

Exhibits

The Prehispanic Ballgame Tradition

"The Ball Game: A Living Pre-Hispanic Tradition." An exhibit, National Anthropological Museum, June-August 1986.

There they were, the 116 archeological pieces moving through four cultures, the Mayan, Huastecan, Teotihuacan, and Mexica-Olmecan. The largest measured 1.78 meters and the smallest piece, just 6 centimeters, every millimeter of their textures dating from 1200 or 800 years before Christ to 1250 years A.D.

There were 44 ethnographic pieces from the Tarahumaran, Purépechan, Tarascan, Mixtecan, Zapotecan and Mestizo cultures. The 17 illustration on display included sixteenth century etchings by Theodore De Bry and others by Cristoph Weiditz done in 1529.

Even after the 13th World Soccer Cup was over, the stone remains, the other items and illustrations gathered from all parts of the country continued to be shown at the National Anthropological Museum, telling of century-old rituals that are still alive in our tradition.

They spoke of the sacred nature of rubber, born of a tree that grows to 30 meters, but only in humid regions at less than 700 meters above sea level. They spoke of rubber's use in the ball game.

The players were grouped into two teams whose numbers varied from two on two, to three on three, to two on three.

One player, fashioned from now eroded clay, recalled that the game was played on a field in the form of a capital H lying on its side. Walls extended on both sides, at the H's crossbar, and a wooden or stone hoop was hung vertical-

ly (differing from basketball's horizontal hoop position) from each wall. The players tried to put a solid rubber ball through the hoop, using only their elbows, hips or legs. The sport was played everywhere in the region, with remains found from Honduras, north to parts of southeast Arizona.

Why didn't the players of this age-old game use their hands?

With this type of ritual exhibit, one shouldn't ask that kind of question. Time's immediate reaction, accumulated in the figures, figurines, sculptures, plates, rattles and models, is to remain silent, a silence that warns: do not ask, *just listen*.

And so, the rock figures continued chatting; in Náhuatl, the ball field was called *tlachtli*, and the game was known as *ollama*. In the beginning the game was played because of religious and magical beliefs. But there's not a game around that doesn't eventually get its due, and *ollama* later became a sport, with gambling, bets, winnings, losses and even murders.

The vulgar form of the game was simple. You only had to get the ball (measuring 20 to 30 centimeters in diameter) across the field's center line.

The game's sacred form was almost impossible to play. You had to get the ball through the two rock hoops embedded in the lateral walls. Whoever managed to do so automatically possessed all of the spectators' clothing, as well as eternal life. According to the codices, in the sacred game the playing field represents the heavens and the hoops represent where the sun rises and sets. The point that marks the center of the field symbolizes the place in the heavens where the sun makes its daily sacrifice to the moon and the stars. The centerline that divides the field signifies the boundary between opposite forces in constant struggle: light and darkness, day and night.

That's why there is a natural symbolic relationship between the sacred ball game and war. In both, there is a confrontation between antagonistic forces. In fact, ball players were also frequently represented as warriors taking part in human sacrifices. It is believed that the rubber ball symbolizes rain, blood, semen, saliva or tears. Rubber was thought to be a sacred substance, a vital and holy sap. The ancient texts show that rubber balls were an impor-

tant part of the offerings dedicated to a variety of gods and that the gods consecrated it. The copious examples from the codices showing the gods playing ball provide further evidence of the game's ritual importance.

A statue, caught in an eternal trance, took advantage of a brief electrical brown-out to explain further: in pre-hispanic times, the heavens were the playing field for the gods; they symbolized antagonistic concepts, opposing

monkey-vitality; and squirrels, turtles, toads, frogs, dogs, rabbits, owls..."

The statue of Xochipilli-Macuilxóchitl, god of flowers and the ball game, added, "If you really want a better idea of what the game is about, you should read the *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e Islas de Tierra Firme (History of the New Spanish Indies and the Terra Firma Islands.)*

'...they played with such skill and



Photo by Rogelio Cuellar

The game is still played today in Chihuahua.

forces that through confrontation sought to establish a certain equilibrium in the universe to assure their own survival. As played by real men, the game was transposed from the heavenly matches; the gods were present as the games were played and presided over them. Xólotl, Quetzalcóatl, Macuilxóchitl, Xochipilli and Xochiquetzal were the most important gods associated with this game.

A clay sculpture of a skull with visible eyes and teeth in a neat row, caught in an expression of mockery and fury, suggested that we get back to the game's more profane side. "Ever since a price was put on the game," he said, "poor people have bet ears of corn on it; others bet some of their clothes. The rich gambled with gold, precious feathers and jewels. Those who had nothing wagered their own freedom or that of their children."

A rock carved in a monkey's image intervened, "It would really be more important to list the animals related in one way or another with the ball game." He continued, "For example, they included the eagle-sun; macaw-fire;

cleverness that in the course of an hour they managed to keep the ball moving from one end of the field to the other, using only their hips, never touching it with their hands, nor feet, not even a calf or an arm; it was the same for one side and the other; they never let it stop. It was quite a wonder."

The game is still played today in Chihuahua ("The Ball Race"), Sinaloa ("Hulama"), Michoacán ("Pasiri-A-Kuri" y "Tarascan Ball"), and in Oaxaca ("Mixtecan Ball").

While all that remained of the 13th World Soccer Cup was silence and the garbage in the stadiums, the stones, the clay figures, the other pieces and the illustrations brought together in the National Anthropological Museum during June, July and August continued everyday to assert:

"We played our ball game before Christ came, and after he left; we will continue to play it as tradition, friendship and amusement so long as the sun shines and the moon glows."★

Luis Perdomo Orellana