

SEASONAL RITUALS AND RIDDLES

Munis Jurayeva Yunusovna

Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in Philological Sciences

Institute of Uzbek Language, Literature and Folklore, Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Uzbekistan

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0004-6231-9858><https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19986496>

Abstract: This article analyzes ethnofolkloristic data related to the fact that, in ancient times, the tradition of riddle-telling constituted an integral part of seasonal rituals. The historical foundations of the seasonal character of riddle-telling practices, as well as their performance exclusively during specific periods of the year, are elucidated.

Keywords: folklore, season, ritual, riddle, time of year, tradition, performance, ancient.

The seasonal rituals of the Uzbek people constitute the product of our ancestors' calendar-based worldview, formed through prolonged and systematic observation of natural phenomena, as well as their extensive life experience and practical skills. A substantial corpus of proverbs, sayings, and belief-based conceptions concerning the seasons and months of the year, as well as the natural and climatic conditions of the region, has been created, preserved in collective memory, and actively applied in everyday life. Refined and transmitted across centuries, this calendrical system has evolved into a rich and sophisticated cultural heritage.

“Drawing upon these forms of the folk calendar over extended historical periods, our ancestors developed customs, traditions, and rituals associated with specific phases of labor activity characteristic of each season. The system of songs, chants, and symbolic expressions performed within such rituals—embodying calendar-related beliefs, folk views, and representations—constitutes what is referred to as ‘the folklore of seasonal rituals.’ [1:6]

In ancient times, the tradition of riddle-telling formed an integral component of seasonal rituals and practices, as it was associated with the idea of fertility and abundance. Our ancestors conceived of riddles as a form of metaphorical speech capable of influencing nature and thereby securing the benevolence of forces believed to bestow plentiful harvests. This, in turn, indicates that the verbal elements of archaic rituals—manifested in chant-like utterances imbued with symbolic meaning—played a significant role in the genesis of the riddle as a folklore genre.

The procedure for conducting the traditional riddle-telling ritual recorded in Udmurt folklore also exhibits distinctive features. Toward the end of autumn, once agricultural work had been completed and the cold winds heralding winter had begun to blow, villagers in Udmurt settlements would gather each evening, in turn, at the home of an elderly individual to engage in riddle-telling. This ritual was typically supervised either by an elderly man or by the hostess of the house in which the gathering was held. According to tradition, the ceremony commenced with riddles on the theme of “the human being,” after which participants would proceed to other topics depending on the dynamics of the gathering[2:182].

In our view, the preservation of riddle-telling among the Udmurts as a distinct ritual form up to the early twentieth century, and its close association with the magic of fertility and mythological conceptions related to the cults of dying and reviving nature, attest to the ancient performative context and ritual significance of this genre. The riddles recited during this ceremony—traditionally held each year from late autumn through early spring—reflect a belief in the magical power of the word. The essence of the ritual was directed toward influencing an animate conception of nature through riddling. Participants believed that, by means of metaphorical speech, it was possible to affect natural forces and thereby attain the favor of powers believed to bestow abundance and a plentiful harvest.

M.A. Rybnikova, who noted that the riddle as a genre possessed a magico-ritual essence at the early stage of its formation, likewise maintains that its primary function consisted in the expression of magical beliefs [3:180]

The historical foundations of the seasonal character of the riddle-telling tradition, as well as its confinement to specific periods of the year, can be traced back to the calendrical rituals of ancient Indian priests. According to T.Ya. Elizarenkova and V.N. Toporov, early riddles functioned as the verbal score of particular magical or ritual ceremonies-that is, as their articulation in words. A pertinent example is the riddle-telling ritual performed annually on the eve of the New Year by ancient Indian priests in the 15th–11th centuries BCE. This symbolically charged practice was known as *brahmodya*, meaning “reflection on Brahman.” During this ceremony, sacrificial offerings were made in honor of the Vedas, and participants engaged in the exchange of riddles imbued with symbolic meaning [4:18].

According to interpretations of ancient Indian mythology, on the night marking the end of the year, the vital force of the cosmos wanes, chaos prevails over order, and the yearly cycle comes to its conclusion. For this reason, ancient Indians considered it necessary to perform a special ritual to ensure the renewal of the cosmos-that is, the rebirth of the year. The custom of riddle-telling during the New Year was conducted in conjunction with the tradition of exchanging various gifts among neighbors.

The riddles and their answers recited during sacrificial rites of the New Year ceremony-conducted with the aim of propagating the mythological conceptions underlying Vedic doctrine-embodied cosmogonic notions from ancient Indian mythology. These include mythopoetic representations of the creation of the world, as well as belief-based conceptions concerning the emergence of material existence from various parts of the body of the deity Purusha, in particular the belief that the Brahmin priests originated from his mouth[4:39].

In other words, the earliest riddles did not function merely as verbal play or as a means of entertainment, but rather fulfilled the role of a “mythological catechism,” that is, a mode of expressing specific religious and mythological conceptions in a question-and-answer format[5:234].

Some of the riddles composed in a question-and-answer form and performed within the *brahmodya* tradition during the sacrificial rites of the ancient Indian New Year festival have been translated into Russian by T.Ya. Elizarenkova, V.N. Toporov, and P. Grintser. These texts are characterized by their structural proximity to the poetic form of the contemporary riddle genre.

Riddle (question form):

Who moves alone?

And who is born anew?

What is the remedy against cold?

And what is the great sowing?

Answer:

The sun moves alone.

The moon is born anew.

Fire is the remedy against cold.

The earth is the great sowing[4:19]

Such riddles, according to P.Grintser [6:423], served as a specific instructional tool for ancient Indian priests. Through these riddle exchanges between future priests and their mentors, the extent to which young initiates had mastered religious and mythological conceptions was assessed.

As noted above, the tradition of riddle-telling became widespread in direct connection with the folk calendar, and the performance context and temporal framework of this genre were localized within specific periods of the year. Although this principle is not a characteristic

feature of the performance context of the riddle genre in Uzbek folklore, one of the genres within the seasonal ritual folklore of the Uzbek people is directly associated with riddle performance. According to Professor B. Sarimsoqov, the custom of riddle-telling was traditionally practiced during the annually held “loy tutish” ritual.

According to tradition, if a passer-by encountered people engaged in digging an irrigation canal, those working would block his path with a shovel or place mud in his way on a spade or belt. If the passer-by accepted the mud, he was obliged to join the work and dig the designated section of the canal. Otherwise, he had to either demonstrate a skill or provide a feast for the workers. In some cases, riddles were presented as a form of “skill.” If the workers failed to solve the riddle, the person who posed it was released from participating in the digging. However, if any of the diggers succeeded in solving the riddle, the person was still required to take part in the excavation.

As noted by B. Sarimsoqov, the father of the Sherabad bakhshi Bo‘ri Bakhshi Ahmedov, Ahmad Bakhshi, once passed by people digging the Zang canal when one of the workers blocked his path by offering mud on a shovel. In response, as soon as the bakhshi accepted the mud, he addressed the workers with the following riddle:

Hojakam hajga ketdi,

Bilmadim gujo ketdi,

O‘n ikki jumurtqadan,

Qirq sakkiz jo‘ja ketdi.

(“My Hojakam went on the pilgrimage to Hajj,

I do not know where he went,

From twelve eggs,

Forty-eight chicks have gone.”)

The answer to this riddle is “one year, twelve months, and forty-eight weeks.” Since none of the diggers were able to solve it, the bakhshi was allowed to pass without participating in the excavation work[7:49-50].

According to a piece of information recorded by folklorist M. Jo‘rayev in the village of Osiyo in the Qorako‘l district of Bukhara region, the practice of riddle-telling within the “loy tutish” (mud-gathering) ritual had acquired the status of a distinctive local tradition. As reported by Sattor Ahmedov (born in 1926), a local traditional accountant from the village of Osiyo, the Mehnat canal, i.e., its annual springtime communal irrigation cleaning, lasted several days. During this communal labor, whoever was assigned to dig under the bridge would place a shovel-load of mud with a piece of bread on top in the middle of the bridge. Any passer-by crossing the bridge was unable to step over the mud with bread placed upon it.

According to the rule, the passer-by was obliged either to wrestle one of the diggers and defeat him, or to demonstrate a skill or art that would entertain the workers, or to pose a riddle. Otherwise, he was compelled to participate in the digging work. On one occasion, Sattor Ahmedov himself happened to pass over such a bridge where the diggers had placed mud on top. The workers asked the elder to present a riddle, and he proposed the following enigma:

“A man was once riding on horseback together with a woman when they encountered bandits. The bandits told him: “Either leave your horse or leave the woman riding with you, and your life will be spared.” The man then said: “I will pose a riddle; if you find its answer, I will agree to your demand. If you fail to solve it, you will let us pass.” When the bandits agreed, the

man pointed to the woman riding behind him and said: "This is my life, I am her beloved, and her mother is the mother-in-law of my mother. Now tell me, who is this woman riding on the horse in relation to me?" The bandits were unable to solve the riddle."

The diggers were also unable to find the answer to the riddle posed by Sattor Bobo Ahmedov and therefore allowed him to pass. In fact, the correct answer to the riddle was that the woman riding the horse was the rider's own daughter.

Considering that in antiquity riddle-telling was performed as a ritual endowed with symbolic significance, and that in certain seasonal ceremonies that later developed on this basis (for example, among the Udmurts), the performance of riddles was intended as a means of exerting a mystical influence on nature, it becomes evident that the institutionalized practice of riddle-telling in the Uzbek "loy tutish" ritual likewise functioned as a magical instrument aimed at ensuring abundant water supply in the coming agricultural season and, consequently, a prosperous harvest.

A comparative-typological study of riddle-telling traditions among the world's peoples, as well as an examination of sources related to the dissemination of this genre, demonstrates that in antiquity the practice of riddle-telling possessed a seasonal character and fulfilled the function of determining whether the year would be fertile or unproductive. Ancient riddles, which functioned as the verbal score-or verbal articulation-of a specific magical act or archaic ritual, were inherently characterized by a symbolic and ritual essence.

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