

## **Bhutan-Swiss Archaeology Project 2013** **The Khoche Manor of Bjoka**

Eberhard Fischer, Barbara Fischer and Namgyel Tshering<sup>1</sup>

### **The Khoche Manor of Bjoka**

Situated with a perfect view over three valleys on top of a sunny slope with terraced fields, the Khoche manor is the most impressive historic mansion we have seen so far in Lower Kheng in Southern Zhemgang dzongkhag (Bjoka gewog), which we visited from March 12–14, 2013. We would like to thank Dasho Karma Dukpa, Dzongda of Zhemgang and Dasho Therchung Kencho, Dungpa of Panbang Drungkha for their support. On this trip, we were assisted by Mr. Phurba Wangchuk (Guide and Ex-Gup of Ngangla Trong), Mr. Tshering Wangchuk, Gup of Bjoka Gup and Mr. Dorji Wangdi, Project Manager, Rural Livelihood Project, Zhemgang. At the time of our visit, the road from Panbang to Bjoka was still under construction. We walked from Pantang via Goshing to Ngala, and from there to Bjoka. On our return, we were able to make use of a truck plying from Ngala to Panbang.

The large and impressive stone house of Bjoka was most likely built as a feudal residence by the Bjoka branch of the Khoche clan of warlords who are said to have ruled not only large parts of Lower Kheng, but also invaded and raided adjacent parts of Assam on several occasions up to the time of the Sinchula treaty of 1865. They must have availed of large financial means and strong manpower in previous centuries. In the decades following the peace agreement, the Khoche chiefs were the undisputed lords of the area and later acted as the intermediaries between the Bhutanese Gov-

<sup>1</sup> Helvetas Bhutan

**Fig. 1** Backside of the Khoche manor of Bjoka in Zhemgang dzongkhag





Fig.2 Northern wall of the Khoche manor in Bjoka

Fig.3 Entrance to the Khoche manor of Bjoka

2

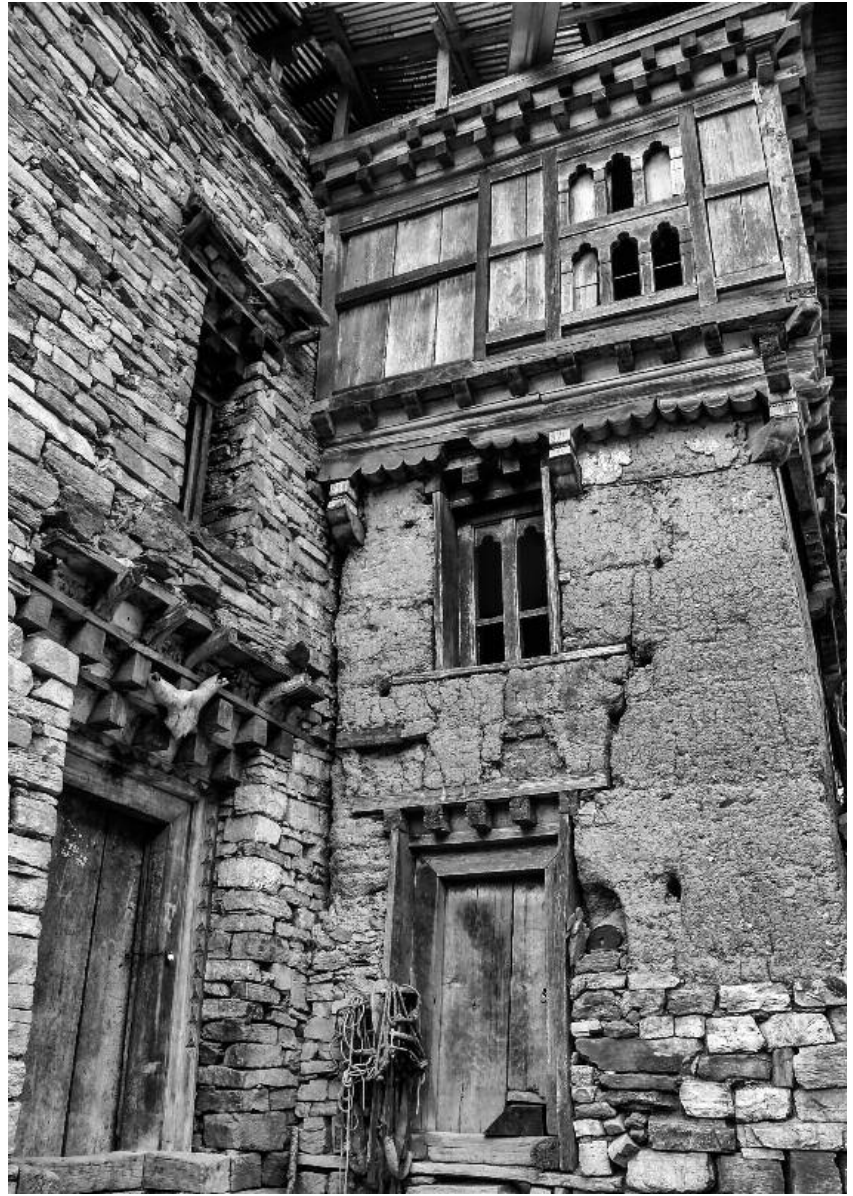


3

ernment and the local people, collecting taxes for the centre as well as for themselves. Until recently, the feudal aristocrats owned several families of slaves for their own farmland and household chores. It seems that the Khoche family's wealth and power slowly but steadily declined in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to the loss of traditional income and the unavailability of new financial resources. This went along with the fragmentation of inherited property which was divided between three family branches and their many descendants. Therefore, hardly any modernization was undertaken recently, and the manor has preserved a very «traditional» look, though obviously much impoverished due to the lack of financial means even for a basic maintenance. During the last ten years, merely a metal sheet roof was placed over the attic, the walls of which were reduced considerably at this time – according to the statement of the actual house-owner.

Fig. 4 The entrance building, a later addition to the Khoche manor of Bjoka

Fig. 5 The main kitchen of the Khoche manor of Bjoka



4

This Bjoka manor was not fortified – at least we couldn't detect any trace of defense walls or trenches in the surrounding fields. When walking around the manor (dimensions approx. 17.50 m × 11 m), it becomes obvious that it was not constructed in one go, at one time. In all likelihood, the walls of the backside, which were made of rather uniformly small dark red stones, can be considered the oldest part. Local tradition has it that the stone comes from Pethangla, a stone quarry some distance away. (If one were to document the fundamentals of the manor, one would however possibly also find rocks of the same blackish-red stone!) It is generally assumed that this feudal mansion was constructed by Assamese slaves in the 18<sup>th</sup> century or so, a narrative that is quite probable. One side of the structure later collapsed, probably due to an earthquake, and was rebuilt and possibly even enlarged by another group of masons, this time using larger and coarser, less precious looking but locally also available grayish stones. They were carefully stitched into the existing walls. Only a few of the dark red stones used earlier on were again re-used for some sections.



5

The entrance side of the mansion with the door to the living rooms, kitchens, shrine, etc. on the first floor has undergone the most changes with several additions, including one of rammed mud walls topped by wooden rooms with windows. Even later, a roughly erected stone staircase was added and expanded by a wooden metal platform on poles roofed with some metal sheets.



Fig. 6 The altar-room of the Khoche manor in Bjoka

Fig. 7 The shrines of the Khoche manor of Bjoka

6

Today, the façade of the manor is reduced to the stone and mud walls with only a few inset wooden windows and doors. It seems to us that in former times, wooden balconies and balustrades projected on many sides, hence giving the palace a far less austere appearance. These wooden structures have weathered away and were not restored, but instead replaced by windows set in the walls.

The interior with a large number of rooms on three stories still retains a lot of its original quality. The house contains (probably since relatively recent developments within the owner-families) three kitchens, of which only one is currently in use. Several rooms are considered private property of members of family branches who do not reside here permanently. Generally speaking, the manor is in reasonably good and well-cared-for condition. But many rooms are unfurnished or completely empty with only a few personal belongings stored away. In general, there is not much traditional furniture left, and hardly anything still conveys the splendor of feudalism in former times. At least we were not shown much of the aristocratic outfit such a place must have possessed in days gone by.



7

Fig. 8 The Khoche manor of Ngala in Zhemgang dzongkhag

Fig. 9 Entrance to the Khoche manor of Ngala



8

As far as we could see on this short trip, the Khoche manor of Bjoka is the most impressive historical building in Lower Kheng representing the feudal period of South Central Bhutan that has remained, and it can, to some respect, reflect a glance of the former magnificence of the aristocratic Bhutanese society in this region. As such it deserves to be protected as a landmark of national importance.



9

The only one comparable structure we came across in Lower Kheng is the Ngala Khoche manor which is of smaller dimensions (approx. 11 m×9.50 m). In its interior, the traditional culture of feudal landlords is far more visible than in Bjoka, because here the households are better equipped with old and new furniture, inherited utensils and materials. This house would also deserve the attention of the Government and should also be preserved as a unique historic building of national importance.

**Bibliography**

TENZIN RIGDEN AND UGYEN PELGEN, 1999, Khengrig Namsum, an historical profile of Zhemmgang Dzongkhag, Thimphu (Integrated Sustainable Development Programme, Zhemgang, Bhutan).