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

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Final reflections

> *"While social scientists have been busy debating whether or not indigenous ethnicities have moved from the local level to the regional level to the transnational level, indigenous intellectuals […] have set out in practice their own definitions. Rather than labeling their efforts as either essentialist or constructionist, I suggest that we […] let them speak for themselves*" Lynn Stephen 2007: 307.

While writing this work, the above quote has functioned as a guideline and inspiration to me. In the past chapters, I have attempted to follow Stephen's example, not only trying to weave together personal narratives and global processes, but also attempting to let the people who taught me to understand *pelota mixteca* speak for themselves. Still, I was of course the person who chose what to quote and what not to quote from the conversations I had. I hope that those who are represented in my work can feel comfortable with the way they are portrayed and can agree with what I say about their game. In these final reflections, I touch on some general thoughts and ideas that I struggled with while writing, but could not find a home for in any of the chapters. Apart from giving more context to the ideas elaborated upon in the previous chapters, my hope is that some of them can function as a basis for future research.

On the possible positive effects of globalization

About a week after finishing a first draft of the previous chapter, in which I suggest that globalization might entail the promise of a better future for Mexico's indigenous population, 43 students of the *Escuela Normal Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos* of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero went missing. In the weeks following their disappearance, news spread that they had been murdered by members of a local drug cartel, after having been turned over to the cartel by the police, who took their orders directly from the mayor of Ayotzinapa and his wife. As the story unfolded, it became clear that the wife of the mayor was one of the leading figures in the Beltrán-Leyva Cartel and that most of the students who had disappeared came from indigenous communities around the country. I mention this tragedy here to reiterate that I do not think that globalization itself miraculously means an end to the discrimination and racism that has been deeply ingrained in Mexican society ever since the Spanish Colonial *casta* system was introduced. Global drug trafficking, and the associated global war on drugs, is the main cause of Mexico's many current problems, including widespread violence, femicide, corruption and overall insecurity. However, the global support movement that arose after

'Ayotzinapa' was only made possible through global mass and social media. Twitter campaigns such as #Ayotzinapa and #43 aided in raising awareness worldwide of Mexico's deplorable safety situation and helped make what happened in Ayotzinapa a possible turning point in Mexican politics, both at home and abroad.

In a similar way, the global support that the Zapatista movement garnered in the 1990s, with many Western supporters visiting the *caracoles*, writing about them in mass media and promoting the Zapatista's demands, gave a significant impulse to the struggle in support of indigenous rights in Mexico and in the continent. The bestowal of the Nobel Prize to Rigoberta Menchú, a few years before the Zapatista uprising, also brought the world's attention to the growing movement for the rights of indigenous peoples. ILO Convention 169 and, much later, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples were created in global forums that promoted the rights of a global 'class' or group of indigenous communities. Globalization allowed indigenous individuals and communities to organize themselves along new lines, because "by eroding the constraints of space and time on patterns of social interaction, globalization creates the possibility of new modes of transnational social organization" (Held and McGrew 2000: 7). It is in this sense that we should think of globalization's positive potential: it facilitates new forms of organization and creates opportunities that, when seized by individuals and communities, might benefit Mexico's indigenous population.

On discrimination and culture

Indigenous migrants in the US suffer from discrimination from the side of non-indigenous Mexican migrants. Young Mixtecs and Zapotecs that frequent primary schools and high schools in the United States are often hesitant to speak indigenous languages or to identify themselves as indigenous Mexicans, for fear of being bullied and called *Oaxaquitos* by other Latinos and Chicanos (Stephen 2007: 216). Naturally, the same goes for adult indigenous migrants who face implicit and explicit discrimination at the work place and in other social settings. As a result, indigenous migrants tend to hide their ability to speak indigenous languages and cultural performances and traditions are mostly carried out within closed social circles. Of course, indigenous individuals in Mexico have suffered years of the same kind of discrimination. Recently indigenous migrant organizations have started to encourage and organize indigenous cultural events, in an attempt to showcase the rich cultural diversity of Mexico's indigenous population. Lynn Stephen quotes from an interview with Valentín Sánchez, secretary of the *Organización de Comunidades Indígenas Migrantes Oaxaqueños* (OCIMO), "In OCIMO, we promote indigenous cultural events in order to decrease the discrimination toward indigenous people among Hispanics. We think that one of the reasons why discrimination exists is that many Hispanics don't know about the cultural wealth of the indigenous people of Oaxaca"

(Stephen 2007: 230). While they may not have phrased their actions in the same way as Valentín Sánchez, in the context of discrimination and migration, attempts by people like Agustín Hernández, the AMJJOP, the Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos y Tradicionales, the Arellanes brothers and others all serve the same kind of purpose. They showcase pelota mixteca as an attractive sport, that has its own value as a sport and as a cultural phenomenon, to outsiders.

In the Los Angeles area, pelota mixteca is played on a pasajuego that is located inside Hansen Dam Park, a large recreational area that is frequented during weekends by many Latino and non-Latino Americans. Quite often, people who walk by the pasajuego stop to look at the games and show interest in knowing more about the name of the game, the rules and of which materials the ball and the gloves are made. Most, if not all, of those interested in the game are Latinos, and questions to the players are always addressed in Spanish, "*Como se llama este juego? Como se juega?*" Spectators are invariably impressed by the strength and agility of the players and by the weight of the ball and the glove. Without consciously attempting to do so, the players in the Hansen Dam Park act as ambassadors of the sport and do exactly what Valentín Sánchez envisions: they showcase indigenous Oaxacan culture to non-indigenous Latinos in an appealing way.

On the future of pelota mixteca de hule

Both historically and at the moment, pelota mixteca de hule was the most popular variety of pelota mixteca. Whereas forro and esponja are only played in certain areas of the Mixteca region, hule is played all over the state of Oaxaca. In migrant communities in Mexico City and the United States of America the rubber ball game also has many more players than esponja and forro. Considering current developments in the game, however, we can question if hule will indeed remain the most-played variant of pelota mixteca. Two factors are relevant here. First of all, the gloves for pelota mixteca de hule are works of exceptional craftsmanship and are only made by Leobardo Pacheco senior. Because Leobardo, despite several attempts at training others, currently has no apprentices or successors, raising the question of what will happen when he stops creating and repairing gloves. Obviously, pelota mixteca de hule cannot be played in its current form without the use of this special equipment. Like playing the game, the manufacturing of gloves is a tradition that has been passed on from father to son since the equipment was first invented. However, since Leobardo Pacheco's son, Leobardo Daniel junior, works as a promising young archaeologist, it seems unlikely that he will follow in his father's footsteps. If Leobardo senior is not able to find anyone to replace him, a serious problem will arise for players of pelota mixteca de hule.

Another important factor that plays into this discussion is that students at the COBAO are taught to play pelota mixteca de esponja. Quite probably, most of the new players that will start

playing the sport in the coming decades will come from the COBAO. If the school indeed continues to name pelota mixteca the official sport of the institute and gives obligatory classes of physical education to all its students, the number of players will increase exponentially. All these players will play esponja and it is doubtful if they will consider switching to hule. I am sure that many of my pelota mixteca friends will disagree, and might possibly become angry at me for saying so, but I think it is very probable that fifty years from now, pelota mixteca de esponja will be the main variety of the game and it is possible that hule will only be played as a sort of exhibition sport, as it was before. Of course, I hope that I am wrong and that hule continues to be a widespread sport, but considering the developments sketched above, I fear that the players are in for yet another challenge.

On 'ethnoarchaeology'

When discussing the work of Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano[28], two eighteenth century writers born in Africa and brought as slaves to the United States, Paul Gilroy (1997: 323) says "we can, of course, identify elements in Wheatley's work which betray the residual presence of African animistic religion or sun worship. We can locate African words and accurate ethnological detail in Equiano's narrative. However, their works ask to be evaluated on their own terms as complex, compound formations. They should not be *belittled* so that they are valued only as means to observe the durability of African elements" (emphasis added). As I mentioned in the introduction to this work, virtually all academic publications that treat pelota mixteca are part of edited volumes on the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican ballgame. Many of these works devote their attention primarily to archaeological material related to the pre-Columbian game and include the modern-day games as a sort of afterthought. These articles often only describe the way the game is played and do not include a serious study into the historical development of these games. While these modern-day games are doubtlessly included in these publications with the best of intentions, the way that they are presented risks giving off the impression that these games have been frozen in time since 1519, have not developed or changed ever since and have little intrinsic value other than their pre-Columbian origins. The field of 'ethnoarchaeology', which studies contemporary cultures in order to come to a better understanding of the past, and its practitioners, to which I (hesitantly?) count myself as well, should constantly be reminded that they are at risk of doing exactly that which Paul Gilroy warns us against. Studying modern-day indigenous culture only for 'rests of the past', as happens sometimes in ethnoarchaeological works, belittles the resistance, creativity, and endurance

[28] Phyllis Wheatly (1753 – 1784) was a celebrated poet, Olaudah Equiano (1745 – 1797) was a writer and political activist for the abolition of slavery.

that characterize indigenous cultures, not only in Mesoamerica but worldwide, and amounts to a lack of recognition of living people(s) and their culture. These cultures are an amalgam of elements from different sources – as are all cultures – which coexist, rather than conflict. Studying historical processes of culture contact, culture change and questions of power and identity that are invariably attached to these issues is necessary to come to a full understanding of cultural elements and avoid presenting indigenous cultures as 'a people without history' (Wolf 1982). A failure to study these processes and a failure to accept the essentially hybrid nature of all cultures, ultimately results in erroneous interpretations of both contemporary and pre-Columbian practices. In the case of pelota mixteca an example of this type of approach is William Swezey's (1972) work on the game, which draws all manner of unsubstantiated parallels between pelota mixteca and Olmec, Classic Maya and Classic Zapotec ball courts. All the elements that Swezey highlights can be explained by studying the historical background of the game, its European origin and the local inventions and developments that changed the game.

It is important to note here that a marked difference can exist between what are traditionally termed *emic* and *etic* perspectives on cultural elements. As I have attempted to show in the last chapters of this work, most people do not consider their own culture to be hybrid. Pelota mixteca is indeed seen by most players as a pre-Columbian ballgame that was played by Mixtec noblemen in the Classic ball court of Monte Albán. Still, from an *etic* perspective, pelota mixteca is of Spanish origin. What is important to keep in mind is that these two perspectives co-exist and that one is not necessarily 'more correct' than the other. Pelota mixteca might be 'of Spanish origin', this does not deny the fact that it is also 'una práctica ancestral', part of contemporary indigenous culture, and as such is also indigenous. Binary oppositions between the two present a view that is too simplistic to adequately express past, present and future realities. Naturally, players of pelota mixteca themselves understand that their game has changed over the years and many have no problem accepting that the game might be of Spanish origin in terms of form. It remains a game that they learned from their forefathers and which was played and formed by their ancestors. When discussing my ideas about the Spanish origin of the game with some players in Los Angeles, one of them said "well, I guess that makes sense. Since we count just as in tennis, which is a European game, the games probably had the same origin." When I asked him about the history of the game, Bebé, a retired pelota mixteca player from Mexico City whom I only know by his nickname, told me, "Yeah, I think long ago it was played with the hips." The outward appearance of the game may have changed, but a significant continuity still exists between pelota mixteca and the pre-Columbian Mesoamerican ballgame. This continuity can only be discerned, understood and explained when

taking into account all of the socio-historical processes that have affected Mexico over the course of the past 500 years.

Still, it seems that to some archaeologists this concept of historical (experiential) continuity in spite of apparent change is still unacceptable or, at the least, hard to grasp. When this thesis was still a work in progress, as a first-year graduate student, I was asked to do a presentation about the project to a peer-group. One of the supervisors of this peer-group discussion, a professor in the archaeology of prehistoric Europe, was of the opinion that it might be scientifically unethical to suggest that, while pelota mixteca is formally a Spanish game, it is, at the same time, in many senses a continuation of the pre-Columbian ballgame. While I do not recall exactly how he phrased his objections, they could be summarized as "the way the game is played is European, so it is clearly not indigenous. Saying that it is is a misconstruing of the facts and a political choice to call something indigenous when it is not."

I find this line of argumentation problematic for several reasons. First of all, the cultural essentialism that is implicit in this reasoning constrains academics in their analyses of cultural complexes and loses sight of the cultural-historical processes that affect cultures worldwide and at all times. The 'invention' of tradition, the assimilation of new cultural elements and the relinquishing of old practices all happen (simultaneously) in all cultures. These processes are often conscious or imposed choices, related to political and social constellations and power structures that influence cultural flows. A second, related, objection is the fact that this type of reasoning closes its eyes to cross-cultural compatibility and similarity. In chapter 3, I quoted Jan Nederveen Pieterse (2009: 86), who asks "are cultural elements different merely because they originate from different cultures?" My answer to this question is decidedly "no". To be sure, the outward appearance of the Mesoamerican ballgame has changed significantly, and no, I do not think that we can say that pelota mixteca is a game that was played at Monte Albán, but I *do* think that pelota mixteca is, in a significant way, the continuation of the Mesoamerican ballgame. Not just because I think that the game fulfills the same social roles as *ullamaliztli*, but also because it fulfills the same social roles as 16th-century Spanish pelota. The secular version of the Mesoamerican ballgame and *pelota a mano* were virtually the same cultural element, they simply originated from different cultures.

A final problem that I have with saying that it is unethical to suggest that pelota mixteca is an indigenous ballgame is that this type of reasoning severely hinders archaeological analysis. If one truly thinks that apparent discontinuity cannot mask continuity, archaeological theory is condemned to seeing all cultures as static and all cultural change as the result of 'people change'. Of course, it is difficult, and oftentimes maybe even impossible, to understand these types of processes through

archaeological material, but one should at least keep an open mind to the different scenarios that social and cultural theory can provide.

Some minor notes on the pre-Columbian ballgame

Because the 'archaeological section' of this work was dedicated to one simple question (Is pelota mixteca pre-Columbian?), many relevant questions and themes in relation to the pre-Columbian ballgame were left unexplored. For example, a thorough examination of the representation and importance of the ballgame in Mixtec and Aztec codices could shed more light on the socio-political role that the ballgame played in Late Postclassic Oaxaca and Central Mexico. A more detailed study of the murals of Tepantitla and their cultural context within Teotihuacan could further our understanding of why these murals were created in a city in which no formal I-shaped ball court has been found and no other ballgame imagery exists. A more in-depth look at the exact relationship between the sociopolitical and cosmological siginificance of the ballgame among the Classic Maya could greatly enhance our understanding of the different meanings that the ballgame had and the different ways in which ballcourts could have functioned (see for example Fox 1996; Moriarty and Foias 2007). While these larger questions are beyond the scope of this dissertation, I would like to elaborate on some points that are raised in chapter three.

I feel that the point that I made about Dainzú - that the presence of a ball in iconography does not necessarily imply that a reference to the Mesoamerican ballgame is being made - can be expanded to include other examples. Often, the presence of a ball, regardless of its size or the way it is held or used, is taken to identify a certain figure as a ballplayer or a certain scene as a ballgame scene. For instance, E. Michael Whittington (2001: 252), in his impressive edited volume that served as the catalogue of the *Sport of Life and Death*-exhibition, describes a Jaina statue of the New Orleans Museum of Art as, "stripped of all his trappings of rank, the aristocratic war captive depicted in this figurine has none of the elaborate gear or accessories usually seen on Maya ballplayers. […] The only indication that he is about to play the ballgame is the small ball he holds in his right hand." However, the ball that this Classic Maya figurine is holding is much smaller than any ball that we see in other depictions of Classic Maya ballgames. It is clear that this 'ballplayer' is not about to play the same game as depicted in Classic Maya iconography, also because it seems unlikely that a ball of this size could be kept under control in the hip ballgame. Nonetheless, the description of the figure identifies him as a war captive that is about to be sacrificed, after having played a game of *ullamaliztli* or *pok-ta-pok*. Another example of this kind are the Xochipala-style figures which are illustrated in the same catalogue and which have also traditionally been identified as ballplayers. These figurines from Formative period (1200 – 900 BCE) Guerrero are identified as ballplayers

because of their attire, which includes a belt around the torso, a helmet and a characteristic type of glove. These implements are thought to have been used in a ballgame, either similar to the hip ballgame or one which used gloved hands to propel the ball. However, the only figure of this corpus to actually hold a ball does not wear any part of this diagnostic attire. In this case, the identification of these figurines as 'ballplayers' is not based on the presence of a ball, but on the assumption that this type of attire may have been used in a game. Rubber balls were not only used in Mesoamerica for the purpose of playing the ballgame, they were also burned during rituals or deposited in ritual offerings (see Filloy Nadal 2001). Hence, the fact that the annual tribute of the province of Tochtepec to the Aztec empire included 16,000 rubber balls, as the Codex Mendoza shows, is not necessarily an indication of the popularity of the ballgame. It seems more probable to think of this tribute as balls that would be used in a ritual context.

Another complicating factor is the fact that in figurines, as well as in sculpted iconographic programs, it is almost impossible to distinguish of which kind of material balls are made. Stone spheres, for instance could have been used as weapons, and, even if rubber balls were depicted, size matters. Like I said in the case of Dainzú, I am not insisting that these figurines *cannot* represent ballplayers, I am only arguing that 1. the suggestion that they show participants in a (ritual) game needs to be substantiated by more evidence, 2. that the presence of a ball does not automatically imply a reference to the ballgame, and 3. if these figurines indeed represent ballplayers, it cannot be readily assumed that all meanings, practices and rituals associated with the hip ballgame were also part of traditions related to other games.

A similar point to the one made above concerns the use of the story of the Hero Twins from the *Popol Vuh* as a basis of interpretation for ballgame iconography throughout the whole of Mesoamerican history. In the introduction to the catalogue of the *Sport of Life and Death*-exhibition, Whittington (2001: 17-8) writes, "the *Popol Vuh* establishes the absolute preeminence of the ballgame in ancient Maya mythology and life, and provides the framework for much of our interpretation of this activity. […] For the ancient Maya and other Mesoamerican cultures, this story of creation and the activities of the gods and humanity became inseparable from the ballgame." Clearly, even though the text of the *Popol Vuh* was written much more recently, for the Classic Maya the importance of the ballgame was intimately tied to the story of the Hero Twins (but see Tokovinine 2002).

However, it seems doubtful that this would also hold true for all other cultures in Mesoamerica. For the Aztecs, for instance, the *Popol Vuh* does not seem to be a reliable source for interpretation, since their ideas about the creation of the sun and the moon were completely different from those of the Maya. Similarly, the fact that sacrifice through decapitation is shown in

relation to the ballgame in multiple contexts (e.g. the ball court of Chichén Itzá and the stelae from El Aparicio, among other places) and that the Aztecs, according to Sahagún, performed human sacrifice inside the ball court, does not mean that sacrifice was an integral part of all or many, ballgame matches. 16th-century chroniclers who witnessed *ullamaliztli* being played stress that the game was forbidden because players 'worship *el demonio*' and that priests perform offerings in relation to the ballgame. If they would have witnessed human sacrifices in relation to the ballgame they would have no doubt mentioned these. It might well be that these human sacrifices were related more to the architectural context of the ball court, than to the actual playing of the ballgame. Sahagún, for example, mentions that several captives were sacrificed inside the *teotlachco* and *tezcatlachco* on the celebration of the festival of *panquetzalitzli* and on days dedicated to *omacatl* (Matos Moctezuma 2001: 89). He does not mention that these captives participated in a game or that a ballgame is part of this ritual. Nonetheless, the hip ballgame is always presented by tourist guides in Mexico as 'the sport in which the winners/losers were sacrificed'. Scholars, likewise, often focus on the sacrificial aspect of the game (i.e. *The Sport of Life and Death*). However, considering even the extremely minimal discussion of this topic here, it seems that a critical reassessment of the relationship between sacrifice and the ballgame might be in order.

On 16th and 20th century globalization and the future of pelota mixteca

As I have tried to show in the second chapter of this work, a form of globalization, in this case sixteenth century European expansionism, was responsible for the creation of pelota mixteca itself. The prohibition in the Colonial era of the pre-Columbian ballgame and the subsequent introduction of traditional European handball games laid the basis for what is today pelota mixteca. Some parallels can be drawn between sixteenth century and twentieth century globalization, when considering how both affected local indigenous sports cultures and how the indigenous population reacted to the introduction of new foreign cultural elements in general. The introduction of Spanish pelota was forced upon Mexico's indigenous population, because of the prohibition of the original games. However, as was the case with other cultural elements that were forcibly introduced by the Spaniards, the indigenous population managed to incorporate pelota playing into their own culture and truly make pelota mixteca into an indigenous, ancestral sport. Likewise, the early twentieth-century introduction of basketball by the Mexican government through the curriculum of rural schools aimed to fight the perceived "degeneracy of local fiestas" and to 'modernize' the habits of Mexico's population (Brewster 2005, 2009). These attempts at modernization through the introduction of Western sports were inspired by globally established models, which emanated from the West, about what a modern state looked like and how its inhabitants behaved. However, rather

than changing local indigenous culture, basketball was incorporated fully into traditional indigenous village life and became an integral part of the local fiestas, just like had happened with the introduction of the Spanish ballgame. As I showed through an anecdote in the last chapter, in some communities in Oaxaca basketball has become such a standard part of traditional culture that it is now seen as old-fashioned and too traditional for modern young people to play.

These parallels between sixteenth and twentieth/twenty first-century globalization also extend to the realm of international migration and the way that migrants have carried these traditions with them. In an overview of the history of the Basque handball games in the Americas, Carmelo Urza (1995: 1) describes how, from the sixteenth century onwards, Basque immigrants introduced pelota playing in their new homelands, "wherever they went, they took their customs and traditions with them, as well as their religion and beloved pelota. There, they tended to confront the unpredictability of a strange land by banding together to conduct business and to share the language, foods and festivals of their native land. Basque pelota was one of these cultural icons which served both as a form of recreation and as a cultural sacrament." In this quote, we could easily replace the word Basque with the word Mixtec, in order to describe the way in which pelota mixteca players have taken the game with them to places to which they have migrated, ranging from Puebla and Mexico City to Fresno and Dallas.

As I have shown in chapter 5, the *pasajuego de la Balbuena* was one of the main focal points of Mixtec migrant culture in Mexico's capital city. It was here that migrants from Oaxaca came together to 'share the language, foods and festivals of their native land' and to meet old and new friends. In California *pasajuegos*, and especially the international tournaments, serve the same function. Basketball, the most popular sport in many parts of Oaxaca, also has a similar role to play for an even larger part of the migrant community. To many indigenous migrants, "basketball is the one familiar thing in the strange land. When Felipe López arrived from his village of San Lucas Quiavini in 1978, he made straight for the courts of Venice Beach, where young men from San Lucas played. There, his Spanish being poor, he could speak Zapoteco in comfort. There, over time, he heard about work, saw old friends, and met new ones" (Quiñones 2001: 121).

Clearly, the social and cultural processes that I have tried to describe and understand in this work are not particular to pelota mixteca or to indigenous Mexican migrants alone. They are characteristic responses to cultural and economic globalization of communities and nations worldwide. Again, Basque pelota offers an illustrative parallel, as a lengthy quote from a study of pelota vasca in a migrant context shows:

> “The ebb and flow of Basque Pelota in its classical forms in the Americas is inexorably linked to Basque immigration. A wave of immigration was inevitably followed by a boom in the construction of frontons and of pelota related activity. As the immigrant generation dies off, pelota dies off with them or is adopted and modified by the local population […] The forces of acculturation have pushed second and third generation Basque- Americans into American-based sports such as baseball, soccer, football, basketball and tennis, [because] each generation is motivated to compete in the sport of the culture dominant at the time and place of one's youth and of one's friends. For the immigrant from the small village it was pelota, but the athletically-talented Basque-American high schoolers will more likely be driven to compete for the pitcher's position than against a dwindling pool of aging pelota players. […] Any possible revitalization of classical Basque pelota in the Americas will almost certainly not happen spontaneously. Rather, if it is to occur, it will be through the efforts of organizations such as the euskal etxeak, the numerous pelota federations and the Basque government. Communication between these institutions is greater than ever and they have made a serious effort to promote the game, particularly among the young. […] Many Basque-Americans continue to learn their ancient language for largely symbolic reasons. It constitutes and reflects an integral part of their identity. They are motivated by an urgency to grasp the archetypical symbols of their ancestors […] only through their conservation and actualization it is possible to share a common thread with other Basques today and to maintain a link with one's ancestors. Pelota is also a product of culture and so it may be that pelota will be embraced by those who value and are dedicated to the maintenance of tradition, as has already taken place with dance and other cultural icons. Pelota underscores the uniqueness of our ancestors, and ourselves.” (Urza 1995: 12-14)

So, if these processes are indeed similar around the globe, what can we learn from this specific case study of pelota mixteca? I feel that what makes pelota mixteca unique is the way in which it has historically been promoted by the state as a cultural tradition and the players’ reactions to this type of promotion. Basque pelota has always been seen as the traditional ‘national’ sport of the Basque population. As Urza describes, there has been intensive cooperation between Basque cultural migrant organizations, pelota federations and the Basque government to promote the game among youngsters. In contrast, the Mexican state showcased pelota mixteca as a cultural tradition. This difference in treatment undoubtedly stems to a large extent from the fact that Basques have had their own forms of political representation, whereas Mixtecs and other indigenous peoples were part of the nation-building project of the Mexican Revolutionary government, but were not

represented adequately in the political arena. As repeatedly stressed in the later chapters of this work, this led to a situation in which pre-Columbian indigenous cultures were revered and incorporated into the national image of post-revolutionary Mexico, but contemporary indigenous traditions were expected to disappear as indigenous communities were culturally assimilated into a modern mestizo Mexico.

While, officially, the Mexican government undertook initiatives to promote the practice of indigenous games, these never achieved a genuine popularization of indigenous games. Only when players started taking matters into their own hands, both individually and through organizations such as the Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autóctonos y Tradicionales and the Asociación Mexicans de Jugadores de Juegos de Origen Prehispánico, did pelota mixteca truly start to be seen as a sport, rather than a cultural tradition, and did it begin to be incorporated into mainstream Mexican culture through the education system. While the players of pelota mixteca all appreciate the cultural value of the sport and its importance as an ancestral tradition, many of them argue for its modernization and professionalization, thereby taking pelota mixteca out of the traditional sphere of indigenous communities' village festivals . They also open up the sport to non-traditional players of the sport. This forms a marked contrast to the way that Basque pelota is promoted. As Urza mentions in the Basque case, "it may be that pelota will be embraced by those who value and are dedicated to the maintenance of tradition, as has already taken place with dance and other cultural icons." Here, preservation of the game is explicitly aimed at those who would traditionally play pelota vasca and the sport is treated as a cultural icon. It is exactly this tension between traditionalism and professionalization that the players of pelota mixteca, the organizations that they have formed themselves and the government institutions that concern themselves with Mexico's indigenous sports will have to attempt to assuage. The example below serves to illustrate this point.

In 2014 students of the Colegio de Bachilleratos de Oaxaca participated for the first time in the famous pelota mixteca tournament of Bajos de Chila. Several quintas represented the school in the largest tournament that exists. This event marked the first time that quintas, consisting of individuals who had not grown up with pelota mixteca and had learned the game at school rather than from family members, participated in an official tournament. The tournament started off with a speech by one of the organizers. According to one of the participants in the tournament, the speech concentrated on the importance of the games' historical and ancestral legacy, lasted for "thirty hours" and left the students with a profound lack of motivation to compete in the tournament. In the promotion to youngsters who did not grow up with the game, the ancestral and historical aspects of the game seemed to be of minor importance. Of course, in the future pelota mixteca will

still be an indigenous game and will still have its value as national cultural heritage, but it will also have to become a 'regular' sport in order to survive. If the focus lies too much on the label of the ancestral sport, it seems that the number of players will never increase significantly. On the other hand, if the game is promoted as 'just another sport' and the history of the game is forgotten, it will lose exactly that aspect which makes it unique. Eduardo Arellanes describes the challenges and possibilities ahead:

> Un deporte no puede perder sus raíces, los va tener. Pero que tenga un desarrollo, una visión de crecimiento. La puede jugar alguien de Michoacán, alguien de Chihuahua, pero el origen sigue siendo lo mismo. [...] Es que no tiene que perder el valor que tiene, las raíces que tiene, pero sí debemos pensar qué es lo que queremos para el futuro con esto. Porque en el futuro la práctica definitivamente, así como vamos, va a perderse. [...] Cómo lo metimos ya no tanto como un acto cultural de una cultura, sino como un deporte que se puede proyectar? [...] Que va perder algo, por supuesto. Exactamente que, no lo sé. Pero va a ganar algo también.

As van Bottenburg (1994: 266) shows in his study of the varying popularity of modern sports worldwide, the most successful (i.e. most played) sports around the world are exactly those that were incorporated into the physical education curricula of national school systems, so it seems that the players of pelota mixteca are headed in the right direction. In the end, only time will tell how pelota mixteca develops and if it indeed becomes a sport that is played throughout Mexico.