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K'AYRA'S STORY

LIVING AT CHIRIPA

BECOMING A KNOWER



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JOHN G. SWOGER

LIFE AND DEATH AT A BOLIVIAN MIDDLE FORMATIVE SETTLEMENT 1000 - 500 BCE



LIVING AT CHIRIPA

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By

Christine A. Hastorf

Comic written and illustrated by

John G. Swogger

Based on research completed at the site of Chiripa, Bolivia by the Taraco Archaeological Project undertaken between 1992 and 2018.

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I had seen twelve harvests
when my mother died.

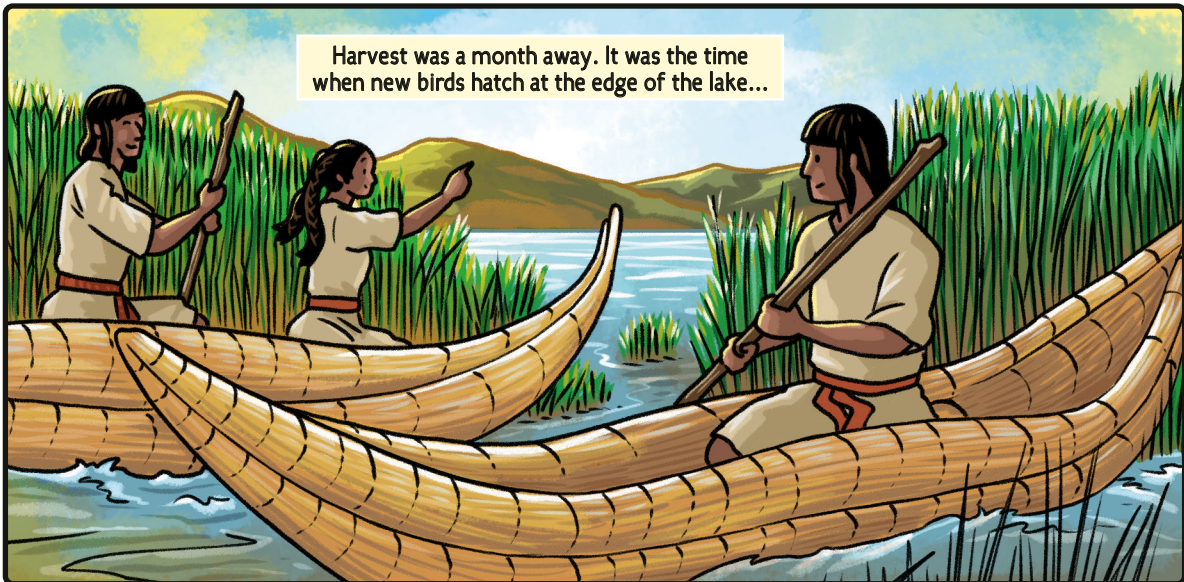
She was a **yatiri** - a Knower.

She knew the uses of all the plants and the stories of all the stars. She knew how things were and of how things should be. The whole village looked to her to help them in time of trouble, and when she died, it was a sad day for the whole village...

But it was also the most important day of my life: the day I stopped being just a girl and started becoming a yatiri like my mother - the day I started...

BECOMING A KNOWER

Harvest was a month away. It was the time when new birds hatch at the edge of the lake...



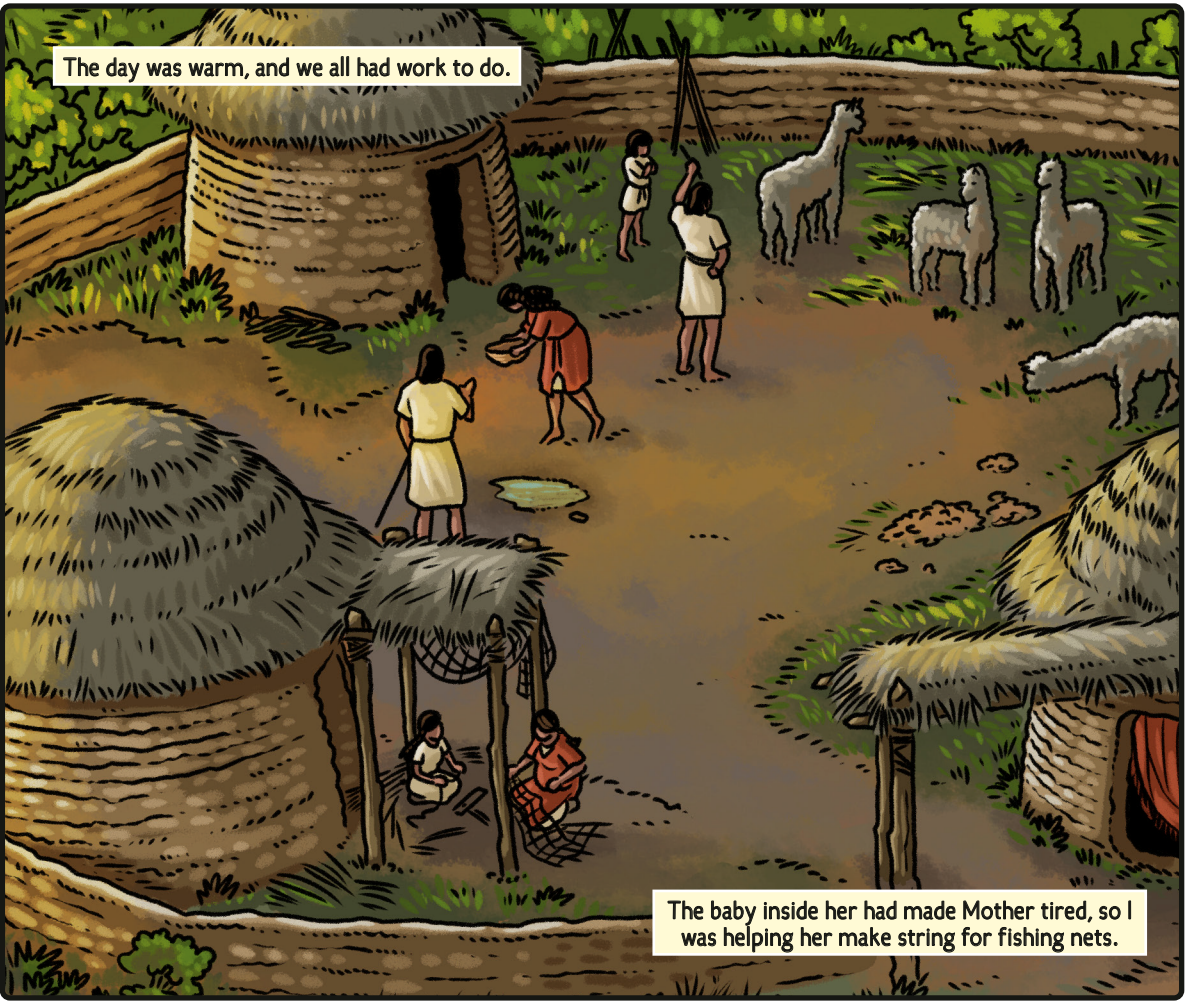
... When the alpacas eat the fresh green grass near the bubbling springs.



...When the fields are being tended, and the quinoa is growing tall.

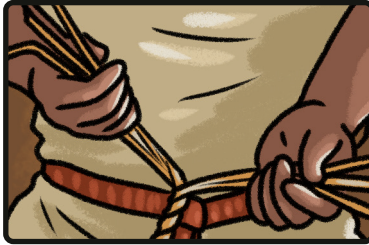


The day was warm, and we all had work to do.



The baby inside her had made Mother tired, so I was helping her make string for fishing nets.

K'ayra, you make such fine string from this ichu grass!



No fish will swim through these nets!









Look!

The child...

... It lives!



You have a fine, healthy son...

But this child no longer has a mother.



Our Knower is dead!



Mother was gone - gone!

I was surrounded by family, neighbours and friends, but I felt so alone.



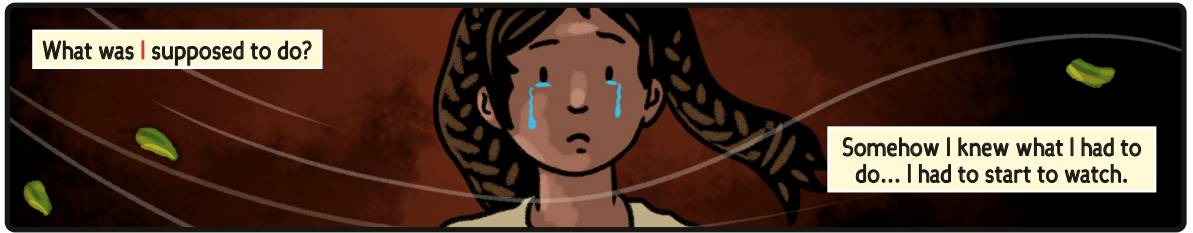
What are they going to do?

Everything must be done properly.



K'ayra... this is **your** time.

You must be brave and decide what is to happen next...



What was I supposed to do?

Somehow I knew what I had to do... I had to start to watch.



I must go to the hills and watch and listen to the wind...

The wind will tell me when to have the ceremony.



And you do not need to do this alone...

We will be with you.



We climbed the Taraco hills and I heard the voice at the back of the wind.

It spoke to me...

... wayra, the wind.

I made it a gift of coca leaves...

... and I watched and listened.

We must wait until after the harvest, when the Seven Little Ones have climbed above the mountains in the east. That is when we will bury mother.



There is so much to do... so much.

Your new baby brother must be cared for - he needs nursing.



Harvest must be brought in for the burial ceremony.

And all our relatives need to be told. How are we to do all this?



Awicha, I am ready to take care of the ceremony.

Tata, we must ask all our neighbours to help share the labour.

And we must visit all our friends, neighbours and relations in time for them to attend the burial.

Together: that is how we are to do all this.

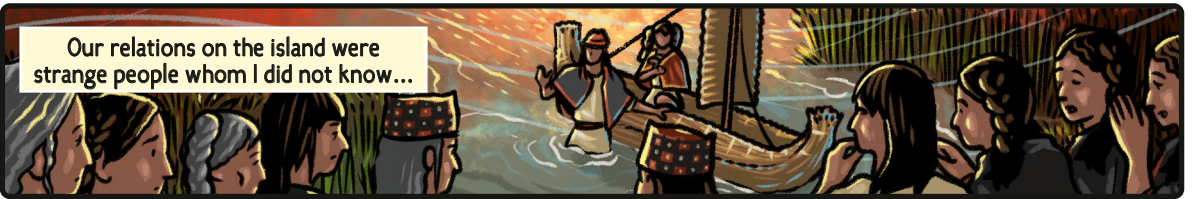
We had many relatives on the island in the lake.



I had never been so far out into the lake before.



Our relations on the island were strange people whom I did not know...



But they welcomed us, full of sympathy.





There was so much that needed to be decided.

We talked all night...



... and all day.



But we could not stay longer than that.



I am proud of you, daughter - that was difficult.

Yes, so many people to talk to!



But they **listened** to you, which is important.



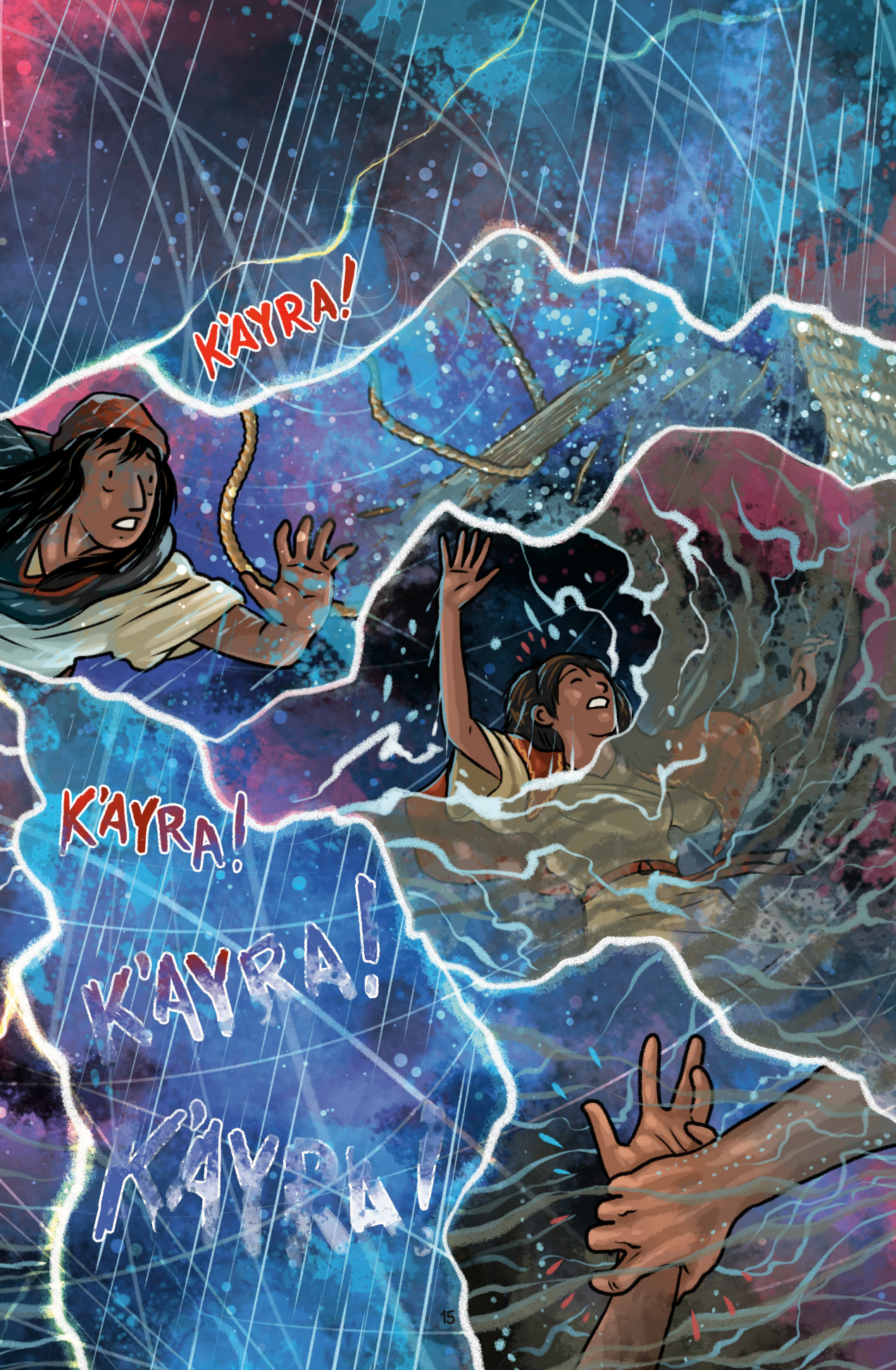


Hold on tight, K'ayral!



TATAI





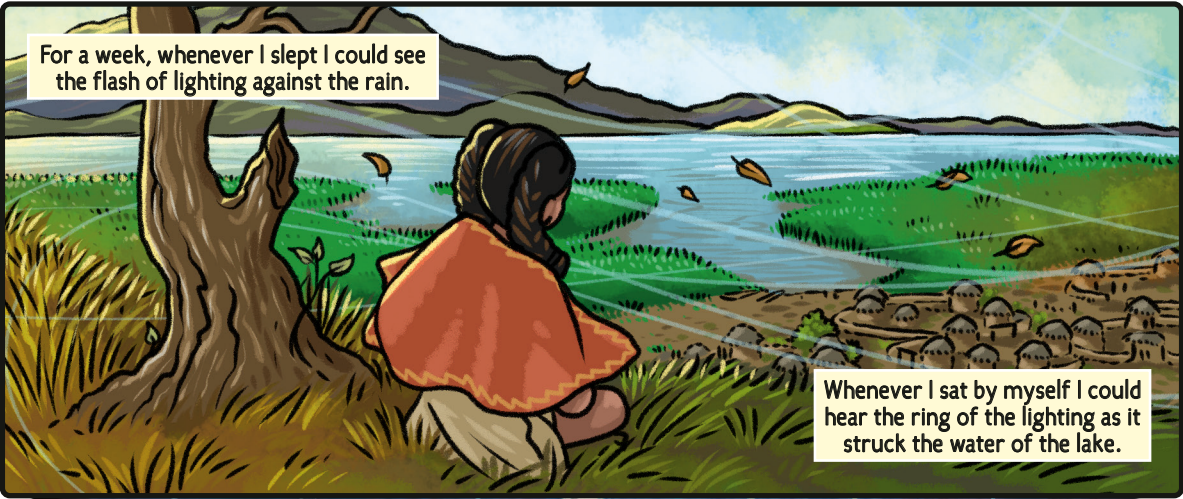
K'AYRA!

K'AYRA!

K'AYRA!

K'AYRA!






For a week, whenever I slept I could see the flash of lightning against the rain.


Whenever I sat by myself I could hear the ring of the lightning as it struck the water of the lake.




What did it mean?



All around me, harvest had begun, and people worked hard in the fields to cut and stack the quinoa and dig up potatoes and oca.



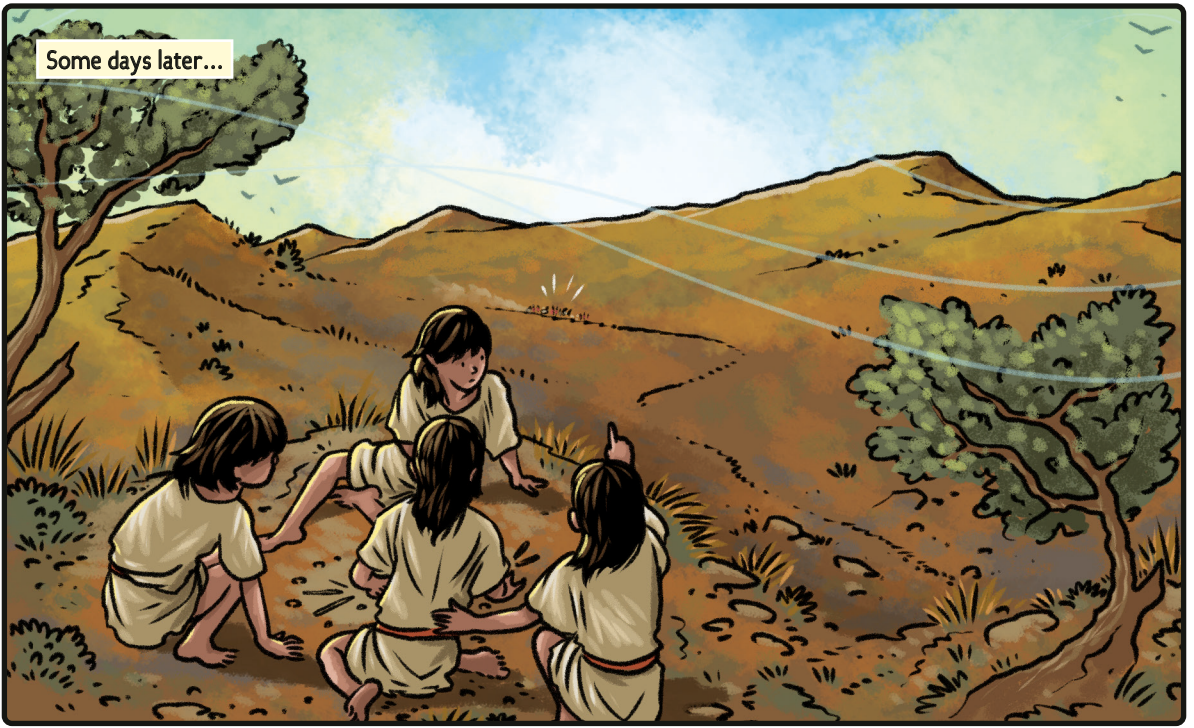
But all I could think about was the lightning.



I felt like I should know something now...

... but what?

Some days later...



They seemed taller than us, and their eyes darker.



Their own language sounded so strange, and ours sounded strange when they spoke it.

But they brought wonderful things:

Gleaming blocks of salt.

Bundles of coca leaves.

Bright macaw feathers.

Flat vilca seeds.

Basalt tools.

Shining obsidian.

Sodalite beads.

Kernels of dried maize.



It seemed strange that they wanted to trade these marvellous things...

... for our ichu rope...

... crumbly chuño ...

... and dried fish of the kind we seldom eat.





Good news! They want plenty of chuño. Mother, bring all the extra we have - we can trade for maize, salt and coca!

Come and eat with us, K'ayra. The traders want to honour the spirit of your mother...

... and want to meet you!



I know my mother would have gone...

... so I must go, too.



Be careful, little one!



The traders' ways are as strange as their speech...

Your mother... good woman. Her spirit... with you, now.

... but it feels important for me to try and know them.



For you. A gift.



Our chuño - you like. Your gift - I like.



Yes, your mother - she liked our gifts, too!



They departed as suddenly as they had arrived - heading for other villages.

They were so very strange - but it was even stranger to hear them talk about mother.

As I watched them depart, I almost wished I could talk to them more.



I went to the hills to look for answers. I sat and waited for the rocks and water to speak.

It is time...

Yes, it is time...



To build **pirwas** for the harvest.



To weave an **alpaca** blanket for Mother.



To brew **beer** from the traders' **maize**.



The Place of the Ancestors is waking up.

No longer still and silent, it echoes with voices and the sounds of travellers arriving.

All of us - living and dead - will be part of mother's burial ceremony.

Our family house at the Place of the Ancestors was ready.

Listen carefully, these are things you must know:

We must follow our traditions and the way things are done...

We must gather river cobbles...

...and bring earth from the hilltops...

... and mud from the shores of the lake.



While mother had been alive, she had worked hard to make sure it was built in the proper way.

She knew the ancestors, and they knew her.

They had trusted her to do everything as it should be done...



... it was important that they trust me now, too.



Father and his brothers must dig in the center of the family house...



... and you must line it with earth, mud and cobbles we have gathered...



... to remind your mother of where she once lived.







Our songs and our grief help carry Mother's spirit to the mountains.



And as we are changed by our mourning...



So Mother's spirit is also changed...



... and released.



Everyone mourns.

But as day turns to night...


... I know the final moment has come.

I must take her into the house of the ancestors...

I must use the vilca seeds...


... and be with her as she makes her final journey to the spirit world.

And I must be brave.



You have travelled safely to the other world, Mother.

Do your work there in peace.




At this time when the living and the dead move through our village...

Remember that we did everything for you in the proper way...

... and that your time here is done.

You rest in the shape of the yet-to-be-born...

... but you are a *malki*, an ancestor now...

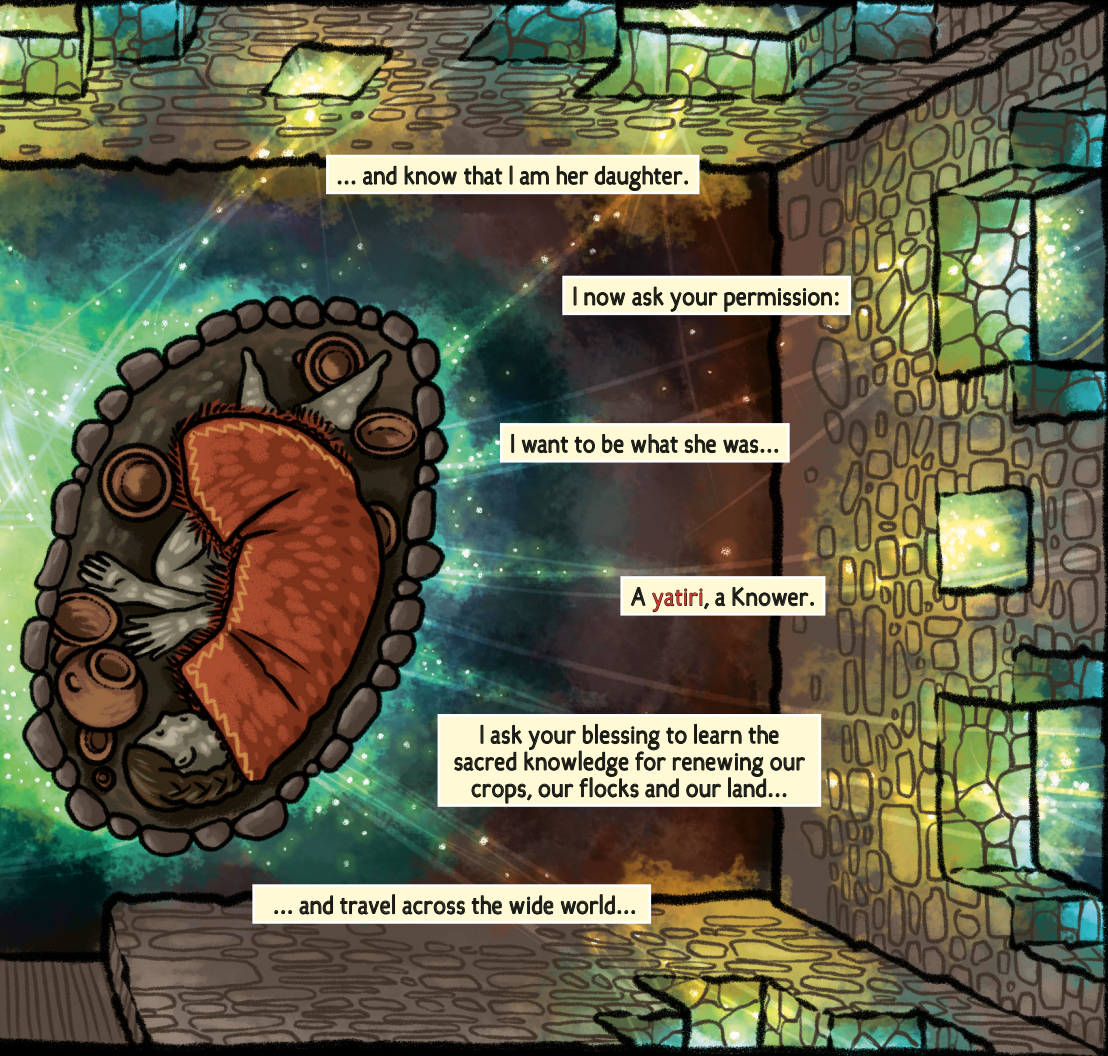


... and keep watch over us all.



Spirits!

Hear the words my mother carries to you...



... and know that I am her daughter.

I now ask your permission:

I want to be what she was...

A **yatiri**, a Knower.

I ask your blessing to learn the sacred knowledge for renewing our crops, our flocks and our land...

... and travel across the wide world...

... to learn all the things that it is right for me to learn...



... and know all the things that it is right for me to know.



I must go too.

I see my path clearly. I now know what I have to do.

I must travel to each of the mountain peaks during this dry season. I must know the land and the sky. I must meet the spirits and learn the proper ways to do things.

Although the burial and these days of mourning are over, my new life is only just beginning.



And now that the burial is over, your baby brother must have his first hair-cutting...

... and be named!



Pacha-Aru.

I name you:
Pacha-Aru.

And when I
return I will tell you
all I know about our
mother...



THE END OF THIS STORY, BUT PERHAPS THE BEGINNING OF ANOTHER...



This book tells just one of the possible stories that might have taken place at the settlement of Chiripa, located on the northern shores of the Taraco Peninsula, in the southern part of Lake Titicaca, Bolivia. It is now the home of the community of Chiripa, Ingavi Province in the altiplano-lake shore zone, which used to have the name Ocorani on historic documents, and perhaps even earlier. This location has been occupied by people for over 3500 years, since about 1600 BCE. While the original community was small, probably about 2 ha. in size, it is one of the earliest Titicaca settlements that has evidence for formalized ritual space and elaborate decoration.

Excavations on the mound by Bennett in the 1930's, Kidder in the 1950's, Browman and Cordero in the 1970's, and Portugal in the 1980's have shown that there was a small mound built and rebuilt over more than 500 years that looked at the lake on a culturally formed terrace. The temple has four major levels of construction that we think spans 1200 BCE - 600 BCE, during the Formative Period. The first action was creating a large walled enclosure where gatherings could have occurred. The next three constructions are from what we call the Middle Formative Phase of the region, stone and mud structures built around the inner plaza, which were then filled in, covered in dirt and more regular structures were again built around the interior plaza. Finally, those too were filled in a platform encircled the plaza. This means that the community was a substantial gathering location with the early evidence of permanent structures and people residing in the area around the temple mound, during and after the onset of agriculture and domestication of local food plants, potatoes and quinoa. We think that this was a time of local, agricultural production and pastoralist development, including small-scale raised fields on the pampa and terraced agriculture on the hillsides, with rituals occurring in a series of places, in association with a codified symbolic system.

It is during this Chiripa phase that we have evidence for beautiful, evocative stone carvings with wiggly snakes, frogs, and lizards, swirling over large stone stelae, often associated with human visages across the southern Titicaca Basin (called Pa ajano or Yayamama imagery). Chiripa has five of these stelae that have been uncovered in the mound and around the community. These images seem to link to water and fertility, suggesting a water focused religion that probably developed at places like Chiripa throughout the basin and beyond. These images are still in the Altiplano mind today in interests, stories and weavings. There is evidence for inter-regional trade of food crops, semi-precious stones, tool making stones and metal from both the north and south of the lake. Chiripa was clearly a center for both trade and inter-community gatherings, seen in the large ground level plaza in front of the mound.

Before TAP's excavations that began in 1992, all previous excavations had occurred on the mound. The most extensive have been in the last levels of the mound, with exposures into the lower phases, especially by Bennett and Kidder. The upper structure walls were sturdily built of river cobbles in clay that were then covered with mud plaster. The excavators have noted colored plaster on some of them. Some walls are double, with small chambers created between the inner room and the outer, visible wall, including small niches, visible inside the interior room. There is a circle of these structures on the mound around the lower plaza. From the archaeological research on the mound, we believe these small chambers were there for storage of ceremonial items, food for ceremonies and perhaps wrapped mummy bundles (fardos).

Suggestions for further reading:

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AT CHIRIPA



With permission from the Ministry of Culture, Bolivia, most of TAP's excavations at the site have been outside of the mound, to the north and south. These excavations have demonstrated that this settlement was occupied steadily before, during, and after these mound constructions. There is evidence for Formative domestic residence around the mound, including oval structures, floors, pits, and burials. Burials were placed underneath a plastered gathering area on a terrace below the mound. TAP has uncovered a series of Formative period semi-sunken plazas to the south and north of the mound that would have been visited and tended at the same time as the mound. They are not all built at the same time but all date to the Formative phases. These were trapezoidal, sunken spaces where group activities and ceremonies occurred, connecting to the night sky. To date, we have identified four of these sunken structures, but there could be more. The number of these enclosures suggest that they were associated with families or communities, such that groups or families had their own place to gather both at these sunken spaces but also a smaller portion of the group could enter the structures on the mound to commune for important ceremonies. These two structure types suggest to us that the mountains and the earth were both very important landscape entities that people wanted to communicate with often.

By the time the mound's upper building's were in use, around 700 BCE, the settlement was closer to 7 ha in size, with residences spreading out along the same elevation as the sunken plazas. There were also nearby communities just 1 km to the east and west. It is unclear how far down the slope people resided at Chiripa. For much of the Formative time, the lake was farther away from the settlement than it is today, providing more flat pampa land for farming and grazing the camelids that were kept by the residents.

While these Formative ceremonial areas stopped being rebuilt once the ceremonial center of Tiwanaku began to be influential across the southern basin around 200 CE, people continued to live at the settlement. They turned to neighboring settlements for the larger gatherings on the peninsula, but eventually, by 500 CE, everyone ended up going to Tiwanaku for large ceremonies.

People have continued to live, farm, herd and fish in this place since the earliest evidence of people settling in this place, around 1600 BCE. TAP continues to complete research at the site, with a focus on the early settlement.



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HOW DO WE KNOW?

How do we know about our world?

For our ancestors, three thousand years ago, there was nothing more important than knowing about life and death, and about caring for all that was around them.

K'ayra's mother is a yatiri - a woman who knows about the world. When she dies unexpectedly, K'ayra is faced with the difficult task of leading her family and her community through a time of mourning and upheaval.

With the help of friends, relatives and the spirits, K'ayra must find a way to turn a time of darkness and danger into a time of hope and new beginnings.



This story is based on what archaeologists have learned about the ancient people who lived at the site of Chiripa, on the edge of Lake Titicaca in present-day Bolivia. Excavation and research have given us a unique understanding of their houses, everyday pots and tools, community spaces and burials - and the lives of the people that called Chiripa home three thousand years ago.

The story of K'ayra as she becomes a Knower helps tell the story of this ancient village. Her story shows us how the search for knowledge - the desire to understand the world - is something that we share with all of our ancient ancestors.



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