

THE NORDESTE HORIZON IN BRAZIL'S ROCK ART

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In the Brazilian semiarid region of the Northeast where Nature is particularly hostile to human occupation, one of the richest and most and expressive prehistoric rock art in the world was developed demonstrating the adapting ability of the human groups occupying the region since the end of the Pleistocene.

We may presently state that in North-East Brazil the rock art representations painted and engraved in the rock shelters and walls near water streams relate to different cultural horizons. In Brazil these horizons are generally named *traditions*. A tradition is considered as the principal analysis unit of the rock art classification. This concept defines the visual representation of a symbolic universe which may have been transmitted for thousands of years without necessarily belonging to the same ethnic group. Tradition should also be considered in the possibility of great gaps of time elapsing as well as of spatial expansion which determined the following *subtraditions* classification. The rock art composition determining a tradition is established from the synthesis of all graphic manifestations represented in a similar form registered within a certain archaeological area. The key elements to identify a *tradition* would be the theme and the form representing it, as well as certain graphisms

which could be called "heraldic", for in them a non-identifiable human action is repeated in the different shelters, including the ones separated by great distances.

Subtradition defines a group detached from the tradition and adapted to a different geographical and environmental area implying that they present new and defining elements. *Styles, varieties, figures*, are other subdivisions mingling and merging among themselves dependent upon the definitions of each author.

Styles within each of the subtraditions would be the more particular subdivision related to the variations observed in the graphic representation techniques, the innovation of which in the themes presentation would reflect the creativity of a given community (PESSIS & GUIDON, 1992, 19). We may consider style as the unique work of a chronologically delimited group, or define it as a subjective macrothematic interpretation of the major rock art traditions.

There isn't any doubt that the evolution of representation forms indicates differences in time and in culture plus the subjective nature of the human hand.

In the North-East region three great traditions were established defining many other cultural horizons, the most significant variables of which are the rock art records found in defined archeological structures.

The traditions named **Nordeste, Agreste and Itaquiara** represent the symbolic universe of prehistoric human groups living in the semiarid regions known as *serties and agrestes* in a geographical area of over one million square meters.

In this article we will focus on the Nordeste Tradition which certainly determines one of the oldest rock art representations of the South American Continent with chronologies going as far back as 12000 years BP, defined for the first time in the 70's in the archeological area of São Raimundo Nonato, Southeast of the State of Piauí³. Research in other regions (MARTIN, 1982, 1985, 1991, 1996) demonstrated that the traits of this tradition were extensive to other North-East Brazil areas such as the art depicting hunting parties.

In over one hundred shelters in Piauí sites with rock art paintings of the *Nordeste* tradition were identified in the region of Seridó- State of Rio Grande do Norte in the Chapada Diamantina and in the central region of the State of Bahia in the lower half course of the Rio S. Francisco's Valley in the State of Sergipe; in the municipalities of Araruna and Queimadas - State of Paraíba and in the municipalities of Buíque and Afogados da Ingazeira - State of Pernambuco, (figure 1). Some modified forms of this tradition are also existent in the upper São Francisco Valley - State of Minas Gerais and in the States of Ceará and Mato Grosso.

The enormous expansion of the rock art horizon we have named *Nordeste* demonstrates the need of introducing subtraditions and other classifications but it remains, nevertheless, not well known due to the great distances separating the shelters and the insufficient density of systematic investigation performed in this immense area of the Brazilian North-East.

From the data collected to this date it can be deduced that the expansion center of the *Nordeste* tradition was in Southeast Piauí in the hilly region bordered by the great valleys formed by the basins of the Parnaíba and São Francisco rivers. We have accepted in principle three expansion areas : one through the valley of the São Francisco river, another in the direction of the Chapada Diamantina, region of hills and tablelands bordering the São Francisco valley, and a third one in the Seridó region with shelters located in the hills surrounding the valley of the Seridó river and its affluents, tributary to the hydrographic basin of the Açu-Piranhas river flowing into the Atlantic Ocean.

The graphic records of the *Nordeste* tradition are easily identified by the variety of themes they represent and by the richness of adornments and attributes of the human figures, possibly indicating social hierarchies or different tribes. Depending on the regions, there is an equivalence between the anthropomorphic representations and the zoomorphic ones (South-East of Piauí), superiority of the human figures (Seridó region) a larger number of zoomorphic figures (Central area and Chapada Diamantina in Bahia), but always forming harmonious groups in the distribution of recognizable figures. Small in size, ranging from five to fifteen centimeters high, the human figures seem to always be in movement, sometimes with their faces in profile as if screaming. Battling, hunting, dancing and sex are cleverly represented with great wealth of detail and interpretation in which a fine tracing technique but also firm and clear was applied. There is no doubt that the *Nordeste* tradition principal features in the rock art of Brazil is not the representation of daily life, but specially the set of graphisms seeming to depict rituals or myths the meaning of which we do not understand and precisely for that, are so significant when they are repeated in different shelters and different regions separated by considerable distances. These are groups of human figures that may be considered "emblematic" of the *Nordeste* tradition.

Emblematic graphism of equal figures back to back can be found as well as , in some cases, they are also standing in front view; associated to a symbol in the form of a hunting spear that through a convention has been named a "threedigit" (fig. 4) . Two human figures appearing to protect or to deliver a smaller one can also be found (fig. 5) . These scenes are repeated in shelters separated by more than one thousand kilometers distance. At last, in

analogous form, emblematic graphisms interpreted as being ceremonial dance scenes around a tree or masked figures dancing with branches in their hands (fig.6) were also considered. These scenes are typical of the *Nordeste* tradition.

As for the colors, various tones of red and yellow, ocher, white, black, gray and blue were used in the paintings. But it is the use of polychromy in the same graphism one of the more significant traits when appearing in essays shading birds feathers in the *cocares*⁴ adorning human heads, as well as toucans with a red body and yellow feathers, running rheas with three tonalities of ocher in their open wings and white and blue deers outlined against red hunters.

THE SUBTRADITIONS OF THE *NORDESTE* TRADITION

1) THE SUBTRADITION OF *VÁRZEA GRANDE* IN SOUTHEAST PIAUÍ

The regional variety of the *Nordeste* horizon in the archaeological area of São Raimundo Nonato (Piauí) named *Várzea Grande* has extended throughout a region of approximately four thousand square kilometers and survived for a long time. Thus, the rock art representations suffered gradual change not only in the themes depicted as well as in the plastic form of graphism presentation. Numerous descriptive and analytical studies have been published on the *Várzea Grande* subtradition paintings, in their majority the work of N. Guidon and A.-M. Pessis, trying to establish the evolving lines and varieties appearing in six thousand years of an unparalleled rock art, not only from an aesthetic but also from an anthropological perspective.

In the general lines featuring the *Nordeste* horizon, the *Várzea Grande* tradition can be divided into three periods which are very well defined. In the first and older one, which might have initiated around 12.000 years BP, individual dynamic representations are observed also depicting play aspects formed by pairs or small human or animal groups. In a second period which could have ended around 8000 years BP the theme appears to be more complete, the attributes and adornments in human figures increase and there are scenes of group sex. In the last phase, the movement of the figures is more subdued, the human figure becomes more rigid and there is a tendency favoring geometrical form. The scenes of violence increase in detriment to the play ones, and depict battles and executions. Different types of weapons are clearly drawn, such as axes, maces, propellers and assagais but not bows and arrows. In the last phase of the *Várzea Grande* tradition, the human figures appear extremely geometrical in form, with the torso made into a rectangle and the arms and

legs drawn with simple lines (Figure 7). The same technique is used to represent deer with graphisms in stark contrast with the curvaceous and sinuous forms of the older phases scenes. It is interesting to note that notwithstanding the rigidity of the geometrical bodies, there is a sensation of movement and the rhythm of a dance in the outline of the extremities.

2) THE SERIDÓ SUBTRADITION IN RIO GRANDE DO NORTE.

The archaeological area of Seridó, located in the valley of the Seridó river and its affluents belong to the hydrographic basin of the Açu-Piranhas river and in the semiarid context of the Brazilian North-East it is considered a region of major water resources and fertile agricultural lands as compared to the ones in the surrounding areas. The archaeological investigations performed in the region are in the epicenter of the small populations of Carnaúba dos Dantas, Acari and Parelhas, in the valley of the Carnaúba, Acauã and Seridó rivers. The relief is formed by coast and hills cut by these rivers where the shelters are located between 350 and 500 meters above sea level. The accesses to the shelters where rock paintings are found are predominantly scarped slopes. In general, these shelters offer scarce habitation possibilities and apparently the prehistoric human groups who chose the ones located in the highest areas of the hills were driven by the water streams. We have presumed they were used as ceremonial places and archaeological excavations have demonstrated that, in some cases, they had been also utilized as graveyards.

When we initiated our archaeological prospecting in the region we started from a theoretical presumption that some ethnic groups of the *Nordeste* tradition, originated from Southeast Piauí had arrived in this region of Seridó traveling distances over one thousand kilometers. The thematic richness of the rock paintings of the Seridó subtradition was a valuable identification variable of prehistoric groups inhabiting the region. On the other hand, the abundance of rock engravures, named *itaquatiaras*, which in the *Tupi* language means painted rock appearing on the rocks by the water streams and of rock paintings of other horizons indicating the presence of different ethnic groups.

The findings of bifacial projectiles, finely carved and retouched, made of sylex, chalcedony and rock crystal unknown in other regions of the Northeast indicate a horizon with refined lithic technology occupying the regions in uncertain dates with extensive expansion in the basin of the Açu-Piranhas river.

The groups of prehistoric hunters who painted the rock shelters of Seridó added new wealth to the old *Nordeste* tradition with other elements unique of

their habitat, such as boats decorated with geometrical figures (figure 8), adornments, body paintings and phytomorphic elements conveying the impression of a landscape. The world depicted by the Seridó paintings is daily life in prehistory, sometimes tragic and violent, with figures possessed of great agitation and others presenting play and joyful aspects documented in the dance movements and in the agility of human figures performing acrobatics. The dynamics of body movement is particularly complex and to express it more clearly resources we could call expressionists were used broadening the silhouette and giving the body sinuous movements stylizing the figures (figure 9). Sex scenes are common, including in group and there are also rape representations (ASÓN, 1996, 142, fig. 5).

The dates obtained in the excavated sites, Mirador (Parelhas) and Pedra do Alexandre (Carnaúba dos Dantas), indicate that the Seridó subtradition would have an initial chronology of approximately 9000 years BP, an hypothesis that should be confirmed as excavations proceed.

3) OTHER SUBTRADITIONS OF THE *NORDESTE* TRADITION.

In the Bahia inlands another subtradition known as *Central* with rock art paintings in shelters of the Chapada Diamantina in the municipalities of Lençóis and Morro do Chapéu has been identified. Some of these shelters have already been cited by Valentín Calderón (1971, 1983) who have included them in one tradition which has generally been called *realist* minutely described it in his work but unfortunately without the graphic information to enable the disclosure of more details. Later on it was possible to prove that in an extensive area of the Bahia semiarid region, in the bordering hills of the São Francisco valley, prehistoric groups dwelled who knew and represented their spiritual world with the technique and theme of the *Nordeste* tradition. The quality of the strokes, the movement of the human figures, the reduced size of the figures, the identification of animal species and certain heraldic graphisms prove beyond doubt, the existence of a subtradition in Bahia within the great *Nordeste* tradition.

In the *Central* subtradition there's a certain predominance of animals related to the human figures. Maria Beltrão, discoverer of numerous shelters in the Central region, identified various moments of the *galheiro* deer behavior in the rock shelters of Lagoa Velha and in the Toca das Corças in Morro do Chapéu, such as battle between males, persecution involving males and females, herds with calves and fighting between deer and man.

The form of depicting the human figure in relation to animals increasing their size in hunting scenes, are common elements in the three subtraditions :

Central, Várzea Grande and Seridó. The figure of a large animal being hunted by small human figures is registered in the Baixão do Gabriel site in Central (Bahia), is a scene which is similar to others of the Várzea Grande subtradition in Piauí, in the shelter of Cabaceiras and in the Toca da Chapada dos Cruz (figure 10). The magnification of the animals size in relation to human figures, valuing the hunting rituals also appear in the rock shelters of Xique-Xique and Serrote das Areias, in Carnaúba dos Dantas, in the Seridó region.

The Central subtradition should be very extensive judging from the shelters known and the extent of the São Francisco valley and the bordering hills, although intensive investigation has not been performed in the region, with the exception of the work of Maria Beltrão in Central. The same Valentin Calderón perfectly captured the value of the rock art in Bahia, specially the ones from Chapada Diamantina. When he describes what he called realistic figures, he is describing the principal traits of the *Nordeste* tradition. Referring to the paintings of the Jabuticaba site, in the municipality of the Morro do Chapéu, he identifies *"an accentuated form of human figure and animals reproduction with more realism and dynamism. These are figures in movement, sometimes violent movement, with abundant details enabling the identification of the actions they perform. In a first group we found a beautiful warrior figure with head adorned with feathers, arms opened with his bow in the left hand and seven arrows in the right hand"*. He also cites human figures in a combat posture under 10 cm in height; figures in a front and profile view in an attempt to show some kind of clothing; birds drawn with outstanding reality in attitudes of fast flight; warriors with bows and arrows and human figures transporting branches and objects; fat dancers in a jump posture adorned with feathers, staffs and branches in their hands. The description of these graphisms remind the Spaniard Calderón of the *Rock Art native of Spain*.

There are indications the *Nordeste Tradition* extrapolates the tenuous limits presently determining its extension based on regions of scarce archaeological exploration. Rock art of this description has been found in the municipality of Buique and Afogados da Ingazeira in the State of Pernambuco (figure 11) and typical representations of the *Nordeste* tradition have also been found in the Center of the State of Minas Gerais in the valley of tributary rivers of the São Francisco rivers and in the State of Mato Grosso in the basin of the São Lourenço river where in the Toca do Parto the representation of hunting, dancing, copulation and delivery depicts sequences with the same expression and movement of the rock art typical of the *Nordeste* tradition.

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³ As per the work of Niède Guidon (1883,1985,1991,1992), Anne Marie Pessis (1982, 1983,1985a, 1985a,1992), Silvia Maranca (1980,1982,1984,1986), Laurence Ogel-Ross (1982), Susana Monzon (1983), Bernadette Arnaud (1982, 1984) and other prehistorians who for twenty five years have performed investigations in the Museum of the American Man in the State of Piauí, Brazil

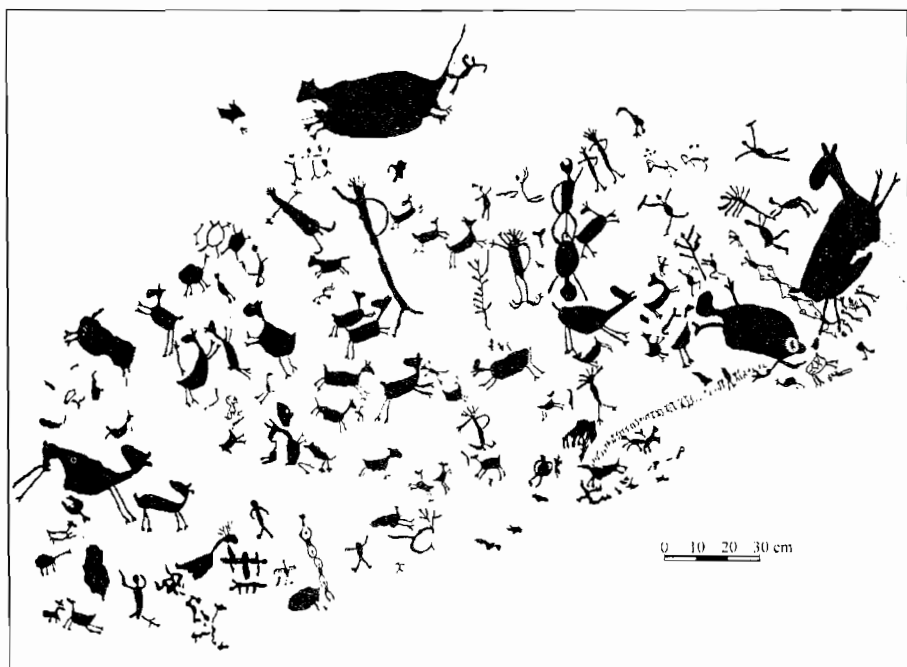
⁴ Cocar is the term used to designate feather ornaments used by the Brazilian Indians

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Figura 1: Difusão da tradição Nordeste de pintura rupestre, no NE do Brasil.



Raimundo Nonato, PI.

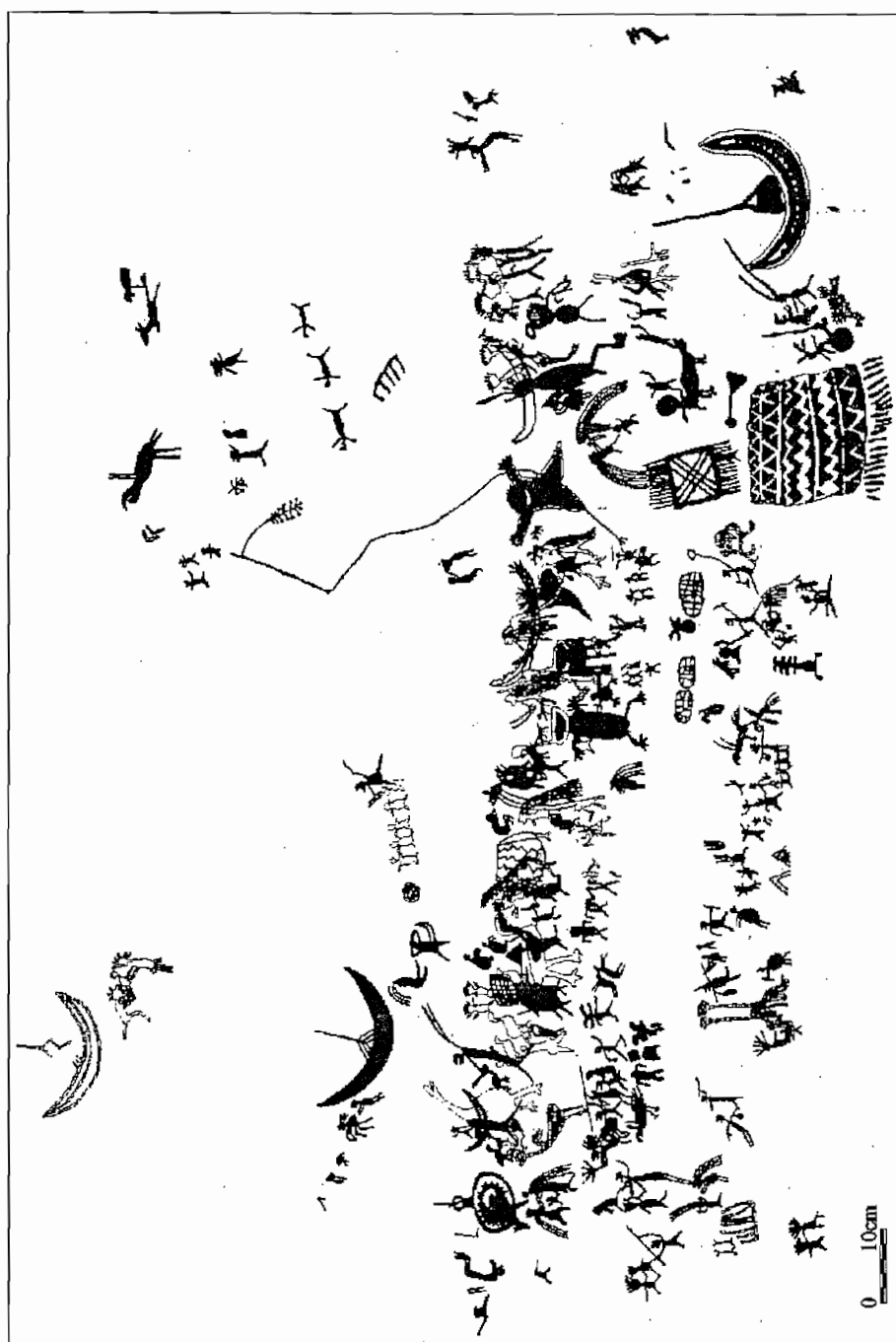
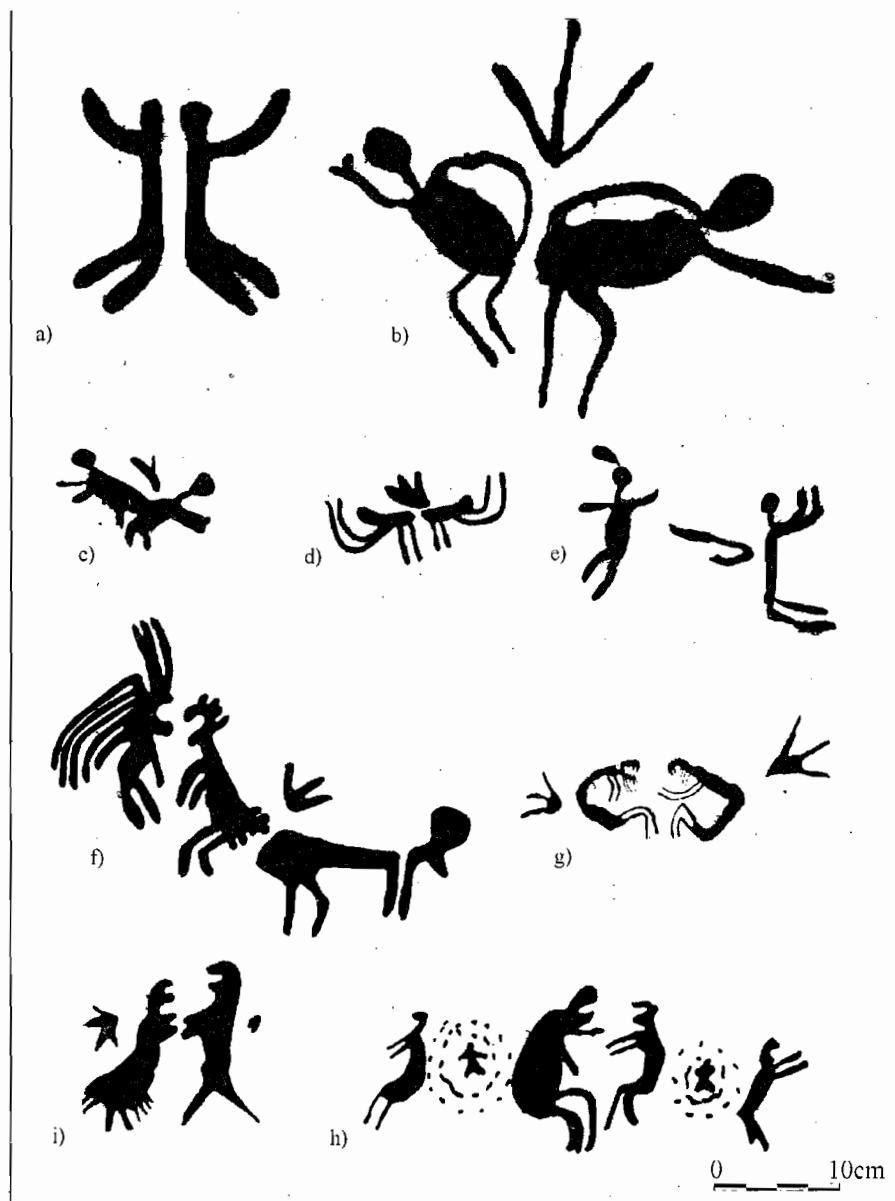


Figura 3. Tradição Nordeste, subtradição Scridó. Casa Santa, Carnaúba dos Dantas, RN.



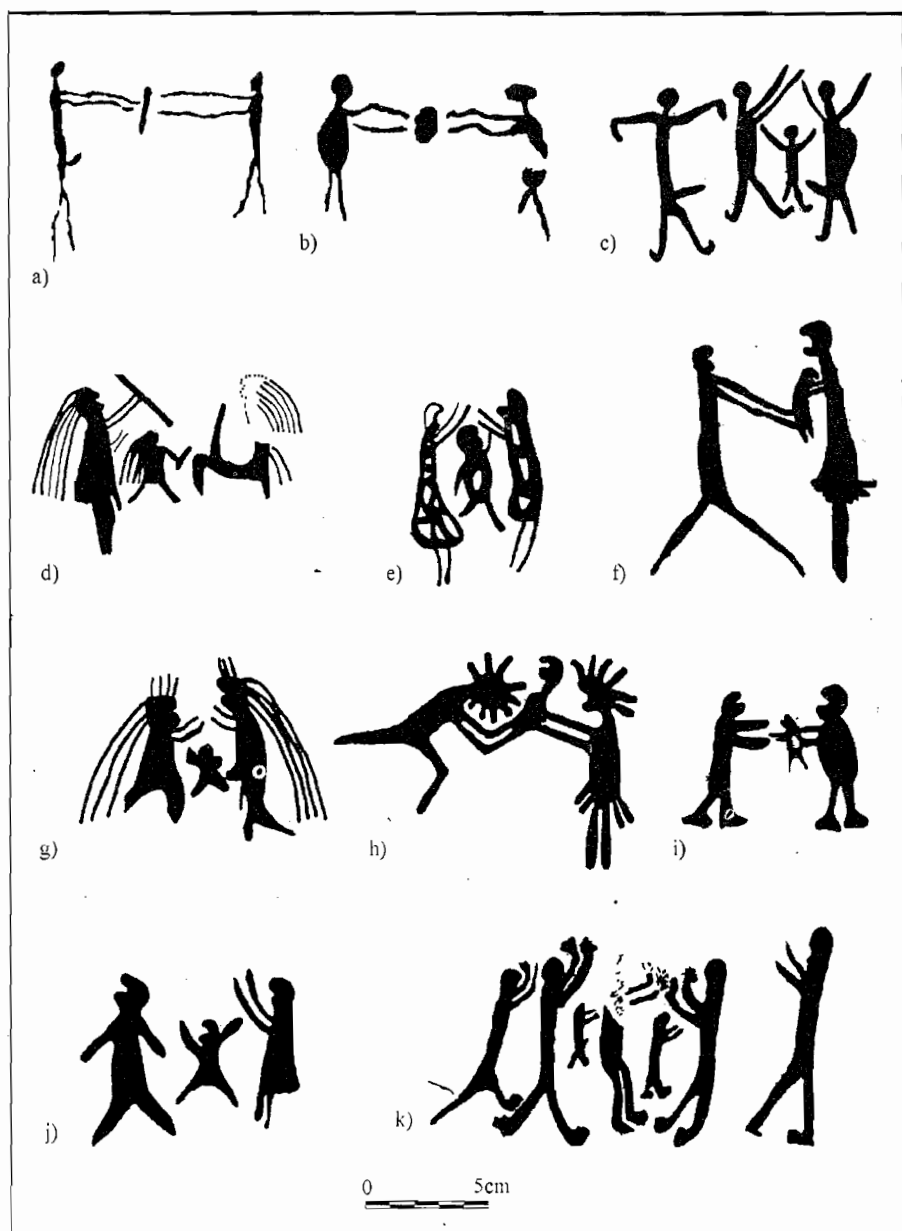
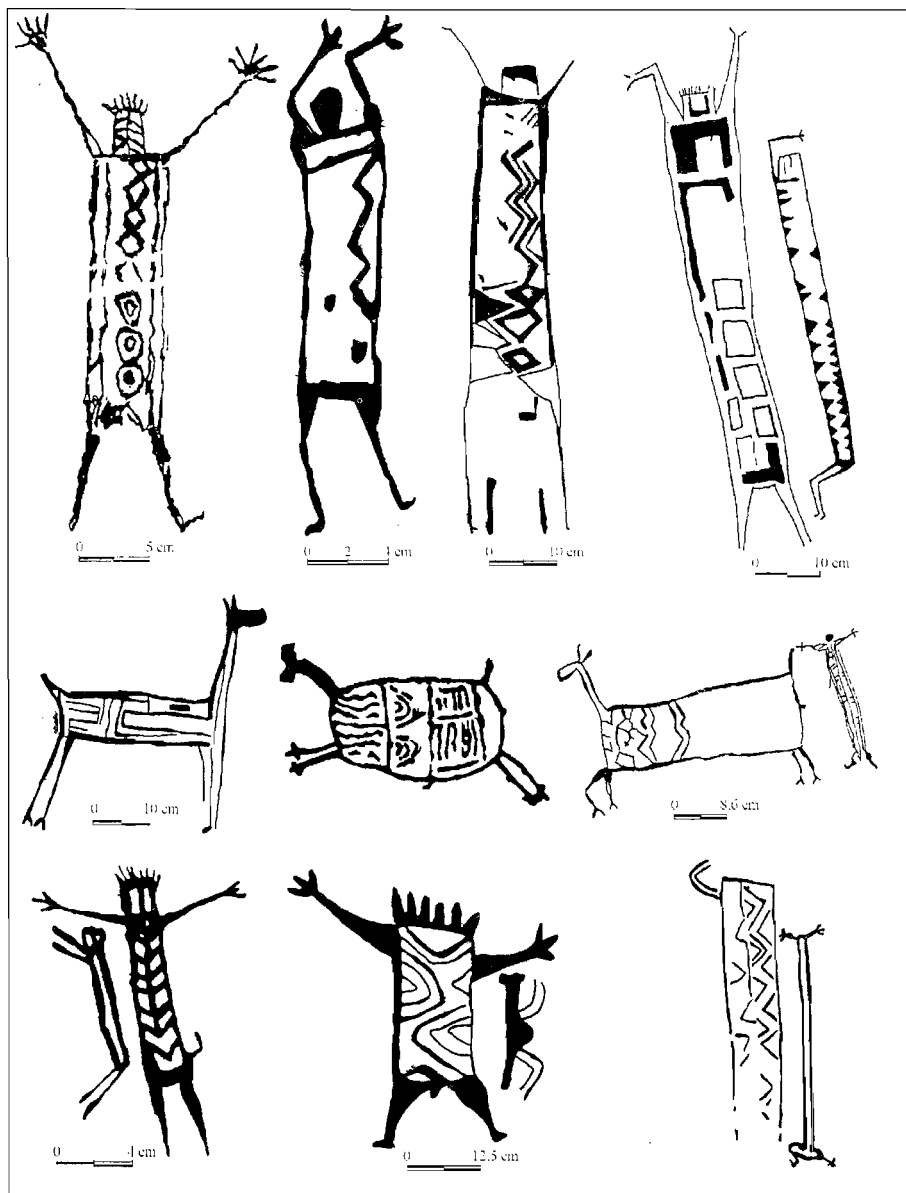


Figura 5. Tradição Nordeste. Cenas emblemáticas que sugerem ação cerimonial; a, b, c) São Raimundo Nonato, PI; d, e, f, g, h, i, j) Parelhas e Carnaúba dos Dantas, RN; k) Lençóis, BA.



Figura 6. Tradição Nordeste. grupos de figuras humanas associados a árvores e ramos. Podem representar um antecedente do culto da jurema e do juazeiro, praticado pelos indígenas históricos no Nordeste; a, b, c) São Raimundo Nonato, PI; d, f, g, h) Carnaúba dos Dantas, RN.



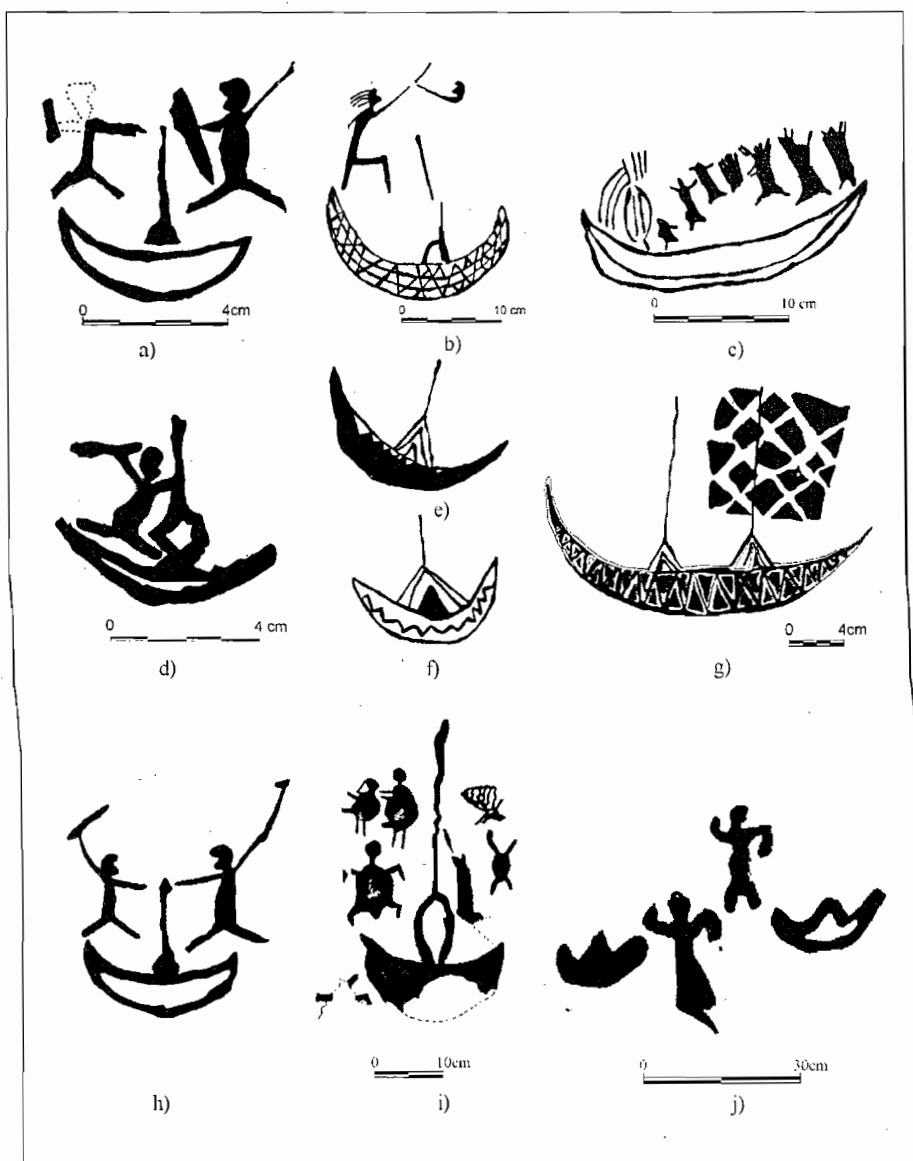
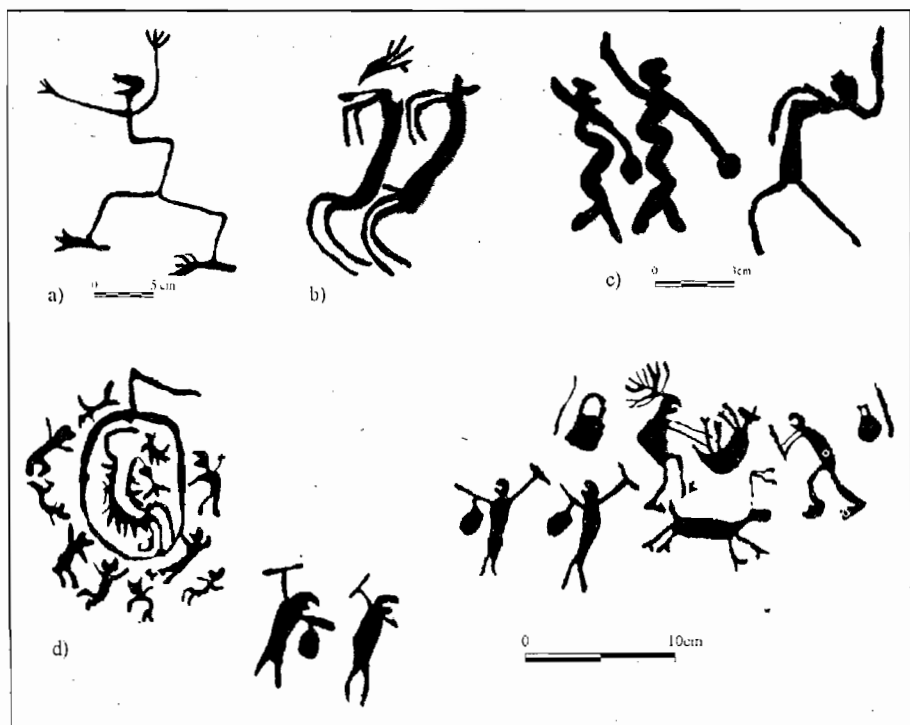
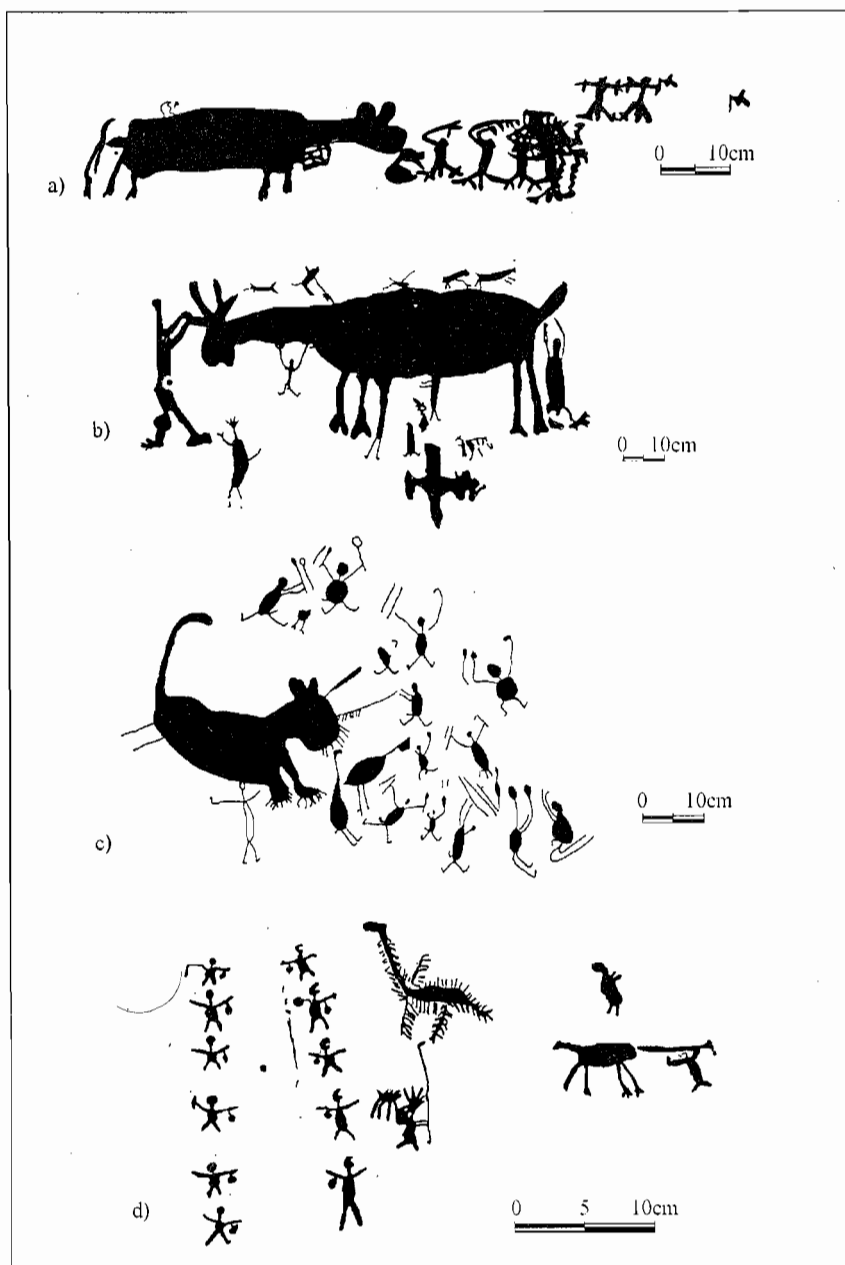


Figura 8. Tradição Nordeste. Representação de pirogas com figuras humanas; a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h) Parelhas, RN; i) Buíque, PE; j) Queimadas, PB.



Dantas.



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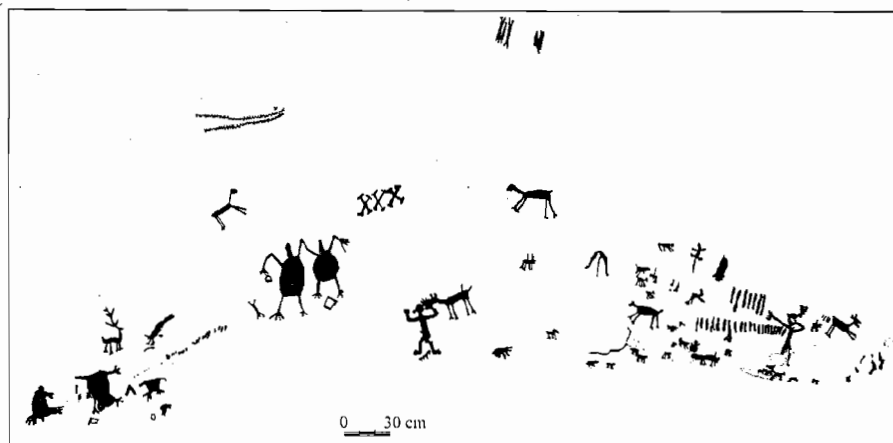
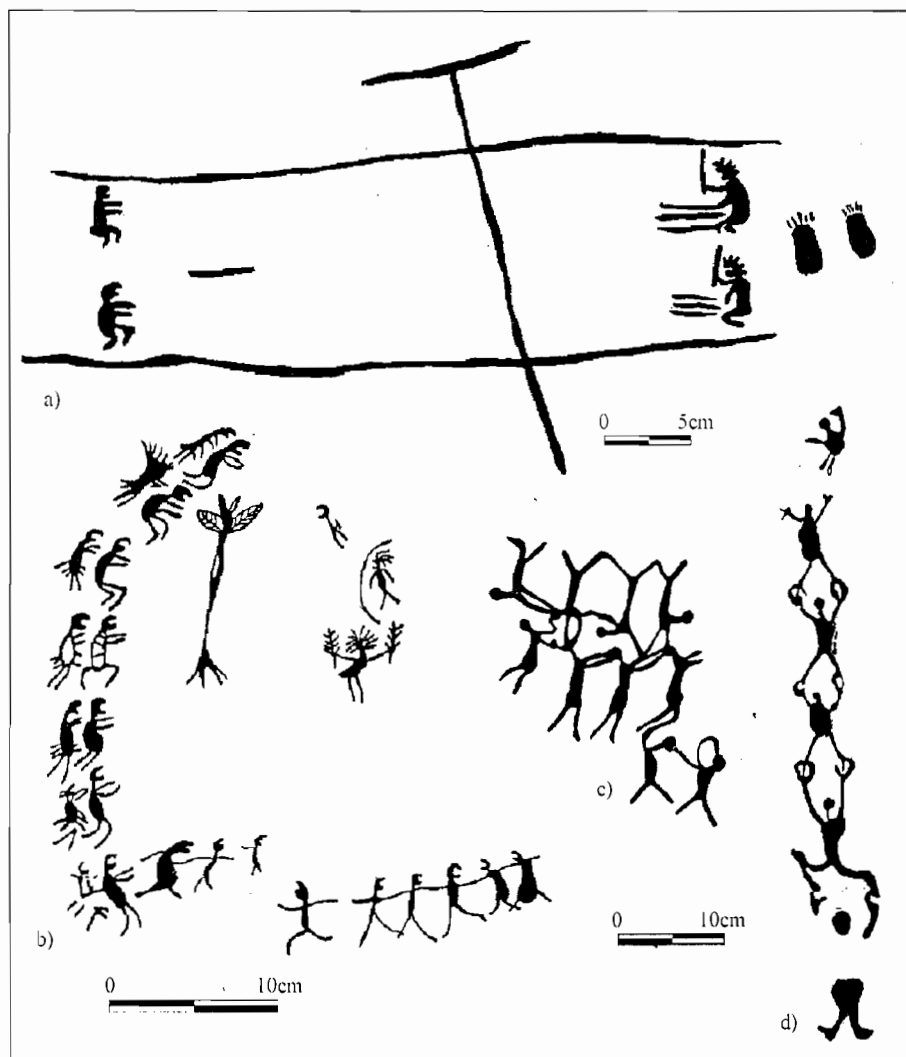


Figura 11. Tradição Nordeste em Pernambuco. Serrote do Giz, Afogados da Ingazeira, PE.



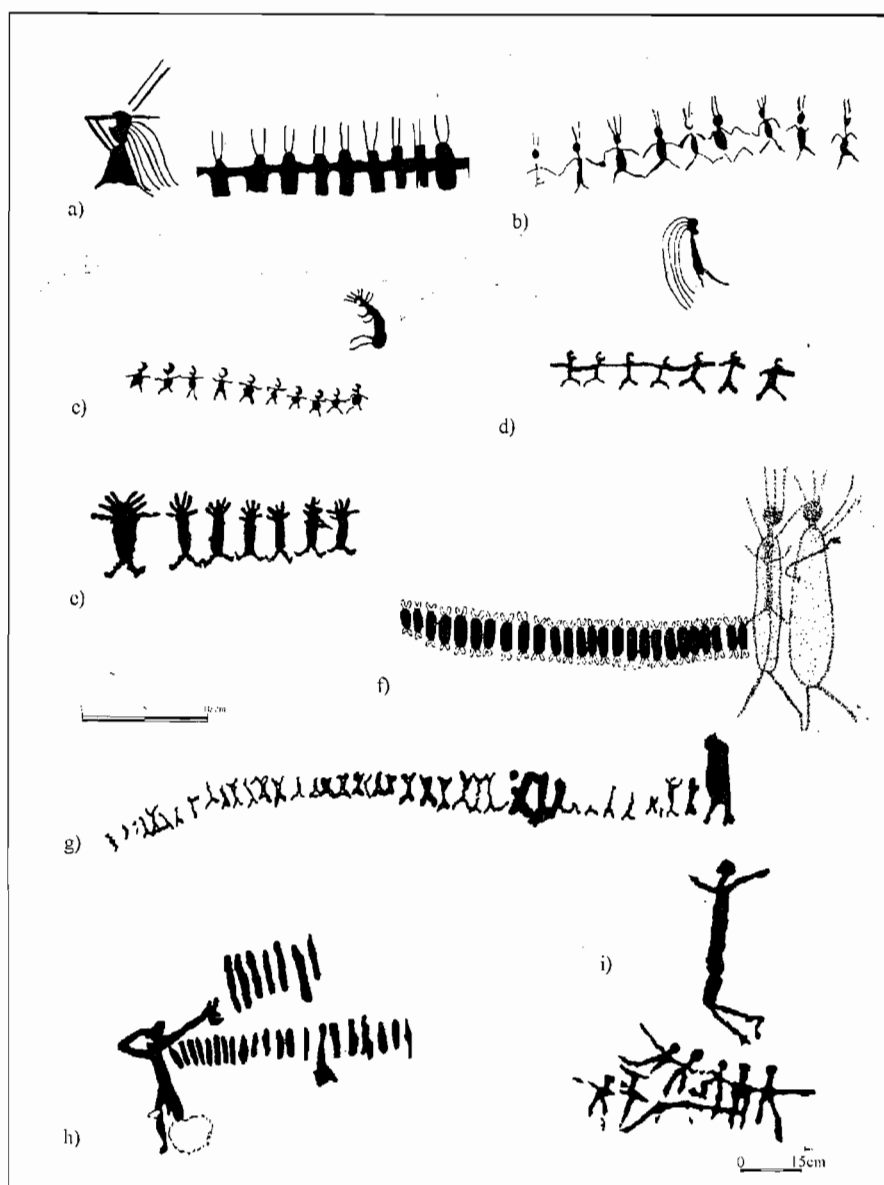


Figura 13. Tradição Nordeste. Figuras humanas enfileiradas, aparentemente guiadas por uma ou duas figuras principais. Observa-se a evolução para o esquematismo na figura humana; a, b, c, d) Carnaúba dos Dantas, RN; e, f, g) São Raimundo Nonato, PI; h) Afogados da Ingazeira, PE.

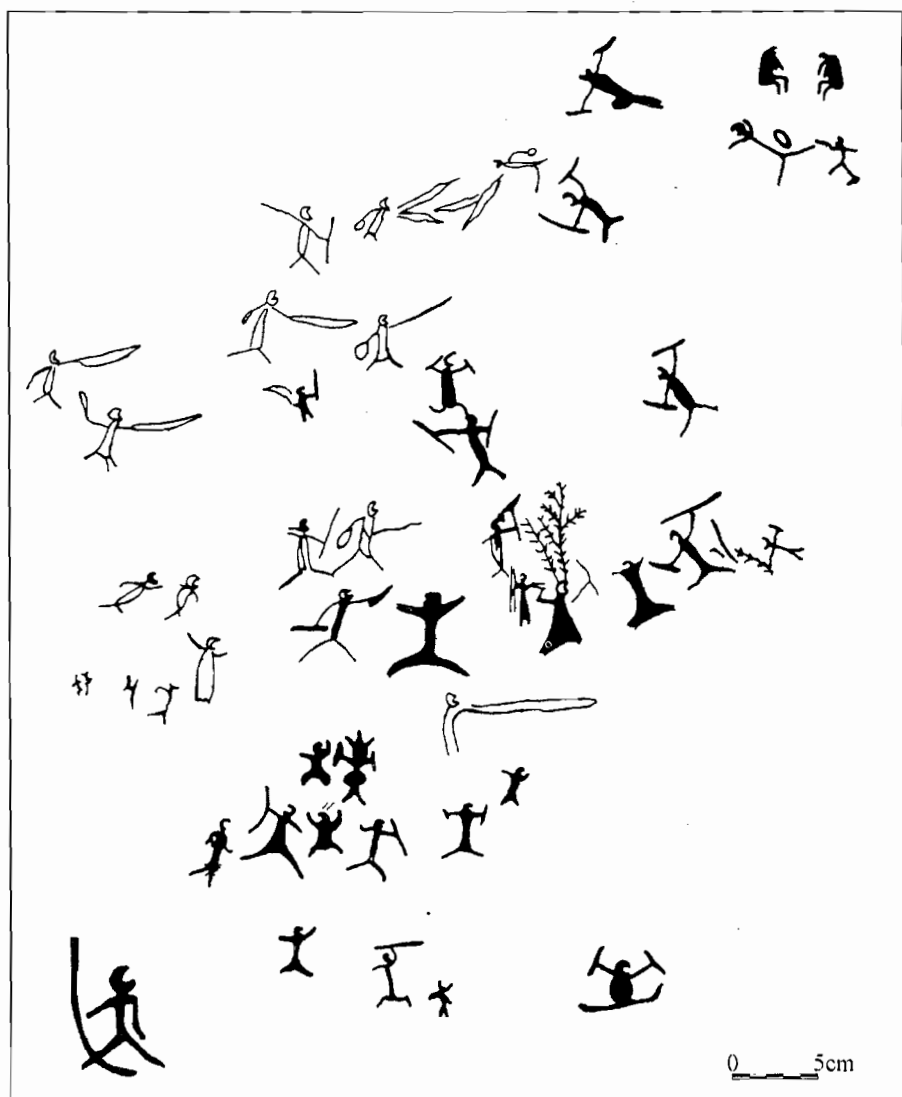




Figura 15. Tradição Nordeste, subtradição Seridó. Parelhas e Carnaúba dos Dantas, RN. Cenas de luta e agressões são comuns em todos os abrigos da subtradição.

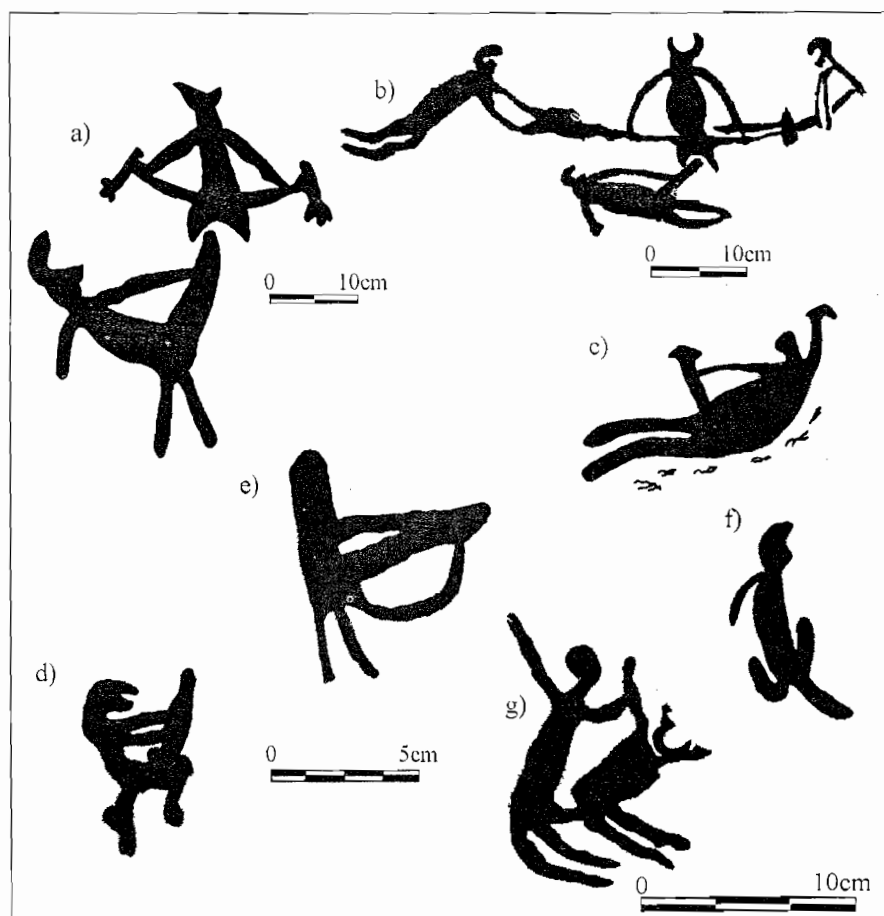


Figura 16. Tradição Nordeste, subtradição Seridó. Cenas de sexo e figuras hitifálicas; a, b) Xique Xique II, Carnaúba dos Dantas; c, d, e, f) Mirador, Parelhas, RN.