourisme, Hôtellerie et Commerce, as part of the training of tourist guides.

3.0 RESULTS

Archaeological data, local testimonies and various field missions have made it possible to make an inventory of several depictions depicted on the rock faces. They are characterized by depicted representations of wildlife, prehistoric man, hunting and breeding activities; musical instruments and representations of warriors.

 Copyright © The Author, 2026

Volume: 09, Issue: 06 November - December 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

3.1 Figurative representation of wildlife

Wildlife is considered one of the major themes of the rock art of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti. The engravings and paintings represent the different animal species that bear witness to the transformations of the environment, human practices and the relationships between ancient populations and their environment. The representation of wildlife is not a simple artistic expression because it represents an environmental memory. The images of animals are considered as visual archives of climate and environmental change. They provide information on the biological diversity of the past and on the gradual evolution of the landscapes of the BET (Bailloud 1997: 53).

The animals depicted also provide information on the relationships between the environment and ancient communities. Some species show isolated animals, while others seem to be involved in hunting, moving or breeding activities. These representations are now an artistic heritage, an archaeological source and a memory of the ancient environments of the Sahara.



Figure 2: Wildlife

The figurative representations of wildlife are made up of, among others:

Table 1: Representation of the rescued fauna and characteristics

Animal names	Characteristics of the figures
Giraffes	Depicted with their slender silhouettes and with long necks.
Elephants	This representation testifies to an environment that was once much more humid and favourable to a large fauna.
Rhinos	These images allow us to understand the ancient Saharan landscapes.
Antelopes and gazelles	They are represented in several figures signifying their large number.
Cattle	These representations bear witness to a pastoral period and the importance of livestock farming.
Bighorn sheep	These figures characterize the rocky areas of the massif.
Austria	This representation is associated with the fauna of open spaces.

 Copyright © The Author, 2026

Volume: 09, Issue: 06 November - December 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

3.2 Figurative representation of prehistoric man (the man of Gonoa)

The results of this research have shown that among the most important sites in Tibesti is Gonoa, famous in particular for the monumental representation called "Man of Gonoa" or "Masked Hunter". This site is located near Barda in the western part of Tibesti. It is a site that is considered one of the major rock engraving complexes in the northern part of Chad. The work of researchers such as Christph Staewen and Karl Heinz Striedter has made it possible to carry out a systematic inventory of Gonoa engravings. Their book published in 1987 brings together more than 1100 engravings from northern Tibesti, including important documentation on the site of Gonoa.

Gono is a site that is characterized by rock formations bearing numerous carvings depicting humans and animals. This diversity of techniques includes incisions or linear lines, staking, hammering, polishing and line engraving.

The Gonoa Man is one of the most famous figures in Chadian rock art. He is usually depicted in literature as a "masked hunter". His depiction with life-size or near-human size contributes greatly to his spectacular character and symbolic value in the prehistoric iconography of Chad. The figure represents a human figure whose peculiar appearance has given rise to different interpretations. The mask or ornament that covers his head is one of the most remarkable elements of the representation. It is difficult, in the absence of contemporary written sources of the engraving, to determine with certainty the meaning of this equipment.



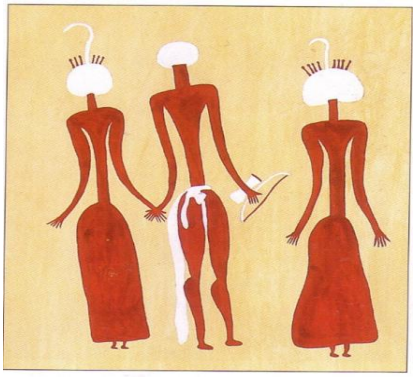


Figure 3: The Gonoa Man Figure 4: Man holding hands

3.3 Figurative representation of activities

3.3.1 Breeding

In the rock art of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti, the representation of livestock farming is also an important testimony to the lifestyles of the ancient populations of the Chadian Sahara. Rock paintings and engravings show cattle, goats, sheep and also scenes associating animals with human figures. These figures bear witness to the importance of the domestic animal in ancient societies. The representations of animals in the BET can be related to the environmental transformations of the Sahara. During certain periods of the Holocene, the Sahara experienced wetter conditions, favourable to the presence of pastures, water points and the establishment of pastoral communities (UNESCO 2012: 36).

 Copyright © The Author, 2026

Volume: 09, Issue: 06 November - December 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

In these representations, the ox occupies a particularly important place in Saharan rock art. prehistoric artists depicted cattle with shapes and details that sometimes make it possible to identify the horns, their bodies, their legs and their different attitudes. These figures are clues to the presence of cattle breeding in today's regions dominated by the desert. Some rock figures relate man and domestic animals. The presence of nearby figures can be interpreted as an evocation of pastoral activities or the gathering of animals. These representations of fauna make it possible to understand the visual memory of the social and economic practices of ancient populations.

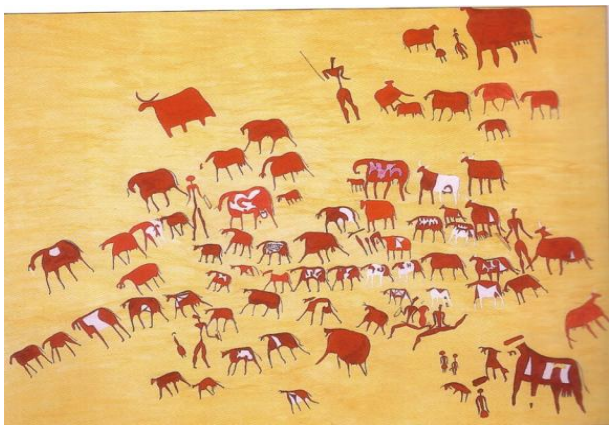


Figure 5: Representation of animals

3.3.2 Hunting

Hunting scenes occupy an important place in the rock art of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti. They generally represent human persons associated with wild animals, sometimes depicted often with bows, arrows, spears or other hunting instruments. These representations testify to the importance of hunting in the economy of ancient populations. They also provide information on the fauna once present in the Sahara, some species of which have gradually disappeared from the region with climatic and environmental transformations.

The hunting scene should not only be interpreted as an economic representation but also have a symbolic or ritual dimension, especially when the characters are associated with animals in complex compositions.



 Copyright © The Author, 2026

Volume: 09, Issue: 06 November - December 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

Figure 6: Representation of hunting

3.3.3 Representations of war and conflict

Some rock representations also testify to the existence of conflicts between human groups. The figures can be represented with weapons such as bows, arrows, spears or shields. The arrangement of the figures and their equipment sometimes make it possible to distinguish confirmation situations.

These figures can provide information on the development of combat techniques, armaments and relations between communities. However, they must be interpreted with caution: a scene depicting armed figures is not necessarily a scene of war, it can also correspond to a hunt or a symbolic representation.



Figure 7: A man holding the shield in his hand

3.3.4 The representation of musical instruments

In the rock art of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti, musical activities are also a particularly important theme. The rock paintings and engravings of the Ennedi show that music occupied a place in the social life of ancient populations. String instruments are particularly remarkable in the rock iconography of the Ennedi. Scenes depict figures playing instruments similar to harps. Studies on Saharan instruments also indicate that the bowed harp is regularly depicted in the cave paintings of the Ennedi (Roger Blench and Loth 1966: 78). All these representations are important because they do not only show an object but they suggest the existence of musicians, collective practices and probably a moment of gathering within ancient communities. These human representations bear witness to everyday life. In the rock art of Ennedi, artists have depicted, at different periods, men and women, animals, dwellings, hunting, and various community activities. Based on our analysis, this music scene is considered to be an activity that can accompany:

- Community activities;
- Ritual practices;
- Important events in social life;
- Dances and feasts;
- Ceremonies and gatherings.

 Copyright © The Author, 2026

Volume: 09, Issue: 06 November - December 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

These musical activities therefore constitute a valuable testimony to the social, cultural and symbolic life of ancient populations.



Figure 8: Representation of musical instruments

4.0 DISCUSSION

The different rock art scenes in Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti constitute an essential basis for understanding the ancient societies that occupied the northern part of Chad. Rock shelters, rock walls and caves have made it possible to have supports in paintings and engravings representing very human beings, animals, scenes of daily activities, weapons, objects and various signs.

The fauna is made up of the most important figurative ensembles. These naturalistic representations bear witness to an environment that was once much more favourable to fauna and human activities. With the development of livestock farming, domestic livestock, particularly cattle, became a dominant figure.

Human figures such as the Gonoa Man appear in a variety of styles. Some are depicted in a relatively naturalistic manner, while others have schematic features or peculiar heads. Some scenes show figures walking, running, carrying weapons, or accompanying wild animals.

Hunting occupies an important place in ancient representations. Artists have associated hunters with different wild species, including giraffes. These scenes make it possible to evoke hunting techniques, the oars used and the relationship between man and his environment. It is important to avoid automatically interpreting any association between man and animal as a hunting scene. Some human figures are placed near animals without clearly identifiable hunting action.

The figures bearing witness to musical activities also constitute a form of visual documentation on the social practices of ancient populations. However, ritual interpretation must remain cautious when the archaeological context does not allow it to be confirmed.

Weapons are also important figurative elements. Bows, spears, shields and other equipment associated with the characters are found. Their representation makes it possible to study the evolution of techniques and warrior practices.

Thus, the rock art of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti can be considered as a real visual memory of the settlement of the Chadian Sahara. It preserves the traces of the relationships between man, animal, territory and economic activities. These figurative representations of the BET should

 Copyright © The Author, 2026

Volume: 09, Issue: 06 November - December 2026

ISSN 2582-0176

not be considered as simple artistic productions. They constitute archaeological and historical documents that allow us to reconstruct, with caution, certain aspects of ancient societies. The wildlife, cattle, human figures, scenes of hunting, breeding, music, war and the objects represented form a coherent whole that testifies to the cultural richness of the Chadian Sahara.

5.0 CONCLUSION

The rock art of Borkou-Ennedi-Tibesti is not reduced to a succession of animal, human and geometric figures. It represents a form of visual language through which ancient communities expressed their experiences, practices, beliefs and perception of the world. The different representations are fragments of memory permanently inscribed in stone. This rock art is a memory that carries a message from prehistoric men and is bequeathed to their offspring. These figures provide information on the way of life of the ancestors and their environment. The BET's rock art is both a memory and a memory for the future generation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. BAILLOUD, G (1997). The Prehistory of North Africa and the Sahara. Paris: Edition du CNRD.
2. Huard, P and Massip, J.P. (1960). "Rock engravings of southern Tibesti and Borkou". Bulletin of the French Prehistoric Society.
3. HUARD, P. (1995) « In memoriam Paul Huard (1903-1994) ». Sahara, 7.
4. LHOTE, H. (1966). "Les peintures parietals de l'Ennedi relevé par Gérad Bailloud dans le cadre du Sahara. Bulletin de la société française
5. STAEWEN and STRIEDTER (1987), Gonoa: Fieldsbilder in North Tibesti (Chad). AricaBib
6. UNESCO, Rock Engravings and Paintings of Ennedi and Tibesti, Tentative List of Chad. Unesco World Heritage Centre

 Copyright © The Author, 2026