

EAGLE FEATHER RESEARCH INSTITUTE



EAGLE FEATHER RESEARCH NEWSLETTER

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Welcome, Willkommen, Bienvenue, Bienvenidos, Benvenuto. Welcome to our December issue that will feature the poorly understood ballgame of pre-Columbian times. Recently, an article appeared in newspapers written by Jeremy Schwartz of the Mexico City Bureau. In it we read of athletes in Villahermosa, Veracruz filing into a field carrying a different assortment of tools: tree trunks, gourds, dried palm fronds, and balls made of woven cornstalk. The girls do not wear jerseys or spandex; rather, they wear brilliant white dresses embroidered with purple and red flowers. What is being reenacted are the ancient sports that go back 4,000 years. According to Alida Zurita Bocanegra, president of the Mexican Association of Traditional and Autochthonous Games and Sports, “globalization is permeating us, and that is why it is so important at this moment to revive the roots that give us identity.”

The sports mentioned in the article are *Uarhukua*, also called the *Purépecha* ballgame. The *Purépecha* are the Tarascans Natives that live by the lake of *Patzcuaro* in the *Janitzio* Isle in the state of Michoacan. Their language is totally different from the Aztec náhuatl normally associated with over 200 tribal nations ranging from the Mohawks of the eastern seaboard, to northern U.S. and Canada, to the Southwest and Mexico and parts of Central America. The sport referred to here is played with wooden sticks and tightly wrapped cloth or wooden ball. This game is at least 3,400 years old. Another ancient sport is called *Corozo*. This is played with dried palm leaves that are used as a combination of lacrosse and field hockey stick. Played in the southern part of the state of Tabasco by the *Chontal* Native people. *A Xek Chote* is a child's game in southern Mexico in which players race to dig up a green vegetable called *Chote* by hurling a sharpened stick into the ground. *Rarajipame* or *Rarjiparo* is played by the *Tarahumara* Natives in the remote mountains of

Chihuahua. Players race extremely long distances, sometimes over several days while kicking a ball. *La Pitarra* is a board game similar to chess and backgammon originally played by the *Otomí* Natives of Querétaro. A national championship of games of mental dexterity is played annually. *Pash Pash* is a children's game in which players hit the ball made of dried corn leaves, trying not to hit the ground. This was originally played by the *Mames*, an autochthonous people from the state of Chiapas. Finally, the king of the pre-Columbian sports is what is normally referred to as the ballgame currently. This game was known as far back as the Olmecs, the Mayans and the Aztecs. The playing field was called "taste" in the state of Sinaloa, also as "pasa-juego" with the Mixteca, derived from the Aztec *tlachtli* or with the Maya *Pokyaho pok-tat-pok* and with the Zapotec *Taladztl*. At the forefront of the playing field it was called *Chichi* while the dividing line was *Analco*. Although not mentioned in the article, its real name is *Ulamatzin*. This comes from the word *Ulli* which refers to rubber. Ulama refer to play with the ball which ultimately should be seen in a symbolic level. Thus, *Ulamatzin* means "the honorable rubber ball game." Many devious and bias interpretations have been made by archeologists, Latin-American scholars, anthropologists and in short academia. Descriptively, it was a friendly but difficult game played in a court in which a nine pound ball is moved with the hip or thigh that ultimately went into an elevated ring that hung vertically.. It has aspects of soccer, volleyball and basketball although the ball does not touch the ground. You must be in excellent conditioning due to the heavy ball that can bruise you strictly on with weight. Natives declare that not everyone can hit the ball. You can try to teach twenty athletes and only five will qualify. Mario Huante, a player with a team from Tirindaro, Michoacan is quick to point out "Foreigners say they invented hockey, but we have been playing this game for 3,000 years."

While the article is interesting, it does not go into its cultural and symbolic pre-Columbian significance. Without taking much more space, I will say that the game was a ceremony, a ritual which taught a lesson in astronomy, philosophy, and cosmology. The court is the universe; the ball is the essence of energy as a sphere. The players can be representative of astronomical planets e.g. the sun, the moon, Venus etc. It is not so much a battle but the changing of the energies, moving from sunlight to darkness as represented by the sun and the moon. It is not so much that the sun is doing battle with the moon but merely it is exchange of energy. One ceases for a short period only to continue the cycle. From this understanding they created the most accurate calendars in the world. They were so advanced in understanding astronomical cycles that they had a Sun calendar, a moon calendar, a Venusian calendar and a Martian calendar. They could predict astronomical events centuries into the future. They were the first to invent and use the zero in a positional form. Without this higher mathematics is not possible.

Documentation in pre-Columbian codices is abundant: the Borgia, the Nuttall, in sculpture, paintings and even the post-Conquest *Tira de*

Peregrinación. Unfortunately, clerics and inquisitional censors interpreted in their own manner, thinking of perhaps the barbaric roman human sacrifice spectacle in the coliseum. For more detailed information, see an article entitled *Ulamatzin* contained in our Mexican anthology (Antología del pensamiento mexicano). This can be located from our Educational Materials-Mexican Series-books. You can also preview the Table of Contents under Abstracts Books.

Today, Hichols, Mayans, Tarahumaras, Tarascans, Otomies and many more native groups make up the living mosaic of Mexico. Marcelino Chan, a teacher in a Mayan village in Campeche sums it up by saying “These games bring together all the peoples. Mexico lives because we keep on living.”

Happy and Insightful Reading,

Arnoldo Carlos Vento, PhD
Executive Officer

