

Ismail Kadare  
The pyramid  
[*La Pyramide*].  
Jusuf Vrioni, transl.  
Paris. Fayard. 1992. 230 pages

It would seem to hold true that absolute monarchs have a predilection for pyramid-form monuments in order to exemplify the hierarchical structure of their power. It comes, therefore, as no surprise that the last representative monument set to the memory of Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha (1908-1985) before the collapse of the system he perfected was the pyramid-form 'Enver Hoxha Museum' erected on the main boulevard of Tiranë. It was a prestigious construction of shining white marble, crowned with a huge blood-red star made of plastic, a symbol which was discreetly removed together with all the relics after the fall of the regime. The building itself, even after three years of democracy, is still by far the most impressive in the country and has something menacingly eternal about it.

At the time of its construction, Tiranë's huge marble pyramid was secretly regarded by many students and writers as the epitome of human folly. One of the delightfully blasphemous slogans of the early Albanian student movement, the force which finally persuaded the aging Stalinists to give way to a less surrealist form of government, was "*piramida diskotekë*", i.e. that the Enver Hoxha Museum, known by then to virtually everyone in the country as "the pyramid", should be transformed into a discotheque for the students and young people of the Albanian capital which was, and still is, bereft of nocturnal amusements.

A direct and imaginative reflection of Ismail Kadare's fascination with this once much-lauded and secretly reviled museum is to be found in his intriguing historical novel 'The pyramid'. Like so many of the Albanian writer's works, it can only be understood properly if read as a political allegory. 'The Pyramid' is the mind-boggling tale of the conception and construction of the Cheops pyramid in ancient Egypt, but also of absolute political power and indeed of human folly.

Cheops, the Egyptian pharaoh, realized that he had dismayed his courtiers when he vowed one autumn morning to break with tradition by not constructing a pyramid as his predecessors had done. The pharaonic establishment and the power of custom and conformity were, however, to prove all too strong. Cheops was soon convinced by the high priest Hemiunu that a pyramid was more than simply a tomb.

*"It is power, Your Majesty. It is repression, might and money. It will also blind the masses, suffocate their spirit and break their will. It is monotony and detrition. It will be your best bodyguard, my pharaoh, it is the secret police, the army, the navy, the harem. The loftier it rises, the more minute you will seem in its shadow, and the more minute you are, Sire, the better you can act in all your glory."*

And so, the Egyptian masses set to work on an absurd construction in the desert, just as, four and a half millennia after them, the Albanian people set to work on the building of literally hundreds of thousands of cement bunkers throughout the country to defend themselves against a supposedly imminent imperialist invasion, and on the construction of a marble mausoleum for their own pharaoh.

'The pyramid' was originally published in the form of a short story which was serialized in the very first issues of the opposition newspaper *Rilindja Demokratike* in January 1990. In

Parisian exile, Kadare subsequently expanded the tale to create the present seventeen-chapter novel which has now appeared in the French translation of Jusuf Vrioni. The Albanian original of the novel has not yet been published, a phenomenon by no means unusual for Kadare's works.

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