

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Food Culture of Sounti Community of Keonjhar District, Odisha

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ABSTRACT

Food in the Sounti tribe of Odisha functions not only as sustenance but also as a symbolic medium of identity, kinship, and ritual life. The study rooted in symbolic and interpretive anthropology, this study examines the intergenerational transmission of food practices and their role in sustaining cultural resilience. The scope of the research is to document how ritual feasts, agricultural practices, and beverages like *handia* embody symbolic values and sustain social cohesion while negotiating modernization, migration, and ecological disruptions. The objectives are threefold: to analyse the symbolic role of food in everyday and ritual contexts, to explore how knowledge and practices are passed down generations, and to understand the impact of contemporary changes on traditional food ways. The ethnographic fieldwork in Kiapada village, Keonjhar district, employed participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and case studies. Findings reveal that ritual foods reinforce solidarity, women act as custodians of culinary knowledge, and meal sharing strengthens kinship ties. Although younger generations are influenced by market foods and migration, ritual contexts safeguard cultural continuity. The study suggests systematic documentation of food traditions, community sensitization for younger generations, policy interventions to preserve culinary heritage, and revival of indigenous crops as sustainable strategies for safeguarding the Sounti community's intangible cultural heritage.

KEYWORDS

• Food • Identity • Ritual • Symbolic • Heritage

INTRODUCTION

Social scientists, aeons ago, have recognized food as an ethnic identity maker and culture. For a contemporary anthropologist, Food is not merely a biological necessity; it is deeply

lodged within the cultural matrix and symbolic edifices. For decades, Anthropologists have long confessed that food reflects and shapes social order, belief systems, and intergenerational continuity. As stated by a

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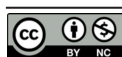
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famous British anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1984) hinted at “where there is dirt, there is system. Dirt is the byproduct of a systematic ordering and classification of matter.”. This highlights the social disparities regarding someone’s class, caste, or birth. In a traditional Indian system where society is stratified into so many castes like the Shudras (workers), Vaishyas (merchants), Kshatriyas (warriors), and Brahmins (priests), with untouchables highlighting the Indian dietary taboos, such as the higher castes like the Brahmins can’t share their meals with lower castes, the remaining three others. This acknowledges that throughout the entire tribal-Indian diaspora, although the majority of tribes in India show egalitarian, animalistic behaviours, but Sountis and some others show disparities as they seem to be inclined more towards a Hinduized society than the rest of the tribal community of that area, which shows a symbolic shift from a traditional egalitarian tribal mindset to a Hinduized society now. The food distribution during a feast is a prime example of this, as the higher castes, such as Vaishnavas, Dhobas, and Karuas, were treated with more hospitality than the Sountis, regardless of their numerical strength, highlighting the contrast between the Sountis and the other castes, with food serving as a symbol of this distinction. Similarly, Sidney Mintz’s seminal work *Sweetness and Power* (1985) illustrates how sugar, once a luxury good, became a symbol of colonialism, class, and global trade, shaping identities across nations. Cuisine, as a symbolic expression of identity, is also evident in ethnic and regional food practices. For example, cuisines like Indian, Chinese, or Mexican are not just categories of food but symbols of cultural pride and differentiation in a globalized world.



Figure 1: A sounti girl holding leafy plates for a communal feast (Source: Fieldwork, 2025)

According to Clifford Geertz (1973), culture refers to a system of inherited concepts represented in symbolic forms, a historically transmitted pattern of meanings encoded in symbols, and a mechanism by which men discuss, transfer, and evolve their attitudes towards and knowledge of life. Considering Geertz’s framework, we can presume that Food is not just food for the Sounti; it is more than that; it is a symbol of their identity, values, and connection to the natural world. It is an essential expression of their culture, identity, and tradition in addition to being a source of nourishment. It is more than just sustenance; it’s an extraordinary vehicle for self-portrayal and exchange of culture among the Sountis men and women. The rich culinary traditions reflect their surroundings, local resources, and cultural ethos. It forms a triangle similar to the work done by Lévi-Strauss (1966) in the culinary triangle, where he furnishes insights into the symbolic nature of cooking through the “culinary triangle,” underscoring the transformative role of food in human societies. Recent scholars like Subramanyam & Narayana Rao (2023) have further underscored the dynamic role of food symbolism in tribal communities across India. However, the sounti’s conventional method of knowledge transfer has faced difficulties in the present period. Traditional food systems have been disrupted by market forces, migration, rapid modernization, and shifting lifestyles, particularly among younger and middle-aged individuals. The survival of their food culture is being threatened by the growing reliance on market goods, as well as the rapid deterioration of the traditional agricultural and foraging methods, such as the heavy use of DDT in crop production or excessive use of urea as a fertilizer, which can be lethal if not managed properly. Deforestation and climate unpredictability are two examples of environmental changes that have further damaged access to natural food supplies, increasing the danger of nutritional and cultural loss in the community. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the Sounti tribe’s identity and resiliency depend heavily on the generational transfer of food culture, which this study intends to provide insight into how traditional knowledge is maintained and the elements that affect its sustainability.

Significance of the Study

The lack of specific studies addressing the Sounti tribe’s dietary patterns, health, and

cultural practices creates a research gap that this study seeks to address. Despite their rich culinary traditions, there is limited documentation on the Sounti subsistence systems, making them vulnerable to erosion due to external influences. Thus, this study contributes to addressing the question: how food is treated as a repository of symbolic denotation among the sounti extremity. The study is a consequence of an endeavor to explore the above question, which is related to symbolism and constructivism. The study focuses on the dietary heritage among the sounti tribe of Odisha. The study attempts to highlight the role of food in the construction of social cohesion, solidarity, and resolution for a stable livelihood in the vicinity of the sounti community.

Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the study are to examine the symbolic role of food in the quotidian life of the Sounti tribe and to understand how food knowledge and practices are transmitted across generations. The inquiry seeks to explore the cultural meanings embedded in everyday food behaviours, emphasizing the ways in which such practices reinforce identity, continuity, and social cohesion within the community. This focus illuminates the enduring significance of food as a conduit of cultural memory. The main objectives stated in the bellows

1. To study the socio-cultural life of the Sounti tribe.
2. To examine the cultural, symbolic, and ritual significance of food.
3. To highlight how food knowledge and practices are continue to the next generation.

Geo-Ethnic Profile of the Sounti Tribe

The Sounti tribe is a scheduled tribe as per the Constitution of India. The tribes name derives from the Odia term for "Gathering things" or "gathered in", In addition to describing the name of the community that has developed gradually through the assimilation of families from their respectable castes, it also tells the story of Hindu communities from which Brahmans receive water but who were expelled by the federal chiefs of various Gadjat states for social crimes. These families have fled their homes and sought refuge in Keonjhar and its

nearby places, and in course of time they were called Sounti. Ota, A., & Gomango, A. K. (2014). They are a Scheduled Tribe with a distinct cultural identity rooted in agriculture and forest-based subsistence. Demographically, the Sounti population is relatively small, yet they have retained a cohesive cultural fabric. Their dialect belongs to the Indo-Aryan group, with Odia as the lingua franca.



Figure 2: A typical Sounti man and woman
(Source: Fieldwork, 2025)



Figure 3: A sounti man making Ropes from waste bags
(Source: Fieldwork, 2025)

Sounti settlements are typically unclan and homogeneous. In multi-ethnic villages, they tend to reside in separate hamlets, maintaining a degree of social and spatial distance from

other communities. Their social organization is largely based on nuclear families, and they follow a patrilocal (residing with or near the husband's family) and patrilineal (descent traced through the father) system. The community identifies itself with a totemic gotra—Nagasya or Nageswar, which refers to the cobra. Within this totemic framework, the Saunti are divided into several exogamous clans (locally known as *khilli*) such as Doldasia, Saru, and Tongania, among others. Exogamy (marriage outside the clan) is strictly observed, preserving lineage purity and clan identity. The Saunti are Hindus by faith. They worship a variety of deities, including village goddesses like *Thakurani* and *Laxmi Maa*, as well as other mainstream Hindu deities such as Shiva and Ganesh. They also participate in major Hindu festivals. Their traditional priest is known as the Dehury, who plays a key role in conducting religious ceremonies and rituals. In terms of governance and social control, the Saunti maintain their own traditional community council, typically led by the village chief and a group of influential elders. This council plays a vital role in conflict resolution, upholding social norms, and preserving community values. A saunti attire for men includes lungi, Dhoti, and Gamcha, and for women, a cotton saree (Suta Luga) for regular wear, ornaments like Betari, a ring locally manufactured by saunti goldsmiths, are worn on the fingers. These rings are made of Gold, Silver, or Bronze. Women also wear anklets on their feet and garlands around their necks. The garlands feature simple round balls, flowers, and leaves as part of the design. Hairpins, known locally as Matar Kanta, are used to secure their hair buns. Some women pierce their noses and wear nose studs, referred to as Naka Dandi in the local language. The Sounti women in the community were particularly famous for their **intricate body art**, where designs are painted on the body using natural pigments. The community uses various materials for creating these designs, including: **Chunchi** (pin), **Kanta** (thorns), and Ink mixed with **Mahua** (*Madhuca longifolia*) oil. These body art designs are primarily created for **ceremonial and ritual purposes**. The tattoos, especially, are believed to hold spiritual significance, with the community believing that the designs can appease **Yamraj**, the Hindu god of death. They believe that this will lead to less pain in the afterlife.



Figure 4: Body art (Tattoo) Source: Fieldwork, 2025

The saunti women receive equal status in the community concerning things like decision making, property ownership, and remarriages. The Sounti have a tight cultural relationship with their neighbouring tribe or caste, the Mahanta caste in this case, and the government has implemented a number of welfare and development initiatives to help them improve their lot in life. The Sounti women have joined Self-Help Groups (SHGs), and receiving financial aid has created new economic opportunities for improved living standards in the region. However, they still maintain certain fundamental tribal characteristics in their sociocultural system that set them apart from other ethnic groups.



Figure 5: Image of a Deity in the village (Source: Fieldwork, 2025)

Religious practices among the Sounti include ancestor worship. They believe their ancestors continue to watch over them and protect them from harm. Ancestral worship is an integral part of Sounti religious life and is observed

with great reverence. Kiasuni Maa, Joda Maa, Muchari Sala, Dasandi Sala, Badama Sala, Andhari Devi, Dharitri Mata, and Thushu Thakurani were some of the prominent deities of the kiapada village. Sounti religious belief is their devotion to a supreme deity known as Kiasuni Maa. She is believed to be the creator of the universe and is worshipped through various rituals and ceremonies. The Sounti maintain a deep connection to nature and believe that all life forms are linked through spiritual ties. This research is thus an endeavor to acknowledge such food rituals and practices.

Methodology of the Study

This chapter is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted among the sounti tribe of Kiapada village in the Keonjhar district of Odisha, India. Although they are dispersed erratically over all of Odisha's districts, Keonjhar and Mayurbhanj are where they are most concentrated. The total population is 112,803, out of which males are 55,759 and females are 57,044 (Ota, Mohanty, Mohanty, 2020). The study was conducted in the Kiapada village of the Murusuan Gram Panchayat of Patna block. The study included a sample of 123 households, comprising a total population of 580 individuals, with 283 males and 297 females. Anthropology is well-known for its rigorous fieldwork, which includes Participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and household case studies, which formed the methodological core of anthropology as a science of fieldwork. The researcher is extensively involved in the study area for collecting primary data from the community and secondary data from different sources. The qualitative methodologies, such as ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation, were employed by the researcher. These methods helped in producing an in-depth understanding of food tradition and practices among the Sountis.



Figure 6: Image of Kiapada village Source: Fieldwork, 2025

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Globalization has brought significant changes to traditional food cultures, leading to hybridization and the commodification of cuisines. Anthropologists such as Arjun Appadurai (1988) in *How to Make a National Cuisine* discuss how national cuisines emerge as products of both tradition and modernity. The blending of local and global influences has created new culinary identities while also posing challenges to preserving traditional practices. The rise of fast food and convenience eating has also been a focal point of anthropological inquiry. The Sounti are predominantly farmers, and farming and related activities constitute the centre of their economic existence. The main crop is **paddy**, cultivated from **January to June**. In the winter, villagers grow a variety of **vegetables**. While some still follow **traditional farming methods**, many now use **modern machinery**. When the farming season ends, many villagers **migrate to other districts or states** for work and return during the next farming cycle. Besides agriculture, villagers also engage in **brick-making, fishing, and small trading activities**. To **protect and bless their fields**, they perform **animal sacrifices** (pig, hen, cock, or goat) to local deities such as **Kiasuni Maa and Bisoipat**. Before harvesting the first crop, they offer *bhog* to the **Sarpat goddess** by the **Baitarani River**, who is represented as a large stone. Many also **pray for rain** during this time. Daily meals are not merely nutritional but carry embedded meanings. Sharing rice, for example, is equated with kinship solidarity. In the past, varieties of paddy like *Arnapurna Kaberi*, *Sarbojanin*, *Naudhana*, *Mayadhana*, and *Kantharengi* were cultivated, but these are now scarce due to poor seed availability. Millet consumption by elders is seen as a marker of resilience and cultural authenticity. In the research, most of the respondents (88 individuals, 71.54%) reported consuming food 2–3 times per day, which aligns with typical daily meal patterns found in many rural communities. A smaller segment (26 individuals, 21.14%) consumes food 3–4 times a day, indicating a slightly higher frequency, possibly due to increased physical activity or better access to food. Only 3 individuals (2.44%) eat just once a day, which may reflect poverty, poor health, or food unavailability. In contrast, another 3 (2.44%) reported consuming more than 5 times a day, potentially indicating irregular

snacking or ceremonial eating patterns. The statistical indicators—mean of 3.19, mode and median of 3, and a standard deviation of 0.63—suggest that the food intake frequency is stable across the population, with most respondents clustered around three meals per day. The slightly negative skewness (-0.17) suggests a small number of people eating less than average.



Figure 7: Agricultural land cultivated using organic manure *Source:* Fieldwork, 2025

Ritual foods

Women cook the majority of these ritual feasts, with males frequently helping out by gathering ingredients, building fires, or helping with labour-intensive chores. Steaming, deep-frying, and slow-cooking over firewood are examples of preparation techniques that have their roots in customs that have been passed down through the ages. In addition to being food offerings, several of these dishes—like *arisa pitha*, *khiri*, and *poda pitha*—are also holy elements of worship. Preparing them is entwined with community bonding, seasonal observance, and dedication. Except for some products, such as *poda pitha*, which are made to last longer, preservation is usually modest because these meals are frequently eaten fresh or within a few days. Ritual food taboos, such as avoiding meat or using specific ingredients, reflect spiritual and moral discipline. Through religious teaching, family customs, and active involvement in festivals, knowledge about these dishes is passed down, guaranteeing the continuation of both culinary proficiency and cultural significance. The Sounti maintain a living heritage through ritual eating rituals, in which food serves as a vehicle for intergenerational learning, communal cohesiveness, and spiritual giving. Sangtam & Marak (2024) similarly document how ritual

foods among the Sangtam tribe of Nagaland have been reshaped under new cultural influences, offering comparative insight into how food symbolism adapts to change. Due to the exploitation of ecosystems and water resources or their conversion to other uses, the availability of all forms of traditional foods—hunted, fished, gathered, and cultivated—has significantly decreased. Complex effects of climate change can be seen in lifecycle processes and ecosystems. Tribal harvesters, for instance, have observed changes in the times at which traditional foods are harvested; if flowering plant timing and pollinator presence—such as insects and birds—become less coordinated, the effects may be felt across the food webs. Understanding how species, habitats, and ecosystems relate to tribal culture is essential to comprehending how climate change affects indigenous cultures. (K. Lynn *et al.*, 2014).



Figure 8: Chini Arisa Pitha for ritual offering (*Source:* Fieldwork, 2025)



Figure 9: A special Kind of Pitha (Palama Pitha) in the Sounti Language for ritual Offering (*Source:* Fieldwork, 2025)

Anthropological studies, such as those by Jack Goody (1982) in *Cooking, Cuisine, and Class*, emphasize how food preparation methods are often tied to gender roles, with women serving as primary custodians of food culture. This transmission not only preserves traditional knowledge but also shapes intergenerational relationships and cultural continuity. Women play a central role as transmitters of culinary knowledge, passing recipes, preparation techniques, and symbolic interpretations to daughters and daughters-in-law. Men participate largely as consumers but uphold ritual protocols. This reflects a gendered division of symbolic labor (Mahapatra, 1962). At least one reason to understand and support regional food culture in development is that in the short to medium term, an identifiable and sustainable regional food system and culture may be lost in the pursuit of available and affordable food (Wahlqvist, M. L. 2007). In the past, the rate of change of food culture has been relatively slow in response to these factors, but most of the relevant factors are now undergoing rapid change, including population growth, migration and displacement with land degradation, changing affordability with the parallel phenomenon of increasing impoverishment and greater affluence, with resource waste on both counts.

Hospitality and kinship

Hospitality is embodied in the serving of handia (rice beer), which functions as both a social and ritual beverage in the Sounti community. Handia is not a monolithic beverage. A staple cuisine is rice beer, also known as handia, which is an indigenous alcoholic-fermented beverage. According to research by Bisai *et al.* (2023), tribal food isn't complete without a native beverage. Within the Sounti community, it takes on various forms depending on context, ingredients, and purpose. These localized classifications reflect the nuanced role Handia plays in both ritual and daily life. Feasts reinforce kinship ties and create opportunities for intergenerational teaching. Depending on context, ingredients, and intent, it might take on several shapes within the Sounti community. These regional divisions capture the complex function of Handia in daily life and ritual. Some of their Handia used in their community include: *Deha Handia*, or Household Handia is prepared for everyday or seldom domestic use. *Parab Handia*

or Festival Handia, created for seasonal rites and religious celebrations such as Pusha Parab, Raja, and Nuakhai. *Bai Handia* (Guest Handia) is ready to greet distinguished visitors, such as in-laws and village elders, on significant occasions. *Sitala Handia* (Medicinal Handia) is a type of handia that is administered to old people, postpartum mothers, and people recuperating from disease. To refuse handia is considered disrespectful.



Figure 10: A Sounti having Handia in a local Hat
(Source: Fieldwork, 2025)

Change and continuity

Market foods, packaged snacks, and migration have introduced new elements, especially among youth. However, ritual contexts remain anchored in traditional foods. This balance demonstrates the resilience and adaptability of the Sounti symbolic food system. The change in food supplies is one of modernization's most notable effects. Anthropologists have also focused on the growth of convenience eating and fast food. George Ritzer's studies on the McDonaldization of society show how traditional dining customs and cultural variety are threatened by standardised culinary practices. The Sounti people have historically depended on seasonal food cycles, foraging, and subsistence farming. Their diet consisted primarily of grains, pulses, wild greens, millets, and forest goods. But a few things are changing their dining scene: Traditional food grains like mandia (finger millet) and kosala (foxtail millet) are declining because of the encouragement of cash crops like hybrid rice, maize, and commercial vegetables. Consumption of native vegetables, tubers, and foraged foods has decreased due to a greater reliance on foods bought from the market, including packaged and processed goods.

Deforestation, legislative restrictions on forest access, and a decline in traditional ecological knowledge among younger generations have resulted in a decrease in the use of wild foods such as bamboo shoots, wild mushrooms, and Kia Chutney (Red Ant Chutney). Although some ritual dishes, such as Poda Pitha and Mansa Pitha (Chicken Pitha), are still cooked during festivals, their cultural significance is eroding, particularly among younger generations who were more inclined towards a modern diet. But adaptation is also taking place. Using contemporary ingredients, some families are adapting old recipes while preserving cultural aspects. This shows an attempt to combine modern amenities with historical preservation.



Figure 11: Image of Kia Chutney (Source: Fieldwork, 2025)

From a symbolic, interpretive, and analytical anthropological perspective, food functions as a text that encodes values, cosmology, and social organization. And in this case, the Sounti tribe illustrates how the intergenerational flow of food practices perpetuates both identity and adaptation.

CONCLUSION

The present study shows that food in the Sounti community operates as a permeating symbolic system shaping daily life, rituals, gender roles, and kinship. It ensures intergenerational transmission of knowledge and continuity, while simultaneously adapting to modern influences. Women serve as primary custodians of symbolic food knowledge, underscoring the gendered dimension of cultural transmission. Despite external pressures, traditional foods persist

in ritual and communal life, safeguarding cultural identity. This study also contributes to symbolic anthropology and tribal studies by demonstrating how food functions as both heritage and dynamic cultural practice. It also underscores the need for policy interventions to preserve intangible cultural assets of the sounti tribe while respecting cultural, ethical, and mutual dignity of their environment and the sacred food that they offer to the goddess.

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