

10 BEAUTY PROTECTS OUR WORLD: INDIGENOUS CHOREOGRAPHIC CULTURE IN KAMCHATKA IN RESPONSE TO WESTERN CONTACT¹

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The fate of the Indigenous peoples of the North, whose numbers are dwindling on the planet, largely depends on the ability of states to promote the preservation and development of the cultural and intellectual heritage of these peoples in an honest, purposeful, and coordinated manner. The history of Russian-German cooperation in studying the life of the Indigenous peoples of Kamchatka and, consequently, in accumulating important information on the history and ethnography of the Itelmen, Koryak, Even, and Aleut peoples has long roots and an important contemporary continuation.

Of the greatest value to the peoples of the Kamchatka Peninsula are the studies of pioneer Stepan Krasheninnikov and the scientists of the First and Second Kamchatka Expeditions led by Vitus Bering (1725–1743), among which the German naturalists Johann Georg Gmelin, Georg Wilhelm Steller, and the historiographer Gerhard Friedrich Müller left significant works. Almost a century later, German scientist Johann Karl Ehrenfried Kegel spent six years (from 1841 to 1847) studying Kamchatka, describing the nature and population of the peninsula in detail.²

Unfortunately, for a number of very dramatic historical reasons, most of the 20th century passed without any interaction between Russian and German scientists in the study of the way of life of the Indigenous peoples of the North. It was only in 1973, at the 10th World Festival of Youth and Students in Berlin, that the people of Germany and many other countries saw the choreographic culture of Indigenous peoples from Kamchatka, represented by the famous Koryak dance ensemble *Mengo*.³ But it took another 20 years for the Siberian branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Novosibirsk, together with the Francke Foundation (Franckesche Stiftungen, Halle), to begin studying German-Russian scientific cooperation in the 18th century and resume scientific research in the territories of Siberia, the Far East, and northern Russia.

At this new stage of the search for the spiritual and cultural values of Kamchatka a significant role was played by Erich Kasten, an ethnologist from the Free University of Berlin, at that time in his mid-forties and already known as an experienced researcher

1 First published in Kasten, Erich 2010 (ed.), 153–170. *Kul'tury i landshafty Severo-Vostoka Azii. 250 let russko-nemetskikh issledovanii po ekologii i kul'ture korennykh narodov Kamchatki*. Fürstenberg/Havel: Kulturstiftung Sibirien. (in Russian)

2 On the differing methodological and ethical approaches of these scientists, see Kasten 2024.

3 <https://bolt-dev.dh-north.org/files/dhn-pdf/kasten2003c.pdf> [accessed 30.11.2025]

and consultant on traditional knowledge and cultural heritage of the peoples in other Arctic regions such as America. Erich Kasten first appeared in Kamchatka in 1993, and since then he has not only penetrated many of the secrets of the traditional customs, way of life, and the philosophy of the Indigenous peoples of this most beautiful and remote region of Russia but has also made many friends who highly value the professional and human qualities of the German scientist.

It should be noted that the efforts of foreign researchers who conduct their research in Kamchatka, including Erich Kasten, are extremely important. The 20th century radically changed the traditional way of life of the so-called small-numbered peoples of northern Russia, bringing them certain benefits of modern civilization, but at the same time exacerbating the problems of ethnic preservation to an extreme degree. The decline of language and the sharp reduction in traditional forms of nature use, low levels of medical care, uncertain social status, and, as a result, a steady decline in the Indigenous population – all of this could lead to the complete disappearance of some of small-numbered peoples. Unfortunately, even in our time – in the first decade of the 21st century – the dangers are not disappearing, but, on the contrary, are multiplying and increasing their impact. The opinions of scientists concerned about the fate of the Indigenous people are rarely heard in the provinces. Economic problems on a global scale are pushing the pressing needs of northerners even further into the background. Numerous meetings, conferences, round tables, and resolutions on the preservation and development of the traditions of Indigenous peoples, which are held with enviable regularity in various regions of Russia, have not yet yielded (at least in Kamchatka) any tangible results.

In this difficult situation, the importance of those who, regardless of the circumstances, try to do something useful for their compatriots, who have managed to rethink the usual framework of their activities and consciously take on more important responsibilities, which they may not have thought about before, is increasing even more. When, in the second half of the last century, national choreographic groups began to appear in different parts of Kamchatka and the Koryak Autonomous Okrug, everyone was amazed by their originality and beauty. The Koryak ensembles *Mengo*, *Ener*, *Fakel*, the Itelmen ensemble *El'vel*, the Even *Nulgur*, and many others, began to create stage productions, based on the song and dance folklore of their peoples, that were accessible and attractive to the average viewer. At the same time, they also had an undeniably political component, as they were intended to reflect the triumph of the so-called “Leninist national policy.” “Look, world,” they said, “how happily and freely all the peoples of the Soviet Union live, even the smallest ones, how their cultures flourish, how high the artistic professionalism of amateur artists from the most remote villages is.”

Creative groups were indeed given assistance. They were given bright stage costumes, sent to various large-scale festivals, some of which gradually even began to be “released” abroad. At the same time, serious attention was paid to the “purity”

and accuracy of the demonstration of ethnographic elements (which is extremely important): mixing or blurring of national characteristics was harshly criticized, stylization was not encouraged, and excessive showmanship, which young people often strove for, was viewed with suspicion. Experts – connoisseurs of the folklore of the northern peoples – diligently helped in the study and mastery of authentic traditions. There were not many of them, but they managed to accomplish a great deal. Unfortunately, such significant figures in the spiritual culture of the northern peoples as T. Petrova-Bytova, M. Zhornitskaia, T. Lukashkina, A. Gil', G. Porotov, S. Kevevtigin, V. Etneut, and others did not live to see the end of the century. Almost no one came to replace them. Thus, in the 1980s and especially in the 1990s, professional control over the activities of choreographic ensembles began to decline sharply. All responsibility for the future of the collectives fell on their leaders, not all of whom were able to ensure the search for, accumulation of ethnographic knowledge, and the creation of new creative programs based on it, due to their personal experience, talent, and interests.

Nevertheless, Indigenous choreographic ensembles still operate in Kamchatka that remain faithful to traditions and demonstrate serious artistic results. Among them are the Koryak ensembles *Angt* and *Veem*, the Itelmen ensemble *El'vel'*, the Even ensembles *Nulgur* and *Nurgenek*, the children's ensembles *Or'iakan*, *Shkolnye gody*, *Lach*, and several others. These creative groups, which were originally created for concert and educational activities, have managed to rethink their tasks and have now become almost the only force ensuring the preservation and development of the cultural heritage of the "small-numbered peoples" of Kamchatka. Therefore, it is no coincidence that scholars from different countries are interested in these ensembles. That is why Erich Kasten, who managed to comprehensively study the culture of the northerners of the Kamchatka Peninsula, made the right choice by inviting the greatest keepers of ancient traditions to Germany. In 1996, as part of a program of events dedicated to the memory of G. W. Steller, the Itelmen ensemble *El'vel'* performed in Germany under the direction of the unique master Boris Zhirkov. In 1999, the Even ensemble *Nulgur* (artistic director – Galina Fedotova) successfully presented to the German public the ethnographic performance "The Shaman's Journey to Other Worlds." In 2004, the ensemble *Shkolnye gody* (School Years) from the northern village of Palana, led by prominent Koryak choreographers Svetlana Beliaeva and Sergei Kutynkavav, performed its program in various cities in Germany. And in the summer of 2009, the children's Even ensemble *Or'iakan* from the Indigenous village of Anavgai (artistic director – Valentina Zhdanova) traveled to Germany and participated in the unique exhibition "Shamans of Siberia." Here, we will tell you a little more about some of the ensembles that have visited Germany.



Fig. 1 The Even ensemble *Or'iakan* from Anavgai at the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, 2009. Photo: Steffen Bohl.



Fig. 2 *Or'iakan*, artistic direction by Valentina Zhdanova, with Ekaterina Gil', Aleksandra Urkachan, Maia Lomovtseva, and Antonina Koerkova, during the TTF Festival in Rudolstadt, 2009. Photo: Steffen Bohl.

El'vel'

The village of Kovran, nestled by a quiet river against the backdrop of the mysterious El'vel' hill, was destined by fate to play a leading role. For it was here the brightest creative forces of the Itelmen people concentrated and tried to survive. Historical injustice, which left the Itelmen with neither a name nor a territory on the map of Kamchatka, multiplied by a chain of tragic events over the last three centuries, brought the people to the brink of extinction. It is enough to look at the map of the Russian explorer Vladimir Atlasov, which shows the places of settlement of Kamchadal-Itelmen people in 1700 (from the northern Tigil' River to the southernmost point of the peninsula), and compare it with the current picture, and any explanations are unnecessary. And the official report is ruthless: according to the 2002 census, the number of Itelmen living in Russia was about 3,000 people (incidentally, the same Atlasov counted up to 20,000 Itelmen).

Against the backdrop of this sad picture, every step that could help preserve and develop both the lifestyle of the Itelmen people and their culture is important. In this sense, the appearance of the Itelmen ensemble *El'vel'* more than forty years ago can be considered, without exaggeration, a most important event. The ensemble owes its birth to the amazing and wonderful Itelmen craftswoman, storyteller, and singer Tat'iana Evstropovna Gutorova (1930–2003). It was she who, back in 1967, tried to shake up her fellow villagers, reminding them of the charm of their own melodies and the magical power of ancient customs and dances. It was as if she already knew the advice of the famous Russian archaeologist, Academician A. P. Okladnikov: "First and foremost, we must preserve the aesthetic perception of the world, which was created, strengthened, and grew over thousands of years, not just centuries – thousands of years. It is this original, unique aesthetic world that must be protected. We need it very much. All people of today."

Three years were spent on auditions, rehearsals, and acquiring initial stage skills. When, in 1970, Gutorova's small ensemble invited the locals to the premiere of the musical and choreographic legend "El'vel'," it became clear to everyone that Kamchatka had gained another wonderful collective to be proud of. Tat'iana Evstropovna wrote the script herself and sang the melodies, which were arranged by local composer Boris Zaev and the mighty talent of Kamchatka, poet and folklorist Georgii Porotov. Some of the dances for the ballet were choreographed by the then young soloist of *Mengo*, Boris Zhirkov. Few of those first actors can be seen on stage today, but their names cannot be forgotten, for every pioneer leaves a trail that makes it easier for others to follow. Nadezhda Slobodchikova, Liubov Pritchina, Petr and Mikhail Slobodchikov, Boris Kile, Yakov Zaporotskii, Aleksei Sadovnikov, Tat'iana Levkovskaia, Oleg Oiachek, Sergei Danilov – far from the public eye, these people managed to unite on the basis of their ardent love for the land of their ancestors, to hear their voices, to be imbued with the spirit of sincere and sublime creativity. From the moment of its premiere, the ensemble itself secured the name *El'vel'*. And that is probably why

there was some confusion with the celebration of anniversaries. In 1988 (why not in 1987?), the ensemble celebrated its twentieth anniversary. And the celebrations for the 30th anniversary took place... in 2000. But let's not nitpick. The main thing is that by creating the ensemble and staging their first major performance, the people of Kovran tried to establish a kind of protective shield on the path of disappearance of their tiny but extraordinary civilization.

Tat'iana Gutorova played the role of the mother of the main character in the play "Elvel." Appearing on stage, performing soulful Itelmen melodies (oh, how she sang!), she herself became the embodiment of the soul of the ensemble, its highest constant symbol. Years later, Tat'iana Evstropovna moved to Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii. But her heart remained there, in Kovran. When she sometimes visited her beloved village to take part in the Alkhalalalai festival, Tat'iana Gutorova was always perceived by everyone as a strict, uncompromising judge who did not forgive falsehood, but with all her soul supported everything that was sincere and genuine.

In 1980, Boris Zhirkov, a unique Kamchatka choreographer who left a bright mark on the creative destiny of *Mengo*, became the director of the ensemble. It was he who, having visited Paris and a dozen other grand capitals of the world, found the strength to return to his tiny, half-forgotten village to take up the baton from Tat'iana Gutorova. With unwavering perseverance and dignity, he continued the work of artistic development of Itelmen folklore. Under the leadership of Boris Aleksandrovich, the Itelmen of the village of Kovran appeared in the 1980s on the stage of the Palace of Congresses, on the open stages of the All-Russian Exhibition Center, and participated in the first (and, as it turned out, last) International Folklore Festival. In the spring of 1988, the ensemble *El'vel'* was included in a large artist delegation and, aboard the propaganda ship *Korchaginets*, made its first foreign voyage to Vietnam. The last decade of the past century brought all of us new problems and unforeseen difficulties, as we know. But neither the collapse of a great power nor the stinginess of a state that considers culture to be a secondary matter (such a conclusion suggests itself) could extinguish



the patriotic need of people to preserve their identity. Having endured many misfortunes, insults, and disappointments, the *El'vel'* ensemble survived. New artists replaced the old ones. Sponsors appeared who found considerable sums of money so that the art of the Itelmen people could be known in distant countries around the world. Thanks to the participation of the joint-stock company *Iianin Kutkh*, *El'vel'* visited Germany in 1996, where the 250th anniversary of the birth of G. W. Steller was celebrated.⁴ (see Zaotschnaja, *this volume*, p. 232)

Fig. 3 Boris Zhirkov, Kovran., 2000 Photo: Valerii Kravchenko.



Fig. 4 *El'vel'* at the Franckeschen Stiftungen in Halle/Saale, 1996. Photo: personal archive E.K.

A little later, the ensemble's accompanist and composer Anatolii Levkovskii demonstrated his art in the United States and, with the help of American friends, managed to release the first collection of his songs and melodies. The residents of Germany were interested in learning about the ancestral songs of Elena Zueva (1998), and the brilliant Itelmen dancer Leonid Sysoev captivated Norway with his unique throat singing (1999). The *El'vel'* ensemble made four long-distance trips in 2000, including a visit to the Norwegian folk festival *Riddu-Riddu* and a summer tour of southern France. In 2003, the Kovran dancers performed in the United States and Canada.

The artists took pride in their achievements, in the opportunity to periodically experience the cultures of other peoples and to confidently express themselves. However, the highest value of the Kovran artists' work lies not in distant overseas tours, but in the fact that on their native land, in very difficult living conditions, they steadfastly and devotedly served their people, preventing the unique Itelmen culture from disappearing forever.

In this regard, the Itelmen festival *Alkhalalalai*, which was revived in 1987 and has since developed, occupies one of the central places in the ensemble's activities. Not only fellow villagers come to the celebration. Whenever possible, guests arrive from distant villages. Scientists, cultural figures from Petropavlovsk and Palana, and numerous foreigners also attend. Oleg Zaporotskii, an Itelmen who played a leading role for many years in solving organizational problems related to the festival, voluntarily took on the task of transporting guests, advertising, and finding sponsors, prizes, and

awards. And in moments of inspiration, he would easily take to the stage with his guitar to sing a native melody.

The *Alkhalalalai* festival⁵ is indeed far from simple, having many layers. It lasts several days, starting in the first half of September, always during the full moon. The program includes various competitions. The women of the village love the *Mimskh* (“Best Housewife”) competition, in which they can demonstrate their knowledge of cooking and local history, and perform a traditional melody in their native language. The men compete on the river: who can best set traps, who can process sea mammals and caught fish faster and better... The “Gifts of the Land of Kutkha” competition for the best Itelmen dish is always colorful. Here, indeed, your eyes run wild. Hundreds of pickles, pastries, and liqueurs appear on huge tables, skillfully decorated and often made according to personal recipes. Children are not left out. They participate in applied art exhibitions on an equal footing with adults and prepare traditional displays of their drawings in advance.

But the key moment of the festival is, of course, the “Rite of Purification.” This is a whole magical performance in which everyone present is involved. A hot bonfire in the center of *Balagan* (houses on stilts) Square on the banks of the Kovran River becomes the main point around which an endless chain of people holding hands moves. Then Boris Zhirkov strikes the drum. Dozens of other drummers respond. The artists of the *El’vel’* ensemble begin their performance. Ritual scenes are replaced by modern folk performances. The power and emotional energy of the dancers work better than any team. The tempo increases; the flame burns ever hotter. Almost no spectators are left. Everyone is dancing, cheering, making noise... Suddenly, the dancing stops. People part, making way for a silent procession. A new wooden idol, representing yet another *Alkhalalalai* that flashed in the abyss of time, is solemnly delivered to the site and placed in line with its predecessors.

Then the most important part begins. A huge ring, woven from birch branches, floats above the clearing. And everyone (!) nervously passes through it. Everyone raises their hands to the sky and joyfully, with relief, exclaims: “*Alkhalalalai!*”... At nine o’clock in the evening, right there, by the fire, a dance marathon begins. Couples who volunteer, after passing a medical examination, start dancing, hoping to win and, of course, to break previous records. The conditions of this competition are not easy: the dancers’ legs are half-bent, and they have three minutes of slow movements every hour. They are allowed to drink water and... kiss.

But let’s leave the dancing “marathoners” near the night fire. Let’s return to prose. The holiday will rush by, and the guests will leave. Snow will cover Kovran... The *El’vel’* ensemble will remember the past and dream of the future... It’s difficult for them! Lonely! There are so few of them! Back in 2000, when I asked for a list of artists who, in essence, uphold the culture of Itelmen, I received 12 names: Oleg Slobodchikov,

5 <https://dh-north.org/dossiers/das-alkhalalalai-fest-der-itelmenen/en> [accessed 30.11.2025]

Valerii and Yurii Meshcheriakov, Ol'ga Kovaleva and Alesha Sokolov, Olesia Shchupakova, Ol'ga Kovalenko, Nastiiia Sarycheva, Tat'iana and Anatolii Levkovskii, Leonid Sysoev, Boris Zhirkov. Today, nine years later, there are even fewer. Leonid Sysoev left in 2003 for a year in Sobolevo, to create there, at the request of the administration, a local choreographic ensemble. And so he got stuck in a strange village. At the end of 2008, something incredible happened: the irreplaceable symbol of *El'vel'* – the unique master and dancer, artistic director of the ensemble Boris Zhirkov – left his native Kovran on the advice of friends and suddenly found himself in the village of Sosnovka (near the Kamchatka city of Elizovo), where he began to create a new collective, *Nyta Aivan* ("Soul of the North")... And yet, *El'vel'* continues to surprise us with its successes. In the spring of 2009, the ensemble visited Moscow, where it participated in the IV International Exhibition and Fair "Northern Civilization – 2009." The Itelmen artists were awarded a diploma and the Vitus Bering International Prize "For their great contribution to the preservation and development of the unique culture of indigenous peoples." A worthy award!

Nulgur

In the center of Kamchatka, where rivers born in the glaciers of the Central Range sparkle, the Even settled over a century and a half ago. Bypassing the northern lands, they settled in uninhabited but fertile places, securing the approval of Governor Zavoiko, and a little later – of the Russian Emperor himself. Today, guests from all over the world come to the Bystrinskii District in Kamchatka. They want to see the ancient ridges, plunge into the healing thermal waters, and listen to the voice of the Even drum, which can bring the past back to life.

The *Nulgur* ensemble, born in the mid-1980s in the village of Esso, is a bright calling card of the Kamchatka Even, a natural and exciting addition to the beauty for which the Kamchatka region is famous. Natal'ia Grigor'eva and Maiia Lomovtseva were the founders of the ensemble, experts and guardians of the ancient traditions of the Even. Their attempt to synthesize their knowledge and use it as a basis for creating stage productions was crowned with success. The name *Nulgur*, which translates from Even as "Nomads," was suggested to the ensemble by local folklorist and writer Kiriak Cherkhanov.

When choreographer Galina Fedotova became the artistic director of the ensemble in 1996, the ensemble broadened its creative horizons and took on more of the characteristics of a concert group. The ensemble's repertoire began to include not only Even, but also Koryak, Chukchi, and Itelmen compositions. The artists began to travel farther and farther from their native village. They appeared in remote settlements on the Kamchatka Peninsula, among fishermen and reindeer herders, and on the best stages of Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, Khabarovsk, Novosibirsk, and Moscow. The diverse, ethnographically accurate repertoire, unique stage costumes, and skill

of the artists captivate everyone. The ensemble's programs feature amazing ancestral melodies, unique throat singing, and choreographic performances based on ancient ritual ceremonies.

In 1999, while preparing for the upcoming seminar in Esso, "The Spiritual World of the Peoples of Kamchatka" (seminar director – Erich Kasten)⁶ and a possible trip to Germany, the ensemble staged a large ethnographic performance, "The Shaman's Journey to Other Worlds" (libretto author and director Kirill Ichanga). The performance attracted the interest of well-known television journalist and traveler Yuri Senkevich, as well as documentary filmmakers from St. Petersburg and England. In 1999, Even artists performed their show to great acclaim on stages across Germany. The *Nulgur* ensemble received high praise at major festivals and competitions in Moscow, Khabarovsk, Novosibirsk, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii...

We will tell you more about the performance "The Shaman's Journeys..." and the trip to Germany.⁷ This period, the late 1990s, was a real turning point in the professional development of the ensemble. The theme of the play created by locals from the Bystrinskii district, if you look closely, is extremely relevant. Perhaps even the authors themselves did not suspect its completely special contemporary resonance. Imagine an ancient Even settlement where a tribe has lived for centuries. The time has come when the nearby sources that sustain life have dried up. And the spirit of the shaman, whom they believed in and worshipped, is about to fade away. The people ask the shaman to tell them what lies beyond the distant mountains, where none of them have ever been. Do other tribes live there? Where should they go to save themselves? The shaman manages to reveal his knowledge. The dances that arise at his will tell of the customs and beauty of other peoples living in the neighborhood – the Koryaks, Chukchi, Itelmen, and Aleuts. And when the exhausted shaman hands over his power to a young successor, the tribe already knows where to go, what to hope for, and whom to trust... The remarkable Even dancer and playwright Kirill Ichanga, combining the choreographic numbers once created in the *Nulgur* ensemble into a single act, proceeded extremely delicately. He did not overload the performance with complex dramatic tasks, assigning himself the role of a kind of narrator who explains the essence of what is happening to both his fellow tribesmen and us, the audience. His narrations were concise, extremely intelligent, and did not aspire to the role of the usual theatrical monologues, which are designed to occupy a central place in the performance. Kirill Ichanga quite consciously gave way to the primacy of choreography. And it seems that he did so not only because *Nulgur* is a dance ensemble. The spiritual tension that the artists imbue each number with, their desire to reveal with utmost authenticity and revelation the meaning and deeper significance of the traditions born on the land of their ancestors, all of this, expressed in dance, takes on the characteristics of a profound philosophy. Myths are not necessary in and of them-

6 <https://dh-north.org/dossiers/workshop-zu-tanz-und-gesang-in-esso/en> [accessed 30.11.2025]

7 <https://dh-north.org/dossiers/gastspielreise-des-ensembles-nulgur/en> [accessed 30.11.2025]

selves. They help to preserve the national essence of the human soul, those unique characteristics that we call traditional culture.

The collective worked joyfully, actively, and selflessly on the creation of the performance "The Shaman's Journeys to Other Worlds." The temperament and dedication of the dancers, who realized their personal responsibility for the fate of national art, the high professionalism of Ekaterina Gil' and Galina Fedotova, and the natural talent and experience of the dancers – Kirill Ichanga, Sergei Adukanov, and the younger ones – Alena Zueva, Aleksandra Yarova, Dima Makarov, and Egor Koerkov – all of this not only predetermined the success of the new work. The performance "The Shaman's Journeys..." is woven from ten concert numbers, diverse in style and dramaturgical solution. The performance opens with the choreographic picture "Dawn," which, according to the dancers, is dedicated to their beloved Ekaterina Gil'. This is followed by the dances "Nymylanskii," "Chavchuvenskii," "Munnikan," "Chaiki" (Seagulls) – how can we do without them! –, "Kotiki" (fur seals), "Urildychi," "Bubnisty," "Khede," and "Norgali." Galina Fedotova's throat singing occupies a special place in the performance, its uniqueness stunning audiences at every show.

The most difficult and, in its own way, unique task in the performance was to be solved by the famous Koryak actress Ekaterina Gil'. The Kamchatka stage knows many performers of the shaman image. Outstanding stage examples were left to us by the artists of *Mengo* Evgenii Pankarinov and Nikolai Lazarev. But for the first time, the role of the shaman was to be performed by a woman on stage. No, this wasn't just a production issue (i.e., Gil dances for lack of other performers for this role). The authors made a conscious and artistically justified decision. Shamanism in Kamchatka was not, as it seems, the prerogative of men. Researchers of traditional Itelmen culture, for example, long ago concluded: "Women usually played the role of shamans." G. W. Steller noted: "They use the drum only in cases where they want to learn something unknown"... Ekaterina Gil' had enough knowledge and personal experience to understand and explain to us, the audience, the essence of the ritual actions entrusted to the shaman. But Gil's intuitive side was particularly well developed. It helped the actress reveal the profound wisdom of ancient customs and find elements that, when brought to life on stage, not only affect the audience as something mysterious and magical but also become a subject of study in themselves.

However, it is precisely this – the opportunity to study the traditional culture of northerners, its origins, and its modern worldview through living examples – that explains the keen interest of foreigners in the work of Kamchatka national ensembles. That is why it is so common nowadays to meet foreign guests in remote corners of Kamchatka. That is also why the best representatives of Kamchatka's Indigenous culture have been traveling abroad more frequently.

This is where we find the special meaning that can be seen in the now famous work of *Nulgur*: artists depicting the attempts of their ancient ancestors to break into "new worlds" in order to experience a different life, gladly accept invitations from foreign



Fig. 5 *Nulgur* in Berlin, 1999. Photo: personal archive Erich Kasten.

guests and travel there (to Europe and America), where undoubted spiritual joy awaits them.

Aleksandra Urkachan, sister of Ekaterina Gil' and employee of the Koryak District Center for Folk Art, participated in the *Nulgur* ensemble's week-long trip to Germany (in 1999, I remind). Aleksandra Trifonovna presented a story in Germany entitled "The Life and Culture of the Coastal Koryaks – Nymylans," illustrating her presentation with family legends and songs in the Koryak language, together with Alena Zueva. She also took part in the mass scenes of the performance. The ensemble traveled across the entire country. Performances took place in four cities: Berlin, Bonn, Münster, and Munich. Erich Kasten was with the

artists everywhere they went. And in Munich, they met with old Kamchatka friends – Tjan Zaotschnaja and Sergei Longinov.

Erich Kasten kept a close eye on Galina Fedotova's group. Through the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs and House of World Cultures in Berlin, he personally resolved issues of financing and organizing the creative activities of the Even ensemble in his country. He met the Kamchatkans in Frankfurt am Main and accompanied them throughout their week-long tour ...

Artistic director Galina Fedotova does not allow her troupe to rest. New ideas and creative projects come to mind constantly. And, most incredibly, Galina Fedotova always succeeds. And this is hardly a coincidence. Erich Kasten was right when he once said:

During my many years of working with Indigenous artists not only in Kamchatka, but also in North America, I have rarely met anyone like Galina Fedotova. She is one of those who understands how choreographic skill and creativity can give new impetus to the further development of traditional, carefully sought-out motifs. It is precisely in emphasizing and successfully processing the transformative process, supplemented with new ideas, that Galina Yur'evna's special artistic talent and acquired experience are manifested.

(personal archive, V.K.)

But Fedotova's strength also lies in her wonderful, combative, and friendly team. She is sincerely and enthusiastically assisted by the remarkable Even choreographers Kirill Ichanga, Sergei Adukanov, young dancers Olga Adukanova, Darina Cherkhanova, Antonina Koerkova, Egor Koerkov, and others. The real jewel of all the ensemble's programs is the youngest Even dancer, Mikhail Perkhun, and his talented mother, Oktiabrina Nikolaevna.



Fig. 6 Galina Fedotova, Esso, 2007.
Photo: Valerii Kravchenko.

Important professional support is provided to Galina Fedotova's team by well-known masters of the Kamchatka stage Ekaterina Gil', Ol'ga Lastochkina, Romual'd Zhukov, Evgeniia Kevevtigina, Anatolii Levkovskii, and Leonid Sysoev. All of them – the leaders and artists of the Ensemble – understand the important role of the *Nulgur* ensemble in the development the culture of the small peoples of the North. And through their joint efforts, they ensure a successful future for the ensemble, which travels around the world.

Shkolnye gody

The North has its own harmony, its own courageous and delicate soul. This statement is fully reflected in the personalities of the founders of the *Shkolnye gody* (*School Years*) ensemble – Svetlana Beliaeva, Honored Artist of Russia, and the talented choreographer Sergei Kutynkavav. Both of them were formerly soloists with the famous Koryak ensemble *Mengo*. Both belong to that now rare tribe of enthusiasts for whom their beloved work is nothing but a joy. In the spring of 1994, while still artists with *Mengo*, they felt the need for creative communication with children. Moreover, they chose a path different from that of well-known Koryak groups: to master and study not only the dance customs of northerners, but also the choreographic art of different countries around the world. The ensemble was open to all schoolchildren who wanted to eventually appear on stage.

This was a wise decision. Cut off from cultural centers, the villages of the North, suffering from the prohibitive cost of air travel for many, could offer their children a very limited range of hobbies: skiing, cinema, library, and for some, music or art school. Most of them could not even dream of theaters, southern resorts, or train trips to other countries. The founders of the *School Years* ensemble broke through this forced isolation of the young population of Palana by accomplishing at least two main tasks. The first was to skillfully involve children in the cycle of creative search, in learning about the unique cultures of peoples of the world living on different continents of the globe, and, of course, in meticulously comprehending the spiritual

heritage of northerners. The second task, which many did not initially realize, included the opportunity – on the wave of creativity – to break out of their native Koryak nest and set off – following the sun! – to various cities and towns that they had previously only learned about in geography classes. Moreover, when setting off on a long journey, the young residents of Palana did not become idle tourists languishing with impressions, but carried out – energetically, beautifully, and spiritually – the lofty mission of emissaries of Russia, called upon to strengthen mutual understanding between nations through the language of art.

Of course, the path to any worthy goal is never easy or short. It took years for ordinary rural schoolchildren to become true artists. Countless rehearsals were held before the ensemble developed a diverse (and very complex) repertoire. It took unimaginable efforts on the part of leaders, deputies, and parents to ensure that each concert number was “dressed” in colorful stage costumes and accompanied by high-quality musical arrangements. But when Svetlana Beliaeva and Sergei



Fig. 7 Sergei Kutynkavav, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, 2008.
Photo: Valerii Kravchenko.



Fig. 8 Svetlana Belaeva during the festival “Golden Springs,” Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, 2008.
Photo: Valerii Kravchenko.

Kutynekavav first presented their brainchild in Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, the city was shocked. No one in the capital of Kamchatka expected to see such a luxurious, professionally polished, and unusually large children's group from Palana! The jury of the festival-competition of children's and youth creativity "Morning Star of Kamchatka" immediately and unconditionally awarded *Shkolnye gody* the Grand Prix (in two categories at once: choreography and folklore). And local newspapers raced to predict an unimaginably bright future for the Palana ensemble.

The journalists were not mistaken. Following their triumph in Petropavlovsk, the young dancers began to conquer more and more stages in Kamchatka, and a little later – cities in Russia and European countries. And here's what's surprising: by performing dances of Europeans, Latin Americans, and Argentines at foreign festivals, schoolchildren from a Kamchatka village unknown in Europe caused delight and amazement not only with their attention to the cultures of peoples far from them. The Spaniards were delighted by the Kamchatka young dancers' skillful plasticity, impetuosity, and fiery energy, characteristic of the folk dances of the Basque country. The Greeks applauded the "Sirtaki," seeing in the Kamchatka dancers' choreography not only an understanding of Greek traditions, but also their favorite dance style, improvisation... Of course, let's not idealize the picture. Becoming a specialist in choreography is not an easy task; it requires a lot of work. And it is unlikely that Svetlana Belyaeva and Sergei Kutynekavav were setting themselves the task of training professionals. Everything was simpler, but also much more complicated. Even in Ancient Greece, music, poetry, and dance were highly valued for the upbringing and education of adolescents. The great philosopher of that time, Plato, explained it this way: "From beautiful images we will move on to beautiful thoughts, from beautiful thoughts to a beautiful life, and from a beautiful life to absolute beauty."

It is precisely this exciting and endless movement towards beauty that is the main goal of choreographers. By studying the dances of the peoples of the world and comprehending the secrets of their own northern peoples, the children not only strengthened their bodies, and developed coordination, precision, and ease of movement. They also began to feel more at ease outside of dance, and thanks to the ensemble, they learned about the richness of cultures far from Kamchatka. When they found themselves in the thick of international events somewhere in Europe, they did not feel lost, but rather comfortable and, most importantly, equal among representatives of all nations on the planet Earth.

Success does not come easily to anyone. The young dancers practiced six (!) times a week. The three age groups that make up the ensemble are constantly being renewed. The concert program is expanding and becoming more complex. The repertoire of the young dancers is not only diverse, but also extraordinarily rich. It includes folk dances of the peoples of the North and dances of the peoples of Russia, classical choreography, jazz, modern dance, narrative dances, folk dances, acrobatics, and break-dancing, which is currently popular among young men (the members of the group



Fig. 9 *Shkolnye gody* at the Kulturstiftung Sibirien in Fürstenberg/Havel, with Ilse Kasten (Erich's mother) at centre, 2004. Photo: Kugler.

Bango-Bango group even won the International Festival “Battle of the Year” in Yalta). The ensemble’s influence on schoolchildren is so great that many graduates strive, if possible, to remain in the group, and some, inspired by art, decide to devote their lives to it... Undoubtedly, *Shkolnye gody* is not just an ensemble. It has long outgrown its original name. *Shkolnye gody* is a real theater, where artists have the opportunity not only to demonstrate their knowledge and considerable choreographic experience, but also to reveal their souls.

In June 2003, the young dancers traveled abroad for the first time, to Italy for the international children’s folk festival “Russian Summer in Italy.” This marked the beginning of the triumphant march of the ensemble from Palana across Europe. In the summer of 2004, Erich Kasten invited the *Shkolnye gody* ensemble to Germany.⁸ There, in various cities, the Koryak schoolchildren gave five concerts and visited the private choreography studio of Svetlana Khiltukhina, who once danced in the Koryak ensemble *Mengo*. Then the young Koryak artists found themselves in France, saw Paris for the first time, and participated in the International Festival in Saint-Mexant. A year later, the *Shkolnye gody* ensemble successfully participated in the VI All-Russian Festival of National Cultures, which was held at the All-Russian Children’s Center Ocean (Vladivostok). The State Republican Center for Russian Folklore (Moscow)

8 <https://dh-north.org/dossiers/gastspielreise-des-ensembles-skolnye-gody/en>
accessed 30.11.2025]

recognized the children's ensemble *Shkolnye gody* as the best based on the results of the 2005 competition. In the summer of 2006, 2007, 2008, and 2009, the ensemble continued to participate in international folklore festivals in cities in Italy, France, Spain, and Croatia.

But when talking about the pleasant achievements of young dancers from the capital of Koryakiia, one important circumstance must be kept in mind. It is that school time for each of the students inevitably comes to an end. This means that every year the ensemble undergoes a renewal. The older (more skilled) members leave, and their places are taken by younger ones. For any creative group, this situation is an additional challenge. But this is the main purpose of the *Shkolnye gody* ensemble: to let as many children as possible experience creativity, to let new generations find joy by visiting the pedagogical hands of the talented masters of the Koryak stage – Svetlana Beliaeva and Sergei Kutynkavav.

Yes, true achievements in the creative work of northerners occur only where experts and enthusiasts work in their field. Despite the many losses and difficulties that we mentioned at the beginning, the cultural potential of the Indigenous peoples of Kamchatka is still noticeable and diverse. We are constantly reminded of this by the festival of creativity of the Indigenous peoples of Kamchatka, “Golden Springs,” which is held every two years in the capital of the Kamchatka Region, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii (the last such festival took place in September 2008 and brought together about 200 participants from most of the regions of Kamchatka). The festival is important. In addition to providing opportunities to meet representatives of traditional cultures, it serves to preserve a unified cultural and information space, clearly reveals artistic reserves, and, most importantly, vividly illustrates the creative problems that need to be addressed.

The cultural ties between the Kamchatka region of Russia and Germany are becoming increasingly stable. In the fall of 1995, the Kamchatka Drama and Comedy Theater toured a number of German cities. In December 1996, during the Christmas holidays, the Kamchatka Choir traveled from Düsseldorf to Munich, giving the residents of the German lands nine unforgettable concerts. In 2003, the public channel of the German television company ZDF filmed a documentary about the Itelmen people in Kamchatka, entitled “The Shores of Russia.” The list of important scientific research, publishing, and practical projects implemented in Kamchatka by Erich Kastan himself takes up more than one page. All this is encouraging, but it also requires continuation. On the difficult path to preserving the identity of the Indigenous peoples of the North, it is not only the specific actions of regional and federal authorities that are extremely important. The international community is making great efforts to ensure the rights of Indigenous peoples to preserve and develop their spiritual cultures. We are grateful also to scientists from the United States, Canada, Japan, and a number of other countries for their professional assistance in studying and developing the cultural heritage of the Indigenous peoples of Kamchatka.

We express our special gratitude to Erich Kasten, a remarkable friend of Kamchatka, a man who is in love with the beauty of northern traditions and who is doing everything possible to ensure that this beauty continues to enrich and protect our unique world.

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Figures

- 1 The Even ensemble *Or'iakan* from Anavgai at the Linden Museum in Stuttgart, 2009. Photo: Steffen Bohl.
- 2 *Or'iakan*, artistic direction by Valentina Zhdanova, with Ekaterina Gil', Aleksandra Urkachan, Maia Lomovtseva, and Antonina Koerkova, during the TTF Festival in Rudolstadt, 2009. Photo: Steffen Bohl.
- 3 Boris Zhirkov, Kovran, 2000. Photo: Valerii Kravchenko.
- 4 *El'vel'* at the Franckeschen Stiftungen in Halle/Saale, 1996 Photo: personal archive Erich Kasten.
- 5 *Nulgur* in Berlin, 1999. Photo: personal archive Erich Kasten.
- 6 Galina Fedotova, Ezzo, 2007. Photo: Valerii Kravchenko .
- 7 Sergei Kutynkavav, Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, 2008. Photo: Valerii Kravchenko.
- 8 Svetlana Belaeva during the festival "Golden Springs," Petropavlovsk-Kamchatskii, 2008. Photo: Valerii Kravchenko.
- 9 *Shkolnye gody* at the Kulturstiftung Sibirien in Fürstenberg/Havel, with Ilse Kasten (Erich's mother) at centre, 2004. Photo: Kugler.