

# Was Pak Subuh a Dukun?

By David Week

A *dukun* is, in Java, a traditional healer. There's nothing wrong or disgraceful about being a *dukun*. I can remember when I lived as a kid in Cilandak, and I got a sore on my back — I had to spend several days lying face down — Pak Subuh kindly sent over a poultice, consisting of some black mixture of herbs, to help the healing. Whether he made this himself, or ordered it in, I don't know. Whether it worked or not, I don't know!

Inez Mahony has written some useful research reports on *dukun* practice:

<http://www.serve.com/inside/edit75/p11-12mahony.html>  
[http://www.murdoch.edu.au/acicis/hi/field\\_topics/inez.doc](http://www.murdoch.edu.au/acicis/hi/field_topics/inez.doc)

According to Mahony, *dukun* are a normal and accepted part of Javanese society:

*Dukun* [are] traditionally... sorcerers and curers, predominantly male practitioners of Javanese mysticism from the various subcategories of *santri*, *priyayi* and *abangan*, who practice a variety of *dukun* specialties yet may be more skilled in a particular area. Literature suggests *dukun* regularly played a central role as priest, spirit contact and respected elder in the many traditional Javanese rituals and ceremonies and that *dukun* were generally consulted as curer and helper in alleviating physical, mental and spiritual problems.

Being a *dukun* is therefore consistent with Pak Subuh's social origins and social class—*priyayi* (the nobility, whose religion was a mixture of Hindu and Islamic mysticism)—and his calling: spiritual guide.

Mahony tells us that:

Today many *dukuns* mix these practices with Islamic terminology and thinking (by claiming, for instance, that whether their medicines work or not is 'up to God'), and in one study, 50% of them didn't want to be identified as a *dukun*, which they saw as associated with 'black magic'. These *dukuns* prefer the term '*orang tua*' — 'old man'.

Among the many *dukun* practices is the preparation of *rajah*. Mahony describes the *rajah* thus:

The usual methods of treatment by *santri* (orthodox Islamic) *dukun* include chanting specially adapted verses from the Koran or burning *rajah* over glasses of water, which are then given to the client to drink.

From another source:

A Qur'anic inscription is written on a leaf or piece of paper. The recipient soaks it in a glass of water that is drunk. This practice is undoubtedly an *abangan* legacy.

Pak Subuh's were written on paper, which was then burned, and the ashes dissolved in water for the patient to drink.

Pak Subuh definitely prepared *rajah*. In one of his talks, he said: 'I was surprised; I

thought Mrs. Subardjo must be ill. I started to collect some paper and a pen in case I needed to make a *raja*h.’ [64 TJK 4] In another, he said: ‘That is why, for example, Bapak has advised you not to try, for example, to make *raja*hs. You may have heard that Bapak sometimes makes a *raja*h for people when they are sick.’ [84 CDK 6]

When Pak Prio Hartono described his first encounter with Pak Subuh, he wrote, in Volume 2 of Inner Wisdom:

Suardi came to tell me that our mutual friend, Masrul Latif Pane, had arranged an appointment for me to meet a *dukun* (faith healer)... Masrul Latif introduced him as Pak Subuh and asked me to explain the purpose of my visit. This too annoyed me since it was not my idea to meet this *dukun*.

However, elsewhere Pak Subuh demurs from being called a *dukun*:

Bapak agrees that he is willing to give people *raja*hs, but sometimes there is no need to ask for one. And if Bapak were to make a habit of doing this, would you be pleased if people called Bapak a *dukun* (witch-doctor)? [80 CDK 1]

Mahony tells us that up to 50% of *dukun* do not want to be called *dukun*, for fear of being labelled a *dukun santet*: a black magician. We can see, however, that Pak Subuh thought that traditional *dukun* practices were helpful to people, and was not averse to preparing the occasional *raja*h.

This is where it gets interesting.

Medicine is not the only area in which *dukun* are asked for advice. According to Martin van Bruinessen, in addition to problems with illness, a *dukun*’s advice is also called upon for:

- \* economic difficulties
- \* career issues
- \* partner problems.

Moreover, *dukun* are asked to name children, which ties in with Javanese beliefs with regard to the importance of a person’s name in determining their fate. Almost certainly, the story of Pak Subuh’s own name-change, as he tells it in his Autobiography, involved a *dukun*:

The baby was named Sukarno. However, because he was sickly, his name was changed to Muhammad Subuh by a mysterious old man that nobody knew. Grandfather accepted the change of name with a feeling of satisfaction as its meaning fitted exactly the time of the baby’s birth: dawn. Thereafter, the baby was both happy and healthy.

There seems to me to a strong correlation between *dukun* practices, and the kinds of practices that Pak Subuh undertook because he saw them as helpful to Subud members. He would prepare the occasional *raja*h. He offered name-change advice, and career direction advice. All of these are consistent with the beliefs of the people of his place and time.

However, we need to ask ourselves:

- \* Are these practices consistent with our own place and time?
- \* Is it good and appropriate for Subud, which aspires to be international and universal in its practice and appeal, to be the conduit for disseminating practices that are indigenous to mid-20th century Java?

*Taken with the author's permission from his blog at:  
<http://demystifyingsubud.wordpress.com/>.*