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**NIKOLAI  
GUMILEV'S  
AFRICA**

TRANSLATED BY SLAVA I. YASTREMSKI,  
MICHAEL M. NAYDAN, AND MARIA BADANOVA



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# NIKOLAI GUMILEV'S AFRICA

Translated by Slava I. Yastremski,

Michael M. Naydan, and Maria Badanova

Edited by Michael M. Naydan

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Nikolai Gumilev

1886–1921

## INTRODUCTION:

### ON GUMILEV'S AFRICAN POETRY

Western readers perhaps know Nikolai Gumilev primarily as the husband of the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. In his time Gumilev was a recognized poet, one of the most important figures in the culture of the Silver Age in Russia, even before his marriage to Akhmatova (who incidentally was not yet an established poet when they married). He was the founder of Russian literary Acmeism, which comes from the French word *acme*, meaning the summit or pinnacle. Along with Symbolism and Futurism, Acmeism comprised one of the three most significant poetic movements in early twentieth-century Russia and focused on “beautiful clarity” (the poet Mikhail Kuzmin coined) and simplicity of expression instead of the profoundly complex and symbolic nature of the word in Symbolism, one of Acmeism’s immediate literary predecessors. In addition to Gumilev and Akhmatova, the major Acmeists included Osip Mandelstam, Sergei Gorodetsky, Georgy Adamovich, as well as a few others. To differentiate Gumilev from the other Acmeists, one can characterize his poetry by its vivid imagery, bright colors, and exotic locales that entered his poems from numerous travels to France, Italy, England, and, what became most important to him, Africa. The poet rightly called the source of his creativity the Muse of Distant Travels.

Gumilev’s life was as bright and fascinating as his art. In fact his biography often overshadowed his achievements as a poet. The critical moment that defined his biography was his execution in August 1921 on charges he participated in a counterrevolutionary conspiracy. In recent years those charges were proven to have been completely false and fabricated by the Soviet secret police. Gumilev was the first major artistic figure to fall victim to the Soviet regime, and his name, especially in immigrant circles, became a symbol of resistance to Soviet totalitarianism, despite the fact that political motifs occupied a very modest place in his writings.

What distinguishes Gumilev not only from other poets of his generation but indeed places him in a unique position in the history of

Russian poetry is his profound involvement with Africa. He extensively wrote both poetry and prose, on the culture of the continent in general and on Ethiopia (Abyssinia, as it was called in Gumilev's time) in particular. During Gumilev's abbreviated lifetime he made four trips to Northern and Eastern Africa, the most extensive of which was an April-August 1913 expedition to Abyssinia undertaken on assignment from the St. Petersburg Imperial Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. During that trip Gumilev collected Ethiopian folklore and ethnographic objects, which, upon his return to St. Petersburg, he deposited at the Museum. He and his assistant Nikolai Sverchkov also made more than 200 photographs that offer a unique picture of the African country in the early part of the century.

African motifs began to appear very early in Gumilev's poetry, even before he actually visited the continent. According to Gumilev's own personal assessment, his first "acceptable" collection *Romantic Flowers* (1908) contains poems thematically centered around Lake Chad, which, at that time the poet associated with the heart of mysterious Black Africa. For the most part his treatment of Africa in the poems from this collection is affected by Gumilev's favorite writers of that time – Jules Verne, Captain Mayne Reid, and especially Ryder Haggard. The poem "Incantation," for example, is directly based on Haggard's novel *Cleopatra*, particularly on the scene in which the priest Harmahis shows Cleopatra (who usurped his throne) the mysteries of the Egyptian gods. In this poem we also find the image of the "pillars of fire" that later will become the title of Gumilev's last collection of poetry (published posthumously in 1921). Gumilev's poem "Giraffe" became the cornerstone of this collection and became Gumilev's trademark in bohemian circles of pre-war (WWI) St. Petersburg. On the whole the African imagery in *Romantic Flowers* is somewhat abstract and closely resembles the pictures of British Pre-Raphaelites and Russian Art Nouveau artists. In the collection Gumilev idealized Africa as an exotic Orient.

The collection *A Foreign Sky* marks a change in Gumilev's treatment of the African theme in his works. The change was undoubtedly caused by the poet's immediate experience on the so-called Dark Continent. By the time he published the collection Gumilev had made two trips to Africa – a brief one to Egypt in 1908 and a much longer one to Abyssinia in 1910. His poems after those two journeys include actual details of African nature and Gumilev's own engagement with it. In the poem "Ezбекиya" from the 1918 collection *The Quiver* Gumilev reflects on his visit to the Cairo

garden in 1908. At that time he was preoccupied with thoughts of suicide because of Anna Akhmatova's rejection of his marriage proposal, which she subsequently accepted two years later. The visit to the Ezbekiya garden healed Gumilev spiritually, and all his future trips to Africa had the same beneficial effect on his state of mind and inspired him artistically.

The collection *The Tent* (1921) became the most significant among Gumilev's poetic works on Africa and was published a few months before his execution. It consists entirely of poems dedicated to Africa. As his wife Anna Akhmatova noted in her memoirs, *The Tent* is a book of geography in verse. This statement is supported by the memoirs of the Russian explorer of Africa V. I. Nemirovich-Danchenko to whom Gumilev said in 1921: "I am writing a geography in verse. It is the most poetic of all the sciences but people make some kind of herbarium out of it. I am now working on Africa, the black African tribes. I must show how they imagined the world for themselves." The plan for a large poetic book of a "geography in verse" was discovered among Gumilev's archival papers. It consisted of six sections: Europe, Asia, Africa, America, and Australia. The outline of the African section showed that Gumilev intended to write his poems in correspondence to an imaginary trip around Africa, starting with Egypt, then following the Western coast of the continent, and ending the journey at the Red Sea. It must be noted that the journey, with the exception of its beginning and the very end, would take place in locations where Gumilev had never been. In comparison with this plan, *The Tent* consists almost entirely of poems dedicated to those places in Africa that Gumilev visited several times, the central of which comprises the area of the Horn of Africa that includes Abyssinia, Galla, Somalia, the Red Sea, and adjacent to the latter, Egypt and Sudan.

Gumilev visited Abyssinia at the end of the reign of the country's great leader Menelik II, who in 1896 defeated the Italian army at the river Adwa and won independence for Abyssinia, which was the only uncolonized African country at the end of the 19th century. It had a special appeal for Russia (which didn't participate in the "scramble for Africa") because of the shared with Ethiopia Eastern Orthodox religion. Gumilev's poems include many references to the history of Ethiopia – from the legendary Axum empire to the times of the more recent military and government leaders such as Ras Mekonnen and the prophet Sheik Hussein – as well as some comments on the modern social issues of the country, such as the conflict between the indigenous population and the Europeans. In the

collection *The Tent*, Gumilev's African landscape becomes as real as the people who populate it. The poet includes his personal recollections of traveling through various parts of Abyssinia, and in descriptions of those parts of Africa where he was not able to go, he proceeds from concrete visual imagery: maps, pictures, and actual artifacts, as is evident in the last poem of the collection "The Niger."

In sum in retrospect we cannot consider Gumilev to have been a "politically correct" writer in regard to his writings on Africa. His views certainly can be characterized as "Orientalist" by present-day standards. However, his African-themed poems bear the stamp of not only his genuine love and understanding of different independent African cultures but also of an actual merging with at least one of them and depicting it from within, from the point of view of a participant.

Slava I. Yastremski

*Professor of Russian Bucknell University*

## A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATIONS

This edition for the first time compiles virtually all of Nikolai Gumilev's Africa-themed works (poems, prose, and diaries) in a single volume in English translation along with a number of extant photographs from the Gumilev archive in Russia. I have stuck to Slava's outline and design for the book, which has been a longtime labor of love for him. Many of the translations are appearing in English for the first time.<sup>1</sup> After my co-translator Slava Yastremski succumbed to illness in November 2015, I was able to download all his materials on Gumilev from his laptop thanks to Slava's widow Irina, who was kind enough to give me access. She also gave me the photographs from Gumilev's African travels that Slava had obtained earlier from the Gumilev archive in Russia for publication in this volume. Given the age of the photographs and Gumilev's death in 1921, all these works lie in the public domain. While Slava's and my translations were approaching completion when he died, he was too weak to do a final edit the months before he passed away. Therefore I have decided to include an edit by my very talented honors college undergraduate student at Penn State Maria Badanova, who did a marvelous job in checking and editing this final manuscript and improving it. I am grateful to Laird Jones for sharing his expertise on Africa with me for this volume. I am responsible for any errors or omissions that might have slipped through. I have decided to use English equivalents of words that Gumilev uses such as "Negro" (negr) and "dwarf" (karlik) instead of versions of those words preferred in contemporary English usage to keep to the style of colonial usage extant in the poet's time.

Michael M. Naydan

*Woskob Family Professor of Ukrainian Studies and  
Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures  
The Pennsylvania State University*

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1 Burton Raffel's and Alla Burago's translations were published in *Selected Works of Nikolai S. Gumilev* (Albany: SUNY Albany Press, 1972). The volume includes just a handful of Gumilev's African poems and three of his prose works on the subject.



## **POETIC WORKS**

THE GARDENS OF MY SOUL

The gardens of my soul are always filled with patterns,  
In them the winds are so fresh and blow so softly,  
In them you find golden sands and black marble,  
And pools that are deep and entirely translucent.

In them, just as in a dream, plants are extraordinary,  
Birds glow pink like water in the morning  
And—who can understand the clue to an age-old secret?—  
In them, there is a maiden wearing a High Priestess' wreath.

Her eyes are like the reflections of pure gray steel,  
Her graceful brow is whiter than eastern lilies.  
She has lips that have kissed no one  
And that have never uttered a word to anyone.

Her cheeks are pinkish pearls of the South,  
The treasure of unthinkable fantasies,  
Her hands that have only caressed one another  
When intertwined in the ecstasy of prayer.

By her feet, there are two black panthers  
With a metallic tint to their fur,  
And flying up from the rose bushes of a secret grotto  
Her pink flamingoes float in the azure.

I do not look at the world of streaming lines,  
My dreams are obedient to nothing but the eternal.  
Let fierce sirocco winds rage in the desert,  
The gardens of my soul are always filled with patterns.

## AN INCANTATION

The young magician in a purple tunic  
Spoke mysterious words  
Before her, the queen of lawlessness,  
He squandered rubies of magic.

The aroma of the burning incense  
Opened spaces that knew no limits  
Where gloomy shadows were rushing,  
Looking like fish, then like birds.

Invisible strings gently sobbed,  
Pillars of fire floated in the air,  
Proud military tribunes submissively  
Lowered their eyes like slaves.

And the queen disturbed these mysteries,  
Playing with the loftiness of the universe,  
And her silky-smooth skin  
Intoxicated him with its snowy whiteness.

Yielding to the power of her whims,  
The young magician forgot everything around him,  
Looking at her small breasts,  
At the bracelets on her outstretched arms.

The young magician in the purple tunic  
Spoke without a breath, like the dead,  
He gave the queen of transgressions  
All that made his soul feel alive.

And when the crescent moon began to sway  
On the emeralds of the Nile and faded,  
The pale-faced queen tossed  
The flower glowing crimson for him.



Men on trail with packhorse



Nikolai Gumilev with man



The sacred book of Sheikh Hussein, a town in southeast Abyssinia/Ethiopia sacred to Muslims and named after the thirteenth-century religious figure Sheikh Hussein, who introduced Islam to the Sidamo people



The sacred book of Sheikh Hussein

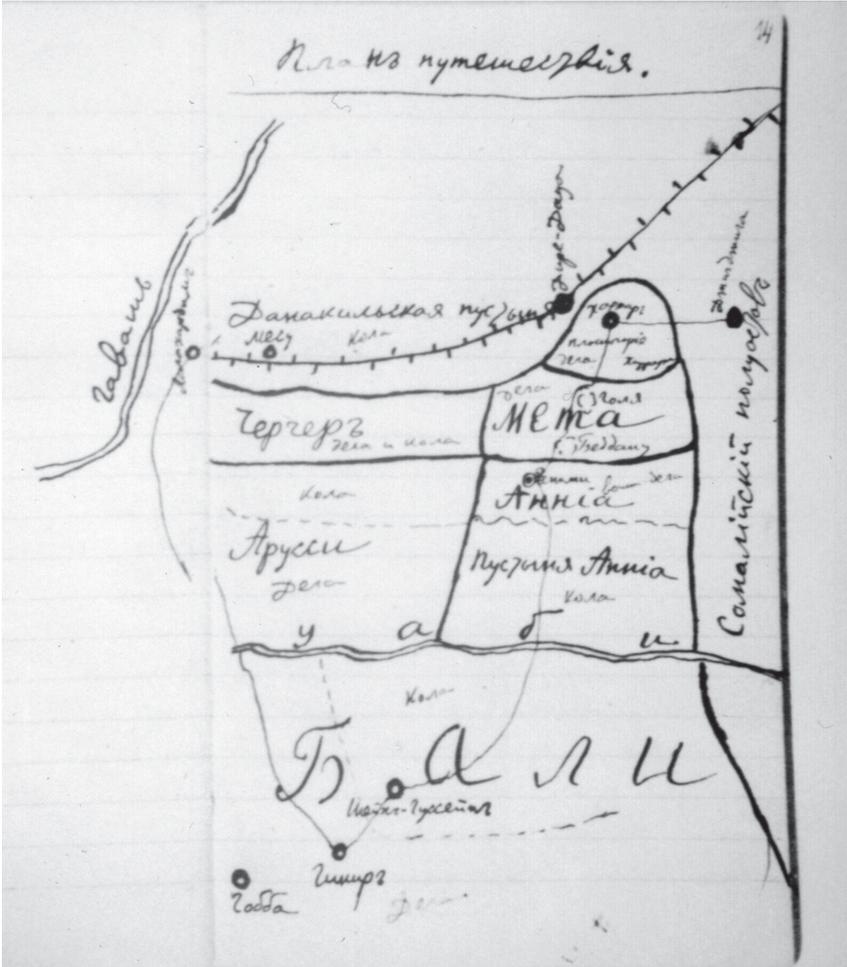
Замбийский, харраритский, сомалийский  
и абиссинский ветви, собранные Э. Менделеевым  
Н. Зуминевым 1913 г. от 1 мая до 15 августа.

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поют древнюю песню; употребляется главным образом  
на семейных торжествах. Цена 2 м. Харрара.

3) Кабалла — ступка с перемалыванием и молотом; в ней  
молотят катис (раба мочкара) и другие продукты, особенно  
румяно и садах под Харрарой. Как замечают  
интервьюемые, ступки и молоты  
это не только с утра ставят на работу или не только  
на вечерние часы. Часто они работают и днем. В ма-  
маше дома они делают как хомаша, так и  
другие продукты. Изобретение в ступке  
удобнее, чем у других, потому что  
идет молотом. Не только в ней делают супы,  
супы, тушеное мясо, в том числе аджугу  
и другие национальные религиозные блюда. Но  
в таком виде идет только хлеб и зерно,  
то периодически не делают, но это. Цена 2 м. Харрара

Милая Веря! Подрываюсь  
тебя съ праздничкомъ Роче-  
ства Христова, да въ твои  
встрѣтитъ и проведемъ  
въ радости и добромъ  
духѣ. Намекать въ твои  
картинки бы, да семью не  
оставить, а забавно другъ.  
Я себя уверую въ то,  
перво мнѣ въ расказахъ  
о мученицѣ величїе и  
много мнѣ еще въ  
свои мнѣ и много нѣтъ  
еще себя при другъ  
а до того скажешь  
на мнѣ, но аманеи въ  
мнѣ много стали заден  
преданїю, а особенно мнѣ.  
Коль и Серена еще мнѣ  
любятъ и неслышно мнѣ  
Ура въ вен. коронѣ. Коль  
въ эту вечеръ поспѣетъ  
два трапки, а Серена и  
не одна. Подумай дружокъ, мнѣ  
Мамы здорова и подрываюсь  
скоро кинуться въ твои



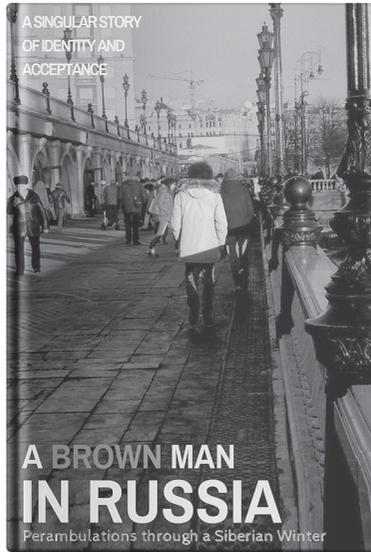
Map in Russian of planned travel route



Emperor Menelik II meets with Russian military delegation



**A Brown Man in Russia -  
Perambulations Through A Siberian Winter**  
by Vijay Menon

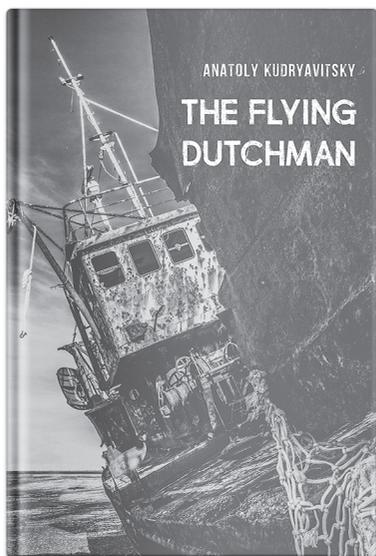


A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, A Brown Man in Russia is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

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## The Flying Dutchman

by Anatoly Kudryavitsky

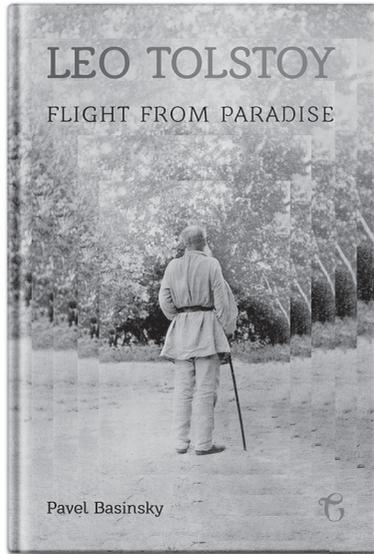


Some time in the 1970s, Konstantin Alphejev, a well-known Russian musicologist, finds himself in trouble with the KGB, the Russian secret police, after the death of his girlfriend, for which one of their officers may have been responsible. He has to flee from the city and to go into hiding. He rents an old house located on the bank of a big Russian river, and lives there like a recluse observing nature and working on his new book about Wagner. The house, a part of an old barge, undergoes strange metamorphoses rebuilding itself as a medieval schooner, and Alphejev begins to identify himself with the Flying Dutchman. Meanwhile, the police locate his new whereabouts and put him under surveillance. A chain of strange events in the nearby village makes the police officer contact the KGB, and the latter figure out who the new tenant of the old house actually is.

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# Leo Tolstoy – Flight from Paradise

by Pavel Basinsky



Over a hundred years ago, something truly outrageous occurred at Yasnaya Polyana. Count Leo Tolstoy, a famous author aged eighty-two at the time, took off, destination unknown. Since then, the circumstances surrounding the writer's whereabouts during his final days and his eventual death have given rise to many myths and legends. In this book, popular Russian writer and reporter Pavel Basinsky delves into the archives and presents his interpretation of the situation prior to Leo Tolstoy's mysterious disappearance. Basinsky follows Leo Tolstoy throughout his life, right up to his final moments. Reconstructing the story from historical documents, he creates a visionary account of the events that led to the Tolstoys' family drama.

*Flight from Paradise* will be of particular interest to international researchers studying Leo Tolstoy's life and works, and is highly recommended to a broader audience worldwide.

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GUMILEV HOLDS A UNIQUE POSITION IN THE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN POETRY AS A RESULT OF HIS PROFOUND INVOLVEMENT WITH AFRICA. HE EXTENSIVELY WROTE BOTH POETRY AND PROSE ON THE CULTURE OF THE CONTINENT IN GENERAL AND ON ETHIOPIA (ABYSSINIA, AS IT WAS CALLED IN GUMILEV'S TIME) IN PARTICULAR. DURING HIS ABBREVIATED LIFETIME GUMILEV MADE FOUR TRIPS TO NORTHERN AND EASTERN AFRICA, THE MOST EXTENSIVE OF WHICH WAS A 1913 EXPEDITION TO ABYSSINIA UNDERTAKEN ON ASSIGNMENT FROM THE ST. PETERSBURG IMPERIAL MUSEUM OF ANTHROPOLOGY AND ETHNOGRAPHY. DURING THAT TRIP GUMILEV COLLECTED ETHIOPIAN FOLKLORE AND ETHNOGRAPHIC OBJECTS, WHICH, UPON HIS RETURN TO ST. PETERSBURG, HE DEPOSITED AT THE MUSEUM. HE AND HIS ASSISTANT NIKOLAI SVERCHKOV ALSO MADE MORE THAN 200 PHOTOGRAPHS THAT OFFER A UNIQUE PICTURE OF THE AFRICAN COUNTRY IN THE EARLY PART OF THE CENTURY.

THIS VOLUME COLLECTS ALL OF GUMILEV'S POETRY AND PROSE WRITTEN ABOUT AFRICA FOR THE FIRST TIME AS WELL AS A NUMBER OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS THAT HE AND NIKOLAI SVERCHKOV TOOK DURING THEIR TRIP THAT GIVE A FASCINATING VIEW OF THAT PART OF THE WORLD IN THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY.

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