

Astar of Opar: The Secret Origin of Sumuru by Rick Lai

Sax Rohmer, the creator of the sinister Fu Manchu, fashioned an equally diabolical evildoer of the opposite sex. Known as Sumuru, she graced the pages of five novels: *Nude in Mink* (1950, British title: *Sins of Sumuru*), *Sumuru* (1951, British title: *Slaves of Sumuru*), *The Fire Goddess* (1952, British title: *Virgin in Flames*), *The Return of Sumuru* (1954, British title: *Sand and Satin*), and *Sinister Madonna* (1956). All but the last title were originally published in the United States as Gold Medal paperbacks. Under their British titles, the entire Sumuru series was reprinted in hardcover editions in the 1970's by a publisher called Bookfinger. An examination of the career of this extraordinary female mastermind indicates a possible connection with certain lost civilizations in Africa depicted by other authors.

Reputed to be the most dangerous woman in the world, the central character of this series was called Sumuru only by the police. She detested the name because it belonged to a hated former husband. She wished to be addressed as Astar, possibly her real name, or by her title of Madonna,

The Madonna was the leader of the Order of Our Lady, a secret society dedicated to imposing a matriarchy on the world. The ideological foundation for the Order was *Tears of Our Lady*, a book authored by Astar. Written in French and containing no publisher's imprint, the book professed that all evil stemmed from ugliness generated by males. In a society dominated by men, women, the natural custodians of human beauty, had been degraded into mere instruments. Civilization had evolved to a stage where a small clique of men deformed in mind and body (e.g. Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin) had thrown the planet into violent wars. Only by elevating women over men could society progress to a utopian level.

All the members of the Order had a tattoo around the left ankle. The design, a snake biting its own tail, was drawn so lightly to be virtually invisible even through the finest stockings. Astar believed in the process of selective breeding. She proclaimed herself to have been a product of it. The Madonna only permitted women of intelligence and beauty to join the Order. With some notable exceptions, the same rule applied to Astar's male adherents. The sex lives of her subordinates were strictly regulated. Only the Madonna decreed which of her followers could mate with one another. In the Order's secret schools in Greece and Egypt, the children from these unions were raised apart from their parents and trained to become the future rulers of humanity. The Madonna once stated that ugly males were useful, but ugly females were useless. Since the Madonna was always praising the ancient Greeks, she may have been as ruthless with undesirable female children as the Spartans were.

To render a detailed physical description of Astar would be impossible. No two persons agreed on the color of her hair. In an unfinished sonnet, Romain Ravillac, the young French poet who committed suicide in 1937 by throwing himself from an ocean liner, asserted that Astar had hair woven like sunshine. A Russian diplomat in Paris suggested that her hair was dark. In all her appearances in Rohmer's novels, her hair was confined in a close-fitting turban, a silk scarf, or a net. Although no one could describe accurately the color of Astar's large eyes, she did have extremely long natural lashes. Her lobe-less ears were like a fawn's. In her secret chambers, she dressed in

either Grecian robes or in flimsy Eastern robes. The latter garments revealed her exquisite nude figure to the viewer. Gold sandals always adorned her feet.

The Madonna's chambers were adorned with Chinese tapestries, mink rugs, silver lamps, mother-of-pearl coffee tables, and bowls of rubies. The last item came from Astar's secret ruby mines. Their exact location was never disclosed (1). Any underlings whose performance displeased the Madonna could be sentenced to labor in the mines.

Besides fabulous art treasures, the Madonna surrounded herself with fierce pets. They included Satan the barracuda, Siva and Kali the black pumas, Rajah the Indian cheetah and numerous tame adders. Some of the Madonna's male entourage could be just as bestial. The giant ape-like Philo, Astar's chauffeur, possessed Herculean strength. Ariosto, her chief surgeon (2), was nearly sentenced to Devil's Island for the murder of a young girl. He was a tall active man with black hair, a high brow, and a penciled moustache. Possessing the face of a human satyr, Ariosto had the sexual appetite to match. Among his scientific accomplishments was a creature known as the Puma, a cross between animal and man reminiscent of the creations of H. G. Wells's Dr. Moreau.

Ariosto's duties often included the administration of Astar's deadliest poison, *rigor Kubus*. The strange toxin was discovered among the Kubus, a primitive tribe in Sumatra, by a Dutch professor in 1923. Although this scientist was called Van Voorden in *Nude in Mink*, his name became Van Noorden in *The Return of Sumuru*. The poison resulted from the spore of a minute fungus. On the first injection, the body underwent complete paralysis. Then a blood change occurred which transformed human tissue into a marble-like substance. The victim was seemingly turned into stone. *Rigor Kubus* was made in mass quantities at a secret laboratory in Java. Astar first employed this poison in North Africa during 1940 (3).

In order to acquire funds for her master plan, Astar married at least five wealthy men. Her first known husband was the Marquis Sumuru, ex-president of the Black Dragon Society of Japan. In order to inherit his fortune, Astar drove the Marquis to commit hara-kiri in 1942, shortly after Doolittle's raid on Tokyo. Her next two spouses was Lord Carradale, the British aviation magnate, and Baron Rikter, one of the richest men in Sweden. The Madonna was married to both men at the same time. By posing as a nurse from Stockholm, Astar persuaded the Baron to marry her on his deathbed. Lord Carradale died in an airplane crash during World War II. For eighteen months, the Madonna was married to the elderly Duc de Serevac before his demise. As the Duchess de Severac, Astar was proclaimed as the best-dressed woman in Paris. Needless to say, she earned the title by publicly appearing in elegant fashions and fur coats rather than in see-through gowns. The Madonna was also married for one year to a South American millionaire named de Castro. At his death, she was bequeathed a fortune in emeralds.

Her past before World War II was shrouded in mystery. In the 1950's, an Egyptian claimed that his father as a boy saw Astar and that she hadn't aged since that time. Through some undisclosed means, the Madonna had discovered the secret of eternal youth. Rohmer dropped hints that Astar may have been the Woman of the Pyramid, the legendary ageless siren who lured man to their destruction, or Decreto, the half-fish goddess of the ancient Syrians, or even a reincarnation of Helen of Troy. The name Astar implies some connection to Astarte, a warrior goddess who had been worshipped in Syria and Egypt

There are other suggestions that the Madonna's origins laid in Greece (4). One of the Order's earliest sanctuaries was located in Crete until the Nazi invasion of 1941. A Greek member of the order, Melissa Astar Carnassus, was Madonna's physical double. The only major physical difference between the two women was that Melissa had earlobes. As the Astar in her name implies, it is possible that Melissa was the Madonna's own daughter. Melissa's father, Phileto Carnassus of Cos, could have been a much earlier husband than the Marquis Sumuru. Astar claimed that her philosophy dated back to Pythagoras and Plato. She frequently referred to the concepts of perfect government formulated by Plato, a philosopher who popularized the legend of Atlantis. Astar also alleged that Atlantis was destroyed in an atomic explosion. These Atlantean connections open the door to speculation that the Madonna was a survivor of the lost continent.

However, there is another theoretical possibility. In the Tarzan novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs, there exists Opar, a lost city of Africa that was suspected of being a colony of Atlantis. Like Astar, the high priestesses of the city were products of selective breeding. Being a city ruled by a woman, Opar would be the natural place for a fanatical philosopher of feminine domination to be born. Although the women were beautiful in Opar, the men were repellent and ape-like. Any woman raised among these male inhabitants would become convinced that all ugliness emanated from men. The Madonna could have been a high priestess overthrown during one of the innumerable power struggles that plagued Opar. Forced into exile with some of her followers, Astar eventually became a denizen of the civilized world. Since Opar was rumored to have been a colony of Atlantis, Astar went eventually to Greece to research the Atlantean legend. Her simian henchman, Philo, was one of the descendants of her male Oparian companions.

According to a remark in *Sinister Madonna*, the Black Dragon Society of Japan was nearly as old as the Order of Our Lady. The Black Dragon Society was founded in 1901. The Order of Our Lady must have been founded in the late 1890's. Therefore, Astar probably fled Opar around that time. When Tarzan first visited Opar in 1910 (5), the city was ruled by a beautiful high priestess named La. It is possible that Astar was La's older sister, and that she was overthrown in order for La to rule the city.

Philip José Farmer has made startling revelation about Opar in two novels, *Hadon of Ancient Opar* (1974) and *Flight to Opar* (1976). In these novels, we learn that Opar was not a colony of Atlantis (6), but actually part of an ancient civilization in Central Africa. In the Tarzan novels, the Oparians worshipped a sun deity only identified as the Flaming God by Edgar Rice Burroughs. The Flaming God was the only supernatural being venerated by the Oparians in Tarzan's time. Farmer's Opar books portray a prehistoric period in which the Flaming God was subordinate to his mother, a deity named Kho. The adherents of the Flaming God sought to supplant the supremacy of Kho. If Farmer had written a third Opar book, he would have explained how the cult of the Flaming God totally obliterated that of Kho in a forgotten age (7). Probably Astar unearthed historical records indicating the earlier supremacy of Kho and attempted to revive the primacy of the female divinity over the Flaming God. Outraged priests of the Flaming God must consequently have ousted Astar and replaced her with La, her younger sister who would then have only been a child (8).

There had probably been an earlier Astar in the ruling dynasty of Opar. She must have functioned as a warrior priestess who led the forces of Opar against invading

armies. The exploits of this original Astar sparked the myth of Astarte, the Goddess of the Battlefield, in the Middle East. La's older sister must have been named after this heroic ancestor (9).

Farmer gives another name for the Flaming God, Resu. This is a variant of Rezu, a name that appears in H. Rider Haggard's *She and Allan* (1921). In Haggard's novel, Rezu was originally the name of a sun god in a lost African civilization called Kôr. An ancient male inhabitant of Kor then assumed the name. This man achieved immortality by bathing himself in the Fire of Life, a supernatural flame first described in *She* (1887). Over the centuries, the immortal known as Rezu struggled for total control of Kor with Ayesha ("She-Who-Must-Be-Obeyed"), an Egyptian high priestess of Isis who had also gained immortality from the Fire of Life.

The Fire of Life bears resemblance to an illusion employed by Astar in *The Fire Goddess*. Set in the spring of 1952 (10), the novel concerns the operations of the Order of Our Lady in Jamaica. The Caribbean island was the site of the Order's rite of initiation. In an ordeal of courage, new disciples were forced to walk into flames that burnt the clothes off their bodies. The initiate covered her hair and body with a fireproof ointment. So long as none of the recruits opened their eyes, everything went well. In order to walk swiftly through the flames, the new members wore fireproof sandals.

Astar could have modeled this ceremony on the Fire of Life. In the 1890's, there was a power vacuum in Kor. The immortal Rezu had been destroyed in 1873 (11). His rival, Ayesha, had vanished from Kor in the 1880's, and was believed to have perished (12). As the high priestess of Opar, Astar would have been aware of the existence of Kor. According to Philip José Farmer, a male member of her dynasty actually founded Kor (13). With the destruction of the great civilization of Central Africa that linked both Opar and Kor, the destinies of the two cities became separate. Fleeing Opar, Astar must have sought out the legendary metropolis that her ancestor had erected. After partaking of the Fire of Life, Astar then left Kor in order to pursue her dreams of conquest.

If Astar had passed through the Fire of Life, she would not only have been immortal, but also virtually impervious to death by ordinary means. Ayesha's opponent, Rezu, could only be slain by a magical axe that once belonged to him. Rohmer never presented any instances of Astar suffering physical injury.

The works of H. Rider Haggard also gives us a clue to the source of Astar's ruby mines. Haggard's *The People of the Mist* depicted a lost civilization in Mozambique. This civilization was located on a large deposit of rubies. The inhabitants of this area were also snake worshippers. The priests of these indigenous people adorned their bodies with snake tattoos. Astar must have gained dominion over this hidden civilization (14). In order to honor the natives for their allegiance, she then utilized a snake tattoo as the symbol of her organization. The domestic affairs of this hidden territory remain a mystery after the departure of the Europeans who visited it in Haggard's novel. *The People of the Mist* would seem to be set around 1884. Ten years have passed since the novel's events, and the book was published in 1894. There was also a reference to William Gladstone being Prime Minister, and his second ministry transpired in 1880-85. Astar could have assumed control of this African civilization by marrying its king. No doubt the monarch then would have gone the way of the Marquis Sumuru and the Madonna's other known husbands.

It could have been the failure to win an earlier power struggle in Opar that prompted the Madonna's savage retaliation against a female rival in *The Fire Goddess*. In that novel, an ambitious head of the Order's branch in Jamaica, Melisande de Croix, subverted the Madonna's authority by organizing her own voodoo cult on the island. Rather than sentenced Melisande to the ruby mines, the Madonna slew her voodoo rival with *rigor Kubus*, and then presented her corpse as a statue to the people of Jamaica.

Astar's brutal punishment of Melisande recalls an earlier series of murders by a different woman. Under the mistaken impression that Opar had once been part of an Atlantean Empire, Astar could have investigated various rumors of lost colonies of Atlantis in Africa. She might have learned of the existence of a secret city in the Hoggar Mountains in the Sahara. This city was described in Pierre Benoit's *Atlantida* (1919, French title: *L'Atlantide*), also published in English as *The Queen of Atlantis*. Two French soldiers stumbled upon this city in 1896. The citadel was ruled by a vicious queen, Antinea, who professed to be descended from the rulers of Atlantis. After she tired of a lover, Antinea would have the man murdered and then preserve his body by transforming it into a statue through the application of orichcalum, a metal that originated in Atlantis. Antinea's method of disposing of her lovers could have given Astar the idea for her adoption of *rigor Kubus* as a means to liquidate enemies. It is rather appropriate that Astar first employed *rigor Kubus* in North Africa, the same general area where Antinea committed her atrocities. Possibly Astar visited the Saharan sanctuary in the late 1890's and overthrew the diabolical Antinea, who was unpunished for her crimes in the conclusion of Benoit's novel (she was still alive in November 1903). Maybe Astar slew Antinea with her own orichcalum process in a manner that foreshadowed the later fate of Melisande. Antinea had supervised a covert network of agents to supply her secret Hoggar retreat with provisions from the civilized world. Inheriting Antinea's assets, Astar could have incorporated this shadowy syndicate into the Order of Our Lady. Antinea also owned the only complete version of the *Critias*, Plato's book about Atlantis (15). As the new mistress of the Hoggar colony (16), Astar then must have studied the *Critias* in order to formulate the ideology that she would impose on her own followers. She later supplemented her knowledge by reading other works of the philosopher, and then departed for Greece to pursue her studies of Plato and his contemporaries.

Could Astar have ever returned to Opar? The final fate of that city is shrouded in mystery. According to Philip José Farmer's *Tarzan Alive* (1972), Tarzan visited that city in 1946, and found it to be inexplicably deserted. There were no clues as to the final fate of La and her fellow inhabitants. Perhaps Astar returned to Opar to seek vengeance on her younger sister La. Considering Astar's treatment of Melisande, her wrath towards La would be devastating. If Astar was responsible for depopulating the city of Opar, she would have also prepared a particularly agonizing death for La. Conceivably it was similar to the demise that this article envisions for Antinea. One can easily imagine a secret room in one of Astar's North African headquarters where the corpses of La and Antinea are preserved as statues.

NOTES

1. Rubies are mined in Africa and Asia. Considering that Astar had a large base in North Africa, it is most likely that the rubies were unearthed further south in East Africa around the general vicinity of Kenya and Tanzania.
2. Ariosto made a curious comment in *Sumuru*. Impersonating an American private detective named Carl Vanderson, Ariosto uttered this statement about one of Astar's potential victims: "He had been marked for death by the second of the two first-class brains in the world today." If Astar (alias Sumuru) was "the second of the two first class brains," who was the other superior genius? Who could have owned a greater intellect than Astar? The most likely answer is Rohmer's other great villain, Fu Manchu. Perhaps Ariosto worked for Fu Manchu before he joined Astar's organization. There exist more obvious connections to other works by Rohmer in the Sumuru series. Starting with *Sumuru*, the second book in the series, Astar's recurring adversary became Drake Roscoe, an American Secret Service operative who appeared as a naval officer earlier in *The Emperor of America* (1927). Both *Sumuru* and *The Emperor of America* featured a private investigator named Ned W. Regan, who also appeared in the short stories involving a stage magician named Bazarada. The stories were collected in *Salute to Bazarada* (1939).
3. *Rigor Kubus* was probably employed against Fascists and Nazis in North Africa. Astar's subsequent activities in Japan in 1942 would imply that she was pursuing a vendetta against the Axis during World War II
4. Surprisingly Rohmer never hints at any connection between Astar and the Greek legend of the warrior women known as the Amazons.
5. Philip José Farmer's *Tarzan Alive* (1972) places the first meeting between Tarzan and La in 1910.
6. The false tradition that Opar was a lost colony of Atlantis may have originated due to the rumors surrounding the existence of Negari, an African offshoot of Atlantis that was visited by the Elizabethan adventurer Solomon Kane (see Robert E. Howard's "The Moon of Skulls"). There is also the matter of Pierre Benoit's lost city in the Sahara that is described elsewhere in this article.
7. Farmer indicated his plans for a third Opar book in a letter published in *Heritage of the Flaming God* (Waziri Publications, 1999) by Francis J. Brueckel and John Harwood.
8. Farmer's *Flight to Opar* concluded with the birth of a daughter named La to his hero Hadon. Her mother was named Lalila, and she is the same character whose name was spelt Laleela in H. R. Rider Haggard's novel of reincarnation, *Allan and the Ice-Gods* (1927). The daughter of Hadon and Lalila is meant to be the founder of a dynasty of high priestesses that ruled Opar. The La from the Tarzan novels is a descendant of Hadon's daughter.
9. We could pretend that his earlier Astar was the second daughter of Hadon and Lalila.
10. The final chapter of *The Fire Goddess* places its concluding events in May 1952. Although this book transpires in its year of publication, other novels seem to be set one year earlier than their respective publication years. For example, *The Return of Sumuru* mentions that *rigor Kubus* was used in the United States during 1950, a reference to the events of *Sumuru*, a novel published in 1951.
11. This year of 1873 for the events of *She and Allan* is based on the following rationale. The novel mentioned that Cetywayo was King of the Zulus. Cetywayo became

monarch in October 1872. Twelve years separate the events of *She and Allan* and *Allan Quatermain* (1887). The latter novel involves an African expedition that took place over a year and resulted in the death of the title character. The story began in January (one week after the funeral of Henry Quatermain in late December). *Allan Quatermain* can't be assigned to January 1884 because Haggard's *Finished* (1917) had Quatermain observing Cetywayo's death in February 1884. Therefore, *Allan Quatermain* must have begun in January 1885, and Quatermain's death happened in 1886.

12. Actually she was reborn in Asia as revealed in Haggard's *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905).
13. In the two published Opar books by Farmer, only the chronological notes to *Hadon of Ancient Opar* contain a reference to Kôr. It is mentioned that the city was founded after Hadon's birth. In the earlier cited letter from *Heritage of the Flaming God* in note #7, as well as an interview quoted in David Pringle's "Allan & the Ice Gods" at <http://www.violetbooks.com/haggard-pringle.html>, Farmer mentioned that Haggard's lost city would be erected by Hadon's son. The physical description of the immortal Rezu in Haggard's novel matches that of Kwasin, Hadon's gigantic cousin in Farmer's Opar novels. Farmer apparently intended Haggard's Rezu to be Kwasin. As Christopher Carey has pointed out to me, the founder of Kor would appear to be Kohr, Hadon's son by the priestess Klyhly. Since Kohr as a child resembled the normal-sized Hadon, it seems unlikely that Kohr became the gigantic Rezu.
14. The title characters of *The People of the Mist* worshipped a pair of deities, Aca and Jal, who were mother and son. Astar could have become interested in this civilization because she suspected a connection between these gods and the Oparian duo of Kho and Resu.
15. It is generally believed by scholars that Plato never finished the *Critias*. Antinea asserted that Plato had actually completed the book.
16. H. P. Lovecraft later utilized this concept of secret Atlantean remnants in the Hoggar Mountains in two of the stories that he revised to varying degrees for other writers. The idea of these Hoggar sanctuaries appears in "The Last Test" (a revised version of "A Sacrifice to Science" by Adolphe de Castro) and "Medusa's Coil" (which Lovecraft wrote entirely for Zealia Bishop). In these stories, Benoit's idea of lost Atlantean outposts in the Hoggar region became wedded to the concepts of Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. There are no irreconcilable contradictions between Benoit's and Lovecraft's depictions of the Hoggar region. "The Last Test" suggested that an American scientist discovered the tomb of an Atlantean wizard in the Hoggar Mountains and then magically resurrected the mage. "Medusa's Coil" only mentioned "the dead Atlantean cities in the Hoggar region of the Sahara." It can easily be imagined that there were uninhabited ruins in the Hoggar co-existent with Antinea's domain. Lovecraft's elaboration of Benoit's Hoggar premise was also briefly cited in the 1965 horror film *Dark Intruder*.