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The Influence of Tribal Conflict, the Great Game, and Trade on Qaraqalpaq Costume

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The Qaraqalpaqs are one of the most fascinating peoples to be found in Central Asia - a small confederation of just over a dozen Turkic tribes who speak a language very similar to Qazaq yet turn out to be closely related genetically to the early Uzbeks. They were formerly semi-nomadic and most of them lived in yurts until the 1950s. However unlike the truly nomadic confederations that migrated vast distances across the steppes the Qaraqalpaqs never left their oases. They simply moved seasonally from their winter settlements to their summer pastures, which were never a long distance apart, always remaining close to the rivers and marshes. They raised cattle, farmed cereals, and caught fish, using their bulls to pull their two-wheeled *arba* carts and to plough their fields.



*Figure 1. A well-off Qaraqalpaq family at Kegeyli.
Archive of the Qaraqalpaq State Museum of Art (QSMA), No'kis.*

Today they mostly live in Qaraqalpaqstan, an artificial country created by the Soviets which is now the largest and most westerly province of Uzbekistan. However their history has been a troubled and violent one, regularly by tribal conflict. As a result they have been continually forced to relocate their encampments across the oases of the Aral Sea region.



Figure 2. The Republic of Qaraqalpaqstan, located in the southern region of the Aral Sea.

The following 1872 Russian map of Turkestan shows the two main rivers that flow from the mountains of Central Asia across the Qizil and Qara Qum deserts to feed the former Aral Sea – the Syr Darya in the north and the Amu Darya in the south.

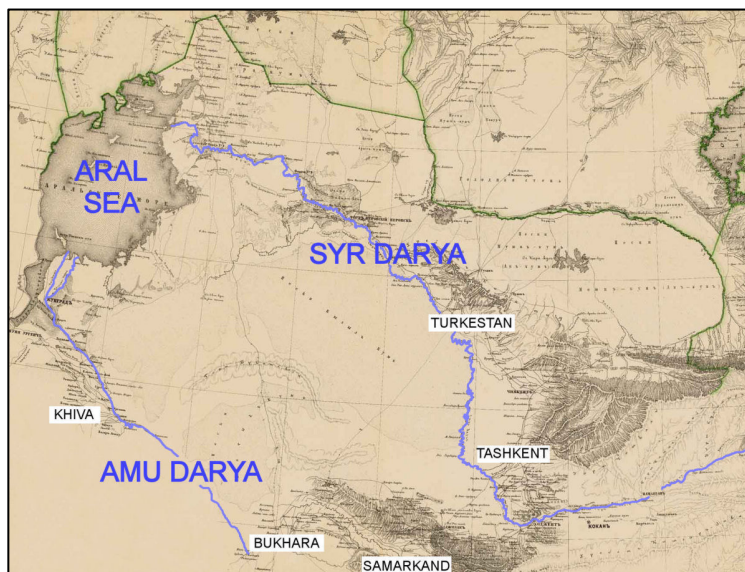


Figure 3. Map of the Syr Darya Oblast of Russian Turkestan published in 1872.

The Qaraqalpaqs were formed in the oases of the lower Syr Darya during the 16th century, probably close to the city of Turkestan, and quickly spread along the entire length of the river as far upstream as Ferghana. By the late 17th century they had been subjugated by the more powerful Qazaqs. Both confederations suffered periodic attacks by Jungars, a warlike Oirat Mongol tribe based in East Turkestan. Following a devastating raid in 1723 the Qaraqalpaqs and their Qazaq masters were thrown into disarray and the Qaraqalpaq confederation became irreversibly divided. The Upper Qaraqalpaqs

located downstream from Tashkent succumbed to Jungar rule, but the Lower Qaraqalpaqs fled westwards, finding refuge on the eastern shores of the Aral Sea close to the mouth of the Quwan Darya - at that time the main outlet of the Syr Darya.

The Lower Qaraqalpaqs appealed for a defensive alliance with Russia and in 1743, after much diplomacy, their envoy Maman *biy* finally obtained a deed of citizenship from the Empress Elizaveta Petrovna. However the deed turned out not only to be worthless – the Russians had yet to establish any military presence in the Aral region – but it also created a schism between the Qaraqalpaqs and the Qazaqs. The Qaraqalpaqs asserted their independence from the Qazaqs who retaliated by attacking their encampments. The weaker Qaraqalpaqs were steadily forced south into the remote marshlands of the Aral Delta. Sandwiched between the southern coast of the Aral Sea and the Khivan oasis it was then a remote and watery wilderness ideally suited to their semi-nomadic lifestyle.

In the east the Jungars soon became completely overwhelmed by the Chinese and in 1756 their territories were consolidated into the newly created province of Xingjian. The Upper Qaraqalpaqs were now free to migrate into the Ferghana and Zerafshan valleys where they gradually assimilated the culture of the local Uzbeks. In the west the Lower Qaraqalpaqs discovered that they had jumped out of the frying pan into the fire. They became embroiled in a long-running Uzbek civil war as the ruling Uzbek Qongrats of Khiva battled to quell an insurrection led by rebel Uzbek Mangits from their bases within the Aral Delta. After decades of fighting the Khivans finally subjugated the Qaraqalpaqs in 1810, along with the rebel Uzbeks and their Yomut and Chodor supporters.

It was the start of a bleak period of Qaraqalpaq history - the ruling Uzbek Qongrats taxed the Qaraqalpaqs excessively and forced them to provide soldiers for the Khan's army as well as unpaid labourers to clean the Uzbek canals. Their own agricultural economy suffered badly and many Qaraqalpaqs were driven into destitution. Their rich material culture was almost destroyed.

Meanwhile, well beyond the Aral region, a much wider conflict was brewing which would radically transform the history of Central Asia. The protagonists were on the one hand a newly resurgent Russia and on the other the British Empire, intent on defending India, its most prized colony. The struggle became known as 'The Great Game', and its goal was the control of the territories of Central Asia and a stranglehold on its markets. Russia had decided to expand south and although the Khivan Uzbeks and the Qaraqalpaqs lived in the remotest region of Central Asia they would not remain immune from these wider events. It took time for the Russians to get there but in June 1873 General von Kaufmann's forces finally breached the walls of Khiva. The right-bank territories of the Khanate were integrated into Russian Turkestan while the left-bank territories became a protectorate. As such the majority of Qaraqalpaqs became genuine citizens of Russia at last and were freed from the tyranny of Khivan Uzbek rule. The overall Russian campaign was an impressive achievement - in the space of some 40 years Russia had colonized a region half the size of America.

Of course one of the driving forces behind Russian colonization was trade and at that time textiles were vitally important commodities. An earlier Russian report¹ tells us that on the Syr Darya the Lower Qaraqalpaqs mainly dressed in coarse cotton calico. It was plain white, or dyed red or indigo blue. The

¹ Gladyshev, Dmitry V., and Muravin, Ivan, 1851. 'Poezdka iz Orska v Khivu i obratno, sovershennaya v 1740–41 godakh poruchikom Gladyshevym i geodezistom Muravinym', *Geograficheskie izvestiya*, no. 4, St Petersburg, 1850; Second publication.

Qaraqalpaqs called it *bo'z*. However at that time they did not know how to cultivate cotton – they would only learn this later from the Khivan Uzbeks. It is therefore likely that some of the *bo'z* was imported. We suspect this was especially the case with indigo-dyed *bo'z*, since it is highly unlikely that the early Qaraqalpaqs had the expertise to dye indigo. Again, they would learn this later from the Khivan Uzbeks. However some *bo'z* was probably woven locally from imported raw cotton. This would have been a coarse and narrow material woven on the crude and simple *o'rmek* narrow-beam ground loom which had a single fixed heddle and was also used for weaving yurt bands.



Figure 4. The simple Qaraqalpaq *o'rmek* loom.

Finer cloths for turbans or for use by the wealthy had to be imported from afar, much of it originating from the then mighty English textile industry which had woollen looms operating in almost every region of the country and a strong tradition of cotton spinning, weaving, and printing centred around Manchester. However the popularity of English cloth among the natives greatly irritated the Russians. The Russian authorities in the gateway town of Orenburg tried to directly block imports only to find that they continued to reach Asiatic Russia through Afghanistan and Persia. The Russians only achieved a monopoly in the late 1890s, firstly by creating a unified customs zone and later by imposing prohibitively high import tariffs. Soon newly constructed rail links opened the floodgates to an influx of cheap factory-made Russian textiles.

One of the most valued imports was a thin felted woollen broadcloth which the Qaraqalpaqs called *ushiga*. They preferred it in just two colours: red and black. Another was printed cotton chintz which they used for turbans, kerchiefs, and linings. With increasing wealth the Qaraqalpaqs could also begin to buy semi-silk ikat *adras* made by small Jewish workshops in Khiva, primarily for use in making women's *chapan* coats. The Qaraqalpaqs called the *adras* from Khiva *pashshayi*. Khivan silk sashes known as *ma'deli* and *tu'rme* were also acquired for turbans and men's waist belts.

The arrival of these stunning new fabrics into this remote and isolated region created great excitement among the local Qaraqalpaqs and they were quickly incorporated into women's ceremonial costume. Traditionally the Qaraqalpaqs had decorated their cotton *bo'z* in exquisitely executed cross-stitch, giving rise to a regimented geometrical style of decoration which incorporated angular horns and stepped

diamonds. In complete contrast imported *ushiga* was smooth and featureless, more suited to decoration with free-flowing chain-stitch. The adoption of this new material led to an explosion of new lively and colourful chain-stitch designs which were far less regimented and proscribed. We suspect that this new style of Qaraqalpaq embroidery was heavily influenced by the Chodor Turkmen who had previously lived along the western fringes of the Aral Delta.

The net effect was that married women's costume changed radically from the late 19th century to the early 20th century. Qaraqalpaq women's 19th-century ceremonial costume was conservative and based on plain home-woven cotton *bo'z* geometrically decorated in cross-stitch. However by the early 20th century it had been superseded by a much more colourful and exuberant style of dress based on red and black *ushiga*, flamboyantly embroidered in chain-stitch.

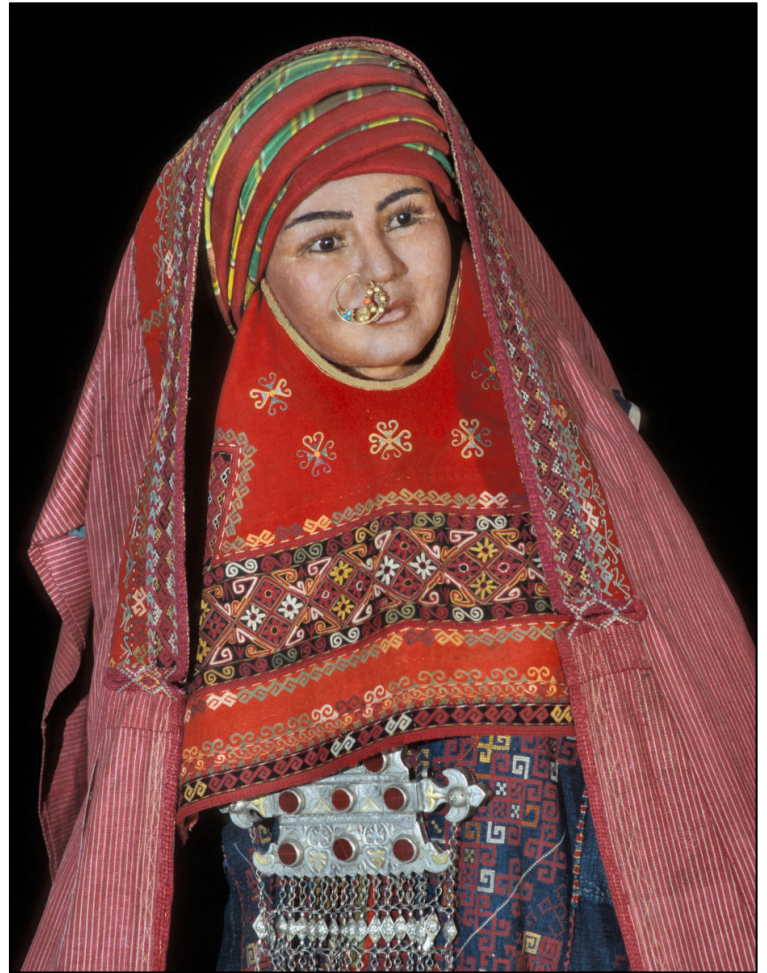


Figure 5, left. Qaraqalpaq married women's ceremonial costume in the second half of the 19th century.

Figure 6, right. A married women's ceremonial costume in the first quarter of the 20th century, displayed in the QSMA.

Unfortunately we only have time to look at how these changes affected a few specific examples of individual costume. Let's begin with the traditional blue wedding dress which was called a *ko'k ko'ylek* and was made from indigo-dyed *bo'z*, dramatically decorated in cross-stitch with a pattern that was likened to chain-mail. Following the Russian embargo on imported Indian indigo it could no longer be made so it was replaced by a luxury gown known as the *pashshayi ko'ylek*, sewn from imported Khivan *adras*.



Figure 7, left. The 19th-century *ko'k ko'ylek*.

Figure 8, right. The 20th-century *pashshayi ko'ylek*.
QSMA and Author's collection.

For festivals and holidays Qaraqalpaq women added decorative oversleeves called *jen'se* to the sleeves of their *shapan* coats. These were traditionally made from indigo-dyed *bo'z* which was embroidered in cross-stitch. However, as a result of the indigo famine they were made from red and black *ushiga* instead, embroidered in chain-stitch. Interestingly some Qaraqalpaq women tried to get round the embargo by replacing the indigo-dyed *bo'z* with brown-dyed *bo'z*.



Figure 9, top. A 19th-century jen'se oversleeve.

*Figure 10, bottom. A 20th-century jen'se oversleeve.
Author's collection.*

The most dramatic example of this radical change in costume is provided by the *kiymeshek* – the ceremonial married woman's headdress, which was worn by the bride on her wedding day and subsequently for holidays and festivals. In the second half of the 19th century *kiymesheks* were made from home-woven cotton *bo'z* embroidered in cross-stitch:



Figure 11, left. The Qaraqalpaq white or aq kiymeshek, QSMA.

**Figure 12, right. The Qaraqalpaq red or qızıl kiymeshek
Qaraqalpaq Regional Studies Museum, No'kis.**

However by the early 20th century this garment had been superseded by the larger and more dramatic *qızıl kiymeshek*, made from red and black fulled wool *ushıga* colourfully embroidered in chain-stitch, with its tail made from a rectangle of Khivan ikat *adras*:

It is likely that this transformation did not take place overnight but took place in a number of stages. First strips of *ushıga* were added to the edges of the face of the cross-stitch *aq kiymeshek*. Then these strips were embroidered – initially in cross-stitch but later on in chain-stitch. The cross-stitch decoration on the face of the *kiymeshek* had traditionally been executed using raspberry red and cream silk threads, but soon new colours such as green and yellow were added. The most crucial development occurred around 1880. The *bo'z* on the *kiymeshek* face was replaced by red *ushıga*, although the traditional horizontal cross-stitch decoration was retained. This was achieved by taking a rectangle of checked *bo'z* and embroidering it with cross-stitch, maintaining the traditional geometric pattern of angular horns. At the same time the plain cotton back was replaced by a panel of ikat *adras* edged with stripes of red and black *ushıga*. However Qaraqalpaq women soon realised that it was easier to embroider directly onto the *ushıga* using chain-stitch, resulting in the creation of about half a dozen new pattern types. Eventually over time these new patterns became more and more complicated.



Figure 13. The three colourways of ikat adras produced in Khiva.

Another interesting aspect is that the ikat *adras* from Khiva was only made in three different colourways, but each complemented the embroidered red and black *ushiga* perfectly. The most common *adras* colourway had a central turquoise stripe with raspberry and green ram's horns. The much less common green colourway had white ram's horns and the most expensive and rarest purple colourway had white and yellow ram's horns.



Figure 14, left. Qızıl kiymeshek incorporating the most common Khivan ikat colourway.



**Figure 15, right. Another Qızıl kiymeshek incorporating the less common green colourway.
Author's collection.**

As with all fashion, the new style of *kiymeshek* eventually fell out of favour. The latest date we know that it was used as a wedding costume was in 1937. The reasons for its demise were farm collectivization, compulsory education, and the inflow of cheap textiles from the factories of Russia. Women no longer stayed at home teaching their daughters to embroider but took jobs on their local collective farm. Even so, the underlying fashion was maintained for formal occasions. The head was always turbaned and outside of the home the turban was always covered with a shawl. Even today most married women still cover their hair and elderly women still wear a turban and shawl for ceremonies, festivals and holidays.



*Figure 16. Qaraqalpaq women in 1954 dressed in oramal turbans and shalg'ish head shawls.
Archive of the Qaraqalpaq Regional Studies Museum, No'kis.*

To summarize, I have shown that underlying traditions tend to prevail, but the way that they are expressed can vary widely. Qaraqalpaq married women's ceremonial costume changed dramatically between the late 19th and the early 20th century, brought about by important economic changes and new patterns of trade. However these were ultimately framed by a combination of local, and especially international, political events.

Despite all the upheavals of the past, the basic obligation for a married woman to completely cover her hair continues up to the present day.