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# Pushkin and Gannibal: Ethnic Identity in Imperial Russia

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## Pushkin and Gannibal: Ethnic Identity in Imperial Russia

### **Abstract**

Since his untimely death in 1837, the nineteenth-century romantic writer Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin has been renowned the world over not only for his literary achievements, but also for being a paradigm of "Russianness." However, Pushkin himself was by no means a "pure" Russian. Like many of the inhabitants of the Russian empire during his time, he was borne of a veritable hodgepodge of ethnicities. The most surprising of these is his African ancestry; his great-grandfather, Abram Petrovich Gannibal, was an African slave brought to Russia in the early eighteenth century. Remarkably, this same slave became the godson and close confidante of Peter the Great himself. Although the link to Gannibal and his inspiring story was one of Pushkin's greatest points of personal vanity, it was also a constant, painful reminder of his disconnection from Russian society and the aristocracy into which he was born.

### **Keywords**

Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin, Imperial Russia, ethnic identity, Abram Petrovich Gannibal

## *Pushkin and Gannibal: Ethnic Identity in Imperial Russia*

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Since his untimely death in 1837, the nineteenth-century romantic writer Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin has been renowned the world over not only for his literary achievements, but also for being a paradigm of “Russianness.” However, Pushkin himself was by no means a “pure” Russian. Like many of the inhabitants of the Russian empire during his time, he was borne of a veritable hodgepodge of ethnicities. The most surprising of these is his African ancestry; his great-grandfather, Abram Petrovich Gannibal, was an African slave brought to Russia in the early eighteenth century. Remarkably, this same slave became the godson and close confidante of Peter the Great himself. Although the link to Gannibal and his inspiring story was one of Pushkin’s greatest points of personal vanity, it was also a constant, painful reminder of his disconnection from Russian society and the aristocracy into which he was born.

Russia’s relationship to the African subcontinent had not been a long one by the time Gannibal made his way to St. Petersburg, and it was only with the rule of Peter the Great (1682-1725) that Russia began to make even small expeditions into Africa.<sup>1</sup> Although the Russian nobility had, for years, retained a small number of “blackamoors” as personal servants or court pages (as was the fashion in Europe), foreign conquests and a continued reliance on serfdom limited Russia’s interest in the African slave trade.<sup>2</sup> There were, nonetheless, slave routes to Moscow in the seventeenth century onwards through which some African slaves “were bought

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<sup>1</sup> Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy and Ludmilla A. Trigos, “Introduction: Was Pushkin Black and Does it Matter?” in *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness*, ed. Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Nicole Svobodny, and Ludmilla A. Trigos (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Nepomnyashchy and Trigos, “Introduction,” 12.

by Russian consuls in Tripoli, baptized on the spot in the Russian Orthodox Church, and sent to Saint Petersburg where, as new converts, they were freed and engaged for life in the service of the imperial court.”<sup>3</sup> At court, these Africans were met by the prejudices espoused in European encyclopedias and journals filtered throughout Russia which engraved stark portraits of Africans and their mannerisms into the minds of educated Russians, one such encyclopedia claiming that “Negroes [are] closer to animals (monkeys) than the representatives of other races.”<sup>4</sup>

With such a negative portrayal of Africans being the predominant one in Gannibal’s lifetime, it would seem impossible for a man such as Gannibal to rise to the status of “the dark star of the Enlightenment,” as Voltaire once called him.<sup>5</sup> After being stolen from his home in Logone (modern-day Cameroon), Gannibal was taken to Constantinople and from there sold in 1704 to Fedor Golovin, a close associate of Peter the Great.<sup>6</sup> Golovin had bought Gannibal and another African child for the purpose of presenting them as gifts to the tsar.<sup>7</sup> Peter quickly grew fond of the young Gannibal and baptized him as his godson, giving him the patronymic Petrov.<sup>8</sup> He even took Gannibal with him in 1716 to France to study at a military school with only three other young Russian men.<sup>9</sup> Gannibal showed great promise in the fields of mathematics and engineering, and, after he returned from France, Peter “entrusted him with the administration of his private cabinet and charged him with teaching mathematics to the young Russian nobles enrolled in the technical schools of Moscow and St. Petersburg.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Czeslaw Jesman, "Early Russian Contacts with Ethiopia," in *Proceedings of the Third International Conference of Ethiopian Studies* (Addis Ababa, 1966), 253-267; quoted in Dieudonné Gnamankou, "Pushkin Between Russia and Africa," *Diogenes* 179 (1997): 211-229.

<sup>4</sup> Nepomnyashchy and Trigos, "Introduction," 7.

<sup>5</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., "Foreword," in *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness*, ed. Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Nicole Svobodny, and Ludmilla A. Trigos (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), xi.

<sup>6</sup> T.J. Binyon, *Pushkin* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002), 4.

<sup>7</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 5.

<sup>9</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 5.

<sup>10</sup> Gnamankou, "Pushkin Between Russia and Africa," 211-229.

After Peter's death in 1725, Gannibal was still treated exceedingly well by Peter's wife and successor, Catherine. She made him the personal tutor of Peter II, the tsar's grandson, as well as giving him a large plot of land in Pskov province.<sup>11</sup> Despite a small period of exile in Siberia due to suspicion and racial hatred on the part of court favorites such as Aleksandr Menshikov in 1724,<sup>12</sup> Gannibal returned to St. Petersburg. There, he achieved an astounding litany of accomplishments: in 1725, he wrote a widely-read treatise on geometry; in the 1740s, the Empress Elizabeth appointed him with the task of determining the Russian border with Sweden; and in 1759, he became the head of all Russian military engineering operations and oversaw the construction of the Ladoga Canal, among other such projects.<sup>13</sup> By the time of his death in 1781, Gannibal was renowned not only for being one of the most exceptional Africans of his time, but also for being one of the greatest *Russians*.

Gannibal's incredible rise to fame had a profound influence on Pushkin's perceptions about his own identity and "Russianness"; this influence can most clearly be seen in Pushkin's first, unfinished novel, *The Negro of Peter the Great*. In this semi-biographical tale, Pushkin explores the significance of Gannibal's presence in eighteenth-century Russia by addressing such issues as marriage and social acceptance through the eyes of Ibrahim, the African protagonist. Modeled after his great-grandfather (with some artistic license taken on Pushkin's part), Ibrahim falls in love with a Frenchwoman, Countess D—, but is too filled with self-doubt to pursue her: "*Why should I endeavor to unite the fate of such a tender, beautiful creature to the miserable fate*

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<sup>11</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 5-6.

<sup>12</sup> N.K. Teletova, "A.P. Gannibal: On the Occasion of the Three Hundredth Anniversary of the Birth of Alexander Pushkin's Great-Grandfather," in *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness*, ed. Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Nicole Svobodny, and Ludmilla A. Trigos (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 63.

<sup>13</sup> Gnamankou, "Pushkin Between Russia and Africa," 211-229.

of a Negro, of a pitiable creature, scarce worthy of the name of man?”<sup>14</sup> This theme of social isolation and its consequences is repeated in an encounter with Ibrahim’s (and Gannibal’s) patron, Peter the Great: “Listen, Ibrahim: you are a man alone in the world, without birth and kindred, a stranger to everybody, except myself [. . .] You must get settled while there is yet time, find support in new ties, become connected by marriage with the Russian nobility.”<sup>15</sup> Pushkin makes clear in the novel the intimate relationship between Peter the Great and Ibrahim, thus creating a “living link” between himself and the modernizer of all Russia.<sup>16</sup> Despite this point of pride, the novel dwells mostly on the issues closest to Pushkin at the time. While writing this novel, Pushkin was thinking about marrying, and had dealt with critiques and comments about his African features his entire life. Consequently, *The Negro of Peter the Great* was cathartic for Pushkin—an exercise in overcoming his own perceived physical faults.<sup>17</sup>

Pushkin’s pride in his ancestry was not, however, shared by all of his contemporaries; rather, some used his lineage to attack him personally. The most famous example of this is a letter to Pushkin written by Faddei Bulgarin, a Polish-Russian journal editor with whom Pushkin often butted heads.<sup>18</sup> In the letter, Bulgarin recounts a false anecdote in which “a Mulatto began to claim that one of his ancestors was a Negro Prince.”<sup>19</sup> He ends the letter by remarking: “Who would have thought then that a poet should claim this Negro. Vanity of vanities.”<sup>20</sup> Pushkin rebutted the letter with one of his own, entitled “My Genealogy,” in which he lambasts Bulgarin but refrains from mentioning his ethnic origins: “[H]e [Bulgarin] cannot be praised for

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<sup>14</sup> Alexander Pushkin, “The Negro of Peter the Great,” in *The Captain’s Daughter and Other Stories*, trans. T. Keane (New York: Vintage Books, 1936), 278.

<sup>15</sup> Pushkin, “The Negro of Peter the Great,” 302.

<sup>16</sup> Gnamankou, “Pushkin Between Russia and Africa,” 211-229.

<sup>17</sup> Gnamankou, “Pushkin Between Russia and Africa,” 211-229.

<sup>18</sup> J. Thomas Shaw, “Pushkin on His African Heritage: Publications during His Lifetime,” in *Under the Sky of My Africa: Alexander Pushkin and Blackness*, ed. Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, Nicole Svobodny, and Ludmilla A. Trigos (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 89.

<sup>19</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 309.

<sup>20</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 309.

responding to Russian advances by besmirching the sacred pages of our chronicles, by denigrating the best of our citizens and, not content to take on his contemporaries, by scoffing at the tombs of our ancestors.”<sup>21</sup> Even Pushkin, proud as he was, chose not to defend the African roots of Gannibal and himself. Instead, he defended the aristocratic name and legacy that Gannibal had left behind in Russia, revealing his own hesitancy to fully acknowledge his African blood in public.

Aside from written skirmishes, Pushkin also experienced racial discrimination on the basis of his somewhat African appearance. In her diary, Dolly Khitrovo, the daughter of an Austrian ambassador whom Pushkin met at a party, claimed that Pushkin “is a mixture of the physiognomy of a monkey and a tiger, he is descended from an African race—there are still some hints of it in his eye and there is something savage about his look.”<sup>22</sup> Pushkin himself would often draw self-portraits that looked more akin to encyclopedia drawings of orangutans than to a human being.<sup>23</sup> This self- and publicly-perceived savageness was reinforced by popular literature such as Shakespeare’s famous play *Othello*, which was widely read among Pushkin’s contemporaries. In the events leading up to and after his fatal duel with George d'Anthès, they likened the author’s fate to that of the jealous moor’s of the title.<sup>24</sup> He had become little more than a character cast in a tragic play to his fellow aristocrats: the exotic African placed in a world to which he did not, and had never, belonged.

Pushkin’s unique and irreplaceable position today as the patron saint of Russian literature has helped to erase much of the general embarrassment over his African roots following his death. Such embarrassment was evident under the Soviet Union, where the issue of Pushkin’s

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<sup>21</sup> Gnamankou, “Pushkin Between Russia and Africa,” 211-229.

<sup>22</sup> Binyon, *Pushkin*, 298.

<sup>23</sup> Gnamankou, “Pushkin Between Russia and Africa,” 211-229.

<sup>24</sup> Nepomnyashchy and Trigos, “Introduction,” 10.

“blackness” was almost never addressed.<sup>25</sup> Only in the occasion of African students studying in Russia or during other such politically opportune moments was Pushkin’s status as the only famous “Black Russian” openly displayed.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the unbelievable story of Abram Petrovich Gannibal survives as one of the most fascinating ethnic encounters in Russia’s long history. For an African slave to be taken in and raised by the Russian tsar himself is the rarest kind of luck; for this unlikely interaction to end up producing Russia’s greatest writer is, perhaps, a bit more like fate.

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<sup>25</sup> Nepomnyashchy and Trigos, “Introduction,” 23.

<sup>26</sup> Nepomnyashchy and Trigos, “Introduction,” 23.