

Who Are the Karakalpaks? Unpacking a Nation's Cultural Identity

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Abstract. *This article explores the formation and preservation of Karakalpak national identity through the lens of contemporary visual art, grounded in ethnographic and documentary research conducted at the I.V. Savitsky State Art Museum in Nukus, Uzbekistan. Drawing on my dissertation, I analyze how Karakalpak identity—historically shaped by nomadism, oral tradition, and ecological hardships—has been visually articulated in the post-Soviet context. The works of artists such as Daribay Tureniyazov, Joldasbek Kuttimuratov, Alvina Shpadi, and Bazarbay Serekeev embody a collective memory shaped by folklore, myth, and lived experience. Using grounded theory and ethnographic fieldwork, this study reveals how art serves not only as a cultural archive but also as a means of resilience and national self-definition. By examining the intersection of artistic expression, ethnic heritage, and geopolitical transition, I argue for the essential role of art in sustaining Karakalpak identity amidst the forces of globalization, environmental degradation, and cultural marginalization.*

Key words: *Karakalpak identity, I.V. Savitsky Museum, contemporary art, ethno-cultural resilience, post-Soviet Central Asia, Aral Sea crisis, visual folklore, Karakalpak artists, ethnic heritage, cultural preservation.*

Introduction

Who are the Karakalpaks? In my research, I found that the question is not simply ethnographic, but deeply entangled with issues of representation, memory, and survival. As an ethnic group historically marginalized by state narratives and geographically isolated by deserts and a vanishing sea, the Karakalpak people have long struggled to assert their identity. My analysis shows that their cultural distinctiveness—once overlooked—finds profound expression in the visual arts, especially through the works preserved at the I.V. Savitsky State Art Museum in Nukus.

I argue that the Karakalpak identity is articulated not only through language and tradition but also through a visual narrative shaped by artists who negotiate between folklore, modernity, and memory. These artists embed their cultural resilience in sculpture, painting, embroidery, and multimedia forms, often reclaiming national consciousness in the face of environmental, political, and cultural erosion. By focusing on the museum's collection and interviewing key artists, I sought to uncover how identity is preserved, adapted, and communicated.

Methods

To explore these themes, I employed a multi-method qualitative research design combining **document analysis**, **ethnographic observation**, and **grounded theory methodology**. I conducted fieldwork at the I.V. Savitsky Museum in Nukus, where I examined the works of nine Karakalpak artists. I also reviewed archival materials, personal interviews, and curatorial notes to contextualize the visual data. Through these methods, I traced the representation of ethno-cultural imagery and its connection to the Karakalpak people's evolving self-conception.

Results

1. Historical and Ethnolinguistic Foundations

The Karakalpaks are a Turkic-speaking ethnic group whose ethnogenesis dates back to the Saka, Massaget, and Hunic tribes that inhabited the Aral-Caspian region between the 7th and 4th centuries BCE. By the 13th century, these groups fused into a distinct people known as “Karakalpaks” or “Black Hats”, whose semi-nomadic lifestyle shaped their social and material culture. The Soviet-era national delimitation of 1924 and the formation of the Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1932 placed them in a precarious position—politically autonomous, yet culturally subsumed within broader Uzbek and Kazakh identities.

2. Language and Cultural Expression

The Karakalpak language, a member of the Kipchak branch of the Turkic language family, remains a cornerstone of national identity. However, its usage is declining due to urbanization and educational policies favoring Uzbek and Russian. The museum’s collection illustrates the richness of Karakalpak traditions in embroidery, sculpture, and storytelling—tools that preserve language indirectly by embedding it within symbolic forms.

3. Artistic Representation in the Savitsky Museum

In my fieldwork, I examined the works of nine artists, including Daribay Turenliyazov, Joldasbek Kuttimuratov, and Alvina Shpadi. These artists use symbolism, folklore, and traditional forms to express Karakalpak identity:

- **Daribay Turenliyazov’s** wooden sculptures draw from oral epics and folklore, particularly in works like “*The Bird Sirin*” and “*The Girl with the Jug*”, which embody feminine strength and cultural continuity.
- **Joldasbek Kuttimuratov**, a pioneer sculptor, merges myth and modern symbolism, most notably in his sculpture “*Amu Darya*”, which personifies the river as a goddess figure—linking nature and nationhood.
- **Bazarbay Serekeev’s** paintings such as “*Felt Makers*” and “*Still Life with Kobiz*” reflect themes of family, oral tradition, and the Aral Sea catastrophe, blending nostalgia with resistance.
- **Olga Joldasova** and **Alvina Shpadi** focus on women’s roles in cultural transmission, using textiles and embroidery to document ritual and daily life.
- **Barlikbay Aytmuratov** addresses the historical trauma of environmental degradation in “*Wedding*” and “*Umirbek Lakki at the Bazaar*”, juxtaposing festivity with ecological despair.

Discussion

In the broader context of globalization and post-Soviet cultural transitions, Karakalpak identity faces both threats and opportunities. My analysis suggests that while language loss and economic migration contribute to cultural erosion, visual art offers a potent mode of resistance and affirmation.

1. Identity and Globalization

Global forces such as media homogenization and market integration challenge local cultures. In Karakalpakstan, this is exacerbated by ecological disaster—particularly the desiccation of the Aral Sea—which has not only devastated livelihoods but eroded traditional ecological knowledge and spiritual connections to the land. Artists like Serekeev confront this loss directly, turning the Aral tragedy into a cultural memory that galvanizes identity rather than silences it.

2. Post-Soviet Reorientation and Cultural Reclamation

Soviet nationality policies forced Karakalpaks to “prove” their cultural worth through art, folklore, and archaeology. Savitsky’s museum, paradoxically supported by the Soviet state, became a haven for forbidden avant-garde art and a shrine for Karakalpak ethnography. Post-independence, this dual legacy is embraced and reinterpreted by artists who reclaim their past on their own terms. The

museum, while once an ethnographic archive, now acts as a living cultural institution that nurtures contemporary identity.

3. The Role of Art in Ethno-Cultural Resilience

Visual art transcends linguistic and political barriers, enabling Karakalpaks to preserve and communicate their identity globally. Works that depict yurt life, wedding rituals, traditional dress, and ancestral heroes not only reflect the past but reimagine the future. As a scholar-artist, I believe that these representations are not static; they are dynamic dialogues between memory, environment, and aspiration.

Conclusion

Karakalpak identity is neither a relic nor a romanticized ethnographic curiosity. It is a living, breathing cultural formation that continues to evolve in the face of adversity. My research shows that the I.V. Savitsky State Art Museum and the artists it features serve as vital repositories and producers of national consciousness. In the face of globalization, ecological trauma, and cultural homogenization, the Karakalpaks remain resilient—redefining who they are through the powerful language of art.

References

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