




Research Article

Es nuestra tradición: the archaeological implications of an ethnography on a modern ballgame in Oaxaca, Mexico

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Abstract

Pre-hispanic ballgames have an extensive temporal depth and geographical breadth across Mesoamerica, with over 1,500 ball courts recorded on 1,200 archaeological sites in Mexico alone. It is likely that ballgames played critical but variable roles in how communities related to each other. Most interpretations emphasize ballgames as cosmological rituals and legitimation practices exclusive to elites, perhaps often overlooking the more mundane sociopolitical processes and reasons why they carried such critical meaning for people of all classes and statuses. Ethnographic research on modern ballgames played by Indigenous and mestizo communities today can helpfully provide some insights or maybe deeper understandings into ancient ballgame practices and their relation to Mesoamerican communities. While modern games are not isomorphic with the ancient games, the duration of these traditions underscores their continuing importance and their relativity to current research. In this article I present the results of an ethnographic study of the modern ballgame pelota mixteca de hule (Mixtec rubber ballgame) in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. Considering the results from the ethnographic data, I then discuss an archaeological case study in the Nejapa Valley of southeastern Oaxaca where numerous ballcourts were recently documented over the past decade.

Resumen

Los juegos de pelota prehispánicos tienen una gran profundidad temporal y amplitud geográfica en Mésoamerica, con más de 1500 canchas de pelota registrados en 1200 sitios arqueológicos solo en México. Es probable que los juegos de pelota desempeñaran papeles críticos pero variables en la forma en que las comunidades se relacionaban entre sí. La mayoría de las interpretaciones del juego de pelota pone énfasis en los juegos de pelotas como rituales cosmológicos y prácticas de legitimación exclusivos de las elites, quizás a menudo pasando por alto los procesos sociopolíticos más mundanos y las razones por las que tienen un significado tan crítico para las personas de todas las clases y estados. La investigación etnográfica sobre los juegos de pelota modernos jugados por las comunidades indígenas y mestizos de hoy en día puede proporcionar algunas ideas o tal vez una comprensión más profunda de las prácticas de los juegos de pelota antiguos y su relación con las comunidades mesoamericanas.

Si bien los juegos modernos no son isomorfos con los juegos antiguos, la duración de estas tradiciones subraya su importancia continua y su relativity para la investigación actual. En este artículo presento los resultados de un estudio etnográfico del moderno juego de pelota conocido como pelota de mixteca de hule en el sureño estado mexicano de Oaxaca. Considerando los resultados de los datos etnográficos, analizo un estudio de caso arqueológico en el valle de Nejapa, en el sureste de Oaxaca, donde recientemente se documentaron numerosas canchas de pelota durante la última década.

Keywords: Mesoamerican ballgame; ethnoarchaeology; Oaxaca; ethnography

Introduction

Mesoamerican scholars have always recognized the importance of the Indigenous ballgames played there (de Borhegyi 1980). Despite the diversity in the material evidence, researchers have often assumed that there was a

singular ballgame and that it primarily served the interests of elites. The sociopolitical processes that made both the games and the courts on which they were played efficacious to all social members are not relatively well understood. Similarly, interpretations of iconography are often rigid and anachronistic (Cohodas 1975; Uriarte 2001; Wilkerson 1991), while ballcourt studies have mostly been limited to questions of typology or construction sequences. Thus, change or flexibility in this 3,000-year-old tradition is not always adequately accounted for.

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Recently there has been a shift in how scholars approach the study of ballgames and ballcourts, incorporating perspectives of ballgames as agentive social praxis and by recognizing that games had more multifaceted functions in Mesoamerican society than previously assumed. Concurrently, there has also been increasing use of ethnographic data and research techniques to better evaluate data from the archaeological record (Arnold 2003; Binford 2002; Bradley 1984; Chance 1996; Chang 1992; David and Kramer 2001; Dietler and Herbich 1993; Gould 1978; Terrell 2003). Ballgames are still played today in different states throughout modern Mexico (Leyenaar 1980; Stern 1948; Turok 2000). While these modern games have been transformed significantly by European colonialism and intervention over the past 500 years, their duration underscores their continuing importance. Ethnographic research on modern ballgames and their place in communities today may help investigators gain insight into how these games operated in the past. While the ethnographic present is not isomorphic with the archaeological past, careful comparison can help provide insight into the more human dimensions of ballgames missing from the material record.

Over the summers of 2009 and 2010, I conducted an ethnographic study on *pelota mixteca de hule* or Mixtec rubber ball, a ballgame played today in the southern Mexican

state of Oaxaca (Figure 1). By showing how ballgames are meaningful social practices presently, we may better understand why they were meaningful social practices for communities in the past. Drawing on the ethnographic research, I argue that core concepts of socially reciprocal obligation and negotiated competition linked ballgames to community networks and politics. Games would have served as a way for people to interact and participate in relationships both conflictive, competitive, and cooperative. Over time these interactions contributed to sociopolitical networks that varied in size, complexity, and function. I then use these insights to evaluate an archaeological case study in the Nejapa region of southeastern Oaxaca.

Current interpretations of the ball game

Previous interpretations of the ballgame can be grouped into either religious cosmological-agricultural-fertility and sacrificial themes, or secular political-economic-conflict metaphor/avoidance themes (Day 2001; Fox 1991; Fox 1996; Gillespie 1991; Hill and Clark 2001; Taladoire 2000, 2001; Taladoire and Colsenet 1991; Whalen and Minnis 1996; Wilkerson 1991). In either interpretation, violence of different forms is strongly associated with the game.

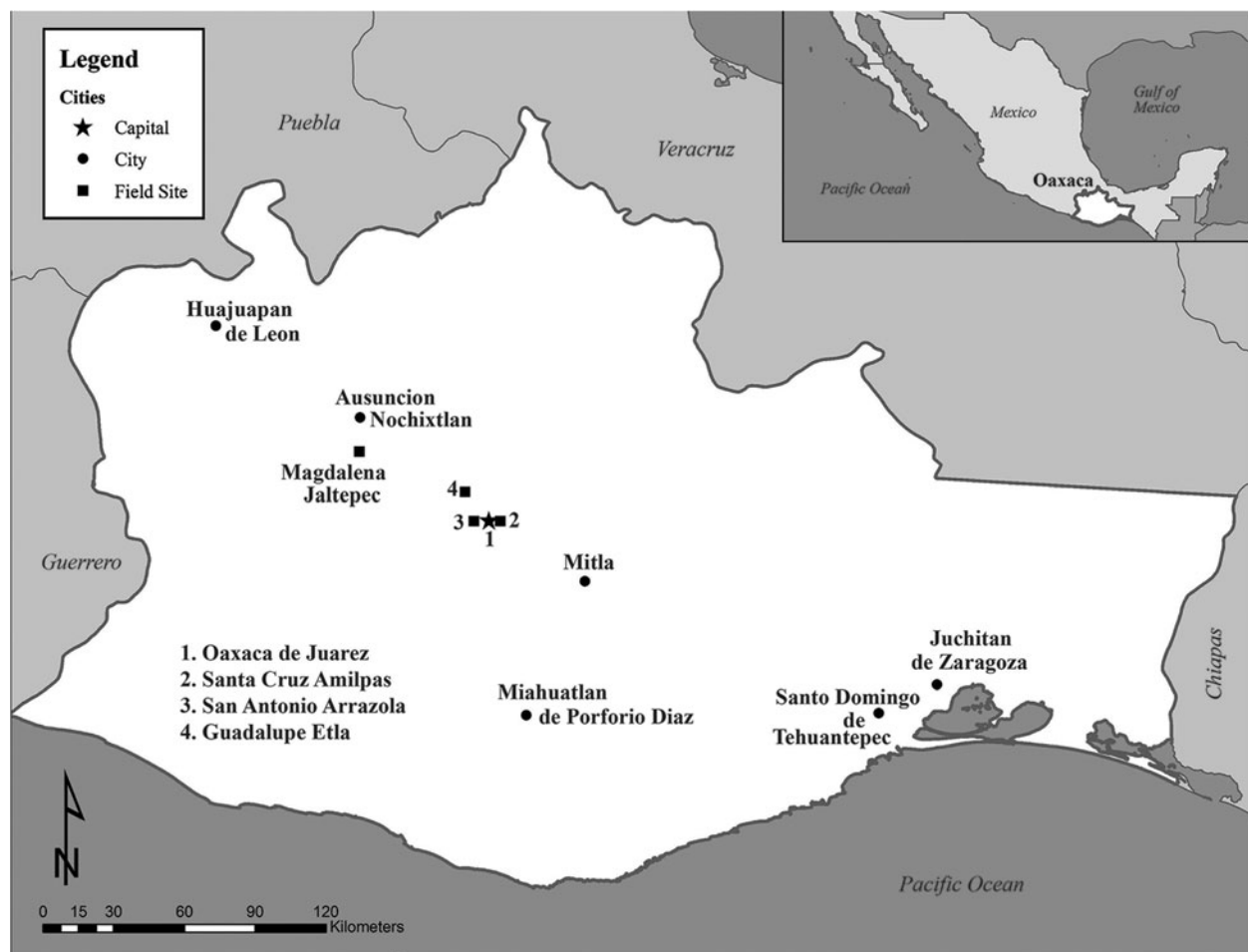


Figure 1. A map of the southeastern state of Oaxaca, Mexico, and the Nejapa study area. Map by the author.

Secular interpretations link the ballgame with rites of accession and the legitimation of authority between elites. It is also seen as an outlet for inter-elite competition, a substitute for warfare, and a way to avoid or terminate interpolity conflict (Joyce and Winter 1996:38; Kowalewski et al. 1991; Stern 1948:96–97; Taladoire and Colsenet 1991:174). Some scholars propose that idle warriors played when not at war to maintain fighting readiness (Kowalewski et al. 1991; Redmond 1983). Formal court structures appearing right as social hierarchies were emerging suggests that games were connected to developing stratification and a rising elite class (Hill 1999; Hill and Clark 2001; Hill et al. 1998).

Ballcourt construction increased in times of intense political competition, particularly in situations where there are multiple polities in a region, heterarchical settlement systems, or a centralized power is breaking down (Feinman and Nicholas 2011). Moreover, the simultaneous use of multiple ballcourts signaled regional political decentralization with elites in constant competition (Santley et al. 1991:4; see Stark [2018] for a contrasting opinion). While the sociohistorical meaning of ballgames varied, the central objective was always the same—economic and personal gain by ruling elites who either participated themselves or sponsored teams (Santley et al. 1991:15; Whalen and Minnis 1996, 2001).

Religious interpretations posit that games were primarily cosmological and/or agricultural fertility rituals involving acts of sacrifice that were exclusively controlled by elites. Games represented the fight between contradicting and opposing forces such as lightness and darkness, the forces of the underworld, or between the sun and the moon (Berger 2009; Day 2001; Fox 1991; de la Garza 2000; Gillespie 1991; Uriarte 2000). Uriarte (2000:30–31) points to Venus and solar imagery in pre-Hispanic art as evidence of the game's celestial character. The central Mexican Codex Borgia depicts sacrificed ballplayers painted with red stripes associated with the deity Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli-Quetzalcoatl, or Venus in its cycle as the Morning Star. Xolotl, or Venus as the Evening Star, was another central Mexican patron deity of the game (Uriarte 2000:30). Several authors also suggest that games likely represented the cosmos, the ball traveling across the court a symbol of the sun passing through the sky and the underworld (Day 2001; de la Garza 2000; Gillespie 1991). In addition to solar and cosmic images, liminal creatures such as butterflies, frogs, turtles, and crocodiles also appear in ballgame iconography, evidence that the ballgame ritually symbolized “unification through opposition” (Uriarte 2000:31–33).

The ballcourt's morphology is said to represent either the entrance to the underworld, the underworld itself (de la Garza 2000; Schele and Freidel 1991; Taladoire 2000:27, 2001; Uriarte 2000), or the channel for the birth of the sun and cosmos (Uriarte 2000:33). In the codices, ballcourts and games are paired with symbolically valued animals such as jaguars, coyotes, eagles, and quetzals. The jaguar and coyote themselves are linked to the earth, night, and war; while the eagle and the quetzal are associated with the daytime world, the heavens, dryness, and the warrior. The codices also depict the court both as a symbol of fertility and a

place of confrontation between opposing and complementary forces (Taladoire 2015).

These interpretations are by no means incorrect as the material evidence does generally support them. Even more so, they demonstrate the multivalence of game meanings. The exclusive focus on elite expressions of ballgame participation or only viewing the game as an elite political strategy or ritual tradition, however, means that we may be missing the larger picture (Stoll and Anderson 2017). Contrasting with these either/or interpretations, recent research incorporating poststructuralist perspectives and theory from the anthropology of sport (Baron 2006; Fox 1994, 1996; Hill 1999; Ramos 2012; Stoll and Anderson 2017) demonstrate that as competitive sports involving some degree of cooperation between opposing teams/social groups, ballgames were integral to community- and network-building for Mesoamerican societies (Stoll and Anderson 2017).

Ballgames and ballcourts in Oaxaca

Investigation into ballgames and ballcourts in Oaxaca is relatively limited. The only regional studies published so far, from the Central Valleys (Kowalewski et al. 1991) and Pacific Coast (Zeitlin 1993), and a small number of courts have been excavated. But what evidence we do have paints a complicated picture of ballgames, game ceremonies, and their role in intra- and intercommunity politics and relationships. Based on a ballplayer figurine (dated to 1399–899 B.C.; Blomster 2012) and a recently excavated ballcourt (dated to 1374 B.C.; Blomster and Salazar Chávez 2020) at the Etlantongo site, ballgames were played in the Mixteca Alta by the Early Formative period. The games may have been present even earlier: the Archaic site of Geo-Shih features two 20-m-long parallel lines of stones placed seven meters apart that could possibly be a dance floor (Flannery and Spores 1993) or a playing field (Blomster 2012:8022; Hill 1999:6). Parallel stone alignments have been found at other similar Archaic sites (Lohse et al. 2013). These stone alignments resemble the open ballcourts (parallel mounds instead of lines) that appeared later in the Formative. Masonry courts are first constructed in the Late Formative (300 B.C.–A.D. 300); around 100 masonry structures have been registered so far and more remain to be recorded.

There are not many artistic representations of ballcourts, games, and players. Ballplayer figurines are not very numerous and few ceramic vessels (de Borhegyi 1980) and tomb murals that depict ballplayers (Urcid 2005) and Atzompá (García Robles y Cuatle 2011). Stone effigies of ballgame equipment such as yokes are known but few, *hachas* are slightly more common while *palmas* are completely absent.

Ballcourt sculptural art is also limited and includes some simple, undecorated, center-alley stone markers; free-standing stone figures (possible dead ballplayers), mostly at sites in the Costa Chica region on the Pacific Coast (Zeitlin 1993) and the Chontal Alta (Zborover 2014); and possible ballplayer monuments from Tlacochauaya and Dainzu in the Central Valleys and Tequixtepec in the Mixteca Baja (Taladoire 2003:328). There is some debate over the

identification of the Dainzu monuments. Bernal (Bernal and Seuffert 1979) initially identified them as ballplayers playing a handball game. While not disagreeing with this identification, Orr (2001, 2003) theorized that the carved figures are engaged in one-on-one ritualized combat using stone balls. Alternatively, they could be boxers fighting ritualized matches (Taube and Zender 2009) or warriors celebrating a successful military campaign or battle (Berger 2011). Urcid (2014) disagrees, arguing that, while the figures are indeed ballplayers, the carvings actually commemorate either the death of two Dainzu governors or the sacrifice of important captives by Dainzu.

Two recent discoveries underscore the uniqueness of Oaxaca ballgame art. Three, large, clay ballcourt sculptures were recorded at the Late Formative Cueva el Rey Kong-Oy site in the Mixe region (just north of Nejapa). One court lies next to a life-sized, mud-sculpted human figure wearing ballplayer regalia, a small ball in each hand (Winter et al. 2014). Over in the Quiechapa region, Badillo (2022) recorded 30 carved ballcourt icons, the largest number found so far in Mesoamerica. These icons represented actual courts and were likely loci for game-related rituals associated with fertility, death, and renovation (Badillo 2022:14–17).

Where we find the most game representations are the Mixtec codices (Joyce et al. 2004; Taladoire 2015). Sections dealing with time immemorial show deities in and around ballcourts (Macazaga Ordoño 1982:64). Most of the court icons are parts of place names or represent physical spaces where important historical events occurred (Byland and Pohl 1994; Joyce et al. 2004; Pohl 2004).

Oaxacan communities utilized ballgames in different ways. Some argue that games played social mediating roles while ballcourts marked physical boundary markers different polities (Byland and Pohl 1994; Feinman and Nicholas 2011; Finsten et al. 1996; Gillespie 1991; Joyce and Winter 1996; Pohl and Byland 1990; Pohl et al. 1997). Zeitlin (1993) proposes that games were integral to a widespread peer-polity network in the southern Isthmus and Costa Chica. Orr (2001, 2003) suggests that there was a ritualized combat handball performed in conjunction with pilgrimages to sacred hill centers. Yet others claim that games helped warriors maintain fighting readiness when idle while also reinforcing key state and elite ideologies (Kowalewski et al. 1991; Redmond 1983).

The ballcourt sculptures discovered in the Cueva del Rey Kong-Oy challenge some of our assumptions about ballgames of Oaxaca. Alongside the ballcourt models are life-sized clay jaguars and human figures with exaggerated genitalia. Some of the male and female figures are depicted in coitus, while other female sculptures are in birth positions with prominently displayed vaginas—images not frequently found in Mesoamerican art (Winter et al. 2014:312–313). These sculptures suggest other ideological meanings linked to the ballgame that remain to be explored.

Indigenous sports and games of the Americas

That Mesoamerican ballgames were also sports has often been dismissed or seen as secondary (Altuve 1997; Bernal

and Seuffert 1979; Cohodas 1975; Day 2001; Fox 1991; Koontz 2008; Leyenaar 1980; Miller 2001; Miller and Houston 1987; Schele and Freidel 1991; Uriarte 2000; Zeitlin 1993), unnecessarily separating ballgames as sports from ballgames as rituals. As liminal phenomena, sports are easily ritualized and politicized (Bell 1997). This explains why elites and other invested social classes would seek to engage in or align with friendly (and not) organized, competitive social activities. To better understand Mesoamerican ballgames, it helps to place them in their larger social context as autochthonous sports and games played by the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, as there are significant differences between Western and Indigenous attitudes towards sports to be considered.

Indigenous sports and games (ISG) were often described in early seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial narratives (Barnett 2014), and they have been studied by anthropologists since at least the nineteenth century (see Mooney's [1890] "Cherokee Ball Play" and Culin's [1907] *Games of North American Indians* for early ethnographies). Many of the pre-contact practices and meanings were still present during this latter period, even as there were ongoing efforts by settler populations to constrain or even wipe out games completely (Rocha Ferreira 2014:51). These early ethnographies therefore capture a critical picture of ISG in their mostly original sociopolitical and cultural contexts.

ISG are typically divided into four general categories: kinetic competence, chance, games of representation, and strategy. Different games were emically related to diverse social processes such as sex role differentiation, group identity, decision-making models, symbolic identification, the development of important physical skills necessary in adult life, communal integration, and resource distribution through wagering (Cheska 1979:229; 1984:250; King 2006:32; Pesavento 1974:3; Penz 1991:54; Salter 1974:497–498). In this way, the meanings of ISG extended beyond physical activity to other important cultural beliefs and traditions (Cheska 1984:250; Delashut 2018: 217–222; Krus 2011:139; Penz 1991:47; Stoll and Anderson 2017; Voorhies 2017).

For instance, lacrosse was frequently associated with warfare by the Wendat, Iroquoian, Anishinaabeg, and other groups that played it (McGarry 2010), while Choctaw (Chahta) stickball or *toli* was known as the "little brother of war" (Vennum 1994). This connection to warfare has influenced some interpretations of the Mesoamerican ballgame and its function in pre-Hispanic societies (Redmond 1983). Lacrosse, however, also had different and changing social meanings through its connection to spirituality, medicinal practices, shamanism, warfare, and gambling (Salter 1974; Vennum 1994). Sports and games were also recreational activities (Cheska 1984:250; Krus 2011:138). Celebrations of annual corn harvests in Mississippi included feasting, and dancing, and *toli* games, with teams representing villages or moieties (Barnett 2014:12–14). Like lacrosse, *toli* was a competitive sport linked to spirituality and traditional ceremonialism (Barnett 2014: 16).

Gambling was and still is a common activity that accompanied nearly all ISG (Michelson 1981; Williamson and Cooper 2017:31; Yanicki 2017; Zych 2017) and can even be

considered a universal aspect of pre-contact Indigenous societies (Cameron and Johansson 2017:1–2). Gambling is popular because it acts as a social leveler, redistributing material wealth and creating some stability between social groups and nations—there is always the possibility that losses can be regained (Delashut 2018:220; Williamson and Cooper 2017:34). In contrast to Western and Christian views, for Indigenous societies gambling was both a religious behavior (Salter 1974:499; Walden and Voorhies 2017:7) and a pleasurable activity that added drama to games (Cameron and Johansson 2017:1–2; Evans 2017). Gamblers bet property, clothes, family members, and even their own lives (Cameron and Johansson 2017; Voorhies 2017:22; Yanicki 2017). The Blackfoot or Siksiká word for gambling is used interchangeably with the words for gaming and play (Yanicki 2017:13).

Through their performance, sports and games create a shared sense of unity or *communitas* (*sensu* Turner 1969) among members and opportunities for strengthening group affiliation (King 2006; López von Vriessen 2004; Penz 1991:46; Piña Chan 1969; Rocha Ferreira 2014:49). This was especially true for Indigenous societies prior to and outside of contact/colonial situations (Cheska 1984). The Oldman River was the playing grounds for the Siksiká Peoples of Southern Alberta's Rocky Mountains (Yanicki 2017:1), while Ute tribes gathered in the Provo River region to engage in various sports such as horse-racing, trading, gambling, foot racing, and wrestling (Janetski 2017:1). Going back further, there is evidence that ballgames in the Hohokam region of the Southwest were opportunities for social and economic interactions between communities (Abbot 2006).

ISG were often included in sacred ceremonies and other social celebrations; they were also tied to symbolic identification and cultural maintenance (Acuña 1978; Cheska 1979:236–237, 1984:250; Gutiérrez 2017; López Austin 1967; Pesavento 1974:3; Salter 1974:497; Voorhies 2017:3; Yanicki and Ives 2017). With their highly stylized pregame and game procedures, ballgames like lacrosse and *toli* have been particularly highlighted as symbolic mechanisms for group identity (Cheska 1979:232, 1984:252–253). Ballgames have always been integral to Chahta society and politics; in the eighteenth century, fields located adjacent to mound sites and depicted on historic shell gorgets (Howe 2014:77, 84). Many game-related myths explain the earliest origin of things. Games themselves were divinely sanctioned because they were played by the gods first, then gifted to the people (Cheska 1979:237; Penz 1991:47).

Catlin's (1953) descriptions of Chahta *toli* matches from the late nineteenth century provide rich descriptions of the game as it was played when stickball still retained many traditional practices and attitudes. Feasting, ceremonial activities, and other games such as handball and a version of jacks would take place before, during, and after the main event (Blanchard 1981:23–43; Catlin 1953:290, 293). Matches were announced several months in advance, with arrangements made between the captains or champions of the respective teams. People would travel around 15–30 kilometers on average to attend these events. Officials or

apisaçi kept score using visual mnemonic devices, typically sticks that represented points for the competing teams inserted into the ground. Drummers played throughout the match and attendant ceremonies, keeping up the excitement of the game (Blanchard 1981:35). Other key figures were doctors (ritual specialists), singers or *italowa*, clowns, and men who supervised the gambling (Blanchard 1981:36). Although many of these traditional elements are not part of stickball matches today, the sport is actively played by the Chahta and Chikasha (Chickasaw) in Mississippi where it still has an important role in community integration and identity creation (Barnett 2014:17).

Many Indigenous peoples today participate in Euro-American sports (Aicinena and Ziyank 2019; Blanchard 1995; Cheska 1979, 1984; Davies 2020; King 2006, 2015). These sports, however, have been integrated into the repertoire of each specific community's cultural performance and group expression (Cheska 1984:250) and can therefore be a form of resistance against colonial culture (King 2006:135–136). For example, the way the Diné (Navajo) play basketball echoes their ethos of cooperation among teammates in ways that contrast with more Euro-American playing styles (Cheska 1984: 253).

Es nuestra tradición: Modern ballgames in Mexico and Oaxaca

Because the focus of my dissertation research was the pre-Hispanic ballcourts in Oaxaca, I thought that an ethnographic study of modern ballgames would be a unique opportunity to observe these games in a living social context. There are very few areas in Mexico today that have both modern ballgames and pre-Hispanic ballcourts. Despite the immense research into Mesoamerican ballgames, however, there has been comparatively little investigation by archaeologists on their modern counterparts (see Taladoire 2003) To address this gap, I directed an ethnographic research project in 2009 and 2010 on the *pelota mixteca* games of Oaxaca (Table 1).

Throughout the project's different stages, I worked constantly to manage any expectations about what I would

Table 1. Location and dates of pelota game matches visited for the ethnographic field project.

Location	Date
San Antonio Arrazola	June 14, 2009
Buena Vista	June 21, 2009
Oaxaca de Juarez	July 12, 2009
	July 19, 2009
Oaxaca de Juarez	July 11, 2010
Guadalupe Etla	July 18, 2010
Santa Cruz de Amilpas	July 19, 2010
Magdalena Jaltepec	July 22, 2010
Santa Cruz de Amilpas	July 26, 2010

learn and observe. Given both the passage of time and the violent impact of European colonialism on Indigenous cultural practices including ballgames, I could not assume that modern games were simply direct analogues of their ancient counterparts. This is especially true for ballgames, which were frequently denounced in missiological writings and by colonial authorities because of their “warlike” nature and the gambling that was integral to them (Delashut 2018:216). Instead, I focused on what the players themselves had to say about *pelota mixteca* and what they felt was most important or meaningful about the game to them.

The primary method for recruiting participants was the chain referral or snowball technique. First, a colleague introduced me to one player, Don Quique, who then introduced me to several others. Those I interviewed would then tell me that I just had to speak to such and such other person, and so on. Sometimes while at games I would simply introduce myself to players. If someone expressed interest in doing an interview, I read them the project protocol that they would then sign if they agreed to participate, of which they received a signed copy for their own records. Only players who agreed to do so on the signed protocol are mentioned here by name. For others I use only their *apodos* or nicknames. Interviews were recorded when given permission; otherwise, I simply took notes. Some players did not want to sign the protocol but were willing to speak with me anyway. The information they provided is subsumed within the general descriptions of the game.

I interviewed retired and current ballplayers on the game’s connection to community functions, whether ritual, political, or economic. Questions focused on technical aspects such as game rules, how often the players meet to play, and how games are organized, as well as more social aspects including how they learned to play, what playing meant to them, and if they knew the game’s origins. During the interviews, other questions would come up in response to what players told me. I did initially ask about any mythology, rituals, or symbolism associated with *pelota mixteca*. These questions were rather unsuccessful: for example, when asked if the ball represented the sun, the men simply said no or were confused and would move on. Although some did tell me stories about the game’s origins, mythic histories like the *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1996) were absent. I later cut these questions entirely. Nevertheless, what I learned from the ethnographic data opened my perspective on Mesoamerican ballgames.

The traditional sports of Mexico today

Despite violent efforts by Spanish authorities to suppress ballgames, Indigenous and mestizo campesinos continued to play in secret throughout the Colonial and National periods. These games survived European colonialism to varying degrees, retaining some of their pre-contact rules and play techniques (Stern 1948; Turok 2002:61). In 1988, the Mexican government officially recognized their cultural importance with the formation of the *Federación Mexicana de Juegos y Deportes de Origen* (Mexican Federation of Games and

Sports of Origin). Ballgame associations in the Distrito Federal and the states of Sinaloa, Guerrero, Oaxaca, and Michoacán were the initial participants. Today, the organization is now known as the *Federación de Deportes Autóctonos y Tradicionales* (Federation of Autochthonous and Traditional Sports [FDAT]). It includes 13 state associations and many groups playing a diverse number of Indigenous and syncretic physical sports and strategy games (Turok 2000:59).

There are currently 13 surviving ballgames played today. Due to space limitations, I discuss only a few examples here. The game considered to have the most pre-Hispanic elements is *ulama de cadera* (hipball), a descendent of *ullamalitzli* (alternatively *tlachtli* or *ōllamalitzli*) or the hipball game described by sixteenth-century Spanish scholars. Although the Jesuit priest Calvijero (1945[1780]) recorded north and West Mexican groups such as the Nayarita, Opata, and Tarahumra playing *ulama*, now it is predominantly played in the states of Nayarit and Sinaloa, although it is now being revived in Mexico City and among some Maya groups.

Ulama de cadera uses a three- to four-kg ball struck with the hips (Turok 2000:62). Matches take place on a *taste* or field that is approximately 60 meters long by four meters wide, divided by a center line called the *analco* that represents the other side of a shore or river. The judges (the *veedores* or *juezes*) who keep track of the score and make decisions during rule disputes stand in the end zones or *chichis* (Ramos 2012; Turok 2000). Two teams of three to five players, assigned to different playing positions on the court, try to keep the ball in motion and not let it hit the ground. If it bounces out of bounds the serving team loses a *raya* or point, while the opposing team receives a point if the ball hits a player outside of the hip-thigh zone. Players described the rules as complicated and that they [the rules] take years to learn, especially since each town has its own rule system (Ramos 2012:210).

Related games include *ulama de antebrazo* (armball), where players strike the ball with the forearm; *ulama de mazo*, where players use two sticks; and *ulama de palo* (stickball), in which players use one stick instead of two. While the ball is smaller in these three games, many of the terms for the playing field and end zones, the point system, and the referees or judges are the same (Aguilar-Moreno 2004; Ramos 2012; Turok 2000). These games are currently popular in various towns in Sinaloa.

In the three versions of *pelota purépecha*, players use sticks of various sizes to strike the ball (Turok 2000:62). *Pelota purépecha encendida* (flaming Purépecha ball) is played in Jalisco and Sinaloa, where in the latter it is known locally as *quiche*. This is one of the few that has symbolic overtones. A cultural tradition “rescued” by the local FDAT of Sinaloa, the game represents a fight between the old and new suns. A maguery root ball is soaked in petroleum and lit on fire, then struck with a hockey stick-like wooden baton. For this reason, the game is played at night (Turok 2000:62-63). *Pelota purépecha de trapo* follows similar rules and playing techniques but uses ball made of different materials. In *pelota purépecha de Piedra*, players employ a flat wooden paddle to strike a basalt stone ball.

How to play *pelota mixteca*

There are three versions of *pelota mixteca* in Oaxaca: *de hule* (rubber), *de forro* (skin or covering), and *del Valle* (from the Valley). Each uses a different type of ball and playing gear (Don José Ángel, personal communication 2009). In *pelota mixteca de forro*, the ball is made of yarn, wool, or worsted yarn lined with suede. Work gloves of hide and cloth protect players' hands when striking the ball. *Pelota del Valle* involves a small skinny tablet or plank measuring 20 × 2 cm to strike a small foam ball, although one informant told me that he once used a shoe when he didn't have tablet. *De forro* and *del Valle* are mostly played by Afro-Oaxacan and Indigenous communities on the coast.

Pelota mixteca de hule (hereafter *pelota mixteca*) is the most popular and widely played. The *Enciclopedia de los Municipios de México* lists 55 municipalities (out of 570) in Oaxaca that still have a *pelota mixteca* field, mostly in the Mixteca Alta and Central Valleys (Reyna 2016:14), although many more existed in the past. Players use colorfully painted, vulcanized rubber balls weighing one kg and specially produced by a factory in Mexico City (Figure 2). This game is famous for the heavy, colorful leather gloves players wear that are made of about 36 layers of stiff cow leather that are held together with hundreds of metal studs or nails and weigh three to five kilograms (Figure 3). They are specially made to order by the only glove maker or *guantero*, a man nicknamed El Caballo (The Horse).

The technical aspects of playing *pelota mixteca*

In the past, *pelota mixteca* was played on designated *canchas* or courts (alternatively *patios*), sometimes on a street in

front of or near the church or central plaza, or wherever open space was available (Berger 2009:9–11). Most formal courts existing today are located in *polideportivos* or sports centers, alongside other fields for Western sports such as soccer and baseball (Berger 2009:9); or are located close to the town center, such as at Magdalena Jaltepec in the Mixteca Alta. An official court, however, is not necessary to play. Many *patios* are simply cleared fields wherever space is available, like the *patio* at Buena Vista located behind Don Quique's house (Figure 4).

The *cancha* measures 100 × 10 m and is divided into three zones: the *zona del saque*, which covers around 3/4 of the field (~70 meters); the *zona del resto*; and the *cajón* (which can be translated as drawer or bin), an eight-m section in the *zona del resto* (Berger 2009; Turok 2000). Where the ball falls in the *cajón* determines which player on the opposing team can hit the ball. In the *zona de saque*, a player also called the *saque* bounces the ball against a flat, inclined stone or *botadura* and then strikes it across the field (Figure 5; Don José Ángel, personal communication 2009). Prior to the game, the field is carefully measured and outlined. The lines are marked by older players with chalk or are simply scratched into the ground (Berger 2009:6). This was also a common practice in historic *Chahta toli* games (Catlin 1953:291).

According to Don José Ángel, how much of the field is in play depends on the strength of the *saque* (*según la capacidad del saque*) or how far they can strike the ball. Players are placed into categories or *fuerzas* (strengths) of *primeras*, *segundas*, and *terceras* (firsts, seconds, and thirds) beforehand by the *coime*, or the custodian of the court, and the team captains. He explained that teams are composed of five



Figure 2. Vulcanized rubber ball used for playing *pelota mixteca*. They are colorfully painted with the name of the village or player. The former are used in the *torneos* or tournaments where multiple teams from different villages are playing. This ball specifically belongs to the team from the *colonia* of Buena Vista. Photograph by the author.



Figure 3. A *pelota mixteca* glove, brightly decorated and studded with over a hundred nails. Photograph by the author.

players called *quintas* and that the team that plays in the *zona de saque* and serves the ball is the *saque* or *contrarresto* (counter), while the opposing team is the *resto* (Figure 6). Game time varies and can last for hours, although matches between *primera* teams often finish in half an hour.

Though the rules of play and point scoring have been recounted elsewhere (Taladoire 2003), I repeat them here because it was clear they are very important in the players' perspective. Once the ball is put into play, the responding team returns, and play continues until the it goes out of bounds. A point or *tanto* is then awarded to the *resto*. Players explained that the point system is like tennis, with points counted as *quince*s (fifteens) using the pattern of 15, 30, and 40. Once one team has achieved 40 points, then a set or *juego* (game) has been won. The first team to win three sets out of five wins the *partido* or match, or as Don Jorge said, "*el que ganó la ventaja*," he who wins the advantage. They were quick to point out that this was the only resemblance between the two sports and that *pelota mixteca* is "*muy distinto*," very different.

One complicated way to win a *juego* is through *rayas*. As Don Pablo described it, "*si sale el bote, donde cruza es una raya*" ("if the ball leaves [the court], where it crosses is a line"). At the point where the ball goes out of bounds after bouncing once on the field, or where it bounces

twice infield but stays inbounds, the *chacero* or referee marks a *raya* or line (Berger 2009:8). According to several players, "*si no hay quince y hay dos rayas, se cambian, pero si no hay rayas, no se cambian*," "if there are no points, and there are two lines, they change sides, but if there are no lines, they do not." Even when the serving team has won their set, if there is a *raya* they must still switch sides—as Don Pablo explained it, "*lo que hace es hacer rayas para cambiarse...se ven acá, hay una raya y quince, treinta, cuarenta y si hay una raya, se cambia*" ("what they do is they make lines to change, they come here [switch sides], there is a line and 15, 30, 40, and if there is a line, they change"). If there are no *rayas* marked and neither team has won the set, they continue to play in their positions. Marking *rayas* reduces the playing field, making it more difficult for the *resto* team to score. Should the *resto* hit the ball past the *raya*, then the *tanto* is awarded to them. Failure to do so awards the point to the other team (Berger 2009:7–8). Therefore, the goal of the *saque* is to block the ball from going past the *raya*.

Everyone I spoke to stressed that a good player knows the rules and how to play. Don José Ángel described the *reglamento* (rule system) as being "*muy sagrado*," "very sacred," and for Don Claudio the rules have never changed, "*son las mismas...siempre esta contabilidad*," "they are the



Figure 4. The informal patio at Buena Vista behind Don Quique's house and next to his corn fields. Photograph by the author.

same...always this counting system," a sentiment that was echoed by others. Whether they have stayed the same or not, this emphasis on the rule system, its antiquity and stability, underscores the importance of proper forms of social conduct in game play and the interactions between players. Proper conduct in social interactions among individuals is important for Indigenous communities in Oaxaca, forming the core of many existing traditions (Monaghan 1995; Royce 2011). At the same time, arguments over scoring still occur.

Players begin learning between the ages of eight to 14. Don José Luis said that while they use a normal-sized ball, boys are given smaller-sized gloves and only switch to the adult-sized gloves as they grow older (Berger 2009:11). When I asked who taught them to play, I received a variety of answers. Some, like Don Claudio and Don Catarino, learned from their fathers. Others like Don Elfino learned from older friends ("de un amigo...un día me dijo, vamos a jugar a pelota") ("from a friend...one day he told me, we're going to play ball!") Don José Ángel explained that players mostly learned from friends or relatives; his own father learned from his *tíos* or uncles. On the other hand, Don Elfino mentioned that some fathers choose not to teach their sons because they consider the game to be dangerous. I met quite a few men while doing fieldwork in Oaxaca who

said their own fathers had played but had refused to teach them. The ball travels very fast when struck and can cause serious injuries. Most often, the sons themselves are just not interested in learning—Don Elfino lamented that he had five sons, enough for a *quinta*, but unfortunately they did not want to play.

There are two other important roles in *pelota mixteca*, mentioned previously: the *coime* and the *chacero*. According to Don Jorge, the *coime* keeps track of the *quintas* playing that day, pays for the maintenance of the *cancha*, provides food and refreshments for players and spectators, and ensures that the court is regulated: "*cada patio debe estar reglamentado*" ("every field should be regulated"). For instance, if the police are called because a fight broke out and the court is not legally approved, the *coime* and the players could go to jail. *Coimes* also receive some of the money made through bets (Turok 2000:64), in most cases about 10 percent (Berger 2009:5), and must be familiar with rules as "*él define si es buena o es mala la pelota*," "he decides if the ball is good or bad." If there is a dispute over a point or rule, the *coime* "*tiene encargado si hay problema*," "he is in charge if there is a problem."

The *chaceros* keep track of the point scoring and *rayas*. Scores are kept in a variety of ways, such as making small rips in leaves, scratching points into the dirt with a bamboo



Figure 5. The *botadora* stone is used in *pelota mixteca* to launch the play into play. Two have been set up in the patio at Buena Vista for a torneo where multiple teams would be playing. Photograph by the author.

stick, or point stones (Figure 7). Sometimes the *chaceros* use a combination of all three. They also use the bamboo stick to mark *rayas*. When there are multiple teams playing, such as at tournaments, a *chacero* will be assigned to a specific team. Current and former players occupy these roles.

When and where games are played

Pelota mixteca games are usually held on Sundays. Those not arranged beforehand are *partidos libres* (free games), with teams made of whoever shows up that day. For scheduled matches or *partidos de compromiso*, arrangements are made beforehand about where and when a game will take place. Don José Ángel explained that the two captains are responsible for discussing the game arrangements, “*los que unen, ellos son responsables y hablan los capitanes*” (“those that unite, they are responsible, and the captains talk”). Then there are the *torneos* or tournaments for celebrating a town’s *fiesta patronal* (saint’s feast day) or other special holidays. Players and teams come from different towns and villages to participate. The more important the tournament, the higher the number and quality of teams, and the more likely there are to be teams composed of players *de primera fuerza*, first strength. Men attend games on whichever day the celebration falls

on, which means taking time from work to travel. Players can spend up to half their year traveling on *pelota mixteca* match circuits (Reyna 2016), just as people in the past traveled in local and regional networks to attend ballgames and other celebratory activities (Abbot 2006).

Discussion: *Pelota mixteca* and community relationships

There are certain expectations—“*tiene sus reglas*,” “it has its rules”—of *pelota Mixteca* players. Don Jorge said that when a team is invited to play *de compromiso*, they are obligated to go. He likened the *compromiso* games to *guelaguetzta*, a Zapotec tradition of cooperative socially obligated reciprocity that has deep roots (Royce 2011:2–3). He explained it this way: “*si me das, te doy*,” “if you give to me, I give to you.” When one team invites a team from another village for a game *de compromiso* or *torneo*, the invited team is expected to come. In turn, they can expect to be hosted and fed. “*Este es el respeto al visitante*,” “this is the respect paid to the visitor,” Don José Ángel said. It is then expected that the guest team will return the favor and invite their host for a game. Don José Ángel described it as “*amor con amor se paga*,” “you pay love with love.” For Don Jorge, the



Figure 6. The *saque* (left) and *resto* (right) teams playing at Buena Vista. Photographs by the author.

game is “*para vivir y para compartir [...] es parte de esta tradición,*” “for living and sharing [...] it is a part of this tradition.” Socially obligated relationships of reciprocity are thus created between host and guest players as well as between their respective communities through invitations to friendly matches and gambling debts

When a team or player does refuse an invitation or fails to show up for a scheduled game, there are social and

economic consequences for both players and hosts. Teams who decline invitations to compete may find their own future invitations rejected, while those that do not show up automatically lose the match and any bets placed beforehand (Taladoire 2003:322). They are also said to lose their *calidad moral* or moral quality (Stoll 2015). Because the percentage of gambling bets the *coimes* earn are used to maintain the court, pay any government permit fees, and cover



Figure 7. Score is kept in different ways by the *chacero* or referee. Here point stones are used to keep track. Photograph by the author.

the food and drink expenses, they are affected if invited teams do not show up.

Another link between ballgames and community relationships comes from the origin stories told by the retired men. According to the Asociación Oaxaqueña de Pelota Mixteca (Oaxacan Association of Pelota Mixteca), it originated sometime before the fourteenth or fifteenth centuries in the Mixteca region. Don José Ángel explained that during these times there were many kings and “*mucho oro, mucha riqueza*,” “a lot of gold, a lot of riches,” which caused many problems among the people. When too many began to die from fighting, they invented pelota mixteca “*para evitar guerra*,” “to avoid war.” The game was then brought down from the Mixteca Alta to the Baja and Costa, and once the communities had been united there it was given to the Zapotecs.

Don Gustavo, who said he did not know the game’s origin, still stressed that it is an ancient tradition “*con miles de años*,” “with thousands of years,” invented “*muy antes del Cristo*,” “long before Christ,” passed down from the ancestors to the players today. Any changes, he claimed, occurred only after the Conquest. Don Elfin Trujillo also declared that *pelota mixteca* had been played long before the Spanish arrived and that it came from the Mixteca. The most interesting origin story was told by Don Catarino Pérez, also known as El Oficial (The Official).

When the Spanish arrived, they asked who had invented this game. They were told that it was a woman and that she played with a tiny ball. After she invented the game, everyone began to play it. Interestingly, Formative-era figurines do feature male and female players holding small balls in the in their hands.

Some scholars argue *pelota mixteca* is of European origin, noting similarities to several handball games from Spain, including *boce lucea* and *de largo y rebote* (Turok 2000:65). Berger (2009:55–57) suggests that the game’s antecedent, *pelota a mano fría* (cold handball), may have been introduced by Spanish friars sometime during the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries after they banned *ullamalitzli*, with Indigenous populations adopting European handball games as substitutes. He rightly cautions, however, that this does not mean that *pelota mixteca* is not a traditional game, as the balls and gloves are clearly local developments.

There is evidence for handball games in colonial-era Indigenous dictionaries (Taladoire 2003). According to Taladoire (2003), Cordova’s (1942 [1578]) *Vocabulario Castellano-Zapoteco* lists several terms for different ballgames: the hip-ball game (*Jugar a la pelota de los yndios con las nalgas* [Indian ballgame with the hips]), listed as *tiquija láchi*, *cotija*, *qqiquijaya*, and *i tiquijaya*; and another game specifically referred to as a handball game (*Jugar a la pelota nuestra con la mano*

[our hand ballgame]), known as *tigàapayapitipi*, *pelólo*, and *cotàapaya*. We see the same distinction in Mixtec (*yocotenidina* [hipball]; *dizen de boleo* [handball]; Alvarado 1962 [1593]); Tarascan (*taranduqua chanaqua* and *taranduni* [hipball], *apantzequa chanaqua* and *apantzeti* [handball]; Gilberti 1901); and Nahuatl (*nematotopeuiliztli* [handball]; Molina 1977 [1880]).

While European influences are likely, especially given colonial violence towards “idolatrous” Indigenous practices, the players I interviewed strongly insisted that for them *pelota* is an ancient, pre-contact tradition. For Don Gustavo and Don Jorge, playing is “*toda la tradición de la familia*” (“tradition of the whole family”). Don Claudio said we have to take care of the game to ensure its survival because it is “*nuestra tradición*,” “our tradition.” As one of two young brothers, known by their collective *apodo* Las Ranas (The Frogs), explained to me when I asked them why they played:

“Yo juego porque a mí el juego me llama la atención más que el fut [fútbol] o el béisbol...un día pasé y ví un juego que nunca nunca lo ví...y me llamó la atención porque jugaban con guantes y me lo pareció bien diferente, me dirigí a la cancha para platicar con los señores, me lo explicaron el juego...y cuando aprendí que es tradición de Oaxaca...pues tradición de nuestra gente, me dio ganas de aprender y jugar...”

“I play because [*pelota mixteca*] is more interesting to me than soccer or baseball...one day I was passing by and I saw a game I had never ever seen before...and it interested me because they were playing with gloves and it looked so different, I went over to the playing field to talk with the men, they explained the game to me...and when I found out that it was a tradition of Oaxaca...well [a] tradition of our people, I really wanted to learn and play...” (Las Ranas, personal communication 2010).

While my research focused on the Central Valleys and Mixteca Alta, *pelota mixteca* is also played on the Costa Chica (Reyna 2016), the coastal region shared between Oaxaca and Guerrero. Games are played on Sundays; “*el domingo tenemos compromise*,” “Sunday we have an engagement,” is a common saying there. Although not every community has a patio, they will still have a team (Reyna 2016:14). In contrast to those other regions, however, there is an additional racial element because only Afro-Oaxaqueños (descendants of escaped slaves) and Indigenous peoples (Chatinos and Mixtecos) play against each other; mestizos do not participate. Normally the relationship between the three groups is characterized by a mutual discrimination and rejection that has roots in colonial systems of structural and social racism (Jackson 1999; Lewis 2003). Despite this racial animosity, Afro-Oaxaqueños treat matches with their Indigenous neighbors seriously. As Reyna (2016:18) observes, the “process of racialization that characterizes [these] forms of interaction takes on a distinct role” through the medium of the game, where participation carries a strong sense of honor, prestige, and...*compromise and reciprocity*” (my translation).

The players I interviewed explicitly link *pelota mixteca* with socially obligated relationships of exchange and reciprocity. Examples of these relationships exist in other

areas, particularly among majority-Indigenous communities (Monaghan 1990; Reyna 2016; Royce 2011). In the Mixtec fiesta system known as *saa sa’a*, households build relationships between themselves by participating in a cycle of hosting and attending (or not attending) fiestas. The cyclical exchanges of goods and wealth link these fiestas together such that each event cannot be treated singularly, as households participate at different levels depending on their debts and credits with others in the system (Monaghan 1990:58–62).

Saa sa’a is similar to the Zapotec *guelaguetza*. Another related concept from the Isthmus Zapotec is *quendalisaa*, literally “making kinship”; i.e., community is created through the social obligations we have to each other and by reciprocating cooperative actions (Royce 2011:3). Finally, there is also the tradition of *tequio*, where individuals participate in communal projects and/or assist fellow community members with their labor needs. Food and drink are provided in exchange, and it is expected that as many as possible will pitch in. All these terms encapsulate communal obligations tied to cooperative behavior that is ideally reciprocated, but also carries the implicit threat of social consequences for those who refuse to participate.

As a competitive and cooperative sport, *pelota mixteca* is a part of these community-building traditions, the commensality generated from playing, gambling, and reciprocity of invitations among players. *Pelota mixteca* fits into this larger moral framework, integral to many rural Indigenous and mestizo communities, that emphasizes socially obligated reciprocity and proper conduct between individuals as members of the same community (Royce 2011:69).

Because players travel frequently to fulfill their obligations to play, they establish extensive social networks at scales beyond the immediate community via these annual game circuits. Many would point out which pueblos the quintas were coming from, often listing several from different regions in Oaxaca—“*vienen de distantes lugares*,” “they come from distant places” (Figure 8). They explained that the *pelota mixteca* was important because “*se usó para unir los pueblos*,” “it was used to unite the people/villages,” in the past and today as well, “*hoy en día también*.” Don Jorge said that games maintained *amistades*, friendships, between people from different and often widely dispersed communities, drawing them together much as stickball did in the past and does today.

Because ballgames were (and are) linked to Indigenous systems of socially obligated reciprocity, they become important social metaphors and, through their enactment, physical representations of the relationships of the individual to the community, and in the past a representation of the community to the cosmos. Thus, ancient ballgames could represent agricultural fertility rituals or celebrations of cosmic duality and *at the same time* be social events where teams competed, bets were won and lost, and people interacted with friends, allies, and rivals. Some events may have had more rituals or sacred ceremonial tones than others (Bell 1992; Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 2007), in particular those games integral to elite practices, but at their core the games could always be linked back to these broader social

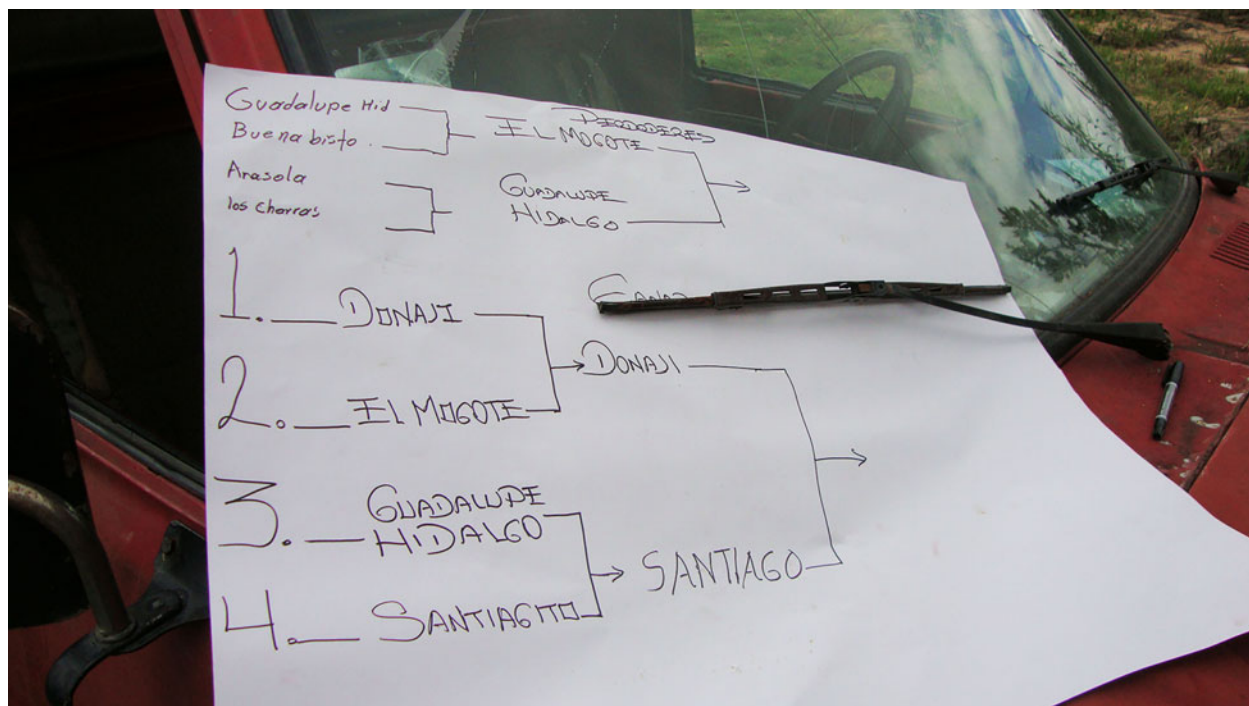


Figure 8. Score board for the day's *torneo* at Guadalupe Etlá, showing the different towns the teams are coming from. Photograph by the author.

practices (Stoll and Anderson 2017). The *pelota mixteca* players themselves repeatedly discussed the sense of community they derived from it, and the fun they had playing with friends and rivals in what they saw as a rich tradition integral to their identity as Oaxacans (Stoll 2015).

While for the most part informally organized, *pelota mixteca* matches are affected by modern political structures. The state government has a general interest through its regulation of the courts and the monetary support it gives for certain tournaments and to the ballgame associations in general. The federal government also sponsors special tournaments through FDAT, including an annual event that pre-pandemic took place in San Diego every September between players from Oaxaca and California. However, many of the men still expressed frustration at the lack of *apoyo* or support from the Oaxacan government. While matches do occur during the Guelaguetza celebrations in July, an annual event that attracts thousands of tourists, they are never featured in the tourist literature nor in advertisements for the festival, surely a missed opportunity.

Political disagreements also happen among players. Don José Luis often complained that many players only knew the rules of the game and not its true history. When I went to attend a *torneo* at the Técnico on July 26th, 2019, I was surprised to see so few players. In my interview with Don José Luis that day, he expressed anger and frustration about the issues affecting players and the organization. Apparently, two *torneos* had been arranged for the same day, but because a large cash prize was being offered at the one in Santa Cruz Amilpas, many of the players went there instead, thereby breaking their *compromiso*. He declared that those playing at the Técnico were there for the love of the

game, while those at Santa Cruz de Milpa were there only for money.

Pelota mixteca, a traditional sport of Indigenous America

There are many similarities between *pelota mixteca* and the Indigenous sports discussed earlier. Gambling was and is an important practice in both. Placing your *apuesta* or bet is a critical component of game matches. Don Claudio mentioned that the game was not just for *diversión* or fun but for gambling as well, and that players must do so to play. For the *partidos libres*, smaller amounts of money are wagered, but at larger events like the *torneos* the men will bet anywhere from \$2,000–5,000 MX pesos (\$108–250 USD in 2010). Nicknames are another similarity. Many of the players have *apodos*, earned through their participation in games. I met men who were called “Lento” (Slow), “El Diablo” (The Devil), “El Caballero” (The Gentleman), and “No Gano” (I Don’t Win), among many others. In fact, many of the men only knew one another by their *apodos*—if I asked about the whereabouts of a player on game days, I would have to use their nickname, “¿Dónde está El Campeón hoy?” (“Where is The Champion today?”). During historical *toli* games, different nicknames were awarded to players, such as *palki* for the fastest players and *saláha wašoha* for the slowest. Fans also gave nicknames such as *čanáša* (moccasin snake), *siti* (snake), and *opa niškin* (owl or owl eyes) to notable players who stood out as exceptional athletes (Blanchard 1995:37).

Catlin’s descriptions of historic *toli* games demonstrate that they were rich events featuring individuals in a variety of different roles and involved in a range of activities. West

Mexican models of ballcourts show that ancient ballgames also featured dancers, musicians, and audience members (Ramos 2012:8, 70), matching early colonial descriptions of ballgames observed in central Mexico shortly after the Conquest. *Pelota mixteca*, stickball, and other autochthonous ballgames today likewise have individuals in different roles, food, music, and a general atmosphere of excitement and friendly competitiveness.

Both ancient and modern ballgames were and are opportunities for social (via prestige from athletic or gambling prowess) and physical mobility (via travel to other communities and locations for game matches) for both spectators and players (Janetski 2017:1; Yanicki 2017:1; Zych 2017:37–39). Ballgame events drew together people who otherwise lived in dispersed communities, a phenomenon that continues today (Blanchard 1981). In this way, these sports established—and still do—sociopolitical networks among otherwise spatially dispersed but culturally linked communities. *Toli* and lacrosse were just as much about competition and athleticism as they were about warfare and spirituality. As with Mesoamerican ballgames, meanings changed as one moved through time and space according to the needs and concerns of the players, game sponsors, and audience members (Stoll and Anderson 2017; Vennum 1994).

An archaeological case study: What can modern ballgames tell us about ancient ballgames in Oaxaca and Mesoamerica?

Although no longer explicitly linked to Indigenous cosmologies or elite political legitimization rituals, what the ethnographic data shows is that modern ballgames like *pelota mixteca* still have the capacity for communal integration, e.g., bringing people together for social engagement, engendering other kinds of cooperative and possibly conflictive interactions. For ancient Mesoamerican ballgames, what role they may have played is interpreted through the number and location of ballcourts within regional systems. Often this is correlated to the degree of regional political centralization or integration—the more ball courts, the more fractious the society (Santley et al. 1991; Whalen and Minnis 1996).

Given what we have learned about Indigenous sports and their role in community relationships, how might our interpretations of court distribution, number, and their significance change? What insights might we gain for settlements with multiple ballcourts, e.g., Cantona (Puebla), El Tajin, (Veracruz), El Arnel (Jalisco), Monte Alban and Atzompa (Oaxaca), or regions/heterarchical political systems where multiple small- to medium-sized sites have their own

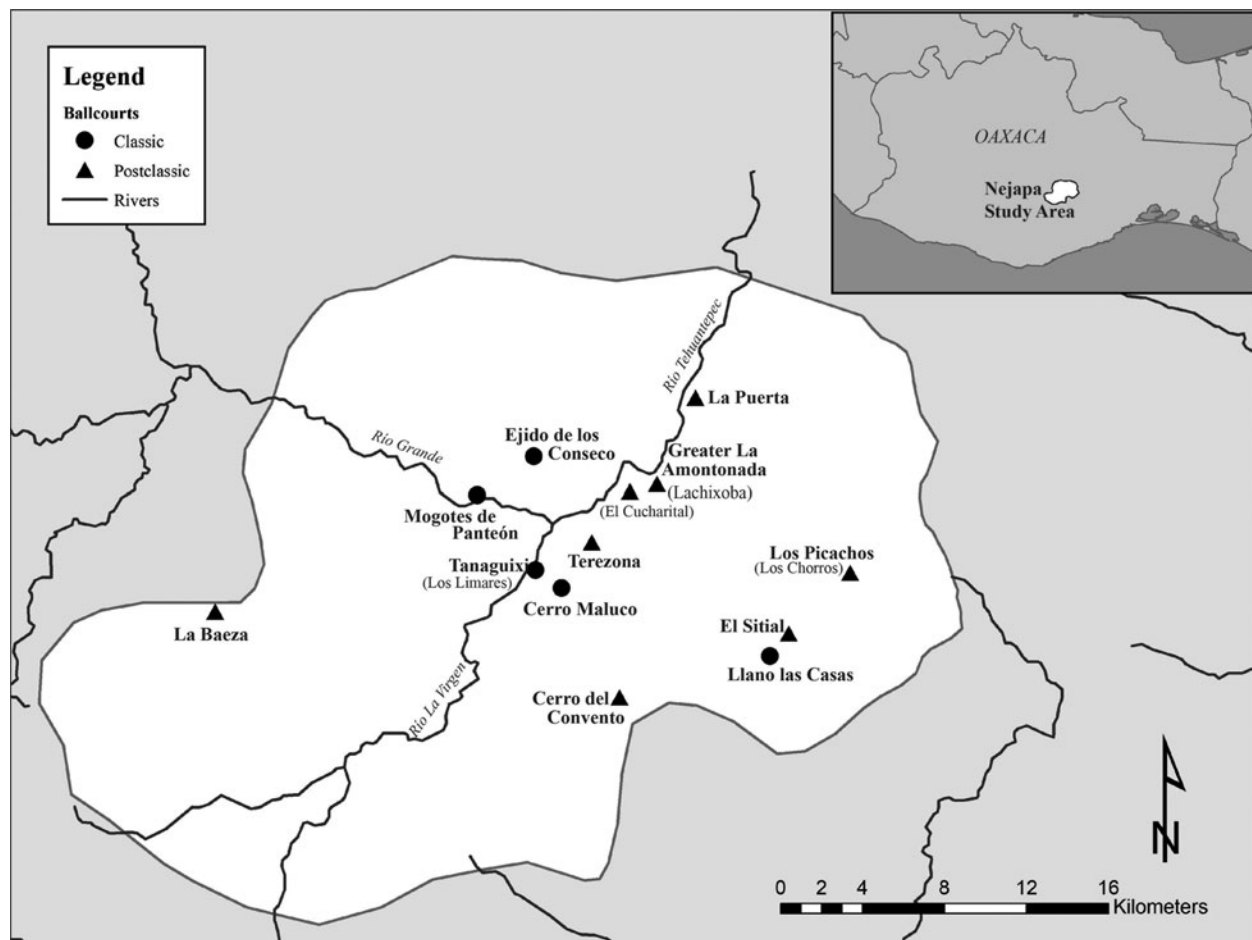


Figure 9. Map of the Nejapa study area in Oaxaca. Map by the author.

ballcourt, such as northwest Yucatan (Anderson 2011), the Cuyumapa River region of Honduras (Hendon et al. 2009), the Upper Grijalva Basin (de Montmillon 1997) and the northeast Peten, Guatemala (Rega 2020)? In these cases, multiple ballcourts may instead be evidence of socially integrated communities that competed and cooperated with each other, negotiating their internal and external social relationships via sport, and where conflict was limited to small-scale rivalries or low-level violence between individuals (i.e., injury but not death).

Our case study is the Nejapa region in Oaxaca's Sierra Madre del Sur mountains (Figure 9). Because of its unique geographic position, the valley was crisscrossed by several historical interregional trade routes connecting the Central Valleys to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (and by

extension central Mexico to the Xoconusco region of Chiapas and the greater Maya area); and the Oaxacan coast to the Mixe region and Veracruz (King 2012; King and Zborover 2015). Here the rivers Río Grande and Río de la Virgen also merge to form the Río Tehuantepec. Today, Nejapa is a frontier region between the modern territories of the Mixe, Chontal, and Zapotec-speaking peoples (King 2012; King et al. 2012, 2014). These same ethnolinguistic groups were already living in the area when the Spanish first arrived (Burgoa 1934 [1674]; Paso y Troncoso 1905).

Outside Nejapa, ethnohistorical documents indicate frequent conflicts between Zapotecs and various Chontal and Mixe communities during the Postclassic period (King and Zborover 2015; Zborover 2014). Within Nejapa, ethnolinguistic identity is much more ambiguous and difficult to trace.

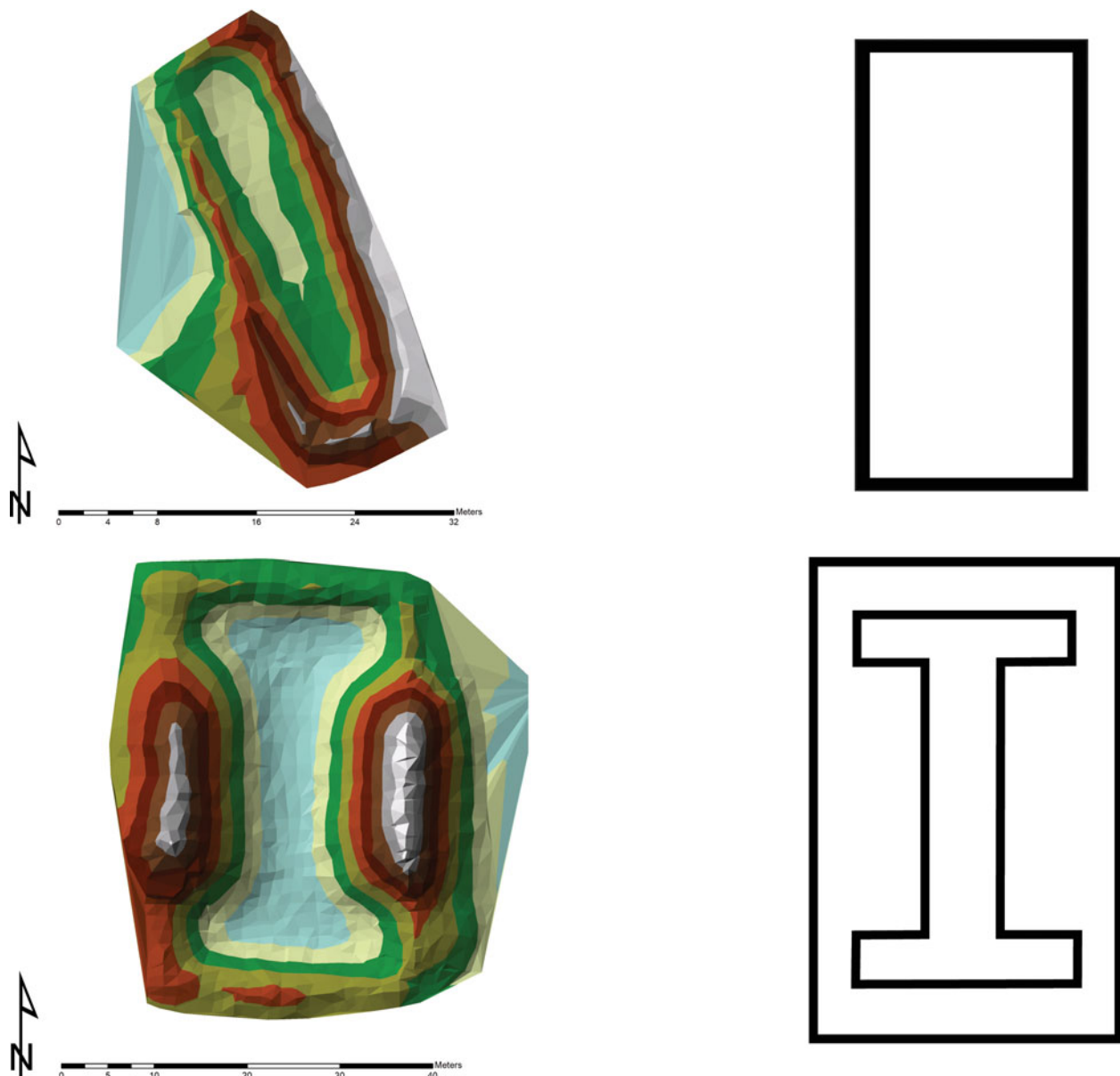


Figure 10. A comparison between *palangana* courts and I-shaped courts. While *palanganas* appear only during the Early to Middle Classic and were limited to specific geographic areas, I-shaped ballcourts existed for millennia and can be found throughout Mesoamerica. Images by the author.

People likely forged shared, social identities—identities shared because of the unique ecological environment they lived in, the common vernacular architecture, and the clay sources they utilized and ceramic vessels they made in common—that may have at times conflicted with each other. Given their potential for both social bonding and conflict resolution, ballgames may have been one way for Nejapa communities to negotiate social relationships and identities.

During the Early and Middle Classic (A.D. 250–650), there are courts that likely hosted two different types of games: one that was played in I-shaped courts near or on the valley floor; and the other played in *palangana* or rectangular courts located high in the mountains (Figure 10). By the Late Classic, depending on when these different courts were abandoned, there could have been as many as three I-shaped courts in use (the *palangana* courts were certainly abandoned by the Middle Classic) or as few as one. If the ballcourt at the Cerro Maluco site was the only one in use at this time, then it would signify a change from communities going to games at different courts at several locations, perhaps as part of seasonal ceremonies, to people traveling to a single court, albeit the largest in the region, for different types of ceremonies (Stoll 2018:711–717).

We have the most courts in use during the Early to Middle Postclassic (A.D. 1000–1250), the majority of which are in the dispersed neighborhoods of the valley-floor Greater La Amontonada (GLA) community (King et al 2014; Konwest 2017). By late Middle Postclassic, there are more courts in the mountains than the valley floor, especially after the abandonment of GLA. In fact, depending on

when another valley-floor court at the Terezona site was constructed and then abandoned, it may have been that only the two mountain courts were active during the late Middle Postclassic to the Late Postclassic (A.D. 1350–1521). The complete abandonment of valley-floor courts and shift to the mountain courts may point to yet other changes in the significances and purposes of ballgames and game ceremonies as well as the social contexts in which they took place (Stoll 2018:718–721).

Although there are slight differences in Classic and Postclassic ballcourt dimensions, they are not statistically significant. In other words, communities across time constructed courts according to their specific tastes and needs while following local preferences with respect to the sizes of architectural features and overall design. For example, the length/width ratios of the central alleys show a preference in their proportions (Figure 11), pointing to shared ways of playing that also continued across time (Baron 2006). When rules or game practices did change, they did so in the negotiation of practices between communities or social groups when playing. Most likely, Nejapa communities strategically used games and game ceremonies within their communities, with their neighbors, and with outsiders from other regions. Certain practices persisted, but strategies would have changed over time according to the needs and goals of hosts, players, and audience members for the specific contexts in which these events took place (Stoll 2018:703–709).

Researchers in Oaxaca have proposed that most ballcourts were constructed at sites on the regional or

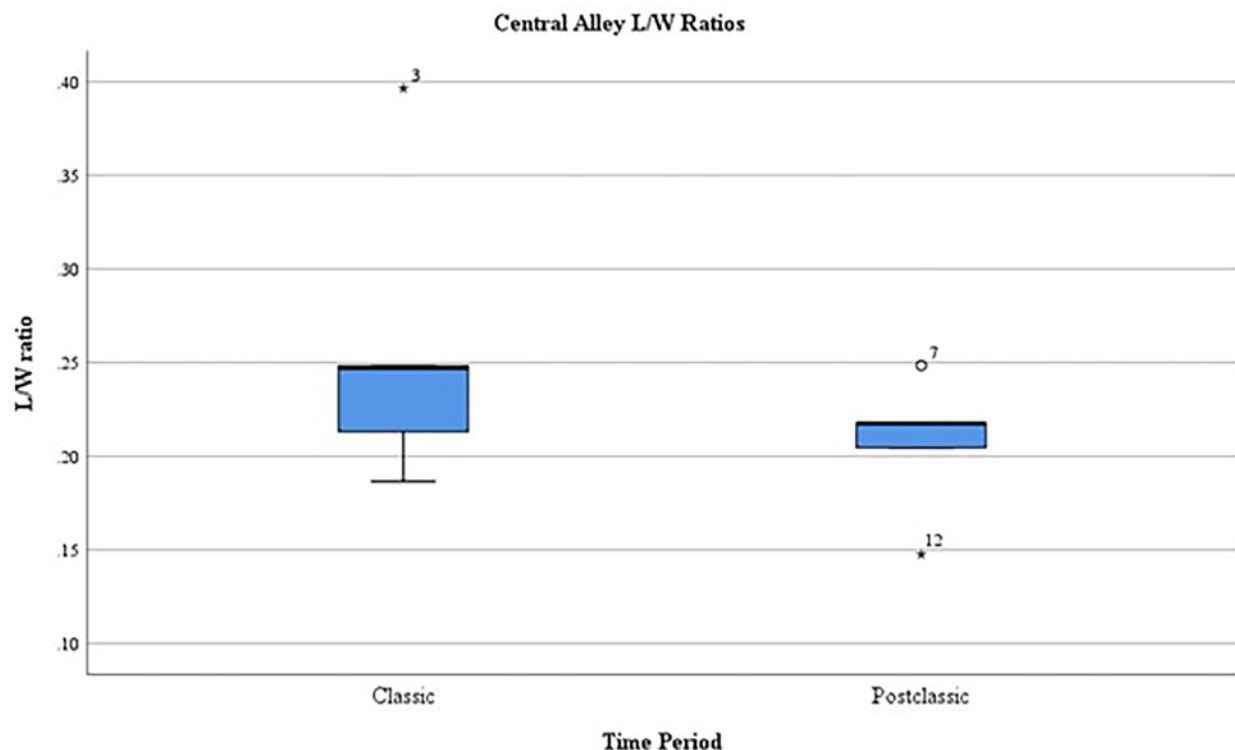


Figure 11. A boxplot comparing Classic and Postclassic central alley length/width (L/W) ratios. The results suggests that there were shared playing styles that continued across time. Graph by the author.

subregional boundaries of polities (Kowalewski et al. 1991), with some in dominant regional centers. Some have proposed that ballcourts abandoned in a previous period became neutral sites for boundary-making or pilgrimage rituals in the next (Byland and Pohl 1994; Zeitlin 1993). Yet others suggest that courts were used as practice spaces for warriors to maintain fighting readiness (Kowalewski et al. 1991; Redmond 1983). The locations of the Nejapa courts (Table 2) contrast somewhat with these proposed patterns (Stoll 2018). There is little evidence, for instance, that they were used as practice spaces for warriors in between periods of conflict.

Nejapa courts were not constructed at sites on obvious political boundaries, regional/subregional capitals, or dominant centers (King et al. 2012, 2014; Stoll 2018:728); nor do court size, measurements, and presence/absence correlate to site size (Figure 12). The Late Formative/Early Classic site Mogotes del Panteón was important given its location at the entrance to the valley, yet it was smaller than nearby contemporary sites Colonia San Martín and much larger Nejapa Viejo. The palangana at the Early to Middle Classic site Llano las Casas was constructed in an isolated intermountain valley and was probably used for communal ceremonies and pilgrimage rituals by different communities. The largest court is found tucked away on a hill far from the primary areas of occupation on the valley floor, at a Late Classic site (Cerro Maluco) smaller than many of its contemporaries.

Meanwhile, Classic-period Ejido de Canseco was either a small-sized occupation or a neighborhood associated with

the more powerful Nejapa Viejo. Similarly, one of the Early to Middle Classic *palanganas* was found in a neighborhood of the mountain site El Sitial. Los Chorros, where we find another *palangana*, may have either been a neighborhood of the nearby Los Picachos, or an earlier Classic occupation. It was not very large, however, and was not very accessible due to its high-elevation location. Another Classic site, Tanaguixi may have been influential during its time, but its court was constructed away from the hilltop occupation closer to the valley floor.

In the Postclassic, GLA was likely an influential, though not dominant, community when it was occupied, especially given its location near the confluence of the three major rivers. Ballcourts were constructed both in its higher status neighborhood and in other mixed-status neighborhoods. Contemporary La Puerta, a piedmont site, is much smaller than its neighbor Los Mogotes del Burro, yet there is only a court at the former. Although Cerro del Convento was a prominent ritual site, getting to the court would have been very difficult as access was tightly controlled; the same can be said about El Sitial. Finally, Terezona remains a puzzle. With its multiple ceremonial zones, it may have been influential as well, but without firmer dates it is difficult to ascertain the site's relationship to others in the Postclassic.

Instead, spatial results reveal that most are found in and around the rivers or other areas that would have experienced the most foot traffic and/or where it would have been possible to observe movement in and out of the region

Table 2. Sites with ballcourts in the Nejapa region.

Municipality	Site Name	Location	Time Period
Nejapa de Madero	Mogotes del Panteón	Piedmont near alluvial plain	Late Formative / Early Classic
	Ejido de los Canseco	Alluvial plain	Classic (most likely Early to Middle)
	Los Limares	Transitional zone from alluvial plain to piedmont	Classic (most likely Early to Middle)
	Cerro Maluco	Piedmont near alluvial plain	Late Classic (could be earlier)
	El Cucharital	Piedmont and transitional zone from alluvial plain to piedmont	Early to Middle Postclassic
	Terezona	Piedmont near alluvial plain	Postclassic
Santa Ana Tavela	Llano las Casas	Mountain	Early to Middle Classic
	El Sitial ^b	Mountain	Classic and Middle / Late Postclassic
	Los Chorros	Mountain	Early to Middle Classic or Transitional Classic to Postclassic
	Lachixoba ^a	Piedmont near alluvial plain	Early to Middle Postclassic
	La Puerta	Piedmont	Early to Middle Postclassic
San Juan Lajarcía	Cerro del Convento	Mountain	Middle to Late Postclassic

^aSites that form part of the Greater La Amontonada community.

^bSites with multiple ballcourts.

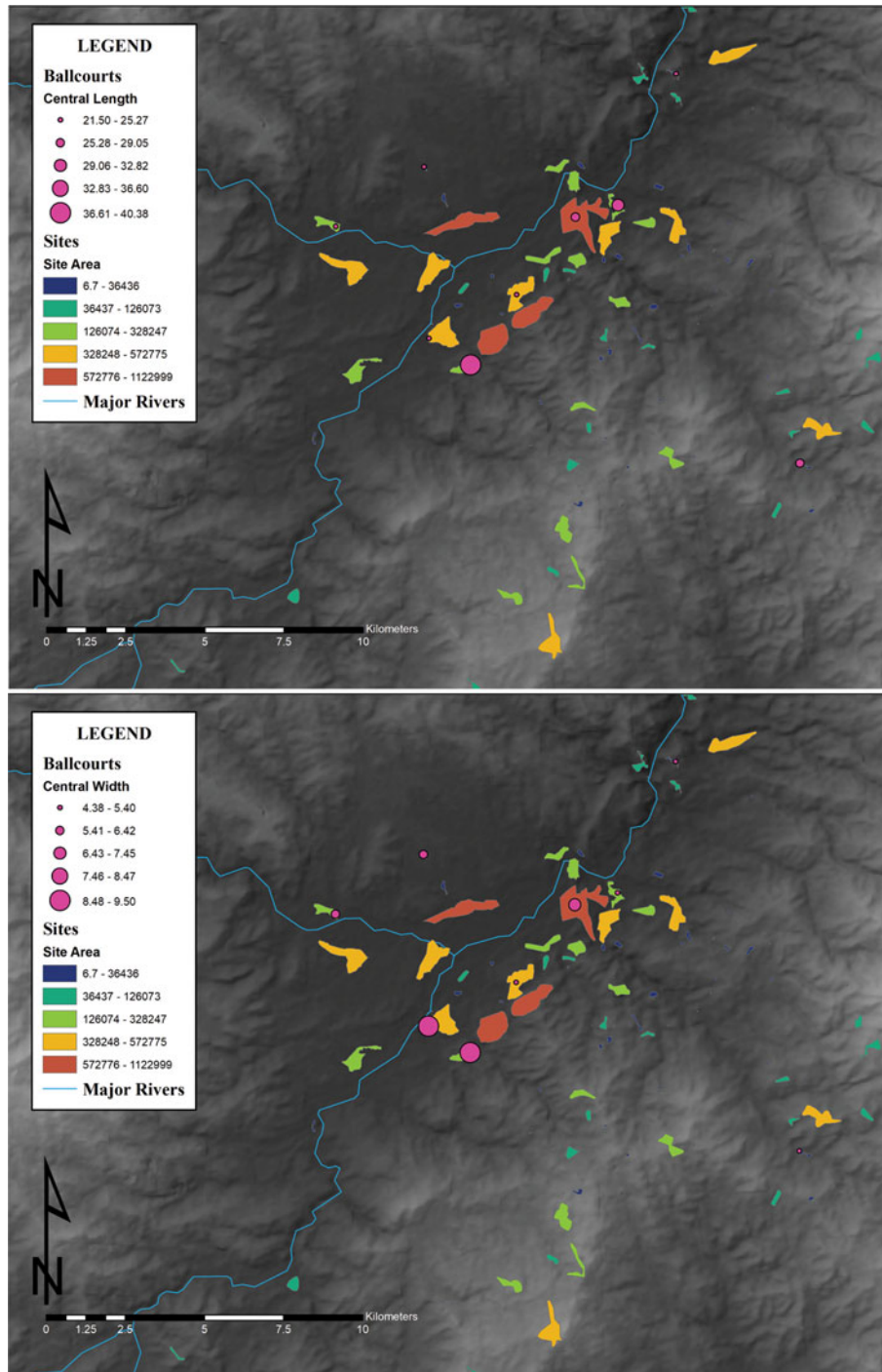


Figure 12. The lengths and widths of the central alleys compared to the sizes of sites with and without ballcourts. Images by the author.

(Figure 13). These locations possibly relate to Nejapa's geographic position as a crossroads for interregional trade and population movements. Yet all these courts, wherever they were located, were structures where important events took place, based on the density of serving bowls and ritual objects documented from both survey and excavated contexts directly related to the courts (Stoll 2018:702).

There are striking similarities in architectural forms and style. All the courts are enclosed with sunken playing floors,

even Terezona's unusual T-shaped structure (i.e., missing a terminal mound) and the *palanganas*. With very few exceptions, Nejapa ballcourts feature low to non-existent terminal mounds on the exterior and much larger lateral mounds. While there are some minor variations in construction technique, court mounds were built using a mixed earth and pebble matrix, then covered with locally obtained stones. El Sital is distinct because of the faced stones on the mounds and their interior clay/sandy matrix, but its

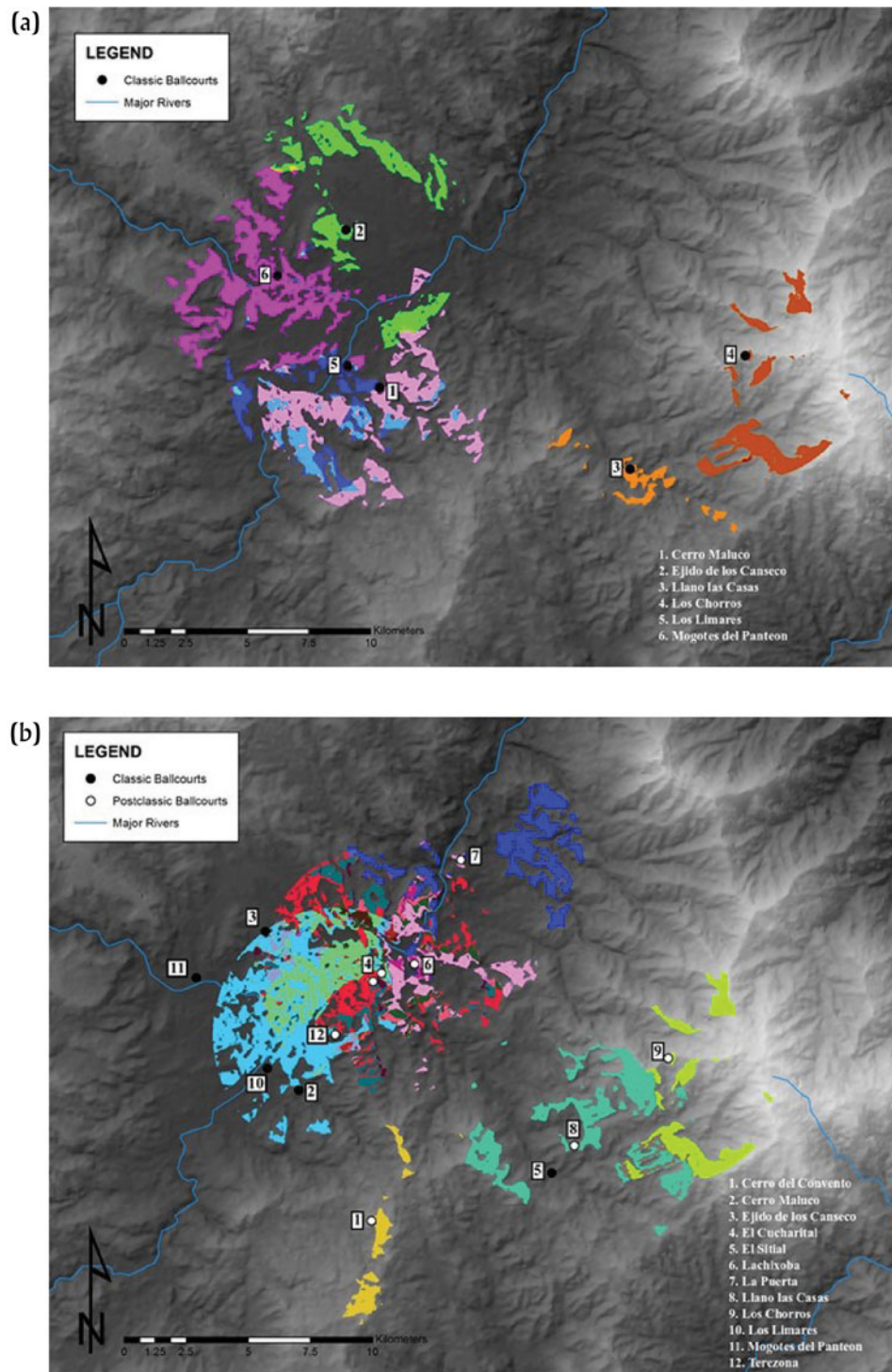


Figure 13. Ballcourt viewsheds for the (a) Classic and (b) Postclassic periods, or where from where on the landscape a ballcourt can be seen and those locations that could be seen from the ballcourt. The results reveal that most courts, especially in the Postclassic, were constructed in and around areas best for observing movement in and out of the region, such as the rivers. Images by the author.

dimensions fall within the preferred size ranges, most notably in the court dimensions that influenced game play (i.e., the central and terminal alleys as well as the interior slopes of the lateral mounds).

From the construction of the first court to the last, there was probably several shifts in the role or meaning of

ballgames played among the communities in Nejapa. When there were multiple courts in use, they would have formed a network of places for hosting and participating in competitive games, ritual ceremonies, and communal feasting. When there was only one court in use, these structures were probably used exclusively by that community,

only inviting allied or associated neighbors and outside people under the tightly controlled conditions of the hosting community and its leaders. The role of ballgames and game ceremonies in the local politics of this multiethnic frontier region would have changed as needed in response to shifts in community alliances, settlement patterns, and larger historical trends. Like other types of rituals or ritualized practices, sports in their performance and form may remain stable over time even as their functions and meanings change in response to historical and political shifts (Bloch 1992).

How ballgames were played in Nejapa and whether they were linked to game traditions from other areas of Oaxaca is currently unknown. For example, we do not see a clear ballgame ideology and symbolism in Nejapa, unlike other regions in Mesoamerica. At the same time, there is evidence for shared ceremonial practices, suggesting that ideological pluralism was a strategic choice. Likewise, *pelota mixteca* players and teams come from different communities with their own local practices in other social areas, but how to play is shared (Reyna 2016; Stoll 2015).

In its social and historical context, Nejapa was a diverse multiethnic and multilingual frontier with communities that had their own practices and ways of living, yet who also shared similar experiences, material cultures, and expressions of strategically deployed identities. Different communities formed variable political and social networks that connected some and not others, and these alliances and rivalries would have shifted and morphed over time. Such relationships frequently crossed ethnolinguistic boundaries that previously have been treated as more defined, static, or even impermeable. Ballgames certainly would have been crucial opportunities where these relationships could be negotiated. The spatial and material evidence suggests that in Nejapa there was a hyper-local ballgame tradition (or traditions) that emerged out of the localized practices and social identities, sometimes shared and sometimes in conflict, of the communities that lived in this unique frontier.

Conclusion

Mesoamerican ballgames were not just linked with war, life, death, fertility, and cosmology, but also with community identity, social integration, and political negotiation grounded within Indigenous systems of socially obligated reciprocity. Their multivalency means games could be and were understood and experienced on many different levels. The historical and ethnographic data on Indigenous ballgames in North America and modern Mexico demonstrate how games were linked to both daily social practices and larger cosmological and political themes. People would use or manipulate game practices, experiences, and symbols in ways that made sense to them.

Understanding the communal role of ballgames in social relationships can help us better interpret cases where the distribution of courts in a settlement system is distinct, such as cities with multiple ballcourts like Cantona and El Tajin; or regions like Nejapa where there are no dominant communities nor signs of large-scale conflict, and/or

where small to medium-sized communities/neighborhoods have their own ballcourts. Moreover, we move away from simple binaries where ballcourts only indicate how politically centralized or decentralized a region is. Finally, while we can never just superimpose the present onto the past with the direct historical approach, the ethnographic data does underscore the importance of incorporating Indigenous perspectives into our datasets and interpretations whenever possible.

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