

# Bait and Switch

By Helen Bailie

I was recently asked by an old friend, whom I hadn't heard from in years, why I was no longer in Subud. It had been a while since I had thought about this issue, having come to terms with my decision to leave long ago. But as most of my family is in Subud, I'm never too far away from its culture and am aware of many of the topics and debates that are of concern to the membership. One of these is the need to bring in new members. To be frank, I think that Subud, as it stands today, has little likelihood of attracting people in any meaningful quantities. I suspect, and this is supported by my experiences as a helper talking to would-be probationers or even with friends simply interested in the organization, that the reasons that it holds little interest to many are the same reasons that drove me away over twenty years ago.

During my teenage years I lived in Cilandak with my family and was opened when I turned seventeen. I later married a man who was a Subud member, became a helper, and finally left Subud twelve years after being opened. The decision to leave was not an easy one. I had spent most of my childhood and my twenties thoroughly immersed in the Subud lifestyle with its practices, ideology, and language. But looking back I can see that even as a child there were aspects of Subud that I had reservations about. I remember meeting Ibu when I was about twelve and she commented to my mother that I thought too much. Unfortunately, it was the worst statement she could have made to a pre-teen already questioning life, people's expectations of me, and the organization that so occupied my parents' life. Her comment only aroused my suspicions that there was plenty to think about concerning this world that my parents fervently embraced. Rather than resolving themselves as I grew older and participated in Subud life, the doubts I had about Subud persisted until I felt it was hypocritical of me to continue to associate myself with a group whose structure and belief system I could no longer support or believe in.

Ironically, it was when I became a helper and found myself explaining to probationers the foundations of Subud, how it was run, its terminologies, and why there was such a pervasive influence of Islam and the Javanese culture on its ideology, that I realized that I could no longer countenance the contradictions that I found inherent in Subud. At this point, I want to emphasize that I never doubted and still do not doubt the power of the latihan itself. The reason that I stopped doing the latihan was that it was too painful to keep receiving how I should be or how I should live a life that would be in accord with my inner nature when I was unable to effect change or act on it, partly because of my life circumstances at the time. The problem I had with Subud, then and now, was with the structure of the organization and what I saw as the contradictions between the ideology and the practice of Subud.

□As I mentioned earlier, some of the concerns I have with Subud have been debated by others, especially in the context of finding ways to attract or keep members. However, as they obviously have not been resolved, maybe they bear repeated discussion. One of these is the insistence on portraying Subud as nondenominational when, in fact, it is strongly rooted in the Islamic and Javanese traditions. (The site "Demystifying Subud"\* is an excellent source for tracing the Islamic/Javanese influence on Subud.) The reason for this is obvious: when asked to explain the latihan Bapak used terms, analogies, and a mythic tradition with which he was familiar. The problem was that the emphasis was then drawn away from the idea that through the latihan we receive what we need as individuals. Perhaps out of a respect for Bapak, many members chose to adopt his religion and to incorporate some of his cultural traditions as part of their own lives. My parents

were among those who embraced Islam, took on Muslim names, and followed many of the practices associated with Islam, and certainly, as I was growing up, there was very much the feeling that Subud and Islam were interfused.

There's a technique that certain salespeople use called "bait and switch" where an advertised product, once the customer has signed a contract or agreed to the purchase of it, is exchanged for another. Those who assure probationers that Subud has no connection to religion are unintentionally doing the same thing. One is sold the idea of Subud being nondenominational, but a cursory look at its foundations and ideology confirms that it is strongly influenced by the religion that Bapak practiced and could very easily be defined as an offshoot of Islam. To add to this, when I was a member, there was a certain pressure or expectation that we would participate in Islamic or Javanese rituals because Bapak and Ibu did them and that not to do so was to be less than spiritual. For my part, I have never been particularly drawn to any religion except as a means of understanding people and their cultures and I saw no correlation between practicing the latihan and dabbling in another's religion. Furthermore, as a member, I often found myself in the position of being expected to justify or defend why I rejected most of Bapak's explanations concerning the latihan, spiritual life, or even secular life. In most cases, his interpretations, because they were culturally based, conflicted with either my world-view or what I felt had meaning to me. For me, the strength of Subud resides very simply in the latihan and the ability for the individual to receive for herself guidance and enlightenment. One of the problems with relying or leaning so much on Bapak's explanations is that it prevents members from trusting their own receiving or listening to their inner voice.

□ It was after I became a helper that I finally quit Subud. Part of this was that in accepting the position of helper, I found that I was now a participant in a major aspect of the organization that had always disturbed me. Though Subud purports to be an organisation where everyone is equal with no distinctions between members, the reality is, to paraphrase Orwell, that while all members may be equal, some are more equal than others. As I see it, the hierarchical system that privileges helpers over members, and international helpers over local and regional helpers, altogether negates any claims to equality. Whatever the rhetoric, the position of "helper" carries the suggestion that helpers' latihans are better, or their receiving is better, or their ability to communicate with others is better than the other members'. This system is reinforced by having "helpers only" latihans and meetings and, of course, the talks that were specifically aimed at helpers. From my own observations over the years, setting up this system of helpership creates, quite frankly, both an air of competitiveness, as members are tested against each other for the positions, and self-complacency, if they are accepted into that rank—both antithetical to the tenets of Subud.

□ From a probationer's perspective, the notion that there is no hierarchy in Subud is contradicted by the very fact that there needs to be a helper to explain Subud to them and there needs to be a helper to open them. Perhaps what's worse is that there are many who have been tested in as helpers that one would actively avoid testing with or bringing one's problems to for whatever reason. For my part, I had many friends who were simply members whose receiving I would trust to be stronger and more objective than those who had been "appointed" to "help".

I might argue here that another problem, from at least this woman's point of view, with structuring Subud along religious lines is that Subud has absorbed the patriarchal attitudes of the religion it is affiliated with. I realize that women and men hold equal positions in Subud and that Ibu and now Rahayu as women are highly respected by members. Likewise, I am also aware that both in the Islamic and the Javanese traditions the genders are in theory considered equal. However, the fact is that Bapak's talks are replete with interpretations and explanations of how to live within Subud that are based on a culturally and religiously biased male perspective. Some of this is evidenced in the dress code for women, which I would like to think

has changed over the years, and, more importantly, on the rule that a woman cannot be opened without the permission of her husband. Of course, I can see numerous justifications for the latter. Would he be willing to look after the children while she took off to her group on Monday and Thursday nights? How would he feel about giving financial support to a group he was not a part of? How would he feel about any changes in her that might occur from doing the latihan? All valid points. But conversely there are no rules that dictate that husbands should ask their wives' permission. In doing the latihan, I was never aware of gender differences. It was only in Bapak's talks and their reiterations by members that male/female distinctions arose.

□ While I am no longer a member of Subud nor have any intention of returning to the group, as I mentioned earlier, I think that there is great worth in the latihan. Of late, I have found myself moved to do the latihan on occasion and while I don't plan it, I follow along with it and have found it both a comfort and a means of insight. Four of my five children were opened and certainly, in spite of my reservations about the organization, I am happy that they have the latihan to help guide them through life. However, they came to Subud clearly able to differentiate between the latihan itself and the organization with its religious and cultural trappings. Many of Bapak's explanations, while interesting anthropologically, have little or no relevance to most people's lives, at least in the West. Therefore, when talking to people about Subud it would seem to me that the religious/cultural associations should be de-emphasized and explained simply in terms of their historical connections to Subud, and the focus, instead, should be on the latihan and encouraging members to trust in it and their own receiving.

\*See website: <http://www.sitekreator.com/demystifysubud/index.html> □