

Assessing the Socio-Cultural Values of *Kulla* Stone House in the Cross-Border Region of Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to assess the socio-cultural values of *kulla*, a traditional Albanian stone house found in the cross-border region of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro. Despite being recognized for its historical and cultural significance in respective countries, *kulla* as a vernacular heritage has not been commonly assessed for its distinct regional heritage values. To address this gap, the study draws on existing literature and field investigations in three countries. The findings suggest that *kullas* have retained much of their authenticity, and that its most distinguished regional values are historical, social, and traditional values, as well as architectural one.

Introduction

Vernacular architecture is globally facing threats from destruction, lack of interest, and lack of awareness of its values. This has made studying it crucial, as it can provide insight into the various ways humans have dealt with housing and community needs and can be beneficial for cultures around the world [1, 24–26]. Vernacular architecture in Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro is prominently represented by the rural stone house, known in the local language as “*kulla*”. The term “*kulla*”, which means “tower” in English, is believed to have originated from the Arabic language and was introduced to the Balkan people through Byzantine influence, as suggested by M. Krasniqi [2, 326]. However, J. Jirecek argues that the term was already present in Greek documents dating back to the 11th century [3, 24]. The word *kulla* refers to a fortified or defensive structure.

Kulla was primarily built by Albanians and was directly connected to the socio-political circumstances of insecurity and ongoing historical unrest in the Balkans. These structures were strategically located to provide views of the surrounding area and were primarily used to provide shelter and security for Albanian families.

Additionally, they served as a gathering place for hosting guests.

Kulla, as both a dwelling and a fortification, has been the subject of research by various travelogues and authors who have analyzed the architecture and history of the Albanian culture. Worth mentioning are the following two historic documents which provide some useful information about architecture and the history of the region: “*Historia e Skënderbeut*” (The History of Scanderbeg) translated from Latin and published in the Albanian language in 1967, written by the Albanian Humanist Marin Barleti (1450–1513), and the Book of Travels “*Seyāhatnāmesi*” of the Turkish travelogue E. Çelebi (1611–1682), written in the 17th century. Çelebi in specific gives information about architecture of Albanian cities, and also provides details about building materials and courtyard formation [4, 5].

Many 19th and 20th century authors have also researched Albanian cultural heritage from a geographical and historical perspective. Worth mentioning are L. Heuzey and H. Daumet’s “*Mission archéologique de Macédoine*” (Paris 1876), L. Heuzey’s, “*Les opérations militaires de Jules César: étudiées sur les terrain par la mision*” (Paris 1886). J. G. von Hahn’s “*Albanesische Studie*” (Vienna 1854), which, as stated by the author to inform about

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his in depth study, in the preface of the book, "... is not a result of fantasy and short journey, but a result of studies and research of several years" [6]. These are followed by early modern studies among which worth noting are: the publication of the Austrian archaeologists C. Praschniker and A. Schober "Archäologische Forschungen in Albanien und Montenegro", published in 1919; E. Čerškov's "Rimljani na Kosovu i Metohiji" (Romans in Kosovo and Metohija), published in 1969; A. Stipčević's "The Illyrians: History and Culture", published in 1977, etc.

More specifically, *kulla*, as Albanian vernacular heritage was a focus in the following writings by foreign authors: F. Nopcsa in "Albanien: Bauten, Trachten und Geräte Nordalbaniens", Berlin, Leipzig 1925; A. Haberlandt in "Kulturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zur Volkskunde von Montenegro, Albanien und Serbien. Ergebnisse einer Forschungsreise in den von den k. u. k. Truppen besetzten Gebieten", Vienna 1917; A. Degrand in "Souvenirs de la Haute-Albanie", Paris 1901; Th. Ippen in "Die Gebirge des nordwestlichen Albanien", Vienna 1908, etc. F. Nopcsa and Th. Ippen, among others, describe the rise and distribution of *kullas* [7]. Going into more details, F. Nopcsa also provides information about the functioning of the areas inside *kullas* [8].

About vernacular architecture in general and *kulla* in specific, there are numerous studies by authors of new generations, primarily from Albania and Kosovo, such as: Z. Shkodra, A. Meksi, A. Baçe, E. Riza, P. Thomo, L. Mile, A. Muka, B. Strazimiri, B. Samimi, Sh. Prifti, M. Krasniqi, F. Drançolli, J. Drançolli, F. Doli, E. Riza, Z. Cana, M. Carabregu, A. Beqiri, E. Dukagjini, Gj. Karaiskaj, H. Statovci, K. Halimi, J. Ivančić, A. Lainovic, M. Lutovac, S. Tomoski, J. Krunic, and others.

Despite a significant amount of literature, *kulla* as a typical vernacular architecture in the Balkans is not well known internationally, given that most publications, particularly recent ones, have not been written nor translated into foreign languages. Additionally, existing studies tend to focus on the structural and architectural aspects, as well as the historical significance of *kulla* as a residential type of building in individual countries like Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, but not in the wider cross-border context. Furthermore, there has been a lack of effort to systematically define the multiple heritage values of *kulla*, partly due to a lack of proper mapping of *kullas* in terms of their spatial distribution and physical condition. One recent initiative in this direction is the on-site capacity-building project "Ilucidare". The anticipated vision of this initiative was to work towards compilation of a joint nomination file for *kullas* and their surrounding landscapes as a shared cultural asset, and as a potential serial world heritage site [9].

This paper seeks to expand on the aforementioned initiative by assessing and defining the shared regional values of *kulla*, as the first step towards recognizing it

as a cultural asset at the regional level. The authors of this paper assert that while *kullas* have maintained their physical authenticity and geographical presence in the border area of the three states, the lack of preservation and protection at the individual state level has resulted in a gradual decline in their numbers and a subsequent loss of their multiple values. The current condition of the *kullas* as observed in the field supports this prediction, indicating that *kullas* are in a state of disrepair.

Our position is that by assessing and categorizing the common values of *kullas*, this paper contributes in the formulation of a shared regional narrative, which will assist in promoting awareness of their socio-cultural importance and their potential for natural and cultural tourism purposes. In conclusion, we propose an assessment format for *kulla*'s socio-cultural values that would benefit all three countries in their future collaborative efforts to ascribe *kulla*'s shared values and its conservation and development as a cultural landscape in the cross-border region of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro.

I. Materials and Methods

In order to formulate the values of *kulla* as a historic building, irrespective of their location in Kosovo, Albania, or Montenegro, the paper draws on previous research on *kulla* to establish its historical, social, and cultural significance as interpreted by different travelogues and writers over time. To complement and refine the values identified in the literature review, the paper also integrates data obtained from on-site capacity-building activities conducted by CHwB Kosovo under the "Ilucidare" project in the three countries, managed by the first author of this study [9]. During the "Ilucidare" field study, 70 *kullas* were identified and evaluated in the villages of Dragobi and Valbona, Albania. Information on their condition, history, values, and other factors were collected and analyzed. Additionally, 28 *kullas* and 11 stone houses were evaluated for their values in the region of Plave and Guci, Montenegro. The intangible values of *kullas* located in four villages in the Dukagjini Plain in Kosovo were also mapped during the project. The field research conducted during 2021–2022 included interviews with *kulla* owners and visual analysis of *kullas*, in order to document the tangible, intangible and natural values of *kullas*, as well as their physical condition.

The material collected from the "Ilucidare" project is used as a guidance in both terms of confirming the geographical setting and the state of art of *kullas* and is the subject of our on-site survey in four villages in Kosovo (Junik, Nivokaz, Dranoc, and Isniq), Valbonë and Dragobi villages in Albania, and the villages in Plavë and Guci region in Montenegro, in 2022. Our investigation takes into account the physical state of *kullas* in these areas to determine whether they qualify as regional cultural assets.

Concurrently, we examined the level of risk posed to *kullas* due to inadequate protection and the potential loss of their socio-cultural values respectively. Our observation has led us to the formulation of two sets of value categories, proposed to be utilized by the three countries to create a common statement for *kullas* as a cultural asset in the cross-border region.

II. Results

A. Current State of *Kullas* in Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro

The protection of *kullas* is of utmost importance for Albanian cultural heritage and identity, which is why this type of architectural heritage has been continuously studied and documented by local architectural historians [10, 47]. However, despite their cultural significance, a limited number of *kullas* are officially designated as monuments and protected by the governments of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro. In Kosovo, a total of 160 *kullas* are designated as cultural heritage under temporary protection by the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport [11], with the majority of them (69 %) located in the Dukagjini plain. In Montenegro, 55 *kullas* are preserved in the Plavë and Guci region, but only one is officially designated as a monument (the *Kulla* of Rexhepagiq family in Guci) [12]. In Albania, out of the 2212 cultural monuments listed on the official website of the National Institute of Cultural Heritage [13], only 75 *kullas* together with other urban dwellings in Albanian Alps, are officially designated as monuments.

Based on the current state of protection, it is evident that the efforts to document and safeguard *kullas* vary across the region. For instance, while Kosovo has conducted an institutional mapping of all *kullas* in the country, no such initiative has been undertaken in Montenegro. Our field observations reveal the fact that *kulla* has undergone two

types of transformations that pose a threat to its heritage status and values. The first type of transformation is related to the *kulla's* historical context throughout the 20th century and how it has evolved up to the present day, while the second type of transformation is a result of recent inappropriate conservation efforts.

B. Condition and Transformations

Kullas were once a part of everyday life for communities living in them. However, due to factors such as wars, lack of preservation efforts, and natural aging, many *kullas* have fallen into disrepair. While some *kullas* are still in use, most of them are abandoned or in poor condition. Although some authentic elements were changed over time, most of the original features are still being preserved.

The degradation of *kullas* in the region began during the Ottoman period in the 19th century and continued throughout the 20th century with the loss of defensive features and the burning or alteration of *kullas*. Arguably, the most substantial harm was the loss of a whole architectural volume known as watchtower (*karollane*), which was the vertical and defensive climax of some *kullas* in Dukagjini and Drenica regions [14, 38–40].

In Kosovo, in the period between two World Wars (1918–1941), many *kullas* were burned as a part of ethnic cleansing. Consequently, many became ruins, and some were heavily altered to adjust to the needs of other ways of living. The period after the Second World War (1945–1998) was a period of transformation of *kullas*, which came mostly as a result of modernization or adaptation to new uses [14, 38–40]. The Kosovo War during 1998–1999 also led to extensive destruction of built cultural heritage, especially *kullas* [15]. As observed during the field research, *kullas* are also affected by various transformations and abandonment, thus endangering the loss of authentic features and setting (Fig. 1a).

Kullas in Plavë and Guci in Montenegro, have also been subject to destruction throughout years. Historically,



Fig. 1. a) – *Kulla* of Haxhi Zeka in Peja, Kosovo, burnt during the war [photo courtesy of Department of Culture, JIAS-UNMIK Kosovo, 2000]; b) – damaged *kulla* in Guci, Montenegro [photo courtesy of Labeatët, 2021]; c) – inadequate interventions in *kulla* in Valbona, Albania [photo by author, 2021].

these buildings were covered with traditional wooden planks, known locally as *shiklla* or *furde* [16]. However, recently these materials are being replaced with cheaper and quicker to install alternatives. As observed during the field research, the biggest threat to *kullas* in Montenegro is their physical condition, which includes deformations, structural cracks, wall deterioration, and the presence of moisture, often caused by lack of maintenance and conservation. In some cases, *kullas* are also destroyed by their owners if they pose a risk to the occupants (Fig. 1b).

The Second World War and subsequent repression caused widespread damage in Albania, including the destruction of 18 000 houses [17] and displacement of many people, particularly in the North-Northeast region. This led to the modification and adaptation of traditional *kulla* houses, including the removal of protective elements and conversion of certain features into balconies or windows (Fig. 1c). The communist state's nationalization and collectivization policies also made it difficult for residents to access materials for roofing, which resulted in the use of industrial materials. The sanitization process [18] aimed to remove cattle from the ground floor of *kullas* and build new stables instead. After the change in political system in 1992, the region was largely neglected by the new state, leading to further deterioration of housing and infrastructure [19]. A lot of residents have been forced to migrate to cities or emigrate abroad, leaving their properties and *kullas* to degrade.

C. Preservation Initiatives

Efforts have been made to restore and adapt traditional *kulla* houses for various uses. In Albania, interventions that took place before 1990s were extensive and included reconstruction of walls and replacement of roofs [20],

while later ones would mainly focus on maintenance, and rarely conservation, only in cases where *kullas* were at high risk of destruction [19].

In Kosovo, before the 1990s during ex-Yugoslavia, there was no interest in protection of *kulla*, whereas after the 1998–1999 war, there have been restoration projects implemented by the Ministry of Culture and other international organizations, firstly focusing on emergency interventions, and later on on adapting them for new uses, such as bed and breakfast, library, etc. (Fig. 2).

In the region of Plava and Guci, Montenegro, there have been only a limited number of interventions on *kullas*. One example is the *Kulla* of Deli Sadri Gjonbalaj, a 100-year-old building located in the village of Vuthaj, which underwent repairs for structural stability and improved thermal comfort in September–October 2021.

D. Definition of Values

Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro have each their national laws on cultural heritage [21]–[23], recognizing the importance of cultural heritage based on multiple values in line with international charters. Unlike Kosovo, where value assessment is regulated by a bylaw categorizing cultural heritage values into historic, archaeological, artistic, scientific, social, spiritual, technological, and rarity values [24], neither Albania nor Montenegro have established a set of cultural heritage values through a bylaw or other binding regulation.

Albanian law refers to cultural heritage assets as those that are valued based on their artistic, historic, archaeological, architectural, urban, ethnographic, archive, and bibliophilic interest. [22, Article 5.40]. Similarly, Montenegrin law regulates the valorization of cultural assets based on their artistic, historical, paleontological,



a)



b)

Fig. 2. *Kulla* Oda e Junikut: left – before conservation in 2001 [photo courtesy of CHwB Kosova, 2001]; right – after reconstruction and adaptive reuse as a library in 2002 [photo courtesy of CHwB Kosova, 2019].

archaeological, architectural, scientific, and technological values as well as other values of social significance [23, Article 23.2].

Table I shows that the three countries have in common historic, artistic and archaeological values. Architectural value is defined in Albania and Montenegro, while in Kosovo, it falls under artistic. The social value, which is common for Kosovo and Montenegro, in Albania is defined as ethnographic value, while the intangible values, more

precisely the traditional value found in Kosovo’s legal framework, is associative with urban (identity, etc.) and other social values as found in Albanian and Montenegrin laws.

Relying on this analysis, for the case of *kulla*, we propose to formulate four values in the regional context, grouped under two categories: a) architectural value and b) historic, social, and traditional value. The reason for this categorization is based on on-site assessment of the abovementioned values, conducted by the authors of this study.

TABLE I

Value Categories in Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro Based on Their Legal Framework [authors using [21]-[23]]

Kosovo [21]	Albania [22]	Montenegro [23]	Proposed regional values for <i>kulla</i>
Historic	Historic	Historic	Historic
Artistic	Artistic	Artistic	
Archaeological	Archaeological	Archaeological	
Scientific	x (Archive, bibliophilic)	Scientific	
Technological	x	Technological	
x	x	Paleontological	
x (Included in artistic) ¹	Architectural	Architectural	Architectural
x	Urban	x	
Intangible (religious, traditional)	x	x	Traditional
Social	x (Ethnographic)	Other social...	Social
Rarity	x	x	

¹ Architectural value in the case of Kosovo is included in artistic value.

E. Architectural Values

Kullas are typically characterized by their compact, cube-like shape and strong fortification features such as high walls, small windows, and shooting holes (Albanian: *frëngji*). Defensive features are characteristic of traditional Albanian houses [25]. They have a rectangular floor plan that is typically around 10×10 m and of similar height, with thick walls made of stone that can reach up to 70–80 m in thickness. The openings or shooting holes in these buildings are minimal. They are usually built in three floors.

Although the architectural composition of each *kulla* is unique across Kosovo, Albania and Montenegro, these buildings show a remarkable unity of design. Most *kullas* have the same functional layout, with the barn on the ground floor, family quarters (house of fire and bedrooms) on the first floor, and the gathering room of men (*oda e burrave*) on the top floor. Each floor has a separate entrance, which makes *kulla* very definable in terms of its economic, family, and social use (Fig. 3).

This functional scheme makes *kullas* distinct from other historic buildings in the Balkans. Firstly, there are no cases

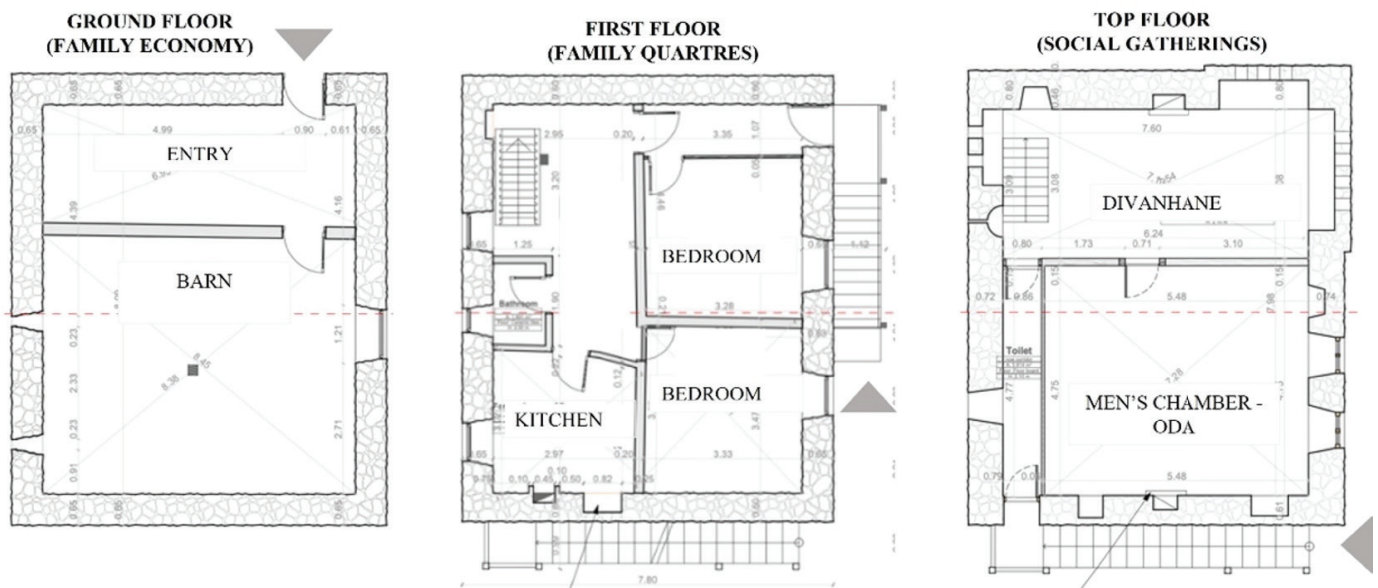


Fig. 3. Floorplans of the *kulla* of Isuf Mazrekaj in Dranoc, Kosovo [drawings by authors].

of barn located in the ground floor of a historic building; we usually encounter them in a separate building. And secondly, *oda* with its distinctive function as a room for men only, but also a court, a festive and mourning room, a reconciliation unit and so on, is what mostly adds the functional value to this type of historic dwellings.

Kullas in the cross-border region of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro share similarities in terms of their structure and layout, but each area has its own unique characteristics, particularly in the exterior architectural details. One of the main features observed during our field research, is the protruding gallery – *dyshekllek* – on the façade, which varies in terms of material, position, and details. While the layout represents the joint regional functional value of *kulla*, we argue that it is the protruding gallery – *dyshekllek* – that forms the main contributing element to the joint regional architectural value of *kulla*. (Fig. 4).

The construction of *kullas* was relatively quick due to the use of local materials and the hiring of craftsmen at least a year in advance [2, 57]. Our observation on the site suggests that construction of *kullas* was a job that could take up to 2–3 years. They were built by talented craftsmen from Dibra and Lunxhëria, who would travel and work regionally on request. Extremely thick stone walls – the main load-bearing structure – which gradually decrease by reaching 60–70 cm in the upper floor, stand on even thicker stone foundations (about 100 cm). The stones were all carved, with straight and smooth angles – especially the stones of the doorposts, some stones of the corners of the walls and door arches, were also carved with pagan ornaments and symbols, but also religious – Catholic and rarely Islamic (Fig. 5).

Considering that the mountainous areas in the cross-border region of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro were rich in stones, the structure of these buildings was always

built of locally provided stones. The main part of the *kulla's* wall consists of round shaped stones, presumably collected from nearby riverbeds. Timber, lime mortar, and in some cases, bricks were also used.

One structural element that sets *kullas* in this region apart is the shape and the material of the roof. In the mountainous areas of northern Albania and western Montenegro, *kullas* have alpine pitched roofs covered with timber boards (*shiklla* or *furde*), while in the lower altitude Dukagjini Plain of Kosovo, *kullas* have lower roofs covered with adobe hollow tiles (Fig. 4).

F. Historical, Social and Traditional Values

Kullas, which began to be constructed in the late 17th century, were built during a time of insecurity and ongoing conflicts in the Balkans [2, 327]. Most of the remaining *kullas* date back to the 18th and 19th centuries, with a few also being built in the 20th century. They were built in various natural areas of the cross-border area of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, with a concentration in the Dukagjini Plain, Has, Gjakova Mountains, western Macedonia, Mat, Lume, Mirditë, and even Vlora.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many families in the region had large numbers of sheep, and the monetary economy enabled the export of animals and cattle products, enriching the villagers. With the end of the feudal system, serfs and shepherds were able to become landowners [2, 326, 343]. *Kullas* were originally built for family safety, but they later became fashionable. All wealthy families, regardless of the areas subject to this study, built *kullas* because they symbolized honor and respect. *Kullas* were not just for the wealthy, as middle-class families also built them, with the community providing materials and sharing in the construction process [27].



Fig. 4. Dyshekllek (protruding stone gallery) in the Kulla of Isuf Mazrekaj in Dranoc, Kosovo [drawing by authors].

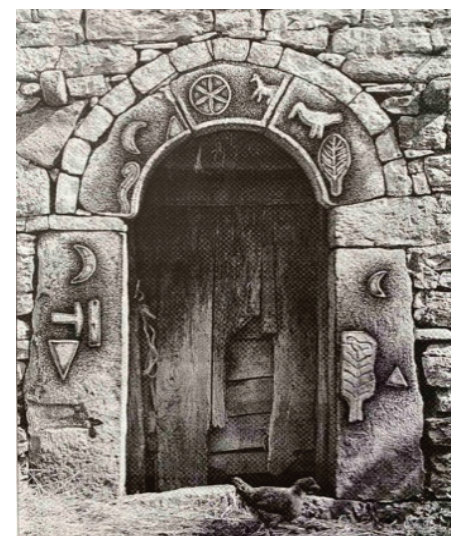


Fig. 5. Cult ornaments on the arched door, Kulla of Ramadan Selimi, Has, Kosovo [26].



Fig. 6. *Kulla* in the cross-border region of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro: a) – Mazrekaj neighborhood in Dranoc, Kosovo; b) – *kulla* in Rragam, Valbona, Albania; c) – *kulla* of Ramok Çelaj, Vuthaj, Montenegro [photo by authors].

The similarities in the design and construction of *kullas* in Albanian territories can be attributed to the common way of life shared by Albanian people, including both socio-cultural and economic factors. The patriarchal structure of the Albanian family, which often included multiple generations living in the same household, is reflected in the organization and hierarchy within families. This is further influenced by the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini [28], a customary law that governed parts of northern Albania and western Kosovo. Kanun's manifestation is embedded in the men's chamber (in Alb.: *oda e burrave*), which represents the identity of the *kulla* itself.

The design of men's chamber – *oda* (see Fig. 7) – was structured in a way that it determined the social status, age, prestige, namely the family and social hierarchy. Although it is a single room, *oda* is divided into two parts – the big part (Alb.: *cerga e madhe*) for the guests and the small part (Alb.: *cerga e vogël*) for close relatives and family. The big part, located on the right, was reserved only for guests and the lord of the house who always sat next to them. Halimi, a resident of Isniq village says: “The oldest ones were always asked to sit in the big part (*cerga e madhe*). The small part was for acquaintances from the village.” The area between two parts, is known as a neutral place. According to Halil from Drenoc: “If you happen to sit there, and you make any mistake while talking, it is not such a big deal, since it is perceived as a neutral place”. However, it is not the same if you sit in *cerga e madhe*. According to him “if you by any chance speak of something not accepted by *oda*, and you happen to be seated in front of the fireplace, you are immediately thought of as either smart or dumb. If you are wrong, *oda* will tell you that” [29]. Moreover, the seating order in *oda* has also reflected the order of speaking, this order, among other things, is respected and guests were very careful to remain silent while someone was speaking. According to Halil, it was a rule of *oda* that “when someone was given the word, others had to listen; it was forbidden that people talk all at the same time...” [29].

The protocol and code of conduct in *kulla*, as reflected in the seating arrangements in *oda* is an important intangible value embodied in the architecture of the region under

review. This room also served as a space for various festive events and ceremonies, including mourning ceremonies, which are still commonly held in *kullas*, while weddings are less frequently held in *kullas* and are more often held in restaurants. *Oda* served multiple purposes, including educational, social, and political roles. It was a place where important gatherings and assemblies took place, where major decisions were made, and where historical events such as political uprisings were planned. Additionally, in times when public institutions were not available, such as during the Serbian occupation in the 1990s in Kosovo, *kullas* were often used as schools and for important political and organizational meetings, as well as for judicial purposes.

In terms of importance, immediately after *oda* comes the kitchen, or so-called house of fire, connoted with the women and children of the family, where food was prepared and the practice of everyday life took place [2, 330]. During the interviews, in 14 *kullas* in Isniq, Kosovo, both men and women have shared their experiences and memories of the house of fire, highlighting the difficult position of women who were responsible for maintaining the fire, preparing food, and taking care of other domestic duties. Despite the hard work and early mornings, some



Fig. 7. Men's chamber – *oda e burrave* – *Kulla* of Isuf Mazrekaj, Dranoc, Kosovo [photo by authors].

remember this time fondly for the order, discipline, harmony, and mutual respect that existed within the family. The quality of home-grown, organic food was also highly valued [29].

III. Discussion

As is commonly understood, definition of values is an important approach to comprehending the socio-cultural context of heritage sites. Socio-cultural values are fundamental to conservation and pertain to the significance attributed to buildings or places, which are meaningful to people affiliated to them, based on their historical, aesthetic, or cultural association [30, 10].

We argue that defining the socio-cultural values of *kulla* is a crucial step in recognizing it as a regional heritage asset, given that Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro each have their own legal and evaluation methods for national heritage assets. This is also a prerequisite for effectively safeguarding *kulla* and promoting its development in a cross-border regional context. Furthermore, this would inform further definition and assessment of economic values of *kullas* as significant assets for regional cultural tourism.

To integrate the definition of values outlined in this article into an established framework, we chose the categorization of socio-cultural values as presented in the report "Assessing the Values of Cultural Heritage" by the

TABLE II

Proposed regional socio-cultural values of *kullas*, in reference to the Getty Conservation Institute [by authors using [30]]

Socio-cultural values definition [30]	Formulation of socio-cultural value of <i>kulla</i>	Regional values typology
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evoke historical significance, including age, association with people/events. Evoke rarity/uniqueness. 	<p><i>Kullas</i> have a deep connection with the history and traditions of the Albanian people. Over 200 years old, <i>kulla</i> has served as a testament to the historical events that have shaped the Albanian settlements.</p> <p>Their emergence (especially the <i>oda</i> institution) is closely tied to the political conditions of the time; they were shaped by the social system deriving from the code of conduct (known as the Kanun of Lekë Dukagjini).</p>	Historical value ¹
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Evoke technological qualities and archival potential. 	Correspondingly, <i>kulla's</i> composition, design and function were influenced by factors such as patriarchy, hospitality, family structure, and overall socio-political contexts marked by conflict, resistance, and resilience, as well as the availability of local materials and adaption to the natural conditions.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cultivate cultural affiliation through symbolic, craft/work-related, and ethnic/group identity values, that include their creation and evolution, design and construction methods. 	<p><i>Kullas</i>, stone houses found in the cross-border region of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, are heritage assets that represent the identity, traditions, and historical-social image of the Albanian people.</p> <p>In the past, <i>kullas</i> have served as a symbol of social status and protection, and today they have maintained much of their traditional authentic appearance and habitat. As such, they continue to play a significant role in shaping the cultural identity and traditions of people living in the cross-border region of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro.</p> <p><i>Kullas</i> were built in simple cubic form of vernacular materials and were adapted to the local terrain. They look like small fortifications, built with strong stone walls with only few small openings.</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promote social connections and networks by serving as public spaces for activities like celebrations, markets, etc. Strengthen social groups and promote place attachment. 	<p><i>Kullas</i> have served not only as fortified residential buildings, but also as institutions for social and historical gatherings. <i>Kullas</i> were places for sporadic celebrations and mourning.</p> <p>They manifest the daily experiences of the people who lived in them, and their presence can still be felt through the remaining artifacts, structures, and collective memories and stories passed down through generations.</p>	Social value ³
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The visual characteristics of heritage encompass the building's design and development, as well as the appearance of buildings. 	<p>Architecturally, <i>kullas</i> are similar to fortifications due to their function as both individual buildings and complexes, which necessitated the use of strong materials, thick walls, and very few openings.</p> <p>Their composition is a basic stereometric shape: the cube. The height of the entire <i>kulla</i> is 3 floors by 3 m and 1 m for the ceiling, a total of 10 m, resulting in a cubic-shape building of dimensions approx. 10×10×10 m: the ideal stereometric stone crystal.</p> <p>The construction of <i>kullas</i> using vernacular materials, their defense system, and unique layout with various functions such as the barn, house of fire, and <i>oda</i>, contribute to their architectural values.</p>	Architectural value

¹ Proposed based on findings from historical records, and modern-day literature.

² Equivalent to the cultural/symbolic value [30]. Proposed based on findings from modern-day literature, also, validated through on-site assessment.

³ Proposed based on findings from modern-day literature, also, validated on-site.

Getty Conservation Institute [30, 10–12]. The two groups of values presented in our paper, namely architectural and functional values, and historical, social, and traditional values, were aligned with this framework (Table II).

Conclusions

Kullas are the most prominent architectural heritage in the cross-border region of Kosovo, Montenegro, and Albania. While they have been recognized and preserved as an example of a unique typology of vernacular architecture, their protection has mostly been approached from an anthropological-historical perspective, with limited consideration given to conservation and sustainability aspects, and almost none from a landscape preservation and development standpoint. The onsite investigation has highlighted that the institutional efforts to protect *kullas* within their broader context are far from being in line with best practices in integrated conservation of wider heritage areas.

Given that the three countries have distinct legal frameworks for protecting cultural heritage, which, however, may offer opportunities for aligning value assessments, a joint value assessment of *kullas* as a shared typological asset could be a significant initial step towards integrated conservation in the broader cross-border region.

We anticipate that the assessment of the socio-cultural values of *kulla* stone house will foster a shared understanding and appreciation of the traditional built heritage not only in the countries of Kosovo, Albania, and Montenegro, but also beyond their borders. This would promote their revitalization, making *kullas* accessible to both local communities and tourists, resulting in their sustainable preservation, and in turn, contributing to the overall development of the cross-border region in social, cultural, and economic aspects. By enhancing their physical condition, interpretation, and the promotion of their cultural values, as well as their significance to the past and present communities of the region, *kullas* may become eligible for consideration as a potential Serial World Heritage Site.

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