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

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Chapter 7. Conclusions to Part II

The second part of this work started out with the aim to answer several questions: Why do people start playing pelota mixteca? Why are there less players of pelota mixteca nowadays, than there were a few decades ago? What has been the attitude of the state towards pelota mixteca? How, and why, has this attitude changed over the years and how have players of the game responded? And what can we say about the future of pelota mixteca? Over the course of the chapter I have attempted to answer these questions by examining what players themselves told me about their engagement with the game, what discourse has been created by the Mexican state on pelota mixteca, and how pelota mixteca has been presented in newspapers and on the internet. Theoretically, I have framed these answers in a discussion of the concepts of cultural globalization and questions of identity. In these conclusions I will briefly revisit my findings, and try to come to an understanding of how this ‘theoretical’ backdrop can help in grasping the ‘how and why?’ of the answers I have come up with.

Traditionally, new players of pelota mixteca started playing because it was part of a family tradition. Young boys – women never played the game – were taught how to play by their fathers, grandfathers or uncles. Starting from an early age they would accompany their older family members to games, retrieve the run-away balls and look at the plays. After their fathers and uncles had finished playing, they would borrow their equipment and start to practice themselves, eventually growing up to be players of the game themselves and forming their own teams with cousins, brothers or friends. Pelota mixteca was something that was part of a family’s identity, something that some players describe as being ‘in their blood’ or as part of their family’s heritage. Not all children from a family would start to play, and sometimes children who did not have a family history of playing the game would become game-enthusiasts and start participating, but a large majority of the players were active because they had inherited ‘the pelota mixteca-bug’.

In the late 19th-century, pelota mixteca was probably one of the few, if not the only, ‘ludic options’ in the villages in which the game was played. Under the influence of economic, political and cultural globalization, this situation changed, as both upper-class individuals and the state introduced new, Western sports that were associated with a ‘modern lifestyle’. New sports, such as basketball and baseball, were introduced by and incorporated into the curriculum of the newly formed national system of education, which aimed to create a new Revolutionary identity. This new education system was part of an ideology that “combined, in various patterns, a nostalgic concern with a real or imagined past with a futuristic or ‘progressive’ rejection of tradition” (Robertson 1992: 150), a worldwide program characteristic of many ‘modernizing’ nations in the late 19th- and early

20th-century, which was carried out with great zeal by Mexico's Revolutionary administrations. While the Mexican state government made the 'glory of the Aztec warrior' (and that of the Precolumbian past more broadly) into one of the formative principles of the newly created post-Revolutionary Mexican identity, the living traditions of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, such as pelota mixteca, were disregarded since they were non-modern and did not fit well into the new image that Mexico wanted to create for and of itself. Attempts to incorporate the indigenous segment of the nation's population into mainstream mestizo society through cultural programs and education rarely went beyond the level of paternalistic tokenism: "this produced a façade of ethnic tolerance, with the indigenous contribution to the Cosmic Race being relegated to the historic, folkloric and ceremonial. In this 'cosmic race', it was the Indian who was forced to do all the running, in a headlong dash towards assimilation" (Brewster 2005: 221; Brewster and Brewster 2009:740).

Both the introduction of foreign sports, which, unlike pelota mixteca, were actively stimulated through formal education, and the representation of indigenous traditions as at the same time anti-modern and cultural patrimony were largely responsible for the decline in the number of players of pelota mixteca. First of all, the advent of new sporting possibilities drew players who normally would have started playing the game away from it, simply because it created new options that were not available before. Second, a change in perspective took place, in which pelota mixteca became 'the old and traditional option' whereas other sports, in Oaxaca primarily basketball, represented 'the modern alternative'. This shift was endorsed by the Mexican state, which aspired to make Mexico into a modern state. This did not mean, however, that 'pre-modern' traditions, such as pelota mixteca, were prohibited as they had been during 16th-century globalization and the arrival of the Spaniards. This apparent tolerance might seem unexpected, but considering the aims of the Mexican Revolutionary government, we should not be surprised, since, as Nestor García Canclini (1993: viii, translated by Lydia Lozano) has noted "capitalist modernization ... does not always destroy traditional cultures as it moves forward; it can also appropriate them, restructure them, reorganize the meaning and function of their objects, beliefs, and practices." Roland Robertson (1992:152) puts it more succinctly when he says that "the museumization of the premodern is a major feature of (post)modernity." Therefore pelota mixteca - and with it the whole of indigenous traditional culture - was still appreciated by the Mexican authorities as a museumized cultural tradition that formed the pre-Columbian basis of a part of national cultural identity, it just was not welcome as a living and active sport. A third factor that played a role in the decline in the number of players, was the fact that pelota mixteca, which was a local, indigenous Mexican sport, lacked an 'aura of globalization'. Whereas the Western sports that were introduced were all played abroad and had their associated World Cups and World Leagues, the highest award that one could win with

pelota mixteca was becoming state champion of Oaxaca, and even this trophy was introduced relatively recently. This problem of a lack of a global aura was exacerbated during the second half of the 20th-century, when mass media started broadcasting and publishing on the World Series and the NBA, as a result of which North-American sports stars, together with Mexican football players, became role-models for young boys wanting to achieve world fame. Many children in Oaxaca no longer dreamt of playing on the same *pasajuegos* as their fathers, they instead dreamt of playing for *El Tri* or the Chicago Bulls.

All these factors together led to a decrease in the number of players of pelota mixteca. Most likely this decrease was slow in the early years after the introduction of modern sports, but after the introduction of mass media in the second half of the twentieth century the process sped up. I have attempted to show that this decline was a direct outcome of Mexican state policies that were influenced by Western conceptions of modernity and late 19th-century/early 20th-century globalization. In the 1970s, when a new wave of globalization, occasioned by the widening scope of global mass media and the growing influence of neo-liberal policies, engulfed Mexico, Mexico's indigenist policies shifted away from an assimilationist approach that portrayed indigenous culture as backward and anti-modern, to a new approach that stressed local development and the strengthening of local cultural identity. While this did not directly occasion a growth in the number of pelota mixteca players, it did set in motion some important developments that heavily influenced the number of individuals playing pelota mixteca. First of all, the neo-liberal policies that were introduced opened up spaces for indigenous representation. This not only enabled indigenous individuals to self-identify as such, but also created a basis from which to organize into interest groups, such as the different associations and federations that represent players of pelota mixteca/indigenous games which have been fundamental in bringing the question of the disappearance of indigenous games to the political agenda. A second important development in the 1970s was that large-scale transnational migration had begun to skyrocket. As a result, new transnational (or transborder) communities formed that lived on two sides of the US-Mexico border. Members of this community gained a certain degree of independence, however slight, from the Mexican state, as they were able to form their own community organizations, that could create 'new ways of being indigenous' (see Kearney and Nagengast 1989, Stephen 2007, Fox and Rivera-Salgado 2003 for more background). As Cooper Alarcón has noted, "challenges to hegemony often require some degree of privileged agency" (1997: xiii), and, it seems to me, that it was due to the formation of these new transnational self-organizations that indigenous individuals and transborder communities gained a form of privileged agency, as compared to their earlier social situation. Still, the number of *peloteros* declined steadily from the 1970s onwards. It is only since a few years that a

potential turn-around has been in the air and, again, I feel that these developments can be explained through the framework of globalization.

In the 21st century, with the adoption by the COBAO of pelota mixteca as its official sport, we see, for the first time in a century, that the number of pelota mixteca players is starting to grow. Unique about this adoption of pelota mixteca into the COBAO curriculum, and in other recent actions taken by the Oaxacan state government and the Mexican national government, is that the Mexican state not only 'stimulates indigenous activities', but actually incorporates cultural elements that are considered indigenous into mainstream cultural practice and daily life. Naturally, this is the diametric opposite of the traditional, assimilationist practices of the INI that prevailed for many years. It is also markedly different from those 1970s policies that aimed to encourage the practice of indigenous traditions inside indigenous communities, confining these practices to their traditional cultural spaces and setting them apart from the mainstream. Perhaps in some ways (taking a rather pessimistic approach) we could consider this new phenomenon a sort of 'assimilation revisited', as it appropriates practices of indigenous peoples and 'deindigenizes' them to incorporate them into mainstream culture. However, in the case of pelota mixteca, the players themselves were the main actors who tried to stimulate the detraditionalization and incorporation into mainstream culture of their game. Therefore I would prefer to take a more optimistic view of these developments and stress the transformative potential that 21st century globalization might have for the position of the indigenous peoples of Mexico within mainstream society.

Part of this transformative potential flows from the 'return to roots' scenario that was sketched above. Under the influence of (cultural) globalization, there is a strong urge for nation-states to revise the way they construct national identities, as well as the content of these identities. According to Roland Robertson (1992: 182), "we happen to be in a period when the appeal to historical length, and depth, has become a major form of legitimizing a large variety of perspectives (as well as ideologies)." In a way this gives the native cultures of Mexico an advantage, since, simply put, their cultures are the oldest in Mexico. As Jonathan Friedman notes, there is a powerful development "toward the local, the national and the fundamentalist. [...] And there is a common basis to these different forms of identity, insofar as they all [...] seek after authenticity, roots, a concrete identity that is absolutely fixed with respect to the flux of modernity" (1994: 188). Whereas, during the 19th- and 20th-centuries, Mexican national identity was constructed using European models and Western building blocks, it is possible that this return to the local will stimulate the Mexican state to truly incorporate living indigenous culture, not only icons from the pre-Columbian past, into Mexican national identity. Transnational and migrant communities, and their self-organizations might play an important role in this development. It might be helpful here to

consider the case of the Chinese diaspora and overseas communities as a comparison for the influence that indigenous migrants from the United States might exert on Mexican national policies. Jonathan Inda and Renato Rosaldo, while discussing the work of Mayfeir Mei-hui Yang on Chinese migrants, mention that

“for China (or, more specifically, for the Chinese state), the fear of western cultural domination is of minor concern in comparison to the consternation over the subversive influence of overseas Chinese communities. [...] The importance of this Hong Kong and Taiwanese cultural invasion, according to Yang, is that it has exposed Shanghainese subjects to overseas Chinese culture and thus made it possible for them to construct new ways of being Chinese. [...] This is not to suggest, though, that the Chinese state has completely lost its subject-making capacity. This is hardly the case. But it is to suggest that it is no longer the sole arbiter of the identity of its subjects” (Inda and Rosaldo 2002: 23, see also Yang 2002 in I & R).

As I have suggested above, migrants and transnational communities seem to have a form of privileged agency of the kind that is also attributed to overseas Chinese communities by Yang and Inda and Rosaldo. As such, globalization, as a return to the roots, a longing for authenticity, or a search for the source might turn out to be a positive development for Mexico’s indigenous peoples, just as the decidedly global movement for the rights of indigenous peoples has led, among other things, to the creation of ILO’s convention 169 and the UN Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Naturally, these possible positive consequences are only possible scenarios that have yet to prove themselves as concrete improvements. The adoption of pelota mixteca by the state alone can hardly function as proof that, thanks to globalization, there is a discrimination-free future in store for Mexico’s indigenous peoples. We should not, and cannot, close our eyes to all the negative impact that globalization has had on the lives of Mexico’s indigenous population, from the formation of *maquiladoras* on the US-Mexico border to the introduction of NAFTA.

Charles Hale has noted that “throughout Latin America, first round concessions of newly christened “multicultural” states cluster in the area of cultural rights, the further removed from the core concerns of neoliberal capitalism the better” (2004: 18). Of course, pelota mixteca is far from a core concern of neoliberal capitalism. Hale describes how in the last two Guatemalan administrations, the Ministry of Culture and Sports has become a post that has been filled by a Maya indigenous person. The Ministry of Education also showcases its multicultural ethos, supporting programs that promote bilingual education and intercultural dialogue. However, “the preposterous idea that an Indian would become Minister of Finance is another matter altogether” (Hale 2004: 18). Yet, if we see the advances that have been made in Mexico over the past 30 years, including the adoption of the Ley Indígena, admittedly a watered-down version of the San Andrés accords but still a document that grants indigenous peoples preferential access to their lands and the right for self-

government, controlled by the state, I feel that we should not be too pessimistic about the future possibilities. While globalization has definitely brought with it many problems, it might also entail the promise for a better future.

Even though I have stressed the structural importance of the onset of globalization, none of the positive developments that have taken place, or might take place in the future, were or will be possible without the agency of indigenous individuals and groups themselves. It is only because people like Agustín Hernández, Leobardo Pacheco, Fidel Salazar Rosales, the Arellanes brothers and many, many others have dedicated themselves to promoting pelota mixteca that the number of players is finally increasing again. While globalization might have made the COBAO as an institution more receptive to incorporating pelota mixteca in its curriculum, it is the effort that the players' associations put into having the game accepted, that teams of young Oaxacan students are now participating in traditional tournaments. In the end, it is thanks to the ability of pelota mixteca players to organize themselves that *pasajuegos* were built as far away as California and that pelota mixteca has been able to survive decades of discrimination in Oaxaca and in locations far removed from its original homeland.