

Ethnocultural And Contemporary Recreational Traditions of The Uzbek People

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Abstract

Conflicts arising during working hours, as well as decisions and judgments issued by administrative authorities that may sometimes contradict the perceptions and needs of employees, are generally accepted by individuals as a natural aspect of social life, since work represents a responsibility imposed by the social order. Being aware of this obligation, individuals tend to comply with such decisions and strive to fulfill them. However, outside working hours, particularly during leisure time, people do not readily accept every norm, value, or decision. Instead, they prefer to adopt only those values that correspond to their interests and needs and from which they can derive spiritual and emotional enrichment. Values and activities that fail to meet these interests and needs are often rejected or openly opposed.

Ethnoculture, having emerged from the spiritual, psychological, national, and cultural needs and interests that have evolved within a nation over centuries, cannot leave members of that nation indifferent. The enduring vitality of traditional values explains the growing interest among contemporary youth in historical and cultural heritage, folk festivals, public performances, and traditional leisure practices. This article examines recreational practices and leisure traditions within Uzbek ethnoculture through the examples of calendar festivals, recreational gatherings, and nature-related rituals.

Keywords: Ethnoculture, leisure, recreation, recreational practices, Uzbek people, calendar festivals, folk gatherings, nature, celebrations, rituals.

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1. Introduction

Although the development of modern civilization has brought numerous conveniences and opportunities into human life, it has simultaneously generated a range of global challenges. Environmental pollution, climate change, the reduction of biodiversity, and the depletion of natural resources indicate a disruption in the balance between humanity and nature. Under such

circumstances, it becomes increasingly important for humankind to return to its roots—that is, to principles of harmonious coexistence with nature.

In traditional societies, human beings were perceived as an inseparable part of the natural world. Customs, rituals, and festivals were largely associated with natural phenomena, seasonal cycles, agricultural activities, and respect for natural resources. Through these traditions,

values such as environmental stewardship, rational use of natural resources, and preservation of nature for future generations were transmitted from one generation to another. In this regard, rituals functioned not only as elements of cultural heritage but also as important social institutions for fostering ecological consciousness.

Today, it is no longer sufficient to view rituals merely as archaic traditions. On the contrary, the values embodied within them - respect for nature, social solidarity, moderation, and responsibility - are highly consistent with the principles of sustainable development. Therefore, interpreting rituals as spiritual instruments for shaping contemporary ecological culture has become an urgent task. Folk festivals and seasonal customs associated with nature, for example, strengthen individuals' sense of connection to the environment and enhance their ecological responsibility.

Thus, in an era characterized by globalization and escalating environmental threats, humanity's return to its ethnocultural roots represents not only the preservation of historical memory but also an essential condition for safeguarding the interests of future generations. Within this process, rituals acquire particular significance as spiritual mechanisms that contribute to restoring harmonious relationships between human beings and nature. Consequently, reinterpreting these traditions within the context of modern ecological and cultural development and adapting them to contemporary social life constitute important scholarly and practical objectives of our time.

2. Literature Review

By its nature and characteristics, ethnoculture is a multifunctional phenomenon associated with all aspects of human life, activity, and social existence. Consequently, it has been studied, both directly and indirectly, within a wide range of academic disciplines, including philosophy, cultural studies, history, ethnography, art studies, pedagogy, economics, social management, psychology, and spirituality studies. Among the scholars who have made significant contributions to the study of culture, particularly Uzbek ethnoculture, are A. Askarov, L. N. Gumilev, A. A. Divaev, I. M. Jabborov, H. Ismoilov, Narshakhi, A. Ochildiev, G. A. Pugachenkova, M. Rakhmonov, L. I. Rempel, E. V. Rtveladze, B. Sarimsakov, M. Sattor, S. P. Tolstov, S. Sh. Shermukhamedov, Sh. K. Shoniyozov, G. Shadimetova, A. Erkaev, U. H. Karabaev, and Ya. G.

Ghulomov.

According to the prominent historian, ethnographer, and philosopher I. M. Jabborov, "the study of our historical heritage is significant not only from a scholarly perspective but also as an important means of benefiting from the spiritual treasures created by our great ancestors, addressing socio-political issues, and fostering the comprehensive development of the individual" [1; - P. 3]. Jabborov is recognized not only as a distinguished historian and ethnographer but also as a scholar who conducted substantial research on ethnosociology and ethnocultural issues, producing numerous influential works in these fields.

U.H.Karabaev approaches the revival and development of folk culture from socio-educational as well as organizational and methodological perspectives. In his view, folk culture is a multidimensional phenomenon; therefore, society must preserve and promote it, while specialized socio-cultural institutions should provide methodological and practical support for these efforts [2; -P. 36–38].

In another study, Karabaev emphasizes the necessity of examining folk festivals from the perspectives of ethnology and ethnic culture. According to him, such an approach facilitates the study of Uzbek folk festivals in terms of: (a) their emergence from the needs of the people; (b) their transformation into an integral part of social life; (c) their transmission from generation to generation as cultural heritage; and (d) their enrichment and development in accordance with changing historical conditions [3; -P. 14].

Overall, U. H. Karabaev classified the internal structures and manifestations of Uzbek ethnoculture and examined their distinctive and universal features as a sociodynamic phenomenon. This approach is of particular importance for the present study.

3. Methodology

This article employs a comprehensive and integrative approach to the study of the ethnocultural and contemporary recreational traditions of the Uzbek people. The theoretical foundation of the research is based on perspectives derived from cultural studies, ethnology, and social philosophy.

A historical-comparative method was utilized to analyze the evolution of traditional recreational forms and their

contemporary manifestations. In addition, ethnographic observation was employed to investigate leisure practices and recreational gatherings that continue to be preserved among the population. Empirical data on recreational habits were collected through questionnaires and interviews involving representatives of different age groups and social strata.

The comparative analysis method enabled the identification of processes of interaction and transformation between traditional and contemporary recreational cultures. Furthermore, a systems approach was applied to examine ethnocultural traditions as an integrated socio-cultural phenomenon.

In general, the methods employed in this study contributed to a comprehensive scientific examination of the research topic and facilitated the disclosure of its contemporary socio-cultural significance.

4. Results

Since ancient times, people have divided their daily lives into labor and leisure, serious pursuits and entertainment. On this basis, folk festivals and spectacles emerged as essential attributes of daily life. Folk festivals and spectacles allowed individuals "to feel as though they were living in the space between art and life. In reality, festivals, spectacles, and specialized games were the very essence of folk life itself" [4; -P. 12.]. During these festivals and spectacles, people were temporarily liberated from hard labor, everyday hardships, and official formalities. They rejoiced in the emergence of free communication, the opportunity to express their emotions without restraint, and the creation of conditions to rest, unwind, and satisfy their psychophysiological needs.

Erich Fromm, one of the most prominent philosophers of the 20th century, investigated the relationship between the individual and society. He concluded that human beings are constantly pursued by contradictions, the oldest of which is the conflict between needs that compel humans to live sometimes an animalistic and sometimes a human existence. He asserted that a healthy society is one that adheres to democratic principles and creates living conditions that foster human virtues, creative qualities, and human needs [5; -P. 451-452.]. In this context, he does not refer to the needs shaped by the destructive influence of "mass culture," but rather to a social environment and methods of leisure that help fully manifest the inner spiritual world and positive qualities

of each person and individual [5; -P. 131]. According to Fromm, if it is impossible to satisfy these psychological and spiritual needs within an environment, society, or individual, both society and the individual will head toward destructive behavior, "severe psychological aberrations," and illness [5; -P. 135-136].

Rest and leisure are aimed at performing mutually dialectically linked recreative (psychophysiological) and socio-spiritual (psychopedagogical) functions. True, as a unique traditional form of ethnoculture, rest and leisure also perform other functions (for instance, communicative, cultural-creative, pastime-related, etc.). In our opinion, these can be generalized and termed the "socio-spiritual function". It is also necessary to note that in events and types of activities aimed at rest and leisure—especially in public festivals and spectacles related to ethnoculture - it is highly difficult to argue that one particular function takes precedence over the others. Therefore, in studying the culture of rest and leisure, we rely on the premise that recreative and socio-spiritual characteristics constantly intermingle and harmonize. However, this does not prevent the categorization of recreative rest and leisure traditions from the perspective of research objectives.

We can observe the methods of rest and leisure in the ethnoculture of the Uzbek people through calendar festivals, recreative festivities (sayils), and rituals associated with nature.

Calendar festivals include folk celebrations and rituals that have traditionally been held during specific seasons or months of the year. U.Kh. Koraboev terms them "ecocultural traditions" [6; -P. 78], while Iso Jabborov calls them "seasonal rituals" [7; -P. 192.]. In our view, these ethnocultural events bear a seasonal (calendar) character, reflecting humanity's attitude toward changes in nature (awakening, fading, or the changing of seasons). Environmental changes affected the human psyche, mood, and health; cosmological views and perceptions from the primitive era did not vanish without a trace. The more deeply humans understood the connection between themselves, their lifestyle, and their livelihood with the gifts of nature, the more colorfully they reflected it in diverse views, customs, and rituals [8; -P. 183.].

Most seasonal holidays and rituals date back to the Zoroastrian era. "During the period of adherence to Zoroastrianism, the system of our ancestors' holidays was formed. Within this system, festivals such as Navruz,

Mehrjon, Sada, and Angom acquired particularly significant importance. They reflected the contradictions between good and evil, light and darkness, warmth and cold, life and death; consequently, spiritual and human virtues such as goodness, benevolence, generosity, dignity, and humanity began to be valued in the customs of this period" [3; -P. 14.]. The Zoroastrians maintained numerous holidays and rituals dedicated to glorifying fire (the sun), water, air, and earth. Furthermore, among clans and tribes, customs such as lagamzodan (bridling a horse), zin zaran (saddling a horse), and kamarbastan (girding the waist/initiation) were strictly observed. In tribes engaged in pastoralism, girls were taught to spin thread from wool, operate spindles and spinning wheels, weave fabrics, and sew garments [9; -P. 6.]. Hence, Zoroastrian customs and rituals were intertwined with real-life necessities and the formation of socially essential skills in individuals, particularly among the youth.

Spring rituals occur more frequently in the ethnoculture of the Uzbek people compared to other seasonal ceremonies. "In spring, it is not only nature that changes, but also human beings themselves. The human soul becomes more tender, yearning for refinement, beauty, and novelty. At this time, individuals seek novelty and beauty in every phenomenon. This internal state occurring in human nature transforms every event connected with nature into a poetically meaningful function and ritual" [10; -P. 174.].

The Navruz festival is a social reality belonging to the ethnoculture of the peoples of entire Central Asia, Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Northern India.

Navruz marks the beginning of the year - a holiday that summons people into the embrace of nature, allows them to enjoy the fresh air, the beauty of the world, and the warmth of the sun, and provides emotion and delight to individuals weary of the tedious and harsh winter. It encapsulates everything from the earliest mythological perceptions of our ancestors to the spiritual views of our contemporaries.

Preparations for the Navruz festival begin a week or ten days in advance. Housewives engage in uy kotarish (spring cleaning); houses, courtyards, irrigation ditches, and streets are thoroughly cleaned, and everyone has new clothes tailored for themselves.

"Navruz begins on the night of March 21st to March

22nd with the ritual of Qozon toldi (filling the cauldron). Qozon toldi is a purely familial ritual, where each family prepares exquisite delicacies based on their financial capabilities" [11; -P. 10.]. On the eve of Qozon toldi, housewives prepared pilaf, boghirsoq (fried dough pastries), greens-filled somsa, and chuchvara (dumplings), and these dishes were distributed among neighbors. The Qozon toldi ritual is linked to our ancestors' ancient beliefs regarding fertility and harvest.

"From the very day the Navruz festival begins, people strive to forget all grievances and put an end to grudges. During the days of Navruz, it is considered mandatory that no ill words or insults come out of anyone's mouth, and conflicts and quarrels are forbidden... During the Navruz festival, hospitality and humanity are vividly manifested. Relatives, friends, and companions visit one another's homes. The youth bring Navruz gifts to the elderly. Visiting the sick and checking upon the poor, orphans, widows, and the destitute during Navruz is considered the duty of every individual" [12; -P. 98]. Evidently, discipline, order, and mutual respect reign everywhere during the days of Navruz.

"Since ancient times, Navruz has been considered a day of freedom and liberty. Working on this day was deemed a fault, and people were liberated from their daily labor, duties, obligations, and worries" [10; -P. 177]. On these holidays, people disposed themselves to be joyful and merry. During Navruz, folk gathered to collectively cook traditional dishes such as sumalak (sweet wheat paste) and halim (wheat and meat porridge).

The Darveshona (dervish-like/charitable communal gathering) ritual. Money was collected from the public to conduct the Darveshona. A sacrificial animal was purchased with the collected funds and sacrificed so that the upcoming year would be prosperous. A portion of the sacrificial meat was allocated to low-income families, while the remaining part was used to prepare dishes (soup, pilaf, or roast meat) in large cauldrons. The community elders (mahalla oqsoqollari) consulted together regarding the tasks to be carried out in the coming year. The cooked food was then distributed to households. The reason this ritual is named Darveshona lies in the ancient practice where the sacrificial meat was distributed to dervishes, orphans, widows, and the destitute.

In folk spectacles and rituals celebrated during the summer, characteristics unique to calendar festivals and

recreative (leisure) rituals intermingle harmoniously. It is well known that Uzbekistan's summer climate is exceptionally hot; consequently, resting outdoors in the embrace of nature, along riverbanks, and in shaded, breezy locations has become a long-standing tradition in our country. For this reason, recreative rituals can also be viewed as seasonal events.

The Angom Festival. The Angom festival is considered one of the seasonal rituals that reflects the reverence for nature and the ecological thinking of our ancient ancestors. This festival was formed primarily on the basis of perceptions linked to water, wherein water was recognized as the source of life, a symbol of abundance, and a token of purity. For peoples living in arid climatic conditions, water was not merely a natural resource, but one of the most critical factors ensuring the survival and development of society.

On the occasion of the festival, the population gathered around reservoirs, irrigation canals, and springs to hold various folk festivities (sayils), competitions, and communal events. Through these rituals, people not only rested and unwound but also transmitted values from generation to generation, such as preserving water, keeping it clean, and utilizing it rationally. From this perspective, the Angom festival also carried significant importance as a traditional form of ecological education.

By showing reverence to water during this festival, ideas such as the continuity of life, gratitude for the gifts of nature, and responsibility toward future generations were expressed. Therefore, the Angom festival is evaluated not merely as a seasonal folk gathering, but as a prime example of ethnocultural heritage that promotes ecological culture, collective solidarity, and the principles of living in harmony with nature.

Autumn Festivals and Rituals. The Mehrjon (Mehrgan) festival is one of the seasonal celebrations that held an important place in the culture of ancient Iranian and Turkic peoples. It was traditionally celebrated in autumn, during the period when harvest operations were concluded. In Zoroastrian traditions, this festival was associated with Mehr (Mithra), the patron of the sun, light, justice, and covenants. For this reason, Mehrjon gained significance not only as a harvest festival but also as a spiritual value expressing feelings of solidarity, benevolence, and gratitude among people.

During the days of the Mehrjon festival, people laid festive tables, held gatherings with relatives and

neighbors, and organized various folk games and public festivities. The core essence of the holiday consisted of offering thanks for the abundance of the earth and the bounties that nature bestowed upon humanity. In this regard, Mehrjon functioned as an important ritualistic tradition that conveyed the interconnectedness between humans and nature.

According to ancient perceptions, a bountiful harvest was viewed as being connected to the forces of nature and divine blessing alongside human labor. Therefore, the spirit of reverence toward the earth, water, and the sun prevailed in the festival's rituals. This circumstance demonstrates that humans perceived themselves not as superior to nature, but as an inseparable part of it.

The Mehrjon festival possesses a spiritual-ecological content that calls upon humans to value the gifts of nature, utilize them rationally, and preserve them for future generations. Hence, Mehrjon can be evaluated not merely as a historical holiday, but as an exemplar of ethnocultural heritage that serves to form an ecological culture and a sustainable lifestyle.

The Mehrgon festival was conducted at the state level: "Mehrjon was celebrated as an official state holiday. For this purpose, funds were allocated from the state treasury, gifts were distributed, public banquets (osh) were given, and festivities, competitions, and spectacles were organized" [10; -P. 79]. Over time, the Zoroastrian rituals associated with the Mehrgon festival were forgotten. After the Republic of Uzbekistan achieved state independence, the Mehrjon festival, along with many other holidays, was revived.

Winter Rituals. Our people, particularly in rural areas, had more leisure time during the winter season. They played various word games around the sandal (a traditional heated table covered with a quilt), sang songs and lapars (dialogue-songs), read poetry, and recited ghazals. Recreative characteristics are vividly apparent in winter rituals. One such ritualistic game is Halfana. Our respondent, Polatkhon aya Kabirkhojaeva, narrates the following regarding the Halfana ritual: "In winter, the girls of our neighborhood would gather once a week to play Halfana. At that time, I was roughly 13 or 14 years old. Once, a friend who was hosting the Halfana invited me to her house. When I arrived, the house was full of girls: one was decorating the table (dasturhon), another was tending to the food, and a third was sprinkling water in the courtyard. When all the chores were finished, the

Halfa (a girl about 3 or 4 years older than us) invited everyone to the table. That day, we friends conversed to our hearts' content, ate well, and most memorably, had a wonderful time singing and laughing" [13]. As observed from this narrative, Halfana is a leisure ritual where adolescent girls gather once a week or a month to rest and unwind.

Village or neighborhood girls gathered and elected a well-spoken, resourceful, and respected girl from among themselves as their Halfa. The Halfa determined whose house would host the next gathering, what each participant would bring, and established the rules of the Halfana. The girls brought various food items to place on the table. Naturally, eating was not the core attribute of the ritual. The primary purpose of the ritual was to converse freely, play the doira (tambourine) or dutor (two-stringed lute), sing songs and lapars, dance, read poetry and ghazals, and hold poetry competitions (mushoiras). In these gatherings, older girls taught their younger friends the secrets of culinary arts, table arrangement, hosting guests, and the culture of communication. Hence, Halfana also served the function of preparing young girls for family life.

The Sada Festival. During the Sada festival, a large bonfire was lit, around which people engaged in festivities and performed various rituals. The Zoroastrians sought to drive away the winter cold, as it were, with the help of fire. This festival was considered one of the ancient rituals expressing humanity's relationship with the forces of nature. Fire was valued not only as a source of heat and light but also as a symbol of purity, life, and renewal. Therefore, the rituals around the bonfire were connected with people's hopes for the upcoming spring, as well as wishes for fertility and prosperity.

The Sada festival carried a symbolic significance, indicating that the coldest days of winter were left behind and the awakening phase of nature was approaching. Collective gatherings were held during the holiday, strengthening unity and solidarity among people. This circumstance shows that the ritual performed a social function alongside its religious aspect. By celebrating seasonal changes in nature together, individuals felt themselves to be an inseparable part of a single community.

Ideas such as the continuity of life, the victory of good over evil, and faith in the new season were embodied

through the element of fire in the Sada festival. Hence, the Sada festival is evaluated not only as a manifestation of ancient beliefs but also as a rich cultural heritage that preserves the people's attitude toward nature, their ecological thinking, and their spiritual values.

Today, technogenic civilization views nature merely as a "resource" (a pragmatic approach). Ritual culture, on the other hand, restores the status of sacredness to nature. From the perspective of axiology in philosophy, ritual elements such as planting trees or clearing the openings of natural springs are methods of purifying the inner world of man and forming ecological ethics.

Traditional rituals (for instance, Navruz, rain-making or wind-summoning rituals, and harvest festivals) are not merely entertainment events. From a philosophical perspective, they represent a mechanism through which humans acknowledge their responsibility toward nature and engage in a co-evolutionary (simultaneous, harmonious) development with it. Through ritual, humans do not "appropriate" nature; rather, they approach it as a partner (subject).

Although folk rituals possess local (national) characteristics, the essence underlying them is universal: preserving nature, ensuring the continuity of life, and maintaining the balance of the biosphere. Symbols within the rituals (for example, trees, water, fire, and soil) are universal archetypes that can serve as a unifying spiritual force for humanity during times of global ecological crisis.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, ritual culture is an essential component of centuries-old spiritual experience that has regulated humanity's relationship with nature. The values, norms, and symbolic meanings concentrated within it serve to shape the human attitude toward the environment, preserve collective memory, and ensure spiritual succession between generations. Viewed from this perspective, rituals manifest not merely as a historical heritage or an ethnographic phenomenon, but as a unique spiritual-ecological code aimed at ensuring harmony between humans and nature.

In the context of today's globalization processes, the dominance of technocratic thinking, and the intensification of ecological problems, the significance of this code increases even further. This is because at the root of the ecological crisis, in many cases, lies human

alienation from nature and its perception solely as an economic resource. Ritual culture, conversely, urges humans to perceive themselves not as the masters of nature, but as its inseparable part. Values formed through it - such as reverence, responsibility, thriftiness, and solidarity - are intrinsically linked to the principles of sustainable development.

Therefore, reinterpreting the content of rituals in modern philosophical approaches and revealing their ecological and humanistic potential carries vital importance. This process allows for evaluating rituals not as conservative or archaic remnants, but as a cultural mechanism that serves to maintain the balance in relations between human, society, and nature. Consequently, ritual culture manifests not only as a means of preserving national identity but also as one of the spiritual foundations of future development by forming ecological consciousness and responsibility.

Passed away in December 1996. From an interview dated April 15, 1994.

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