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# Cultural Continuity and Change: A Study of the Gadaba Tribe

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**Abstract**

The study takes up the dynamics of cultural continuity and change in the indigenous Gadaba tribe of hilly areas of Odisha and Andhra Pradesh, India. The Gadabas are the descendants of longstanding traditions, language, clothing and ceremonies, and represent the strength of tribal identity in the face of socio-economic changes. The research explores the tribe's efforts to preserve their cultural ways and to respond to external influences including modernization, state policies, education and migration through ethnographic methods, historical analysis and oral stories. The study emphasizes the following features of cultural continuity (dance forms such as Dhemsa, traditional weaving, clan-based social structures, and language use) and emergents (youth aspirations, livelihood patterns, and language use). The paper's analysis of these interwoven themes brings a new perspective to the ongoing debates on indigenous resurgence, identity negotiation, and globalization's effects on tribal communities in modern India.

**Keywords:** Gadaba tribe, cultural continuity and change, indigenous community

## 1. Introduction

Tribal communities are very important in the history of India. They keep social systems, languages, traditions, art and ways of living. Their customs are connected strongly to their past the place they live how they relate to each other and who they are as a group. Tribal societies are not the same all the time. In the times more contact with the bigger society has caused changes in education, jobs, how people make a living how they talk, moving to new places and how they live together. These changes have brought chances for tribal communities as well as changed the old cultural ways. So, it is important to look at the ways and the new changes when thinking about tribal culture The Gadaba are one of important indigenous groups of Odisha, who are mainly located in Koraput district and adjoining districts of Andhra Pradesh. They communicate through their language, clothing, ceremonies, festivals, social structure, traditional careers and performing arts. Dhemsa dance is an important cultural expression among these cultural expressions in community life. It is done at festivals, social events as well as when people get married and other events and is a place for people to participate together and express themselves culturally. The Gadaba identity is further accentuated by traditional weaving, dresses, clan based social relations and other customary practices. Gadaba society, meanwhile, has undergone significant social and economic changes. Everyday life has been affected by modern education, Government policies, improved communication, migration, alteration in livelihoods and increased interaction with urban and non-tribal society. Young people, especially, are being exposed to new educational, working, technological, fashion, spoken and popular culture experiences more than ever before. Consequently, some traditional practices are being

continued, others are being adapted, diminished or dropped. These changes may not mean the end of culture; they are a manifestation of the way communities chart a course for their identity in the face of evolving social realities. This is why the research in the area of cultural continuity and change becomes significant when dealing with the Gadaba community in balancing the inherited culture with the present aspirations. The Dhemsa dance, the traditional dress, the weaving, the rituals, the clan based social structure, the language use, livelihoods, migration, education, and aspirations of young people illustrate aspects of cultural continuity, while others, such as the language use, livelihoods, migration, education, and aspirations of the youth, illustrate processes of cultural transformation. Both of these aspects when examined together can help to understand how Gadaba identity is preserved, negotiated and restructured in the modern era. While historians, anthropologists and social scientists have written about tribal communities, the dynamics of traditional practices that are preserved and transformed in each community need to be investigated at a community level. Understanding the relationship between cultural practices and the current socio-economic change can offer more depth to the understanding of indigenous resilience and identity negotiation in particular. Hence, in this study, the Gadaba community is studied using ethnographic fieldwork, historical study, and oral history, where traditional cultural practices are examined as they continue, adapt and change in response to the influence of modernization, state policies, education, migration and broader processes of globalization.

Gadaba population is a part of the cultural region which roughly corresponds with the former district of Koraput in the eastern ghats mountain range in Odisha. The Gadaba are generally classified as members of a larger group which is often not clearly defined, known as "Poraja" (Subject) and includes other indigenous groups in the southern part of Odisha. The Gadaba are also called by the name Desia ("People of the Land") and by themselves use the same term for themselves.[1] The Gadaba are one of the important tribal communities of Odisha and have a rich and unique cultural heritage. Gadaba is thought to be derived from the word Gada, which meant a small stream in the Godavari valley. The anthropological identification of Gadaba people is with Proto-Australoid. In the linguistic aspect, their native language is Gutob, a language of the Austro-Asiatic language family. The Gadaba people have a unique and easily identifiable socio-cultural identity.

## 2. Review literature

Berger (2014) looks at indigeneity in the communities of Highland Odisha. The focus is on identity, social organisation, cultural traditions and how these communities relate to their environment. He shows that indigenous identity stays strong through cultural practices and through interaction with the wider society.. The study does not go into much detail, about how specific cultural traditions have continued or changed over time. This research fills that gap by looking at the cultural practices of the Gadaba people and how they have evolved under the influence of modern life.

Padhi (2020) studies the cultural life of the Gadaba tribe. He covers their beliefs, rituals, festivals, deities, songs, music, clothing ornaments and social customs. He also talks about how modernisation and outside forces have changed ways of life for the Gadaba people. The work gives a view of their religious and cultural practices. It does not explore in depth the historical development of these traditions how they have been passed on or how they have transformed over time. This research fills that gap by using ethnographic

[1] Berger, Peter, and Georg Pfeffer. "Gadaba." *Brill's encyclopedia of the religions of the indigenous people of South Asia online*. Brill, 2021.

fieldwork to examine Gadaba cultural practices. It focuses on continuity, change, traditional knowledge and how the Gadaba people respond to influences

Dash (2020), examines changes in the social and cultural life of the Gadaba community. The study highlights traditional customs, social relations, festivals, dress, food habits, beliefs and other cultural practices. It shows how education, modernisation and external influences have transformed Gadaba life. However, it broadly discusses socio-cultural change without detailed attention to cultural continuity, traditional knowledge and its transmission. The present research addresses these aspects through ethnographic study.

Khara and Sutapadia (2024) examine, I find that how Gadaba women contribute to the household economy, agriculture, forest resource collection and ecological management. The study points out Gadaba women's knowledge, their economic participation and their role in managing natural resources. It shows how Gadaba women's activities support both their livelihoods and community life. However, the study mainly focuses on Gadaba women's ecological roles and gives little attention to Gadaba women's cultural practices the way they pass on knowledge and how their cultural expressions are changing. This new research examines these dimensions within the socio-cultural transformation of the Gadaba community.

Mishra and Dash (2026) discuss how Dhemsa is understood, enacted and valued in society. The study helps us see Dhemsa as a form of community expression rather than just entertainment. More focus should be given to the changes in Dhemsa, such as the musical instruments used, dance movements, modernization, the participation of young people and costumes. This current study will focus on these changes by observing them in the field.

Bariha (2026) examines Dhemsa as an expression of tribal cultural identity and community life. The study looks at how cultural continuity and social change relate in the Koraput region. However, the study gives attention to the detailed historical changes in dance movements costumes, musical practices and performance patterns. This new study addresses these aspects by observing them in the field.

Dash and Sethi (2026) examine how folk dances shape interaction, cultural values and behavioural patterns in Odisha. The study highlights folk dance as a medium through which communities express their identity and transmit practices. However, the study gives attention to the historical transformation of specific tribal dances, especially Dhemsa including changes, in costumes, movements, music, instruments and youth participation. This current study addresses these changes by conducting fieldwork.

## 3. Objectives

- To study how Gadaba cultural practices, such as dance and social organisation, have continued and changed over time in response to changing social and demographic conditions.
- To understand how modernisation, education, migration, economic changes and the aspirations of young people are influencing the preservation and transformation of Gadaba cultural identity

## 4. Methodology

With the help of ethnographic measures, the process of both continuity and change of Gadaba culture has been studied in Odisha. The information was collected through fieldwork which was done via conversations and interviews with the representatives of the community along with listening to their experiences. Secondary sources such as books, research articles, reports and previous studies have also been used in the study. The information has been analyzed in order to understand how Gadaba culture is

being kept as well as how it has been changing with the course of time with influence of modernization, education, migration, changed economy and ambitions of the young generation.

## 5. Background of the Study

### 5.1 Rituals Belief

Gadaba religion is not about believing in gods or ancestors or holding religious ideas. It is not about concepts like Des. Maphru or Des. Anibai. The Gadaba people do not spend time thinking about personal beliefs or theology. They do not have strong ideas about deities. What matters most to them is how rituals are carried out. It is about knowing the way to talk to nonhuman beings what kinds of offerings certain deities need and what behavior those beings are expected to follow. For the Gadaba religion is deeply tied to maintaining relationships with nonhuman beings. These relationships are managed through rituals. The goal is to keep everything in balance so that well-being can be achieved. This well-being includes not people staying healthy but also animals staying fertile and crops growing well. The categories of people, animals and plants are often seen as connected. In some rituals crops are thought of as children or brides. A buffalo might be seen as a relative. Illness or bad luck is not a physical problem. It is seen as a sign that a relationship has been damaged perhaps a spirit has been. A deity has been left out or a neighbor is jealous. These problems must be fixed through ritual. The Gadaba ritual system divides relationships into two types: bol soman, which means balanced and bipod which means dangerous and threatening. There are two ritual cycles. One is the life cycle, which includes events like birth, marriage and death. The other is the cycle, which follows the farming year. These cycles help keep the relationships alive and help renew them. These relationships make up the order, called niam which was originally created by the gods. Other rituals are focused on protection on stopping harm before it happens. Even though the rituals are different they all have three things in common. First sacrifice and blood are seen as life-giving. Blood is not a symbol it is believed to carry power and renew life. Second food is important, especially food that comes from sacrifices. This food is called tsoru. It is treated with care. Used in rituals. Third food is often used as a way to explain things. People use food-related ideas to talk about relationships, values and processes. For example feeding a deity is like giving a gift to a guest. Cooking food is, like preparing for a ceremony. Food becomes a way to show respect to make connections and to keep order.

### 5.2 Changing of belief system

This paragraph highlighted the changes in traditional religious beliefs, rituals, and ceremonies of the Gadaba community. For example, the Gotar ceremony, especially among Gutob Gadabas. The Gotar ceremony has traditionally involved the buffalo and the recovery of coins from its stomach which was an important aspect of the ritual. However, recently this particular element has virtually disappeared. Several factors are responsible for this including the rising price of buffaloes, and gradually increasing influence of Hindu practices on daily life of the people, restrictions imposed by the government on animal sacrifices, and growing awareness on animal rights and cruelty issues. Education and greater communication with the outside world have also impacted the attitudes of people against the old rituals leading a number of people from the community to reconsider the rituals which they utilized to regard earlier as an indispensable part of their life.

There are also changes in the practices of ancestor's worship. Although clan respect for ancestors remains among the people of Gadaba, it has become less acknowledged in communities and more familiar for family households. Funeral practices of the Gadaba are becoming simpler compared to their earlier traditions. Some elements of traditions are still present in the funerals, but the ceremonies are now simpler

and less costly. Generally speaking, there are many changes in the annual festivities that used to require the high expenses and involve many people or at least community members who took part in the ceremonies.

The passage emphasizes the vanishing and changing of the traditional Gadaba religious and ritual observances. The Gotar practice has considerably declined, especially in the case of the Gutob Gadabas, who have ceased to recover coins from the buffalo's rectum. High cost of buffaloes, Hindu religion influence, government ban on animal sacrifice and increasing awareness of animal cruelty are cited to be responsible for this reduction. These changes have also been brought by education and exposure to the wider society. In addition to the decrease in Gotar, the worship of ancestors is also diminishing in significance and is much more commonly carried on within the household. While simple funereal practices still exist, many annual festivals and life-cycle rituals, formerly elaborate and expensive, are now carried out in a less celebratory manner.[2]

**5. 3 Appearance, dress, and ornaments**

- **The cloth's name is Kerang. In the Gadaba language, they called it "kislav."**

In the entire human journey, apart from food and shelter, the third most important aspect has been clothing. In the remote prehistoric era, when textiles had not yet been invented, people used to wear tree bark or animal skins. This practice is what made humans different from other animals, as there was a concept, an idea of modesty or shyness that humans developed and tried to maintain throughout their journey. To protect their privacy and to cover their private parts, early humans came up with the idea of using bark or animal skins as clothing. Later, as they evolved, they began to invent and explore various other aspects of clothing, gradually developing more advanced and diverse garments. They came up with various ways of using tree bark, and from there, they started extracting threads and yarns. One of these trees is called the *Kerang* tree. The Gadaba communities, who live in the high mountains of the Eastern Ghats region of Koraput district in Odisha, are well known for extracting thread and yarn from the *Kerang* tree. Using various ingenious techniques, they made two-piece clothing, especially for women. This *Kerang* tradition has continued over time. The colors of the *Kerang* sari are red, blue, and white. Although now only the older, elderly women wear it on particular occasions, as it is no longer necessary for daily use. The Gadaba are an indigenous community with rich cultural traditions.

**5.4 Changing of Dress and Ornaments**

The study discusses an important shift in dress pattern of the Gadaba community, especially youngsters. In the traditional times Gadaba women put on their *Kerang* sari and traditional jewellery but nowadays the use of these ornaments is limited to festivals and marriages. The use of synthetic fabric and modern dresses has been promoted due to modern education, urbanisation, job and contact with outsiders of the village.[3] Most young girls are wearing frocks and salwar whereas young women are wearing sari, blouse, petticoat and others new dresses. The Gadaba men have also shifted their attire from dhoti, lungi, turban, lenguti to jeans, trousers, shirt and t-shirts. Woollen clothes are also now popular, especially in the winter. Government tribal hostels have even been able to affect the fashion, hairstyles and clothing of the youth. Therefore, traditional and contemporary clothes are occasionally mixed, indicating a gradual shift in Gadaba dressing and identity.

[2] Padhi, "An Ethnographic Manifestation of Religious Life of Gadaba Tribe in Its Changing Dimensions," 2020.
[3] Padhi, "An Ethnographic Manifestation of Religious Life of Gadaba Tribe in Its Changing Dimensions," 2020.

I noticed that the Gadaba community had changed the traditional dress pattern during my field visit to Bairipada village when I attended *Chaiti Parab* festival. The villagers were not in their traditional attire (*Kerang)* nor in traditional ornaments associated with Gadaba cultural identity. Women wore normal sarees and salwar suits etc., which were in vogue in modern times. Jeans, T-shirts and full-sleeved shirts were commonly worn by men. No traditional dress and ornaments were seen among the villagers even during the festival. This is an observation of the shift in Gadaba clothing and an indicator of the impact of modern education, availability of goods in the market, and shifting lifestyles and broader contact with other societies on traditional cultural activities.

**5.5 Dance forms**

The Gadaba people of Odisha have several traditional dances such as Khunda Dhemsa, Anta Jhulani, Gadi Betani, Mandi Lachkani, Gad Betani and Bag Dhemsa. These dances are danced collectively as community activity, are chain-like in formation, coordinated in action and participate rhythmically. Groups of dancers (20-50 or more individuals) form a line during festivals and other social events. When the dancers hold each dancer to the right shoulder, or waist, they form a connected formation where each dancer is connected to the next. This way, the dancers are able to perform as a group instead of as separate individuals. Typically, the first dancer will lead the formation and direct the movement. The other dancers follow in the rhythm, posture and pattern of the leader. The dancers perform in coordination, frequently bending their knees, stepping in rhythm and keeping the line going. The movements can be up and down, back and forth and circular depending on the type of dance and when it is performed. The group's movement is dependent on the movement of each dancer and the cooperation and attention of the participating dancers in the connected formation. One dancer's change of direction or rhythm loss can impact the coordination of others.

**5.6 Changes in dance forms**

In Bairipada village on the occasion of Chaiti Parab, I noticed some changes in the attitude and attitudes of the Gadaba people in the way they present the Gadaba dance, the dressing style, ornaments, musical composition and participation. Traditionally Gadaba cultural performances are linked to particular clothing and ornaments such as the use of Kerang fabrics. In the Chaiti Parab celebration that I watched however, no one wore the traditional Kerang dress or traditional ornaments. The women were dressed in normal saris and salwar suits and the men wore T-shirts, jeans and long sleeves. It was striking that there were no traditional dress or decorations during the festival, as this was an essential element for the festival that allowed the community to participate and express their culture.

The musical scene of the festival too had undergone a major transformation. One side of the assembly had musicians performing the traditional music with native instruments and the other side had a DJ set-up on a four-wheeler playing the recorded music at a loud volume. Consequently, a contemporary festival could simultaneously house traditional instrumental music as well as recorded music. Some remained engaged with Dhemsa dance with traditional musical instruments while others, mainly the young people, seemed to be more interested in the recorded music and DJ music. Young participants were also observed doing individual dances to contemporary songs, instead of just dancing in the traditional collective dance formation. It caused a contrast between the group dances, which were traditional, and individual dances, which were new. Rhythm is an integral part of the traditional Dhemsa dance. The rhythms are made by indigenous musicians using traditional instruments and these rhythms direct the movement and steps of the dancers. In this observation, I noticed that the importance of rhythm in the Dhemsa performance was still present, especially in the traditional form of the Dhemsa which involved those participating. The

dancers' movements were synchronized and tightly linked to the music being played by the instrumental musicians. Simultaneously, the DJ music provided a new rhythm and setting for the young people to move in and free themselves in their own style of dance.

Another change can be observed in the physical formation of the dance. The Dhemsa is traditionally danced communally, in a line or chain. Dancers can hold hands, shoulders or waist of another dancer and perform in harmony with the rhythm set by the musicians. This type of formation allows for co-ordination and accentuates the group nature of the dance. In my field observation, I could see that the group Dhemsa was still practiced, but some young dancers preferred individual dancing and neglected the physical connection between dancers. This means that participation is not only increasingly more and more diverse, but that traditional collective dancing coexists with individual and modern dancing. There were also changes in movement patterns and pace. The traditional style of Dhemsa is derived from rhythmic steps and group movements that are repeated in sequence. Individual dancing to DJ music and recorded music had more variable and faster movements. The younger participants seemed to be at ease with these contemporary ways of body expression. Thus, there is no replacement of traditional dances by modern dances, but traditional dances and modern dances were there during the same festival. This intermingling serves as an illustration of the possibility of cultural modification by the incorporation of new customs and traditions along with the old. The findings at Bairipada suggest that there is a change in certain visible aspects of Gadaba dance culture such as costumes, ornaments, music, participation, and movement due to modernization. DJ music and personal dancing are a form of entertainment and cultural expression that is changing with the younger generation. But the use of traditional instruments by Dhemsa proves that traditional practices have not been eradicated as a whole. Rather, traditional and modern elements are now coexisting in the festival setting. Hence, the changes witnessed in Bairipada can be interpreted as a process of cultural transformation, where the aspects of traditional dance remain but the new aspects of music, dress, participation etc. are slowly coming up in the contemporary life of Gadaba culture.

**5.7 Changes in marriages**

Marriages were largely arranged by elders, and practices such as bride service played a central role in strengthening family and community bonds. Marriage ceremonies were simple, community-based, and closely linked to customary norms and rituals. In recent years, Padhi notes that factors such as education, migration, exposure to modern lifestyles, and interaction with non-tribal communities have influenced marital practices. Bride service has gradually declined and is often replaced by monetary payments, increasing the financial burden on families. Wedding rituals have become more elaborate, sometimes imitating non-tribal customs. Young people now have greater freedom in choosing their partners, reducing the authority of elders. Although inter-community marriages are slowly increasing, traditional rules like clan exogamy and ritual validation of marriage continue to remain important, reflecting both continuity and change in Gadaba society.[4]

**5.8 Analysis**

The material presents Gadaba society as a culture in which traditional practices are changing under the influence of education, modernization, economic conditions, government intervention, urbanisation and increasing interaction with wider society, but these changes do not necessarily mean that traditional culture has disappeared. In the religious sphere, Gadaba practices are described mainly through ritual relationships with nonhuman beings, where rituals are connected with human well-being, animal fertility and

[4] Padhi, Soubhagya Ranjan. "Institution of Marriage Among Gadaba Tribe: Continuity and Change." *Editor's Note*: 35.

agricultural productivity; however, several traditional practices have declined, particularly the Gotar ceremony among the Gutob Gadabas, including the earlier practice of recovering coins from the buffalo's rectum. The material associates this decline with the high cost of buffaloes, the influence of Hindu religion, government restrictions on animal sacrifice, awareness of animal cruelty, education and wider social exposure. Ancestor worship and elaborate annual and life-cycle rituals have also become less prominent. Similar changes are visible in dress and ornaments, where the traditional Kerang cloth, once an important element of Gadaba identity, is now mainly associated with older women and particular occasions, while younger people increasingly use modern and synthetic clothing. Young women wear frocks, salwar suits and modern sarees, while men increasingly wear jeans, trousers, shirts and T-shirts; government hostels and contact with wider society are also identified as influences on youth fashion. My field observation at Bairipada during Chaiti Parab provides primary evidence of this transformation because villagers were not wearing traditional Kerang dress or ornaments even during the festival; women wore ordinary sarees and salwar suits, while men wore jeans, T-shirts and full-sleeved shirts. I have seen the pattern in Gadaba dance, where old Dhemsa and other types of dances keep their group shapes steady beats, teamwork and native instruments. In days dancers line up in a linked row moving with the beat that the leader sets so that everyone joins together instead of standing out alone. What I saw at Bairipada is different. Alongside the musicians and instruments a DJ, on a four-wheeler blasted recorded tracks and some young people chose to dance alone to modern music. Thus, traditional collective Dhemsa and modern individual dancing existed within the same festival. The change is also visible in movement and pace, as traditional Dhemsa depends on repeated rhythmic group movements, whereas individual dancing to recorded and DJ music allows faster and more varied bodily movements. Importantly, the evidence does not indicate that modern dancing has completely replaced Dhemsa; instead, both traditional and modern forms are present together. A similar pattern appears in marriage practices, where older practices such as bride service have declined, monetary payments have become more common, wedding ceremonies have become more elaborate, and young people have greater freedom in choosing partners, while clan exogamy and ritual validation of marriage continue to be important. Therefore, the overall analysis of the material suggests that Gadaba cultural change should be understood as a process of selective transformation rather than simple cultural loss. Some traditional practices have declined or disappeared, while others continue but in modified forms, and new practices have been incorporated into existing cultural spaces. In the case of dance, this transformation can particularly be seen through costume, ornaments, musical instruments, DJ music, participation, formation and movement, with traditional collective Dhemsa continuing alongside contemporary forms of individual dancing. Your Bairipada field observation is therefore important because it demonstrates how cultural change can be observed directly within a festival setting, where traditional and modern elements operate simultaneously. The material supports an interpretation of Gadaba culture as dynamic, adaptive and continuously negotiated between inherited traditions and contemporary influences, rather than as a culture in which tradition has simply been replaced by modernity.

**Conclusion**

The analysis of Gadaba society demonstrates that cultural change is a gradual and selective process shaped by education, modernization, economic conditions, government intervention, urbanisation and interaction with wider society. Several traditional practices, including aspects of religious rituals, Gotar ceremony, traditional dress, ornaments and marriage practices, have declined or undergone modification. At the same time, cultural traditions have not disappeared completely; rather, they continue in altered forms and

alongside newly adopted practices. The field observation at Bairipada during Chaiti Parab clearly illustrates this process, particularly through changes in dress, musical practices and dance. Traditional Dhemsa continues to preserve collective participation, rhythmic coordination and indigenous instruments, while DJ music and individual contemporary dancing have become part of the same cultural setting. Thus, Gadaba culture reflects both continuity and transformation, where inherited practices are retained, modified or selectively abandoned according to changing social circumstances. The study therefore shows that modernization has not simply replaced Gadaba tradition but has created a cultural environment in which traditional and contemporary practices coexist and interact. This changing relationship between continuity and adaptation is particularly significant for understanding the contemporary development of Gadaba dance and cultural identity.

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