

Article

Dancing Faith, Reproducing Identity: The Lord of Miracles Devotion Among Barcelona's Migrants

Wilson Muñoz-Henríquez¹ and María Esther Fernández-Mostaza^{2,*} ¹ Facultad de Educación y Humanidades, Universidad de Tarapacá, Arica 1000000, Chile; wemunozh@academicos.uta.cl² Department of Sociology, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, 08193 Bellaterra, Spain

* Correspondence: mariaesther.fernandez@uab.cat

Abstract: The procession of El Señor de los Milagros is a multitudinous religious manifestation originally from Peru that tours numerous cities around the world each year in October. In Barcelona (Spain), the procession centers the diverse dances performed in honor of the “Cristo Moreno”, especially La Marinera, which is considered the cultural heritage of the Peruvian nation and is performed mainly by dance groups formed by new generations of Peruvian migrants’ children. This article analyzes the relationship between new generations and the practice of dancing La Marinera in honor of El Señor de los Milagros in Barcelona. Our main methodological strategy was an ethnography focused on the processions held in Barcelona (Spain) in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2022. We also conducted in-depth interviews with key informants and focus groups and a review of documents and historical information. In this article, we will show that the performance of the Marinera dance in the procession can foster a connection between young dancers and the worship of the Lord of Miracles. Its performance promotes the appreciation and safeguarding of this practice as a distinctive cultural and national element of Peru, also allowing for a public staging oriented toward spectacle, framed in a transnational and globalized context.

Keywords: migration; Catholicism; ritual; dance; heritage; Barcelona



Academic Editor: Martin Hoondert

Received: 2 December 2024

Revised: 17 April 2025

Accepted: 14 May 2025

Published: 28 May 2025

Citation: Muñoz-Henríquez, Wilson, and María Esther Fernández-Mostaza. 2025. Dancing Faith, Reproducing Identity: The Lord of Miracles Devotion Among Barcelona's Migrants. *Religions* 16: 693. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16060693>

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1. Introduction

The procession of El Señor de los Milagros is a multitudinous religious manifestation originally from Peru that tours numerous cities around the world each year in October (Paerregaard 2008; Roldán 2017). In Barcelona (Spain), hundreds of migrants come together in a spectacular procession focused on Cristo Moreno (Brown Christ). This is the most important public celebration organized by Peruvians and their descendants in the city. The procession is a complex manifestation that has historically recreated cultural, ethnic, religious, and political elements in the public space, from its origins in Lima (Banchero 1972, 1976, 1995; Costilla 2016) through its more recent presence in Barcelona (Merino 2002; Muñoz-Henríquez and Fernández-Mostaza 2021).

In a global context of declining Catholic adherence (Smith et al. 2002; Parker 2005; Cerda-Planas 2021; Hoffman et al. 2015), the public worship of the Lord of Miracles remains remarkably vibrant worldwide, particularly in cities with significant Peruvian immigrant populations. More broadly, research has consistently demonstrated how migrant groups carry ideas, customs, practices, and objects from their home cultures throughout their migratory journeys (Eastmond 1993; Bhabha 1996; Miller 2008). These elements serve to mobilize and reactivate their national, cultural, and religious connections to their countries of origin. This phenomenon is especially evident in Latin American popular Catholic

devotion on a global level, manifested through the veneration of images of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and various saints (Mallimaci 2008; Gómez 2009; Barelli 2011; Ameigeiras 2022). Some scholars (Borup and Ahlin 2011; Lyck-Bowen and Owen 2019) argue that these connections facilitate migrants' integration into diverse sociocultural environments, particularly in transnational contexts. However, others highlight the tension that arises when these cultural elements must be adapted to new local conditions, and when their practice involves innovation by subsequent generations born in host societies (Ricucci 2019; Friberg and Sterri 2021). This adaptation process may potentially jeopardize the continuity of traditional religious practices.

The largest public and collective religious manifestation of Peruvians in Barcelona demonstrates a thriving cult with significant support among teenagers and young adults. In this context, one of the most distinctive and central practices of this procession involves dances performed as it moves through public spaces, a characteristic feature of Latin American popular Catholicism (Jasso and Martínez 2022). These dances structure much of the celebration and constitute the devotees' primary tribute to the image of El Señor de los Milagros. They are predominantly performed by new generations of Peruvian migrants born in Barcelona. This is particularly evident in La Marinera, a mixed couples dance that embodies Peru's cultural and national heritage (Zevallos 2019; Burmester 2000).

This article explores the role of dance practice in forging connections between new generations and the veneration of El Señor de los Milagros. We depart from the traditional approach that has typically analyzed ritual manifestations from a purely symbolic perspective, such as emphasizing the role of "master symbols" (Turner 1970) in shaping Catholic festivals and rituals, as Eric Wolf did in his study of Mexico (Wolf 1958). Instead, we conceptualize dance as a ritual manifestation. While there is extensive debate on the distinction between dance and ritual (Schechner 1987; Gill 2007; Lisina 2012), we argue that ritual is not exclusive to religion, nor is dance limited to artistic or aesthetic domains. Consequently, we frame dance as a ritual practice—a unique social activity simultaneously linked to participants' experiences and the organization of action (Houseman 2012, p. 13). Both aspects are defined by the specific relational configuration conferred by the ritual interaction itself. This relational configuration endows ritual dance with the capacity to generate symbols and practices that may not only reinforce but also challenge and disrupt the sociocultural relationships governing everyday life (Houseman and Severi 2009).

Furthermore, this allows us to explore how this ritual manifestation demonstrates the power of migratory contexts to modify both practices linked to a historical popular Catholicism as well as practices of secular origin used for nationalist purposes (Lynch 2012), generating contemporary religious hybridizations (Bellah and Hammond 2013). Contrary to somewhat static and monolithic descriptions of Catholicism, this would be in dialogue with a more recent reading of popular Catholicism that conceives it as a movement with significant internal sociocultural differentiation, and with high flexibility and adaptability of its beliefs and practices, both historically (Christian 2017) and at present (Norget et al. 2017; Marzal 2002).

Thus, this article analyzes the relationship that young generations create with the practice of ritual dance of La Marinera in honor of El Señor de los Milagros in Barcelona. We hypothesize that the La Marinera dance is the most crucial practice performed by new generations of children of Peruvian immigrants to worship El Señor de los Milagros publicly. Through it, they establish connections that promote the national recognition of this practice as a key element of their "Peruvianness", which second-generation immigrants live and publicly express in the public space. Finally, we reflect on whether this fact can be considered a particular way that these young dancers use to practice a popular religiosity of great historical depth in Peru, using a dance disseminated for nationalist purposes in

their country of origin and enhanced with a theatrical amplification or spectacularization characteristic of contemporary mass manifestations (Debord 1992; Balandier 2006).

This article is structured as follows: After describing the material and method, we offer a brief contextualization of the origins of the cult in Barcelona (Spain), showing its insertion in the local social and ecclesial context, and noting that this is a migrant, mobile group of worship. We then discuss the importance of the dances in the procession and the strong connection that young people have to the La Marinera dance, a unique religious, cultural, and national manifestation. We then briefly describe the intergenerational controversy around how La Marinera should be performed before El Señor de los Milagros. This will allow us to show the close connection that young people establish with El Señor de los Milagros through this dance. Finally, we discuss the main findings of the study, reflecting on the general role that La Marinera plays in the religious adherence of new regions and the reproduction of this global group of worship.

2. Materials and Methods

In this study, we mainly use an ethnographic methodology. This is particularly appropriate for addressing the performances and interactions deployed throughout the procession in the public space. First, it allows for direct contact with the stakeholders and their interaction (Flick 2002; Willis and Trondman 2002). It also creates dense descriptions and analyses of the events (Kalocsai 2000). The fieldwork was conducted in 2016, 2017, 2018, and 2022.¹ This study is focused on the procession carried out by the Hermandad del Señor de los Milagros de Barcelona in honor of Cristo Moreno. The entity was founded in July 1992 by two Peruvian followers to reproduce the original cult of El Señor de los Milagros that was practiced in Peru and to bring together Peruvians living in Barcelona. Of the 25,769 Peruvians residing in the province of Barcelona, almost half are in the municipality of Barcelona (INE 2020). More than 150 of them and their descendants are part of La Hermandad del Señor de los Milagros. Among them are its founding members, the board of directors, the crews of bearers of the image of El Señor de los Milagros (called “brothers”), and direct collaborators. In addition, two external crews each year pay homage to the image: a group of male bearers and the *sahumadoras* (incense bearers). The brotherhood leads and organizes the festival each year, which is attended by between 1500 and 2000 people, most of them Peruvian. The procession is held in October in the Les Corts neighborhood of Barcelona near Iglesia de Sant Ramon Nonat, which has hosted the group and the image of Cristo Moreno for the rest of the year since 1997.

The main information gathering technique used was the observation of the event. In addition, we collected documents related to the celebration in general, the procession itself, and the Hermandad (including websites, internal board documents, and other resources). We collected 28 interviews and oral testimonies from key informants, men and women, 27 of Peruvian nationality and one Spanish. Among them we considered founding members, presidents, treasurers, the secretary, the person in charge of the disciplinary board, spokespersons, and members of the board of directors, the foreman and head of the crews, and the bearers of the image of El Señor de los Milagros. We also included members of the Hanah Pacha Cultural Group (president and former dancer), the Peru Rhythms and Customs Dance Association (teacher and dancer), and the Barcelona GRONE group (president, vice president, spokesperson, and members), all organizations that actively participate in the processions. We interviewed the Rector of the San Ramón Nonat Church (Spanish), a young dancer, the Consul General of Peru in Barcelona, and a journalist closely linked to the celebration. All the information collected was triangulated, and content analysis was used to analyze them (Hsieh and Shannon 2005).

3. Results

El Señor de los Milagros is a complex ritual manifestation in which the recreation of cultural, ethnic, religious, and political elements has historically been connected to its manifestation in the public space (Muñoz-Henríquez and Fernández-Mostaza 2021), from its origins in Lima to its more recent appearance in many international cities (Altamirano 2000; Paerregaard 2008). This increased when the Vatican named El Señor de los Milagros, also known as the Cristo Moreno, the Patron Saint of Resident and Immigrant Peruvians on 15 October 2005, so that “each Peruvian living abroad is an ambassador of Peru” (our translation) (Benza 2008).

3.1. *Origins of the Migrant Brown Christ’s Worship in Barcelona*

As in so many other cities, this procession is held on the third Sunday of October in Barcelona, Spain. The tradition began in July 1992 when Peruvian followers Rosa Uchuya and Rosa Cruzatt asked the city’s Archbishop to hold a Mass to celebrate Cristo Moreno at the Catedral de Santa Cruz y Santa Eulalia de Barcelona. They also began the process of bringing an oil painting bearing the image of El Señor de los Milagros from Peru, as Rosa Uchuya explained to us in 2018:

“I came here on 11 January 1991. When I went to the Peruvian center, I asked if there was an image, and they said no. I felt alone, naked because there was no image because you feel enveloped where there is a religious image. My son sent me a print of El Señor de los Milagros. I thought he was going to send a small one, but it measured 1.2 m. Two. He sent me two. So I put them out like this: one on one side and one on the other, but with glass. With a frame and glass. The head had some nails, and that’s how the Lord was depicted. I made a little altar with a small table. It was all meant to be, because I said, “I will perform your procession even if it is with a small table”. And my friend had her son, her sister-in-law. And everyone began to go. They started to go to the Cathedral. I had seen them before, so we quickly became friends. And then they came to the Mass. It was the second year, or the first one. Because I invited people by word of mouth. I didn’t know anyone. “Are you Peruvian?” I would ask. “No”, they would say. I would ask again, “Are you Peruvian?” and they would say “Yes”. And I would say, “There’s going to be a Mass at the Cathedral on the 18th”. It was like that around the Cathedral for five years. We didn’t have permission from anyone, including the police. We would carry the Catalan flag and a little Peruvian flag. Because we were immigrants.”

This slow appropriation of the public space that is apparently the result of a personal initiative that became more and more collective was an initial attempt to reorganize local religious practices and beliefs from their country of origin through a process of reterritorialization of local saints and virgins. This has been observed elsewhere in the world as well (Ruíz Baia 1999; Hervieu-Léger 2005; Levitt and Schiller 2004; Casanova 2007; Roldán 2017). Thirty years after the first manifestation of religiosity around one of the most emblematic places for Catholicism in the city, La Santa Iglesia Catedral de la Santa Cruz y Santa Eulalia (headquarters of the Archbishop of Barcelona), there have been many important changes.

Of all of the differences between the first procession and those that we have been able to observe since 2016 (with the exception of 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19), thus far we have found two things. The first is the increase in the number of participants. Most are Peruvian, but we also observed individuals from other South American nationalities attending and participating. The second is that the change in location was also important: from an emblematic and centrally located location in the city (the Cathedral) to the San Ramon Nonat parish, which is located on the outskirts of Barcelona. The procession moves

through the area for nearly seven hours, halting traffic and blocking bus stops involved in the procession circuit.

The ways in which religious communities use the public space to hold activities like processions constitute encounters with a very important symbolic dimension (Casanova 2007; Grier et al. 2021). Here, the peripheral and liminal spaces that the procession occupies is particularly important both socially and spatially in a context of growing migration and religious diversity. As the parish priest at Iglesia de San Ramon Nonat explained:

“The parish’s territory covers Barcelona, but we cover the Collblanc Highway, and we are already in L’Hospitalet. So the parish territory covers two populations. They are different and experience very different realities. This area is part of the Sant Ramon neighborhood and is more bourgeois, artisans. . . . And if we go down to L’Hospitalet, we find people who have come from abroad. They are from migratory flows from the 1950s and 1960s, and include people who came from elsewhere in Spain like Andalucía, Extremadura, etc. Over the past 20 years, the area has welcomed folks from around the world, from Magreb, Sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America, India, China. So it is much more multicultural, more “multireligious”, etc. As such, the upper part is Barcelona, and has the “better” class, the bourgeois, or the business class- people who work in commerce, etc. Then there is the lower part, the L’Hospitalet part, which is home to simpler folks -workers, etc.- and many immigrants. That is the reality of the parish. . . .”

Along with this urban location, it is interesting to highlight the position of the image of El Señor de los Milagros within the church itself throughout much of the year. It is located in a lateral nave that cannot be accessed directly, again recreating the idea of a relative spatial exclusion and displacement with respect to the central nave of the church. We were able to corroborate this during our field work and it was also confirmed by the parish priest. Even so, neighbors and believers who do not agree with how El Señor de los Milagros is celebrated in the church have expressed serious concerns:

“Some people complain. They are from a different culture. They are also Christians, but they come from a different culture, and there are things that shock us. We have to learn to create spaces for ourselves and adapt to each other. We won’t do it that way, but if it is so important to them. . . . But yes, some people have complained. People from outside [of the community], the noise [referring to the procession]. I understand it, but I don’t understand this reaction from the people from within the community. I guess they are prejudiced”.

The testimonies show that for members of the community associated with the church and local residents of the Collblanc neighborhood who do not belong to it, the veneration of El Señor de los Milagros is a religious and cultural manifestation that is unique to migrants of Peruvian origin. This group is socially and spatially linked to the working class, and the local Spanish population does not have a significant connection to it. Cristo Moreno is the Christ of Peruvian migrants.

On the other hand, the ethnographic and documentary evidence shows that the veneration of El Señor de los Milagros is a ritual manifestation historically marked by mobility and urban displacement dating back to its origins in Viceroyal Lima (Vargas Ugarte 1966; Rostworowski 1992; Costilla 2011, 2015), migration to a city like Barcelona and then on to the margins of that city (Fernández-Mostaza and Muñoz Henríquez 2018). In addition, if we consider the fact that the most important manifestation of this group involves holding a procession that has the Cristo Moreno move through the streets of the city and where the main way to pay homage involves executing dances that mobilize migrant followers’ bodies, we understand that this is truly a migrant Christ in movement.

The young people who worship him seem to have a unique way of understanding and living this, as we will see below.

3.2. Procession and Dance; Dance and Procession

The dances performed during the profession play a key role in the structuring and developing of this religious manifestation in the public space. The procession is organized as follows. The image of El Señor de los Milagros moves through the streets around Iglesia de San Ramon Nonat, as shown in the map (Figure 1). Each group places stations along the route to “honor” El Señor de los Milagros in a unique way. This homage tends to involve an offering of flowers and a dance, along with a few words of thanks from the organization’s leader. The dance plays a central role because it is the main form in which followers show devotion to the image. It takes up the most time and space during the brief visit the image makes and requires the most work of devotees. As a result, it becomes the center of attention during the procession. In fact, along with the movement of the image of Cristo Moreno through the streets, the dances are the center of the ritual, the nucleus of public attention.



Figure 1. The route of procession (2017, Barcelona).

Turning to the celebration, the El Señor de los Milagros procession and spatial reconfiguration are phenomena that are ritually co-produced through dance (Muñoz-Henríquez and Fernández-Mostaza 2021). The procession has not only progressively taken over the urban public space, but also has become a ritual scene in which the internal unity and differentiation that exists between the social, cultural, and athletic groups that participate in the procession are simultaneously spatially performed. The dances play a key role, as they spatially and ritually interpret the identifications and differences that exist between the different groups, showing evidence of differentiation and inequality under a single

ritualized devotional movement. There is thus a clear hierarchy between the organizations that worship El Señor de los Milagros.

However, the different generations also find in dance a space of communion that is publicly expressed. This reveals a potent and subtle connection between worshippers and the image of El Señor de los Milagros (Fernández-Mostaza and Muñoz Henríquez 2018). It is expressed in one of the characteristics of the dance: facilitating generational interaction among followers. Basically, the dances require the participation of youth and adult followers to learn and perform them in public. The dances also structure the hierarchy of the stations distributed along the procession route through the unity they provide. If we focus on the procession around the church of San Ramon Nonat, we see that an extra-quotidian appropriation of the space is carried out through the dance. One way to show that hierarchy clearly is through La Marinera, the main dance of the procession held in honor of El Señor de los Milagros in Barcelona.

3.3. La Marinera: Reproduction and Intergenerational Transmission

Along the procession route in Barcelona, the various groups of participants perform multiple dances in honor of El Señor de los Milagros. The dance that most clearly manifests the dual focus—both social and religious—is La Marinera.

La Marinera is a mixed partner dance that is especially well known in coastal Peru. Its specific characteristics depend on its regional variants, and there are versions from Lima, northern Peru, Puna, Arequipa, and the Andean region. It is now considered part of the country's national heritage, and for many people it is the queen of dances (Burmester 2000). It is especially important to recall its historical origins and close connection to Peruvian nationalism dating back to the end of the war between the Peru–Bolivia Confederation and Chile (1836–1839). Chile's United Restoration Army brought a dance called the Chilean Zamacueca to Peru. It became the most popular dance of the 1860s and 1870s and became known as La Chilena. However, its name was changed to La Marinera in 1879 thanks to the efforts of Abelardo Gamarra (known as “El Tunante”), who decided to rename it in honor of the Peruvian Navy that had fought against Chile (Zevallos 2019). The idea was to highlight Peru as a nation and shed any vestiges that referred to its enemy (Tompkins 1981). This is clear in the document cited below, which was published by Gamarra himself on 8 March 1879 in the newspaper *El Nacional*:

“No more Chilenas.—Criollo musicians and poets try to put an end to dances with Chilean names. They want Peruvian content: elements developed here that do not have a foreign name. They have proposed calling dances that have the air and lyrics of what was called La Chilena ‘Marineras’ instead” (Our translation).

La Marinera thus became a dance that plays a key role in all Peruvian civic, military, and religious activities, and it was interpreted in a special way when it was performed far from Peru. This is why it is performed publicly in honor of El Señor de los Milagros in Catalan territory. The fact that it occurs in the context of a markedly religious procession like the one in honor of El Señor de los Milagros underscores the idea that national and religious identity complement and reinforce each other in the destination country (Fernández-Mostaza and Muñoz Henríquez 2018). The practice of La Marinera brings the two dimensions together to a great extent. At the Peruvian consulate in Barcelona, Franca Deza, publicly stated during the 2013 procession seconds before La Marinera was performed in honor of El Señor de los Milagros, the first station of the procession organized by the Peruvian consulate:

“The Consulate of Peru and its entire staff are here, as are all of their relatives, to worship at the first station of this procession. El Señor de los Milagros unites all Peruvians in faith. ... As such, it is a universal faith at this time, and [the dance]

is a simple way to honor de los Milagros El Señor deeply and sincerely, Patron Saint of Peru”.

In addition, the performance of La Marinera is key in the spatial–temporal organization of the stations that form part of the procession (Tables 1 and 2). It begins and ends the procession. The dance also makes explicit a clear hierarchy regarding the rest of the stations in which it does not have a presence, as the dances in the latter do not usually require such a significant use of the public space or block traffic. Finally, it is important to note that the dance that is routinely performed at the end of the procession before entering the church where El Señor de los Milagros is held throughout the year is La Marinera. All of this shows the importance of this dance in the public worship of Cristo Moreno.

Table 1. Stations, groups, and cultural events in the 2016 procession (Barcelona).

Station	Groups	Dance and Music
1st	General Consulate of Peru in Barcelona	Marinera
2nd	The Peruvian Centre in Barcelona	Huayno
3rd	Cultural Association for Social Outreach (ACPES) and the Chalán Horse Riders of Barcelona	Waltz and Marinera
4th	St Peter of Chimbote, Barcelona	Marinera
5th	Scissors Dance Group	Scissors dance
6th	Barcelona Lord of Miracles Volleyball Club	–
7th	Marinera Academy, Peru	Marinera
8th	Barcelona Virgin of the Gate of Peru Gypsy Association	Gypsy dance
9th	Brotherhood of the Lord of Miracles, Barcelona Grone Comando Svr	–

Table 2. Stations, groups, and cultural events in the 2017 procession.

Station	Groups	Music and Dance
1st	General Consulate of Peru in Barcelona	Marinera
2nd	The Peruvian Centre in Barcelona	Huayno
3rd	Cultural Association for Social Outreach (ACPES)	Waltz and Marinera
4th	St Peter of Chimbote, Barcelona	Marinera
5th	Movi-Peru Association	–
6th	Barcelona Lord of the Miracles Volleyball Club	–
7th	Northern Marinera Dance School, Rhythms and Customs	Marinera
8th	Barcelona Virgin of the Gate of Peru Gypsy Association	Gypsy dance
9th	Alma Peruana Cultural Association	Agrarian celebration
10th	Leoncio Prado Alumni Association	–
11th	Holy Virgin of Cisne de Loja, Ecuador	Ecuadorian dance
12th	Hanan Pacha Cultural Association	Marinera
13th	Brotherhood of the Lord of Miracles, Barcelona Grone Comando Svr	Salsa

But which of these migrants transmit the elements that manage to bring together what are considered religious practices of Peruvian origin and hybrid ones? Our ethnographic experience shows that they are initially older migrants and adults who promote practices like La Marinera. We also found that generations born in Spain frequently participate in the dances, and that they have very unique ways of experiencing the procession and the

religiosity. These elements are key to sustaining the health of the cult and constitute the main driver of the ongoing reproduction of this specific form of religiosity.

The version of La Marinera that the young followers perform in the procession tends to be learned in one of the cultural, music, and folk groups that promote Peruvian culture in Barcelona. These include *Asociación Cultural de Proyección y Extensión Social* (ACPES), *Chalanes de Barcelona*, *Centro Peruano en Barcelona*, *Academia de Marinera Perú*, *Escuela de Baile Marinera nortea, Perú: Ritmos y costumbres*, *Asociación Cultural Hanan Pacha*, *Asociación Cultural Alma Peruana*, etc. La Marinera is performed professionally by these groups, and their members participate in local, national, and international competitions.

The groups' participation in the procession varies. It tends to be direct, but they often participate indirectly by allowing their dancers to dance La Marinera at other organizations' stations (as occurs with the station run by the Peruvian consulate). The dance has regional variants, but its main structure (in terms of both the music and the performance) is shared across all of them. In this regard, when young people honor El Señor de los Milagros in the various stations through La Marinera, they make this offering unique, particularly through their personal experiences as performers. This allows us to distinguish the performance of this dance at any other public gathering (competition, cultural event, etc.) from the way they dance for Cristo Moreno (Figure 2). In the latter case, which focuses on religion and ritual, the performers' personal connections to El Señor de los Milagros is established through a cultural and national experience associated with Peru. As one 17-year-old dancer from the 2018 procession who had participated since the age of five—as is the case with many other young migrants—explained, La Marinera allows them to cultivate their connection to Peruvian culture in the Catalan context: “I learned the dance here. I was born in Barcelona, and I know this culture and have participated in the religious events that are held thanks to my parents”.



Figure 2. Dancing the Marinera at the front door of the Church (2017).

The same young woman noted the importance of making a small but meaningful change by dancing La Marinera before the image of El Señor de los Milagros barefoot. She explained that it shows that she danced with Christ and not only for Him. In this sense, it is a ritual dance that is performed publicly with a clear religious connotation that also

shows the connection that this young woman establishes with the image of El Señor de los Milagros. She also highlighted this religious connection by understanding the practice of dancing barefoot as a physical sacrifice made for Cristo Moreno:

“People are very surprised to see me dancing barefoot here. When they see me, they say, “That poor girl! Why is she dancing barefoot?” And, well, I like dancing with no shoes. [La Marinera] is meant to be danced barefoot, and I like to do it that way. I feel more comfortable. I feel like it is... something that I do, like a sacrifice. And, as I said, at this point I don’t feel the rocks or even the cold when I dance”.

Most of the young people who worship El Señor de los Milagros in the procession do not regularly participate in the religious services offered by Iglesia de San Ramon Nonat or the ecclesiastic activities that the Brotherhood of El Señor de los Milagros organizes every weekend and during the months leading up to the procession (Masses, rosaries, etc.). However, understanding and performing La Marinera as a clear homage and offering to El Señor de los Milagros is one of the most direct, explicit, and public ways that new generations have to show and develop their faith. They seem to have found the best way to honor a migrant Christ who has historically been in movement: dancing with and around Him. However, this unique connection between young people and El Señor de los Milagros that is brought to fruition through La Marinera has another unique aspect that does not tend to be viewed as strictly religious by older followers. We will explore this aspect in the following paragraphs and show its importance for reproducing this form of religiosity.

3.4. Devotion or Spectacle: An Intergenerational Controversy

We have seen that the connection between national and religious unity is very important in the procession held in honor of El Señor de los Milagros. La Marinera is one of the artistic and cultural manifestations that was historically built to manifest this connection. However, the success of the dance within the Barcelona procession has not always been viewed in a positive light by part of the organization that leads the brotherhood of El Señor de los Milagros and organizes the event each year. Some have criticized the fact that the brotherhood performs the dance with the image of Cristo Moreno as well as the way La Marinera is publicly performed by members of younger generations. We will examine each case below.

As we mentioned above, La Marinera is a key element of the procession. In fact, just before completing its procession through the public space, the image of El Señor de los Milagros must dance a Marinera before bidding his follower’s farewell. However, the most recent president of the Brotherhood of El Señor de los Milagros stated that this was sacrilege. Since then, the image has not danced La Marinera in front of the Church of San Ramón Nonat. As one of the members of the organization’s leadership commented:

“The image of El Señor de los Milagros used to dance La Marinera. But El Señor de los Milagros cannot dance La Marinera; we were engaging in sacrilegious behavior. And I include myself in that group because I was there, too. I didn’t know. That’s why I always ask God and the Virgin for forgiveness. Why? Because I have been allowing it without knowing. Now that I am here more, I am in the church and I am learning more and more... So La Marinera is no longer danced. There is a departure and a return. And they [members of the brotherhood] are called to a meeting ahead of the event [the procession], and we tell them the rules: “We have some rules for all of the stations.” We will maintain our position until my presidency is over. I will hold the line. There will be dances of worship at each station because El Señor de los Milagros is part of Peruvian culture... I also made it very clear that they [the worshippers] don’t pay anything. They don’t

give us any offerings- just the floral offerings that they leave at the station, and, most importantly, their acts of worship [dances]. Nothing else”.

The Cristo dancing La Marinera was interpreted by the leadership as a popular act that would impinge on its “sacred” status to the point of being considered a sacrilege. The discourse does not question the connection between El Señor de los Milagros, national culture, and the worshippers. This shows that La Marinera is an homage or offering that followers perform for the image of Christ but is not something that the image itself would perform. Reestablishing this distinction between Christ and His followers through the prohibition of the dance restores the distance between the two.

In addition, this distance that the leadership seeks to establish has been requested more emphatically by some adult and older adult worshippers who have questioned the fact that young people perform the dance before El Señor de los Milagros. As we noted above, the immense majority of the dancers in the procession participate in Peruvian dance, culture, and folk organizations, and many of them learn these dances professionally and compete at local, national, and even international events. This gives them a level of technical skill that is appropriate for this sort of competition, which highlights the significant technical quality of the performance of the dance itself and how the performance involves more direct interaction with the public. The last point is essential to ensure a global performance that is welcomed in the majority of the context in which the dancers perform. However, this has been problematic in the context of the procession in honor of El Señor de los Milagros. One of the followers stated the following regarding how the way that La Marinera is danced has evolved over the years:

“She [a woman who dances La Marinera] danced for El Señor when she was younger. She did things for El Señor, and said “Siiii”, and danced for and honored him. She dedicated her dance to El Señor. . . . But now as an adult, now that she is a little older, she dances for. . . for the audience. And I tell her, “No. Don’t come to a procession to dance for the audience. You have to dance for El Señor de los Milagros, honey. It shouldn’t matter what they say about you. You have to dance for El Señor.” She no longer honors him. She honors the audience. And, personally, I don’t like that. . . . Because she did it with a lot of marketing -she markets it-, promoting her dance so that they would invite her to dance and she could charge for it”.

The progressive increase in professionalism and technical skill that is appreciated in the performance of La Marinera is criticized in the story of one follower, but it seems to be an especially comfortable element for younger generations. They comprise the majority of the groups that cultivate the dance, mainly performing it at competitions. They are the ones who honor El Señor de los Milagros through this dance. It seems that this new way of worshipping has come to stay, at least among young people.

The procession for El Señor de los Milagros could not be held during the COVID-19 pandemic. But the procession did not return to the streets of CollBlanc once lockdowns were lifted and large public events could again be held in Barcelona. A change in leadership that has been interpreted by many as a turn toward religious conservatism or purism amplified organizational differences and power plays within the organization. This led to a decision to suspend the procession but continue to hold religious services (Masses, prayers, etc.) to venerate El Señor de los Milagros. The Brotherhood of El Señor de los Milagros of L’Hospitalet, a nearby city, has gradually absorbed many members of the Barcelona collective, and lots of members have joined an increasingly large procession that is held there. As of last year (2024), the first dance performed in honor of the image of El Señor de los Milagros when leaving Sant Enric d’Ossó parish continued to be La Marinera. It featured a handful of young and happy performers whose performance seems to show that

they were fully aware that it was a public spectacle but was nonetheless no less religious in nature. It was very well received in this new context.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

The procession held in honor of El Señor de los Milagros is one of the most important religious manifestations held in the public space of Barcelona. As we have seen, one of the unique characteristics of the procession is that the various dances performed in honor of the “Cristo Moreno” play a central role, especially La Marinera. This dance, which is part of Peru’s cultural and national heritage, is mainly performed by young people who tend to be the children of Peruvian migrants. In this article, we have highlighted aspects that constitute the connection between these young people and the practice of dancing La Marinera in honor of El Señor de los Milagros.

We conceptualize La Marinera as a complex ritual practice performed within the context of the procession honoring El Señor de los Milagros. This dance emerges as a distinctive ritual practice due to the experiences of its young performers and the connections mobilized through its execution. These connections encompass aspects of Peruvian national identity, cultural heritage, religious devotion, and public performance. In this regard, aligning with our theoretical framework ([Houseman 2012](#)), the Marinera dance transcends mere symbolic representation. Instead, it functions as a practice that, through ritual enactment, creates and recreates a network of national, cultural, religious, and social relationships, as detailed below.

On the one hand, La Marinera is Peru’s official national dance. It has acquired this status after a historical construction linked to the dissemination of Peruvian nationalism. This phenomenon is evident in the dance’s aesthetics and its performers’ presentation, as well as in its role during public events like the procession analyzed here. As some scholars have noted, the incorporation of national elements in rituals is crucial for understanding the attachment they generate among practitioners ([Bryan 2016](#)), a pattern observed in other transnational popular Catholic cults ([Mallimaci 2008](#); [Barelli 2011](#)). After examining the procession’s structure and the characteristics of its principal dances, we observe that La Marinera serves as a vehicle for promoting Peruvian national identity ([Fernández-Mostaza and Muñoz Henríquez 2018](#)).

Moreover, La Marinera’s designation as part of Peru’s cultural heritage has led to its cultivation and dissemination by the Peruvian government and various sociocultural organizations ([Zevallos 2019](#); [Burmester 2000](#)). This is exemplified by the Peruvian migrant groups and their descendants participating in organizations involved in the El Señor de los Milagros procession in Barcelona, honoring him through La Marinera. Many Peruvians regard La Marinera as the “mother or lady of all Peruvian dances”. Devotees report that the practice and appreciation of this dance are reinforced outside of its country of origin, potentially a result of the transnational context in which it develops, and so contributes to its growing cultural significance.

It is crucial to note the close connection between La Marinera and El Señor de los Milagros, reflecting a clear religious link to this cult originating in Viceregal Lima. In the Barcelona procession, La Marinera is the dance that symbolically makes the patron saint of Peru dance, occupying the most prominent and frequent position in the procession and forming a central part of this religious manifestation. More specifically, this dance is one of the primary means by which younger generations express their religious devotion.

Two additional aspects constitute the final dimension mobilized by this dance in the procession. La Marinera is not only the most frequently performed dance by young people for El Señor de los Milagros but also plays a crucial role in the intergenerational transmission of rites and other cultural manifestations ([Van der Walt and Bowman 2007](#);

[Corsaro and Johannesen 2014](#)). Furthermore, it is increasingly taught and learned in a more technical and professional manner. The combination of these aspects makes it a unique ritual and cultural manifestation, serving as an intergenerational bridge that allows new generations to unite around the national, cultural, and religious affirmations present in La Marinera while following a performance format focused on engaging a large audience. This evolution transcends the opposition expressed by older generations regarding the latter point, generating controversies that are inherent to many forms of ritual performance ([Tepper 2002](#); [Langer et al. 2011](#)). Thus, the progressive transformation of this ritual dance into a spectacle can be viewed as an adaptation of the traditional Marinera to a diasporic and global context, facilitating broader social integration among young people.

The performance of La Marinera during the Barcelona procession has become one of the main mechanisms for promoting youth adherence to El Señor de los Milagros. It enables them to establish a complex connection that mobilizes national, cultural, and religious recognition within a public performance focused on spectacle. La Marinera's capacity to mobilize these relationships reinforces the dancers' lived experiences through its ritual and public performance. Honoring Peru and its cultural heritage in Barcelona while dancing for Cristo Moreno as part of a spectacle appears to be a unique strategy employed by young people to connect with this migrant Christ.

In this sense, following [Sassone \(2007\)](#), this form of popular Catholic religiosity can be viewed as a strategy for transnational cultural integration. This religiosity, expressed through festivals, processions, dances, etc., is utilized by migrants in their destination as a form of adaptation that connects them to their places of origin. These adaptations not only generate ethnic identity ([Mallimaci 2008](#)) but also national, religious, and cultural identities, thus contributing to the reproduction of a constantly evolving global popular Catholicism.

More specifically, the performance of the dance emerges as a complex ritual element that, following [Houseman's \(2012\)](#) proposal, not only allows for the staging and establishment of relationships with elements that promote the idea of national, cultural, and religious unity around the Lord of Miracles; it is also the practice where the intergenerational difference between devotees and dancers around these ideas is most clearly expressed. However, we propose that this constitutive aspect of ritual dance, far from weakening it, strengthens it, significantly contributing to the success of this popular Catholic worship among young people.

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These adaptations generate not only ethnic and religious identification (Mallimaci 2008), but also cultural and national. La Marinera is a dance that exemplifies this.

It is a complex ritual (Houseman 2012) that evidences a hybridization between the religious contents of a popular and historical tradition in Peru, such as the worship of El Señor de los Milagros, with a performance created in a context of Peruvian nationalist propaganda (Zevallos 2019). Furthermore, it has been enriched with a public staging that is closer to contemporary secular and mass spectacles (Debord 1992; Balandier 2006). Thus, the dance allows for the staging and establishment of relationships with elements that promote religious, cultural, and national identification. However, it is also the practice where the intergenerational difference between devotees and dancers around these ideas is most clearly expressed. However, this constitutive aspect of the dance strengthens it, as it promotes the recognition of this practice as an element of “Peruvianness,” especially by young dancers, second-generation immigrants. Finally, it is a practice that allows us to understand better not only the flexibility and adaptability of global Catholicism (Christian 2017; Norget et al. 2017; Marzal 2002) but also the success of one of its concrete manifestations practiced by many young Peruvians in Barcelona.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, W.M.-H. and M.E.F.-M.; Methodology, W.M.-H. and M.E.F.-M.; Investigation, W.M.-H. and M.E.F.-M.; Writing—original draft, W.M.-H. and M.E.F.-M.; Writing—review & editing, W.M.-H. and M.E.F.-M.; Supervision, M.E.F.-M. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by Spanish Government, Project “I+D-Excelencia CSO2015-66198-P: The Place of Religion in Open Urban Spaces: A Comparative Case Study of Public Religious Acts and Celebrations in Madrid and Barcelona (EREU-MyB)”.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Ethics Committee for Animal and Human Experimentation (CEEAH) at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (UAB) First Ethical Approval: 2697, 17 June 2022; Second Ethical Approval: 6027, 14 April 2025.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author due to privacy reason.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Note

- ¹ It should be noted that in 2023 and 2024, the procession did not take place in Barcelona itself, although the dance was performed in a neighboring city which we attended. Additionally, in 2019, we conducted fieldwork at the procession in Rome, which included a presence in Vatican City and receiving the blessing of Pope Francis.

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