

Eternal friends and erstwhile enemies: The regional sporting community of the Southeast Asian Games

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Abstract

A paradox lies at the heart of the biennial Southeast Asian (SEA) Games. On the one hand, the region's premier sporting event has consistently celebrated themes of regional friendship and cooperation; on the other, the SEA Games are synonymous with controversy and poor sportsmanship, especially over the strategic selection of sports by host nations. Yet the Games go on – every second year – just as they have done since 1959. In introducing sport to existing debates on regional community in Southeast Asia, this article seeks to understand the key features of the sporting community of the Southeast Asian Games, particularly the emergence and development of the institutions and norms that help this event to thrive in the face of national self-interest. Through this analysis, the article argues for a distinctive approach to regional community in Southeast Asia, based not on notions of unity but principles of reciprocity and exchange.

KEYWORDS: sport, nationalism, regionalism, regional community, Southeast Asian Games, South East Asia Peninsular Games

INTRODUCTION

THE BIENNIAL SOUTHEAST ASIAN (SEA) Games constitute one of the region's longest-running regional events and perhaps its largest in terms of cumulative participant numbers. Since being established as the South East Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games in 1959, almost a decade before the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the event has been conducted 28 times. Yet a major paradox lies at the heart of this event. On the one hand, it has consistently celebrated its regional basis through the rhetoric of regional family, friendship, and cooperation, reinforcing these through localised Olympics rituals and exuberant press coverage. On the other, the Games have become synonymous with controversy and poor sportsmanship, especially over the strategic selection of sports by host nations. Routinely resulting in threats to withdraw, this cynicism is rooted in the perception that the national interests of host countries outweigh the ethos of rewarding superior athletic performance, thus undermining the regional objectives of the SEA Games.

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In spite of the competing discourses surrounding the event, the SEA Games continue to be held every second year. Indeed, far from being diminished by such apparent contradictions, the event has grown dramatically over the past six decades, from six countries and around 800 athletes and officials in 1959, to eleven countries and up to 5000 participants in the past decade. Today the SEA Games typically include 30 to 40 sports and hundreds of events, attracting tens of thousands of spectators and millions of online and television followers. As the spectacle of the SEA Games has grown, estimated budgets have increased to as much as US\$300 to \$400 million, even in countries as poor as Laos (2009) and Myanmar (2013). Whatever one makes of such extravagance, the spectacles that result constitute a giant stage for the popular enactment of national and regional identity.

This article investigates the regional sporting community that has emerged with the growth and consolidation of the SEA Games. My aim is not to build on classical literature on community in Southeast Asia, although such an approach may later prove rewarding. Motivated by the themes of this special issue, the article aims rather to examine the SEA Games in relation to concepts of regional community, which have increased in prominence with the launch in 2015 of the ASEAN Community and its three ‘pillars’: the ASEAN Political-Security Community, the ASEAN Economic Community, and the ASEAN Socio-Cultural Community. While these institutions are named Communities and deploy the language of community, they represent the latest in a long line of institutional agreements aimed at fostering regionalism and regional cooperation in Southeast Asia. Yet they are not the only institutions to pursue such objectives. In a generic rather than institutional sense, the category of ASEAN communities includes other institutions and entities that promote regional relations between the nations that lie in the geographical area defined by ASEAN. While the original SEAP Games predated the formation of ASEAN and initially emerged from different conceptions of the region, the SEA Games – as the event is now known – is a key institution of this type. Like ASEAN, moreover, the SEA Games are intrinsically international in that they constitute a form of regional engagement that also strengthens nationalism.

Introducing sport to the study of regionalism builds on social, cultural, and historical approaches to a field usually dominated by international relations, security studies, and economics. As historian Anthony Milner (2011: 121–122) writes: “Effective region building must give concentrated attention to integrating institutions in their local historical and social context”. In the same way, a wider disciplinary skillset brings a more holistic perspective to the study of regionalism, extending beyond mechanical questions of ‘regional architecture’. Anthropologist Eric Thompson (2013: 289–290) makes a similar point in stating that “ASEAN and the ASEAN way is a belief system as much as if not more than a rational, institutional system for problem solving”, which is brought into being through everyday discursive and symbolic practices. In this respect, the common belief that ASEAN

and Southeast Asia lack a common identity is misconceived: “ASEAN and Southeast Asia have identities and those identities – as organisations or frameworks for political action as well as research – are brought into play in a variety of contexts” (Thompson 2013: 298–99). While we might question the nature and depth of these identities, social and historical methods introduce new ways of understanding how these frameworks and organisations have propagated regional ideas within Southeast Asia itself (see also Thompson and Chulanee 2008).

Although the SEA Games have not been seriously examined in the scholarship on regionalism in Southeast Asia, international sporting relations are never autonomous from other elements of international politics and society. To treat them as such, as sports historian John Hoberman (1995) argues, is to confuse sporting myth with reality. Relationships between regional sporting culture, politics, and society can thus shed new light on regional interconnections. Just as Hoberman’s theory of Olympic internationalism engages with other forms of internationalist thought, the regionalism of the SEA Games must be examined as a form of, and in conjunction with, other forms of regionalist endeavour. In stressing these connections, this article aims to develop an approach that can also be applied beyond sport and will advance the scholarship of regionalism more broadly.

The remaining question is what sort of community has emerged with the evolution of the SEA Games, particularly given the criticisms of the event touched on above. In one sense, the paradox of the SEA Games reflects the special capacity of the Olympics, the model on which all international sporting mega-events are based, to reinforce both national and international identities (Keys 2006). Celebrating dualities such as solidarity and antagonism, and cooperation and competition, such events represent an ideal vehicle for the promotion of international communities of nations. Yet the SEA Games also differ markedly from the Olympics, particularly in certain rules and norms that favour host nations. In this respect, the regional sporting community of the SEA Games is characteristic of ASEAN itself and the way in which it is seen to privilege national over collective interests. To account for these critiques, this article develops a theory of regional sporting community in Southeast Asia that draws on a radical reappraisal of community by Italian political philosopher Roberto Esposito. Taking regional sport as a point of departure, it challenges the assumption that community is defined by unity, proposing new ways of thinking about how national interests not just coexist with but function as a core quality of regional community in Southeast Asia.

THE REGION OF THE SEAP/SEA GAMES

Although Southeast Asia has attracted little attention relative to other parts of the world, sport has long functioned as a means of forging solidarities in the region. Introduced with colonialism to build diligent, disciplined and loyal imperial subjects, Western sports were appropriated by local elites and, after independence, used as a

means of nation building (Antolihao 2015; Creak 2015a).² National governments established mass sport and fitness programmes, formed National Olympic Committees, and inaugurated grand sporting events, such as national games in Indonesia and Laos (e.g. Brown 2008; Creak 2010). Over these decades, sports and sporting events became a major means of promoting imperial and national identification, as well as non-hegemonic identities such as those of ethnic minorities (Jonsson 2003; Emmanuel 2011). In addition to European sports, traditional physical practices were codified according to similar principles, creating the regional game of *sepak takraw* (kick-volleyball) and various ‘national sports’ such as *muay thai* (Thai boxing) and *chinline*, a Burmese variety of *sepak takraw* (Aung-Thwin 2012; Pattana 2005).

The era of decolonisation heralded increased participation in international and regional sporting events. Whereas only the Philippines had regularly taken part in pre-war international competitions, notably the Far East Asian Championship Games (1913–1934) and the Olympics, by the Melbourne Olympiad of 1956, most countries in the region had joined the Olympic and Asian Games.³ The latter event, founded by India in 1951, was especially important for the development of international sport in Asia (Huebner 2016). Like joining the United Nations, participation in these international sporting festivals provided a ‘sign of statehood’, demonstrating membership of the post-war community of nations (Stanton 2014; Creak 2013).

The Asian Games also provided the most immediate inspiration for the South East Asia Peninsular (SEAP) Games, established by the Olympic Council of Thailand (OCT) during the third Asiad in Tokyo in 1958. The founding objectives of the SEAP Games were twofold: (1) to promote better relations among the countries of peninsular Southeast Asia; and (2) to enhance the performance of member nations in the larger Olympics and Asian Games (since athletes would be able to compete against rivals of similar ‘calibre’) (Organizing Committee of the First SEAP Games 1961). In recognition of Thailand’s leading role, the first SEAP Games were scheduled for Bangkok the following year.

The ‘P’ in SEAP reflected the decision to limit the event to the countries of the peninsula: Burma, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, South Vietnam, and Thailand. Self-governed Singapore, although initially overlooked, was added prior to the inaugural SEAP Games in Bangkok.⁴ Over time, however, the participants’ composition changed. Cambodia withdrew from the first SEAP Games in Bangkok due

²For an overview, see Little’s (2010) survey of a wide range of article-length studies. The first academic monograph studies of sport, colonialism, and nationalism in Southeast Asia appeared only recently (Antolihao 2015; Creak 2015a).

³On the emergence of the Asian Games from the pre-war Far Eastern Championship Games (FECCG), see Huebner (2016). Although the Dutch East Indies participated in the FECCG in 1934, the Philippines was the only regular participant from what is now known as Southeast Asia.

⁴Thai sources suggest the organisers of the first SEAP Games wanted to avoid the embarrassment of a subsequent host admitting Singapore. The official reason offered, however, was that the causeway between Johor Bahru and Singapore made it part of the peninsula. *Rai ngan kanprachum kha-nakammakan chat kankhaengkhan kila laemthong khrang thi 2/2508* [Report of meeting of the

to political tensions with Thailand, cancelled the 1963 SEAP Games scheduled for Phnom Penh after taking Indonesia's side in its famous dispute with the International Olympic Committee (Pauker 1965; Lutan and Hong 2005), and again withdrew in 1967 and 1969. Although Cambodia re-joined in 1971 under the Lon Nol regime, all three Indochinese countries withdrew in 1975 due to the communist revolutions. Leaving just four nations as participants, these withdrawals prompted expansion to Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei, and the renaming of the event as the Southeast Asian Games. While Pol Pot's Democratic Kampuchea re-joined between 1983 and 1987, and Laos and Vietnam re-joined in 1989, it was not until Cambodia again returned in 1995 that the Games included the ten countries that, four years later, would make up the ASEAN-10. In 2003, newly independent Timor Leste brought that number to eleven.

For the few scholars considering sport and regionalism in Southeast Asia, this record of unstable participation undermined efforts to build a cohesive regional sporting culture. Sports scholar Charles Little argues that the history of the SEA Games "reflects the lack of overall regional sporting unity" prior to 1995, reinforcing member countries' divergent experiences of colonial sport (Little 2010: 588–589). Adopting a different periodisation but the same logic, French scholar Hugh Tertrais (2003) argues that the event took on a "regional dimension" only with the end of the Vietnam War, when the SEA Games Federation (SEAGF) admitted Indonesia and the Philippines, and membership spanned the insular and peninsular parts of Southeast Asia. Despite the different periodisation, both analyses define the natural and authentic region of Southeast Asia according to the membership of ASEAN (despite its changing complexion between 1975 and 1995).

It is not accurate, however, to suggest regional modes of association that do not conform to ASEAN membership are partial or lacking. As is widely recognised in Southeast Asian studies, the notion of Southeast Asia emerged historically through a range of epistemes and institutions. The standard narrative of this process focuses on politico-strategic institutions: the wartime South East Asia Command; the post-war Southeast Asia Treaty Organization; aborted initiatives like Maphilindo and the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA); the original ASEAN-5; and eventually the expanded ASEAN-10 (Acharya 2009; Tarling 2006). Despite reflecting different geographical conceptions of the region, the SEAP/SEA Games were similar in that multiple and overlapping ideas of the region took time to distil into something more fixed. In 1958, Thai officials and their American advisors discussed the inclusion of Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore, and even colonial British North Borneo.⁵ Although only Singapore joined the six foundation members at the inaugural SEAP Games in 1959, this

Organizing Committee of the Southeast Asia Peninsular Games, meeting 3/1959], 6 July 1959. NAT MFA 94.1/158. *Kankhaengkhan kila laemthong khrang thi 1* [1st SEAP Games], 1958–59.

⁵This consideration is made clear in an untitled and undated report (Feb 1958?) by David Dichter, an American involved in establishing the SEAP Games (see below) (personal collection of Dr Dichter). For the reference to North Borneo, see American Embassy, Bangkok, to Department

consideration illustrated the contingency of the sporting region, as did Malaysia's support for the inclusion of Indonesia and the Philippines from 1967.⁶ In this respect, the initial decision to limit the SEAP Games to the mainland and subsequent changes in participation did not prevent the emergence of a regional sporting culture, but reflected changing ideas of the region this culture applied to.⁷

In Thailand in the 1950s, a prominent idea of the region was reflected in the term Suwannaphum (Golden Land) or its vernacular equivalent *laem thong* (Golden Peninsula). First appearing in ancient Indian texts, Suwannaphum referred not to a specific region but to a "prosperous somewhere in the area" (Thongchai 2005: 116). For nationalist and religious reasons, the Thais and others embraced the term to refer to continental Southeast Asia. The translation of Suwannaphum as 'peninsula' (*laem* in Thai) was part of a later "regional perspective" that emerged with the Cold War (Thongchai 2005: 116). Though shaped by strategic concerns, this regional perspective received expression in a number of proposals in the mid 1950s for cultural and religious groupings (a basis that avoided clashing with Thailand's obligations to SEATO). Open to Thailand's non-communist neighbours, these proposed groupings – including one called the Golden Peninsula Group (*klum laem thong*)⁸ – had the goal of containing Vietnamese communism. Although none of these proposals eventuated, the same regional perspective was referenced in the Thai and Lao name of the SEAP Games, Kila Laem Thong (Golden Peninsular Games). Thus, if the rejection of Indonesia and the Philippines in 1959 was aimed at keeping the SEAP Games "small"⁹ – a decision that undoubtedly favoured Thailand's athletes – the event's restriction to the peninsula also reflected this mode of Thai-centric, anticommunist regionalism encompassing mainland Southeast Asia.

THE REGIONAL SPORTING COMMUNITY OF THE SEA GAMES

If a Southeast Asian regional sporting culture emerged with the evolution of the SEAP Games from 1959, it is equally true that this culture – and the community that emerged from it – was characterised by disunity and disagreement. The first and most obvious example was the withdrawal of Cambodia on several occasions between 1959 and 1969. But even since then, controversies over sporting issues, particularly host countries' selection of sports, seem to make a mockery of official

of State, Washington. Thai National Athletic Program, 13 May 1958. National Archives and Records Administration (United States), Records Group 84, UD3267, Box 111 [Old box 8].

⁶Sieh Kok Chi, interviewed 27 March 2014, Kuala Lumpur.

⁷Little bases his analysis on the only two books to have been published on the SEA Games (Anonymous 1985; Seneviratne 1993), but these are generalist and non-academic texts.

⁸National Archives of Thailand (NAT), Prime Minister's Office 0201.7/221. *Kan ruam klum prathet thai-phama-kamphucha-lao* [Gathering of Thailand-Burma-Cambodia-Laos group], 15 June 2500 [1957].

⁹David Dichter, interviewed 5 December 2015, Linwood, New Jersey.

discourses of regional friendship and cooperation. Given these divisions, what kind of community might the SEA Games constitute?

In sport as in regional relations more generally, notions of community evoke a “unity of unities” or “wider subjectivity”, and are therefore challenged by the appearance or reality of disunity (Esposito 1991: 1–2). Evidence of disunity reinforces the view, common among realist scholars of international relations, that national interests undermine common purpose and the development of intramural solidarities that underpin the formation of regional security communities (Jones and Smith 2006). Such certainties also challenge more sanguine constructivist approaches, which are premised on the basis of a shared identity or cultural imaginary (e.g. Adler 1997). On this basis, despite earlier arguments to the contrary, prominent constructivists concede that ASEAN cannot be said to represent a security community in the strictest Deutschian sense, even though it has promoted a common set of norms and values known as the ‘ASEAN Way’ (Acharya 2009; Roberts 2012).¹⁰ While Acharya and others have invoked Anderson’s (1991) “imagined community” in relation to the regional context, the absence of “deep horizontal comradeship” – a defining feature of Anderson’s framework – highlights the profound differences between national and regional communities, and the weakness (if not absence) of the cultural experiences shared by the latter.

Employing an alternative approach, scholars at the University of Malaysia’s Institute of Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS) distinguish between the big-‘C’ communities of ASEAN institutions, and the organic and spontaneous small-‘C’ communities that proliferate in economic and socio-cultural fields (Lee *et al.* 2008; Tham *et al.* 2008). But if the first of these are formalistic and remote from people’s lives, the second tend to be based on existing trans-border cultures and economies, and limited to particular zones within Southeast Asia (Mandal 2008; Othman 2008). Thus, while small-C communities are certainly more organic and locally rooted than the big-C communities of ASEAN, the spatial metaphor of Southeast Asia is often incidental rather than instrumental to them (Tham and Othman 2008). In short, the notion of regional community remains highly problematic in Southeast Asia despite the ever-increasing rhetoric of the big-‘C’ ASEAN Communities.

An alternative approach can be borrowed from the work of Esposito, who challenges the assumption that community is based on “a unity of unities”. Using an exhaustive etymological analysis, Esposito argues that the Latin *communitas* (community) primarily invokes not the common or collective (*commun*) but relations of exchange and reciprocity between parties defined by difference (Esposito 2010). The etymological foundation of Esposito’s argument is the root *munus*, which relates to an obligation of gift giving as the basis of reciprocal relations: “The *munus* that the *communitas* shares isn’t a property or possession.

¹⁰I have drawn here from the summary by Davies (2014).

It isn't having, but on the contrary, is a debt, a pledge, a gift that is to be given, and that therefore will establish a lack. The subjects of community are united by an 'obligation'" (Esposito 2010: 6). Focusing on these relations of obligation and reciprocity can help us to understand how the SEA Games, and perhaps other regional institutions, function as a form of regional community.

The foundation for relations of obligation and reciprocity is found in the international basis of the SEA Games. A fundamental principle of the Olympics, the model on which the SEA Games are based, is the ordering of human diversity according to discrete and essentialised national units (MacAloon 1981). In this respect, metaphors of Olympic community rest not on the dissolution of national boundaries but on the assembly and reification of the world's nations. Participating athletes or officials, as representatives of their nations, are conceived as 'friends' or members of corporate units such as the 'Olympic family', but rarely as part of a single subjectivity or undifferentiated mass of humanity. As Olympic anthropologist John MacAloon writes of Olympic rituals, rival nations are joined in "cooperative unity, though a unity of ordered segmentation", thus promoting national identities at the same time as they celebrate universal attributes of humanity (MacAloon 1984). Even when idealistic principles of sportsmanship and fair play are usurped, the rules of international sport are based on the agreement to honour both nations and the global community (Keys 2008). In this respect, Olympic sport can be considered "a world language with many dialects, rather in the way that mathematics and music, Christianity and Buddhism, capitalism and socialism are 'world languages'" (MacAloon 1982: 101). The agreed grammar (i.e. rules) of this language structure the communication, in Esposito's terms, that constitutes international sporting communities. These characteristics are mirrored in the adapted ritual and semiotic features of the SEA Games, which similarly assert the place of the nation at the heart of regional endeavour.¹¹

Nevertheless, the SEA Games also depart from this model in one crucial way. Unlike the Olympics, the SEA Games ultimately privilege principles of reciprocity and exchange over those of rewarding athletic excellence. This is clearest in the principle of rotating hosting rights and, more problematically, fostering host nation success through strategic selection of sports, a strategy that is aimed ultimately at securing government funding. Such is the centrality of these features of the regional sporting community that they routinely trump conventional sporting principles, such as athletic merit, fairness, and the equality of conditions of competition.

The event's governing body, the SEA Games Federation, has played the key role in defining, policing, and negotiating this normative framework. The analysis

¹¹Although I have not yet applied this framework to the SEAP/SEA Games, I have done so with the National Games of postcolonial Laos (1961 and 1964), which were based on the SEAP Games. See Creak (2010; 2015a, chapter 4).

that follows draws on nineteen interviews with senior SEAGF officials from ten of the eleven participating countries (see Appendix A), observations of SEAGF meetings prior to the 28th SEA Games in Singapore in 2015, and informal discussions with SEAGF officials during those and previous SEA Games.¹² While subsequent research would be required to understand how the regional sporting community is experienced at a popular level, this rare access to regional officials reveals two crucial features of this community: (1) the ways in which the SEAP/SEA Games have accommodated nationalism by recognising nations as the basis of a regional sporting community; and (2) the SEAGF's normative framework of reciprocity and exchange. The remainder of this article identifies the key features of this framework: the SEAGF, including its emergence, structure and adaptability; the biennial regularity of the SEA Games; the rotation of hosting rights; host selection of the sports; the interpersonal dynamics of the SEAGF's Sports and Rules Committee; 'middle-out' regionalism; and consensus and inequality. This analysis highlights how these features of the sporting community produce – and manage to contain – the central paradox of the SEA Games: the tension between official discourses of friendship and cooperation and the equally ubiquitous discourses of disunity.

STRUCTURES AND NORMS OF THE SEAP/SEA GAMES

The Southeast Asian Games Federation

The regional sporting community of the SEA Games stems primarily from the administrative structure and culture of the Southeast Asian Games Federation (SEAGF, formerly the SEAPGF).¹³ Established at the meetings in Tokyo in 1958 that founded the SEAP Games, the SEAPGF was created from the National Olympic Committee (NOC) or national sports authority of each member country. Each country was able to nominate up to three representatives to the SEAPGF Council, with the leadership positions of president, vice-president, and honorary secretary rotating every second year with hosting duties. In addition, member countries nominated one member each to the Executive Committee and, later, a number of standing committees including the crucial Sports and Rules Committee. Together with its specific organisational features, a key importance of the Federation has been defining and promoting the objectives of the event.

The official objective of regional cooperation was embedded in the founding principles of the SEAP Games. Announcing plans for the SEAP Games in May 1958, the president of the OCT and inaugural president of the SEAPGF,

¹²These meetings, in order, were of the Sports and Rules Committee, Executive Committee and SEAGF Council. They were held on 3–4 June 2015 at the Swissotel Hotel, Singapore.

¹³According to the event's original name, the SEAGF was originally called the SEAPGF and remained so until 1977 when the name of the Games changed. To avoid confusion, I use SEAGF except when referring specifically to the period before 1977.

Lieutenant-General Praphat Charusatien – who was also deputy prime minister and interior minister in the Thai junta – stated that the event sought “to strengthen the friendly relations that happily already exist among the countries that lie in the Peninsula” (*Bangkok Post* 1958). “Only through these brotherly relations”, he informed the US ambassador, “could peace and independence in this area be maintained according to the ideals of the United Nations”.¹⁴ Such objectives were recounted so regularly by officials and in the press as to become the discursive and rhetorical bedrock of the Games. More than five decades later, virtually all of the officials interviewed for this research cited this objective, unprompted, as the core purpose of the event.

Notions of friendship, goodwill, and cooperation were explained by reference to shared cultural, geographical, and physiological characteristics. In a report titled ‘Why SEAP Games?’ vice-president of the OCT and SEAPGF, Luang Sukhum Naipradit, explained: “the various countries in the Peninsula, geographically called ‘South East Asia’”, shared among themselves “a great affinity in practically all respects, such as the way of life and climate as well as of physical appearance” (Organizing Committee of the First SEAP Games 1961: 1).

Behind the scenes, there was also a political and strategic rationale. Although Sukhum is recognised as the founder of the event, the idea for a regional multi-sport event came originally from a US Information Service (USIS) officer, David Dichter, who was also honorary coach of the Thai national track team. A former high school track champion, Dichter carried out his coaching duties in his spare time in the belief that regional competition would enhance performance and promote friendship.¹⁵ These plans were neatly aligned with the USIS goals in Southeast Asia of boosting America’s image, reducing the appeal of communism, and promoting relations among non-communist nations in the region (Frey 2003). Dichter and his superior at USIS argued that the SEAP Games could achieve all three USIS objectives.¹⁶ The goal of promoting regional cooperation also reinforced the Thai policy of containing Vietnamese communism through cultural relations with its non-communist neighbours.

Almost immediately, the idealistic regionalism of the SEAP Games Federation came under challenge from bilateral tensions between pro-US Thailand and Sihanouk’s neutralist Cambodia. In late 1959, just prior to the first SEAP Games in Bangkok, the two countries’ well-known dispute over the Preah Vihear/Phra Viharn Temple flared (Strate 2013). In the face of anti-Cambodian protests in Bangkok, Cambodia withdrew due to the Thai government’s inability to guarantee the safety of its athletes and officials in the “extremely hostile” atmosphere of

¹⁴Letter from Praphat Charusatien to U. Alexis Johnson, 24 December 1959. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Record Group (RG) 84, UD3267, Box124 [Old box 20], (1959–1961), 600.3.

¹⁵David Dichter, interviewed 5 December 2015, Linwood, New Jersey.

¹⁶American Embassy, Bangkok, to Department of State, Washington. Thai National Athletic Program, 13 May 1958. NARA, RG84, UD3267, Box 111 [Old box 8], 600.3.

Bangkok (Réalités Cambodgiennes 1959).¹⁷ Relations between the two countries improved little over the following decade. After joining the second SEAP Games in Rangoon, Cambodia cancelled the third SEAP Games, scheduled for Phnom Penh, when it sided with Sukarno in his dispute with the IOC over the Games of the New Emerging Forces (GANEF) (Lutan and Hong 2005; Pauker 1965). When again scheduled to host them in 1967, it withdrew again, this time resigning from the SEAPGF (Organizing Committee of the Fourth SEAP Games 1967: 14).

Despite these divisions, Thai coverage of the inaugural SEAP Games celebrated the official theme of regional friendship and cooperation. Waxing lyrical at the sight of the opening ceremony, the Bangkok newspaper, *Siam Nikon*, exclaimed that Cambodia, despite its absence, was remembered during this “symbol of love, sportsmanship, [and] friendship of neighboring countries in the golden peninsula region”. “This beautiful and impressive picture” would be recreated in “every country in the golden peninsula, including Cambodia”, which would soon return as a SEAP member (Siam Nikon 1959: 5). While these sentiments were idealistic, such warmth was lacking in other press coverage of Cambodia.

The resilience and adaptability of the SEAPGF was demonstrated again with the withdrawal of the Indochinese countries in 1975 and the addition of Indonesia, the Philippines, and Brunei two years later. Despite these changes in membership and the event’s name, the biennial regularity and numbering of the event continued.¹⁸ Likewise, the SEAPGF simply changed its name to the SEA Games Federation (SEAGF). Despite their withdrawal, the three Indochinese countries remained as members throughout their absences after 1975, and from the early 1980s regularly considered re-joining. Although Vietnam and Laos did not participate again until 1989, it was in fact the presence of Democratic Kampuchea in 1983–87 rather than Cold War divisions between Vietnam and ASEAN that extended their absence during this decade (Straits Times 1983a, 1983b).¹⁹ Indeed, the fact that these countries remained members of the SEAGF during this period was significant given the divisions between ASEAN and Vietnam after 1979.

Biennial regularity

The SEAGF developed a number of rules and norms that would become central to the endurance of the regional sporting community. After the Tokyo meetings of 1958 agreed on a provisional list of thirteen guiding principles, the Federation adopted the formal SEAPGF rules in June 1959. Although these rules were consciously adapted from those of the Asian Games Federation, two distinctive clauses became crucial to the SEAP/SEA Games culture of exchange and

¹⁷For general background on the relationship between Thailand and Cambodia, including the personal animosity between Sarit and Sihanouk, see Smith (1965: 147–148).

¹⁸That is, the 8th SEAP Games in 1975 were followed by the 9th SEA Games in 1977.

¹⁹Also see Sieh Kok Chi, interviewed 27 March 2014, Kuala Lumpur. This version of events can be contrasted with that of Little (2010: 588).

reciprocity. The first of these was the regularity of the SEAP Games, which were to be held “every two years so that they would fall between the Asian Games and the Olympics” (Organizing Committee of the First SEAP Games 1961: 2). This meant the SEAP Games would be held biennially, rather than quadrennially, during odd-numbered years, i.e. 1959, 1961, and so on.²⁰ This timing was aimed at preparing national teams for both the Olympics and Asian Games, the second of the event’s official objectives, and therefore improving the performance of member nations at these events.

In practice, however, member NOCs embraced this logic to differing degrees. Smaller countries, in particular, for whom success at the Asian Games is rare and at the Olympics unrealistic, embrace the SEA Games as the best chance of achieving national sporting success. In this respect, the short-term priority of winning medals can trump long-term objectives. Like the programming of traditional and other non-Olympic sports, discussed below, the focus on winning medals at the SEA Games is controversial, because it threatens to undermine one of the two reasons for the existence of the SEA Games, that is, preparing athletes for the Asian Games and the Olympics.²¹

Long-serving officials nevertheless credit the biennial regularity of the SEA Games with reinforcing regional sporting relations. Specifically, meeting twice as often with a smaller group is thought to enhance intimacy among the ‘SEA Games family’. For example, the vice-president of the Singapore NOC, Tan Eng Liang, stressed biennial regularity as the “unique” feature of the SEA Games.²² Similarly, Steve Hontiveros, honorary secretary of the Philippine Olympic Committee, stated: “people have been suggesting from outside to make it once every four years but the Southeast Asian family loves to see each other every other year. I mean, aside from the Games, the friendship of the Southeast Asian countries is the most important thing”.²³ Based on interviews and discussions with Tan, Hontiveros’ and many of their colleagues, NOC officials reserve a special affection for the SEA Games precisely because they become relatively well known to each other, a closeness they see as being replicated among athletes and other officials.

Rotation of hosting rights

The second major innovation of the SEAPGF rules was – after the inaugural SEAP Games in Bangkok – the system of rotating the host country according to alphabetical order. If a country was unable or unwilling to host, the SEAP

²⁰The Olympics and the Asian Games are held quadrennially, in a staggered sequence, so that the SEA Games are staged two years apart from each other.

²¹As noted above, this observation and the remainder of this article draws on nineteen interviews with senior SEAPGF members from all member countries with the exception of Brunei (see Appendix A). Quotations and other specific details are referenced individually.

²²Tan Eng Liang, interviewed 5 June 2015, Singapore.

²³Steve Hontiveros, interviewed 7 June 2015, Singapore.

Games would be passed to the next country in alphabetical order. Although not mentioned in the rules, countries that missed their turn would retain a standing offer to host if and when they were able to do so. At the June 1959 SEAPGF meetings in Bangkok, South Vietnam proposed replacing this innovation with a competitive bidding system but the proposal was defeated (Organizing Committee of the First SEAP Games 1961: 9–10).

In practice, this system would be applied loosely. After the first SEAP Games in Bangkok, the 2nd SEAP Games took place in Burma in 1961 and the 3rd SEAP Games, later cancelled, were scheduled for Cambodia in 1963. When, two years later, Laos declined to host them due to financial constraints, the 3rd SEAP Games were finally held in Malaysia (formerly Malaya). In 1967, after Cambodia again withdrew when nominated to host, only Thailand was willing to hold the SEAP Games at short notice. As the lack of a suitable stadium delayed Singapore's turn and the three Indochinese countries declined to host them due to the Vietnam War, the subsequent SEAP Games returned to Burma in 1969, Malaysia in 1971, Singapore in 1973 (after the government built a new stadium), and Thailand again in 1975, when the three Indochinese countries withdrew.

As early as 1967, regular host countries such as Malaysia complained that the burden of hosting the SEAP Games needed to be shared more equally. Indeed, a major reason for expanding the renamed SEA Games to Indonesia and the Philippines was to replenish the pool of viable hosts. Although Malaysia agreed to host the Games in 1977, hosting reverted thereafter to alphabetical order: Indonesia (1979, 1987, 1997), Malaysia (1977, 1989), the Philippines (1981, 1991), Singapore (1983, 1993), and Thailand (1985, 1995). While small or poorer countries – Brunei, Burma/Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Laos – did not host them during this two-decade period, they were invited to do so “when ready”.²⁴ Thus, Brunei (1999), Vietnam (2003), and Laos (2009) finally hosted their first SEA Games in the following decade while, in 2013, Myanmar hosted them for the first time since 1969. Although Timor Leste is considered too small to host in the foreseeable future, Cambodia is scheduled to finally do so in 2023, a full six decades after its cancelled SEAP Games of 1963 (Manjunath 2016).

Despite these inconsistencies, officials believe nothing has been more important than the principle of rotating hosting rights to the ongoing success of the SEAP/SEA Games. This principle avoided the costly (and potentially corrupt) process of competitive bidding, and produced a cooperative system for sharing the benefits – and burdens – of hosting. As hosting constitutes the most meaningful act of participation, the system for rotating hosting rights is crucial to the reciprocal basis of the SEA Games.

²⁴Khin Maung Lwin, interviewed 13 December 2013, Naypyitaw.

This significance is demonstrated by three recent SEA Games, when pre-games controversies were overshadowed by the positive spirit of countries hosting for the first time or after a long period of not doing so. In 2009, 50 years after the Kingdom of Laos participated in the inaugural SEAP Games, the renamed Lao People's Democratic Republic finally held the event for the first time. Despite pre-event concerns over a perplexing choice of sports (see below) and the event's much reduced size, the 25th SEA Games in Laos sparked unprecedented popular pride in the country and widespread affection from fellow SEAGF members (Creak 2011). Likewise, when Indonesia hosted the 26th SEA Games in 2011, the first time it had done so since the financial and political crises of 1997–1998, it lived up to local expectations that these SEA Games would return the country to its rightful place as a regional leader in sport and generally. Again, two years later, Myanmar trumpeted its return to regional affairs by celebrating its first Games as host in 44 years (Creak 2014). In each case, the underlying narrative was that hosting the SEA Games finally (or again) made the host country a full member of the regional community.

Host selection of sports

This is not the only way in which the rotation of hosting rights illustrates the norms of the regional sporting community of the SEA Games. More controversially, the same principles of reciprocity and exchange explain the host country's prerogative to tailor the sports programme in order to maximise its haul of medals. Virtually all SEA Games hosts exceed their usual level of performance, with many topping the table. This is no coincidence: while to some extent improved performance can be attributed to the investment of host governments (or foreign patrons) in coaching, training, and equipment, a greater factor is the SEAGF rule that allows hosts to select the sports programme. This is why biennial regularity and the rotation of hosting rights are so important to the sporting community's norms of exchange and reciprocity: over time, all countries will receive their 'gift' of SEA Games success.

This system emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. According to the original SEAPGF Rules, athletics was the sole compulsory sport and hosts could include "as many other sports as possible" (Organizing Committee of the First SEAP Games 1961: 13). A total of twelve sports were included on the roster in Bangkok, all of which were also Olympic sports. In 1965 the programme began to expand when Malaysia included *sepak takraw*, a quintessentially South-east Asian game of foot volleyball (Pradith 1985: 64–65).²⁵ If inclusion of this sport could be easily justified, hosts soon started to add obscure, specialist, and local sports. Writing in 1985, Thai journalist Pradith Nithiyanan cited the examples of running butt shooting (added by Malaysia in 1977), softball (the

²⁵ Apparently this decision followed the example of Japan's successful campaign to include judo in the 1964 Olympics (Pradith 1985: 64).

Philippines in 1981), water-skiing (Singapore in 1983), women's football (Thailand in 1985), and the Indonesian martial art of *pencak silat* (1987) (Pradith 1985: 64). These inclusions constituted corruption, he argued. Despite such views, the practice has taken place on a growing scale since the 1980s, with the number of sports peaking at 43 in 2007 – in Thailand!

Criticism of these practices has intensified in recent years. In 2009, when organisers of the first ever SEA Games in Laos included obscure sports such as fin swimming and shuttlecock while omitting the Olympic disciplines of basketball and gymnastics, leading Malaysian critics dismissed the event as a small and amateurish “community games” (Creak 2011). Two years later, rivals cried foul when Indonesia included roller-blading for the first time, sweeping all twelve events and helping to boost its tally of gold medals to a phenomenal 182. In Myanmar in 2013, organisers introduced the national game of *chinlone*, played nowhere else in the region, as a discipline of *sepak takraw*. Not surprisingly, the host country collected gold medals in all events that it entered, leaving journalists and officials from rival countries incensed (Creak 2014).

Critics argue these practices are unfair and, since local sports are not played at the Asian and Olympic Games, undermine the SEA Games objective of promoting better performances in the larger events. “A new standard or another farce?” posed the *Bangkok Post* after the Myanmar Games in 2013. Why not just make the next SEA Games in Singapore an event of traditional sports, the author wondered, rather than maintaining the pretence that it could be both a celebration of regional cultures and a training ground for the Asian Games and Olympics (Wanchai 2013). The same year, the Philippine Olympic Committee threatened to quit the Federation unless the SEAGF Charter (as the rules are now known) be amended to prioritise Olympic sports (Manicad 2013). Based on such responses, the strategic inclusion of obscure and local sports not only undermines the goal of preparing athletes for bigger international events but sabotages the spirit of friendship and cooperation that is celebrated as the primary objective of the SEA Games.

Well before 2013, however, the SEAGF had already made rule changes aimed at reasserting the original goal of improving performance in the Asian and Olympic Games. It did this by modifying the SEAGF Charter to include three categories of sports: (I) compulsory sports (athletics and swimming), (II) sports played at the Olympic and Asian Games, and (III) other sports. In addition to the two Category I sports, hosts may include as many Category II sports as they wish, but are formally limited to just eight Category III sports. In practice, however, it is customary for the SEAGF Council to negotiate the sports programme proposed by the host country. In addition, host countries can adhere to the letter of the regulation while circumventing its spirit. For example, hosts frequently bolster the programme with relatively obscure Category II (i.e. non-Olympic) sports. A similar pattern occurred in Myanmar in 2013 when, despite it never having been played at the Asian Games, the host included *chinlone* as a discipline of *sepak takraw*, a Category II sport (Creak 2014).

Host countries also bolster their chances by excluding sports they expect not to win. For example, Malaysia announced in early 2016 that it would omit a number of athletics events from the programme of the 29th SEA Games in 2017, as well as established Category II sports, such as canoeing, fencing, judo, and triathlon (Singh 2016). The new secretary general of the Olympic Council of Malaysia (OCM), Ms Low Beng Choo, confirmed that the organising committee was seeking to balance two aims – “to be the best organiser in the history of the SEA Games and emerge as the overall champion” – with the latter being especially important given that 2017 was to mark the 60th anniversary of Malaysia’s independence (Bernama 2016).

As this episode showed, the main reason rival officials accept this practice is because they do the same thing. In a master plan for the 2023 SEA Games released soon after the latest controversy over the 2017 SEA Games, the secretary general of the National Olympic Committee of Cambodia, Vath Chamroeun, asserted that the “top priority of the country’s prime sports body is to considerably boost the medal-winning capacity of Cambodian athletes”. It would aim to achieve this not only by identifying talent and providing the best training possible but by “[including] some of our traditional sports” (Manjunath 2016). While many officials profess to support Olympic sports, all host countries play the system. This is why efforts to stem criticism through modifications to the rules have made little difference.

The SEAGF’s approach is also typical of the way in which it contains conflict through principles of exchange and reciprocity. Rather than seeking to stop the practice of hosts choosing non-Olympic/Asian Games sports, SEAGF delegates recognise it as an essential part of sharing the spoils of hosting. This is because NOC officials understand that host governments, which fund the SEA Games, demand medals to boost national prestige and, ultimately, their political fortunes. Central to the success of the SEA Games, these norms produce an event that is both regionalist and partisan. Mutually dependent, these two characteristics stem from the principle of rotating hosting rights.

A more positive outcome of these norms is the development of a sports programme that is unique to the region and to the SEA Games. While it is well known that *sepak takraw* – a name that combines Malay (*sepak raga*) and Thai (*takraw*) – is played throughout Southeast Asia, it is less well known that the SEAP Games helped to establish it as a standardised sport in the region. The first SEAP Games meetings recommended the inclusion of ‘takraw’ as a demonstration sport in Bangkok and, after efforts by the Association of Southeast Asia (ASA) to draft standardised rules, the sport was added to the official programme in 1965.²⁶ Since then, many more local sports have been included, a

²⁶Association of Southeast Asia, Report of the Joint Working Party on Economic and Cultural Cooperation among Southeast Asian Countries, Bangkok, Thailand, June 1961, p. 9; ASA Standing Committee, Co-operation in the social and cultural fields, 29 July 1963, pp. 1–2. It is not known if the ASA initiative produced the rules used in 1965 and beyond, but the 1963 document stated “agreements to be implemented immediately”.

feature which officials embrace – despite the controversy – as the defining feature of the SEA Games. Naturally, the inclusion of local sports associated with individual countries – for example, *muay thai* (Thailand), *pencak silat* (Indonesia), *arnis* (Philippines), *vovinam* (Vietnam), shuttlecock (Laos), and *chinline* (Myanmar) – can be controversial as they favour these countries. Officials counter that the SEA Games help to promote their national sports in a regional setting. Once again there is tacit reciprocity to this pattern, in that members support the inclusion of national sports on the basis that they are able to do the same.

The Sports and Rules Committee

Given the importance of negotiating sports selection, the key committee of the SEAGF is not the Council or the Executive Committee but the standing Sports and Rules Committee (SRC). The SRC includes the most active and important representatives from each member country. Given service spanning several decades, interpersonal relationships between such figures provide the social glue that helps to hold the SEAGF together. In recent decades, the most important individual has been Malaysia's Sieh Kok Chi, OCM secretary from 1992 to 2015. Having attended his first SEAP Games in 1965 as a water polo player, he joined Malaysia's swimming federation, was elected to the OCM, and was eventually appointed to the SEAGF. In the past 20 years, in particular, Sieh has provided guidance and advice for a number of less experienced host countries, notably Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, and Myanmar, and he is already advising Cambodia for 2023. This has helped him to build strong and lasting relations with the so-called SEA Games family. In helping these countries, Sieh seeks to ensure that as many countries can host as possible, which he sees as the main aim of the SEA Games.²⁷

Based on my observations at the SEAGF meetings in Singapore in 2015, the SRC is characterised by frank and open debate. Although key agenda items might be discussed among key committee members such as Sieh in advance, it is in this forum that final positions on the most contentious issues are argued and adopted. After acceptable compromises are adopted here, decisions flow up to the more formal meetings of the Executive Committee and Council (of which many SRC delegates are also members). In contrast with the open and argumentative atmosphere of the SRC, the formal SEAGF Council meeting – the only one attended by the press – takes on an air of formality and occasion, with no debate at all.

'Middle-out' regionalism

Another key to understanding the sporting community of the SEA Games is the intermediate position the SEAGF occupies between the state and non-

²⁷Sieh Kok Chi, interviewed 24 March 2014, Kuala Lumpur.

government sectors. While the SRC is the most important organ of the SEAGF in administrative terms, the senior office bearers of member NOCs provide crucial links between the SRC and high-level political networks. These men, and occasionally women, often enjoy high-level access in their respective governments, militaries, or bureaucracies. In the early years of the SEAP Games, for example, the OCT president Praphat Charusatien was minister of the interior, deputy prime minister, and a key lieutenant of dictator Field Marshal Sarit Thanarat. While Praphat's deputy at the OCT, Luang Sukhum Naipradit, an experienced civil servant, was the ideal person to organise the SEAP Games, Praphat's political access was crucial for securing Thai and US government support.

This tradition continues today. When during the 2015 meetings in Singapore, Brunei withdrew an earlier undertaking to host the 2019 SEA Games, the secretary general of the Philippine Olympic Committee (POC), Steven Hontiveros, suggested his country might be able to step in as host. But first he would need to "discuss [the matter] with my [NOC] president", Jose (Peping) Cojuangco, an uncle by marriage of the then national president, Benigno Aquino. POC officials considered this access crucial for gaining approval to host the Games, which was later forthcoming.²⁸ While the political dividends of hosting sporting events are well known, especially in authoritarian countries (Creak 2010, Koch 2013), sporting networks such as these are essential for facilitating connections.

The most active members of the SEAGF, usually SRC delegates, thus represent crucial intermediaries between the Southeast Asian sporting community and regional political networks. First, they facilitate vertical linkages between politically connected NOC officials and national sporting communities, made up of sporting federations, athletes, administrators, media, and fans. Second, they provide horizontal linkages between the eleven-country community of the SEAGF. In this sense, the regionalism of the SEA Games is neither top-down nor bottom-up, but 'middle-out' (Lederach 1997). In the field of peace building, this level of interaction is considered effective because mid-level officials maintain important relations with both the political elite and society more broadly. In the case of the SEAGF, these officials broker connections across the region between national and regional sporting officials, as well as politicians and the general population. In this respect, the SEA Games occupy a place between the region's organic, small-'C' communities and the formal institutionalism of ASEAN's big-'C' communities (cf. Lee *et al.* 2008).

Consensus and equality

The organisational culture of the SEAGF – like that of ASEAN – favours informality and consensus over formality and majority rule. Yet consensus should not

²⁸Steve Hontiveros, interviewed 7 June 2015, Singapore; and Julian Camacho, interviewed 11 June 2015, Singapore.

be confused with equality. Based on interviews and observations of the 2015 meetings, ideas are driven by a small number of core countries, namely Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines. Not coincidentally, these countries are also the most comfortable using English, the lingua franca of the Games.²⁹ The remaining members can be divided into two groups: the three middle powers of Indonesia, Vietnam, and Myanmar, the support of which can be crucial, and the four smallest members, Brunei, Cambodia, Laos, and Timor Leste, which contribute little to meetings and discussions. In this environment votes are no longer taken (as, for instance, in 1959). Instead, a coalition of two or three of the most influential officials typically makes propositions and builds support by winning the backing of other representatives, making concessions where necessary to build a consensus position.

The four most influential NOCs mentioned above tend to be most concerned with the original objective of using the SEA Games to improve performance at larger international events. Along with the Indonesian NOC, they also adhere to IOC convention in being formally independent of government.³⁰ Delegates from the most influential countries are nevertheless sensitive to the different national contexts in which NOCs operate. For their part, smaller countries need the SEA Games – especially Category III sports – most of all since they stand little chance of winning medals at the Asian or Olympic Games. Thus, while the most influential countries recognise that fewer traditional sports would result in a purer sporting event, they accept that this would risk driving the smaller countries out of the SEA Games. Again, this balance results in a double commitment to national self-interest and the regional values of the SEA Games.

Ultimately, this balance highlights the value that is placed on the regional community of the SEA Games. While the absence of smaller countries and category III sports would improve sporting standards, it would diminish the regional aspect of the event. That this is not contemplated demonstrates the importance placed on the regional credibility of the SEA Games. This credibility relies upon all countries of Southeast Asia – rich and poor, athletically strong and weak – being included in the event. Even in the face of criticism due to the selection of obscure sports, the SEAGF opts for regional credibility, maintained through a tacit system of exchange and reciprocity, over conventional measures of sporting credibility, such as fairness, standardisation, performance, and equality of conditions of competition. “What are we going to do? Boycott?” Low Beng Choo asked rhetorically when reflecting on the OCM’s resigned acceptance of Indonesia’s 2011 programme.³¹

²⁹On the issue of language, it is noteworthy that Thailand’s Professor Charoen Wattanasin, a member of the Council, Ex-Co, and SRC in 2015, was fluent in English (having been educated in the United Kingdom).

³⁰The NOCs of other SEA Games countries are formally or effectively part of the government.

³¹Low Beng Choo, interviewed 4 June 2015, Singapore.

CONCLUSION

The regional sporting community of the SEA Games has evolved thanks to organisational structures and norms that have developed since the birth of the SEAP Games in 1958–1959. As argued in the second half of this paper, these norms have produced a community based on relations of reciprocity and exchange rather than principles of unity. As exemplified by the ritual kerfuffle over the selection of sports, the SEA Games do not honour sporting principles of fairness and equality – in which case the SEAGF might take control of sports selection – but the principle that every country will have its turn to benefit from a system that promotes the self-interest of host nations. Despite discriminating against non-host countries, this system is considered essential for securing the government support that permits the SEA Games to go on. The losers in this normative framework are not sports officials or journalists, who complain the loudest, but the athletes whose chances of success are structurally weakened (unless their country happens to be host).

What can these features of the regional sporting community of the SEA Games tell us about the nature of ASEAN communities more broadly? On one level, the parallels might seem limited given that the two institutions have developed on different trajectories. The SEAP Games started as a mainland event, extending to the insular nations in 1977 and welcoming back, after a period of absence, Cambodia in 1983 (and again in 1995) and Vietnam and Laos in 1989. By contrast, ASEAN started almost a decade later than the SEAP Games and, until the late 1990s, was limited to anti-communist countries, all of which except Thailand were in the insular part of the region. As a result, in almost 60 years since first being held in 1959, membership and participation of the SEAP/SEA Games has overlapped with that of ASEAN at just two SEA Games, those held in 1999 and 2001. They will do so again only if (or when) Timor Leste joins ASEAN.

As discussed earlier, however, the different geographical makeup of ASEAN and the SEAP/SEA Games illustrates the contingent nature of regionalism rather than more deep-seated differences. With this in mind, the SEA Games and ASEAN have in fact become stronger for one another, particularly since the 1990s, when the SEA Games and then ASEAN embraced the principle of ‘one Southeast Asia’ (Acharya 2012: 214). During this period, the two institutions have invoked one another as mutually reinforcing elements of regional society, with references to the ‘ASEAN family’ becoming a common feature of the SEA Games. In 1997, for example, Indonesia agreed to host them “in order to keep the celebration of the ASEAN Family Games going” (Organizing Committee of the Nineteenth SEA Games 1997: vii). The same year, the official SEA Games song included the following lines: “Although our cultures are not the same we are one big family / We ASEAN together at SEA Games arena to compete is the game” (Organizing Committee of the Nineteenth SEA Games

1997: 33). Not coincidentally, that year constituted a landmark in ASEAN history as Laos and Myanmar finally joined – two years after Vietnam had done so – and the expanded ASEAN adopted its Vision 2020.

Just as ASEAN is as much a regional idea as an institution (Thompson 2013), so too are the SEA Games. Based on my own observations at four SEA Games in four countries since 2009, spectators and officials are more likely to refer to the geographical region as ‘ASEAN’ than ‘Southeast Asia’. Partly this is due to the popularisation of the English acronym ASEAN, pronounced *Ah-si-an*, as opposed to the various structures used in local languages. Through common usage in media and education, *Ah-si-an* has become a ubiquitous and arguably more meaningful geonym than the English term Southeast Asia or its vernacular equivalents (e.g. *Asi tawen ok siang tai* in Lao and *Aesia akane* in Thai). The SEA Games represents a popular institution and event at which ASEAN as a geonym is popularised. Indeed, some fans even refer to the SEA Games as the ‘ASEAN Games’, a term that makes sense given the established awareness of *Ah-si-an* versus *Si* (i.e. SEA).³² As a form of ‘discursive regionalism’ (Thompson 2013), the imagined contiguity of the SEA Games and ASEAN is reinforced among the public. The reverse appears equally true in that the growth of ASEAN’s profile since the turn of the century – including the recent inauguration of the ASEAN Community – has boosted the profile of the SEA Games.

Most crucially, the SEA Games and ASEAN both reify the nation as the means of ordering human diversity in Southeast Asia. In a regional system that privileges national sovereignty, it is the reification of the nation that enhances the importance of accommodating difference over the urge to reinforce, or enforce, homogeneity. As a result of this privileging of the nation, ASEAN and the SEAGF are both maligned as aberrant forms of regionalism. Yet of the two, the nation-building – or *inter-national* – character of the SEA Games seems less problematic. Although controversies fuelled by parochial nationalism attract condemnation, sport is considered the proper site for such expression, and national conflict is accommodated in the Olympic format of the multi-sport mega-event. More than that, this paper argues, regional difference and disunity are diffused in the shared norms of exchange and reciprocity that reside at the heart of the regional sporting community.

This raises a final, if speculative, point of comparison: the norms of reciprocity and exchange that bind the SEA Games look strikingly similar to the much-maligned ASEAN Way, particularly its cherished principle of respecting and strengthening national sovereignty. These norms also bear significant resemblance to ASEAN members’ ‘agreement to disagree’ over the ASEAN Human Rights Declaration, not because they share a common identity but because each country identified different national interests in signing it (Davis 2014).

³²According to Sieh Kok Chi, changing the name would be impossible since international multi-sport events must be named after a geographical designation.

While these patterns may not satisfy definitions of community based on ‘a unity of unities’, they exemplify Roberto Esposito’s deconstruction of *communitas*, which looks beyond presumptions of ‘unity’ and highlights the shared commitment to reciprocity and exchange – between subjects defined by difference – that is embodied in the gift (*munus*). Such an approach may warrant closer examination in relation to the enduring riddle of ASEAN – a Community with no community.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the SEA Games Federation officials listed in Appendix A, whose enthusiastic involvement was invaluable for developing my arguments. The views expressed in this article are nevertheless my own and do not represent those of the SEAGF or individual officials. I am grateful to the Sogang Institute for East Asian Studies (SIEAS) for inviting me to the conference, Assessing ASEAN Communities, in 2015, and to fellow participants for their comments. Generous fieldwork funding was provided by the Hakubi Center for Advanced Research, Kyoto University (2012–2014), and an Early Career Researcher Grant (2015) from the University of Melbourne.

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APPENDIX A INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED WITH SOUTHEAST ASIAN SPORTING OFFICIALS

Name	Position (NOC)	Country	Date	City
Charouk Arirachakaran (Maj-Gen)	Secretary General	Thailand	14 Sep 2012	Bangkok
Khin Maung Lwin (Mr)*	Joint Secretary General	Myanmar	18 Dec 2013	Naypyitaw
			4 June 2014	Singapore
Sieh Kok Chi (Dato)^	Secretary General	Malaysia	24 Mar 2014	Kuala Lumpur
			25 Mar 2014	
Chris Chan (Mr)*	Secretary General	Singapore	16 July 2014	Singapore
S.S. Dillon (Mr)^	Former Secretary General	Singapore	18 Jan 2014	Singapore
Charoen Wattanasin (Prof)*	Vice President	Thailand	4 June 2014	Singapore

Continued

Appendix A *Continued*

Name	Position (NOC)	Country	Date	City
Low Beng Choo (Ms Dato)*	Vice President	Malaysia	4 June 2014	Singapore
Rita Sabowo (Mrs) ^o	President	Indonesia	4 June 2014	Singapore
Tan Eng Liang (Dr)*	Vice President	Singapore	5 June 2014	Singapore
Kasem Inthara (Mr)	Vice President	Laos	7 June 2015	Singapore
Steve Hontiveros (Mr) ^o	Honorary Secretary General	Philippines	7 June 2015	Singapore
Vath Chamroen (Mr)*	Secretary General	Cambodia	9 June 2015	Singapore
Hifni Hasan (Mr) ^o	Secretary General	Indonesia	10 June 2015	Singapore
Laurentino (Mr)*	Vice Secretary General	Timor Leste	10 June 2015	Singapore
Julian Camacho (Mr)*	Treasurer	Philippines	11 June 2015	Singapore
Hoang Vinh Giang (Prof)*	Standing Vice President	Vietnam	12 June 2015	Singapore

NOC: National Olympic Committee

*SEAGF Council Member

^SEAGF Honorary Member

^oSEAGF Honorary Life President