

# VISUALISATION OF TRIBAL IDENTITY IN TRADITIONAL KAZAKH AND KARAKALPAK COSTUMES (USING THE EXAMPLE OF KIMESHEKEK/KYIMESHE)

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**Abstract.** The relevance of the study is determined by the need to analyze Kazakh and Karakalpak traditional costume from the perspective of visual semiotics as a sign system through which clan and tribal identity is represented and transmitted within the historical and cultural space. The conscious selection of distinctive markers in clothing can be regarded as a semiotically significant act, that is, as a sign demonstrating an individual's clan affiliation. Hence, *the aim* of the study is to identify, describe, and analyze clan and tribal markers as signs of a woman's identity and belonging, based on the example of the Kazakh *kimeshek* and the Karakalpak *kiymeshek*. The article employs a set of interdisciplinary *methods*, combining historical-ethnographic, art historical, and cultural approaches. *Results.* Folklore data, materials from fiction, ethnographic sources, and information provided by traditional costume artisans suggest that visually most Kazakhs were once able to distinguish representatives of one clan (and possibly sub-clan) from another by specific details of their clothing. These markers, conventionally termed here as clan and tribal markers, are expressed in certain technological features of production, decorative elements of headdresses, methods of turban wrapping, the cut and decoration of outer garments, as well as in visually perceptible details of jewelry. In this function, both Kazakh and Karakalpak traditional costumes may be regarded as a kind of visual passport demonstrating a particular clan and tribal identity.

**Keywords:** tribal identity, visualisation, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, costume, headdress, *kimeshek/kiymeshek*, marker, sign system, non-verbal communication

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## Introduction

Traditional costume as an object of scientific research has long attracted the attention of researchers. Scientists consider a wide variety of perspectives: from understanding costume as an art form to presenting, it as an important source in the study of ethnogenesis. One of the little-studied areas of Kazakh and Karakalpak traditional costumes is the issue of how they reflect tribal characteristics. However, there are precedents for research on this issue based on materials from cultures close to the Kazakhs and Karakalpaks. Murad Annanepesov and Ata Dzhikiev note that even at the beginning of the 20th century, it was easy to distinguish the ethnic affiliation of representatives of various divisions and subgroups (tribes, clans) among the Turkmen by their appearance, clothing, the shape of their yurts, dialectal features of speech, etc. (115).

Headwear in any traditional culture has the highest sacred status, is cherished and treated with special reverence. Among the wide variety of headwear worn by the peoples of Central Asia, according to Olga Sukhareva, it is the shape of women’s headwear that depends most on tribal affiliation, especially among nomadic peoples who have preserved their tribal organisation (301). With regard to the sedentary population of Uzbekistan, the scholar suggests that tribal differences in

headwear have gradually been replaced by territorial (local) differences in the course of historical development (301).

The aim of this study is to examine the traditional female headdress – *kimeshek/kyimeshek* – from the perspective of how it reflects tribal markers, which we consider to be an expression of identity and belonging. To achieve this goal, the study addresses three main tasks: 1) to identify the functions of *kimeshek/kyimeshek* in Kazakh and Karakalpak society; 2) to summarise the available materials on the tribal characteristics of *kimeshek/kyimeshek*; and 3) to outline prospects for future research.

## Methods

The article employs a set of interdisciplinary methods combining historical-ethnographic, art historical, and cultural approaches. The historical-ethnographic method made it possible to trace the origins of the *kimeshek/kiymeshek* and to identify its regional and clan-specific features through the analysis of archival sources, 19th–20th century ethnographic descriptions, museum collections, and scholarly publications. The comparative-typological method was used to examine Kazakh and Karakalpak examples in terms of form, construction, ornamentation, color palette, embroidery techniques, and modes of wearing. Iconographic and semiotic analyses enabled the interpretation of

ornamentation as a symbolic system reflecting ideas of clan affiliation, age, social status, and marital status of women. The visual-anthropological approach included the analysis of museum and private photographic materials, as well as their digital processing to clarify details of ornamentation and textile structure.

## Discussion

### *Kimeshekek/kyimeshek and its functions in Kazakh and Karakalpak society.*

Headwear in any traditional culture is designed to perform practical, status-age, ritual-magical and other functions that allow the wearer's national, regional or tribal affiliation to be determined. The Kazakh and Karakalpak *kimeshek/kyimeshek* is no exception in this regard; first and foremost, it reflects the status and age function, to which all others are related.

After the birth of her first child, a daughter-in-law in Kazakh society was given the honorary title of *ayel*, which was accompanied by a change in her appearance and costume. In a solemn atmosphere, she was dressed in a *kimeshek* (in the southern regions, this was done immediately after the wedding) (Tokhtabaeva 280), which women did not take off for the rest of their lives. According to Svetlana Aitbaeva, during the celebration of the first ritual dressing of the *kimeshek*, the mother-in-law took her daughter-in-law to a place of honour for the first time, thereby giving her blessing and permission to move freely around the house. This tradition is called "zhaulyq salu". Later, when the second child was born, the *kimeshek* was wrapped in a white scarf called "shylaush". Thus, with each child, the headdress became higher and higher (Aitbaeva).

According to researchers, the Karakalpaks first put on the *kyimeshek* during the wedding in the husband's village: "Before entering her husband's yurt, the bride puts on the *kyimeshek* and hides her face under a piece of white cloth.

From that moment on, she becomes a married woman" (Zhdanco 554).

At the same time, the question of where exactly the bride put on the *kyimeshek* requires further clarification. It can be assumed that this ritual, marking a change in social status, could hardly have taken place publicly, before entering the groom's dwelling. Nina Lobacheva shares her doubts about where and when the bride put on the *kyimeshek*: "There are discrepancies in the information about when this happened and who put it on the bride" (57). If we assume that the bride entered the groom's house while still a maiden, it seems more logical that the symbol of a married woman was put on inside the house, behind the ritual curtain *shymlydyk*, away from prying eyes. This is not contradicted by one of the arguments of the above-mentioned researcher: "There is an opinion that this happens when the bride crosses the threshold of the groom's house" (57).

The functions of the *kyimeshek* were twofold. On the one hand, it served as an element of married women's outer clothing, and on the other, it played the role of a ritual wedding attribute designed to conceal the bride's hair. *Kyimeshek* accompanied Karakalpak women throughout their lives, and the change from *kyzyl kyimeshek* to *ak kyimeshek* after the end of reproductive function symbolised a change in their status and stage of life.

The ritual of changing from a maiden's headdress to a woman's headdress took place during a festive meal organised by the mother-in-law and symbolised a woman's transition to the next age group – that of mothers. According to experts, it is considered the most archaic form of the cycle of female initiations (Sukhareva 322). In particular, with the birth of children, especially sons, not only did the status of the woman herself change, but also the status of her husband and the family as a whole (Stasevich 55).

A woman-mother, “crowned” in a *kimeshek*, gained the right not only to actively participate in public life: folk festivals, funeral rites and other collective events, but also, with age, became their expert guardian (the status of *baybishe/ keyuana*), the corrector of these rites within her clan, her own family and kinship group. Boris Kufin wrote that women’s voices often had an influence at clan gatherings (11).

Hence, the status of *kimeshek* in Kazakh culture is incomparably high, as evidenced by the well-known expressions «kieli *kimeshek*», «kii pir – *kimeshek*», «ak zhaulyk – tapyrmas baiylik» and others. Literally everything emphasised its status: the main colour of the headdress fabric is white, which marks the sacred top for Kazakhs; the design is a “hood” and a turban (“shylaush,” “kundik”); the methods and techniques of decoration, the colourfulness of the decor.

In Karakalpak culture, the *kyimeshek* is associated with archaic cults. When worn, its shape resembles the silhouette of an eagle, which is one of the most significant and revered cults among the Karakalpaks. Studies show that the image of the eagle was associated with ideas of fertility (Kusekeev 65; Esbergenov, Atamuratov 116) and played a significant role in the cultural practices not only of the Karakalpaks, but also of a number of other peoples (Sternberg; Basilov 36). This connection between the *kyimyshek* and the image of an eagle is emphasised by the semantics of individual elements of the headdress, such as the *kuyrik* tail, as well as the fringe along the edge of the back part, interpreted as a symbolic representation of wings. Based on this, it can be assumed that the *Kyzyl kimeshek* originally functioned as a symbolic representation of an eagle, serving as a talisman for women. Later, as the culture developed, the *kyimeshek* evolved from a ritual attribute into an element of everyday clothing.

The status of *kimeshek* and similar headdresses is emphasised by their significance in life cycle rituals. Although the hood-like design has fallen out of everyday use among the Tajiks, it has long been preserved in funeral rites, becoming part of the shroud (Shirokova 190). A similar connection with the shroud can be traced in the cut of the Karakalpak *kyimeshek* (Esbergenova 84). Among many peoples of Central Asia, the size of the fabric for a turban had to be sufficient for use as a shroud. The Karakalpaks had a number of strict taboos regarding the *kyimeshek*, regulating its use and transfer. In particular, the *kyimeshek* could not be bought, sold or given as a gift; it had to be kept by its owner throughout her life, and only after her death was it given to the washers (Esbergenova 84). The simultaneous presence of headdresses at funerals and weddings emphasises that these events are part of a single mythological narrative linking various aspects of the life cycle (Lotman 113).

Thus, the *kimeshek* as a marker of women-mothers had decorative elements that changed with her age: for young women, it was brighter and richer, signifying a wish for fertility and happiness in marriage; for older women, it was more modest, as dictated by traditional etiquette, and for widows, it was practically undecorated, reflecting the idea of a joyless life for a wife without a husband. However, among modern foreign Kazakhs in Mongolia and China, there are women of a fairly advanced age who wear *kimeshek* with rich decorations.

Consequently, decorative adornment is not always a reliable indicator of age characteristics. Most likely, it was the first, ritual *kimeshek* that was decorated particularly richly. With regard to the aspect we are studying, it seems that in the course of development, the design, decoration and method of wearing the *kimeshek* turban among different tribal groups, depending on the ethnocultural

type, began to acquire certain canonical forms, expressed in a stable set of markers.

Experts trace the origins of turban-like or chalm-like headwear among the peoples of Central Asia back to the most ancient layers of culture associated with Iranian-speaking peoples. The first material evidence of this can be found on terracotta figurines from the Kushan period in the first centuries AD (Sogdian tradition). On some statuettes, a significant detail is the depiction of a baby figure, representing the image of a woman-mother. The image of a goddess with a baby undoubtedly goes back to some ancient Eastern prototypes of female deities (Meshkeris 16). The image of a woman with a baby wearing a headdress similar to a *kimeshek* appears on Polovtsian/Kipchak stone sculptures.

Analysing the statue, Svetlana Pletneva writes that it symbolises the image of a woman giving life and strength to a woman - the direct reproducer of the family line. That is why the infant clearly displays signs of gender, just like its mother. This statue, as we see it, also testifies to the fact that the Polovtsians, at least certain clans, still adhered to the matrilineal reckoning of kinship characteristic of matriarchy (Pletneva 74).

In general, Nina Lobacheva considers the clothing and costumes of the medieval Kipchaks to be a common foundation for all the ethnic cultures of the peoples of Central Asia, and traces some headdresses back to even earlier cultures, to the Scythian-Saka substratum (Lobacheva 89). She traces the origins of the *kimeshek* specifically to the complex headdresses of Kipchak women (Lobacheva).

The etymology of the Turkic term «kimāšak» [kir.], which according to Vasily Radlov means «headdress of old women» (1406), also gives rise to certain thoughts. According to linguistic research, the semantics of Turkic phraseology can have direct and figurative meanings. Perhaps the term “kimāšak” [kir.] has a figurative meaning in addition to its direct meaning,

close to the concept of the headdress of an elder, chief, divine woman. As we see it, the *kimeshek* acts as a talisman-symbol of origins lost in the mists of time, dating back to the most ancient attributes of the Great Mother and the original guardian of the Clan. From this perspective, headdresses such as *kimeshek* can be seen as a symbol of the cosmos, a sacred crown emphasising the involvement of the woman-mother in phenomena of a cosmological nature.

Apparently, the originally tall and intricate turban dates back to the cult of ancient goddesses of fertility, and the origins of various methods and techniques of wearing it can be explained by the initially different ethnocultural types and the influence of neighbouring cultures. Roziya Mukminova is undoubtedly right in noting that the shape and size of the turban, as well as the length of the fabric used at different times, could vary depending on the locality and the social category to which a person belonged (74). We can add to this tribal affiliation.

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## Results

*Kazakh kimeshek in the light of tribal markers: the search for artistic and decorative solutions for originality*

*Kimeshek*, as noted, was intended exclusively for married women and was decorated with visual markers characterising the clan of her husband. In modern times, special credit for the reconstruction of some types of *kimeshek* goes to the well-known ethnic designer T. Sultan, who restored many samples based

on his research of ancient headdresses kept by Kazakhs living abroad.

The *kimeshek* of representatives of the Alban, Zhalaïr, Dulat, Shanyshkyly and Suan clans have certain similarities in their artistic design: all the decoration tends towards a square shape in terms of its general compositional features, combining embroidery, beadwork (Kazakh 'marzhandau') made of coral and metal figurative plaques, mainly made of silver (stamped). Most often, the 'tail' of the *kimeshek* is decorated in the form of an acute angle, and the embroidery was technically performed in various ways: baspa keste, qabyrga keste, etc. The headdress of the Shanyshkyly (Shanshykly) clan, a sample from the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan (KP 19004), bears a certain resemblance to these types of *kimeshek*.

According to Tlek Sultan's collection, the most preferred method of embroidery on the *kimeshek* of women from the Alban clan is cross-stitch (Kazakh 'aikyish') and the obligatory presence of 'tobe', which could also be decorated with decorative running stitch, beads or metal plaques. The appearance of contrasting artistic stitching (red on white) as a finish is associated with the widespread use of sewing machines. Nina Lobacheva attributes the hand-embroidered 'cross' stitching of the peoples of Central Asia and Kazakhstan to the earliest examples of embroidery on homespun linen fabric. The specialist also attributes the sewn-on metal plaques made of silver to ancient types of clothing decoration (7).

Decorative metal plaques can be round, rectangular, or square in shape and vary in size from small to medium. The patterns on the plaques are geometric in style, featuring diamonds, dots, five-petalled flowers, etc. Such plaques are commonly referred to as 'shytra' by the people. The REM collection (10972-1) includes 22 large rectangular plaques with rounded petal-shaped corners, 36 smaller rectangular plaques, and 9

plaques on the crown. Almost all of the plaques have blackened ornamentation. In general, judging by the iconography, this headdress most likely belonged to members of the Alban clan.

In some cases, the plaques were replaced with coins: the Alban clan *kimeshek* from the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan collection contains Soviet coins from the 1940s (KP 16868). Some examples of clothing combine both plaques and coins. For example, a girl's camisole – kymal shapan from the REM collection (6979-2) has 127 coins from different periods sewn onto it, as well as a number of silver plaques. Another favourite decorative technique of craftsmen from the Senior Zhuz is marzhandau, which involves sewing on coral and pearl beads. In the example of a *kimeshek* from the Alban clan from the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan, KP 9714, 351 coral beads were used. The embroidery is mainly floral in nature, but there are also examples with geometric patterns.

The iconography of the embroidery on the *kimeshek* of the Dulat clan from Tlek Sultan's collection is noteworthy: three tumars with four pendants are embroidered on the front (chest) part of the headdress. A similar ornamental motif is present on the *kimeshek* of the Suan clan from the collections of the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KP 22499). A headdress from the Zhetysu region (formerly Taldy-Kurgan region), made by folk artist Dina Kuansheva (59-tk), is kept in the collections of the A. Kasteev State Museum of Art of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which is similar to the iconography of the *kimeshek* mentioned above. The rich embroidery of this *kimeshek* is made with dark red and bright red cross-stitches. There are figures similar to the tumars pattern.

An interesting *kimeshek* of the Dulat clan from the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan (KP 18594) has a pointed-

rounded shape at the end. The embroidery on this *kimeshek* is presented in the form of alternating oval medallions. The decoration in the form of machine stitching (Kazakh 'syrlau'), mainly with red threads forming a wide variety of graphic figures, is present on almost all of the samples examined.

Several *kimeshek* of the Alban clan from the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan (KP 11864; KP 16044, etc.) are similar to those described. A slightly different iconography of decoration is presented in a sample of *kimeshek* of the Alban clan from the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan (11865): the craftswoman, framing the ornament around the face in the form of a rectangle on the front, placed a large eight-petalled rosette around it, surrounded by buds. The embroidery pattern resembles the style of embroidery of the Kyzay clan from the Middle Zhuz (description below).

As shown in the materials above, the decoration of the *kimeshek*, which is apparently close to a single prototype, is observed in the tribes of the Senior Zhuz – Alban, Zhalaïr, Dulat Shynashkyl, Suan and possibly other tribes belonging to this Zhuz. The collective name for the tribes of the Senior Zhuz is Uysun. Veniamin Vostrov and Marat Mukanov wrote that Semirechye, the Chu and Talas regions formed a single ethnic centre, where a whole group of other tribes (Dulat, Kangly, Zhalaïr, Alan, etc.) united around one of the most ancient tribes, the Usun (Vostrov, Mukanov 27).

The embroidery, most often in an elongated rectangular shape, is represented by gold stitching, coloured threads, braid, etc. The turban is much simpler than that of the representatives of the Senior Zhuz. The headdresses presented no longer have tower-like structures. However, as noted by Irina Zakharova and Rukia Khodzhaeva, tower-shaped turbans were found in Semirechye, Aulieata District, Syr Darya and Central Kazakhstan, and in the western regions among elderly women (Zakharova,

Khodzhaeva 221). For example, a photograph by Alexander Melkov (MAE 1351-132), taken in the Kyzylorda region in 1928, shows a woman wearing a *kimeshek* with a high turban.

The Central State Museum of Kazakhstan has a number of examples of *kimeshek* from the Naiman (KP 18084; KP 13033; KP 12725; KP 13233; KP 13246 etc.) and Argyn (KP 25822/3; KPD 271). An examination of some examples of *kimeshek* showed that the face opening in the headdresses of the Naiman clan is most often made in the form of a narrow strip. Hence the peculiarity of its artistic design.

Of those mentioned, the sample of the Naiman-Karakerey clan (KP 13246) is particularly attractive: the embroidery is done with a tambour stitch and has a floral character, the inner field of flowers is embroidered with a chain stitch. Three tumarsh patterns are embroidered on the chest, connected by wavy lines. Four-petalled flowers are embroidered on both sides (Traditional Kazakh clothing 79). Another *kimeshek* of the Naiman-Karakerey clan, KP 13253, is decorated with a complex floral ornament, where, in addition to the front part, there are three separate ornamental parts in the form of an elongated rhombus with 'hanging' elements. These parts resemble tumars patterns with pendants, as on the *kimeshek* of the Dulat and Suan clans. Examples of these *kimeshek* were purchased from residents of the Zhetysu region.

In this group, the decoration of the *kimeshek* of the Kyzay clan, one of the subdivisions of the Naiman tribe, stands out as a special subgroup. Such examples can be found in the collection of Tlek Sultan and the funds of the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KP 13254; KP 13975 etc.). In some samples, the cutout for the face is shaped like a slit, and the 'tail' is at a right angle. The ornamental decoration is immediately recognisable and quite specific: the delicate embroidery pattern consists of various buds, which

can be open and completely filled, or with an 'empty' inner field. This is the case, for example, with another sample of *kimeshek* from the Kyzai clan from the Central State Museum of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KP 13975). However, the embroidery pattern is always complex and ornate.

Similar in ornamental design to the headdress of the Qyzai clan is the *kimeshek* of the Naiman-Matai clan from the collections of the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan (KP 13266). It has a trapezoidal neckline, the upper part of which is decorated with a geometric ornament in the form of rhombuses, and on the sides, floral motifs are combined with geometric motifs in the form of a zhuldyzsha pattern. The front part is decorated with a heart-shaped petal, inside which a three-leaf lotus is embroidered. The central heart-shaped petal transitions into a large lotus flower at the bottom, the petals of which end in pink flowers (Traditional Kazakh clothing 84). In this sample, the area covered by the decoration is impressive, covering almost the entire front of the *kimeshek*. Products of this kind are commonly distinguished in the folk environment as: «Qyzai keste», «Qyzai *kimeshek*», «Qyzai syrmaq», «Qyzai kalpak» and «Qyzai takia», which, according to legend, is associated with the craftsmanship of Qyzai ana (Kunimbike Baidibekkyzy 1402-1480). Along with exquisite floral and plant ornamentation, the favourite colour palette of Kizai products is characterised by all shades of red: from pink to purple-violet.

The only *kimeshek* of the Argyn clan in the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan (KP 25822/3) is unique in its own way. The item is from the Pavlodar region, and the decoration consists of embroidery, beads and metal sequins. The description of the item notes that the front neckline is framed by two strips of embroidery in yellow, light green and blue threads, decorated with beads and sequins. The front part is embroidered with a stylised ram's horn

pattern (Traditional Kazakh clothing 95). Rather, the central decorative pattern resembles a lyre-like figure similar to the iconography of the Great Mother pattern than to ram's horn. The lower part of the central figure clearly shows a figure in the form of an inverted tree. According to information recorded in the western regions of the Akmola region by Irina Zakharova and Rukia Khodzhaeva, representatives of the Argyn clan wore orama *kimeshek*, which is considered the most archaic form (218).

The next group consists of *kimeshek* samples from the tribes of the Junior Zhuz. However, there are very few such samples in the collections known to us. The catalogue of the Central State Museum of Kazakhstan lists two *kimeshek* from the Berish clan (KP 19921/2 and KP 19921/1). The decorative design combines braid, chain stitch, plaques and embroidery. The neckline is decorated in the form of a trapezoid, along which is a strip of floral pattern embroidered with braid, and small metal plaques are also sewn on (Traditional Kazakh clothing 97). The decorative area is small and forms an elongated, narrow rectangle at the end.

The collection of Tlek Sultan contains an example of a headdress worn by the Junior Horde, commonly referred to as a sulama. It is a cylindrical headdress similar in shape to a saukeleye. According to Boris Kuftin, married Kazakh women of the Lesser Horde and part of the Middle Horde wear a tall cylindrical headdress made from a long piece of white muslin or calico (jaulyk) wrapped around a cardboard crown; a special white hood called a *kimeshek* is usually worn underneath it (43).

The only decorative element on the sample from Tlek Sultan's collection is braid (Kazakh «zer bastyr»). According to Rustembek Shoibekov and Tattigul Kartayeva, such a decorative element is most often found in Western Kazakhstan (270).



Figure 1. Kimeshek of the Alban clan. Author: Tlek Sultan. 2018. Computer processing of photo by Zhanerke Shaygozova

Thus, a preliminary analysis of materials on the tribal differences of the *kimeshek* allows us to conclude that certain tribes had their favourite decoration techniques, which could vary within one ethnocultural type and had similar elements. The clans of the Senior Zhuz preferred rich polychrome decoration, combining embroidery, beads (coral, pearls) and figured metal plaques. The decoration was usually formed closer to the face: on the temporal part and under the chin, while the rest of the head was most often covered with a shatyrma seam. The turbans of this group are most often voluminous, tall and vary in shape, depending on how they are tied.

The Kazakh women of the Middle Zhuz preferred more restrained decoration, but this group also has some interesting examples in terms of artistic design, especially the *kimeshek* of the Kyzay-Naiman and Naiman-Matai clans. They

are characterised in most cases by ornate embroidery in a floral style, as well as the widespread use of *yki* (Kerey). Gold and silver embroidery is often found in this group. The Argyns of Central Kazakhstan and the northern regions wore turbans similar to those of the Uysin and Oiik tribal groups, while some tribal groups of the Naimans living in Eastern Kazakhstan had differences in the way they tied their turbans (Zakharova, Khojaeva 125), i.e. differences within the same tribe.

Representatives of the Junior Zhuz preferred decorative braid (usually without any embroidery). But the main difference between the Kazakh women of the Junior Zhuz is their unique way of wearing the *jalyq* (veil/scarf), mainly without using a «hood». A rich example of a *jalyq* is captured in the drawings of Vladimir Plotnikov (Culture and Life of the Kazakhs 27). Some examples of Kazakh *kimeshek* from the collection of Tlek Sultan are shown in Figures 1–4.

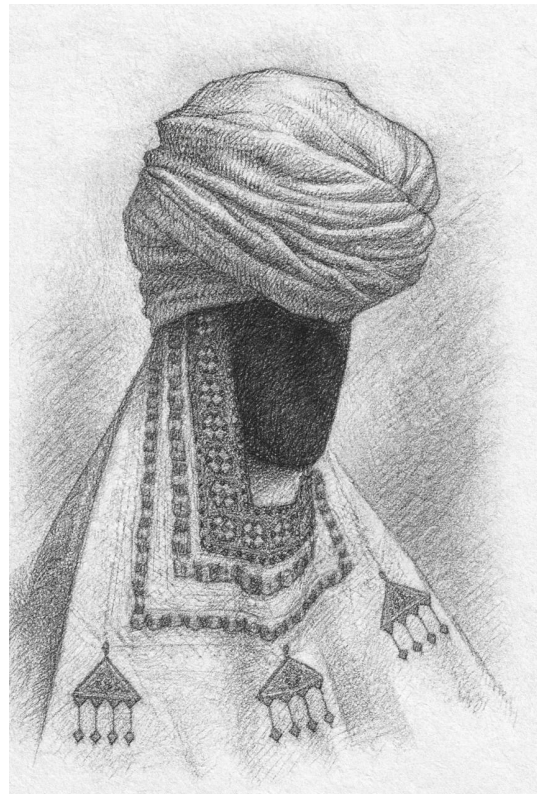


Figure 2. Kimeshek of the Dulat clan. Author: Tlek Sultan. 2020. Computer processing of photo by Zhanerke Shaygozova

*Karakalpak kyimeshek. Searching for clan markings in ornamentation and design*

In scientific works devoted to the study of ornamental traditions, the hypothesis has been repeatedly put forward that in the past, large clans may have possessed a unique set of ornamental motifs reflecting their specific cultural and historical identity. However, this hypothesis has not yet been convincingly confirmed empirically due to the limited availability of data and the lack of a comprehensive analysis of existing ornamental traditions. The authors of this study do not set out to provide a definitive answer to this question, but merely propose to consider its individual aspects using the example of *kyimeshek* ornamentation.

The Karakalpak *kiymeshek* is a headdress with an opening for the face. The front part, called *aldy*, is trapezoidal in shape and descends to chest level. The

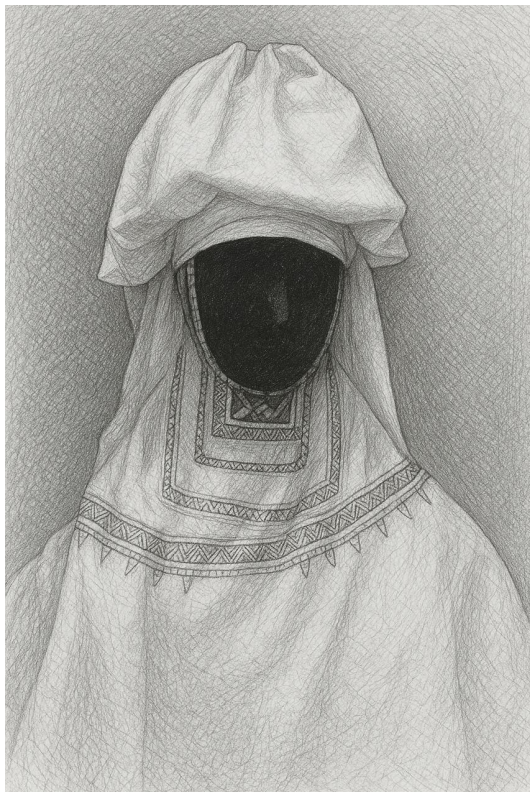


Figure 3. *Kyimeshek* of the Suan clan from the collection of Tlek Sultan. Zhetysu region, 1960. Computer processing of photo by Zhanerke Shaygozova.

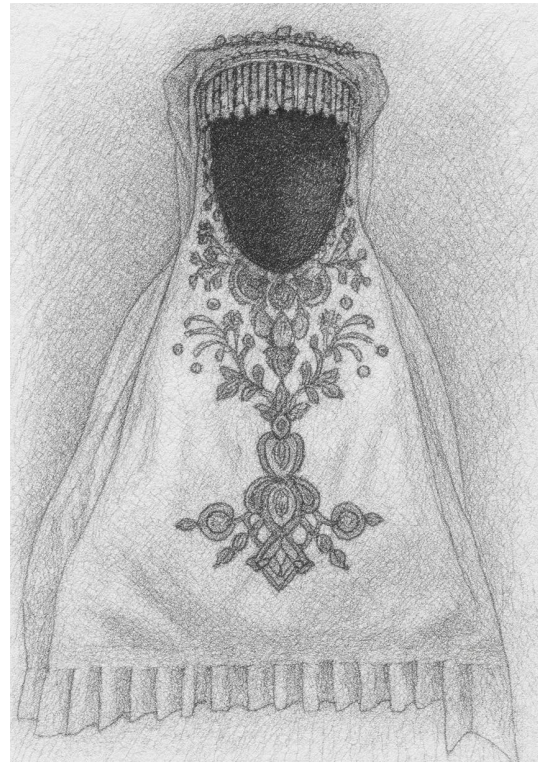


Figure 4. *Kyimeshek* and *Shylaush* of the Kyzay clan (Naiman tribe). Author: Tlek Sultan. 2024. Computer processing of photo by Zhanerke Shaygozova

back part, *kuyrik*, is a large square piece of silk or semi-silk fabric, trimmed with a strip of black cloth around the perimeter. There are two main types of *kyimeshek*: *kyzyl kyimeshek* and *aq kyimeshek* (Figure 5-7).

Two main techniques are used in Karakalpak embroidery art: the tambour stitch *ilme* and the cross stitch *shyrs nagys tigyv*. It is noteworthy that the combination of both techniques in *kyimeshek* ornamentation is extremely rare, which may indicate the existence of strict traditions in the art of embroidery. This limitation suggests that each technique has a specific symbolic meaning, which may vary depending on regional affiliation and clan identity.

The idea that in the past each Karakalpak clan had its own distinctive ‘set of symbols’ in the form of ornaments was expressed by Tatyana Zhdanco (380). Later, Aginbay Allamuratov attempted to develop this idea in his research, noting



Figure 5. Front view of the Kiyimeshek. Savitsky Art Museum, Nukus. Photo by Zemfira Kurbanova



Figure 6. Kiyimeshek. Savitsky Art Museum, Nukus. Photo by Zemfira Kurbanova

that in the 18th century, some Karakalpak biis used clan tamgas instead of signatures (Allamuratov 57). This indicates that the tamga served as a visual marker denoting clan affiliation and acting as a means of identification and legitimisation of authority. Nina Lobacheva, based on field materials collected in the 1950s, also notes that «... there were several ornaments that were associated with certain groups of Karakalpaks” (56). In the



Figure 7. Front view of the Ak Kiyimeshek. Savitsky Art Museum, Nukus. Photo by Zemfira Kurbanova

context of embroidery on *kyimeshek*, the use of unique ornaments can be seen as a continuation of this tradition, where each pattern becomes a symbol of a particular clan or tribe.

A study by Irina Bogoslovskaya, covering more than 400 samples of qyzyl *kyimeshek* and about 250 elements of qyzyl *kyimeshek* aldy, led to the conclusion that women from certain Karakalpak clans used unique ornaments that functioned as tribal markers. The embroidered pattern on the bride’s wedding dress, in particular on the *kyimeshek*, served as a symbolic element demonstrating her belonging to a specific clan, which is especially relevant in the context of wedding ceremonies involving the interaction of different clan groups (187).

In support of the hypothesis about the clan marking of ornaments on *kyimesheks*, an argument can be made based on an analysis of exogamy, characteristic of Karakalpak society, according to which young men cannot marry girls from their own clan. This tradition gives special significance to the embroidery on *kyimeshek* in the context of marriage

alliances. The need for visual identification of clan affiliation becomes particularly relevant on the wedding day, when the bride displays the symbols of her clan to her new relatives.

Art historians have identified several stable ornamental combinations that presumably served as tribal markers. Aginbay Allamuratov classifies *kyimeshek* aldy into four groups according to their composition and colour scheme: 1. Orta qara is completely covered with muiz curls connected by a complex interweaving. The most typical for this group is a single row of large rhombuses with curls inscribed in them, extending from the corners and walls; 2. Two or four rows of rhombuses arranged in a checkerboard pattern, with flowers inscribed in them, fill the entire surface of the orta qara; 3. A chain of cross-shaped rosettes of plant origin is located in the centre of the strip, while the side spaces are filled with koltyksha triangles; 4. The ornamental strip on the ort qara consists of squares with curls, the number of which may vary (50 - 51).

Irina Bogoslovskaya identifies 12 stable types of ornamentation on the ort qara: 1. Shubal nagys creeping ornament; 2. Qauasha or erik gül cotton or apricot flower; 3. Tokalak müiz chopped horn in a diamond-shaped net; 4. Segiz or on eki muiz eight or twelve horns; 5. Khorasani muiz Khorasan horns; 6. Ayil nagys ornament of a girth with elements of shtaq blacha; 7. Orta kara with a 'crawling snake' ornament; 8. Qalta gul pattern for a pocket; 9. Iyt taban dog paw print; 10. Tokalak muiz chopped horn with elements of iyt taban; 11. Tuye taban camel footprint - only one example is known so far; 12. Kolytsh muiz - angular, for the armpit (9).

According to research by Aginbay Allamuratov, the ornamentation of *kyimesheks*, which were common among women living in coastal areas (Muynak, Takhtakupyr and Kungrad), is characterised by the use of plant motifs that stylistically reproduce reed beds and various

floral compositions. These ornamental elements not only reflect the specifics of the local landscape, but are also presumably associated with the traditional economic activities of the population. The Muiten tribe had a pattern known as Muiten Nagys (57), which illustrates the specific aesthetic preferences of this clan. In the Kegeyli district, there is a marked preference for the segiz muiz ornament and its variations. The kuyurshak auyz ornament, associated with the image of a bird, is characteristic of the *kyimeshek* found in the Muynak and Kungrad districts.

Due to the mixed composition of the population in the areas designated as places of acquisition of *kyimeshek*, it is difficult to establish a clear connection between a specific example of *kyimeshek* and its belonging to a particular clan. In this regard, the study set out to identify the affiliation of artefacts to larger tribal associations – arys – based on an analysis of the shape of the front strip of the *kyimeshek* – orta qara.

Arys Konrat, in turn, was concentrated in the northern part of the delta, on the lands adjacent to the Aral Sea, as well as on the left bank of the Amu Darya, in the Kungrad and Chumikeev bekdoms of the Khiva Khanate (Zhdanco 38).

Historically, the Chimbai and Kegeyli districts have been predominantly inhabited by representatives of the Qatai, Qypshak, Mangyt and Keneges tribes. The Muynak district is dominated by the Qyat, Ashamayly and Muten tribes. The population of the Kungrad district is characterised by a mixed ethnic composition, including Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Karakalpaks belonging to the Qyat, Ashamayly and Kandekli clans. The Takhtakupyr district also has an ethnically mixed population, due to the presence of Kazakhs and Karakalpaks belonging to the Muten, Bessary and Karamoyin clans.

The kitai (Chinese), kypshak, mangyt and keneges clans belong to the On tort ury clan. The clans of kiyat, ashamayly,

myuiten, kandekly, bessary and qaramoyin, in turn, belong to the arys Қоңырат. In the district, this structure can be traced as follows: in the Kegeili and Chimbai districts, the tribes and clans belonging to the On t'urt uru arys predominate, while in the Takhtakupyr, Muynak and Kungrad districts, the tribes and clans belonging to the Konrat arys predominate.

Analysis of the shape of the ort qara samples of *kyimeshek* aldy and *kyimeshek* revealed variations in the shape of the trapezoidal strip and horn-like branches (pointed, rectangular, rounded), as well as the width of the strip itself and the angle of the horn-like elements. A preliminary comparison demonstrates the absence of a clear relationship between the identified structural parameters (the shape of the horn-like elements, the angle of their location, the width of the band) and belonging to the On tort uryġ and Konyrat arys. In particular, the presence of rounded and rectangular horn-like elements, as well as the variability of the width of the strip, are found in representatives of both arys, which makes it difficult to differentiate based on these characteristics. However, during the analysis, rare samples were identified that deviated from the standard form: a *kyimeshek* aldy with three horn-shaped branches (two at the edge of the trapezoid and one in the centre), acquired in the Kungrad district, and a *kyimeshek* aldy with two ort qara, acquired in the Kegeyli district. Based on these findings, we can hypothesise a potential connection between the three-horned trapezoid shape and arys Konrat, and the double orta qara arys On tort ur'u. However, this hypothesis requires further verification by expanding the sample of specimens studied and conducting an in-depth analysis of contextual information, which opens up prospects for further study of the role of the structural features of orta qara identifying tribal affiliation.

The results of the analysis, based on the study of the collection of *kyimeshek* from

the Igor Savitsky State Museum of Art, indicate the complexity of unambiguous identification of clan affiliation based on ornamentation. Nevertheless, the identification of rare specimens with deviations from the standard form allows us to put forward preliminary hypotheses about the potential connection between specific variants of orta qara and a particular arys, which requires further verification on an expanded sample and taking into account contextual information.

## Basic Provisions

The headdress frames a woman's face, shaping her overall appearance and helping to make the right impression on those around her, thereby marking her high position in society with the help of specific decorative elements – distinctive markers that we understand as a sign of identity and belonging, and tribal solidarity, which provides the wearer with protection for the tribe. In this capacity, it occupied almost the main position in the architecture of traditional Kazakh and Karakalpak women's costume, and its decor, to some extent, brings us closer to a visual representation of social differentiation.

The appearance of tribal markers in *kimeshek* is explained by the dominant role of the woman-mother in a particular tribal community, which, to paraphrase Abdesh Toleubaev, can be expressed as follows: the abundance of offspring, especially males – future warriors, brothers and relatives in general – guaranteed the high social status of the tribe/clan (40). This elevated women with many children (or the potential for many children) to the rank of the most respected members of society – of a particular clan or tribe as a whole. Respect and even a certain degree of worship of women in Kazakh and Karakalpak culture most likely dates back to the divine – the Great Mother, who in this function acts as the Guardian of the Clan.

## Conclusion

During the study, it was established that the traditional costume of the Kazakhs and Karakalpaks serves not only a utilitarian and aesthetic function but also acts as an important carrier of clan and tribal identity. Elements of headdresses — the *kimeshek* among Kazakhs and the *kiymeshek* among Karakalpaks — function as visual markers that allow one to distinguish a woman's affiliation with a particular clan or sub-clan.

Analysis from the perspective of visual semiotics showed that the features of tailoring, decoration, wearing methods, and technological techniques of these elements

form a complex system of signs conveying social, age, and clan-related information. Thus, the traditional costume can be regarded as a kind of visual “passport” of ethnic and clan identity, where every detail carries a semiotically significant function.

The study presented in this article does not aim to provide a comprehensive resolution of the issue. Nevertheless, the authors hope that the materials and analysis offered will contribute to further research and a deeper understanding of the complex relationship between ornamentation, structural features of costume elements, and clan identity within the specified ethnocultural contexts.

### Authors' contribution:

**Zh. N. Shaygozova** – the author of the idea, methodology and concept of the study, writing the main text, searching for citations, formatting the article and the list of references

**Z. I. Kurbanova** – analysis and generalization of the research material, editing of the article, and writing additional text on the Karakalpak traditional headwear.

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**ВИЗУАЛИЗАЦИЯ РОДОПЛЕМЕННОЙ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТИ В КАЗАХСКОМ И КАРАКАЛПАКСКОМ ТРАДИЦИОННОМ КОСТЮМЕ (НА ПРИМЕРЕ КИМЕШЕК/КИЙМЕШЕК)**

**Аннотация.** *Актуальность* исследования определяется необходимостью анализа казахского и каракалпакского традиционного костюма с позиций визуальной семиотики как знаковой системы, посредством которой репрезентируется и транслируется родоплеменная идентичность в историко-культурном пространстве. Осознанный выбор отличительных маркеров в одежде можно рассматривать как семиотически значимый акт, то есть как знак, демонстрирующий родовую принадлежность того или иного индивида. Отсюда, *цель исследования* - выявление, описание и анализ родоплеменных маркеров как знака идентичности и принадлежности женщины на примере казахского *кимешек* и каракалпакского *киймешек*. В статье использован комплекс междисциплинарных *методов*, объединяющих историко-этнографический, искусствоведческий и культурологический подходы. *Результаты:* данные фольклора, материалы художественной литературы, этнографические источники и сведения мастеров-изготовителей народного костюма позволяют утверждать, что визуально большинство казахов могли раньше отличать одного представителя рода (возможно подрода) от другого по тем или иным деталям одежды. Эти, условно называемые нами родоплеменные маркеры выражаются в некоторых технологических особенностях изготовления, декоративных элементах головных уборов, способах наворачивания тюрбанов, крае и декоре верхней одежды, а также в визуально уловимых деталях ювелирных украшений. В обозначенной функции как казахский, так и каракалпакский традиционный костюм можно рассматривать как своеобразный визуальный паспорт, демонстрирующий ту или иную родоплеменную идентичность.

**Ключевые слова:** родоплеменная идентичность, визуализация, казахи, каракалпаки, костюм, головной убор, кимешек/киймешек, маркер, знаковая система, невербальная коммуникация

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**ҚАЗАҚ ЖӘНЕ ҚАРАҚАЛПАҚ ДӘСТҮРЛІ КИІМІНДЕГІ РУ-ТАЙПАЛЫҚ БІРЕГЕЙЛІКТІҢ ВИЗУАЛДАНУЫ (КИМЕШЕК/КИЙМЕШЕК МЫСАЛЫНДА)**

**Аңдатпа.** Зерттеудің өзектілігі қазақ және қарақалпақ дәстүрлі киімдерін визуалды семиотика тұрғысынан, яғни рөлдік-тұрмыстық идентичтілікті тарихи-мәдени кеңістікте көрсететін және таратуға арналған таңбалық жүйе ретінде талдау қажеттілігімен анықталады. Киімдегі ерекшелікті белгілерді саналы таңдау семиотикалық маңызы бар акт ретінде қарастырылуы мүмкін, яғни бұл жеке тұлғаның руға немесе тұқымға тиесілілігін көрсететін белгі болып табылады. Осыған орай, *зерттеудің мақсаты* – қазақтың кимешегі мен қарақалпақтың киймешегін мысалға ала отырып, әйел адамның идентичтілігі мен тиесілілігін көрсететін ру-тұқымдық белгілерді анықтау, сипаттау және талдау. Мақалада тарихи-этнографиялық, өнертанулық және мәдениеттанулық тәсілдерді біріктіретін көпсалалы *зерттеу әдістері* қолданылған. *Нәтижелер:* фольклор деректері, көркем әдебиет материалдары, этнографиялық деректер және халық киімінің шеберлерінен алынған мәліметтер көрсеткендей, бұрын көпшілік қазақтар киімнің белгілі бір детальдары арқылы бір рудың (мүмкін ру тармағының) өкілін екіншісінен визуалды түрде ажырата алған. Біздің шартты түрде «ру-тұқымдық белгілер» деп атайтын осы маркерлер киім элементтерін жасау технологиясының кейбір ерекшеліктерінде, бас киімнің декоративтік элементтерінде, тюрбан орау тәсілдерінде, сыртқы киімнің қиылысу және безендіруінде, сондай-ақ зергерлік әшекейлердің визуалды айқын детальдарында көрініс табады. Осы функция тұрғысынан қазақ және қарақалпақ дәстүрлі киімі өзіндік визуалды «паспорт» ретінде қарастырылуы мүмкін, ол белгілі бір ру-тұқымдық бірегейлікті көрсетеді.

**Түйін сөздер:** ру-тайпалық бірегейлік, визуалдандыру, қазақтар, қарақалпақтар, дәстүрлі киім, бас киім, кимешек/киймешек, маркер, таңбалық жүйе, вербалды емес коммуникация.

**Дәйексөз үшін:** Жанерке, Шайгозова және Құрбанова Земфира. “Қазақ және қарақалпақ дәстүрлі киіміндегі ру-тайпалық бірегейліктің визуалдануы (кимешек/киймешек мысалында)”. *Central Asian Journal of Art Studies*, Vol. 11, No. 1, 2026, pp.120 – 140, DOI: 10.47940/cajas.v11i1.1146

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*Авторлар қолжазбаның соңғы нұсқасын оқып, мақұлдады және мүдделер қақтығысы жоқ екенін мәлімдейді.*

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