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2012

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

Women Playing a Man's Game: Reconstructing Ceremonial and Ritual
History of the Mesoamerican Ballgame

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the
degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Maria Isabel Ramos

Committee in charge:

Professor Elizabeth Newsome, Chair
Professor Ricardo Dominguez
Professor Kuiyi Shen
Professor Roberto Tejada
Professor Eric Van Young

2012

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

2012

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my mother Josefina Ramos Heredia, a woman of great strength and courage who has been my role model and inspiration.

EPIGRAPH

Games are a way of coping with the world

John Loy

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Some of the names utilized in this study are abbreviated for use of space.

MNAH:

Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia

MAX:

Museo Antropología Xalapa

MAPMRT

Museo de Arte Prehispánico de Mexico Rufino Tamayo

MRC

Museo Rafael Coronel

GOBES:

Gobierno del Estado de Sinaloa

CCT:

Centro Cultural de Tijuana

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to greatly acknowledge Irma and Ricardo Enriquez for being my biggest support system in Los Angeles. Thank you both for all the help you gave me throughout. To my family, friends, and colleagues in Los Angeles and Mexico for never letting me give up on my dream, and reminding me that my sacrifice was well worth the journey. The success of this dissertation I owe to the following professors whose guidance taught me how to improve as an academic and as an individual. Dr. Elizabeth Newsome, whose dedication to my studies was significant for my intellectual growth. Many warm thanks to my thesis committee members, Roberto Tejada, Eric Van Young, Kuiyi Shen, and Ricardo Dominguez. I would especially like to acknowledge Dr. James Brady, my mentor and professor during my Master's program who encouraged me to pursue a PhD degree. His mentorship was critical for my intellectual development as a grad student.

A very special thanks to Dr. Manuel Aguilar, for giving me the opportunity to participate in *Proyecto Ulama*, a research project that is highly significant for the study of Mesoamerican art. Parts of Chapter Five are reprints of the material as it appears in *Estudios Jaliscienses* 2004. Ramos, Maria Isabel, *El Papel de la Mujer en el Ulama*, 2004. The dissertation/thesis author was the primary investigator and author of this paper.

I am grateful to the professors, museum directors, and historians who took the time to assist me in my research, and provided me with information on the subject I was investigating. Sarah Ladron de Guevara (MAX), Ixchel Reyes

(MAX), UNAM, staff at Museo Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Museo de Arte Prehispánico de Mexico Rufino Tamayo, Hermilio Tellez, Director of Cultural Affairs, Zacapu, Michoacán, John Sullivan, Director of IDIEZ, The tlamachtianih at IDIEZ, my Náhuatl colleagues at IDIEZ, María Elena Bernal-García, María Teresa Uriarte, Eric Taladoire, La Asociación Historica de Mazatlán, Jesús and Martha Gomez, to the consultants in the communities of Los Llanitos, La Savila, El Quelite, Villa Unión, El Vainillo, La Mora Escarbada, Esquinapa, and Cacalotan.

This dissertation was greatly influenced by those scholars who fight everyday for indigenous women to receive their proper recognition in history. Funding for my fieldwork in Mexico was granted by the Center for Iberian and Latin American Studies, the Russell Foundation, the Visual Arts Department at UCSD, UC Mexus, Arts and Humanities Department, and the Institution for International Comparative Area Studies.

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Women Playing a Man's Game: Reconstructing Ceremonial and Ritual History
of the Mesoamerican Ballgame

by

Maria Isabel Ramos

Doctor of Philosophy in Art History, Theory, and Criticism

University of California, San Diego, 2012

Professor Elizabeth Newsome, Chair

In a few rural vicinities of Sinaloa, Mexico, there is a sport played by the Mexican peoples whose roots are embedded in the pre-Hispanic past. It is called *ulama*, a game in which an eight-pound rubber ball is propelled using either the hip or the forearm. As was custom for many pre-Hispanic cultures and time periods, men are at the forefront of these games; however, recent ethnographic studies have revealed that women have also played *ulama* since the early nineteenth hundreds.

There is also evidence suggesting that women may have played the

game in ancient times. Ceramic female ballplayer figurines found in archaeological contexts throughout Mexico help support this theory. Yet, while these ballplayer figurines and ethnographic reports point to the inclusion of women in the rubber ballgame, scholars are still reluctant to address them and continue to treat the game solely as a male activity.

This dissertation is dedicated to the study of women ballplayers and the importance of their participation in the modern and ancient rubber ballgame of the Americas. It is a subject of great value that may inform us about the social roles, material practices, and human relationships of past and present Mexican societies. It is also challenging because little or no information is available on women's roles in the game, and ceramic female ballplayers specifically. Nevertheless, with archaeological evidence from past excavations, and ethnographic accounts by past ballgame scholars, as well as my own, I approach the subject through a comprehensive analysis of terracotta figurines, ancient codices, sixteenth century colonial sources, and oral accounts provided by *ulama* players and community members from Sinaloa.

What I intend with this investigation is to contribute to the body of knowledge pioneered by past scholars who have concerned themselves with the marginal treatment of women in Mesoamerican art history. While the hypothesis presented here may not definitely answer all questions that concern women ballplayers, it certainly seeks to produce critical inquiries about the formation of social identities and statuses of women.

Chapter One: Women Ballplayers of the *Ulama* Rubber Ballgame: An Introduction

“Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for men to teach them their playing” (Johan Huizinga, 1955: 1)

The observation that Huizinga makes suggests that play is primary to culture, and through the act of play, it constitutes cultural identities and social relationships that may serve a productive role. Throughout our lives we have all played games. We have played them for mere pleasure, to gain some type of reward, or as a symbolic performance to communicate some sort of idea. In each and every game there is embedded a special meaning; that certain element that allows us to escape from ordinary life. In this sense games can be transformative. They allow us to take on another role other than our own customary, daily persona, and transport us into an imaginary place that can only be inhabited through this transfiguration. In the act of play, life becomes isolated and acts as a separate occupation that is engaged with precise limits of place and time (Caillois, 1979: 6).

Men and women have both become socially integrated into games in one form or the other. Occasionally, women have formed part of teams in certain types of games such as the Otomac rubber ballgame played during the sixteenth century in the Orinoco Basin (Gumilla, 1745). However, a woman's presence is sometimes obscured by the exclusive discussion of male players in scholarly texts. A tendency to minimize the attention paid to women ballplayers has characterized research ever since scholars began to examine the subject of

games. It is a problem that is conspicuous in games that men have traditionally dominated. Nowhere is this more clearly manifested than in the rubber ballgames of the Americas.

Games played with a rubber ball were known throughout Mesoamerica, the American Southwest, the Caribbean islands, and what is today Venezuela.¹ The game's significance is attested by the number of ball courts discovered in the last several decades of archaeological research. According to Eric Taladoire, more than 1,700 courts were unearthed over a span of the past sixty years (personal comm., 2012). The specialized courts in which the game took place varied in size and construction per culture and became more secularized as time progressed. While most courts were used for game playing, they were also known to have served as public spaces that, through the interaction of the ballplayers, became socially produced sites of display and popular discourse.

The first population to practice the game in a ritualized form was the Olmec culture (1200- 600 B.C.), inhabitants of a place the Aztecs later called Olman, which is translated as "the place of rubber." However, this view is now being contested by the discovery of an earthen ball court at Paso de la Amada, Chiapas (1400-1250 B.C.) that predates Pre-classic period (c. 1800 B.C.- A.D. 250) figures (Hill, *et al.*, 1998). Olmec sculptures of decapitated ballplayers inform us that religion played a large role in early period games. The diversity of ballgame equipment and courts even at these early dates likewise suggests that games could also function in a more recreational form.

The presence of Pre-classic ceramic female ballplayer figurines

illustrates another aspect of the game that has been overlooked in the reconstruction of the game's history—that the ancient rubber ballgame was not exclusively open to men, as affirmed by eyewitness chroniclers of the early contact periods. Sixteenth century observers make explicit mention of women ballplayers in certain areas outside of New Spain, a little known facet of indigenous ball play that may be explored more extensively through figurines in the archaeological record.

The game was so important for the indigenous people that its practice continued up until the Post-classic period, terminating with the Aztec culture (A.D.1325-1519). After the Spanish conquistadors seized the Aztecs' capital city, Tenochtitlán, all ritual activities came to an end, and the Nahua people were forced into accepting a religion that meant the total destruction of their own. Similar struggles, resulting in the displacement or transformation of indigenous belief systems, occurred elsewhere in areas where the game was played.

Women were no longer playing rubber ballgames in central Mexico during the sixteenth century, but were active participants in areas of the Gulf Coast, Caribbean Islands, and Rio de Orinoco. There is no documentation of women ballplayers for other regions after that time. Nevertheless, they reintegrated into the game several centuries later in a few small rural towns of Sinaloa, Mexico (figure 1.1). The game's survival five hundred years after the conquest and three thousand years after its first beginnings speaks powerfully for its value to the ancient Mexican populations.

This thesis examines women ballplayers and their participation in a sport that has long been considered a masculine domain, today and in the pre-Columbian past. Through study of the game, I want to find out what social or cultural factors have contributed to, or limited women's engagement in the ancient and modern game of *ulama*. It is an initial attempt to systematically address this and other questions, and to discover why only a few women have played the game in Mexican rural towns since its emergence there in the 1930's, and why ceramic female ballplayer figurines have not been given serious consideration in discussions of the game.

I also conduct a comparative analysis of the costume and physical characteristics of ceramic female ballplayer figurines to identify cultural and regional influences and differences in how women played the game. Social information may be accessed through a close examination of the figurines that isn't available in the rigid canon of dynastic art. The figurines' ballgame costume may also reveal the prominent roles that women held in early period societies that would have given them social prominence and visibility, such as roles in kinship and residential relations, economic roles (such as crafts, markets, commerce), and roles in fertility and procreation. In addition, an in-depth examination of the societies in which the figurines were manufactured helps me form general theoretical positions concerning the role of material culture in those specific areas.

The primary goals of this research are to shed new light on the importance of women in the rubber ballgame, and to illustrate how ceramic

female ballplayer figurines help to impart a general understanding of past indigenous artistic styles and ritual practices, as well as how gender was performed in particular contexts. The contributions of this thesis to the study of Mesoamerican cultures as a whole is presented in the concluding chapter, where I also consider the current challenges and future directions for the study of gender and sports in the ancient periods and of modern Mexican communities as well.

1.1 Site-specific Areas of the Study

In northern and southern Mexican regions variations of ancient rubber ballgames are still played by peoples of *mestizo* descent. Most of these games have survived in the state of Sinaloa that is situated in the northern part of Mexico, along California's Gulf Coast.² The name Sinaloa is of unknown etymology, and for a long period of time scholars were under the impression that it belonged to the Cahita language and that it meant "round *pitahaya*," a fruit of the region. The state's Coat of Arms is based on this interpretation, as its overall shape is outlined like the *pitahaya* fruit (Ortega Noriega, 1999:14). However, to date, there is no general agreement as to its meaning.

In pre-Hispanic times, the Totorame, Cahita, Pacaxee, Acaxee, and Xixime tribes inhabited Sinaloan territories. Their main economic activity was agricultural production, but the people were also known for making large pots that were used to store remains of the dead as a symbolic manifestation of the mother's womb (GOBES, 2011). Another cultural activity practiced in Sinaloa

was *ulama*, the rubber ballgame. Although we do not know exactly when the game began in those areas, a few scholars have suggested that it was introduced when central Mexican indigenous tribes migrated north during the sixteenth century to work in the silver mines (Alegria, 1983).

The Jesuit priest Francisco Javier Clavijero (1945) was one of the first authors to mention the game in his accounts. He wrote that around 1780, the Nayarita, Opata, and Tarahumara tribes were playing a rubber ballgame. His information is consistent with the reports provided by Rafael Landívar, who had also witnessed *ulama* games in some of the same northern regions (Leyenaar, 1992b: 129). Today the games of *ulama de antebrazo* (arm-*ulama*) and *ulama de palo* (stick-*ulama*) are played in the towns of El Guamúchil and Mocerito, while in Esquinapa, Los Llanitos, La Mora Escarbada, El Chamizal, and La Sávila, *ulama de cadera* (hip-*ulama*) is the most popular game practiced by the people (Aguilar, 2004: 27).

Long before rubber ballgames were played in the north, they became cultural manifestations in other Mesoamerican areas as early as the Pre-classic Period (c. 1800 B.C. – A.D. 250). This was a crucial moment in Mesoamerica's history because it was when women first became integrated into a formal variant of the game. Evidence of women ballplayers in the form of figurines comes from the Pre-classic sites of Tlatilco, Tlapacoya, Tuxcacuesco, Xochipala, and Pánuco (figure 1.2).

Tlatilco was a small village situated in what is today the municipality of San Bartolo Naucalpan, whose name derives from the Náhuatl word *tlatia*

meaning “To hide or to burn” (Karttunen, 1983: 297).³ Patricia Ochoa Castillo (1992) establishes its occupation in the Early (2500-1500 B.C.) and Middle Pre-classic periods (1500-900 B.C.), and its most productive phase between 1300 and 900 BCE. Female figurines were so copious in that area that they became a diagnostic trait of that site (Bernal García, 2007: 154).

A form of entertainment practiced by the Tlatilco residents was the rubber ballgame. While no actual court structures have been found in Pre-classic regions, site excavations suggest the game was played on flat terrains that may have been similar to those used in the modern game of *ulama*. Whereas male ballplayer figurines outnumber those depicting women ballplayers, the existence of the latter implies that women played prominent social roles in Tlatilco society.

Further south on the former shore of Lake Chalco stands Tlapacoya as another Pre-classic center of importance for figurine assembly. Tlapacoya is a Náhuatl name that means “Place where one washes” according to an etymological interpretation by Alonso Molina (1977: 130). The production of crafts was a specialized duty in that area, and may have been assigned to both sexes, as suggested by the data found by Román Piña Chán (1952, 1955) and others. The most popular ceramic item manufactured was the figurine.

In archeological finds, figurines representing ballplayers were numerous. Those that portray male players are dressed in elaborate costumes that make reference to the Maize God. Women were also ballgame participants, although they may have played the game in a more secular form given the simplicity of

the female figurine's ballgame regalia. Analogous representations resembling the Tlapacoya female ballplayer figurines were unearthed in Xochipala, Guerrero, but these display a greater naturalism and movement similar to the Maya figurines from Jaina, Campeche (Griffin, 1972: 303).

In the cultures of the West, the ballgame established a strong legacy. However, the associated art was quite different than that of central Mexico or the Gulf Coast. The gestures of the west Mexican figures are livelier, and ceramic models of village scenes in which people are conducting daily activities became a popular craft (Weigand, 1996: 30; Flores, 1994: 38). Ceramic ball court models from Colima and Nayarit were also common in west Mexican art. These models are excellent sources not only for the study of the game, but also for understanding the social structure of the west Mexican people. Although women are present on the models only as spectators, female ballplayer ceramic figurines from Tuxcacuesco and Xochipala confirm that they were also ballgame participants.

The best examples of ceramic female ballplayer figurines, in my opinion, are from Pánuco, Veracruz. Pánuco is a Náhuatl word that is defined as "A crossing point" (*pano*: pass through the river; *co*: locative) (Molina, 1977: 80), and is the name of a municipality of Huastec origin that flourished during the Classic period. The Huastec territory runs along the Gulf Coast starting from the Cazonas River, Veracruz to the Soto la Marina River in the state of Tamaulipas (Solís, 2006: 29).

One aspect of material culture that distinguished the Huastec people

from their contemporaries is their large sculptures of men and women whose bodies were often incised with complex designs. While the sculptures may not tell us about the difference in economic activities of both genders, ceramic ballplayer figurines imply that both men and women were allowed to participate in the game (Luján, 2008: 38). Given the numerous examples of female ballplayer figurines that were made in this region, and the information available on the Huastec culture, the figurines from Pánuco will serve as models for this study.

1.2 Data and Methodology

The hip *ulama* game, that is the focus of this study, began in the Archaic Period (Hill, *et al.*, 1998), but it appears that the initial participation of women occurred during the Middle Pre-classic. Female ballplayer figurines from west and central Mexico and the Gulf Coast show what appear to be young girls in ballgame attire that suggests they played a game in which the ball was struck with the hip, forearm, or knees. Scholars are still questioning whether women played the rubber ballgame in antiquity, as they also question the participation of women players today. Nevertheless, close examination of the figurines and research on the modern rubber ballgame indicate that women were involved as players in both historical contexts.

A major challenge we face as scholars in studying Pre-classic period female figurines is that most samples were removed from their archaeological setting. Museums usually acquire these artifacts through donations from

private collectors who obtained the objects from uncontrolled digs. Due to the poor conditions in which some of the figurines were found, the contexts of the finds often make it difficult to assess how representative they are of a range of different social situations and roles. Given these constraints, it has also been difficult to examine the figurines in light of the proveniences where they were found.

Those samples that are recovered in fragments add to this already limited body of information. Nonetheless, I was able to examine several female ballplayer figurines that were intact, from which I made a comprehensive study of the ballgame costume, headdress, corporal adornment, and physical characteristics. Through careful analysis of these figurines I can attempt to create relevant theories as to their possible function and use, and the roles of gender in their creation.

The figurines chosen for the study include the following: 33 complete figurines and 5 fragments from Pánuco, Veracruz; 48 samples from Tlatilco, in the state of Mexico; 46 from Tlapacoya, in the state of Mexico; 14 from Jalisco; 9 from Xochipala, Guerrero, and a group of 8 figurines from El Opeño, Michoacán; 1 ballplayer and 1 ballgame set of 14 figures from Colima. A large percentage of this corpus of figurine is housed in Mexican museums, while the others were examined through published sources that discuss the function and history of the rubber ballgame.

The corpus of Pre-classic period female ballplayer figurines is relatively small in comparison to the art available in the medium of monumental sculpture.

However, the rarity of the female ballplayer figurines makes the subject even more interesting and important because they contradict all previous notions that the game was only played by men. The figurines also provide knowledge about the social or ritual roles women played in early period Mesoamerican societies.

In this investigation, I use different methodological processes because, although the figurines share a common ballgame theme, the subject can be approached symbolically, comparatively, or analytically. To facilitate the work, I incorporate figurine typologies based on those used by Rosa María Reyna Robles (1971), who organized the figurines into styles, traditions, and geographic distributions. Whereas Reyna Robles focuses on iconographic details alone, I move beyond this analytic framework and study the costume of the figurines to determine their possible meaning and use.

Recognizing cultural expression and contextual codes in the figurines may help determine whether the ballplayers were meant to be symbolic, conventional, idealistic, or made for ritualistic purposes. Beatriz de Barba Piña Chán proposed that to find the purpose for the creation of figurines, one's methods must not be limited to simple description and analysis, as this limits our comprehension of the subject at hand (1956: 13).

I begin the work by describing in general terms the production of female figurines from the early, middle, and late Pre-classic periods in Central Mexico. I then examine female ballplayer figurines in terms of the places where they were found, their ballgame equipment, and their corporal paint or modification, such as tattooing and scarification. The third section is dedicated to the female

figurines from Pánuco--their ballgame outfit, headdresses, and corporal decoration or modification.

The Modern Ballgame

The present investigation developed out of a research project that commenced several years ago when I, along with six other colleagues were invited to participate in “*Proyecto Ulama*,” an interdisciplinary project from California State University, Los Angeles that investigates the ancient Aztec ballgame, *ullamalitzli* and the modern ballgame currently played in Sinaloa, Mexico. The topics that were covered included the game’s history, sacred landscape, rules of the game, production of rubber balls, and the roles of women. The research took place in the towns of Los Llanitos, El Quelite, La Mora Escarbada, Esquinapa, Cacalotan, El Vainillo, Villa Unión, and La Sávila. The main objective of our research was to continue the systematic study of the *ulama* game that has been conducted over the past sixty years, and to expand on some issues not addressed in previous scholarly works (Aguilar and Brady, 2004).

Since arriving at the University of California, San Diego, I have expanded on these studies as an independent project with a broader scope that systematically examines women in the Mesoamerican ballgame, focused on the study of figurines and taking into account both the ancient and modern game. In this field study, I was interested in finding out if women’s participation was an issue that dealt mainly with social perceptions about women’s physical ability, or with cultural criteria about gender roles. Furthermore, I wanted to

investigate how men and women from the rural towns viewed femininity, and what they considered to be the appropriate conduct of both adolescent girls and women. Here, I suspected beforehand that this question would prompt mixed assessments.

Important issues concerning the gender of players dealt with sport segregation, attitudes toward women ballplayers, *machismo*, and the influence of peer groups. A few questions I posed with respect to women's marginalization based on the observations of the researchers and consultants were: Did the ethnographers choose not to ask about women ballplayers? Did the ethnographers assume there had been no women ballplayers? Did any of the consultants intentionally omit information concerning women who had played *ulama*? Did both the ethnographers and consultants disregard the participation of women entirely?

Some of the places I visited formed part of an earlier investigation carried out by Miguel Valadés and the Dutch ethnographer Ted Leyenaar. Valadés' dedication to the study of the *ulama* game played a large role in its preservation in northern communities. Likewise, Leyenaar's data reveals important aspects of the modern game, yet the roles of women remained poorly identified. Leyenaar recorded that women were not allowed to pick up or touch the ball, and customarily only men attended games (1978: 58). My fieldwork in some of these same towns nearly thirty years later demonstrates, however, that some prohibitions did take place, but I found no evidence of any restrictions in regards

to women touching the ball or attending games. Such prohibitions often occur in connection with indigenous religious rituals where women were excluded from participation, but in Sinaloa the game has no religious associations (Redfield and Tax, 1952: 33).

Furthermore, the data I collected reveals that women were actively involved as *ulama* participants. In virtually every town where investigations were conducted, consultants could name individual women who had played the game, and in several cases named some who were still playing. There appears to be good evidence that women's teams also existed.

1.3 Studies of Women in Contemporary Sports

In contemporary times, studies of women have been approached with the same bias that has been displayed in Mesoamerican art history. Particularly in the field of sports, women rarely become subjects of interest. This has also been the problem in the reconstruction of the ancient game and the lack of attention given to women ballplayers. Not much has changed with current discussions of the *ulama* game and the topic of women's roles. Below I shall critique how scholars have gone about examining women in sports, specifically sport practices in patriarchal societies. A few of the themes I will address are gender roles, women's experience in sports, gender constructs, and myths associated with a woman's biology. These concepts will form part of a more thorough discussion in Chapter Six.

In a report written in 1990, Guadalupe López traced the history of sports

in Mexico and how social and political institutions have affected women's participation in sporting events. According to López, Mexican women first became integrated into official competitions in the year 1916 when Venustiano Carranza, who was president at the time, organized the athletic event "*Primeros Juegos Deportivos*" ("First Sportive Games"). Two years later, female basketball players formed part of a competitive event despite the fact that basketball was still considered a masculine game. The critiques they received from society were so severe that other women avoided forming friendships with them (*ibid.*, 12).

Integration into sports that men dominated became a gender struggle for many women because they were immediately perceived as not being feminine or belonging to a homosexual subculture. Some female athletes even had to prove that they were still women by publicly emphasizing the feminine traits that are valued by society. In other words, they had to "emphasize their femininity" by wearing dresses, heels, or make-up (Washington and Karen, 2001: 198). These stigmatizations continue to affect female athletes in the same manner that has impacted those women who participated in the *ulama* game.

Biological Determinism

Marie Hart's study of games illustrated critical points about how male and female athletes are viewed in modern society (1976). Although she concentrates her analysis on American men and women, her arguments are comparable to the way other cultures view the sexes. Hart attributes women's marginalization in the field of sports to the cultural norms that are inculcated in

the way men and women are socialized. The failure to live up to notions of femininity and masculinity, for example, have led to women's exclusion from certain male-related activities.

The cultural anthropologist Margaret Mead proposed in the early 1930's that gender differences are culturally constructed rather than innate. In *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (2001), Mead provided evidence that culture and not biology made men and women varied individuals. In her assessment of normative cultural views, masculine or feminine social roles can be attributed to one's cultural upbringing, and not to biology. Along the same lines, Susan Gray noted that the determination of what is masculine or feminine rests with one's social group (1957: 204). Thus, an adequate index of sex-appropriate behavior might be obtained by investigating the opinion of one's peers. The influence of peer groups played a prime role in the activities in which both sexes participated in the rural towns where I conducted investigations.

Other than the norms established by society, sports literature is just as responsible for transmitting negative messages about women's athletic abilities. It reinforces the idea that women are physically inferior to men in sports, and that female emotional temperament is unsuited to athletic competition (Hart, 1976: 443). In the article "Same Sport, Different Gender," Nancy Theberge emphasized that sports literature is marked by an unintended tendency to reinforce naturalized gender constructions grounded in notions of biological determinism, "whereby all human beings are assumed to fit, by nature, into

unambiguous and oppositional bipolar categories of ‘female’ and ‘male’” (1998). In these terms, women are considered weak and are presumed to perform less successfully than men.

The Muscle Gap

In the field of sports this is known as the ‘muscle gap.’ It is a myth sustained by patriarchal societies that often limits what women can or cannot do in public activities. Not only are women restricted from sports, but also from access to full knowledge and use of their own bodies (Buñuel Heras, 1996: 1).

As Ana Buñuel observes:

In a society in which women have been trying to become incorporated in many public spaces and equal social conditions, the world of sports remains difficult to access because their integration is sustained by their biological difference. Sport, as a corporal and social learned conduct, plays a central role in the construction and consolidation of the existent hierarchy between the genders, because it is associated widely with the natural, with the “obvious” (*ibid.*, 2, trans. from Spanish; my translation).

Moreover, there is a false notion that women who engage in particular games develop large muscles that make them appear more masculine. Dudley Sargent was one of the first persons to discuss this idea in the early twentieth century, stating that any woman who excelled in male-related sports inherited or would acquire masculine traits, and that a woman’s success in certain activities could only be achieved if she gained these masculine attributes (1912: 71). Since that time, this myth has been propagated worldwide and has had a large impact on women’s involvement in sports. It is undeniably one reason why Mexican women in rural towns are afraid to play the rubber ballgame.

The Weaker Sex

A woman's presumed biological inferiority and the social constructions that have designated her as the 'weaker sex' are defined and reinforced in many ways (Prakash, 1990; De Beauvoir, 1969). In Mexican rural towns, the biological differences between the sexes have been used as an excuse to prevent women from playing *ulama*. In part this is because males believe they are superior to women. Rural Mexican Sinaloan towns are characterized by a patriarchal order whereby the male gender role is elevated above the female role. From this point of view, women are expected to remain in the home where they can attend to their domestic duties. A woman must accept this role and never defy or question her husband's whereabouts or behavior (Basham, 1976: 128). It is an attitude based on *machismo* that according to Americo Paredes is not restricted to Mexico, but can be found in many cultures worldwide (1967: 82).

The erroneously interpreted or ideologically identified biological differences have, in Catriona Parratt's words, sustained behavior norms that have limited women's use and knowledge of their bodies and their participation in sportive activities (1994: 6). This is not surprising because men have dominated sports through their institutionalization in society. In the *ulama* rubber ballgame, not only have women been discouraged from participating, but also those who have played in the past have been criticized for taking part in what Mexican society perceives as a 'male' game.

To understand and uncover the problems with women's lack of

participation in games we must go beyond describing their experience, and study the underlying assumptions and biases that have led to their exclusion or marginalization in the sports field (*ibid.*). For one, we cannot take for granted what has been written in articles or texts about sports because it is often the case that the information provided are erroneous or misleading.

I first encountered this when I was researching the contemporary hip rubber ballgame. The fact that no ethnographer had mentioned women ballplayers led me to assume that women never played. If I had not questioned women's participation, I would still be under the impression that *ulama* is an exclusively male sport. Unfortunately, a woman as ballplayer, rather than mere spectator, is an important topic that does not fit within the spectrum of scholarly interests.

In the last five hundred years we have seen a change in the *ulama* game. It has slowly transformed from religious ritual into a secular activity that contemporary *ulama* players say expresses the significance of community integration. Yet, if the *ulama* sport is said to serve a social end, why were women who became participants in the game subject to criticism and discrimination by male participants?

1.4 Toward An Initial Study of Women's Histories

When we read the sixteenth century postconquest Mexican manuscripts that concern the history of the Americas we confront various discrepancies. The first is that history is based solely on the experiences of men, and the

second is that the discussion of women has been added in solely as an after thought to fill in missing links, or women have been treated as inconsequential to the formation of indigenous Mesoamerican cultures. This was a common thread in the writing of both Spanish and indigenous historical narratives of the time, because not only were the documents produced by male Spanish clerics, but elderly indigenous males of high rank were also narrating the lives of indigenous women (Clendinnen, 1991: 154).

Androcentrism

In general, the inclusion of women in the historical record has been based on androcentric points of view about the experiences of men and women. Male scholars assumed that “males and male experience was the norm for human behavior, and that female and female experience were deviations or exceptions from the norm” (Basow, 2002: 125). In recent times, this argument has been contested and challenged by female scholars in a wide variety of disciplines. Rather than seeing women as inferior to men, scholars are now capable of treating women as equally responsible for the group’s development and survival (Lerner, 1986: 18).

In her highly influential book *The Second Sex* (1969), the French novelist Simone de Beauvoir offers a concrete analysis of women’s oppression in the areas of religion, politics, and sports, among others. Her famous phrase “one is not born but becomes a woman” expresses the idea that women are creations of patriarchal structures that treat and view them as subordinate to men (*ibid.*, 267). Female subordination has been established in much

academic literature as a universal given, as if nothing has changed over time. Conceptual frameworks that relied on the idea that women were passive actors have nowadays been discarded and replaced with new conceptual methods that allow us to look at women's roles through a different theoretical lens.

Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere extended this argument into the field of anthropology upon writing the book *Woman, Culture, and Society* (1974). In their study of human culture, the authors criticized the manner in which their male colleagues were writing history. At a time when women were perceived as uninteresting or peripheral to the formation of society, the authors demonstrated that they were relevant actors, and that they held more power than had been previously acknowledged (*ibid.*, 9). They argued that when their colleagues were writing historical texts, they were guided not only by their race (white), but also by their social status (middle or upper class), which ultimately dictated how they viewed the societies they were examining.⁴ This shaped their bias toward the elite, male-dominated aspects of society, and furthered their marginalization of women as cultural subjects.

In Mexico, the study of women has a long history of marginalization. This began when Spanish Franciscan friars were sent to New Spain to document the life of the Nahua peoples. The works that followed in Mesoamerican studies displayed the same prejudices. Nonetheless, androcentrism in the study of ancient Mexican cultures has slowly improved with the publications of male scholars who enlarged their studies to include discussions of women (León-Portilla, 1998; Lesure, 2002, 2005, 2011; Bradley,

2001; Carrasco, 1991). Examples of this trend are Richard Lesure's, *Interpreting Ancient Figurines. Context, Comparison, and Prehistoric Art* (2011), and Douglas Bradley's, "Gender, Power, and Fertility in the Olmec Ritual Ballgame" (2001).

Bradley's investigation, in particular, was the first to address the subject of ancient women ballplayers. Since then, no other male scholar has devoted attention to this important topic. This omission may be due in part to the perception on the part of many male researchers that the study of women in Mesoamerican art is a "feminist topic only of concern to women" (Klein, 2001: 364). It is a small list, however, compared to the works available today that focus on women's roles in patriarchal societies.

Contemporary Gender Studies in Mesoamerican Art

Today, studies of gender in Mesoamerican art represent a variety of different theoretical and methodological approaches, all notable for the reconstruction of social and gender categories.⁵ Through these studies we have come closer to defining gender relations and roles, and how gender affected the ritual and political structures of past indigenous societies. In ancient Mesoamerica the division of gender roles both in the public and private domain was often defined by the labor carried out by each sex. Local cultural codes established sexual and social roles for both genders (Rodríguez-Shadow, 2007: 52). As María Rodríguez-Shadow points out, status certainly varied according to either region or community, and the creation of hundreds of female figurines suggests women's status may have been held in high esteem (*ibid.*).

Sex and gender were more often constructed and altered with respect to age among the Aztec peoples, while among Maya royal women, status sometimes served to mediate socially dictated gender roles. For the Pre-classic period cultures, it is more difficult to distinguish between elite and non-elite social elements, although it has been suggested that burials point to individual status differences (Piña Chan, 1952, 1955, 1956).

In 1986, Virginia E. Miller and Mary Ellen Miller organized a major conference in Bogotá, Columbia that dealt with issues of gender in Pre-Columbian art. What followed was a magnificent volume on gender entitled *The Role of Gender in Precolumbian Art and Architecture* (1988). This was the beginning of what would become a new concern among art historians for the study of indigenous women. This innovative conference persuaded other scholars like Rosemary A. Joyce to pioneer research on Mesoamerican women, and most importantly for this investigation, to produce serious studies of female figurines.

In the late twentieth century, Joyce examined the manner in which specific actions came to be representative of certain kinds of gender (2000a). She summarized the way in which women's experience differed from that of men in various indigenous societies by applying different theoretical models of gender identification. For Joyce, gender was differentiated through a specific performance rather than sex characteristics. Certain of her ideas regarding gender as a performative activity parallel Judith Butler's insight on the performance of gender and sexuality (1993).

Elizabeth Brumfiel's examination of gender issues in Post-classic Mesoamerica resulted in new ways of looking at female roles in ritual. One of the most critical things that gender representation illustrates according to Brumfiel is the way in which the analysis of different types of media may be incorporated into wider questions of social relations between rulers and kinship groups (*ibid.*). In many ways, my work coincides with that of Joyce and Brumfiel, as I also endeavor to demonstrate that women played a large role in the construction of social, economic, and political systems.

1.5 Early Studies of Women in Mesoamerican Art

Royal Women

In Mesoamerican research, Tatiana Proskouriakoff (1950) was the first scholar to produce a serious study of the portrayal of indigenous women, while she worked at the Carnegie Institution of Washington as an architectural illustrator (1939-40). Although she is most recognized for the contributions she made to the understanding of Maya writing, she established that a number of Classic Maya portraits that had been previously identified as male actually portrayed royal women. Since then, Maya researchers have prioritized attention to women in the elite realm such as those represented in monumental stone media, or figures that are involved in some type of ritual activity, such as the images of women painted on Maya vases.

Mary Miller and Simon Martin observe that, while the majority of images

of Maya women represent elites, names of female owners of ceremonial regalia and women who took titles in political administration appear in the art historical record (2004: 101). Similarly, Robert Sharer mentions in his distinguished volume *The Ancient Maya* (1994: 541) that women were engaged in dancing, which was considered a very important ritual activity in Maya societies according to Mathew Looper (2001).⁶

Apart from monuments that record the portraits and titles of elite women, Mesoamerican art offers some clues about the contributions of women from the common classes. For example, the richly decorated woven outfits worn by women and men of the upper class were made by women commoners. In Mesoamerica, weaving functioned as a woman's testament of her social status in the community. Women who were good weavers were well respected and admired for their skill in producing richly woven garments, and those who were not faced criticism from society as a whole.

The importance of clothing for anthropological and historical studies is that it serves as a visual indication of status and occupation. Dress can demonstrate who someone is and what roles one played in society. Obviously, the social function of clothing was more elaborate in societies that had many ascribed statuses, in which a person's position would not be readily apparent from age and gender alone. Clothing, thus, provides important visual clues to one's social rank (Olsen, 1988: 105).

Goddesses

Adding to the focus on high-ranking women in Mesoamerican art history

is the study of Late Post-classic central Mexican goddesses (Klein, 2001; Milbrath, 1997; Miller, 1999; Quezada, 1999; Smith, 2003; Soustelle, 1961, 1982; Townsend, 2000). However, little research examines the roles women played in the rituals and religious life that focused on these deities. 16th century texts preserve very little information on gender roles and practices in community ceremonialism and domestic life, or their change over time (Brumfiel, 2001: 61). The tendency of the friars to marginalize the roles of other women such as deity impersonators may be a result of their desire to eliminate the religious rituals of the Nahuas. Confronted with these gods and their ceremonies, the clerics were motivated to present a strong case for the successful conversion of Mesoamerican communities to the Spanish King.

Status, Prestige, and Knowledge

While there is still much to learn about Aztec goddesses and their diverse functions in Post-classic Mexico, it is also important to recognize that some women in Aztec society held prestigious roles. The *cihuatlamacazqueh*, or priestesses, were crucial in the formal education and initiation into religious duties of the adolescent Nahua girls when they reached the age of twelve or thirteen (Sahagún, 1961). The physical preparation and organization of special monthly ceremonies, specifically the sweeping of holy places, was an important duty assigned to high priestesses. The sweeping of the temple was not solely an act of purification, but contained a meaning in ritual preparations, since in sweeping, one opened the way for the gods. Through this action, the priestess was establishing a correctly ordered world by purifying sacred space (Soustelle,

1961).

Women also played several roles outside of the domestic realm that contributed to the economic organization of their communities (Tarazona Garza, 1991: 30). One of these roles was as members of the *pochteca*, commercial sellers in the marketplace who were very rich and powerful. Additionally, in the article “*Cihuayotl lixco Ca: La Feminidad Luce en su Rostro*” (1998), Miguel León-Portilla discusses the *huehuehtlahtolli*, the ancient Náhuatl word that describes noble Aztec women and the characteristics required to become one.

A noble woman of renowned fame was Azcaxochitlzin, who became Netzahualcóyotl's wife, and his right hand in political matters. Netzahualcóyotzin was the famous ruler/poet of Texcoco whose contributions to the arts and sciences were revered by the Nahua people (Escobedo, 1967: 170). Azcaxochitlzin was not only beautiful, but also intelligent for she was able to help Netzahualcóyotl gain alliances with the kings of Mexico, Texcoco and Tlacopan.

There are also stories of women who were princesses or supreme governors, and even artists and poets, two very important skills that were highly recognized throughout Mesoamerica. The daughter of the second Aztec *tlatoani*, Huitzilihuitl, was known as “the painter,” but was actually a scribe. To be a poet or a scribe one had to be literate and well trained to transmit through glyphs important messages concerning such matters as historical events, the count of days, and monthly festivals (Tarazona Garza, 1991: 37). Another important female personage was Iztacxilotzin, a woman of Toltec heritage who

founded and governed the city of Cuahuititlán (Escobedo, 1967: 111).

Roles such as those played by these women in late Post-classic period Mexico are not commonly associated with women because the skills and status required for these positions usually characterize roles reserved for men. However, these examples clearly demonstrate that not all women in Mesoamerica were relegated to the private realm. All these roles were important, and these examples indicate that women, in some situations, did have power and access to public roles and could take part in prestigious activities that gave them access to elevated status.

It is possible that a parallel situation occurred during the Pre-classic period when women were playing the game. Their participation in the game would have given them recognition and a high level of visibility within their communities. And even if the games were not as complex as those games played by the subsequent cultures, women still had to train, learn the rules of the game, and acquire the playing skills necessary to beat their rivals.

Although we do not know how the game was played in the pre-Hispanic past, these are basic game-playing components that one must have knowledge of to play the game well. This applies in a similar fashion to the modern game of *ulama*. All participants must go through rigid training and have knowledge of the rules, which I found are very complicated and can take as long as ten years to learn. The fact that over the last 3,000 years women have proven not only that they could play the game, but that they were capable of holding positions of high esteem and power, demonstrates that women have the potential to excel

in activities in which men have been the chief participants.

1.6 Studies of Ceramic Female Figurines

Images of women are preserved throughout Mesoamerica, but their characteristics and function changed as cultures began to become differentiated and began to formulate their own social, religious, and political agendas. For the Pre-classic periods we do not have written accounts that can help determine whether women and men were treated as equals, or if men were the sole leaders. However, the archaeological record tells us that the numerous female figurines made during the Pre-classic period pertain to a gender population associated with key economic, political, and symbolic values (Ladrón de Guevara, 2008: 11-12).

This is evident in places like Tlatilco, where women were represented in ceramic media as a manifestation of their importance to culture and society. In certain regions of the Gulf Coast, attention to feminine representation also took a variety of forms. For example, in the state of Veracruz women are depicted as deities, or shown playing different roles representative of the life cycle (*ibid.*). The diversity in the costumes worn by the female figurines further points to their participation in public activities such as the rubber ballgame.

The Mesoamerican ballgame was a ritual sport that transmitted symbolic codes about the beliefs and ideology of the indigenous people. To have women arrayed in the ballgame costumes comments on their importance for the game, and reveals specific gender information about the communities and time

periods in which they were made. More importantly, they, along with male ballplayer figurines, inform us that the game was played in areas where no ball courts have yet been discovered (Ekholm, 1991: 242).

Pioneers of Female Figurine Studies

The last decades have seen important developments in figurine studies with the creation of figurine typologies and new discussions of female figures. A few pioneers who contributed to the basis for these works were George C. Vaillant (1930, 1932, 1933), Miguel Covarrubias (1961), and Román Piña Chán (1952, 1955, 1972).⁷ Figurine typologies are commonly used to establish relative chronologies in the absence of materials suited to absolute dating methods (Christmas, 2011: 12). Early research focused on identifying styles and regional traditions, as well as basic knowledge of content and meaning. Finding meaning within traditions and styles greatly enhanced our knowledge of the early period cultures.

Nevertheless, figurine analysis was based solely on iconographic descriptions, ignoring the importance of larger issues that center on female depiction. This is particularly true of female figurines that represent ballplayers. Although the works of Christine Neiderberger Betton (1987) and Douglas Bradley (1997, 2000, 2001) were innovative for the study of female ballplayer figurines, their iconographic analysis does not sufficiently address their use or function.

All types of artwork, regardless of their size or medium, are subject to iconographic interpretations. It is a necessary procedure that informs us about

the objects, and the underlying meaning of the political, social, and ritual structures of ancient Mesoamerica. Since the ancient populations did not have a writing system like those we have today, the people had to transmit their ideas and beliefs using imagery on paper, clay, or stone. This made it difficult for the first generation of iconographers to decipher the meaning behind complex works of art such as the ancient Mexican pictorial manuscripts (Klein, 2002: 29). The first scholar to undertake this task in Mesoamerican studies was Eduard Georg Seler, a linguist who developed an iconographic methodology that is still used today (*ibid.*). Beatriz de la Fuente eloquently describes how iconography changed the manner in which we viewed and understood Mesoamerican symbols:

Iconographic manifestations associated with diverse traces of ancient Mexican societies constitute a fundamental tool to understand aspects difficult to access through other means...the etymology of the word [iconography] illuminates its essence, that is, its subjects...the iconographers look to interpret the message that lies behind the images rendered in mural paintings, sculptures, codices, vases, among others (quoted in *Arqueología Mexicana* 1990: 27, trans. from Spanish; my translation.).

However, iconographic studies have limited the way researchers interpret figurines. Figurines are often only regarded as symbolic fertility figures, or as having other symbolic value. They are rarely viewed in light of the complex roles that women may have held in Pre-Hispanic societies. For example Gutierre Tibón noted that the nude bodies of figurines was ritual, like in the sculpture art of Mesopotamia and in ancient Greece, and was an act of devotion intended to attract the fertility of the earth (1967: 30). This

metaphorical connection to woman and earth expresses a relationship that is not only stereotypical, but is common in the writings of Western researchers who perceived Mesoamerica as an exotic environment in which women's prime role was that of the mother.

The assigning of figurines to fertility rites is an observation based on intuitive induction, a process by which scholars judge rapidly a piece of art having only limited information about it (Lesure, 2011). It is also based primarily on iconographic studies, and mere speculation on the part of scholars, particularly male scholars whose own gender biases have overlooked the importance of women in Mesoamerican studies in general.

This viewpoint represents a flawed analysis because the minimal attention that has been devoted to figurines is an insufficient basis for interpretation. It also diminishes the view of women as social agents, assigning the portrayal of feminine subjects to a symbolic realm, compared to viewing these portrayals of women in relation to the "exclusively" male roles that gave them power and social status.

A few anthropologists insist that individualized facial features refute the idea that female figurines only relate to magical or fertility themes. Instead, they argue, this attention to facial features indicates that at least some female figurines depict specific people. Rodriguez-Shadow has suggested that if female figurines are treated as a general "fertility" type, then there is no material, historical, or ethnohistorical evidence to support this assumption. She believes that the presence of female figurines points to the possibility of a

matrilineal society (2007: 63). Lesure notes that the creation of figurines may relate to differences in strategies of social affiliation commemorated in the crafting of visual representations (2011). Rather than reflecting generalized gender ideologies advocating reproduction, he argues that figurines should be examined in light of the different complex roles women may have played.

The difference in their mode of dress and place of excavation suggests the function of female figures varied within communities, and their frequent presence in household deposits contradicts the possibility of them being used to gain good harvest. Apart from providing ethnographic information about dress, social customs, and ritual practices, the depiction of female figurines may serve to mark them as important protagonists in the legitimatization of distinct social statuses.

More problematic than the fertility concept is the assignment of gender to figurines based solely on headdresses or other markers of apparent status, such as has been the case of figurines that display Olmec characteristics (i.e. Tlatilco and Tlapacoya ceramic figurines). According to Billie Follensbee, the apparent guideline for determining gender in Olmec-type figures appears to be “male unless proven female,” or even, if not unquestionably female, then male by default (2000: 42). While there are figurines whose primary sexual characteristics are obscured by costume, or who lack specific genital characteristics that would define their sex (e.g. *pilli*-type Olmec female ballplayer figurines), newly discovered artifacts can contribute to the effort to delineate the differences between portrayals of men and women. There exist

the possibility that indigenous artists decided not to emphasize or depict specific gender attributes, or that gender was characterized in a way that is not easily identified, such as the use of non-gender specific clothing (Lesure, 2011: 23).

With advances in the fields of archaeology, anthropology, and art history we are now able to pursue more solid judgments about the nature and use of figurines. We can start by searching for information in archaeological contexts, and inquire into the dimensions of meaning pertaining to figurine production in particular societies (*ibid.*). As important as iconography is in the study of figurines and other media, discovering the “symbolic code” of such general themes as “fertility” in these objects must not limit us if we are to make sense of these artifacts and the societies that produced them. This includes allowing for the identification of individual social roles and traits that may illuminate the social and cultural formation of gender.

A closer inspection of female figurines beyond the conventional limits of iconographic interpretation has other advantages in that they may tell us how the image expresses or even contributed to constituting social relations, and the social customs or ritual and artistic practices of Mesoamerican cultures. Methodologically, they serve as a reminder that attributes of material culture generally categorize as “standardized craft production” are, in fact, potentially important sources for such queries as “the ways in which one inscribes and therefore produces and announce one’s situational, specifically gendered, identity” (Conkey, 2001: 349).

Unfortunately, figurines that are representative of the public roles of the broader population of women are often neglected in the historical record because they are assumed to have been less prestigious than those sculptures of women in the elite realm. In comparison to the studies dedicated to large-scale monumental sculptures of women, which are often situated in such elite settings as temples and plazas, the study of these small ceramic figurines has been nominal within the archaeological discourse.

Nevertheless, they are equally important in that they communicate more about women's roles in popular culture than do monumental female images. In fact, it is the public roles held by women outside of the elite realm that formed the underlying basis of women's ways of life in Mesoamerican societies. The ritual regalia we see on a number of the figurines demonstrate that not all women were relegated full-time to the domestic domain, and that they were crucial participants in secular and religious rituals that formed part of everyday life.

For example, Mari Carmen Serra Puche's discovery of female figurines at Xochitécatl, Tlaxcala demonstrated that several of the figurines depict important women (2001: 256). She believes that the figurines represent real women and not goddesses, since a few were found in burials whose offerings included artifacts associated with the women's life cycle (i.e. mothers, infants, old women). She also suggests that the costume on some of the figurines is a possible indication that women ruled in government positions, or more significantly, that they belonged to a matriarchal society (*Ibid.*, 268)

Although Serra Puche has not yet identified the ethnic identity of Xochitecátl inhabitants, she interprets the female figurines as portraits of women in the community who were leaders in the feminine rituals conducted in the ceremonial center. The most important part of this study for Serra Puche, however, is not acknowledging that women were important in the Epi-classic period, but recognizing and identifying these portraits as real social actors, rather than ceremonial symbols.

1.7 Concluding Remarks

This introduction has outlined several categories pertaining to the study of the rubber ballgames of the pre-Hispanic cultures and contemporary Mexico, and the roles of women within this ritual. In the first part of this work, I made specific observations regarding how experts have or have not approached the topic of women ballplayers. While my coverage of this topic has not been exhaustive, the past forty years of scholarship has been reviewed. I dedicate this thesis to uncovering the complexities that are involved in women's participation in the game. I devote the remainder of this investigation to other related topics.

Chapter two examines ceramic female ballplayer figurines from west and central Mexico and the Gulf Coast. It looks at the figurines' ballgame costume, and reflects on what costume tells us about indigenous ritual practices, society, gender roles, and how the treatment of the ceramic form represents certain artistic practices and skills, and aesthetic concepts such as style.

Chapter three is an introduction to the Mesoamerican ballgame. It presents a general history of the game and how it has evolved through time and space. It begins with the Olmec culture, the first civilization to flourish during the Pre-classic period and to lay the foundations for subsequent cultures. The study continues with Classic period ballgames played by the Maya, Totonac, and Teotihuacán cultures and ends with the Aztec's game, *ullamaliztli*. Ballgame equipment becomes an integral part of this discussion, as well as the game's relationship to human sacrifice, cosmology, war, and fertility.

The following chapter traces the ballgame back to pre-conquest Mexico, and explores the probable causes that led to women's exclusion from the Aztec ballgame and their inclusion in some regions of the Caribbean Islands. In it I examine its social and religious significance and the roles of women in and out of the game. The role of the Spanish Franciscan friars is key to understanding the changes in the status of women that occurred over time.

In Chapter Five, "*Ulama*: Survival of Ancient Ritual Sport," I discuss the rubber ballgame as it is played today in several rural Mexican towns in the state of Sinaloa. I first explore the theories that have been proposed in regards to its survival in the north, the documentation of sixteenth century rubber ballgames, the meaning and function of the game, production of the rubber ball, the experiences of the female ballplayers, and the attitudes of men and women toward women who have played the game.

In Chapter Six, "Gendered Bodies, Gendered Sports: Female *Ulama* Players and Social Constructions of Femininity," I lay out the defining issues

that relate to women in the *ulama* game. Some of these address men and women's roles in rural towns, concepts of masculinity and femininity, gendered performance, the male position and power that exists in patriarchal societies, and the myths that have been used against women to discourage them from playing. Gender roles and other structural constraints operating outside *ulama*—like family or cultural expectations—have also played a large role in restricting women's participation.

Overall, these chapters seek to demonstrate how ceramic female ballplayer figurines were created to reflect the social and ritual roles of commoner women, and how gender was performed through specific costume. It also points to the importance of women in both the ancient and modern game. Reconstructing the past is a complex task that usually leaves many open questions, but a dialogue needs to be initiated with the material at hand. Subsequently, given that the data available for early period figurines is limited, I rely on those authors who have initiated an important conversation about the portrayals of women and the material evidence available about their lives.

In the process, I examine several methods to approach answering some of the questions that I have posed regarding women's participation in the ancient and modern ballgame. Although the questions may not produce definite answers, they initiate an important discussion of women ballplayers that I hope provokes others to continue the study of women as social agents in ancient and contemporary Mexico. It is a topic that I believe contributes greatly to Mesoamerican art history, anthropology, archaeology, and other humanistic

disciplines.

¹ The game of the Americas has been recognized as the oldest game that makes use of a rubber ball.

² Games like Pelota Púrepecha and Pelota Mixteca are also practiced in the states of Michoacán and Oaxaca, but do not fall within the limits of this study.

³ Miguel Covarrubias (1961) and Maria Elena Bernal Garcia (2007) mention that Tlatilco derived from the Nahuatl word *tlatia*, meaning “to hide.” In a personal communication, Bernal Garcia mentioned that scholars define the word Tlatilco as “to hide” because of the number of artifacts found in interments, Victoriano de la Cruz, instructor at the Instituto de Docencia e Etnología de Zacatecas (IDIEZ) thinks that the correct definition is “to burn given that Molina does not distinguish between short and long vowels, and only supplies one definition of the word. Frances Karttunen (1983) identifies “tlatia” with a short “a” sound as “to burn” and “tlatia” with long “a” sound as “to hide.” To date, the exact definition is unclear.

⁴ The biases present in anthropological or archaeological studies are shared by entire academic traditions and are not limited to anthropology or archaeology (Conkey, 1984: 3).

⁵ The past twenty years have seen a dramatic change in gender studies. According to Margaret Mooney Marini, scholars now use the term “sex” to refer to biologically based distinctions between the sexes and the term “gender” to refer to the social construction of differences between women and men (1990: 95).

⁶ Mathew Looper wrote an exquisite volume on Maya dance, examining the nature and function of dance and the aesthetics of performance (see *To Be Like Gods. Dance In Ancient Maya Civilization*. Austin: University of Texas Press (2009).

⁷ Clarence Hay was the first to create a figurine topology, which was elaborated by his former student George Clapp (Reyna Robles, 1971).

Chapter Two: The Ceramic Female Ballplayer Figurines of the Pre-classic Cultures of Mesoamerica

Material culture presents for us an opportunity to look into the past at the lives and ritual customs of the native Mesoamericans. Correspondingly, it complements and corrects historical records when they contain incorrect information or biases concerning ethnicity, gender, and class (Brumfiel, 2003: 207). One means by which we can examine the pre-Hispanic populations is through small terracotta figurines. The figurine is a ceramic portrayal of the human body that has served as a material point of reference for reconstructing the social and ritual structures of ancient societies. While their exact function is unclear, the disparity in form and dress among figurine types suggests their uses varied across space and time.

From the earliest farming villages down to Aztec civilization, women have been the most common subjects of ceramic art. Even in their most abstracted manifestation, female subjects were making their presence visible in Mesoamerican communities since ancient times. One of the roles rendered using the female ceramic form was the ballplayer. Figurines dressed in ballgame accoutrements have been invaluable for the study of the ancient game because they have shed light on its beginnings, players' equipment, and places and mode of practice (Ekholm, 1991: 241). Although they constitute a small portion of the findings in excavations, their costume reveals an important fact about women that has received only trivial attention in Mesoamerican art history: their participation in the ancient rubber ballgame.

The objective of this study is to examine ceramic female ballplayer figurines in order to illuminate the importance of women in the Mesoamerican rubber ballgame. Given the scale of this research I center my analysis on the female ballplayer figurines from central and west Mexico and northern Veracruz. These areas provide promising case studies because they are regions where the ballgame was highly elaborated, and where a majority of the ballplayer figurines were produced.

This investigation will serve several purposes: 1) to look at the development patterns of female figurine production; 2) to examine the ballgame equipment of the figurines to look for possible regional or cultural influences; 3) to find out the function of the ballplayer figurines, if they were used for purposes other than to represent one of the roles played by women; 4) and to access clues as to the social structures of the societies where women were allowed to play the game in order to better understand why female ballplayer figurines appear more frequently in one area than another

2.1 The Early Pre-classic Villages

The Pre-classic Period (2500 B.C. – 200 A.D.) represents for the history of Mesoamerica a time of growth and cultural transformation.¹ Notable advances in areas like the sciences (e.g. astronomy, calendrics, writing) and ceramic technologies emerged during this time, which influenced and were further developed in the periods that followed. Early settlers built their homes near sources of water, and fertile land that they could use to cultivate crops

(Ochoa Castillo, 1992: 32). Homes were simple wattle and daub huts that did not vary much in size or form (Bernal, 1969: 130), although it is possible the leader of the community was afforded special privilege. The leader could have been a man or woman of special rank, or the shaman who interceded between the people and their gods. Deities related to the earth, fertility, and rain were venerated although they were not represented as material forms (Báez-Jorge, 1988: 145; Ochoa Castillo, 1992: 33), but invoked through special rituals in which figurines may have played a large role.

Apart from tending to agricultural practices, the people were involved in the production of pottery and ceramic figurines. Pots were simple, utilitarian objects decorated with a range of colors and incised designs known as *graffito* (figure 2.1). Figurines were ceramic human forms that were modeled in the nude, or shown wearing a few items of clothing (figure 2.2). It is likely that the garments of the early villagers were made from vegetable fibers like grass that they used to cover their intimate body parts (Coe, 1965: 26). Women's breasts were left exposed, as they symbolized the sustenance and fertility of the earth (excerpt from MNAH, 2010).

The crafts produced in the Pre-classic villages were exclusive per site, and could be recognized by certain traditions, motifs, or styles. By 1200 B.C., sites like Tlatilco and Tlapacoya were influenced by Olmec art due to the migration of Olmec groups into the Basin of Mexico. Contact between the groups gave the Olmec the opportunity to share their religious practices that

included the veneration of natural forces and the Jaguar God (Diehl, 2004: 100-101). The ballgame also became fundamental in the lives of the central Mexican inhabitants during this time.

Among the different customs practiced by the people were cranial deformation, corporal and facial painting, and possibly tattooing. These modes of modification are recognizable on several figurines, especially those that represent women. There are also female figures that have double heads or three eyes that may allude to the Mesoamerican concept of duality (figure 2.3). Ceremonial masks worn by some of the ritual ballplayer figurines from Tlapacoya point to this idea as well (Ochoa Castillo, 1992: 34).

The production of figurines achieved complexity at the time that social organization was well established, sometime during the Middle Pre-classic (Vela, 2010: 15). In ceramic art, women always appear more often than men, conducting some type of activity like dancing, playing an instrument, or carrying a baby (figure 2.4) (Coe, 1965: 26). Female figurines were found on the floors of collapsed buildings, interred in special deposits, burial offerings, or common refuse (Bradley and Joralemon, 1992: 17; Lesure, 2002: 587). Their presence in distinct archaeological contexts suggests they served various purposes. To date, the earliest example to depict a female figure (approximately 2,300 B.C.) is an anthropomorphic artifact from Zohapilco (Tlapacoya) in the state of Mexico. It is a figurine that belongs to the Archaic/Pre-classic transition (figure 2.5) (Ochoa Castillo, 1992: 34). Other female samples show women dressed as ballplayers, a ritual custom that developed during the Pre-classic period.

The areas I propose to examine in this investigation (Tlatilco, Tlapacoya, Tuxcacuesco, Xochipala, and Pánuco) make up only a small portion of the splendor and art of the Pre-classic societies. Nevertheless, they merit attention because they were among the first cultures to practice the game, and to show in the form of ballplayer figurines that women were allowed to play. Female ballplayer figurines manifest the importance of women in ritual activities that would have shaped indigenous communities. Unfortunately, most authorities have not given them thorough consideration.

While we cannot identify the stories behind the figurines from simple iconographic descriptions, their clothing and the contexts in which they were found may help us interpret such narratives (Lesure, 2011). Whether they were produced in the Basin of Mexico, the West, or Gulf Coast, their study and interpretation demands appreciation to help disprove the misconceptions that women were passive players in the formation of Mesoamerican cultures.

2.2 Early Studies of Ceramic Figurines

The ancient indigenous craftsmen did not take long to realize they were surrounded by rich natural resources that they could use to create splendid objects. One of these resources was clay, material from which they made an assortment of ceramic items like figurines. The fabrication of figurines was a product of the people's art, and not dominated by the ideology of the elite classes. For all cultures and time periods, women were the favored subjects of the Mesoamerican craftsmen. We are uncertain as to who made the female

figures, but it is possible the task was assigned to women, who found in this skill a means through which they could express what was most important to them and the society in which they lived.

In 1887, the archaeologist Charles Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg organized an exhibit of ceramic figurines at the Trocadéro Museum in Paris, France. This was the first exhibit of its kind to display ceramic figurines to the general public. The figurines were found below Pedregal de San Angel in the Valley of Mexico, and identified by Francisco del Paso y Troncoso as Olmec (Reyna Robles, 1971: 3). Interest in these artifacts led Paso and Troncoso to continue investigations in Mexico's Basin. Subsequently, his research paved the way for future figurine investigations, particularly those of Franz Boas (1911), Manuel Gamio (1917), and George C. Vaillant (1928-33), among many other well-known archaeologists (Báez-Jorge, 1988: 146).

Vaillant's work has been the most recognized for the site studies he conducted at Zacatenco, Gualupita (today Cuernavaca), El Arbolillo, and Ticomán, regions located in the central Mexican Highlands that were the first sites to be thoroughly tested and reported (Tolstoy and Paradis, 1970: 344). After much thought, Vaillant labeled the cultures he studied as "Middle Cultures" and not "Archaic," a term that had been formerly used by archaeologists to describe the Pre-classic period regions (Reyna Robles, 1971: 6).²

A notable achievement in Vaillant's work was the typologies he devised that stratigraphically defined the chronological sequence of the figurines he examined (Table 2.1) (Coe, 1965: 25).³ Those typologies formed the basis for

the study of figurines, but as with any preliminary work, there were some discrepancies in his analysis and definitions. Years later, Luis Covarrubias and Eduardo Noguera refined Vaillant's charts, establishing four ceramic traditions instead of the three Vaillant had proposed, which overall simplified the typologies he originally designed (Noguera, 1965: 69).⁴

Upon completion of Vaillant's fieldwork, excavations ceased in central Mexico until brick workers discovered the site of Tlatilco in the 1940's. This site proved to be one of the richest Pre-classic archaeological regions in all of Mesoamerica (Coe, 1968: 93; Bernal García, 2007: 154). Miguel Covarrubias and Hugo Moedano conducted the first systematic explorations there in 1942. Unfortunately, the data they collected were never published, and have remained in the archives of the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) ever since. However, Covarrubias was able to obtain monetary support from INAH and the Viking Fund to continue the project, and along with Daniel Rubín de la Borbolla initiated a more thorough study of the site (Noguera, 1965: 68).

In terms of social rank and economic advantage, Tlatilco surpassed its contemporaries. This is observable from the quantity of burials and offerings found in Tlatilco's tombs, especially female figurines (Coe, 1962a: 73).⁵ The figurines were found lying down on their backs or chests, standing inside a small vessel, or reclining in a bowl (Bernal Garcia, 2007: 151). Contrary to popular belief that they served as companions for males, female figures were more often interred with female skeletons (*ibid*). Whatever function they served

alongside the deceased, they were essential companions for the journey that awaited them in the afterlife.

The importance of women is further confirmed by the fact that for over three hundred years, during the Early Pre-classic period (1500 B.C. – 1100 B.C.), female figurines were produced more often than male effigies in that site. Why women were represented so frequently in ceramic art is still an open question. Piña Chán believes that their exclusive creation points to the formation of matrilineal clans within Pre-classic societies (1955: 39). While Piña Chán's theory is persuasive, it is difficult to tell from the figurines alone why there was such an emphasis on women. The creation of female figurines may relate to the transition of pubescent girls into adulthood, or some form of emphasis on female ancestral veneration. Clearly, the early period villages recognized women's importance through these ritual acts.

By the Middle Pre-classic female figurines began to lose their monopoly due to the vast production of male figures. However, the creation of male figurines in ceramic art did not suppress the production of female forms. On the contrary, this is the time when the best representations of women were executed (Tibón, 1967: 17). Unlike the simple treatment of the female body in the preceding era, females take on a more voluptuous shape, as did the face, head, and adornments that embellished the female body. Perhaps the new forms that figurines were representing reflect new emphasis on the difference between the sexes, or because standards and fashions changed, figurine manufacturers were producing styles that varied per site and period.

Toward the end of this era (400 B.C. - 200 A.D.), female figurines outnumber male images, reversing the situation in the previous phase. They also began to change in form, showing a marked influence of west Mexican art, especially from Chupícuaro, Guanajuato (Noguera, 1965: 70-71). Rather than making schematic bodies, naturalism becomes a central component of the female design in this era. Strong stylization is also visible on both the head and the face. Another difference between these figurines and those of the Middle Pre-classic is that the former do not display the fertility imagery that their male counterparts had exhibited before, such as the corn symbols that form part of the ballgame costume of a few male ballplayer figurines from Tlapacoya.

A significant social role that emerges at this time is the priest. He introduces the cult of deities to the people, gods that are no longer abstract representations, but exhibit recognizable attributes of deities like the Fire God, Huehuetéotl. The construction of stone tombs—some of which were found in Tlapacoya—also indicates that social stratification was more defined, since the occupants of these tombs appear to have been important personages because of the elaborate offerings they contained (Ochoa Castillo, 1992: 33).

In the following section, I examine figurine production from the central Mexican Highlands and the local traditions that emerged there. I concentrate on this area because it is the one that has been more thoroughly studied and documented than other Mesoamerican regions, and serves as the primary model for my comparison between the ancient and modern game. I am interested in finding out if central Mexican regions were influenced by or may

have influenced other traditions in later times.

We know from the archaeological record that each culture, and in fact, each village within that culture, exhibits its own artistic traits, as well as its own cultural and social values. Nevertheless, somewhere along the line, systems of exchange allowed for the incorporation of borrowed designs, especially in ceramic art. The preliminary analysis of figurines in this section refers to the Tlatilco culture unless indicated otherwise.

2.3 The Evolution of Female Figurine Production

In the early production stage, female figurines were made as “gingerbread” types and continued to develop to include large, hollow human forms that show stylistic characteristics of the Olmec culture (figure 2.6). They measure between 15 and 30 centimeters high, and can be identified by their small pubic protuberances that seem to designate the emerging sexuality of girls (figure 2.7) (de la Fuente, 2003: 240; Joyce, 2006: 310; Lesure, 2011). Other samples are not marked by sex, but often emphasize age, ritual, and social status (Marcos, 2006: 179) that can be distinguished by a certain hairstyle or jewelry such as ear spools.

The major concern of the artist was not correct anatomic proportion since a large number of figurines were hand-modeled with slender bodies, short arms, and wide thighs and hips (figure 2.8). Given the hips’ resemblance to an onion shape, they have been labeled *piernas de cebolla* (onion legs) (Westheim, 1950: 173; de la Fuente, 2003: 4; Joyce, 2000a: 33).⁶ If the

intention of the artist was to present a figurative form, then their realism was limited to the basic characteristics of what they represent (Westheim, 1950: 170; de la Fuente, 2003: 10). Figurines associated with the Pre-classic period according to Vaillant's typologies are classified as: A-B, C5-C9, D1-D2, and K.

The type D figurines that appeared during the Middle Pre-classic are more profuse than any other types. Figurines from this time period are characterized by their fine execution and attention to detail. They depict women with large slanted eyes, thin noses, and fine contours of the mouth, particularly those known as the "pretty ladies" (figure 2.9). Hand made with local clays, they were solid and hand-modeled with a technique known as *pastillaje* (appliqué). They also began to show stylistic traits of the Olmec culture (Bernal García, 2007: 158; Ekholm, 1944).

Hair

While the body was generally simplified, there is visual emphasis on the head that involved diverse and elaborate hairstyles that varied per region and figurine types. A few samples are shown with shaved heads and long strands of hair that falls either on the front, or to one side of the face (figure 2.10). All show traces of red paint on their hair and parts of their body. In Mesoamerican thought, the color red was associated with blood and understood to refer to kinship or bloodlines (Altman and West, 1992). In the past, vivid colors like red or blue were made from vegetable juices.

During the pre-Hispanic era (2000 B.C. -1525 A.D.), tints were extracted from plants that were utilized and combined with various elements, which

formed part of diverse artistic representations in the cultural groups of Mesoamerica (Guriola, 2010: 3). Covarrubias thinks that the red color was made from the seed of the *achiote* plant (*bixa oteuana*) that is the same one that the natives from Ecuador have used for many years to color their hair red (1961: 28-29). The red dye may have also been obtained from the cochineal insect that many Mesoamericans used throughout the years as a red color.

In ancient times, the red color was related to Xipetotec, “Our Lord of the Flayed One,” who was for the Aztecs, the red aspect of the quadripartite Tezcatlipoca (Markman and Markman, 1989: 31). There is also a relationship of the color red to a women’s menstruation and to the “East,” one of the four cardinal directions that in the Aztecs’ worldview was called “*Tlapallan*,” and *Tonatiuh Yquizayampa*,” where the sun rises” (Aguilar, 2006: 302)

Laurette Sejourne interprets the red dye on the hair as a symbol of the young corn plant, and thinks that the figurines were used in corn ceremonies (quoted in Báez-Jorge, 1988: 152). Sejourne’s theory is acceptable as a possible interpretation of one of the uses of figurines, as some of them were found in agricultural fields. Nonetheless, we cannot place all female figurines in the same context. What about the figurines that were found in domestic environments? Nudity offers a stimulus for procreation, and for that reason, female figurines have often been interpreted in relation to agricultural rites. If we consider the variety of costumes on figurines, then we can easily deduce that their uses were variable and flexible (Lesure, 2011).

Along with these decorations, several of the females are shown with

headdresses and turbans that vary remarkably per tradition. They range from simple to ornate, flat to tall, or round to cone-shaped (figure 2.11). Only a few figurines wear similar turbans or headdresses. The diversity in design not only serves to represent the different headpieces worn by Tlatilco women, but also may have indicated a marker of their social status or identity.

Corporal Paint

In addition, female figurines exhibit carved or incised designs on their bodies (figure 2.12). At times, only one side of the body is decorated, and part of the face in areas around the mouth, cheek, and across the eyes. Common pigments were red, yellow, white, and black. Although the people would have painted their bodies with different materials, roller stamps were the likely tools used for applying these designs on the body (Coe, 1965: 26). Sejourne provides an excellent description of Tlatilco female figurines and their aesthetic beauty:

When one observes these figurines up close, we are surprised to discover that, despite their diverse adornments and expressions, they [are] of a surprising uniformity (...) they appear to represent young girls: infantile faces (...) small breasts, hips and abdomen characteristic of adolescents in formation (quoted in Báez-Jorge, 1968, trans. from Spanish; my translation).

The facial and body paint displayed by the female figurines inscribes what Rosemary Joyce has called “permanent moments of beautified, gendered performance” (2000a). In Mesoamerica, markers of individual distinction would have played a major role in the lives of the people, whether to conform to one’s prescribed individual identity, or display ties to a group other than one’s own.

The incorporation of body ornamentation and movement in figurine design served to express this individual quality, which was commonly related specifically to sexuality (*ibid.*).

Female figurines that wear ballgame vestments fit into the category of gendered performance. As ballplayers, they could become incorporated into a community ritual that involved entertainment, competition, role-playing, and spectacle. Their costume in itself would have transformed them from ordinary women to ritual performers. Throughout the course of history, women have searched for a public arena where they could express their individuality. Ball courts would have served as the perfect settings for these personal expressions.

2.4 Introduction to Female Ballplayer Figurines

The ancient rubber ballgame was a ritual sport that embodied all aspects of indigenous ritual life, religion, and myth. Some cultures played it as a form of recreation, and others sought in the ritual a means by which they could confront the gods on the court. While there were a variety of games played in the pre-Hispanic past, the hip rubber ballgame stands out as the most popular form adopted by the peoples of the Americas.

Because the ball could be struck with the hip, thigh, or forearm, depending on the game involved, decoration that represents the padding worn on these body parts provides important clues to the kinds of games women played. In some regions players were also allowed to use their elbows, fists, or

knees. These body parts were protected with thick cloths fabricated from cotton or animal skin such as deer hide. There is also a suggestion of teams, as indicated by figurines that wear similar ballgame outfits, such as those samples from the sites of Xochipala, and Pánuco.

In Tlapacoya, female ballplayers wear similar hip garments and no other padding on the body is displayed, which suggests they were playing the hip rubber ballgame in that area. This differs from the outfit worn by the male players, which is more elaborate and suggests a complex ceremonial role in the ballgame ritual. In contrast, a few figurines from Xochipala wear padding on their hips, wrists and knees, which resembles the ballgame outfit of the male players. This is important because it suggests that men and women were involved in similar types of games, and they may have held equally social roles. The female figurines from West Mexico and the Gulf Coast further demonstrate that women played variations of the rubber ballgame, since female figurines are depicted with diverse ballgame uniforms.

Although most of the figurines are upright and show no movement of the body, there are a few samples that exhibit some type of ball-playing action (kneeling down to strike the ball, forward stance of the body). The figurines from West Mexico, in particular, appear as if they are already playing the game (El Opeño, Xochipala). While the rules of early period games were not recorded, we can detect what types of games were played from sculptures and ceramic figurines dressed in ballgame vestments.

The knowledge we have of the game's function and symbolism is ample,

but unfortunately not much is known about the ballplayer figurines, much less about those that represent women. Bradley's essay entitled "Gender, Power, and Fertility in the Olmec Ritual Ballgame" is the only work that broadly discusses the outfits and symbolism of female ballplayer figurines from the Valley of Mexico (2001).

Thus, the aim of this chapter is to contribute to the scholarship initiated by Bradley's work, and that of the few scholars who have acknowledged women as prominent social actors in indigenous ritual activities. An analysis of the female ballplayer figurines' costume will aid in this task, and in the overall reconstruction of the Mesoamerican ballgame.

Ballplayer Figurines from the Valley of Mexico

The Valley of Mexico played a major role in the formation of the ancient hip rubber ballgame ever since it was first practiced there. First of all, a large number of ballplayer figurines were made in and around that area. Second, the game became central to religious activities in Tenochtitlán under the influence of Aztec culture during the late Post-classic period (Pasztory, 1972: 441). While the Aztecs did not make ballplayer ceramic figurines, they did express the importance of the game through sacred codices, and the rituals that recreated the illustrious battle on the ball court between the Sun god, Huitzilopochtli, and Moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui.

The Tlatilco Tradition (1500 B.C. – 200 A. D)

The ballplayer figurines from Tlatilco have been primary sources for

understanding the game in the Valley of Mexico. They inform us that both men and women were allowed to play, although female ballplayer figurines are relatively scarce in comparison to male samples. This is surprising because female figurines commonly outnumber males in Tlatilco's archaeological record. The ball courts they used to play the game were not constructed from stone, as was the custom in other parts of Mesoamerica during the Late Pre-classic period. Rather, they played on open spaces that may have been reserved especially for the game and the rituals that it incorporated. The Olmecs, who may have introduced the game there, also played on flat open fields that were constructed from dirt.

Male Ballplayer Figurines

Ceramic figurines of male ballplayers are a distinct minority compared to the quantity we see in the Tlapacoya corpus. Yet there are enough samples to detect what type of ballgame garments males wore and how the game was played. The outfits worn by the ballplayers vary from simple to elaborate (figure 2.13a-d; 2.14e-f). Their arrangement on the body suggests they were worn in playing the hip rubber ballgame, although it is likely players used other body parts to strike the ball, given that a few samples show padding on their knees, hands, and ankles. The differences in the ballgame costume worn by various figurines may point to the status or role of the person wearing it, and may also indicate what type of game was being played.

Some of the figures are shown with turbans, rounded hats, or helmets.

The functions of these headpieces may have been to protect the players from the rubber ball. However, the difference in the design would have been particular to a certain tradition. Those individuals that are shown with the most elaborate headdresses also wear costumes that are well defined, and whose intricacy suggests a ceremonial role (figures 2.14e-f). The buccal mask and circular adornments that complement the figurines' costumes are similar to those worn by some of the male players from Tlapacoya. There, they have been identified as rulers or shamans (Neiderberger, 1987), but I suspect that the figurines of male players from Tlatilco are portraying persons of special rank, and not religious personages.

The youthful facial characteristics of the figurines and slender youthful body leads me to believe that the male players were young men, even though there is an example of a bearded man holding a ball who appears to be of old age (figure 2.15). The bearded figure wears a hip garment like those worn by some of the other players, which suggests that his role in the game was that of a player, or perhaps he served as judge, or sponsor. All the male ballplayer samples have traces of yellow and red paint, and have been classified by Michael Coe (1965) as type D1 figurines.

The only example I was able to find that has been identified as a female ballplayer does not fit into Tlatilco's artistic tradition, but is modeled like the female figurines from Tlapacoya (figure 2.16a) (Whittington, 2001). Her likeness to the figurines from that area is noticeable in the treatment of the

hands and feet that have been pinched or curved. Neiderberger Betton (1987) identified this as a general trait of *pilli*-type figures. The female ballplayer's simple hip garment suggests she played the hip rubber ballgame. While the body is carefully modeled, her face appears to be abstracted. This may be a result of wear over time, or that the artists did not place emphasis on the face as they did on male samples, particularly those that wear intricate costumes.

A similar clothing item is shown on a few female figurine fragments from Tlapacoya (figure 2.16b-f). Although they are not acknowledged in scholarly literature as ballplayers, the likeness in the outfits suggests they were also representing this role. Here, in contrast to the religious role that males may have played in the game, I suspect that women were playing the game as a pastime given the simplicity of their outfit. Although Bradley (2001) identified the headpiece on *figure 2.16a* as a corn symbol, this theory has yet to be proven, as there are not sufficient female ballplayer samples available that we can use to compare with the outfits of the male players.

The Tlapacoya Tradition (1500 – 200 B.C.)

Tlapacoya is recognized for its distinct production of *pilli*-type figurines that portray acrobats, musicians, and ballplayers (Diehl, 2004: 162). Neiderberger—who discovered the figurines in the late 1970's—gave them this name that signifies “noble” in the Náhuatl language (Karttunen, 1983: 195). A general characteristic of these figurine types is their arched pupils that were made with a plowing stroke (figure 2.17) (Coe, 1965: 18). While these

characteristics are unique for Tlapacoya, in some ways they also resemble traits of Olmec sculptures (Piña Chán, 1956: 88; Bradley, 2001; Betton, 1987). Stylistic Olmec conventions include: naturalistic depiction of body and head; figurines that are oblong in frontal view and in side view; eyes typically formed with narrow slits tapering to points with no indication of pupils; incised eyebrows; trapezoidal mouth, sharply down turned at either side (figure 2.18) (Covarrubias, 1961: 31).

Ballplayer figurines were found in Tlapacoya completely fragmented or with figures fully intact. A few contain traces of black manganese deposits on their bodies, suggesting they were placed in underground chambers or tombs. Their placement in interments implies that figurines may have been protectors and companions for the deceased in the afterlife (Tibón 1967: 12). Covarrubias had proposed this idea when examining the burial sites in Tlatilco. Other scholars believe the figurines were interred with the dead to continue the game in the Underworld (Barba De Piña Chán, 2007; Ochoa Castillo, 1992: 34; Wolf, 1967: 74).

Although there is no clear indication of how many of the figurines were male or female, Maria Elena Bernal Garcia observed that regardless of the sex of the deceased, female figurines were more commonly interred with the dead (personal comm., 2012). The wide corpus of female figurines in burials makes a strong statement about the way early agricultural societies viewed gender roles. When we think of the terms “protectors” or “companions” we often tend

to associate them with male attributes because these roles have been commonly assigned to them. In the past, men were associated with the Underworld, and the forces of darkness because presumably only they could ward off the evil forces that resided there. It is also why scholars have not generally thought of women as ballplayers, since the game required a great amount of physical strength.

However, the fact that female ballplayers were also interred with the deceased suggests that gender roles in Pre-classic societies were not constructed or defined according to patriarchal notions of who was strongest or most powerful. Rather, women and men may have held similar roles that they each carried out differently. In the ballgame, this argument may not seem convincing given differences in the ballgame costumes of men and women with more elaborate regalia on the males, which suggest that in the ballgame they may have had a more significant role in the ballgame ritual. However, this difference is only marked for early periods and not thereafter. At times the importance of women ballplayers is not indicated by costume, but by quantity or mode of manufacture, such as is the case of the female ballplayer figurines from Pánuco that display exquisite attention to the human body and face.

In-depth examination of the outfits of the ballplayers indicates that there is no consistency between the vestments of men and women (Bradley, 1997; 2001: 33). Male *pilli* ballplayers wear elaborate ball court paraphernalia, while the female's outfit is limited to a simple hip garment (figure 2.19). Women may

have played the game in a more entertainment-based form, while the complexity of the male's outfits suggest their role was more ceremonial, such as was the case in Tlatilco. All samples thus far can be traced to Tlapacoya. Although only a small percentage of those are female, and even a smaller number are dressed as ballplayers, their discovery marked an important breakthrough for the study of female roles (Bradley, 2001; Bradley and Joralemon, 1992: 17).

Male Ballplayers

Male figures in the *pilli* style are particularly abundant in the Valley of Mexico during the Early Pre-classic Ayotla Phase (1250-1000 B.C.) (Bradley, 1997; 2001: 33; Bradley and Joralemon, 1992: 18). The thick, protective bands on their arms, wrist (or hands), knees, and ankles identify them as ballplayers (figure 2.20). Additional ballgame gear includes a wide heavy belt that protrudes toward the front that most often contains a circular object, which may represent the concave mirrors worn by Olmec nobles (Coe, 1965: 54). Coe identified the mirror as a symbol of political and religious authority that was used to evoke the Sun God, an aspect of the Bird Monster (Bradley and Joralemon, 1992: 19).

Characteristics of the Sun God as classified by Joralemon are the flame eyebrows and wing claws (Joralemon, 1990: 65). The pads that hang over their hips remind me of those worn by the Maya ballplayers of the Classic period (figure 2.21). However, unlike Maya ballplayers who are always depicted in energetic poses (figure 2.22), the figures from Tlapacoya show no movement or

action. To a certain extent, the static stances of the bodies are transmitting a role they were meant to carry out or symbolize (de la Fuente, 2004: 13).

Masks and Headdresses

The majority of the male figurines wear a small buccal mask (a ritual clothing item that is not present on female figurines) that covers the lower part of the face. Presumably the masks were worn to acquire the qualities of the supernatural the player wanted to represent, while at the same time maintaining his identity (Bradley and Joralemon, 1992: 18). Among the Aztecs, deity impersonators often used masks in monthly ceremonies. In addition, some Aztec gods are shown in codices wearing them (Borhegyi, 1955: 210). For Peter Markman and Roberta Markman, partial masking delineates a merging of god and man in a truly *liminal* moment (1989: 78). Masks may have also functioned as performative props to depict some type of drama or religious theme. Borhegyi defines this dramatic performance as the main objective of the masked dancers on the Bonampak murals (Borhegyi, 1955: 210). Given the different uses of masks in Mesoamerican cultures, I am certain they played important roles in the Pre-classic game other than to protect the player.

Another item worn by the male players is a towering and distinctive headdress that forms the shape of an hourglass (Coe, 1965: 54). A ballplayer figurine sample (figure 2.23) wears a particular headdress that is embellished with trios of circular medallions that have been placed around the wide brim of the headdress. Bradley and Joralemon identified the medallions as symbols of the “Seed-corn Dot” motif that is shared by the Olmec Maize God (1992: 19).

While Coe suggests that the masked figures are ritual ballplayers (1965), Neiderberger (1987) and Reyna Robles (1971) argued that they could have served other roles such as rulers, priests, or shamans, or a combination of these. The message that these masked ballplayers embody is a generalized concept of fertility and authority controlled by one type of man, but as Westheim notes, their manufacture and number suggests they are emblems, and not depictions of specific individuals (1950: 22).

Female Ballplayers

In comparison to the male's outfit, the costume worn by female ballplayers is more basic. It was generally composed of a belt, pendant, and strap that are draped across the female's hip or waist (figure 2.24a). In rare cases, the outfit differs from this arrangement. For example, a female figure (2.24b) that Douglas Bradley identified as a ballplayer does not wear this hip garment. Instead, she is shown with a skirt-like outfit that has what appear to be tassels hanging from below. A similar figure in Reyna Robles's charts depicts the same clothing piece (2.24c) (barely visible). Reyna does not state that the figure is a ballplayer, but her outfit and padding on the ankles and wrists points to this role. The game these women played seems to not have been limited to the use of the hip.

At first glance, I was skeptical of their identification as ballplayers because Bradley never mentioned why he had reached such a conclusion based on the outfit alone. When I first observed the image of the figurine I was under the impression that the female figure was wearing a ceremonial skirt that

women may have worn in a ritual dance or performance. The padding on her ankles and wrists may also be rattles and ceremonial bracelets, and not necessarily ballgame padding. However, upon closer examination of the male's outfits, I was able to find at least one sample that uses the same padding on the wrist and ankles as part of his ballgame equipment (figure 2.19a). A few of the ballplayer figurines from Xochipala are likewise shown with this type of padding.

Other samples wear black painted belts that contain a rectangular panel that hangs from the waist and another over the groin area (figure 2.25). The placement of the padding suggests they played a game similar to hip *ulama*, in which the ball was struck with the hip, thighs or buttocks. The fact that the outfit was applied after it had been fired suggests that the uses of these figurines were multiple (Bradley, 2001: 37).

Despite the apparently limited depiction of Tlapacoya female ballplayers, according to Bradley, their presence suggests that the game began as a sport played by common people, and evolved into a religious ceremony controlled by rulers (*ibid.*, 34). I agree with Bradley that the game almost certainly developed out of play by common people, and the depiction of women suggests that both sexes played. I am less convinced about the evolution of the game into an institution exclusively controlled by the elite because he has failed to appreciate the political significance of artistic representation.

If one were to examine baseball in the United States for instance, the preponderance of artistic representations—baseball cards, posters and television—one would conclude that the game was limited to professional

baseball played exclusively by males, and that form of baseball is controlled by a handful of powerful individuals. The professional sport, however, makes up a minuscule portion of all the baseball played throughout the country by common people, and the elite have little control over that game. It is not surprising to see the inventory of Pre-Columbian ballgame images that are preserved on figurines, vases, and stone reliefs that reflect the patronage of the ruling classes dominated by males in royal garb (figure 2.26). However, these images speak less to the nature of the game and elite control over it than to the political nature of image making.

The need to carry out more extensive systematic studies of popular culture is reflected here with Douglas's analysis. In Mesoamerican research, there has been a bias toward the analysis of elite objects of material culture (which also may be more well preserved), such as the jade pieces from Olmec regions or Maya stelae. Given their status in society, they have been the subject of more attention than figurines, which some scholars find are less significant than the elite media given their small-scale and their manufacture in clay that is presumably less prestigious than jade or basalt.

2.5 Female Ballplayer Figurines from West Mexico

During the early part of the 20th century, the ritual and social significance of the rubber ballgame in West Mexican towns had not yet been fully recognized. While archaeologists and art historians were studying the ceramics of the West, ballgame related art was completely ignored. The significance of

the ballgame is not only attested by actual ball court structures, but also by the vast number of ballplayer figurines and related ceramic ball court models that have been found in burials throughout West Mexico. Furthermore, investigations by Lorenza López and Jorge Ramos de la Vega have demonstrated that the West Mexican game tradition is as old if not older than those versions played elsewhere throughout Mesoamerica (1998).

One of the sites that proved significant for the game's practice in this area was El Opeño, Michoacán. Eduardo Noguera and Arturo Oliveros were conducting tomb excavations there in the 1970's when they discovered a group of eight figurines involved in what appeared to be a ritual ballgame. Five of the figurines were males and three female (figure 2.27). The males are shown with ballgame gear--*manoplas* (hand mitts), padding on their arms and lower legs—and wear similar helmets that seem to suggest they formed part of a team (Stevenson, 2001: 67).

It is not clear whether the females are also ballplayers, since they wear no ballgame outfit. The female figurines are in a seated position, perhaps as spectators, which Oliveros suggest was the role of women for the game played at that time in El Opeño (1992: 46). The entire figurine set was discovered in an ancient shaft tomb, along with a *yugito*, a small curved stone object possibly used as knee or hand protection during a game (Scott, 2001: 51). They have been dated to 1500 B.C., making them contemporaneous with, and perhaps even earlier than other figures of the early Pre-classic, including examples from Olmec sites.

Figurine sets that represent teams were also found in Colima. In one example (figure 2.28) some of the figures are wearing ballgame outfits, while others are playing music, dancing, or performing acrobatics (Stevenson, 2001: 69). A few of the ballplayers wear ballgame yokes with phallus-like adornments attached in the front that may represent *hachas* (ceremonial axes). We see similar phallus-like elements worn by Huastec men during the Aztec festival of Ochpanztli in which they are shown impersonating clowns, and performing a mock battle before the sacrifice of a maiden (see figure 4.11). The other players wear hip garments that hang down to their ankles. The men standing around do not appear to be ballplayers, but perhaps are spectators who are waiting for the game to begin. The combination of the players and ritual outfits worn by the other males demonstrates that the west Mexican ballgame was rooted around secular activities that focused on the entertainment-based quality of the ballgame ritual.

Female Ballplayers from Tuxcacuesco, Jalisco

In the 1940's, Isabel Kelly (1949) examined ceramic female figurines from a series of related sites along the Salado and Colima rivers in northeastern Colima and around Tuxcacuesco in southern Jalisco. These figurines yielded the surprising date of c.1500 B.C., comparable to those of El Opeño (Townsend, 1998: 22). The postures of the figurines suggest some type of action, most likely related to the ballgame (figure 2.29). Figurines from this site were commonly hand-made in a flat "gingerbread" style or modeled fully in the round. One of the female figurines is shown holding a ball (a). In the art of the

West, it is common to see a figure holding a ball (figure 2.30). Those ballplayer samples from Jalisco, in particular, are hardly represented in other poses. They are assumed to be ballplayers because of the hip garment they are wearing.

The ballplayers from Tuxcacuesco also wear hip garments that appear to be yokes, specialized belts made of stone, leather, wood, or padded cotton and worn around the hips as body protection.⁷ The yokes can be separated into three distinct styles: 1) *traditional* (figure 2.29a), 2) *phallic* (figure 2.29d), and 3) *Tuxcacuesco* (figs. 2.29e-f). The *traditional* type appears mostly on males, although there are samples of female players that wear yokes of this style. Their outfit is the simplest of the three styles. *Phallic-style* yokes are a variation of traditional style yokes that have representations of phalluses attached in the front. Round figurines of buff, unslipped ceramic wearing phallic-style yokes are identifiable as dancers, musicians, and acrobats, all types associated with ballgame celebrations throughout Mesoamerica that perhaps represented ritual performers, and perhaps some form of ritual humor. The Tuxcacuesco figurines wear yokes that most resemble those worn by Post-classic period ballplayers.

Female Ballplayers from Xochipala

At Xochipala, Guerrero, hundreds of figurines were made that celebrated playing the ballgame. Some adopt the ball-players' characteristic kneeling posture; others wear the ballplayers' protection around the head, hands, or waist (figure 2.31). The Xochipala ballplayer (figure 2.32f) in the Princeton Museum holds a ball at chest height and prepares to set it into play (Miller,

1989: 24). While this ballplayer is often referred to as a male in scholarly sources, I concur with Mary Miller that it represents a woman, not only because of her painted nipples, but because her outfit parallels those worn by the other female ballplayers. In this respect, I also argue that *figure 2.32a* is a woman and not a man. Although the figure is wearing a ballgame outfit that resembles the ones worn by males (*figure 2.31b*), her physical characteristics, such as the narrow shoulders, slim body, and small breasts seem to suggest otherwise.

I want to briefly point out that the sexual characteristics of the female ballplayers from Xochipala are not the only elements that led me to conclude they represent women. In this analysis I also took into consideration other factors like individual attributes and their relation to types of clothing or age. In Mesoamerica, men and women were not always represented with specific sexual characteristics because in some cultures gender status could be interchangeable or ambiguous.

In this case, the manner in which one could determine whether someone was socially identified as male or female was usually through a certain mark, symbol, and at times, clothing items. On the same note, it is possible that women from Xochipala may have played some of the same games in which males participated. In this respect, the ballgame regalia may have been similar to those worn by men. While there have been cases where women assumed male roles and vice a versa, I do not find it likely that this was the case for Xochipala. Rather, the similarity of the outfits suggests that women may have been playing against men, or that they formed mixed-sexed teams. In addition,

the representation of female ballplayer figurines with hip garments may illustrate only one type of game for that area, and not necessarily that this was the only game they played.

Small, modeled breasts and a swollen belly oftentimes represent female sexuality. Ornamentation on the figures also helps to determine if they are male or female. Generally, female figurines are wearing necklaces or bracelets (Joyce, 2000a: 33). In the case where these ornaments are missing and the body is sexually neutral, it is more difficult to determine the sex of the figure. However, the Xochipala female figurines display physical traits (breasts, slim body) that are exhibited on other female figurines such as those from Tlatilco.

The west Mexican ballplayer figurines presented here refer to a profound sentiment that is attentive to daily life. They present for the spectator an interesting dialogue that speaks of the importance of the game and secular ritual. This we can see most clearly in the ceramic ball court and village models that portray children, adolescents, elders, and men and women who are either talking, playing or observing the game, or engaged in other activities that are non-ballgame related (Arroyo García, 2003: 19).

The diversity of dress on the ceramic figurines and the depiction of ceramic models of the festivals that accompanied ballgame rituals place the game in a wider social context than had been suggested by scholars before the West Mexican collections came to light. Ceremonial complexes centered on the game and ball court spaces would have allowed the community to express its social values, build relationships, and establish aspects of social and political

order, all at the popular level. While the production of female ballplayer figurines ceased in the Late Pre-classic period in Western Mexico, women continued to play an important role in the rubber ballgame in Pánuco, Veracruz within the Huastec culture.

2.6 The Huastec Culture

The Huastec region along the Gulf Coast is a mountainous area with a warm climate that allowed for the cultivation of an assortment of crops. People relied on agricultural practices for subsistence and were known to be great hunters and gatherers. The Gulf Coast was also home to the Olmec people who may have been the first society to transform the game into a religious activity that involved human sacrifice. Many changes occurred after the establishment of Pre-classic Huastec villages, including the formation of city-states and construction of large circular structures that were dedicated to Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl (Miller, 2006: 181). These structures became a distinct architectural feature of Huastec communities, contrasting dramatically with the pyramidal shapes of buildings that were forming throughout ceremonial centers during the Post-classic period. When Cortés' arrived there in 1519, the Chichimec, Tamaulipan, and Totonac tribes inhabited this area (Kuehne, 1993: 158).

The People, Dress, and Ritual Customs

The lives and customs of the Huastec people may be best understood from reading *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (1961). In

Volume Ten, Sahagún vividly describes the Huastec culture, their religion, physical appearance, and ritual practices. According to Sahagún, the Huastec were known as Toveiome, Panteca, or Panoteca (“crossing point”), names that designate the region that today is known as Pánuco. Their language is related to the Mayan language family of southern Mesoamerica (Miller, 2006: 181).

Sahagún describes the people as having wide foreheads and stubby heads. Women’s hips were large and their heads were wide. These physical qualities of Huastec women are not shown on female stone sculptures, but are displayed on clay figurines. Their physique was a delight for Huemac, the ruler of Tula, who on one occasion asked for Huastec women because they had hips that were “four palms in width.” Women are also mentioned in the *Anales de Cuauhtitlan*, where Huastec women are described as goddesses, and referred to as the ixcuiname, one of the names attributed to the central Mexican goddess Tlazoltéotl (Ochoa, 2000: 60).

Among the differences between Huastec men and women were their personal appearance and behavior. Men were always seen nude, and perforated their noses to insert gold ornaments, feathers, or palm leaves. They also filed and stained their teeth red or other dark colors. One of the pleasures of the Huastec men was drinking *pulque*. Although the drink was probably reserved for ritual celebrations, the Huastec drank it in excess for its intoxicating qualities. The Aztecs viewed the drunken behavior and nudity of men as a defect of the Huastec peoples (Sahagún, 1961).

Some Huastec women went without clothes, but most wore shirts and

skirts on a daily basis. In addition, they adorned their hair with multicolored strips of cloth and bright feathers. Both men and women used diverse colors on their hair, along with corporal and facial decoration that they applied with paint, ranging from simple linear designs to complicated geometric ones. In Huastec culture, adornment appears to have been an important part of the representation of the self that served to distinguish the individual from the rest of the community members. Using bodily adornment and an iconography that remains poorly understood, the Huastec transmitted messages of social identity through an amalgamation of symbols. The Aztecs, who were their contemporaries, condemned the use of corporal and facial decoration in women in their own society because they believed it was a practice reserved for prostitutes (Luján, 2008: 35).

Another form of corporal decoration was scarification. They achieved this by piercing the face, arms, or legs with a jagged or pointed tool. Examples of this form of mutilation can be seen on some Huastec female figurines (figure 2.33). The modification of teeth was not as common as we see in the Maya culture, but there are a few examples of teeth inlaid with precious stones, perhaps to reflect an aesthetic ideal about how a person from a specific group should look. These forms of decoration or body modification would have varied across times and regions.

Religion

The religion of the Huastecs focused on the veneration of a pantheon gods and goddesses. Two of the most important deities were comparable to

the Aztec gods Mixcóatl and Tlazoltéotl. Mixcóatl was known as the god of hunting, and for that matter the Huastecs identified themselves as “people of the deer” or as “descendents of Mixcóatl” (figure 2.34) (Ochoa, 2000: 60). Tlazoltéotl was the goddess of filth and carnal pleasures (figure 2.35) who consumed the sins of men. She was the wife of Piltzintecutli, the young sun god (Thompson, 1934: 232). The deity was associated with cults of fertility, women’s reproductive cycles, maternity, the moon, and the art of weaving.

While she could be benevolent, she could also be destructive (Fuentes Reyes *et al.*, 2008: 21). We do not know what the Huastecs called her, but the deity that Sahagún describes as the Aztecs’ Tlazoltéotl appears to be the same one the Huastecs worshipped. Sometime during the Post-classic period, she was borrowed from the Huastecs by the Toltecs and later the Aztecs (Ochoa, 2000: 60). When she returned to the Huastec region, she had been completely transformed by these cultures.

Another deity of importance was Ehécatl, god of wind (figure 2.36). In Central Mexico he is identified as a manifestation of Quetzalcóatl, Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl, and is characterized by a cone-shaped hat, earspools in the form of a hook, and a pectoral in the form of a cut shell called *eheilacacózcatl* (*ibid.*, 62). Several Huastec male sculptures are shown displaying this deity’s costume.

Huastec Art

Lapidary arts, goldsmithing, and weaving were some of the crafts that the Huastecs practiced with a high level of expertise. The ornaments they wore

on different parts of their bodies were finely crafted with precious jewels like jade and shell. The mantles that women made for the community were called *centzontilatli*, a name that signifies “mantle of a thousand colors.” They were of the finest quality, and adorned with complex designs, and because of their exquisite beauty this was the primary tribute item Huastec communities provided to the Aztec rulers (Diehl, 2000: 184).

Large stone sculptures of men and women were created in great quantities, and generally represented fertility and agricultural deities or were tied to death cults. The production of statues was not limited to portraying any one gender, but represented men and women equally. The attention given to the proportions and quality of the sculptures of both sexes suggests that Huastec society was based on an egalitarian system of gender relations, which most likely was reflected in economic and sociopolitical management (Ladrón de Guevara, 2008: 12).

The statues of women stand out for the magnificent modeling of the body. Their protruding breasts and hands placed on the abdomen distinguish them from the males. They are also shown with complicated headdresses and conical hats whose designs are related to the phases of the moon. This connection to the moon links the sculptures with Tlazoltéotl (Solis, 1994: 188) who wears a nose-plug in the form of a semi circle, which symbolizes the half moon as it appears in the night sky (Glasson, 2001:140). Moon goddesses and lunar phases were related to women’s conception, fertility, and childbirth. Prominent breasts and hands placed on the belly might indicate the female

sculptures emphasize women's fertility and maternal value.

Female Figurines

The Huastec people produced equally magnificent sculpted ceramic figurines. In this specialized craft, most figurines were made to represent women (figure 2.37). Figurines were grouped into types according to similar traits, and the manner in which they were made—by aesthetic standards and the same technical methods (Ekholm, 1944: 435). The characteristics that determined how they are grouped include mode of manufacture: hand or mold-made, the technique for forming the facial features, the shape of the head and face, and the quality of the clay (*ibid*).

While many of the figurines are dressed in casual attire, a number of them represent the goddess Tlazoltéotl, identified by the dark spots on their mouths that represent the “filth” or the sins that the goddess consumes (figure 2.38). Cranial deformation displayed on some of the figurines is also symbolic of the goddess in her manifestation as a member of the *Cihuateteo*, who were the spirits of women who died in childbirth. As with the Aztecs, women with elongated heads may have been selected for deformation at birth, since cranial deformation was practiced on newborns (Tarazona Garza, 1991: 36).

Some of these same figurines have a buccal mask similar to the one the combined deity Xipe-Tlazoltéotl wears (Centro de Veracruz, Soledad de Doblado 300-900 d.c) (Fuentes Reyes, *et al.*, 2008: 24). In this variant, Tlazoltéotl dons the skin of the sacrificial victim, a characteristic attribute of Xipetotec, who wore the flayed skin of a sacrificial victim as a facial mask in

association with a fertility ritual tied to vegetation and the earth. Others are dressed as ballplayers, a ritual custom that was one of the most important practices of the Gulf Coast societies.

2.7 Huastec Culture Female Ballplayer Figurines

In Pánuco, Veracruz, large quantities of ballplayer figurines were manufactured during the late Pre-classic period and up until the Post-classic. Figurines from this region are of local origin and have distinctive traits that could not be confused with any others (Ekholm, 1944: 435). Both male and female figurines have similar physical characteristics: marked muscles, thin waists, wide hips, and protruding breasts, although women show a marked sensuality that is reminiscent of the “pretty ladies” from Tlatilco. The same treatment and shape applied to both the male and female bodies suggest that women might have been creating the figurines (Luján, 2008: 38).

Following the typologies created by Gordon Ekholm for the region of Pánuco, most female ballplayer figurines would fit into the “C Type” category and the males in the “B Type.” Characteristic of the “C” type are the large heads that were made from a fine grained, light brown clay that is often very well polished. Female figurines are further recognized by the three punctuations that form their eyes, the smooth fillets that shape their nose and mouth, and the two punctuated marks on these areas (figure 2.39). The chronological position of these figurines is not defined because they were found in different levels of excavation, or were purchased from private collections.

The type “B” figurines are the most common figurine types, and show some characteristics of the “C” type figures. They have been separated from the latter on the basis of their smaller size, crude execution, and lack of polish (Ekholm, 1944: 442). Unfortunately, there has not been sufficient excavation in this region to document the arrangement of the figurines that were found in interments. However, it is possible that figurines symbolizing entire teams may have been interred with the deceased to create ritual ballgame scenes (Stevenson, 2001: 70).

Female ballplayers are also represented in media other than clay. A stone *yugo* from Palma Sola, Veracruz (A.D. 600-900) contains an image of a female ballplayer hidden inside (figure 2.40). Although we do not know who wore the *yugo*, or for what purpose, the depiction of the female ballplayer confirms the importance of women for the game. While no more images similar to this example were found in Palma Sola or anywhere else for that matter, there is some evidence that further points to the importance of women for this region. Sara Ládrón de Guevara stated that when archaeologists were reconstructing Palma Sola’s shrine, they found images of women specifically on the east side of the site (2008: 16). In Mesoamerican ideology, the East represented one of the four cardinal directions, and was attributed to *Tlapallan* (Aguilar, 2006: 302).

Ballgame Outfit

The ballgame attire worn by the female and male players differs in style

even within figurine types. For example, some figures wear a painted hip garment, or a yoke-type hip or waist protector. There are also some samples that show a mixture of both. Only a few of the figurines wear the traditional ballgame outfit that was used during the Post-classic period and is still used today in the modern hip rubber ballgame. The last category of figurines describes those ballplayers that have no hip garment, but do wear knee protectors. The classification of the ballgame equipment is as follows:

Ballplayer Figurines With Painted Hip Garments

There are five figurines that fit within this category, and four possible samples that may also be ballplayers. Figures 2.41 *a-d* have painted hip garments that were applied before or after firing such as was the case of the *pilli*-type female ballplayer figurines from Tlapacoya. Although the hip garment for figure 2.41*f* is not clear, there are traces of black paint in the groin area that suggests she also wore this garment.

Four of the samples (a-d) have scarifications on their shoulders. The similarity in the marks may indicate they were from the same village, a particular group, or of a certain age. Only sample 2.41*d* has marks on her forearms that, in my opinion, indicate the use of padding. One of the ways in which the game was played in the past was by hitting the ball with the forearm. Dulce Elizabeth Villa from El Guamúchil, Sinaloa uses this type of protection on the arm to play *Ulama de Antebrazo* (figure 2.41*e*). In addition, this figure has padding on her knees just like female sample in 2.41*f*. These different forms of protection would have involved a game in which the players were permitted to

hit the ball with body parts other than the hip.

Bartolome de las Casas mentioned that during the sixteenth century women in Haiti played a rubber ballgame in which the knees and fists were used to strike the ball (1967). I speculate that the ball used for the games in Pánuco and Haiti was smaller than the one used for the hip rubber ballgame given that its weight (around 8 lbs) would have injured those body parts. The last figures in this group also have a black painted hip garment on their groin area (figures 2.41g-h). Only figure “H” shows a mark on the knee that seems to be a kneepad. The broken legs of the other female ballplayer make it difficult to determine if she also had padding there.

Ballplayers With Ballgame Yokes

The following group of ballplayer figurines is shown with heavy padding on their waists that may represent *yugos* (yokes) (figure 2.42a). Yokes were popular ballgame items in Veracruz during the Classic period, and were also worn by Maya ballplayers in southern Mexico. Ballgame yokes were usually made from stone, wood, or other perishable material. The yokes worn by all the figurines in this group are relatively similar. Several of the samples also wear kneepads (*figs. a, f, g, h*), arm bands (*figs. f, g, h*), or wristbands (*figs. a, b*). Others show scarification marks on their shoulders or arms (*figs. a, c, e, h*).

The hip garment worn by several figurines is further accentuated with other body ornaments, including collars, bracelets, elaborate headdresses or hairdos, and earrings. The power of wearing the ballgame outfits with these decorative objects or hairstyles reveals the performative aspect of the game.

Their physical features and adornments suggest that most of the figurines represent young men and women. The fact that the figurines represent this age group makes me think that the ballgame may have been played in connection with the rituals that were performed as a means of initiation into adulthood. Perhaps these young players had to compete in games to be accepted as prominent members of society. Certainly, the decorations and modifications they used on their bodies would have also separated them from the other members of their village.

Aztec iconography offers examples of body ornaments being used to identify stages of adolescence. In Aztec society, women may have not been allowed to decorate their bodies, but Aztec children were ornamented according to their age. Joyce mentions that approximately every four years from birth through adolescence, transitions in the lifecycle were visibly marked through changes in practices of dress and body ornamentation (2000b: 478). These ritual behaviors may not have been limited to the Aztec and the Huastec, but reflect practices that began with the earliest Mesoamerican villages.

The young female ballplayers from Esquinapa, Sinaloa that are currently playing hip *ulama* practice similar methods of decoration when they perform in special exhibits and parades. They have a special outfit that they use that has been decorated with indigenous designs to stand out from the other teams. They also paint certain design motifs on their faces to create the impression that they are ancient ballplayers. It is a practice that their uncles and grandfathers have used for years, and for which they are highly recognized

among the communities that play the game.

Similarly, when Don Chuy from El Quelite was participating in exhibition games at Cancún, he said that the players had to wear *ridiculous* (my emphasis) headdresses, decorative outfits, and geometric designs on their faces when they performed in front of the public (figure 2.43). The *ulama* male players were against this form of decoration because they could not play well while wearing the ballgame costume. They also disliked wearing make-up, which they thought should be reserved for the lady dancers who were supposedly impersonating ancient Maya women.

Although Don Chuy no longer performs in Cancún, he says the ballplayers are still forced to dress this way. I agree with Don Chuy that wearing additional props with the ballgame outfit makes it difficult to play. It also alters the meaning of the game, and reflects Eurocentric or romanticized views of how players would have looked in ancient times. While some pre-Hispanic ballgame-related art does show men attired in elaborate ballgame gear (e.g. Maya ballplayers), I doubt that they would have worn all these props during the game, since this would prevent them from moving freely across the court.

Traditional Hip Garments

Those outfits that most resemble the ones used by the Post-classic ballplayers or the modern *ulama* players fit within the category of traditional hip garments (figure 2.44a-h). Interestingly, almost all male players, and one female (g), wear this type of outfit. Since a few of the figurines also wear arm or

kneepads, the game may have been played in different forms. Two of the male figures wear an extra clothing item across their chest that may indicate their status or rank, which may have been removed once the game began (figure 2.44 e-f).

Ballplayers With No Hip Garment

The last group of ballplayers is unique because either they did not wear hip protection, or the paint has faded over time (figures 2.45a-e). They do, however, show padding on their knees. The first figure (a) is the one that Whittington identified as a ballplayer, while the others were simply classified as female figures (b-c). However, they have the exact same scarifications, and even the same treatment of the head (no hair). The baldness of their heads is reminiscent of Olmec figurines, particularly those known as “baby faces.” As I previously mentioned, figurines that display similar characteristics may very well be part of the same group of ballplayers, hence composing a team. The other figurines of this type also wear padding on their ankles, but only the figure on the right (e) shows some indication of a ballgame outfit.

Overall, figurines that may have belonged to a large group show rather common costume elements as opposed to the elaborate costume found in the two and three player figurine groups. Laura Ibarra argues that the figurines that are shown with more elaborate attire seem to suggest women who wore these outfits may have held a higher status, possibly one related to matrilineal social organization (1996: 122). As much as I would like to agree on both points, there is not sufficient evidence, to date, to prove that matrilineal clans existed in

Pánuco during the time periods in which the figurines were made. Perhaps future investigations may reveal the existence of matrilineal clans for Mesoamerican societies.

Headdresses and Corporal Adornment

Headdresses

Although the physical characteristics of the ballplayers do not show a marked distinction between them, the headdress of a figurine appears to indicate social identity. The headdress may consist of a peaked turban or a simple flat plaque that may represent hair (Ekholm, 1944: 441). The headpieces worn by ancient Huastec people served to identify personages who played a particular role in social organization. They may have also functioned as indicators of men and women who participated in a certain specialized type of activity or ritual (Vásquez Zárate, 2008: 57). It is likely that these elaborate headdresses were not everyday items, but were reserved especially for the ballgame ceremony. For example, the costume or headpieces would have differentiated between members of different teams.

The tradition of using headdresses to identify a certain group or person is practiced today in some parts of Veracruz. Huastec women adorn their hair with complicated turbans on special occasions such as market day, or someone's wedding. The design of the headpiece varies per community, and is distinguished by a certain arrangement of the hair and designs. A similar practice was recorded while I was conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Sinaloa. In the community of Los Llanitos, the men wear red bandanas on their heads to

show that they are from a certain community. Since some males who play *ulama de antebrazo* also wear red bandanas in ballgame competitions, the men from Los Llanitos flip the front part of the bandana to give it a different look. Similar distinctions may have applied to the headwear illustrated on ancient figurines, perhaps identifying players from specific communities.

Other teams who play the game today have altered their ballgame equipment altogether by decorating the hip garment in distinctive ways, or by wearing an additional clothing item on their ankles or feet. The ballplayers from Pánuco must have also followed certain traditions that would have determined what type of headdress they wore for such ritual celebrations. The intricacy of the design in the headpiece would have identified this person's rank, age, or status within the community, but not gender, since some of the females wear headdresses that are similar to those worn by the males.

Body Modification

One of the most interesting features of the ballplayer figurines from Pánuco is their corporal modification or scarification. This is a unique kind of marker that distinguishes these ballplayers from those of the areas previously discussed. Body modification was conducted in the past as an initiation rite, to mark a girl's transition from child to woman, the elevation of a commoner to king, or the rise of a young man to the status of warrior, among other things.

Blanca Martínez and León Mármol view the intentional modification of the human body as an act by which socio-cultural standardized rules are enacted, such that rulers of particular communities may have mandated these

forms of mutilations to distinguish one group's ethnic, social, or sexual status from another's (2008: 30). I agree that people would have applied these ritual practices to differentiate themselves from other groups, even within their own communities. Nevertheless, people may have used these forms of corporal modification because they were following certain norms or traditions dictated by society, perhaps related to clans, local community, or ceremonial status, and not necessarily social codes dictated by rulers.

The ancient Huastecs may have also practiced corporal modification to mark joining a special group. The story of the Spanish conquistador Gonzalo Guerrero exemplifies the way body modification relates to this strong sense of social belonging. After he had been shipwrecked and was captured by Maya warriors, he managed to escape sacrifice and became completely integrated into their culture. When Cortés sent his Spanish companions to rescue him, he refused to go with them. Not only were they surprised that he did not want to be "rescued," but they were also astonished to see him completely "adorned" (probably tattooed or painted) from head to toe, and wearing ear and nose plugs. Guerrero's complete transformation not only demonstrates that he had identified himself as a member of this Maya group, but that they had recognized him as a noble, since this corporal adornment was reserved for the elite (Vela, 2010: 12). Thus the kind of body decoration illustrated in the Pánuco figurine groups may have served, as in Guerrero's case, to mark both group membership and high social status.

Other scholars view corporal modification as a practice that is performed to better one's appearance (Luján, 2008; Reischer and Koo, 2004: 297). In today's society, men and women all over the world spend large amounts of money to transform themselves using cosmetics, jewelry, tattoos, and high status clothing. Beauty is judged by popular culture, that is, what viewers see on television, magazines, and billboards, and in the case of adolescents, peer pressure. Ultimately, they resort to spas, tanning salons, and especially, cosmetic surgeries to make themselves more attractive. Ballplayer figurines may also reflect standards of physical beautification, an ideal of athleticism, youth, and proper adornment.

Body modification can also relate to spiritual concepts and values. In some parts of Melanesia, for example, self-decoration is a medium through which people demonstrate their relationship to their ancestral spirits, and express certain ideals and emotions; in short, it is a way to make statements about their social and religious values (Strathern and Strathern, 1971: 1). Likewise, in the Korowagi Province in New Guinea, members of the Kamaneku tribe tattoo their bodies to identify a person as belonging to a specific group. The nose perforation performed on men who are to be warriors indicates their status, and is also used to intimidate other tribal members who have not yet become warriors and earned respect. Nose perforation is not mutilation in the context of its use, but instead signifies that a man has reached a new level in social rank (Discovery Channel, September 28, 2011).

For the residents of Pánuco, scarification may have served in part as a form of beautification. The same can be said of tattooing, or corporal adornment in general. In *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress, and the Body* Warwick and Cavallero observe that, “our understanding of bodily presentation cannot be limited by corporeal boundaries, since the alteration of the body through modification and ornamentation would affect one’s relationship to self and society” (1998).

Beauty, therefore, should be understood as more than superficial attention to appearance because it is closely tied to self-definition and social validation. Beauty, though highly subjective, is more than a matter of taste or aesthetics (Reisher and Koo, 2004: 298). It reflects a sense of being, of belonging, and is not necessarily limited to outer appearance. Standards of beauty also speak to societies and how they understand what is aesthetically pleasing. When words cannot transmit messages or social codes, people resort to other means, such as visual display, to do this.

The indigenous populations were masters of using the body as a medium for visual expression. Through the intentional modification of the body, they established a social identity for whoever engaged in this practice was participating in social circles that recognized specific cultural norms. Erica Reischer and Kathryn Koo once wrote, “Cultural ideals of beauty are also an index and expression of social values and beliefs so much so that the history of [society] is in large measure the history of women's beauty” (*ibid.*, 298). The messages that the ballplayers of Pánuco were trying to convey through their

ballgame costume, corporal adornment, and body mutilation may never be known, but through study of these figurines, we have a means to approach what was aesthetically and socially important.

2.8 Concluding Remarks

Archaeology establishes for the past a history that unfolds through an infinite display of monuments, sculptures, and artifacts. It is a discipline that finds parallels in written history and for that matter, can be granted the same considerations that have been made in relation to it (Barba de Piña Chan, 1956: 13). All art works unearthed in the last decades are valuable for the information they impart about the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica. In them we find relevance to history itself, and a glimpse into the lives of the individuals who created them.

The cultures of the Pre-classic period produced some of the finest ceramic figurines ever made by indigenous hands. These terracotta objects have been crucial for the study of Mesoamerican societies because they inform us about the dress and gender roles of the people who populated indigenous villages. However, they are often marginalized in archaeological and historical studies because they are not as commanding in size as the monumental stone sculptures made by the ancient Maya or Aztec. This is an unfortunate oversight, because figurines can offer ethnographic information about many aspects of life in ancient societies (Marcus, 1996).

In the archaeological record, it is women who appear more frequently

than males in small-scale ceramic arts. They have been found in diverse archaeological contexts such as burial offerings and common refuse, which suggests that their function and uses were interchangeable. Figurine production was a popular craft and not controlled by the elite classes. It is likely that women were making the figurines given the attention devoted to the female body and the number of female figurines that were made during the early Pre-classic period in such sites as Tlatilco. The craft may have begun as a simple activity using figurines to show the different stages of a women's lifecycle, or simply to represent real women. As time progressed, women were portrayed in social or ritual roles that projected symbolic codes about their importance in Pre-classic communities. Such has been the case of the female ballplayer figurines that are the focus of this study.

A challenging factor for examining female figurines is finding out how they were used. Although they made up more than half of the samples of artifacts unearthed in digs, their function remains ambiguous. Valliant (1930, 1934, 1935) associated them with fertility and growth, while Covarrubias (1961), Coe (1962), Tibón (1967) and Piña Chan (1952, 1955) believed they were placed in tombs as companions for the dead. Yet, their presence in both funerary contexts and trash deposits suggests that their functions were variable (Pasztor, 1983).

At times, we can detect the uses of figurines by examining the archaeological contexts where they were found. However, in most cases, figurines appear scattered throughout a site. All too often, they are removed

from archeological contexts, making it more difficult to access information as to how they were used. Neiderberger's 1987 reevaluation of the Tlapacoya corpus suggests that the large numbers of richly costumed Olmec-type figurines (e.g. ballplayers) found in that area might be related to subsistence activities. However, I argue that we cannot tell from costume alone how the figurines were used (or if they were used at all) for any type of ritual.

While the function of female figurines is still a matter of debate, some scholars agree that none were meant to represent goddesses or deities. The basis of this interpretation rests on the fact that they exhibit very little religious symbols that would identify them with such roles, such as the buccal masks worn by some male ballplayer figurines from Tlapacoya that make reference to the maize god (Bernal García, 2007; Piña Chán, 1952, 1955; Tibón, 1967; Covarrubias, 1961; Pasztory, 1983: 38). Yet, even though there is some agreement that they do not portray religious figures, they express a complex symbolism that has been interpreted generally or in part (Westheim, 1950: 158).

We must keep in mind one very important aspect of Mesoamerican societies. Pre-Hispanic civilizations contained a high degree of political, economic, and social complexity, and this would have determined the manner in which the figurines were used (Ekholm 1991: 249). Richard Lesure pointed out that in the Americas, youthfulness and coquetry rather than divinity seem to characterize female models (2011: 13). Lesure, a leading authority in figurine studies, has written extensively about all the positive ways in which figurines illustrate localized perceptions and portrayals of social difference, such

that:

The subject matter of the figurines should not be rulers, gods, or characters from myths but rather stereotypes, publicly shared representations of ordinary people. When such conditions are met, figurine analysis may be able to illuminate context-specific interplays of multiple dimensions of social difference. We may be able to glimpse how identities were constructed or subjectivities formed (*ibid.*, 31).

The female ballplayer figurines that I presented in this work have also been subject to scrutiny. While studies of them have been nominal within the archaeological discourse, those few scholars who have referenced them in their own works do so in terms of iconographic analysis alone. Others have simply ignored them completely in discussions of the ancient game. Their study and interpretation demands appreciation to help disprove the misconceptions that women did not contribute to the social formation of Mesoamerican cultures.

Bradley's work was innovative in that he was the first to address the figurines in terms of what they represented, an important breakthrough for their study. This chapter has moved beyond his analysis and has included other possible uses and functions of the figurines and what their presence means in terms of women's social status. Their existence suggests women played prominent social roles in early period societies and contradicts all previous notions that the game was an exclusively male sport. However, Bradley has suggested that the game began as a sport played by common people and evolved into a religious ceremony controlled by rulers. I am not convinced that the elite monopolized the game in these later periods because Bradley has failed to appreciate the political significance of artistic representation.

Female ballplayer figurines were manufactured in the sites of Tlatilco, Tlapacoya, Tuxcacuesco, Xochipala and Pánuco. Part of my study included an analysis of the social and ritual structures of these sites in order that I could form general theoretical positions concerning the role of material culture in that specific area. While they make up only a few of the areas where figurines were produced, they are of central importance to the study because they demonstrate that the game was played since the early Pre-classic period and that women were also allowed to participate.

Several female ballplayers figurines were found in underground chambers or tombs, suggesting they were companions for the dead, or were placed in these spaces to continue the game in the Underworld. While it is not clear how many female figurines were interred with the dead, their presence says something about the way early period cultures viewed gender roles. Usually tomb guardians are associated with male attributes, because men are usually characterized as protectors or the “tougher sex.” However, women may have held similar roles that were carried out differently.

In Tlatilco there were fewer female figurines than in Tlapacoya, and both were exceeded by the quantity found in Pánuco. It is interesting that the ballplayer sample from Tlatilco closely resembles the style of Tlapacoya. Their arched pupils and pinched or curved arms stylize the figurines from that region. The samples have been classified as belonging to the *pilli*-type figurines that resemble Olmec figures. Perhaps the figurines from Tlapacoya and those made by the Olmec shared similar artistic traits.

In Tlapacoya, the outfits on both male and female samples indicate that there is no consistency among them. Whereas the outfit of the male is more elaborate, the ballgame outfit worn by women is fashioned in a simpler form. The fact that their outfits were applied after firing suggests they may have served various purposes. The outfits on the female ballplayer figurines likewise indicate that in central Mexico young girls were playing hip *ulama*, while in West Mexico women were playing other variations of the game as suggested by the padding worn on the wrists, arms, and knees.

As for male ballplayers, there were variations in their ballplayer regalia such as ceremonial masks and headdresses. While the male ballplayers from Tlapacoya have often been described as shamans, I suspect they represent persons of special rank. There are other samples that also wear the same type of ballgame gear but have not been identified as ballplayers, such as the female ballplayer figurines from Pánuco that display no hair.

In the art of the West, ceramic ball court models show village scenes in which people are conducting everyday activities and other rituals such as the ballgame. The significance of the ballgame is not only attested by the actual ball court structures, but also by the number of ball player figurines and related ball court models found throughout west Mexican sites. The ceramic ball court models have been imperative for the study of the game because they demonstrate that not all ball courts served exclusively as playing grounds, and the people of the west placed emphasis on social activities that were observed on courts and in connection with the game. The community may have

expressed its social values, built relationships, and established social and political order in ball court spaces or ceremonial complexes, all at the popular level. Female ballplayer figurines from West Mexico are also minimal in number compared to male samples, but do show diversity in ballgame costume, which suggests the west Mexican people were playing several different ballgames.

In Pánuco, Veracruz, a large number of female ballplayer ceramic figurines were manufactured. The quantity of the figurines suggests that women held prominent roles in Huastec culture, as evidenced not only by the female figurines, but also by the number of female sculptures available, and the veneration of the Moon goddess Tlazoltéotl. The emphasis on gender balance demonstrates that Huastec cultures saw women as important persons who could also serve important public roles.

Tlazoltéotl's importance is also manifested on several figurines that are shown with black spots on their mouths to represent the filth that the goddess consumed when she forgave the sins of men. They are shown with cranial deformation that is a manifestation of the *Cihuateteo*, who were the spirits of women who died in childbirth and were compared to men going to battle. The buccal mask that some of them appear to wear makes reference to Xipe-Tlazoltéotl who wears the skin of a sacrificial victim in association with fertility rites tied to vegetation and the earth.

The physical characteristics of the ballplayers in Pánuco indicate that

they were young, and that the game may have been played in connection with the rituals that were performed as a means of an initiation into adulthood. The similarity in their physical characteristics such as the female figures that display the same type of scarification may indicate that they represent teams, or belong to a specific village. The unique feature of body modification may have served as a status marker, to mark initiation from child to women, or was simply applied for aesthetic reasons. The same treatment of the male and female bodies suggests that women may have been creating the figurines.

The headpieces worn by the ancient Huastec people would have served to identify personages who played a particular role in social organization or indicators of men and women who participated in certain ritual activities. It is likely that the headdresses were only worn on special occasions but were reserved for the ballgame ceremony. There is another representation of a female ballplayer that was produced in a different medium. At Palma Sola, Veracruz, a stone *yugo* displays a female ballplayer inside. However, the reason for its placement there is unclear.

When I began this investigation I wanted to find out why female ballplayer figurines were made more frequently in one area than another. The rarity of female ballplayer figurines for the first four sites I discussed at the beginning of this chapter (Tlatilco, Tlapacoya, Xochipala, Tuxcacuesco) may be due to several factors. First, female ballplayer figurines may form part of private collections, or were taken from digs without scientific supervision, making them

less visible to the general public. Second, there is also the possibility that some female figurines have not yet been identified as ballplayers, such as the figurine fragments I mentioned from Tlapacoya. Third, female ballplayer figurines may have been interred in areas that have not yet been excavated. Additionally, more examples may remain in museum warehouses where they have not been available for study, either because they are in fragments, or because the corpus of figurines from central and west Mexico have lost favor as exhibit items.

There is also the possibility that women were not often represented as ballplayers in these areas because figurine makers were preoccupied with displaying women acting in traditional roles, such as cooking or carrying a baby. Perhaps the ballgame was an activity in which women participated in their free time, and for that matter, the ballgame may not have been that important as a subject for figurine art. Lesure makes an excellent point when he states that the tradition of figurine making might have appeared and disappeared at random in each area (2011: 23). Furthermore, the tradition may have lasted for a short period of time, localized in space in archaeological terms, without any significant antecedents or legacy (*ibid.*).

¹ In an anthropological sense, Miguel León-Portilla mentions that “the concept of culture is comprised of shared attributes and elements that characterize a human group like forms of living, roles played by the sexes, social values, and beliefs and traditions” (2006: 18).

² Edwin Shook was the first to use the term “Pre-classic” to identify the early cultures of Mesoamerica. Before, scholars like Alfred Tozzer and Herbert Spinden referred to this time period as the “archaic” (Robles, 1971: 4, 6). Other scholars simply prefer to use “Formative”

because it is when the high cultures of Mesoamerica began to form (Noguera, 1965: 68).

³ Vaillant's classification charts have been referenced in other works, and will not be dealt with here (See for example, Piña Chan, Roman. 1952. Tlatilco y Cultura Preclasica del Valle de Mexico. In *Anales del Instituto de Antropología e Historia* IV(32): 33-43).

⁴ Years later, Reyna Robles argued that there were six ceramic traditions, each with a significant number of variants, that are designated as types and subtypes (1971: 40).

⁵ It is interesting that the interments of young adults were more elaborate than those of their elders, since in them were found the most exotic, expensive personal ornaments, and polished iron-ore mirrors. For Rosemary Joyce, the burial patterns suggest that Tlatilco society was stratified by age, within which gender was less of a categorical dimension (2006: 311).

⁶ The Venus of Willendorf and the Venus of Vestonice correspond to these characteristics (Zhender, in Báez-Jorge, 1968: 148).

⁷ Specialized belts or yokes were used in the ballgame since the Classic Period. These yokes were made from diverse materials like stone, wood, wicker, or other perishable material. Stone yugos were mostly found in the Gulf Coast and Guatemala Highlands. Nicholas Hellmuth (1974) had suggested that the stone yokes worn by Maya ballplayers were used in ballgames to show the agility of players, while Scott (2001) believes they were only used for ballgame ceremonies and taken off once the game began. Due to the weight of these objects they may have been used for ceremonies only, and then given out as trophies.

Chapter Three: The Mesoamerican Rubber Ball Game

In the fifteen month of the Aztec calendar, a sacrificial rite was performed in honor of Huitzilopochtli, the god of War. A man dressed as Paynal, one of Huitzilopochtli's manifestations, descended from the god's temple, and proceeded to sacrifice four captives in the Teutlachco, the temples ball court...

(Bernardino de Sahagún, 1961)

The above passage describes a monthly ceremony (Panquetzaliztli) in which the pre-Hispanic Nahuas performed a solemn rite in honor of a tutelary god in the Aztec pantheon. The temple's ball court was the designated area; the sacred space that manifested the inherent powers of the seen and unseen. Space where the indigenous community gathered to perform one of the most consecrated rituals in pre-Hispanic societies: the rubber ballgame.

The ancient game with all its ritual elements represented a fundamental rite of Mesoamerican cultures (Westheim, 1977). As a symbolic, performative mechanism, it was a physical activity where the corporal, spiritual, and supernatural were personified in the bodily actions of the players. All peoples of the Americas engaged in the sport from the remotest antiquity and for ritual motives common to all. From its beginning to its end with the conquest of Mexico in 1521, the game became a sanctified testimony of Mesoamerica's cultural development.

The rubber ballgame has fascinated Mesoamerican scholars ever since the Spanish Franciscan friars set foot in the Americas and begin to document the ritual. With concepts rooted in the game such as war, life, death, fertility,

and cosmology, the game was enacted in different forms and understood on many levels. For example, the game was played as a means to obtain a good harvest; as a political tool to resolve conflicts between neighboring communities, polities, or rulers; and as an excuse to obtain the valuables of both the losers and spectators who bet on the games.

The specialized courts in which the game took place were also heterogeneous. While the general outline of ball courts was in the shape of a capital "I," there existed simpler court structures like those used in Pre-classic period games. Additionally, courts that appeared to have been used strictly for game playing could also serve as spaces for the performance of social festivities that were non-ballgame related. West Mexican ceramic ball court models provide excellent examples of these secular ceremonies, while at the same time revealing the game's social worth for the west Mexican people. In the performance of secular ritual, women were included and in some cases acted as leaders of it.

Women's importance is further attested by their involvement in the game as suggested by ceramic female ballplayer figurines from west and central Mexico and the Gulf Coast. The figurines indicate that the participation of women began in the Early Pre-classic Period (1200 - 900 B.C.), and ended sometime during the Early Post-classic (900-1400 A.D.). For the period in between known as the Classic era there is no evidence of women ballplayers in Maya areas, but Maya queens were given the special privilege of setting the ball into play.

By the middle of the sixteenth century, men controlled the most important affairs in Aztec society and were the sole participants in the rubber ballgame. Women were in charge, however, of making the mantles given to the ballgame winners and in the accompanying ballgame rituals (Sahagún, 1961; Torquemada, 1969). Although they were not allowed to play the game, late Post-classic Central Mexican and Mixtec codices reveal the presence of goddesses on ball courts.

In the Codex Borbonicus, Xochiquetzal, the goddess of love, lust, and gambling is pictured as the protector of the game (Blom, 1976: 499). In the same manuscript, the Earth goddess Coatlicue is paired with Quetzalcóatl, the plumed serpent, to play a game against Xochipilli and Ixtlilton, both ballgame deities. The representation of goddesses on ball courts discloses the importance of women for the Post-classic period game, and in a symbolic sense, the game's feminine aspect.

After the Spanish conquest, the indigenous people were prohibited from venerating these and other gods and most codices that contained images of them were destroyed. At the same time, Nahua women lost their autonomy and were relegated to serving roles with lesser prestige. Nevertheless, the suppression of women in late Post-classic Mesoamerica did not prevent women from playing the game in other parts of the New World. Several ethnographic sources mention them participating in rubber ballgames during the sixteenth century in neighboring regions of Mesoamerica that included La Hispaniola and El Rio de Orinoco in Venezuela. In my own research I found

evidence of women ballplayers for the contemporary rubber ballgame of *ulama*, a variant of the ancient game. In this particular sport, scoring methods and ballgame equipment are used that are similar to those used in the Aztec game, although the courts seem to have reverted back to the simple earthen court structures built by the Pre-classic period civilizations.

In this chapter I present a comprehensive history of the ballgame as it was played in Mesoamerica since the time of the Olmecs. Although I include the most important social and religious aspects of the game as they concern the major cultures of ancient Mexico, I focus the study on the Aztec game of *ullamalitzli* because it serves as a prototype for the modern game of *ulama* where roles of women ballplayers are also examined.

3.1. Introduction to the Olmec Game

In the early twentieth century, the Olmec culture was credited with the game's origin. The discovery of earthen ball courts such as the Palangana mound at San Lorenzo (600-400 B.C.), ballplayer figurines, and other related paraphernalia supported this assumption. The game's complexity and distribution during the Pre-classic period, however, implicate its presence before the rise of Olmec civilization (Taube, 2004; Wilcox and Scarborough, 1991; Diehl, 2004).

Evidence of pre-Olmec games has been documented for the state of Chiapas where ball court mounds dating to the Archaic Period were found. This groundbreaking discovery disproved all previous notions of the game's

invention by the Olmec. Unfortunately, the scarcity of material for that area has prevented me from discussing the game's symbolism or function in this time and place. Thus this study begins with the Olmec peoples who were the first to leave a significant mark in early ballgame practices.

The Olmec have been designated by some scholars Mesoamerica's Mother Culture for being the first to develop a sophisticated art style, calendar, and hieroglyphic writing system (Caso, 1965; Covarrubias, 1961). They flourished between 1200 - 600 B.C., a time when ceremonial centers were beginning to evolve politically and economically (Piña Chan, 1972: 12; Grove, 1973: 129). The two most important centers were San Lorenzo Tenochtitlán and La Venta located in the modern states of Veracruz and Tabasco. These areas were not only rich in natural resources, but also produced a large quantity of latex trees; hence, the reason why the Aztecs called them the *Olmeca*, "rubber people" (Blom, 1976: 498).¹

The wealth of latex in these zones contributed considerably to the game's popularity in Olmec regions. Although the role of the Olmec game is still under investigation, a few experts believe it was a religious sport that incorporated human sacrifice (Diehl, 2004; Taube, 2004). The sacrifice-ballgame relationship is notable in San Lorenzo's "Monument I" that Karl Taube has identified as a ballplayer on top of a bound captive (figure 3.1) (1992).

In an earlier analysis by Mathew Stirling this statue had been described as a mythic copulation scene between a male jaguar and a female human (Diehl, 2004: 104). For past indigenous cultures, the jaguar was an object of

reverence because it was an animal associated with the night (sky) as well as the Underworld, the hearth of the earth (Grove, 1973: 134). Coe also suggested that the Olmec believed that they had descended from a union between jaguar and man, a belief that finds parallels among indigenous groups outside Mesoamerican territories (1962a: 85).

Aside from this sacred relationship, controlling water or rain constituted another function of the Olmec game. Water was thought to possess sacred qualities identified with mountains and other natural forces. Conversely, just as rain could help the growth of vegetation, it could also destroy it. The large quantities of rainfall the Gulf Coast received per year threatened the natural environment. It would not be surprising to discover that the Olmec peoples conducted water rituals as a means to control rain more than to propitiate it.

In Olmec art, symbolic visual traits often occur in combinations connected with rain (Markman and Markman, 1989). Rubber balls unearthed in the sacred springs of Cerro Manatí validate this relationship between the game and rain (Taube, 2004: 11). This is manifested in a similar fashion on male ballplayer ceramic figurines who are shown wearing buccal masks, a common attribute of the Olmec Rain God (figure 3.2).

Stylistic characteristics of the Rain god are the sharp downward slanting eyes, heavily furrowed brows, and long curving canines. These traits are also representative of the jaguar—a creature that has been identified with the Tlaloc, Cocijó, and Chaak rain gods of later Mesoamerican cultures (Taube, 2004b: 30). The importance of rain as a ritual constituent was not an isolated

feature of Olmec society. In later Mesoamerican cultures hundreds of monuments were created with this idea in mind.

If there is one feature that best characterizes the Olmec people is their monolithic carved stone monuments. Stone was a preferred medium of the Olmec that was used extensively to disclose their perceptions about their ancestors, the cosmos, and deities. Rectangular thrones and stelae offer a vivid display of themes that center on these concepts. Smaller artifacts made from semi-precious stones portray shamans and supernatural beings such as the were-jaguar, an infant human combined with feline traits.

In its most secular form, the ruler utilized stone to establish his prestige and dominance (Cyphers, 2007: 39). The numerous Colossal Heads scattered throughout the Olmec heartland testifies to their authority (figure 3.3). When these thirty-ton sculptures were first discovered they had been identified as decapitated ballplayers. Today scholars have recognized the Heads as portraits of individual rulers whose opulence served to epitomize their status and power (Taube, 2004b; Diehl, 2004; Cyphers, 2007).²

An interesting aspect of these massive sculptures is their method of transportation. The Colossal Heads were made from volcanic basalt that had to be transported from the Tuxtla Mountains some sixty kilometers from the main centers (Cyphers, 2007: 39). This task was achieved through the organization and labor of thousands of workers. The cost and time of transporting stone across treacherous terrain, and possibly the river in wooden rafts, is a public testimony to the centralized rulership present in Olmec society (Taube, 2004b:

8).

The fact that stone quarries were located at such a distance may have contributed to the Olmecs' preference for using man-made fields or natural settings as playing grounds (Diehl, 2004). Olmec courts were flattened fields constructed from dirt, the same material that was used for the court's walls that enclosed the central alley. The simplicity of the court design suggests that the game may have been less complex than those of later periods where court rings and markers were used for scoring.

In Sinaloa similar structures are used for the contemporary ballgames played there, as well as rubber balls like those found at Cerro Manati. Yet these are the few remnants of the Olmec game because religion no longer plays a key role. Instead, the game has taken on a more entertainment-based character that comments on the importance of community collaboration.

Collaboration and camaraderie in villages may have been important features of the game in pre-Hispanic times. Other than integrating religion into the community, the ruler may have also hosted secular games to maintain solidarity among the people. In these gatherings created for public entertainment, the social nature of the game would have allowed for the participation of all social classes and ages, including women. The presence of women is not improbable considering that select Pre-classic cultures produced female ballplayer ceramic figurines whose facial features and body types were characteristic of the Olmec style (e.g slanted eyes; tiny, robust bodies).³

The significance of the game during the Olmecs' rule allowed it to spread

to other ceremonial centers. Perhaps its dispersal followed the trade routes where an array of goods and ideas were exchanged between the Olmec and other peoples (Piña Chan, 1972: 12; Ochoa Castillo, 1992: 34). While stone courts did not form part of the usual ballgame setting, the persistence of the game proved that the people did not need masonry structures to practice the sport.

Needless to say because the construction of stone courts in Maya regions replaced the earthen mounds common until the middle of the Pre-classic period, the game began to take on another form. With the introduction of monumental architecture and development of ceremonial centers, the formation of courts reached its apogee (Ochoa Castillo, 1992). No doubt these constructions dramatically changed the disposition of a ritual game that has endured until present times.

3.2 Symbolism and Function of Ball Courts

Archaeological excavations to date have uncovered more than 1,700 Mesoamerican ball courts, the majority of which were found near a town's market or civic-ceremonial complex (Taladoire, 2001; Santley, *et al.*, 1991). The Soconusco region at Paso de la Amada, Chiapas marks the location where the oldest court was discovered during an excavation in 1995 (Hill *et al.*, 1998). The earthen mound dates to 1400-1250 B.C, a period that predates all existing Pre-classic iconography.

Ball courts were present throughout Mesoamerica, the American

Southwest, Puerto Rico, the Greater Antilles, and the Caribbean Islands, yet they varied in construction and followed no particular pattern of distribution. While some sites had one, others had multiple such as the case of Cantona, Puebla that has twenty-four. According to David Wilcox, the presence of multiple courts was most common among societies competing for social control (1992). In the periphery of towns smaller courts were built as playing grounds for the local inhabitants, or for other ritual activities.

Among theories relating to court construction, one proposes that they were built to align with the four cardinal directions. However, Theodore Stern has pointed out that this alignment is found only within a few ceremonial complexes (1966: 513). Correspondingly, Eric Taladoire who has conducted an intensive study of ball court architecture has recently demonstrated that the placement of courts had more to do with the site and proximity of the court to other buildings (2001).

The same opinion applies to skull racks (*tzompantli*) and sweat baths (*temascalli*) and their relation to courts. *Tzompantli* were altars where human skulls of sacrificial victims were displayed as trophies (figure 3.4). They are depicted on late Post-classic codices and ancient Spanish documents, although there is a clear example of one at the Templo Mayor complex in what is now Mexico City. Sweat baths were circular domes usually made from volcanic rock and cement (figure 3.5). They were used for the purification or curing of an individual before or after a special event such as birth or war. Although a few places like Chichén Itzá, Tula, and Tenochtitlán had these structures built

next to their courts, it does not denote a general pattern of court design.

Like court placement, court dimensions varied within regions, with the average size ranging 120 by 30 ft.⁴ The Great Ball Court at Chichén Itzá is an exceptional case where court size exceeds these proportions. It is also one of the few sites that adopted the use of the *tlachtemalacatl*, court rings (figure 3.6). Other places integrated stone markers or niches into court architecture, and in rare cases, a combination of these. Whereas markers might have been used as a method of scoring, niches would have housed ballgame deities that served as protectors of the game.

One of game's objectives was to acquire points by passing the ball through the ring, or striking one of the markers. A few scholars believe the ring symbolizes an opening from which the Sun ascended into the sky and descended at night into the Underworld (Pasztor, 1972; Krickeberg, 1966). Another interpretation proposes that the ring is a filter where water traveled to reach the earth and fertilize it (Macazago Ordoño, 1982). Both of these analyzes are fitting considering the game's connection with the movement of the astral bodies and the renewal of agricultural fertility. Popular images that appeared on these carved objects were celestial beings, deities, or animals and symbols central in indigenous mythology.

Courts as “Lived Spaces”

In general, the game was played on a long playing alley with vertical or sloping walls and end zones that altogether took the shape of the letter “I” (figure 3.7). The outline represented the four cardinal directions: east, west,

north, and south, as well as the world's center and the Underworld. In ancient codices a particular color, deity, or life form represented each of the quadrants (Quezada, 1999: 25). What happened to an individual when he played in this quadruple space is that he became engaged in a close relationship with the celestial bodies and their patterns (Carrasco, 1990).

As structuring agents for religious rites, ball courts linked humans with the agriculture and celestial cycles and other sacred elements (Koontz, *et al.*, 2001: 5). Nonetheless, the court also served as an arena where participants performed diverse activities embedded with social and cultural values. Just as sculptures and ceramic figurines were subject to change in form and function, so were ball courts. However, some archaeologists still view them as static architectural bodies made exclusively for game playing (Fox, 1996: 495).

Worthy of note within this contextual framework is Christopher Tilley's discussion of space as a medium for human interaction (1994). Tilley's study of place and the lived environment diverges from the traditional methods of looking at landscapes, which treat space as voids separate from social existence. The study of secular court rituals reflects on this important aspect of the game that has rarely been discussed. It is a point of departure and investigation for those of us who wish to understand the complete significance of indigenous public spaces.

Ceramic ball court models from West Mexico provide some of the best examples that show ritual activities taking place on spaces that were presumably exclusively for games.⁵ A new dialogue in the field has been

generated by their discovery and reassessment.⁶ In the Worcester model, for example, two participants stand in the center of the court locked in a fighting posture (figure 3.8). Another figure (not visible in this view of the court) stands alone behind one of the court walls. Given the action of the participants, this scene appears to be portraying some kind of activity other than a game.

Moreover, an example from the state of Colima differs dramatically from any ball court ceramic model in that the subject portrays a very somber scene (figure 3.9). First, all the figures, including the court, were made from one solid grey piece of stone. Second, the participants—who appear to be standing or sitting at the periphery of the plaza square-like structure—surround a ball that sits in the middle of the ball court. It is a rare example because the art of West Mexico shared a preference for the representation of figures with lively, naturalistic gestures.

It is not clear what is happening in the ritual, although the postures of the figures suggest there is no ballgame taking place. I suspect that it involves a ritual that was performed before or after a game, such as the invocation of an ancestor, or the offering of the rubber ball, as graphically demonstrated in several Mesoamerican codices (figure 3.10). Hasso Von Winning has proposed that courts served to commemorate dead players, and this model might be portraying exactly this subject given the model's solemn formation and color (1996: 130).

Other functions of courts would have included providing a setting for various rites of passage, such as accessions to office, or initiation of games

(Stevenson, 1998: 154). A ceramic figurine from Jalisco shows a ballplayer holding a ball that appears to be presented at a game's initial ceremony (figure 3.11) (*ibid.*). Similarly, the scene in the Yale ball court model seems to represent a ceremonial activity and not a game (figure 3.12). In this particular example, the figures are wearing headdresses, ear spools, and jewelry suggestive of royal attire.

From the early Pre-classic to the time of the conquest, headdresses and body adornments were an imperative, almost indispensable, component of dress in figural art. Headgear was not only part of a costume, but also an iconographical element that distinguished rank (Von Winning, 1974: 21). The fact that all the figures in the model are wearing the same vestments suggests they were from similar ranking classes.

Feasting and the Game

A study conducted by John Fox has revealed that inter-factional ballgame rituals involved the competitive sponsorship of ballgames and feasts (1996: 491). The connection between the two forms of ritual is shown in midden deposits in Mesoamerican territories from the Maya periphery to west Mexico. Feasts played a central role in Mesoamerican rituals, and today, they still accompany ballgames, and may be considered more critical than the game itself. Sponsored feasting, in particular, would have served to display the sponsor's power and prestige in an effort to mobilize material and social resources (*ibid.*, 494). Archaeological remains in the form of smashed service vessels, discarded *jute* snail shells, and occasionally deer bones and turtle

carapaces demonstrate that sumptuous feasts were also conducted in Maya regions, perhaps after ballgames or other important rituals (Zender, 2004b: 1).

Considering the importance of public and political entertainment, it is likely that in other cultures and times ball courts served as stages for theatrical performances or dramatic events. Ballplayer figures from Jaina, Campeche depict men in ballgame garb that wear removable masks, suggesting the men they portray played another role besides competing as ballplayers. Several west Mexican figures dressed as ball players found independently in shaft tombs are shown holding fans, musical instruments, cups, and other items. According to Jane Stevenson, these objects confirm that the game was a ceremonial event that incorporated a large complex of rituals that included dance, music, and drama (2001: 155).

In 16th century accounts ballgames were known to create team or village loyalties, heightening a sense of belonging to a community (Sahagún, 1961). Through social interaction, human experience replaced the divine presence consecrated in indigenous sacred activities (Eliade, 1969: 68). Unfortunately, scholars have placed more emphasis on the game's religious associations than on its secular aspect. In particular, human sacrifice has been well documented and has therefore commanded special attention.

During the Post-classic period there is no doubt that the Aztec *tlatoni* (ruler) utilized ball courts as stages to present lavish banquets, performances, as well as to exert his power over the people and rival tribes. The Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún stated that every festival at

Tenochtitlán involved dancing, feasting, singing, and processions (1961). The most important settlements were organized around ceremonial complexes that at one time served as theaters for ritual drama. All space in the Aztec world was organized to accommodate these culturally constructed performances, and ball courts were just as suitable for these grand presentations.

3.3 The Classic Period Ballgame

The games of the Pre-classic cultures initiated what would become one of the most widely practiced and important rituals in all of Mesoamerica. Pre-classic courts were simple playing fields built in ceremonial complexes where rulers might have dictated the rules of the game. Although the Olmec were the most advanced culture during that time, creating innovating technologies and complex social systems, the Teotihuacán and Maya cultures eventually surpassed them (Cohodas, 1975: 100).

Esther Pasztory asserts that the ball game served as a state cult and inspiration for monumental art only at the midpoint of the development of Mesoamerican civilization (1972: 443). Nonetheless, the construction of courts underwent a drastic change. Courts fall into disuse in some areas and in others construction ceases altogether during the Classic era. It should be noted, however, that the presence of courts was not always a social or political indicator of power and complex organization. In major Classic urban centers like Teotihuacán, the game was played in different forms, yet archaeologists have not found one single ball court there. The same applies to such Maya

sites as Ichmul, El Resbalón, and Bonampak where formal courts are absent even though stone inscriptions depict the verb “to play ball” (figure 3.13) (Taladoire, 2001; Freidel, *et al.*, 1993: 338).

Three types of games have been documented for Classic centers: the hip rubber ballgame, a type of handball, and a game played with sticks or batons. The hip rubber ballgame was the form adopted by most indigenous cultures since the time of the Olmec. While there is no record available that explains how the Classic game was played, information is obtained primarily from ballgame scenes painted on vases, and sculptured reliefs that appear on the court walls, stone ball court markers, benches and stone rings of Classic courts (Cohodas, 1975: 99). Recurrent themes in Classic ballgame imagery are death and human sacrifice.

The Maya Ballgame

Among the great cultures to prosper during the Classic Period (500 – 900 A.D.) were the Maya who inhabited areas from southern Mexico down to the northern parts of Central America. Theirs was a society that is noted for the development of a fully written language and complex mathematical and astronomical systems. Maya art is considered one of the most refined in all of Mesoamerica with stylized figures that portray lively gestures and postures like those present in the art of the West. Ballgame imagery is predominant in regions from the Peripheral Lowlands to the Guatemala Highlands (Pasztor, 1972: 444). An overt display of human sacrifice with a major emphasis on decapitation is common in Maya ballgame art.

In most Maya regions, the game was known as *chaah* and *pitz*, and *pok-ta-pok* in the Yucatán peninsula. The purpose of the game was to ensure the ascent and descent of the sun through a human sacrifice based on sympathetic magic (Cohodas, 1975). Protagonists in ballgames were Maya kings, whose participation was thought to set the course of the celestial bodies (Schele and Miller, 1986). Through this confrontation, the king promoted his legitimate rule and assured the sustenance of his people. There is no mention of women as ballplayers, but Maya queens formed part of the ballgame ritual by placing the balls into play, or as spectators in a ritual game that is thought to occur in the cosmos (figure 3.14) (Freidel, *et al.*, 1993).

Ballplayers were given the names *ajpitz*, *ajpiitzil* or *ajpitzal* that all means “ballgame player” according to Susan Gillespie (1991). When several players participated, the principal ones stood in the narrow space of the court while the others stood toward the back (Blom, 1976: 497). As was common in ancient ballgame practices, the ball could not be touched by the hands or feet. Players were allowed to strike the ball only with their hips, buttocks, elbows, and knees (Westheim, 1977).

To play the game the players had to pass the ball to the other side of the court and keep it in motion. The ball was called *quiq*, a term that is defined as “blood” or “sap.” As Frans Blom noted, this is the name that appears to refer to the latex from which the ball was made (1976). While there is no information as to its weight or to the method by which the ball was manufactured, bas-reliefs and figurines suggest its size was half that of a human head.

Maya Ballgame Outfits

One of the elements that distinguished the Maya game from its contemporaries was the ballgame outfit. Each player owned the equipment he used, including the ball. The outfit was composed of several clothing pieces that were usually worn on top of the ruler's regalia when ruler's played—however, it is likely that there were also others of lesser rank who played the game. These varied by name, but some of the most common were: *ex* (loincloth), *keue*, *tzuun* (leather protector), *hup kab keul* (gloves), *yugo* (yoke), *yugito* (small yoke used on one hand), *palma* (palmate stone), *hacha* (thin stone heads), the ball (*kik*, *pok*), ring (*bate*), headgear (*yachvach*), and face net (*vachzot*) (Blom, 1976: 491; Stern, 1966).⁷ Along with these accoutrements, extra padding was worn on areas where the ball was to be struck.

The *yugo* that was worn on the player's hips or waists was a "U" shaped object weighing between 45-55 pounds (figure 3.15) (Kemrer, 1968: 3). Several ballplayer figures from Yucatán, Guatemala, and Veracruz are shown wearing this ballgame gear (Monument No. 1 Bilbao, Guatemala) (figure 3.16). The *yugos* that are on display at various Mexican museums were made of finely carved stone and contain images of animals or other important symbols. Unlike the stone *yugos* found in the Gulf Coast and Guatemala Highlands, those worn by the Maya may have been constructed from perishable materials like wicker or wood.

Many interpretations have been given for the use of yokes. Several

scholars believe they were removed during the game, or only worn for ballgame ceremonies (Scott, 2001). Nicholas Hellmuth offers a substantial interpretation for the use of yokes that contradicts the general opinion (1975). He suggests that young Maya athletes wore these items during the game to exhibit their playing abilities to play well despite the weight of the heavy yokes. The relief panels that display ballplayers in ball playing postures wearing *yugos* validate Hellmuth's theory (figure 3.17).

Due to the weight of these objects, it is feasible that the ballgame winners wore them as trophies. Perhaps the actual *yugos* worn during the game were made from lighter materials. They may have also been used during a ceremonial dance performed before or after the game. In all of Mesoamerica, dancing functioned as a medium through which basic cultural principles were communicated and where prestige was bestowed. Maya rulers were known to have participated in dances during important ceremonies.

In Palenque, Chiapas, a limestone tablet from Temple 14 shows the Palenque King Kan-Balam performing a victory dance after his defeat of the Lords of Death in Xibalba (figure 3.18) (Schele and Miller, 1986: 272). On the Amelia hieroglyphic panels and a vessel from Copán, divine patrons of the game are shown dancing after a ballgame (Tokovinine, 2002: 4). Maya sacrificial rituals often took the form of dance, serving to open the worlds between the Maya gods and humans (Looper, 2001).

Like yokes, *hachas* were additional ballgame pieces that helped to

deflect the ball. These were made from stone that was flattened on one edge and tapered at the bottom (figure 3.19). *Hachas* are intricately carved, and most often represent human heads, figures, or animals, specifically birds or parrots.⁸ Stone palmates were also used as part of the ballgame equipment, but were slightly larger than *hachas*. They differed in design and resembled the shape of a fan. Images that appear on *palmas* are effigies or scroll symbols (figure 3.20). In Classic sites like El Tajin and Chichén Itzá, ballplayers are depicted wearing these objects on their belts as part of their ballgame equipment.

Kneepads and masks were other items used in the ballgame. Both male and female ceramic figurines, particularly those from Maya regions and central Mexico, depict these ballgame accoutrements on their bodies. Kneepads may have served two major functions; to protect the player when he dove to strike the ball from below, and as padding when the ball was struck with the knees, as was custom in the ballgames played by women in the Greater Antilles. The material of the kneepads and masks would have varied among communities.

Early evidence of the use of masks can be found in the book of the Popul Vuh. The story recalls two twins, Hun-Hunahpú and Vucub Hunahpú whose ballgame equipment included masks (Tedlock, 1996). A few male *pilli* ballplayer figures from Tlapacoya and Tlatilco are also shown with masks (Bradley, 2000; Kemrer, 1968: 9). Additionally, two female ballplayer figurines from Pánuco, Veracruz appear to be wearing masks perhaps as a representation of Tlazoltéotl, the goddess of the moon, sins and sexuality.

A group of figurines from Oaxaca also depicts masks and other items associated with the ballgame (figure 3.21). Four of the figures are male and two female, one that is standing and another that is seated. All six figures have their eyes closed, perhaps indicating they are dead and that the scene is taking place in the Underworld (Stevenson, 2001: 70). The seated female on the throne has a rectangular implement on her left hand that resembles a *manopla* (heavy mitt). The female's heads are unsophisticated, probably because the masks were meant to cover them. The masking in this scene and of the other figures suggests that the ballgame participants were involved in some type of ritual performance (*ibid.*, 71).

3.4 Sacrificial Rituals in the Maya Game

The costumes worn by Maya ballplayers formed part of an elaborate ritual whose ultimate outcome was death by decapitation. Susan Gillespie views decapitation as a metonym for dismemberment (1991: 373). In Mesoamerican thought, the body's separation was metaphorically linked to the partition of time into agricultural seasons marked by the periodic movements of celestial bodies (*ibid.*). Beheading was one means by which the cosmic order of the universe was sustained, and where the transition between life and death was achieved. The act of sacrifice was widely recognized for other Mesoamerican cultures, yet scholars had a much different perception of the Maya peoples. At the beginning of Maya explorations they were assumed to be a peaceful race until epigraphers were able to decipher Maya glyphs that in due

time revealed the bloody nature of Maya rituals (Schele and Miller, 1986).

In all Maya regions there was no place with such exuberant attention to the representation of decapitation than at Chichén Itzá. This Maya site has been dated to as early as 700 – 1050 A.D. (Coggins, 2002: 46) placing it in the Late Classic Period instead of the Post-classic as had been proposed by past Mesoamerican scholars. Unlike the Classic Maya whose ballgame images commonly depicted gods or nobles, warriors arrayed in Toltec regalia were the prime protagonists in the art of the Itzá's (Krickeberg, 1961: 251).⁹

Debate over the similarity of styles between Chichén Itzá and Tollan, home of the Toltec tribes, has remained unsettled within Maya studies. While several scholars had proposed that Tollan had been the major source of influence for the structures and artistic style at Chichén, others believed it happened the other way around (Davies, 1977: 212, 215). Proskouriakoff noted that because structures like the Great Ball Court demonstrate an eclectic and imperfect integration of styles it could not be representative of just one foreign group (1950: 171). Recent studies, however, have proposed that Chichén's artistic origins were largely Maya (Miller, 2006: 187).

One of the artistic traits that scholars agree is not Toltec is the narrative style visible on the relief panels on the benches of the Great Ball Court (Davies, 1977: 205). In one of the panels, a procession depicts richly attired warriors headed toward an altar where there is an image of a disk with a skull in the center (figure 3.22a).¹⁰ The relief represents a ritual re-enactment of warfare that culminated with the sacrifice of ballplayers after a ballgame (Sharer, 1994:

397). The victorious ballplayer in front of the skull holds a knife in one hand and the decapitated head of his vanquished foe in another. In front of this figure is a decapitated ballplayer who emanates streams of blood in the form of serpents and a branch that generates fruits and flowers.

A similar scene is depicted on a ball court panel from El Aparicio, Veracruz (figure 3.22b). The serpents protruding from the victim's head in both scenes are symbols for fertility and the regenerative power of human blood (Whittington, 2001: 260). Yet in Chichén Itzá, the death of the ballplayer and dress of the victors suggest a strong relationship between the ballgame and war. The Classic Maya were known to have launched wars to capture victims to sacrifice them in ballgames (Kowalski, 2000). War may have been considered an intense form of play and perhaps the most primal form of competition. In Huizinga's words, "in certain archaic forms of warfare the play-element finds immediate and, comparatively speaking, a more pleasant expression" (1955: 91).

War was sometimes called "the hunting of men," and in the dry season both war and the ballgame were carried out to propitiate rain (Quezada, 1999). Hunting and fighting were the province of young, noble men, and these events could culminate in the ballgame (Miller, 2001: 82). Subsequently, war and sacrifice were interrelated in coronation rites when society was transformed from a state of dissolution to reintegration and production (Townsend, 2000).

Above the Great Ball Court in the Temple of the Jaguars we see several

murals with images of warriors and war-related weapons (figure 3.23). It is not clear if the men are ballplayers, since they are not wearing any of the common ballgame gear such as the hip loincloth, *yugos*, or *hachas*. Rather, they are shown holding sticks and a hand stone that may have been used to strike the ball. They may also be actors in some allegory of the game or other type of ritual (Baudez and Latsanopoulos, 2010: 7). Ultimately, what these images point to is the ballgame's association with a war cult.

Furthermore, the act of decapitation becomes more explicit in scenes where the ballgame takes place on or near a staircase (figure 3.24). In fact, almost all ballgame imagery depicts ballplayers against a flight of stairs and not on courts. Mary Miller and Stephen Houston suggested that staircases were locales for the performance of sacrifice, and where the reenactment of the humiliation and defeat of enemies was publicly exhibited (1987: 58). Other examples show a captive bound and tied like a ball, then rolled down the staircase, an action thought to have occurred at the end of the game (figure 3.25). These gruesome images stressed the violent nature of the Maya ballgame, while at the same time they demonstrate that its role was more complex than previously suggested.

Maya Courts

That the rubber ballgame was central in the lives of Maya kings is confirmed by the placement of courts in the center of ceremonial centers. Courts served as spaces where life was turned over to those who had originally sacrificed themselves for humans. The giving of one's life was the most

precious gift a sacrificial victim could give to the gods. In Maya society the court was known as *hom*, and it was a flat play-area bordered by a taller structure bearing a recessed cornice hole. It was shaped like the letter “I” or a double “T,” with open end zones that at times connected to ceremonial buildings.

The layout of the court as a rectangular shape appears in late Post-classic Central Mexican codices where it is divided by four colored quadrants representing the four cardinal directions. Once again, this shape held a significant meaning in Maya ideology. The number four was associated with the four *Bacabs* who held up the sky, and the four rain gods, or *Chacs*, that were placed on each side of the world (Mathews and Garber, 2004). There were other important relationships of this number to creation myths and divisions in the celestial and terrestrial realms.

In contrast to the ball courts found in Pre-classic sites, some courts in Maya areas had sloping walls and playing alleys that contained permanent or movable markers, or ball court rings that were attached to the talus walls along the centerline. Markers depicted mythical and ritual ballgame scenes, often bordered by a quatrefoil that marked an entrance into another world. Thus far, ball court rings have been unearthed only in northern Maya regions (Stern, 1976: 513).

An interesting feature visible on a few Maya courts was the sunken level of the playing alley. In the Puuc region of northern Yucatán, a sunken ball court at Uxmal is situated between ceremonial complexes, almost representing an

opening of the earth (figure 3.26). Several scholars have proposed that these openings are symbolic entrances to the Underworld, Xibalbá, a place of fear where the dead had to pass through treacherous levels of human suffering.

As perfect settings for a cosmic passage, several courts, such as the Uxmal example, were placed in specific locations to represent this entrance. Due to their placement in lower parts of ceremonial centers, Taladoire (personal comm., 2012) proposed that the court should be understood as a symbol for the Underworld itself and not just an entrance to it. He bases his argument on the legend of the *Popul Vuh* that describes ballgames taking place in the sacred court located in the Underworld where the Lords of Death resided.

The Popul Vuh

The *Popul Vuh* is a mythical narrative that not only puts the Maya game in context, but also describes how humans and the universe were created. It illustrates a dual relationship between good and evil, defeat and victory—dualistic elements that were basic foundations of Mesoamerican ideology (Schele and Freidel, 1991). A new translation of the text demonstrates that the story is conceived as a performance, and that the myth was probably borrowed from an earlier culture (Tedlock, 1996: 33).

The story begins when the Maize Gods and their helpers molded the first generation of humanity from *maize* dough. The Quiché called these grandparents Xpiyacoc and Xmucané. The mother of the Hero Twins and wife of the Maize Gods was the young Moon Goddess, known as Ixik and Sak Ixik. According to Linda Schele and Peter Mathews, all of the great Maya lineages

descended from these primordial ancestors (1998).

The part that is critical for this study discusses the story of two twins, Vucub Hunahpú and Hun Hunahpú, who play a ballgame with the Lords of the Underworld. These Lords outwit the brothers and eventually defeat and kill them. Vucub Hunahpú's body is buried in the ball court, and the head of his brother, Hun Hunahpú is turned into a calabash that is hung on a gourd tree. When the daughter of one of the Lords goes to the terrestrial level and approaches him, she becomes impregnated with his saliva. From this union she gives birth to the Hero twins, Hunahpú and Xbalanqué.

The second set of twins grew to be much wiser because they outwitted the Lords and were able to defeat them in a ballgame. In turn, they resurrected their father and then became the Sun and the Moon (Tedlock, 1996). Their father's death and rebirth is essential in this story because it represents a symbolic re-enactment of the cycle of the *maize* plant. Reference to the life cycle is repeated frequently in Maya ballgame rituals due to the importance of this crop (Miller, 1989). Although the Hero twins are the key players in the story, there are very few examples that represent them in Maya ballgame scenes. One of the few portrayals of the Hero Twins (or at least one of them) can be found at Copán, Honduras. The ball court marker from Structure A3 shows a ballplayer with the Maya glyph that has been interpreted as Hun-Ahau's name, a version of the Classic period name for Hunahpú, one of the Hero twins (figure 3.27) (Schele and Miller, 1986: 251)

While the Hero Twins were rarely depicted in Maya ballgame art, Jeff

Kowalski suggested that when members of the elite class played the game, they were representing these brothers (1992). Other images also show a confrontation between two players, along with a decapitated head. This may be a reference to Vucub Hunahpú's death, which in mythic terms is a recreation of "decapitating" the *maize* plant when the corn is plucked from the stem.¹¹

In recent times Paula Gunn Allen has insisted that Xbalanqué is a woman and not a man given that in the Mayan language the "x" refers to "little" or "woman" and also references the moon (1991: 53). Barba de Piña Chan had proposed that Xbalanqué was a woman, or Hunahpú's alter ego (2007: 87). Another character in the legend referred to as a "he" is Xpiyacoc who together with his wife Xmucané are called Grandmother of the Sun, Grandmother of the Light. Gunn Allen believes that the Bishop of Yucatán, Diego de Landa who was responsible for having burned all the Maya books changed the story in order that the divine couple Xmucané and Xpiyacoc appear as grandmother and grandfather instead of both grandmothers (1991: 55).

3.5 The Epi-classic Period Ballgames

Another major Classic center of importance was Teotihuacán. In the Náhuatl language, Teotihuacán translates to "Place of the Gods." It was there, according to central Mexican legends, where the gods reunited before the creation of man to create the Sun and Moon, and with it, heat and light necessary for life in the universe (Ibarra, 1999: 293). In the 1st millennium C.E., Teotihuacán was the largest city in all of Mesoamerica. It is best known for its

residential complexes, temples with sloping and rectangular panels known as *talud-tablero* architectural style, and the presence of some of the largest Mesoamerican pyramids (figure 3.28).

Various scholars have addressed the identification of this place with the legendary Tula or Tollan. During the Post-classic period, Tula had been the residence of the well-known cultural hero and ruler/priest, Ce Ácatl Topiltzin Quetzalcóatl. Sejourne was one of the first scholars to posit that Teotihuacán was Tollan (1994: 30). In the article “The Teotihuacan Ballgame and Beginning of Time,” Uriarte pointed out that the Maya glyph *pu[h]* that appears frequently on the Tepantitla mural walls is defined as the “place of reeds,” otherwise identified as Tula (2006: 21). The epigrapher Erik Velásquez, who conducted an in-depth examination of Maya glyphs in the last years, affirms that *Puh* was an archetypal city, and that Teotihuacán held an important role in the strengthening of the ancestral type, perhaps referring to kingship or rulership (López Austin, 2004: 43).

Teotihuacan’s version of the ballgame remained obscure until archeologists discovered the well-preserved murals at the Tepantitla Palace Compound. The scenes depicted in the murals confirm that the inhabitants of Teotihuacán found pleasure in more than one variant of the rubber ballgame. Ballplayers are depicted using their hips, pallets, or *manoplas* (sticks) to play the game (figure 3.29). The last two forms were characteristic of the games practiced at El Opeño, Michoacán and Dainzu, Oaxaca.

Today the hip rubber ballgame continues to be played in northern rural

towns by the local people, while the game played with sticks is active in the states of Michoacán, Oaxaca, Puebla, Zacatecas, and other states. The most interesting aspect of these games is that women are playing variants of these sports (figure 3.30). Although no ball court has been found at that site, Uriarte proposed that the Avenue of the Dead, the long pathway that leads to the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon, served as a ball court (2006). If this had been the case, the surrounding ceremonial platforms would have accommodated the spectators and the elite during ballgame competitions.

The ballgame scenes at the Tepantitla Complex have also demonstrated that human sacrifice formed part of the ballgame ritual. On the southeast wall, for example, an individual is holding what appears to be a knife directed toward a reclining male (figure 3.31) (Uriarte, 1992). The structures surrounding the characters indicate that this scene is taking place inside a ball court. Another scene depicts a ballplayer painted with red stripes, a design that was used by the Aztecs on sacrificial victims during the Post-classic period (figure 3.32).

The Ballgame at El Tajín

Some of the best evidence of human sacrifice in connection with the ballgame is found at the site of El Tajín in Papantla, Veracruz. El Tajín (600-1200 A.D.) was the most important center after the fall of Teotihuacán. Eighteen ball courts have been found to date, along with ceremonial compounds that were built with a type of cement unknown in other parts of Mesoamerica. The main courts are up to 197 feet long, and contain some of the best bas-reliefs that show ballgame sacrificial scenes and other ritual

ceremonies (figure 3.33). In the South Ball Court a figure being prepared for sacrifice is lying on what appears to be a sacrificial stone (fig. 3.34). On one of the walls of the Pyramid of the Niches, a ruler stands in front of a skull and the decapitated body of the central figure (Pascual, 2009: 85). This scene indicates that the sacrifice has already taken place before the actual game took place.

Pulque, the Drink of the Gods

Other images on ball court reliefs link the game with *pulque*, an alcoholic drink that was made from the *maguey* (agave) plant. The consumption of *pulque* was a central component of all rituals and feasts throughout central Mexico and the peripheral coastal lowlands (Fox, 1996). The importance of *pulque* is emphasized by the frequent symbols of *maguey* plants, or the figure of a rabbit in the iconography of late Post-classic Central Mexico. The rabbit was the symbol of drinking and drunkenness, and it is likely that the moon's realm extended to the complex of *pulque* deities (Coe, 1975).

For the Aztecs, Mayahuel was patron of the day sign associated with the rabbit (*Tochtli*). This animal is often shown inside a jar that has the form of a half moon. The old Maya Moon Goddess used this jar when she collected water and poured it over the Earth in the form of rain. The female body was also related to the moon and its many phases. For example, the indigenous Mesoamericans believed that women menstruated when the moon was full (Westheim, 1977: 232). Other symbols associated with the moon are shells, a woman's womb, and the disembodied skull (Soustelle, 1982: 153). All symbols of night, death, darkness, and the Underworld.

In the south central ball court relief, a rain god is depicted drawing blood from his penis to replenish a pool of *pulque* for a dignitary below him (figure 3.35). This figure has been identified as the personification of a counterpart of Tlaloc, the Aztecs' Rain (Coe, 1962b). Tlaloc was thought to reside in the Underworld and could only be approached through death. Thus the best way to make contact with this god would be through a ritual ballgame (Wilkerson, 1991).

Secular Functions of Ball Courts

El Tajín ball courts likewise served as spaces where political power was enacted and proclaimed. Those games that included sacrifice played secular roles in making the ruler visible, acknowledging the fact that he had the power to do whatever he wanted (Wilkerson, 1991: 51). Even though hierarchical power structures evolved as early as the Olmec period, it was during this time in the Classic period that the legitimatization of rulers secured and strengthened newly formulated social roles inside burgeoning new polities (Koontz, *et al.*, 2001).

In one of the relief panels from the walls of the South Ball Court two players confront each other in what could be the initiation of a game (figure 3.36). Their tongues form the symbol for "*ollin*" (movement), which shares the same origin as *ulli* or *olli*, the Náhuatl word for rubber (Sahagún, 1961). The material of the rubber ball corresponds to *Castilla elastica*, a native species that grows in humid environments (Filloy, 2001). Rubber was identified with rain, blood, saliva, tears, the Sun, and semen (Oliveros, 1992). The symbol shaped

like a St. Andrew's cross is related to a dualistic idea that is recreated throughout the game in diverse symbolic forms (Uriarte, 2001). In the ball court relief described above, the conflict of the players is resolved in the game through the fundamental concept of movement necessary for the continuance of life and of time (Ladron de Guevara, 2000).

Another theme associated with the ballgame at El Tajín is war. The South Ball Court depicts the ritual dressing of a protagonist as a warrior. The scene is of ritual preparation, and is viewed by the death deity who is shown arising from a pot, floating on a vat of liquid (figure 3.37). Although there is no indication of a ball court structure, scholars presume that the most important matters at El Tajín were taking place near or on ball court spaces (Wilkerson, 1991: 59). It was in these public spaces that the rulers and elite chose to mark their power by controlling the ritual of the game (Sarro, 2001). This episode and others throughout the iconographic of the ball court reliefs complex demonstrate that this major ceremonial structure was created under the direct control of rulers, whose purpose was to secure the favor of the gods (*ibid.*, 231).

After the late Classic period, ballplayer images fall into disuse in most Mesoamerican sites, with only a few appearing at Tenochtitlán and Tula (Pasztor, 1972). The game did not revive until the late Post-classic with the Aztec and Mixteca-Puebla cultures, as suggested by the ballgame imagery (e.g. ballgame gods and ball courts) that appeared in ancient Mixtec and Aztec codices. The rubber ballgame was an important part of Aztec society for its entertainment-based value, as well as its political and religious significance.

Gambling in the game was popular among the spectators who often bet anything they possessed, from ornate feathers, to land, to children. Some even sold themselves as slaves in order to pay off the debt. Other times, the game was used as an excuse to attack a rival tribe to bring back sacrificial victims.

In its religious presentation, the game symbolized the dual between the Sun and the Moon, or at times, was linked to the morning and evening star phases of the Venus cycle. As in all ritual games, there is always a confrontation between two opposing beings. The astronomical relationship is most clearly manifested by beliefs that concerned the planet Venus, which is symbolized by the deities Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli-Quetzalcóatl (the morning star) and Xólotl (the evening star) (Uriarte, 2000). This battle between opposites, between light and dark, between the Sun (symbol of the masculine) and the Moon (symbol of the feminine) are represented in the myth of the foundation of Tenochtitlán, in which the Sun god fought the Moon goddess in the sacred ball court.

The court itself represented the night sky or the Underworld where this dual took place. It also served as a sort of temple, since effigies of ballgame deities were positioned on its lower walls as good luck charms before games commenced (Stern, 1966: 63). The ultimate act of all ballgame matches was human sacrifice. The death of the players caused the growth of vegetation and the continued rising and setting of the Sun. This idea, fundamental in the Aztecs' cosmovisión, manifests the importance of the ballgame for their daily living.

3.6 The Aztec Game of *Ullamaliztli*

Many were the games played by the Aztec people and many were the addictions associated with them. Out of the games practiced in Aztec society, the populace found special amusement in a particular ritual sport called *ullamaliztli*. Despite the bloody nature of this game, the conquistadors were astonished at the players' skill and resilient properties of the rubber ball. Rubber ball games were played in Europe, but the balls there were made from other materials that did not produce the inertia or velocity of those used in the Aztec capital. When the Spanish saw the game in Tenochtitlán for the first time, they were so amazed that they took a *ulama* team to perform in the Spanish court of Charles V.

The game of *ullamaliztli* was a sport widely practiced by the *pipiltin* (noble youth) who received training in the *Calmecac* (the priestly school) (Sahagún, 1961). Ballplayers were young, noble men known as *ollamani* (Blom, 1976: 491), and those born on the day sign 1*calli* were destined to play the game.¹² Other team members were enemies captured in combats that through the game were destined to be sacrificed. These sacrifices frequently took place on ball courts where the public witnessed and participated in the indigenous rites of passage.

Those who were professional players were given benefits and social position by men of high rank who admired their playing skills (Castro, 1986: 30). The performance of the players in the game was parallel to their performance on the battlefield. In both activities, skill was central to achieving an elevated

social position or to escape from a lowly one (Clendinnen, 1985: 47). This status elevation motivated males of all social ranks, not just the nobles.

The game was played on a masonry court called *tlachcoi*, *tlachtli*, *teotlachco*, and *ollamaloyan* that contained ball court rings and benches for its spectators. The two main courts were located in the marketplace, with lesser ones in the suburbs (Motolinia, 1971: 380; Stern, 1966: 51; Sahagún, 1961). The dimensions of the court were generally 20 to 30 feet wide with a length of 40 to 50 feet, measured only between the sidewalls (Sahagún, 1961: 459). Competitions took place between two to three players on each team, and at times one could play against three, depending on the game and sponsor.

Ballgame Equipment

The equipment used by the *ollamani* was minimal and analogous within teams (Durán, 1971). On their thighs they wore a *maxtlatl* (thick leather loincloth) and a leather girdle called *quezeuatl* that was made from deerskin (Stern, 1966: 57). This additional garment helped protect the players from the impact of the rubber ball. When the players dove to receive a low strike, their hands were protected with a leather bandage called *mayerumatl* (Krickeberg, 1966: 193). In addition, they often wore a half mask on their faces to cover their cheeks.¹³

The ball that was used for game playing was made from solid rubber, and was known to weigh between 8-9 lbs. It bounced so high and with such speed that the Spanish conquistadors thought it must be a devilish act. Leyenaar pointed out that several types of balls were used in Spain at the

beginning of the sixteenth century (1992). These included (1) a hair-filled leather ball, *pelota*, used for the game of *trinquete*, a kind of tennis played at many medieval courts; and (2) a leather ball containing an air-filled bladder, *pelota de viento*, used in the game from which both *pelota vasca* and jai alai developed. The Spaniards were also acquainted with a leather ball filled with feathers, a type of ball used in the Low Countries to play a game called kolven, the proto-type of golf (*ibid.*, 117). However, none of those balls ever achieved the same bounce as those in Tenochtitlán.

The Function of the Aztec Game

The purpose of the game was to pass the ball to the opposite side of the centerline and stay within the court's boundaries. A player who could pass the ball through one of the stone hoops immediately won the game for his team. As a reward he received fine woven mantles and jewels owned by the spectators (Motolinia, 1971: 382). At times, the spectators fled the scene to avoid having their possessions taken (Acosta and Moedano Koer, 1935-1946).

The primary objective of Aztec games was to increase the prestige, power, and wealth of the nobles, who bet large amounts of money (Santley *et al.*, 1991). Items waged were jewels, slaves, precious stones, fine mantles, the trappings of war, and woman's finery. Others wagered their mistresses, their children, and even their own lives. Fray Diego Durán provided a vivid description of the people's obsession for gambling (1971: 318).

The men who sought greed instead of recreation played for stakes of little value or worth, forced to gamble their homes, their fields, corn granaries, and their maguey plants...they sold their children in order to

bet, and even staked themselves and became slaves to be sacrificed later if they were not ransomed in the manner which they sold themselves.

In so far as the game is concerned, its gambling nature caused the death and ruin of many men. This, too, was the final outcome of some rulers who utilized the game as a political tool. Although the players sought victory and promotion in rank, political situations oftentimes affected the game's results. A ballgame played between the sixth Aztec ruler Axayacatl and Xihuitlémoc, the king of Xochimilco illustrates the politics involved in ballgame competitions. In that game, the Aztec ruler bet the marketplace, while his opponent wagered his beautiful garden. When the king of Xochimilco won the game, Axayacatl was to give him the marketplace, but he refused to pay his debt and sent his warriors instead to kill his adversary (De Alba Ixtlilxóchitl, 1985: 178).

Pre-Ballgame Ceremonies

The religious character of the game is defined, along with its other aspects, by the complex ceremonies that took place before games, such as the inauguration of a new structure, the use of the ball as an offering, and the invocation of ballgame deities (Castro-Leal, 1986: 30). A multitude of gods were associated with the game, but in Aztec culture, Xólotl was the ballgame's patron. Xólotl was recognized as Quetzalcóatl's twin and a manifestation of Venus as the evening star (Uriarte, 2000). In Central Mexican codices he was often represented with the face of a dog. The dog was the animal that escorted the dead to the Underworld and the Sun in its journey across the sky (Krickeberg, 1966: 149).

The sanctification of the court was another ritual that took place before ballgames. In a figurative sense, the court became alive through the movements of the dancers, songs and chants, the rhythmic sounds of the trumpet conch shells, *teponaztli* (slit gong drum), and the *huehuetl* (drum) (Fox, 1996). In Fray Motolinia's account of rubber ballgames, he describes this solemn act of consecration (1971):

When the court had been completed...they put the heart in the court with certain witcheries¹⁴...they decorated two idols and put them on top of the walls of the ball court, and sang before them and recited their chants... others went as messengers to the temples to inform the priests that they made a ball court and fulfilled therein all the solemnities and ceremonies, that there remained nothing more to do but for the priests to go and bless and sanctify it. Several priests, black as those who come from Hell, took the ball and threw it four times against the court (trans. from Spanish; my translation).

In sixteenth and seventeenth century documents, the court holds a special place in the foundation of a town or village. One of the most important migration legends describes the story of Huitzilopochtli's arrival at Cóatepetl, Serpent Mountain. Huitzilopochtli was the Sun/War god and patron deity of the city of Tenochtitlán. This was the place the gods had chosen, and where the four roads, symbolic divisions of the empire, and universe connected (Pasztory, 1972: 109).

This legend is significant because it designates the strategic location of the main ball court in Tenochtitlán that became a fundamental center where sacred powers were concentrated. The events that led to its foundation vary by source, and are often metaphoric expressions that cannot be pinned down historically. Spanish colonial buildings cover the court today, but the friars

mentioned that it was located in front of the Templo Mayor (Great Temple). The middle of the court contained a hole they called “*el pozo de agua*” (water hole) that marked the location where the people were to settle and from which all living things would miraculously grow. In this same hole, the Sun god had thrown the heart of his sister who had fought against him at his birth. As a consequence of this act, the hole dried and prevented the growth of vegetation (Baquedano, 1998: 168; Alvarado Tezozómoc, 2001).

Another migration legend describes Quetzalcoatl’s journey to Tula, where he built a ball court that had a mark in the center and an opening in the earth. In ancient Mixtec codices, this hole is depicted in the center of the ball court, as seen in Plate 19 of the Tonalámatl Aubin (figure 3.38). The round shape may be referencing the rubber ball, or may allude to the idea that it is an entrance to the Underworld where the game is to be played.

3.7 The Role of Religion in the Aztec Game

Before the arrival of the Spanish army, the Aztecs had a religious system that centered on the veneration of numerous gods and goddesses. These deities possessed individual iconographic attributes that encompassed relationships to the earth, water, fire, war, the moon, the sun, and Venus. Deities were conceived as divine entities that could transform themselves into other supernatural beings, whether male or female. This formed the basis of Aztec religion, creating a complex system that honored the gods and their original sacrifice for the continuation of humankind (Smith, 2003: 192).

The private ceremonies and high drama of public performances structured Aztec rituals (Clendinnen, 1991: 66). Myths that dealt with themes of birth, death, and renewal were reenacted through ritual in sacred spaces. Their organization and execution was the exclusive job of the *tlamacazqueh* (high priests) and *tlatoqueh* (rulers). It was myths that drove the priests to meditate and search for a deeper meaning and purpose to life. Through experience and reflection they soon discovered the transitory nature of their existence (León-Portilla, 1963).

Two interrelated themes permeated indigenous thought in ritual performances. One was the maintenance of cosmic order; the other dealt with periods of rain, dry seasons, and the rebirth of plants. Debt payments in the form of human sacrifice were conducted on a monthly basis to assure a cyclical renewal of all natural phenomena. Types of sacrifice included heart extraction, decapitation, dismemberment, and auto-sacrifice.

Warriors who would become sacrificial victims were prepared since birth to meet their fate. Through their death they became messengers to the gods and caused the rebirth of the Sun. That is why the sacrificed victim was well cared for before the moment of his death. In fact, the victim built a close relationship with the one who had captured him. This high regard was demonstrated when the captor acknowledged the captive as his son and the captive acknowledged his captor as his father (Pasztor, 1983).

Perhaps the most important reason for conducting human sacrifice was to compensate the gods for the sacrifice they had committed to ensure life's

preservation. In the *Florentine Codex*, Sahagún (1961) describes how the gods at Teotihuacán threw themselves into the fire to illuminate the world becoming transformed into the Sun and the Moon. When these celestial bodies proved to be immobile, the other gods had to sacrifice themselves to give them movement. The idea that life had been created from divine sacrifice, and that the cosmos is older than the sun are basic conceptions of Aztec cosmology (Krickeberg, 1966: 128).

The Aztecs' Worldview

An essential feature of the cosmos was its animate character. Mountains, lakes, trees, and all celestial entities were conceived as living beings. The human body was also a symbol for the microcosm of the universe. As a microcosm filled with cosmological importance, the human body was a container of life filled with supernatural powers and entities (Ashmore, 2007). The belief in the equivalence of the cosmos and the body was exemplified in the linking of the five directions with the four limbs and body center, and relating the calendar's 20 day signs to the different parts of the body.

Furthermore, the distinct levels of the universe were equivalent to those names given to different anatomical parts of the human organism. The head, *tzontecomatl*, was recognized as the equivalent of *Ilhuicatl*, heavenly water, or sky; the heart, *yollotl*, was symbolic of Tlalocan, the divine level associated with water as rain; and the liver, *elli*, was connected with the special forces of the Underworld and earth (López Austin, 1984). This classification pertains to an important attribute of landscape conceptualized as a coherent bodily structure,

and similarly expresses processes that in nature and the body were conceived as parallels (Carrasco, 1990).

The Four Cardinal Directions

The division of body into five parts was also reflected in the construction of urban space, pyramids, the calendar, and of ball courts (Broda, 1991; Caso, 1971). One of the fundamental concepts of the Aztec religion was the grouping of all beings according to the four cardinal points of the compass and the central direction, or up and down. Each of the directions dominated sixty-five days in the Aztec's ritual calendar. In addition, each of the 20 days in the 260-day calendar came under the influence of one of the four spatial directions through an infinite rotation.

It was the wise men (*tlamatinime*) that devised an astronomical explanation for the divisions of the world. The *tlamatinime* were avid astronomers who tracked the stars, constellations, and movement of the heavenly bodies during the course of night. They symbolized the universe's quadripartite structure in the shape of the *quincunx*, a design that emerged from the idea that the universe had the form of a cross containing a fifth region in the center.

The world's middle section marked the principal point where horizontal and vertical planes crossed, and was the residence of the principal Aztec deities: Huehuehtéotl (god of old age), Xiuhtecuhtli (god of fire), and Ometéotl, the god of duality who inhabits Omeyocan, "the place of duality." Ometéotl is a god who also simultaneously embodies Tonacacihuátl and Tonacatecutli (the

primordial couple) (León-Portilla, 1963: 30). He was “mother and father of the gods” who conceives first the gods, then all existing things (*ibid.*, 32).

The vertical axis was composed of thirteen heavens, the earthly level, and the nine passages of the Underworld. In Aztec thought, the Underworld was called Mictlán. Most people who died went there, unless one’s death was caused by a special circumstance such as parturition, war, or sacrifice. The center, or *axis mundi*, was a sacred place that facilitated contact between persons and the human and non-human environment. Mircea Eliade (1969) saw the “centre” as a region present in every microcosm and inhabited region in the world. This middle space reflected sacred, subjective mythic geography, as opposed to abstract and nonessential geography that is profane.

A cosmogonic Aztec myth magnificently portrays the importance of cardinal orientation. The Legend of the Fifth Sun relates that there had been four historical ages, called Suns—eras identified in succession with the earth, wind, fire, and water—that had been previously destroyed and whose transformation led to the formation of the present earth and all living things. This is the era identified as the Fifth Sun, or *Ollintonatiuh* (León-Portilla, 1963: 6; Townsend, 2000: 124). The four natural elements were represented as associated with the four cardinal directions, each containing a specific deity, collectively, these directional gods were known as the four Tezcatlipocas (Aguilar, 2006: 139).

The four gods compose the primary forces that set in motion the history

of the world, and the symbolism of their colors—red, black, white, and blue—allows us to trace their identification with the directions of space, the natural elements, and the periods of time allotted to their influence (León-Portilla, 1963: 33). This sequence of eras is displayed on the famous sculptural monument “Stone of the Fifth Sun” that is also known as “The Aztec Calendar” (figure 3.39). That is why the numbers four and five were very important in Aztec mentality and were manifested in all religious concepts (Caso, 1971: 22).

3.8 The Game and Cosmology

In the early nineteenth century, the symbolic connection between celestial movements or periodic agricultural cycles and the game made its way into Mesoamerican research through the works of Eduard Seler. It was he who perceived a relationship between the movements of the sun and the path of the ball during play. The daily movement of the Sun, whom the Aztecs called Tonatiuh represented the most important point of reference for the distribution of space (Ibarra, 1999: 290). Space was linked to perceptions of the subject; neither the Sun nor the subject could live or perform without the existence of the other. This basic concept underlies the Mesoamerican system of thought based on duality where complementary opposites interacted actively in dualistic principles like earth/fire, female/male, and drought/rain (Taube, 2004).

Due to its spherical shape, and its movement across the ball court, the ball became a symbol for the sun. The ball was associated with the glyph *ollin* that is depicted in the center of the “Stone of the Fifth Sun.” This form

symbolizes the beginning of time when the heavenly bodies were able to move, and also the moment when the world will be destroyed (Soustelle, 1961: 96). In turn, the ball as cosmic movement and essence of terrestrial fertility was essential for comprehending the movements of the celestial bodies (Weisz, 1993: 80).

The importance of the Sun for the indigenous people cannot be overestimated. It is shown frequently in late Post-classic Central Mexican and Mixtec codices along with the planet Venus. In Plate 35 of the Codex Borgia the Sun rests on a figure's belly in the middle of a ball court (Krickeberg, 1966; Seler, 1963) (figure 3.40). The red color of the court was associated with the East, known as *Tlapallan*, "the place of red color"; and *Tonatiuh Yquizayampa*, "where the sun rises" (Aguilar, 2006: 302). This disk appears repeatedly in settings whose characteristics and surrounding symbols denote rituals or ceremonies dedicated to the Sun.

Designs from other codices where the ball court is correlated with burning rubber balls and the deity 4 *Ollin* support this theory (figure 3.41). The date 4 *Ollin* is significant because they announced the arrival of the rainy season that fell on the vernal equinox (Durán, 1971). During the spring or vernal equinox when *milpas* (corn fields) were burned the sun was thought to descend into the underworld to become an aged fertility god (Cohodas, 1975).

A solar ritual taking place in the ball court at the exact calendrical point of the equinox can be seen in Plate 40 of the Codex Borgia (figure 3.42). The protagonist is a red skeletal deity whose arms and legs are wide open in the

posture of a toad. Skeletonization is often identified with death imagery, but may be related to fertility-life giving qualities of the earth (Furst, 1995: 22-23). The toad itself was a central symbol in Mesoamerican art because it was a terrestrial and aquatic animal, a dualistic being (Uriarte, 2000: 33).

Frogs or toads have also been associated with female sexuality (Klein, 2002). In Nahua speech, the word for “frog” was sometimes used as a name for Tlaltecuhltli, the Earth Goddess (*ibid.*). Tlaltecuhltli was a toad-saurian creature whose posture was compared to a woman giving birth (Pasztor, 1983: 82). Given these interpretations, the emergence of the young god and the skeletal mother in the middle of the ball court appear to depict the death of the goddess in parturition.

Consequently, the ballgame’s association with vernal equinox and a sun deity strengthens Krickeberg’s suggestion that the ballgame was played specifically on the vernal equinox to influence the descent of the sun. It is likely that the ballgame was played on the equinoxes and during certain seasons at the height of its popularity during the Post-classic to represent the battle of celestial and infernal forces (Aveni, 1980).

At Xochicalco, Morelos, the sun’s position of the horizon at the equinoxes appears in precise alignment with the ball court there (*ibid.*, 20). This is a striking phenomenon that I suspect occurred at other ball court locations. A number of investigations have demonstrated that several Mesoamerican sites were built at specific locations so that ball courts and other structures would align with the sun’s appearance at the equinoxes and solstices

(Uriarte, 1992; Krickeberg, 1966). The Main Temple at Tenochtitlan was designed so that during the spring equinox, the sun rose directly between the twin Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli temples (Smith, 2003: 252).

Another astral body that was well established in symbolic connection to the ballgame was Venus. As an evening star, Venus could be considered responsible for the sacrifice and descent of the sun. Warriors were equivalent to the planet Venus because both were in constant dual with another being; the warriors with their enemies, and Venus with the Sun. The indigenous Nahuas called Venus different names, but the most common was Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli, “Lord of the House of Dawn” (Seler, 1963)

Venus had two deity manifestations, one as Quetzalcóatl, the Morning Star, and the other as Xólotl, the Evening Star. Quetzalcóatl and Xólotl are related not only through their association with morning and evening stars, but their vestments identify them as twins. For the ballgame, this dual identification was essential because the game always required the confrontation of two beings (Krickeberg, 1966: 221). Ballgame players who had lost the game were commonly painted with red stripes on their bodies, corresponding to the manner in which victims of sacrifice were arrayed to honor Tlahuizcalpantecuhtli-Quetzalcóatl, the manifestation of Venus as morning star (figure 3.43).

In recent times the Huastec people in Veracruz continue to venerate the planet Venus. This astral body is called *Tonquetl*, which in the Náhuatl language is translated as “*lucero de la mañana*,” and “*lucero de la noche*” (light of day, and light of night). It contains the same root as *tona* that occurs in the

term *tonatiuh*, which is translated as heat, or sun. When *tonquetl* is low, it means that the sun is rising and it is time to conduct one's regular activities. In certain times of harvest, the *tepatiquetl* (healer) sings specific songs to invoke the planet and the rest of the astral bodies in order that the people can accomplish their daily tasks. My consultant mentioned that *tonquetl* is invoked in most Huastec rituals (Victoriano De la Cruz, personal com., 2010).

3.9 The Ballgame and Its Relationship to War

The constant need to regenerate the earth drove the Aztecs to practice war during the dry season in order to favor the rains. Warfare carried out the same function as the game, since both were attempts to gain victory against two rivals. Armed conflict was replaced by ballgames that involved acts of human sacrifice (Townsend, 2000: 209). We have seen the connection of the game to war in previous periods, but in the Aztec culture its practice occurred on a larger scale.

The connection between the game and war is based on the idea that both were practiced to display one's physical strength and ability. For this, both the players and warriors used the *chimalli* shield as a source for protection. The desire to defeat death made the sport similar to a gladiatorial combat where the player's strength and skill was exposed and challenged. Before going to war, warriors went to the main temples to elicit supernatural assistance. The act of sacrifice was not entirely religious, but appears to have been more political, since the Aztecs had to go to war to capture victims for

sacrifice. However wars were also waged for combat training, and these pre-arranged combats were given the name *xochiyaoyotl*, or flowery wars (Hassig, 1988: 10).

For the Aztecs, warfare was a practical matter and pursued in that fashion (*ibid.*, 11). The nature of Mesoamerican political relations determined which polities might be appropriate targets, but also dictated to what extent such polities might be integrated into the Aztecs' imperial system once victims were conquered (*ibid.*, 13). Most wars yielded prisoners, and men were indeed sacrificed, which made for an impressive display of military power. War also afforded an occasion for publicly recognizing individual captors, which thereby encouraged the acquisition of military skill (Motolinia 1971: 349-351).

The ceremony of *Panquetzaliztli* that Sahagún describes (see quote at the start of this chapter) represents the intimate relationship between the game and war, both a fight against opposing forces (1961). The court was dedicated to Paynal, the god of battle and a manifestation of Huitzilopochtli. The ceremony began with a procession that passed through various places in the city, parading the image of the god through the community. Paynal's statue was taken to the ball court on the following day, along with four war captives that were to be sacrificed. These captives represented Huitzilopochtli's brothers, the Centzon Huitznahua. Two of the captives were sacrificed to Amapan and two to Huappatzan, deities of the ballgame, whose statues were located on the ball court next to Huitzilopochtli's temple. After the captives had been sacrificed, warriors chased and fought each other through the town, and

eventually the chase ended with the death of many men.

The act of war is made explicit by the mock battles carried out by the ceremony's participants. However, it also recreates the birth of the Sun, and his constant dual with the Moon and the Stars (López Austin, 1993: 6). In both cases, we see the male's gender identity being reflected through the act of war, whether physical or mythical. It is an appropriate festival because with the coming of the dry season, agricultural pursuits came to a close and the season of warfare began (Milbrath, 1997: 188).

The legend of the Sun and Moon's dual is well known in literature, yet recent studies have demonstrated that it does not reference the triumph of Huitzilopochtli over his sister, as was proposed by Seler, but rather a lunar eclipse. The classical Náhuatl term for lunar eclipse, *metztli iqualoca*, refers to the moon being eaten (John Sullivan, personal comm., 2011). Images in codices and 16th century documents show the moon being eaten by the sun, which alludes to this idea.

The relationship of the game to war is further attested by the legend that recalls Tezcatlipoca's dual against his adversary Quetzacóatl in the court at Tollan. Tezcatlipoca was the patron god of warriors and sorcery. He could either cause anguish and affliction or bestow wealth, honor, rulership, and nobility (Mysyck, 2012: 118). Their struggle for supremacy caused an ongoing battle between them that eventually led Quetzalcóatl to flee Tollan where he ruled (*ibid.*, 119). Additionally, the Codex Nuttall depicts an image with two ballplayer figures dressed in war regalia that face each other as if resolving a

treaty (figure 3.44) (Stern, 1966: 70). Warfare itself grew to be the principal agency for securing the large number of victims the Huitzilopochtli official rituals demanded, and even superceded the central need for fertility rites (*ibid.*).

Women were also related to the act of war. A woman's moment in parturition was compared to the warrior in combat, the woman who just gave birth was compared to with the victorious warrior, and the one who dies during parturition was compared with the warrior who dies in battle, or in gladiatorial sacrifice. If a woman was victorious in giving birth, then her child would become the trophy. Yet if she were to die while giving birth, her death would be just as noble as the warrior's death, and just like the warrior, she would ascend into the sky to the House of the Sun (Tarazona Garza, 1991: 56).

3.10 Concluding Remarks

More than 3,000 years ago, Mesoamerican rubber ballgames became public events that combined religion, sport, and entertainment, inspiring the creation of countless of sculptures, figurines, and ball courts. The first culture to play the game in a ritual form was the Olmec. They lived in lush tropical areas of the Gulf Coast where latex—material used to make the rubber balls—grew in large amounts. Given the lack of masonry courts for those areas, it seems that the Olmec ballgame was practiced in open earthen spaces. With the development of city-states in the Middle Pre-classic Period, court construction began to appear throughout southern Mesoamerica.

The ritual significance of the game is reflected in the amount of effort

devoted to court construction. More than 1,700 courts have been discovered and it seems that with every excavation a new one is unearthed (Taladoire, 2000). Courts were situated within an architectural complex and centrally located at the meeting points of large plazas. While they varied in size and shape, most took the form of the capital letter “I” and were surrounded by sloping or vertical walls. A few ball courts, such as those found in southern Maya regions and Central Mexico, also contained stone hoops through which the players had to pass the ball to score a point. Any player who achieved this task immediately won the game for his team.

Studies by John Fox (1996) have demonstrated that ball court spaces likewise served as public arenas for secular rituals that could or could have not have been ballgame-related. Fox has pointed the way toward a highly productive analysis of ball courts that hopefully will inspire further studies of the Mesoamerican ballgame, and bring it out of the narrow categories of cult and sport into the broader sociopolitical spectrum. Secularism finds its roots in early period games where the ruler may have brought together the community to witness and participate in communal celebrations conducted on court spaces. Entertainment as a means of achieving social cohesion would have fared well with strategies to enhance the ruler’s power and status. All community members participated in the development of these social events including women.

The best examples of community camaraderie are represented in the iconography of West Mexican ceramic ball court ceramic models. The models

and accompanying figures express the idea that communities were created and reconstituted through participation in shared ritual. Feasting was an important ritual that was conducted on ball court spaces, providing an exceptionally lavish form of entertainment if hosted by the elite. Feasting, gift-giving, and spectacular ritual displays have played major roles in social integration and in social ranking all across the Americas, in areas such as the North West Coast, and in native California. It is likely that other secular activities were also conducted on ball court spaces, such as initiation rites or accession to office. As facilities for social integration, ball courts provided meaningful settings for what Ervin Goffman has called “focused gatherings” (quoted in Fox, 1996: 495).

During the Classic period, masonry courts appeared throughout Mexico, particularly in Maya regions. The Maya game was enacted to gain the favor of the gods. All ballplayers were men, but queens formed part of the ballgame ritual either as spectators or by setting the ball into play. The ballgame outfit of the Maya was so elaborate that some scholars believe that it was only worn for ballgame-related ceremonies. However, ceramic figures and ball court reliefs suggest that the outfit formed part of the game, as the ballplayer is seen in playing action wearing the ballgame equipment.

Major Classic centers that participated in the ballgame ritual were Chichén Itzá, El Tajín, and Teotihuacán. In all three sites, the game was played in different forms and for various purposes. In Chichén Itzá, the game appears to have been associated with a war complex. The majority of ball court reliefs show warriors dressed as ballplayers that are witnessing or forming part of the

sacrificial ritual of a captive in the form of decapitation. Sacrifice was a major theme in Classic ballgame art. At El Tajín, the reliefs in the South Ball Court display sacrifices taking place on court spaces. There are also images linking the game with *pulque*, an alcoholic drink that was consumed during ritual ceremonies. An interesting aspect of the images at El Tajín is that they do not depict the actual playing of the game.

The murals in the Tepantitla Palace Compound at Teotihuacán include various ballgame scenes that depict human sacrifice. The act of sacrifice itself is not depicted, but there are images and symbols associated with its practice. Ballplayers are also shown playing the game in a variety of forms. Had it not been for these images, we would have been unaware of the game's existence there, since, to date, no ball courts have been found in Teotihuacán.

At the end of the Classic period the game began to lose its popularity, and regained central importance during the Post-classic period in the Aztec culture. The Aztec game, *ullamalitzli*, was a ritual sport played by Aztec nobles who bet anything they owned, including their own lives. Rulers who played the game also waged their properties, such as when the Aztec king Axayacatl bet his marketplace when he played a game against the king of Xochimilco. From political performances to human sacrifice, the ballgame practice always favored those privileged few who could extend their power over those they played against.

In every game, time and space were also manipulated, and in this we find symbolic meanings that were tied to these religious principles: ritualism,

cosmogony, cosmology, and mythology (Nicholson, 1971). Several key ideas have been proposed to explain the game's symbolic links to cosmology.

Krickeberg suggested that the ballgame reenacts the dual between day and night, or of light and day, that causes the Sun to rise and set (1966). Knauth sees the game as a dual between the Sun and Moon Goddess, which finds parallels with Krickeberg's analysis (1960). Uriarte connects the game to fertility rites and replication of astronomical cycles, metaphors expressing life and death concepts (1992).

Perhaps the most important aspect of the ball game was the desire to maintain stability both on earth and in the cosmos. One of the functions of ballgames was to assure the continuation of celestial and agricultural cycles. Agricultural fertility is a seasonal phenomenon, and the periodic movements of heavenly bodies such as the sun and the moon mark seasonality (Gillespie, 1991). The yearly cycle of agricultural activity, and the rituals which attended it, formed the basis for indigenous ideology. To achieve this germination of vegetation and renewal of life itself, human sacrifice was performed as part of the ballgame ritual.

Human sacrifice was a response to the instability of the Aztecs' world, which was in constant threat of destruction (Soustelle, 1961: 99). It was enacted to propitiate the germination of plants and the prosperity of cultivation to sustain the population. The ballgame's conclusion with a violent sacrifice symbolized the death (and eventual rebirth) of the sun or moon, necessary for the recurring astral movements to proceed in their usual manner (Gillespie,

1991: 321). This cyclical regeneration is one of the major themes displayed on Central Mexican codices. Although the loser seems to have benefited less from his dual with the opposing player, he also received honor since his death was metaphorically linked to the rebirth of the sun. In this context, sacrifice expressed a profound theme of death-life transformation (Townsend, 1992: 178).

Sacrifices were often performed in ball courts, as a method to manage the unstable social and symbolic dynamics between the imperial center and the allied and enemy periphery (Carrasco, 1991: 7). As Pasztory notes, “For the elite, who saw themselves as individuals whose fame and fortune was earned through birth and merit, the collapse of their political order would be equivalent to the collapse of the universe, and a tragedy for their own fortunes besides.”

Women were not allowed to play the game in Central Mexico because power was organized between a dominant male class and a male dominated group (Rodriguez-Shadow, 1997: 60). Along with this, the impact of colonialization introduced new social roles for women, and imposed new moral standards for their behavior. Additionally, the Spanish invaders produced a feminine ideal for Aztec women, which were compared to the Virgin Mary. If a woman was to adhere to these virtues, she had to be “pretty” at all times, and this meant adopting specific feminine traits (*ibid.*).

However, women contributed their presence to the ballgame mythically. In late Post-classic Central Mexican and Mixtec codices, ballgame goddesses

are pictured on or next to ball courts. They are there as protectors of the game, and to emphasize its dual aspect. Duality was a major theme in all of Mesoamerican art, and this was demonstrated in the game itself and its participants, who were symbolically portraying the Sun and Moon. The presence of women in the game was not casual, but an instrumental part of the ballgame complex that conveyed the Mesoamerican concept based on duality where male and females formed opposing but complementary pairs that constantly interacted through their symbolic union.

While we cannot access the narratives of women's lives in pre-conquest periods, we are fortunate to have a rich corpus of codices, narrative accounts, civil and ecclesiastical documents that in modern times have helped us understand the ideology, art, and the economic, political, and social roles of women in indigenous cultures (*ibid.*). A few of these documents will be examined in the subsequent chapter in an effort to understand why women were not allowed to play the game in central Mexican regions, but continued to play in the Gulf Coast, Caribbean islands, and Antilles during the sixteenth century. Through this study, I will consider whether the game was open to commoner women, the elite, or all members of society regardless of age or gender. I will also examine the social or political factors that have contributed to women's participation in the game through time.

¹We do not know what the people in the Gulf Coast called themselves during the Pre-classic period. The name "Olmec" was used during the Post-classic to describe the people who lived in the Gulf Coast. Today, it is the name commonly used to describe their art style. In Post-classic Nahuatl, the term is defined as *Olmecca*, "people of rubber." Ollman signifies "the place of rubber," and Olmecah is the plural of Olmecca. John Sullivan, personal communication, 2010.

² The difference in gesture and the headgear of each Colossal Head may help to identify them as portraits of rulers. The portrait according to Beatriz de la Fuente is the representation of an individual, whether alive or death, real or imaginary. The fact that the portrait is made from a variety of materials does not change the idea that there is some similarity to the person being represented (2003: 225). Although most scholars agree that the Heads are not ballplayers, there is a strong possibility that ruler's played the ballgame, and that the Colossal Heads are rulers in their guise of ballplayers. The helmet-like headgear they wear makes a strong suggestion for this.

³ The Olmec were the first to achieve a socio-political state that gave rise to many cultural traits adapted by later cultures (Castro-Leal, 1992)

⁴ The different court designs will not be discussed in this paper. See Taladoire, Eric. 1992. The Architectural Foundation of Courts. In *El Juego de Pelota Mesoamericano. Raíces y Supervivencia*, Maria Teresa Uriarte, ed. Mexico: Siglo Veintiuno. (2000) who has conducted the most extensive study of ball court designs, usage, and symbolism.

⁵ West Mexico is identified by the states of Jalisco, Nayarit, Guerrero, Colima, Michoacan, and Guanajuato.

⁶ The archaeological excavations by Phil Weigand and others have discredited the preconceived notion that the west Mexican game did not compare in sophistication to its contemporaries in other Mesoamerican regions (Weigand, 1996, 2005; Hers, 1993).

⁷ The names for the Maya ballgame equipment vary by author and seem to change within regions.

⁸ For more on these ballgame objects see, Borhegyi, Stephan F. 1967. "Thin Stone Heads" and Other Pre-Columbian Miniature Stone Objects from Mesoamerica. In *American Antiquity* 32(4): 543-546.

⁹ The armed men shown at Chichén Itzá, many explicitly identified as Toltec, were a specialized part of the complex Itzá society with its noble and priestly class, countless administrators, merchants, craftsmen, and ordinary citizens—all elements in the southern Mesoamerican Itzá coalition that shared an idealized Toltec warrior ancestry which was portrayed in the upper registers of the Lower Temple of the Jaguars at Chichén Itzá (Coggins, 2002: 74),

¹⁰ Alfred Tozzer had suggested that the warriors depicted on the Great Ball court celebrates the Toltec's victory over the Maya and their peaceful entrance into the city (1930). However, Proskouriakoff contradicts this theory because no archaeological evidence was found there that supports this conclusion (1950).

¹¹ Among the Witot, a South American tribe, there is a similar relationship between the ballgame and decapitation. Legend has it that when the heavenly deities competed in a ballgame contest, one of them was decapitated by the ball, and devoured by his opponents, the forces of evil. Afterwards, his two sons sought revenge in a second game, defeating and destroying their foe (Alegria, 1983).

¹² This sign was a bad omen, and whoever was born on this day would become a thief or farmers of filth. They would die in war, sacrificed, or drowned Sahagun (1961).

¹³ It is amazing that the ballgame equipment was able to survive the perils of the conquest because *ulama* players today wear similar vestments on their hips.

¹⁴ When the priests are said to "put the heart in the court" it refers to them giving the court life, and not that they literally put an actual human heart in the court.

Chapter Four: Ethnohistoric Accounts of the Rubber Ballgames of Ancient Mexico and the Caribbean Islands

When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés and his army of soldiers arrived in Tenochtitlán in the year 1519, the richly decorated buildings and wealth of the Aztec nobility amazed them just as did the lush landscape that surrounded the city. Within a matter of years, the Aztec people had transformed their homeland into a social environment filled with villages, towns, and cities that were set within a modified agricultural countryside (Smith, 2003: 11). The rituals they practiced were manifold and often rooted in a profound religious significance. Everyone participated in rituals from children to adults, nobles to commoners, and men to women.

There was one ritual in particular worthy of note, a game called *ullamaliztli* that was a sport in which players had to propel an eight-pound rubber ball with their thighs, hips, or knees. The game was played on an elongated masonry court that took the shape of a capital letter “I.” A few of the courts contained two stone rings on their walls through which the ball had to pass. Although the game had become mostly secularized upon arrival of the Spanish conquistadors, religious rites continued to form part of the ballgame’s many activities (Stevenson, 2001: 76).

Legend has it that the Mexica leader Huitzilopochtli (“the blue heron bird”), also known as Mexitli, was the first to introduce the game in Tenochtitlán when he settled there in the year 2 House (approximately 1325) (Townsend, 2000: 65; Clavijero, 1945: 76).¹ Huitzilopochtli was the god of war who had

migrated from the city of Aztlán, a mythical place that to date has not been geographically located.² The designated setting had been chosen by the gods, and was to contain a sign in the form of an eagle perched atop a prickly pear cactus (figure 4.1) (Del Paso y Troncoso, 1980: VIX). Of the four god bearers who guided the Mexica to their destined land was a woman by the name of Chimalma, who appears to have become the first female to hold a prestigious role in Mexica society (figure 4.2) (Pasztor, 1983: 200).

One of the first things Huitzilopochtli built in this location was a ball court. It was one day at midnight that in this ritual space he fought his sister Coyolxauhqui, the Moon goddess, who along with the *Centzonhuitznáhua* (the 400 Southerners, referring to the stars) were attempting to kill their mother Coatlicue (the earth goddess) for becoming impregnated (Alvarado Tezozómoc, 2001: 59-60). The story recalls that the people found the dead bodies and extracted hearts in the *Teotlachco* (sacred ball court) or *Tzonpanco* (skull rack) of those that had organized a rebellion against him (Durán, 1867: 25-26).³ The death of the Moon goddess and 400 Southerners resulted in the birth of Huitzilopochtli, a warrior who was born to fight all enemies that opposed him (Matos Moctezuma, 1981: 17).⁴

The warrior nature of the Mexica's tutelary deity formed the basis for political and military organization in Aztec society and marked the beginning of heart sacrifices. In due time, the Mexica's had gone from a tribe based on clans to a kingdom based on ranked lineages governed by noble elites (Nash, 1997: 337). Because men from the military aristocracy controlled all social,

economic, and political affairs, women had limited public authority and were restricted from participating in male-related activities. This included integration into the rubber ballgame. Nevertheless, the Spanish Franciscan friars who wrote ethnographic accounts in the sixteenth century observed them performing other ritual activities that suggest they were significant contributors to the sport.

In this chapter, I conduct a brief investigation of the roles of women in the game of *ullamalitzli* in order to determine what factors led to their exclusion in a game that at one time was played by both men and women. I begin by examining the roles assigned to the sexes from birth until adulthood, and how these impacted women's participation in the game in central Mexico. I also analyze the roles that women played within the ballgame ritual. While there has been very little written on women's social status in Aztec society, there exist some data that can help me form a general theoretical understanding of the roles they played.

I then examine images of late Post-classic ballgame goddesses who seem to have been fundamental for the game's religious value. In the last section, I compare the rubber ballgame of the Aztecs with those of the Caribbean Islands and South America, where women were prominent participants at the same time that games were being played in Mesoamerican territories. Given that the information provided by the Spanish chroniclers for the game in regions outside of Mesoamerica is not as extensive as that available for *ullamalitzli*, I am limited to discussing the game and the roles of

women using the limited sources available.

4.1 Reconstructing the Past

Ethnohistory is a discipline in which specialists use documents and other written materials to study the lives of past cultures. The scholars who undertake this research utilize the accounts of explorers, soldiers, missionaries, and others to reconstruct cultures at the time of western contact (Smith, 2003: 12). Ethnohistorical studies of the lives and peoples of ancient Mexico commenced during the late part of the sixteenth century when Spanish Franciscan friars were sent to the New World to help with the evangelization of the Nahua tribes. Their documents, along with the native codices, oral accounts, and ancient manuscripts written by Nahua elders (*huehuetlahtolli*) have been prime sources for Mesoamerica's cultural and ritual historical reconstruction.

The person to whom we are most indebted for having compiled the history of the Aztecs was the Spanish Franciscan fray Bernardino de Sahagún. In his twelve-volume compendium, *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (1550-1569), he provides a comprehensive account of the lives, customs, and rites of the Aztecs and their many gods. In this manuscript he incorporated a general description of the game of *ullamalitzli*, including the roles of the male players, their costumes, and the rites associated with it (1961). While this account has been the Rosetta Stone for understanding the Aztec game, the roles played by women in the same ritual are not given sufficient

consideration compared to those of their male counterparts.

The lack of attention given to Nahua women in Sahagún's accounts is comparable to other documents of the time. For the most part, the history of ancient central Mexican societies was dedicated to the study of men's roles, as if women had been passive players in the development of Mesoamerican cultures. The biases present in Colonial texts also prevail in contemporary times with discussions of ancient indigenous women. This ongoing problem led me to formulate a number of questions that came to form the basis for the following investigation. Did the Spanish friars' religious upbringing influence them to assume women's roles to be insignificant? Did the native informants who were supplying information limit their discussions to the roles of males? Were women's roles before the conquest less esteemed than those of males? How did society view women's roles in the ballgame ritual?

The Formation of Aztec Children

At the moment of birth, all Aztec children met their destiny. The midwife—who was a respected elder in the community—addressed them regarding their roles in life and the expectations of proper gender behavior (figure 4.3). Like their mothers, girls would grow to be chaste, obedient, and dedicate themselves to the home and service in the temples. The mother also formed part of this education, and was responsible for giving her daughter advice on matters concerning her roles and duties in and out of the domestic sphere (Sahagún, 1961).

A child acquired a name four days after birth if he or she was born

on a lucky day (Vaillant, 1950: 115). At the same time, boys and girls were given small instruments that characterized their gender roles. Girls received a small broom, spinning and weaving implements, as well as their miniaturized version of the garments they were to wear as mature females. In her study of ancient indigenous costume, Patricia Rieff Anawalt noted that the early exposure to weaving was important for a number of reasons (1981a). First, clothing was an obvious necessity; secondly, fine cloth and mantles were used as tributary payment; and finally, this was a woman's essential duty, just as being a warrior was the duty of men (*ibid.*, 11).

Thus, Nahua girls were taught weaving techniques at an early age, and they received various punishments if they disobeyed their mothers. At the age of ten young girls were already being prepared for marriage, which generally occurred around the age of sixteen (López de Gomára, 1826: 157; Vaillant, 1950: 117). Social status was acquired through marriage if the girl's future husband was of high rank (Clendinnen, 1991: 156). In this sense, marriage was not a sacred act, but became a social necessity.

Boys, on the other hand, received their arrows, bow, and shield that marked their future role as warriors (*ibid.*, 153). They attended the *cuicacalli* or 'houses of song' between the ages of twelve and fifteen at the same time as girls, where they learned music, singing, and dancing (Soustelle, 1961: 236; Berdan, 1980: 88). While all boys went through military training, only noble boys could rise in social status if they became warriors, eagles (a prestigious "knightly order"), or priests—positions of high honor. The *macehualtin*, or

“commoners,” were allowed to attend the *telpochcalli* “young man’s house” together with the noble boys, and oftentimes also the *calmécac*, the elite priestly school (Berdan, 1980: 64, 75). Another special privilege young noble men received was training in the rubber ballgame. Durán provides a brief commentary on how boys were recognized for participating in this game (1971: 313-314):

It was a highly entertaining game and amusement for the people, especially for those who held it to be a pastime or entertainment...through this demanding sport excellent players were formed, and, aside from being esteemed by the sovereigns, they were given notable dignities, were made intimates of the royal house and court, and were honored with special insignia.⁵

The patriarchal order that was founded in Aztec society was continually reflected throughout one’s adulthood. Specific cultural codes governed interpersonal relationships and content of men and women’s roles and the daily activities that accompanied them (Berdan, 1980: 73). Men became heads of the family, and the wives maintained themselves within the home where they had to comply with their domestic duties. Rodríguez-Shadow asserts that this male supremacy began with Huitzilopochtli’s mandate to his followers, because he represented all that was masculine: warrior, priest, ruler; in other words, Huitzilopochtli embodied all the traits that gave one power and prestige in the social and political realm (1997: 68).

While Aztec males enjoyed fame and power out in the public realm, females dedicated themselves to temple services where they made penitence and daily offerings to the Aztec idols. Cooking and weaving were other

responsibilities, which they had to comply with, and one was considered a 'bad' woman if she did not cook or weave, well. These expectations applied to both commoner and noble women.

Notable Women in Aztec Society

Although the activities of the majority of Nahua females were constrained inside the home and temples, there were others who achieved substantial social mobility during the late part of the fifteenth century (Clendinnen, 1991: 158). Susan Kellogg pointed out that the roles the sexes played were different, but both were necessary for the balanced functioning of the Aztec world (1995: 564). For example, the woman known as Cioaqualli was in charge of acquiring all the offerings like flowers and smoked canes that were made to goddesses honored during a specific festival. Another important female personage was Cioaquacuilliztaccihaztl, who took care of the *Cu* (temple), the sweepers, those who lit the fires, and those who dedicated their lives to temple services (Sahagún, 1961).

Some scholars posit that the significant statuses women held during the late Post-classic period helped to establish a matriarchal institution within Aztec society (Rodríguez-Shadow, 1997: 67). If such a matriarchal institution existed, the emergence of exogamous clans and transformations taking place in family relations would have resulted in the integration of patriarchal structures and elimination of matriarchy (*ibid.*). Furthermore, although Rodríguez-Shadow argues that the existence of a matriarchal society is difficult to postulate, she is inclined to accept the existence of matrilineal or matrilocal systems (*ibid.*, 68)

The importance of women is also manifested in the Aztec's religious traditions; for example, when the moon goddess led her brothers to kill their mother (Matos Moctezuma, 1981; Tarazona Garza, 1991; López Austin, 2010). Her sister Malinalxóchitl played another important role in the foundation myth, since she was to take command of the seven tribes that left Aztlán if her brother Huitziton died. Nevertheless, the priests who escorted the tribes wanted complete control, and told the people that Malinalxóchitl was a bad woman whose power was malevolent. Those who chose to follow the priests abandoned her and her allies during the night, and continued their journey on to the site of Tula, where they settled on the hill of Coatépec, home of the Chichimec and Otomi tribes (Durán, 1867: 22, 24). Having been left behind, Malinalxóchitl took her group towards the state of Mexico and founded the site of Malinalco, "place of the grass or herb" (Aguilar, 2009: 59).

Additionally, Aztec goddesses were depicted in ancient codices as powerful, earthy, active, sexual, and even violent (Kellogg, 1995: 568). As Clendinnen has observed, significant male deities had female partners who were habitually depicted as mothers, sisters, and/or wives, whose identity was closely linked with the males in an "easy androgeny" (1991). Other women who played important roles were such *maize* deities as Chicomecóatl, Xilonen, and Xochiquetzal. Chicomecóatl was the goddess of crops and subsistence who was always represented by the corn plant, the Aztecs' most important staple food. Xilonen and Xochiquetzal were the embodied spirits of young growth, and, by analogy, of youth and games (Vaillant, 1950: 176).

It is important to note that while men and women played equally important roles during their lifetimes, this does not mean to imply that Aztec society was egalitarian (Kellogg, 1995: 564). There was considerable attention devoted to gender hierarchy whereby men were given more recognition than women. This is particularly true of those men who held positions in political office, and is likewise expressed in the number of sculptures that depict Aztec gods. In ceremonies, it was male priests who donned the costumes of the goddesses to whom a festival was dedicated. In becoming the deity impersonator (*ixiptla*) he was no longer a living mortal, but conceived as the god himself/herself (Carrasco, 1991).

4.2 The Roles of Women in the Aztec Game

During the Aztecs' reign (1325-1521), young noble men went through rigorous training to become skilled ballgame players. The acquisition of physical strength was a critical factor for their participation, and ultimately, it was through ballgames that prowess and endurance were performed (López Austin, 1993: 22). The game involved a tremendous amount of risk, since both the spectators who gambled in the game and losing players could forfeit all their personal items if one of the opposing players were to pass the ball through the stone hoops (Durán, 1971). While gambling became a major element of the sport, human sacrifice was always the final outcome. Due to its religious content, the Spanish invaders did not hesitate to eradicate this ritual. What remains today are the mere remnants of the ball courts that at one time formed

part of a very complex ceremonial center.

Before the arrival of the Franciscan friar's women had been banned from playing the game, but were involved by making the mantles given to the ballgame winners (Motolinia, 1971: 381; Torquemada, 1969: 554). Mantles were fine woven cloths that required time and skill to weave, and had to be produced in large quantities. Textile production was a task exclusive to women and for which they were highly recognized. June Nash noted that women's labor in producing textiles was essential in reinforcing the re-distributive economy of the palaces (1997: 354). During Moctezuma's II reign (1505-1520), he used mantles as tribute items and always demanded a large supply (figure 4.4) (Codex Mendocino, 1980).

The rulers, priests, and elite class wore elaborately woven mantles that were decorated with fine threads and intricate designs (López de Gomára, 1826: 156). These precious garments were also used to dress the idols that were housed in the temples, particularly when they were transported through the town during a specific festival. In addition, smaller mantles called *quachtli* were produced and used as money. Mantles were valuable items that were used to make wagers when games were played. A woman's husband even gave her five mantles to buy domestic supplies at the marketplace (Tarazona, Garza, 1991: 27, 31).

Women also participated in the dances and rites performed before and after games. The role of music, dance and ritual performances became increasingly important for boys and girls as adulthood and their time for

marriage approached (Smith, 2003: 172). Not only was dance essential in all rituals and monthly ceremonies, but also a vast amount of information concerning religious knowledge and beliefs was transmitted through dances when sacred songs formed part of the festive repertoire (Berdan, 1980: 88).

Corporeal forms of expression such as dance complemented and enriched oral narratives that recalled the creation of life and the sacrifice of gods for the benefit of humankind. All cultural groups throughout Mesoamerica shared some widespread aspects of these myths. According to Alfredo López Austin, myths are ideas or beliefs whose elements are manifested through social life. They help to explain nature and creation, the congruence and opposition of things, the laws which govern and direct all aspects of society, and divine and worldly processes: they constitute a cosmovision (2004: 603). All characters involved in myths become important for the myth itself, whether they belong to primordial time, or the time of humans. It is a transition from the divine to the birth of natural and celestial entities that helps to shape and maintain the mundane world and all of its inhabitants according to a society's core myths.

The Relation of the Game to Post-classic Aztec Goddesses

In Aztec society, myths included deities that had influence over natural and supernatural phenomena. These deities were perceived as animate, personified beings that were the focus of their own distinct mythical cycles (Miller and Taube, 1983: 89). Male and female deities marked the differences between the genders as far as defining the social positions that men and

women could occupy (López Hernández, 2007: 251). A few gods were even capable of producing human kind without the intervention of goddesses (e.g. Huitzilopochtli) (*ibid.*).

Additionally, several deities played important roles in the ancient rubber ballgame. In the Aztecs' mythic realm, the patron deity of the game was Xólotl, "man of the chichimecas" who was related to concepts regarding twins and deformity (figure 4.5). In the Náhuatl language, *xolochau* signifies "to wrinkle or double over" (Miller and Taube, 1983: 190). In the myth of creation, he was Quetzalcóatl's alter ego or companion in his decent to the Underworld where he had been sent to retrieve the bones of mankind (Uriarte, 2001: 43; Miller and Taube, 1983: 190). A song in Sahagún's *Florentine Codex* speaks of Xólotl's relationship to the game (1961):

*Juega pelota, juega pelota el Viejo Xólotl,
En la plaza de juego de pelota de hechiceros juega xólotl
Señor del país de la piedra preciosa.
Mira si Piltzintecuhtli se aloja
En la casa de la oscuridad, en la casa de la oscuridad.⁶*

In the above passage, the god Piltzintecuhtli symbolizes the setting sun. He was the husband of Xochiquetzal, one of the patron goddesses of the game. In central Mexican codices, ballgame goddesses controlled sexuality and fecundity. They were displayed as passive personages whose attributes were linked to the home and earth. Drawing from this analysis, Laura Ibarra observed that sexual acts were regulated during pregnancy or menstruation for fear of contaminating the male partner, the couple's children, and even the food with which women came in contact, because female deities involved in

pregnancy and women's cycles had special powers over an array of natural phenomena (1996: 131).

All ballgame goddesses were considered avatars or aspects of the earth goddess known as Tlazoltéotl or Tlaltecuhтли. They represented feminine aspects of Aztec cosmology such as darkness, water, the earth, the moon, and passivity. In contrast, the masculine principle was associated with luminosity, the sun, the sky, and energy (Graulich, 2000: 101). Tlazoltéotl was a beast that had to be split in half to make her enter the human world. Men were born from her breasts and returned there when they died. In the Náhuatl language "to die" is defined as "*miqui*," and is also expressed in the phrase *ytechnaci yn tlaltecuhтли* "to copulate with Tlaltecuhтли" (Molina, 1977: 86). It is a direct analogy with the ancient game because it appears to describe the moment when the ball enters the stone hoop that, according to Michel Graulich, symbolizes the setting sun being eaten by the earth (2000: 102). The hoop also symbolizes the woman's vagina, the sexual metaphor for death, and the ball represents the male principal as a symbol of the sun.

At times earth and lunar goddesses were confused or intentionally conflated with goddesses of fire because they shared similar traits and emblems (Krickeberg, 1961: 142). In sixteenth century chronicles and codices, fire, moon, and earth goddesses are all depicted wearing a triangular blouse called the *quechquémitl* (figure 4.6). The *quechquémitl* was a ritual garment in Aztec society that carried explicit fertility overtones (Rieff Anawalt, 1981b: 212). It was not a design that originated with the Aztecs, but was possibly borrowed

from the Gulf Coast region given the various representations of fertility goddesses that may be of Huastec origin that are depicted wearing this clothing item (*ibid.*). Due to its ritual importance only goddesses and their impersonators wore this blouse.

Another trait of earth goddesses is the cotton band they wear on their heads that is shaped like a spindle. They also wear a nose ornament that takes the form of a half moon.⁷ Both of these items were symbols of fertility and vegetation, and indicated that the earth and the moon had influence over them. In their hands they hold an *ayochicahuaztl*, a cane resembling a rattle whose sound was said to call the rain. The broom they carry was used to sweep the earth before the harvesting of corn (Soustelle, 1982: 124).⁸ Most often they wear white dresses and are sometimes painted with wrinkled skin on their bodies. In Aztec cosmological thought, white was the color of the West, “*Cihuatlampa*,” one of the cardinal directions, and an area where women resided in myth and the place where birth and aging occurred (Aguilar, 2006: 164). This was also the place where the *cihuateteo*, or women who had died while giving birth resided after they had accompanied the sun at its setting (figure 4.7) (Matos Moctezuma, 2003: 18).

4.3 The Ballgame Goddesses

Coatlicue

One of the principal functions of the earth was being the mother of all that existed. For the Nahua people she was Tonantzin, “Our Mother,” also

known as Coatlicue, “she of the snake skirt” and Coatlantona, goddess of flowers (De la Maza, 1981: 57; Clavijero, 1945: 80). In ancient Mexican ideology snakes symbolized fertility and the female principle, the beginning and end, and served as the symbol of time, which was not considered apart from space (Anton, 1999: 58). As the mother of all men, Coatlicue gave life to the god of war through a miraculous impregnation:

Coatlicue was a priestess that lived a life of chastity after having given birth to the Moon and the Stars. One day while sweeping the temple she saw a ball of feathers fall from the sky. She took them and put them on her belly, saving them for the altar she had for the gods. After she had finished her chores, she looked for the feathers but did not find them. It was then that she found herself impregnated. When she miraculously gave birth to Huitzilopochtli, he created a sunbeam to attack his sister Coyolxauhqui and his brothers, the 400 Southerners, who wanted to kill their mother for conceiving him (Chavero, 1887).

Coatlicue was identified as the earth progenitor of the War/Solar god, the Moon and stars, and she was also identified with other goddesses—Cihuacóatl, “woman serpent,” and Tlazoltéotl, “the goddess of filth” (Fernández, 1972: 128). As a goddess she created life, but as a monster she could destroy it. Depictions of her body indicate she is not young like Xochiquetzal, who was one of her many manifestations. In fact, she is ageless, and will feed on man until the end of time to keep her rejuvenated. In Tenochtitlán she had a temple called *Yopico* where the flower vendors made festivals in her honor (Clavijero, 1945: 80).

Despite her importance in Aztec mythology there were very few images that represented her. Coatlicue’s most impressive statue currently stands in the

Museum of Anthropology and History located in Mexico City (figure 4.8). When the statue is observed from the front, her body forms the shape of a cross (Fernández, 1954: 214). The cruciform idea comes from the cosmological belief that the earth was divided by four cardinal directions with a central direction that formed the *axis mundi*. In Aztec society the numbers “4” and “5” provided the mathematical design principle for the creation of sculptures and monumental structures (Caso, 1970: 10).

Tlazoltéotl

Tlazoltéotl was a ballgame goddess of filth and lust, and sweeper of bad air to whom the people went to confess their sins (*tlaçolli*, waste that is thrown on the dunghill; *teotl*, deity; deity of pleasure and sin) (Clavijero, 1945: 81). The black spot on her nose and mouth is thought to represent this filth (figure 4.9), which was gradually acquired, since the sins from her worshippers were transferred to her, scholars have interpreted her association with excrement as sin relative to sexuality (Giasson, 2001: 138). In this earth goddess, more than any other, were combined all the elements of the Great Mother Earth. Both the earth and Tlazoltéotl produced life, and within them was found the mystery of creation (Ojeda Díaz and Rossell, 2012). Having given birth to the young corn god, Tlazoltéotl was considered the feminine embodiment of procreation (Glasson, 2001: 148).

Originally she was a Huastec deity who had been borrowed by the Aztecs. Xólotl was her consort, with whom she was credited with founding the great Texcocan state, and she served as its patron god (Ochoa, 2000: 61). The

Aztecs identified her by different names, but in the Huastec area she was known as “Teem” (*ibid.*). Her ritual garments are comprised of the *quechquémitl* and the *yacametztl*, or nose ornament. Like the other earth goddesses she wears the usnpun cotton headband on her headdress that contains two winches or spindles (Caso, 1984: 75). In recent times, the spindle has been symbolically connected to the act of coitus. The placement of the spindle in the spindle whorl symbolizes intercourse, as does the placement of both in the spinning bowl (Cordry and Cordry, 1968: 14). Lowell Gustafson and Amelia Trevelyn have identified another similar relationship between the growth of the ball of thread when it is spun and the growth of the fetus (2002).

In Maya regions, the rope that attaches the weaver’s backstrap loom to the tree or other support is referred to as the *yuikut*, or umbilical cord. The rope links the weaver metaphorically to the *axis mundi*, which expresses the same idea as the way Maya rulers were linked to their ancestors through the vision serpent (Gustafson and Trevelyn, 2002: 117). The relationship of women with the moon and weaving processes provides for Gustafson and Trevelyn a rich source of metaphorical connection between women, fertility, cosmological phenomena, and textile processes (*ibid.*). These concepts were important in the game and were manifested through the act of play and its accompanying rituals such as the weaving of trophy textiles for the winners.

Coyolxauhqui

Coyolxauhqui was a goddess who was patron of women’s progenitive powers and the ruler of her own supernatural court (Miller and Martin, 2004:

96). Her name is composed of the term *coyolli*, the Náhuatl word for bells, and *xuah*, which references face painting (Milbrath, 1997: 185). This goddess is best known for being the first female warrior to govern and lead men and to oppose masculine power (Ibarra, 1996: 120; López Austin, 2010: 40).

Women who died in childbirth were likewise conceived as female warriors, and were called the *mocihuaquetzqueh*. Through death, these women became immortalized as the *cihuateteo* who carried the Sun on a mantle of quetzal plumes from its zenith to its setting (Soustelle, 1961: 107; Aguilar, 2006: 164). The Aztecs feared these women because they were thought to harm children, and could seduce and cause men to commit sexual transgressions (Miller and Taube, 1983: 61). In diverse codices, the *mocihuaquetzqueh* are represented with nude bodies and the same vertical folds in their abdomen that are visibly apparent in one of Coyolxauhqui's statues (figure 4.10) (Cué, *et al.*, 2010: 45).

In that particular example, her body's dismemberment was a consequence of her battle with the War/Solar god. Coyolxauhqui became the moon after her defeat, and her brother became the sun who emerged from the underworld into the heavens (Cohodas, 1975: 110).⁹ This battle was so significant in Aztec society that it was recreated in monthly festivals in which females were beheaded (Baquedano, 1998: 167). Decapitation was a major form of ballgame sacrifice that also figured in the veneration of related fertility goddesses, as in the festival of Ochpaniztli (the sweeping of the way) that was carried out in the eleventh month of the Aztecs' ritual calendar (figure 4.11).

This rite of fertility was dedicated to Teteoinnan, or Toci, mother of the gods. The person who was to impersonate the goddess had to be a young maiden. Elderly women who lived in the main temple provided constant care for her, and made sure she did not cry or grow sad because her tears were believed to cause warriors to die in battle, or women to die while giving birth. To console the girl, she was told that the ruler would compensate her for her sacrifice when she gave up her virginity to him (Carrasco, 1991).

The girl's captivity ended at the temple when a high priest severed her head. Jacques Soustelle associates her decapitation with the falling of the ears of maize when they are plucked from the stem (1961: 100). It is a suitable association given that festivals often revolved around the significance of corn. The maiden's decapitation parallels the myth of Coyolxauhqui (and her decapitation) in that both their deaths resulted in the continued rising and setting of the sun.

Xochiquetzal

Xochiquetzal was the goddess of love and prostitutes who became patroness of all feminine labors (Krickeberg, 1961: 144). She had positive and negative powers, such as when she prohibited the scorpion from accumulating too much lethal power, or when the gods created flowers from her sexual organs (figure 4.12) (Raby, 1999: 223). When she used her malevolent forces she was known to punish adulterers, yet these dishonest men were also recognized as excellent warriors (*ibid.*). Weaving and beauty were some of her most important attributes, and in ancient codices she is depicted wearing the

richly embroidered skirt and shoulder cloth that represent these two aspects of feminine ideals. The deity was sometimes pictured seated at a loom, but her confidants and messengers were responsible for carrying out the weaving process (Pasztory, 1983: 92).

In Tlaxcala, Puebla people paid high reverence to the goddess for her invention of weaving. They believed she resided in the ninth sky that was located in the top layer of the celestial realm. In Aztec mythology, the number nine was associated with the Nine Lords of the Night, and the nine levels of suffering in the Underworld, and might also stand for the nine missed menstrual cycles during pregnancy (Aguilar, 2006: 166). In the top layer resided Tonacacíhuatl, wife of the primordial god, who in some accounts is identified as Xochiquetzal (Díaz Cíntorna, 1990: 10). In contrast to Tlaxcalan beliefs, the Aztecs conceived the celestial realm as having thirteen layers instead of nine. The number thirteen symbolized the thirteen heavens and the thirteen counts in the *trecena*. In the *tonalpohualli*, the ritual lunar calendar, *trecenas* represented one group of thirteen-day numbers (Aguilar-Moreno, 2006).

In a few late Post-classic central Mexican codices Xochiquetzal is pictured next to a ball court. In the Codex Borbonicus (Plate 19) she appears to be there as if guarding the court (figure 4.13). Salvador Díaz Cíntorna provided an interesting interpretation of this ritual scene. Her carnal character has led him to believe that the presence of the goddess signifies her control over this ritual space and all those who enter it. In his view, her presence relates to the ball court as a zone associated with sexual prowess. Given that she is the

goddess of love, she bestows sexual pleasure on whomever she pleases (1990: 35). This sexual penetration occurs on the court at the moment the player enters the playing field, and is also manifested in the ballgame when the ball passes through one of the stone rings (in the case where rings were included in the court's design).

Thus far, I have demonstrated the importance of the ballgame goddesses for the Mesoamerican game. As earth goddesses they became protectors of the game, its players, and also made sure that through the game all life was recreated. The goddesses shown next to or inside the court are pictured not as rivals, but rather as complements of the male principle. One of the key aspects of the game was its inclusion of two powerful forces that were symbolically interrelated. This expresses the Mesoamerican concept of cosmological duality that featured such contrasting pairs as fire/water, light/day, and male/female, among others.

The mythology of the two divine beings, Tonacatecuhtli and Tonacacihuatl, (Acosta, 1935-1946: 165) references this dual concept. From these primordial gods all life emerged (Tena, 2009: 11). They formed part of a complex religious system that included countless gods represented as human figures, whose sacred nature was believed to reside in the elaborate costumes they possessed. In this plethora of religious order, gods and goddesses could become manifestations of each other.

Religion was an essential element in the formation of the Aztec game, just as women were essential to the balance of gender concepts the game

required. Nevertheless, very little has been written about the latter. While women were not allowed to play the game in Post-classic central Mexico, there are accounts that mention their participation in games of the Caribbean Islanders and South American cultures. It will be interesting to see what roles women held in those societies, how society viewed gender roles, and what similarities or differences are noticeable from the accounts. The information for the games in these areas will be limited, since the evidence regarding their indigenous cultures is scarce. This has made it difficult for scholars to determine how the game began there.

4.4 The Ballgames of the Caribbean Islands

At the same time that the indigenous people were playing rubber ballgames in central Mexico during the late part of the sixteenth century they became popular in other sectors in and around the Caribbean Islands (figure 4.14). Local differences were evident in descriptions of the outfits of the players and the playing fields. Mythological contexts resembled those of Mesoamerica in that the game emphasized celestial movements, or some type of dual struggle. Just like Mesoamerican cultures, the Caribbean people believed in a primordial being that had created the world from four twins that were associated with the cardinal directions. One major difference, however, between the games of the Caribbean and those of late Post-classic Mexico is that women were allowed to play during the sixteenth century in areas that were known then as El Rio de Orinoco (Venezuela) and La Hispaniola (Haiti).

The earliest evidence of games in the Caribbean Islands dates from around A.D. 600 on the Island of Puerto Rico (Alegria, 1983). According to Samuel Wilson, early villages were autonomous and social status was not marked, as it had been in central Mexico (2007: 11). Perhaps the people had communal obligations to the village members and kinship ties to their neighbors. At the time of Columbus' arrival in the Greater Antilles, social differentiation and political elaboration were at their peak. Wilson also mentions the existence of polities in those areas including more than 100 allied villages, with combined populations in the tens of thousands (*ibid.*).

In many respects, Europeans encountered Caribbean societies that were comparable to those described elsewhere in the Americas where political and social power were characteristic of middle range societies or chiefdoms. The exception, however, was that men and women of high rank possessed equal amounts of political power and social status (*ibid.*). The equal value placed on the roles of men and women, and the opportunities they were given in the public and political realms gave women the opportunity to participate in the Antillean game.

The game's origin elsewhere in the Caribbean Islands has not been confirmed due to the lack of documents available for those areas. Ricardo Alegria provided the most comprehensive documentation of the games played in the Caribbean and South America. He has suggested that the game began in Mesoamerica and was later introduced in the Caribbean Islands by tribes who may have traveled there (1983: 4). For example, people from the Taino

culture had access to sea travel, which would have given them the opportunity to trade with Mesoamerican peoples. Other than acquiring goods, they might have developed interest in the game and would have taken it back to their villages to use as a form of recreation. The stone courts and archaeological evidence found on the Island of Puerto Rico substantiate Alegria's theory.

Another group who we know was influenced by Mesoamerican cultures was the Otomac peoples from El Rio de Orinoco. The games they practiced in their own villages appear to be similar to those played by the Aztecs. In the case of women's games, there were practices resembling the ballgame played by the Tarascans from the state of Michoacán. The following investigation will focus on the games women played in the Greater Antilles among the Taino peoples and the Otomac tribes.

The Taino Games

In 1519, J. A. Mason became the earliest explorer to witness a game in Taino villages (Hatcher, 1992: 406). He recorded the existence of ten ceremonial plazas (ball courts) in Maisabel, Puerto Rico. These plazas were actually ball courts that the Taino called *báteyes*, and were situated on a small spur of land surrounded by deep ravines on three sides (*ibid.*). A few of the courts were carved with strange designs that represented some sort of animal-humanoid motifs. The most important Taino towns and ceremonial centers were organized around these courts. The largest ball court measures 60 by 120 feet, and has huge granite slabs weighing up to 2,000 pounds along the western wall (*ibid.*).

The ballgame was an important part of Taino life and was similar to those games played in Mesoamerica and northern South America (Alegria, 1983). Some of the early chroniclers mention that the game was a communal affair that featured a great amount of entertainment. Another aspect of the game involved the interaction of different polities (*cacicazgos*). Wilson pointed out that in areas between these polities were found several ball courts where a whole range of interactions such as trade, ceremonies, intermarriage, and other exchanges might have taken place (2007: 121).

Teams were composed of one to thirty players and were positioned on each side of the court (Zucchi, 1988: 443). The ball was made of solid rubber that the Spanish called *caucho*, *pelota*, *ule*, and *ulli*. Ballgame teams competed in trying to keep the rubber ball from bouncing more than once on the floor, using any part of their bodies except the hands. If the ball were to hit the ground it was considered a “dead” ball (Alegria, 1983: 3). In the contemporary *ulama* ballgame, players also refer to a ball that falls out of bounds as “*pelota muerta*” (dead ball). In 1517, the Jeronomite friars described betting as part of the games’ activities, another similarity to the modern game (Wilson, 2007: 121).

Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés witnessed a Taino game in 1525 at La Hispaniola that was also called *batey* (1851-55). At times the game was played before making important decisions and as a religious rite. For instance, he relates how in Puerto Rico the cacique Aymamón captured the Spanish youth Pedro Suárez “and ordered his people to gamble for him at

batey (which is the Indians' ball game) and that the winner at the game should kill him" (*ibid.*, 471).

The courts that were used for game playing were made from stone and had carved designs. There were also benches for the spectators like those present in some parts of Mesoamerica. A team consisted of usually ten or twenty players per side. The ball was made of solid rubber, and one could strike it with the shoulder, elbow, head, knee, and hip. Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés mentioned that both men and women were allowed to play the game. A women's team had the same number of ballplayers as did the men's team.

Women usually played against each other and at times against male players:

And it is marvelous to see the Indian men (and many Indian women) in this game, which is continuously played with men against men, women against women, and sometimes a mixture of both; it also happens that women play against the men and the married women against the virgins (trans. from Spanish, 1851-55).¹⁰

Although all women were allowed to play *batey*, the virgins would wear no clothes, regardless if they played or not, as long as they had had no sexual encounters with any man. The female leaders of the community (*casicas*), married women, or those who had already been with a man wore shawls when they played the game that were wrapped around their bodies from their waist to midway down the thigh (*ibid.*, 299). Women of all classes participated, and there seems to have been no distinction between the games.

In the above description, the friar also remarks that women were just as agile as the men. It is interesting to note that none of the chroniclers, who undoubtedly observed several games, mentions the use of belts or any other

utilitarian or decorative elements worn by the players. While Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés does not provide a description of the male's ballgame outfit, his accounts suggest that they wore no clothes at all. This situation immediately changed after Roman Catholic conversion, as the males were asked to wear loincloths to cover their private parts

Fray Bartolome de las Casas witnessed a similar game in La Hispaniola that involved women ballplayers. The difference between the games he saw and the ones recorded by Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés is that the former mentions that women only played against women. While men often used their hips or shoulder to strike the ball, women used their knees and fists (1967: 350). If the ball weighed around the same as those used in Mesoamerica (approximately eight pounds), and Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés suggests it does, it must have been difficult for women to strike it with those fragile body parts. Undoubtedly, there must have been severe injury to the knees and elbows, but neither of the chroniclers makes note of this.

It is unfortunate that de las Casas does not provide more information about the equipment used by women ballplayers, or the exact function of the game in La Hispaniola. His descriptions are limited to discussions of the courts and the meaning of "*batey*" as it pertained to the *yucayeques* or Taino people. In his brilliant account *Apologética Historia de las Indias* (1909; 1967), he states that in front of the king or lord's house was a large long clearing that was swept and smoothed, which the islanders called *batey*. They would place richly decorated idols on the ball court before a game, a ritual practice that parallels

the one recorded by Sahagún and Durán in central Mexico. He also describes the plaza as being “fenced in by small mounds, one or two hands-breadths in height,” and that the ball could not be thrown outside the limits of the enclosure, for this would cause the team to lose a point.

The team was composed of twenty to thirty players on each side (1909: 350). There was betting involved, just as in the games in Mesoamerica and today. When the ball was thrown from above, the male players would propel it back to the opposing team with their shoulders. When it was thrown from below, they would use only their hips. Walter Krickeberg mentions that the players in La Hispaniola were also allowed to use the back (1966: 282). He makes no reference to women’s involvement in the game, although he concludes that the similarity of the ball courts in all three places implies that the game was played in a similar manner (*ibid.*, 283).

The significance of the Taino game is demonstrated by its survival even after Spanish colonization. During this time, indigenous society was disintegrating under the impact of the European conquest (Alegria, 1983: 9). Although the chroniclers did not realize the ceremonial importance of the game, they were able to detect that the Tainos played the game before making critical decisions. While the game was often played as a pastime, it also involved religious rites that included human sacrifice. The prize for victory was a sacrificial victim who was usually a prisoner granted to a winning player (*ibid.*).

4.5 The Ballgame of the Otomac Culture

In the late part of the eighteenth century, the Jesuit J  se Gumilla (1745) also witnessed ballgames in El Rio de Orinoco where women participated. The game was similar to *batey*, as well as the ballgame played by the Acaxee in Northern Sinaloa during the early part of the nineteenth century. The Orinoco region was home to the Otomac culture, people that lived between the Orinoco, Apure, and Meta rivers in the Venezuelan valleys of northern South America (figure 4.15) (Alegria, 1983: 14). Special playgrounds were built for the game that the Spanish called *trinquete*, a word that was used to designate the rubber ballgame played in Spain.

It was Christopher Columbus who first traveled to El Rio de Orinoco in 1498 (Gumilla, 1745: 25). In the middle of the seventeenth century expeditions of conquistadors penetrated the Occidental Valleys, and mentioned the presence of diverse indigenous groups that resisted the Spanish invasion in their *Entradas* (*ibid.*). A document written in 1659 stated that between the nations of the valley were “*Algunas de caribes comdeores de carne humana, en que se incluyen los Otomacos*” (“Some caribs who ate human meat included the Otomacos”) (Zucchi, 1988: 448).

In general, the Otomac people did not use clothes, and were caught by surprise when they saw the first missionaries who were wearing them (Gumilla, 1745: 121). The missionaries were so outraged by this custom that they gave women cloths to cover themselves. Notwithstanding, women threw the cloths in the river and in some cases hid them because they refused to be dressed. The

only things they used on their bodies were oil and designs made with paint.

Every morning after the Otomac *caciques* had assigned everyone their duties, the game began. The ball was described as being as big as that used by the ancient Maya. As in the *ulama* game, an elder from the community served as judge and dictated the game's rules. He could be identified by the piece of jaguar skin he held in his right hand (Zucchi, 1988: 499). He also received the items placed as bets, with the winners receiving rewards that included maize baskets, glass pieces (used to decorate their pottery and dresses), and other items of value in their homes.¹¹ The game took place on a clean court that was located in the outskirts of the town (Gumilla, 1745: 469). The ball was put into play with the right shoulder only, and no other body part was to be used. As in the Aztec capital and those games played in Sinaloa, the players could strike the ball from above and from below.

In the afternoon, women would join their husbands' teams when they had finished making their clay pots. A women's game required the use of a wooden mallet with a rounded edge that served to strike the ball. Women's teams were composed of twelve on each side, the same number of players chosen for the men's team. Each woman had a playing position, and at no time did any of them change her position during the game.

Gumilla does not provide a description of any special ballgame garment or court used for the game in the Orinoco Basin. He did state, however, that if women struck the ball hard or a member from the opposing team were to miss she would use her back to protect herself (*ibid.*, 149). This is an interesting

point that I believe Krickeberg misunderstood when he stated that players were allowed to use their backs to strike the ball. From Gumilla's description, it appears that the women's game was similar to *Pelota Púrepecha*, the ballgame that young girls currently play in the state of Michoacán. This game has its antecedents dating back to the Classic period as demonstrated by the murals at Tepantitla, Teotihuacán, where players are shown holding a mallet that was probably used to strike a ball.

Although the game in El Rio de Orinoco might have begun as a pastime, there were religious practices involved. During the game the ballplayers conducted auto-sacrifice by cutting their legs and arms, and proceeded to wash themselves in a river close to their village when they considered enough blood had been shed. Later in the afternoon, they grabbed a fistful of clay from the soil where the blood had dripped and placed it in their mouths (*ibid.*, 150). The Otomac people generally consumed clay that was in abundance where they lived (Zucchi, 1988: 449).

These types of sacrifices were frequently conducted throughout Mesoamerica, where auto-sacrifice by cutting the arms and legs was a common practice. The offering of blood was a monthly practice that honored particular gods in the Aztec pantheon. These rites were highly dramatized through song, dance, and deity impersonation, particularly in rites associated with Xipetotec, "Our Lord the Flayed One," who was honored during the festival of Tlacaxipehualiztli ("The Skinning of Men") (Sahagun, 1961).

The diffusion of sacrificial rites in connection with the rubber ballgame

demonstrates that the natives from the Caribbean Islands and the Orinoco area found more than just amusement in the game. It also shows the complex social structure in the villages where the game was played. To form competitive games like those of the Taino tribes, societies must have achieved a certain degree of sociopolitical sophistication and some technological competence, since construction of the courts would have required a vast amount of organized labor. The chief of the village not only had to find enough people to build these courts, but he or she had to supply them food and water. Undoubtedly, these efforts would have not taken place if the game had been a mere recreational form of entertainment (Alegria, 1983: 4). Although the game itself and its associated customs do not survive today, the term *batey* is still used to designate the area cleared of vegetation in front of people's homes (*ibid.*, 2).

4.6 Concluding Remarks

The arrival of the Spanish in Mexico-Tenochtitlán presented a crucial moment in the lives of the indigenous populations of ancient Mesoamerica. It was a time of cultural change and religious acculturation that transformed this native territory into a city governed by new religious orders. The buildings and sculptures that at one time adorned the Aztec city had been completely destroyed and replaced with Spanish-style churches and images of Catholic saints. When the Spanish conquistadors arrived in New Spain they did not expect to see the magnificent wealth of buildings and sculptures that

surrounded the Aztecs' capital. Nor did they expect to witness a ritual sport that made use of a rubber ball that bounced much higher than the ones they had in Europe. This was the game of *ullamaliztli*, and it was a sport played by noble men that enabled them to acquire fame, strength, power, and through human sacrifice, a guarantee that the sun would rise again.

Aztec society was modeled according to religion and received from it a deal of great influence (Quezada, 1999: 22). Myths formed a fundamental part of their religion, and it was through them that the Aztecs attempted to explain their conception of both the terrestrial and celestial worlds. These myths were transmitted through song, dance, oral narratives, and godly images. Dancing was a skill that involved highly intricate movements that had to follow the rhythms established by the drums and songs.

At a very early age, Nahua boys and girls went to a special school to learn these dances, and they were each active performers in the rituals conducted on a monthly basis to honor a specific god. For the ancient Mesoamerican peoples, the movement of the dances assured the continuation of the seasons, the return of rain, the germination of the plants, and the rising of the sun (Soustelle, 1953: 152). These dances were oftentimes performed before or after games as part of the ballgame ritual.

The information we have about Post-classic games has been made possible by the sixteenth century documents written by the Spanish Franciscan friars who had been sent to New Spain to Christianize the native population. Theirs was a history that helped to explain the religious practices of the Nahua

people, and their preoccupations with life and death. Thanks to these sources, codices, and oral traditions, we know that gender and one's social roles were established since birth. Girls were taught domestic duties like cooking and weaving, while boys become warriors, rulers, and ballplayers (Rodríguez-Shadow, 2007: 67). Given the restraints that women faced in the household, their inclusion in public activities was limited. There are rare cases, however, as Kellogg has demonstrated, of women who excelled outside the home who held public positions such as priestesses, governors, and rulers (1995: 565).

One role that women could not play in Aztec culture was that of a ballplayer. This role was exclusive to noble men who received high praise and could rise in social status through their participation. However, the agency of women is reflected in their involvement as mantle weavers, dancers, and food preparers. These were all ritual processes that were critical for the game. For instance, weaving was a skill that required a great amount of time and effort and knowledge of both the fabric and designs. Intricately woven mantles were worn by the elite, and also used to dress the idols during ritual ceremonies. Mantles were also a prized item collected by the winning team of a particular game.

Women also played a key role in the game mythically. Ballgame goddesses took part in this very important ritual by becoming ballgame players or court guardians. They symbolized the feminine aspect of the game in representing sources of life and death. They were earth goddesses who could transmit benevolent and malevolent powers at the same time. For example,

although the earth goddess Coatlicue gave birth to the Mexica's tutelary deity Huitzilopochtli, she also devoured humans when she was not compensated with human sacrifices. Her daughter Coyolxauhqui became the moon after the war god defeated her on the sacred court.

Tlazoltéotl, goddess of filth and forgiver of sins, was also recognized as goddess of midwives for having given birth to the corn god. The spindle that covers her headdress and nose ornament in the shape of a half moon are displayed by other earth goddesses and demonstrate the significance of the moon's phases. In Aztec times, the moon influenced the rhythm of the plants just as it did a woman's reproductive cycles. A woman's menstrual cycle was compared to the phases of the moon, in that both women and the moon were cyclical, and a woman's monthly menstruation corresponds to the 28-day lunar cycle (Ojeda Díaz and Rossell, 2012).

In the Islands of the Caribbean, women also took part in the ballgame ritual directly, and there is evidence that there were women's teams. Taino tribes on the Island of Puerto Rico reveal that societies were organized by egalitarian systems where women could hold high leadership positions and could participate in the game. The game, like all other traits of the Taino culture, was intimately related to their religious beliefs and could not survive the rigid Catholicism imposed by the 16th-century Spaniards.

We are fortunate that the Spanish friars who resided there were able to record aspects of the game and its religious and secular value (De las Casas, 1909, 1967; Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, 1851-55). In their accounts they

referred to the game and courts as *bateyes*, *juegos de indios*, *juegos de bola*, *cercados*, or *corrales de indios*. They stressed its importance in Taino and Otomac societies, describing it as a ritual sport that included entertainment, gambling, and religion (Alegria, 1983).

Although there are a few discrepancies in their accounts, they all agree that the game was played with a solid, heavy rubber ball that was propelled with the hips, shoulders, and other parts of the body, but never with the hands. They also concur that both men and women were active participants. However, the changes that took place after the Spanish conquest caused the game to disappear, along with the ritual customs that at one time formed part of very complex societies like those that developed in Mesoamerica.

Change becomes necessary for societies to evolve, but change sometimes creates hierarchal positions that place more value on men's roles. In Tenochtitlán, men came to govern all political, economic, and social activities and this led to women's exclusion from playing a game that manifested both indigenous religious ideology and male power. Having only read the history of Mexico during the contact period, one might conclude that women never played the game during the sixteenth century. This is precisely why a study of this nature is necessary to dispel the misconceptions that concern ancient indigenous women and their public roles.

The history of the ballgame presents us with a view of the lives and beliefs of the indigenous people. It was no ordinary sport, but contained a ritual and symbolic significance that cannot be found in any other sport played

throughout the Americas. The ballgame is thought to have commenced during the Archaic period, as has been made evident by court structures that were unearthed in Paso de la Amada, Chiapas. Clearly the game was so important for the native inhabitants that it was able to survive for three thousand years and reappear in northern contemporary Mexican regions.

In the state of Sinaloa, the *ulama* rubber ballgame transcended all boundaries including those that relate to gender. Women were also active participants, although this is not manifested in any of the ethnographic accounts from 16th century Central Mexico or nineteenth century research concerning the *ulama* game. Studies of the ancient game clearly demonstrate the same marginalization of women ballplayers in Aztec society, and it is one of the reasons why this study of women's roles in the game has been undertaken.

¹ The people that were guided by the leader Huitzilopochtli were known as Mexicas, who were nomadic hunters that belonged to one of the ethnic groups of the Chichimec tribe (Berdan, 1983: 3). Today most scholars refer to them as the "Aztecs," and it is the name that I will use throughout the text that refers to the people after the conquest.

² The term "Aztecs" is taken from the name Aztlán, where the Nahua tribes believed they began their migration (Townsend, 2000; Solis, 2001).

³ In Sahagún's account (1956, Book III), he mentions that Coyolxauhqui's head had been decapitated and her body was thrown down the temple stairs where it became dismembered.

⁴ When the Templo Mayor was excavated in 1978, Coyolxauhqui's relief carving was discovered at the bottom of the temple, and sometime later, Huitzilopochtli's shrine at the temple's summit, perhaps indicating his victory over the moon goddess. This act was so significant for the Nahua peoples that a series of rituals were conducted on the ball court and Templo Mayor to recreate this cosmic event.

⁵ "Era un juego de mucha recreación para ellos y regocijo especialmente para los que lo tomaban por pasatiempo y por entretenimiento...había con el ejercicio tan diestro y excelentes jugadores, que demás se ser tenidos en estima, los reyes les hacían mercedes y los hacían

privados en su casa y corte y eran honrados con particulares insignias" (Duran, 1971).

⁶ "Play ball, play ball the old man Xólotl, in the plaza of the rubber ballgame of the sorcerers Xólotl plays, god of the land of precious stone. See if Piltzintecutli rests in the house of darkness, in the house of darkness" (my interpretation).

⁷ Maternal fertility symbolized in the diamond-shaped *quechquémitl* (a cotton garment worn in the Gulf area since 150 C.E.) worn by most of the great goddess figures is still the basic pattern for the dress of indigenous people in the area of Morelia (Nash, 1997: 349)

⁸ In contemporary times the Otomies continue this ritual. They cleanse the earth from dust and cobblestones before the cultivation of corn (Soustelle, 1982:124).

⁹ Other interpretations have suggested that the myth of Coyolxauhqui and Huitzilopochtli reflects a successful masculine challenge against a matriarchical complex. However, scholars who have studied Aztec society say there is no evidence that a matriarchy existed.

¹⁰ "Y es cosa de maravillar ver qu  n diestros y prestos son los indios (   aun muchas indias) en este juego; el cual lo mas continuamente juegan hombres contra hombres,    mugeres contra mugeres, y algunas veces mezclados entre ellos y ellas; y tambien acaes  e jugarle las mugeres contra los varones, y tambien las casadas contra las virgines." (Valdes 1851-55).

¹¹ Alberta Zucchi stated that the clear relationship that existed in the Otomac culture between the tiger and moon is apparent in the chronicles of those who wrote about the cultures in the Caribbean Islands. Apparently both played a significant role in the Otomac's magico-religious system. The tiger was not only associated with shamanic practices, but also the ballgame and a dance called *maena* (tiger = jaguar), both with profound ritual implications (1988: 450).

Chapter Five: *Ulama*: Survival of An Ancient Ritual Sport

In the country that today is known as Mexico we can still find traces of ancient native languages and traditional ritual practices such as the *ulama* rubber ballgame. Over a span of sixty years, the game has become a cultural manifestation of community solidarity that reflects both the life and times of those who played the game in the pre-Columbian past and continue to play it in northern rural towns. While religious concepts are no longer rooted in the game, it continues to thrill audiences, as well as its participants. Despite the nation's cultural transformation as a result of the Spanish conquest, the game's endurance reveals the significance of this sport for the rural populations.

The survival of the game has generated interest among contemporary scholars in a wide range of disciplines. The manner in which the game is played and the vestment worn by the players has attracted their attention since the 1970's (Leyenaar, 1978). Their data has revealed that the players still observe some of the same ritual practices that attended the ancient game, such as sexual abstinence and feasting. One topic of discussion not present in their accounts is the subject of women ballplayers.

The ethnographic work I conducted in Sinaloa towns demonstrates that women were participants in the game since the 1940's. Although the number of women ballplayers has been relatively small in comparison to male participation, women players have proven that they were able to disconnect their aspirations from the traditional gender roles that are imposed on rural girls

at a very early age. Their presence in the game is a direct manifestation of their competence and power as members of their communities that, hopefully, will persuade other women in these towns to become involved in male-related activities. Their integration into the game has also challenged the stereotypes that assume women to be physically weaker and socially subordinate to their male counterparts.

5.1 The First Evidence of Ulama Games

In the year 1939, Isabel Kelly was conducting archaeological surveys in western Mexico when she discovered that a variant of the ancient rubber ballgame was still played in Acaponeta, Nayarit. Kelly did not provide information as to when the game began, but she did record that its practice ended in 1930. On certain occasions the people continued to play in nearby towns and hillside communities on the feast days of particular saints, Sundays, and the Saturday of Easter week (1943: 163).

The game was called *ulama* and it was played on a *taste* (pronounced Tas-Tay), a flattened dirt court that resembled the shape of a wide narrow street.¹ The court's dimensions were approximately 3 *varas* by 15 *varas* long. In standard measurement, the *vara* is equivalent to roughly one yard.² The Spanish were the first to use this unit of length in Mexico, and it is likely that the people adopted it into their own measuring systems. The other method for calculating size was the *paso*, a measurement that consisted of two short paces totaling a little over 1.5m. Using these methods of calculation, the dimensions

of the court in Acaponeta was around 2.25 by 208m (*ibid.*, 166).

A male from the community considered the 'owner' of the game organized all ballgame competitions and could also serve as judge. He supervised the training of the ballplayers and received the most money when bets were made. As was common practice in pre-Hispanic times, heavy gambling was involved, and in this both men and women participated.

The balls for the game were made from solid latex and the root of a plant called *machaquana*. These two materials were mixed together and then layered to produce the round shape of the ball. After the ball hardened, it was placed inside a bag and hung from one of the ceiling posts.³ Balls weighed around 3 kilos and sold at a price range from 25 to 60 pesos (*ibid.*, 171). Very few balls were available in Acaponeta because only one family in the community knew how to make them.

The equipment of the ballplayers consisted of a protective leather breechcloth worn on the player's hip to protect him from the blow of the solid rubber ball. A thick belt called *chimal* constructed from the root fiber of the *chilate* plant was placed over that garment. At times a leather piece, or a section of automobile tire was used as extra padding (*ibid.*, 165). A drawing of *ulama* players produced by Christopher Weiditz in the Spanish court of King Charles V provides an excellent example of the outfits described by Kelly (figure 5.1).

Bodily protection was a key element of games, as was abstinence. A requirement for the game was that players abstain from certain foods and any

sexual contact with women. The organizer of the game was in charge of guarding the players to prevent these rules from being broken. He was also allowed to punish or whip a player if he did not follow these restrictions.

The *ulama* players today still observe the practice of abstinence. Ethnographic fieldwork conducted by members of the *Proyecto Ulama* in El Quelite, Los Llanitos, La Mora Escarbada, and other rural towns in Sinaloa from 2003- 2005 included interviews with several local consultants on this subject. During an interview in the town of El Quelite Rafael Lizárraga, the oldest of the *ulama* ballplayers, asserted that if a player had sex with his wife before a game he could lose his vision (Garza, *et al.*, 2004: 31). Some of the current male players agreed, and responded that they did not have sex the night before a game, not because of a prohibition, but simply because it took too much of their energy and would affect their play. Several of the ballplayer's wives, however, contradicted this in saying that they regularly had sex before games.

My own documentation of the practice of sexual abstinence in Sinaloa paralleling Kelly's findings in Nayarit for the 1930's is interesting in that it suggests that this may have been a widespread prohibition at the time. If so, it would be another significant survival of ancient practices, since the Spanish Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagún noted the same custom among the Aztecs (1961).⁴

The *ulama* game exemplifies the endurance of a sport that managed to survive the cultural destruction of the Spanish invaders. Although that game was not as complex as the games played in the past, there was a clear

relationship between them. First, the *ulama* ballgame outfit was comparable to the hip garments worn by the Aztec ballplayers. Second, the earthen *taste* appears to have been similar to the courts used in Pre-classic period games. Clearly, the persistence of the game and related modes of practice allowed it to survive in northern rural towns.

Its perseverance there was unexpected given its popularity in the Valley of Mexico before the arrival of Cortés. Several scholars have suggested that its northern resurgence resulted from migration patterns of the native tribes who were searching for a better way of living. After the Spanish colonization of New Spain, the Aztecs had to pledge allegiance to a Spanish ruler who imposed upon the native people an entirely new religion. Along with this spiritual transformation, all temples and idols were destroyed, and the aftermath of conquest caused a major decline of the native population due to warfare, famine, European epidemic diseases, and dislocation of native people from their traditional lands (Berdan, 1982: 172).

In the following section, I trace the migration flow of indigenous groups into northern territories. My goal is to determine what were the factors that contributed to the game's survival there. I draw mainly on ethnographic accounts of the Spanish priests who lived in northern states during the late sixteenth century. Although these accounts are limited, they impart important information as to how the game was played during the Colonial period and may shed light on its survival in northern rural towns.

5.2 *Ethnographic Accounts of Northern Rubber Ballgames*

The first missionaries to arrive in Mexico-Tenochtitlán were twelve Franciscans friars known as the “Twelve Apostles” (Aguilar, 2006: 388). They were religious men from the Order of St. Francis who embodied a utopian social vision within Spain’s Catholic Church (Townsend, 2000: 9). Their settlement in Mesoamerica played a central role in the religious reformation of Central Mexican groups (Bernal Díaz del Castillo, 1986: 828). However, the greed of the conquistadors and the violence toward the natives did not fit well with the friars’ Christian dogma, so that they decided to accompany Juan de Tolosa on his quest to gain riches in the northern frontier (Powell, 1947: 236, 242).

The north was an attractive destination because it possessed some of the largest silver mines in the world. The opportunity to work in the mines, and in the case of the Spanish, to exploit them, caused the migration flow to northern areas in the sixteenth century. Although the wild Chichimeca tribes inhabited this region, the people did not hesitate to settle there.

One of the groups that joined the northern relocation was the Otomi.⁵ Their residence in the Valley of Mexico and exposure to Aztec rituals makes them prime candidates for introducing the game in the north (Alegria, 1983). Since religious rites were no longer incorporated into the game, the Spanish did not prohibit its practice. Besides, the Spanish were more concerned with the acquisition of silver and land than the persistence of native ideology (López Austín, 1998: 17).

The arrival of the Spanish was unwelcome, provoking intense hostility

among the Chichimeca tribes. They did not easily accept Spanish intrusion, much less conversion to Catholicism. As a result, Jesuit priests were sent to the northern states to try to pacify the Chichimecas. While some of them reluctantly accepted the Christian way of life, others engaged in constant battle with the intruders. Ultimately, the Jesuits were able to convert most of the inhabitants, although a large percentage of them were relegated to slavery (Pérez de Ribas, 1944: 11).

Notable among the first priests to arrive in the northern states was Andrés Pérez de Ribas. His sixteen-year residence in Sinaloa and Durango allowed him to interact with the people there, where he could study firsthand their ways of living. His document *Triunfos de Nuestra Santa Fe* (1944) is one of the primary sources we have available that best describes ballgames of the Colonial period. Reflected in his accounts are the humanitarian attitudes of the priests and soldiers who fought daily to maintain tranquility in the New World. Followed by the accounts of Ralph Beals (1933) and Isabel Kelly (1933), Pérez de Ribas' documentation has made a strong contribution to the study of the *ulama* sport.

Sinaloa and Durango were home to the Cahitas, who played a rubber ballgame similar to those practiced in Central Mexico. However, no stone courts were used for that game, as was common practice in its Mesoamerican antecedents. Rather, the inhabitants played on a dirt field called *batei*, a term that the Spanish used to describe the ball court and ballgame they saw for the first time in the Antilles. Before games took place, sexual abstinence was

observed, and at times it was necessary to stay at someone else's home to conform to this prohibition (*ibid.*, 22).

Peréz de Ribas provides no specific facts regarding the number of players per team, but his account suggests there was more than one on each side. All participants are assumed to have been male given that women were not mentioned in respect to the game. The game's objective was to strike the ball with either the shoulder or the hip and pass it over to the other side of the court. A point was lost if the hand or other body part touched the ball, or if it did not stay within the court's limits.

Ralph Beals (1933) and Javier Alegre (1958) recorded similar games further north in the Topia Valley, a small vicinity in Sinaloa where the Xixime and Acaxee tribes resided. The Acaxee played a particular rubber ballgame game called *pelota de hule* that involved precise rules and religious activities (Beals, 1933: 11). The game was so important for the chief that the first thing he built in the village was the court. The field, also called *batei*, was analogous to the one described by Peréz de Ribas with the exception that the court's walls were built from stone.

The players used a heavy rubber ball that weighed 2-3 kilos (roughly 8 lbs). The ball had to be propelled with the buttocks and right shoulder only. There were six to eight players per team, although there were times when the opposing side outnumbered that of the sponsors by more than half (Alegre, 1958). Competitions were held between villages and neighboring communities with betting forming part of the game's many activities. With the arrival of the

Spanish, wagers doubled in price. Items placed as bets were dresses, bows, arrows, silver, and mantles, and as much as five hundred pesos. The ballgame equipment was not described, but it is possible that following old traditions, the players wore ballgame uniforms like the ancient ballplayers referenced in sixteenth century Spanish chronicles.

Several years later, rubber ballgames began to appear in the coastal regions of northern Mexico. While women did not play the game in those areas, Beals and Alegre did mention that they played a game of dice called *Patolli*. In pre-Hispanic times, this game had ceremonial and religious associations, and was eliminated just like the other indigenous rituals that were considered acts of paganism.

5.3 Ulama: The Contemporary Rubber Ballgame

In a small town in the northeast part of Sinaloa people gather on select Sundays to watch ballgame contests of *ulama de cadera*. The *ulama* sport appears to be a vestige of the Aztec's game *ullamalitzli* with only a few variations. Although the religious character of the game has diminished in large part, it is still recognized as an invaluable expression of Mexico's cultural heritage.

In the state of Sinaloa three rubber ballgames have survived. They are *ulama de cadera* (Hip-*ulama*), *ulama de antebrazo* (Arm-*ulama*), and *ulama de palo* (Stick-*ulama*). The first two games are played in the towns where I conducted investigations, while *ulama de palo* is more popular in Oaxaca and

Michoacán. In all three variations women have been or are still ballgame participants. Today, the towns of Los Llanitos, La Mora Escarbada, Esquinapa, Guasave, and El Guamúchil are practicing these games.

Ulama is played on a *taste* that is approximately 60 meters long by 4 meters wide (figure 5.2) (Aguilar and Brady, 2004: 6). The *taste* is divided by a centerline called *analco* that signifies “on the other side of the shore or river,” and is enclosed by end zones called *chichis*. *Veedores* or *juezes* (judges), who are the experts of the game, are stationed within these areas. There are times when judges are not available during ballgame competitions, in which case a retired *ulama* player must fill the position.

The game is played between two teams of 3-5 players that are assigned different playing positions on the court. Those at the front who are usually the best players are known as *topadores*, while those positioned toward the back who receive the hardest impact of the ball are called *golpeadores* (hitters). To play the game, the players wear an outfit called *fajado* that consists of the following clothing articles: *gamuza*, *chimalli*, and *faja* (figure 5.3).

The *gamuza* is a leather loincloth that is worn underneath the rest of the equipment. In most towns this loincloth is made from deer hide. The *faja* is a long cloth that is wrapped around the abdomen to further tighten the *gamuza*. The *chimalli* is a leather belt that is strapped around the buttocks to give the players additional support. It is the most important part of the ballgame outfit because it prevents muscle tears from the impact of the ball. The word *chimalli*

in the Náhuatl language has been translated as “shield” (Molina, 1977: 21).

According to sixteenth century accounts, the Aztecs were known to have used elaborately decorated *chimalli* when they went to battle. Several of the players also wear cloth bandanas on their heads as an additional decorative element. This is the ballgame outfit that has been used for centuries, perhaps since the Pre-classic period, as suggested by the costume on ballplayer figurines and sculptures.

Before a competition, an organizer is picked from one of the communities who becomes in charge of the players’ training and wellbeing. He does not allow the players to drink alcoholic beverages, have sex, or work days before the game. He also takes care of their families by supplying them with food while the players are being trained. This month long preparation is an essential part of the game because excellent players are produced through this rigorous training.

As the game is about to begin, the players line up diagonally on the court in postures that resemble those of men going to battle (figure 5.4). In fact, the game and war are synonymous in that they are both carried out to gain victory over an adversary (Durán, 1971: 315). I noticed during an exhibition game that some of the players even made aggressive gestures, most likely to intimidate their opponents. When Kelly was in Nayarit she documented that the players lined up in the same manner. In the seventeenth century, Alegre also witnessed a ballgame ritual where men dressed like warriors stood on the court while calling other participants to join in the pre-ballgame songs and dances

(1958). In the Aztec capital during the festival of *panquetzaliztli*, men dressed as warriors performed a mock battle before the big game (Sahagún, 1961).

Images of players in the half-crouch posture are frequently displayed in ancient Mexican codices (Clendinnen, 1985: 62). For the players of the past, the game recreated a mythic battle between two opposing forces that fought constantly to gain control over each other. When the players entered the court, they became these mythical beings and the court the original place where the battle had begun. In conquering his foe, the player defeated death, just as the Sun defeated the night when it rose at dawn (Bellah, 1965: 77).

It is interesting that the *ulama* players have very little knowledge of the symbolic elements involved in *ullamaliztli*, yet they have adopted postures similar to those used by the players from the past. Having watched the exhibition games and a few practice sessions, I suggest that the sponsors—who are well aware of the game's history—have imposed upon the players these performative behaviors. In reality, these men are performing for a crowd of tourists who have paid a good price to watch the recreation of an ancient game.

The Rules of the Game

The objective of the game is to keep the ball in motion and maintain it inside the court. The judge puts the ball in play by serving it from below. The ball is struck *por abajo* (from below) until one of the team members hits it in the

air; then the players must play *por arriba* (from above) (figure 5.5). Only one side of the player's hip can be used to strike the ball, and this cannot change during the course of the game. If the ball bounces out of place that team loses a *raya* (point). Additionally, if the ball hits the player outside of the hip-thigh zone, the opposing team receives a *raya*. A ball that falls out of bounds is called *pelota muerta* (dead ball).

In so far as the game goes, scoring is exclusively by means of fouls or failures (Aguilar, 2004; Leyenaar, 1978). A game generally lasts from two to four hours without rest periods, and may continue the next day if players become tired, or if the sun has set. To win, one of the teams must acquire eight *rayas*. This sounds simple, but it is not that easy to achieve this score because if teams tie, whoever makes the next point causes the other team to lose all of theirs.

The rules of the game are complicated and only a few players have full knowledge of them. Some players mentioned that it took them at least ten years to play the game before they could understand the rules. Since rules have not been recorded, each town has its own way of dictating how the game is played. This makes ballgame competitions difficult because discrepancies occur among teams when fouls are made.

A *veedor* or two, one for each team, stands in the centerline to make sure that the rules are followed. No one but the *veedor* can judge how the game is played. If the *veedores* are from different communities, they come to an agreement as to how rules are established. When *veedores* are not

available, the eldest *ulama* player will settle the score. During a ballgame competition one of the retired *ulama* players commented to one of my colleagues that the rules were handed down from father to son and have remained the same for many years. The production of the *ule* (rubber ball) is another part of the game that has been passed on from generation to generation.

The Production of the Rubber Ball

The procedure described by Kelly for the production of the rubber ball is comparable to the one used in the modern game. Nonetheless, specific details not included in her data were recorded during my interviews. One of the most important steps that a person has to take to make the ball completely round is to drop it on the floor continuously to get rid of irregularities. Once the ball is dropped, it must bounce back to the approximate place from which it was released. This is usually at the waistline and never below or above. If it does not return to this position it is not used in the game because the players say that the bounce is not appropriate. Those men who know how to make the rubber ball state that is imperative that the right amount of latex and *machacuana* are used; otherwise, the ball will not bounce correctly.

After the ball has dried, it is placed in a semi-round cement mold that prevents it from warping. A person from the community is chosen to be the ball's caretaker, and he or she (usually a male) must rotate the ball several times during the day. Some caretakers prefer to place the ball inside a

bandana and hang it from ceiling posts as was done in ancient times.

Considering the amount of time it takes to make a rubber ball, it is amazing that 16,000 balls were required at one time as tribute to the Aztec ruler Moctecuhzoma II (figure 5.6) (Codex Mendocino, 1980).

To reduce the time involved in making a rubber ball, the *ulama* research team attempted to make one from synthetic latex. This process took almost thirty-two hours non-stop. Two balls were made altogether, one that was perfectly round, but too hard, and the other that was soft, but not round enough. After a few tries, we were unable to make a ball that bounced properly. Another incentive for using synthetic material had to do with the cost of rubber balls that in these communities range from nine hundred to one thousand pesos in price (approximately \$900.00 USD). It is an excessive price that exceeded anyone's budget. Since there are only a few men who know how to make the rubber balls, they refuse to show anyone else because they know they can profit from their knowledge.

We informed some of the men that if at some point synthetic latex could substitute for the latex from the rubber trees, the *ulama* research team would supply the material to them. They expressed disapproval, remarking that synthetic balls could never replace the original and would completely change the nature of the game. It appears that maintaining old traditions of rubber ball production is very important for this local sport. Together with this concern for keeping the game as authentic as possible is their rejection of female ballplayers.

5.4 Fieldwork Methodology

The ethnographic work I conducted in Sinaloa towns was a point of reference for investigating the roles of women in the ancient rubber ballgame. Through observations and participation, I was able to determine the social expectations about men and women's roles, how men and women perform these roles, the status of the ballplayers, and how the game helps to form one's individual identity. This is something we are limited in doing when we examine past cultures, particularly the roles of women in public ritual activities. Although there is a wide time span between the ancient and modern game, I was able to build a theoretical framework through my ethnographic fieldwork for studying the ancient game and the roles of women in the pre-Columbian past.

One of the main objectives of this study was to find out why there have been only a few women who have played the game in northern rural towns, and the factors that have contributed to their sparse participation. The Spanish chronicles suggest that women were not allowed to play during the sixteenth century in the Aztec state, although other sources of the time did mention that they were playing in South America and the Caribbean Islands (De las Casas, 1909, 1967; Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, 1851-55; Gumilla, 1745).

While ancient ballgame practices are reflected in the modern ballgame, women have played a minor role within this communal sport. This was not always the case, however, since there were moments in Mesoamerica's history when women were actively participating in the game, and might have held equally significant public roles. This is made evident by the number of female

ballplayer ceramic figurines that have been discovered in the last decades in various Mexican territories.

In an effort to gain a better understanding of the discrepancies underlying women's participation in the modern rubber ballgame, I spent three seasons in Sinaloa conducting interviews with consultants of both sexes. The fieldwork required hours of labor and analysis of data collected. The methodological techniques I used consisted of observation, interviews, and dialogues with women, men, and adolescents. Most of the female consultants were housewives, ranging from 21-60 years of age. The adolescent girls' ages varied from 13-17. Only one 9 year-old girl was interviewed. The majority of male consultants were *ulama* players who worked in the *milpas* (corn fields) near their homes. Their ages ranged from 24-97. The adolescent boys were 14 or 15 years of age, and only a few boys between the ages of 8-10 participated in the interview process.

My in-depth studies covered a heterogeneous, although numerically small set of towns located in rural areas. All of my qualitative research incorporated a perspective on gender, and in most cases, focused on the views of males regarding women's participation in the game. Gathering women's viewpoints was even more critical for the game's overall assessment because their voices are rarely heard in ethnographic accounts. For the purpose of the study I concentrated on the hip rubber ballgame because it is the one that most resembles those played by ancient indigenous women.

Background of the Study

The residents of the rural towns where I implemented interviews are of *mestizo* descent and only speak the Spanish language. Their communities are characterized by the *rancheria* style, or ranch quarters habitations. The people sustain themselves through the cultivation and selling of corn and livestock. Men are the primary caretakers, while women attend to their children and to their domestic duties. There is a clear division of gender roles in and out of the household. This has been the custom for hundreds of years in Mexico and remains the same today.

Ballgame competitions and exhibition events take place in the town of Los Llanitos because they have the best-preserved *taste* in all of Sinaloa. This was the first community where I conducted interviews. Getting there was quite an adventure because it is situated off the highway in a remote area, and if you look for it on the map it is likely you will not find it. Fortunately, we had a guide drive us in his old pick-up truck that somehow managed to survive the heavy load of students and rough terrain.

The social structure of this town is maintained within a patriarchal ideology and strong tendency toward *machismo*. Machismo is by definition an attitude that differentiates or discriminates against the physical or mental aptitudes of women (my definition). The suppression of women is displayed in the limitations imposed on them in interacting with other people, and the roles they are expected to fulfill in the private and public sphere. It is rare to see women engage in public conversations, unless they speak with their immediate

family members or a close friend. Other types of verbal interaction are considered gossip.

As I was trying to speak to the some of the women there I noticed that they did not openly respond to my questions when the men were present. Most of the time that I was asking women questions, the men supplied the responses. I knew that if I wanted to obtain information from the female consultants I had to speak to them when the men were not around. For that matter, the information they provided regarding women's participation in the game was minimal in comparison to that for men.

I confronted greater difficulties in trying to interview the men because most male consultants did not want to discuss the subject of women ballplayers. Their short responses and negative gestures, such as rolling of the eyes and twisting of the mouth, confirmed their lack of enthusiasm for the subject I was investigating. Discouraged by the lack of information I received in Los Llanitos, I went to El Quelite, which had been home to some of the best *ulama* ballplayers during the 1960's.

For a long period of time, El Quelite was recognized more for its Mexican cuisine and vernacular architecture than the *ulama* game. Most people who ventured through there were unaware of the game's existence, much less that it had been home to one of the few women who played *ulama*. Thanks to the efforts of its residents, like Dr. Marcos Osuna Tirado, the ballgame has now become one of the main attractions of the city.

Another active *ulama* supporter in El Quelite is Jesús Arreola, who is

known in the community as “Don Chuy.” Jesús is a retired *ulama* player who has played the game since his youth (figure 5.7). On one occasion he became captain of his *ulama* team when he was in Cancún performing for the tourists. He was quite popular among his teammates because every time his team would score, he danced around the *taste* and mocked the other players. Don Chuy is known for being “*muy picueco*,” which describes a person who is a “trickster,” “character,” or “prankster.”

According to Don Chuy, all *ulama* players in El Quelite had been men, but a girl named Martina played hip *ulama* in the 1980’s (figure 5.8). “When Martina practiced with her father,” Don Chuy remarked, “the people in the community would gather around to watch her.” “She was a hard hitter,” he continued, “no one would dare play against her.” When the girl married she stopped playing the game. My consultant recommended I speak to her parents, Ismael and Ramona Palacios who lived in the same town.

Martina’s parents are well known in their community because Ismael was a star *ulama* player in El Quelite during the 1960’s. When I went to the couple’s home, I asked if I could speak to them regarding their daughter’s participation. Both parents declared that neither felt opposed to the idea of Martina playing. The father, in particular, was very enthusiastic about her involvement because his sons never took an interest in the *ulama* game. While a girl playing with men is generally frowned upon in Mexican society because of the possibility of sexual liaisons, Ramona was not concerned because Martina was with her father. This made me think that since Martina had a sort of

“escort,” in this case her father, she was accepted as a ballplayer.

Moreover, the mother reiterated that Martina played *ulama* with her father after the men’s game had ended. This led me to question if Martina’s involvement was purely recreational, or if the father’s expectations of her participation were taken as seriously as the mother had suggested. I asked the couple about other female participants, and Ramona stated that a girl from El Chilillo had also played the game. On one occasion she was to compete against Martina, but never showed up. Ramona believes the girl found out that her daughter was a tough competitor. This incident celebrates the protagonist’s toughness, the proof of which is exemplified in the intimidation of her opponent. It is an interesting story because it is similar to those told by male consultants about male players, which serve to epitomize the virtue of *machismo*.

5.5 Interviews With Female Ulama Ballplayers

Having gathered the information from Martina’s parents I went to Los Zapotes where Martina lived. When I spoke to Martina I realized that the circumstances of her commitment to *ulama* were different than what I had been told by her mother. Martina immediately drew the distinction that at the age of fifteen she had *practiced* and had not *played ulama* with her father. Since the games between the father and Martina were conducted as a pastime, the girl never played on an actual *taste*. Only games that involved formal competitions took place in the community’s main court, while all others were held in a field nearby. Martina commented that if the girl from El Chilillo had competed

against her, the game would have taken place on the *taste* that was used for formal competitions. Martina would have also worn her father's *fajado* instead of the lycra shorts she wore during practice sessions.

Although Martina was the only female player in El Quelite, she affirmed that she never saw the game as a male sport. The actual situation, however, was more complicated than that because she also stated that her girlfriends would support her for being the only female participant, so she was clearly aware of her status. No other girls in her community wanted to play the game because they felt it was too rough for women. In spite of the fact that the *ulama* games between Martina and her father were informal, she felt proud to have practiced with him because she considered him an excellent player.

When I was speaking to Martina her children were surprised that she had never told them she had played *ulama*. Martina responded that when the game in El Quelite died out she simply forgot about it. Furthermore, she recalled that on one occasion she had mentioned it to her husband, but he did not believe her. After this incident she felt it was not important to share this information with anyone else. Using the rubber ball that the *ulama* team had made, Martina showed her children how she used to hit it (figure 5.9). It was not long before the other children in the community gathered around Martina to watch her hit the ball. While she no longer has the physical conditioning nor the time to play, she would teach the younger children in Los Zapotes if they wanted to learn. For her, the survival of the game is important because, as she recalls on *ulama* Sundays, everyone from the community came together to form part of the

activities.

Female Ballplayers from La Mora Escarbada

In other nearby towns, two other women had competed against each other in *ulama* games during the late 1940's. Trinidad Osuna Sanchez "La Trinita" from El Vainillo played against María Lizárraga "La Prieta," a competitor from La Mora Escarbada. At the time they were around 15 or 16 years old. Unfortunately, I did not get the opportunity to speak to María and Trinita because they had moved to the city. Francisco Angúlo Pérez, a former player from El Vainillo provided the information I received.

Francisco recalled the girls playing formal games with rules and bets ranging from 10 to 20 pesos. Unlike ballgame practices of the 1930's, only males were allowed to bet. Since Mexican traditional norms during the 1940's prohibited women from wearing pants, the girls wore the ballgame uniform over their skirts or dresses. While the community praised the girls for playing a rough game, their parents disapproved of their participation because they viewed *ulama* as a male sport. This was an unusual reaction given that their brothers were also banned from playing. Consequently, when boys and girls from El Vainillo wanted to compete in *ulama* games, they had to go to La Mora Escarbada where the game was open to all community members.

In the same town, Lorenzo Covarrubias Estrada remembered that in the mid 1940's his niece and a girl named Suhey competed against two other girls from El Vainillo. For a formal competition the girls had to borrow the younger boy's pants so they could to strike the ball from below. The girls played for

several years up until their marriage. According to a consultant, only Lorenzo's niece wore the *fajado*.

The acceptance of female ballplayers in La Mora gave other women in the same community the opportunity to participate. For example, Angelina Covarrubias Estrada was a *ulama* player when she was young, sometime in the 1960's. Women from La Mora would meet women from other villages to play *ulama* on their way to the main town for their daily grocery shopping. They played early in the morning on a *taste* located between towns when the men were not around.

Female Ballplayers from La Sávila

In La Sávila, women had also been active ballplayers and a male consultant mentioned the presence of a women's team. The team disintegrated after several female ballplayers moved from the town. A young boy from the same community stated that his sister Yahaira Lizárraga played when she was young, and had taught the boys and the girls how to play *ulama* (figure 5.10). The girl's competitors were mainly boys because there were very few girls who wanted to play the game, or who would dare compete against her.

Perhaps playing the game was second nature to Yahaira given that she comes from a family of *ulama* players. Her father Manuel played in the 1960's, and her four brothers were playing against local teams and at exhibition games. Her twin brother Edgar "El Cuate" played with younger boys in the community whenever time permitted (figure 5.11). Yahaira reiterated that the support she

received from her brothers was influential in her participation. However, her mother asked her to quit because she developed bruises from the impact of the rubber ball. In spite of her absence, girls and boys continued to compete against each other, forming both same-sex and mixed-sex teams.

Yahaira's sister-in-law had also played the game against another girl from El Vainillo. However, after a certain time she stopped playing because every time she struck the ball it hurt her thighs. Her husband insisted she continue playing, but she preferred to leave the game to the males. The other girls from La Sávila who also played the game did not take the sport as seriously as Yahaira. They felt that it was easier for her to be accepted as a female player because she received support from her father and four brothers.

Female Ballplayers from Esquinapa and El Guamúchil

I had the opportunity to meet another family of hip *ulama* ballplayers in the town of Esquinapa (figure 5.12). The oldest female participant is Martina Huaira who started playing the game at the age of ten. Her female cousin and she had competed against two other girls from the same community. Now that Martina is thirty-three she no longer plays the game. Currently, the only female players in that community are her nieces Edith Jazmin, Jessica Antonia, and Aided Zulema. When the young girls are not practicing in the local school ground, they perform in *ulama* competitions at exhibitions or parades.

For these special occasions the girls use a *fajado* that their uncles decorated with indigenous designs. The girls adorn their faces in the same

manner as a symbolic gesture to imitate the ancient ballplayers. When I asked the girls regarding the source of the designs the oldest girl stated that her uncles had copied them from a book that contained images of ancient gods. The decorative motifs they use on the clothes and face distinguish the Huaira girls from the other *ulama* teams.⁶

The oldest girl Edith enjoys *ulama de cadera* more than the other sports her girlfriends play at school (figure 5.13). She also knows how to *play ulama de antebrazo* that is similar to *ulama de cadera*. The outfit that is used for this game consists of a long cotton cloth that is wrapped around the forearm where the ball is to be struck. The ball is smaller than the one used for hip *ulama*, but the same court is used for both variations of the game.

Dulce Elizabeth Villa Velásquez from the town of El Guamúchil has played this game since the age of ten (figure 5.14). Dulce learned the rules from her father that he, in turn, had learned from his own father. The players in her father's team are her biggest supporters during ballgame competitions. They all agreed that she was better than her male competitors, and this she graphically demonstrated in the exhibition game (figure 5.15).

5.6 Attitudes Toward Women Ballplayers

After having completed my fieldwork in seasons one and two, it was evident to me that the support of the family was instrumental for a girl's participation. However, it was also apparent that some members of society

completely disapproved of female ballplayers. Whereas most female consultants displayed a cooperative and cheerful attitude when questions were posed, men's reaction varied from helpful to disinterested. In some cases male consultants found a way to change the nature of my questions. When questions were asked, the answers always dealt with the male game, and only when specifically asked did they supply any information.

Rafael Lizárraga Ibarra was reluctant to discuss the roles of women ballplayers, and even cut my questions short when asked about the subject (figure 5.16). After being pressed on the issue, he said that a long time ago there had been women who had played the game, but he believed they stopped playing because the *hule* (rubber ball) was too heavy. This appears to be a widely held male view that I encountered in other towns. Similarly, Fito Lizárraga, one of the older players in Los Llanitos, did not want to speak to me when I was in the community. He finally admitted that women had played when he was young, probably in the 1970's. Antonio, a player from Villa Unión who played in the Olympic exhibition game in 1968, agreed that women played at that time as well.

After having received this information from the male consultants, the conversations immediately shifted to the male game. During the interview Fito remarked, "*la pelota es hombre, y solo un hombre puede manejarla; aqui no hay lugar para una mujer*" (the ball is male, and only a male knows how to handle it; there is no room here for a woman"). In the same town, Chuy Páez, captain of the *ulama* team argued that women were not "real" players because

a one-on-one competition did not fit the criteria of a team. In an assertive tone he stated that if women were playing on the *taste*, they were most likely “messaging around” with the ball, but not engaged in a genuine competition. Other male players from the same community supported Chuy’s remarks.

I agreed with the *ulama* captain on one point. A team is formed by a group of people who come together to cooperatively engage in a sportive competition. Nevertheless, that does not mean that a game is not serious if it involves two people only. In the game of *ulama de antebrazo* matches commonly occur between two players such as was demonstrated in the exhibition game. Images of ancient rubber ballgames also demonstrate that the game did not always involve the use of teams. In Maya culture, for example, ceramic painted vases suggest that the Classic Maya ballgame involved the participation of two rivals (figure 5.17). In central Mexican codices, there are also images of paired gods who are playing the ballgame.

Although the games played by the girls were not formal competitions, there was some sense of playing by established rules to their engagement. No sport activity is purely physical because it imparts some action that is at least slightly serious and competitive. By stating that the girls were involved in a playful act devoid from any serious intent, Chuy downplayed the value that it had for the girls who played competitively against others. I wonder if he would have made the same remark if the match had involved two male ballplayers, or more specifically, him and another player?

Unlike the negative behaviors exhibited by the males in these communities, a few male consultants approved of women's participation. Marcos Osuna from El Quelite, the senior doctor in the community, supported female ballplayers, and asserted that women were merely seeking fair inclusion in male activities. When I brought up the question of injury to a woman's body, he commented that all risks would be taken into account if women had the will to do something. Don Chuy declared that women's participation in the game was one way in which they could liberate themselves from the cultural norms that Mexican society has so strictly imposed upon them.

Women's Attitudes Toward Women Ballplayers

In Mexican rural towns, boys and girls are taught from an early age that they must play certain roles that are suitable for their gender. Any deviation from these roles can result in punishment, and in severe cases, withdrawal from the family. The restrictions girls face in their homes and community have discouraged many from engaging in the sport. In the town of Esquinapa, Edith's aunt had told her not to play *ulama* because it was a game for men. The aunt's comment made Edith uncomfortable, and for a short period of time she questioned her involvement. The girl's mother told her not to pay attention to the comments of the others, and that if her uncles supported her then no one else's opinion mattered.

Juana Madrigal, an eighty-nine year old widow from Cacalotan, recalls when *ulama* was actively played in her community in the 1940's (figure 5.18).

She is widow of the famous *ulama* player Silverio Rodríguez, who was known in her community as “El Tarro.” Juana never saw women players, and stated that other girls did not like the game because it was too rough for them. When her husband and brother played in the 1940s, women were not interested in participating because the game was perceived as dangerous.

Sylvia Páez, wife of the *ulama* captain in Los Llanitos, was very firm when she stated that she liked the *ulama* game, but not the manner in which its team members treated women (figure 5.19). At first the game was insignificant to Sylvia because women were not taken into consideration for any decision making in the home or in the community in matters concerning the community or the family. After she married Chuy, her ideas changed and she told him to include her in decision-making or else she would not support him in playing *ulama*. Sylvia feels that if women are excluded from decision-making they should not have to cook for their husband’s team when they have *ulama* reunions. Although her husband now respects her opinion, she is certain that women will never be given the same respect as the men, nor will they be able to participate in a game that has been controlled by the male population.

One exception to this standard is Martina’s mother, who spoke of her daughter’s participation with great enthusiasm. Ramona was not afraid to let Martina play the game because the ball used by the men was bigger than the one Martina played with. She also noticed that Martina learned quickly, and hardly complained about bruises, even when the ball hit her hard. Ramona described her daughter as being “*muy cabrona*” and “*machetona*,” [this is the

female of *macho*, manly, and gave the sense of being “tough like a man,” as an admirable quality].

5.7 Indirect Participation of Women

Other women in the communities that I interviewed were not *ulama* players, but still felt like participants because they were the ones who practiced with their sons while their husbands were working in the *milpas* (corn fields). Even though fathers might be the role models as players, mothers were often more important than fathers in day-to-day practice sessions, since these occurred most often during the day.

Rosa Maria Osuna, wife of a famous ballplayer in Villa Unión, remembered rolling the ball to her husband in their living room so that he could practice returning the low serve. At times when she was busy with her household responsibilities, her daughter Maricela would play a mock game with her father (figure 5.20). Maricela related that her father had wanted her to learn the game well, so she could form a women’s team. However, her responsibilities in school and at home left her no time.

Another area where women play a crucial role in the ballgame is in the preparation of the *taste* before big games. This task must be performed early in the morning before the game begins, since it requires hours of hard labor. It is a job that only a few people can execute because the court must meet the conditions required for *ulama* games. I was fortunate to have been present when several women were cleaning the court the day before the exhibition

game at Los Llanitos. I remember them making crude comments at the men standing by, jokingly saying that they were lazy because they did not want to help. The men simply laughed at their comments as they stood around making sure the court was swept properly before they could water it to give the court an even smoother shape.

The maintenance of the court is an indispensable part of the game, as it was in the past. The *taste* is regarded more than just a simple playing field, since the community and the players receive recognition and prestige when their *taste* is chosen for ballgame competitions. Although the court design has been simplified in modern times, the same attention is given to it as attested by the manner in which it is kept and the pride the community shows when they speak about it with other people. There are even arguments between communities as to whose court is better.

Women were also central in preparing food before a big town *fiesta*, or special Sunday when the men played against another town. As Garza, *et al.* (2004) note, the *fiesta* and hospitality offered to the visiting team is an important element in a complex of activities in which the game itself is only one part. The preparation of feasts that accompanied ballgames was likewise a women's activity during the 1930's. Beals describes a particular ceremony carried out by the Acaxee where women played a central role:

On the third day, the women occupied themselves in preparing a feast for the day of the contest. If the challenging village won, the visitors were given a great feast, but, if it lost, the visitors were given nothing, the losers consoling themselves by eating the feast alone (1933: 12-13).

Juan de Torquemada illustrated how the ancient indigenous groups would decorate the market places on holidays before a game, but he does not specify who performed such tasks (1969: 553). I would suggest that women might have played a large role in the decorating described by Torquemada.

Spectatorship

When women are not preparing the feast for the winning team, they are in the court supporting their husbands or relatives when they play *ulama* games. Male *ulama* players love to be praised by the crowd, but react more vigorously to the applause and the cheers of the female spectators. The enthusiastic reaction of the female crowd motivates them to exhibit their skills and masculinity. Juana Madrigal mentioned that when women went to see games, the players were the main attraction and not the game itself because they liked to see the men “*medio bichis*” (“half naked”).

For the youngest of the Huaira girls being a female ballplayer has a lot of rewards. Everyone in the town knows who she is, and when she and her sisters perform for exhibits and parades, they are the center of attention, especially among their peers. Peraza’s statement that two girls in El Vainillo participated in inter-community games that had spectators and betting also indicates that female players could be the focus of community attention. When there were games in El Quelite, men, women, and children would gather to watch and no one said anything to discourage the female spectators from attending.

Don Chuy mentioned that women were highly respected in his community, and he recalled that when Martina played, a crowd of people would watch the game just to see her. “It was spectacular to watch a woman play,” he stated, “everyone knew who she was.” He also related that when he was young his girlfriend saw him play *ulama* games. However, Don Chuy never saw the girlfriend because she always hid behind a bush. The girlfriend had to be discrete because her parents did not like him. Although she pretended to be indifferent toward his participation, he always knew that she was there when he played the game.

Spectatorship definitely has its rewards for those participants who want to be recognized within the community. Since visibility or being known is a central aspect of peer status, participants tend to have higher status than non-participants. Yet for many ballplayers being the center of attention also has its down side. I remembered that during my interviews with the Huaira girls a couple of boys who were passing by mocked the girls by shouting, “*Ulama, ulama, alli estan las del ulama*” (“*Ulama, ulama, there are the ulama girls*”). Apparently, the attention the girls were receiving from the *ulama* research team did not please the other adolescents in the community. Rural Mexican society provides very few opportunities for girls to receive public attention, so those who do immediately become the focus of *envidia* (envy or jealousy).

5.8 Concluding Remarks

A long time ago pre-Hispanic rubber ballgames left a distinct cultural

mark on the lives of Mexico's indigenous inhabitants. Despite the intent of the Spanish to destroy the game in 1521, it managed to survive five hundred years later in Sinaloan towns. From a sacred rite to a recreational activity, the ballgame and its festivities suggest it has maintained ties to some ancient traditions, such as town reunions on the court that focus on game playing and feasting. The sole fact that it continues to be played in northern rural towns attests to its value as an enduring cultural practice.

Ethnographic studies of the *ulama* game began in the mid 1930's with Isabel Kelly's research. The rubber ballgame that she observed in Acaponeta, Nayarit was strikingly similar to the games played in the Aztec culture. The main difference between both the two forms of the game was that the game in Acaponeta had transformed into a secular activity. Parallel accounts were recorded in some of the same towns in the late 1970's. While none of these accounts mention women ballplayers, my ethnographic fieldwork thirty years later proves that women played the game since the 1940's. However, it is also clear that their participation has been relatively small. My interviews suggest several reasons for this.

First, educational and home responsibilities have priority and assume an important role in keeping women from playing the game. Most women showed an interest in starting a team, but their responsibilities did not permit it. The dangers that accompany the *ulama* game such as severe bruising or death caused by internal bleeding have also discouraged many women from participating. Yet, perhaps the biggest factor for not engaging in this sport has

to do with the prejudices that female players have confronted in their own communities for playing a game that men have controlled since the Spanish set foot in the Americas.

Rural Mexican towns are organized by a patriarchal order that has played a central role in the division of gender roles and spaces. While men have the freedom to engage in any public activity, women are confined to the domestic sphere where they have to fulfill their feminine roles as wives and mothers. The men with whom the woman lives (husband or father) constantly supervise her interaction outside of the home. Therefore, women who have participated in the game have been severely criticized by society for not adhering to the roles that have been constructed for them. Some women ballplayers have even been called such names as *raras* (strange) or *marimachas* (lesbians; tomboys). While these negative remarks have discouraged most women from playing, there were a few young girls in the communities who were willing to become integrated into the game if their parents would support them.

The facts presented here reflect a few practices in the late 1960's and early 1970's, precisely the time when Leyenaar (1978: 58) was noting that women were prohibited from touching the ball. Why should my data so directly contradict his? It is possible that practices varied markedly from one village or town to another. The prohibitions Leyenaar recorded about women not touching the ball or attending games in the towns he studied therefore may not have been practiced in the towns I visited.

Alternatively, Leyenaar may have been given idealized or normative views of the rules that did not reflect actual behavior. I would suggest that if his data on prohibitions involving women were supplied by men, they may have been of a highly idealized nature reflecting the male consultants' views of the game. I make this observation because when I was questioning the male consultants about women ballplayers, the data I compiled contradicted the information received by my male colleagues on the same subject.

Furthermore, the statements Martina supplied to me during her interview in Los Zapotes indicate that she did not participate in *ulama* matches that involved rules and bets, nor did she use the *fajado*. However, when I interviewed Don Chuy, who had originally told me about Martina, he confirmed that she played actual games and wore the ballgame outfit. Don Chuy also mentioned that when Martina played, the court was marked differently. Additionally, he mentioned that in matches involving less than three players, the dimensions of the court were reduced to accommodate that number. This was the first time a consultant provided this type of information. No one before Don Chuy had mentioned that the court was marked according to the number of players.

I further note that contradictions appeared in my own data when comparing information supplied by male consultants to my colleague Cesar Espinosa with information on the same subjects supplied by women to me. When he asked about women ballplayers, the male consultants laughed, and assured him that women never played the game. When I asked the same

question to a couple of the female consultants, Patricia Lizárraga declared that her sister-in-law had played *ulama*, but stopped when she found out she was expecting a child. This appears to have been the case for several other female players in nearby towns, indicating that there may have been a pattern of women playing up until their first pregnancy.

In discussing the *ulama* game with several consultants in the rural towns, it was evident to me that the father-daughter relationship was a matter of central importance. Virtually all female players were daughters or relatives of players and became attracted to the game by watching their fathers or uncles play. Their fathers' or uncles' status as a player opened the door for the girls to gain acceptance by other members of the team, and also shielded the girls from any suggestion of sexual impropriety. The male relative's company was critically important in another respect. A girl, particularly as she reached puberty, would not be allowed to play with males her own age and older because Mexican culture assumes that there are gender-appropriate games, and one of them is not *ulama*.

Although certain generalizations about public opinion on women and the *ulama* game cannot be achieved through this investigation, the consistency of the responses provided by the consultants indicate that certain issues regarding women ballplayers are shared by a broad group of men. After three seasons of fieldwork, my research has made it clear that the game is considered by society at large, both men and women, to be a male sport. The principal reason for this is that the sport is considered to be too rough even for many men. As an

outsider, I would agree this is an incredibly rough game. I would simply note that rural Mexican women are tough, and my observations reveal that they would accept the challenge if they were given the opportunity.

It was interesting to hear stories of women that celebrate their strength, toughness and ability to intimidate opponents. Women in Mexican society are generally not praised for being “*muy cabrona*” and “*machetona*.” These stories are structurally the same as those related about males. Nevertheless, the *ulama* experience is fundamentally different for women. *Ulama*, at least for the last sixty years covered by my information, simply does not play a major role in defining a woman’s personal identity as it does for males.

As *ulama* has been slowly dying, women’s participation has been more drastically impacted than men’s. Acknowledging *ulama* as a male sport recognizes the fact that fewer women actually participated; so for decades, there have been only a handful of women actively playing at one time. This has meant that there were fewer opportunities for women to play against other women. My data clearly shows that such matches were public affairs where women represented their communities. Nevertheless, the decline of *ulama* has cost these women their role as public symbols.

A very special thanks to Dr. Manuel Aguilar, for giving me the opportunity to participate in *Proyecto Ulama*, a research project that is highly significant for the study of Mesoamerican art. Parts of Chapter Five are reprints of the material as it appears in *Estudios Jaliscienses* 2004. Ramos, Maria Isabel, El Papel de la Mujer en el Ulama, 2004. The dissertation/thesis author was the

primary investigator and author of this paper.

¹ According to Ted Leyenaar, the term *taste* is a Spanish corruption of *tlachtli*, the Nahuatl word for court (1992).

² When Francisco Clavijero described the size of the court in the Aztec capital, he mentioned that it was 40 *varas* in length (1945, 308). Given the information provided by Clavijero, the size of the court in Acaponeta decreased by almost half.

³ In accounts of ancient games and ballgame related myths such as those recorded in the *Popul Vuh*, the players used similar procedures for maintaining the ball (see Sahagún (1961), Durán (1950), and Tedlock (1983).

⁴ For both the modern and ancient game, sexual abstinence has been considered a form of purification. It was indispensable that players enter the ball court free from any mental or physical impurities. This cleansing gave the players more vigor and valor to beat their opponents.

⁵ Sahagún mentioned in the *Florentine Codex* that the word *otómitl* that served as the name of the Otomies was taken from their leader Oton (1961). Today, the Otomi Indians prefer to use their indigenous names, *ñāhñu* (Mezquital), *n'yühü* (Sierra Madre Oriental), *nātho* (Toluca), and *ñañho* (south of Queretaro) because "Otomi" is associated with a stereotype that appears in pre-Hispanic and modern texts (Wright, 2005: 3).

⁶ Corporal decoration was practiced by the early central Mexican cultures during the Pre-classic period. Female ceramic figurines from Tlatilco suggest it was women who engaged in this practice. Perhaps it was one means by which women could represent their age, affiliation with a certain group, or used simply as a form of beautification. In contemporary times, corporal adornment has reached another level: mutilation of the body. This, too, was an ancient practice, particularly in the Gulf Coast.

Chapter Six: Gendered Bodies, Gendered Sports: Female *Ulama* Ballplayers and Social Constructions of Femininity

Ulama ballgame competitions are spectacular events that bring together local crowds and foreigners from all parts of the world. The first time I witnessed *ulama* rubber ballgames was in the spring of 2003 in the town of Los Llanitos. I was very excited to watch a game, since I had only been exposed to ballgame reproductions. While the *ulama* players were putting on their ballgame uniforms, multiple activities were occurring simultaneously. The older women were preparing the food for the post-game celebration, and the younger women were arguing about whose husband played the best. Once the debris had been cleared from the court, the players slowly entered and the crowd began to cheer. The spectacle began.

Despite the severity of the scorching weather, the spectators maintained their joyful spirit throughout the competitions. However, when Dulce, the young girl from El Guamúchil, started beating her opponent during the last exhibition game of *ulama de antebrazo*, the roaring sound of the crowd diminished. Whereas the female spectators applauded for the girl, the males kept yelling at the boy “*Pareces una vieja!*” (“You look like an old woman!,” but in a very derogatory way). While this remark was amusing to the most of the males present, it was an overall offense to the female population.

Given the historical roots and development of *ulama* in Mexico, the attitude of the males is not surprising. For years men have dominated the *ulama* game and have used it as a means to display their masculine dexterity.

As with other activities where they have been the sole participants, the game has played a fundamental role in defining their masculine identity. Although women have become integrated into the game, the enthusiasm for their participation has not gone unchallenged. Whereas males are highly recognized for playing a game that is rough, women are criticized for having “intruded” into the male domain. Women’s participation is viewed as an anomaly in these towns because girls are presumed to perform the traditional gender roles that society has constructed for them. That is one reason why female players have been criticized and called such names as “*raras*” (strange).

This chapter synthesizes data concerning how men and women are viewed in rural Mexican towns, and the roles they perform in the public and private domain. It seeks to demonstrate how the participation of women in the *ulama* game has been affected by their cultural and social upbringing. It also offers an analysis of the myths and misconceptions related to a woman’s biology and physical capability that people in the communities have expressed as some disadvantages to women’s participation.

The criteria that I follow pertain only to those towns where interviews were conducted, and should not be taken as a generalized assessment of gender roles in Mexico. In addition to my ethnographic work, I sought information in scholarly sources on the subjects of femininity, masculinity, *machismo*, gender identity, peer groups, and related issues pertaining to women in sports.

6.1 Methodology

The ethnographic investigations I implemented on the *ulama* rubber ballgame brought together a collection of stories related by men and women who have directly or indirectly formed part of the ballgame sport. These studies took place in several Mexican rural towns located in the state of Sinaloa where the *ulama* game is practiced. The main purpose of my fieldwork was to disclose the factors that have prevented women from participating in the modern rubber ballgame. As part of my research objectives I examined gender roles within particular contexts to understand the dynamics by which gender relations and values are reproduced in modern day Mexico.¹

Through observation, participation, and the collection of empirical data I was able to form a better comprehension of the social importance of the game, gender relationships, and hierarchies in Mexican rural towns. Paraphrasing Robert Carmack (1971), field studies can be very constructive in cultural reconstruction if we take into account the fact that many scholarly sources are often deficient in cultural information. On this point, he further notes that this is particularly true with respect to highly intimate and personal affairs and to many mundane activities (*ibid.*, 131).

The data collected from men and women in each of the communities was instrumental to the overall understanding of the social and political structures that operate in rural towns. The testimonies of the female ballplayers, however, were of utmost importance because they have never been given the opportunity to talk about their experiences in and out of the *ulama* game.² This has been a

major problem in past and present ethnographic studies of *ulama* that is also characteristic of literature about the ancient rubber ballgame in the lack of scholarly attention to ceramic female ballplayer figurines.

In the last decades, female scholars such as Margaret Conkey (2001, 1997, 1984), Joan Gero (1997), and Elizabeth Brumfiel (2001), among other well-known women researchers, have addressed this lack of attention to women's lives by advocating for a more self-conscious perspective and approach to the study of women, particularly in prehistory. In this thesis I join in their effort to identify and set forth the histories of Mexican women within the archaeological and ethnographical contexts, where I hope to incite more interest about the roles of women in rituals and the public realm. I also intend to demonstrate how women's gendered performance is used to display and reinforce existing gender categories, or, in the case of women players, to dissent from these standards and contest them.

During my ethnographic field studies I obtained a vast amount of information concerning women ballplayers, and the stereotypes they have faced from engaging in a sport that has been traditionally associated with men. However, one of the obstacles I confronted during the interview process dealt with men and women's reluctance to talk about the subject. I noticed from the dismissive attitudes on the part of several of the consultants that this was not an easy topic to discuss. While men attempted to be as courteous as possible when discussing female players, they generally expressed disinterest in the subject at hand. In a similar fashion, women who disapproved of female

ballplayers did not know how to approach the subject matter without causing too much discontent on the part of the females present, including myself.

Maintaining impartiality was especially challenging because there were times when men made negative comments about women's physical strength and value. I experienced this sexist attitude when, during the exhibition game, I was asked by some of the males to stay outside the court and go with the other women who were cooking or sitting behind the fence. The excuse I was given was that I ran the risk of getting hurt by the eight-pound rubber ball. This seemed like an appropriate request at the time, yet I wondered why they thought that male spectators were not prone to the same type of injury.

It did not take long before I came to realize that a few of the men wanted to keep me out of the playing area because the ball court is perceived as a 'man's space.' In a dismissive type of gesture, I heard some of the older townsmen make such negative remarks as "*Este no es lugar para mujeres*" (This is no place for women"), and "*Se pueden lastimar porque el hule esta pesado*" ("You can get hurt because the rubber ball is too heavy")—referring to the female reporter and I. The males who were standing by laughed, and were saying to each other that the ballplayers were going to lose their concentration if we remained inside the court.

The remarks made by the older townsmen were not only expressing their opinion about a woman's vulnerability, but they were also insinuating that the court was an exclusive space for males, while women's place was in the kitchen; hence, why I was asked to go with the women who were cooking. This

division of spaces is reflected in the prohibitions that women face when they want to engage in public activities—also a man's privilege. Men, in contrast, have the liberty to participate in public activities where they can acquire intellectual stimulation and social recognition. This status difference has a broad impact on the way men are expected to treat women and how women are permitted to express their social roles.

6.2 An Ethnographic Study of Gender Roles in Rural Mexican Towns

Mexican society has long been characterized by the separation of men and women's roles.³ This starts at an early age when children are instructed on what chores they have to carry out, and how they are to behave in and outside the home. Parents are also influential in matters such as what clothes or colors children will use (pink is for girls, blue is for boys) and what activities they will pursue. The inculcation of social and cultural values forms part of this gender conditioning. In the middle adolescent stage, boys and girls learn more about gender roles at school and through the media, including books, newspapers, and magazines.

The roles assigned to boys and girls find parallels among rural communities and are dramatically different for each sex. They are also of unequal value, because the roles that girls enact are less esteemed than those of their male counterparts.⁴ Although a woman's biology is often blamed for this sexual inequality among members of the communities, a woman's inferiority largely stems from the ideals that patriarchy has created. As De Beauvoir

argued, biology becomes significant only when it is interpreted by human actors and associated with characteristic modes of action (1969: 29-33).

Traditionally, men are expected to take care of the family financially and physically, roles for which they are instructed about leadership, and how to be tough, aggressive, and competitive. Their performance in extracurricular activities will likewise display these masculine qualities. The characteristics ascribed to males will be just as important for gaining access to positions of power and privilege (Mooney, 1990: 110). Boys then become obligated to meet these standards, and the more vigorous they are, the more admiration they will receive.

Girls, by contrast, are subject to inherent limitations of their gender.⁵ They are taught not to be assertive, spontaneous, or bold because they have been socialized to be docile and nurturing, and to conform to activities that are female oriented (De Beauvoir, 1969). While most will comply with this expectation, there have been cases where girls have detached their social conduct from these ascribed roles. However, those that fail to fully conform with the gender norms of society may face criticism, disapproval, or rejection for their antithetical behavior.

Starting at around the age of eight or nine, girls learn domestic labors such as cleaning and cooking. There are occasions when the girl has to fetch water from natural sources as it was done in past agricultural societies. Thus, the work load that girls carry make it difficult for them to do anything else outside the home, much less become involved in sportive activities. Although

boys are also assigned equally demanding chores, they are given more freedom to play with their peers.

Young girls in rural towns also come to understand and accept that their roles will be as wives and mothers. Their primary goal and aspiration in life is to attract a man and to mother his children above anything else. One of the female consultants in La Sávila remarked that she did not play the game because she wanted to maintain her feminine appeal. For her it was more important to acquire a husband than to play a game in which only men participated. Yahaira's mother declared that she was unwilling to let her daughter play the game at first, but told her at a later time she could form a girl's team. However, her participation was only permitted until she reached puberty because by then, she would have to comply with more traditionally feminine roles.

One of the roles young ladies are expected to fulfill is marriage. Brides have often just turned fifteen or sixteen years of age during this rite of passage, but the husband will be older by at least five years. This is one of the most important steps in a girl's life because the mother has taught her that her spouse will provide her life long happiness and social integrity. Once girls get married, they situate themselves within the nuclear family, where they and their children become dependent on one man.⁶

The teachings of the Catholic Church---which remains the dominant religion in Mexico---helps to further reinforce family values and the importance of motherhood, which has the Virgin Mary as its prototypical model.⁷ Although

the rural inhabitants identify themselves as *mestizos*, Catholic theology has had a large impact not only on their religious practices, but also on the manner in which women must behave. That is, submissiveness, obedience, and chastity are correct forms of moral conduct for rural women. These gender norms were likewise implemented in the Aztec culture as demonstrated by the manner in which women were severely punished for their promiscuity or committing other sexual sins (Sahagún, 1961).

Getting married, having children, and being a good wife and parent will confirm the girl's loyalty to both the family and the Church. Community members have an unfavorable opinion of women who have not met these standards by a certain age. Hence, girls in these Sinaloan towns must choose between becoming a mother and playing the game. This is not a difficult choice for most females because the majority will opt for the first, given the expectations of their family and friends.⁸

When I was listening to the testimonies of the female consultants I immediately related to their experiences because as I was growing up I faced a similar dilemma. Although I was not raised in Mexico, that is my place of birth, I had to behave like a proper young Mexican woman even though my family and I lived in the United States. I remember not being able to engage in activities that were presumably only for boys. I was also expected to be neat and passive at all times, and could not express my opinion concerning family matters. These restrictions applied to my mode of dress as well. When I was a child I disliked dresses because they prevented me from climbing fences or

riding a bicycle. My mother kept insisting that I wear them because she told me they would make me look more feminine. For a long time I questioned what that meant.

6.3 The Influence of Peer Groups

The sociological pressures that girls confront in the household are comparable to those they have to face in the field of sports. While parents have a say as to what games girls should play at home, teachers play a large role in the games they play at school. Notwithstanding, girls will consistently choose activities that also involve their girlfriends. Peer groups are an essential part of a girl's, or boy's, social development, because they will more than likely influence their conduct and involvement in public affairs away from the home. Members of peer groups perceive that their friends accept their behavior, and that they are all equals in some way. In small communities where the total population may range from one hundred to one hundred fifty, social popularity is a matter of central importance because it can make or break an adolescent's sense of social acceptance.

This was exemplified in the behavior of several female *ulama* players such as Yahaira, who stopped playing the game because of embarrassment over comments made by girls her age. As a young girl, Yahaira's peers admired her for being the only female player in her town. This attitude changed when she became an adolescent, because her girlfriends and teachers persuaded her to play other games like volleyball and basketball. Although

these were not the only two recreational activities offered to girls, they were the most popular among the female population. Curiously, these games are considered more aesthetically pleasing as compared to the *ulama* game that most people think is extremely rough, undoubtedly too rough for what these communities regard as suitable feminine behavior.

In Esquinapa, the female ballplayers from the Huaira family faced analogous reactions from their girlfriends because they play *ulama*. Girls tease the youngest player, Jessica, because she has expressed a preference for this sport rather than the games her friends play. Her older sister Edith confronted the same situation. Her friends asked why she had chosen a male game, when there were others that were more acceptable for females, like the aforementioned games. Contrary to Yahaira's inclination for engaging in recreational activities that her friends approve, the Huaira girls continue to perform in *ulama* exhibition matches.

Having listened to the girls' comments with respect to their athletic preferences, I was surprised to find out the teachers consent to the girls involvement in basketball, which has an element of physical roughness rooted in that sport. Basketball is one of many competitive games that can make players act aggressively and even violently. It also involves more physical contact, and it is my opinion that the chances of one getting hurt are greater than in the game of *ulama*. Needless to say, aggressiveness and competitiveness have been labeled as masculine traits that women are not supposed to express according to the cultural requirements of their gender.

How traits are established according to each sex is perplexing, since in some situations, these attributes are valued in women by both men and women outside of rural towns (or only women). Given this contradiction, is it right to categorize any given trait as exclusively masculine or feminine?

Additionally, in 1918 when women first began to play basketball, their involvement provoked a significant amount of controversy. Fanny Ruiz, president of the Mexican Women's Basketball Association during the 1940's, commented that Mexican women who played this sport faced harsh critiques from society. They were labeled *machorras* (dikes), and most of their girlfriends did not want to acknowledge associating with them anymore. A few women even prohibited their daughters from continuing friendships with them (Lopez, 1990: 12), perhaps for the fear that they, too, would be treated in the same manner as their friends. Considering the negative attitudes toward past female basketball players and the roughness of the sport, I am left to wonder how it is that parents and teachers decide that some games that have been male dominated in the past (and still are at higher levels) are more suitable for girls than others?

It is possible that these sports are accepted as appropriate activities for young girls because they are performed in school settings where the teachers can monitor the behavior of the girls. Perhaps the leaders of the towns were supplied with equipment for these games, and thus, adolescents had no choice but to play them. In contrast, girls playing the *ulama* game would be performed in public settings where they are exposed to a variety of negative attitudes from

the community members, or sexual insinuations. Furthermore, because the *ulama* game enhances male power and virility, it becomes identified as an inappropriate activity for adolescent girls.

By and large, the experiences that boys have in the private and public domain do not compare to those of girls. Whereas girls rely on social relations to gain status among peers, males have the possibility of gaining status through athletic involvement (Eder and Parker, 1987: 201). Through the game they are able to build strength, individual achievement and confidence, and the more aggressive the *ulama* player, the more praise he will receive. The value placed on this belligerent behavior has become a major source of pride in male peer groups, especially for boys whose physique may not be well regarded in other arenas of play. Their admiration has to do in part with the courage to play a game that has potential for serious injury and can even result in someone's death.

Moreover, boys and men have come to believe that if they play well on the court they will perform well sexually. A few females commented that they would prefer to marry a *ulama* player because they are viewed as celebrities in the communities, and potential life-long partners who will help produce healthy children. During one of the practice sessions in Los Llanitos Sylvia shouted, "*Ese es mi hombre, es muy macho!*" ("That is my man, he is very manly!"). Other women who were standing around laughed and made similar comments about other *ulama* players such as "*Esos ulameros son meros hombres*" ("Those *ulama* ballplayers are real men").

Therefore, the boy's competence in the game is so demanding that he is often ridiculed for not meeting the standards demanded for physical conditioning. Older *ulama* players mock younger male players by making comments like, "*Le pegas al ule como una mujer*" ("You hit the ball like a girl"), and, "*No eres un verdadero hombre*" ("you are not a real man"). These attitudes may likewise reflect the attitudes applied to ancient male ballgame players who were performing on the court to display their skill and masculine dexterity.

As I have demonstrated above, the maintenance of one's masculinity is vital for men who play in the *ulama* game. This applies to women as well, since they struggle on a daily basis to sustain their femininity. Female ballplayers, in particular, are repeatedly belittled for not being feminine enough. One of the female consultants in La S vila stated that negative remarks were made about Yahaira because she practiced a male sport. Another young girl commented, "*Si jugamos el ulama vamos a parecer mas como hombres que mujeres y los muchachos no nos van a querer*" ("If we play *ulama* we will look more like men than women and the boys will not like us"). Since women are expected to be delicate and pretty at all times, men look down on female ballplayers because they are assumed to be less feminine as compared to other women in their community. For that matter any woman who wants to play the game will be constantly reminded that the society in which she lives will expect her to be a lady first and a female ballplayer second.

6.4 Female Ballplayers and Social Constructions of Femininity

In today's world, femininity refers to the degree to which persons regard themselves as feminine given what it means to be a woman in a particular socio-cultural context (Stets and Burke, 2000: 1). Feminine traits in most cultures include such things as style, behavior, and appearance (sexual and otherwise). These attributes relate not only to a women's physical ability, but also to her role in society at large (Oglesby, 2007: 19).

In Mexico the stigmatization of female ballplayers for not being feminine is overpowering, and can oftentimes be overwhelming. Although passivity, grace, and feminine sensibility identify some of the characteristics of females in rural areas (Buñuel Heras, 1996: 1), this is not a clear indicator that one is perceived as "feminine" just because one is female (Hart, 1976: 439). The activities that women take part in, whether in the home or public sector, must conform to the views of Mexican society. That is, women will be restricted in their access to certain types of conduct, dress, and any sport activity that is considered rough or aggressive.

Stereotypical notions of femininity and masculinity have divided the *ulama* game among gender lines. While sports like volleyball and basketball are considered more 'feminine appropriate,' the *ulama* game, which emphasizes aggression and strength, is generally not. In large part this has to do with the manner in which players project their bodies when playing the game.

In the introductory chapter to the *ulama* sport (see Chapter Five), I briefly

explained that there are certain postures that the players must exhibit in order to strike the ball correctly. These postures—thrusting of the hip, spreading the legs to strike the ball from above or below—are not criticized when performed by male players. Nevertheless, when women strike the same poses the rural population considers them to be rough and sexually provocative.

One of the former female *ulama* ballplayers recalled that during one of the practice sessions, a woman passing by made a negative remark about how she was thrusting her hip to strike the ball. She told the female ballplayer that it was inappropriate for girls to exhibit themselves in that manner. If this is to be accepted as truth, then women have broken yet another unspoken social rule—the prohibition against presenting her body in a sexually explicit, non-feminine fashion.

Would women have experienced the same behavior in the pre-Hispanic past? Perhaps during the Post-classic period in certain regions such as Central Mexico women were restricted to using their bodies in certain ways that may have been viewed as sexually provocative. Sahagún describes how mothers would sermon their daughters on proper female behavior, whereby the girl was instructed how to walk slowly and with care, as to not provoke certain fantasies (1961: Book VI). This idea would have been reinforced by Spanish clerics who were the first to tell Aztec women to cover their upper bodies so they would not illicit any sexual conduct on the part of the men.

For the early period cultures, these restrictions would have varied across space and time. In the Pre-classic period, for example, ceramic female

figurines suggests that women could perform their bodies in ways that were not acceptable for later cultures given that the most figurines are completely nude. Their nudity was acceptable because for one, clothing may have been used only for special occasions, such as a religious ceremony. Given the emphasis placed on corporal decoration, these early period societies would have encouraged women to exhibit their body more than to cover it. In the game, women could have had the same freedom to perform their bodies in ways that, for Pre-classic village societies, may have been viewed as acceptable feminine conduct.

Consequently, I suspect the implicit view that girls who play *ulama* are not feminine may be an obstacle to their participation in the game. While some men appear to accept and permit them in the *ulama* sport, there clearly are consequences for that participation in the male domain. Women who have become integrated into the sport may be perceived as unattractive because they are using their bodies more freely, and women have been taught that to be feminine one must walk and sit in a more modest way. Mothers, aware of the negative attitudes of men (and as the parent who watches over their daughters' marriage prospects) actively discourage their daughters from playing after they reach puberty.

***Ulama* and the Role of Machismo**

The roles carried out by men and women in Mexican rural towns have been specifically defined by social convention. Patriarchy is largely responsible for creating these roles, as the sexes are not seen as equal, but as two

separate categories of gender in which men have total command over private and public affairs. As a result of these differences, men have acquired more power, privilege and status than women ever hope to gain (Marini, 1990: 96).

In his study of Mexican culture, Octavio Paz asserts that women are viewed as inferior to men because they have “given in” to the gender norms that society has created (1994). While women are required to be submissive, they are also viewed with contempt for playing this subordinate role. As in many other cultures, women are perceived solely as instruments for satisfying sexual requirements and mere objects of men’s desire. They are not there to think, but to attract with their bodies, and to comply with the generic models that underline a woman’s passivity and vulnerability. For this, however, she is also scorned for being “*la rajada*,” a coward; the one who is willing to submit to anything (*ibid.*, 33).

More recently, this male sense of superiority has dictated why women should not play the *ulama* game. In Mexico, this idea of masculine superiority is commonly referred to as *machismo*. The term is translated in general terms as “sexual prowess, including verbal ‘action,’ daring, and, above all, absolute self-confidence” (Basham, 1976: 127). Machismo attitudes can be found in many cultures, although in the case of Mexico, it is a clearly defined pattern of conduct (Paredes, 1967: 73) that is displayed by a large percentage of men in rural towns.

There is no consensus among scholars about when *machismo* began in

Mexico. While Americo Paredes contends that it began during the conquest period when Cortés and his soldiers arrived in New Spain and raped Aztec women (1967: 65), Patricia Fernández-Kelly asserts that the behaviors identified today as *macho* existed since pre-colonial times (2005: 78). Although this is still a matter of debate in scholarship, there is a general consensus that *machismo* became popularized in the forties and fifties with the figure of the revolutionary warrior personified in the *charro* (Mexican cowboy).⁹

In the *ulama* game, the demonstration of physical ability plays a central role in the affirmation of the masculine identity (Szasz, 1998: 96). Machismo is present in the manner in which men treat women, and how they behave in terms of their role in society. Since men are the breadwinners in the family, they feel they have the authority to control women's behavior and activities. As a married woman, the wife is the binding force of the family, and is expected to be obedient, faithful, and a sort of quasi-virgin that engages in sexual intercourse not for pleasure but in the anticipation of motherhood (Basham, 1976: 129). Since her virginity and femininity are highly valued, integration into the *ulama* game is by no means accepted as a gender-appropriate form of conduct for girls because it places attention on her body, which when making the *ulama* ball playing poses appear sexually provocative. For that reason, the majority of women are prohibited from playing it.

There are certain attitudes about women playing *ulama* that were less visibly expressed in the communities. For example, when I was conducting interviews, various consultants expressed the idea that the ball could hurt a

woman in the abdomen, which would prevent her from having children. Some of the mothers were also worried that their daughters could get hurt in the vagina. Hence, not only does the girl run the risk of not having children, but also of losing her virginity. Since virgins are more desired than non-virgins, the girls in the communities do not want to lose the opportunity to be chosen by the best male candidate in their towns.

Moreover, men feel that they are the only ones who should be allowed to play the game because it is assumed to have been created by men, and so on those grounds, it is off limits to women. Because men's masculinity is at stake in the game, it cannot be altered in any shape or form by a woman's presence. This was graphically demonstrated at the exhibition of *ulama de antebrazo*. When Dulce won three quick points, the female crowd quickly came to life, and the male players standing around the table yelled many comments at the boy. Not surprisingly, a large percentage dealt with the need to protect or maintain his manhood. Quite clearly, Dulce's success was threatening to many of the males present because it challenged their attitudes toward male athletic superiority.

Another convincing example of *machismo* was recorded in the town of Los Llanitos, when Sergio Garza (2004) posed the question to a couple of men there, "Have there ever been any female teams?" and the men gathered around him broke into laughter. Furthermore, a younger player added, "Not all men can play *ulama*, much less women." What is interesting about the response they gave to Garza's question is that when I interviewed the same group of

men, they reacted differently when I asked the same question. Some of the men told me that women could play the game although they also believed that they would get hurt more easily. I suspect that the reason why they gave Garza that answer is that if they admitted that women are capable of playing the game it would demonstrate an inner weakness in their masculine status that they did not want to reveal to male researchers.

Interestingly, I found that throughout our interview sessions most of the information that my male colleagues recorded did not coincide with the information I had received. A similar situation occurred when I was comparing my information with the data collected by Leyenaar (1978) who had reported that in the late '70s women were not allowed to touch the ball or attend games. The contradictions in the ethnographic data collected by my colleagues and I are not limited to contemporary ethnographic works, but may extend as far back as the conquest period. There is a high probability that when the Spanish Franciscan friars were questioning Aztec men regarding women's roles, responses were based on biased or androcentric points of view that influenced men's remarks about women.

Sahagún's *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España* (1961), for example, fails to portray the importance of women in Aztec society. While the overall total of festival calendar illustrations is greater than in his first book *Primeros Memoriales*, fewer contain women. Women are mentioned in reference to many rituals, but their status or role is altogether vague. Betty Ann Brown speculates that Sahagún's own cultural heritage—the Catholic exclusion

of women from the priesthood—may have blinded him when he was gathering this information (1983).

Contradictory data in ethnographic fieldwork is not uncommon and almost expected because men and women react differently when speaking to the opposite sex. The difference in data also has to do with how one poses the question and the setting where the interviews are taking place. If men in Los Llanitos reacted negatively when Garza posed the question of women ballplayers it is because the *ulama* game confirms the social assumption that asserting and overcoming, doing and being are the appropriate models for male gendered performance (Felshin, 1976: 71).

Women are not raised with the same cultural models, and are compelled to believe that when it comes to sports, they are indeed the weaker sex. De Beauvoir (1969) describes how young girls who engage in sports are forced to conform to accepted 'norms of behaviour.'

Sports are still open to her: but sport, which means specialisation and obedience to artificial rules, is by no means the equivalent of a free and habitual resort to force, it is a marginal feature of life, it does not provide information about the world and the self as intimately as does a free fight, an un-premeditated climb... since scuffles and climbing are... forbidden, their bodies have to suffer things only in a passive manner This lack of physical power leads to a more general timidity: she has no faith in a force she has not experienced in her body; she does not dare to be enterprising, to revolt, to invent; doomed to docility, to resignation, she can take in society only a place already made for her.

The critique offered above is a fitting example of the manner in which Mexican society views women's roles. In the arena of sports, women have very few options, and parents, teachers, and peers must approve those offered to

them. Perhaps the few women who have participated in the *ulama* game were searching for liberation from the restrictions they faced since childhood. With a sense of affirmation, Edith boldly stated that, “*Aunque la mayoría de las muchachas siguen las reglas en sus casas sobre el papel del genero, yo he escogido jugar el ulama*” (Although most young girls follow the rules that have been imposed upon them regarding gender roles, I have chosen to play *ulama*). Both Edith’s statement and the participation of other women in the game has helped them to express who they are, however small its impact on overall perceptions.

Above all, these female ballplayers want to direct the activity of their bodies away from merely serving as an object of the male gaze to becoming a body that is enacted or performed. Unfortunately, the social and cultural norms of gendered bodily performance in rural Mexican communities have had a great impact on other women who would like to take part in the game. A few young girls in La Savila claimed that they would like to play the game, but were afraid that their parents or peers would laugh at them if they performed their body in a non-feminine manner. Alongside these restrictions, a wide variety of myths relating to a woman’s biology and physical strength have discouraged women from participating.

6.5 Myths and Misconceptions About Women Ballplayers

One of the challenges that scholars have confronted over the years has been related to their concern with trying to get rid of some of the

misconceptions that center on women who participate in sportive activities. The limits imposed on women have remained constant from years of absorbing several cultural mythologies created and passed on from one culture to another (Burns-Ardolino, 2003: 55). Most of these misconceptions about women who participate in sports have not been scientifically proven, and are obvious extensions of pre-conceived notions of a woman's potential and physical abilities (Prakash, 1990: WS-25).

One of the myths that has been applied to women ballplayers claims that women do not have the physical ability to play as well as men. Another is that those who do engage in the sport acquire masculine traits over time, and a third is that aspects of a women's biology, such as menstruation and breastfeeding, diminish a woman's ability to participate. These myths have been difficult to conquer because parents and teachers continue to instill in young girls such ideas about gender-appropriate roles. In the following pages I will examine some of these widespread myths and the arguments that have been made against them. These myths are important for the study of the modern game because they have influenced the gender relationships in the West Mexican communities, and because scholars may have also implicitly applied these same limiting gender ideologies to the study of the ball game and women's role in ancient Mexico.

Myth 1. "The *Ulama* Game Makes Women Less Feminine"

In the town of Villa Unión, "El Gallo" mentioned that when he was young,

there were women who played the game and these women were viewed as *marimachas* because the game was considered too rough for “normal” women. A consultant from La Savila had likewise stated that women in nearby *rancherías* spoke of Yahaira in a negative way and called her a *marimacha* because she played a masculine sport.

While the term *marimacha* is most often associated with lesbianism, I want to point out that in some towns, a *marimacha* is a term that Mexican people use to describe a woman who acts like a tomboy, in the sense that she participates in recreational activities that are uncommon or improper for girls. Females who are labeled as such are usually described as having large muscular structures, a clear deviation from the petite, well rounded shape that is desired in women and which ultimately makes a woman feminine. Thus, if young girls are frequently reminded that playing the game will make them less feminine, they may believe that they must choose between playing *ulama* and maintaining their femininity as defined by body image. It is a complicated choice that girls have to make that has the potential for setting up deep emotional conflict in female players that will continue later into adulthood (Hart, 1976: 439).

Myth 2. “Women Who Play *Ulama* Will Develop A Muscular Structure That Will Make Them More Masculine”

The “muscle myth” as it is commonly known in the world of sports, is the second factor that has prevented women from playing the rubber ballgame. This myth has led to the belief that girls will develop bulging muscles if they

engage in any rough or competitive sport activity for a certain amount of time.

The culprits for perpetuating this false idea have generally been adults (*ibid.*,

442) and men who have formed negative opinions about women athletes.

Sargent (1912) was one of the earliest scholars to assert that women who

engage in sports become more masculine:

The women who are able to excel in the rougher and more masculine sports have either inherited or acquired masculine characteristics...[and therefore] women must be encouraged only those activities which improved upon feminine characteristics such as for instance exercises like bowling, tennis, swimming which broaden the hips—a feminine characteristic.

Contrary to such opinions about women athletes, participation in sports or games does not masculinize them. Exercise specialists support this argument because they have found that excessive muscular development does not result from athletic competition (Hart, 1976: 442). Carl Klafs and Daniel Arnheim have similarly demonstrated that the secretion of testosterone, other androgens, and estrogen varies considerably for each gender, and this ultimately determines how muscular one becomes (1969: 127-134).

Myth 3. “Women Do Not Have the Physical Ability To Play the Game”

Social constraints have been another barrier to access and participation in the game. Some constraints are ubiquitous, such as the perception that women’s physical capabilities are inferior to men’s (Oglesby, 2007: 15). Such assumptions are grounded in a binary view of the athletic abilities of boys and girls (Theberge, 1998: 184). Boys have always been perceived as the stronger sex not because they build more muscle, but because society instills in them

this idea.

When I questioned some of the female consultants about their physical potential to play the game, one of the young girls in Esquinapa commented that she could not hit the ball as hard as an adult male, but could out perform males her own age. Dulce also believes that she is just as a strong competitor as the boys she plays against. Although a woman's biology is the largest factor in creating the physical differences between the sexes, it is ultimately the patriarchal environment in which men and women live that is responsible for constructing gender roles that have been so rigidly enforced.

In addition, a girl's involvement in physical activities has been geared toward the improvement of her health, and not necessarily to mold her as a professional athlete. This behavior has been imposed at such an early age that girls often feel that they cannot play *ulama* because they do not have the physical strength to do so. Lower expectations often lead to the conviction that boys are naturally superior athletes (Burton Nelson, 1991: 33). Adding to this notion of superiority is the belief on the part of the males that they are the biologically dominant sex. Consequently, a girl's inhibited intentionality, as Wendy Burns-Ardolino describes it, represents the first of many kinds of alienation that women experience (2003: 47).

Myth 4. "The Participation of Women in the *Ulama* Game Reduces A Woman's Chances of Conceiving"

The last myth claims that vigorous athletic activity can damage a woman's reproductive organs, possibly ruining her chances to become a

mother. Since *ulama* is an aggressive sport, many women are afraid to play it. Yahaira's girlfriends, who finally admitted they had played the game when they were young, stated that they loved to see her play, but would not do it themselves for fear they might get hurt in the abdomen. For these young girls any activity that endangers their possibility of becoming mothers is automatically seen as undesirable.

I accept the fact that the game of *ulama* involves potential risks that can injure or kill a player. However, we must take into consideration that because a woman's reproductive organs are internal, they are stronger than men's. In addition, no study has proven that integration into sports will limit a woman's ability to bear children. There is also insufficient evidence that pregnancy and labor are affected adversely by physical activity in sports (De Beauvoir, 1969; Prakash, 1990).

Another fear that women confront in playing the game is that the weight and impact of the rubber ball may scar or kill them. These beliefs are based on stories that past *ulama* players have passed on from community to community. A few people mentioned that in the 1960's a player was struck by the ball on the stomach and died from a hemorrhage. In Cacalotan, Juana Madrigal remarked that one of the players was hospitalized after the ball had struck him in the abdomen. The player's internal bleeding caused his death, and after this incident no one wanted to play the game.

Ballplayers from other communities have developed permanent bruises on their waists or hips that, with time, have formed an unpleasant callous. I

recall that during one of my visits I attempted to play the game with a couple of the boys in Los Llanitos just to feel the weight of the ball. Since I did not strike the ball with my thigh as I was supposed to, I acquired a large, painful bruise on my leg. Women, afraid to injure themselves or scar their bodies do not participate for the simple reason of risking an unattractive scar. However, as with any sport, the player must learn the game well before any attempt is made to play at a more serious level. I see how a woman could become injured if she did not have the proper training. However, my consultant's statements confirmed that the girl's fathers or uncles took the proper precautions when teaching them how to play.

When I questioned women about the potential for injury to their bodies, there was again some ambivalence among my consultants. In Los Llanitos, Patricia expressed the opinion that women's hips are too fragile to play *ulama*, and her friend Sylvia surprisingly exclaimed, "Frágil? Mira estas caderas!," ("Fragile, look at these hips!"). Her point is well taken, in that women's hip structure is in no way a disadvantage. As Bradley (2001) notes, "Broad hips and a low center of gravity located in the pelvis give a woman a natural advantage over a man in the ballgame because she can get under the ball and hit it more solidly and easily." Although a woman's biology is often considered to blame for their performance in the game, the opinions presented here, along with the data provided by my consultants, suggests that it is not the woman's physical inability to perform which affects her participation, but what society makes of this condition.

6.6 Concluding Remarks

The present investigation has examined several issues relating to gender roles and identities of men and women in Mexican rural towns, and how these have affected women's participation in the *ulama* sport. It is a study that was made possible through qualitative ethnographic research in which men and women were interviewed regarding their perspectives on the roles they play in their communities, how they adhere to these roles, and how they view women's participation in the rubber ballgame. In an effort to explore conceptions of the game and the attitudes of community members, concepts that were addressed in the study included masculinity, femininity, peer pressure, *machismo*, and myths and misconceptions about women's physical capabilities.

The objective of the research was to discover why the number of female ballplayers has been minimal in comparison to male participation. It is a critical study for the history of the rubber ballgame because it focuses on the stories and experiences of women ballplayers who are prominent members of rural communities where women are widely marginalized in the public sector.

Whereas men are praised for playing a sport that is very rough, women players have confronted prejudices that have adhered not only to their biological traits, but also to the social stereotypes that presume them to be physically weaker than men. In a culture that is structured under strict patriarchal dominance, female players have been disparaged by the broader society for engaging in an activity that is perceived by the masses as an exclusively male sport.¹⁰

After three seasons of fieldwork and in-depth analysis of the data collected I reached several conclusions. First, it became evident at the end of season one that the roles parents and teachers assign to boys and girls are the biggest contributors to women's lack of participation. These roles not only vary per sex, but those of males are assigned more importance and value. This is not abnormal conduct for people in rural towns, since Mexican society is founded on conservative patriarchal notions that emphasize cultural values such as family, marriage, and conventional femininity.

These moral codes have instructed women on how to be obedient and attractive and prepare themselves for their primary goals, which are to become wives and mothers. Women's participation in sports is allowed as long as it does not interfere with their serious work, which is the maintenance of the household and children. These duties are tasks girls are taught with a view to their practical activities in life. However, Herbert Spencer notes that some of these roles have more to do with how a society views women than to the immediate personal welfare of its members (1820: 9).

The assignment of roles and values to each sex has created gender inequalities among the rural inhabitants. Whereas male players have the freedom to be creative, spontaneous, assertive and athletic, women ballplayers have had to withstand criticism and derogatory remarks regarding their biological attributes and feminine state of being. Cultural traditions that favor men over women, and the subsequent cultural practices that sustain that discrimination lead to women's social exclusion from high-status activities in

public life. This finds support in the works of Margaret Mead who proposed this idea in the early twentieth century when examining the behaviors of men and women in seven Oceanic cultures (1975; 2001). Her studies led her to conclude that being feminine or masculine is not determined by biology, but is culturally constructed.

Second, during the adolescent years, peer groups become important for gender conditioning. While parents continue to support their children throughout their puberty, peer groups become more important in terms of socialization and the formation of friendship networks (Veed, 2009: 20). This was a surprising find because in season one, I had been under the impression that the barriers to girls playing *ulama* might originate with male opinions because some of the former male players had described women who played the game as *raras* (strange).

Based on their statements, I suggest that mothers discourage their daughters from playing so as not to jeopardize their marriage opportunities. In speaking with female players and informants in the following years, it became clear to me that most of the pressure came from other girls their own age; in short, their peer group. This is not only because girls who play *ulama* are not conforming to female norms, but also must be understood in the context of Mexican culture.

In the last twenty years, the popularity of women's participation in the *ulama* sport has experienced a remarkable decline. Several women think that if they get married they have a better opportunity to leave their town and migrate

into the city where their husband will find a better job. As the number of playing opportunities has diminished, girls and women who continued to seek integration into the game have faced growing prejudices.

For example, there have been insinuations linking women who participate in the game with masculine qualities. Others state that girls who play the game will never perform as well as men because they do not have the physical conditioning to do so. Many girls have also come to believe that they are inferior to men both physically and mentally. Perhaps the most damaging of these negative perceptions, as Jean O'Reilly and Susan Cahn observe, is that their involvement in male-dominated spaces will result in physical and sexual impropriety, among other things (2007: xv).

Negative responses expressed by rural community members not only reflect broad cultural values, but also how that those values are related to being masculine or feminine. The question of how different societies define masculinity and femininity has been thoroughly addressed by feminist scholars in all disciplines, particularly in the field of anthropology (Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Conkey 1984, 2004; Conkey and Gero, 1997; De Beauvoir, 1969; Friedan, 1983). These studies provide valuable tools for examining the way people view femininity in Mexican society, and also counterattack all previous notions about the biological basis of one's masculine or feminine social attributes.

To be feminine, in the value systems of these rural towns, indicates that

a woman cannot be assertive, tough, and focused on material success because these are considered to be masculine characteristics.¹¹ Qualities associated with masculinity are athletic ability, competitiveness, aggression, and vigor (Graydon 1983: 5). Games like *ulama* that involve all of these attributes seem to make them a social model for masculine rather than feminine ideals (Hart, 1976: 439). Furthermore, the game provides males the chance to reinforce their masculine identity as ballplayers, and equally important, provides a basis for ridiculing other ballplayers as insufficiently manly.

Women, on the other hand, have had fewer resources with which to counter negative impressions about their physical unattractiveness, lack of sexual respectability, and generally unfeminine behavior. If, as Mead claims, gender is something that is culturally determined, then women's subjugation to the domestic domain can be contested and modified. Women who have played the game since the 1940's have taken the first step in this social and cultural adjustment. Through their participation they have permanently transformed long-standing patterns of discrimination and corresponding beliefs in female athletic inferiority.

Despite the fact that a few women have challenged negative views about their participation, there has been relatively little interest on the part of other females in engaging in the *ulama* sport. Factors that contribute to this fear have to do with the weight of the heavy rubber ball, and the negative manner in which society treats women for engaging in a game that most members of the communities consider to be strictly masculine. While these are ample reasons

for girls to stay away from the game, their biggest obstacle to playing the game may be their concern with the idea that their place in the world is already fixed (De Beauvoir, 1969: 71).

If the *ulama* game defines a man's masculine identity and helps to shape his social status, then what opportunities does the game offer women? For one, integration in the game allows women to express themselves and increase their self-esteem and self-confidence. The *ulama* sport also carries with it a tremendous potential to positively impact attitudes towards gender equality among the younger generation (Oglesby, 2007). In particular, women who become involved in recreational activities can shape attitudes towards women's capabilities as leaders and decision-makers, especially in male domains (*ibid.*). Another positive outcome for integration in the game is that a girl's participation may become a way of asserting powers she has been taught to inhibit.

I am not suggesting that change in the *ulama* game is easy or accessible. These are just some possibilities offered to women that can help them to challenge patriarchal notions of male empowerment. For generations, women in these rural towns have been confined to social roles that have made them subordinate to the male sex. These roles have been socially determined, obeyed, and performed in daily life since boys and girls were old enough to understand the differences between men and women. However, these roles are subject to change because being a woman in any community is not to be regarded as a static social persona or a universal given.

On a similar note, Judith Butler argued that gender is a performance in

which the body becomes its gender only through a series of acts that are renewed, revised, and consolidated through time (1993: 140). It is not what one is, but what one does that ultimately determines the gender of an individual (*ibid.*). Since gender is learned and practiced, men and women gain access to intelligible social identities through interpretative social acts, that is, when others understand a performing body's gender (Joyce, 2000a).

Long ago in the pre-Hispanic past, indigenous villages provided a medium for the performance of gender. The costume on female ceramic figurines strongly suggests that gender was performed through dress and the body revealing or presenting the physical self (Joyce, 2000a, 2000b, 2005). Figurines have become principal sources of information about Mesoamerican societies because they help to identify patterns of change over time, as well as social and cultural traditions. In them we see women in daily activities such as women carrying babies, cooking, or performing some ceremonial ritual. There are also examples of women dressed as ballplayers, a clear indication that the game was not open exclusively to men.

Architectural spaces also provided a setting for gender performance, in the form of open plazas, ball courts, or delineated spaces near ceremonial centers or households. Performances in the ballgame linked, crossed, and changed territories where the sacred could be made manifest through ritual, as every structure and every person in the game played a ritual role, even including those who may not have held a dominant role (Turner, 1986). Men who engaged in the game also became performers through wearing their

ballgame costume and performing their prescribed athletic and gender roles.

Even when women were not permitted to play the game, they were involved in other activities that were ballgame-related.

¹ This approach was based on Donna Eder and Stephen Parker's study of the relationships and behaviors of adolescent boys and girls (1987: 202).

² The most notable of these ballgame accounts are by Leyenaar (1978, 1992, 2001); Kelly (1939); Beals (1933); Pérez de Ribas (1944, 1968) and Uriarte (1992).

³ Gender roles consist of the political, economic, and cultural activities of men and women as well as their status within society (Brumfiel, 2001: 57).

⁴ Women's presence and the roles they enact have been poorly recognized in Mexico, perhaps long before the Spanish conquest. It is an attitude that is not limited to Mexico, but exists in many societies throughout the world.

⁵ Traci Arden describes gender as concepts and relationships that exist to organize sexual difference, leaving open the number and nature of those concepts. Sex is often defined as the biological differences in male and female bodies (2008: 4).

⁶ The practice of child marriage has its antecedents long before the Colonial period. It was a universal practice in Mexico during the sixteenth century in Nahua tribes. The age of marriage for females was well below thirteen years. On average, the male was seven years older than females causing them to remain in the parental household (McCAA, 2003: 33).

⁷ The Virgin of Guadalupe has become Mexico's national symbol and is referred to as the patroness of the Americas. Her apparition to the Aztec peasant Juan Diego has been widely documented. The earliest account was written in Nahuatl in the year 1556. (see, Antonio Valeriano. *Nican Mopohua*. 2nd ed. Guillermo Ortiz de Montellano, trans. Mexico: Universidad Iberoamericana, 1990). For the indigenous people, she represented their earth goddess Coatlicue, who had been venerated in the same spot where the Virgin is supposed to have appeared. Many scholars believe that this miraculous event helped in the conversion of hundreds of native peoples.

⁸ Betty Friedan views the submission to feminine roles as female conformity. It is the woman's acceptance of the conventional good behavior that is expected of her by her parents, specifically, her mother. In her work the core of the problem is not sexual, but is a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique (1983: 73-77).

⁹ The representation of the brave and seductive Mexican cowboy was widely projected in radio and television throughout Latin America and helped to shape men's masculine character (Viveros, 2006: 115).

¹⁰ Patriarchal is defined in general terms as the power of the father and not of men. A patriarchal society has a hierarchical economic, political, and social structure where men of different classes, races, and ethnicities depend on one another to execute power over women (Dietiker-Amsl r, 1990: 10).

¹¹ I consider these traits to be unrealistic because it does not include how women define themselves. In other words, what is treated as normative female gender may correspond only to a small segment of biological females.

Chapter Seven: Women Playing a Man's Game: Conclusions and Reflections

This thesis has explored the roles of women ballplayers in a ritual sport that became one of the most important traits of Mesoamerican cultures. It was a ritual rubber ballgame that can be traced as far back in history as the Archaic Period, and began to decline at the time of the conquest with the arrival of the Spanish conquistadors. Women became integrated into the game in the Pre-classic Period, and continued to play up until the Post-classic in the state of Veracruz and surrounding regions of the Caribbean islands. After the sixteenth century there is no documentation of women ballplayers, but they did begin to play a modern counterpart of the game in the 1940's in several rural towns of Sinaloa, Mexico where a version of the game had survived.

Information on the game comes directly from sixteenth and twentieth century sources by Colonial authors and the twentieth century studies of modern researchers who have written widely on the subject. Through them we have learned of the game's function and symbolism, as well as its social and ritual significance in past and present day Mexico. Their contributions have been critical for our understanding of the game, yet questions concerning women ballplayers remained unanswered that I sought to address in this dissertation. In the preceding chapters, I examined several ballgame-related issues I considered deserve attention, and that I thought would help to clarify my inquiries in regards to women and the game. This is an investigation that is necessary for the reconstruction of the game in general, and of gender roles

specifically.

I commenced this research project nine years ago when I became part of “*Proyecto Ulama*” which was created with the intent to discover the relationship between the ancient and modern rubber ballgames played in Mexico. A few of the themes covered include the roles of women in the game, sacred landscape, and the production of rubber balls. None of the team members knew what to expect once we arrived in Sinaloa, since the last time any one had conducted fieldwork in these rural towns was back in the late 1970’s (Leyenaar, 1978).

Ethnography has many advantages, in that as ethnographers we are able to observe and participate in the lives of the people we are studying. It is a rare opportunity we do not have when we are examining ancient cultures. Nevertheless, archaeology plays a critical role in our quest for uncovering the lives of the pre-Hispanic peoples by providing us with material evidence that can be used to compare with present ethnographic data. Through an in-depth analysis of this material we are able to formulate working theories concerning the actions and beliefs of the indigenous Mesoamerican people and how these changed over time.

This becomes especially important when studying those cultures that have been less fully documented and researched, as is the case of the indigenous cultures of the Caribbean islands. The documents written by fray Bartolome de las Casas (1909) and other prominent Spanish friars were critical for the game’s reconstruction in those areas. They also provide evidence of the participation of women in the Antillean game. However, after the eighteenth

century the game slowly began to disappear, and it was not until the early 1930's that ethnographers witnessed rubber ballgames in northern and west Mexican coastal territories (Kelly, 1943; Beals, 1933; Perez de Rivás, 1944, 1968). This manifestation of the game's importance in these particular areas is surprising given its popularity in central Mexico right before European contact. While the game today has lost its religious character and is not played as often as before, it is still capable of transmitting a certain power that speaks of its value for the modern Mexican populations.

7.1 The Ulama Game and the Roles of Women Ballplayers

The fieldwork that the *ulama* research team implemented in Sinaloa, Mexico from 2003 – 2006 helped to clarify many of the misconceptions about the *ulama* rubber ballgame, and for my personal interests, about women ballplayers. The most important part of the interview process for me was acquiring the testimonies of the women who had played the game. It was a unique opportunity for them to talk about their experiences in the game, and express their points of view regarding their participation and how society views them in general.

In the year 2003 I had the opportunity to observe an exhibition game between a boy and a girl from the town of El Guamúchil. The game they were competing in was *ulama de antebrazo* (Arm-*ulama*), a sport where players use the forearm to propel a small rubber ball. Despite the fact that both competitors were skilled players, much to the discontent of the male crowd, the girl beat her

opponent. While community discussions thereafter focused on previous ballgame contests, at no time did anyone comment on the girl's victory. The marginalization of modern women ballplayers is equally manifest in the area of scholarship. The assumption that the game is an inherently masculine pastime continues to plague the work of ballgame scholars who have written widely on the subject. In their research women are either not discussed, or are mentioned solely in terms of their roles as wives or relatives of ballplayers. At no time has there been an interest, until recently with my own work, in examining their roles as ballgame participants.

Narratives of women's histories and their social status in Mexican rural towns have been marginalized in ethnographic accounts because men have dominated the task of writing history. Although this has slowly changed over time, the oral accounts of women have not reached parity by any measure with the narratives of males.

When conducting ethnographic fieldwork several things must be taken into consideration. The first is that we have to become familiar with the environment we expect to study, and the other is to get acquainted with the people we expect to consult. This is what is known as "participant-observation," and it is an approach that allows the ethnographer to experience first hand the lives and daily rituals of the consultants in a given community (Emerson, *et al.*, 1995:1). It is a method I struggled with during my three seasons of fieldwork not because I was an outsider, but because I was a woman.

The first time I went to Sinaloa I confronted problems during the

interview process because several of the men did not want to discuss the subject of women ballplayers. Others simply changed the conversation to the male game, or ignored me completely. At first I was unaware of the circumstances of this behavior; then I found out that the rural communities where the game is played are structured under a patriarchal order where men have complete control over women. Whereas men have the liberty to go anywhere they desire, women are confined to the home and have limited freedom outside of this space. They are not allowed to engage in public activities unless their husbands are present. In extreme cases, women cannot speak to anyone outside of the home unless it is a close relative or friend. The restrictions women face in their communities complicated my research, as I was asking questions on a subject that aroused men's disapproval, and they perceived me as invading male territories.

Male domination was already the prevailing social practice in Mexico during the Aztecs' reign as sixteenth century texts and codices demonstrate about the division of public and private spaces and gender roles. Men had complete authority over all the important affairs, including participation in the game, while women had limited access to the public domain. This differentiation intensified when Spanish Franciscan friars arrived in the Americas and began to impose strict rules of moral conduct on indigenous women.

Male supremacy became highly marked in Mexico during the 1940's when images of the brave Mexican cowboy were publicized in newspapers and

other media (Paredes, 1967). This male prototype represented for Mexican men valor, roughness, and physical strength. These masculine qualities could also turn one into a “*machista*”; that is, a man who is impervious, arbitrary, controlling, and unpredictable (Basham, 1976). In the *ulama* game, *machismo* has been a key factor that accounts for women’s lack of participation.

In the town of Los Llanitos, male players conceive of women as not only physically different, but also inferior to them. In both subtle and explicit ways, young girls have faced many obstacles to becoming integrated into the rubber ballgame because of their biological characteristics. The social stereotypes traditionally associated with concepts of femininity, along with a woman’s biological make-up continue to limit the activities women can perform (Buñuel Heras, 1996: 1).

While a few girls have gradually begun to play the *ulama* game at a slow pace, they have done so under the scrutiny of men who perceive the game as a secular sport that heightens their masculine identity. Men participate in *ulama* as a means to establish their manliness because as a player, a man is considered to be tough and apt to excel in physical performance in and out of the field. As ballgame participants, men become more competitive, powerful and dominant. Furthermore, the community views them as heroes for playing a game that is very rough.

On the other hand, women are viewed as weak and incapable of playing the game like men. While the explanation given for their non-participation is expressed in terms of physical limitations, this was simply a rationalization of

several underlying problems. For the most part, people in Sinaloa have embraced certain myths about women's athleticism ever since women first participated in games in Mexico (López, 1990).

One of these myths presumes that women who take part in certain sports accumulate masculine traits over time. It is a myth that is perpetuated by both adults and sports authorities. Women afraid to look or behave more like a man do not want to play the game because they do not want to lose their femininity. Since young girls in rural towns are expected to be "pretty" and "docile" at all times, they are discouraged from engaging in any sport that is not considered feminine-appropriate. Most young girls have followed these social and cultural standards, and have chosen to become involved in other more suitable recreational activities. However, the few women who have played the game have been severely criticized by their family and peers and called such names as "*machorras*" or "*marimachas*" (lesbians or tomboys).

Consequently, if a girl is to be a "real" girl, she must participate in games that are gender-appropriate like volleyball or basketball that have gained social acceptability as feminine games (Hart, 1976: 439). Classifying games as "feminine" or "masculine" presents a problem in itself because it has restricted men and women's engagement in certain sports. Femininity is nothing more than a cultural construction of society that has been widely used to limit what women can do (Mead, 1975, 2001). It is a cultural condition that is subject to change because as De Beauvoir has argued, women are not born women, but become women through the process of socialization (1969).

There is another related issue that in my opinion is one of the major causes for women's non-participation in the *ulama* sport. Most people in the communities think that if women ballplayers get hurt in or around the abdomen area it reduces their chances of becoming mothers. In patriarchal communities where being unable to bear children is viewed negatively, the potential risk to reproductive abilities is a sufficient deterrent to keep women from participating.

The discrimination women have confronted in the *ulama* game over the past years may not have been a problem in the games of the Pre-classic Period. It is likely that indigenous women's participation was determined by some form of rite of passage from childhood to adolescence, or adolescence to womanhood, or initiation into a certain group, not necessarily determined by age. The frequent presence of ceramic female ballplayer figurines in the archaeological record suggests that the game was an integral part of the community, and playing it perhaps was a requirement to accentuate the girl's public role or status.

Besides, the early period villages may have been more concerned with community collaboration than the division of gender roles. For that matter, I suspect that the game and other public activities were open to all members of the community. With the formation of states and social hierarchies women's access to the game may have declined given that men had control of all social, political, and economic matters. This becomes especially prominent in Aztec society where the game became a political theatrical performance of power and prestige. As a result of women's non-participation in Late Post-classic central

Mexico scholars have assumed that this was a general pattern of ballgame practices throughout Mesoamerica, and in all periods.

However, in the Caribbean Islands several friars witnessed women playing ballgames around the same time the Spanish noted they were not playing in the Valley of Mexico. Accounts of the ballgames of the Caribbean are not as extensive as those for Mesoamerica, yet the documents that were written by the Spanish friars who lived among the Islanders have provided us with important information concerning the games in those areas (Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, 1551-55; De las Casas, 1909, 1967; Gumilla, 1745; Alegria, 1983).

7.2 The Ancient Game and Its Evolution Through Time

Around 3,000 years ago, Mesoamerican rubber ballgames became intrinsic manifestations of the unity between man, earth, and the celestial bodies achieved through embodied performance. More than a sport, the game was a complex ceremonial activity that defined the paradigm for rituality in pre-Hispanic societies. All peoples of Middle America played the game for recreation or religious motives, and oftentimes both were integrated through rites, dancing, feasting, and songs. The game became so popular that it extended into Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras, and eastward into the Caribbean islands, including the Dominican Republic and Cuba (Whittington, 2001: 18; Alegria, 1983).

Early Period Games

The Olmecs were the first culture to practice the game as a form of religious rite (1500-200 B.C.). The Olmec came from a land called Olman, translated as the “place of rubber.” Although archaeologists have not found masonry ball court structures in Olmec areas, it has been suggested that the people played on earthen mounds whose walls were made from the same material (Castro-Leal, 1991). The Olmec people may have not used stone to build courts given the distance they had to travel to acquire it. There is also not much good building stone in the Olmec area—the basalt for stone sculptures came from the Tuxtla mountains some 50 miles away.

Long before the Olmec started playing games, the inhabitants of Paso de la Amada, Chiapas had already initiated its practice. In 1995 archaeologists discovered an earthen ball court in that area dating to 1400 - 1250 B.C. (Hill, *et al.*, 1998). Stone courts did not make their appearance in Mesoamerica until the Middle Pre-classic Period. These courts were commonly shaped like a capital “I,” and at times contained two stone rings that were attached on the wall or talus so that the ball might be struck to pass through them. A player who could achieve this difficult task immediately won the game for his team. Other courts contained markers that also had to be struck with the ball. While there are a few records that indicate how the game was played, rules vary per chronicler and have not been substantially defined.

The largest court structure was found at Chichén Itzá in the Yucatan peninsula. It measures 120 by 30ft and has two stone hoops on its walls that are placed 7 meters off the ground. The height of these rings suggests that the

game played there was not the hip rubber ballgame, but another version of the game where players would have used other body parts like the elbow to propel the ball. The game at Chichén Itzá involved human sacrifice, an act that was represented by images of decapitated ballplayers displayed on the reliefs of the court's benches. The act of sacrifice was recorded in Mesoamerican art since the early Pre-classic, as represented by the decapitated sculptures of ballplayers in Olmec sites. In El Tajín, this ritual act was a fundamental part of the ballgame, just as it had been in the central Mexican Aztec culture.

Ball courts were also used to conduct secular activities that may or may not have been directly associated with the game. In El Tajín, ball court reliefs show men dressed as warriors or rulers who stand face to face as if making some important decision, initiating a game, or resolving some type of conflict. Fox also found caches near ball court spaces that suggest feasting was taking place in and around courts (1996: 491). Feasts were essential activities that accompanied all rituals in Mesoamerica whether they were sacred or profane. We must consider the fact that because ball court designs changed over time, their functions would have served multiple purposes.

Throughout Mesoamerica, the ball for the game was made from solid rubber that was created by mixing the latex from the rubber tree and the root of a specific plant. The ball weighed eight to nine pounds, and could only be struck with the thighs, hips, knees, and in some games, with the elbow. In the games of the Antilles, women were also allowed to use their fists and men could propel the ball the ball with their shoulder. The only body parts that

players could not use were the hands or feet.

The Classic Period Game

During the Classic Period the game had taken on a different form. Ball court architecture appeared throughout southern Maya regions and human sacrifice became a critical element of the game in most areas. At El Tajín, sacrificial ballgame scenes were displayed on ball court reliefs, but never the actual act of play. In the South Ball Court are images of sacrifice and the ritual drinking of *pulque*. To this ritual drink were related a great multitude of gods that corresponded to the family of the *centzontotochtin*, the “400 rabbits,” also known as the gods of *pulque* (Gonçalves de Lima, 1956: 32). In Aztec culture Mayahuel was the goddess of *pulque*, who was portrayed in diverse sixteenth century codices next to or inside a maguey plant (*ibid.*, 133).

For the Maya peoples, the ballgame symbolized life and death and rebirth of the maize plant. This is represented in the legend of the *Popul Vuh*, a sixteenth century Quiché Maya poem that records how a ritual ballgame came to influence these occurrences and the creation of life itself (Cohodas, 1975: 109). In a particular episode, the Hero Twins, Hunaphpú and Xbalanqué, play a game against the Lords of the Underworld and eventually defeat them. The myth of the Hero Twins was reenacted on ball courts through death and rebirth of the sacrificial victim. The ball court therefore became a place of transition, a *liminal* stage between life and death.

Although the Hero Twins became the most important personages of the Classic Maya ballgame, they are rarely depicted on Classic ballgame scenes,

with the exception of the Copán ball court that represents Vucub Caquix (Seven Macaw) holding Hunahpú's severed arm. Another interesting aspect of the Maya ballgame is that the game generally was depicted in scenes carved in stone reliefs as taking place near a flight of stairs, but never on an actual court. In a few ballgames scenes, the heads of decapitated ballplayers are shown rolling down the stairs, perhaps used as playing balls.

Teotihuacán is a Classic period site that contains no actual ball court structures, but we know that the ballgame was practiced there because the murals at the Tepantitla Complex display images of the game and its ballplayers. The murals at Tepantitla show different versions of the game and also its emphasis on human sacrifice. Uriarte has postulated that the game may have taken place on the Avenue of the Dead, the road that leads visitors to the pyramids of the Sun and Moon (2006).

The Post-classic Period Game

By the time the game reached the Aztec capital, it had transformed into a pretext for gambling and political power. Men who played the game were wagering all their goods, including their homes and wives. The game was an exclusive activity of elite males, and although women were not able to play, they were the main producers of the fine woven mantles that were given to the ballgame winners. They also participated in ritual dances and were in charge of the feasts that followed games. These activities may seem marginal compared to those performed by male players, but they were as just vital to the game's ritual significance.

The association of ballgame goddesses with the game's religious and ritual themes also indicates women's importance in the ballgame ritual. While there were several female ballgame deities, I have only discussed the ones I suspect played a fundamental role in the game's religious significance. The four goddesses that I discussed in the chapter on Ethnohistory were lunar and earth deities that represented not only the important role that the earth played in the life of the indigenous people, but also fertility and the renewal of vegetation. Through the death of one of the ballgame goddesses, Coyolxauhqui, all life began when she confronted her brother Huitzilopochtli in the *teotlachco*, the sacred ball court. Her death resulted in her transformation into the Moon, and her brother became the Sun, the most powerful astral body in Mesoamerican religions.

Huitzilopochtli became the Aztecs' tutelary Sun god who killed his sister and brothers, the *centzonhuitznahua*, with his *xiuhcōatl* "turquoise serpent" that emitted solar rays. When the earth goddess Coatlicue miraculously gave birth to him, he was armed with this weapon. For the Aztecs, the *xiuhcōatl* symbolized terrestrial and celestial fire (Krickeberg, 1966: 134). Fearing that the sun would not rise the next day, the Aztec people offered hearts of sacrificial victims to him during the game and at monthly ritual festivals.

The Games in the Caribbean islands

Evidence of women ballplayers was also recorded outside of Mesoamerica in Hispaniola and El Rio de Orinoco. It was the Spanish friar Fernández Oviedo y Valdés who demonstrated that both men and women were

playing the game, with women playing against the men on certain occasions (1551-55). The ballgame outfits used by women were not like those worn in certain parts of Mesoamerica, since women who had not yet married wore no clothes when they played, but the *cacicas*, or principal women, did use long petticoats reaching “from their waist to the ground.” If they were younger female ballplayers they utilized a short apron-like garment reaching the thigh.

The ball had to be propelled with the hips, thighs, head, and shoulders, but never with the hands. Las Casas also noted that women had played the game in Hispaniola, but they only played against each other (1909, 1967). While Fernández Oviedo y Valdés mentioned that players could only use the above body parts, Las Casas stated that women could hit the ball with their knees and closed fists.

In the 18th century the Jesuit priest Jose Gumilla (1745), described a similar game among the Otomac peoples of the Orinoco River in Venezuela where women were also prominent participants. The difference between these games and those recorded by Las Casas and Fernández Oviedo y Valdés is that women used a wooden mallet to strike the ball. This resembles current ballgame practices in Michoacán, where young girls play a version similar to the Otomac game with a wooden club and a burning rubber ball.

According to Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés, the ballgame was played on occasions when a ruler had to make an important decision. Sacrifice was used as a form of reward for the winning player. Both Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés and Las Casas mentioned in their accounts that there was a special

place reserved for game playing. These spaces—called *bateys* or *plazas*—were next to the chief's house. Court remains were also found in eastern Cuba, Turks and Caicos, Hispaniola, Mona, and Puerto Rico. Although there is no archaeological evidence in Jamaica, ethnohistorical sources demonstrate that the Sub-Taino Indians who lived there at the time of the conquest also played a rubber ballgame (Alegria, 1983: 4).

Apparently, there were different variations of the Antillean game, and this would have determined what body parts were used. In my opinion, the reason why women were allowed to play is because the accounts suggest that the Caribbean cultures did not strongly emphasize the division of space according to gender, and that the integration of community members of both genders in public affairs was significant. Perhaps both sexes had equal access to public activities and women may have held high social positions in the Caribbean regions that would have permitted women's participation. The important thing here is to recognize that women were playing the game in these areas, which disproves all misconceived notions that they never played.

7.3 Female Ballplayer Ceramic Figurines

Evidence of women ballplayers was manifested through ceramic figurines long before the Post-classic period. In Tlatilco and Tlapacoya, the most important sites for figurine production, several figurines depict females wearing ballgame vestments. Similarly, female ballplayer ceramic figurines appeared in Xochipala, Guerrero, Tuxcacuesco, Jalisco, and Pánuco, Veracruz

displaying a more elaborate ballgame outfit than had been used in central Mexico. Female ballplayer ceramic figurines have been critical for the reconstruction of the early period games because they reveal where the game was played, and the types of ritual clothing worn by the people of the time.

Lesure has suggested that it was women who were making these female figurines, imitating the roles they played during their life cycle (2011). This task may have not been characteristic of elite women, but open to those whom the community thought important according to a more popular system of social statuses. On the same note, it is not impossible to imagine that women may have been given command of certain activities, such as figurine production, if not of certain communities where they may have had access to chiefly or other leadership roles. The active participation of women in the game would have allowed them to accentuate their importance in the community, especially in such a vital aspect of Mesoamerican social life.

According to Victor Turner, social unity, especially during the phases of ritual that concern *liminal*, or transitional states or statuses, tends to diminish the differences between the sexes in matters of dress, decoration, and behavior (1986). Thus it might be expected that male and female ballplayer figurines would demonstrate similar modes of attire and decoration that relate to the ball game as a social or religious rite of passage performed in connection with puberty or calendrical ceremonies, for example.

Other than playing the game, corporeal decoration served to accentuate the female ballplayers' affiliation with a specific group, age, class, or role. As

vehicles of identity construction, dress, the body, and the self are perceived simultaneously as indivisible parts of a complete social identity (Fisher and Di Paolo, 2003: 228). Body decoration or modification was most popular among the cultures of central Mexico and the Gulf Coast. In the Huastec region of Veracruz, for example, a large number of sculptures and figurines display what appears to be corporeal decoration, scarification, or tattooing. This is particularly evident in the ballplayer figurines from Pánuco.

The equal number of men and women in figural sculpture and other media indicates that members of both sexes may have held prominent statuses in the Huastec culture. Women's importance was similarly attested in Tlatilco by the amount of offerings that were found in the burials of women. A few scholars have even suggested that the number of female figurines made in this area point to a matrilineal society (Piña Chán, 1952, 1955). However, Rodríguez-Shadow argues that these data are inconclusive, because feminine social contexts in early Mesoamerican societies are difficult to trace (2007: 60).

It has also been suggested that their abundance in archaeological finds indicates that the figurines were used for fertility rites (Follensbee, 2000; Tibón, 1967). As Ann Cyphers notes, "the role of women as highly visible actors in the dynamics of social-hierarchy formation and accentuation has been greatly obscured by 'fertility cult' explanation" (1993: 216). In iconographic studies, female figurines are rarely examined in light of the roles women played in ancient Mesoamerican societies. Part of this flawed assessment has to do with the fact that most of Mesoamerican history has been written by males who gave

little consideration to women's statuses and roles (Brown, 1983: 118; Klein, 2001: 364). As far as female ballplayer ceramic figurines are concerned, there have been relatively few studies that have centered on the roles of women in the ancient game. In particular, the female ballplayer figurines found by Neiderberger Betton in the early 1970's remain unidentified as far as their relationship to the ballgame is concerned.

The figurines in this study seem to catalogue the appropriate appearance cues and behaviors for females of different ages. They also demonstrate that women's lives were strongly structured by social notions of what gender is and how the individual is gendered (Claassen and Joyce, 1997: 7). For Joyce, the female figurines from Tlatilco are testimony to the bodily incorporation of several kinds of differences like age, sex, seniority, and social role. Each is a component of the emerging definition of socially marked young adult statuses and female genders. In *Bodies that Matter* (1993), Butler argued strongly for the decoupling of gender from the "natural" body, suggesting that gender is a distinct mode of self-representation. With this in mind, I believe that it was through ballgames that gender distinctions could be minimized when girls and women participated in certain types of ritual and social activities.

These figurine samples imply that gender ideologies were neither fixed nor proscribed in the same manner, either across Mesoamerican societies or within them. Indeed, as Miranda Stockett has pointed out, contrary to the expectations of gender hierarchy and complementarity, other identities repeatedly took precedence over gender in the enactment and experience of

the social lives of the Mesoamerican peoples (2005: 573). Whether ancient indigenous women played the game for ritual or as a form of entertainment, their presence points to their important role as social agents.

What is ultimately represented in the female ballplayer figurines is a symbolic manifestation of women's appearance and the roles they played in society. Ancient female ballplayers were searching for a sense of belonging; a way in which they could express their importance out in the public realm. This is the same factor that I feel motivated women to play the game in contemporary times, since they are restricted in their participation in all public activities. We should treat these female figurines as manifestations of the activities that were available to young girls in the broader social world, perhaps including some that were not necessarily open to women of higher statuses.

The presence of women in both the pre-Hispanic and modern game says something important about the manner in which social and gender relationships were established in Mexican communities. It also comments on how Mexican society has either transcended or incorporated the teachings of the Spanish and their emphasis on gender division. The study of these gender ideologies brings us a step closer to comprehending their overall integration in the reconstruction of Mexican culture.

7.4 Conclusion and Reflections

The female ceramic ballplayer figurines discovered in the last forty years demonstrate that long ago women had established a meaningful place in

Mesoamerican society. As Mesoamerican scholars we are aware of the game's symbolism and social significance, but rarely do we consider that women were also players in this important ritual. Had it not been for scholars like Douglas Bradley, and in a sense Michael Whittington for documenting images of women ballplayers, the participation of women in the ancient game would have remained in the dark.

In Mesoamerican studies women have generally been perceived as having the same types of roles across the area's diverse regions and periods of time, as if their social identities were uniform, and nothing changed over time. For any historical reconstruction, the examination of the social relations and traditions of societies is important, as well as the cultural meanings embedded within the rituals women were practicing. We must be cautious in utilizing historical models that present the game as an exclusively male activity. As authors marginalize the study of figurines—including the majority that portray women—from their analysis of the archaeological record, they exhibit indifference toward the information they may provide about social statuses and women's lives.

Whether private or public, ballgames between women, or women and men, would have promoted a mutual association between teams, sponsors, and villages that would have given rise to new social formations over time. At this point, we can no longer underestimate women's roles and contributions if we are to fully comprehend how social agencies were established and organized in past indigenous societies. Ignoring their context and meaning will leave us with

a partial view of history structured by conventional gender thinking.

In recent times Mexican women have gained more access to the public arena, yet it will be long before they are granted the same respect as their male counterparts as prominent competitors in athletic activities. Existing social constructs of femininity and masculinity have played a key role in determining access, levels of participation, and benefits from participation in games, particularly the *ulama* sport. Young girls in rural communities have encountered social pressures related to becoming good mothers and wives, and for that matter they have often chosen to play games that are widely viewed as more suitable for their gender. Additionally, the game of *ulama* simply does not provide girls with the same level of recognition for athletic achievement or status among their peer group as it does for boys, especially when those who play the game are frequently criticized for lacking femininity.

Studies by Guadalupe López of women in Mexican sports have demonstrated that although their participation in sportive events has increased in recent years, the percentage of their involvement remains low. First, prejudices against women have not been completely eradicated. Second, these prejudices have influenced the politics that have been applied to sports in Mexico (1990: 12). Women may never acquire the recognition they deserve in the *ulama* sport because the participation of women in sports has never been taken seriously in comparison to male games.

For example, Mexico currently has a women's soccer team that many argue is much better than the men's. Nevertheless, the attention they receive is

so meager that some people are oblivious to its existence. In fact, most people, when questioned about the women's team, say that their game is probably played differently than the males'. Others simply dismiss the fact that women play soccer.

These attitudes toward women ballplayers reflect the same types of attitudes I encountered from some of the consultants during my interviews in Sinaloa. They are behaviors that have persisted for hundreds of years, and although there have been some changes in the last decades regarding women's participation in sports, women have a long way to go before they are treated with the same recognition as their male counterparts.

However, it is my impression that rural women are slowly changing patriarchal notions of gender, and are becoming more involved in public activities than in the past. Women's participation in the game has served as a liberating statement, a vehicle through which they can express themselves in public performance. Every woman who seeks access and active involvement in playing the game creates for herself a less restrictive consciousness that empowers her in the same respect to the meanings of activities that may follow. Although women's involvement in *ulama* can produce both negative and positive outcomes, the game can offer them such benefits as the transformation of gender norms, and the acquisition of woman's intellectual and social power.

In conclusion, I consider it important to mention that this investigation would not have been possible without the work of several anthropologists, archeologists, and ethnographers who established the basis for later

investigations. Works by Douglas E. Bradley, Michael Coe, David Joralemon, Christine Neiderberger Betton, Rosa María Reyna Robles, Eric Taladoire, María Teresa Uriarte, and Ted Leyenaar established the chronological sequences and formulated the interpretive schemes that I have been using throughout this thesis.

By introducing some of the problems that have occurred in the historical and archaeological record, this study seeks to motivate other scholars to examine the roles of women in the public sector. New research may confirm, revise, or replace the theories I have proposed. This work is a call to Mesoamerican scholars to expand the scope of our analyses of gender and sport, and to look more closely at the ritual activities assumed to be performed exclusively by males. There are still many stories to be written in regards to Mexican cultures, and the roles of women in the rubber ballgame is just one of them.

APPENDIX

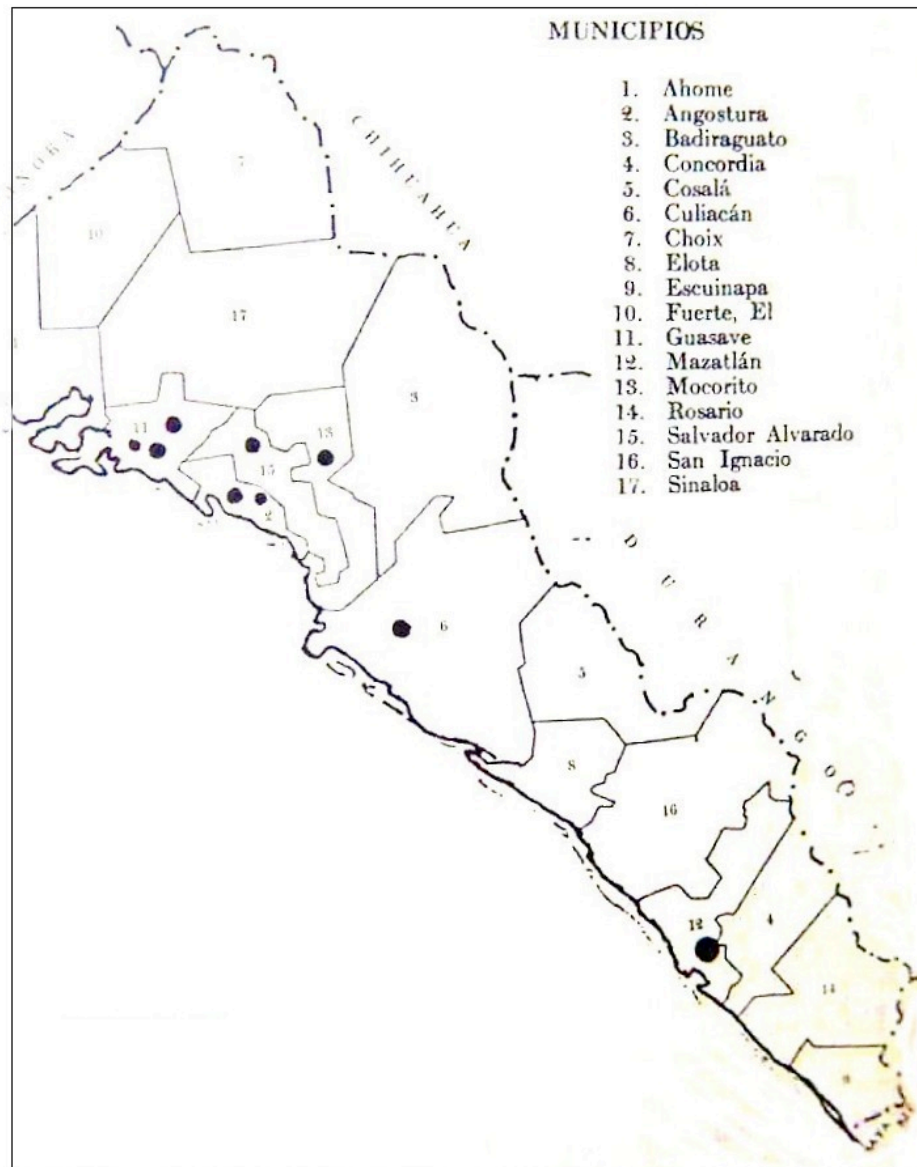


Figure 1.1 Map of the rural towns where *ulama* is played
(Courtesy of Javier Cordon, 2012)



Figure 1.2 Map of Mesoamerica showing Pre-classic regions
(De la Fuente, 2003: 49)



Figure 2.1 Pre-classic period pots (Diehl, 2004: 159)



Figure 2.2 Early ceramic female figurines from Tlatilco; Early Pre-classic period (Photo by Maria Ramos; MNAH; Arqueología Mexicana Edición Especial 34: 20)



Figure 2.3 Ceramic figurines with multiple heads and eyes; Tlatilco; Middle Pre-classic (www.clevelandart.org; Photo by Maria Ramos; MNAH)



Figure 2.4 Ceramic figurine of woman carrying a baby; Tlatilco, central Mexico; Early Pre-classic period (Pasztory, 1983: 39)



Figure 2.5 Anthropomorphic figure of a woman: Tlapacoya, central Mexico (2300 B.C.) (García-Bárcena, 2000: 17)

**Table 2.1 Chart showing figurine types and subdivisions
(after Báez-Jorge, 1988: 146).**

Early Pre-classic:	E, I, G, H, M, N, J (figurine types) (Arbolillo, Zacatenco I, Coatapec)
Middle Pre-classic:	B, F, K, D (figurine subtypes) (Zacatenco II, Copilco, San Juanico, Tlatilco)
Late Pre-classic:	C1, C2, C3, C4, F (figurine types) (Zacatenco II, Ticomán, Cuicuilco)



Figure 2.6 Transition of female figurines types (Reyna, 1971: Lamina 102; Piña Chán, 1958: Lamina 16)



Figure 2.7 Female ceramic figurines; Tlatilco, Pre-classic period (Photo by Maria Ramos; MRC)



Figure 2.8 Diverse female body types; Tlatilco, Early Pre-classic period (photo by Maria Ramos MNAH, México, D.F)



Figure 2.9 Type “D” female figurines known as “pretty ladies”; Tlatilco, Middle Pre-classic period (Photo by Maria Ramos; MNAH)



Figure 2.10 Hairdos; Tlatilco, Middle Pre-classic period (www.clevelandart.org; Coe, 1965)



Figure 2.11 Headdress and turbans worn by Tlatilco women (Reyna, 1971: Lamina 16A)

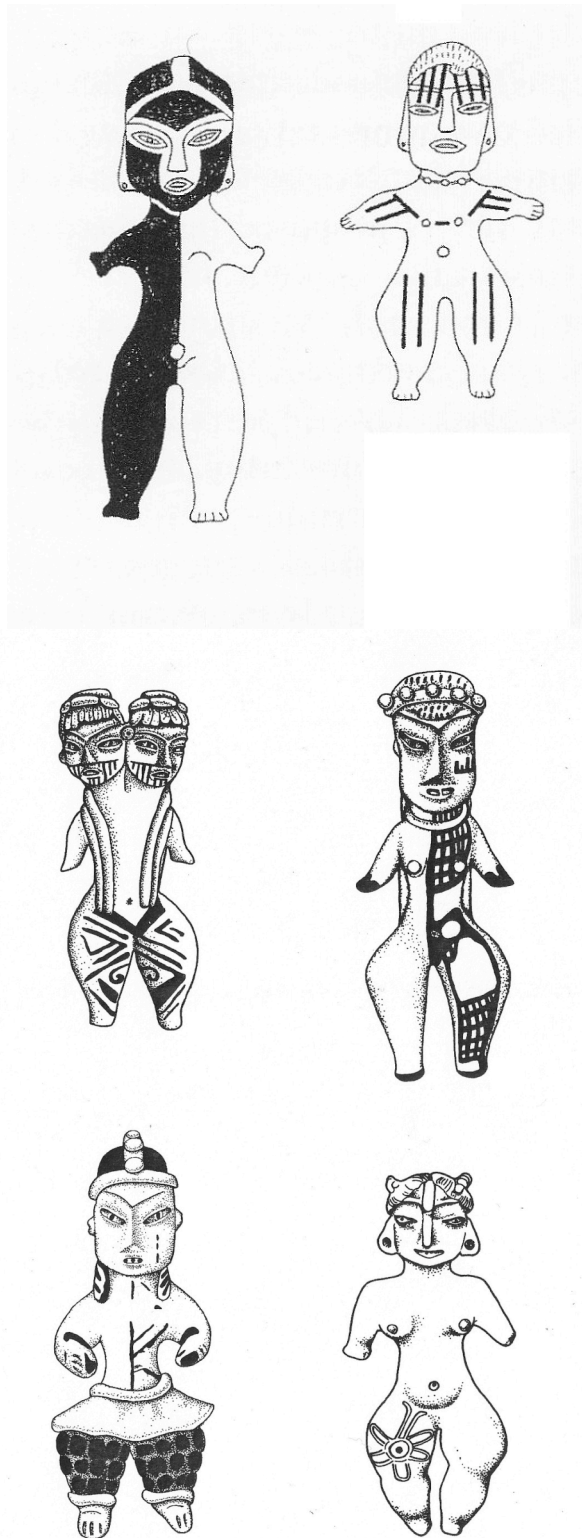
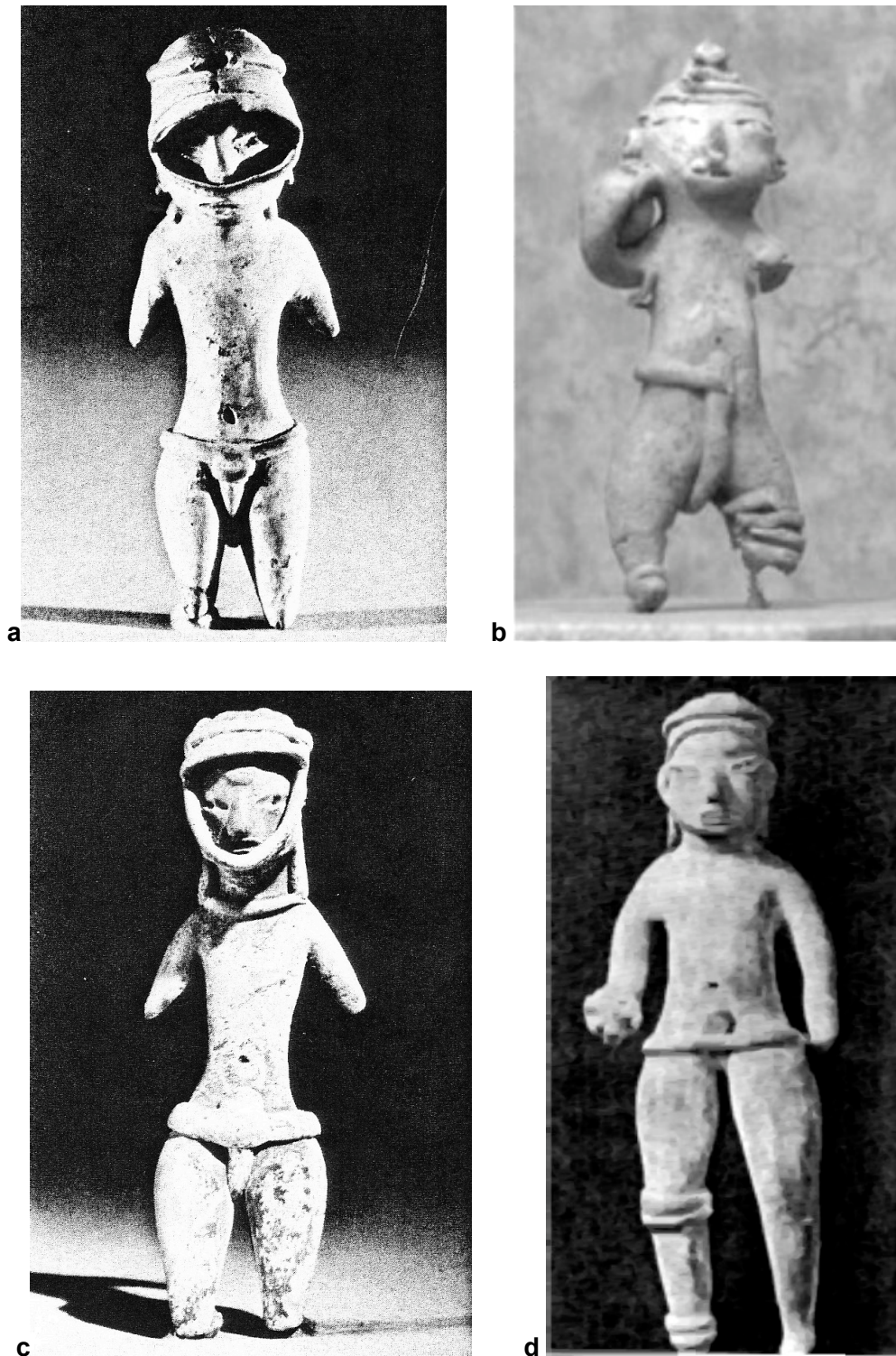


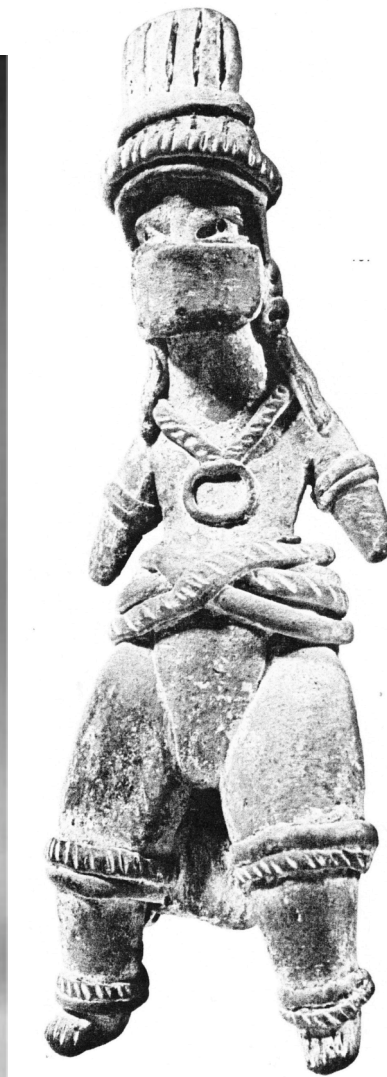
Figure 2.12 Corporal and facial decoration (Diehl, 2001; Neiderberger Betton, 1986: 458, fig. 317)



Figures 2.13a-d Male ballplayers with simple ballgame regalia (Coe, 1965:67; figs. a, c) (Piña Chán, Lamina 18) (Photo by Maria Ramos; fig. b); MNAH)



e



f

Figures 2.14e-f Male ballplayer figurines with elaborate gear; (Whittington, 2001: 143) (Coe, 1965: 67, 84)

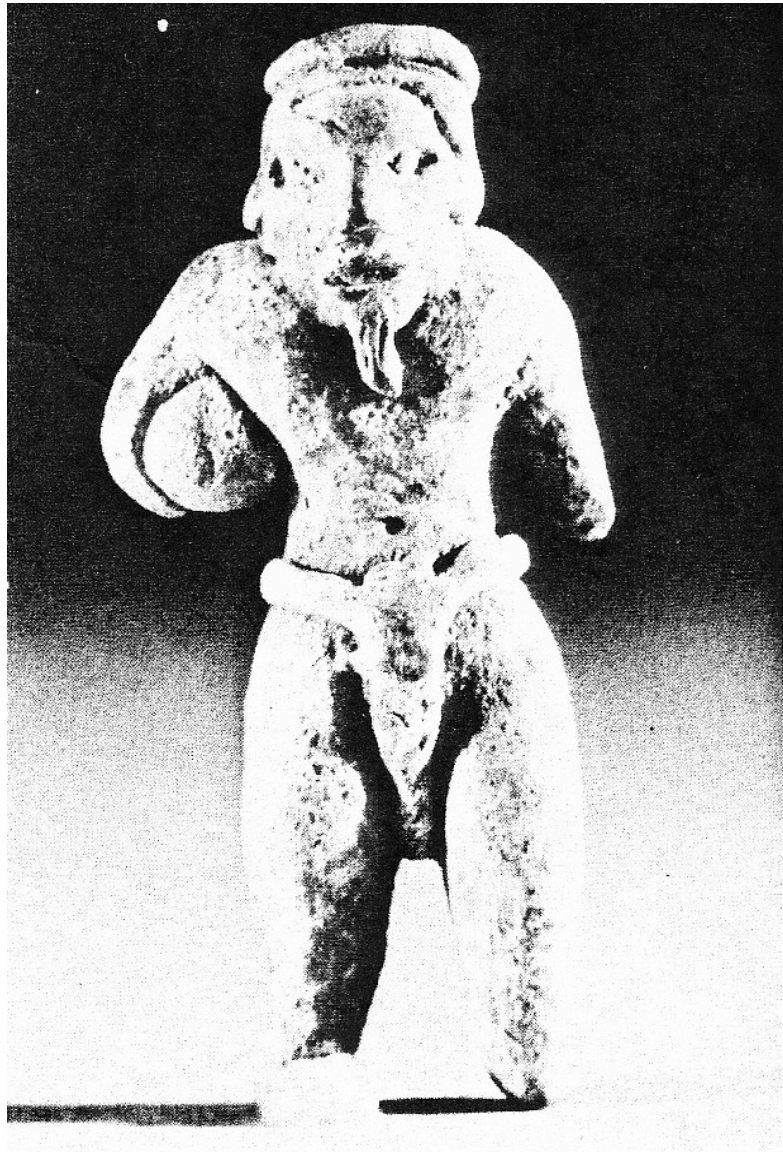
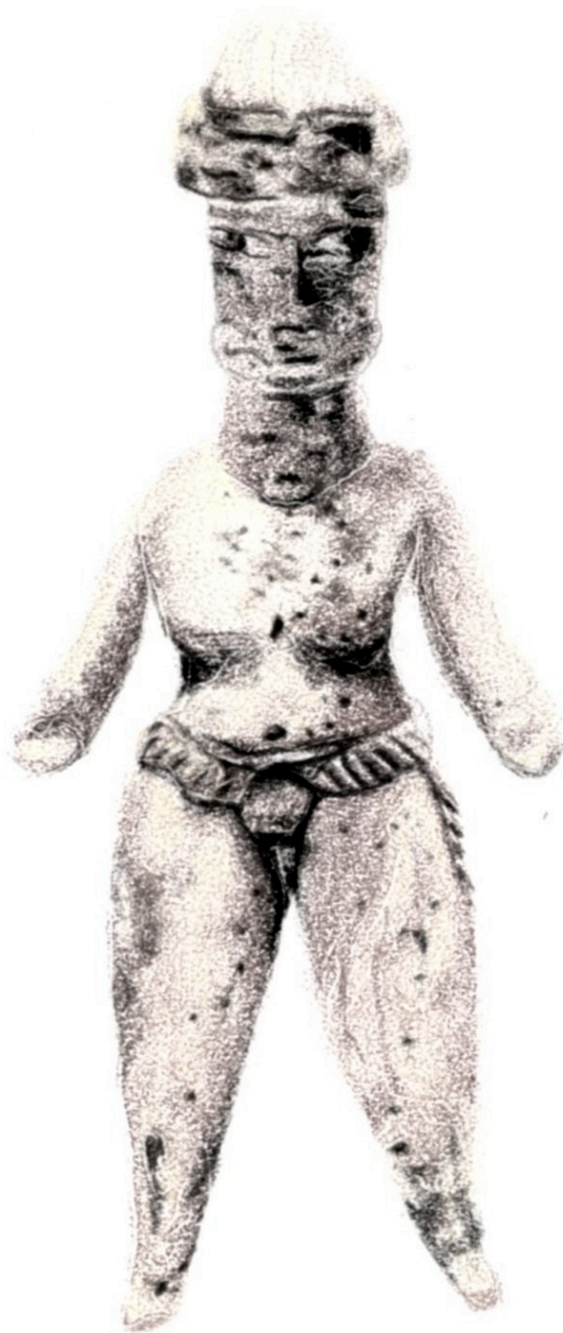
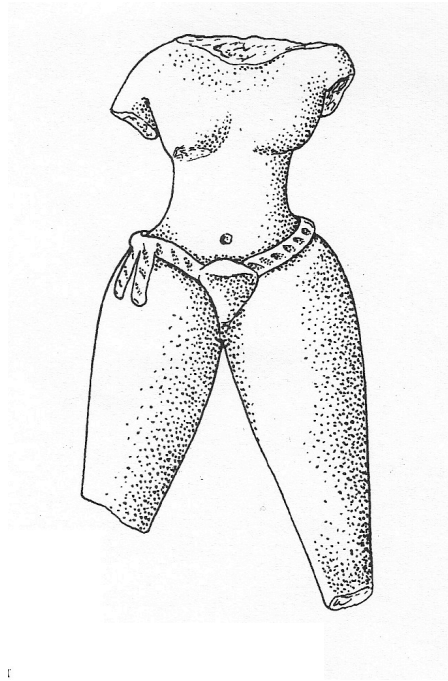
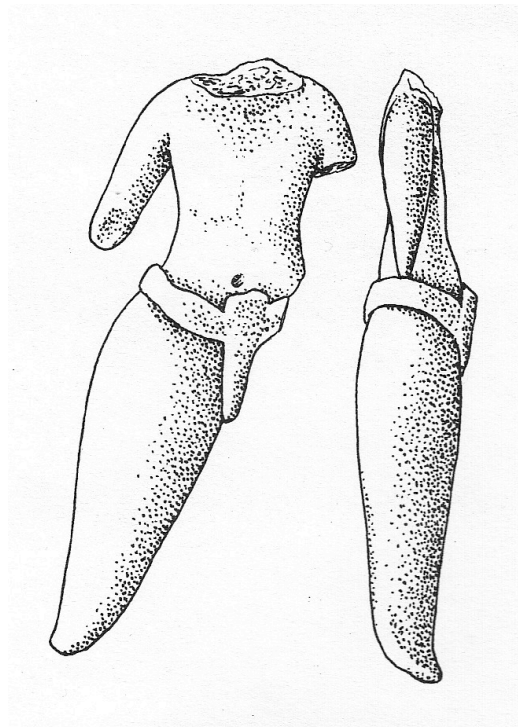


Figure 2.15 Bearded man holding a ball (Coe, 1965: 68)



a

**Figure 2.16a Female ballplayer figurines with ballgame outfit
(Drawing by Maria Ramos, after Whittington, 2001)**

**b****c**

**Figure 2.16b-c Female ballplayer figurines with ballgame outfit
(Neiderberger, 1986: 432)**



d



e



f



Figure 2.16d-f Female ballplayer figurines with ballgame outfit
(Reyna, 1971: Lamina 66)

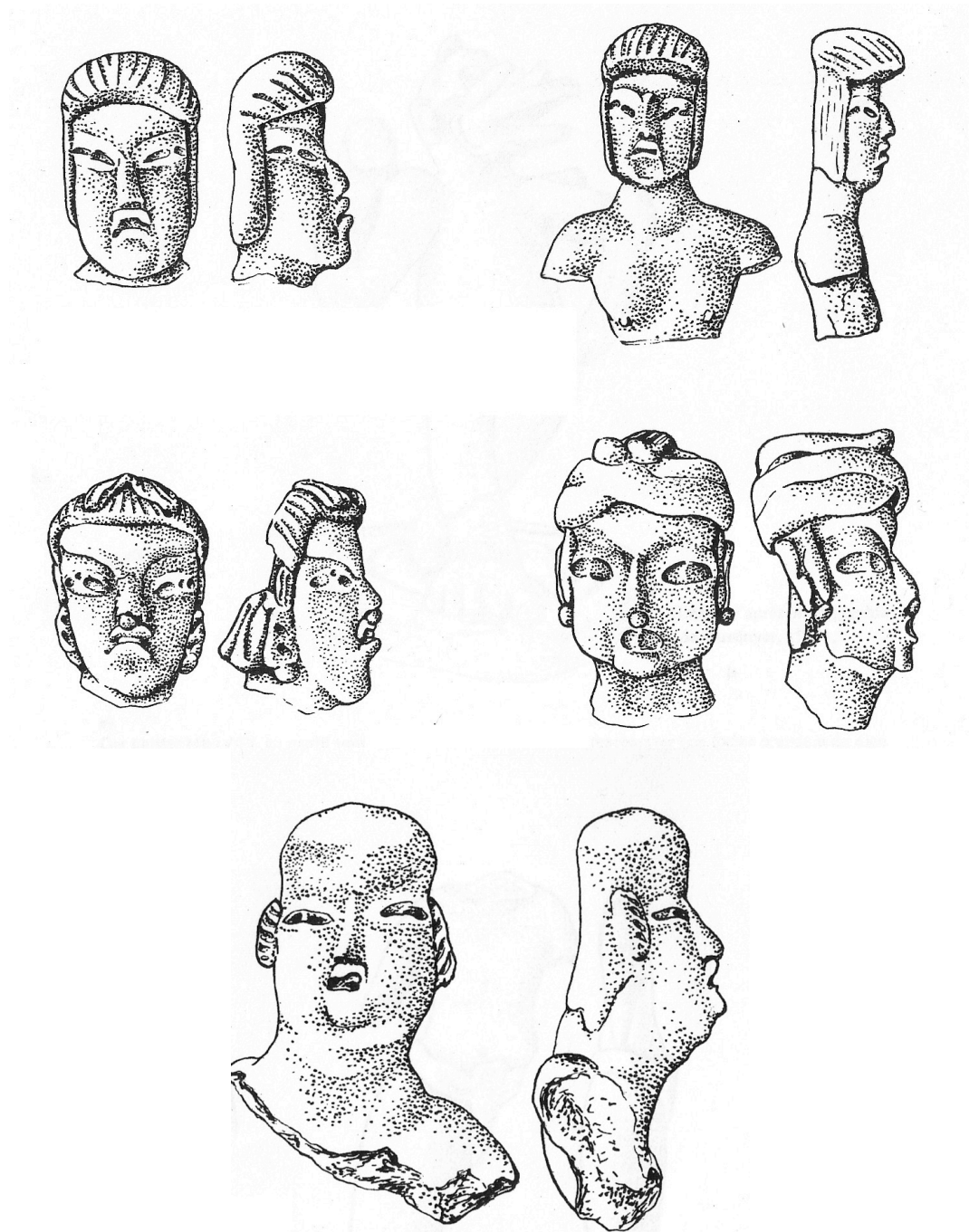


Figure 2.17 Pilli-type figurines from Tlapacoya; Central Mexico; Middle Preclassic (Neiderberger, 1986: Figs. 274, 277, 278)



Figure 2.18 Olmec personage (Photo by Maria Ramos; MAX)



Figure 2.19 Comparison of ballgame outfits of men and women (Coe, 1965: fig. 158; Bradley, 2000)



a

Figure 2.20 Ruler male ballplayers (Reyna, 1971: Lamina 67)

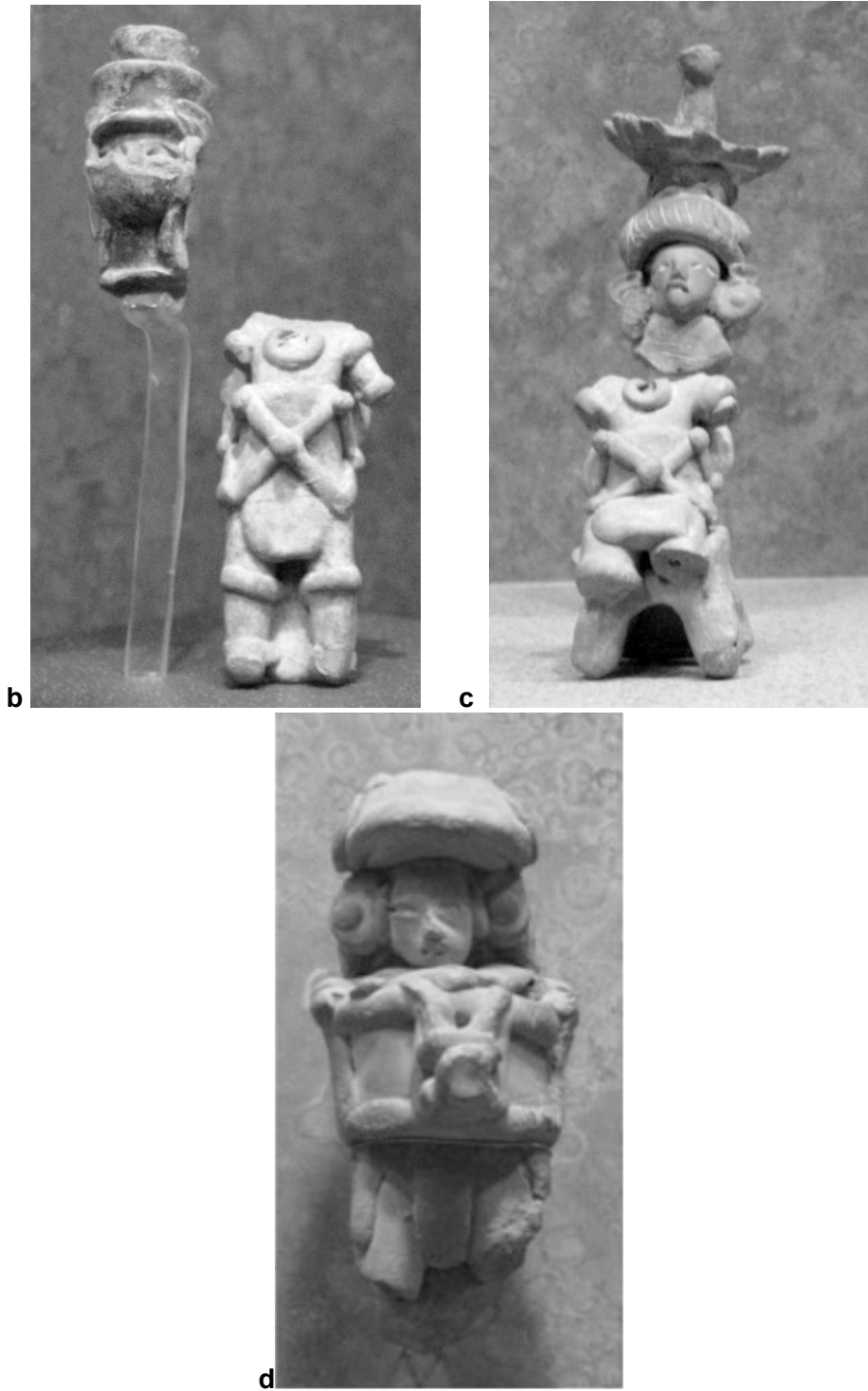


Figure 2.20 Ruler male ballplayers (Photos by Maria Ramos; MNAH)



Figure 2.21 Maya Ballplayers; Jaina, Campeche; Late Classic Period (Whittington, 2001: 228)



Figure 2.22 Maya ballplayer in ball playing pose (Whittington, 2001)



Figure 2.23 Pili-type ruler ballplayer with bichrome mask; Tlapacoya; Early Pre-classic period (Drawing by Maria Ramos, after Bradley, 2001)

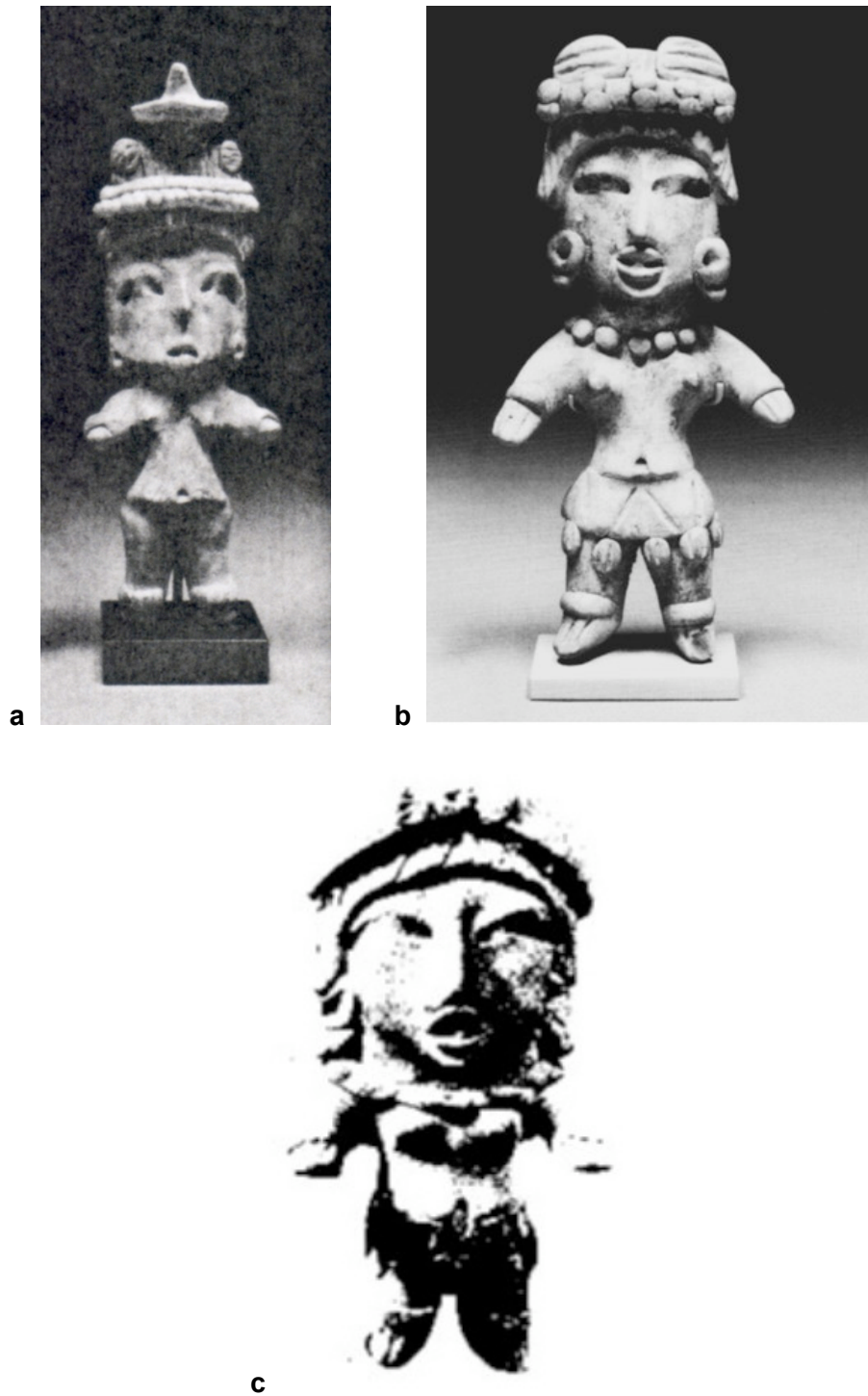


Figure 2.24 Female ballplayer figurines with hip garments (Bradley, 2000; Reyna, 1971: Lamina 6)



Figure 2.25 Pilli-type female ballplayer ceramic figurines (Drawings by Maria Ramos, after Bradley, 2000 and Whittington, 2001)

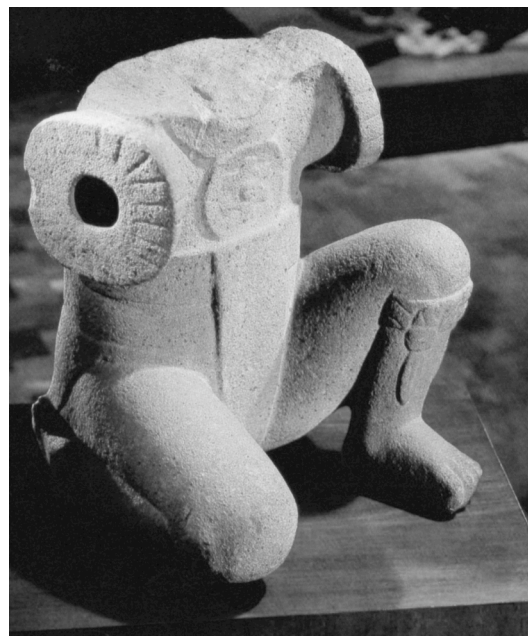
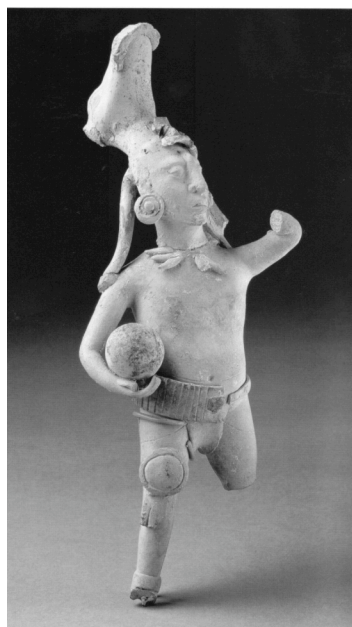


Figure 2.26 Images of male ballplayers (Whittington, 2001)



Figure 2.27 Ballplayer figurines from El Opeño, Michoacan; Early Pre-classic period (Photo by Maria Ramos; MNAH)



Figure 2.28 Model representing a ballgame scene; Colima (Stevenson, 2001)

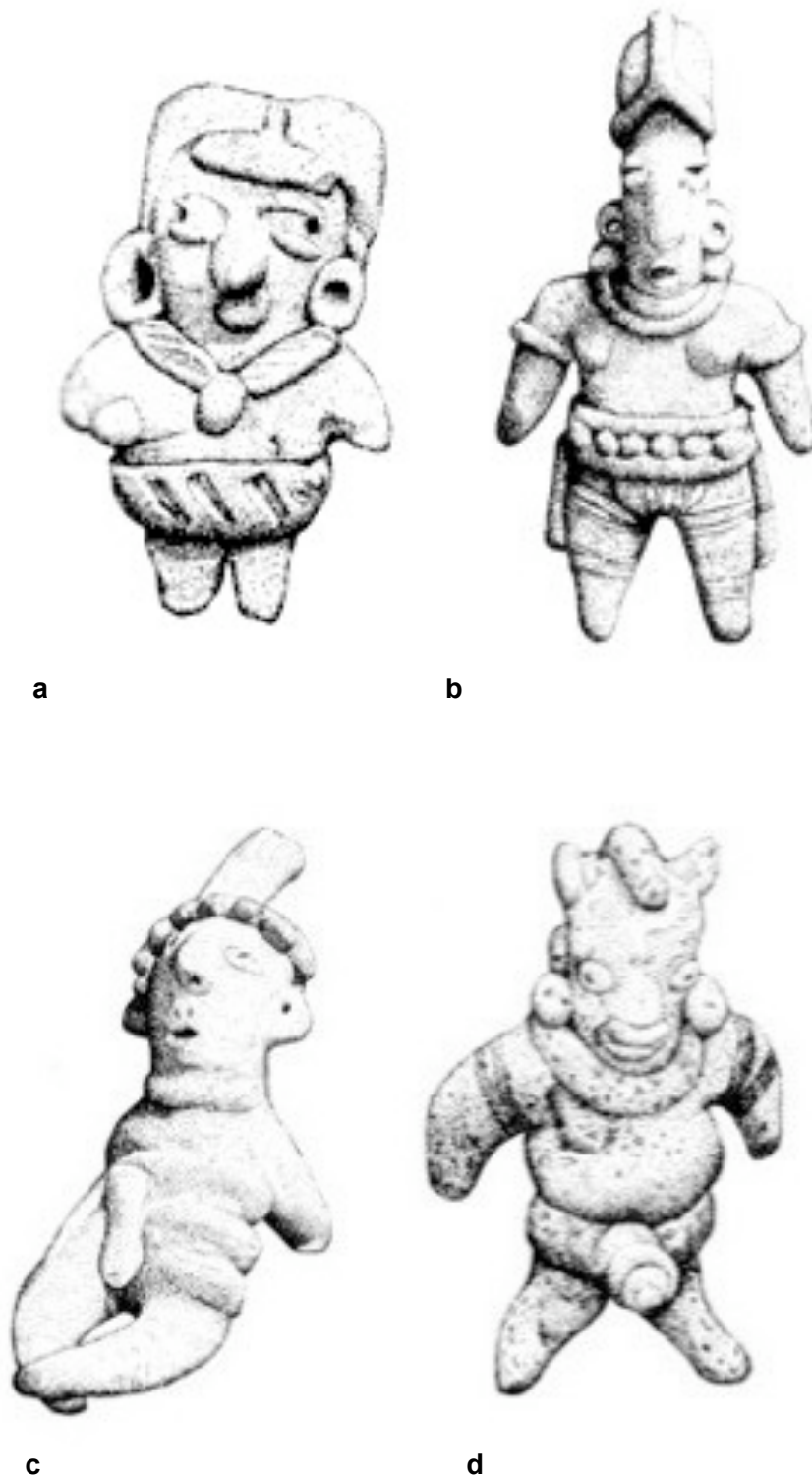


Figure 2.29 Female (a-b) and male ballplayers (c-f); Tuxcacuesco, Colima; Early Pre-classic period (Stevenson, 1998: 159)



e



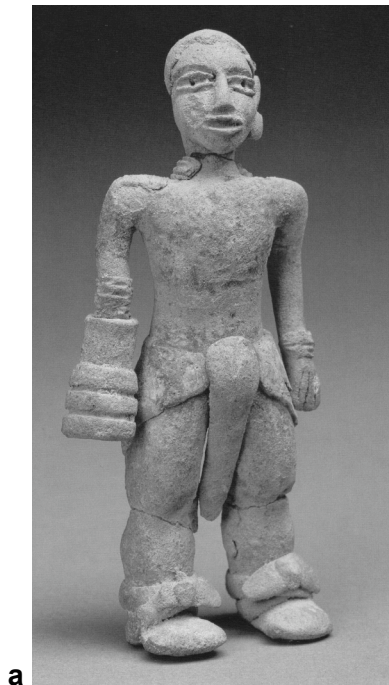
f

Figure 2.29 Male ballplayers (e-f); Tuxcacuesco, Colima; Early Pre-classic period
(www.clevelandart.org/collections; Stevenson, 1998: 159)



d

**Figure 2.30 Male ballplayers figurines from Jalisco
(Photos by Maria Ramos; MNAH)**

**a****b**

**Figure 2.31 Male ballplayers from Xochipala, Guerrero
(Whittington, 2001)**

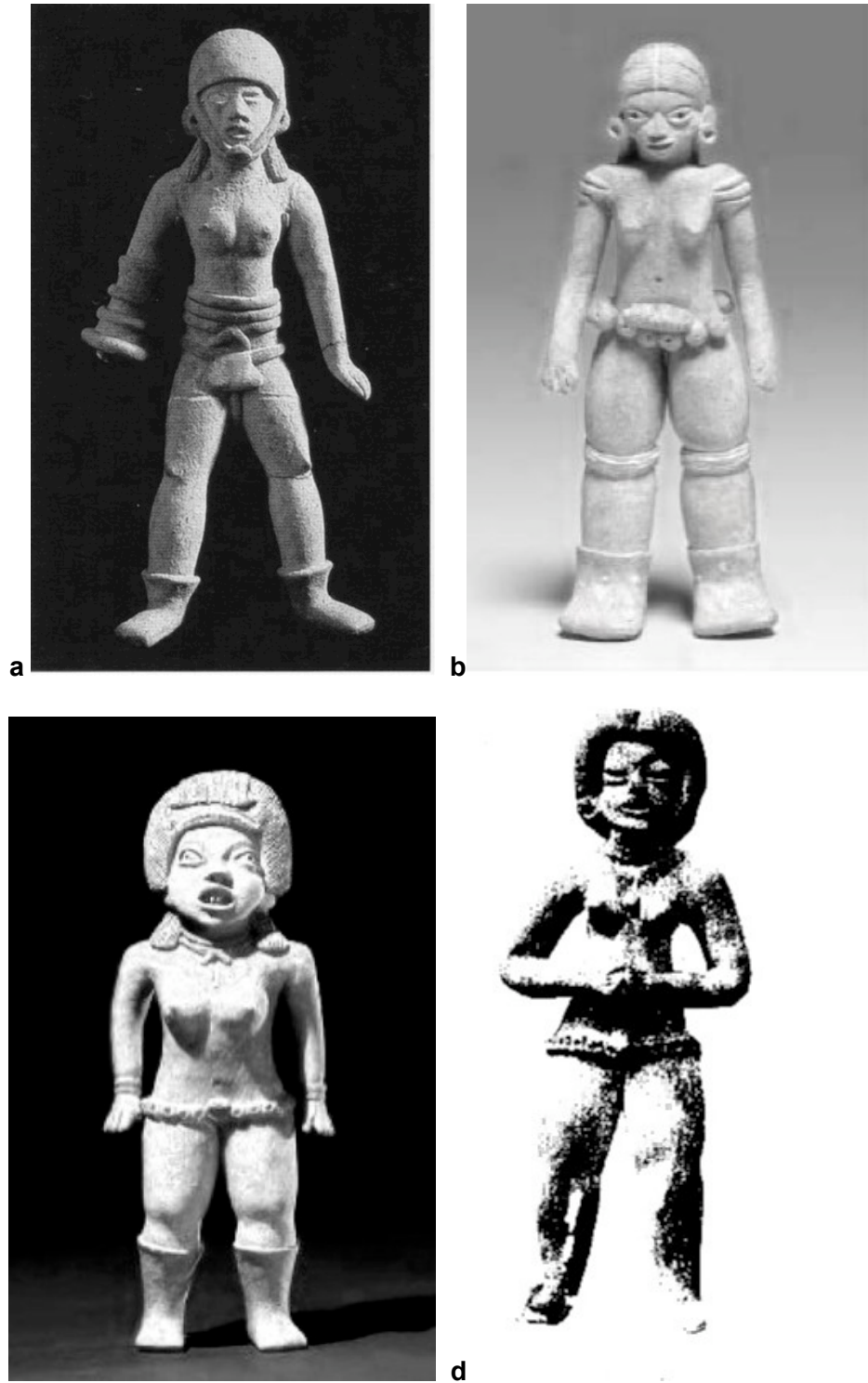


Figure 2.32 Female ballplayer figurines; Xochipala, Guerrero (Whittington, 2001; Female ballplayer from Xalitla, Guerrero; www.clevelandart.org/collections; Justin Kerr Portfolio, FAMSI: fig. 3804; Reyna, 1971: Lamina 93, pg. 356)



Figure 2.32 Female ballplayer figurines; Xochipala, Guerrero (Whittington, 2001)



Figure 2.33 Ceramic female figurines showing scarification
(www.clevelandart.org/collections; (Photo by Maria Ramos; MNAH))



Figure 2.34 The Huastec deity, Mixcóatl; *Códice Borbónico* (Arqueología Mexicana Edición Especial, No. 30, 2009: 77)



**Figure 2.35 Tlazoltéotl, the goddess of filth and lust
(Codex Borgia, 1993)**

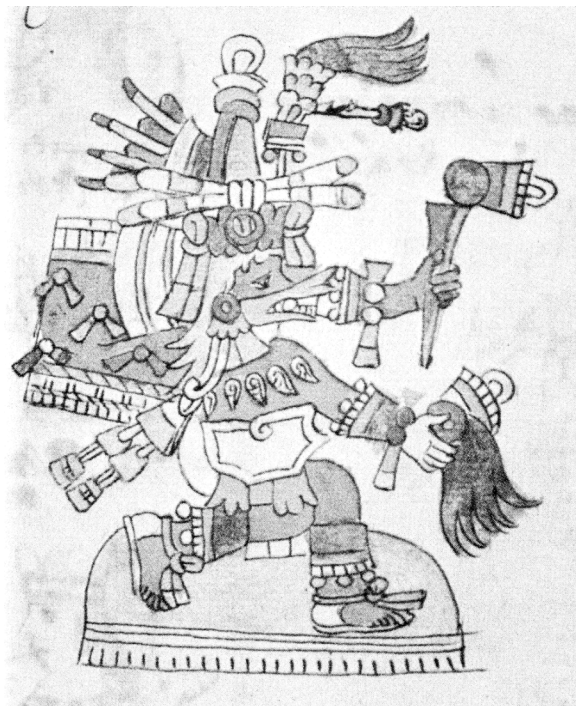


Figure 2.36 The god of wind Ehécatl-Quetzalcóatl (Arqueología Mexicana Edición Especial, No. 30, 2009: 47)



Figure 2.37 Ceramic figurines from the Huastec region (Photo by Maria Ramos; MAPRT)



Figure 2.38 Ceramic figurines with dark spots on their mouths (Photo by Maria Ramos; MNAH)



**Figure 2.39 Pánuco “C Type” female ballplayer ceramic figurines
(Drawing by Maria Ramos, after Whittington, 2001; Whittington, 2001)**



**Figure 2.40 Representation of a female ballplayer inside a *yugo*;
Palma Sola, Veracruz; 600-900 A.D.
(Photo by Maria Ramos; MAX)**



Figure 2.41a-b Ballplayer figurines with painted hip garment (Drawing by Maria Ramos, after Whittington, 2001; Photo by Maria Ramos; MAX)



Figure 2.41c-d Ballplayer figurines with painted hip garments (Photos by Maria Ramos, MAPMRT)



Figure 2.41e Dulce playing Arm-ulama (Photo by Mario Davila, 2003)

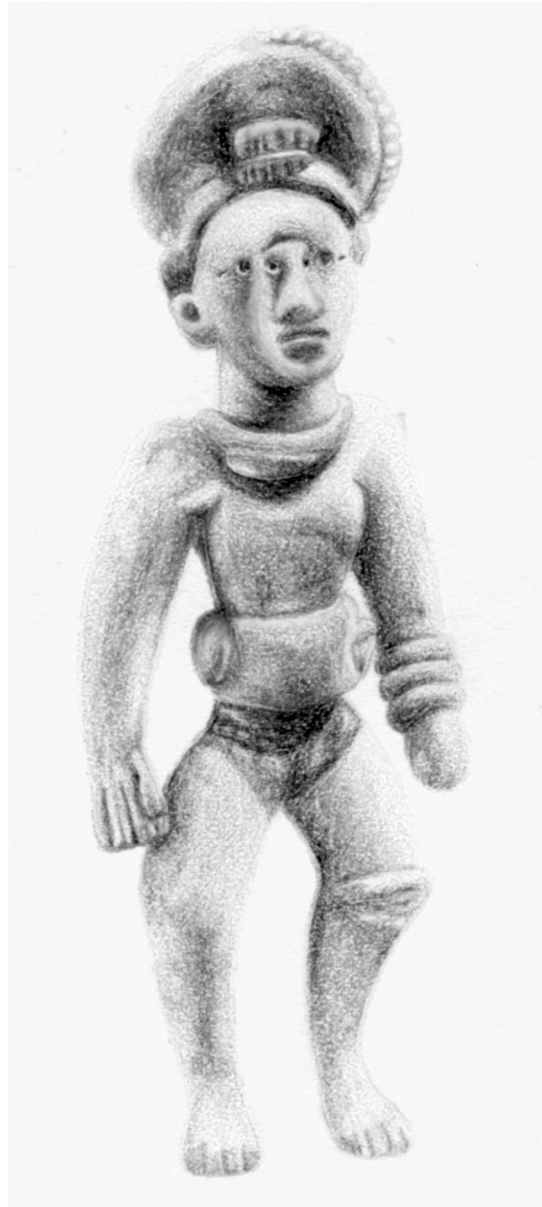


f

Figure 2.41f Ballplayer ceramic figurine from Pánuco (Photo by Maria Ramos, MAPMRT)



Figure 2.41g-h Female ballplayers from Pánuco
(Photos by Maria Ramos, MAX warehouse)



**Figure 2.42a Ballplayer figurines with ballgame yoke
(Drawing by Maria Ramos, after Whittington, 2001)**



Figure 2.42b-c Ballplayer figurines with yoke
(Photo by Maria Ramos; MNAH; Whittington, 2001)



Figure 2.42d-e Ballplayer figurines with ballgame yoke
(Photo by Maria Ramos; MAX warehouse)



Figure 2.42f-g Ballplayer figurines with ballgame yoke
(Photo by Maria Ramos; MAX; MNAH)



h

**Figure 2.42h Male ballplayer figurine with ballgame yoke
(Photo by Maria Ramos, MAPMRT)**



**Figure 2.43 Ballplayers performing in Cancún (Photo courtesy of Efrén Lizárraga,
2004)**



Figure 2.44 “Traditional” ballgame outfit (Photos by Maria Ramos; MAPMRT; Durán, 1971)

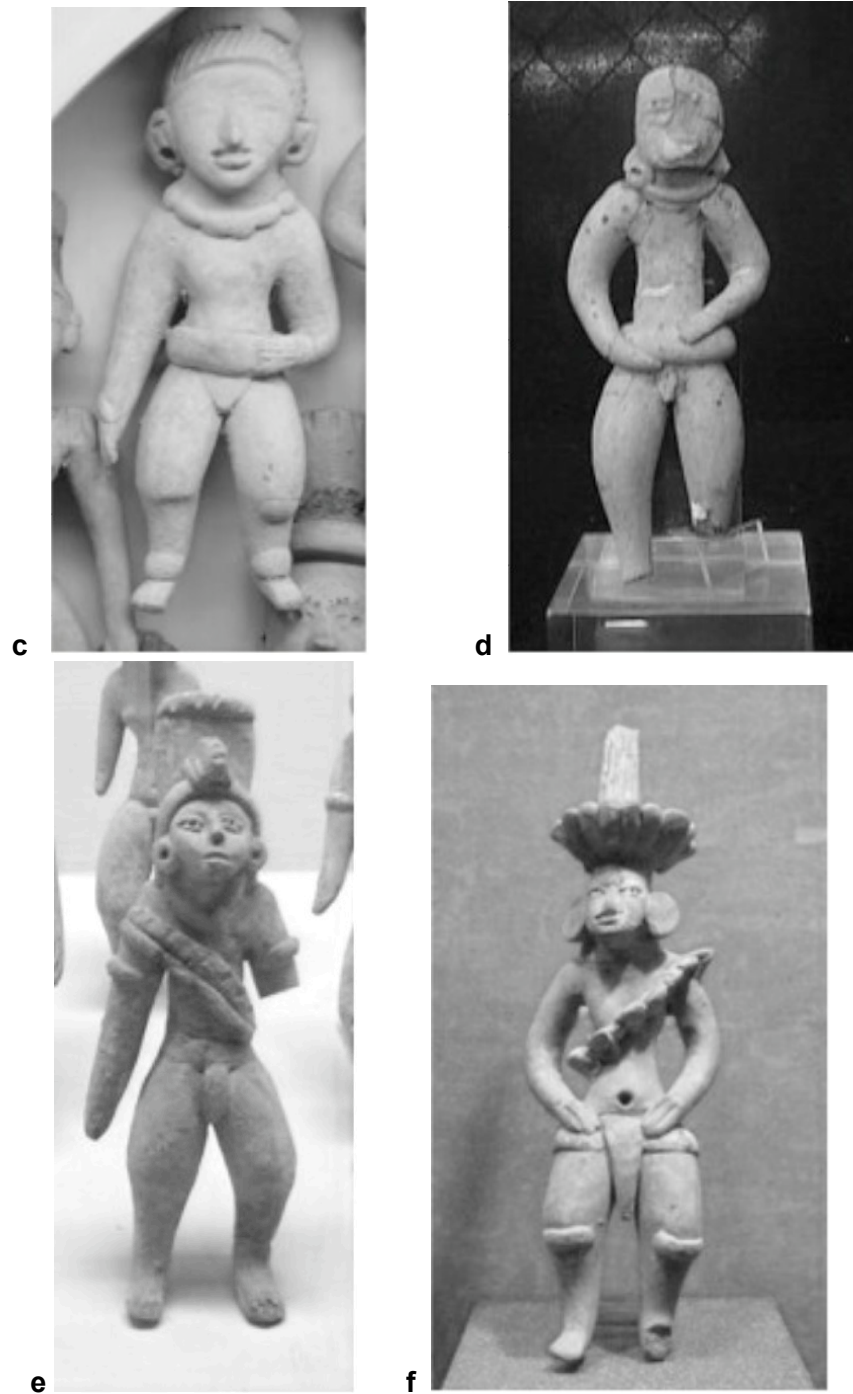


Figure 2.44c-f “Traditional” ballgame outfit (Photos by Maria Ramos, MAPMRT; MNAH; MAX)



Figure 2.44g-h “Traditional” ballgame outfit (Whittington, 2001; Photo by Maria Ramos, MNAH)

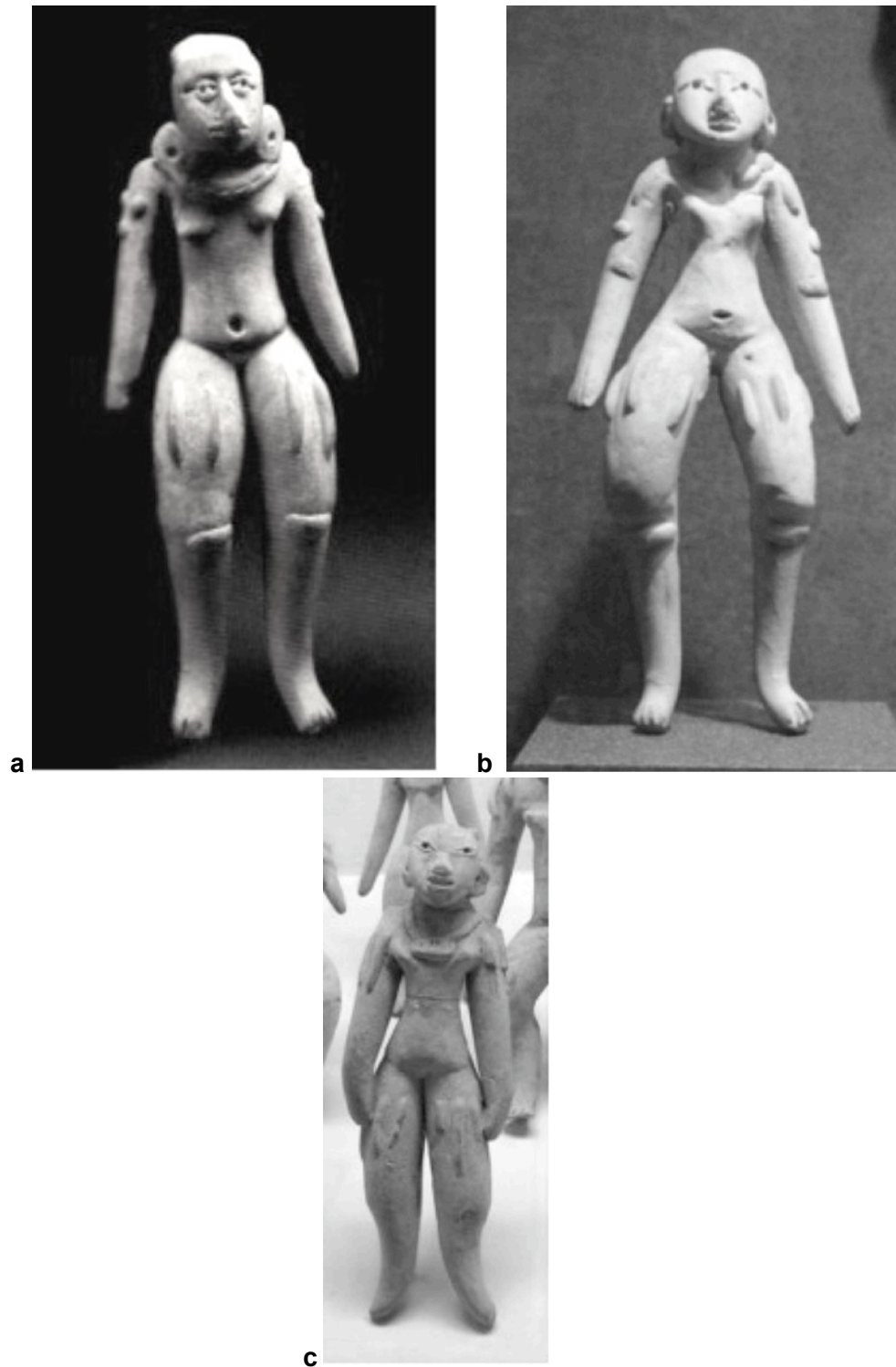


Figure 2.45a-c Ballplayers with no hip garment (Whittington, 2001; Photos by Maria Ramos; MNAH; MAPRT)



Figure 2.45d-e Ballplayers with no hip garment (Photos by Maria Ramos; MAX)



**Figure 3.1 Ballplayer subjugating a captive
(Diehl, 2000)**



**Figure 3.2 Male ruler ballplayer figurine wearing a buccal mask
(Drawing by Maria Ramos, after Bradley, 2000)**



Figure 3.3 Statues of Colossal Heads (Photos by Maria Ramos; MAX; MNAH).

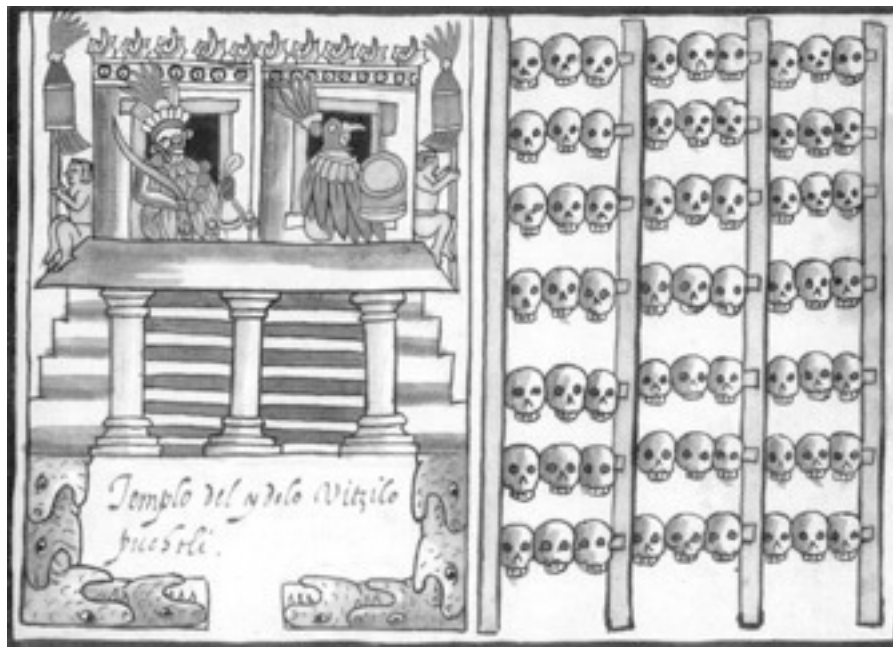


Figure 3.4 *Tzompantli*, pre-Hispanic skull rack (Sahagún, 1961).

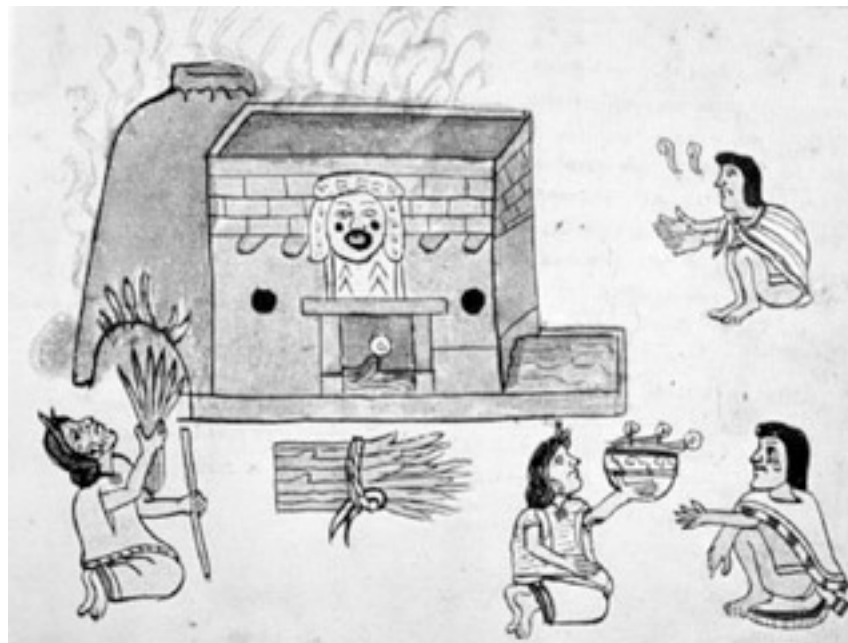


Figure 3.5 The *temazcalli* (Sahagún, 1961).



Figure 3.6 *Tlachtemalacatl*, ball court ring; Chichén Itzá (Whittington, 2001:101)



Figure 3.7 Common I-shaped court; Monte Albán, Oaxaca
(Photo by Maria Ramos)



Figure 3.8 A ceramic ball court model from Ixtlán del Rio (Stevenson, 1998: 164)

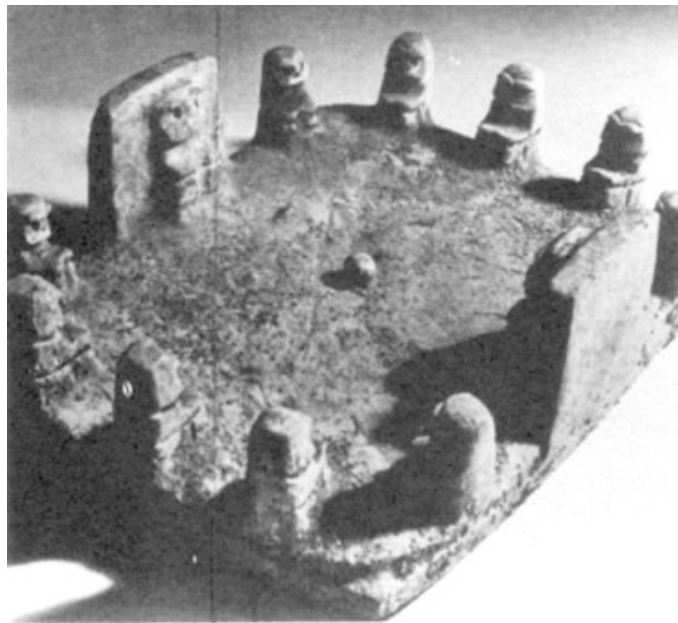


Figure 3.9 Ball court model from Colima (Von Winning, 1996: 183)



Figure 3.10 The offering of a ball (Codex Borgia, 1983; Pl. 14)



Figure 3.11 Seated ballplayer from Jalisco (Stevenson, 1998)



**Figure 3.12 Model of a ball court; Ixtlán del Río style; Yale University
(Stevenson, 1998: 163)**



Figure 3.13 Glyphs representing the verb “to play ball”
(Friedel and Schele, 1993: 328)

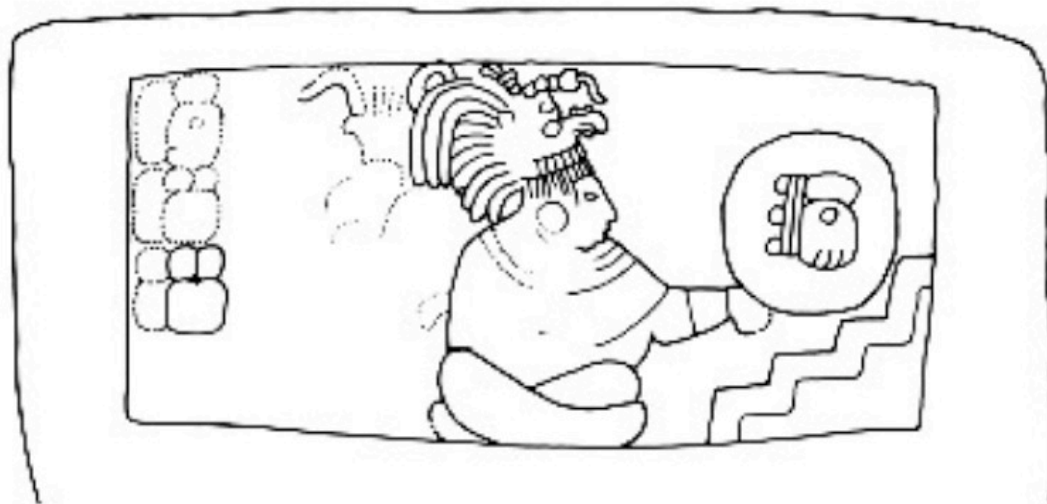


Figure 3.14 Maya queen putting the ball in play (Freidel, Schele and Parker, 1993: 356)



Figure 3.15 Classic stone *yugos* from Veracruz
(Photos by Maria Ramos; MNAH)



Figure 3.16 Monument No. 1 Bilbao, Guatemala (Hellmuth, 1992: 188)



Figure 3.17 Ballgame relief panel showing Maya ballplayer (Schele and Miller, 1986: 263)

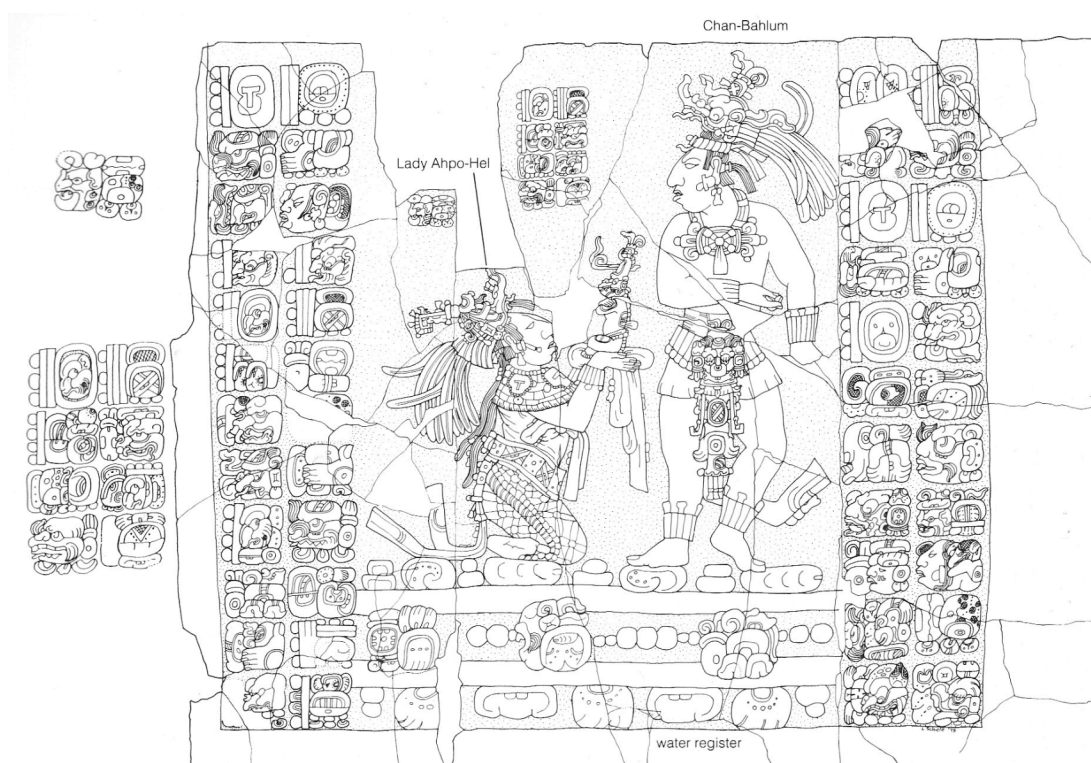


Figure 3.18 Palenque King Kan-Balam (Schele and Miller, 1986: 272)



Figure 3.19 Ceremonial *hachas* (ballgame axes); Central Veracruz (Solís, 1998: 96)



Figure 3.20 *Palmas* with decorative elements; Central Veracruz (500-900 A.D.) (Solís, 1998: 95)



Figure 3.21 Ballgame scene taking place in the Underworld; Oaxaca, Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Whittington, 2001: 189)

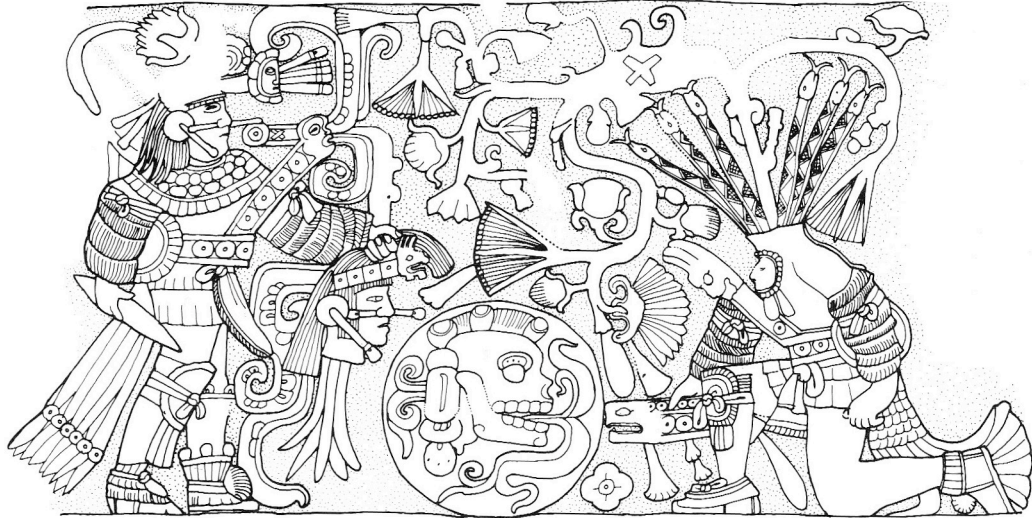
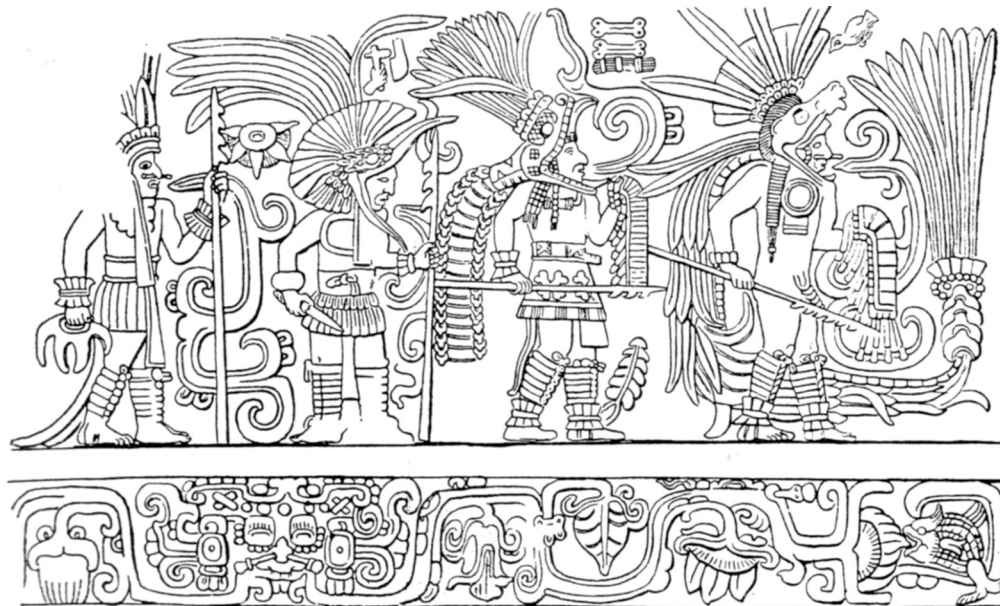


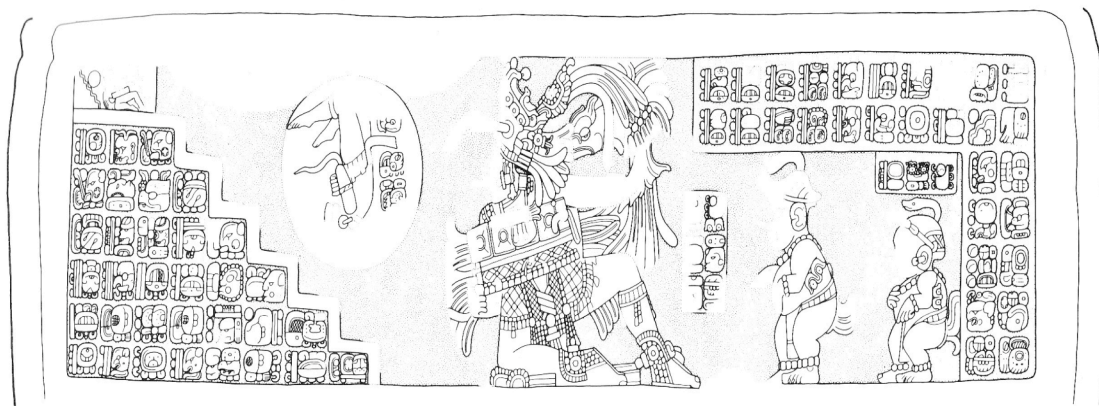
Figure 3.22a Ball court relief at Chichén Itzá (Schele and Miller, 1986: 244)



**Figure 3.22b Court panel from El Aparicio, Veracruz
(Photo by Maria Ramos; MAX)**



**Figure 3.23 Chichén ball court relief depicting warriors; rear wall of Hall E
(Seler, 1998: 104)**



**Figure 3.24 Ballgame ritual taking place near a staircase
(Schele and Miller, 1986: 250)**

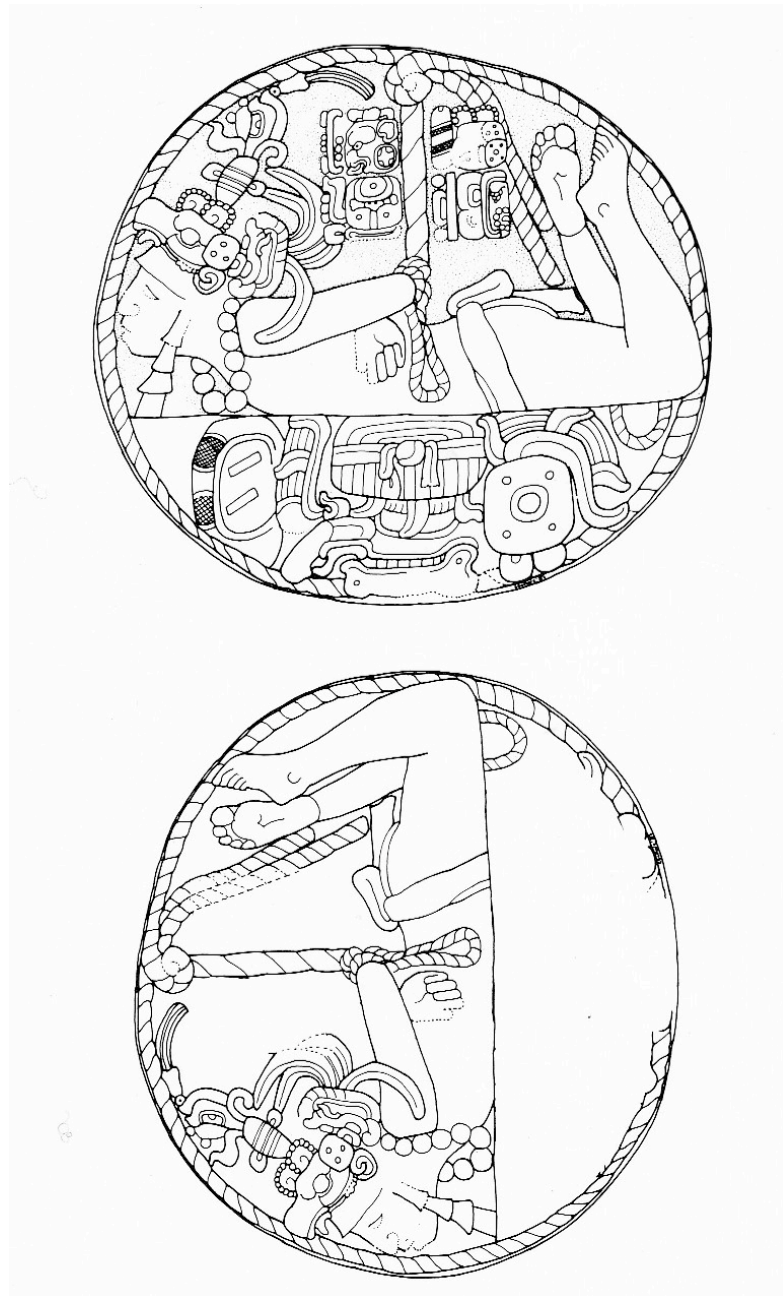


Figure 3.25 Image of a bound captive (Schele and Miller, 1986: 251)



Figure 3.26 A sunken ball court at Uxmal, Yucatán (Whittington, 2001)



Figure 3.27 Center marker depicting Hun-Ahau; Copán, Honduras (Schele and Miller, 1986: 252)

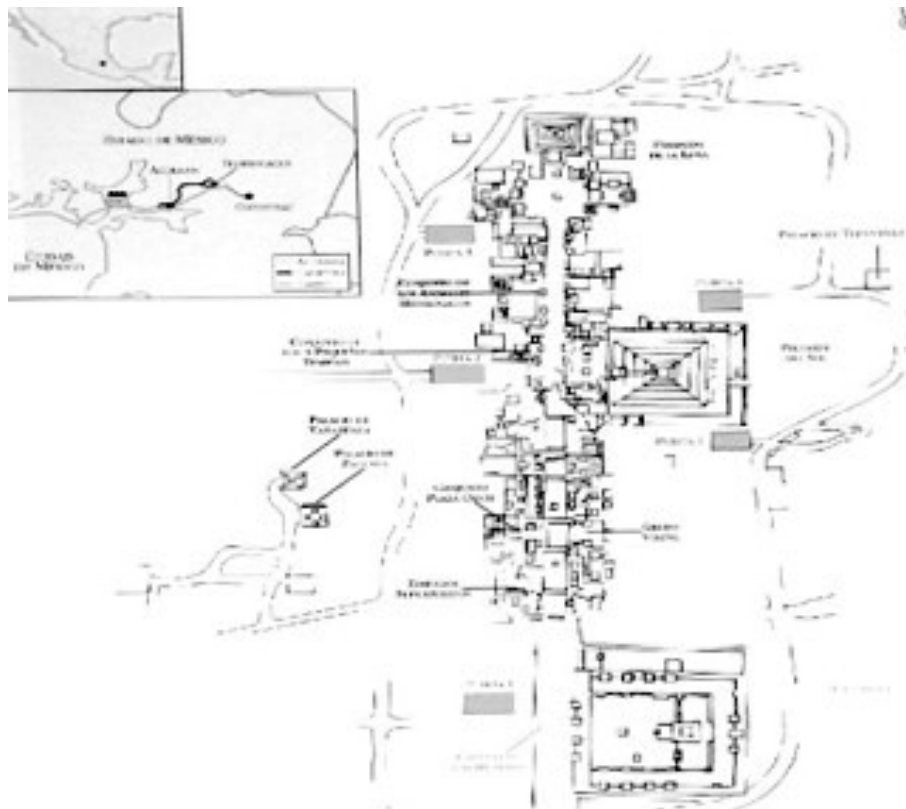
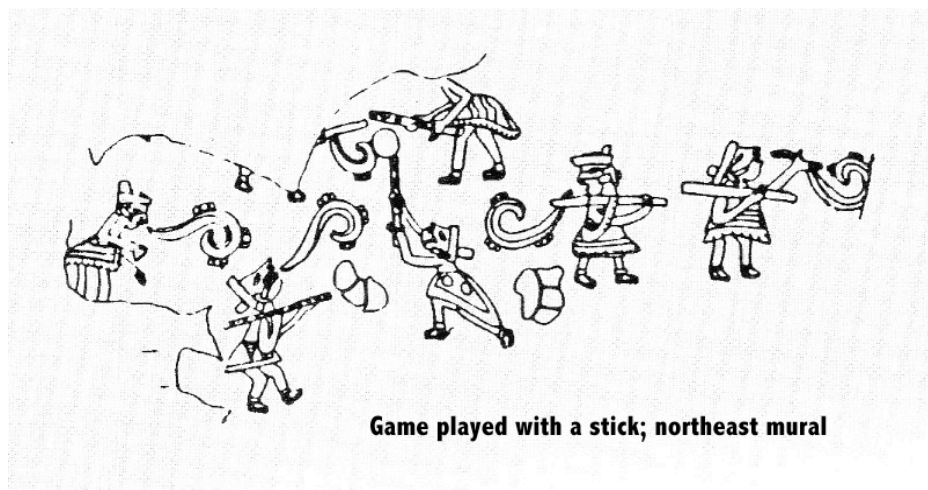
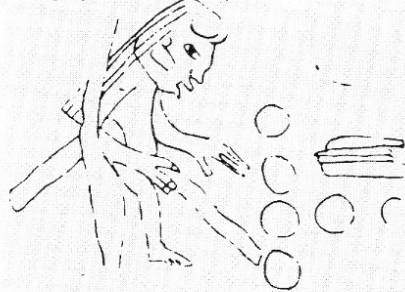


Figure 3.28 Teotihuacán (Uriarte, 2006: 18, 19)



Game played with a stick; southeast mural



Game played with the foot; southeast mural

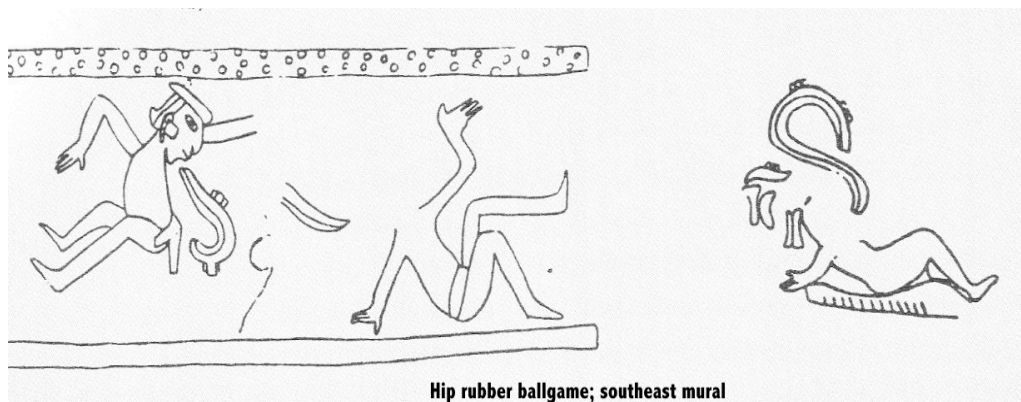


Figure 3.29 Murals at Tepantitla Complex showing ballplayers (Uriarte, 1992: 117)



Figure 3.30 Female ballplayers playing *Pelota Purepecha*; Tirindaro, Michoacán
(Photo by Maria Ramos)



Figure 3.31 Mural at Tepantitla showing sacrifice scene (Uriarte, 1992: 127)

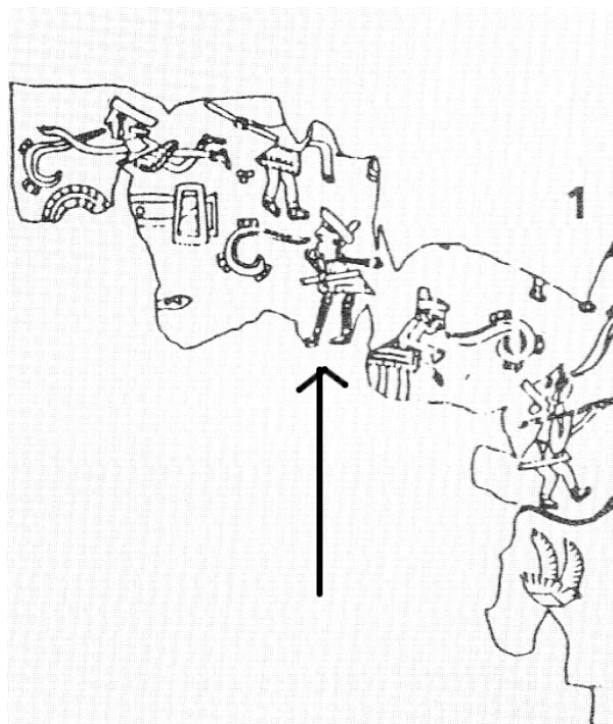


Figure 3.32 Ballplayer with red stripes (Uriarte, 1992: 122)



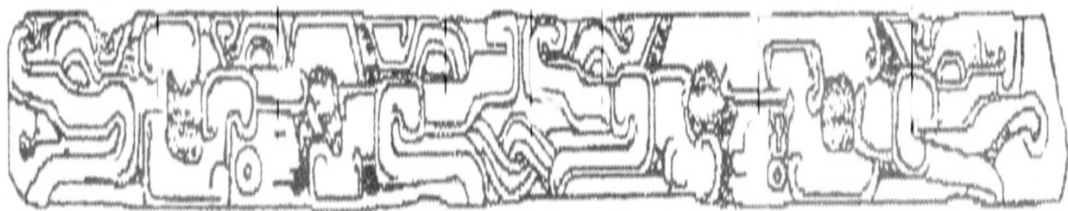
Figure 3.33 South Ball Court at El Tajín
(Photo by Maria Ramos)



Figure 3.34 South Ball Court relief panel showing sacrifice scene
(Photo by Maria Ramos)



**Figure 3.35 South central panel at El Tajín
(Photo by Maria Ramos)**



**Figure 3.36 Detail of a frieze at Building 11; El Tajín, Veracruz
(Ladrón de Guevara, 2000: 40)**



Figure 3.37 Ritual dressing of a protagonist as warrior (Photo by Maria Ramos)

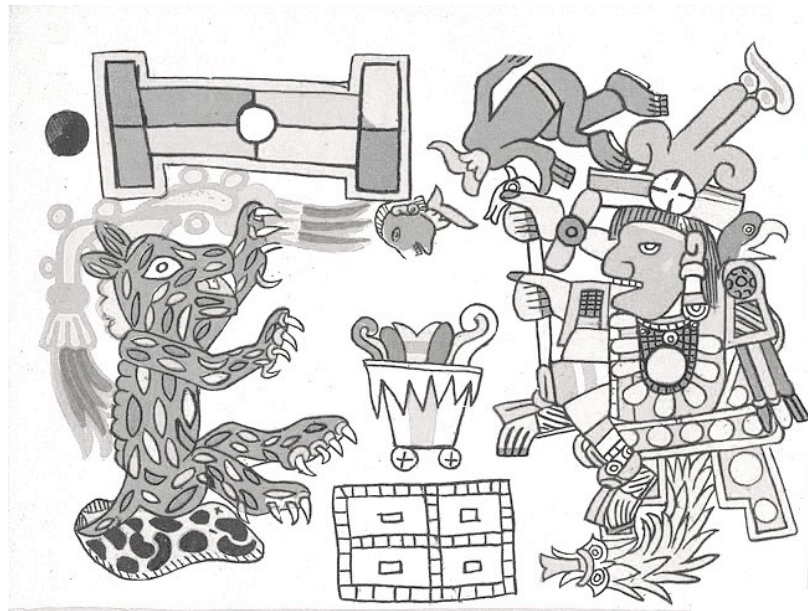


Figure 3.38 Plate 19 of the Tonalámatl Aubin (Krickeberg, 1966)

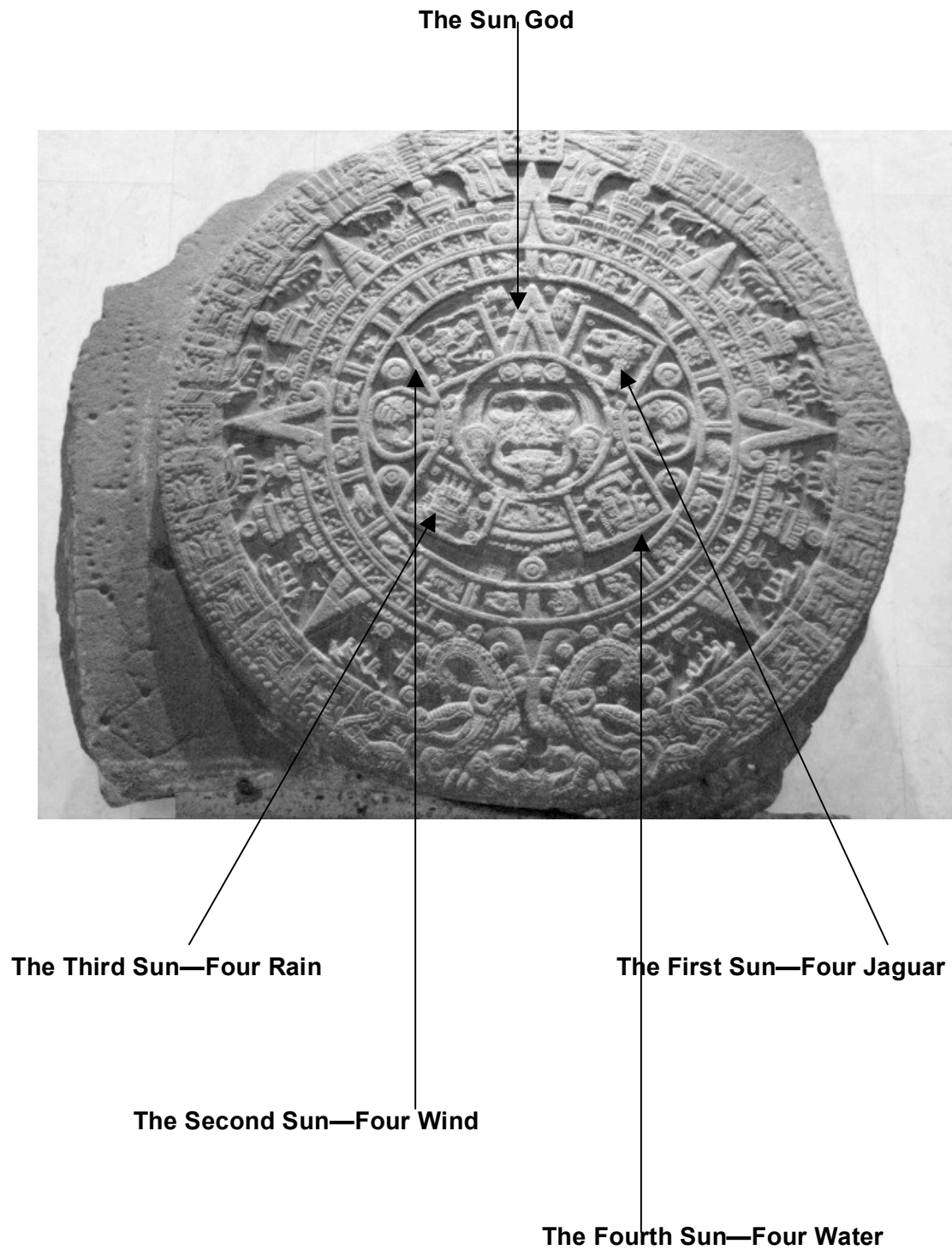


Figure 3.39 Stone of the Fifth Sun (Photo by Maria Ramos; MNAH)

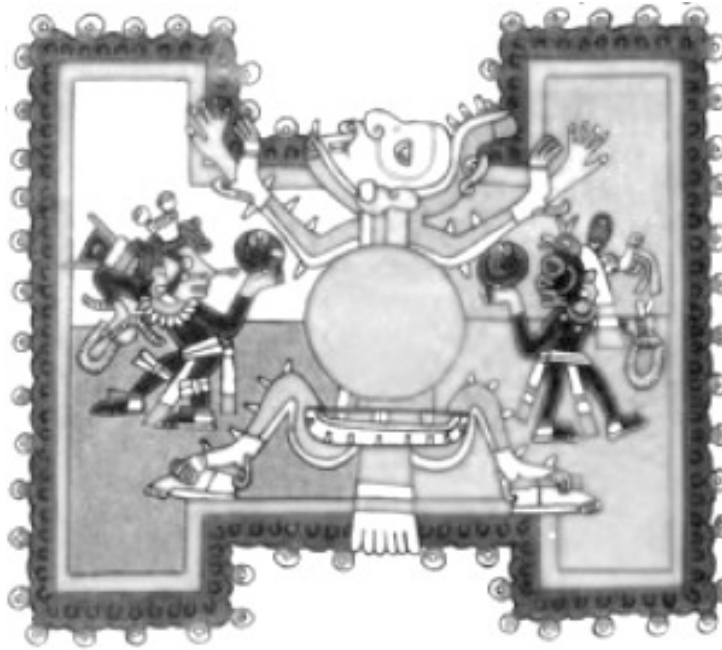


Figure 3.40 Fragment of Plate 35
(Codex Borgia, 1993)

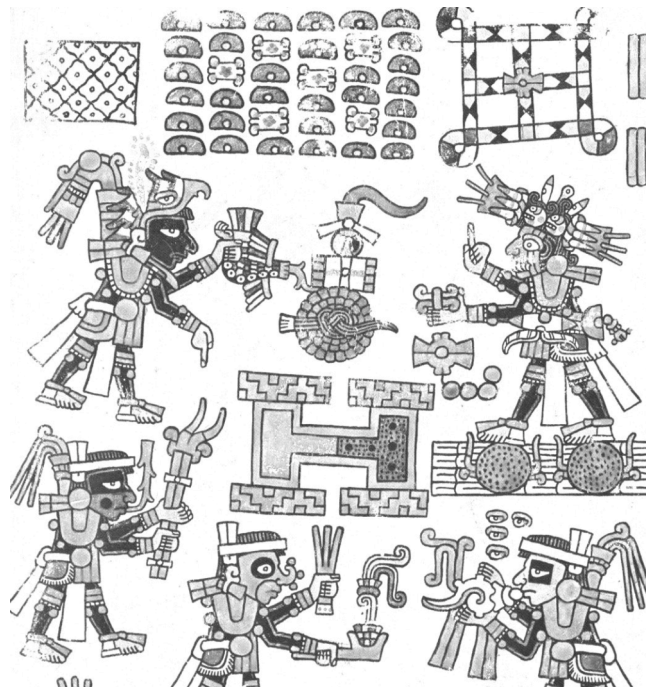


Figure 3.41 Burning rubber ball and deity 4 *Ollin* (Codex Vienna; fol. 20r)



Figure 3.42 Solar ritual (Codex Borgia, 1993 Pl. 40)

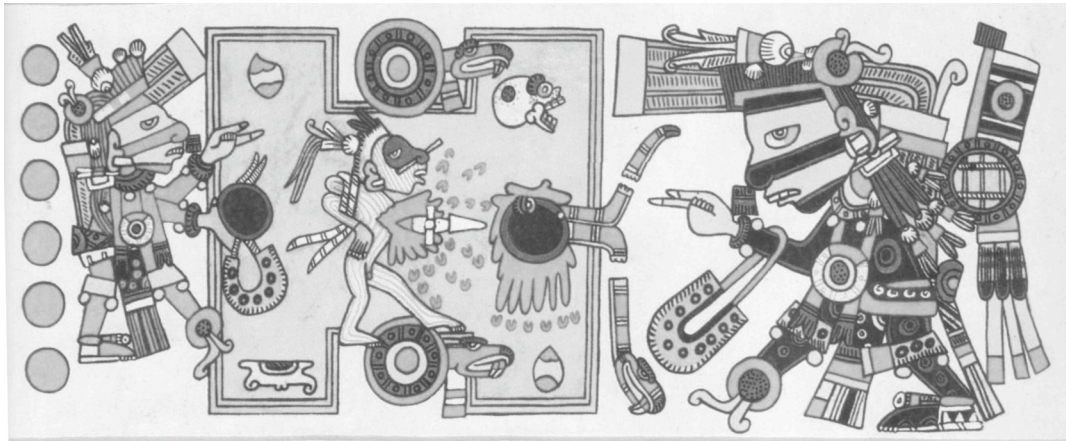


Figure 3.43 Body of sacrificial victim (Codex Borgia, 1993; Pl. 21)

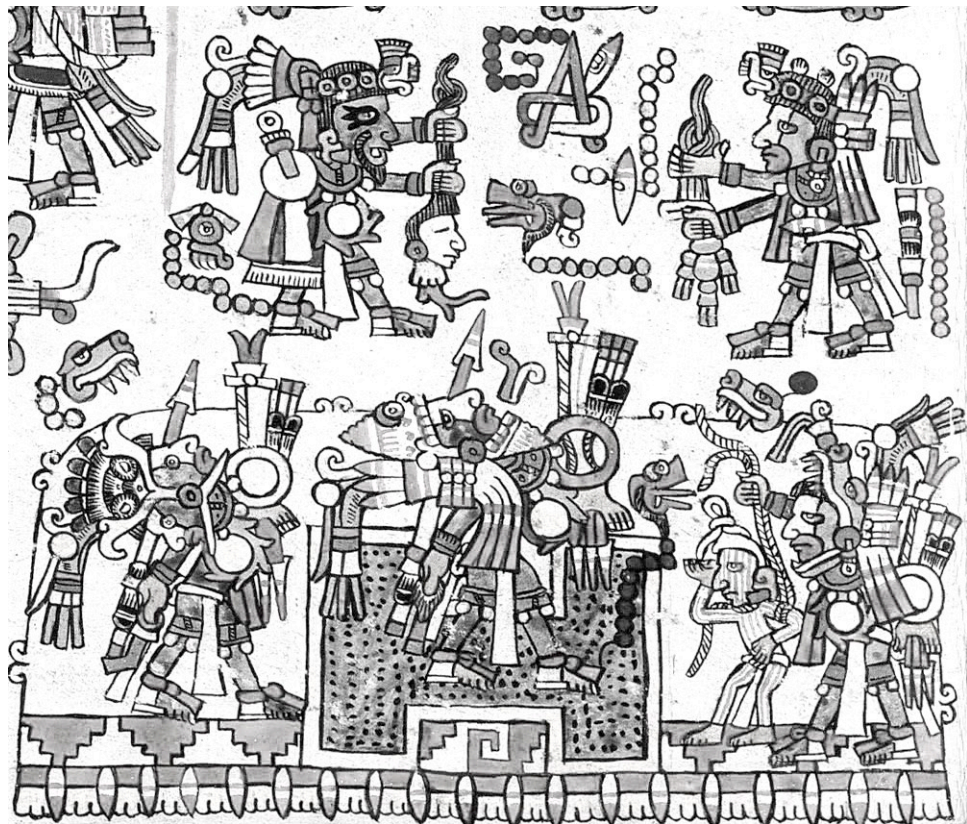


Figure 3.44 Ballplayer figures in war regalia (Codex Nuttall; fol. 21r)



Figure 4.1 The foundation of Tenochtitlán (Codex Mendocino, 1980: fol.3)

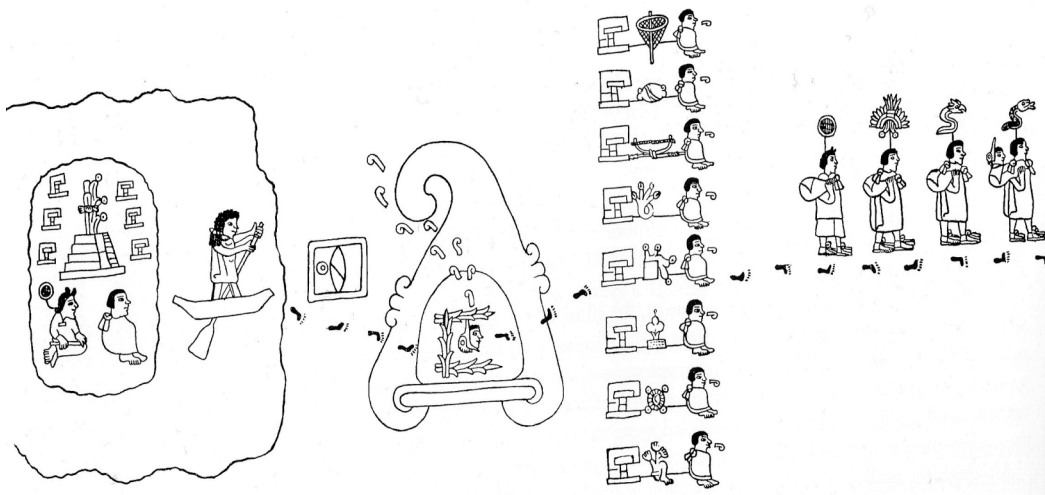


Figure. 4.2 Chimalma (Pasztory, 1983)

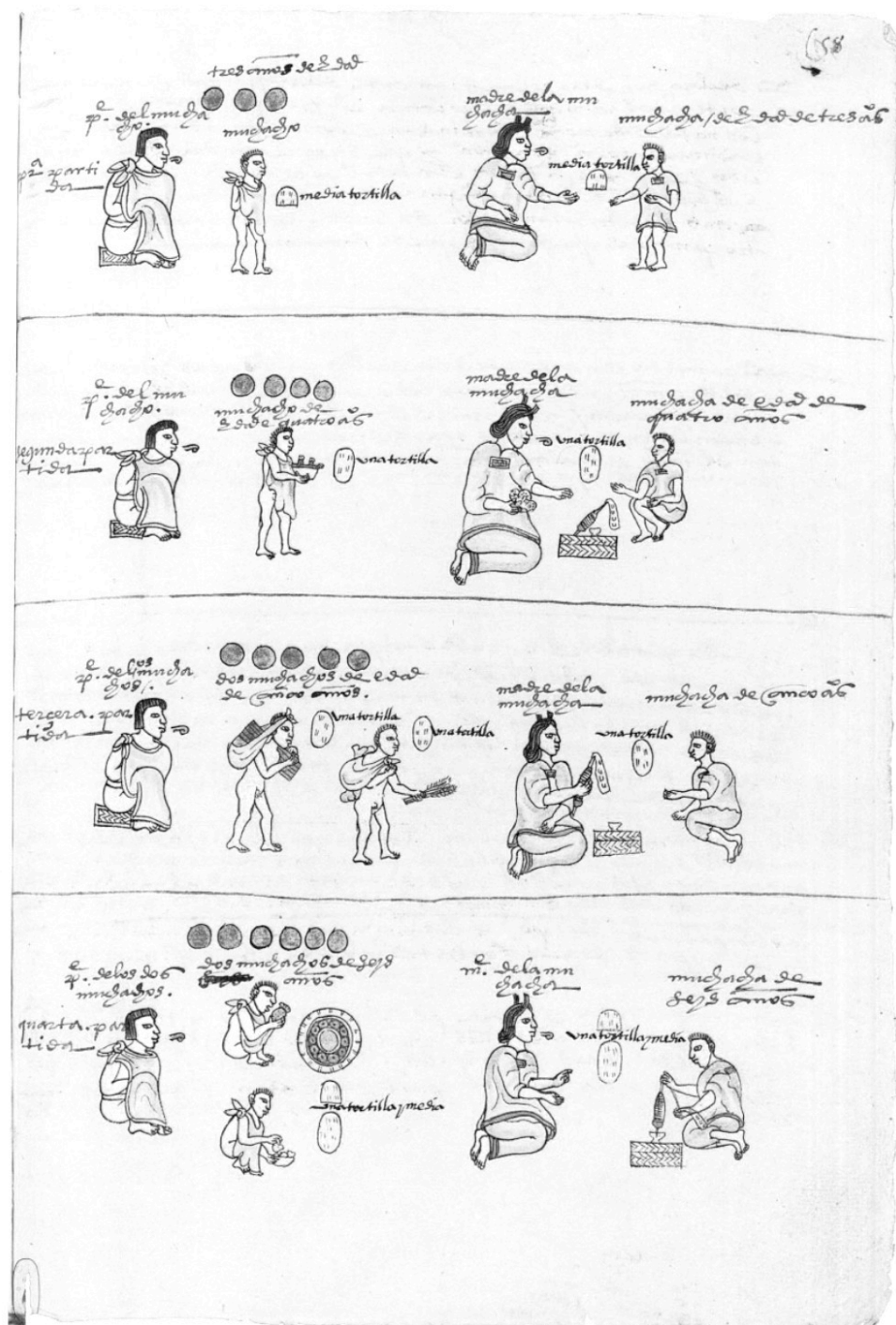


Figure 4.3 The roles of Nahua children (Codex Mendocino, 1980; fol. 58r)



Figure 4.4 Mantles paid as tribute items (Codex Mendocino, 1980; fol. 31)



Figure 4.5 Xólotl (Códice Borbónico; fol. 16)

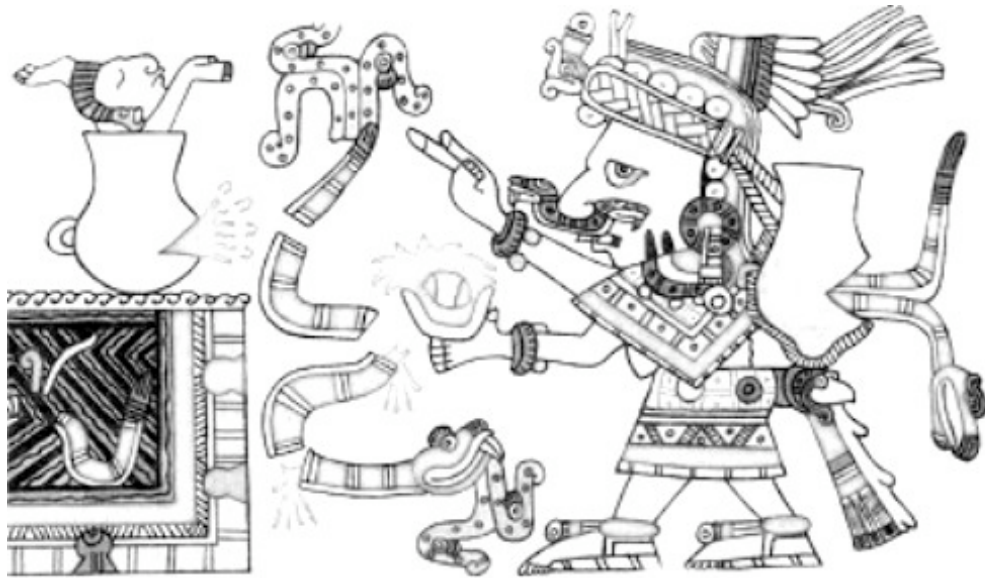


Figure 4.6 Aztec Goddess wearing the *quechquemiltl*; Codex Borgia (1993; Pl. 20)



Figure 4.7 The *Cihuateteo*; Codice Borgia (Codex Borgia, 1993; Pl. 48)

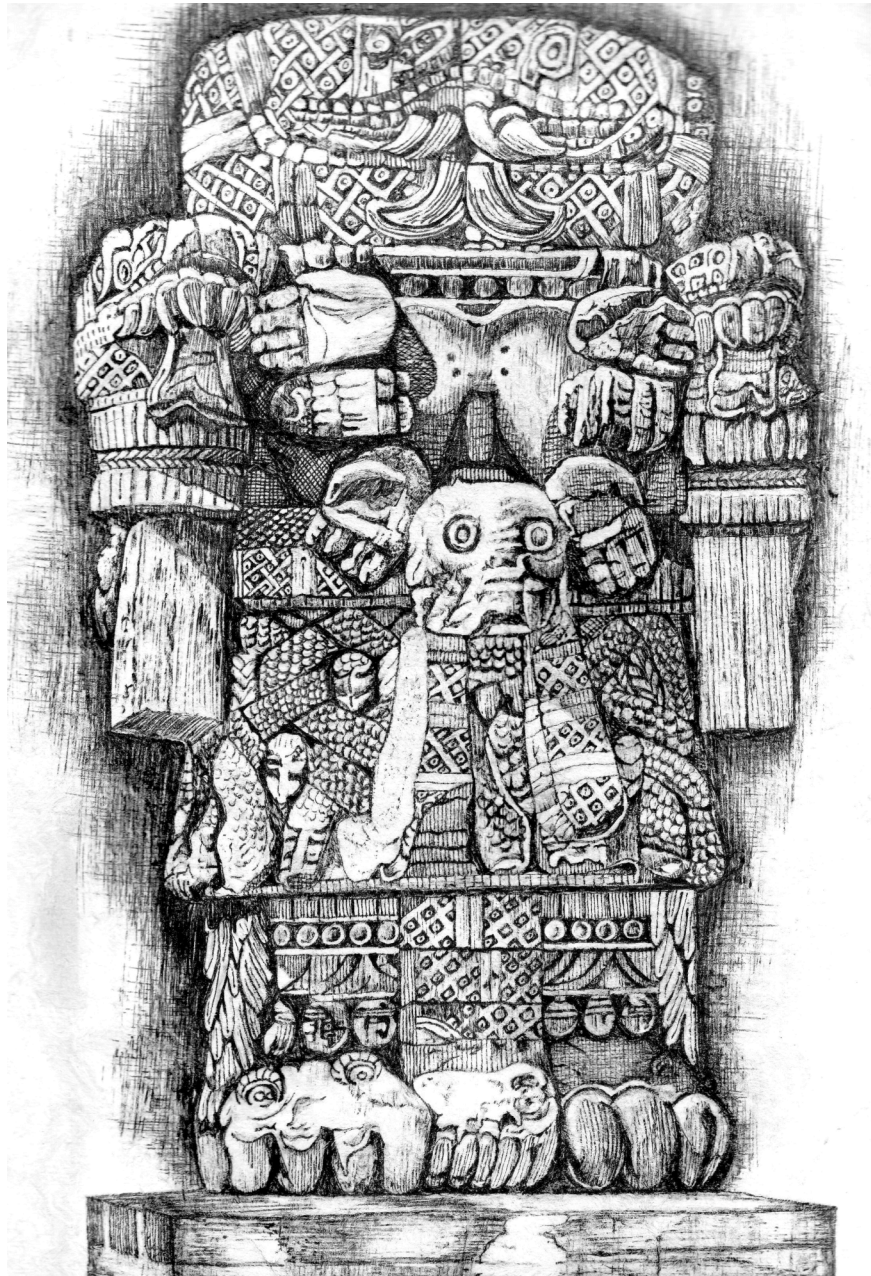


Figure 4.8 Coatlicue, the Earth goddess (Drawing by Maria Ramos)



Figure 4.9 The Aztec goddess Tlazoltéotl (Codex Borgia, 1993: Pl. 16)



Figure 4.10 The Moon goddess, Coyolxauhqui (Pasztory, 1983: 154)

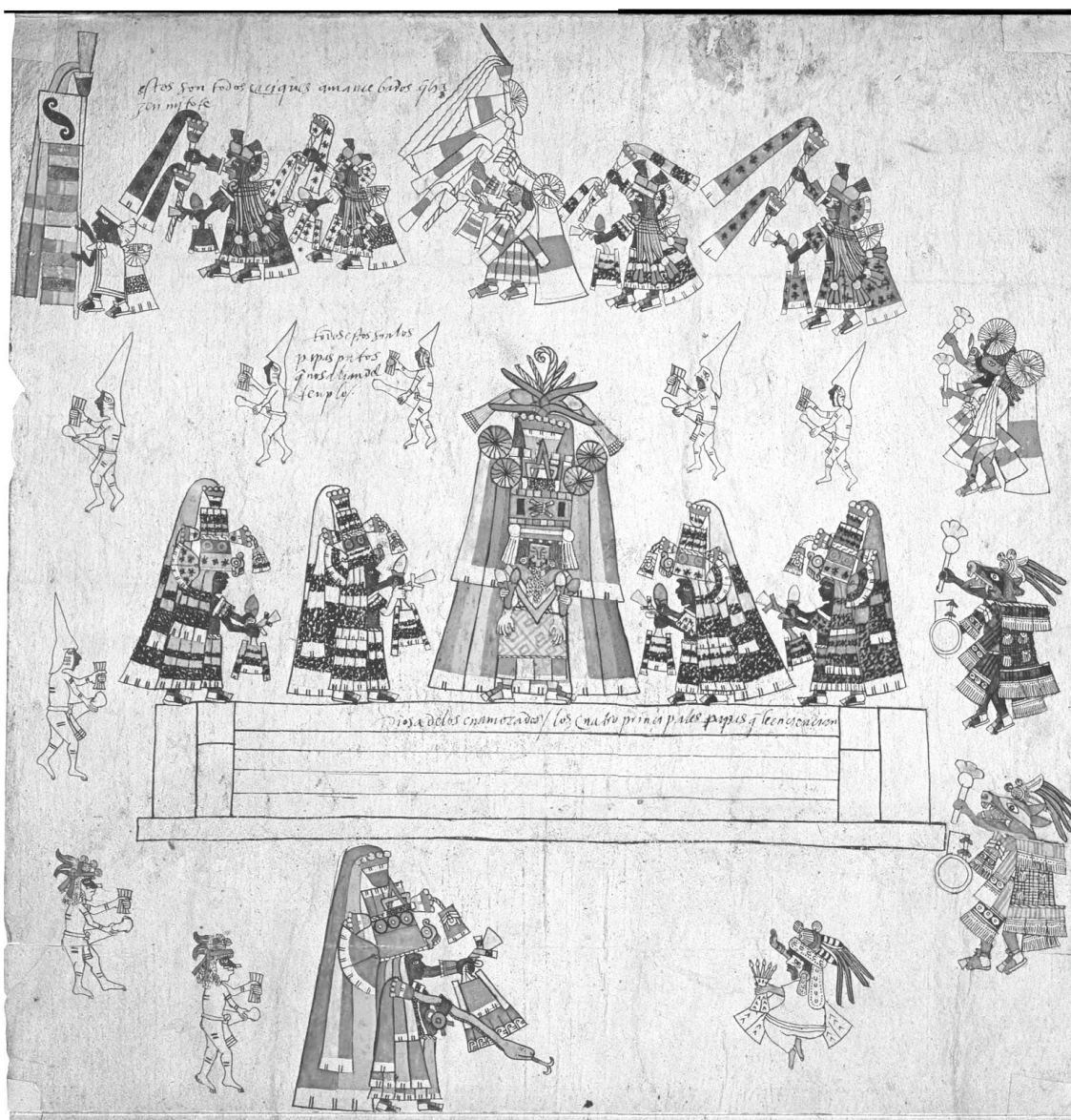


Figure 4.11 Festival of Ochpaniztli (Códice Borbónico; folio 30)



Figure 4.12 The Aztec goddess, Xochiquetzal (Códice Borbónico; fol. 22)



Figure 4.13 Xochiquetzal as a court guardian (Códice Borbónico; fol. 19)

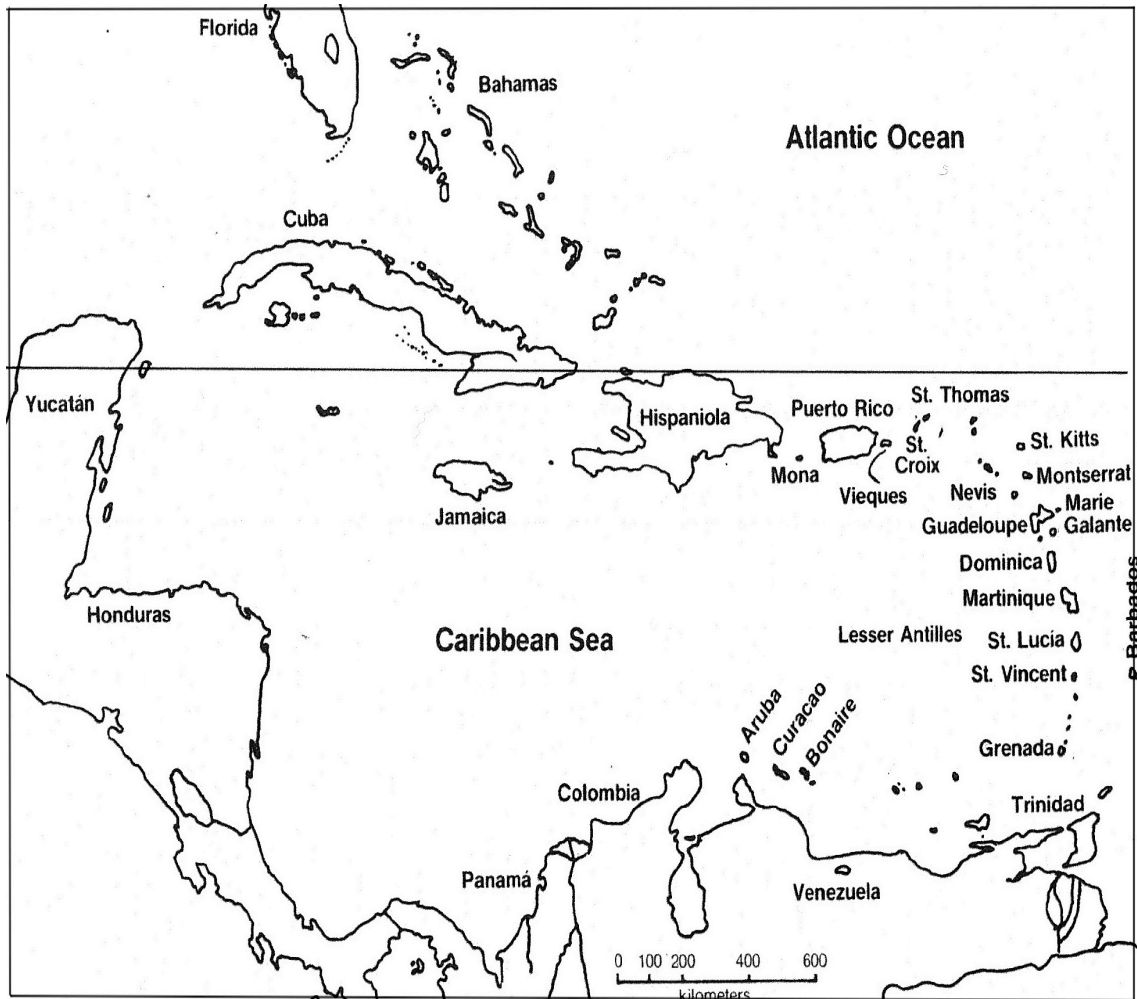


Figure 4.14 Map of the Caribbean Islands (Alegria, 1983: 4)

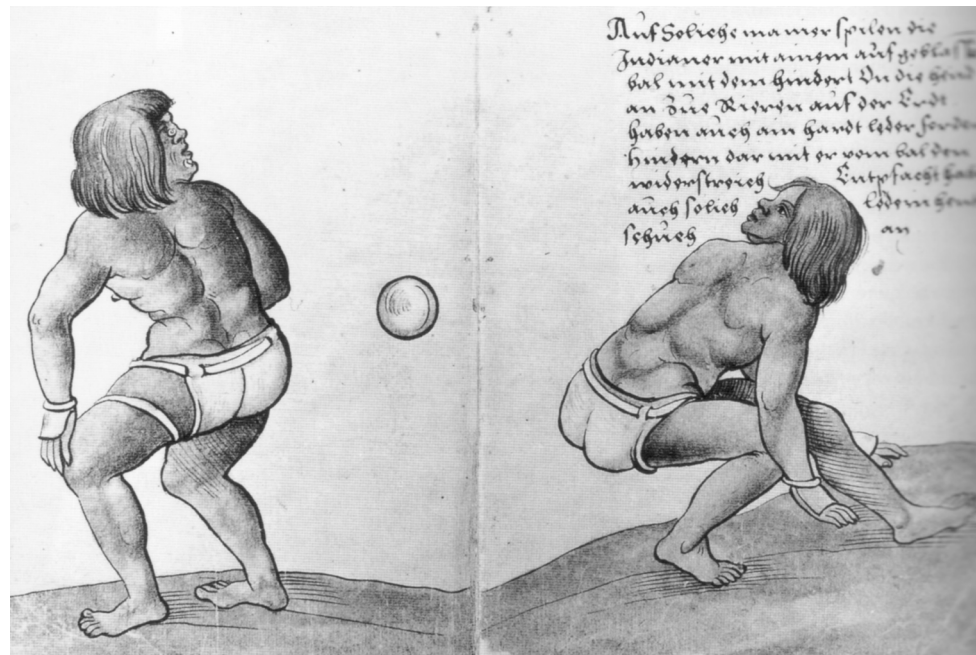


Figure 5.1 Drawing by Christopher Weiditz of *ulama* players (Uriarte, 1992)



Figure. 5.2 The *taste* at la Mora Escarbada (Photo by David Mallin, 2006)



Figure 5.3 The ballgame outfit, *fajado* (Photo by David Mallin, 2006)



Figure 5.4 Ballplayers from La Mora Escarbada (Photo by David Mallin, 2006)



Figure 5.5 Contemporary *ulama* players
(Photo by David Mallin, 2006)



**Figure 5.7 Picture of Jesus Arreola “Don Chuy”
(Photo by Maria Ramos, 2003)**



**Figure 5.8 Martina Aramburo from Los Zapotes
(Photo by David Mallin, 2006)**



**Figure 5.9 Martina demonstrating how to hit the ball
(Photo by Maria Ramos, 2003)**



**Figure 5.10 Yahaira Lizárraga from La Sávila (Photos by David Mallin, 2006;
Ricardo García, 2004)**



Figure 5.11 Yahaira's brother, "El Cuate" (Photo by Maria Ramos, 2003)



Figure 5.12 Female ballplayers from Esquinapa (Photo by Maria Ramos, 2003)



Figure 5.13 Edith Huaira (Photo by Manuel Aguilar, 2003)



Figure 5.14 Dulce Elizabeth Villa Velásquez (Photo by Mario Davila, 2003)



Figure 5.15 Exhibition game at Los Llanitos (Photo by Maria Ramos, 2003)



Figure 5.16 Rafael Lizárraga Ibarra (Photo by Maria Ramos, 2003)



Figure 5.17 Image of Maya ballplayers (Whittington, 2001)



Figure 5.18 Juana Madrigal; Cacalotan (Photo by Maria Ramos, 2003)



**Figure 5.19 Interview with Sylvia Pérez; Los Llanitos
(Photo by Manuel Aguilar, 2003)**



**Figure 5.20 Rosa Maria Osuna and her daughter Maricela
(Photo by Maria Ramos, 2003)**

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