

But What /s Subud?

By Lilliana Gibbs

What would you think if someone described Subud to you like this?

Subud is one of many spiritual practices originating from Indonesia. We call the founder 'father' and his successor, 'mother', and refer to each other as 'brothers and sisters'.

We often ask Father or Mother to give us and our children names, sometimes more than once. We have a penchant for Moslem names, and like to adopt Islamic practices. We commonly use Indonesian words and customs in our community life.

Although accurate, this is not usually the way we explain Subud. I've often heard Subud described to applicants by what it *isn't*, rather than by what it actually is: it isn't a religion, but embraces all religions; there is no dogma; it's not a cult; it doesn't have a guru; it's not exclusive, and is available to everyone; and it's not like any other practice—the latihan is unique.

Let's look at what each of these 'isn't's actually means, before distancing ourselves from them.

Religion—a belief in and worship of a superhuman controlling power, especially a God or gods.

Dogma—a principal or set of principals laid down by an authority as incontrovertibly true.

Cult—a system of religious veneration and devotion directed towards a particular figure or object.

Guru—a spiritual teacher.

While I am not suggesting we promote Subud as a cult or religion, it certainly *looks* as if it qualifies for all of the above; don't we worship God, adhere to certain understandings and principals we believe to be true, and venerate Bapak and Ibu Rahayu, who are the spiritual teachers?

And how is Subud open to everyone? Surely we must reject Buddhists if we believe that practising meditation and doing the latihan would be 'mixing'. And Taoists and Hindus—as the former don't believe in God and the latter believe in many.

And what is our position on gay people? Bapak said homosexuality is unnatural and much more besides, so how can Subud be inclusive if we are in reality homophobic?

Hundred of millions of people engage in spiritual practice. For many, the purpose is connection to a higher power, getting in touch with their inner selves, and being more aware in their daily lives. So are we really unique in our Subud practice? (And why is this important, I wonder.)

There is a glaring mismatch between what we profess to be, and how we actually behave. There is a lack of integrity here, and it bothers me. And I'm not alone. Many of my contemporaries, Subud kids now in our thirties, forties and fifties, and also our

children's generation, have grown up with this contradiction. Subud is part of who we are, whether we are active or not. It is a valuable part of our life and experience, but it's not *all* our life, as it was for many of our parents. So Subud is 'apart', separated from other aspects of life. Why? For me it's been because it just seems too odd, it *sounds* like something I wouldn't want to be involved in.

An interesting way to look at this is by using the psychological concepts of 'rules' and 'norms'. All groups, from our families to our workplaces, have two sets of rules: the overt ones, which are openly expressed, and the covert rules, called 'norms'. Norms are the powerful, often unspoken conventions by which a group operates. These naturally emerge from a group's history, patterns of behaviour and the dynamic way it develops. Norms are adhered to, consciously or unconsciously, in order to belong.

In Subud it can be unclear what is a 'rule' and what is a 'norm', since one of our norms is to say there are no rules!

I would say that Subud's overt rules include:

- being 17+ years old before being opened
- separate latihan for men and women
- testing candidates for committee roles and
- following one's own experience in the latihan.

I suggest some of our norms are:

- the latihan is superior to other spiritual practices
- thinking is inferior to feeling
- accept all that Bapak said, and
- don't question too much

Sometimes rules and norms clash; how do you 'follow your own receiving and experience' and also accept what 'Bapak said' if these things are at odds?

And what about belief in God, isn't this actually a rule? The opening statement that applicants read at their opening begins: 'I believe in the One Almighty God, and I wish to worship only God'.

Much of what Subud is today results from the time and place of its origin, and the culture and religion associated with that time and place. There is no mystery about this, except perhaps a denial that this is so. Here is a simple example. We are all familiar with the Indonesian greeting, '*Saudara Saudara*', meaning 'Brothers and Sisters'. But this is also a term used to address any group; it's a way of saying 'Ladies and Gentlemen'. I wonder how that translation would have altered our Subud culture.

My teenage years were spent in Cilandak in the 1970s, so I can differentiate somewhat between Indonesian culture, Javanese tradition, and Islamic custom. The Javanese language has three, separate vocabularies. Which one is used depends on whether you are speaking up to higher-status people, down to lower-status people, or to an equal. Javanese culture is infused with hierarchy; the seven levels, higher and lower forces etc. all reflect this perspective. This particular understanding has been accepted in Subud as fact, because Bapak explained things through his cultural lens. But how does this fit with our very different backgrounds and world-views?

As a young adult, when I left Jakarta and visited a few Subud groups outside of Indonesia, I was surprised by all the batik, the long skirts, gamelan music, and banana fasts. It was a weird culture shock; I hadn't expected Subud to be so

entangled with Indonesian culture and Islam.

This is not to say we can't adopt foreign habits and rituals that resonate with us; I'm just uncomfortable when they become synonymous with Subud. At the Innsbruck Congress, I was delighted to see wine and salami being served in the foyer, something most unlikely to happen at Subud gatherings in wine-drinking, pork-eating Australia or New Zealand.

Talking about this article over dinner recently, my daughter coined the term 'Sublam', which goes to show how a sixteen-year-old Australian views Subud as merged with Islam.

Subud has an ageing and shrinking population, and I suspect this is largely because it is not very user-friendly and has a serious image problem. For Subud to be more accessible, let's recognise that we can genuinely move beyond the Indonesian, Islamic prism of the '60s and '70s.

Subud doesn't need protecting. We *are* Subud; we can question and change what supports who we are, and drop what doesn't. We can become more relevant and connected to the place and times we live in, and to the wider community.

Personally I'm much more interested in understanding what *unites* us with everyone else, rather than what *separates* us.

Many good things in Subud are happening in this direction, but let's also find a way of expressing what Subud actually is that is congruent with who we are.

Every person will find for himself or herself the right way towards God, and what might be the right way for one may be completely wrong for another. Therefore, you must discover your own self, and develop your inner self. You must not follow or imitate anyone else.

—Bapak Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo