

Aztec Games and Rituals

1 A god of games?! The ancient Aztecs of Mexico had just such a god: Macuilxóchtli (ma-quill-SO-chi-tul), which tells us something about the importance of games in the Aztec culture. And their games were not simply pastimes; they had religious significance as well.

2 *Pelota* was the forerunner of all present-day games that are played with a rubber ball. It was played on a large, H-shaped court. The ball was extremely hard, so hard that the players had to wear padded clothing for protection. They were allowed to hit the ball only with their elbows, hips, and knees. The object of the game was to knock the ball through a stone ring at either end of the court. The team of the first person to succeed in doing this won the game. And it was very important to win, for the team that lost was sacrificed!

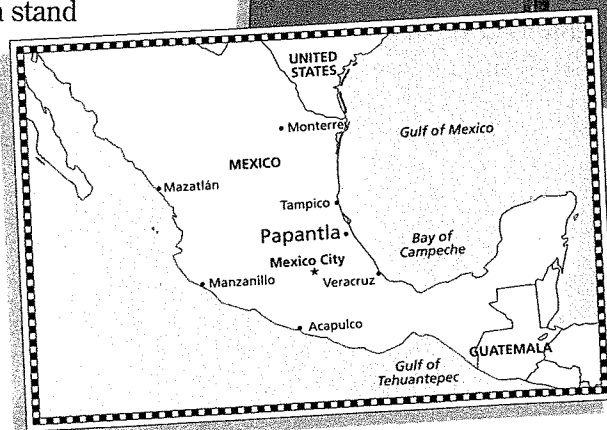
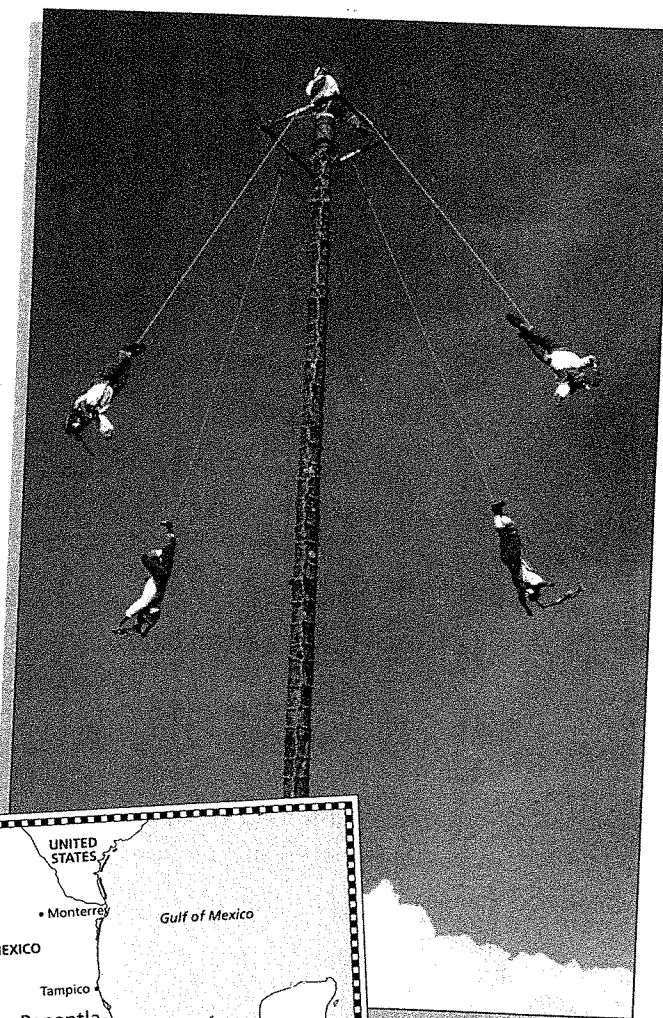
3 *Patolli* was a very different type of game, much more enjoyable for all concerned and very popular. It was a board game similar to parcheesi played on a cross-shaped board. Specially marked beans were used as dice. Twelve differently colored counters were divided among the players, who moved them around the board depending upon the throw of the dice.

4 One of the most dramatic of the Aztec rituals was also a ritual for many other indigenous groups. It is still performed by the Totonac of Papantla, a village near Veracruz, Mexico. It is the ancient ritual of the *voladores*, or fliers. It survives to this day because the Spanish missionaries did not forbid it. They did not realize that it was a religious ritual and not just a dangerous sport.

5 Picture a pole a hundred feet high. At its top is a platform on which five men stand in costumes decorated with brightly colored feathers. One man is playing a flute. The other four suddenly leap into the air. You gasp, then realize that each of them is attached to the top of the pole by a rope tied around the ankles. As they fall, the ropes unravel, causing them

to circle the pole. The length of the ropes is such that each *volador* flies around the pole thirteen times before landing on the ground.

6 The calendar was at the center of Aztec life. Perhaps the four *voladores* originally represented the four seasons, each with thirteen weeks (the thirteen circuits of the pole). Or the total number of circuits (13) that the *voladores* (4) make may have represented the 52 years that made up a cycle in the ancient sacred calendar. Today, however, it is not the religious aspect of the event, but its spectacular grace and daring that attract spectators.



- 1 The Aztec game of *pelota* has elements of two modern games in it. Which ones?
- A soccer and baseball
 - B basketball and baseball
 - C volleyball and soccer
 - D soccer and basketball

- 2 The Aztec game of *pelota* could still be played today exactly as it was originally, but one element of the game would have to be changed. What is that element?
- F The players would have to wear unpadded clothing.
 - G Both men and women would have to be allowed to play.
 - H The losing team would have to be allowed to go home after the game.
 - J The court would have to be shaped like the letter E.

- 3 What present-day sport is most comparable to the ritual of the *voladores*?
- A high diving
 - B bungee jumping
 - C skateboarding
 - D rappeling

- 4 Why can people still see the *voladores* perform today?
- F It was not just an Aztec ritual.
 - G The Spanish missionaries enjoyed the grace and daring of the dangerous sport.
 - H The missionaries didn't understand what was happening.
 - J The missionaries encouraged religious rituals.

- 5

READ
THINK
EXPLAIN

 Imagine that you were alive during the Aztec empire and you observed one of the games or rituals described in this text. Write about your experience attending the event. Include details about the setting, other people who were there, the event itself, and its outcome.