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Of African Princes and Russian Poets

By **SERGE SCHMEMANN**

LA FÈRE, FRANCE — On a gray, chilly autumn day, an unusual cluster gathered by the stern red-brick barracks of a former artillery academy here in northeastern France to attend the unveiling of a curious plaque.

Alongside the luminaries of the town and province were high representatives of Russia and Estonia, as well as the ambassador of Cameroon and the sultan of Logone-Birni (now in Cameroon), resplendent in the colorful garments of their African homeland.

The requisite speeches were delivered, and all shivered at attention as the local marching band wrestled gamely with the European Anthem (more familiar as Beethoven's "Ode to Joy"). Then the sultan, Mahamat Bahat Marouf, was ushered forward to pull the veil off a modest plaque affixed to the wall. The legend, in French and Russian, declared that Abram Petrovich Gannibal (Hanibal in French), born in Logone-Birni in 1696 and deceased in Russia in 1781, chief military engineer and general-in-chief of the Imperial Russian Army, was a graduate of the royal artillery academy of La Fère.

It also noted that he was the great-grandfather of Russia's greatest poet, Alexander Pushkin.

In Russia, it is common knowledge that Pushkin was descended from an African who was raised to high rank by Czar Peter the Great. Pushkin's African ancestry was evident in his appearance, and the poet was proud of the heritage, using Gannibal as the model for an unfinished novel known in English as "The Negro of Peter the Great."

But it is only in recent years that Gannibal, and Pushkin, have become sources of pride for Cameroon. The main reason for that is the research done by an African historian who pored over Russian, French and African sources to conclude that Gannibal most likely began life as the son of a chief in the ancient sultanate of Logone-Birni. Indeed, it was the findings of the historian, Dieudonné Gnamankou, himself from Benin, that led to the little celebration in La Fère.

Gannibal's story is remarkable by any historical yardstick. Kidnapped at the age of 7, he was presented as tribute to the Ottoman sultan in Constantinople. There he was somehow acquired by the Russian ambassador (Count Peter A. Tolstoy, himself the great-grandfather of another celebrated Russian man of letters, one Leo) and sent as a gift to Czar Peter I, subsequently emperor and "the Great."

Never one to waste imported talent, the modernizing czar became the young African's mentor and godfather (whence the patronymic "Petrovich" — and, for a while, the surname "Petrov," both derived from "Peter") and chose for him a military career.

On a trip to Europe in 1716, Peter left his 20-year-old ward behind in Paris to be educated in military science, and in 1720 Gannibal was enrolled in King Louis XV's just-opened artillery academy at La Fère (it was closed in the 1990s). Gannibal fought with the French against Spain, and it was in France that he took a storied African military name, that of the Carthaginian general Hannibal, for his own.

Gannibal returned to Russia an expert on fortifications. He weathered the intrigues that followed Peter's death (with a stint in Siberia) and at his death at the ripe old age of 85 was a general, governor and landowner, known to his admiring peers as "the black lord" and possessed of a coat of arms he designed himself, blazoned with an African elephant. He had 11 children, one of whom was Pushkin's maternal grandfather.

Gannibal's roots in Africa, however, long remained vague. Russian biographers decided early on that he was Ethiopian, though the only known fact was that he himself wrote in a letter to Empress Elizabeth, Peter the Great's daughter, that he was from the town of "Lagon." Vladimir Nabokov, conducting research for his definitive translation of Pushkin's "Eugene Onegin," was the first to cast serious doubt on the Ethiopian angle. But it was Mr. Gnamankou who first made a strong case in 1995 that "Lagon" was Logone, the capital of the ancient Kotoko kingdom of Logone-Birni on the southern side of Lake Chad, now located in northern Cameroon.

Mr. Gnamankou's thesis caused something of a stir in Russia, where Pushkin has the status of a god. Roots in black Africa, Mr. Gnamankou suspects, seemed less acceptable than roots in the ancient Christian kingdom of Ethiopia. Nonetheless, his book on Gannibal was translated into Russian in 1999 and was judged the best book on Pushkin that year at the Moscow Book Fair. In 2000, a documentary about Gannibal shown on Russian television included scenes shot in Logone, as well as an interview with Mr. Gnamankou.

In Logone-Birni, the discovery of a tie to one of the world's great poets was a sensation. Sultan Mahamat may, in fact, be a distant relative of Gannibal. The sultan claims to be the 47th in his line, and Mr. Gnamankou believes that Gannibal was most likely the son of the local ruler. He believes the boy was kidnapped in 1703 by a neighboring chief to be given as tribute to the newly enthroned sultan in Constantinople. There, the boy was converted to Islam as Ibrahim, which became Abraham, or Abram, when Czar Peter had him baptized in the Russian Orthodox faith.

The ceremony at La Fère was thus something of a personal triumph for Gnamankou, who was the main speaker at a subsequent symposium — and whose wife, Joëlle Esso, a professional singer, entertained the gathering with rousing songs she wrote about Gannibal and Pushkin ("Le czar le rappelle en Russie/ Hannibal n'en a pas très envie ...").

The fact that an African could rise to high rank in the Russian and French royal service in the

18th century figured prominently in the speeches of the day. For Gannibal, Gnammankou said, Russia became “his land of liberty, which gave him the means of fulfilling his talents.” In return, Russia gained its greatest poet.