

# **Symbology: A Study of Symbols in Human Adornment**

**By Sindi Schloss**

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***Symbol.*** The word is provocative. It invokes reflection, contemplation and a sense of the curious. Many definitions for *symbol* exist, however “something that through its nature or appearance, reflects another thing more profound than itself”<sup>1</sup> seems most engaging. Many symbols do not have a single constant meaning, but may be linked to many interpretations and have meanings that vary from various cultures and eras. Carrying meaning within cultures, symbols take on various functions in society from a range of social markers, such as ethnic and individual identity, spiritual which can be a protective belief, religious signifier and ancestral ties, wealth, and adornment. Symbols are seen in art and architecture. They become the fabric of a culture: the often overlooked connection to earth, one another and how the individuals who make up a given culture see and represent themselves.

***Symbolism*** is an “instrument of knowledge and the most ancient and fundamental method of expression”<sup>2</sup>. It is the practice of representing things by symbols – attributing meaning or significance to objects, events or relationships, creating order in a seemingly chaotic world. When translated into a material form, physical remnants were created which have been subject to interpretation and debate amongst archaeologists and anthropologists.

***Symbology*** becomes the study or interpretation of symbolism, and it is this study that has held this author captive. The use of symbolism in human adornment is only understood within a vast warehouse of symbols. With that in mind, this article will attempt to distill and present the basic symbols seen in most art forms, be they architecture, textiles, art or adornment.

Interestingly, archaeologists consider adornment, in the form of a bead, to be one of the initial indicators of when early hominids developed the ability to symbolize, thus becoming “modern man”. Beads are one of the first expressions of symbols in a durable material. The beads were small, purposely drilled shells (fig.1), arranged in such a way on the skeletal remains, as to suggest being worn as a necklace. Not only were beads the first indication of adornment, they are “unambiguous examples of “symbolic behavior” because they have little to do with survival”<sup>3</sup>. Being one of the first material objects not necessary for survival, “beads play a dominant role in discussions relating to the evolution of symbolic thinking and predate pictographs and/or petroglyphs.”<sup>4</sup> It is possible that organic materials such as seeds, feathers, claws, might predate the shells, but unfortunately, due to their tendency to decompose, little evidence exists. That being said, new research suggests that Neanderthals wore feathers, particularly dark feathers, for symbolic reasons, as use of ornaments which suggests complex thinking (fig.2).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Miranda Bruce-Mitford. The Illustrated Book of Signs and Symbols.

<sup>2</sup> J.C. Cooper. An Illustrated Encyclopedia of Traditional Symbols.

<sup>3</sup> Dr. Stephen L. Kuhn. University of Arizona School of Anthropology. Lectures.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Curtis Marean. School of Human Evolution and Social Change. Arizona State University. Lecture.

<sup>5</sup> MSNBC.Science. 2012

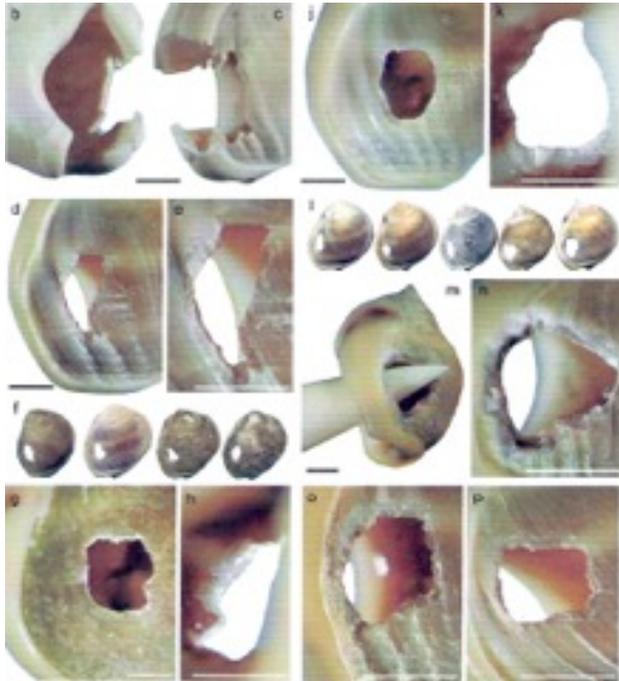


Fig.1. Study in piercing *Nassarius gibbosulus* shells. D'Errico et. Al. *Journal of Human Evolution* 48 (2005) 3-24. Permission to publish obtained.



Fig.2. Representation of Neanderthal wearing dark feathers (and claws).  
Image by Mauro Cutrona (no copyright information). MSNBC.Science.2012.

When did symbolic thinking happen? Around one hundred thousand years ago, several species of hominids existed: *Homo sapiens* in Africa, *Homo erectus* in Southeast Asia and China and *Homo neanderthalensis*<sup>6</sup> in Europe and central Asia. *Homo sapiens* are credited with being the first culturally modern species i.e. exhibiting “modern behavior”, and were the first to make ornaments and beads. As dating techniques have become more advanced, a much earlier date for the onset of symbolic behavior has been identified, than originally thought. The excavation yielding the oldest drilled Nassarius or tick shells was in Skhul Cave, Mt. Carmel, Israel, dating approximately one hundred thousand to one hundred thirty thousand years ago.<sup>7</sup> By sixty thousand years ago, ornaments spread throughout the world.<sup>8</sup> The Neanderthal, credited with the first burials, decorated bones (fifty thousand years ago) and first cave art (forty thousand, eight hundred years ago) coexisted for some time with *Homo sapiens*, but by thirty thousand years ago, only *Homo sapiens* existed. As a *Homo sapien* invention, beads had already been around for seventy thousand years!

As stated, the question of **when**, during prehistoric humans’ history (currently thought to be 100,000 + years ago), did images emerge from human consciousness or sub-consciousness into a physical expression, suggesting symbolic or modern behavior, is answered. But what about **how**? Two theories seem significant to the author, as possible and probable origin of symbolic expression.

An intriguing theory, the Entoptic theory (Greek for “within vision”) was expounded in 1988 by Lewis-Williams & Dowson<sup>9</sup>, to explain the ubiquitous phenomena of certain shapes used as symbols. Their theory suggests an intrinsic or hard-wired proponent of our nervous system which has changed little for one hundred thousand years (when we became “modern man”)! The theory describes six basic forms or patterns, produced by physical stimulation. They are the result of our physical makeup, within the optic system, between and including the eye and visual cortex of the brain, where the signals from the optic nerve are interpreted. Produced by physical stimulation, rubbing your eyes, these six forms are common to all humans, as they are manifestations of the human nervous system. The six patterns are: a grid, parallel lines, dots, zigzags, open “U” shapes or “nested” curves, and filigree or meandering lines (fig.3,4). Most non figurative art tends to have one or more of these forms.

The second theory describes patterns representative of early human observation of the environment around them. Often geometric, these patterns are ubiquitous throughout the world of art, artifacts, textiles, ceramics, wood work, metal work, architecture, and many material objects produced by humans. These patterns include the spiral, circle, straight lines and

combinations thereof, such as the cross, asterisk, square and triangle, zigzags and waves. Many of these basic patterns take on permutations as they become three dimensional.

Figures 3,4 are from The History of Human Adornment, since Cavemen! A course designed and taught by Sindi Schloss and can be seen on the next page.

<sup>6</sup> Neanderthal or Neandertal have been identified by various scholars as either a separate species (Homo neanderthalensis) or a subspecies of the Homo sapiens (Homo sapiens neanderthalensis).

<sup>7</sup> Science 23, June 2006: Vol.312 no. 5781, pp 1785-1708.

<sup>8</sup> James Lankton, A Bead Timeline. Vol.I: Prehistory to 1200 C.E.

<sup>9</sup> Lewis-Williams & Dowson. Entoptic Theory. Entoptic chart Image available on [www.wynja.com/arch/entoptic.html](http://www.wynja.com/arch/entoptic.html)

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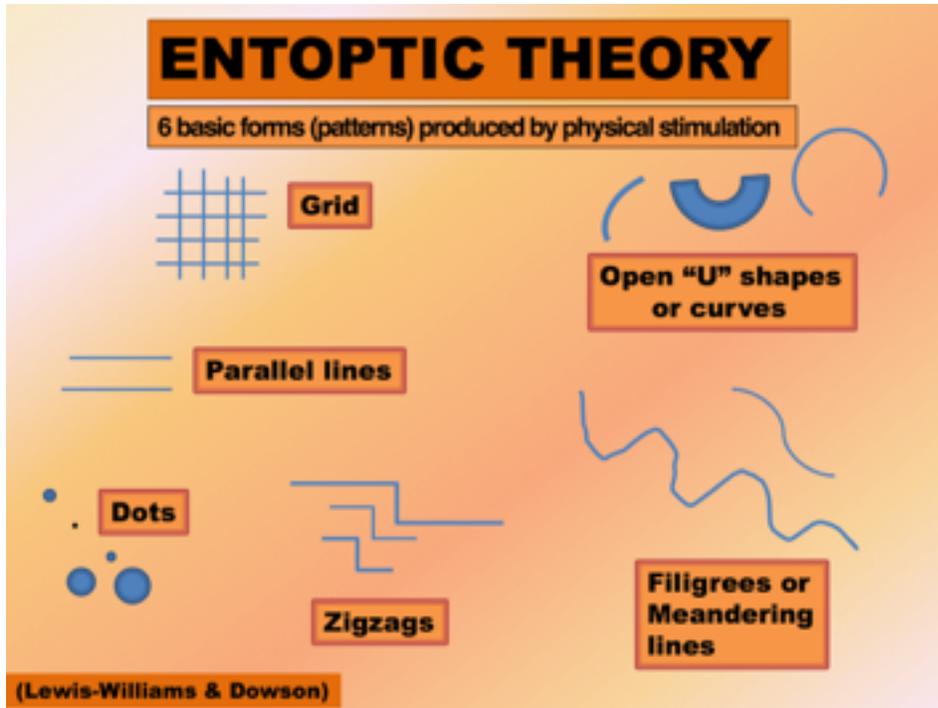


Fig.3. Entoptic patterns. Sindi Schloss, Course in The History of Human Adornment since Caveman! Symbology presentation.



Fig.4. Photos of entoptic patterns on rocks at Newgrange and Knowth, Ireland, dating to 3500 BCE. Sindi Schloss, course presentation.

Examining these patterns in more detail, we find that one of the most common of all decorative motifs is the spiral. Seen as rotating energy that drives the cosmos, the spiral can be represented in two or three dimensions. A three dimensional spiral with a constant radius, is called a coil. Spirals can be seen in three forms: expanding, contracting or ossified. Expanding spirals are naturally present in the universe, galaxies (questions still exist whether or not galaxies are, in fact expanding or whether it is the general movement of the universe) and solar systems. Contracting spirals are evidenced in whirlpools, ossified spirals are static, with examples seen in plants and shells (fossil and otherwise) (fig.5).

Mathematically, spirals start at the inside. They can have direction: counter clockwise or clockwise. This phenomenon in nature is due to the Coriolis effect. You may have experienced standing on the Equator and watching the movement of water in a plastic bowl. As the water is disturbed north of the Equator, it will swirl in a clockwise direction. When the bowl is moved a few inches into the southern hemisphere, the water circles counter clockwise. Notice which direction the water moves next time you flush the toilet! Interestingly, most symbology emerged from Northern Hemisphere peoples and in the Northern hemisphere, a clockwise spiral is more common.

A clockwise spiral is considered to be unwinding, indicating evolution, a creative force and associated with the male. This has been referenced as an exercise performed by Tibetan lamas.<sup>10</sup>

In many cultures, a counterclockwise direction represents a rolling up or involution. Often it is associated with a spiraling journey towards the innermost self or Divine and has a female attribution. Counter-clockwise spiral movement is believed by the Sufi whirling dervishes, to induce a state of ecstasy, enabling humans to dimensions beyond physical and material limitations. It is curious that destructive natural events in the northern hemisphere, like tornadoes, hurricanes and typhoons, move in a counter-clockwise direction!

Spirals are a symbol of growth and change, connecting to some points again and again, but at different and deeper levels, seen with greater wisdom and reflection of life itself. Spirals have been a symbol for power, wisdom, creativity, eternity, journeying and when seen in opposition, such as the yin yang symbol, they balance opposing principles (fig.6).

The three dimensional coil has historical examples in a shell bracelet found in Palawan, Philippines, dating to 1500-1000 BCE, a bronze bracelet from Ban Chiang, Thailand, dating to 500 BCE and a Bronze age bracelet from Turkey (fig.7). More recent examples are seen around the necks of the Paduang women of Myanmar (Burma) and the legs and necks of the Ndbele women in South Africa (figs.8), as well as on fashion runways. Our DNA forms a double helix design.

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Fig. 5,6,7 are from The History of Human Adornment since Cavemen! Course by Sindi Schloss and seen on the next page.

<sup>10</sup> Peter Kelder. Ancient Secret of the Fountain of Youth. Pg.17.

# **SPIRALS:** rotating energy of the cosmos

One of the most common and ancient of all decorative motifs

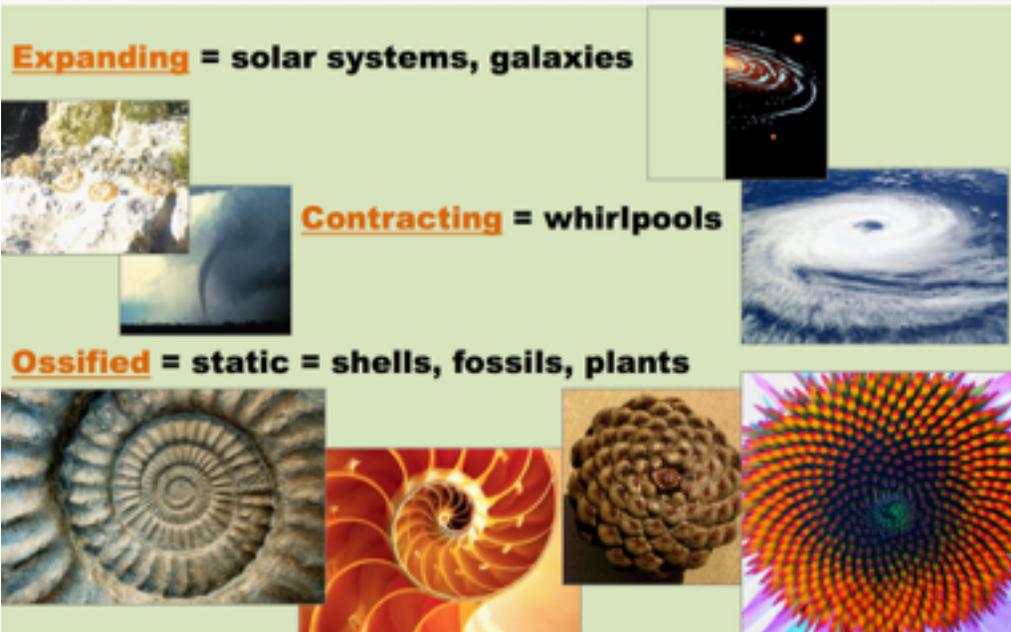


Fig.5. Sindi Schloss, course presentation.



Fig.6. Spirals in metal jewelry.  
Photograph by Sindi Schloss



Fig.7. Bronze age Turkey coil bracelet.  
Archaeological Museum. Istanbul.  
Photograph by Sindi Schloss

The second pattern, circles, are the only geometric shape with no division and alike at all points. They actually represent a special case of a spiral, with a constant radius. Circles can be open or closed (dot). The circle is a symbol for eternity, totality, the wheel of life, perfection and the sun. In the jewelry world, we know that a ring represents eternity becoming tangible. The circular beaded collars of the Maasai and Pokot peoples in Kenya as well as many rigid neck rings or torques throughout India and central Asia, exemplify the circle (fig.8a-f).

A series of circles, with natural examples as seen in tree rings, orbits and onions, is a symbol of completeness. The three dimensional circle or sphere is widely found in nature. We see it in pearls and spherical beads. Once the circle is filled with a dot (solid circle), it becomes the ubiquitous symbol of an eye, which in many cultures is worn to avert a malicious or jealous glance, or “evil eye”. The earliest reference to the evil eye is in the Old Testament and in the Quran. The earliest use of the evil eye symbol was on 3000 BCE Sumerian clay tablets, found in present day Iraq. So popular was the eye symbolism in early civilizations throughout Africa and the Middle East, that simplified open or closed circles (dots) also functioned as evil eye deterrents. The earliest known eye beads are made of agate, dating to 2200 BCE. It is striking how prevalent the circle and dot design has been on beads, both historic into the present-day (fig.9).

The third pattern, straight lines, is used to create an axis: a linear symbol of a center or supporting spine, around which everything rotates. This symbol is seen in nearly all cosmologies of the ancient world. It is prevalent in shamanism, used as an “axis mundi” or means of moving between different layers of existence: the underworld, earth and heaven, or world of the ancestors. Symbols ranging from rods, columns, trees, sacred mountains, sticks, and others are often employed by caretakers of civilizations to maintain homeostatic relationships with other realms and influences. Ancient systems of divination and philosophy are based upon combinations of broken and unbroken lines. Worn as a charm, they are believed to safeguard from harm and ensure continued good fortune.

When two lines intersect, we get either a cross or an “X” design. This is usually a directional symbol with the center point or nexus, being the place where all is possible. The cross was a prevalent symbol employed by early peoples and only became a religious symbol for Christianity after the crucifixion of Christ. In the “X” design and some cross designs, the legs are of equal length. The legs can bend and create a rotating symbol. Legs can be added to create a special case of the cross, appearing as an asterisk, a common star symbol. When gazing at distant lights at night, often we see an asterisk due to our neurological and cellular makeup of our optic system.

Four lines placed end to end create the square, which like the cross is a symbol of four directions, four elements (fire, air, earth and water). The magic square symbolized harmony with the laws of the cosmos and the square is a symbol for Earth. The circle in the square (or square in a circle), are a form duality, symbolizing heaven and earth. This symbol is seen on many temples.

Carl Jung felt this to be a symbol of the psyche or self and the body or material reality.

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Fig.8a,b,c. Circles and coils seen from left to right: Pokot, Kenya, Ndbele, S.Africa and Padaung, Myanmar. Postcards: Left, no attribution; center: permission from [africancraftsmarket.com](http://africancraftsmarket.com) right: Maehongson.

Fig. 8 d,e. Below: Left: Rajasthan, India girl with arm coils Photograph courtesy of Serga Nadler. Right: Maasai girl. Kenya. Postcard. Copyright by Sagra M.M.

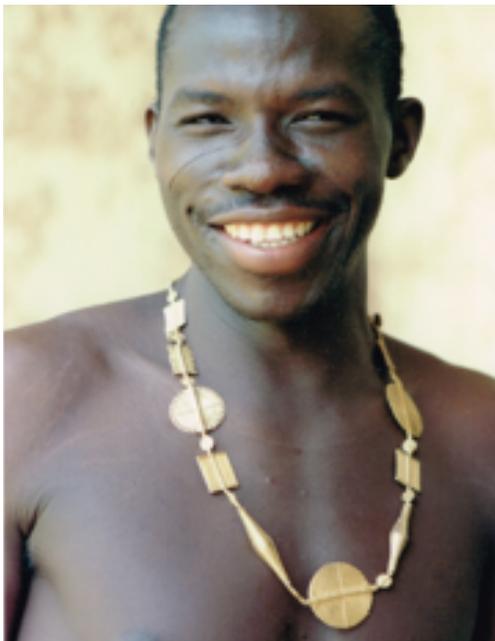


Fig. 8f. Gold necklace of concentric circles with center Cross and squares. Akan man, Ghana. Photograph by Gabrielle Liese.



Fig.9. Clockwise from right: Miao collar, Southern China, Blue eye beads, Turkey, wedding ring set, mixed eye beads and Tuareg pendant, Niger. Sindi Schloss, Course presentation.

Triangles, or three lines placed end to end, also have a directional attribute. When the apex, or point, is facing down, the triangle is a female symbol; when the apex faces up, it is male. A natural triangle form can be seen in many shells. Shells and metal danglers have embellished textiles as well as jewelry, from Native American apparel to Thailand and Africa (Fig.10a,b). Triangles are used extensively throughout North Africa, worn in the hair, on men's head scarves, necklaces, rings and fibulas used to hold clothing. The triangle is a symbol of the trinity and when two triangles face opposite directions and overlap, they represent duality and the philosophical belief of "as above, so below".

Zigzags and waves (special case of the zigzag) are both entoptic patterns and observed in nature in waves, sand and snow drifts. It is easy to recognize that these shapes would be symbols of the waxing and waning of seasons, cycles and our lives. The snake is the animistic symbol and has been known to represent intermediary stages in afterlife.

Having discussed basic shape symbols, we turn now to reviewing materials such as stone, metals and minerals (including gemstones). Due to their permanence and durability, stones have been a symbol of divine power in many ancient cultures. Sacred structures built with stones goes back to 6000 BCE. Heaps of stones are used to mark human passages and as signs of a spiritual presence, through many parts of the world. Silver, resembling the color of the moon is

associated with the female. Gold, which does not tarnish, is a fitting symbol of eternity and ancestral life after death. Gold is a sun symbol with a male association. Gemstones, often more translucent to transparent, were believed to have a more direct influence by channeling energies from different planets or elements. Jewelry, in general, was believed to ward off magic spells, especially when set with gemstones. As a great example of symbols changing over time and eras, DeBeers did a wonderful marketing job of making diamond a symbol of eternity to be used in marriage and significant occasions. “A diamond might be forever in modern times, but 100,000 years ago, the way to a woman’s heart was with a bunch of shell beads!”<sup>11</sup> Objects, be they from the animal world, human body parts, human constructions like keys or locks, have all become symbols by different cultures, at different times (Fig.11,12).

Color as symbols, have been attributed with “emotional character” and have been connected with human attributes, mythical beings, human rituals, including rites of passage, as well as the belief that they have influence on the world. An example was the sudden appearance of green mineral beads during the Neolithic (New Stone Age - 9000 BCE-6000 BCE) period, when early humans began to domesticate plants and animals. Becoming less nomadic, the beginnings of farming created a greater reliance upon crops to provide sustenance. It has been suggested that green may have been worn to encourage crop growth.<sup>12</sup>

Hot and cold color combinations have been and continue to be, used by many cultures to create balance in the universe.

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<sup>11</sup> IDEX Magazine. No. 170: facets, pg.134.

<sup>12</sup> Daniella E. Bar-Yosef Mayer & Naomi Porat. Greenstone Beads at the dawn of agriculture. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences USA. 2008

Red is not only the first color after black and white to be given a name in primitive languages, but it is the most prevalent color in world flags. The Indus Valley civilization (3750 – 1300 BCE) was the known stone fashioning industry of the time: carnelian (red) and lapis lazuli (blue). So highly coveted were these gemstones with strong coloration, that early trade was established to contemporaneous Mesopotamian and Egyptian civilizations. Over time, turquoise, found in Iraq and China, serpentine from central Asia, yellow to golden amber traded from the Baltic, coral from the Mediterranean and shell, drove trade and interaction between early peoples and civilizations.

It is interesting to note that when faience, a precursor to glass, was first synthesized in Mesopotamia and Syria approximately 5400 BCE<sup>13,14</sup>, it was used to imitate carnelian, turquoise and lapis lazuli. True glass appeared around 3500 BCE, the same time writing emerged, and was initially used to imitate minerals, predominantly agate. The use of glass as adornment predated glass vessels by two thousand years! Originally a luxury item, technological advancements led to glass being produced in larger quantities, making it available to upper classes and commoners alike. With greater accessibility and an extraordinary range of colors in which glass could be

produced, it is no wonder that it became and still is, so prevalent in human adornment.

As glass making and stone (gemstone and other) fashioning industries rise and fall throughout human history and the world, a look around any jewelry or bead show, in any country will demonstrate a vibrant and continuous desire to adorn. With an astute eye, one can recognize the underlying patterns, be they lines, squares, triangles, curves, circles, or zigzags, on most accessories. Many designs are new takes on old themes, but when broken down into their basic elements, these basic forms are as significant as they ever were, even if the symbolism has changed. After all, our neurological system has not changed much in one hundred thousand years!

The function of symbols is to communicate how we see ourselves, one another, and the world. However, the same hard drive is built into all of us, so try rubbing your eyes and test the entoptic theory for yourselves!

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<sup>13</sup> James Lankton. A Bead Timeline.

<sup>14</sup> Robert Liu. Ornament magazine, Spring 2000.



Fig.10a. Examples of squares, triangle dangles and dots, worn on Lisu girl, Thailand.  
Postcard. Photograph by Jamnong Srinual

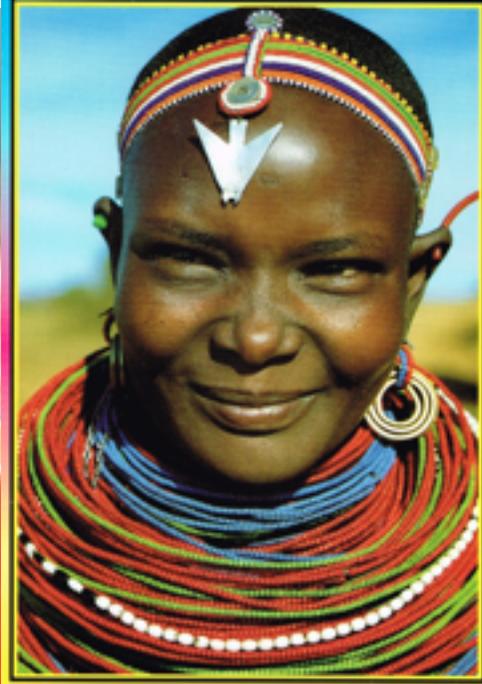


Fig.10b. Triangle forehead, spiral earrings and multiple circle necklaces.  
Postcard. Photograph by Sapra M.M.. Mount Kenya Sundries Limited. Nairobi, Kenya.



Fig.11. Newspaper rock – Petrified Forest National Park. Anasazi, 900-1300 AD. Notice humans, body parts, spirals and meandering lines.  
Photograph by Sindi Schloss



Fig. 12. A modern brooch by Urban Fetishes. 1998.  
Photograph by Sindi Schloss