

## **Wind, student and chauffeur discovered Sahelanthropus. No paleontologist entered into it**

by Dorrit van Dalen

‘Most of the work is done by the wind. In the first months of the year it moves complete dunes and cleans surfaces that have been covered for ages,’ says Djimdoumbaye Ahounta, de Chadian student who last year discovered the oldest fossil (6 to 7 million years) of a hominid, an ape-like human or a human-like ape. Because of the wind, searchmission in the Chadian desert often take place in summer. Sahelanthropus was found on July 19, 2001, when the temperature in the desert was 56 degrees Celsius.

Like on other days the researchers had woken up at 5.30 in the morning and started walking at 6.30. Djimdoumbaye: ‘We all walk in a different direction. After half an hour I saw between the black stones something reddish. A jaw, lying with the teeth up. Probably of the kind of pig we had been finding there earlier, I thought. I knelt, loosened the bone from the sand and then I was holding a complete skull. When I turned it around, I looked into two eyes. I seemed to be a large ape, 6 or 7 million years old, because that is the age of the terrain we were searching. Even that was so exciting, that I stayed alone for ten minutes to get control over my emotions. Then I waved to Fanone, who was nearest to me. It took him some time to get to me. Then he looked at the skull and said: it’s not an ape, it’s a man.’

Whatever he was, the discovery of Sahelanthropus is ‘hugely important’ according to paleontologists and anthropologists and sheds light on the period when the evolutionary line leading to humans split from the one leading to chimpanzees. In fact the fossil contributes to the theory that there may have been several of those lines in the same period. That the skull and other bones of the same species were found not in east or southern Africa, but in the centre, in the middle of the Djurabdesert in present day Chad, is remarkable from a scientific point of view. For the inhabitants of Chad, who know that their country means very little to the world, it is a source of hope. President Deby realised that when he baptised the skull of July 19 ‘Toumai’, which means Hope of life.

The Djurab itself knows little life and is far from the inhabited world. In the wide surroundings of site TM266, where, 7 million years ago, pigs and elephants strolled around, and plants, fish and crocodiles lived, there is now absolutely nothing. The nomads who cross this place with their camels and cattle in certain periods of the year, have been raised in these difficult circumstances. But not the four people who participated in the mission of July 2001. Except Djimdoumbaye Ahounta, there was Fanone Gongdibe, engineer and born like Djim in the green south of Chad, there was Mahamat Adoum, chauffeur, cook and researchassistant, and the French geographer Alain Beauvilain. No paleontologist entered into it.

The fieldresearch is part of the work of the Mission Paleoanthropologique Franco-Tchadienne (MPFT) which is headed by the scientific director Michel Brunet, professor of paleontology at the University of Poitiers, France. In Chad paleontology has only just started. In the projects researchcentre in N’Djamena, there is only one Chadian doctor of paleontology. He did his doctorate in Poitiers and gives such a complicated explanation for his choice of elephants as a specialty that it rather seems to emphasize his regret. The most experienced fieldresearcher is Fanone. He studied social sciences in Cameroon and was too old, past 40, to get a scholarship in Poitiers when the collaboration with that university started. But he has prepared hundreds

of fossils, been on almost 30 missions in the desert and has avidly accumulated the knowledge of foreign scholars who were often his companions. Fanone saw immediately what prominent paleontologists from all over the world have been discussing for over a year now: that Toumai's molars look like those of humans, because they are larger and rounder than those of apes.

Djimdoumbaye set out to study medicine in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, a few years ago. After some time his money ran out and he had to return to Chad. There he could study natural sciences. But when he had reached his bachelors, he fell ill and had to spend his money on medical care. He stopped his studies and did odd jobs for the MPFT. There his enthusiasm was appreciated, but there was no money to give him a contract. Until August 2002 he was paid per day. That is why he also makes and sells jewelry from cowhorn.

Sometimes paleontologists from the University of Poitiers and other western universities join the desert missions. Then the group is larger, there is more money and the researchers spend the night in army tents. 'And when they join us, they decide where we search. None of those journeys has ever yielded anything special. They always look in the wrong places,' notices Beauvilain maliciously. He works in Chad since 1989 as advisor of the National Centre for Research (CNAR) and started coordinating the MPFT missions a few years later. His employer is the French ministry of development cooperation, not Brunet. The two Frenchmen don't hit it off. Beauvilain would like to see it mentioned that the 3,5 million year old skull of *Australopithecus bahrelghazali* ('Abel') was found by the chauffeur Mamelbaye Tomalta and not by Brunet (who claims it) and, now that we're at it, also that Yves Coppens, who is supposed to have found skull Lucy in 1974, wasn't even present at the time.

Since 1999 the large missions together with Poitiers have stopped, because rebels make the region unsafe. Meanwhile, Beauvilain and the Chadian researchers continue with minimal means. Without any protection against sandstorms they spend the nights outside on campbeds (because of scorpions), they eat sardines for weeks and the bread they bring on the first day. Sometimes nomads pass and offer them milk in return for sugar. But Mahamat says they do not camp near the nomads *fericks*. 'You don't know who you're dealing with.' Security is not something anyone in Chad can count on, even fifteen years after the end of the war. For drinking and washing Mahamat brings five liters of water per person per day. 'Some wash twice a week, other once in two weeks.' But that is no privation for them: 'At night the temperature is near freezing. You don't even want to wash yourself.' Djimdoumbaye: 'You don't make these trips to discover the beauty of the desert. You have to work hard, otherwise you can feel terribly down and lonely.' Sometimes the work starts by sweeping the Sahel, with regular household brooms. The surfaces that have been finished, are marked with used waterbottles filled with sand. The blue lids at regular intervals in the pink sand change the plain in a chessboard Dali could have painted. These unreal surroundings nurse the friendship between Djim (a Christian) and Mahamat (a Muslim), who in the capital N'Djamena do not see each other after work, but slide together on their bellies from the sanddunes when they are here.

On July 19, 2001 the four men were all set to return to the capital; a literary topos which Djim tears from the reality of that journey. The water supply was almost finished. But it had been a disappointing trip. 'On the evening of the 18th everybody was tired. Only Mahamat and Fanone climbed a dune to see what was on the other side. They saw a lot of black stones, and that became site TM266.' They decided to prolong the mission one more day, and fame was the result. 'After Toumai we have been turning really every stone there, the whole rest of the day.' Bad memories are attached to the night of the 19th. Sleeping was impossible because of

a heavy sandstorm. Then it took three days of jolting over hard sand and digging to get the car out of soft sand to reach home. Toumai remained unharmed. Other fossils being packed in pink toilet-paper, he was wrapped in cottonwool.

Later, the skull of Sahelanthropus was also given special treatment. Usually the finds are being cleaned in the 'workshop' of the National Centre of Research, with bent and rusty tools like a dentists, at the sink next to the tins of instant coffee and instant milk. When the bottoms of the fossils are smeared with glue, they are stored in wooden (stallage scaffolding, staging?). But Toumai left immediately for Poitiers, where resine copies were made, for use at the university and for press conferences. One copy was offered to president Deby. But to Beauvilain great anger and to the embarrassment of his Chadian colleagues, the CNAR has not received a copy. Brunet explains that in Poitiers 'a long phase of scientific research has now started' during which time the skull 'can only be confided to those with a scientific conscience'. Not, that is, to folk in N'Djamena. That the same holds true for a copy of the skull must stem from some magic belief.

Since Sahelanthropus tchadensis has appeared, Brunet and Beauvilain are on bad terms. The conflict is not any more about honour and decency alone, but about money as well: about the right of publication of the pictures Beauvilain took on his 28 missions and for which magazines are willing to pay tens of thousands of euro's. Are they his or do they belong to the MPFT directed by Brunet?

Nevertheless the hope Toumai offers in Chad is seen especially as hope of reconciliation – a theme that does not wear out in this split country. Letters to editors talk of Toumai as the ancestor of all people, and therefore the common ancestor as well of Islamic nomads and herders in the north of the country and Christian farmers in the south, who now have more reason than ever to accept each other as brothers after decades of violence. Since last year school, associations and small enterprises are also called Toumai, by chairmen and owners who feel that their anonymity too has lasted long enough. For Djimdoumbaye his lucky hit has finally won him a contract with the CNAR and a scholarship for Poitiers.