


Chapter 10


Symbolism, Ritual, and Continuity: A Socio–Cultural Interpretation of Kumaoni Folk Art Aipan

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ABSTRACT

The chapter aims to explore Aipan, a traditional floor art form of the Kumaoni people in Uttarakhand. It examines Aipan as a cultural practice that encompasses symbolism, rituals, gender roles, and oral traditions. The chapter uses insights from folklore studies, anthropology, and cultural theory to study the visual language and social-religious importance of Aipan motifs. It will also examine how these motifs, which are rooted in Brahmanical tradition but maintained through folk practices, represent personal and community identities. Aipan is not just an art form; it is a culturally meaningful practice that conveys cosmological, spiritual, and social stories. In a time when tradition is both being revived and diluted in the modern market, the chapter will also discuss how Aipan is changing to fit today's consumer culture thus addressing important questions about preservation, change, and authenticity.

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INTRODUCTION

Indigenous art traditions around the world are not just cultural expressions; they are systems of knowledge, symbolism, and continuity. The Aipan art from the Kumaoni region of Uttarakhand, India, exemplifies how visual forms act as living record of beliefs, social structures, and ritualistic engagements. Aipan is rooted in everyday life and holds deep spiritual significance. Rooted in everyday life yet profoundly spiritual, *Aipan*, with its intricate motifs drawn in white rice paste on a red ochre base represents a performative and symbolic art practice that has survived centuries of change, holding together a community's ethos through its cycles of life, death, fertility, and renewal. The word *Aipan* is believed to derive from the Sanskrit "Arpana" or "Lepana," which means to offer or to plaster, signifying a ritualistic dedication of space to the sacred. Aipan art varies across regions in India, but it has different names in each area. For example:

- Aipan in Kumaon
- Aipona in Bengal and Assam
- Aripana in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh
- Mandana in Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh
- Rangoli in Gujarat and Maharashtra
- Kolam in some parts of South India
- Muggu and Bhuggul in Andhra Pradesh
- Alpana, Chita, Jhoti, or Muruja in Odisha

The art's historical emergence during the reign of the Chand Dynasty in Kumaon (7th–18th century CE) reflects its rootedness in royal patronage and devotional practices of the region. Three classical typologies of Aipan exist: Siddha (floor-based ritual forms), Daiva (wall-based deity pattas), and Laukik (household motifs), indicating its multivalent ritual applications across time and space. It represents a visual language that links the physical and spiritual worlds. Mostly performed by women, it employs gestures and symbols passed down through oral traditions and lived experiences. This chapter delves into Aipan as a dynamic blend of symbolism, ritual, and cultural continuity. By interpreting its motifs such as Swastikas, bindus, abstract yantras, and animal forms this study aims to uncover the spiritual and philosophical themes that influence its creation and reception. It also tracks how Aipan continues to be a ritual performance woven into religious ceremonies, life events, and seasonal festivals.

Drawing on insights from visual anthropology, folklore studies, and symbolic anthropology, the chapter examines the social and cultural context in which Aipan is practised and shared. Victor Turner's (1969) theory of ritual as a liminal process,

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