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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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CHAPTER 2. Pelota mixteca history and origin

Attempts to study the origins and historical development of pelota mixteca are complicated by the fact that the name pelota mixteca only came into use in the beginning of the twentieth century. Before then the game was called pelota a mano fría or simply juego de pelota or juego de pelota a mano. Hence, to my knowledge, the earliest known document that describes pelota mixteca is a *reglamento*, a rule book, for the game that was written by Espiridión Peralta in 1901 and is called *Reglamento del Juego de Pelota de Hule a “Mano Fría”*². Similarly, a rule book written by Tomás Pérez Bazán and Adolfo Manterola and published in Oaxaca in 1936 is called ‘Disposiciones y reglamento para el juego de la Pelota a mano’. However, players and fans of pelota mixteca, nowadays, know that the game is derived from the game of Mano Fría. Looking at the *reglamento* of Peralta (1901) it is very clear that he is indeed describing pelota mixteca, only under a different name.

To my knowledge, the first time that the name pelota mixteca appears in official documentation is in a *reglamento* from 1947 written by Raúl Bolaños Cacho, as mentioned, the secretary of physical education in the Oaxacan state government. This *reglamento* was published as part of a program that aimed to promote the state’s indigenous sports. At what point the name of pelota mixteca was introduced is not quite certain, but it is probable that the change of the name coincided with the change of the implements used for the hule variety of the game. But what were these changes and what caused them? Below I will give a short overview of the development from pelota a mano fría to pelota mixteca.

From Pelota a Mano Fría to pelota mixteca

The change of the name from Pelota a Mano Fría to pelota mixteca is probably tied to the change of the implements used in the hule variant of the game, which consisted of the creation of a glove used in the game and a change in the size of the ball. These changes were instigated by Daniel Pacheco Ramírez (Fig. 12), a butcher and Pelota a Mano Fría player who lived in the town of Ejutla de Crespo in the southern Sierra region of Oaxaca. In 1911, after having injured his hand while working, Daniel

² Taladoire (2003: 320) refers to this *reglamento* as Peralta (1903), Inzúa (1985: 102) says that the document was written/published in 1905. I follow Pérez (1997), because that publication includes a copy of Peralta’s *reglamento*.

Pacheco sought a way to protect his hand while playing, so that he could still participate in important pelota matches. He found the solution when he cut off two pieces of leather from his saddle and sewed them together. He added two strings to be able to tie the pad to his hand, and this way the first rudimentary glove for pelota mixteca de hule was created (Fig. 13). After playing with this pad on his hand for a while, Daniel Pacheco noticed that he could strike the ball with greater force, giving him an advantage in the game. Appreciating the difference, Daniel Pacheco created a more sturdy leather glove, which consisted of three layers of leather and weighed about 200 grams (Fig. 14). This glove was first introduced around 1915. Because of the advantages that the gloves afforded Daniel Pacheco, other players also started using them, enabling Daniel Pacheco to become a fulltime artisan, producing gloves for pelota mixteca. Around 1920, Daniel Pacheco started to add *pulseras*, little iron rings, to the glove to improve the strength with which the ball could be hit. The next step, around 1930, was to add nails to the glove. This was possible because the glove now consisted of so many layers of leather that short nails could be hammered into it. By this time, the glove weighed around 1500 grams and the small ball made of natural rubber, which weighed about 150 grams, was hit with such force that a bigger ball was needed. Therefore, the ball was made larger and heavier, about 200 grams (Fig. 15).

Until the 1950s, the ball was made of natural rubber and had to be kept in a sock or legging, to prevent it from flattening out. Eight days before a game would be played, the ball would be taken out of the sock and rolled between the hands, to make sure that it would be perfectly round. This all changed when the process of vulcanizing rubber became more widespread and Agustín Pacheco Morga, the son of Daniel Pacheco who had started to help his father in the workshop at a very young age, devised a 'vulcanizadora' with which balls of vulcanized rubber could be produced. The decorations on the gloves (Fig. 16) started around 1960 and were an idea of Agustín Pacheco. He was inspired by the 'grecoas prehispanicas' that he saw in archaeological sites such as Mitla. Ironically, these decorations have sometimes been taken by archaeologists to be indications of the pre-Columbian origin of the gloves used in pelota mixteca.

Because of the advantages that the big glove afforded the players, pelota mixteca gloves kept growing in size until around 1980, when the glove reached a weight of five to six kilograms. With this weight the gloves had reached their limit, since heavier gloves could hardly be lifted to strike the ball and no longer provided an advantage in the game. With these bigger gloves also came bigger balls. A standard contemporary glove weighs around 5.2 kilograms. A standard ball weighs around 920 grams. Still, the weight of the glove depends on the preferences of the individual players, as well as their positions on the court.

At the moment, there are only two people who are skilled in making gloves for pelota mixteca de hule, these are Agustín Pacheco Morga and his son Leobardo Pacheco Vásquez. Even though Agustín Pacheco still visits the workshop from time to time, he has retired due to old age. Around Oaxaca and in the city of Mexico some players of the game have rudimentary knowledge of how to repair the gloves but the only artisans creating the gloves are Agustín and Leobardo Pacheco, following a family tradition. Recently, some artisans outside the Pacheco family have started creating pelota mixteca de hule balls, incorporating new, non-traditional designs (Figs. 17, 18). These 'newcomers' have been rather successful in that many of the balls that are currently used in the USA are made by an artisan from Mexico City. Players have also started to decorate their own gloves in 'modern' ways, especially in the United States. Gloves are now sometimes decorated with the logos of well-known sports teams, for example the Los Angeles Raiders, or with brand logos, such as Nike (Fig. 19). Whether other artisans will start making gloves as well is a question of whether the Pacheco family will be able to pass on the knowledge of how to manufacture these truly unique objects.

Since Pelota a Mano Fría, as the name already indicates, was played barehanded - though Peralta (1901) mentions the wrapping of the hand with a cotton band for protection - the shift to the use of gloves meant that the game could no longer be called Pelota a Mano Fría and thus it needed a new name. If this analysis is correct and the change of the name was caused by the introduction of gloves for the game, the name pelota mixteca was probably introduced somewhere between 1920 and 1930. Why this name became pelota mixteca and not Pelota Oaxaqueña or Pelota Zapoteca, which seems equally probable since the game is played in different areas of Oaxaca and by several indigenous Mesoamerican peoples, is unknown. An explanation is suggested by Leobardo Pacheco Arias (n.d.), who links the choice for pelota mixteca to the prevailing view of Oaxacan archaeology in the first decades of the 20th century. According to Pacheco Arias, after the 1932 discovery of the Mixtec Tomb 7 at the famous archaeological site Monte Albán, the central valley of the state of Oaxaca was thought to have been conquered by Mixtecs at the end of the Late Postclassic period (1300 – 1521). This conquest was thought to have led to a hybrid culture called Mixteca-Zapoteca, based on the introduction of Mixtec cultural elements. As a result, Pacheco Arias suggests that pelota mixteca may have been thought to have been introduced by the Mixtecs at the start of the Mixteca-Zapoteca period, which itself was the result of Mixtec invasions in the central valley of Oaxaca. While this scenario is interesting in view of the attitude of the Mexican state towards pelota mixteca as a 'deporte ancestral' (see chapter 6 and 7), it is not entirely clear why pelota mixteca would have been thought to have been introduced during the 'Mixtec invasion'. In the 1930s, the game was played enthusiastically in many parts of Oaxaca. The invention of the pelota mixteca gloves even took place in Ejutla de Crespo, in the Zapotec part of the state, rather than in the

Mixteca. Additionally, there was no evidence of a Mixtec pre-Columbian ballgame in the archaeological record that would have made archaeologists believe that the game would have originated there. Still, as Pacheco Arias implies, it is quite possible that the name pelota mixteca, rather than being a bottom-up invention, was a top-down imposition by archaeologists or anthropologists, or by members of the Oaxacan state legislature who wanted to promote indigenous and autochthonous culture after the Mexican Revolution.

The hypothesis that the change in name of the game was caused by the change in implements is partly confirmed by an intriguing mention of Pelota a Mano Fría in the extensive ethnographic work of Basilio Rojas 'Miahuatlán, un pueblo de Mexico' (1958-64). In his section on games, Rojas notes that "el juego de pelota a mano fría es el que más adeptos tiene" (1962: 401), followed by a description of the game. Since this work was compiled in the 1950s and 60s, it is interesting that the game is still called Pelota a Mano Fría, instead of pelota mixteca. Additionally, Rojas mentions that "la pelota de guante se jugó mucho en Miahuatlán, teniendo las mismas reglas que la de mano fría, con la diferencia de jugarse con unos guantes que tenían la figura de un ovoide hueco cortado longitudinalmente, y con él aventaban la pelota como se hace con la cesta vasca" (ibid.: 402). This other 'gloved game' was played with a ball made of rubber, which had a lead bullet in its center, to give extra weight to the ball. Rojas notes that Miahuatlán produced some legendary players in this game and that games would be played between Miahuatlán and Ejutla, drawing large numbers of spectators. From Rojas' description it seems that this game is not the same as pelota mixteca. The description of the gloves used for this game make one think, as Rojas mentions, of the 'basketgloves' used for the Basque game of *Cesta Punta*, or *Jai Alai*. These gloves were first introduced at the end of the 19th century by a player of Basque origin living in Buenos Aires called Melchor Guruceaga (Méndez Muñiz 1990:32). It seems that Rojas is describing a variety of *Pelota Vasca* here, which apparently gained popularity over the whole of Latin America. In any case, he mentions that "cayó este juego cuando los trastornos guerreros dividieron a las gentes de nuestro pueblo en el segundo decenio del siglo actual, quedando sólo su recuerdo en la mente de los supervivientes de aquel tiempo" (Rojas 1962:403).

Documentation on the historical development of pelota mixteca

The reglamentos

Apart from the name change, the study of pelota mixteca's historical development is complicated by the fact that there is no documentation of pelota mixteca/pelota a mano fría predating the early twentieth century. The earliest documents concerning the game are *reglamentos*, rule books that describe the way in which the game should be played. These *reglamentos* were written by players,

for players and are simple descriptions of the way the game is played. They also form the only primary sources, if we can call them that, on the game. Naturally, however, they do not tell us anything about the origins of the game, its historical development or about the way the game spread over the state of Oaxaca. In any case, the historical moment in which these documents were drafted and published might be significant for two reasons. A first point is that, in the late nineteenth- and the early twentieth centuries Western sports were introduced in Mexico (see also chapter 7). As opposed to traditional sports and games, which often had rules that differed from place to place and which had no codified regulations, these Western sports were clearly regulated and were played according to standardized rules. The introduction of these sports might have inspired players of *pelota mixteca*/*pelota a mano fría* to come to a clearer standardization of the rules of their game. A second factor that might have influenced the creation of *reglamentos* is that the early twentieth century marked the beginning of labor migration that brought (indigenous) inhabitants of small communities in the Oaxacan countryside to places far removed from their hometowns. When describing the creation of the regulations of American football, a mixture of European football and rugby, Maarten van Bottenburg (1994: 119) has argued that the rules for this game needed to be better-defined and circumscribed than those of its European precursors. According to van Bottenburg, the rules of football (soccer) and rugby were clear enough to English players of these games, because they were based on a long tradition of negotiation and compromise within playing communities. In contrast, for American students who wanted to play these games, the rules were open for interpretation. They had no older, more experienced players to whom they could turn for an explanation of the rules. As a result, the rules needed to be set down clearly, so that all players could agree on the way the game was played. There might be a parallel here between the formation of American football and *pelota mixteca* being played outside of its traditional communities. The start of larger-scale migration in the early decades of the 20th century ensured that similar groups of migrants started playing the game in new locations, and met other players from different source communities, who might not have agreed on the rules. In this new context, clear and uniform regulations for the game were needed in order to be able to play together in a new social setting. Significant in this respect is the fact that the oldest rule book for *pelota a mano fría* that has been found to date, written in 1901, was kept in Mexico City rather than in Oaxaca (Perez 1997).

Anthropological and archaeological studies

Apart from the *reglamentos* that were published in the first half of the twentieth century, which we could term primary sources, several descriptions of *pelota a mano fría*/*pelota mixteca* exist in

ethnographic and archaeological literature. The earliest of these descriptions that I was able to find was written around 1910 by Manuel Martínez Gracida, a well-known author, anthropologist and archaeologist from Oaxaca. In the fifth volume of his extensive publication on the ethnography and archaeology of Oaxaca he describes a ballgame – to which he simply refers as Juego de Pelota – that is played in the city of Oaxaca. From his discussion, in which he uses terms such as *escase*, *botadera* and *raya* to describe the game, it is clear that Pelota a Mano Fría is being described. The court is described as being outlined by cords (*'cuerdas'*), which form the *escases*. Interestingly, Martínez Gracida (1910) remarks that the *pasajuego* of Oaxaca “tenía el suelo enladrillado y tres paredes: la del oeste y sur altas y la del este más baja”. This description refers to a type of court which is outlined by walls, rather than by *escases*. Two variations of this type of court existed, one which only had a wall at the end of the field, which was called *frontón*, the other which also had one or two lateral walls, which were termed *piquete* (cf. Bolaños Cacho 1947; see Fig. 20). Nowadays, these variations of pelota mixteca are no longer played. However, in the first half of the twentieth century, there were at least three pelota mixteca courts in the city of Oaxaca, one which had no walls, one which had only a *frontón* and one which had both a *frontón* and a *piquete* (Juan Rodríguez, personal communication). This type of court was still in use in the 1950s (Grace 1954, quoted in Taladoire 2003), but its use has died out since then. These features are important when examining the possible pre-Columbian or European origins of pelota mixteca, a discussion to which I will return a little further on.

In addition to Martínez Gracida's work, there are only a few mentions of pelota mixteca in ethnographic literature. For Mitla, where pelota mixteca is played today, Elsie Parson's (1936) mentions that no organized ballgames were played in the town before the introduction of basketball in 1935. However, she does mention a game in which boys played with a ball that skipped off their wrist. While it is impossible to determine from Parson's brief mention whether she is talking about pelota mixteca, she might be referring to the game here. Taylor (1960) notes that pelota mixteca was played in Teotitlán del Valle in 1956/7, saying that “there is a game played by the men on Sunday afternoons on a large, dirt court at the southern edge of town. A small, black ball is employed, but the rules of the game were not learned. Informants say that it was learned from the Mixtecs.” Sadly, this information on the possible spread of pelota mixteca from the Mixtecs to the Zapotecs is not elaborated upon. Hence, it is not clear whether this was presented to Taylor as an historical fact or whether it was assumed that the game was learned from the Mixtecs because of its name.

The Handbook of Middle American Indians (1967) mentions that, together with basketball, pelota mixteca was a favorite game among the Chocho, an indigenous people linguistically related to the

Mixtecs living in the north of Oaxaca. For the Chatino, it is mentioned that “a form of handball common in rural Oaxaca is still played, but schools have introduced basketball and volleyball, and teams of older boys compete at these sports” (HMAI 1969: 365). It seems probable that the handball game referred to is, in fact, *pelota mixteca*. Interestingly, the entries for the Mixtec and the Zapotec do not mention any specific sports being played. The only mention of sporting activities that is made in the Mixtec entry states that “group sporting events are limited to acculturated settlements” (1969: 396). Of course, it is no surprise that mid-twentieth century ethnographic descriptions of (indigenous) Oaxacan communities mention that *pelota mixteca* is played, since we know that the game was played by Oaxacan migrants in Mexico City as early as the 1930s or 40s. The lack of interest on the part of anthropologists in the specifics of the game, considering for example the lack of detailed description by Taylor (1960) or the only cursory mention of the game for the Chatino in the HMAI (1969) is, however, noteworthy.

While *pelota mixteca* is not mentioned in many ethnographic studies of the daily life of (indigenous) Oaxacan communities, it is often included in works that focus primarily on the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican ballgame. Mostly, these works are concerned with the architectural, ritual and political aspects of the Mesoamerican hip ball game but do also include a section on ‘the surviving varieties’ of this pre-Columbian game. Apart from *pelota mixteca*, these chapters on contemporary games generally include *ulama*, a hip ball game still played in western Mexico, *pelota tarasca*, a handball game very similar to *pelota mixteca* played in the Tarascan region in Michoacán and Guerrero, *pelota p’urépecha*, a game similar to hockey also played by the P’urépecha (Tarascans), and *rarájpuami*, a sort of race with a ball which is played by the Rarámuri (Tarahumara) of northwestern Mexico (see for example Cortés Ruiz 1986, 1992; Inzúa C. 1985; Sweezey 1972; Turok 2000). While a few of these publications mention that these indigenous ballgames might have been influenced by European games in a general manner (e.g. Turok 2000), the inclusion of these games in volumes on the pre-Columbian game implies that these games are generally seen as being of pre-Columbian origin. Nonetheless, authors working on topics other than the archaeology of Mesoamerica have argued that *pelota mixteca* is actually a game form of European origin, introduced after the Spanish Conquest. Below, I will present a brief overview, in chronological order, of the different views on the origins of *pelota mixteca* that have been set forth in the literature.

Spanish, pre-Columbian, or mixed origin?

Pelota mixteca as a ‘pre-Columbian survival’

Most archaeologists who have dealt with *pelota mixteca* in the past have regarded the game as a tradition of purely pre-Columbian origin. The first archaeologists to mention *pelota mixteca* - apart

from Martínez Gracida (1910), who does not try to relate Pelota a Mano Fría to the pre-Columbian ball game - are Hugo Acosta and Jorge Moedano Koer (1946:366-7). When discussing the present-day survival of the Mesoamerican ballgame, they mention that “los [que juegan pelota mixteca] cuentan el partido por tantos y rayas como en la época precortesiana” (*ibid.*:366), implying that they consider pelota mixteca to be a game of pre-Columbian origin.

Arguably, the scholar most convinced of the pre-Columbian origin of pelota mixteca was Ignacio Bernal, who worked at the site of Dainzú and linked the iconography of that site directly to pelota mixteca. In chapter 3, I will present a more detailed treatment of Bernal’s arguments, for now it suffices to say that Bernal considered the Late Preclassic relief carvings from Dainzú to be representations of an ancient version of pelota mixteca.

The first archaeologist to consider the relationship between European games and indigenous Mesoamerican games is Stéphane de Borhegyi, who, rather than postulating any European influences on Mesoamerican games, notes that “such sixteenth century, European hand-protecting equipment as the loophandled and spiked wooden hand and knee protectors [...] used in the Pallone games in [Europe] were undoubtedly derived from or modified after the Mesoamerican loophandled, spike-studded stone manoplas” (1969:510). He also mentions that some contemporary indigenous games played in Mexico still use a kind of manopla, implicitly referring to pelota mixteca. Clearly, de Borhegyi considered pelota mixteca to be of pre-Columbian origin, having influenced European handball games after the Spanish conquest.

William Swezey (1972) was, to my knowledge, the first archaeologist to publish a research article devoted solely to pelota mixteca. This article contains a description of pelota mixteca and mentions some similarities that Swezey sees between the pre-Columbian ballgame and the 20th century game. Sadly, most of these similarities seem to be inspired more by Swezey’s wish to ‘find something old’ in the game, than by actual research into the details and historical development of pelota mixteca. Some possible analogies between pelota mixteca and the pre-Columbian ballgame that Swezey mentions are the use of *rayas* in pelota mixteca and their similarity “to the ball court markers found in association with the ball courts in Copan and Xochicalco [...], the serving stone of the pelota mixteca [*botadera*] and the circular stone uncovered in the center of the ball court at Monte Alban, [and] the receiving area in the pelota mixteca court and the ends of the Classic ball courts found in Mesoamerica” (*ibid.*: 473). While it is possible that some of these features indeed served comparable functions in their respective games, we will see below that the *rayas* and the *botadera* are typical features of European handball games, and were most probably introduced by the Spaniards after the conquest. Furthermore, Swezey, considering the *manoplas* (or knuckle-dusters) depicted on several Olmec monuments, states that “it is feasible to equate in form, some functions

and some uses the gauntlets used by the player of the pelota mixteca today with the “knuckle-duster” represented by the Olmec “knuckle-duster”” (*ibid.*: 474). However, I have shown above that pelota mixteca actually evolved out of pelota a mano fría, which was played without the use of a glove/gauntlet, and that the glove that is used for pelota mixteca de hule today was invented by Daniel Pacheco in 1911. Hence, we can be sure that this analogy is incorrect.

Lilian Scheffler and Regina Reynoso (1985: 48) also see pelota mixteca as a pre-Columbian game, mentioning that pelota mixteca is one of “los juegos de Pelota de origen prehispánico que subsisten hasta la actualidad”, and that it might be related to a ballgame depicted on the murals of Tepantitla in Teotihuacan. Similar to Scheffler and Reynoso, Cortés Ruiz (1992: 169) hypothesizes the existence of a pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican handball game, from which pelota mixteca must be derived.

Cortés Ruiz’s hypothesis of the existence of a pre-Columbian handball game was inspired by Eric Taladoire’s work on the archaeological evidence for the existence of an ancestor of pelota mixteca (1977, 2003). In his most recent work on the topic, Taladoire (2003) has related pelota mixteca to the *palangana* type ballcourts, which are found in parts of Mesoamerica, most prominently in Guatemala and parts of Oaxaca (also see chapter 3). Even though Taladoire accepts the value of more recent work on the possible European origin of pelota mixteca (see below), he does state that “we can [...] assert with reasonable security that the *Pelota mixteca* can be traced up to late pre-Hispanic times” (*ibid.*: 329).

Pelota mixteca as an import

In contrast to the views presented above, some authors have argued that pelota mixteca is a game of European origin, rather than a continuation of a pre-Columbian handball game. The first to state that pelota mixteca was not a game of pre-Columbian origin was Theodore Stern. In his classic “The Ballgames of the Americas” (1949) Stern mentions that handball games played in contemporary Mexico – like pelota mixteca – are all of European origin, on the basis of linguistic evidence. He argues that, because not one of these ballgames has the word ‘olli’, Nahuatl for rubber or rubber ball, in its name in a 16th century dictionary compiled by Fray Alonso de Molina, they cannot be of pre-colonial origin. We will treat the 16th century dictionaries in more detail later, but I must say that I find myself in agreement with Swezey, when he says that: “this is analogous to saying that today linguistic evidence alone would indicate that football, baseball, and basketball are obvious ball games since the word ball is contained within their rubric, but soccer, rugby, and polo are games that do not employ a ball” (Swezey 1972:471).

A second objection to seeing pelota mixteca as a direct pre-Columbian survival, one which finds its basis in more elaborate research than Stern’s hypothesis, is made by Heiner Gillmeister (1988,

1998). While Gillmeister has not made an in-depth study of pelota mixteca, he argues, on the basis of an exhaustive study of the handball games played in Europe in the Middle Ages, that pelota mixteca is actually a game of European origin. According to Gillmeister (1998), pelota mixteca is part of a family of handball games that originated in Europe in the Early Middle Ages and that evolved into different local varieties, one of which is modern-day tennis. Below, I will test Gillmeister's hypothesis by comparing pelota mixteca to two European games; 1. a detailed description of *pilota valenciana*, a traditional handball game played in Spain today, and 2. a description of a traditional handball game played in The Netherlands in 1430, as described by a 15th-century Dutch writer.

Pelota mixteca and Pilota Valenciana, a comparison

The Rules

Several traditional ballgames still exist in modern-day Spain. One of these games is Pilota Valenciana, which is played in the region around Valencia, in the eastern part of the country. Like pelota mixteca, Pilota Valenciana has several different modalities that vary in playing style, court, and rules. García and Llopis (1991) in their *Vocabulari del joc de Pilota* mention 40 different modalities of play, but for my purposes I will concentrate on three modalities of the game: *Llargues*, *Galotxa* and *Perxa*. The first is normally played outside, the latter two can be played either inside in a court – called *trinquet* in Valencian – or outside on the street.

The most interesting of the three games for comparative purposes is the game of *llargues*. To be able to appreciate the resemblances between *llargues* and pelota mixteca the description that Garcia and Llopis give in their *Vocabulari* is worth quoting at length. This description also includes two definitions of the word *llargues*, both of which are relevant to our purposes. To facilitate understanding, I have translated the text from Valencian into English:

Llargues: 1. A modality of the ballgame, which was more popular in the past and which formed the basis for several other variants of the game. It is practiced on a court of 8 to 10 meters wide, which is divided transversally by three lines, two that mark the limits of the playing field, that of the *traure* [service] and that of the *quinze*, and the third one, the *ratlla de falta*, which is placed between 50 and 60 paces from the service line, depending on the *pacte*. It is played by two teams of four players, among whom the player who effectuates the *traure* is the most important one. The game consists of hitting the ball, always directly from the air or after the first bounce, until one of the teams wins a *quinze* when the other hits the ball outside the *ratlles de quinze*. Its most important and interesting characteristic is the system of the *ratlles* [lines]. The whole game revolves around these *ratlles*, one team

trying to win them, the other trying to defend them. This variety of the game follows the scoring system of *quinze*, game, and match.

2. *a llargues*: general term used to describe the pilota valenciana games, in contrast to the Basque pelota games, which are played against a *frontó* [wall/*frontón*].

(Garcia and Llopis 1991:137)³

Several characteristics of the *llargues* game are very similar to pilota mixteca. In the first place, the size of the court; with a width of about 8 to 10 meters the *llargues* court is about as wide as a pilota mixteca court. The court is outlined by three transversal lines: the *ratlla del traure* (service line) and the *ratlla del quinze* (line of the *quinze*) at both ends, and the *ratlla de falta* (fault line) in between. The distance between the service line and the line of the *quinze*, is said to be around 80 paces, giving the whole court a length of about 60 to 80 meters, equivalent to the older pilota mixteca courts. The fault line that splits the court into two zones is about 50 to 60 paces from the service line, giving us approximately the same division as in pilota mixteca.

Interestingly, Garcia and Llopis remark that the *ratlla de falta* can be drawn somewhere between 50 to 60 paces from the service line, depending on the *pacte*. The *pacte* is described in the same vocabulary as an “agreement in which the two teams establish the conditions of a game, in regards to the rules of the game and the bets that will be placed” (*ibid.*:151)⁴. This is very reminiscent of the *juegos de compromiso* that are played in pilota mixteca, in which the *botadera*, the ‘service stone’, is placed at different distances from the *cajón*, depending on the rules agreed upon beforehand.

Also interesting in this context is the mention of bets (*travesses*) that are agreed upon beforehand in the *pacte*, an indispensable element in Pilota Valenciana and pilota mixteca alike.

When comparing the rules of the game, some similarities with pilota mixteca are directly evident. The game is played by two teams of four players. Pelota mixteca is played in teams of five players in the case of *compromiso* games, but can also be played one-on-one, or in teams of two to four

³ *Llargues*: 1. Modalitat del joc de pilota, més estesa en temps passats, que ha donat origen a unes altres, que es practica en un carrer de 8 o 10 metres d'amplaria i que ve delimitat longitudinalment per tres ratlles, dues que en marquen els limits, la del traure i la del quinze, entre les quals solen haver-hi 80 passes, i la tercera, la ratlla de falta, la distancia de la qual respecte a la primera pot oscil·lar, segons el pacte, entre 50 i 60 passes. Hi participen dos equips de quatre pilotaires, entre els quals qui trau és el jugador més important i consisteix a colpejar la pilota, sempre a l'aire o al primer bot, d'un equip a l'altre, de tal manera que s'aconsegueix quinze quan s'ultrapassen les ratlles de quinze.

⁴ 1. Tracte de paraula en el qual els dos equips estableixen les condicions d'una partida, tant pel que fa al joc com a les travesses, directament o per mitja dels padrins o apoderats.

players⁵. A second similarity is that the game consists of hitting the ball ‘directly from the air, or on the first bounce’, as in *pelota mixteca*. Also, Garcia and Llopis mention that *Llargues* is played ‘using the scoring system of *quinze, joc, and partida*’, reminding us of the *quinze, juego, and partido* in *pelota mixteca*.

One last point is that - as Garcia and Llopis already mention – most interestingly, there are the *ratllas* (or *rayas*, lines). According to Garcia and Llopis the whole game revolves around these *ratllas*, ‘one team trying to defend them, the other trying to gain them, in order to win the service’. As we have seen earlier, this system of scoring points by winning *rayas* is one of the characteristic elements of *pelota mixteca*. Looking at the description that Garcia and Llopis give of the way of scoring *ratllas* in *Pilota Valenciana*, there can be no doubt that both games use the same scoring system:

“*Ratlla*: [...] characteristic of the games of *llargues* and *raspall amb ratlles*, modalities that are sparsely played today, that came about when the ball was stopped before reaching the end of the playing field. At this point a marker was placed and a line was drawn that served as the dividing line in the *disputa de les ratlles*. If the team that played as the *rest* made to two *ratlles*, or one of the teams had *val* [40] and a *ratlle* was made, they would change to the *traure* [service] side. From this moment, the *ratlles* had to be disputed before anything else.”⁶

Clearly, this complicated *raya/ratlla* system is the same in *pilota valenciana* and *pelota mixteca*. While the way a *raya* is formed differs somewhat between the two games, the rule in *pilota valenciana* being a somewhat antiquated version, the way the *rayas* are disputed is, undoubtedly, the same. In this description we also see the use of the words *rest* and *traure*. In *Pilota Valenciana* the team that receives the service is called *rest* (cf. *pelota mixteca resto*). The team that effectuates

⁵ A *reglamento* from 1977 (Plazola 1985), states “son cuatro los jugadores que deben integrar cada equipo”, especially for the games *de compromiso*. This *reglamento* seems to come from Mexico City, and it might be that the rules were different there around 1977. One player from Oaxaca, who played the game in the 1950s and 60s, told me that *pelota mixteca* was played with four people per team, others, however, told me that teams had always consisted of five players.

⁶ “*Ratlla*: [...] 2. a. Situació del joc a *llargues* o a *raspall amb ratlles*, modalitats molt poc practicades actualment, que es produïa quan la pilota, sense arribar al frontó contrari, es deturava en un punt que s’assenyalava amb una marca i servia en la disputa de les ratlles com a línia divisòria del terreny de joc, amb la particularitat que, si l’equip que era al *rest* feia dues ratlles, encara que no s’haguessin produït *quinze*, o una *ratlla* quan tenia *val* (40, MB), passava a *traure* (service, MB), de tal manera que a partir d’aquest moment s’havien de resoldre en primer lloc les *ratlles*”

the services is called *contrarest*, and the player that serves the ball is sometimes called *saque*, though *saque* is actually a Spanish loanword in Valencian (cf. pelota mixteca: *contraresto*, *saque*).

Galotxa, Perxa, and the Dau

The games of *galotxa* and *perxa* are variations on the game of *llargues* that generally follow the same rules, but have one important characteristic that sets them apart. In *galotxa* and *perxa*, an extra line is drawn on the field, creating a zone that is called the *dau*, in which the service has to fall and which has a length of five to six meters. The *dau* in the Valencian games is thus the same as the *cajón* in pelota mixteca. Interestingly, Bolaños Cacho in his *reglamento* (1947), mentions that, “en dos formas se puede llevar a cabo la competencia “partido a largo” [Spanish for the Catalan/Valencian word *llargues*] y “partidos a raya”, esta última es la más usual y se diferencia estriba en el trazo de una línea más en el campo de juego que limita el terreno en donde forzosamente debe ir la pelota al ser lanzada en ‘saque’”. Here we see the same difference between ‘partido a largo’ and ‘partido a raya’, as between the games of *llargues* on the one hand and *galotxa* and *perxa* on the other. The games without the use of the *cajón* (largo) are, to my knowledge, not played anymore in Mexico.

The service and the architectural setting

Whereas the normal service in the Valencian game is called *traure* (or *saque*), varieties of the game that use the *dau* have a different kind of service that is called *ferida*. Apart from the fact that it has to fall inside the *dau*, the *ferida* is distinguished from the *traure* by the fact that the ball has to be bounced on the *pedra* before being hit to the other side. The *pedra* is a square that is marked on the ground on one lateral side of the court, which is placed in approximately the same position as the *botadera* in pelota mixteca and serves the same function.

The *ferida* is mostly used in games that are played outside, as opposed to the *traure* that is generally used in variants of Pilota Valenciana that are played in a court, called *trinquet*. The *trinquet* is an enclosed court that is between 7,58 and 9,90 meters wide, and between 56 and 58 meters long (Garcia and Llopis 1991:103). The walls at the back of the court are called *frontóns*, and the walls at the lateral sides are called *muralles*. Both Peralta (1901) and Bolaños Cacho (1947) mention that pelota mixteca courts can have no walls, only a *frontón*, or a *frontón* and *piquete*, reminding us of the aforementioned description by Martínez Gracida (1910) of the court in the city of Oaxaca. As we can see in figure 12 the *frontón* is the wall at the back of the court, like in the Valencian game. We do not find the name of the *piquete* anywhere in the vocabulary of Pilota Valenciana, but in the description of the *ferida* Garcia and Llopis (1991:118) do mention that “in the trinquet, after having

bounced the ball on the *pedra*, the service has to touch the wall to the right side of the *pedra* in such a way that it hits the wall [*pique* in Valencian] above the *ratlla de la ferida*⁷. This could be a possible origin of the name *piquete* for the lateral wall in pelota mixteca.

The Escases

The lines delineating the playing field in pelota mixteca are called *escases*. Though there is no term resembling *escase* in the Valencian Pelota games, the Basque-Spanish dictionary does have the entry *eskas*, with the meaning “línea en el frontón” (Lopez-Mendizabal 1977). The frontón is a variant of the same family of European handball games. Pelota mixteca, thus, does not only have linguistic resemblances with Pilota Valenciana, but also has traces of the Pelota Vasca/Euskal Pilota games.

Pelota mixteca and Pilota Valenciana, similar games

From the comparison made above, it is clear that pelota mixteca and pilota valenciana are essentially the same game. They use the same scoring system, are played on a court that has similar dimensions and divisions and both games use similar terms for special characteristics of the game. Naturally, some changes have occurred over time which have changed some aspects of the games, causing some difference in the exact court size, some details of the scoring system and, of course, the equipment used for the game. Still, I am certain that pelota mixteca players could easily play a match against players of Valencian *llargues*, without too much confusion. Hence, the question arises, if both games are indeed descendants of the same original game, should we search for the origins of this game in Europe? Or do they share a common pre-Columbian origin, having spread from Mexico to Europe after the Spanish conquest, as was suggested, for example, by de Borhegyi (1969)? In order to answer this question, I will briefly examine the history of handball games played in Europe around the time of the Spanish conquest, arguing that these formed the basis for the modern-day game of pelota mixteca. In the next chapter I will have a more detailed look at the ballgames that were played in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, in order to determine whether any elements of these games might still be present in pelota mixteca or might even have influenced European ballgames.

European ballgames of the Middle Ages

Ballgames in general

⁷ “al trinquet, després de botar la pilota contra la pedra, l’haura d’enviar contra la muralla que té a la dreta, de tal forma que hi pique per dalt la ratlla de la ferida.”

Pilota Valenciana forms part of a group of handball games that have been played in several parts of Europe since the Middle Ages (Gillmeister 1988, 1998; de Bondt 1993, 1997; Breuker 1997; Stemmler 1988). These games share three defining features, which are also characteristic of pelota mixteca: 1. the scoring system; i.e. four winning strikes earn a 'game', 2. the rule of the *raya/ratlla/chaza/kaats/chase*, as explained above, and 3. the game is played by two teams opposing each other, one team being the serving team, the other the receiving team (de Bondt 1997:37). Modalities of this family of sports can nowadays be found in Spain (the different varieties of Pilota Valenciana and Pelota Vasca/Euskal Pilota, and the *pelotamano* of the Canary Islands), Italy (*palla bracciale, tamburello*), Sweden (*pärkspele*), France and Belgium (*jeu de pelote*), and The Netherlands (*kaatsen*) (Gillmeister 1998; Breuker 1997a). The best-known member of this family of sports, though quite recent and not retaining the important *chase/chaza* characteristic, is the game of tennis.

The origin of this family of games lies in northern France where, somewhere around the year 1000 CE, a handball game was played by monks in the cloisters of their monasteries (Gillmeister 1998:ch.1; de Bondt 1997:37; Stemmler 1988; see Fig. 21). This ballgame consisted of hitting a ball back and forth between two persons or teams, trying to score points by getting the ball into the typical arcaded galleries of the cloisters. There is no room or need to go into the history of the way this particular game evolved to become a popular game around the whole of Europe, played by kings, noblemen, monks, and commoners alike⁸. The fact is that, around 1500 CE, a ballgame very similar to Pilota Valenciana was played from Spain to the Netherlands, and from England to Italy. One of the defining characteristics of these games is the so-called *chase* rule (cf. pelota mixteca *chacero*, one who administers the *chases*). This *chase* rule was the basis of the rule of the *raya* or *ratlla*, outlined above. Until approximately the start of the 15th century, this *chase* rule entailed that a *chase* (line) would be drawn at the point at which the ball was stopped after the second bounce. This rule is still used in some modern varieties of the handball game, such as the Italian *pantalera*. The more recent *raya* rule, which is used in pelota mixteca - in which the line is drawn at the point where the ball bounces for the second time, as opposed to at the point where the ball is stopped by a player - originated somewhere in the beginning of the 16th century in France, and spread to Spain from there (Gillmeister 1998: 41). This complex defining characteristic of both *llargues* and pelota mixteca, is thus of European origin. Clearly, pelota mixteca is part of a family of handball games that originated in Europe around the year 1000 CE. A brief comparison between a 15th-century

⁸ For an excellent treatment of the history of these games, see Gillmeister (1998)

description of one of these games and modern-day pelota mixteca shows that pelota mixteca is formally of European origin.

Dat Kaetspel ghemoralizeert

In *Dat Kaetspel ghemoralizeert*, a document written around 1430 by Jan van den Berghe and published in Bruges, the traditional Dutch handball game *kaetsen* is used as an allegory to write about the judicial system of the day (Roetert 1915). While van den Berghe does not provide many details about the way the game is played, some interesting passages in the book give us hints as to the game's rules. Firstly, van den Berghe mentions that the game is administered by a referee who should draw the *kaetsen* (lines/*rayas*) – “so they need two types of servants / one to honestly and well draw the *keatsen* / and he should not draw unfair / more for the good of one party / than of the other”⁹ (Roetert 1915:9). This passage perfectly describes the role of the *chacero* in modern pelota mixteca, who should keep track of the *rayas* that are made. We are also informed about the arrangements that are made for the game beforehand. These are reminiscent of the *compromisos* about bets and rules that are made in pelota mixteca – “the players tend to agree on how they will play / and what the game will do / and how much one will win or lose by playing / and all the like / and to be sure / that one really wants to play / so they tend to wager money or deposit”¹⁰ (Roetert 1915:18). The most significant passages in the work of van den Berghe are found on Folio 20b. and 33b. On fol. 20b. van den Berghe writes, “so they begin their game [...] and the one who wins four *kaetsen* / wins the game”¹¹ (Roetert 1915:42). On fol. 33b., van den Berghe describes the way in which teams change sides, after having drawn two *kaetsen*, like in pelota mixteca – “and when two *kaetsen* have been made / so those that were in go out / and those that were out go in / to win the two *kaetsen* that have been made”¹² (Roetert 1915:XXVII). Finally, concerning the scoring system, van den Berghe mentions that, “before it is said how the game is won by four *kaetsen* / but there it

⁹ “so es hemlieden van nooden te hebbene twee manieren van dienaers / den eenen omme te teekenen wel ende ghetrouwelike de kaetsen / Ende ne behoort niet dat hij onghetrouwelike teekene / meer ter bate van der eenre partije / danne van der andere”

¹⁰ “de kaetsers pleghen overeen te draghene hoe diere dat zij spelen willen / ende wat tspel doen sal / ende hoe vele dat men winnen of verliesen sal metten spele / Ende als zij dies eens sijn / ende van accoorde / daer men zekere spelen wille / zo pleecht men ghelt of pant bij te stellene”

¹¹ “zo beghinnen sij haer spel [...] Ende so wije die vier kaetsen wint / die winnet spel”

¹² “Ende als twee kaetsen ghemaect sijn / zo gaen buten diere binnen waren / ende die buten waren gaen binnen spelen / omme die twee kaetsen diere ghemaect sijn te winnen.”

is not said how [much] the players win with one strike / XV. And this is a little strange that they count or win more / than one / with one *kaetse* / but they win with one *kaetse*. XV. And with two *kaetsen*. XXX/ and with three *kaetsen* XLV. And with four *kaetsen* LX. And then the game is won”¹³ (Roetert 1915:63). All the above mentioned passages could have been taken from a rulebook written for pelota mixteca.

Given that van den Berghe’s description of *kaetsen* dates to around 1430, there is no possibility that the game that he describes was influenced by any Mesoamerican game. Instead, all the evidence points to the fact that pelota mixteca is played according to a set of rules that are of European origin. Apart from the peculiar 15-30-40-game count, the similarity of names of positions and the court size, the *chase/raya*-rule is of such complexity that it seems quite improbable that it would have been invented independently on two different continents (cf. Gillmeister 1988:25).

Concluding remarks

Over the past few pages, I have attempted to show that pelota mixteca is a member of a family of handball games that originated in Europe in the Middle Ages. While this means that the way pelota mixteca is played is of European origin, it does in no way mean that pelota mixteca is not a traditional, indigenous Mexican game. While we know little about when pelota mixteca was first played by people of Mixtec heritage, we do know that it was already considered a pre-Columbian game in the 1940s (Bolaños Cacho 1947), and the name pelota mixteca – obviously indicating a local heritage – was introduced sometime in the first decades of the 20th century. Implements used in the game - such as the glove used for pelota mixteca de hule, the board used for pelota mixteca de esponja, and the balls used for both of these games – are unique items, that were developed locally, and have no equivalents in Europe. I am adding these nuances to avoid the impression that I am suggesting that the formal European origin of pelota mixteca means that it is not a traditional Mexican game. Pelota mixteca is by all standards a traditional Mexican game, the existence of which can be traced back in documentation at least 100 years. Nonetheless, it was definitely played by indigenous and non-indigenous inhabitants of the state of Oaxaca long before its first mention in the literature. Over the course of these many years, pelota mixteca has become a traditional indigenous sport, with unique elements that were all developed locally. The origins of the way the game is played, however, should be sought in Europe, rather than in Mexico.

¹³ “Voren es gheseyt hoe dat tkaesspel ghewonnen es met vier kaetsen / maer daer en es niet gheseyt hoe dat de speelders winnen met eenen slaghe / XV. Ende dit es een ghedeelkin vreemde dat sy meer rekenen of winnen / dan een / met eenre kaetse / maer zy winnen met eenre kaetse. XV. Ende met twee kaetsen. XXX/ ende met drie kaetsen XLV. Ende met vier kaetsen LX. Ende danne zo es tspel ghewonnen.”

But if pelota mixteca is indeed of European origin, how, when, why and by whom was it introduced, why did it become so popular among the indigenous inhabitants of Oaxaca, and how did it come to be seen as an indigenous game, rather than a European import? While none of these questions can be answered in much detail, because of the lack of historical documentation on the game, in the next chapter I will attempt to come to an understanding of the social and cultural processes and conditions that led to the 'creation' of pelota mixteca.