

The Status of Sahrawi Women and their role in the family and Society in the regions of Tassili and Al-Haggar-In The Prehistoric period-

مكانة المرأة الصحراوية ودورها في الأسرة والمجتمع بمنطقة التاسيلي والهقار

-فترة ما قبل التاريخ-

SAKOUAN NADJLA

Ahmed Draia University - Adrar - Algeria –

nadjla.sakouane@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0003-3645-3917>

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• **Abstract:**

Archaeological research shows that the Tassili and Al-Hoggar areas are still among the oldest areas where man has settled and practiced a range of activities to meet his needs, ranging from collection, capture, hunting, stories, animal domestication and family formation. The rock paintings and sculptures scattered in Tassili and Hoggar helped to convey the features and characteristics of all aspects of prehistoric life, in the absence of written chronicles.

The aim of this study is to highlight the position of Sahrawi women within the family and society, and the role they played in front of husbands and children in the prehistoric period through rock drawings and inscriptions spread in the Tassili and Haggar regions.

Elements of the Article

- 1- The origins of the first inhabitants of the region through the data of rock art.
- 2- The status of women in society in the Tassili and Al-Haggar region during the prehistoric period.
 - 2.1 Marriage between men and women.
 - 2.2 Pregnancy and childbearing.
 - 2.3 Raising children.
- 3- Activities of family members in the Tassili and Haggar region in the prehistoric period.

Keywords: Algeria - Tassili - Hoggar - The Desert Woman – Prehistoric.

الملخص:

تظهر الأبحاث الأثرية أن منطقتي التاسيلي والهقار لا تزالان من أقدم المناطق التي استوطنها الإنسان ومارس فيها مجموعة من الأنشطة لتلبية احتياجاته، بدءاً من الجمع والالتقاط والصيد والقتل وتدجين الحيوانات والزراعة، وصولاً إلى العبادة والزواج وتكوين الأسرة. وقد ساعدت الرسوم والمنحوتات الصخرية المنتشرة بالتاسيلي والهقار على نقل ملامح وخصائص جميع جوانب الحياة في عصور ما قبل التاريخ، في ظل غياب سجلات مكتوبة تؤرخ لذلك. وهدف من هذه الدراسة إبراز مكانة المرأة الصحراوية داخل الأسرة والمجتمع، والدور الذي لعبته أمام الزوج والأبناء في فترة ما قبل التاريخ من خلال الرسوم والنقوش الصخرية المنتشرة في منطقتي التاسيلي والهقار.

عناصر المقال:

- 1- أصول سكان المنطقة الأوائل من خلال معطيات الفن الصخري.
 - 2- مكانة المرأة ودورها داخل الأسرة والمجتمع بمنطقة التاسيلي والهقار خلال فترة ما قبل التاريخ.
 - 2-1- الزواج بين الرجل والمرأة.
 - 2-2- الحمل والانجاب.
 - 2-3- تربية الأبناء.
 - 3- أنشطة أفراد الأسرة بمنطقة التاسيلي والهقار في فترة ما قبل التاريخ.
- الكلمات المفتاحية:** الجزائر – التاسيلي – الهقار – المرأة الصحراوية – ما قبل التاريخ.

Introduction

Rock art in Algeria is primarily concentrated in two significant regions: Tassili n'Ajjer and Hoggar. Due to the sheer abundance of rock engravings and paintings—numbering over fifteen thousand—these areas are often described as vast open-air museums. In Tassili n'Ajjer, the major rock art sites are located on the high plateaus north and northeast of the city of Djanet, including places such as Sefar, Jabbaren, Tamrit, and Tan Zoumaitak. In Hoggar, the Tifedest massif is among the richest in terms of rock engravings, along with other nearby sites around Tamanrasset. It is widely agreed that these artworks were not created randomly, but rather with purpose, reflecting a strong will to document events and convey messages through time.

The features of social and family life in Tassili and Hoggar appeared in most of their aspects and characteristics during the primitive stages that accompanied the development of humans in that region during prehistoric times. The establishment of the family, the emergence of population settlements, and the construction of homes and villages significantly enhanced social life. Archaeological research has indicated, and continues to indicate, that the Tassili and Hoggar region is one of the oldest areas where humans settled and engaged in various activities to meet their needs. They progressed from gathering and foraging to hunting and trapping, and even domesticating animals and farming. The rock paintings and engravings scattered in Tassili and Hoggar have depicted the aspects and characteristics of all life aspects, which have aided in studying prehistoric times and envisioning daily activities, especially in the absence of writings or inscriptions that document that period.

1. The Origins of the Region's Early Inhabitants Through Rock Art

One of the most defining features of Tassili and Hoggar is their richness in rock art sites, considered vital evidence of ancient human presence dating back to the Neolithic period or even the late Paleolithic era. Analyses conducted by specialists indicate that the creators of this ancient art, around 10,000 BCE, were black-skinned African populations. This conclusion is drawn based on the physiognomy of human figures depicted in the art.¹

Some scholars connect these depictions to the Troglodyte Ethiopians mentioned by Herodotus, who were chased by the Garamantes. These people, he said, consumed snakes,

¹ ONPACA, Mission de préhistorique dans les Tassili Wan Ahggar (Circuit touristique de Tagrera-Youf Ahkit), Rapport de mission Tamanrasset, 1990, P1.

crocodiles, and antelopes—elements also visible in the animal representations found in the rock art.

The remains of such animals, particularly reptiles like crocodile bones and tortoise shells, have been discovered around the rock art sites, suggesting these creatures were consumed. The presence of these remains near ancient hearths supports the idea that prehistoric inhabitants consumed them regularly.

Certain studies propose that the black populations depicted in this period may be the ancestors of the modern Peul (Fulani) peoples who migrated from East Africa to settle in Tassili and Hoggar. This is especially evident in the rock art of the pastoral period¹.

Anthropological studies have identified distinct physiological traits among these early populations. Murals from places like the Amazar valley show strong, dark-skinned men and women with carefully styled hair.

During the intermediate rock art period (the pastoral period), the artwork reveals the coexistence of both black and white populations. By the time of the later rock art period (3000–3500 BCE), migrants from Mediterranean regions with lighter skin tones began inhabiting the area, coinciding with the emergence of horse-related imagery².

Although some have tried to attribute the area's early peoples to other civilizations, archaeological studies confirm the existence of a unique culture, reflected clearly in the diversity of human figures, Libyco-Berber inscriptions, and depictions of horses and chariots³.

2. The Role and Status of Women in Prehistoric Tassili and Hoggar Societies

Rock art from these regions documents various stages of the relationship between women and children, starting with sexual activity, followed by pregnancy, childbirth, and ending with childcare. These stages reflect the multifaceted role of women as wives, mothers, and educators⁴.

2.1. Marriage, Mating, and Customary Norms

Rock art reveals multiple types of relationships between men and women, hinting at early forms of marriage and mating customs. Some scenes depict uninhibited sexual relations, possibly symbolic or ritualistic in nature. These include:

¹ONPCA, Prospection préhistorique dans les Tassili de Timissao et les Tassili Ouan Ahggar, Rapport de mission, Tamenrasset, 1997, P3

² Camps (G), Aue Origines de la Berbérie, Monuments et rites funéraires protohistorique, Mémoire du CRABE, Alger, AMG, Paris, 1961, P123

³ ONPCA, Prospection préhistorique dans les Tassili Imbourou, Rapport de mission, Tamenrasset, 2000, P1

⁴Ulrich W Hallier, Brigitte C, Hallier, The People of Iheron and Tahilahi, The world of petroglyphs, Part 39, 2009, P23

- Free sexual relationships without written laws.
- Temporary unions easily dissolved.
- Hybrid human-animal beings possibly linked to fertility rituals or mythical deities.

Researchers like Jean-Loïc Le Quellec and Malika Hached argue these depictions are symbolic, reflecting reverence for fertility rather than actual behavior. Masked figures in the rock art, often with animal features, may represent fertility goddesses.

Marriage was informal and based on mutual understanding and cooperation. Women's roles extended beyond childbirth to include active participation in family and social life¹.

2.2. Pregnancy and Childbirth

Pregnancy, a defining female trait, is a prominent theme in the cattle period rock art. Notable depictions include:

- A pregnant woman near the great god in Tamrit.
- At Sefar, pregnant women and female antelopes circle a central god figure in a ritualistic posture, likely invoking divine protection.

Body decorations seen in these scenes may have been intended to protect against evil spirits. The 'moon goddess' scene at Sefar, showing a large pregnant woman holding the moon, highlights the symbolic significance of fertility and pregnancy².

Researcher Hassiba Safrione categorized pregnancy depictions into early and late stages based on the shape of the belly and spinal curvature. These scenes often include magical symbols, such as masks, horns, and circular motifs, reinforcing the sanctity of the pregnant woman³.

2.3. Child Rearing

Prehistoric people viewed children as essential for protection, wealth, and increasing tribal numbers. Rock art often shows women pleading with deities for children, accompanied by animal sacrifices.

A famous scene from Ifedaniouene portrays a mother lovingly holding her child. Other scenes, like those from Tajelahit and Sefar, depict families walking together or mothers teaching their children.

¹ Lhotte(H), Les peintures pariétales d'époque bovidienne du Tassili, Eléments sur la magie et la religion, J.S.A, Vol:36, N01, 1966, P88

² Paris (F), Archéologie funéraire et peuplement, La préhistoire de l'Afrique de l'Ouest, Nouvelles données sur la période récente, éd: Sépia, 1996, P142

³ Maitre (J.P), " inventaire préhistorique de l'Ahaggar " Libya T:XVI, C.R.A.P.E, Alger, 1968, P65

Elderly women are also shown playing key roles, such as resolving disputes or commanding respect, highlighting the importance of grandmothers within the family unit.

These portrayals confirm the matrilineal nature of prehistoric society in Tassili and Hoggar, where lineage was traced through the mother and the woman was the core of the family¹.

3. Family Activities in Prehistoric Tassili and Hoggar

Families in these regions were driven together by instinct, habit, companionship, and mutual aid. The strongest motivation, however, was reproductive instinct. Despite the harsh and vast landscape, men remained with women beyond childbirth, often aiding in child-rearing.

Some evidence suggests polygamy was practiced. Although not directly observable in material remains, the pastoral lifestyle supports this conclusion. Livestock was the family's capital, necessitating help from numerous children for protection and care².

Diodorus Siculus once described a society where women ruled and men stayed home, raising children and obeying their wives. This matriarchal structure aligns with findings in the region.

Over time, families expanded into clans sharing housing and herding duties. Rock art, such as the Sefar mural, illustrates large herds managed by groups of people, symbolizing a growing, economically self-sufficient community³.

From rock art, we learn that Neolithic people engaged in diverse activities such as herding, which was a shared family responsibility. These societies required many helping hands, making children vital to economic life. Herding became a social practice, evident in murals depicting fathers and sons guiding cattle, or milkers seated while milking cows.

Women played a central role in both domestic and economic activities. In horse period imagery—also known as the Libyco-Berber period—women appear larger and more prominent than men, possibly indicating their leadership role. Scenes show women walking behind men, riding cattle, or managing camps⁴.

At Tissoukai and Iheren, scenes show women pitching tents and engaging in daily work. Some images even depict women warriors, as noted by Henri Lhote, confirming their participation in defense and combat.

The region hosted diverse ethnic groups over time, including black and white populations. These groups eventually settled in fixed dwellings after nomadic lifestyles. The

¹ Maitre (J. P), Contribution a la préhistoire de l'Ahaggare, 1965,P167

² Badi (D), Les régions de l'Ahaggar et du Tassili N'AZjer, Réalité d'un mythe, éd A.N.E.P, Alger, 2004,P189

³ Aumassip (G), Le caballin, Une période de L'art rupestre saharien Algérien deux millions d'années d'histoire L'Art des origines, Exposition: Djazair, Une année de L'Algérie en France,2003 ,P145

⁴ Camps (G), Les civilisations préhistoriques d'Afrique du Nord et du Sahara, éd, Doin, Paris,1974,P98

woman, often central to the family structure, fulfilled roles of spouse, mother, educator, tent-builder, and sometimes warrior¹.

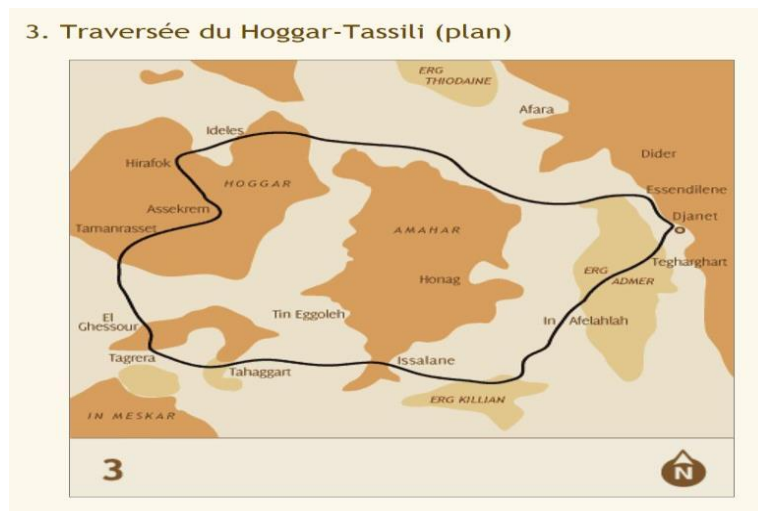
Conclusion

From the analysis of prehistoric rock art and archaeological findings in Tassili and Hoggar, we can conclude the following:

1. The Tassili and Hoggar regions were once lush, with ample rainfall, vegetation, and diverse fauna.
2. These areas held rich and unique social, economic, cultural, and religious characteristics during prehistoric times.
3. Despite their current arid condition, these regions possess deep aquifers dating back to prehistory, crucial for sustaining ancient life and civilizations.
4. Though the precise origin of early populations remains uncertain, evidence points to multiple migrations from various ethnic backgrounds including Hamitic and Semitic peoples.
5. Human remains, tools, pottery, and vibrant rock art all indicate sustained human settlement and activity throughout prehistoric times.
6. Women in prehistoric Tassili and Hoggar played foundational roles—not only in reproduction and childcare but also in economic work, leadership, and even warfare—highlighting their esteemed status in early society.

¹ Farrtti (F), Una particolare tipologia di monumenti preislamicinel Ti-nRehroh (Algeria, Tassili meridionnnali), Sahara centrostudiluiigi Nero.,N:18, 2007,P123

The pictures



The Tassili and Hoggar sites¹



A picture showing magical rituals of a woman placing a sun disc on her head².

¹ https://journals.openedition.org/encyclopedieberbere/docannexe/image/820/im_g-1.png2022/02/24

² Hachid (M), Le Tassili Des Ajjer, Aux sources de L'Afrique, 50 siècles avant les pyramides, éd:Paris, Méditerranée, 1998,P199



An image showing a sorcerer in the act of searching for souls¹.



Women with royal hairstyles in the desert²



The mural of the great god at the Tassili n'Ajjer³

¹ Hallier Ulrich W, Brigitte C, Hallier, The people of Iheron and Tahilahi,P06

² ONPCTA

³ ONPCTA



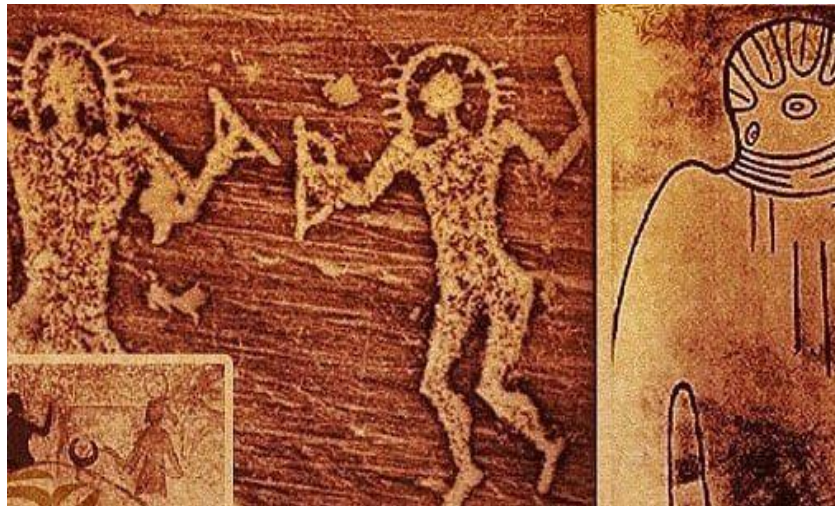
An image showing the dependence of ancient humans on hunting¹.



An image showing beings that do not resemble humans².

¹ H.Lhotte, Les peintures pariétales d'époque...,P10

² ONPCTA



An image showing humans resembling astronauts¹.

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