

## **The impact of the European cultural background in the study of Saharan rock art Example: Josephine, who was sold by her sisters a lecture on the impact of culture A lecture of the impact of colonial culture on indigenous population art**

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**Received: 20/04/2024**

**Published: 16/09/2024**

### **Abstract:**

During the 1930s, French Captain M. Bernans made several scientific expeditions to the Tassili-N-Ajjer Plateau and its environs in the central Sahara in North Africa, where there are thousands of paintings and engravings dating back to Neolithic, around the eighth millennium.

The administration of the Museum of Man subsequently sent the reports of these missions to a very famous religious man named L'Abbé Henri Breuil, who decided to postpone these drawings by an old friend, Jean Bouyssonie.

Breuil's study focused on the interpretation of the scenes and human groups presented. According to him, the author readily acknowledges his experience in deciphering painted rocks, even to the extent of being able to understand the artistic mindset of the creators of these frescoes.

In reality, the influence of his European and religious or Christian culture on his interpretations of Saharan-African paintings, which are far from being related to his own culture, will easily trap this decipherer!

Today, as specialists, we will re-examine some scenes deciphered by Breuil, focusing on his subjectivity, interpretation, and cultural judgment. However, he remains far from being accepted by specialists today.

**Keywords:** Rock art, Sahara, Tassili-N-Ajjer, bovidian, round heads, Neolithic

### **Introduction:**

In the thirties of the last century, the French captain Bernans led several exploration campaigns to the Tassili N'Ajjer plateau, located in the central desert of North Africa and currently part of Algeria. At that time, the region was under the brutal rule of French colonialism.

Through a series of scientific exploration trips, the group discovered thousands of wonderful rock drawings and engravings dating back to the Neolithic period, some of which date back to the eighth millennium and possibly beyond.

Then, Bernans entrusted the reports of those exploratory campaigns to the management of the Museum of Man in Paris, which, in turn, assigned them to the distinguished French researcher at the time, Henri Breuil, who was known for his research in European prehistoric arts.

However, the latter, in turn, sent those linear scenes of the artistic scenes to a close friend, Jean Bouyssonie, and asked him to transform those scenes into schematic drawings, after which he would undertake an in-depth analytical and descriptive study. He also studied the artistic methods adopted as well as the human and animal groups represented in those particular scenes.

At that time, Breuil was the first researcher and perhaps the most qualified to decipher the “code” of those exciting drawings, so much so that the latter gave himself the right to stand at the “artistic mentality” of those artists who had accomplished their masterpieces thousands of years ago.

As he attempts to analyze scenes of purely African Saharan origin that have no connection to Western European culture, Breuil would fall into the trap of subjectivity and a complete departure from scientific objectivity in his pioneering study of that time.

Today, the group of researchers in the field of Saharan rock art is careful while dealing with the results of Breuil's research; there are those who mock her and even those who reject her.

### **Where is the "Josephine" scene located?**

The famous scene known as "Josephine, who was sold by her brothers," is located within the scope of the rock station known as "Ijabaren." The latter is located in the eastern part of the Tassili N'Ajjer plateau and is known for the most beautiful desert rock art scenes, and perhaps the most beautiful in the world.

Tassili N'Ajjer is located halfway between Upper Egypt and the Ethiopian highlands. It is a plateau that sometimes reaches a height of 1500 m. This southeast Algerian region borders Libya. It also has borders with Mali and Niger.



**Figure 1- Map showing the location of Tassili n' Ajjer in relation to the map of Algeria**

This amazing rock art was discovered around 1910 by a French colonial military unit and now covers an area of 72,000 square kilometres and is considered the largest open-air museum in the world and is currently managed by the Tassili N'Ajjer National Park.



This scene is situated within the central mountain mass, a group of the most attractive rock stations.

Over thousands of years, the winds carved the bases of the rocks, creating what scientists call "Taffoni," unique geological formations that formed natural homes suitable for prehistoric man.

These are rock shelters of varying sizes, some of which are so large that they are considered caves. These caves carry thousands of rock art scenes from thousands of years ago on their various facades.

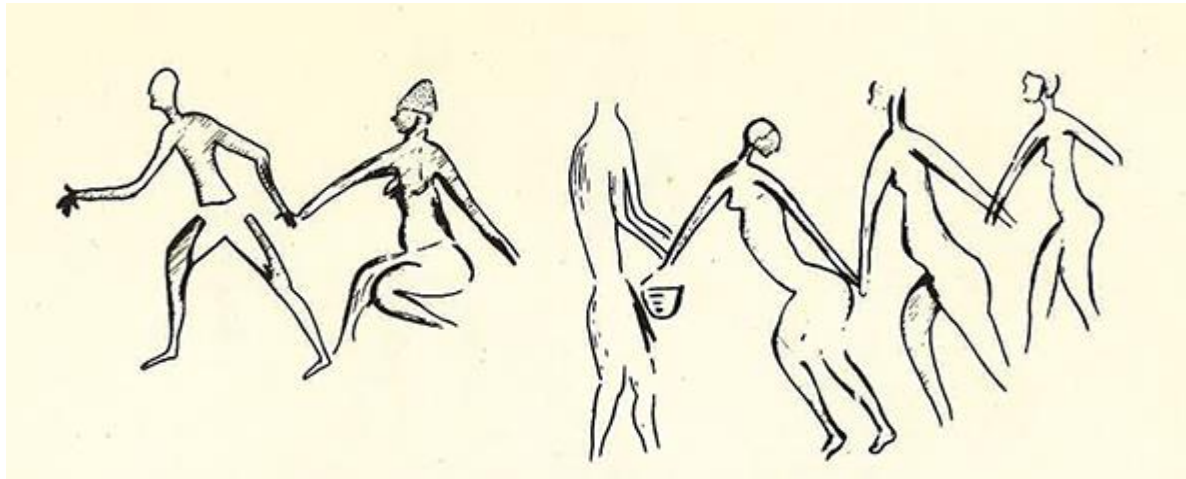
These dwellings, located on paths that formed the routes of ancient migrations between Egypt and the coasts of Sirte, the Great Maghreb, and the countries of the African Sahel, have played a major role in the history of the peoples of North Africa.



**Figure. 3- Natural Taffoni formations (below it are facades drawn by a prehistoric artist).**

### **How did the Josephine scene reach researcher Breuil?**

We found a different scene on the same site than Breuil had studied or published. While the real scene has 11 human characters, male and female, and an obscure giant character, in Breuil's study we find only 6 characters, and the dwelling was completely absent from the scene, which is accompanied by a number of animals, all of which are vertebrates, and is completely removed in the schematic statement that gets it done by Bouyssonie. So how would Breuil describe the scene?



**Figure. 4-Schematic form of the Josephine scene made by Bouyssonie at the request of Breuil (Breuil.H.1952; fig.101:205)**

**Breuil describes the scene as follows:**

Ijabaren-Amazar (Fig. 101): This is a scene measuring 0.40 m in width, representing the sale of a woman to strangers. She called it 'Josephine, who was sold by her sisters'. All the figures appear naked and may represent young girls.

They wear yellow hats like a shave, and one of the sisters holds Josephine's arm to show her the courage of the one who receives the cheese basket, turning her face away in shame from the incident of selling it while Josephine struggles with the kidnapper as he drags her by the wrist. She has a concave nose that is more prominent than her sisters. All the girls are shepherds.

But the males may be strangers wearing front skirts, as the kidnapper carried a skirt with two crossed pieces that was not colored; it may have had a color and faded over time. It may be white. The hands end with five fingers, whereas the one receiving the cheese basket shows his head. And he hid some side skirt features.

I consider this scene to be one of the most curious, as it appears alongside another scene that depicts the sale of women to strangers.

This scene, in my opinion, is one of the most intriguing. This scene is juxtaposed with another scene that depicts the process of selling women to strangers, leading us to believe that Tassili, at an advanced stage of the shepherd's stage, had a market for selling women.

(Breuil.H.1952;fig.101:205)

**Did Breuil intentionally deviate from Josephine's scene?**

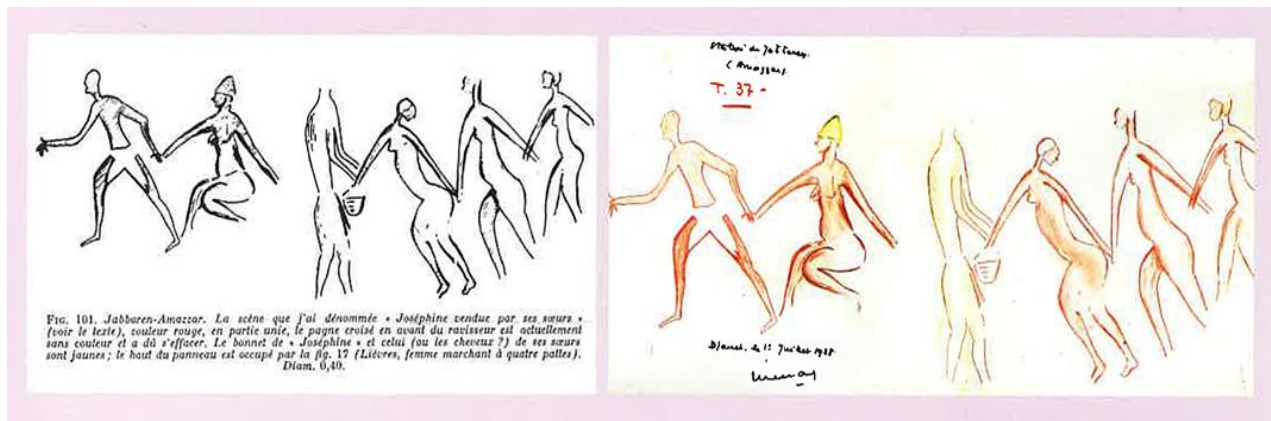
Did Breuil alter the Josephine scene, or did the scene arrive incomplete if it wasn't distorted through the schematic form that Captain Bernans used?

. When we compare the sketch made by Captain Bernans with that made by Bouysson at Breuil's request, we find the difference very slight. Once Breuil published this scene, along with the other scenes he had posted in the field, specifically in Tassili, the soldier never offered any comments. Bernans and Breuil were thousands of miles apart from each other. Breuil never met the soldier, as if he completely ignored the scene of the dwelling, and it is clear in the scene as clear as sunshine. Then he did the survey drawings on large sheets of paper in a fragmented manner, with some notes written on the sides.

Sometimes parts of scenes were attributed to unrelated scenes, resulting in many fallacies.

(Belkhiri, L., and Safrioun, H., 2024:288)

So let's say that Breuil received the scene incomplete, while he devoted himself to unleashing his imagination to describe the scene in an imaginative way.



**Figure 5-On the right is the figure draw statement made by Bernans and on the left is the figure draw statement made by Bouyssonie. (Lajoux.J.D.2012:165)**

### **The real scene of Josephine**

The famous scene, known as Josephine being sold by her sisters, appears completely different in form and content from what was previously mentioned. Although it has been criticized heavily by a group of contemporary researchers, it has not been studied in depth. Even Lago, who aimed to criticize Breuil in a scientific and merciless manner, never took the initiative to conduct a thorough, scientific study of the situation.

We stopped in the field at this wonderful artistic scene several times, and before studying and analyzing it, we treated it with the DStretch system, which is a modern information system used to process damaged and faded images in order to try to recover the damaged ones through the radiology system. Perhaps the scene was damaged due to the washing process that researcher Lott,

who frequently used this method before photographing scenes or completing linear drawings, subjected it to. (Le Quellec.J.L&Al.2013:177-198)



**Figure 6- Josephine scene picture before processing with the stretching system.**



**Figure 7- Josephine scene shape after processing it with the stretching system.**

The scene itself may contain two different scenes, the first of which is what Breuil previously called Josephine, while the second represents figures grazing their animals, which are cows, and is a more recent scene, but both scenes date back to the Bovidian-pastoral stage that Tassili N'Ajjer witnessed during the Neolithic period between the seventh millennium and the third millennium BC.

**The scene involving Josephine is being studied and analyzed.**

The artist deliberately did not color it, but only showed the face to show the features, as if it were a character who was intended to remain hidden, appearing seated with a bent back and the arms over her thighs, listening or talking to a character of unknown gender (perhaps she is female).



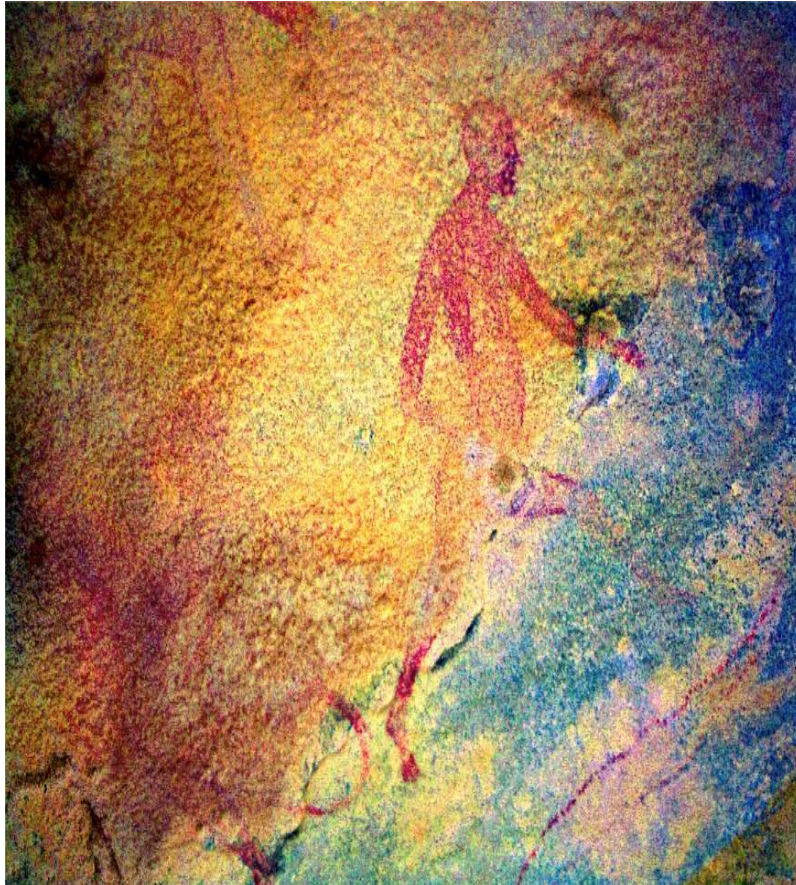
**Figure 8-** The giant character in the scene after processing it with the DStretch system.

The latter is only drawn in the upper part and appears to be in a state of uproar, and she screams in the face of the first large character.



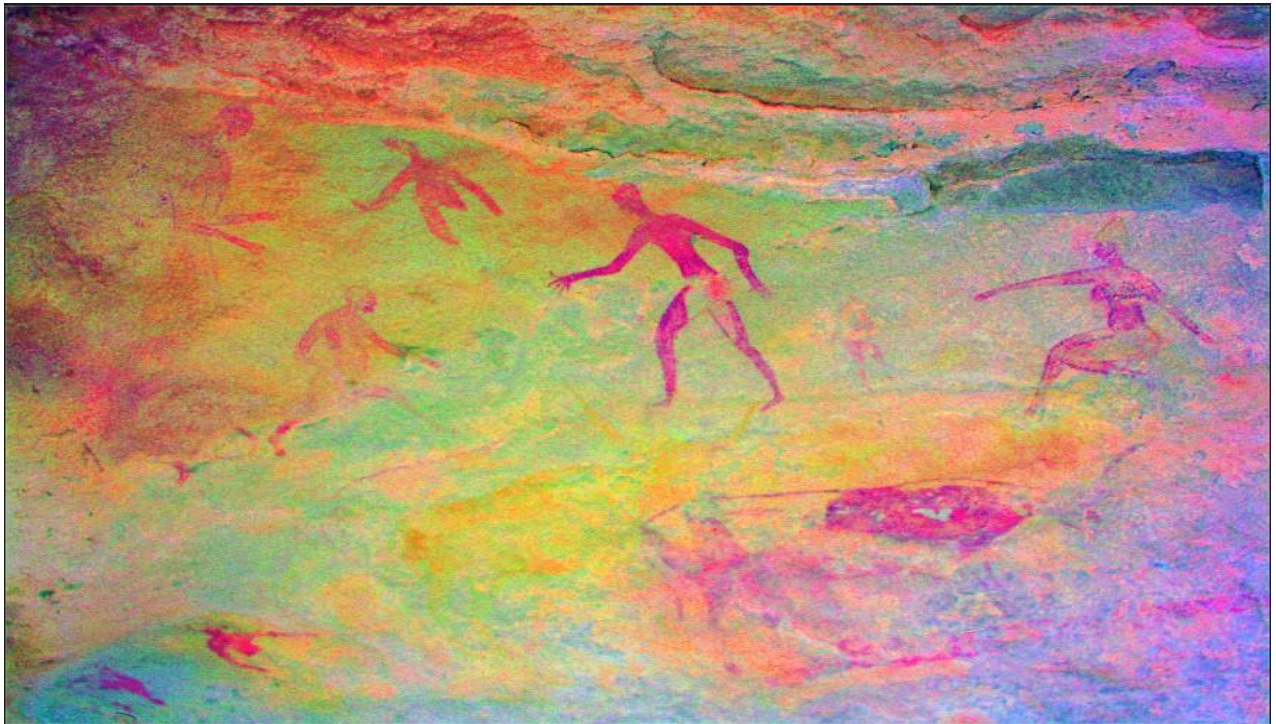
**Figure.9-** Conversation loudly with the big personality

Directly below these figures we can see a third figure running, perhaps a male shouting towards figure (04) who appears in a different colour (Negro, slaves, etc., or servants). This latter figure, likely a male, appears to be encouraging him to continue running towards the dwelling, although it's unclear what his face looks like.



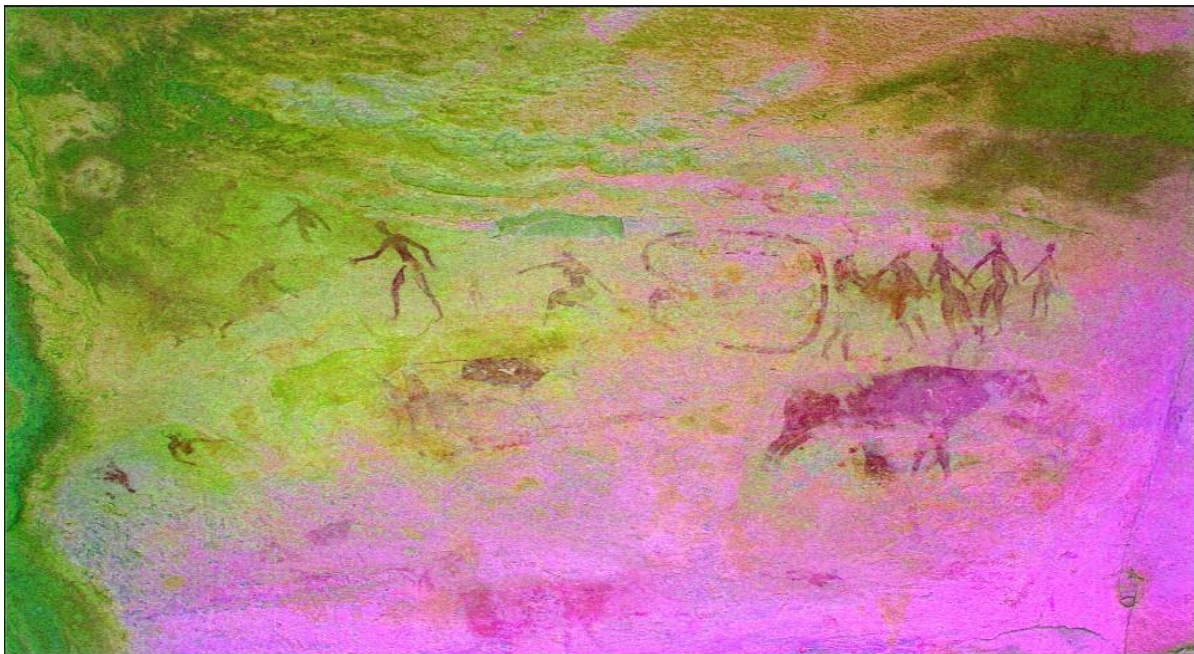
**Figure. 10- The fleeing or the jogger running character?**

Behind this male figure, there is another female, dressed in very small sizes, not to emphasize her youth but to emphasize the significant distance between her and the lady sitting in front of the house, who is pointing at her with one finger and inviting her to enter the house with the other. Despite the small size of this character, we can easily identify her gender. The artist made an effort to highlight the details of the lady standing in front of the house.



**Figure. 11- Characters appear clearer after processing with the DStrech system**

The dwelling is a rectangular hut with an open door, and on its northern side is a group of objects that may be clay home household utensils or from baskets.



**Figure. 12-The total scene after processing with the DStrech system.**

Behind the dwelling, we find a male figure holding with both hands the forearm of a female figure holding in her hand a basket (a cheese basket, as Roy mentioned?) or a bucket or something of the

sort. The latter turns her face behind her to talk to her counterpart in a gesture that indicates modesty and coquetry.

That is, without violence, she holds her counterpart's hand with her other hand. The latter, in turn, holds her loyal counterpart's hand. All of the figures appear to be young women, or perhaps girls.

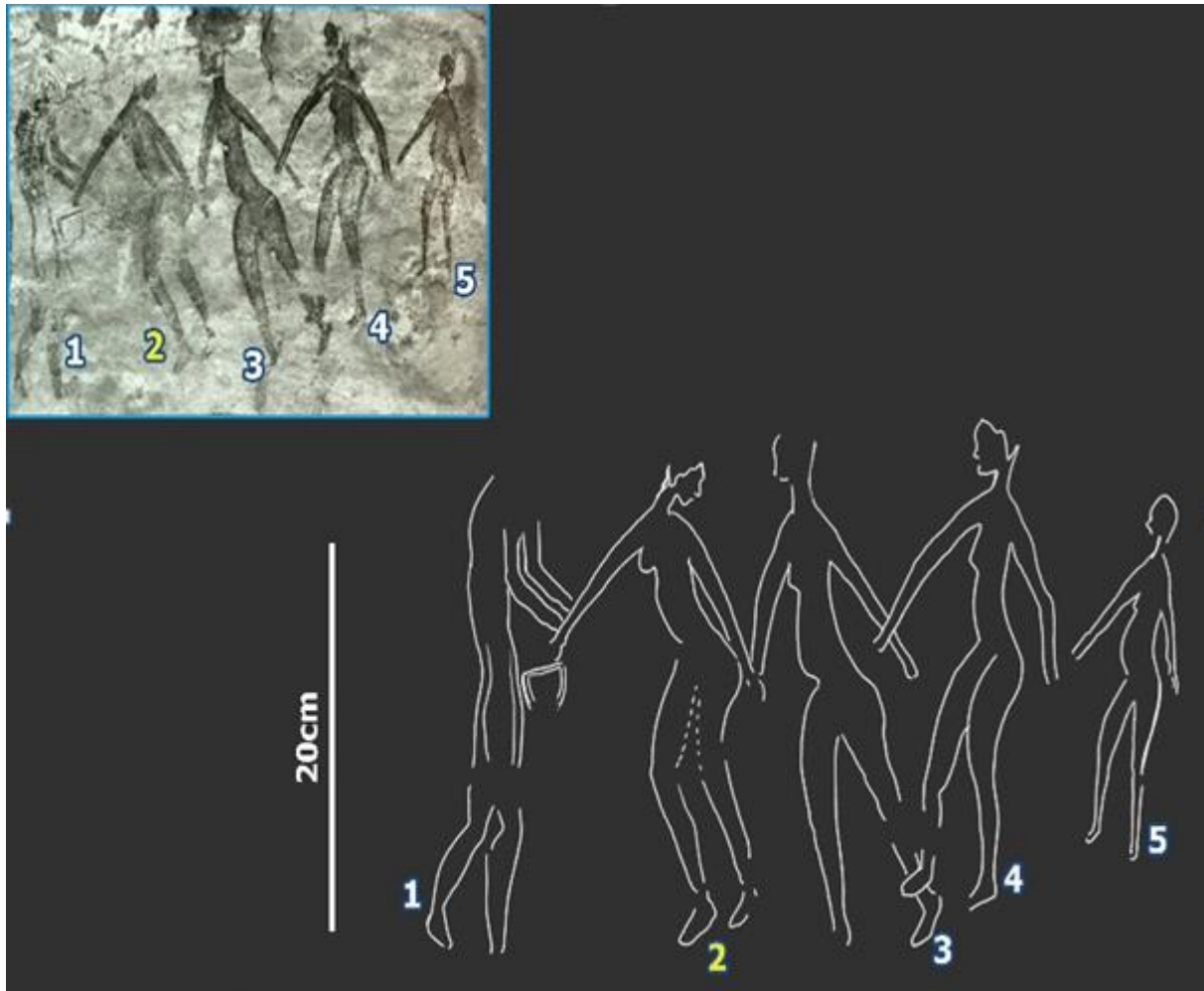


Figure. 13 - The linears scenes of Josephine's character

**So the scene is divided into two parts:**

**Part one :**

It suggests an atmosphere of tension.

Two characters are exchanging words, two characters are running away, and two other characters (the male and female in front of the house) are urging her to enter the house. Nearby, we can see a group of domesticated animals of the peccary family, which come in different colors.

Two characters engage in a verbal confrontation, while another pair of characters, a male and a female, stand in front of the house, encouraging her to enter. Nearby, we can see a group of domesticated animals of the Bovins family, which come in different colors.

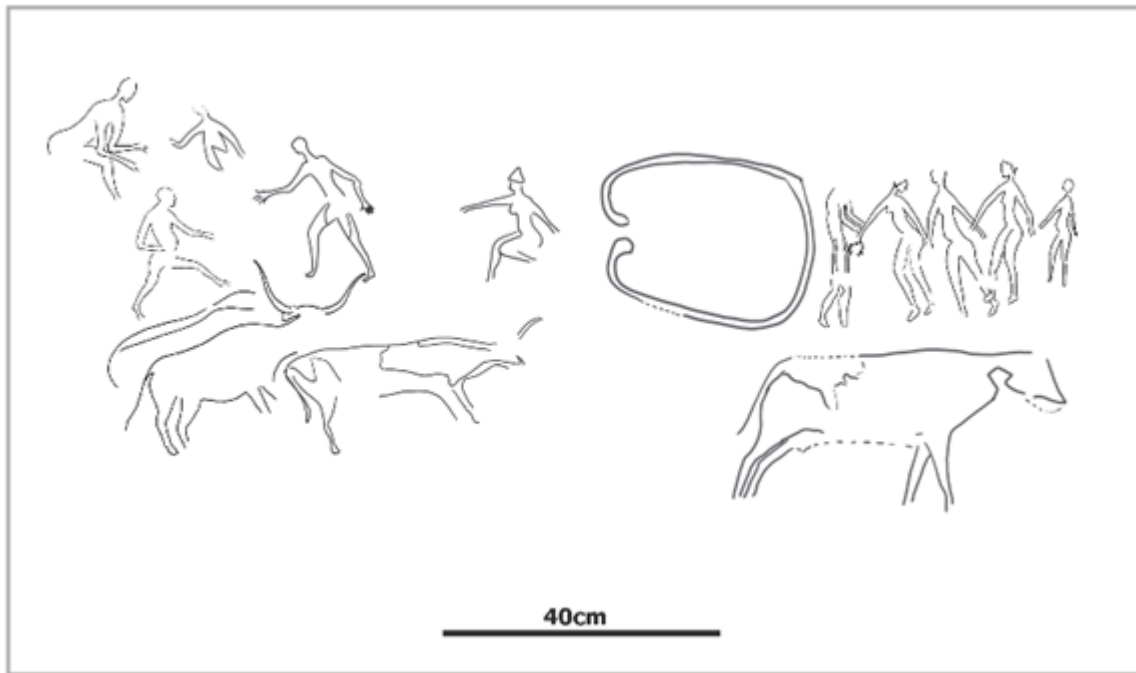
**Part two :**

An atmosphere of peace and familiarity:

It is a male who invites a young woman, perhaps during a picking trip, to follow him, or perhaps he is flirting with her; the latter does not refuse violently but rather begins to act coyly towards him, holding her counterpart, who holds the next one, and so on for the four characters—they appear as young women who have not yet known the functions of reproduction and motherhood through the absence of greasy adiposity on their bodies and their tight breasts.



**Figure. 14 - The real line painting of Josephine's character**



**Figure. 15 - The linear scene of overall painting**

The name 'Josephine' and its connection to the story of the Prophet Joseph:

There is no doubt that Mr. Breuil, with his religious thought and thanks to his affiliation as a clergyman to the Christian Catholic Church, would not have missed the story of our master Joseph, son of our master Jacob or Israel, and his suffering with his brothers. The Book of Genesis, Chapter 37, recounts the story of Joseph, the son of Prophet Jacob, who lived in Canaan, an Arab land. It details how his brothers betrayed him and led him to Egypt. The Qur'an confirms these details in a Surah, which God dedicated to our Prophet Joseph and referred to as "the best of stories."

Could it be that Breuil, an old man steeped in Christian culture, adopted the naming of the scene from the story of the Prophet Joseph, peace be upon him?

**Did Breuil mean to name the play?**

"Josephine, Solded by Her Brothers" is also the title of a French silent film produced in 1917, adapted from a three-act opera of the same name, which was first performed in Paris on March 20, 1886. It is an adaptation that came in the form of a satirical imitation of the story of the Prophet Joseph, peace be upon him.

"Josephine, Solded by Her Brothers" is also the title of a French silent film produced in 1917, adapted from a three-act opera with the same name, which was first performed in Paris on March

20, 1886. It is an adaptation. The adaptation took the form of a parody of the story of the Prophet Joseph, peace be upon him.

The opera has been performed more than 200 times and has enjoyed unprecedented popularity. The opera tells the story of Josephine, a young girl who has 11 sisters, all of whom are very beautiful. Their mother, Mrs. Yaqoub, is pleased with them all. Josephine, on the other hand, has a special talent for having a mezzo voice. She began to aspire to a place in the opera, so she took lessons with her lover until one day, luck smiled on her, and she participated in an opera in Cairo. Her jealous sisters tore up the draft of the contract that she was going to sign with Mr. Alfred Pasha, and she entered into a conflict with her mother, who rejected the idea. However, Josephine signed the contract and flew to Paris victorious.

Again, we pose the question: Did the elderly gentleman, renowned for his diverse cultural background, derive the name of the scene from his theatrical heritage? Or is it the case that it came like this by chance?



Figure. 16 - Theatrical performance banner for the play Josephine at the Opera House in Paris

## Conclusion

What Breuil studied differs greatly from the scene at Ijabaren in Tassili N'Ajjer in the central Algerian desert. A military explorer in the region painted a linear painting of the scene for the latter, who never saw it. The latter had completed a painting that contained many errors and shortcomings.

Although Breuil crowned his studies with articles and published books, Bernans, who had completed the linear painting, did not object to the post or attempt to correct it.

With his Christian religious background and European culture, Breuil will attempt to name the scene in a way that directly recalls the story of the Prophet Joseph, peace be upon him, despite the fact that the scene itself bears no connection to the story.

Did Breuil unleash his vast imagination and study Saharian African art within a strange culture to which it had no connection?

Whether the naming originates from the story of the Prophet Joseph mentioned in the gospel, which a religious man and son of the church like Breuil cannot ignore, or from the famous opera or silent film, which perhaps reflects the Breuil broad culture, this, if anything, indicates the presence of subjectivity and the absence of objectivity in the study of an art with African local roots, with a Christian religious projection and a Western culture that does not extend any connection to the subject

Despite the many criticisms of Breuil regarding his study of desert and African rock art scenes as a whole, this scene has not been re-studied with scientific data and modern technological methods, whether by a group of veteran researchers such as Lajoux or new researchers such as Le Quellec, for example.

Our study of the famous scene known as Josephine was done after we returned to the site, i.e., after a new field study. Then we worked on processing the images using the latest information system, which is DStretch. We tried to analyze the scene within the limits of what the scientific data dictated to us, despite the complexity of the scene in terms of the subject.

The scene, with its subject matter, falls within the scope of desert rock art in form and content and is very far from European rock art or European culture.

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