

NOTES FROM AMARANTH LAND (III)

Julia Mensch, Jujuy & Buenos Aires, Argentina, March 2023



Kiwicha Aroma, Tumbaya, Jujuy Province, Argentina.

Kiwicha. Being Present

I fly from Buenos Aires to Jujuy, a province that borders Bolivia. I reach the Quebrada (which means valley or ravine), and the noise that I bring with me from Buenos Aires transforms into silence, bird song, and the murmur of wind and the breeze. As I contemplate the setting, I try to weave myself into the landscape. I want it to absorb me, transform me into a different being. Not the urban being that I am, but one full of presence.

Kiwicha is pure presence and exuberance. I visit a small planted patch located in a town called Volcán, where rows of one species of my teacher plant: **amaranthus cruentus** are sown.

Surrounded by mountains and grazing cows with horns, the *kinicha* and its already flowering panicles move softly, reciprocating the breeze of the Quebrada's calm winds. Some grow upright, other curve slightly downward under the weight of the blooms. The majority of the panicles are already an intense magenta. Some, however, are yellowish, a light beige color, spattered with magenta spots which will slowly expand until the panicle will wind up turning entirely into that strident color. That intense, almost unreal magenta contrasts with the ample palette of colors in the landscape all around the small planted patch. Among the cultivated plants, I also see some amaranth weeds, which are much smaller, but the same as the ones I have seen in GM soy plantations. They grow alongside the *amaranthus cruentus* without disturbing it. They are simply there, seeming to accompany the others without hindering their growth. When they give me a little bag of seeds as a gift before leaving, I see that the white ones which correspond to *cruentus* are mixed in with a few black ones, which come from the weed amaranth species I am observing. There are only a few, but they stand out due to the contrasting color.

Kinicha is native to these lands, but has been forgotten by local inhabitants. There is only one wild species that some remember, which they call *aroma* or *ataco*. When I ask about it, they say "I've heard of it, but never seen it". In this region, the same verb, *sentir* (to feel), is also used as a synonym for *escuchar* (to hear). This is a beautiful use of language, and I speculate that it indicates that when the inhabitants of the Quebrada listen, they feel, as opposed to only rationalizing.

Diverse species of amaranth await me in this terrain. Among them is *amaranto aroma*, which even though it grows on its own, is not called a weed, but a wild plant, and it is said that it grows on the street and in gardens with no need to be cultivated.

When the afternoon draws to a close, I leave Volcán with my hands full of *amaranthus cruentus* plants, and by coincidence, I happen to meet **Celestina Nieves Abalos**, a high school teacher who has wild amaranth in her garden. She affirms that they are native to these arid lands, and that she lets them grow freely because of their beauty. They sprout on their own every year, and the panicles have an ornamental use in religious celebrations during Easter week. I had already heard about these celebrations. When the Virgin comes down from the mountain during Easter week, she is received with ornaments made out of amaranth, among other plants. This plant has tremendous resistance in terms of cultural syncretism: the amaranth that the Spanish colonizers prohibited because of its utilization by indigenous people in religious celebrations not only managed to survive as a crop, but also to remain in these lands spiritually, with a presence in Quebrada's typical Catholic processions.

After exchanging telephone numbers, I visit Celestina a few days later in Tumbaya, a small village I was unfamiliar with, which has no tourism. She receives me at the door of a house whose entrance is full of plants, all in pots, arranged on a raised circular base made of wood. I enter and she takes me to the back yard in order to see her wild *kinicha*.

In the arid soil of Jujuy, the *amaranto aroma* is surrounded by other plants in her garden: there is lemon verbena and roses and other flowers whose names I do not know. The *kinicha* plants' panicles are already in bloom, at different heights, all a dark reddish color, practically maroon. Many of the leaves are still green, some are in transition, losing their green and others are already

completely dark red, in that almost maroon color that I have only seen in this particular amaranth. She chooses the most mature and beautiful of the *kinicha aroma* plants, and gives me its panicle as a gift. After cutting it, she shows me how to remove the seeds; we shake each of the blossoms and small black dots fall onto the newspaper we set the plant on. Like the seeds of the weed amaranth that is resistant to agrottoxins (*quitensis*, *hybridus* and *palmeri*), these too, are black.

Until now, what I had read and heard in different circles was that all plants originate first as weeds, but while Celestina and I found ourselves surrounded by her plants, she defines weeds, or wild plants, from a different viewpoint. She introduces me to *aroma* (wild amaranth) as amaranth's ancestor, saying that if we should happen to lose the domesticated species, which we consume, we would be able to recover its seeds from this plant, its ancestor. We could go back, she says. The case is the same for quinoa, in addition to potatoes and corn; they all have their ancestors. The question is being able to identify them, one must have the knowledge, and care for them, she concludes. She says *care for them*, to take care of weeds as cultivated plants' ancestors. It is the opposite of industrial agriculture's view, which seeks to eliminate them, using all of their resources to do so.

We wrap up the plants and their seeds and I prepare to leave. We walk together to the bus stop, where Celestina knows the bus will pass soon. I have the wild amaranth she has given to me. With the wind in our faces we sit side by side at the bus stop and while we wait for the arrival of the bus that will take me to Tilcara, we look at the mountains on either side of the highway, where diverse vehicles speed past right in front of us. The bus takes quite some time, and as we sit waiting, the weariness of a long day settles in on us both and we wind up yawning as if in a relaxation session of yoga, talking about who we are and what we do. She invites me to climb up the mountain we see from below the next time, to feel the same strong wind of the Quebrada, but from the heights.

Celestina is neither an agricultural engineer nor a theoretician, but a teacher, a gardener in her own small realm, a mother and a native of these lands. After this short time spent together, it can be discerned that, much like amaranth, she knows how to be still, to be a presence. I know I will return to see her again, and I know that she and her wild amaranth have much to teach me among all that I have yet to learn so that I, too, can manage to be still and be a presence.

Long-distance, Yvonne proposes that I focus even closer on the amaranth plants, that I examine them more meticulously, and that I write what I glimpse while observing them. I think that Yvonne, in some way (although she does not say as much), is asking me to achieve more presence. That in examining amaranth and observing it, I look from a different standpoint, abandoning my urban anthropocene gaze. Maybe it isn't possible for me to distance myself from my human perspective (if this were possible, even in part) yet, to adopt the viewpoint of this ancestral crop that has so much to teach me. I have a lot to learn from the cosmovision of the Quebrada, in order to make an attempt, at least. Now, with the wind in my face, *kinicha aroma* in my hand as a companion, and the mountains all around to offer refuge, I feel that I am initiating the path that can lead me there.