

The Quiché Maya Ballgame: Mythistorical Perspectives

Michael A. Salter

University of Windsor

Classicists, ethnohistorians and social historians, indeed all who examine the past, face a common challenge—one of information retrieval. Concerns arise regularly with respect to the nature, validity and reliability of sources, and most importantly, as to the extent of the data bank. The problem of limited data can be particularly acute for scholars examining either preliterate societies or peoples, such as the Maya, whose written records have largely been destroyed. Their task then is to supplement the often meagre information available from mainstream sources by uncovering and examining materials not traditionally employed in historical research. Among the latter are legends, myths, stories, rhymes, and songs, all of which deserve consideration. The examination of such a source served to focus this study of the Quiché Maya.

The Quiché Maya established, during the 14th and 15th centuries, unquestionably the most powerful pre-Hispanic confederacy in all of Mesoamerica. From the centre of their kingdom in the highland city of Utatlán they controlled much of what is now Guatemala. Their military and economic accomplishments firmly established them as one of the Conquistadors' prime targets.

From this Post-Classic society emerged the *Popol Vuh*, an epic that has been billed as one of the major literary achievements of the native Americas. The *Popol Vuh*, or Sacred Book of the Council of the Quiché Maya, is a sophisticated cosmogonical saga, part mythological, part historical. While primarily a story of creation and tribal history, it delves extensively into such dualities as the sacred and profane, good and evil, order and chaos, heaven and hell, and life and death. In short, the norms, values, mores, and beliefs of the Confederacy's power élite are revealed through the document. The historic and mythic parts of the narrative complement each other. It is its holistic

nature that allowed this mythistory to be employed as a cultural backdrop to the ancient Quiché civilization.

The underlying purpose of this study was to revisit the rubber-ball court game of the Quiché Maya through a textual analysis of the *Popol Vuh*. Archaeologists have some knowledge of the game through early Spanish chronicles, Quiche artifacts and architecture. This information was compared against that gleaned from the *Popol Vuh*.

There are many references to play throughout the manuscript, the majority of which revolve around the ballgame. Passages in the *Popol Vuh* reinforce much of what is already known about the game; however, the narrative provides a considerable amount of new data from which a number of conclusions can be drawn. To illustrate: The fact that ball courts were located in the economic, religious and political heart of each community suggests that the game was a central feature of Quichéan life. Further, each massive structure and the games contested on it fell under the jurisdiction of a prominent civic official and member of the dominant lineage. In return, his lineage enjoyed certain rights whenever they played on the court. We learn also that the game was probably played only by the nobility, that each player possessed his own playing equipment, and that the equipment of skilled performers was highly prized, presumably because it was believed to be supernaturally endowed. Despite the fact that most contests were of a social nature, the cosmic and supernatural elements of the game were pervasive. This was particularly so on those ceremonial occasions when a losing player was ritually sacrificed by decapitation. As the contests between the Hero Twins and the Lords of the Underworld clearly demonstrate the game was steeped in symbolism and closely linked to the heavens, death and, in a macabre way, immortality.

Of course questions remain unanswered, however, insights gleaned through the *Popol Vuh* do help to clarify the symbolic nature of the rubber-ball court game, its associated rituals, and its prominence within the Quiché Maya Confederacy.