

Thai-Mon Vernacular Houses

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Foreword

Mon civilization presents us with many interesting topics to look into. Its history, people, culture, art, architecture, religion, politics, governing system and other aspects, are all worth studying.

Unfortunately, the place where this great ancient civilization once prospered and established itself cannot officially be found in the world map of today due to political circumstances under the current ruling system. As a race however, the people still exist, clustering themselves in certain areas within the vicinity of their original settlement. In Thailand, they have settled themselves and formed their own communities that are scattered in various places. These communities were established during several different periods of time. Some, such as at Nakorn Kheunkhan for example, were formed during Thailand's Thonburi period by those who sought refuge from wars. Two more major migrations into Thailand also took place in the early Rattanakosin period during the reigns of Kings Rama II & III, when they settled themselves in Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, and Phra Pradaeng which was formerly known as Nakorn Kheunkhan. The Early Mons who arrived in the Thonburi period also settled at Koh Kred in Nonthaburi while those who arrived later, or the Later Mons, scattered themselves in Pathum Thani and Phra Pradaeng.

Apart from those mentioned, there are also Mons who originally settled themselves in the western region of Thailand in areas not too far

from the major Mon location in Burma (Myanmar). These communities can be found in Ratchaburi and Kanchanaburi Provinces, while some have scattered even further as far as the upper central region of Thailand.

The final group of Mons in Thailand are those who sought asylum from the Mon-Burma political problems. This latter group who are considered to be Displaced Mons, have been designated by the officials to settle in Sangkhlaburi district of Kanchanaburi Province, and housed in Paendin Dham Paendin Thong village. This large community settlement has certain interesting physical characteristics which also reflect their traditional way of life and culture.

It has been found that there are many different groups of Mons in Thailand. Some have converted themselves completely into Thais, some have retained certain customs and practices whilst their houses have become almost like Thai houses, and yet they have managed to retain their traditional style of the physical environment and culture. There are also those who cannot speak Thai, have not assimilated into Thai culture, refuse to do so, and are still completely Mon. Considering the above, it is felt that a comparative study ought to be undertaken in order to establish the similarities and differences in house forms, the causes, and the possibility of preserving the Mon culture and their vernacular architecture for future references.

Objective

The objective of this research is therefore to study the character of vernacular Thai-Mon houses, focusing on communities in which the Mon social and cultural characteristics are still evident. The study looks into the structure of each community, the dwellings - their structure, construction, and materials used, as well as the influence of local beliefs and customs that are indigenous to each locality on the use of spaces in the homes. This implies that comparative studies must be made to identify the similarities and differences together with looking at the causes or factors involved, for the purpose of ascertaining the possibility of preserving vernacular Thai-Mon houses.

Method

In carrying out an architectural research dealing with the physical aspects of community settlements and dwelling units that require studying local social and cultural influences as well, it was necessary to study documents, maps, photographs, and make measured drawings of the

buildings being studied. Ten villages were selected for field surveys based on the criteria that each village displays prominent Mon cultural identity, and are scattered geographically so as to cover a representative cross section of samples for case studies. These village communities are :

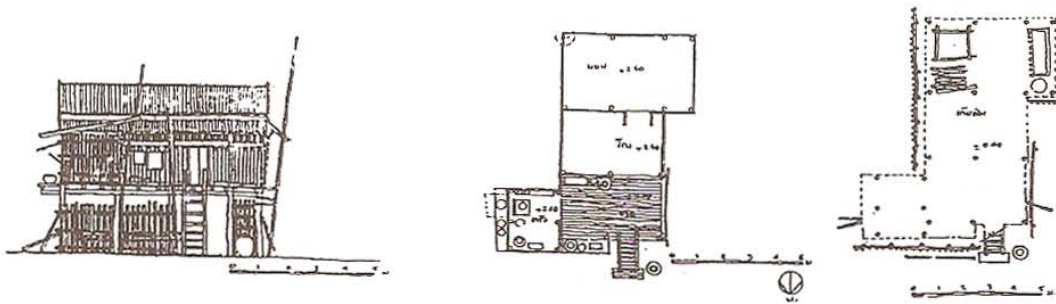
- (i) Ban Bangtoey, Bangtoey, Samkhoke, Pathum Thani Province
- (ii) Ban Song Kanong, Phra Pradaeng, Samut Prakarn Province
- (iii) Ban Koh Kred, Pak Kred, Nonthaburi Province
- (iv) Ban Tong Bo, Kanonluang, Bang Pa - In, Ayutthaya Province
- (v) Ban Muong, Ban Pong, Ratchaburi Province
- (vi) Ban Soi Fah, Soi Fah, Phodharam, Ratchaburi Province
- (vii) Ban Khao Tong, Phayuha Khiri, Nakorn Sawan Province
- (viii) Ban Phaendin Dham Phaendin Thong, Sangkhlaburi, Kanchanaburi Province
- (ix) Ban Mong Sa - theu, Sangkhlaburi, Kanchanaburi Province
- (x) A reference village case study carried out by Therdsakdi Mahareunsong for his postgraduate thesis in Thai architecture at the Graduate School of Silpakorn University, 1977. This village has been selected as a reference case in order to study the similarities and differences when compared to those surveyed between 1996 - 1998.

Reference Frameworks

In order to achieve the objective of this research, several frameworks are necessary for the analysis and interpretation of informations gathered. The following frames of thoughts have been adopted for reference:

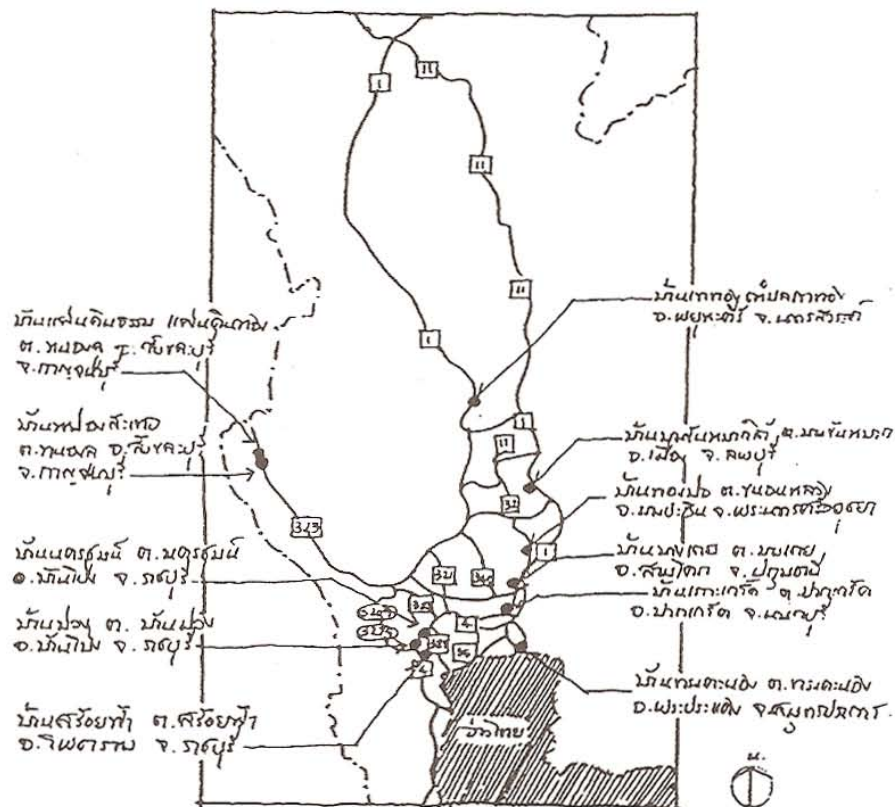
- (i) contextual framework: the broad context needs to be looked at before selecting potential case studies
- (ii) specific framework: make specific and detailed study of the selected cases
- (iii) comparative framework: look at similarities and differences, changes and modifications, factors influencing those changes
- (iv) conservation framework: look at potential for preservation of vernacular architecture

These four frameworks were in turn governed by the larger framework of social and cultural factors that are indigenous to each locality.



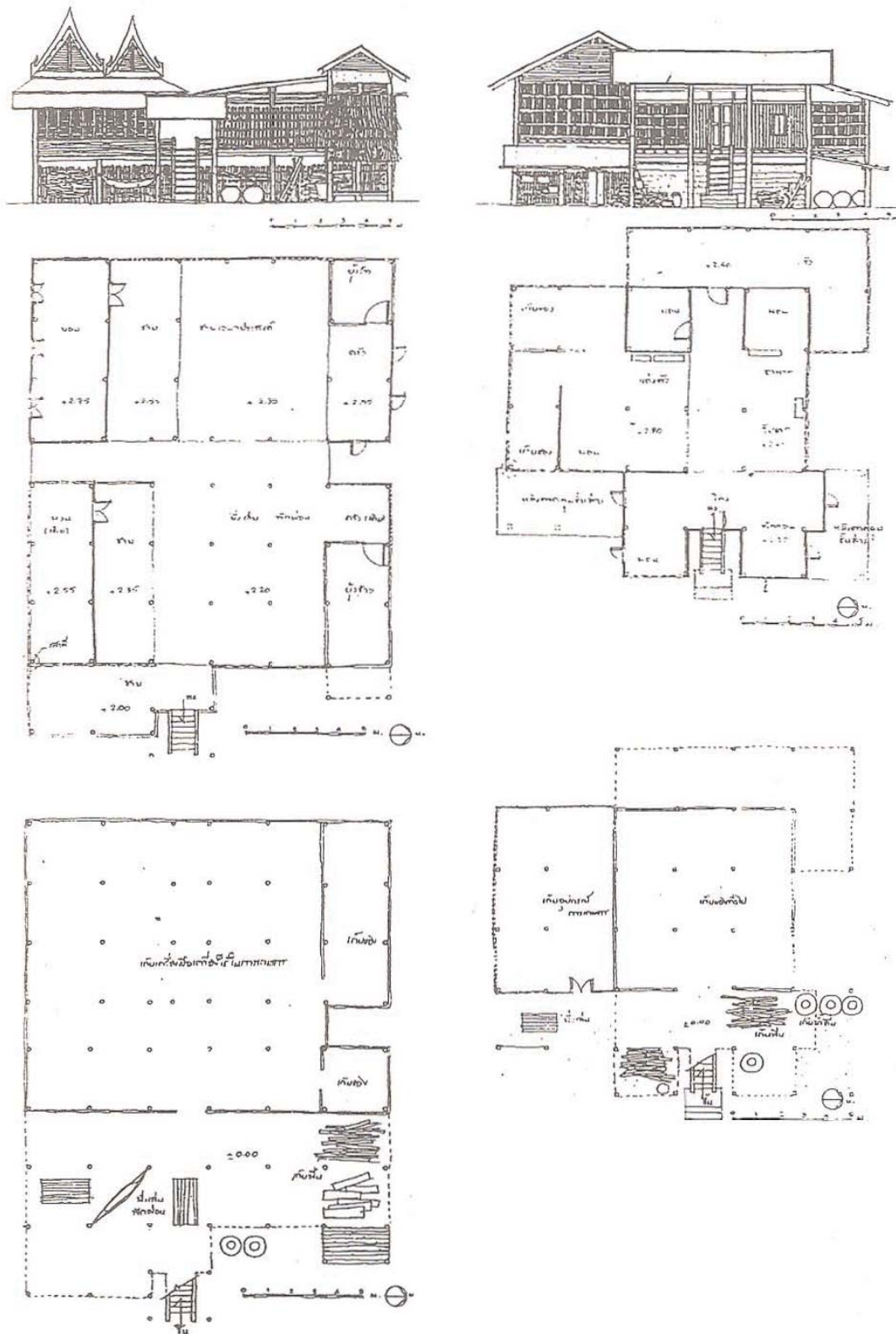
(Fig. 1)

Reference case study: "Rampan House" Ban Bang Khanmak, Lopburi Province; surveyed in 1976 by Therdsakdi Mahareunsong

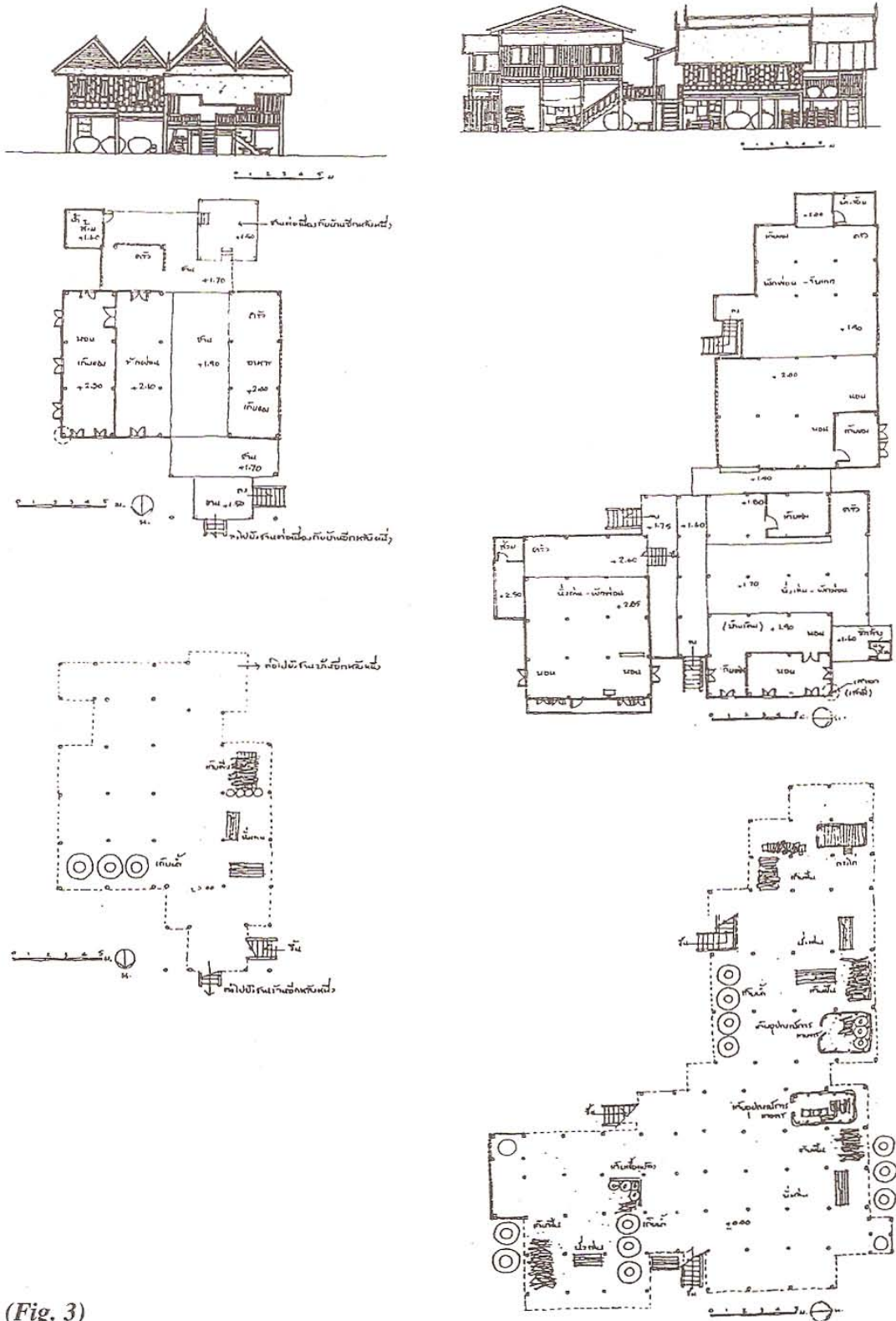


(Map)

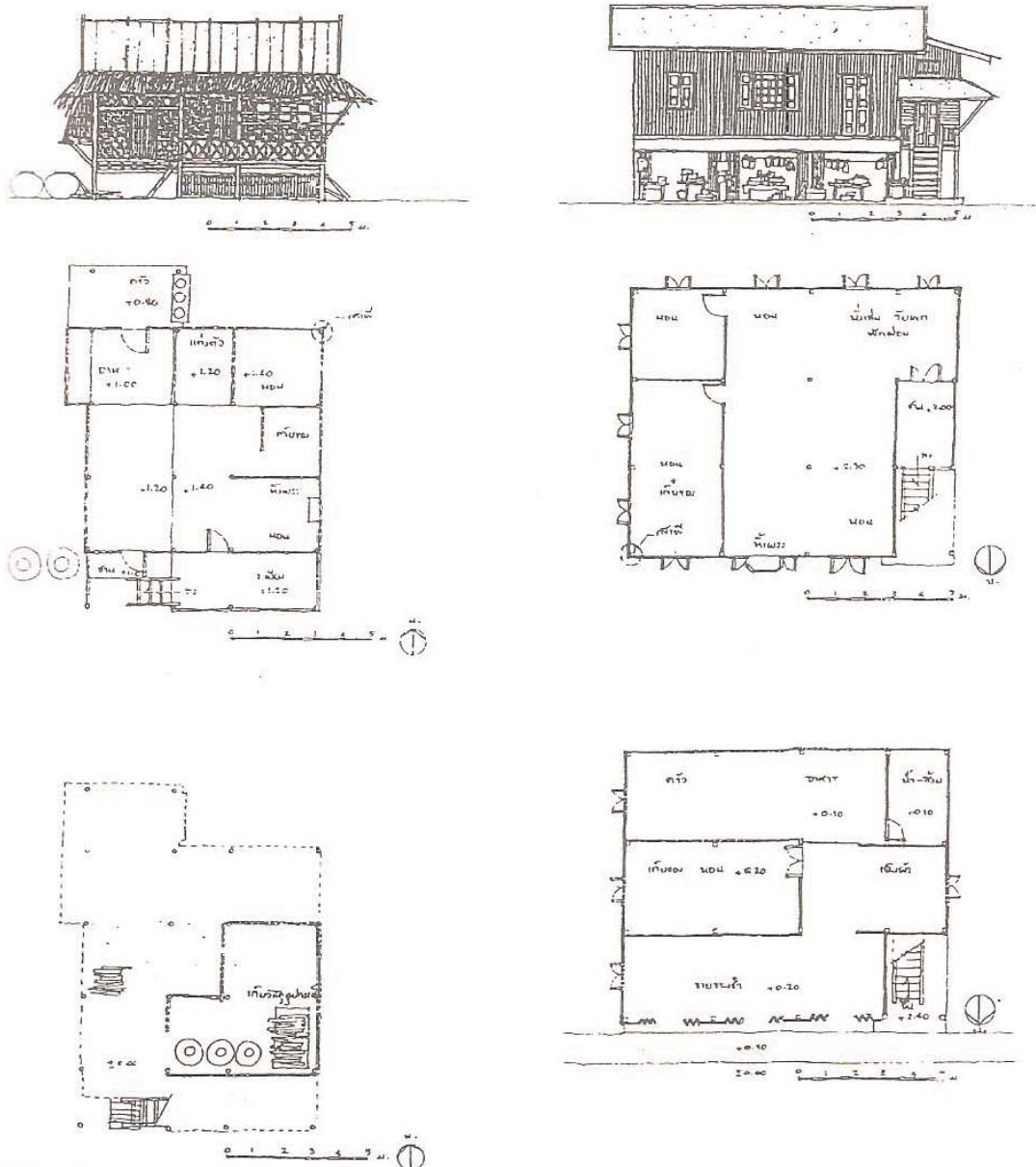
Map indicating villages from which case studies were taken ;
Ref : 1990 Highway Map



(Fig. 2)
 "Chalor House" & "Soh House" Ban Muong & Ban Soi Fah case studies,
 Ratchaburi Province; surveyed in March 1998



(Fig. 3)
 "Soi House" & "Samnieng House"
 Khao Tong case studies, Nakorn Sawan
 Province; surveyed in April 1996, May
 1997



(Fig. 4)
 "Khin Gee House" & "Anu House" Nong Lu case studies, Sangkhlaburi, Kanchanaburi Province; surveyed in January 1996

Conclusions

With regards to the questions raised at the inception of this research, the study has provided the following conclusions :

*Are there any similarities and/or differences in the cases studied?
 If so, what are they, and what are the factors involved?*

Most of the Thai-Mon houses studied, have added on extensions in the same way as the Thai houses. The Thai concept of the extended family is generally centered around the parents. Additions or extensions in Thai houses, are therefore usually built along two sides of the deck in

front of the parents' unit. Each addition has its own attached verandah and can be shut off for privacy. Thus the added units follow the same planning principle as the original parent unit. The Mon extended families however, do not follow this system but have many variations such as :

- * adding rooms on to the main house itself
- * building another house which may or may not be in the same manner as the main one; in most cases, they are different
- * enlarging the central common space according to demand for extra sleeping or living space
- * adding wing-extensions on to the common space to satisfy new requirements such as kitchen, toilet, and storage space
- * the extensions usually adjoin the central common space with additional flooring linking the floor of the extension to the floor of the original structure

These variations make the extended Thai-Mon houses differ from the Thai house extension pattern that is characteristic of the central region of Thailand. Upon entering a Mon house from the front porch, the visitor is confronted with a large common space similar to being in the multipurpose hall of a temple. The bedrooms and ancestor's room are private and not open to guests. Thus it can be seen that this roofed central common space is the main space of the Thai-Mon house.

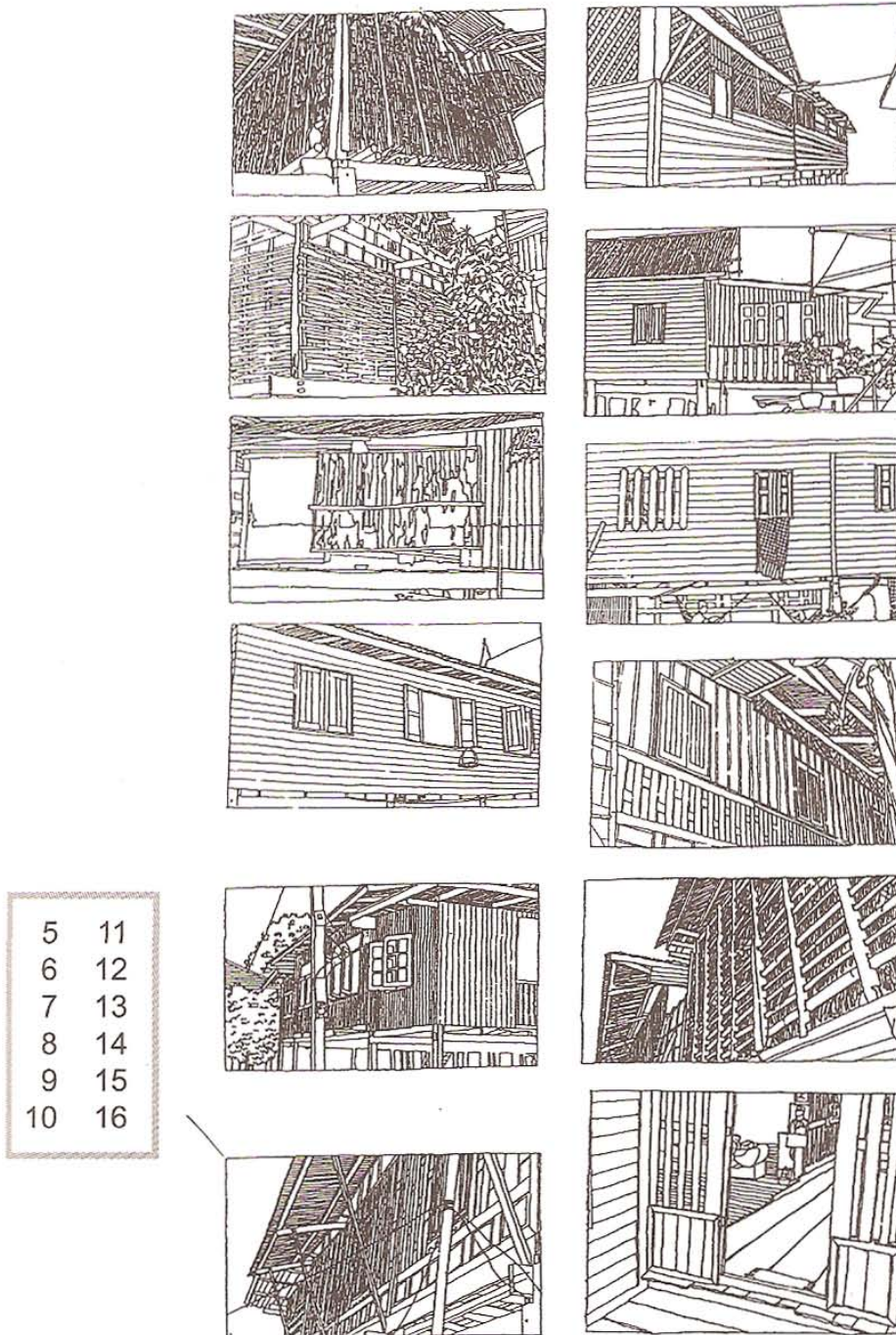
Similarities in Thai-Mon houses from case studies

Forty-eight case studies taken from 10 villages were surveyed and looked at together with relevant documents and texts. It was found that although there are many physical differences, there are also several common characteristics apparent in the functions and plans of the houses as follows:

- * the houses are raised on stilts and built of timber or bamboo, and the space beneath each house is used for living and/or storage
- * the houses are orientated on an axis in the way that the gable ends face east and west
- * each house has a primary post or spirit post placed in the east position
- * each has a roofed central common space for multipurpose functions that is more spacious than the fully enclosed rooms
- * each house has many split floor levels.

Many of the houses located in provinces near Bangkok (Pathum Thani, Nonthaburi, Samut Prakarn, and Ayutthaya) once had a spirit room

together with the spirit post. In many cases, this room devoted to the spirit of the ancestors, has now been converted into a Buddha room. In provinces of the western and upper central regions however, this spirit room has been kept and still used today for rituals and praying to the ancestors.



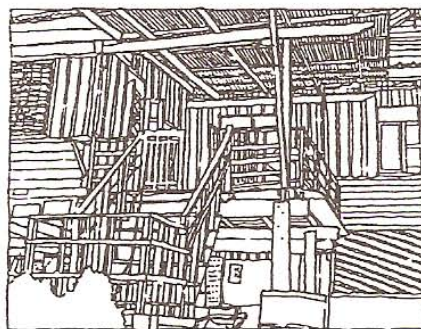
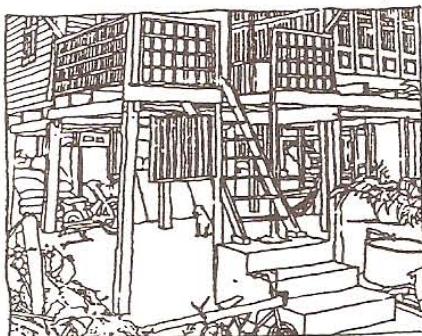
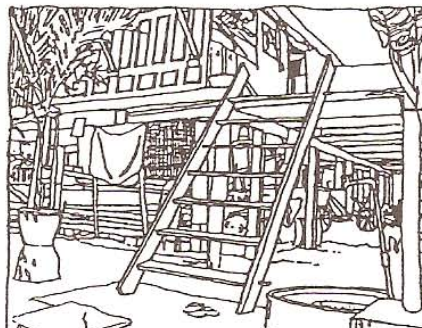
(Fig. 5-16)

Different types of wall construction built from bamboo, timber and tin sheets

Differences in Thai-Mon houses from case studies

Amidst the similarities in the way of life, the beliefs that influence the use of spaces and other similarities, there are the following differences:

- * the total floor area of each house ranges from 34 to 345 square meters, and can be divided into 6 groups
- * based on the same functional requirements, differences in the physical character can be identified into 4 groups :
 - (i) traditional Thai house combined with low pitched gables
 - (ii) several gabled houses grouped together
 - (iii) two-storied timber houses similar to shop house
 - (iv) bamboo houses

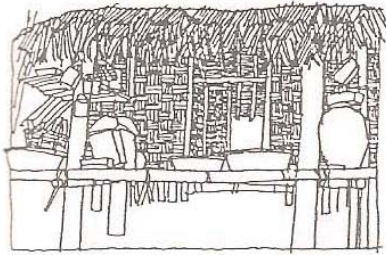
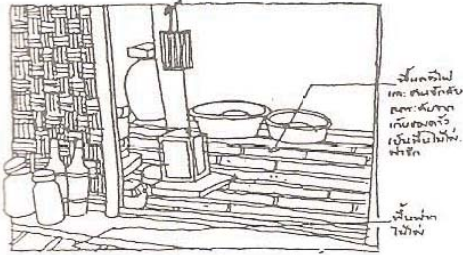


17	20
18	21
19	22

(Fig. 17-22) Variations in placement of steps leading up to the house

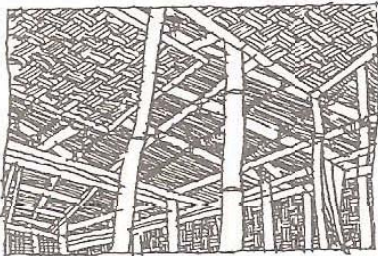
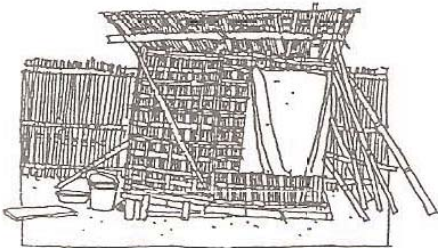
Factors affecting physical differences in Thai-Mon houses

* Differences in the expansion of kitchen space: in areas where there is distinct kinship type society, there is greater tendency to expand the kitchen than houses in other areas; this also applies to enlarging the common space (as can be seen from the case of Ban Muong in Ratchaburi Province and Ban Khao Tong in Nakorn Sawan)

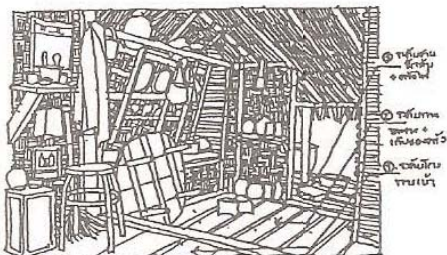


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(Fig. 23-24) Kitchen



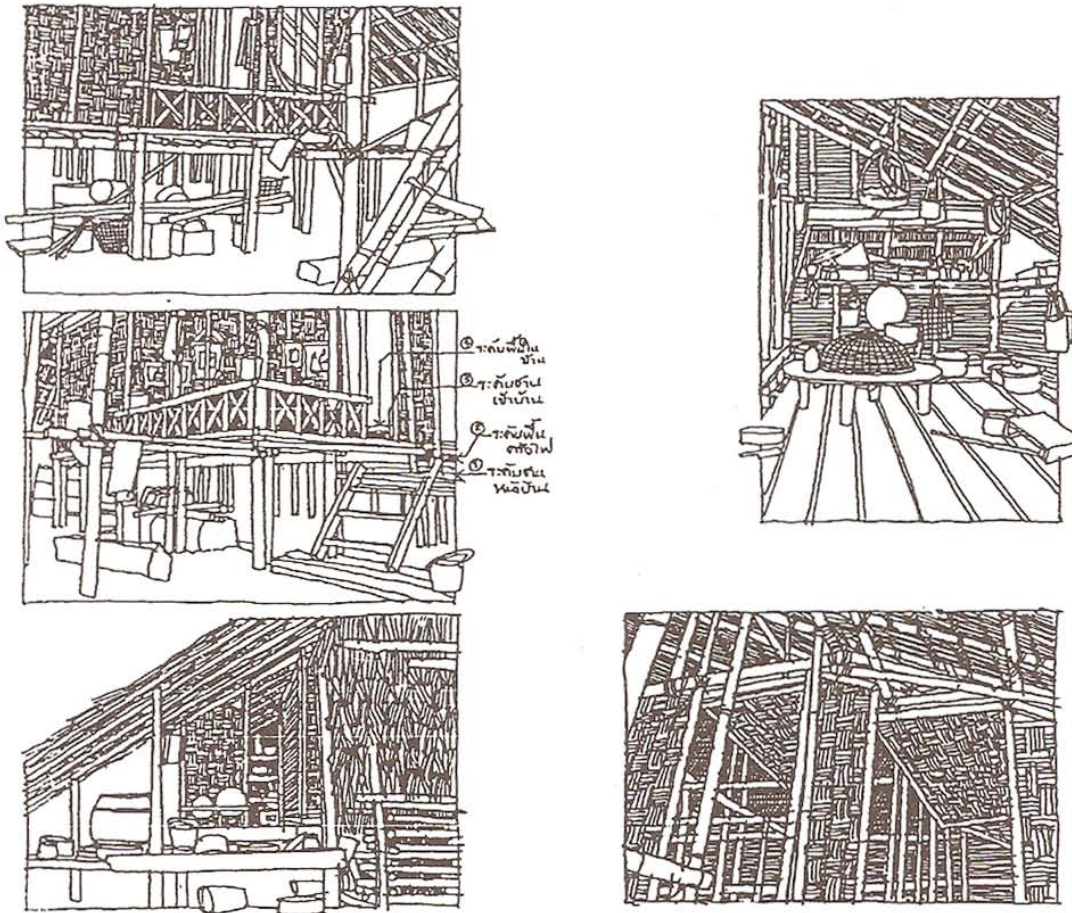
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(Fig. 25) Bamboo outhouse
(Fig. 26) Matted construction
(Fig. 27) Change in floor level between eating & cooking areas

* The age of the house: all houses have, to some extent, added on spaces at various stages; thus houses which were originally in the traditional Thai style some 80-100 years ago have undergone several alterations making the differences more apparent than the ones that were more recently built

* The construction materials



28

29 31

30 32

(Fig. 28, 29) Front porch

(Fig. 30) Cooking area

(Fig. 31) Eating area

(Fig. 32) Top-hung thatched door

Are there any cultural influences affecting physical changes in the house form? If so, what, and how?

It is natural that the Thai-Mon communities and the Thai communities coexisting together in the same locality, having the same religion, and sharing similar basic beliefs, should influence each other in terms of culture that becomes apparent through the use of domestic spaces. As has been pointed out, the spirit room in houses where the community is predominantly Mon, is still kept according to their belief. In communities where the Thai-Mons have blended well with the Thais however, such belief has become weak. The spirit room is no longer a requisite, and the ancestors' spirits have been invoked and transferred to reside at the spirit house next to the shrine of the guardian spirit, or to a temple. Mon communities near the outskirts of Bangkok have absorbed the Thai beliefs into their society. Those further out that formed themselves into large communities such as Ban Muong and Ban Khao Tong however, have held strongly on to their belief and still retained the spirit room for their ancestors.

Conversely, in Thai communities which were once inhabited by the Thai-Mons who have since moved out, such as Ban Rune in Ayutthaya for example, the present inhabitants have retained the physical characteristic of their houses. Especially those with extended family similar to the Mons whom they have been familiar with since the past. The Thai communities of Ban Khom and Ban Mon in Maharat at Ayutthaya also have this characteristic. These were formerly Mon communities, and it has been found that at present, many Thais have also incorporated a *door of the dead*, which is a door on the west side of the house's upper floor with no external landing and used for moving the dead out of the house according to ancient Mon belief, to their houses.

What are the factors causing modifications to the homes?

- * In terms of physical aspect, these are:
 - the extended family
 - the age of the house and subsequent additions
 - the construction materials
- * In terms of non-physical aspect,
 - beliefs concerning spirits of the ancestors

There is also another aspect that lies between the two. This is related to the changing Thai-Mon way of life that is becoming more modern, and solving the problems concerning the climate in order to create suitable comfort conditions.

With regards to change, the Thai-Mon house which formerly had a central common open deck similar to the Thai house, can now rarely be found as they have virtually all been roofed up. The space beneath the house however, remains the same since this is a pleasant space to relax in and receive cool breezes. Change to the common space on the upper level is therefore a mean of satisfying new requirements and facilitating use.

Another factor causing change to the physical character of the house is in the case of its site being on the waterfront. The Mons are very particular about the directions associated with the living and the dead. South and east are considered to be the directions of the living and therefore steps leading up to the house are generally placed in those directions in about 70 percent of the cases. However, in several cases where the house is located by the riverfront which is on the north - south axis, the steps are placed on the west side. This contradicts the long held superstition and illustrates that today, between belief and river, the river has more weight in decision making when it comes to placing the steps.

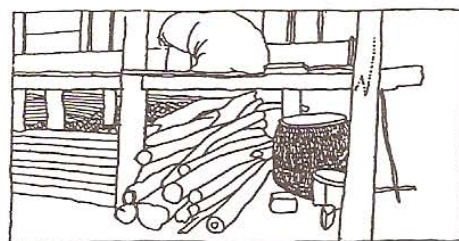
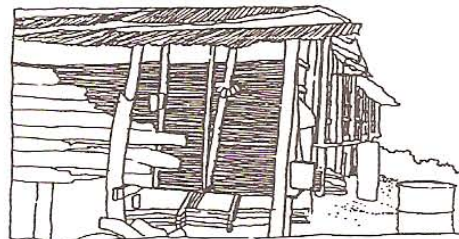
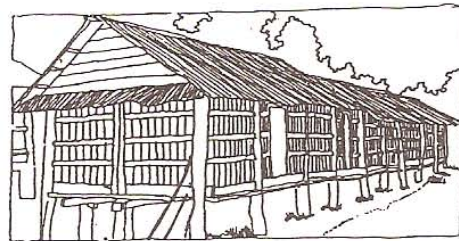
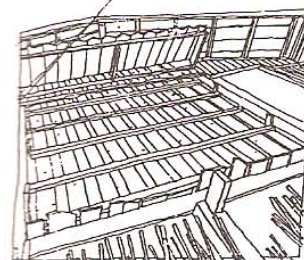
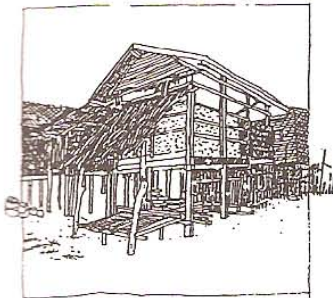
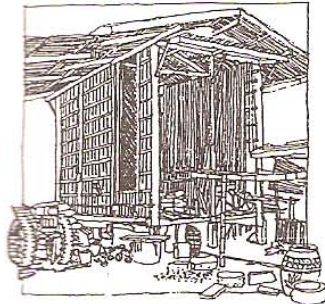
Are there any possibilities for Thai-Mon characteristics to be preserved?

As far as vernacular architecture is concerned, the actual buildings themselves may not be solely accountable for their value but the way of life and socio-cultural factors also have their roles in contributing to it. As can be seen from this study, the character of Thai-Mon houses do not suggest any real architectural significance whether it be in the form, structural feat, or construction materials used - except in the case of bamboo construction which may be of interest for its intrinsic value. On the other hand, it is the kinship aspect that stands out as having major influence on adding extensions to the house and giving it its character that is distinct from the Thai houses. This is what makes vernacular Thai-Mon houses interesting and together with their beliefs and customs, brought about the physical character with the large central common space which is their outstanding feature.

As a final conclusion, it can be said that :

* Their beliefs and the kinship or extended type of family is important to the value of Thai-Mon vernacular houses. This implies that if such traits are still a part of their way of life, then the characteristic feature of their houses will also continue to remain. But if these traits disappear, then the outcome will undoubtedly be like other vernacular houses that are in vulnerable positions.

* Revival of unique local identity such as at Ban Muong, Ban Khao Tong and Ban Bangtoey, which although directed mainly at publicizing Mon festivities, can instill a sense of awareness of Thai-Mon way of life, its value, and the importance of preserving it.



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(Fig. 33-36)

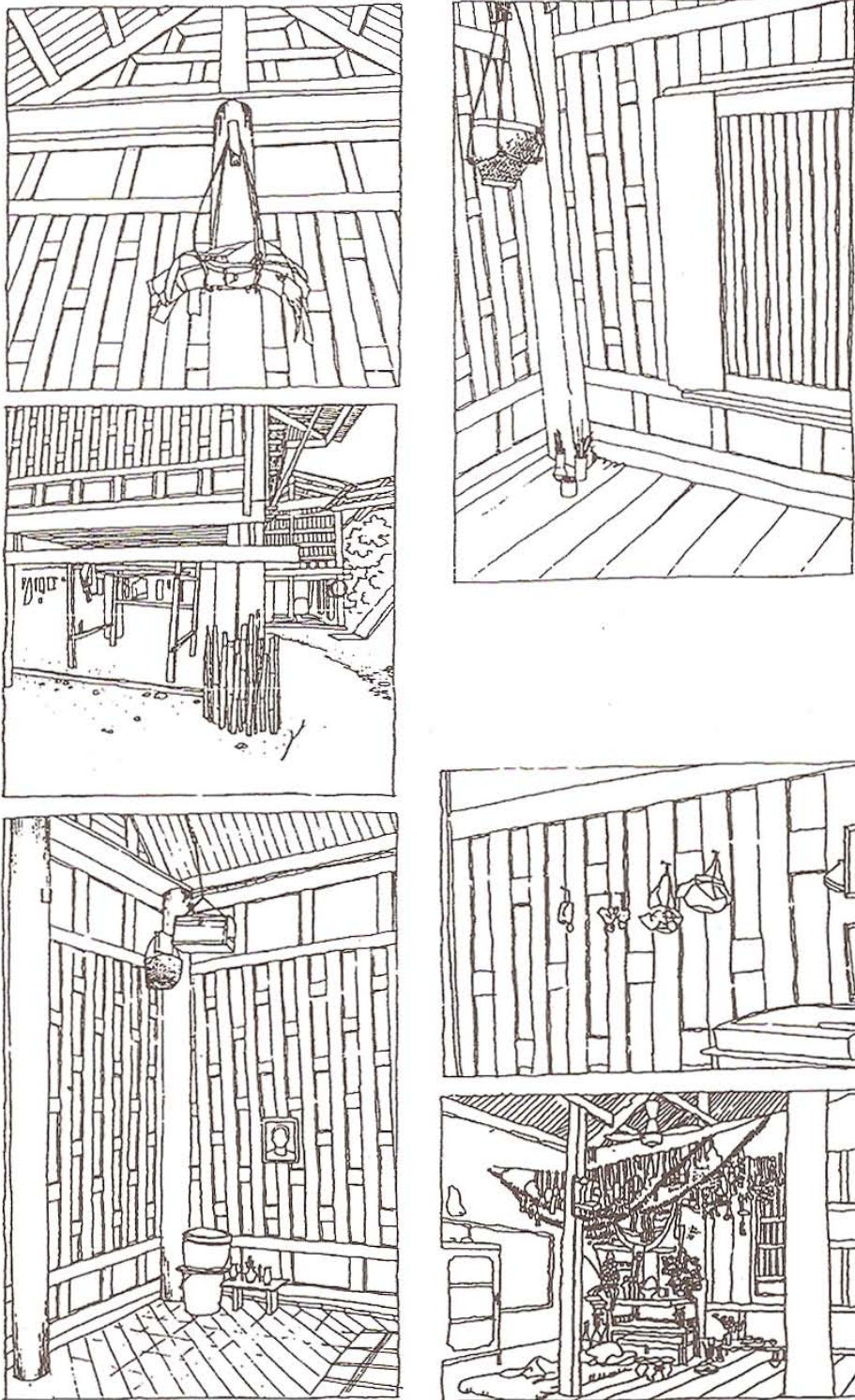
Rice storage sheds in Ratchaburi Province

(Fig. 37, 38)

Rice storage sheds in Nakorn Sawan Province

(Fig. 39)

General storage space beneath the rice shed



40	43
41	44
42	45

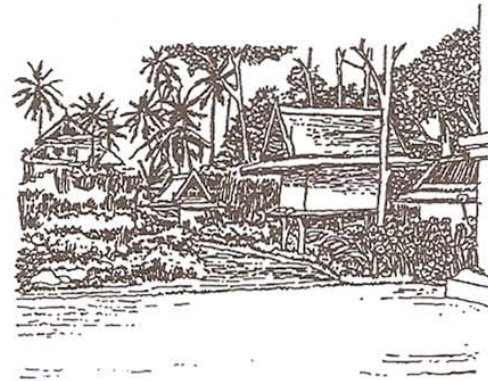
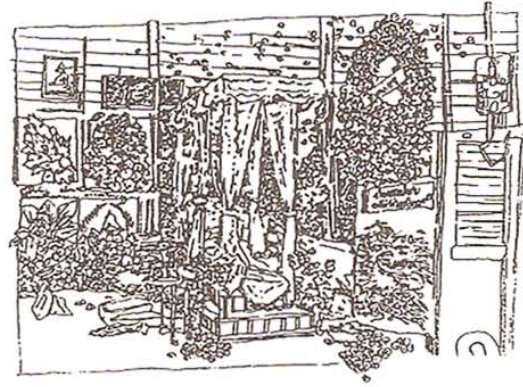
(Fig. 40) Holy scripture hanging from spirit post

(Fig. 41) Spirit post protected at the base with bamboo wrap

(Fig. 42, 43) Small crate and basket containing clothes of the dead hang from above

(Fig. 44) Spirit jars and pots hang against wall

(Fig. 45) Spirit room



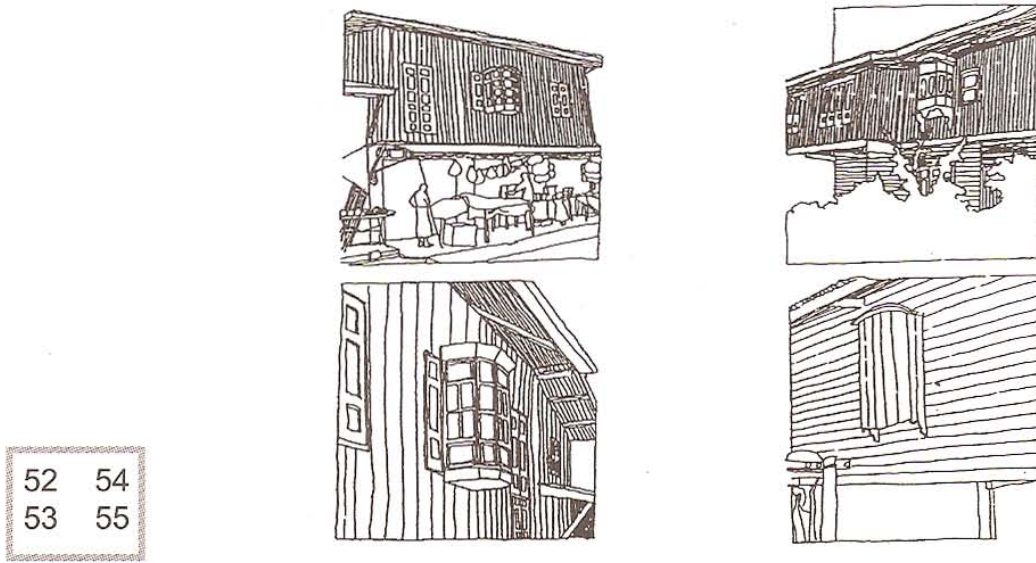
46	48
47	49
	50
	51



- (Fig. 46) Spirit Houses in Ban Muong
 (Fig. 47) Shrines for the guardian spirits of the compound
 (Fig. 48) Coffin in a four-poster during funeral at a house
 (Fig. 49) Repository at a temple
 (Fig. 50) Ornate coffin in form of castle
 (Fig. 51) Funeral pyre decorated with banana stem

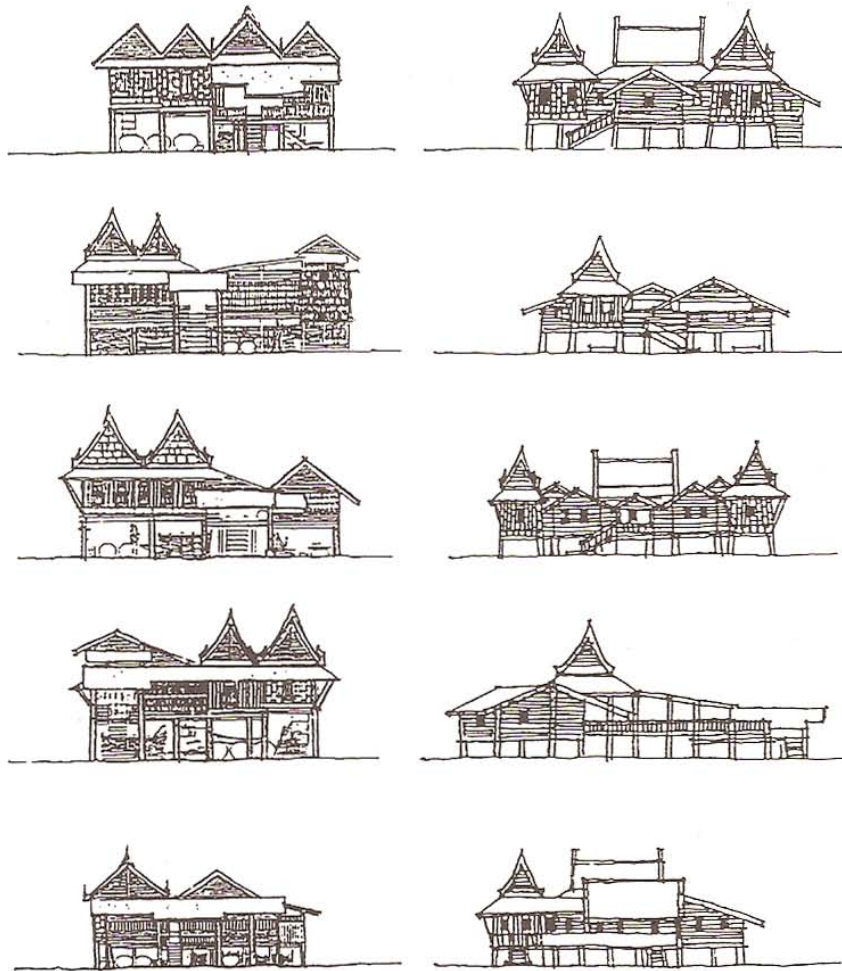


*Figures 48-51 were sketched From photographs taken by Suwannee Krueapan, 1987



52	54
53	55

(Fig. 52-55) Protruding Buddha enclave



56	57
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(Fig. 56) Thai-Mon extended family houses from the surveys

(Fig. 57) Thai extended family houses in Ayutthaya Province

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