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Cultural and Civilizational Characteristics of the Small Karakalpak Ethnic Groups Settled in The Northern Bukhara Region (From the 18th Century Onward)

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Abstract: This article examines the cultural and civilizational characteristics of small Karakalpak ethnic groups settled in the northern Bukhara region from the 18th century onward. Drawing on historical, ethnographic, and comparative materials, the study explores settlement patterns, dwelling forms, clothing traditions, and patriarchal family structures. Despite intense interaction with neighboring Uzbeks and Kazakhs, these groups retained distinctive elements of Karakalpak material culture and social organization. Special attention is given to the evolution of household architecture, women's ceremonial attire, and marital customs shaped by Sharia and adat. The findings highlight both cultural resilience and adaptive transformation within multiethnic environments.

Keywords: Karakalpaks, Northern Bukhara, Material Culture, Settlements, Clothing Traditions, Patriarchal Family, Customary Law, Cultural Adaptation

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1. Introduction

The small Karakalpak ethnic groups that settled in the northern Bukhara region from the eighteenth century onward represent a unique case of cultural continuity within a multiethnic environment. Their migration from the lower and middle Syr Darya to the Zarafshan and Ferghana valleys occurred during a period of significant political and economic transformation in Central Asia. Despite increasing integration with Uzbek, Kazakh, and other neighboring populations, these groups preserved many features of their ancestral material culture, including dwelling types, decorative arts, clothing forms, and family structures. At the same time, sustained interaction with surrounding communities facilitated selective cultural borrowing, resulting in hybrid forms of architecture, attire, and social customs. Understanding these cultural and civilizational characteristics contributes to broader studies of ethnocultural resilience, identity formation, and the dynamics of cultural exchange in Central Asia. This article analyzes the key elements of Karakalpak settlements, domestic architecture, dress traditions, and patriarchal norms based on historical and ethnographic data [1].

Literature Review

Scholarly interest in Karakalpak culture has been shaped by historical and ethnographic works, including early descriptions by Grebenkin, Kharuzin, and the Nalivkins, who documented settlement patterns, gender norms, and material culture in

the late nineteenth century. Later studies by Tolstova and Shalekenov expanded the analysis of household structures and rural life, while contemporary research (e.g., Kamalova) examines ritual practices within modern contexts. Collectively, these works highlight both cultural distinctiveness and the influence of neighboring Uzbek, Kazakh, and Tajik communities on Karakalpak traditions [2].

2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a multidisciplinary approach combining historical, ethnographic, and comparative analysis. Archival documents, early ethnographic accounts, and fieldwork materials (including oral testimonies) provide the primary data for reconstructing cultural practices. Comparative methodology is used to identify similarities and differences between Karakalpak groups and neighboring Uzbek and Kazakh populations [3]. Descriptive-analytical techniques support the interpretation of settlement forms, clothing traditions, and family structures, while contextual analysis enables understanding these features within broader socio-economic and political transformations from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries [4].

3. Results and Discussion

Settlements and Dwellings

At the end of the 18th century and during the first half of the 20th century, the small ethnographic groups of the Karakalpaks, having migrated from the lower and middle reaches of the Syr Darya to the Zarafshan and Ferghana valleys and other territories, continued for a considerable period to preserve key elements of their ancestral material culture [5]. They retained the use of the traditional *qara uy* (yurt) and other temporary forms of dwelling, the dispersed pattern of settlement, the household practices, construction techniques, and national forms of dress. As noted earlier, even after relocating to new territories, the Karakalpaks for a long time maintained a semi-nomadic way of life. This is evidenced by the continued use of temporary dwellings – such as yurts, reed shelters, and pit-houses (*töle*) – which persisted over many decades [6].

In the Zarafshan river basin, Karakalpak communities likewise relied for a long time on yurts and reed-built shelters. Settling in areas with abundant lakes and marshlands, they erected their yurts on elevated sites surrounded by thick reed enclosures. Groups of yurts were often situated at considerable distances from one another, which was a natural feature of their settlement pattern [7]. These early clusters later became the foundation for present-day Karakalpak villages [Following their transition to agriculture, small groves began to appear around dwellings, and reed shelters gradually came to replace yurts. Under the Bukhara Khanate, the Karakalpaks often lived within fortified enclosures that protected them from constant military threats – information confirmed both by A.D. Grebenkin and by oral accounts from local informants [8].

By the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with the spread of agriculture and sedentism, permanent dwellings began to appear alongside temporary structures. The incorporation of Central Asia into the Russian Empire, which brought relative stability and reduced internal conflict, played an important role in this process. As different Karakalpak groups transitioned to sedentary life, they adopted construction techniques from neighboring peoples (various Uzbek groups, Russians, etc.), which resulted in significant variation in building styles across different Karakalpak communities [9].

Among Uzbeks, dwellings traditionally consisted of two distinct parts: the outer and the inner sections. In the outer courtyard the household head carried out his daily work and received guests, while the inner quarters were reserved exclusively for family members and inaccessible to unrelated men. In poorer rural households such division did not exist; however, a small wall was built at some distance from the entrance to prevent

outsiders from seeing into the interior [4, pp. 74–75]. Uzbek houses were generally enclosed by high clay walls, and their windows never faced the street [10].

Among Karakalpaks such a division into outer and inner zones was not typical. They usually constructed a separate guest room (*meymanxana*), though this was often only a part of the general dwelling complex; only wealthy households built stand-alone guest houses. Poor families typically had no *meymanxana* at all [5, p. 47]. Karakalpaks rarely fenced their dwellings, and if they did, the enclosure was usually made of reeds or brushwood. This can still be observed in many Karakalpak villages, particularly those far from Uzbek influence, such as Keneges and Kama-Basy. Clay or mud-brick walls (*guala*, *paksa*) were characteristic only of mixed Uzbek–Karakalpak settlements [11].

The houses of the poorest families consisted of a single room and a corridor (*daliz*), with an *ayvan* (veranda) in front. Sometimes the dwelling included two rooms (the outer room and *meymanxana*), along with a corridor and an *ayvan*, with the corridor positioned between the two rooms. Wealthier households had multiple rooms: in addition to the entrance hall, there were guest rooms, storage rooms, kitchens, corridors, and verandas [12].

During this period, the Samarkand Karakalpaks began constructing *shöpkér*-type houses, in which wooden frames were filled with brickwork. Dwellings in the middle Zarafshan basin had their own distinctive features – for example, a heating system different from that of the Ferghana region. In Khorezm, Karakalpaks built mud-brick (*paksa*) houses, common throughout the oasis. Yet, despite these similarities, the permanent dwellings of Karakalpak subgroups never replicated Uzbek houses exactly, retaining instead a number of indigenous architectural features [13].

Despite the growth of sedentary architecture, temporary dwellings such as yurts and tents (*qos*) continued to play a major role among most Karakalpak groups up to the October Revolution. Moreover, some groups preserved traditional structural features of the Karakalpak yurt. For example, the Ural Karakalpaks maintained the distinctive form of their yurts, which differed from those of the Kazakhs even in the early 20th century. As noted by A. Kharuzin, Karakalpak yurts often belonged to the «Kalmyk type». The difference lay in the size and angle of the *shanyraq*: among the Kyrgyz it was larger, with roof poles set at a steep angle, forming a domed structure, while among the Kalmyks and Karakalpaks the *shanyraq* was smaller and the poles more vertical, giving the yurt a conical shape [6, p. 40]. This conical type was characteristic of most Karakalpak communities, including those of Khorezm [14].

Not all Karakalpak subgroups retained these traditional features. For instance, the desert groups of Bukhara came under strong influence from neighboring Kazakhs, which led to the loss of certain structural distinctions. Their yurts resembled Kazakh ones and were covered entirely with felt, since reeds suitable for weaving *shiy* were unavailable in the desert environment (unlike in Khorezm). Internally, they also differed: the *zhanbau* was absent, and the dome was decorated with a narrow felt band called *tuwrylyq qas*. In the desert regions of Bukhara, the yurt remained the primary dwelling type until the October Revolution, which reflected the environmental conditions, economic practices, and lifestyle of these communities.

Despite the fact that elements of dispersed settlement persisted among the sedentary Karakalpak groups of Fergana, Samarkand, and the Ural regions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the fundamental unit of settlement gradually became the village (*aul*).

Among the Karakalpak groups of Khorezm, Fergana, and Samarkand, the interior decoration of dwellings during the indicated period shows considerable similarity in construction techniques. In this respect, traditional practices remained rather stable, being only minimally influenced by neighboring peoples and only slightly affected by environmental differences in the regions where these groups settled [15].

Woven mats (*boyra*), felt coverings, carpets, and *alasha* (flat-woven rugs) played an important role in interior decoration among the Fergana Karakalpaks. Carpets and *alasha* were also widely used by the Samarkand Karakalpaks. Carved wooden chests decorated with ornamental motifs held a significant place in the household decoration of all the aforementioned groups. These chests were used not only for storing bedding but also for placing *qarshyn* and *boqjama* cloths, which are still common among the Karakalpaks of Khorezm. Similar decorative motifs can still be observed today in the carpets produced by the Khorezm, Fergana, and Samarkand Karakalpaks.

Naturally, the interior decoration of both permanent dwellings and yurts among smaller Karakalpak groups was influenced by neighboring Uzbek and Kazakh populations. In the desert Karakalpak groups of Bukhara, Kazakh influence on yurt decoration was particularly strong. Among the Khorezm Karakalpaks, various woven items used for reinforcing and decorating the yurt – such as *baskur*, *bau*, and *ayak bau* – were widespread. Besides decorative items like *kergi*, felt coverings, and *alasha*, the Khorezm region also preserved Kazakh-inspired felt pieces decorated with traditional patterns (*tus kiiz*).

Traditional household utensils and vessels found among all Karakalpak groups were largely similar. Woven, wooden, and gourd-made containers played an important role, while clay and metal vessels were used less frequently compared to the Uzbeks. For example, among the Fergana Karakalpaks one could encounter the following domestic items: *astakta* (low table), *oqlaw* (rolling pin), wooden plates, *kersen* (large wooden container), wooden spoons, *shemish*, *gübi* and *piskek* (grinding tools), *keli* and *kelsap* (mortar and pestle), sieves (*elek*, *galbir*), bread baskets, fruit baskets, *sholpy* (metal ornaments), and others. Similar household items were also found among the Karakalpaks of Khorezm and Samarkand.

Clothing and Dress Culture

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the small Karakalpak groups that had become assimilated among other peoples largely adopted the clothing styles of the surrounding populations. The Karakalpaks of Fergana and Samarkand adopted Uzbek-style dress, while those living in the Bukhara desert zone adopted Kazakh-style attire. Nevertheless, even during this period, certain remnants of traditional Karakalpak clothing continued to survive among these small groups, whereas other elements persisted only in collective memory. Among the Karakalpaks of Fergana, Samarkand, and Bukhara, one traditional type of women's headwear – *kiymeshek* – remained in use for quite a long time.

According to informants from the Samarkand and Bukhara Karakalpaks, in earlier times wealthy women wore a type of ceremonial headdress known as *saukele*. For example, a resident of the village of Zhanaqazgan (now part of the «Kommunizm» state farm, Kenimekh district, Bukhara region), Omarov Qazaqbay, aged 50, Karakalpak (Korpeqtay subgroup), reported the following:

«In the past, the daughters of wealthy Karakalpaks wore a headdress called *saukele*, gilded with gold and silver. Its long tail would trail along the ground and was split into two ends. According to what we heard, the daughters of renowned wealthy families along the Syr Darya wore such *saukele*. They were crafted by Karakalpak jewelers. When other peoples raided Karakalpaks, the *saukele* was the very first item they tried to seize».

According to recollections provided by older Uzbek-Karakalpak women of Samarkand, in earlier times Karakalpak women and girls wore dresses with richly embroidered sleeves and hems. Among the Khorezm Karakalpaks, such embroidered sleeves were known as *zhenşe*.

While among the Fergana and Samarkand Karakalpaks the traditional sheepskin men's cap (*qara börik*, also called *qurash* or *shögirme*) had nearly disappeared by the end of

the 19th century, it continued to be preserved among the Ural Karakalpaks. In 1889, A. Kharuzin wrote:

«The Karakalpaks wore an oval-shaped cap sewn from black lambskin. This is one of their principal distinctive features».

However, by the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the small Karakalpak groups increasingly began to imitate the clothing of the more numerous surrounding populations, especially in terms of outer garments. The Bukhara Karakalpaks closely followed Kazakh dress traditions: the fox-fur winter cap, common among Kazakhs, was widely worn. Similarly, Karakalpaks adopted the Kazakh felt hat (*kiyiz qalpaq*). Women's and girls' headscarves also reflected Kazakh influence – women wore white scarves, while unmarried girls wore red ones (whereas in Khorezm, both married and unmarried women traditionally wore red scarves).

In terms of outer garments, middle-aged women often wore long, sleeveless jackets (*qarkespe*), characteristic of Kazakh women's clothing.

Patriarchal Family Relations

In the everyday life of the Karakalpaks of Fergana, Samarkand, and Bukhara, many features of the large patriarchal household were still preserved at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. At that time, a typical family consisted of parents, their married sons, the sons' wives, and their children.

As a rule, sons could not separate from the parental household while their father was still alive. After marriage, they lived in a separate room within the same household and jointly managed a common economy with their father. In wealthy families, married sons were often provided with a separate dwelling within the same courtyard, yet property – land, livestock, and other possessions – remained collective, and the entire extended family ate from a single cauldron. Among the Bukhara Karakalpaks, a married son, after having children, was given his own yurt. Separating a married son from the father while the latter was still alive was considered shameful, and the community disapproved of such actions. It was common for 15–20 people to live as one family unit, and in wealthy polygynous households the number of family members was even greater.

Domestic life was regulated by Sharia and customary law (*adat*), both of which reflected male dominance and the subordinate status of women. The household was directly headed by the father; all property belonged to him, and his word was unquestioningly obeyed by all members of the family. In most cases, after the father's death, the extended household disintegrated. The instability of the patriarchal extended family and its fragmentation into smaller units after the patriarch's death can be explained by the decline of the natural economy and the growing influence of capitalist relations in the provinces of the Turkestan Governor-Generalship.

The situation of women in the family was extremely difficult. A woman was considered an incomplete legal person; she was required to obey her father and then her husband. A girl could be married off by her father without her consent in exchange for *qalyng mal* (bride-price). A husband could dismiss his wife at any time without justification. The position of the daughter-in-law (*kelin*) was especially burdensome: she was obliged to perform all domestic work and obey every member of the household.

Women were forbidden to pronounce the names of their husbands and their husbands' male relatives. This patriarchal and clan-based custom, which violated women's dignity, was observed among the Karakalpaks of Fergana, Samarkand, and Bukhara, as well as among the Amu Darya Karakalpaks and several other peoples (Kazakhs, Uzbeks, etc.). An excerpt from the «Bir Sälem» bet-ashar song recorded among the Nura ta Karakalpaks illustrates this rule:

Güldey sheshék jaydıñız,
Körıp turısıñız aydı siz,

Minaw turğan myrzagañ,
 Qiyametlik qayniñiz.
 Ala-gula demeñiz,
 Atın aytip qoymañiz,
 Qayniñizge bir sälem!

English Translation:

You have blossomed like a flower,
 And you behold the shining moon.
 This gentleman standing here
 Is your eternal brother-in-law.
 Speak not ill or thoughtlessly,
 Do not utter his name aloud –
 Offer your brother-in-law a respectful greeting!

This reveals that a daughter-in-law could not mention even the names of young boys related to her husband.

Among the Fergana Karakalpaks, certain customs involving the seclusion of women were adopted largely from the Uzbeks. Although dividing the house into separate men's and women's quarters was not practiced, the *paranji* veil appeared only in Uzbek-influenced villages. In most Karakalpak settlements, women did not enter a room where male guests were present and concealed their faces with a scarf or coat if they unexpectedly encountered unrelated men outside. This custom was entirely absent among the Khorezm Karakalpaks, whose women moved openly and freely, without seclusion, and could enter a guest room without hesitation. Among the Samarkand and Bukhara Karakalpaks, women likewise did not practice strict seclusion. Although some Samarkand women had worn *paranji* in earlier times, its horsehair mesh (*chimmat*), typical of Tashkent and Khiva, was absent. Samarkand Karakalpak women covered their faces with a *zhelekbash*, but unlike the Juz and Qyrq clan women, they did not conceal their entire face. Similarly, Bukhara Karakalpak women did not wear the *paranji* at all.

The old custom of *levirate* – the obligation of a widow to marry one of her deceased husband's relatives – was extremely oppressive for women. This custom existed not only among the Khorezm Karakalpaks but also earlier among the Fergana, Samarkand, and Bukhara groups. Originating from early forms of group marriage, it gradually strengthened as a means to keep a woman within her deceased husband's household. In such cases, the property of the deceased, as well as the widow herself, remained within the family, where she was often treated almost as property. The related custom of *sororate* – marrying a deceased woman's sister to the widower – was also practiced occasionally, though it did not carry obligatory force.

Women's circumstances were particularly difficult in wealthy polygynous families. Sharia permitted up to four wives, but in practice even taking a second wife was affordable only to the wealthy, as it required substantial *qalyng mal* payments.

Describing the practice of polygyny among wealthy Karakalpaks in Fergana, V. and M. Nalivkin wrote in the late 19th century:

«Among the wealthy rural population, having two wives is fairly common among Karakalpaks, Qipchaqs, and recently sedentarized Kyrgyz, who possess both lowland fields and livestock that spends the spring, summer, and autumn months on mountain pastures. In such families, one wife remains at home managing the household, while the second wife stays in the mountains tending livestock»

Like the Khorezm Karakalpaks, the Bukhara Karakalpaks strictly observed clan exogamy: a young man could not marry a girl from his own clan. Among the Fergana and

Samarkand Karakalpaks, however, little attention was paid to clan affiliation. A young man and woman could marry whether they belonged to the same or different clans. This indicates that the process of weakening clan structures began relatively early during the period of Russian rule.

Among the Karakalpak groups under discussion, endogamous marriages within the Karakalpak population were considered preferable and socially advantageous up to the October Revolution. However, interethnic marriages – mostly with Uzbeks and Kazakhs – did occur.

Traditional Karakalpak wedding practices preserved many archaic patriarchal and clan-based elements. Marriages arranged by parents, betrothals concluded at a very young age, moral persuasion of the bride and groom, the payment of *qalyng mal*, the exchange of numerous ritual gifts (*sarpay*) between the families at every stage of the wedding, the ceremonial nature of wedding preparations – all these reflected the burdensome legacy of patriarchal norms and Islamic law, leaving young couples almost no personal freedom.

Small Karakalpak groups living outside the Khorezm oasis preserved, even at the beginning of the 20th century, many customs typical of the Khorezm Karakalpaks. Among the Karakalpaks of Fergana, Bukhara, and Samarkand, large bride-price payments, usually in livestock, were common; in Fergana and Nurata, the bride's family hosted a large wedding feast; and in Fergana, Samarkand, and Nurata the *bet-ashar* ceremony held in the groom's household remained an important tradition. In earlier times, the bride's face was lightly covered with white powder.

This custom, known among the Khorezm Karakalpaks, also existed among the Karakalpaks of Fergana, Samarkand, and Nurata, as well as among other peoples such as the Tajiks.

Examples of *bet-ashar* verses recorded from Samarkand Uzbek-Karakalpaks include the following greeting addressed to an esteemed elder:

Darbasasi dañq etken,
Dañqi Samarqanğa ketken,
Isaq babamızğa bir sälem.

English Translation:

His gate is honored by all,
His fame has reached all Samarkand –
A respectful greeting to our ancestor Isaq Baba.
A humorous variant reads:

Tambasında pahal joq,
Sipalasa sahal joq,
Abillaña bir sälem.

English Translation:

There is no dust upon his doorstep,
And even if there were, it would brush off easily –
A playful greeting to Abilla!

4. Conclusion

Overall, the family and wedding customs of the small Karakalpak groups strongly resemble those of the Khorezm Karakalpaks, confirming once again their shared ethnic origin. At the same time, the traditions of these groups also show influences from neighboring populations – for example, the adoption of Uzbek customs of female modesty among the Fergana Karakalpaks, the absence of clan exogamy among the Fergana and

Samarkand groups, and the impact of Kazakh customs on the family life of the Bukhara Karakalpaks.

Furthermore, the family relations of the Karakalpaks of Fergana, Samarkand, and Bukhara share many features common to numerous peoples of Central Asia, reflecting their regulation by Islamic law (Sharia) and normative customary ethics.

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