

CINCA-INAH-MEX



Marker for the Mayan ball game.  
Chichén Itzá Site Museum, INAH, Yucatán.

# The Mesoamerican Ball Game<sup>1</sup>

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The preservation of the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican ball game down through the centuries in many parts of Mexico despite cultural changes as violent as those brought about by the Spanish Conquest undoubtedly demonstrates its profound significance. As a human activity, it can be studied from very diverse viewpoints. One of these is play,

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with the gods  
in cosmic survival.

examined on the basis of the archeological context or the iconographic content of the many objects that in sculpture, painting or relief work depict this sacred game.

As a literary, linguistic and anthropological manifestation, the analysis of the text of the Popol-Vuh is popular among researchers. The game court —its size, layout, orientation and other characteristics— is a research topic among architects and archo-astronomers. In fact, the very number of studies on the ball game from the most diverse points of view illustrate the game's significance.

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Translated by Jacqueline Buswell.

Is the ball game solely a playtime activity? A sublimation of social violence through sacrifice? A ritual marking ascension to power? A means to resolve territorial conflicts? A pretext for gambling? The only action carried out on the court, with other ceremonies before and after the game held somewhere else, perhaps next to the hieroglyphic staircases? An allegory for war? A fertility rite related to the Sun, the Moon, Venus, the calendar, hallucinogenic plants, the underworld, life or death? The ball game contains these elements and many more. Perhaps we can understand it better if we begin with a systematic, comparative and universalized study that deals with the constants and variables of the game. Let us see.

We know that the game was played with a rubber ball as early as the Olmec era in Manatí on the Gulf Coast, according to the discoverers of this site. From those early times a symbolic system began to develop, enriched with the passing of the centuries.

Researchers calculate that the first courts appeared during the middle formative period [about 1200 B.C.]. We can imagine that the ritual celebration, both of the game and other related ceremonies, were originally held in spaces marked only by mobile indicators, without a special area reserved for the game.

In 1981, Eric Taladoire published the results of very complete research into the form, elements and spread of the ball courts. It was already known that rings and other kinds of markers were used in the ancient games, while yokes, palm leaves and axes formed part of the apparel worn by the players. Several studies address whether the ball passed through the rings or whether the stone instruments

that obviously reproduce the theme of the game were worn by the players.

The survival of the ball game has provided a substantial vein of research for ethnologists and anthropologists. The varieties played in different parts of Mexico, the players' clothing, objects associated with the game and the making of the rubber ball are aspects that have greatly interested researchers for several decades.

#### MAINTAINING THE COSMIC ORDER AND PRESERVING LIFE

The diverse astronomical alignment of the courts correlates with the different times when they were built. Researchers have concluded that the oldest courts face north-south while, from the middle classic period onward, this changed to east-west. This is not as clear-cut as it sounds, however, because some sites are aligned between one point of the compass and another. We cannot imagine, however, that the precise alignment of the setting sun with the ring of the court in Xochicalco during the spring and autumn equinoxes is mere coincidence.

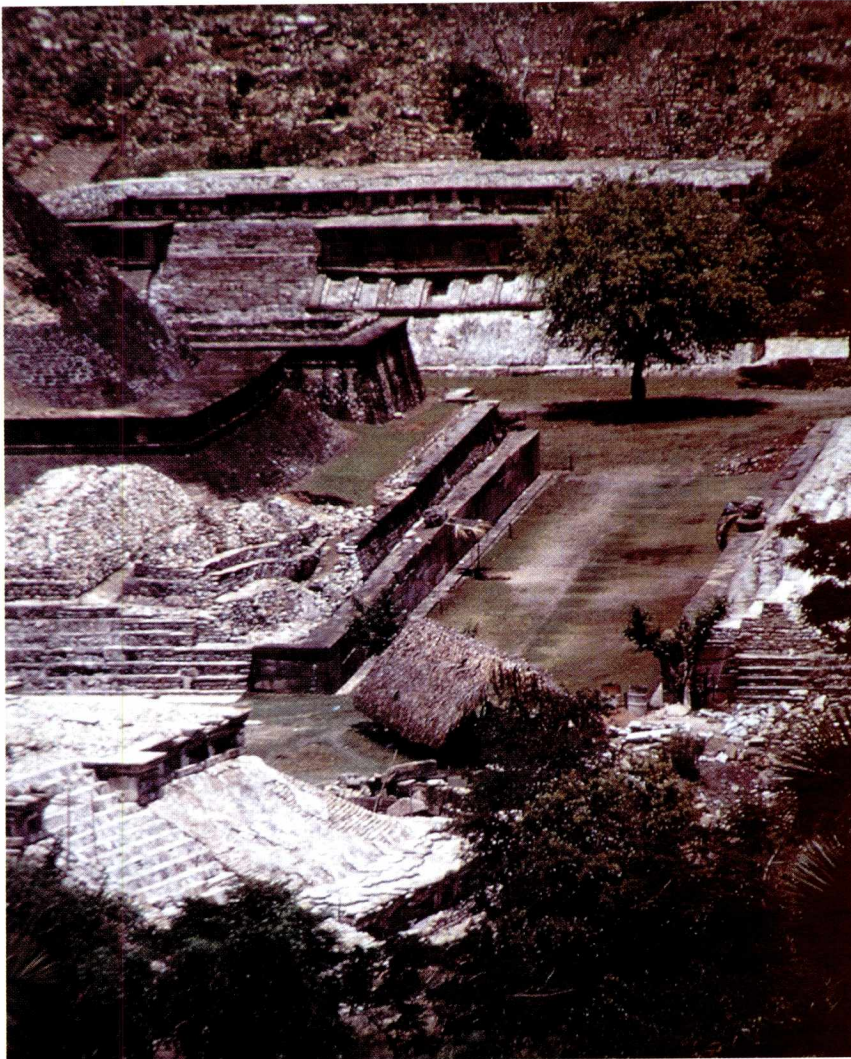
Researchers have speculated a lot about the links between the ball game and astronomy. The clearest astronomical relationship is with Venus, since symbols associating the game with the planet appear at many sites. In the illustrations of the Borgia Codex and some other codices, the victims of the game appear painted with red stripes on their bodies. Researchers have observed that victims sacrificed in honor of Tlahuizcāpantecuhtli-Quetzalcóatl were painted like this, and Quetzalcóatl is associated

with Venus as the morning star. The counterpart of Tlahuizcāpantecuhtli is Xólotl, Venus as the evening star. For the Mexicans, Xólotl was the patron god of the ball game.

The profound significance of pre-Hispanic cosmology, so bloodthirsty to Western eyes, becomes clear when examined in its own context in which man is a participant in maintaining the cosmos through the offering of his blood (López Austin, 1967). Aveni (1980) has demonstrated that the equinoxes announced the coming rainy season to pre-Hispanic peoples. Abundant rains and the subsequent growth of vegetation were possible thanks to man's sacrifice. In this way, the pre-Hispanic world linked astronomy and the fertility of the land.

Thus we find two interrelated aspects in their cosmology: the first is the maintenance of cosmic order, the victory of the Sun in its struggle against the gods of the underworld, possible only through the immolation of human beings; that is, the triumph of light over darkness is only possible through human sacrifice. The second is also linked to human offerings: the different moments of the solar year, solstices and equinoxes and their relationship to the dry and rainy seasons and the rebirth of vegetation. Man must participate through a holocaust in all these events, or the Earth cannot survive.

The ball game was one means whereby the human offering of blood and death was consummated; from the pre-Hispanic perspective, the sacrifice of life was necessary to ensure its continuation. The game offered the loser in war and conquest the opportunity to be sacrificed with honor and to fight against the adversary. Like the Sun that conquers the night with



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A panorama of the southern ball game court in El Tajín. More than 15 courts were built at this site.

every dawn, the sacrifice of the player in the game, the offering of his blood, allowed the plants to germinate and thus assured the people's sustenance.

In the complex world of pre-Hispanic cosmology, sacrifice and self-immolation allowed man to participate in cosmic survival with the gods. Were the gods not all-powerful? Did the rite of sacrifice confer to man the power of the gods? Did man sacrifice himself out of fear, generosity or vanity? What was he like, this man depicted in paintings or stone sculptures participating in bloodthirsty rituals? He was a

stranger to our culture, invested with non-earthly attributes and yet a man, with fears, hopes, doubts and ambitions.

Thus the ball game is related to the universe through sacrifice, decapitation and mutilation that we see represented in the reliefs of El Tajín, Chichén Itzá, El Baúl, Vega de Alatorre and Izapa, among other sites. The illustrations of the codices, meanwhile, associate the sacrificed players with rain, vegetation and fertility and with the victory of the Sun over darkness.

The ball game also had a social function: the enemy conquered in war main-

tained his honor, because he was allowed to die in the game. This profound sense is reflected in the *teotlachtli* of Mexico-Tenochtitlan: the gods become human and play. Playfulness becomes sacred, or the divinity plays like men.

Today, the ball game has as many forms as regions where it is still played. We can suppose that this was also the case when the Spaniards arrived in Mexico. Therefore the size of the ball itself, the fields where the game is played and the dress of the players vary enormously, an extremely extensive universe of symbols that appear again and again, constantly repeating themselves without limit.

Why is the game associated with agriculture? How is it possible that it is simultaneously linked with the cosmos? Why are certain plants, the butterfly and the water lily present in the symbolism of the Olmecs, Mayas and Zapotecs, in Teotihuacan and among the inhabitants of the Gulf Coast?

I think we should try to enter into this way of perceiving the world, cross the barriers of specialized studies—that are necessarily fragmented—to try to reach the hearts of the men who played the ball game and search the symbolic evidence for the ideological meaning behind this mythical celebration. To do this we must try to experience that world just as did the man whose close contact with nature gave him a pragmatic knowledge converted through oral tradition into myths, legends and religion.

#### THE PRIMORDIAL CONCEPT

It is nothing new to say that the ball game symbolizes the struggle between

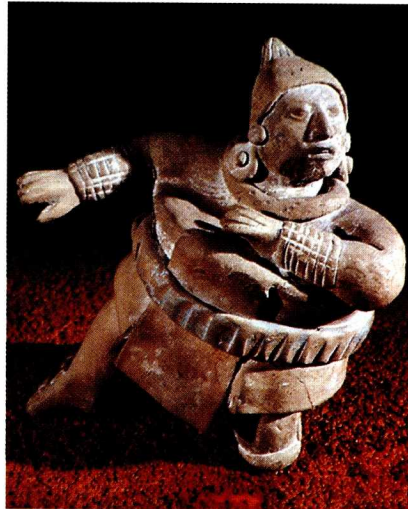
opposites, and that the representations of plants, trees and stick figures link it with fertility, the sustenance of the cosmos through sacrifice, life and death. When we look at the research on the topic, however, we find what at first appear to be unrelated elements.

One of these mentioned most frequently is the union of adversaries on the playing field; the meeting obviously synthesizes unification through conflict. Nor is it new to point out the way these opposites are joined in the sacred game, just as the path to the underworld was at the same time the path for the sun's daily rebirth. The cosmos and the depths of the earth existed as a dual concept.

Neither is it a novelty to speak of the duality of the Mesoamerican gods; researchers of the pre-Hispanic world have known about the dialectical concept of fusion through the conflict of opposites for a long time. Those of us who seek to understand the world of the Mesoamerican man take this basic concept for granted.

Snakes, crocodiles, toads, turtles, shells and shellfish are common themes in representations of the ball game or in objects related with the game. These are themes we could call paradigmatic, because their constant and wide-spread appearance has charged them with meanings and associations with other themes. At the same time, this has given the ball game an ever more closed symbolic root.

Another symbol that appears frequently is the butterfly. Whenever associated with the ball game, the butterfly symbolizes change. Some of its metaphors are transformation, initiation, the spirit that has abandoned the body.



Ball game player, Maya (ceramics), National Museum of Anthropology, INAH.

The jaguar is also frequently used to represent the players. It is probably the most often depicted feline of the pre-Hispanic world. A nocturnal animal, its skin bears the marks of stars seen by ancient Mexicans; it lives near bodies of water, submerges itself to fish and eats fish and shellfish. It is associated with the underworld, shamanic practices, ancestry and the setting Sun. Some cultures associated the jaguar with the ball game and with other symbols like the water lily.

A generally accepted truth about pre-Hispanic art is that decoration was not an end in itself. Therefore the symbols constantly associated with the ball game in their paintings and sculptures necessarily have to contain a common denominator that identifies them.

What do the butterfly, the water lily, daturas (thorn apples), toads, crocodiles, snakes, turtles, shellfish and the jaguar have in common? The lily is a flower, but unlike most flowers it grows in water, not in earth. It is a dual being, like the butterfly, toad, crocodile and the turtle.

The union of opposites is inherent in all the symbols I have mentioned. The turtle, crocodile and the toad are obviously dual. The duality of shellfish is less evident: they are aquatic animals, but they do not swim; rather they move along the marine floor.

The profundity of the duality concept is confirmed in many allegoric figures. One of them is the union of the jaws of a batrachian or of a jaguar, like the doors to the underworld. Water, or rather, the link between water and earth, again becomes the entrance to the world of the dead.

Another fact is also important: the roots of the water lily are hallucinogenic. This little known property leads us to another duality: the use of consciousness altering substances to reach a different reality. When we examine the perception of interacting nature, we find that the use of psychedelic substances is very common. Attempts to enter a different reality are a common human quest, regardless of time or place. Substances that alter consciousness provoke unity in the duality; that is, different worlds unite in a sole reality through the mystical experience.

Perhaps this is why the water lily was for the Mayas, and maybe also for the people of Teotihuacan, the symbol of access to this different reality, induced by its psychedelic effects,<sup>2</sup> and at the same time the symbol of tranquil waters in the path to the underworld.

Among the Mayas, the water lily also appears associated with the jaguar. Some authors suggest that it symbolizes the night Sun, that is, the Sun on its path through the underworld. The lily opens its leaves at dawn and closes them at night, reinforcing its symbolism.

## SEARCHING FOR HARMONIC DUALITY

According to Gerard W. van Bussel, the ball game court is an allegory of access to the underworld. He bases this hypothesis on several pieces of evidence. One is the fact that in the Quiché language of Guatemala the word *hom* means “tomb” and also “ball game court.”

On the other hand, the game at the same time implies the possibility of rebirth. Indeed, death dies, or, what amounts to the same thing, life lives and the cosmic order emerges. The Sun and the stars descend to the underworld, but they come back.

The scenes of the ball game frequently include cords or ropes. The cord holds the head above the playing field. Does this cord, connected to the head, which in turn symbolizes inherited power, refer to the continuity of hierarchic succession through the ball game?

It is interesting to add that Bussel analyzes the fact that the words for “blood” and “rubber” are the same in Mayan: *k'ik*; and its similarity to the word for “semen”: *k'ikel*. He concludes that the ball game could be an allegory of life through dynastic succession.

Perhaps we could infer another symbolic relation. The snake that substitutes for blood, associated with the earth's fertility, also becomes an allegory of power.

A last symbol I wish to analyze is that of *ollin* (movement) that has the same origin as the word “rubber” in Nahuatl.

The synthesis of the primordial concept, as the last and most evident symbol, is movement, *ollin*, *ulli*, the movement of the ball, the movement that emerges in the unity of opposites on the playing



Ax from El Tajin used in the ball game (basalt), Xalapa Anthropology Museum, Xalapa, Veracruz.

field, the point of access to human and divine realities.

The harmonic duality, the equilibrium that man seeks and finds in nature and all its manifestations, is, finally, only the reflection of the duality of his own inner being, of the search for the unified being, the aleph, the last absolute that unifies the contradictory forces of yin and yang.

The symbol *ollin* is the clearest graphic sign of the pre-Hispanic world, equivalent to the Chinese symbol that unifies opposites. It marks the existence of a quest by all human beings on the planet. Two opposite directions are the underlying

ing primordial concept of Mesoamerican culture, demonstrated in one of its most interesting manifestations: the sacred ball game. ■■■

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Abbreviated version of the introduction to the book compiled by María Teresa Uriarte, *El juego de pelota en Mesoamérica: Raíces y supervivencia* (Mexico City: Siglo XXI and DIFOCUR-Sinaloa, 1992) pp.21-35. Reprinted courtesy of Siglo XXI.

<sup>2</sup>The roots of the water lily are also a powerful emetic; they could have been used during a prior stage of purification.

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