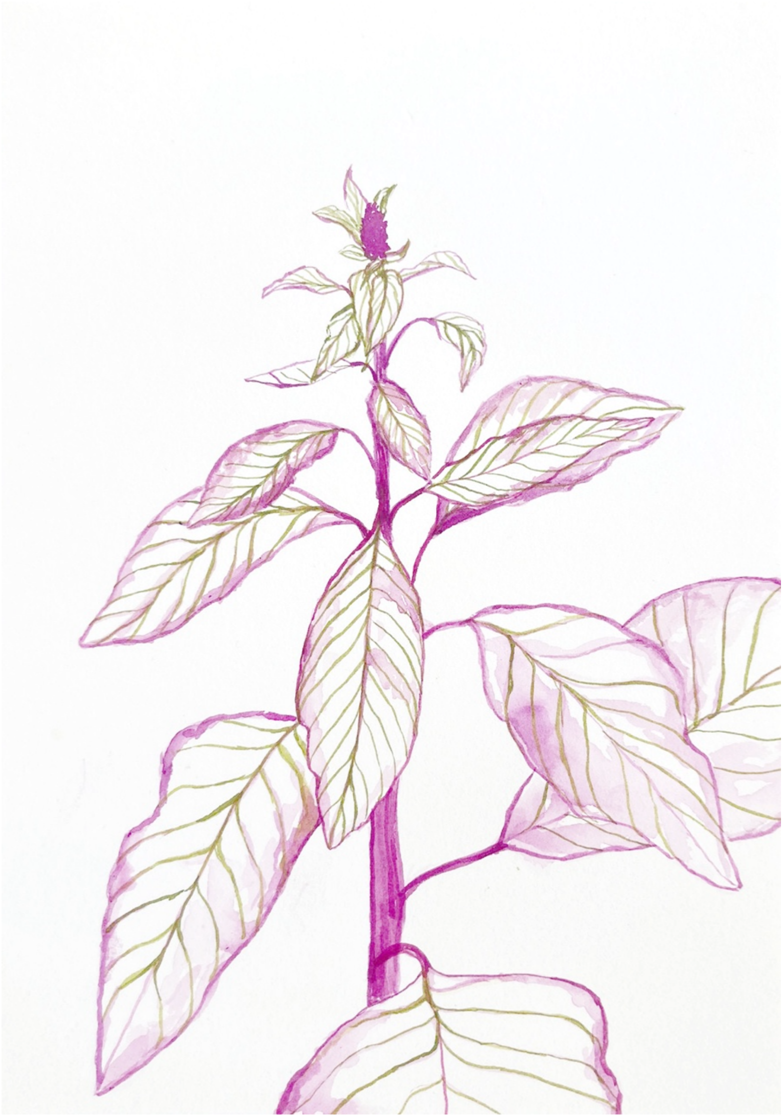
NOTES FROM AMARANTH LAND (VI)

Julia Mensch, Province of Jujuy, Argentina, March 2024



Kiwicha Aroma, Kreuzberg, Berlin, Germany.

1.

March 24, 2024. I get up at 4 in the morning to go to the Aeroparque airport to catch a flight to Jujuy, the Argentinean province situated at the northern-most tip of the country, bordering on the Plurinational State of Bolivia. I am returning there because I've heard that during Holy Week, a Virgin descends from a mountain accompanied by amaranth plants. Today, Sunday, March 24th, she is brought down to Tumbaya, a small town in the Quebrada that I had visited for the first time last year.

Before going up the steps into the plane, I almost regret undertaking this trip. I don't want to leave Buenos Aires today, I don't want to miss going to the Plaza de Mayo to be part of the sea of beings walking the streets for the same reason that I would. I almost decide not to go up the stairway, and halfway up, I excuse myself as I turn around and go back down the steps. I wind up talking to the pilot, to the person in charge of transporting the luggage and then, with the airline hostess who first, all convince me to get on the plane, and then, to congratulate me for doing so. The airline navigation crew seats me in first class, taking pity on the unstable passenger who doesn't want to leave Buenos Aires on that day, or who doesn't want to leave the ground, rise up and float in the air one more time. From high up I see the Río de la Plata, and I imagine the living beings who were thrown into it,[1] moving like dots in that brown water, dots similar to the small seeds of amaranth that I will carry in my pockets on my way back from this trip. With a knot in my throat, I repeat to myself in silence that this March 24th, 2024, is very important. I know that the Plaza simply must be filled to the point that no room for any doubt whatsoever is left, to show that there are some things they will not be able to do, because we will be there. Or, truth be told, all of you will be there, the fellow compatriots of this migrant who, being in Buenos Aires this time, dares to go to Jujuy on March 24th, to await a Virgin who will come down from a peak accompanied by amaranth plants.

I land in a fragile state, traveling through Quebrada until reaching Tilcara. Once there, I see a sign in the town square that commemorates what we now call the Día de la Memoria (Day of Remembrance), marking the first day of the coup in 1976. But there's no one left there, and all I see are one *sikuri*[2] band after the other, still heading off to I don't know where. Next to the church, I am received by a very purple *kiwicha*, an *amaranto aroma*, a wild plant typical in these parts. The *sikuri* music envelops her, dances around her and there she is, softly swaying in the breeze of Tilcara.

Today is Palm Sunday; that is the name given to this March 24th, within the context of Holy Week. After getting my bearings, I take a bus and reach Tumbaya. When I get there, I am surprised by the crowd; I have never seen a town in Quebrada so full of people, buses and food stands. The truth is that I have never participated in any religious pilgrimage before. In a few days' time, Javier Rodríguez will tell me the story behind what I am witnessing now, but on this Sunday, all I do is walk the streets of Tumbaya in search of my teacher plant, and the only one I find is an ornamental amaranth, alongside other plants and flowers, in the church entrance archway.

I let myself go, simply following along with what is happening around me, and standing on a high little wall for hours, I wait for the Virgen de Punta Corral along with thousands of her devotees, who tell me she will arrive accompanied by the last *sikuri* band. Dozens of bands pass by, who have been playing beautiful, strident music while walking from 8 to 16 hours (depending on their physical condition and speed) up to the peak of the Apus—the name given to the sacred mountains in this area—to get the Virgin and come back down again along the same route.

A powerful energy pulsates in this space, surrounded by hills. On this March 24th, I am part of a sea of beings, but they are other bodies; not the ones in Plaza de Mayo, but devotees of the Virgin de Punta Corral, overcome by emotion. As night falls, I silently ask myself, repeatedly, what I'm doing here. Until, surrounded by the multitude, I accept being another devotee, but in my case, of the *kiwicha* plant.

2.

Two days later, once again, like so many times before, I visit the Cooperativa de Productores de la Quebrada Cauqueva, in Maimará. With the palette of the mountains in the background, Javier Rodríguez, the agrobiologist and co-founder of the Cooperative, narrates a story to me.[2]

The story goes that in the late 19th or early 20th century, the Virgin appeared before a shepherd of small livestock who lived close to Punta Corral, right at the highest point of the mountain, on the border between the departments of Tumbaya and Tilcara. The story says that she appeared to him in the form of a shining triangular stone, and that the shepherd heard a voice. He then went down to the church, and told the priests about his experience, showing them the stone, which he had carried down from the mountaintop in his arms. However, they do not believe him, and have him arrested for sacrilege. The stone remains in the church, and the following day, it disappears. With the shepherd in prison, they could hardly accuse him of having stolen it, and so decide to go to the place where he had originally found the stone. There was the stone, at the highest point of the mountain, and that is where the story of the Virgin of Punta Corral began. In the Andean worldview, there are sacred mountains which are the guardians of the territory; they are called Apus and that of Punta Corral is one of them.

For many years, a procession would take place from Tumbaya to the top of that mountain, and an image of a Virgin was made, related that of Copacabana in Bolivia. During one of the last dictatorships, however, Javier doesn't remember exactly which one, a group of businessmen from Tilcara managed to convince Jujuy's military interventor to have the procession come down to Tilcara, instead of to Tumbaya. Years later, after the return of democracy, the townspeople of Tumbaya accomplish a return to having the Virgin come down to their town. But obviously, the people of Tilcara had become used to having their Virgin and the procession. So a commission was organized, and 10 kilometers from the original one, another shrine was built, with a new image of the Virgin de Punta Corral, to descend to Tilcara. From that point on, two processions began to take place up to the peak of the Punta Corral Apus: one that goes to Tumbaya and another, to Tilcara (each procession has a different image of the Virgin, and a shrine situated on the Apus peak; Tilcara's is called the Virgin de Abra de Punta Corral, and Tumbaya's, the Virgin de Punta Corral).

Over time, the Tilcara pilgrimage grew, but Tumbaya's had few people participating in it, and almost no *sikuri* bands. That was until the late nineties or beginning of the two thousands, when the church of Jujuy declared the Tumbaya pilgrimage to be official. Since then, both have grown in importance, and the *sikuri* bands began to go to both events. Over the years, since Tumbaya was the official event, it took on a more ecclesiastical character, and Tilcara's became more popular. Currently, six thousand people participate in the pilgrimage in Tilcara, and four thousand more are part of the *sikuri* bands. In Tumbaya, they say that roughly ten thousand people participate, given that in addition to the *sikuri* bands, there are many individuals who join in, and many more who wait for the Virgin in either town, without going up the mountain.

All along the road where the procession heads out and comes back, from the peak of the Apus to down below, there are *apachetas* (wayside shrines) that are on a par with the altars to the Virgin. The *apachetas* are like cairns made of many stones. They are altars, but made of little heaps of stones dedicated to the Pachamama. Javier explains that it is very significant that the processions take place precisely on the Apus. It shows the mestizo mix these peoples have achieved, managing to incorporate their beliefs hidden within Catholic symbolism. In the course of this history, conflicts, political and cultural contradictions are hardly lacking; everything is intermingled, Javier continues, and there, too, the stones and plants are present, the amaranth among them.

3.

A few days later, at midday, the town of Tilcara begins to festoon itself in flowers, awaiting the thousands of people who will come down from the Apus with the Virgin de Abra de Punta Corral. I walk the streets from one end to the other several times; I see groups of neighbor women decorating arches that cross from one side of the street to the other with plants and flowers, including the purple, deep red, almost maroon *amaranto aroma.* No one is able to tell me what significance the presence of this plant, one prohibited by the Spanish after their conquest of the Americas, has in the procession. The only reason that someone comes up with to tell me is that the *kiwicha* blooms at that time of year, and so is one of the plants available for use in ornamentation.[3] Many times, I think that only the plant has the answer. She is who found a way to not disappear, to survive the prohibition for centuries, making her way silently into the pilgrimages and worship of the very religion that had prohibited and sought to banish her.

According to historical data, amaranth was important in the Aztec and Inca empires, and not only as a ceremonial plant; it was also a fundamental source of food for both empires' armies. The Inca and Aztec armies were maintained with the food accumulated as different provinces' tributes to the emperor. Researcher Renata Kietz states that lists that have been conserved have enabled knowing the inventory of the tributes the Aztec provinces made. It is known that almost all of the provinces would deliver amaranth grains to the Aztec emperor in quantities varying from 5,000 to 20,000 tons per year. Kietz's hypothesis is that this enormous quantity can only be understood if the grain was destined to feeding the indigenous army.[4]

I meet with Javier in Tilcara, and we wait for the Virgin's arrival together. Once again, one *sikuri* band after the other comes down the mountain, playing music that wraps us in a continual embrace. It's raining, and there we are, many human and plant beings waiting under the soft but persistent drizzle. The *sikuri* bands differ greatly from one to the next; some pertain to institutions, like a hospital or firefighting squad, others are made up entirely of women, some carry symbolic indigenous images as identification. When the bands arrive, the inhabitants of Tilcara draw near to offer them water, or sometimes sandwiches and little bags of candy for the children. In the midst of the *sikuri's* enveloping music, the Catholic church seems to be diluted in this pilgrimage, serving only as an excuse to render homage to the earth. It may be that, as was the case with the Virgen del Cerro de Potosí, the Virgen de Abra de Punta Corral is the form that the inhabitants gave to the Pachamama, in order to be able to carry on with their worship. After hours of waiting, the Virgin arrives with the final *sikuri* band, blessing everything that forms part of the decorated arches as she passes. People overcome with emotion try to get close to her, and once she has passed, they take away the little bags of candy, the flowers and the plants adorning the arches that have been blessed by her passing. Surrounded by this energy, even more vibrant than that of Tumbaya, I am thankful for having taken the plane that brought me to this region. Like the rest of the devotees, I take plants from the arches: two *kiwichas*, one for Javier and one for me. Mine will accompany me all the way to Berlin, and its seeds will sprout months later in front of my house along the sidewalk.

4.

For decades, different families have come together in Tilcara during Holy Week to draw with plants. The huge images that they collectively elaborate are called *ermitas* (hermitages), a term I was previously unfamiliar with. The Spanish dictionary decribes it as: “chapel or shrine, generally small, commonly situated in unpopulated areas, which tends not to have ongoing worship services.”[5] This description has little to do with what an *ermita* really is, and once again, it is Javier who tells me the story behind these images.[6]

Historically, a series of families from Tilcara have been responsible for carrying them out. It is a labor that is handed down from generation to generation. Shortly before or during Holy Week, each family comes together for intense, collective work over the course of several days to produce them. In the end, the *ermitas* will be shown on the sidewalks of Tilcara on Good Friday, and the procession of the Virgin (a different one, found in the town chapel, called La Dolorosa) will stop at each one as it travels its route throughout the town. The images are based on a sketch made on an expanse of cloth or a wood panel (depending on the family, given that each one proceeds in a different manner). Only natural elements, such as plants and flowers, are used to realize them, either sewn or adhered to the underlying support. Javier explains that the *ermitas* gradually change in accordance with the political context and the priest who is in the parish. Many of the motifs are very ecclesiastical, but many reflect the country’s political reality. He recalls one Holy Week in particular, that of 1988, when, with democracy having been recovered, one *ermita* showed Monsignor Angelelli, the Bishop for the province of La Rioja who was assassinated in 1976 during the military dictatorship. The *ermita* showed his body, thrown to the ground beside the wheel of a vehicle, with blood spattered all around. He also remembers another one that read: “la sangre derramada no será en vano” (the blood spilled will not have been in vain) alongside the image of a kneeling, half-naked man with his hands tied behind his back, tortured, with the boots of a member of the military beside him. In both images, the blood was portrayed with *aroma*, the wild amaranth that grows in these parts.

I find the names of two families who have been making *ermitas* for generations, and I manage to contact one, who accepts my offer to help with its realization. We set a day and time, and when I turn up at the prearranged moment, the work begins. I find myself in a large warehouse, the A4 sized sketch on the table, with the *ermitas* from previous years on the walls around us. There are thick needles and thread, and plants of different kinds and colors in wooden boxes. A happy family greets me, consisting of members from different generations. They give me my tools for working: amaranth plants, needle and thread. They teach me how to use them, and with supervision, mate and jokes along the way, we begin to work. Those who arrived today, Thursday, March 28, from diverse parts of the country to carry out this collective family labor at full speed, are aunts and uncles, cousins and children. They only use natural materials, which they gather themselves, drying and storing them during the entire year in some cases. The white of the sky is made up of flowers called white *itatíes*. They also dry pink, yellow and maroon *itatíes*, and they work with leaves from cattails, pear trees and poplars, and stalks of bamboo. They tell me they have previously worked with stones, corn husks, mud or even ground brick, in the case of making (or rather depicting) a house, street or mountain.[7]

After having spent so much time drawing amaranth plants as a way of observing their growth, I am now drawing with the plant itself, sewing it—still clumsily—to a white canvas. With each stitch, it's reddish color expands across the large support, which by the next day will be entirely covered with nature.

I travel through the Quebrada once again heading to the airport, where I will take the plane that will bring me back to Buenos Aires. We take off. I recall the quote "the blood spilled will not have been in vain", written in *amaranto aroma's* deep red in 1988. I think in loosely in single words and ideas: plant, blood, prohibition, poison. I mentally invent the quote, "the seeds prohibited and eliminated will not have been in vain". Along with my plant travel companions, I think once again about the wisdom and resistance of this plant being, which has risen up and reinvented herself, always renewed, over the course of centuries in the lands of this downtrodden continent that is America. I return to Buenos Aires, the nerve center of a new presidency, and repeat to myself that today, more than ever, I must, and we must, learn resistance strategies from the creative and persistent plant that is the *kiwicha*. We must learn to multiply, in silence, but insistently. To expand. To exist, to coexist along with others in the battlefield that is our territory. I land with my pockets full of amaranth seeds.

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[1] One of the methods utilized by Argentina's last military dictatorship (1976-1983) for the secret, systematic extermination of perceived political enemies were the "death flights", which consisted of throwing people—sedated and bound—from planes into the river or the sea. While some bodies eventually appeared on different shores, many remain disappeared today.
[2] Traditional panpipe ensembles.
[3] Javier Rodríguez, interview/conversation by author, Tilcara, March 26, 2024.
[4] Celeste Goldberg, interview/conversation by author, Hornillos, March 26, 2024.
[5] Kietz, Renate *Compendio del Amaranto*, ILDIS Instituto Latinoamericano de Investigaciones Sociales, La Paz, Bolivia, 1992, p. 39.
[6] Diccionario de la lengua española*,* accessed September 2, 2024, https://dle.rae.es/ermita?m=form.
[7] Rodríguez, interview/conversation.
[8] Claudia Salazar, interview/conversation by author, Tilcara, March 28, 2024.