

**Filming the 'Limbo of Interchange' of/from the Bodies.
Visual Anthropology and Sensory Engagement in Ethnographic
Filmmaking with the Peruvian Religious Cultural Association
Virgen de Cocharcas**

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Abstract

This paper is the result of intermittent fieldwork conducted between 2018 and 2024 with the Peruvian religious and cultural association Virgen de Cocharcas in Rome, in the framework of the project "Le statue da vestire dell'area metropolitana di Roma", promoted by the Soprintendenza ABAP for the metropolitan area of Rome, the province of Viterbo, and Southern Etruria. Audiovisual media decisively shaped our ethnographic engagement, both legitimising our presence in the field and enabling a collaborative project with the Association—thus delineating the contours of what may be understood as a "shared epistemology." The camera emerged not merely as a device of documentation but as a constitutive instrument of encounter, fostering reflexive processes of knowledge co-production ('enskilment') entangled with gestures, sensory experience, and the materiality of devotional practices. Filming illuminated the performative dimensions of faith, foregrounding the body as an active medium of ritual and social significance. The intimate relational proximities cultivated during the ethnographic filmmaking experience profoundly shaped processes of filming, selection, and editing, generating tensions between affective involvement and narrative efficacy. Rather than restitution, our research experience suggests an ongoing reconstruction unfolding within a "limbo of interchange," a contrapuntal space where heterogeneous perspectives and power relations converge, and where visual anthropology not only records but actively reconfigures embodied practices.

Keywords

Shared epistemology; embodiment; Peruvian diaspora; visual anthropology; religious materiality; sensory ethnography

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Encountering the Ritual World of the Peruvian Diaspora¹

We first encountered the Religious and Cultural Association 'Virgen de Cocharcas' in 2018, in the context of a project on clothed simulacra in the province of Rome². This encounter gave rise to an at-home ethnographic research project, carried out intermittently and still ongoing today, in which film was adopted as a medium from the outset. In this paper, we reflect on the epistemological implications emerging from one of the outcomes of the research: an ethnographic documentary completed in 2021, entitled *Nuestra Señora de los Migrantes* (20'). The use of a "video camera" – a small digital SLR with an APS-C sensor – enabled us to undertake an experiment that evolved into a collective endeavour, shaping the entire process of knowledge production and co-construction of meanings in the field, as well as the attitudes and relationships of the actors involved (cf. Banks and Morphy 1997).

The Religious and Cultural Association 'Virgen de Cocharcas', formally established in 2008, currently counts an average membership ranging between 110 and 150 individuals. Its headquarters are located in Fonte Nuova (RM), a municipality of approximately 30,000 inhabitants situated in the hinterland of the Italian capital, within a semi-urban area that forms part of Rome's broader metropolitan fabric. At the core of the Association's devotional activities stands the statue of the Virgen de Cocharcas – a clothed simulacrum that serves as the principal focus of the group's cultural and ritual practices. This statue is kept in the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, located in Casali, a hamlet of the municipality of Mentana, approximately five kilometres from Fonte Nuova. Casali thus functions as the 'spiritual centre' of the Association. Monthly Masses dedicated to the Virgen are celebrated there, and every 8 September, the statue is carried in a solemn procession through the local streets.

¹ Paragraphs one and three were written by Daria De Grazia, while paragraphs two and four were written by Michela Buonvino. The attribution, however, is purely conventional, as the article was conceived and developed jointly by both authors. All translations were produced by the authors. The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their careful reading and helpful comments, which improved this paper. They also thank the volume editors for their support and editorial work.

² This research was carried out as part of the project "Le statue da vestire dell'area metropolitana di Roma" promoted by the Soprintendenza ABAP for the Metropolitan Area of Rome, the Province of Viterbo and southern Etruria. As part of this ongoing ethnographic work, in addition to a master's thesis and several articles, we have produced an ethnographic documentary entitled *Nuestra Señora de los Migrantes* (20'), in close collaboration with the members of the Association's executive committee.



Figure 1 The procession. Photo by Michela Buonvino, 2019.

The Association's activities are primarily centred along Via Nomentana, one of the main arterial roads linking Rome to its provincial hinterland. Beginning in Casali di Mentana and extending towards the capital, one finds - just beyond the Grande Raccordo Anulare (Rome's ring road) - La Balera Romana, a venue that has long served as a key site for many of the Association's festive events. Upon entering Rome and moving beyond Via Nomentana, the spatial network of places frequented by the Association broadens across the north-eastern sector of the city. Within the area situated between Via Tiburtina and Via Prenestina are located several social centres where the *junta directiva* (the Association's governing committee) regularly carries out its *actividades* (organisational activities). The Association's members, all of Peruvian origin, migrated to Italy during the 1990s and the early 2000s. Their migration narratives reveal that, alongside the economic factors prompting their departure from Peru, the existence of established family and friendship networks in Italy played a decisive role in facilitating their relocation. Such social ties significantly influenced both the paths of migration and the strategies of mobility adopted, shaping the cultural and practical resources mobilised by migrants before departure, throughout the journey, and after their settlement in the host country.

In the late 1990s, a small group of newly arrived Peruvian families began to gather around a painted image of the *Virgen de Cocharcas*, which had been brought from Peru to Italy by the H. family. This moment marked the formation of an initial associative nucleus around which the community's devotional practices gradually took shape. Shortly

thereafter, the cult evolved into a *mayordomía*³, adopting the traditional organisational form that characterises many Peruvian religious celebrations. The subsequent transition from a *mayordomía* to a formally established association represented a turning point in the material expressions of devotion: the painted icon was replaced by a sculpted statue of the Virgen de Cocharcas. This statue followed a transnational migratory route—travelling from Sapallanga (Huancayo) to Lima, and from Lima onwards to Rome—before ultimately being enshrined in the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, where it remains today as the central subject/object of veneration for the Association.

As several members of the Association recounted during ethnographic interviews, the simulacrum is understood as embodying the experience of a migrant. In their accounts, the statue metaphorically and materially retraces the same migratory trajectory as the devotees themselves. Much like its followers, it is described as having to pass through border controls and “prove its identity” to the authorities in order to successfully cross international frontiers and eventually reach Rome (De Grazia 2024)⁴.

In Rome, the events surrounding the formation and subsequent consolidation of the Association reflect the broader processes through which individuals, by cultivating their relationship with the Virgen, continuously renegotiate their sense of self and articulate transnational identity poetics within the specific context of their arrival and settlement in Italy. From this analytical perspective, the clothed simulacrum emerges as a genuine “body of memory” (Rak 2017): an object-person (cf. Severi 2018) around which life histories, personal memories, collective nostalgia, and shared imaginaries among devotees are intricately articulated (cf. Buonvino 2021). At the same time, the simulacrum acts as a powerful symbolic agent, endowed with the capacity to organise, mediate, and integrate personal experiences into a collective project of faith and belonging. In this sense, the sacred device plays an active role in structuring community spaces, behavioural patterns, and social relations within the devotional network (Dei 2017: 153). It is precisely

³ The *mayordomía* is a common hierarchical system for organizing festivals in Central and Latin America. It forms part of the broader *cargo* system and involves couples who voluntarily take charge of the logistical and financial responsibilities of a religious or civic celebration, sometimes retaining leadership roles beyond their term. Scholarly debates have focused on its function in managing community resources and on possible syncretisms between pre-Hispanic and Christian institutions. Wolf (1959) and Nash (1958) describe the *cargo* system as a protective institution within closed corporate communities that redistributes wealth internally, whereas Harris (1964) sees it as a colonial mechanism that channels resources outward, notably to the Church. Chance and Taylor (1985) outline the main historical and ethnographic models, and Ortega Olivares and Mora Rosales (2014) provide detailed Mexican case studies. Later works examine exchanges and social dynamics within the system: Monaghan (1990) focuses on reciprocity and redistribution during *fiestas*, while Mathews (1985) highlights gendered divisions between men’s public roles and women’s less visible but crucial contributions. Uribe (2012) defines *mayordomía* as part of a dense network of reciprocal obligations that make rituals possible. Urban adaptations are discussed by Portal (1996) and by Guillet and Whiteford (1974). Cannada Bartoli (2004) identifies parallels between these systems and devotional practices surrounding the “santo in casa” tradition in parts of Lazio, Italy.

⁴ The narratives surrounding the journey of sacred icons from Peru to host countries often take on legendary or miraculous qualities. The images are frequently described as concealing their true identity from border authorities or overcoming obstacles through faith and divine intervention. One example concerns the statue of the Mamacha Cocharcas brought to Rome by Silvia H.’s mother. After purchasing the statue in Sapallanga, she encountered difficulties at the airport, where officials attempted to seize and x-ray it. By embracing the image and pleading with the authorities, she ultimately succeeded in bringing it to Italy. In Silvia’s account, the Virgin’s statue mirrors the trajectory of migrants themselves: it travels along the same routes, undergoes identity checks, and faces border controls. The icon is thus anthropomorphized, embodying both the vulnerability and perseverance of migration.

through the exchanges and interactions between devotees and the simulacrum that an identity perimeter is traced and reinforced over time. One emblematic example of this dynamic is the attempt to organise a festival in honour of the Mamacha Cocharcas in Rome. By recreating a ritual structure that mirrors the festivities celebrated annually in Huancayo, this initiative enables participants to learn, rehearse, and perform an imagined Peruvian identity. This can be understood as a process of “becoming Peruvian” (Berg 2011), in which community members actively imagine, select, and outline the essential features of a homeland to be preserved in a foreign context—thereby nurturing and strengthening their collective bonds.



Figure 2 The *Virgen de Cocharcas*’ statue looking at the fireworks. Photo by Daria De Grazia, 2024.

The processes through which this imagined Peruvian identity is constructed unfold simultaneously on several fronts; the religious-associative sphere represents only one of the multiple social and cultural arenas in which such identity negotiations and practices take shape. This broader set of transnational actions (Datta and Brickell 2011) is composed of a range of practices in which what Sebastiano Ceschi (2011: 147) describes

as a “game of belonging” is constantly at play. It can be conceptualised as a process of cultural interweaving that generates hybrid configurations, “stretching [...] into an intermediate space” (Simonicca 2015: 32)⁵. Within this case study, devotional practices have been strategically employed over time to transform and re-signify urban spaces, making them habitable, familiar, and socially accessible for the community (cf. Giorgianni 2022). In doing so, they delineate an alternative “cartography of belonging” (Levitt 2003: 853), overlaying the existing urban landscape with new layers of meaning and affective attachment. By integrating ethnographic accounts with the life histories of participants, this study makes it possible to explore the complex dynamics of territorialisation and re-semantisation of the cult “from Huancayo to Rome.” This analysis sheds light on the mechanisms through which Peruvian identity is constructed and articulated in a migratory context, emerging through practices of appropriation and negotiation of unfamiliar urban spaces within the setting of arrival. These practices ultimately aim to legitimise the community’s presence within the territory and to “claim forms of spatial justice” (Parbuono 2016: 172), in a dynamic encounter—sometimes dialogical, sometimes conflictual—with host groups.

The employment of audiovisual media significantly influenced the modes of engagement, perception, and mutual observation that characterised our experience in the ethnographic field. On one level, the presence of the camera operated as a legitimising device, affirming our role and visibility as researchers in the eyes of participants. At the same time, it created both the practical and symbolic framework necessary for developing a collaborative project with the Association. Throughout the research process, we made systematic use of a video camera, especially during the first three years of fieldwork, when its employment was most sustained. The camera can therefore be conceived, drawing on Francesco Marano (2015: 59), as “an integral part of the filmmaker’s body,” a kind of prosthetic extension that “becomes part of the environment, sensitive to the flow of reality, which, rather than a specific point of view, conveys one experience among many possible ones” (ibid.). This conceptualisation resonates with Brent Luvaas’s (2019) account of the distributed agency of the camera,

⁵ In this sense, it is of fundamental importance to take into account the transformative dimension of the social production and construction of space, at the centre of which we clearly find the subject who embodies it. Here, we understand “embodiment” following Csordas (1994: 12) as an “indeterminate methodological field defined by perceptual experience and mode of presence and engagement in the world.” Through this embodied relationship, the subject acts upon, defines, narrates, and constructs space. In short, what is at stake is the observation of how individuals create meaningful relationships with the places they inhabit, thereby transforming abstract spaces into lived and meaningful places – “attach meaning to space and transform ‘space’ into ‘place’” (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003: 13). This involves investigating how experience becomes inscribed in places and, conversely, how places themselves come to embody memories that are intertwined with people, events, and histories. According to Gupta and Ferguson (1997: 38), “in this culture-play of diaspora, familiar lines between ‘here’ and ‘there’, centre and periphery, colony and metropole, become blurred.” As the boundaries of territories and places become increasingly fluid and indistinct, imagined communities (cf. Anderson 1991) acquire growing significance. These communities, through the “work of the imagination” (Appadurai 1996), actively invest spaces with meaning, producing, tracing, and unravelling networks of connection. The transnational space is thus conceived as a space of social relations and practices: a lived, practised space that is never ontologically given, but is instead continuously mapped discursively and enacted through bodily practices and movements (de Certeau 2001; Clifford 1997; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003).

whereby camera and anthropologist form a co-agentive pair, with the camera actively shaping perception and movement within the field (Luvaas 2019: 76-78, 94).

In this sense, the camera was not simply a recording instrument, but an active participant in the field situation - mediating interactions and co-producing the conditions of ethnographic knowledge. Through the situated learning process that Tim Ingold describes as 'enskilment', "the filmmaker learns to observe, know and film in a sort of conversation with the elements present in the environment in which he moves" (Marano 2015). As we will see, this process unfolded gradually, as our bodily and perceptual engagement with the field became increasingly intertwined with the camera's presence. During the initial two years of research in particular, the intricate web of reciprocal gazes between ourselves and the interlocutors was consistently mediated by the video camera. This mediation facilitated the construction of what Katia Ballacchino (2015) has called a "meeting space": a shared, negotiated space of interaction and co-presence. The camera thus served as a relational device through which a tacit pact of collaboration took shape, grounded in a shared objective—to envision, construct, and narrate a story collectively. This story was, on one level, a narrative reconstruction of the Association's events, rituals, and cultural practices; yet, at the same time, it also represented the story of our encounter and gradual integration into the group - ultimately reflecting the unfolding of a shared cognitive and ethnographic process.

Sensing Knowledge and Shaping Epistemologies through the Skin of the Image

Ethnographic engagement in religious contexts frequently entails a deeply participatory experience that is simultaneously physical, cognitive, and emotional, involving a close interaction with the ritual and devotional practices of the people concerned (Groisman and Pierini 2016: 3). In this regard, Emily Pierini proposes an understanding of "belief" as a "territory of contested categories," in which the practices enacted by social actors are conceived as a distinct "way of knowing" (ibid.). This perspective invites us to interpret fieldwork not merely as a process of observation and description, but rather as an active and relational "project of knowing" that brings into play a multiplicity of actors and positionalities with whom the ethnographer interacts and co-produces knowledge. As Pierini and Groisman argue, this project of knowing involves, firstly, the "other" selves encountered in the field, with whom researchers engage in situated projects of shared understanding during ethnographic encounters. Secondly, it involves our own "otherness," that is, the reflexive awareness of the transformations we undergo as subjects through the experience of "becoming" in the field. This process does not rely on imitation or naïve identification with the native point of view; rather, it constitutes "a movement by which a subject leaves her own condition through a relation of affections that she can establish with another condition" (Groisman and Pierini 2016: 3).

Within this framework, the processes of "knowing" are understood as forms of "acting in company" (Pierini 2016: 43). Fieldwork is therefore conceived as a mode of knowledge production expressed through both intellectual engagement and bodily practice (ibid.),

where learning, perception, and affect are inseparably intertwined. Following Francesco Faeta (2011: 46), we adopt here a conception of the ethnographic gaze as:

Completely far from any hypothesis of objectivity, firmly rooted in a peculiar subjectivity; subjectivity shaped, however, through the inescapable centrality of the body, the inescapable relationship that the body maintains with the social context, the inescapable reflective attitude that vision and its cultural elaboration entail.

In recent years, visual anthropology has offered several critiques of 'disembodied' epistemologies in ethnographic research, moving towards methodologies that foreground the body, affect, and co-presence as central to knowledge production. Our approach embraces this shift, engaging with the camera as a non-neutral, reflexive actor within ethnographic encounters. Following David MacDougall's (2006) conceptualisation of the camera as a participant-observer capable of engaging with the corporeality of both subjects and researchers, we fully share the opinion that visual ethnography gives rise to a mode of relational knowing grounded in co-presence and shared embodiment. This position has an important precedent in Jean Rouch's concept of *shared ciné-anthropology* (Rouch 1974), which conceived of ethnographic filmmaking as structurally entailing what Yanai (2025: 698) calls a "subjective-objective" relation: in order to film aptly, the ethnographer must be continually affected by what is being filmed, such that the boundary between observer and observed becomes operationally unstable. The lens thus becomes a site of encounter—a mediator of affects, temporalities, and meanings that fosters new ways of understanding the process of anthropological knowledge production.

This perspective was further developed by Sarah Pink (2009), who introduced the conceptualization of what has come to be known as sensory ethnography, which argues that ethnographic practice is more about the cultivation of sensory and affective 'adjustment' than about the cognitive accumulation of data and concepts. According to Pink, knowing through the body in space – via touch, movement, smell, rhythm – is not supplemental to ethnographic understanding but constitutive of it, allowing the ethnographer to access new perceptual domains, in a mode of "being-and-living-with". As we try to demonstrate in this article, our own fieldwork practices reflect this insight, seeking moments of collaborative filming based on shared viewing experiences. Moreover, the editing process carried out together with interlocutors illustrates how audiovisual tools can foster forms of epistemic proximity grounded in co-experience. This means that all these practices participate in shaping the so-called 'reality', moving beyond the representationalist and vision-centred models of ethnographic filmmaking and understanding.

More generally, ethnographic knowledge is co-constructed in what Vincent Crapanzano (1980) described as the "limbo of interchange". With this expression, he referred to a space of dialogic ambiguity and epistemic indeterminacy proper to the *limen*, where multiple perspectives and affective registers converge and interact. Indeed, Crapanzano's notion is central to the epistemological and methodological tensions at the

heart of ethnographic inquiry itself. In *Tuhami. Portrait of a Moroccan*, this "limbo" becomes a space where the boundaries between ethnographer and subject, self and other, blur. The encounters between Crapanzano and Tuhami, an illiterate Moroccan tilemaker, are emotionally charged exchanges that defy straightforward interpretation: meanings are continuously deferred, and understanding is always partial, mediated, and unstable. In Crapanzano's written yet strongly body-focused restitution, this liminal zone is most evident in the way Tuhami narrates his life, particularly his sexual and spiritual experiences, such as his marriage to a she-demon. These stories challenge the limits of ethnographic comprehension. They are deeply symbolic, affectively charged, and rooted in a cosmology foreign to the Western rationalist framework within which Crapanzano operates. Yet rather than reducing these elements to cultural tropes or psychoanalytic case studies, Crapanzano situates them within the limbo where neither he nor Tuhami holds absolute epistemic authority. Their dialogues – fragmented, evasive, and deeply intimate – also reveal the tensions that characterise the production of meaning and representation, both imbued with power relations⁶. In this liminal zone, meanings are always subject to renegotiation and reinterpretation. The notion of "shared epistemology" (see Silverstein 2013) emerges from this dynamic, referring to the process by which knowledge is collaboratively produced through co-presence, co-experience, and co-interpretation, and in this case is mediated by the camera's gaze.

For example, during our visual ethnographic fieldwork, we were granted permission to film the intimate ritual of dressing the statue of the Virgen de Cocharcas in preparation for Her annual celebration. The event took place behind the apse of the church where the statue is located. Manuel V., a long-standing devotee and one of the founders of the Association, guided us through the process, both logistically and affectively. As Daria began to position her camera, he gently intervened, guiding her practice towards a specific epistemic and affective register. A particular concern for Manuel was the statue's nudity; he was attentive to ensuring that its vulnerability was approached with respect. He communicated through gestures and positioning, which Daria intuitively perceived; she therefore adjusted her framing, letting herself be guided into a specific epistemic register that mediated between devotion, propriety, and her ethnographic gaze. In other words, Daria's role as researcher and filmmaker was refracted through Manuel's devotional lens, and the camera entered what we may call a 'relational dimension of care'⁷.

⁶ While Crapanzano acknowledges his role in shaping the narrative and recognizes the impossibility of full access to Tuhami's interior world, he also implicates himself in the ambiguities of the ethnographic process. His reflexive stance does not dissolve the asymmetry but instead lays it bare as part of the ethnographic condition.

⁷ This resonates with Roger Canals' analysis of the cult of María Lionza, in which visual creativity and ritual co-performance are active engagements in the making of divine presence. As Canals (2022) argues, images in Afro-Venezuelan religious contexts are not passive objects of veneration, but dynamic agents that both mediate and materialise the sacred. The image, in his terms, is a being that acts, transforms, and reveals through its interaction with practitioners and observers alike. Moreover, like the Virgen de Cocharcas in Rome, María Lionza's travelling image in diasporic Venezuelan contexts is transformative: as Canals notes, the material and visual dynamics of ritual practice abroad often give rise to new configurations of sacred presence. In our fieldwork, we similarly observed how the dressing, dancing, and touching of the Virgen's statue became sites where diasporic identity and religious intimacy were co-constituted.

Now, rather than viewing this as a methodological liability or as a lack of epistemic clarity, the instability of roles opens critical reflexive spaces for thinking about the politics of representation, the ethics of visibility, and the distribution of interpretive authority (cf. Dietrich 2023). Thomas Csordas' (1994) theory of embodiment further supports this orientation by asserting that all perception is inherently embodied, and that culture is not simply encoded in language or symbols but enacted through the body's continuous engagement with the world. According to these considerations, the camera becomes embedded within the lived experience of fieldwork, entangled with the movements, affects, and perspectives of those involved.

From this perspective, the use of the camera itself invites researchers to inhabit uncertainty, rather than to seek immediate resolution: filming a ritual or gestures alongside community members has often been for us an act of mutual learning, wherein both the ethnographer and the participants engage in processes of framing, interpreting, and emotionally responding. The post-production process, including debating interpretations, further exemplifies how audiovisual media can mediate co-authorship and co-theorisation, giving rise to what can be defined as an epistemic intimacy; this intimacy is shaped by differences in access, agency, and narrative control.

Religious practices within the Virgen de Cocharcas association offer a compelling site to explore the merging of the visual and sensory domains as modalities of embodied knowledge, but also, in a broader sense, to examine the relationships between religion and material culture. From the tactile devotion of dressing the statue and carrying it in procession to the intricately choreographed dances during celebrations, until the moment dedicated to the *baile de despedida* with the final ritual touching practices, the Virgen de Cocharcas worship is saturated with sensory 'layers', making visible what we call "the skin of the image": a surface of contact where gesture, devotion, and affect transform into visual traces that exceed representational containment. In filming these rituals, the camera 'felt' ritual expressions, becoming a site of sensory apprenticeship, a medium of immersive, embodied attention. This sensorial dimension reached a heightened intensity during the *baile de despedida*, when the statue of the Virgen de Cocharcas, positioned on the *anda* (a wooden processional litter adorned with flowers and garments), was made to dance one last time. As the musicians played the final songs, the *cargadores* swayed the *anda* rhythmically, gently rocking Her body in an intensely affective farewell. The Virgin danced through the collective motion of bodies beneath Her. The interplay between the dancing body of the statue, the devotees, and the camera reveals a deeply entangled corporeal coordination of religious materiality and perception, where movement becomes constitutive of devotion. The statue's dance itself enacts a profound interdependence between the sacred and the somatic: the Virgin's swaying body, suspended on the *anda*, becomes a sort of kinetic icon. The sculpted statue comes alive in ritual action, mediating divine presence through motion and touch.

The camera entered this web of relations. During moments like the *baile de despedida*, the camera's movements absorbed and transmitted the emotional crescendo of the final moments spent with the Virgin, before saying goodbye. Together, the statue, the devotees, and the camera formed a triangular structure of devotion. As the music

faded and the statue's swaying slowed to stillness, a new form of contact began, and devotees surged forward with reverent urgency. They gathered around the *anda* to enact their final gestures of proximity: hands reached up to touch the Virgin's robe, her cloak, her crown, her face and her hand, while others brushed their fingers across the flowers adorning the platform, plucking one to carry home. The camera was immersed in the density of these moments: Daria filmed while surrounded by moving bodies, arms and murmured prayers. At times, the lens was partially obstructed—a hand brushing across the frame, a burst of colour from a bouquet. These weren't disruptions but tactile traces of proximity, signals that the camera was not outside the scene but within its intimate choreography, which motivated the choice to include these scenes in the final film.

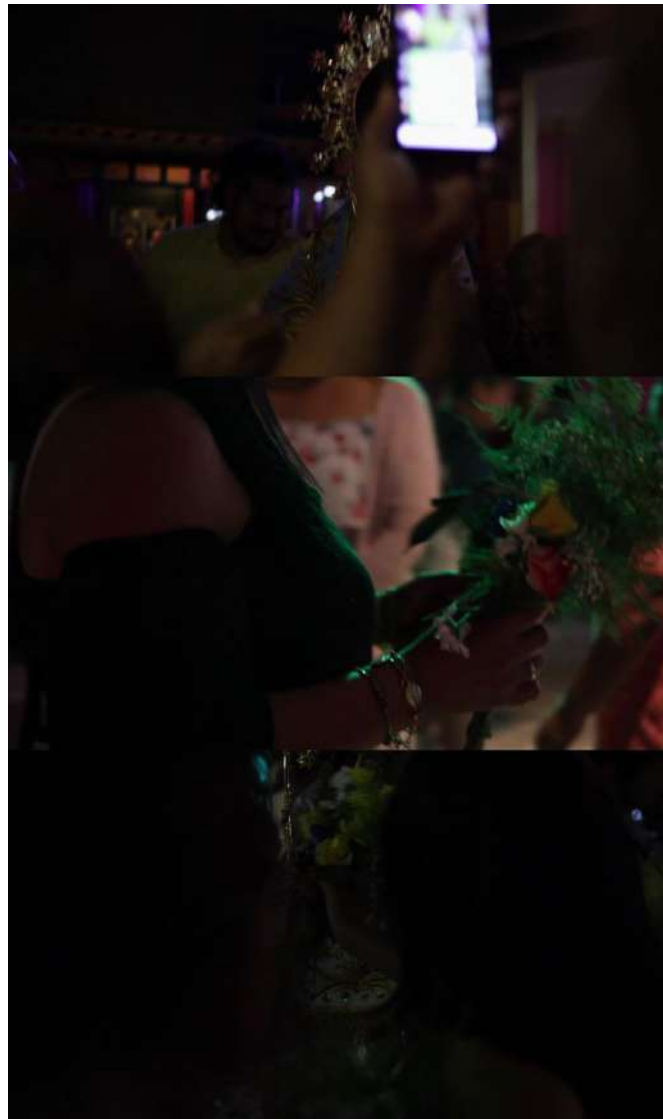


Figure 3 *The camera immersed in the baile de despedida. Frames by Daria De Grazia.*



Figure 4 *Paola offers the camera - and us - the last flowers of the year in an almost empty room. Frames by Daria De Grazia.*

Here, the camera becomes a surface of contact. In this closing sequence, a liminal space - after the dance, before the departure - the image becomes porous, sensate, and ethically entangled. This dynamic highlights the central role played by material culture in shaping and sustaining religious experience, which functions as an active participant in the (re)enactment of devotion. Objects—including religious icons, altars, and other ritual paraphernalia—possess agency: they influence human behaviour, rearticulate social relationships, and participate in the creation of meaning (Gell 1998). From this perspective, religious practice emerges as an embodied, sensorial negotiation with material culture: the sacred is enacted, transmitted, and felt through objects, revealing devotion as a relational, multisensory, mediated phenomenon. Complementary to this, Carlo Severi's notion of "object-person" mentioned above emphasizes that objects involved in ritual or devotional contexts can assume qualities of personhood. This means that the statue's agency is relational: it comes into being as an active interlocutor through the practices and devotion of the community.

Co-editing Intimacy, Looking Together

Participating in and filming devotional activities required a sensitive attunement to the affective rhythms of devotees' ritual life. As we engaged with community members in shared acts of filming and viewing, a reflexive and relational process gradually took shape. This co-presence generated what we conceive as a living and continuous ethnography—an affective, co-produced mode of inquiry extending beyond the immediate field encounter into the collaborative spaces of post-production, exhibition, and interpretation. These collective practices of witnessing and editing fostered new forms of mutual recognition, as participants assumed the role of co-authors in the making of the audiovisual narrative.

As mentioned earlier, by filming ritual gestures in ways that highlight their material density and temporal complexity, we attend to the politics of embodiment and to the ways in which ritual operates as a form of historical and epistemological practice, one that orders and classifies the world. This reframing of audiovisual ethnography entails significant theoretical and political implications: it calls for an epistemology grounded in co-experience and enables a methodological ethics based on relational presence and reciprocal recognition.

More broadly, articulating what we may call 'a living ethnography of the senses' underscores the open-endedness of fieldwork. Rather than producing a fixed account, this perspective understands visual-sensory research as inherently processual and always in the making. In this view, the image is not a final product but a provocation—a fragment within a longer, evolving dialogue between researcher and interlocutors. Methodologically, the construction of the video itself constitutes a crucial analytical and collaborative phase within the broader ethnographic process. As Sarah Pink (2001) has observed, editing and assembling images should not be regarded as merely technical procedures but as key moments of reflexive engagement, collaborative theorisation, and methodological innovation. In this regard, the importance of reflexivity within visual anthropology has been extensively discussed. Jay Ruby has long maintained that reflexivity lies at the core of the discipline, framing it as a foundational aspect of ethical practice and identifying it with the pursuit of "proper" anthropology (Ruby 1980; 2000). David MacDougall further develops this debate by distinguishing between "deep" and "explanatory" reflexivity. The former, made possible by the medium of film or video, renders visible the very relationships that constitute ethnographic work; the latter, more typical of written ethnography, involves a retrospective reflection on those relationships (MacDougall 1998: 89).

Returning to our fieldwork experience, once we considered the collected material sufficiently substantial, we began to envision presenting a proposal to the members of the Association for editing the film around the thematic nodes that had gradually emerged and been negotiated across the various phases and temporalities of the research. Throughout the delicate process of selection, scripting, and editing, it became necessary to make a series of critical decisions and exclusions, thereby shaping the film's

final narrative form. Within this context, the emotional proximity that had developed over time, along with the sharing of multiple intimate relational spaces with the film's protagonists, played a significant—and in many respects decisive—role. This became particularly evident in discussions concerning the “visibility” of all participants within the final work, even when certain inclusions proved narratively weak or ineffective, and not entirely consistent with the film's overall structure or communicative coherence. Furthermore, the expectations of our interlocutors significantly informed our decision to produce a filmic reflection that deliberately avoided addressing the internal frictions within the group. These were regarded by many as irrelevant or even inappropriate to include in the collectively constructed representation. Consequently, the narrative composition underwent substantial revisions, reflecting the complex attempt to respond to the Association's expectations, to allocate meaningful space to all the individual life stories that inevitably intersected with the collective story of the Virgen, and to acknowledge and give value to the shared ‘journey’ that we had undertaken over the preceding years. Narratives are, in fact, simultaneously part of individual experience and agents in shaping that experience. They serve as fundamental resources through which events are structured into one or more meaningful frameworks, allowing for the emergence of aspects of the self that are partial, previously unexplored, or otherwise marginal (cf. Good 1994; Crapanzano 1980). Through the careful assemblage of discursive narratives, we sought to convey and give meaning to the complexity of the experiential events that had been lived and shared. During the structuring and editing phase of the documentary, we repeatedly found ourselves faced with a series of questions. We reflected on whether the interpretations we proposed, the selections we made, and the narrative trajectories we envisioned would yield representations that could be genuinely shared. We also questioned whether these representations could adequately convey what is, at once, a cultural universe of devotional practice and a universe of sacrifice and hardship that accompanies transnational life, within the broader collective attempt to *salir adelante*⁸. We were thus confronted with problems related to the socio-cultural dimension of empowerment connected to storytelling, defined by Michael Jackson as:

a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances. To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one's own

⁸ According to Pren and Takenaka, who have worked with Peruvian migrants in Japan and the United States, the expression ‘*salir adelante*’ “denotes two types of movements – social (up the socioeconomic ladder) and geographical (to another place). The underlying meaning is leaving the country to move ahead in life” (Takenaka and Pren 2010: 29). In our context, however, it does not seem that the concept is used to refer to a change in social status. Rather, it implies an ethic of sacrifice aimed at overcoming difficulties and at not allowing oneself to be defeated by the obstacles encountered along the way; it refers to the capacity to tactically channel pain by integrating it into a divine moral universe, thereby enabling it to acquire a sense and a comprehensible meaning. *Salir adelante* means precisely to keep going, in any case, at any cost, despite everything. It is only by observing intimate experiences and personal stories that it becomes possible to understand the nuanced and discontinuous paths through which individuals manage to mobilise nostalgia, orienting it towards action in the present, with their gaze turned towards the future, *para seguir adelante*.

imagination [...] a coping strategy that involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one's experience of the world (2002: 15-18).

The individual and collective empowerment associated with the act of storytelling arises precisely from its transformative potential—from its capacity to reimagine the world agentively and to domesticate time through narrative practice. Yet this also raises critical questions: who has the right to tell a story, what can legitimately be told, and for whom is it narrated? It became necessary to reflect carefully on the power dynamics embedded in the right to narrate—the issue of story ownership (Shuman 2015).

We first viewed the edited version of the documentary—which at that stage had an initial running time of eighty minutes – together with the members of the Association's executive committee and their families. The screening took place in 2021, in a darkened room within a small shop in Mentana (RM), which we had specially arranged and equipped for the occasion. The mixture of expectation, anticipation, and shared anxiety generated a tangible tension in the space. During the opening minutes, a dense silence filled the room; then, quite unexpectedly, laughter erupted. At first, someone laughed in response to a humorous line in the film; gradually, others joined in—commenting, joking, and engaging in dialogue about what we were watching together. They laughed again, and then, at a certain point, someone began to cry.

Following that significant moment of collective viewing (Pink 2001: 90), we began to reflect on the imaginative spaces that were produced during and after the ethnographic work. In what ways do the “etically” proposed narratives of anthropologists intersect with the “emic” self-representations of the subjects involved in the research? Shortly after the first screening of the edited version of the documentary, a particularly meaningful episode occurred. At the conclusion of the collective viewing, Pilar, the Association's spiritual secretary, contacted us by telephone. During the conversation, she expressed gratitude for the care we had devoted to selecting the most significant material through which to tell both the story of the Association and her own personal trajectory. She also confided that she had felt deeply unsettled by the intimacy of the encounter, especially by the projection of her dream narratives—stories she had herself chosen to share and had encouraged us to include in the film.

We report here an excerpt from her testimony:

The Virgin—ever since I have been here—the Virgin has given me so many things, as I was saying. I have learned to be strong because, day after day, up until now, I have asked her to give me the strength to carry on. I have asked her for so much for my family, and for me the Virgin is something immense; there are no words to describe her. When my mother died, my life changed so much. When my mother was very ill, I prayed to be strong, that whatever might happen, I would not cry. But... a mother is a mother. The months went by, and I was always sad; I cried. Then I had a dream. A dream in which I was walking with my sister through a field. My sister was walking ahead of me, I was following her, and behind us was my mother. Then, at a certain point, we turned around, and she was no longer there. So, I said, “I have to go and see where my mom stopped!” I looked for her, and I found her. I found her cooking, because she was a mother who loved to

cook all the time. But next to her there was a person, dressed in a white robe, with long hair and a beard. I said to my mother: "Mom, let's go! Let's go! What are you doing here? Let's go! We have to leave, we have to go back home!" And she replied: "No. I will not come with you because my place is here, by his side." I looked at him... I looked at this person... And for me this person was God, because he wore the white robe, had long hair, and a beard. "I must stay here," my mother said. And then I woke up. It was the only time I ever dreamed about my mother. And in that way, I understood that my mother had earned her place in paradise.

Despite her natural reserve, Pilar thanked us for giving form to her strong desire to express herself and to share emotionally meaningful content, while at the same time displaying an ambivalent emotional reaction, as she felt almost destabilised. This episode highlights how co-editing extends into the realm of emotional feedback, shared reflection, and narrative negotiation. Moreover, collaborative storytelling practices, as has already been emphasised, constitute genuine tools of empowerment and can enable some individuals to reclaim their lived experiences, to rework them in an agentic way, and to structure their personal histories within shared frameworks of meaning. Furthermore, Pilar's case illustrates how the process of collaborative narration can generate complex emotional tensions, arising from the interaction between the desire for visibility and the need for self-protection, thereby requiring an ethical and narrative care that goes far beyond any considerations regarding the filmic product itself.

In conclusion, it seems to us that, at least in part, we succeeded in "looking together," or, at the very least, in glimpsing shared imaginative spaces as our trajectories converged along a common stretch of path. This shared act of 'looking together' resonates deeply with the very meanings inscribed in the language through which we describe these collaborative processes. Following Alessandra Broccolini:

The verb *restituire* ("to restore") has a beautiful etymology: from the Latin *restituere*, meaning "to re-establish." It evokes the idea of restoring a balance, restoring a relationship, restoring something; but that prefix *ri-* suggests the need to act out of some sense of guilt, the need to repair something that has been broken. By contrast, the verb *condividere* ("to share") has a more interesting etymology, one that leads to a single certainty: that of *videre*—"to see"—"to see with," to see together. It conveys the idea of looking (and acting) together (Broccolini 2020: 28).



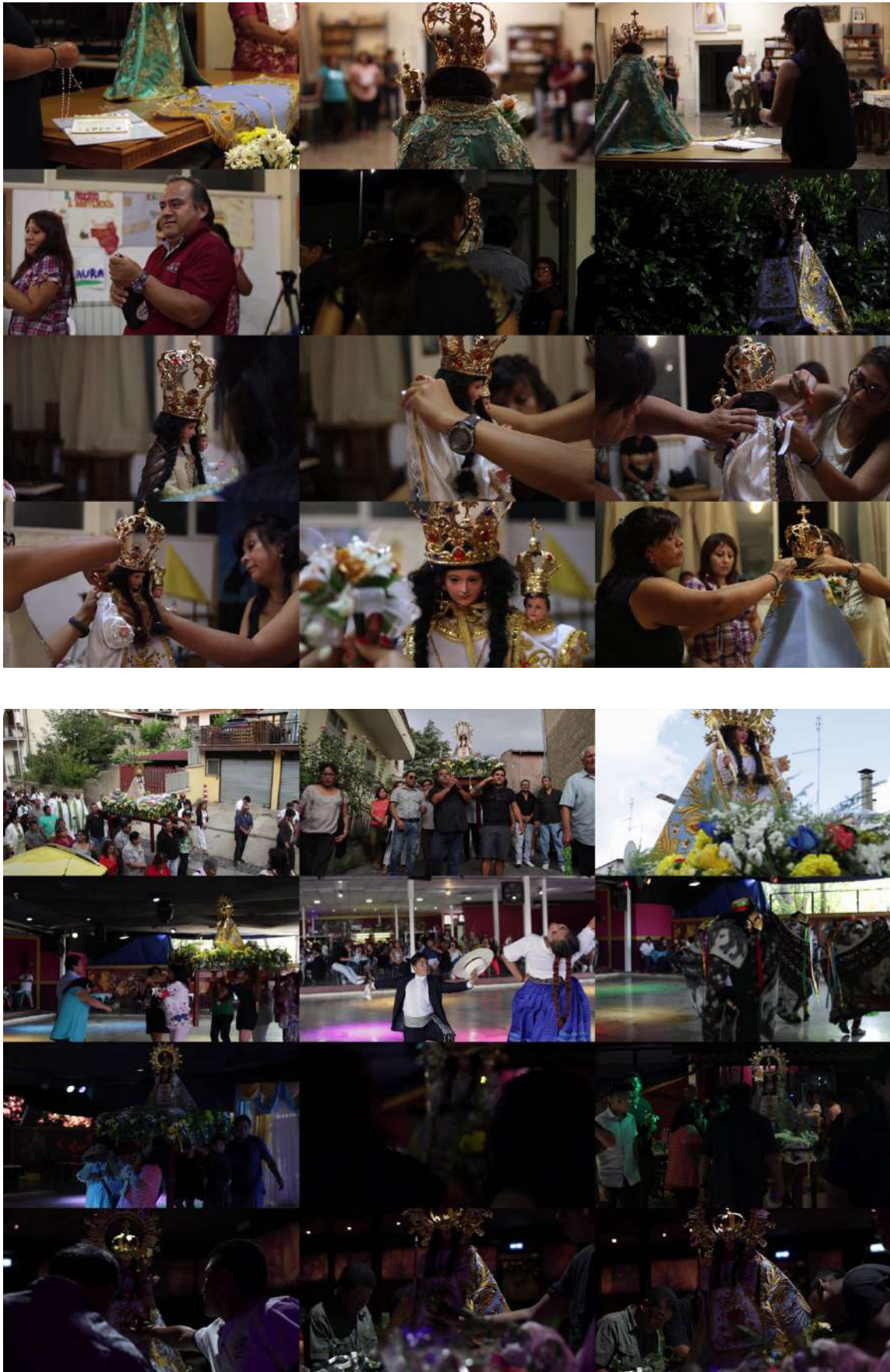


Figure 5, 6, 7, 8 Assemblages of frames from the editing process. Frames by Daria De Grazia.

Beyond the Filming Process: On the Uses of Anthropological Knowledge

For about a year now, the Association—following an initiative by the *junta directiva* to open up to second generations—has begun to make substantial use, for self-promotional purposes, of the materials that we researchers have produced and shared over the years. Through a process of selection, creative appropriation, and reworking of the materials produced by the researchers, the group is literally rewriting the history of the Association, redefining the identity boundaries of the “Peruvianness” that is expressed within it, and collectively reimagining and reframing what is perceived and experienced as a ‘tradition’. This represents an interesting creative process of enhancing what they perceive as their own heritage - a process of becoming a heritage community (Padiglione and Broccolini 2016)⁹ - which employs anthropological knowledge as a means of acquiring greater legitimacy in the public religious sphere. In fact, in the last five years, the landscape of Peruvian cultural and religious associations around Rome has been populated by other “competitors”; in particular, another group devoted to the cult of the Virgen de Cocharcas has been formed, some of whose founders came from a split with the current members of the cultural and religious Association “Virgen de Cocharcas”. This other group has already obtained recognition from the Holy See, a fact that has significantly shaped the dynamics of legitimacy in the field. Precisely for this reason, the members of the Association explicitly asked us to help them reuse and reframe the ethnographic materials, in order to support their own request for official recognition from the Vatican.

In our case, assimilation within the Association’s group took place over time, and when other Peruvian religious groups in Rome and its surroundings invited us to attend other festivities, our ‘belonging’ clearly emerged, a tacit pact according to which we would not carry out the same work elsewhere. Nevertheless, these invisible boundaries were always very fluid and porous, and we often took part in other Peruvian celebrations, though these usually amounted to brief incursions. This highlights not only the centrality of ethnographic positioning and the process of *encliquage* (Olivier de Sardan 1995) but also the broader implications of anthropological research as a social and cultural resource. The ways in which knowledge is appropriated, mobilised, and re-signified by interlocutors remind us that ethnography can confer forms of legitimacy, and it can become a tool in local struggles for recognition. This challenges us, as researchers, to reflect on our responsibilities in co-producing knowledge that may subsequently be employed for political, religious, or institutional ends. The choices of the ethnographer inevitably

⁹ The heritage dimension of the Association’s practices—encompassing its strategies of heritagization, its negotiations with institutional actors, and its processes of collective identity formation—constitutes a significant analytical thread throughout this research. However, a comprehensive engagement with heritage theory, as well as with broader questions of belonging and legitimacy, lies beyond the scope of the present article, which instead focuses primarily on the methodological and epistemological implications of ethnographic filmmaking. The processes of heritage-making observable within the Association are examined in greater detail in Buonvino (2021) and De Grazia (2024), to which the reader is referred for a more sustained discussion of these issues.

generate consequences that extend beyond the research itself, shaping the very social realities he/she seeks to describe. In this sense, the case of the Association reveals how anthropological knowledge, once disseminated and re-appropriated, becomes part of the repertoire of actors who negotiate identity, authority, and belonging in transnational religious contexts. As Lassiter (2005: 96-97) argues, collaborative ethnographic practice is inherently also a public act, in which the knowledge co-produced in the field circulates beyond the research encounter and becomes entangled with the representational and political agendas of the communities involved.

The new stance adopted by the new members of the *junta directiva* primarily responds to the emergence of new internal needs within the Association and should therefore be situated within a broader transforming social and cultural framework. In fact, the assumption of the *cargo* by members of the second generation—young people who have spent most of their lives in Italy—necessarily softens and reshapes what, until recently, were the prerogatives of first-generation immigrant members (cf. Buonvino 2021; De Grazia 2024). Owing to their greater emotional distance and their different perception of migratory and transnational life experiences, these younger members enable the emergence of new communal and devotional practices and new narratives that reinterpret the group's memory. In doing so, they creatively transform into heritage a painful past that had previously been 'too present', through new gazes and alternative ways of inhabiting the heterogeneous social space of associative life. One element that suggested a first perspectival shift was the presence, during the festival in honour of the Virgen de Cocharcas on 8 September 2024, of an Italian flag accompanying the Peruvian flag and the Association's banner. In this sense, these new festive and devotional practices become part of a broader cultural weaving process, represented by the entire ensemble of transnational actions that constitute what has been described as a "game of belongings" (Ceschi 2011: 147). Over the years, this 'game' has acquired increasingly well-defined contours through the remembrance and (re)construction of the migratory memories and practices of the first generations.

The experience carried out with the Association confirms that the impact of anthropological research can never be exhausted by the practices of documentation, nor by the production and dissemination of research "results." This becomes particularly evident when the very process of interaction, sharing, and enhancement of community knowledge entails the prolonged presence of the researcher. This presence itself, and the constant dialogue with the community, can have lasting effects on the group—effects that are not always, and not entirely, predictable or controllable. At times, the group begins to reflect on its own history and to rework it in new ways. We can observe the coexistence of different tensions, where generational transmission unfolds through moments of rupture as well as continuity. The re-elaboration of memory becomes a site of negotiation in which conflict, divergence of perspectives, and competing claims over what should be preserved or reinvented intersect with the desire to ensure the persistence of tradition across generations.

Sometimes this process takes shape as a true act of identity rewriting, in which the Association's history is reinterpreted, the boundaries of "Peruvianness" are redefined, and

traditional practices are transformed or reinvented. The assumption of the *cargo* by second-generation members appears to be the paradigmatic moment of this renewal. It thus becomes interesting to explore which stories survive this process; which are lost along the way; and which internal frictions emerge when certain stories are enhanced, and others are marginalised. What long-term effects will all this have on group cohesion and on the continuity of the cult? The issue of legitimacy proves to be central here: internal legitimacy, which is articulated through the confirmation of shared roles and practices, and external legitimacy, which raises the “problem” of visibility and social recognition.

In this context, the research process itself constitutes a privileged lens through which to observe the dynamics of the production of communal meaning and value. At the same time, it invites us to continuously question the role of anthropology in mediating heritage and memories, and therefore in reimagining the future of the groups with whom we work.



Figure 9 The *Junta Directiva*. Photo by Daria De Grazia, 2025.

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