

# Social Parallels Of Urban And Rural Neighborhood Communities In Karakalpakstan

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**Received:** 15 June 2025; **Accepted:** 25 July 2025; **Published:** 31 August 2025

**Abstract:** The study explores the social parallels of urban and rural neighborhood communities in Karakalpakstan, highlighting their historical roots, structural differences, and cultural functions. Since ancient times, the peoples of Central Asia, including Karakalpaks, have maintained a strong sense of collectivism that has shaped communal life, family traditions, and everyday interactions. In rural areas, neighborhood communities (*köşe, meshit käwim*) remain closely tied to kinship groups, ensuring solidarity, mutual support, and preservation of traditional practices during life-cycle events such as weddings and funerals. In contrast, urban communities (*makankoms*) are primarily territorial in nature, yet they preserve many of the same functions of collective assistance, moral guidance, and cultural continuity. The research demonstrates that despite the influence of modernization and globalization, both rural and urban neighborhood communities continue to play a vital role in sustaining cultural identity, intergenerational communication, and social cohesion. The analysis also reveals a gradual transformation of community roles in urban areas, where some traditional practices are shifting toward more individualized or commercialized forms, while rural communities largely retain their customary functions.

**Keywords:** Karakalpakstan, neighborhood community, collectivism, urban community, rural community, *köşe, meshit käwim, makankom*, traditional customs, social cohesion.

**Introduction:** The peoples of Central Asia have always been characterized by a strong sense of collectivism, which unites people and brings them together. In both traditional family events and everyday life, the role of the community is invaluable. Such communities serve to preserve and transmit traditional customs. In urban areas, however, the structure of local communities and the relationships within them differ somewhat from those in rural settings. The need for moral and material support from neighbors in various life situations is one of the factors that unites the members of a community. Since ancient times, the peoples of Central Asia have possessed the quality of collectivism, which united them and enabled them to solve many problems together by consulting with elders, relatives, and neighbors. People especially sought advice during

family events that required the participation and support of relatives, close friends, and neighbors. In carrying out such events, the role of the community was invaluable, as its members actively participated and fulfilled the tasks assigned to them. It is precisely these types of communities that serve to preserve and transmit traditional customs.

The scholar I. Jabbarov also points out the role of the community: "According to customary law, weddings or anniversary celebrations were not considered the private matter of an individual family, but rather an affair for the entire mahalla, or even the village, for all relatives and kin, neighbors, and acquaintances" [2, p. 154].

The structure of local communities has certain distinctive features. The entire territory of our republic

consists of several thousand local self-governing bodies. In urban areas they are called makankoms, while in rural areas they are known as SSG (APZh). For example, the city of Nukus is administratively divided into several dozen makankoms, which serve as official local self-governing bodies and exercise certain functions of the local administration. At present in Karakalpakstan, such terms as SSG, aul council, makankom, meshit käwim, käwim, jämääti, and awyl jämääti are in common use.

In addition to these, there also exists the neighborhood community, which usually consists of 30–40 families living on the same street. Compared to the makankom, they maintain closer relations with the population and are directly aware of the situation within each household. Such communities are also referred to by the term köshe (street), whose informal public leader is the biy, traditionally called köshe biy. If a street is large and contains a significant number of families, it is divided into two or more communities.

Our informants explain such a division by the fact that sometimes several events are held simultaneously on the same street, and one biy physically cannot be present at all of them. Relations between community members are not always limited to one neighborhood or settlement; sometimes they extend beyond its borders. Usually, connections are established with several neighborhoods and auls. Several neighboring territorial communities — köshe — are served by one mullah. He takes an active part in all events held in the area, but he is primarily invited to conduct funeral, memorial, and other rituals requiring his participation. Accordingly, several territorial-neighborhood communities located in a particular area unite around one meshit käwim.

The term meshit käwim originally had a somewhat different meaning. In Karakalpakstan, up until the beginning of the 20th century, every meshit käwim had a mosque with an attached mekteb (Muslim school). All residents of a particular aul attended this mosque, and the entire aul constituted one meshit käwim (käwim — tribe, people).

Today, a meshit käwim covers a vast territory and is divided into smaller territorial-neighborhood communities. This term is widely used in rural areas. The reason is that in urban environments, close neighborly relations exist mainly only within a specific territorial community. Various factors contribute to this: in rural areas, such relations depend on geographical location or on belonging to a particular clan group. In villages, when any kind of event is held, the entire meshit käwim participates. In cities, the situation is different: territorial-neighborhood relations

are formed depending on the relationships between neighbors.

The territory of a meshit käwim is determined by the number of its inhabitants, its location, whether there is a mullah in the area, and the extent of his influence. Let us take an example from a rural area to show the role played by the meshit käwim and directly by the mullah. Informant Otarbayev Zhiyenbay, born in 1949 (urū Qtay, Bessary, Qoily, Qurbonqul, Chimbay district, Kenes SSG, Bessary aul), reported that until recently his aul had a respected and influential mullah named Mambetsharip Maksym. “Mambetsharip Maksym oversaw a large territory where the urū Bessary, Aralbay, Kangly, Kazayakly, and Koldawly lived. But after his death, no leader of such stature was found. As a result, this entire territory was divided into separate smaller parts, and each of the above-mentioned urū became an independent meshit käwim” [4].

Another informant, Mambetniyazov Nuratdin, born in 1960 (urū Muyten, Kentanaw, Karauzyak district, Karauzyak SSG), described a similar case when a previously unified community was divided into many smaller parts. “In our meshit käwim,” said Mambetniyazov Nuratdin, “there live about 140 families. They are further divided into five parts, each with its own aul biy, and each under the leadership of its biy includes about 25–30 families” [5]. Next to the meshit käwim mentioned by our informant, there was another meshit käwim. Together they constituted one large, densely populated settlement. According to the same informant, the division of each meshit käwim into smaller parts occurred because there were cases when funerals were held simultaneously in different sections (separated by the main road). It was impossible for one aul biy to manage the organization and conduct of all these events.

As has been revealed, in urban areas the structure of such local communities and their relationships differ somewhat from those in rural areas. The main distinction of the urban local community from the rural one is that in cities it has a territorial character, whereas in villages it primarily unites residents of one aul belonging to a single clan.

The functions of makankoms and territorial-neighborhood communities share many similarities. The activities of makankoms include the distribution of various types of assistance (to low-income families, disabled citizens, etc.) within their territory, maintaining order, as well as responsibility for the improvement of the given area and so on. A makankom is headed by an aksakal — officially the chairman of the makan kenes.

In cooperation with the biys, the makankoms address

not only the issues mentioned above but also intrafamilial problems. For example, they prevent marital divorces and resolve everyday issues related to communal living (such as various utility and housing problems in apartment buildings, etc.). In addition, the biy takes an active part in the community's public works, attends makankom meetings where matters of order, improvement, organization of events, and other general issues concerning the given territory are discussed. Sometimes these meetings address specific problems arising within an individual family. In particular, discussions are held with young families on the verge of divorce. Typically, the biy, representatives of the makankom, and elders of the community participate in these conversations.

There are also situations when members of a particular community cannot solve certain issues without the help of their neighbors and the community as a whole. For example, during family events (weddings, funerals, etc.), the need for neighbors' support and joint problem-solving related to communal life is especially strong. Here is an example from the city of Nukus that illustrates how a family can be influenced by the community. A resident of Nukus wanted to hold a feast (*yel käde toy*) in honor of her daughter's marriage. Shortly before the event, however, her neighbor passed away. The deceased man's wife, a respected woman in the community who had performed the pilgrimage to Mecca and was therefore called hajy apa, initially gave her consent for the wedding feast, since she had been asked beforehand. The woman began preparing for the celebration, purchasing everything necessary. A *kenes* (council) was convened, the plan for the feast was discussed, guests were assigned to neighbors' houses, and invitations were sent. But two days before the feast, hajy apa changed her mind and declared that she was against the event because forty days had not yet passed since her husband's death and the neighbor should wait until the *qyrqy* (the fortieth-day commemoration). Moreover, hajy apa demanded that neighbors refuse to host the guests of the informant. The hostess of the feast tried again to obtain her consent, but she refused, and all the neighbors supported hajy apa. Finding herself in a hopeless situation, our informant appealed to her elder relatives (*aksakals*) to influence hajy apa, but without success. As a result, she suffered enormous material and moral damage. The celebration could only take place after hajy apa had completed the fortieth-day commemoration for her husband.

There are also other factors that serve to unite community members, such as the need for moral and material support from neighbors in different life situations, the need for advice from elders, and

assistance in resolving financial issues, among others.

In recent times, a certain trend has emerged toward the diminishing influence of the community over the family, particularly among urban residents. Cases of families asserting independence from the community have become more frequent. For instance, many family events that were traditionally held within a certain neighborhood with the involvement of neighbors are now increasingly organized in restaurants. One reason for this, in our view, is the community's constant exposure to stereotypes of foreign cultures. On the other hand, it also reflects the improvement of families' financial circumstances.

Naturally, within-community relations ensure the reproduction, preservation, and transmission of traditions. Daily interaction and the collective celebration of holidays foster the exchange of experience, practical know-how, and the formation of public opinion within the community, while also demonstrating norms of behavior.

As noted above, neighbors play a significant role in organizing large events, without whose help it would be impossible to manage. They offer their homes to accommodate the guests of the event's host (*qonyq jay* — a house for guests to stay) and serve them (providing tea, food, and, if the guests come from afar, overnight lodging). Neighboring women help to prepare traditional *bawyrsaq* and bread (*nan jabyw* — flatbreads). Male neighbors and youth carry out all kinds of tasks in the preparation and conduct of these events. For example, on the instructions of the event's host and the biy, men, along with close relatives and friends, take responsibility for notifying all invited guests. For this, they are given invitation slips — *patek qagaz* (a piece of paper with the names of invited guests, the name of the host, and the date and venue of the event). Neighboring youth gather the day before the event at the host's house to peel carrots for *plov* and clean the yard. During the event itself, young people escort guests to the *qonyq jay*, deliver *plov* to the houses where guests are staying, and provide other service functions.

Informant Niyetullayev Begdulla (b. 1958, *urū Keneges*, *Aktogyn*, *Kegeyli* district) explained: "In the neighboring aul *Karasyyrak*, there is a tradition of guest service involving youth. This type of service is called *ot jaqqysh* (literally, 'the one who lights the fire for the *kazan* and *tandoor*'). It works as follows: to each house is assigned an *ot jaqqysh*, who, together with the host of the house, receives and serves the guests until their departure" [3]. Such a practice has already been forgotten in other places. This tradition greatly influences the upbringing of the younger generation

and serves as a means of transmitting traditional culture.

Overall, this institution, both in urban and rural settings, unites people regardless of their social or national affiliation, preserving strong neighborly relations that in turn define the way of life of the Karakalpak people and exert a profoundly positive influence on the upbringing of the younger generation. Despite certain differences between urban and rural neighborhood communities, they share many common features, especially in preserving traditional relations among their members. This phenomenon is explained by the continuing close ties between the city and the countryside, which contribute to the stable preservation of traditional culture in the urban environment.

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