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# Transcultural Identity of Twerking: A Cultural Evolution Study of Women's Bodily Practices of the Slavic and East African Communities

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## ABSTRACT

Human culture is built upon nature to help humans adapt to their environment – first natural, but later natural-cultural. Cultural practices are aimed at aiding survival in changing environments, and in different settings they meet different environmental pressures, causing later changes in trajectories. According to cultural evolutionism, behaviours, ideas and artefacts are subject to inheritance, competition, accumulation of modifications, adaptation, geographical distribution, convergence and changes of function – these are mechanisms present also in biological evolution. In the following paper, we examine women's dance and physical exercise practices, which contain similar postures performed in comparable circumstances, as found in initiation ritual dances in chosen East African communities and in Slavic gymnastics for women in the Belarusian tradition. In times of globalization and the mixing of cultures, the position on knees and elbows is recontextualized in a visually attractive form of contemporary dances like Kangamoko and Baikoko, or more widely different variants of 'twerking' and reconstructed physical exercises. Approaching 'twerking' positions, especially on knees and elbows as a cross-genre performance, we find common roots in the communal support for women's good wife and mother status teachings in various cultures, showing the importance of women's circles, women's health and well-being for the community.

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## Introduction

The transcultural perspective evolved from the recognition of cultural relativism, multiculturalism and the assessment of commonalities in and across various cultures. It is often based on the evolutive paradigm in cultural studies in its contemporary form. The perspective on cultural evolution at the beginning of cultural anthropology in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century recognized one culture as developing, which had reached the highest level of development in Europe. However, since the 1980s, cultural evolutionism is neither normative nor Eurocentric but is searching for common grounds from which various cultural trajectories stem and are studied as well as understood. This perspective asserts that culture is built upon nature by helping humans adapt to their environment – first natural, but later natural-cultural. Just like practices of clothing and food production allowed us to conquer climate and led to human independence from finding sufficient food, other practices are aimed at aiding survival in changing environments. It is interesting to notice that other behaviours

also contained in traditional cultural practices were focused on basic needs; although in different settings, they met different environmental pressures which caused their later changes in trajectories.

The case we examine in the following paper concerns women's dance and physical activities rooted in milling and birth labour traditions, which contain similar postures in comparable circumstances, found in East African and Slavic cultures. The similarity of postures in dance and in gymnastics, and in milling and in sex, means the muscles used in those activities are the same that are used also during childbirth, hence the practice of those activities enhances the process of childbirth. These are also the postures present in the contemporary modern dance called 'twerking', which is performed publicly for the entertainment of an audience composed mainly of men. Going deeper and searching for the common roots of certain postures and movements performed by women in different cultures, we are tracing variants and modifications of the 'twerking' positions, especially on knees and elbows, approaching it as a cross-genre performance focused on women's health and well-being.

We had the opportunity to research this topic due to our participation in the international project TPAAE (Transcultural Perspectives in Art and Art Education, realized within the European Union's MSCA-RISE Horizon 2020 programme), participating in workshops of Slavic gymnastics for women in a Belarusian tradition by Sonia Mrzygłocka-Pyć in Poland (2020) and conducting a research trip to communities in Embu and Meru regions in Kenya (2021). The investigation aims to emphasize the transcultural characteristics of the 'twerking' posture in reference to women's health, well-being and function in a community.

The methodology of research is twofold: based on the literature – specifically the field of dance and gymnastics and generally the literature on the theoretical background of cultural studies in perspective of cultural evolutionism – and on the ethnographic fieldwork that was realized in the form of participatory observation and interviews. Therefore, our methodology is interdisciplinary, connecting professional expertise of each of us: in a theoretical approach to cultural studies, in ethnographic research and in sports and dance.

Therefore, we will first introduce the basic concepts of cultural evolutionism and mechanisms that operate on behaviours, ideas and artefacts – such as variation, inheritance, competition, accumulation of modifications, adaptation, geographical distribution, convergence, changes of function – which are mechanisms present also in biological evolution. Secondly, we will present the position on hands/elbows and knees, performed in initiation ritual dances in chosen East African communities and in Slavic gymnastics for women in the Belarusian tradition. Some of these practices are found also in other cultures from the Far East with different historical paths. In East Africa, initiation practices exclusively for women and girls that were heavily guarded for centuries by taboo and considered sacred and worth conserving in the culture are now condemned, and in recent years have been facing strong cultural pressure to be abandoned or even legally banned, like the case of the Baikoko and the Kangamoko dance of Tanzania (Edmondson 2001; Fair 1996; Sanga 2016). In the Slavic region, practices that had been abandoned centuries ago due to cultural pressures, among these Christianity, are now being reconstructed in Slavic gymnastics for women.

In conclusion, we stress that finding out about the common ground of communal support for women's good wife and mother status teachings in various cultures shows the importance of women's circles, women's health and well-being for the community.

Putting together women's bodily practices realized in women's circles in a specific ritualized form calls for a consideration of why certain movements and postures appearing in different cultural contexts, having therapeutical function and being meaningful within a community, can be practiced with dedication and researched, as in case of Slavic gymnastic for women, or can be socially condemned and rejected, as in case of East African contemporary culture. Then, we look at trajectories of bodily practices involving the same postures and movements and shed a light on both similarities and differences between them, instead of searching for a broad generalization.

## Evolutionary Approach to Culture Studies

The approach of cultural studies in its beginnings in the 19th century was evolutionist. However, evolution was considered univocal and strictly linear, with the evolution of one 'species' as culture. This Eurocentric perspective was based on the supposition of the constant and positive character of civilization's development and on the laws of cultural development which, combined with the notion of human nature, allow us to compare societies at different stages of development (Taylor 1889). This approach was not only descriptive but was also strongly normative, which is evident in the use of such concepts as barbarity and primitivism in juxtaposition to the concept of civilization. It understandably evoked critique in the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, leading to the emergence of cultural relativism with Franz Boas (1940), Margaret Mead (Mead and Boas 1928) and Ruth Benedict (1934), claiming that researchers should not apply their own categories in investigating a culture, as they were often contaminated with belief in one's own cultural superiority. Researchers should instead use participant observation to understand specific cultural phenomena in their local context. These phenomena also transformed through migration and the passage of time, which stresses the importance of local history in cultural studies.

The relativist approach was followed by structuralism with Lévi-Strauss, deconstructivism with Stuart Hall (Hall 1996) and the Birmingham School (Edgar and Sedgwick 2008), mostly focused on disclosing the forms and methods of cultural oppression imposed by language and its meanings, opening the possibility to oppose it. The main topics were the 'lived' culture of different classes, the centrality of mass media, youth, subcultures, education, race and gender. Within symbolic anthropology – starting with Clifford Geertz – the importance of the perspective of a researcher, his/her experiences and his/her lack of transparency was also stressed. In place of unified and synthetic categories (such as art, beliefs or customary law) Geertz postulated analysis focused on details and fragments because according to him, a researcher cannot reach the objective representation of culture but only create an impression of it (Geertz 1973).

Nevertheless, since the second part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century there has been development in the evolutive approach to culture, for example by Luigi L. Cavalli-Sforza, who in addition to recognizing cultural diversity, searches for the common ground on which this diversity can be analysed. This renewed evolutionary approach is already informed about cultural diversity and cautious about its own presupposition. Given this background then, the concern of how culture and cultural evolution is understood in contemporaneous literature arises. Alex Mesoudi, working in the Human Behaviour and Cultural Evolution Group at the University of Exeter, states that cultural evolution is the idea that information in the sphere of culture changes frequently 'according to a similar process by which species change, that is, through selective retention of favourable cultural variants, as well as other nonselective processes such as drift' (Mesoudi, Whiten and Laland 2004). The information can be passed through various means: words, writings, dances, rituals, images, various cultural phenomena. These cultural phenomena are not static, but dynamic, and their change is not random, nor mechanistic, but rather follows laws of evolution as retention of favourable variants or constant slight modulations towards certain directions. In this respect, the 'species' or 'units of inheritance' considered are not only one culture, but various cultural phenomena like practices, rituals, customs, beliefs and artefacts that are developed and transformed within the historical and social process in a certain setting.

Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza claims that '[i]n culture it is ideas and techniques and skills and behaviours which are transmitted from one generation to another' (Cavalli-Sforza 1986). The main evolutive forces recognized are mutation, natural selection, drift and migration. According to Campbell (1965), they operate in an analogous way to biological studies. The methods of transmission of information which form a culture are inheritance, as well as social and individual learning, which is both vertical (from generation to generation) and horizontal. Various factors influence inheritance: variations, accumulation of modifications, adaptation, geographical distribution, convergence and changes in the function of social practices and cultural artefacts.

The cultural phenomenon of certain types of postures and movements of women, appearing in East African dances and so-called Slavic gymnastics for women, was transmitted through generations by social learning from elderly women to young novice women. The transmission in different geographical settings, such as East Africa and Eastern Europe, was exposed to different kinds of forces and influences, adaptations, variations and changes of function in both cases (due to mutation and drift). This paper examines specific movements and positions, associated with the Baikoko and Kangamoko dances of the Tanga people from East Africa and Slavic gymnastics from Eastern Europe. The dances considered for this study were specific to female initiation rituals and had deeper connotations that transcended the physical movement, which will be interrogated to expose aspects and meanings that have supported their evolution through the generations.

## Dance in the African Context

Dance is a very important component of African culture. It has tremendous significance in communities which ranges from physical, social, economic, political, religious, psychological and health-related importance. Traditional dances, from which the dances being studied here derive, are not haphazard. According to Senoga-Zake (2000), they are functional and woven with the customs, beliefs and traditions of the communities from which they emanate. They are designed to serve specific purposes which are predetermined. For instance, initiation dances were only carried out during initiation season, while courtship dances were only meant for girls and men who had attained the age of marriage and had been through ceremonies that initiated them to adulthood. The dances were gendered so that there were those reserved for men, for instance war dances, and those reserved for women, such as specific initiation dances for girls. The instruments, costumes and movements were carefully designed to serve the specified purpose of the dance. The messages were carefully crafted and woven into movements, costumes and lyrics, so their meanings should not be taken at face value. Contemporary dances on the other hand are mainly done for entertainment. They feature influences ranging from traditional to global dance trends. There are no specific movements meant for men or women, but the movements are creatively adapted for any gender. Though they still have physical, economic, health and social significance, they are remarkably differentiated from traditional dances.

Dance in its entirety is not a reflex or mere entertainment; it is an integral and meaningful part of any communities' life (Kilonzi 1992). In African traditional communities, the inclusion or exclusion of instruments, gender, costume, songs and any other prop in a dance had a wider significance that aimed to serve the greater good of the community. This therefore can be said to be true in the choice of movements for either male or female dances. According to Ikibe (2014), dance performances are enjoyed within the context of the culture and the occasion in which they are used. Therefore, all African music and dance has human developmental significance. The interrelationship between dance, drama and music has a connection with the sociological, psychological, physiological and physical significance of the participants and the community at large.

There have been factors in contemporary societies which have seen the removal and decontextualisation of traditional dances outside the confines stipulated by traditional communities. These factors may encompass religion (such as Christianity), politics, economy, education and technology. As such, some movements of some traditional dance practices that were originally carried out in seclusion and only meant for women and girls have now been brought to the public sphere, in view of children and male audiences, contrary to the set customs. In other words, we are witnessing dances that were meant to mentor young girls on how to please their husbands and attain their own sexual pleasure with movements and postures that could be said to enact sexual acts. These are now being performed in public entertainment spaces and have also enjoyed large viewership on YouTube and other social media platforms. This is what has happened to dances such as Baikoko and Kangamoko of the Tanga people of Tanzania, which are transformed versions of female initiation dances of the Tanga community. As a result, governments such as Tanzania have labelled them as immoral. It is the premise of this

paper that the movements used in these dances should not be discarded as immoral and thereafter banned, as in the case of Tanzania (Edmondson 2001; Sanga 2016; Van der Stockt 2019). We argue that such movements, like in the popular 'twerk dance style' (James 2021), should be understood as expressions of deeper cultural meanings that were culturally acceptable and functional and which could justify why they have survived, reproduced and evolved over time.

In the context of this paper, we evaluate the significance of the knee and elbow or forearm position and movement prevalent in Baikoko and Kangamoko dances practised by young women of the Tanga people in Tanzania, and also in Slavic gymnastics for women in Eastern Europe. While acknowledging the significance of these dances to their respective communities – which includes physical and mental well-being, along with economic, social and cultural significance – these practices targeted young, novice women. We seek to unfold the meanings that were passed through generations, being important for community life, stressing the importance of health, sexual satisfaction and the social role of women. This is possible by showing and interpreting the noticeable connection between the knee and elbow or forearm position present in African dances and Slavic gymnastics and the milling and labour birth traditions of the communities involved.

### The Baikoko and the Kangamoko Dances in Cultural Context

The Kangamoko and Baikoko dances (Michuzi Media Group 2012) are popular dances found in the contemporary society of urban towns and cities in Tanzania. These two dances were popularized in Dar es Salam in the 2000s by different performing troupes that bore the two names respectively. The dances derive different aspects of music, movements, and accompaniments from the original *ngoma ya ndani* (literally translated as 'the music of the insiders') genres (Sanga 2016) of the Digo people of Tanzania including *Gita*, *Chera* and *Mdindiko* dance (Van der Stockt 2019) (Figure 1).

The *ngoma ya ndani* dance genres of the Digo people in Tanga, from which the Kangamoko and the Baikoko dance derive, were traditionally done in seclusion and were meant to introduce the novice to marriage life which awaited them. The dance movements were designed to instil skills necessary to cherish sexuality and support health, and also to entertain and please a man sexually in bed (Van der Stockt 2019). Appropriation of the Baikoko and Kangamoko styles outside the confines designed by the traditional communities still seems to be publicly tolerated and rewarded, as evident in the increasing number of hits and views of live shows posted on social media (Swahili Lab 2016). This is despite censorship and banned airplay by the government of Tanzania, which regards the dances as immoral, vulgar and unsuitable for public consumption (Van der Stockt 2019). Up and coming popular music artists in Tanzania, such as Mbosso (aka Mbwana Yusuf Kilungi) and Diamond Platnumz (aka Nasibu Abdul Juma Issack), have also packaged the dance practices in modern music styles and stirred a series of dance challenges on social media across East Africa that showcases the Baikoko dance. The Baikoko dance challenges feature more creative movements with

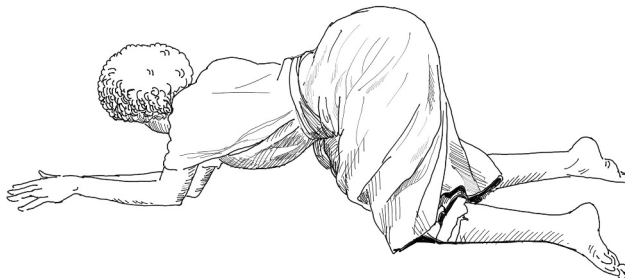


Figure 1. Knee elbow position common in the Baikoko and Kangamoko dance.

a hint of twerk among the youth practitioners and can be viewed as another variant of the original dances. Twerking refers to a type of dance that came out and was popularized alongside a New Orleans type of hip-hop known as the bounce music scene in the late 1980s (Wheeler et al. 2016). Cagle argues that twerking originated from the traditional Mapouka dance of the people of Ivory Coast, which also faced a governmental ban in the 1990s after a newer version influenced by New Orleans bounce emerged in urban areas (Cagle 2013). Though twerking is not exclusive to women only, its movement encompasses sexually provocative mannerisms involving throwing or thrusting the hips back and shaking the buttocks, often in a low squatting stance. Other moves incorporated include mixing, exercising, the bend over, the shoulder hustle, clapping, booty clapping, booty popping or the wild wood – all recognize a booty shaking or bounce.

It is impossible to contextualize the dance positions and movements associated with initiation dances such as the *ngoma ya ndani* genres without contextualizing female initiation practices. Initiation practices in most East African communities introduced young girls to marriage life; as a matter of fact, it is a symbol of adulthood and change of status in society (Karoki 2014). The initiation ceremonies were a platform through which young women could be made marriageable. They were spaces through which young girls could symbolically seal and celebrate their sexuality. Dance movements were one of the ways through which the diverse goals of initiation practices could be achieved. Aspects of activities in the initiation practices that were related to sex and sexual pleasure were carefully incorporated into the day-to-day activities of girls and young women to ensure continued practice. Such activities included those assigned to women, such as maize milling, fetching water and blowing fire, among others. Of course, in milling, women did not use elbows and forearms, because it is obvious that dance and grinding positions differ from each other. In milling, the woman stood on her knees with a straight back and arms, in order to lean on the hands with the whole torso's weight, thus exerting the greatest force (Figure 2). However, during our field research in Embu and Meru regions in Kenya, we confirmed the existence of a connection between the grinding position and sexual appeal, which was stressed on some occasions with accompanying practices such as poems or songs.

In traditional societies of East Africa, elderly women who had previously gone through initiation rituals were key in mentoring young girls into womanhood. According to Fair (1996), female initiates in Zanzibar between the 1890s and 1930s were taken through a series of lectures, dances, songs and demonstrations that related to a range of women's issues: male and female structures, the physical aspects of sexuality, desire and orgasm, masturbation and physical relations between men and



Figure 2. African women (grinding millet). Adaptation of the original photo of a Matabele woman, Africa, 1930s. The drawing was reproduced with permission from Mary Evans Picture Library, [www.maryevans.com](http://www.maryevans.com).

women. Through explicit songs and dances, the girls were taught how to achieve sexual satisfaction for themselves and their partners as well as various ways of having intercourse. The sole purpose was to prepare young women for their most desired role in their societies, which included the much-preferred motherhood to many children who would carry the legacy of their communities and families to the future. If one looks deeper into the lyrics of the songs, one may notice the context within which the dance movements and positions were developed (Fair 1996).

Fair recorded songs accompanying the dance and further strengthens our understanding of what happened in these practices. She noted that several women demonstrated these lessons for the young girls while other women danced and sang. The text of the lyrics contain content such as 'grind, grind, grind for me my husband', 'the sought after one has been slept with, has been slept with, has been taken with the mouth' or 'if you grind, grind in front, the rear is for the stupid'. The girls, who were emerging out of puberty, were also taught about fertility enhancement, pregnancy, birth and childcare as noted by Fair (1996). This was achieved through practising specific movements in their dances. It can be assumed that the sexual pragmatics of the dance allow it to be classified not only as a ritual genre but also as a genre for demonstrating physical endurance and flexibility, which are essential for certain female activities and age status.

The dance movements of the Kangamoko and Baikoko dances, deriving from initiation dances, mostly involve gyration of the waist, thighs and buttocks, as though twerking erotically. These body movements could be carried out while standing with the legs slightly apart, in a knees-forearm position, on knees with straight arms with palms spread out or while holding onto a surface bending forward (Illustration 1). These movements are linked to the *ngoma ya ndani* dance genre's movements. Sanga describes these as 'provocative, vulgar, prostitutional and immoral' (Sanga 2016). Its movements can also be likened to the *msondo*, a more public initiation dance performed by women on the occasion of wedding (Fair 1996), and *unyago*, a genre of initiation ceremonies and dances performed for girls at the onset of puberty which became popular in the 19th century throughout East Africa (Fair 1996). These are practices of the Mijikenda communities on the coast of the Indian Ocean, from Somalia through Kenya to Tanzania (Fair 1996).

This dance position is not very common in traditional male dances, nor is it common among communities that do not have farming as the primary economic activity in East Africa. Stone, a cultural leader of the Kiambere cultural group from the Mbeere district in Kenya, said in an interview in 2021 that the knee-elbow/straight arms variations of body position taken while grinding cereal grains were an opportunity for the man of the house to admire and appreciate his wife's beauty by watching her grind millet and maize on the millstone in Mbeere communities. He stated that usually, in a marriage, the man's meals are prepared by his wife when he gets home. They must be prepared afresh, and this entails that the wife must grind the maize to prepare a meal when a man arrives in the house. He said that in Mbeere communities, the man would sit strategically behind the wife and watch her, admiring from a distance as she moved on the grinding stone, intermittently praising her. One who could grind maize and millet was considered a beautiful and good wife (Illustration 2). Stone reckons then that this activity was a chance to seduce a husband by a wife (James 2021).

Other dances that feature this position are the *nzaiko* dance among the Akamba, the *jaiko* dance of the Ambeere people of Kenya and the *malaya* dance of the Arabic communities on the coast of East Africa (James 2021). Contemporary Baikoko and Kangamoko dances possess cultural traits of the original group of dances and exhibit variations. These variants have different rates of survival and reproduction, and so they were adapted for use and context of the practitioners reproducing them and have been transmitted from one generation to another via social and cultural learning such as imitation and speech. We argue that the variants of the *ngoma ya ndani* genres, Baikoko and Kangamoko, have survived due to the significance they have availed throughout generations, some of which have remained constant.

## Traditional 'Slavic' Gymnastics for Women in Cultural Context

Whereas there is taboo in East Africa concerning meanings of initiation dances with the use of 'twerking' knee-elbow positions, it helps to turn to Belarusian tradition in which we also find the same positions and to physiotherapists' and obstetricians' evaluations aimed at proving its positive effect on women's health. The exercises are designed to increase the elasticity of the pelvic floor muscles and the mobility of the hip joints, which is of paramount importance in preparation for childbirth. It was a women's practice taught exclusively by women amongst women. According to Gennadij Adamovich (2004, 12), the author of the first description of these exercises, any of the twenty-seven exercises allegedly were used by women in sex or 'love games' to bind a man to her. Apparently, for this reason, it was reported that a similar knowledge of women's positions may have been possessed by men.

However, first we are forced to make several comments on the credibility of the data published by Adamovich, starting with his 1999 handbook for students. In this text, Adamovich did not give any names of the students who talked to the bearers of knowledge about the exercises, no data from interviews nor any names of women or localities where students may have found evidence of the exercises. In the next editions of his books, Adamovich only repeated the account of the students without providing any additional information. He also included a chapter in his 2004 book *Gymnastics of Slavic Enchantresses* with drawings of twenty-seven female positions from his 'system' of exercises and completed the drawings with a male silhouette to visualize sexual intercourse, in nineteen of which positions a man was behind and in six of which positions a woman was on top, kneeling and facing the man. Adamovich did not explain the dominance of female 'standing' postures (nine poses) and 'kneeling-elbow-chest' ones (eleven poses) in gymnastics if treated as sexual positions. Nor did he explain the absence of traditional 'knees and hands' and 'feet and hands' positions in gymnastics, which can be seen in the drawings of a Belarusian sex-imitating dance.<sup>1</sup> Adamovich also claimed that gymnastics 'was used by witches and those women who wanted to have a good figure and not suffer from gynaecological diseases' (1999, 16). The credibility of data published by Adamovich was heavily undermined by his concealment of the ethnographic sources of the exercises and his hypertrophied emphasis on the sexual sphere and the fantasy pseudo-Slavic horoscope in gymnastics. All these had negative consequences for the acceptance of gymnastics among ethnographers, folklorists and historians of folk medicine. Gymnastics initially found itself outside the realm of scientific criticism and discussion (Figure 3).

It wasn't until 2019 that the exercise technique and the teaching method of Oksana Pawlowska, a master instructor of gymnastics in Belarus since 2005, were applied by a physiotherapist in a research project of Medical University in Poznan (Pluto-Prądyńska 2019). Pawlowska already had fifteen years of experience teaching gymnastics and training instructors at that time. From 2012 to 2019, several of Pawlowska's students, like herself, used positions from gymnastics during different phases of childbirth (Illustration 3). This allowed her to pass on to the physiotherapist knowledge of micro-movements and intuitive physiotherapy, which were preserved in the exercises due to their kinship with traditional or primitive women's birth labour positions. Pawlowska studied historical descriptions of these positions and continued her work with physiotherapists. She was the first



Figure 3. The graphics of Belarusian Gymnastics exercises.

person to suggest that the intuitive positions of women in birth labour should be seen as the origin of the exercises (Pawlowska 2021).

In the ethnography of Belarus, the position of a woman in labour while she was kneeling and resting on her elbows or forearms on the ground was unknown. Belarusian and Ukrainian women (for example in the Polesie region), as well as Russian women, gave birth standing, including postures using a counterforce or a cloth tied to the ceiling beam. Explanations of the necessity of such a posture varied: 'one should not lie down – the blood will bake'; 'a woman should give birth standing up, when she is lying down the baby can roll under the solar plexus'; 'to give birth lying down is considered a great sin: God will mistake [a woman] for a cow' (Baranov 2001, 18). Pawlowska therefore widened the scope of investigations on women's labour positions.

There are many examples of the knee-elbow and knee-forearm labour and birthing positions among the peoples of other cultures, showing its appropriateness – it can be found in China, Tibet, Nepal, India, Bhutan, ancient Scandinavia, indigenous tribes of North America and from ancient southern Europe and Africa. The knee-elbow position was depicted in a section of the Wheel of Life as the eleventh of twelve links of dependent origination. Jochens reported that the normal birth position in Old Norse society was kneeling on the floor, with helpers ready at the woman's knees or supporting her arms. 'As the birth progressed, she would shift to a knee-elbow position, and the child would be received from behind' (Jochens 1995). According to Engelmann, Native American women from Cheyenne and Arapahoe tribes, as well as Nez-Perce and Gros-Ventre, seek a change of position to the knee-elbow one in cases of protracted labour. The indigenous Kootenays women gave birth in the knee-chest position: 'the face touching the ground; hands, one above the other, grasping a pole planted in the ground, head touching the hands; legs apart' (Engelmann 1883, 58). The famous physician Michele Savonarola (died c. 1466) reported that the knee-elbow position was known and used in labour in Italy. This position has been recommended by Ancient Greek, Roman, Arabic and Persian obstetricians for very stout persons. These included Hippocrates, Galen, Paul of Aegina, Aëtius, Soranus, Jahiah Ebu Serapion and Rhazes. In the 1790s, prevailing opinion claimed that hands and knees posture was 'instinctively sought by unassisted women'. A similar hands-and-knees position was actively used by Irish and Welsh women in the 1800s (Engelmann 1883, 58). Witkowski reported: 'in some cases, American women, like their sisters in Ireland and Scotland, are positioned on their knees and elbows [obeying their tradition]; this is the case when the umbilical cord falls out' (Witkowski 1887, 418) (Figure 4).

The hypothesis of birthing positions as the origin of the exercises in Slavic gymnastics was primarily confirmed through Pawlowska's collaborative work with physiotherapists and obstetricians rather than from the ethnography of Slavic peoples and through comparative study. It should be noted that there is painstaking work to be done to gather evidence with which we can explain why

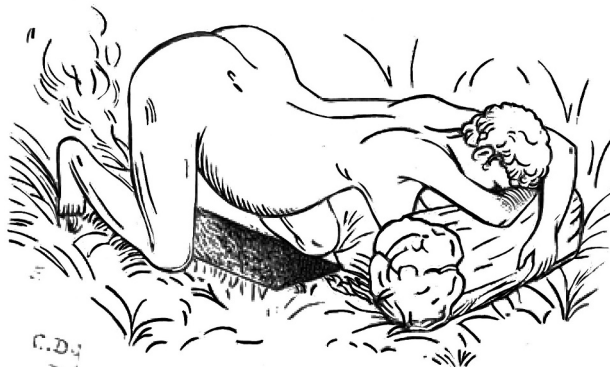


Figure 4. African woman in Difficult Childbirth.

gymnastic 'birth exercises' have not been revealed by researchers of Belarusian culture and folk medicine. As early as 1897, for example, collectors of rituals accompanying childbirth complained about the difficulty of collecting material among the peasants of Central Russia. It was reported that these rituals constitute a professional secret of village midwives, who passed the incantations on to each other orally, forbidding them to be retold to outsiders (Listova 1989, 147).

Christianization in Central and Eastern Europe dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and in East Africa to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Longer influence by the Christian religion led to the oblivion of a significant portion of traditional knowledge. In the area of Belarus in the 14<sup>th</sup> through 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Orthodox and Catholic Churches imposed severe prohibitions on two traditional sexual positions: with the woman on top and with the man behind the woman. For example, Orthodox men who forced or tempted a woman to be on top were punished with seven years of fasting. A woman having sex in this position was punished with five years of fasting or six years of repentance and communion from Easter to Easter. Compare this with penalties for other male sexual practices: for sodomy the penalty was three years of fasting and for bestiality the penalty was only one or two years of fasting. The position 'man behind a woman' was called 'pagan' and equated to intercourse among cattle: a man 'shall be called a bull' (Pushkareva 1999). Sexual positions with a man behind have been suppressed and moved to taboo sphere. This confirms that, despite oblivion, traditional knowledge and practices survived in a reduced and hidden form through various cultural practices.

The felt revival of traditional practices, in the form of cultural reconstruction plays that can be observed nowadays, requires and supports non-sexual (or anti-sexual) reconstruction of a set of gymnastic exercises as was done by Pawlowska, connected to the traditional bodily knowledge encoded in cultural practices. Knowledge of birth labour positions and exercises for women's health in the Slavic region was hidden and is brought to light nowadays in a transformed way.

## **Significance of the Hand/Elbow Knee Position in East Africa and the Slavic Region**

The scope of activities incorporated in initiation traditions of the East Africa is mostly geared towards achieving sexual satisfaction for both males and females. The associated lessons and mentorship of these traditions are geared towards fertility enhancement or prevention, childcare, pregnancy and safe birth (Fair 1996). As is the case in many cultures, children were a great asset for a family and a community. Dances and movements included in cultural practices were intentionally oriented towards procreation. Dances were therefore spaces where young women could practice achieving what was expected of them as women in their society.

The knee and elbow position supports achievement of sexual satisfaction for women, allowing for deep penetration in both traditions. This position is also recognized by many ethnographers as present in birth labour traditions in many cultures (Illustration 4). Knowledge of the importance of sexual and reproductive meaning derived from the movement of the Baikoko and Kangamoko dances as well as Slavic gymnastics as transmitted by elderly women to novices in women's circles continues to be surrounded by many taboos. Participation in these physical dance activities elicits known general and specific health benefits that directly or indirectly influence reproductive health outcomes for women. Reproductive health outcomes are a package of mental, social and physical attributes that supports the process of reproduction. Examples include the socialization process where participants are educated on the required roles and responsibilities of women associated with marriage institutions through song and dance activities under the supervision of older women in the same cultural context. The physical dance movements and postures, just like hypopressive gymnastics, help upcoming mothers prepare their bodies for the path to pregnancy and its benefits. It focuses on revitalizing the reproductive and hormonal systems. If practised regularly, it helps in stimulating the uterus and ovaries, increases abdominal muscle tone, strengthens the back muscles, enhances the flexibility of hips and groin, relieves stress and anxiety, boosts blood flow to the uterus and ovaries and balances the hormones. All of these aid in healthy pregnancy and enable a smooth delivery and quick recovery after childbirth (Ennour-Idrissi, Maunsell and Diorio 2015).

Similarly, these transcultural women's practices have mental benefits, just like those observed in fertility yoga or stress management for patients with infertility. They could reduce psychosomatic pain, enhance fertility by influencing directly the Pituitary Gland-Hypothalamus-Ovarian axis, decrease depression and anxiety that could lead to osteoporosis and reduce the rate of assisted vaginal delivery due to muscle relaxation, hence enhancing the range of motion of pelvic joints and improving foetal outcomes (Darbandi et al. 2018). Also notable is the therapeutic dimension of these practices as supported by dysmenorrhea gymnastics, which is proven to increase b-endorphin by four to five times in the blood, so that the more exercise, the higher the b-endorphin level in the blood. If this is done regularly and correctly, for twenty minutes at the time of dysmenorrhea, it can increase b-endorphin which has been shown to be closely related to reducing pain, improving appetite, improving memory, improving respiratory function and lowering blood pressure (Rahayu, Suryani and Marlina 2014).

However, traditional physical women's practices endure in a transformed way. The East African dances, which were originally done in secret in women's circles, have been decontextualized to public spaces of mostly religious communities yet in spaces with men who are craving sexual attention. The change in the audience and the transformation of the traditional performance are reasons why these dances are categorized as immoral. The meaning of the dance as informing women about their sexuality and health gets lost in translation; this is what this paper is attempting to retrieve. We state that the movements of the dances under study here – like from the Digo *ngoma* genres, the Baikoko and the Kangamoko, which have been tainted and labelled as immoral and solely as tools to maintain sexual desire in men – have a deeper purpose of supporting the knowledge of women's sexual and reproductive health in context of their activity in the community and that they have evolved through the generations for a purpose.

Slavic gymnastics for women in the Belarusian tradition was reconstructed in recent years after centuries of oblivion. Contemporaneously, they are becoming trendy due to the growing interest in natural healing methods and one's own tradition. They are not practised around the home with grandmothers, as it was supposedly in the traditional Slavic communities, but during classes and friends' meetings of women. Men are still excluded as part of the audience, contrary to the East African Baikoko and Kangamoko dances.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, scholars in the anthropology of dance and movement passed beyond ethnographic description and surface meaning (Royce 2002). We intended to follow this trend, focusing on cross-genre origins of knee-elbow/forearm positions in women's bodily practices present in African dances and Slavic gymnastics for women. These practices could be regarded as having natural or physiological origins, transmitting a ritually enveloped sexual appeal due to the mixing of any women's practice with a sexual culture. Culture is built upon nature, and many cultural bodily practices aim at the satisfied and healthy body, which is the case of the knee and elbow/forearm position.

## Conclusions

An important aspect for understanding the evolution of East African dances and Slavic gymnastics exercises as women's practices is to examine the relationship between creator, performer and audience in these activities. The creators and teachers of female dances/exercises/positions were older women. The performer of the dance or 'exercise' was a young woman or woman in labour. The audience was composed of elderly women who were considered midwives, like Europe. In Central Russia, knowledge about how to help a woman in labour was passed from one generation to the other, usually from mother to daughter, sometimes from grandmother to granddaughter (Dobrovolskaya 2001, 93). In Belarus, a woman who had never been a midwife was an object of ridicule. She was predicted punishment after death, that she would herd hares (Kabakova 2001, 112). Although these practices are not alive anymore, the reconstructed version keeps up with the condition of seclusion. However, in an East African context, the audience of feminine dances is not

only women but mixed, with a predominance of men. This situation changes the meaning attributed to the dance and the position present in it, leading to a propensity for misunderstandings and simplifications, such as food for a man equals sex for a man equals dance for a man. These result in omitting the idea that these cultural practices had broader and deeper meanings regarding women's health, well-being, sexuality and roles in the community.

In times of globalization and the mixing of cultures, traditional practices must undergo changes if they are to survive in a transformed environment. The commercialization and objectification of the world and culture cause recontextualization of the discussion on knees-and-elbows/forearms positions as a visually attractive form of contemporary dances like Kangamoko and Baikoko, or more widely as different variants of 'twerking', and of reconstructed physical exercises.

## Note

1. One of the sex-imitating Belarusian dances is skoki or the jumping dance Kaza i kazel (She-goat and He-goat) performed at a wedding, where an elderly man and woman dance together. In this dance, at one moment the woman kneels resting her hands on the floor, while the man caresses her back with his hands, and leans or lies down on her from behind. Then he stabs her with his imaginary 'horns' formed by hands and fingers and topples her on the floor. At one point he imitates sexual intercourse (Kozenka 2011, 46).

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There is no created data set associated with the paper.

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