

## ***The calabashes in the women's houses in Mbarara***

### **Calabashes-symbol of creation and the uterus**

Within many cultures in Africa the calabashes are not only used as drinking cups and storage devices but also keep a very strong symbolic importance for these nature cultures.

The Barasanas appreciate the calabashes as the source of fertility. The Kogi-Indios in South America honour them as the reflection of the cosmos as well as of the woman's uterus. The Taoism equates the calabashes, as the "uterus of all origin", the primordial state of the universe. We notice that within the most different kind of cultures exists an overall understanding and the connected symbolic for the calabashes as symbol for femininity, renewal, birth and creation.

### **The calabashes in the women's house in Mbarara.**

In 1972 Dr. Wilhelm Horkel, a German gynaecologist visited a friend and fellow doctor in Uganda in the hospital of Mbarara. There he saw for the first time the extraordinary application of calabashes. Next to the hospital the women's houses were located. In these houses the midwives took care of the mothers-to be. Thanks to the arrangement of Dr. Horkel's friend he could have a look inside the houses and had the chance to talk to the Ugandan midwives. Inside, he saw chains of dried calabashes which hung onto the wall fixed with bast chainlike. The midwives explained that the pregnant women use the calabashes to stretch their pelvic floor as preparation for the oncoming birth. to prevent perineal injuries. In Uganda,

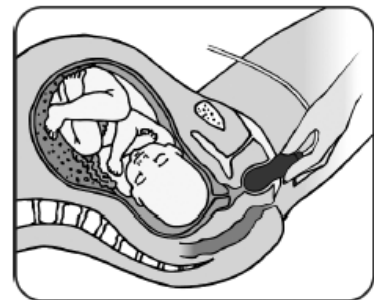
especially in rural areas, a tear of the perineum is considered a very severe injury due to the fact that neither doctors nor midwives can sufficiently cure them. The widening of the pelvic floor is realized by women using calabashes with increasing diameters. After use the woodlike-hard pumpkins were sterilized in boiling water and hung up again on the wall for drying.

### **Learning from the traditions of the nature cultures**

5-years later Dr. Wilhelm Horkel and his colleague Dr. Rexilius took over the women clinic in Starnberg. Cornelia Schreiber, the leading and very experienced midwife became important help to the two gynaecologists. Dr. Horkel / Dr. Rexilius. Since 1970 Cornelia Schreiber had already had great experience with this to date completely unknown method of natural birth.. The Max-Planck-Institute for behaviour psychology, headed by Prof. Konrad Lorenz, was located nearby this small women clinic in Starnberg. Lorenz and his crew had already been investigating the subject of Natural Birth as being practised by, e.g. the Papuas in New Guinea. Also the assistants of Prof. Lorenz preferred giving birth the natural way- with Cornelia Schreiber as their midwife. Due to positive experiences and the wide-range knowledge of Cornelia Schreiber as well as the effort of the team Dr. Horkel/Dr. Rexilius, they became the pioneers in natural birth in Germany - which was roughly the same time as Fréderick Leboyer introduced similar natural birthing methods in France.

After Dr. Horkel had retreated from his work in the clinic in 1994

he pursued the idea of the pelvic floor training he had seen before in Uganda. But, of course, Western women would not use a woodlike-hard pumpkin, just thinking of hygienic reasons. But the basic idea of this pelvic floor training could also be done with a soft balloon. Its supple material seemed even more appropriate than a dried pumpkin shell. The belly of a pregnant woman increases its size continuously and slowly. The same idea of continuity and slow training stands behind the pelvic floor training as well. The Ugandan example shows it the same way. In cooperation with midwives and pregnant women Dr.W. Horkel invented and developed the today's EPI-NO.



In 1999 the application of the balloon was tested in a study led by Prof. KTM Schneider at the University Hospital in Munich. It was confirmed what had already been practised by Ugandan midwives for generations: Less birth injuries of the pelvic floor, less birth anxiety, less analgesics requirements and healthier babies were the consequences of the pelvic floor training with EPI-NO.

Today EPI-NO is sold in many countries all over the world, e.g. in Australia-Canada-Europe. It is also recommended by "Birth International" the international website for training and career subjects for midwives.