

VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE: CHANGES IN THE TRADITION FOLKLORIC FORMS AND NARRATIONS IN OLD LEBANESE HOUSES

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Abstract

The vernacular houses have sustained our traditional habits and customs which were related to the way dwellers lived and adapted to the interior space of these houses. Although they share most of the essential characteristics, each house had its unique approach to details: location, orientation, kind of stones and woods, among many other basics used in the interior. These houses were built for a purpose, with the determination to create a shelter, to provide privacy and to establish a heaven within those thick walls '*kallin*'; securing against danger, disaster and malicious attacks.

In a gesture of written preservation to manuscript some types of old traditional houses still existing in the country side, namely in Achkout; my village in the heart of Keserwan, overlooking the Mediterranean Sea in Lebanon, I will document the few still-existing custom habits and household folkloric patterns and record old and bygone stories and rituals that are still in the memory of the very few elderlies who are still alive, in a sincere effort, I try to preserve Achkout's identity and to create awareness legacy; to help in protecting my village identity and to resuscitate in the hearts and minds, the curiosity and mystery of the old folkloric spaces of the 'once upon a time' era.

Needless to say, that after these transformations, the vernacular house is on the verge of losing all relations with the old heritage and traditional ways of construction; masonry work that undertook abundant group work; voluntary craftsmanship of helping hands; "*aouneh*", to finish, is nowadays fading away.

The "*aouneh*", free exchanging aid between the villagers, that was the ritual way of living which established the profound bonding between the house, its dwellers and the rest of the village inhabitants. These architectural customs are being communicated now as mere competitive forms of complicated commercial entities built on random sites, spread along the country side, where the concept of "*aouneh*" ceases to exist.

Concerning the folkloric structure in building and accessorizing, not one single house was similar to the other, even in the generals, such as tools and partitions; "*outa-a ou aata-a*". Each detail in every house was directly related to the dwellers who characterized, personalized, and occupied the interior space to fulfil their necessities and daily needs.

The unrestrained diffusion between the past and the present, the divergence and the intermixing between conventional customs and the old ethnic performances related to the folkloric masonry of interior spaces, could coexist.

Keywords: Household, folklore, forms, patterns, tools, tradition, customs, dwellers, masonry, construction, interior, vernacular, coexist

1. INTRODUCTION

Traditional land of the Phoenicians that had been, conquered, influenced and occupied by many civilizations centuries ago, starting from the first settlements in Lebanon; Canaanites and Phoenicians (3000 – 1680 B.C.) then the conquest of Alexander the Great (333- 323 B.C.) and the domination of the Seleucid Empire which lasted till 64 B.C. after which the Romans till 395 A.D., and with the end of the Byzantine Era in 634, started the dawn of the Middle Ages which lasted from 634 till 1516 A.D.; Arab Conquest, after that came The Empires of Umayyad and the Abbasid till the Crusade that lasted from (1252 – 1516) and with it began the Modern Times (1516 – 1914) Ottoman Domination which divided Lebanon; “*Aahed el Mutasarrifiyah*” that ended by the famous war “*hharb el arbata-aesh*” where thousands of Lebanese people in the mountains died mainly from famine. The beginning of the French Mandate paved the way to the Lebanon to claim its of independence in 1943. each of these civilizations and societies left behind monuments, ruins and signs spreading their existence all over the country till our present time. (Ismail A. ,1972).

Memories of the past shaped and molded our present; traces, citations and even patterns survived many generations to modified a present rich in traditions, full of folkloric forms and narrations that are naturally integrated in our customs as part of our present daily routine.



Fig. 1. Map of the old neighborhoods and regions in Achkout around which most of the vernacular houses were built.



Fig. 2. In Blue; The old river that used to pass under the bridge; “*Jes*” Achkout.

Houses and even buildings are now mainly constructed to be rented or sold to stranger from outside the village, and the village close community depleted. Everyone knew everyone, not anymore.

Sheikh Albert Massaad born 1926, wrote in his book, my translation in English: “.....the number of houses in Achkout in the 30s was 120 houses; 41 with red brick between pointed and rectangular rooftops which was known by “*karmid el batershil*”, out of which 34 were ruined “*khirbi*”, due to World War I, there was three churches and plenty of wild trees outside the center of the village. Achkout was protected by three hills from South East reaching the edge of Faytroun village planted with vineyard and fertile trees; “*Tallet Shir Al Natou*”, “*Tallet Al Ramiyet*” and “*Tallet Al Moushet*”, and the wild natural boundaries; from the East by the mountains of Faytroun, from the North “*Kirset Al Aateen*”, going through the middle, passing through the central mountain, “*Flintstone rock*”, “*Sakhret Al Souwan*” going East till the steep valley of “*Wadi Al Msailekh*”....”, “.....it was heaven on earth, the green mulberry trees wrapping every single house and the old oak trees casting their shadow over the front-surface of these houses, “*staiihha / staiihhet el bouyout*”, entwining with long branched vineyards spread over the rooftops...”, (Massaad, 2014, p.23)

Achkout, my village in the heart of the stony Mountains of Keserwan witnessed dramatic changes over the past few decades; following the new trend of transformation; from that traditional village and its humble houses scattered here and there, to a concoction of multi-cultural mix which doesn't relate to our culture and ancient heritage nor to our folkloric methods of construction and “*mode de vie*”.

The rigid and difficult nature of the land with its sloppy landscape formation, made Achkout one of the hardest places to survive and to dwell on, yet it played a very crucial role of being the roundabout of all the villages around, connecting them to the city of Jounieh; the coastal and commerce center of Keserwan.



Fig. 3. Picture of Achkout in the 1940s, archive Massaad, A.



Fig. 4. Google map

Many stories were transmitted from generation to generation about battles and oppressions in the past century, people running and taking refuge in the mountains of Achkout. The statistics which was conducted only between 1933 and 2006 showed an expected increase from 2078 dweller in 1933 to reach 4919 in 2006, and that was more than 10 years ago. (Boulos,1986, p. 201).

The vernacular houses that sustained our traditional habits and customs that were directly related to the way dwellers adapted their living behavior to interior space, are now losing these important and profound aspects. These houses are on the verge of losing all relations with the old heritage and the folkloric ways of domestic interactions and deeds that used to be applied in almost every household chores that were done by the use of the expression “*a-aouneh*” which meant the act of helping and assisting one another without any compensation; exchanging aid. (Khater, 1977, p.111)



Fig. 5. Personal pictures showing the invasion of concrete, Achkout, 2018.

The fundamental transformations in the architectural folkloric approach of building houses changed dramatically since the dawn of the French mandate (1920 - 1943). These fundamental changes were integrated in both interior spaces and designs, as well as, in the exterior structural aspects of every new house built. The dominant fact is that technology is overcoming traditions and all the folkloric issues are being widely advertised and applied haphazardly while disregarding the vernacular masonry designs of ancient times “...It is only in recent times that the sudden mobility within the country, the rapid development of the main cities and the acceptance of and even addiction to all western novelties, have brought about profound changes which jeopardize the survival of traditional values”. (Ragette, 1974, p.12).

Needless to say, that after these transformations, the vernacular house is on the verge of losing its identity; all relations with the old heritage and traditional ways of construction as well as, the way dwellers live and perform inside these houses, in the craftsmanship and helping hand or “*a-aouneh*” that was their routine way of living.

Besides the financial reason, the lack of know-how and the enormous time consuming that was need to build a traditional house, the major reason in changing the technique and the method of construction is due mainly to the fact that houses and even buildings are now being commissioned to be constructed by machines; faster and less expensive, to be eventually sold or rented to stranger from outside the village. These

reasons led to this irreversible fissure in the closeness of the village community, among others. (Makki, 1995, p.17).

2. OUTER FEATURES

2.1. Controlled and Uncontrolled Fundamentals

In Achkout, houses for the rich and powerful did not exist, most of the land was owner by few families where the remaining terrains were too rough and hard for anyone to dwell on comfortably. Due to these fact and others, namely, oppressions and persecutions; the very old traditional houses, unlike other villages, at that time, were built apart from each. Each old house had its fables and stories that survived from generation to generation.

The concept of a house was a home able to shelter its dwellers from natural and human oppressions; hiding, living and surviving. These traditional houses were scattered on both sides of the three main roads known by “*Tarii Al Mkariyet*”, while the rest were built close to the old river that used to run through Achkout; from “*Bekaetet-Achkout*” all the way to “*Wadi Jounieh*” going through “*Al Mseilekh Valley*”. With their simple exterior appearance and extremely crafty interiors, modesty and humbleness was strongly reflected in every house; assemble, accommodate and protect. Each of these remaining houses are becoming less and less convenient and abandon and barely noticeable in our days.

Our ancient folkloric forms, patterns, tools and designs are now fading away, left to be ruins “*Khirbi*” of once-upon-a-time dwellings, and with this fact, many of our inherited habits related to those domestic behaviors will eventually vanish. Among these small crafty structural details; “*Staihha*” or balcony; the first thing you notice before entering the house, “*ta-a*”, this small opening located below the last “*Midmek*” which is the last level of stones, these small openings were used for ventilation since they didn’t have chimneys and all the cooking and heating was done inside of the houses especially in winter. Many Lebanese authors wrote about the old house with its stone-cut beauty, ‘*ta-asib el hhajar*’, namely Sheikh El Khazen (El Khazen, 1995)



Fig. 6. My pictures of some remains of vernacular houses in Achkout showing shattered ruins or “*Khirbi*”, where there still exist; “*A-atbet*”, “*A-aed*”, “*Midmek / madamik*”, “*Satehh*”, “*Manbesh*”, “*Daraj*” and “*Staihha*”.

2.1.1 Weather

Incorporated in the mountain, that was the perfect choice for building an old house. This primarily choice was due to many reasons; source for stones to build with, strong foundations, camouflage and totally unseen and to be able to embrace and reverse the different weather conditions; warm and cozy during stormy winters and cool and fresh during hot summers.

Protected by mountain cliffs and rocky reefs, these houses had the perfect component to be secured and unobserved, their scatterings close to valleys and water sources played an important role in surviving, as well as, in creating the perfect leeway and the perfect escape route when threatened or attacked by anything or anyone. As time passed by, political and social aspects changed, communities began to formulate and families were raised and the concept of neighborhood in Achkout, the village was established.

There exist an old Lebanese proverb: “between October and November there befall another summer”, accordingly, the old generation of masons, always had a foremost concern; to finish, at least, the masonry work before November. Considering the Altitude, Achkout is about 1000 meters above sea level, therefore rain and snow could last for months and with the primitive means and tools, it was impossible to build houses that needed dried soil and wood in its construction process.

Besides the stone houses, there existed also two kind of temporary sanctuaries: “*Khaymet*” and “*Elliyet*”;

small shelters that were built during the summer season, on top of the main court, in front of the house; “*Staiihha*”, on the side or even on top of the house, where both were tents made of wood and covered with branches and straws or “*Lezzan*” and “*Saikoun*”; kinds of wild grass and plants, but the “*Elliyet*” was more refined. These shelters were used between June and the ‘first rain’ of November since both of these accommodations provided the perfect protection from the heat and were also used as cool places to sleep underneath during starry nights.

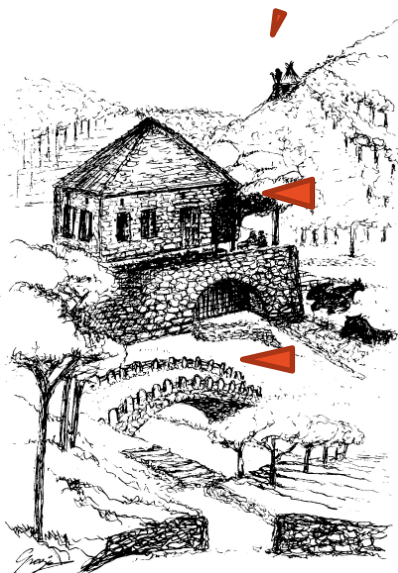


Fig. 7. My illustrations showing “*A-arzel*” and “*Natour*”, the “*Khaymet*”, and “*Jisr*”; bridge

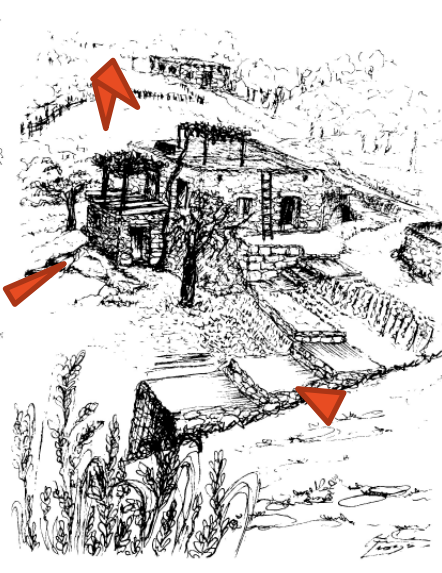


Fig. 8. showing “*Elliyet*”, and “*Abou*” where the dwellers used to shelter their domestic animals, the “*Jal*, plural *Jlelet*”



Fig. 9. showing an old three arched façade house with the “*Abou*” where they stored food and they could the access directly from the house.

Another form of shelters also existed in Achkout, namely “*A-arzel*”; a simpler form of primitive and temporary formation that were built in the fields, near the crops in the summer time. When the first inhabitants settled in the mountain of Achkout, they began looking for the good soil to cultivated the land, they discovered that such a soil was scarce. The ‘rich’ soil was randomly sprinkled here and there and the waste of time spent every day to reach it, could be avoided by building “*A-arzel*”; built out of trees and branches and later on, they used, only uncut stones or “*Dabsh*”.

Since Achkout is mountainous by nature, the dwellers spent their precious time making “*Jlelet*, singular *Jal*”; flattening the land by building steps of uncut stones or “*Dabsh*, picking the gravels, plowing, planting and tending to the crops; vines, fruitful trees and vegetables. At a later stage, the “*A-arzel*” was occupied by what they called, the field guard or “*Natour*”; *this person was very important and respected man in the village, he would be responsible for looking after all the fields, protecting the land from thieves and wild animals.* (El Kassis, 2001, pp. 173 – 176)

2.1.2 Material

The abundance of white clear rocks of the calcareous mountains of Achkout, together with the traditional know-how stone construction techniques that were firmly established since the Romans, was reflected in the pre-dominance of pure masonry building methods that were revealed in the vault designs. These vaults were more durable to last than the flat mud-roof houses, that needed regular maintenance, besides the fact that the timber logs needed to be imported and thus, made it more expensive to be adapted by all the local inhabitants specially that most of the dwellers, back then, were either shepherds or farmers.(Abou Al Ainain,1980, p. 54)

The mason used only natural material in building the old traditional house; stones and gravels, wood and tree branches, soil and mud, straw and hay.

The assorted and cut stones were used from the exterior side of the “*Kalline*” walls; these “*Kalline*” walls

could reach one meter in thickness, and uncut stones “*Dabsh*” from the interior. The filling between these two layers of stones was mud and hay and gravels, every couple of layers, huge stones were integrated in the “*Kalline*” walls called “*Rbaat*” their main function is to hold and connect the two sides of the wall. Finding a rock to build on, was an essential issue, since everything was carried either by men or by mules or donkeys. The mason followed this; large stones in the first rows and smaller ones as the constructed walls went up.

As for the plaster known as “*Hhouwara*” it was made out of a thick layer of crashed stones brought from the mountain of Bkerki mixed with straw and water to be colored after that using domestic white paint; “*Kilss el hhay*”; that they used to get as a result of building the traditional “*Yattoun*”.



Fig. 10. My pictures showing: the “*Kalline*” walls; double-stone rows, cut from the outside and uncut from the inside



Fig. 11. Vaulted “*Abou*” with curved window with a row of small key stones



Fig. 12. Natural elements showing the thick layer of plaster; “*Hhouwara*”

Large tree trunks were used to cover ceiling forming rows of straight beams supported by one or two pillars; depending on the length of the house. On top of the beams, flat wood panels were laid that formed a tight layer upon which a thick layer of approximately 50 cm of small branches, soil and mud pressed tightly using “*Mahhdalet*”; long cylindrical stone attached to a bended iron rod. Every-time the rain falls, the ceiling should be press by pulling the heavy “*Mahhdalet*” all over the ceiling. Wood was also used to make doors, windows, and to manufacture some basic pieces of furniture; boxes and shelves, closets to store food known as “*Namliyet*”, also “*Afass*” which was a wood shell box, covered with chicken-wire, hanged from the ceiling in the that was used to store organic food away from insects, such as meat, cheese and any food left-overs. Besides using clay and mud to make their kitchen tools; plates, pans and different sizes of jars, among others, clay was also used to cover inner walls of the fire place or “*Maouaadet*”, and the walls of the “*Mastabet*”

Everything that was used to build the walls, ceiling and other parts of the interior space and the exterior sections of the old houses in Achkout were made using natural, recyclable and sustainable material that reflected their folkloric habits in preservation and respect to mother nature.

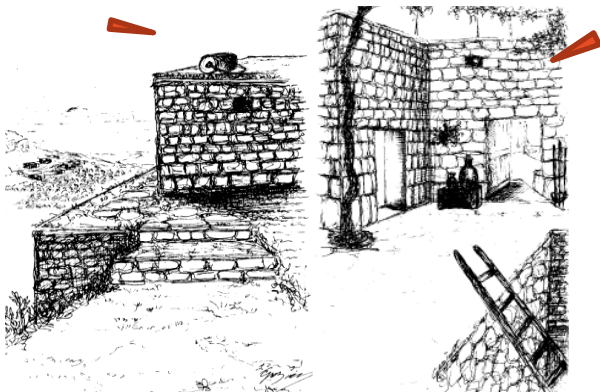


Fig. 13. “*Mahhdalet*”



Fig. 14. “*Ta-at*”

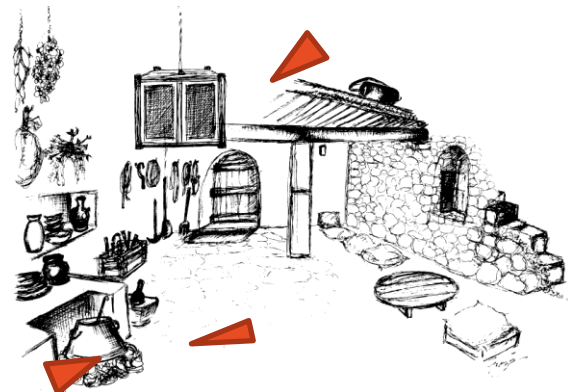


Fig. 15. “*Afass*”, “*Dist*”, and “*Maouaadet*”

In their interior spaces, only the essential designs were used, minimum pieces of furniture, multifunction parts were either hanged, piled, stored all around the interior space. Everything the dwellers used in their houses was taken from nature and its richness; plants, herbs, trees, insects and animals. They used their own folkloric methods to produce the necessary utensils, appliances, tools and weapons, also they used their intuitive ways to create covers, carpets, cushions, seats, plates, pans, cups, ropes, baskets to name a few, that they used to serve and assist all family members and everyone who came knocking or asking for help.

2.1.3 Tools

Depending only on themselves and their need to adapt to the wild mountain life, the first dwellers embarked on forming small communities and villages; going to the city of Beirut was like travelling abroad, the whole village would assemble in the main square or “*Sehhit el Daia-a*” for a big fair-well gathering.

To stay in the mountains and survive, they needed shelters and later on, houses. Everyone needed the mason, “*Ma-alem el a-amar*” and the carpenter “*Nejjar*”; at later stages the blacksmith or “*Hhided*” became popular too

Using hand-made tools and working with earthy material, both the mason and the blacksmith accommodated and fulfilled all the humble and the necessary domestic needs of the village from furniture to accessories. These tools were invented and developed to serve, in the best way they know how; either to cut, mend, shape, patch, carve and so on. Accordingly, some tools were very heavy while others were light, long, short, pointy, sharp, flat, thin, flexible and even rigid depending mainly on their function.



Fig. 16. my pictures: an old “Abou” with a small “Youk” as inner separation



Fig. 17. ceiling made of wooden loges; “Ousallet” with a huge old “Youk” underneath



Fig. 18. some old folkloric forms and some artifact items of ancient times that were used in old houses

The carpenter worked in parallel with the mason, his role was cutting trees, preparing ceiling logs, fixing doors and windows and constructing different basic pieces of furniture; the famous “*Youk*” which was a big wooden closet, served as the only partition in the old rectangular or vaulted houses, it was used from both sides of the interior space; in some old houses, an inner wooden door was attached to the “*Youk*”.

In this part, I am just going to focus on few of these tools that were used by the mason whose main concern was to cut the huge rocks, shape them and have straight piled strong walls for the intended house. Most of the mason’s tools were use on the outside wall of the “*Kalline*” walls the inside walls were not neatly cut since a layer of mud and hay was later spread and finally covered with white layer of natural limestone. The names of the tools vary from one village to the other, all the tools were made of solid iron, strong natural yarns and hard wood.



Fig. 19. showing some tools that needed the small stone “*Msan*” to stay sharp

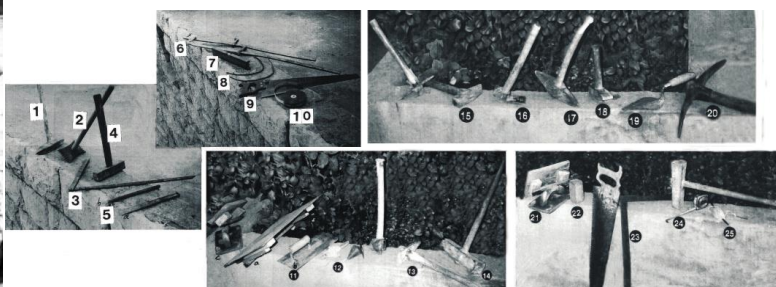


Fig. 20. my pictures of my fathers’ masonry tools; back until in the 80s all of these tools were still in use.

Tools, these essential utensils for building an old Lebanese house, some masons kept on using them until the nineteenth century, namely my late father, "Maalem" Phillip, sadly to say that almost all seized to be in use nowadays.

n. 1 "Shahhouta" it had two sides; one side flat and the other side like a fork. It was used to determine and flatten the shape

of the stone: square, rectangle or corner.

n. 2 "Beek": it had two sharp ends, used to flatten the stone from all sides and was used to flatten the floors in old houses

n. 3 "Itta-aa" it was used to make smaller tunnels in the big rock. It had two sides, the first was a pointed edge and the

second a flat one. After making these tunnels, the "Mhaddi" was used to strike the stone into smaller pieces.

n. 4 "Shakouf" it was the first tool used by the mason, it was a big, heavy tool, used to cut roughly pieces from the rock

n. 5 "Boushard" or the "Mtabbet" it was used to flatten the surface of the stone to the finest degree. It had one ruff side

and another smooth one.

n. 6 "Tartbeek" it was used like the cutter before the "Shahhouta". It was a thin tool compared to the others with a pointed

edge at one end and a flat one at the other

n. 7 "Msan" it was a very important tool, sort of rectangular sandy stone, mainly "Shahhar", used to sharpen the tools.



Fig. 21. My illustration showing the act of "A-aounet" in building an old vernacular house in ancient times.



Fig. 22. (El Khazen, 1995, p. 78) showing my father while working on reconstructing old church in the 80s.

Based on what I started documenting back then; in the 1990s. I will try to show that "A-aounet" used to start first thing, on the sight; men got together, worked together and helped each other. Tasks were distributed and the construction began in a familiar system, similar to a bee hive or "Khalliyet Nahhel", everyone knew what to do, everyone was lending a hand, helping and working to finish the task assigned to him by "el Maalem"; men were cleaning, plowing, digging and straightening the land, others were carrying, cutting and carving the big rocks while others were sorting, cleansing and smoothing the stones whilst others carrying water and hay and mixing the paddings, while others were crunching smaller stones and mending the ground for the formation and the foundation of the first and most important row of large roughly cut stones.

Some of the masons' old tools were used for measurements; in the exterior as well as in the interior such as; "aashit el ma-alim", "mezoura", "khait el ma-alim", "khait mizan" or "bilbol", "zaiba-a", "dra-a", "beekar", "aalees" and "zeouyet; needless to say that all these measuring tools became now obsolete, such as the "Mitr" which used to be made out of stripes of wood divided into ten pieces and each piece 10cm or 20cm for 1m or 2m. to be folded into one small straight piece.

Other old tools were used on sight for various purposes, either to hammer or cut or dig, mix also to sharpen or flatten the stones or the ground, such as: "siroua-a" or "minshar", "maadour", "Shaouket", "raffsh", "addoum" "matra-a", "zmeel", "Shahhouta", "mistarin", "el melij", "el kaff", "mafrak"



Fig. 23. My pictures: Using old masonry techniques by using old tools; “*Beek*” and “*Shahhouta*”; smoothing the surface of the stone to be used as lintel, *in the process of* renovating an old house in Achkout built in 1875, now owner Massaad C.



Fig. 24. (Acra-Raad, 1997, p. 129)

Every tool used in building the old traditional houses in Achkout was made from basic material, well-looked-after and systematically used by skilled masons. Needless to say, the drastic transformation between traditional tools and innovative machinery, pushed the vernacular house to the verge of losing all bondage with the inherited folkloric know-how, the intuitive ways of construction and most importantly the human relationship towards family and nature within the village context.

3. INTERIOR SPACE

3.1. Volumes and Spaces

The traditional old houses in Achkout were mainly divided into two types; both of which were modest and humble from inside out.

Farmers' houses were simple but neatly built in a square or rectangular shape. Such houses were located in valleys and fields to be near streams and rivers to water their crops and to be able to travel safely and quickly between villages.

Outlaws' shelters that looked more like hideouts; quickly and randomly built, where most of the stones were not carved. These shelters looked more like dens integrated within mountain verges to be able to safely hide and securely be able to travel in case of unexpected attacks or disasters.

As families grew, more houses were needed and households started to get closer to each other, especially among family members, this created deep bond and strong respect towards to the head of the family; grandfather, father and son, respect, values and ethics was part of the cultural quality in every family.

The formation of the interior space of the old house with its “*Dar*”, nowadays known as Salon, permitted the development of establishing close family relationship. Families assembled, connected, talked, laughed, played, ate and slept all in one place, that interaction founded the fundamental base of family relationship a relationship that shared, endured and survived good and bad times.

Not everyone in the old days was able to build his house with clean cut stones, most of them used small rough stones and to hide these rough stones, a mixture of soil, straw was applied to be cover once dried with a layer of domestic and totally organic plaster.

Inside these walls, cold nights were spent telling fables and fairy stories while eating dinner around a low circular table, close to the fire under one or two lights from oil lamps placed on the thick inner wall of the only window in the house. (Al Kassis, 2001, pp. 101 - 105)

3.1.1 Volumes

The first inhabitants who settled in the mountains of Achkout lived in conventional primitive vaulted shelters “*Abou a-aed*”, a single cell volume of five to eight meters long similar to one directional tunnel, were not really suitable as a living quarters, so their function shifted to provide the perfect shelter to the domestic animals keeping them close by, under the house; that was built on top of the “*Abou*”. The domestic animals mainly, sheep, goats, cows, donkeys were precious and extremely important since they provided food; milk and meat, clothes and covers, vessel to carry water “*Daarff*”, among others. (El Khazen, 1995)

The vaults were also used as dens to store the huge ceramic jars “*khebiyet / khawebi*”, “*dakouji / dkakij*” of olive oil, wine, flour and all sort of seeds and dried herbs, in other words “*mounet*” that our ancestors prepare with the use of “*a-aounet*” during the summer season to consume in winter.

In earlier times, vaults were used, as time passed, the two-story houses, spread and became popular especially next to the main old street, known as “*Karrousa*”; small shops coffee shop, barber, post office which in Achkout in the old days were actually one shop, this shop used to be located in the village square or “*Sehhet el Daia-a*” near the old church on the ground floor, in one shop or “*Dikkenet*” owned by Rokoz Massaad 1875.

The connection between the two floors was mainly external, but as they started searching for convenience and security, stairs started to appear from the interior of old houses. This inner connection leading to the vault was secured by a door called “*el Manbesh*” that was extremely important during the heavy storms and thick snow.

We have two reasons for the scattering houses to build inner passages to the vaults:

Peasants needed such passages to be able to reach their domestic animals in winter. As for the somehow rich people, those passageways lead to a den secretly built to hide weapons, food and money.

The ground of the vaults was made of dried earth, pressed and flattened. This way, it used to provide warmth and coolness for the animals and also acted as a natural filter for the smells of the animals or “*Tarsh*” when they were locked in during stormy weather.

This adaptation of the two-floor construction method was significant since it allowed the vertical separation between the living area and the service area. In other words, terminated the cohabitation of man and animal.

3.1.2 Old Methods in Building

Major elements were needed to build one house; the appropriate location, proper timing, enough cut stones, timber, wood, mud, hay and plenty of helping hands “*a-aounet*” and it used to take many months to finish. We have two major types of traditional houses in Achkout mostly inhabited by peasants and farmer or shepherd; either in a square or rectangular vaulted forms, where the height of these vaults varied between three to five meters depending mostly on the location while the interior design was mostly based on modesty humbleness and satisfaction in a neat and organized central space. (Bassil, 2007, p. 255)

The basic applied processes in assembling vaults for the “*Abou*”, were many, depending on the personal experience of the mason, his “*a-aounet*” and their expertise in using the old tools and the kind of stones used made some differences between one and the other. Yet the oldest predominating technique used in Achkout; cutting trees, placing them on top of each other to create the desired mold accordingly the stones were sorted, measured, and cut, once reaching the top, the vaulted roof was closed by the last set of cut key stones “*ifl*”, forming a firm closure of the vault. Once the trunks of the trees are removed, the cut stones cave in and hold one another in almost a perfect curve then the entrance was closed with a thick wall, leaving just a small door for the entrance. Windows did not exist at first. Later on, door was located at one end and one small window on the other end.

3.1.3 Design Elements and Furniture

Dweller of these old vernacular houses began developing shapes and pieces of furniture essential to their everyday lives. The minute they passed the threshold, while performing a humble bow, they directly step in this recessed zone called ‘*Madwara*’ where they washed their shoes “*Shdoud*”, to wore their “*Shahhata*” to enter the house. The uneven and unusual textured floorings gave each house a unique character. These floors that were covered with handmade “*Bsat*” plural “*Bost*” and sheepskins or others, to keep warm and give a cozy and warm feeling. The most important feature would be the huge closet or ‘*Youk*’, this main furniture piece that consisted of one large store-closet, used from one side to store food for winter or “*mouni*”, and from the other side to pile linens and clothes, transforming the space from living room to bedroom, in a simple, nonetheless well-organized fulsomely act of, multifunctional space efficiency, that revealed the mastermind perpetual folkloric use of architectural forms and customs in a unpretentious manner. Moving to some smaller pieces, they used to drink using “*Breek*”, eat food that was place on “*Tabliyet*” while sitting on “*Terrahha*, plural *Trarihh*” that were filled with staw and hay using the light of “*Andeel Kaz*” usual would be hanged on the wall. Going further inside the house, they had “*Taa-et*” singular “*Ta-at*”; they cooked inside the house and needed natural ventilation system, “*Maouadi*” and “*Dist*”; this large container made of brass for cooking food located close to “*Mastabi*”; a very important feature to raise chickens, “*Sallet Ash*” used to carry fruits, “*Mda-at*” and “*Jirm Kibbet*” used to smash meat and different

herbs like “zaatar” or thyme. (El Kassis, 2001, pp. 47 – 69)

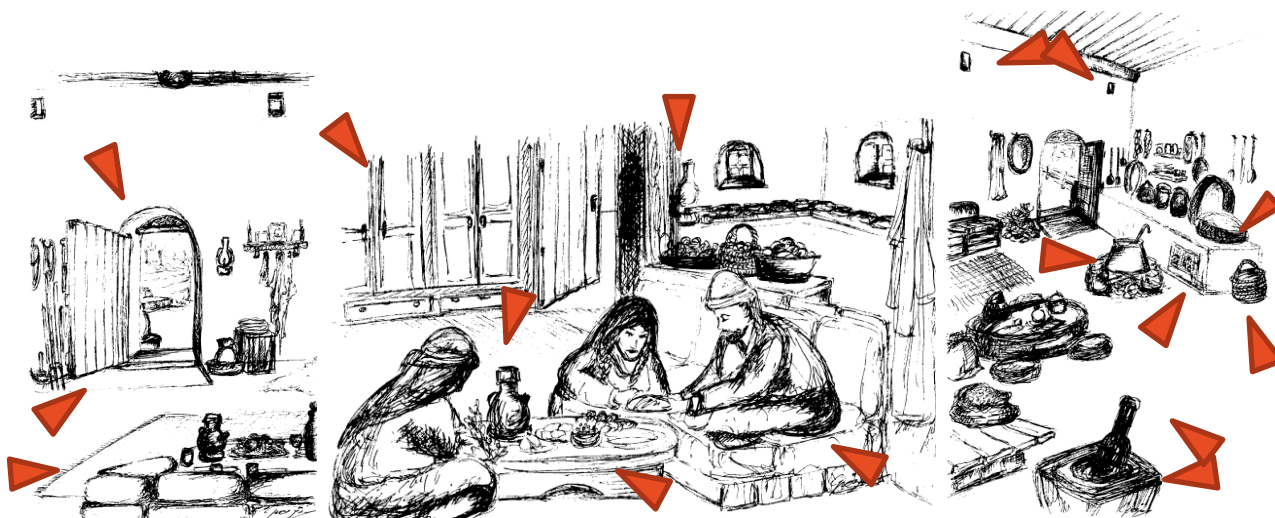


Fig. 25. My illustrations showing old domestic interior spaces and some essential pieces of furniture that dwellers used in their humble houses; “A-atbi”, “Madwara”, “Bsat” “Youk”, “Breek”, “Andeel Kaz”, “Tabliyet”, “Terrahha plural Traarihh”, “Ta-at”, “Maouadi” and “Dist”, “Youk”, “Ma-jen”, “Sallet Ash”, “Mda-at” and “Jirn Kibbet”, to show a few.

All doors in the traditional houses of Achkout had short threshold obliging everyone to bend before entering the house, this had two explanations, first, one should bow to be able to enter the home of someone and the second, if you are carrying the traditional long riffle or sword, one cannot force his entrance and hold those weapons if he was bending and ready to battle. As for their location, doors used to be situated on opposite walls taking into consideration three justifications; to be able to enjoy the nice wind-draft in summer, to have another exit if the snow blocked the main door in winter and finally to be used as a quick getaway in case of any raid.

As for the windows, they were very simple rectangular shape, most commonly built on the South-West or South-East sides; trying to avoid always the North winds. We cannot distinguish any ornamentations or decorations for the windows until lately. The only thing which was added to the stone windows was the iron bars from the outside and the wooden shutters from the inside; both on the exterior wall, leaving the edge of the window to be used as a shelf from the interior.

4. CONCLUSION

The way our ancestors behaved towards creating a shelter in Achkout and in the approaches, they endured to design their interior spaces in these mountains, revealed this constant regard to mother nature. In every chore in every act there was ethics human values and moral integrity. The mason who built the stone house with just few primitive tools, using only genuine methods, and humble regard and respect to both mother nature and to mankind, features that were clearly reflected, in the close bonding with nature; from nature to earth; an old saying which meant to them take only what you need and beware, eventually you are going to rest in earth.

The uncontrolled infusion between the past and the present in constructing and building houses in the villages need to have a better structure in the intermixing between conventional customs and the old ethnic performances related to the folkloric masonry of interior spaces so we can be proud of the houses in our mountains.

Finally, the old gathering and helpfulness act called “a-aount” that used to engage many people, made them feel useful and the accomplishment of one house would be a celebration to all who worked on sight, exist no more; is the need to build houses more important than building a home?

nowadays each stone that took so many hours of tough work to reach its final form and size is now on the verge of total demolition; destruction of our traditional old houses.

It is just a shame to lose such a heritage, it is a part of our history and culture and we need to keep it active; I am not saying that in order to build a stone house, we should spend years in the making, I am just highlighting the fact that we can benefit from the Tradition Folkloric Forms and Narrations which were

previously used to set new guides towards better future designs; new invention in designing stone houses that would be better adapted to the nature of the mountains of Achkout; eco-friendly, sustainable and recyclable and more correct regarding the folkloric legacy of building, reserving and reviving our traditions.

After all, is it not human achievements to satisfy human Needs?

“Architecture is a conscious process, which conceptualizes Platonic Forms into spatio-temporal entities, in conformity with the contemporary paradigm (epistemological, ontological, teleological and methodological dimensions), to satisfy Human Needs”. (Younes, 2009, pp. 15-19).

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