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# Creating Spaces of Transborder Play: Indigenous Mexican Migrants in California and the Game of Pelota Mixteca

**Martin E. Berger and Leopoldo Peña**

## **Abstract**

This photo-essay documents the indigenous Mexican ballgame pelota mixteca and the way it is played by indigenous Mexican migrants in California. The focus is on the migrant experience, the role pelota mixteca plays in creating and maintaining transnational/transborder communities, whose members live on both sides of the Mexico/US border, and the way it creates spaces for these communities, in which they can perpetuate their own culture, in a country with ever harsher immigration policies. It also explores the question of what the game means to future generations of players, who are starting to lose interest in the game, and the way that local promoters try to encourage youngsters to play the game in an attempt to secure its survival.

## Introduction

Generally, in the United States, Mexican migrants are considered to be a group with a relatively homogeneous ethnic composition. Mexicans are thought to have Spanish as their first language, come from a *mestizo* ethnic background, and be part of, what is perceived to be, a generalized Mexican culture. This view of Mexican migrants, however, is not in line with reality, since a significant number of migrants are indigenous Mexicans, whose first language is often not Spanish, and who bring with them traditional, indigenous culture.

While some Mexican indigenous peoples have only recently started migrating to the United States in larger numbers, Mixtecs and Zapotecs from the Mexican state of Oaxaca have a long history of labor migration, both within Mexico and to the United States. Labor migration first took these indigenous villagers to the neighboring states of Veracruz and Puebla, later they went further afield to the states of Sinaloa and Baja California to work in agriculture, and, ever since the Bracero Program (1942–1964), they have been coming to the United States, especially California, to work in agriculture temporarily, or to establish themselves permanently. In the early 1990s, around 50,000 Mixtec migrants lived and worked in California's Central Valley, while around 55,000 Zapotecs had settled in Los Angeles<sup>1</sup>. In the United States, these indigenous migrants suffer from 'double discrimination'. On the one hand, immigrant workers face discrimination from mainstream American society as Mexicans, on the other hand, indigenous migrant workers, like indigenous peoples in general in Mexico, face discrimination from *mestizo* migrant workers who look down on the *indígenas*<sup>2</sup>.

Despite this discrimination within and outside the migrant community, indigenous migrants have organized themselves and created strong communities that are active on both sides of the Mexico/US border. They have done this not only through the formation of organizations, but also through the creation of spaces in hostile urban and rural environments. One of these types of spaces are courts for pelota mixteca. Pelota mixteca is an indigenous handball game that originated in the southern Mexican state of Oaxaca. In terms of the rules, the game resembles tennis, with a score count of 15-30-40-*juego*. Points are also scored in a similar manner as in tennis. A main difference between pelota mixteca and tennis is that the Mexican game is played in teams of up to five players. Additionally, the ball is not struck with a racket but with a padded

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado, "Building Civil Society among Indigenous Migrants." In *Indigenous Mexican Migrants in the United States*, ed. Jonathan Fox and Gaspar Rivera-Salgado (2004) ; Lynn Stephen, *Transborder Lives: Indigenous Oaxacans in Mexico, California, and Oregon*. (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007)

<sup>2</sup> Carole Nagengast and Michael Kearney, "Mixtec Ethnicity: Social Identity, Political Consciousness, and Political Activism," *Latin American Research Review* 25 no. 2 (1990): 61-91

glove or a wooden board. While it is still matter of debate whether the way the game is played is of pre-Columbian or European origin<sup>3</sup>, the game has been played in indigenous communities for such a long time that it has become an integral part of the culture of many indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, especially Mixtecs, Zapotecs, and Chocho, and is nowadays a truly indigenous ballgame.

Because of the extensive migration, different cities outside of Oaxaca became important centers for pelota mixteca. Legendary matches played in places like Orizaba and Puebla, outside the native state of Oaxaca, still live on in the memories of older players, but, since most people nowadays migrate to Mexico City or the US, no pelota mixteca match has been played in these cities for a long while. In all these places, pelota mixteca courts represented spaces for meeting your *paisanos* (countrymen), perpetuating traditional cultural forms, and recreating a feeling of being back home.

Many of the photos in this photo-essay were taken during the *Torneo Internacional de Pelota Mixteca*, which is organized annually in Fresno, California by the *Asociación de Pelota Mixteca, California Central*, the local collective of players from California's Central Valley. This organization was founded in 1996 by local players and has organized the tournament ever since. This tournament, which was held for the first time in 1998, brings together teams from California and a selection of players from Oaxaca to compete for the title of 'international pelota mixteca champion'. In the past, teams from California would also travel back to Oaxaca to compete in tournaments in the home communities. However, since most of the players of pelota mixteca cannot cross the border to Mexico and come back easily, this part of the exchange of players has become exceedingly rare. This interchange strengthens the ties of this transnational community of play and is a source of pride for players to participate in.

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<sup>3</sup> For the discussion of the possible pre-Columbian origins of pelota mixteca see Martin Berger, "El Juego de Pelota Mixteca: Tradición, Cambio y Continuidad Cultural", *Itinerarios* 12(2010): 157-176 ; and Eric Taladoire, "Could we speak of the Super Bowl at Flushing Meadows? La pelota mixteca, a third pre-hispanic ballgame, and its possible architectural context", *Ancient Mesoamerica* 14 (2003): 319-342

## Tangible Connections



Pelota mixteca de hule is played with a large glove, weighing about 12 pounds. The gloves, which cost up to \$350, are only made by one artisan in the city of Oaxaca and are ordered by phone or e-mail. They form a constant link to the 'homeland', a material expression of a transnational tradition, one of the many elements that make up the flow of ideas, people and things from Mexico to the United States and vice versa. Pelota mixteca only really started being played in California in the late 1970s, when there were enough gloves for two teams to play against each other. A retired player, who migrated together with the man who brought the first glove to California, says: "Como lo compararía? Como Cristóbal Colón, cuando pisó. Primer paso en la tierra. Descubrimiento"<sup>4</sup>, "What could I compare it to? Like Christopher Columbus, when he got here. First step on the ground. Discovery."

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Don M., Fresno, June 2012

### A Sunday Game in Hansen Dam Park



When pelota mixteca first started being played in California, matches were played in parks and abandoned terrains on the outskirts of cities. A *pasajuego*, a playing field, measures around 100 by 10 yards, and since the ball, which weighs 2 pounds and is made of solid rubber, can cause serious injuries when it hits a person, large open spaces were sought that were not visited much. Around these spaces, a community of players and spectators soon formed, creating migrant communities of play. In some places, pelota mixteca is still played in parking lots, high school sports fields or abandoned terrains. In Fresno, the players cooperated and, through communal labor, following traditions from Oaxaca, created a permanent *pasajuego*. Nowadays, pelota mixteca is still played in Hansen Dam Park in Los Angeles, shown in this photo. In the background people taking a stroll through the park pass by, quite probably oblivious of what game this is and the large history that accompanies it.

### To Serve in a Foreign Country



In 2012, the team that was invited to come to California was 'Arellanes', a team consisting of five brothers from Mexico City. Nicknamed 'Los Gemelos' ('The Twins') after the two twin brothers that are members of the team, one of whom is performing a serve during a game in the photo, they have tried to encourage the professionalization of the sport by creating team jerseys and baseball caps, a Facebook page for the team, and stickers advertising pelota mixteca. Coming from Mexico City, the Arellanes brothers are themselves children of migrants from Oaxaca who established themselves in Mexico's capital, a city which also had a thriving pelota mixteca community until a few years ago. The pelota mixteca court of *Balbuena* in Mexico City was a point of reference for all players of the game and functioned as a meeting place since the 1950s for Oaxacan migrants.

## Maybe One Day?



The most important reason for new players to start playing this ancestral game, is the family relation they have to it. The game is considered a family tradition, as it is transferred from father to son, uncle to nephew, or grandfather to grandson. From a young age, children accompany their fathers to games and retrieve the run-away balls that disappear into the bushes surrounding the playing field. After the grown-ups have finished playing, they play on the same field, using the gloves and the balls that are available. This way they are integrated into the playing community at a young age. This traditional aspect of the game is fundamental in generating new players for the game. However, it is also the most important reason for the decline of the number of players of pelota mixteca, both in Mexico and in the United States. Since the game is seen by many young people as something old-fashioned, a tradition of their fathers and grandfathers, rather than a modern sport like soccer, basketball or baseball, many do not start playing. Still, there are children who accompany their fathers to the *pasajuego* on Sundays and dream of one day playing at the same level and on the same courts as their forefathers.



### Applauding Dad's Play



Traditionally, girls and women do not play pelota mixteca. While they sometimes accompany their fathers or husbands to the playing field to support them during matches, and there are often a few women present at pelota mixteca matches who sell drinks and make traditional Oaxacan food, women never participate actively in the games. However, in Oaxaca, where initiatives to teach the game as part of primary and secondary school curricula have been on the rise, girls are starting to learn how to play the game. The historical legacy of pelota mixteca as a man's game is being challenged now that the sport is becoming more internationalized and part of the state-wide school system in Oaxaca.

## Oaxacalifornia



Pelota mixteca courts create spaces in which Oaxacans, mainly people of a Mixtec or Zapotec indigenous background, can recreate a feeling of being back home. Not only is it a meeting place to see your *paisanos* it is also way of organizing and sustaining a community of migrants who suffer from discrimination as indigenous people in Mexico and in the US. Thus, the *pasajuego* represents, not only a literal, but also a metaphorical, space in which one can play, but which is also a center, if not a haven, for indigenous culture, migrants and communities. The playing field is physically in California, but culturally in Oaxaca, it is in Oaxacalifornia.

## The Future?



In Fresno, a few teams comprising only players born in the US have already formed. Still, the future of the game is insecure, since only a few second (and third) generation migrants start playing the game. In many families, only one or two out of many brothers takes an interest in playing and keeping the tradition alive. Only time will tell whether the sport will survive and which measures the players will take to ensure the survival of the game.

### About the authors

**Martin E. Berger** works as a Junior Curator for Middle-and South-America at the National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden, The Netherlands, and is pursuing a PhD at the Faculty of Archaeology at the University of Leiden. His research focuses on sport, society and globalization in the broadest sense, including the archaeology of the Mesoamerican ballgame, the study of modern-day ballgames, and processes of migration and globalization in relation to indigenous (sporting) cultures, and community and identity formation.

**Leopoldo Peña** was born in Michoacán, Mexico. He has lived in Los Angeles since 1992. He is an independent photographer who has consistently exhibited in the Los Angeles area. In 2011, Chicano artist and curator, Patsy Valdez selected his work to be in Revival: Día de los Muertos Exhibition at Self Help Graphics. In 2010, his work became part of The Latino Museum of Art, History and Culture's permanent collection. His work has been published in *Al Borde*, *Derive*, *Grey Magazine*, *Retina*, *NACLA: Report on the Americas*, *B/W Magazine* and *El Tequio*. Currently, he is a Ph.D. student at University of California, Irvine in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese. He received a Master's degree in Spanish and Latin American Literature from Cal State University, Long Beach in 2012. He is also a community photography mentor and language instructor and continues to develop personal photo projects exploring the symbolism created by man-made objects imposed on the natural landscape and on documenting cultural performance within Mexican indigenous immigrant communities throughout California.

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