ARTICLE

ASPECTS OF SAORA RITUAL: PERMANENCE AND TRANSITION IN ARTISTIC PERFORMANCE

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Abstract: The present article discusses the performance of the ancient artistic technique of the wall paintings known as *anital* among the indigenous group of the Lanjia Saora of the Rayagada district in southern Orissa (India). The anital is a painting in which the aesthetic holds maybe a lesser importance if compared to its ritual function in Saoran shamanic practices performed by the kuran (the medicine man of the community). Through the wall-painting, as through a window between the dimensions that constitute the cosmos, the group strengthens the covenant between the living and the dead. The subject of this ādivāsī art form is thus highly symbolic and usually tells a dream, or a vision of the shaman that, through his performance, portrays the subtle world. However, with the advent of Christianity the anitals have become a target of persecution among the converted, precisely because they embody the tribal identity of the past. The recent revival of indigenous works along with many initiatives developed by local NGOs have tended to replicate ad infinitum the arcane motifs of anitals, identifying them for the consumption of modernity as purely 'tribal art' deprived of its ancient and authentic religious value. Despite this moment of profound social change and anthropological transition I will demonstrate how the traditional technique is still alive and how it can be decoded through knowledge of the Saoran culture.

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[O spirits] Come in [to my] body, come in [to my] mind,
come to reveal the cause of the affliction.
O you, come instantly,
I will tell you about all circumstances.
Fathers of the fathers, mothers of the mothers,
O kurans (shamans) of previous generations, please come!
Sonums of the Lanjia Saora people, please come!
Strangers gods and goddesses from distant lands, come!
Gods and goddesses, come all together in the place of the pūjā.
Deities, spirits and ancestors all, come in the place
that I'll show you and that I only
know.

Introduction: classical art, tribal art and the spiritual path

This invocation is the classic incipit of a shamanic prayer of Lanjia Saoras, an indigenous group of the state of Odisha in Central-Eastern India (Beggiora, 2010: 136). The Saoras have transmitted a magic-religious complex universe in which the *kurans*, or shamans in the Saora language[1], are the intermediaries between the village community and the subtle entities (*sonum*) that inhabit the forest. The place of *pūjā*, or the ritual, the secret place that only the shaman knows, is actually a particular artistic painting (*anital*) which according to the tradition of this indigenous group forms a real door of communication with the afterlife. The present study aims to show how this

particular art form possesses fundamentally ancestral and cultic features, as the cult of the dead and the worship of ancestors is vital in the shamanism of these areas. Since this indigenous culture is fast disappearing today under the pressure of modernization, we consider it absolutely necessary to put forward some considerations on this subject, especially since in contrast to its context, this art form is in some way managing to survive this period of strong contrasts and social transition by reinventing itself. However, given that the topic of art in India is extensive and tribal performance has arisen almost as a genre in itself since the Modern age, we consider it appropriate to propose some preliminary discussion of Indian art.

It is well known that Indian art has always been somewhat complex for the 'outsider'. This is because the performance of the Indian artist transcends the aesthetic and goes well beyond the figurative genre. Not only is the artistic theme in India closely connected to the religious and metaphysical themes, but at the same time the artwork should express concepts, should be propaedeutic. Indeed the same canons of classical Indian aesthetics - *rasa* and *bhāva* i.e. frame of mind and emotion - interlinked to each other, are classed as steps to a spiritual path (Mukerjee, 1965: 91-96; Dasgupta, 1969: 14; Coomaraswamy, 1924: 30ff; Deheja, 2013: 13ff). On the one hand therefore an infinite number of symbols are displayed in front of the observer and on the other the gesture of the artist must be flawless, retracing perfection. According to the traditional conception of time in India, humanity currently lives in the Kali Yuga. Of the four eons (*yugas*) that make up the time cycle, the calculation of which was based on the precession of the equinoxes, the Kali Yuga is the worst because it is dominated by violence and ignorance. Humanity would be without any possibility of salvation was it not confident in the teaching of various texts of Hinduism with particular reference to Tantra.

In relation to art, among many sources, the myth of the dialogue between the king Vajra and the sage Markandeya is particularly renowned. The Visnudharmottara Purana (III. 86-66) tells how king Vajra consulted the saint (*ṛṣi*) Markandeya about the way of salvation (Kramrisch, 1976: 425; Delahoutre, 1994: 12-13). The sage replied that only the images preserved in the temple could provide union with God. Therefore the contemplation of art can be considered as a way of transcendence for man. On the basis of that King Vajra requested to learn the art of sculpture from the sage, in order to acquire happiness through the worship of the gods. Markandeya replied that there is no sculpture without painting. Moreover there can be no canon for painting without the knowledge of dance. So we could add that dance cannot subsist without instrumental music, which in turn does not exist without the study of singing. Song, and therefore *in extenso* the knowledge of *mantra* – numinous sound - is the knowledge of the whole. From this it is clear that in India figurative art should be considered within the set of the arts. Consequently it is therefore conspicuous that in India the arts are considered a science, and as such must be accurate, as well as a sacred way of knowledge. Moreover, as Coomaraswamy (1975) has already pointed out, art cannot be conceptually separated from religion, from astronomy, from astrology, etc., or from the conception of the cosmos and from alchemy, which regulates the manifest world.

Nevertheless so-called tribal art is considered a separate genre from the main strands of classical Indian art. Although the art of *ādivāsīs* is also rich in sculpture, paintings, and representations of various types, many scholars are inclined to consider the two

types of performance on a different level (Vidyarti and Rai, 1977: 308ff; Panikkar, Mukherji and Achar, 2003). But since the *ādivāsī* religiosity is very rich in terms of shamanic and ancestor worship and since for centuries it has lived in parallel or often intertwined with Hindu traditions - or at least at a popular level (Mallebrein 2000: 51ff) - is it possible to consider that *ādivāsī* art has equally assumed similar aims and importance?

If it is a fact that, in synthesis, a theoretical approach to the existence of a post-mortem is present also in complex and articulated forms in Indian shamanism[2], in the present study, however, we would like to explore some perspectives – these are real and genuine views or 'visions' - on it. Therefore we propose a case study among the group Lanija Saora of Odisha. Here not only is the shaman able to see beyond the threshold of death, but the whole process of rationalization of this event, sometimes traumatic by definition, and the normalization of relations between the community of the living and that of the dead, takes place through the perfect gesture of the artist who represents the details of this vision upon the wall (Beggiora, 2003: 139-158).

The definition 'tribal art' is extremely general, or rather completely generic, but is at least to some extent intuitive and it is perhaps appropriate to summarize a large amount of phenomena, including the example which I go on to document. One of the biggest problems we face when we intend to treat of art and religion in an Indian tribal context – and here too they are two closely interlinked concepts -- is how this 'low' tradition handles cultural institutions, including those of caste which were particularly dominant in this region. Moreover, one of the distinctive features of Hinduism is its versatility in incorporating and correlating the religious elements of the Indian Subcontinent. According to this process cults of localized communities, and consequently the relative artistic expression, would be homologated over time to the highest models of religiosity, sanctioned, accepted and widespread as a transregional language by the intellectual-sacerdotal Brahmanical class. This is what many scholars perhaps too summarily term a process of Sanskritization, an undeniable force in many cases at the present time. However, in our opinion this definition is partial in that it assumes a prevailing unidirectional relationship. We have strong evidence[3] that the higher tradition, the socio-culturally prominent castes of the major centers of the Subcontinent, has maintained a constant dialogue with a large number of territorially important cults (Schnepel, 1995: 145-166; Saraswati, 1997: 114-116). This has meant that over the centuries alongside schools, in parallel with the technical and higher teaching of the *śrenis*[4], whose production was probably destined for the most important places of worship and temples, there existed a real kaleidoscope of productions emerging through a more popular or folkloric matrix, equally intended for the sacred geography of the territory (Nayak 2012: 169-180; Bundgaard 2013: 220ff).

Images of minor deities, but also popular representation of ancestors or various kinds of tutelary spirits, symbolizing the territorial ancestrality, but also guaranteeing life after death, have come over time to overlap with the canonical images of Hinduism: sometimes assimilating to them, sometimes – pay specific attention to this - vice versa, that is moulding the Hindu tradition over the specific regional form. A glaring example in Odisha is the emblematic and still mysterious *mūrti* of Jagannāth in Puri, whose origins are still being debated, and which are an issue for movements concerned with the re-

appropriation (da Silva, 2010: 10-11, 16-17, 235ff) of local identity.

Coming back to folk and tribal art the flowering of a large amount of complex representations of various kinds should be then imagined, in addition to images of deities or spirits[5], an innumerable variety of different objects, ritual or more commonly used instruments, which have merged in the specificity of local handicrafts. Of this mass of material, whereas it is often possible to identify genuine works of excellence, unlike classical art in India, habitually nothing remains over time, due to the fact of its being predominantly made on and with poor and perishable materials. This last fact seems to be extremely important in two fundamental aspects. The first is that in many parts of India, as well as in Odisha, this kind of production has historically put tribal groups and their production in contact with many low castes specializing in handicraft work, possibly through the employment of simple or poor materials, such as brass and copper among the metals, crockery and terracottas and so on. This socio-historical process is important and testifies to the reducing of isolation for many indigenous groups, as well as the possibility of putting folk/tribal art and handicrafts on a single plane which might be defined as vernacular (Mahawar 2011; Manohar and Shah, 1996: 47).

The second aspect of great interest for the purpose of our study is the possibility that the object, made with poor material on the whole, may deteriorate. Or 'die': in the sense that it can disappear. From this then arises the need to ritually renew it, to produce it again, to cyclically let it be reborn, to give it a 'second life' after death - that is exactly what in one way or another many of these works represent.

Another major problem we have in identifying the eschatological and shamanic theme of Indian tribal art, is the caesura that occurred in colonial times. It is well known how the British period was a revolutionary period for Indian art, or an involution phase depending on point of view. With the British, Western art makes a powerful entrance into the Subcontinent, from painting to architecture, distorting all the previous parameters and turning it towards a contemporary and international dimension (Mitter, 1992: 180, 270ff).

In short, and because it would take too long to summarize here so rich and complex a period, we will observe that if on the one hand the production of the period seems to accompany the statement of colonial rule in India, on the other, particularly after the Mutiny (1857), the Indian art scene will turn to the dynamics of affirmation (the symbols of nationalism), identity paths and self-assertion (in which even ethnic minorities have their considerable weight) and new socio-religious reform movements (avant-garde)[6].

In this process, having demolished the canons of aesthetics of classical Indian art, or the *rasa* and *bhāva* as transcendental means or a spiritual path, the modern artist will be engaged in dissimilar rules, techniques, but mostly in different purposes for performance. The paradox in this is that already in the Victorian age and in the last century the British showed great appreciation or at least a certain pleased attention to those forms of minor folkloric art, that the 'high' Indian tradition had relegated to the background. Therefore collecting phenomena, musealisation and mass production of tribal art began in order to meet a purely aesthetic taste, which generally loses contact or memory itself of the original meaning of the work (Guha-Thakurta, 2004:43ff). If in a sense

this is fortunate for certain genres because it will allow them to survive the sometimes fierce impact of the contemporary and globalized world, on the other hand, as we shall see, it is a tragic dynamic because the survival of this art scene is detrimental in leading to the death or the drastic decline of its original cultural matrix. Furthermore, it often today exists by virtue of tourist or commercial dynamics[7].

Since in this framework the topic is mural painting, we would like to remember that, according to a general overview of murals or of simple applications in relief of mud, performed on the walls of the houses for ritual or at least auspicious purposes, there are characteristic forms of both rural Hindu India and the more properly *ādivāsīs* context (Chaitanya 1994: 43ff). These include the typical decorations with mud of Gonds in central India, the peculiar images of the Bhils in Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan, and many other examples from different ethnic subgroups of Odisha and again Deccan and Gujarat. It is a reality that today is rapidly disappearing as are the tribal cultures themselves, but where it survives it does so by virtue of the dynamics that we have mentioned above. Among many, an example: the mass production of Madhubani paintings[8] that were typical of Bihar and Nepal or the Warli paintings of Maharashtra [9] . The techniques change, they are made on a base of paper, the colours become industrial, once again the purpose of the work is modified.

Anital: a window on the afterlife

Coming back to the topic of shamanism in *ādivāsī* art, the actual case study in our research[10], we will analyze now a special traditional style of mural that represents in fact a piercing of the veil between the human and the subtle world. In Odisha the oldest and more interesting tradition of the wall paintings is certainly that of *anitals* of Lanjia Saoras. The Saoras are one of the largest indigenous groups in Odisha; they are now classified by the Indian Government as Scheduled Tribes. Within the major grouping of Saoras the minority of Lanjias, or Hills Saoras, is distinguished. Living in groups of villages, they inhabit the plateau rising from Gunupur towards Pottasing in southern Orissa, in the districts of Rayagada and Gajapati. The Lanjia Saoras are today classified by the Census of India in the subgroup of PVTGs (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group), on account of the peculiarities of the territory in which they live, the low level of growth and in general the backwardness of the techniques and methods of their subsistence (Singh, 2001: 1058-1060; Patnaik, 2005: 167-183). Moreover, perhaps thanks to the fact that they have lived throughout history in relative isolation in the jungles of the highlands, from a cultural point of view the Lanja Saoras are renowned both for the peculiarities of a particularly vigorous shamanism and for the deep symbolism in their art. Once again, however, we document how the two concepts are not at all disconnected from one another, i.e. a form of art that is closely linked to the magical-religious world of local shamanism and that can only be interpreted through it. Indeed the *anitals* are paintings devoted to the dead and in general to ancestor worship and specifically their representation, as we shall illustrate, results in a certain sense in a vision, a particular perspective that the shaman (*kuran* or *kuramboi* if female) has about the afterlife, articulated through predetermined stylistic features.

The term *anital* (sometimes *idital* or *ittal* depending on the area) is derived from the Saora verbal root *id-*, write, and the noun *talan* (probably contraction of *kitalan*) wall (Elwin, 1955: 401). So the term can be translated as mural-writing or wall 'painting'.

The name of the so-called *anitalmaran*, the performer, could be translated as painting-man. In ancient times, when this tradition was certainly more intensely widespread, it is said that it was an adept, an assistant of the shaman (*idai*), who traced the work under his supervision. Probably some people, including those who consider themselves the custodians of the art among the various clans, in the past followed the instructions of the spiritual leaders of the group in this sacred representation. More recently, however, there has been a progressive simplification of the ritual of performance and, where this has not yet died out, it is usual for the shaman himself to represent the vision seen in a dream by his own hand.

The interpretation of dreams (*genümten*) is very important in the Saoran culture. It is in fact a kind of vision of the subtle world that only the shaman is able to interpret appropriately. In the cosmological conception of Saoras, the nature of the shamanic universe is the result of interpenetration between the empirical world and the subtle realm of spirits and deities (*sum* / *sonum*) that inhabit the forest. The spirits of the dead (*rauda*) are destined to a chthonian dimension called Kinorai, the world of the dead, which extends below the earth's surface. This dimension – a fairly typical element of the indigenous cultures of India - is a kind of reflection of real life, but in some way contiguous (Vitebsky, 1993: 66ff). In the immediate post-mortem, for the Saoras the souls of the dead are scared, frightened and wander in the forest seeking to return to their villages of origin. This is a particularly dangerous phase because, as is common believed in many cultures, if they do not receive the appropriate funeral rites, they could become larvae or spectra, embodying the dynamic of revenants, the dead coming back after death afflicting his place of origin on account of his suffering[11]. However, if these souls receive the appropriate rituals, which formally - as we shall see - correspond to the donation of symbolic or more explicit means to reach the Kinorai and start a new life, in this case they will be destined to become ancestors, protectors of their clan (*jujum*[12]). All these spirits are thus seen in constant motion, travelling, in procession to the afterlife; or even imagined as living parallel lives in the chthonian dimension. But if the dream of the common man can be said to be influenced by these presences, once in the waking state they are like a fleeting glimpse, evanescent memories of a dimension that is absolutely alive and real but difficult for the layman to understand. Only the shaman, who has a controlling influence on the practice of trance - and therefore by extension on his dream activity - is able to look through this window, to seize this shining perspective on the subtle world and to fix it forever, like a photograph, on the mural.

For this particular reason, all the many elements that populate the paintings of the *anital* are considered non-human agents, or at least no longer human. It is interesting in this regard to note that according to the conventional creation of the painting, the artist's task is to sleep at the foot of the wall, observing fasting, after offering libations to the spirits of the ancestors. Once asleep, his dreams will inspire the subject to paint, or else the state of trance of the shaman can come in support and clarification of the ongoing representation. In some cases direct interaction with the spirits, through the mouth of the possessed shaman, can provide guidance on adjustments to be made, including through symbolic offerings then transposed into painting, to complete the work. We can therefore say that the *anital* is really a means of communication between the world of living and the world of the ancestors.

In agreement with the theme of ancestrality, strongly present in local shamanism, each *kuran* has on the other hand in his home a personal *anital*, celebrating his guiding spirit, or telling - through the usual and complex grid of symbols – the initiatory experience, the abduction in the forest, the processions by spirits of men and animals, the axis mundi and sacred plants, and the visions seen in trance, etc. During my fieldwork I noted that all of these paintings, specifically by virtue of their function, were positioned in the darkest and most intimate corner of the hut, or always inside and never outside. This is also the reason for the poor quality of the images that I can now produce and the use of infrared or photographic filters to bring out some details (Figure 1 and 2). In any case, we can deduce that the *anital* is not a work with only aesthetic purposes, or at least we can infer that such aesthetic transcends the mere empirical dimension.

Figure 1: Anital at Dengorjango village

Moving on to examine some of the details, we see that the most common subjects are means of transport and processions of musicians and dancers (Figure 3 and 4). These should not be interpreted as a representation of something tangible, but as processions of dancing spirits or tutelary entities. Means of transport, such as horse or elephant, but also modern vehicles such as bicycle or bus clearly indicate a journey. The theme of the trip, as we have said, the departure is important in the cult of the dead who are imagined as preparing to embark on a new life in the hereafter. So these (Figure 3) figures are intended as souls of the dead who are preparing for a journey that is both long and exceptional; the means represented is in a sense an obligatory pass for the current process. It is interesting to note that the subjects of past and present, insofar as they gradually adapt to modernity, whatever mode of transport they use always satisfy the unique character of the event as reflected in the exceptional nature of the vehicle. This is one that, insofar as it may be known, is not commonly used by members of the villages: i.e. as once *ādivāsīs* were not accustomed to riding horses or elephants (or it was at least a rare possibility) so today the trains and planes represented certainly do not halt in the jungles of the highlands.

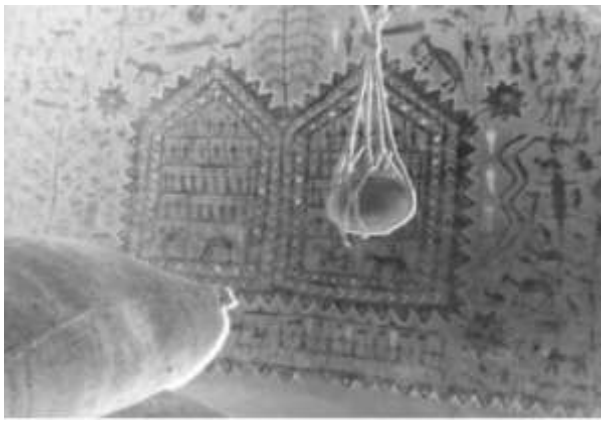

Figure 2: Anital at Sogeda village

In figure 5 there is another interesting example where the real and the supernatural overlap at the same level in the representation. A seated figure is performing a ritual, assisted by two other silhouettes alongside. This is therefore a shaman, although the image is stylized, it is recognisable by the classical sitting posture, in which the Saoran medicine man officiates shaking the rice winnowing fan (*ruṇku*), which is substituted for the shamanic drum among the indigenous peoples of these areas. Next

to him can be identified human assistants and a spirit assistant (probably the guiding spirit) who attends the scene standing holding a rifle. Nearby in the representation is the patient for whom the rite is held, lying suffering in what appears to be a *charpai*. In this little vignette, portrayed with a few brush strokes, is depicted all the dramatic tension of a healing *pūjā*.

Figure 3: Detail of image 1

Among the many other most common subjects we mention the representation of the peacock, a symbol of royalty in almost the whole of India, which equally here symbolizes the presence or the descent of *sonum*, or spirit; this is the reason why the peacock typically is depicted at the highest point of the representation, almost a kind of consecration of the painting itself. The monkey (*a:rsi*) rather (Figure 6), thanks to its agility, leaps toward the trees, crossing all barriers as no other living being is able to do: in *anital* then it is intended to symbolize the soul of the shaman who wanders between worlds without bodily constraints. Another animal also understood to be associated with shamanic action is the porcupine (*kanji:ŋ*): since it digs a burrow underground where it descends to re-emerge, passing almost undisturbed among the dimensions of the cosmos, it is considered a shaman among the animals. Omnipresent alongside or within the frame of *anital* there is usually a sacred tree that clearly represents the axis mundi. Among

Figure 4: Detail of image 1

the Saoras this is represented by the central pole that holds up the roof of the huts next to which a mortar for grinding grain is typically created, by making a hole in the ground. This is clearly an aperture into the chthonian dimension, where the tree-axis of the world spreads its branches upward, but also sinks its roots into the Kinorai, the world of the dead. Now, as we have seen, the soul of the shaman in trance is imagined to be free to soar upwards, literally climbing the cosmic tree or vice versa descending to its roots and performing a kind of catabasis. In the pictorial transposition, is often possible to note the tree populated by monkeys, on the top of which is perched a peacock that testifies how the scene (supernatural) should be coded according to its complex symbolism. There are recurrent representations of a particular type of palm tree, from which human figures draw wine: this is the *Caryota urens* also considered a sacred plant. It is indeed of fundamental importance in the shamanic ritual and worship of ancestors (Beggiora, 2016). Not only does the shaman drink the fermented juice of the plant (*alin*) in the early stages of trance, but he also makes an

offering, evoking the spirits and renewing the alliance between the living and the dead through this particular type of alcohol. In the

indigenous cultures of the place, as well as indeed elsewhere in India, the trees that ooze latex are the symbols of the divine motherhood: this is why it is thought that they are sought after by those spirits who try to return to life. However in the shamanism of the tribes of the region, the plant embodies a true divine manifestation in this case vegetal: its juice opens intimacy with the supernatural forces, tearing the veil that hides the secrets of the forces that govern the surrounding nature. Therefore processions of armed men, who are the guardian spirits of sacred places, and soon follow in the paintings. It would be too long to enumerate here all the subjects that we were able to record in the field - we give a brief summary in the note[13] - not least because the local variations are many. What certainly appears to be fundamental in this analysis is to understand how the representation of the painting and its codification correspond to a strict symbolic grid substantially based on the relationship of the living with the dead and with the post mortem.

With regard to processing techniques we document that the surface on which the work is created is the wall of the hut, which is beforehand washed with water and red clay[14]. Concerning the application we observe that the *anitalmaran* prepares the colors with natural products thus: for white he mixes water with rice flour and for black he needs ashes and water to which can be added soot or red ocher to darken or lighten the tone.

Figure 5: Details of Image 1

There are no other colors; the background of red clay of the wall is the basis on which the figures are drawn. On the other hand it is known that *anitals* are all bichromatic or at most trichromatic. First of all, the artist draws the outline consisting of a double or triple frame in a generally quadrangular shape, although trapezoidal or semicircular ones are quite common. The decorative motifs are often rhomboidal or herringbone, surrounded by a thick outer frame, white, with points facing outside. The silhouettes of the figures, however, are generally constituted of triangles to which are added the limbs and the head, with fineness of detail relating to all that they hold in hand. However the general structure of *anital* – the trapezoidal shape is the most recurring, almost bringing to mind the shape of a hut – is clearly that of a house. And in any case it should be considered in that way: a house where the ancestors are called to reside during special festivities. When the work is completed, then the shaman consecrates the painting by hanging in front of it various types of offerings: usually he lavishes palm wine in jugs hung opposite the image (but also umbrellas, peacock

feathers, various kinds of vegetable offerings).[15]

Figure 6: Detail of Image 1

Another interesting aspect of this cult is that not only the totality of the figures, but the image of the spirit-guide or ancestor in particular, should be represented to perfection with all his attributes. In the case of spirits of the dead it is frequently the custom to graphically represent all the most important objects they owned in life, such as animals, tools, agricultural utensils. Likewise the structure-house should be stylistically appropriate to the figures represented on the inside or outside. This requires frequent corrections and additions. In the event of accident, illness or disasters that hit the village and if these events can be related to the action of some nefarious ancestor who is angry or dissatisfied (as a result of some fault of the group or infringement of taboos), this could be an opportunity to adjust the dedicated *anital*. Mediation between the spirits and the group is always through the shamanic trance. However, the painting can then be expanded over time through successive rituals, if the shaman deems it necessary. So basically this is not only an artistic genre that is updated, refreshed by coping with modernity, but we document a sequence of works that are themselves constantly expanded and modified across the years. Some *anitals* indeed display different layers of representation that testify to later additions over time. Others are preserved intact, but circumscribed by layers of new plaster, a sign that the tradition was interrupted in some way, but ancestor worship is still alive (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Anital at Odaser village

Some scholars have noted strong similarities between the *anitals* of Saoras and the famous rock art engravings in the site of Bhimbetka in Madhya Pradesh (Pradhan 2009: 1-11; Mathpal, 1984: 217; Tribhuvwan and Finkenauer, 2003: 95ff; Chakravarti, 1999: 213-222; etc.). In Bhimbetka a large collection of images which apparently have been handed down through different historical periods are still studied by archaeologists, considering the richness and the high number of caves they show great vitality and narrative skills. Leaving aside the later phases, i.e. the ancient historical and the later medieval periods having a different variety of graffiti, the early prehistoric periods seem to be truly interesting. The earliest phase is dated to the Upper Palaeolithic period and is characterized by large linear representations of such animals as rhinos and bears: it is undoubtedly fascinating but probably less interesting for the purposes of our study. However the representations of the Mesolithic period are smaller and portray, besides the animals, human activities. Lastly the paintings from the Chalcolithic period (Early Bronze Age) clearly expose the primeval conceptions of human

beings related to the agricultural revolution. In fact, in these last two phases can be found elements of strong analogy with our subject of study. There is a very heated debate in India around these issues into which we think there is no need to enter in this case.[16] However, we notice on the one hand a tendency in some universities to consider *ādivāsī* society as a sort of open laboratory, an observatory, a cross-section of lifestyle and techniques of subsistence of proto-historical societies (hunters and gatherers or the period of the agricultural revolution / Bronze Age) (Nagar, 1977: 23-26; Ghosh, 1984: 106-111). In other words there is a tendency to give an overly evolutionary interpretation to the reality of the indigenous ethnic minorities of India which in our opinion cannot be placed scientifically in relation to such prehistoric communities. However the fact remains: a certain similarity of some elements, of some figures and of the way of articulating a general structure of the image is in some cases very strong; it seems nevertheless appropriate to reject this suggestion. At least, from the deeply symbolic interpretation of the shamanic phenomenon of *anitals*, we can assume that – also on the basis of the cornerstone of Leroi-Ghouran's study (2006) - these ancient societies could conceivably have a religion similarly profound and articulated through these messages written on the walls. However having already experienced not a few difficulties in the codification of *anitals*, it seems prudent not to enter deeper into this always fascinating mystery.

Conclusion: continuity and change in indigenous communities

In anthropology in modern times, the first to link the mural painting of the tribes of Odisha to a deep and articulated magical-religious code was Verrier Elwin, in the Forties / Fifties of the last century (1948: 35-44; 1951: 197ff; 1955: 401-443). Although the *anitals* of the Saoras have become very popular today, for reasons that we shall soon see, there do not currently exist many systematic studies of this religious tradition and its initiatory meaning, except in relation to an external or superficially folkloristic appearance.[17]

Moreover we have documented that for more than twenty years in the Pottasing and among nearby settlements there has been a constant process of Christianization (Catholic). Pottasingh is in the heart of, or rather in the access area to, the plateau inhabited by Lanjia Saoras; it is a large village mainly inhabited by low caste Hindus and Pano untouchables (Ḍom). They were the first to convert to Christianity, thus becoming the vehicle of the new religion in the area. Already at the time of our first fieldwork in the late '90s I noticed how the missionaries were particularly intransigent towards all the fundamental aspects of tribal culture and identity. In exchange for some medicine and food aid, the Christians were forcing conversion upon the people of the neighbouring villages. Among the converted then there was the peremptory obligation to abjure tradition: that is the rejection of shamanism, the systematic destruction of murals, even to the desecration of cemeteries. It goes without saying that this process had led to extreme tension between converted and non-converted people, but it is nevertheless quite clear that social contrasts between low castes/untouchables and the *ādivāsī* population were involved in this dynamic around issues of the welfare state and privileges, as well as matters of political relevance to the government of the local *pañcāyat*. In one way or another, however, in all these years the idea that conversion to the new religion implied the fact of 'becoming modern' has basically been predominant. This would signify having access to welfare and the glorious development of contemporary India: roads, schools, TV, electricity, buses, Coke,

things that until a few years ago were unthinkable in these villages, and remain so in some remote areas. Today a paved road joins the Christianized villages, all connected with providing electric pylons, which are however lacking in settlements inside the forest. But the problems of the area are far from resolved. Moreover since my last fieldwork I recall that many *anitals* had by then been obliterated, while some others had been preserved almost in secret in some homes. Along the roads connecting the converted villages or on the iridescent facades of the churches the 'tribal art' has been replaced by a chaotic jumble of Christian themed graffiti: hearts, doves and crosses of various kinds and sizes.

It is noteworthy that at the same time, as a sort of repercussion to this deplorable trend of annihilation of *ādivāsī* culture, throughout the state interest in this kind of art is experiencing a moment of genuine revival. The people realize that it is an endangered, if not yet vanished, tradition and that it must be protected by some means. So the Government of Odisha and many NGOs organize studies, craft workshops, schools, that work on reproductions of *anitals* on any scale. A workforce of tribal origin is often employed in this new dynamic, with the task of mass production, reinterpreting the traditional patterns of *anital* in a modern way. Today all this practice is becoming a big business, especially in recent times, and is fairly successful. For example, traveling today across Odisha, is easy to see everywhere the motifs of *anitals* or *similia*, that are replicated, mass produced in thousands of released variants: T-shirts, postcards, paintings, prints, wristwatches and wall clocks, even applications for nail-styling! For many metropolitan non-governmental organizations this is a way to prevent the disappearance of this kind of art and at the same time to re-employ the fruits of this business in fair trade projects or cooperative development of *ādivāsī* existence. It is hard to say to what extent this reinvestment of funds is incisive. It should however also be noted that the driving energy for this flawed revival has developed during a particular period of international enhancement and valorization of ethnic arts, a moment in which perhaps the fruits of the interest and appreciation accumulated over the past decades are tasted. For this reason, we repeat, these activities often have the direct patronage of central institutions or at least those of the state, because in any case they are economic activities that produce a certain income and, if not providing relief to a somewhat disadvantaged social subject, nevertheless they can be understood as a form of development. On the other hand, after more than sixty years of a somewhat ineffective – if not occasionally destructive – tribal policy, we believe it is currently possible to wish for more.

The fundamental problem is that these performances, conveyed nowadays, as we have said, on paper with industrial colours, and which distort the traditional subjects while wherever possible imitating the style, are completely decontextualized from the ritual scope and tragically lose their original and deep meaning. The motifs of the representations moreover do not respect any criterion or rule. The definition of tribal art has in some way become a stereotype, due to homologating a wide range of expressive and aesthetic peculiarities of the *ādivāsī* matrix, through a standardization that has lost even the memory of its origins.

One of the interesting aspects of this phenomenon is that on the other hand separated genres of tribal art have now become the symbol of some *ādivāsī* groups, which historically being marginalized communities, have thus the opportunity to

emerge and to reaffirm their identity. Artists have arisen who, aware of their role as spokesperson, even promote themselves as national and international celebrities. This too is a phenomenon deserving of renewed interest in the sense that previously, as for for classical art in India, the single performer, the artist, did not exist as an individual creativity. Rather, the work conveyed sense, meaning and values through a style that was exclusively shared within the group. Today this ancient meaning has been lost, but this same style conveyed outside the community becomes the desperate cry of the indigenous communities that affirm their right to exist in the contemporary world. The systematization of this dynamic, the patronage of the reiteration of a certain *ādivāsī* ritualism in the arts, as well as the musealisation of the ethnic today seems to be the only way of survival of what remains of these cultures. The theme is extremely topical and is the subject of debate today, not only in India, but almost everywhere.

In conclusion, observing the mysterious *anitals*, that once enclosed the secret initiation of shamans and allowed man a view of beyond the dimension of space and time, we can attest that today they have survived the decline and disappearance of *ādivāsī* culture. However, there remains also the bitter realization that this new life is nothing more than a pale reflection of what it once was.

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Notes

[1] The Saora Language, or Sora, is classified as Austro-Asiatic, Munda, Ethnologue ISO 639-3 srb.

[2] Among many materials on this theme, we would like to mention the collection of Rigopoulos and Mastromattei (1999)

[3] With particular reference to region of Orissa are very interesting the German works of Orissa Research Project. In brief we quote Schnepel (2002) and Pfeffer (2007).

[4] Here understood as traditional art or craft guilds

[5] For which the aniconic or the symbolic in the representation are anyway prevalent. See Elwin (1955: 178ff; 1951: 110-126)

[6] See again the dense work of Partha Mitter (1994; 2007)

[7] On *ādivāsī* art in the dimension of global contemporary art see also Guzy (2010: 169-179)

[8] See Richard H. Davis (2008: 77-99) and ICCR/Cesmeo (1987).

[9] See Yashodhara Dalmia (1988). and Ajay Dandekar (1998).

[10] Oct. 1998 / Feb. 1999 M.A. fieldwork in Rayagada; Jan. /Apr. 2001 Research Project funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Nov. / Dic. 2002 Research and development cooperation in Khandmal ('Orissa Mission') funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Govt. of the Veneto Region; Sep. / Oct. 2005 Ph.D. fieldwork; researches with Academy of Tribal Languages and Cultures of Bhubaneswar; Jan./ Feb. 2007 individual research; Dec. 2012 / Jan. 2013 individual research.

[11] *Kulbā* or *kulbānji*, generic expression referable to the oḍiā *bhūto* (hin. *bhūt*).

[12] Colloquial expression meaning 'grandfather'; more specific terms are *idaisiman* or *idaisumji*.

[13] Angaisim/ Moon *sonum*; Bees/ Labosim (Earth *sonum*); bow and arrows/weapons of spirits *ilda*; banyan or *sal*/trees of *raudas* (ancestors); harvest/wealth; frog/rain; fish or crab/ decorative motifs; snake or *jitipiti* (gecko)/Uyungsim (Sun *sonum*); tiger/Kinasim (Tiger *sonum* or man-tiger metamorphosis); dogs/spirit dog (Kambutung) dogs of Ratusim (*sonum* of crossroads); person sitting on stool/guiding spirit; man drinking, preparing liquor or dancing/servants of *ilda* spirits; etc.

[14] The huts of Saoras are entirely built of mud. This technique is probably intended to compact and smooth the surface to be painted.

[15] The plants chosen in particular are all considered sacred; the feathers are from a sacred animal representing royalty and the descent of the spirits, as we have seen. The use of umbrellas is quite common, especially during funerals. While celebrating the guar ceremony, with the sacrifice of a buffalo and erection of the memorial stone for the dead, the soul is considered absolutely naked, frightened, cut off. In this period, the family builds a miniature hut on piles whose roof is made with an umbrella. The soul of the deceased is imagined to reside temporarily there and then beside it are placed all his properties. The umbrella symbolizes a hut, or better the protection of a roof.

[16] See also Jasiewicz and Rozwadowski (2001: 3-14).

[17] In summary we can mention Mahapatra (1991), Doshi (1992: 71), Vitebsky (1993: 20, 53, 37) Mallebrein (2001: 93-122), Patel (2005: 53-57)