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AGENCY, AESTHETICS, AND COMMODIFICATION OF SAORA ART

Abstract

Art represents the human experience, and anthropologists approach the study of art like any other aspect of human existence. Agency is a vital concept in the anthropology of art, referring to the capacity of people and things to act in the world. Art objects possess ritual agency as social agents, capable of mediating social agency. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study Saora's art through Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency. Every tribe in India has its own distinct identities embedded in its cultural traditions, which speak of its diverse and colourful vibrancy while conveying shared values and aesthetics. These art forms encompass many utilitarian and decorative media, including cloth, wood, paper, and metal. For the present study, mural art and wall paintings known as Ittalan, Idital, Anital, or Dital inside the house of LanjiaSaoras are considered Saora Art. The paper seeks to elucidate the aesthetic and socio-religious aspects of Saora Art and examine its agency. It also aims to analyse the commodification of the Saora art and its impact on the agency thereof. Further, it assesses the implementation of government policies and NGOs' efforts to safeguard and upliftSaora Art and artists.

Keywords: *Saora, Art, Idital, Icons, Agency, Agency, Commodification*

The impulse of humans to express their thoughts and imaginations through visual or other sensory means dates back to the discovery of the red hand stencil in archaeological sites in Spain where the Neanderthals lived. These ancient arts, preserved in glacial caves, offer insight into the culture and ideas of pre-existing ancient civilisations, including their cognitive experiences, anxieties, and emotions. Art is a vivid means of expressing these cultural aspects, and its meaning is subjective and varies based on individual perception of aesthetics, which is influenced by factors such as age, gender, cultural cognition, and phenomenological experiences. Art creates forms symbolic of human feeling and picks up where language leaves off (Langer, 1953). Art is defined through the complex interrelations between individual intentions, interpretative context, and attributive definitions that make sense of the spatial existence of an object,

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meaning-encoded functionary skills, or ritualistic performances. Art represents the human experience, and anthropologists approach the study of art like any other aspect of human existence. Anthropologists take a holistic approach to any given topic, situating it among the broader context of a culture—its "language, environment, economy, religion, family life, governance and so on" (Plattner 2003). All of these details are implicitly and inextricably embedded in the products of a culture, which cannot be fully understood and appreciated without some awareness of them. Gell (1998) argued that art is defined by its distinctive role in advancing social relationships constructed through an agency. "Agency can be ascribed to things without this giving rise to anything particularly recalling the production and circulation of art". In this paper, an attempt has been made to study Saora art through Alfred Gel's theory of art and agency.

Art and Agency

Alfred Gell has used the term agency, but he is one of manywho have used it. It is pertinent to note that Giddens saw an intimate connection between agency and power. For Giddens (1984: 9, 15),the agency does not refer to people's intentions but their ability to act. Agency is the ability to act in particular ways where more than one course of action is possible. One ceases to be an agent if one can no longer make a difference.

The idea of art objects as social agents has been introduced previously (Layton 1981: 43; Wolff 1981: 24-25). Appadurai (1986:4) wrote, 'In many historical societies, things have not been so divorced from the capacity of persons to act'. Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency significantly contributes to the anthropology of art. According to Gell, the agency is a vital concept in the anthropology of art, referring to the capacity of people and things to act in the world. He argues that art objects possess ritual agency as social agents capable of mediating social agency. Gell defines agency as the capacity to initiate causal sequences, which are events caused by acts of mind, will, or intention. He suggests that an agent is the source or origin of causal events, independent of the state of the physical universe.Gell's theory of art and agency is complex, highlighting several forms of agency that art possesses, including psychological, physical, aesthetic, and semiotic. Art is a system of action, an agent like a person or subject that can persuade and fascinate their viewers (patients), where art is both the source and the object of "social agency." He explains that art's ability to mediate social agency is based on indexes and material elements that drive inferences, responses, or interpretations. For Gell, the anthropology of art is the theoretical study of social relations in the vicinity of objects mediating social agency. Gell's theory is grounded in a biographical (anthropological) frame of reference, where social relationships are part of the relational texture of social life. According to Gell, social relations only exist insofar as they manifest in actions. Therefore, performers of social actions are referred to as "agents," and they act on "patients" (social agents in the "patient" position concerning an agent-in-action) (Gell, 1998).

Art in Anthropology

The nineteenth-century anthropologists were involved in the study of art and material culture. The alluring interest caused by novelty and the exoticism of otherness caused friction in deciding the ethical obligation of the researchers from an ethnocentric perspective. In Britain, the evolutionary theory began to come in for strong criticism. Characterising societies in terms of traits and their ranking according to typologies based on the movement from simple to complex forms was seen as an impoverished theory based on an inadequate method. It was argued that evolutionary theory failed to place cultural traits in the context of society. It could not show the interrelationship between components in the present and demonstrate the truth of its hypotheses based on the available data. The term "art" in the museum is associated with the more highly valued collections of classical civilisations whose objects are part of European heritage. The arts of classical civilisations were positioned in a trajectory that led to European fine art and was associated with the connoisseurship and value creation processes of the art market (Proimos, 2006)

Many renowned social anthropologists like Robert Redfield, Verrier Elwin, Franz Boas, Sheldon Nodelman, Robert Adams, Gregory Bateson, William Buller Fagg, and Robert Layton have done intensive works on ethnological art. The term "ethnological art" as a substitute for primitive or tribal art has been adapted following the coinage of terminology made by Haselberger (1961). Most researchers have included motifs, styles, technology, functions, etc., in their treatment and exercise on art forms, features, and functions. Ethnological art represents society with its multi-dimensional facets. At the same time, this overall methodology may be modified to some extent, and thereby, the art objects can be used as markers of social, cultural, economic, and religious attributes. The 1960s also saw the growth of interest in visual anthropology, a renewed interest in material culture, and anthropological archaeology development(Kubler, 2008). Franz Boas, in his book 'Primitive Art' (1927),argued against the idea that the art produced by non-Western cultures is primitive and inferior to Western art. Boas also critiques the idea that primitive art is "pure" and untainted by Western influence. He shows that many non-Western cultures have been in contact with Western cultures for centuries and have incorporated Western elements into their art. Overall, "Primitive Art" is an important work that challenges the idea of cultural superiority and highlights the value of studying and appreciating the artistic traditions of all cultures.

Raymond Firth maintained a strong interest in indigenous art throughout his life. Firth (1936) studied the indigenous art of Maori and New Guinea and found that it was an essential part of their social and cultural life. He believed these artworks were not merely decorative but deeply embedded in these societies' cultures and traditions and played crucial roles in social interactions, religious rituals, and political systems. Forge was another British

anthropologist who focused primarily on art. At the centre of his analysis of Abelam's art is the relationship between style and meaning, concepts that link his work to art history interests and the symbolic anthropology of the 1960s. Levi-Strauss defined art as an ordering system of signs and communication, like language, that forms a hierarchical structure that forms the foundation ofsociety's core beliefs (Wiseman, 2007).

Anderson (1993) explores how artworks can convey cultural recognition by combining tangible elements to create meaningful cultural symbols that evoke sensory responses closely linked to the geographical and historical context. While it is widely accepted that visual art shares similarities with ritualistic ceremonies in symbolising cultural beliefs, Layton's argument that artworks serve as ritualistic symbols has further reinforced this notion of the presentational paradigm. (Anderson & Field, 1993).

Tribal Art In India

Verrier Elwin (1955) was an early scholar who recognised the significance of tribal art in India. He methodically recorded the wall paintings and associated rituals within this tradition. Elwin's documentation of these ethnographic details provides valuable insights into the study of Indian tribal culture. In the 1960s, J.L. Fischer recognised the significance of tribal art, particularly rock art in India, and put forth hypotheses for comparing Indian rock art in his article 'Art Styles as Cultural Cognitive Maps'.Wakankar and Brooks also attempted to compare rock art and tribal art, precisely that of Korku, Warli, Gond and Saora tribes, with decorated ceramics from Central India in their book, "Stone Age Painting in India" (1976). They highlighted the images of Saora wall paintings in their book and urged researchers to undertake a comparative study of rock art and tribal art.

Before the 1960s, researchers analysed artwork by integrating it into evolutionary or diffusionist hypotheses, creating cultural types associated with areas, tribes, or schools. However, in the post-1960s, there was a growing interest in understanding symbolic expression and exploring meaning beyond symmetrical features. This led to an interdisciplinary approach combining anthropology, archaeology, art history, and aesthetics to identify core cultural practices. Tribal aesthetics are unique in their adaptation to the socio-ecological culture and religious ideologies of the members and can be characterised by the following features:

- The transmission of knowledge from one generation to another through folk art, folk songs, folklore, customs, and rituals exemplifies the lived reality and social structure.
- Due to its basis in mythological characters, the origin and authorship of this tradition take time to ascertain.

- The portrayal of relationships, communal harmony, and the decision-making process in a functional society is depicted with great flexibility without relying on complex multimodal administrative authority.
- The tribal aesthetic vividly depicts unity and incorporates cultural elements into everyday life, as affirmed through rituals and institutions.
- These traditions also serve a cathartic purpose, entertaining and promoting conformity in accepting behavioural patterns while educating society members about their cultural heritage and social identity.

The remarkable diversity of tribal art in India showcases a harmonious blend of cultural traditions and communal solidarity rooted in profound philosophical beliefs. The transmission of tribal art through oral traditions takes on various clandestine forms, including architecture, dance, handicrafts (such as decorative crafts and wood sculpting), oral literature (including drama and poetry), music, painting, textile weaving, and embroidery. Storytelling plays a significant role in tribal art, shaping the cognitive framework and aesthetic presentation. Tribal paintings are deeply influenced by their unique cultural and ecological contexts. Here are some examples of well-known tribal paintings from different states in India:

- The Kalamkari paintings, created using natural dyes, are renowned among the local tribes of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. These paintings intricately depict mythological Puranic deities, showcasing exceptional penwork. Over time, Kalamkari evolved with the patronage of the Mughal sultanate.
- Originating from Mithila in Bihar, Madhubani paintings portray the folklore and daily life of tribal communities, incorporating stories of historical and mythological significance.
- Pattachitra, a cloth painting from Odisha, revolves around the mythological importance of Lord Jagannath. It is believed that the Savara tribe initially worshipped the deity, and later, the monarch king brought the deity to the Puri Jagannath temple. These paintings, with their creative motifs, date back over a thousand years and depict simple mythological themes.
- Phad painting from Rajasthan is a folk art form done on scrolls, depicting narratives of local tribal deities. These paintings, carried by Priest-singers known as Bhopas, represent the mobile abode of the tribal deities.
- Pithora Paintings, originating from Gujarat, emerged as mural paintings within the Bhilala and Rathwa tribal communities. They are ancient ritualistic depictions centred around a single central theme, often representing a divine vision.

- Saora Paintings from Odisha are renowned for their repetitive motifs, inspired by religious pantheons and cultural traditions. This traditional art form carries sacred meanings, with involvement from Shamans who represent various themes for different occasions.
- Warli Paintings from Maharashtra are famous for their ornamental designs, featuring simple motifs that portray everyday life discourses. These paintings often revolve around joyous activities and celebrations of festivities.
- The North-Eastern tribes of India are celebrated for their exquisite wood sculpting and bamboo work. Totemic poles, masks, and engravings in vibrant colours represent the guardians of respective tribal communities. Bamboo craftsmanship ranges from miniature detailed art to comfortable and decorative furniture (Sharma, 2015).

Regarding Indian tribal art and aesthetics, folk art reflects daily lifestyle through visual art, performance through songs and dance, and oral literature. Folk art comprises painting on several media for decorative purposes or religious performances. Verrier Elwin[1] (1902-1964) was one of the first scholars to realise the importance of Saora art. He systematically documented the wall paintings and the rituals associated with this tradition. His contribution to the documentation of rich ethnographic details is valuable for studying the tribal culture of Orissa. Several series of articles and books have been published by anthropologists on Saora and their culture in the 'Adibasi', an Orissa tribal museum journal.

Sitakant Mahapatra (1991) unequivocally underscores the critical function of art in tribal communities by interconnecting ritualistic customs with religious observances aimed at appeasing the gods. A lucid clarification has been given regarding the magico-religious customs that entail summoning spirits or forces for the betterment of society. Dinanath Pathy (2009), an eminent art historian and painter, has lucidly illustrated the different styles with minor differences in art forms within the Saora art. He described the Saora painters, their techniques and materials, stylistic features, and design concepts in Saora art.

For the present study, the mural art and wall paintings known as *Ittalan* (*Id* - write, *Kitalan* - wall)(Elwin,1951), Idital (Elwin,1955; Mahapatra,1991), *Anital* (Chandragiri) inside the house (Mahapatra,1991) of Lanjia Saoras are being considered as Saora Art along with the depiction of the similar on other material forms in the contemporary period. Every state and union territory across India has distinct identities embedded in its cultural traditions, which speak of its diverse and colourful vibrancy while conveying shared values and aesthetics. These art forms encompass many utilitarian and decorative media, including cloth, wood, paper, and metal.

Situating the Saora tribe

The Saora tribe is an ancient tribe in India, mentioned in Hindu mythology and Sanskrit literature. They are also known as Savara and Sora and are one of the oldest significant tribes in Odisha. They are concentrated in the Gajapati district and Gunupur Subdivision of Rayagada, and their population in Odisha was 534,751 according to the 2011 Census of India, with a sex ratio of 1023 females per 1000 males and a literacy rate of 54.99%. The LanjiaSaoras are one of the 75 Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in India and one of the 13 PVTGs found in Odisha. The Saora worship countless deities and spirits, both benevolent and malevolent, through their religious practices. They have no belief in a supreme deity and make wall paintings or icons called *Ittalan, Idital, Anital* or *Dital* inside their houses to flatter and please their gods and ancestors. These icons contain sketches of humans, animals, plants, hills, forests, trees, moons, suns, tigers, birds, etc. and are simple but challenging to understand. This art form is frequently found in Odisha's RaghurajpurRayagada, Gajapati, and Koraput districts.

Odisha exhibits the highest diversity in its scheduled tribe population, comprising 62 tribes. The captivating Saora art captures the attention of observers, drawing them into its world. The allure and enchantment experienced by onlookers can only be easily explained byexamining the underlying cultural and belief systems. Saora iconography has captivated numerous researchers, ethnographers, visual artists, and ethnomusicologists from around the globe. Saora art, also called*Ittalans* by Elwin, is alternatively known as *Anitals* and *Iditals*, depending on the region. The striking wall paintings are referred to as *Iditals*. In essence, Saora art represents a house within a house, functioning as a sacred space for benevolent spirits and a barrier against malevolent spirits. This adorned wall art serves as a propitiatory practice to maintain balance in the metaphysical and theological realms, ensuring the well-being and happiness of the community (Rath, 2019).

Fieldwork among the Saora

Anthropology provides a comprehensive framework for investigating the processes and the reasons behind artistic expressions. Anthropologists employ various methods to study art, including observation, interviews, focus groups, and site assessments. The anthropological exploration of art encompasses ethnographic studies and investigations rooted in physical anthropology and archaeology. Examples of such investigations include the examination of Upper Palaeolithic cave paintings and Aboriginal rock paintings. These anthropological techniques also apply to analysing artistic creations and sporting events. This could involve excavating and evaluating artefacts from ancient societies, interviewing theatrical performers, or attending games and matches. Studying art, music, and sports requires the same holistic and wide-ranging approach as any other anthropological inquiry.

The first author conducted fieldwork in Puttasing village in the Gunpur block of the Rayagada district in 2019. The focus of this study was the LanjiaSaora tribal community, specifically chosen for their adherence to the traditional practice of Saora Art. Puttasing, serving as a cultural centre for Saora Art, provided valuable insights into the dynamics and preservation of this ancient art form. An ethnographic study utilised a mapping technique to identify spatial arrangements, housing patterns, gardens, forests, roads, paths, and village boundaries. The purposive and convenience sampling method was employed to select informants/respondents for interviews and focus group discussions. The informants included individuals, regardless of age or gender, actively involved in Saora Art. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, involving approximately 25-30 participants in this preliminary study. The case study approach was instrumental in collecting data on socio-religious rituals related to Saora art, documenting exceptional cases of wall paintings observed during the study, and gathering folklore and myths associated with other Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTGs) in Odisha.

Finding and Discussions

Saora art / Ittalans

The captivating nature of Saora's art captivates the observers' gaze, preventing their attention from wandering elsewhere. The sheer magnitude of attraction that mesmerises onlookers can only be adequately explained byexamining the underlying cultural beliefs. Saora iconography has fascinated researchers, ethnographers, visual artists, and ethnomusicologists worldwide. Referred to as *Ittalans* by Elwin, Saora art is also known as *Anitals* or *Iditals*, with variations based on the region. The exquisite wall paintings produced by the Saora community are called*Iditals*. In essence, Saora art represents a house within a house, serving as a sacred space for benevolent spirits while simultaneously acting as a confinement for malevolent spirits. Therefore, this embellishment of wall art serves as a propitiatory practice to maintain balance in the metaphysical and theological realm, ensuring the happiness and well-being of the community (Rath, 2019).

The essential nature of symbolism in any form of art is crucial for exploring the essence of the art itself. Examining the framework using Cartesian units and arranging it comprehensively is imperative, forming a thematic map visually representing the subject matter. In Figure 1, the symbols presented serve as illustrations of how they are employed to unveil the theme of the painting. The interplay and significance of their combination contribute to the overall composition, resulting in a complete and vivid depiction. To comprehend Saora's paintings, one can approach them from the following perspectives that shed light on their intended purposes:

- Icons for appeasing spirits (tutelary spirits, nature spirits and other

underworld spirits).

- Icons for the promotion of health and welfare (averting and curing illness, diseases and epidemics)
- Icons for fertility and harvest (to increase the fertility of the soil, to produce good crops, an offering of first-grain fruits, vegetables and pulses)
- Icons for childbirth (for easy delivery)
- Icons for the dead (mortuary ceremony)
- Icons for the welfare of the village (representing shrines and deities)
- Icons for festivities (Dolapurnima, Dusshera and MargasiraGurubara)
- Icons for those who have been abroad (working in the tea gardens of Assam)
- Icons for marriage and birth anniversary (marriage of Kudanmaran to tutelary spirits and Anjuman paintings).

Verrier Elwin (1955) identified and categorised sixty distinct types of *Iditals* into seven groups based on their purpose. Through a primary ethnographic study conducted in Puttasing, Odisha, remnants of KarjaIdital, IldaisumIdital, and a collection of photographs capturing Iditals that were once present were discovered. Additionally, intriguing reconstructions of certain ideals were found, depicting a combination of all the gods. These reconstructions were not intended for worship but represented an amalgamation of the Saora religious Pantheon. One such example is the *Anjuman Idital*, which portrays the name-giving ceremony of a child. Another ceremony called Tinjuman, although similar to Anjuman as it involves naming a child, differs in that it is performed for a child born in a distant location.

Fig. 1. *Anjuman Idital* depicting the name-giving ceremony in the Saora community.

(Picture: Somen Rath, June 2019)

1. In this depiction, the birth of a child is represented symbolically, with the house resembling the protective environment of the mother's womb. Before birth, the child is under the guardianship of the gods, and the sacred peacock acts as a guardian, warding off any malevolent spirits.

2. The Sun god, Uyungsum, holds significant reverence during the name-giving ceremony and is considered the progenitor of the stars and the earthly realm. His presence signifies that the child is born with his blessings.

3. As part of the welcoming ritual into this world, seven dancers perform to the rhythmic beats of the Dagudu, an indigenous drum-like musical instrument. Gathering seven dancers is a common practice, often representing the sacred significance attributed to the number seven in ceremonial dances.

4. Additionally, a bull and an elk are considered sacrificial offerings to the Sun god, signifying the child's naming. The hunted elk is carried

on a bar by individuals, while women bring grains as offerings to the deity.

5. The Kudanboi, a skilled practitioner, is tasked with creating the jataka, or horoscope, for the newborn child, which involves predicting their future. If any potential obstacles are foreseen, the Kudanboirecommends protective measures to mitigate them.

6. During this ritual, the Sepoys of Raudasum, the Chief Saora deity, stand guard to witness and ensure the smooth and proper execution of the ceremony. Any deviation from the prescribed rituals can have repercussions for both the child and the parents in the future. The Tree of Life is depicted in the artwork, symbolising the source of life. Just as a tree is rooted in the soil, the child is rooted in this world, seeking blessings from all the gods.

The nature of these paintings is fascinating to explore, as they intricately intertwine with ecological elements, social structures, and religious customs and beliefs. Saora art is not the only form of Indian art that exhibits such characteristics. Another renowned tribal art form, Warli, also features triangular anthropomorphic figures with stick-like limbs. Although Saora and Warli art emerged at different times in human evolution and history, several aspects of both traditions bear resemblances.The Saora wall paintings encapsulate elegance, charm, aesthetics, and ritualistic associations. These pictograms serve as literature and philosophy for the Saora people. One of the drawbacks of Gell's theory of art and agency is the lack of attention towards the creator's intention. In the Saora context, *iditals* hold a significant religious connotation and serve as a platform that brings the sacred performer to the forefront. Comprehending the role of a shaman or shamanin is imperative to grasp the genuine essence and importance of *Iditals*. Within the LanjiaSaora community, the shaman, known as *kudanmar* or *kudanboi*, plays a direct role in religious practices and is actively involved in creating*Iditals*. Without the shaman's intervention and guidance, the hidden meanings embedded within an *Idital* remain elusive. Among the dwindling population of *Kudanbois*, one such remarkable individual is Lakshmi Sabar, residing in Puttasing. Her classification of shaman aligns closely with Elwin's categorisation of shamans within Saora society.

- ***Raudakumbaran:*** They are married to tutelary beings and come to know about them and their activities in dreams and sitting trance. They are qualified to perform various rituals and deal with routine rituals.

- ***Raudakumboi***[2]: Shamanic practitioners characterised by their ability to enter a trance state (as indicated by the Saora term *raud* denoting fainting, trance, or spirit possession). They possess the capacity to officiate a diverse range of ceremonies, including the *Karja*[3]ritual.

- ***Guarkumboi*[4] or *Gobgobkumboi*:** Female practitioners who share similarities with idaiboisprimarily focus on rites for the deceased due to the extensive duration of certain funerary ceremonies. However, they differ from *idaibois*by having personal tutelary spirits, exhibiting trance abilities, and assuming prominent roles in ceremonial practices, while *idaibois* serve as mere assistants. (It is expected that *guarkumbois* abstain from marriage and childbearing, while a *raudakumboi*can engage in such pursuits. A *guarkumboi* typically receives training and initiation from her paternal aunt, while a *raudakumboi* may be initiated by anyone, including the paternal aunt or the tutelary spirit through dreams.)
- ***Ildaboi*:**Shamanin without any tutelary. It refers to a shamanic practitioner lacking a personal tutelary spirit and unable to enter trance states through spirit possession.
- ***Regamboi***: Female counterparts of *regamarans*[55] who primarily engage in the procurement of remedies against sorcery practices.

The shamanic initiation process presents intriguing aspects for exploration when examining the roles of religious functionaries. Establishing a shaman within Saora society raises pertinent questions regarding the challenges and complexities of assuming such a position. Equally significant is the process of unbecoming, which sheds light on the social tensions and familial disruptions experienced by individuals when they lose their esteemed status as celebrated *kundanbois*.

Becoming Kudanboi: A Case Study

Every shamanin, during the onset of puberty, undergoes a remarkable dream experience that plays a parallel role in the experiences of other shamans. This transformative encounter culminates in her "marriage" to a tutelary spirit from the underworld, marking the beginning of her sacred responsibilities. This spiritual union typically does not impose restrictions on earthly marriages (although it may do so for *guarkumbois)*, as the Saora people do not hold a specific belief in the magical efficacy of chastity. Consequently, the shamanin often enters into a marital union with a human spouse after a few years. However, her relationship with her dream Lord remains equally significant. When conversing with a shamanin, it is not always evident which of her two husbands holds greater significance in her life. This dream experience may precede or follow formal training in divination. In some instances, a girl from a family with no prior association with shamanic practices may be called to the role through a dream, and it is the dream husband himself who imparts the knowledge and skills of the art to her.

Typically, a girl is affiliated with a family where the tradition of shamanin already exists, often with her mother or father's sister assuming

the role of shamanin. From an early age, the preparation of the young girl for her future life as a shamanin begins under the guidance of her family member. Consequently, the dream experiences encountered by the girl are not entirely unexpected (although they are conventionally regarded as a significant surprise), following a regular pattern influenced by mythology and social traditions.

The transformative dream that propels a girl into her shamanic profession and sanctifies it with supernatural endorsement takes the form of visits from a suitor from the underworld, presenting a marriage proposal along with its aesthetic and illuminating implications. This husband figure assumes a Hindu persona, exuding refinement and charm, possessing considerable wealth, and adhering to numerous customs unfamiliar to the Saora community. According to tradition, he appears in the depths of night, and upon his entrance into the room, the entire household falls under a spell and succumbs to a deep slumber resembling death. In nearly all cases, the girl initially rejects the proposal, recognising that the path of a shamanin is arduous and fraught with perils.

As a consequence, she begins to be burdened by nightmares wherein her divine lover transports her to the underworld or threatens her with perilous falls from great heights. A decline in her physical health is typically observed, and there may be instances when she temporarily loses her sanity, wandering with a dishevelled appearance through fields and woods. At this point, the family intervenes. Given that, in most instances, the girl has been undergoing training for a certain period, everyone is aware of what she is about to face, and even if she does not explicitly disclose the situation to her parents, they generally possess astute awareness. However, it is customary for the girl to confess to her parents that she has received the call, initially refused it, and now finds herself in danger. This confession immediately alleviates her guilt and enables her parents to act appropriately.Consequently, the parents swiftly arrange the girl's marriage with her tutelary spirit, solidifying her commitment to the shamanic path.

The Saora culture encompasses the practice of shamanic trance, wherein individuals undergo somnambulistic possession by supernatural entities, often preceding dissociative amnesia. Among the Saora tribe in Orissa, confident young men and women exhibit behaviours that may be classified as mental disorders, according to Western-trained mental health professionals. These individuals display inappropriate crying and laughter, memory loss, fainting spells, and report sensations of being bitten by ants despite the absence of such insects. Typically, these individuals are adolescents or young adults who feel little attraction to the conventional lifestyle of subsistence farming. They experience considerable psychological stress due to social pressures exerted by their relatives and peers. The Saora attribute these peculiar behaviours to the influence of supernatural beings desiring to marry these individuals. To resolve this situation, a marriage ceremony is performed

wherein the disturbed person is wedded to the spirits. Following this marriage, the abnormal symptoms subside, and the young person assumes the role of a shaman responsible for healing others. In society's eyes, they transform from being peculiar teenagers to respected adults possessing valuable skills acquired through supernatural encounters. These coping mechanisms serve as means of adaptation.

Regarding the initiation process, a girl initially trains alongside other shamans until she becomes proficient and experienced, as mistakes in this profession can have tragic consequences. Once adequately prepared, the young shaman establishes her practice and quickly gains prominence, becoming as sought after as her counterparts. Her duties are extensive and demanding. If she is a *guarkumboi*, she must attend every funeral within her designated service area. Additionally, she oversees or assists in Gaur or karja ceremonies and participates in lengthy name-giving rituals.

Lakshmi Sabar is the sole remaining *kudan* among the LanjiaSaoras of Rayagada. Other individuals who previously held significant power have either passed away or lost their abilities when their respective tutelary supernatural spirits departed from them. Before becoming a *kudanboi*, Lakshmi enjoyed a contented marriage with Pashto Sabar, a r*egemmar* (herbalist). Despite having dreams involving supernatural and tutelary spirits indicating her future as a shaman, she initially disregarded these experiences. However, after the tragic loss of her fourth son due to her failure to heed the spirits' call, she experienced profound emotional distress, nearly succumbing to madness before recovering. She embarked on the journey to become a shaman to protect her family from further misfortune. Given that her grandparents were shamans, it was highly probable that she would become the next and final Shaman of Puttasing. At 35, she successfully underwent the ritual of becoming a *kudanboi*. According to her, becoming a shaman can be hereditary or dependent on the appeasement of a chosen deity. Since then, she has served as a shaman, choosing not to convert to Christianity out of fear that such a conversion may anger supernatural spirits. Her family consists of three sons, their wives, two grandsons, and four granddaughters. Her eldest son is trained in Saora painting and is currently employed at OTEL (Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihood Programme Plus) Bhubaneswar.

Fig.2: An *Idital* from the house of Lakhami Sabar in Puttasing, Rayagada (Odisha). She is the last living Shaman *(Kudanboi)* in Puttasing village. (Photograph: Somen Rath 2018)

Commodification Of Tribal Art

In an increasingly interconnected world, the continuous flow of people, ideas, and technology has significantly impacted tribal art forms. As time progresses, noticeable changes have occurred in the art created by tribal societies, leading to concerns about authenticity in the contemporary period. Commodification is a process by which things come to be evaluated primarily in terms of their exchange value in the context of trade, thereby becoming goods and services; the exchange value of things is stated in terms of market prices (Cohen 1988). The packaging of cultural activities and artefacts for the market has been around for a while. It is pertinent to consider whether the commodification of artwork undermines its authentic traditional essence. The concept of traditional art has become blurred and subject to debate as different perspectives emerge regarding its definition and authenticity. Some argue that traditional art should remain unchanged over time, while others contend that modern forms, commercialised and marketed to a global consumer base, can also hold authenticity. Can authenticity be sustained over a long period? Cohen (1988) argued that authenticity has no objective quality as it is socially constructed and therefore negotiable.

Numerous agencies, both governmental and non-governmental, have actively participated in the promotion of India's tribal art forms. Their efforts focus on providing artists with better livelihood opportunities while ensuring

the preservation of traditional knowledge embedded within tribal paintings. While some tribal communities have made progress and can integrate with non-tribal communities, others still rely on assistance, waiting for support from administrative and political centres.To meet the market demand for aesthetically appealing artwork, workshops and training programs are being organised to impart the skills of tribal art to community members who are interested in learning as a hobby or a source of income. These initiatives aim to empower the community, improve livelihoods, and facilitate sustainable management of natural resources through communal engagement. They also focus on effectively marketing these products, ensuring that the artists or creators receive recognition and fair compensation to support themselves and their families.

They are considering the global demand for tribal artworks, even as souvenirs for tourists; a foundation-building approach has been adopted to merge technological innovations with indigenous knowledge. This approach aims to foster a pro-tribal environment that encourages the art form's development while preserving its authenticity.In Odisha, the "Idital Federation of LanjiaSaoras" has emerged, employing numerous unemployed youths by training them in Saora art. The federation has secured orders from major online platforms like Amazon and Flipkart, enabling these artisans to showcase and sell artwork. Moreover, government organisations such as OPELIP Plus (Odisha PVTG Empowerment and Livelihoods Improvement Programme), OTELP Plus (Odisha Tribal Empowerment and Livelihoods Programme), and TDCC (Tribal Development Cooperative Corporation) are actively involved in the production of various Saora art forms, including silk canvases, framed photos, clothes and ceramic vessels, among others (fig 3&4). OPELIP, in particular, is dedicated to improving living conditions and reducing poverty among Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Groups (PVTG) and other impoverished communities in Odisha. Their efforts align to enhance the livelihoods of these communities and empower them economically (Rath, 2019).The Odisha government facilitates skill training programs and offers dedicated platforms for creating*idital,* contributing to the socio-economic prospects of the Saora community (Jena & Prasad 2022). Additionally, initiatives such as the SCSTRTI (Schedule Caste and Schedule Tribes Research and Training Institute) Bhubaneshwar and micro projects provide novel opportunities for the younger generation. The motivation behind opting for this profession among the LanjiaSaoras youth lies primarily in financial gain rather than preserving their traditional heritage, considering the significant demand for *iditals*. Scarcely, any idital painters remain unemployed within these villages, and the artists are also commissioned by state authorities to embellish urban walls with their artistry (fig 5). The state's interest in tribal art forms is a welcome step towards preserving "dying arts" and protecting the cultural heritage of the LanjiaSaoras, which are classified as a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group (PVTG).

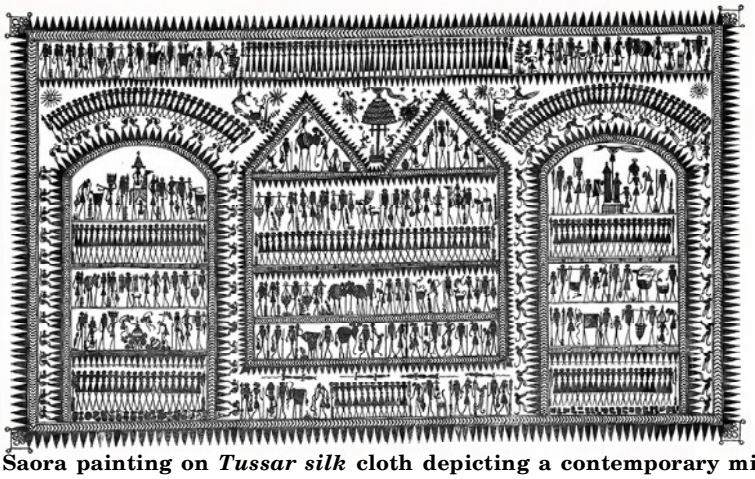

Fig 3. A Saora painting on *Tussar silk* cloth depicting a contemporary mixture of traditional Saora pantheon (without any particular religious ritual theme) is being sold at a handicraft fair (Bhubaneswar, Odisha).

Fig 4: Modern Saora painting on glass, sold by Tribal Development Co-operative Corporation of Odisha Limited (Bhubaneswar, Odisha). Photograph: Somen Rath.

Fig 5: *Idital* or a Saora Wall Painting photographed in Bhubaneswar (Odisha) as a part of city beautification.

With the increased commodification of the Saora art, it is crucial to secure the intellectual property rights of the art for its rightful owners. In 2019, the Ministry of Commerce and Industry received a proposal to secure a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for Saora wall paintings, supported by the Odisha ST & SC Development, Minorities & Backward Classes Welfare Department and the Ministry of Textiles. This initiative aims to promote wall paintings at national and international levels, provide recognition and royalties to the artisans, and ensure the preservation of this unique art form. In safeguarding and preserving Saora paintings, it is imperative to acknowledge that their significance extends beyond their aesthetic value. These artworks, which embellish surfaces such as walls, frames, clothing, and objects, profoundly represent the Saora people's life cycle and cultural traditions.

Concluding Remarks

Art plays a significant role in studying anthropology, reflecting and guiding our understanding of human cultures. It is a human creation that embodies intentionality, imagination, creativity, and skill, although its definitions vary across cultures and historical contexts. The intentional nature of art highlights its potential as a cultural artefact, conveying meanings, values, and symbolic expressions.Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency has made notable contributions to the anthropology of art. However, his theory is not free from criticism. Layton (2003) contended that Gell's stance, which downplayed the significance of cultural convention in influencing the interpretation or 'understanding' of artistic artefacts, needed to be revised. Heoutlined two fundamental stages in Gell's theory of agency in art: one about the agency residing in individual artistic objects and the other considering the artist's oeuvre as a reflection of social identity (2003). Consequently, it becomes evident that artistic objects influence the minds of their recipients. An artwork maintains its prominent position as long as there exists a recipient, be it through its physical form, memories associated with it, or its representation within a network of agency. Notably, Gell acknowledges that art retains its agency through its relevance to the recipient. Layton further emphasises that agency emerges from an artwork's positionwithin a network of social relationships, and its isomorphy in both the internal and external aspects of the artwork. Furthermore, art does not merely symbolise social status; it constitutes an integral part of the larger corpus of cultural expressions. Layton also highlights the significance of sense and reference in art, as its potency lies in its ability to influence minds. Saora art, in particular, preserves its agency when there is a recipient. Although the recipient may have a limited understanding of its ritualistic aspects, they can still appreciate its aesthetic qualities, thereby honouring the artists and reflecting reverence towards the art form.

Art is fundamental in establishing cultural identity, embodying the deep-rooted beliefs and values that shape a culture. The Saora wall paintings

exemplify their close association with rituals. They serve as expressions of the Saora people's literature and philosophy. Studying art objects within their cultural context is essential, as the surrounding environment often holds significant importance and contributes to their overall meaning.With the advent of developmental interventions,traditional modes of subsistence have been impacted. The influence of emerging technologies and global markets has changed traditional occupations.The academic community must demonstrate a conscientious effort to preserve and sustain invaluable cultural traditions and art forms while ensuring the voices of the creators are not silenced. Conservation endeavours must encompass the physical and cultural ecology of ethnic tribal communities.Rather than imposing, there should be encouragement for tribal communities to embrace and nurture their ethnic heritage and skills, respecting their autonomy in making such choices. The significance of preserving traditions and ancient knowledge should be acknowledged even in the face of changes in religious beliefs without questioning the sincerity behind such shifts. It is vital to effectively protect tribal people and their cultures against external threats by recognising their traditional rights over land, water, and forests. This approach ensures the safeguarding of their rich heritage and way of life.Ensuring progress without compromising communities' rich culture and traditions is essential.

It is essential to recognise that when Saora art is produced solely for commodification, it loses its ritual agency. In such cases, tourists or consumers may be attracted to the aesthetics of the art without understanding the underlying intentions and symbolism embedded within the icons depicted. Consequently, the original intention of the creators becomes nullified or diminished. It would be unjust to solely focus on the art object while disregarding the creators' intentions and cultural significance. Artistic production should not be viewed merely as applied aesthetics but rather as an activity deeply rooted in an art world encompassing a complex network of social relationships. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge and honour the multifaceted human connections that have contributed to the creation of Saora art. By doing so, we can ensure that the cultural integrity and richness of Saora paintings are preserved and celebrated.

We askquestions regarding the responsibility of the academic community. Should their obligation lie with the administrative and sponsoring entities or with the people who have been the subjects of numerous documentaries, theses, books, and journals, often without consideration for their genuine needs? The goal is not to advocate biased promotion of any particular art form but to emphasise the importance of accountability. Accountability ensures an authentic and comprehensive representation of communities with accumulated indigenous knowledge, which finds expression through art.By acknowledging the cultural value embedded in tribal art and providing an inclusive platform, we can foster a holistic representation that

respects and preserves the indigenous knowledge and artistic expressions of the tribal communities.

Dedication

This paper is collaboratively written as a tribute to the late Somen Rath, a dedicated PhD scholar from the Department of Anthropology. Somen passed away on 22 May 2022 after valiantly battling brain cancer during his research journey. His work was centred on the Saora tribe in Odisha, where he studied their vibrant art tradition using visual methodologies.

Notes

1 Elwin's publications: *Tribal myths of Orissa* (1949), *The Tribal Art of Middle India* (1951), *Tribal Myths of Orissa* (1954), *The Religion of Indian Tribes* (1955), and *The Art of North-East frontier of India* (1959) are major resources for the present study.

2 First-grade female shaman, the counterpart of Raudakumbaran.

3 It is a kind of death ritual performed after funeral rites (Guar) to commemorate and honour those who have died in that period.

4 Female counterpart of Guarkumbaran (who performs funerary rites on the occasion of Guar, Kajra, and Lajap.

5 A person who prescribes various uncommon material ingredients against sorcery, body infection, tendency to commit suicide, and perform magical rites to control the danger of man-eating tigers

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