

Traditional Houses in Western Kosovo: A Descriptive Survey of Kullas in the Municipalities of Istog and Klina.

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INTRODUCTION

The Kosovo conflict rendered a heavy toll on the housing stock; more than one third of the houses were damaged and destroyed. In the western part of Kosovo the damage was more intense and amounted to around 80% of the total, due to concentrated militia resistance. Neglect and lack of maintenance in about ten years of instability also played a role. International organizations came to Kosovo in the summer of 1999 and started the reconstruction campaign. Traditional houses received their share of the destruction, but they were overlooked in the reconstruction process.

The two main types of Kosovar-Albanian traditional houses that prevail in Kosovo are: the stone house (kulla) and the Ottoman type town house (cardak).

KULLA

The kulla, which means tower in Albanian, is mainly seen in the western part of Kosovo. It is a distinctive traditional style of the Dukagjini plain that borders Montenegro, west of Kosovo. Kullas were mostly constructed between the end of the 18th century and the first decades of the 20th century, and inhabited by generations of families. Their design is influenced by the social and cultural needs of the people. The Institute for the Protection of Monuments of Kosovo states that kullas were the only architectural type which were built by all Albanian social classes [1]. During my field work in that region, however, I was told by the locals that the kullas were the traditional houses of the rich Kosovar-Albanian families. The style and method of construction of the majority of kullas endorses this opinion.

The kulla has either two or three floors and is mostly square in plan. They were usually utilized by the men of the family, while women and children lived in an attached annex having the same number of floors or less (Fig.1). Animals were kept in the ground floor and the upper floor was used by the men of the house and their guests. There are usually two entrances and staircases. One for the guests, from the main entrance, leading directly to the upper floor and the guest room without passing through the family private quarters. Another for the women, from the side entrance, leading to the middle floor if the kulla has three floors, or to the main floor in case of two floors.



Figure 1: kulla of M. Gega, Gjurrakoc, Istog, as it used to be with the attached annex. Constructed of stone and brick. Taken from an old picture.

The exterior walls are about one meter thick at the ground level and decrease upwards. They are constructed of stone (Fig.2), brick (Fig.3) or both (Fig.1) having one or two floors constructed of stone and the other floors of brick, with various patterns. In some, for example, in kulla of Adem Beke Zakaj, Moistir, Istog, the walls were constructed of bricks and then covered with stones from the exterior. The stones were excavated locally. The bricks are usually Harasan bricks, which were made of sand, chalk, water and a little cement, hand made and baked in kilns, or occasionally mud bricks. Interior walls are constructed of mud bricks with mud as the binding material and occasionally constructed of wood. The front door is through an arch opening in the wall. Small arched windows pierce the rather massive elevations. Many kullas have cantilevered parts and windows in the upper floor, constructed of the same material as the kulla, i.e. stone or brick with various decorative patterns, or of wood in the style of cardak with wooden arches and decorations (fig.4). There are also very small openings called (fringji) used for firing artillery and defense purposes. In fact, the architecture of the kulla, is as defensive as a fortress and must have provided excellent security during its history.



Figure 2: Kulla of R. M. Avdijaj, Syne, Istog, constructed of stone.



Figure 3 : Kulla of C. Ahmetaj, Zabllac, Istog, constructed of brick.



Figure 4: Kulla of S. Mata, Doberdol, Klina, with cardak style cantilever [2].

The floors were constructed of tree trunks and the upper floor ceiling was covered from the inside with decorated wooden planks. The roof was topped with stone sheets which have later been mostly replaced with roofing tiles (Fig.6) or corrugated metal sheets. Many details were incorporated in the design. Some kullas have the Qibla, a vertical niche in the wall pointing in the direction of Mekka and used for prayer. Certain rooms have fireplaces, which were gradually blocked with birds' nests and later were built and closed. There are also wooden hangers attached to the ceiling above the fireplaces for drying clothes (Fig.7), built in wooden ornamented cupboards for storing coffee in the guests room (Fig 8), stone built-in boxes in front of windows and fringjis, stone sinks with an opening to the outside for drainage (Fig 9), and traditional eastern type toilets which were either built originally with the house or added at a later time (Fig.10).



Fig.5: inner ceiling.
Kulla of H. Maxharraj, Gramnik, Klina



Fig. 6: stone sheet roofing.
Kulla of H.Maxharraj Gramnik, Klina



Fig. 7: closed fireplace with hanger
Kulla of H. Maxharraj, Gramnik, Klina



Fig. 8: built-in cupboard
Kulla of U. Ukaj, Kalikan, Istog



Fig.9: Stone basin
Kulla of J. Jaku, Ranoc, Klina



Fig.10: Added eastern toilet
Kulla of C. Ahmetaj, Zabllac, Istog

Influence of Islamic culture is obvious in the design of the kulla and clearly manifested in the segregation of men and women social spaces and entrances. The small windows having a double function of privacy and defense. Examples of similar plans exist in the middle-east, like the Yemeni tower houses for instance, where the ground floor is used for animals and the upper-most floor has the “Mafraj” reserved for the men and their guests [2].

Climatically, kullas are better suited to the local weather than the presently prevalent modern houses. Kosovo weather is cold and harsh during the winter, but could also be hot during the summer. The thick walls, which could be one meter wide and constructed of solid stones or bricks, have high thermal capacity and appreciable time lag. The roofs have also good thermal insulating properties, being constructed of wood and stone. This regulates the interior heat and eliminates the temperature differences between the days and nights. They are also warmer in winter and cooler in the summer due to their high thermal resistance. When this is coupled with good orientation it could result in great energy savings.

The modern houses need considerable energy for heating in the winter. The Kosovars became dependent on electricity and wood burning in stoves for heating. With the present situation of unstable and low electricity supply, the wood burning stoves are being used extensively. Large amount of trees are being chopped every year to provide for heating in winter, that would lead eventually to the depletion of the forests.

FIELD ASSESSMENT

The survey was conducted in August-September 2000, in the municipalities of Klina and Istog, of Peja region, which is known as the Dukagjini plain in Kosovo. The survey consists of 59 kullas, being the total traditional housing stock in the two municipalities. An analytical and visual description has been prepared with an assessment of their condition.

Information of location of kullas were gathered from:

- 1- The department of Culture in Klina.
- 2- The Culture House in Istog.
- 3- International Management Group (IMG) survey charts.
- 4- Agencies encountering kullas during their work in the field.
- 5- Information collected during my visits to the villages.

The kullas surveyed were mostly constructed in the 18th and 19th century, with the exception of three more recent ones built in the first half of the 20th century. Those are in Klina:

- 1- Ranoc, kulla of Jake Jaku (1942).
- 2- Sferke, kulla of Ismet Gashi (1932).
- 3- Zllakucan, kulla of Mark Kasaj, (1942.)

Almost all the kullas suffered from neglect. Interviews with locals and local officials show that around 44 were damaged by the war, burned or shelled. Most kullas were abandoned and people were still living in only nine of them. It is possible to categorize kullas according to the state of damage into the following five categories:

- 1- Badly destroyed or reduced to part walls or rubble (Fig.11).
- 2- Outer walls in various rates of damage but nothing was left of the interiors and the roof (Fig.12).
- 3- Outer walls in good or repairable condition and need some restoration of the interiors and roof (Fig. 13).
- 4- In a fairly good condition and are inhabited (Fig.14).
- 5- Altered and rebuilt and their facades had undergone significant changes (Fig.15).



Fig.11: Badly destroyed kulla
Kulla of F.Meta, Shushice e Ulet, Istog



Fig.12: Kulla with exterior walls only
Kulla of K. Fazlia, Lubozhda, Istog



Fig. 13: kulla in need of some wall, interior and roof restorations.
Kulla of M. Gega, Gjurrakoc, Istog



Fig. 14: Kulla in a good condition
Kulla of S. Bicaj, Vrelle, Istog



Fig.15: Altered and rebuilt kulla
Kulla of N.Shatri, Tomoc, Istog

Kullas, which have been reduced to only very small parts of walls or rubbles are not shown in the pictures files. These are:

- 1- Klina, Gremnik: kulla of Haxhi Merlakv.
- 2- Istog, Carralluke: kulla of Gani Papaj, demolished to be replaced by a new house.
- 3- Istog, Cerce: a- kulla of Tahir Kada and
b- kulla of Isuf Zeqe Rehaj.
- 4- Istog, Uce: a- kulla of Rame Alia,
b- kulla of Col Bajraktari
c- kulla of Ali Imeraj.
- 5- Istog, Tomoc: kulla of Mulla Ramush.
- 6- Istog. Llukavc of Beg: kulla of Asllan Beqiri.
- 7- Istog, Shushice e Eperme: kulla of Halil Syla.

In time, the social and cultural needs of the community changed, and shelter priorities differed. Annexes started disappearing and the whole family lived in the main kulla. Kulla of R.H.Salihaj, Shushice e Ulet, Istog, was used as a small village school and had its windows enlarged. Others were abandoned in favor of more modern houses. In fact, people complained of windows being too small and the interiors being dim. Families of thirteen of the kullas have taken the initiative to enlarge some or all windows, thus

changing the appearances of the facades (see assessment tables). Few kullas were also altered from the inside by, for example, changing the partitioning, plastering the walls, adding toilets, constructing concrete slabs between floors, and adding other entrances or rooms (see kulla of Bardhec, Grabanice, Klina).

International agencies, that started a reconstruction campaign in 1999, were not interested in restoring kullas, but rather in building houses of standard building materials next to the kulla, if the area of the site permitted, or in demolishing the kulla completely and building on the same spot if the area of the site was small, as it happened in Istog, Caralluke, kulla of Gani Pepaj. The locals were also more interested in getting new houses than restoring their kullas. Only four kullas were maintained by their owners, and in Vrelle, Istog, the villagers collected money to restore the roof of kulla Sali Osman Bicaj.

The physical maintenance of kullas and the reconstruction of damaged ones are urgently needed and needs special attention. The fact that most binding material is made of mud, especially in the interior walls, exposes the kullas to further damage under rain and snow, since the mud binding material will be washed away.

CONCLUSION

Restoration of kullas is important for the following reasons:

- They have two or three floors which if reconditioned can accommodate two to three families, helping in solving the present housing crisis. In fact, some families have already done that.
- They are environmentally sustainable in terms of suitability to climatic conditions, energy consumption and use of local building materials.
- To preserve authenticity. During the conflict, cultural and heritage buildings, i.e. churches, monasteries, mosques and traditional houses, were targeted by warring parties possibly due to their symbolic value, or to weaken the sense of attachment.
- Without urgent intervention, kullas are in danger of extinction and consequently the loss of a traditional house type exclusive to this region.

REFERENCES

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