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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 5. Pelota mixteca and the formation of communities

Introduction

The analysis in this chapter is based on a variety of sources. The most important of these are the conversations I had with players of pelota mixteca, as well as a series of semi-structured interviews I conducted in Oaxaca and California between July 2008 and April 2015. These conversations took place around several *pasajuegos* in Oaxaca, as well as in Mexico City and in the cities of Fresno and Los Angeles in the United States. Some of the interviews were also conducted at an international traditional games festival in Verona, Italy, in 2014 at which Mexico was the featured country and demonstrations of several Mexican games, including pelota mixteca and *ulama*, were given. Over the course of the past few years, I spoke to about fifty to sixty players, spectators, relatives of the players and officials of Mexican organizations that promote traditional games and sports. Longer semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten individuals from Oaxaca, Mexico City and Fresno. Because the informal conversations are documented in my own words in my notes and only the semi-structured interviews were taped, in the text below I quote directly from conversations with only a limited number of individuals. While this might seem a small sample, I do feel that this limited number of individuals is representative of a larger group, because the quotes are representative of the many talks I had with players and spectators that are not quoted in the final text. Quotes from individuals who reside in the USA without official documentation are presented under aliases to protect their identity. This is only the case for 'Jaime', 'Ricardo' and 'Pedro'.

Apart from the direct conversations with players, internet articles, Facebook pages and other digital media reports on pelota mixteca formed an important source of information. Newspaper articles not only provided much basic information on when and where tournaments were to take place but also, more importantly, were a source of information on the way the game was represented in the media. In addition, the comments that were published on websites in reaction to articles distributed online provided useful information. Several *quintas* have their own Facebook fan page, which I regularly used and consulted. E-mail and Facebook messages also provided ways to continue conversations with people I had met in Mexico but was not able to visit on a regular basis. Finally, in addition to the conversations and digital publications, government documents, including laws and motions, were an important source of information in trying to

reconstruct the way that Mexico's federal and state authorities dealt with pelota mixteca, and the official national discourse that was created about the game.

The following chapters follow a loose structure that moves from Mexico to the United States and back, starting off, in this chapter, with an outline of how pelota mixteca has functioned and continues to function in the creation of communities, primarily, but not solely, in the context of migration. Subsequently, I turn my attention to the United States and the way that pelota mixteca was 'internationalized' and the role that it plays within the transborder communities that have arisen because of international migration. From this discussion of pelota mixteca and communities follow questions of pelota mixteca and identity. Do the members of these communities indeed all identify in the same way? If so, what does this identity entail and, if not, why not and what are the perceived differences? In the previous chapter I have shown that the way in which identity is constructed has changed significantly under the influence of globalization and that globalization can have homogenizing, hybridizing or fundamentalizing consequences for local cultural identities. Thus, after having examined these questions related to pelota mixteca and identity, I turn to the impact that globalization has had on these identities. In chapter 6, I examine the historic role that the nation-state has played in the increase or decrease of the number of players of pelota mixteca and the way that globalization might impact government policies related to pelota mixteca. The research for this project was conducted intermittently over a period of almost seven years, from 2008 to 2015. As I will attempt to show in the next three chapters, this particular period marked a time of significant change in the relationship between the players of pelota mixteca, on one side, and Mexico's authorities and state institutions, on the other. Because of a marked increase in initiatives that try to stimulate the practice of the game and the interest that politicians have increasingly started to take from the early 2000s onwards, pelota mixteca is very much in flux. I have tried to capture and understand this moment of change in the chapters below, but because of the ongoing nature of these processes, it is difficult to say anything definitive on the eventual outcomes of current events. In the conclusions and in the final reflections I have tried to sketch some possible scenarios for the future.

Pelota mixteca and the formation of communities

The traditional setting for important games of pelota mixteca is a village's *fiesta patronal*. In honor of the patron saint, festivities would include a tournament in which *quintas* from other villages and towns would compete for the prizes. However, as is the case today, the patron saint's festivities were most certainly not the only times that important games were played. Important tournaments were also organized around general holidays. The Guelaguetza tournament, that is

organized each year in the city of Oaxaca and brings together teams from the whole state as well as from Mexico City, is one of the biggest tournaments currently organized. Traditionally, the time around Easter was also an occasion at which large tournaments would be organized. These Easter tournaments in communities in the state of Oaxaca were already visited by *quintas* from Mexico City in the early 1950s, as evidenced by newspaper articles from those days.

Apart from these traditional occasions for fiestas and tournaments, as well as the *compromiso* matches which could be organized at any moment but were also often clustered around important holidays, tournaments were sometimes organized for special reasons. An amusing example was narrated to me in Fresno in 2012 by Don Marino, a migrant from Jaltepec who has lived in the US since the early 1970s and who was one of the first migrants in California to play *pelota mixteca*:

DON MARINO

“Yo me acuerdo, pa’ narrarles una pequeña historia, en Jaltepec estaban dos viejillos que jugaron en su juventud. Yo tendría 18 años. Y esos dos viejillos se hicieron de palabras en el pueblo, “No que cuando yo jugaba [te ganaba]” y el otro dice “Don Arturo, no pero que yo te ganaba a ti”. Dice el otro señor, le decían el Plutarco, dice “No, que Taco, yo te ganaba”. Ya estaban viejitos y estaban reumáticos ya tenían sus años. Y entonces dice Doña Lola, la que es la hermana de Don Arturo. “Pa’ que no se están haciendo de palabras no más, pa’l trece de julio van a jugar ustedes.” ... Entonces Doña Lola mató cuatro chivos, y se hizo el deporte. ... Y se hizo una fiesta en grande. En aquél entonces me acuerdo que estaba[n] ... todos los equipos grandes jugando. Fue un torneo, fue un gran torneo. No fue un juego. No más para quitarse los viejitos para andarse hablando uno a otro. Así fue como se dijeron. Y el equipo que ganó fue el de Don Arturo. Pero ganó el equipo de Don Arturo, no Don Arturo. Porque [Don Arturo y Don Plutarco] echaron no mas así [como reumáticos].”

For Don Marino, this example of a tournament, which was organized only to settle a discussion between two old men, is not just an amusing memory and an anecdote on the history of *pelota mixteca*, but an example of what he thinks is the essence of the game, a starting point to promote the game nowadays and ensure its survival and revitalization. He started the above story by saying:

DON MARINO

“Tenemos que empezar a preservarlo como era el original. El original del deporte era fiestas. Cuando se jugaba pelota, se jugaba por fiestas. ... Eran fiestas, era barbacoa, era con todo y no se vendía nada. Todo era gratis. ... Y se ha ido perdiendo a causa de que no le estamos dando la promoción correcta. ... Porque como se comienza a restaurar las cosas? Recordando la raíz. Esto no comenzó con balazos, no comenzó con pleitos. Comenzó con gozo, con fiestas, con barbacoas. Así fue como comenzó la pelota. Así es como llegó aquí [a Fresno].”

To Don Marino, the essence of playing pelota, of participating in tournaments, be it as a player or as a spectator, is *convivencia*. It is being together in a festive atmosphere, sharing in food and drink and playing together, while playing against each other. This does not mean that every pelota mixteca tournament is always a happy affair in which there is no disagreement between players, teams or spectators. After all, pelota mixteca remains a sport, which brings with it the highly emotionally charged atmosphere of any sports competition, especially when big games are being played and significant amounts of money are bet. However, through being together, following a tournament circuit and the exchange of teams, games create *convivencia*. Food and drink play an important part in the creation of this *convivencia*. Enjoying a large meal together after a tournament is customary at many traditional tournaments and matches. Often only the competing teams are invited to these meals, but sometimes spectators and others are also invited to partake. For example, in 2009 and 2010, Leobardo Pacheco organized a large tournament as an alternative to the traditional Guelaguetza tournament, in which he invited over 30 *quintas* to come and play at the *pasajuego* of his team in Santa Cruz Amilpas. At the end of the tournament, a large *comida* was organized for the teams (more than 150 individuals in total) and all the participants received a prize. These prizes ranged from a ball for the losing teams to cash prizes for the winners of the tournaments. In his description of the tournament and the meal afterwards, Leobardo used the word *convivencia* several times to describe the importance of bringing all the players together in a meal and awarding a prize to all the participants, not only to the winners. Similarly, in a newspaper article reporting on a tournament that took place in Minas Llano Verde, in the municipality of San Jerónimo Sosola, the author writes “al término del torneo se llevó a cabo *una convivencia* entre los jugadores de las diversas quintas participantes”, and when announcing that another tournament will take place in a few weeks time in Tamazulapam, says “habrá una bolsa de 2 mil pesos en efectivo y también se cerrará con *la acostumbrada convivencia*” (Sánchez León 2011b: 1 my emphasis). Still, *convivencia* not only entails parties, food and drink that accompany the games and tournaments, but also a sense of being part of a community, which is created through a shared interest in the game.

Convivencia is also what is at the basis of the exchanges between teams from different communities for the *partidos de compromiso* and the *fiestas patronales*. The relations between communities have to be good in order for teams to be exchanged. An example is described by Philip Dennis in his ethnography of an inter-village conflict between the towns of San Andres Amilpas and Santo Tomas Soyaltepec (1973)¹⁷. The conflict between the two towns arose after the murder of a man from one of the communities. Members of the other community were accused of the murder, but were never sentenced. Before this conflict, *pelota mixteca* teams from both communities would customarily visit the other community on the occasion of their *fiesta patronal* and compete in a game. After the conflict arose, however, teams were not exchanged for many years and the traditional *pelota mixteca* contest did not take place. Clearly, while, on the one hand, *pelota mixteca* creates a community of its own, on the other hand, this community is also disrupted by and subject to the relationships that exist between different communities on a larger scale.

It is not only to Don Marino and the inhabitants of the villages described by Dennis (1973) that *convivencia*, creating community, is one of the most important aspects of playing *pelota mixteca* and coming to see the games. In a newspaper article describing the introduction of classes of *pelota mixteca* at the Colegio de Bachilleres de Oaxaca (COBAO), one of the students, who does not have a family background in *pelota mixteca* and had never played the sport before it was presented to him during his studies, explains his choice to start learning the game: "Nos llamó mucho la atención, yo ya voy en sexto semestre y estoy por empezar la carrera académica. He elegido estudiar una licenciatura en deportes y quiero enseñar el juego de pelota a los niños ... Este juego es de mucha *convivencia* y me parece muy sano" (Sanchez Leon 2011: 1, my emphasis). Similarly, Alfonso Ramírez Ríos, a member of the organizational committee of the tournament that is held in Bajos de Chila (Oaxaca) says of the event that it is "más que un torneo, es una reunión de amigos que vienen desde muy lejos para convivir con nosotros" (Torretera 2012). The Bajos de Chila tournament, which is organized annually in February around the patron saint's day of the community, is one of the three most important tournaments in the *pelota mixteca* calendar and draws players from the whole of Oaxaca, Mexico City, and, occasionally, even from the United States. Still, in the quote above, we see that even a tournament of this magnitude, one of only a handful that actually brings together *quintas* from all of the places in which the game is played, is described by an organizer as 'a meeting of friends', coming together to take part in the *convivencia*. Clearly, the aspect of *convivencia*, the creation of community, of being together with your fellow

¹⁷ The book was reissued in 1987, in which the names of the towns were changed to San Andres Zautla and Santo Tomas Mazaltepec.

players, your *paisanos*, the friends whom you have not seen for a long time, is one of the principal reasons for players and spectators to go to tournaments and to participate in pelota mixteca.

'Back home' in Mexico, the *convivencia* aspect of pelota mixteca is significant because it creates communities of players and spectators, as well as strengthening the ties between villages and towns that compete against each other. Naturally, *convivencia*, the feeling of being part of a community, is even more important for migrants who have moved away from their home communities, and try to embed themselves into new social structures in a new, often hostile, environment. To many migrants, who are away from home and regularly confront difficult socio-economic circumstances, going to see a game of *pelota mixteca* provides the opportunity to come together with family, friends and *paisanos*. The *pasajuego* functions as a meeting place for people from the same background. In the words of Marcelo Carreño, a Oaxacan migrant who lives near Dallas, Texas, and is one of the first pelota mixteca players in Dallas, "I knew about pelota mixteca, but I am only starting to play it now. We get together after work. We spend time playing and sharing memories of our hometowns. I love it" (Estrada 2009).

As is the case with international migration from Mexico to the United States, in earlier days meeting people of a similar background was, of course, equally important for migrants who moved from villages in Oaxaca to Puebla, Orizaba, Mexico City and other cities outside of the state. The first migrants to play pelota mixteca in the nation's capital arrived in the late 1920s. At that time, no pelota mixteca courts existed in Mexico City and the game was played in the streets in different parts of the city (Inzúa C. 1998: 75). This situation persisted until the 1950s, when the *pasajuego de Balbuena*, the main pelota mixteca court of Mexico City, was constructed. From the moment of its construction to its final expropriation and destruction by the Mexico City authorities in 2009 (see below), the *Balbuena* formed the epicenter of pelota mixteca in the city. Cornelio Pérez, the chairman of the Asociación del juego de pelota de hule, describes the importance for migrants of the *Balbuena*, which was constructed with a permit of the authorities of the Federal District, in the days before the widespread availability of telecommunication:

CORNELIO

"[El pasajuego de Balbuena era] un espacio que, desde sus orígenes, ayudó, pues, a darle un núcleo de convivencia a muchos de los migrantes, en este caso de origen Oaxaqueño. ... Era un espacio donde, en particular las personas de Oaxaca, de donde son originarios mis padres, pues ahí se encontraban. Había dos lugares donde en aquella época se buscaba la gente. [Como no había acceso a un] teléfono, simplemente llegaron y no sabían ni a donde ir.

Los podían buscar en la Villa de Guadalupe, donde todo el mundo se congregaba porque iban ahí a la Virgen de Guadalupe, o venían al pasajuego de Balbuena.”

As such, the Balbuena not only formed a meeting place for migrants who had already established themselves in the city for a long time, but, perhaps more importantly, was also a point of reference for new migrants who had just arrived from communities in Oaxaca and were trying to find their way in their new surroundings. Since maintaining contact with family members and friends who had already come to the city was complicated, because of the lack of access to telephones or other means of communication, it was difficult for newly arrived migrants to find their relatives and acquaintances. Because the Balbuena formed a focal point for the Oaxacan migrant community, new migrants knew that they could find their *paisanos* there. At the Balbuena they could (re)connect with their family members, friends and *paisanos*, and find them in a city of overwhelming size. The Balbuena had an important function in creating and establishing communities of migrants from Oaxaca, as well as from Michoacán, in the case of players of *pelota tarasca*, who also used the courts to play their game. The Balbuena itself was also the result of a communal effort, as it was constructed by an already established community of players, consisting of migrants who had started coming to the city from the 1920s onwards. Cornelio Pérez describes the way in which the *pasajuego de Balbuena* was created in the 1950s:

CORNELIO

“Nosotros llegamos a esas instalaciones ... con un permiso que otorgó el gobierno de la ciudad de aquella época. ... En aquél momento, la misma regencia de la ciudad otorgó un permiso para que se construyan esas canchas. Porque además no las construyó el gobierno, también queremos que quede muy claro. Simplemente otorgó el permiso para usar terrenos que los compañeros de aquella época, mediante trabajo comunitario, limpiaron a través de uso del esfuerzo de todos los jugadores y [lo] acondicionaron con sus propios recursos.”

Through the communal labor of the players of *pelota mixteca* and other migrants from Oaxaca, the *pasajuego de Balbuena*, was constructed, without, as Cornelio stresses, one cent of economic subsidy from the DF government. Over time, the *Balbuena* became a well-known, almost legendary, name within the circles of *pelota mixteca* players as a location where great games took place. It was the focal point of *pelota mixteca*-culture in Mexico City, as well as one of the important points of reference for Mixtec and Zapotec migrants in general. A place where people could *convivir*,

a place that formed and strengthened the migrant community, and a place that was itself a testament to the ability of the migrant community to create spaces for themselves.

The story of the creation of the *pasajuego de Balbuena* has many parallels with the creation of one of the most important *pasajuegos* in the United States, in Fresno, California. This court was constructed through the communal labor of Mixtec migrants, mostly from the Jaltepec-Nochixtlán region. Don Agustín Hernández, *coime* of the Fresno *pasajuego* as well as president of the Asociación de Pelota Mixteca California Central, recounts its history:

DON AGUSTÍN

“[En los años 70] no teníamos el tipo de campo que se necesita para la pelota. Entonces se iba a los parques. Pero teníamos que ir temprano, porque ya en el día llegaban las familias y ya no podíamos practicar ... Y así cada ocho días, hasta que empezamos a cooperar poco a poco dinero de cinco pesos, diez pesos, como era la posibilidad, y al final rentamos un terreno. Pagábamos 100 pesos cada ocho días. ... Fue unos tres, cuatro años que se jugó ahí. Después nos pidieron el terreno porque ya lo iban a cultivar, y ya nos quedábamos sin campo otra vez. Y seguimos buscando, hasta que rentamos aproximadamente unos cinco, seis veces. Estuvimos rentando desde esa fecha [1977] hasta el '96, que yo tuve la oportunidad de conseguir este lugarcito. Y me motivó conseguir algo, porque ya no teníamos campo donde seguir practicando la pelota. ... Entre todos nos ayudamos para darle su arregladito al campo.”

In the case of the Fresno court, Don Agustín was one of the main actors who facilitated the creation of the court. He was the one who bought the land on which he built his house with a *pasajuego* in his backyard. However, like in the case of the Balbuena, it is only because the players of the game cooperated as a community that they were able to create their own space in which they could play the game. This space is enlivened by cultural items and practices from ‘back home’ and represents a small part of Mexico that is recreated in California. At the Fresno international tournament in 2012, Oaxacan *tortas de quesillo* were sold, as well as tacos and tortillas, and Mexican music was played over the sound system during the whole tournament. The event started off with all the participants, both spectators and players, singing the Mexican national anthem. At the end of the tournament, all of the teams, those from Mexico and from the United States, as well as some spectators, joined in a large meal of tortillas with beans. During an earlier edition of the tournament, one of the participants even provided two pigs and a large *barbacoa* was prepared. Clearly, for migrants outside of Oaxaca, *pelota mixteca* is not only a weekly event that holds the migrant community, or at least a small, well-described part of it, together in a new environment. It also

enables some of them to create new spaces for themselves, both physically and metaphorically, in which they can (continue to) experience and recreate an atmosphere that is similar to, if not the same as, the one in Mexico during *pelota mixteca* games and tournaments. In the following, I will focus on the history of *pelota mixteca* in the United States, explore what impact migration has had on the game and what role, if any, *pelota mixteca* plays in the transnational and transborder communities that have formed over the past four decades.

The transnational/transborder community

Many indigenous peoples of Mexico have a long history of labor migration, both within Mexico and to the United States of America. These patterns of migration go back to the end of the nineteenth century, when, under the presidency of Porfirio Díaz, the construction of large networks of railroads led to the seasonal migration of many indigenous and non-indigenous peasants (Beezley and MacLachlan 2009). While many Mexican indigenous peoples, such as the Triqui and Maya's, have historically migrated primarily within Mexico, others, such as the Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and P'urépechas, have a much longer history of migration to the United States. This tradition of migration to the United States goes back to the Bracero program (1942-1964), a labor program that was created in order to alleviate the labor shortages in the United States occasioned by World War II. Under the Bracero program, many indigenous migrants from Oaxaca migrated seasonally to work in agricultural labor, often returning to their home communities when their contracts expired. As time progressed, however, many migrants decided to stay in their new homelands (either legally or as 'illegal immigrants'), creating communities of indigenous migrants in the United States, as well as giving rise to groups of second- and third-generation indigenous migrant US citizens. From the 1980s onwards, the number of indigenous migrants started to increase significantly (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004: 2; see also Stephen 2007: 66-77). This not only meant an influx to the United States of indigenous peoples like the Maya, who did not traditionally migrate to the US, but also led to a marked growth in the number of indigenous migrants from already present populations, such as Mixtecs and Zapotecs. In part, this increase was due to the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), which was passed in 1986 and allowed many 'illegal' migrants who were already in the USA to regularize their status. This provided them with possibilities to accept better-paid jobs and move up the socio-economic ladder, which opened up room in the lower end of the job market for new migrants. In this wave of migration, Mixtecs primarily ended up working in rural farm labor, while Zapotecs found employment in urban services. By the early 1990s, around 50,000 Mixtecs lived in California's Central Valley, and around 55,000 Zapotecs had settled in the Los Angeles area (ibid.: 9-10).

For many Oaxacan migrants, the choice to migrate across the US-Mexican border was only the next step in an established pattern of migration that started in the beginning of the twentieth century after the end of the Mexican Revolution.

“The first travels of Oaxacan villagers in search of employment began back in the 1930s, taking them to Oaxaca City, the sugarcane fields of Veracruz, and later to the growing neighborhoods in Ciudad Nezahualcóyotl on the periphery of Mexico City. Then labor contractors supplying the agribusinesses of the northwestern state of Sinaloa began recruiting, especially in the Mixteca region. These south-to-north flows later extended to the Valley of San Quintín in northern Baja California. By the early 1980s, indigenous migrants reached further north, to California, Oregon, and Washington.” (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004: 9).

This migration northward is also reflected in the places where pelota mixteca was played during the past century. In the middle of the twentieth century, important locations where pelota mixteca was played outside of Oaxaca included the city of Puebla in the state of the same name and Orizaba in Veracruz. Over the course of the past decades, however, as migrants decided to move ever further northwards in search of work, pelota mixteca has disappeared in these places, and now only survives in Mexico City.

The establishment of large numbers of indigenous migrants in the United States has created a novel form of community, referred to in the literature as ‘transnational’ or ‘transborder’ communities. These communities are characterized by the fact that they, according to Stephen (2007: 9), “[do] not exist in one geographic place but [are] spread out throughout multiple sites in the United States and Mexico”, and are inhabited by ‘transmigrants’, people who “having migrated from one nation-state to another, live their lives across borders, participating simultaneously in social relations that embed them in more than one nation-state” (Glick Schiller 2003: 105). As such, these ‘transnational communities’ consist of people living in multiple locations, who, in the case of Mexico, often identify with the same hometown. According to Stephen (2007: 6), the lives of these transmigrants are not only transnational, living on different sides of the borders of nation-states, but are rather ‘transborder’, considering that “the borders they cross are ethnic, class, cultural, colonial, and state borders within Mexico as well as the U.S.-Mexico border and in different regions of the United States.”

One border that seems difficult to cross for indigenous migrants, however, is that of ethnicity. Whereas mainstream North American society sees the mass of Mexican immigrants as a homogeneous ethnic/racial group, within the migrant community indigenous immigrants are still

seen by non-indigenous Mexican migrants as *indios*, with all the negative connotations this term entails. As a result, in the United States, these indigenous migrants suffer from ‘double discrimination’. On the one hand, immigrant workers face discrimination from mainstream American society as Mexicans, a foreign group within the United States of America, on the other hand, indigenous migrant workers, like indigenous peoples in general in Mexico, face discrimination from *mestizo* migrant workers who look down on the *indígenas*. Because of this process of discrimination within the group of Mexican migrant workers, indigenous individuals never felt a consequent sense of identification with this group of Mexican migrants. They simply did not feel at home in a community that systematically discriminated against indigenous migrants because of their ethnic background. As a result, a unified class of foreign migrant workers, which included indigenous migrants, never truly formed in the United States (Nagengast and Kearney 1990:87). Indigenous migrants still identified mostly with their communities of origin, forming transnational/transborder communities. Nonetheless, over the course of the past decades, because of this shared sensation of double discrimination, new ethnic identities, for example Mixtec or Zapotec, but also, more broadly, *indígena* have started to form (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004; Nagengast and Kearney 1990). These identities did not exist ‘back home’ in Oaxaca, mostly due to historical legacies of inter-village conflict, but emerged when a form of cross-community solidarity took shape under the influence of the new socio-economic conditions in the United States, and gave rise to new organizations that represented the interests of indigenous migrants (Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004: 12). The question here is what importance pelota mixteca has, or could have, for these newly constructed organizations and identities, and vice-versa, how do these coalitions, organizations and identities influence the game? For example, do players of pelota mixteca themselves actually choose to employ the label of ‘Mixtec’ or ‘indigenous’ when describing themselves and their game, or do they simply refer to themselves as members of a certain village-community? Below, I will examine the history of pelota mixteca in the USA, followed by an exploration of what role pelota mixteca plays in forming and maintaining transnational or transborder communities.

Pelota mixteca in the USA

Before crossing the border became increasingly complicated during the last decades of the twentieth century, many undocumented migrants in the US were seasonal migrants who planned to return to their hometowns after working in the US for a limited period of time. The first Mixtecs and Zapotecs, potential players of pelota mixteca, who reached the United States through the Bracero program, would go north to work on a specific job after having been recruited by labor contractors,

but would return home when the work was finished. The program only “allowed the importation of Mexican workers for annual harvests with the stipulation that they were to return to Mexico after their work was finished” (Stephen 2007: 72). Because of the temporary character of their stay abroad, these migrants never really brought pelota mixteca with them to the US in an organized form. They did not carry their gloves and, if they were players of the game, they would resume playing back home. These first migrants, then, did not ‘internationalize’ pelota mixteca. But when did pelota mixteca start being played in the United States, where is it played nowadays, and how can we understand its historical trajectory?

Don Agustín, whose father had come to California to work as a Bracero worker, followed his two older brothers to California in 1975. According to him, the game started to be played incipiently in the mid-1960s:

MARTIN

Usted, cuando llegó acá?

AGUSTÍN

En 1975 ... entonces ya se jugaba acá, las otras personas que ya tenían unos diez años más antes que yo [lo jugaron]. Fueron los primeros que empezaron a traer el guante y pelotas. Ya se empezaba a practicar en tres, cuatro, cinco. ... No había bastantes jugadores en esos tiempos. ...

MARTIN

Desde cuando hubo bastantes jugadores para practicar?

DON AGUSTÍN

Después del '75 que llegué yo, ya empezaron a migrar más y más Oaxaqueños que jugaban la pelota mixteca. Y, pues, ya con el tiempo, como en el '77, ya se completaban diez jugadores y ya se jugaba cinco a cinco.

Don Agustín dates the first full-fledged pelota mixteca matches in California to the late 1970s, around the time that he first arrived in the United States. Before then, the game was played just as a pastime, but actual matches could not be organized, not only because there were too few players, but also, more importantly, because there were not enough gloves for all to play. Don Marino, who came to California in 1972, around the same time as Don Agustín, describes the story of how, according to him, the first glove came to California and how they played the game before there were enough gloves for everyone to play.

DON MARINO

[El primero que trajo un guante de pelota mixteca a California fue] Crescencio Trinidad. Y como [lo] sé? Porque nosotros venimos desde siempre. Llegamos a trabajar a Coalinga, y él se trajo un primer guante. Y cuando pasamos la frontera nos agarró la migra. Y empezaron a revisar. Yo no traía nada, él traía una pelota y un guante. No más eso traía. ... Él era un hombre que tenía fe en el deporte, porque para todo hay que tener fe. Y él tenía fe en el deporte. Y cuando se lo llevaron [el guante], le pasaron rayos X, y no se explicaban que material tenía, porque pesaba demasiado. Y que tenía adentro? No le encontraron nada. Entonces lo tuvieron investigando. ... Les tuvo que explicar [como era el juego]. ... Y cuando ellos empezaron a escuchar cómo se narra, dijeron 'Este es semejante al fútbol Americano'. Semejante, nada más que se juega en diferente forma. ... Y cuando dio esta explicación, lo dejaron libre. Lo echaron para Tijuana, le dejaron su guante, no se lo quitaron, pero se lo querían quitar. [Antes,] ahí en Coalinga, nada más se paraba uno, me paraba yo de un lado y Chencho de otro lado. Le botaba yo la bola. Cambiábamos por turnos, y luego otro botaba y así no más. ... Como al año, llegó uno que se llama Guadalupe Hernández y entonces, como se sabía que ya hubo un guante, se trajo otro guante. Los primeros dos guantes que llegaron fueron el de Lupe y el de Chencho, fueron los que pasaron para acá. Y de ahí empezaron a llegar. Fue un tal Regino Bolaños y trajo cuatro guantes. Entonces ya eran seis. ... Y entonces ya jugábamos tres de un lado y tres de otro lado. Esto es bien hermoso como comenzó. Después de ahí, ya empezaron a llegar. Cada persona que venía empezó a traer guantes. ... [Fue] Chencho. Chencho Trinidad, el primero que pasó su guante. Estuvo bien bonito porque lo investigaron como si hubiera pasado mucha contrabanda. Pero no, era nada más un guante y una pelota. ... Como lo compararía? Como Cristóbal Colón, cuando pisó. Primer paso en la tierra. Descubrimiento.

MARTIN

Y entonces antes, aquí no había pelota?

DON MARINO

No había. ... Estábamos como veinte personas, antes no éramos muchos. ... Fue como en el 80. Para no exagerar, pero fue en los ochenta cuando comenzó ... Tendrá como cerca de treinta años el deporte aquí. ... Fresno fue el primer lugar donde se jugó.

While there is a slight difference in the dates that Don Agustín and Don Marino give, it is clear that pelota mixteca was not played as an organized game, that is to say with enough players and gloves for there to be actual matches and tournaments, until the late 1970s or the early 1980s. This timing would agree with Fox and Rivera-Salgado's (2004:9) assertion that it was not until the early 1980s that large groups of Mixtec migrants travelled further north than Baja California and started settling in California in sizeable numbers. The main destinations that indigenous Oaxacan migrants travelled to were the San Joaquin Valley, the Los Angeles metropolitan area and northern San Diego County, places where Oaxacans now have long-established communities (ibid.:9). Not surprisingly, it is in exactly these places that most pelota mixteca players and teams can be found. According to Jesús Hernández, in 2013 there were around 18 teams in California, five in Fresno, five in San Fernando, two in San Diego, two in Santa Barbara and one each in Gilroy, Monterey, San Bernardino, and Oxnard. According to Don Agustín, the number of teams is larger. He says there are seven in San Diego and four in Santa Barbara, apart from the ones in other cities. This estimate only counts the pelota mixteca de hule teams. There are also pelota mixteca de esponja teams in different cities in California, most notably in Los Angeles and Santa Maria. During fieldwork I was told that there were also some *quintas* of players of pelota mixteca de forro in the US. This would not be surprising since there has been, and continues to be, a lot of migration from the Mixteca Baja, the heartland of pelota mixteca de forro, to the US, but I have personally never met any players of this variety of the game in the US, nor have I found any documentation of the game being played. Outside of California, pelota mixteca is played in Dallas, Texas. A newspaper article on pelota mixteca in that city says that the game started there in 2007, when Jesús Ramírez brought some balls and gloves back with him from a trip to Oaxaca (Estrada 2009). Here, again, we see that the start of pelota mixteca in a region, in this case northern Texas, is related to the arrival of more sizeable groups of indigenous migrants, a development that, in the case of Texas, has only taken place in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2014 the Arellanes brothers, of the *quinta Los Gemelos*, had received an invitation to come to Texas and compete against the local *quinta*, opening up possibilities for another international tournament. It could be that pelota mixteca is also played in other states to which many Mixtecs and Zapotecs have migrated, for example Oregon, Washington, Illinois, New Jersey or New York, but I have not found any information on this. One possible reason could be that the climate in many of these northern states is more prohibiting and that this complicates the construction of a *pasajuego* and playing the game year-round. What is sure is that there is no contact between the players in California and the players in other states.

Naturally, the history of pelota mixteca in the United States mirrors the development of migration flows to the United States from Oaxaca, for the simple fact that if there are no people,

there is no pelota mixteca. As a result, the game was popularized around the time that a 'critical mass' of migrants arrived in the US and it is played especially in the state with the most Mixtec and Zapotec migrants, California. But what role does the game play in creating and maintaining transborder communities? Why do teams from Oaxaca come to play in the *Torneo Internacional* and what does this mean to the players involved?

The most remarkable outcome of the 'transnationalization' of pelota mixteca is the international tournament that is organized annually in Fresno, California. In this tournament, which was organized for the first time in 1998, a selection of players from Oaxaca competes with a selection of players from California for the title of 'international champion of pelota mixteca'. The tournament has been organized from the outset by Agustín Hernández. He recounts the history of how he and others came to organize it:

DON AGUSTÍN

La pelota mixteca se abrió a nivel internacional en [1998]. Y desde entonces, año con año hacemos lo posible para traer la mejor selección de Oaxaca, para que venga competir, pues, nos dé buen espectáculo para todo nuestro público aquí en Fresno. ... La asociación [de Pelota Mixteca California Central] se fundó en el '96, cuando iniciamos solicitando al estado de Oaxaca que queríamos traer una selección de ahí para acá. Y, entonces, el cónsul que estaba en función en ese tiempo aquí en Fresno dijo que sí nos apoyaba pero quería saber algo sobre la historia de la pelota. ... Entonces me dijo, 'Si tú me consigues algo de información, yo la leo. Me das un mes para leerla, y yo te contesto si te apoyo o no te apoyo.' ... Hicimos un viaje especialmente a Oaxaca, hablamos con los amigos ahí. Nos consiguieron una información. [La traíamos al consulado] y de ahí esperamos a que nos contestaran. Al mes, más o menos, nos contestan que estaba muy interesante la historia de la pelota. Les había gustado mucho y que estaban interesados en apoyarnos para que se abriera a nivel internacional. Nos llevó como ocho meses, tramitando papeles ... Hasta que los dos gobiernos lo aceptaron, el de Estados Unidos y el de México.

The organization of the annual tournament is in the hands of the *mesa directiva* of the pelota mixteca association that Don Agustín and others founded in 1996. This *mesa directiva* consists of seven individuals, including Don Agustín. The organization of the tournament starts about six months in advance by selecting the players that will be invited and starting the process of contacting the Mexican consulate in Fresno, which will provide the necessary letters of invitation that enable the players from Mexico to obtain a visa. While, officially, the tournament is organized

by the *mesa directiva*, it is Don Agustín who does much of the work, also because he functions as the *coime* of the *pasajuego*, which was constructed in the backyard of his house.

One of the main reasons to organize the tournament is the pride and motivation it brings to players from both sides of the border. It inspires the players to practice harder and strengthens the (community) relationships that exist between the players (and the players' families and friends) on both sides of the border. Jaime and Pedro comment:

JAIME

Eso me da mucho orgullo a mí, de yo jugarle a una quinta [de Oaxaca] ... porque traen guantes, yo llevo guante, ... el orgullo es lo bueno, me entiendes? De que le juegues!

PEDRO

Sabes qué? Lo que pasa es que aquí no estamos como allá. A veces jueves, los días que quieren van a volar al Tecnológico [en Oaxaca], a sus pueblos. Aquí es difícil que vayamos, que vengamos. A veces no se puede. Y más en cambio, si juegan, juegan enseguida con otros que juegan más. Y aquí no. A veces jugamos entre nosotros a veces no hay.

MARTIN

Porque hay menos jugadores?

PEDRO

Hay menos jugadores. Entonces te imaginas, nos sentimos orgullosos de poderle jugarlos a ellos, que tienen un nivel mucho más alto que nosotros. De poderles competir.

While Pedro's idea of the number of players that there are in Mexico and the amount of time that people in Mexico have to play might be somewhat overly positive – there are not too many players anymore and teams like Los Gemelos from Mexico City have to travel all the way to Oaxaca to play high-level games – it is clear that the players feel proud to represent the place where they live against a team from the place where their roots lie. This sentiment of pride is echoed by players who make the journey the other way around and come from Oaxaca and Mexico City to compete with the teams in California. Salvador Montes, a man from Jaltepec who was a member of the traditional authorities of the town and who joined the 2012 selection from Oaxaca as an accompanying member says:

DON SALVADÓR

Hoy en este día [del torneo internacional], para nosotros es un orgullo... estar en este lugar, ya que venimos de allá del estado de Oaxaca, México, para convivir unos momentos acá con nuestros paisanos que radican en este lindo California.

While Don Salvadór did not participate in the tournament as a player, the renewed contact with *paisanos* and the participation as a spectator in the tournament give him a sense of pride and belonging. The 2012 tournament was won by the selection from Mexico, which was represented by the team Los Gemelos, a group of five brothers from Mexico City. In an interview after the final of the 2012 international tournament, Eduardo Arellanes, one of the main spokespeople for pelota mixteca in Mexico City, says:

PEDRO SILVA

Cuál es el sentimiento después de ganar?

EDUARDO

Mira, el sentimiento, no es nada más el triunfo. [Es] el llegar, el estar aquí, en tierra muy lejana, pero es cercano, porque el espíritu del juego está aquí, nuestra gente está aquí. Gente que no hemos visto desde hace mucho tiempo, así que no venimos a tierra extraña. Porque venimos con nuestra gente y venimos con nuestro deporte. Pero de todos modos sigue siendo un juego. Entonces lo que quieres en un juego es ganar. Y ahora que hemos salido triunfadores en este torneo, pues, la emoción se multiplica es lo mejor que nos podía haber pasado.

PEDRO SILVA

Hay un sentimiento en especial en triunfar en una tierra donde usted no radica?

EDUARDO

El sentimiento de saber que solo tienes una vez, pues ... No es como estar allá en México que sabes que tendrás una revancha. Aquí vienes y es en un día donde se va a decidir todo. Donde un mal día, donde una mala pelota puede hacer que se frustren las ideas que tenemos desde seis meses atrás, cuando nos informaron que vamos a ser los que vamos a representar al estado de Oaxaca. ... Entonces el estar tan lejos, el tener una oportunidad tan rara de estar aquí, el ganar, es muy emocionante.

In Eduardo's and Don Salvador's comments, we see the combination of two of the most important elements of pelota mixteca in a transnational context. In the first place, there is the

convivencia, the creation of community, being together with your *paisanos* in a different place. Here, pelota mixteca is a way of maintaining contact within the ‘transnational community’, in this case a transnational community of players of pelota mixteca. Additionally, however, in contrast to many of the other cultural traditions that are being continued or revitalized across the border, pelota mixteca is a competition, a game in which only one of the teams can come out triumphant. Commenting on why the victory of his team is so special, Eduardo says that it is the uniqueness of the event that makes it so valuable. You only get one shot, so you’d better get it right.

While, for the players from Oaxaca, there is only one possible moment a year to go to California, there are, or at least used to be, sometimes multiple opportunities for them to compete against the players from California, as some players from California travel(led) to tournaments in Oaxaca. The tournament which is organized for the *fiesta patronal* of Jaltepec is one of the moments at which players from California compete against players from Oaxaca. This is due to the fact that many players in Fresno are from Magdalena Jaltepec and return home to celebrate the fiesta. The tournament of Bajos de Chila, the second-largest tournament after that of the Guelaguetza, is sometimes visited by players from the United States as well, as was the Guelaguetza tournament in Oaxaca City. Don Agustín recounts the emotion of going back to Oaxaca and playing the traditional game there:

DON AGUSTÍN

Nos motivó a todos nosotros que venimos hoy, ver a la selección [Oaxaqueña], verla jugar. ... Entonces, imagínese, yendo una quinta de aquí a Oaxaca. Cuando nosotros íbamos, nos dejaron el campo a nosotros solos. A la quinta que iba de acá, contra la quinta que nos ponían de allá de Oaxaca. El campo estaba llenecito de público. Y ese era el gusto que nos traíamos nosotros, que el público estaba con nosotros. Llenábamos el campo de pelota de gente, por vernos jugar. No éramos, como digo, la misma categoría de juego que ellos, pero es lo que a la gente motivaba, que íbamos a jugar. Ese era el gusto.

Over the past years, as the immigration laws of the United States have gotten tougher and tougher and border patrols round up immigrants trying to cross the border even in the remotest places, the frequency of players travelling back to Mexico to compete in tournaments has decreased because many of the players in Fresno are undocumented. Because of the increased difficulties to cross the border back to the United States, players decide not to go back to compete in their hometown fiestas or larger tournaments in Bajos de Chila or Oaxaca:

DON AGUSTÍN

Tuve la oportunidad de participar algunas ocho, nueve veces en el Torneo Guelaguetza del estado de Oaxaca. Nos hacían invitación oficial, me la mandaban. Y aquí seleccionábamos a los mejores compañeros que podían viajar, que tenían la oportunidad de viajar y regresarse sin ningún problema, ya tenían su residencia. Entonces, con ellos participé para ir allá. ... Toca la situación de que ahorita los mejores jugadores que jugaron hoy, no tienen la posibilidad de ir y regresar. Sí pueden ir, pero no pueden regresar. Entonces, por esto hemos dejado de participar, porque pues el único que puedo ir soy yo y mi hijo, y ya los demás no pueden. Sí hemos ido de todos modos. Allá tenemos más familiares que juegan pelota mixteca en la ciudad de México, entonces ellos dicen 'Si vienes, nos completamos la quinta y vamos a jugar.' Este año [2012] nos pidieron si podíamos llevar una selección [al torneo de la Guelaguetza]. Estamos viendo esto ahorita pero, como digo, no hay ninguna garantía, porque los mejores compañeros no tienen la oportunidad de volver a regresar fácilmente. Eso se nos complica mucho. Pero sí sería bonito que un día tuviéramos esa oportunidad para seguir yendo. Esto motiva más.

The lack of documented status of many of the players is not only problematic for teams that want to compete in international tournaments, it also hinders players within the United States. In San Diego, for example, few people play the game, and even less spectators come to witness the games, because the pasajuego can only be reached by passing the *casilla de San Clemente*, where *la migra* often checks the papers of those who pass. Migrants who do not have the correct documentation cannot afford to risk being caught by the immigration services when going to see or participate in a game. The fact that undocumented migrants in the United States can no longer return easily to their villages of origin, for fear that they will not be able to get back into the country, naturally, has a profound impact on how social relationships with friends and family back home are maintained. Since many people cannot travel back and forth anymore, the tournament in Fresno also functions as a meeting place for people living in the US who cannot go back, and their friends and family from Oaxaca who, for once, can come and visit:

MARTIN

Mucha gente aquí viene de Jaltepec, verdad?

DON AGUSTÍN

Bueno, radican en diferentes partes aquí de California, pero son de Jaltepec. Y como saben que viene [la selección de Oaxaca], y vienen a veces parientes de ellos, vienen aquí. Conviven

con ellos y es un gusto porque, como digo, uno no puede ir para allá, entonces, así aprovechan.

The role of the tournament as a meeting place of Mexican (indigenous) migrants in California, ensures that it can also serve as a means to reach many members of the community at one time. Hence, it is an ideal place to organize with others for a common goal, or to advertise products or services that could interest (indigenous) Mexican migrants in Fresno, a group that might otherwise be hard to reach. For example, at the 2012 Fresno tournament, Don Agustín had installed a large sound system that played Mexican *ranchero* music throughout the tournament. The music was interspersed with Don Agustín taking up the microphone from time to time to direct comments to the audience, inform people of the score of the game, or to simply comment on the game that was being played. During one of these comments, he took the microphone to advertise the next elections of the *señorita Belleza Oaxaqueña*, a beauty pageant organized for girls with a Oaxacan background in the Fresno area. He was asked by one of the women organizing the pageant to announce the competition, since funds needed to be raised so that the competition could take place and added, “Yo los invito a cooperar un pesito para nuestras candidatas. ... Vamos a cooperar todos a apoyar nuestras candidatas.” This way, the pelota mixteca tournament enables others who want to organize different events for Oaxacans to announce them and to start fundraising. Similarly, the organization of the tournament was sponsored by several smaller and larger businesses from the Fresno area. In his opening speech, Don Agustín thanked the different parties who had contributed to the organization of the tournament. Among them were a local Oaxacan restaurant who sold traditional Oaxacan food like tlayudas, mole Oaxaqueña and tortas with quesillo Oaxaqueño, a local enterprise that supplied sodas and bottled water for the participants, different individuals from the community who had helped with practical matters, the local Wells Fargo branch, and Tony and Mike’s Fresno boxing, a local boxing school.

Another sponsor that Don Agustín thanked in his opening speech, was the Mexican consulate in Fresno. He describes the kind of support that they give to the tournament:

DON AGUSTÍN

El apoyo que nos da el consulado de México aquí, es el apoyo de los premios que tenemos para el día de hoy. Y los trámites de papeles de invitación, año con año que se envían de aquí para Oaxaca, solicitando el apoyo de la selección. Ese es el apoyo que ellos nos dan. Económicamente, no nos dan ningún centavo en apoyo.

Even though they do not directly support the organization of the tournament financially – they do however supply the trophies that the teams receive – the involvement of the Mexican consulate in Fresno is important. If they did not supply letters of invitation for the players from Oaxaca, the process of receiving visas would be much more complicated and the players might not even be able to come over to the US. As in the case of the indigenous organizers of events and small local businesses that provide support for the tournament organization, the consulate uses the event to promote their services and as a way of community outreach. Three employees of the consulate visited the 2012 tournament carrying many boxes filled with children’s textbooks and other reading materials in Spanish. They encouraged parents and children to take the material home and learn Spanish, math and other subjects. A line of children who wanted to obtain the materials that the consulate employees had brought formed in front of the consulate stand (Fig. 38). The representatives of the consulate also encouraged the children’s parents and other adults to take part in an educational program that the consulate had sponsored, which provided primary and secondary education to adults. At the completion of the program, participants received an official certificate of the Mexican Secretaría de Educación Pública, that they could use in Mexico as well. The consular representative mentioned an example of an 80-year old man from Oaxaca, who had graduated from the program in 2011, stating that “nunca es tarde para seguirnos educando.” As such, the tournament functions as a meeting place among migrants, between migrants and visitors from Oaxaca, and between migrants and representatives of the Mexican state government. The tournament, thus, also plays a central role in maintaining the community of migrants and alerting members of this community to other events or services that are organized for them.

Material connections/the gloves

The exchange of players and teams between Mexico and the United States is the most direct personal contact that pelota mixteca brings about. However, it is not only people who travel across the border. The gloves that are used for pelota mixteca de hule, and which are only made and repaired in Xoxocotlán, Oaxaca, also cross. According to Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2004: 19), “as in the case of many other Oaxacan migrant cultural activities – dances, music, food – Mixtec ball has generated a demand for traditional equipment, creating jobs for the artisans back home who make the gloves and balls.” This is only partially true, since there is only one person who knows how to make the gloves at the moment. Hence, there is indeed more work for one person in Oaxaca, but the demand for gloves from the United States does not really create additional jobs in Mexico. Players from the United States normally order new gloves by telephone directly from the glove maker in Oaxaca. After they pay a deposit, the glove is made and it is sent across the border by

regular mail, which in most cases only takes a few days, according to Leobardo Pacheco. Agustín Pacheco, who made gloves from the middle of the twentieth century until the early 2000s, said that gloves were already being ordered from California as early as the 1970s. Leobardo Pacheco has accompanied the Oaxacan selection that travels to the United States on several occasions, since this provides him with extra contacts and opportunities for work. Sometimes gloves need to be repaired and they are sent back to Oaxaca for reparation and, after, go back to the United States. In many senses, gloves cross national borders much more easily than people.

The gloves that players of pelota mixteca de hule wear are constant links to Oaxaca. Unlike the equipment for pelota mixteca de forro or esponja, which can be crafted locally by anyone with a bit of skill, the gloves for hule cannot be created by the players themselves, and buying a glove is a big investment. As a result, players feel very attached to their gloves and play with the same glove for a very long time. Jaime and Pedro say:

MARTIN

De donde sacaste el guante, lo compraste directamente del guantero?

JAIME

Mira, este guante, yo tuve un padrazo y me gustó [este guante] y dijo “no, pues sabes, que yo te lo compro, me dijo”

PEDRO

Fíjate, como este está bien. Porque hay diferentes guantes. ... Si tu metes la mano ...

JAIME

... tu sabes si el guante está bueno o no está bueno.

PEDRO

Si es tuyo o, sabes que no es para mí, mejor buscas otro. Pero cuando ya lo encuentras, no lo sueltas, no lo sueltas.

MARTIN

Ya te quedas con el guante toda la vida?

JAIME

Yo desde el tiempo que yo empecé a jugar este deporte, este es el único guante que yo he tenido. Es el único. Ahora, otra cosa, yo he escuchado de gente que cambia guantes, que dice “oy, que esto no me gusta y que otro” me entiendes. Pero eso, yo pienso que eso no es de jugadores. Un jugador tiene que adaptarse con su guante. ... No me lo cambio por nada, me entiendes. Estos son míos, me entiendes. Así, aunque me des dinero, lo que sea, yo no te lo voy a vender. Porque es mío, yo lo quiero, yo me siento a gusto.

The gloves are a shared concern for all of the migrant players of pelota mixteca de hule. As a result, Leobardo Pacheco, who makes the gloves, is in direct or indirect contact with virtually all of the players of this modality of the game in Mexico and the United States. In contrast, not all of the migrant players of pelota mixteca are in contact with each other in the United States. They form separate communities, based on the variety of the game they play, the regions and villages they come from in Oaxaca, and disagreements that have taken place. For instance, Don Agustín and his brother mention that there are between twenty and thirty *quintas* playing pelota mixteca de hule in California at the moment. They mention places like San Diego, Monterey, and Santa Barbara among others. Apart from these places, Fox and Rivera-Salgado (2004: 19) mention that the game is played in Selma and Watsonville. These cities were not mentioned by Fresno players like Don Agustín. This seems to suggest that there is not one state-wide pelota mixteca community. As is the case in Oaxaca, there is some contact between players of the hule and esponja variants, but these are not in contact with the players of pelota mixteca de forro. Also, disagreements that have arisen locally lead to divisions in established communities and the formation of new ones. In the case of Fresno, there are two different *pasajuegos*, that are used by different groups who formed as part of a disagreement. One player told me in confidence that this was due to the fact that two brothers got into a fight with each other and one team decided to relocate to another *pasajuego*. According to the same player, the players from the other *pasajuego* have started to ask visiting teams to pay for ‘the privilege’ of playing at their *pasajuego*. This is extremely unusual since, normally, teams that come to compete only pay a small fee for the *coime* as a contribution to help to keep the playing field in a good condition, but are not expected to pay for anything else. As a result of this division in the playing community in Fresno, sometimes there are not enough players at both *pasajuegos* to be able to play a regular 5-a-side game.

Pelota mixteca and the creation of a transborder community

Pelota mixteca clearly has a role to play in establishing and sustaining communities of both indigenous migrants and of non-migrant inhabitants of Oaxacan villages. The *pasajuego* functions as a meeting place that creates and sustains communities of players and spectators, and their respective family and community members. These communities are created on multiple scales. In the first place, at the level of the team, where five players come together and form a *quinta* that represents a family or a group of friends. This ‘small community’ is the most basic level and often forms out of an already existing family relationship. As we will see below, new players often start playing the game because someone in their family, often their father, grandfather or uncle, is an

enthusiastic player of the game. As a result, many of the pelota mixteca teams that are active nowadays consist, at least partly, of members of the same family. For example, the team that has dominated many competitions in the period around 2012 is called 'Los Gemelos' and exists of five brothers, two of which are twins, hence the name of the team.

Looking at a larger scale, the game creates a community of families of the players, spectators and other people that come to watch the games and support the teams. As we have seen in the example described by Dennis (1973) above, teams often not only represent themselves, but also represent their home communities in *partidos de compromiso* against other communities, be it during village fiestas or at other occasions. By representing the community they come from, they unify the people of their village to root for their team. Here pelota mixteca, functions just as any other sport, in bringing together people from different backgrounds, by rallying them behind the team that represents the community. It is at this level that the aspect of *convivencia* plays a large role, as we saw in the description of the Bajos de Chila competition as 'a meeting of friends, rather than a tournament'. Within this community, there is a sense of reciprocity, ranging from wanting to have a rematch against a team that beat your team earlier, to the fact that, when one team travels to another village to play, the team from that village will come back to compete in a second match in the hometown of the others at a later moment. In the case of pelota mixteca, there is an interesting additional aspect, which is that of the bets being placed by bettors. The amount of cash that is bet on games can be very large, up to the hundreds, and occasionally thousands, of pesos. Naturally, this influences the involvement of bettors with the teams. It creates a community, in the sense that bettors see their own interests represented in the fate of the teams, but can also be a cause of conflicts if bettors stand to lose a lot of money and feel that players are not giving it their all. While the creation of these communities, on the one hand, brings people together, there are clearly possibilities for conflicts as well, since two opposing teams, or communities, are in competition.

At the largest scale pelota mixteca also creates a community that consists, simply, of everyone involved and interested in the game in any way. This 'pelota mixteca community' includes many people that are involved in different ways – all the teams that meet each other in different tournaments and games, the family members that accompany teams to the matches, the spectators that attend the competitions, members of organizations like the *Asociación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos* who try to promote indigenous games, and others. In a way, one could say that there is a sense of shared identity amongst all these individuals, who, apart from their differences in social and economic background and the fact that they live in different villages and countries, all identify themselves in some way with or in relation to pelota mixteca. The long history of the game, and its supposed pre-Columbian origin, is often part of the self-identification of players of pelota

mixteca. When asked about the history of the game, many players will respond that pelota mixteca is a prehispanic game that was played long before the conquest. In Oaxaca, players will often refer to the archaeological site of Monte Albán and say that the game was played there, sometimes adding that it was a royal game, reserved for kings and noblemen. Thus, the players present and see themselves as the heirs of an age-old tradition that was played in famous places such as Monte Albán. As a result, it seems that this larger community is the one with the strongest political potential, since it unites players across social, national, and ethnic borders and makes the pelota mixteca community into a larger social movement, which presents itself as the guardian of an authentic indigenous Mexican tradition. We can consider this community as a type of 'transborder' community, in the sense of Stephen (2007), as it is a community that brings together players from different sides of all kinds of borders – players born in the US, with legal residency and a steady job, players born in Mexico who migrated to the United States and live there without documents and try to get by on minimum (or less) wages, players from Oaxaca, who still live there, either in small village communities or Oaxaca city, and third-generation migrants from Oaxaca, who live in Mexico City. What ties all these people together is the game of pelota mixteca, and the way they identify with the game. So, it is to these questions of identity and identification in relation to pelota mixteca that I will turn in the next chapter. Can we really speak of a shared identity among the players? If so, is this identity created locally, regionally, nationally or transnationally? What is the influence of migration and globalization on the emergence of this identity? To what extent do questions of identity determine whether someone starts playing pelota mixteca and joins the community? If a shared sense of identity is indeed one of the main reasons to start playing, what identity are we talking about? That of a Mixtec, Zapotec or other indigenous person? That of a family, a town, a region? In the next chapter I will examine these questions in more detail and try to understand why young people decide to start playing the game and become part of the community or, conversely, why they decide not to start playing and how these choices were influenced by the nation-building project of the Mexican state.