

Equality, People-Centeredness, and Social Justice in the Works of Nineteenth-Century Karakalpak Thinkers: A Socio-Philosophical Analysis

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Abstract. *This article examines the formation of equality, people-centeredness, and social justice in the works of the nineteenth-century Karakalpak thinkers Kunkhoja, Otesh, Ajiniyaz, Berdakh, and Omar. It aims to identify how these concepts interact as poetic images, moral judgments, and social demands. The source corpus comprises works addressing labour, taxation, official responsibility, and human dignity. Historical-contextual interpretation, comparative analysis, thematic coding, and conceptual reconstruction are applied. The findings show that justice is articulated through four recurring criteria: fair remuneration for labour; equal treatment regardless of social status, the accountability of officeholders to the people, and protection of human dignity. Labour justice is most prominent in Kunkhoja and Otesh; legal and moral equality is central to Ajiniyaz; and taxation, coercion, and public responsibility dominate the relevant works of Berdakh and Omar. The article does not equate these historical ideas with fully developed modern political theories. Instead, it interprets them as historically situated moral conceptions of justice. The study concludes that people-centeredness in Karakalpak classical thought is more than sympathy for ordinary people: it is a normative position that connects labour, rights, responsibility, and dignity.*

Keywords: *nineteenth century, Karakalpak thinkers, social justice, equality, people-centeredness, labour justice, taxation, official accountability, human dignity*

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XIX əsr qaraqalpaq mütəfəkkirlərinin yaradıcılığında bərabərlik, xalqpərvərlik və sosial ədalət: sosial-fəlsəfi təhlil

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Xülasə. *Məqalədə XIX əsr qaraqalpaq mütəfəkkirləri Künxoca, Öteş, Əjiniyaz, Berdaq və Ömər in yaradıcılığında bərabərlik, xalqpərvərlik və sosial ədalət anlayışlarının formalaşması sosial-fəlsəfi baxımdan araşdırılır. Tədqiqatın məqsədi bu anlayışların bədii obraz, mənəvi hökm və ictimai tələb kimi qarşılıqlı əlaqəsini müəyyənləşdirməkdir. Mənbə korpusuna əmək, vergi, vəzifəli şəxslərin məsuliyyəti və insan ləyaqəti mövzularına həsr olunmuş əsərlər daxil edilmişdir. Tarixi-kontekstual şərh, müqayisəli təhlil, tematik kodlaşdırma və konseptual rekonstruksiya metodlarından istifadə olunmuşdur. Nəticələr göstərir ki, ədalət ideyası dörd əsas meyarla ifadə edilir: əməyə layiqli haqq, sosial mövqedən asılı olmayaraq bərabər münasibət, vəzifəli şəxsin xalq qarşısında cavabdehliyi və insan ləyaqətinin qorunması. Künxoca və Öteşdə əmək ədaləti, Əjiniyazda hüquqi-mənəvi bərabərlik,*

Berdaq və Ömərda isə vergi zorakılığı və hakimiyyətin məsuliyyəti ön plana çıxır. Müqayisə mütəfəkkirlər arasındakı fərqli vurğuları da ardıcıl şəkildə üzə çıxarır. Məqalə bu irsi müasir siyasi anlayışlarla eyniləşdirmir, onu ədalət haqqında tarixi mənəvi təsəvvürlər kimi şərh edir. Belə nəticəyə gəlinir ki, qaraqalpaq klassik düşüncəsində xalqpərvərlik sadəcə rəğbət deyil, əmək, hüquq və ləyaqəti birləşdirən normativ mövqedir.

Açar sözlər: XIX əsr, qaraqalpaq mütəfəkkirləri, sosial ədalət, bərabərlik, xalqpərvərlik, əmək ədaləti, vergi, vəzifəli şəxslərin məsuliyyəti, insan ləyaqəti

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Introduction

Restricting the study of nineteenth-century Karakalpak social thought to literary history narrows its normative meaning. Kunkhoja, Ajiniyaz, Berdakh, Otesh, and Omar not only represented the social experience of their time poetically but also proposed standards for evaluating the value of labour, the accountability of officials, attitudes towards rich and poor people, and human dignity. Although their works were not written as systematic philosophical treatises, they contain historically situated moral answers to the question of what makes a society just. Understanding social relations in nineteenth-century Central Asia requires simultaneous attention to the Khanate of Khiva, the agrarian economy, tax obligations, and systems of local administration (Adle et al., 2005; Bregel, 2003).

Modern theories of justice provide conceptual tools for organising this historical material, but they cannot be imposed on classical texts as ready-made templates. Rawls associates justice with the fair organisation of basic social institutions, while Sen approaches it through the reduction of actual injustices and the expansion of human capabilities (Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009). Honneth, in turn, describes disrespect and denial of recognition as experiences that damage a person's social existence (Honneth, 1995). In the language of Karakalpak thinkers, these issues appear through moral categories such as right, equality, oppression, shame, the suffering of the people, and official responsibility.

Existing scholarship has extensively addressed the thinkers' biographies, artistic skill, and literary traditions (Ismailov, 1961; Pirnazarov, 2000). Their views of justice, however, have not been sufficiently compared through the interconnected criteria of labour, equal treatment, governmental responsibility, and human dignity. This article therefore asks: through which social problems did nineteenth-century Karakalpak thinkers articulate justice, and what common normative structure can be identified in their views? Its purpose is to reconstruct the historical-philosophical meaning of their critical imagery without modernising the texts or attributing contemporary political doctrines to them.

Methods

The study was designed as a qualitative historical-philosophical analysis. The primary corpus included Kunkhoja's *Jarimadim*, *Choponlar*, and *Kun qayda*; Otesh's *Sharmanda and Bolar*; Ajiniyaz's *Nasiyat*, *Kerak*, *Kerekti*, *Koring*, and *Otarsang*; Berdakh's *Soliq*; and Omar's *Aytmasam bolmas*. The texts were examined through published selected works and anthologies (Ajiniyaz, 1988; Berdaq, 2022; Kúnxoja, 2019; Ótesh, 1973; Qaraqalpaq poeziyasının antologiyası, 1956). Because

editions may contain orthographic and line variants, the analysis focused on stable semantic motifs rather than isolated word forms.

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, the social actors represented in the works—shepherds, hired labourers, wealthy people, the poor, judges, biys, tax collectors, and rulers—were identified. Second, situations expressing injustice were grouped into five codes: non-payment for labour, status-based privilege, abuse of official power, tax pressure, and humiliation of human dignity. Third, each thinker's criterion of justice was conceptually reconstructed. Fourth, the views were compared for similarities and differences. This procedure prevents poetic images from being treated as direct historical facts while allowing the normative content of the texts to be examined separately.

Studies of the social and economic organisation of Central Asia and the Khanate of Khiva were used to establish the historical context (Adle et al., 2005; Bregel, 2003). The theoretical interpretation drew on three dimensions: distribution, recognition, and the practical reduction of injustice (Honneth, 1995; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009). These categories were not claimed to exist in the historical texts in fully developed form; they served as analytical instruments for organising the ideas found in the sources. The study is not a quantitative content analysis: its findings depend on the functions of themes, images, and moral judgments rather than word frequencies.

Results

The analysis identified correspondence between labour and its social recognition as the first criterion of justice. In Kunkhoja's *Choponlar*, the image of a shepherd receiving very little compensation after a long period of service expresses a sharp imbalance between labour and reward (Kúnxoja, 2019). Reading this image merely as a description of poverty is insufficient. It also reveals the labourer's lack of recognition, the subordination of the worker's time and energy to the owner's interests, and the moral corruption of the economic relationship. For Kunkhoja, therefore, justice arises not from the existence of labour alone but from its adequate valuation.

Kunkhoja's people-centeredness is not limited to observing or sympathising with ordinary life. He adopts an active position by communicating popular suffering, exposing the arbitrariness of the powerful, and morally legitimising labourers' claims to what they are owed. The critical treatment of rank and reputation in *Jarimadim* likewise suggests that social status does not automatically determine moral worth. Scholarship on Kunkhoja stresses the close relationship between his life experience and the everyday existence of the people (Ismailov, 1961; Pirnazarov, 2000). People-centeredness thus means not simply selecting the people as an object of description, but making their interests a standard of evaluation.

In Otesh's *Sharmanda*, labour justice is expressed through an even sharper moral judgment. Withholding a labourer's due appears as a twofold violation: the material value of completed work is appropriated, and the worker's dignity as a human being is denied (Ótesh, 1973). The notion of shame in the work's title elevates injustice from a private disagreement to a matter of public judgment. The unjust party may obtain an economic benefit, yet loses moral standing in the eyes of the community. Public opinion thereby functions as an informal mechanism of social control.

Kunkhoja and Otesh share a view of labour not merely as a means of subsistence but as an activity constitutive of social worth. Their emphases nevertheless differ. Kunkhoja primarily exposes the disparity between work and remuneration through poetic imagery, whereas Otesh evaluates non-payment directly as a moral offence and public disgrace. A cautious comparison with Honneth's theory of recognition shows that economic harm and moral humiliation are inseparable in these texts

(Honneth, 1995). This comparison does not present the historical works as products of modern theory; it clarifies their normative force.

The second criterion of justice is impartial treatment regardless of social status. In Ajiniyaz's *Nasiyat*, judges, rulers, wealthy people, and members of other social groups are reminded of their obligations. A judge is expected to apply the same standard to the rich and the poor, as well as to beks and sultans, rather than altering decisions according to rank or private interest (Ajiniyaz, 1988). This position is not a complete modern theory of legal equality, but it affirms moral limits on office and presents impartiality as the basis on which authority can be justified. Equality here does not mean identical capacities; it means the rejection of class privilege in adjudication.

In *Nasiyat*, a ruler's justice is likewise not an abstract virtue. It is measured through practical actions: protecting an impartial judge, refraining from oppressing citizens, listening to experienced advisers, and preserving public peace. The moral value of authority is therefore assessed by its effects on people's lives rather than by power or rank itself. Ajiniyaz's criticism of officeholders connects his literary legacy to the problem of social responsibility (Pirnazarov, 2000). A careful comparison with Rawls's account of institutional fairness shows that justice in this text concerns procedures of decision-making as well as personal generosity (Rawls, 1971).

In Ajiniyaz's *Kerekti*, equality appears as a collective need broader than the virtues of a particular official. The image of many people awaiting equality indicates both a moral objection to the existing order and hope for a better life (Ajiniyaz, 1988). Equality is not a completed political programme here; it is a normative demand formed as an alternative to oppression, status-based discrimination, and arbitrariness. In comparison with Sen's approach, its significance lies in its orientation towards removing visible injustices rather than constructing a comprehensive model of an ideal order (Sen, 2009).

The third criterion of justice is the fair distribution of taxation and other obligations among social groups. In the nineteenth-century Khanate of Khiva, taxes and service duties were closely connected to the agrarian economy, local administration, and political authority (Adle et al., 2005; Bregel, 2003). For the Karakalpak population, taxation was not merely an economic payment but a direct, everyday form of interaction with power. Violence, privilege, and arbitrariness in tax collection consequently appear in the thinkers' works as moral problems.

Berdakh's *Soliq* criticises not taxation as such, but its unjust assessment and violent collection (Berdaq, 2022). Tax relations reveal disparities between rich and poor, the conversion of office into privilege, the vulnerability of weaker groups, and the moral responsibility of authority. For Berdakh, people-centeredness requires not only recording the people's hardship but also exposing the relations that produce it. The modern edition of his selected works similarly demonstrates that public interests and social reality are central themes of his writing (Berdaq, 2022).

Omar's *Aytmasam bolmas* continues this critical tradition from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century. The poet refuses to remain silent about violence by tax collectors, the difficult lives of labourers, and the estrangement of local officials from the people (*Qaraqalpaq poeziyasınıń antologiyası*, 1956). The title raises truth-telling to the level of the writer's moral duty. Because Omar was born in 1879, his legacy represents a transitional position between the nineteenth-century classical tradition and new social experiences of the early twentieth century. He is therefore considered here as a successor to the nineteenth-century intellectual tradition rather than treated without qualification as a nineteenth-century author.

The synthesis of the findings indicates that the fourth criterion—the protection of human dignity—integrates the preceding three. Withholding wages is both economic damage and disregard for the person; adjudicating by status denies equal worth; and coercive tax collection violates citizens' dignity and security. Dignity is consequently not an isolated theme but the shared moral foundation of reflections on labour, rights, and authority. Comparison with Honneth and Sen shows how recognition and the reduction of actual injustice are interconnected in these texts (Honneth, 1995; Sen, 2009).

Discussion

Comparative analysis reveals a common normative structure in the thinkers' views. First, justice is not an abstract concept detached from popular experience; it is tested in concrete situations involving wages, taxation, courts, public office, and everyday humiliation. Second, people-centeredness is not simply praise of the people but the adoption of the weaker party's interests as a moral standard. Third, equality is expressed not as a demand to eliminate all differences in wealth and position, but as the application of the same moral measure to judgments, treatment, and obligations. Fourth, authority is justified not by office itself but by the fulfilment of responsibility to the people.

Despite these common features, the thinkers emphasise different dimensions. Kunkhoja foregrounds the imbalance between labour and reward; Otesh, the moral disgrace of withholding what is due; Ajiniyaz, the impartiality of decision-makers; Berdakh, the unjust distribution of obligations; and Omar, the duty to speak truth in the face of injustice. These differences prevent their works from being reduced to repetitions of a single idea. Instead, they demonstrate complementary dimensions of justice in classical Karakalpak social thought: labour, recognition, impartiality, distribution, and accountability.

Comparison with modern theories of justice is useful in two respects. Rawls foregrounds institutions and fair arrangements, Sen the need to reduce actual injustice, and Honneth the moral injury caused by denial of recognition (Honneth, 1995; Rawls, 1971; Sen, 2009). Karakalpak thinkers articulate related concerns through local historical experience, poetic imagery, and the moral language of the people. Similarity, however, should not be mistaken for identity: classical texts do not systematically formulate constitutional rights, modern citizenship, or a theory of distributive justice. Their value lies not in anticipating modern theory but in perceiving injustice clearly within their own historical environment.

The study proposes a four-criterion interpretive model as its principal scholarly contribution: fair remuneration for labour, impartial and equal treatment, governmental accountability, and protection of dignity. This model identifies common ground without erasing the writers' individual styles. Applying it comparatively to other nineteenth-century Central Asian literary traditions may reveal shared and distinctive features of regional concepts of justice. Such work must continue to treat historical context and textual variants with caution.

Limitations

The study relies on selected published works; it does not encompass all manuscript copies, oral variants, or textual editions. Some works may have orthographic, line, and title variants. The article therefore does not resolve questions of textual criticism or authorship attribution. Its findings constitute a socio-philosophical interpretation of stable themes in the selected works.

A second limitation is the risk of anachronism when applying modern theoretical concepts to historical texts. To reduce this risk, the ideas of Rawls, Sen, and Honneth are not presented as fully formed concepts already contained in the sources; they are used only as instruments of comparison.

Third, the article does not empirically investigate reception history—that is, how later generations interpreted these ideas.

Future Research

Future studies should establish textual differences between early editions and manuscripts, examine the semantic history of justice-related concepts in the Karakalpak language, and analyse how the thinkers' works have been interpreted in later textbooks and collective memory. Comparative analysis of labour, taxation, and official accountability in Karakalpak, Kazakh, Uzbek, and Turkmen classical poetry using a common set of criteria may also yield new findings for regional intellectual history.

Conclusion

Ideas of equality, people-centeredness, and social justice in the works of nineteenth-century Karakalpak thinkers developed in close relation to the period's actual social contradictions. The devaluation of labour, status-dependent judgment, unequal tax burdens, official arbitrariness, and humiliation of human dignity are the principal objects of criticism. Justice is advanced not as an abstract aspiration but as a practical standard for evaluating relations among people.

Kunkhoja and Otesh particularly emphasise labour justice; Ajiniyaz, impartial judgment and equal treatment; Berdakh, taxation and official responsibility; and Omar, the moral duty to speak truth. Human dignity provides the common foundation connecting these views. People-centeredness in classical Karakalpak thought should therefore be understood not merely as sympathy with popular life but as a normative position integrating labour, rights, responsibility, and dignity. This legacy is both a historical source and an important form of local moral reasoning about justice.

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