

Book Review

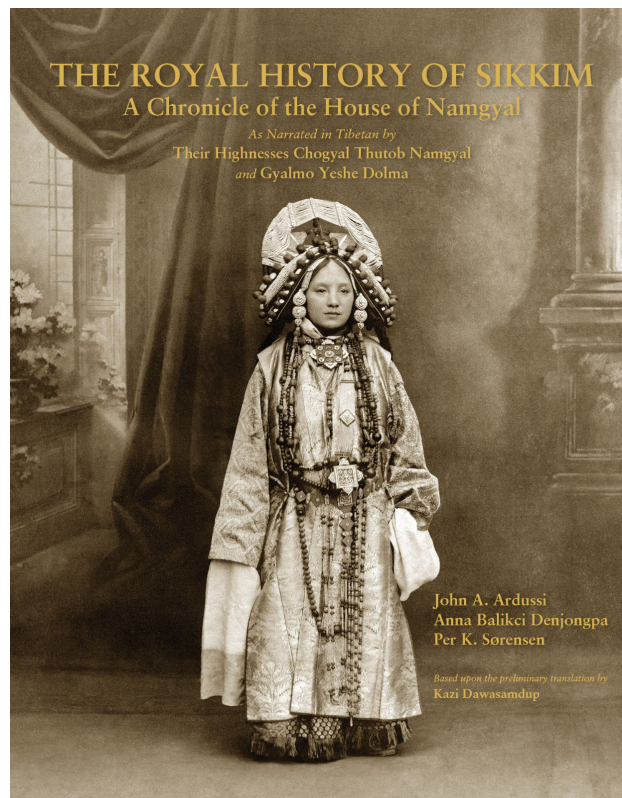
## Review of *The Royal History of Sikkim: A Chronicle of the House of Namgyal*

Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2021. 635 pages. ISBN: 9871932476392

As Narrated in Tibetan by Their Highnesses Chogyal Thutob Namgyal and Gyalmo Yeshe Dolma. Based upon the Preliminary Translation by Kazi Dawasamdub. Corrected, Supplemented, and Thoroughly Revised by John A. Ardussi, Anna Balikci Denjongpa, and Per K. Sørensen. Under the Patronage of Her Majesty Gyalyum Kesang Choeden Wangchuck, Queen Mother to His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan

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*The Royal History of Sikkim* is an exquisite work of local history and a profound contribution to our collective understanding of the Himalayan region. Equal parts historical chronicle, gorgeous visual record, archival offering, and unique narrative, this door-stopper of a publication - clocking in at 635 pages and weighing over 4kg - will soon occupy its rightful place as the definitive publication pertaining to the House of Namgyal written by cultural insiders.

It is difficult to know where to start describing this book. A suitable point of entry may be to explore the roles of the many varied contributors to this remarkable text. Principal authorship is held by Their Highnesses Chogyal Thutob Namgyal, the Ninth Sikkim Chogyal, and his Tibetan consort, Gyalmo Yeshe Dolma, who passed away in 1914 and 1910 respectively. Even though the Chogyal is credited as first author, it is “well accepted in Sikkim that Gyalmo Yeshe Dolma was the driving force behind the project” (p. 25). In addition, it is known that the royal couple received generous assistance from local scholars in the compilation of what would eventually become this publication. It is worthy of note that the *Denjong Gyalrab*—the original Tibetan title of the *Royal History of Sikkim* which I will use interchangeably in this review—is the first and only history of a Himalayan state written in Tibetan by or at the explicit behest of a queen.

Between 1909 and 1910, the prominent Sikkimese scholar Kazi Dawasamdub worked closely with the then king and queen to draft a preliminary English translation of the *Denjong Gyalrab*, but neither the Tibetan nor English text were ever formally published until now. During British rule in India, descriptions of Sikkim’s deep and intimate relationship with Tibet were distinctly out of favour, and throughout the 20th century, the Tibetan text remained poorly known. Making good use of carbon paper, typed and retyped copies of Dawasamdub’s English translation of the *Denjong Gyalrab* circulated under the radar to those with connections and who knew whom to approach. Even though copies of the English typescript of the *Denjong Gyalrab* have long existed in private libraries in the region as well as in London, descendants of the royal couple have until recently been unenthusiastic about pursuing publication in light of how certain individuals and historical events had been represented.

While it is left unclear as to what changed (and when) for the royal family of Sikkim to soften their position regarding the wider dissemination of this precious text, we can safely assume that a realignment in their thinking has taken place, given that *The Royal History of Sikkim* is prominently billed as appearing under the patronage of a grand-daughter of the original authors: Her Majesty Gyalyum Kesang Choeden Wangchuck, Queen Mother to His Majesty the Fourth King of Bhutan. Thanks to the sustained industry over many years of three highly-regarded scholars - John A. Ardussi, Anna Balikci Denjongpa, and Per K. Sørensen - credited in the colophon of *The Royal History of Sikkim* as having “corrected, supplemented and thoroughly revised” the text, this outstanding document is now available to anyone who can afford it and has a bookshelf robust enough to retain it. Chicago-based Serindia Publications, internationally recognized for their high production quality in cultural and art books on Asia, must also be applauded for their enduring commitment in seeing *The Royal History of Sikkim* into press and for producing such an attractive and professional publication. Bibliophiles will be interested to note that the copyright for the entire text is held by the Gyalyum Ashi Kesang Choeden Wangchuck Trust Fund.

*“The Royal History of Sikkim is an exquisite work of local history and a profound contribution to our collective understanding of the Himalayan region”.*

- Mark Turin on *The Royal History of Sikkim*

In terms of content, the *Denjong Gyalrab* offers a rich chronicle of the history, culture, and political climate of Sikkim from its fabled origins as a ‘Hidden Land’ through to an “increasingly autobiographical account of the Namgyal ruling dynasty” (p. 27). While the text relies heavily on existing written records from Tibet alongside monastic biographies and correspondence, *The Royal History of Sikkim* assumes a voice that is intentionally more personal and secular. As Ardussi, Balikci Denjongpa, and Sørensen note in their introduction, the *Denjong Gyalrab* was also written with another goal in mind: “to counter the highly Anglo-centric account of Sikkim” (p. 28) as embodied in H.H. Risley’s 1894 *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, until then the only comprehensive source in English on the kingdom. While it may challenge our contemporary sensibilities to think of

a ‘royal history’ as being in any way subversive, the peculiar context of Sikkim’s entanglement with British India in the 19th century served to ensure that only an authoritative and distinct counter-narrative could reassert Sikkim’s political sovereignty.

As a whole, *The Royal History of Sikkim* offers a compelling account of how the small and encircled country of Sikkim maintained its cultural independence in the face of enormous pressures from the increasingly muscular geopolitical giants active in the region. The narrative takes on, at points, an almost David and Goliath quality. It must be underscored that *The Royal History of Sikkim* is much more than an improved and corrected translation of the *Denjong Gyalrab*: the author-editors included a wealth of supplementary material such as salient short essays and important biographies, genealogies, and newly designed and attractive historical maps to add greater context to the historical narrative and speak to recurring themes and enduring questions in Sikkimese history and culture.

For those readers wishing to learn more about the making of *The Royal History of Sikkim*, and the years of painstaking research that preceded publication—including the copious consultation of source materials in Tibetan, Sanskrit, Chinese, and various European languages—the open access and freely downloadable Volume 52, Number 1 (2021) of the *Bulletin of Tibetology* offers many insights and a wealth of additional material with contributions from many of those involved in the production of the text.

*The Royal History of Sikkim* is a labor of love and, at the same time, much more. The original moment of its creation reflects a commitment by the then royal couple to make a lasting contribution to the historical record of the nation which they had the responsibility and privilege of heading. Their goal was to ensure that their unique story would not be bulldozed out of view by a colonial narrative that was increasingly hegemonic. Collective care and devotion are what kept the text alive in the archives and minds of Sikkimese citizens for over a hundred years, until the conditions were right for its wider dissemination. And finally, over the last decade, sustained scholarly attention and rigorous research by Ardussi, Balikci Denjongpa, and Sørensen through a collaborative and respectful partnership with descendants of the royal couple have woven this fragmented fabric together once again, repairing the historical rifts so that this work could land in our hands. A century in the making, *The Royal History of Sikkim* is quite simply a magnificent achievement.

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