



Idital: The Sacred Wall-Painting Tradition of the Lanjia Saura Tribe of Odisha

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ABSTRACT

The symbolic wall-painting tradition of the Lanjia Saura tribe of Odisha, known as Idital, represents one of the oldest surviving artistic and religious traditions of eastern India. Practiced primarily in the forested and hilly regions of southern Odisha, Idital functions as a visual expression of cultural identity, ancestral memory, religious belief, and social organization. More than a decorative art form, it serves as a sacred medium through which the Saura community communicates with ancestral spirits and supernatural forces. The painting preserves rituals, myths, and collective experiences that have been transmitted across generations. The paper also discusses contemporary challenges facing the tradition and highlights the urgent need for documentation, preservation, and community-based safeguarding efforts following its recent recognition through Geographical Indication (GI) status.

1. Introduction

Odisha is renowned not only for its temple architecture and classical artistic traditions but also for its rich heritage of tribal and folk arts. Among the state's sixty-two tribal communities, the Saura tribe possesses one

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of the most distinctive visual art traditions known as Idital. Painted primarily on the interior walls of houses, these murals are deeply embedded in the religious and social life of the community.

The Idital tradition reflects a continuous cultural journey extending from prehistoric times to the present. Through symbolic imagery and ritualistic representation, these paintings preserve collective memory, ancestral worship, and indigenous knowledge systems. They function as visual narratives that document the beliefs, customs, and worldview of the Saura people.

This study explores the historical origins, religious significance, artistic characteristics, and contemporary relevance of Idital paintings among the Lanjia Saura tribe of southern Odisha.

2. Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

Examine the historical and cultural background of the Lanjia Saura tribe.

Analyse the religious and ritual significance of Idital paintings.

Study the materials, techniques, and stylistic features of the art form.

Understand the symbolic meanings represented in Idital imagery.

Assess the challenges faced in preserving this indigenous artistic tradition.

3. Methodology

The study is based on qualitative and descriptive research methods. Information has been collected from ethnographic studies, published literature, field observations, and documented interpretations of Saura artists and scholars. Particular attention has been given to the pioneering works of anthropologists who documented Saura religion and artistic practices.

4. The Lanjia Saura Tribe: Historical and Cultural Background

The Saura (Savara) tribe is one of the oldest tribal communities of Odisha, known for its rich cultural heritage and deep connection to Indian mythology. Saura oral traditions and regional folklore associate the community with figures such as Shabari of the Ramayana and Jara Savara of the Mahabharata, reflecting the tribe's longstanding presence in the cultural imagination of eastern India. whose devotion to Lord Rama symbolizes faith and humility, and Jara Savara from the Mahabharata, whose role is associated with the sacred Jagannath tradition of Odisha. The values of dedication and sacrifice seen in the story of Ekalavya also resonate with Saura culture and traditions.

The Saura people mainly live in the districts of Ganjam, Gajapati, Rayagada, and Koraput in Odisha, as well as parts of Andhra Pradesh and other states. They are renowned for their traditional Idital paintings, which depict gods, ancestors, animals, festivals, and daily life.

Through their art, rituals, and oral traditions, the Sauras continue to preserve a unique heritage that reflects their close relationship with nature, spirituality, and community life.

The Saura tribe, also known as Saora, Savara, or Shabara, is one of the most ancient tribal communities of India. Anthropologically, they belong to the Proto-Australoid racial group and are linguistically associated with the Austro-Asiatic language family.

The Lanjia Saura, considered one of the Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs), inhabit the Eastern Ghats regions of Rayagada, Gajapati, Ganjam, and Koraput districts of Odisha. Their settlements are typically located in hilly terrains ranging between 1,000 and 3,000 feet above sea level.

Traditionally, the Saura people depend on terrace cultivation, forest resources, hunting, and handicrafts. Their engineering skills in creating terrace farms along steep hill slopes are remarkable and demonstrate a sophisticated understanding of ecological management.

The religious worldview of the Saura is rooted in nature worship, ancestor worship, and belief in supernatural forces. Various deities associated with agriculture, forests, fertility, and social welfare are worshipped through rituals and sacrifices.

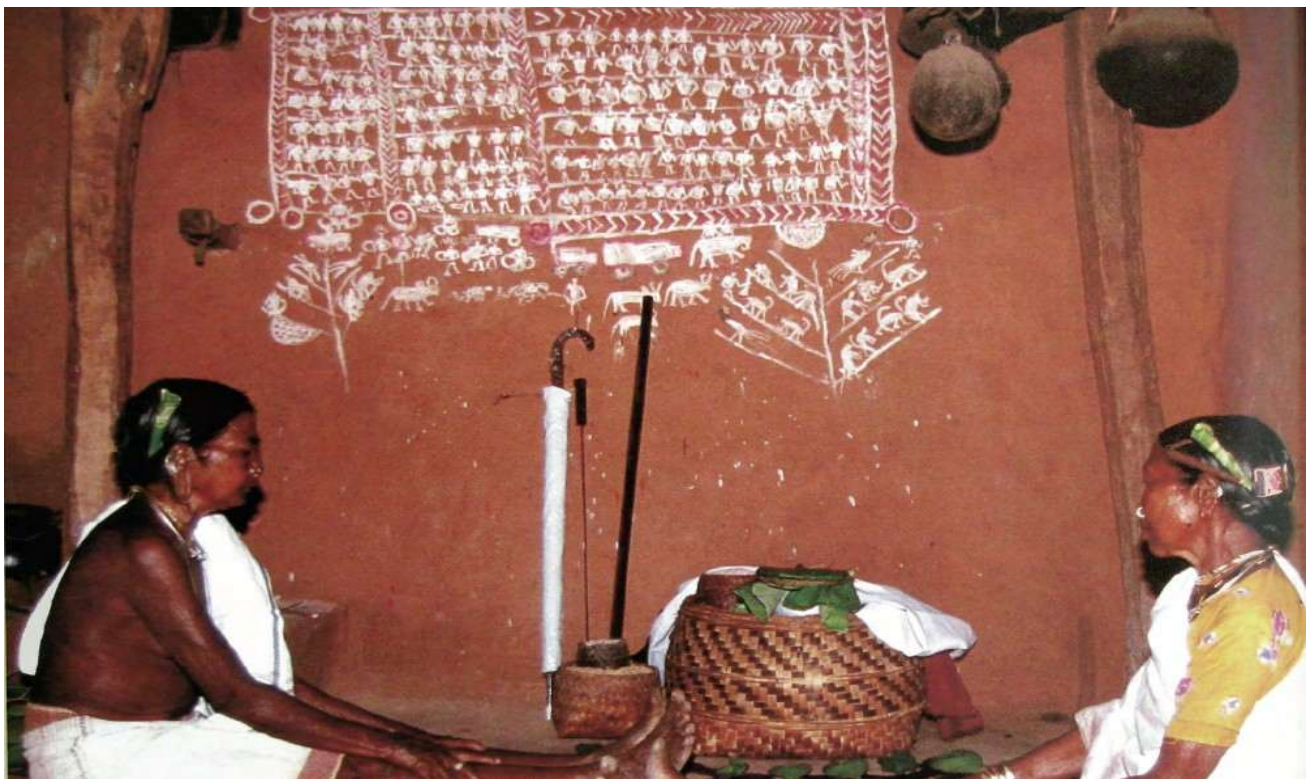


LANJIA SAURA TRIBES OF ODISHA

5. Ancestor Worship and the Concept of Duma

A distinctive feature of Saura culture is the worship of ancestors, known as Duma. The Saura believe that deceased ancestors continue to exist in another realm and influence the welfare of their descendants.

Ancestors are regarded as active members of society who provide guidance, protection, and blessings. Forgetting or neglecting them is considered a serious offense. Consequently, ancestral spirits occupy a central place in Saura religion and are prominently represented in Idital paintings. The belief in ancestral presence forms the philosophical foundation of the Idital tradition.



EDAI BOIA (WOMEN PRIESTS)

6. Idital: Meaning and Origin

According to Saura mythology, the origin of Idital is linked to ancestral spirits who requested a dwelling place within the household. The term Idital derives from two words: Idi (picture) and Tal (wall). It literally refers to sacred images painted on walls. Through divine guidance, symbolic houses were created on walls using rice paste, allowing spirits to reside peacefully and protect family members.

Thus, Idital emerged as a sacred visual language through which humans, ancestors, and deities could coexist. Unlike decorative murals, Idital paintings are primarily religious and ceremonial. They are created to



seek blessings, ensure prosperity, cure diseases, protect crops, promote fertility, and maintain harmony between the living and the spiritual world.

7. Artists and Ritual Specialists

Traditionally, artists use natural materials sourced from their surroundings. White is made from rice paste, red from earth, black from charcoal, and yellow from plant extracts. Bamboo brushes are used to create the delicate lines and intricate patterns that characterize this art form. These materials reflect the Saura people's close relationship with the natural world.

Many paintings carry specific ritual purposes. They may be created to ensure a good harvest, seek protection from misfortune, promote healing, or honour ancestral spirits. Each symbol and figure embodies a sacred intention, transforming the artwork into a bridge between the human and spiritual worlds.

8. Ritual Process of Creating an Idital

The creation of an Idital follows a carefully prescribed ritual sequence.

Preparation

The wall is cleaned and coated with red clay. Ritual offerings such as rice, liquor, fruits, and flowers are prepared. Ancestors and deities are invoked through prayers.

Dream Guidance

The artist spends the night near the selected wall and awaits symbolic instructions through dreams regarding the composition and imagery to be painted.

Execution

Using rice paste and simple brushes made from bamboo or palm sticks, the artist begins painting according to spiritual instructions.

Consecration

After completion, sacrifices and offerings are made. The painting is then treated as a sacred shrine within the house.

9. Materials and Techniques

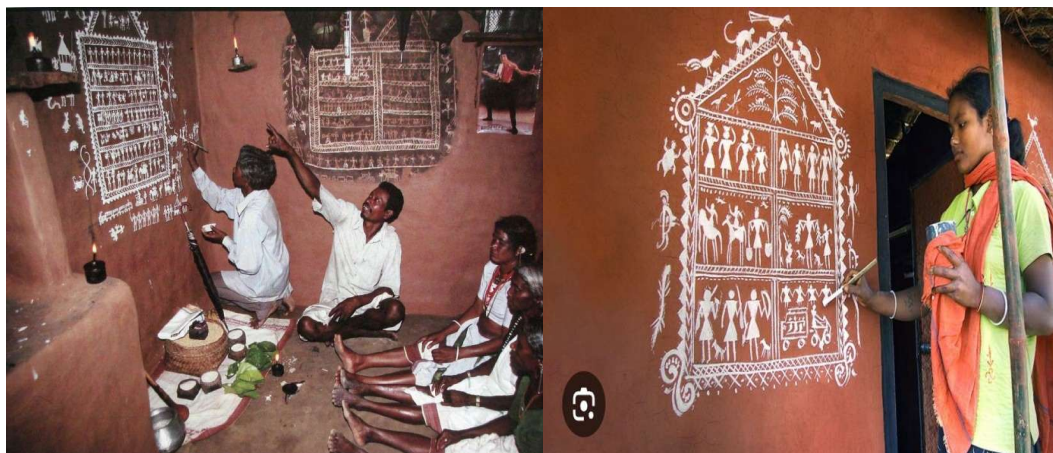
Idital paintings employ locally available materials:

- Red clay for background preparation.
- Rice flour paste for white pigment.
- Bamboo or palm-stick brushes.
- Occasionally black pigment for outlining.
- The visual language is characterized by:
 - Geometric compositions.
 - Linear drawing techniques.
 - Stylized human and animal figures.
 - Symbolic rather than realistic representation.
 - Dense arrangement of imagery without empty spaces.

The creators of Idital paintings are known as Idital Maran.. They are not ordinary artists but individuals who possess ritual knowledge and spiritual responsibility.

Many painters are also shamans or ritual specialists known as Kudan, Kudangamars, or Kudangabois. These religious practitioners act as mediators between the living and the spirit world.

Before beginning a painting, the artist performs rituals, offers rice and liquor to ancestors, and seeks guidance through dreams. The final composition is believed to be directed by ancestral spirits rather than solely by the artist's imagination. Painting an Idital is therefore regarded as a sacred duty rather than a commercial profession.



EDITALMARAN AND KUDANGMAR

Human figures are generally depicted using triangular forms, straight lines, and circular heads. Animals, birds, trees, and ritual objects are similarly simplified into symbolic motifs. The contrast between white imagery and red backgrounds produces a striking visual effect while emphasizing ritual purity and sacredness.

10. Idital: Living Heritage of Faith and Culture

Saura painting is more than a traditional art form; it is a living expression of the history, spirituality, and cultural identity of the Saura tribe of Odisha. Every painting tells a story, preserving ancestral wisdom and the community's deep connection with nature. Far from being decorative, they serve as sacred offerings during important occasions such as births, marriages, harvest festivals, healing rituals, and ancestor worship. Each painting acts as a visual prayer seeking blessings, protection, prosperity, and harmony.



IDITAL PAINTING BY LANJIA SAURA TRIBES OF ODISHA

11: Types of Idital Paintings

Andumjpur Idital

Associated with agricultural fertility, seed-sowing rituals, and harvest ceremonies.

Jodisum Idital



Dedicated to the guardian deity of the village and associated with earth worship and harvest celebrations.

Sarpalasum Idital

Created for healing rituals, protection from diseases, and communal well-being.

Kittungsum Idital

Associated with fertility, prosperity, and agricultural abundance.

Jananglasum Idital

Dedicated to health protection and the prevention of illness.

12.Idital asa visual language and Recognition

Saura paintings are distinguished by their unique visual language. The compositions leave no empty spaces, symbolizing completeness and spiritual protection. Through continuous storytelling, they depict daily life, rituals, agriculture, animals, and ancestral spirits, reflecting the interconnectedness of all existence. Human and divine figures are usually faceless, emphasizing collective identity and spiritual presence rather than individual personalities.

In January 2024, Lanjia Saura Painting, popularly known as Idital, received the Geographical Indication (GI) Tag. This recognition acknowledges the cultural significance of the art form, protects its authenticity, and supports the livelihoods of traditional Saura artists.



GI TAG RECOGNITION OF IDITAL PAINTING

Today, Saura paintings are celebrated in museums, galleries, and cultural exhibitions across India and beyond. While increasing popularity has created new opportunities for artists, preserving the spiritual and cultural essence of the tradition remains essential.

More than an art form, Saura painting is a living heritage that embodies faith, memory, and identity. Through its timeless symbols and stories, it continues to preserve the rich cultural legacy of the Saura people for future generations.

13. Contemporary Challenges

Despite its cultural significance, Idital faces serious threats: Declining transmission of traditional knowledge. Urbanization and modernization. Replacement of mud houses with concrete structures. Changing lifestyles among younger generations. Religious conversion and transformation of ritual practices.

Lack of systematic documentation and institutional support. Documentation and workshop records of traditional Saura artists including Laxman Sabara. Various ethnographic studies on Saura religion, culture, and visual traditions. Many villages no longer maintain traditional wall paintings, placing the continuity of the tradition at risk.



MORDEN IDITAL PAINTINGS



14. Conclusion

The Idital wall paintings of the Lanjia Saura tribe represent a remarkable synthesis of art, religion, history, and social memory. Far more than decorative murals, they embody the spiritual worldview of a community whose identity is deeply rooted in ancestral worship and harmonious coexistence with nature.

As an invaluable cultural heritage, Idital deserves systematic documentation, scholarly research, preservation, and public recognition. Without immediate efforts toward conservation, this unique artistic tradition may gradually disappear under the pressures of modernization and cultural transformation. Preserving Idital is not merely the protection of an art form but the safeguarding of an entire indigenous knowledge system and worldview for future generations.

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