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

Berger, M.E.

Chapter 6. Pelota mixteca, identity and the Mexican state

Many players of pelota mixteca play the game because of a family tradition. It is because of this tradition, something which was in the blood of the players, in their family histories being passed on from generation to generation as something of a family heirloom, that the game has survived for so long and was able to thrive not only in its region of origin, but also in other places to which Oaxacan migrants moved over the course of the twentieth century. For example, Jaime, one of the more promising young players in California, was born in Mexico and migrated to the United States with his family as a teenager. While he comes from a family of players of pelota mixteca, he was not very interested in playing the game when he was younger. Jaime describes how he became interested in the game after he had moved to the United States, how his desire to become part of the pelota mixteca community was awakened and how his fellow players functioned as role models and inspiration:

JAIME

A mí no me gustaba [la pelota], y dije, pues esto no es lo mío. Pero después la gente me empezó como a apoyar, a dar ánimo. … Es por eso que estoy jugando ahora, me entiendes? Más que nada por la gente. Porque si la gente nunca me hubiera dado alas, no me hubiera dado ánimos, yo pienso que ahorita no estuviera aquí, me entiendes.

MARTIN

Pero cuando fue el momento que tu dijiste “eso sí vale la pena”?

JAIME

Mira, la primera vez yo que me puse un guante, la primeritita vez que yo me puse un guante a jugar. No te miento, pero a lo mejor esta él de testigo, hay mucha gente de testigo. Que yo, fíjate, sin saber cómo se jugaba, yo entraba y le pegaba la pelota y me salían. Y todos “ay no, mira. Ese chamaco, mira. Como le pega” , me entiendes. ... Yo cuando recién empecé jugar este deporte, yo a estos muchachos, lo que es él [Pedro] y es su hermano, yo les consideraba [muy buenos jugadores], dije “Oh my God”.

MARTIN

Quiero ser como ellos?

JAIME

> Eso, eso mismo! Yo dije, quiero ser como ellos, me entiendes? ... Yo no te voy a decir, que yo me inspiré solo. Yo me inspiré, porque la gente me inspiró a mí. Porque me dijeron "ey, tú tienes con qué. Tu dale!", me entiendes. Fue lo que me inspiró a mí.

This sentiment of wanting to inspire other (future) players, and to help the pelota mixteca community grow, is echoed in the words of Ricardo, the captain of the Fresno team who won the *segunda fuerza* competition at the Fresno 2012 international tournament. Ricardo was born in Mexico but migrated to the United States, where he now lives with his wife and three children. During an interview which was filmed for the making of a documentary on *pelota mixteca*, he directs himself to the film's possible audience:

> RICARDO
> A todos, si me están escuchando, yo los invito a los que me escuchan los invito que vean el juego, que lo practiquen. Porque es un juego muy bonito. ... No digo, sabes, yo soy el chingón y no más yo. Yo quisiera que salieran mucho más chingones. Para mí, el apoyo para todos que van subiendo para arriba y que sigan. Yo quisiera que se respendiera a nivel mundial nuestro juego, porque se inició en Oaxaca, hasta donde yo sé. Ahí se inició. Se empezó a extender. Se vino para México y ahorita, gracias a Dios, estamos aquí [en los Estados Unidos].

Because of his love of the game, Ricardo has started to teach his children the rules of *pelota mixteca* and has started training them in how to play it. His oldest son is already a *pelota mixteca* enthusiast, who knows the rules of the game by heart and comes to many of the games his father plays. Within the playing community, family relationships, especially father-son and sibling bonds, are very important. Many teams exist that consist of brothers, cousins or fathers, sons and uncles. Most of the players, both in Mexico and in the United States, start learning the game because someone in their family, mostly their father, grandfather or uncle, is a player of pelota mixteca and brings them along to matches and tournaments. Young people often start out as *corredores*, running to retrieve the run-away balls that often tend to disappear into the brush that surrounds the pasajuego. Sometimes they are paid a small amount of money – ten to twenty dollars or a hundred pesos – for their help. The money can function as an extra motivation for some children to join their fathers in the games. Family relationships can also be a source of inspiration for naming a team, as in the case of *Los Gemelos*, which exists of several brothers, two of whom are twins. Likewise, Ricardo's team, that consists of a few of his brothers and other family members, is called *Los Chivos* after Ricardo's grandfather who was a well-known player in the 1960s and who was nicknamed *El Chivo*.

For Ricardo, pelota mixteca is a family tradition that is passed on from father to son and that travels with the family as a sort of heirloom:

RICARDO

Yo lo traigo, se puede decir, de herencia. Yo empecé desde los 14 años a jugar. Ahorita tengo 33 años, entonces desde los 14 años para acá yo he jugado la pelota. No he descansado ni un año, ni seis meses. Toda la vida he estado jugando. Mi abuelo, él jugó pelota, mi papá jugó pelota, yo juego pelota. Ahorita tengo mis tres hijos. Dos hijos hombre y una mujer y los estoy entrenando porque yo quisiera de mi parte que este juego siguiera adelante.

The description of Don Agustín, one of the central figures of the *pelota mixteca*-world in the United States, of how he learned to play is very similar to Ricardo's story:

DON AGUSTÍN

Nosotros desde niños, mi papá jugaba, mi abuelito jugaba. Entonces esto ya viene como... Ya viene por generaciones, no? Y yo creo que es algo que lo traemos en la sangre, porque cuando yo llegué aquí al estado de California, pues, había muchos deportes que practicar. Pero no me llamaban la atención, sino yo quería seguir practicando la pelota mixteca. ... Yo empecé como a los nueve años a practicarlo. Mi papá jugaba, terminaba de jugar él y sobraban los guantes. Los guantes que ellos ocupaban, pues entonces nosotros ya los niños que veníamos ver el juego de ellos, pues nosotros ya nos poníamos los guantes y ya que el campo estaba libre empezamos a practicarlo. Y de ahí, cada jugada que tenían cada ocho días íbamos a ver y a correr por las pelotas. Y ya después, como digo, terminaba el juego y ya, pues, quedaban los guantes y a practicar otra vez.

DANIEL CASAREZ

Y tu hijo, cuando empezó él?

DON AGUSTÍN

Michael también empezó a andar conmigo desde seis, siete años. No jugaba, pero le encantaba ir a ver los juegos que yo hacía, acá en el Valle de San Fernando o en Santa Barbara, San Diego. Estos eran los lugares, los campos que nosotros visitábamos con los amigos. Y el siempre [dijo] "Vámonos, ahorita me voy contigo". Y desde chico, le ha gustado andar conmigo y pues le gustó mucho la pelota mixteca. Ya como a los 10 años empezó a practicarla. Y hasta la actualidad pues es uno de los jugadores. De ocho hijos, él es uno que está jugando.

Whereas Ricardo sees playing *pelota mixteca* as a family *herencia*, Don Agustín thinks that the game is something that is *en la sangre*, in his blood. He is not the only one to refer to *pelota mixteca* as something more than a traditional sport, but as running through his veins, as a part of his being:

JAIME

Todo este deporte consiste en una cadena, pues. Si al nieto, al sobrino, al hijo, si le gusta, lógico que va venir, me entiendes. ... Yo tenía 15 años y yo iba a la highschool y todo ese rollo. Pero nunca me atraía este deporte. Como que yo decía que "no, está muy caliente", pero después de ahí dije pues quiero empezar. Pues como que me empezó a atraer y dije, no pues esto es lo mío

PEDRO

Yo pienso que traes algo de antes, de tu familia.

JAIME

La sangre!

PEDRO

La sangre. La familia de él [Jaime] jugó mucho.

JAIME

Eso es lo que te digo, yo iba a la high school y que esto no era mi rollo. Dije "ay, el clima está muy caliente, no quiero jugar". Pero después como que, te hace como, no un hobby, pero ni un pasatiempo. Un pasatiempo no se te hace, me entiendes. Pero es como, como te diré. Como que algo que te trae, que tú te dices " tengo que estar cada ocho días ahí" me entiendes. … Es como que la sangre llama.

The three players of pelota mixteca quoted here are migrants and say that the game is something they brought with them to their new homeland 'in their blood' or as part of their 'heritage', as part of a family tradition. They play the game because their ancestors, most concretely their fathers and grandfathers, played the game and they took pride in performing a tradition that their ancestors competed in, probably for many generations. While the players quoted here are all migrants, in Oaxaca, likewise, most new players start playing because someone in their family played the game. As such, players, rather than focusing on their Mixtec or indigenous identity, tend to stress the importance of the identity of their families as their main motivation to start playing the game. However, this stress on family inheritance and this tradition of transferal of the game from

father to son or uncle to nephew seems to be, in some ways, impeding the spread of the game and, possibly, threatening its survival. Since learning to play *pelota mixteca* seems to be, above all, a family affair, the game is kept within a small circle of players and their families.

For example, at the 2012 *Torneo Internacional* a majority of the spectators, as well as one of the *quintas* from Fresno, consisted of natives of the town of Jaltepec, in the Nochixtlán district of the Mixteca region. The tournament brought together many migrants from around Fresno, but these were primarily migrants from Jaltepec, especially the Rancho Buenavista, and their families. Other Mixtec migrants that were not from the same region, or who did not have a family background of playing the game did not attend the tournament and would probably not consider learning how to play the game. This not only goes for migrants who do not come from a family with a background in the game, it is also, especially, true for young people in Mexico. While some beginners do decide to play the game simply because they see others play it in their neighborhood, all of the young players I talked to around Oaxaca started playing because their father, grandfather or uncle was an avid player of the game. The same goes for players in California. While some indicated that they only started playing after having arrived in the USA, even these players came from *pelotero* families.

While people who do not come from a *familia pelotera* will often not start playing the game, even within families that do have a tradition of playing, a lot of the young people no longer start playing the game. As we have seen before, of the eight children of Don Agustín, who is one of the foremost promoters of the game in California, only one plays *pelota mixteca*. Likewise, in the family of Jaime, he and his brother are the only two of his siblings to be playing. Obviously, the fact that young people do not start playing the game is a threat to the survival of the game in California and Mexico alike. According to Jaime and Pedro, who are in their mid-20s and -30s, the game is going to have trouble surviving:

MARTIN
Y tus hermanos, ya no juegan?
JAIME
Aquí tengo uno presente, que juega, más que nada.
PEDRO
Ya se está acabando. Él es el único, tiene sobrinos. Sus tíos jugaron, sus hijos no juegan. Y él es el único sobrino.
MARTIN
Y por qué?
JAIME

Mira yo te voy a decir una cosa, aquí los niños, los jóvenes están en otro país, me entiendes. No tienen la mentalidad como en México. Si todos los morros que estuvieran aquí … estuvieran en México tuvieran otra mentalidad.

PEDRO

No viste los chicos jugando con los guantes? Tienen poco tiempo que llegaron aquí, y traen otra mentalidad.

JAIME

Por qué? Porque, desgraciadamente, en este país los niños tienen mucha libertad de hacer las cosas.

MARTIN

Y no traen amor a las raíces?

JAIME

Sí! Y eso es malo. Por qué? Porque desgraciadamente las raíces se van perdiendo. ... Y la verdad, que te esperas de mis hijos, imagínate? Si sus hijos de él [Pedro], él que ya es más grande que yo, si sus hijos no juegan, que te esperas de mis hijos míos?

PEDRO

Pero todos los hijos, fíjate, … son como 10 hermanos, y nadie juega. Nadie, de todos. De todos los hermanos. Como el casi es el único de los sobrinos [que juega].

Whereas, in the United States, Pedro and Jaime attribute the loss of the game among children and young people to a different mentality from that of youngsters back home, in Oaxaca itself it is often said that the reason that the sport is in danger is that young people consider the sport to be something of the past, a game that is not really something that anyone 'modern' would play. The words *caduco* and *aburrido* are often used to describe the opinion that young people have of the game. For example, Don Ignacio Canseco an older player from Ejutla says "A mis hijos no les llama la atención la pelota mixteca, les parece muy aburrida; es que ellos tienen opciones más modernas y por mucho que les quiera inculcar esto a los jóvenes no lo ven atractivo; como es un deporte que no se ha modificado en años, dicen que está caduco" (Ruíz 2005). Naturally, it is not quite true that the sport has not changed in years, one need only think of the development of the gloves in the hule variant or of the invention of the esponja variant over the course of the past decades, but it is clear that pelota mixteca is seen as an ancient sport, something that was played by the ancestors but which is now considered old-fashioned and not as 'modern' as other sports like soccer, basketball or baseball. These global sports often have a larger appeal for young players, who, in a globalized sporting world, can choose between many different alternatives. Sports that lack an

'aura of globalization' have less appeal and are less likely to attract young players (van Bottenburg 1994: 260). Margarita García García, a deputee in the state senate of Oaxaca who proposed an initiative to stimulate the playing of pelota mixteca by organizing a *campeonato estatal*, says in an interview "los jugadores de pelota mixteca, viejos en su mayoría, están convencidos de que este juego no morirá, pero a la vez les preocupa que sus hijos y nietos no se interesen en él por considerarlo caduco y aburrido" (Martínez 2011). It should be mentioned that the above sentence that is presented as a quote from an interview with Margarita García, is taken directly from another article that was published years earlier in a piece written by Elisa Ruiz on the website of the CJIB (Conféderation International de Jeu de Balle). What this says about the 'authenticity' of the interview and the actual engagement of the *diputada* with pelota mixteca and its players, I cannot judge.

It is clear that the main reason that pelota mixteca is in danger of 'extinction', is the fact that many young people do not start playing it anymore. This lack of enthusiasm among young people for the game has widely been attributed to the fact that the game is seen as old-fashioned, boring and anti-modern. As a result, politicians who have wanted to promote the game have tried to make young Oaxacans aware of the importance of the game. However, it could be argued that politicians and the state-created discourse around pelota mixteca that was formed from the Mexican Revolution onwards, are themselves largely responsible for this representation of pelota mixteca as something old-fashioned and ethnically particular, bordering on the historic and folkloric.

In the next section, I will attempt to sketch a diachronic overview of the Mexican state's attitude towards indigenous peoples in general and pelota mixteca in particular. This overview looks at the overall discourse that was created on the value of indigenous culture and the policies that were implemented in relation to indigenous traditions (including sports). I will examine how the Mexican nation-building project, from Independence onwards, has prompted the Mexican state to promote or discourage playing pelota mixteca and how pelota mixteca itself has featured in narratives and discourses on Mexican national identity. Government initiatives have not only significantly influenced the decision of individuals to start playing the game, they have also framed the ways in which players of the game have been able to identify themselves and their game. As a result, these policies and discourse are fundamental to understanding the evolution of pelota mixteca over the course of the past century. At the same time, as I have argued in chapter four, modernity, globalization and migration have opened up new possibilities of self-identification and this development has given players of pelota mixteca an opportunity to define their own agenda. In the last part of this chapter, I focus on this new agenda for promoting pelota mixteca and the ways

in which globalization has enabled the players, and their self-organizations, to take matters into their own hands in order to ensure the game's survival.

Mexican Indigenist Policies since the Spanish invasion

Roughly speaking, starting from the Spanish Conquest, the history of the (Spanish-) Mexican state's attitude towards indigenous cultures can be divided into four broad periods. Firstly, the Spanish Colonial government (1521 - 1821) treated Mexico's native population as a racialized group, organized in the *República de Indios*, that existed alongside the formal Spanish Colonial system. Indigenous peoples were identified according to ethnic and cultural criteria and were resettled in new communities, which were easier to control and to extract tribute from. While a certain degree of indigenous self-rule was accepted under the *República de Indios*, a system in which local indigenous *cabildos* or *caciques* would govern indigenous communities, indigenous individuals were considered to be intellectually comparable to children who needed the guidance of Spanish Colonial Rule. Indigenous peoples were subject to different legal arrangements and were not regarded as full citizens of the Spanish Empire, but rather as members of a lower caste within the state.

Briefly before Independence, in 1812, the Constitution of Cádiz was passed, which formally abolished the caste system and rendered all Spaniards and 'Indians' equivalent as citizens of the empire (McEnroe 2012:185). While this new constitution granted the indigenous population of Mexico more formal rights as citizens of the Spanish empire, at the same time, it took away their rights to self-rule of the indigenous local *cabildos*. In other words, whereas Mexico's indigenous population was acknowledged as a separate, though inferior, group prior to the Constitution of Cádiz, after this moment, they were simply seen as citizens of the Spanish empire, without any regard to their cultural or ethnic diversity. This policy of, at least officially, dismantling the caste system was continued after Mexican independence from Spain in 1821 and was reaffirmed in the new Mexican Constitution, which came into effect in 1824, building a national identity that simply denied the existence of the indigenous population (Jung 2008: 80; McEnroe 2012: 194). It was assumed that the indigenous population of Mexico would eventually disappear because of cultural assimilation and intermarriage with criollo and mestizo inhabitants of Mexico.

This politics of *mestizaje* as a 'solution to the Indian problem' was, with some modifications and the use of new terminology, carried on after the Mexican Revolution. The indigenist policies of subsequent post-Revolutionary Mexican governments, until the 1970s, were aimed at incorporating the indigenous sectors of society into a Mainstream Mexican culture, which took the Mestizo as its ideal. These policies were largely based on the ideas and writings of the philosopher and Secretary for Education (1921 – 1924) José Vasconcelos, who promoted his visions of a racially and culturally

homogenous Mexico under the name of the *Raza Cósmica*. This Cosmic Race was founded on an amalgam of Mexico's pre-Columbian cultures and Spanish/Western models of governance. The principal means to achieve this goal was through the standardization of national public education, using schools as the primary agent through which to construct a new Revolutionary Mexican identity. However, while Vasconcelos' policies were aimed at improving the socio-economic circumstances of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, his main objective of 'modernizing' Mexico through the education system, at the expense of traditional culture and indigenous languages, meant that the only contribution of Mexico's indigenous population to the Cosmic Race was that of their prehispanic ancestors, denying the value of contemporary indigenous traditions. In the words of José del Val (1999: 355), "visionario y racista, Vasconcelos soñó con un México moderno, racialmente unificado y culturalmente sajón. Su reivindicación del México prehispánico se plasmó en murales justicieros y en el culto por los indios de piedra, en demérito de los indios vivos que en su proteico proyecto estaban condenados a desaparecer." Under this regime, Mexico's indigenous population was no longer identified on the basis of cultural and ethnic criteria, as had been the case in the Colonial era, but, rather, in a class-based state organization, was incorporated into the category of 'peasants' (see Aguirre Beltrán 1992 for a discussion in favor of this position).

A major turning point in the approach of the Mexican state, and its most important indigenist institute the INI (Instituto Nacional Indigenista) came in the 1970s with the presidencies of Luís Echeverría (1970 – 1976) and José López Portillo (1976 – 1982), who abandoned the economic isolationist policies of their predecessors and opened up the country for participation in the global economy (Friedlander 2006: 193-212; Jung 2008: 80). During and after the 1970s significant changes took place in the indigenist policies of the Mexican state in general, and of the INI more specifically. With the abandonment of economical isolationist policies, came the dismantling of the revolutionary project, which included the idea of the *Raza Cósmica* and the racially and culturally unified Mestizo nation. This opened up the possibility of seeing Mexico as a multicultural rather than a culturally homogenous country. Anthropologists and archaeologists had been fundamental in the creation and functioning of the INI, ever since its foundation in 1948, and had had a significant impact on the social policies of the Mexican state, especially in regards to education and indigenous issues. Large part of the changes that came about in the policies of the INI were implemented under pressure from a group of anthropologists who were critical of the assimilationist tendencies of the INI and who voiced their critique in the publication *De eso que llaman antropología Mexicana* (Warman 1970). However, as Friedlander (2006: 184) notes, in the 1970s "as Mexico's leaders prepared the country to open its doors wider to international markets, they relied more heavily on the advice of

economists than they did on the advice of their friends in Anthropology, with whom they had had a very special relationship since the days of the Mexican Revolution."

Thus, we see that the opening up of the Mexican internal market to the global economy, coupled with Mexico's wish to play a larger role in the international political arena – evidenced, for example, by López Portillo's wish to become secretary-general of the United Nations after his presidency (Friedlander 2006) – led to the abandonment of traditional Revolutionary ideas of Mexico as a unified Mestizo nation, creating more space for the recognition of indigenous cultures and multiculturalism. According to Courtney Jung (2008: 148), this turn towards neo-liberal politico-economical models was coupled with a discourse of democracy that "opened space for political mobilization around demands for representation and citizenship that link politics to groups constituted in terms of ethnicity, gender, and race." These new identity-politics replaced earlier class-based movements and political agendas, refocusing the political debate away from questions of economic redistribution towards the recognition of indigenous cultural rights. As a result, indigenous peoples and movements no longer identified themselves, or were identified as, peasants but gained a new, potentially powerful identity as *indígena*. At the same time, the re-orientation of the INI, under the influence of strong criticism from anthropological circles, made that the Mexican government, through its indigenist institute, focused more on respect for and recognition of indigenous culture, than it did on cultural assimilation. This change of perspective cleared the way for the later ratification by the Mexican government of ILO's Convention 169 in 1989, and the amendment to Article 4 of the Mexican Constitution in 1992, which asserted Mexico's commitment to protect indigenous languages, cultures, *usos y costumbres*, resources and specific forms of social organization. As such, (economic) globalization, played a clear and distinctive part in the altering of traditional ethnic relationships in Mexico from the 1970s onwards. Later on in this chapter I will treat this development in more detail, discussing how these international developments might have influenced the attitude of the state towards pelota mixteca. First, however, I will try to develop an overview and understanding of how these different 'currents of indigenism' impacted pelota mixteca.

Pelota mixteca and the state, a diachronic overview

The Colonial period

Because of a lack of sources on indigenous handball games from the Colonial period, it is difficult, and maybe even somewhat nonsensical, to attempt to determine the attitude of the Colonial administration towards pelota mixteca. In chapters 2 and 3, I have argued that the

traditional Spanish game of *pelota a mano* was adopted by indigenous peoples in southern Mexico, most notably Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Tarascans, during the Colonial period. However, since we cannot determine with certainty at what point in time this adoption actually took place, it is virtually impossible to relate this assimilation of the game by indigenous peoples to specific socio-political developments. Nonetheless, on the basis of the information we have on the general attitude of Spanish colonial society towards indigenous culture, we can postulate some ideas.

First of all, from 16th-century chroniclers, we know that the traditional hip-ball game of *ollamaliztli* was prohibited by the Spanish Colonial authorities, because of its intimate relation with non-Christian religious practices, as well as its potential role in the creation of conflicts between communities that had competed with each other in the ballgame. In the previous chapter, I have suggested that pelota mixteca's precursor*, pelota a mano*, may have been introduced by Spanish missionaries as a substitute for the hip-ballgame, as part of initiatives to Christianize and 'civilize' the indigenous population. Moreover, these games would have taken place in communities that were part of the *República de Indios*, in which indigenous cultural customs that did not interfere with the regular economic goings-on of the Spanish authorities or were not in direct contradiction to the Christian doctrine were allowed. Following this hypothesis, we could argue that the birth of pelota mixteca as an indigenous sport was actually instigated by the Spanish Colonial administration. Of course, it is important to note here that the first known documents that describe pelota mixteca as an indigenous practice date to the late nineteenth century. As a result, we cannot speak of the stimulation of indigenous culture by the Spanish Colonial administration – that would be quite ridiculous, considering the large-scale prohibition of indigenous traditions that took place in the Colonial era – but, ironically, we do see that, as in other cases, the Spanish Colonial system laid the basis for a new indigenous tradition.

Pre-Revolutionary Independent Mexico

According to Jung (2008: 85), the attitude of Mexico's post-Independence, pre-Revolutionary governments toward the indigenous population "was that it would disappear; it would be incorporated into the Mexican national identity through assimilation and miscegenation." As a result, indigenist policies of the 19th century concentrated on 'acculturating and educating the Indian', focusing not only on promoting Spanish as the national language, but also teaching hygienic standards and promoting a 'scientific outlook on life'. This movement of modernization was especially strong under the presidency (or dictatorship) of Porfirio Díaz (1876-1911). During the *Porfiriato*, Mexico, like many other countries in the world at that time, experienced a period of drastic economic and social changes. Political centralization, and nationalization of culture, with the

aim of creating a new Mexican national identity, were among the most prominent of these new developments. This process of 'modernization' affected all areas of Mexican life, not only politics and economy, but also cultural expressions such as music, clothing, and amusements.

As part of this process of 'modernization', several Western sports were introduced from Europe and the United States by the Mexican elite. While the 18th and early 19th century had seen the introduction of more traditional European games like bowls, *pelota vasca*, cricket (Krämer-Mandeau 1992:79), and very probably *pelota a mano* the precursor of pelota mixteca, at the end of the 19th century more modern sports such as football, rugby, baseball, and basketball – but also polo, golf, rowing and cycling (Arbena 1991; Beezley 1988; Magan 2002) – were imported and played by the upper classes of Mexican society, in their desire to resemble their Western counterparts. As a result, a socio-economical divide in leisure and sporting activities was produced, in which the lower classes would participate in more traditional activities, while the elite and urban middle class participated in modern sports (Arbena 1991:351). Of course, the playing of pelota mixteca was part of the more traditional activities, which were of no interest to the Western/'Modern'-oriented elite, who preferred to partake in sports that had an aura of modernity and globalization. While this development was a reflection of the government's agenda of modernization, it did not explicitly initiate these changes – it were individuals or small groups that imported the new sports and started the sports clubs. Sports were, at this time, not used as a tool in the process of nationalization of culture, in order to create a new Mexican identity. As a result, no specific policies in relation to pelota mixteca, or any other sport, were implemented before the Mexican Revolution. However, the lack of any interest in traditional indigenous culture from the part of the Porfirian administration, because of its focus on modernizing Mexico, makes it improbable that if a policy on sports would have existed, pelota mixteca would have featured prominently in any government plans.

Post-Revolutionary Mexican governments (pre-1970s)

Even though the Mexican Revolution was an explicit reaction to the reign of Porfirio Díaz and the social system that was associated with it, its indigenist policies were largely a continuation of earlier models, phrased in a different discourse. The formation of the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP), which was charged from the 1920s onwards with creating the new Mexican identity and incorporating all sectors of society into this ideal, is one of the most significant outcomes of the revolutionary period. However, while the reach of this institution was definitely novel, its basic principles and aims were nothing new. In the words of Mary Kay Vaughan (1997: 28), "infantilizing campesinos, educators denied them knowledge, culture, and rationality. The SEP assumed that

peasants had no information to contribute to their own transformation. Enlightenment came from abroad and from the cities."

Sports played a significant role in the ambitions of the SEP. Every rural school was expected to be equipped with a sports field on which physical education classes, including Western sports such as basketball and baseball, were to be taught. Within this framework an array of athletic activities was promoted, that would instill in the students a spirit of team work, loyalty and sacrifice, while at the same time combating the widespread alcoholism that was thought to characterize the countryside (Arbena 1991:353, Vaughan 1997:180). By participating in team sports, such as baseball or basketball, *indígenas* – it was hoped – would learn how to cooperate with each other and others. Additionally, by giving talented individual athletes the possibility to compete, individually or in a team, on a national level, they would be incorporated into the national social structure. Moreover, successful indigenous athletes - excelling in Western, modern sports - could serve as role models for the *indígenas* in the rural communities, to show that *indígenas* could also achieve success in *mestizo* society. Whereas, during the *Porfiriato,* sports did not form part of official government policies, after the Mexican Revolution, sports became an important political tool for the new Revolutionary governments that tried to forge a new national identity for all Mexicans. According to Benjamin (2000: 110), "sports became a metaphor not for the historic 1910 revolution itself but rather for the benefits of *la Revolución* in the present and its promise for the future, as embodied in the forms of healthy, strong, and disciplined young people."

Considering that this policy of using sports to create a new subject in a new nation focused explicitly on the modernization of the nation, how did this impact indigenous sports and games in general and pelota mixteca in particular? First of all, it has to be remembered that "the ideological thrust of projected physical education programs was to direct social change and enhance state consolidation" (Arbena 1991:354). Hence, it seems doubtful that any initiative to stimulate indigenous games could have been successful, since indigenous culture in general was considered anti-modern and in need of replacement by modern customs and pastimes. Nonetheless, some attempts to promote indigenous games were made. For example, in 1935 the Secretaría de Educación Pública (SEP) launched a national program that was aimed at reviving the indigenous sports and games. These indigenous sports would form the basis for a new form of national physical education (Brewster 2004:224). The program aimed to promote not only indigenous games but also traditional dances of different indigenous groups from all around Mexico by teaching them at rural and urban schools. It is possible that the rulebook of pelota mixteca that was compiled by Oaxaca's secretary of Sports and Education, Raúl Bolaños Cacho, and published in Oaxaca in 1946 was part of

an initiative that flowed from this program. In the introduction to this *reglamento,* Bolaños Cacho (1946: i) states:

> "al florecer la gran Cultura Mixteca Zapoteca, apareció la actividad deportiva conocida con el nombre de 'pelota mixteca' actividad autóctona que hasta la actualidad viene siendo practicada por nuestra población indígena […] Uno de los errores más grandes que hemos cometido, radica en que nos olvidamos de nosotros mismos, en mucho se desconoce el pasado histórico deportivo de México, vivimos familiarizados con deportes extranjeros."

This introduction reflects the concern of the State to promote indigenous sports, games, and other pastimes, favoring them over imported sports, such as basketball and baseball. Despite attempts such as that by Bolaños Cacho, however, this program never achieved its goal to put indigenous sports center stage in the national physical education programs.

Apart from the active promotion of indigenous physical education in schools, which never really stood a chance of success, another form of promotion of indigenous games was through displays and exhibitions that took place during national holidays, such as the Juegos Nacionales de la Revolución. These games, which were organized on the Día de la Revolución in 1941, consisted of exhibitions of indigenous games, such as bow and arrow shooting contests, a form of wrestling from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and shooting blow darts. Other games that were included were Ulama de Hule and Tambuche, a traditional ballgame from Nayarit. Pelota mixteca is also noted in a document that announces the preparations for this festival. Interestingly, however, it appears that pelota mixteca was never played during this festival, the somewhat peculiar reason being that the players of pelota mixteca were too well-organized. The document reads, "la pelota mixteca está en la actualidad perfectamente organizada en una Federación adherida a la Confederación Deportiva Mexicana, por lo que será presentado en un lugar preferente, ya que no cabe dentro del programa técnico que regirá a estos Juegos Deportivos."[18]

If we look at the reasons for presenting other indigenous games we see that they are selected on the basis of their qualities as a spectator sport and are generally described as 'spectacular'. For example, in the introduction we see that those sports that will be displayed are "aquellos deportes autóctonos que por su interés y vistosidad merezcan ser presentados." Examining the effect that the organizers of the games envisioned for the games more closely, we see

[18] This and following quotes from a report of the Comisión Recreativo-Artistica (25.6.1941), archived at the Archivo General de la Nación in the presidential archive of Manuel Ávila Camacho (MAC 532/29). I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Keith Brewster for supplying me with this reference.

that, for the blow dart competition "la eshibición [sic.] de un grupo de indígenas en este deporte despertará en el público mucho interés y admiración." For another sport it is mentioned that "al ser presentado en un concurso despertará la atención y el interés del público." Additionally, the document mentions that the committee intends to present a reconstruction of a "Juego de Pelota con los trajes típicos en usanza en la época pre-cortesiana." As we will see later on, this presentation of the prehispanic Mesoamerican hip-ballgame was still a standard feature during exhibitions of indigenous sports in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Thus, it seems that the aim of the exhibitions was mostly to present the spectacular splendors of indigenous Mexican sporting culture, rather than to stimulate the public – non-indigenous inhabitants of Mexico-City – to take up one of these sports and start playing them. We see that pelota mixteca, the only one of the sports that is actually well-organized under the umbrella of the Mexican Sports Federation, and which could easily be promoted as a sport that spectators can also play, is exhibited elsewhere, since, in typical obtuse bureaucratic jargon, 'it does not fit in with the technical program'. Below we will see that until very recently, and some would say even today, this is a recurring characteristic of this type of indigenous sports exhibitions – indigenous activities are presented not as something open for participation, but as a spectacle of the Indígena, the necessary Other on which a significant part of Mexican cultural identity is based, but who is only appreciated by the mainstream as a historical counterpoint to the desired modern Mexico. As a result, the programs of Revolutionary Mexican administrations were aimed mostly at consolidating the state and cultivating a positive image of 'the historical Indian'. Living traditions were, in the words of Keith Brewster (2004: 215), "faced with one of two possible outcomes: either a process of incorporation leading to folklorism, or continued marginalization."

Post 1970s

As mentioned, the 1970s marked a turning point in the official indigenist policies of the Mexican state. Under the influence of critical anthropologists and neoliberal socio-economic policies, the INI turned away from the traditional assimilationist policies that had characterized state-indigenous relations since the Mexican Revolution and Vasconcelos' Raza Cósmica. One of the main anthropological criticisms of the indigenist politics of the post-Revolutionary state was that, in line with the official state indigenism, the only way for the indigenous population to truly contribute to the advancement of Mexican society was by ceasing to be indigenous. In the words of Guillermo Bonfil (1970: 55), "el indio, se piensa, no puede contribuir a esa tarea en tanto se mantenga como indio, esto es, como 'el otro', como ajeno; su capacidad de acción y su perspectiva de liberación están en su mexicanización total." From this critique flowed a new form of indigenism, which, rather than aiming at total cultural assimilation of the indigenous population, actually stimulated local

indigenous development and even self-identification of indigenous Mexicans as such. At the same time, the socio-economic policies that were introduced coeval with this new indigenism opened up spaces for indigenous self-organizations, which were also stimulated by the INI. In the words of Charles Hale (2004: 17), "neoliberal democratization contradicts key precepts of the mestizo ideal. Downsizing the state devolves limited agency to civil society, the font of indigenous organization."

Of course, these new policies affected pelota mixteca. First of all, it is important to note that the 1970s were also the first period in which pelota mixteca really started to become a transnational sport, played by communities on two sides of the Mexican-US border. Naturally, this was an unintended outcome of the neoliberal policies that opened up Mexican markets and stimulated large-scale migration of Mexicans to northern Mexico and beyond. If we look at state policies that directly affected pelota mixteca we see that these are very much in line with the overall aims of post-1970s indigenism – local development and the cultural empowerment of indigenous peoples. For example, in 1994, the 'Ley de Estímulo y Fomento al Deporte' was passed. *Deportes Autóctonos* were named as one of the main priorities on the Mexican national sports agenda. Indigenous sports were considered to play a vital role in the constitution of indigenous communities. As a result, indigenous sports were included as a separate priority within the 'Programa Nacional de Educación Física y de Deporte 1995-2000'. Pelota mixteca is one of the sports that is mentioned explicitly in this program, and is considered 'uno de los deportes mas notables'. The program recognizes that many of the indigenous sports and games played in Mexico around 1995 are in danger of extinction because young people prefer to start playing modern sports. To resolve this problem, the program proposes three main points of action to ensure the survival of indigenous sports:

> 1. Registering indigenous sports and promoting research on indigenous sports,
> 2. Creating and diffusing materials on indigenous sports, and promoting them in the indigenous communities that practice the sports today, and
> 3. Establishing a program that would recognize and stimulate local promoters of the sports, and capacitate youngsters that will be able to teach the sport (my synthesis and translation).

The aims of this program differ considerably from earlier state interventions that were aimed at incorporation and acculturation, resulting in the disappearance of indigenous traditions through assimilation. In contrast, the 1995-2000 program explicitly states that the goal of the diffusion of indigenous sports is "desarrollar el sentido de identidad, solidaridad y unidad de los pueblos indios mediante el deporte"[19]. While this program aims to promote and stimulate the

[19] http://info4.juridicas.unam.mx/ijure/nrm/1/333/default.htm?s=iste

practice of indigenous sports it is clear that it intended to do so within indigenous communities themselves and did not envision the promotion of these traditions to a larger audience, forming part of a national culture of physical education. The plan aims to "difundir las actividades físicas, recreativas y deportivas precolombinas, así como sus manifestaciones actuales", but mentions that the main objective is "fomentar la promoción de estas actividades en las comunidades indígenas que las practiquen." Of course, promoting indigenous traditions, rather than ending them by assimilating the indigenous population, is a positive step in the direction of preserving these traditions. However, it can be questioned whether the promotion of these sports solely within indigenous communities will actually contribute to their survival. I will elaborate on this point later in this chapter when discussing the initiatives that players of pelota mixteca have taken towards the detraditionalization/deindigenization of their sport.

One of the outcomes of the 1995-2000 program was the introduction in 1999 of a workshop on indigenous sports into the SEP's 'Carrera Magisterial'. Later, in 2004, the SEP incorporated this workshop into a new course that was taught at twenty 'Escuelas Normales de Educación Física' called 'La educación en el Medio Rural Indígena'[20]. From these programs, it seems that indigenous sports are only supposed to be promoted by teachers who will be working in 'el Medio Rural Indígena', not by teachers who want to introduce indigenous sports into the everyday lives of Mexico's non-indigenous population. Looking at developments over the past 5 years, we see that, after having been absent from the 'Programa Nacional de Educación Física y de Deporte 2008-2012'[21], in 2014 the new 'Plan Deporte 2014-2018' mentions indigenous sports as a separate category or priority. However, the mention is only cursory. When discussing the national system of sports competitions, the plan states that "México dispone de un amplio y variado sistema de competencias deportivas para todos los rangos de edad durante el periodo de vida escolar, hasta su integración a selecciones nacionales, *además de atender otros sectores como el deporte social, autóctono e indígena*"[22] (my emphasis). It is clear that indigenous sports, while being mentioned in the national sports policies, are explicitly set apart from mainstream Mexican sports culture.

One of the main reasons that we only find one mention of indigenous sports in the national sports program is probably that the updated Ley General de Cultura Física y Deporte of 2013 delegates the burden of diffusion and promotion of indigenous sports to individual states and *municipios*. While the *Ley* has as one of its aims "difundir el patrimonio cultural deportivo", it also

[20] www.codeme.org.mx/autoctonoytradicional/antecedentes.html

[21] http://www.conade.gob.mx/PNCFD_2008/PNCFD.pdf

[22] http://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5342830&fecha=30/04/2014, accessed 11-11-2014

mentions that "los Juegos Tradicionales y Autóctonos y la Charrería serán considerados como parte del patrimonio cultural deportivo del país y de la Federación. Los Estados, el Distrito Federal y los Municipios en el ámbito de sus respectivas competencias deberán preservarlos, apoyarlos, promoverlos, fomentarlos y estimularlos"[23]. Clearly, indigenous sports are considered a local matter, only a concern of the national government when it comes to cultural heritage and patrimony, rather than a category of sports that might be incorporated into the national sports agenda. This 'setting apart' of indigenous sports is, in my view, still part of the legacy of indigenism, which, before the 1970s, tried to 'folklorize' indigenous sports in its project to assimilate indigenous culture into national identity, and, after the 1970s, tried to stimulate indigenous traditions, while keeping them confined to indigenous communities. Below, I will argue that this stress on the 'cultural peculiarity' of indigenous traditions is one of the biggest threats to the survival of pelota mixteca. In order to do this, I will first try to outline the narratives and discourse on pelota mixteca that were created by Mexican politicians. I aim to do this through an analysis of state policies, legislation and initiatives, as well as newspaper articles on pelota mixteca.

Discourse

I hope to show that Mexican authorities have created an official discourse on *pelota mixteca* that was based on three main assumptions:

1. That *pelota mixteca* is a game that has been played for over 3000 years and is a direct descendant of the ancient Mesoamerican ballgame,
2. That *pelota mixteca* is a tradition particular to certain indigenous peoples, mainly Mixtecs and Zapotecs, and
3. That *pelota mixteca* is an indigenous cultural tradition, rather than a sport, more similar to a type of indigenous cultural activity or ritual, than to a 'real' sport, like football or basketball.

I will argue that, as a consequence, until very recently, the actions of the state concerning *pelota mixteca* were primarily aimed towards promoting the game as a cultural event or a tourist attraction, rather than towards promoting *pelota mixteca* as a sport that could be played by all Mexicans. This policy, in my view, hindered the spread of *pelota mixteca* and endangered its existence as a living sport, since it implicitly reinforced the view of the game as *caduco* and old-fashioned, which I have touched upon earlier. Below, I will treat every assumption in more detail.

[23] http://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5301698&fecha=07/06/2013, accessed 11-11-2014

Assumption number 1

The first, and most prominent, assumption on which the Mexican authorities' discourse on pelota mixteca is based is the fact that pelota mixteca is a game that has been played for over 3000 years and is a variation of the ancient Mesoamerican ballgame. The assumption that *pelota mixteca* is a variation of the pre-Columbian ballgame, in short that it is a *juego de pelota de origen prehispánico*, is present in nearly all government and media communication on the game. Some, however, are more explicit on the fact than others. For instance, a proposal of Francisco Sánchez Ramos of the federal *cámara de diputados*, which aimed to promote pelota mixteca, contains four paragraphs explaining the way the pre-Columbian ballgame was played, how many ball courts have been found in archaeological excavations and links *pelota mixteca* to pre-Columbian ball courts in sites like Chichén Itzá, Tula, and Monte Albán, among others.

Nearly all newspaper articles concerning pelota mixteca, refer to the game as 'un deporte ancestral' and relate it to the (archaeological) past of the Mixtec and Zapotec inhabitants of Oaxaca. One article, for instance, states that "Oaxaca cuenta con un tesoro histórico al practicar la pelota mixteca" (García 2013). When reporting on the fact that students at the COBAO have started to learn pelota mixteca as part of their courses, Julio Sánchez León writes: "En un hecho inédito, jóvenes estudiantes de nivel medio superior han comenzado a incursionar en la práctica de la pelota mixteca, ancestral disciplina que buscan mantener con vida" (2011). Another article on the same subject reads: "El COBAO continua impulsando el juego de la pelota mixteca en nuestra entidad y promoviendo entre los jóvenes la práctica de este deporte ancestral, a fin de preservarlo como legado de nuestros antepasados" (COBAO 2011).

Going back further in time, we see that the fact that pelota mixteca is an autochthonous Mexican game was stressed in newspaper coverage of the game as early as the 1950s. An article in *El Imparcial* of Oaxaca, published April, 2 1953, which announces that a team from Mexico City will be coming to Oaxaca to compete against a local team, reads

> "Para el Sábado de Gloria se anuncia en esta ciudad, la realización de interesantes encuentros de pelota mixteca en los que competirán un equipo local y otro procedente de la ciudad de México, ambos que cuentan con jugadores muy fuertes. ... Los encuentros se llevarán a cabo en el patio del Toronjal, cercano a la Escuela Presidente Alemán, existiendo gran animación por concurrir a ellos dado que se trata de uno de los poquísimos deportes netamente mexicanos que aún se conservan y tiene sus últimos reductos en Oaxaca, Puebla, México y uno que otro sitio más."

Apart from the label 'ancestral sport' newspaper articles reporting on pelota mixteca invariably relate the sport to the Precolumbian Mesoamerican ballgame, the rituals related to this game and the many ball courts that are found in archaeological sites in Mesoamerica. Sometimes this leads to forms of exotization of the game, as in the case of a journalist who notes that "el juego de la pelota mixteca tiene connotaciones mágicas y religiosas, ya que para los Mixtecas la pelota es el simbolismo del universo, el Sol y la tierra" (Torrentera 2012). The first pelota mixteca tournament that was ever held in Huatulco to celebrate the town's patron saint's day, in 2011, was even given the name of *torneo de pelota prehispánica* by the organizers, who were members of the municipal authority (Sánchez León 2011c). While I have no direct evidence for this, my impression is that, since Huatulco is an important tourist location on the Oaxacan coast, the name of *pelota prehispánica* was chosen in order to draw more tourists to the tournament and use pelota mixteca, at least partly, as a tourist attraction. This tourist-oriented presentation of a tournament of pelota mixteca as a *torneo de pelota prehispánica* is largely in line with what Daniel Cooper Alarcón describes as the 'strategic staging of authentic Mexicanness' on the part of the town's authorities. When discussing the creation of modern, completely planned tourist locations that are only created for the specific purpose of attracting more tourists, such as Cancún or Huatulco, Cooper Alarcón (1997:194) says

> "these completely modern, carefully designed, and sanitized tourist resorts so totally transform the landscape that they effectively erase most of the markers that [outsiders have been trained] to read as authentically Mexican (like those at Disney's Epcot Center), creating a bizarre situation in which the tourist developers must selectively reconstruct Mexicanness – or, to use MacCannell's theory, must strategically stage "authentic" Mexicanness. […] The [Mexican] secretariat [of Tourism] learned the hard way how important such staged authenticity is when its infrastructural make-over of Loreto in Baja California left the town with no identifiable "authentic" Mexicanness whatsoever, and a profound lack of tourist interest."

While, at first glance, the assumption that *pelota mixteca* is a 3000 year old pre-Columbian game does not seem a factor that could hinder the game in its spread – it even forms a source of pride for many players who see themselves as the heirs of an age-old tradition – the implications of this attitude towards the sport are potentially harmful if one wants to increase the number of players. It represents the game as something pre-modern, something of the past, something *caduco* and as a part of folklore and tradition, rather than as a modern-day sport that is still played by thousands of people. A demonstration of traditional games that was organized by the Federal

District authorities in 2008, only a few days after *pelota mixteca* and *pelota tarasca* were declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of the City of Mexico, serves to illustrate this point. During this demonstration, which was organized on Mexico City's Zócalo as part of the official celebration of the *Día de los Muertos*, one of Mexico's largest and most famous national holidays, games of *pelota mixteca*, *pelota tarasca* and *ulama* were played inside the replica of a prehispanic I-shaped ball court. This replica included the rings that are traditionally found in Aztec and Post-Classic Maya ball courts, as well as Aztec calendar signs and plastic skulls on the walls. At the beginning of the match the players lined up, their captains wearing a shield that was adorned with a painted illustration of an Aztec-style depiction of a skull and a serpent (Fig. 39). Naturally, this ball court replica did not resemble in any way a normal *pasajuego* or even the playing field on which modern-day *ulama* is played, but did do well with tourists who were attracted to the precolonial imagery. According to one participant, the players of *pelota mixteca* were even asked to wear loincloths instead of regular clothing, so that the demonstration would have a more 'authentic' feel. The *peloteros* responded to this request by saying that their families had not worn loin clothes in at least 500 years, if not much more, and refused to dress up especially for the event. They did, however, participate in the demonstration in hopes of promoting their sport to outsiders and recruiting new players.

The presentation of pelota mixteca within a replica of a prehispanic ball court is a perfect example of the strategy that the Mexican state pursued for a long time of representing indigenous culture devoid of any modern elements. This way a demonstration functioned solely as a presentation of an alien tradition of a certain indigenous group, which the Mexican state was proud of as historical patrimony but which did not fit into the mestizo cultural ideal. This strategy is similar to what Nestor García Canclini (1989: 164-77) describes for the ethnographic display of the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Mexico City, where the highly traditional representations of the life of certain indigenous groups are always 'sanitized', stripped of any indications of the inclusion of these individuals and communities in a modern globalized world, to present 'the Indian in his pure form'. According to Charles Hale (2004), this persistence of the 'Indian Other' was essential in order to create a counterpoint to the mestizo cultural ideal. The indigenous population still formed a large part of the backbone of Mexican national cultural identity, but a temporal distance had to be created. In the case of pelota mixteca this was achieved by giving demonstrations of the game within a replica of a prehispanic ball court.

Assumption number 2

A second assumption underpinning the Mexican authorities' attitude towards pelota mixteca is that the game is a tradition particular to certain indigenous peoples, mainly Mixtecs and Zapotecs. The fact

that *pelota mixteca* is a practice particular to certain indigenous peoples seems relatively indisputable and, possibly, also quite harmless. However, saying that pelota mixteca is a game solely played by Mixtecs is not a very accurate representation of the population that plays the game. Considering the ethnic background of the players of the game and the way they identify themselves (as indigenous or not) it seems more accurate to speak of a *pelota Oaxaqueña* than of a ballgame played only by Mixtecs. Not only was and is the game also played by people of Zapotec and Chocho ancestry, it is also practiced by many people who have never considered themselves indigenous, let alone Mixtec.

Nevertheless, examining what politicians are quoted as saying in Oaxacan newspapers, we see that they consistently stress the historical background of the game, as well as its cultural particularity to the Mixtec indigenous population of Oaxaca. Margarita García García of the Oaxacan legislature says in an interview that "muchos escritores reclaman que el juego es descendiente directo de otro jugado hace más de tres mil años por los Mesoamericanos. La pelota mixteca se muestra en los relieves del sitio arqueológico de Dainzú. Y zonas arqueológicas de la región mixteca" (Martínez 2011). Daniel Cuevas Chávez, the head of the Oaxacan committee on sports and youth policy, who was elected as the representative of the district of Nochixtlán, an important center for pelota mixteca, and who has shown himself to be an enthusiastic promoter of the sport in the years that he has been head of the sport committee, refers to pelota mixteca in one interview as "este deporte practicado por la etnia Mixteca desde los tiempos del Rey Cazador Garra de Tigre Ocho Venado" (Hernández 2011). When explaining why he, together with other members of the state senate, proposed to have pelota mixteca declared intangible cultural heritage of the state of Oaxaca, he is quoted as saying that

> "este decreto busca proteger una actividad deportiva que practicaban los antiguos mixtecos y zapotecos, así como otras culturas de Mesoamérica, donde la victoria simbolizaba el reconocimiento de toda la comunidad. ... los orígenes de este juego, datan de la época prehispánica. Más de mil 200 canchas han sido encontradas en Mesoamérica, lo que demuestra el grado de importancia que este juego tenía para nuestros ancestros." (Diario Oaxaca 2011)

While well-intentioned, these statements, which are undoubtedly meant to convey the historical importance of pelota mixteca and the deep roots of the game in Oaxaca, stressing the fact that it should not be lost for subsequent generations, cast back the game to the past and seem to reinforce the view of the game as something *caduco*, and possibly also *aburrido*.

The 'indigenousness' of *pelota mixteca*, that is to say, the representation of the game as something purely Mixtec or Zapotec and its associations with traditional village life and culture, is one of the important factors that make that young people, both indigenous and non-indigenous,

decide not to start to play the game. Due to 500 years of discrimination against and oppression of indigenous language and culture, the adjective 'indigenous' is seen by many Mexicans as a pejorative. For years, indigenous culture has implied backwardness, lack of civilization and degeneracy to large sectors of mestizo Mexican mainstream society. Unavoidably, this pressure from mainstream mestizo Mexican society has also influenced the appreciation of indigenous peoples of their own language and culture. An example is the term *el dialecto* which is used by speakers of indigenous languages in many parts of Mexico to refer to their own languages. This self-discrimination, brought on by years of discrimination from the part of mainstream society, also affects the choice of indigenous sports and pastimes by indigenous players.

Ironically, this discrimination of traditions of indigenous origin not only affects the popularity of *pelota mixteca*, which is undeniably indigenous, but also that of other sports, such as soccer, baseball, and basketball. For example, in the community of Huautla de Jiménez in the Mazatec region of the state of Oaxaca, basketball has been replaced by *fútbol rápido*, a form of football which is played on a smaller pitch and with fewer players. In his description of life in the community, Benjamin Feinberg notes that basketball, which was probably introduced around the 1920s or 1930s, is seen as a traditional sport in the town, rather than as a cultural introduction from the outside. According to Feinberg,

> "basketball is not seen in the Sierra as anything new, or as an instance of acculturation. I asked the official in charge of the tournament in San Antonio, said to be the oldest in the Sierra, when the tournament there began. "Years and years," he told me. I asked, "Since when, before you were born?" "Yes," he replied (and he was not a young man by a long shot). "Forever."" (2003:104)

However, the fact that basketball is seen as a game that is traditional of the Sierra and has been played 'forever' in the community, has, according to Feinberg, led to a decrease in the number of players over the past ten years. Whereas, during the early nineties, every young guy in Huautla had or wanted to have a Chicago Bulls cap (Feinberg 2003:103), in the beginning of the 2000s, the number of players of basketball declined, while the number of players of *fútbol rápido* increased. According to Feinberg (2003:104), the players of *fútbol rápido*, some of which used to play basketball before, claimed "that soccer is more sophisticated, or cool, to the outside world while basketball is too indigenous." Obviously, if basketball is seen as something 'too indigenous', the fact that pelota mixteca is seen by young people in Oaxaca as something *caduco*, because of its long

history in indigenous communities and the government's stress on its cultural particularity, is not surprising.

The representation of pelota mixteca as an ancestral, autochthonous sport, that is particular to certain indigenous peoples shapes the last assumption that forms part of the traditional discourse on pelota mixteca:

Assumption number 3

The last and most fundamental assumption that has shaped Mexican indigenist and sports policies on pelota mixteca over the past century is the treatment of the game as an indigenous cultural tradition, rather than a sport. This assumption is also the one that has had the largest impact on how the game was (re)presented. Pelota mixteca was/is considered to be more similar to a type of indigenous cultural ritual or spectacle, than to a 'real' sport, like football or basketball. Since pelota mixteca is considered to be an ancestral, indigenous game that descends directly from the famous Mesoamerican Ballgame, its value has traditionally been considered to lie in its cultural and historical particularity and its connections to the pre-Columbian past, rather than its virtues as a sport. This representation obviously has repercussions for the type of support that the Mexican authorities brandish to individual players of pelota mixteca players, as well as organizations that try to promote the game. Eduardo Arellanes describes his experience when petitioning cultural and sports committees in Mexico City for financial support to acquire gloves for children so that they could learn how to play: "llevamos [a la comisión] unas de la playeras con los logos, dijeron que lo veían muy beisbolero … entonces, yo no sé qué es lo que esperan, que juguemos en taparrabo?!"

The Mexican state has treated the game as a traditional spectacle that was to be displayed during cultural festivals that presented indigenous culture, rather than to be incorporated into sports festivals in which it would be presented as a sport. We have seen this for the Juegos Nacionales de la Revolución in the 1940s, but also in the 2008 presentation of indigenous games on the Mexico City Zócalo that was described above. Hence, as I argued before, a temporal and cultural distance was created, that reduced pelota mixteca, and other indigenous games, to spectacles to be marveled at by non-indigenous spectators, turning them into exhibitions that could be used by the tourist industry. A short comparison of two motions, one that failed and one that was successful, that were introduced in the federal and Mexico City district legislature serves to illustrate how this 'cultural tradition vs. sports'-dichotomy plays out in the political arena and which consequences it has for the survival of pelota mixteca.

The motion that failed

Francisco Sánchez Ramos, representative of the PRD party in the federal *cámara de diputados*, introduced a motion which was heard in senate on the 27th of February 2007. The point of agreement of the proposal reads: "The Secretary of Public Education is requested to intensify the practice of autochthonous and traditional sports at the level of primary education. The National Committee of Physical Culture and Sport is requested to increase the support for the Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos y Tradicionales, with the aim of promoting and preserving traditional sports."[24] This proposal is addressed at the Secretary of Public Education and stresses the importance of teaching *pelota mixteca* and other traditional sports to children in primary school, an excellent way of making sure that the sport is preserved for and by future generations. Teaching pelota mixteca at primary schools nationwide would take the sport out of 'the sphere of the culturally particular' and make it into a modern sport that is not only presented as part of an historical legacy. Also, this proposal requests an increase of the support for the Federation of Traditional Games, which could aid in the promotion of indigenous sports and sports tournaments. In short, this proposal is explicitly aimed at the needs of the *pelota mixteca* players themselves as well as at the preservation of the sport as a sport, rather than a cultural phenomenon particular of Oaxacan migrants or a tourist attraction. However, this proposal was not successful.

The successful motion: Declaration as intangible cultural heritage

The proposal that *was* successful, was one that was signed by Marcelo Ebrard, then president of Mexico's federal district on July 14, 2008 and entered into force on the 27th of October in the same year. The declaration proclaimed pelota mixteca and pelota tarasca intangible cultural heritage of the city of Mexico. This decision was the outcome of a long process of negotiation and research by the legislature of the federal district, started in 2005 through a request of the Asociación Mexicana de Jugadores de Juegos de Origen Prehispánico (AMJJOP) to declare these games "Patrimonio Cultural de la Ciudad de México". The "Consejo de Fomento y Desarollo Cultural de la Ciudad de México" decided to ask the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) for advice on the matter. The INAH advised that, because of their history, the games were worthy of protection and revalorization in order to guaranty the continuity of the tradition. As a result, the

[24] "Se solicita a la Secretaría de Educación Pública incentive la práctica del deporte autóctono y tradicional en los niveles de educación básica, y al titular de la Comisión Nacional de Cultura Física y Deporte (Conade) incremente el apoyo económico destinado a las tareas de la Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos y Tradicionales, AC, con el fin de difundir y preservar los juegos y deportes autóctonos tradicionales."

declaration of Cultural Heritage was issued. The declaration consists of five points, two of which are of particular interest here.

Firstly, the third point of the declaration, following the normal trajectory of decisions concerning Cultural Heritage, makes the Secretary of Culture (not the Secretary of Education or the Commission for Physical Education and Sports) responsible for following up on the actions derived from the declaration. The second point of the declaration explicates what the Secretary of Culture is expected to do: "To contribute to the preservation and promotion of the ballgames of prehispanic origin […], the Secretary of Culture will, in agreement with the organizations of players of prehispanic ballgames and the relevant authorities, create a cultural program of stimulation and spread of said games, also aiming to promote them as a cultural tourist attraction."[25]

Differences between the failed and the successful initiative

Comparing the unsuccessful proposal and the one that was accepted, we see that the proposal that failed was explicitly aimed at the necessities of players and aimed to promote the sport among children, in order to increase the number of players. The state entities that were expected to take on the challenge of promoting pelota mixteca were the Secretary of Education and the Commission for Physical Education and Sports. This proposal recognized pelota mixteca as a sport that could be played not only by Oaxacan immigrants, but also by schoolchildren from Mexico City and other non-Oaxacans. The declaration that resulted from the second proposal and which came into force in October 2008, on the other hand, departs from a view of pelota mixteca as a cultural tradition, rather than a sport. In the proposal and declaration, the Secretary of Culture is requested to undertake action to not only stimulate the survival of the sport, but also to aim to promote it as a cultural tourist attraction, something that is not necessarily in the interest of the players or in the survival of pelota mixteca as a living sport, and something that would never happen in the case of basketball or soccer.

Initially the declaration as cultural heritage was requested by the players themselves, united in the AMJJOP. This association had formed in the late 1980s after the first threats of expropriation of the *Pasajuego de Balbuena*, the oldest pelota mixteca court in Mexico-City, which was created through communal labor in the 1950s and which formed one of the main meeting places for Oaxacan migrants in the Mexican capital. Sadly, the *Balbuena* was constructed in an inconvenient

[25]"Para contribuir a la preservación y promoción de los juegos de pelota prehispánica [...], la Secretaría de Cultura acordará con las organizaciones de jugadores de pelota prehispánica y con las autoridades competentes, un programa cultural de fomento y expansión de dichos juegos, tratando de promoverlos también como atractivo turístico cultural."

location, since, years after the *pasajuego* itself had been constructed, the nation's *cámara de diputados* was constructed very close to it, as were several buildings of the Secretaría de Seguridad Pública (SSP). As a result, ever since the 1980s, the players of pelota mixteca and pelota tarasca, which is also played on the same courts, have tried to ward off attempts to expropriate their terrains. In response to the first attempts in the 1980s by the Mexican city police to expropriate the terrain, the players formed the *Asociación Mexicana de Jugadores de Juegos de Origen Prehispánico* (AMJJOP). This association has represented the players ever since, in their conflicts with the Mexico City authorities. Towards the end of 2004 the threat of expropriation and destruction became imminent again, when the *Cámara de Diputados* reached an agreement with the authorities of the *Delegación Venustiano Carranza*, to which the Balbuena area belongs, to turn the *pasajuego* into a parking area for the legislative body. In response, the AMJJOP requested the *Secretaría de Cultura*, also a part of the Mexico City authorities, to declare both pelota mixteca and pelota tarasca, and their associated *pasajuegos*, protected intangible cultural heritage of the City of Mexico. The hope of the players was that, if pelota mixteca and pelota tarasca would be proclaimed intangible heritage of the city of Mexico, the traditional space in which it had been played for over fifty years would automatically also be protected. Sadly, this was not the case, and while the Secretary of Culture advised positively on declaring the game intangible cultural heritage, the *pasajuego* was turned over to the SSP in order for them to construct a parking lot on the terrain (Fig. 40, 41). As a result, the players were left with a game that was considered intangible cultural heritage but no space in which to play it. Despite promises by the city authorities to construct new courts with better facilities, no sufficient alternative had been constructed in 2015. Thus, we see that, clearly, for the Mexico City legislature, the cultural and traditional aspects of pelota mixteca was considered to be more important than its value and role as a sport.

Authorities in Oaxaca

A short analysis of a leaflet published by the Oaxacan state government serves to illustrate that this type of treatment of the game was not only prominent in Mexico City, but was also prevalent in Oaxaca. The pamphlet is entitled 'Sabías que los Mixtecas contaban con un juego parecido al tenis?' and was handed out during the Guelaguetza festival, in addition to being published online (Fig. 42).

Sabías que los Mixtecas contaban con un juego parecido al tenis?

The first point that jumps out in terms of representation, are the images that are used. While one of the images depicts a ball used for forro, the least-played variant of *pelota mixteca* and also the variant that uses a type of ball that looks 'least modern', the other two images are illustrative of the temporal distance that is created and that frames *pelota mixteca* as an historical tradition. One image shows a ring from a pre-Columbian Mesoamerican ball court and the other is a picture of the Classic era (AD 200 - 900) ball court from the archaeological site of Monte Albán. Both these images have no relation to the way in which pelota mixteca is played nowadays and it is striking that, instead of choosing a spectacular image that shows pelota mixteca players in action, the creators of this pamphlet chose to depict images related to the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican ballgame.

Looking past the images at the text of the pamphlet, the use of the past tense in both the title of the pamphlet and a highlighted quote are significant. Of course, the title, which uses 'contaban' instead of 'cuentan', reduces the game to its prehispanic roots among 'the Ancient Mixtecs', *en passant* also historicizing the Mixtec people as a whole. Additionally, the second page has a highlighted quote, in place of images, which reads "el juego de pelota mixteca era parecido al tenis." Naturally, the modern-day game of pelota mixteca is *still* very much 'parecido al tenis' and there is absolutely no need here to use the past tense, unless one aims to present pelota mixteca as a historical game, kept at a temporal distance. Looking at the text of the leaflet, we see that *pelota mixteca* is described as "a sport that was played for hundreds of years before the Spanish conquest by Mixtecs and Zapotecs […] one of the places where the game was played, was at Monte Alban and the winner would receive the heart of a young woman." This again stresses the history of the game, casting the practice of the game back in the past, and emphasizes the cultural particularity of *pelota mixteca* as something that is only practiced by Mixtecs and Zapotecs. Additionally, the mention of the fact that the winner of the game would receive the heart of a young woman – this is meant literally, not figuratively – connects the game with 'barbaric' practices of the pre-Columbian past and stresses the pre-Columbian game's ritual aspect, rather than the fact that it was also a normal sport. The most symbolic way in which this pamphlet represents the Oaxacan government's traditional view of *pelota mixteca*, is the fact that it was published by the Secretary of Tourism, rather than by the Secretary of Sport and Physical education. Naturally, this is not only symbolic but also has many repercussions for the treatment of the game by Oaxacan authorities.

While stressing all these historical aspects of the game, its link to archaeology and particular indigenous peoples, and its touristic potential, the pamphlet ends with: "Commentary: It is important that our young people practice this type of sports that […] form part of our culture, which we cannot permit to disappear." This commentary is virtually the only part of the pamphlet which

recognizes pelota mixteca as a living practice and one that can be practiced by others than the 'ancient' Mixtecs and Zapotecs. However, it is not entirely evident to whom this commentary is addressed, since the pamphlet is a publication of the Secretary of Tourism, which normally publishes material for domestic and foreign tourists.

Nevertheless, the fact that this pamphlet was published by the Secretary of Tourism is not surprising, since using pelota mixteca as a way to stimulate tourism through exhibitions and demonstrations has been a recurrent feature of state policies on the game over the past decade or two. In the period up to 2010, the Oaxacan city and state government generally promoted pelota mixteca in two ways. One was to (partly) sponsor the annual pelota mixteca tournament that is held during the festivities of the Guelaguetza festival in July/August. In this tournament teams from all over Oaxaca, as well as from Mexico City and, occasionally, California participate in three divisions for the title of pelota mixteca champion of the state of Oaxaca. Since the Guelaguetza festival is Oaxaca's main tourist event throughout the year, the organization of a pelota mixteca tournament during this time, while not expressly aimed at tourists, still has a certain touristic component. Another way of promoting the game, was the plan to build three pelota mixteca courts at so-called *paradores turísticos*. These tourist centers were placed along the newly-formed *Ruta Domínica* that led tourists around the three famous 16th century monasteries of Teposcolula, Coixtlahuaca and Yanhuitlán. Ironically, of these three communities, pelota mixteca is only played in Teposcolula, so teams would have had to have been brought in from other places to give exhibitions for tourists. Priority was given to constructing courts for the game at places where tourists would come and see exhibitions, over spending funds on the construction of courts in places where the game was actually still played actively. A recent example of pelota mixteca being used as a tourist attraction by the Oaxacan government can be seen in a motion that *diputada* Margarita García introduced in the state parliament in December 2011. The motion read: "I encourage the Secretary of Tourism and the State Commission of Sports, to work together in the spread and promotion of the game of *pelota mixteca*, and to institute a state championship." Here, again, we see the stress that is placed on the touristic, and by extension economical, value of pelota mixteca, as opposed to encouraging more people to play the game, so that it might actually survive.

The players' reaction; a turning point?

Above, we have seen how the representation by the Mexican state of *pelota mixteca* as an ancestral tradition particular to certain indigenous peoples from the state of Oaxaca led to several government initiatives that focused on 'the cultural sphere', declaring the game intangible cultural heritage and promoting it as an attraction for tourists. These actions were a logical outcome of the

discourse that was created by the Mexican state on the game. It was thought that these initiatives – including the organization of a "Day of the *pelota mixteca*", the institution of a cultural program to promote the sport and using the sport as a means to attract tourists – would ensure the survival of the sport.

However, many players of pelota mixteca themselves thought differently. Their idea of how to save the game from extinction was predicated on the belief that the only way to keep pelota mixteca alive is to have it played, not to confine it to the (open-air) museum. As Cornelio Pérez notes: "estos juegos desgraciadamente se vuelven como piezas de museo, uno va al Museo de Antropología y hay canchas de juego, pero hay una versión distorsionada, hay una visión de museo, de libro" (El Universal 2012). The promotion by the Mexican and Oaxacan governments of *pelota mixteca* as a tourist attraction and the representation of the game as a culturally particular tradition do not contribute to the survival of the game. On the contrary, these initiatives stress the game's past and represent it as a cultural tradition that is not open for others to participate in. People who have not grown up with *pelota mixteca* will hardly ever start playing *pelota mixteca*, not only because the majority of them will not know of the existence of the game, but, more importantly, because *pelota mixteca* has the image of something that is not to be learned by people who do not play it traditionally. In the words of Eduardo Arellanes, a player from Mexico City who is a member of the *quinta Los Gemelos* and who has been an enthusiastic promoter of the sport: "when we give exhibitions of the game, people don't know if the game is being promoted so that it will be played, or whether we are being brought in as a circus phenomenon, that people see us as something strange, they don't see it as something they can also practice"[26].The stress on the cultural and historic background of the game, which is prominent in virtually all government communication, as well as the presentation of *pelota mixteca* as a cultural tradition, rather than as a sport led Eduardo Arellanes to comment that "Cuando [las autoridades] nos llevan parece que tiene que ser algo del INAH [Instituto Nacional de Antropología e *Historia*], que es algo histórico, que ahí se queda, como algo caduco, viejo."[27]

As a result, many players, acutely aware of the fact that the game is in need of new impulses if it is going to survive at all, argued for a different route to ensure the survival of *pelota mixteca*. Naturally, they also see the problems that the game faces and understand that the solution to this problem lies in getting more young people to start playing the game. In order to achieve this goal

[26] "cuando damos exhibiciones la gente no sabe bien si se está fomentando para que se practique, o si nos llevan […] como un fenómeno de feria, donde la gente parece que allí nos ve como algo extraño, no lo toma como algo propio que pueda practicar"

[27]From radio interview with Eduardo Arellanes, available at http://www.archive.org/details/undergroundprograma1

several individual players and teams, as well as the self-organizations and the federation of pelota mixteca players, have started initiatives to help promote the game among youngsters and enlarge the number of young *peloteros*. These initiatives can be divided into two categories, 1. plans to incorporate pelota mixteca into the curricula of primary and secondary schools, and 2. spectator-oriented activities that aim to stimulate more people to take an interest in the game, either as a player or as a spectator. All these initiatives form a stark contrast to previous government interventions; they argue for a *detraditionalization* of the game, so that the game could be taught at schools, played in sports clubs and become more spectator-friendly, as opposed to the government's initiatives which attempted to enshrine pelota mixteca as a cultural tradition in the canon of Mexican national heritage.

The spectator-oriented initiatives focus on making the game more intelligible and easier to follow for outsiders. To make the sport more understandable for those who have never seen the game, some tournaments have chosen to have only one match played at a time. Normally four teams play at the same time, which is quite confusing to the untrained observer. Through these modifications in the way games are being played and tournaments are organized, pelota mixteca, which is actually very spectacular once one has a good grasp of the rules, will become more intelligible to people who have never seen a game and do not understand the rules. One of the teams that has been most active in trying to 'professionalize' the marketing and 'spectator-friendliness' of the sport is the *quinta Los Gemelos* from Mexico City. By using social media and creating merchandise, they attempt to encourage new players to practice pelota mixteca. Like other teams in Oaxaca had done before them, the Arellanes brothers have been creating their own team-jerseys, which they customize especially for every event that they compete in (Fig. 43). They also created a team logo, which they also use for general marketing of pelota mixteca, and have created stickers that showcase this logo, as well as a Facebook page which is called 'pelota mixteca', which uses the logo and aims to promote the game through social networks (Fig. 44). There is also a separate 'pelota mixteca Arellanes'-team Facebook page (which has over 500 likes) on which team members post pictures of the games they attended as well as announcements of where they will be playing next. Some other teams have also created Facebook accounts through which they communicate with their fans and invite spectators to visit upcoming matches. Naturally, using the internet and social media is a novel and bottom-up approach which provides players and teams with their own media outlets to showcase their games and accomplishments and which can be a powerful tool to encourage more young people to get to know more about the game.

When demonstrations of pelota mixteca were organized by the Secretary of Tourism or by the INAH, many players were often hesitant to participate because they feared that they and their

sport would be exoticized. In contrast, many pelota mixteca players actively try to be part of exhibitions that are currently organized by the Comisión Nacional del Deporte (CONADE). Armando Padilla Alonso, one of the founders of the Mexican Federation of Autochtonous and Traditional Games, sketches the struggles that the federation went through in order to have the game accepted as a sport, rather than as a cultural tradition:

> [Fue muy difícil] de entrar en el mundo del deporte mexicano, sobre todo en el mundo del deporte occidental. Porque no aceptaban, o no querían aceptar, que estos juegos están ahí, que eran practicados por grupos tradicionales mestizos y por grupos indígenas, sobre todo. Entonces tuvimos que luchar muy fuerte desde un punto de vista de justificación. A través de artículos, a través de intervención en la cámara de diputados y como asociación civil, hasta que finalmente logramos tener cabida en la institución donde se agrupan todas las federaciones deportivas. Y después el logro más importante fue tener el apoyo de una institución que surgió que es la regidora del deporte en México que es la CONADE. Lo más interesante es que logramos tener un presupuesto. Para poder realizar una serie de actividades, y ser incluidos en la primera ley que se armó en México del destino del fomento al deporte, donde ya se habla de los juegos autóctonos y tradicionales.

During exhibitions of the CONADE, players bring their gloves and balls for playing the game and give spectators the opportunity to practice with the ballgame equipment, so that spectators can appreciate the incredible weight of ball and glove and the power and skill involved in playing pelota mixteca. Players hope that outsiders are encouraged to start playing pelota mixteca themselves. At demonstrations, players often bring along gloves that were made especially for children, so that they too can develop an interest in the game from an early age. An example of this form of promotion of pelota mixteca was part of the activities of the Tocatì festival in Verona, Italy in 2014. At this festival, which is dedicated to showcasing and promoting traditional games from all around the world, Mexico was the featured nation in 2014. As part of this event, the CONADE, which coordinated the event together with the Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos, invited two pelota mixteca players from Mexico City and two from Oaxaca to come to the festival and give demonstrations of the game. Since the Arellanes team consists of five brothers but only two players from Mexico City could be invited by the organization, the brothers decided to jointly pay for the trip of the remaining three team members. During the exhibitions, which were held in the historic center of Verona, the players presented a demonstration but could not really play the game due to lack of space. Because of the risk that the use of the heavy rubber ball, which can cause serious injuries, presented to large crowds of people and breakable cars and windows, the players only hit the ball back and forth, without actually competing. After the demonstrations, children and adults were invited to try their luck at playing pelota mixteca. This invitation was readily accepted by dozens of children, and some adults (Fig. 45). One of the enthusiastic spectators was a player of the traditional

Italian handball game *pantalera*, a sport which is part of the same family of handball games as pelota mixteca. After having tried to play with glove and ball, and understanding that the rules of the two games were virtually the same, he challenged the Mexican players to an international match: Mexico versus Italy (Fig. 46). This match was played using the equipment and rules of *pantalera* and ended in a 6-6 draw, after some exciting plays and cheers from the crowd. Most importantly, through this exchange, the pelota mixteca players were able to broaden their networks to an international level, bringing them in contact with players of similar games from Europe. In the long term, these kind of exchanges might enable pelota mixteca organizations, as well as individuals, to learn from the strategies that traditional European sports, many of which contend with the same problems as pelota mixteca, have deployed in order to ensure their survival. Additionally, a possible outcome could be that pelota mixteca players will be invited to participate in the 'Handball' World Cups that are organized by the International Handball Confederation every year. While Mexico is represented in this forum by non-indigenous players of variants of the Basque and Valencian hand ballgames, pelota mixteca players have never been invited, because their sport was considered to be a *juego autóctono*. Nonetheless, if the construction of an international network by pelota mixteca players is successful and they are invited to participate, the recognition that comes with being invited to participate in a World Cup could present a strong stimulus for more people to start playing pelota mixteca, because it gives the sport an 'aura of globalization'.

Apart from the spectator-oriented initiatives, other actions focus on the way people learn to play the game and try to incorporate pelota mixteca into children's education. While some players, such as Leobardo Pacheco, try to achieve this goal by trying to open a school for pelota mixteca, others try to work together with outside partners to have pelota mixteca incorporated into mainstream education. A successful initiative in this regard has been the incorporation of pelota mixteca into the curriculum of the Colegio de Bachilleres del Estado de Oaxaca (COBAO), the largest organization providing secondary education in Oaxaca. As a result, pelota mixteca, which was made the official sport of the institution, will be part of physical education classes of hundreds, if not thousands, of students in Oaxaca. Pelota mixteca de esponja was chosen as the variety to be played, since equipping all students of the COBAO with pelota mixteca de hule gloves would hardly be possible and the game would also be much harder to learn. The program, which is called 'Rescate de los Juegos Tradicionales Oaxaqueños' came into existence in a cooperation between the COBAO and the Oaxacan chapter of the Federación de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos. During the public announcement of the program, in 2011, the director of the COBAO, Germán Espinosa Santibañez, said "estamos formando generaciones de jóvenes comprometidos con su pasado, con el legado de sus ancestros, pero también preparados para enfrentar el futuro con sensibilidad y el compromiso

de aportar a la solución de las diversas problemáticas sociales" (COBAO 2011). This program has, so far, been a success, since it has already resulted in the formation of many pelota mixteca teams at the different locations of the COBAO, and a few teams of COBAO students have even participated in the tournament of Bajos de Chila. Ultimately, the aim of the COBAO is to create a state-wide pelota mixteca league, with help from the state authorities, in which teams from the COBAO, as well as others, compete for the title of best Oaxacan team. Apart from the COBAO initiative, the Committee of Sports of the state of Oaxaca, after consulting with the players' federation, has announced that it will make funds available to buy equipment for the game. Considering the high cost of the balls and the gloves for pelota mixteca de hule, supplying free, or cheaper, equipment could be an impulse for young people to start playing. Since all of the initiatives described here are very recent, it has hard to judge at this moment what their outcome will be. However, considering the fact that some of the COBAO teams have already competed in pelota mixteca tournaments, only a few years after the inception of the program, some actions can already be considered a success. The future of pelota mixteca looks a lot brighter if we assume that every year new students of the COBAO will start to learn the game and will participate in state-wide leagues, which might eventually even be televised so that the number of pelota mixteca fans will also grow.

Globalization, detraditionalization and the creation of new identities

So what relation do these developments have to the processes of globalization and identity construction that I have reviewed in chapter four? As we have seen, players of pelota mixteca often say that they started playing the game because it was a part of their ancestral or family heritage, or something that is in their blood. It is clear that this means that pelota mixteca, in some way, is part of their identity, it is part of who they are and who they consider themselves to be. However, they never mention that they play the game 'because they are Mixtec/Zapotec/indigenous'. For example, Jaime, when he explains why he plays the game and what is important for him in playing, says:

> JAIME
> Lo que cuenta mucho es el orgullo de que no pierdas. Bueno, para mí. A mi punto de vista, yo pienso que eso es mucho el orgullo, me entiendes.
> MARTIN
> Pero si dices orgullo de las raíces que quieres decir? Raíces de México? De Oaxaca? De la Mixteca, de tu pueblo?
> JAIME

Pues, cuando yo hablo de raíces, yo pienso que ando hablando pues de mis raíces, de mis ancestros, de todo lo que era.

This short conversation is exemplary of all the conversations of this type that I had with players of the game. Rather than speaking of his Mixtec background, Jaime speaks of his ancestors, his roots, his family. However, in the coming twenty years, as new regional and ethnic identities are created under the influence of globalization, this situation might be beginning to change. Until now there were, in my view, three main reasons for players not to identify themselves, or the game they play, as Mixtec.

First, and foremost, decades, if not centuries, of discrimination against indigenous culture and language on the part of the Mexican state and mainstream society have made indigenous individuals reluctant to identify themselves as such. Naturally, this discrimination and politics of assimilation, mainly through education, has also led to an enormous decrease in the number of speakers of these indigenous languages, and the loss of traditional indigenous culture. At the same time, from the point of view of the state, as well as general mestizo society, once indigenous individuals start speaking Spanish, master reading and writing, and join urban economies, they are regarded as mestizos (Martínez Novo 2006: 148), thus restraining even further the possibilities of indigenous individuals to identify themselves as such. This leads us to the second, more fundamental, reason that players of pelota mixteca do not identify their participation in the game as 'an element of Mixtec culture'; they often simply do not (or do not want to) consider themselves indigenous, largely because of the hegemonic definitions of 'what an indigenous person is' (and what the actual value of indigenous culture is), that have formed in Mexico since the Mexican Revolution, combined with the fact that they do not speak an indigenous language.

Thirdly, we can ask whether it is actually possible to identify as Mixtec, in the same way as one identifies as Mexican, Dutch or German. These national identities have formed over the course of several decades, or in some cases even centuries, and have, for a large part, consciously been created by political elites attempting to forge a unified nation. National (cultural) identities did not spontaneously form themselves, nor are they the result of some pre-existing social condition that expressed itself through specific national identities. They are not things that individuals are born with, but are, rather, systems of cultural representation, which create and sustain 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). They consist of several main building blocks, including a 'narrative of the nation', an emphasis on continuity and tradition, the invention of tradition, and foundational myths (Hall 1996: 293-4). In the Mixtec case, such narratives were never created. The formation of them was actively discouraged by Mexican political elites who tried to assimilate indigenous peoples

and their cultures into mainstream Mexican society, as part of a politics of indigenism after the Mexican Revolution. There was no discourse, no system of cultural representation, no narrative of the Mixtec nation that gave Mixtecs (people who spoke the Mixtec language, lived in the Mixtec region, and shared a certain cultural and historical background) the possibility to even consider identifying themselves as such. Naturally, this is not to say that there was no Mixtec culture. The Mixtec language existed (with all its dialects and varieties) and inhabitants of the Mixtec region shared a very similar cultural and historical background. It just means that, until very recently, apart from the criterion of speaking the Mixtec language, there was no way to identify oneself as Mixtec since no one bothered or was able to create or invoke that category.

As a result of transnational migration, new possibilities for identifying oneself as Mixtec or indigenous may be created. Some have argued that this form of identification is on the increase. Gaspar Rivera Salgado and Luís Escala Rabadán refer to this phenomenon as "the counterintuitive proposition that long-term transnational migration is increasing, not reducing, self-identification by ethnicity" (2004: 171). Whereas, traditionally, Mixtecs, Zapotecs and other *indígenas* in Mexico would identify themselves on the community or village level, indigenous individuals now start to identify themselves more broadly as Mixtec, or, even more generally, as *indígena* (Leal 2001; Nagengast and Kearney 1990:87; Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2004:46). These identities can form in a new social context, that of transnational migration, which, under the influence of widespread 'double discrimination' against indigenous migrants, opens up new spaces for broader ethnic identities. "This experience of discrimination outside of Oaxaca was a major stimulus for indigenous migrants to appropriate the labels – *mixteco*, *zapoteco*, and *indígena* – that formerly had only been used by linguists, anthropologists, and government officials" (Kearney 2003, quoted in Fox and Rivera Salgado 2004). Apart from discrimination, according to Perry et al. (2009: 209), in the process of transnational migration, in which (indigenous) communities are being dispersed over different countries, "ethnicity can become a source of social cohesion." Interestingly, as we have seen in the examples of Huajuapan and the COBAO, that link pelota mixteca to elements of Mixtec or Oaxacan identity, it seems that Mexican authorities are starting to take an interest in also creating, sustaining, and actively promoting these forms of identification. As we have seen, politicians have recently started referring to pelota mixteca in the media as 'the game of Lord 8 Deer', and related it to rituals and sports that were performed by Ancient Mixtec warriors. Judging from this type of rhetoric, it seems that something of a Mixtec identity narrative, which is based on history and archaeology and in which pelota mixteca plays an important role, is being hesitantly created in the political arena. This is of course coupled with, and quite possibly an outcome of, the creation of new identities by diaspora, who influence the politics at home. This new interest of the state in indigenous peoples

and forms of self-identification, then, seem to be an outcome of the onset of international migration and globalization. Not only because transnational communities, a typical phenomenon related to globalization and the increase in international labor migration, have influenced and stimulated the creation of these new identities and encouraged politicians to take an interest, but also because of the 'search for the authentic' that globalization seems to occasion in nation-states across the world. A few examples serve to illustrate this point.

When looking at the way that the concept of 'identity' is used by legislators and policy makers in Mexico, we see that they construct pelota mixteca as an exemplary tradition of 'Mixtec' or 'Oaxacan' identity, or, at times, even more broadly, as constitutive of 'Mexican' identity. For example, when presenting a plan to stimulate pelota mixteca by including the game in the curriculum of the physical education classes at the Colegio de Bachilleres del Estado de Oaxaca (COBAO), the director of the institution is quoted as saying:

> El Colegio de Bachilleres del Estado de Oaxaca rescatará uno de los juegos prehispánicos más importantes de la entidad, la pelota mixteca, afirmó el director general del COBAO, Germán Espinosa Santibañez, al anunciar el programa Rescate de los Juegos Tradicionales Oaxaqueños. ...
> Espinosa Santibañez reconoció el interés de parte de las autoridades municipales y de los jugadores por mantener vivas las raíces oaxaqueñas a través del deporte, porque así como la pelota mixteca y las danzas forman parte de *nuestra identidad como oaxaqueños*. (COBAO 2011, my emphasis)

In this quote, it is clear that pelota mixteca is seen as a cultural trait that is one of the important cultural building blocks of a supposed 'Oaxacan identity'. This Oaxacan identity is shared by all Oaxacans and will be created, stimulated and enacted, through this program, which will stimulate the COBAO's students to start taking an interest in the game.

On a more local level, the *ayuntamiento* of Huajuapan, a traditional center for pelota mixteca de forro in the Mixteca Baja region, is also trying to stimulate individuals to play the game. Here, too, the aim is to get more people to play pelota mixteca and to save an ancestral tradition, that, according to the *regidor* of the municipality is an important part of 'Mixtec identity':

> En la región Mixteca, un aproximado del 60 por ciento no muestran interés por practicar la pelota mixteca, prefiriendo así disciplinas más actuales ... informó Alejandro Ortiz Gabriel, regidor de Educación y Cultura del Ayuntamiento de Huajuapan. "Desde varios años, el juego

de pelota mixteca se ha dejado de practicar, debido a que las nuevas generaciones no tienen el interés de jugarlo como lo hacían sus ancestros, por ello apoyamos al Comité de la pelota mixteca a la inauguración de una liga para practicar este deporte, con el objetivo de que no se pierda pues *es una parte muy importante de nuestra identidad como mixtecos*" (nssoaxaca.com 2013, emphasis added)

Clearly, the concept of identity, and the way that is represented, used, and created in discourse is situational. It depends on the context in which pelota mixteca is used, and on whom the discourse addresses, to which kind of 'identity' it is attributed. In the case of the COBAO, a state-wide institute that aims to reach all the inhabitants of Oaxaca, pelota mixteca is presented as a cultural characteristic of 'Oaxacan identity'. In the case of the municipal authorities of Huajuapan, a traditionally Mixtec community inside the Mixtec region, pelota mixteca is represented as a more local expression of a 'Mixtec identity'. In Mexico City, where pelota mixteca is only played by a few hundred migrants and the sport is not, at this moment, an everyday reality for inhabitants of the city, the authorities wish to represent the game as a part of national 'Mexican identity'. A cultural tradition that connects today's inhabitants of the federal district with the inhabitants of Tenochtitlán. As a result, when describing the importance of a new sports complex created especially for indigenous games, the coordinator of the heritage office of the city is quoted in an article as saying:

"La coordinadora de Patrimonio Histórico, Artístico y Cultural, Guadalupe Lozada León, representante de la Secretaria de Cultura, Elena Cepeda de León [manifestó que] "el reconocimiento del juego de pelota prehispánico no es la excepción para la Ciudad de México, a la que se dota a partir de hoy de *un espacio propicio para encontrarse con sus orígenes, con sus tradiciones y con su propia identidad reflejada en una de sus más vistosas manifestaciones culturales*. [El nuevo espacio para los juegos y deportes autóctonos] será *un espacio dedicado a rescatar nuestra identidad*, revalorando los juegos y deportes autóctonos y tradicionales, que lograron sobrevivir y llegar hasta el día de hoy, con su carga ceremonial que soporta el peso de la historia. (Secretaría de Cultura México DF 2010, emphasis added)

Apparently, all levels of government in Mexico – municipal, state and federal – have discovered pelota mixteca as a sport/tradition that is exemplary of their identity. While the Mexican national identity has of course existed for a long time, the appeal to a Oaxacan or a Mixtec identity are relatively new developments. All these developments flow from processes of globalization that

have enabled pelota mixteca players to organize themselves and create new forms and politics of self-identification. Individuals and organizations of players have grasped this opportunity to change the way that pelota mixteca is represented and stimulated by the state. Of course, the players understand better than anyone else that the sport will only continue if there are enough players. Hence, these initiatives were taken in order to make pelota mixteca more popular and to break out of the discourse of an historical indigenous tradition, focusing more on the promotion of pelota mixteca as a sport. Of course, all these measures will bring new players to the game who would traditionally not have played it. This strategy is even followed by Don Agustín in Fresno, who also realizes that, in order for the game to survive in Fresno, more people who do not have a family history of playing pelota mixteca have to get involved with the game. He not only wants to involve more Mexican or Mixtec migrants, but also Americans:

> DON AGUSTÍN
> Ya hemos tenido unas tres, cuatro juntas con la ciudad de Fresno. Yo les he solicitado un campo para este deporte de pelota. Porque si usted se da cuenta, año con año, nosotros estamos alzando el nombre de la ciudad de Fresno hace a arriba. Pero ellos no se han sentado en la mesa a platicar con nosotros. La verdad, este deporte es un deporte sano como todos. Pero necesitamos un espacio más amplio, porque, si usted se dio cuenta, el día de hoy vino mucho público. Y lo que queremos es que haya más espacio para este público, porque queremos que, si los Americanos interesan venir a verlo, queremos que haya espacio, y que todos participan.

Naturally, like in Mexico, once non-indigenous Mexicans or Americans, who have not traditionally played the game, get involved and start playing, the character of *pelota mixteca* as a traditional Oaxacan sport will change. No longer will it be a family tradition that is continued by some members of the Mixtec immigrant community, it will be, rather, a sport just like any other that can be played by anyone interested (and willing and able to acquire the expensive equipment, in the case of the hule variant). Somewhat ironically, this *detraditionalization* or *deindigenization* of pelota mixteca appears to be the most effective way for the game to survive in a 21st-century context. The need to widen the social circle in which pelota mixteca is played and to shift the focus from pelota mixteca as a family tradition to pelota mixteca as a sport is recognized by many players. Many of them consider the federal education system to provide the best chances of realizing their aims. Fidel Salazar Rosales, the president of the players' association in Oaxaca, is quoted in a newspaper as saying "que este deporte se está agotando, ya que sólo se transmite de padres a hijos, y a nietos"

(Gómez 2011). Not coincidentally, he was also, as president of the Oaxacan players' association, one of the leading figures in bringing pelota mixteca to the COBAO and, by doing so, taking the recruitment of new players out of the family sphere. Of course, as a result, the locus of cultural reproduction shifts away from the home and the family (father teaching son to play *pelota mixteca*) to the state (boy and girl learning to play *pelota mixteca* at school), and pelota mixteca might lose its traditional/indigenous character.

What happens when indigenous traditions are accepted into mainstream culture and, as a result, lose their 'indigenous character'? Pelota mixteca, when played by students of the COBAO, is still an autochthonous sport, but is it still indigenous, and is this even a relevant question? To some players of the game, this question is quite irrelevant. Eduardo Arellanes, one of the players who has been a strong and consistent advocate for the professionalization of the sport, for example, says that

> Pienso que mitificar el juego no ha ayudado mucho para promoverlo. Pienso que es un error el tomar la bandera del juego ancestral que jugaban los antepasados. Esto llevó a que por mucho tiempo deberíamos dar exhibiciones en taparrabos y en zonas arqueológicas. [El público] nos ven igual como los voladores de Papantla. [...] La gente que veía estas exhibiciones no nos preguntaban ¿cómo se llama el equipo? o ¿dónde y cómo entrenan? ¿dónde me inscribo para practicarlo? No, las preguntas son ¿es cierto que al que ganaba lo sacrificaban? o ¿por qué no vienen vestidos con taparrabos? [...] Pienso que si tenemos esta herencia la mejor opción es compartirla y no que se acabe con nosotros [y que], si para la práctica masiva ha de tener algunos cambios, es preferible así.

From Eduardo Arellanes's comments we can see that, while he might think that the 'ancestral sport' label is significant, he does not object to pelota mixteca being taken out of the traditional sphere, in order to survive. The same goes for Leobardo Pacheco who dreams of starting a pelota mixteca school, which will teach the sport to children. In short, it seems that there is a relatively widespread consensus among *peloteros* themselves that pelota mixteca will need to be played by more young people to be able to survive and that the best way of achieving this goal is by way of formal education and (partial) detraditionalization. As a result we see here an apparent paradox: the state has argued for the continuation of tradition inside the traditional sphere, whereas the players of the tradition themselves argued for detraditionalization of their game. While it is too early in the game to call a victory for the players over the attempts of the state to contain them, they have already achieved significant successes and have been able to promote their own sport

(and tradition) on their own terms, thanks to their ability to organize and lobby. Only time will tell what the eventual outcome will be, but the players are undoubtedly off to a successful start.