

The End of the Road

by Marius Kahan

No clairvoyance or crystal ball required - Subud is doomed. Unless, that is, the powers that be fundamentally alter the way it is presented to the world - and that's unlikely to happen. That's not to say that in the future there won't be little pockets of people doing the latihan here and there under the banner of Subud, but as the herald of a new spiritual age - no chance, I'm afraid.

As a whole, Subud brings to mind the behaviour of a small child - rather innocent and naïve, entirely self-centred, and incapable of conceiving of either the world outside itself or the way other people think. Of course, the latihan is wonderful, and I'm sure that everything's quite Eden-like for the 'true believers' in Subud, even if that's not enough for those who wish the association would grow and evolve as, thanks to the latihan, they have.

In my view there are three fatal flaws that would haunt Subud for years to come even if they were rectified forthwith, so in order to rehabilitate the association's public image a complete reboot and gargantuan public relations effort would be required as well.

The first of these flaws is that Subud claims not to be a religion, yet exhibits all the symptoms of being nothing else. This has already been extensively tackled by Subud Vision contributors and there is nothing to add, especially since 'official' Subud doesn't seem to be listening and 'trubies' universally write these contributors off with all the subtlety of a fundamentalist who presumes that theirs is the only way and that any other belief leads to perdition - which is a tragic betrayal of the gift of the latihan.

If Subud is to grow, it needs to learn to look at itself from the perspective of someone who's never experienced the latihan and who is armed with all the tools of present day scepticism - because objective scrutiny of Subud reveals a deep-rooted self-contradiction that makes it look like a muddle-headed shell of a spiritual movement. A religion, in other words.

The second flaw follows on from the first and is the way in which Subud betrays itself by deviating from some of its core principles. I think it's legitimate to claim not to be a religion while adhering to some basic tenets, especially the one to which Bapak strongly and repeatedly alluded: *That Subud had no leader and that as such, nobody would succeed him*. It's worth noting here that anyone who's been exposed to even a handful of Bapak's talks will likely have heard him refer to dreams as being of little consequence and therefore best not taken too seriously.

So, given that the founder of Subud made it clear that (a) there was no leader of Subud now, nor should there be in the future and (b) that in his view dreams had no great relevance... what's the deal with Ibu Rahayu? It's a matter of record and is even cited on Wikipedia - in an article to which Subud members have contributed - that she claims to have had a dream in which she met Bapak, and he designated

her his successor. How can a non-leader even have a successor?

I'm probably about to offend a lot of people here, so if you're 'trubie', please look away now. To accept her contention that she was anointed by Bapak in a dream demands absolute credulity and looks to me very much like an obvious and clumsy power grab. She specifically mentions succeeding Bapak in a talk given to the National Gathering at Semarang on 5th March 2010, and I find the tone notably egotistical compared to Bapak's talks, which tended to err on the side of impersonal. For example:

"As Bapak often said, he hoped you would become witnesses [. . .] And a time indeed came when - well, not by my will - I became a witness. Whether this was real or not, I leave that to God.

[. . .] Well, do not say, 'Oh yes, well of course she could be a witness. After all, Ibu Rahayu is Bapak's daughter. What Bapak had, probably sprinkled on her.' Do you know what I mean by 'sprinkled'? Well, maybe it did sprinkle on me. All the same, even if it did, had I not had the strength or capacity, I could not have received it."

I don't recall ever hearing such a self-aggrandising statement from Bapak. Later, she goes on to say:

". . . I received this experience when Ibu Siti Sumari was about to die. It was as if it had been arranged: Ibu would die the following day, but on the eve of her passing, God summoned me. 'What? How come Ibu Rahayu was summoned like Prophet Muhammad?' Well, it was... this was real. And for me... this was a gift from God, so I could not refuse it.

Bapak was still alive then. But, indeed, I am not someone who says much, and neither could I talk about it; I was not like now in that I can talk to you, no. At the time I did get a chance to tell Bapak that I had received this and this. Bapak said, 'Oh, yes.' That was all. 'Oh, yes.' Just that."

Another way to read Bapak's response is that perhaps he recognised emergent delusions of grandeur in Ibu Rahayu and thought it best not to encourage her. If he had perceived it as a true experience, might he not have been a bit less noncommittal, especially with his own daughter and 'future leader' of Subud? She then continues:

"And it seems that my experience touched people without me saying anything. Consequently, those who did not agree, who questioned why I was giving talks... [Ibu turns to Soetriman who is in the audience.] I am going to tell the truth about what happened, okay? Soetriman was the National Chair then. [He said], 'No one except Bapak can give talks! No one else.'

Look, the man is alive and here today... [Ibu laughs]; you can ask him in person. Soetriman was not the only one; many were against me."

In other words - "you might have tried to stop my accession to the throne, but look at me now! I won and you lost." In the context of an apparent desire for power and glory (as suggested by the claim that Bapak designated her his successor in a dream) I find this public display of triumphalism absolutely abhorrent. However, much like a politician, she proceeds to justify herself by finding a convoluted way to twist one of Bapak's comments towards a meaning that suits her purpose:

"Finally, they made me... they gave me a role as 'spiritual advisor'. Congress approved it. So, I did not become advisor just because I wanted it, no. The International Congress decided it.

And Bapak once said, 'The truth is my replacement will be the Subud Congress.' So it is not an individual; it is the Subud Congress. If congress proposes and all members, represented through the congress, approve, that is the right way. So, do not think of me as a rogue advisor, okay? If that were so, everyone in Subud would feel they could act in a rogue manner. So, I need to make this clear, so that you know that when something is God's will, there will be a way for it to happen. Had I wanted this, it probably would never have happened. This is the story, so that you know."

Personally, I find her statements in this talk outrageous and I'm deeply disappointed by the way in which Ibu Rahayu's pronouncements are now being quoted with the same reverence as Bapak's (a Subud habit that itself has always bothered me with the way it substitutes vicarious wisdom for direct experience) especially when statements like the following, from the same talk, undermine another of the founding principles laid down by her father:

". . . reading Bapak's talks is so necessary. Well, you probably think reading them is a burden, because indeed to read Bapak's talks takes a long time. That is because we do not learn by studying those talks, no. We feel them by following the talk using the understanding that exists in us. That understanding comes, of course, as a result of the spiritual training of Subud. So, there is a connection: neither reading talks but not doing latihan, nor doing latihan continually and never reading or listening to Bapak's talks, will suffice."

That's new... what I gleaned from Bapak's comments was that our spiritual development would result from direct contact with the Great Life Force in the form of the latihan, that this obviated the need to study, and that his explanations were an optional extra offered without guarantee.

Maybe I'm being unfair. Perhaps Bapak did have second thoughts from beyond the grave and popped in to let Ibu know that she was now Subud's figurehead. I suppose that it's possible that this Soetriman and the "many others" who were against her needed to be put in their place - publicly. I am distant from Indonesia, I wasn't there, and I don't know Ibu Rahayu personally. Nevertheless, when viewed in the cool light of objectivity, I find these claims and comments impossible to accept.

Ibu Rahayu's assertions undermine what Bapak himself said and by giving her its blessing, the WSA is failing to support Subud's founding principles - and to compound the problem by presenting this explanation of her status as fact on a public and trusted resource such as Wikipedia is potentially very damaging.

But the third flaw represents an even bigger problem and it absolutely *must* be tackled if Subud is ever to grow. It's the elephant in the room, something that sits at the very heart of Subud's collective cognitive dissonance - namely Subud's blatant predisposition to associate itself with Islam.

It seems highly likely to me that if Bapak had been, say, a Hindu, the majority of Ruslans and Harlinahs in Subud would be Vikrams and Parmjits - and even if I'm wrong about that, I think that it would be far from unreasonable for the average observer to assume that Subud's Islamic leanings persist because Bapak was a Muslim. Yet the conventional Muslim world is totally down on Subud and getting more so, with some obsessive Imam in Trinidad even issuing a fatwa against Subud:

(http://www.darululoomtt.org/oldsite/fatwa_444.shtml)

So Islam is hardly Subud's friend - and associating Subud so strongly with Islam is a bit like sticking a "kick me" slogan on our back. But as far as Subud's ambitions to be a global spiritual movement go, it's caught between a rock and a hard place.

Bapak is on Islam's radar as a heretic and, even if it's an insignificant matter at the moment, it's a worrying trend that is entirely likely to grow. But there's also Christianity. Plenty of Christians are posting negative stuff about Subud on the internet while, almost without exception (there have been just two) every Christian with whom I have ever had the discussion has told me that Subud is a sure-fire road to Hell. So we're hardly going to see born-again's beating a path to our door, but even if they did, they'd soon be put off by the Islamic connection; the vast majority of Christians I have met believe that Islam is the religion of Satan and that we're headed for a huge religious showdown in the Middle East.

What about those who are attracted to Subud by the new-agey, Pantheistic viewpoints that are sometimes expressed? Once exposed to religious-sounding sentiments such as the imperative to "surrender to the will of Almighty God" they are quite likely to be completely turned off. I was raised an atheist, so please believe me when I tell you that this sort of language will have them running for the hills.

However, I believe that this Islamic flavour is, and will continue to be, what causes the greatest damage to Subud's ambitions to grow, thanks to the Islamophobic undercurrents prevalent in western media these days. This trend means that it's probably wise to think twice before posting a comment like "Ramadan Mubarak" on social media pages or Subud websites - and one can hardly be surprised if this sort of thing reinforces the notion that Subud is an offshoot of some Mohammedan cult. Like any Subud member, I know that to fast during Ramadan would in no way mark me out as a Muslim. But that's irrelevant - the concern here is public perception and while posting a greeting such as the one above is well-intentioned, I believe that it is ill-advised.

When I joined Subud in the mid-seventies the global picture was almost unrecognisably different from the situation today - America was a popular, world-leading super-power (despite Vietnam) and Islam was widely perceived as a moderate and civilised religion (even if that impression ignored the stirrings of fundamentalism which would come to the fore in Iran in 1979). I have to confess that Islam's apparent aura of exotic mystery added to the appeal of Subud when I stumbled across it in 1976, but equally I'm pretty sure that a very different perception of Islam - and religion in general - would drive me away if I discovered Subud for the first time today.

Perhaps the worst aspect of all is the way members routinely describe the founder of Subud. I'm sure few would disagree that the first thing an 'outsider' will invariably hear or read of Bapak is that he was "a Javanese *Muslim*." This has to stop, or Subud really IS dead in the water.

But is the WSA ready to admit this to itself?

If Subud is to grow, it must distance itself from Islam. Islam has no time for Subud, Christianity has no time for Subud or Islam, new-agers generally have no time for Christianity, Islam or movements that speak in terms of "surrender to Almighty God" and sceptics despise all of the above. Unless Subud becomes truly neutral in word and deed, we are going to run out of options for growth other than by out-breeding the rest of the world - which could take months.

Does the WSA want Subud to grow and become the much-vaunted global movement that brings the latihan to a world that, from where I stand, desperately needs it? Because it is their intransigence that is costing Subud its life and depriving the world of the gifts the latihan has to offer.

I would venture to suggest that, in the modern world, the overarching spectre of Islam is THE deal-breaker for almost any Westerner potentially interested in Subud.

Without root and branch reform, how can Subud possibly hope to overcome that?