

**OPEN ACCESS**

SUBMITTED 30 August 2025
ACCEPTED 23 September 2025
PUBLISHED 31 October 2025
VOLUME Vol.05 Issue10 2025

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The Concept Of Karakalpak Youth And The Historical, Social, And Spiritual Foundations Of Its Formation

Usenov Jiengaliy

Acting Associate Professor at Nukus State Pedagogical Institute, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), Uzbekistan

Abstract: The notion of “Karakalpak youth” is not only a demographic label for people aged 14–30 living in the Republic of Karakalpakstan; it is a cultural, historical and axiological construct formed at the crossroads of the Aral Sea civilization, steppe and Khorezm traditions, Soviet nationality policy and contemporary Uzbek state youth policy. According to Uzbek legislation, Karakalpakstan has the right to implement its own youth policy within the national framework, which allows the region to reflect its specific linguistic, ecological and cultural context in programs for young people. At the same time, the ethnogenesis of the Karakalpaks, which combined Oghuz, Kipchak, Khorezmian and later Kazakh components, created a multi-layered identity in which loyalty to the land of the Lower Amu Darya, Islamic spirituality, epic oral tradition and a sense of historical vulnerability in the Aral Sea zone were central. The article analyses how these historical, social and spiritual factors shaped the value system, social roles and civic orientations of Karakalpak youth in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. It is argued that the current generation of young Karakalpaks is simultaneously the bearer of a rich nomadic-sedentary cultural heritage and the main resource for overcoming ecological, economic and demographic challenges in the region. The study concludes that strengthening spiritual continuity, improving youth participation mechanisms and expanding culturally competent education in Karakalpak and Uzbek languages are essential for sustaining this identity.

Keywords: Karakalpak youth; ethnogenesis; state youth policy; Aral Sea region; spiritual heritage; oral

tradition; identity formation.

INTRODUCTION: Karakalpakstan is an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan, occupying the north-western part of the country, with about two million inhabitants, of whom roughly a third identify as Karakalpaks, while sizeable Uzbek and Kazakh communities live alongside them. This multiethnic setting has always required a careful balance between republican autonomy and all-Uzbek integration. On the one hand, Karakalpaks possess a distinct Turkic language, epic tradition and decorative art connected to centuries of life around the Amu Darya and the Aral Sea. On the other hand, modern Karakalpak youth grow up in the political, educational and digital space of Uzbekistan, speak Uzbek and Russian, study in national universities and participate in nationwide youth organizations. This tension makes the concept of “Karakalpak youth” analytically interesting, because it combines universal categories of youth studies—socialization, employment, value change—with region-specific historical and spiritual layers. The national tourism and cultural portals describe Karakalpak culture as the outcome of interaction between Pecheneg, Oghuz, Kipchak and Khorezm civilizational zones, which preserved irrigated agriculture, fishing and semi-nomadic herding while integrating Islamic institutions.

Independence of Uzbekistan in 1991 was followed by the adoption of the Law “On the Fundamentals of State Youth Policy,” which explicitly stated that the Republic of Karakalpakstan can “independently determine and realize the state youth policy” in its territory. This legal provision is important because it recognized that youth in Karakalpakstan might have specific needs: ecological migration caused by the drying of the Aral Sea, higher rurality, and the necessity to preserve the Karakalpak language, folklore and crafts. Later, the 2016 updated law and program documents of 2021–2025 again emphasized youth participation, employment and spiritual education, placing Karakalpak initiatives in one line with national reforms.

However, law and policy do not by themselves produce a youth identity. For Karakalpaks the sense of belonging is deeply rooted in historical memories of the Lower Amu Darya, in the oral performance of heroic and romantic dastans by baksy and jirau, and in Sufi-Islamic practices that survived alongside adat. Modern young people in Nukus, Khojeyli or Muynak find themselves located between this inherited world and the contemporary challenges of labor migration, climate-induced health problems and the fast modernization of Uzbekistan’s economy. Therefore the aim of this article

is to conceptualize Karakalpak youth as a historical-social-spiritual construct and to reveal the foundations which produced it from the 18th century to the present.

The study uses an interdisciplinary qualitative design. First, historical sources and contemporary overviews on Karakalpak ethnogenesis and cultural heritage were examined, including works on the interaction of Karakalpaks with Uzbeks, Kazakhs and Turkmens in the 18th–20th centuries and on the medieval Khorezm background of the region. These texts make it possible to reconstruct the long-term factors that formed collective consciousness—mobility along the Amu Darya, a defensive attitude toward the land and collective solidarity around water and pasture resources.

Second, legal documents of Uzbekistan and Karakalpakstan on state youth policy (1991 law, 2016 law, 2021 concept) and analytical papers that assess their implementation were analyzed to determine the official age boundaries, policy priorities and mechanisms of youth involvement.

Third, ethnographic and folklore studies of Karakalpak spiritual life, especially those dealing with Sufi influences, oral literature, music and children’s folklore, were used to identify the value-normative layer of youth socialization.

Finally, a contextual method was applied: the materials were interpreted against the background of present-day socio-economic processes in Karakalpakstan, such as the consequences of the Aral Sea catastrophe, urban growth in Nukus and the expansion of higher education. This enabled us to see how historical and spiritual constants interact with new social structures.

The concept of youth in Karakalpak society historically appeared later than the institution of the extended family and clan-territorial communities. In the traditional system, personality was defined primarily through kin (urug), place (aul, kishlak), occupation (fisher, farmer, craftsman) and religious belonging. Age differentiation existed but was not institutionalized as in modern states. Young men passed through labor and military socialization within the community, while young women entered the sphere of marriage alliances early, which consolidated inter-clan cooperation along the Amu Darya. The emergence of the modern category “youth” became possible only with the integration of Karakalpak lands into the Russian Empire and later the Soviet Union, where schooling, military conscription, Komsomol and the planned economy created separate youth cohorts with their own organizations and mobility. Despite this, pre-modern cultural codes—respect for elders, collective decision-making, sacralization of land and water—remained the

normative base, and they still influence today's youth attitudes to authority and social hierarchy.

A specific historical factor that molded Karakalpak youth was the frontier position of the region. Karakalpaks were often located between stronger neighbors and migrating groups, which generated a heightened sense of group solidarity and survival. Ethnographic research notes that the Karakalpak worldview often connects the wellbeing of the community with the moral order, meaning that violation of *adat*, disunity or disrespect for elders is believed to cause misfortune. This moral geography was transmitted through oral epics performed by *jirau*, in which young heroes defended the land, restored justice and guaranteed continuity of the people. Young listeners internalized the model of a brave, generous, religiously conscious protector, and this ideal entered the spiritual foundations of the Karakalpak youth identity.

The Soviet period introduced mass education, literacy and a new concept of youth as the vanguard of modernization. For Karakalpaks this was ambivalent. On the one hand, it opened access to teacher training, medical schools, engineering and art; on the other hand, it introduced a standardized Soviet identity that tended to minimize local particularities. The Nukus museum project and the ethnographic expeditions around Karakalpakstan in the mid-20th century, however, helped preserve visual and narrative heritage and later became a powerful symbolic resource for post-Soviet generations. The present-day youth who study or work in Nukus encounter this heritage in museums, festivals and media, which strengthens a sense of belonging to a unique culture with both nomadic and settled roots.

In the post-independence period, the social foundations of Karakalpak youth were redefined by two parallel processes: national youth policy of Uzbekistan and regional ecological-economic challenges. The 1991 and 2016 laws established youth as citizens aged 14–30, guaranteed them access to education, labor, health care, culture and participation, and specifically allowed Karakalpakstan to adapt these measures to its conditions. State programs and the Youth Union of Uzbekistan then created channels for mobility and leadership, which meant that a young person from Karauzyak or Takhtakupir could take part in national contests, study in Tashkent and at the same time represent Karakalpak culture.

Ecological degradation of the Aral Sea, salinization of soils and related health problems became another strong socializing factor. For young people this created a narrative of responsibility for the region, a feeling that

they must both preserve traditional livelihoods and master modern professions to diversify the economy. Youth participation in environmental, cultural and volunteering projects in Muynak or Khodjeili is therefore not only civic activity but also a continuation of the historical ethic of guarding their land. The state policy discourse, which describes youth as the “leading force of Uzbekistan,” resonated well in Karakalpakstan because it gave institutional recognition to the long-standing collective ethos.

The spiritual foundations of Karakalpak youth formation are rooted in Islam of the Khorezm tradition, Sufi orders that spread in the Aral region and the pre-Islamic layer of protective beliefs connected with water, fertility and ancestors. Recent research on the influence of Sufi traditions in Karakalpakstan shows that practices of revering saints, visiting mazars and performing charitable rituals persist and often involve young people, though in reinterpreted forms. These practices socialize youth into respect for continuity, moderation, mutual help and service to the community. At the same time, oral folklore—fairy tales, proverbs, children's songs—conveys linguistic and aesthetic norms distinct from Uzbek or Kazakh traditions. Young Karakalpaks who pass through this cultural environment develop a stable symbolic code: the steppe and river as motherland, the yurt and ornaments as signs of home, the hero-defender as moral ideal, the wise elder as legitimate authority.

Another important spiritual element is the multi-confessional tolerance historically inherent in Karakalpakstan due to close contacts with Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Turkmens and even Slavic settlers. Historians emphasize that ethnic-cultural relations in the 18th–20th centuries were dominated by pragmatic cooperation in trade, water distribution and defense, and conflicts were usually resolved through negotiation. This experience was transformed into a social norm of peaceful coexistence and respect for diversity, which is visible today in mixed families, bilingualism and the readiness of young people to work in different cultural environments. Thus, interethnic tolerance is not an abstract ideological demand but a lived historical memory, and it enters the identity of Karakalpak youth as evidence of their people's ability to survive in a complex environment.

Taken together, these historical, social and spiritual foundations show that “Karakalpak youth” is not merely a subcategory of Uzbek youth policy. It is a group whose worldview was shaped by environmental vulnerability, by the symbolic centrality of the Aral Sea, by the synthesis of Turkic and Khorezmian cultural codes, by oral epic performance, by Islamic–Sufi ethics of service and by Soviet-era modernization. The present

generation inherits all these layers; therefore, educational and cultural work with them must rely on bicultural and even tricultural competencies (Karakalpak, Uzbek, Russian/Kazakh) and must connect ecological initiatives with spiritual values rather than present them as purely technical tasks.

The analysis confirms that the concept of Karakalpak youth is historically conditioned, socially institutionalized and spiritually saturated. Historically, the frontier location of the Aral region and the ethnogenesis of the Karakalpaks produced a collective identity centered on land, water and solidarity. Socially, the post-1991 legal framework of Uzbekistan enabled Karakalpakstan to develop a youth policy that takes into account ecological challenges, rurality and the need to preserve language and culture. Spiritually, Islamic and Sufi traditions, together with oral folklore, continue to transmit values of respect, service and cultural pride to the young. To sustain this identity in the era of migration and digitalization, it is necessary to deepen the participation of youth in local self-government, to strengthen bilingual and bicultural education, to digitize folklore and museum resources in the Karakalpak language and to integrate ecological volunteering into spiritual-moral education. If these steps are taken, Karakalpak youth will continue to be the key resource for the cultural and economic renewal of the republic.

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