Bending but Not Breaking—Awakening to Limbo

Kieron Dwayne Sargeant

Abstract

This article traces the evolution of Limbo from its sacred origins as a funerary rite rooted in African cosmologies to its contemporary manifestations as commercial spectacle, athletic display, and global entertainment form. Through a personal ethnographic approach, I interweave family oral histories, structured interviews, immersive fieldwork, and archival research to document how Limbo has transformed across spiritual, performative, and institutional contexts—from nighttime wakes in rural Trinidad to Carnival stages, circus arenas, and viral media platforms. Grounded in BaKongo cosmology and Africana ancestral practice, the study foregrounds Limbo's original function as a funerary technology designed to assist the soul's transition between earthly and ancestral realms. It critically examines the consequences of reversing the ritual's cosmological logic—particularly the symbolic shift from bar-raising to bar-lowering—and interrogates the pedagogical, spiritual, and cultural implications of this shift. Drawing on insights from key cultural figures including Julia Edwards, Torrance Mohammed, Emelda Lynch Griffith, and Thomas Talawa Prestø, the article offers a layered reflection on the tensions between tradition and innovation, ritual integrity and commodification, and sacred memory and global performance. Bending but Not Breaking is a call to cultural responsibility, reframing Limbo as a living ancestral technology whose survival depends on deliberate, ethically rooted adaptation.

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Early Family Involvement

I remember standing in my grandmother's backyard one humid night in deep-south Trinidad, eyes fixed on a stick propped between two battered chairs. The bar sat low, nearly skimming the dusty ground, and a hush fell over the circle of relatives, neighbors, and children who had gathered for the wake. The small group of men beat out overlapping rhythms on biscuit tins and goat-skin drums, weaving complex sounds that sent tremors up my spine. I might have been ten or eleven years old—the exact year is fuzzy, but the emotional impression is vivid.

At some unspoken cue, a cousin (or perhaps an uncle) stepped forward, knees bent, torso arching back, arms splayed. In a slow, deliberate shuffle, he scuttled beneath the low bar, guided by the layered drum beats. When he emerged on the other side unscathed, cheers rippled through the yard. The man on the biscuit tin did an extra flourish, rolling the rhythm to celebrate. Even at that early age, I sensed that Limbo was more than a passing game—it felt like a communal rite, a movement bridging life and death in the hush of a funerary vigil. I later learned from elders that in the original funerary ritual, the bar was raised each time a dancer succeeded—a symbolic inversion of the "tourist" version we commonly see today. Far from a mere novelty, the dance carried a spiritual resonance, rooted in African cosmologies linking the deceased's transition to ancestral realms.

These nighttime gatherings shaped my earliest impression of Limbo, tying it to polyrhythmic, up-tempo drumming and a solemn hush that signaled respect for the spirit world. Only years later would I discover that this hush-filled, low-bar-first approach was distinct from the more widely recognized commercial version, where the bar starts high and is lowered incrementally for dramatic effect. That difference—so seemingly small—speaks to a deeper tension: how Limbo's sacred origins have been continually reimagined, whether for carnival spectacle, global circus stages, or record-breaking feats on social media.

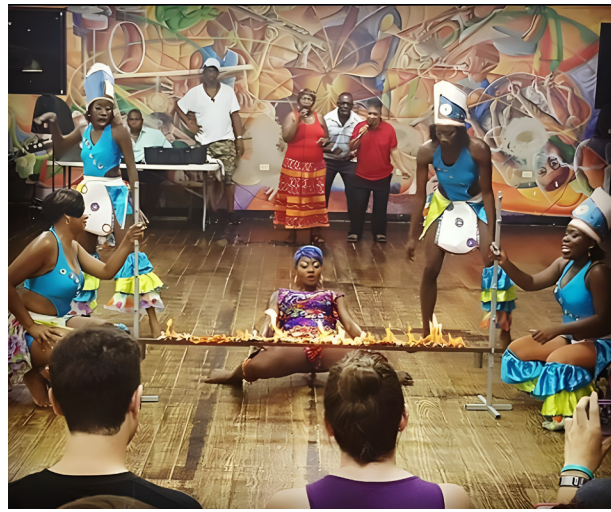

Figure 1: Kimmy Stoute Robinson performing the limbo dance with the Malick Folk Performing Company for students of the Pacific Lutheran University, at Pamberi Steel Orchestra. Image used with the permission of Kimmy Stoute Robinson.

In the decades since that backyard gathering, my relationship with Limbo has deepened and complicated itself. My initial curiosity, sparked by childhood memories and fragmented family stories, evolved into scholarly pursuit and eventually professional engagement as a performer, choreographer, and cultural researcher. This article intertwines my personal ethnographic observations with a broader historical and cultural study of Limbo, moving from solemn wake rituals vividly remembered by older Trinidadians to the dazzling downward arcs staged at the UniverSoul Circus and elsewhere.

My methodological approach integrates ethnographic fieldwork—including immersive participation in dance events, structured interviews, and informal dialogues with cultural practitioners—with detailed archival research spanning several decades. Importantly, I deliberately foreground personal narratives, family recollections, and community insights as equally legitimate and essential sources of historical knowledge. This narrative-driven approach serves not merely as a record of cultural tradition but also as an intentional act of remembering, reconnecting, and reclaiming aspects of

Trinidadian collective memory frequently overshadowed by spectacle and commercialization.

The work draws on extensive conversations and oral histories gathered during my field research. These included semi-structured interviews, site-based dialogues, and community-engaged interactions across Trinidad and Tobago. Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling and long-standing relationships with cultural practitioners. All interviews were conducted with informed consent, and ethical considerations—such as cultural respect, reciprocity, and representational accuracy—were prioritized throughout the process.

This oral material is placed in dialogue with the foundational scholarship of individuals such as Julia Edwards (see Figure 2) (1933–2017), the pioneering figure credited with popularizing Limbo in 1950s Trinidad and Tobago; Molly Ahye (1933–2018), a leading Caribbean dance scholar; as well as Rawle Titus, Gregor Breedy (1965–2022), and Thomas Talawa Prestø. Their collective insights layer through and ricochet within my own reflections, shaping both the analytical frame and the choreographic memory of the project.

In highlighting these lived experiences, I hope to frame Limbo not as a static folklore but as a dynamic cultural practice: an ancestral ritual continuously reshaped by the shifting contexts and demands of history. This article explores precisely how these transformations occurred—at what cost, with what benefits, and under which influences—and interrogates the very idea of authenticity itself. It also asks readers to consider what happens when ritual crosses into commercial space, when sacred memory meets global spectacle, and when collective identity negotiates pressures of commodification.

The title of this ethnographic exploration, *Bending but Not Breaking*, reflects the core idea guiding my inquiry: the remarkable resilience of Trinidadian Limbo. It endures, adapts, and flourishes across myriad contexts—funerals, carnivals, nightclubs, circuses, record books, and social media—without ever completely severing its ties to ancestral spiritual heritage.

Ultimately, this journey is personal as much as it is academic. It began in a small backyard wake, under the shadowy hush of communal grief and rhythmic drums, and has led me to stages and circus tents thousands of miles from Trinidad. As readers navigate these pages, I invite you to join me in reflecting not only upon Limbo's evolution but also upon broader issues of cultural memory, heritage preservation, and our responsibilities as inheritors and innovators of tradition. Through the stories told here—mine, my family's, my elders', and those of numerous dancers and scholars—we can better understand Limbo as a vibrant testimony to Trinidad and Tobago's cultural resilience, a testament to our shared human capacity to bend profoundly, yet remain unbroken.

Historical Context—Plantation Rituals and Afro-Caribbean Legacies

The roots of Limbo, like many Afro-Caribbean traditions, trace back directly to the harsh conditions of enslavement in Trinidad. From the late 17th to the early 19th centuries, thousands of Africans forcibly transported across the Atlantic were brought to work on sugar plantations, subjected to systematic attempts at cultural erasure. Yet despite colonial prohibitions and severe punishments aimed at suppressing African practices, elements of ancestral cosmologies and rituals endured, subtly embedded within the everyday lives of enslaved communities (Brown University).

One such ritual, central to the preservation of African spiritual consciousness, was the wake. These funeral gatherings became rare moments of collective spiritual expression. Drums—outlawed under ordinary circumstances—resounded openly, while dances like Limbo served to communicate spiritual allegory and cultural memory. At wakes, the Limbo bar began low, nearly touching the earth, symbolizing the burdens carried through life. Each pass under the bar represented incremental spiritual elevation, a metaphor for the deceased's journey toward ancestral rebirth, as described extensively by dance scholars Molly Ahye (1978) and Rawle Titus (2008).

My family's oral histories reflect this scholarly narrative vividly. I recall elders discussing plantation-era stories during family gatherings. My great-uncle once shared memories handed down through generations: whispered tales of how wakes provided rare solace amidst the trauma of enslavement. He described ancestors dancing Limbo at night beneath mango trees, beyond the overseer's gaze, their rhythmic movements not merely entertainment but deliberate, defiant acts of remembrance and spiritual sustenance. Such stories became foundational to my understanding of Limbo, highlighting its deep historical resonance as both resistance and survival.

Following emancipation in Trinidad in 1838, formerly enslaved Africans formed free villages, relocating away from plantation estates. Communities like Moruga, Princes Town, and Mayaro—places where I spent my childhood—became vibrant centers for maintaining and openly practicing rituals that had once required secrecy. Emancipation enabled more public expressions of dances such as Limbo, though they retained their essential spiritual functions within wakes.

In Trinidad's rural landscapes, Limbo continued quietly as a communal rite, practiced in the intimacy of extended-family gatherings rather than in public spectacle. Historian and folklorist, Rawle Titus, explains that these dances, including Limbo, were explicitly funerary—ritualistic performances marking passage from earthly suffering to ancestral peace. Limbo was fundamentally understood as a symbolic enactment of liberation, a theme profoundly resonant with the historical context of slavery and emancipation.

Even as Trinidad's urban centers grew, pulling rural families into expanding towns, practices like Limbo gradually moved into more public spaces, eventually merging with Carnival celebrations. However, throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, Limbo largely retained its solemn, communal character within rural funerary settings. Drumming, integral to its performance, maintained the polyrhythmic patterns echoing Kongo cosmologies, emphasizing cyclical notions of death and rebirth.

Another personal recollection comes to mind, reflecting this historical transition. During one Carnival season in my teenage years, an elderly relative visiting from Moruga watched as Limbo dancers performed in the streets of Port of Spain. He shook his head, muttering, "This is a different thing now." When I asked him what he meant, he replied softly, "When I was your age, we danced it, for our dead. Now look—it's everywhere, loud and bright. Not the same at all" (pers. comm., 2002).

His brief commentary encapsulated the cultural shifts occurring around Limbo, highlighting tensions between its origins as a funerary rite embedded in Afro-Trinidadian spiritual practice and its contemporary framing as a spectacle of entertainment. What he witnessed in the Carnival streets—choreographed routines accompanied by booming sound systems, performed for tourists and judges—stood in stark contrast to his memory of Limbo as a solemn, sacred act of passage. The "not the same" he referred to was not simply aesthetic but spiritual: a dislodging of the practice from its original temporal, emotional, and cosmological contexts.

It was within this historical shift—from private sacred ritual to emerging public spectacle—that Julia Edwards and Boscoe Holder played pivotal roles. Both Trinidadian artists reimagined Limbo as a choreographed performance art, with Edwards formalizing it for stage and export, and Holder incorporating it into theatrical and visual representations. Their work transformed Limbo from a community-based funerary rite into a symbol of national culture, shaping its perception both at home and abroad.

Before fully exploring that transformation, however, it remains critical to ground our understanding in the deep historical significance Limbo originally carried. As plantation-era rituals adapted, morphing into new contexts of freedom and self-expression, Limbo continued to reflect the Afro-Caribbean capacity for adaptation and resilience. Its survival—and eventual flourish shows Trinidadian communities' collective strength in preserving ancestral wisdom despite continuous pressures of cultural suppression and commercial appropriation.

Figure 2: Limbo dance pioneer and icon Julia Edwards in performance flight. Image courtesy the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian Limited/part of the National Archives of Trinidad and Tobago collection.

The historical roots of Limbo, therefore, are far more than background details. They constitute the vital connective tissue between contemporary spectacle and ancestral spiritual consciousness. They are lived histories, vividly remembered in family stories, scholarly explorations, and embodied practices—each iteration echoing the resilience of the people who first danced Limbo beneath moonlit skies, quietly defying the oppressive constraints that sought to erase their cultural identities.

Limbo as Funeral Rite—Ritual of Wakes

Historically, Limbo held a significant place within the spiritual rituals associated with Trinidadian wakes—traditional gatherings that followed the passing of a community member. These wakes provided communal solace, combining mourning with celebratory expressions

that marked the deceased's transition into ancestral realms. Rawle Winston Titus (2008) explains that the Limbo dance was integral to these rituals throughout the Caribbean, symbolizing a spiritual rupture between the physical existence and the ancestral world. Titus describes how each passage beneath the horizontal bar represented a transition, signifying the deceased's journey toward ancestral renewal and rebirth.

The original version of Limbo performed during wakes differs markedly from the contemporary commercial interpretation. In its authentic funerary form, the bar was set at its lowest level at the beginning of the wake and progressively raised each night until reaching its highest point on the final night, known locally as "Victory Night." According to Trinidadian dance scholar, Molly Ahye (1978), this progression symbolized the spiritual ascent of the deceased's soul toward liberation from worldly burdens, culminating just before burial. Ahye's work points to Limbo's sacred symbolism and its grounding in African cosmologies, specifically Kongo-derived rituals that celebrate spiritual transition through embodied performance.

I recall attending wakes in Moruga as a child, experiences that etched deep impressions onto my understanding of Limbo's spiritual significance. At one particular wake, drums played strongly and evocatively in my grandmother's yard, forming rhythmic vibrations that seemed to ripple through the air. Under the canopy of night, elders arranged the Limbo stick low, barely lifted above the grass. Mourners circled, full longs singing traditional chants. An older relative stepped forward solemnly, and with slow precision, began his backward passage under the bar. As we were taught the steps, elders explained to us that the journey beneath the stick represented the departed soul's passage from life's earthly struggles toward ancestral peace and rebirth.

These family-led rituals were consistently affirmed through community practice. The late Torrance Mohammed, a prominent dance practitioner from Trinidad, articulated to me in 2019 that Limbo had always been a ritualistic dance connected deeply to funeral rites in Trinidadian villages. Mohammed emphasized that Limbo's

practice at wakes reflected a strong cultural memory of West African rites of passage, specifically rituals marking puberty and fertility, and symbolizing strength, endurance, and transcendence. He further explained that wakes created crucial spaces for cultural transmission—allowing younger community members to learn ancestral wisdom through embodied experience.

Adding another personal dimension, I recall my great-aunt speaking at a wake about the connection between Limbo and other traditional dances performed during these gatherings, notably the Bongo dance. She explained that both dances symbolized passage, with Limbo focusing specifically on spiritual elevation through bodily contortion. The Bongo dance similarly expressed the crossing over of the deceased into ancestral dimensions. At that wake, the choreography was deliberate, not theatrical. Movements carefully mirrored the spiritual metaphors described by elders like my aunt, reinforcing the ancestral significance of these dances.

A poignant insight into the cultural and historical significance of Limbo as a funeral rite emerges from the 1982 documentary by Bruce Paddington titled *Limbo*. Julia Edwards, and elders interviewed in the documentary, clarify how Limbo originally had no association with commercial performance, emphasizing instead its sacred roots in funerary practice. The documentary explains that historically Limbo was primarily performed by men, as cultural modesty enforced under enslavement made participation by women inappropriate. Furthermore, Limbo was seen as a sacred act of spiritual strength and resilience, never simply as entertainment or spectacle. Thomas Talawa Prestø (2023) in his public lecture gave another explanation, pointing to BaKongo retentions of ritual practice. We enter the world through a woman, and we are carried out by men, completing the circle. This is why the casket in many Africana traditions is danced and carried by men, questions of modesty are not as present in Africana practices that do not sexualize the body in the same way, but interpretations of why we do what we do, are often rendered through respectability politics. Considering the presence of winin and other movements in

the Trinidad space, Prestø's explanation seems more likely to me, than questions of supposed modesty.

Dance pioneer Julia Edwards, who later popularized Limbo for public performances, always reinforced this distinction. In interviews, she consistently emphasized Limbo's serious spiritual purpose within wakes, distinguishing its ritual origins from the commercial form she introduced to broader audiences. Edwards highlighted that although she adapted Limbo to theatrical contexts, its fundamental meaning was deeply rooted in ancestral reverence and spiritual symbolism.

Reflecting upon these collective memories and scholarly insights, it becomes clear how Trinidadian communities carefully balanced the sacred origins of Limbo with the growing external demands of spectacle and entertainment. The wakes of my childhood—quiet yet powerful ceremonies rich with ancestral remembrance—exemplified this careful cultural preservation. Elders taught us, through quiet demonstration and explanation, that Limbo was not merely a physical feat but a profound ritual of spiritual transition, deeply connected to our collective past. Today, Limbo's funeral rites remain a poignant aspect of Trinidadian cultural identity, although their practice is increasingly overshadowed by commercial performances. By recalling these earlier experiences, grounded in community gatherings and familial teachings, I seek to highlight and preserve Limbo's original function—as a sacred ritual marking life's passage, intimately connecting us with ancestral wisdom that continues to shape our cultural memory.

Edwards, best known for popularizing Limbo in the 1950s, has long maintained that the dance's meaning transcends sheer physical display. Once deeply rooted in funerary rites, Limbo signified the deceased person's journey beyond mortal life. In *The Golden Heritage*, Molly Ahye—whose book remains the only text dedicated solely to the folk dances of Trinidad and Tobago—insists that Limbo should be interpreted in light of Kongo-derived cosmologies. She describes "limbo" as an in-between zone bridging the earthly and spiritual realms, akin to the Catholic notion of limbo. This passage,

Ahye argues, represents a "dis-eruption on the earthly plane," (Ahye, 2002, p. 111), a series of trials culminating in ultimate reward.

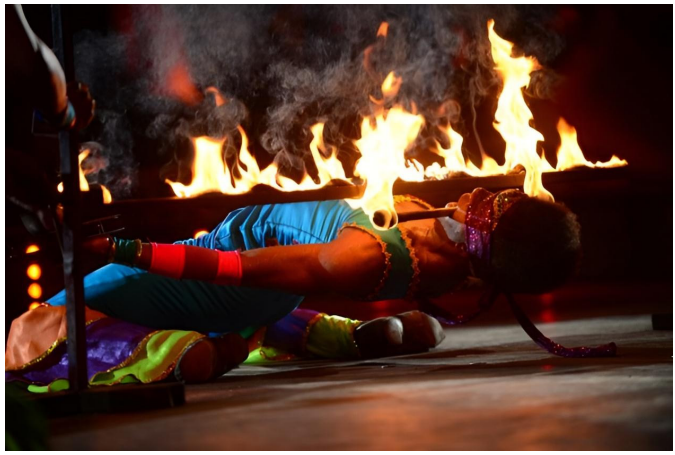

Figure 3: Limbo dancer Shaquille Mitchell performing limbo under fire at the Universoul Circus. Photo Credit Kyle Bradley.

Thomas Talawa Prestø (2018–2023) and Gregor Breedy (2023) share intersecting views regarding this dance's ancestral significance. As the bar moves to navel height, it underscores a central point of rebirth in numerous African cosmologies, signaling that while one elder passes on, younger generations keep lineage alive, allowing the departed ancestor to "return" through reincarnation.

In tandem with Limbo's development, Trinidad's Carnival evolved from a complex mix of African, European, and Creole cultural influences. Gregor Breedy (2025), a doctoral candidate in Cultural Studies, illuminates how particular Carnival masquerades, like the "Sailor Mas," sprang from specific historical encounters—most notably, a 1907 visit by the US Atlantic Fleet.

The entanglement of military presence, economic exchange, and cultural performance in Trinidad's colonial history is a vital backdrop for understanding how certain masquerade figures—such as the sailor—entered and endured within Carnival traditions. The 1907 shore leave of the US Atlantic Fleet in Port of Spain is one such moment where geopolitical movement intersects with cultural transformation:

> In 1907 the two thousand officers and men on the U.S. Atlantic Fleet commanded by Admiral Evans were granted shore leave on December 24th at Port of Spain. The sailors brought with them large supplies of Christmas goodies and a not inconsiderable amount of cash, which they dispensed liberally in exchange for the variety of services on offer. According to newspaper reports, 'they were warmly welcomed by the population when they landed.' As a result, sailors and marines were among the more popular types of masquerades at the following Carnival, 1908. (Ottley 2012, p. 135)

This passage illustrates how foreign military presence did not just stimulate the local economy—it also influenced cultural memory and creative expression. The U.S sailors' visit, marked by visibility, spending, and interaction, left such an impression that their likeness was absorbed into Carnival masquerade the very next year. The quote reveals how quickly historical encounters can be aestheticized and how the Carnival space operates as a living archive, capturing and reconfiguring political encounters through performance. The sailor masquerade, which continues into the present, thus emerges not only as costume but as commentary—on power, economy, mimicry, and memory.

Gregor Breedy (2023) further explains that the Sailor Mas tradition in Trinidad and Tobago is structured around multiple subdivisions, each defined by specific costumes and dance elements reflecting social hierarchies and relationships. Over time, distinct sections emerged—King Sailor, Free French Sailor, Fireman, and Mischievous Sailors—each developing its own signature movements. For instance, the Fireman character became known for sliding steps symbolizing a sailor tending the ship's engine. These groups introduced a range of dances—including Bote, Crab, Marico, Rock the Boat, Ire dandy, and the Camel hop—that collectively showcased camaraderie at the heart of Sailor Mas. Notable practitioners of these dances in Trinidad and Tobago include Ralph Dyette, Senor Gomes, and Jason Griffith, whose skills and performances significantly shaped this vibrant tradition.

Moncell Durden, a faculty member at USC Glorya Kaufman School of Dance and founder of the organization Intangible Roots, highlights the connection between the dance movements in the Sailor character of Trinidad and Tobago and well-known Authentic Jazz dance movements. This interplay resulted from a two-way cultural influence when more than 100,000 American soldiers were stationed in Trinidad during the Second World War, bringing dance moves with them and subsequently taking others back home.

Other traditional Carnival characters—such as Dame Lorraine and Minstrels—reveal further facets of Trinidad's layered colonial history. Dame Lorraine, originally a satirical caricature of lavish French plantation balls, features exaggerated bodily proportions, elaborate hats, fans, and a repertoire of mocking or risqué street theater moves. This character, traditionally portrayed by men dressing as women, might also be considered an early form of drag performance worthy of study within queer performance theory. Minstrels, adopting jazz-inflected tunes, black-and-white face paint, scissors-tailed coats, and tall-brimmed hats, embody a different strand of cultural syncretism. Scholar Hollis Liverpool (2001), in *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, terms these practices "masking," framing them as rituals born from African cultural beliefs that provided both communal release and veiled subversion during colonial rule.

Thus, Trinidadian Limbo—originating as a profound ritual marking spiritual transition—stands amid these rich historical and cultural intersections. Its sacred origins persist within community memory, even as its contemporary forms adapt to global stages. Balancing ancestral authenticity with evolving cultural expressions, Trinidadian communities continue to uphold Limbo as a living tradition, embodying resilience and cultural continuity in the face of ongoing transformation.

Globalizing Limbo – Carnival, Nightclubs, Film, and Television

By the late 1950s and into the 1960s, Limbo had transcended Trinidad's national borders, rapidly gaining popularity across the Caribbean, North

America, and Europe. This global transition was propelled significantly by the dance's integration into Trinidad's bustling nightclub scene, its presence in major Carnival events, and especially by its exposure through international film and television appearances. Through these channels, Limbo became synonymous with Caribbean cultural identity, though increasingly detached from its original ritualistic roots.

Julia Edwards' performances at prominent venues such as Miramar Club and the Strand Theatre in Port of Spain accelerated Limbo's entry into mainstream entertainment. Her innovative presentations introduced audiences—both local and international—to a Limbo characterized by elaborate costumes, dynamic choreography, and dramatic feats like the Flaming Limbo. The captivating spectacle Edwards crafted made Limbo appealing to tourists and expatriates, establishing it as a key attraction within Trinidad's burgeoning tourism industry (see Figure 1).

The Carnival festivities in Trinidad similarly embraced and amplified Limbo's visual and theatrical elements, reinforcing its role as entertainment. The National Dance Association of Trinidad and Tobago and the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Calypsonian Organization (TUCO) further institutionalized this form by hosting annual Limbo competitions, notably starting in the late 1990s. These events, staged alongside Calypso and steel pan performances, showcased Limbo's athletic virtuosity and theatrical appeal, attracting massive audiences and embedding Limbo deeply into Trinidad's Carnival traditions.

My own teenage experiences vividly illustrate these changes. Attending Carnival celebrations in Port of Spain, I recall witnessing Limbo performances that were vastly different from those quiet, solemn rituals of my early childhood wakes. One Carnival night remains particularly memorable. Bright stage lights illuminated dancers, their sequined costumes shimmering vividly, and the crowds roared enthusiastically as dancers passed under increasingly lowered flaming bars. Standing among excited spectators, I felt simultaneously proud of my cultural heritage displayed spectacularly yet strangely detached from the Limbo of my earlier memories. The communal solemnity was

replaced by theatrical excitement—a sign of how dramatically Limbo had evolved in public perception.

Perhaps most significantly, Limbo's entry onto international screens profoundly reshaped global perceptions of Caribbean culture. Edwards' choreography and performances featured prominently in the Hollywood production *Fire Down Below* (1957), starring Rita Hayworth and Robert Mitchum and filmed in Tobago. This film exposed Limbo to vast international audiences unfamiliar with Trinidadian culture, positioning the dance as an exotic, alluring Caribbean spectacle. Edwards' subsequent performance on the *Ed Sullivan Show* further solidified Limbo's global appeal, presenting it to millions of viewers worldwide. For many international audiences, these televised appearances represented their first encounter with Trinidad's cultural artistry, permanently imprinting Limbo as a visually compelling entertainment form.

In a personal interview conducted with Earlyn Williams, a longtime performer with Julia Edwards' dance troupe, Williams emphasized how transformative these international exposures were for local performers. "We saw our culture respected abroad," she reflected, "and suddenly people knew Trinidad because of Limbo. But it changed things too. We had to keep audiences entertained, so we moved away from the traditional ways." Williams' comments encapsulate the complexity surrounding Limbo's globalization—simultaneously elevating Caribbean culture on a global stage while inadvertently diluting its original ritualistic significance.

The documentary film *Limbo* by Bruce Paddington further highlights these cultural shifts. Paddington interviews Trinidadian elders and cultural figures who express mixed feelings regarding Limbo's rapid commercialization. One elder explains in the documentary, "We saw Limbo change overnight—from ritual dance in the yard to nightclub performance for tourists. It was good economically, but spiritually something was lost." These documented insights reinforce Limbo's cultural ambiguity as it gained international prominence, raising essential questions about cultural authenticity versus commercial appeal.

Hollis Liverpool (2001), in his seminal work, *Rituals of Power and Rebellion*, contextualizes Limbo's globalization within broader colonial and post-colonial dynamics, highlighting how Trinidad's artistic expressions were strategically adapted and presented to external audiences. Liverpool emphasizes that while international recognition brought economic benefit and cultural pride, it also prompted critical debates about maintaining authentic traditions amidst global commercialization pressures.

Reflecting upon these historical transformations, I understand the complexity of Limbo's globalization intimately. Having personally experienced Limbo both as sacred ritual and as theatrical spectacle, I recognize that its global journey exemplifies Trinidad's broader cultural negotiations—balancing ancestral respect with contemporary adaptations. My experiences in Carnival crowds, watching televised performances, and conversing with elders and dancers have deepened my awareness of these tensions.

Today, as Limbo remains a celebrated symbol of Caribbean culture worldwide, we continue to grapple with preserving its authentic heritage while embracing the creative innovations that facilitated its global appeal. By documenting this journey, we affirm Limbo's resilience as a cultural expression, continually adapting yet remaining deeply connected to Trinidadian identity, memory, and community pride.

Bringing Limbo to the theatrical stage in Trinidad and Tobago catalyzed a significant shift in the dance's public perception, moving it from a sacred funerary folk tradition toward a crowd-pleasing spectacle. Historically, Limbo had been integral to wakes, embodying a spiritual journey wherein the raising of the bar symbolized the soul's progressive elevation through liminal spaces. Yet, with the dance's rising global profile and commercial potential, its spiritual resonance receded from center stage. While it thrived as entertainment for tourists and Carnival enthusiasts, Limbo's deeper cultural and spiritual underpinnings were increasingly overshadowed by its flashy, visually captivating techniques.

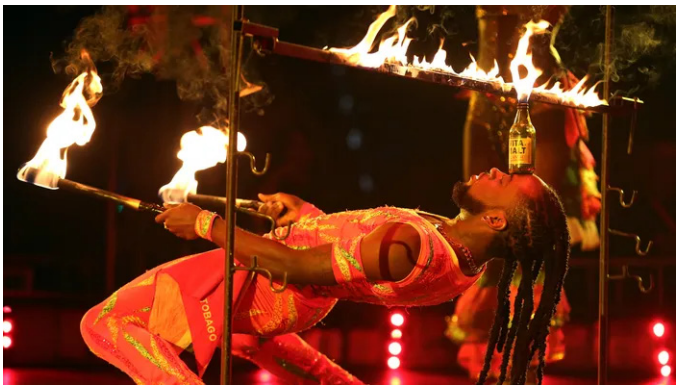

Figure 4: Limbo dancer John Sterling performing the Dance limbo under fire with additional objects at the Universoul Circus. Photo Credit Kyle Bradley

This period of innovation—marked by styles such as Flaming Limbo and Human Limbo—was led by Trinidadian artists Julia Edwards and Boscoe Holder. Their work transformed Limbo from a funerary ritual into a staged spectacle. In the commercial version that followed, both the structure and movement vocabulary of Limbo changed significantly. The structure now includes choreographed sequences that happen around the bar—side dances and formations performed while the bar is lowered or adjusted—often drawing from Calypso-inspired movement rather than from traditional, polycentric dances. The central act of passing under the bar is isolated and emphasized, while the surrounding choreography builds atmosphere and prepares the audience.

Movement-wise, commercial Limbo features less groundedness, less percussive footwork, and far less use of polycentric motion. Instead, it prioritizes visual spectacle: deep backbends, extended limbs, dramatic poses, and attention-grabbing flourishes. Performers may pause beneath the bar, strike a pose, or call for applause. The overall rhythm becomes linear and theatrical rather than cyclical or trance-inducing. The ritual dimensions of the bar—as a symbolic threshold—are replaced by its function as a test of flexibility and showmanship. In this version, the dancer performs for the audience rather than in relation to spirit or ancestral force.

Thomas Talawa Prestø (2018–2023) highlights the spiritual ramifications of this evolution, noting how the original funeral wake practice involved raising the bar incrementally to represent the spirit's ascension toward ancestral realms. Edwards' theatrical inversion, though highly effective as performance spectacle, partially obscured the dance's underlying cosmological principles—the profound symbolism of progressively "lightening burdens" as the spirit ascends. Instead, it popularized a crowd-pleasing narrative centered on the physical challenge of "How low can they go?"

Yet, from a practical standpoint, this spectacle-based approach captivated tourists and local audiences alike. Nightclubs, hotels, and post-Carnival events quickly adopted the bar-lowering style for its dramatic suspense. By the 1960s, this approach became prevalent in Trinidad's urban cultural events, gradually eclipsing earlier yard-based traditions. Some local dancers continued to recognize the older, sacred approach as the "real Limbo," even as they acknowledged the economic and professional opportunities presented by the newer spectacle format.

One of the most visually striking developments was the Flaming Limbo, a spectacular innovation often credited to Julia Edwards in the late 1950s. Edwards sought to intensify Limbo's theatricality by igniting the bar as performers navigated beneath it—sometimes brandishing flambeaux in each hand (see Figure 4). Another popular variation featured dancers holding a flaming horizontal stick between their teeth as they contorted their bodies under the burning bar (see Figure 3). Occasionally, blindfolds heightened the sense of risk, compelling dancers to perform with even greater precision and courage. This heightened visual drama reinforced Limbo's appeal as mesmerizing entertainment, further distancing it from its solemn wake origins and cementing its role in tourism-driven presentations.

An interview conducted in 2019 with Torrance Mohammed (1931–2021) provided insight into a key innovation known as the Human Limbo. In this variation, dancers replaced the traditional bar with their own bodies, arranging themselves to form openings through which

the Limboist would pass. Performers might sit or stand with arms or legs extended, creating complex bridges and contorted tunnels. In one version, five dancers stood in wide-legged stances, forming a series of human arches that the Limboist navigated through (see Figure 5). These shifting human structures required the dancer to adapt posture, weight, and timing—resulting in both symmetrical and asymmetrical contortions shaped in direct response to the living architecture around them.

The Human Limbo emphasized agility, improvisation, and relational intelligence, transforming the body into both obstacle and path. Paired with the theatrical danger of Flaming Limbo—in which dancers pass under a flaming bar—these innovations reveal how Limbo has evolved choreographically while retaining its deeper symbolic structure. Each adaptation reinterprets the threshold, not only as a bar to be passed under, but as a site of creative challenge, communal composition, and performative risk. Through these evolving forms, Limbo continues to test how the body negotiates passage—through fire, through form, and through the spatial negotiations of other bodies—while preserving its core logic of bending without breaking.

Figure 5: Limbo Queen Nydia Byron performs the Human Limbo as she passes under the dancer's legs. Photo Credit Norvan Fullerton

Thus, while embracing global stages and innovative performance forms, Trinidadian Limbo maintains a dialogue between spectacle and spirituality, commercial appeal and ancestral symbolism. By acknowledging these evolving perceptions and documenting their historical trajectories, we continue to honor Limbo's profound heritage while celebrating its enduring capacity for renewal.

Institutionalizing Limbo – The Prime Minister's Best Village Trophy Competition

In the decades following Limbo's transformation into popular spectacle, one of the most significant developments ensuring its institutional preservation was Trinidad and Tobago's Prime Minister's Best Village Trophy Competition. Launched formally in the early 1960s, Best Village was envisioned as a structured platform to celebrate, promote, and sustain Trinidad's diverse cultural traditions, including folk dances, music, drama, and crafts. Over time, this initiative significantly reshaped public perceptions of Limbo, moving it decisively from informal community practice into a standardized, competitive performance format.

From its inception, Best Village provided a critical institutional framework that allowed rural and urban communities to publicly display cultural traditions once confined largely to private or local settings. Limbo, with its rising international appeal, quickly became a standout feature of the annual competition. As communities competed intensely each year, the dance was recontextualized—incorporating choreographic innovation, elaborate costuming, and theatrical staging to capture the judges' and audiences' attention.

My personal experience with Best Village began in my teenage years, when I joined local community groups in preparing performances for this high-profile competition. Our rehearsals were rigorous yet joyful, bringing together elders, teenagers, and children in a shared effort to represent our community with pride. I recall vividly the excitement backstage as we awaited our moment to perform. Unlike the solemn hush of the wakes I attended as a child, these competitions were infused

with heightened anticipation, adrenaline, and ambition. The drums beat faster, rhythms intensified, and costumes sparkled under bright stage lights. The collective energy was transformative—both exhilarating and revealing of how significantly Limbo's practice had evolved.

In conversation with Emelda Lynch-Griffith, President of Trinidad's National Dance Association, she emphasized that the Best Village competition helped institutionalize Limbo by formalizing specific stylistic standards and performance expectations. Lynch-Griffith explained that these competitions significantly reshaped the dance's character, shifting emphasis toward theatricality, virtuosity, and technical precision. While acknowledging that this competitive framing diverged from Limbo's original spiritual context, she stressed its crucial role in preserving and legitimizing Limbo as part of Trinidad's national cultural heritage.

Notably, the competitions fostered local talents who later carried Limbo onto international stages. Performers such as Nydia Byron, a three-time National Limbo Champion (1998–2000), became iconic figures recognized nationally and internationally. Byron's artistry and technical excellence exemplified how Best Village served as a training ground, providing emerging dancers the exposure and experience necessary to advance their careers and, by extension, promote Trinidadian culture abroad.

Figure 6: Three-time National Limbo Queen Nydia Byron on tour with Skiffle Bunch in 1992. Photo Credit – Junia Regrello.

An essential aspect of Best Village competitions involved innovations like the Flaming Limbo and Human Limbo, both adaptations introduced earlier by Julia Edwards. These performance styles were increasingly institutionalized and standardized through competition rules and judges' criteria. Edwards' theatrical innovations were systematically integrated into Best Village performances, thereby solidifying her influence within Trinidad's official cultural landscape. This process of formalization is visually captured in Figure 6, which shows three-time National Limbo Queen Nydia Byron on tour with Skiffle Bunch in 1992, exemplifying the fusion of traditional form and theatrical precision that Best Village helped shape.

Another vivid memory illustrates Best Village's profound cultural significance. During one competition in Port of Spain, I recall standing beside an older dancer backstage who had competed for decades. Watching younger dancers prepare energetically, he remarked quietly, "Look how far Limbo come—from the yard at wakes to stage lights. This is good for the youths; they are learning discipline and pride. But remember, the old ways are still important too." His words poignantly highlighted the competition's dual nature—as both a celebration of Trinidad's evolving cultural traditions and a subtle reminder of ancestral practices at risk of fading from collective memory.

Indeed, the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a critical development in Limbo's institutionalization through significant collaborations between the Trinidad and Tobago Unified Calypsonian Organization (TUCO) and the National Dance Association (NDA). According to Emelda Lynch-Griffith, this noteworthy partnership specifically organized annual Limbo Competitions as part of Trinidad's Carnival festivities. Staged intentionally on Thursday night, immediately preceding the official two-day Carnival, these competitions ran parallel to Calypso contests and "pan-around-the-neck" steelpan showcases—strategically embedding Limbo within the broader fabric of Carnival celebrations to sustain and celebrate the tradition (Emelda Lynch-Griffith, interview by Kieron Sargeant, St. Joseph, Trinidad, December 18, 2024).

Various prominent performance groups—such as Northwest Laventille Cultural Movement, Malick Folk Performing Company (see Figure 1), Cocorite Ujama, Diego Martin Footprints, and ensembles from Tobago—enthusiastically competed, performing both solo and group routines. In the individual category, participants vied for the prestigious title of National Limbo Queen, skillfully demonstrating their abilities by maneuvering under a flaming bar at increasingly lower heights. Some competitors heightened the spectacle, incorporating elaborate props such as trays of cups or an iron rod set aflame at each end, held firmly in their mouths as they navigated beneath the bar. These competitions showcased an exuberant display of acrobatic virtuosity reminiscent of styles popularized by international circus contexts, notably the UniverSoul Circus, yet remained deeply rooted in Trinidad's inventive and fiercely competitive Carnival ethos.

Over time, Best Village and the TUCO–NDA collaboration provided a robust platform for a new generation of exceptional Limbo dancers, including three-time National Limbo Queen Nydia Byron, and Kimmy Stoute Robinson (see Figure 9), as well as prominent performers in the field like Vernon 'Hopee' Hope, Junior Renaud, Sonny Salina, Earlyn Williams, Gail Edinborough, Su-Ellen St. Louis, Natalie Joseph Settle, Delton Frank, Makeba Gabriel (see Figure 8), John Sterling, Corey Herbert (see Figure 7), Shaquille Mitchell, Aquisia Frederick, Darcelle Kirk, and Brittney Jones, among others. This partnership formed a significant bulwark against potential declines in Limbo's local prominence, as dancers refined advanced techniques, integrated comedic or hyper-athletic elements into their performances, and continually introduced new groups to the national stage. Although the traditional, quiet, and spiritually charged funeral wakes were not evident within these competitive contexts, the competition nonetheless performed a vital cultural function by sustaining a vibrant performance culture around Limbo, publicly acknowledging dancers through official titles and awards.

Yet, despite these positive outcomes, the competitive nature of Best Village also raises unresolved questions about cultural authenticity and heritage preservation. While the competition elevated Limbo's

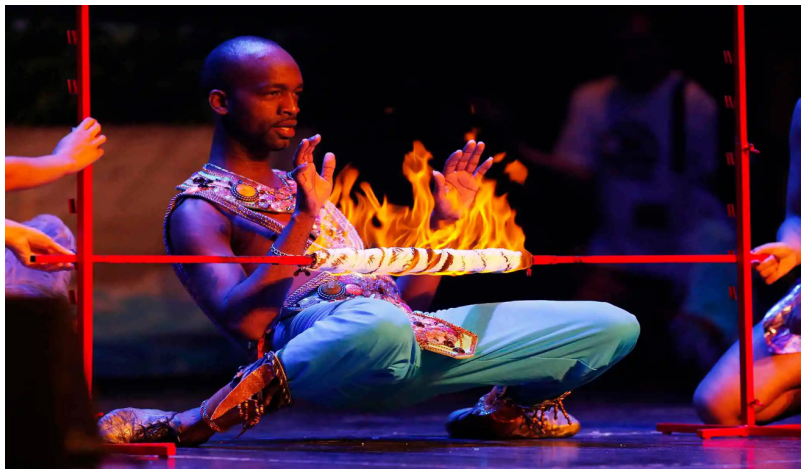

Figure 7: Limbo Dancer Corey Herbert limboing under the flaming limbo pole. Photo Credit Creator: John Woods; Credit: Winnipeg Free Press

national and international visibility, many elders and traditionalists voiced concern that its sacred, funerary dimensions had become obscured by theatrical display. The shift toward spectacle—flaming bars, choreographed symmetry, stylized costuming—offered aesthetic innovation but increasingly decentered the quieter, spiritually resonant gestures that once guided Limbo's ancestral function. In this context, cultural negotiation is neither equal nor neutral. It unfolds as a site of asymmetry, where tradition is often recontextualized to fit evaluative rubrics that prioritize visual impact over ritual depth. Authenticity is not entirely displaced, but it is filtered—performed as echo, citation, or trace—rather than as cosmological practice. This generates a tension: while Best Village sustains Limbo's visibility, it risks normalizing a version of the form that no longer carries the full weight of its original meaning.

Reflecting on my own involvement in these competitions, I remain ambivalent. Best Village offered crucial spaces for community formation, artistic rigor, and national pride. But these very platforms also trained us to deliver cultural memory in digestible fragments, calibrated to impress rather than to invoke. The negotiation, then, is ongoing but it demands clarity: are we honoring tradition, or staging its likeness? As Trinidad and Tobago continues to shape its cultural

future, the challenge is not only to preserve visibility, but to sustain depth—to ensure that ancestral technologies such as Limbo do not survive merely as aesthetic artifacts, but as living systems of spiritual and historical continuity. As Trinidad and Tobago navigates its cultural future, Best Village remains an invaluable cultural institution, ensuring Limbo's continued prominence in national consciousness. By carefully documenting and reflecting upon Limbo's Best Village journey, we acknowledge the intricate balance between heritage and innovation that defines Trinidad's rich cultural landscape.

From my perspective, the complex dynamics of tradition and innovation at Best Village are deeply personal. I performed in Best Village as a teenager, primarily focusing on spiritual dance segments inspired by Orisha rituals and Haitian folkloric practices. In these performances, Limbo frequently featured prominently within other acts, typically accompanied by lively steel bands or recorded drumming tracks. The quiet, hush-laden spiritual atmosphere that I vividly remember from my grandmother's backyard, rich with ancestral reverence and communal reflection, was seldom present at these competitions. Instead, Limbo was often reimagined with comedic interactions, vibrant audience banter, and dramatic build-ups to a triumphant final pass beneath a near-ground bar.

This theatricalized style became so normalized within the competitive setting that first-time spectators, unfamiliar with Limbo's historical depth, might easily assume the "high bar first, lowered each pass" format had always defined the tradition. Indeed, this transformation illustrates how quickly performance conventions can reshape collective cultural memory—subtly shifting the public understanding of a ritual deeply rooted in sacred cosmological symbolism toward one focused on thrilling suspense and visual spectacle.

Yet, even amid this stylistic transformation, the significance of Best Village in the preservation and evolution of Limbo cannot be overstated. Beyond merely institutionalizing the spectacle, Best Village provided critical platforms for dancers to refine and showcase advanced techniques, contributing directly to the professionalization

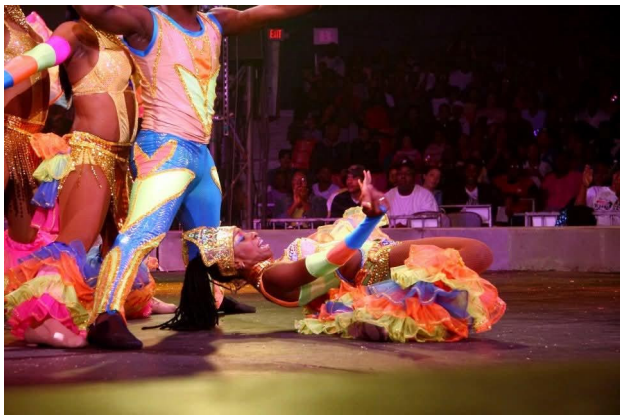

Figure 8: Makeba Gabriel passing under human limbo bar at Universoul Circus. Photo Credit Kyle Bradley.

and international recognition of Trinidadian performers. For many dancers, Best Village became a training ground where they perfected technical prowess, experimented with choreographic innovation, and gained visibility that opened doors to professional opportunities abroad. Numerous top Limbo exponents, having honed their craft through these competitions, subsequently found successful careers in international performance contexts, overseas tours, or within the booming Caribbean tourism industry.

In this manner, Best Village effectively transformed Limbo from a once-regionally specific ritual, deeply tied to local wakes and private communal gatherings, into a recognized national performance art form. While the sacred dimensions of Limbo were often relegated to the background in favor of comedic elements and competitive energy, Best Village undeniably played a pivotal role in maintaining Limbo's public visibility, ensuring the dance's continued presence in Trinidad's cultural consciousness. This evolution represents a powerful example of cultural adaptation and resilience, highlighting Trinidadian communities' ability to navigate between preserving ancestral heritage and embracing new, innovative expressions of identity.

Limbo in the Big Top—UniverSoul Circus and Personal Turning Points

The global evolution of Limbo entered a distinctly new phase with its integration into circus performances, notably the UniverSoul Circus—one of America's most prominent Black-owned circus companies. Founded by Cedric Walker in 1994, the UniverSoul Circus showcased diverse acts from the African diaspora, quickly becoming an influential platform that transformed Limbo into an even more dynamic, visually captivating, and internationally celebrated performance. Within this commercial circus environment, Limbo took on heightened theatricality, emphasizing dramatic feats, audience interaction, and high-energy spectacle.

Trinidadian dancer, Nydia Byron (1957–2024), taught by the late Domingo "Shortpants" Moreno, played a pivotal role in introducing Limbo to international circus audiences through the renowned UniverSoul Circus. A three-time National Limbo Champion (1998–2000), Byron was recruited in 2001 by Cedric Walker following strong recommendations from the late Norvan Fullerton (1949–2024), founder of Trinidad's esteemed Malick Folk Performing Company (Fullerton 2018). Byron's inaugural tour with UniverSoul featured a performance group aptly titled "Caribbean Soul," which not only showcased Limbo but also included other distinctively Trinidadian cultural traditions, such as the visually captivating Moko Jumbies (stilt walkers) and vibrant carnival-inspired masquerade characters. Under Byron's artistic leadership, Limbo quickly became a popular and defining attraction within the circus' program, significantly boosting the visibility and prestige of Trinidadian performance art on global stages.

Through extensive tours with UniverSoul Circus, Byron played a crucial role in transforming Limbo's public perception, firmly establishing it as a serious artistic discipline rather than merely a fleeting tourist novelty. Her performances exemplified how traditional dance practices could retain elements of cultural authenticity even within highly commercial, entertainment-driven contexts. Byron's meticulous attention to detail, combined with her exceptional

technical proficiency, set new standards of professionalism and artistry for Trinidadian Limbo performers aspiring to international recognition.

Beyond the circus tent, Byron further advanced Limbo's artistic and professional standing by founding FireQueen Productions—a Trinidad-based enterprise offering specialized workshops, professional stage shows, and customized corporate entertainment. Through FireQueen, she mentored emerging dancers with a dual emphasis on technical rigor and cultural integrity, equipping them to navigate the fraught terrain where folkloric tradition meets commercial entertainment.

Byron's legacy invites deeper reflection on the question of originality within contexts of appropriation and spectacle. As Limbo is transplanted from sacred wakes into competitions, circuses, and corporate events, aspects of its original cosmological function are inevitably altered. Yet appropriation is not always a complete erasure—it can also be a recontextualization that carries traces of origin into new formats. Byron's work, I argue, straddled this line with care. She did not resist spectacle outright, but infused it with encoded ancestral logic, subtly embedding gestures, rhythms, and structural decisions that gestured back toward Limbo's spiritual foundations. In this sense, her choreography functioned as a form of cultural translation—rendering Limbo legible to international audiences while attempting to preserve its epistemic density.

Still, this balance is precarious. The further Limbo is abstracted from its ritual roots, the more it risks being consumed as novelty rather than understood as ancestral technology. Byron's interventions offered a model of conscientious adaptation—yet they also raise the question of whether even the most careful artistic stewardship can prevent the slow dilution of ritual meaning under the pressures of global consumption. My position, then, is not to dismiss commercial forms outright, but to remain vigilant: originality is not merely a matter of aesthetic form, but of epistemological anchoring. Without active efforts to teach, contextualize, and embed the deeper cosmological frameworks, even the most spectacular Limbo performance may ultimately float untethered from the spiritual soil that once gave it meaning.

Byron's untimely passing created a significant void in Trinidad's local leadership of the fire-limbo tradition. Her legacy, however, endures through the dancers she mentored, who continue to carry her vision and standards forward onto global stages. Her life and work serve as compelling evidence that, despite the decreasing prominence of the hush-laden spiritual origins in contemporary presentations of Limbo, it remains possible to sustain a profound sense of cultural identity and pride even within large-scale, financially rewarding international arenas. In this respect, Byron exemplified the resilience and adaptive creativity characteristic of Trinidad's artistic heritage, demonstrating that authenticity and innovation need not be mutually exclusive, but can coexist meaningfully within evolving cultural practices.

A subsequent generation of Limbo artists, including John Sterling, Makeba Gabriel, Kimmy Stoute Robinson, and Darcelle Kirk, continued Byron's legacy at UniverSoul Circus, integrating additional carnival characters and dance styles into the performance. Erica Rawlins, in particular, introduced vibrant carnival elements, incorporating burrokeet and fancy sailor characters, effectively blending traditional carnival aesthetics with Limbo's theatricality. These innovations reflected a continuous evolution toward spectacle, emphasizing

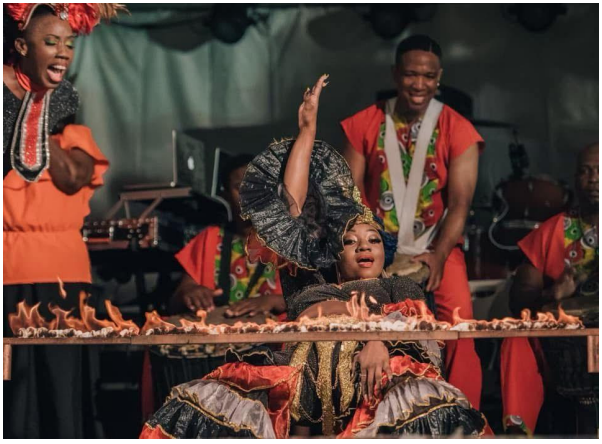

Figure 9: Three-time National Limbo Queen Kimmy Stoute Robinson performing with Malick Folk Performing Company at Carriacou Maroon & String Band Music Festival (2019). Photo Credit: Hunter Bacchanal HD Adams.

visually appealing costumes, dramatic lighting, and choreographic complexity aimed explicitly at international audiences.

My own involvement with UniverSoul Circus began in 2010, marking a pivotal turning point in my personal and professional relationship with Limbo. Cedric Walker first noticed me performing at Trinidad's Prime Minister's Best Village Trophy Competition, where my choreographic style deeply resonated with him. Walker approached me enthusiastically, praising my ability to convey spiritual and rhythmic intensity through movement. Although commitments at that time—completing my undergraduate studies and teaching at Pleasantville Secondary School—prevented immediate collaboration, this encounter planted the seed for my eventual engagement with the circus.

In 2015, I finally joined UniverSoul Circus, tasked with choreographing Limbo for their Caribbean-themed segment. Transitioning from local cultural practice to this international circus stage challenged me profoundly. Unlike my earlier experiences at wakes or even Best Village competitions, the circus environment demanded a distinctly commercial approach: dramatic pacing, audience engagement, and highly structured choreography set to recorded tracks rather than live drumming. My traditional references—ancestral symbolism, spiritual metaphors, and polyrhythmic interplay—needed reimagining to meet the circus' theatrical expectations.

One particularly revealing rehearsal illustrated these tensions vividly. As I guided dancers through choreography, I instinctively attempted to evoke the quiet rhythmic intensity familiar from my childhood wake experiences. Quickly, I realized this subtle, spiritually nuanced approach did not align fully with circus expectations. Recognizing my discomfort, a veteran dancer advised gently, "You have to think differently here; we perform for spectacle, not spirit." His comment encapsulated the inherent challenge—maintaining respect for Limbo's origins while fulfilling the circus' entertainment demands.

Through my collaboration with UniverSoul Circus, I grappled with navigating cultural authenticity and commercial necessity. Despite initial struggles, the experience became deeply rewarding, enabling

me to showcase Trinidadian cultural artistry internationally and creating professional opportunities for fellow Trinidadian dancers. However, it simultaneously compelled ongoing reflections about cultural commodification—transforming a sacred, ancestral tradition into entertainment spectacle, inevitably reshaping Limbo's original meanings.

Thomas Talawa Prestø, whose scholarly insights have greatly informed my perspective, articulates this tension clearly in his research (Prestø 2024). Prestø emphasizes the profound implications of altering Limbo's traditional upward-bar trajectory (symbolizing spiritual ascension) into the dramatic downward progression used commercially. This inversion, he argues, disconnects Limbo from its cosmological foundations, privileging theatrical suspense over spiritual symbolism. Prestø's analysis resonates powerfully, prompting ongoing critical self-reflection regarding my circus choreography decisions and their broader cultural implications.

The late Torrance Mohammed, interviewed in 2019, echoed similar concerns about Limbo's commercial evolution. Mohammed acknowledged UniverSoul Circus' importance for promoting Trinidad's cultural visibility globally but stressed the importance of recognizing and preserving Limbo's spiritual roots. His commentary highlighted a delicate balance—embracing Limbo's commercial potential while safeguarding its ancestral dignity.

In retrospect, my experiences with UniverSoul Circus significantly enriched my understanding of Limbo's contemporary cultural complexities. This professional milestone provided invaluable insights into the delicate negotiation required when traditional cultural expressions enter global commercial spaces. Today, I view this circus experience as deeply formative—educationally, culturally, and spiritually—having profoundly shaped my ongoing scholarly explorations into Limbo's complex global journey.

As Limbo continues to evolve within international commercial contexts, our responsibility becomes clear: to honor its roots even while navigating inevitable transformations. But this balance is never simple. It requires constant negotiation—between economic opportunity

and cultural integrity, and between artistic freedom and ancestral accountability. Many cultural forms across the world face similar pressures, where traditional practices are adapted—or diluted—to survive within commercial frameworks. The danger is not only loss of meaning, but misrecognition: when sacred forms are consumed without context, or when spectacle replaces function so thoroughly that the deeper logic is no longer traceable. My ongoing research and professional practice aim precisely toward this unstable middle ground—celebrating Trinidadian cultural innovation while maintaining critical awareness of our ancestral heritage. Yet, I also recognize that preservation is not always possible in performance. Sometimes, all we can do is carry the knowledge forward, document the shifts, and prepare future dancers to see what may no longer be visible onstage.

Contemporary Limbo—Record-Breaking Feats and Digital Media Influence

In recent years, Limbo has taken on an entirely new dimension through its presentation as an extreme athletic feat, amplified by digital media and social networks. Contemporary Trinidadian Limbo performers, such as Shemeka Charles Campbell and Zakita Edinborough (see Figure 11), have embraced social media and international television appearances, dramatically reshaping Limbo's image in popular culture. These artists have successfully positioned Limbo as a performance of extraordinary physicality, skill, and daring spectacle, significantly extending the dance's global reach and popularity.

Shemika Charles Campbell (see Figure 10), originally from Trinidad and Tobago, exemplifies this contemporary approach to Limbo. She has earned international acclaim and multiple entries into the Guinness Book of World Records for remarkable Limbo achievements, including famously Limboing under two parked cars in the United States—a feat requiring extraordinary flexibility and precise bodily control. Her television appearances on mainstream programs, such as the syndicated talk show *Pickler & Ben*, showcased Limbo to vast

audiences, further solidifying its reputation as a form of extreme athletic entertainment rather than cultural or spiritual expression.

Charles Campbell's approach starkly contrasts with the ritual Limbo of my childhood. Watching her performances on television and social media, I have often experienced a mixture of admiration and ambivalence. The physical prowess displayed is undeniably impressive, yet it highlights how profoundly Limbo's public perception has shifted away from ancestral symbolism toward spectacular entertainment. Seeing Charles Campbell maneuver beneath cars in viral online videos initially surprised me—it felt distant from my personal memories. Yet, simultaneously, I recognized this evolution as part of Limbo's ongoing adaptation within Trinidadian cultural resilience.

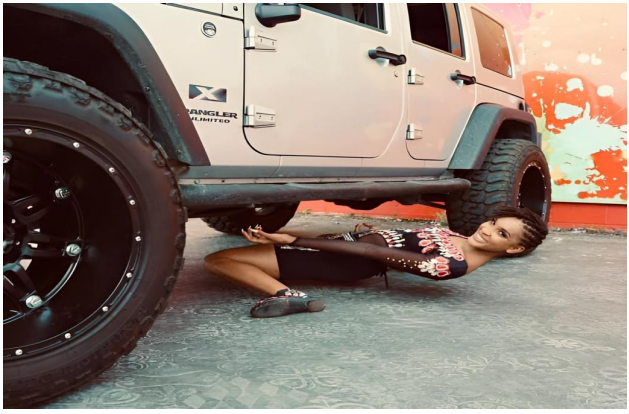

Figure 10: Guinness World Record holder Shemika Charles-Campbell limbos under van. Photo Credit – Marc Jeffrey

Similarly, Trinidadian Limbo dancer Zakita Edinborough has strategically utilized social media platforms, particularly Instagram, to showcase Limbo in inventive and often humorous ways. Edinborough's short-form video clips combine dazzling physical performances with comedic narratives, effectively engaging digital audiences worldwide. Her Instagram presence significantly popularizes Limbo among younger audiences, simultaneously introducing them to Trinidadian culture and reshaping Limbo as a dynamic, visually compelling, and accessible global spectacle.

A conversation I had with younger Trinidadian dancers during a recent Limbo workshop in Port of Spain vividly illustrates Edinborough's influence. Several teenagers enthusiastically described discovering Limbo primarily through social media videos. When I asked if they were aware of Limbo's historical significance or ritual origins, most shook their heads. Their understanding of Limbo was shaped entirely by these contemporary digital performances—highlighting both the transformative potential and cultural complexities arising from Limbo's social media representation.

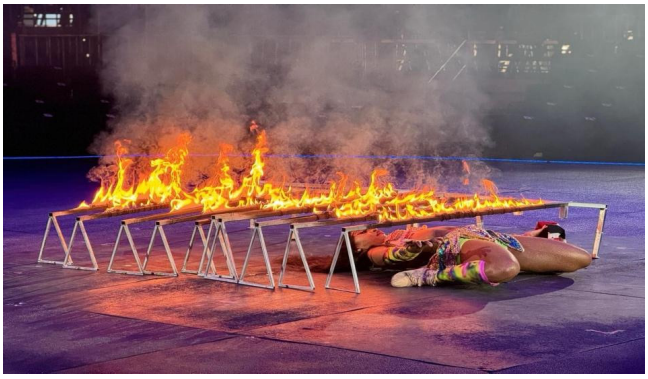

Figure 11: Zakita Edinborough bending the last bar under fire at the Universoul Circus during Caribbean Segment of the show: Used by permission of Zakita Edinborough.

This digital shift raises crucial scholarly questions about the intersection of cultural tradition, digital representation, and globalized media. Trinidadian cultural scholar and historian, Hollis Liverpool (2001), offers critical insight, noting that digital platforms dramatically extend cultural visibility yet inevitably simplify complex traditions into easily consumable spectacles. Liverpool's observations resonate deeply with my own experiences, prompting critical reflection on the opportunities and tensions inherent in Limbo's contemporary digital proliferation.

These transformations vividly illustrate Limbo's remarkable adaptability as a cultural form. However, they also introduce significant challenges—particularly regarding cultural authenticity, spiritual

heritage preservation, and meaningful community engagement. Performances explicitly designed for digital consumption prioritize visual spectacle over nuanced cultural understanding, potentially eroding deeper historical contexts and communal connections that originally grounded Limbo's meaning.

Thomas Talawa Prestø in his lectures and Ph.D dissertation has similarly reflected on these digital and televised performances, critically observing how contemporary media representations often divorce Limbo entirely from its historical, ritualistic, and spiritual foundations. Prestø emphasizes that despite global popularity and impressive athleticism, these contemporary presentations risk losing critical ancestral symbolism, reducing Limbo merely to physical novelty rather than meaningful cultural practice.

Reflecting personally on these contemporary representations, I recognize their complexity and their paradox. Charles Campbell's and Edinborough's impressive performances undeniably expand Limbo's international recognition, affirming Trinidad's ongoing cultural resilience. Yet, simultaneously, they compel critical examination of how contemporary media reshapes Limbo's public understanding, potentially obscuring its rich historical and spiritual contexts.

As Limbo continues to evolved Within contemporary digital landscapes, our ongoing cultural responsibility becomes increasingly clear. We must celebrate Limbo's global visibility and creative adaptations while simultaneously deepening public understanding of its historical, spiritual, and communal foundations. Through careful documentation, reflective practice, and committed cultural education, we can embrace these contemporary evolutions without losing the profound ancestral wisdom originally embedded within Limbo's rhythmic movements and quiet spiritual symbolism.

This balance, however, is fraught with complex tensions—particularly the sacred-commercial divide. One cannot fully appreciate this shift without referencing the insights of Thomas Talawa Prestø, who has extensively examined the aesthetic and spiritual implications of reversing Limbo's original bar trajectory. Prestø highlights that in

traditional funeral wake contexts, each successful pass under the bar led to the bar being raised higher, symbolizing the soul's gradual ascension. The final navel-level height represented a crucial threshold within many African cosmologies, signifying rebirth and ancestral reincarnation. This practice reinforced the continuity of lineage: as an elder transitioned, the younger generations carried the lineage forward, facilitating the ancestor's eventual return through new births, thus affirming an ongoing cycle of life and death.

By contrast, the modern spectacle flips this narrative entirely. The contemporary theatrical form starts with the bar high and progressively lowers it, focusing the performance on how low the dancer can bend. This narrative builds dramatic suspense for audiences, transforming Limbo into an exhilarating physical challenge. However, Prestø argues that this reversal sidelines the dance's original spiritual symbolism, shifting the focus away from uplifting the soul and shedding earthly burdens, toward a crowd-pleasing spectacle that emphasizes physical prowess and visual drama. This fundamental alteration is evident across all major Limbo stage productions, from local hotel shows to international performances by groups such as the UniverSoul Circus.

If we take the spiritual and cosmological aspects of Limbo seriously, we must carefully consider the implications raised by Prestø: what are the potential consequences of adapting a sacred ritual, originally intended to assist spirits in their transition between the earthly realm and the ancestral world, into a spectacle primarily focused on entertainment? Prestø's research has uncovered profound connections between Limbo and other African diasporic funerary traditions. For instance, in Jamaican wake dances, women sometimes dance atop two bamboo sticks while men pass beneath another set of sticks—a practice remarkably similar to Limbo. Such rituals, also remembered by Prestø's grandfather in Trinidad, align with the sacred symbolism embedded within the BaKongo cosmogram, in which women embody gateways between ancestral realms and the living world. The deliberate positioning of the stick at the woman's navel height, as observed in these traditions, emphasizes the navel as both a literal

and metaphysical tether to ancestral lineage—a poignant reminder that we are continuously born into an unbroken ancestral continuum.

Furthermore, Limbo, like many funeral wake traditions throughout the African diaspora, was originally designed to calm unsettled spirits, acknowledging the harsh reality that during enslavement and plantation eras, most deaths were traumatic and far from peaceful. Such rituals soothed restless souls, facilitating their peaceful passage into ancestral domains. Thus, reversing Limbo's narrative—from ascension to descent, from spiritual upliftment to mere physical challenge—may carry unforeseen spiritual repercussions. Instead of reinforcing ancestral continuity, the modern spectacle inadvertently narrates a story of spiritual inversion and descent. Although much is gained dramaturgically and commercially, there is a risk that equally important spiritual and ancestral connections are diminished or entirely lost.

Prestø warns that this choreographed and entertainment-driven version of Limbo has almost entirely supplanted its original cultural practice, creating new narratives disconnected from their initial contexts. Indeed, many people—including those within Trinidad—remain unaware of Limbo's funerary origins. Prestø expresses deep concern regarding this cultural disconnect, citing instances where young people spontaneously manifested spirit possession ("acting as divine horsemen") without the proper spiritual preparation or even the presence of drums, in settings as incongruous as shopping malls (Presto 2018–2023). Such occurrences highlight a profound imbalance and suggest that a rupture may be occurring in the carefully governed spiritual mechanisms historically associated with ritual dance.

I too have witnessed these unsettling spiritual manifestations. As someone deeply knowledgeable about our ancestral practices, I share Prestø's concern about the directions Limbo and other ritual dances are taking. We must critically examine how we stage our culture, clearly differentiating genuine preservation from mere choreographic spectacle. This demands mindfulness regarding what we perform, where, when, how, and, crucially, why we perform it.

This does not imply that we should rigidly adhere to tradition without innovation—far from it. Innovation and creative evolution are not only essential but inevitable. However true innovation should not sever us from our roots or erase our historical and spiritual references. Instead, genuine cultural innovation respects the archive, acknowledges historical references, and fully understands the depth and significance of ancestral spiritual technologies. Thus, the question is not whether Limbo should evolve—it already has. Rather, the pressing question is whether we consciously recognize and take responsibility for what is lost, transformed, or carried forward through its evolution. Our task, then, is to cultivate a conscientious and balanced approach, ensuring Limbo's rich cultural legacy remains vibrant, respected, and deeply connected to its ancestral origins, even amid contemporary adaptation and global recognition.

Pedagogical Reflections—Teaching Limbo and Cultural Preservation

The extensive transformations Limbo has undergone—from sacred ritual to global spectacle—pose significant pedagogical challenges and opportunities. Today, Limbo is frequently taught within educational settings across Trinidad and Tobago, presented in school curricula, community dance workshops, and cultural heritage programs. However, these teaching contexts primarily focus on theatrical and commercial adaptations of Limbo, raising critical questions about cultural authenticity, historical awareness, and ancestral knowledge transmission.

Within Trinidadian schools, Limbo instruction commonly emphasizes choreographed routines designed explicitly for staged performances or competitive environments. Students typically learn standardized techniques, focusing on physical skills, dramatic presentation, and theatrical choreography. While these methods provide valuable discipline, skill development, and creative

expression opportunities, they often overlook Limbo's original cultural meanings and ritual functions, disconnecting students from deeper ancestral connections.

A recent teaching experience vividly highlighted these tensions for me. While conducting a Limbo workshop at a secondary school in Port of Spain, I observed students eagerly rehearsing dynamic, visually-striking routines designed explicitly for upcoming competitions. Their enthusiasm and commitment impressed me deeply. Yet, when I paused to discuss Limbo's historical origins, particularly its roots in funerary rituals and spiritual symbolism, students expressed surprise, admitting they had never learned these ancestral dimensions of Limbo in prior classes. This encounter reaffirmed my conviction regarding the necessity of embedding cultural and historical context into Limbo education alongside physical technique and performance skills.

In my conversations with Trinidad's National Dance Association President, Emelda Lynch-Griffith, she similarly emphasized the urgent need for culturally grounded Limbo pedagogy. Lynch-Griffith acknowledged that current institutional approaches emphasize performance standards and technical proficiency, often at the expense of broader historical understanding and cultural appreciation. She advocated integrating structured historical and cultural education within Limbo curricula, enabling students to appreciate Limbo holistically as both artistic practice and ancestral tradition.

Echoing Lynch-Griffith's insights, Thomas Talawa Prestø (2023) has extensively addressed the pedagogical risks inherent in teaching Limbo solely as commercial spectacle. Prestø argues persuasively that educators must explicitly foreground Limbo's original cosmological meanings, ritual functions, and cultural contexts alongside physical training and choreographic innovation. Without such integrated pedagogical approaches, Prestø cautions that students risk losing critical cultural knowledge, understanding Limbo merely as physical novelty rather than profound ancestral expression.

Mohammed, reflecting similarly, emphasized during our 2019 interview the importance of balanced Limbo pedagogy, deeply

embedding historical consciousness and spiritual awareness within contemporary instruction. Mohammed advised that effective Limbo teaching should intentionally weave together performance techniques, cultural histories, and ancestral symbolism, enabling students to develop comprehensive understanding and genuine appreciation (Torrance Mohammed, interview by Kieron Dwayne Sargeant, Creative Arts Center, San Fernando, Trinidad, July 10, 2019.)

Another pedagogical consideration emerged from an enlightening conversation I had with a fellow dance instructor. During a community-based workshop, she shared challenges encountered when attempting to introduce Limbo's sacred historical context. She described receiving resistance from community members primarily interested in Limbo's entertainment potential rather than its cultural background. Her experience highlighted broader societal challenges faced by educators, illustrating the complex negotiations required between maintaining historical authenticity and meeting contemporary community expectations (Anonymous dance instructor, interview by author, location withheld by request, August 2023).

These pedagogical reflections underscore essential challenges currently facing Trinidadian educators and cultural practitioners. We must navigate complex intersections between cultural authenticity, historical preservation, community engagement, and educational innovation. Limbo's extensive global transformations should compel educators toward deeply reflective, culturally responsible practices that simultaneously honor Limbo's ancestral heritage while embracing contemporary creative adaptations.

Critically, scholarly insights from Trinidadian cultural historian, Hollis Liverpool, reinforce the importance of integrated Limbo pedagogy. Liverpool stresses the necessity of comprehensive cultural education programs explicitly addressing Trinidad's complex histories, ancestral cosmologies, and colonial legacies. Effective Limbo teaching, Liverpool argues, must combine historical consciousness, ancestral knowledge transmission, and contemporary artistic innovation, ensuring comprehensive student learning and genuine cultural appreciation.

In reflecting personally upon my educational practice, I strive continually toward such balanced pedagogical approaches. My workshops, classroom instructions, and community engagements intentionally emphasize both physical excellence and historical consciousness. Through integrating Limbo's ritual origins, historical evolutions, and contemporary expressions within educational contexts, I seek explicitly to nurture culturally grounded awareness and holistic student appreciation.

Ultimately, effective Limbo education requires thoughtful, reflective, and culturally responsible practices that simultaneously embrace ancestral heritage and creative innovation. Through committed scholarly inquiry, culturally grounded pedagogy, and community engagement, we ensure Limbo's ongoing vitality, maintaining critical ancestral wisdom even amid global contemporary transformation.

Conclusion—Bending but Not Breaking

Reflecting on Limbo's historical arc—from its sacred role in Trinidadian wakes, through its staged reinventions in Carnival, competition, media/tv film and circus, to its current viral life in digital media—what becomes clear is not just its transformation, but its capacity to endure. My central argument is that Limbo exemplifies Trinidad and Tobago's cultural ingenuity: bending under the pressures of spectacle, globalization, and entertainment demand, but not breaking from its foundational roots in ancestral cosmology, ritual function, and community transmission. From the solemn movements I witnessed as a child in my grandmother's yard to the fire-lit performances of Julia Edwards, the record-setting feats of Shemika Charles Campbell, and the digital choreography of Zakita Edinborough, Limbo continues to shift—sometimes subtly, sometimes dramatically—but always along a line of negotiation between ancestral knowledge and contemporary visibility.

The pedagogical insights shared by Emelda Lynch-Griffith, the spiritual grounding taught to me by elders like Hazel Franco and

Louis McWilliams during my studies at the University of the West Indies, and the perspectives of cultural stalwarts such as the late Torrance Mohammed and scholar Hollis Liverpool have all helped shape my understanding that Limbo is not just a dance, but a carrier of worldview. As it continues to circulate globally, our responsibility is to ensure that each new generation of dancers understands not only how to perform Limbo, but why it moves the way it does—what it remembers, what it lifts, and what it refuses to let go of. Moving forward, I call for an intentional return to cosmological grounding within our pedagogical practices and choreographic choices. This does not mean resisting innovation, but rather ensuring that innovation is guided by memory, and that spectacle is held in relationship to spirit. *Bending but Not Breaking* speaks not only to the physical feat of the dance, but to the cultural logic that allows a ritual practice to survive the very conditions that could erase it. That logic lives on through careful transmission, informed choreography, and a commitment to honoring what moves beneath the movement.

Author Biography

Kieron Dwayne Sargeant, from Trinidad and Tobago, is an Assistant Professor of Dance at Skidmore College, and an expert in African-Caribbean diaspora dance traditions. With an MFA in Dance from Florida State University and an MA in Community Dance from Ohio University, he has over two decades of international teaching and performance experience. Founder of the Kieron Sargeant Dance and Dance Education Foundation, his travels and research span the United States, Canada, Cuba, Grenada, Barbados, Togo, and Nigeria, delving into the morphology of African diaspora dances in the US. Kieron remains actively engaged in collaborative projects affiliated with Hofstra University and Rutgers University. His collaborations with international scholars and artists further underscore his commitment to understanding and enhancing the global impact of African influences on dance traditions

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