

Knowledge, Territory, And Identity: The Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition In The Ethnographic Discourse Of Karakalpakstan

Rustamjon Isakov

Tashkent state university of oriental studies, PhD researcher, Uzbekistan

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Submission Date: 20 September 2025

Accepted Date: 13 October 2025

Published Date: 16 November 2025

VOLUME: Vol.05 Issue11

Page No. 10-16

DOI: - <https://doi.org/10.37547/social-fssj-05-11-02>

ABSTRACT

The article examines the earliest ethnographic studies in the territory of Karakalpakstan and the activities of the Khorezm archaeological-ethnographic expedition in the region. It discusses the expedition's role in shaping the ethnographic discourse of Karakalpakstan, highlighting how field research contributed to the study of local social structures, material culture, and ethnic identity. The author presents their own perspective on the historical and ethnographic significance of this scientific work.

Keywords: - Karakalpakstan, ethnography, Khorezm expedition, T.A. Jdanko, S.P. Tolstov, S.K. Kamalov, social structure, material culture, ethnic identity, field research.

INTRODUCTION

The study of the ethnography of the Karakalpak people is of great relevance today, as understanding their historical development, social structures, and cultural identity is important not only for preserving regional heritage but also for research in Central Asia. The investigation of the traditional lifestyle, language, and culture of the Karakalpak people began in the 1920s. In 1937, the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition was established, conducting extensive archaeological and ethnographic research in Karakalpakstan. In 1945, under the leadership of T.A. Jdanko, an ethnographic research group was formed. This group systematically documented the traditional lifestyle, clan systems, material culture, and ethnic identity of the Karakalpak people. Today, these scientific materials serve as a crucial source for studying ethnogenesis, cultural continuity, and social identity processes in Karakalpakstan and Central Asia.

In the 1920s, the first professional ethnographic studies of the Karakalpak people's way of life were initiated. As a result of the national-territorial delimitation of the Central Asian republics in 1925, the Karakalpak Autonomous Region was established within Kazakhstan. In 1930, it was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR), and in 1932, it received the status of the Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, remaining part of the RSFSR until 1936, when it was incorporated into Uzbekistan.

During and after the delimitation period, extensive economic, statistical, and demographic research was conducted throughout the Central Asian republics, which stimulated growing scholarly interest in the history, languages, and ethnography of the region's peoples, including the Karakalpaks.

The first ethnographic expedition devoted to the Karakalpak people was organized by Moscow State University in 1926. As part of their field practicum, three students of the Faculty of History and Ethnology N. A. Baskakov, A. Kh. Devlet, and A.I. Ivanov were sent to Karakalpakstan. The expedition focused on studying the Karakalpaks' traditional lifestyle and language, resulting in the collection of valuable ethnographic and linguistic materials. A detailed report of the 1926 expedition, written by N. A. Baskakov and accompanied by numerous photographs taken by A. Kh. Devlet, unfortunately, was never published. According to Baskakov, the original manuscript of this report is preserved in the Central State Historical Archive in Moscow.

In 1927, A.S. Morozova, a graduate of the Faculty of Oriental Studies in Tashkent, began the ethnographic study of the Karakalpaks. During 1928–1929, she, together with N.A. Baskakov, continued a series of ethnographic expeditions in the region. Over several years of work at the Complex Research Institute and the Karakalpak Local History Museum, Morozova collected substantial and valuable materials concerning the ethnography and language of the Karakalpaks. Although she compiled these findings into a manuscript, it was never published.

Later, she utilized this extensive data to prepare her candidate dissertation titled “Household Culture of the Karakalpaks in the 19th – Early 20th Centuries (On the Problem of Ethnogenesis)”, which she successfully defended in Tashkent in 1954.

During the same period, another ethnographic expedition organized by the Society for the Study of Kazakhstan conducted fieldwork along the right-bank territories of Karakalpakstan. One of the expedition participants, artist A.S. Melkov, produced a rich visual record in the form of detailed sketches created directly in field conditions. This collection is currently preserved in the archives of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences, in Saint Petersburg.

Based on the materials collected during earlier expeditions, the Karakalpak Local History Museum was established in 1930 in the city of Turtkul. After the republic became part of the RSFSR, scientific activity in the region began to intensify. In 1931,

the first academic institution — the Complex Research Institute (KITI) — was founded, within which an ethnolinguistic department was created to unite linguistic and historical-ethnographic studies.

With the aim of supporting the development of research on the still little-studied history, science, and culture of the Karakalpak people, the Institute engaged not only local folklorists and linguists but also a number of prominent scholars from Moscow and Leningrad. Joint ethnolinguistic expeditions were led by the well-known Leningrad Turkologist Professor S.E. Malov together with N.A. Baskakov.

Around the same time, the Oriental historian P.P. Ivanov began to examine the earliest historical sources on the Karakalpaks. In 1935, he published his renowned work “An Essay on the History of the Karakalpaks”, which became a fundamental study for understanding the ethnogenesis of the Karakalpaks and their historical development during the 17th–19th centuries.

The historical ethnography of the Karakalpaks also deeply interested S.P. Tolstov, particularly the question of their early ethnogenesis. In his extensive studies on the prehistoric and ancient cultural history of Central Asia, Tolstov frequently referred to the ancient survivals in the everyday life of the Karakalpaks. Even as a student — in 1929, as part of the RANION ethnographic expedition — he carried out fieldwork in Northern Turkmenistan and Karakalpakstan (notably in the regions of Old Urgench and Khojeyli).

Later, while working at the Central Museum of Ethnography of the Peoples of the USSR in Moscow, Tolstov participated in creating a new exhibition dedicated to Central Asia. For this purpose, he undertook several field trips to Karakalpakstan, gathering ethnographic collections. Particularly valuable were the materials obtained during his 1932 and 1934 expeditions, which included a complete Karakalpak yurt (traditional nomadic dwelling) and other significant artifacts.

During the pre-war period, the research activities of the Khorezm Archaeological Expedition extended to the southern Kyzylkum regions, as well as to areas along the lower reaches and delta of the Syr Darya River — territories historically inhabited by the Karakalpaks in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. In these regions, traces of an

ancient and distinctive semi-nomadic economic and cultural lifestyle of the Karakalpaks were identified.

Together with newly collected historical, ethnographic, and linguistic data, these materials enabled S.P. Tolstov to formulate his well-known concept regarding the principal stages of Karakalpak ethnogenesis. He first presented this theory in 1942, and later, in 1945, delivered a comprehensive lecture on the origins of the Karakalpak people at a visiting session of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan held in Nukus. In the following years, Tolstov repeatedly returned to this topic in his broader works encompassing archaeology, history, and ethnography.

It is particularly noteworthy that in 1945, following the interruption caused by the Second World War, the Khorezm Archaeological Expedition of the Institute of the History of Material Culture (Academy of Sciences of the USSR, Moscow) resumed its activities in a renewed form — as the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition under the auspices of the Institute of Ethnography of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.

The inclusion of specialized ethnographic research groups within the expedition structure corresponded entirely with the scholarly interests of its founder and director, S.P. Tolstov, who was not only an archaeologist but also an ethnographer. He was a devoted follower of the scientific school of the eminent Russian scholar D.N. Anuchin, particularly valuing his principle of historicism in ethnography and his comprehensive methodological approach that combined data from archaeology, ethnography, and anthropology. In one of his analytical essays, Tolstov referred to Anuchin as not only a prominent scientist but also as one of the founding figures of Russian ethnography. He further defined Anuchin's integrative approach — uniting archaeology, ethnography, and anthropology — as the “Anuchin triad,” emphasizing it as a fundamental basis for historical research.

In both his scholarly works and his organizational approach to field research, S.P. Tolstov consistently developed and enriched the method of comprehensive, interdisciplinary study. The Khorezm Expedition itself serves as a vivid

example of this approach. Over the course of many years, its activities brought together not only archaeologists, ethnographers, and anthropologists, but also geographers, geomorphologists, topographers, architects, and artists. In addition, engineers specializing in aerial photography were involved in the study of ancient channels, riverbeds, and archaeological monuments buried under the sands of the desert.

In 1945, an ethnographic research group focusing on the Karakalpak people was organized under the leadership of T.A. Jdanko. This team conducted substantial and systematic studies on the history and ethnography of the Karakalpak population. Similar to the later-established Uzbek and Turkmen ethnographic groups, the Karakalpak group aimed to carry out comprehensive research on the regional population, to identify the spatial distribution and internal structure of local groups, and to compile detailed ethnographic maps.

Another key direction of the group's work involved the collection of historical and ethnographic data in the settlements inhabited by the local population. The group focused on an in-depth study of the traditional culture and lifestyle of the Karakalpaks, identifying ethnographic patterns shaped by the historical, natural, and ecological conditions of the Khorezm oasis, as well as analyzing ongoing sociocultural changes within the modern way of life.

In addition to T.A. Jdanko, the group also included young researchers who were still students at the time, such as N.P. Lobacheva, N.N. Grozdova, and L.F. Monogarova, as noted by Z.I. Kurbanova. The presence of these young scholars was well received by the local population. T.A. Jdanko himself recalled: “My ethnographic research team in Karakalpakstan was well known in the villages, and people often referred to it as the ‘girls’ group.” This suggests that the study of the Karakalpak people generally did not face resistance from the local communities.

Throughout its activities, the research team carried out fifteen seasonal field campaigns. While T.A. Jdanko led these ethnographic expeditions, the composition of the participants evolved over the years. Among the most consistent contributors in conducting focused studies, stationary research, scientific investigations, and publishing collected

materials were N.P. Lobacheva (1945, 1956–1959), B.V. Andrianov (1946–1949), L.S. Tolstova (1946–1950), as well as employees from scientific institutions in Karakalpakstan: R.K. Kosbergenov (1945–1950), S.K. Kamalov (1948–1950, 1956), U.X. Shelekenov (1954, 1958, 1967, 1969), and X. Yesbergenov (1956, 1959, 1969, 1974).

Between 1954 and 1959, photographer Yu.A. Argiropulo, a regular participant of the group, significantly contributed to the collection of ethnographic data through his exceptional photographs. Artist I.V. Savitskiy (1950, 1953, 1954, 1956) also added value to the team's work with his paintings. By the late 1950s, however, for various reasons, he transferred his artistic contributions to T.V. Poletika.

In addition, architect Yu.V. Steblyuk and engineer-topographer N.I. Igonin created a rich collection of drawings, plans, and illustrations of Karakalpak villages, courtyards, and various types of traditional and modern dwellings, which have been published multiple times. Among the regular participants in the research team's field trips were students from the Department of Ethnography at the Faculty of History, Moscow State University, the Karakalpak Pedagogical Institute, and other higher education institutions. Furthermore, archaeologists from the Khorezm Archaeological Expedition (Yu.A. Rapoport, B.I. Vaynberg) and the Karakalpak branch of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan (A.V. Gudkova, V.N. Yagodin, among others) also joined the group on several occasions, as noted by Z.I. Kurbanova in her studies.

A primary goal of the ethnographic research group was to compile a detailed ethnic map of Karakalpakstan, as official population data were insufficient. Fieldwork covered all administrative districts, incorporating land-plot maps, local statistics, and direct interaction with residents to identify ethnic, clan, and tribal composition. Understanding the Karakalpak clan system was essential for analyzing their historical ethnography, economic practices, social organization, communal life, and contemporary ethnic processes.

The team also collected extensive historical and ethnographic data on 19th- and early 20th-century Karakalpak life, developing thirteen schematic kinship models to illustrate stages of social development, clan formation, and internal

relations. Research included marriage and wedding customs, reflecting the richness of traditional rituals.

In terms of material culture, traditional dwellings—courtyards, permanent houses, and portable yurts—were studied along with construction techniques, local building materials, and transport types. Ethnographic data on clothing, jewelry, and associated crafts were also gathered and systematically organized.

Between 1945 and 1948, the Karakalpak ethnographic research group, led by T.A. Jdanko, studied both the transformation of traditional culture and the social structure of the Karakalpak people at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries. Jdanko emphasized the central role of clan and tribal units in early 20th-century Karakalpak society, noting that clan affiliation shaped social identity not only through kinship but also in economic, political, and governance contexts. This system was especially prominent in the Khiva Khanate, influencing settlement patterns, resource use, and socio-economic relations. The empirical data gathered by the group provided a strong foundation for understanding the stability and dynamics of the Karakalpak clan system.

The study of Karakalpak clans and tribes holds significant historical and ethnographic value. The ethnographic group collected extensive data on settlement patterns, clan histories, oral traditions, social relations, governance, taxation, land ownership, and family-life values, providing key sources for analyzing the social organization of the Karakalpaks.

Their research also encompassed other ethnic communities in Karakalpakstan, particularly the Ural Cossacks and Koreans. Studies on the Ural Cossacks near Nukus, led by E.E. Blomkvist, examined migration, socio-economic structures, traditional culture, and adaptation, published as *Ethnographic Studies among the Ural Cossacks*. In 1959, under R.Sh. Jarilg'asinova, the group investigated the daily life, labor, social relations, and cultural traditions of Koreans in the Ravshan state farm, contributing to understanding ethnic integration in the region.

T.A. Jdanko was instrumental in developing ethnographic thought in the republic. Her monograph, *Essays on the Historical Ethnography of the Karakalpaks (1945–1948)*, systematically

summarized field research and provided a comprehensive analysis of Karakalpak social and clan structures at the turn of the 19th–20th centuries.

According to Jdanko, the Karakalpaks' historical-ethnic territory included the Aral Sea region, particularly the lower Amu Darya and Syr Darya basins. While primarily sedentary, some groups practiced semi-nomadic lifestyles. Their economy centered on irrigated agriculture, complemented by livestock farming in desert areas and fishing, reflecting adaptation to diverse geographic conditions. This traditional economic and cultural complex represents a multifaceted lifestyle integrated with the ecological environment.

Jdanko emphasized that the clan system underpinned social and economic life and played a central role in forming ethnic identity. Strong clan traditions, governance, and social structures reinforced cohesion, ensuring social stability and cultural continuity. She highlighted exogamy—the prohibition of intra-clan marriage—as a key and enduring tradition, while marriages between maternal relatives were encouraged. Violations of exogamy were considered serious offenses with severe social consequences.

Jdanko concluded that “this ancient custom, directly related to clan divisions, was one of the primary factors regulating family and marital relations and remained a significant feature of Karakalpak social and domestic life in the early 20th century.” She critically evaluated previous studies and theories concerning the ancient ethnogenesis of the Karakalpaks, noting that their formation prior to the medieval period had not been sufficiently explored. Jdanko regarded attempts by many scholars to equate the Karakalpaks with the Pechenegs (referred to as “qora qalpoqlar” in Russian sources) based solely on ethnonym similarity as insufficiently substantiated.

She also criticized Khvor's view, which highlighted the Nogai stage in Karakalpak ethnogenesis during the 11th–12th centuries, and noted that P.P. Ivanov, like others, underestimated the role of Kipchak clans within the Nogai composition. Additionally, Jdanko dismissed A. Vamberi's attempts to link the origin of the Karakalpaks to Eastern Europe and the Volga region and to

associate them with the Pechenegs as scientifically unsubstantiated, since Vamberi relied on a few folk narratives and misclassified linguistic groups. Overall, Jdanko advocated for understanding Karakalpak ethnogenesis within the historical and cultural context of Central Asia.

T.A. Jdanko also engages with S.P. Tolstov's views on issues of Karakalpak ethnogenesis, noting several points of agreement. In particular, she supports Tolstov's assertion that ancient Massaget tribes, especially the Apasiaks, who inhabited the Aral Sea region, played a significant role in the formation of the Karakalpaks.

Despite the monograph's value as a key source on Karakalpak ethnogenesis, the process of Karakalpak formation remains complex and insufficiently studied. Specifically, the roles of Turkic tribes inhabiting the Ural region, the North Caucasus, and the Lower and Middle Volga areas, as well as their historical and cultural influence, remain inadequately explored in contemporary ethnological research, as highlighted by Z.I. Kurbanova.

Questions concerning the early stages of Karakalpak ethnogenesis—including their initial formation and ethnic development during the medieval period—persist as complex scientific problems within historiography. As early as the 19th century, P.P. Ivanov, analyzing Russian and foreign sources on Karakalpak origins, emphasized that these issues remained unresolved. Modern historiography, drawing upon archaeological, ethnographic, and written sources, also requires a comprehensive and systematic approach to illuminate the initial historical processes of Karakalpak formation. This situation highlights significant gaps in our understanding of Karakalpak ethnic history and underscores the necessity of re-examining these issues from a historical-anthropological perspective, using expedition materials as a primary basis.

T.A. Jdanko interprets Karakalpak ornamental arts as integral to the people's cultural history, viewing motifs as reflections of ethnic characteristics, daily life, environment, social practices, and religious beliefs. She emphasizes that many forms of ornamentation have persisted over centuries and that effective art-historical or ethnographic analysis requires archaeological materials. Her

research demonstrates that ornamentation is a crucial source for studying Central Asian ethnogenesis, revealing widespread Oghuz motifs in Karakalpak culture, from ancient settlements along the lower Syr Darya and Aral Sea to Turkmenistan's Kunyo-Uaz site, whose 11th-century destruction S.P. Tolstov linked to Seljuk Oghuz migrations.

Jdanko also notes affinities between Karakalpak motifs and those of southern Siberia, particularly the Altai region, attributing these similarities to historical contact and cultural continuity. Ethnographic comparisons indicate long-term interactions between Aral Sea and Ural populations and Altai Turkic tribes, underscoring ornamentation's value as a historical-ethnographic source. She further suggests that the traditional sauekele headgear may derive from Sak-Massaget and Sarmatian-Alan women's battle helmets, reflecting matriarchal social structures.

Epic literature represents another essential source. Karakalpak epics, such as Alpomish, Qoblan, Maspash, and Qirq Qiz, provide insights into historical memory, archaic social structures, and cultural values. Jdanko, building on S.P. Tolstov's earlier analyses, highlights Qirq Qiz as preserving elements of pre-Christian culture within a broader Near Eastern-Central Asian context. Studying these epics enables reconstruction of both ethnic memory and regional history, and future monographic and comparative research could deepen ethno-historical understanding.

A key task of the ethnographic group was compiling a detailed ethnic map, led by geographer B.V. Andrianov. Surveys of tribes, clans, and genealogies enabled the reconstruction of the complex Karakalpak clan system, clarifying interconnections between its units. Field records from these studies have informed numerous articles and major scholarly works, providing crucial data on Karakalpak migration, settlement patterns, cultural traits, and the formation of their ethnic territory.

For example, in his work "The Ethnic Territory of the Karakalpaks in Northern Khorezm (18th–19th Centuries)," B.V. Andrianov extensively used the field records of the group to study the migration history of the Karakalpaks. He examined the formation of this ethnic territory, particularly in

relation to changes in the geography of the Amu Darya delta and the Aral Sea.

R. Kosbergenov, in his study "The Status of the Karakalpak Population in the Khanate of Khiva at the End of the 19th–Beginning of the 20th Century," also made extensive use of field materials. This research investigated the region inhabited by Karakalpaks along the left bank of the Amu Darya, showing that the feudal-despotic governance structures of the medieval period persisted until 1920. Kosbergenov analyzed the historical context by relying on the population's understanding of khanate policies.

S.K. Kamalov, in his work "The Popular Liberation Movement of the Karakalpaks against the Khans of Khiva in the 19th Century," drew on numerous historical and folkloric records. All three of these studies were published using the materials collected during the Khorezm expedition. Later, S.K. Kamalov's book "The Karakalpaks in the 18th–19th Centuries" compiled extensive field data and archival documents. The study of field records has proven to be a crucial scholarly tool for a deeper understanding of Karakalpak history, their ancient cultural traditions, and the stages of their historical development.

CONCLUSION

The Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition played a crucial role in shaping the ethnographic understanding of Karakalpakstan. Its research provided systematic documentation of the Karakalpaks' traditional lifestyle, clan system, settlements, material culture, art, and epics, contributing significantly to the study of ethnic identity and historical territory. The works of T.A. Jdanko, S.P. Tolstov, S.K. Kamalov, and other scholars based on expedition materials enhanced knowledge of Karakalpak ethnogenesis, social organization, and historical development. Despite these achievements, the early stages of Karakalpak formation remain insufficiently studied, and expedition materials continue to serve as an essential foundation for further historical and ethnographic research.

REFERENCES

1. Аржанцева И.А. Имперская археология и археологические империи: советская Хорезмская археологическая экспедиция //

- Этнографическое обозрение. 2013. № 4. – С. 65-87
2. Аржанцева И.А. Хорезм. История открытий и исследований. Этнографический альбом. – Ульяновск: ООО Артишок, 2016. – 288 с.
 3. Жданко Т.А. Очерки исторической этнографии каракалпаков. Родо-племенная структура и расселение в XIX – начале XX века // Труды Института этнографии АН СССР (новая серия). Т. IX. – М.; Л., 1950. – С. 82-94
 4. Жданко Т.А., Рапопорт Ю.А., Чебоксаров Н.П. Сергей Павлович Толстов (К 60-летию со дня рождения) // Советская этнография. 1967. №1. – С. 130-138
 5. Жданко Т.А. Этнографические исследования и этнографы Хорезмской экспедиции // Этнографическое обозрение. 1997. № 2. – С. 15-33
 6. Курбанова З.И. Фотоальбом А.Л. Мелкова как источник изучения этнографии каракалпаков // Вестник ККО АН РУз. 2000. № 2. – С. 52-53
 7. Курбанова З.И. Становление и развитие этнографической науки в Каракалпакстане (1920-2000 гг.): автореф. дис. ... канд. ист. наук. – Нукус, 2002.
 8. Курбанова З.И. Этнографическая наука Каракалпакстана: этапы становления, современное состояние. – Нукус: Илим, 2020. – 121 с.
 9. Курбанова З.И. Коллекция отдела этнографии Государственного музея искусств Республики Каракалпакстан им. И.В. Савицкого // Историческая этнология. 2023. Т. 8. № 2. – С. 222-233
 10. Курбанова З.И. Традиционные верования и представления каракалпаков, связанные с одеждой и украшениями // Вестник антропологии. 2016. № 3. – С. 64-73
 11. Курбанова З.И. Этнографические отряды Хорезмской археолого-этнографической экспедиции // Приаралье на перекрестке культур. – Самарканд: МИЦАИ, 2013. – С. 73-80
 12. Нурмухамедов М.К., Жданко Т.А., Камалов С.К. Каракалпаки (Краткий очерк истории с древнейших времен до наших дней). – Т., 1971. – 130 с.
 13. Савицкий И.В. Народное прикладное искусство каракалпаков. Резьба по дереву. – Т., 1965. – 193 с.
 14. Этнография каракалпаков. XIX – начало XX века (Материалы и исследования) / отв. ред. Т.А. Жданко, С.К. Камалов. – Т.: Фан Узбекской ССР, 1980. – 202 с.
 15. Морозова А.С. Культура домашнего быта каракалпаков начала XX века (к вопросу этногенеза): дис. ... канд. ист. наук. – Т., 1954. – 257 с.