

LINGUISTIC AND ETHNOCULTURAL FEATURES OF GEOGRAPHICAL NAMES IN KARAKALPAK TOPONYMY

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Abstract

This article examines the linguistic and ethnocultural features of Karakalpakstan's toponymy from theoretical and analytical perspectives. It substantiates that, alongside their function of naming geographical objects, toponyms are linguistic units that reflect the history, ethnic composition, natural and geographical environment, economic activities, and cultural worldview of the people. The article considers the history of research into Karakalpak toponymy and the classification of geographical names. The specific features of the formation of toponyms based on natural-geographical, ethnic, anthroponymic, and socio-historical motivations are identified. The names Abadan, Abas, Abat, Aqshakól, Aqjağıs, Aqmanqazğan, Qaraqol, Khojaawıl, Khatep, and Aqkól, taken from the Explanatory Dictionary of Geographical Names of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, are analyzed from linguistic, etymological, and ethnocultural perspectives. The results demonstrate that Karakalpak toponyms are not merely nominative units designating geographical objects but also linguistic sources preserving the historical and cultural memory of the people.

Keywords: Toponymy, toponym, Karakalpakstan toponymy, geographical name, ethnotoponym, hydronym, oikonym, etymology, linguoculture, historical toponym.

Introduction

Toponymy is one of the special branches of linguistics that studies the origin, development, semantic structure, etymology, and usage patterns of geographical names. Geographical names represent the linguistic result of how people perceive their surrounding environment and preserve information about the natural, historical, and social characteristics of a particular region. Therefore, toponyms should be studied not merely as names of geographical objects but as complex linguistic units formed at the intersection of language, history, ethnography, and culture (Ábdimuratov, 1965; Dosimov & Egamov, 1991).

Karakalpakstan's toponymy is of particular scholarly interest in this respect. The geographical names of the region preserve information about the people's way of life over long historical periods, migration processes, tribal and ethnic composition, economic activities, natural environment, and historical memory. The geographical names of Karakalpakstan encompass cities, districts, villages, water bodies, mountains, sands, deserts, and other geographical objects. Each of them provides specific information when examined from linguistic, historical, and geographical perspectives (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

The systematic study of Karakalpak toponymy began to develop from the middle of the twentieth century. Q. Ábdimuratov's work *Nege usılay atalğan?* is one of the important studies devoted to identifying the origins of geographical names, while T. Begjanov's *Qaraqalpaq tili*



dialektologiyası máselelerinen examines regional features of linguistic units. The work *Jer atamaların qısqasha túsındırme sózligi* by Z. Dosimov and X. Egamov occupies a special place in the lexicographic systematization of geographical names (Ábdimuratov, 1965; Begjanov, 1971; Dosimov & Egamov, 1991).

The study of Karakalpakstan's toponymy continued in subsequent periods. The research of K. Nurjonov and Ğ. Khojaniyazov devoted to the Amu Darya provides valuable material for the historical and geographical interpretation of hydronyms, while J. Moyanov's work on the history of the Kegeyli region pays attention to linking regional geographical names with historical sources (Nurjonov & Khojaniyazov, 2004; Moyanov, 2009). K. Qunnazarov systematized geographical names from a regional perspective in his work on the cities and districts of Karakalpakstan (Qunnazarov, 2016).

Regional studies of toponymy are also of great importance for identifying the internal structure of Karakalpak toponymy. G. Abishov's work devoted to the toponyms of Shımbay District makes it possible to identify the principles of toponym formation based on materials from a particular area. The *Dictionary of Karakalpakstan Toponyms* by Q. Paxratdinov and G. Abishov is one of the important works aimed at systematically collecting and explaining geographical names (Abishov, 2020; Paxratdinov & Abishov, 2021).

The specialized study of hydronyms constitutes a distinct area within the study of Karakalpakstan toponymy. G. Mambetova's research on the hydronyms of the northern districts of Karakalpakstan demonstrates how geographical characteristics, natural conditions, and the experience of the people are reflected in the names of water bodies (Mambetova, 2021).

One of the important recent works aimed at generalizing the toponymy of Karakalpakstan is the *Explanatory Dictionary of Geographical Names of the Republic of Karakalpakstan*, prepared by Q. M. Seytniyazov, O. O. Baltabayev, G. M. Abishov, M. D. Qurbanov, and G. A. Tureeva. The work systematically presents geographical names found throughout Karakalpakstan and analyzes each name from linguistic, historical, and geographical perspectives. The dictionary is based on many years of scholarly research, archival documents, and ethnographic materials collected from the population (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

The aim of the article is to theoretically reveal the linguistic and ethnocultural nature of Karakalpakstan toponyms and identify the motivations underlying their formation using specific geographical names as examples.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives were established:

1. to clarify the theoretical content of the concepts of *toponym* and *toponymy*;
2. to identify the main areas of research into Karakalpak toponymy;
3. to determine the principal motivations underlying the formation of geographical names;
4. to identify the specific features of ethnotoponyms, hydronyms, and natural-geographical names;
5. to analyze ten selected toponyms from linguistic, etymological, and cultural perspectives;
6. to evaluate toponyms as linguistic units preserving the historical and cultural memory of the people.



Research Methods

The article employs descriptive, componential, etymological, comparative, and linguocultural analysis methods. The primary source is the information presented in the *Explanatory Dictionary of Geographical Names of the Republic of Karakalpakstan*. In analyzing the toponyms, their structural composition, semantic components, formation motivations, and relationships with geographical objects were compared. Such a comprehensive approach makes it possible to reveal not only the dictionary meaning of a toponym but also the historical and ethnocultural information underlying it.

2. Linguistic and Ethnocultural Analysis of Karakalpakstan Toponyms

2.1. ABADAN

Abadan is the name of a populated locality and railway station in Nukus District as well as in Qońrat District. According to the dictionary, the origin of the name is associated with people who migrated to the area to work on railway lines. The newcomers named the place Abadan, expressing the wish that the area would become prosperous and well-developed. The lexical meaning of the word includes such concepts as *sufficient*, *abundant*, *plentiful*, *prosperous*, and *well-being* (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

The distinctive feature of this toponym is that it not only designates a geographical object but also reflects the wishes and aspirations of the people. Thus, the name Abadan was formed in connection with social conditions and people's hopes for the future.

From a linguistic perspective, the component *abadan* entered the geographical name as an already existing lexical unit. From an ethnocultural perspective, it reflects folk concepts associated with a good life, prosperity, abundance, and peace. Therefore, Abadan may be classified as a toponym motivated by a good wish.

2.2. ABAS

Abas is the name of a populated locality in Shımbay District. The toponym is based on the name of the Abas tribal subdivision. The dictionary identifies Abas as one of the subdivisions of the Aranshi Keneges tribe of the Karakalpaks and notes that members of this tribal group mainly lived in the settlement (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

This example clearly demonstrates that toponyms can preserve ethnic history. In this case, the geographical name was formed not on the basis of a natural feature or relief but on the basis of the name of an ethnic unit.

The structure of the toponym is simple: Abas → Abas. In other words, an ethnonym directly became the name of a geographical object and subsequently developed into a toponym. Such names are highly significant for identifying the ethnotoponymic layer of Karakalpakstan's toponymy.

2.3. ABAT / ABATAWIL

The names Abat and Abatawıl occur as names of several geographical objects in Kegeyli, Xojeli, Beruniy, Taxtakópir, and Shımbay districts. According to the dictionary, these names were given in accordance with the people's good wishes for prosperity, peacefulness, security, and harmonious living (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).



Like Abadan, Abat is motivated by a positive wish. However, its semantic core is somewhat more specific: the component *abat* is associated with the concept of a peaceful, comfortable, and secure life.

The broad geographical distribution of this name is also noteworthy. The recurrence of the same word or root in several districts demonstrates its semantic stability in the folk language.

2.4. AQSHAKÓL

Aqshakól is the name of a lake and populated locality in Ellikqala and Beruniy districts. According to the dictionary, the toponym is not interpreted simply as a combination of *aq* + *sha* + *kól*, but is primarily associated with the component *aq*. The word *aq* is widespread in Turkic languages and, alongside its literal meaning referring to color, also has figurative meanings. For example, in certain contexts, the component *aq* may express the concepts of fortune, abundance, prosperity, and well-being (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

In this case, it is insufficient to interpret the semantics of the toponym simply as “a lake of white color.” The broad semantic field of the component *aq* in the worldview of Turkic peoples should also be taken into consideration.

Thus, the toponym Aqshakól combines a geographical component (*kól*, “lake”) with an evaluative-cultural component (*aq*). This makes it possible to reveal its linguocultural content.

2.5. AQJAĞIS

Aqjağis is one of the toponyms with a strong historical content. The dictionary records several explanations of the name preserved in oral tradition. According to one of them, the place was called Aqjağis because a boatman dressed in white clothes and wearing a white cap could be seen from a distance. It is also reported that in the first half of the eighteenth century a large fortress existed here and that during the period of the Khiva Khanate fires were lit at this location to protect against enemies and inform the population (Ábdimuratov, 1965; Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

The interesting feature of this toponym lies in the relationship between the toponym and folklore narrative. That is, the etymology of the name is associated with an oral story. In such cases, it is necessary to study not only the linguistic structure of the toponym but also the folklore materials that have developed around it.

In the name Aqjağis, the component *aq* may indicate a visual feature, while the component *jağis* may be related to the location or coastal characteristics of the geographical object. However, based on the available dictionary data, it is not possible to provide an equally definite etymological explanation for all components of the name. Therefore, unsupported hypotheses should not be presented as established facts.

2.6. AQMANQAZĞAN

Aqmanqazğan is the name of a well in Qońırat District and represents a hydronym. The well is located west of Barsakelmes. According to the dictionary, the origin of the name is associated with a wealthy man named Aqman. According to the account, Aqman had a well dug to provide drinking water for himself and his livestock. Therefore, the well came to be called Aqmanqazğan (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).



This toponym was formed on the basis of an anthroponym + action-denoting component. Thus, a personal name became part of the name of a geographical object and subsequently remained permanently associated with that object.

The example of Aqmanqazǵan demonstrates the direct influence of human activity on the naming of geographical space in Karakalpakstan toponymy. Here, the well is not merely a water source but a historical object whose name preserves the memory of the person who created it and his activity.

2.7. AQMOLA

Aqmola is the name of a lake and sacred site in Qońırat District. According to the dictionary, the historical reason for this name is associated with the construction of dwellings in the area. In earlier periods, when bricks were unavailable, white stones were brought from other places for construction. Since the houses were built from this white stone, the place came to be called Aqmola (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

The toponym Aqmola demonstrates the intersection of a natural characteristic and human activity. Although the name may initially appear to be associated with color, its underlying motivation is connected with the people's experience of using construction materials.

This example demonstrates that in the formation of a toponym, not only the geographical environment itself but also the interaction between humans and the geographical environment may constitute a fundamental factor.

2.8. QARAQOL

Qaraqol is the name of a lake in Taxtakópir District and is a hydronym. According to the dictionary, the lake was called "Qaraqol" because its external shape resembled a hand (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

This example represents a clear manifestation of the principle of naming a geographical object according to its shape.

The first component of the toponym is *qara*. However, it would be incorrect to automatically interpret it as "black." The meanings of toponymic components may change depending on context. Dictionary materials also indicate that the component *qara* may have been associated in some old Turkic words with concepts such as land, dry land, elevation, or hillock (Koýshıbaev, 1965).

Therefore, when interpreting the name Qaraqol, its components should not be limited exclusively to their meanings in the modern literary language.

2.9. KHOJAAWÍL

Khojaawıl is the name of a populated locality occurring in several districts of Karakalpakstan. According to the dictionary, the name consists of the components *Khoja* and *awıl* and is associated with a settlement founded by people belonging to the Khoja ethnic group or tribal community (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

The component *Khoja* is particularly widespread in Karakalpakstan's toponymy. The occurrence of numerous cities, villages, and water bodies associated with the Khoja community demonstrates its historical social and religious significance in the region. The dictionary



indicates that the word *Khoja* originates from Persian and historically expressed meanings such as *master, leader, owner, and proprietor* (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

Thus, the name Khojaawıl follows the ethnic + geographical nomenclature model. The component *Khoja* has a socio-ethnic meaning, while *awıl* identifies the type of geographical object.

2.10. KHATEP

Khatap is one of the historical names associated with the Xojeli area. The dictionary indicates that the name refers to a former rural settlement and the channel of an old riverbed. Its origin is associated with a religious-cultural center in the area. It is reported that large mosques and religious communities once existed there and that religious representatives—*khatibs*—delivered sermons to the people during Friday prayers, Ramadan, and Eid al-Adha (Ábdimuratov, 1965; Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

This name is particularly interesting because it represents the transition of a religious-social term into a geographical name. The word *khatib* is of Arabic origin and means “speaker” or “preacher.” Thus, the historical content underlying the toponym preserves features of the region’s religious life.

The study of such toponyms makes it possible to identify the relationship between geographical names and religious-cultural history.

3. Discussion

The ten toponyms examined above demonstrate that Karakalpakstan’s toponymy was not formed according to a single principle. Their formation involved natural-geographical, ethnic, anthroponymic, social, religious, and folkloric factors.

First, the natural-geographical factor is clearly reflected in hydronyms such as Qaraqol, Aqkól, and Aqshakól. In such names, the color, shape, soil, or other natural characteristic of a water body becomes the motivation for naming. For example, Qaraqol was named according to the shape of the lake, while Aqkól was associated with the fact that its water appeared white from a distance (Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

Second, the ethnic factor predominates in toponyms such as Abas and Khojaawıl. These names preserve the connection between geographical space and a particular tribe, clan, or socio-ethnic group. The relatively high proportion of ethnotoponyms in Karakalpakstan’s geographical names can be explained by the historical ethnic composition of the region.

Third, the human factor is evident in names such as Aqmanqazğan and Aqmola. While Aqmanqazğan is associated with the activity of having a well dug, Aqmola reflects the practice of bringing and using construction materials. These toponyms linguistically preserve the human appropriation and transformation of geographical space.

Fourth, social and ideological factors are reflected in names such as Abadan and Abat. Such toponyms embody the people’s wishes, aspirations for a better life, and social ideals in geographical names.

Fifth, the religious-cultural factor is clearly visible in Khatap and Khojaawıl. The widespread occurrence of the component *Khoja* in Karakalpakstan’s toponymy and the association of Khatap with religious activities demonstrate the influence of religious and cultural processes on regional



toponymy.

Sixth, the folkloric factor is manifested in toponyms such as Aqjaǵıs. In such cases, information about the origin of the name is supplemented by oral stories and legends. This transforms the toponym into a shared object of study for folklore, history, and linguistics.

At the same time, several factors may operate simultaneously within a single toponym. For example, Khojaawıl combines ethnic and geographical components; Aqmanqazǵan combines anthroponymic and economic factors; while Aqjaǵıs connects geographical characteristics, folk narratives, and historical events.

From this perspective, it is insufficient to regard Karakalpakstan's toponymy merely as a "collection of place names." It is a linguocultural system in which the historical experience, ethnic composition, perception of the natural environment, and cultural memory of the people are preserved.

4. The Role of Karakalpak Toponyms as Carriers of Ethnocultural Information

The historical significance of a toponym becomes even clearer when the reason for its naming is known. For example, the name Abas provides information about the tribal structure of the Karakalpak people; Aqmanqazǵan provides information about well-digging and water-supply practices in the region; while Aqmola provides information about the methods of using construction materials.

Names such as Khojaawıl and Khatap, in turn, provide opportunities to study the history of religious and social groups in the region. The widespread occurrence of geographical names associated with the Khoja community demonstrates that its social and religious role in the history of Karakalpakstan left a clear imprint on the geographical landscape.

Another important feature of toponyms is their ability to preserve historical memory for long periods. The name of a geographical object may survive even after the event that caused the name to emerge has been forgotten. Therefore, geographical names can serve historians as valuable linguistic-historical sources alongside written records.

The introduction to the *Explanatory Dictionary of Geographical Names of the Republic of Karakalpakstan*, published in 2025, also emphasizes that geographical names provide information about the natural conditions, relief, vegetation, animal world, and mineral resources of earlier periods.

Thus, the informational content of a toponym can be viewed through three principal layers:

geographical layer → historical layer → ethnocultural layer.

Only when these three layers are considered in relation to one another can the actual semantic content of Karakalpakstan's toponymy be fully revealed.

5. Conclusion

The theoretical and linguocultural analysis of geographical names in Karakalpakstan's toponymy has produced the following conclusions.

First, toponyms are not only nominative units naming geographical objects but also linguistic sources preserving the historical, ethnic, and cultural characteristics of a particular region. Their semantics reflects natural-geographical features, human activities, tribal and ethnic relations, religious beliefs, and the wishes and aspirations of the people.



Second, the analyzed toponyms—Abadan, Abas, Abat, Aqshakól, Aqjağıs, Aqmanqazğan, Aqmola, Qaraqol, Khojaawıl, and Khatep—differ in their motivations. Names such as Abadan and Abat reflect positive wishes and aspirations for prosperity, while Abas and Khojaawıl are connected with ethnic and social factors. Aqmanqazğan and Aqmola preserve human economic activities in geographical names, whereas Qaraqol and Aqshakól are based on natural-geographical characteristics. Aqjağıs preserves folkloric and historical information, while Khatep reflects religious and cultural factors (Ábdimuratov, 1965; Seytniyazov et al., 2025).

Third, interpreting toponymic components exclusively through their modern meanings does not always produce accurate results. In particular, color components such as aq and qara may denote not only literal colors but also historical or figurative semantic meanings in geographical names. Therefore, when determining the etymology of a toponym, historical vocabulary, dialectal materials, and the geographical environment should be considered together (Begjanov, 1971; Dosimov & Egamov, 1991).

Fourth, ethnotoponyms constitute a distinct layer of Karakalpakstan's toponymy. The transfer of clan and tribal names to geographical objects makes it possible to study the ethnic history, settlement areas, and social relations of the people. In this respect, Karakalpakstan's toponyms can serve as valuable sources for reconstructing the ethnic history of the Karakalpak people (Paxratdinov & Abishov, 2021; Qunnazarov, 2016).

Fifth, hydronyms occupy a special place in Karakalpakstan's toponymy. The names of lakes, rivers, canals, wells, and other water bodies reflect not only natural characteristics associated with water but also the people's economic practices, lifestyle, and perception of the geographical environment. Aqshakól, Qaraqol, and Aqmanqazğan represent different manifestations of this layer (Mambetova, 2021; Nurjonov & Khojaniyazov, 2004).

Sixth, some toponyms emerged on the basis of anthroponymic motivation. In Aqmanqazğan, for instance, a personal name became the basis of a geographical name. Such names preserve the connection between the activity of a particular person and geographical space, thereby strengthening the historical-memory function of the toponym.

Seventh, a number of geographical names linguistically preserve the worldview and wishes of the people. Names such as Abadan and Abat transform folk concepts of prosperity, abundance, and peace into geographical names. This demonstrates that toponyms possess not only a nominative function but also an axiological, or evaluative, content (Ábdimuratov, 1965).

Eighth, folkloric materials are particularly important sources for the study of toponyms. Folk narratives associated with names such as Aqjağıs not only explain their origin but also preserve collective memories of historical events that occurred in the region. Therefore, linking toponymic studies with folklore and history is scientifically productive.

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