FROM REFLECTIONS OF KAMPONG PLAY CULTURE TO MIRRORS OF MODERN SPORT: THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHYSICAL EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE SCHOOLS
1945-1990

by

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Abstract

The Republic of Singapore is a dynamic and prosperous island state which has seen rapid growth since its independence twenty-eight years ago. It is a multi-racial community that has attracted many immigrants since its emergence as a tiny British colony in 1819. This paper examines the continuation of the traditional kampong play culture into the physical education and sports system of a recently modernised society. Using the oral history archives of the School of Physical Education little evidence is found to support the working hypothesis that the Kampong play culture has provided a contribution to the development of physical education and sport in schools. Rather physical education appears to have been strongly influenced from the outset by the models developed by the British both in elite and vernacular schools. An alternative hypothesis is however adopted, that the play spirit found largely in unstructured sporting contexts was an important element of early post-war physical education which appears to have become lost in the current developments within schools.
Introduction

This paper draws on the resources of an oral history project conducted at the School of Physical Education of the Nanyang Technological University in 1992. One hundred and fourteen interviews were undertaken by students and staff. Interviewees represented selected leaders in Singapore physical education and a wide range of teachers and participants in PE and sport in schools from 1946 to the present. The question considered in this paper is the extent to which an existing kampong play culture has been incorporated into the physical education and sport system developed to serve the needs of a newly industrialised nation state. It has been addressed through the hypothesis that the development of physical education and sport in Singapore schools has reflected a move from a kampong play culture to a more institutionalised and formal model of physical education and school sport.

The nation of Singapore

Singapore entered the nineteen nineties as a newly industrialised economy - one of the little dragons of Asia. It is a modern city state of just over three million people spread over an area of 226 square miles at the very tip of the Malay peninsula. It is a nation that has already sought and achieved excellence in many areas. It can claim for example the world's best airport, the world's busiest container port and the world's tallest hotel. It has set its sights on developed nation status for the next century and few doubt that this will be successfully achieved.
Such achievements are founded on just twenty-seven years as an independent nation, a status that followed a century and a half of colonial rule. Sir Stamford Raffles is recognised and indeed honoured as the founder of modern Singapore. Seeing its potential from its strategic location along the established trade-route from Europe to the far east, he claimed "this swampy inhospitable island"(1) for the British crown in 1819. Under colonial rule the island changed its nature from having a sparse population set in small and scattered fishing villages, to becoming a thriving settlement which attracted immigrants from the surrounding region. The major ethnic groups of modern Singapore - the Chinese, the Indians as well as the Malays, established their traditions in the Straits settlements over this period of time and provided the basis of the multi-racial society that is today's Singapore.

The development of education - background

There is not the space in this short paper to trace the development of education pre-1946. The topic has been summarised by Gopinathan (2). He concluded that the prerogative of preserving British political authority caused official colonial policy to move along ethnically and culturally divisive lines. The result was an educational system that served to divide rather than unite leaving a legacy of bitterness and misunderstanding. Gopinathan summarised the features of the educational system up to the end of the second world war thus (3):
* the existence of four types of schools divided according to medium of instruction

* the existence of government, government-aided and private schools, with the private schools almost exclusively Chinese and English

* a growing sense of hostility between the private Chinese schools and the government

* full government support for Malay medium education.

Post 1945 developments

The thrust of the development of education post 1945 can be broadly seen in terms of the attempt to "build a unified nation out of a plural society"(4). Immediately following the restoration of British rule and the ending of the Japanese occupation, a ten-year programme was introduced by the then director of education, J. B. Nielson. At the heart of the programme were two general principles (5):

1. That education should aim at fostering and extending the capacity for self-government and the ideal of one loyalty and responsibility and that it should be available to all races;

2. The policy will be to provide universal free primary education through the medium of one or the other of the following tongues; Chinese, Malay, Tamil and English.
However Gopinathan concluded that in 1955, nine years after the introduction of the ten-year programme, "the promise of equal educational opportunity aimed at 'fostering the capacity for self-government' seems not to have borne fruit"(6). The picture he sketches at that time demonstrated the interaction between the developments in education and broader social and political developments. It showed four discrete systems divided primarily by language. The English medium system, which served just over one third of the school enrolment; the Chinese schools which accounted for 58% of total enrolments and the smaller Malay (6%) and Tamil (<1%) vernacular schools. The decade had seen a politicization of the Chinese schools which had become linked with communist inspired subversion, in part perhaps associated with perceived discrimination against them in terms of funding. The Malay system although supported by the government was solely primary level as was the Tamil system which was not even supported by its own community. The perception that the English language offered the road to advancement was enhanced by the decision of the Rendel commission to make English the sole language of the new legislative assembly. This led to a further alienation of the majority Chinese educated group, despite evidence that following the assumption of local control efforts had been made to redress the inequitable funding which had benefitted English and Malay instruction at the expense of Chinese language education.

In the 1950s then, Singapore was faced with a situation where Chinese was the language of the majority, Malay assumed
vital importance because Singapore saw its future tied to the Malaysian Federation, yet English was recognised as having vital international and commercial importance. All of this occurred in the context of a search for national identity and shared values. Following the separation from Malaya and the somewhat unexpected assumption of complete independence in 1965, the emphasis on multi-racial unity was strengthened. As a part of this bilingualism was made compulsory in all secondary schools with English a required language. The need to develop a common curriculum and common resources hastened the use of English as a common working language. Now today all students undertake instruction in English and select the mother tongue as a second language.

Thus Singapore has developed a unified education system with English as a common language from a tradition of four separate systems. The benchmarks for attainment are the primary school leaving exam (PSLE), the Cambridge 'O' level and 'A' level General Certificate of Education. The system is selective and highly competitive with entry into the most prestigious secondary schools and junior colleges being based on performance at PSLE and GCE 'O' level respectively. Entrance to the National University of Singapore remains at the apex of the system and the imprimatur of successful achievement. Alternative exit points are offered by the Institute of Technical Education and the Polytechnics.
The British influence is clearly strong, although the developments of the sixties and seventies in the U.K. - child-centred education, comprehensive education have notably been eschewed. There has been rather a continuing emphasis on striving for excellence. To encourage such striving, selected schools have been invited to become independent and charge modest fees to students. These schools are then expected to be the trendsetters in terms of innovation and excellence. In so many features these schools represent the model of the British Public School - prefects, houses, sports days, speech days and the academic curriculum. So too is the doctrine of 'noblesse oblige'. Thus the principal of the secondary school which developed from the founder of Singapore - Raffles Institution, known popularly as RI - discusses the school's destiny:

Stamford Raffles could not have foreseen then, how the island was to evolve historically. Yet he set in place a plan that was eventually to stand the island in good stead in the face of historical developments. What was possibly even more significant was that from the institution he envisaged, even if it grew along different lines, were to emerge people who not only contributed to the progress of the island in a variety of ways, but also stood in the thick of the historic process and shaped the course of events and the very destiny of the island and its peoples. With many of Stamford Raffles' initiatives it seemed as if he anticipated the day when the island he claimed for the British Crown would have to stand alone and face the world.

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Physical Education and Sport

A system of physical education and sport might then be expected to reflect aspects of four distinct traditions. But in
particular one might expect the history of PE and sport in schools to reflect a move from the village culture of the early Straits settlers to the international culture that best describes modern Singapore. This was then the hypothesis for this paper that the development of physical education and sport in the schools reflects a move away from a kampong play culture to a more formal modern sport model.

Kampong play

Popular myth in Singapore looks back to a freer existence characterised by a much more playful orientation. This is exemplified in the recollections of Mrs Theresa Teow, educated in a mission school in the late 1940s. She remembers a very basic physical education in her schooldays which was supplemented by a more informal play outside of school

Yes, I would play softball with the kampong boys in my neighbourhood. PE lessons were simply insufficient for me.

Other interviewees talked of the opportunity to climb and jump and play near rivers and creeks. Yet these reflect the exploratory play of small boys the world over. There are in the transcripts far more references to be found to softball and soccer than to traditional and indigenous activities. Despite some more recent attempts to remember and even revive the kampong games there were very few spontaneously occurring references to them. Traditional games that have been identified include (10,11,12):
a) Sepak Raga  This game uses a rattan ball and is found with several minor variations. Gullick describes one version thus:

A contest between teams, consists in putting each team into the ring to see whether it can achieve a higher number of kicks than its opponents before the ball is missed and falls to the ground. The kick is given with the side of the foot and the entire game calls for much practice and skill.

(13)

In the form of 'Sepak Takraw' this activity has become institutionalised as a sport that has been played in the South-East Asian Games since 1965. This sport is played across a net between teams of three aside.

b) Chaptek (Captehl)  A similar game claimed to be of Chinese origin which uses a large shuttlecock rather than a rattan ball. Again this is usually played as a circle or net game with teams of between two or four players.

c) Main Gasing – or top spinning, is a popular Malay game. Tops are lovingly constructed in different sizes and weights from Malay hardwoods. The competition is to see who can keep their top spinning for the longest. Traditionally contests were held during the season of the rice ripening and the activity was believed to be associated with the bringing of a good harvest.

d) Layang,layang – or kite flying, is still a popular family pastime today. Kites were constructed from rice paper and bamboo and were frequently clumsy and unwieldy. Some children introduced an element of fighting between the kites.
el Changkok A simple board game with a wide currency throughout Asia. It is played between two players on a long (about 3’) board shaped like a boat (or junk). Two rows of evenly sized cups- "houses" - lead to a large storehouse at the end. The players distribute the shells or seeds with the idea of filling their storehouse. In Malaysia it was considered more a ladies game.

Another significant group of games with a more contemporary heritage were children’s games that characteristically used the materials that were readily available in and around the kampongs (14). Thus ‘Bicycle Rim’ - where players would bowl along an old bicycle wheel using a short stick as they completed a race; ‘Tepak Kuda’ which consisted of races while walking on old tin cans with strings attached; ‘Tick-tock’ played with a short stick (20 cms) and a long stick (40 cms) and teams of four to six players. Like a version of T-ball, one team would attempt to hit the stick as far beyond the line as possible with the other attempting to field it.

Although there is certainly evidence to suggest that children play less in their contemporary urban environment, there is little evidence to suggest that kampong games ever featured in the development of physical education and sport in Singapore’s schools following the second world war. To return to Raffles Institution, its physical education and sporting traditions were totally consistent with those of the C19 English Public Schools on which it was modelled. Its chronicler has this to say of the headmaster who guided the school from 1948-1951
Wilson’s strong interest in games led to a school rule being formulated which demanded the attendance, at least once a week, of all boys to support school teams when playing other schools. Wilson himself was present at all school games and the attendance of the boys was taken. Wilson gave the school its strong sports component. Perhaps, being an outstanding sportsman himself, he led the school into the thick of inter-school competitions. He favoured the school’s sportsmen and got to know them personally. Many an earlier principal had extended the school’s sports and games activities but it was Wilson who gave it the tradition of a sporting school. From his principalship onwards there was this great enthusiasm on the part of school teams to win in every competition. This became entrenched in the life of the school and it yet manifests itself. Winning in sport is what the boys relish most. Second place is inconsistent with the whole scheme of things. Wilson gave the Institution that spirit.

Clearly athleticism was well and truly established in Singapore’s leading secondary schools by this time.

Yet similarly, in the less privileged schools, there is evidence that an English style of physical education was in existence. The 1933 syllabus, and particularly its emphasis on systematic and structured exercise seems to be reflected even within the Chinese medium schools, as this interviewee, a young relief teacher at the time, recalls

What activities did you have during the PE lessons?
The usual exercises, trunk exercises, arms and leg exercises, callisthenics and they were more or less the same– and there were some games.

What kind of games?
Relay games, throwing the ball, tunnel ball, skipping – teaching the boys skipping skills. They were at that time very young, 7 to 8 years old. Some of them were not able to skip when they first came to school.
This picture of drill/callisthenics together with a diet of relays is a picture that emerges again and again. To this may be added a helping of a relatively unstructured pursuit of sports such as football and rounders, and the sports day itself. Very few children in this period experienced skilled physical education teaching. Yet frequently expressed were fond memories of participation in self-organised games.

The time was actually when the PE teacher trains those selected for the netball games. Then the rest without potential, we enjoyed our game. We organised our own netball game and that was the time when we had some fun among us. Then we positioned ourselves as the receiver, the attacker, and we had fun playing among ourselves. Though we didn’t have a proper rule or proper game, we just enjoyed shouting among ourselves and having fun. Whereas the others, the good ones, they were trained for the proper game. This was the time when we enjoyed.

(17)

A similar picture has emerged for all the language schools. Although little evidence of a native tradition of games and physical education can be observed, there is evidence of what Lau called "the racial typing of games". Thus Chinese schools were associated with basketball, volleyball and table-tennis whereas English language schools identified more with soccer, rugby and hockey (18). It is indeed interesting that the merger of the Schools Sports Councils became one of the first steps taken to assist the integration of the various language stream systems into a single national education system.

Current developments

The development of physical education and sport in Singapore
schools has to all intents and purposes proceeded steadily but in line with national goals and priorities. By this statement it is meant that physical education and sport have assumed a significant role in Singapore education but never at the expense of the quest for academic excellence. The concern in the 80s and 90s has been for the basic physical fitness of a population that enjoys the comforts of a prosperous and technologically advanced urban lifestyle and places a high priority on academic and economically relevant work. A national College of Physical Education was established in 1984 and for seven years this institution produced two year trained diploma students of a high calibre, who have helped to consolidate the place of physical education in the schools. The College’s successor the School of Physical Education of the Nanyang Technological University has now introduced a four year degree programme and Masters and Ph.D degrees by research have been available since 1992. The Ministry of Education has set manpower targets aimed at bringing a physical education programme taught by qualified specialists or resource teachers to all pupils in primary and secondary schools and the junior colleges.

The government has recently implemented a ten year healthy lifestyle campaign and there is a high level of awareness of the value of physical activity as a component of lifestyle. Yet there still exists within this environment a feeling of marginalisation among physical education teachers. Mr S, a junior college teacher, acknowledges the progress that has occurred but expresses some scepticism.

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I was a student from 1970 to 1980. Now PE is very much different from the olden days. We teach students now how to execute certain strokes and how to play certain games. It's good yes for the students that they're aware of certain things. But how well they take PE and how well they think of PE - you should maybe interview them. I look at it this way. Since PE is not an examination subject, these students take it lightly.

(19)

A senior academic who was interviewed saw the barriers to sporting excellence as being culturally ingrained

I suspect for a vast majority of the younger generation, the role models are still wanting to be a doctor, be an architect and not necessarily wanting to be an Olympic champion - because they don't think they can make it.

(20)

He sees the barriers to a high status for sport and PE as being strengthened and not diminished in the contemporary context

The present generation of parents are far better educated. I feel that the present generation is far more restrictive to sports than the older generation because the former didn’t know. If you said you're going in the afternoon to play football they'll say go ahead and don't care if you play. Now they'll say "Are you playing for your school?" "When are you playing?" and then, "I'll pick you up after work." Sometimes they'll say "Are you sure you're going to play football?" "Haven't you done your homework?" and why haven't they done it.

(21)

Conclusion

Undoubtedly the development of physical education and sport in post war Singapore has seen the arrival of a more structured and systematically delivered PE curriculum which has existed alongside a comprehensive extra-curricular sports programme.
(ECA). There is no evidence of a kampong play culture as ever providing a starting point for physical education in schools. Hence the hypothesis underlying this paper must be rejected. However an alternative hypothesis has suggested itself. There exists in the reminiscences of many of the interviewees a feeling that the rapidly changing lifestyle has indeed wrought widespread changes in the community as a whole which have impinged on the needs of today’s PE curriculum.

I shall say yes, PE wasn’t emphasised. But then now, looking through I look at it this way. Those days compared to now, when we finished school, we’ll go back home and with our fellow friends, we’ll climb trees, fishing, swimming and whatever on our own, or even catching birds. That is our time for PE. Those days we were quite rugged. Now students don’t go back home after school, they stay back for their activities. Some of them have never climbed trees and I’ll say it’s a changing of time. Those days, those kids’ survival instincts were tough compared to now. I’ll give you an example. People have climbed trees, fall down and nothing happens. Now people just jump down from the step-up boards and they break their legs!

What then has been lost in the putting in place of a physical education and sport system in Singapore schools has not been any traditional activities, but rather the more essential spirit of play that was a feature of an earlier environment. This is encapsulated in the recollections of one of Singapore’s sporting greats, C. Kunalan, now a physical education lecturer and still the national 100 metre record holder.

As the years went by, I really missed the PE lessons, because we never went out for PE. But I think we compensated for all these because we played a lot. Our recess was half an hour an hour long, so we had plenty of time to play. We came early to school and
played, inter class on our own, inter-racial. So we had Indians versus Malays, soccer and it would go on for weeks - the rivalry, although we did not bring the rivalry into class or anywhere else. But there were always more Malay boys, so the Indians and Chinese would join up and play against the Malays. Rounders was big, rounders and soccer for general playing. Then there were seasonal games during recess time. Sometimes it would be hopscotch all the while, everybody would be playing hopscotch, I don't know who made the decision. Then suddenly it'll be marbles, everyone will be playing marbles.

(23)

The lessons are clear. It would seem that the missing element of modern physical education and sport is the impromptu play element found in the earlier kampong culture yet now apparently driven out of our modern highly urbanised environment. It is this that physical and sport educators need to revive rather than the actual play forms that existed then. If physical education is to be more than a sterile exercise prescription in the immediate future, this is the priority that needs to be addressed.
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