

A Combination of Geometry and Spiritual Expression: Santali Art and Idital Art

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Abstract

Santali art and Idital art—two visually compelling tribal traditions of eastern India—embody a unique synthesis of geometry, spirituality, and cultural memory. While emerging from different ethnic groups, both art forms employ symbolic structures that translate cosmology, ritual practice, and community identity into visual communication. This paper examines how these traditions use geometric organisation not merely as aesthetic design, but as a structural grammar that encodes mythological narratives, ancestral relationships, and ritual functions. Santali art, characterised by rhythmic line work, stylised human forms, and painted wall panels, reflects the community's social activities, musical culture, and agricultural cycles. Idital art of the Saora tribe, on the other hand, operates as a ritual pictographic language created by religious specialists, in which linear motifs, spirit figures, terraced compositions, and diagrammatic arrangements serve as mediators between the human and supernatural realms.

Through comparative visual analysis, ethnographic observation, and symbolic interpretation, the study highlights how geometry becomes a conduit for spiritual expression in both traditions—whether through repeated linear forms symbolising collective harmony in Santali murals or ladder motifs, ancestor lines, and cosmograms in Idital panels that map the journey between worlds. The paper argues that the fusion of geometric structure and spiritual intent in these arts challenges the common separation between 'design' and 'ritual painting,' demonstrating instead how indigenous visual systems operate simultaneously as aesthetic objects, mnemonic devices, and sacred texts.

In the context of modernisation, commercialisation, and changing socio-religious practices, both Santali and Idital arts are undergoing reinterpretation. Yet their geometric-spiritual framework continues to anchor them, offering insight into how tribal communities preserve knowledge, negotiate identity, and adapt visual traditions to new contexts. By positioning Santali and Idital art within broader discussions of indigenous design intelligence and spiritual semiotics, the paper contributes to contemporary debates on cultural preservation, visual anthropology, and the evolving role of tribal art in India's creative ecology.

1. Introduction

Tribal art in India embodies a profound intersection of visual storytelling, spiritual philosophy, and symbolic communication. Functioning as both cultural memory and communal identity, these art forms are inseparable from the social and ritual practices of the communities that create them. Among the diverse tribal groups of eastern India, the Santals and the Lanjia Saoras stand out for their distinctive aesthetic systems—Santali mural traditions on one hand, and the codified ritual pictographs of Idital art on the other. Though emerging from different ethnic origins, linguistic families, and ecological environments, the

artistic expressions of these two communities share an underlying conceptual framework defined by the interplay of geometry and spirituality.

For both Santali and Idital artists, geometry is not simply a visual device or decorative design. Rather, it serves as a symbolic language through which cosmic order, ancestral presence, and ritual intention are articulated. Basic geometric elements—circles, triangles, spirals, grids, and linear sequences—carry layered meanings. A circle may signify the cyclical nature of life and agricultural renewal; a triangle may represent fertility or protective energies; parallel lines may evoke community unity or the pathways of spirits. These shapes are not abstracted in a modernist sense, but are intimately connected to oral narratives, environmental knowledge, mythic imagination, and everyday ritual practices.

Santali murals, often painted during festivals or on household walls, reflect communal life, music, seasonal cycles, and social harmony. Their compositions employ rhythmic repetitions and symmetrical arrangements that communicate balance and collective identity. In contrast, Idital art—traditionally created by *Kudan* or *Kidan* (Saora priest-artists)—operates as a sacred diagrammatic system. Motifs such as ladders, ancestor figures, terraced fields, and cosmograms are drawn with precise linearity to mediate between the human world and the supernatural realm. The geometric structuring in these ritual paintings is deeply connected to healing practices, rites of passage, and the invocation of protective deities.

This paper investigates how geometry functions within these two traditions not only as a compositional framework but as a vehicle of spiritual meaning. By examining visual motifs, ritual contexts, and narrative structures, the study aims to illuminate the ways in which Santali and Idital art embody cosmic principles, transmit ethical and ancestral knowledge, and sustain cultural continuity across generations. Through this comparative lens, the paper reveals how indigenous aesthetic systems integrate the material and metaphysical, challenging modern assumptions about the separation of art, ritual, and design.

2. Contextual Overview

2.1 Santali Art

The Santals constitute one of the largest and most widely distributed tribal communities in India, with significant populations across Jharkhand, Odisha, and West Bengal, and smaller groups in Assam and Bihar. Their artistic practices are deeply integrated into everyday life and ritual structures, reflecting a worldview rooted in nature, communal celebration, and ancestral continuity. Santali visual expression includes murals, floor decorations such as **alpana** or **aripana**, wooden sculptures, ceremonial objects, and painted clay reliefs. These forms are not produced merely for aesthetic appreciation but are embedded within ritual cycles associated with sowing, harvesting, marriage, festivals like *Sohrai* and *Baha*, and the veneration of spirits (*bonga*).

Santali art is characterised by dynamic yet simplified compositions that emphasise linear rhythm, flat colour fields, and the repetition of geometric patterns. Triangles, zig-zag lines, dots, circles, and checkerboard patterns frequently appear, symbolising agricultural abundance, protection, fertility, or cosmic balance. Although Santali art does not follow a rigid iconographic code like Idital, it relies on a shared visual vocabulary that has evolved through oral traditions and communal memory.

Common themes include scenes of dancing and drumming—central to Santal cultural identity—depictions of forests, birds, domestic animals, hunting sequences, and daily village activities. These motifs are typically rendered in profile or frontal poses, creating a two-dimensional surface that prioritises symbolic clarity over realism. The absence of strict perspectival rules accentuates the narrative and rhythmic quality

of the artwork. In essence, Santali art functions as an expressive medium that documents collective life while reinforcing values of unity, harmony with nature, and spiritual gratitude.

2.2 Idital Art (Saora Tribe)

Idital art, practised by the **Lanja Saora** tribe primarily in the Rayagada district of Odisha, represents one of India's most sophisticated forms of ritual painting. Unlike many tribal mural traditions that derive from festive or domestic contexts, Idital is fundamentally a **sacred and priest-led** art form. The term "Idital" refers to a deity invoked during ceremonies, and the paintings themselves are created as spiritual offerings in response to life events such as childbirth, marriages, crop failures, deaths, epidemics, or misfortune. They serve as both a medium of communication with the divine and a visual record of the community's cosmological understanding.

Traditionally, Idital paintings are executed by ritual specialists known as **Kudan** or **Kidan**, who possess esoteric knowledge of symbols, myths, and ritual procedures. These priest-artists use natural pigments derived from stone powders, rice paste, and plant extracts, applied with thin bamboo sticks to create fine linear strokes. The resulting images are deeply encoded with **sacred geometry**, narrative sequences, and symbolic motifs that map the Saora universe.

Idital compositions often feature symmetrical arrangements and terraced layouts populated by spirit beings, deities, ancestors, animals, forests, and scenes of daily activities. Key motifs include the **ladder symbol** connecting the human and ancestral realms, the **sun and moon** signifying cosmic balance, and repetitive anthropomorphic figures representing communal unity or generational lineage. The linear style—characterised by delicate strokes, minimal ornamentation, and precise spatial organisation—reflects a worldview where the material and spiritual worlds are interconnected through invisible pathways.

As ritual diagrams, Idital paintings are understood not only as visual expressions but as **active sacred objects**. Their purpose is to heal, protect, invoke blessings, or mark transitions, making them indispensable to Saora ritual life. The geometric structuring of these paintings operates as a visual theology, embedding myths, moral codes, and cosmological principles into a pictorial language transmitted across generations.

3. Geometric Elements in Tribal Art

Geometry plays a crucial role in tribal visual culture, functioning not merely as an aesthetic device but as a symbolic system through which cosmological order, social organisation, and ritual communication are expressed. Both Santali and Idital art demonstrate a sophisticated and intuitive grasp of geometric principles, embedded within cultural memory and transmitted through generations. The use of symmetry, repetition, and sacred shapes forms a visual vocabulary that encodes metaphysical ideas, ethical values, and ancestral teachings.

3.1 Symmetry and Balance

Symmetry in tribal art is more than a compositional tool—it represents an **ideological belief in equilibrium**, reflecting how tribal communities conceive harmony within the cosmos, nature, and society. In Santali murals, balanced compositions often mirror community life, agricultural cycles, and seasonal rhythms. Figures arranged in circular or linear patterns—such as dancers in the Sohrai festival—are placed with deliberate balance to signify social unity and interconnectedness.

In Idital art, symmetry is even more pronounced and purposeful. Ritual paintings often display centrally placed deities surrounded by mirror-image figures or repeated motifs on both sides. This bilateral structuring is symbolic of:

- **Life and death**, two parallel yet inseparable realms
- **Human and spirit worlds**, connected through ladders or pathways
- **Male and female principles**, seen as complementary cosmic energies

By maintaining symmetrical balance, Idital art visually embodies the Saora cosmology in which the material and supernatural worlds must remain in alignment for wellbeing and protection.

3.2 Repetitive Motifs and Patterns

Repetition is a foundational aspect of tribal aesthetic logic, serving both decorative and symbolic purposes. It reaffirms continuity, rhythm, and collective identity.

In Santali murals, repeated **triangles, chevrons, diamonds, and zig-zag borders** frame narrative scenes. These patterns often symbolize:

- **Agricultural abundance**
- **Protection against malevolent forces**
- **The rhythmic cycles of seasons and festivals**

The repetition enriches the visual surface while embedding cultural meanings related to labour, nature, and ritual cycles.

In Idital art, repetition carries a highly spiritual significance. The priest-artists use steady sequences of **stick-like human figures, animals, trees, huts, and terraced shapes**. These are not mere decorative elements; they represent:

- **Lineage and ancestry** through chains of figures
- **Community life and shared memory**
- **The cyclical nature of existence**
- **Multiplicity of spirits inhabiting different realms**

The rhythmic pacing of these motifs also reflects the recitation of myths and ritual chants, creating a visual equivalent to oral storytelling.

3.3 Sacred Geometry

Sacred geometry forms the backbone of symbolic representation in both Santali and Idital art. Each geometric shape is charged with layered meanings that correspond to cosmological beliefs.

Circles

The circle appears frequently in both traditions, representing ideas such as:

- **Wholeness and completion**
- **The sun and lunar cycles**
- **The presence of ancestral and protective spirits**

In Idital compositions, circular forms may mark sacred zones or the dwelling space of deities.

Triangles

Triangles hold diverse symbolic meanings:

- **Fertility and growth** (often linked with feminine energies)
- **Mountains, forests, or natural guardians**
- **Directional forces** guiding spiritual interactions

In Santali murals, clusters of triangles often frame scenes involving cattle, harvest, or family rituals.

Lines, Grids, and Ladders

Lines in tribal art guide the viewer's eye and organize mythic time and space.

- Straight lines signify order, human relationships, or paths of ancestral spirits.

- Grids establish structured spaces for narratives, suggesting controlled movement within the cosmic order.
- In Idital art, the **ladder motif** is especially significant—it symbolically connects the human world to the ancestral or divine realm, indicating access, communication, and transformation.

Thus, sacred geometry is not merely a visual element but a **codified map of spiritual understanding**, shaping how communities interpret existence, movement, and metaphysical relationships.

A table or infographic connecting geometric forms to their spiritual meanings.

Geometric Shape	Santali Meaning	Idital Meaning
Circle	Sun, protection	Ancestors, cosmic wholeness
Triangle	Mountain, fertility	Feminine force, ritual direction
Spiral	Life cycle	Soul’s journey
Grid	Home boundary	Ritual narrative structure

Purpose: To visually decode spiritual symbolism.



Figure 3.1

Source: Santali wall, Vijayant Dash, Researcher, Artist, Curator, 2024, Mayurbhanj, Odisha



Figure 3.2

Source: Santali Wall, Vijayant Dash, Researcher, Artist, Curator, 2024, Mayurbhanj, Odisha



Figure: 3.3

Source: Idital, Author, 2024, Rejingtal Village, Rayagada, Odisha



Figure : 3.4

Source: Idital, Author, 2024, Rejingtal Village, Rayagada

4. Spiritual Significance of Geometry

Geometry within tribal art is never accidental or merely ornamental. In both Santali and Idital traditions, geometric shapes function as **spiritual signifiers**, guiding ritual practice, narrating mythologies, and preserving the worldview of the community. These shapes articulate relationships between humans, ancestors, nature, and cosmological forces, turning each artwork into a spiritual document encoded with cultural meaning.

4.1 Geometry as a Cosmological Map

In Idital painting, geometry serves as an intricate **cosmological and spiritual map** that visualises how the

Saora people understand the universe. The spatial placement of figures, the direction of lines, and the layering of motifs follow a coded logic grounded in ritual theology.

- **Vertical arrangements** often represent the layered worlds—underground spirits, the human world, and celestial beings.
- **Ladder symbols** act as metaphysical bridges, illustrating communication between the living and the dead.
- **Terraced layouts** symbolise the structured path that spirits take, or the order of the cosmos maintained through ritual.
- **Borders and frames** demarcate sacred zones, functioning as ritual boundaries that protect the household and contain spiritual energy.

Each Idital painting thus becomes a form of **spiritual architecture**—a carefully constructed diagram intended to invite protection, healing, or divine intervention. The geometry provides structure to mythological narratives, ensuring that ancestral presence is visually and ritually anchored in the domestic space.

In the Santali tradition, although geometric structuring is less codified, the use of symmetrical and repetitive floor and wall designs during festivals like **Sohrai, Baha, and Karam** serves an equally sacred purpose.

- These designs purify the home,
- mark the arrival of deities, and
- create a sanctified environment for worship and celebration.

Thus, geometry becomes a medium through which divine presence is invoked and maintained within the community.

4.2 Ritual and Identity

For both Santali and Saora communities, the process of creating geometric art is itself a **ritual act infused with intention and sacred discipline**. The act of painting is not merely artistic; it is devotional.

- In Santali villages, women often create symmetrical murals or floor designs using natural pigments, a practice associated with cleansing, fertility, and safeguarding the household. Their participation reinforces **gendered roles in cultural preservation** and connects the community to ancestral values.
- In Idital tradition, the ritual specialist (*Kudan* or *Kidan*) paints with precise strokes guided by ritual chanting and invocation. Every line or symbol is drawn with the belief that it holds spiritual power and must follow ancestral prescription.

This ritualised creation of geometric forms becomes a powerful expression of:

- **tribal identity**,
- **collective memory**,
- **cultural continuity**, and
- **spiritual protection**.

Through repeated practice, each generation reaffirms its relationship with the past while strengthening its sense of belonging in the present.

4.3 Oral Transmission and Spiritual Codes

Historically, both Santali and Saora cultures relied on **oral tradition** rather than written language. As a result, geometric motifs function as mnemonic devices—**visual codes** that store, transmit, and preserve spiritual and ancestral knowledge.

- A **circle** may stand for cosmic unity, the presence of spirits, or the cyclical nature of life.
- A **triangle** may evoke fertility, mountain deities, or feminine creative power.
- A **grid** or **cluster of lines** may represent agricultural rhythms, community structure, or mythic pathways.

These shapes provide a visual shorthand for complex stories, rituals, and cosmological principles that might otherwise be lost across generations.

In this sense, geometry becomes a **non-literate script**, a visual language that encapsulates centuries of accumulated wisdom. It ensures that even without written records, tribal communities can transmit their heritage—spiritual beliefs, ritual practices, and ethical values—through art that is universally accessible within the community.

5. Continuity and Change in Contemporary Context

The visual traditions of both Santali and Idital art have undergone significant transformation in recent decades, influenced by socio-economic changes, state patronage, globalisation, and the growing market for indigenous aesthetics. While these art forms were once deeply embedded in ritual spaces and community-specific functions, their contemporary trajectories reflect a complex negotiation between **cultural continuity and creative adaptation**.

Commercialisation and tourism have played especially influential roles, creating new platforms for recognition but also posing challenges regarding authenticity and meaning. As tribal artists increasingly produce works for exhibitions, craft fairs, and international audiences, traditional constraints of medium, surface, and ritual context have begun to shift. Murals that were once painted exclusively on the walls of homes or sacred spaces now appear on **canvas, paper, textile, plywood**, and other portable surfaces suited for commercial circulation.

Santali Art: Expanding Narrative and Aesthetic Flexibility

In contemporary Santali art, there is a noticeable movement toward narrative expansion. While geometric structuring remains an important reference point, artists often experiment with:

- Free-flowing compositions
- Individualized styles
- Colour palettes inspired by urban art markets
- Depictions of modern themes such as education, migration, and environmental issues

As a result, the strict balance and symmetrical geometry of traditional festival murals may be loosened in favour of dynamic storytelling or expressive spontaneity. This evolution reflects the Santals' engagement with broader cultural and economic networks, but it also raises questions about how traditional motifs are preserved or reinterpreted.

Yet, even when modified, many Santali works retain foundational elements—such as repeated triangles, rhythmic lines, and symbolic animal forms—indicating that **geometric memory remains central to cultural identity**.

Idital Painting: Negotiating Ritual Integrity and Aesthetic Reinvention

Idital art faces an even more delicate tension, as it originates from a ritualistic and priestly tradition. Historically, Idital paintings were executed *only* for sacred purposes and followed strict iconographic rules. However, the commercialisation of tribal art has encouraged Saora artists—some trained priest-artists, others not—to reproduce these works for decorative purposes.

This shift has resulted in several adaptations:

- **Simplification of sacred geometry** to create visually appealing compositions
- **Rearrangement of ritual symbols** outside their traditional cosmological context
- **Stylisation** of human and spirit figures for aesthetic uniformity
- **Use of synthetic paints** instead of natural pigments

Such changes prompt debates about the boundaries between cultural preservation and artistic freedom. While some purists view these modifications as a loss of ritual sanctity, others recognise them as necessary adaptations for survival in a changing economic environment.

Importantly, many contemporary Saora artists emphasise that even when produced for commercial contexts, the **core symbolism—ladders, ancestral figures, cosmograms—remains intact**, suggesting that the essence of the tradition is being preserved within a modern visual language.

Balancing Tradition and Modernity

Despite these changes, both Santali and Idital artists remain committed to maintaining cultural continuity. Their adaptations often reflect **strategic transformations**, not mere dilution:

- **The medium changes, but the message persists.**
- **Geometry remains a cultural anchor**, even when aesthetic expressions evolve.
- **Spiritual significance is reinterpreted rather than erased.**

The contemporary tribal art market thus becomes a site of negotiation where identity, memory, and tradition are continually reshaped. The new forms—though influenced by global art circuits—still serve as repositories of tribal spirituality and cultural wisdom, demonstrating the resilience and adaptability of indigenous visual languages.

6. Conclusion

The artistic traditions of the Santals and the Saoras (Idital painters) demonstrate that geometry in tribal art is never merely decorative — it is a living expression of cosmology, ritual practice, and cultural identity. The circles, triangles, spirals, and grid-like frameworks seen in these art forms embody an entire worldview, where the material and spiritual realms are inseparably linked. Geometry becomes a language through which communities articulate their relationship with ancestors, nature, and the divine.

For the Santals, floor and wall designs drawn during festivals like Sohrai and Baha are acts of renewal, purification, and thanksgiving. The recurring forms — sun motifs, leaf patterns, rhythmic lines — mark the home as a sacred space. Among the Saoras, Idital paintings are even more explicitly ritualistic: their geometric arrangement becomes a spiritual architecture that invites and guides ancestral spirits. In both communities, the symbolic order of shapes reinforces social structure, memory, and moral teachings passed down through generations.

In the contemporary era, these practices are transforming as tribal artists engage with new materials, markets, and audiences. While commercialisation and tourism often encourage stylisation or aesthetic experimentation, they also create new platforms for cultural visibility. The challenge lies in balancing innovation with fidelity to ancestral knowledge. Some artists adapt their compositions to canvas and paper, modifying scale or adding narrative elaboration, while others remain committed to the traditional ritual codes that define authenticity within the community. Yet across these varied trajectories, the underlying logic of geometry — as a vessel of spirituality, identity, and continuity — remains remarkably resilient. Ultimately, Santali art and Idital art demonstrate how indigenous aesthetics evolve without severing their roots. Even as these traditions enter galleries, cultural festivals, and global art markets, their geometric-spiritual foundation continues to serve as an anchor. Through every line and motif, the art forms reaffirm

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