

# The People of Mollamarka:

## Preserving Old Ways in the Peruvian Andes

*By Carla Woody*

The main thoroughfare heading east of Cusco soon empties out onto dirt, quickly becoming a winding road, hugging the side of never-ending mountains going higher with each breath-taking turn.

After about 60 miles—and four hours later—you finally come to the small town of Paucartambo, known for its Festival of the Virgin of Carmen, the syncretic celebration of pre-Colombian Andean rites and the town's Catholic patron saint, which draws throngs of revelers in mid-July.

An intersection on the far side of the village forces a choice, no further easterly travel by road is possible. Going left will eventually have you descending through the Cloud Forest and into the jungle preserve called Manu. Taking the right turn will provide an increasingly narrow road, sheer drops that can cause novice travelers to break into a sweat, mop their brow and pray for safe passage.

But over the years I've grown used to it and find the journey, and its outcome, well worth it. Within an hour or so, the byway, that until about 25 years ago was merely a horse trail, dead ends into the Quechua Indian village of Mollamarka.

Through a long-term friendship with respected Peruvian mystic and poet Don Américo Yábar, I've been able to bring small groups to Peru, those who are up for the unexpected, the things that widen a life and take us into the unknown. Don Américo throws open the doors of his centuries-old ancestral home aptly named Salk'awasi, in Quechua meaning the "House of Undomesticated Energy."

The old hacienda has a rich history, some of its previous inhabitants shrouded in mystery, like the three women who lived together having fled the Basque Region during the Inquisition, rumored to be witches.

Nestled below Mollamarka, staying at



*Photos by Kelsey Collins*

*Above, Mollamarka children gather to have their photo taken. Below, traveler Angela Foss, left, poses with the people of Mollamarka.*



*Photo by Kelsey Collins*

*The sacred mountain Apu Ausangate (snowcapped in the distance) is visible along the road to Mollamarka.*

Salk'awasi is a means to slow down, be truly present and experience what the Andean way of life has to teach us.

Although electricity came to the village in the last few years, few families can afford it, and Don Américo chose for Salk'awasi to go without it. Many of the old ways are preserved in Mollamarka. But who knows for how long? The opportunity to participate in the old dances

and healing rituals may soon become more limited.

As in many Indigenous cultures, women are the keepers of the traditions and, for the most part, stay close to home.

Through the Club of Mothers they watch out for the health of the children and the well-being of the community as a whole. In Mollamarka, the women are the backbone of the community, keeping

it stable, while most of the men range from the village, bringing back outside influences and argue politics.

Healers like Doña Maria and her daughter Gumercinda work with the energy of plants in *limpia*, or clearing, rituals. And through these engagements, it's quite possible to find yourself transformed in ways you can't quite put your finger on, like I was years ago after a good stay at Salk'awasi.

I had traveled there with a friend. It all started through a two-day clearing process. The first day involved the *limpia* ritual, giving it a rest overnight.

The next day Doña Maria and Gumercinda returned about the same time. As before, we waited for them in the same place, with anticipation, for the completion of their work with us.

First, it had been necessary to clear from us what debris we inadvertently carried with us to that place from the ordinary world. Being as pristine in that realm as possible, we were then prepared for the next aspect, a push to the left side.

The left side is the place of connection, the realm of the Mystery, the feminine aspect of receptivity. From that side comes the experience of insight—not the mental noting of it—that can flood the right-sided life with richness previously not lived.

Again, Gumercinda cleared the house with her smoking pan. Meanwhile, her mother deposited on the floor a ball of yarn and a few stalks of the same herb used the previous day. When her daughter had exited the room and returned, Doña Maria arranged the plants in a star shape on the floor.

When she was satisfied with the arrangement, she stood. Inviting my friend to remove her shoes and socks, she motioned for her to come stand on top of the plants. Then, taking the yarn in her hand, Doña Maria put one end under the big toe of my friend's foot. She began winding it around her body, until she encased her to the top of her head in a string shrouding that passed around her joints and major energy centers of the body.

No sooner did Doña Maria complete the wrapping than she immediately began to undo it, snapping the yarn and breaking it quickly with her hands at each

juncture of the body that she deemed necessary.

All the while, she spoke softly and rapidly in Quechua, compelling the string to do its work as she stored the broken pieces in her other hand. After all string had been removed, Doña Maria used the yarn bundle to wipe my friend down from head to foot, much as she had the day before with the leaves. When done, she handed the yarn laden with heavy energy to Gumercinda, who was crouched on the floor to one side. Gumercinda hid the bundle in her skirts to contain it. My friend stepped back to her seat, her body relaxed.

Doña Maria turned to me expectantly. I arose and moved to the ritual space. I felt the leaves cool underneath my bare feet, sticking to them as I shifted to find my balance. Closing my eyes, I perceived the narrow pressure of the yarn being wound around my big toe and continuing in intervals up my body, joining my legs together, pinning my arms to my sides, slightly cutting into the base of my throat and sealing my eyes shut. I was aware of a sense of feeling tied and cut off, something that was not unfamiliar to me in the past if I allowed myself to become unconsciously encased in the right-sided world.

Immediately following that fleeting awareness, I began to experience both a literal and a metaphorical loosening and lessening. Hearing the snapping, the breaking of my ties and Doña Maria's voice compelling something to let go, to shift, generated what I can only describe as an effervescent quality in the interior of my body that surrounded me as well. It was as though something was opened inside that was flowing outward in gentle waves. I knew from past experience this sensation to be an expansion of my subtle energy field. But it was different somehow.

The brushing of the wool over my head and face signaled to me that Doña Maria was collecting any remnants of heaviness that may have remained in my field. When I felt the yarn softly scratching my feet, I knew she was done. I opened my eyes and sensed rather than saw her deliver the soiled package to Gumercinda, who immediately departed from the room, the hucha, or heavy energy, safely



Photo by Carla Woody

*The Dance of the Ancients is performed for visitors.*

restrained in her closely held skirts.

Doña Maria gathered her simple instruments, dipped her head to us, and soon left as well.

Seated once again, I began to detach myself from my surroundings. But before I completely moved into a meditative state, I heard Don Américo remark that a man was waiting to run swiftly all the way down to the river to deposit the hucha. The river would cleanse the heaviness, eventually carrying anything remaining to the sea where it would be dispersed.

A few hours later when we made our daily journey up the mountain to witness the transition of the day, I remarked to my friend that I felt like I had just emerged squeaky clean from a long, hot shower.\*

As healing as it is to undertake these rituals, engaging with the children of Mollamarka is just as nourishing. Their open, smiling faces and abject curiosity remind us that we can rediscover that in ourselves.

One time a woman from the even higher mountain arrived hurriedly with her newborn. Having heard that our

group of waikis was staying at Salk'awasi, she wanted us to name her child and conduct the baptism. Such was the trust and honor we were afforded.†

Another time, when our group was walking on a nearby mountain trail, we came across several giggling young boys carrying huge burlap sacks full of some bounty they kept from us. The next day during festivities, they performed the Dance of the Ancients, the contents of their bags, gathered from the land, turned into the costumes they wore.

Such are just a few memorable times in an out-of-the-way village in the Peruvian Andes, the generous people who make it home with traditions that, I hope, still have a long life ahead.

For more information on Spiritual Travel to Peru: The Heart of the Andes and the work of Carla Woody, visit [www.kenosis.net](http://www.kenosis.net) and [www.kenosispiritkeepers.org](http://www.kenosispiritkeepers.org) or call 928-778-1058.

\*Excerpted from *Standing Stark: The Willingness to Engage* by Carla Woody.

†*Waiki is a Quechua term of endearment, used freely, for a cherished friend, brother or sister.*