

Subud and the Art of Automobile Maintenance

by Marius Kahan

I like cars — I always have, and I'll brook no nonsense about it being a shallow material interest; at their best, cars are comparable to works of art. Inextricably combining contemporary design with cutting edge technology, the automobile is, in my view, a far more accurate barometer of the zeitgeist than music, clothes, football, software or architecture. It has reflected all that is good, bad and mediocre about the world at any given moment in its roughly 100 year history and there has rarely, if ever, been a universal icon that has shot so quickly to prominence, said so much about human taste and desire, and been so widely aspired to — while continually reinventing itself.

Something else that emerged in the last hundred years or so is Subud and I find myself wondering why it can't reinvent itself too. I may lose some of my audience with this tack, but the car analogy seems particularly apposite, because in the world of automobiles, technological advancements have, to a large extent, influenced the evolution of the car, and as society has progressed I would have expected something analogous to have occurred with Subud. So for the purposes of this little essay, the motor industry will serve as metaphor.

When Bapak was a young man, cars were built as chassis with all the oily bits attached to them, and a body would be bolted on top. The *grandes marques* of the day such as Rolls Royce, Duesenberg, Alfa Romeo and Hispano Suiza supplied machines to be appropriately clothed by a coach-builder. And most early cars took many of their cues from horse-drawn carriages, including the now inconceivable notion that the driver would sit outside while the privileged passengers nestled inside; it seemingly never occurred to people that there was no need for this lowly servant to be exposed to the elements — that this was a practice born of the necessity to control a team of horses via the reins.

Similarly, the conventions of religion (and the pronouncements of Bapak) are often embraced not because they necessarily make any sense, but because of an entrenched and outmoded belief that true authority is to be found in ancient books and 'great' leaders — something that prevails even today. Yet the ancient cosmologies, based mainly on sacred texts and guesswork, paint a very different picture of the universe from what we now know to be true. By contrast, the post-modern, liberal, compassionate and deconstructionist mindset demands moral autonomy, if accountability and free will are to mean a damn, that is. And wasn't that *exactly* what Bapak was trying to tell us? That we should receive for ourselves and take responsibility? Could it be that he was a true post-modernist on the inside, while hidebound by the religious orthodoxy of his upbringing on the outside? Could he have been conflicted, a 'mugwump' (the term coined by British philosopher Alan Watts to describe someone who had their mug on one side of the fence and their 'wump' on the other)? Was he the bus driver dropped into the cockpit of a Formula One racer, bewildered by the sheer power on tap? Or was he simply and blissfully devoid of self-doubt?

The power-plants of early vehicles were basically no different from those found in most cars of today and likewise I would suggest that the 'engine' of Subud — the life force that is the latihan — is not really any different from the power that Jesus is said to have

talked about. Bapak indicated more or less the same thing, although he strongly suggested that the advent of Subud represented the first time this energy had been made available to all humankind. My belief (based on personal experience of Christianity in a non-Subud context) is that the latihan is no different from what Christians refer to as The Holy Spirit, except that in the latihan we have a 'de-restricted' version, the Christian experience having been curbed by the imperative to reconcile this spiritual force with the rigid edicts of scripture.

I've long perceived the major religions as 'transport for the masses' and when I came across Subud it was like discovering that I could have a private car. Please don't bother accusing me of elitism; I've heard it all before and wouldn't even disagree. Anyway, when did it become a bad thing to aspire to elite status? Isn't the whole point of an elite that it's the best of the best? I reckon that, when the chips are down, the vast majority of people would readily choose the elitist world of the five-star hotel, the business lounge, the driving seat of a new Mercedes over the flea-bitten two-star hotel, grubby departure lounge and gum-plastered bus seat. The major religions are big coaches full of people you've never met, all going to the same place, the same way, with no control over how they get there or when they stop to take in the sights or use the lavatory. Subud is the private car and, just as people personalise their transport by their choice of make, model, colour, power and trim, the individual is free to choose what the latihan means to them. Which makes me wonder — why are the WSC and various Subud publications and information leaflets trying to force us all onto the same train?

In Subud we have the extreme good fortune to have received contact with (to borrow from the Star Wars movie franchise) 'The Force'. In my opinion the latihan is exactly that; a power source, pure energy — super-consciousness if you will. It really doesn't matter whether we call it 'God' or not; we know from over fifty years experience in the West that even someone who professes atheism can receive the latihan, so we can take it as read that God — whatever that may mean to you — doesn't take sides. It seems clear to me, therefore, that we should be presenting the latihan as a non-partisan force that *some may take to be God, or to come from God*, rather than continuing to describe ourselves and the latihan in hackneyed religious terms. Subud is not — or should not be — about regulations, beliefs or linguistic peculiarities. It's about the latihan, pure and simple and, to stray momentarily from my chosen metaphor, like the Olympic flame it should pass from one generation to the next unhindered by cultural baggage. The latihan can no more remain in the 20th century than a torch-bearer can refuse to hand the sacred flame from one territory to the next.

What we receive in latihan is, apparently, of the same stuff whether we live in a world of planes, trains and automobiles or a primitive society centuries before world-changing discoveries such as electricity. In 1925 it was not even known for sure whether or not there was intelligent life on Mars. Quantum physics may have been waiting in the wings but it was far from the mainstream topic it is today. There was comparatively little awareness of the scale of the universe, radios were not much more than amplified crystal sets, TV was not yet available, phones were a relative luxury, the mass of information and misinformation available today via the internet wasn't even dreamt of, movies were still silent, DNA was unknown and Louis Armstrong was in the avant-garde. And Bapak, a Javanese Muslim living in a society even more isolated from emergent technology than most Europeans at the time, apparently received a revelation. I'm not knocking Bapak, just trying to give some context to his receiving, because — like the rest of us — he would have had no choice but to interpret whatever was presented to

him, whether inwardly or via sensory input, in terms of his understanding of the universe.

As cars progressed they became more streamlined, quieter, more efficient, logical. Weird and wonderful creations such as propeller driven cars, two-wheeled gyroscopic monsters and motorised wheels with an occupant perched in the hub fell by the wayside in favour of the conventions that we take for granted today. And just as some of the modes of transport that emerged in the early days of motoring were too far-out to merit further development, some of the ideas that do the rounds in Subud, while masquerading as spiritual truth, seem even more fanciful than the bizarre contraptions referred to above. I strongly believe that they should be dropped from the literature or accompanied by a disclaimer stating that they are the musings — or at best interpretations of the receiving — of a Javanese Muslim born around the turn of the last century.

Here's just one example: Bapak said, in several talks, that angels travel at 1,000 times the speed of light, and that it would take an angel (sent by God to check that creation was up to snuff, by the way) fifty years to travel to the far reaches of all the Heavens and the same amount of time to get back again. And even though that comes from a series of talks given in the sixties, it was quoted to me — *as if fact* — less than a year ago.

I'd be interested to know what the source material was for the notion of angelic return trips; perhaps it came from a Javanese folk-tale or is written somewhere in the Koran, and of course it's possible that Bapak received something that seemed to tally with this idea — but it doesn't stand up to scrutiny. We now know that the universe is big — very, very big. Fifty years at 1,000 times the speed of light won't even get you from one end of our galaxy to the other, and there are trillions of galaxies in the universe. And come to think of it, why *is* this statistic so geocentric? The time it takes an insignificant planet (which is more or less how Bapak characterised Earth on more than one occasion) to orbit a minor star, multiplied by 100,000 is the time taken for a return trip around the universe by an angel (whose wingspan, by the way, is the length of a football pitch according to other talks). A Catholic priest once told my father, 'Give me a child until the age of five, and I'll give him to the church for life.' It's all about programming in other words — and it's very hard to edit once the code has been saved in some hidden area of memory. I've often heard it said in Subud circles that Bapak was in a state of permanent receiving and so all that he said was direct from the latihan (although just how they could know that is a mystery), yet in his talks he openly cited the Bible and the Koran. Stories of angelic speed and dimensions were, I imagine, part of Bapak's upbringing and — just as people raised in the church are unable to conceive that the Bible is not the last word in authority — he likely didn't question the tales that he'd grown up with.

To return to the motoring analogy: Subud could be compared to a vintage car club whose members claim that the best days of automotive design and technology are in the past; they insist on driving around in 'classic' cars, but are hampered by the problems of maintaining these cumbersome beasts which, even at their best, are unable to keep pace with modern vehicles. And that's OK in the world of cars — I totally get it. I'll admit to owning a minor classic myself: a luxurious, hand-built Italian tourer with a world-famous previous owner; all walnut trim, leather seats and a big, sonorous V6 engine — it has a gravitas that few modern cars can match. But when I recently rented a diesel powered Vauxhall it outclassed my Lancia by any technical yardstick you'd care to throw at it: handling, acceleration, top speed, economy, ergonomics, ease of use. Truth be told the Lancia is a dinosaur, but I love it. I also loved Subud in the Seventies; it was bang on

the zeitgeist then, but the world has moved on. We need a more modern bodywork, updated suspension and a more fuel efficient Subud if we are to avoid our inexorable decline.

But never mind that there is a preponderance of terms like 'worship' in Subud literature and that since Bapak's death there seems to be almost universal acceptance that anything suggested by Ibu Rahayu should be taken as holy writ; this is not where Subud should be at and *it was never intended to be*. Ideally we should have a neutral face, but if that is not possible we should at least reflect the way global spiritual awareness is evolving. To be absolutely candid, recent pronouncements from Ibu Rahayu sound antiquated and anachronistic, and more like religious dogma than the liberating vision I got from the talks Bapak was giving thirty odd years ago. As people keep pointing out, he exhorted us to stand on our own two feet and to believe nothing he said unless we'd received it for ourselves — yet it seems that a significant contingent in Subud is unwilling or unable to follow his recommendations. Ironic, isn't it?

Crucially, as well as stating that he was not the leader of Subud, only the caretaker, Bapak frequently made it clear that after he died, *no-one would replace him*. Yet from where I stand, it looks very much as if Ibu has done — and in the twilight of her life I have heard people say, 'What will we do when she's gone? We'll be like lost children.' Is *that* what Bapak hoped for us? I don't think so — yet in Ibu we have somebody who has effectively set themselves up as de facto leader. Some might argue that the membership foisted this upon her, but either way she took up the mantle and now tells us to change nothing and to read Bapak's talks. Doesn't this sound suspiciously like a church leader? Doesn't it set the scene for turning Subud into a religion? Doesn't it go *completely against what Bapak stood for*?

I wouldn't buy a car manufactured according to a 1925 design, and I think that neatly sums up the problem with Subud's 'look and feel'. Genuine seekers today are more critically aware, cynical even, because they were left profoundly jaded by the debacles that unfolded around Scientology, Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh, the Maharishi, Sai Baba, Sri Chinmoy and others. In contrast to these movements, I believe that Subud still has the potential to present itself as having the genuine article in the latihan, but for now it looks as if the only people taking the bait are those looking for an alternative to religion — and they're finding it in something that is becoming one.

We should be offering the chassis and running gear — the latihan by any other name — but instead we're offering a complete car and, just like a far-eastern start-up auto maker in the eighties, our bodywork is ill-proportioned and aesthetically clumsy, our interior trim cheap and plasticky. We've got the engine, gearbox, brakes and suspension from a first-rate manufacturer. Let's stop trying to set ourselves up as *carrozzeria** as well.

* *Italian coach-builders; design houses such as Pininfarina, Bertone and Giugiaro are widely held to be synonymous with style.*