

Traditions Specific to Seasonal Ceremonies in Uzbekistan (on the example of Kashkadarya region)

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ABSTRACT

The Kashkadarya region is one of the distinct territories characterized by the ancient cultural layers of the Uzbek people, their traditional lifestyle, agricultural and pastoral economic customs, and the convergence of sub-mountainous and oasis cultures. Since ancient times, the Kashkadarya oasis has fostered a unique ethnographic environment through historical and cultural hubs such as Karshi, Shahrisabz, Kitob, Yakkabog, Chiroqchi, Guzar, Dehqonobod, and Kamashi. Rituals associated with the changing of seasons, the arrival of spring, planting crops, driving livestock to pastures, harvesting, and winter household preparations have carried immense significance in the lives of the local population. Seasonal rituals are not merely forms of celebration or leisure in the life of the people; rather, they are viewed as a cultural system that reflects society's worldview regarding nature, labor, faith, family, and community.

INTRODUCTION

The Kashkadarya region is one of the distinct territories characterized by the ancient cultural layers of the Uzbek people, their traditional lifestyle, agricultural and pastoral economic customs, and the convergence of sub-mountainous and oasis cultures. Since ancient times, the Kashkadarya oasis has fostered a unique ethnographic environment through historical and cultural hubs such as Karshi, Shahrisabz, Kitob, Yakkabog, Chiroqchi, Guzar, Dehqonobod, and Kamashi. Rituals associated with the changing of seasons, the arrival of spring, planting crops, driving livestock to pastures, harvesting, and winter household preparations have carried immense significance in the lives of the local population. Seasonal rituals are not merely forms of celebration or leisure in the life of the people; rather, they are viewed as a cultural system that reflects society's worldview regarding nature, labor, faith, family, and community.

In folklore and ethnographic literature, seasonal rituals are interpreted as recurring customs, songs, games, symbolic actions, and community gatherings linked to the seasons of the year. In his studies on Uzbek ritual folklore, B. Sarimsoqov demonstrated the interconnectedness of rituals with oral tradition, symbolic actions, and social functions. Similarly, U. Qoraboyev interpreted the system of Uzbek folk holidays as a historical-cultural process, showing that celebrations evolve in connection with the people's labor experience, their relationship with natural phenomena, and their spiritual needs. In the Kashkadarya region, seasonal customs manifest within the framework of these nation-wide traditions, yet they acquire a unique character through local performance, regional dialect, songs, attire, cuisine, and collective practices. Spring rituals in the Kashkadarya region are among the most active and multi-layered customs. In the popular imagination, spring

is associated with the awakening of nature, the revitalization of the earth, the commencement of agricultural work, the arrival of the new year, and the hope for abundance. For this reason, Navruz has always been widely celebrated among the oasis population. Navruz rituals include practices such as cleaning houses and yards, clearing irrigation ditches, visiting cemeteries, checking on relatives, receiving blessings from elders, wearing new clothes, and preparing traditional dishes. Although these customs may outwardly appear to be ordinary household activities, their inner essence embodies the ideas of purification, renewal, hope for sustenance, community solidarity, and the continuity of generations.

One of the most important ritual dishes associated with Navruz is sumalak. In Kashkadarya, the preparation of sumalak is treasured as a custom that showcases women's solidarity, neighborly cooperation, and makhalla unity. The process of making sumalak involves sprouting wheat, crushing it, boiling it for a long time in a large cauldron, singing songs around the cauldron, making prayers, and distributing it to children. The preparation of sumalak from wheat is linked to the symbols of fertility, vitality, sustenance, and abundance. Women actively participate in the ritual, while young girls learn culinary skills, patience, collective labor, and ritual culture from their elders. In this sense, sumalak is not just a dish, but a ritual space where education, memory, and social experience are transmitted.

Festivals dedicated to spring flowers also hold a special place in the Kashkadarya oasis. Festivals such as Lola Sayli (Tulip Festival), QizilgulSayli (Red Rose Festival), and Boychechak (Snowdrop) chants have long thrived in connection with the sub-mountainous and foothill regions. In the folklore-ethnographic traditions of the Kashkadarya oasis, flower rituals involve wearing clothing appropriate for the blossoms and performing songs matching that mood. The presence of the song "Lola Sayli" in the repertoire of the "Rizvongul" folklore-ethnographic folk amateur ensemble demonstrates that this ritual memory continues to endure as an art form in the Kashkadarya oasis. These festivals are not merely about enjoying natural scenery, but are social phenomena involving the collective experience of spring's arrival, youth interaction, song and dance, folk games, and the exchange of good news and wishes.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Chants associated with the snowdrop also reflect an ancient layer of seasonal rituals. The snowdrop is accepted as the first sign of spring. Children would gather snowdrops and go from house to house singing chants, while elders gave them gifts, sweets, or other shares. In such customs, the child appears as the harbinger of spring. The texts of these chants express the awakening of nature, wishes for goodness, and desires for sustenance and abundance. O. Safarov identifies seasonal folklore texts as one of the ancient and collective forms of oral tradition. In boychechak chants, children's performance, ritual processions, visiting households, and receiving gifts merge to function as an ethno-pedagogical mechanism that introduces young children into community life.

Customs related to seasonal rituals in the Kashkadarya region embody the people's ideas about nature, labor, harvest, blessing, community, and historical memory. Navruz, sumalak gatherings, chants associated with tulips and snowdrops, agricultural and pastoral customs, rainmaking rituals, harvest celebrations, and winter gatherings occupy an important place in the spiritual life of the oasis population. Through these rituals, the people perceived the changing of seasons not just as a natural phenomenon, but as a process that renews social solidarity, moral education, and cultural memory. Before Navruz, seven rows of seeds from seven different types of grain crops were planted and sprouted. These consisted of wheat, barley, flax, millet, chickpeas, sorghum, and rice. The year's agricultural productivity was estimated based on how well they sprouted. The swelling soil was copiously sprinkled with water, symbolizing the desire for abundant water and moisture throughout the year. Girls and women rode on swings. On this day, people exchanged gifts, grudges were forgotten, and conflicts were ceased. Seven types of dishes were placed on the Navruz table, and these dishes began with the Arabic letter "sin", corresponding to the "s" sound. These included hazorispan (wild rue), olma (apple), siyohdona (black cumin), sinjid (oleaster/ - olive oil), vinegar, sarimsoq garlic, and sabziy (wheat grass).

Seven branches from trees such as willow, olive, quince, pomegranate, and mulberry were placed in the middle of the table. A pink-colored liquid was placed in one vessel, and clean water in another. Leaves from fruit-bearing trees were tossed onto the clean water. The table was adorned with patir (flaky flatbread), yogurt, milk, cheese, dyed eggs, rooster meat, dried fruits, walnuts, almonds, pistachios, fish, and a mirror. Candles lit for the Navruz table were strictly required to burn down to the end. Additionally, special dishes like go'jaosh, sumalak, and halim were cooked for the table.

Furthermore, because the Navruz festivities lasted for up to forty days—mostly until the middle of May—they encompassed a wide variety of rituals. Rituals such as sumalak, boychechak, and lolasayli (sayligulisurx) are essentially considered integral parts of Navruz and continued to be held throughout this period. Sumalak is a symbolic dish representing the eternal motion of dying and reviving nature; it is cooked during the Navruz festivities and celebrated as a distinct tradition. The word sumalak is originally derived from the Persian phrase “simalak”, meaning “thirty angels (fairies)”. According to legend, this sacred dish was cooked by those thirty angels, and its name originated from there. Sumalak is a dish prepared during the days of Navruz by pounding specially sprouted wheat grass in a mortar (o'g'ur) or chopping it with a meat cleaver, and then mixing flour into the boiling strained juice extracted from it.

It is prepared primarily by women. To prevent it from burning or sticking to the bottom, the cauldron must be stirred continuously. This process continues all night long, starting from the evening when the juice is poured into the cauldron. For this reason, the women preparing it organize a celebration around the sumalak cauldron that lasts through the night, bustling about with joy and enthusiasm, dancing and singing the following songs while praising the sumalak:

*Bright red tulips bloom all around,
As Navruz is about to arrive,
Sumalak is a healing balm for the soul.
We have sprouted the wheat.
Enjoy the sumalak with a joyful heart,
Come and visit us as our guests,
If you wish to live with no regrets.
We have prepared the sumalak.*

In Ferdowsi's Shahnameh, the Navruz holiday is associated with the name of King Jamshid. In particular, with the intention of doing good for the country, Jamshid teaches people crafts, melts iron to forge weapons, spins thread to weave clothing, constructs buildings, uncovers the secrets of medicine, builds ships, and plants gardens. Finally, when his deeds flourish and bear fruit, he has a throne constructed and ascends into the sky upon it. According to this legend, it is from this very day forward that Navruz began to be celebrated.

In Yusuf Khash Hajib's book Qutadghu Bilig (The Wisdom of Royal Glory or The Knowledge That Brings Happiness), Navruz is described as follows: “First, the spring breeze blows from the East, opening the way to paradise to adorn this world. The white color (meaning snow) departs, filling the earth with fragrance, and bright red hues take over everywhere, for the world desires to deck itself in beautiful ornaments. The breeze of spring banishes the tedious winter, and pure spring reigns supreme once more. Trees that had shed their leaves dress in green again, adorned in white, yellow, blue, and red...”.

Meanwhile, Nizam al-Mulk's Siyasatnama (The Book of Government) contains accounts stating that on the days of Navruz and Mihrjan, kings would personally receive commoners who arrived with grievances and petitions, pass relevant decisions, and ensure that the rights and privileges of all individuals were entirely equal during these days. In his book Navruznama, the philosopher-poet Omar Khayyam expresses the factors that led to the establishment of the Navruz holiday as follows: “If we are to state the reason for the institution of Navruz, it is because the Sun has two revolutions, one of which is as follows: every three hundred sixty-five days and a quarter of a day, the Sun returns to the exact moment it departed into the first minute of the

constellation of Aries, and every year this period decreases. When Jamshid understood this day, he named it Navruz and turned it into a custom to celebrate it. Kings and other people accepted it as well. It is said that after Kayumars, the first king of Ajam (Persia), ascended the throne, he decided to name the days and months of the year and introduce a calendar so that people would know. Determining the day when the Sun entered the first minute of the constellation of Aries at dawn, he gathered the mobeds Zoroastrian priests of Ajam and ordered the reckoning of the year to begin from that moment. The mobeds assembled and instituted the calendar from that very time. According to the mobeds of Ajam, who were the scholars of that era, the great and blessed Izid (God) created twelve angels, sending four of them to the heavens to guard against the evil spirits, four to the four corners of the world to prevent the ahrimans from crossing Mount Qaf, and commanding four angels to traverse the heavens and the earth to keep the ahrimans away from humanity. They say that this world is situated inside another world, much like a new room within an old castle, and Izid Almighty created the sun out of light and nurtured heaven and earth with it. In the eyes of the world's people, the sun is a single ray of the light of Izid Almighty. The reason they look upon it with reverence as majestic is that Izid Almighty bestowed more favor upon it during its creation compared to others. They provide the following example for this: if a great king shows honor and respect to one of his caliphs, people glorify him, and whoever glorifies him is understood to have glorified the king. They say that when the great and blessed Izid commanded the sun to move from its place so that its rays and benefits would reach everything, it emerged from the head of Aries; darkness was separated from light, and night and day came into being. This is how the history of this world began. Then, after one thousand four hundred and sixty-one years had passed, it the sun, returned to that exact location on the same day and at the same minute. During this time, Jupiter conjoined with Saturn seventy-three times. This is called the 'lesser conjunction, and this alignment occurs every twenty years. When the Sun completes its single revolution and returns to its place, a conjunction occurs between Saturn and Jupiter in the sign where Saturn falls into depression, which is opposite to the sign of Libra, the sign of Saturn's exaltation.

One revolution is here, and another is there, just as we indicated, and the placement of the stars is exactly as we demonstrated. When the Sun departed from Aries, and Saturn, Jupiter, and other stars stood in accordance with the decree of Izid Almighty, the state of the world changed, and new things emerged in alignment with the world and destiny. To honor the Sun at that moment, and considering that not everyone could determine this day, the kings of Ajam marked it, established a holiday, and made it known to everyone so that all would adhere to this date. They say that when Kayumars instituted this day as the beginning of the year, he divided the solar year-in which a single revolution of the sun occurs within three hundred sixty-five days-into twelve months of thirty days each, naming them after the twelve angels sent into the world by the great and blessed Izid. Subsequently, he termed the great period consisting of three hundred sixty-five days and a quarter of a day as the 'great year' and divided it into four parts. When the four parts of the great year pass, the Great Navruz occurs, and the state of the world is renewed. Kings have a custom: at the beginning of the year, they must bless good deeds, set calendar dates, and hold certain rituals for public celebration. It is said that whoever celebrates and rejoices on the day of Navruz will remain cheerful until the next Navruz".

Navruz was also considered a crucial holiday during the Zoroastrian era. According to Zoroastrian teachings, all changes in nature submit to specific laws. The spring season was viewed as a symbol of the renewal of life and the victory of good over evil.

Mary Boyce, a prominent scholar of the Avesta, wrote about how the origin of this holiday is directly linked to the idea of glorifying goodness, personified in the image of the beautiful and exquisite deity Asha: "Zoroastrianism, which is also based on the fact that the arrival of spring has been celebrated since ancient times as a festival dedicated to Asha Vahishta and fire, made it a custom to celebrate this festival at the spring equinox. As the final celebration of the seven festivals, this holiday signified the last day of the world-the day when Asha would achieve complete victory. This was considered the final day of the passing year and, at the same time, the new day of eternal life. This holiday signaled the beginning of summer-the season of the year belonging to Ahura Mazda-as well as the annual defeat of the Evil Spirit in early spring".

The ancient Persians calculated the beginning of the year precisely from the spring equinox. For this reason, Navruz was accepted as the start of the new year. The famous scholar Abu Rayhan Al-Beruni provided detailed information about this in his work *The Remaining Signs of Past Centuries*. Seasonal rituals emerged due to the daily needs and requirements of our ancient ancestors. For instance, if there was little precipitation during the spring months, crops would not thrive. In such times, two types of rituals were performed to call for rain. Our ancient ancestors summoned rain using the yada stone. The word yada is derived from the word jat, which signifies witchcraft, and in the ancient Turkic language, it was applied to objects possessing magical power and might.

The Sust Khotin ritual consists of calling for rain by imploring the rain goddess Sust Khotin. During the ritual, the “Sust Khotin” song was sung. Historically ancient, this ritual is called by different names in various regions; for example, it is also known as ChalaKhotin (“Incomplete Woman”) in the Karakol and Alat districts of the Bukhara region. B. Sarimsoqov explains that Sust Khotin is a folk phonetic adaptation of Tishtriya, the deity of heavenly waters praised in the Avesta, which transitioned from Tishtriya to Tusht, then to Sust, and finally took the form of Sust Khotin. While it is widespread among Uzbeks under the names Sust Khotun, Sut Khotun (“Milk Woman”), SuvKhotun (“Water Woman”), and ChalaKhotun, it is referred to as Syuyt Khatun among Turkmen, and Sust Momo (“Sluggish Grandmother”) or Ashaglon among Tajiks. The procedure for conducting the ritual also varies by locality. B. Sarimsoqov identified and explained four variants of it. However, its common feature across all regions is that it is performed exclusively by women.

At a designated day and time, more than ten women dress a doll-or in some places, a scarecrow (kho’sa)-in an old woman’s dress. One of the women leads the way carrying it, while the others follow her, entering households one by one throughout the village or neighborhood. As they enter the households, they begin to sing the following song:

*Sust Khotun, O sovereign queen,
Whose shadow spans the wide terrain,
Will the skies not pour, Sust Khotun?
Will the raindrops fail to fall, Sust Khotun?
Will a seventy-year-old crone, Sust Khotun,
Not be swept away by the torrents, Sust Khotun?*

The homeowners welcome them with joy, sprinkle water over the doll or scarecrow, and offer donations and gifts to the performers. In return for these donations, the participants complete their ritual tasks, remaining hopeful for the rain to fall. In the later evolution of the ritual, it also began to be performed by men and children. In their version of the song, the dominant motif is the desire to cultivate a bountiful harvest:

*Make the skies pour down, Sust Khotun,
Let the wheat crops thrive, Sust Khotun.
Drop down droplets from the sky, Sust Khotun,
Feed the land and people, Sust Khotun.*

The Sust Khotin ritual originated during the matriarchal era. It emerged as a result of primitive humans’ inability to understand the root causes of nature’s whims, leaving them powerless to find ways to prevent them. Only a single genre has survived from the folklore of summer rituals. This is Choy Momo – a ritual to stop the wind and its associated chant. This ritual was performed with the specific purpose of halting severe, continuously raging winds.

Choy Momo is actually a variation of Chuy Momo, which means “Wind Mother” in the ancient Turkic language. In ancient times, the wind was conceptualized as a living entity. This ritual was initially performed by women, and later on, men began to participate as well. According to the ritual procedure, two old women put on old coats and clothes, smear soot on their faces, and holding walking sticks in their hands, sing the following Choy Momo song:

Choy, choy, choy momo,

*Keep pouring out your gifts,
The wind mother has passed away,
May this wind spill out and dissolve.
Keep stepping and pressing down,
May this wind be suppressed and calmed.
May this cunning wind be subdued.
Keep flying and fluttering away,
Choy, choy, choy momo,
May this cunning wind be blown away.*

Meanwhile, five adolescent girls follow them in chorus, covering their heads with a red rug. They are followed by a seven- or eight-year-old boy riding a donkey laden with a large saddlebag. A rolling pin, a soft broom, and a mortar pestle are tied together and dragged along behind that very donkey. Whichever household the Choy Momo practitioners visit, the homeowners offer them alms in the form of wheat, bread, or money.

The boy on the donkey continuously places these items into the saddlebag. Finally, after going around the entire village or neighborhood, a commemorative ritual is performed for the Wind Father using the flour gathered at a designated spot. For this purpose, chalpak (fried flatbread) is cooked, and twelve pieces of chalpak dedicated to the Wind Father are stuffed into the ground or into a hole at a site deemed sacred. It was believed that this action would block the wind's path and cause it to subside. Sometimes, the gathered goods were sold to buy a sheep, which was then taken to the place where the wind was thought to originate and slaughtered as a sacrifice. Any leftover soup prepared from the mutton was poured into the hole from which the wind was assumed to emerge.

Among the symbolic items used in the ritual, the rolling pin and mortar pestle represent sustenance and daily bread, while the broom signifies the driving away and sweeping out of harms and afflictions that provoke the wrath of the wind god. Overall, this ritual is a relic of the patriarchal/matriarchal transition that later underwent transformation and came to be performed by men as well.

Only two genres have been preserved from the folklore of autumn rituals: the harvesting of the last handful of wheat (Oblo Baraka) and the ritual of calling for the wind (Yo, Haydar). The last handful of wheat is referred to as the "mother wheat". Whichever reaper reaches this final handful cuts it down while chanting, "I have reached it, I have reached it, may God grant abundance!" In the "Yo, Haydar" song, Haydar, who is addressed as the patron of the wind, is in fact Hazrat Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad. He is invoked with the following chant:

*Haydar, Haydar,
Your father and mother have passed away,
Their wealth is left entirely to you,
Your child has been swept away by the waters,
Unleash your wind and let it blow.*

It is believed that Hazrat Ali, as the master and father of all natural phenomena, including the wind, holds it under his direct control. When addressed in this manner, he would release the wind he was holding back. According to a second interpretation, he would ride his legendary horse, Duldul, and strike it with a whip; as the horse galloped with fierce speed, the rising and falling of its mane would generate the wind. The cycle of mythological concepts belonging to the Uzbek cult of the wind that relates to the belief systems of the matriarchal era consists of the religious views surrounding Yalli Momo or Yalala Momo, whereas the patriarchal era comprises the system of beliefs regarding Yalang'och Ota ("Naked Father"). Folk beliefs about them have been preserved as part of the wind-stopping rituals practiced by the Uzbeks of the Lower Zarafshan oasis. According to M. Jurayev, Yalli Momo is one of the figures that evolved within the mythology of the Turkic peoples and is more ancient than Choy Momo. This is because it preserves a specific form of sacrifice

to the masters of the wind namely, the custom of crafting a wind doll and burying it. The folklore of winter rituals includes the gap-gashtak and yas-yasun gatherings. These are not interconnected with the labor process. The gap-gashtak ritual is also referred to as social dining gathering in some areas. According to this custom, men who were free from field labor during the long winter nights would take turns hosting feasts in their homes or teahouses to avoid boredom. The gathering was managed by a presiding elder (oqsoqol) and his assistant, who monitored and regulated the order of the rotation, the general conduct, and the games played during the feast.

Before the feast commenced, whichever person the polvontavoq (the grand serving platter) was placed in front of was considered the next host in the rotation. The gathering would begin with tea drinking and, following the consumption of dishes prepared according to the participants' preferences, would continue late into the night with various forms of entertainment and games. At midnight, palov was served, after which the entertainment and tea drinking resumed. Finally, with the permission of the circle leader (davraboshi), the attendees would disperse to their homes. There was no alcohol consumption at these gatherings. This ritual cultivated an individual's skills in proper etiquette within social circles, hosting guests, and entertaining them, thereby serving a cultural and educational purpose through its role in social networking and advocacy. The yas-yasun ritual emerged among nomadic pastoralists as a qimiz (fermented mare's milk) drinking gathering, and its literal meaning signifies "the rules of sitting in a circle". In certain localities, it is also known as buza drinking gathering) traditional seasonal gatherings. The yas-yasun is held within a sherda (a formal assembly circle). The chairman of the sherda along with his right-hand and left-hand deputies manage the entire ritual. Responsible figures such as the eshikog'asi (the master of the house where the sherda takes place), the biy (chief), and the yasovul (usher/herald) who enforces the orders issued by the biy and his deputies as well as the kosagul, also perform vital duties during the ritual.

The ritual enforces strict requirements consisting of the following conditions. The participants:

Must drink the buza handed to them by the kosagul in a single breath;

Are strictly forbidden from spilling or splashing any buza from the bowl;

Must always sit cross-legged and may stretch out their legs or lean sideways only after receiving permission from the biy;

Must maintain proper etiquette and avoid intoxication until the very end of the sherda;

May leave the sherda gathering only with the explicit permission of the biy or the doorman;

Must execute the instructions of the biy or his deputies without question.

When the kosagul offers bo'za to the sherda participants, he must recite various quatrains, and the members of the sherda are required to respond in kind. The structural rule for the quatrains recited during the ritual dictates that whichever word the first stanza begins with, the second stanza must also begin with that same word; on this basis, an anaphora is created between the stanzas, ensuring a rhythmic and compositional unity. For example, as the kosagul hands the buza to the sherda participants, he addresses them with the following chant:

May the song of alyor resound,

May the Lord be your helper and guide.

To the abundance given by the Lord,

May the enemy look with envious longing.

The kosagul's invocation songs of this nature can vary; most importantly, no single quatrain should be repeated. Upon receiving the bowl, the person to whom the buza is handed must recite a paired couplet or a paired quatrain praising either the kosagul or the buza, ensuring that both couplets or quatrains begin with the exact same word or phrase. For example:

Buza I drank – its intoxicating vapor rushed to my head,

My neck amulet was left behind in the embrace of my beloved.

I could find no excuse whatsoever to go to her,

Yet the amulet on your neck became the perfect excuse.

Buza's cup is like a blooming tulip,

Acta Sci., 27(2), 2026

DOI: [10.22178/acta.27.2.22](https://doi.org/10.22178/acta.27.2.22)

*Even a mother-in-law becomes a companion to the young man.
If that young man emerges from the gathering drunk on bo'za,
His beloved comes out dancing to welcome him.*

While such songs sung during the yas-yasun ritual are referred to as haqqonalar or ko'nalar around Turkistan, Sairam, Qarnoq, and Iqon, they are known as “the songs of the buza drinkers” in other regions. The defining characteristic of Kashkadarya’s seasonal customs is that they endure in direct connection with folklore, ritual cuisine, collective labor, song, dance, and symbolic actions. Under contemporary conditions, this heritage can be staged, showcased at public events, and integrated with tourism; however, its authentic ethnographic substance, local style of performance, and educational function must be preserved. A profound scientific study of seasonal rituals is essential for systematically documenting the intangible cultural heritage of the Kashkadarya oasis, transmitting it to the younger generation, and safeguarding the uniqueness of regional culture.

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