



5-1-2009

# The Yoke and Its Significance in the Mesoamerican Ball Game

Leslie Arapi  
*University of Pennsylvania*

---

## The Yoke and Its Significance in the Mesoamerican Ball Game

## ***The Yoke and Its Significance in the Mesoamerican Ball Game***

Leslie Arapí

Mesoamerican societies during the pre-Columbian era were marked by diversity, which was enhanced by culture and tradition. Cradling the most advanced urbanized civilizations in North America at the time, the cultivation of customs, rituals and religion were inevitable. Polytheism was a characteristic of the region where gods had a dual nature and rulers held both secular and religious roles.<sup>1</sup> In conjunction with religion, the complexity of Mesoamerican culture was marked by the symbolism depicted in the art and the construction of monumental architecture of these peoples.<sup>2</sup> One striking aspect of every day Mesoamerican society was the presence of ball courts. By the Late Middle Classic Period (7<sup>th</sup> century) the ball game grew in significance among the Mayans, a civilization located in the Yucatan Peninsula and modern-day Guatemala.<sup>3</sup> An extraordinary archaeological find associated with the Mesoamerican ball game is the stone belt, providing insight to how the game was played. Through archaeological evidence, such as the discovery of a player's belt and the use of other related artifacts, the ubiquity of the Mesoamerican ball game is apparent, but it can be extrapolated that its emergence in Mayan culture served as a mechanism that held together religious, economic, social and political structures.

Through the use of various sources of archaeological evidence, one could get the closest first hand account of how the ball game was played. There are many primary accounts of Spanish chronicles that describe the ball game. Also, there is evidence from pre-Columbian stone sculptures, clay figurines, and figurine groups which reveal that the game is played in two teams.<sup>4</sup> On each of these teams there were an equal amount of players, ranging from one to eleven players. Players had a specific position on which side of the field to play, indicated by the whether their gear was worn on the right or left side of their body. From the figurines, the body postures indicate how the game was played. The game used a heavy rubber ball, about the size of a beach ball, in which the goal was to make sure the ball bounced off of one player to another and a point was given if the ball hit the floor of the opposing team.<sup>5</sup> The players wore loincloths, pants made out of buckskin to protect their hips, and gloves to protect their hands. Some of the equipment that was worn during a competition included handstones, stone yokes, *palmas* and thin stone heads (*hachas*) that could be attached to the yoke. Handstones were light and easily manipulated and believed to have been used to maintain balance when diving to bump the ball.<sup>6</sup>

One of the most salient artifacts associated with the ball game is a stone belt, also named a yoke by the Spanish. A yoke is generally u-shaped and made out of various stone, such as diorite, basalt or other fine stones.<sup>7</sup> Depending on the stone used to make the belt, it could give the belt a burnt orange color. Usually yokes are decorated with detailed carvings on the outer surface. For example, a face could be carved into the front of the belt, with scroll patterns along the sides. These belts remarkably fit around a person's waist fairly well. The purpose of wearing a yoke during the game is believed to have been to add more weight on the player in order to hit the large, heavy ball with a greater force. This force would propel the ball at a higher velocity and longer range. The function of these stone belts can be paralleled to the Puerto Rican stone "collars" which were worn during the ball game.<sup>8</sup> By comparing similar artifacts of other cultures, archaeologists can make a good predication as to how the object was actually used in Mesoamerica. Also through experimental archaeology, archaeologists have put on the belt and simulated its use to test different functions of the belt.<sup>9</sup>

The purposes of a stone belt are debatable among anthropologists and archaeologists. The main focus of this disagreement is whether or not the actual stone belt was worn during a match, or is an imitation of what was really used. One piece of evidence to support the stone yoke use during the match is an effigy vessel in the Museum of American Indian.<sup>10</sup> The figure

carved on the vessel is wearing a heavy belt around the waist on its right side, the same form as an opened, u-shaped stone yoke. The cross section: thick at the top, thin at the bottom and cut off squarely are characteristic of most stone yokes.<sup>11</sup> This carving on the vessel is believed by Ekholm<sup>12</sup> to be a perfect match to an actual stone belt, thus further proving the theory's validity. Other evidence in favor of this argument are two small figurine fragments from the Huasteca that also seem to be wearing stone yokes. These sculptures are just a few of many that indicate the use of stone belts during the ball game. In contrast to this point of view, it is commonly debated that the massive stone are just ceremonial imitations of the stone yokes worn during the game since the stone yokes are massively heavy.<sup>13</sup> This is contradicted by the pottery and carvings found which depict the stone yolks used in play. There are other theories that explain the yoke's use, but are less probable. One hypothesis is that yoke was used in human sacrifice, and put around one's neck to immobilize and make unconscious.<sup>14</sup> Another explanation is that yokes were "mortuary crowns," because in one site a skeleton was found with a yoke place around its skull.<sup>15</sup> Depending upon what context the yoke is found in, the theory of its function will vary. In general, the predominant view among scholars is agreed to be that the stone belt was used during the ball game.

Although the discovery of the stone belt is a substantial archaeological find, of even greater significance is belt's role in Mesoamerican society. The Mesoamerican ball game specifically played multiple roles during the height of Mayan prosperity, and is thus necessary to use other evidence to understand the belt's importance. During the Middle Classic period the Mayans experienced a rise in interregional activity and status due to the increase in interactions between other Mesoamerican cultures and creation of Teotihuacan, one of the Maya's most complex cities. This gradual shift of power to the Mayans parallels the rise of ball game, as well as ball court art and architecture. The Maya were broken up into a city-states and the ball game maintained a connection between these regions, fostering networks of trade.<sup>16</sup> Kaminaljuyu is an archaeological site of a Mayan town that eventually flourished into "small civic center" because a ball court was built next to a chief's house.<sup>17</sup> This site is an example of how although Teotihuacan was the center of Mayan society it was not the *only* symbol of authority due to the addition of a ball court in Kaminaljuyu. This site exemplifies the direct relationship between ball courts and status. Through its religious implications, the Mesoamerican ball game proves its cultural significance in its origins in the myth about a duel between the celestial and underworld gods. In summary, the myth involves a ball game duel in which the celestial gods, First Fathers, are defeated by the underworld, but the Hero twins get their revenge, reestablishing celestial order once again. This myth is found in the Mayan book of mythology *Popol Vuh*, one of the few texts to survive from the Classic Mayan Period.<sup>18</sup>

Through the analysis of the stone belt that is associated with Mesoamerican society, the complexity of their culture and tradition is conveyed. The archaeological context in which is examined defines its exact use in the lives of Mesoamericans. The most accepted theory is that the yoke was used during the ball game, but others believe it to be a mere imitation of the actual belt used in the game. Other scholars view the stone belt as a sacrificial element, in contrast to others who believe it to have been used in burial. It is evident that the application of various archaeological techniques and models will bring forth different views on the object's use. Nonetheless, by accepting the prevalent view it is clear that the association of the yoke to the ball game provides insight to the complexity of the game and how it influences Mesoamerica through the example of the Maya.

**Leslie Arapi** is a junior in the College majoring in Anthropology, with a concentration in Human Biology, and minoring in Consumer Psychology. This paper was written for Introduction to Archaeology, taught by Dr. Harold Dibble. The objective of the paper was to choose an artifact in the Penn Museum, research the artifact, and speculate about the artifact's archaeological significance.



<sup>1</sup> Burkholer, Mark A. and Lyman Johnson L. *Colonial Latin America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>2</sup> Burkholer, 3.

<sup>3</sup> Cohodas, Marvin. "The Symbolism and Ritual Function of the Middle Classic Ball Game in Mesoamerica." *American Indian Quarterly* 2, (1995): 100.

<sup>4</sup> De Borhegyi, Stephan F. *American Antiquity* 30, (1964): 84-85.

<sup>5</sup> De Borhegyi, 85.

<sup>6</sup> Morse, Mike. "Sport as a Model for Cultural Interaction: The Class Maya Ball Game." *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 16, no. 1 (1992): 41.

<sup>7</sup> Ekholm, Gordon. "The Probable Use of Mexican Stone Yokes." *American Anthropologist, New Series* 48, no. 4 (1946): 594.

<sup>8</sup> de Borhegyi 1964, vol. 30:85

<sup>9</sup> de Borhegyi 1964, vol. 30:85

<sup>10</sup> Ekholm, 594.

<sup>11</sup> Ekholm, 593.

<sup>12</sup> Ekholm, 594.

<sup>13</sup> Morse, 40.

<sup>14</sup> Ekholm, 593.

<sup>15</sup> Ekholm, 59.

<sup>16</sup> Morse, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Morse, 36.

<sup>18</sup> Morse, 36.