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

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Citation

Berger, M. E. (2016, May 26). *From Ollamaliztli to Pelota mixteca and beyond : the role of globalization in the historical development of an indigenous Mexican ballgame*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/39643>

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

Issue Date: 2016-05-26

CHAPTER 1. Pelota mixteca

Introduction

This first chapter is concerned with the very basics of pelota mixteca: how, where, when and by whom is it played and what is its (recent) history? In the first part, I will present an overview of the different modalities of pelota mixteca that exist today, as well as the rules for all of these modalities, the places where the game is played, and the types of occasions at which pelota mixteca is played. The second chapter is concerned with the (recent) history of the game and the question of its origins. In that chapter I will argue that pelota mixteca developed from a family of handball games played in Europe around the time of the Spanish conquest of Mexico, some of which are still played in several European countries today.

Apart from the referenced literature, the information presented in the first part of this chapter is based on conversations and interviews conducted with spectators and players at pelota mixteca matches in the periods of January 2007, July-August 2008, and July-August 2011 in the cities of Oaxaca, Nochixtlán, and Pochutla in the state of Oaxaca, as well as a visit in 2012 to the international pelota mixteca tournament that is organized annually in Fresno, California in the United States, and attendance of two matches in Los Angeles in 2015.

Modalities

The game of pelota mixteca has three modalities: pelota mixteca de hule, pelota mixteca de forro, and pelota mixteca de esponja (also referred to as pelota mixteca del Valle), which are distinguished mainly on the basis of the equipment used for the game, rather than on rules or court size.

Pelota mixteca de hule

Pelota mixteca de hule is played using a glove of about 20 x 25 x 15 cms., that weighs somewhere between 3 and 5.5 kilograms, a weight that depends on the preferences of the individual player, and on when the glove was made (Fig. 1, 2). Nowadays, the standard weight for a glove is 5-5.2 kilograms, but some players prefer to use lighter gloves. The fingers are placed inside the glove, after which it is tied to the hand with the use of shoelaces. Before the 1950s, the balls for *hule*, which means rubber, were made from natural rubber that was obtained from rubber trees in the southern part of the state of Oaxaca, most notably around Juquila (Leobardo Pacheco Sr., personal communication). These plantations, however, have died out and rubber is no longer produced in this region. Today, the ball is made of industrial rubber that is vulcanized using a process especially

devised for the ball. The ball has a diameter of about 12 centimeters and weighs approximately 920 grams (Fig. 3). Pelota mixteca de hule is the modality of pelota mixteca that is best-known outside the circle of players of the game and has always been the variety of the game with the most active players. Hule is played in all areas of Oaxaca, except for some parts of the Mixteca Baja, and is also popular in Mexico City and the United States.

Pelota mixteca de forro

As opposed to hule, which is named after the rubber ball that is used in the game, this modality of pelota mixteca is played with a ball that is made of leather, wool and thread, which are sewn together in a ball weighing about 275-300 grams (Castro Leal et al. 1986; Cortés Ruiz 1992; Inzúa 1985:84). In this variety the ball is hit with the hand, using a regular glove, of the type normally worn by gardeners or construction workers. This glove is wrapped with cotton bands, in order to make the ball bounce off the hands more easily (Fig. 4). Pelota mixteca de forro is mainly played in the Mixtec region, especially the Mixteca Baja and the western part of the Mixteca Alta, in the (north-)western part of the state of Oaxaca, as well as some areas in the Mixteca Costa. Forro also has some players in the city of Mexico.

Pelota mixteca de esponja or del Valle

Mostly just referred to as pelota esponja, this variety of the game is played with a ball that weighs about 100 grams and is slightly smaller than a tennis ball, about 6 centimeters in diameter. The ball is hit with a wooden board of about 20x20 centimeters that is tied to the hand with shoelaces, in the same way as the glove used for pelota mixteca de hule (Fig. 5). Inzúa (1985:85) and Turok (2000:63), who base their data mostly on research in Mexico City, refer to pelota esponja as pelota mixteca del Valle. Personally, I only encountered this name on a sign hanging above the entrance to the pelota mixteca court in Mexico City, and in some newspaper articles. It appears that the name pelota del Valle is generally used in Mexico City, whereas the game is mostly referred to as pelota esponja in the state of Oaxaca.

According to Cortés Ruiz (1992:213), this variety of the game first emerged during the 1960s in the southern part of the Valles Centrales and the Sierra Sur of Oaxaca, especially around the town of Ejutla de Crespo. As this variety of the game became more popular, it spread from the Sierra Sur to other parts of the state of Oaxaca. Unlike pelota mixteca de hule and pelota mixteca de forro, pelota esponja is not mentioned in a *reglamento* of pelota mixteca that was written around 1947 by Raúl Bolaños Cacho, then secretary of sport and culture in the Oaxacan administration. Hence, we can be sure that pelota esponja was not widely played in Oaxaca in the late 1940s. This gives credence to

Cortés Ruiz's assertion that the game was invented during the 1960s. We could explain the appearance of pelota esponja by looking at developments that took place in pelota mixteca de hule, the only modality of the game played in central and southern Oaxaca in the first half of the twentieth century.

During the 1930s and 40s the gloves and rubber balls for pelota mixteca de hule grew in size and, as a result, became more and more expensive. This development had its origin in Ejutla de Crespo, where the inventor of the pelota mixteca de hule gloves lived (see below). Quite probably, many players of pelota mixteca de hule did not have the resources to afford this new equipment. As a result, players that could not, or did not want to, buy these expensive implements created their own game, in which they only needed a relatively cheap ball and a wooden board that they could manufacture themselves. This would also explain why, in the regions in which pelota mixteca de forro is the main modality that is played, esponja did not spread as widely, since there was no need to invent a new game when the balls and gloves became expensive.

Pelota esponja is gaining ground on the other varieties of pelota mixteca, and is especially popular amongst younger people, most notably in the coastal regions. The main reason for this growing popularity is the fact that it is easy and cheap to buy a ball used for pelota esponja and to manufacture the wooden board that is used for the game. In contrast, the gloves and balls used for hule have to be made by a specialist and the gloves cost up to 3000 pesos/200 euros (in 2011).

Esponja was introduced as the official sport of the Colegio de Bachilleres del Estado de Oaxaca (COBAO) in 2011, which means that it will be taught during physical education classes at Oaxaca's largest institution for secondary education. Of course, this will dramatically influence the number of players of pelota esponja and might result in pelota esponja becoming the most popular variety of pelota mixteca, rather than hule which historically has always been the most-played variant. In chapters 6 and 7, I will analyze this development in more detail.

Court and Rules

Although pelota mixteca has three different modalities, the rules for hule, forro and esponja are similar, if not the same.

The Court, or Pasajuego, and the players

Generally, a court (or *pasajuego*) for pelota mixteca measures about 100 x 11 meters and consists of packed earth (Fig. 6). However, court sizes vary between 80 to 110 meters, because the court does not have well-defined end zones. The playing field is divided into three zones: the *zona de saque*, the *zona del resto*, and the *cajón*. The *zona de saque* covers about three quarters of the length of the

playing field (ca. 70 m.). The *cajón* makes up the first 8 meters after the *zona de saque*, the rest of the playing field is referred to as the *zona del resto* (Fig. 7). The playing field is outlined by lines drawn in the sand, which are often accentuated by chalk or cords. The lines that are drawn on both sides of the playing field are called *escape lateral*. The lines that mark the *cajón* are drawn across the court and are called *escape transversal*. Teams normally consist of five players and stand on opposite sides of the playing field. Sometimes teams will consist of fewer than five players, but this is only the case when not enough players are available.

Teams are simply referred to by the name of the section of the court that they are standing on - the team in the *zona de resto* is referred to as *resto*, while the team on the opposite side is called *saque* or *contraresto*. A slightly slanted stone, called the *botadera*, is placed in the *zona de saque*, about 30 to 40 meters from the *cajón*. The exact placement of the *botadera* depends on the strength of the player. The player that will effectuate the service bounces the ball on this stone, before hitting it to the other team on the rebound. The different positions in the field have different names. The player that starts the game by serving is called the *saque*, while the players that have to return the ball after the serve are called *bolea* (Inzúa 1985:80) or *cuide* (Cortés Ruiz 1992). The players that play in front of the *saque* or the *cuide/boleas* are called *rayas* (Inzúa 1985:80), *atajes* or *rayeros* (Cortés Ruiz 1992). The players that play in the end fields behind the *saque* or the *cuide/boleas* are called *resto/contraresto* (Inzúa 1985:80) or *largos* (Cortés Ruiz 1992).

Scoring points

There are several ways of scoring a point (or *tanto*) in pelota mixteca, some of which are more complex than others. Nonetheless, the basics of the scoring system are quite simple – whenever the ball falls out of bounds on its first bounce, the team that hit the ball loses the point. A short ‘play-by-play’ of a possible game might aid in understanding how pelota mixteca works. If at some point the explanation of the ways of scoring points seems to become incomprehensible, keep in mind that both the scoring system, and the way of scoring a point are very similar to tennis.

As mentioned, the game starts when a player from the serving team, called the *saque*, drops the ball on the *botadera* and hits it towards the opposing team. This *saque* or service has to fall inside the *cajón*. If it fails to do so (goes out of bounds), the *resto* gain a point. If the serve does fall inside the *cajón*, the ball has to be returned by one of the players of the opposing team (*resto*). If the *resto* returns the ball and it goes out of bounds, the *contraresto* or *saque* team gains a point. If the ball is returned by the *resto*, falls inside and bounces once, it has to be returned by the *contraresto/saque*. In this way the game goes up and back with both teams hitting the ball and trying to force the other team to make a mistake. Except for the esponja variant, in which scores are simply counted ‘1 – 2 – 3

– *juego*’, scores are counted in *tantos* or *quince*s, following the pattern 15, 30, 40, *juego* (game), like in tennis. The first to win three or five *juegos*, depending on the arrangements made beforehand, wins the *partido* (match).

There are multiple ways to score a *tanto* or point. The simplest way is if the opposing side hits the ball out of bounds. A more complex way to score a point is to win a *raya*. A *raya* (line) is drawn either when the ball goes out of bounds after having bounced once inside the playing field, or when a ball bounces twice inside the playing field. In the first case a *raya* is drawn at the place where the ball crosses the sideline or *escase*, after having bounced. In the second, a *raya* is drawn at the place where the ball bounces for the second time. A *raya* represents a ‘pending game’, meaning that it does not directly reward a point to the team that made the *raya*. If the score of a game is 15-0 and the team that has 0 scores a *raya*, the score becomes 15-0, 1 *raya*. When a second *raya* is scored, the two teams change sides – the *saque* team becoming *resto* and vice versa – and the *rayas* are ‘disputed’.

A *raya* is a line that is drawn transversally on the playing field between the *botadera* and the *cajón*. This line effectively reduces the playing field for one of the teams, making it harder for the opposing team to score. Rather than being drawn in the sand of the playing field, a *raya* is signaled by a *raya* marker, a small object that is placed on the sideline of the court. Disputing a *raya* means that the opposing team has to hit the ball past the *raya*. If they fail to do so, the team that won the *raya* is awarded a point. So if the score is 15-0, 1 *raya*, and one of the teams makes a second *raya*, the teams change sides and dispute the *rayas*. If the team that had 0 points wins both *rayas*, the score becomes 15-30. If both teams win one *raya*, the score becomes 30-15, and if the team that had 15 wins both *rayas*, the score becomes 40-0. In all cases, after disputing the *rayas*, they are erased and the game continues as normal, without *rayas*. When one *raya* exists, and one of the teams reaches 40 – or if one of the teams has 40 and a *raya* is drawn - the teams change sides and the *raya* is disputed immediately, because *rayas* can never be ‘left over’ as would be the case if one of the teams wins the *juego*, without having disputed the *raya*.

The coime, the chacero and the apostadores

Every court, at least in Oaxaca, has a caretaker called *coime*, who makes sure that the court is kept clean, the lines are clearly visible and any fences around the court are in good shape. This maintenance work is mainly financed by the players of the game themselves. For every game that is played, the competing teams together pay 150 pesos (in 2011) to the *coime*. Of these 150 pesos, 100 go to the *coime* for the maintenance of the court, the other 50 pesos go to the *chacero*, the referee. In addition, the *coime* receives about ten percent of the bets that are made during games.

Sometimes the work of the *coime* is supported by local governments who provide funds for the maintenance of the court. *Coimes* are elected by a democratic process, whereby players vote for the *coime* they support. If the playing community is not satisfied with the work of the *coime*, or if other conflicts arise, *coimes* can be replaced on the basis of a new vote. In California, where many courts are less formalized than in Oaxaca, not all courts have a *coime*. If a court does not have a *coime*, the players cooperate to keep the court in good shape.

The referee in pelota mixteca is called *chacero*. As referee, the *chacero* not only keeps track of the score, but also marks the *rayas*. They do this by drawing a line in the sand with a stick at the side of the playing field. Sometimes these lines are marked by a *raya* marker, a plastic or iron token that has the number 1 or 2, for the different *rayas*, on it. Often the *chaceros* hold sticks of about three meters long, which are used to single them out from the crowd and to enhance the visibility of the *rayas* (Fig. 8). The role of *chacero* is mostly performed by experienced players who referee other teams' games. Another important duty of the *chacero* is to keep track of the bets that are placed on games. As we will see further on in this chapter, betting is a characteristic feature of pelota mixteca; money is always bet on a game. Those that bet are called *apostadores*.

Like in every sport, the decisions of the *chacero* are not always respected. For example, during the tournament for the *fiesta patronal* in Nochixtlán in 2011, the final was not finished due to a dispute that arose over a *chacero's* decision. At a decisive point in the match, with one team leading the other by one *juego*, the *chacero* did not count an important point for the losing team, because he argued that the ball had fallen on the wrong side of the *escape*. This decision was disputed by players of the losing team, who asked the *chacero* to go over and look at the place where the ball had made an impact in the dirt, hoping this would prove that the ball had actually fallen on the inside of the *escape*. After the *chacero* had looked at the spot where the ball had fallen, he changed his mind and ruled that the ball was in. This upset the winning team, who thought that the ball was out, and who accused bystanders of having moved the steel cords that outlined the playing field. A large discussion ensued in which not only the teams argued their points, but the *apostadores*, who had bet large amounts of money on the result of the match, also participated very actively. Since the *chacero* was not prepared to change his opinion, in the end, one of the teams refused to continue playing and the match was not finished. The result was that the prize money was split between the two teams and the money that the *apostadores* had bet on the game was returned to them.

This anecdote demonstrates the large influence that the *apostadores* and the money that they bet can have on the outcome of matches, as well as on the participants. If there are large sums of money bet on a particular match, bettors will push the players to perform and players will not only feel the pressure of wanting to win a match for themselves, but also experience the added pressure that is

put on them by the bettors, who stand to gain or lose substantial amounts of money on the basis of the performance of the individual players.

Where is it played?

Geographic extension

Pelota mixteca is mainly played in the Mexican state of Oaxaca, Mexico City, and some parts of the south-western and southern United States of America. In the past it was also played by Mixtec immigrants in the state of Puebla, most notably in the cities of Puebla and Orizaba. According to some authors (Cortés Ruiz 1992: 213) it is still played there, or at least it was at the time that they wrote. To my knowledge, there are no longer any active players of pelota mixteca in the state of Puebla.

Interestingly, even though pelota mixteca is now played in places as far removed from Oaxaca as Fresno, California, it is not played in all regions of the state of Oaxaca. According to the Enciclopedia de los Municipios de Mexico¹ (EMM), 55 municipalities in the state of Oaxaca have at least one pelota mixteca court. This number of 55 municipalities is far from exact since, on the one hand, a municipality may not list a pelota mixteca court despite having one and, on the other, a municipality might still list a pelota mixteca court even when the game is actually no longer played. Of the 55 municipalities that did report having a pelota mixteca court, twenty-two are located in the Mixteca region, twenty-one are in the Central Valleys, five are on the coast, two are in the Sierra Norte, and five are in the Sierra Sur. In the regions Cañada and Papaloapam there are no municipalities that list a pelota mixteca court within their boundaries. This does not necessarily mean that the game has never been played in these regions. In addition to the municipalities that list the presence of a court for pelota mixteca, there are two municipalities that list a court for pelota esponja. One of these is located in the Juchitán district of the Istmo region, the other in the Ejutla district of the Central Valleys region. All the aforementioned municipalities are spread over what could be considered the “Mixtec-Zapotec heartland”. The areas that have traditionally been inhabited by Mixe, Chinantec, and other peoples do not have any communities with pelota mixteca courts mentioned. Though the absence of these courts, and the people playing pelota mixteca on them, is no evidence that pelota mixteca was never played in these regions, it does at least seem to point to a less well-established tradition.

Up until the 1990s, Mexico City used to be the main center for pelota mixteca outside the state of Oaxaca, as migrants used to move from communities in Oaxaca to Mexico City to find work. More

¹ Available online at http://www.e-local.gob.mx/wb2/ELOCAL/EMM_oaxaca

recently, with the main migration flows moving to the United States, the game is played less and less around Mexico City, to the extent that teams from Mexico City now have to travel all the way to Oaxaca to be able to participate in tournaments. On the other hand, the number of players and teams is slowly increasing in the United States, giving rise to pelota mixteca associations and tournaments there. Traditionally, pelota mixteca was mostly played in California, since it had the largest concentration of Oaxacan migrants in the United States. Recently, however, pelota mixteca players in Dallas, Texas have started organizing matches, showing that pelota mixteca is still a growing sport in the USA.

Within Communities

Many pelota mixteca courts are now located in so-called *polideportivos*, in which a *pasajuego* is constructed next to a football field, a basketball court, or a baseball diamond. Some courts, however, are still found in what was probably their traditional location: in front of the village church. For example, in Magdalena Zahuatlán, a small town in the north of the state of Oaxaca, the pelota mixteca court is located in front of the church. In Chalcatongo, in the Mixteca Alta, pelota mixteca used to be played to the side of the church (Maarten Jansen personal communication 2015). In Nochixtlán, up until the 1950s, the game was played in front of an old church which, after the building of a new edifice, has fallen into disuse. Until September 2005 – when the local authorities forbade it, because of danger to the passing public - pelota mixteca was played on the central plaza in Tlaxiaco (Doroteo Arvea, personal communication 2008). Pelota mixteca can, however, also be played without an official court. For example after September 2005, the players in Tlaxiaco simply moved to a wide street away from the center of town, where they continued playing. According to the EMM (see above) in San José Estancia Grande, people play pelota mixteca “en las calles o espacios baldíos ya que no se cuenta con un lugar adecuado para este deporte tan antiguo.” Likewise, in the United States *pasajuegos* are often located in public parks or on abandoned agricultural fields (Fig. 9). Since, in the USA, players often do not have government permits, or funding, to create official *pasajuegos*, they use any space that suits their needs and is available.

When is it played?

Partidos de compromiso and partidos libres

While pelota mixteca training can take place on any day of the week, depending on when players have the time to play, most matches are held on Sundays. The main reason for this is that most people work six days a week and so only have the Sunday off to play a match. This is especially the case for matches that are played *de compromiso*. Playing a match *de compromiso* (‘by commitment’)

means that the teams make arrangements beforehand, establishing the date and time of the game (normally some weeks in advance), the *pasajuego* at which it will take place (in most cases the 'home ground' of one of the two competing teams), the exact rules that will be followed (amount of games that will be played, etc.), and the amount of money that will be placed on the game. In games that are played *de compromiso*, a certain amount of money is bet on the outcome of the whole *partido* and on the separate *juegos*. The amount of money that is bet can range from a little - 500 pesos/50 USD per *partido* - to a lot - over 10,000 pesos per *partido*, in addition to 500/1000 per *juego*. The bets are essential to pelota mixteca. An elder man even went as far as to state, "Si no hay apuesto, no hay juego" - 'If there's no bets, there's no game'. Betting in pelota mixteca is definitely not a modern feature. Catarino 'El Oficial' Perez, a well-known pelota mixteca player from the city of Oaxaca, who stopped playing in the early 2000s at the age of 79, told me a story about how, in the 1940s, he once won 5,000 pesos with his team, during a match in Orizaba. With the earnings of this one match he was able to buy a house and a plot of land. Not only the players of the team bet money on the outcome of the game, the public is normally also involved in the betting. Matches that are not played *de compromiso*, are called *libre*. These are matches are not arranged beforehand, but are simply arranged on the day of the game. These games do, however, also involve bets, though normally in lesser amounts than the *partidos de compromiso*.

Tournaments

Apart from the *partidos de compromiso*, the most important pelota mixteca matches take place during the tournaments that are held throughout the state of Oaxaca. Many of these tournaments form part of the festivities that take place in Oaxacan communities to celebrate the *fiesta patronal*. The number and quality of the teams that participate in the tournaments and where they come from depends on the importance of the tournament. Teams from all over the state of Oaxaca, and sometimes also from Mexico City, take part in the bigger tournaments, while the smaller ones may only be visited by some local teams. Teams, and by extension tournaments, are organized in three categories (*primera*, *segunda* and *tercera fuerza*), depending on the strength of the teams, the teams of *primera fuerza* being the strongest.

As a general rule, though naturally there are exceptions, the teams of the *primera fuerza* are composed of players between the ages of 20 and 35 (players which are at the top of their physical abilities), in the *segunda fuerza* teams of players between the age of 35 to 45 compete, and the *tercera fuerza* consists of players younger than 20 and older than 45. As such, it seems that for the continuation of the tradition and the learning process of younger players, the *tercera fuerza* is the

most important category. In this category, younger players learn to play competitive matches and develop their skills and can benefit from the knowledge of the game that the older players have. The most important tournaments for the hule variety are the ones held in February for the *fiesta patronal* of Bajos de Chila, in the Costa region near Puerto Escondido, and the Torneo Estatal, which is organized annually during the Guelaguetza festival in the city of Oaxaca. Additionally, there is the *Encuentro Internacional de pelota mixteca*, which is held annually in the city of Fresno, California (Fig. 10). For this tournament a selection of players from Oaxaca travels to Fresno and plays games against pelota mixteca teams from all over California.

Tournaments are organized by one or more persons from the community where the tournament is to be held. Prize money is always awarded to the winners, but often all participating teams earn some money to cover a (small) part of their expenses. This money can be supplied by the *gobierno municipal*, affluent inhabitants of the community and/or other sponsors. During a tournament different modalities of the game can be played. Thus, it is not unusual to have a tournament that features both pelota de hule and pelota esponja.

Since tournaments are generally held on specific Catholic feast days, there is a tournament cycle that follows the same pattern every year. Players tend to know in advance which town will have the next festival and organize a tournament. Invitations to the teams are spread by the organizing committee during tournaments through word-of-mouth, but also through newspaper announcements, posters and, more recently, also through the internet (Fig. 11). Still, it happens frequently that several tournaments are held during the same weekend. For example, during the weekend of August 17th, 2008, tournaments were held in Nochixtlán, Pochutla, and a smaller town in the Valles Centrales of Oaxaca.

How does one learn to play?

Since pelota mixteca is not a sport that is as widespread and commonplace as baseball, basketball or football, most young people who start to play follow family traditions; their father, uncle or older brother gave them a glove to practice with when they were young. Children start learning to play somewhere between the ages of 10 and 14, though there is no standard and children can start learning earlier or later. Practice, at least for pelota mixteca de hule, is done with a normal ball (of about 920 grams), but with a smaller glove that is designed especially for children. By hitting the ball against a wall, children develop a feel for the ball and as they grow older they start using heavier gloves. They play training matches until they are ready for the real game, forming teams either with friends, or joining their family's team. Since 2011 pelota mixteca has been taught at the Colegio de Bachilleres de Oaxaca (COBAO), the state's largest institution for secondary education. Pelota

mixteca classes are taught at the COBAO throughout the state of Oaxaca. This means that, in addition to the traditional transmission of the game within the family, young people start to play the game at school. Of course, this has a significant impact on how the game is learned by youngsters and changes the locus of cultural reproduction from the family to a state-sponsored institution. I will discuss this development in more detail in the final chapters of this work.