

Cross-Cultural Puzzle Traditions: Function and Structure of English and Karakalpak Riddles

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ABSTRACT

The present article is devoted to a comparative classification of English and Karakalpak puzzles according to their function, structure and form. Although belonging to different linguistic and cultural traditions, both English and Karakalpak peoples have developed rich repertoires of puzzles that exhibit surprising similarities as well as striking differences. The classification of puzzles is a multidimensional task that reveals not only the internal logic of the genre but also the cultural values and modes of thinking embedded in each society's use of language.

Keywords: Riddles, puzzles, classification, function, oral traditions, structure, form, compare, resilience, adaptability.

INTRODUCTION

The origin of puzzles traces back to the earliest stages of human civilization, emerging naturally as a form of playful yet serious engagement with the mysteries of the world. Both in English and Karakalpak cultures, puzzles have deep historical roots intertwined with the development of oral traditions. In ancient English society, puzzles and riddles were not only forms of entertainment but also vehicles for transmitting wisdom, religious teachings, and cultural values. A prime example is the collection of riddles found in the Exeter Book, a 10th-century anthology of Old English poetry, which demonstrates how riddles served as reflections of everyday life, spiritual

contemplation, and the natural world [8: 86]. Over the centuries, riddles evolved and entered various literary genres – appearing in children’s books, newspapers, and games. During the Middle Ages, riddles were used by monks and poets not only for amusement but also for spiritual and intellectual reflection. In the 19th and 20th centuries, they became more secular and widely circulated among the public in printed forms. They reveal the Anglo-Saxon people’s fascination with nature, craftsmanship, and existential questions, presenting the world through metaphor and layered meanings.

Similarly, in Karakalpak culture, puzzles (*jumbaqlar*) have been a vibrant part of the rich oral tradition for centuries, closely associated with nomadic life, environmental adaptation, and community cohesion. Passed down from generation to generation, they reflect the lifestyle of nomadic and rural Karakalpak communities [1: 373]. These riddles are frequently tied to elements of nature, domestic life, animals, and traditional occupations. Unlike English riddles that have evolved through printed and digital media, Karakalpak puzzles remain deeply embedded in spoken tradition, often recited by elders during social gatherings or storytelling sessions. Living in the challenging conditions of the Aral Sea region and the steppes, Karakalpak people developed puzzles that encapsulated their close relationship with nature, social structures, and survival skills. Puzzles often referenced local flora and fauna, domestic life, and elements of Karakalpak cosmology, reflecting a deep connection between language, environment, and collective experience.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The material was collected by the following groups of research methods: descriptive, comparative, and analytical methods. As our research rely on comparison of two unrelated geterogen languages, our main used material consists of dictionaries of these languages. The research uses samples of English and Karakalpak puzzles are collected, classified, and analyzed to identify patterns and differences. Elements of semantic and

structural analysis are applied to interpret figurative language and symbolism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Puzzles, as a distinct genre of folklore and verbal art, can be classified in multiple ways depending on their structure, thematic content, function, and cultural context. One of the most widely accepted approaches divides puzzles into riddles, logical puzzles, and narrative puzzles. Among these, riddles – brief, metaphorical, and descriptive questions – are the most prominent form in both English and Karakalpak traditions. In our present article we classify them according to their function, structure and form.

Classification by function

1. **Didactic (educational) puzzles.** They teach children logic, language, or moral values and used in both school settings and home life. For example: “I’m tall when I’m young, and short when I’m old.” – Candle. *Baxıt-baylıqözinde, berekettabıssözinde, Atalarbilgendanalıq, sàwlelengenbetinde* (It has happiness, wealth and income in speech, It describes wisdom of ancestors).
2. **Ceremonial riddles** used during weddings, community gatherings, or festivals. Ceremonial riddles in English tradition are quite rare today, but they once played important roles in ritual, festive, and communal settings – especially during weddings, Christmas feasts, and harvest celebrations. These riddles often functioned as tests of wit or symbolic initiation, not just as entertainment. Such riddles in Karakalpaks are solved in order to enter a home, win a bride, or prove intelligence. Guests must solve a riddle to enter the bride’s home or to proceed in ceremonies. For example: “I went to the church and saw a crowd, And yet no word was said aloud. Men in black and women in white, Joined together in joy and rite. What is it?” – A wedding. *Quyırqajıjoq, at emes, sonda da onjoradeydi, Merekedebàyigiqosılmas, seyisiana, shabandozıbaladeydi.*

- (It's called as horse but it hasn't tail, It doesn't compete, its groom is mother and horserider is a child. Answer: Cradle - Besik).
3. **Entertainment-based riddles.** Such riddles are told for humor or leisure and common in oral storytelling, especially in winter evenings or group settings. English nursery riddles: *What has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening?* – Man. Karakalpak winter riddles shared during long evenings in yurta (*qaraüy*) gatherings. *Tıymeykùldi, sùymeykùldi.* – (It laughs without touching, without loving). Answer: Fire.
 4. **Testing or initiation riddles** often serve as trials, used in stories or myths and such riddles must be solved to gain access, pass a challenge, or survive (e.g., the Sphinx myth or Khan's challenges in folk tales).

Classification by structure and form

1. **Question-and-answer format** is the most common kind of riddle; a short question with a metaphorical description. *What has a face and two hands but no arms or legs?* (Clock). *Aspanaqarasań, dõńgelenipturadı, àlemgejaqtıberedi, qanebunikimbiledi?* (Looking at the sky, you see its round, it gives light to the world, who knows what is it? Answer: Sun)
2. **Poetic verse riddles** often rhymed or rhythmic, especially in oral traditions and common in both Karakalpak folk poems and Anglo-Saxon riddles.
3. **Visual riddles or pictorial puzzles** less common in traditional oral culture but found in modern adaptations. Ex., rebus puzzles or symbolic illustrations.

In addition to traditional classifications, modern folklore scholars propose more nuanced systems based on the cognitive processes involved in solving puzzles. Some puzzles require primarily logical reasoning, while others depend heavily on imaginative association or cultural knowledge. For instance, some English riddles from the medieval period rely on the solver's familiarity with Christian theology or medieval daily life, making them

inaccessible without specific background knowledge. Similarly, many Karakalpak puzzles presuppose intimate knowledge of the environment, such as the behavior of animals, seasonal changes, and traditional occupations. Another emerging classification focuses on the level of abstraction: concrete puzzles describe tangible objects or phenomena (such as a river, a horse, a tree), while abstract puzzles involve intangible concepts (such as love, time, or wisdom).

CONCLUSION

Culturally, puzzles served as a means of reinforcing shared knowledge and communal memory. They were often performed during gatherings, storytelling sessions, and family evenings, offering not only amusement but also an opportunity to teach younger generations the essential knowledge and values needed to navigate their world. In both traditions, the act of posing and solving puzzles was considered a test of intelligence, wit, and social maturity. Furthermore, puzzles reflected societal hierarchies and expectations: in medieval England, riddles could demonstrate a scholar's education and sharpness, while in Karakalpak tradition, success in solving riddles could signify readiness for greater responsibilities within the tribe.

The historical development of puzzles in both cultures also shows their resilience and adaptability. As societies evolved – through Christianization in England or through social changes among the Karakalpak people – puzzles absorbed new themes, symbols, and references, ensuring their continued relevance. Even today, traditional puzzles coexist with modern variations, adapted to contemporary life while still preserving their core functions and cultural essence.

Thus, the historical and cultural contexts of puzzles in English and Karakalpak traditions reveal not only the continuity of human curiosity and linguistic creativity but also the deep interconnection between language, environment, belief systems, and social life. Studying puzzles offers a valuable lens into the everyday realities, aspirations, and philosophical outlooks of past and present generations.

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