

Life and Death Overtime: Sacred Play of the Ancient Mesoamerican Rubber Ball Game

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INTRODUCTION

In the low-lying tropical forests of Mesoamerica, as early as 1400 BCE, the indigenous people of the Olmec civilization played one of the earliest known forms of a court-based ball game. Based on archaeological evidence, the game is thought to have been played by the major civilizations of Mesoamerica including the Olmec, Toltec, Maya, and Aztec. The game was more than a sporting event; as a means of conflict management and social cohesion, it was deeply ingrained in the ritual lives of the culture. Not unlike other ritualistic events of the Mesoamerican cultures (such as ritual music or dance), performance in the ball game was a matter of life and death. Based on murals and carvings depicting the ball game, the sport was linked to ritualistic human sacrifice. Blended with the mystery of gods, kings, and mythology, the sacred play of the Mesoamerican rubber ball game remains one of the most intriguing mysteries of the Pre-Columbian civilizations. The article explores the mechanisms of religious ritual and social cohesion employed vicariously through the ball game by Mesoamerican cultures.

ORIGINS OF THE BALL GAME

Archeologists have not come to a consensus on precisely when or where the Mesoamerican ballgame originated, although most agree that it originated in the cultures of the humid rain forests home to the rubber tree. Rubber was a vital aspect of the Mesoamerican culture in this region. The Aztec referred to their predecessors as the *Olmeca*, or “rubber people”¹. Rubber, an abundant natural resource in this region, had significant sacred and ceremonial value to these cultures. A mysterious substance that was caught between the elements of solid and liquid, rubber played an important role of in the everyday lives of early Mesoamerican people. The most innovative use of rubber was not for warfare, construction, or agriculture, but for ceremonial sport.

The ball game may have originated in the coastal lowlands along the Pacific Ocean (Taladoire 2001:107-108). At the ruins of the city of Paso de la Amada, archaeologists

¹ The term *Olmeca* is not synonymous with the name given to the more ancient civilization, “The Olmecs”, by twentieth century archeologist Richard Diehl.

discovered the oldest known ball court; approximately 3,400 years old. It is believed that the ball game spread throughout much of Mesoamerica by 300 BCE. Ceramic ball player figurines have been discovered as ceremonial internments in cities such as San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán (the last site of the Olmec civilization) and areas such as the Valley of Oaxaca.

GAMEPLAY AND VIOLENCE

Some archaeological evidence suggests that some games were played using a wooden stick², but the most common and most widely played game used no additional equipment; players kept the ball in play using their hips. While game play varied from the city to city, the fundamentals of play were the essentially the same throughout ancient Mesoamerica. The game was played informally on fields as well as in the large stone courts in the major Mesoamerican cities. Later Aztec games were played with stone hoops through which the ball was meant to be thrown.

The game was taken seriously by the players and by the culture. The game was brutal and serious injuries were inflicted by the solid, heavy ball. Nearly 500 years ago Spanish chronicler Diego Durán reported that some bruises caused by the ball were so severe that they had to be lanced open. Durán (1971) also reported that players were even killed when the ball “hit them in the mouth or the stomach or the intestines” (315-316). The game was brutal and dangerous.

Evidence of ritual human sacrifice associated with the ball game has been discovered by archeologists (Kubler 1993: 147). The Classic Veracruz and the Classic Maya cultures contained the most explicit depictions of human sacrifice on the ball court panels. A mural on the walls of the southern ball court at El Tajin depicts the ritual sacrifice of a ball player.

Military captives were part of the Mesoamerican iconography; for example, ceramic figures depicting game balls have been discovered. It is believed that military captives were used quite literally as “balls” and rolled down temple stairs by kings (Grube and Nahm 1994: 711), demonstrating the mastery of enemies in the same way a ballplayer mastered the ball in play. Some scholars speculate that decapitated heads and skulls were also potentially used as balls and placed into play (Schele and Miller 1992: 243).

SACRED PLAY OF GAME AND MYTH

While the Aztec version of the ball game has been well documented, the earlier Mayan version of the game remains largely mysterious. Archeological discoveries pointed to deeply rooted religious mythologies connected to the ball game, but because no late Postclassic sites with a formal ball court have been found. Thus, the archeologists infer

² A mural at Teotihuacan, an early Olmec site, depicted the ball game being played with wooden sticks.

that the Mayan version of the game may have disappeared before the Spaniards arrived in Mesoamerica in the sixteenth century.

However, the Maya religious narrative, the *Popol Vuh*, is among the most compelling documentations of the importance of the game to the Maya. The game was more than a mere sport – it provided important clues for the mythological and religious interpretation of the ball game. Michael Coe (1989) documented the religious significance of the Mayan *Popol Vuh* myth. Linda Schele was largely responsible for the reconstruction of ritual context of the Maya ballgame framed by the *Popol Vuh* myth (Schele and Miller 1986; Schele 1987; Schele and Grube 1990).

The *Popol Vuh* myth was framed by the Maya in the context of their cyclical understanding of life and death, creation and destruction. Schele asserted that the ball game may have served as a religious reenactment of the reciprocal participation of the gods in the cycles of nature. Some argue that the ball, while suspended in the air during play, may have represented the sun, the moon, or Venus (Taladoire and Colsenet :173).

The *Popol Vuh* myth began with a set of “hero twins” whose father and uncle are playing ball near the underworld, *Xibalba*. The lords of the underworld were angered by the disruptive noise of the ball playing. The lords of *Xibalba* sent owls to lure the twins’ father and uncle to the ball court of *Xibalba*, situated on the western edge of the underworld. Despite the danger of traveling into the underworld, the brothers follow the owls and fall asleep; they are then captured and sacrificed by the lords of *Xibalba*, executed, and buried in the ball court. The myth provides an explanation for the birth of the hero twins involving the father’s head spitting into the hands of the goddess who conceives them. The twins continued the ball game where their father and uncle left off and were also lured into danger by the lords of *Xibalba*. One of the brothers was decapitated by the underworld lords and his brother provided him with a squash to use as a surrogate head until his real head – which was being used as a ball for a game in the underworld – could be retrieved. In a colossal ball game between the twins and the underworld lords, the twins emerged victorious but were unable to retrieve the body of their father. Thus, they left him buried in the ball court of the underworld.

It is argued that the myth of the hero twins and the lords of the underworld linked ball courts with death. The ball court was a symbol of transition, a place where the veil between life and death was thin. Courts were decorated with mythical scenes of the ball game; the centerline of the court may have depicted the line between life and death. Further, some archeologists believe that an elaborately decorated quatrefoil marked the opening of a portal to the afterlife. The Mayan legend of *Popol Vuh* demonstrates that the ball game blurred the line between religion and reality, overworld and underworld; the game was not mere play – it was sacred play; a matter of life and death. But did the myth, and thereby the game, have social utility?

While it is tempting to assume that the *Popol Vuh* myth and other religious symbolism connected with the ball game informed ceremonial game play, quite the opposite may have actually been the case. Most scholars are intrigued by the intricacy of a relatively sophisticated sport devised by an otherwise Neolithic culture. The questions raised by the archeological discoveries of religious and ceremonial associations to the ball game have generally led to assumptions that myth and superstition drove the development of the game itself. But the question must be asked: What came first, the game or the myth?

Moscow State University archeologist Alexander Tokovinine (2002) concluded that Mesoamerican religious myths such as *Popol Vuh* had less to do with the myths themselves and more to do with the centrality of the game in Mesoamerican culture (7). The myths had more to do with general themes of competition and confrontation than with the game itself (Nicholson and Keber 1991). If the Maya played the ball game to honor the gods and heroes of *Popol Vuh*, it is more likely that the game was imposed on the myth more than the myth informed the game. The rudimentary rules of the sport, the gathering and shaping of rubber to make the ball, the construction of courts, and the social contracts necessary to make the game possible were likely already in place before the religious myth was popularized. The myth justified the social importance of the game in a sacred context.

GAMEPLAY AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION

According to Tokovinine (2002) the ball game may have been used to integrate conquered communities into the community of their conquerors. By staging a ball game with representatives from either side, the communities were unified by their connection to the gods, regardless of who won or lost the game (5). Taladoire (2001) suggested that “the ballgame was used as a substitute and a symbol for war” (174). As a symbol for war, the game may have satiated the socio-emotional instinct for aggression. As a substitute for war, the game may have saved valuable natural resources and prevented unnecessary military casualties. Kowalewski (1991) suggested that the ball game developed to not only mediate external conflict between city states, but also to resolve disputes and competition internal to communities as well (43). If the Mesoamerican cultures used the ball game to resolve socio-political conflicts, it would serve as one explanation for the uneven distribution of ball courts throughout the Mesoamerican region. City states less inclined to warfare, less often conquering, or more often conquered would not require many ball courts as conflict would be less frequent.

FROM SIMPLE GAME TO DEADLY CEREMONY

It is unlikely that sincere religious zeal alone fueled the popular rise of the rubber ball game in Mesoamerican cultures. It is also unlikely that the game was a purely utilitarian means of resolving political conflict. Tokovinine’s skepticism regarding the value of the *Popol Vuh* myth to the Maya conception of the game is bold and warranted. While religion surely played a part in shaping the nature of the ball game, it is more likely to consider that the religious establishment was its advocate rather than its progenitor. It is possible

that the game was a mechanism of social cohesion and like all such mechanisms that achieve any measure of success; it fused religion, politics, and entertainment in a creative albeit deadly way. Durkheim's theory of religion stated that the key to religion is not its beliefs but in the social rituals that its members perform. In the case of the role religion played in the ball game, Tokovinine would be in agreement with Durkheim: religion was a key to social solidarity for Mesoamerican cultures and the mythology of religion were important in their own right only insofar as they served as symbols of social groups. The mythological aspects of the ball game were an example of non-rational phenomenon playing a central role in social life.

According to Durkheim's theory of religion, the foundation of all religions can be reduced to a singular belief: a distinct between the sacred and the secular³. The Mesoamerican cultures would have considered their mythology sacred and their everyday activities (such as working, sleeping, and eating) secular. Ritual, in Durkheim's theory, is activity wherein the secular and the sacred meet; but ritual is not a means that leads to an ulterior end, not in the same way that planting a seed yields a crop. Ritual is strictly determined behavior and so long as it is performed prescriptively, it serves as its own end. Durkheim saw ritual as paramount to myth; therefore, the ceremonial aspects of the ball game were more important than the myths that they represented.

Expanding on Durkheim's work, Collins (1982) argued that the ultimate reality to which all ritual points is society itself. One way or another, ritual speaks to the collective human condition. The ritual of the ball game spoke of conflict, power, cooperation, trickery, conquest, triumph, and loss. It may be that these social realities, emotionally and physically apparent in sport, informed the mythology more than the mythology informed the game. When a group collectively participates in ritual behavior, social realities are amplified. Collins argued that the ritualistic energy of assembled groups can become both powerful and dangerous. Collins noted that in public, ritualistic events people become "capable of becoming martyrs, especially if it is done in public with a strong supporting cast" and the crowd quickly "loses all sense of restraint" (Collins 1982: 40). An application of Collins's theory of ritual to the Mesoamerican rubber ball game validates its efficacy.

Religion and ritual are powerful means of social cohesion. It is difficult to imagine that the ball game was linked to celestial rotations, gods, and myths in its early stages of development. It is possible that as the game popularized, political and religious leaders recognized that while common people enjoyed it as recreation, it socially engaged them and could be used as a means of building social cohesion and maintaining control. Perhaps, the mythology associated with the game emerged after the ritual of the game was well established. Simple recreation became a means of competition, competition became a means of resolving conflicts, resolving conflicts became a religious mediation, religious mediation became ceremonial, ceremony turned to obsession, and obsession led to higher stakes. As the society demanded riskier, more dangerous games with higher

³ Durkheim used the terminology *sacred* and *profane* (*heilig und profan*).

stakes, the establishment had to acquiesce – after all, it wasn't just a game any longer, it was sacred play.

CONCLUSION

While the religious significance of the Mesoamerican rubber ball game is apparent in the archeological record, the role myth and ceremony played in the game may need to be reexamined. Combing the archeological work of Tokovinine and the sociological insights of Collins may shed light on the ritual of the game. That which started with a simple ball of natural rubber playfully bounced for sport evolved into an elaborate system of headdresses, rituals, mythology, gods, and sacrifices. What implications does the ancient rubber ball game have for contemporary society when professional athletes are paid millions of dollars in annual contracts, stadiums are filled with tens of thousands of avid fans, and millions of home television sets are tuned to professional sporting events each week? What sociological insights can be drawn from the game in a culture when the stakes of reality television are incessantly raised and public demand becomes increasingly outrageous?

There are many lessons to be learned from the ancient rubber ball game about the role of religion in society, ritual, competition, and conflict. Although the cultures of Mesoamerica are long extinct, their experiences speak to contemporary issues in eerily familiar ways. Perhaps lessons learned from the Mesoamerican cultures must be applied to contemporary issues of religion, ritual, myth, and social cohesion – it may be a matter of life and death.

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