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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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Summary

Pelota mixteca is a ballgame that originated in the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Nowadays, due to the large-scale labor migration that has taken place within Mexico and from Mexico to the United States of America, the game is not just played in the state of Oaxaca, but also in Mexico-City and in several parts of the United States, most prominently the states of California and Texas. In academic circles the origins of the game are a subject of debate. While some archaeologists see the game as a local variation on the well-known precolonial Mesoamerican hipball game, others consider pelota mixteca to be a member of a family of European handball games that originated in northwestern Europe in the Early Middle Ages.

In this dissertation I attempt to answer several questions surrounding the origins of the game, its historical development and the influence that several waves and forms of globalization have had on the development of the game. Part 1 describes the way in which the game is played, followed by a comparison between pelota mixteca and handball games of European origin. This comparison is followed by an examination of the ballgames that were played in Mesoamerica before the Spanish invasion and colonization. This part of the research aims to determine whether a ballgame similar to pelota mixteca was played in precolonial Mesoamerica. The second part of the document focuses on the historical development of pelota mixteca after the Spanish invasion, the influence that the so-called indigenista politics of the Mexican state had on the development of the game and on how, in turn, these politics, and by extension the game itself, were influenced by twentieth and twenty-first century processes of globalization. In order to better understand and explain these historical processes, the social-historical development of pelota mixteca is framed within a discussion of current ideas on globalization and culture/cultural identity.

Pelota mixteca is a handball game that is played on a court that measures around 100 meters by 11 meters. The score is counted following the same rules as tennis, 15-30-40-juego. Three modalities of the game exist; pelota mixteca de hule, pelota mixteca de forro and pelota mixteca de esponja, which is also referred to as pelota mixteca del valle. The modalities are differentiated by the equipment and the type of ball that are used. The ball that is used in hule is made of rubber (hule in Spanish) and the glove that is used to propel the ball is made of leather and iron nails. Forro uses a ball that is made of leather and textile. In this modality of the game, the hand is protected by a simple glove that is wound with cotton bands. An industrially-made ball is used for esponja, which is hit with a square wooden board that is tied to the hand using leather straps. The balls for hule and

forro are made manually by specialized artisans. In the case of forro, several specialists are able to create these balls, most of whom live in the Mixteca region in the state of Oaxaca.

While only a few people are able to create balls for hule, there is only one family that possesses the knowledge to create the elaborate gloves that are used in this modality of the game. Both the gloves and the balls are inventions of the Pacheco family. The founder of this tradition was Daniel Pacheco, a butcher who lived in the town of Ejutla de Crespo in the southern Sierra region of Oaxaca. Daniel Pacheco was an avid player of pelota a mano fría, the name given to pelota mixteca before the invention of the gloves. In 1911, only days before an important match, Pacheco cut his hand while working. He decided to cut a piece off his saddle and create a partial protection for his hand. When he noted that this hand-protection enabled him to hit the ball with more power, Daniel Pacheco started experimenting with bigger and more complex gloves. Since Pacheco's team mates and opponents also noted that he had an advantage in the game, he also started to create gloves for other players. As time went by, the gloves grew ever more complex, from one layer of leather in 1911 to more than thirty layers of leather, reinforced with iron nails, nowadays. Naturally, the weight of the glove also increased, from 150 grams to 5.2 kilograms today. Because of the increased weight of the gloves, which enabled the players to hit the ball with more power, the size and weight of the ball also increased. The rubber ball that was used for pelota a mano fría at the beginning of the twentieth century weighed about 100 grams. Today, the standard weight for a ball is 920 grams. The gloves for hule are still made according to the Pacheco family tradition. Agustín Pacheco, Daniel's son, took over his workshop initially. Today, after the retirement of Agustín, the workshop is led by Leobardo, Daniel Pacheco's grandson.

The creation of the gloves had an unintended side effect, because the cost for the equipment with which to play pelota mixteca rose significantly. In 2011, a glove for hule cost around \$350, a large sum of money in a country where the average monthly income is around \$500. Because some players refused, or simple were not able, to pay this much money for the equipment, pelota mixteca de esponja was created in the mid-20th century. Balls for this modality could be bought in stores for a relatively low price and the wooden boards that are used to propel the ball could simply be made at home.

Generally, pelota mixteca is seen in Mexico as a 'deporte precolombino', a pre-Columbian sport. The game is considered to be a variation on the well-known precolonial Mesoamerican ballgame and the players of the game themselves often mention archaeological sites, such as Monte Albán, as one of the places where the game originated. Most archaeologists have also traditionally considered pelota

mixteca to be a game of precolonial origin. However, a comparison of pelota mixteca with handball games that originated in Europe in the Middle Ages shows that, in terms of its rules, pelota mixteca is of European origin. Three main arguments support this hypothesis – the similarities between the score count of pelota mixteca and that of European handball games, the fact that these games were played in Europe before 1492, and the lack of any depictions of or references to pelota mixteca in pre- and early colonial sources.

Anyone who is familiar with the rules of tennis will instantly recognize the 15-30-40-game score count of pelota mixteca. However, one important additional rule exists in pelota mixteca that is no longer present in modern-day tennis, the so-called raya-rule. The raya is a line that is drawn across the playing field. A raya is drawn when the ball bounces twice inside the playing field or when it crosses the sideline, after having bounced once inside the playing field. When two rayas have been drawn, or when one of the teams is at 40 and a raya is drawn, the teams change sides. The team that had performed the service becomes the 'receiving' team and vice versa. Even though this rule has disappeared from modern-day tennis, it is still used in many contemporary sports that are part of the same family of handball games as tennis. These sports include Spanish pilota valenciana, Dutch kaatsen and pantalera from Italy.

This family of handball games originated in the early Middle Ages in convents in northwestern Europe and, from there, spread throughout the entire continent. Gradually, this form of handball became the most popular sport in pre-modern Europe, among both elite and commoners. Despite the variation that exists between different game forms that belong to this family, all these games share three basic characteristics. 1. Four winning strikes win one game (i.e. 15-30-40-game) and a match consists of multiple games (mostly three or five). 2. The game is played by two teams, of which one is the team that performs the service and the other is the receiving team. 3. The raya rule, which is also called chaza, ratlla, chase or kaats in different modalities of the game. All these characteristics apply to pelota mixteca and it is clear that pelota mixteca is a member of this European family of handball games. Considering the fact that these games were already played in Europe hundreds of years before the Spanish Conquest, it is clear that the formal aspects (i.e. score count, court size, number of players, etc.) of pelota mixteca are of European origin.

It has been suggested by archaeologists that, despite the European influences that pelota mixteca has clearly undergone, a type of handball game existed in precolonial Mesoamerica that could be seen as a precolonial precursor for pelota mixteca. Nonetheless, a detailed study of the variation in ballgames that existed in Mesoamerica before the Conquista shows that there is no clear evidence

for the existence of a precolonial Mesoamerican handball game. Early Colonial dictionaries of indigenous languages compiled by Spanish friars only give the indigenous name that was given to the Spanish ballgame. That is to say, these dictionaries do provide entries for a handball game, but this game is described as 'de los nuestros', our handball game. Spanish chronicles from the same period lack any descriptions of handball games. Likewise, there are no depictions of handball games in any of the indigenous codices that were produced around the time of the Spanish invasion. The only ballgame that is depicted in these codices is the well-known pre-Columbian Mesoamerican ballgame that was played with the hip.

There is no clear evidence in the archaeological record for the existence of a precolonial handball game. While it has been argued that depictions of handball games are shown in the iconography of a handful of sites in Mesoamerica, alternative interpretations for all these examples are possible. The most-often cited examples of a supposed precolonial handball game come from the Tepantitla compound at Teotihuacan and from the Late Preclassic site of Dainzú in the Oaxacan central valleys. While it is true that many handball games are depicted in the murals of Tepantitla, a handball game is not one of them. The corpus of Dainzú has been associated with a handball game ever since the first excavations of the site by Ignacio Bernal in the 1960s. Several authors have suggested that a precolonial version of pelota mixteca is depicted at Dainzú, mostly because of the fact that the individuals in the reliefs hold small round objects in their hands. However, it is unlikely that the Dainzú corpus depicts a type of handball game that is related to pelota mixteca. First of all, there is no clear indication that the corpus depicts a type of game or sport at all. In addition, even if a game or sport would be depicted, Dainzú is the only archaeological site in the whole of Mesoamerica at which this supposed game is depicted. Considering the uniqueness of this 'game' and the large temporal distance between Dainzú and modern-day pelota mixteca, it is highly unlikely that an historical relationship exists between the Late Preclassic (200 BCE) Dainzú game and modern-day pelota mixteca.

Since pelota mixteca most probably originated as a counter reaction to the Spanish prohibition of the hipball game in the early Colonial era, the game has been played for hundreds of years by indigenous and non-indigenous players in Oaxaca. Therefore, despite the fact that the way the game is played is undoubtedly of European origin, pelota mixteca is clearly an indigenous game today. Clearly, the creation of pelota mixteca was one of the outcomes of a 16th-century form of globalization. The Spanish invasion brought different European cultural elements to Mesoamerica, one of which was the handball game. In the 19th and 20th century, new waves of globalization brought new sports and games to Mexico. The 19th century saw the introduction of European elite

sports, such as polo, cycling and rowing. Football (soccer) was also introduced to Mexico during this period. Later, in the early years of the 20th century, North American sports such as basketball and baseball were introduced. The introduction of these new sports automatically led to a decline in the number of people that played pelota mixteca, if only because new 'ludic options' were created. The practice of Western sports was actively stimulated by the Mexican authorities. The newly-created nationwide educational system brought children throughout Mexico in contact with sports such as basketball, baseball and football. In contrast, indigenous sports were not taught or played at schools. On the contrary, these indigenous pastimes were associated with indigenous traditions and culture and their practice was discouraged by teachers and missionaries alike. They were, however, displayed during folkloric festivals that showcased indigenous culture for the mestizo population of Mexico.

The promotion of Western sports, to the detriment of indigenous sports and games, was a logical outcome of the indigenismo policies that the Mexican authorities pursued. This politics of indigenismo, which formed after the Mexican revolution at the beginning of the 20th century, aimed to create a new national identity for Mexico, one that envisioned Mexico as a nation that was racially mestizo and culturally Anglo-Saxon. From the combination of Mexico's precolonial history and the adoption of Western cultural elements and standards, a new people would form that combined the best of both worlds. The Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, one of the leading thinkers behind this movement, called this new nation the Raza Cómica, the Cosmic Race. However, in order for this cosmic race to come about, Mexico needed to be 'modernized' and in order to become true Mexican citizens the indigenous population of the country needed to relinquish their 'antiquated' culture and traditions, including their native languages. The national education system was the main vehicle to achieve this modernization. As a result, speaking indigenous languages was prohibited in schools and children were taught Western customs, including sports.

Because Mexico's precolonial heritage was one of the cornerstones of the Raza Cómica, the practice of indigenous traditions was not outright prohibited, as had been the case during the Colonial period. Nonetheless, these traditions were severely restricted and were only used by the Mexican authorities as demonstration sports during folkloric festivals that were held during national holidays. The goal of these demonstrations was to strengthen the sense of national pride that Mexicans felt in the precolonial traditions that they had inherited as a nation. While these demonstrations may have indeed strengthened feelings of national pride in the public, these events were not aimed at increasing the number of players of the sport. Since, according to the logic of the Raza Cómica, the indigenous populace of the country and their culture were bound to disappear

into the culturally Western-oriented whole of the new Mexican nation, the mestizo public was not expected to be interested in learning how to play these indigenous sports.

The name *pelota mixteca*, which was created in the 1920s or 30s, clearly indicates that the game was already seen as an indigenous tradition at the end of the 19th century. The representation of and discourse on *pelota mixteca* that the Mexican authorities created from the beginning of the 20th century was founded on three basic assumptions, which departed from this idea of *pelota mixteca* as an indigenous tradition. These assumptions were, 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. This idea of *pelota mixteca* as an indigenous tradition has exerted a heavy influence on the potential number of players of the game and, by extension, on the chances of survival of *pelota mixteca* in a globalized world. Not only would non-indigenous Mexicans be hesitant to start playing the game, because of the widespread discrimination that existed and continues to exist towards indigenous cultures, indigenous young people would also be more inclined to start playing Western globalized sports, since indigenous pastimes were presented within discourse as antiquated and outdated. The role models of indigenous young people were no longer their fathers or grandfathers who played *pelota mixteca*, but rather global sports icons that played football or basketball.

In the 1970s, the indigenista politics of the Mexican government changed. Two developments laid the basis for these changes. First of all, anthropologists voiced a strong critique on the way that the Mexican state had treated the indigenous population and their culture since the Mexican revolution. Fundamental to this critique was the notion that, according to the logics of the *Raza C6smica*, indigenous individuals could only become true modern Mexican citizens if they chose to relinquish their own culture and adopt the Western-oriented culture of modern Mexico. Only through total 'mexicanization' – that is to say, by no longer speaking an indigenous language and by leaving behind their 'outdated' indigenous cultural practices – could an indigenous person truly become a full citizen of modern Mexico. Critics of this idea proposed a new form of indigenismo that recognized Mexico as a multicultural society, in which the indigenous population was entitled to practicing their own culture and identifying themselves as both indigenous and Mexican. During the same period, Mexico adopted neoliberal socio-economic policies which constituted a break with the isolationist economic politics that had been prevalent in the country since the Mexican revolution. These policies opened up the country to foreign investors. As a result, not only did more foreign businesses

establish themselves in Mexico, more Mexicans also started migrating to the United States in search for work. In the case of the United States, more migrants than before chose to stay in their new homelands. This was in contrast to earlier patterns of migration, in which migrants performed seasonal work and would return to their home communities after their contract had ended. Naturally, players of pelota mixteca were also among those who established themselves abroad and, as a consequence, pelota mixteca has been played on a regular basis in the United States since the 1970s.

This form of 'neoliberal democratization', in which the state devolved limited agency to civil society, combined with the growth in (indigenous) migrant communities in the United States, created spaces for the emergence of self-organizations of (indigenous) Mexicans. With regards to Oaxaca and California, many of these self-organizations were transnational home town associations, that brought together members of one originating community who lived in Oaxaca, Mexico City, Baja California or the United States. These home town associations, in turn, often developed into larger organizations that represented broader groups of migrants.

While the new indigenista politics created more space for indigenous people to self-identify as indigenous and to practice their own culture, this did not lead to a larger promotion of indigenous cultural practices to non-indigenous Mexicans. These newly created spaces, however, did lead to the formation of (transnational) self-organizations that aimed to preserve and stimulate the practice of indigenous sports in general and pelota mixteca in particular. The Asociación Mexicana de Jugadores de Juegos de Origen Prehispánico was formed in the 1980s in Mexico City and represented the players of pelota mixteca and pelota tarasca in that city. More broadly, the Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes Autótonos, that was formed in 1988, is committed to the preservation and growth of indigenous Mexican sports and games in general. In the 1990s, the Asociación de Pelota Mixteca California Central, an organization that represents pelota mixteca players in California and that has organized international tournaments in Fresno for many years, was established. The goal of all these organization is to save pelota mixteca from extinction, i.e. to halt the decline in the number of players and to stimulate more indigenous and non-indigenous people to start playing the game. The most important strategy that is followed by all these groups is the 'detraditionalization' or 'deindigenization' of the game. Instead of showcasing pelota mixteca as an indigenous tradition, a form of representation that was in line with the traditional Mexican discourse on pelota mixteca, these organizations and individuals aim to promote pelota mixteca as a true sport, as something that can be played by any non-indigenous or indigenous person. By pursuing this strategy of detraditionalization, 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). One of the most significant successes that has been achieved is the introduction of pelota mixteca into the curriculum of the Colegio de Bachilleres del Estado de Oaxaca (COBAO), the largest institution for secondary education in the state of Oaxaca. At the COBOA, hundreds of young people who traditionally would not even have heard of pelota mixteca are taught how to play the game. Some teams that were trained at the COBAO have already participated in the Bajos de Chila tournament, one of the largest pelota mixteca tournaments around.

Clearly, globalization played a major role in the creation of pelota mixteca and the historical development of the game. Not only was the creation of the game an outcome of a form of 16th-century globalization, the introduction of Western sports during several waves of 19th- and 20th-century globalization led to the marginalization of the game, under the influence of the Western-oriented identity politics of the Mexican authorities. Despite the myriad negative consequences that neoliberal globalization in the second half of the 20th century had for the indigenous population of Mexico, it also opened up spaces for the self-organization and empowerment of indigenous individuals and groups. As a consequence, advocates for the game who were concerned with the game's survival were able to promote pelota mixteca on their own terms, focusing on the sport-aspects, rather than on the traditional aspects. In the end, while global developments provided the structural backdrops that enabled these individuals and groups to act, it is only because of their incessant passion for the game and their agency that pelota mixteca is still a living and growing sport, today.