

The Karakalpak Yurt

Contents

[Yurt Anatomy](#)

[Yurtmaking](#)

[Tent Bands](#)

[The Yurt Door](#)

[Inside the Yurt](#)

[Qarshons](#)

[Esikqas](#)

[Kergis](#)

[Other Bags](#)

[Yurt Erection](#)

[Yurt Customs](#)

[Yurt History](#)

[Overview](#)

[Special Features of the Karakalpak Yurt](#)

[Types of Karakalpak Yurt](#)

[Materials Available for Yurt Construction](#)

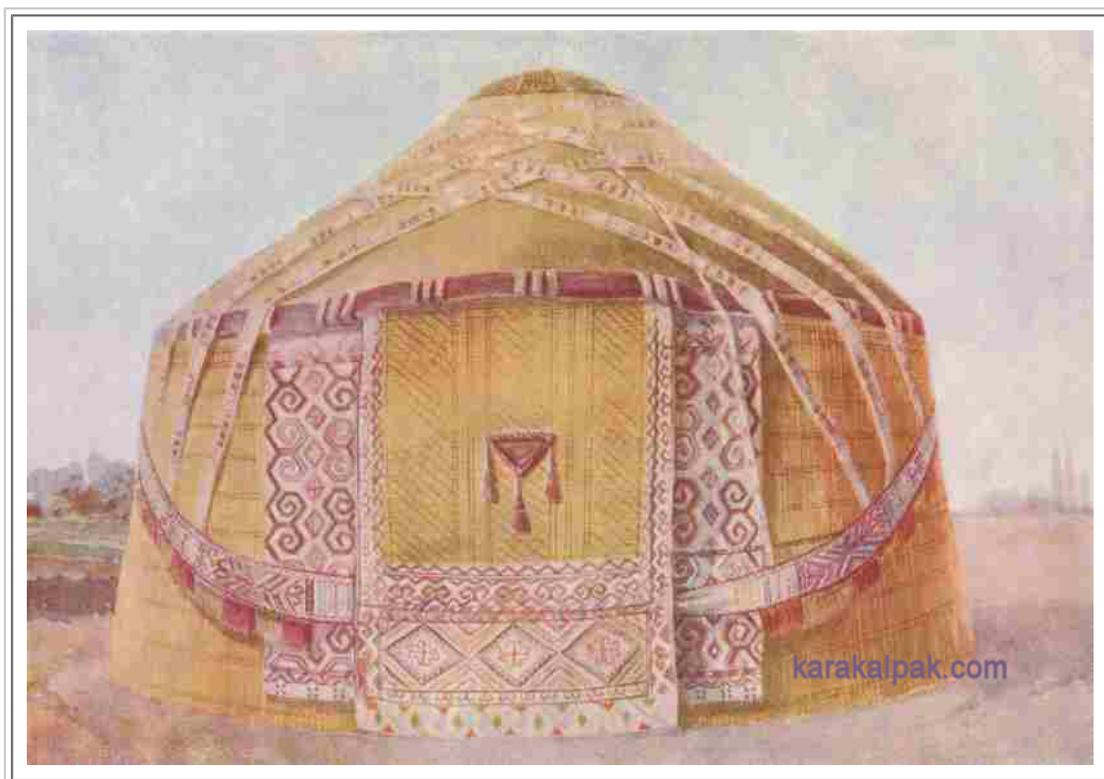
[Yurtmaking Crafts](#)

[Pronunciation of Karakalpak Terms](#)

[References](#)

Overview

The Karakalpak yurt is unmistakable. Erected and fully decorated, it becomes a glorious expression of Karakalpak folk art.



An idealistic image of the Karakalpak yurt.

[Home Page](#)

[New Book](#)

[Lectures & Articles](#)

[The Karakalpaks](#)

[Costume](#)

[Yurts](#)

[History](#)

[Karakalpakstan](#)

[Tour Guide](#)

[Glossary](#)

[External Links](#)

[About Us](#)

[Contact Us](#)

Courtesy of the Khorezm Archaeological and Ethnographic Expedition, Moscow.

The Karakalpaks inherited the yurt from their Turkic ancestors – the essential characteristics of the collapsible trellis-walled felt yurt had already been fully developed before the Karakalpak confederation of tribes emerged in the 15th or 16th centuries somewhere in the vicinity of the lower Syr Darya.

The yurt has remained the predominant dwelling for the Karakalpak family up until the early part of the Soviet era. A multitude of different crafts and skills were required to make its various component parts. Not surprisingly it has become the centre piece of a whole branch of Karakalpak culture and folk lore.

The yurt has many qualities: portable yet robust; quick to erect and dismantle yet stable and secure; warm in the bitter winters yet cool in the baking summers; affordable for a livestock-breeder yet capable of being used by a Khan. Of course the design of the Turkic yurt has evolved through a process akin to natural selection over almost one and a half thousand years. Each tribal confederation developed its own style of yurt with its own unique features, so although Karakalpaks lived besides Uzbeks, Qazaqs, and Turkmen in the Aral Delta, their individual yurts were immediately discernable.



A Karakalpak yurt with a **shiy** screen and outer door. Photographed at some time prior to 1960. From Vasilyeva and Makhova, 1960.

Yurts are normally associated with nomadic pastoral societies, so it is important that we remember that the Karakalpaks were not nomads. They were traditionally “semi-settled”, meaning that each clan would have a wintering ground, *q•slaw*, and a summering ground, *jazlaw*, the two usually not too far apart from each other.

In the winter the yurts would be erected inside a windbreak fence for protection, and another fenced enclosure or *qora* would be built for the cattle. In the spring they would move their yurts to the summering ground, close to the cultivated areas, allowing their herds to graze on the surrounding pastureland and marshes. Working bullocks would be used to till the land. The *aw•ls* of individual clans were often located close to a water channel to which the members of that clan had hereditary rights. In the winter they relied on their agricultural by-products for forage: hay, wheat and millet straw, *ju'weri* stems (sorghum), and cane. In the autumn the fodder would be harvested and moved to the wintering ground by bullock cart or *arba*. In the marshy areas, especially in the north of the delta, this fodder would be supplemented by harvesting the local rushes.



A local fisherman with a *qay•q* full of fish.

The Karakalpak fisher-folk who lived in the northern part of the delta had a different lifestyle. Their *aw•ls* were often described as "cities of reeds" because their yurts had walls and roofs of reed, their farms had reed fences, and their cattle were kept in reed shelters. The men would depart on fishing expeditions, often making temporary camps on floating islands of vegetation while their nets were cast. In 1873 Major Herbert Wood sailed through the northern delta on the Russian gun-boat steamer "Samarkand" as a member of the Russian Imperial Geographical Society expedition to the Aral Delta. The sight of the local Karakalpak fishermen was a shock:

"Poor and ill-clothed as these people are, each little gang of fishermen has a canopy or tent of cotton cloth, within which to pass their nights; for without such shelter, sleep, and perhaps, indeed, life, would be impossible, so innumerable are the mosquitoes and so painful are the bites of these insects in this locality."

In addition to their seasonal migrations Karakalpaks often had to move because of the changes to the river systems, which frequently flooded, forcing them to seek out new dry areas of land. In the same year of 1873 A. V. Kaulbars observed that:

"Approaching the Karakalpak village, located near the small estuary, supplied with water by the Amu only at high water, we saw bustle; cries were heard from all sides; property and nomad tents were rapidly loaded onto *arbas*, and everything which was prepared was moved away somewhere in a hurry. Assuming that our unexpected appearance was the reason for this flight, we accelerated our step and sent our leaders to quiet the population. It proved to be, however, that the reason for the bustle was the rapid increase in the level of water in the adjacent estuary, and before our eyes the place occupied by the village was flooded, so that the *arbas* which had arrived late were being loaded by people already standing in water."

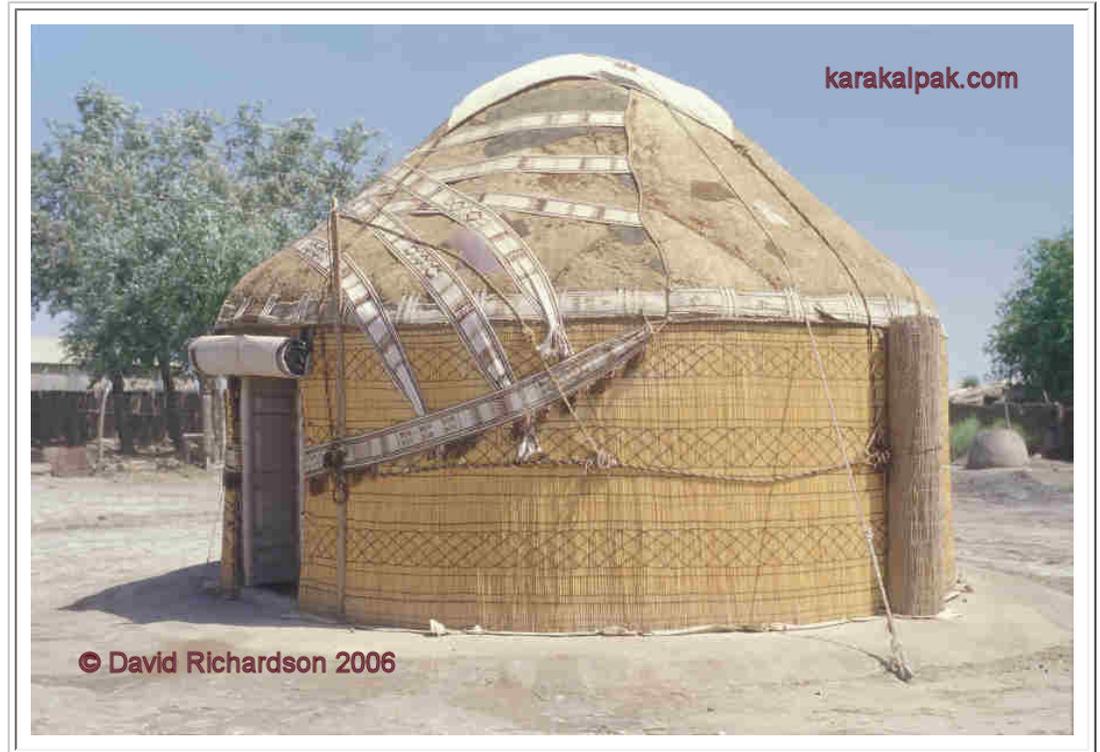
Although Kaulbars recorded that every Karakalpak in the delta was involved in farming to various degrees, not every clan was the same. Some engaged in simple agriculture while others relied on more sophisticated irrigational farming. Herbert Wood noted that the riverbanks were lined with dense beds of tall rushes backed by low, scrubby, thorny jungle. But beyond, on the higher ground, were wide and open pastures occupied by Karakalpak herds of cattle and occasional encampments with small agricultural plots. Closer to Qon'•rat there was more intensive irrigated agriculture, supplied with water by

wheels powered by horses. Here the Karakalpaks were growing wheat, barley, oats, and melons as well as lucerne for animal feed, and, on the wetter ground, rice.

Special Features of the Karakalpak Yurt

The Karakalpak yurt is similar to the Turkmen, Uzbek, Qazaq, and Kyrgyz yurt, but does have some unique features, such as a distinctive *shan'araq*, or roof wheel.

From a distance Karakalpak yurts have a characteristic cone-shaped roof, whereas the roof of the Qazaq or Turkmen yurt is traditionally dome-shaped. Having said this, modern Qazaq yurts made in Karakalpakstan are now also cone-shaped. In the 19th century some Qazaqs used animal skins rather than felts to cover their yurt roof.



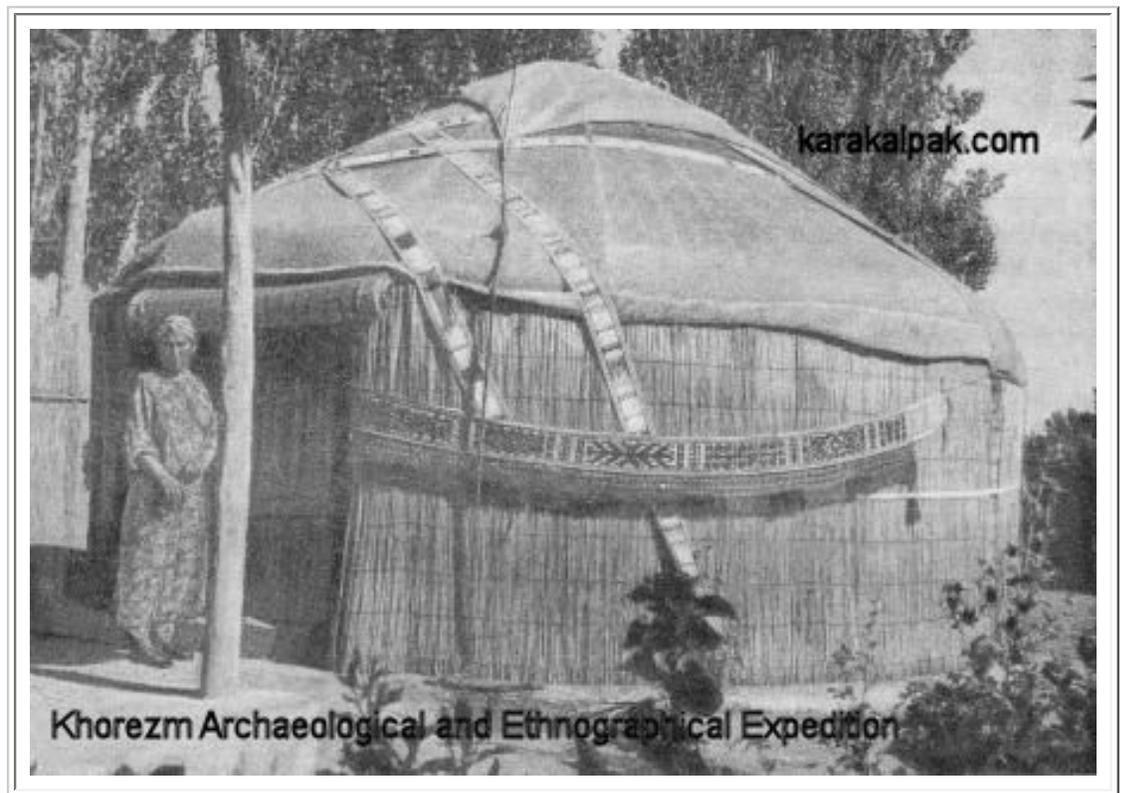
Karakalpak yurts have retained their distinctive conical roof shape up to the present day.

However the yurts of the Khorezmian Uzbeks and the southern Kyrgyz also had a conical roof, the *uw•qs* having a single bend about 45cm from the end, just like the Karakalpak. Of course Kyrgyz yurts were never seen in the Aral Delta, but Uzbek yurts were quite common in the 19th century, especially on the left bank of the Amu Darya.

The main difference between the Karakalpak and the Uzbek yurt lies in the

kerege trellis wall: Uzbek *qanats* were made from thicker and rounder poles and had much smaller lattice openings (*ko'z*). Zadykhina reported that an Uzbek yurt could weigh three times as much as a Karakalpak or Qazaq yurt, the reason being that the Uzbeks were settled so their yurts were never moved. In the winter, even though the felts and *shiy* screens were removed, the frames were often left in situ. Another obvious difference between Karakalpak, Qazaq, and Uzbek yurts is that the frames of the latter were never stained red.

When properly decorated, the Karakalpak yurt can be immediately identified from the white tent bands criss-crossing the roof, the *shiy* screen walls, the jolly pink and brown *janbaw* suspended like a garland on either side of the door, and the bold ram's horn motifs on the weavings flanking each side of the door.



An Uzbek yurt from the Qon'rat region of the Aral Delta

The one complicating feature is that within the Aral Delta some Qazaqs and Uzbeks purchased their tent bands from the Karakalpaks. Consequently some of the yurts in regions such as Qon'rat that were owned by Aral Uzbeks still had the appearance of a Karakalpak yurt.

Types of Karakalpak Yurt

The normal yurt is called a *qara u'y*, meaning black home or dwelling, so

called because over time the covering felts become darkened. This was especially so in the old days when every yurt had a hearth. Some well-to-do families erected two yurts: one, the *qara u'y*, was used as the living quarters for the elderly relatives and children; the other, the *otaw* (sometimes transliterated as *otau* or *otav*), was used for leisure and for receiving guests.

Wealthier families would also erect an *otaw* at the time of a wedding, so that the bride and groom could spend their first nights together in private. This would be specially decorated as part of the wedding celebrations, its furnishings being an obligatory part of the bride's dowry. However Anna Morazova noted that the distinction between a *qara u'y* and an *otaw* was a fine one, since the decoration of some *qara u'y* was just as good as that for a new *otaw*.

It is possible that the word *otaw* derives from *otüy*, the word used by the Noghay for a similar marriage tent. Andrews quotes Bonch-Osmolovskiy, who noted that some writers refer to the Qazaq white tent as an *ota-üy*. The term white tent refers, of course, to a new yurt as opposed to an old or blackened one.



As Karakalpak families built single-storey adobe houses in the early Soviet period, the yurt was retained for recreational use and for sleeping in the hot delta summers.

We should note here that although the word yurt has now become completely established in the Western vocabulary as a label for a portable trellis-walled

dwelling, its use is not strictly correct. Today the yurt is actually the ground on which the trellis-walled dwelling (the so-called yurt) sits – the Karakalpaks call this the *jurt*. In the past the Turkic word yurt referred to a territory, such as a camp site, an expanse of steppe pasturage over which an individual, family or clan held grazing rights, or an estate from which an aristocratic tribal leader derived an income. The misattribution comes from the Russians, who described a nomadic dwelling as either a *yourta* or else a *kibitka*. The latter is also incorrect, being derived from the Turkic *kebit*, meaning booth. Most Turkic tribes use the word for dwelling to describe a yurt, such as *ev*, *öy*, or *üy*.

For simplicity we will continue to use the word yurt, which is now a well-established and understood term for a portable, felt-covered, trellis-walled dwelling in the West.

Materials Available for Yurt Construction

In the past the lower reaches of the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya supported a unique and thriving natural environment. Numerous winding channels, oxbows, and sweet-water lakes were separated by extensive marshes and swamps, many choked with dense stands of reeds and rushes, some up to 8 metres high! In some areas the perennial reeds formed floating islands of vegetation, called *kupaki* by the Karakalpaks. The surrounding banks were covered with impenetrable tangles of *tugay* forest, with shoreline communities giving way to reedbeds, then gallery forests, then fringe shrubs, sedges, and finally desert, the latter providing patches of low-quality pastureland along its fringes. Endemic varieties of poplar and willow dominated the forests, while tamarisk and *elaeanus* filled the shrub thickets. This dense vegetative cover provided habitats for a rich spectrum of wildlife: birds, waterfowl, large and small mammals, amphibians, and, in the spring, huge quantities of mosquitoes.





As the Aral Delta progressively dries out, the areas of marshland become smaller and smaller.

People have lived in this region since antiquity, generally following a similar lifestyle centred on cattle-breeding and fishing. This has led some to assume that there must have been a continuum of occupation within the deltas, the Karakalpaks being descendants of the original Apasiak marsh dwellers who entered the region over two and a half millennia ago.

The heterogenic nature of the Karakalpaks and their genetic similarity to the Khorezmian Uzbeks proves that this cannot be so. The explanation for this similarity in lifestyle is quite different – the special features of the delta environment determine the domestic economy of the peoples who successfully inhabit it. For example the Kelteminar people, who arrived in the region in the 4th millennium BC, built communal shelters made of poplar which they roofed with reeds. They were hunter-gatherers who lived primarily by fishing and hunting game. Later pastoral inhabitants, such as the Tazabagyab, the Apasiaks, the Jety Asar, the Pechenegs, and the Kerder were all cattle-breeders, who supplemented their diet through fishing, hunting, and simple farming.

In the 19th century the Karakalpak Qon'orat, who lived in the northern part of the delta, were mainly cattle-breeders and fishermen, while the lives of the more southern dwelling On To'rt U'rov principally revolved around irrigated agriculture. Some cattle were raised in stalls using both agriculturally grown and natural fodders, while some were driven to summer pasturelands and were only corralled in the winter.



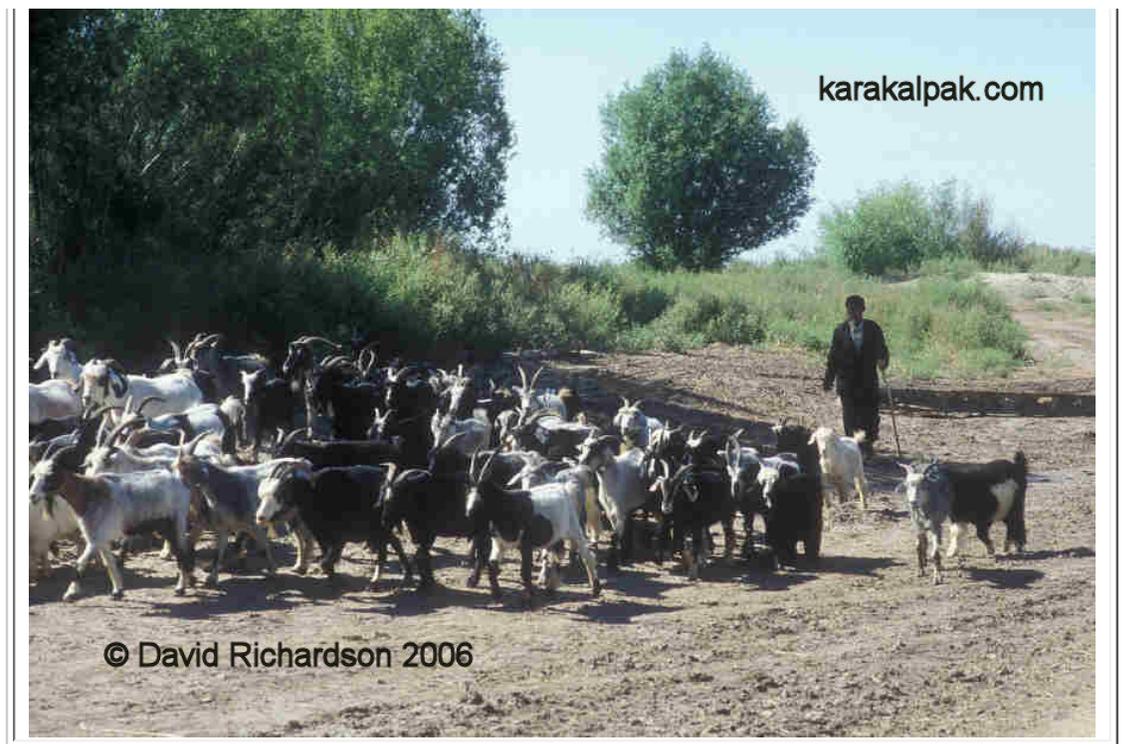
A young Karakalpak boy with cow and calf at the Sunday *mal* or large livestock bazaar.

Unlike the nomadic Turkmen and Qazaqs, the semi-settled Karakalpaks did not specialize in raising sheep until well into the 20th century. Even then there were only two specialist sheep-raising *kolxoz*, both utilizing land on the fringes of the delta. By contrast, the Turkmen long ago developed sheep farming into a refined art, breeding varieties specifically for the quality of their wool.



A mixed herd of cattle and goats in the central Aral Delta.

Sheep and camels were not suited to the marshy, frequently flooded lands of the delta, while cattle and goats thrived, feeding on the extensive reedbeds and *tugay* forest scrub. Of course sheep were bred in limited numbers in certain Karakalpak *awols* – in 1873 the Russian writer A. V. Kaulbars observed Karakalpaks keeping young lambs and kids inside the yurt for protection and observed them seasonally migrating with "fine bulls, cows, calves, goats and sheep...". Herbert Wood saw Karakalpaks moving both cattle and sheep by boat later the same year.



A Karakalpak goat herder north of Kegeyli in 2005.

However the overwhelming majority of sheep (and camels) were raised by the neighbouring Qazaqs and Turkmen on the drier low-quality pastureland surrounding the delta. This was to be found on the fringes and in the hearts of the Qizil Qum, Qara Qum, and Ustyurt deserts.

Camels too were not common among the ordinary Karakalpaks but were kept by the more wealthy *bays*, who of course were the most likely to have the best quality weavings.

Wool was available to Karakalpaks, therefore, but not as a major commodity unless, of course, it was purchased from the neighbouring nomads.

The main materials available for the construction of dwellings, the weaving of tent bands and the production of containers were as follows:

- *qam•s*, or reeds, which grew in abundance close to the river channels and canals,
- *jeken*, or bulrush, used for making rope, aprons, and sh•pta mats,
- *shiy*, a tall and thin but inflexible rush-like grass that once grew prolifically in the delta but has now died out as a result of soil salinization,
- *kend•r* or wild hemp,

- *aq tal* (*Salix oxica*) and *qara tal* (*Salix australior*), both introduced species of willow, and *aq terek* (*Populus alba pyramidalis*), white poplar,
- *qazan* or goat hair, which had longer fibres than sheep or camel wool that were more resistant to sunlight degradation,
- *paxta* or cotton, which had been grown domestically in Khorezm long before the introduction of Soviet monoculture,
- leather, animal skins, and fur pelts,
- horn and bone from goats and cattle,
- *qabaq*, or dried pumpkins and gourds,

Many of the endemic species no longer grow in the delta today and some have been replaced by introduced species which are more tolerant to salty soils.



Sacks of goat hair for sale at Shomanay bazaar.

The Karakalpak yurt and its contents were all constructed from these local materials. The components of the yurt frame and the doors were made from local willow and poplar woods, tent bands were woven from either goat hair or cotton, felts were purchased from local Qazaq nomads, and screens and outer doors were made from goat hair and *shiy*, more latterly, *qam•s*. Inside

the yurt, mats of reed or rushes were spread on the floor and were covered with simple felt mats and quilted cotton *ko'rpe*. An *alasha gilem* woven from goat hair or sheep's wool might hang on the *kerege* to decorate the *to'r* and goat hair tassels might hang from the roof. Grain might be stored in a hemp sack, while other provisions would be kept in leather, skin, or cotton storage bags, or perhaps hollow gourds, all hung from the *keregebas*.



An itinerant merchant selling dried gourds for water containers in the Aral Delta.

A wooden *sand•q* would hold the family valuables with a rectangular *qarsh•n* bag, made from goat's hair with a woollen pile front, for storing clothing on its top. Plates and cutlery were stored in a simple or perhaps a decorated cotton *kerji* storage bag. If the family was well-to-do, a small rectangular woollen-piled *esikqas* would decorate the space above the door. The husband's leather saddle and riding tack was hung from the *kerege* in the male side of the yurt.

Yurtmaking Crafts

Various crafts were employed to fashion these raw materials into the yurt and its associated artefacts. The manufacture of yurt frames required the

specialist skills of workshops with yards to store the seasoning timber, and ovens to heat-treat the wooden laths. The construction of door frames, *sand•qs*, and *sabayaqs* required carpentry and carving skills. Both were the preserve of male craftsmen.

However the textile components of the yurt, including *shiy screens*, were all made by women in the home. Until the 1920s it was the responsibility of every young girl to make her own dowry or *baw shuw* in time for her future wedding. This process could begin when she was still a child and she would receive help from her mother and any elder sisters or female relatives. In addition to costumes for herself and her mother-in-law, the dowry included a full set of tent bands and decorations for the matrimonial yurt, including an *aq basqur*, an *esikqas*, internal and external *janbaws*, a *qarsh•n*, and possibly a *kerji* tent bag.

In the case of wealthy families the parents of the fiancé would provide the frame of a new yurt, or *otaw*, for the young married couple, which would be assembled and decorated with the bride's tent bands at the time of the marriage ceremony. Less wealthy parents might be forced to accept a yurt from the bride's parents. In the case of a poor family's wedding, the married couple might have had to live with the groom's parents for many years before they could afford a yurt of their own.

Whatever the circumstances, the responsibility for producing the woven yurt components fell on the young future bride. Weaving was an essential female skill and a good weaver was assured of a good husband. Fortunately all of the items required – even the all-pile weavings - could be woven on the same crude and simple loom, the *o'rmek*, which is found throughout Central Asia and as far as Iran and Afghanistan. It has a single heddle suspended from a tripod or four-legged trestle and the two alternating sheds are formed by raising or lowering a shed stick. The girl would begin with the simplest weavings, such as *dizbe* or *qur*, working her way up over the years to the most complex tent band of all, the *aq basqur*.





A young Qazaq weaver from Sh•mbay making a modern **beldew** on an **o'rmek** loom.

Of course talented craftswomen continued to weave after they were married, making items for their own families or for sale or barter. For example it was reported that many Qazaqs and some Uzbeks purchased their tent bands and decorations from the Karakalpaks, just as the Karakalpaks obtained the felt coverings for their yurts from the Qazaqs. There are also reports that Qazaqs purchased Karakalpak *jez shiy* screens. It was only later, during the Soviet era, when skills were being lost that some craftswomen began to specialize in the production of *shiy* screens and tent bands for sale and markets developed for the sale of second-hand items – for example, Sh•mbay Sunday bazaar became an important centre for buying and selling yurt parts and tent bands.

Pronunciation of Karakalpak Terms

To listen to a Karakalpak pronounce any of the following words just click on the one you wish to hear. Please note that the dotless letter 'i' (•) is pronounced 'uh'.

aq basqur	kerege	qara u'y	sand•q
dizbe	kergi	qarsh•n	shan'araq

esikqas	ko'z	q•slaw	shiy
janbaw	o'rmek	qur	to'r
jazlaw	otaw	sabayaq	uw•q

References

- Andrews, P. A., *Nomad Tent Types in the Middle East*, Dr. Ludwig Reichert, Wiesbaden, 1997.
- Andrews, P. A., *Felt Tents and Pavilions*, Melisende, London, 1999.
- Antipina, K. I., *Special Material culture and applied art of the southern Kyrgyz* [in Russian], Academy of Science of the Kyrgyz SSR, Frunze, 1962.
- Kaulbars, A. V., *Lower reaches of the Amu Darya, described from his own research in 1873* [in old Russian], Transactions of the Russian Geographical Society, Volume 9, Saint Petersburg, 1881.
- Morozova, A. S., *The Domestic Cultural Life of the Karakalpaks* [in Russian], Doctoral Thesis, Department of History, Academy of Sciences of the Uzbek SSR, Tashkent, 1954.
- Tlewbergenova, N., *A propos des habitations Karakalpaks* [in French], in *Karakalpaks et autres gens de l'Aral*, Published by Edisud, Tashkent/Aix-en-Provence, 2002.
- Vasilyeva, G. P., and Makhova, E. I., *Programme for the collection of material on the rural dwellings of the population of Central Asia and Kazakhstan for the Historical-Ethnographical Atlas* [in Russian], pages 110 to 136, *Materials on the Historical-Ethnographical Atlas of Central Asia and Kazakhstan*, edited by Zhdanko, Moscow-Leningrad, 1961.
- Weinstein, S. I., *Problems in the Evolution of Eurasian Nomadic Dwellings*, pages 42 to 62, *Soviet Ethnography*, Number 4, 1976.
- Wood, H., *The Shores of Lake Aral*, Smith, Elder, & Co., London, 1876.
- Esbergenov, X., *Karakalpak Rites and Beliefs Related to the Yurt* [in Russian], "Science", Moscow, 2000.
- Zadykhina, K. L., *Development of Dwellings, Uzbeks of the Amu Darya delta* [in Russian], *Works of the Khorezm Archaeological-Ethnographical Expedition*, Volume 1, pages 319 to 426, Academy of Science of the USSR,

Moscow, 1952.

Visit our sister site www.qaraqalpaq.com, which uses the correct transliteration, Qaraqalpaq, rather than the Russian transliteration, Karakalpak.

[Return to top of page](#)

[Next Page: Yurt Anatomy](#)

[Home Page](#)



This site was last updated on 6 March 2012.

© David and Sue Richardson 2005 - 2014. Unless stated otherwise, all of the material on this website is the copyright of David and Sue Richardson.