

Floor Art Motifs as Cultural Time-Capsules: Mythical Narratives and Identity in Floor line Traditions

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Abstract

Floor arts in India serve as a profound reflection of identity for local cultures, intertwining myths and legends with ritualistic practices. With its roots in pre-history and imbibing modernity through value-addition, floor arts exist as a testimony to history and its continued impact in the present. With the motifs travelling along with the demography and cultural exchange, they have come to represent diverse concepts in different cultures, often associated with mythical narratives. This study explores the intricate relationship between floor designs, mythical narratives, and cultural identity, focusing on the “Yamduaar” or “Gate of Yam,” a symbol of protection against evil forces, as represented in the Broto Alpona tradition of Bengal. The tradition of “Bhai-Phonta,” where sisters pray for their brothers’ long life, encapsulates this connection through a rhyme that refers to Yam’s gate, illustrating the protective essence of these rituals. The rhyme emphasizes the act of marking the brother’s forehead and metaphorically links it to the divine myth of Goddess Yamuna- who prays for her brother Yam- the Hindu God of Death, thereby reinforcing the cultural significance of the floor art as a ritualistic practice. The gate of Yam has been depicted in the Bengali culture for centuries through the motif of “Yamduaar” employed in the Broto Alpona tradition. Yamduaar appears and re-appears in various narratives around the Indian subcontinent, creating a strong background narrative to the motif.

Furthermore, similar designs are observed across India, such as the “Chakravayuh” in Uttarakhand, which alludes to a military formation from the Mahabharata, showcasing how the same design can embody different identities across cultures. Parallels can be drawn with the motif “Labyrinth” – a popular motif from Greek mythology, widely used in the western world. This study employs content analysis and expert discussions to delve into how these floor designs manifest mythical narratives, ultimately referring to a shared cultural heritage. This exploration not only highlights the aesthetic value of these art forms but also emphasizes their role as a cultural time capsule, preserving the myths and rituals that shape the identities of communities.

Keywords: *Yamduaar, Broto Alpona, Chakravyuh, Labyrinth, Floor line-art, Folk-Narratives.*

Introduction

Symbols have been one of the defining identity elements representing cultural ethos. In visual manifestations of culture such as in art, symbols in the form of motifs encapsulate narratives to be perceived by the denizens of the culture. With the Onion Model of Culture, Hofstede et al. (1990) depicted the levels of depth in which cultural phenomena are embedded in people's minds. The degree of depth also signifies the resilience of cultural phenomenon types: The more superficially rooted a cultural phenomenon is, the more probable it is to be modified or abandoned (Sawagvudcharee, 2018).

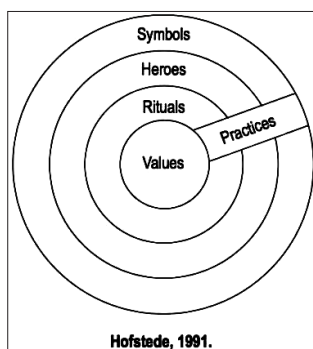


Figure.1. shows Onion Model of Culture, Hofstede. Source: <https://www.coderfrontline.com/elements-of-the-culture-onion/>

Motifs in visual culture have been in utilization for centuries carrying historical and social perspectives of the times in which they emerged. In visual arts such as Broto Alpona from West Bengal, India and Bangladesh, motifs have been central to visual composition as well as the carrier of cultural contexts. While the motifs contain narratives from specific cultures, it has been observed that certain visually similar motifs are shared between cultures. A popular example is the motif of a labyrinth, known as the “Yamduaar” in the Broto Alpona Tradition (Biswas, 2015), also found throughout India, popularly known as the famed “Chakravyuh” formation, as used in the mythical Mahabharata War (Dudeja, 2018). Similar labyrinth pattern can be found across the globe, transcending cultures.

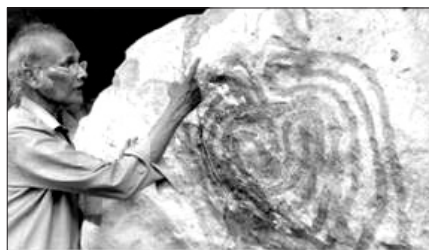


Figure.2. shows archaeologist Kadiyala Venkateswara Rao at the labyrinth in Kolimeru village, East Godavari district. Source: <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Vijayawada/prehistoric-labyrinth-discoveredgodavari/article19892482.ece#:~:text=The%20labyrinth%2C%20dating%20back%20to,the%20cave%20facing%20the%20Sun.>

In the East Godavari area, close to Kolimeru hamlet near Tuni, a prehistoric painting depicting a labyrinth has been found in a cave perched on a hill. The Neolithic-era labyrinth is made up of seven red-ochre circles painted in white pigment on a rectangular rock in front of the cave that faces the (Kumar, 2015). The finding of the labyrinth sheds light on archaic civilizations' understanding of astronomical indications in addition to their previous religious customs, such as sun worshipping or predicting seasonal changes and natural calamities (Hindu, 2017).



Figure.3. (a) shows sculpture of Chakravayuh, Source: (Brooks, 1953);
(b) shows the Yamduaar from Broto Alpona. Source: (Biswas, 2015)



Figure.4. Shows the Cretan Coin from Crete Greece, Source: <http://vla.chez-alice.fr/d95.htm>

Evidence of the enduring cultural importance of the Labyrinth in Crete is found in ancient Cretan coinage, particularly from the city of Knossos. Coins dating to the 4th century BCE often depict a stylized version of the Labyrinth on one side, typically as a square or circular motif (Anon., n.d.). The myth of the Labyrinth is supposed to have its origins in the Minoan culture, which flourished on Crete between 2000 and 1400 BCE. Few studies suggested that the narrative was inspired by the Palace of Knossos (Herva, 2023), a vast and ornate Minoan palace in modern-day Heraklion, Crete. The palace contained complex passageways and apartments that may be described as a “Labyrinth”.



Figure 5. Shows an ancient coil-like symbol resembling a labyrinth design from Tantra practice. Source: SOHAM Himalayan Centre

Fig. 5 shows a geometrical mandala-like symbol resembling a modern-day Yantra (designs in Tantra believed to invoke deities). In Tantra practice, Yantras are sacred designs believed to invoke cosmic energies, facilitating transformative experiences. The words surrounding the central motif, in Devanagari script, appears to be mantras recited to activate the symbol. Such instructional suggestions direct focus on spirituality and rituals directed towards attaining spiritual experiences.

While the coiled symbol shows similarity to the labyrinth design, the design shows aspects of Tantric practices that have been prevalent in the ancient Southeast Asia. Exploring links to such ancient practices may provide insights into the varying interpretations of the same designs across the region.



Figure.6. Shows the Labyrinth developed by Govt of India to promote tourism and preservation of culture heritage in Miyawaki Forest at Gujarat's Ekta Nagar. Source: <https://www.indianarrative.com/culture-news/pm-modi-inaugurates-maze-garden-and-miyawaki-forest-at-gujarats-ekta-nagar-66587.html>

The Maze Garden is part of a broader initiative to develop tourism in Ekta Nagar, which also includes a Miyawaki Forest designed to promote biodiversity and environmental awareness. This labyrinth garden is not just a recreational space but also serves as a cultural and educational attraction that highlights India's commitment to sustainable tourism and environmental conservation (Whitmore, 2004).

While the background of such transcendental nature of the motif is unknown as according to the current state of study, this investigation, through interviews with experts and content analysis, sought to understand the possibility of thematic association among the similar motifs from different cultural backgrounds through a study into their narrative contexts, often connected to mythology and memories of cultural practice.

Methodology

This study examines the complex symbols of labyrinths from India, emphasizing their artistic, historical, and cultural value. The research uses a qualitative approach, analysing the labyrinth

symbols' content and holding in-depth interviews with Aipan experts (N=2), art historians (N=2), Anthropologists (N=2) to obtain expert insights. The collected data was then analysed along with the secondary data collected from background literature survey to reach the conclusion.

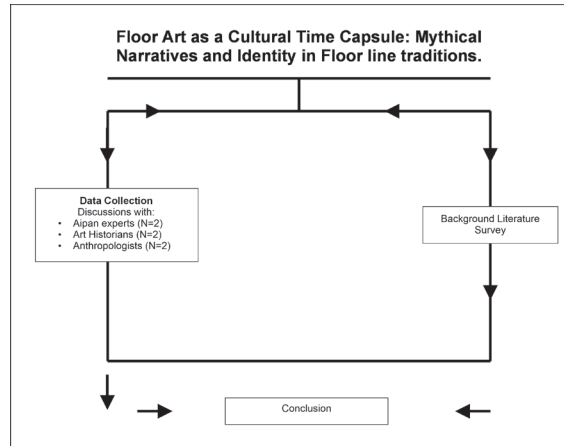


Figure.7. Shows the study diagrammatic design of the methodology followed for this study.

Result of discussion

The discussions with the experts, historians and anthropologists (n=6) yielded some interesting interpretations of the labyrinth motif. Given below is a summary of the interpretations:

Womb of the mother: According to some experts, the labyrinth is often interpreted as a powerful symbol of the womb of the Mother (Shelton, 2013), encapsulating the cyclical journey of life, death, and rebirth. This metaphor underscores the sacred, life-giving power of the females, linking it to the worship of the Mother Goddess, prevalent in Vedic culture. As individuals navigate the labyrinth's intricate paths, they engage in a pilgrimage that mirrors gestation, wherein each twist and turn represents the complexities of existence and personal transformation (Eternalised, 2024). Labyrinths and spirals too, predispose to womb-like symbolism. As Lima de Freitas states, to delve into a labyrinth is to step back into the “bosom of Mother Earth,” imagined as the earth as yoni or womb (ELECTRONICA, 2024). In every culture, a cave or underground maze is a cosmic womb/tomb: prehistoric and megalithic labyrinth designs are typically linked at the same time with death (the underworld) and fertility. For instance, in European megalithic art, scientists discovered “Ringwallbilder” patterns— concentric circles penetrated by a central spiral or line – that resemble both female genitals and fertilization iconography (semen entering an ovum) (Lundquist, 2006).



Figure 8 shows the Ringwallbilder Pattern in a ancient temple, in Mysore.

Source: <https://www.theyogicjournal.com/pdf/2018/vol3issue2/PartK/3-2-116-503.pdf>

These motifs, clearly, link the journey through a maze with the fruitful cycle of life. The labyrinth archetype (from ancient Crete to Celtic Britain) generally is a womb–spiral symbol of change: one enters “the interior of the earth,” moves through death and uncertainty, and is reborn at the center. This connection emphasizes the labyrinth’s role as a spiritual tool for self-discovery and healing, resonating with ancient beliefs surrounding femininity (Kaleshwara, 2020)

Naag Aipan: In Kumaon, the labyrinthine patterns of Aipan art symbolize protection and fertility, reflecting the intricate pathways of life. This art form embodies a spiritual journey, connecting the divine with everyday existence, much like the serpentine forms of the Naag (Serpent), representing continuity and renewal. One expert suggested the existence of an identical design of the Naag Aipan, an Aipan design used to pay reverence to the Naga Gods (D’Silva, 2019). In Himalayan cultures and all over India, Nagas were semi-divine beings living in subterranean realms, rivers, lakes, and springs. They were protectors of water—a power of nature that was essential to fertility, agriculture, and the very survival of life (Chang, 2024). In farming cultures like 15th-century Kumaon, where life was balanced on the seasons’ rains and fertility of land, the Nagas were both protectors and possible threats. Their blessings were sought to bestow fertile crops, the protection of animals, and the health of the people.



Figure 9. shows a 12th century sculpture of a Naga couple (Naga and Nagini) at Chennakeshava temple at Belur, Karnataka. Source: <https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/N%C4%81ga>

The relationship, though, was not of only worship—it was also one of fear and reserve. In a country like India, where snakes were in abundance- a threat to the daily livelihood of humans, the worship of serpentine Gods is a natural occurrence- the early humans worshipped the things they were afraid of. Nagas were said to be angry if overlooked or slighted, and they could inflict drought, disease, or catastrophe. Their poison could destroy, but their blessing could cure. Therefore, appeasing them with rites, oblations, and sacred iconography was a necessary act of cosmic equilibrium. The Naag Aipan, therefore, is a promise and an entreaty—a visual prayer inscribed on doorways, beside sources of water, and at sacred places to recognize the Nagas’ ascendancy over the powers of nature. The snake-like nature of the Naag Aipan reflects the coiled posture of snakes and reminds one of the meandering ways of nature and of fate. It is a symbol of continuity since snakes shed skin to claim new ones. Rooted mythological beliefs state that all lands were “borrowed” from the Nagas by human beings who appropriated lands as per their own utility (Dinu Das, 2017). Such a myth is usually present in oral myths and folklores (Andrews, 2025), where tracing serpentine lines is a gesture of reparation—an act of respect towards the original owners of the land. This connection with wells and water tanks gives credence to this because such places were considered to be gates to the Naga world.

War formation: In the Indian epic Mahabharata, a war formation- “Chakravyuh” has been mentioned in the Drona Parva, where Dronacharya designed the labyrinth formation, which resulted in the entrapment and killing of Abhimanyu. It has been mentioned that the formation enables the enemy to navigate inside and facilitate their own entrapment, utility similar to Yamduaar. In the rich tapestry of Indian mythology and cultural practices, the concepts of Yamduaar from Broto Alpona and the Chakravyuh from the Mahabharata share intriguing philosophical parallels. Both symbolize protective barriers, employing intricate designs and strategies to encapsulate and contain energies or adversaries, each rooted in a deep cultural and spiritual ethos (Lundén, 2003). Rajnaun in the Hamirpur district, Himachal Pradesh, is historically and mythologically important village site to be associated with the Chakravyuh, a complex military formation described in the Mahabharata. People are of the view that during the Agyatvas when the Pandavas, particularly Arjuna, were in exile, they practiced and may have inscribed the complex formation in stone itself in this region. This place, known as the Arjun Chakravyuh Rachna, is claimed to be among the few to have such a structure, after Kurukshetra (Pandey, 2023).



Figure 10 shows the Arjun Chakravyuh Rachna at Rajnaun Village, Himachal Pradesh. The image stone formation believed to represent the Chakravyuh—a complex military formation described in the Mahabharata. Source: <https://www.opindia.com/2023/02/according-to-legends-arjuna-learned-about-the-chakravyuh-at-rajnaun-in-himachal-pradesh/>

The Cycle of Karma: The philosophy of the design enables the notion of entrapment, drawing parallels to the vicious cycle of Karma and rebirth, popular across various ancient religions, the way out being attaining enlightenment (Banerjee, 2018). The concept of karma has been present since time of the Upanishads. Thus, in Brahmana- a Vedic stuti attached to the Samhitas, “karma” was used to mean the ritual work of the brahman, work which was attended by – as was the law cause and effect – favorable, materialistic consequences after death for the brahmin who might attain the world of the Gods. Indian philosophical-religious thought from this point on starts to question the meaning of all the facts of a man’s life and not only those of ritual facts. Reflection about the ritual process of “cause and effect” it was inevitable to find that all action, by the sheer fact of obtaining an outcome, was comprehended in an unlimited chain of causes and effect. There was a question of the fate of the “atman”- the human soul- often believed to be the person’s true self, after life has ended for a person, due to ritual deeds. Thus, the Brahmins’ thinkers attempted to find during life things which were also causes which had to be accompanied by their respective effects. These activities (karma) are associated with “avidya”, as it is ignorance that leads human beings to forget the consequences of activities. The term “samsara” is also related to the terms “avidya” and “karma.” Samsara is the cycle of the world’s existence of birth, death, and rebirth (Natesan, 2009). As per last life activities, the individual can get reincarnated and assigned a destiny to fulfill in the life, associated with the past life activities. Each individual has behind him a series of past lives, in which he has endured infinitely much and intensely. Eternally, each person has strayed away from existence to lived ignorant of the truth that the pleasures are transient and the pains permanent, he/she has continued to show his/her aspiration for a new life. Whereas samsara gives person temporary pleasures to make him/her want to be reborn and enjoy the luxuries of the world, only when one transcends this cycle of death and rebirth can one enjoy complete and eternal happiness is attained (Bjorling, 1996). This freedom is referred to as “moksha”. It is said that after a certain number of reincarnations, man becomes one with the cosmic spirit. The ultimate purpose of life has been called “nirvana,” “moksha,” or “samadhi.” It is being defined as realization of man’s union with God, union with the entire universe, full knowledge of self-detachment from worldly desires.

Protection from negative forces: Aligning with the other representations, the labyrinth design has been utilized in floor art designs such as in Broto Alpona where it is known as “Yamduar” at the front of the outer line (creepers) of the Alpona to ward off evil forces (Mukhopadhyay, 2023) as shown in Figure 3 (b). Since Broto Alpona is an indigenous art form practiced primarily by the indigenous communities of Bengal region in India, the higher strata consisting of the higher castes often averted from it. Broto Alpona remained an indigenous practice, and the element of evil forces differ greatly from that in the Vedic philosophies. While according

to the Vedic scriptures, evil can be defined as a disruption in the cosmic order (Radhakrishnan 1999: 41), the indigenous metaphors for evil were embodied spirits who could get lost in the labyrinth, preventing them from entering the central area of the Alpona design.

Conclusion

Culture and collective memory are influenced by mythology (Pethes), Myths depict or symbolize the moral lessons, norms of society, or memories of history, and become more or less enmeshed in the culture of the society. Accounts related to Theseus, the Minotaur, and the Chakravayuh, as well as the Mahabharata, illustrate the point that myths can reflect civilization and encapsulate rather intricate human experiences. Looking at such myths through various cultural practices, broad themes can be derived that touch on human concerns and issues of existence (Wang, 2017).

The Labyrinth has come to represent more than just a physical structure; it symbolizes the intellectual and psychological challenges associated with navigating complex problems. In a broader cultural context, the Labyrinth can be viewed as a metaphor for the human condition—one in which individuals must confront fear, uncertainty, and seemingly insurmountable obstacles, much like Theseus. The presence of the Minotaur within the Labyrinth introduces the idea of duality: reason and civility (Theseus) versus primal, animalistic nature (the Minotaur).



Figure.11. Shows the major varying interpretations of the Labyrinth design into two main themes as communicated: Entrapment and Self-realization.

In essence, the interpretations underscore a timeless lesson: the path to liberation, whether from a battlefield formation or spiritual entrapment, lies in the wisdom to navigate complexity with clarity and purpose. Entrapment may symbolize the materialistic constraints of earthly life. Self-realization may resemble the concepts of Nirvana and Moksh, signifying liberation from earthly bindings. Yamduaar reflects the belief that understanding the spiritual dimensions of art and life can safeguard against unseen dangers. It highlights the notion that protection is not merely physical but also metaphysical, emphasizing a holistic approach to safety and well-being. The parallels between the Chakravayuh and Yamduaar reveal a deeper cultural narrative about the balance between entrapment and liberation, protection and exposure. They teach

that while challenges and adversities are inevitable, true mastery lies in understanding both entry and exit, ensuring that we are neither trapped by circumstances nor vulnerable to unseen threats. The usage of labyrinth in temples and parks as a process of walking meditation as shown in Figure 12 (a),(b) asserts the same.

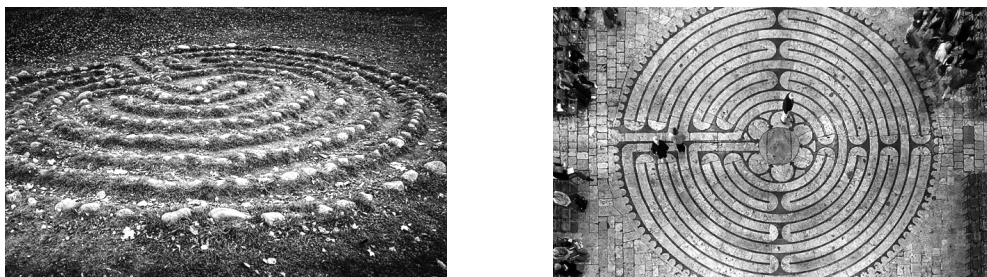


Figure 12 (a) & (b) shows examples of labyrinth design at parks and churches which is used for meditative walking practises.

Source: <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20240508-labyrinth-walking-an-ancient-activity-that-could-help-ease-anxiety>

Labyrinth symbols occur across the globe and cultures. While this study sought to summarise the various interpretations of the symbols primarily from an Indian perspective, more research may be driven towards the factors impacting appearance of the symbol in varying cultures with no known connections in the ancient world.

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