The Royal History of Sikkim: A chronicle of the house of Namgyal, by John A Ardussi, Anna Balikci Denjongpa and Per K Sørensen

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REFERENCES


The Royal History of Sikkim is a secular history of Sikkim and the House of Namgyal. It was written to record and preserve the history of the country from a Sikkimese perspective and in contrast to the prevailing British representation. Before Sikkim became an Indian state in 1975, it was a small Buddhist kingdom. The kingdom was founded in the seventeenth century with the establishment of the Namgyal Dynasty as sovereign and its rulers continued to provide Sikkimese kings, called ‘Chogyal’, up until the twentieth century. From the beginning, Sikkim kept close contact with and was significantly influenced by Tibet. For example, Sikkim was known as an outstanding beyul, a land that offered protection to Buddhist practitioners in difficult times. As a result, Tibetan Buddhist masters visited this place which, according to legendary accounts, Guru Rinpoche had once blessed. Apart from that connection, Sikkim received Tibetan estates from the Tibetan government, called Ganden Phodrang, and various Sikkimese queens came from Tashilhunpo, the monastic seat of the Panchen Lama. Hence, Sikkim maintained close ties with Tashilhunpo and the Ganden Phodrang (1642–1959). At the same time, the kingdom came under considerable pressure from its neighbours in other quarters throughout its history. Apart from attacks by the Gorkhas and Bhutan, the modern era also saw British India approach Sikkim as an economic
gateway to Tibet, which they were eager to open. By the nineteenth century, Sikkim became a protectorate of British India.

2 At the turn of the nineteenth century, the ninth Sikkim Chogyal Thutob Namgyal (1860–1914) and his Tibetan wife Gyalmo Yeshe Dolma (1867–1910) initiated the writing of the Chogyal dynasty’s history, which was completed under the Tibetan title Denjong Gyalrab in 1908. Given the Tibetan provenance of the queen, it may safely be assumed that Her Highness Yeshe Dolma was the driving force behind the project. Travelling throughout Sikkim to collect information and with the help of local lamas and scholars, she created a unique Sikkimese history in Tibetan. In 1909–10, a first draft translation into English was provided by the Sikkimese scholar Kazi Dawasamdup (1868–1922). However, that version was neither a complete translation nor was it ever published. The royal authors’ granddaughter, Her Majesty Gyalyum Kesang Choeden Wangchuck of Bhutan, commissioned a complete translation into English in 2000. Thereby, she fulfilled her mother’s wish to publish this work for Sikkimese people.

3 The team of author-translators of The Royal History of Sikkim consisted of John A Ardussi, Anna Balikci Denjongpa and Per K Sørensen. The two Tibetologists J A Ardussi and P K Sørensen provided a close and complete translation from Tibetan. For better readability, sub-headings have been added to the English translation and years were converted according to the Gregorian calendar. The story of Sikkim and the House of Namgyal is presented in eleven chapters. The text opens with a supplication prayer by Her Highness Yeshe Dolma along with legendary accounts of the origins of the royal family. This is followed by the lives and circumstances of individual rulers up to the autobiographical report of the ninth Chogyal and his Tibetan wife.

4 The period from the first to the eighth Chogyal (chapters 1–8) make up about half of the work. By far the largest part is taken up by the life, time and circumstances of the ninth Chogyal, which occupies three chapters (chapters 9–11). These are divided between an account of his early rule, the establishment of the British residency in Gangtok and the restoration of the king’s authority over Sikkim. The original Tibetan text concludes with the departure of the political officer in Sikkim, John C White (1853–1918), in 1908. Note that these final chapters were most likely written by Her Highness Yeshe Dolma ‘in language that is first person, emotional, and direct. This style of royal chronicle (rgyal rabs) has no parallel elsewhere in Tibetan literature’ (p29). Her authorship makes this book a unique testimony to a local history of a Himalayan state and, at the same time, to female agency.

5 The anthropologist A Balikci Denjongpa provided detailed supplementary information that rounds off the book. Grey text boxes were used for additions to distinguish them from the translation. They have been included throughout the text to provide valuable background information. The supplementary material includes, among others, information on members of the royal dynasty after the sealing of the Tibetan text in 1908. These include a review of the tenth and eleventh Chogyal, as well as information about the Princess of Sikkim Choni Wongmo (1897–1994), daughter of Her Highness Yeshe Dolma and mother of Her Majesty Gyalyum Kesang Choeden Wangchuck of Bhutan. This additional information completes the history of Sikkim and the House of Namgyal. Further information on royal seals, flags, royal hats and hairstyles, places, people and trade, as well as genealogies and indices provides an informative overview for the reader.
The team of authors has enriched the entire book with a remarkable collection of drawings as well as old and current photographs that accompany the translation. The photographs show historical recordings from Sikkim and from Darjeeling, Bhutan, Tibet, and British India. Hence, the book constitutes a real treasure trove not only for those interested in Sikkim, but also for all those who devote themselves to the study of neighbouring regions. Particularly noteworthy are the maps, the watercolours by Walter and Eva Hodges from the turn of the twentieth century and the historical thangka paintings from the 1960s. Walter Hodges was John C White’s clerical superintendent in Sikkim. He and his wife Eva captured scenes and landscapes from all over Sikkim with their watercolours. The thangka paintings were made by the Sikkimese artist Rinzing Lhadripa Lama (1912–1977). He most likely used *Denjong Gyalrab* as a template for all five thangkas that depict the history of Sikkim in great detail and, in addition, provide captions. The artist was commissioned by the twelfth and last Chogyal, Palden Thondup Namgyal (1923–1982).

The research and work carried out by the team of authors over a period of nearly twenty years have clearly paid off. On the one hand, a long-awaited and comprehensive translation of a Sikkimese history has been delivered. On the other hand, additional documents and supplementary information have been painstakingly integrated, which makes it an extremely valuable contribution. The only downside seems to be the price, which will no doubt limit its distribution to university libraries. Nevertheless, if one takes into account the breadth of the work, the enormous number of colour images and the impressive size of the book (33.7 x 25.7 x 6.8cm), the price seems entirely justified. Importantly, a reduced price is provided for residents of Sikkim and South Asia, which should enable them to purchase the book, too. Whatever the case, it deserves a broad readership.

In summary, *The Royal History of Sikkim* is a welcome and significant addition to the fields of Sikkim Studies, Tibetan Studies, Himalayan Studies and Buddhist Studies. It is an appreciable resource for the Sikkimese who are interested in their own history as well as for researchers and scholars who address social, political, religious and cultural aspects in the Himalayas and their trans-regional intersections.

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Marlene Erschbamer holds a PhD in Buddhist Studies from the Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich. Her research interests include the Barawa Kagyu tradition and Sikkim Studies. More recently, she worked on cultural aspects of water and the role of gender in a Buddhist context in Sikkim.