



MATERIAL CULTURE OF THE KARAKALPAKS: ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

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Abstract

The article analyzes research dedicated to the material culture of the Karakalpaks, one of the largest Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia. Particular attention is given to works published since 1991, the year Uzbekistan gained state independence. During this period, various aspects of the Karakalpaks' material culture, including traditional clothing, jewelry, culinary traditions, and traditional forms of housing, have been actively studied. The analysis of these studies not only deepens the understanding of the daily life and practices of the Karakalpak people but also reveals broader ethnocultural processes occurring in the region. Each of the mentioned elements of material culture serves as an important indicator of the historical evolution and cultural identity of the Karakalpaks, reflecting their traditions, customs, and values.

Key words: Karakalpaks, ethnographic historiography, material culture, traditional clothing, jewelry art, traditional cuisine, crafts, housing.

Аннотация

В статье проводится анализ исследований, посвященных материальной культуре каракалпаков — одного из тюркоязычных народов Центральной Азии. Особое внимание уделяется трудам, опубликованным начиная с 1991 года, обретения Узбекистаном государственной независимости. В этот период активно исследуются различные аспекты материальной культуры каракалпаков, включая традиционную одежду, ювелирные изделия, кулинарные традиции, традиционные формы жилища. Анализ этих исследований позволяет не только углубить понимание повседневной жизни и быта каракалпакского народа, но и выявить широкие этнокультурные процессы, происходившие в регионе. Каждый из упомянутых элементов материальной культуры служит важным индикатором исторической эволюции и культурной идентичности каракалпаков, отражая их традиции, обычаи и ценности.



Ключевые слова: Каракалпаки, этнографическая историография, материальная культура, традиционная одежда, ювелирное искусство, традиционная пища, ремесла, жилище.

The historiography of Karakalpak material culture represents a vast and multi-layered field of research encompassing various aspects of the people's way of life. Since Uzbekistan's independence in 1991, interest in Karakalpak culture has significantly increased, resulting in the publication of numerous academic studies and articles. Both local and international scholars have actively explored traditional dwellings, clothing, household items, jewelry, and culinary traditions, aiming to uncover their historical and cultural significance.

A pivotal development in the historiography has been the growing attention to transformations in material culture influenced by social and political changes as well as globalization. Studies conducted in recent decades have focused on the interaction of the Karakalpaks with neighboring peoples, which makes it possible to identify elements of mutual influence and cultural exchange.

Traditional clothing, food, and housing are key components of material culture that shape the unique appearance and identity of different ethnic groups. The evolution of these cultural elements among the Karakalpaks is closely linked to the landscape and climatic conditions of their region.

Traditional clothing, in particular, constitutes a vital element of national cultural identity. Although ethnographic research on folk attire was conducted and published during the Soviet period, the topic remains relevant and continues to attract scholarly attention.

Studies from recent decades show that while thematic approaches to this field have remained largely consistent, this may reflect the resilience of traditional methodologies. Nevertheless, new research efforts have emerged in recent years, aiming to broaden the scope of inquiry and offer a more comprehensive understanding of the cultural and historical dimensions of traditional dress.

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on individual elements of Karakalpak national costume. Notable among these scholars are X.E. Esbergenov, S.H. Esbergenova, and Z.I. Kurbanova, who have concentrated on specific aspects of traditional attire.

The ancient headdress known as *saukele* was studied by X.E. Esbergenov. This helmet-shaped headpiece, made of felt and covered with bright fabric adorned with fine embroidery, coral decorations, and various metal plaques, served as the



basis for an ethnogenetic analysis of the Karakalpak people. The study emphasized the cultural and historical importance of the *saukele* in shaping ethnic identity. In another article, X.E. Esbergenov analyzed the traditional women's tunic-dress *kok koilek*, highlighting its ritual function and the embroidery on its front, which was believed to protect the wearer from the evil eye and convey personal information about the wearer [1, pp. 66–67, 100–102]

S.H. Esbergenova explored the women's headwear *kiymyshek*, particularly a red variant called *kyzyl kiymyshek*, which was an essential element of a young woman's outfit [2, pp. 83–85]. A more detailed examination of this item was presented by N.P. Lobacheva, who noted that the *kiymyshek* served both as an outer garment for married women and as a ritual bridal veil that concealed the bride's hair [3].

Ethnologist R. Baliyaeva investigated the adaptation of traditional clothing to climatic conditions, social stratification, and practical household needs. She emphasized that in the Aral Sea region, materials for clothing came from animal husbandry, agriculture, and specific plants [4, p. 39].

In the post-independence period, the *ak zhegde*—a cloak-like garment with false sleeves worn over the head—regained the attention of ethnographers. Z.I. Kurbanova and M. Davletiyarov analyzed specimens from the Savitsky State Museum of Art to enhance knowledge about age-specific ornamentation patterns [5, p. 34].

When analyzing the Karakalpak costume ensemble, it is essential to consider not only ethnographic but also art-historical research. Art historian I.V. Bogoslovskaya conducted a comparative analysis of ten *saukele* samples, highlighting their similarities and differences [6, pp. 109–119].

The compilers of the photo album *Karakalpak Costume* did not aim to make scholarly discoveries in traditional clothing studies. Their work focuses on popularizing the cultural heritage associated with traditional dress. The album serves as an inspiration for folk fashion designers, who incorporate traditional elements into modern designs, as well as for fashion professionals and museum conservators [7].

Z.I. Kurbanova dedicated a separate article to traditional Karakalpak men's clothing. She noted that men's garments had long been subject to external influences while also following their unique path of development. Traditional forms of men's clothing had largely taken shape by the mid-19th century, and garments from this period are well represented in museum collections. According to the scholar, the first



quarter of the 20th century was a turning point, influenced by socio-political change and cultural shifts [8].

The result of many years of research on traditional costume was a monograph by Z. Kurbanova. The paper analyzes the development of the traditional Karakalpak costume from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 21st century. The author substantiates the influence of natural and climatic conditions and the peculiarities of the economy on traditional clothing.

Interest in Karakalpak jewelry significantly increased in the early 21st century, notably through the works of S.H. Esbergenova and X.E. Esbergenov [9, pp. 81–83]. Art historians have also actively examined these adornments. Z.Zh.Alieva's articles provide classifications and symbolic interpretations of Karakalpak jewelry [10, pp. 12–15].

A.Allamuratov, who focused on the study of Karakalpak applied art, repeatedly turned to the consideration of Karakalpak jewelry [11]. His work reflects such aspects of art history as artistic imagery, Karakalpak jewelry.

Researcher D.A. Kudaibergenova analyzes the types of folk jewelry of the Karakalpaks of the XIX–XX centuries, emphasizing the presence of a local school of jewelry art [12, pp. 234-244]. It is important to note that in this article, in addition to materials about the folk jewelry of the Karakalpaks, presented in the collection of one of the leading museums of the republic, information about the jewelry of the Uzbek, Turkmen and Kazakh peoples is provided.

Traditional Karakalpak cuisine was reflected in a number of works from the Soviet period. In this context, it is worth noting the studies of A.S. Morozova, T.A.Zhdanko, and U.Kh. Shalekenov. The transformation processes in traditional food practices in the modern era, as well as the introduction of new dishes into the local food culture, have become subjects of interest for ethnographers and historians. In an article by G.M. Khodjaniyazova, traditional dishes and elements of hospitality are examined through the lens of oral folk literature [13, pp. 113–118].

In the economies of the peoples of Central Asia, handicraft production has held a significant place since ancient times. The study of crafts became an important aspect of ethnographic research from the moment ethnography began to take shape as a scientific discipline in Karakalpakstan. Among the Karakalpaks, tailoring, jewelry making, blacksmithing, yurt production, wood carving, and leatherworking were well developed.

One of the first ethnographers to study the folk crafts of the Karakalpaks was A. Utemisov. The results of his research were presented in a monograph. The work



offers a detailed analysis of crafts such as wood finishing, jewelry making, blacksmithing, weaving, and ceramics production, and also examines apprenticeship schools and the charters of Karakalpak craft guilds.

One of the characteristic features of Karakalpak artisans was that they most often worked to order, maintaining close ties with agriculture.

In the years of independence, one of the key components of the ethnographic triad — the dwelling — became a subject of study. Various forms of traditional Karakalpak dwellings, both stationary and portable, were examined by N.Tleubergenova [14, pp. 104–109]. In her articles, the author analyzes not only the structural features of the dwellings but also the organization of interior space and the various beliefs associated with them. In particular, in one of her works, the researcher determines the proper location for building a home, explores the rituals carried out before construction begins, the placement of the entrance, the set of decorations used for embellishment, as well as the materials employed in construction and their origins.

The dwelling of the dispersed ethnic group of the Ural Cossacks living in Karakalpakstan became the subject of study in a dissertation project by E.Kalbanova. In the course of the research, the author analyzed the process of formation and the specifics of the traditional culture of this ethnic group. Particular attention is given to the religious significance of these dwellings. This work represents a significant contribution to the study of ethnocultural closeness between the Cossacks and the Karakalpaks, promoting a deeper understanding of their cultural interconnections [15, pp. 142–144].

The traditional nomadic dwelling of the Karakalpaks — the yurt — as well as the rituals associated with it, once again became a subject of research by X.Esbergenov. He enriches existing knowledge about the rituals connected to the yurt with new data [16, p. 278].

A kind of generalization of the available ethnographic data is represented by the work of David and Sue Richardson [17]. Although the authors are not specialists in this field, they compiled all the existing literature containing information about the Karakalpaks. The book by these English authors is richly illustrated and is, perhaps, the first work on the Karakalpaks published abroad.

In summarizing this research, it is important to note that, in contrast to the Soviet historiography of Karakalpak material culture — which focused on studies emphasizing traditional aspects of daily life, crafts, and customs, often in the context of class struggle and socialist development, and constrained by ideological



boundaries — modern historiography has expanded its horizons. Contemporary studies focus on the adaptation of traditional elements to modern conditions, as well as on the importance of cultural exchange and identity, indicating a more comprehensive and multifaceted approach to the study of Karakalpak material culture in the post-Soviet period.

The historiography of Karakalpak material culture represents a dynamic and multilayered field of research that continues to evolve in the context of contemporary sociocultural changes.

Thus, further research in the field of Karakalpak material culture not only contributes to the preservation of their cultural heritage but also opens new perspectives for studying the interrelations among different ethnic groups in Central Asia. The necessity for a comprehensive approach to the study of traditional culture, including both ethnographic and art-historical research, becomes especially relevant in today's world, where cultural traditions are confronted with the challenges of globalization and shifts in lifestyle.

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