



REIMAGINING INDIGENOUS VISUAL LANGUAGES: A SEMIOTIC STUDY OF TRIBAL, FOLK, AND CONTEMPORARY ART PRACTICES IN ODISHA

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Abstract:

Indigenous visual languages embody the cultural memory, ecological knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and social identity of communities. In Odisha, tribal and folk art traditions have evolved over centuries as symbolic systems that communicate narratives beyond written language. However, globalization, commercialization, urbanization, and digital technologies have transformed these visual traditions, resulting in new hybrid forms of artistic expression. This research article employs a semiotic framework to examine how indigenous visual languages are being reimagined through tribal, folk, and contemporary art practices in Odisha. Drawing upon the theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, and indigenous visual epistemologies, the study analyzes the symbolic structures embedded within Saura paintings, Dongria Kondh motifs, Pattachitra, and contemporary artworks by Odia artists. The paper argues that indigenous visual languages are not static cultural artifacts but dynamic systems of meaning that negotiate tradition, identity, sustainability, and modernity. Through qualitative visual analysis, the study demonstrates how contemporary artists reinterpret traditional symbols while preserving cultural memory, thereby creating new visual narratives that address ecological consciousness, gender, migration, and indigenous rights.

Keywords: Indigenous Visual Language, Semiotics, Odisha, Tribal Art, Folk Art, Contemporary Art, Saura Painting, Pattachitra, Cultural Identity

1. Introduction

Visual language constitutes one of humanity's earliest systems of communication. Long before the emergence of written scripts, indigenous communities represented their worldview through symbols, patterns, rituals, and artistic practices. In Odisha, one of India's richest cultural landscapes, tribal and folk art traditions continue to function as repositories of collective memory and identity.

Odisha is home to sixty-two tribal communities, including the Saura, Kondh, Bonda, Juang, Gadaba, and Santhal peoples, each possessing distinct artistic vocabularies rooted in cosmology, ecology, and ritual life. Alongside these traditions, Odisha has nurtured sophisticated folk and classical art forms such as Pattachitra, Palm-leaf engraving, Talapatra Chitra, Pipili appliqué, and Dhokra metal craft.

While these traditions remain deeply embedded within local communities, the emergence of museums, digital platforms, art markets, and contemporary artistic practices has reshaped their meanings. Traditional symbols increasingly appear within galleries, installations, graphic design, public art, and digital media, raising important questions concerning authenticity, representation, and cultural continuity.

This paper investigates these transformations through semiotics, exploring how indigenous visual languages continue to evolve while retaining their cultural significance.

2. Methodology

This study adopts a **qualitative, interpretive research methodology** grounded in visual semiotics, visual culture studies, and indigenous knowledge systems to examine the transformation of indigenous visual languages in the tribal,

folk, and contemporary art practices of Odisha. Since the primary objective is to understand how visual symbols communicate cultural meanings and how these meanings evolve across different artistic contexts, a qualitative approach is considered the most appropriate. Rather than measuring or quantifying visual elements, the research focuses on interpreting symbolic meanings, cultural narratives, and aesthetic expressions embedded within artworks.

The research is primarily based on **semiotic analysis**, which provides a theoretical framework for decoding the visual signs and symbols present in indigenous art. The study draws upon the semiotic theories of Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce, and Roland Barthes to examine how images function as systems of communication. Saussure's concept of the relationship between the signifier and the signified is employed to understand how visual motifs such as trees, animals, geometric forms, and ritual figures represent broader cultural concepts including fertility, ancestry, spirituality, and ecological harmony. Peirce's classification of signs into icons, indices, and symbols is used to identify different modes through which meaning is generated within indigenous visual traditions. Barthes' theory of denotation, connotation, and myth further enables the study to investigate how traditional visual symbols acquire new ideological and cultural meanings when they are reinterpreted in contemporary artistic practices.

The research relies on **multiple sources of qualitative data**. Primary data include visual documentation of tribal, folk, and contemporary artworks collected through museum collections, art exhibitions, published exhibition catalogues, artists' portfolios, and, where possible, field observations in regions of Odisha known for their rich artistic traditions. Particular attention is given to visual forms such as Saura wall paintings, Dongria Kondh decorative motifs, Pattachitra paintings, palm-leaf engravings (Talapatra Chitra), Pipili appliqué work, and selected contemporary artworks inspired by indigenous traditions. These artworks are treated as visual texts whose symbolic structures can be interpreted within their social, cultural, and historical contexts.

Secondary data consist of scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral theses, museum publications, government reports, archival documents, and previous research on Odisha's tribal and folk art traditions, visual anthropology, indigenous aesthetics, and semiotics. These sources provide historical background, cultural context, and theoretical perspectives that support the interpretation of visual materials. The literature also facilitates a comparative understanding of how indigenous visual languages have evolved over time and how they are positioned within broader debates on cultural heritage, identity, globalization, and decolonial aesthetics.

The analytical process follows a systematic sequence of visual interpretation. Initially, artworks are selected based on their cultural significance, representativeness, and relevance to the research objectives. Each artwork is then examined in terms of its formal visual characteristics, including composition, colour, line, form, spatial organization, repetition of motifs, and narrative structure. These visual elements are subsequently analyzed as signs within their respective cultural contexts. Rather than interpreting symbols in isolation, the study considers their relationships with ritual practices, oral traditions, ecological knowledge, religious beliefs, and community values. This contextual approach acknowledges that indigenous visual languages derive meaning from lived cultural experiences rather than solely from aesthetic appearance.

A **comparative analytical approach** is also employed to identify both continuity and transformation across different artistic traditions. Traditional tribal and folk artworks are compared with contemporary artistic practices to examine how indigenous motifs are adapted, recontextualized, or hybridized in response to changing social, political, economic, and technological conditions. The comparison explores shifts in symbolism, artistic intention, audience reception, and modes of visual communication while identifying elements of cultural continuity that persist despite stylistic innovation.

The study further incorporates principles of **visual culture studies**, recognizing that artworks function not only as aesthetic objects but also as cultural texts embedded within systems of power, identity, memory, and representation. Indigenous visual languages are therefore interpreted as dynamic communicative practices that negotiate relationships between tradition and modernity, local knowledge and global artistic discourse, and community identity and contemporary cultural production. This interdisciplinary perspective allows the research to move beyond formal stylistic analysis toward a broader understanding of the cultural significance of visual expression.

Ethical considerations are central to the research process. Indigenous artistic traditions are approached with respect for community knowledge, cultural ownership, and traditional meanings. The study seeks to avoid interpreting indigenous symbols solely through Western theoretical frameworks and instead situates semiotic analysis alongside indigenous epistemologies and local cultural contexts. Wherever possible, the research acknowledges the historical,

ritual, and social functions of artworks, recognizing indigenous communities as active producers of knowledge rather than passive subjects of study. Proper academic citation and attribution are maintained for all visual and textual sources used in the research.

Through this qualitative, interpretive, and interdisciplinary methodology, the study aims to demonstrate that indigenous visual languages in Odisha are living systems of communication that continually negotiate cultural memory, ecological consciousness, identity, and artistic innovation. The methodological framework enables a comprehensive understanding of how tribal, folk, and contemporary art practices preserve, transform, and reimagine indigenous visual knowledge within an increasingly globalized cultural landscape.

3. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates **semiotics, visual culture studies, indigenous knowledge systems, and postcolonial perspectives** to examine the symbolic meanings embedded in the tribal, folk, and contemporary art practices of Odisha. Indigenous visual traditions are not merely aesthetic expressions but complex systems of communication through which communities transmit cultural knowledge, religious beliefs, ecological values, and collective identities. Therefore, understanding these artistic practices requires a theoretical approach that recognizes visual images as culturally constructed signs whose meanings emerge from historical, social, and ritual contexts.

The primary theoretical foundation of this research is **semiotics**, the study of signs and signification. Semiotics provides an effective framework for analyzing how visual symbols function as a language capable of communicating ideas beyond verbal expression. The research draws initially upon **Ferdinand de Saussure's** structural theory of the sign, which defines a sign as the relationship between the **signifier** (the physical form of the sign) and the **signified** (the concept or meaning associated with it). According to Saussure, meanings are socially constructed rather than naturally inherent in objects. Within the context of Odisha's indigenous art, visual motifs such as the tree, sun, animals, geometric patterns, and human figures act as signifiers that evoke culturally shared meanings related to fertility, ancestry, spirituality, agricultural life, harmony with nature, and cosmological beliefs. Their meanings become intelligible only within the cultural framework of the communities that produce and interpret them.

While Saussure's model explains the structural relationship between signs and meanings, the study further employs **Charles Sanders Peirce's** triadic model of semiotics, which expands the understanding of visual communication by classifying signs into **icons, indices, and symbols**. Icons communicate through resemblance, indices indicate causal or physical relationships, and symbols derive meaning through cultural convention. Indigenous artworks in Odisha often embody all three forms simultaneously. For example, representations of animals or trees resemble natural forms and therefore function as icons; ritual paintings created during festivals or life-cycle ceremonies serve as indices of specific social and religious practices; and recurring motifs associated with ancestral spirits or sacred landscapes function as symbols whose meanings are learned through cultural participation. Peirce's framework enables the study to examine the multiple layers of signification operating within indigenous visual traditions.

The research also draws significantly on **Roland Barthes' theory of visual semiotics**, particularly his concepts of **denotation, connotation, and myth**. Barthes argues that images communicate literal meanings (denotation) while simultaneously producing deeper cultural and ideological meanings (connotation). These repeated cultural meanings eventually become myths that appear natural within society. Applying Barthes' framework allows the research to explore how indigenous visual symbols acquire new meanings in contemporary artistic contexts. Traditional motifs originally associated with ritual practices, ecological balance, or religious devotion are increasingly reinterpreted as symbols of environmental conservation, cultural resistance, gender identity, indigenous rights, and sustainable development. Through this perspective, the study investigates how contemporary artists retain traditional forms while generating new cultural narratives that respond to present-day social realities.

The theoretical framework is further informed by **visual culture studies**, which view images as active participants in the production of social knowledge rather than passive artistic objects. Visual culture scholars argue that images shape identities, influence cultural memory, and mediate relationships between communities and their environments. This perspective is particularly relevant because indigenous artworks in Odisha are embedded within everyday life, ritual performance, oral traditions, architecture, and ecological practices. Rather than existing solely within galleries or museums, these visual forms function as living cultural texts that communicate social values across generations.

Consequently, the research interprets artworks not simply through formal artistic analysis but within the broader cultural systems that produce and sustain their meanings.

An equally important component of the framework is the concept of **indigenous knowledge systems**. Indigenous visual languages are inseparable from local epistemologies, oral histories, ritual practices, ecological knowledge, and collective memory. Unlike many Western aesthetic traditions that emphasize individual artistic expression, indigenous art often emerges from communal practices in which creativity serves cultural, spiritual, and environmental purposes. The meanings embedded within tribal and folk art therefore cannot be fully understood through universal semiotic models alone; they must also be interpreted through the cultural worldviews of the communities that create them. This perspective encourages the study to approach indigenous visual traditions as dynamic knowledge systems that preserve cultural identity while adapting to changing historical circumstances.

The study also incorporates insights from **postcolonial theory**, particularly its critique of colonial representations of indigenous cultures. Colonial scholarship frequently categorized tribal and folk art as primitive, decorative, or ethnographic rather than recognizing it as sophisticated systems of visual communication. Postcolonial perspectives challenge these assumptions by emphasizing indigenous agency, cultural resilience, and the decolonization of knowledge. This theoretical lens enables the research to examine how contemporary artists reclaim indigenous symbols, negotiate issues of representation, and transform traditional visual languages into forms of cultural resistance and identity formation within global artistic discourse.

Together, these theoretical perspectives provide a comprehensive framework for understanding indigenous visual languages as evolving systems of meaning rather than static cultural artifacts. Semiotics explains the mechanisms through which visual signs communicate; visual culture studies situate these signs within broader social contexts; indigenous epistemologies emphasize community-based knowledge and lived experience; and postcolonial theory highlights the politics of cultural representation and identity. By integrating these complementary approaches, the study examines how tribal, folk, and contemporary art practices in Odisha preserve ancestral knowledge while continuously reimagining indigenous visual languages in response to contemporary cultural, environmental, and political transformations. This interdisciplinary framework therefore supports the central argument of the research that indigenous visual traditions are living, adaptive, and culturally significant systems of visual communication whose meanings continue to evolve across time and context.

Tribal Visual Languages

The tribal communities of Odisha possess rich and diverse visual traditions that function as sophisticated systems of cultural communication. These visual languages are deeply rooted in indigenous knowledge, oral traditions, religious beliefs, and ecological practices, serving as repositories of collective memory rather than merely decorative art forms. Every motif, colour, pattern, and composition conveys specific meanings that are understood within the cultural context of the community. Odisha is home to sixty-two Scheduled Tribe communities, including the Saura, Dongria Kondh, Juang, Bonda, Gadaba, and Santhal, each of which has developed distinctive artistic traditions shaped by its environment, rituals, and social organization. From a semiotic perspective, these visual expressions operate as symbolic languages through which communities communicate concepts of ancestry, fertility, spirituality, identity, and harmonious coexistence with nature.

Among the various tribal art forms, **Saura painting (Idital)** is one of the most significant examples of indigenous visual language in Odisha. Traditionally painted on the walls of houses during rituals related to birth, marriage, harvest, and ancestor worship, Saura paintings depict stylized human figures, animals, birds, trees, agricultural activities, and celestial elements using simple geometric forms. These images are highly symbolic rather than naturalistic. The recurring **Tree of Life** represents fertility, continuity, and the interconnectedness of all living beings, while human figures symbolize community participation and ancestral presence. Similarly, the **Dongria Kondh** community expresses its visual language through body ornamentation, textiles, beadwork, and decorative motifs inspired by hills, forests, rivers, seeds, and wildlife. These symbols reflect the community's spiritual relationship with the Niyamgiri Hills and communicate indigenous ecological knowledge, emphasizing the sacred bond between humans and nature.

The tribal visual languages of Odisha continue to evolve while maintaining their cultural foundations. Traditionally associated with ritual practices and community life, these visual forms are now being reinterpreted by contemporary artists in paintings, murals, graphic design, textiles, and digital media. Indigenous motifs that once communicated religious beliefs and social values have acquired new meanings related to environmental conservation, cultural

identity, indigenous rights, and sustainable development. Despite these transformations, the symbolic essence of tribal art remains intact, demonstrating its adaptability and resilience. Viewed through a semiotic lens, the visual traditions of Odisha are not static relics of the past but dynamic systems of communication that preserve ancestral knowledge while responding to contemporary social and cultural realities.

Nature as the Central Symbolic System

A defining characteristic of tribal visual languages in Odisha is the centrality of **nature** as both subject and symbol. Trees, animals, birds, rivers, mountains, seeds, the sun, and the moon appear consistently across different tribal art traditions. These elements are not represented simply because they exist in the surrounding environment; rather, they embody spiritual beliefs, ecological knowledge, and social values. Nature is perceived as a living entity in which humans, ancestors, spirits, and the environment exist in reciprocal relationships.

This ecological worldview distinguishes tribal visual languages from many modern artistic traditions that separate humanity from nature. In indigenous art, natural forms symbolize life cycles, fertility, regeneration, and cosmic balance. Repetition of these motifs reinforces communal memory and transmits environmental ethics across generations. Consequently, tribal visual language functions simultaneously as aesthetic expression, religious practice, environmental philosophy, and educational system.

Transformation and Contemporary Relevance

Although tribal visual traditions remain rooted in ritual practices, they have undergone significant transformations in response to modernization, globalization, tourism, and contemporary artistic experimentation. Today, Saura motifs appear in public murals, textile design, graphic illustration, digital media, handicrafts, and contemporary paintings. Similarly, motifs inspired by Dongria Kondh ecology and indigenous symbolism are increasingly employed by contemporary artists to address issues such as climate change, environmental conservation, cultural identity, and indigenous rights.

This process of reinterpretation demonstrates that tribal visual languages are not static remnants of the past but dynamic systems capable of generating new meanings in changing cultural contexts. Traditional symbols continue to preserve ancestral knowledge while simultaneously engaging with contemporary social concerns. From a semiotic perspective, these transformations illustrate how visual signs evolve without losing their cultural foundations, allowing indigenous communities and contemporary artists alike to negotiate continuity and change.

Tribal visual languages of Odisha represent highly sophisticated symbolic systems that communicate cultural identity, spiritual beliefs, ecological wisdom, and collective memory. Through motifs, patterns, colours, and ritual imagery, these traditions encode complex systems of knowledge that have been transmitted orally and visually across generations. Their continued adaptation within contemporary artistic practices confirms their enduring relevance and demonstrates that indigenous visual languages remain living, evolving forms of cultural expression rather than static artifacts of the past.

Folk Visual Languages

The folk visual traditions of Odisha represent a vibrant and enduring form of cultural expression that communicates religious beliefs, historical narratives, social values, and collective identity through symbols and artistic practices. Unlike tribal art, which is closely associated with specific indigenous communities, folk art has evolved within broader regional and religious traditions and is deeply integrated into the everyday cultural life of the people. These visual languages employ motifs, colours, patterns, and narrative compositions to convey meanings that are widely recognized within Odia society. From a semiotic perspective, each visual element functions as a sign that reflects cultural beliefs and shared experiences, transforming folk art into a powerful medium of non-verbal communication that preserves and transmits cultural heritage across generations.

Among Odisha's most celebrated folk traditions, **Pattachitra** is a highly developed narrative painting style closely associated with the Jagannath cult. Painted on prepared cloth using natural pigments, Pattachitra depicts stories from the *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, and *Bhagavata Purana*, as well as the lives of Lord Jagannath, Krishna, and other Hindu deities. Its visual language is rich in symbolic imagery, with motifs such as the lotus representing purity and spiritual awakening, the conch symbolizing divine sound, the chakra signifying cosmic order, and the peacock expressing beauty and devotion. Similarly, **Talapatra Chitra** (palm-leaf engraving) combines text and imagery to preserve

religious literature and historical narratives, while **Pipili appliqué** employs colourful textile motifs of the sun, moon, flowers, birds, and chariots to express themes of celebration, prosperity, and devotional culture. Together, these art forms demonstrate how visual symbols communicate complex religious and cultural ideas without relying solely on written language.

In contemporary times, the folk visual languages of Odisha have expanded beyond their traditional ritual and religious contexts to become significant sources of inspiration for modern art, design, fashion, public murals, and digital media. Contemporary artists and designers reinterpret traditional motifs to address themes such as cultural identity, environmental awareness, gender, and globalization while preserving their symbolic significance. This process of adaptation illustrates that folk visual languages are dynamic and continuously evolving rather than fixed or obsolete. Through a semiotic perspective, these transformations reveal how traditional symbols retain their cultural essence while acquiring new meanings in changing social contexts. Consequently, the folk art traditions of Odisha continue to function as living systems of visual communication, bridging the past and the present and ensuring the continuity of the region's rich cultural heritage.

Folk Visual Languages in Contemporary Contexts

The visual languages of Odisha's folk traditions have undergone significant transformations in response to modernization, tourism, commercialization, and digital technology. Today, motifs derived from Pattachitra, Pipili appliqué, Talapatra Chitra, and Dhokra craft are widely incorporated into contemporary painting, graphic design, fashion, textiles, advertising, public murals, product design, and digital media. While these adaptations often introduce new materials and artistic techniques, the symbolic vocabulary of traditional folk art remains largely intact.

Contemporary artists reinterpret these indigenous motifs to address themes such as environmental conservation, gender equality, cultural identity, globalization, and sustainable development. For example, the lotus may symbolize ecological regeneration in environmental art, while the Jagannath iconography is increasingly employed to express Odia cultural identity in national and international contexts. Such reinterpretations illustrate that folk visual languages continue to evolve while maintaining their cultural foundations.

From a semiotic perspective, these transformations demonstrate that symbols are dynamic rather than fixed. Their meanings expand and adapt according to changing historical and social conditions, allowing traditional visual languages to remain relevant within contemporary artistic discourse. Rather than diminishing the value of folk traditions, this process of reinterpretation highlights their resilience and continuing communicative power.

The folk visual languages of Odisha constitute a rich and dynamic system of symbolic communication through which communities preserve religious beliefs, historical narratives, cultural values, and collective identities. Whether expressed through the narrative paintings of Pattachitra, the intricate engravings of Talapatra Chitra, the colourful textiles of Pipili appliqué, or the sculptural forms of Dhokra metal craft, these traditions demonstrate the enduring capacity of visual art to function as a language. Their symbols, motifs, colours, and compositional structures communicate meanings that extend beyond aesthetic appreciation, serving as repositories of cultural memory and indigenous knowledge. Contemporary reinterpretations further affirm that these visual languages remain living traditions, continually adapting to new artistic practices while sustaining the cultural heritage of Odisha.

Semiotic Interpretation

The tribal and folk visual traditions of Odisha can be understood as complex semiotic systems in which every motif, colour, form, and compositional arrangement functions as a sign that communicates cultural meaning. Drawing upon Saussure's concept of the signifier and the signified, visual elements such as the Tree of Life, the sun, animals, birds, geometric human figures, lotus, conch, and chakra serve as signifiers that evoke culturally shared concepts including fertility, ancestry, spiritual continuity, ecological harmony, divine protection, and social identity. These meanings are not inherent in the images themselves but are constructed through the collective cultural experiences and belief systems of the communities that create and interpret them. Similarly, Peirce's classification of signs into icons, indices, and symbols helps explain how indigenous artworks operate simultaneously at multiple levels of meaning. While many images resemble natural forms and therefore function as icons, their ritual use and cultural associations transform them into symbols that communicate religious beliefs, environmental ethics, and collective memory.

The semiotic interpretation of Odisha's indigenous visual languages also reveals that these signs are dynamic rather than fixed. Following Roland Barthes' theory of denotation and connotation, traditional motifs that once primarily

represented ritual practices and cosmological beliefs have acquired new meanings in contemporary artistic contexts. For instance, the Tree of Life, originally associated with fertility and ancestral continuity in Saura paintings, is now frequently interpreted as a symbol of environmental conservation and sustainable living. Similarly, Pattachitra iconography, once confined to devotional narratives, has been reimaged in contemporary art, public murals, and digital media to express cultural identity, social awareness, and ecological responsibility. These evolving interpretations demonstrate that indigenous visual languages continue to negotiate tradition and modernity, preserving their cultural essence while responding to contemporary social, political, and environmental concerns. Thus, semiotic analysis reveals that the visual traditions of Odisha are not static cultural artifacts but living systems of communication that continually generate new meanings across changing historical and cultural contexts.

4. Conclusion

The indigenous visual traditions of Odisha illustrate the enduring vitality of symbolic communication. Tribal and folk arts are not merely aesthetic practices but complex semiotic systems through which communities express cosmology, ecology, spirituality, and social identity. Contemporary reinterpretations demonstrate that these visual languages remain dynamic, adapting to new contexts while preserving their cultural essence. A semiotic approach reveals continuity beneath transformation, showing how symbols acquire new meanings without losing their ancestral significance. Protecting and promoting these evolving visual languages demands interdisciplinary scholarship, community participation, ethical cultural policies, and innovative educational initiatives that recognize indigenous knowledge as a living resource rather than a static relic.

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