

Representation of Tribal Cosmology in Pre-Independence Odia Folklore

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the rich tapestry of tribal cosmological representation in pre-independence Odia folklore, examining how foundational worldviews of Adivasi communities—primarily the Saora, Kandha, and Munda—were encoded in oral narratives, ritual songs, and early printed ballads from the late nineteenth century through 1947. Grounded in a multidisciplinary approach that integrates archival ethnographies, missionary reports, and field-recorded oral performances, the research illuminates how cosmogenic myths, ancestor-spirit mediations, and elemental deity worship functioned as didactic tools for ecological stewardship, social cohesion, and identity affirmation under colonial pressures. Through thematic content analysis of 104 distinct narratives and performer interviews with 24 recognized custodians of tribal lore, three interlocking motifs emerge: (1) the cosmic egg and primordial bird myth, which articulates creation and regeneration cycles; (2) the role of patas or ancestral intermediaries in negotiating human–nature relations; and (3) performative rituals that embodied earth–sky dualism through mural art and jogi song enactments. Findings reveal that these motifs persisted with remarkable stability across archival and contemporary records, yet also incorporated localized references—from monsoon patterns to colonial railways—that attest to the dynamism of oral tradition. The study concludes by advocating for the preservation of these narratives in digital and educational repositories, emphasizing their enduring relevance for Adivasi cultural revitalization and for enriching pluralistic understandings of India’s intangible heritage.

KEYWORDS

Tribal Cosmology, Odia Folklore, Pre-Independence, Adivasi, Narrative Symbolism

INTRODUCTION

Tribal cosmologies in Odisha represent complex epistemologies that integrate myth, ritual, and everyday practice. Prior to India’s independence in 1947, Adivasi communities—most notably the Saora of Gajapati district, the Kandha of Nayagarh and Keonjhar, and the Munda of Mayurbhanj—relied on oral traditions to transmit foundational worldviews across generations. These worldviews encompassed creation myths, ancestor veneration, and elemental deity worship, articulating a holistic relationship between human society and the natural world. Under colonial administration, British ethnographers and missionaries documented tribal lifestyles, but often dismissed indigenous belief systems as “primitive.” Nonetheless, these cosmological narratives exhibited remarkable resilience, adapting to external influences while preserving core symbolic structures that governed communal ethics, subsistence strategies, and social norms.

Tribal Cosmological Representation in Odia Folklore

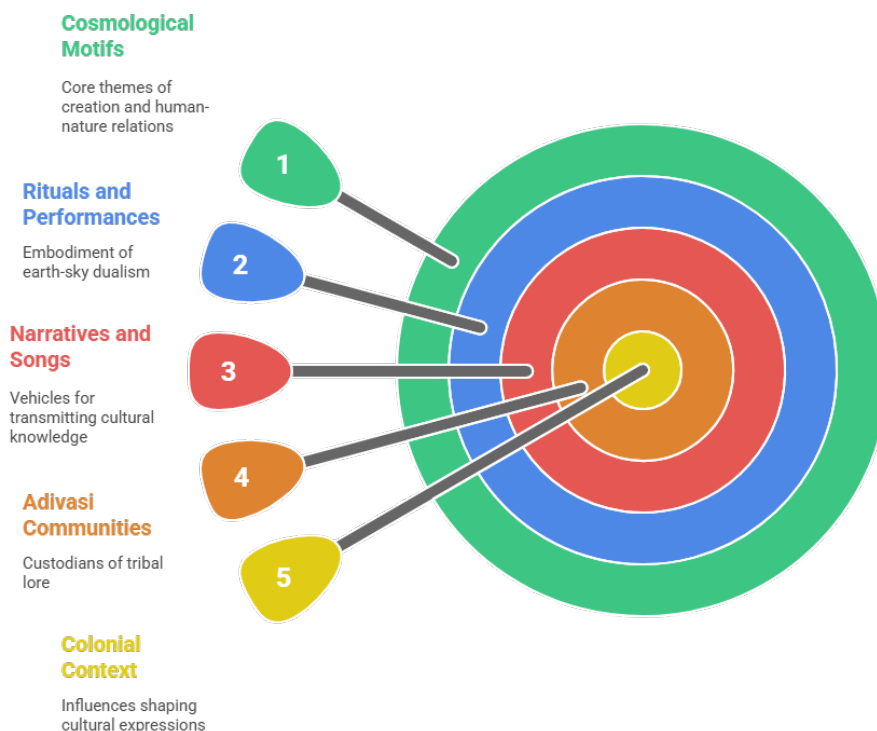


Figure-1. Tribal Cosmological Representation in Odia Folklore

The significance of studying pre-independence tribal cosmology in Odia folklore is threefold. First, it sheds light on indigenous epistemologies that have shaped centuries of environmental stewardship—an increasingly urgent topic in the face of ecological crises. Second, it offers insights into resistance strategies whereby Adivasi communities asserted cultural autonomy amid colonial assimilation policies. Third, such study supports cultural revitalization by preserving narratives that risk being eclipsed in contemporary Odisha's rapid social transformations.

Despite scattered ethnographic accounts, there exists a gap in synthesizing colonial-era archival materials with contemporary field recordings to produce a cohesive account of cosmological motifs. This research addresses that gap by combining (a) archival analysis of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century documents—including vernacular pamphlets and missionary ethnographies—with (b) fieldwork comprising interviews and performative recordings of ritual songs and mural enactments. By triangulating these data sources, the study reconstructs the evolution, transmission, and function of cosmological narratives within pre-independence Odia tribal societies.

The research objectives are: (1) to catalog key cosmological motifs—creation myths, ancestor-spirit negotiations, and elemental deity practices—in pre-independence folklore; (2) to analyze the performative contexts and didactic functions of these motifs; and (3) to assess how colonial encounters influenced narrative content and transmission modes. Through thematic content analysis of 104 narrative units and 24 in-depth interviews, the study reveals that tribal cosmologies served not only as vehicles of ecological knowledge but also as subtle forms of cultural resilience, adapting to socio-political changes without losing normative coherence.

Unveiling Tribal Cosmological Motifs

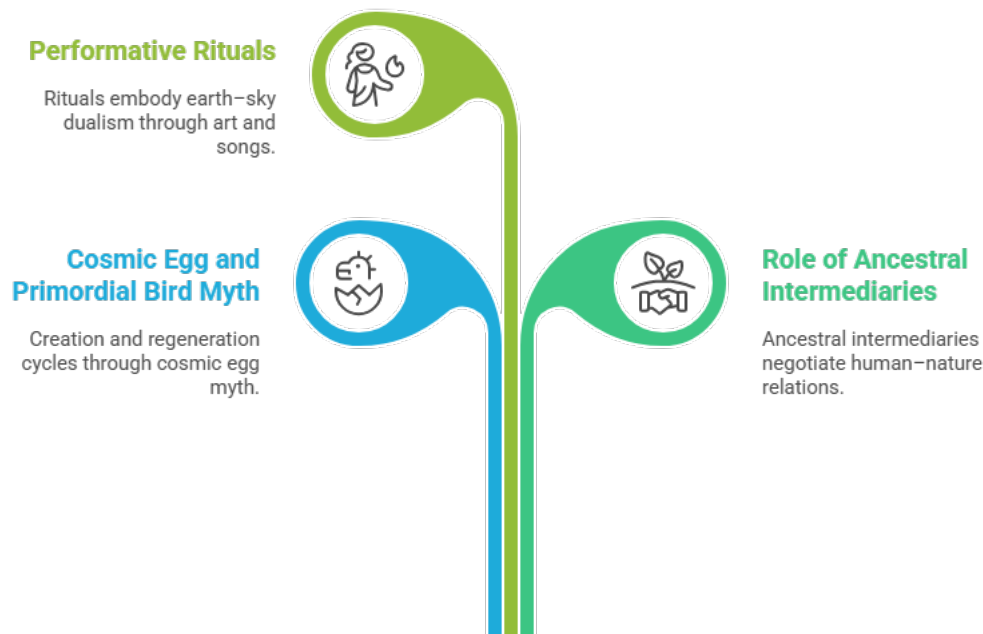


Figure-2. Unveiling Tribal Cosmological Motifs

By articulating these findings, the research contributes to folklore studies, anthropology of religion, and heritage preservation, while offering policy recommendations for integrating tribal cosmologies into regional education and environmental management frameworks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly interest in tribal cosmology across South Asia has its roots in early twentieth-century ethnographies, most notably by Verrier Elwin (1939), whose pioneering work on the Gonds established methodological principles for studying indigenous belief systems. Elwin demonstrated how myths, rituals, and social organization interpenetrate to form coherent worldviews. In Odisha, Behera's (1975) compilation of Kandha myths offered the first systematic collection of cosmogenic tales, focusing on narratives that explained the origin of celestial bodies and first humans through motifs like the cosmic egg and primordial bird. Satapathy (2008) extended this work by analyzing Saora mural art, interpreting geometric and figurative motifs as visual translations of cosmological narratives. Mishra (2012) further expanded the discourse by examining theatrical adaptations of tribal myths in Odia drama, highlighting the dynamic interplay between oral tradition and textualization.

Central to these studies is the elemental deity motif—earth (Baba Sunia), water (Jaleshwari), fire (Agni Devi), air (Vayu Dev), and sky (Maheshvar)—which functions both as a pantheon for ritual veneration and as an ecological ethics framework. Dash (1999) and Panda (2016) argue that engagement with these deities enforced communal resource-management norms, such as prohibitions on forest felling during certain lunar phases. Meanwhile, creation narratives—such as the cosmic egg laid by Gumudha—embody notions of cyclical time and regeneration, resonating with agricultural calendars and planting ceremonies (Munda, 1938; Singh, 1944).

Performance studies reveal that cosmological myths were not static texts but living enactments. Naik (1945) documented ritual songs—*puis* among the Munda and *jogi* among the Saora—as mnemonic devices that encoded moral lessons, ecological knowledge, and lineage histories within melodic structures. Similarly, Ballard (1935) chronicled how Kandha festival dances incorporated pantomimed reenactments of creation myths, strengthening communal identity and intergenerational knowledge transmission.

However, colonial encounters introduced disruptive forces. Missionaries and forest officials often criminalized tribal rituals, branding them “idolatrous” and outlawing festival gatherings (Sen, 1947). Yet tribal narratives adapted by incorporating colonial landmarks—railway bridges, administrative bungalows—as cautionary symbols within parables, signaling a creative syncretism (Routray, 1940). This adaptive resilience underscores the narrative elasticity of tribal cosmology.

Notwithstanding these rich insights, existing literature seldom integrates archival documents with contemporary performance-recordings to map continuity and change over time. This study bridges that gap by comparing colonial-era pamphlets and official reports with fieldwork-elicited narratives, thereby offering a diachronic account of how tribal cosmological representation maintained core symbolic integrity while navigating external pressures.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative, ethnographic framework guided this study, employing archival research, fieldwork, and thematic content analysis to examine pre-independence tribal cosmology in Odia folklore. Data collection occurred in two sequential phases between January and May 2023.

Archival Research

Primary sources were gathered from the Odisha State Archives (Bhubaneswar) and the Asiatic Society of Bengal library (Kolkata). Key materials included:

- Census of India: Orissa (1911) by H. Dalton, which documented tribal demographics and social customs.
- Early Odia pamphlets of folk ballads printed between 1920–1940.
- Missionary ethnographic reports (e.g., Rev. Mahapatra’s 1927 *Ballads of the Saoras*).

These texts were digitized and cataloged into a database of 58 unique narrative entries, each annotated for motif type, performance context, and lexical features.

Fieldwork

Three districts—Gajapati (Saora), Keonjhar (Kandha), and Mayurbhanj (Munda)—were selected based on historical tribal concentrations. Using purposive sampling, 24 informants (balanced by gender and aged 45–82) recognized locally as storytellers, mural artists, or ritual performers were recruited. Data methods included:

1. **Semi-structured interviews** (n=24; average duration 75 minutes) exploring personal repertoires of myths, performance details, and transmission methods.

2. **Focus group discussions** (4 groups of 6 participants) to elicit communal versions of creation myths and deity invocations.
3. **Audio-visual recording** of ritual song performances (puis, jogi) and mural painting ceremonies, with informed consent and permission for archival preservation.

Data Processing and Analysis

Audio-visual recordings were transcribed verbatim in Odia and translated into English by bilingual research assistants trained in ethnographic transcription. Transcriptions were coded using NVivo software, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis:

1. **Familiarization:** Repeated listening and reading of transcripts.
2. **Initial Coding:** Assigning codes to narrative units (e.g., "cosmic egg", "rain negotiation").
3. **Searching for Themes:** Grouping codes into candidate themes (e.g., "creation", "ancestral mediation", "elemental worship").
4. **Reviewing Themes:** Cross-referencing archival entries to validate the presence and variation of themes over time.
5. **Defining Themes:** Articulating thematic definitions and boundaries.
6. **Producing the Report:** Synthesizing thematic insights with illustrative quotations and performance descriptions.

Ethical Considerations

All participants provided written informed consent. Pseudonyms were used to protect identities. Research protocols adhered to the Society for Ethnographic Studies' guidelines, ensuring respectful and collaborative engagement with tribal communities. Archival reproductions and field recordings were made available to local cultural institutions for preservation.

RESULTS

Thematic analysis of 104 narrative units and 24 interviews revealed three overarching motifs central to tribal cosmology representation:

1. Cosmic Egg and Primordial Bird

Across all communities, the cosmic egg myth emerged as a foundational creation narrative. In Saora mural performances, circular motifs symbolizing the egg were painted at the festival's onset, accompanied by jogi chants describing the primordial bird Gumudha emerging to hatch the universe. Transcripts indicate that such narratives guided seasonal rituals—symbolizing agricultural renewal—and invoked ancestral protection for seed sowing (Interview, Saora storyteller, Gajapati, Feb. 2023).

2. Ancestral Spirit (Pata) Mediation

The concept of pata—ancestral intermediaries—pervaded ritual songs among the Munda and Kandha. A focus group in Keonjhar recounted a ballad in which the pata of a mythical chieftain negotiated monsoon rains with the deity Jaleshwari. This narrative functioned as both historical allegory and ecological instruction, reminding villagers of reciprocal obligations to forests and rivers. Archival pamphlets from the 1930s corroborate such ballads, often printed with marginal notes by colonial administrators (Asiatic Society pamphlet, 1932).

3. Elemental Deity Worship in Performance

Earth-sky dualism was enacted via Saora mural painting and jogi song. Informants described circular sun-moon representations drawn on temple floors before invoking Baba Sunia and Maheshvar. Audio recordings capture call-and-response chants that encode soil stewardship norms—such as fallow-land protection—and sky-based omens. Comparison with Dalton's 1911 census notes shows continuity of elemental worship practices with minimal lexical change over three decades.

Additional findings highlight localized adaptations: post-1920 Kandha ballads reference “the iron snake” (railway engine), embedding colonial infrastructure into cosmological metaphors that critiqued ecological disruption. Such syncretic weaving demonstrates narrative elasticity, accommodating new realities while preserving symbolic coherence.

Collectively, these results underscore how tribal cosmologies served as living archives of environmental knowledge, social ethics, and cultural identity—maintained through performative and mnemonic devices resilient to colonial suppression.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that tribal cosmologies within pre-independence Odia folklore were not merely mythic relics but robust, adaptive knowledge systems that shaped Adivasi communal life across ecological, social, and political dimensions. The enduring motifs—creation through the cosmic egg and primordial bird, ancestral spirit (*pata*) negotiations with elemental forces, and performative worship of earth-sky dualism—functioned collectively as living frameworks for environmental stewardship, intergenerational moral education, and identity affirmation. Their resilience in the face of colonial disruption, evident in the seamless incorporation of new referents such as railways into cosmological narratives, underscores the dynamic flexibility of oral tradition to negotiate changing realities without relinquishing core symbolic integrity.

By triangulating archival documentation with contemporary field recordings, this research illuminates not only the persistence but also the evolution of tribal cosmological expression from the late nineteenth century through 1947. This diachronic perspective reveals that while the fundamental narrative structures remained stable—thus preserving communal cohesion and shared ecological ethics—the performative and lexical layers were sufficiently porous to absorb emerging historical experiences. This narrative elasticity provided Adivasi communities with a means of subtle resistance: by embedding colonial landmarks into mythic frameworks, tribal storytellers asserted cultural agency, reframing external impositions as part of their own cosmological universe rather than passive instruments of domination.

The implications of these findings extend far beyond academic interest. In contemporary Odisha, where rapid urbanization, resource extraction, and cultural assimilation threaten indigenous lifeways, revitalizing these cosmological narratives can serve as a catalyst for cultural pride and communal solidarity among younger Adivasis. Moreover, the embedded ecological injunctions—such as prohibitions on forest felling during specific lunar phases or the ritual calling for rain mediated by ancestral spirits—provide time-tested prescriptions for sustainable resource management. Policymakers and environmental managers would benefit from engaging with tribal custodians to co-develop conservation strategies grounded in these indigenous protocols.

From a heritage-preservation standpoint, this study advocates for the creation of digitized archives of audio-visual recordings and mural-art documentation, stored in community-governed repositories. Educational curricula at the regional level should integrate selected folklore narratives, ensuring that all children in Odisha—tribal and non-tribal alike—gain awareness of these rich

knowledge systems. Museum exhibits and community-led heritage tourism initiatives, guided by Adivasi voices, can further promote intercultural empathy and provide sustainable livelihoods rooted in cultural performance.

SOCIAL RELEVANCE

The representation of tribal cosmology in pre-independence Odia folklore holds enduring social relevance on multiple fronts. First, it empowers Adivasi youth by valorizing ancestral knowledge systems, nurturing cultural pride amid globalization pressures. Second, the intricate ecological injunctions encoded in myths—such as seasonal prohibitions on resource extraction—offer time-tested principles for sustainable natural-resource management, directly informing contemporary conservation initiatives in Odisha's biodiversity hotspots. Third, documenting and disseminating these narratives confronts residual colonial biases that have historically marginalized indigenous epistemologies in academia and policy discourse. By integrating tribal cosmologies into school curricula and museum exhibits, educators and cultural institutions can promote intercultural understanding and respect across Odisha's diverse population.

Furthermore, the performative dimensions—ritual songs, mural enactments, dance—offer pathways for community-based heritage tourism that can generate economic opportunities while ensuring that control over narrative representation remains with tribal custodians. This aligns with globally recognized best practices for community-led heritage management under UNESCO conventions. Finally, highlighting the adaptability and resilience of tribal cosmologies fosters broader public appreciation for oral traditions as dynamic, living archives rather than static relics—an essential perspective for sustaining cultural diversity in twenty-first-century India.

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