

Fifty Years of Doubts and Reservations

by Michael Rogge

Early History

It was in December 1954 that I first heard of Subud from Husein Rofé, who was then living in Hong Kong. At the time I was attempting to set up a group to study the phenomenon of spiritual rebirth. I was attracted to the Subud latihan for two reasons. I had already had experiences of what might be termed being filled by light or the grace of God; Rofé claimed that the exercises would develop these experiences. And at the same time it was exciting to witness the birth of a new movement dedicated to this opening of oneself to deeper spiritual levels.

Rofé was intelligent enough to sense the framework of ideas of the person he was talking to and adapt his explanations accordingly. And so he did with me. Bapak's talks and his outlook on life were kept in the shadows. Yet from his translation of *Susila Budhi Dharma*, published by Ye Olde Printerie in Hong Kong in early 1955, I gathered the gist of it. Looking back I detect that at the time I read far more into the so-called explanations than what was really meant, as I lacked knowledge of the background from which they sprang. In later years Rofé and Bennett provided a presentation adapted to Western spiritual philosophy. That is why their books are still drawing applicants.

That picture changed as more and more of Bapak's talks were translated into English and presented as authoritative statements on the nature of Subud, at a time when Rofé and Bennett were being manoeuvred into the background. When I visited Bapak in Jakarta in May 1955 there were already forebodings that expectations and reality did not always match. Indeed there were many wondrous stories, but would the results of the exercises really be so convincing?

When I returned to Europe in 1955 I found out soon enough that my enthusiasm for Subud was not shared by most Western people. The picture changed in the following years. I observed what a deep influence the exercises had on people and devoted myself to the spread of Subud. But soon enough the expansion tended to foster sectarian traits. Gradually there emerged what is nowadays termed 'Bapakism', characterized by an absolute faith in the leader, Bapak, in spite of this being denied vehemently. With most members blindly accepting the premise that the latihan is a gift of God, no one dared to give his own interpretation of the nature of the latihan. Bapak claimed to know the Will of God. All his talks became prescribed reading in spite of errors which escaped the attention of his devotees as a result of their total ignorance of Javanese and Islamic concepts and terminology. What irked me also was the complete lack of interest in investigating the background of Subud. Bapak's poem, *Susila Budhi Dharma*, was held in high regard, although few read and understood it. It is striking that the concept of unconditional love is absent from this work. Hardly ever is it quoted in Subud literature. In consequence of all this I helped Rofé publish his second book, *Reflections on Subud*, which warned people not to fall into the trap of taking everything in Subud at face value.

A development took place in Bapak's talks. His statements, somewhat reticent in *Subud and the Active Life* (1959), became bolder and more authoritative. He introduced more and more Muslim concepts, and even practices like circumcision and taking Arabic names.

There was little or no interest in Subud circles in exploring Subud's background in Javanese mysticism. Rumours had already reached the West that Subud was not

such a unique phenomenon among Javanese spiritual movements. In the late sixties some members did some research: French member Michel André, Dutchman Philip Renard, and Richard Engels. They talked with critical witnesses who gave a different version of the traditional story of Subud's beginnings. But it was not taken up as members preferred the myth of uniqueness and being the chosen ones.

Many of the gradual changes and subsequent accretions went too far for a number of members and they dropped out. In fact most people left, except for a few.

Other factors did further harm to the spread of the movement: the emphasis on Subud enterprises, which all too often failed, casting doubt on the value of testing, even Bapak's testing; and helpers acting in an authoritarian and erratic way. Moreover there was such a strict observance of the rule about not making propaganda that even encyclopedias were not provided with necessary information about Subud. In that vacuum editors had to revert to garbled definitions drawn up by outsiders.

Failed Attempts at Change

I had hoped that after Bapak's demise in 1987 the forces of change might start to take over and a re-examination would be undertaken of all that Subud stood for. Together with a few other members I introduced a plan for moving in that direction at the World Congress in Sydney in 1989, but as a result of testing it was torpedoed and never presented to the assembly. (The manifesto may be found here: <http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/Xroads.html>) From the very beginning, disgruntled members had started their own splinter groups but most of them did not survive.

Present Weakened Status

As things stand now, groups are diminishing, funds dwindling, partly as a result of the costly conference-culture that is emerging. There is a serious lack of commitment for taking on committee functions or helper's duties.

Subud will no doubt survive, albeit much smaller, possibly more and more sectarian, or on the other hand more liberal. Who knows?

Recommendations

In short I can only see hope under the following conditions:

- A. If an attempt is made to present Subud in understandable terms in the framework of modern spiritual philosophy, psychology, even brain research. No mystical dogmatism, speculation about lower forces etc., or superstitious beliefs.
- B. If, in referring to or recommending Bapak's talks, more emphasis is placed on passages containing general human insight instead of Javanese/Muslim culture-colored explanations.
- C. If name changes are not encouraged anymore, and there are no more dogmatic statements such as the latihan being a unique gift of God to mankind.
- D. If discriminatory pronouncements about homosexuality for instance are dropped. The same applies to judgments about religions other than Islam and other spiritual disciplines.
- E. If we make more use of our common sense, rather than steering by divination through testing.
- F. If there are no more Subud enterprises, at any rate not sponsored by the organisation, with the exception of charitable efforts—the only real enterprise being the art of living. See my article: <http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/precepts.html>

Gloomy outlook

After fifty years my hopes do not run high. Most members have no interest in Subud's past, nor are they inclined to examine its precepts and explanations.

The phenomenon of the latihan is not recognized for what I believe it is: a mechanism for mind-cleansing and redemption, a healing faculty present in man and seen in all of nature, leading to transcendence and the receiving of divine grace.

Basically the movement has solidified. It will steer its own course now and may move in any direction. When the time comes for Ibu Rahayu to step into the background, one wonders who will take over her position of spiritual authority. One may hope that it is someone who will feel the tide of change and direct it in a more universal course.

Finally the question remains: Why did I stay in Subud in spite of all these misgivings? Principally because of the liberating and transcending power of the latihan and also the friendships I made: the wonderful people I met who are near to my heart, although most of them have left Subud by now.

[For further reading, see Michael's article 'On the Psychology of Spiritual Movements' which can be found at <http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/psymove.html>]