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Ritual Art as a Medium of Social Cohesion: A Study of Saura Indigenous Painting and Sculptural Traditions

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Abstract:

The ritual art of the Saura tribe of Odisha constitutes a rich form of visual language that helps in retaining social bonding, ecological awareness, and traditions handed down from generation to generation. This paper explores how the Saura tribe uses its ritual arts in expressing their collective identity and social solidarity in their ritual paintings called Idital (wall paintings) and ritual sculptures. While decorative arts are meant to decorate walls and floors, Idital paintings are sacred visual stories made during ritual events by a village priest referred to as Kudang (priest man) or Kudangboye (priest woman). Each painting is different and represents the story of each family's history, daily activities, farming, festivals, gods, and interaction with nature. The participation of members of the community in painting, dancing, music, and ritual performances is a way of fostering social ties and affirming shared beliefs. Examples of sculptural ritual include the Dasahpathar ritual, which involves creating stone structures that remember the ancestors, in an indigenous installation of art that engages memory, ritual, and public space. The Judising is another example of sculptural ritual where the installation of wooden or stone carvings in the form of a pair of geometric shapes between two villages expresses inter-village fraternity. The practice of Saura art forms provides useful insights for today's debates about community solidarity, cultural sustainability, and participatory arts, showing how ritual art is still a living embodiment of social solidarity.

Keywords: Ritual, Idital, Saura, Tribe, Art

Introduction

Saura tribal ritual art is a traditional indigenous practice that encapsulates their spiritual beliefs, unity of the community, and their relationship with nature. Apart from being a means of visual expression, Saura art plays the role of documenting their traditions, beliefs, customs, and values (Elwin, 1955; Mohanty, 2006). The wall paintings of the Saura tribe, known as Idital ("wall painting") in their language, are done during their sacred rituals conducted with the help of the village priest, who is referred to as Kudang (in case of a male priest) or Kudangboye (female priest). Along with rituals and chants, the invocation of spirits and ghosts, each Idital painting tells the tale of an individual family and portrays the Saura belief that their ancestors still guide and protect them (Elwin, 1955; Dash, 2011).

The subjects of Idital paintings include all facets of Saura life such as agriculture, hunting, festivals, village activities, nature, gods, deities, and ancestor worship. Such paintings serve to communicate the

values, common obligations, and the spirit of cooperation and support among people that characterizes their community. The rituals involve joint actions of music, dance, painting, and ceremonies (Mohapatra, 1992; Mohanty, 2006).

Moreover, the Saura culture features considerable examples of sculptural and spatial expressions signifying social integration. Mandusing, which is the deity of each village located at the center of every village, is the spirit guardian and embodies the unity of the community. The Judising, which are geometric wooden or stone forms that are erected between two villages, symbolize the friendship, peace, and eternal union of the neighbouring communities. One more ritual called Dasahpathar is a sculptural tribute to the ancestors with the erection of memorial stones in their honor. This ritual helps to maintain the collective memory, preserve the ancestral ties, and reinforce the communal identity. In many ways, the Dasahpathar ritual may be considered installation art as well.

The art practice of the Saura tribes through paintings, rituals, sculptures, and community ceremonies showcases the role of art as a very strong vehicle of social bonding, spirituality, and cultural survival. The art practice of the Saura not only helps to preserve their culture and traditional knowledge but also gives lessons about sustainable living, social responsibilities, and the interconnection between man, nature, and the spiritual world. The ritual art of the Saura is a very good example of the role of art in community development and cultural preservation through the generations (Elwin, 1955; Jain, 1998; Ota & Mohanty, 2015).



Lanjia Saura Tribe, Before Dance, Puttasing; June 2026, P.C.- Professor Samburu Sovara, Odisha.

Research Gap:

Even though the Saura paintings have been studied extensively by scholars as forms of tribal and ritual art, comparatively less work has been done in terms of sculptural representations that complement the rituals. The existing body of literature is primarily concentrated on wall paintings (Idital), ignoring the importance of sculptural art (Judising, Mandusing, Dasah Pathar) in the lives of the Sauras from the perspective of their religion and culture. It is important to note that both the wall paintings and ritual

sculptures are essential visual and symbolic representations that serve to enhance cultural identity, collective memory, and community participation. Thus, ignoring sculptural representation is inadequate in comprehending the Saura art and ritual tradition.

Research Question:

How do Saura wall paintings and sculptural expressions, as integral components of ritual practices, contribute to maintaining social cohesion within the Saura community?

Research Objectives:

To study the forms, meanings, and functions of Saura wall paintings and sculptural expressions.

To study the incorporation of the wall paintings and sculptural expressions in the rituals of the Saura tribe.

To find out how these ritual art forms help in the process of social integration, collective identity formation, and cultural continuity in the Saura society.

To look into the roles played by the artist, ritual performer, and the community members in creating and performing these ritual arts.

Literature Reviews:

In terms of the artistic and ritual traditions of the Sauras, much research has been conducted. The wall paintings of the Sauras called Idital are studied by many scholars. According to Dash (2011), an overview of Saura paintings is provided, focusing on the visual language, the symbolism, and the ritual function, as well as the importance of the artworks in the cultural heritage of Odisha. Similarly, Jain (1998) gives a broader perspective on the folk and tribal arts of India, including the native aesthetics and symbolic representations characteristic of Saura painting. Though these sources contain much information about the artistic aspects of Saura painting, they are mainly concentrated on the style and symbolism of the artwork.

Further ethnographic literature explores the religious and cultural aspects of the Sauras. Thus, Elwin (1955) examines the topic of tribal religion and rituals, illustrating the importance of sacred ritual activities in establishing the connection between people, ancestors, and the spiritual world. In addition, Mohapatra (1992) provides some information about the social structure, traditions, and rituals of Sauras, while Mohanty (2006) and Ota and Mohanty (2015) give more general ethnographic insights about the identity, culture, and socio-cultural transformations of the tribes of Odisha.

The theoretical implications drawn from the anthropology of rituals and material culture also add insight to this investigation. Émile Durkheim (1912) considers ritual a means to create collective consciousness, while Victor Turner (1969) stresses the importance of rituals in creating social solidarity through participation. Clifford Geertz (1973) views rituals as a cultural meaning-making system, and Daniel Miller (2005) claims that material objects influence social relations and not vice versa. This means that ritual art does not only express itself aesthetically but can be used as a way of creating social ties among communities.

Despite all these important theoretical advancements, research into Saura art has been mainly devoted to Idital wall paintings without any consideration of the sculptural heritage that is also ritualistic. There has been no systematic investigation of the interrelated functions of both wall paintings and ritual sculptures in establishing collective identity and cohesion.

Most existing studies focus more on stylistic and symbolic aspects than the relation between ritual art and social cohesion.



Idital, Samaraguda, Gajapati, P.C – Chitranjan Moharana 2026

Research Methodology:

Sl	Component	Description
1	Research Design	Qualitative research
2	Research Approach	Ethnographic approach
3	Research Method	Field-based ethnographic study of ritual art practices
4	Data Collection Methods	Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, photography
5	Field Visits	Multiple visits to ritual sites, artists' households, and the community
6	Observation	Observation of the creation and use of wall paintings and Sculptural art.
7	Interviews	In-depth interviews with artists, ritual specialists, elders, and
8	Photography	Documentation of wall paintings, sculptural expressions, ritual, Dance
9	Visual Analysis	Analysis of motifs, symbols, forms, materials, spatial arrangements

Saura Rituals and Art

The Saura (Sora or Savara), one of the major tribal populations of Odisha state, has a rich ritualistic and artistic culture in which ritual and art are closely intertwined. Religious ideas of the Saura people are mostly animistic, based on the worship of nature, ancestors' souls, and local gods. Rituals take place at all the crucial moments in people's lives, such as birth, marriage, death, and agriculture. At the same time, well-known Saura wall paintings (Idital art) are considered to be a spiritual artistic expression of their spirituality and culture. Traditionally, Saura ritual paintings were drawn by ritual specialists from the villages and depict symbols of ancestors, gods, humans, animals, and nature. All the paintings have their uniqueness and embody the dialogue between the ritualist and the spirit world. Nevertheless, the real value of the Saura art is not only in their specific ritual functions, but also in the harmony in the interconnection of the figures, which symbolize unity and collaboration of community members. Despite the fact that Idital paintings can be painted in the case of some individual rituals, such as healing or worship of ancestors, they are very important in communal rituals and festivals as well. Therefore, among the Saura, art is not only decorative but is also an essential element of the rituals through which cultural heritage is preserved, community identity strengthened, and harmony is maintained between the human world, nature, and spirituality.

Birth and Death Rituals

In the case of the Saura people, birth is considered an event of gaining a new member of the family and community. A series of rituals are performed as an attempt to seek the blessings of the ancestral spirits as well as deities so as to ensure the health, long life, and well-being of the child. Traditional healers perform various rituals to protect the child from the bad influences of the spirits and assure prosperity in life. It is seen during the fieldwork that most of the Saura homes have paintings known as Idital, which are done particularly for child welfare. Unlike the other ritual paintings that usually depict adult figures, these depict groups of children engaged in various activities.



Idital, Benevolence of Children, Samaraguda, Gajapati, P.C – Chitranjan Moharana 2026

Death ceremonies are equally important for the Sauras, who believe that the soul of the deceased continues to live and ultimately becomes part of the ancestors' community. Death ceremonies are then

succeeded by the processions, which aid in the transition of the deceased into the world of the ancestors. In the course of such ceremonies, Idital wall paintings are painted in order to pay homage to the dead person and invite the ancestors to shower blessings on the surviving members of the family. These paintings use linear characters to tell the story of birth, death, and the life cycle.

One of the unique characteristics of the Saura funeral tradition is the Dasah Pathar ceremony, which consists of the dedication of a stone to the dead person in their honor. These stones are placed underneath a holy tree, along with other memorial stones of other ancestors of the Saura people. In addition to its spiritual value, this Dasah Pathar site could also be viewed as an environmental monument, which embodies the concepts of collective memory, ancestry, and communal spirit. The stacking of memorial stones beneath one sacred tree highlights the connection between the living and the dead people of the community.

Dasah Pathar, Saura Tribe, Puttasing; June 2026, P.C.- Professor Samburu Sovara, Odisha.

Marriage Rituals



Marriage in the Saura tribe is seen as both a social and spiritual bond that enhances the link between two families and their lineage and ancestry. The marriage ritual is characterized by gift-giving, blessings from the elders, feasts, traditional music, singing, and dancing, all of which strengthen kinship and social cohesion. One important ritual takes place in front of the Idital painting, where sacrifices are offered to the ancestors and Mandusing (the village deity) in

order to bless the marriage with peace, fertility, prosperity, and well-being of the couple. The Idital painting is used as the sacred ritual space that represents the presence of the ancestral spirits who are witnesses of this marriage ritual. Traditional ornaments, ritual decorations, and symbolic patterns add value to the ritual, and at the same time, traditional music and dances convey collective happiness. In this way, the artistic and ritual components make the marriage ritual a sacred cultural ritual.

Rituals of Harvesting

Agriculture plays a vital role in the lives of the Sauras; therefore, harvesting rituals form an integral part of their cultural traditions. At the start and close of the agricultural period, members of the family make offerings of crops, fruits, flowers, and even animals to the spirits of nature and local gods as a way of showing their thankfulness for a good harvest. Group songs, dances, and performances are conducted during these ceremonies as a way of promoting unity and the community's reliance on nature for its existence.

Ancestor Worship for Health

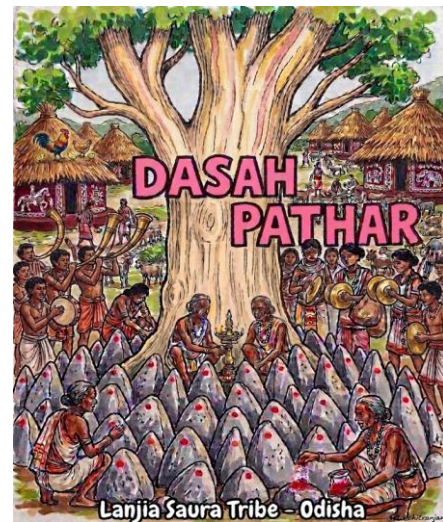
Ancestor worship is one of the key features of Saura religion. The Saura consider the spirits of their ancestors to affect the health, prosperity, and safety of the family members. Any illness or other bad things are seen by them as a sign that the spirits of the ancestors want something, and some offering or sacrifice is required. Special ritual specialists, Kudang and Kudangboye, speak to the spirits of ancestors on such occasions, revealing the problem and restoring harmony. The creation of Idital paintings, where the pictures of ancestors, gods, humans, animals, and ordinary people are depicted, is a significant element of these rituals for the promotion of physical, spiritual, and social well-being.

Festivals

There are numerous festivals celebrated by the Saura associated with agriculture, seasonal changes, and religion. These festivals are dedicated to offerings to the gods of the village and ancestors, communal eating, traditional dances, and music. These festivals are the moments that unite the social group, preserve the culture, and allow the passing of indigenous knowledge from one generation to another.

Findings of the Research

The research findings show that the Saura ritual art acts as an important means for social cohesion, cultural continuity, and spirituality. Both Idital wall paintings and ritual sculptures like Mandusing, Judising, and Dasah Pathar are an integral part of rituals associated with birth, marriage, harvesting, ancestor worship, and death. The practice of art encourages the active participation of people in such forms of art as painting, music, dance and rituals, hence strengthening kinship, relations between villages and culture. The designs used have human figures interrelated, indicating cooperation, responsibility towards each other, and harmony with nature. Kudang and Kudangboye, ritual experts, are very significant in preserving and passing down the tradition from one generation to another.



Dasah Pathar, Ritual, Developed Image, P.C- Chitrnanjan,

2026

Conclusion

The study brings to light the Saura cultural life and practice, which work collectively to serve as an expression of their religious beliefs, memory, and social life. Through artistic practices during childbirth and marriage, farming, ancestor worship, and death ceremonies, the Sauras are connected to nature, spirits, and the deities of the village. It must be noted that the Idital paintings and sculptures are not only pieces of art but serve as a sacred language to communicate and preserve indigenous knowledge and spiritual values.

One of the key findings from this research is the fact that Saura art is a source of social cohesion. As it was mentioned earlier, Idital paintings have compositions of interconnected humans instead of isolated figures, signifying cooperation and kinship. Also, communal rituals, use of Dasah Pathar, and other artistic practices encourage active participation of the families and the whole community, developing their social ties.

Thus, through spiritual rituals, communal participation, and cultural memory, Saura art goes beyond its ritual function, becoming the means of social cohesion.



Mandusing, Ramnaguda, Rayagada, P.C.- Chitranjan Moharana, June 2026

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