Chapter 6

MORALITY, SELF AND POWER: THE IDEA OF THE MAHALLA IN UZBEKISTAN

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This chapter explores the relation between morality and the self. It discusses how we might think about moral selfhood as produced through a creative engagement within a social environment, so that morality is particular and individualised, while at the same time recognising that moral evaluation is made with reference to standards that exist outside the individual. It thus addresses the relationship between the universal and the particular. However, the universal is not a static set of norms or system of values, but is a set of dynamic and flexible moral frames, individually shaped within personal experience while remaining shared moral references.

Attention to the moral dimension of social interaction, moreover, broadens our understanding of the relationship between the state and citizen in authoritarian state contexts beyond the standard analysis of power and resistance. In the context of the Soviet Union, it is commonly argued that the attempts by state authorities to shape the consciousness of citizens caused them to adopt separate public and private lives. In public, people acted as if they believed the ideology of the Communist
Party, while in private they held radically different views (Kotkin 1995: 220f.; Kharkhordin 1999: 270f.). However, a stark dichotomy between public compliance and private resistance or dissimulation focuses solely on the issue of power. It implies that Soviet citizens either adopted state discourses wholesale or more often rejected them in favour of their own alternatives. Alexei Yurchak has criticised this approach, arguing that, despite routinely transgressing officially proclaimed norms, many Soviet citizens remained committed to what they saw as the fundamental values of socialism. Individuals perceived themselves as committed Communists, genuinely engaging in efforts to build a socialist society, while rejecting ‘mere formality’. In effect they reinterpreted Communism in their own terms (Yurchak 2003).

Yurchak’s analysis hints at how we might progress beyond the linear focus on power and resistance, in that he implies that individuals not only are embedded within relations of power but also make moral judgements (Lambek 2000). In the Soviet Union, official ideological pronouncements and texts did not in and of themselves constitute the core values in reference to which individuals fashioned themselves as committed Communists. Rather, I suggest that socialism is a moral frame within which citizens placed their own particular constructions of ideals such as social justice and equality. Socialism was therefore both individually shaped within particular experience and was a transcendental frame that encompassed a multitude of personal constructions.

The mahalla similarly acts as a moral frame in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. On one level this is a territorially defined residential district of a town or village, and it also serves as model for a moral community. In Uzbekistan it is regarded as a historically evolved institution of social organisation that pre-dates Soviet and Russian rule in the area. The mahalla as a moral frame incorporates an ideal of mutual aid and communal solidarity among residents, practically realised in the contribution of labour to common projects and the marking of life cycle events, and is overlaid with Muslim religious identity. It has been adopted by the post-independence regime in Uzbekistan as an element within a new national ideology, its own presentation of Uzbekistan’s ‘spiritual heritage’ intended to replace the Marxism-Leninism of the Soviet Union. The regime presents this ideology in moral terms, framing its policies with reference to the region’s Islamic history and religious practice and the spiritual values of the Uzbek people. Most citizens recognise the regime’s discourse on the mahalla as a transparent attempt to legitimate the authoritarian rule of President Islam Karimov. At the same time, however, the moral claims of the regime are not empty window dressing. The mahalla, like the idea of socialism, is a moral frame that gathers within itself diverse ideals and practices of individuals. By engaging with
the moral frame of the mahalla among others, such as Islam, the regime is speaking directly to the subjectivities and ‘beliefs’ of citizens, who fashion their moral selves with reference to them.

**Morality, Self and Power**

While it might be tempting to think about morality as the norms and values of a particular society (Edel 1962), this can only produce a static picture of a moral system or structure abstracted from the dynamic interactions and the creative moral reflections of individuals. Rather, a number of anthropologists have suggested that an anthropology of morality should focus on the processes by which individuals make of themselves a certain kind of person though reflection upon the practices and models found in society (Laidlaw 2002). It should explore the dynamic relation between transcendent values and lived practice, and the effects of relations of power in constituting and regulating moral ideals and practices (Howell 1997a). Thus, morality can productively be located in selfhood, in the processes through which individuals fashion moral selves with reference to what they perceive as transcendent ideals. Moreover, this is a creative process. Drawing inspiration from Aristotle’s concept of practical reason, Michael Lambek has argued that moral reasoning and virtuous action consist in a person’s creative engagement with and manipulation of shared symbols, myths and local histories, and conscious interventions in their societies on the basis of this. Morality consists in the reasoning involved in choosing to contain, exploit or reject the application of power, the practical judgements people make about how to live their lives well, and also virtuous, practical engagement in the form of actions aimed at the general good (Lambek 1996, 2000, 2002).

The intimate interrelation of morality and selfhood has been examined by the philosopher Charles Taylor, who argues that identity is linked to a person’s sense of the good:

> My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand. (Taylor 1989: 27)

Taylor argues that moral issues involve ‘strong evaluation’. These are ‘discriminations of right and wrong, better or worse, higher or lower, which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or
choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged’ (Taylor 1989: 4). Individuals exercise moral evaluation and make sense of their lives with reference to what he calls ‘frameworks’. Within a pre-modern ‘enchanted’ world, Taylor argues, a single overarching framework is unchallenged, whereas, in modern society, no unifying framework can be assumed to be shared by all. This extends Durkheim’s opposition between the coercive morality of societies founded on mechanical solidarity, where all members are forced to act within an enveloping system of moral values, and more complex societies in which morality becomes the subject of critical reflection by rational individuals, but where nonetheless members are bound to society through a certain level of shared morality. At a minimum this is a respect for the dignity of the individual. For Taylor, modern society is distinguished by a ‘post-Durkheimian’ individualism, where the individual no longer conforms to any general societal moral framework, but seeks his or her own spiritual development through personal insight (Taylor 2002: 65f.). However, this modern individual is not an amoral utilitarian, but selfhood continues to be constituted with reference to moral frameworks, albeit personally constituted, within which strong qualitative discrimination is possible. A person with no framework is a damaged, dislocated person.

Following Taylor, I locate morality in selfhood and argue that moral selfhood is constituted through what Taylor calls strong evaluation. However, there is no need to oppose a single shared morality to unconstrained individualism. The moral frames I discuss act in two separate ways. The highly particular values and standards an individual develops in the course of engagement in his or her environment are established as legitimately transcendent and authoritative for that individual by being placed within moral frames. But frames themselves are not the property of the individual. They are shared references which gather a diversity of values as these have significance for individuals. Frames are in this way subjectively recreated within individual experience, while at the same time remaining as ‘public symbols’ with reference to society as a whole (Obeyesekere 1981). In any society, modern or pre-modern, there are a number of available frames, and individuals might develop their moral selves in relation to a number of them simultaneously. In contemporary Uzbekistan some of these frames are translocal, such as Islam, Christianity and socialism, while others are locally specific, such as the mahalla.

A problem with Taylor’s construction of frameworks is that it sets up an opposition between a pre-modern mechanical reproduction of tradition and a modern, reflective creativity. Taylor’s frameworks are thus either all-encompassing, dictating the values and moral identities of all members...
of society in a similar way, or are individualised and therefore not shared. However, in any society, pre-modern or otherwise, tradition is never mechanically reproduced from generation to generation but recreated anew (Carrithers 1992: 9). While there may be a greater choice of frames in globalised, complex societies, the creativity inherent in developing moral selves in reference to them is present at all times and in all places. At the same time, while moral frames are creatively recreated by individuals, they continue to act as common references that encompass a number of diverse representations within a single, transcendental moral tradition. Moreover, Taylor’s analysis ignores the important dimension of power. The relations of power within which individuals are embedded shape the conditions of possibility within which they can relate to moral frames. The presentation and perception of moral frames, their recreation within subjective experience and the formation of moral selves take place within relations of power. Power and morality mutually constitute each other.

The Mahalla as an Institution and an Ideal

There are accounts of a number of different types of social organisation encompassing groups of households in the area of modern-day Uzbekistan, many of which were historically related to regulation of the irrigation infrastructure, cooperation in agricultural work and the marking of life cycle events (Rassudova 1969). In present-day Uzbekistan units of local self-organisation have been formalised by central government as self-governing institutions known as mahallas. Residential areas in both rural and urban areas have been divided territorially into mahallas, governed by a mahalla committee, which is elected by residents. This is headed by a chairman (often known as oqsoqol - literally meaning ‘white beard’), and includes, among other officers, a secretary, chairman of the women’s committee, and a postbon. This last is a community policeman who is elected by residents but who works closely with state law enforcement agencies. In some regions the territory of the formally state-recognised mahalla is further subdivided into locally organised unofficial mahallas with their own oqsoqol and locally chosen personnel.

In practice, the extent to which the institution of the mahalla is relevant to its residents varies. In many newly urbanised city districts that have no history of mahalla organisation, but where it has been imposed recently by central government, the mahalla is of minimal social relevance. People turn to it only if they need official documentation such as proof of residence. In other areas, particularly rural districts and the
older historical centres of cities such as Samarkand and Bukhara, the social authority accorded to the mahalla by residents is greater. Some would also stress the oppressive nature of social control, where people's actions are constantly the subject of gossip, judgement and intervention by the mahalla leadership and neighbours. Despite this, the mahalla remains a powerful symbol and a model for communal solidarity and virtuous living. The ideal of solidarity and mutual aid within a mahalla is available as a model for relations within other social units, such as a household, where the income and labour of household members is pooled and distributed according to perceived need (Rasanayagam 2002).

The post-independence regime in Uzbekistan has attempted to replace the Marxist-Leninist ideology of the Soviet Union with a nationalist discourse founded upon a construction of the 'Golden Heritage' (oltin meros) of the Uzbek people. The region’s Islamic history, particularly that of Sufism, past literary figures and historical rulers such as Amir Timur constitute this heritage (Schubel 1999; Roy 2000). The moral basis of the new national ideology rests upon an ideal of ‘Uzbekness’ and the cultural and spiritual values of the Uzbek people. The mahalla is central to this and plays a dual role for the regime. On the one hand, the regime uses the ideal of mahalla to legitimate the authoritarian rule of the president. The state is presented as a mahalla writ large, a family or community where all members perform their allotted duties and look out for each other’s well-being. One of the president’s often quoted slogans is ‘from a strong state to a strong society’. This is used to justify the existence of a strong executive presidency as necessary to protect democratic ideals and individual freedoms. On a more practical level, the institution of the mahalla is functionalised as an instrument of surveillance and control over the population (Massicard and Trevisani 2003). Even during the Soviet period state authorities co-opted the mahalla as a vehicle for spreading official ideology. During the 1930s the Soviet authorities incorporated the mahalla into the state bureaucracy by instituting the mahalla committee. The leader of this committee was nominally elected by the local community but in reality the appointment was controlled by the Party organisation. The mahalla committees were attached to a Party cell in an educational institution or enterprise and they were responsible for organising ideological campaigns and lectures. They employed personnel (aktiv) who devoted their time to this work (Koroteyeva and Makarova 1998; Moryakova 1998).

Since independence the central government has formalised the institution of the mahalla and integrated it further into the state administrative system. To this end the network of mahalla committees has been expanded. Although these committees are by law self-
governing institutions with a locally elected leadership and are outside the state governing structure, in practice they are treated by centrally appointed local governors (hokim3) as an extension of their own personal authority. For example, they use the mahalla to collect payments for utilities such as gas and electricity, to collect taxes, and even to aid in the fulfilment of production targets for industries. Mahalla committees are expected to promote regime propaganda through the work of their various sub-committees. They are expected to organise state-sponsored festivals such as Independence Day and Navruz (a festival in spring celebrating the New Year). In addition, the educational programmes undertaken by the mahalla committees mirror state priorities, and each year the committee is obliged to present its programme of activities to the office of the district or city governor for approval.

Mahalla leaderships are expected to act as the eyes and ears of the government and to be on the lookout for anti-regime sentiments among their residents. They keep a record of all residents who are working abroad and report this to the district government. After a series of bomb attacks in the capital in 1999, which were attributed to Islamic opposition groups, the president called on mahalla leaderships to monitor the populations and mosques in their territories for indications of what the regime considers ‘extremist’ tendencies.4 During the period of my field research in the spring of 2004 there was a further spate of bombings and shootings directed against the police, after which mahalla chairmen were asked by the state security forces to inform them of any residents who expressed dissatisfaction with the government.

Central government has functionalised the mahalla as an element within its legitimating ideology and as a practical extension of its authority and control over the population. At the same time, individuals recreate the ideal of the mahalla within their own subjective experience, and constitute their sense of themselves as moral persons. This process is shaped by relations of power, within which access to the repressive capacities of the state play a large part. I explore this through an account of Abdumajid-aka, a person I met on my first day in Samarkand in 2003 and who cooperated with me in much of my fieldwork in that city.5

**Abdumajid-aka**

Abdumajid-aka is in his late fifties. He is a lecturer in mathematics at the University of Samarkand and director of a secondary school. In 2003 he was elected chairman, or oqsoqol, of his mahalla committee.
Abdumajid-aka is what might be called a social activist. He takes seriously the official legal status of the mahalla as a self-governing institution and believes that the mahalla can form the basis for a genuine democratic society in Uzbekistan. He is active in promoting the interests of mahalla residents. He does not see himself or his residents in principle as in opposition to the state. On the contrary, he believes in cooperative relations, with residents, the mahalla leadership and city officials working towards a common goal. Of course, many local government officials do not share this idealistic view.

Much of his work as mahalla chairman is in cooperation with the city government officials or in support of central government policies. For example, he has taken the initiative in working with the public utility providers and local government to find a means to ensure that the gas and electricity bills are paid on time. Abdumajid-aka is not simply concerned that his residents are guaranteed supply. In fact the gas supply to an individual household is rarely cut off because of non-payment. Instead, shortages of gas result in an overall reduction in provision. In the case of electricity, it is common for people to illegally connect themselves directly to overhead power lines, avoiding payment altogether.

Abdumajid-aka always has a larger vision of the equitable distribution of resources in the nation as a whole and in the contribution of individuals to the collective good. In the case of natural gas, he believes that it is the property of the people (Russian, narodnie dostoyanie) since it is extracted from the ground. He denies that the gas-supplying organisation is in financial crisis, arguing that the cost for gas has increased much faster than salaries and that those who pay are in fact making up for those who do not. As evidence he points to the relatively high salaries of its employees, with their leather coats and mobile phones. The solution he has suggested is to cancel past debts and for the mahalla leadership to work in cooperation with local government in collecting payments. In return, the mahalla would be allowed to keep a percentage of the revenue in order to aid poorer families.6

Abdumajid-aka is widely travelled, having visited Iceland and Israel for academic conferences and courses, and a few years before my field research he had visited the United States on a project promoting the creation of civil society sponsored by the US government. On his return, he founded an association of heads of mahalla committees with the aim of protecting their members and increasing awareness of their legal rights and status. To this end his association runs seminars to educate mahalla chairmen of their rights vis-à-vis the local state representatives. This is something unprecedented in Uzbekistan and, in the political context in which any hint of activism independent of central government control is regarded as suspect, it is not a little...
dangerous. What protects Abdumajid-aka and his association is the state discourse itself. It provides space for initiatives such as this as long as they can be presented as fitting within official discourses about the mahalla and as being supportive of the regime, or at least not in conflict with it.

This democratic vision of the mahalla is exceptional among committee chairmen I came across. Most described the mahalla as the lowest layer in the state governing hierarchy, directly under the control of the city or district governors. Some described themselves as ‘little hokims’, mapping the national structure of executive government on to the mahalla. In this structure state power is largely concentrated in the hands of the president, who appoints the provincial governors (hokims), who have similar executive authority in their regions. These governors in turn appoint the lower-level district and city hokims. Although the mahalla leadership is not appointed directly by governors but elected by residents, their appointment must be approved by the district governor.

Even where mahalla leaders see themselves as primarily acting in the interests of their residents rather than as mere extensions of the state, they do not perceive this in terms of democracy. They tend to view themselves in paternalistic terms, as acting in the best interests of their communities, upholding and enforcing correct conduct, looking after the economically vulnerable and protecting residents from the excesses of state authorities. To support their authority over residents they use their control over certain resources and functions, such as the issuing of documentation people need to formally obtain exit visas for travel or work abroad, the allocation of state-provided relief for poor families and the issuing of character references for jobs and court cases. They might also organise social boycotts of those they consider are ignoring their authority. Their vision of the mahalla and the role of the oqsoqol as an authoritarian but benevolent leader mirrors central government discourses. However, since they are not outsiders cynically attempting to instrumentalise the mahalla for their own ends, but seek to protect residents from interference from the outside, their self-representations are perhaps more convincing to mahalla residents.

Abdumajid-aka’s activities have led him into direct confrontation with the city government and the leadership of law enforcement agencies on a number of occasions. One such conflict concerned their efforts to force the mahalla chairmen to collect fees from prospective army conscripts for a reduced term of military service. As things stood during the time of my field research, military service was no longer compulsory. However, in order to enter the police force, the SNB (successor of the Soviet KGB) and the public prosecution service (all highly desirable careers, not least because of the opportunities for
earning money through bribes), a certificate of completed military service is necessary. People can either serve for a full year or can pay the equivalent of around US$140 to serve for one month. This has led to the unusual situation in which people actually pay a bribe or use personal connections in order to enter military service for the full one-year term as places for this are now limited. There were a large number of people who did not manage to get a place, however, and were signed up for the one-month service but who failed to pay, and the local government was forcing the mahalla chairmen to collect this money.

At a meeting organised by the city district authorities to which the mahalla chairmen were summoned, the assistant district public prosecutor tried to bully the chairmen into compliance. He referred ominously to certain of them who were refusing to collect this money, claiming that this indicated that they were expressing opposition to the president. When some of the mahalla chairmen objected, he dismissed them rudely, telling them to shut up and sit down. Abdumajid-aka and the press secretary of his association decided to publish an article in a national newspaper dedicated to mahalla matters about how the assistant public prosecutor was exceeding his authority and failing to treat the mahalla chairmen with respect. In a meeting with the head of the provincial branch of the national Mahalla Foundation (a body set up by the government to develop the mahalla as an institution) it was decided that the assistant public prosecutor would be asked for an apology. However, the Mahalla Foundation official refused to allow the article to be published, fearing the image of Samarkand it would create with central government authorities. Determined to publish in any case, Abdumajid-aka and his press secretary did so through the local Uzbek-language newsletter of the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, a British NGO supporting local journalism. As a result of the embarrassment this article caused to the local government officials, showing them to be opposing an institution the president was publicly supporting in his official pronouncements, the assistant public prosecutor was transferred to a position in the provincial administration.

This conflict reveals something about the nature of governance in Uzbekistan, which to a large extent is a legacy of the Soviet period. Formal adherence to the law is not as important as displaying loyalty to the regime. In this situation, state officials themselves can be just as vulnerable to the application of the coercive capacities of the state as citizens within their jurisdictions. It is not simply a matter of state officials having access to state power and directing it at others. Both state officials and non-state actors manipulate presidential pronouncements and publicly stated regime goals to portray themselves as in accordance with them and their opponents as violating them.
Abdumajid-aka is aware that he is treading a dangerous line. He is safe only so long as his actions cannot be portrayed as being in opposition to the regime, and his only protection against such an interpretation is his prominent position within Samarkand society, his reputation for integrity and disinterested public service and the fact that he works closely with local government authorities in forwarding their own work in a number of areas. He does not openly confront the regime but directs his protests at the actions of individual officials, pointing at how their actions are in contravention of presidential pronouncements and the law. He stresses that he is not opposed to payment for the shortened period of military service and considers that the law itself is good since the money that previously went into someone’s pocket in the form of a bribe to avoid service now goes to the government. It is the implementation of the law that is the problem. He was not even opposed to being asked to help in the collection of payments, and considered it the duty of the mahalla chairmen to cooperate with state authorities wherever possible. What he objected to was the dictatorial manner of government officials. Once the public prosecutor changed his tune in the face of open opposition from the mahalla chairmen and asked politely, Abdumajid-aka decided to cooperate and visit those of his residents who had not paid: ‘I fulfilled his request, but if he hadn’t asked politely, I wouldn’t have gone. But I know that the army needs money, needs to protect the borders, fight terrorism. I understand. An educated person should understand, but you have to understand at the level of the subconscious, and not on the level of insult or pressure.’

Abdumajid-aka and the state officials he is criticising are in fact all operating within the same moral frame of the mahalla and its presentation within the official pronouncements of the regime, but the meanings they attach to it and the ends to which they direct their actions are very different. State discourse on the mahalla emphasises its importance in providing support for residents, socialising and educating young people, and instilling traditional Uzbek ‘spiritual’ values. It is even described as a primary school in democracy. However, the regime’s aim is to instrumentalise the mahalla as part of a new national ideology to replace Marxism-Leninism and to legitimate the need for strong executive control. For local governors, the mahalla is an extension of their own authority, a tool for monitoring and controlling the population and for fulfilling the directives handed down to them from central government.

Abdumajid-aka views things differently. He translates the ideals and practice of social solidarity and equality within the mahalla in the context of the modern nation state as a genuine basis for democracy,
taking seriously the regime’s own propaganda. He reverses the president’s slogan, ‘from a strong state to a strong society’, to argue instead that in order to have a strong government you need a strong society. In day-to-day interaction he encounters local government officials who have very different ideas of this institution and in struggles, negotiations and cooperation with these officials Abdumajid-aka is attempting to realise his own vision of a moral community and fashioning his moral self in the process.

The Subjective Recreation of Moral Frames

Abdumajid-aka recreates the frame of the mahalla within his personal life experiences and this contributes to his vision of a virtuous society. When discussing the mahalla he emphasises ideals of mutual assistance and equality, which are universally recognised, if not enacted in practice by everyone to the same extent. In reply to my question as to why wealthy businessmen would want to contribute large sums to mahalla projects, Abdumajid-aka replied:

First of all, the structure of the mahalla over the centuries is like a social unity. In the east, in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and so on, people live within a family. Around each person, the first cover is the family and family property. The second cover is the mahalla and the mahalla property. When I organise a wedding I use the furniture, necessary things which the mahalla has … I know that is not just the mahalla’s, but mine as well. Businessmen who live in the mahalla understand this. This is bought with contributions from residents, who donate according to their ability. A businessman wouldn’t be comfortable giving only a small amount. Everyone knows he’s a businessman, that he has the ability to give 20,000 sum. His neighbour is a teacher and gives 500 sum … Businessmen understand this. They are creating the foundations for the future. Where’s the guarantee that his own son won’t be poor in the future, that his grandchildren will also be rich? If this does happen, then people will say that his father or grandfather was rich but he built houses, a bakery, established electricity or gas for the mahalla.

Abdumajid-aka’s experience of Islam as well as his Marxist education and life within the Soviet Union also contribute to his vision of a moral community. He claims to believe that one day people will attain what he calls a communist society, where people receive according to their needs and give according to their ability, although he does not think it could have been achieved within the former Soviet socialist system. He also dismisses the current regime’s ideology as unconvincing and not reflective of people’s lived experience. The ideal society might be
arrived at through religious education and upbringing or through ideology.

I imagine God as complete understanding that has to bring order into our disorder. This may be by the help of different religions, maybe through Islam, Orthodoxy, Judaism or Bahaisim ... I think that in the future religion will develop in such a way that it will develop general social principles for conduct in society. Religion first develops for a certain group of people, and then gradually becomes a kind of constitution for all humanity, which people accept in their spirits. It won't be important to pray in a mosque or a church. The principles of behaviour will be important. Religion was a carrier of ideology and in the future this will be the case as well. This ideology will direct people, a general ideology, not like the state ideology which changes. Religion lasts longer than government ideology.

Abdumajid-aka constructs himself as a moral person with reference to multiple moral frames. These include the mahalla, Islam, Marxism and democracy. None of these constitute coherent systems of moral norms, or ‘blueprints’ for moral action. Rather, Abdumajid-aka's particular life trajectory, his educational background, Muslim upbringing, experiences of life and work in the Soviet Union, his foreign travel and engagement with Western development agencies involved in democracy building in Uzbekistan have influenced the way in which he subjectively recreates these frames within his life project. They have shaped his concept of the mahalla as an indigenous foundation for democratic governance, and his moral self is created through his efforts aimed at realising this ideal.

At the same time, Abdumajid-aka's freedom to interpret these frames is not unbounded. The form a frame takes, the way it is perceived and how it can be adopted are to a large extent shaped within relations of power. Despite the claims of regime discourses that the mahalla is an ancient institution and carrier of Uzbek cultural values, the form the mahalla takes today is very different from how it might have existed at any time in the past. During the Soviet period and particularly since independence in 1991, the institution of the mahalla has been standardised as a residential unit with a leadership and a set of personnel with defined duties. It has been imposed in areas where it had never had any history before, and variations in local forms of social organisation have been regularised through the now official structures.

Moreover the relationship of the mahalla leadership with both state authorities and residents is to a large extent a product of the official duties and practical power bestowed by the state. For example, the official mahalla committee is responsible for the distribution of state-funded poverty relief and child benefit, it issues documents and certificates that everyone needs at one time or another, and the state judicial system often
refers back to the mahalla domestic disputes and other cases that judges consider of minor importance. Thus, the way in which Abdumajid-aka can project on to the mahalla his ideals about what constitutes a virtuous society, and so project his moral self into public space, is shaped by relations of power within which state actors play a prominent role. Were Abdumajid-aka to exceed the bounds of expression considered politically acceptable by the regime, he would be forced into the position of political opposition activist with all the dangers and restrictions on personal freedoms that would entail. He would no longer be able to retain a self-representation as a person trying to improve the lot of his residents through cooperative engagement with the state.

Within these limitations, the frame of the mahalla is interpreted and enacted in radically different and often opposing ways. However, in order to communicate and present themselves through it, actors do not need to persuade others completely of their own interpretations. The mahalla as a moral frame is multivocal. Many members of Abdumajid-aka’s association do not share his particular view of the mahalla as a democratic institution but rather hold self-representations as benevolent autocrats, enforcing correct forms of behaviour and assisting their more vulnerable residents. They are happy to be active within Abdumajid-aka’s association because this helps to protect their mahallas against the interference of outsiders. All focus on the mahalla as a unit of communal solidarity and mutual support, and on the leadership’s duty to protect the interests of residents vis-à-vis outside authorities. Where Abdumajid-aka’s concept of democracy encompasses accountability of leaders to the residents who elect them, for many other mahalla chairmen, if they think in terms of democracy at all, then it is about guaranteeing the integrity of the mahalla, a locally constituted institution, from the illegitimate interference of central government.

When Abdumajid-aka works with city government to forward government policies and programmes, for example, to ensure that state utilities bills are paid, he is acting upon his own ideals of social justice. Abdumajid-aka and the state officials he is working with relate to each other within a conception of the mahalla as a microcosm of social solidarity which provides a model for relations within wider society. That this constitutes a genuine value commitment for Abdumajid-aka and that local government officials merely instrumentalise the mahalla as an extension of their authority do not prohibit their mutual engagement in these terms. It is only when Abdumajid-aka’s vision of ideal relations in society comes into direct conflict with the actions of state officials that problems arise. Even in these conflicts, it is the perception of Abdumajid-aka as an ally of city government in other contexts that helps him to avoid being perceived as in opposition to the regime.
Conclusion

I have discussed how moral selfhood is produced through an individual’s creative engagement within his or her social environment, while at the same time recognising that moral evaluation is transcendent, defined with reference to frames that stand outside the individual. Moral frames gather within themselves diverse ideals and practices. They allow communication and productive engagement by individuals with differing, even conflicting objectives and visions of a moral community. Thus, attention to the dimension of morality links the subjective sense of self to a shared culture. It also provides insight into the question of ‘belief’ by highlighting how moral frames are incorporated within individual selves. In Uzbekistan, the regime’s discourses are authoritative because, by engaging with moral frames, they are engaging directly with the beliefs of individuals who develop their own moral selves through subjective recreation of these frames. Regime discourse and practice in Uzbekistan do not crudely produce particular citizen-subjects, and citizens do not simply submit or resist. The regime attempts to fill shared moral frames with a particular content, to fix their interpretation within its construction of Uzbekness. It seeks to persuade others to its vision of society, but mutual communication and interaction do not depend on everyone sharing the same interpretation. The regime’s discourse is but one presentation among many, and there is no need for a single hegemonic ideology. When situated within a shared moral frame such as the mahalla, the varied and often conflicting visions of different individuals, and even the legitimating discourses of central government, come to constitute a single, shared moral tradition, which can act as a frame for mutual engagement, communication and contestation.

Notes

1. In the context of urban Tajikistan, Collette Harris has described the socially repressive nature of relations within mahallas, particularly concerning gender relations (Harris 2004).
2. In official publications, many of which are authored by President Karimov himself, the mahalla is characterised in this way (Karimov 1992, 1993, 1995).
3. This term refers to the governors of provinces as well as the heads of city and district administrations.
4. Speech of President Karimov entitled ‘Will and Faith: A Test of our Faith’, reproduced in Islam ziyosi ozbekim siyimosida (The Light of Islam in our Uzbek Form) (Tashkent Islamic University, Tashkent) (2001) 169–82. Human Rights Watch has reported such surveillance activities undertaken by mahalla committees (Shields 2004) and some mahalla committee chairmen told me that they indeed did this.
5. This chapter is based on material collected during field research in the city of Samarkand between June 2003 and April 2004, although it also refers to previous research in the Fergana Valley, conducted from 1999 to 2000.

6. This is in fact a version of an existing scheme proposed by central government, which has proved unattractive to most mahalla committees because to participate they would have been forced to take on responsibility for the considerable debt burdens of the past.

7. Ideya natsionalnoi nezavisimosti: osnovnie ponyatiya i printsipy (The Idea of National Independence: Basic Understandings and Principles), pp. 67–68. This is a booklet outlining the new national ideology that President Karimov is promoting.

8. There are accounts of a number of different types of social organisation encompassing groups of households in the area of modern-day Uzbekistan, many of which were historically related to regulation of the irrigation infrastructure (Rassudova 1969; Lobacheva 1989)