

Gifts from the Ecuadorian Highlands of Caliata  
By: Emily Kuhn

The Caliata Initiative is [raising funds](#) to buy a water pump and build a cistern with a smallholder agricultural community in the Central-South Highlands of Ecuador.

**Beginning of Piece**



Sumaizhi holding freshly picked berries from the land.

Children ran laughing through a terraced forest garden, lush with corn and sunflowers against the mountainous urban backdrop. This is where my stewardship journey began, at a community intercultural bilingual school in Quito, Ecuador. I became a student of the *chakra* during my brief time as a volunteer at Yachay Wasi School in 2020, and returned to tend the seeds that were planted there in 2022 for a Fulbright Research grant dedicated to [Kichwa Agroecology](#).

*Chakra* is the traditional Kichwa subsistence agroforest in which food, medicines, and cultural rituals have been reproduced for millenia. I learned about this ancestral classroom guided by conversations with Kichwa campesino elders from across the ecologically and culturally diverse landscapes of Ecuador. Along the journey, I met the Caranquis, a Kichwa Puruah family from the volcanic green highlands of the Chimborazo province. They generously welcomed me into

their home for a month to practice Kichwa, and in doing so, forever affirmed my commitment to ecological stewardship.

A brilliant smile lights up the face of a young girl in her traditional broad-brimmed hat as she strips the leaves from an ear of corn to reveal its gleaming red-orange kernels. Sumaize is one of a handful of the youth generation that remains to help her grandparents with the summer harvest in Caliata, Chimborazo. In a few short weeks, she will wake up at four in the morning each day to catch a bus into the city of Riobamba, where she goes to school. Today, however, we are learning together in a different kind of classroom – one that is integral to the reproduction of Kichwa cultural knowledge<sup>1</sup>.

Sumaizhi, her younger cousin and I carefully observe the corn stalks' delicately painted details for clues, and then we each guess the color that will soon be uncovered. As we open the gift-wrapping of their leaves, eight varieties of corn reveal themselves in unique medleys of black, deep purple, dark red, fuschia, orange, and gold, all shimmering at the sun's touch<sup>2</sup>.



The snowcapped volcano, Chimborazo, is visible from the Caranqui's home in Caliata.

Tayta Chimborazo – the snowcapped volcanic giant for which the province is named – stands proudly against the clear August sky. The Indigenous people of this land respectfully refer to him as “Father” in their native Kichwa. Nestled in the green valley of Caliata, the Puruha people tend their ancestral land with care – adapting to the demands of modern life while continuing to nurture the life-giving processes that ensure their subsistence.

---

<sup>1</sup> “Land as pedagogy” <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/14687941241246174>

<sup>2</sup>Caliata: An Indigenous Community in Ecuador Offers Lessons on Food Sovereignty and Sustainable Diets. Gallegos-Riofrío, Waters, Carrasco, et. al. 65.



Sumaizhi and her cousin demonstrate the corn their grandparents have harvested.

The Food and Agriculture Organization recognizes Andean agriculture as one of the most important ecosystems of the world's agricultural heritage, in part because Andean crops are among the most resilient to environmental stress and climate change<sup>3</sup>. The biodiversity that assures such resilience is evident in the corn's color, shape, and nutritious quality.

“Saramama” is a far cry from the homogenous supersized white-yellow variety I am accustomed to seeing in U.S. grocery stores. Eating and producing food here in the rural Andes is inseparable from Kichwa cultural practices. Traditional ecological knowledge is transferred through the survival of traditional diets and their relationship of mutual care with the agroecosystem known as the *chakra*<sup>4</sup>. In this intergenerational Andean learning space, corn is not a mere commodity but a cherished mother of the people. Across the Americas, the corn mother is traditionally grown alongside her two younger sisters: beans and squash.

---

<sup>3</sup> FAO 2019, Meldrum et al. 2018; Ruiz et al. 2014.

<sup>4</sup>The *chakra* is not only a productive space, but also includes bonds between the geography, non-human nature and people. (Altieri 1999, et. al). In Andean communities, for example, the *chakra* is an agroecosystem with dimensions that transcend the biophysical (Coq-Huelva et al. 2017); it is a ritual space that can include terraces, raised beds, an irrigation canals of an intricate design (Tarragó 2000).



Sisters Milka and Sumaizhi alongside the author in front of Santo Cristo church constructed in Caliata, 1812.

Sumaizhi's eldest sister, Milka, invited me to her home in Caliata after we became fast friends while dancing *muyuy* together with their mother in the streets of Otavalo. *Muyu* means seed in Kichwa. Kichwa is the most widely spoken of the fourteen pre-colonial languages indigenous to Ecuador. The cyclical dance of *muyuy* is performed for the seeds during the Summer Solstice festivities celebrated throughout the Andes. During this auspicious period of Inti Raymi, long nights of harvest celebrations mark the end of the life cycle for the diverse seeds.



Author and the Caranqui sisters paint their faces with berries and adorn themselves with flowers on a walk in Caliata.

Music echoes throughout the city while guests' plates are laden full with potatoes, grilled guinea pigs, and puffed corn. By the end of the vivacious gatherings and home-brewed fermented beverages, those that steward the seeds all season long become tired and rest with the sun. In this way, the dance of *muyuy* seeds friendships and ensures the sharing of the season's abundance. When the festivities come to an end, tired feet and seeds alike slow down for the fallow season, and the mutual care of the *chakra* continues anew.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Ishkay Yachay. Santillán Santillán y Chimba Simba. 52-57.



Sumaizhi sits on a pile of harvested corn stalks.

A month after our meeting, Milka and I arrived in the Caliata community while her mother facilitated a city council meeting. As the president of Caliata, she serves as a facilitator for the council meetings, which are a discussion among the *ayllu* – the primary social unit for organizing in Andean communities. *Ayllu* traditionally includes the nuclear and extended families of the entire locality as well as the non-human residents of the space they inhabit — rocks, rivers, plants; everything that is vital is sacred and has a voice<sup>6</sup>.

---

<sup>6</sup> “The Ayllu System of the Potato Park, Cusco, Peru”. Argumedo, Alejandro y Bernard Yun Loong Wong. Satoyama Initiative, 2010, 3 de mayo. 12. [https://satoyama-initiative.org/case\\_studies/the-ayllu-system-of-the-potato-park-cusco-peru/](https://satoyama-initiative.org/case_studies/the-ayllu-system-of-the-potato-park-cusco-peru/).



Author carries corn on her back during community harvest in Caliata.

The Caliata community understands that the survival of *ayllu* depends on collaboration. A routine part of the agenda for these city council meetings is the scheduling of *mingas* – collective participation in work that is essential for the community. *Mingas* are central to Kichwa life, particularly for agricultural subsistence communities like Caliata. Regardless of who owns the land, neighbors routinely participate in days of service together. In the spirit of reciprocity, food, refreshment, or a portion of the harvest is provided to everyone who participates in *minga*.

Everyone who is able-bodied gathers for a *minga* the week following my arrival in Caliata. Heavy rains caused the fragile water system to collapse, and the entire community is without clean water until the waterway can be restored. This is why the Caliata Initiative raised funds to build more resilient clean water infrastructure. Now, their work continues to address other local vulnerabilities through the restoration and preservation of pre-Columbian cultivation terraces.

The people of Caliata maintain a deep understanding of their local ecology, reinforced by their multigenerational relationships with the biodiverse seeds they sow. Thank you for supporting the Caliata Initiative: a collaboration between locals, farmers, students, researchers, and educators dedicated to ensuring the health of people and the planet for seven generations into the future.

Visiting Caliata at the end of my yearlong exchange in Ecuador deepened my own stewardship as an urban farmer in water-scarce Southern California. Their resilience gave me hope for a future rooted in the sacredness of mutual care; one where the abundance of the harvest is multiplied in the gifts of fresh air, healthy soil, clean water and for all.



Elderly community members, mothers' carrying children, and the few young people of Caliata working vigorously at removing debris from the blocked waterway.

## END OF PIECE

### My bio:

Emily Kuhn grew up in the farm-to-table restaurant industry and discovered her love for culinary storytelling from a young age in her grandparents' kitchens. She began deepening her own stewardship practice by working at farms in California and Colorado after studying abroad in Ecuador in 2020. She completed her Bachelors' degrees in Environmental Sociology and Spanish at Pitzer College and has since earned Certifications in Permaculture and Applied Agroecology. In 2022 she returned to Ecuador for a Fulbright Research grant and recorded campesino oral histories for Kichwa Language and Ethnoscience education. Now, Emily Kuhn is the Communications and Programs Coordinator for Multinational Exchange for Sustainable Agriculture and a Farmer for the first Agrivoltaics Research in Southern California with the Robert Redford Conservancy.

