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3<sup>RD</sup> CONFERENCE OF THE SUB-COMMITTEE FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

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Living in wooden heritage:  
Reviving craftsmanship

2 Examples of traditional wooden  
houses in French Guiana:  
The Boni house and the Creole house

Christian MARTIN Architecte - France

STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCING HISTORIC  
CITIES' RESILIENCE TO DISASTERS

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SEPTEMBER 10-15, 2025  
KULDIGA, LATVIA



## 2 Examples of traditional wooden houses in French Guiana:

The Boni house and the Creole house.



Boni House  
(Papaïchton)



Creole House  
(Sinnamary)



# The Boni (or Aluku) people

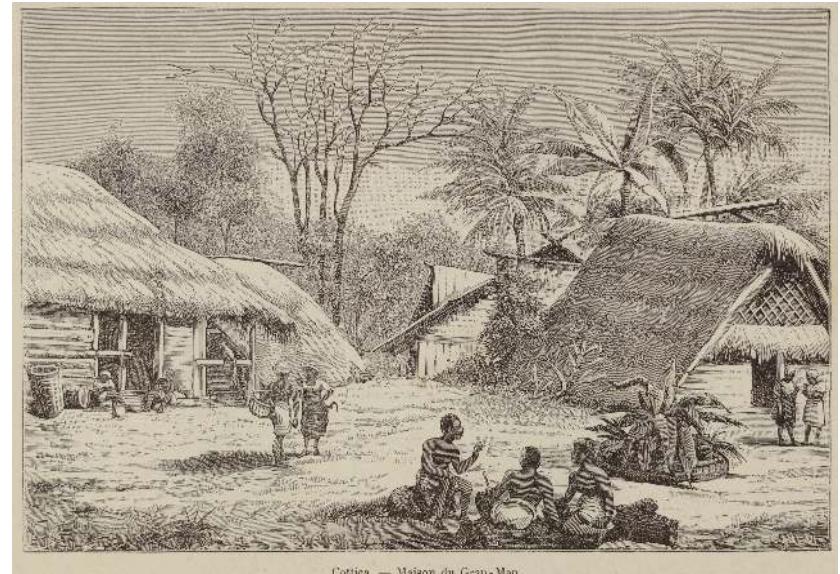
The Boni are slaves who escaped in the 18th century from the plantations of Dutch Guiana, and who took refuge on the French side of the Maroni River.

In the Amazon rainforest, in contact with the Amerindians, they developed a social organization and an original culture, because coming from different regions of Africa, they did not even have a common language.

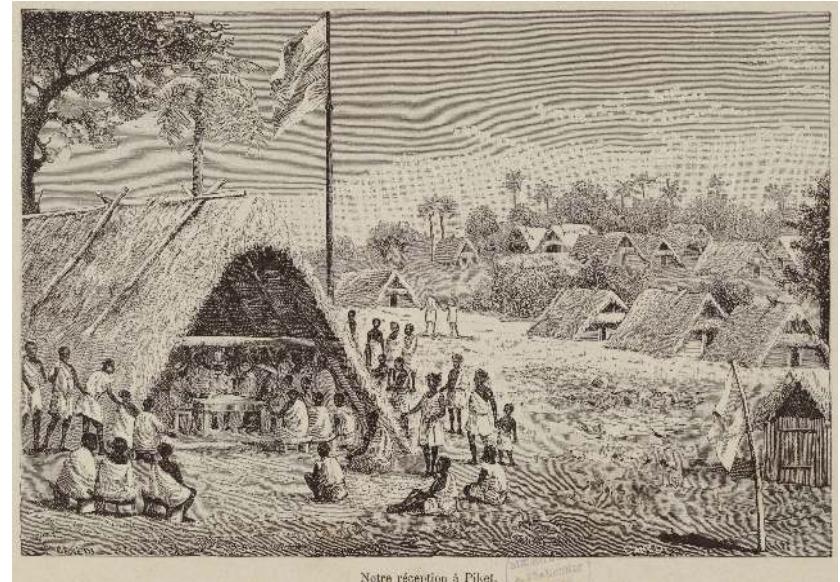
The very complex culture invented by the Boni is a syncretism of Amerindian, European and African inspiration.

(Social organization, language, religion, art...)

Boni Villages  
19th century engravings



Cottica. — Maison du Grand-Man.



Notre réception à Piket.

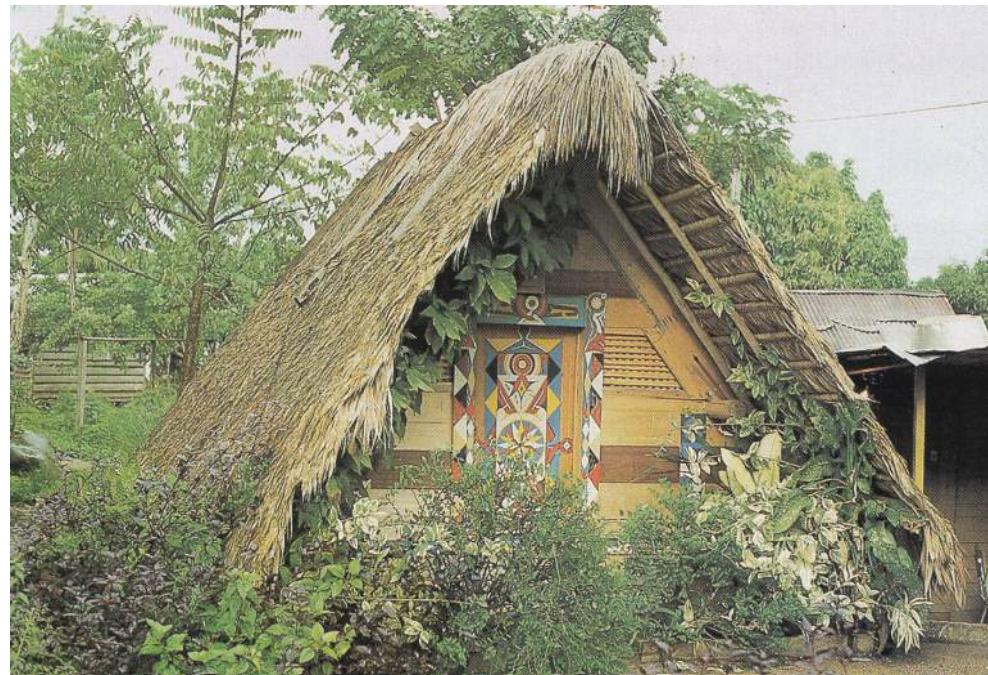
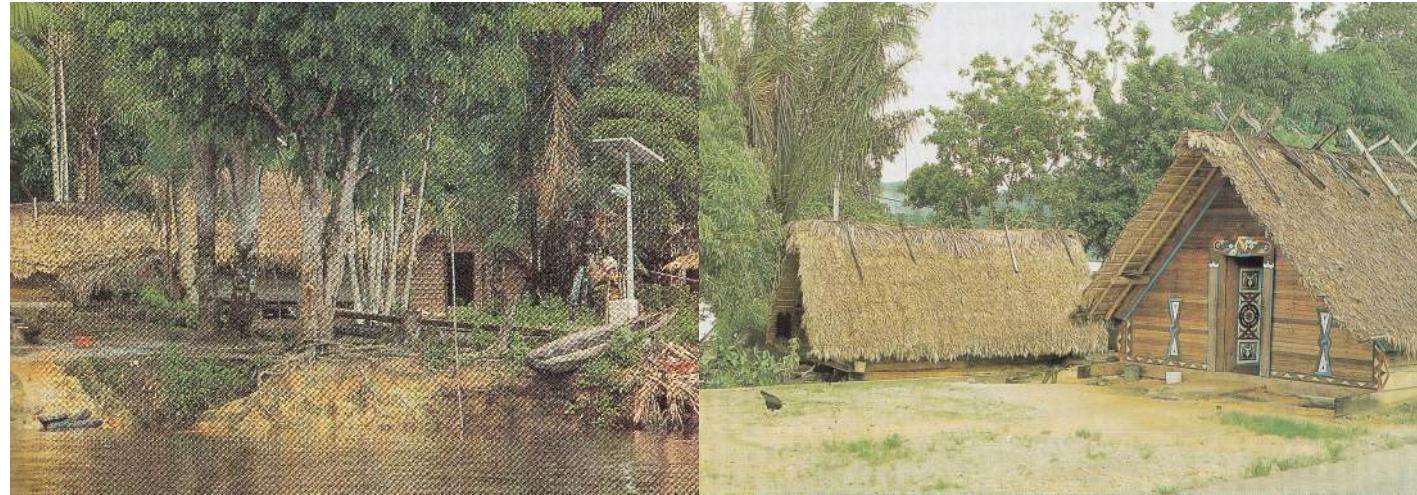
# The Boni villages

Until the 1970s

The villages are located along the Maroni River and accessible by canoes.

The houses still had their green cover (now it's exceptional)

The different lineages occupy different neighborhoods, around community services concerning meetings and reception, cassava preparation, worship and the mortuary space.



Cover of Wai

## Boni Houses Right now

No longer adapted to today's way of life, the traditional heritage of these houses is now in ruins.

The plant cover has been covered with metal sheet to avoid maintenance, the technique of which is lost.

The low height of the doors is a handicap.

Abandoned by the new generations, they were destroyed by humidity, and replaced by modern masonry houses, built on the outskirts of the heart of the village.



Abandoned houses



Historic centre of the village of Boniville

The construction method of the Boni house has its origins in the Amerindian house "Kalina" with European timber elements.

But if the Amerindian house is open to nature, the Boni house is closed according to an African tradition.



Native American House "Kalina"  
19th century engraving

*Trois paires d'arbalétriers croisés en tête (dagu bwi) sont posées sur les lobaliki, et créent des formes de fermes qui donnent à la toiture sa pente caractéristique.*

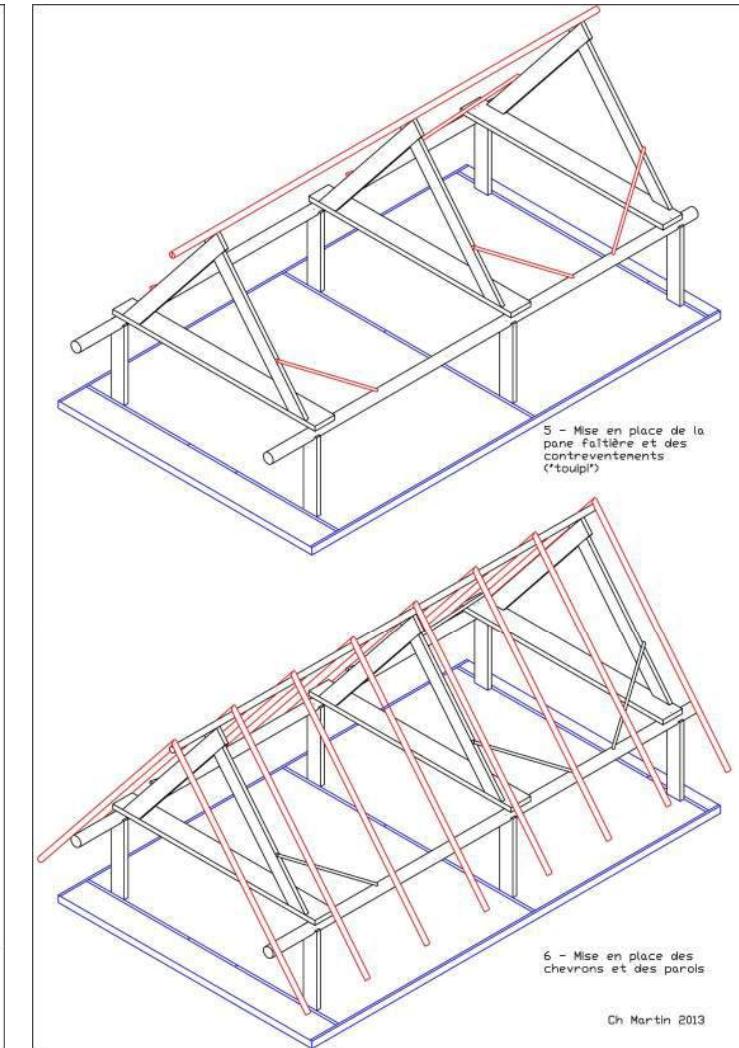
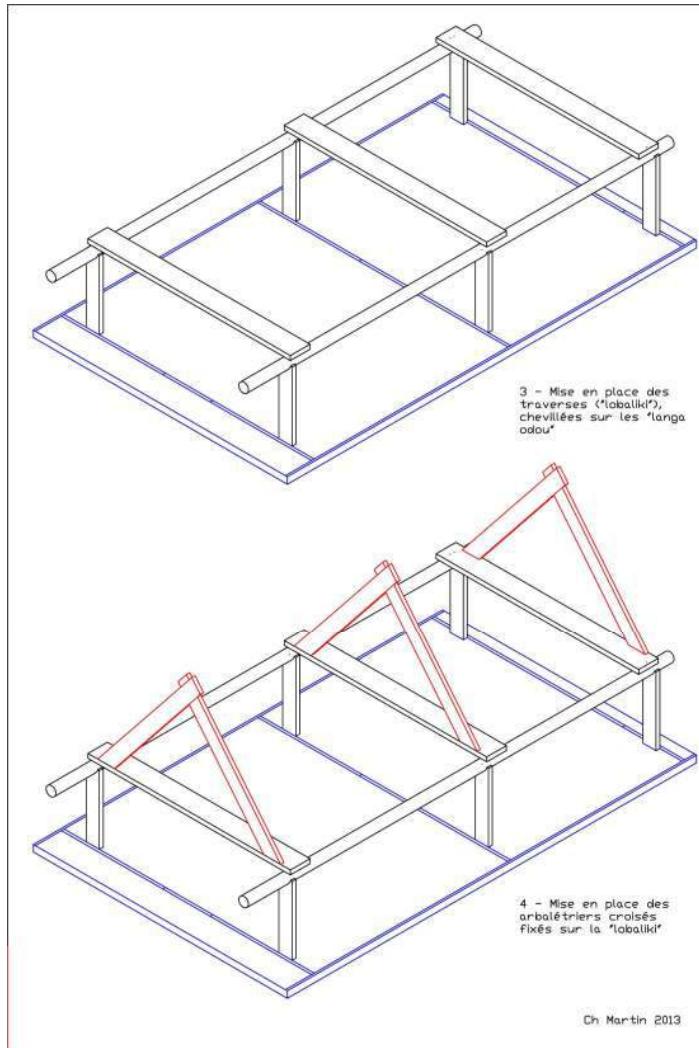
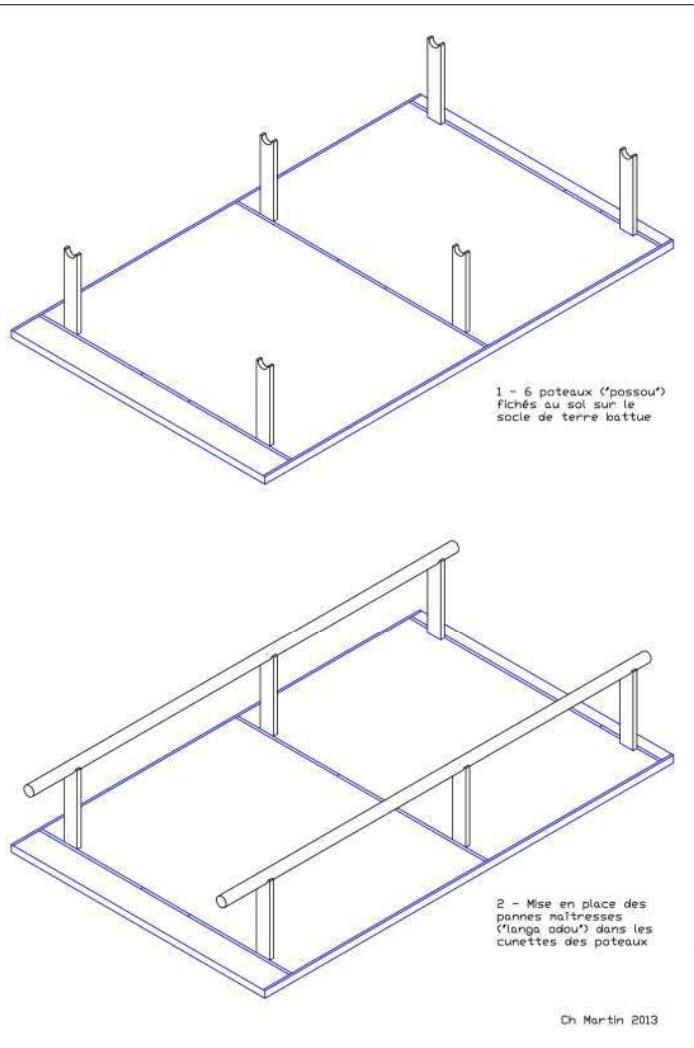
*Trois traverses (lobaliki), sont posées à plat sur les pannes principales, au droit des poteaux, faisant portique avec ceux-ci*

*Deux pannes principales cylindriques sont posées sur ces poteaux (langa-udu)*

*Six poteaux de section rectangulaire (possu), plantés profondément dans le sol, forment les pieds de trois portiques alignés*

*Schéma de Christian Martin (2013)*

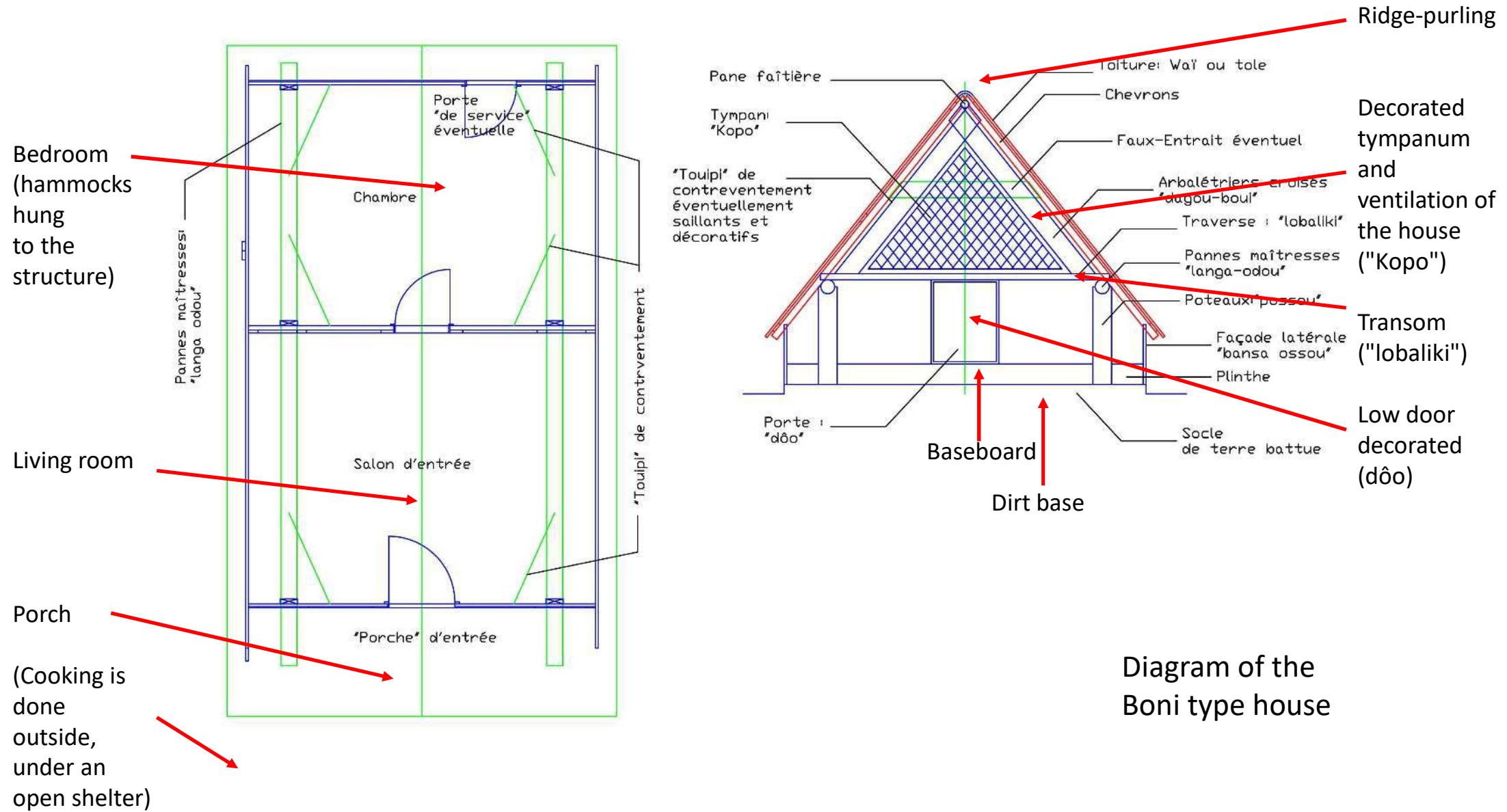
The structure of the Boni house



Posts ("possou")  
and master purlin ("langa udu")

Sleepers ("lobaliki")  
and frame ("dagu bwi")

Ridge – purling  
Bracing ("touipi")  
and rafters

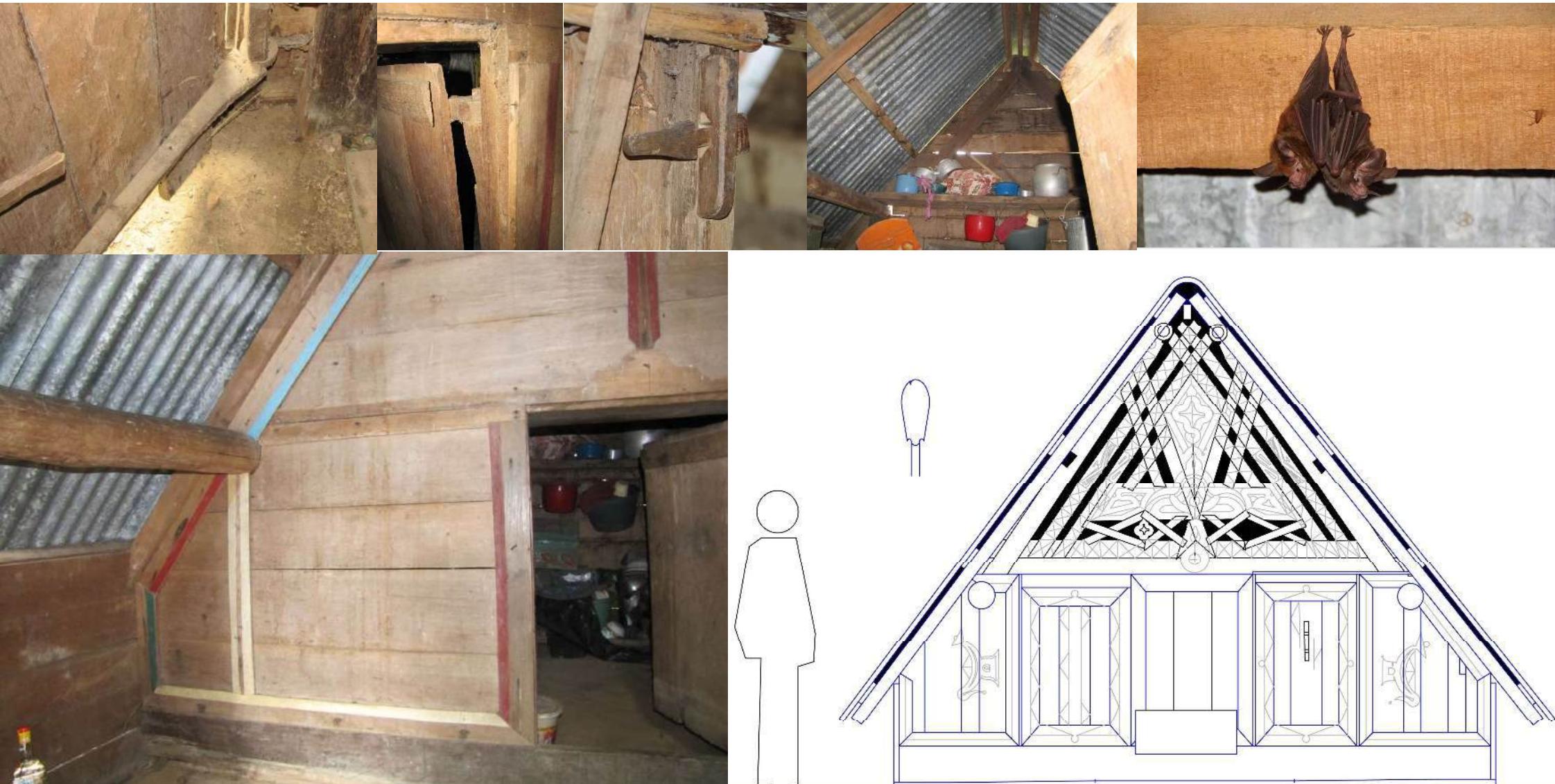


## Decorative elements

The decoration of the "Kopo" and the door is carried out by "Tembé", an art specific to the Boni culture. Intertwined patterns have symbolic meaning and express a concept.



Ma Kuli House in Loka



Ma Kuli House in Loka.

0 1 Relevé Ch. MARTIN Arch. 2013 3m  
Maison MA KULI - Loka.

Home of Machine  
Abaneli  
in Boniville  
Element of  
"Tembé"  
Preserved

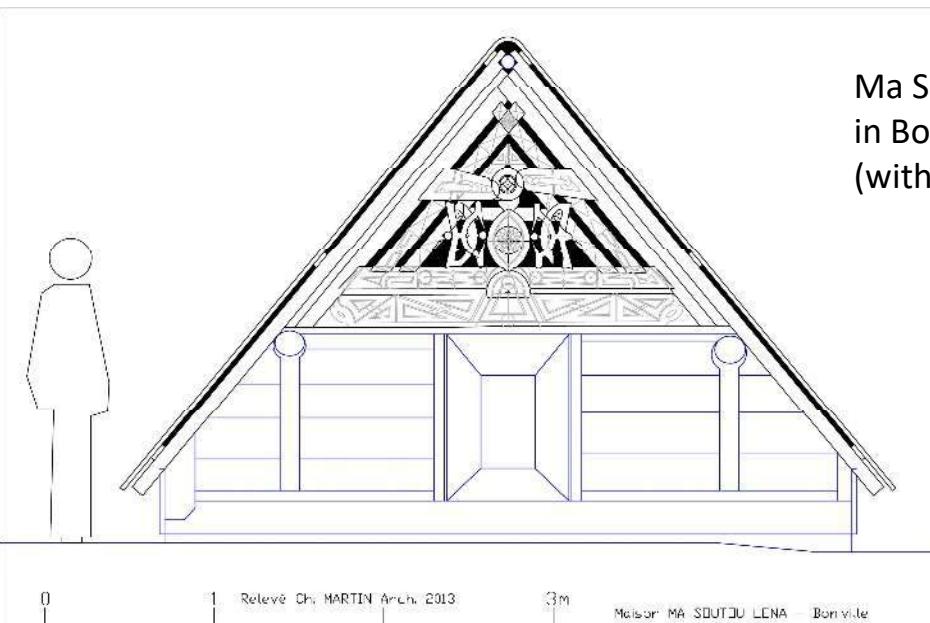


Before (with low door and vegetal ventilation "kopo")

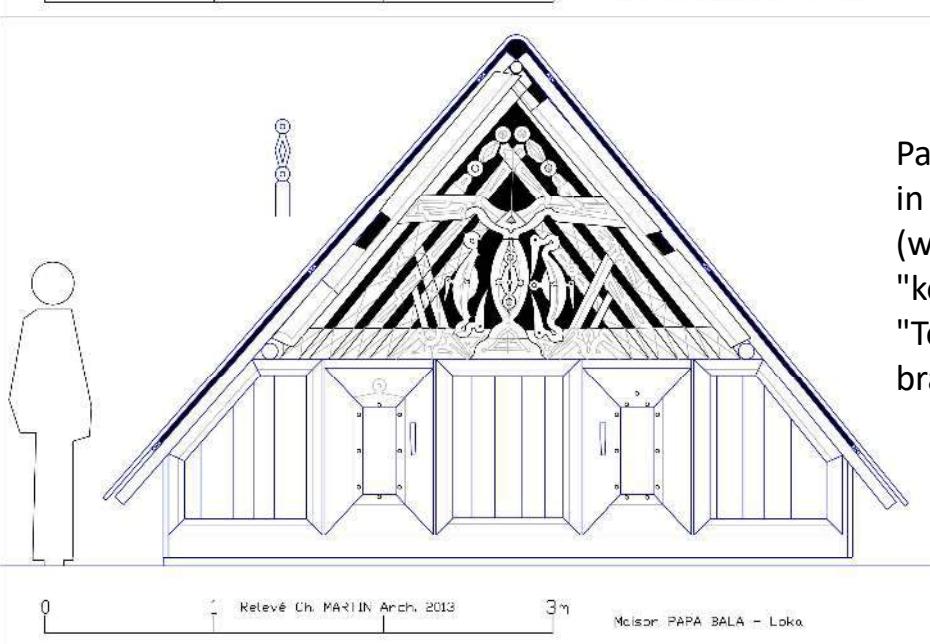
To stop bending down when passing through the door, the resident cut the crossbar (lobaliki), to raise the door. It has removed the plant "kopo" that provided ventilation, but has preserved an old element of "Timbé", a historical trace of the ancestors.



After (with door raised and "kopo" removed)



Ma Soutou Léna House  
in Boniville  
(with "kopo" engraved)



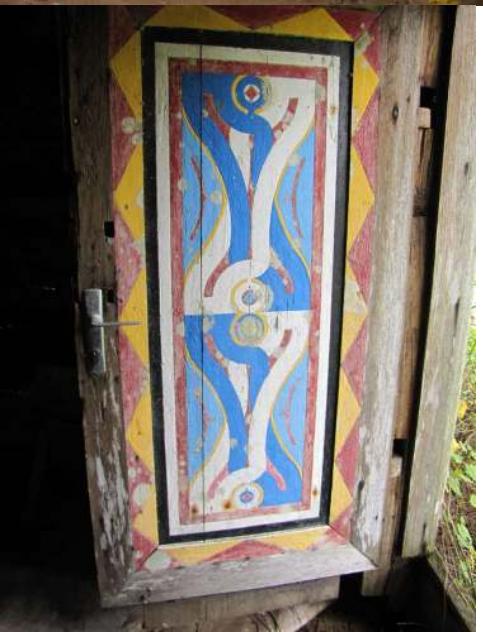
Papa Bala House  
in Loka  
(with double doors  
"kopo" painted and  
"Touipi" of protruding  
bracing)



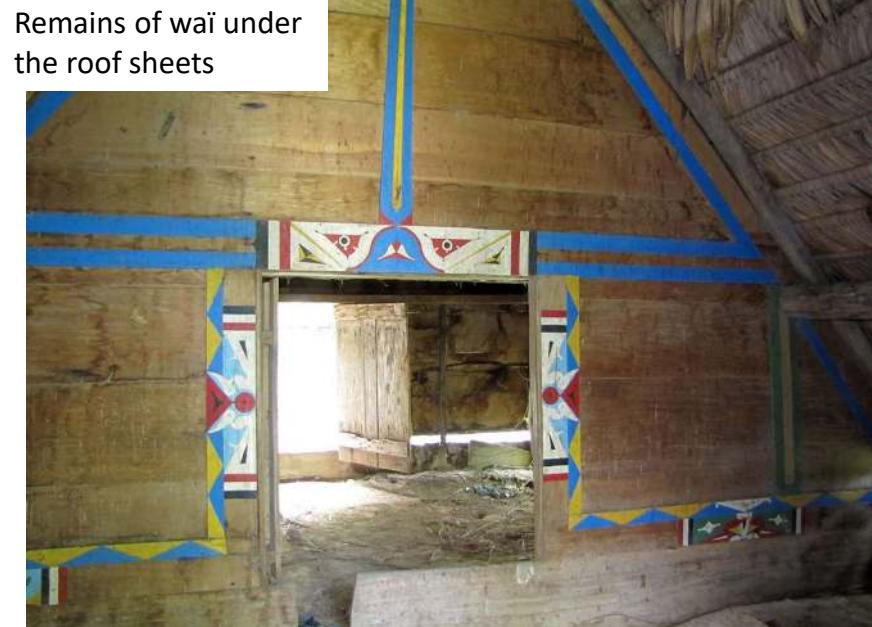
Loka Village Center

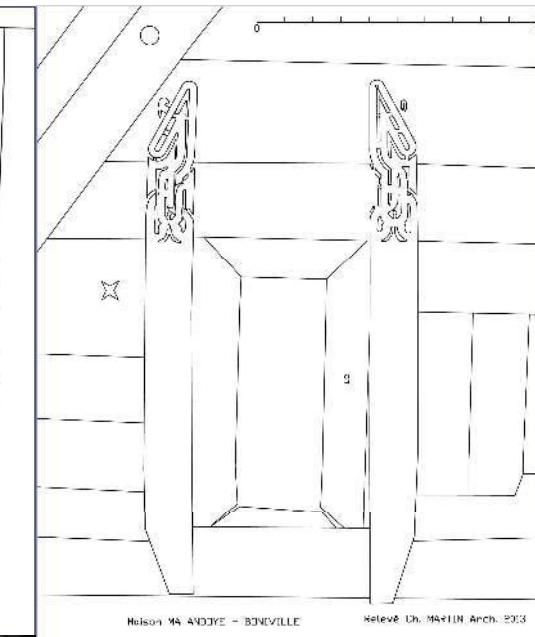
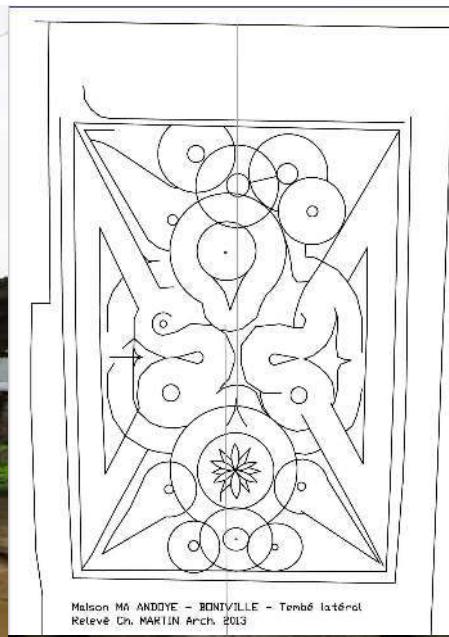


Abandoned house in Loka



Remains of waï under the roof sheets





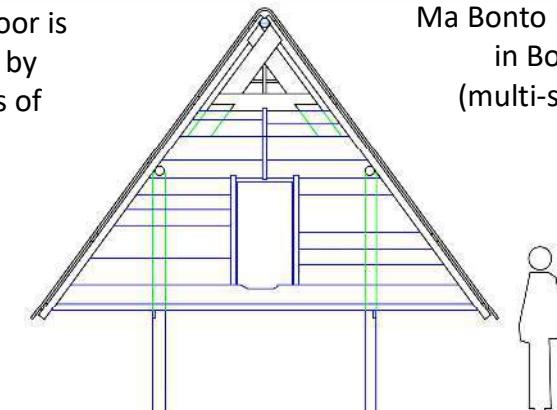
Ma Andoyé House in Boniville  
(Reused Tembe and "Saramaka" style door decoration)



The first floor is supported by the 6 posts of the typical structure

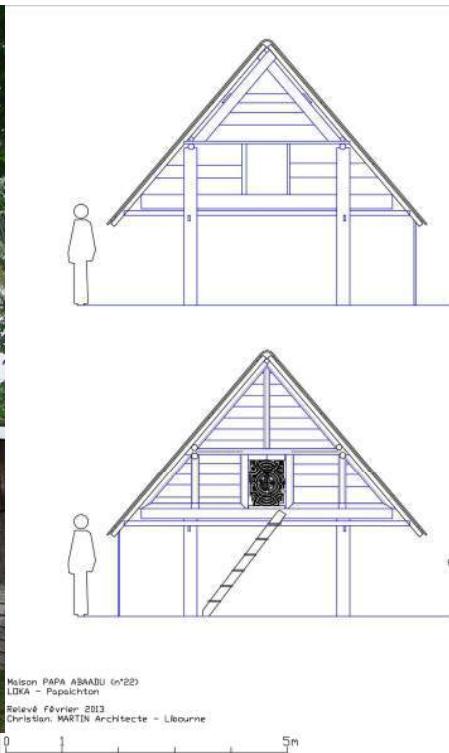
Maison MA BONTO (n°4)  
BONIVILLE - Papachton  
Relevé février 2013  
Christian. MARTIN Architecte - Libourne

0 1 5m

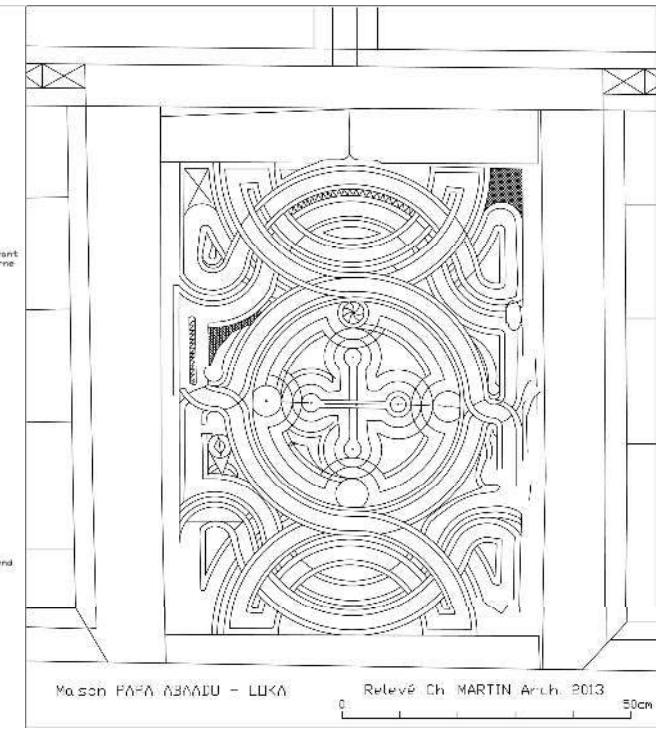


Ma Bonto House in Boniville (multi-storey)  
(Tembé and ventilation triangle at the top of the gable)

## Papa Abadu House in Loka



(raised, following the same construction model.  
The 6 posts support the floor)  
With Timbé inside and "balcony" open to the river



Timbé of the door  
of the room

## Views of the village



Houses in the historic centre



New houses on the outskirts of the village



Access to the village by pirogue. The houses benefit from the fresh air coming from the river

## Life in the village



Despite the exodus to Maripasoula or Saint Laurent du Maroni, the Boni villages are still inhabited, and the children return to the house where they were born for traditional festivals (holidays often linked to death after a death)



"Faya osu" (house of fire): Community kitchen and place of sociability (preparation of the couac from cassava)

The child's stroller (to the left of the door) bears witness to a village that is still alive

## Places of worship in the village



"Faaka Tiki" ("flag in the wind")  
(worship)



"Obia Osu" – cult of Mama Goon  
House of the Earth Goddess

## "Restoration" of 6 houses in 2017 / 2020

This work-school was supervised by the Amazonian National Park of French Guiana and the Municipality of Papaïchton.

It has enabled the training of some young people from the village and the awareness of the ancient heritage of already experienced building craftsmen.

The notion of Restoration (as defined by the Venice Charter), is difficult to understand by the local population. Few elements have been preserved. It is a reconstruction close to the same that has been carried out. . . Perhaps a first step towards a real protection and restoration of this identity heritage.

Two local experts, an artist in "Tembé" and a wood specialist brought their knowledge.



# The choice of woods

The species of wood used have been chosen according to tradition and their resistance to humidity and insects:

Wakapou: wood that is not attacked for posts, lobalikis, frame and kopo.

Gombé (eel wood), for purlins and rafters

Angélique for floors and side facades

Mahogany or Black Cedar for the main facades

Wapa for skirting boards in contact with the ground.



The training project  
(Villages of Loka and Boniville in Papaïchton)



Papa Topo House in Loka

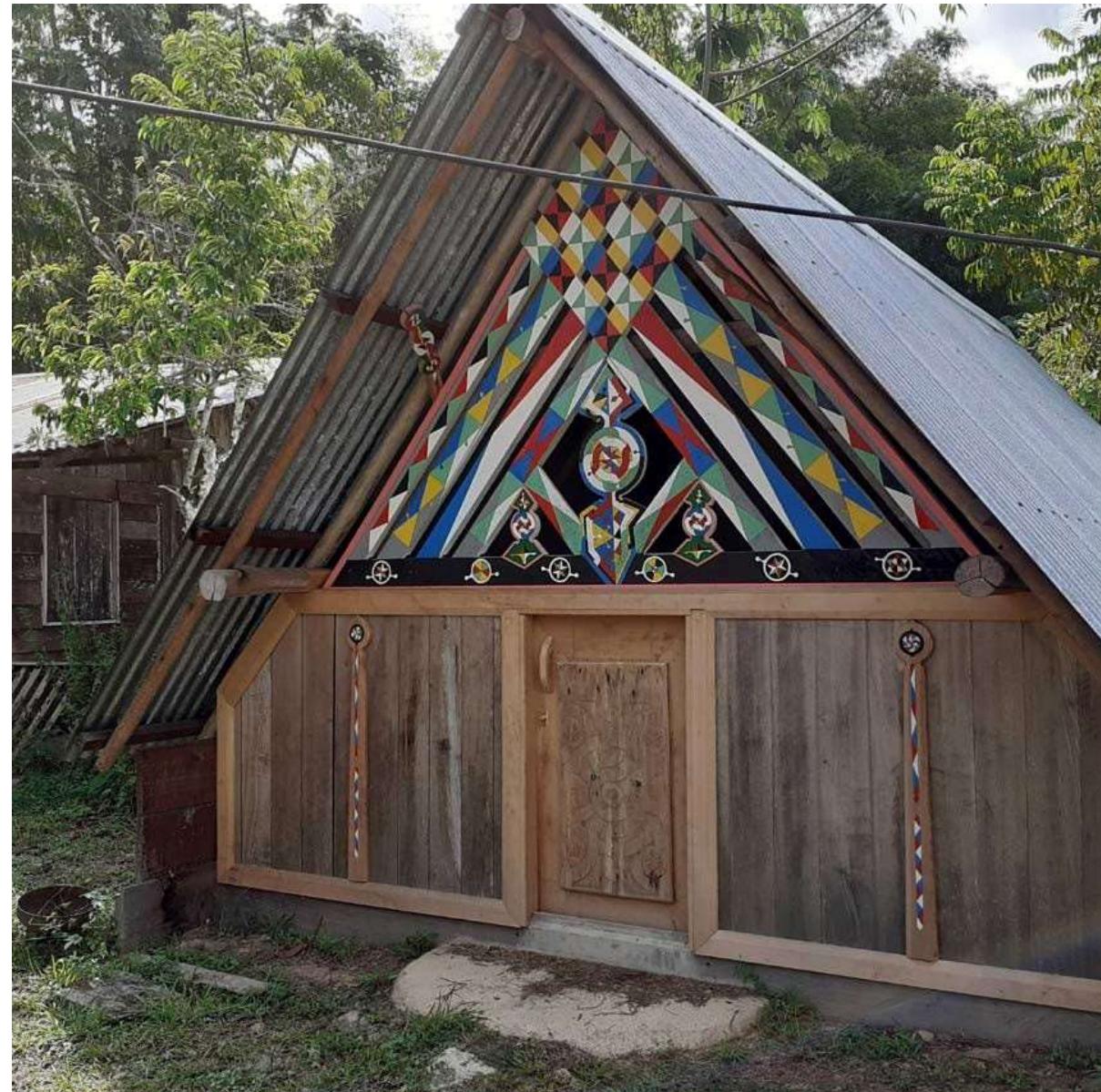


Ma Bonto House in Boniville

Mr. Raymond's house "restored" in Loka

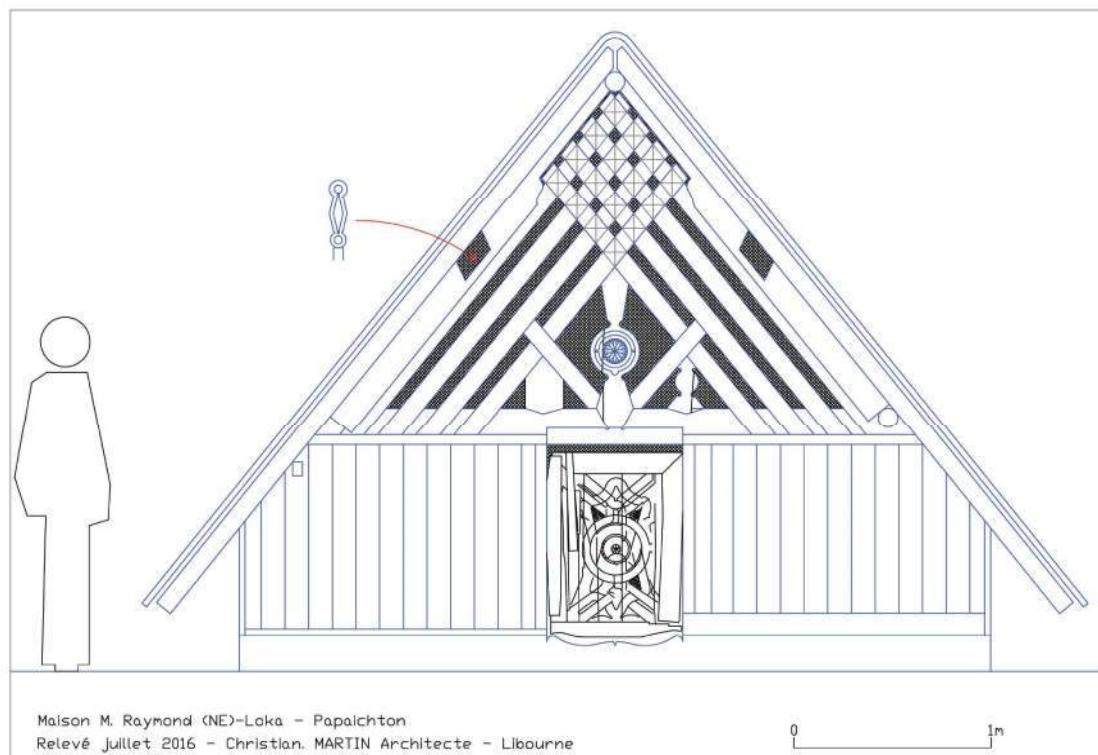


Before (with Tembé, kopo, touipi and inner tembé)



After renovation

Mr. Raymond's house "restored" in Loka



The "Kopo" redone



## Papa Bala's House in Loka (Customary Chief)



Before



After renovation

Papa Topo's house in Loka (former village teacher)



Before



After renovation

(Sociability benches, restored under the porch)

## End of the school project and graduation ceremony (2021)



17



## The traditional "Creole" house Examples in Sinnamary

The architecture of the Creole house is inspired by European wooden houses (Normandy, Great Britain, etc.), imported to the Americas by shipwrights from the 17th century onwards.  
(With occasional passage through French Acadia, in North America)

The Creole house of Guyana is a house with a wooden structure, adapted to the tropical, hot and rainy climate.  
The traditional house offers living comfort, without the addition of air conditioning.

2 types of houses (always on the same models):  
The house on the ground floor ("case"), and the two-storey house.



## Sinnamary



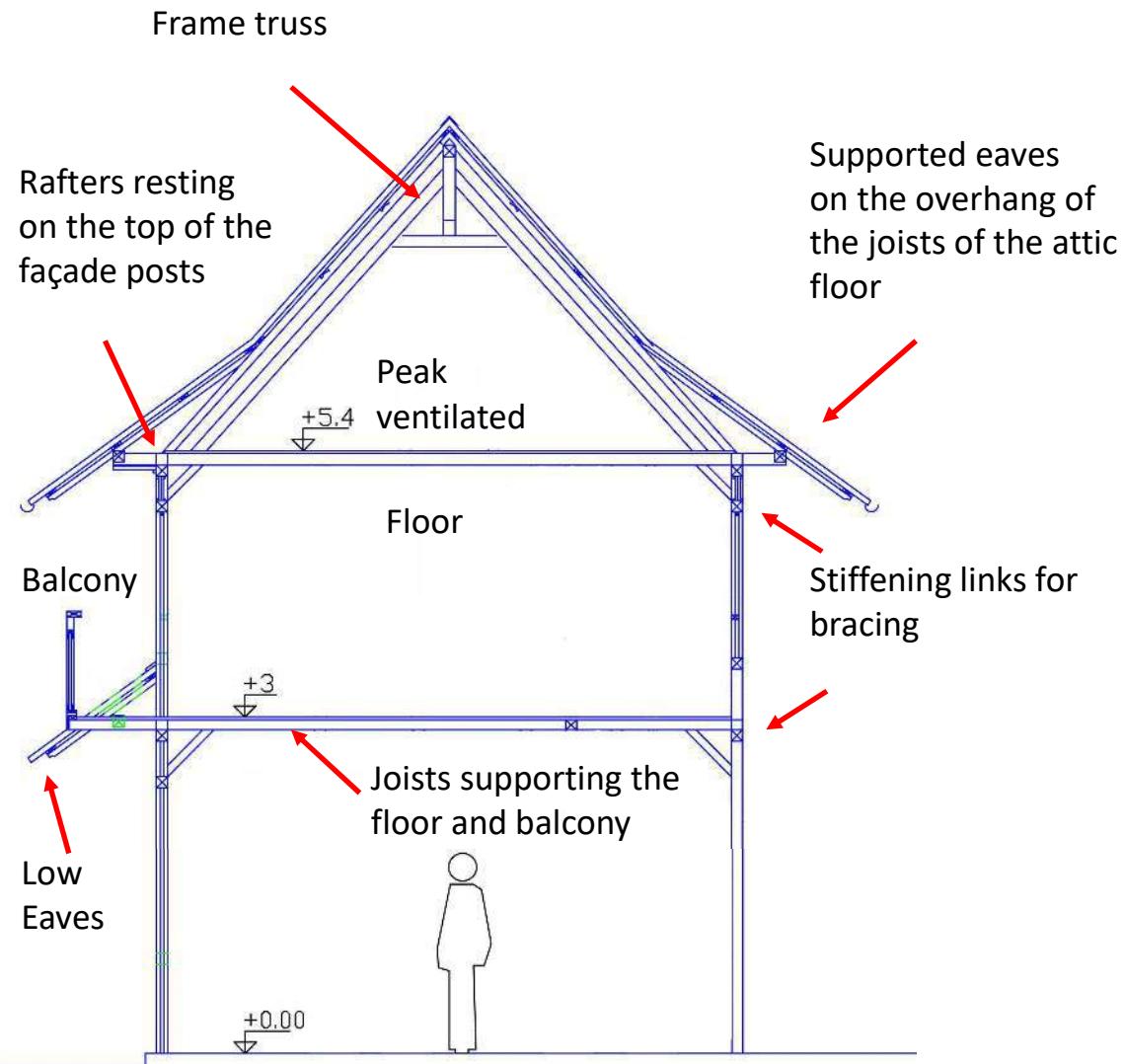
The main streets, oriented towards the river and in the direction of the prevailing winds, allow better ventilation of the houses in the village

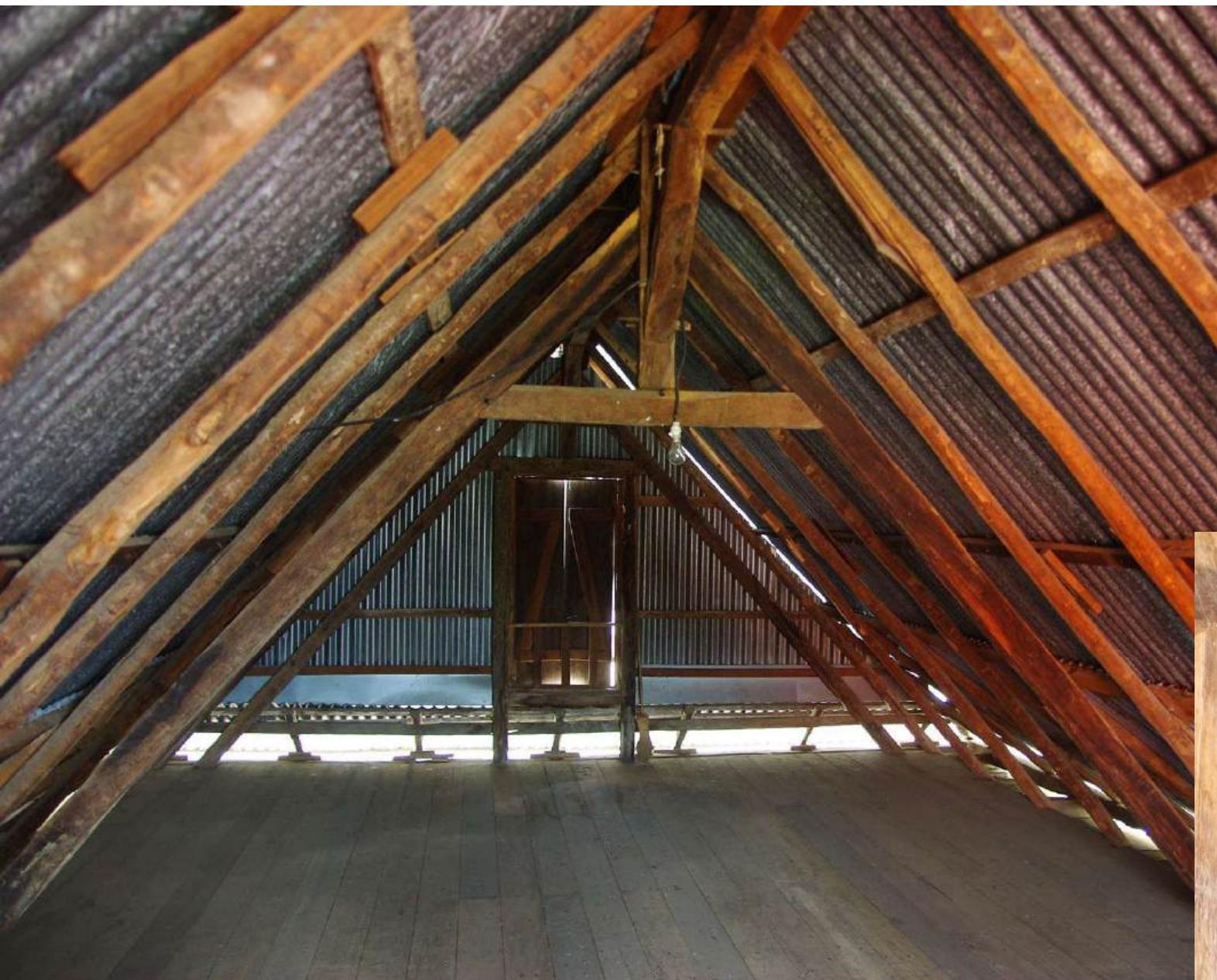
## Streets of Sinnamary



## Schematic diagram of the structure the 3 transverse gantries

Didine House - Sinnamary



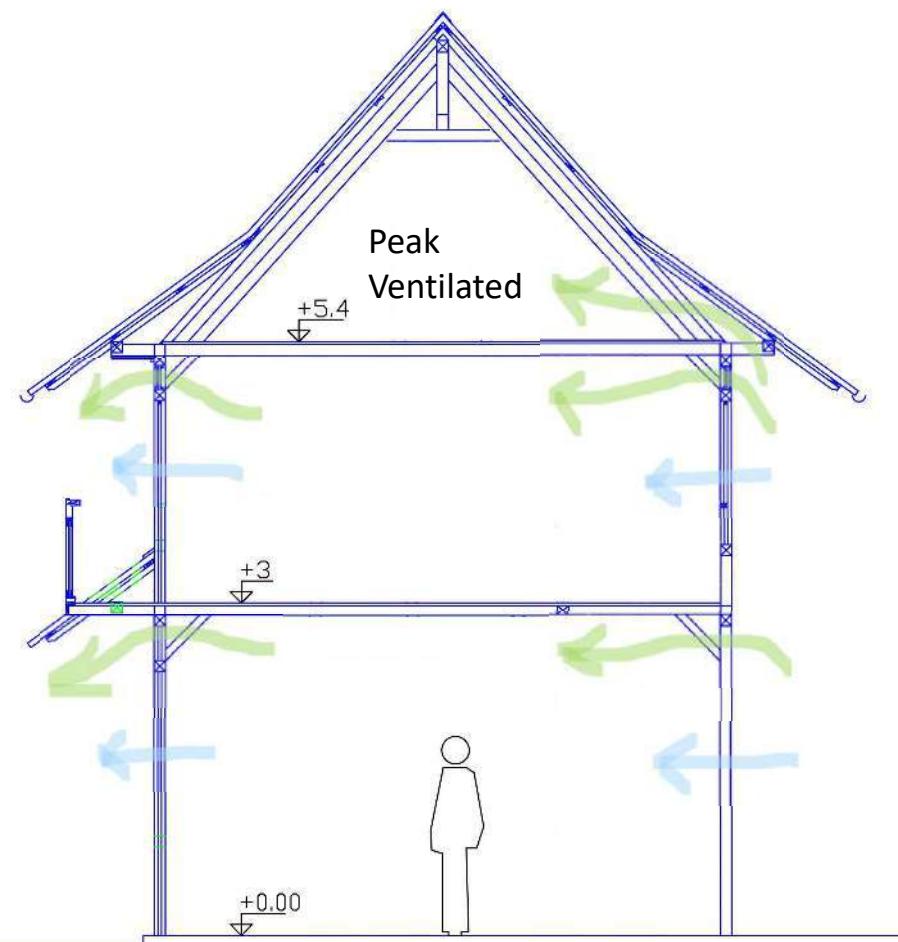


Didine House  
The ventilated  
attic and the bats  
that live there



## Cooling by air circulation

Unlike recently built houses, a traditional Creole house is comfortable without air conditioning.



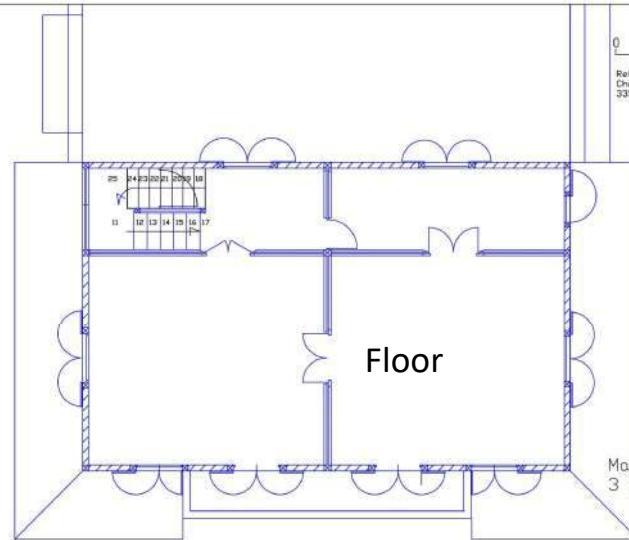
Didine House - Sinnamary



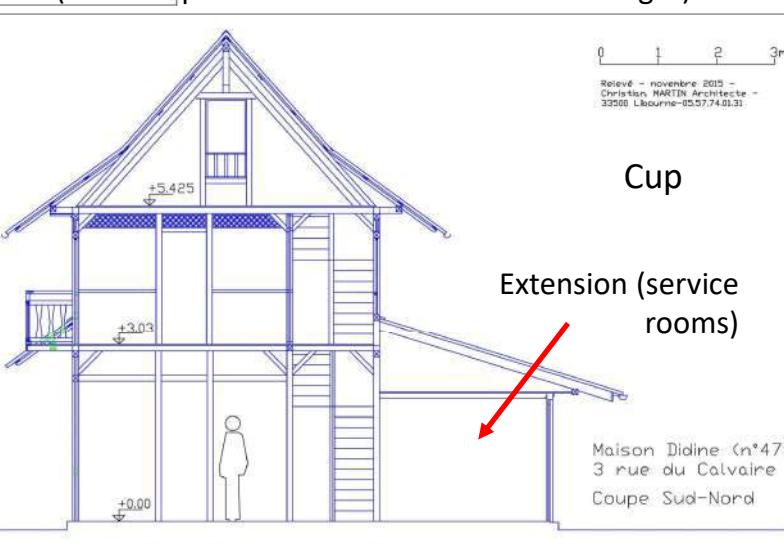
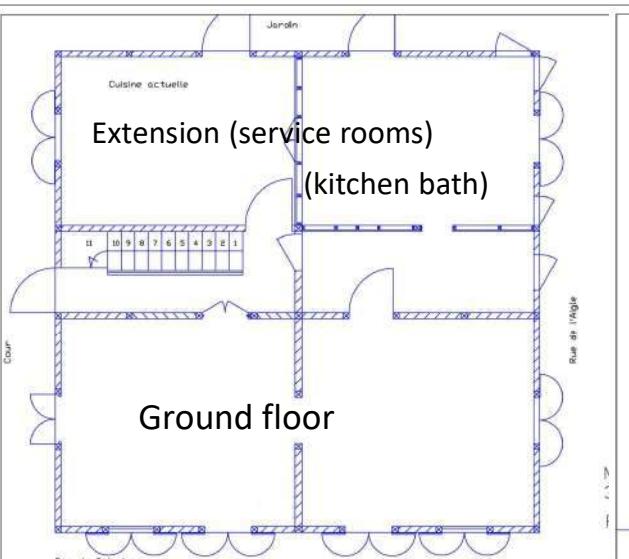
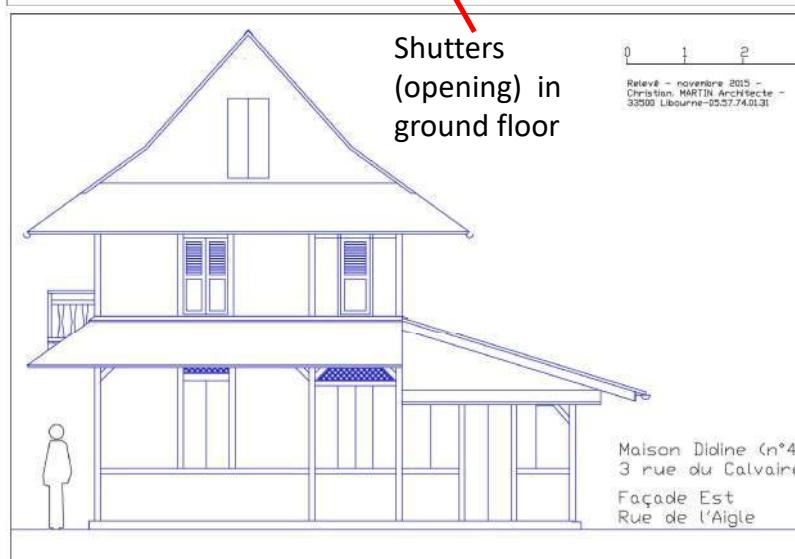
Permanent ventilation to the outside and between interior rooms, through the transoms (flush with the ceilings)  
Adjustable ventilation via shutters, shutters and sashes  
(Now, openings are often protected from insects by the installation of fine mesh)

## The plans

### Didine House - Sinnamary



(wooden partitions with stiffener at mid-height)





## Hermégéilde Tell House Museum (Cayenne)

The living rooms are widely ventilated (transoms, movable shutters, shutters)  
The openings are in the shade of the eaves



The kitchen and the bathroom are in the annex volume of the service rooms



## Roof

Wapa wood shingles are now replaced by metal sheet, (thermally harmful), but are again used on some constructions.



Decorative valance



Customizing a gable





## The walls

Filling of the  
wood frame  
with  
plastered  
bricks



Pegged and  
prefabricated  
timber frame  
with  
numbered  
assembly  
signs





Filling of the wooden frame with mud cob placed on a slatted, braided (gaulettes) and plastered.

At the bottom of the wall, the earth filling, does not resist humidity well



Currently being demolished



## Doors and windows

On the ground floor, the openings are protected by solid shutters

At the back, the openings are equipped with low doors and windows, with screens preserving privacy and ensuring ventilation.

(The low, sliding window is removable)

A lace curtain completes the protection against insects and gives a touch of coquetry.

A ventilated transom is located above.



## Upstairs windows

- Upstairs, the windows are equipped with shutters ensuring privacy and ventilation.
- Lace curtains complete these screens and protect from insects.
- The upper transom provides ventilation at the level of the ceilings



The transoms are architectonic elements of identity, in Sinnamary as well as in Cayenne or Mana



## Some houses in Sinnamary



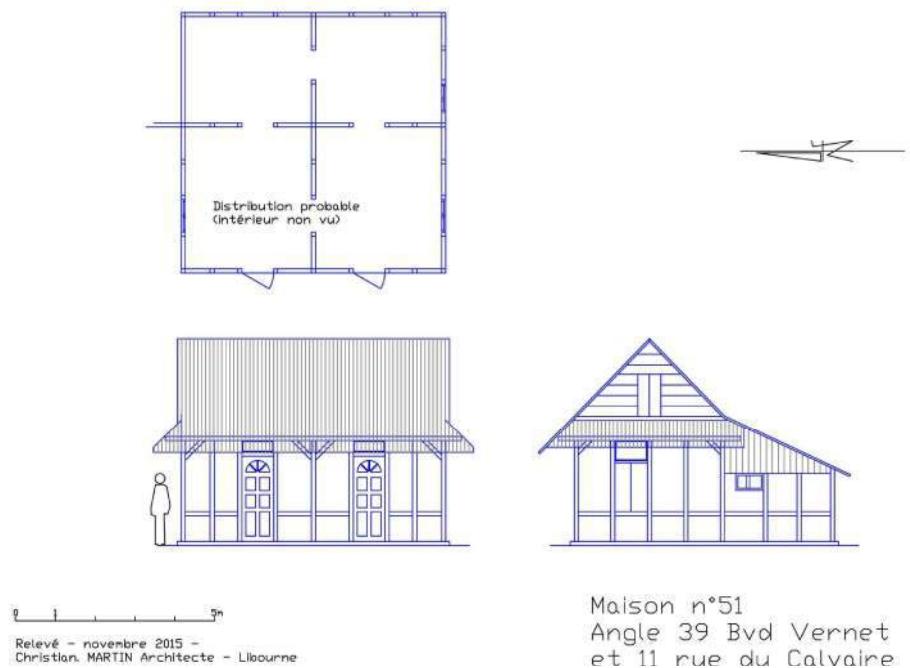
In general, the structure is clad in wood, upstairs and a balcony is often installed.

Birthplace of  
Henry Salvador



## The « huts »

The huts, without floors, have the same type of wooden structure as the two-storey houses.



Maison n°51  
Angle 39 Bvd Vernet  
et 11 rue du Calvaire



The huts are equipped with screen panels and transoms that allow them to be ventilated



## The "gaulette" houses

This type of precarious house, now abandoned, was used by forest workers.

They have a wooden frame of the same type as the Creole huts, but the walls are made of woven wooden slats, allowing air to pass through.  
(the "gaulette")

Gold Prospectors' Village  
With wooden shingle roofs and  
"gaulette" facades

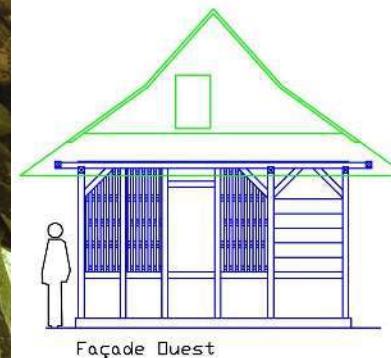
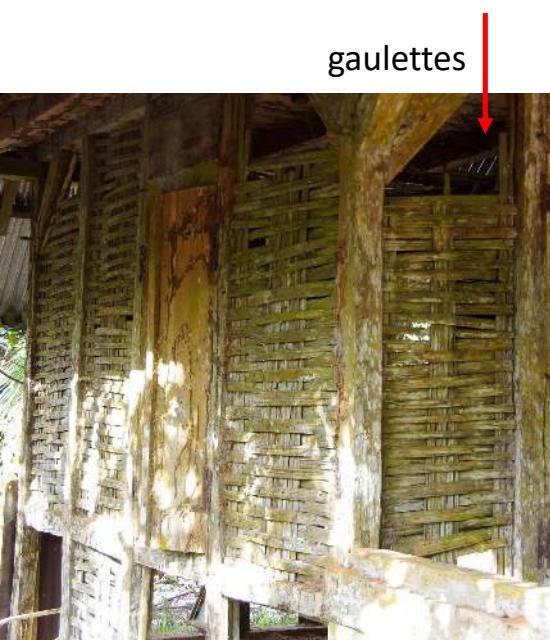
(Photo early 20th century)



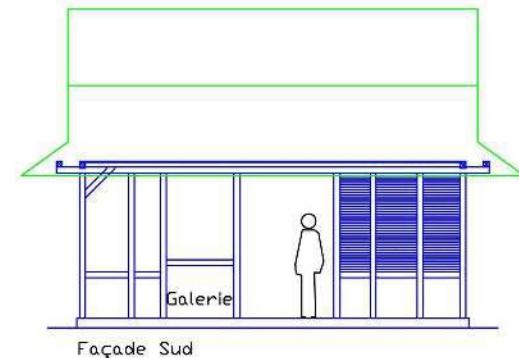
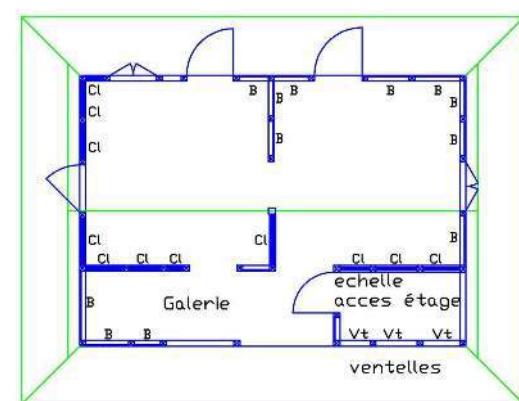
## Houses "in gaulets" From Sinnamary

They are in ruins and located in an area overgrown with forest.

Most of the walls are made of braided "gaulets", or "ventelles" (ventilation slats)  
Some walls are clapboard  
They are equipped with a gallery and an attic.



Façade Ouest



Façade Sud

## Current modern buildings and extensions



Ugly and incongruous collective housing



Villagehall, financed by Soyuz which launched rockets from Sinnamary (near Kourou)

Located on the outskirts, it does not impair on the village

Skylights and parasitic extensions destroyed the eaves and disfigured the house



Home extensions often disfigure the original traditional construction. It is proposed that the urban planning by-law should favour extensions by the construction of a new volume, connected to the existing house by a low link, which does not destroy the eaves



## CONCLUSIONS

The traditional houses of French Guiana are adapted to the tropical climate.

Boni houses do not correspond to the current way of life, but are an identity heritage that must be preserved. The Papaïchton worksite-school is the beginning of an awareness of protection, which must be followed by other development operations.

The traditional Creole house is also a heritage to be protected. (Urban planning by-law to come?)

It is suitable for a comfortable lifestyle in a hot and humid climate.

Existing houses must not be disfigured by unnatural additions.

Their design method must be a source of inspiration for contemporary bioclimatic architectural creations.

Thank you for your attention  
Christian MARTIN - Architecte

