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From Ollamalitzli to Pelota mixteca and beyond : the role of globalization in the historical development of an indigenous Mexican ballgame

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Preface

To the general public, ‘The Mesoamerican Ballgame’ is one of the best-known characteristics of the Mesoamerican cultural area. Tourists from all over the world, who flock to Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, and Honduras for the climate and culture, visit archaeological sites and hear about “that game in which they decapitated the winners... or was it the losers?” They see the impressive *juegos de pelota* that have been found and reconstructed in sites like Chichén Itzá, Monte Albán, and Copán and hear the stories that tourist guides tell them about the ritual ballgame. According to these stories, the game was played to please the gods, as a substitute for warfare or as a means of consolidating power and was, according to the tour guides, invariably accompanied by human sacrifices.

Parallel to this general public-oriented discourse, which, as said, most often emphasizes the competitive and ‘bloody’ nature of what is referred to as ‘The Precolumbian Mesoamerican Ballgame’, exists a wealth of scientific studies in Mesoamerican archaeology. These studies document, describe, and analyze archaeological finds, ethnohistorical documents, and iconographical sources related to a hipball game that was called *ollamalitzli* by the Aztecs (Molina 1944[1571]), *tiquija làchi* by the Zapotecs (Córdova 1942[1578]), and, possibly *pok ta pok* or *pik* by the Classic Maya. They have focused on issues as diverse as the sociopolitical role of the ballgame in pre-Columbian society, the cosmological significance of the game, the implements and attire used to play the game, and the architectural development of the I-shaped ball courts inside which the game was played (Borhegyi 1980; van Bussel, van Dongen, and Leyenaar 1991; Castro-Leal 1986; Fernando 1992; Leyenaar and Parsons 1988; Scarborough and Wilcox 1991; Scheffler et al. 1985; Taladoire 1981; Whittington 2001, to name but a few of the most often cited works).

While many of the studies mentioned above have mostly considered ‘The Mesoamerican Ballgame’ to be one specific game played with the hips, others have suggested the existence of multiple (ritual) ballgames in Mesoamerica, including football, handball and stickball (Cohodas 1991; Green Robertson 1991; Stern 1949; Taladoire 2003; Uriarte 2006, among others). While the so-called ‘unity principle’ of the Mesoamerican ballgame is still a matter of debate among archaeologists, the proliferation of different modern-day indigenous ballgames has attracted the attention of archaeologists and ethnographers alike. These indigenous ballgames include, but are not limited to, *rarajpuami*, *carrera de bola*, *pelota purépecha*, *ulama*, *pelota tarasca*, and *pelota mixteca* (Berger 2010; Cortez Ruiz et al. 1986, 1992; Inzúa 1985; Kelly 1943; Leyenaar 1978, 2001; Turok 2000). Whereas ethnographers have focused mostly on game forms as they are practiced today, archaeologists have tried to use these games as evidence for the existence of different forms of pre-

Columbian ballgames in Mesoamerica and to interpret pre-Columbian Mesoamerican iconography (see for example Baudez 2007; Bernal 1968; Bernal and Seuffert 1979; Bernal and Oliveros 1988; Sweezy 1972; Taladoire 2001, 2003). Few in-depth studies of indigenous (ball)games played in Mexico today exist, and even fewer, if any, have studied the historical development of these games or have focused on the social, cultural, and political issues and questions that surround these modern-day expressions of indigenous culture (Padilla Alonso and Zurita Bocanegra [1997], Inzúa [1985] and Turok [2000] are notable exceptions, but these are also limited in scope).

In this dissertation, I trace the history and development of one of these modern-day ballgames, pelota mixteca. Pelota mixteca is an indigenous ballgame which was originally played in the state of Oaxaca, in southern Mexico, but which, due to the extensive labor migration that has taken place over the past century, is nowadays played not only in Oaxaca, but also in Mexico City and parts of the United States. While pelota mixteca is undeniably an indigenous ballgame, which has been played by many generations of indigenous individuals in Oaxaca for hundreds of years, the origins of the game are disputed. While some, including myself, (Berger 2010, 2011; see also Gillmeister 1998) have argued that the game is a Spanish import that was assimilated by the Mixtec and Zapotec population of Oaxaca after the conquest, others have argued that the game is of pre-Columbian origin (Bernal and Seuffert 1979; Bernal and Oliveros 1988), or is a pre-Columbian game which has been influenced by the introduction of Spanish handball games (Taladoire 2003). In the first part of this study, then, I try to answer the question of the origins of pelota mixteca. Is the way the game is played indeed pre-Columbian, is it European, or is it a pre-Columbian game that was modified under the influence of European games? I will approach this question by studying the way pelota mixteca is played today, followed by a comparison of the game to traditional handball games played in Europe since the Middle Ages. From this comparison I conclude that the set of rules by which pelota mixteca is played is of European origin. Subsequently, I will turn my attention to the archaeological record and sixteenth-century historical accounts, in order to examine if there is any evidence of a pre-Columbian game similar to pelota mixteca. In this part of the work I also attempt to come to an understanding of how pelota mixteca came to be a part of the traditional culture of several indigenous peoples in Oaxaca. Answering this question of the origins of pelota mixteca is relevant for two reasons. First, the interpretation of the archaeological record is hindered by the, in my view, erroneous assumption that pelota mixteca had a precolonial precursor. If such a game never existed, as is my contention, analyses and interpretations of iconographic programs in which this hypothesized game is depicted should be revised. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the supposed precolonial origin of the game, which gave the game its status as a 'deporte prehispánico' or a 'deporte ancestral', has profoundly influenced the discourse that was created around pelota

mixteca by the Mexican state, as well as the attitude that young potential players of the game have towards pelota mixteca. As a consequence, it has also affected the number of people that play the game, and its chances of survival in a globalized world. I explore these questions of discourse, the state and the perpetuation of pelota mixteca more profoundly in the second part of this work.

In Part II I focus on the present. Lynn Stephen (2007: 31), in the introduction to her book *Transborder Lives*, says that her goal “is to weave together the personal histories and narratives of indigenous transborder migrants and the larger structures that affect their lives and to highlight their creative responses in many arenas to transborder existence.” I attempt to follow Stephen’s example and try, through personal narratives of players of pelota mixteca, to explore what role issues of identity and community formation play in the way the game has developed and continues to develop and how international migration and globalization have affected both the game and its players. I also examine the relationship between pelota mixteca and the Mexican state, directing my attention to the way that the Mexican government has used sport in general, and pelota mixteca more specifically, in matters of nation building and national identity formation. What type of discourse was created by the state and by the (indigenous) players themselves around pelota mixteca, and how do these discourses relate, contrast, conflict, or unite? How does the appropriation by the state of pelota mixteca, or the lack thereof, reflect broader issues concerning the relationship between indigenous peoples and mainstream Mexican society? What role does pelota mixteca play in ‘the transnational community’, now that the game has been ‘internationalized’, and how have the game and its players been influenced by the onset of globalization?

In this study I attempt to understand the historical development of pelota mixteca over the course of the past centuries, and explore its possible future trajectories. Considering the topic of this study, it is clear that it is, and must be, diachronic in nature. In a broad sense, it seeks to examine the relationship between sport and power in Mesoamerican/Mexican society at different points in time. For the period after the Conquest, it seeks to understand how the game that is nowadays called pelota mixteca was constituted over the centuries as a European game, an indigenous game, and, possibly in the years to come, a Mexican game, through the discourses created around it. Because of the thematic that I attempt to address in this work, this has to be an interdisciplinary study, combining archaeology, anthropology, history and sociology. Naturally, having been trained as an archaeologist, I feel more at home in some of these disciplines than in others. Because of this wide scope, I feel I ran the risk of ‘spreading myself thin’ and producing a study that only scratches the surface of all the topics addressed, rather than a thorough and insightful study of only one aspect. I

will leave it up to the reader to judge if my attempt to answer all these interrelated questions has been successful.

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