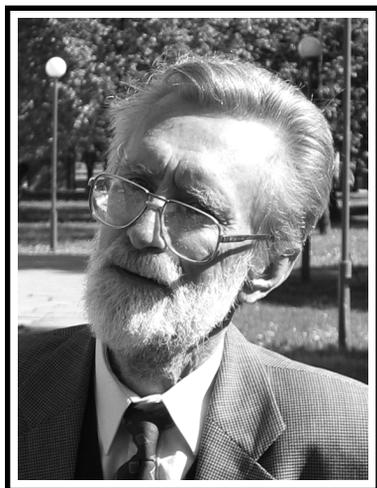


## Nikolai Mikhailovich Girenko (1940–2004)



On the morning of 19 June 2004, my colleague and close friend Nikolai Girenko was shot dead by a hitman from a St Petersburg fascist organisation. In death he remained true to his academic and civic duty: he was murdered because he had made honest and accurate assessments of the activities of fascist and extremist groups, and had presented these to the appropriate legal authorities. The fascists decided he had to be silenced, and fired shots into him through a door. It now falls to me, Nikolai's friend from early childhood, and for many years his colleague at the Department of African Ethnography, Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, St Petersburg, to recount the life of this remarkable man who died in such a tragic way.

Nikolai Girenko grew up in Leningrad, where he had a typical childhood for those years immediately after the War. He felt a deep attachment to the street where he was born, Ulitsa Podkovyrova, to Bolshoi Prospekt (the one on the Petrograd Side, not Vasilevsky Island), and to the Petrograd Side as a whole, where he knew everyone and everyone knew him. The closeness of the community he grew up in as a boy was vital to survival in that difficult era. Despite the damage and devastation wrought by the War, people were never left to fend for themselves, and in

the cramped conditions of the badly damaged city *'there was always someone to help you, there were friends everywhere'*. To deceive these people or to disgrace oneself before them was unthinkable. Friendships were cultivated on the streets, since the communal flats were packed to the doors; the many ruined buildings gave young lads space to play.

For the young Nikolai, as for everybody, this life came to an end when he finished school and began military service, a prospect which back then did not seem so terrifying as it has in more recent years. There a different, short-term life began, its duration limited to the period of service, after which time he had to choose a life for himself. Nikolai chose to study Swahili at the Department of African Studies in the Oriental Faculty of Leningrad University. Here he stood out from other students because of the interest he showed in his subject: he did not simply 'drink in' the great volume of truly fascinating and exotic material which the lecturers imparted to us, but strove to interpret it, to understand it as a system. Indeed, the capacity for systematic thought set him apart throughout his life.

Students being students, we devised grand plans, and the future seemed to hold as much boundless interest as did the present. Fortune certainly favoured Nikolai: when he graduated from university in 1967, he and one of his fellow students got jobs as translators not just in any old place, but in Zanzibar, whose name alone says it all. There he experienced the two shocks that inevitably afflict every Orientalist or Africanist who finds himself in the 'country of the language of study' for the first time. First: 'Oh God! I don't understand a word! What have they been teaching me?' Second: 'Hooray! I can understand everything! I know the language!' Naturally, both these impressions later turn out to be as inaccurate as they are powerful. But the main thing was that there for the first time in his life was the Africa of 'dreams and reality' that neither Nikolai himself, nor his wife Valentina, who gave birth to their second daughter, Sonya, there, would ever forget. Their first daughter, Katya, was soon chattering away merrily in Swahili, and in their amazement the local people began to refer to Nikolai as 'Baba ya-Katya', 'Katya's father', even though honorific forms of address to fathers are customarily based upon the name of a son, not a daughter. The Zanzibari were also gratified by the name chosen for the second daughter ('He's given her one of our names — Saniya'). The happy father refrained from telling them that Sonya was not the same as Saniya, but was in fact an affectionate form of Sofya.

Nothing lasts forever, and in 1970 the adventure in Zanzibar came to an end. And here Nikolai had another stroke of luck: Dmitry Alekseevich Olderogge offered him a job at the African Division of the N. N. Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography.<sup>1</sup> Olderogge was a legendary figure, and to work with him was a rare privilege and mark of success, even if it did mean adapting to an institute salary of eighty-three roubles (sixteen bottles of vodka in the liquid currency of the time),<sup>2</sup> an act of patriotism in itself, and no mean feat for a man recently returned from Zanzibar with two children to support. However, Nikolai took up the

<sup>1</sup> The predecessor of the Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> And considerably below the average wage as defined in official Soviet sources, which then stood at about 120 roubles a month. [Editor].

challenge and worked there until the day of his death. Valentina understood and supported his decision; he had also been lucky in his choice of a wife.

The Division gave him yet another invaluable gift: contact with such an original thinker and great expert on Africa as Vyacheslav Mikhailovich Misyugin, who, although he was neither a member of the Division nor an employee of the Institute, nevertheless came in nearly every day. It was not the first time that Nikolai Girenko had met Misyugin, for he had been taught by him at university, but in lectures the relationship between teacher and student is basically one-sided: the teacher talks and the student listens. There it was a different matter. Misyugin was often at the Division, and it was there that the graduates of the Department of African Studies got to know him properly. Why Misyugin came to the Division no-one now can say for sure. He evidently felt the need to share his remarkable ideas, to refine them in debate — in short, he needed the academic contact for which there is no place in a university faculty: the dining-hall is always full to overflowing — you can't get settled down for a quiet chat in there — while the department itself is always busy with classes and lectures.

To say that our contact with Misyugin at the Division was beneficial is to understate the case vastly. When we arrived there, we did not know how to talk, how to write, how to support our ideas with anything other than our own passionately held convictions. To sit down with a cup of coffee in the famous Akademichka<sup>1</sup> every day and discuss everything that came into our heads was an education in itself. Misyugin subtly guided us away from the propaganda of ideas, leading us instead to their origins, and he taught us to begin with the facts, which he knew inside out and would set out engagingly. He then embarked upon critical readings and discussions of our first articles, in which our thoughts flowed freely to the point of incomprehensibility. With his vast knowledge and experience of matters academic and practical (the latter included welding and boat-building), Misyugin had an intuitive, almost physical, sense of the world and of its history. Girenko, a systematic thinker, wanted *'to verify [his teacher's] harmony with algebra'*.<sup>2</sup>

The 'coffee-break debates' opened Girenko's eyes to the enormous terminological confusion in ethnography, to the fact that the discipline would go right ahead and use as terms (i.e. as words which by definition should have one meaning and one meaning only) ordinary words whose sense might vary enormously depending on the user. Girenko thought it vital to develop what he called a 'categorical apparatus' for exposition and discussion, based upon a precise correspondence between terms and concepts.<sup>3</sup> For this reason he devoted considerable attention to kinship terminology as an historical source,<sup>4</sup> indeed as one of the few historical sources available

<sup>1</sup> A café next to the library of the Russian Academy of Sciences in St Petersburg. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> A slightly inexact quotation from Pushkin's 'little tragedy' *Mozart and Salieri* (1830): in the original, Salieri says, *'With algebra/I verified harmony.'* [Editor].

<sup>3</sup> N. M. Girenko. 'Ethonim i etnicheskaya obshchnost v etnograficheskikh istochnikakh' [The Ethonym and the Ethnic Community in Ethnographical Sources] // *Marksistsko-leninskaya nauka o putyakh preodoleniya otstalosti afrikanskikh stran*. Moscow and Leningrad, 1974. Pp. 154–6.

<sup>4</sup> N. M. Girenko, 'Sistema terminov rodstva i sistema sotsialnykh kategorii' [Systems of Kinship Terminology and Social Categories] // *Sovetskaya etnografiya*. 1974, № 6. pp. 41–50.

to the researcher into non-literate societies. For new concepts Girenko introduced new terms such as *'the social organism of kinship'*, and these innovations sometimes made a strong impression. For instance, the head of our division, Olderogge, a great expert on the Russian language and lover of the classics of Russian literature, once complained to me that in the periods of insomnia which afflicted him now and again *'the social organism of kinship'* sometimes seemed to come and sit on his chest, crushing him so that he could not sleep.

The research conducted at the Division under Olderogge's leadership gradually brought about a revision of earlier views on the course of African history. In 1973, Olderogge published his article 'Colonial Society — A Stage in the Ethnic Development of the Peoples of Africa (Defining the Problem)' in the little-noticed Leningrad collection *Problems of Population and Agriculture in the Countries of Africa*.<sup>1</sup> However, *sapienti sat*: specialists in the field immediately recognised the significance of his work, and Girenko was one of the first to respond to it, by applying the ideas of his divisional director to his own East African data.<sup>2</sup> For most members of the Division, Olderogge's article was a major factor in their decision to focus on the pre-colonial period in African history, a direction in which Misyugin had always gently nudged them. Girenko did not lag behind, and in 1975 he defended a thesis for the degree of Candidate of Sciences entitled 'The Traditional Social Organisation of the Nyamwezi: Major Developmental Trends in the Pre-Colonial Period'. He was given no choice in the topic of his subsequent research; he had to stick to working in the areas that he had done, because although experts in many disciplines were being sent to Africa at that time, there were no specialists on Africa among them.<sup>3</sup> Since he did not wish to abandon his study of ethnography, he was essentially left with two contiguous fields to choose from, both of them highly theoretical: kinship terminology (the relationship between types of terminology and the origins of society) and fundamental questions pertaining to the origins of political organisation. Girenko was nothing daunted. Of the two fields, the latter was especially risky in a political sense. A hundred years had elapsed since the publication of Engels's revolutionary work 'The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State', which formed the foundation of the Soviet theory of the origins of political organisation; it had inevitably become outdated in that time, but there could be no question of revising the classics of Marxism. Not that Soviet ethnographers were exactly likely to re-write Engels's article anyway, not being much interested in the family and private property. The origins of political organisation, on the other hand, they found exceptionally interesting: there were strong suspicions among them

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Olderogge. 'Kolonial'noe obshchestvo — etap v etnicheskom razvitii narodov Afriki (Postanovka problemy)' // *Problemy naseleniya i khozyaistva stran Afriki*. Leningrad, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> N. M. Girenko. 'Kolonialnyi rezhim i traditsionnye instituty (na primere Tanzanii)' [The Colonial Regime and Traditional Institutions: the Case of Tanzania] // *Sovetskaya etnografiya*. 1974, No. 1. Pp. 50–69.

<sup>3</sup> Which is to say, doing fieldwork was ruled out. In the Soviet system, such decisions were made on a purely political, rather than practical, basis, high up the administrative line, and even the directors of institutes, let alone individual researchers, could do little or nothing to influence them. [Editor].

that the state (or, for the sake of argument, the potestary organisation of society) had come into being before social classes emerged.

This idea was current everywhere, and in Moscow it received serious attention from Lev Evgenevich Kubbel, another of Olderogge's students, who had worked in the African Division for many years. Of course, from a high Marxist point of view it sounded heretical, but the good thing about having killer whales around is that the little fish learn to keep their wits about them. Kubbel decided to define the problem in terms of the domination that is inevitably inherent in any society, and he described it by outlining its history — a necessary precaution, certainly, but one that was nevertheless an obstacle to the precise formulation of a system of views on the subject.<sup>1</sup>

Girenko decided to approach the issue from a different, social, angle, that of the tribe, since this is the medium from which statehood was generated. In 1991 he published his book *The Sociology of the Tribe: The Making of Social Theory and the Fundamental Components of the Social Dynamic*,<sup>2</sup> whose importance has yet to be fully appreciated. Girenko himself attached greatest importance to his idea that the relationship between culture and society is the relationship between form and content, in which culture is 'a form of realisation of social existence'. He regarded society and culture as relatively independent quantities which are defined first and foremost by their differing degrees of historical dynamism.<sup>3</sup>

The beginning of the 1990s was a very productive time for Girenko. As well as his book, he also published several major theoretical articles: 'The Ethnic Group and Ethnic Processes in the Pre-Colonial Period: Examples from East Africa';<sup>4</sup> 'The Dynamics of the Bio-social System in the Natural-Historical Process';<sup>5</sup> 'The Tribe and the State: Problems of Evolution'.<sup>6</sup>

However, the revolutionary changes taking place in the country at the time (that is, the re-distribution of property under the banner of freedom) spawned many illusions, and Girenko became caught up in a maelstrom of practical activity. Life was changing rapidly and unpredictably: few people thought that freedom would arrive 'naked'<sup>7</sup> and vulnerable to quite

<sup>1</sup> L. E. Kubbel. *Ocherki potestarno-politicheskoi etnografii* ('Studies in Potestary-Political Ethnography'). Moscow, 1988. — Presenting this historical schema in the form of sketches was a 'necessary precaution' because it played down the extent to which this schema took issue with traditional Marxist-Leninist views that class formation and social development were inseparable. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> N. M. Girenko. *Sotsiologiya plemeni. Stanovlenie sotsiologicheskoi teorii i osnovnye komponenty sotsial'noi dinamiki*. St Petersburg, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. N. M. Girenko, 'Vzaimodeistvie kultury i obshchestva v svete leninskoi dialektiki' [The Interaction of Culture and Society in the Light of Leninist Dialectics] // *Leninizm i problemy etnografii*. Moscow, 1987. Pp. 118–46.

<sup>4</sup> N. M. Girenko. 'Etnos i etnicheskije protsessy v predkolonialnoi period (Po materialam vostochnoi Afriki)' // *Etnosotsialnye protsessy*. Moscow, 1990. Pp. 15–24.

<sup>5</sup> N. M. Girenko. 'Dinamika biosotsialnoi sistemy v estestvennoistoricheskom protsesse' // *Afriskanskii etnograficheskii sbornik*. XV. Leningrad, 1991. pp. 4–68.

<sup>6</sup> N. M. Girenko. 'Plemya i gosudarstvo: problemy evolyutsii' // *Rannie formy sotsialnoi strati-fikatsii*. Moscow, 1993. pp. 122–31.

<sup>7</sup> 'Freedom arrives naked': the opening line of section 17 of the Futurist writer Velimir Khlebnikov's narrative poem *War in a Mousetrap* (1915–1922). [Editor].

such brazen exploitation as in fact took place. In these difficult circumstances, Girenko took on the burdens of being Deputy Director (and later Director) of the N. N. Miklukho-Maklai Institute of Anthropology and Ethnography, a deputy on St Petersburg City Council, and a member of the Permanent Commission on Human Rights and Public Bodies. These responsibilities inevitably interfered with his academic pursuits.

Then, as the heady atmosphere cleared, we all began to realise that a new era really had begun, and that the old injustices and barbarities were being replaced by new ones. The ethnic problems which we had not been able to study in Africa were now affecting St Petersburg. When the widespread enthusiasm for *perestroika* and the fashion for participation in public life passed, Nikolai Girenko was one of the few people who did not embark upon a business career or lock himself away in an ivory tower: he was among the first to realise that ethnic conflicts were a time-bomb waiting to explode and to appreciate just how dangerous a weapon these tensions could be in the wrong hands. He was an active member, and later also president, of the Group for the Rights of National Minorities; he was also co-president of the Union of Academics, in which role he publicised issues connected with inter-ethnic relations. He played an active role in organising community groups for ethnic minorities in St Petersburg, and he helped to foster constructive relationships between these groups and the local civic authorities and law-enforcement agencies — to this end, he arranged a campaign against ‘ethno-political illiteracy’ amongst civil servants and police employees...

But he devoted most time and effort to the preparation of expert testimonials for court cases involving national extremists of all types. At first there seemed to be little point in all this. Quite apart from the fact that writing testimonials took up the vast majority of his time, leaving him no chance to write theoretical articles, or indeed to supplement his income (he refused payment for his expert evidence as a matter of principle),<sup>1</sup> the conduct of the investigators and prosecutors meant that more often than not cases would collapse before reaching court. But Girenko did not give up; the refinement and legal precision of his argumentation gradually increased, until it could no longer be overlooked by the courts. However, even this was not enough for him: in his last years he gave a lot of thought to the vital task of creating a set of procedural recommendations for trials concerned with incitement to racial or national<sup>2</sup> hatred. These recommendations would have helped to bring about root-and-branch reform, and would have given all Russian courts and prosecution services the means to rein in brownshirt extremism.

What if Nikolai Girenko had known that his efforts would have such a tragic conclusion? Would he have kept a bit quieter, perhaps, stuck his neck out less often? Even the most distant of his acquaintances knows that it

<sup>1</sup> By the early 1990s, the salary paid by academic institutes was no longer anywhere near enough to live comfortably on, especially for a person with family responsibilities. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> The existence of two separate terms, where, say, British law recognises only ‘incitement to racial hatred’, is a legacy of the terminology used under Soviet power, where *natsionalnost* referred to the ethnic identity of Soviet citizens (Jewish, Armenian, Tatar, etc.), and *rasa* to the ethnic identity of foreigners (Africans, Indians, Chinese, etc.) [Editor].

would have made no difference. He was a man of honour, and with a stern sense of duty, and the only thing that could prevent him from doing his civic and professional duty was death.

There is a prayer used in the Orthodox Church which asks that one might be granted a death with nothing to be ashamed of, a sentiment which everybody must feel at one time or another. Nikolai Mikhailovich Girenko died just such a death, and as we grieve for him, we also feel pride in having known such a man.

Sevir Chernetsov

*Translated by Sarah Turner*