UDK 39(=512.164)(575.1):94

THE ETHNIC HISTORY AND SETTLEMENT OF THE TURKMENS OF KASHKADARYA: TRADITIONAL ECONOMY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

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Annotation. Drawing on historical and ethnographic sources, the article examines the ethnic history, territorial distribution, traditional economy and material culture of the Turkmens of the Kashkadarya oasis. It shows that the core of the local Turkmen population is linked with the Ersari tribe, which migrated from the Middle Amu Darya in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and describes their settlement in the western Karshi steppe – the Mirishkor (Pomuq), Kasbi, Koson and Muborak districts. The paper analyses their composite economy combining irrigated farming, karakul sheep breeding and pastoralism, their crafts (carpet weaving, felt making, woodwork), dwellings (yurt, kappa reed hut, adobe house), dress and food. It argues that economic exchange with neighbouring Uzbeks, Arabs and Tajiks was the main mechanism of mutual influence in material culture.

Keywords: Kashkadarya oasis, Turkmens, Ersari, ethnic history, settlement, traditional economy, karakul breeding, carpet weaving, material culture, dwelling, dress, Pomuq.

INTRODUCTION

In the ethnography of the peoples of Uzbekistan, the study of the traditional economy and material culture of smaller ethnic communities is one of the most reliable ways to reconstruct their ethnic history. Where written sources remain silent, dwelling types, carpet motifs and tools can provide valuable evidence. The Turkmens of Kashkadarya Region are one such community. According to the preliminary results of the 2026 census, a substantial proportion of Uzbekistan's 194,700 Turkmens [1] live in this oasis, mainly in the western districts of the Karshi steppe. Having lived alongside Uzbek,

Arab and Tajik populations for centuries, they have preserved a distinctive economic and cultural pattern.

This article aims to provide a concise account of the ethnic history and settlement patterns of the Kashkadarya Turkmens, focusing on their traditional economy and material culture in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries—crafts, housing, clothing and food—and to identify the mechanisms of cultural interaction with neighbouring peoples.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The principal research foundation for the economy and material culture of Central Asian Turkmens was established by Soviet-period ethnographers. G. P. Vasilyeva studied the ethnogenesis of the Turkmen people and the components of different tribes [2]. In the 1950s she also conducted an ethnographic survey across Charjow and Bukhara regions and noted the influence of Uzbek culture on Turkmens who had migrated to the Karakul oasis [3]. Ya. R. Vinnikov carried out a comprehensive study of the tribal and clan composition and settlement of the population of Charjow Region [4]. V. G. Moshkova's Carpets of the Peoples of Central Asia, based on expeditions conducted in 1929–1945, remains a major source on the techniques, motifs and tribal emblems (göl) of Turkmen carpets, including those of the Ersari [5].

The works of B. Kh. Karmysheva are particularly important for southern Uzbekistan. She demonstrated that some Turkmens from the Middle Amu Darya moved to the lower reaches of the Kashkadarya and Zarafshan while maintaining connections with their tribespeople and preserving their ethnic identity and culture [6]. On the basis of field materials collected in 1971–1986, she provided detailed descriptions of Ersari economic activities, dwellings, crafts and exchange with neighbouring populations [7]. Late nineteenth-century Russian military and statistical accounts by N. A. Mayev [8] and N. Fevralev [9] provide valuable evidence of Turkmen occupations. Nevertheless, the material culture of the Kashkadarya Turkmens has not been the subject of a dedicated study; the existing evidence is scattered, and this article seeks to bring it together and systematise it.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study follows the principles of historical and systematic analysis. Within the framework of the theory of economic-cultural types, Turkmen economic activities are

examined in relation to both the physical environment and ethnic traditions. Using a historical-comparative approach, ethnographic information on Turkmens of the Middle Amu Darya, Surkhan and Zarafshan areas was compared with material from Kashkadarya. Retrospective analysis was used to reconstruct earlier conditions from observations made in the mid-twentieth century. Sources include ethnographic monographs and articles, accounts of late nineteenth-century travellers and military observers, the 1926 regionalisation materials [10], encyclopaedic publications and modern statistical data.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

1. Ethnic history and settlement.

The ethnic history of the Kashkadarya Turkmens consists of three layers. The oldest is associated with the settlement of areas adjoining the upper Amu Darya by Oghuz–Turkmen groups from the twelfth century [11]. During the Shaybanid period, the territory from Termez to Karshi became a Kungrat tribal area, after which some Turkmens left while others gradually adopted Uzbek identity [7, pp. 114–115]. The principal layer consists of Ersari groups [12] who had moved from Mangyshlak to the Middle Amu Darya in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and then migrated to the lower Kashkadarya in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. B. Kh. Karmysheva identifies the annual washing away of hundreds of hectares of arable land by the Amu Darya, difficulties in digging new canals and adverse social conditions as the causes of this movement [6]. A third layer formed during the development of the Karshi steppe in the 1960s–1980s.

Geographically, the oasis Turkmens are concentrated in the western Karshi steppe near the border with Turkmenistan. Their largest compact settlement is the town of Pomuq in Mirishkor District, where more than 16,000 people, predominantly Turkmens, lived in 2018 [13]. The local Pomuq dialect developed through extensive contact between Turkmen and Uzbek [14]. In Kasbi, Koson and Muborak districts, Turkmens live in more dispersed communities alongside Uzbeks and Arabs [15; 16]. During their migration, the four major divisions of the Ersari tribe—Qora, Bekovul, Gunesh and Ulugdepe [12; 17]—founded new villages in compact groups, helping preserve their clan structure [7, p. 116].

2. Traditional economy.

The economy of the Kashkadarya Turkmens belonged to the diversified type characteristic of Middle Amu Darya Turkmens, combining irrigated cultivation with pasture-based and mixed arable-pastoral livestock raising [6]. The principal crop was sorghum (Andropogon cernus), which Kungrat Uzbeks readily exchanged for melons, wheat and barley [7, p. 116]. Later, the Turkmens established orchards and vineyards; their large white-fruited mulberries and jujubes were well known in local markets. They had extensive experience in clearing riverine thickets, digging canals and bringing new land under cultivation, skills that later proved useful in developing the Karshi steppe.

The leading branch of animal husbandry was Karakul sheep breeding. As B. Kh. Karmysheva observed, groups living in the lower Kashkadarya and Zarafshan valley combined Karakul sheep breeding with irrigated farming [6]. The wormwood and saltwort pastures of the Karshi steppe were well suited to Karakul sheep. The low population density that persists in Mirishkor and Muborak (32–42 persons/km²) is linked to this steppe-pastoral legacy. Camels and horses were also raised alongside sheep: camels were used for caravan transport, while horses retained their significance in military-nomadic traditions. Fishing, hired work on boats (kayuk) and cart driving were supplementary occupations among poorer riverside Turkmens. In the early 1890s, N. Fevralev recorded that Turkmens living in riverine thickets wove carpets, flat-woven rugs and coverings and engaged in fishing and cart driving [9; 7, p. 116].

Table 1. Structure of the traditional economy of Kashkadarya Turkmens (late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century)

Sector	Activities	Source
Irrigated farming	Sorghum, wheat, barley; horticulture (mulberry, jujube, grapes); canal digging and clearing floodplain woodland	[7]; [6]
Livestock raising	Karakul sheep (pasture and mixed arable-pastoral systems), camels, horses, goats	[6]; [15]
Supplementary occupations	Fishing and salting fish; hired boat work, cart	[9]; [8]; [7]

Sector	Activities	Source
	driving, collecting firewood	
Household crafts	Carpets, flat-woven rugs, saddlebags, felt; wooden vessels, butter churns, leather water containers; spinning wool	[5]; [7]
Exchange	Melons, pumpkins and grain from Kungrats; millstones and medicinal herbs from Tajiks; ceramics from Poshxurd potters	[7, pp. 116–117]

Note: compiled by the author from the literature.

3. Crafts.

Carpet weaving is among the most distinctive expressions of Turkmen material culture. In 2019, the art of traditional Turkmen carpet making was inscribed on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity [18]. According to V. G. Moshkova, every Turkmen tribe and clan had its own göl, a medallion-like ornamental motif. Ersari carpets differ from those of other tribes in their large-scale and comparatively free compositions, combining vegetal and geometric patterns against a reddish-brown background [5]. Among Kashkadarya Turkmens, women wove carpets (xali), flat-woven rugs, prayer mats (namozliq), saddlebags (xurjun) and yurt decorations (ensi, qapiliq). Such textiles formed a central part of a bride's dowry. Yarn was spun with simple spindles from Karakul and Hisori sheep wool, while traditional dyes were obtained from madder roots, pomegranate peels and walnut husks. Aniline dyes and factory-made yarns spread from the mid-twentieth century.

Felt making was needed to produce yurt coverings and floor mats. Men's crafts included woodworking—making yurt frames (uuq, tarim), wooden vessels and the kuvi (a vessel for churning butter)—as well as sewing leather water containers (meshkob or burduk). Neighbouring Uzbeks and Tajiks purchased these items from Turkmens [7, pp. 116–117]. Timber for yurt frames was brought from the Kafirnigan

valley. Pottery, by contrast, was not well developed among Turkmens; they obtained ceramic vessels from potters in Poshxurd and Sherobod.

4. Housing and village structure.

Turkmen dwellings took three principal forms reflecting their economic way of life. The first was the yurt (Turkmen: gara öy), inherited from a nomadic past and used as a principal dwelling not only on pastures but also in villages until the mid-twentieth century. B. Kh. Karmysheva noted that Tajiks, Uzbeks and Turkmens in the foothills of Köýtendag lived in yurts throughout the year [7, p. 117]. The second was the kappa, a hut typical of riverside and floodplain woodland zones. Constructed from narrow-leaved cattail (yegen), this rectangular structure (3–4 m × 2–4 m) had a pitched roof, could be moved without dismantling and protected against wind and rain [7, p. 117]. The third was the flat-roofed house with rammed-earth (paxsa) or mud-block (guvala) walls, which spread with sedentarisation under the influence of Uzbek and Tajik architecture and became part of the enclosed courtyard homestead.

An important village-settlement tradition was the establishment of a community near a sacred site or burial ground (mozor). When migrants arrived in a place without such a site, they sometimes “created” one by burying a Qur'an at a chosen location and establishing a cemetery around it [7, p. 117]. This practice is consistent with the formation of a Turkmen village around the Isoq Ota shrine near Pomuq [14]. Villages were organised by clan: each clan occupied a separate neighbourhood or section of an irrigation canal, and by the early twentieth century clan names often became village names.

5. Clothing and food.

Traditional Turkmen dress was clearly distinguishable from that of other ethnic groups in the oasis. Men wore a long, loose-fitting red-striped silk or semi-silk robe (don), wide trousers, a shirt and a tall sheepskin hat (telpak). A. P. Khoroshkhin noted that even Kazakhs living near the Khiva border wore “tall Turkmen hats” in the nineteenth century [6]. Women's dress centred on a long red gown (köynek), an overgarment (chabit), a cap (börik) and a headscarf. Silver ornaments—gupba, bilezik, dagdon and asiq—indicated a woman's age and marital status. Uzbek influence on clothing increased in Kashkadarya during the twentieth century: men began wearing the Uzbek skullcap (duppi) and robe (chopon), while women adopted Uzbek-style dresses and

trousers (ko‘ylak-lozim). Turkmen national dress and silver jewellery nevertheless remained in use at weddings.

Food culture reflected the economic system. Staple foods included dairy products (chal, gatiq, suzma and agaran), mutton, bread made from sorghum and wheat flour (chörek, baked in a tandoor), and porridges. Riverside Turkmens engaged in fishing preserved fish by salting it [8]. Melons obtained from Kungrat Uzbeks were dried (qoq) for winter storage [7, p. 115]. Coexistence with Uzbeks and Tajiks brought dishes such as pilaf (palov), shavla and samsa into the Turkmen diet.

Table 2. Principal elements of Kashkadarya Turkmen material culture and neighbouring influences

Domain	Traditional Turkmen element	Twentieth-century change	Degree of continuity
Housing	Yurt (gara öy), kappa hut, villages near sacred sites	Rammed-earth or mud-block house and courtyard homestead (Uzbek–Tajik influence)	Low
Carpet weaving	xali, namozliq, ensi, qapiliq; Ersari göl; natural dyes	Factory yarns and aniline dyes; dowry tradition retained	High
Men's clothing	Striped don robe, wide trousers, telpak hat	duppi skullcap and Uzbek-style chopon	Low
Women's clothing	Red köynek, chabit, börik; silver ornaments	Uzbek-style dress and trousers; national dress for ceremonies	Medium
Food	Dairy products, chörek, sorghum porridge, salted fish	pilaf, shavla, samsa	Medium

Domain	Traditional Turkmen element	Twentieth-century change	Degree of continuity
Crafts	Felt, wooden vessels, kuvi, leather water container	Replaced by manufactured goods	Low

Note: compiled by the author from [7], [6], [5] and [14]; assessments of continuity are the author's.

6. Mechanisms of cultural interaction.

The analysis indicates that exchange of material culture between Turkmens and neighbouring peoples occurred primarily through economic specialisation and barter. B. Kh. Karmysheva observed that relationships such as the “trading friend” institution, the temporary lending of draught animals by herders to farmers, and the storage of nomadic goods with sedentary neighbours often developed into kinship through marriage [6]. Turkmens supplied carpets, felt, wooden vessels and sorghum, receiving grain, melons and gourds, ceramics and millstones in return. A second mechanism was a shared natural environment: Turkmens and Kungrat Uzbeks living in similar settings inhabited the same type of kappa hut and cultivated similar crops. A third mechanism involved language and marriage. Large Turkmen communities were already bilingual in the early twentieth century [6], contributing to the development of mixed dialects such as that of Pomuq. In compact communities, however, clan organisation, carpet patterns, clothing and ritual practices remained stable markers of ethnic identity.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

First, the ethnic core of the Kashkadarya Turkmens consisted of Ersari groups from the Middle Amu Darya, who migrated to the lower Kashkadarya in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and established clan-based villages in the western Karshi steppe, in present-day Mirishkor, Kasbi, Koson and Muborak districts.

Second, their economy was a diversified system built on irrigated agriculture (sorghum cultivation and horticulture) and Karakul sheep breeding, accompanied by developed carpet weaving, felt making and woodworking. This system complemented the economies of Uzbeks and Arabs in the oasis and sustained neighbourly relations through exchange.

Third, despite the increasing influence of Uzbek culture on housing, clothing and food during the twentieth century, carpet motifs, women's jewellery, ceremonial dress and clan memory have continued to support the preservation of ethnic identity.

Recommendations include ethnographic field expeditions to document carpet göls, clan emblems and genealogies in Pomuq and other Turkmen villages; the development of a Turkmen material-culture collection at the Kashkadarya Regional Museum of Local History; support for Ersari carpet weaving through programmes of the Hunarmand Association and its promotion in the context of UNESCO heritage; and analysis of ethnicity and mother-tongue information by mahalla after the final results of the 2026 census are released.

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