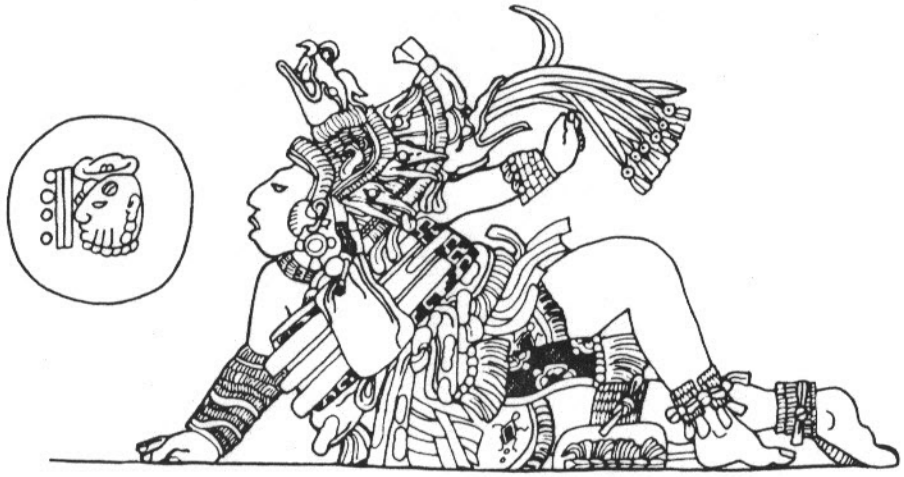

The Mesoamerican Ballgame

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CHAPTER 16

Ballgames and Boundaries

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Rubber-ball games were played by many Native American societies over a wide geographical range and a span of time of perhaps two millennia. Despite the great variation in the procedures and symbolism of the ballgame among all the peoples who played it, there is an underlying unity. All of these games are related in their sharing of certain principles dealing with the purposes for which they were played. They have a unifying function which extends not only to rubber-ball games in North, Middle, and South America, but also to many of the other New World games, including shinny, hoop andpole, and lacrosse. The Mesoamerican rubber-ball game is not an isolate but is a manifestation of an ideology that is at least pan–New World.

The symbolism of the Mesoamerican game is explored here from this perspective by an examination of its mythology and iconography. The discussion begins with a summary of the current interpretations of ballgame iconography, in particular, solar movement and agricultural fertility themes and the assumption that these themes are associated with human sacrifice, especially by decapitation. The decapitation scenes that pervade the symbolism of the Mesoamerican game lead to an investigation of "Rolling Head" myths which are found in many New World societies and are intimately relatedto games. I argue that decapitation is a metonym for dismemberment, and that dismemberment—the separating of the body into its constituent parts—is metaphorically linked to the separation of time into agricultural seasons which are marked by the periodic movements of celestial bodies. All of these

phenomena are associated with games because games involve a similar separation of society into groupings. I conclude with a discussion of the ballgame as a mechanism for establishing and maintaining the boundaries that mark the divisions within a variety of phenomena—temporal, spatial, and especially sociopolitical.

Current Interpretations of Mesoamerican Ballgame Symbolism

Many scholars of the Mesoamerican ballgame are more interested in the game as a ritual rather than as a sport because of its cult importance over a wide area of Mesoamerica, particularly during the Classic period but continuing into the Postclassic. The ritual significance of the game is reflected in the expenditure of effort in the building of ballcourts, many in ceremonial precincts, and in the artwork devoted to the game. Examining this evidence has provided much of the information on the symbolic themes that motivated the playing of the game. Many categories of artwork reveal aspects of the ballgame: carved panels, benches, and tenoned heads and rings on some ballcourts; presumed ballgame paraphernalia preserved as carved stone objects (yokes, *palmas*, *hachas*, handstones); stelae and other bas-relief carvings thought to represent the ballgame or ball players; depictions on ceramic vessels; and figurines and other portable artifacts. Additional information comes from Aztec and Mixtec painted codices showing the ballcourt, the game in action, and ball players.

Besides these iconographic representations, there are post-conquest written descriptions of the Aztec and Maya ballgames. The most influential account has been the *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1985), a cosmogonical narrative from Highland Guatemala which reveals a number of the mythical underpinnings of the game. Information about the game is also gained from the study of contemporary ballgames, especially in west Mexico (Anonymous 1986; Kelly 1980a [1943]; Leyenaar 1978).

Other sources of data for understanding the ballgame exist but are utilized less frequently because they come from outside of Mesoamerica. For instance, there are many versions of a rubber-ball game played in South America (Stern 1949). Attempts are rarely made to link the rubber-ball game with other kinds of games in the Americas (except in a historical way; see Krickeberg 1966 [1948]; Stern 1949), and with the exception of the *Popol Vuh*, myths about ballgames in Mesoamerica and neighboring areas are infrequently consulted (but see Krickeberg 1966; Pasztory 1976:207). This neglect is unfortunate since there is a rich corpus of information revealing the sharing of basic themes which structured the symbolic and ritual significance of many New World games.

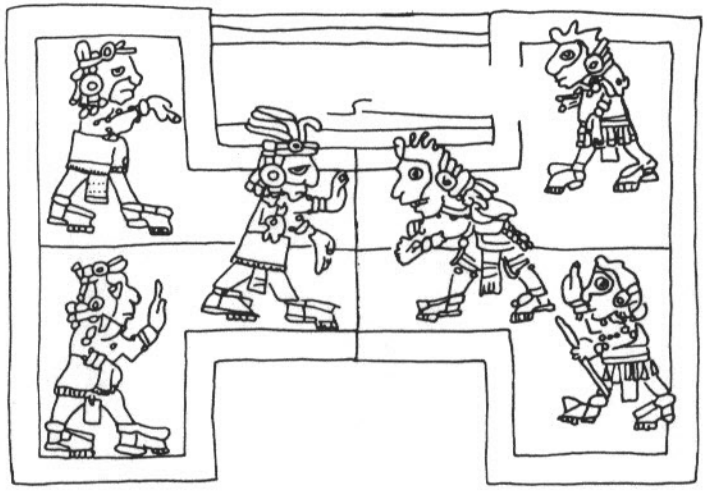

Figure 16.1. The Lords of Day and Night play ball against each other on an I-shaped ballcourt divided into four quarters (Codex Colombino:*Pl. 11*).

Interest in the symbolism of the Mesoamerican ballgame seems to have begun at the turn of the century with Eduard Seler. Seler perceived a relationship between the path of the ball during play and the movements of the sun, an idea which reflects the solar symbolism popular during his time (Pasztory 1972:445; Stern 1949:68–69). Walter Krickeberg (1966) developed this notion further, seeing the ballgame as a symbolic reenactment of the struggle between day and night, between light and darkness. It therefore symbolized the daily and seasonal journey of the sun and other celestial bodies, their cyclical descent through the Underworld and ascent into the sky. Evidence for this interpretation is drawn, for example, from an illustration of a ballgame played between the Lords of the Day and the Lords of the Night (Figure 16.1) (*Codex Colombino* 1966:Pl. XI), from the orientation of some ballcourts which would suggest an association with astronomical movements, and from the *Popol Vuh* especially, which tells of a ballgame played by the sun and moon against Underworld forces.

A second major symbolic theme proposed for the ballgame is agricultural fertility (Pasztory 1972, 1976, 1978a; Stern 1949:71). It is evidenced by the flowering and fruiting plants on ballgame reliefs at El Tajín, Bilbao, and Chichén Itzá (Pasztory 1972:444) and the iconography of the ballcourt markers at Copán (Baudez 1984). Lee Parsons (1969:103) suggested that vegetal fertility was "perhaps the ultimate significance of ballgame sacrifice." This

idea was also promoted by S. Jeffrey K. Wilkerson (1984; this volume) in his analysis of the Tajín South Ballcourt reliefs, which he interpreted as showing the sacrificial death of a ball player in order to gain *pulque*, the fermented sap of the maguey plant associated with agricultural fertility.

The fertility theme is not distinct from the solar symbolism but instead is inextricably linked to it (see also Brundage 1982:219). Agricultural fertility is a seasonal phenomenon, and seasonality is marked by the periodic movements of heavenly bodies such as the sun, moon, and constellations. Thus the ballgame cult is said to have "functioned to assure the continuation of the cosmic cycles of the sun, moon, and planets and the alternation of the dry and rainy seasons. . . . [Its aim was] the furthering of agricultural and natural fertility—a general preoccupation in Mesoamerica" (Pasztory 1978a:131).

The association between seasonal change and the ballgame, as suggested by Esther Pasztory, relies on the transforming mechanism of sacrificial death and rebirth:

> The essence of the ballgame seems to be a contest between opposing forces, which may be represented by male twins or a couple, a contest which often involves a cyclically recurring pattern of death, rebirth, and revenge. In each case, one contestant is devoured or beheaded (an act ritually recalled by the practice of human sacrifice), as a result of which great benefits inure to society, especially in the form of agricultural fertility. Because of the ambiguities inherent in the mythology, it is impossible and in fact unrewarding to try to decide in favor of the stellar or fertility interpretations of the ballgame. (Pasztory 1976:209–210)

A principal metaphor of this transformation is the movement of the sun. The ballgame is seen as reenacting the death and descent of the sun into the Underworld, an event which subsumes both diurnal and annual cycles (Pasztory 1978a:131, 138; see also Pasztory 1972:446). The death of the sun is presumably indicated by the descending sun god depicted on some ballgame reliefs (e.g., from Bilbao [Parsons 1969:Pl. 32–33]), skeletal deities, decapitation, and trophy heads. The rebirth of fertility is shown by water and plant representations, including plants emerging from the necks of decapitated players (Pasztory 1978a:138).

A slightly different idea was presented by Lothar Knauth (1961:197). He accepted the interpretation of sacrifice in a context of the cycles of heavenly bodies, but stated that it is the moon, symbol of fertility, and not the sun, which must be sacrificed. Another alternative (Moser 1973:48) is that the severed heads in ballgame iconography represent stars.

Marvin Cohodas has shown that all of these ideas are interrelated, forming part of a more complex ideology:

> The ball game, a game of action and motion, appears to have taken on the connotations of the motion of the sun at the meeting points of the upperworld and underworld, for it represents these points of transition when the sun enters into and exits from the underworld. At the height of its popularity as a cult, the ballgame was probably played on the equinoxes to represent the battle of celestial and infernal forces. The sacrifices which culminated the game were employed as sympathetic magic to bring about the two crucial events in the yearly cycle of the sun and of agricultural activity. (Cohodas 1975:110)

According to this interpretation, in the game played at the vernal equinox, forces of darkness defeat the forces of light and the sun descends into the underworld. The player on the losing side who is sacrificed at the end of the game represents the sun, an event which by sympathetic magic causes the descent of the sun. During the summer solstice, the sun mates with the moon to conceive the maize deity, who is the sun reborn. At the autumnal equinox the sacrificed player represents the moon goddess, indicating the victory of the forces of light over the forces of darkness since the death of the moon is coincident with the ascent of the sun (Cohodas 1975:108–110).

The current interpretations of ballgame symbolism can thus be summarized as follows: The ballgame is associated with the movements of celestial bodies, especially the sun and moon, which are related to seasonal agricultural fertility. The ritual game concluded with a sacrifice of a player symbolizing the death (and eventual rebirth) of the sun or moon which was necessary for the cyclically recurring astral movements to proceed in their usual manner.

Decapitation and Sacrifice

Paramount in these interpretations is the notion that the sacrifice of a player was necessary to bring about the desired benefits which the game was thought to produce. "The ball game cult of the Middle Classic period was essentially a sacrificial cult" (Pasztory 1978a:138). The sun (or moon) was sacrificed, as represented or caused by the sacrifice of a player, in order that it die so that it could then be reborn, continue its cyclical movement, and rejuvenate seasonal agricultural fertility (Pasztory 1972:444).

The evidence for ballgame-related sacrifice is overwhelming (e.g., Borhegyi 1969:507, 509; 1980; Knauth 1961), and only a few examples of this evidence can be listed here. At the Aztec annual Panquetzaliztli ceremony dedicated to the rebirth of Huitzilopochtli, an avatar of the sun, victims were sacrificed in the ballcourt (Sahagún 1950–1982:Bk. 2, Ch. 34). There is a sacrificial scene (probably decapitation) on a bas-relief panel at El Tajín's South Ballcourt (Kampen 1972:Fig. 23). Depictions of the act of decapitation and disembodied heads or skulls are found on ballcourt reliefs at Chichén Itzá

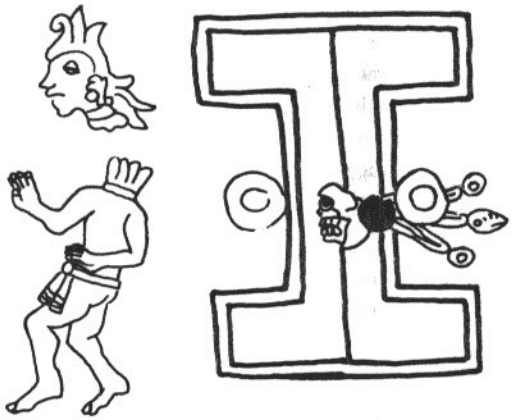

Figure 16.2. Divided ballcourt with two rings at midcourt, a central skull, and a rubber ball from which water flows, next to a decapitated man (Codex Borbonicus:*Pl. 19*).

(Great Ballcourt [Tozzer 1957:Fig. 474] and Monjas Ballcourt [Bolles 1977:226]); with ballcourt representations in codices (e.g., *Codex Borbonicus* 1981:Pl. 19; *Codex Borgia* 1963:Pl. 21; *Codex Magliabechiano* 1983:Pl. 80; *Codex Nuttall* 1975:4) (Figure 16.2); on a gold pendant from Tomb 7 at Monte Albán with a skull depicted in the center of a ballcourt (Krickeberg 1966:Fig. 30); on Maya vases with ballgame scenes (e.g., Hellmuth 1985); and on ballgame-related objects, such as the Aparicio stela of a decapitated ball player (Moser 1973:Fig. 13), a *palma* with a decapitation scene (Moser 1973:Fig. 14) (Figure 16.3), and the Bilbao stelae which portray ball players with disembodied heads (Parsons 1969:Pl. 32a, 34a). There are stone *hachas*, worn at the waist of ball players, in the shape of heads and skulls (Parsons 1969:Pl. 21). The Mixtec "decapitated goddess" is shown in the codices with a ballcourt among her insignia (Furst 1978:167–168). There is also an architectural construction known as the *tzompantli* (skull rack), on which human skulls were displayed, located immediately adjacent to ballcourts at some sites (e.g., Chichén Itzá, Late Postclassic Tula, Tenochtitlán). Actual skulls have also been found associated with ballcourts as the result of archaeological investigations at various Mesoamerican sites (e.g., Norman Hammond pers. comm.; Weigand this volume).

Mythical evidence of ballgame-related sacrifice is said to be found in the *Popol Vuh*, in which the "father" and "son" twin pairs were killed by their ballgame opponents and one twin of each pair was decapitated (see Borhegyi

Figure 16.3. Relief on a Late Classic palma *from Coatepec, Veracruz, shows a man with a knife in one hand and a severed head in the other (after Moser 1973:Fig. 14).*

1969:501). A similar story of decapitation occurs in an Aztec myth in which the goddess Coyolxauhqui was beheaded by Huitzilopochtli. Although this act was not a ballgame sacrifice, it did occur in a ballcourt, at its center, the *itzompan*—"place of the skull" (Tezozomoc 1980:228–229; Stern 1949:54).

Almost all of the evidence for ballgame sacrifice concerns decapitation. Either the act itself is depicted or else the disembodied heads or skulls are shown. Thus it is widely supposed that ballgame-related decapitation as sacrifice was a major aspect of the ritual game (see especially Castro-Leal Espino 1972; Knauth 1961). There is some support for this view from mythology outside of Mesoamerica associated with other games. In a Pawnee myth (Dorsey 1906:236–239), Spider Woman played the twin-ball game and hung the heads of her losing opponents on her wall. A related Caddo myth (Weltfish 1937: 172–177) has "evil beings" who played the hoop and spear game and who also hung the losers' heads on the wall. Stephan F. de Borhegyi (1980:24) remarked on a possible symbolic association between the hanging of the losers' heads on the wall and the head-shaped *hachas* worn by players as well as the tenoned stone heads set into ballcourt walls.

Although the iconography of severed heads and disembodied skulls is indisputable, the presumption of actual sacrificial death of a player by decapitation following a loss in a ballgame is less certainly supported by this evidence.

Mesoamerican societies of the Classic and Postclassic periods used several methods of sacrificial execution, but decapitation was not principal among them (see, e.g., Boone 1984; Durán 1971). The fact that decapitation or its result is frequently depicted in connection with ballgame iconography therefore requires further investigation as to why this action predominates. More importantly, the notion that decapitation is actually an act of sacrifice must be confirmed, not just assumed.

The critical link between the act of decapitation and sacrificial death in association with the ballgame is the *Popol Vuh* (Brundage 1982:222). Within this epic, there are clear indications of sacrificial deaths of ball players, as well as acts of decapitation of ball players. Careful reading of the *Popol Vuh*, however, reveals that decapitation was not the cause of the players' sacrificial deaths. The acts of sacrifice were separated from the acts of decapitation. Of the two decapitated ball players in the story, one was already dead when decapitated, and the other did not die when decapitated. In the first instance of ball player decapitation, the victim was one of the "father" twins, One Hunahpu and Seven Hunahpu. Both of these heroes were sacrificed by their opponents, the Underworld Lords, before they even played the ballgame, but how they were killed is not mentioned. After he was dead, One Hunahpu was decapitated, and his head was hung in a tree (similar to the fate of the heads in the myths mentioned above). Thus the sacrifice itself was not by decapitation: "And then they were sacrificed and buried. They were buried at the Place of Ball Game Sacrifice, as it is called. The head of One Hunahpu was cut off; only his body was buried with his younger brother" (Tedlock 1985:113).

As for the "son" twins, the head of one of them, Hunahpu, was severed from his body, but this was done prior to the final ballgame. This decapitation was not explicitly an act of mortal sacrifice because Hunahpu did not die. His brother, Xbalanque, placed a pumpkin on his brother's neck which was transformed into Hunahpu's head (Tedlock 1985: 145; thus a pumpkin became a head, whereas with his father, One Hunahpu, his head was put into a tree and became a gourd). Furthermore, the eventual sacrificial deaths of the younger twins, which took place after Hunahpu's decapitation, did not result from their defeat in the ballgame because they won the contest. Afterwards, the younger twins allowed themselves to be killed by their enemies and were executed by being burned to death in a large stone oven, not by decapitation (Tedlock 1985:148–149).

When the boys revived a few days later, they sacrificed themselves in a plot to defeat their adversaries, the Underworld Lords: "And this is the sacrifice of Hunahpu by Xbalanque. One by one his legs, his arms were spread wide. His head came off, rolled far away outside. His heart, dug out, was smothered in a leaf . . ." (Tedlock 1985:153). Here the sacrifice is not an act of simple decapitation but head and heart removal, with a scattering of these body parts. Significantly, this was also the fate suffered by Coyolxauhqui, sacrificed in a ballcourt in the Aztec myth mentioned above; her head and heart were removed (Tezozomoc 1980:229). In another version of this myth (Sahagún 1950–1982:Bk. 3, Chap. 1), Coyolxauhqui was actually dismembered by Huitzilopochtli, and this more complete dispersal of body parts is a clue to the meaning of decapitation, as will be elaborated below.

The actors in the *Popol Vuh* ballgame and in this Aztec myth all have astronomical connotations. Coyolxauhqui is associated with the moon, while her brother deity, Huitzilopochtli, is an avatar of the sun. In the *Popol Vuh*, the older twins may be Venus in its Morning and Evening Star aspects (Coe 1975: 90), while the younger twins are explicitly named as the sun and the moon. Therefore, a relationship between ballgame/ballcourt sacrifice and celestial bodies has not been dismissed by these arguments, but the method of sacrifice was not simple decapitation.

While both decapitation and sacrifice are related to the ballgame, decapitation must refer to more than the method of sacrificial execution, especially considering the additional heart sacrifice in the myths. Heart sacrifice was common in Mesoamerica, and Hunahpu, in the excerpt above, was laid out in the correct position for heart removal. If the purpose of the act was merely to kill, there is no need to add decapitation to heart removal.

Thus, to understand the meaning of ballgame decapitation, one must go beyond the notion of sacrifice, and indeed, sacrificial death is not the only necessary outcome of decapitation. Simply put, decapitation is the removal of the head from the body, resulting in a headless body and a bodiless head. The *Popol Vuh* and other New World myths show that for symbolic purposes, a loss of life does not necessarily follow. Either the head alone may continue to live, or both head and body remain alive after their separation. Freeing decapitation from the concept of sacrificial death, which is proposed here, does not mean that currently accepted themes of periodic astral movements and agricultural fertility are incorrectly attributed to the ballgame. On the contrary, these themes are further supported and interrelated in a systematic way by a reanalysis of decapitation.

Rolling Heads

Christopher Moser (1973) has devoted an entire monograph to decapitation in Mesoamerica; here I wish to pursue only one aspect of this act—the bodiless head. The heads or skulls represented in ballgame iconography have not been given much attention apart from the idea that they are the outcome of mortal sacrifice. They are usually relegated to a "trophy head" cult (Borhegyi

1969:502; Henderson 1947; Parsons 1969:167; Pasztory 1972, 1978a:128). However, some data indicate that the head may be symbolically equivalent to the rubber ball; if so, this would be of great significance. The identity between the game ball and a human head is not confined to Mesoamerica but has been found elsewhere, including the Old World (Henderson 1947:17; Massingham 1929:224–226).

A famous Mesoamerican example of this equivalence is again found in the *Popol Vuh*, when the Underworld Lords substituted the severed head of Hunahpu for the rubber ball in the final game. Iconographic support for the ball as a head or skull is found in ballcourt reliefs at El Tajín (Figure 16.4) (Kampen 1972:Fig. 19a) and Chichén Itzá (Bolles 1977:226–227; Tozzer 1957:Fig. 474), which show a ball with a skull on it placed between opposing players. The skull between the players on the Monte Albán Tomb 7 pendant has also been interpreted as a ball (Clune 1963:70). There are depictions in the painted codices of ballcourts with balls which appear to have faces on them (e.g., *Codex Borgia* 1963:Pl. 35, 42), and a Veracruz carved ceramic vessel shows ball players with disembodied heads which may represent balls (Hellmuth 1978:Fig. 10). Thus, one way decapitation is related to the ballgame is that the ball, a necessary instrument of the game, is equated with a bodiless head, and it must be procured by removing someone's head, either symbolically or literally.

An important aspect of the ballgame was to keep the ball in constant motion in the air (Durán 1971:313). This was possible due to the elastic qualities of rubber. The rubber ball bounced back when struck and seemed to have its own internal source of motion, as seen in the fact that the Nahuatl word for the rubber ball (*olli*) has as its root the word for movement (*ollin*) (noted by Blom 1932:495; Wilkerson this volume). Given the symbolic equivalence of the ball in motion and the human head, then the head in this context would also have been considered animated, capable of its own movement. Decapitation would therefore bring about not a lifeless head, but a head that, once freed from the body, could jump, roll, and fly.

This hypothetical connection between a "living" head and a ball is actually found throughout the New World among peoples who played many types of games, not just those with rubber balls, so its meaning goes beyond the noted elasticity of rubber. The animate severed head is a defining motif in myths known collectively as "Rolling Head" or "Rolling Skull" stories. The occurrence of this motif ranges from the Arctic Circle to Tierra del Fuego (Lévi-Strauss 1979:55; see Waterman [1914] and Swanton [1929] for partial distributions of this myth in North America). Significantly, these myths about disembodied living heads are related to ballgames. They also deal with the changing seasons, the movements of the sun and moon, and agricultural

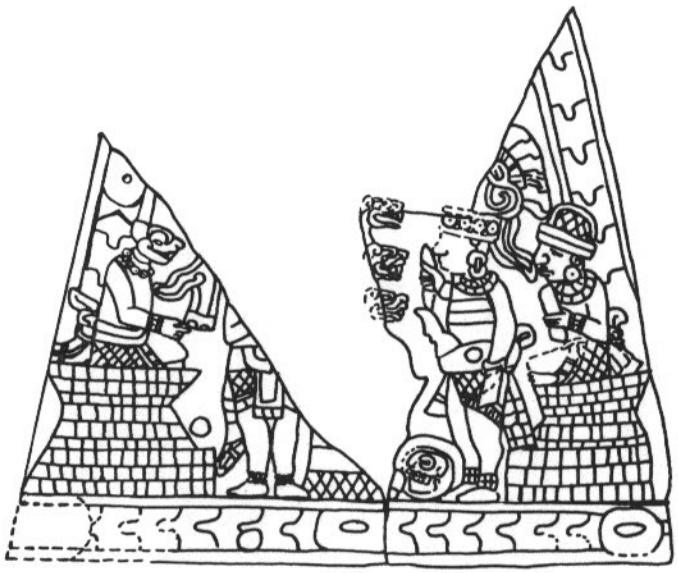

Figure 16.4. Pyramid of the Niches, Sculpture 7, from El Tajín, Veracruz, shows players in a ballcourt, one holding a knife, with a skull on the ball between them (after Kampen 1972:Fig. 19a).

fertility—all of the symbolic themes that have been suggested as underlying the Mesoamerican ballgame. They indicate a strong connection between these themes, games, and decapitation in a context other than simple sacrifice. While the myths cannot be analyzed here in detail, the linkage to the ballgame and its symbolic themes can be explored.

Rolling Heads Used as Balls

Borhegyi (1969:503) once suggested that the Mesoamerican ball players may have played with actual human heads. Mythical examples of the animated "Rolling Head" being used in ballgames are found outside of Mesoamerica as well, in societies lacking both rubber balls and ritual decapitation practices or trophy head cults. In a Seneca myth (Curtin and Hewitt 1918:285–296), a cannibal killed a woman and ate all but her head, breasts, and the boy twins she was pregnant with, which he placed in a hollow tree. The boys survived on the milk in the breasts and were later discovered by their father, who made them ball clubs and a ball to play with. The mother's skull was still alive, and in fear of it the boys and their father fled. The father, helped by his invisible brother, was chased by his wife's flying skull until it was finally killed. After the skull was dead, it was used as a ball in a game.

In this myth, not only is an animated head used as a ball in a ballgame, but there are other details of interest to Mesoamericanist scholars: the twins play ball with equipment given them by their father, a man who also has a "twin" (as in the *Popol Vuh*). Playing ball with a skull is not limited to human skulls, however. The Eskimo of Baffin Land (Boas 1901:146) and the Chukchee (Bogoras 1904–1909:324) believed that the Northern Lights were the souls of the dead who play ball with a live and roaring walrus head.

In South America, the Apinayé, who played rubber-ball games only at the boys' initiation ritual, told a myth about the origin of the rubber ball which again shows that the ball was once a rolling head. In this story (Nimuendajú 1939:175–177), a man who attacked people at night with his sharpened leg-bone was beaten to death by villagers, who cut off his head. His head jumped away, and returned in the daytime to attack the people, but they tricked it into falling into a hole and covered it with dirt. Later, youths going through their initiation came past the spot and noticed a rubber tree growing out of the head's grave. Using the sap from the tree they made the first rubber balls for the rubber-ball game. This myth has explicit connotations of the mutilated leg associated with nighttime and the severed head associated with daytime, indicating a division between day and night which is correlated with a division between upper and lower body parts (see below).

Rolling Head as Sun and Moon

In many interpretations of the Mesoamerican ballgame, the rubber ball is thought to be a symbol of the sun or moon. There are Rolling Head myths in which the head (a substitute for a ball) becomes the sun or moon. This equivalence is made in a number of ways. The Pawnee (Dorsey 1906:31–38) told the story of a girl chased by a noisy Rolling Skull. She was rescued by a man who struck the skull with an axe, breaking it into two parts. One part of the skull became the moon, and the other became the sun.

A different relationship between the Rolling Head and the sun and moon is found in a Blackfoot myth (Grinnell 1893:44–47). It begins with a woman whose foot and head were cut off by her husband when he discovered that she had a snake for a lover. The one-footed body of the woman chased after her husband, while her rolling head pursued her two sons. The head was eventually stopped by the boys, after which they separated, one to create white people and the other to create the Blackfeet. But the headless body, which became the moon, continues to chase her husband, who is the sun. If she can catch the sun, it will always be night, but as long as she does not catch him, day and night will continue to alternate.

The relationship between the sun and moon and the severed head appears as well in South America, where seasonal, monthly, and daily movements of these astral bodies are distinguished by different classes of Rolling Head myths (Lévi-Strauss 1979:107). There are several examples of the Rolling Head rising into the sky to become the moon (e.g., Kuniba and Cashinawa: Lévi-Strauss 1979:94–97). In the Cashinawa myth, a man invited a member of an enemy tribe to his home. The stranger's head was cut off and stuck up on a post. Some friends saw his head, which was still alive, and tried to help it, but the head demanded they give it ripe fruit to eat. Eventually it decided to become the moon, thereby making women menstruate. In this myth, the Rolling Head as the moon is associated with lunar periodicity and the female biological cycle.

Other myths of a severed head in this part of Amazonia differ in that the head, instead of rolling around, clings to a person and becomes an example of the "Clinging Woman" motif (Lévi-Strauss 1979:107). Her counterpart in North America is "Burr Woman" (e.g., Assiniboine [Lowie 1909:180–181], Wichita [Dorsey 1904:187–191]). The Clinging Woman is the upper half of a woman whose body has been cut in two (another indication of a division of the human body into upper and lower parts). She clings to other people, and is often metonymically represented by a head which attaches itself to its victims. In a Uitoto example (Lévi-Strauss 1979:54–55), the Rolling Head attached itself to her husband's shoulder, a nocturnal hunter, and eventually the man changed them both into a bird which sings at night while the moon shines. Preuss (1921[1]:110) explained this myth in terms of the phases of the moon.

Rolling Heads and Constellations

There are also Rolling Head stories about the origin of constellations, especially those whose cyclical movements were associated with the change in seasonal subsistence activities. One example is an Assiniboine myth (Lowie 1909:177–178) on the origin of the Big Dipper. As in the Blackfoot tale, a man discovered that his wife had a snake for a lover. While the woman was out, her husband told their six sons and one daughter to flee the house. When his wife returned and stuck her head in the door, the man cut it off. Her head rolled after the children, who escaped by forming a circle and throwing a ball to one another. While playing they rose into the sky and became the Big Dipper.

In this myth, the severed head is the motive for playing a ballgame which causes the seven siblings to leave the earth and enter the sky as a constellation. The Pawnee explained the origin of the Pleiades (Dorsey 1906:119–122) in a very similar way. A girl and six men were being chased by a Rolling Head.

The girl took a ball and kicked it in the air seven times. Each time she kicked it, one of them rose into the sky, where together they became the seven stars of the Pleiades. In a similar Gros Ventre tale (Kroeber 1907:105–108) in which the girl and her six brothers form the Big Dipper, the constellation itself is called Cut-Off-Head. A Wichita version (Dorsey 1904:63–69) has the girl escaping from a cannibal (here substituting for the rolling head; see below for the Southeastern myths), and using the ball she and six men became the Little Dipper.

Games and Periodicity

The Rolling Head has been shown to be equated with the ballgame ball and also to be associated with the basic Mesoamerican ballgame theme, the periodicity of celestial bodies. Periodicity is found as well in other myths which are related to the Rolling Head myths but do not explicitly deal with a Rolling Head. In an Arapaho tale (Dorsey and Kroeber 1903:153–159), the seven who became the Pleiades were chased not by a Rolling Head but by a round rock. The stone is clearly analogous to the severed head (Lévi-Strauss 1979:99), and the substitution of a rock for the head is fairly frequent (e.g., two almost identical Pawnee myths, Coyote and the Rolling Skull, and Coyote and the Rolling Stone [Dorsey 1906:447–448, 446–447]). This substitution takes on added interest in myths from the Southeastern United States, for here the stone that chases the people is the chunkee stone used in the chunkee game (e.g., Koasati [Swanton 1929:182–183], Alabama [Swanton 1929:131–132], Yuchi [Wagner 1931:89–96, 224–228]). Thus the part played by a Rolling Head in other myths, a head which is sometimes used as a ball in the ballgame, is here played by a game object equivalent to a ball.

The Alabama myth (Swanton 1929:131–132) illustrates this point. A cannibal kidnapped a girl and demanded that she cut up her body for him to eat. The girl managed to escape, and when the cannibal realized she was gone, he took out his chunkee stone and rolled it on the ground. The stone followed the girl's trail, with the cannibal close behind, but the girl's brothers struck the cannibal in the ankle and head with a cooking paddle, and killed both him and his chunkee stone.

In a Yuchi version (Wagner 1931:89–96), only the chunkee stone followed the girl, making a thunderous noise as it approached her. In several of the myths given above, the Rolling Head is also said to be very noisy (see also Pawnee [Dorsey 1906:31–38], Yana [Sapir 1910:123–128], Tembe [Lévi-Strauss 1979:92]). The Yuchi myth states that the noise is specifically that of thunder, and in an Arapaho myth (Dorsey and Kroeber 1903:278–282) the Rolling Head also makes a thundering noise. The connection between the

head or playing stone and thunder is revealing since thunder is frequently associated with ballgames, giving a symbolic relationship among animated heads, thunder, and games. The Kavina of South America believe that thunder is caused by a small boy throwing a rubber ball (Métraux 1942:43). The North American Menomini associated the game of lacrosse with thunder (Skinner 1913:78, 55). In a Menomini myth very reminiscent of the *Popol Vuh* story, the Thunderers played ball against "Underground Beings" (Hoffman 1896:131–135). The same event takes place in a modern Sierra Totonac (Veracruz) myth in which the young maize god plays ball against the Thunderers (Ichon 1973:73–81), causing rain and establishing the agricultural seasons. In a Natchez Rolling Head myth (Swanton 1929:215–218) which relates all three of these concepts, a woman who had been pursued by a Rolling Head was helped to victory in a ballgame by her son, Thunder.

What these myths and beliefs indicate is an association between games and climatic events tied in with the cyclical movements of astral phenomena, revealing that the Mesoamerican rubber-ball game is only one example of a much more general relationship. Michael A. Salter's (1980, 1983) examination of the games of Eastern North America determined that many of them were part of calendric fertility rituals or rituals designed to cause climatic change. These games include hoop and pole, chunkee, lacrosse, football, shinny, whip-top, ring and pin, pole-ball, handball, and the straw, bowl, and hand-dice games (Salter 1980:73, 77; see Culin [1975] for descriptions of these games). An example is the lacrosse game played by the Indians of the Six Nations (Salter 1983), part of the Thunder ceremony performed to bring rain for the crops. It was played by seven old men, representing the Seven Thunderers, against seven young men of the opposing moiety. Similarly, in the Seneca hoop and pole game the two teams represented the sun and the moon (1983:215), and in the Arkansas shinny game they represented the earth and the sky (1983:216). The Delaware straw game and ring and pin game could be played only during the winter, and it was believed that playing the game resulted in a blizzard. Salter (1983:217–218) suggested that the Delaware played the game in order to keep such bad weather within the winter season and not allow it to occur during the growing season when crops would be damaged; that is, to keep the balance between the seasons, so that winter would not overtake summer (see below).

In Western North America, string games and cup and ball games were played by peoples from the Arctic Circle to California in order to affect the length of the summer and winter seasons (Lévi-Strauss 1979:173). Some Southwestern Indian games are similarly associated with seasonal change. The Tewa ritual relay race was performed at the summer solstice to strengthen the sun for its journey to its winter home (Ortiz 1969:108). Certain

Tewa games, such as marbles and jacks, are considered cold-producing and are played only during the winter, whereas shinny is played during the summer to strengthen the sun (1969:114).

What is it about games that relates them to seasonal changes associated with climatic events and the movements of celestial bodies? To answer this question one must first examine the phenomenon of seasonal change. Over the course of the year days and nights are of unequal length, shorter on one side and longer on the other; hence they "limp" (Lévi-Strauss 1973:463). If the process does not reverse itself, and the shortening winter days do not begin to lengthen, then one is faced with the prospect of eternal winter, eternal night. This is the fate predicted in the Blackfoot myth given above, and it is to prevent this fate that many rituals, including games, are performed: to ensure an alternation, and hence a balance, between the oppositions which make up the daily and seasonal cycles.

Limping is part of many seasonal rituals around the world (Lévi-Strauss 1973:460–462). The limping gait (as opposed to the normal gait in which the left and right legs are of equal length) represents the imbalance of night and day or of the seasons (1973:464). Similarly, games are "lame" if the purpose in playing them is to "shorten on one side and lengthen on the other" in imitation of the seasons (Lévi-Strauss 1979:174). They "limp" by introducing an inequality among the participants, serving to separate them into teams, or into winners and losers. "Games thus appear to have a *disjunctive* effect: they end in the establishment of a difference between individual players or teams where originally there was no indication of inequality" (Lévi-Strauss 1966:32).

In the same way, the daily, monthly, and seasonal cycles introduce an unequal separation of the cosmos. In all of the games that are thought to affect seasonal movements or climatic change, the result is obtained by playing the game itself, which repeats the disjunctive character of periodic cycles, and not by any "sacrificial death" as is usually suggested for the Mesoamerican game. Such sacrifices are merely redundant, for North American mythology indicates that "to win a game is symbolically to 'kill' one's opponent" (Lévi-Strauss 1966:32).

The concept of disjunction helps to explain why games are played during times of separation; for example, ritual games played on solstices (when inequality between day and night or between the seasons is greatest), on the first day of the planting season, or at the start of the rainy or dry season. This concept also extends to playing games at times of social separation as well, such as during the initiation of Apinayé youths when they are neither children nor adults. In many societies the game is a contest between the two major social divisions, the moieties of the Apinayé (Nimuendajú 1939:66), the Menomini, as noted above, and many of the other North American tribes (Krickeberg 1966:295).

Periodicity and Dismemberment

Games are associated with periodicity because they introduce or emphasize a disjunction within the society, while the periodic movements of astral bodies introduce a disjunction in time and space, separating the cosmos into night and day, summer and winter, rainy and dry season. Decapitation and the Rolling Heads symbolize exactly the same phenomenon—the introduction of a disjunction—in the division of the body into its parts. This is why dismemberment, rather than mortal sacrifice, may better explain the references to decapitation in Mesoamerican ballgame imagery. Dismemberment of the human body into its discrete parts represents *par excellence* the introduction of discontinuity into what was once a unified whole, for the human body is a symbol of the cosmos, a "microcosm of the universe" (Turner 1960). The belief in the equivalence of the body and the cosmos was exemplified in Mesoamerica in a number of ways, such as the linking of the five directions with the four limbs and body center (Klein [1976:13–14] citing Nuttall), relating the 20 day signs—a complete cycle—to the different parts of the body (e.g., *Codex Ríos* 1964:Pl. 73; *Codex Borgia* 1963:Pl. 53; see also Klein 1976:13–14), and the Yucatec Maya use of the same word for "man" and "20," the complete cycle associated with both time and space (Edmonson 1984:98). Cutting up the body thereby symbolizes the division of the cosmos into its constituent parts, both spatial (geographical) and temporal (cyclical).

The sacrifice involved in the Mesoamerican ballgame is not merely the loss of life but the loss of the unity of the body. The unity of the body represents the primordial unity of all phenomena prior to the creation of culture, for the invention of culture requires the separation of all things into meaningful categories. Since decapitation is really an aspect of the separation of body parts and the resulting loss of unity, which leads to the establishment of culturally constituted categories, it is not surprising that the South American Rolling Head myths (Lévi-Strauss 1979) are really dismemberment myths or myths dealing with mutilation of various parts of the body. This generalization applies to other Rolling Head myths as well. The California Yana Rolling Head myth is explicit in this regard (Sapir 1910:123–128, 202–203); for a similar Maidu myth see Dixon [1912:189–193]; see also a South American Kavina myth (Lévi-Strauss 1979:98). In the Yana tale, a man became a Rolling Head while up in a tree harvesting pine nuts. He took his body apart and threw the pieces down from the tree instead of the nuts, leaving only his moving head up in the tree.

Furthermore, dismemberment, and not just decapitation, is tied to the origin and movements of celestial phenomena. As we have seen, severed heads become the sun and moon or bring about the origin of constellations with seasonal significance. But it is not the heads alone which are so transformed

or transforming. In both North and South America, several constellations are believed by different societies to have been formed from various body parts of legendary individuals (Lévi-Strauss 1969:222–225). Certain Amazonian myths correlate Orion and the Pleiades with lower-body mutilation, Berenice's Hair and the sun with middle-body mutilation, and the moon and unnamed stars with upper-body mutilation (Lévi-Strauss 1979:107).

Agricultural fertility is also an aspect of total body dismemberment. The Yana Rolling Head (dismemberment) myth given above takes place during the time of the pine-nut harvest. Other Rolling Head myths also involve ripened fruit (Natchez [Swanton 1929:215–218], Alabama [Swanton 1929:131–132], Cashinawa [Lévi-Strauss 1979:95–96]). And going back to the *Popol Vuh*, when the head of One Hunahpu was placed in the tree, the tree miraculously bore fruit (Tedlock 1985:113). In fact, the Mesoamerican world view shared in the nearly universal theme of dismemberment as a source of primordial creation and fertility (see, e.g., Baal [1966:222] for a famous Old World example). This belief is best shown in an Aztec document, the *Histoyre du Mechique* (1905:29). In this account of the formation of the world, two gods divided the earth deity into two halves. The upper part of her body formed the earth and the lower part the sky. Afterwards, various plants arose from specific parts of her upper body.

Dismemberment is an all-encompassing concept which connotes the same basic themes as the rubber-ball game: celestial periodicity and agricultural fertility. There is also some iconographic support for the broader concept of dismemberment (as opposed to simple decapitation) in association with Mesoamerican ballgame symbolism. Monument 1 at Bilbao, Guatemala, is a Classic period stela often cited for its representation of ballgame decapitation (Figure 16.5) (Parsons 1969:Pl. 34a). It depicts a large central figure and four smaller figures, one in each corner. The central personage is recognized by his accoutrements to be a ball player. He holds a severed head and a knife in his hands, while the four other figures also hold severed heads. However, the main personage is standing on a human torso, a torso lacking arms and legs as well as a head, and there are hollows carved on the torso to indicate sockets where the limbs were removed (noted by Parsons 1969:104). Thus, the stela depicts dismemberment. Other carvings from this site, some associated with the ballgame, also portray cut up human body parts (1969:Pl. 44; Parsons this volume; see also Borhegyi 1980).

Body Symbolism and the Ballgame

Because so much ballgame iconography deals with the cutting up of the body, it is useful to explore further the symbolism associated with the separation of

Figure 16.5. Monument 1, Bilbao, Guatemala, depicts a ball player (with yoke) standing on a dismembered human torso. He holds a knife and a severed head. The four personages in the corners also hold severed heads (after Moser 1973:Fig. 16; Parsons 1969:Pl. 34a).

body parts. A clue to the significance of the act of dismemberment comes from a ballgame device, a *palma* from Veracruz (Figure 16.6) (Parsons 1969:Pl. 61b, c), which depicts human body parts on both sides. On one side are the legs and pelvis (lower body) and on the other are the arms and head (upper body). This *palma* thereby incorporates the division of the body into upper and lower parts which has already been noted in several myths.

The assignment of meaning to these body divisions is also revealed by the playing of the ballgame itself, because there were strict rules as to which

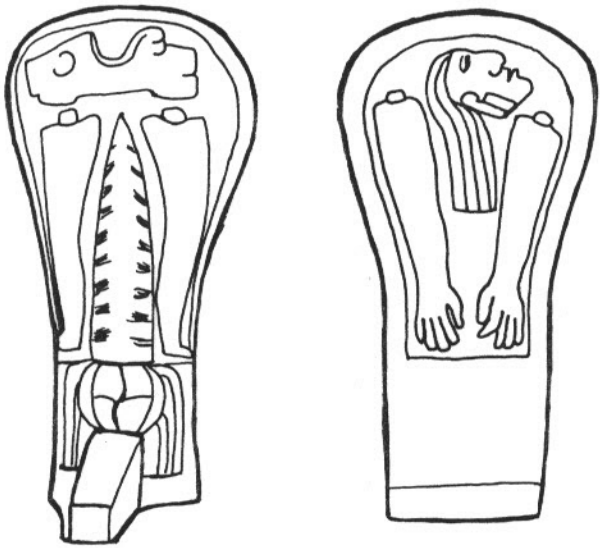

Figure 16.6. A Veracruz palma *shows dismembered human body parts on both sides (after Parsons 1969:Pl. 61b, c).*

areas of the body could be used to strike the ball (e.g., Métraux 1942; Stern 1949). For most of the Mesoamerican games, only the middle part of the body, usually the hips and buttocks, could touch the ball during play (Stern 1949:Map 3). This means the ball could touch a player only at the boundary between the upper and lower body, further reiterating the conceptual division of the body noted above for the Veracruz *palma*, an object which was worn at the player's waist, at the conceptual boundary.

A similar division into halves with a dividing line in between can be found on the ballcourt. Many representations of ballcourts in the codices show it as separated into two or four parts (see examples in Krickeberg 1966). Descriptions of the game by chroniclers (e.g., Durán 1971:315) and modern ethnographers (e.g., Kelly 1980a:166) mention a central dividing line separating the two teams. The line is often referred to by its Aztec name, *tlecotl* (Krickeberg 1966:195); in the Nayarit game it is called *analco*, meaning "from the other side, on the other shore of a river" (Kelly 1980a:166). What is significant about this division is that it parallels the division of the human body into halves or quarters as represented by the two limbs of the upper body and two limbs of the lower body. Furthermore, whereas the ballcourt has been thought to represent the earth and its four quarters (Stern 1949:69), the human body is also a representation of the earth or the cosmos. Therefore, the ballcourt is the same as the human body, divided in half or in quarters, as a symbolic representation of the same phenomenon.

Iconographic support for the supposition that the ballcourt represents the human body is found in the *Codex Borgia* (1963:Pl. 35) (Figure 16.7), where the splayed body of the anthropomorphized crocodilian earth is positioned on a ballcourt. The splayed or hocker position of the deity is related to the earth as earthmother since it is the birthing position (Klein 1976:15; Nicholson 1967:82). In the *Codex Borgia* picture, the four limbs of the deity's body are positioned in the four corners of the court, and the exaggerated circular midbody is at the center. Interestingly the head of the earth deity is not on any part of the ballcourt. This is because the ballcourt, as a four-part structure representing the four divisions of the human body, is headless. The ball, which moves back and forth from one end of the court to the other, is the

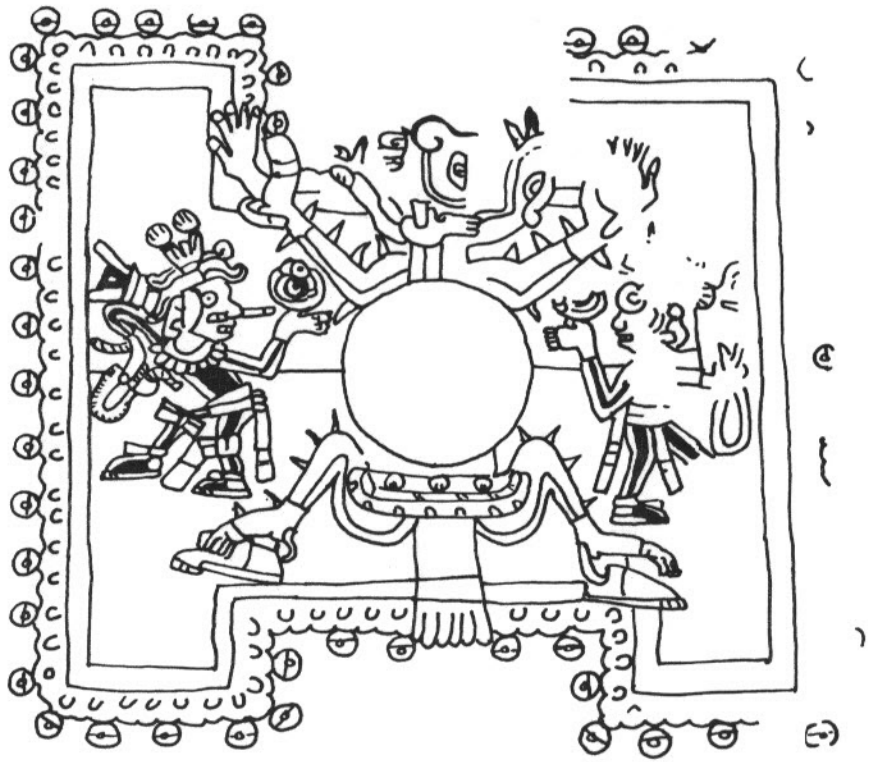

Figure 16.7. An anthropomorphic earth deity wearing a crocodilian skin is depicted in the splayed or hocker position with one limb on each quarter of a ballcourt, while two deities on either side hold balls with faces on them (Codex Borgia:*Pl. 35*).

severed head of the ballcourt, further emphasizing the separation of body parts and the symbolic significance of the head.

Another important part of the human body is its center, where the four divisions are joined. On the *Codex Borgia* deity, the center of the body is coincident with the center of the ballcourt. Ballcourts are often shown in the codices with centers marked by a circle (e.g., *Codex Colombino* 1966:Pl. 2; *Codex Bodley* No. 2858 [Krickeberg 1966:Fig. 19]), a *chalchihuitl* (jade jewel) symbol (*Codex Nuttall* 1975:74), or a skull (*Codex Nuttall* 1975:4; *Codex Borbonicus* 1981:Pl. 19). Many of the Aztec depictions of earth deities in the splayed or birthing position have the same or similar symbols marking the center of the body: a *chalchihuitl*; a quincunx (repeating the five-part directional symbolism of the body); a heart (Nicholson 1967:82); an *ollin* (movement) symbol, itself analogous with the four-quartered ballcourt (Krickeberg 1966:252); the sun symbol; and, very frequently, a skull. Personages in a similar splayed position with a central circle were also depicted on ballcourt markers at Tenam Rosario, Chiapas (Agrinier 1983). The ballcourt is thereby further linked to the body and to the earth by having its four quarters arrayed like the four limbs of the splayed earth deity, and by the sharing of the same symbols in its center, its "navel."

The "navel" of the earth is the entrance to the Underworld, as we know from myths of especially the Aztecs, and similarly, the ballcourt is an entrance to the Underworld (see, e.g., Brundage 1979:10; 1982:215; Cohodas 1975:110), specifically its center. The idea that the Underworld entrance is associated with the midbody is repeated in other aspects of the ballgame. For a certain distribution of the game (Hellmuth's [1975a] Toltec-Veracruz-Cotzumalhuapa-Tiquisate game), this part of the body is where another important piece of ballgame equipment was worn: the yoke. The iconography of many of these yokes depicts toads as zoomorphic representations of the earth (Nicholson 1967:83), or other individuals in the splayed position (see Proskouriakoff 1954) (Figure 16.8).

What is interesting about the use of this iconography on the stone yoke is that where one would expect to find the abdominal marker, the navel of the earth-deity, there is the opening of the yoke itself. When the yoke is worn, the ball player is positioned in this opening, in the navel, so that he is halfway in and halfway out of the Underworld (see also Wilkerson 1984:116). Because he wears the yoke at midbody, his lower body is in one realm, and his conceptually separate upper body is in another, so that his entire body is positioned at the threshold or boundary between the two realms. Being halfway in and out of the Underworld emphasizes the separation of the body into two parts, upper and lower, and the symbolic importance of the midbody, the only part allowed to touch the ball.

Figure 16.8. Relief carving of a toad in the hocker position decorates a Veracruz stone yoke. The opening of the yoke is located at the center of the toad's body (after Proskouriakoff 1954:Fig. 2).

Other scholars, as early as Preuss's work at the beginning of this century (cited in Krickeberg 1966:220), have observed that the yoke was probably conceived as an entrance to the Underworld, as were the vertical rings (see also Brundage 1979:10; 1982:215–216; Cohodas 1975:110) which were positioned on the ballcourt walls, notably at midcourt. The yoke, rings, and the idea of a central hole (whether or not real ballcourts actually had one [see Tozzer 1957:127]) reinforced the imagery of the ballcourt as an entrance to the Underworld, as did the fact that the court itself was often either partially sunken or had the appearance of being sunken into the ground (Brundage 1979:10), its inward sloping benches giving it the appearance of a V-shaped cleft (independently noted by Schele and Freidel this volume).

To be at the boundary between these two realms and thus have access to both is to be in a position of extraordinary power. As seen in other examples of Mesoamerican art, rulers had themselves depicted in the mouths of earth-monsters or niches representing entrances to the Underworld, demonstrating their singular ability to belong to both worlds. The ballcourt was therefore an extremely powerful place. As such, it was used for many other ritual activities besides the ballgame. The game itself can be viewed as equivalent to the "labyrinth," the difficult journey or test which must be overcome before one can gain entrance to the source of sacred power.[1]

Ballgames and Boundaries

In the symbolic separation of the body, in the separation of the space between the world of men and the world of gods, and in the separation of time into periods marked by celestial movements and the change of seasons, ballcourts and ballgames are associated with boundaries. Such boundaries marked the division of a unity into its discrete components. It was this principle which generated the surface symbolism seen in the iconography and mythology of game-playing peoples throughout the New World. Exactly how these ideas

were expressed obviously differed in space and time, as various societies used the game to emphasize disparate kinds of boundaries, separating a variety of categories.

In keeping with its disjunctive quality, the ballgame also and most especially marked the separation of society into its component groupings, just as ballcourts were the loci where this separation was made manifest, and ballgame paraphernalia and costuming were the implements for symbolizing or accomplishing this separation. As noted above, there are examples from both North and South America of moieties playing one another in the game. In the Apinayé game, for example, the Kolti moiety (associated with the sun) played against the Kolre moiety (associated with the moon). It was only on this occasion that individuals addressed one another by their moiety name instead of their personal name (Nimuendajú 1939:67), further demonstrating that social separation was a crucial motive for the game. Furthermore, the rubber-ball game was played by the Apinayé only during the time of the boys' initiation, when they were in a liminal state, on the boundary between being children and adults.

The Classic Maya also associated ballgame imagery with a change in personal status, in this case, the accession of a king (Schele and Freidel this volume). There is iconographic evidence that the king dressed in ball player regalia, although it is uncertain if he actually played a game, in order to draw on the connotations of disjunction, as well as to demonstrate his personal link to cyclical cosmic forces. For example, Step VII of Yaxchilán Structure 33's Hieroglyphic Stairs depicts in bas-relief a ruler in ballgame regalia in position to strike a descending "ball," on which is carved a bound prisoner (Figure 14.6). These sacrificial victims, who were probably war captives and were identified with the ball, indicate the symbolic linking of the ballgame, interpolity warfare, and certain celestial events, particularly Venus events (Schele and Miller 1986:250). The game was thus a boundary maintenance mechanism between polities, with the sacrificial victim representing a "social decapitation," the removal of a member of the society (sometimes its ruler, its political "head") from the "body politic."

Other sacred histories relate that even a change in entire political hegemonies was accomplished via a ballgame, which served as the dynamic threshold between succeeding empires. In an Aztec myth (Mendieta 1945: 88), a ballgame defeat by the Toltec king Quetzalcóatl caused him to abandon his capital city, thus marking the end of the Toltec empire. Another story (*Leyenda de los Soles* 1975:126) also has the Toltec empire falling into ruin because of a ballgame, this time due to a victory by a Toltec king. This king, Huémac, played ball with the rain gods (similar to the North American "Thunderers" who played ball), but his failure to accept the winnings he was offered

brought Toltec hegemony to an end and paved the way for the rise of the Aztecs. In a later historical episode, the ruler of Azcapotzalco essentially brought the Tepanec empire to an end, allowing the Mexica of Tenochtitlán to take its place, by his loss in a ballgame (Chimalpahin 1965:96, 194).

Just as the game connoted a temporal and sociopolitical boundary marker, the ballcourt itself marked a spatial division. Metaphorically, it lay at the boundary between the earth's surface world and the Underworld, as we have seen. Building a ballcourt was an act of territorial possession in which the natural landscape was transformed into cultural space (Leyenaar 1978:13), at the threshold between nature and culture. According to an Aztec document (Tezozomoc 1975:31) which tells the story of the Mexica migration to Tenochtitlán, their patron deity, Huitzilopochtli, built a ballcourt with its adjacent *tzo ıpantli* (skull rack) as the first act in their settlement of Coatepec. Destruction of this same ballcourt, after Huitzilopochtli killed and decapitated Coyolxauhqui there, forced the people to leave that place (Tezozomoc 1980: 229; see Gillespie 1989).

The location of ballcourts in those societies which built these special structures also indicates their use as marking a variety of boundaries. Where a motive was to emphasize the distinction between diverse, probably competitive ethnic groups, ballcourts would be located at the edges of their respective territories, where their geographical boundaries coincided. Ritual ball playing here would have served as a boundary-maintenance mechanism, to keep the balance in the established "distances" (in all senses of the word) between the two groups. This seems to have been the case in Postclassic Highland Guatemala where the ballgame was played between the Quiché and other ethnic groups on the frontier (Fox 1981:342, this volume). Similarly, in the Valley of Oaxaca during the Monte Albán II period, a time of decentralization when ethnic/political/territorial distinctions may have been emphasized, there is evidence for ball playing particularly on the outer perimeter of the valley, on its frontier (Kowalewski et al. 1983:51; Kowalewski et al. this volume).

In contrast to these examples, there are also ballcourts at the centers of sites. Here an internal boundary was indicated, relating to divisions within the society. At Utatlán in Highland Guatemala, there is also a central ballcourt which bisected a line dividing moietal residential areas (Fox this volume). At Classic period Copán, Honduras, the Main Group is located between two roadways running east and west and leading to certain household types. "Not coincidentally, this central point in the Main Group coincides almost exactly with the location of the main ballcourt" (Fash 1983:283). In many of the west Mexican sites, ballcourts separate different circular residential complexes (Weigand this volume).

The boundary created by the ballcourt also marked cosmological divisions

associated with rulership and the separation of the ruling lineage from its subjects. At Classic period Quiriguá, Guatemala, a ballcourt lies on the boundary between the northern/sacred/ritual area of the Great Plaza Acropolis and the southern/profane/worldly area (Ashmore 1983:9). At Preclassic Cerros in Belize, there is also a "mediating ballcourt" between a tall northern structure and a low southern structure which compose the Str. 50 Group (Ashmore 1983:11; see Ashmore 1989 and Scarborough [this volume] for further examples of mediating ballcourts in Maya settlement patterning).

Aztec Tenochtitlán's sacred precinct also has a pronounced north–south division most emphasized by the Templo Mayor itself (see map in León-Portilla 1978:App. II). An imaginary east–west line running through the precinct, separating the Tlaloc and Huitzilopochtli temples on top of the main pyramid, would cut the ballcourt in half. The two halves of the ballcourt may therefore have been invested with the same oppositional meaning as the pairing of the temples of Tlaloc (on the north, associated with rain and earth) and Huitzilopochtli (on the south, associated with sun and sky), notably in the annual north–south movement of the sun corresponding to the alternation of rainy and dry seasons and their related ceremonies.[2] This ballcourt is also situated at the entrance to the ceremonial precinct itself, at the threshold between sacred and profane.

Periodicity as Metaphor for Sociopolitical Divisions

The ballgame was an event that manifested the separation of a unity into its parts—symbolized by the two teams, each on its own side of the playing field—but which simultaneously provided for an ongoing relationship connecting these parts to one another in a structured way, by the movement of the ball back and forth between the two sides. The nature of the game further provided that in this relationship, a correct distance be maintained between the divided parts so that one side did not consistently overtake the other (one team did not take possession of the entire court). Although one team would temporarily have an advantage in the winning of the game (and thus the game would "limp"), such imbalance would be evened out over time as future games were played.

The themes of the Mesoamerican ballgame revealed in the iconography and mythology—astronomical periodicity and agricultural seasonality, related to dualism and the involvement of twins—have all been reiterated in the interpretation presented here. However, these themes should be understood as specific examples, even metaphoric representations, of a more general principle: The ballgame introduces a disjunction and further serves to maintain the boundary between the opposing categories that make up that

disjunction. While much of the Mesoamerican iconographic and textual imagery of the ballgame is explicitly related to seasonal fertility and celestial phenomena, I doubt that this was the major concern of the game. Instead, the dynamic cyclicity associated with the movement of heavenly bodies—though important to an agricultural society—*was itself a symbol* of the segmentation of, and the maintenance of the "correct" distance between, sociopolitical categories.

The concern for marking social boundaries would obviously be great in societies at a state level of organizational complexity, but even much smaller groups played the game for identical reasons. The ballgame of the Sherente of South America (Nimuendajú 1942:19–22) perhaps most clearly reveals how the game serves as a balancing act for social divisions, while at the same time takes on symbolic connotations of periodicity. The Sherente are divided into moieties affiliated with the sun and the moon. From knowledge of the symbolism of the Mesoamerican game, one would expect that each moiety fielded its own team so that the sun and moon could "struggle" with each other to symbolize the duality of day and night. In this case, however, the game is played only by the "foreign" clans which are not part of the moiety organization, in order to emphasize the recognized role these clans have in mediating between the two autochthonous moieties. By playing the game, and by their nature as outsiders, the foreign clans maintain the boundary (the correct "distance") between the sun and the moon, and more obviously, between the social categories represented by the moiety divisions.

The notion that the boundaries being marked and the distances maintained were not simply tied to seasonal periodicity is supported by other evidence, such as the Mixtec codices, which indicate the intercommunity and intracommunity mediating functions served by the ballcourts (Molloy 1985), and the Rolling Head myths. Although many of the myths from Amazonia are about the origin of the moon (the Rolling Head introducing monthly periodicity), in fact they really deal with marriage alliances (Lévi-Strauss 1979:73). They are concerned with maintaining the proper social distances among persons, and thus they examine both incest (where the relationship is too close) and marriage with animals (a relationship that is too distant).

Indeed, many of the myths about the sun and moon deal with social relationships (Lévi-Strauss 1979:91–92, 157). In these myths the sun and moon are placed in their proper locations in the heavens, at their proper distances from the earth and from one another. Therefore, each will have its turn during the day and nighttime, and the cyclical system will remain balanced. Nevertheless, the spatial axis between sky and earth, in which the sun is kept at a certain correct distance—not too far (= eternal night, cold) or too near (= eternal day, drought)—is related to the ideal distance between two potential

spouses in the marriage alliance system (Lévi-Strauss 1979:174).

In North America, the Rolling Head myths are concerned with the more fundamental separation between humans and animals (Lévi-Strauss 1979:74) rather than the separation of people into marriage categories. In the Blackfoot myth and others, the wife has an animal for a lover, thereby failing to distinguish animals from humans. Her decapitation, the introduction of disjunction in her body, is the pretext for emphasizing the separation of humans and animals. (The Blackfoot Rolling Head myth introduced a further ethnic separation, between whites and Indians; see above.)

In the Southeastern United States, the Rolling Head was replaced by a chunkee stone which was owned by a cannibal. Cannibals eat people, and confuse people with food (animals). In some versions the cannibal even ate his own wife; he eats what he should have sex with. He is an inversion of the Plains woman who has sex with what she should eat. In all these examples, one must look beyond the obvious references to astronomical, agricultural, calendrical, or other overt symbols to determine the more fundamental categorical separations that are being examined.

Conclusions

The unity of the rubber-ball game in its many manifestations, and its link to similar New World games, are based on the premise that by its nature a game marks a disjunction, a separation into opposing categories, while maintaining a balanced relationship between those categories. The balance may be attained by the action of the ball itself as it alternates between the teams, or in the alternation of winners and losers in successive games. The complicated scoring procedures of the surviving west Mexican rubber-ball games, in which points can be both gained and lost in various ways (Kelly 1980a:169; Leyenaar 1985), reveals how difficult it was for either side to overtake quickly the other. This underlines the notion that what was desired was a recognition of the separation of phenomena into categories with a simultaneous balance between them.

The diversity of the ballgames, seen in the playing rules, the configuration of the courts (or their absence), the equipment and costuming, and the iconography of related artworks, results in part from the diversity of boundaries that were of concern to the New World peoples who played the games. The more abstract conceptions frequently were not made explicit but were couched in the easily grasped metaphoric representations of the separation of the cosmos into seasons or day and night by the cyclical movements of astral phenomena, separations which were already meaningful to the people. These ideas were further symbolized by the ritual act of decapitation, separating the head from the body. In Mesoamerica in particular, the headless body represented the ballcourt itself, its four quarters the symbol of the divisions of the cosmos, and the animated head represented the ball which conjoined those divisions by its movement between them.

Notes

1. The link with the Underworld—source of supernatural power—also helps to explain the prognostication or divinatory aspects sometimes associated with the game.

2. The sun at equinox appears to rise precisely between the two temples on top of the Templo Mayor pyramid, an event said to account for an early map of Tenochtitlán in which the "sun" is represented by a head peering between the two temples (Aveni 1980:246–248). Also appearing in this map is a headless body placed in front of the Templo Mayor—right where the ballcourt was located. Continuing this argument to its logical conclusion, during the year the sun will move north and south of this equinoctial line. In the summer it will move into Tlaloc's "court" in the north, with great danger that the sun-ball will become "dead"—it will cease moving—when it reaches the end of that "court" at the solstice. This may be why points were lost in the game when the ball became dead at the end of the court (according to Durán 1971:314), when it ceased to move at its farthest extreme, when the seasons seemed to "limp" the most. In that case there would be permanent summer, and seasonal balance would be lost. What was needed to avoid this imbalance was for the sun-ball to be returned to Huitzilopochtli's side of the "court," which it entered at the autumnal equinox on its southern journey. During the winter, the dry season, "when the sun was weak . . . Huitzilopochtli was feasted and celebrated . . . to coax him, as sun fire, to retrace his journey in the ecliptic and recreate a balance with the earth" (Hunt 1977:126–127).

[This copy lacks the bibliography, which took the form of a combined bibliography for all chapters.]