



DAILY LIFE CONTRIBUTION TOWARDS RECONSTRUCTING PREHISTORIC DAILY LIFE

*Avraham Ronen**

ABSTRACT - Present-day Ethiopian women dwelling in round houses are normally very heavily decorated, possibly showing their socio-economic status. We suggest that women living in the Natufian and early Neolithic circular houses were likewise heavily decorated. This is supported by the wealth and variety of beads uncovered in those periods in the Levant.

RIASSUNTO - Le donne etiopi dei nostri giorni, che vivono in abitazioni di forma circolare, indossano di norma ricchi ornamenti, che testimoniano il loro status socio-economico. Sosteniamo l'ipotesi che anche le donne della cultura natufiana e del primo Neolitico che abitavano in case circolari si ornassero con altrettanta abbondanza. Ciò viene confermato dalla ricchezza e varietà di perline ritrovate nel Levante e riferite a tali epoche.

In this paper we shall discuss A) circular houses and jewelry; B) present walking stance and the archaeological dance.

A. CIRCULAR HOUSES AND JEWELRY

A sedentary settlement pattern first appeared in the Epi-palaeolithic of the Levant, encompassing the Natufian (13 –10,000 BC, Eckmaier et al., 2012) and the Pre-Pottery Neolithic A (10-9,500 BC) periods, still maintaining a largely gathering/hunting subsistence. Sedentism brought the oldest permanent dwellings. These houses, with a simple circular plan and no internal divides (Fig. 1), reigned throughout the period of gathering/hunting subsistence pattern.

Circular dwellings were shown in ethnographic studies to support a largely egalitarian, collectivistic and polygynous society where men reside in individual or communal houses and women are confined, with their offspring, to their house. The house thus effectively becomes a “container of women” (Duncan, 1981), with no outsiders admitted.

The simple Epi-palaeolithic Levantine society of the circular houses was long believed to have maintained basically a Palaeolithic level of social organization and technology. The discovery of the huge PPNA temple structures at Göbekli Tepe (Fig. 2), (SE Turkey, Schmidt 2012) changed, however, the model of loosely connected Levantine Epi-palaeolithic communities to that of a powerful and centralized tribal organization.

With the advent of food production and the domestication of plants and animals in the Pre-Pottery Neolithic B (first half of the 7th millennium), rectangular houses gradually replaced the circular ones in the Levant (Cauvin, 1978, 57). “Buildings are ways of ordering behavior” (Rapoport, 1979, 15). Therefore, a causal connection is generally acknowledged between the socio-economic changes which accompanied food production and the rectangular house.

Several tribes in Ethiopia presently live in circular houses. Field observations were carried out in February 2013 among the Konso, Hamar and Mursi tribes of the Omo Valley in southern Ethiopia. All live in very simple circular houses (Fig. 3) and all are polygynous. The walls and the roof of the house are generally made entirely of straw. Sometimes a conical straw roof is built on top of a circular wall made of wooden logs stuck in the ground, with mud-filled spaces. These earth walls resist the mild rainy season and can hold for years. Every few years, new straw is added to the roof. The roof is supported by a central wooden pole (Fig. 4). The entrance to the house is sometimes located, for security reasons, above the ground and is reduced to a small opening some 50 cm high (Fig. 5).

* Zinman institute of Archaeology, University of Haifa



A cow-skin covered sleeping quarter is normally located to the left of the entrance, taking some 30% of the floor area. On the opposite side, a storage space may be located. At the far end, opposite the entrance, a cow or a goat may be housed. The kitchen is an open fire between a few stones (Fig. 6) located in the center of the residence, near the central pole. The furniture in the circular house completes with a chair, a plastic container of water, a gourd containing milk or yoghurt and a sack filled with cow dung for fuel.

An extended family occupies a small compound of a few houses (Fig. 7) encircled by a low fence made of branches and thorns. The village is formed by a few compounds and is similarly fenced. The village, a few hundred individuals at most, is part of a cohesive tribal organization which may number thousands or hundreds of thousands individuals. The tribe is an ethnic group with a distinct territory, culture and language. The builders of Göbekli Tepe may have had a similar social organization. Unlike their Levantine predecessors, however, these Ethiopian tribes are food producers with simple agriculture and domesticated cattle and goats. These tribes thus maintain the old fashioned residence form and social organization in the economic context of food production. The primacy of social order and house form over economic conditions is thus demonstrated.

By far the most striking character of the circular house residents in Ethiopia is the exceptionally rich jewelry attire of the women. Men may be adorned too, wearing necklaces and arm or leg bracelets, but masculine adornment is far poorer than the glittering jewelry of women. Chief among women's adornment items is the cowry shell. Cowry shells allude to both the eye and the female genitals (Sciama, 1998, 15), and are thus believed to be imbued with the power to bring luck, health and fertility to the soil and humans. Adornments both beautify and protect (Sciama 1998, 41). The rich jewelry of women residents of circular houses incites to look into the meaning of jewelry and its possible ties with the circular house.

Jewelry immitate animals and the sexual aspect of animals. The origin of jewelry is thus sexual. Animals are naturally adorned according to the mating season; humans can make it as long as they please (Paulme et Brosse 1956, 16). Jewelry stems from the desire to present one's most pleasing aspect (Paulme et Brosse 1956, 7), and the desire to be distinguished from others, to appear as unique (Paulme et Brosse 1956, 30).

Beads began an intermittent appearance in the archaeological record in the African Middle Stone Age (D'Errico and Vanhaeren, 2007) and in the early Upper Palaeolithic period in Eurasia from ca. 40 ka ago (White 2007). The real proliferation of both shell and stone beads came, however, with sedentism and the circular house (Bar-Yosef Mayer 2013; Valla et al, 2007, 355; Rees 1991). The flourishing of beadmaking can therefore be understood in terms of the new social and economic needs created by sedentary life (Wright and Garrard 2003). The function of the earliest beads was, according to D'Errico and Vanhaeren (2007), exchange and gift-giving. But those functions could have come only once beads have become socially and personally valued.

Jewelry has become an almost language-like sign system understood within cultural conventions, and separate between a culture and its neighbors (Sciama 1998, 24). Jewelry items became markers of ethnic affiliation: beadwork (Figs. 8 – 10), hair-do, facial décor, paint and tattoo (Fig. 11) and lip-disc (Fig. 12 and 13); markers of one's social position within the group: first or second wife (Figs. 14 and 15), and the person's uniqueness among her peers (Figs. 16 and 17) (D'errico and Vanhaeren, 2007, 283). Beads appear, in fact, to have a life of their own ((Janowski, 1998, 244).

Personal taste and individuality can not be expressed in the circular house. For one, the houses are all identical inside-out with no option for an individual mark. Secondly, practically no one is allowed into the house and if a personal mark had existed there, it could not be seen. Under these constraints, the only means left for a house wife in a circular house to express herself and beautify, was her body. Similar ties between circular houses and adornment may have existed in the Levantine Epi-palaeolithic.

It is not clear to what extent the architectural and behavioral details observed in Ethiopia may apply to the Levantine Epi-palaeolithic circular houses. These observations offer, at least, options of looking at the Levantine archaeological evidence. White (2007, 299) warns against imposing ethnographic knowledge on the past. But in our case there is hardly any past data. Ethnographic knowledge may fill the gap and help generate assumptions. The numerous stone beads of varied forms unearthed in the Natufian and Neolithic phases in the Levant (Figs. 18, 19) (Bar-yosef-Mayer 2013) allude to rich adornment. Of these stone beads, 86.3% originate in circular houses (Bar-yosef-Mayer 2013, 133). Stone beads unearthed in a final Natufian layer consist of 12% black beads, 21% gray-green ones, 23% red ones and 34% white specimens (Valla et al, 2007, 355). In the Natufian and PPNA, dentalium shells were the dominant personal ornament species (Bar-Yosef D. 1991; Rees, 1991; Weinstein-Evron et al., 2007, 105). Given similar psycho-social drives and similar physical constraints, Levantine women of the circular dwellings could have been as richly adorned as their present day counterparts.

Among the ca. 450 Epi-palaeolithic burials excavated in the Levant, some were buried with jewelry. The jewelry found in burials invariably consist of shell and bone beads. Stone beads were not encountered in burials (Boquentin, pers. Comm) with the exception of a single case in a PPNA burial at Hatula (Le Mort 1994,

55). Hence, two categories of jewelry are shown, for the first time, to have existed in the Epi-palaeolithic Levant: jewelry for the living, including stone beads and, no doubt, dentalium shell and bone beads; and jewelry for the dead, encompassing only shell and bone.

B. WALKING STANCE AND STICK DANCE

Ethiopian rural males generally walk with a stick in hand. Frequently (estimated 50%), the stick is positioned horizontally behind the neck, parallel to the shoulders, its extremities held in the palm of each hand (fig 20).

We submit that this very common stick-holding posture may be depicted in early dance drawings which were thoroughly studied by Garfinkel (2003). Prehistoric dancing is interpreted as a religious performance (Garfinkel 2003, 65). Hence it is implied that the numerous instances of raised hands depicted in the archaeological record signify worship and prayer. One should, however, distinguish between two positions of hand-raising. In one, the hands are raised above the head or to the height of the head. In the other, the hands are bent at the elbow and raised to the height of the shoulders, which is precisely the stick walking posture (Fig. 20).

The first posture does, perhaps, indicate prayer but the second posture may well depict dancers whose hands are holding a stick. Of the 9 different arm positions identified by Garfinkel (2003, Figure 2.1), (Fig. 21), three positions could well depict dancers holding a stick: one (G) shows the stick held at the shoulder height while in the other two (H and I), the dancer seems to hold the stick at waist-height.

Garfinkel notes that according to ethnographic data, dancing is generally accompanied by music and he wonders (2003, 73) why musical instruments are not seen in the archaeological depictions. The sticks could have served, in fact, for rhythmical clapping or rattling, like in present day stick dances. If true, a stick-dance was apparently among the earliest dances in history.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Yoel Rak suggested Ethiopia; Mesfin Mekonnen planned the itinerary and took care of logistics; Eyob Abebe was the driver and translator; Anat Regev-Gisis helped with the figures; Yossi Garfinkel and Daniela Bar-Yosef Mayer kindly gave permission to use data from their publication; my sincere thanks are due to all. Photographs are by the author.

REFERENCES

- Bar-Yosef Mayer, 2013 Towards a typology of stone beads in the Neolithic Levant. *J. of Field Archaeology* 38, 129-142.
- Cauvin, J., 1978 *Les premiers villages de Syrie-Palestine du IX^e au VII^e millénaire avant J.C.* Maison de l'Orient, Lyon.
- Carey, M., 1998 Gender in African Beadwork: An Overview. In: Sciamia, L.D. and J.B. Eicher (eds.), *Beads and Bead Makers*, 83-93. Berg, Oxford.
- D'Errico, F. and M. Vanhaeren, 2007 Evolution or Revolution? New Evidence for the Origin of Symbolic Behaviour In and Out of Africa. In: Mellars, P., K. Boyle, O. Bar-Yosef and C. Stringer (eds.), *Rethinking the human revolution*, 275-286. McDonald Institute, Cambridge
- Duncan, J.S., 1981 From Container of Women to Status Symbol: The Impact of Social Structure on the Meaning of the House. In: Duncan, J.S. (ed.), *Housing and Identity, Cross-cultural Perspectives*, 36-59. Croom Helm, London.
- Eckmeier E., R. Yeshurun, M. Weinstein-Evron, E. Mintz and E. Boaretto, 2012, 14C Dating of the early Natufian el-Wad Terrace, Mount Carmel, Israel: Methodology and Material Characterization. *Radiocarbon* 54, 823-836.
- Janowski, M., 1998 Beads, Prestige and Life Among the Kelabit of Sarawak, East Malaysia. In: Sciamia, L.D. and J.B. Eicher (eds.), *Beads and Bead Makers*, 213-246. Berg, Oxford.
- Garfinkel, Y., 2003 *Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture*. University of Texas Press, Austin.
- Le Mort, F., 1994 Les sépultures. In: Lechevallier, M. and A. Ronen, (eds) *Le Site de Hatoula en Judée Occidentale, Israël*, 39-72. Mémoires et Travaux du Centre de Recherche Français de Jérusalem No. 8, Paris.
- Paulme, D. et J. Brosse, 1956 *Parures Africaines*. Hachette, Paris.
- Rapoport, 1979 Cultural Origins of Architecture. In: Snyder, J.C. and A.J. Caranese (eds.), *Introduction to Architecture*, 2-20. McGraw-Hill, New York.
- Rees, 1991 Marine Shells in the Levant: Upper Palaeolithic, Epi-palaeolithic and Neolithic. In: Bar-Yosef, O. and F.R. Valla (eds.), *The Natufian Culture in the Levant*, 629-636. International Monographs in Prehistory, Ann Arbor.
- Schmidt, K., 2012 *Göbekli Tepe. A Stone Age Sanctuary in South Eastern Anatolia*. ArchaeNova e. V., ex oriente, Berlin.
- Sciamia, L.D., 1998 Gender in the Making, Trading and Uses of Beads: An Introductory Essay. In: Sciamia, L.D. and J.B. Eicher (eds.), *Beads and Bead Makers*, 1-45. Berg, Oxford.
- Valla F.R. et al, 2007 Les fouilles de Ain Mallaha (Einan) de 2003 à 2005: Quatrième rapport préliminaire. *Journal of the Israel Prehistoric Society* 37, 135-379.
- Weinstein-Evron, M. et al., 2007 After 70 Years: New Excavations at the el-Wad Terrace, Mount Carmel, Israel. *Journal of the Israel Prehistoric Society* 37, 37-134.
- White, R., 2007 Systems of Personal Ornamentation in the Early Upper Palaeolithic: Methodological Challenges and New Observations. In: Mellars, P., K. Boyle, O. Bar-Yosef and C. Stringer (eds.), *Rethinking the human revolution*, 287-302. Mc Donald Institute, Cambridge.
- Wright, K. and A. Garrard, 2003 Social Identities and the Expansion of Stone Bead-Making in Neolithic Western Asia: New Evidence from Jordan. *Antiquity* 77, 267-284.



Figure 1 A circular PPNA house at Hatula (after Lechevallier and Ronen 1994).

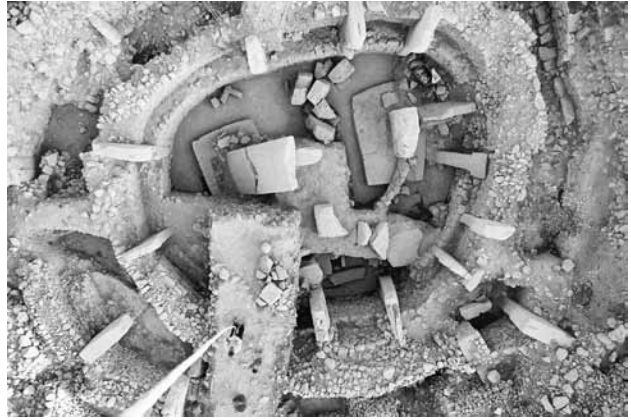


Figure 2 Göbekli Tepe, a circular temple with giant columns (after Schmidt 2006)



Figure 3 A circular house, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 4 Central pole in a circular house, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 5 Entrance to a circular house, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 6 Kitchen in a circular house, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 7 A compound of circular houses, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 8 Beadwork of the Konso tribe, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 9 Beadwork of the Konso tribe, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 10 Beadwork of the Amara tribe, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.

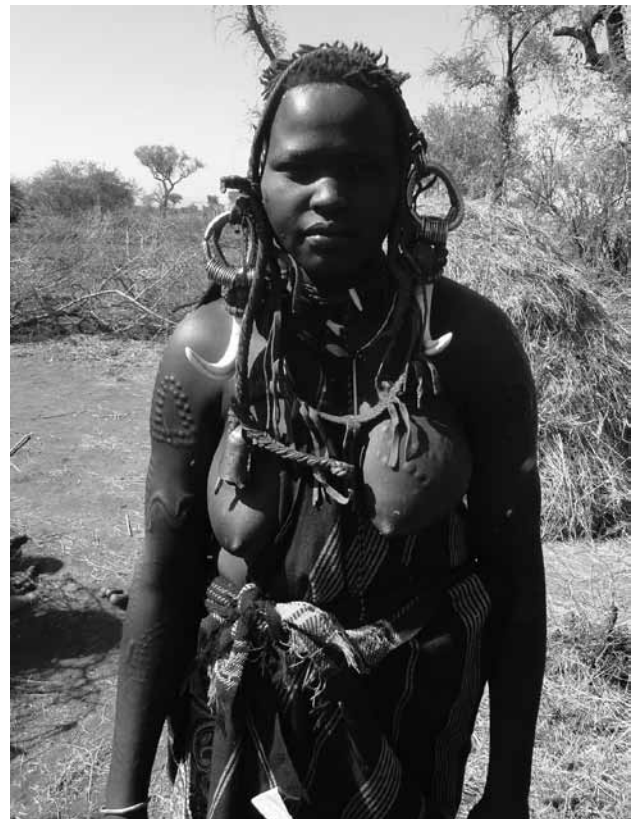


Figure 11 A Mursi woman with facial gadgets and protruding tattoo, Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 12 White paint and a decorated Mursi lip-disc. Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 13 A Mursi lip-disc (diameter 82 mm). Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 14 Hamar with necklace of first wife. Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 15 Hamar with necklace of second wife. Omo Valley, Ethiopia.

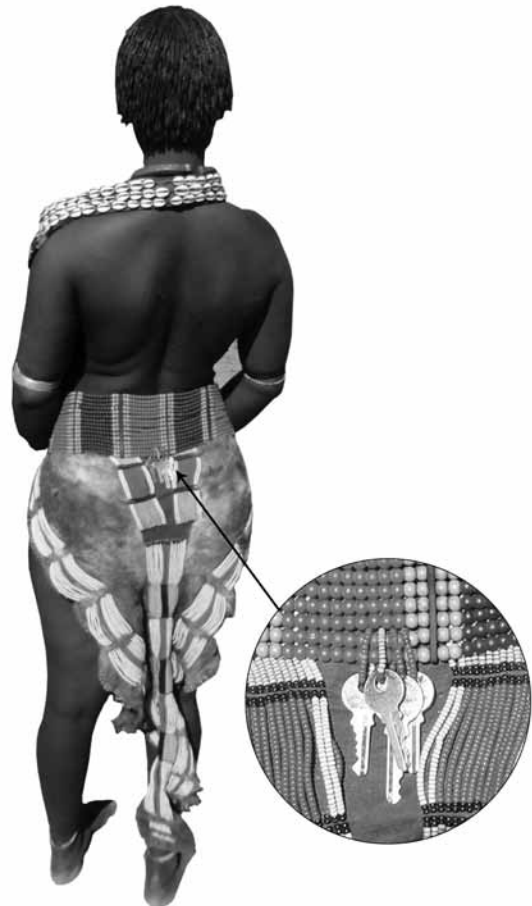


Figure 16 Personal choice, keys in belt. Omo Valley, Ethiopia.



Figure 17 Personal choice, bullet shells at the end of dreadlocks. Omo Valley, Ethiopia.

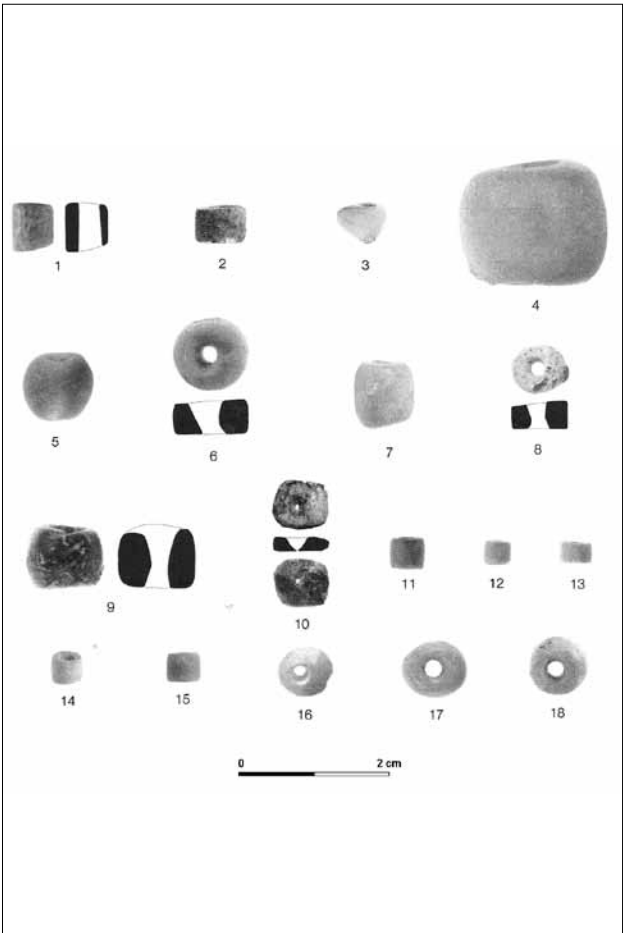


Figure 18 Stone beads of Levantine circular houses (after Bar-Yosef Mayer 2013).

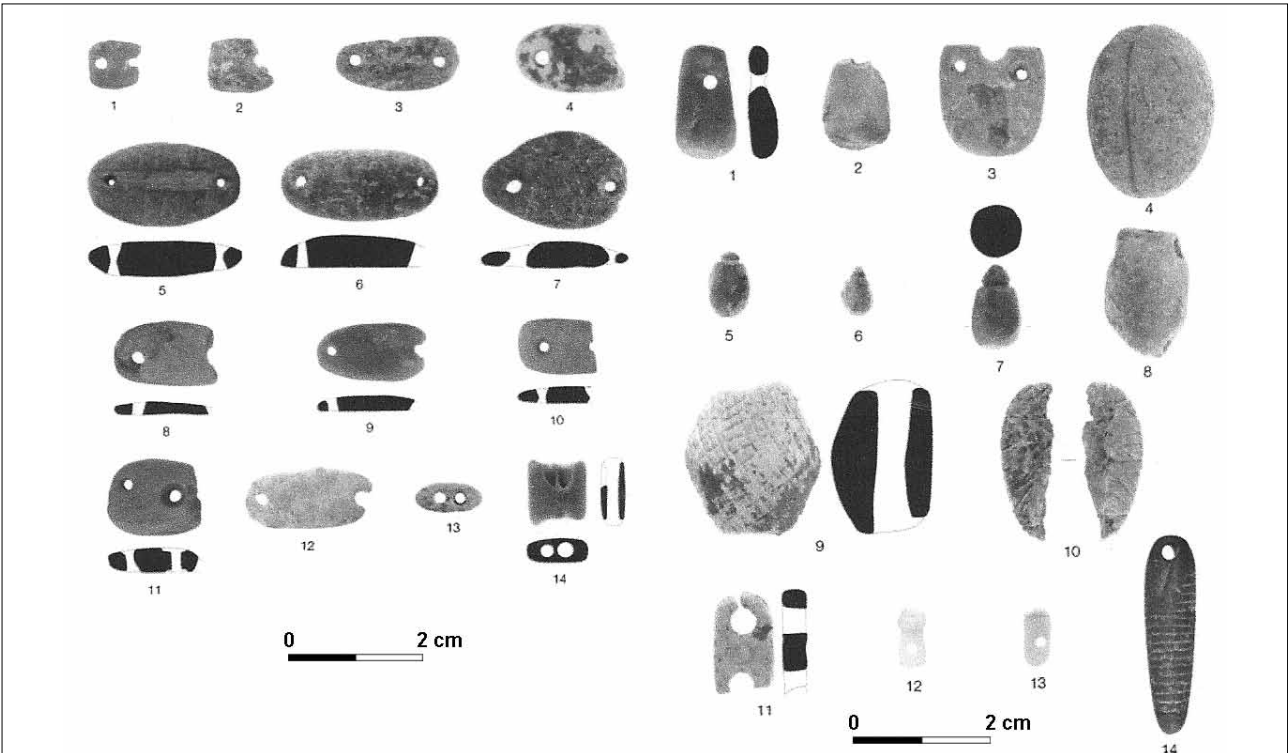


Figure 19 Stone beads of Levantine circular houses (after Bar-Yosef Mayer 2013).



Figure 20 Typical posture of man walking with a stick. Afar, Ethiopia.

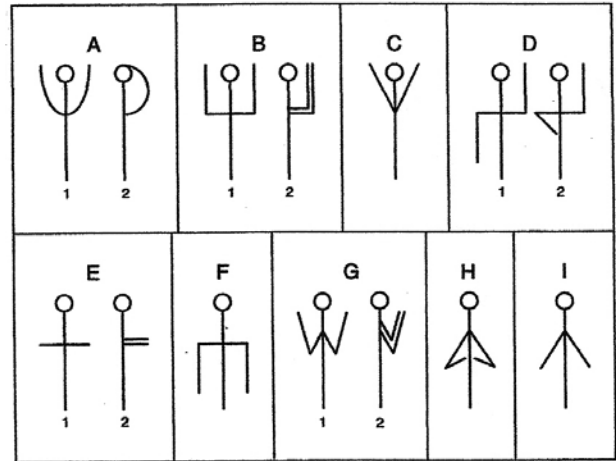


Figure 21 Basic variations of arm positions in archaeological dancing scenes (after Garfinkel 2003, Figure 2.1).