

SUBUD AT CROSS-ROADS

A manifesto introduced by Michael Rogge at the Sydney Subud World Congress in January 1989

Introduction

The following paper is meant as a basis for discussion. It represents not only the meaning of the author but of some other members he has been in contact with. Its basic assumption is that in the course of its development Subud has not been able to free itself of its background. The way Subud has presented itself to the outside world and the clarifications on the process of the latihan were influenced by Javanese psychology and mystical traditions. Members have always submitted themselves uncritically to leadership and have failed to give Subud an inter-religious appearance and universal appeal. This paper discusses various subjects:

1. Why the subject of change is brought up at this time.
2. Reasons for the need to acquaint ourselves with Subud origins.
3. Loss of membership and its possible causes.
4. Javanese mysticism and Subud's place in it.
5. History of the development of Subud on Java before 1950.
6. Is Subud truly universal?

I am doing so against a background of more than 35 years of Subud practice, having been opened by Husein Rofé; in 1954 in Hong Kong. (For my early days in Subud please refer to Ilaine Lennards: "In Those Days". I was known as "Keith" at the time, and to Harlinah Longcroft's monumental 'History of Subud')

Necessity for re-orientation

The demise of Bapak has left a void in our midst. In former days most of the members had seen Bapak and attended his latihan. Many in doubt about Subud stayed because of the inspiration and uplift that accompanied his frequent visits to countries all over the world. Now Bapak has gone Subud is being judged on what newcomers and members experience and observe in their groups and (inter-)national gatherings.

The departure of a founder has always heralded crucial times for a spiritual movement. In Christianity it was followed by the descent of the Holy Ghost. This ushered in the transformation of one of the many Jewish messianic sects into a world-religion. That meant also that the original character underwent changes to accommodate to the existing need for a religion with an inspiring vision for that time offering simultaneously a spiritual catharsis and salvation.

In order to understand Christianity well, a study of its origin, the Jewish religion, and the spiritual movements of that time are indispensable. It is beyond comprehension that people are prepared to change their entire lives and submit to extreme sacrifices to comply with the commandments of their particular religion, yet are quite indifferent to acquire any insight into the origin of their belief in an objective manner.

Subud Origins

Alas, this also applies to Subud. Although we may pride ourselves in possessing a wealth of talks and clarifications of Bapak, few attempts have been made to place them against the background of his cultural background and the religions of Java. One of the few exceptions was: "Reflections on Subud" by Husein Rofé. This book was ignored generally and not mentioned in official literature-lists.

Research into the origins of Subud tradition may appear to be a subject typical for a historian or anthropologist. It should not be forgotten, however, that present Subud precepts are rooted in its past.

It is only natural that Bapak is our first-hand source of explanations. No one like him had that intimate experience of the process of receiving that takes place in us. Yet Bapak gave his explanations from what he learned about mysticism from his parents, teachers and all sources of tradition that he came in contact with before receiving his revelation.

The shape Subud took in the course of the years was to a great extent moulded under this influence. It led to its international dissemination. It should be born in mind that other Javanese mystical movements with a far greater following in Indonesia never became known abroad.

Evaluating Tradition

It seems in the present time of transition appropriate to take stock of where Subud stands today and see if it is functioning satisfactorily. Admittedly there is a danger in evaluations. It is an activity of the mind over matters spiritual. It fosters doubts that have a damaging influence on belief, solidarity and receiving. That is why it is taboo and avoided. A blind belief can work miracles. However, if even these fail to occur is it then not time to pause and take stock especially so if the survival of our movement seems at stake?

Causes for lack of growth

- Subud resembles a transit camp. From the very beginning members came and went without interruption. We do not seem to have more members today as twenty-five years ago. Since Subud came to the West nearly one hundred thousand members may have been opened. Yet few remained. Usually this is explained in terms as: it is not quantity but quality that counts. But who is to determine whether quality remained?

Bapak for one saw God's hand in the rapid growth of Subud in the early days. Its novelty then attracted hosts of people. For many it was the first contact with Oriental tradition and discipline. At present, however, there are numerous other spiritual movements in the West to provide for their needs. Undoubtedly there is an element of competition in which - judging by numbers - we do not appear to fare quite well.

Bapak said that we should draw people to us by making an example of our lives. Alas, we appear to have failed because the membership is stagnant. But then, even Bapak's group on Java numbered less than fifty people after twenty years of slow growth.

A member who has been in Subud for twenty years writes to me from the U.S.A.: *I have not been doing the latihan for about three years. Occasionally I miss friendship with certain people in Subud. Yet I don't miss the latihan itself and the Subud community at all. Last October I attended a weekend Subud retreat here. It reinforced my previous thoughts that Subud has long lost the edge, obscured by the tremendous spiritual awakening and growth achieved by all kinds of communities, groups and individuals. While the world around Subud has changed rapidly, Subud seems to remain the same.* (Happily I can mention here that he returned to Subud a few years after he wrote this.)

- • **Lack of information about Subud**

Many members wonder whether Bapak's wish that we should make no propaganda has not been taken too literally. Presently there is hardly any information available about Subud. Subud books have either been sold out, or have limited sales- outlets. Moreover, there is no consistent policy to donate them to public libraries. Encyclopedias carry little or no information about us because we have not provided it. If they carry some, it has been culled from second- or third-hand accounts with the resulting misconceptions..

We do not co-operate with journals, yearbooks, or periodicals that publish addresses, and further information that could lead inquirers to us. Moreover there is hardly any standard introduction available that tells outsiders in a few pages what Subud stands for in terms that are understandable to Western minds. We had an excellent one of June Sawrey- Cookson, but it needs being brought up-to-date.

- • **Lack of binding power**

It is not only that we have made it nearly impossible for people to know about us, once they have joined, we do not seem to be able to hold on to them. Apparently something is felt missing.

The following may be some of the causes:

- **Absence of Bapak as a charismatic and inspiring leader** has already made itself felt. In the past the prospect of meeting the

founder on one of his world tours attracted quite a number of people. In future groups will have to rely on their own appeal.

- **Expectations are not met.**
The suggestion is sometimes given that by simply doing latihan desirable inner changes will follow. In reality it is different. Change often involves sacrificing destructive habits and requires commitment and motivation.
An often heard complaint is that Subud does not provide modern therapy, individually or in groups, or forms of training that are offered by other movements. The need for this is being felt because members give sometimes the impression that Subud stimulates odd behaviour. Members would like to discuss their problems, their loneliness, or their handicaps. This is left to the initiative of individual groups who cater for these needs only in very rare cases.
- **Level of helpers/members found wanting.**
New members look up to the helpers or older members for being examples of the benefits of following the latihan. Yet some helpers show more peculiarities than people outside Subud.
- **Explanations too far removed from Western conceptions.**
Bapak's cosmological and psychological explanations are quite different from contemporary western conceptions. Whereas in modern times the orthodox Christian world view has been assailed and torn down to make place for a search for essence, there appears to be in Subud an unqualified acceptance of Javanese/Islamic mystical teachings and practices of olden times. Some members give the impression of being attracted just because of the exotic aspects. Non-Muslim members find difficulty in relating Subud explanations to their own religious belief. Others consider them in conflict with presentday scientific research on the evolution of man, the mechanism of mind, and modern psychological or philosophical thought.
- **Islam- and Javanisation.**
Subud is supposed to take no stand in religious matters. Yet it abounds in Muslim and Javanese customs. Some are official, such as the separation of the sexes.
Others inofficial:
 - **Circumcision.** It appears to have been pushed to the background lately, but at one time an operation was considered to be imperative for spiritual progress.
 - **Change of names especially into Muslim names.**
 - **Fasting according to the Muslim calendar.** When it comes to fasting the Ramadan is being observed whereas other religious fasting traditions are not even considered.
 - **Selamatans.** Besides being influenced by Islam, animistic practices from pre-Islamic Java have crept in, such as selamatans.

Other causes for discord and disappearance of members have been:

- **Subud enterprises.** In spite of repeated warnings it has only now dawned upon us that we might have bitten off more than we could chew. Reading over the recent retrospective analyses of what went wrong one is again and again faced with the conclusion that the membership was withheld insight in the true situation of failing enterprises. One of the reasons put forward to explain this is that Bapak's and other people's feelings had to be considered. As such it exposes the attitude of unconditional acceptance of all what Bapak proposed in spite of the fact that many of these enterprises endorsed by him, proved to be a failure. Promises of turning over a new leaf - so often heard in the past - became monotonous.
- Members have been showered with **appeals for money**. Subud publications seemed to be more concerned with it than our spiritual welfare. Helpers were being urged to push participation amongst members. As things stand now a number of members who have heeded the pleas for investments have suffered considerable losses and are left in the dark.
- There has been such dependence and lip-service to Bapak that it has suffocated practical all attempts to explain the Subud experience in other points of view in accordance with **different cultural approaches**. Bennett may have been the last one to do so, but was derided for it. Members who once craved for Bennett's "teachings" dropped him like a hot brick, once the word was given.
- This lip-service to a Bapak is not uncommon on Java. **Bapakism** is even an Indonesian expression for the general tendency to avoid responsibility and making decisions by looking up for guidance from a superior - a Bapak as it is called on Java. Prof. Niels Mulder writes: *I often had the feeling that there is a craving for leadership in Javanese society, that people do not like to make their own decisions, that they are in search of a leader, a Bapak, whom they can follow, and whom they feel they can trust. The basis of this order is located over and above any single individual and ultimately derives from insight in the cosmic order, from the blessing of superiors, from inspiration (ilham) and revelation (wahyu).*
- From a Subud member's letter: *Yes, I think Subud members do have a **father complex** in common. It is part of the need to have someone else "more powerful" take responsibility for our lives. Bapak certainly filled that role and through his own actions perpetuated our dependance on him.*

Lack of interest in the spread of Subud

At the international Subud Congress in Sydney in 1989 Jim Holland of New Zealand introduced his paper: "The Spread of Subud", which contains a similar viewpoint as mine, at a meeting of the workgroup devoted to this subject. It met with little enthusiasm. For a number of days there was a lively debate by delegates of most countries on ways to foster the dissemination of Subud. However, every time a draft with recommendations was drawn up it

was watered down later on. Finally we arrived at a compromise. But even that was torpedoed by a committee of zonal delegates and therefore not even submitted to the General Assembly of the Congress for approval and acceptance.

We have to accept that interest in this subject is lukewarm. "It is all in God's hands. We cannot do anything". It is this attitude that has made that even the simplest practical recommendations were waved aside by the leadership of Subud.

All the above aspects may be traced back to Subud's past and its roots in Javanese religious culture. Subud outside Indonesia has failed to adapt itself to people of other ways of living and thought. It has still the appearance common to Javanese mystical movements. Inasmuch as little is known about this subject, this is not apparent to most members. Therefore I append below some information about this subject.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND JAVANESE MYSTICAL MOVEMENTS

During the last decades Javanese mysticism has become more and more of interest to anthropologists. They base their books, articles, doctoral theses, etc. partly on Dutch studies during their colonial past, partly on their own observations during field-work. Java is particularly fascinating because its culture bears traces of various religions.

The original religion of Java was animistic. Prevailing was the belief in powers, nature-spirits and souls of the deceased hidden in the unseen world.

The **selamatan** is considered to be part of that folklore. This gathering is held at specific dates such as the third, seventh, fortieth, hundredth, and thousandth anniversary of the decease of a relative. The food eaten is meant to be a sacrifice for the soul of the dead person. After thousand days the soul is supposed to have disintegrated or reincarnated. Prof.J.M.van der Kroef writes: *The homeostasis sought via the selamatan has an animistic background which is part of the Javanese cosmology: man is surrounded by spirits and deities, apparitions and mysterious supernatural forces, which, unless he takes the proper precautions, may disturb him or even plunge him into disaster.*

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz divides the Javanese population in three main groups: the abangan, the priyayi and the santri.

- The **abangan** are nominal Muslim, but to a great extent they are guided by the ancient belief, the kejawen. Dr.S. de Jong: *Flora and*

fauna have like man a soul. The animal and vegetable soul is deeper sunk in material existence than the human soul. Therefore certain plants and animals may be harmful...The Godhead towers above in serene rest and offers no assistance. The abangan remain two possibilities: surrender -rela-, and worship -bekti. The primitive main concepts recur in 20th century mystical groups, may have never been absent.

In the 5th century **Hinduism** was introduced in Java and struck root. One thousand years later it was followed by Islam. The form of Islam that reached Java had already undergone Ishmaili Shi'ah influences. In Java it was again adapted to suit the existing Hindu and animistic elements. Sufi mysticism was embraced particularly, because it coincided with the existing way of thought. Sufi brotherhoods - tarekats - of the Sufi orders of Naqshabandiyya, Qadiriyya, and Shattariyya were formed and spread slowly.

- Towards the middle of the 19th century opportunity arose for the Muslim population to have more contact with their fellow-believers. This led to a reform movement to rid Indonesian Islam of Hindu-Javanese elements. The **Santri** belong to this part of the population. They condemn such diversions as Wayang performances and selamatan. They reject the belief in the unity of man and God, in rasa(feeling) over akal(reason).
- **Subud = priyayi?**
For scholars Subud is considered priyayi. In his dissertation: "Susila Budhi Dharma"(1974) Dr.P.P.Sitompul considers Bapak a typical guru of the priyayi type. To this group belong the descendants of the aristocracy of the Javanese courts of Yogyakarta and Surakarta, who the Dutch won over to become members of the appointive civil service in colonial times. Nowadays they constitute the intelligentsia of Java. They have their roots in the Hindu-Javanese courts of pre-colonial times. A noble and pure character is attributed to them. They were the bearers of the mystic court-traditions taught to them by highly revered guru's. Priyayi conserved and cultivated the art of dance, drama, music and poetry.

In Javanese mysticism one learns that it is good to honour one's superiors...Justice and well-being are expected to flow from above, to originate from a Bapak who in his turn derives his power for protection from a higher Bapak, etc., until one reaches the realm of supernature and the leader "by the grace of God".", notes Prof.N.Mulder (p.42) and adds: "Every guru invariably stresses the originality of his revelation or intuitive insights while rejecting knowledge from books or the influence of tradition.(p.26)

According to Prof. van der Kroef Subud is a continuation of, or a new elaboration on "traditional mystical patterns emanating from the Javanese courts and propagated largely but not exclusively by the aristocracy". The Raden Mas title of Bapak refers to this descent. According to Bapak his mother was a descendant of Prince

Purbokusumo, who in turn descended from Sunan (=king) Kalidjogovan(also called Kalidjaga). The latter Bapak credits with having given the ancient Wayang play its present form. Before it was part of the Javanese ancestor- worship. The shadow figures represent the spirits of the dead. Subsequently the Hindu epics Mahabharata and Ramayana were introduced and integrated in Wayang performances.

Of course Bapak's preference for Javanese art-forms is well-known. The cassette with his gambang music has been played all over the world by members. He appeared on his seventieth birthday in Javanese court dress. In short he belonged to the priyayi class.

Subud also bears Priyayi marks. Its name consists of three Sanskrit words: Susila = chaste,ethical; Budhi = Buddhi = intelligence; Dharma = norm, customary observance (J.Gonda).

Of course in mysticism these words take on a different meaning. *To live according to one's darma and the rules of social order is to fulfil "the will of "God"(kodrat).*(Mulder,p.25)

Symbols representing the seven spheres, like in the Subud emblem, are also known in Javanese mysticism.

In Bapak's explanations all of nature is endowed with souls. Prof.van der Kroef notes:" Monistic identification is carried to great lengths in Subud: vegetable and animal "essences" shape human personality and destiny (e.g. after eating goat's meat "the goat's tendency to get lost will be manifested in the man as the desire in all circumstances to follow his own impulses") and pantheistic unity is accepted as a matter of course (e.g. "in the world of fishes there are many that serve God with faith and, moreover, are not neglectful in the manner of their prayers...")

Mixing

Between the three groups of abangan, priyayi and santri has always been an area of tension. The Santri accused the other two groups of mixing Islam with Javanism. Prof.van der Kroef: "Conflict, even violence ... has repeatedly occurred between adherents of these groups, frequently involving a clash between provisions of the local adat (customary law) and hukum (Islamic law)...".

In this context our aversion against mixing might be seen against the background of defending Subud against Muslim reproaches of mixing with Javanese mysticism. In later years when Subud had spread to the West mixing referred to Western spiritual movements, disciplines and practices which have little in common with Javanism. References to such movements do not convince one that their nature was understood entirely in Indonesia.

Javanese mystical movements

Yet in fact Bapak had a dislike against kebatinan, Javanese mysticism. He bracketed it together with spiritism, hypnotism and meditation (or samadi). Again another area of conflict should be noted here namely with the so called aliran kebatinan, or Javanese mystical movements.

These groups formed themselves around a teacher, who often had received enlightenment (Wahyu). Hundreds of such groups are known to exist. Often when the guru dies, the group dissolves. Some groups may be far larger than Subud. Pangestu claims to have 90.000 members in Indonesia, Sapta Darma 10.000.

In colonial times the Dutch Government kept a sharp eye on these movements including the tarekat Sufi brotherhoods who often stirred up uprisings fired by messianic and millenarian expectations. The Indonesian Government followed this policy because it was afraid of communist infiltration into these groups. To keep an eye on them it required the mystical movements (kepercayaan) to be registered. Subud was registered in Solo for instance as being founded in Semarang in 1932 practising meditation with movements, glossolalia and healing.

Sumarah

Of special importance is the Sumarah movement because it has the closest resemblance to Subud. A dissertation (D.G.Howe) and a thesis (Paul Stange) have been devoted to this brotherhood. Its founder, Sukinohartono, was opened by Subud helper Wignosupartono. The latter was known for his healing powers and was also the first person to be opened by Bapak. Sukinohartono had himself a revelation thereafter in 1932. He underwent a series of experiences from 1935 until 1937. After an intense cleansing Sukino was given to understand that he would receive guidance through hakiki and the angel Gabriel. He was taken in sequence through nine spiritual stages. Stange: "The dimensions he passed through parallel the realms discussed in classical mystical literature, mirror the descriptions found in wayang and Sufism." Sukinohartono reported a.o. encounters with Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad.

In 1949 Sukinohartono had another revelation. Neighbours related that they had seen a wahyu celestial light fall on Sukino's house during the night. Note the parallels with the descriptions of Bapak' revelation. Sukino also received "clear guidance to the effect that he had to lead humanity toward total submission to God."

In Sumarah there were two levels of practice: kanoman and kasepuhan. Kanoman exercises took three principal forms:

- **karaga**, meaning automatic movement;
- **karasa**: sensitizing of intuition; and
- **kasuara**: spontaneous speech. These were understood as being the result of the movement of God's power within the candidate.

- For elders and those mature in spirit was a second initiation: the **kasepuan** silent meditation. The latter became the standard practice. The kanoman exercise came in disregard after 1949. The same applied to the separation of the sexes and facing Mecca during the exercise. In the early days there was also an intense "checking" of members' progress, which may be compared to our testing.

Sumarah attracted far more followers than Subud: "In 1951 Subud remained a nucleus of around fifty people, by that point Sumarah was a Java-wide organisation of several thousand." Yet Subud became known worldwide, whereas Sumarah attracted little foreign attention. (In passing it may be noted that several other people who had contact at one time with Subud founded groups that surpassed Subud in membership: Da Free John, and Bhagawan Shree Rajneesh.)

Subud history

Subud has a place apart amongst these kepercayaan. In most movements meditation is being practised. Subud appears to lean most to the Sufi tarekat tradition, yet bears some Santri and priyayi influences. The latihan appears quite unique, however. I have yet to come across a similar exercise in the descriptions of other disciplines. Of course, if one were to term the latihan "ecstatic" several other parallels may be found in other countries and in history (early Christianity).

To evaluate the present state of Subud it would be of importance to know more about its history. Alas, Bapak's autobiography has thrown little more light on certain gaps in our knowledge of its development. We do not know much about Bapak's first two books preceding the Susila Budhi Dharma written in Semarang in the thirties. His first book was named **Serat Uran-Uran Trikanda** or 'Book of Songs' and 'Three Speakers', referring to Bapak and his first two helpers: Pak Wignosupartono and Pak Semantri Hatmowidjojo.

In 1934 he wrote another book **Serat Djati-Makna** or True Facts. In a letter to Husein Rofé Bapak comments: "All commentaries required for spiritual matters are to be found in that book." According to Rusli Alif (Subud World News Sept.'73) it consisted of seven volumes. For lack of fuel copies of the book were burned for cooking by young Subud freedom fighters in the heat of the 1945 revolution.

From Rusli Alif we also know that the Javanese art of self-defense, **pencak silat**, was practised in Subud by the junior group and called latihan pencak current. The elders did a latihan ilmu current (inspired knowledge of the inner current).

Healing was also part of the helpers' task. Prio Hartono came to Subud after being cured by helpers when in hospital. Healing also played a part in Husein Rofé's dissemination of Subud.

From the above it is clear that Subud underwent changes in the course of time. Bapak appears to have adapted explanations and practice to suit Western members' sensibilities, like Sumarah and other movements made similar changes for Indonesian members.

In fact Subud is a process. At this moment and time we should consider whether Javanese influences still serve their purpose or whether further steps should be set on the road to universalisation. In so doing we might make our principle that Subud is no religion and has no teachings, ritual, or master, more convincing.

Retrospection

In hindsight, fifteen years later, all the issues raised in this manifesto have become more poignant than ever.

- Bapak's absence, in spite of all the splendid efforts of Ibu Rahaju, is more and more felt. Membership dwindles, groups grow smaller and smaller. Their members are hardly prepared anymore to serve in committees.
- In spite of all warnings and bad experiences new Subud enterprises (Premier Hotels) have been started and folded up, costing another number of members' savings.
- In the West Islam has lost a great deal of its goodwill since 9-11. Having a Muslim name is not such a blessing anymore as it may have seemed decades before.
- Java has lost most of its splendor. Its name now associated with one of the most corrupt societies in the world. Moreover terrorist massacres have made it clear that fundamentalist Islam is shaking its ugly head there too. Subud is not a brotherhood in name anymore, but an association. The name reminding us too much of the Muslim, and other violent brotherhoods.
- An introduction to Subud, comprehensible for Western readers, has not been produced either. No book has appeared with a similar appeal as the one's of Rofé and Bennett. Hardly any bookshop carries Subud literature, nor does the name mean anything to most people.

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(For other literature bearing on this subject please refer to the author)

Links:

- [Subud](#)
- [Subud and Sufism, by Dirk Campbell](#)
- [A mysterious encounter of Dutch painter Auke Sonnega with Javanese mysticism on Bali in 1950.](#)
- [A commentary of Husein Rofé on Pak Subuh's 'Susila Budhi Dharma'](#)
- [WIRID, the mystical teachings of the eight sages of Java, and other ancient Javanese texts.](#)
- [Reflections on Islam. Myth versus enlightenment](#)
- [Robert J. Kyle: Rethinking Javanese Mysticism: A Case Study of Subud Mysticism](#)
- [OVW: Javanese Religion](#)
- [Welcome to Subud, Yogyakarta](#)
- [A study of the art of living. An excellent in-depth treatise of Javanese Mysticism by David Howe Ph.D.](#)
- [The Book of Being \(Sumarah\) by D.G.Howe Ph.D.](#)
- [Joglosemar - Kejawen, a Javanese traditional spiritual teaching](#)
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