

A Necessary Reappraisal

By Ragnar Lystad

The way ahead for Subud seems uncertain. The old members are becoming very old and will soon leave the scene, whereas recruitment is slight and uncertain. Disillusionment and disappointment are widespread. We are disappointed by the enterprise failures and that Subud has not become a major force in the world; some are also disappointed with their personal progress. Such attitudes do not make fertile ground. If Subud is going to survive, a change is needed.

The future of Subud itself may not be the most important thing. What is essential is the dissemination or spread of the latihan. But the Subud movement could have a role to play in that. The members have after all amassed a lot of practical experience that could have great value for newcomers to the latihan. It seems a pity if such experience is lost when the first generation is no more.

Maybe other movements also have the latihan or something similar, but call it something else. We do not know. But what we do know without doubt is that we, in Subud, have received a certain spiritual exercise and also the ability to transmit it to others. We must assume that we, in addition to doing the latihan ourselves, also have a responsibility to make it available to a wider circle of humanity. We are not fulfilling that responsibility now. We need to know if that is because there is something wrong and, if so, what that may be and how we might correct it.

Many have pondered this question, but I think that we have not sufficiently reviewed the connection between Subud and its founder. We have been too much in awe of him to subject him to close scrutiny.

Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo — Bapak — founded Subud and led it in a rather authoritarian fashion from its beginning to his death in 1987. But his influence is still very much alive. We continue publishing his talks, and his daughter is delivering essentially the same message and advice. His advice is still the guide for the conduct of Subud affairs, his words are read and endlessly quoted in all Subud literature and we are all encouraged to read his talks regularly and diligently. In short, he is still the supreme guru, venerated and considered by most Subud members to be a spiritual figure of the highest level.

But Bapak was not infallible and he himself provided all the necessary evidence for that conclusion.

On Bapak's urging, encouragement and almost command, millions of dollars were spent on projects that have all failed. (The Kalimantan mining project is still not definitively terminated, but has struggled for survival for more than twenty years without substantial results.) Many Subud members are still wrestling with the consequences of the losses they suffered because of their loyal investments. Enormous amounts of labour have been wasted for nothing, the only result being loss of money, loss of trust, and growing

disappointment.

The most serious aspect of this was, however, not the losses and failures per se. Of greater consequence was the change of focus that took place at the beginning of the 1970s. Subud members were originally encouraged to do enterprises for reasons that mostly pertained to them as individuals; they should, for example, learn to take care of their personal material needs and not think too much about their spiritual progress. But with Bapak's decision in 1971 to establish a Subud bank, a new element was introduced, and we got a new direction and a new purpose. From being individual affairs only, enterprises were to represent the Subud organization to the world. The bank, and other collective Subud enterprises that Bapak envisaged and initiated would also serve as advertisements for Subud, making the Subud name and organization respected and known all over the world as a real benefactor to humanity.

Thus the 1970s signified a marked change in Subud's policy and approach to itself and the world. Those of us who joined Subud before that will be able to remember how everything changed at that point. From a situation of calm but generally happy optimism, the atmosphere became very serious, strained and stressful, even bordering on despair.

What happened in practice was that the promotion of the organization was given first place, instead of the latihan. This was the error that, instead of promoting Subud, undermined its foundation, by taking away its *raison d'être*. It made it much more difficult to work towards the real aim, which should be to make the latihan more readily available. So Subud was hampered in its development in three ways: first, by the personal disillusionment and disappointment resulting from the enterprise failures; second — and I think this was a more serious effect — because we lost sight of our real purpose; and third was the loss of morale and personal self-esteem ensuing from increasingly uncritical submission to Bapak's leadership. I feel that the Subud movement underwent a serious setback, with a corresponding impact on most Subud members.

There is one good thing about this, that we should utilize for what it is worth: that Bapak has thus given us irrefutable evidence of his own fallibility. We all (or almost all) thought that Bapak was led by God to start these enterprises, and that they in fact were the will of God Himself. We now know, or should know, that it was not so. There is no other plausible explanation of what happened than that these enterprises were willed not by God, but by Bapak personally, and that they all were ill-founded and possibly just an expression of his own ambitions — his own personal ambitions and his ambitions for the organization of which he was the undisputed leader. For one thing, he set Subud on an unlucky path; for another, what he claimed to have received would come to pass, never did. We cannot in every instance accept him as a channel for God. And we can use these observations to question the role of Bapak and the value of his advice in other contexts and in general. It may give us a clue as to the role that Bapak and his teachings — they were not just 'explanations' — should have in the Subud movement in the future.

For those who have even an elementary knowledge of religious traditions, i.e. Christianity, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism, it is obvious that Bapak's teaching was heavily coloured by his upbringing in Javanese traditions, which are a mixture of all these. Even if we regard this Javanese blend as a valid representation of eternal truths, there is still no reason why we should be obliged to accept precisely this formulation in preference to various alternatives that are available and may be better suited to our

particular cultural and personal background. The latihan is, as we know, not in itself bound to any particular faith or teaching. Bapak's talks contain spiritual insight, but are not to be accepted wholesale. They may provide stimulating reading, but should not be treated as guidelines for the Subud movement. We have given uncritical obedience to a teacher and accepted a teaching that has a disputable origin, and we should not have. This is in direct contradiction to the primary message in Subud: that we should receive for ourselves.

I think there is ample reason for Subud members to be ashamed, and I am probably not the only one who is. The depressing story of Subud enterprises is one reason, but we should also be ashamed to have to admit that we follow and submit to the teachings of a guru. Subud is a training to receive; why then do we have to follow a teaching? Why do we have to follow — in the worst case, for the rest of Subud's existence — rules that were made by a teacher who obviously led the movement on a very unsuccessful track and, moreover, as can easily be shown, presented a teaching that was clearly a Javanese mix of different religions? We cannot tell other intelligent people that we believe wholeheartedly in all this without feeling ashamed. As many of us are highly educated people, we should not behave like the followers of so many other movements that clearly play on the credulity of naïve persons.

The latihan is a gift. Bapak was himself a receiver of that gift. Thus, he was not essentially different from those who came next — Husein Rofé, Roland Starr, J. G. Bennett, who were all instrumental in bringing the latihan to the attention of people outside Indonesia. But even if we acknowledge Bapak's special role in the process, this does not imply that we also need to accept his teaching.

If Subud is going to have a future, we must develop a new attitude to our founder. An objective reappraisal of Bapak is a necessary step in a reorientation. If we are no longer committed to Bapak and his teaching, we can focus on the most important thing: the latihan and the practice of the latihan. The need for a teaching can be satisfied by a multitude of other writings — not to mention religions — that can easily be combined with the practice of the latihan. We do not really need Bapak's teaching, although some might like to study it for their personal benefit.

We have been governed by a religious or spiritual leader, and it seems that we still are. This is usually called a theocracy. This cannot, however, be reconciled with our declared aim that we all should follow our own path, as revealed to each one of us from within. 'Dethroning' Bapak might help us to develop into a democracy, and that is probably what people need nowadays: a movement devoted to the practice of a spiritual exercise, but, at the same time, a real democracy.