

AZTECS AND GAMES

At the end of the sixteenth century, Friar Juan de Torquemada watched the game of *volador* on the central plaza in Mexico.¹ At the top of a pole some twenty meters high there was a small pivoting platform. Four ropes were wound around the top of the pole and held in place by a wooden frame. Five men dressed in feathery costumes making them look like birds climbed up the shaft. One of them reached the narrow platform and began to dance. Then the other four bird-men tied themselves to the ends of the ropes and plunged into space, head down, held by the ropes around their waists. This initiated a spectacular circular flight in ever widening rings as the cords unwound. They straightened up only at the last moment, just in time to put their feet on the ground, dizzy and staggering. But on that particular day, one of the dancers was not to straighten himself up. The rope had been badly attached and broke, dropping the man like a heavy mass to the ground, lifeless. The Franciscan at once used this as an argument to demand that the Viceroy prohibit this game. But the civil

Translated by R. Scott Walker

¹ The Plaza de Volador was in the southeast part of Zocalo. It was transformed into a market at the end of the 18th century. The market of Volador was known for its second-hand dealers and book stands before the construction on this site of the Supreme Court in 1940.

authorities refused to do so, to the monk's great consternation.²

For the accidental death of the Indian had only been a pretext. The real reason which motivated Torquemada to request the prohibition of *volador* was religious in nature. The learned chronicler had fully understood that *volador* was a ritual before being a game. And almost a century after the Conquest, he saw in this, and correctly so, the occasion for the indigenous peoples to perpetuate an eminently pagan cult of pre-Hispanic origin. "I impute this invention to the devil who imagined it to keep a better hold on his subjects and the servants under his sway and to keep alive in them the memory of his infernal and abominable services. For this *volador* was a commemoration of the 52-year cycle which they used before the Faith was implanted and at the end of which they celebrated the new Fire to seal the pact which they had made with the Demon... They made thirteen rotations in actual fact, and since there are four ropes, we arrive precisely at the number fifty two".³ Behind the vertiginous aerial ballet there was disguised a cosmic ritual.

It was this osmosis between play and liturgy which impressed upon the early Spanish missionaries the need to condemn the Aztec ball game. The same interdict was pronounced against *patolli*, that curious game of chance in which beans replaced dice. "All these games seemed to us steeped in idolatrous superstitions", noted Sahagún.⁴ He was absolutely correct. Games in ancient Mexican society were never a separate and distinct area. Play at that time had neither autarchy nor exterior form. It would be useless to seek to define what was, for the Aztecs, the range of play or, to the contrary, the sphere of the non-game. These Western categories for play can only be applied very imperfectly to that complex and fluid society where oppositions were never firmly fixed. And our dichotomous thought structures are often revealed as inadequate for expressing the Nahua reality. What role could chance (*alea*) play in a totally pre-destined society? What might be the substratum of social dynamism in a cultural universe which was unaware of competition? Ethno-historical sociology frequently surprises us. Observing how ancient Mexicans lived, we encounter,

² Juan de Torquemada, *Monarquía indiana*, Mexico, Porrúa, 1975, t. II, p. 307.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 306.

⁴ Bernardino de Sahagún, *Historia general*, Mexico, Porrúa, 1975, p. 460.

for example, unrestrained behavior inserted into highly dramatic contexts. And on the other hand, certain gestures, which we would have thought playful, were, for the Aztecs, charged with remarkable seriousness.

It should not be astonishing, then, if, under the pseudonym of play can be found mixed pell-mell ritual, celebration, spectacle, pleasure, raging battle, the vertigo of drunkenness and the bounce and rebound of rubber, the syncopated rhythm of drums and the mortal splendor of sacrifice.

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Aztec civilization impresses us with its specificity. Certain cultural traits which might have been thought to be universal are strangely absent from pre-Columbian Mexico. For example, competitive games, which in Roger Caillois' typology corresponded to the *agôn*, have no true equivalents in the Aztec world. Nevertheless, there are certain manifestations of play which, without participating in the spirit of the *agôn*, approach it by their exterior form. In the front ranks of these characteristic "games" are strange skirmishes, rhythmic as ballets, both brutal and artificial, impetuous and codified. These are the *icaliztli* which took place during certain great holidays. During the month of *Ochpanitzli*, for example, the festive ritual called for a "*juego de pelea*" played by none other than midwives! On the eighth day of the month, "midwives, both old and young, along with courtesans, began a skirmish, dividing themselves into two equal groups... In this simulated combat, the woman who was destined to die and who incarnated Teteo Inna, the mother of the gods to whom the festival was dedicated, launched the first attack against the opposite squad. She was accompanied by three old women who were like her mothers and remained at her side. The combat consisted in pursuit and throwing balls of *pachtli*,⁵ balls of bullrushes, prickly pears or yellow flowers called *cempoalxochitl*. They each had a belt from which there hung little gourds filled with tobacco powder. One of the groups attacked the other at a run, and then this one ran back

⁵ The *pachtli* is an epiphytic plant of the Bromeliaceae family which grows abundantly on the tall Mexican cypresses. Its leaves are shaped like long greyish filaments.

against the first one. The two squadrons continued like this in a series of attacks and retreats. Then the skirmish concluded and Toci⁶ was taken back to the house where she was kept... This simulated combat took place for four days...⁷

Obviously there is in this ritual an aspect of play and an agonistic dimension. But it would be difficult to describe this skirmish as a game which derives from the spirit of competition. It is rather a representation of mythological inspiration, a game without stakes, where *agôn* exists only in a purely artificial fashion.

What is strange is the importance the Aztecs gave to this model. Each time there was a competition, it was inserted in a ritual under this totally unreal form, reduced to a formalistic display. We have many examples of this. On the third day of the month of *Atemoztli* there took place the *chonchayocacaliztli* in which young warriors were matched against young priests. "One man incarnated *Chonchayotl*; his hair was all dishevelled, blood-soaked, frightful. Once he was ready, two groups were formed. The *tlamacazque*, the priests, were on the side of *Chonchayotl*. Facing them were the *telpopochtin*, the young warriors. At noon the struggle began. They fought with pine branches and with reeds, or else with woven bullrushes or roots of reeds tied together tightly with ropes. They made much noise as they struck one another. In fact, they even injured each other a little. And if the young warriors caught a priest, they rubbed him with agave leaves, making his skin itch and burn. And if one of the young warriors was captured, the priests made cuts on his ears, his arms, his chest and his thighs with agave thorns causing him to cry out with pain. If the priests succeeded in chasing the young warriors back into the royal palace, then they laid sack to it, taking all the woven mats, the rope rugs, the seats, the beds and stools. If they found the drums, they carried them off. They took everything. And if the young warriors pursued the priests back into their college, they too stole everything. They carried off with them the woven mats, the conches and the seats. At sundown they separated, and the skirmish came to an end".⁸

This pseudo-combat obviously contained a large share of play.

⁶ *Toci*, "our ancestor", is another name for the goddess *Teteo Innan*, "the mother of the gods".

⁷ Sahagún, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁸ *Florentine Codex*, part III, p. 137-138.

But this aspect seems a little submerged by codification. It is easy to recognize the substratum of this *juego di matachines*; it corresponds to an institutionalization in game form of a social antagonism. In Mexico power was shared by the priests and the warriors. Of course the clergy and the military authorities always worked in close cooperation. The actions of each side were intimately related. But this did not inhibit the development of a keen rivalry between the two camps which was concretely manifested in the area of education.

The priests ran the *calmecac*, colleges which somewhat resembled monasteries. There young children, noble for the most part, were instructed in devotion, mortification, meditation; they were taught to write; they learned history, mythology and the sacred hymns. The mystic dimension of the universe was here unveiled to them. The warriors, on the other hand, accepted young men from every social class in their *telpochcalli*. These youths were trained to handle arms; and they were inculcated with a sense of duty, the spirit of courage and a taste for physical effort.

Once a year this duality of the educational system, a reflection of a social competition, found its expression in the form of a game. The punishments inflicted on the young men who fell into the hands of their "adversaries" are significant. Scarifications made by agave thorns were a common exercise, prescribed by regulations, among the Aztec clergy. Rubbing with nettles was a common punishment in the warriors' colleges. Here each side applied its own norms to the other. The action was not an innocent one. In symbolic terms, to pierce the ears, the chest or the thighs of a young man was to confer on him *de facto* the status of a young priest. Conversely, the nettle punishment, when applied to a young *calmecac* student, made of him an apprentice-warrior. Just beneath the surface is the outline of a veritable battle where the essential objective was to capture the other party, the adversary. And the culmination of the "combat", seizing the furnishings in the residence of the rivals, is explained by reference to the booty of war. Here the invaders made off with the woven seats (*icpalli*) which symbolized power⁹ and stole the musical instruments which are,

⁹ In indigenous pictorial manuscripts, important figures are always represented seated on an *icpalli*.

in fact, the distinctive emblems of the opposite camp. The conch was the most significant religious instrument since it served to mark the hours of the day and night; control of time and of the calendar was, for the Aztecs, a sacerdotal monopoly. As for the drums, their function was to give rhythm to the warriors' dances in the "house of music" which had a place in every *telpochcalli*.

The ceremonial game of *chonchayotl* was quite certainly instituted to allow regulating the latent rivalry between priests and warriors. By confining their antagonism to the realm of a game in a form which was half "nice kids", half aggressive, Aztec leaders probably hoped to liberate accumulated or potential tensions and at the same time to prevent this opposition from manifesting itself in civil life where it would have affected the normal cooperative relations between priests and warriors for managing power. This does not preclude the fact, however, that the game of *chonchayotl* derived from an agonistic model which was nothing other than war itself.

The phenomenon is even more evident during other ceremonial skirmishes practiced by the Aztecs. During the month of *Ochpaniztli*, several days after the performance by the midwives described earlier, the *zacacaliztli* took place.¹⁰ This opposed two carefully differentiated groups. On the one side was the goddess Toci, "our ancestor", accompanied by "Huastecs";¹¹ on the other were young nobles and old warriors, armed with shields and blood-soaked grass brooms.¹² The goddess Toci as before led the charge. But the other team, after stirring up the furor of the Huastecs, gave way, and the struggle turned into a noisy and vociferous rout. With wild gesticulations the partisans of the goddess Toci pursued the group of warriors from the Pochtlan neighborhood to the temple of the Aztec tribal god, Uitzilopochtli. And there the skirmish seems to have ended abruptly. However, the ritual continued, namely by an expedition into enemy territory, a distribution of medals to valor-

¹⁰ Cf. *Florentine Codex*, part III, p. 120 ff.

¹¹ The Huastecs lived in the northeast part of Mexico. A non-native population, of non-Nahua culture, they were dependent on the Aztecs from the mid-15th century. In Mexico they had a well-established reputation for licentiousness. Here, the Mexicans who played the role of the Huastecs wore imposing ithyphallic attributes. (Cf. *Codex Borbonicus*, pl. 30.)

¹² It is this grass, *zacatl*, from which the name of the game is derived (*zacacali*).

ous soldiers and a variety of actions with a warlike connotation. The festivities were closed by a final game confrontation. The teams present were the same as before, but the scenario was reversed. This time the warriors, led by the emperor himself, pursued Toci and the Huastecs as they fled from the crowds who spat on them and threw flowers at them. Here in passing can be recognized a simulated stoning which is explained by referring to the hagiography of the goddess Toci. An erotic figure, she was known for having inspired adultery which the Aztecs punished by stoning. The chase was ended at the temple of Toci where the goddess found refuge surrounded by her Huastecs.

It is difficult not to see in these sumptuously staged pseudo-combats the evocation of a historical combat. If we can believe the chronicler Diego Durán, the organization of the ritual for festivals in the Mexican calendar was due to the vice-emperor Tlacaelel. In the middle of the fifteenth century, the vice-emperor did undertake a vast religious reform which was accompanied by a rewriting of history. The Aztec victory over the Huastecs took place in a battle in the eleventh year of the reign of Motecuzomo the Elder, i.e. around 1451.¹³ It is therefore possible that Tlacaelel might have wanted at this time to commemorate this great Mexican military event with some form of game. In fact the meaning of the ritual goes beyond the simple historical reference, for *zacacali* is part of a highly sophisticated ceremonial corpus which includes several symbolic strata. Nevertheless, when the form of the competition is analyzed, it follows step by step the movements of a war.

Additional proof could be cited in the confrontation between the *xipeme* and the *tototectin*, celebrated in honor of Xipe Totec, the god of flaying,¹⁴ or the combat game between slaves and captives which took place during the festival of *Panquetzaliztli*, whose function was to recreate the victory of Uitzilopochtli over his 400 rival brothers.¹⁵

There is a first instructive element here. Competition in the Nahua world did not assume any of the Western forms to which we are accustomed. Nor did it fulfill the same functions. If the

¹³ Cf. Diego Durán, *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España*, Mexico, Ed. Porrúa, 1967, t. II, p. 163 ff.

¹⁴ Cf. *Florentine Codex*, part. III, p. 48-49.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 134-135.

paradigm of war dictated its laws and controlled the institutionalization of the *agôn* in game, it is helpful to understand why the Aztecs retained a place for it within the ritual festival cycles. Through the form of simulated combats, war entered the realm of festival and consequently of religion. By becoming a game, war became a cultic expression. This neutralized any danger of breakup of Nahua society. The military, which managed exterior conquests, was not on one side and the priests, who organized social life around religion, on the other. War was legitimated and made honorable from within, at the heart of the religious sphere.

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The role which these symbolic competitions periodically played was fulfilled institutionally and constantly by human sacrifice. It might appear surprising perhaps to discuss sacrifices in an analysis of Aztec games. And yet games in Mexico often served as a prelude to death.

Human sacrifice was the keystone of the Mexican social structure. The administration of death allowed extending a participation in power on an equal basis to the two dominating groups—priests and warriors. The military on the field of battle had as objective to kill as few of the adversary as possible! On the other hand, they attempted to take prisoners; these captives were brought back alive to Mexico, there to be sacrificed by the priests during grandiose public religious ceremonies. In this way the clergy gained the power to put to death. In exchange for this, warriors had the right to participate in the sacrificial celebration. This sharing of tasks was accompanied by a transfer of each one's field of action.

Public religious life was thus articulated around human sacrifice, and warriors were to arrive in great numbers on the ritual stage, both physically and spiritually. On the one hand the military took part as actors in the official liturgies. On the other, the spirit of the rites was strongly marked by the traces of a warrior ideology. Here we have the explanation for the pseudo-competitions which we have described, but we can also better understand the massive intrusion of games before the sacrifice.

The codification of sacrificial gestures naturally borrowed heavily from militarily-inspired scenarios since originally the sacrifice

was only the *deferred* death of a prisoner of war. But it is clear that when inserted in the framework of these celebrations, the warrior themes could only take on the form of games, that is be made unreal. And games, strongly devalued in the Aztec mind because of their apparent gratuitousness, found in this pre-sacrificial setting their ideal upward evaluation by being assigned the role of prelude to a sacred death.

The historical sources are all unanimous in mentioning the systematic presence of games *before* human sacrifices. The victims were required “to play” before being ceremonially executed. Quite often they performed extensive dances which could last for several days at a time. During *Tecuilitontli*, “the little feast of lords”, the ritual called for the sacrifice of a woman incarnating the goddess of salt water, Uixtociuatl. Here is how the chronicler Sahagún describes preparations for the sacrifice. “For ten days without stopping, covered with all her attributes, she danced with women who sang and danced also to make her rejoice. . . They all danced holding onto the end of little ropes to hold themselves up. All wore garlands on their heads made of that fragrant herb called *iztauhyatl* which resembled the incense from Castille. They sang their melody in a very high tone. . . The woman who wore the ornaments of the goddess and was to be sacrificed remained in the midst of the others. . . She sang and danced for ten days with all these other women. When the ten days had passed, she sang and danced throughout an entire night without sleeping, without resting for an instant, holding herself up simply by leaning on the arms of old women who danced with her. . .”¹⁶ What a strange image is this staggering woman, drunk with fatigue, reeking of the penetrating *iztauhyatl* perfume, who can only remain on her feet by holding on to the arms of sympathising women who take turns standing at her sides!

The games-skirmishes could also form a type of pre-sacrificial game. The *zonecaliztli* of the mid-wives was performed “to rejoice the woman who was to die in sacrifice and who incarnated the goddess Toci”.¹⁷ The confrontation of the *Uitznuaua* during the

¹⁶ Sahagún, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* p. 132.

month of *Panquetzaliztli* was only the prelude to the execution of all participants in the skirmish.¹⁸ But the most famous of the pre-sacrificial games is certainly the one which the Spaniards called *gladiatorio*. In a particularly spectacular fashion it staged an unequal struggle in which a man had to ward off the assaults of real warriors with artificial arms made of wood and feathers. The ceremony took place during the festival of *Tlacaxipeualiztli*, the festival of “the flaying of men”. “Before taking up arms, there was a solemn procession. Priests incarnating all the gods descended from the top of the temple called Yopico. There were very many of them and they walked in procession. Behind them there came the four valorous warriors who were to confront the prisoners. Two were knight-tigers, the other two knight-eagles. They moved forward simulating a sort of swordplay with their swords and shields. When they had arrived at the bottom, they all sat according to their ranks in their *quecholicpalli*, their ceremonial seats, around the sacrificial stone. . . The flutes and seashells then began to sound. . . And with that, one of them arrived with the prisoners to be sacrificed. Holding his prisoner by the hair, he led him to the *temelacatl*, the sacrificial stone. . . Then the prisoner was made to climb up on the round stone. A minister of the temple approached. With a rope which came out of a hole in the center of the stone, he tied the victim around the waist. Then he was given a wooden weapon with bird feathers glued to it in the place of flintstones. He was also given four throwing weapons, wooden objects made of pine to defend himself with. The prisoner’s master then left him and withdrew from the stone a little. He danced while watching what was about to happen to his captive. At last the combat began. The prisoner’s adversaries struck him with blows which could be of the most danger to him. . . Some of the prisoners were valiant enough to try to resist their four attackers and not let themselves be killed. In this case a fifth man would intervene, a warrior incarnating the god Opochtli who was left-handed. He overcame the prisoner, taking his weapons away from him, and threw him down. At that moment the priest Youallauan appeared, representing Totec. He cut open the prisoner’s chest and pulled out his heart”.¹⁹

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 145-146.

¹⁹ *Florentine Codex*, part III, p. 51-53.

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Here can be recognized the two-fold requirement of a pre-sacrificial game. As symbolic representation of a victory, the *gladiatorio* is an illustration in a game of Aztec superiority in military matters. However, in addition to this, it includes torture whose purpose is to prepare for a ritual execution. The pre-sacrificial game is in fact subject also to a practical imperative. It must make it technically possible to accomplish the immolative gestures. This is why it is always so violent, so excessive, so drawn-out. The fatigue that it induces allows bringing the victims to the foot of the sacrificial stone in a sort of secondary state where their nebulous consciousness could pass for resignation or for consent.

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In the Nahua world, not only did war serve as model for all manifestations of games which took on the form of a competition, but war itself was a game. The Aztecs called it *xolchियाoyotl*, "the flower war".²⁰ Flowers, however, are always a sign of games in indigenous thinking. The Aztecs, in fact, were apparently perfectly logical. If war seemed like a game to them, it is because war was, in fact, the only true competition which they knew and practiced.

First of all, unlike the *icaliztli* which are only ritualized enactments, war represented real stakes: life and death. On the battle field, actors played with a real risk. If they were taken prisoner, they would end up on the sacrificial stone of the opposing city. On a social level also, war played exactly the same role as competition in modern liberal societies. It was the basis of a veritable *cursus honorum*. To the most valorous, war opened up significant perspectives of social ascent, just compensation for the risks undertaken. The merits of a soldier were evaluated in relation to sacrificial requirements and were based on the number of his prisoners. In Mexico, he needed to have taken at least four captives to have the rank of *tequia*, or confirmed warrior, authorized to take part in the tribute. This opened up the way to a career which, progressing through highly varied grades, could lead to the elite fraternities

²⁰ Cf. Durán, *op. cit.*, t. II, p. 418.

of knight-eagles and knight-jaguars. The highest authorities of the government were drawn from among these elite warriors. Since a career in arms was open to all, with no requirements of birth, the battle field was apparently a special and probably unique opportunity for social competition. The Aztecs' art consisted in causing private interests to coincide with the collective interest. Once more Mexicans subjected their internal social dynamic to sacrificial necessities and to the warrior ideology which demanded ever more captives to immolate.

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But perhaps it is time to ask a question which now becomes insistent. In ancient Mexico, was there truly no form of popular games, spontaneous and detached from any ritual implications? Did Aztecs remain ignorant of play for the sake of play?

At first glance, the ball game could serve as a good example of an athletic type game. But there too it seems that this would be an error in point of view. Our perception of this game is probably betrayed by a too Western concept of indigenous America. It might be good to take another closer look.

The ball game, from the beginning, was extremely fascinating to the Spaniards. There is a good reason for this. *Tlachтли* is played with a rubber ball. But this black elastic substance with its unpredictable bouncing was absolutely unknown in the Old World. The curiosity of the chroniclers was whetted by this, and several good descriptions of the game have come down to us. Diego Durán says, "It is important to know that in all cities of any size, prestige and authority. . . the lords, concerned about their reputation, had built areas for playing ball in elegant and well-constructed settings. Inside, the floor was smooth and stuccoed with many paintings of the images of the idols and demons to whom the game was dedicated and whom the players consider to be their intercessors in this exercise".²¹ The playing area had the shape of a capital I. The game field was long and narrow, opening up at both ends to a rectangular area, perpendicular to the field. The walls were vertical. A gently sloping edging approximately one meter high ran

²¹ Durán, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 206.

the length of the field which allowed bouncing the ball at waist height. In the middle of the field, on each side of the central areas, there were two huge stone rings attached to the walls about three or four meters high. The goal of the game was to make the rubber ball go through these rings. To accomplish this, the players were not allowed to use their hands or their feet. "They did not play with their hands, but with their buttocks; they wore gloves and a piece of leather around their hips to hit the ball".²² The gloves obviously were essential, for the players were constantly throwing themselves to the ground to retrieve the ball and to be ready with their striking hip movements. Some authors mention the possibility of using the knees. "They played with their buttocks or with their knees, and it was considered a fault to touch the ball with the hands or with some other part of the body".²³

In any case, it is rather difficult to reconstitute the rules of this game which derive from a logic and a cultural environment which is quite different from our own. We know that there were a certain number of lines marked on the playing field to indicate whether a play was valid or not. For, of course, the ball did not go through the ring with each attempt. It should also be noted that there was not one *single* Aztec ball game but several. The rules could vary depending on the number of players present on the field, on the place where the game was played, on the circumstances of the match, etc.

Without entering into a detailed discussion, let us analyze games in terms of their general characteristics and spirit. *Tlachtli* seems primarily to be a ritual which was performed on a consecrated field which manifested all the qualities of a temple. Sahagún mentioned the large playing field in Mexico-Tenochtitlán, the *teotlachco*, among the structures located within the sacred perimeters of the *Templo Mayor*.²⁴ Torquemada speaks explicitly of this. "Each *trinquete* was a temple; there were two images placed in them, one of the god of games and the other of the god of the ball. . . . At midnight of a day when the signs were favorable. . . a priest came from the *Templo Mayor* with certain ministers to bless the field (if

²² Sahagún, *op. cit.*, p. 459.

²³ Durán, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 206.

²⁴ Sahagún, *op. cit.*, p. 161 (Appendix II of Book II, 39th edifice). The chronicler also speaks of another field for a sacred game, the *tezcattlachco* (32nd edifice).

it is possible to speak of blessing for such a detestable superstition). He spoke certain words and dropped the ball four times on the field. When this had been done, they called the playing field a sacred area".²⁵ The chronicler adds that each match began with "ceremonies and offerings to the god of games". It is clear that games were part of a highly religious context. *Tlachtli* is quite removed, it would seem, from the insignificance of a football match.

A tradition which nowadays is highly credited would have it that the ball games ended with the sacrifice of the captain of the losing team. Truth obliges us to say that there is no historical document describing this. This idea, which is preposterously formulated and Eurocentric in inspiration, seems to have arisen in the 1920's and appears to correspond to the discovery of the great playing field of Chichén Itzá (Yucatán). On the walls of this field are some beautiful bas-reliefs depicting a decapitation scene. Later several archaeological discoveries throughout Mesoamerica confirmed the association of the ball game with human sacrifices. It is highly probable that it was similar in Mexico. But to say, as this unfounded theory would have it, that the ball game implied human sacrifice is to grant the game an autonomy and independence which it never had in the Nahuatl world. On the other hand, since sacrifices always required a prelude, it is possible to believe that *tlachtli* fulfilled this function.²⁶ The ball would then correspond to one of the forms of pre-sacrificial games and would be a part of the cultic context described previously.

The very significance of the game would tend to reinforce this interpretation. It can hardly be doubted that the ball symbolized the sun and that the opposing struggle of the two teams referred to the fundamental cosmological combat where the survival of the world is at stake. The rubber ball was called *ollin*, and *ollin* in indigenous semiology represented the concept of movement. But for the Aztecs, this movement is always threatened, menaced by the forces of deceleration and by the exhaustion of strength which underlie it. It is the role of men, periodically and untiringly, to give the impulse which will reactivate cosmic movement. Such at

²⁵ Torquemada, *op. cit.*, t. II, p. 553.

²⁶ Sahagún also confirms this by noting human sacrifices on the *teotlachco*. Cf. *op. cit.*, p. 144.

least is the justification which the Aztecs brought forward for sacrifice. The blood of the victims nourished the Sun and *restored* Energy. On the playing field, the ball game illustrated this belief perfectly. The players' actions were meant to maintain the ball in movement, but also, symbolically speaking, to maintain the dynamic energy of the cosmos.

However, it is important not to force the concept too much. We have seen that there were several forms of games. Although certain matches did in fact correspond to pre-sacrificial rituals, others took place in a much lighter context. The chroniclers affirm that in general *tlachtli* was an aristocratic "pastime". According to Durán, it was practiced by noble lords, "to distract themselves from perpetual war-making".²⁷ Other authors tend to present the game as a sort of physical exercise meant to serve as training for war. One troubling detail is the fact that all documents insist on the fact that the ball game was officially reserved to the "lords". However, the term *señores*, which is the translation of the Nahuatl word *tlatoque*, is applied exclusively to the leaders of war and other dignitaries of the army. Once again we must affirm that just beneath the surface there was a close connection between games and war.

But where the *tlachtli*-exercise finds an original aspect is in the fact that it was the subject of betting. For bets were placed on the matches played by the lords! The players wagered cotton, coats, jewels, embroidered shirts, sets of precious plumes, gold. Some even bet fields, houses, slaves. It should be noted that the nature of these bets makes them comparable to the rewards normally granted to elite warriors and victorious leaders. The ball game was basically a substitute in game form for warrior activities. But the appearance of betting raises a problem. Does this fact mean that we should consider that *tlachtli* falls into the domain of games of *chance*?

We know that Aztec society was an overdetermined and totally predestined society. On the day of his birth, every individual received a destiny, contained in a sign called *tonalli*. This destiny enclosed the life of each being within the narrow restraints of a pre-established character and predetermined social role. How then, in this framework, could chance have been allowed to develop?

²⁷ Durán, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 210.

How could luck intervene since, by nature and by definition, nothing was capable of modifying the destiny inscribed in the name of each person?

In point of fact, the Aztec never allowed chance to acquire such a status. In the Nahuatl language there is no word to express such a concept. The only equivalent to what we call chance is the wheel of signs, the rotation of the calendar which, day after day, mechanically distributes the *tonalli* to new-born babies. On the other hand, the foreordained was not necessarily known. What a temptation it is, then, to attempt to pierce through the secret of one's destiny! We can easily imagine the attraction which ancient Mexicans must have felt for all divination techniques; they never missed a chance to question destiny.

The bets which were placed on the ball games seem to me to fit into this frame of thought. The player did not win because he had played well; he won because he was born under a propitious sign, or in any case under a more favorable sign than that of his adversary. This is what the Franciscan Motolinia had wisely observed in his *Memoriales*. "Of a good player, one who handled the ball well, it was said that he had his talent from his destiny, from his good fortune and from the sign under which he was born. And they attributed the disgrace of the loser to his bad sign".²⁸ The contest of a *tlachtli* thus allows each one of the players to test the nature of his destiny, to evaluate his capabilities for success in the future.

This too explains ball games played between certain sovereigns.²⁹ The game of *tlachtli* could serve as ordeal. In case of a conflict, it might spare the agony of a full-fledged war by making appeal to a divine decision. The result of the match would not only be considered as an indication of technical superiority, it would also indicate in which direction destiny was leaning. Men could only submit themselves to it. This is why sovereigns could *delegate* their roles to players without danger and have themselves replaced on the playing field by men who had been specially trained. But such recourse to champions obviously would only make sense if the ball

²⁸ Motolinia, *Memoriales*, II part, ch. 25. See also Torquemada, *op. cit.*, t. II, p. 554.

²⁹ See for example the famous match in three *rayas* in which Motecuzoma II was opposed to Nezaualpilli, lord of Tezcoco. Cf. Ixtlilxochitl, *Obras históricas*, Mexico, UNAM, 1977, t. II, p. 181-182.

game was seen as possessing the quality of an ordeal. *Tlachli* is a means of revealing power; victory in the game conferred legitimacy because it made manifest the favors and the complicity of destiny, that transcendent order which rules over human affairs. The myths themselves used the metaphor of a ball game to mark those moments of history where there had been a shift in power. Tezcatlipoca defeated Quetzalcóatl on the *tlachco* of Tula, marking the triumph of the sacrificial ideology. During a memorable match, Huemac, the last Toltec ruler, confronted the Tlaloques, the gods of native waters. He beat them but refused their “tribute”. Huemac regarded with scorn the ears of corn which his defeated opponents brought him. Because he disdained them, the Toltecs were soon to suffer a drought and a famine which sealed the end of their power.³⁰

The Mexican ball game was thus a noble institution. But it probably had a darker and more menacing face as well. According to the splendid testimony of the chronicler Diego Durán,³¹ there existed in Mexico a sort of “parallel” game, an underground circuit, played far removed from spectators, off the official fields, in a sort of semi-clandestine *demi-monde*. This game was practiced exclusively for the purposes of betting, and it took the form of a “private” competition between two spectators. Durán insists in presenting this game as a true aberration and points out that it was found exclusively among people of “the lower states”, who played “for vice and for gain”. It is obviously tempting to see, in this secularized game, a copy of the noble *tlachli* which has been profaned and reduced to the level of pure game. If we can judge from certain details which the chronicler relates, this was perhaps not quite the case. For there were “superstitions” which surrounded preparations for this game. “When night had come, the players set the ball they were to use on a paten and hung from a post the gloves and the leather belt which they would use for protection. They squatted before these instruments of play, adoring them and addressing to them invocations and superstitious words with an intense devotion. . . . And in order that the ball would be favorable to them, they invoked the mountains, the waters and streams, the valleys, the trees, wild beasts and serpents, the sun,

³⁰ Cf. Códice Chimalpopoca, Mexico, UNAM, 1975, p. 126.

³¹ Durán, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 209-210.

the moon and the stars, the clouds and the rain. . . . When he had finished this accursed and pagan prayer, the player dropped a bit of incense into a brazier set aside for this purpose and offered a sacrifice to the ball and the other accessories of the game. It was an offering of food. . . . The following day, after he had eaten the food which he had offered, he set off to find his opponent".³² As far as we are able to determine, even when this game was practiced for profane purposes, it did not cease being religious in its essence. Certainly the players wanted to obtain material gain. But the outcome of the matches remained subject to the decision of destiny and depended on the good or bad luck of each player. It is striking that Durán's text, which, after all, describes a "professional" player, never speaks of him practicing or exercising, but only of praying, imploring fortune, entreating the gods to be favorable to him!

* * *

Little by little the portrait of the Aztec player has been sketched. He was a highly discredited figure. In the indigenous scale of values, games were perceived in an absolutely negative fashion. Taken as a whole, they were worse than lying, cowardice or presumption, which were numbered among the most dreaded failings by the Aztecs. Games were reprovved for philosophical, moral and civic reasons. The Draconian prohibition of them was a result of the Aztec desire to economize ambient energy at all costs. For this reason daily life was codified in the direction of reserve and of effectiveness: no haste, no useless gestures; no anger nor laziness, no raging nor flabbiness. Tact dictated an ideal based on judicious balance.

Games, which by their very essence represent a gratuitous expenditure of energy, seemed to the leaders of Mexico to be an unacceptable waste. They could only be tolerated if a social utility could be found for them. Games thus had to be official or else be outside the law. Consequently the player who played for his own selfish purposes violated the general imperative regarding the conservation of energy as well as transgressing the social norm which united games and ritual.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 209.

But the taste for games was never, for the Aztecs, based in personal inclinations or particular temperaments. If some players existed, it was because the ritual calendar included game coefficients among its twenty signs. A person was a player because he had been born under the sign of the game, and no one could escape his own destiny.

The *tonalpoualli*, “the sum of destinies”, included two signs which were expressly related to games: the rabbit and the flower. The rabbit (*tochtli*) was a specialized sign which predisposed one to drunkenness. In the Aztec symbolic universe, the rabbit was an agricultural sign associated in the ancient pre-Nahua pantheon with the moon and with *octli*. *Octli*, which the Spaniards were to call *pulque*, was the only alcoholic beverage which the Aztecs knew. They made it from the agave, that imposing prickly plant which is characteristic of the landscape in the central plateau. Consumption of this fermented beverage is a tradition which had been implanted on the Altiplano for over a thousand years. The *pulque* thus had a certain cultural value. But the drunkenness which might result from it was the object of severe condemnation which was carefully cultivated by Aztec authorities. For inebriation was compared to games behavior because of the ataxia which it produced. A drunken man is excited, speaks loudly, gesticulates; he easily becomes aggressive and boastful. These were all attitudes which were held in disapproval by the Aztecs because they were contrary to the most elementary imperatives of civic behavior: calmness, moderation and sociability. In the discourse delivered by a newly elected sovereign during the enthronement ceremony, the leader devoted a long exhortatory passage to describe the evil effects of alcoholic intoxication. “What I recommend to you primarily is that you keep yourselves far removed from drunkenness and that you do not drink *octli* at all, for. . . it makes a man lose his senses. This is why our ancestors were detached from it and were afraid of it, considering *octli* as something horrible and disgusting. Senators and lords of times past hung a great many men for this vice; they broke open the heads of some with stones, and they had many others flagellated. *Octli* is the root and origin of every evil and is the path to perdition, for *octli* and drunkenness are the cause of all discord and all dissension, of all revolts and all troubles in cities

and in kingdoms. It is like a whirlwind which destroys and overturns everything. It is an infernal storm which brings with it every type of evil combined. From drunkenness there comes adultery, rapes, the seduction of virgins and incest, thievery, robbery and other crimes, curses and false testimony, murmuring, denigration, clamorous outbursts, disputes and shouting. All this is the fruit of *octli* and of drunkenness".³³

Despite such warnings, which were accompanied by punishments meant to serve as examples, there were drunks in Mexico. They had the misfortune to be born under the sign of the "rabbit" and did not know how or were unable to correct the tendencies which were inscribed in their lines. It was said, for example, that "whoever is born under the sign of the rabbit would be drunken and inclined to drink immoderately; he would look for nothing more than *pulque* and would be drunk every day. . . . He would never get enough of it; and even if he had to drink the dregs filled with flies and bits of straw, he would drink it. . . . And if he didn't have anything to buy his *pulque* with, he would sell his coat or his loin cloth to be able to buy some. And this is how he would become poor, miserable and abandoned by every one. . . . But it was simply said that he had been born under such a sign and that there was just no remedy for it".³⁴

The first sanction against drunkenness, considered as the product of an unfortunate determinism, was social ostracism. Games were perceived as being lethal to the social organism. All such uncontrolled manifestations set off a defense mechanism which terminated inexorably in exclusion and premature death for the player. Aztec society sought to preserve itself from every danger of contamination.

The scenario was identical for individuals born under the sign of the flower. The flower (*xochitl*) connoted games in the broad sense. It had overtones of erotic impulses and an uncontrolled urge for betting. It is evident that sexual licence was condemned by the Aztecs. What could be more useless ultimately than sexual play when divorced from demographic objectives? This was considered especially true in that sexual energy was thought to be a non-

³³ Sahagún, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p. 226-227.

renewable resource. Once the capital had been exhausted, its owner was ruined and impotent. But even more disturbing in the personality of a player was his attraction for games of chance and in particular for the game of *patolli*.

And once again there is an enigma hidden behind this term. Aztec *patolli* has been compared to the goose game, to checkers, to *tables reales*, to chess, to dice, to the game of the little horses, to Asian Parcheesi, etc. Naturally, all these comparisons are in vain since *patolli* only has meaning when interpreted in the context of pre-Columbian thought. We know of the game from 16th-century descriptions, pictorial representations and archaeological information. And so it is possible for us to outline in general its framework and its spirit. It was played with beans, or to be more precise with a certain type of bean, the *patolli*, from which the game derived its name. This *patolli* is a red bean known in Mexico by the name of *colorín* and in the United States as the *mescal bean*. This name is incorrect, by the way, since the bean contains cytisine and not mescaline. But no matter what the nature of the alkaloid contained in the red bean, it should be classified within the category of psychotropes. The *patolli* initially was a hallucinogenic drug. We have here an indication which allows making a preliminary sketch of the Aztec games of chance. The use of hallucinogenic substances is, in fact, associated historically with shamanistic divination. Even after having settled in Mexico, the Aztecs, whose origins were in the north, retained practices of this type, applied particularly to the formation of a diagnosis in case of disease.³⁵ Thus the *patolli* seems, genetically, to have had some connection with a questioning of destiny.

On the eve of the Spanish conquest, this game was played on a mat with a cross-shaped motif. The codexes contain images which represent this playing board for us. It was divided into squares. Two players threw the beans; the stakes are shown around them. The game takes place under the watchful eye and the protection of the god of games, Macuilxochitl, in the presence of spectators who place bets.³⁶ Although the game has been described in several

³⁵ See for example H. Ruiz de Alarcón, *Tratado de las supersticiones y costumbres gentílicas*, Mexico, 1629.

³⁶ Cf. *Codex Magliabecchi*, fol. 60; *Códice Florentino*, fig. 63.

chronicles, the way it was played remains largely undeciphered. In general it seems to have involved moving small stones forward as determined by symbols painted on the beans. But the exact rules remain unknown. The shape of the playing area, however, suggests one interpretation. The cross was (and there can be no doubt of this) a cosmological symbol; and the objective of the players seems to have been to arrive at the central squares. The game could have had a religious significance. Nevertheless, the most disturbing aspect remains the gesture which underlies the existence of *patolli*. Throwing beans on a mat corresponds to a method of divination which was widely used in Mexico. Every indication leads us to believe that the game of *patolli* was an imitation of divination—in the form of a game—by casting seeds. Under the appearance of a game of chance, the player who tossed the beans in fact was soliciting a manifestation of destiny. The game of *patolli* is not a game of chance, but literally a game of *fate* where destiny became incarnate in the fall of the sacred beans.

All the misfortunes of inveterate players came from the fact that the sign of the “flower” predisposed them to a tendency to dangerous risks, stirring up their greed, but in no way guaranteed them success! To the contrary, the sign of the game is the sign of *loss*. In Aztec thinking, this was rooted in the most basic logic. Games were dissipation, loss, entropy. How could the flower *xochitl* be made to appear an emblem of success? In the Nahuatl vocabulary, a player was always a loser! Listen to one of the priests in charge of interpreting the signs of the calendar. “He who is born under the sign of the flower will have respect for no one. He will speak with pride and arrogance. Everyone will take him for a troubled spirit and as one who has been abandoned by the gods. . . . Everyone will scorn him. As for him, when he sees himself rejected by all, seized by pain and anguish, he will fall ill. And he will become poor, lonely, forgotten by all. He will want to die, to leave this life. . . . All that he owns will melt like salt in water. . . . And if a woman should be born under this sign, she will be a good embroideress but she will have to do penance in order to keep her sign from working against her. Otherwise she will live in poverty and in the scorn of all. She will be filled with vice and will sell her body. And it will be said of her that it is because of the sign of her birth. . . .”³⁷

³⁷ Sahagún, *op. cit.*, p. 230.

It is evident that fortune did not smile on creatures who were born under the sign of the flower!

The life of a player was thus situated in an inevitable system. Condemned to lose, whether he played *tlachtli* or *patolli*, automatically he one day would come to bet more than he had. "When someone lost everything that he had bet—clothing, precious stones or plumes—he began betting on his word, putting up what he said he had at home. If he continued to lose, the winner went home with him and demanded that he turn over what had been bet. If he was unable to pay his debts, he was thrown into prison. And if his wife or children did not get him out of there by paying his debts for him, he became the slave of his creditor".³⁸

Most of the time after having played for everything they owned, including their houses, their land and their wives' clothing, the big bettors even began to bet their own freedom. "They bet themselves, evaluating themselves at a certain price, knowing that if they were unable to buy themselves back within a certain amount of time, they would become the slave of the winner forever".³⁹

And this is the designated end for the player. Once he started down the fatal slope, he would continue to lose until that day when he was obliged to put his own freedom on the line. But on that day, he bet his life. For once he had become a slave, it was perfectly legal to put him up for public sale. His owner would be able to realise the amount of the bet which had been lost, and a merchant would purchase him to be offered in sacrifice. This time death would not miss its chance. And the circuit was thus closed. Games led to loss and destruction; but such ostracism could only be temporary. For in a society as centrifugal as was the world of the Aztecs, no one could remain asocial for long. Slavery would thus compel the fallen player to find some sort of useful function. In front of the slave there lay the path to becoming a sacrificial victim. At the end of his orbit, the player's destiny would make him fill a social and religious role which satisfied the needs of the community. The *patolli* player who seemed to have escaped from the sacrifice was ultimately transformed into a divine offering.

³⁸ Durán, *op. cit.*, t. I, p. 210.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

At the time of the Spanish Conquest, the missionaries had good reasons for denouncing the demon of games. In Tenochtitlán, playing with the devil led to the sacrificial stone.

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