

# Bul: A Patolli Game in Maya Lowland / Lieve Verbeek

Comparative ethnographic research on colonial and contemporary Mesoamerican<sup>(1)</sup> board games revealed that the Maya board game, called *bul*, played by the Mopan and K'ekchi' farmers in Southern Belize<sup>(2)</sup>, is a native American game. There is a well-marked affinity and relation between the pre-Conquest "game of the mat and patol beans" of the Aztec, called *patolli*, and its various twentieth century manifestations.

## 1. Introduction

In the pre-Conquest times games of chance employing beans or reeds as dice were quite popular and widespread in Mesoamerica. Although there is an abundance of ethno-historical documents, no accurate description has been found of how these games were played. Even the well-known Aztec board game of *patolli* is still a riddle. Only the "superstitious" aspects of the game and the heavy betting that went with it are well documented. If we are to believe what the earliest Spanish chroniclers wrote about the native American games of chance, we must assume that by the end of the sixteenth century the Mesoamerican games were abolished (fig. 1) and replaced by Spanish or Old World games (Duran 1967, Sahagún 1981). Besides, the twentieth century ethnographers and anthropologists do not show much interest in the games of the native Americans either. The reason probably is that there is no direct demonstrable association between modern recreational games and divination. No doubt, in ancient times the Mesoamerican games must have had a mantic significance, but at the eve of the Conquest sheer gambling was the main objective of the native American gamblers. On the other hand ethno-historians and archaeologists are still studying the various designs of the *patolli* boards that have been discovered in ancient sites all over the Mesoamerican area. Although there are still many questions unanswered, it is generally accepted that the *patolli* boards are cosmological images (Caso 1924-27, Duverger 1978, Swezey and Bittmann 1983).

By now the term *patolli* has become a generic term. It does no longer signify one specific Aztec game of chance, played on a mat on which there was drawn a cruciform board, with four black, marked *patolli* beans as dice (fig. 2). *Patolli* now labels any variant of the square, cruciform or circular game-boards drawn or incised on floors or benches of ancient Mesoamerican buildings (figs. 3 to 6), or featuring in the multiple pre-colonial or early-colonial codices (figs. 7 to 9), as well as some of the twentieth century games of chance that are assumed to be survivals or variants of the ancient game of *patolli*. For indeed, in some remote areas, safely away from the surveilling and punishing Spanish authorities, indigenous groups preserved their ancestors' games of chance well into the present century.

Nevertheless, it must be considered a lucky coincidence that this author recently had the opportunity to observe a Maya board game in the field<sup>(3)</sup>. In the tide of modern civilization and technology even the most isolated communities are swiftly substituting their cultural heritage for the "blessings" of westernized societies. And thus, the



*Execucion de los juegos y tabulexias de los jueces y fue justiciado  
como ellos por el Señor jurado de esta tierra por mandado de los señores*

Fig. 1: Execution of a patolli player. His patolli board, dice, counters and bundle with superstitious objects are being burnt (Relaciones Geográficas: Tlaxcala, Tomo I. 241v 11).

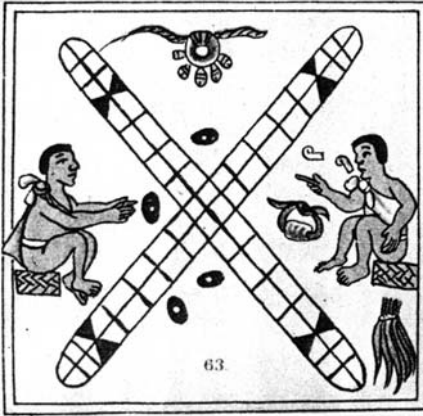


Fig. 2: **Patolli**, codex Florentino, lam. XLVIII, nr. 63, reproduction from the work of Sahagun, Madrid, 1905

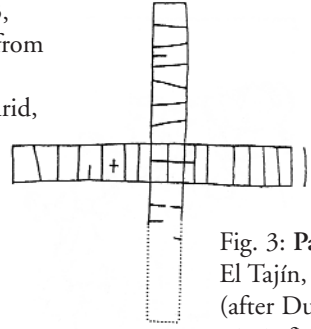


Fig. 3: **Patolli**, El Tajín, Mexico (after Duverger, 1978, fig. 4c)

Fig. 4: Xunantunich, Belize, **patolli** Type I (after Mackie, 1961)

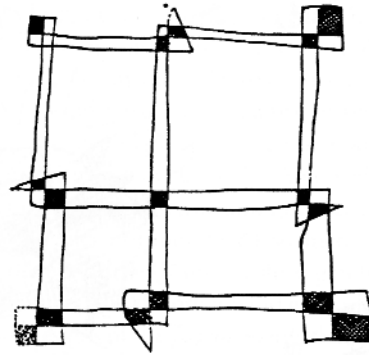
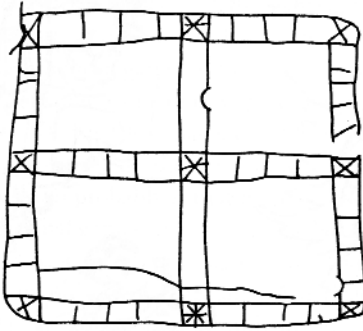


Fig. 5: Teotihuacán, Mexico, **patolli** Type II (after Bernal, 1963, lam. 9:3)

Fig. 6: Chichen Itzá, Mexico, **patolli** (after Ruppert, 1943, fig. 4c)

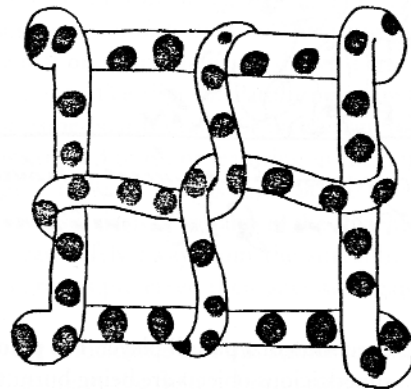
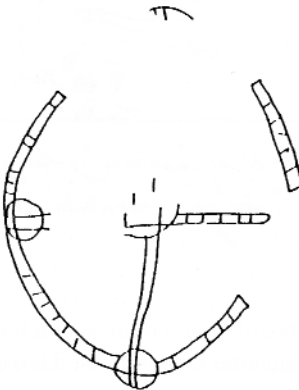


Fig. 7: **Patolli** in Codex Borbonicus, p. 19, facsimile edition, commentary by Hamy, Paris, 1899.

traditional games are being dismissed by the younger generations. The registration of the ancient games is becoming an urgent issue, not only for native American folklorists and ethno-historians but also for the indigenous groups themselves, if they are really concerned about safeguarding various aspects of their cultural heritage.

The study of Mesoamerican board games comprises a large and still unexplored field. In the scarce literature on contemporary Mesoamerican board games most descriptions date from the first half of the twentieth century. The ethnographers seldom gave an accurate reflection of the rules or the playing context and often did not bother to make a distinction between Old World and New World games. Ventur's structural description of the Mopan dice games stands in contrast to the vague accounts in most colonial and even modern sources (Ventur 1980: 257). The purpose of this paper is twofold: first, to present the Belizean version of the game of *bul*, as it was observed in its natural context by this author, and second, to prove that the board game *bul* indeed is a modern variant of the ancient Mesoamerican *patolli* game. For that purpose the data on *bul* will be compared with what is known about a few other Mexican board games. At the same time this comparison should result in a tentative typology of the *patolli* games.

## 2. Bul, a Ceremonial Game

One day in the month of May, my Mopan hosts invited me to the customary vigil ceremonies they perform before planting their corn. For that purpose the helpers at the next day's planting use to come to the hut of the farmer to spend the night with him. After the habitual prayers and incense-offerings to the God of the Earth and the Wood, Santo Witz, Santo Hook, Santo Che', in front of the house altar, the men told me that now I was going to witness an important part of the ceremony: they were going to "play corn". One Mopan man took some grains of corn out of one of the corn bags in the hut and put them on the floor in a straight line. In the meantime the others went outside to look for suitable counters, each of them returning with five similar small pieces of twig, leaf stem or grass, different from the counters of the other players. They formed two teams and squatted on the floor, in front of each other with the corn "track" between them. One player then looked for four suitable grains of corn to make the lots, the corn dice. One side of each grain was blackened with charcoal he took from the cooking fire. And then the game could be started. It appeared to be a kind of a war-game. The players moved their men up and down along the corn-track by throws of the four corn-dice, called *bul*, which is also the name of the game. During a break the players drank large cups of their traditional cocoa. At a certain moment the farmer took the incense burner, lighted its fire and went outside the hut to pray again to the God of the Wood. I learned later that, in order to enforce their supplication for a rich corn harvest, the farmers mention the playing of the *bul*-game in their prayers as another ritual obligation that is being fulfilled (Verbeeck 1996: 84). Notwithstanding the ritual character of the game the atmosphere among the men is very joyful and exceptionally loud. It is very unusual to hear the retiring Maya laugh and shout boisterously. Women never play or even watch the *bul*-game. But they follow the proceedings of the game in the kitchen with great interest. Judging from the men's exclamations and remarks, they know who are winning.

Fig. 8:  
Patolli in  
Codex  
Borgia, pl.  
62 (Anders  
& Jansen,  
1988: 54)

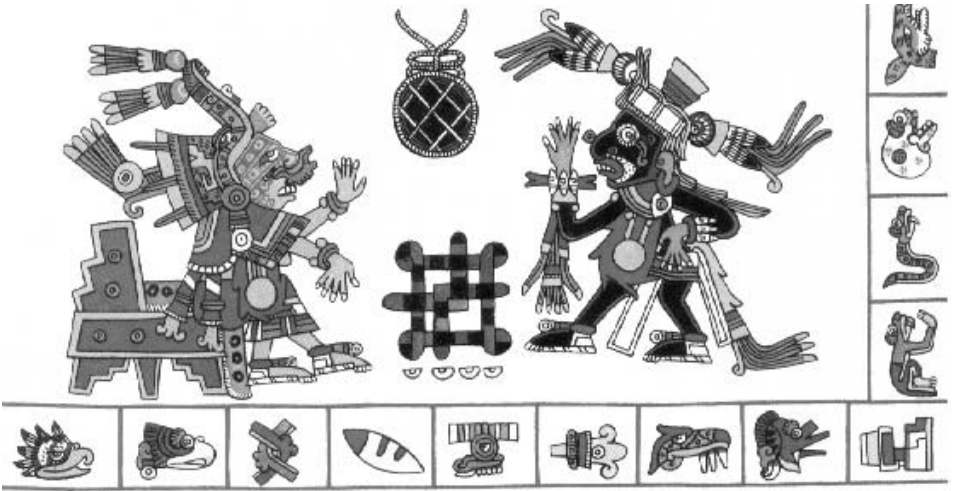
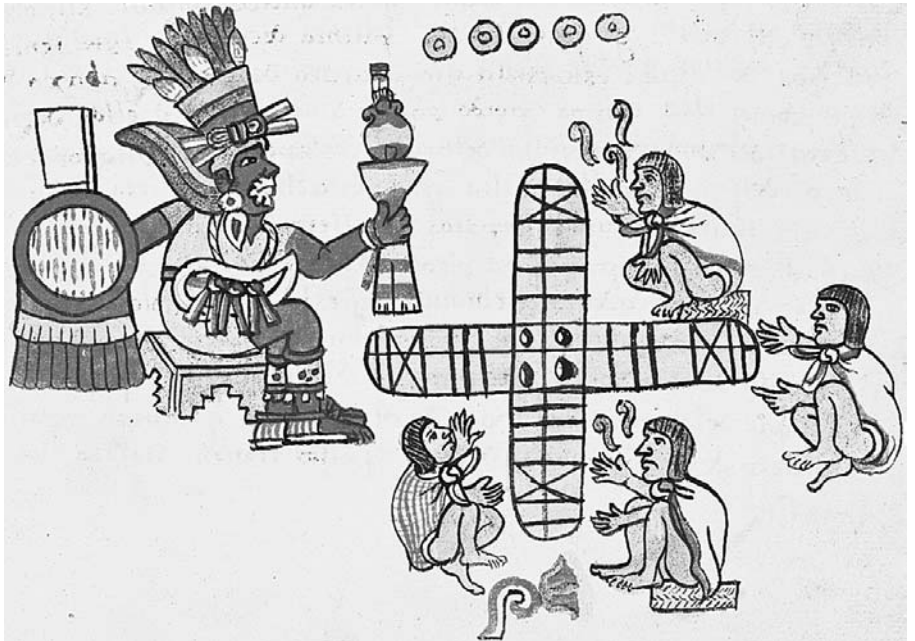


Fig. 9: Patolli,  
Codex  
Magliabecchi,  
fol. 60,  
reproduction  
loubat, Rome  
1904; Graz  
1970.



They enjoy imitating their excited cries for a favourable throw of the *bul*. That evening the whole play took more than three hours. By then it was midnight and the due moment had come to close the vigil with the ceremonial meal that consists of *wah tel chicharron*, corn tortillas with pork rind in broth. The *bul* and the counters were thrown away, nobody cared about saving the game instruments.

It was confirmed by other Maya informants that the *bul*-game is an essential part of the rituals and ceremonial obligations of the “vigil of the maize”. In the richer villages however, there are music and dancing besides or instead of playing *bul*. What seems to be important is that the corn, which is going to be planted the next day, should be surrounded by bright joyfulness the night before it will go down into the “dark earth” (Pacheco 1981: 104). This is probably the reason why I observed so little competitiveness during the game. The general atmosphere of that *bul*-evening radiated harmony, joy and fun. It did not matter at all who won or lost; what was important was the cheerful playing together. The function of the *bul*-game is to create a foreshadowing of the ‘alegría’ that will reign at the harvest of the corn.

Only the catholics among the Belizean Maya still maintain the old ‘*costumbre*’ of the vigil of the maize. As they are becoming a minority, the *bul*-game is gradually falling into oblivion and with that another element of the old Maya traditions threatens to disappear.<sup>(4)</sup>

### 3. Description of the Game of Bul

#### 3.1. Players and tools

*Bul* can be played with any even number of players above six. They play in two teams inside the house, squatted in front of each other around the game board. The board is marked on the clay floor of the hut by twenty grains of corn. The grains are placed in a straight line, some 5 cm apart, the intervals being the points of play. The board is called *bej*, the ‘road’, which is the circuit the players have to run up and down from their starting point. Depending on the number of players, more than ten or sixteen, the road is lengthened with five or ten more grains respectively (fig. 10).

Every player has selected his own five counters, recognizable by their specific material, colour or length. They consist of five similar pieces of equal length of twig, leaf stem, grass or any other oblong object measuring between 4 and 10 cm, which can be found in the surroundings of the hut. Bulb shaped counters, like berries, cause hilarity among the players, first of all because the person who introduces these irregular counters proves himself to be lazy or not well acquainted with the rules of the game. But secondly, there is a humoristic linguistic aspect to the deviant shape of counters, because during the game these objects must be referred to as *tziit*, the Mopan numeral classifier for oblong objects. The numeral classifier for bulb-shaped objects, *kuul*, is used for the grains of corn, which are the other game tools: they form the track and are used as dice. In the course of the game the players constantly shout to their partners the number they should throw in order to land on the “right place”. In their exclamations “one!” (*hun kuul*), “two!” (*ka’ kuul*), “three!” (ox *kuul*), etc., the word *kuul*



Fig: 10. Mopan Maya playing **bul** (photo L. Verbeeck 1994).

is always in the air. This intentional linguistic confusion of the dice with the counters is typical for Mopan humour.

The counters are moved by the throws of the four *bul*. These dice are four flat-sided grains of corn, so that they only have two sides to fall on. The grains are prepared by digging out with the thumbnail the eye on one side of each grain. This is called *k'oyik u päsäk'al a ix'i'mi*, "to pick the heart of the corn". Then the hollow of each grain is marked with a black dot, either by rubbing charcoal in it or by using the live end of a glowing stick. This operation is called *bonik tel butz'*, "to give colour with charcoal", or *jo'ochtik tel butz'* or "rub with charcoal". The black-spotted side of the dice is called *u wich a bul*, "the face of the dice", the unmarked side is called *u yit a bul*, "the bottom of the dice". The value of the throws is determined by the number of black dots that fall upwards:

*ka wila' bon a jäwá'ana*, “look how many are lying on their back”. This may be one, two, three or four. If the four unmarked sides have fallen upwards, *le'ek wa laj päklaji*, when all lie face downwards, the score is five<sup>(5)</sup>. The *bul* are simply thrown from the hand onto the ground. While a player is preparing his throw, by shaking the *bul* in his hands, the others are anxiously following his movements whispering *tun kaxäl* (“they are falling”).

### 3.2. Rules

- ◆ Each player has two throws in a turn. He moves his counter after the second throw, advancing it according to the score of each throw, in arbitrary order. This is important because it enlarges the possibilities of capturing an adversary.
- ◆ The home fields of the teams lie at their left end of the “road”. Thus the teams enter their men from opposite sides and move in opposite directions. When they have reached the opponents’ field, they return to their starting point along the same “road”. It is not necessary to throw an exact number to enter the home field.
- ◆ The first men of both teams make a throw to decide who starts the game. The highest throw wins. After the first player entered a marker, the other members of his team, from left to right, each throwing twice, enter one counter. Then the opponents get their turns to advance their men from the opposite side of the board, etc. Each player can only have one movable man at a time on the board. When he has reached his home field safely, he re-enters that man.
- ◆ But it is the hope of every player to land into a space occupied by an opponent. In that case he starts returning back to his home field carrying his opponent as his captive. The opponent loses his man and enters another counter at his next turn.
- ◆ Whenever a player captures an opponent he moves directly backwards towards his home field. But this shortened track does not guarantee his safely passing out, because the combined men remain vulnerable. If any player of the opposite side plays his man to the point occupied by the reversing men, he puts his counter on top of the little stack and moves all of them back to his own home field. This man in his turn may be taken, losing himself and his prey. They will be reversed again in the opposite direction towards the last captor’s home field. There the captives are retained. The counters belonging to the partners of the winner are “liberated” and returned to their owners, who enter them again. The number of these takes and retakes is in fact unlimited. The accumulation of counters increases the excitement of the players. A stack may be captured by another stack.
- ◆ Doubling a space occupied by a partner is permitted and does not change the play of either.
- ◆ Players never throw more than twice. If the first throw takes an enemy’s counter, the second one counts towards carrying him home. If the first throw brings a player safely home, the second can be used for re-entry on the board.
- ◆ No player loses his throw. If he has lost his fifth counter, he continues to throw the *bul* to help his partners. However, Ventur presents a restriction in the Guatemalan *bul* game. If all the markers of a player are “immobilized”, he is temporarily “paralyzed”; his turn is passed, and he cannot again throw the dice until the outcome



of these captures is determined' (Ventur 1980: 251).

- ◆ The game ends when a team has no counters left to enter. Winner is the team that captured most of the enemy's men.

The goal of the game is to capture as many men of the adversaries as possible. The whole idea shown by the terms of the game and especially by the exclamations of the players is that of the pursuit and safe transporting of captured load or prey back to the home field: *in mächaj u kuch* ("I grabbed his load"), *watak ta pach* ("he is coming after you"), *tak ti kol* ("and now straight to the field"), *jobi* ("he is killed").

### 3.3. Variants of the *bul* game

The game of *bul* consists of a set of five variants, played in a fixed order and which differ from each other in the way of running or attack. Four variants are inspired on local animals and their specific ways of catching their prey. This determines the rules of each variant and its name.

The first game, called *aj sayil* (wee-wee ant) follows the general rules as described above in 3.2. and is indeed regarded as the basic game.<sup>(6)</sup>

The second game, *aj t'iwil* (the eagle), is the quickest variant. The player who takes an opponent immediately leaves the road with his prey. He does not re-enter his counter.

In the third game, *aj sind'anil* (the scorpion), a man can move forward and backwards to capture an enemy. Retakes are possible in this variant. The winning counter is re-entered.

With the army-ants, the fourth variant, *aj sakalil*, the men keep on moving straight ahead to the other end of the road, even when they are carrying one or more opponents. They do not run back to their home field. The winner re-enters the road from his starting point.

At the start of the last game, *a k'aak'il* (the fire), there is a small circle drawn with charcoal in the middle of the road. The player who lands into that circle is burnt by the fire and his prey will burn with him. If a player captures an adversary before reaching the fire, he may return immediately. His counter may be re-entered after his safe arrival home.

After each variant the teams count how many opponents they 'ate' or 'killed'. But in the end the outcome of the game is not important.

### 3.4. Some general remarks on *bul*

This Maya war game obviously does not require much mental skill or calculation of its unsophisticated players. The only "clever" move a player can make, is to count his two throws in the appropriate order, when there is an opportunity to take an opponent. In Ventur's description this possibility is non-existent, but he points to the *sind'an* variant as the most complex of the five games. This game requires some strategic insight as the player can move his counter forward or backward to capture an opponent, but is not obliged to do so (Ventur 1980: 253). As was explained before, the purpose of the *bul* games is to pass the time during the vigil and ultimately, it is not important who are the winners. The game is entertaining, not only for the players who can all take part

until the end of the game, but also for the spectators, who love to see the moves that lead to captures and recaptures of stacks of counters. Although the playing of *bul* occurs in a ceremonial, religious context, the elements of the game do not bear any specific religious meaning. Nor did the players indicate any connection between the game circuit and the cardinal points and the centre, which traditionally have a strong symbolic value in the Maya area. The use of grains of corn as game implements is simply obvious as these kernels are always ready to hand in a Maya hut. The symbolism of the game expressed in the players' terminology is not farfetched either: the game reflects the farmers' life. Their walking up and down to the field, their carrying a load, the uncertainties about winning or losing at harvest time: these are the vicissitudes of life that are fairly familiar to them. The players were quite conscious of the fact that they were performing an old "*costumbre*", but they certainly did not bother about the probably ancient roots of their game. Besides, it is quite possible that the set of variants, or at least some of them, are the result of a recent, regional development and perhaps of an Old World introduction. The last variant in particular, in which a 'fire' is drawn in the center of the track, is reminiscent of the game of goose. Another peculiarity, that might illustrate a development in the game, is the fact that the English translation the players gave for certain game elements do not correspond with the Mopan word. When explaining in English certain episodes on the game for instance, the players talked about 'bullets' when referring to the counters, the image of the animals as hunters being lost. In Mopan the counters have no metaphoric name, they are called *che'* (sticks) or reference is made to their owner. The 'fire' (*kaak'*) in the last game becomes a 'ditch' in English.

#### 4. Historical Sources on the Maya Game of Bul

Nearly a century ago Stewart Culin published in his *Games of the North American Indians* a K'ekchi' Maya version of this *bul* game, called *boolik* (Culin 1907: 141-143). A certain Thomas J. Collins had provided him with a detailed description of a corn game, that was in common use among the K'ekchi' Mayan Indians in Alta Verapaz, Guatemala. The ethnographer Karl Sapper described in 1906 a similar game, called *puluc*<sup>7)</sup>, which he had observed not only with the K'ekchi', but also with other "tribes of Northern Middle America" (Sapper 1906: 284). The extensive description given by Culin corresponds more or less with the basic game as described above in 3.2.. The testimony of Culin's informant from 1899 only differs on the length of the track. In that K'ekchi' version a player only has to run to the opponent's field, at the other end of the board. When he has completed his passage of the line without capturing an opponent, he immediately enters again at his own end of the board. He does not have to run back to his home field along the line, as today's Mopan players have to do. None of the one century old descriptions mention the five variations, which might indeed indicate a recent development. Nor did the authors make any reference to ceremonial circumstances.

It is unclear why Murray (1952: 149, number 6.7.6.) classified Culin's version of *boolik* as a race game and not as a war game, as he concludes his description with the

remark that “the game ends when all the men of one side are taken”. Bell based his interpretation on Karl Sapper’s very brief description of *puluc* and constructed his own rules to create a playable corn game. Bell classified *puluc* as a “running-fight game”, which is one of the subclasses he differentiates among the war games category (Bell 1960: 89). Following de Voogt’s classification, all four descriptions of the Maya board game (Sapper 1906, Culin 1907, Ventur 1980, Verbeeck 1996) indeed fit in the class of war games, their subclass, based on the purpose of the game, being: destruction (de Voogt 1995: 15).

## 5. Bul, a Mesoamerican Board Game?

How old is this Belizean board game? It is certainly not a recent invention of some playful Maya Indian. But how to prove that it is not a game the native Americans learned from their European conquerors? There is no direct evidence of its pre-Colonial origin<sup>(8)</sup>. From the sixteenth-century chronicler de Landa (1566 [1985]) and the Mayan sacred book, *Popol Vuh* (Tedlock 1985), we only learn that the Maya played with dice. But it remains unclear what kind of dice they used and how they played. The etymology of the Yucatec Mayan word *bul* evidences that in the sixteenth century, the Mayans knew dice games and that gambling was associated with them (Barrera Vasquez 1980). Also the K’ekchi’ cognate *buul*, bears the complex meaning of playing a board game and of winning in a game of chance or a lottery (Haeserijn 1979). Ventur’s exploration in colonial and modern dictionaries or vocabularies reveals that *bul* and its cognates gloss the native dice games as well as all European games of chance and their artifacts (Ventur 1980: 244-46). But this linguistic evidence of the existence of Maya native dice games does not prove that the Mopan *bul* game indeed is a variant of an ancient Mesoamerican game. Comparison of the data on *bul* with what is known about other Mesoamerican games of fortune should solve the problem. This will be treated in the remainder of this paper. At the same time it will be attempted to define the most salient features of those board games in order to establish a tentative list of Mesoamerican characteristics. This should distinguish them as a regional subclass from the general class of American race games presented by Murray (1952:150). Murray based his ‘general characteristics of the American race-games’ on Culin’s catalogue (1907), which describes one single Central American dice game. Murray in fact only typified the North American board games.

### 5.1. Patolli in Mesoamerica

The game of *patolli* was most popular in Aztec times. According to the chroniclers the Aztecs had a passion for gambling. In his *Historia de las Indias*, Diego Duran (1575-81 [1967]) mentions that professional gamblers travelled from town to town with dice, tied in a cloth, and play-mats, with a cruciform board painted on it, under their arms. The dice were four large, black beans, called *patolli*, marked with white dots. The early descriptions of the game unfortunately are unclear and confusing. The ancient Mexicans apparently played various games of chance. But we only know the name of the most famous game, *patolli*. Following Culin’s classification, Murray and Bell presented this particular “game of the mat” as a race game (Culin 1898: 844; Murray 1952: 147 no. 6.7.1.; Bell 1960: 6). But, the earliest Spanish sources in fact referred to both war and

race games, when they tried to compare *patolli* with “alquerque”, or “castro”, or “tablas reales” (Sahagún 1981: VIII, c 10, p 300; Lopez de Gomara 1552: fol. 42).

Just when and where the game of *patolli* originated is not clear. The bean, also known as the mescal bean, was found in archaeological sites in Texas and Northern Mexico and is said to have been used in prehistorical divinatory cults, long time before the Aztecs settled in the valley of Mexico in the fourteenth century. The Aztecs would have brought the hallucinogenic patol beans from the north and named the game after the beans they already used with oracles and divinations (Duverger 1978).

From archaeological sources it can be deduced that the *patolli* boards already occurred in the Classic times, at least some ten centuries ago, in the Maya area as well as in Central Mexico (Swezey and Bittmann 1983). The design of *patolli* boards varies considerably, as is illustrated in figs. 2 to 9, and, from the ancient pictographical manuscripts we infer that also stick dice were used (Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus, sheets 13 and 20). Moreover, the first board game Durán described in his Chapter XXII, on Aztec games and gambling, appears to be a kind of war game played with cane dice instead of *patolli* dice. He accounts as follows (Durán 1575-81[1967: 197]):

“There was another game, which was that they made in a plaster floor little hollows after the manner of the game called “fortuna”, and one person took ten stones and the other ten stones, and the one put his stones on the one edge and the other on the other on opposite sides, and with some reeds split down the middle, they cast them on the ground so that they sprang up, and as many reeds as fell with the hollow side upwards so many places he moved his stones forward, and thus one followed the other, and all the stones he overtook he took away until he left the other without any and it happened that five or six were taken and with the four that were left, he could tell the reeds to turn against the other and he would still win the game.”

In the colonial period dice games, played with beans or with reeds or sticks, were observed all over Mexico. In many cases the word *Patol* labelled stick-dice games too<sup>(9)</sup>. Culin mentions several of these dice or board games in his catalogue. Their variations are more in the materials employed and the circuit than in the object or method of play<sup>(10)</sup>. Summarizing the data presented above this author complies with the use of the name *patolli* as a generic term. As will become clear in the next paragraph, *patolli* labels both race and war games of Mesoamerican origin.

## 5.2. In search of the Mesoamerican link

The board games still extant in Mexico, which were studied for this comparative presentation, are the Nahuatl *petol*, played in Puebla (Caso 1924-27: 203-211), the Purehepecha *kolitza* or *kuiliche*, played in Michoacan (Beals and Carrasco 1944: 516-22; Soto Bravo 1992), and the Chinantec *los palos*, played in Oaxaca (Weitlaner and Castro 1973: 189, 191). They will not be presented here at length. Only the common characteristics with *bul* will be highlighted. An important contribution to the study of *patolli* was paid by the Mexican ethno-historian Caso. Seventy years ago he discovered in the Mexican state of Puebla a race game called *petol*, that he considered to be a regional variant of the famous ancient game (Caso 1924-27: 203-211). The Nahuatl-

Fig. 12 (right):  
Petol game  
board (Caso,  
1924-27, fig.  
6)

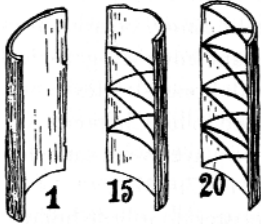
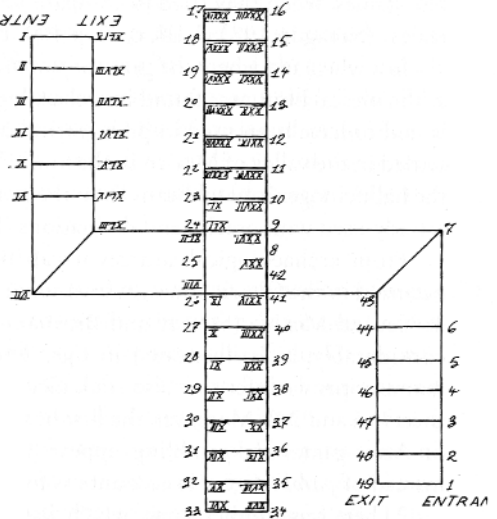


Fig. 11: Petol  
cane dice  
(Caso, 1924-  
27, fig. 5)

speaking descendants of the Aztecs now use four short stick-dice, made of split reeds, two of which are marked differently with crossed lines in their hollow insides (fig. 11). Caso also refers to Durán to prove the ancient origin of the stick-dice. This set of cane dice resembles the various North American sets described by Culin (1907), not only in their markings but also in the throwing and scoring method. However, the resemblance of this Nahuatl *petol* game with other Mesoamerican games is quite striking and offers good evidence for a common origin or development within the Mesoamerican culture area.

First of all there is the use of four two-sided lots [1], which corresponds with the number and characteristics of the patol beans used in the ancient times. As to the cane dice, it appears that in the modern games also the hollow sides indicate the score, just as in the game described by Durán, above in 5.1. (Durán 1575-81[1967:197]). We may assume that also the pre-Hispanic scoring method has survived: as a rule every marked side counts one [2].

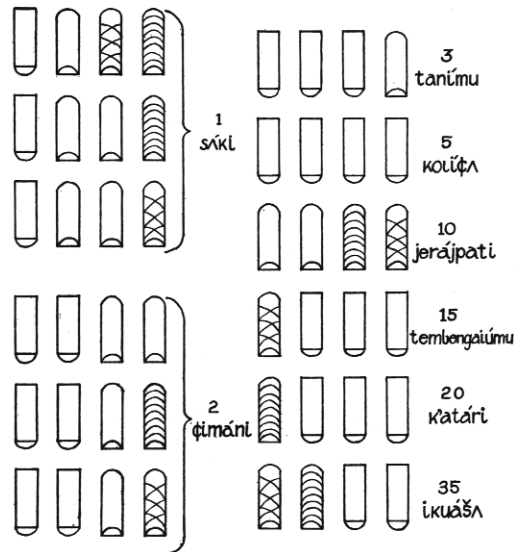


Fig. 13: Kolitzá  
scoring method  
(Beals and  
Carrasco, 1944  
fig. 5)

Some modern scoring methods may be more or less complicated according to the variety in markings on the sticks or reeds, but the common characteristic is the value of five [3] for a throw of four identical lots, four unmarked sides up mostly. This value of five is no coincidence. The number five had a symbolic value in the ancient times (Duverger 1978:93) and it was associated with Macuilxochitl “Five Flower”, the Aztec patron deity of the *patolli* game, as is illustrated on folio 60 of the Codex Maggliabecchi (fig. 9). The importance of the number five is also reflected in the name of the Purepecha board game *kuiliche* or *kolitza* (Beals and Carrasco 1944: 519; Soto Bravo 1992: 3). Both words label the throw that counts five, although the highest score is 35 (fig. 13). The higher scores, due to extra markings on two of the reeds are probably a colonial introduction. This is probably also the case with the Nahuatl *petol* dice. According to Caso the reed that now is worth 15 is a substitute for the ancient value of 5 or 10.<sup>(11)</sup> The Maya game of *bul* exemplifies the simplest version of the scoring method and thus, a throw of four unmarked grains of corn gets the highest score of 5.

Another correspondence in the Mesoamerican board games we find with the number of players. The games are always played in two teams [4] of equal numbers. Every player has his own distinctive set of counters but the games are team games. The individual player participates until the end of the game.

Capture by simple replacement [5] is another pan-Mesoamerican characteristic. No matter the shape or length of the circuit, the teams have their own entrances [6] on the board. As to the boards indeed, there are differences. The modern Nahuatl *petol* board for instance, shows the “modification” of the ancient Aztec cruciform pattern into a swastika shaped circuit (fig. 12). According to Caso this change probably did not affect the character of the game, as neither did the substitution of *patolli* beans by cane dice. Which means that in Caso’s opinion the ancient *patolli* was a race game. What is

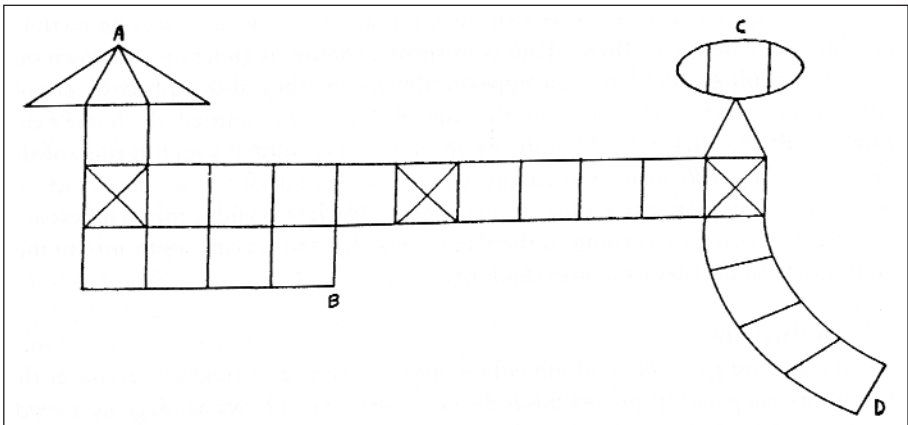


Fig. 14: Los Palos  
(Weitlaner and Castro,  
1973: 192, fig. 47)

especially important in this comparative study is how the circuit is used. It appears that in the modern *petol* variant the players run their men only along three arms of the cross. The pieces enter at the opposing far ends of the bent arms of the swastika and move by the throws towards the centre of the board. Then the counters run along the two stretched arms of the cross. It is only in this straight section (in fact between the points 10 and 40 of fig. 12) that the men can be captured. When a player arrives again at the arm of his entrance, on point 42 of fig. 12, he is not vulnerable anymore. He just has to get a correct throw to leave the circuit. His opponents leave along their own 'safe' arm. By counting the number of points the teams have to run Caso found a strong indication that the modern *petol* game reflects the symbolic numbers related with the ancient Mexican chronology and astronomy, which certainly also applied to the ancient game of *patolli*. But this aspect has fallen into oblivion among the modern *petol* players. In this author's opinion the common part of the circuit, where capture is the object of both teams [7], is a crucial feature in the comparison of the Nahuatl race game with its contemporary variants. In the Mexican state of Oaxaca the anthropologist Weitlaner observed a *patolli* variant, called *los palos* ("the sticks", obviously named after the cane dice they use), with a similar common circuit of going up and down a straight line (Weitlaner and Castro 1973: 189, 191-2). The 'safe' entrance arms, however, are moved to the ends of the line (fig. 14). This means that in the Oaxaca variant, *los palos*, the players enter the common part of the circuit at the ends of the line, and not in the middle. Thus there is little resemblance left with the original Aztec cruciform board, except for the cross markings, which remind of the enigmatic markings on the original boards (figs. 1, 2 and 9). In this Oaxaca variant these marked places are "safe spots" where a man cannot be taken, just like the centre in the *petol* game.

On the other hand this game of *los palos* shows sufficient similarities with the Maya *bul* game too, such that their Mesoamerican affinity is fairly evident. To begin with: they are both war games. They use four two-sided lots and have the same scoring method, their highest score is five, their circuit consists of a continuous going up and down one line, their counters also move in opposite directions, they also capture by simple replacement. On the *bul* game-board the 'safe' playing area is omitted, the home fields lying outside the circuit. In this author's opinion this is another simplification of the Mesoamerican *patolli* board. The circuits on the *bul* board or of *los palos* are in fact not linear, but continuous, just as they are on the other Mexican board games. This cyclical movement of players returning to their starting point and leaving again for another round is typical for Mesoamerican thinking.

## 6. Conclusion

The Maya board game *bul* undoubtedly is another survival or modern variant of the pre-Columbian *patolli* games. As this is the only instance of a Maya board game it is not possible to define a typically Maya development in the Mesoamerican board games. Within the group of Mesoamerican board games *bul* offers a special attractiveness by the fact that captives keep on accompanying their captors on the circuit and consequently may expect their chances of retakes and liberation. This is might be a

colonial or perhaps more recent development of this Maya *patolli* variant.

The comparative study of four existing Mesoamerican board games resulted in a tentative typology of this regionally defined group of native American board games, called *patolli*. Common characteristics we find in the dice [1] and the scoring method [2],[3], the team game [4], the captures [5] and the circuit [6],[7]. This typology includes both race games and war games. This distinction in object of game does not really play a part. In both types the opponents have to run a circuit. Besides the dissimilar objects of *petol* and *kuiliche*, the Nahua and Purehepecha race games, and *bul* and *los palos*, the Maya and Oaxaca war games, the difference between the two types of games actually only lies in the fact that in the latter games the opponents' counters are not returned to let them enter the circuit again. We can agree with Yuri Averbakh (1997:3) that this difference is very small.

Still, the question whether the famous Aztec *patolli*, the "game of the mat" was a race game or a war game, remains an intriguing one.

## References

- Averbakh, Y. 1997. About the Transformation of Race Games into War Games. Proceedings: Board Games in Academia. Alexander J. De Voogt, ed., Leiden.
- Barrera Vasquez, A. 1980. Diccionario Maya. Editorial Porrúa, Mérida.
- Beals, R. en P. Carrasco 1944. Games of the Mountain Tarascans. American Anthropologist. Vol. 46: 516-22, Washington.
- Bell, R. 1960. Board and Table Games from many Civilizations. Oxford University Press, London.
- Bernal, I. 1963. Teotihuacán: descubrimiento, reconstrucciones. I.N.A.H. Mexico.
- Caso, A. 1924-27. Un antiguo juego Mexicano: El Patolli. El Mexico Antiguo, Vol. 2: 201-11.
- Codex Borbonicus, facsimile edition, commentary by Hamy, Paris, 1899.
- Codex Borgia, facsimile edition, commentary by Selser, Rome, 1904-1909; Graz, 1976.
- Codex Florentino, reproduction of illustrations from the work of Sahagún, Madrid, 1905.
- Codex Magliabecchi, reproduction Loubat, Rome 1904; Graz, 1970.
- Codex Vindobonensis Mexicanus I, Graz, 1964.
- Culin, St. 1898. Chess and Playing Cards. Washington: Report U.S. Nat. Museum 1896, pt.2.
- Culin, St. 1907. Games of the North American Indians. Washington: Smithsonian Institute New York Reprint New York: Dover edition, 1975.
- Durán, Fray D, de 1967. Historia de las Indias de Nueva España e islas de tierra firme. Mexico.
- Duverger, C. 1978. L'esprit du jeu chez les Aztèques. Mouton, Paris.
- Erasmus, C. 1971(1950) Patolli, Pachisi, and the Limitation of Possibilities in Avedon E.M. and B. Sutton-Smith The Study of Games. J. Wiley and Sons



- Gomara, Fr. Lopez de 1943. *La historia de las Indias, y conquista de Mexico (1540-1552)*, 2 Vols. Mexico.
- Haeserijn, E. 1979. *Diccionario K'ekchi-Español*. Guatemala: Piedra Santa.
- Kendall, T. 1980. *Patolli a Game of Ancient Mexico*. Kirk Game Co., Inc., Belmont, Mass.
- Landa, Fray D. de, 1978. *Relación de las Cosas de Yucatán*. Ed. Porrúa, Mexico.
- Landa, Fray D. de, 1985. *Yucatan before and after the Conquest*. Translation by W. Gates, Dover, New York. First published as Publication 20 of the Maya Society, Baltimore 1937.
- Lopez Batista, R. 1992. Romayá. Un juego Tarahumara, el "15". *Nuestra Palabra*. Publicación especial de El Nacional, en colaboración con el Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes y el Instituto Nacional Indigenista. Mexico, 31 de enero 1992. Año III, Número 1.
- Mackie, E. 1961. New Light on the End of the Classic Maya Culture at Benque Viejo, British Honduras. *American Antiquity*, 27/2: 216-24.
- Murray, H. 1952. *A History of Board Games other than Chess*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Pacheco, L. 1981. Religiosidad K'ekchi alrededor del Maiz. *Guatemala Indígena*, Vol XVI. I.I.N. Guatemala.
- Relaciones Geográficas del Siglo XVI, Tlaxcala*. Ed. Rene Acuña. 1988. UNAM Mexico.
- Ruppert, K. 1943. *The Mercado Chichen Itzá*. Carnegie Inst., Publication 546, Contribution No. 43, Washington.
- Sahagún, Fray B. de, 1981. *Historia General de las Cosas de Nueva España*. Ed. Porrúa, Mexico.
- Sapper, K. 1906. *Spiele der K'ekchi Indianer*. Anthropological Papers written in honor of Franz Boas: Boas Anniversary Volume. New York: 283-9.
- Soto Bravo, V. 1992. K'uilichi: P'urhecheri tua anapu ch'anakua. Juego ancestral Purépecha. *Nuestra Palabra*. Publicación especial de El Nacional, en colaboración con el Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes y el Instituto Nacional Indigenista. Mexico, 31 de enero 1992. Año III, Número 1.
- Swezey, W. and B. Bittmann, 1983. El rectángulo de cintas y el Patolli: nueva evidencia de la antigüedad, distribución, variedad y formas de practicar este juego precolombino. *Mesoamerica*, vol. 6.
- Tedlock, D. 1985. *Popol Vuh*. New York.
- Tylor, E.B. 1879. On the Game of Patolli in Ancient Mexico and its probably Asiatic Origin. *Journal of the Anthropological Institute (London)*, Vol. 8: 116-131.
- Tylor, E.B. 1896. On American lot-games, as evidence of Asiatic intercourse before the time of Columbus. *Supplement zu Band IX von Internationales Archiv für Ethnographie*: 55-67.
- Ventur P. 1980. Mopan Maya Dice Games from the Southern Peten. In *Play and Culture: 1978 Proceedings of the Association for the Anthropological Study of Play*. Helen B. Schwarzmann, ed., West Point, N.Y.: 242-62.
- Verbeek, L. 1996. *Het spel en de stokjes: Mesoamerikaanse bordspelen*. Wampum 14. Leiden.

- Voogt, A.J. de 1995. A Classification of Board Games. In *New Approaches to Board Games Research: Asian Origins and Future Perspectives*, ed. A.J. de Voogt, IIAS Leiden.
- Weitlaner, R. en C. Castro 1973. *Papeles de la Chinantla*, VII. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Mexico.

## Notes

1. The term *Meso-America*, introduced by Paul Kirchhoff (1947) does not indicate a strictly limited geographical area, but the pre-Columbian culture area in which different native American peoples shared common cultural traits. According to Kirchhoff the northern frontier of Meso-America reached at its peak the Rio Grande, a line that had receded again by the fifteenth century. The southern frontier ran east of Nicoya in Costa Rica. The Maya area is the southernmost subregion comprising southern Mexico, Guatemala, Belize, southwestern Honduras and El Salvador.
2. The 10,000 Belizean Mopan and K'ekchi' belong to two distinct Mayan linguistic groups, whose languages are mutually unintelligible. Both are the descendants of emigrants from the Guatemalan Petén area. They are subsistence farmers maintaining the traditional slash and burn method. The data on this board game were collected in the village of Santa Cruz, Toledo District, Belize in 1993 and 1994, while making a study of linguistic acculturation in Mopan Mayan. The author wishes to express her gratitude to Santiago Ash, Benito Canti, Enriques Coy, Marcos Sho, Placido Sho and Raymundo Sho. Without their assistance this paper could never have been written. Many thanks also go to Thierry Depaulis, Dr. Irving Finkel, Dr. Bas van Doesburg, Hans Roskamp and Rosanna Woensdregt, who pointed out to me most valuable literature.
3. Pierre Ventur (1980) presented a description and analysis of similar Mopan dice games still practised in the Southern Peten (Guatemala) based on staged games with his informant.
4. There is another game that indicates the link with the religious belief system. The Mexican board game *kuliche* or *kolitza* is played in the restricted context of the vigil of Assumption of the Holy Virgin, on the 15th of August, in the state of Michoacán.
5. According to Ventur the Guatemalan players determine before each game on how to count unmarked kernels that land edge-wise or end-wise (Ventur 1980:248-49).
6. The Guatemalan taxonomy of the five *bul* variants does not differ much from the Belizean. The basic game is labeled *jil bul* 'real dice'. The second variant is called *mujan* 'hawk'. The rules of the variants however are identical (Ventur 1980:250-52).
7. The names *boolik* and *puluc* have obviously been written down by ear, by persons who were unacquainted with the spelling of the K'ekchi' language. In nowadays' K'ekchi' the spelling of the name of the corn game is *buul*.
8. Stewart Culin strongly emphasized the interrelation and native origin of the dice games he described in his catalogue of North American games, in which he included a few Middle American games (Culin 1907: 32). He opposed Tylor's theory that American lot games were brought over from Asia before Columbus. Tylor based his argument on the similarity between the Indian game of *Pachisi* and the early-Colonial accounts of the Mexican game of *Patolli* (Tylor 1879 and 1896). Although he did not have accurate data on this ancient Mexican game, also Murray concluded that Tylor's claim was not valid (Murray 1952: 231). The discussion of diffusion or invention is still open as can be read in Erasmus' "Patolli, Pachisi, and the Limitation of Possibilities" (1950) in Avedon and Sutton-Smith 1971:109-29.

9. The transfer or the extension of the name *patolli* to the name of similar games with different lots is quite common in the Mesoamerican languages. In the sixteenth-century Nahuatl dictionaries one finds *amapatolli* ('paper-*patolli*') for playing cards and *quauhpatolli* ('wood-*patolli*') for chess.
10. A selected list of *Patolli* variants consists first of all of descriptions published in Culin's *Games of the North American Indians* (1907: 146-154). They were played by various native American groups in the states of Arizona and New Mexico (US) and Sonora, Chihuahua, Sinaloa (Mexico) such as the Papago, Pima, Opatá, Tepehua. The names of the games are *Patol* or *Kinse* (which is the Spanish word for 'fifteen', indicating the highest score that can be thrown. This is probably borrowed from an introduced Spanish game of cards.) The Tarahumara were reported to play a *patolli* variant called *romavóá* (Lumholtz 1902, *Unknown Mexico*, Vol. 1, p. 278). A more detailed description was provided in 1992 in an article by Lopez Batista *et al.*, in an occasional publication of *Nuestra Palabra* titled "Romayá: un juego Tarahumara, el '15'". Beals and Carrasco described in 1944, in *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 46, a Purhépecha game called *kolitza* or *k'uilichi* (= five). This *patolli* variant is still known in the conservative community of Angáhuán in the Mexican state of Michoacán (Soto Bravo 1992, *Nuestra Palabra: K'uilichi: Juego ancestral Purhépecha*.)
11. Caso bases this hypothesis on Durán's rather obscure description of the *patolli* game, in which five or ten *patolli* beans were used. A throw of five marked *patolli* up was rewarded with 10 and ten *patolli* gave 20 (Durán 1967: 198). This does not quite correspond with the information we get from the other chroniclers and from the pictographical documents: they all indicate that there were four *patolli* beans. Did Durán mix up two different games? Caso does not seem to pay attention to this problem. (Caso 1924-27: 208).