Nuristan's Cliff-Hangers

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One of the more isolated parts of Afghanistan is Nuristan in the Kunar Province, close to the Afghan-Pakistan border. Here in the major valleys and the innumerable small ones, villages cling defensively to the hillsides. The Nuristanis traditionally chose to have little to do with their neighbors. The formidable mountains were the initial deterrent and their unique language, origin, customs and religion reinforced the isolation. The origin of the Nuristanis is still unknown. The occurrence of light hair, blue eyes and red beards among them could indicate a central Asian beginning. The most frequently cited theory is that they are Aryans who migrated into the area as early as 2000 B.C. Their language, although differing greatly from one village to another, is more like the Indian than the Iranian languages. Legends of the invincible Nuristani ancestors recall their successful defense against the Emperor Tamerlane in 1398 and even a joint campaign in India with Alexander the Great more than 2300 years ago. Contact with the Afghans was rare and unfortunately in the form of raids. For many years the Islamic Afghans lived in constant fear of the Nuristanis, and referred to these warriors who swept down upon their villages to take slaves as "Kafirs" or infidels and called their territory "Kafiristan" or land of the infidels. The Kafirs were so independent and strong that it wasn't until 1896 that the Afghan kings finally subdued the area and converted them to Islam. King Abdur Rahman Khan set out for Kafiristan with Afghan troops and modern rifles and shot Kafirs until those remaining were ready to accept both Afghan rule and Islam. Kafiristan was renamed Nuristan or "land of light."

The social and economic structure of the Nuristan village is rigidly divided into two distinct groups: the cattlemen, the traditional ruling class; and the "Bari," once a slave caste but now, under Afghan rule, most often the artisans of the village. Money, only recently introduced, to Nuristan, is of little importance. Barter is still the essential means of commercial exchange. For example, when a man wants to build a house he announces his intentions to the entire village. Neighbors who come and assist him for a day or two when they have the time are paid with food and hospitality. Most of the buildings is done by the Bari who are paid in fixed amounts of goods. Although it is possible for an entire house to be contracted for one cow or an extra room added for the price of a goat, the division of labor is respected. The people who cut and strip the trees in the forest are paid differently from those who deliver the wood, or those who erect the house or carve the decorations.

In Nuristan, the division of labor is unique to the rest of Afghanistan. Here the women do most of the hard work. They work the farms, tend the herds and prepare the dairy foods. The men hunt or stay at home to take care of the children and do the housework.

Consequently the women have a very liberal tradition. Unlike other Afghan women, they have never worn the veil and they mix freely with the men of the village, participating in the singing and dancing festivities.

Most Nuristani villages are reached only after a difficult and exhausting climb. Even though the Nuristani women and children scramble up and down the hillsides, it took us two hours to climb to Kamdesh, a large village of approximately 800 houses. The defensive
but the elaborately carved and defined porch areas individualize and particularize each house.
In the past the decorated elements were more deeply cut. In many cases a single column was carved into four columns still tied together with a common base and capital as in the mosque of Kamu. Although not found in the village studied, older decorative motifs found in neighboring villages involved figures and faces indicative of the days before the Kafirs converted to Islam. The Nuristanis have altered these forms into the more appropriate geometric patterns condoned by Islamic law. Today the most popular wood carvings used are based upon the interweaving patterns found in grass mats. Symmetrical circles or flower forms are also found interspersed with the intertwining weaving patterns carved on the buildings.
The flooring and roofing consists of a multi-layered system of girders, beams and crisscrossing joists and purlins, all framed together and supported by exterior bearing walls and interior heavily carved columns. A final layer of mud and straw is applied to the roof surface for water protection. When it rains the walking on the mud and straw compresses them, fills in the cracks and makes the roofs watertight. During the winter the snow is quickly shoveled off the roofs to prevent its absorption by the mud and straw.
At times the use of columns occurs outside the massive bearingwall structure; it is used to hold an extended porch or a landing where a large bearing wall would be inappropriate. In these cases the major part of the house rests solidly on its bearing wall base, but spindly exterior landing columns run ten meters down to the ground to perch precariously on large stones below. Apparently Nuristanis love to sit on the very ends of these jutting promontories enjoying the view and the potential danger equally.
A wooden fascia board fully encloses the roof and is held in place by long wooden pegs. In some cases this fascia board is richly carved. Wooden rain spouts are placed at the corners to allow the roof drainage to spill out without running down the facade and eroding the mud infill of the exterior walls.
All of the interlocking of structural members and elaborate wood joinery are done without nails. Joists are cleverly notched to meet the beam and the corners are carefully spliced so that no gaps occur. The construction of the house takes place during the warmer season, but during the long winter months the heavy structural members are intricately carved. In some cases the wood members are carved before erection.
The elements of construction are tied together by the decoration to strengthen the visual effect. The regular horizontal rhythms of dark hewn wood alternating with the mud covered stone provide a strong sense of continuity throughout the village. The slender vertical columns and diagonal ladderways twisting up to lifted porches and entrances create everchanging patterns as one moves through the village. In Nuristan the challenging site conditions, the unique working out of family and community priorities, the unity of construction and the well-integrated decoration have resulted in a tradition of folk building unmatched elsewhere in Afghanistan. The entire community seems to take pride in its accomplishments and the quality of their crafts is kept high. Even today when you ask a man from this part of Afghanistan who he is, he answers, “I am a Nuristani.”
Fig. 11: Window panel showing intricate decorations.
Although the porches are covered and are an integral part of the house structure, in many ways they function like the interior courts of the traditional Afghan house. The more private rooms are located at the back of the long linear porch. The members of the family retreat to these rooms for sleep or to get away from the more gregarious activities of the main porch. In winter the main porch is exposed to bitter winds. To escape from the cold, the family moves into the back rooms that are sufficiently heated by a small fireplace located in the middle of the room. To conserve the precious heat, only a single small window in the back wall lights the room.

Connecting the back rooms to the main porch are heavy wooden doors consisting of two panels of wood, a lower half and an upper half. During the winter both panels are closed but during the warmer seasons the lower panel is closed for privacy while the upper panel is left open to let in more light. In the Kamu house only one back room is found behind the porch. In the more complex house of Kamdesh, two back rooms line the porch space; one is used for cooking and the other more elaborately furnished is used for entertaining and sleeping. The Nuristani, unlike most Afghans, use wooden furniture, elaborately decorated low chairs and tables as well as beds. The furniture is placed along the perimeter of the inner room, leaving the center open for the fireplace.

In the larger houses of expanded families, the front porch is further elongated in plan and many small or nuclear family rooms are lined along the back of the porch. This arrangement gives the appearance of a central festive space with a string of almost hotel-like rooms along the inner side. The multiple openings of the porch space are usually treated in the following manner. The two end modules of the cellular front face are usually kept permanently closed with large wooden panels hewn from a single piece of wood. Thus the corners of the porch area are more enclosed and shelter the more domestic activities of the family such as cooking and washing. From the exterior the end panels better define the porch area. Seen from a distance, the Nuristani village seems to be a wall of rowhouses.
The rooftops swarm with children playing games and the women use these large flat communal work spaces for threshing grain. Close by the men sit in the shade discussing business. The communal rooftops give an impression of relaxed, inter-family communication and cooperation.

The basic Nuristani house is divided into two parts: the lower stories are enclosed by massive solid walls of alternating horizontal layers of wood and stone. They can be reached either directly from the lower level, where the animals are kept, or from the inside of the top living areas by a trap door and ladder system. When the exterior lower door is well bolted from the inside, the provisions are secure from theft. The interior ladders enable the family to bring up firewood, etc. without going outside. The interior access solution also allows neighboring units to be juxtaposed. The resulting higher density provides for economy of construction, better heat insulation and security. The back of the house is dug into the mountainside and neighboring houses are contiguous on both sides so only a single exterior wall with openings just large enough to provide ventilation of the storage areas is exposed to any possible threat. In contrast to the heavy solid base of the storage area, the top story is open, airy and well decorated with large wood panels that fit into a light post-and-beam framework.

The top story is divided into two major parts: a front porch with a view and plenty of fresh air, and back rooms nestled against the mountainside where more private activities occur. The porch is the principal multi-use area for the family and runs the entire length of the house. A line of richly ornamented wooden columns runs down the middle of the room. This large family space is usually kept open and commands an excellent view of the village below and the surrounding landscape. Well ventilated, it is the main entertainment and work space during the warm summer months. A long bench just below the front open balustrade is built for the family and the many visitors. Cooking is done off to the side of the porch.

Since most outdoor space becomes part of the general community circulation areas, the porch is the place for family activities in the Nuristan villages.
mountain sites of the Nuristani villages remind us of the days when one village would raid and plunder another. The physical isolation accounts for the important language differences between even neighboring villages. The distinctive dialects often make it difficult for a man to converse with someone from the next village.

Kamu, a village overlooking a small river that joins the larger Landdai or Nuristan River, is another good example of a Nuristani village. It is located on an elevated basin amid softly rolling fertile mountain slopes. The village is nestled against several hillsides and its orientation is predominately to the south. The distribution of water in Kamu, as well as in most of the Nuristani villages, is quite ingenious. The water supply is carefully controlled by the community and elaborate water bridges carved of long logs carry the water from one point to another. Where the land is level, long dugout ditches are used. But where the water must cross small valleys aqueducts of lively logs are constructed.

The Nuristani housing takes full advantage of the hillsides. The houses cling to the mountain sides with one man’s roof serving as another man’s access. Many villagers must walk across the neighbors’ roofs to reach their own house. Roofs and twisting paths take one along horizontally and an elaborate system of steep ladders leads one up vertically. In the more heavily trafficked areas, these ladders are carved of a single log with a handrail added to facilitate climbing. But in the relatively unused areas, ladders are thin twisted logs haphazardly notched here and there with steps long worn with age and use. These log ladders can be tricky since one must start the climb with the correct foot forward. The children who learned to climb at an early age race up and down the log without looking. These light ladder stairs can be hoisted into the house above, making access almost impossible to outsiders.

In contrast to the more traditional Afghan village forms, where the street is public and the family is well concealed behind high compound walls, in Nuristan the houses are so tightly pressed against the mountainside that the rooftops provide the major open space and the family moves onto them in search of sun.
Fig. 2: View of Kamdegh village.

Fig. 3: Its system of horizontal and vertical circulation using neighbors' roofs and ladders is typical of communities elsewhere in the region.

Fig. 4: The top floor of a typical house in Kamdegh.