



ORGANOLOGICAL AND PERFORMANCE CHARACTERISTICS
OF KARAKALPAK AND TURKMEN GIRJEK INSTRUMENTS: A
COMPARATIVE-HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract: *This article explores the historical role, organological features, and mutual musical-cultural connections of the girjek (gijjak)—a leading bowed string instrument in the traditional music culture of Central Asian peoples—within the Karakalpak and Turkmen performance traditions. The study provides a comparative-analytical examination of the construction, tuning, ensemble and bakhshi accompaniment functions, as well as the similarities and distinctive features in performance techniques of the girjek in both cultures.*

Keywords: *Karakalpak national music, Turkmen girjek, organology, comparative analysis, bakhshi art, master-apprentice tradition, gijjak, bow (tartqish), ensemble performance.*

The musical culture of the Turkic peoples of Central Asia shares a common historical and cultural foundation in terms of its musical and aesthetic roots. In particular, the fraternal, neighborly, and ethnocultural ties between the Karakalpak and Turkmen peoples are vividly manifested in traditional instrumental performance. The *girjek* (gijjak), a bowed string instrument, occupies a central position as a primary accompanying instrument in the musical life of both peoples, especially in bakhshi art, epic storytelling (*dostonchilik*), and folk ensembles. Historical-ethnographic sources and musicological studies demonstrate that the instrumental schools of the Karakalpak and Turkmen peoples have mutually enriched one another,



creating a unique harmony of musical thought. The main purpose of this article is to conduct a comparative analysis of the origin, organological structure, tuning systems, and performance practices of Karakalpak and Turkmen girjeks.

1. Historical roots and mutual cultural influence

According to musicological and ethnographic data, there is a close historical and musical connection between Karakalpak and Turkmen girjek performance. The formation and popularization of girjek performance in the history of Karakalpak traditional music were significantly influenced by the performance styles and masters of the neighboring Turkmen people.

Scientific sources note that the widespread adoption and development of the girjek among Karakalpaks during the 19th and 20th centuries are closely linked with renowned bakhshis, notably Sultaniyaz (Suyew) bakhshi. The joint participation of bakhshis from both peoples in weddings, public gatherings, and epic storytelling evenings, along with the exchange of master-apprentice traditions, served to expand the performance repertoire and stylistic range of the girjek.

2. Organological and anatomical comparison

Although the girjek has preserved its ancient structure, it exhibits certain distinct constructive features in the practice of each people:

Features	Karakalpak Girjek	Turkmen Girjek
Number of strings	Traditionally strictly 3 strings (<i>mi, lya, re</i>).	Primarily 3 strings, though 4-string variants are also found in modern orchestras and ensembles.
Tuning system	Tuned mainly by fourths.	Tuned by fourths, and in modern professional performance, by fifths as well.



Features	Karakalpak Girjek	Turkmen Girjek
Soundbox (Kese) and skin covering	Compact soundbox, tightly covered mostly with catfish skin .	Slightly larger soundbox, covered with tanned goat skin, sheep skin , or fish skin.
Neck structure	The neck has no fixed (tied) frets ; the performer relies entirely on musical pitch and ear.	The neck also has no specially tied frets; the performance tempo is relatively fast and agile.
Bow (Tartqish)	Length of 50–60 cm; made from horsehair, with the lower part adapted for technical movements.	Ergonomically very lightweight, flexible, and convenient for playing rapid passages.

3. Accompaniment in bakhshi art and performance style

In both cultures, while the girjek can serve as a solo instrument, it primarily functions as an **accompanying instrument (*janapay*) to the dutor**:

- **In the Karakalpak tradition:** The girjek accompanies the *alamoynaq dutor* and the vocal delivery of the bakhshi. Performance is characterized by traditional melodic ornaments (*melizmlors*), expressive intonation, and maintaining the lyrical spirit of epic melodies. Because there are no frets, the performer relies heavily on a refined musical ear.

- **In the Turkmen tradition:** The Turkmen girjek is distinguished by active and rapid navigation across registers. It harmonizes with the unique rhythmic structure of Turkmen dutor and epic performance through flexible bow movements in high registers.

Conclusion

The comparative-historical analysis of the Karakalpak and Turkmen girjek instruments demonstrates that these two instruments share common roots in terms of



origin, organological structure, and ensemble function. At the same time, shaped by the linguistic, folkloric, and vocal characteristics of each people, unique national colorations have emerged in the instrument's tuning, timbre, and bow technique.

Today, through modern performers and educators of both fraternal nations, the girjek instrument continues to be actively studied and passed down from generation to generation as a heritage, both in traditional epic performance and within the professional educational system.

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