

From Bangkok to Palembang: The Southeast Asian Games and a Cultural Approach to Studying Regionalism

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The 26th Southeast Asian (SEA) Games opened spectacularly in the South Sumatran city of Palembang, Indonesia, on the auspicious date of November 11, 2011. With a digital carpet (i.e. giant TV screen) covering the stadium field and almost half of the stadium converted into a monumental stage piled with LED screens and speaker-stacks, the sound and lights of the opening extravaganza blasted away pre-games corruption and mismanagement concerns – at least momentarily. As in such extravaganzas elsewhere, the show was rich in representations of history and culture. The principal theme was “Srivijaya: The Golden Peninsula,” referring to the ancient kingdom located near present day Palembang. This was an intelligent choice: not only do the Srivijaya and Golden Peninsula motifs relate to local and national history, but also to that of Southeast Asia and the SEA Games themselves, thereby reinforcing the theme of regionalism.

Yet despite regional cooperation having been a key theme since 1958, when the SEA Games were founded as the South East Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games, the event has not figured in scholarship on regionalism and regional history in Southeast Asia. In one sense, this may be due to lingering ignorance of sport as a meaningful object of political, social, and cultural analysis, though in most parts of the world this has changed. Just as importantly, oversight of the games also points to the absence of culture from studies of regionalism and regionalization, which tend to be dominated by politics, international relations, and economics. Here I sketch the establishment of the SEAP Games and make some preliminary observations of how the event might enhance the study of Southeast Asian regionalism.

Founding the SEAP Games

The SEAP Games were the brainchild of Vice President of the Olympic Committee of Thailand, Luang Sukhum Naiyapradit, a modern-minded noble who in the 1930s had excelled at college sport in the United States. Luang Sukhum wanted to consolidate the increasingly regular sporting exchanges between Thailand and her neighbors in a regional multi-sport event similar to the Asian Games and Olympics, which many countries in the region were now participating in. These countries, he believed, possessed a similar climate and their people a similar “physical appearance” as well as comparable sporting prowess. Based on these similarities, he believed regional sporting games would help the countries to improve their sporting standards and further regional cooperation.



Southeast Asian spectacle: Palembang's Gelora Sriwijaya Stadium lights up during the opening ceremony of last November's SEA Games.



Flags of the 11 competing nations and the SEA Games Federation flag (third from right).

In May 1958, during the 3rd Asian Games in Tokyo, Luang Sukhum proposed the event to sporting officials from Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Malaya, and South Vietnam. The meeting ratified his proposal for a “Little Asian Games” called the South East Asia Peninsular Games, formed the SEAP Games Federation to oversee the event, and planned games for every second year between the Asian and Olympic Games. The inaugural event in 1959 was scheduled for Bangkok in recognition of Thailand's leadership role. Thailand proposed 12 sports for the first games, including athletics, which was made compulsory, and other international sports such as football, basketball, and boxing. In addition, the meeting proposed including the indigenous regional game of *takraw* (rattan ball) as a demonstration sport, and it later became a full medal sport. The meeting also reputedly

coined the term '*sepak takraw*,' a compound of the Malay and Thai names, which has since become the accepted international nomenclature. Although international sports were most common, the coinage and inclusion of *sepak takraw* injected regional content into the schedule.

In Tokyo and afterwards, Luang Sukhum and fellow officials reiterated the two major objectives of the SEAP Games. In an instrumental sense, they would enhance sporting standards in the participating countries, thus increasing their competitiveness in the Olympics and Asian Games. "Our teams are not strong....Our standards are low," Luang Sukhum stated bluntly, and the SEAP Games aimed to reverse this situation (*Bangkok Post*, May 26 1958, p. 6). Secondly, the SEAP Games were established for the purpose of promoting regional solidarity. OTC president General Praphat Charusathian, protégé of the Thai dictator Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, heralded the event as a means of "better[ing] the already existing bonds of friendship among the various member nations of the Games" (*Bangkok Post*, May 12, 1958, p. 6).

A Regional Family

If organizers were enthusiastic about how the SEAP Games would further regional friendship, they were less explicit about the criteria for membership of this "family" (kinship terms were used frequently). Yet there were clearly two considerations. First and most obviously, the SEAP Games were limited to the countries of peninsular Southeast Asia. This principle was relaxed with the last-minute inclusion of Singapore in the 1959 games, which may have been a direct response to Cambodia's withdrawal, apparently due to its dispute with Thailand over the Preah Vihear/Phra Viharn temple (back in the news in recent years). Nevertheless, the peninsular principle remained fundamental until 1977, when the renamed SEA Games were expanded to Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei after communist Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia had withdrawn two years earlier.

Behind the geography, however, were history, politics, and historiography. In the Thai and Lao languages, the SEAP Games were also known as *kila laem thong*, the *laem thong* or Golden Peninsula Games. The term *laem thong* has much in common with Suwannaphum, a mythical "golden land" mentioned in Buddhist texts (and the name of Bangkok's airport, showing how poignant the motif remains). The "golden land" myth has different versions throughout Southeast Asia. In the Indonesian one, which featured in the 2011 opening ceremony, "Suwannadwipa" (golden island) was Sumatra. In the Thai case, intellectuals such as Luang Wichit Wathakan had spent the 1930s and 1940s asserting that the Golden Peninsula/Suwanaphum encompassed all of mainland Southeast Asia and, most importantly, that the martially superior Siamese had historically been the dominant power in the region. "Siam has become the heart of the Golden Peninsula, like Athens was the heart of Greece," wrote Luang Wichit, which had attracted other "races" to settle in there. "All of us on the Golden Peninsula are the same ... [but] the Siamese Thais are the elder brothers," opined one of his characters (Baker and Pasuk 2005: 129). Such irredentism, which was behind renaming Siam "Thailand" in 1939 and the country's invasion of

neighboring "lost territories" during World War II, had faded into a less aggressive expression of regional historical ties in the SEAP Games.

The second consideration, anticommunism, was more obviously political and contemporary. Although Burma and Cambodia were non-aligned, the remaining countries were steadfast allies of the United States. Under the young regime of charming but ruthless dictator, Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat, SEAP Games founder Thailand was the strongest American ally of all. Emphasizing the ideological stance of the event, the only communist country on the Golden Peninsula, North Vietnam, never participated, and the US Operations Mission in Bangkok was approached to help with facilities for the 1959 games.

Culture and Regionalism

The founding of the SEAP Games was a significant step in regional institution building. Although it was not the first regional event or body, predecessors such as the South East Asia League and Southeast Asian Treaty Organization were respectively short lived and had narrow strategic goals under the stewardship of the United States. The SEAP Games preceded the Association of Southeast Asia (1961) and Maphilindo (1963) as well as their more resilient successor, ASEAN (1967), and from the mid 1980s, the Indochinese countries rejoined the SEA Games well in advance of joining ASEAN. In 2007 Timor Leste also joined, reinforcing how the event fosters soft diplomacy.

More important than this diplomatic function, however, was the popular and cultural character of the event. Together with politicians like Praphat, the games involved thousands of ordinary people, from athletes and officials to spectators and fans following in the press. These human interactions, repeated biennially for over half a century now, have combined with cultural features of the format to give substance to the regional themes of the games.

A series of familiar symbols and rituals were adapted in 1959 to reinforce the theme of regional amity. The SEA Games flag featured a light blue background, representing "the water that surrounds, or the sky that covers the Southeast Asian Countries," with six interlocking "bright yellow gold rings ... intertwined to denote friendship, brotherly love and unity of purpose" (Bell 2003). The flame of the first SEAP Games in Bangkok was lit from torches brought from each of the competing nations, so that the games flame symbolically embodied the unity between them. Likewise, the athlete's oath was read as the national team captains draped the six national flags, symbolically unified, over a rostrum emblazoned with the six-ringed SEAP Games emblem. Also adopted were the Olympic procession and assembly of athletes, in which national teams enter the stadium and form ranks on the stadium field. By juxtaposing national and universal symbols, this display "expresses cooperative unity, though a unity of ordered segmentation" (MacAloon 1984: 252). The scale and spectacle of such rituals adds to their cultural force, and contrasts with the staid character of political and economic meetings.



Proud and excited: Lao women's petanque medalists, Palembang, November 2011.

Featuring modern technologies such as amplified sound, sports stadia, and the press – and last year's spectacular in Palembang demonstrated how much further the technology has come – these performances were much changed from those of Clifford Geertz's famous "theatre state." Yet Southeast Asian traditions of political performance surely helped create a captive audience for this kind of display (Creak 2010). Emphasizing these continuities, the opening and closing ceremonies in 1959 were overseen by none other than a young King Bhumibol, then enjoying the early years of the monarchy's Sarit-sponsored renaissance and the rebirth of the Thai theatre state.

Regionalism, Nationalism and Personal Experience

As in the Olympics and similar events, symbols, rituals, and spectacle have combined to reinforce the official theme of universalism. Also as in these events, however, nationalism rather than regionalism predominates in the sporting events themselves and media reporting, as well as in many of the most serious controversies: from Cambodia's withdrawal in 1959 to complaints in 2011 that Indonesia included obscure sports to boost their medal tally (a charge leveled at most hosts). Indeed, nationalism was central in Thailand's use of the Golden Peninsula motif in the founding of the SEAP Games.

At times the pervasiveness of nationalism seems to drown out regional themes almost entirely. But while press reports bemoan the absence of "ASEAN spirit," nationalism does not stop the games' from fostering regionalization, if this is taken to mean the increasing density of intraregional connections and flows. It would be wrong to reduce the event's impact to one of nationalism or regionalism; the SEA Games plainly promote both,

revealing a tension that lies at the heart of Southeast Asian regionalism more generally. The popular and cultural format of the event means that, in the SEA Games, this tension is not abstract but rooted in the personal experiences of participants – athletes, team officials, organizers, volunteers, spectators, etc. – particularly the types of personal interactions they experience and the emotions that their involvement triggers.

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