

# Children's life and Community Education in Uzbekistan's Mahallas from Historical Perspectives

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## Introduction

From the moment they are born, children in Uzbekistan experience various rites of passage and traditional festivals as they grow up. Most of these rituals are based on Islam.

For example, *sunnat to'y*, the circumcision of Muslim boys living in *Mahallas* (local communities) are celebrated on a large-scale comparable to that of wedding ceremonies. Before and after a circumcision, relatives and neighbors are invited to a banquet and the whole Mahalla is required to participate.

Unlike with every day chores at home, the rules and values based on Islam have various social restrictions to do with gender, ethnicity, age and the time in which we live which more clearly manifest themselves in children's behaviors at these special times of rituals. Also, at the same time, children's behaviors are influenced by external factors such as a restriction on lavish feasts by order of the president, the introduction of ceremonies including circumcisions, Ramadan, the spring festival 'Navro'z', and the traditional Uzbek wedding to school education, and the holding of meetings and summer courses to promote Cultural Renaissance by NGOs in Uzbekistan as part of the government's cultural and educational policies.

In this paper, I would like to clarify Children's life, community education and local community's educational role in Uzbek Mahalla by considering the cultural and religious background, and social structure, of Uzbekistan, and by discussing the different aspects of children's lives which are based on the traditional customs and Islam in a Mahalla from historical perspective during Imperial Russian and Soviet Union period, and after independence of Uzbekistan in particular.

Firstly in this paper, children's lives within a Mahalla in Uzbekistan will be discussed over three time periods: the former being under Imperial Russian rule when the modern education system started to be supplemented by the informal education in a Mahalla, then under the Soviet Union rule when the Mahalla was used as a part of building a socialist state, and lastly after independence was gained and the current state's reconstruction policy of emphasizing the role of the Mahalla.

Secondly I will discuss characteristics of the children's life and community education in abovementioned three time periods. Regarding children's life today, I would analyze governmental line and cooperation between Mahallas and school.

Lastly, I will try to clarify how children's life and community education have changed in Mahallas through historical aspects, educational role of local community, and any future challenges and issues.

## Children's life in Uzbekistan's Mahallas

In Uzbekistan, children are socialized through the participation in activities organized and implemented by national educational institutions, such as kindergartens, elementary and secondary schools, and various other social groups, and by their Mahalla and home environment.

How the life of children in Mahallas has changed over history will be reviewed here in three different time periods: (1) at the time of Imperial Russia (up until 1917), (2) in the time of the Soviet Union (1917 - 1991) and (3) after the independence of Uzbekistan (1991 - present).

The word Mahalla is derived from Arabic meaning 'a block of an "Islamic city"' (Komatsu, 1991: 46) or 'a community formed by settlers in the Central

Asian region a long time ago and is a form of local government within a social structure' (Arifkhanova, 2003: 137). Combined with these various definitions from past research, Mahalla has been defined as a local community within the Muslim society, which is closely attached to, and formed in relation to, the roads which support the life of people.

After the collapse of the USSR, and in order to break away from the ideology of communism and the state system of the former Soviet Union, a movement to return to traditional values of individual ethnicities was actively pursued. At the same time, government support for Mahallas increased and using them as the base of a new state was strengthened.

Through the promotion and modernization of Mahallas, they have re-emerged as an active support body to the state government. In 2002, by order of the president, the government decided to name 2003 as 'the Year of the Mahalla', and a campaign was waged to promote the importance of the Mahalla with slogans such as 'We were all born in a Mahalla' and 'The Mahalla is our social and political mirror' (Massicard and Trevisani, 2003: 206).

Currently, a Mahalla in Uzbekistan consists of public facilities including a mosque, schools, a multifunctional hall for residents' meetings, an office for the acting committee and representatives, and a place for weddings, funerals and neighborhood watch; with the interaction of all families living in the Mahalla. Under a government regulation, a Mahalla is required to have more than 500 families. Mahalla representatives are elected and they receive income from the government. They have various jobs including solving family feuds, restoring finances and securing support, operating and developing each facility within the Mahalla; and the configuration of specific activities depends on the representative's experience and each family's situation (Kawano, 2010: 53).

For example, at the Mahalla that the author visited, a Mahalla representative was paying out of his own pocket to promote children's and young people's sports. He was so passionate that he was saying that 'Sport is the essence of this Mahalla'. At another Mahalla, a representative who used to teach

Information Science and Information Technology at university had created a database on a computer of the Mahalla's residents to be used for the Mahalla's operation (Kawano, 2010: 53-54).

Each Mahalla has an active committee which carries out specific activities as an administrative body, and it has sub committees beneath it. Sub committees such as 'Ethics & Education', 'Women' and 'Social Security' implement various activities in their area of responsibility (Kawano, 2010: 54).

Following is a historical perspective on how children's rites of passage and lives have changed in Mahallas within the contexts of Islamic traditions, culture, and the education system.

### Under Imperial Russian rule (until 1917)

In the old days, people lived in small communities in cities and rural villages in Central Asia based on their occupation, ethnicity and religion. For example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in Bukhara, metal workers and body-washers lived together in their own areas and these areas served as being both residential as well as their place of work (Sukhareva, 1966: 325-326). These communities were called 'Mahalla' in Tashkent and the Ferghana region, and 'Guzar' in Bukhara and Samarkand.

Each Mahalla had a mosque/holy temple and people participated in rites of passage, weddings, and funerals within the Mahalla that they belong to, they also co-operated in the use of the local water well, and helped each other to create and maintain an awareness of being part of the same Mahalla. When any trouble or arguments occurred within the Mahalla, the Mahalla's elderly, called 'oksokol', would act as mediators. As seen in Bukhara between the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, these Mahallas were important units to solve issues in people's lives.

Until the expansion of the education system under Imperial Russia, boys' education was conducted at a Maktab or Madrasa attached to mosques and girls' education was conducted at teacher's houses, and it was mainly traditional education based on their religion (Bendrikov, 1960: 27-60). Islam at that time in Central Asia was greatly influencing the customs

of families, and the society, and adults and children's interpretation of the world. 5 times-a-day prayers at the mosque in the Mahalla were repeated in front of children and religious days were an opportunity to also clearly express the customs at home and in society (Bendrikov, 1960: 28).

Boys went to the Maktab for elementary education between the ages of 6 and 16 (or 5 and 15) and learnt reading and writing as well as the disciplines based on the spirit of Islamic faith. Before the beginning of Imperial Russia's invasion into Central Asia in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were Maktab in each local Mahalla and Guzar in Samarkand, as well as some Maktab for girls. The teachers at the Maktab were mostly Imams from the nearest mosque (Muminov, 1969: 293). Bendrikov describes the relationship between teachers, pupils and families, and their activities in relation to religious days at Maktab at that time as follows:

'On religious days, especially on boy's festival days, teachers were given Muslim turbans, scarves and sometimes jackets by the pupils' parents. Because of this, most teachers taught children of rich families with enthusiasm.' (Bendrikov, 1960: 41)

'Religious celebrations were held at Maktab and children did not have normal classes for the preparation.' (Bendrikov, 1960: 41-42)

Muminov also mentioned that meetings and debates with famous poets, scholars, and a comic group called 'Majilis', were held at the Madrasas, people's homes, shops, workshops and Bazaars (Muminov, 1969: 290).

As such, children had the opportunity to learn within the Mahalla about the rituals of praying at a mosque, the jobs associated with their Mahalla, and about their ethnic heritage. By living in a Mahalla, children were able to learn about religions and occupations pertinent to their lives, as well as acquire knowledge about their ethnicity and gain a self-awareness as being a member of society. At that time, Mahallas were places where informal education, as

mentioned above, was constantly implemented and Mahallas played a role in supporting this learning. With the expansion of education at Maktab and Madrasas, Mahallas became places to support such informal education.

Under Imperial Russian rule, Mahallas came to be seen as places to support its governance at the grass-roots level. Education was being standardized and the first Russian co-education school was opened in Tashkent in 1866 (Bendrikov, 1960: 61). Also, in March 1871, a Tashkent merchant Said-Azimbay Muhammedvaev presented a report that criticized the existing Madrasas and requested Kaufman, the Turkistan general at that time, to open a new type of Muslim school. In response to Muhammedvaev's plea, and in order to prepare for building a new school in the Isankr Madrasa, Terencheva, who was the captain of the cavalry became the chairperson in June 1871 (Bendrikov, 1960: 69-70).

As such, immediately before and after Imperial Russia, it was a time when children's learning within Mahallas started to be formalized. During the rule of Imperial Russia, informal education at Mahallas was continued, but with the standardization of education at Maktab and Madrasas undergoing a change to a more Imperial Russian type public education the differences between these three systems was becoming more apparent.

### Period of the Soviet Union (1917 – 1991)

Under the Soviet Union rule, the Soviet Union government attempted to use the traditional systems and operation of Mahallas to change the residents' way of thinking to be more 'Soviet-nized' and socialistic in order to make them 'Soviet citizens'.

As a specific example, there was a place called 'Choikhona' where people got together to prepare weddings and traditional festivals. It is known that the Soviet government changed the name from 'Choikhona' to 'Red Choikhona' to utilize this place as a means of deepening the understanding of the government. In the book "History of Samarkand", edited by Muminov, it describes the situation as follows:

'Teachers from the Soviet devoted their energy and knowledge into educating future leaders of communism. Teachers provided highly-charged lessons at school and constantly undertook to incite the general public at the Red Choikhona, clubs and Mahallas. At the 1946's election of the Supreme Soviet of the Soviet Union, out of 3,000 agitators of Samarkand, approximately 500 were school teachers.' (Muminov, 1969: 292)

The book highlighted how farming and urban industry, cultural activities and education under the Soviet government, together with the activities of the scholars in Samarkand with Marxism-Leninism ideology, contributed to the modernization of Uzbekistan and reflected the policies and ideology of the communist party at that time. Although books like this were obviously a part of the political propaganda of the government, it is quite interesting to read in detail about the implementation of the national education policy, numbers of students, numbers of schools, and the advertizing activities at Mahallas from the early Soviet time to 1960.

From books by Muminov and others, it can be seen how the responsibility to change people into 'citizens' through the educational content, and traditional framework of Mahallas was placed on them in order to modernize and 'Soviet-nize' the people to assimilate the ideology of the Soviet government. At that time, unlike at the Maktabs, Madrasas or the Russian schools that were being expanded during the Imperial Russian rule, the Mahallas became responsible for a new informal education.

Although informal education in the everyday life of the people continued, due to the standardization of an education system centered around the development of a school education, and the expansion of teachers' activities under Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union rules, the Mahallas' role in education also began to contain more standardized components.

Due to the change in social structure surrounding Mahallas, the life of the children who resided there changed accordingly. During World War II, guidance divisions were established by committees at each level of the community, city, state and republic for

evacuated children (Muminov, 1969: 227). Also at the same time, orphanages and teaching facilities for youth were established. At that time, kindergarten teachers contributed greatly by playing a key role in preschool education. In Samarkand, there were 2,435 children educated in 43 institutions in 1950, and by 1957 the number had increased to 3,823 children at 49 kindergartens (Muminov, 1969: 295).

It was not only public education which affected children's lives greatly. Under the Soviet Union rule, extra-curricular activities were also being expanded, and social education facilities such as the Pioneers Palace became places for children's activities. At the palace, children studied there and also learnt singing, dancing, sport and various other things. During summer holidays, children participated in a 3-week camp and learnt about nature and how to work together with other children of the same age.

The main difference in children's lives between the times of the Soviet Union rule and the Imperial Russian rule, was that under the Soviet Union rule national and public development was extended to include children's activities outside of school. Until the time of Imperial Russian rule, the main focus was on the development of school education and the government did not intervene much into children's lives outside of school. However, under the Soviet Union rule, children's domains shifted from the Mahallas and the traditional Choikhona to incorporate the Soviet's 'Red Choikhona' and activities at the Pioneers Palace.

Specifically due to policies based on Atheism, the education at mosques was reduced. Children under Soviet Union rule heard teachers talking about the ideology of communism at school, at the 'Red Choikhona' within their Mahallas after school, and during long holidays where they participated in activities at the Pioneers Palace.

In addition, the religious rituals and festivals such as circumcision, post-Ramadan festivals, the Feast of Sacrifices, and traditional Uzbek weddings were either banned or restricted; instead, 'Komsomol Weddings' or 'Red Weddings' were introduced as 'new rituals'.

These strategies to change the people to be more

'Soviet-nized' and become 'Soviet citizens' with a socialist view became deeply rooted in children's everyday lives.

### After the independence of Uzbekistan (1991 – present)

The factor which had the the most impact on children's life after the independence of Uzbekistan was the great transformation of the education system and the curriculum. The school system is undergoing a change from 11-year combined elementary/secondary schooling to a 12-year elementary/lower secondary/upper secondary separate schooling, but there are still many 11-year general education schools. Compulsory education is for 12 years and afterwards students can go to university by passing the entrance examinations. Skipping grades is also quite normal.

Regarding the language policy, Uzbek became the official language under the 'National Language Law' in 1989, for new entrants at elementary schools in 1996, and the written form of Uzbek changed from the existing Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin script so that now all the textbooks at elementary school level are written in the Latin alphabet. Reform in the school curriculum has proceeded and the Uzbek language became a compulsory subject in 1999. However, not all schools teach students in Uzbek. Many schools in the cities teach only in Russian and some teach in both Russian and Uzbek.

Due to this change in the writing system, a problem arose in that some students were unable to read the Cyrillic script which they needed for studying at university. Also, as most signs and billboards in the towns are still written in Cyrillic, this is causing a divide between people who can only read the Cyrillic script and people who can only read the Latin script.

The aim of the classroom content to highlight the traditional Uzbek culture is prominent. As part of re-valuing their history, heroes, and traditional culture, oral literature such as the epic about the hero 'Alpamish', the history of the Amur Timur Empires, using traditional musical instruments, playing traditional sport (*kurah*: the traditional sport of

Uzbekistan which is similar to the Japanese *Sumo*), the role of Mahallas and the spring festival 'Navro'z' are taught in class.

One of the children's rites of passage, the cradle ceremony, is also included in a children's textbook. Children learn themes including 'Family Tradition' and 'Tradition – its Role in the Development of Nationalism and Patriotism' (Kostetsukiy, 2007: 87, Kostetsukiy, Mametova, Mal'kumova and Sergeeva, 2007: 51-52).

After the independence of Uzbekistan, the unofficial activities of Mahallas now included the spring festival 'Navro'z', 'Memorial Day' (formerly Victory Day) (May 9), 'Child Protection Day' (June 1) and 'Women's Day' (March 8); and many of these events are organized at the Mahalla by the office of Mahalla's committee and many children participate in them. 2003 was declared as 'The Year of Mahalla' by the order of president and various traditional competitions were organized to mark this occasion (O'zbekiston Mahalla xayryya jamg'armasi, 2003: 200-236).

At this time, collaborative activities between Mahallas and schools were encouraged by the government policy. For example, school "A", a school in the Mirzo-Ulugbek district, invited the Mahalla's representatives to the Constitution Memorial Day on December 8 to give a lecture on the theme of 'Ideology – an unified national flag and society' in the lesson of the 'Principle of National Independence'. Moreover, the Mahallas' representatives participated in the school events during the 'Base of National Independence' week.

Under Soviet Union rule, the existence and function of Mahallas was almost ignored, but after independence of the state was gained, they were re-born as the base on which to build a new nation, and they were believed to play an important role in children's education. Cultural and educational activities conducted by the former Soviet Union government, such as the ones at the Pioneers Palace, were shifted to the Mahallas and other NGOs; and instead of following the ideology of the former Soviet Union, the 'Principle of National Independence' is now taught to children by Mahallas.

Recently, the tie between school, home and the Mahalla is actively promoted, and the Mahallas support, and become involved in, school education more often (O'zbekiston Respublikasi xalq Ta'limi Vazirligi., Yo'ldoshev, H. Q., 2004: 7).

### **Transition of Children's life, community education and local community's educational role**

From analysis three time periods such as under Imperial Russian rule, period of the Soviet Union and after the independence of Uzbekistan, it became clear that how children's life, community education have changed and local community's educational role.

During period of expansion of Imperial Russia's modern education, children had the opportunity to learn within the Mahalla about religion and own ethnicity, and so on. In other word, within everyday life in Mahalla, children were able to learn about religions and occupations pertinent to their lives, as well as acquire knowledge about their ethnicity and gain a self-awareness as being a member of society.

In the context, Mahallas were places where informal education, as mentioned above, was constantly implemented and Mahallas played a role in supporting this learning. With the expansion of education at Maktab and Madrasas, Mahallas became places to support such informal education.

Under Imperial Russian rule, Mahallas came to be seen as places to support its governance at the grass-roots level. After Imperial Russia, it was a time when children's learning within Mahallas started to be formalized. During the rule of Imperial Russia, informal education at Mahallas was continued, but with the standardization of education at Maktab and Madrasas undergoing a change to a more Imperial Russian type public education the differences between these three systems was becoming more apparent.

During period of the Soviet Union, Mahallas have the responsibility to change people into 'citizens' through the educational content, and traditional framework of Mahallas was placed on them in order to modernize and 'Soviet-nize' the people to assimilate the ideology of the Soviet government. At the same time, unlike at the Maktab, Madrasas or

the Russian schools that were being expanded during the Imperial Russian rule, the Mahallas became responsible for a new informal education.

Although informal education in the everyday life of the people continued, due to the standardization of an education system centered around the development of a school education, and the expansion of teachers' activities under Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union rules, the Mahallas' role in education also began to contain more standardized components. Due to the change in social structure surrounding Mahallas, the life of the children who resided there changed rapidly.

The remarkable difference in children's lives between the times of the Soviet Union period and the Imperial Russian rule, was that under the Soviet Union rule national and public development was extended to include children's activities outside of school. Until the time of Imperial Russian rule, the main focus was on the development of school education and the government did not intervene much into children's lives outside of school. However, under the Soviet Union rule, children's domains shifted from the Mahallas and the traditional Choikhona to incorporate the Soviet's 'Red Choikhona' and activities at the Pioneers Palace.

Under Soviet Union rule, the existence and function of Mahallas was almost ignored, but after independence of the state was gained, they were re-constructed as the base on which to build a new nation-state, and they were believed to play an important role in children's education. Cultural and educational activities conducted by the former Soviet Union government, such as the ones at the Pioneers Palace, were shifted to the Mahallas and other NGOs; and instead of following the ideology of the former Soviet Union, the 'Principle of National Independence' is now taught to children by Mahallas. Furthermore, the tie between school, home and the Mahalla is actively promoted, and the Mahallas support, and become involved in, school education more often today.

Overall, these findings suggest that children's life, community education are greatly influenced by the political situation and government's various policies.

Mahalla and its educational role are also shaken up by government, and government vested Mahalla with a variety of duties along policies. In particular, Mahalla and its function are introduced into school education, and cooperation between Mahalla and school are actively promoted by government after independence. It can be said that children's life and community education within Mahalla are continuing to systematize at present.

However, it is worth noting that grass roots community education and people's educational activities in Mahalla have been maintained up to now. Under Soviet Union rule, rituals and Islamic traditional education were oppressed by the Soviet Government, but, on the other hand, people have kept up own tradition in their everyday life unofficially. Nowadays, Post-Soviet Uzbek Government establishes a system for autonomy in Mahalla and its educational activities. However, people's grass roots educational activities which are based on the bond of the neighbors in the Mahalla also live on. It suggests that education in Mahalla is divided into two parts such as official educational activities by government and grass roots educational activities by neighbors.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the main focus has been on children's life and community education in Mahalla from historical perspectives, and policy towards Mahalla. However, as I mentioned people's grass roots educational activities, a great variety of educational activities between neighbors are developed. It is important to look at all these activities and people's challenges, together with the nation's policies, and address further research towards the issue of children's life, community education in Mahallas and its educational role in Uzbekistan.

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