

# BOSNIAK CULTURAL HERITAGE: CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF TRADITIONAL KNOCKERS AND GATES

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*Review paper*

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Received: 10.06.2011

UDC: 728:930.85(497.6)

Accepted: 08.11.2011

## ABSTRACT

*Culture, molding the attitude of one, creates social order and ensures social identity of the belonging community. When it comes to Bosnian, or more precisely Bosniak culture, it is of high importance to discuss traditional gates, which represent one of the most significant creations that vividly paint the culture of Bosniaks – one of three constitutive nations or ethnic groups of Bosnia and Herzegovina – the place of juxtaposition of different Southern Europe and Balkans cultures thus creating colorful, and above all rich cultural and social structure.*

**Key words:** culture, gates, tradition, custom, architecture

## INTRODUCTION

The Balkans are placed between East and West and has strategic position of the Aegean and Mediterranean sea water crossing. Therefore, the Balkans represent a place at the crossroad between Asia, Europe and Africa, and thanks to its position, it was of immense geo-strategic importance. One of five great European peninsulas, the Balkan peninsula, due to its geo-strategic position, witnessed continuous attacks and as a direct consequence, in different periods of Bosnian history, many people started building their home here, in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Arseven, 1983, pp. 947-948).

The fact is that the Turkish and Islamic culture imprinted the strongest influence on Bosnia and Herzegovina, who faced the influence of various civilizations. This symbiosis that created a serious domino effect on the Bosnian cultural milieu, constructed the Bosnian cultural and social identity, and played important role in forming national consciousness (Selver, 2003, p.75). Bosnia and Herzegovina, having a high role in the Ottoman Empire and its leadership, began a completely new period in the field of social and cultural structure.

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Consequently, this brought changes in all spheres – art, literature, architecture, and everyday life (Yürür, 2007, p. 7). Traditional Bosnian gates, a subject matter of this research, in the very process of introducing the Turkish – Islamic tradition, has become one of the most recognizable architectural artifacts of the regional cultural heritage. This work focuses on traditional gates, which identifies the national Bosniak culture, that has became a cultural symbol. A special emphasis has been given to the gates knockers and their material and engraved spiritual elements.

## DISCUSSION

As it is known, humanity is in a constant fight and struggles to satisfy the basic human necessities such as food, water, sleep and a place of one's own – a home. As a direct result, and under particular conditions of the land of our forefathers and their knowledge, a specific culture was born.

Alongside with an attempt to fulfill the aforementioned basic human needs, the gates had been changing and molded throughout history of architecture, gaining the form and features depending on climate and other conditions. Gates today, just as before, function as shields that protect from the undesirable external influences (Çal, 1999, pp. 275-284).

They are made of wood or iron and are used as an entrance and exit from a closed and enclosed area, consisting of wings that can be closed or open. Structurally, gates are different in different cultures, baring the marks of the culture they are being recognized by. The most recognizable feature is their external look and the material they are made of; there are those with one, or more wings; there is this difference in height and other features such as knocker, nail, chain or handle (Çal, 1999, 275-284).

Characteristics also appear to be a consequence of a different societal religious milieu they were created, as well as of their civilization development stage. During the research, conducted in Sarajevo, Travnik, Tuzla, Bihac and Novi Pazar, we came to a conclusion that when it comes to Bosniak traditional home architecture - stone, soil, bricks, wood and metal were the materials of choice. However, since the gates, as parts of those buildings, are the subject of this paper, the focus will be on them.

A special place in traditional Bosniak houses holds the main gate, made of wood, placed at the exit of the household, right on the small road, and was large enough for a horse carriage to pass through. Those gates mainly consisted of two gates, with a binjeketas on each side (a stone used for mounting a horse or used as a sitting place). Above the upper part of the gate, a log, 40 to 50 centimeter in diameter, was placed. From the log a pent was hanging, fixed on the wall where the gate was placed. In order to strengthen the wooden two gate wings, iron rings called "ajna" (small iron plates) were used, but also handles, nails, chains and knobs. Based on their look and the material they were made of, it could be easily deduced the social status of the landlord. It is worth mentioning that the gate knockers were the main gate parts Bosniak houses were being recognized by (<http://www.muzejsarajeva.ba>).

Traditional Bosniak gates were not known for having mallets in form of knockers, but rather metal rings. A knocker ("zvekir") is rather a decoration, an appendage, made of "ajna" (a metal tablet) that a knocker is fixed on. "Ajna" is a name for a round plate or tablet, whose purpose is to produce a sound when hitting a knocker against it, but pulling it would also open or close the gates. It has already been emphasized that traditional Bosniak houses were recognized by their gates, and that the

knockers were always in pair, each wing having one (<http://www.mmfdergi.gazi.edu.tr>).

Gate rings also differed in their geometrical shape. Most common were those in the form of rings. Almost all of them are from 8 to 12 centimeters in diameter and fixed on the iron plate – ajna. Rings and ajnas can be divided into two categories. There are those rather simple and those with more decorations and as such placed on a prominent spot where they would be easily seen. Other geometrical shape, though rare in this area, is the elliptic one, and just as the round one, makes with an “ajna” one unit (<http://www.nuveforum.net/1698-kultur-tarihi>).

There are symmetrically placed knockers and plates on the both wings, and a question arises: why are there two, and not only one knocker? The answer to the question should be sought in a traditional way of living and cultural delicacy. We come to realize that the knockers are truly small pieces of art. Knockers and plates are made of iron, and it should be emphasized that they also differed in sound they produced. Moreover, some knockers produced a very sharp sound, while some produced a lot deeper sound (Şapolyo, 1970, pp. 13-14).

If a woman hit a knocker, it would produce a delicate, but sharper sound, while hit by a man, the sound would be more sonorous. Based on that, the household was able to say whether there was a woman or man at the gates and the gates were opened in a suitable way (Ünal, 1995, p. 275). Traditional Bosniak gates usually have knockers that are preferred to mallets, which picture us a calm and meek Bosniak temperament, since the knockers produces a softer sound, not disturbing the peace, which is a clear sign of care toward others, something they have and cherish.

It is of high importance to emphasize the fact that the knockers with their delicate form and graving,

round shape and decorations are in fact a reflection of a landlord's social status. Actually, it can be said that knockers and “ajnas”, from 1 to 3 centimeters in diameter, based on its function, a harmony of sounds they produce are, as stated earlier, works of art.

Crests are also found on gates, protecting them from the external factors that can harm their structure, such as rain and snow, and therefore make the gates last longer. A wooden brink and lining contributed to a more attractive and interesting look, but also strengthening the gates.

Kabara – iron nails - were used in order to make gates constructed of many wooden parts more compact. Each wing on the inside had an iron linker (Turkish: kusak), from 3 to 5 centimeters thick and 1 to 1,5 meters high, that was fixed with an iron cord and nails (Turkish: gjatan, kabara). There is fully seen their importance, which means that those iron cords (kabarasa) were meritorious when it comes to endurance (Arseven, 1983, pp. 947-948). Keyholes, French keys, gate valves, chains and nails, and other minor parts are of high importance and deserve to be a matter of research as well.

## CONCLUSION

Reality is such that our modern world imposes on us different habits when it comes to a way and culture of living, in other words, it influences all spheres of our everyday life and by doing so individualize people, making them egoistic, which causes that our neighborly and other relations lose their importance. The most prominent example is that we build the buildings that ooze soulless and are equipped with all available protection devices. We talk about 15 or 20 story buildings where only one door hides hundreds of apartments – places

where people live without knowing a person living next door; the buildings with population of an average village.

Traditional gates deserve a special attention since they represent a part of Bosniak cultural heritage and it is inadmissible that, as such, be forgotten. They are there to remind and remonstrate a modern

man. Culture is a value built on foundation of people themselves. It is a national duty not to allow demolition of tradition and to fight for its survival. We are the ones who should not undermine the significance even the smallest part of our culture we belong to and it is our duty to do everything in order to preserve it – the sooner, the better.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

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