

# Physical Education and Physical Culture in South Africa, 1837–1966

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**Publisher:** Palgrave Macmillan

**Year:** 2024

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**DOI:** <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2223-0386/2025/n33a11>

## Summary and scope

Francois Johannes Cleophas's *Physical Education (PE) and Physical Culture in South Africa, 1837–1966*, offers a comprehensive historical account through which PE and physical culture emerged within South Africa. The book is an extensive exploration of the philosophical, sociological, and pedagogical underpinnings of PE, which analyses the relations of sport, politics, race and colonialism in particular contexts in the Cape Colony and subsequently, South Africa. The book aims to bridge traditional concepts of physical culture with contemporary educational practices. Through his research, Cleophas critically interrogates how European colonial powers, missionary education, and racial ideologies shaped physical culture in South Africa. The research spans historical evolutions of physical activity, the integration of PE into broader educational goals, and its role in fostering holistic development in learners. This study ranges across the early period of Dutch and British colonialism through the post-World War II era, foregrounding how both sport and physical training were employed as a means of oppression as well as empowerment. The author articulates the relevance of PE in modern societies, grounding their arguments in both Western and Indian perspectives.

## Critical evaluation

The book excels in providing a comprehensive overview that is both theoretically rich and practically grounded. The book's strengths lie in its ability to situate South African physical culture within global trends. Another lies in its interdisciplinary approach—drawing

from philosophy, psychology, sociology and education to present a multidimensional view of physical culture. Cleophas engages closely with international authors, noting, for instance, Andrew Morris's *Marrow of the Nation*, about the way physical culture was shaped by European forces as well as the way in which non-European societies accepted such practices. The inclusion of Indian thinkers and philosophies, such as references to Swami Vivekananda and Gandhian principles, offers a culturally contextualised narrative that is often missing in global discourses on PE. Integrating studies on Muscular Christianity, eugenics and nationalism, Cleophas convincingly shows how South African PE was part of wider ideological contests over race, fitness and morality.

The book is also valuable in its analysis of how PE was racialised. In Cleophas's view, PE curricula in South Africa were moulded by colonial authorities who wanted to discipline colonised populations through physical training. Using archival sources—government reports and records from the mission schools—Cleophas presents convincing evidence of how physical training was imposed on Black and Coloured students and presented as a civilising tool.

The book highlights the institutional and ideological influences without also foregrounding the students, teachers or community leaders involved in PE programmes. A bottom-up approach would shape a stronger story. The work sometimes leans heavily on descriptive content without sufficiently critiquing the implications of the discussed frameworks in real-world educational settings. Some sections could benefit from more critical engagement with current global challenges in PE.

## Methodological analysis

The methodological approach of the book is largely qualitative and conceptual and does not outline a specific research methodology, which is appropriate given its nature as an academic monograph, rather than an empirical study. Educators and scholars might find the lack of empirical evidence a limitation if seeking data-driven guidance for curriculum development or policy-making.

Cleophas's approach is interdisciplinary, drawing from history, sociology and political science. The author employs a narrative synthesis method, where he depends on archival research, going through primary sources like government reports, educational policies and periodicals. In particular, Cleophas draws on materials from the Lutchter Starke Centre at the University of Texas and the private archives of the Olympian Ron Eland, which lend the book historical richness. This is effective for the book's purpose of theoretical exploration,

however, limits its applicability to empirical educational research or policy implementation.

The book also challenges conventional narratives that consider PE as an apolitical, neutral field by tying together historiographical arguments. Previous South African historiography has been criticised by Cleophas for ignoring the social and political aspects of physical culture. The author argues that national identity, gender roles, and racial hierarchies were all significantly shaped by PE.

## **Connections to other literature**

The book builds upon foundational works in PE by figures like Pierre de Coubertin and integrates classical Indian literature, thus, offering a dual heritage approach. It aligns with contemporary texts that emphasise the importance of holistic education, such as works by Ken Robinson and Martha Nussbaum on educational philosophy. The book also forms part of a growing field focusing on the relationship between physical culture and colonialism. It occupies a unique and important space within a growing body of work that has, until now, examined the European and American contexts of physical training and conditioning. The author's analysis also connects with the study of sports and politics in South Africa during apartheid. It lines up with the research of scholars like Christopher Merrett and Peter Alegi, both of whom have examined how sports served as a site of both resistance to and control exerted by the apartheid state. Cleophas's work lays the basis for understanding how colonial-era physical culture policies influenced later apartheid sports policies.

This book is recommended for historians, sociologists and sports academics who are interested in South Africa's colonisation, education, and racial relations. It is a useful tool for anybody researching the connections between politics and physical culture because of its critical analysis and extensive archival research. Additionally, the philosophical framing resonates with books that discuss the ethics and values in education, making it a valuable companion text in interdisciplinary education programmes. The book's engagement with more general concerns of imperialism and social control makes it valuable to global sports studies as well, though South African history experts will find it especially pertinent. Overall, Cleophas's *PE and Physical Culture in South Africa, 1837–1966*, is a noteworthy addition to the field, since it provides a thorough analysis of the ways in which PE served as a tool for colonialism as well as a tool for community empowerment.