

WALTZING THROUGH EUROPE

Attitudes towards Couple Dances in the
Long Nineteenth-Century



EGIL BAKKA, THERESA JILL BUCKLAND,
HELENA SAARIKOSKI AND ANNE VON BIBRA WHARTON (EDS)



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Cover image: *A Drunken Scene in a Dancing Hall with a Sly Customer Eyeing a Young Girl* (1848). Coloured etching by G. Cruikshank, after himself. Wellcome Collection, CC BY 4.0. Cover design: Anna Gatti.

II. Continuity and Reinvention: Past Round Dances in Present Estonia¹

Sille Kapper

Introduction

Who needs round dances today, and why? The aim of this chapter is to discuss the meanings and functions of round dances² in social and recreational contexts in Estonia, since the nineteenth century, and explore the way in which they gradually turned into a specific practice valued as local or national cultural heritage. The dance forms in question derive from the repertoire of the Estonian-speaking population, who, until the beginning of the twentieth century, lived mainly in rural settings. I shall focus on the use of past round dance forms in modern times — from 1991, when important changes in the entire social and cultural sphere were initiated by Estonia regaining its independence, until 2012,

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- 1 This research was supported by ETF (Eesti Teadusfond, Estonian Science Foundation), grant no. 9132.
 - 2 In this contribution, the concept of round dances is based on the minutes of the first meeting of a sub-study group of the study group on Ethnochoreology, *Round Dances — Couple Dances Originating in the 19th Century*, held in Prague on 3–6 April 2003. According to the minutes, the major characteristics of round dances were that 1) one couple can realise a complete version of a dance; 2) couple-turning moves along a circular path; and 3) in couple turning, partners face each other. Waltz, Polka, Schottische and Mazurka were mentioned as focal dance types for the planned research, while regulated (one-melody, sequence) dances were considered as a separate group, adjacent, but connected, to round dances.

when the research project was completed. During the period under study, we witnessed a broad range of different and partially opposed ideologies and identities revealed in the dancing of round dances in Estonia. A Polka or Waltz can be danced because they are perceived as a manifestation of someone's local origin (identity); for a dancer or choreographer the same dances may also mean and express being Estonian (as national identity and ideology). However, these dances can also be chosen by a dancer or a choreographer in order to emphasise some aspects considered characteristic, important, and desired in traditional dancing (ideology) by a particular community or group of dancers (identity), etc. To understand the roots of these numerous possibilities for interpreting round dances in a contemporary society, I shall provide a short summary of the history of round dances in Estonia.

General Outlines of the Historical Background

Round dances conquered the dance floors of Estonian peasants by the end of the nineteenth century,³ superseding earlier chain dances, older forms of couple dancing and contra dances.⁴ The scholarly collection of Estonian folk dances⁵ started in 1913⁶ and at first, relatively little attention was paid to unregulated round dances. The focus was on

3 Kristjan Torop, 'Kussai tantsida ja mida tantsiti enne meid', in *Vanad seltskonnatantsud*, ed. by Heino Aassalu, Pill Luht, and Kristjan Torop (Tallinn: Rahvakultuuri Arendus- ja Koolituskeskus, 1997), pp. 8–12 (pp. 10–11).

4 Rudolf Põldmäe and Herbert Tampere, *Valimik eesti rahvatantse* (Tartu: Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiiv 1938), p. 41.

5 In order to avoid confusing connotations, I employ the term *traditional dance* instead of *folk dance*, but the latter sometimes appears in quotations and reviews.

6 The earliest data about Estonians' dancing are found in *Gesta Danorum* by Saxo Grammaticus (1172), followed by medieval chronicles (1584, 1610), and later travelogues (1741, 1819), in which Baltic-Germans emotionally describe local festivities. See Anu Vissel, 'Ülevaade varasematest töödest eesti rahvatantsu kogumisel ja arhiveerimisel Eesti Rahvaluule Arhiivi materjalide põhjal', in *Rahvatantsu uurimine: arhiivid, meetodid*, ed. by E. Lukka (Viljandi: Viljandi Kultuurikolledž, 1991), pp. 54–64 (pp. 54–55). In 1913, Anna Raudkats, the first Estonian scholar specialising in choreology, made expeditions to Kolga rand on the Northern coast and Setumaa in the South-West of Estonia. Her research produced a list of thirty-eight dances (EÜS X 1147/1335). Raudkats herself considered many of them as 'modern salon dances with local names', and did not accord particular importance to this set within the dances listed; Richard Tõnnus, *Anna Raudkats oma ajas* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat, 1991).

variants of sequence dances and older forms, where possible. Probably one reason for the lack of interest in ‘simple’ Polkas and Waltzes was their popularity and wide distribution as social dances among different population groups, which encumbered their use on stage. During Estonia’s first period of independence between 1918 and 1940, the capacity to build national identity was the main justification for any kind of national research, including folklore studies. As can be detected from contemporaneous comments,⁷ folklorists looked particularly for obsolete dance forms. Valuable materials were as old and ‘authentic’ as possible, preferably without urban influences,⁸ and peculiar to ‘original’⁹ Estonian peasant culture. Round dances, especially their unregulated forms (as opposed to sequence forms) were considered unsuitable for stage presentation, and therefore not worth collecting either.

With the development of technology, film recording of traditional dancing was also made possible from the beginning of the twentieth century, but, due to several reasons, a thorough analysis of collected audio-visual materials only started in 2007.¹⁰ Materials recorded from the small West-Estonian island of Kihnu formed the first collection to be analysed, and it also constitutes an important part of the basic data used in the present study. The statistical composition of analysed film and video clips provides evidence for oral statements often repeated in the archives.¹¹ 31 of 352 excerpts are classified as Polka and 43 as Waltz, the rest are divided between 44 different dance types (mainly one-melody dances, sequence dances, but also unregulated Schottische and *Labajalg* — to be addressed later in this chapter). While archival

7 E.g. ‘Ka rahvatants muinsuskaitse alla’ [n.a.], *Postimees*, 200 (28 July 1936).

8 It should be noted that urban influences were certainly there. According to folklore collections, many popular dances are said to be ‘brought in’ by musicians, seamen, remote workers or soldiers. But, unlike many other European countries, there are no (or at least no discovered) references to dancing masters’ activities or organised training courses in Estonia before the first period of independence (1920–1939).

9 Meaning here: unique, different from others.

10 The grant project ETF7231 examining ‘original choreographic text and performing style of Estonian folk dances on the material of audio-visual recordings’ was carried out by researchers from Estonian Literary Museum (Ingrid Rüütel) and Tallinn University (Eha Rüütel, Angela Arraste and Sille Kapper), based on materials from West-Estonian island Kihnu. See also <https://www.etis.ee/Portal/Projects/Display/2c23791e-80ab-4a48-b957-79d568798615?lang=ENG>

11 ‘Polka and Waltz were the main dances’ as Kristjan Torop has put it in *Viron vakka. 105 virolaista kansantanssia* (Tampere: Suomalaisen kansantanssin ystävät ry., 1991), p. 10.

manuscripts shed light on the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century all over Estonia, the audio-visual recordings used in my study derive from Kihnu in 1931–2009. However, the proportion of round dances seems to be quite similar in both sources. At the same time, unregulated Polka and Waltz dances, although very popular, are not described in published Estonian folk dance collections,¹² which are based on verbal fieldwork notes, mainly from the first half of the twentieth century. This suggests low folkloristic interest in those dance types, but this is explained by the fact that at the time of collecting, round dances were still popular — everybody knew them and so they felt no need to fix or preserve them. Another reason for the lack of interest may be the seeming simplicity of round dance patterns — dances without formation were deemed unsuitable for stage presentation.

Due to the late inception of the scholarly collection of traditional dances in Estonia, we have little information about their choreographic texts before the mid-nineteenth century. Assumptions have been made based on indirect sources such as music, or on better-investigated neighbouring dance cultures like those of the Finnish, Scandinavian (especially Swedish), Russian and also German peoples, because the local upper class in Estonia consisted of Baltic-German nobility. However, researchers¹³ have claimed that Estonian peasants probably had more influential cultural contacts with the lower classes of neighbouring countries. This can be seen from the repertory spread and the proliferation of dancing styles that were described as rather simple and having little in common with court dances. For a more nuanced appreciation of round dancing, we have to consider the communication that existed between the Baltic-German nobility and Estonian-speaking peasant communities — in archival manuscripts, there are remarks that refer to their dancing together, although as a rare and exceptional occasion.

12 Such as Anna Raudkats, *Eesti rahvatantsud* (Tartu: Postimees, 1926); Põldmäe and Tampere, *Valimik*; Herbert Tampere, *Eesti rahvapillid ja rahvatantsud* (Tallinn: Eesti Raamat 1975); Torop, *Viron vakka. 105 virolaista kansantanssia*.

13 Põldmäe and Tampere, *Valimik*; Kristjan Torop, *Kontratantsud* (Tallinn: Rahvakultuuri Arendus- ja Koolituskeskus, 1995).

Theoretical Background and Some Methodological Aspects

In this article, round dances are addressed mainly within the frameworks of social communication and traditional dancing. I define the latter based on Lauri Honko¹⁴ and Tiiu Jaago¹⁵ as a part of folklore (oral traditions) — a way of dancing or a dance form that exists in variants and occurs within communities. This folkloristic approach is essential when analysing choreographic texts, with which a credible dance study should begin. Looking at verbal descriptions, audio-visual recordings, and live events of round dances danced in Estonia, their individual and communal variability is obvious. In public discourse, the same phenomenon may also be called ‘folk dancing’, but I would rather avoid this term here because of its vague nature and connotations related to stage performance. I shall mention stage dance later in this article (and the expressions ‘national stage dance’ and ‘stage folk dance’ are then used as synonyms) — this is because of the particular situation in Estonia where the position of stage dance is very visible and powerful, leading people to see traditional dancing through the prism of stage folk dance as well.

The social position of traditional dancing is better understood by addressing it as a functional practice, which could be defined by its use of traditional movement elements or patterns for different purposes like ritual or social communication. Following Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin,¹⁶ tradition can be seen as a symbolic representation of the past, inseparable from its present interpretation. I find this approach especially suitable in the case of such an ephemeral phenomenon as dancing, regardless of whether the first, second or third existence of a dance¹⁷ is in question, as we shall see in this chapter.

14 Lauri Honko, ‘Folklooriprotsess’, *Mäetagused*, 6 (1998), 56–84, <https://doi.org/10.7592/mt1998.06.honko>

15 Tiiu Jaago ‘Rahvaluule mõiste kujunemine Eestis’, *Mäetagused*, 9 (1999), 70–91, <https://doi.org/10.7592/mt1999.09.rhl>

16 Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin, ‘Tradition: Genuine or Spurious?’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 97 (1984), 273–88, <https://doi.org/10.2307/540610>

17 Andriy Nahachewsky, ‘Participatory and Presentational Dance as Ethnochoreological Categories’, *Dance Research Journal*, 27/1 (1995), 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1478426>

Regina Bendix¹⁸ emphasises the temporal character of the authenticity of traditions and asks who needs them and why. Proceeding from this idea, traditional dancing can also be addressed as a bodily manifestation of identity — either personal or corporate, not necessarily national. People need and use dancing to reinforce or even declare their identity, and identity formation through real bodily activity should be accessible to everybody. In today's Estonia, national identity-building is colourfully expressed in choreographed national dances, widely practised in organised folk dance groups and performed on stages and in stadiums. The individual agency and identity of dancers tends to be suppressed in such cases, and therefore, one cannot really address such dancing as revival or second-existence dance.¹⁹ Traditional dancing in its participatory and social functions, on the contrary, permits and reveals personal identities because it is based on dancers' adherence to norms or rules they have chosen deliberately.

Until about the end of the nineteenth century, traditional dancing was the only way of dancing an Estonian peasant would consider — other opportunities were unknown or at least their practice unthinkable. Nowadays, traditional dance as a style is chosen consciously and purposefully from an immense range of alternatives. Choosing round dances is another step further along the same path, which reveals something about their attitude to traditional dancing, and to traditional culture in general.

Although some data describing local variants of internationally known round dances has existed in Estonian folklore collections since their very beginning, the opportunity to highlight round dances as a special genre and possible expression of identity has emerged only with their gradual falling out of everyday use. The speed of this process has differed regionally throughout the twentieth century. Now we have arrived at a highly interesting situation in which round dances are practised in different, smaller communities, both real and imagined,²⁰

18 Regina Bendix, *In Search of Authenticity: The Formation of Folklore Studies* (Madison: University of Washington Press, 1997).

19 Please see Felix Hoerburger, 'Once Again: On the Concept of "Folk Dance"', *Journal of the International Folk Music Council*, 20 (1968), 30–32, <https://doi.org/10.2307/836068>

20 Benedict Anderson's (1983) concept of imagined communities refers to nations as socially constructed and imagined groups of people who never really meet all together. I propose to imagine communities as culturally constructed groups whose

usually in recreational situations, but nevertheless carrying several identity-related meanings or ideologies. Previously, addressing staged folklore and dance folklorism in Estonia²¹ and following the examples of Peter Niedermüller²² and Ingrid Rüütel,²³ I have also referred to such groups as symbolic communities — groups of people sharing common values and expressing them in their choices concerning dance movements and context. In this chapter I have decided to use the term ‘imagined communities’ to stress the imaginary of dancers’ communities as differentiated from real social groups of people.

In dance research, direct participant observation can sometimes contribute more than a critical analysis of recordings. Therefore, much of my data concerning the context and use of round dances nowadays derive from my personal bodily experiences on dance floors, combined with observation and conversations with dancers and musicians. My unstructured fieldwork diary covers about the last eight years of my experience, but my visual and bodily memory as a dancer and dance teacher reaches back to the 1990s. Based on the combination of verbal, visual and embodied data, I shall proceed with my discussion of the main issue of this chapter: the role and position of round dances in Estonian social dance tradition.

Round Dance Types in Kihnu

The memories of elderly people interviewed by dance collectors since the beginning of the twentieth century reach back to the second half of the nineteenth century, even in Kihnu, where systematic dance

peculiarities come from, and are expressed in, their dancing. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983).

- 21 Sille Kapper, ‘Tantsufolklorismist tänases Eestis’, in *Tonditosin*, ed. by Mall Hiimeäe and Liina Saarlo (Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi Teaduskirjastus, 2008), pp. 24–52.
- 22 Peter Niedermüller, ‘Central Europe between Tradition and Modernity’, in *Tradition and Modernisation. Plenary Papers Read at the 4th International Congress of the Société Internationale d’Ethnologie et de Folklore*, ed. by Reimund Kvideland (Turku: NIF Publications, 1992) pp. 109–21.
- 23 Ingrid Rüütel, ‘Pärimuskultuur postmodernistlikus ühiskonnas — minevikurelikt või taasleititud väärtus?’, in *Pärimusmuusika muutuv as ühiskonnas. Töid etnomusikoloogialalalt*, vol. 1, ed. by Triinu Ojamaa and Ingrid Rüütel (Tartu: Eesti Kirjandusmuuseumi etnomusikoloogia osakond, 2002), pp. 165–89.

collection started especially late — the first descriptions derive from 1932, written by local school teacher, historian and musician Theodor Saar (1906–1984).

Kihnu, with its approximately 500 inhabitants and 16.4 km² area, is a small island located in the Baltic Sea. Physical detachment (it lies over 10km from the mainland, and 41km from the nearest city) has shaped the conditions for the preservation of regional differences in Kihnu culture. Among other traditional phenomena present in everyday life today, Kihnu people know their older dance forms well and are always eager to dance when musicians play the suitable tunes. This has made possible a relatively long period of folkloristic documentation, and in this way Kihnu culture constitutes a unique reservoir for a researcher interested in the change in traditions over time, including dancing. Continuous dance practices in Kihnu literally provide tangible data from intangible past times.

Labajalg before and after the Waltz

In the middle of the nineteenth century and earlier, the only dance used for entertainment purposes in Kihnu was *Labajalg*.²⁴ It is important to discuss *Labajalg* here because it is the direct predecessor of the Waltz in Estonia, and remains closely related to it after the emergence of the Waltz in Estonia. In earlier scholarly literature,²⁵ *Labajalg* is described as similar to several European 3/4-time couple dances with rather fast

24 ERA II 56, 206 (26) and 217 (3) — H. Tampere 1933; ERA II 128, 41 (10) — H. Tampere 1936. Chain dances with *labajalg*-like basic steps were also used in ritual functions, which slowly disappeared during the second half of the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, and have sometimes been revived for special occasions later (e.g. SKSÄ-K 23 — P.-L. Rausmaa, I. Rüütel, K. Torop 1987). The ritual function of round dances is not the main topic of this chapter, but I cannot resist mentioning that our ‘main dances’, Polka and Waltz, have also been used in ritual situations, e.g. bridal dancing at weddings, which used to be graced by the (pre-Waltz) *Labajalg* (Kristjan Torop, *Viron vakka. 105 eesti rahvatantsu* (Tallinn: Eesti Rahvatantsu ja Rahvamuusika Selts, 2008), p. 14). Later, the Waltz or Polka tended to fulfil this function (RKM II 10, 11/104 (2) — T. Saar 1947). The most common dance in this context was the Waltz, and it is also the dance of the bridal couple in contemporary mainland weddings — special wedding Waltz lessons are taught for that purpose, but sometimes newlyweds select their favourite tune to perform the dance to.

25 Pöldmäe and Tampere, *Valimik*, p. 41

turning, like the German Dreher or Ländler.²⁶ Kristjan Torop compares earlier forms of *Labajalg* with the Finnish couple *Polska*.²⁷ Its basic step combination consists of three supports on the full sole, one on each beat of a bar while the first (or another) beat is usually stressed. Variations in the steps are possible, but this is the basic scheme. Presumably, the same step combination was also used in chain dances and Polonaise-like couple-column dances in older forms of couple dancing, as can be derived from the rather fragmentary descriptions and musical analysis that exist.²⁸ Estonian data does not reveal much about the partners' hold and movement paths in older couple dancing from the beginning of the nineteenth century or earlier. However, the scarce information available hints at similar traits as old Norwegian couple dancing as described by Egil Bakka:²⁹ it is likely that older forms of couple *Labajalg* included the improvisational combination of traditional elements, such as holding hands and turning round on the spot (or with very little progression) or travelling along the dance floor without turning (promenade), and they were not accompanied by any special melody.³⁰ Torop also states that couple-turning on the spot might be characteristic of older couple dances, practised before the contra dance era.³¹

Written analytical descriptions of the nineteenth-century (and later) *Labajalg* in Kihnu³² do not specify the turning technique other than to say it is 'usual', which in 1936 probably meant executing a full turn during two bars as in the Waltz, Polka, etc. That is why I address *Labajalg* in this chapter, concentrating on nineteenth-century-derived round dances; although *Labajalg* steps and even couple-turning were probably already danced much earlier, in the nineteenth century they intermingled with the round dance technique in which the turning couple moves along

26 For a detailed description of these dances see e.g. Aenne Goldschmidt, *Handbuch des Deutschen Volkstanzes* (Berlin: Henschelverlag Kunst und Gesellschaft, 1981), pp. 100–12, 177–86.

27 Torop, *Viron vakka. 105 eesti rahvatantsu*, p. 13.

28 Tampere, *Eesti rahvapillid ja rahvatantsud*.

29 Egil Bakka, 'Dance Dialects: Traces of Local Development or of Processes of Diffusion', *Studia Musicologica Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 33.1 (1991), 215–29, <https://doi.org/10.2307/902445>

30 Tampere, *Eesti rahvapillid ja rahvatantsud*; Torop, *Viron vakka. 105 eesti rahvatantsu*, p. 13.

31 Torop, *Kontratantsud*, p. 23.

32 ERA II 128, 39/40 (6–7) — H. Tampere 1936.

a circular path.³³ However, what is noteworthy is that the descriptions from Kihnu mention turning couples progressing in a big circle in a clockwise direction.³⁴ This was unusual elsewhere in Estonia,³⁵ but quite widespread in eastern Europe,³⁶ e.g. Poland or Slovenia.

According to collected data, in Kihnu, couples turning with the *Labajalg* step clockwise or counter-clockwise always moved clockwise in the large circle, until the first decades of the twentieth century. It is quite unusual in other parts of Estonia, and similar data are only derived from the western coastal area (geographically and culturally close to Kihnu).³⁷ Elsewhere, couple dancing usually meant progressing in the circle counter-clockwise; there are plenty of data about Estonian couple dances, including *Labajalg*,³⁸ as well as from European social dance tradition. The reasons why clockwise progression was popular in Kihnu remain unclear, but there are colourful memories among the Kihnu people about how counter-clockwise progression first came into fashion approximately after the First World War. The following archival quotation from T. Saar also contains much information about other aspects of *Labajalg*; therefore, let me present it in full:

Labajalg is nowadays played when older women are present, in weddings and christening parties, for example. The younger do not participate much in this dance. [...] Fifteen to twenty years ago, the dancing usually progressed clockwise. Then a change came. Perhaps the new fashion was brought in by men who came back from the [First] World War. In the transition period, usually before dancing, it was agreed in which direction to dance. More 'modern' guys sometimes made others dance counter-clockwise by starting the dashing dance in the opposite direction. Now, clockwise dancing is seen very seldom, and it tends to be danced as a 'joke' by women over thirty because the younger women are not able to follow.³⁹

33 Bakka, 'Dance Dialects', 266.

34 ERA II 133, 613/4 (137) — T. Saar 1937.

35 Except for some western coastal areas — Tampere, *Eesti rahvapillid ja rahvatantsud*, pp. 62, 159.

36 Personal communication.

37 Tampere, *Eesti rahvapillid ja rahvatantsud*, pp. 62, 159.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 159.

39 ERA II 133, 613/4 (137) — T. Saar 1937, translated from the Estonian by Sille Kapper.

Descriptions lack detail about how this ‘dashing dance in the opposite direction’ functioned practically. It could not last for long because it is technically impossible (or could cause serious problems) to move simultaneously in opposite directions on the same trajectory. Consultation and agreement were more peaceful options, and, indeed, there were others: in personal correspondence in 2010–2011, Estonian ethnomusicologist Ingrid Rüütel, who has been studying Kihnu culture for more than half a century, also remembered her own experience with two different dancing directions. In 1951, at a dancing party in an old community house in Kihnu there were very many dancers, she said, and therefore, two concentric circles were formed, one of them progressing clockwise and the other counter-clockwise.⁴⁰ What makes this information interesting is that in the 1950s, the *Labajalg* had fallen out of fashion. The archival quotation above shows that the *Labajalg* started to disappear from wider use in the second half of the 1930s at the latest. By the 1950s, many new dances had come into use. In 1956, Rüütel and her colleague described twenty-one of them, including the Waltz and the Polka,⁴¹ and by then these new dances were also performed progressing clockwise.⁴² Forming two or more concentric circles is a traditional and widespread way of dancing round dances (unregulated as well as sequence forms), but, until now, there has been no data of circles moving in opposite directions.

The last sentence of the quotation is also noteworthy: T. Saar claims that younger people cannot dance progressing clockwise. It really requires some mastery to transform the movement schemas so that the couple can progress clockwise, but probably only because it is an unfamiliar way of moving, at least in the beginning. On film and video recordings there is no evidence of clockwise progression in round dances — now, Kihnu people have generally accepted the standard European and mainland-Estonian way of dancing.

40 From the author’s personal communication with Ingrid Rüütel.

41 TRÜ EKRR I 9, 387/485 — I. Rüütel and M. Sikk 1956.

42 After reading a draft of this article, Rüütel additionally remembered that the Foxtrot was also danced at the party she described, and that later, in 1955–1956, it was the only dance with random movement paths in the repertoire.

The Polka

Although the women of Kihnu have always been more eager to dance than men, and traditional round dances are usually danced by female couples (see Fig. 11.1),⁴³ new dances were introduced by men.⁴⁴ Due to natural and geographical conditions and historically developed customs, they were usually seamen or, in later times, they at least worked away from home. So, according to folklore collections, the arrival of the Polka can be dated quite exactly; in 1937, eighty-seven-year-old Liis Alas described how, about sixty-three years earlier, Uieda Jõnn brought the Polka from Denmark. There was no Polka in Kihnu before, she said.⁴⁵ The Jõnn in question was a ship captain born in 1848, so he was really a young man at that time and travelled a lot, at least on the Baltic Sea. Based on this excerpt and some other similar data, we can conclude that the Polka was brought in from overseas and it has been danced in Kihnu since the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

The Schottische

There is not such exact data about the Schottische coming to Kihnu, but elsewhere in Estonia, and since the 1950s in Kihnu, it has usually been mentioned as of the same period as the Waltz and the Polka. The Schottische is very popular among Kihnu people nowadays, and it is danced not only to traditional music, but also to any suitable rhythm, including pop music. In the usual schema of the Kihnu Schottische, there are some characteristic differences from the versions danced on the mainland, but in recent years the younger people of Kihnu have also started to improvise and use more variants of the Schottische. On the mainland, interested dancers sometimes try to imitate the usual Kihnu version.

43 Additionally, a video example of Kihnu women and girls dancing their traditional version of the Polka in July 2016 in Viljandi can be seen here: '20160729 161512 polka', 1:23, posted online by Sille Kapper, *Youtube*, 14 November 2017, <https://youtu.be/3Bu5pumjPUU>

44 Ingrid Rütel, 'Kihnu pärimustantsud minevikus ja tänapäeval', *Mäetagused*, 41 (2009), 53–74, <https://doi.org/10.7592/mt2009.41.ryytel>

45 ERA II 172, 110 (1) — H. Tampere 1937.

The Mazurka

In the existing research data, among Kihnu dances, the Mazurka has only been mentioned once and without any further description.⁴⁶ The informant was born in 1871 and knew ‘*Massorka*’ from when she was young, i.e. the end of the nineteenth century. Elsewhere in Estonia there was the *Polkamasurka* — with a basic step consisting of three supports in a bar and down-and-up swings on each support.⁴⁷ Herbert Tampere thinks the latter has also intermingled with the *Labajalg*.⁴⁸ Maybe some fusion with *Polkamasurka* can be seen in the movement of the only Kihnu *Labajalg* captured on videotape, in which some couples dance with noticeable bounds and rebounds on every beat,⁴⁹ but without any typical Mazurka basic step.⁵⁰ On the other hand, in this recording the *Labajalg* also very much resembles the Waltz, and only differs in some nuances. This can be explained by the fact that, for the recording, older ladies were asked to demonstrate the *Labajalg* they could remember from their youth, but which was not in active use any more.

The Waltz

The smooth assimilation of the *Labajalg* into the Waltz may be the reason why it is hard to say when the Waltz arrived on the dance floors of Kihnu. Liis Pull, born in 1880, has said that she danced the Waltz when she was young,⁵¹ i.e. the Waltz had arrived at least by the turn of the twentieth century. This is the earliest date we can derive from the folklore collections of Kihnu, but it is extraordinarily when compared to other regions of Estonia, to say nothing about Europe in general. What I mean by the assimilation of the *Labajalg* into the Waltz is mainly the turning technique that allowed couple progression along a circular path, because in the basic step no principal differences actually emerged. The Kihnu Waltz is also danced on an almost full sole and with modest bounds in

46 KKI 7, 402 (10) — R. Viidalepp 1948.

47 ERA II 172, 49/50 (19) — H. Tampere 1937.

48 Tampere, *Eesti rahvapillid ja rahvatantsud*, p. 62.

49 SKSÄ-K 23 — P.-L. Rausmaa, I. Rüütel, and K. Torop 1987.

50 For the typical Mazurka basic step, see e.g. Goldschmidt, *Handbuch des Deutschen Volkstanzen*, pp. 199–200.

51 RKM II 27, 487 (7) — A. Strutzkin 1948.

the ankle joint and ball of the foot. In the Kihnu Waltz, the combination of turning motifs and travelling without turning also persist, but instead of promenade-like progression where partners are positioned next to each other, now the closed position is retained, and in progressing the girl usually moves backwards. In progression without turning, the basic steps of the Waltz are usually replaced by walking (one step on the first beat of each bar). Motifs are changed according to the music, usually after each sixteen bars. Based on the analysed audio-visual recordings,⁵² the older way of changing motifs was rather unified — when a couple started walking or waltzing (turning), others followed; nowadays different motifs may also be danced. Couples progress in a big circle counter-clockwise, and, although different motifs (turning or travelling without turning) do not have to be performed by all couples at the same time, the progression speed of couples is similar so that it is easy to maintain the circle.

Round Dances as Part of Kihnu Identity

Since the 1980s, there are no more data about clockwise progression in Kihnu dance collections, but progression in a circle has remained, namely in its counter-clockwise form. Furthermore, nowadays the position of couples in a big circle and their progression along a circular path are considered special traits of dancing in Kihnu, and local people present the floor pattern of round dances as peculiar to the dance tradition of Kihnu. Similar statements can also be found in the scholarly literature.

Ingrid Rüütel has described how Kihnu people form their own 'Kihnu circle' around other dancers when dancing together with mainland people.⁵³ In January 2009 I observed the same in Pärnu Kuursaal, where traditional Kihnu dance tunes were played. Many couples from Kihnu danced the Waltz, Polka and Schottische, as well as sequence forms in a big circle around the others, who did not know those dances and seemingly also did not care much about them. The circle was clearly formed and Kihnu dancers sometimes struggled to maintain it when

52 SKSÄ-K 22 (2) — P.-L. Rausmaa, I. Rüütel, K. Torop 1987; ERA, DV 34 (33) — I. Rüütel 1997; ERA DV 615 (1) — I. Rüütel 2007.

53 Rüütel, 'Kihnu pärimustantsud minevikus ja tänapäeval', 59.

those who weren't aware of it had disrupted the pattern. Some mainland couples who tried to join the circle were kindly accepted on the condition that they were able to keep up with the speed of movement.

In August 2003, I documented a similar personal experience in Kihnu. There was a band in a local pub playing pop music and a crowd of tourists were hanging around on the dance floor. Several couples formed of Kihnu girls and young women danced Polkas and Schottisches in a circle around the tourists. I was there with my teenage daughter and we decided to join in. Local dancers did not pay any attention to us.

Based on the above events, my reading, and my personal experience as a dance teacher, I never would have thought that a circular movement path was something peculiar to Kihnu. Rather, I associated it with the turning technique of nineteenth-century-derived couple dances, which succeed best when the couple moves around on a circular path. But another case I observed in July 2010 brought me back to the idea that the floor pattern of round dances can really be regarded as an identity symbol: Kihnu women were teaching some dances, including the Waltz, the Polka and the Schottische, in a festival workshop where their group leader Veera Leas emphasised that Kihnu couple dances are always performed in a circle. What I heard her expressing at that moment was a proud declaration of difference in respect of what is actually a typical feature of internationally known social dances; she wished to identify a peculiarity unique to her own small region, her home.

Round Dances and Dancing Communities in Postmodern Estonia

In contemporary Estonia, oral traditions of dancing are rather fragmented, as is the entire cultural environment. Traditional dance forms are practised in different real and imagined communities with their own peculiarities and unique traits. In the following, I address the use of round dances in a real community (Kihnu) and two imagined communities of dancers (stage folk dancers and dance clubs).

Inhabitants of Kihnu



Fig. 11.1 Women dancing the Polka at a wedding ceremony. Photo by Olev Mihkelmaa (2009), Kihnu, Estonia. © ERA DF 28313.

Veera had every right to say what she did. Nowadays, the island of Kihnu, in addition to its geographical location, has turned into a cultural island within the landscape of Estonian dance tradition. Nowadays the Kihnu dance tradition represents distinctive qualities dissimilar to surrounding areas. The knowledge of round dancing technique, together with the traditional circular movement path, has been retained in Kihnu despite the influence of modern ballroom dances (Foxtrot, Tango, etc) that resulted in the increased popularity of random movement patterns elsewhere. On the Estonian mainland, people started dancing Polka and Waltz along random pathways, which obviously reflected the influence of modern ballroom dances adopted first in towns and, since the 1920–1930s, also taught in villages.⁵⁴ Kihnu people continued dancing the Waltz, Polka, and Schottische throughout the twentieth century, thinking of them as local traditional dances (although remembering the common knowledge that they had initially been brought in from outside). The

⁵⁴ Torop, 'Kus sai tantsida ja mida tantsiti enne meid', p. 11.

local forms of those dances also included maintaining the circular movement path. Thus, a former internationally known fashion turned into a local peculiarity, and, thereby, a means of identity expression as well as a useful 'unique' element to be presented to guests and tourists. Local identity is manifested in bodily movement while dancing, and in forming the 'Kihnu circle' anywhere there are enough Kihnu people dancing together.⁵⁵ It is also expressed verbally when explaining the Kihnu way of dancing to others, as in the above-mentioned workshop or in my interview with Maria Michelson in 2011.⁵⁶



Fig. 11.2 Women dancing the Waltz 'Sõrmõlugu'. Photo by Anu Vissel (1985), Linaküla village, Kihnu, Estonia. © ERA Foto 14172.

In addition to the steps, the turning technique and the circular travelling on the floor, the dancing of the Kihnu community is quite original in its movement style, which has been characterised by different observers as modest, peaceful and dignified, but also light and lively. For a typical dance hold and dancers' posture, see Figures 11.1, 11.2, and 11.3, and

55 E.g. ERA DV 702–704 — I. Rütel, S. Kapper 2009.

56 Sille Kapper, Interview with Maria Michelson in Kihnu on August 13 2011. Private collection.

also the video example in footnote 43 above. The style is revealed best in round dances when many couples are dancing at the same time;⁵⁷ it does not depend much on the dancers' age, but has some connection with individual skill. The Kihnu community is also justified in being proud of their dancing, because such uninhibited circular flow of round dances is based on good body co-ordination and technical skills that many untrained mainland dancers do not possess.



Fig. 11.3 Dancing in Kihnu. Photo by photo by Mikk, TRÜ (1954), Kihnu, Estonia.
© ERA Foto 2530.

Stage Folk Dancers

Stage folk dancers⁵⁸ are usually able to co-ordinate themselves so that couple-turning in round dances succeeds. But this rule has exceptions, because choreographed national stage dances learned in many hobby groups often do not include a round dance couple-turning technique and therefore, in some cases, little attention is paid to it in group rehearsals.

⁵⁷ E.g. TRÜ EKRK I 9, 387/485 — I. Rüütel and M. Sikk 1956.

⁵⁸ I use this term in reference to people belonging to organised folk-dance groups and ensembles that meet regularly (once, twice, or three times a week as a maximum) for rehearsals and usually learn their repertoire for performing purposes.

Another reason for the disappearance of round dances from social dance floors is that regular practice or some special training are required to be able to move this way, and even more so if several couples are on the floor: in that case, knowledge of the tradition is needed by a critical number of dancers who can make the circular progression work, as is the case in Kihnu. In national stage dance choreographies, on the contrary, traditional circles are purposefully broken and floor patterns diversified. In Estonia, folk dances were presented on stage for the first time in 1904,⁵⁹ and, in the beginning, their form was not changed much. Stylised national stage dance, similar to character dance, was developed in Soviet times and it has been fostered until the present as a special style clearly distinct from traditional dancing. Increasingly sophisticated compositions, thick with different motifs and rich in standardised details, often leave out the turning technique as well as the floor pattern of round dances. Due to this, through national stage dances practised in folk-dance groups, the skill of traditional round dancing technique is not passed on. However, teachers with a special interest in older traditions consciously choose to introduce motifs belonging to traditional dancing, including round dances, and there are also groups who mainly deal with traditional dances or who have interest, time and energy for both styles.

As a result, stage folk dancers (or former stage folk dancers), who through their activity in folk-dance groups know the steps and techniques of round dances, can be imagined as a community in contemporary Estonia. Their dancing style is usually influenced by national stage dance training and is therefore rather different from, for example, Kihnu style, but this does not matter if stage folk dancers use their knowledge and skills in spontaneous dance situations. It is important that in those cases their dancing can be seen as a dual expression of their personal identity: their identity as a skilled dancer and their identity as an Estonian.

Dance Clubs

However, observations of traditional dancing events — e.g. traditional music concerts, traditional dance festivals and workshops or dance club⁶⁰

59 Tõnnus, *Anna Raudkats oma ajas*, p. 99.

60 Dance club (Estonian: *tantsuklubi*) is an informal social movement for practising traditional dances mainly derived from Estonian villages at the end of the nineteenth

gatherings — however, show that there are not enough opportunities for practising round dances nowadays (at least, not from the point of view of skilled and interested dancers). The use of round dancing knowledge is impeded by the small number of skilled dancers, which sometimes may turn out to be frustrating. In 2011, a dance student expressed her resentment to me in this way: ‘I am frustrated when I dance a normal dashing Polka and then they [other dancers] dawdle in my way’.⁶¹ Therefore, people interested in traditional dancing organise special events, such as dance clubs, where people come together to learn and enjoy old social dance forms they consider traditional. But the acquisition of round dance steps and turning techniques implies some systematic exercise, which is not done in dance clubs. Sometimes, short workshops on different topics are organised, but this does not substitute for regular practising. In dance clubs, there is no formal dance teaching. According to my observations, long-term regular participation may result in knowledge of the round dance turning technique and the skill to practise it, but often it does not. In dance clubs, as a rule, sequence dances — which usually include round dance turning elements during four bars maximum — are popular. This is a manageable amount of turning, easy even for occasional guests. The inability to perform coordinated couple-turning, I suppose, has caused the popularity of a sequence Polka form consisting of heel and toe steps, basic Polka steps moving forward counter-clockwise and girls turning under their partner’s arm.⁶² This is often danced to any Polka music instead of couple turning.

Dance club guests sometimes consider unregulated round dances boring, which can also be connected to their lack of skills (and thus their lack of enjoyment in the experience of turning). However, this can also be caused by deeper changes in society; traditional forms of round

and beginning of the twentieth centuries. The movement started in Estonia in the beginning of 1990s, following the example of Hungarian *táncház*, as opposed to national stage dance. Regular events that always include live music are held in Tallinn and Tartu every two weeks, occasionally in other places.

61 Translated from the Estonian by Sille Kapper.

62 At the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, this sequence spread in Estonia under many different names, the most popular of them *papiljonipolka* (Butterfly Polka), but it was usually danced to a specific type of melody only. In Norway, this dance form is known under the name *lettisk polka* (Latvian Polka).

dancing began over one hundred years ago, when the speed of life was different. Nowadays, young people seek kaleidoscopic change on dance floors and elsewhere. Dance club dancers say that sequence forms bring variety. From my observations, I can add that, nowadays, richer and more frequent variation is brought into round dances performed by skilled couples too.⁶³

International Round Dances in Local Mirrors: A Kihnu Case and an Estonian Case

The casual atmosphere of dance clubs and other traditional music and dance events allows people to choose their way of dancing and thereby express their attitudes, beliefs, and convictions. The situation on contemporary dance floors in Estonia can be described as postmodern, fragmentary, plural, and playful. Round dances are out of fashion in general, but danced in more or less historical forms in some small communities — the real one of Kihnu and imagined communities of stage folk dancers and dance clubs. To be accurate, unregulated round dances have never been alone on Estonian dance floors. Sequence forms, later modern ballroom dances or improvisational styles, have been danced by turns with round dances. In this way, knowledge and use of unregulated round dances reveal the attitudes, beliefs, and convictions of dancers, i.e. their identity.

The dancing of Kihnu people reveals their respect for past dance forms as part of their local culture and identity. The high value put on local cultural space from inside and outside the island has allowed purposeful safeguarding of past knowledge by teaching children to dance and play music and organising events where traditional dances, including round dances, can be practised, e.g. traditional weddings. It has been an individual and communal choice to preserve round dances, once brought in from outside the island, now taking on the role of local peculiarity. Since the 1970s, the performing activities of the local folklore

63 In the following video, a young couple improvises with Estonian *Reinlender* (Schottische). They sometimes consciously break down the traditional four-bar-schema (done by the other couple who joins in later). 'Harju Mehed ja Tarmo Noormaa — Reinlender', 8:26, posted online by Tiit Saare, *Youtube*, 7 December 2010, <https://youtu.be/WK8O-QN96vQ>

group Kihnumaa have also contributed to the survival of traditional round dancing that, based on the example of surrounding areas, could have disappeared without conscious learning and preservation.⁶⁴ It is interesting that, in contrast to other regions of Estonia, in Kihnu the use of traditional dances has not substantially influenced the dancing style. Based on video recordings and personal observations, I can say that, nowadays, it is rather similar to the style described by Ingrid Rütel half a century ago.⁶⁵ This, once more, indicates a firm reliance on past traditions.

Safeguarding the local variants of round dances, together with other cultural peculiarities, is essential in Kihnu because they now also function as a source of income through the developing tourism industry. Knowledge of dance techniques can be compared here with handicraft skills, which can be of direct use in earning one's living. At the same time, round dances have retained their entertainment function because they are enjoyable and easy when dancers manage the appropriate techniques.

In the rest of Estonia, great interest in past traditions, including dancing, can be observed at traditional music events and workshops, which are enormously popular.⁶⁶ I have repeatedly observed how traditional music concert audiences actively and diligently follow the instructions given by musicians when following traditional movements. Unfortunately, round dances cannot be learned this way, because the acquisition of technical skills needs more detailed instruction and regular practice. Figuratively speaking, the music goes forward and, in the case of round dances, the audience cannot catch up with it. Concerts, workshops, dance clubs and even hobby-folk-dance groups have not been able to gather the critical number of skilled round dancers who would change the general situation on the dance floor. This is probably the place to repeat the words of my teacher, Kristjan Torop, that every kind of social dancing is the child of its era, and mechanical transfer into another time period would be impossible.⁶⁷

64 Rütel, 'Kihnu pärimustantsud minevikus ja tänapäeval'.

65 TRÜ EK RK I 9, 387/485 — I. Rütel and M. Sikk 1956.

66 The statement is based on my participant observations at Viljandi Traditional Music Festival 2010 and 2011, which, with its 20,000 guests, is one of the largest of its kind in the Baltic and Northern countries; see also <https://www.folk.ee/en/>

67 Torop, 'Kus sai tantsida ja mida tantsiti enne meid', p. 11.

The use of traditional movements and techniques is also inhibited by the fact that music has evolved quickly and often without regard for the needs of dancers: skilled dancers claim that new elaborations of former dance tunes are often uncomfortable or totally unsuitable for dancing older traditional forms due to beat or rhythm irregularities or other added contemporary elements. On the other hand, the number of musicians interested in and trying to make high-quality traditional dance music is slowly growing, because of the obvious need for such music among the dancing audience.

Conclusion

In Estonia, functional use of round dances has moved from real village communities into communities with a special interest in the forms. Here, round dances occur as tradition, repeatedly recreated and reinvented in different ways according to the individual and shared values of the dancers. Past movement material is performed again and again in more or less changing forms, depending on dancing purposes as well as the music, company, surroundings or dancers' personalities. In discussing who needs traditional round dances in Estonia today, and why, generally two prevailing functions can be outlined:

- identity confirmation — conscious reconstruction, presentation and reuse of old forms and styles in order to preserve them as a living practice for posterity and thereby maintain and confirm local identity (e.g. Kihnu);
- amusement — improvisational recreation and reinvention of past patterns for the sake of ecstatic joy from the successful turning and exercise of one's physical, spiritual and intellectual abilities, general entertainment, or just as a pleasant and safe background for conversation.⁶⁸

The use of round dances in any function is possible thanks to knowledge and skills acquired in the community: by growing up in a real local community with this knowledge, like Kihnu, or learning to dance in a

⁶⁸ Personal communication with young skilled dancers between twenty-two and twenty-four years of age, in 2010.

special environment created for that purpose, e.g. a folk-dance group. Skills necessary for performing round dance turning provide dancers with more opportunities to feel joy from dancing, but also make them more demanding in respect to music or other dancing conditions.

As a subsection of the first function, the connection of traditional round dances with national identity can also be seen in Estonia. It can be revealed through the stepping-stones of local identity as in Kihnu, while in dance clubs it is rather hidden behind personal values that are important to young dancers, such as impressive music or communication with friends. Among dance club patrons, the awareness of the foreign origin and international character of social dances often prevents an excessive stress on nationality. From the above-described communities, stage folk dancers certainly appreciate national values the most and quite directly through the stage and stadium performances of choreographed compositions. To some extent, the importance of nationality can also be seen in round dances when stage folk dancers bring their technical abilities and habits into social dancing, such as their use of positions, holds, posture or step versions that are characteristic of the standardised national stage dance style.

The boundaries of communities described in this article are not sharp. Many young stage folk dancers also participate in dance clubs and bring along their knowledge and skills. Boys and girls from Kihnu are often studying or working on the mainland, and also use their knowledge of traditional Kihnu dance forms and dancing skills at traditional music events outside the island. In this way, the role and position of unregulated round dances is different in every person's life. The general similarities and principles that can be observed on dance floors outlined above demonstrate the continuous importance of round dances for many people who have made the conscious choice, or have had the opportunity, to learn these dances.

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