ROBINNE, François
1993 "General characteristics of the burmeses rural house", in *Encyclopedia of vernacular architecture of the world*. Oxford : Blackwell Publishers (Paul Oliver ed).

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE BURMESE RURAL HOUSE (MYANMAR)

As a general rule, a village is constitued by a squaring of parallel streets, between which two lines of houses are located. The village and each patch of the village are delimited by a vegetebal fence : even if, sometimes, two gaps are allow to enter from one patch to another (Lubeigt, 1974, p. 265), people come in and out of the village or of the house by only one entry. Each house is occupied by a nuclear family : parents, children, sometimes grandparents and, more rarely, a young couple, because residency is going towards neolocality.

Houses built on ground

Although most of the houses are built on piles, it is not rare to see them next to houses built on ground, which are not less traditionnal but usually concentrate in the dry zone of Central Burma : approximately inside the triangle Thazi-Shwebo-Pagan for the zone of our interest, and in the Inle Lake area where the Intha's double entry houses are also on piles or built on ground (Bernot, 1982, pp. 11-12).

Built in light materials : non squarred wooden posts, bamboo walls and palm tree leaves roffs (Pichard, 1988), the houses built on ground are generally owned by sugar palm producters whose incomes are among the lowest of the country.

Although built on ground, these houses are raised by a small beaten earth base which has a double practical function : flood risks are limited and it makes the house separated from the intrisic impurity of the ground. For the same reasons, the common bed is raised on four feet; it takes all the building's width on about 1/3 of the total length : this is the properly so called occupied space, used by the family only and exceptionnally by some friends invited to spend the evening. In this space, the Buddha's altar can be also found. This "room-bed" is not divided from the others. The reception room and the kitchen are in the prolongation, but below the level of this room.

All these rooms are aligned in a parallel direction with the ridge tile.

Houses on piles

Several reasons have been given to explain the preponderance of piles in South-East Asia : ambient wetness, surrounding wild animals, protection against robbers ... all these reasons have a part of truth, complementary to social contraints. In Burma, piles'heigh is proprotional to social status, as the four pitch roofs show the power, religious or temporal (Garachon, 1983), in opposition to the double pitch roofs of the ordinary buildings.

When the house's piles are not very high, the ground space, and more particurlarly the one under the kitchen, is a real mess where chicken, pigs and dogs find the scraps evacuate through the floor. On the contrary, if the floor is high enough to allow someone to stand at the ground level, this one is arranged consequently. It is a lattice-work but, generally, some bamboo matts are fixed in one angle. When they don't have any independant storehouse, it is where peasants stock the paddy grains which will be used at the next sowing. The coolness of the place invite also to rest there, on a big common bed, to sling the craddle of a child, to possibly place a loom and to store the water pots in shadow.

However, whether it is the 70 cm high bed in the houses built on ground or a real storey, only the highest room of the house is used as a properly so called lodging : it less a tendance than a rule.

A longitudinal staircase gives access to the storey; it begins by a small platform where people take their shoes off and where their feet are washed. Beginning downstairs on the "feet gable" side, the staircase opens upstairs in the verandah, towards the "head gable" (Brac de la Perrière, 1984, p. 309) : these vernacular expressions are refering to the orientation of the body during the night. Perpendiculary to this axus head/feet, which is the one of the ridge tile, the three rooms of the house follow one another, each one at a different level floor.

Differents floor's levels

First is the verandah with a balustrade topped by a woodden or bamboo interlacing which filters the sun and allow the passage of the wind : this is a transition place where the visitor is at the same time inside the house and not really inside yet. Some people call it "the free place", in where visitors are free to enter, but with shoes off, and without the right to step further unless they are invited to.

Then is the access to the principal room, which is separated from the verandah by a 20 cm higher floor, without any dividing wall. It is where, theorically on the East gable if th epagoda of the district or of the village in this direction, and anyway on the "head gable" side, the Buddha's altar.and, in an angle of the wall, slightly lower, the house's spirit altar are.

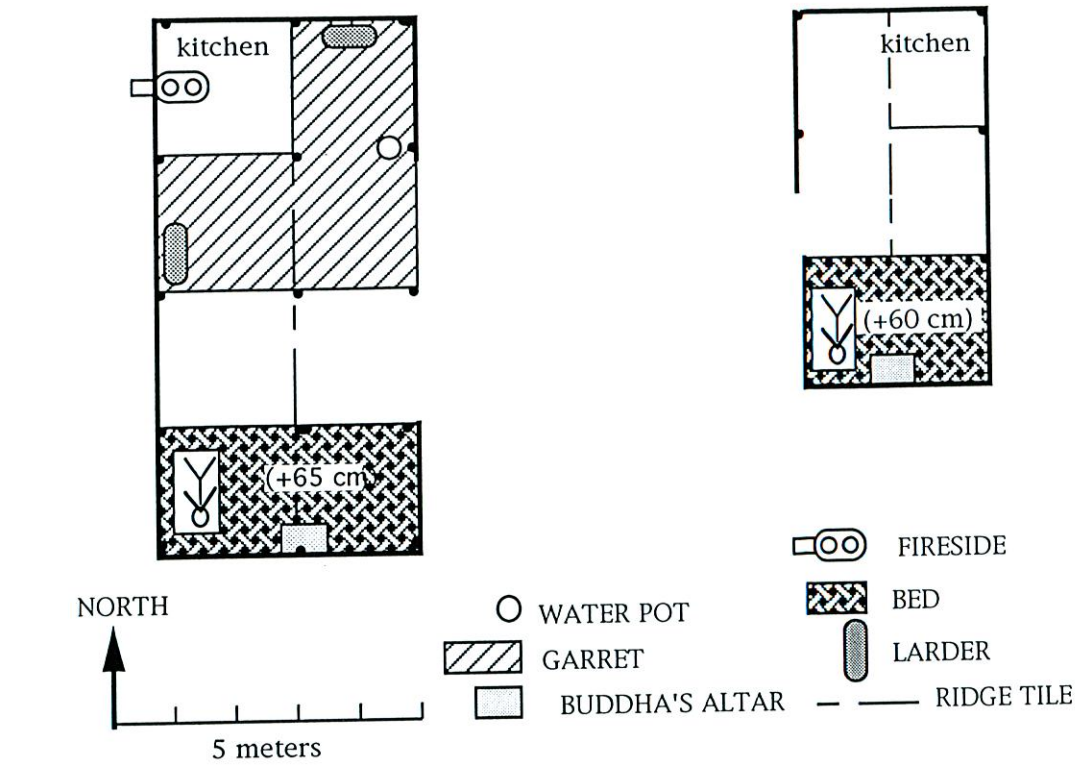
The stranger will not trepass the limit after which the access to feminine rooms is. The possible bedrooms are on the same level, but some dividing walls protect the young girls' and couples' privacy.

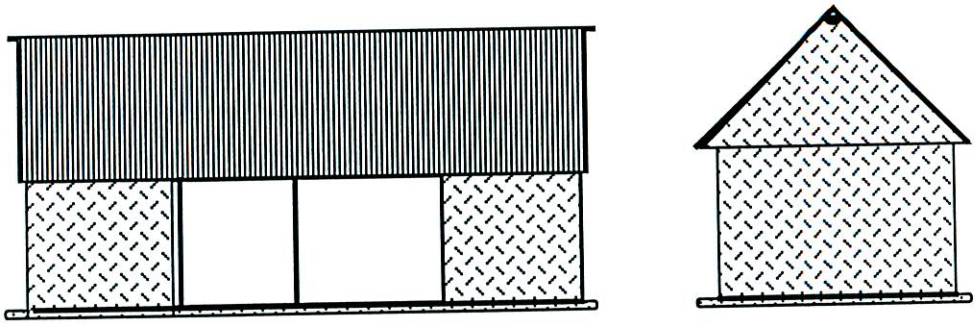
The kitchen, about 20 cm lower than the verandah, and 40 cm than the principal room, is a standing back room; its floor and roof surbasement, as well as the materials used for its construction and the opposite direction of the plates in comparison with the other parts of the house, everything contributes to make the kitchen a separated room (Robinne, 1993); its effective permutable character gives again the feeling that the kitchen space disturbs, and as a matter of fact, smells and smoke are feared because they are supposed to induce disease and to raise fever. Somehow, the kitchen is set inside, under or beside the house, so long as it doesn't offend heither the next house's head gable nor its own head gable.

Social contraints.

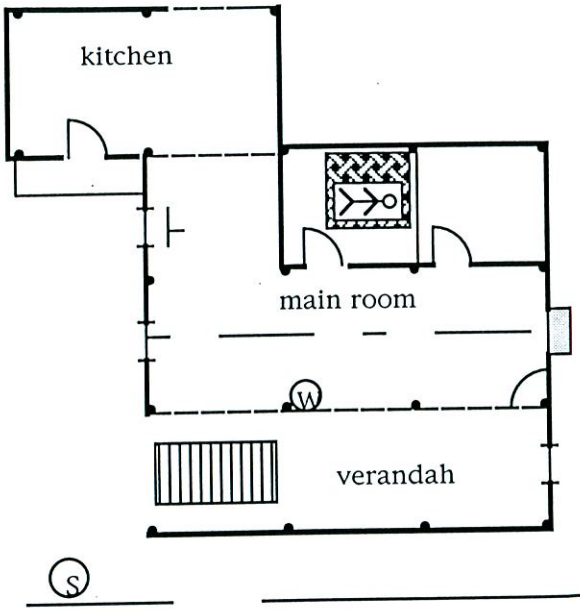
The day of construction, the choice of material and the piles' placing are socially normalized (Shway Yoe, 1963, pp. 76-77), just as the orientation rules determine the internal disposition of a house and the disposition of the adjacent houses.

In a like manner, the head gable where the Buddha's altar is, is in opposition to the feet gable where the kitchen is, and the ideal orientation of the head gable towards East shows the superiority of East on West; in the same way, the shower space will be ideally found on South side, in opposition to the latrines facing North. Consequently, going from East to West in a house is going from the very holy part to the very profane part, from the cleanest to the durtiest, and from the most masculine to the most feminine too; that's why the piles'placing is following the sun's run, as the dishes pass during meals and as the circumvolution around the pagoga is made.

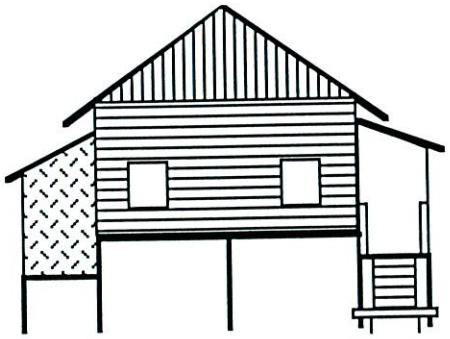




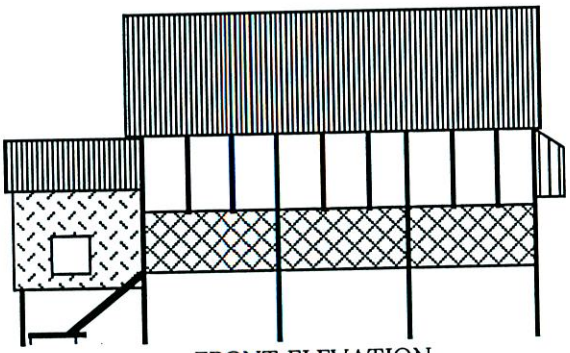
BURMESE HOUSE BUILT ON GROUND



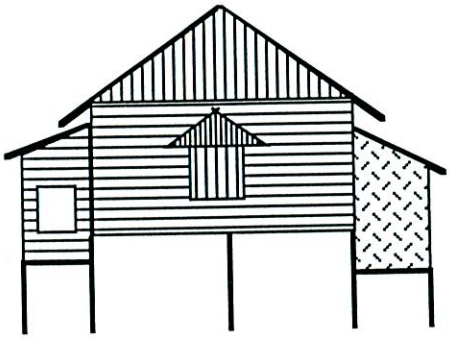
BED
FIRESIDE
W WATER
S SHOWER
DIFFERENT LEVEL
BUDDHA'S ALTAR
NAT'S ALTAR
THANAKA
STAIRS
NORTH
5 meters



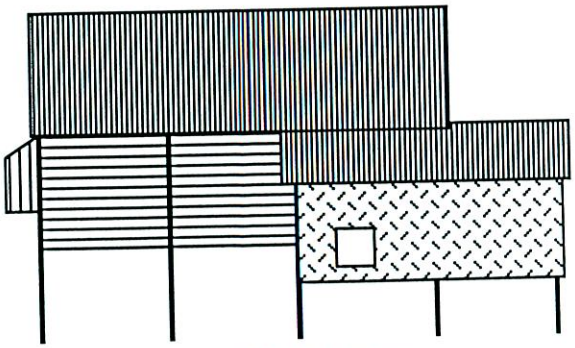
"FEET" GABLE



FRONT ELEVATION

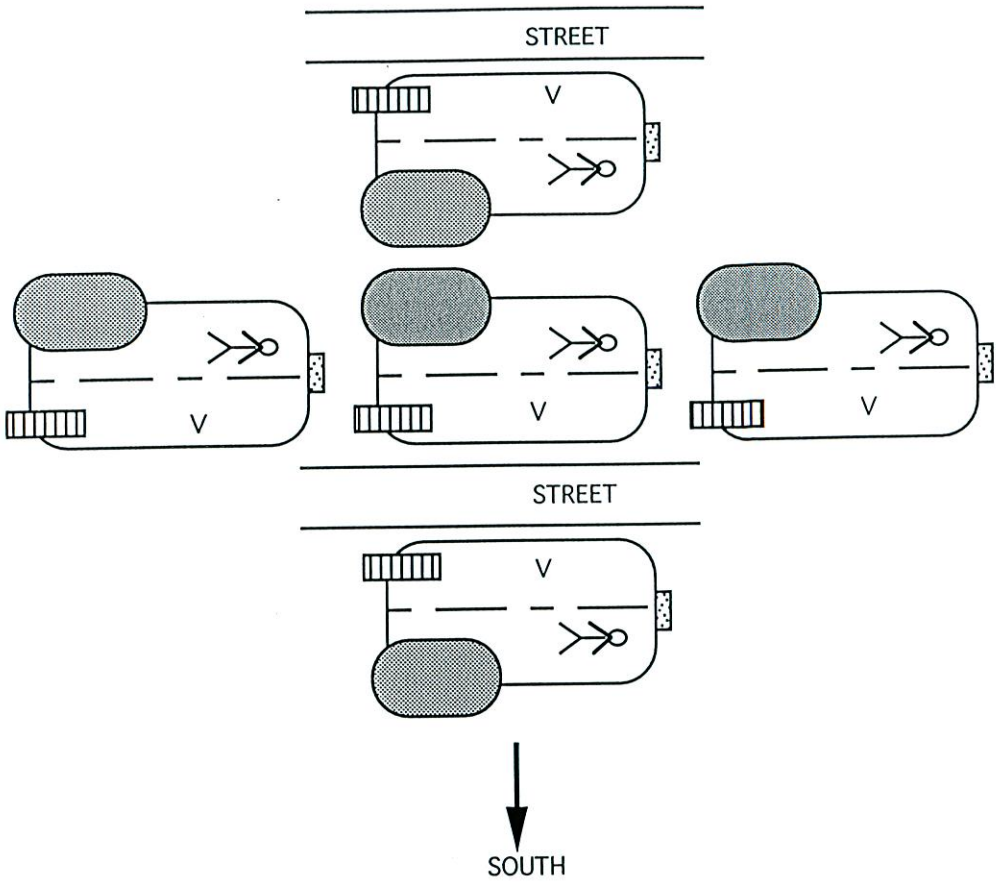


"HEAD" GABLE



BACK ELEVATION

BURMESE HOUSE BUILT ON PILES



STAIRS

CUISINE

V VERANDAH

BUDDHA'S ALTAR

RIDGE TILE

DISPOSITIONS OF HOUSES IN A BURMESE VILLAGE

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