

Aya Despacho: A Prayer Package for the Dead

by Kitty Edwards

After death our physical body returns to the earth.

Our wisdom returns to the mountains.

Our soul returns to the stars.

I first met Don Francisco Chura Flores, a Q'ero shaman, when I attended a class on shamanic energy medicine in the desert of Joshua Tree, CA. He dressed in the colorful hand-woven clothing of his people who live in the high mountains of Peru. He was not a tall man, but his presence was substantial. He had traveled to the desert as a guest of The Four Winds Society to give us, the students, the healer's rites of the Q'ero lineage of medicine men and women.

At the time, I was grieving the death of my aunt and godmother, who had died on the day I arrived in Joshua Tree. At her request, my cousins in Alabama had not told me of her impending death. She had successfully fought off breast cancer for many years, but at age 86, the cancer returned. She wanted only her daughters to attend her in her final days. I was shocked at the news of her death and further saddened that I could not travel quickly enough to get to her funeral. My southern upbringing triggered both guilt and grief because of my inability to participate.

Prodded by one of my teachers, who knew how unsettled I was, I put my name into the lottery for a private session with Don Francisco. My name was chosen and I was assigned a meeting time. Coincidentally, my session was scheduled at the same time as my aunt's funeral. Don Francisco and I sat facing each other on the floor in a small room. All around him were baskets of candies, chocolates, leaves, colorful yarns, beans, corn, quinoa, and fresh flowers. He asked me to blow on three leaves that he held in his hands. He then blew on the same leaves and laid them on a square sheet of paper that was positioned on the floor between us.

Over the next hour he created a beautiful despacho filled with my prayers and wishes. In the process, we celebrated the abundance and beauty of Pachamama (Mother Earth) and the journey we take through life. At some point in this ceremony, my grief shifted to a celebration of my relationship with my aunt and our love for each other. I was amazed how quickly this ritual brought me comfort, even though Don Francisco spoke no English and I spoke no Quechua.

A despacho is a prayer bundle or offering to the mountains, the earth, and our guiding spirits. There are many types of despacho ceremonies, each unique in form and intention. The Q'ero shamans

perform despacho ceremonies to help individuals face the significant events in their lives. During a despacho ceremony, participants place symbolic objects into the despacho to voice their intentions and requests.

An Aya (death) Despacho is created to assist the deceased in their journey into the afterlife. Through ceremony, participants create a rainbow bridge to ease the process of crossing over. According to the Q'ero shamans, after death our physical body returns to the earth. Our wisdom returns to the mountains. Our soul returns to the stars. The Aya Despacho is also a celebration of life, bringing closure to a life just lived. It is a participatory ceremony in which family and friends of the deceased reminisce, laugh, cry, and celebrate.

Since that time I spent with Don Francisco, I have learned to create Aya Despacho for others, helping grieving family members and beloved friends step into ceremony to lift the heaviness in their hearts. Even though this tradition has roots in a specific ancient cosmology, it is alive with meaning for our modern world.

During an Aya Despacho ceremony, participants sense the wisdom of this indigenous tradition rooted in archetypal energies. As they use their breath to express their hopes and wishes and place symbolic objects into the layers of the Aya Despacho, a rainbow bridge is created. The first two layers represent the lower world, which embodies the spirit of the earth and her ancient feminine powers. The next two layers represent the middle world, the world in which we live and the life of the person who has died. The last three layers represent the upper world, the world of our becoming. The structure of an Aya Despacho ceremony is traditional. However, the intention is to step beyond structure, beyond time, and into the unseen world of the spirits and the ancestors.

The power of these concepts was brought home to me when I traveled through



the Andes. I found myself awestruck by the immediacy of the symbols of this cosmology. The mountains that soar 20,000 feet above the sea are simultaneously dominant and protective. I felt the influence of the mountains surrounding the Sacred Valley, the ancient capital of the Inca Empire. Once, while floating across Lake Titicaca at night, the Milky Way appeared as an illuminated pathway to a timeless domain. I knew then that this was truly the path of the ancestors.

Below you will find abbreviated instructions for performing an Aya Despacho ceremony, which creates a prayer bundle of many layers.

Aya Despacho Ceremony

It is important to begin any ceremony by opening sacred space. When open, sacred space creates an envelope in the shape of an octahedron (eight-sided, six-pointed) around the ceremony. The most common way to do this is to call on the cardinal directions: south, west, north, and east. With each direction, invite in natural elements that represent that direction. Examples might be: summer, fall, winter, and spring; mountain, desert, ocean, and jungle; or animals, such as serpent, jaguar, hummingbird, and eagle. Next, invite the earth below you and the sky above you to complete the octahedron. Within this container, everyone is protected and anything is possible. Make an offering to the earth by splashing red wine on the ground. Then, toss white wine into the air as an offering to the heavens.

Black Layer

Fold a large sheet of black paper into thirds one way, and then in thirds the other way. This will create nine squares on the paper. The despacho is built on the center square. The black layer represents the dark world of the unconscious and unknown. Each element added to this layer acknowledges the mystery. Place sugar in each of the four corners of the center square.



For this black layer, each participant creates two k'intus. Each k'intu is made up of three dried leaves. Place the three leaves on top of each other. Add one red carnation petal and one white carnation petal on top of the leaves. Blow your prayers and wishes into the k'intu. The breath is very important. It is the active prayer of engaging the sacred. Pass the k'intu to the person on your left, who will add their prayers and wishes to yours.

The purpose of the first k'intu is to honor any unfinished business between yourself and the deceased. The purpose of the second k'intu is to honor any unfulfilled dreams. Once all the k'intus have been passed, place them in a circle in the center of the despacho. Sprinkle seeds over the despacho to grow the prayers.

To fuel the release of any dreams, place fat on this layer. Put a red bean and a black bean into the despacho to balance masculine and feminine energies.

Red Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of red tissue paper, cut slightly smaller than the outer black paper. The items added to this layer are in gratitude to the earth. The tradition is to feed the earth with chocolates, candies, herbs, and incense. Place a photograph of the person who has died on this layer.

Green Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of green tissue paper. Everything we add to this layer is in gratitude for the abundance in our world. Animal cookies,



Photographs all by Candace Brad

quinoa, paper money, tools, corn, and fat are added to this layer. Participants can personalize the offerings by telling stories about the deceased, his pets, work, and favorite foods. Raisins are added to this layer to represent the wisdom of our ancestors that lives on in us today.

Blue Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of blue tissue paper. This layer represents the sacred mountains. Everything we add to this layer is white. Sugar, cotton balls for clouds, rice, salt, candles, flowers, and wine are offered symbolically. The final addition to this layer is a white feather for flight.

Purple Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of purple tissue paper. This layer represents the many colors of the rainbow bridge. Everything we add to this layer is in gratitude to the journey. Place a shell at the center of the despacho. Place into the shell a symbolic human figure of the opposite sex from the deceased. This is the cosmic twin that connects with the departed. Next, add multi-colored yarn in the shape of a rainbow. Colorful flowers, confetti, and incense are also added. The final addition to this layer is a white ribbon placed in a circle to represent the cycle of life.

Gold Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of gold tissue paper. This layer represents vision and alignment with destiny. Everything we add to this layer is in gratitude to the stars. Participants create two more k'intus for this layer. These k'intus encourage participants to surrender to the unknown. On this layer all other ingredients are gold- or silver-colored. Incense, stars, flutes, a sea star, and a seed pod are added.

White Layer

Cover the previous layer with a sheet of white tissue paper. This is the layer of oneness and nothingness. It covers all the other layers. Nothing else is added.

Once the rainbow layers have been assembled and all items added, fold the outer black paper over the contents of the despacho. Tie the despacho with gold and silver cords. Wrap the cords carefully around the despacho without flipping it over, so that the prayers inside are not disturbed. Close the sacred space. Thank and release each of the energies that were called in to create the sacred space.

Fire Ceremony to Burn an Aya Despacho

An Aya Despacho should be burned in a ceremonial fire as soon as possible. Fire provides rapid transmission of the prayers and wishes.

To build the fire, first place two sticks of kindling in the form of the Southern Cross, a star constellation in the southern hemisphere. Build a teepee of wood above the cross. Participants stand closely in a circle around the fire. Open a sacred space by calling in the cardinal directions, the earth, and heavens. Light the fire. One person should act as the caretaker for the fire during the ceremony, adding wood as needed.

Sing a chant or a familiar song that has simple, repetitive words. Choose a song that is appropriate for the traditions or beliefs of the participants. Place the despacho in the fire when the fire is hot. With politeness, turn your backs to the fire and stand in silence while the despacho burns. It is considered rude to watch the spirits consume a despacho.

When fire keeper indicates that the despacho is completely burned, close the sacred space in gratitude. At least two people should stay with the fire until the embers are cold. Do not put water on the fire. Ashes created in this sacred fire should be buried in the earth at a later time.

An Aya Despacho and fire ceremony are performed to assist the dead in the process of stepping out of their physical body. The Q'ero shamans say that the spirit of the dead lingers in the vicinity for





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Two Realms: The Teachings of the Q'ero Shamans

In the high mountains of Peru, the Q'ero people lived in isolation for hundreds of years, escaping the destruction of their culture by the conquistadors. The Q'ero shamans, who preserve the ancient spiritual and healing traditions, are the descendants of the Incas. In the 1950s, because a prophecy directed them, the Q'ero shamans descended from the mountains and engaged with the people below to assist in the transformation that would occur in 2012 and beyond. They brought their cosmology and ceremonies to the valleys of Peru and the rest of the world.

seven days before moving on to the upper world. In the first two weeks following an Aya Despacho ceremony there are instances of opportunity for healing to take place for the one who has crossed over and the ones left behind. During this time, it is possible for relationships to shift and new connections to be made. 🌱

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Like other indigenous peoples, the Q'ero believe that there are two realms of existence. First, there is the ordinary realm, the world we can see, touch, taste, and smell. In addition, there is a non-ordinary realm, which exists outside of time, and where guardian spirits and the ancestors reside. According to the Q'ero, this non-ordinary realm informs everything in the universe. The purpose of any despacho ceremony is to provide a means of communication between the ordinary and non-ordinary realms.

Similar to many religious mythologies, the Q'ero also believe in the existence of three levels of experience: the lower world, the middle world, and the upper world. The lower world is a dark and mysterious place; this is the domain of our subconscious and our shadow. The middle world is where we reside, work, play, and love, discovering all that is possible in our physical bodies. We travel to the upper world after death. It holds our destinies. The non-ordinary realm in each of these worlds is mapped by shamans, who journey between these worlds in service to their communities.

