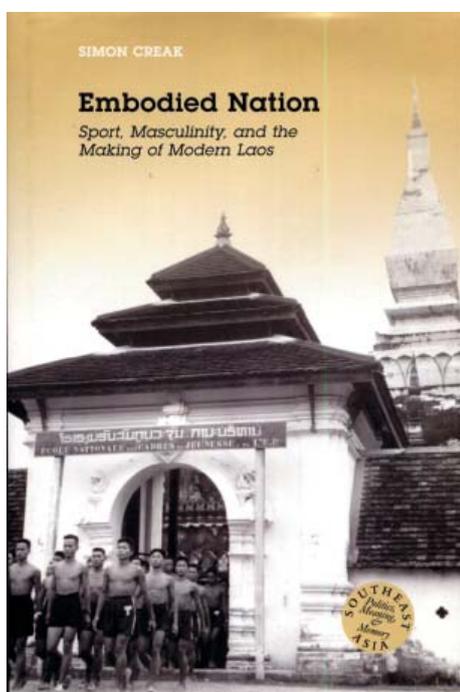


## Review Article

*Embodied Nation: Sport, Masculinity, and the Making of Modern Laos* by Simon Creak.  
(Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2015). ISBN: 978-0-8248-3889-8. US\$54.00.



Laos is not a nation that excels in competitive sport, nor are the Lao preoccupied with physical fitness – which makes it all the more surprising to come across a book devoted to both. What is also surprising is the remarkable extent to which, even in Laos, as Simon Creak so well demonstrates, sport and fitness contribute to and are embedded in political culture and nation building. These linkages go back to the making of modern Laos under the aegis of French colonialism, which is where Creak begins; and continue through to the present day. Their interaction both reflects the political and social turmoil of the last century of Lao history, and provides a prism through which to examine it. To use sport and fitness in this way is both clever and perceptive.

Creak tells his story in eight chronological chapters. I shall outline these in some detail in order to reveal not just the dimensions of political, social and cultural interaction that Creak discovers in the history of sport and fitness in Laos, but also the breadth of his analysis. Only then shall I comment on what appear to be Creak's theoretical assumptions.

I want to begin, however, where Creak does, with the kind of incident that can so easily occur at a sporting event, when supporters of rival teams clash and hurl abuse at each other. For in the modern world, sporting contests have become vehicles for conflicting emotions associated with group identity, fed by the resentments of history and frustrations of the present. The incident Creak cannily chooses happened in February 1936 when a brawl erupted at a football match between a predominantly Vietnamese team and a predominantly Lao team competing for the local Bédier Cup. In commentaries after the match, each side focused on the failings of the other, as sportsmen and as civilised and educated people. But behind their antipathy lay a racial divide exacerbated

by anger over French policies that had created, in the name of a unified Indochina, a hierarchical administration in Laos with French at the top, Vietnamese in middle-level posts, and Lao mostly at the bottom. Thus, apparently atavistic racial emotions actually reflected a desire to assert a separate Lao identity, and their expression at a sporting event reinforced political awareness.

To sort out the causal relationships involved in this feedback loop is not straightforward, for they operate on three levels: the cognitive/psychological, the cultural/behavioural, and the social group level, and historians lack a paradigm theory linking the three. Instead, Creak argues that physical culture (in which he includes military training as well as competitive sport and fitness) and modern Lao history 'parallel' each other. But how, and to what effect?

To answer these questions, Creak situates his study in the context of debates over both the historiography of Laos and theories pertaining to the role of the body, its gendered physicality, in the construction of the nation-state. In a nutshell, Creak argues that physical culture 'substantialises' (gives substance to) conceptions not just of the body and masculinity, but of the nation itself (which he maintains is a 'cultural artefact'). In other words, by reinforcing consciousness of the nation-state, physical culture both reflects and augments state power. The theoretical debate is a bit abstruse, reflecting the origin of the book as a doctoral thesis, and in the end it is not entirely clear where the author stands.

Creak begins his first chapter with an analysis of how a peculiarly Lao contest called *tikhi* was interpreted by French scholars. *Tikhi* has both physical/competitive and ritual/cultural dimensions. It is not a sport in the modern sense for which players train long hours in order to compete; but then nor is it closely associated with any Buddhist belief or ceremony. If anything, its associations go back to pre-Buddhist *phi* (spirit) worship. Its most celebrated instance takes place during the three-day festival of the twelfth lunar month centred on the great stupa of That Luang in the Lao capital Viang Chan (Vientiane). The contest opposes two equal 'teams' of unspecified number, each equipped with a sort of hockey stick. One team is made up of civil servants, representing 'administrators'; the other of inhabitants of nearby villages representing 'the people'. There is no referee and no rules other than to steer a ball into the opposing goal. The contest can be highly physical, but the people's side always wins two out of three matches, thus ensuring a prosperous year to come.

Creak's analysis of the various French and Lao descriptions and interpretations of *tikhi* aims not to adjudicate between them, but rather to show how different ways of understanding the contest contributed to different constructions of Lao 'national' culture, which could then be directed towards desired political ends. The historical context of this joint Franco-Lao elite project to create a culture for a country changed entirely, however, from the 1890s when French intentions were to use the territory they had seized east of the Mekong as a springboard to annex Lao areas west of the river, to attempts in the 1920s and 1930s to create an integrated *Indochine Française*. While constructing a uniquely Lao culture in the 1890s furthered French interests, to do so in the 1930s was more problematic: while it reinforced the distinction between Lao and Thai, it threatened to undermine France's Indochina project.

This political difference was not reflected in the discourse on *tikhi* that Creak examines, but then the reconstruction of a national culture to reinforce the political independence of an artificially truncated geographical entity was not primarily the product of French imperialism, and owed very little to interpretations of *tikhi*. Rather it was constructed by those Lao who found themselves within borders French and Thai machinations had created, as a political response to threats of absorption (as they saw it) by both their Thai and Vietnamese neighbours. And the culture they created was based upon Buddhist beliefs and communal memory of *Meuang Lao* as a *mandala* (spatial polity) separate from Siam stretching back 600 years. For any cultural construct to be socially learned requires both language and imagination, but these always advert to the co-ordinated social structural and materially productive practices of a population sharing a common worldview and building a common sociocultural niche.

In Chapter Two, Creak resurrects a little-known period of Lao history when it formed part of Vichy France, subjected to the propaganda and policies of French fascism. He shows how Nazi racist ideology was disseminated via Vichy France to Indochina in the form of an obsession with fitness education, manual work and sport as the means of building healthier and more masculine (or feminine) physically superior bodies in service of the state. In Laos, this took the form of a uniformed youth movement, with strong emphasis on quasi-military physical training.

The period from 1940 to 1941 coincided with the rise of a movement for national restoration known as *Lao Nhay* (literally Great Laos), a name not only conjuring up a time when the Kingdom of Lan Xang was a power to be reckoned with in mainland Southeast Asia, but also Lao claims to those northeast Thai provinces that had previously formed part of the Lao kingdom. Its immediate purpose was to oppose Thai expansionist ambitions and demand the return of the Lao provinces of Xayaburi and part of Champasak, west of the Mekong, seized by Thailand in 1940. As such the movement had French backing, not for any political implications of its cultural nationalism, but in order to strengthen a vulnerable part of French Indochina.

What has not previously been recognised was how the militaristic Vichy youth movement with its emphasis on physique and fitness, discipline and commitment, strength and growth, boosted the confidence of Lao participants in their ability to “rule themselves”. But it was this confidence, Creak argues, that gave leaders of the Lao Issara independence movement the courage to act decisively in 1945 when Japanese forces invited into Indochina by the Vichy administration suddenly interned their allies. This is a fascinating chapter that breaks new ground in understanding the history of this crucial period.

The outbreak of the First Indochina War and its political repercussions in Laos are the focus of Chapter Three. Lao units were recruited in the name of national defence, for which Lao youths were urged to prepare themselves by building their physical fitness – neatly illustrated in the photograph that graces the cover of *Embodied Nation* showing a double file of bare-chested youths marching out of their school in the That Luang cloisters to perform physical activities. The resulting militarization and masculinization of Lao society took place under French direction, not in support of Lao independence, but for the benefit of the French Union. Creak demonstrates how the masculine ideal of the

soldier was promoted through deconstructing publications, drawings and photographs of the time (all illustrated in the book), and in his analysis of the ceremonies in 1950 marking the transference of internal administrative powers to Lao authorities.

Full independence did not come until October 1953 while the Lao government was still deeply embroiled in a war not just against the Vietminh, but also their Lao Marxist allies, the Pathet Lao. So not surprisingly, the National Army came to symbolize the newly minted nation-state and its aspirations, most notably unity and modernity, the former not realised until formation of the First Coalition Government in November 1957; the latter a distant beacon. Creak shows how the image of the soldier as the embodiment of courage and discipline, fitness and strength, permeated Lao society as the ideal for all Lao youth to emulate – and incidentally prepared the ground for military leaders to enter politics.

In Chapter Four, Creak introduces a new theme – the use of sporting events as ‘theatrics of power’ to promote political ends. Creak takes this metaphor from Clifford Geertz’s concept of the ‘theatre state’ in which, in the case of Bali, state ceremonies were used to bolster the status, and thus political domination, of the ruling elite. In Laos, the first National Games were held in Viang Chan in November 1961 with similar political intent, as a spectacle replete with symbolism designed to unite the country, at a time of deep division and civil war, behind the government of strongman Major General Phoumi Nosavan. They were thus a transparent attempt to reinforce Phoumi’s legitimacy and power.

The Games brought together athletes from each of Laos’s twelve provinces, though Creak is unclear whether those representing provinces under Pathet Lao control did so with its blessing. While the theatrics of the Games borrowed from the example of the Olympics, their symbolism reiterated the ideal of Lao unity – from the flag with its twelve interlocking rings to the flame lighted simultaneously by an athlete from each province – at a time when it did not exist other than as a political ideal. Creak shows how the stated purpose of the Games, to strengthen a sense of solidarity between athletes from different parts of the country and to improve Lao sport to the level of international competition, identified sport both with progress and with the international standards expected of a modern nation-state.

The same theme of political unity was reiterated at the Second (and last) National Games of March 1964. But it was a hollow hope. Laos was being drawn inexorably into the Second Indochina War: Phoumi’s power was fading; and the Second Coalition Government had collapsed in all but name, its facade of unity in tatters. Creak does not compare and contrast the political messages of the two Games, but instead argues that both were attempts to use sport and physical fitness not just to promote political unity, which Phoumi himself had done so much to destroy, but more especially as symbols of the modernity and material progress to which every Lao aspired.

In Chapter Five, Creak adds a further regional and international dimension to his account, by showing how the tensions of the Cold War that wracked both Laos and the region were reflected in participation in rival sporting events. Sport was used to promote solidarity between nations that were politically aligned, as communist, anti-communist or neutral; and participation was a political decision taken for political purposes.

The SEAP Games were inaugurated in 1959 as a Thai initiative with strong American backing, grouping anti-communist states, including South Vietnam. The Games provided an opportunity to reinforce Lao credentials as a sovereign nation in the face of Thai condescension, and as Creak shows, it was rivalry with Thailand above all that fuelled Lao determination to compete on an equal footing. When the Lao team defeated ‘big brother’ Thailand in a regional football competition known as the King’s Cup in 1969, it was a cause for national pride and rejoicing.

Much more controversial were the Games of the Newly Emerging Forces (GANEFo) organised by Indonesia in competition with the Asian Games, to protest what President Sukarno believed to be Western dominance over the Olympic movement. Although designed as a contest between non-aligned states, the Games were widely interpreted as anti-American. Laos despatched a small team to the first GANEFo in Jakarta in 1963, but it was the second version, held in Phnom Penh with Chinese support three years later, that had major political repercussions. Claiming neutrality, the Lao government declined its invitation, whereupon a Pathet Lao team was invited. That its attendance provided international exposure for a revolutionary movement during a civil war was significant enough, but by nominally representing the nation as a whole, Pathet Lao participation claimed Laos as a member of the ‘socialist bloc’, thereby promoting an alternative, revolutionary conception of *Meuang Lao*. Membership of an alternative international network of states, Creak claims, contributed to what he calls the ‘global processes of organization’ that through this post-colonial phase of national construction created alternative competing versions of the Lao nation-state.

From the GANEFo Games of 1966, celebrated as the original event in the history of revolutionary sport in Laos, Creak jumps a decade to the role of physical fitness in the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (LPDR), particularly in producing the ‘new socialist person’ (or citizen) who would build the new socialist Laos. This was to be achieved, according to official propaganda, through three revolutions – in production, technology, and consciousness.

Creak develops two themes here, one centring on the language of socialist propaganda (or its rhetoric, as Creak prefers), and the other on the contribution made by physical fitness – both to the three revolutions. With respect to the first, Creak argues that “Lao revolutionary rhetoric possessed a ... capacity to effect cultural change” (in opposition to the conclusion of the late Grant Evans that it did no such thing); and to the second that “the language of ideological production gains much of its force from physical idiom and metaphor” (both p. 170), which is equally questionable.

By any measure, the project of creating new socialist citizens was a failure. Not that this was admitted. For the ideologues of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party (LPRP), language provided not a prism through which to view and shape reality, but a substitute for it. This is why the analysis of propaganda does not get us very far without some measure of its effect. Creak agrees that the first two revolutions did not achieve their objectives, but argues that this made the third, brought about through effect of language on thought and culture, all the more important – judged, curiously, not by their effectiveness, but by their means.

Creak reveals the extent to which mass sport and physical culture figured in both

the policies and rhetoric of the regime aimed at creating a new socialist consciousness and culture. He also reveals the failure of both. Not only was sporting infrastructure insufficient, but few Lao could be cajoled into mass morning callisthenics. As Creak concludes, this suggests “a significant disconnect between the LPRP and the masses it invoked in its rhetoric” (p. 185).

Faced with this failure, Creak turns to the prioritization of productive labour in both the rhetoric and ‘cosmology’ (by which he means ‘worldview’) of communist Laos – which incidentally was required to bring about the revolution in production. For this, workers had to be physically fit. Senior leaders were shown vigorously exercising, and in every propaganda poster the progress of socialism was proclaimed in images of cadres, soldiers and youths beaming with health and strength. On the basis of its images and language, Creak maintains that “socialist culture privileges physical attributes” (p. 192) – whether this translates into behavioural change or not.

In Chapter Seven, Creak extends his analysis to spectator sports, promoted by the regime as occasions of revolutionary ‘fun and liveliness’, as opportunities for fraternal exchange with athletes from other socialist countries, and as promoting the international reputation of Laos on the world stage. To these ends, sporting events figure prominently in the celebrations of all ‘historical days’ in the Lao calendar (commemorating the army, the Party, socialism and the regime), and in international exchanges (for example, between the three former Indochinese states).

The Lao National Games were revived, and Laos also participated in the international arena of the Olympic and Asian Games. The minimal success of Lao athletes was glossed over by lauding their exemplary efforts and application. As Creak shows, all these events promoted the political priorities of the regime: the superiority of socialism, its triumph in Laos, and the leadership of the Party. What is less convincing is his contention that spectator sports represent the perpetual activity demanded of socialism in the name of continuous progress; and that in this they differ from the spectacles of the 1960s. For ‘progress’ and ‘reform’ are catchcries of all political parties.

Creak’s final chapter jumps to 2009, when Laos was host to the 25th Southeast Asian Games, which he shows were no less political and contentious than any previous sporting event. Against all expectations, even though fewer sports were included, the Games were a triumphant success. Lao athletes performed remarkably well, and the Games provide a fitting conclusion to the book.

In examining the event itself and its political repercussions (not least over the controversial compensation awarded Chinese companies for financing construction of Games venues), Creak displays all his analytical skills. The final pages are a tour de force, but in arguing for the significance of sport in Lao history, Creak makes some long calls. It is one thing to maintain that Laos has entered a phase of ‘postsocialist developmentalism’, but why formation of a National Sport Committee reflected this transition is hard to see, in view of its self-justification as supporting the long-standing goals of national defence and socialist construction.

Creak also claims that “an abiding concern with physicality...has been fundamental to how Lao people have seen themselves and their place in the world” (p. 240), as reflected in the ‘changing imaginings’ of successive regimes, from colonial to post-socialist.

But this is not born out by the evidence presented, which has rather demonstrated how regimes have promoted sport for political purposes, and not always successfully – which suggests that another ‘significant disconnect’ exists between how the Lao government and ‘Lao people’ see themselves and their place in the world.

Thus it is a step too far to claim that “[p]hysical practices have constituted political power in a multitude of its dimensions” (p. 241). For the fact that conceptions of ‘national birth, resuscitation, progress, development and growth’ are all partly ‘physical’ (or natural or material) metaphors does not mean that physicality has been central to the construction of successive national identities. Indeed Creak himself suggests that the reverse also holds: that “the epistemologies, cosmologies, and ideologies that have formed modern Laos” have been given physical expression in sport and physical culture (p. 246), as well as vice versa. In fact, of course, a feedback loop exists, though causal relationships are not spelled out in any detail.

So what has led Creak to overplay his hand? We can see from the above chapter summaries that what Creak has done by selecting specific sporting events for analysis is not to write a narrative history of sport and physical fitness in Laos. That was never his intention. Rather it was to illustrate an overarching metaphor that equates the physical body not just with the body politic in Laos, but with the nation itself (as he states on p. 180 and elsewhere). But metaphors are literary devices, and as such can reverberate further than intended – which is why they tend to be embraced by post-modernists: by not being very precise, they invite multiple interpretations. Indeed the less precise, the more suggestive they are. By extending the metaphor of embodiment from the body politic to the nation, Creak is in danger of allowing the analysis of discourse to take precedence over causation. This is the postmodernist trap. Creak identifies as poststructuralist rather than postmodernist, but one easily blends into the other – and it doesn’t help that at one point Creak quotes the post-modernist historian Alan Munslow’s adage that ‘all history is historiography’.

Historians must be cautious in adopting any literary theory. For whereas literature makes no necessary referential claims beyond the language in which its forms and interpretations are expressed, history does. History is grounded not in discourse but in a methodology that works from material sources, not all of them by any means written texts. Within the spectrum of scholarly disciplines, history stands somewhere between literature and the social sciences, and is drawn in different ways towards each. Historians reconstruct the past in the form of narratives that causally relate events; and each reconstruction presents a hypothetical interpretation that remains open to criticism and reformulation. In doing so, as the *Annales* historians pointed out, history both draws upon and synthesises findings from across the social sciences, formulated in relation to their own middle-level theories. For this reason alone, no literary theory will ever be adequate as a theory of history – and postmodernism certainly is not. All that historians should take from postmodern literary theory, therefore, is the lesson that language is never transparent and that sources require perceptive interrogation.

Poststructuralism has more to offer historians, by insisting that the language in which source documents are written requires analysis of all the multiple layers of meaning, both intended and interpreted, they have accumulated over time. All source texts have a

life of their own, to which the work of each generation of historians contributes another layer. The lesson of poststructuralism, therefore, is methodological. Textual criticism is essential, however textual origins hark back to past events, and how these can best be reconstructed and understood is ultimately what historians seek to do.

Creak has used sport and physical fitness to reveal unsuspected dimensions of key events in Lao history, by showing how on each occasion they contributed to political objectives, competing ideologies, and the construction of national culture and consciousness. The examples he has chosen – from the Bédier Cup to *tikhi* to the GANEFO Games to the socialist experiment and the Southeast Asian Games – illuminate like intermittent strobe lights the way in which sport and politics have interacted at significant times in Lao history. Almost all these case studies break new ground. Such perceptive analyses do not need the trope of embodiment to validate them.

This is an insightful and intellectually demanding study, and theoretical references do not in places make it easy reading. But it repays perseverance. Factual errors are few (Laos obtained full independence in 1953, not 1954 (p. 20)). Footnoting is extensive, and so is the bibliography. In conclusion, the book makes a substantial contribution to Lao historiography, and will be required reading for those with a serious interest in Lao history.

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