
Chapter 8

The archaeology of sharing immaterial things: social gatherings and the making of collective identities among Eastern Saharan hunter-gatherers

Emmanuelle Honoré

The most challenging practices to detect in the archaeological record are those evidenced by the fewest traces, as they leave a broad area for interpretation. It is not unusual for the physical remains of a unique archaeological site to be read in completely different ways by different researchers, even before starting the reconstruction of ancient peoples' lives (Muzzolini 1986, 35). The sharing of food is a common topic in the anthropological and archaeological literature (Gurven & Jaeggi 2015; Enloe 2003), whilst the sharing of immaterial things remains little investigated, especially in archaeology. The latter concept is fraught with pitfalls, justifying why it is still barely found in archaeology. With insights gained from a case study involving Late Stone Age rock art, this chapter examines how the sharing of immaterial things can be studied in the archaeological record. On the walls of natural shelters nested in the rocky flanks of the Libyan Desert massifs, hunter-gatherer groups represented themselves performing group activities. Images of social gatherings allow one to question the relevance and significance of the concept of sharing – especially applied to immaterial things – both for the hunter-gatherers who painted such scenes and, more generally, in our discipline.

The concept and the practice of sharing in archaeology

The sharing of material things is a practice that has potential material manifestations in the archaeological record. However, sharing leaves only indirect traces or no traces at all when it concerns immaterial things. The concept and practice of sharing has been studied more by anthropologists than by archaeologists so far: most – if not all – theories about sharing amongst hunter-gatherers have been elaborated by anthropologists (amongst others Service 1966; Ingold 1980; Bird-David 1992; Hawkes 1993). One key aspect of several early theories is that the double diet of meat and plants,

hunting and gathering, involves a division of tasks and, consequently, the sharing of food. Based on evolutionary theories, researchers have traditionally assumed that the division of tasks was made on a sexual basis: men hunt and women gather (Lee & DeVore 1968, 11). A number of experimental studies has provided evidence for both qualitative and quantitative differences between male and females when performing hunting and/or gathering tasks (Silverman & Eals 1992; Panter-Brick 2002; Pacheco-Cobos et al. 2010). Data for energy expense and types of spatial ability would indicate that women are more efficient in gathering (landmark strategy) and men in hunting (orientation strategy related to mobile preys). After having been viewed initially as the 'natural' explanation of sharing, the division of labour explained by sex differences has then rapidly been considered as the necessary proof of it. Some ethnographic counter-examples – among which the Guayaki men who gather (Clastres 1974, 89–90) and the Ainu or Inuit women who hunt (Testart 1986) – prove that this rather simplistic scheme has perhaps to do more with what Wiktor Stoczkowski (1994) calls 'naïve anthropology' rather than with the scientific justification of the origins of sharing amongst hunter-gatherers, as there is no regularity across different hunter-gatherer societies (Bird-David 1992, 28). Sharing is not always justified by bare necessities. Many different forms of sharing happen, between different agents or groups and for different purposes. Furthermore, what is analysed in the archaeological and anthropological literature as sharing is not always practiced or explicitly assumed as such.

Sharing: an ambivalent concept

In practice, there is no strict boundary between what is 'exchanging' and what is 'sharing', or between what is 'giving' and what is 'sharing' (Gurven 2004). Research on sharing is imbued by the topic's theo-

retical underpinnings within the nebulous galaxy of concepts that includes distribution, exchange and gift: the obligation of reciprocity invoked by giving and/or sharing (Mauss 2007; Godelier 1996), the theory of generalized exchange or ‘social exchange theory’ (Ekeh 1974; Sahlins 1972), and the many processes involved in specific forms of sharing like the ceremonial exchange of the *potlatch* (Barnett 1938; Boas 1896), the *kula* or the *gimwali* (Malinowski 1922; Weiner 1988), linking together the obligations of giving, receiving and giving back (Mauss 2007, 247; – see also Widlock, this volume). Except in complex forms of reciprocity (Weiner 1992), sharing material things involves giving – or ‘giving up’ (Hawkes 1993, 341) – part of them. Nonetheless the term itself is ambiguous. Sharing can refer to division: when people share a portion of food, they divide it into different parts, either equally or unequally – the cake-cutting problem. ‘Any system of sharing is arbitrary, thus unfair’ (Testart 1985, 163). It can lead to conflict and to disunity, contrary to what is implied by the term sharing when defined as ‘put in common’, from which the word ‘community’ derives. In this regard, a distinction can be made between the sharing of material goods, which means in most cases dividing, and the sharing of immaterial things, which means in most cases multiplying (Fig. 8.1). The sharing of immaterial things does not necessarily mean that the group will not face disadvantage. For example, if one group shares strategic information about the location of a source of raw material, this group could face some disadvantage because they no longer have sole access to the source.

The concept of sharing has been the starting point of discordant theories, from collectivism and

primitive communism to the origins of capitalism viewed as a system of relations. At one extremity of the spectrum is the theory of the altruistic nature of humans: sharing, more than fighting, was the leading cause of the Plio-Pleistocene hominization; humans are naturally good and caring (Isaac 1978). At the other extreme, neo-Marxist theories state that sharing has engendered a form of domination: ‘What is called sharing is not the only distribution, but it also refers to a form of appropriation of the thing and thus, to a relation of production’ (Testart 1985, 11). Sharing is studied as one concept in this volume (Lavi & Friesem, introduction) but it is actually many concepts depending on the nature of the thing shared, the motivations of the sharer (egoistic or altruistic; see Vermunt 2014, 61) and the significance of the practice in a given society, which is not always and/or necessarily a ‘social whole’ (Gellner 2003).

The only point on which anthropologists and archaeologists agree is that sharing is universal or almost universal (Sahlins 1965) and of considerable importance in social mechanisms. ‘Sharing is the central rule of social interaction among hunters and gatherers’ (Lee & Daly 1999, 4). In practice, the different forms of sharing (Testart 1985, 64–5) are difficult to distinguish and many anthropological theories remain nearly unverifiable on archaeological sites, since the identification of sharing practices themselves is already a matter of debate. Sharing is a weakly operative concept in the field: the nature of the archaeological record makes it almost undetectable. As noted by James Enloe (2003, 4), ‘the difficulty lies first in establishing that food sharing took place, as opposed to the mere assertion that it did’.

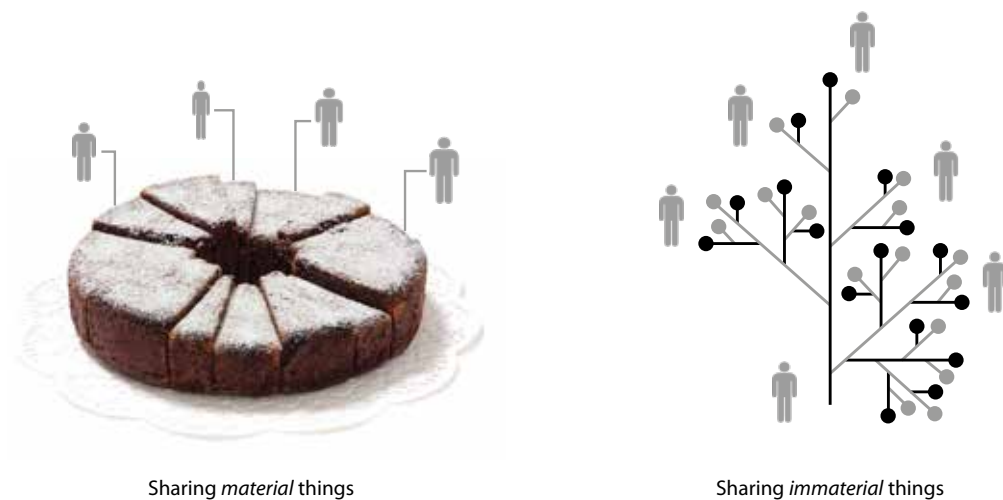


Figure 8.1. A visual representation of the sharing of material things (dividing) and the sharing of immaterial things (multiplying).

Thus far, sharing has been debated mostly in terms of food sharing. Indeed, in ancient societies, ‘the economy is only seen for its visible moments’ (Corsin Jimenez & Willerslev 2007, 528). Food sharing has the advantage of being quantifiable (Ingold 1980, 147). But archaeology is a discipline based on material evidence, and practices of sharing involving only immaterial things are much more difficult to detect. They remain unnoticed if no indirect remnant testifies to them, and detection relies mostly on inferences supported by the necessary dialogue of archaeology and anthropology. From a ‘palimpsest fieldwork’, it is a challenge to trace back the concept and to link material evidence with such evanescent practices.

Approaching the sharing of immaterial things in archaeology

There have been many attempts by archaeologists to study immaterial concepts and practices that leave no direct evidence. What anthropologists call the ‘sharing of knowledge’ (see Salali et al. 2016 for the concept of ‘cumulative culture’) can be traced back, for example, in the level of technical skills in stone tool manufacture, testifying to learning steps (Karlin 1991, 139–40). During the past decade, researchers have stepped up efforts to address themes that are not directly accessible from the archaeological record, having developed the archaeology of performance (Inomata & Coben 2006; DeMarrais 2014), the archaeology of feast (Dietler & Hayden 2001; Hayden 2014) and the even more intangible archaeology of emotions and feelings (Harris & Sørensen 2010).

Despite a consistent willingness to approach human behaviour in its entire complexity, there remain obvious limits constituted by the very nature of the archaeological record, which gives access in priority to technical aspects. As early as the 1960s, André Leroi-Gourhan founded the *Ethnologie Préhistorique* (Prehistoric ethnology), with the aim of studying Magdalenian groups at Pincevent as an ethnographer would do. The intention was not only to describe finds as it is done in traditional archaeology, but also to reconstruct the complete life of groups in space and time. The *Ethnologie Préhistorique* was primarily concerned with technical processes (Leroi-Gourhan 1943, 1945, 1964, 1965), especially with the reconstitution of the *chaînes opératoires*. Other attempts have followed the same path: when Michael Schiffer and James M. Skibo founded the laboratory of behavioural archaeology at the University of Arizona, they called it the ‘Laboratory for Traditional Technology’ (Schiffer 1992; Skibo & Schiffer 2009; Schiffer 2011). Such major historical examples highlight how hardly accessible

are, in archaeology, past actions having involved to a least extent the material culture or any technical action – as it is the case for the sharing of immaterial things.

Interaction and the making of social existences by sharing performances

The rock art record of the so-called ‘Green Sahara’ includes numerous paintings of humans performing various activities, making it key to the investigation of social existences and interactions. In the Gilf el-Kebir, in the Libyan Desert (Egypt), images of collective gatherings provide invaluable insights into what might have been group events and festive meetings during the later prehistory of the region, given that we have found no other archaeological evidence of such things so far. Be they snapshots of concrete events or idealized representations of the group, the images testify to an intricate social life relying on gathering, performing and sharing together.

The rock art site of Wadi Sūra II is located in a remote area of the Libyan Desert in the Eastern Sahara: the Gilf el-Kebir, a massif in southwestern Egypt, not far from the Libyan and Sudanese borders (Fig. 8.2). The site is on the southwestern border of the northwestern Abu Ras plateau, in a region with a very high density of rock art sites, contrasting with the south plateau of the Gilf el-Kebir (the Kemal el-Din plateau) (Honoré, in press). It is a naturally curved rock wall of 20 meters, a typical large rock shelter – despite it has been called the ‘Cave of Beasts’ (Kuper 2013). According to archaeological evidence, the micro-region was peopled during what are called the Gilf B (6500–4400 BC) and the Gilf C (4400–3500 BC) phases (Gehlen et al. 2002, 104–5). There is only very scarce evidence of a Gilf A occupation phase (starting from 8100 BC) (Riemer & Bartz 2013, 32–7), even though data show that the palaeoenvironmental setting was most probably suitable for sustaining a hunter-gatherer way of life during this early phase (Kröpelin 1987).

Covered with around 8000 paintings and engravings, Wadi Sūra II is one of the most important rock art sites in the world (Fig. 8.3). Discovered in 2002, it has been digitally recorded by a team from the University of Cologne (Kuper 2013). Several layers of paintings are superimposed on the walls (Watrin, Saad & Honoré 2008). Like Wadi Sūra I, Wadi Sūra II does not show figures painted in the typical pastoralist rock art style widely disseminated in the Gilf-‘Uweināt area (Zboray 2013). Considering the depiction of hunting activities and the absence of clearly identifiable domesticated animals in the motifs, it is highly probable that the Wadi Sūra II paintings pre-date

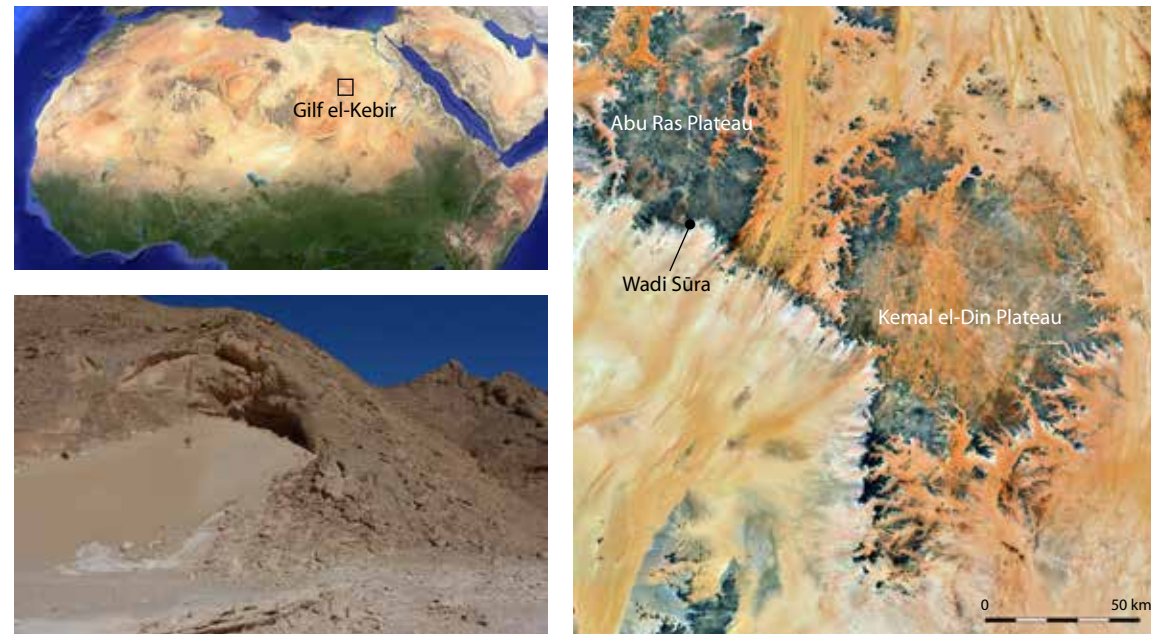


Figure 8.2. Location map and general view of Wadi Sūra II, Eastern Sahara.



Figure 8.3. The central panel of Wadi Sūra II paintings.

domestication in the region and should therefore be assigned to hunter-gatherer groups. In terms of chronology, no direct dating has been carried out but most authors agree on a dating of the main layers of paintings to between the seventh and the fifth millennium BC (Riemer, Kröpelin & Zboray 2017, fig. 6), varying from between the second half of the seventh millennium BC and the sixth millennium BC, around 6000 BC (Honoré et al. 2016, 246), to between 5500 and 5000 BC (Riemer, Kröpelin & Zboray 2017, 20).

The repertoire at Wadi Sūra, as well as more widely in Saharan rock art, is dominated by the human figure. In depictions of group activities, several scenes involve more than five people mostly undifferentiated in terms of their appearance (same colour, same dress) and in similar positions (Figs. 8.4–8.6). In these scenes, some elements seem to underline the importance of dance and music. Two groups appear in frontal view with legs bent like those of crabs. This posture is never adopted by an individual



Figure 8.4. A group of human figures depicted with legs bent like those of crabs in the rock art of Wadi Sūra II.



Figure 8.5. Human figures in a row at Wadi Sūra II.



Figure 8.6. A row of human figures holding what could be musical instruments (drums?) at Wadi Sūra II.

alone, it is exclusive to groups. The position of the arms varies: most of the time, they are opened like the legs and slightly flexed (Fig. 8.5), but they can also be one down and one up (Fig. 8.4), or together on one side (Fig. 8.6). It is hypothesized that these dynamic postures could represent dancing (Honore in press, 6). According to Yosef Garfinkel (2003, 18–19), the depiction of movement in a static medium can be achieved by four means; three (excepting figures depicted in a circle) are found in Wadi Sūra II scenes: humans depicted sharing the same direction, the same rhythm and the same body position. All individuals are in row, facing altogether someone or something. Moreover, their specific body position recalls tribal dances and is especially close to the most characteristic steps in African dance (Menardi Noguera, pers. comm.; Asante 1996). In some tribal dances, like the Kapa Haka performed by the Maoris, the primary intention is to intimidate opponents, but the circumstances and aims of group dances are numerous: for celebration, for ritual purposes, for natural and supernatural entities, for competition, for courtship, etc. In any case, performing together is a way of reinforcing group cohesion with the sharing of a more or less codified performance by all members of the group, or by members of a subgroup. Several visual elements emphasize the importance of group membership: there is no difference in status, gender or age expressed, and even no marker of it. Finally, the human figures hold objects in the form of large sticks (Fig. 8.6). Based on their size and shape, they could be portable traditional drums like, for example, the Saharan lithophones identified by Erik Gonthier at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris and most probably spread in different regions of the world during late prehistory (Gonthier 2005; 2006; Caldwell 2013).

Group cohesion and the different forms of sharing

How should we interpret the Wadi Sūra II scenes? While Michael Dietler and Brian Hayden's theory of feast has a special focus on the sharing of food and beverages in collective gatherings, the Wadi Sūra II images invite us to consider the importance of immaterial shares such as moments, actions and performances (and any share that is non-directly useful to subsistence) for enhancing group cohesion. As early as the late nineteenth century, the German sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1887/2017) distinguished between 'community' (*Gemeinschaft*) and 'society' (*Gesellschaft*) as two types of human groupings. In his theory, sharing is practiced in both forms of human groupings, but in a 'community' the whole and the unity of the whole (the 'common good' and the 'common will') are

paramount, whereas a 'society' is an agglomeration of individuals in which individual will (*Kürwille*) is a driving force. Depending on the type of activities performed, and despite the fact that they are all cooperative, the painters at Wadi Sūra II have depicted both types of human groupings: the 'society' in hunting scenes with differentiated individuals, and the 'community' in dancing scenes with unity reflected *inter alia* by the physical uniformity of the people involved. The humans depicted on Wadi Sūra II walls perform the same activities, but the way they are depicted shows that they share more than dancing: they share a common identity.

A second level of interpretation is accessible from the same scenes. The act of depicting images of collective gatherings can be viewed as resulting from an intention to share memories of those shared moments. As defined by Andrew Jones, remembrance is 'a bodily encounter between people and things as people don't remember in isolation nor do artefacts' (2007, 26). Images act as the materiality of actions leaving otherwise no material traces. Creating rock art is also a performance in itself; therefore depicting images of past or imagined performances is a double *mise en abyme*. The number of superimpositions of paintings in the same place at the Wadi Sūra II site poses a question of the meaning of this site and of the importance of perpetuating tradition.

Finally, the question of the formation of collective memories needs to be raised. The reinforcing of group identity can happen as much in the sharing of an image of the group performing dance as it can in the sharing of the performance of the dance itself. Depicting these actions in a certain way has fixed an image of the group: a shared memory or what we could term with Paul Connerton (1989, 6–40) a 'social memory'. Several researchers have argued that rock art can be studied as places and instruments of memory (Wrigglesworth 2006; Armstrong 2010; Morphy 2012; McNeil 2012). These innovative approaches have to be nuanced with the fact that this memory can be a construction, and is not necessarily a transcription of moments and things that actually happened. As such, it can be a virtual memory constructed to provide historical grounds to a social reality or, at Wadi Sūra II, to inspire the feeling of being part of a long-established community. Dan Sperber, the originator of the theory of the 'epidemiology of representations', explains that a cultural representation 'includes a set of mental and public representations. Each mental version is the product of the interpretation of a public representation, which is itself the expression of a mental representation' (1996, 40). The process of making rock art images (pictorial representations) borrows from mental representations

deriving themselves from commonly shared opinions and memories, and contributes in return – by sharing the images – to the formation of collective representations (of 'cultural representations' in Sperber's terms).

Conclusion

Despite the long-standing dialogue between archaeology and anthropology, the different nature of the material they study makes it difficult for archaeologists to fully benefit from the advances in anthropology on the concept of sharing. The majority of sharing events in the past have no transcription in the archaeological record, and most theories are hardly workable with fragmentary evidence, especially when working on the archaeology of hunter-gatherers. Acting as a transcription of group gatherings, rock art images on the walls of Wadi Sūra II testify to a complex social life. Even though immaterial shares are less visible in archaeology, the case study presented in this chapter seems to show that the sharing of dance performances has been a more cohesive form of sharing than subsistence-related shares amongst the Late Stone Age hunter-gatherer groups in northeastern Africa. The hypothesis developed here is that the depiction of similar people when they perform ritual dances, while they are individualized in other group activities like hunting, may result from the intention to depict the 'community' more than the 'society'. As such, the scope and significance of sharing has been substantially different in these groups depending on the thing shared. Painting such performances contributed to the representation of social identities, the definition of which was different depending on the activity performed. Ultimately, rock art appears as a means of sharing a certain idea of the group within the group and, beyond, with any onlooker.

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