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THE MONASTIC UNITY

A contemporary Burmese artefact?

François Robinne

In the village context, most of the wooden monasteries of contemporary Burma constitute a “unit” by themselves, a single building sheltering the Buddha images in a wide hall, together with the monk cells, more often with no stūpa (*zedi*) or ordination hall (*thein*) within the precinct and, when there is one ordination hall it is a small building relegated behind the monastery or in a corner of the courtyard (Pichard 2000: 126). This was not the conception of Sadler, when semantically discussing the Burmese term for a monastery:

In Burmese there is no word for monastic enclosure as a whole, as a *gestalt*. There is consequently [...] no conception of a unified whole, of a monastic compound as a unit. (Sadler 1970: 287, quoted by Richard O’Connor 1985: 4)

This problem thus stated, plus the reflections conveyed by the different contributors during the workshop and the following discussions as well, led me to revise my paper originally entitled “Buddhist monasteries of Burma as operator of transethnicity”. Compared more especially to the Thai *wat*, which is a monastic complex generally consisting of a shrine (*wihan*), an ordination hall (*ubosot*), a stūpa (*chedi*) and monks quarters (*kuti*), the Burmese building, *kyaung*, makes up a whole by itself at least for a great majority of the wooden village monasteries.

The fieldwork mainly focused on three monasteries:

- 1 – the Burmese monastery of Nyun-Pin in Central Burma;
- 2 – the Shan monastery of Kan-Tha in the old site of Thibaw in the Northern Shan State;
- 3 – the Intha monastery of Kye-Za-Kun and other villages of the Inle Lake in the Southern Shan State;

in any case, it will be referred to neighbourhood monasteries.

*See map
of Burma
page 73*

Notwithstanding their effective spatial and cultural diversity,¹ these selected monasteries have in common the fact that they are all located in a region which was under a Shan influence after the fall of Pagan at the end of the 13th century, and which is nowadays under the growing influence of a burmanization process. All these wooden monasteries are more or less restored, but were originally built at the end of the 19th century. This study does not include the urban monasteries.²

Number and density of monasteries in the concerned areas

The census of the High Authority of the Buddhist Sects, published in 1985,³ records the total number of monasteries, together with a more controversial number for the Saṅgha community members, in each administrative region all over the country. The estimated numbers for the three concerned areas show as follows:

	Number of monasteries	Number of monks	Number of novices
Kyaukse District Central Burma	256	557	1205
Nyaung-Shwe District Southern Shan State	179	571	
Thibaw District Northern Shan State	218	566	1938

As a rule, each village would have its own monastery. Such was the case for most of the Intha villages around the Inle lake in the Southern Shan State as well as for those situated on the Shan high plateau and in the surrounding Palaung mountains of the Northern Shan State; such is also the case of Nyun-Pin and the neighbouring villages in Central Burma: one monastery for one village figuring the ideal situation.

In fact, villages without their own monastery are numerous and their number is more and more increasing. According to the above-mentioned census there are only 179 monasteries for a total of 451 villages in the whole Nyaung-Shwe district, let the ratio be of 1 monastery for 2,5 villages. Some reasons can explain this lack of balance between the number of monasteries and that of villages. It may be due to accidents. For example, a few years ago, in the lake-village of Khan, the head monk was killed when a home-made rocket, ritually launched by the Taungyo during the full moon of April-May, unfortunately fell on his holy skull while he was going out of his monastery. The fatal crash was understood as a supernatural warning intervention owing to a wrong

1. The Intha – and the Taungyo whom we shall refer to – belong to the Tibeto-Burmese linguistic family; the Shan or Tai belong to the Thai-Kadai family; cited below: the Palaung and the Danaw are Austro-Asiatic while the Pao are Karen.

2. For an introduction to some monasteries in Mandalay, cf. Elizabeth Moore 1996, 304-327. Mostly for the quality of the iconography, we can refer also to Irene Moilanen and Sergey S. Ozhegov 1999. For a compilation of the vernacular architectural words, see Gilles Garachon 1983.

3. Referred to in the bibliography as “High Authority...”.

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spatial organisation. The monastery was demolished and part of the villagers followed a widow to search for and select a new place of settlement where they rebuilt their houses and, thereafter, a new monastery. The ones who remained in the previous village had to wait for years before getting a new monastery. Violent death, epidemic, fire, accident, etc., all inauspicious events of any kind are interpreted as an inadequate combination between the social and the cosmic orders.

The demographic growth, going together with the ever-increasing number of villages, may also – or mostly – account for the lack of monastery in some villages, or in other words, it may explain that only one monastery can be serving a group of two, three, four and even more villages. Such is the case, for example, around the lake where five Intha villages named “Top Yua-Kyi”, “Low Yua-Kyi”, “Lay-Khye”, “Middle Lay-Kye” and “Pway-Kun” share one single monastery; the same applies to the neighbouring villages and far beyond. In any case, with regard to the roundup of the villages the presence of a monastery prevails by far over any administrative division. On both sides of the lake, a group of eight Pao villages and another one of three Taungyo villages are, each of the two groups, dependent on one central monastery despite their official belonging to different townships, despite also the presence, in one case, of an Intha village and in the other case of a Danaw village (Robinne 2000: 144-46).

Whatever the administrative or ethnic references may be, three main types of monasteries – including the Palaung’s monasteries built in bricks – can be singled out from their architectural features.

Architectural features

The Pāli-Burmese commentaries of the Culawaga (*Cullavagga*) – the first of the three divisions of the Piṭaka and the fourth of the five books of the *Vinaya* – give a list of five different types of monasteries derived from architectural criteria:⁴

Vihāra

The generic pāli term for “monastery”, defined in the Buddhist texts as a monastery with a two- or four-sided roof according to the pāli or the Burmese version. The latter mentions the word *ca kyo*, spelled *ca kro* in the Judson’s dictionary (1960: 346) and described as a “four-sided roof”.

Amu yoga

According to the Pāli-Burmese text, it is defined as “a one-sided roof of a bamboo monastery”.

Pāsāda

Pāli term also spelled *prasād* or *prāsād*. Monastery with a multitiered roof with three up to seven tiers.

Hāmmiya

Pāli term for a monastery with a multitiered roof topped by an umbrella.

Gūham

Monastery having the shape of a cave when it is not a natural cave. It is also called *umañ lhuin gu kyon*., with *umañ* and *gū* which designate a cave or an artificial grotto.

4. Two volumes have been consulted and discussed with the head monk of Nyun-Pin in Central Burma: a pāli-burmese version published in 1936 and a burmese translation published in 1958.

If the pāli terminology refers to a comparatively accurate architectural typology based on the roof shape, no one among the monks we interviewed was really able to name the type of his monastery after this list, even with the text in hands. This is certainly because each monastery possesses other specific characteristics and the variations are numerous from one wooden monastery to another. Nevertheless, among the three main types of monasteries emerging from this diversity, two of them can be distinguished by their roof shape and arrangement: those with contiguous roofs, and those with cross-shaped roofs.

Monasteries with contiguous roofs

figure 1 (a, b, c)
opposite page

The monastery of Kan-Tha in the Northern Shan State is an example of this type. The following is the translation of a pāli-burmese inscription commemorating the donation of this monastery:

Wish you everything auspicious in this world South of Mount Meru. In *Kambojā*⁵ there are mountains, forests, rivers with seasonal flows from right to left. The new city of Thibaw is surrounded by moats. [...] Five relics of *rahandas* have been placed in the middle of the *zedi*. The donator has built nine *zedi*. His Kudaw is well-known in every region of the reincarnation cycle. The donators⁶ of this monastery are the governor *amat krī*: U Myat Mwun Myat Zan and his wife Ma Khe Yu [...]. They founded this monastery by being full of the three noble wishes of charity (*puppā cetanā*), honesty (*munca cetanā*) and altruism (*para cetanā*). They expected to be free from the affairs of this world, from anger, from ignorance and from stupidity (*loka-dosa-moha-awijjā*). The foundations (*panak*) of this monastery were dug on the 15th day of the waxing moon of the month of Tasaungmun in the year 1237 ME⁷ (1875 AD). According to the Buddhist precepts, a ceremony of pouring water (*re cak khya*) has been performed in order to share the good actions with others. We have offered this foundation to the head monk. [...]

The structure of this monastery is divided outside and inside into three parts: to the three groups of parallel multitiered roofs correspond the three different levels of the floor. On the highest level stand the Buddha images, the medium one being reserved for the monks and the lowest one for the donators (lay people).

Such a pattern is common, whatever the region or the linguistic origins may be, at least for the village monasteries built from the middle of the 19th century and afterwards. Of course, many variations can be noted in space and time. Some are material: in the Kan-Tha monastery, the space built behind the shrine is used as a dining room for the monks. But the symbolic is never very far: by the addition of such a building behind the altar the images were shifted from against a gable towards a central position; this trend to move the sacred images to the centre follows a more general evolution engaged earlier in Pagan (Pierre Pichard: 1998 and *supra* in this book).

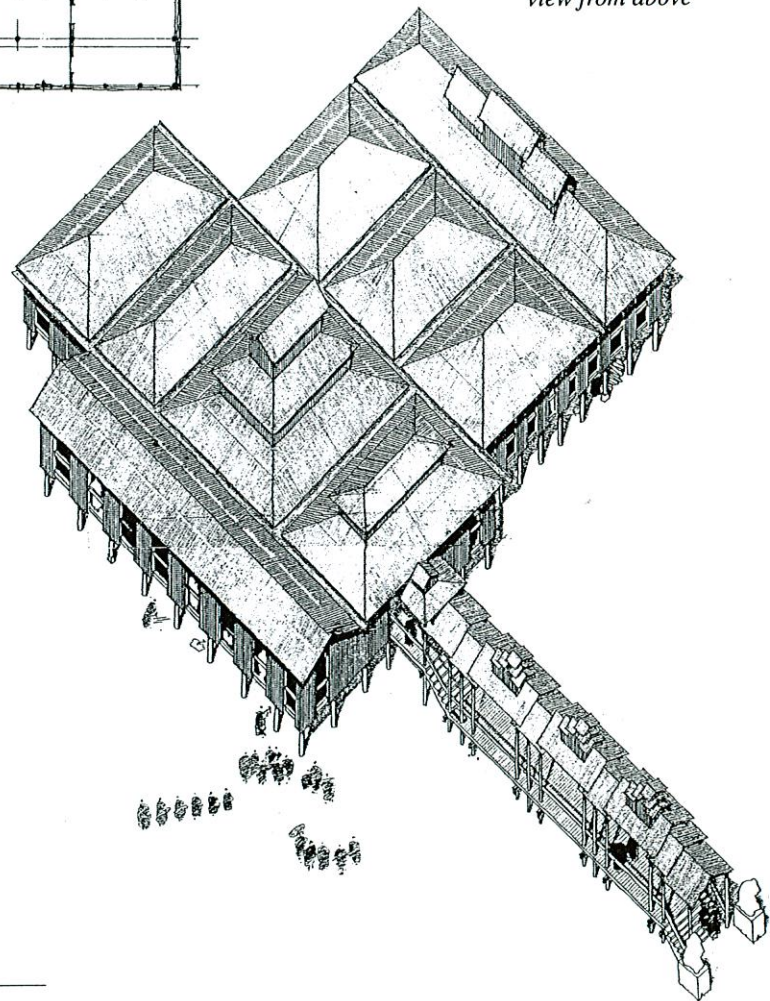
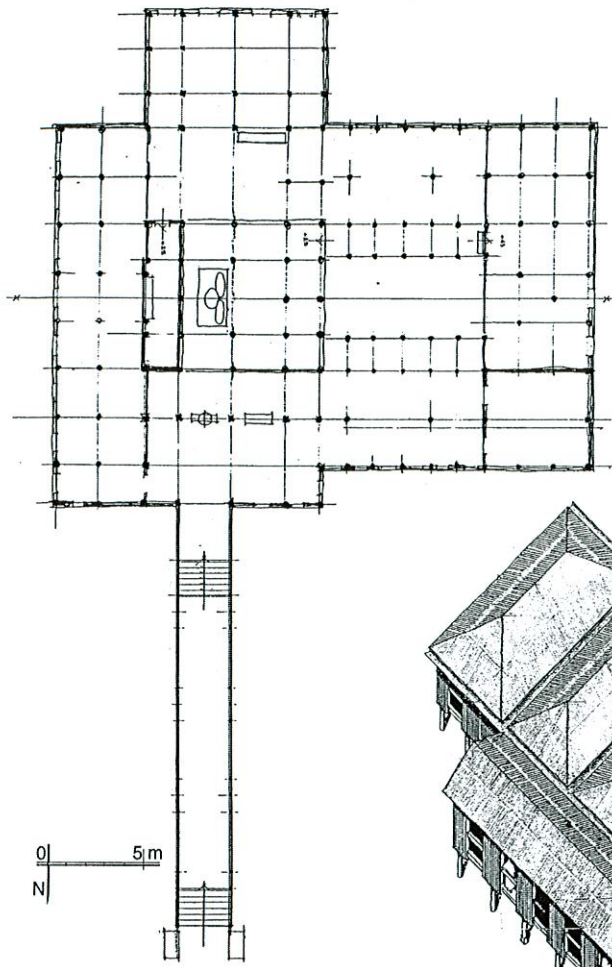
5. *Kambojā* is a former name of the Shan State.

6. *Kyon*: *takā*, a burmese-pāli term made up of *Kyon*: “monastery” and *takā*, short for *dāyakā* “donators”, meaning every Buddhist. In Adoniram Judson’s days the expression was used also for a respectable old man (1966: 223).

7. ME for “Myanmar Era”, different from BE or “Buddhist Era”.

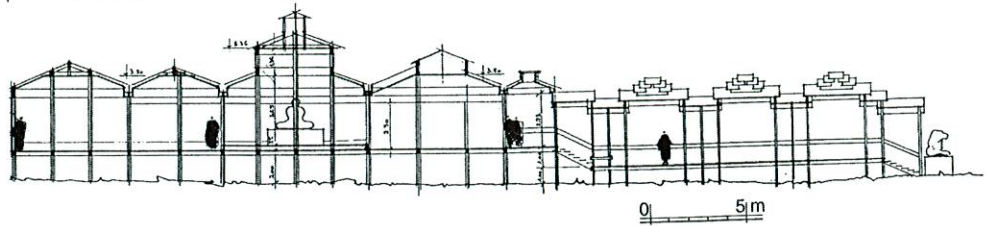
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1 | *Kan-Tha Monastery,
Northern Shan State*
| (drawings Guy Robinne)



0 5m
N

1c - Section



Monasteries with cross-shaped roofs

Two main ridges intersect perpendicularly, giving a crosswise plan to the roof and therefore to the whole building.

Built on posts, according to such a plan, the Nyun-Pin Monastery, in Central Burma, stands in the south part of a large religious complex. The upper floor shelters the Buddha images on a raised platform in the eastern part of the cross; monk and novice quarters are in the southern part, the space for the meals in the western one and the storerooms in the northern branch. Between the posts, the ground floor is used for storage, water supply, rest beds and for a school for lay pupils and novices. A roofed stairway leads up to the upper-floor entrance, right in the middle of the west wall of the southern wing of the building.

figure 2 (a - e)
pages 81-3

The successive steps of the monastery construction, together with the enumeration of the different owners,⁸ are recorded in a book belonging to the head monk of Nyun-Pin:

The 8th day of the waxing moon of the month of Tasaungmun in the year 1294 ME (1932 AD), the great donators U Naing and his wife Daw Hle, inhabitants of Nyun-Pin village, offered 750 kyats to the carpenter in order to build a monastery at the head of the village. The whole cost was 10,000 kyats.

The 8th day of the waning moon of the month of Wazaw in the year 1311 ME (1949 AD), the donator U Naing made offerings to repair the monastery which suffered of the assaults of impermanence.

The head monk named U Nemeindaka gave the monastery to the monk U Laba. When the latter died, the monastery became U Thun Aung's property. U Thun Aung offered the monastery to the monk U Azera. When he died, the monastery became one more time the property of U Thun Aung. He offered it to the last monk disciple U Kukla in 1305 ME (1943 AD).

The same document points out in what way the initial dimensions were drawn up for each one of the five parts constituting the building:

U Thun Ka, chief of the village drew the general form of the monastery with a bamboo having a man height, and then he prescribed the measures to the carpenter in charge of the task : 4 x 4 bamboo lengths for the place intended for the Buddha shrine on east, 4 x 3 bamboo lengths for the place assigned to the monks, novices and students on south, 4 x 4 bamboo lengths for the refectory, on west, 3 x 4 bamboo lengths for the storeroom on north, 6 x 5 bamboo lengths for the central part.

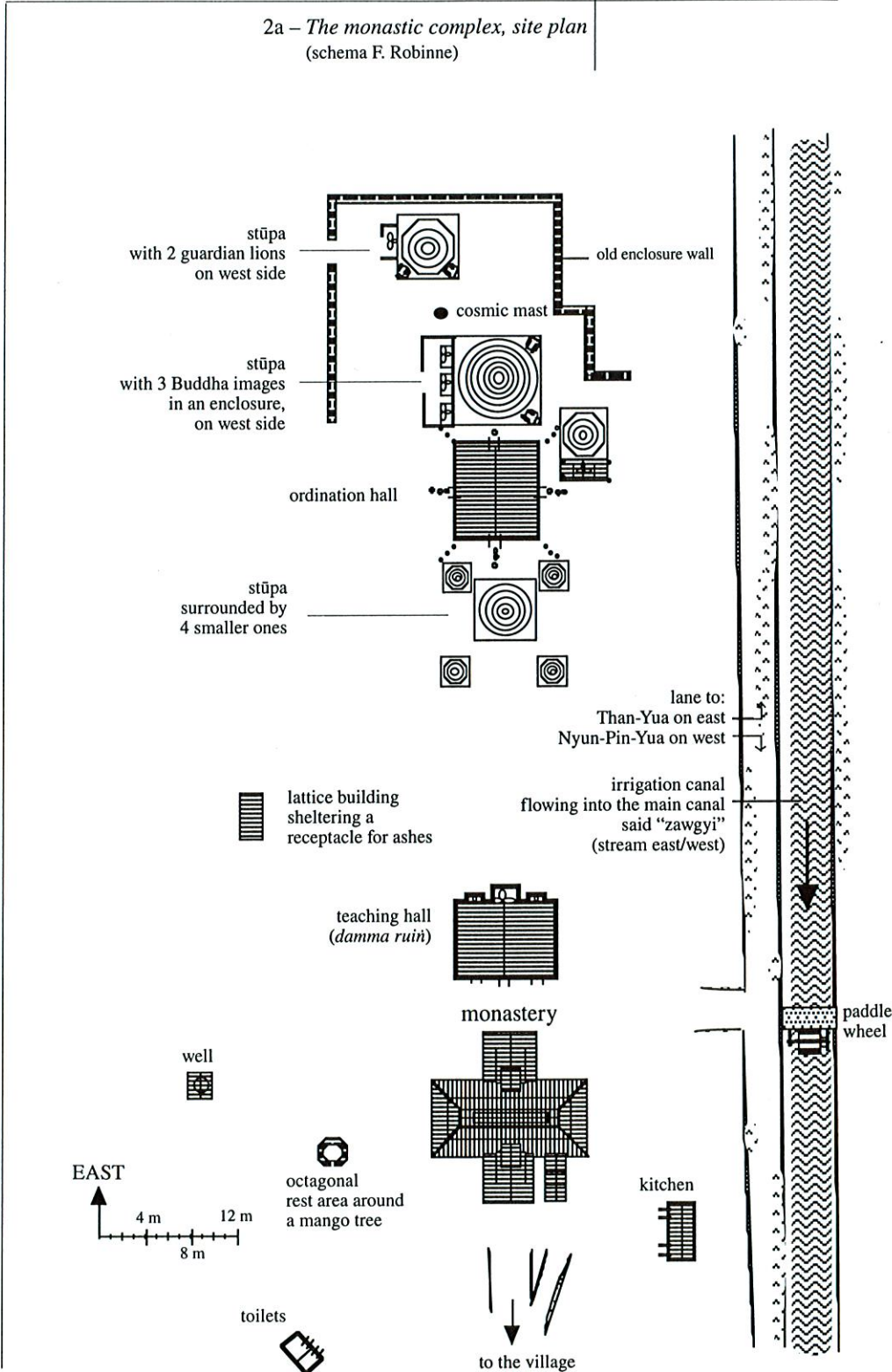
An old wooden house designed on such a cross-shaped plan still exists in Nyun-Pin village. According to the owners, whose grandparents were U Thun Ka's first cousins, this house was built sixty or so years ago, just after or before the monastery construction in 1294 ME (1932 AD). The same crosswise plan characterises also the monastery of East Phwazaw village in Pagan, but these typical features are far from being limited to Central Burma. What seems to be derived from a colonial influence can be also noticed in some houses and monasteries in Mandalay and Rangoon.

8. Melford E. Spiro (1970: 313) and E. Michael Mendelson (1975: 124-127) discussed the monastery ownership systems in Burma, distinguishing between the individual property (*poggalika*) and the Saṅgha community property (*sangghika*). The lay owners of the two monasteries considered here are natives – at least inhabitants – of the corresponding village. On the other hand, the origins of the monks and the students living in a monastery are much more diversified.

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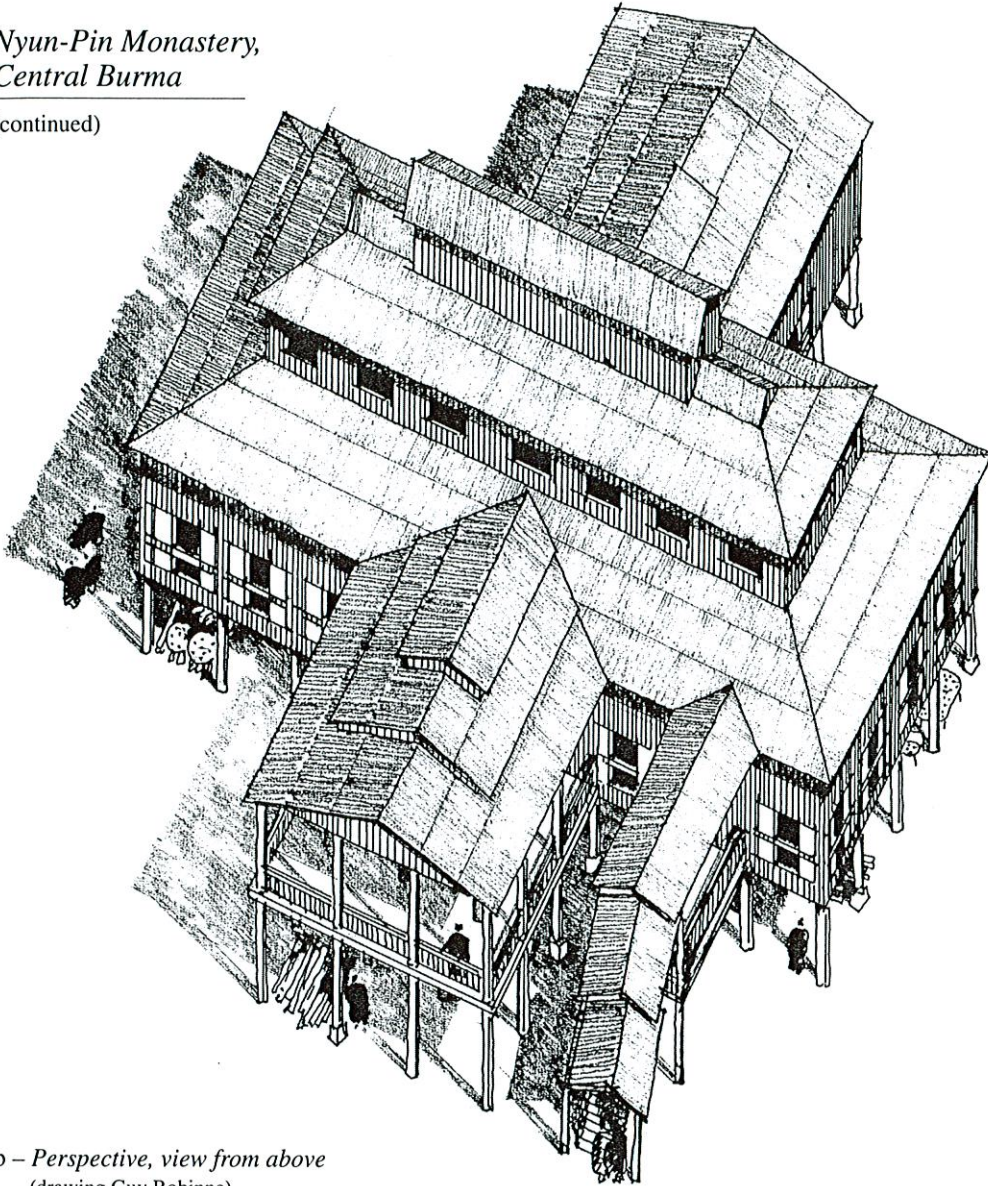
2 Nyun-Pin Monastery
Central Burma

2a – The monastic complex, site plan
(schema F. Robinne)



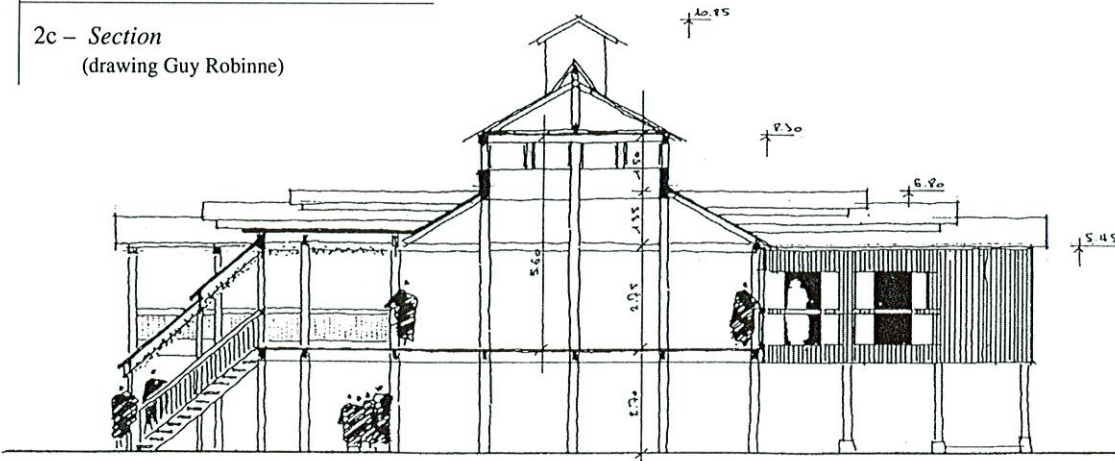
2 | *Nyun-Pin Monastery,
Central Burma*

(continued)

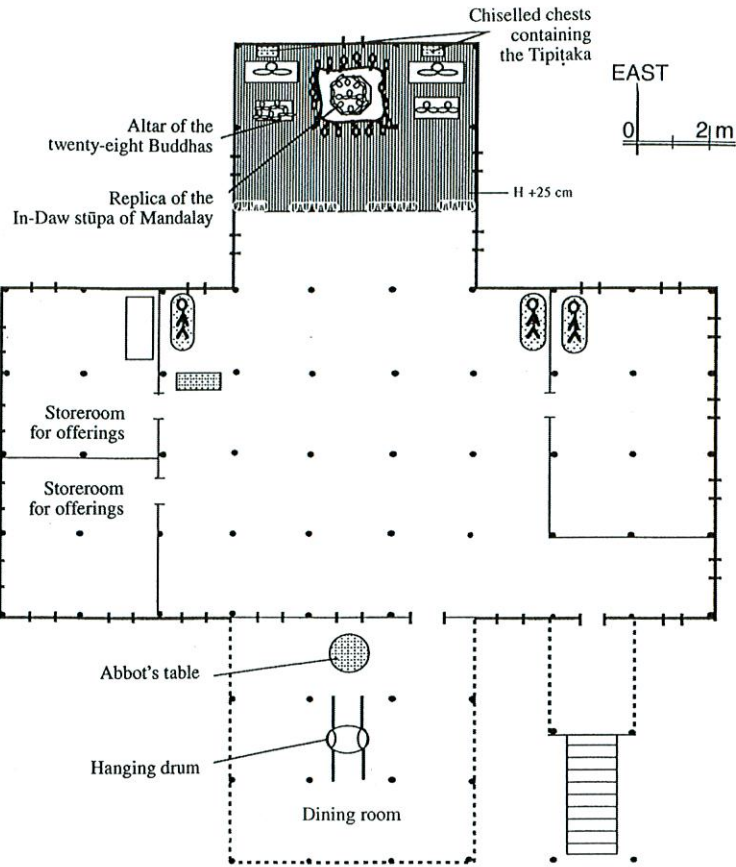


2b – *Perspective, view from above*
(drawing Guy Robinne)

2c – *Section*
(drawing Guy Robinne)

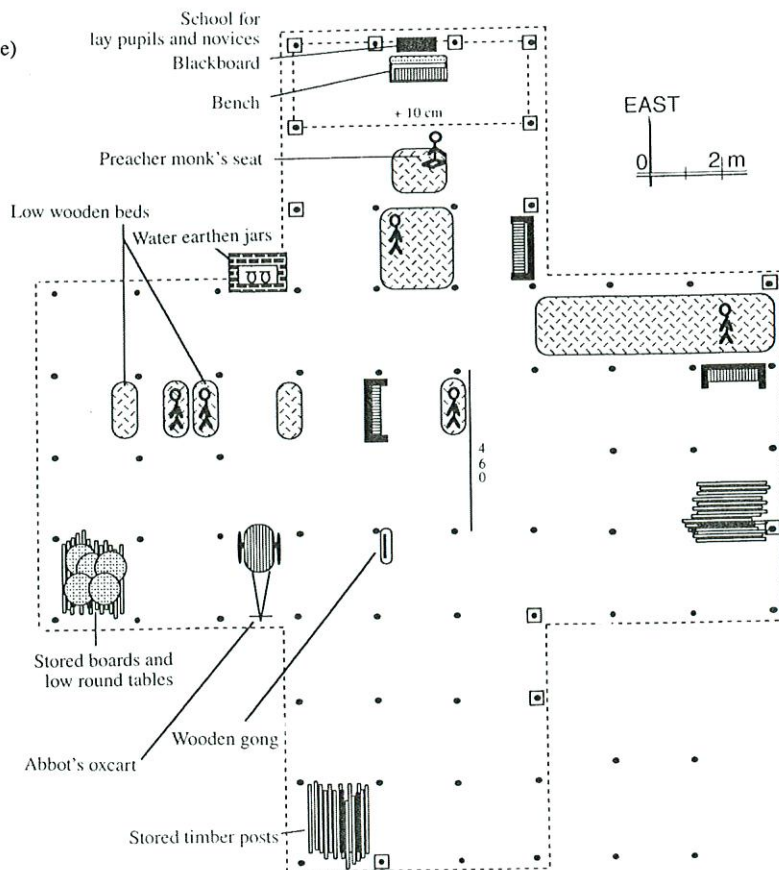


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2e – Upper floor
(schema F. Robinne)

2d – Ground floor
(schema F. Robinne)



Staging monasteries and staging halls

Besides the two types of monasteries defined above a third model is to be found in the Nyaung-Shwe district of the Southern Shan State, characterised by the inner space organisation of the buildings due to the specific purpose they fulfil: they are staging monasteries and staging halls destined to shelter the so called Phaung-Daw-U Buddha images, settled for one night upon their central altar, during the time of an annual processional ceremony all around the Inle Lake.

In the Phaung-Daw-U hall, at the lake centre, stands a very sacred group of five Buddha images – so venerated that they are completely misshapen by layers and layers of gold leaves continuously stuck as offering by the pilgrims. Every year, on the new moon of *sītañ: kywat* (September-October) four of the five images are taken aboard a sacred barge to perform, in successive stages, a large circumnavigation around the lake. At the end of the 19th century the procession stopped off at seven villages and lasted for five days. Later on, this processional ceremony expanded steadily, both in space and in length of time, up to stop off nowadays at twenty-one villages and to last for twenty-six days.

In the staging monasteries or the staging halls the inner space organisation, with a central altar, mirrors the original centred configuration formed by the arrangement of the Buddha images upon the Phaung-Daw-U altar, that is four images surrounding the fifth one. This trend towards an axial configuration partakes of a more general level of elaboration: since the 12th century AD, in the course of time, the five Buddha images were moved step by step from the Pao or Taungyo mountains towards the banks and up to the middle of the lake where they now stand inside the Phaung-Daw-U hall, in the care of the Intha trustees (Robinne 2000: 262-300).

The specific halting places meant to shelter the Phaung-Daw-U Buddha images during the procession are of two sorts: either the inner space of the very village monastery is adapted to the end or an independent hall is purpose-built.

On the one hand, when an ordinary monastery has to be converted into a staging monastery its inside plan must be reorganised according to an axial pattern, shifting the images stand from its customary outlying position to the appropriate central one.

On the other hand, where the village is rich enough and the collected donations permit it, a completely new hall is erected, built on a square or an octagonal plan with brick walls and a multitiered roof.

The staging monasteries keep their daily monastic life going the whole year round and remain a place for the villagers to gather in any occasion, whereas the staging halls open their doors only once a year for the Phaung-Daw-U Buddha images to stop off during one night.

The vernacular terminology gives an imperfect account of the distinction between the both sorts of buildings. The staging hall used once a year is called *kyoñ: tō*, the “holy monastery”; the staging monastery is called *bhum:krī: kyoñ:*, literally “monk + monastery”, the ordinary appellation for any monastery. The terms “staging hall” and “staging monastery” are used here in order to avoid any confusion.

Both of them have a holy pavilion in their centre. Its appellation comes from the Burmese word *cam*, the semantic value of which is very extensive. In its nominal form, it means “standard”, “model”, from which are issued the expressions *cam kyoñ:*, “model + school, monastery” and *cam tō*, “model + sacred royal”. In its verb form *cam* means

3 – *Nga-Phay (Intha)*
Staging monastery
(photo F. Robinne)



4 – *Yua-Ma (Intha)*
Staging monastery
(photo F. Robinne)



5 – *Wa-Kyi-Myaung (Taungyo)*
Staging monastery
(photo F. Robinne)



6 – *Nyaung-Shwe*
Staging hall
(photo F. Robinne)



“to enjoy”, “to take delight”, “to live” or “to sojourn” when speaking of a king or of a Buddha and his representations; in that sense the verbal expression *cam pay* is used when the Buddha images arrive somewhere on the occasion of a processional ceremony. The richly ornamented golden pavilion shelters an octagonal altar called *pallān*, from the pāli *pallānka*; this term also names a throne as well as the holy preaching-chair for a monk to sit when giving a sermon.

Not many of the Lake Inle villages can afford to possess an independent staging hall. Out of the twenty-one villages where the processional ceremony stops off, eight of them own a staging hall, the remaining thirteen villages having a staging monastery. Three of these monasteries offer the distinctive feature of having two altars standing side by side right in their centre: one is supporting the monastery permanent large image(s) while the other is devoted to receive once a year the movable small-sized Phaung-Daw-U images during their peregrination.

Nevertheless, even in the Lake area, such an axial composition remains exceptional and out of the 179 monasteries situated in the Nyaung-Shwe District only those 21 staging monasteries and halls show those specific features.

In any case, whatever their axial or outlying inner pattern may be, the different types of monasteries above described cannot be dissociated from a more extended scope, that is the combination between a social order and the cosmic order.

Varying cardinal directions

Let us consider the Nyun-Pin monastery in Central Burma. Originally its structure included a stairway lined up both on the Buddha images and on the main village entrance. The monastery abbot U Sunndara would not accept such an alignment arguing that stairways and tile-roofs offer easy passageways – he said “a crocodile way” – to the roaming spirits in search of a support and that the houses and the monastery should not therefore be built on the same axis. Well known as a skilled astrologer, the monk determined the most auspicious day – which by chance coincided with the date of his induction as the monastery Superior – to shift the stairway from its primitive axial position to an outlying one in relation to the Buddha images and the village axis as well.

For the same purpose, that is to prevent and veer off course the possible wandering spirits attacks, the stairway roof must fit perpendicularly together with the monastery roof. Such an appropriate lay out can be found in the Kan-Tha monastery located on the western bank of the Inle Lake, where the entrance gallery arrives perpendicular to the monastery side wall leading into the shrine sideways to the main Buddha image. When the entrance faces the Buddha images, the axial door is avoided, and there are usually two parallel stairways and two doors. That is why, in the Intha monastery of Kye-Za-Kun and the Pao-Karen monastery of Lway-Kho in the Southern Shan State, as well as in the Shan monastery of Matteya in the Northern Shan State, one, sometimes two or four, lateral stairways give access to the building.

It is more difficult to infer any symbolic justification from the variations as regard to the different floor levels and the related roof levels. Sometimes the platform reserved for the monks runs all along one side between the front wall and the rear wall: such is the case in the Intha and the Taungyo monasteries of the Southern Shan State. In the Shan monasteries of Thibaw, the platform stands against the front wall, the monks happening then to be seated face to face with the Buddha images. The Palaung tea planters, in the same part of the Northern Shan State, build their monasteries with a two-level floor, the Buddha images and the monks sharing the higher level.

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Not going further into particulars let us only point out that the traditional rural houses features are not necessarily the corollary of the monasteries architectural structure. A three-level floor characterises both the Burmese monasteries and the houses; but the Intha lake-houses have a continuous one-level floor, whereas the floors of the monasteries are laid out in two or three levels (Bernot 1982; Robinne 1999).

None of these variants happens to be the prerogative of any specific ethnolinguistic community, which they transcend. The same remark could be made concerning the general orientations. On the Inle lake, a monastery is preferably built facing east but this is more a trend than a fixed norm. Referring to the village, the Intha monastery of Aw-Kun faces north, while the monasteries of Sa-Lay and of Nam-Hu are facing south. In the nearby Taungyo mountains, an old monastery was first located on the north-east side of Kun-Pun village, while a new one was later built at the intersection of the three villages of Wa-Kyi-Myaung.

Technical or symbolical, whichever they may be, the variants occur according to a cosmogony framework materialised by the so called "square of directions", made up of the eight cardinal points at the periphery, their related day subdivided and arranged according to the lunar and the solar systems, the whole pattern being organised around the *kit* central square.

The fact that many architectural types can be observed among the monasteries and that the occurring variants cannot be exclusively linked to one type or to one cultural sphere, demonstrates the universally confirmed theorem stating that different forms can ensue from a same norm, and that inversely many norms can result in a same form. The monasteries of Central Burma and Shan State bring us back to this evidence.

For these Buddhist populations who share a same cosmology, the only constraint is to refrain from breaking, or from acting against, the harmonious relationship between social and cosmic orders. Even if Buddhism is imposing few interdicts while offering a large range of possibilities, some unsuitable combinations can nevertheless occur. Extraordinary manifestations may reveal that the social and cosmic orders are not organised into a hard-and-fast – or at least appropriate – coherence. Why did the Phaung-Daw-U images, five images at the time, fall down and drown into the lake water during one of the annual Intha processional ceremony? Why did one ritual home-made rocket kill the head monk on his way out of his monastery? In both examples, the causes of such accidents could be identified. In the Phaung-Daw-U case it was realised that one of the five images was not supposed to leave the sanctuary and had to be kept in its proper place onto the altar during the twenty-six procession days (Robinne 2000: 263). In the case of the lethal rocket it turned out that the monastery orientation was not appropriate in relation to the village houses disposition (Robinne 2000: 143).

Through these few examples one can understand that a Burmese Buddhist monastery is not just an independent holy place where the sacred images stand and the Saṅgha community members live, together under the same roof; if a monastery constitute one structural unit, it is not socially an autonomous one. The monastery life and the village life are necessarily interdependent, the monastery being the point of convergence for more than one activity of the village community and being, moreover, a median pole between the village and the temple. The monastery gets its full meaning out of this dynamic dimension.

Village, monastery and stūpa

The monastery as a point of convergence

The monasteries here considered, except for one, constitute independent units built separately both from the village and from a more complete Buddhist complex. In any case, the monastery represent a median pole between the village and the temple, whatever its distance from them may be; as such it cannot be dissociated from these two other components of a definite space organisation. These three poles and their respective constitutive parts are settled and oriented in relation to each other according to a strict combination principle.

Nowadays in Burma, several villages can be tied to one single monastery as well as several monasteries can be attached to the same stūpa. The stūpa may sometimes be very far from the monastery, but the Richard O'Connor's assertion that "conceptually and physically the Burmese separate monasteries or *kyaung* from pagodas [stūpas]" (1985: 3) needs to be qualified, this fact representing more a trend than an absolute rule. One of the most complete monastic complex I have seen is situated at Nyun-Pin, including a teaching hall (*damma ruiñ*), an ordination hall (*thein*), three main stūpas (*zedi*) surrounded with smaller ones at the corners, a cosmic mast (*tam khwan tuiñ*)⁹. Although the ordination hall, with its indispensable boundary-stones, forms the subject of the greatest number of treatises (Main Khain Seyadaw 1966), this building is far from being omnipresent. The existence of monasteries with no ordination halls is also attested in Northern Thailand. In his *Forest Monks and the Nation State* J. L. Taylor (1993: 228) has stressed upon the fact that "most forest monasteries were not sanctioned to carry out ordinations under national Saṅgha regulations as they had no officially consecrated area (*sīmā*)". As pointed out by this author (*ibid.*: 242), the lack of an ordination hall does not mean that there were no ordination at all but that only simple ceremonies for novices (Burmese: *shinbyu*) could be performed and in no case an "higher ordination" (Pāli: *upasampada*): "Previously, interested candidates for higher ordination had to go either to Norngkhaai or Beungkaan some 80 kilometres away" (*ibid.*); this represents the extant situation for many village monasteries – and not necessarily the most remote ones – of contemporary Buddhist Burma.

figure 2a
page 81

A stūpa is not a *sine qua non* condition prevailing for the erection of a monastery. The presence of a cosmic mast should also be discussed: if it does not exist in the Intha monastery yards, it is around such a mast that Palaung boys and girls perform a ritual dance two times a year; the cosmic mast, richly carved, topped by a mythical bird or snake, with spirits standing towards the four cardinal points is present in the Burmese context; on the other hand, they are two big bamboo trees which raise their beautiful simplicity in front of the Taungyo pagoda on the hill which overhangs the village of Wa-Kyi-Myaung. And we should speak of the Shan specific bamboo structure as well: built in the middle of a village, it consists of a three-step platform of sand protected by sharp bamboo sticks, with a main pillar erected in the centre.

Actually, very few village monasteries interact directly with such a large holy complex, but all of them are always tied to a village – even when they are isolated hermitages. The monastery position – based on astrological reckoning – becomes

9. "Cosmic mast" is a tentative rendering of the burmese word transliterated *tam khwan tuiñ* which means literally "long piece" + "handled ax" + "pile", the bisyllab *tam khwan* meaning a streamer, an oriflamme.

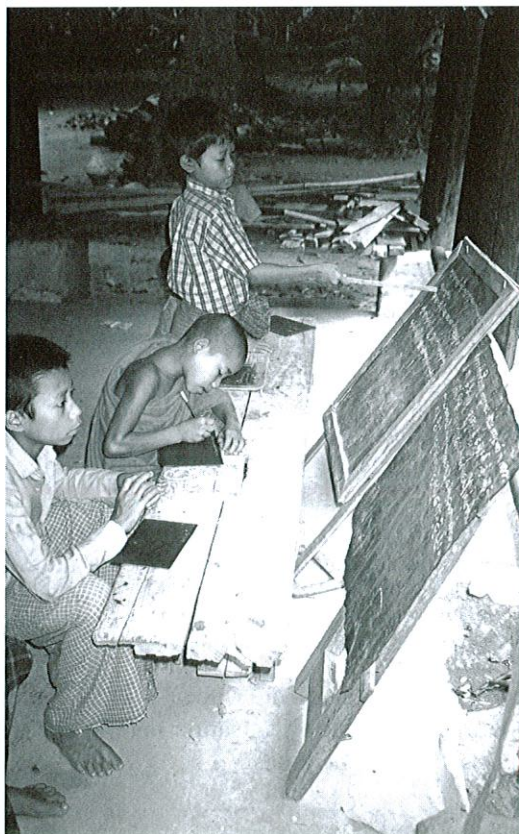
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integrated into an harmonizing configuration, together with the houses, the graveyard, the spirit altars on the one hand, and with the ordination hall, the stūpas and the cosmic mast on the other hand. In fact, the monastery/village pair represents the only constant, considerably overriding the monastery/stūpa pair. The statement, based on our field-work, that not every monastery is systematically a part of a larger religious complex is not historically attested. This was neither the case at the time of “Early-Burma” (see Pierre Pichard’s contribution) nor in Thailand from ancient times up to nowadays (see the related contributions).

The monastery as the centre of a social network

A short survey of the different functions of a monastery will put in evidence the structural interactions linking the monastic community to the village one. At least in Burma, the Buddhist monastery is a school. The Burmese terminology expresses this reality, attested everyday and everywhere: the Burmese expressions *bhum:krī: kyoñ:*, and *ca tañ kyoñ:* mean respectively a “Buddhist centre” and a “teaching centre”; the word *kyoñ:* is a generic term which applies to any pedagogical institution, be it lay or confessional, a state school or a monastery¹⁰. The monosyllable *kyoñ:* is sometimes followed by *tuik*, a generic term for “construction”. Melford Spiro (1971: 312) introduced

7 – *Nyun-Pin Monastery*
Ground floor,
lay children and novices
at school
 (see figure 2d p. 83)
 (photo F. Robinne)



10. The connotation of the burmese terminology bears witness to the literacy high level among the Buddhist societies.

a distinction between the teaching monastic complex (*kyaung:taik*) and the village monastery (*ywa caung:*). In the same way, Michael Mendelson (1975: 129) seems to distinguish the *Kyaungtaik* from the *kyaung* when associating only the first term to a centre with an educational authority.

I do agree with Richard O'Connor (1985: 4) when he writes that "*kyaung* is not clearly distinguished from school"; and, if it is exact too that "*a kyaung* can have a single monk in a single building" (*ibid.*), I would add that a monastery may also welcome hundred or thousand monks for a few days on specific occasions: a temple ceremony, an initiation ceremony, the ceremony of the first rice, etc.

The terminology does not establish clear distinctions between meditation centre, village and social organisation centre, or teaching centre because each of these functions is an integral part of the monastery role. Besides the spiritual observances, teaching is one of the Saṅgha members main duties; moreover the monasteries are all more or less important economic centres (Himanshu P. Ray 1996): a village market may be an autonomous institution, but no Buddhist celebration can take place without a busy temporary market, the stalls being sometimes put up inside the monastery courtyard itself. Some monasteries specialise as medical centres, according to an ancient tradition which is attested in some archaeological sites of Sri Lanka (Leelanada Prematilleke, 1996) where they can be still observed, as well as in Thailand and Burma. Let us just mention also the political function of a monastery: it is there that any important decision is debated and, in the case of an interethnic situation like in the Shan State, it is first and foremost the place where a comprehensive multilingual dialogue can be instituted. Concerning the border areas of Thailand, Taylor (1993) has, all along his demonstration, insisted upon the predominant place held by the monks and the monasteries at the various levels of relationship: between the disciples and the abbots on the one hand and, on the other hand, between the Saṅgha community and the local political sponsors and at last between the "frontiersmen and the State". In an extreme form of the networks formed by and around the monasteries, Martin Smith has pointed out the "vital role" of the monasteries in the ethnic insurgencies in Burma (Smith 1999: 182, 310).

By way of conclusion, let us just say that this preliminary note elaborates more especially upon the architectural features of the monastery and its situation in the social space, nowadays in Burma. In no case, the architectural structures of the monasteries can be associated to a defined function. A more anthropological research, including studies about monks biographies, monks networks and about the origin of the pilgrims as well, would point out the social dimension of the Buddhist monastery as the focus of so many activities. The study of the exact functions of a monastery, beyond – or combined with – that of its spiritual dimension, should be further developed. Such a systematic analysis would without a doubt demonstrate the role played by the monastery both in the social organisation and, in the case of an interethnic intricacy, in the construction of identities.

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