

# **GOD OF HUNGER**

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**JOHN COUTOUVIDIS**

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## Synopsis

(The following passage is quoted directly from a reader's report)

*God of Hunger* is a fascinating and imaginative novel which take us to different settings and allows the reader to view the story through the eyes of different sets of characters, seeing the unfolding history of the end of colonial Africa from the points of view of the Greek and Polish communities as well as other expatriates, in a period when German rule had given way to British, which in turn was about to be replaced by native independence. The struggle of the non-Africans to find a role for themselves and continue the colonial system by subtler means seems to be the message of the novel, and their struggle a microcosm of twentieth-century world history.

The book tells the tragic life story of Theo Kokopoulos. Theo is the son of Kostas Kokopoulos, an ambitious expatriate Greek who has lived in Tanganyika since the 1920's, having been part of the great migration that followed the end of the First World War. We first meet 'KK', as he is known, on the verge of independence, as he angles for position in the new government, hoping to nudge it towards a Soviet-style Socialist utopia. The narrative follows his son, Theo, through his upbringing, in which he finds himself torn between his power-hungry, anti-Semitic father and Misha, a survivor of the Holocaust. In a sense Theo seems to represent the vulnerability of the post-war world, torn between two conflicting directions. In the end, neither side gains full control, as he contracts cancer; despite moving to London for specialized treatment, Theo dies.

In this opening part we are treated to a bravura display of historiography, as the events of the main narrative are woven into the world events of the twentieth century: the demise of Austria-Hungary and the Ottomans, the Greco-Turkish conflict, the rise and fall of British Southern Africa, the emergence of apartheid and the imprisonment of Mandela. The breadth of reference is striking- even *Blackadder Goes Forth* is quoted at length.

The focus shifts away from the Greeks, simultaneously dividing between Polish expatriates and the Tanganyikan natives moving for independence. It becomes clear fairly quickly that the author is just as interested in the Poles as in the Greeks, and although he seems to have shot many of his European historical bolts in the first part, he has plenty left. He weaves a compelling tale about a family of Polish émigrés. The lives of Marisha's lovers mirror Theo's in some ways; they have a passionate devotion to hunting game, as well as men.

The symbolism maintains its intensity when we return to 'KK'. In a strange, idiosyncratic and ambiguous manner, his death and the bizarre scenes in which

he is mummified seem to represent the fate of the European enterprise in Africa.

In conclusion, *God of Hunger* is an extraordinary work of literary fiction. Obviously it isn't aimed at a popular readership. It is idiosyncratic, complex and makes fairly significant demands on the reader. But it is very intelligent, erudite, and manages to compel the reader's involvement from the very beginning. The sense of history is grandiose without being grandiloquent; a quality which it owes to its basis in well drawn human characters. I recommend this novel highly.'

## Prefatory Notes

*God of Hunger* takes its title from the street name of Tanganyika's First Minister and Tanzania's first President, Julius Nyerere: *Mungu wa Nja*. The father of the nation, who is justly lauded for creating unity out of a variegated tribal polity, but was responsible for the gross impoverishment of his country.

The book may be read as a string of ancient Anatolian stone worry beads twirled in remembrance of the dead; souls alleviating God's hunger. The stones are inscribed with names as they appear in chapter headings. As characters, all are drawn from lithomancy.

The beads are strung onto Tanganyika; the thread that binds them together. Having been superseded in 1964 by Tanzania, the country of the book belongs entirely to mythology.

Tanganyika emerged out of German East Africa in 1918 after the defeat of the Central Powers.

It was the Germans who invited the Greeks to their colony to work on the railways inland from Dar-Es-Salaam, on the Indian Ocean, to Mwanza on Lake Victoria and Kigoma on Lake Tanganyika, retracing the slave route from Ujiji, where Stanley found Livingston, to the coast. Whence again, from Tanga, to Moshi beside Kilimanjaro and Arusha beneath Mount Meru.

Greeks, as foremen, were employed on the French construction of the Suez Canal and after its completion in 1869, transferred their skills to the building of Germany's colonial railways. They were later offered land and settled in Tanganyika to make their living in growing coffee at altitude, or sisal on coastal plains.

In 1921, when Ataturk, in the course of creating modern Turkey, defeated Greek forces intent on resurrecting Byzantium, many exiles from Anatolia joined their kinsmen in Tanganyika, a Mandated Territory under British governance.

To this entity were sent, in 1942, Poles; mainly women and children, the remnants of a massive forced exodus, in 1940, from Eastern Poland which was occupied by the Red Army under the terms of the Secret Protocol of the Nazi Soviet Pact of August 1939.

A census taken in Tanganyika ten years later, revealed that Greeks and Poles made up the majority of its European population, then at its height, when life for most was as good as it was going to get; Tanganyika resembled a ship sailing erratically on oceans of history while its passengers believed that the captain had a true bearing on their destination. Under the tropical sun a few

flourished, more wilted, while most simply got by, in a country to which they went with feelings of trepidation, from homelands they often recalled, to a place they never forgot; a land which now bears little trace of them. This book is dedicated to their remembrance.

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I was born (1944) in Tanganyika arriving in the UK in 1963 to attend the Cambridgeshire College of Arts and Technology. Finding the fenland winter too cold to bear, I spent much of my first year identifying the college with the best heating system and found it at Keele University where the Nissen hut accommodation was served by the largest radiators in the land. Keele then allowed its undergraduates a Foundation year during which I discovered History, the love of my life after Merrillyn, whom I met at Keele. We married in 1969 and were blessed in 1972 with a daughter, Sophie. The family home of forty years and more is in Staffordshire where, at various colleges, I have taught African Politics and Government, International (European and Non-European) Political History and modern Polish, British and German Diplomatic History.

In writing this book I have relied mostly on memory; on remembered conversations within a family where story telling was the main source of entertainment. We did not listen to the radio. Nor to the gramophone. We also read next to nothing. Perhaps this was because when night fell regularly at 6 (or at 12, by the Swahili clock) the paraffin lamps gave inadequate light for that pastime? Or was it simply because talking in the dim flickering light had the added attraction of shadow play on our lime washed bedroom walls?

There were some two dozen books in the house; a set of *Golden Pathway* which a slick salesman off-loaded as the best source of knowledge for our betterment. The Wedgwood blue, hardbound volumes, were never consulted save for a look at each coloured frontispiece. Strangely, many years later, I saw a play in Nantwich, in Cheshire, based on the unread contents; it was all very English. There was also a three volume set, in Polish, recording the battle for Monte Casino whose summit was taken by Poles. Next, a book in Greek entitled *Hellenes Abroad (Tanganyika)*, written by John Tsondos, published in Nicosia, no date of publication. It contains material I have long treasured such as mention of every Greek in the Territory, including many photographs, including one of our family. There was also a tome called *Greeks in Africa*, in English, published by a Greek publishing house in Alexandria, in 1955, listing every Hellene in every corner of the continent. The photographs show men in short sleeved shirts, knee length baggy khaki shorts (*kaptulas*) and knee high long socks. Women in flower patterned light cotton dresses, and couples often leaning on the bonnets of automobiles, one foot on the running boards, *a la* Bonnie and Clyde. The American limousines, box-bodies and pick-ups are straight out of fifties movies. My Godfather owned a brown Hudson which had a massive steering wheel on which was mounted a glass globe the size of a small paperweight, enabling the driver single-handedly to swing the wheel

within which a concentric chrome ring could be pressed to sound a melodious note of warning. This true *limousine* had immensely comfortable bench seats where his chickens, flying in through open windows, loved to roost when the limo was static. The designation De Luxe, a hallmark of the age, was proudly emblazoned on the sides of a long bonnet; he loved to use the term which he pronounced as *delooxaria*. Fords, Pontiacs, Chevrolets and Studebakers there were a plenty. The only Cadillac in town belonged to Mr. Subzali who owned the concession for the marque. My cousin and I would gaze at the chrome hub caps, the size of today's television dishes, on display in a long glass cabinet in the showroom of Subzali Motors. No ducal silverware, polished to its most dazzling shine, could ever surpass the glittering beauty of those wheel dressings. As for white walled tyres, soon covered in red earth which rendered them pink after every wash, these were the height of automobilistic aspiration. Coming away with glossy brochures of the latest dreams from Detroit was sufficient compensation, especially as each had an exchange rate of one for four Eagle comics, three Beano or Dandy, two War or Cowboy comics or one Classic.

Other reading matter at home included a photographic record, in a series of six tomes, of the Second World War, in which my brother George and I recorded our response to each image with an exaggerated system of marking as though we were teachers assessing work in blue crayon, from A quadruple plus to D quadruple minus. We were thoroughly beaten for the defacement of books otherwise unread. Lastly there was a children's book of poetry. Preparing me for kindergarten, my father insisted on teaching me to memorise Little Boy Blue. He pronounced meadow as *meadow* and when I repeated the word at my first declamation in school the teacher laughed so raucously that I wet my shorts in terror. I also cried from laughter when listening to my father's version of Olivier's Henry by Shakespeare, which he had seen on screen, first at The Victory, then at The Paradise and again at The Metropole; each time the funnier; drama was only ever rendered as comedy at home.

It was linguistically confusing to grow up in a household in which, around the dining table, five languages, all jumbled up, could be heard: 'Pass me a glass and the jug of water please', with Polish, Greek, English, Warusha (akin to Masai) and Swahili words in the same sentence. (Purists will wince at my usage of Swahili. I would however point out that I write it as it is spoken on the streets; Colonial Officers in Tanganyika, who had to pass an examination in the language, were taught a written form few understood and a pronunciation all locals found risible.)

I have long since held that all children should first be taught just one tongue, English. The world's language, taught to a high standard, giving everyone a full command of its vocabulary, grammar and syntax; a language for all seasons; fit for every purpose, from rap to Queen's Speech. Yet, for all that, our domestic

tower of Babel prepared me well in the art of national identity and the science of international history.

In this book, I have attempted to render words or statements in Greek, Polish, and Swahili as they would be pronounced by a native speaker. For example: instead of *hoi poloi* which confusingly *sounds* to the Anglophone as ‘the posh’ rather than meaning ‘the many’, I suggest *ee polee*; the way Greeks say it and I would bet a *thrahma* (*th* as in the) to an *evro* that when a Sapho or an Omeeros (Homer) is resurrected through some frankensteinian sparking of dry old DNA, we shall discover that that is how they would have pronounced the Greek language. In the meantime, I would, with great respect, suggest that Classicists listen to the modern Demotic before attempting to speak the Ancient.

In matters Greek, the book owes much to I.N. Tsondos, *Elleenes En Tee Xenee* (Tanganyika) (*Greeks in Tanganyika*) and to *Greeks in Africa*, but most of all from papers held in private archives which were proffered to me in Tanzania in 1987 and in research material I had collected, but did not use in penning *The Kidron Bible*.

The Polish story is based on previous work, now out of print, to which I have copyright: *Poland, 1939-1947*, the English translation of Garlicki’s *Jozef Pilsudski*, the New Edition of Zajdlerowa’s *The Dark Side of The Moon* and on two lengthy video-recorded interviews: Sir *Frank Roberts, A Diplomatic History, 1939-1968* and *The Dark Side of the Moon* whose surface was lightly trod by that most graceful of women; my mother.

My opinion of Julius Nyerere is mainly informed by conversations in 1987 with members of Tanzania’s masses, *ee polee*, or, if you insist, *hoi polloi* and on T.S.Eliot’s notions of culture and social structure. The central question highlighted in his preface to the original, anonymously written, edition of *The Dark Side of The Moon*, published in 1946, is: ‘What happens to a society, a nation, when its apex is forcibly removed?’ A question I have attempted to answer in ‘*T.S. Eliot’s Model of Society in the light of Polish Experience*’, published in the first volume of the journal, *Text and Context*.

The consequences of gross social engineering (by which I mean the eradication or attempted metamorphosis through state policy of *any* layer of humanity within the imagined triangle) perpetrated upon a nation has been of long interest to me; ever since, as a boy in my beloved grandmother’s care, an august lady who was my main link in Eliot’s transmission chain of culture, I first learnt of my grandfather’s murder at Katyn.

That atrocity has indelibly coloured my take on political history in Europe and in Africa.

John Coutouvidis, The Boat House, Barlaston, Staffordshire

13 April, 2011

*For my Parents and in memory of my Godfather*

# GOD OF HUNGER

## Kokopoulos

John Konstantine Kokopoulos, otherwise known as KK, was blessed from an early age with an inquiring mind, a great appetite for learning, a heightened drive for adventure and the resilience of a peasant. His parents worked on the Argenti estate, the richest in the fertile plain of Hios (Chios) known as the *Kamvo*, famous for its *Mastiha*, a shrub whose sap produced a chewing gum produced mainly for the harem market.

His father laboured on the land and his mother served as housemaid in the big house. The spirit of the place was Tuscan; cultured, elegant and civilised and ahead in every manner of life, though not in philosophy, to all other inhabitants of the island of Hios.

Despite the material poverty of most Hiotes few could doubt the richness of their identity; their intellectual heritage. Hios is the island of Omeeros and Sapho. It is also the birth place of Christopher Columbus and many other seafaring adventurers. And it is also the island from which Kolokotronis, so named after a shot from a Turkish musket stung (*kotroni*) his posterior (*kolos*), took on the might of the Ottoman fleet in the fight for modern Greek political and religious freedom which came in hard fought stages between the first quarters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries after centuries of Turkic occupation.

It was the Ottoman Turks who had shaped the third largest piece of intellectual furniture in the Hiot mind; an oriental orientation in manners and music. The first piece, alluded to above, was crafted by classical Hellenism and the second by the Greek Orthodox Church.

To be a modern Greek is to be of the Greek orthodox faith. It goes without saying until questioned when it becomes clear that whilst nation and faith are one, the church hierarchy is rarely respected. Priests are tolerated, Metropolitans and above barely so. And God and his saints and angels are best understood as a Greek Testament gloss on the Animism of the Ancients. And everywhere, the Evil Eye.

As a boy, KK had little time for religion but, like most islanders found the long Sunday service a boon chance for the exchange of news and gossip. Participation in the liturgy came naturally and automatically; everyone knew the order of service by heart but not by mind. The Classics were another matter.

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