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VERBAL AND CULTURAL CODES IN SELECTED UZBEK FOLK RITUALS A Linguocultural Analysis of Sust Xotin, Choymomo, Kelin Salom, and Chilla

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how selected Uzbek folk rituals use verbal forms to organize relationships among participants, natural forces, material objects, and socially significant transitions. The study focuses on four ritual complexes: the rain-making ceremony Sust Xotin, the wind-stopping ceremony Choymomo, the wedding greeting Kelin Salom, and the forty-day transitional period known as Chilla. Rather than claiming an exhaustive corpus or new ethnographic fieldwork, the research undertakes a qualitative reanalysis of ritual texts and descriptions reported in published Uzbek folklore scholarship and heritage documentation. The analytical framework combines lexical-semantic analysis, morphosyntactic description, conceptual metaphor, and speech-act-oriented pragmatics. The findings indicate four recurrent tendencies within the selected material: the personification of natural forces through kinship vocabulary; the use of imperative, optative, and hortative forms to express culturally intended action; the association of colour and household vocabulary with purity, protection, and social order; and the use of taboo avoidance and euphemistic naming during periods of perceived vulnerability. These tendencies do not establish a single, uniform Uzbek ritual system, and their historical origins cannot be determined from textual similarity alone. They nevertheless demonstrate how ritual discourse links linguistic form with communal expectations and culturally transmitted models of efficacy. The article concludes by proposing a source-transparent digital corpus of Uzbek ritual language that records regional, textual, and performance variation.

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Keywords: *Uzbek folk rituals; ritual language; linguoculturology; Sust Xotin; Choymomo; Kelin Salom; Chilla; speech acts; taboo; cultural metaphor.*

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1. Introduction

Language is not only a system for transmitting information; it is also one of the principal means through which communities classify experience, preserve social memory, and coordinate culturally meaningful action. This premise is central to linguoculturology and ethnolinguistics, which investigate the relationship between linguistic forms and historically transmitted cultural knowledge (Tolstoy, 1995; Telia, 1996; Maslova, 2001). Ritual discourse is especially valuable for such investigation because words are produced together with prescribed gestures, objects, participants, times, and places. The meaning of an utterance in a ritual setting therefore depends not only on its dictionary content but also on what the community understands the utterance to accomplish.

Research on performative language provides a useful basis for describing this relationship. Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) showed that utterances can function as actions under socially recognized conditions. Studies of ritual and verbal art further demonstrate that efficacy is attributed to speech through conventional form, authorized performance, repetition, and communal participation (Tambiah, 1968; Bauman, 1977). In this article, ritual efficacy is treated as a culturally organized belief and practice, not as an empirically proven ability of words to alter physical events.

Uzbek folklore scholarship has documented a broad range of seasonal, agricultural, family, and lifecycle ceremonies (Alaviya, 1974; Sarimsoqov, 1986; Imomov et al., 1990). These descriptions preserve vocabulary, songs, invocations, and accounts of performance that may no longer be widely used in everyday life. The national inventory of intangible cultural heritage also records regional names and practices associated with rain-making and wind-stopping ceremonies. For example, the rain ritual is reported under forms such as Sust Xotin, Sut Xotin, Suv Xotin, and Chala Xotin, while Choymomo is described as a ceremony intended to stop destructive wind (Intangible Cultural Heritage of Uzbekistan, n.d.). Such variation makes it necessary to avoid treating any single textual version as representative of all Uzbek communities.

The present study narrows its scope to four ritual complexes that permit comparison across two functional domains. Sust Xotin and Choymomo address environmental uncertainty in agricultural life, whereas Kelin Salom and Chilla regulate social incorporation and vulnerability during family transitions. The article does not claim to reconstruct a complete archaic worldview or to prove direct descent from Zoroastrian, shamanistic, or other pre-Islamic systems. Historical associations reported in earlier scholarship are treated as hypotheses that require independent philological, archaeological, and comparative evidence.

1.1. Research questions and contribution

The study addresses the following questions:

- Which lexical and morphosyntactic features are most salient in the selected ritual texts and descriptions?
- How do kinship terms, colour terms, household images, and euphemistic expressions organize cultural meanings within these rituals?
- How do verbal forms interact with the social and pragmatic functions attributed to the rituals?

The contribution of the article is methodological rather than archival. It brings four frequently discussed ritual complexes into one explicit analytical framework, distinguishes textual evidence from historical interpretation, and states the limits of the available material. It also demonstrates how a linguocultural analysis can remain attentive to morphology and syntax instead of relying only on broad statements about national mentality.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language, culture, and ritual performance

Linguocultural approaches examine how culturally salient concepts become conventionalized in words, phraseological units, metaphors, and discourse patterns. Tolstoy (1995) emphasized the parallel organization of folk language and folk culture, while Telia (1996) and Maslova (2001) developed frameworks for interpreting linguistic units as carriers of cultural knowledge. Within Uzbek linguistics, Mahmudov (2011) and Shaxobiddinova (2017) have contributed to the study of national-cultural meaning and the linguistic picture of the world. These approaches are productive when they begin with observable linguistic evidence and avoid assuming that every lexical item directly represents a unified national consciousness.

Ritual speech also benefits from pragmatic analysis. Austin’s distinction between saying and doing, Searle’s account of speech acts, and Tambiah’s analysis of the “magical power of words” direct attention to conventional authority, formal repetition, and the participant’s understanding of what speech is meant

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to achieve. Bauman (1977) adds the dimension of performance: parallelism, marked delivery, and formulaic organization can signal that an utterance should be interpreted differently from ordinary conversation. Because the present data are primarily printed texts, the analysis can describe textual parallelism and grammatical form but cannot make strong claims about intonation, vowel length, rhythm, or audience response.

2.2. Uzbek ritual scholarship

Uzbek folklore collections and studies provide the principal basis for the present analysis. Alaviya (1974) documents ritual songs, Sarimsoqov (1986) offers a systematic treatment of Uzbek ceremonial folklore, and Imomov et al. (1990) situate ritual verbal art within the wider field of Uzbek oral poetic creativity. Eshonqulov (2008) examines the development of mythological images in Uzbek folklore, while Safarov (1984) records forms of children's folklore that also intersect with ceremonial performance. These works establish the importance of formulaic language, but their descriptions differ in regional coverage, transcription practices, and analytical purpose.

Recent documentation reinforces the need to recognize regional variation. The national intangible-heritage inventory lists several names for rain-making rituals and reports different locations of performance. Özkara (2026), focusing on Choymomo and Yalli Momo, likewise identifies regional differences in participants, objects, and symbolic actions while emphasizing the personification of wind. Such evidence supports comparative analysis, but it also prevents the researcher from presenting a single poem, object, or role distribution as an invariant national model.

2.3. Gap addressed by the study

Existing descriptions are rich in ethnographic and folkloric information, yet linguistic observations are often dispersed across discussions of mythology, genre, and custom. The specific gap addressed here is therefore not the absence of any prior research on Uzbek rituals. It is the need for a limited, source-transparent comparison that connects concrete lexical and grammatical forms with carefully defined cultural-pragmatic functions. This formulation avoids an untestable claim of complete novelty and makes the analytical contribution proportionate to the available data.

3. Data and Methodology

3.1. Research design and data scope

The article uses a qualitative, interpretive research design. Its data consist of selected verbal examples and ritual descriptions reported in published folklore studies and heritage documentation. No interviews, participant observation, audio recording, or new fieldwork were conducted. The study is therefore a textual reanalysis of secondary and published primary materials rather than an ethnographic survey of contemporary practice.

Table 1.

Data scope and evidential status

Ritual complex	Functional domain	Main verbal evidence	Principal sources	Limits of evidence
Sust Xotin	Rain-making / agricultural uncertainty	Invocations containing vocatives, imperatives, optatives, and paired clauses	Alaviya (1974); Sarimsoqov (1986); Imomov et al. (1990); ICH Uzbekistan (n.d.)	Regional variants and performance details differ; no audio data
Choymomo	Wind-stopping / crop protection	Vocative address, personification, imperative and hortative forms, offering vocabulary	Sarimsoqov (1986); ICH Uzbekistan (n.d.); Özkara (2026)	Texts and participant roles vary by region

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Ritual complex	Functional domain	Main verbal evidence	Principal sources	Limits of evidence
Kelin Salom	Wedding incorporation and kinship hierarchy	Formulaic greetings, honorific address, kinship and household metaphors	Alaviya (1974); Sarimsoqov (1986)	The present study uses reported patterns, not a quantified song corpus
Chilla	Postpartum or newlywed transition and protection	Avoidance terms, euphemistic reference, temporal vocabulary	Eshonqulov (2008); published ethnographic descriptions discussed in Uzbek folklore scholarship	Practices are locally variable; claims concern language ideology, not causal effects

The sample is purposive rather than statistically representative. The four cases were selected because they permit comparison between environmental and lifecycle rituals and because each case contains or is associated with identifiable verbal forms. Textual variants are presented in standardized modern Uzbek Latin orthography as they appear in the working manuscript and cited publications. Since the original archival recordings and all first editions were not available for direct collation, the analysis does not claim to establish a definitive critical text.

3.2. Analytical procedure

Each example was examined through a five-part coding matrix:

- Lexical-semantic coding: culturally salient words, including kinship, colour, spatial, agricultural, and household vocabulary.
- Morphosyntactic coding: imperative, optative, hortative, possessive, and parallel clause structures.
- Conceptual coding: personification, metaphor, binary contrast, and relations between natural and social domains.
- Pragmatic coding: the culturally intended action of requesting, appeasing, blessing, greeting, protecting, or avoiding.
- Contextual coding: the participants, objects, temporal stage, and social conditions described for the performance.

The categories were applied comparatively across the four cases. Interpretations were retained only when they could be connected to a cited lexical form or an explicitly reported ritual practice. Historical-origin claims were excluded from the findings unless they were clearly marked as hypotheses in the literature. Because the dataset is small and non-random, no frequency claims are made.

3.3. Research ethics and source transparency

The study involves no human participants and uses no confidential data. Its ethical responsibility is therefore primarily one of accurate attribution and interpretive restraint. The article distinguishes among direct textual evidence, descriptions reported by previous researchers, and the present author’s analysis. Regional diversity is treated as a substantive feature rather than as noise to be eliminated.

4. Analysis

4.1. Sust Xotin: verbal direction toward rain and communal renewal

Sust Xotin belongs to a group of rain-making rituals associated with communities dependent on dry farming. Heritage documentation records several regional names—Sust Xotin, Sut Xotin, Suv Xotin, and Chala Xotin—and describes processions in which an effigy may be carried while participants sing and pour water (Intangible Cultural Heritage of Uzbekistan, n.d.). The diversity of names and actions indicates that the ritual should be treated as a family of related practices rather than as a single fixed ceremony.

The selected verbal lines contain forms that orient speech toward a desired change in the environment:

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(1) *Ko‘kdan yomg‘ir tila, xotin.*
Yomg‘ir yog‘sin, sel bo‘lsin,
Yer ko‘karib, el bo‘lsin!
English translation: *Ask the sky for rain, woman. Let rain fall, let there be a torrent; let the land grow green, and let the community flourish.*
Source: selected Sust Xotin lines reproduced in the manuscript and attributed to Uzbek ritual-song collections (cf. Alaviya, 1974; Imomov et al., 1990).

Three grammatical features are relevant. First, tila is a second-person singular imperative of tila- “to ask, request, or wish,” directly addressing the personified ritual figure. Second, yog‘sin and bo‘lsin contain the third-person marker -sin, which in this context expresses an optative or directive meaning: “let it rain” and “let it be.” Third, the repeated bo‘lsin produces syntactic parallelism. The verbal structure progresses from the meteorological event to agricultural regeneration and then to communal well-being.

The sequence yer “land” and el “people, community” is especially significant. The words are phonologically close and form a compact parallel pair, but their importance is not merely aesthetic. The pairing connects ecological and social continuity: the greening of the land is represented as a condition of collective flourishing. The text therefore maps a natural process onto a social outcome without requiring the analyst to claim that the words themselves physically cause rain.

The lexeme xotin “woman/wife” in the ritual name and vocative helps personify the addressee. Earlier scholarship has proposed associations with female water or fertility figures, including Zoroastrian deities; however, such interpretations are not uniform, and phonological resemblance alone cannot establish direct historical descent. The defensible conclusion is narrower: in the recorded ritual discourse, the environmental force is made addressable through a socially familiar human category.

4.2. Choymomo: personification, appeasement, and shared action

Choymomo is described as a wind-stopping ceremony performed when prolonged or destructive winds threaten crops. Sources report significant regional variation in who performs the ritual and which objects are used. The national heritage description records women-led performance in some accounts and male performers in others, while recent comparative work also documents regional differences in symbolic actions (Intangible Cultural Heritage of Uzbekistan, n.d.; Özkara, 2026). The stable analytical point is therefore not a fixed cast of participants but the transformation of wind into a being that can be addressed and appeased.

(2) *Choymomo, jon Choymomo,*
Shamolingni qo‘y, momo.
Oq unimiz sochaylik,
Yo‘lingni biz ochaylik.
English translation: *Choymomo, dear Choymomo, leave off your wind, grandmother. Let us scatter our white flour; let us open your path.*
Source: selected Choymomo lines reproduced in the manuscript and attributed to Uzbek ritual-song collections (cf. Alaviya, 1974; Sarimsoqov, 1986).

The vocative jon Choymomo uses jon literally “soul/life” and conventionally “dear” to reduce social distance. Momo “grandmother” frames the wind through an elder-female kinship category. Such naming does not simply describe the weather; it creates a relationship in which respectful persuasion becomes possible. This is a form of conceptual personification grounded in kinship language.

The form qo‘y is a second-person singular imperative meaning “leave, stop, let go.” The noun shamolingni contains shamol “wind,” the second-person possessive suffix -ing, and the accusative marker -ni: the wind is linguistically represented as belonging to the addressed figure. By contrast, sochaylik and ochaylik contain the first-person plural hortative suffix -aylik, “let us scatter” and “let us open.” The text thus combines a directive to the personified force with a pledge of coordinated action by the human group.

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The phrase oq un “white flour” links an offering object with the culturally positive associations of oq “white.” In Uzbek cultural semantics, white is frequently associated with cleanliness, blessing, auspiciousness, and peaceful intention (Mahmudov, 2011). The present example supports an interpretation of non-confrontational appeasement: participants offer a valued food substance and symbolically clear a path. It does not establish that oq has one unchanging meaning in every Uzbek context.

4.3. Kelin Salom: verbal incorporation into a kinship order

Kelin Salom, the bride’s formal greeting, belongs to the wedding complex rather than to the legal-religious act of nikoh alone. Its central social function is the public introduction of the bride to members of the groom’s family and community. Folklore descriptions present it as a highly formulaic performance in which relatives are acknowledged according to age, kinship position, and social responsibility (Alaviya, 1974; Sarimsoqov, 1986).

The relevant linguistic mechanisms differ from the environmental rituals. Instead of directing an external natural force, Kelin Salom organizes social relations through names, titles, honorific expressions, blessings, and metaphorical descriptions. Senior male relatives may be represented through images such as ustun “pillar” or bosh “head,” which foreground support, authority, and structural responsibility. Senior female relatives may be connected with chiroq “lamp/light” or dasturxon “laid table/tablecloth,” images associated with domestic continuity, hospitality, and nourishment. These examples should be interpreted as recurrent metaphorical resources in reported texts, not as obligatory labels used in every performance.

The greeting is performative in a social rather than supernatural sense. By bowing, listening to formulaic descriptions, and responding within an authorized ceremony, the bride and assembled relatives publicly recognize a new relationship. The words do not independently create kinship; they contribute to a wider sequence of actions through which kinship is acknowledged and displayed. The verbal, bodily, musical, and spatial components are therefore interdependent.

A critical reading must also recognize that some metaphors encode hierarchical expectations. Descriptions of the father-in-law as “head” and the domestic sphere as organized around fixed gendered roles reflect particular social models. Linguocultural analysis should describe these models without presenting them as timeless, uncontested, or universally accepted by contemporary Uzbek families.

4.4. Chilla: temporal boundary, taboo avoidance, and protective naming

Chilla denotes a forty-day period associated in different contexts with postpartum recovery, newborn care, or the early stage of marriage. The word is conventionally connected with Persian chehel “forty.” Within ritual practice, however, the term names more than a number: it marks a socially recognized interval of transition, restricted interaction, and heightened care. The participants are treated as being between established states, which makes temporal vocabulary central to the ritual concept.

Published descriptions report verbal prohibitions and euphemistic strategies during this period. Direct references to death, threatening beings, sharp objects, or other sources of danger may be avoided, while expressions such as yaxshilar “the good ones” or bizdan bo‘laklar “those other than us” can be used as indirect designations. The precise inventory of avoided words is locally variable and should not be generalized without field documentation.

The relevant phenomenon is language ideology: speakers attribute protective value to not naming a feared entity directly. Allan and Burridge (2006) describe euphemism and taboo as context-sensitive strategies for managing social, emotional, and sacred danger. In Chilla, indirect naming can reduce explicit confrontation with a feared category and signal compliance with communal expectations. This does not prove linguistic determinism or the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis. It shows that participants may understand naming itself as consequential within the ritual setting.

Compared with Sust Xotin and Choymomo, Chilla relies less on public directive formulas and more on regulation of ordinary speech. The pragmatic mechanism is avoidance rather than command: the

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socially appropriate utterance is sometimes the euphemism, paraphrase, or silence that replaces a direct term. This contrast broadens the understanding of ritual language beyond songs and incantations.

5. Comparative Results

The comparison identifies four recurrent mechanisms. They are tendencies within the selected data, not universal properties of all Uzbek rituals.

Table 2.

Linguistic mechanisms and culturally attributed functions

Mechanism	Examples in the selected data	Culturally attributed function	Analytical qualification
Personification through kinship	xotin “woman,” momo “grandmother”; household and family-role metaphors	Makes natural forces or social positions addressable through familiar relational categories	Does not prove a single historical deity or invariant national archetype
Directive and optative grammar	tila; qo‘y; yog‘sin; bo‘lsin; -aylik forms	Expresses requests, desired states, and coordinated participant action	Describes intended ritual action, not demonstrated physical causation
Symbolically marked lexicon	oq un; yer/el pairing; ustun, bosh, chiroq, dasturxon	Links material objects and social values such as blessing, continuity, authority, and hospitality	Meanings are context-dependent and may be contested or variable
Taboo and euphemistic substitution	yaxshilar; bizdan bo‘laklar; avoidance of direct threatening terms	Manages vulnerability and signals adherence to protective norms	Evidence concerns language ideology, not strong linguistic determinism
Formulaic parallelism	repeated bo‘lsin; paired clauses; structured greeting sequences	Marks speech as ceremonial and supports memory and collective participation	Audio-based claims about rhythm or hypnosis cannot be made from printed texts

5.1. From natural uncertainty to social coordination

The environmental rituals transform difficult-to-control phenomena into relational partners. Rain is requested through a female ritual figure, and wind is addressed as a grandmother. This personification allows speakers to use familiar pragmatic strategies—request, affection, respect, exchange, and collective promise—when responding to ecological uncertainty. The important result is not that nature is literally understood as human in every context, but that ritual discourse temporarily organizes it through human social categories.

The lifecycle rituals organize uncertainty differently. Kelin Salom uses public address and metaphor to position a new family member within a kinship network. Chilla uses temporal restriction and indirect naming to manage perceived vulnerability. Across both domains, language helps participants make a transition socially intelligible: environmental crisis becomes a negotiable relationship, and biological or marital change becomes an ordered social stage.

5.2. The verbal code as one component of a multimodal system

The evidence does not support ranking the verbal component as the “ultimate” or independently sufficient code of ritual. Sust Xotin may involve water, an effigy, procession, and household contributions; Choymomo may involve costume, soot, food offerings, and movement; Kelin Salom includes bodily greeting and musical performance; Chilla includes spatial and behavioural restrictions. Words receive much of their force from their coordination with these actions and objects. A more accurate model is multimodal interdependence among verbal, material, bodily, spatial, and temporal signs.

5.3. Cultural continuity and variation

The selected expressions preserve vocabulary and metaphors that connect present descriptions with older agricultural and kinship practices. At the same time, continuity should not be confused with

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unchanged survival. Different names for Sust Xotin, different performers in Choymomo, changing family expectations in Kelin Salom, and local differences in Chilla demonstrate that ritual traditions are repeatedly adapted. Linguocultural meaning is preserved through variation as well as repetition.

6. Discussion

The analysis supports a restrained version of the claim that ritual language stores cultural knowledge. It does so not because each word contains a fixed national code, but because recurring forms link lexical meaning with socially learned contexts of use. The suffix -sin in yog‘sin and bo‘lsin is an ordinary grammatical resource of Uzbek; in a rain ritual, its optative force becomes part of a collective appeal. The kinship term momo is also an ordinary word; in Choymomo, it frames wind as an elder figure. Cultural significance therefore emerges through the interaction of grammar, vocabulary, genre, and performance context.

This conclusion has two methodological implications. First, linguocultural interpretation should begin with linguistic description. Claims about purity, authority, protection, or social balance are more persuasive when attached to identifiable words, affixes, contrasts, or discourse sequences. Second, historical reconstruction requires a separate evidential standard. The presence of water, a female figure, fire-water contrasts, or the number forty may be compatible with several religious and historical traditions. Direct origin should not be asserted without dated textual evidence and comparative historical analysis.

The selected data also show why “national mentality” must be used carefully. Rituals may express culturally familiar values, yet communities contain regional, generational, gendered, religious, and individual differences. Kelin Salom, for example, can preserve hospitality and respect while also transmitting hierarchical role expectations that contemporary participants may reinterpret. A linguocultural study should therefore describe the social model encoded in a text without equating it with the beliefs of every Uzbek speaker.

Finally, the analysis suggests that ritual vocabulary is a valuable target for documentation. Terms such as Sust Xotin, Choymomo, Kelin Salom, Chilla, and their regional variants are difficult to represent in ordinary bilingual dictionaries because their meanings depend on participants, objects, times, and beliefs. Madvaliyev’s work on Uzbek terminology and lexicography provides a relevant foundation for designing entries that combine definition, etymology, regional label, textual example, and cultural context (Madvaliyev, 2017).

7. Limitations

The study has four principal limitations. First, it analyses a small purposive sample and cannot establish frequency or representativeness. Second, most evidence comes from printed descriptions and selected textual variants rather than from recordings, which prevents reliable analysis of melody, tempo, intonation, vowel length, gesture timing, and audience response. Third, the study does not systematically compare regions or dialects; regional information is used only to demonstrate variation. Fourth, several historical and etymological interpretations in the secondary literature remain disputed or insufficiently documented. These limitations require cautious conclusions and define priorities for future research.

8. Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has examined verbal and cultural mechanisms in four selected Uzbek ritual complexes. Sust Xotin and Choymomo use personification, vocative address, directive grammar, and collective-action forms to organize culturally meaningful responses to environmental uncertainty. Kelin Salom uses formulaic greeting, kinship vocabulary, and household metaphors to publicly acknowledge a new social relationship. Chilla demonstrates a different mode of ritual discourse in which euphemism, avoidance, and temporal naming regulate speech during a period of perceived vulnerability.

Across the selected material, language does not operate independently of action. Verbal forms interact with offerings, gestures, spatial arrangements, social roles, and prescribed times. The most defensible theoretical conclusion is therefore that Uzbek ritual discourse is multimodal and relational.

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Words help participants identify who may speak, who or what is addressed, which outcome is desired, and which behaviour is appropriate. The texts preserve culturally significant models, but those models vary across regions and change over time.

Future research should develop a digital, source-transparent corpus of Uzbek ritual language. Each record should include the ritual name and variants, location, date, collector, performer information where ethically appropriate, original script and transcription, audio or video when permission is available, interlinear glossing, translation, associated actions and objects, and bibliographic provenance. A regional comparison should be based on balanced data rather than on isolated examples. Collaboration among linguists, folklorists, anthropologists, local communities, archives, and lexicographers would allow endangered vocabulary to be documented without presenting living traditions as static remnants of the past.

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Author’s Note on Data Availability

18. The article is based on published folklore collections, scholarly descriptions, and publicly accessible heritage documentation listed in the references. No new field recordings or interview data were collected. The textual variants used in the examples should be collated against the cited editions before submission to a journal that requires page-specific quotation verification.

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