

Subud Spoofed

Notes on a burlesque of the Subud *latihan* in John Quigley's *The Secret Soldier* (1966)

By Bei Dawei

O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
— Robert Burns, ('To a Louse', 1786)

Over the past several years, I have been collecting English-language novels about Taiwan. One of these – John Quigley's thriller, *The Secret Soldier* (1966) – contains what seems to me to be an obvious burlesque of the Subud *latihan*. I present it here in the hope that knowledgeable readers will share their observations. (I am not a Subudian.)

The plot of *The Secret Soldier* concerns George Ackers, a British counterfeiter of Scotch whisky living in Taiwan, who finds himself blackmailed into cooperating with a plot to smuggle opium onto the island. His wife Alice is something of a spiritual seeker, and now follows a teacher called Mr. Elijah. A journalist character explains their group's distinctive practice:

They meet twice a week in a place they've rented for him and perform something called the *parina*. [...] They jump about, roll on the floor, and moan their heads off. That's supposed to be their wickedness leaving them. They say they're being purified.... (p. 27)

The same man characterizes the group's origins as:

The usual revelation stuff. It all came to him in a blinding light one night while he was lying in bed smoking. (p. 27)

Several passages describe the *parina* as 'the same purifying power that had descended on the apostles at the Last Supper' (p. 54, cf. 117). Yet its founder is not a prophet, at least not according to Alice: 'Mr. Elijah doesn't make any claims for himself or his teaching. In fact, he even denies that he has a teaching.' (p. 10)

By now anyone familiar with Subud will have recognized two things: First, Quigley is clearly making fun of Subud. His *parina* mirrors the Subud *latihan*, while the 'blinding light' which appeared to Mr. Elijah recalls the 'ball of radiant white light' which in 1925 descended onto the Subud founder, Muhammad Subuh Sumohadiwidjojo (Geels pp. 120-121). Second, the parallels are fictionalized, and therefore inexact. To begin with, Mr. Elijah is an American. No Indonesian or Islamic flourishes are in evidence, though the word *parina* – whose etymology is never explained – suggests some sort of exotic origin. (I speculate that it represents a corruption of *parinirvana*.)

The following passage represents promotional literature produced by Mr. Elijah's group (which has no name):

In the year 1951, in a humble lodging room above the shop where he worked, a ray of divine inspiration descended on a young draper's assistant. There, in a glow of beneficent starlight and to the

accompaniment of a celestial melody, it was revealed to Elijah Mannerheim Jones that through him there would be released into the world the Sacred Great Mercy which alone can purify man to the state of self-realization on which not only his own redemption but the whole future of humanity depends. There is no name for the Sacred Great Mercy that works through Elijah Mannerheim Jones. It is neither a teaching nor a religion, but it deepens and illumines all teachings and religions. Its only outward form is the *parina*. The *parina* is not a religious ritual. It is a state of submission in which the individual soul opens itself to the grace of God. Through it, all things are transformed for the true seeker. It is wrong to come to the *parina* seeking physical cure. But he who comes to the *parina* open as a little child will be relieved of physical defect. Disease cannot exist in a purified being. (p. 52)

Apart from Mr. Elijah's epiphany, other Subudian parallels include the insistence that his teaching is not a religion, and the description of the *parina* as an opening up to God. Subud's faith-healing tradition is illustrated by the example of Eva Bartok, who in 1957 was apparently cured of pregnancy-related complications (see Bennett, ch. 3). A further detail alludes to Subud's septenary cosmology (but diachronic, rather than synchronic as represented by the 'Seven Circles' symbol):

In different epochs different efforts are required of mankind. This is the Seventh Epoch we're in now. In the first Epoch man was required to struggle – to fight his way up out of the swamps, the slime, and the darkness. [...Now] the spiritual keynote is Harmony. [...] It does not yet exist. The Seventh Epoch is just starting. [...] As a matter of fact, it started with Mr. Elijah's awakening. [...] Harmony is Mr. Elijah's mission. He is the Herald of Harmony. (p. 118)

Exactly the same sort of evolutionary dispensationalism is found in Bennett's *Concerning Subud* (ch. 1), which proposes a similar scheme of seven epochs. (Of course the idea is anticipated by Mme Blavatsky and Ibn al-Arabi.) Gurdjieff wrote a tract called *The Herald of Coming Good*, while Ouspensky/Gurdjieff student Rodney Collin wrote another called *The Herald of Harmony*. Before meeting Mr. Elijah, Alice studied under a Gurdjieff analogue (who was, however, Japanese): 'Mr. Zumima wasn't a dancing teacher – they were sacred movements he taught, like the dervishes do'. (p. 10) As for other spiritual figures, Alice has also studied with a Nepali teacher named Sansheb, whom Ackers mistakenly refers to as a 'yogi' (p. 10); and numbers Jiddu Krishnamurti and Albert Schweitzer among the few people with an innate experience of the *parina*, without any need for initiation (p. 54).

Turning to the *parina* itself, a newcomer named Anna Fielding is led before the group and given the following explanation:

The *parina* is an act of worship. We are purified in it, sometimes in strange ways. You must try to make yourself open and receptive. No human person can tell you more than that. No human person can offer it to you. You must ask for it. Your presence here is sufficient request. (p. 54, also 206-207)

Cf. the Subud formula of 'opening' (given in Sumohadiwidojo, section on 'Applicants, Opening'). Interestingly Mr. Elijah, unlike Mr. Sumohadiwidjojo, does not require wives to seek permission from their husbands before being initiated. After these preliminaries, the actual practice then commences:

Mr. Elijah closed his eyes. So did everyone else. Mr. Elijah said softly, 'Begin.' Instantly there was a scream and a thud that jarred along the floor and up the quivering walls. A man had hurled himself to the floor and was now thrashing about as if in a fit. [...] The room was filled now with chaos and lunacy [...] Several men had sunk to the floor and were lying there in various positions, simpering and mouthing idiotically. Others walked about with their eyes closed and their arms stretched in front of them. Moans, screams, and grunts filled the room. [...] Most of the women were behaving in a more subdued way, either kneeling as if in prayer or swaying gently like flowers in a breeze. But one woman [...] was marching aggressively from one end of the room to the other, her arms swinging like a sergeant major's and her feet crashing on the floor at every turn. [...] Somewhere up the room a man let out a long, purifying torrent of pigsty noises. [...] a large man who had been jumping down the hall like a pantomime frog landed [...] and crouched there croaking. [...] Through the confusion and the zoo noises Mr. Elijah maneuvered with dignity, gliding round the worshippers, approaching but never touching, singing wordlessly as he moved. (pp. 55-56)

The *parina* continues until Mr. Elijah calls 'Stop'. He congratulates Anna, but calls her 'Elizabeth'. When she corrects him, he tells her that 'In the eyes of the world you may be Anna [...] but I have seen tonight that in the eyes of God you are Elizabeth'. (p. 57) This recalls the common Subud practice of requesting Sumohadiwidjojo (or nowadays his daughter, Siti Rahayu Wiryohudoyo) to assign new names.

Although it is difficult for outsiders to ascertain exactly what goes on in the *latihan*, a number of written accounts exist. Hartley Ramsey reports that his Coombe Springs *latihan* group 'must have sounded like bedlam':

Around me I heard strange cries and thuds of falling bodies, stomping and singing and shouting and the sounds of running feet....One 'O' grouper [this was the *latihan* group to which the loudest participants were assigned], I recall, said my latihan utterances sounded identical to the disturbed and retarded children he had in his care during the day. (Ramsey pp. 4-5)

Still, one must suspect Quigley of having indulged in a certain amount of exaggeration and creative license. Mary Siegal, secretary to the group following Mr. Elijah, confesses that 'I had to smother an absolutely overpowering wish to stand on my head tonight.' (p. 50) Her concern is for her modesty, skirts having inhibited some of the women from following their true instincts in the *parina*. Their solution is to adopt 'purity bloomers', a style of 'black silk Chinese pajamas' (p. 50) with a revealing neckline (pp. 118-119). 'Either that,' adds Mrs. Siegal, 'or we have two *parinas*, one for the men and one for the women.' (p. 50) (This is in fact the Subud practice.) 'In the *parina*, Mr. Elijah had said, one can do no harm and one can come to no harm' (p. 56); nevertheless, Hans Himmelmeyer – the one jumping like a frog – continues his bizarre activity even after the end of the exercise. When Alice wonders how to stop him before his heart gives out, Mr. Elijah replies that 'Only God can make him stop.' (p. 131) Himmelmeyer dies.

Quigley paints Mr. Elijah not as a con-artist, but as a deluded fool – he sincerely believes in what he is doing. We know this because several passages (pp. 53-54, 136) reflect Mr. Elijah's point of view, by way of an omniscient third-person narrator. A perceptive German character named Wanger offers a reductive psychological interpretation of the *parina* combining sublimated sexuality,

autosuggestion, and epilepsy (p. 59). Cf. the aforementioned journalist character, who diagnoses the *parina* as a 'communal orgasm' (p. 27). Certainly it arouses sexual desire in Alice (whose husband has been neglecting his marital duties), as she finds herself lusting first after Mr. Elijah (pp. 55-56), then another man (p. 207), while in the *parina*. Mr. Elijah has grown tired of fending off the advances of infatuated housewives (p.131); however, he reluctantly submits to being seduced by Alice, as a means of persuading her to assist with the disposal of Himmelmeyer's corpse (p. 136).

The benefits of the *parina* include (at least in theory) a diminished desire for alcohol (p. 51) or other drugs, including tea and sweets (p. 116). Such benefits accrue not only to the participants themselves, but also to family members (p. 83). As Alice points out to her distiller husband, 'People don't change all at once, George. Even the *parina* can only work a slow transformation. Mr. Elijah himself is the only one who was transformed in an instant.' (p. 84) Mr. Elijah has also reportedly taught his followers 'how harmful it was for them to eat food that did not grow in the country of their birth. The vibrations, apparently....' (p. 44) I have never heard any of these restrictions mentioned in connection with Subud, but perhaps readers will correct me.

I speculate that Quigley may have encountered Subud during his seventeen years as a reporter for the *Scottish Daily Express* (Glasgow), which he left in 1963 to pursue a career as a novelist (see Fullarton). This would have placed him in a good position to hear of the goings-on at Coombe Springs in 1957-59, when Subud made several hundred British converts. I have not yet been able to determine whether Quigley ever traveled to the Far East, but if so, Subud groups were meeting in Japan and Hong Kong several years before that, and in Formosa by around 1961 (Bright-Paul p. 133). Strangely, the drama surrounding Mr. Elijah's group plays no role in the novel's central opium-smuggling plot, and one wonders why Quigley would have included it at all. One possible answer is simply to boost the page-count. (Other filler material includes a similarly harsh depiction of a Scottish missionary from some fundamentalist sect; and much propaganda from Chiang Kai-shek's government, apparently reproduced verbatim.) Another possibility is that Quigley sought to imitate Graham Greene, whose novel *The Quiet American* (1955) includes a prominent role for the syncretic Vietnamese spiritualist religion of Caodaism. In any case, he was obviously enjoying himself, and perhaps that was reason enough.

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