

Aya Uma, The Protector of the Inti Raymi

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The sun has not yet broken through the dark cold sky, but that does not mean that there isn't life moving around. Across the foot of the volcano, where the snow meets the luscious green fields, we can see something moving, almost as if it is stirring awake. Suddenly, we see the outline of a man... No — — a creature. Perhaps it's a being that is both — something that has the body of a man, but the face... the faces in fact — — give the appearance of a devil... No — — an angel. Perhaps both. The Indigenous People of the Ecuadorian highlands call this creature Aya Huma. Despite this other-worldly appearance, there is not a single sign of destruction or fear. The birds, rabbits, deer, dogs and cats see this creature moving around, starting to walk across the plain. But yet, there is no fear, as if they know that this creature does not bring harm, but rather is their protector, giver of life, giver of nourishment, giver of peace. As the creature continues to journey closer and closer to a nearby town. The few Indigenous People who have started their day very early, wave, smile, and even share a quick dance as the Aya Huma passes by. Not a single fiber of fear, just full of love and appreciation. The Aya Huma continues further into the town and more Indigenous People and again more smiles and acts of kindness. But then he passes by all the churches and religious centers in town — suddenly everything changes. The mood in the air shifts, the atmosphere turns sour, and there is a whiff of tension in the air. A Spanish Catholic priest walks out of the church, then a second, and then before long, there are hundreds of them on the street. The Aya Huma senses the evil inside of them, senses the Indigenous blood they have spilled, senses the thousands of miles they have traveled from Spain, senses the evil intentions they have when trying to “convert” the Indigenous people to conform by force their way of life and religious beliefs. The Indigenous people in the town run back to their houses, some of the braver ones stand behind the Aya Huma, because they know he will protect them. They know that he is there to preserve their culture. They know that he is there for love, peace and unity. The priests falsely believe that other cultures should be forced to change their ways, stripping other cultures, killing other people, destroying ways of life. However, there is no blood shed here, there is no attack or violence by the Aya Huma. One face turns towards the evil conquistadors, showing a pleasant smile of obedience. However, his other face turns towards the Indigenous people, showing a loving and nurturing smile full of warmth — — perhaps even a slight smirk as to let his people know that this day is for them. It's a day of celebration, a day of peace, love, and community support. The people understand this. So they all continue to walk — — down the intimidating obelisk that is the Cross, attached to all the churches on this street

The Aya Huma finally stands in front of the church's main entrance. He bursts through the door with such a tremor and thunder that all the candles are instantly extinguished. Every step he takes continues to fill the church with a cold and terrifying aurora, almost as if the building itself knows that the Aya Huma doesn't belong there. However, there is a smile on the Aya Huma's face because he knows that he is there for a reason. It

appears as though the Aya Huma is heading towards the altar, but suddenly takes a sharp right turn. It seems as though he knows every inch of this church, but yet he is only here to visit once a year. The summer solstice, June 21st is the day he has chosen to let his presence be known. Now, with a bigger smile on his face he stands in front of another entrance, but this time he opens the door with such care and even a softness that most people would not believe he is capable of possessing. We enter a room filled with darkness — — what possible nightmares await us in this room? But wait, there is no fear here, there is no sense of dread in this room. Instead we are filled with a sense of familiarity, like we have all been here before. A place where we feel at home. A place that brings peace and even a sense of fulfillment and nourishment. There is just enough light seeping through the dull and dust covered stained glass windows. At first we can only make out the fiery red and yellow hues of the sun mixing with the black and blue emptiness of the sky. The first thing that comes into focus is Cotopaxi Volcano. The sun has just started its journey across the sky. As the eyes start to adjust, we can make out the sink, the refrigerator comes into view, a wooden counter with plates, knives hanging on the wall. There are also dead and wilting plants around. The perimeter that shows there used to be life here, but has been empty for a long time. Finally, there is a look of peace and pure bliss on the Aya Huma's face. Even if it were pitch dark in this kitchen, he knows where everything is. He reaches for the apron, puts it on, looks around the room, takes a deep breath and prepares himself for the task ahead — — it's food time!

On this day, the Summer Solstice, we celebrate “El Inti Raymi” or the Festival of the Sun. A time when we must give thanks to Mother Earth for all the crops we receive. A time to give thanks to the Sun for providing us with all the warmth and energy to live. And a time to reflect on all of our traditions, food, and customs with everyone in the community. And the best way to show our gratitude and appreciation with carrying out the “Pambamesa” with the community, which is a feast is normally prepared for all the community to participate in. A celebration where we all eat the same food, no different levels of privilege or superiority, just with a sense of unity, sisterhood and brotherhood, all together as one. In this case, the typical dish from the Ecuadorian Sierra will be prepared. The famous “Yawar-Lukru” A traditional stew composed of lamb entrails including the brains, intestines, tongue and liver, served with pickled red onions, avocado and topped with fried lamb blood.

The Aya Huma sees the sun starting to rise, and knows that the preparation for the feast must commence. First, a few red onions are taken from the sack and placed on the table. Using an immaculate chef's technique, the red onions are quickly sliced and diced with ease. A quick taste to make sure they are perfect. Yum — excellent flavor. An expression of happiness and content passes over Aya Huma's face as he hums his favorite song while swaying side to side. Almost as if the kitchen were his second home. Done! Next, the avocados. There is an opening along one of the stained glass windows in the church. The Aya Huma continues to hum

and sway as he makes his way towards the window. Two perfectly ripened avocados are hanging from the tree. Pluck! Pluck! Moving back to the cutting board takes time to examine the avocados, these are perfect! Slice! Slice! The avocados are cut in half. The pit is expertly removed in one seamless stroke of the blade. Slice! Slice! It is further cut into smaller pieces. The perfect green ripeness of the avocado looks divine! Another taste of the ingredients. Yum — excellent flavor. Done! Next, Aya Huma takes out a huge pot, places it on the counter. Then, walk to the corner of the kitchen where the firewood is laid out. He opens the wood-burning stove and places the firewood inside and then lights it. The deep red, yellow fire in the stove is perfectly balanced with the blue flames — such warmth. The water in the pot continues to boil in the background. The potatoes! A few are taken out of the sack, they are washed and placed on the cutting board. Again, with the most perfect chef's technique. Slam, the potatoes are now on the cutting board. Slice! Cut! Peel! Dice! The potatoes are ready along with the other ingredients. The steam fills the room. All the ingredients are coming together. Everything is being separated into pots and pans. The kitchen is starting to be filled with the intoxicating aroma of the fresh ingredients — everything is starting to come together perfectly — — but wait — — something is missing... Ahh yes! The star of the plate: the lamb!

Aya Huma's smile grows wider and wider. He knows it's time for the best part to begin.... He now stands in front of the cutting board. Now the Aya Huma places his hands together — almost as if he is about to pray.... The kitchen trembles, a powerful aurora fills the room, and in an instant... there it is... a newly dead lamb has been conjured on the cutting board. The Aya Huma grabs the biggest and sharpest knife he can find, stands in front of the lamb — the room is silent, there is an intense focus on his face, his eyes are big and wide, his breathing has increased — it is time. Slice! Crack! Blood spills. Slice! Crunch! Crack! Slice! Slice! More blood spills. The lamb's organs have been perfectly removed as if a laser was used. But looking at the Aya Huma's apron, it's clear that an execution has just taken place. The brain, check, The tongue, check. And now the intestines — — Slice! Swish! Rip! The bloody scene continues — a sharp contrast from the peaceful and united meal this is supposed to be — but yet a necessary part of the process; for there cannot be food and nutrients for the people without blood and gore.

The organs are removed, the viscera all over the table. The Aya Huma takes a cautious and thorough approach when cleaning the intestines and other viscera. After all, this plate is the star of the celebration. The people will feed upon its delicious and nutritious bounty. Everything MUST BE perfect. The fire continues to burn bright, the dark shadows of the room contrast the greens and reds from the table. The only sounds are currently that of the fire burning and the water boiling — — but this will soon change.

The Aya Huma makes a mad dash to the cupboard. SLAM, on the table. It's the salt. SLAM, on the table. It's the coriander. Slice! A lemon is cut. Slash! The ingredients are thrown in the pot. Spill! Blood and water fly

through the air. Hiss! Everything looks ready, but something is missing yet again... the fried blood! A new pan starts to heat on the stove. More firewood! Oil— more oil! The blood is carefully added to the pan. And almost as if a magic spell were being concocted, the room is once again filled with steam, mist, a magical mix of smells and aroma.

There is a symphony of fire, steam, smoke, aroma, love, and passion that continue to fill the room. The firewood glows a magnificent red, yellow and blue. The pots and pans are forcing the smoke and steam to rise, almost as if they are dancing above the Aya Huma's head. It would almost be a shame if this could not be shared with the rest of the community — almost. However, the open window will not allow the kitchen to be so selfish. Now, as the sun is fully in the sky, the window is allowed to share the love, passion, and magic that is happening inside the kitchen with the outside world. But as always, nature and the animals are the first to sense what is going on. The flapping wings of various birds can be heard — both predators and prey have called a truce to share a spot on the window sill. The bigger animals in the deep forest are starting to stir, slowly making their way to the church. There is a magnetic force that is calling to all of these animals, luring them to the magic that is taking place in this kitchen, this moment, this wonderful day that only comes once a year. The luckiest animals are the small ground-dwellers that can easily squeeze through the window. There is one animal in particular here that has a special role to play: the guinea pig.

The Aya Huma has a more serious look on his face now — — he knows that everything is almost done. All the final touches have to be made now. Dishes and bowls are now being set all over the kitchen — it is almost time. But first, the Aya Huma goes station to station, checking the status of all the elements. With a tablespoon, the Aya Huma tastes it. Almost. A dash of salt is added, perfect. The fire seems to be settling down as well. Everything is simmering and mixing all the flavors as it should be. Grabbing an oversized ladle, the Aya Huma starts to serve the broth into each bowl. It's the beginning of the final step. The broth in the bowl looks lonely, almost as if it knows that it is missing a part of itself. Next, the Aya Huma adds the onions — — almost perfect. Then, the avocado is placed gently on top of the other ingredients — — almost perfect. The final ingredient must be added to make all this fully perfect: the blood. Now, it is perfect.

The sun feels like it is fully within the kitchen. The plants outside look like they have grown three times as big since this morning. Even the empty branch where the avocados that were picked earlier in the day seem to have grown once again. The kitchen has almost become like a center stage, the plants and animals outside are the audience, the guinea pig has a VIP ticket to the show, Aya Huma is the conductor, and the star of the show is the Pambamesa. Aya Huma has fully served the meal, every single bowl is filled to the brim and all the toppings are perfectly presented, a masterpiece. The Aya Huma carefully bends down, reaches towards the guinea pig, carefully picks him up, with a very loving and tender touch, he caresses him, almost as if a parent

with a child. Aya Huma moves closer to the guinea pig's ear, and whispers, "It is ready, it is time. Go and tell the community that the feast is ready. Go tell them that the celebration is about to commence. Go tell them that the Pambamesa is served."

The indigenous community starts to gather one-by-one, and suddenly it feels like there are hundreds of thousands of people surrounding the church in a blink of an eye. There is an incredible sense of love, trust, brotherhood, sisterhood, a sense of strength, bonding, and peace. The bowls are being placed wherever there is an empty hand, placed at every table, placed at every empty lap. Almost as if there is an infinite number of dishes waiting to be devoured.

All the evil spirits are shunned. They are cowering at the sight of this unity of people, food, and sense of belonging. All the diseases, droughts, famine, and sickness that once covered the land is being driven out. Aya Huma is at the center of this magical source of energy. He is the community leader, the leader, the mother, the father, the warrior that possesses and wields the vital energy that is contained within nature itself. He ensures that every single empty stomach is full of food, full of life and nurture. He ensures that every single bad spirit is driven away from the land. Every small seedling feels like a massive oak tree. Every puppy and kitten feels like a wolf and a wild cat. Every man, woman, and child feel like a higher-power living on this Eden, that we call Earth. Now — Now everything is perfect. Now, the world is at peace. As the sun continues to travel across the sky, more bowls are served. More singing. More dancing. More love. More power within the community.

This is the day of the summer solstice, this is the day of the people, this is the day of our community.