

Laos

Embodied nation: Sport, masculinity, and the making of modern Laos

By SIMON CREAK

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The number of serious studies on the history of sport, fitness, and public health in Southeast Asian countries is very limited, although the situation is slowly changing. Simon Creak makes an important contribution to the field by addressing the connection between sport, ideas of masculinity, and nationalism in Laos. Based on research in several archives and the use of a substantial number of mostly French and Lao journals and newspapers, Creak chronologically covers sport-related Lao nation-building from French colonialism until the 2009 Southeast Asian Games in Vientiane.

Using an 'eclectic theoretical approach drawing on cultural history, cultural anthropology, sports studies, and gender studies' (p. 19), the author in the introduction presents and combines theories and concepts related to nationalism and masculinity. Among them are Ana Maria Alonso's advocacy of an analysis of 'everyday routines, rituals, and policies of the state system' (p. 8), Michael Billing's *Banal nationalism*, and R.W. Connell's work on hegemonic masculinity (or masculinities). Applied to sport in Laos, Creak argues 'that sport and related physical activities are among the most important strategies of substantialization through which abstractions such as the nation are materialized in everyday action' (p. 9). Due to this focus, one gets the impression that a short reflection on Anthony Smith's ethno-symbolism would also have been fruitful.

The first chapter covers *tikhi* (a game resembling field hockey) during French colonialism. Travel-writers and academics describing *tikhi* as the Lao national game, and discussing its ritual dimension and courageous all-male participants, helped create 'the idea of the Lao race and culture that corresponded in some way with the entity of Laos, justifying its constitution as a French colony and later as a distinct and independent nation, even when this was not the most immediate concern' (p. 50).

The particularly interesting second chapter concerns physical education during the Lao *Nhay* cultural renovation movement (1941–1945), an offspring of Vichy France's National Revolution. It needs to be left to Creak, Anne Raffin, and others to debate whether or not sport and physical education were, as the author argues, in practice 'central elements' (p. 53) of the movement. Creak emphasises his point of view by showing that at least the plans of the colonial regime and the various institutions that it set up sought to discipline and strengthen masses of male bodies as a means for a national 'regeneration'.

In the third chapter, Creak analyses the contribution of sport and physical education to the militarisation of Lao society during the 1950s. He shows that it was not only institutions such as military academies and cadre schools but also French and Lao newspapers and PR material, such as magazines for soldiers, which communicated an image of soldiers as guarantors of national freedom.

The fourth and fifth chapters continue to investigate decolonisation until the communist takeover in 1975. First, Creak argues that the staging of the newly founded Lao National Games of 1961 and 1964 as symbols of national development allowed Phoumi Nosavan to display his political power. According to the author, in the sense of Clifford Geertz's theatre state, the military strongman appeared, even more so than the king, as *the* mobiliser of men and skills. Particularly noteworthy is the finding that no civil society organisations were involved. I consider this important, since the YMCA already during the 1910s and 1920s had been the driving force in founding national games in several Asian countries.

In the fifth chapter, the author explains convincingly how the Southeast Asian Peninsular Games, founded by Thais in 1959, served pro-American region building, before discussing the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF) as a more left-leaning event.

The last three chapters are about the Lao People's Democratic Republic. Creak in the sixth chapter explains that the mass sports movement initiated by the government failed outside of cities due to a lack of money, equipment, teachers, and motivation. In the seventh chapter, he interprets spectator sports such as international competitions and national events as not having been seen by the population as entertainment sponsored by a benevolent government, but as a temporary relief from the disasters it had caused. The last chapter combines an analysis of the Southeast Asian (SEA) Games in Vientiane in 2009 with a brief conclusion. With the help of substantial investment and foreign aid funds, the Lao government hosted the event and 'consolidated Lao national symbols, bringing together official and popular notions of nationalism and national success' (p. 239).

In conclusion, Simon Creak has written a very well-researched study that, due to the skilled combination of textual sources, photos, and cartoons, illustrates how ideas of masculinity and representations of the male body shaped Lao nationalism over the course of almost a century.

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Food studies has become institutionally mainstreamed, with PhD programmes, dedicated appointments in areas such as global food history, and a raft of methodological guides. Given Singapore's cultural position at the intersection of imperial history and multiculturalism and its geographical position as a major equatorial port city