



On the track of a new cradle of Mankind...In Chad, Central Africa...

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In the 80's, early hominids are known in South and East Africa but the oldest being in East Africa led Coppens (1983) to propose his "East Side Story" original savannah hypothesis. From 1994 the M.P.F.T.2 digging in Djurab desert (Northern Chad) unearthed successively a new australopithecine, *Australopithecus bahrelghazali*, nicknamed Abel (biochronologically dated to 3-3.5 Ma), the first ever found West of the Rift Valley (Brunet et al., 1995) and a new hominid (nicknamed Toumaï) *Sahelanthropus tchadensis* Brunet et al., 2002 from the late Miocene, biochronologically dated close to 7 Ma (Vignaud et al., 2002). This earliest hominid is a new milestone suggesting that an exclusively southern or eastern African origin of the hominid clade is unlikely to be correct. Since 1994, our roots went deeper, from 3.6 Ma to 7 Ma today, with three new Late Miocene species: *Ardipithecus kadabba* Haile-Selassie, 2001 (5.2-5.8 Ma, Middle Awash, Ethiopia) and *Orrorin tugenensis* Senut et al., 2001 (ca. 6 Ma, Lukeino, Kenya) while the oldest (ca. 7 Ma) is the Chadian one which has a scientific impact similar to that of *A. africanus* Dart, 1925. *S. tchadensis* displays a unique combination of primitive and derived characters that clearly shows that it is not related to chimpanzees or gorillas, but clearly suggests that it is related to later hominids, and temporally close to the last common ancestor between chimpanzees and humans (Brunet et al., 2002 & 2005; C. P. E. Zollikofer & al., 2005). In Chad, the Late Miocene sedimentological and paleobiological data are in agreement with a cyclical mosaic of environments (Vignaud et al., 2002, Schuster et al., 2006). Today the Okavango Delta (Central Kalahari, Botswana) appears to be a good analog with a similar mosaic of lacustrine and riparian waters, swamps, patches of forest, wooded islets, wooded savannah, grassland and desertic area (Brunet et al., 2005). Among this mosaic the precise habitat of Toumaï is still in progress but probably, as the others known late Miocene Hominids, a wooded one. Moreover these three late Miocene hominids

are probably usual bipeds. So the models that invoke savannah in the hominid origin must be reconsidered. Now, it appears that the earliest hominids inhabited wooded environments and were not restricted to Southern or Eastern Africa but were rather living in a wider geographic region, including also Sahelian Africa: at least Central Africa (Chad) and probably Libya. So, the early hominid history must be reconsidered within a completely new paradigm.

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