

## Ayni: Living Life in the Round by Patricia Soledad Llosa

Today For You, Tomorrow For Me.” This is the meaning behind ayni, a living Andean philosophy and practice that awakens a balanced and harmonious relationship between nature and man. In Andean cosmology, this is expressed through complementary opposites such as male/female; sun/moon; gold/silver. Their interaction is a form of reciprocity called ayni.

One of the guiding principles of the way of life of the Quechua and Aymara people, this equilibrium of exchange and mutuality, which has been practiced since ancient times (since before the Incas), creates a cycle of connectivity and support essential to social and spiritual wellbeing. Anthropologist Catherine Allen describes it beautifully: “At the most abstract level, ayni is the basic give-and-take that governs the universal circulation of vitality. It can be positive ... or ... negative .... This circulation ... is driven by a system of continuous reciprocal interchanges, a kind of dialectical pumping mechanism. Every category of being, at every level, participates.”

I grew up in Peru in the 1970s. Lima, its chaotic metropolis, was still alive with a deep imbalance—a colonial attunement to Europe and America that offered a blind eye and deaf ear towards the riches of the native culture. At that time anything that carried a whiff of the local indigenous was usually subject to derision. A white person wearing a sweater with a llama on it could be only a tourist. While this split between indigenous and modern Western attitudes has changed greatly over the last thirty years, I personally knew nothing of ayni until I left the country and traveled the world.

But I returned to the land of my birth and childhood with new eyes and ears.

While visiting my father in Lima, I was invited to one of those typical languorous Peruvian lunches that extend through an afternoon rife with seafood and pisco sours. It took place at the home of Susana Baca, at the edge of Barranco—the neighborhood of choice for the Lima bohème. An Afro-Peruvian singer, Susana is winner of several Latin Grammys, former Minister of Culture of Peru, and a grande dame of song who takes her rightful place amongst such international luminaries as Cesaria Evora, Mercedes Souza and Virginia Rodriguez.

It was the 24th of January and her husband, Ricardo Pereira, originally from Bolivia, told me that today was a unique day of reciprocity and generativity that he wanted to celebrate. He reached into his wallet and took out a tiny piece of paper the size of a fingernail. I looked more closely at it and realized that it was a miniature dollar bill. “This is for you, in the reciprocal spirit of the day” he said. “I give to you today, you give to me tomorrow. Today is the day of the Fair of the Alasitas in La Paz, Bolivia, an Aymara

celebration where miniatures are purchased and exchanged. One purchases what one wishes most to have in the coming year.”

This was my introduction to a core principle of native Peruvian wisdom, expressed through a marketplace of hopes and dreams in miniature. This tiny little dollar, from the world of *-ito*, the Spanish diminutive, grew in my imagination until I undertook the journey to Bolivia, to see with my own eyes the market of miniatures. *Alasitas* is Aymara for “buy me.” The market is centered around the plaza of San Francisco though it spreads throughout the streets of the city. People fill the streets buying miniatures either homemade or mass produced. The throngs grow towards the midday hour, which is the hour of greatest potency, when the sun is at its highest point in the day.

I found myself purchasing a diploma and a license to practice psychology as well as myriad tiny objects such as a miniscule Mac computer (you could choose between that and a Dell) and a bright plaid suitcase the size of a fist stuffed with dollars and Euros. The miniatures of every size and shape were a feast for the delighted child in me, but as the day wore on I began to understand that something much more profound was actually taking place. What was innately understood by the thousands of people participating (although unknown to tourists like me) was that these miniatures symbolizing seeds of intention for a living desire were part of a communal rite of participation in the circular dance of reciprocity of the cosmos—balance enacted on a personal and a communal scale at the same time.

I gradually became aware of the message: if the personal is balanced within the community, then the community is balanced. And if the relationship between the needs of man and nature is balanced, then all is well with the world. This was so different from the Western concept of accumulation for an uncertain future and the hoarding of natural and other resources, that I marveled. One example of this kind of thinking: When I walked into a small store with beautiful textiles which I thought to buy, I found the whole family playing at counting out their debts in miniature bills. “We need to return the money, the resources to the Earth,” they explained to me, “so that we can continue to ask resources of her.”

You could buy building blocks, toilets, tickets for travel, homes, trucks, cars, along with babies and wedding invitations. Every aspect of modern human life was present in miniature and for sale for a small charge. I learned that “real” money only started changing hands in the 1930s. Before then, the focus was not on purchase but on exchange, and what was exchanged were buttons or pebbles, pieces of ceramic or polished stones. These antecedents to today’s miniatures are “*illas*,” which in Aymara means “generator of plenty,” an essential creative element in the formation of the world. The miniatures represent seeds, materialized forms of intensity, dense matter that can be made generative through being part of exchange and relationship at a propitious time.

The relationships that can be defined as *ayni* thus extend to everything beneficial and generative involving two parties, or two opposites. The awakening and flourishing of this cycle of generativity takes place through blessings sung by local shamans who sprinkle flower petals and alcohol, and blow smoke from a burning altar. This is all in the spirit of the multiplicity of resources. At the same time, part of the morality of *ayni* is to take or ask for only what one needs. If one trusts in the balance of this connectedness then the balance is always present. If one simply asks for only what one needs, one can trust that it will be there.

When you take only what you need, you receive what you need. That is at the heart of

this day-long ritual, and not the acquisition of dreams as I had initially thought. If you participate in this cycle you maintain the interconnectivity of everything. If you break this cycle and do not participate in it, the world is out of balance. It is said that “Nature is in me and I am in nature.” And “the cosmos is our family.” The premise behind ayni of the unity of all things reminded me of what Mary Oliver called “the family of things.” Chief Seattle and other Native Americans have said that “Everything is connected, like the blood which unites one family. We are all ultimately mutually dependent.”

Ekekos of various sizes and owners. Photograph by Aizar Raldes

Let me introduce you to a unique protagonist of the festival. The ekeko is a very important person—the keeper of the illas. He wears a traditional alpaca knit chuyo on his head and his feet are shod in ojetas, sandals made out of recycled rubber tires. He often sports a spanking white shirt, which establishes him as someone beyond the agricultural realm, with sometimes a tie and a brightly colored jacket and slacks. Mostly, you cannot see more than his head and his toes peeping out because the rest of him is hidden under an abundance of packages.

What is in this cornucopia of packages? If we take a closer look we can see food stuffs, beans, pasta, money, a car, a television, a mattress, a heart which could symbolize marriage or a healthy heart, etc. In other words, he carries everything one could ask for to live a healthy, enjoyable, and generative life.

The ekeko himself stands for the cultivation of ayni, the relationship between giving and receiving, and by cultivating a relationship with him one cultivates that circular relationship of exchange that maintains the relationship between balance and our personal desire. He requires an offering of alcohol and cigarettes, usually on Tuesdays, Fridays, and special occasions. When he is supplied with these gifts every week by his owner, the ekeko helps to invest the objects the owner carries with power and vitality.

Seen as an ambiguous figure, a sort of Andean Hermes, who can be both benign or harmful depending on the circumstances and the relationship established with each particular individual, the ekeko is a masculine figure, reminiscent of volcanic gods when he puffs his cigarettes or is activated by spirit (alcohol). Some say he represents an evolution of the Pre-Colombian god of abundance who has survived and maintained his original meaning, but whose outer representation has been influenced by colonial form. He is as stocky as an Andean but his physiognomy is quite Western. Some say he is an indigenous creation in the form of a wandering merchant of colonial times, sometimes called a “turk,” who would deliver much needed resources throughout the scarcity of the altiplano. Because he sports a thin moustache it has also been said that he is a representation of Don Sebastian Seguro, the Spaniard who instituted the Alasitas fair in the eighteenth century.

The ekeko has made its way to Japan and appears in a chapter of an animated series called *Ano Natsu de Matteru* in which the main character arrives home from a trip to Bolivia carrying the god of abundance as a “souvenir.” Most recently, a Bolivian artist named Danitza Luna has created a female ekeko: She has a note pasted on her chest reading: “The Ekeka was always me.” Her right hand is on her chest, while her left holds a suitcase with the words “dreams, hope, rebellion, joy.”

My personal journey has developed out of that sense of being spellbound by the ritual, the

aspect of longing which the miniature represents, and the playful resolution through purchase, followed by the realization of its the deeper meaning. Many Native traditions tell us about weaving the world into being. It is not simply about the restoration of balance, but about maintaining the balance of the generative cycles. What was most striking about the Alasitas festival and the figure of the ekeko was not so much the desires that were chosen each year by the participants, but that they were tempered and balanced. The desires have to do with the demands of everyday life and growth—with generativity rather than acquisition. It is a balanced relationship to our “requirements” that we could do well to learn from.

As I left the festival, I complimented a woman on her braids and how they made a such a beautiful circle. After we talked for a while she confided to me that this way of dressing her hair was related to the circular principle of the balance between giving and receiving. In the Andean tradition, human beings establish ritual relationships of reciprocity with Mother Earth and with the community around them. Thus the basic needs of life are met as every category of being, at every level, participates in this cosmic circulation.