

## SEASONAL CUSTOMS RELATED TO AGRICULTURE IN THE MIDDLE ZARAFSHAN VALLEY

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### ABSTRACT

The article discusses the emergence and development of agricultural culture in the Middle Zarafshan Valley, as well as the formation of customs related to it, particularly seasonal customs.

### Keywords

Zarafshan Valley, customs, seasonal rituals, Politimet, agriculture, Navruz, "Sust Khotin" (Lazy Woman), Melon Festival, Bulung'ur, Bog'ibaland, Fig Festival.

**Introduction.** In his speech at the celebration of "Farm Workers Day," President Shavkat Mirziyoyev stated: "A farmer is the sturdy pillar of life, the strong foundation of existence, and this is no exaggeration. The abundance, joy, and prosperity of the people come primarily from the hard work of those who sow seeds and grow invaluable gifts of nature." The farmer symbolizes vast fields, gardens, various delicacies on our tables, weddings, festive days, and all of life itself.[9] The emergence and development of agricultural culture have played a significant role in the formation and advancement of ancient civilizations. The earliest states in world history emerged in regions where agricultural societies developed. Many tribes and peoples, who lived for thousands of years by hunting and gathering and did not practice agriculture, could not reach the level of statehood. The earliest states emerged in the 4th millennium BC in Mesopotamia (between the two rivers) and ancient Egypt. Over 10,000 years ago, these areas began transitioning from hunting and gathering to agriculture and the domestication of animals — the shift towards pastoralism. Gradually, agriculture spread from these regions to neighboring areas (Caucasus, Iran, Central Asia, India, and China). By the 3rd-2nd millennium BC, there were established historical and

cultural connections between the ancient Eastern countries. Archaeological findings show that by the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, in Uzbekistan (Surkhandarya region), the process of transitioning to early statehood began, based on the development of ancient agricultural culture. This process had its own unique features and laws of development. Once, A.V. Vinogradov and E.D. Mamedov, based on their comprehensive research, hypothesized that during the 7th-8th millennia BCE, the climate in Central Asia was relatively mild. The fauna and flora were similar to the modern world. As a result, by the end of the Mesolithic and the beginning of the Neolithic, the areas of Central Asia suitable for habitation were settled by primitive humans. However, these people lived in different natural, ecological, and climatic conditions across mountainous, foothill, and plain regions. This led to the emergence of a number of distinctive archaeological cultures: the Joytun culture occupied a small part of the Kopet Dag mountain plains; Hisor and the central and eastern parts of the Pamirs; the Kaltaminor culture in the lower reaches of the Amu Darya; the ancient regions of the Kyzylkum and Zarafshan; the Sazagan culture in the Fergana and Middle Zarafshan regions; and the Ustyurt culture. The Zarafshan Valley in ancient times was a favorable geographical area for human settlement. Like all the major and minor river basins of the Eastern irrigation, the emergence of ancient farming cultures in the middle of Central Asia, particularly in the Zarafshan Valley, was connected to the development of irrigation networks, the construction of waterworks, and the growth of irrigation agriculture.[1.190]

**Main part.** The Zarafshan Valley is located in the central part of Central Asia, between the Turkistan-Oqtov and Zarafshan mountain ranges. The eastern mountainous part of the valley is in Tajikistan, while the western foothill and plain parts lie within Uzbekistan. The valley was formed through tectonic processes. The Zarafshan Valley begins from the Zarafshan glacier (at an elevation of 2775 meters) and stretches westward to the sandy desert (at an elevation of 185 meters), covering a distance of 781 kilometers. Over this distance, the valley runs in a westward, southwestward direction, gradually descending and widening. In the eastern mountainous part of the valley, there are six terraces. Up to the city of Panjakent (300 km away), the valley is narrow and deep, with the Turkistan and Zarafshan mountain ranges rising steeply on either side. The Zarafshan River, in its upper reaches, has created a broad valley (4-5 km wide) due to glacial movement. At the point where the Kishtutsoy River flows into the Zarafshan, the valley becomes very narrow, with the steep mountain slopes rising sharply from the riverbanks. In the lower part of the valley,

it widens, and once it enters Uzbekistan, its width increases to 60–70 kilometers in some places (in the Bukhara region). During periods of flooding, water inundations also occurred, and in the Zarafshan Valley, this was referred to as "Marzob," which usually happened in April. The length of the Zarafshan Valley in Uzbekistan is approximately 480 kilometers, and in this region, the Samarkand, Bukhara, and Qorako'l oases are located. The Samarkand oasis is situated in the Samarkand depression, surrounded by relatively low mountains: to the north by the Gubdintog', Oqtog', and Qoratog', and to the south by the Qoratepa, Zirabuloq, and Ziyovuddin mountains. The Zarafshan Valley in this area is quite wide, up to 50 kilometers. The historical sources mention the name "Zarafshan" starting from the early 18th century, but written information about the river and its valley dates back to ancient times. The word "Politimet" in ancient Greek means "honorable," "great," or "mighty." According to the famous Russian scholar V. Livshits, the term is mostly explained in historical sources as the Sogdian "Namich," which conveys the meaning of "majestic" or "significant." The current name "Zarafshan" means "Zar" (gold) and "Afshon" (disperser or spreader).

The name of the river is not related to gold, but rather it is based on the concept of water being as precious as gold for the area it flows through, which serves as a source of life. This interpretation is closer to the truth. According to the prominent Central Asian historian S. Tolstov, the name of the river is also linked to the ancient "Alay" people, who were ancestors of the Ossetians, and the name of this people is associated with the Scythian tribes. The words "afshin" and "afshon," meaning "disperser" or "spreader," are still preserved in the Ossetian language.[3.3-56]

The term "agriculture culture" originally meant "to cultivate the land," and later expanded to include other fields, eventually evolving into the more general term "to create culture." Due to agricultural practices and the cultivation of plants, humans, as children of nature, have continuously demonstrated their creative abilities. Through their skills and hard work, people have artificially domesticated the hundreds of plant species in nature and transformed them into agricultural products.[2,87] Irrigated agriculture mainly developed in the ancient oases of Khwarezm, Bukhara, Samarkand, Tashkent, the Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya basins, and the Fergana Valley. Irrigated agriculture required immense labor. The construction of large irrigation structures, along with their regular cleaning and maintenance, demanded significant financial resources and the organized effort of many people. Due to the varying natural geographical conditions across different regions, the types of crops and irrigation methods differed. In particular, the mountainous and foothill areas of the Samarkand

region, including Nurobod, Koshrabot, Urgut, and Payarik, primarily focused on crops such as wheat and grapes, while regions like Bulung'ur, Jomboy, Pastdarg'om, Paxtachi, and Oqdaryo specialized in secondary crops such as vegetables and fruits. For rural residents, the main sources of income were agriculture and livestock. Through agriculture, people sustained their lives and maintained their households. In this lifestyle, agricultural traditions and rituals formed. According to researchers, Uzbek rituals are divided into two main categories: family and domestic rituals, and seasonal rituals.[4.134]

Among the widely practiced and nationally significant seasonal rituals in Uzbek culture, some are particularly notable. According to some researchers, Uzbek seasonal rituals can be classified into the following categories: 1) winter rituals like gap-gashtak, yasa-yusun; 2) spring rituals like Nowruz, bird calling, tulip or red flower festivals, mud ceremonies, and the "lazy wife" festival; 3) summer rituals such as the "Melon festival" and "Choy Momo"; 4) autumn rituals like the harvest-related "Mihrgan," "Oblobaraka," "Wind calling," and "Grape festival."

Nowruz, the famous holiday celebrated across all of Central and West Asia, has been observed for millennia. This festival is connected to the agricultural calendar and marks the spring equinox, around March 20-21. In the works of Beruni and Omar Khayyam's "Nowruz-nama," as well as in other sources, customs related to the celebration, such as watering or sprinkling the earth, exchanging greetings and gifts, riding on swings, distributing sweets, marking the harvest cycle, and bathing in rainwater, are mentioned.

One of the folk festivals celebrated during Nowruz is the "Darveshona" festival. This festival, which has been known by this name for thousands of years, takes place at the beginning of the year, during the spring season. The ritual, which originated before Islam, involves villagers gathering near a river or road in early spring, where they sacrifice an animal and cook food. This food was meant for travelers, beggars, and wanderers passing through. The name "Darveshona" reflects this practice, as it was intended for wandering dervishes, travelers, and others in need.

According to the beliefs of our ancestors, water, fire, earth, and air were considered sacred. After eating food prepared over sacred fire, any leftovers were cast into the water, symbolizing the removal of misfortune and the arrival of good. The main dishes served during this ritual were "Moshova, goja, yorma, and halim", which

were considered to be special foods. In ancient times, shepherds, service providers, cooks, and village leaders were appointed to take care of village matters during these rituals. This custom, though modified, continues to this day.

In early spring in Uzbekistan, particular attention is given to cleaning and preparing the irrigation canals and ditches for the new season. As such tasks were too large for individual households, the entire village or district would contribute in a collective effort known as "Community work." In ancient times, villagers would often complete agricultural work through this method. Clearing vineyards, cutting and pruning vines, gathering hay, collecting fruit, and cleaning large canals and main irrigation systems were all carried out through "Community work". The saying, "The dust of a lone horse does not rise, even if it does, it won't make a sound," reflects this communal effort.

In ancient times, during periods of drought when rain did not fall as expected in spring or autumn, our ancestors performed special rain-calling rituals. This custom continues to be practiced today in the Boysun district of Surkhandarya, where folk performers skillfully carry out and demonstrate these traditions. Villagers—men, women, and children—would gather in the fields and pray to the god of rain, asking for a downpour to bless the land.

Slow wife, sultana wife,  
Her hem is a field, wife.  
What does the slow wife need?  
Pouring, pouring rain is what she needs...  
(Sust xotin, sulton xotin,  
Ko'lankasi maydon xotin.  
Sust xotinga ne kerak?  
Sharros, sharros yomg'ir kerak...)

The tradition of the "Sust Xotin" (Lazy Wife) ritual originates from pre-Islamic times, dating back to the era of Avestan and Zoroastrian practices. It is a ritual born out of religious beliefs and worship. This ritual is also known by other names such as "Water Wife" or "Milk Wife". During the ritual, a large effigy in the form of a woman is created using branches and small twigs. This effigy is placed in the center, and people



walk around it while chanting specific prayers. Water is fetched from a well or stream and poured over the effigy.

The practice of this tradition was not limited to Central Asian nations but was also common among Afghans, Pakistanis, and Indians. According to some reports, the "Lazy women" ritual used to take place in villages 40-50 years ago, occurring 2-3 times a year, especially in the spring. [5.131] In the villages of Shorchik and its surroundings, as well as among Uzbek communities in Southern Tajikistan, the ritual was primarily carried out by men. In this ritual, instead of an effigy, a person would wear a woman's dress, and water would be poured over them. The custom of burning or throwing the effigy into an old well at the end of the ritual indicates that it is a remnant of sacrificial practices from ancient times. Ethnographic studies show that early sacrifices often involved humans, especially the elderly or young girls (in the Hindu tradition), and later shifted to animals or inanimate objects, like in the story of Prophet Ibrahim. Thus, the ritual of burning or throwing the effigy into a well is considered a symbolic form of human sacrifice.[7.104]

**Agricultural Rituals and Traditions.** In agricultural traditions, particularly those related to the summer harvest and wheat harvesting, there are unique customs filled with ancient beliefs. Before harvest, when crops begin to ripen or when grains are planted, a scarecrow is made in the form of a human and placed in the center of the field to protect the crops from birds. This custom is considered a way to protect the harvest. One such ritual is "Hayri Hudoyi," which takes place before the harvest season. In the Zarafshan Valley, especially among the Uzbeks of Samarkand, before starting the Hayri Hudoyi, nine loaves of bread are baked, and smoke is produced. The owner of the house or the farmer sacrifices an animal, usually a rooster, and the elders, workers, and villagers gather for the ritual. The village mullah recites Quranic verses, and prayers are offered for the prosperity of the crops. The meat from the sacrificed animals is used to prepare a meal for the guests, and after eating, everyone prays for the success of the harvest.[8] The origins of this ritual go back many centuries. It is considered a charitable act for the sake of God, including practices such as reciting Quranic verses, offering prayers, and making sacrifices. Ethnologist E.B. Taylor considers rituals like "Hayri Hudoyi" as characteristics of humanity's early developmental stages, similar to early petitions and prayers.[6.138]

**Harvest Festivals.** In autumn, there are several harvest festivals such as "Harvest Festival", "Melon Festival", and "Grape Festival". The "**Harvest Festival**"

is a traditional celebration of agricultural workers, also known as "Cotton Festival" until 1972 in Uzbekistan. The festival is held at the end of the harvest, particularly after the collection of crops like wheat and cotton. In Samarkand, this festival is widely celebrated with exhibitions, agricultural fairs, artistic performances, sports competitions, and public festivities. One such event is the "Tomato Festival", which was first held in the Bulung'ur district of Samarkand. This festival showcases various tomato varieties, their cultivation methods, prices, and unique characteristics, along with an exhibition of processed products from local factories.

**Fig Festival in Samarkand.**In the Bog'ibaland neighborhood of Samarkand, the Fig Festival has been held for the past two years. Participants have the chance to visit the 40-hectare fig orchards, which are considered part of the gardens of Amir Timur. The figs grown here are rich in microelements and are known for their unique qualities. The figs grown elsewhere in Samarkand do not taste as good as those from the Bog'ibaland orchards. This is likely due to the orchards being located near the Cho'ponota hills and close to the Zarafshan River. Historical records indicate that the Bog'ibaland orchards date back several centuries, with the "Baburnama" mentioning a garden called "Bog'ibaland" built by Amir Timur for his beloved granddaughter, Oqbegin.[10]

**Conclusion.**The Zarafshan Valley is one of the most fertile and culturally rich regions in Uzbekistan. Its development is closely linked to the Zarafshan River, which has provided the region with water for farming. As agriculture became the main way of life, many rituals and traditions were created around it. The customs and rituals related to farming reflect the region's rich cultural heritage and the community's deep connection to nature, faith, and prosperity. These traditions continue to thrive and evolve, preserving the ancient agricultural customs of the region.

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