

Subud and Sumarah

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The two movements, Subud and Sumarah, have often been described as branches of the same spiritual tree. It has been said that the founders of the two movements were once united in one single group, which was later split into two slightly different movements.

In his doctor's thesis from 1980, the historian Paul D. Stange states:

“Although the founders [of Sumarah] made no effort to distinguish the core of their practice from Subud's, there is reason to suspect contrasts in personal style and emphasis from the beginning. Despite differences, the two movements have remained close cousins within the larger kebatinan family. They share similar stress on practice rather than teachings; on total surrender to God; and of the reality of experiences which are transmitted and witnessed.”

This is an objective opinion expressed in a scholarly paper discussing the origins of Sumarah. It seems evident that Subud and Sumarah are connected, but how? What is the common ground, and what is not?

Background and history

Muhammad Subuh experienced his first revelation in 1925, followed by three years of receiving the *latihan kejiwaan* almost nightly. In 1932 he had another strong spiritual experience that he later referred to as his ascension, and shortly after this he started transmitting the *latihan* to others. In 1934, when Bapak was still living in Semarang, a small group formed in Yogyakarta around his first disciple, Wignosuparino, who, in spite of his young age, had already won a certain reputation as a healer. This group included Pravirodisastra, Sumantri and Sudarto Martohudoyo (known to old-time Subud members for his weird stories in the periodical *Pewarta Kejiwaan Subud*), Sukinohartono, who later became the founder of Sumarah, and his near associate Suhardo. At this time Subud practice had not crystallised and there was no clear organisation. We know from Sudarto's writings that there were close connections. It seems that Pak Subuh and Sukino knew each other well, both being disciples of *kiai* Seh Abdurachman, the Sufi teacher who once told the young seeker Muhammad Subuh that he could not teach him anything, that he would receive his teaching directly from God. And when Bapak in 1935 decided to rent a house in Yogyakarta, he did not write to Wignosuparino, but to Sukino, whom he asked to do this for him.

In a letter to Hussein Rofé in 1953, Pak Subuh confirms that Sukinohartono was opened by Pravirodisastra in 1934, and that the practice of Sumarah (surrender) is much the same as that of Subud. In regard to the system or teaching of Sumarah, Bapak states: “His [Sukino's] commentaries on the Seven Heavens and such matters could have been obtained either from the stories of the Nine Sages, or from a book I wrote myself in 1934, called *Jatimakna* or 'True Meanings'.”

There are many parallels in the early lives of Sukino and Pak Subuh. Both were born into Javanese village culture and the Islamic tradition. Both received some secondary education and worked for Dutch companies and in the local administration. Both raised large families in the early twenties, and both contacted several Sufi teachers in search of mystical experience. And we know from Bapak's autobiography and the records of Sumarah that they would get the same answer: the *kiai* had nothing to teach them. The teaching would come from within, directly from God. This answer does not imply that the person spoken to, the disciple, is regarded as having special

powers or being spiritually superior in any way. This message *is* the teaching, the very core of mysticism, and it has been passed on to members of Subud and of Sumarah.

Apparently, Sukino regarded his opening in what was later to become Subud and his practice of the *latihan* as a preparation. His real spiritual development started with his revelation in 1935, which led him to found Sumarah and share his experience with others.

Practice and organisation

Subud: Bapak has given general explanations about the *latihan* in a lot of talks, but there is no instruction of any kind during the *latihan*, and no interaction between the members during *latihan* sessions, each participant receiving for him/herself. The *latihan* lasts for half an hour. There is no prohibition against talking about one's receiving afterwards, but, as a rule, most people do not.

Sumarah has rather long meetings, usually three hours. The members of the group (from five to a hundred people) discuss problems in meditation and daily life, and a *pamong* or "guide" decides when to start and stop the meditations. There are usually two meditations during a session.

Sumarah depends on verbal communication during sessions while Subud does not. This fact alone goes far to explain why Subud has spread to half of the world's countries, while Sumarah mainly has remained an Indonesian movement, notwithstanding the fact that in more recent years, Sumarah groups have been formed in many Western countries.

Subud has grown into a representative democracy, with the World Congress as the highest authority, and the *latihan kejiwaan* is practised in the same way all over the globe. Sumarah groups are more differentiated, shaped by the local *pamong's* personality. Sumarah training uses self-observation, self-analysis, and self-correction. In this, Sumarah bears more resemblance to, for instance, the Gurdjieff work than to Subud.

Paul D. Stange characterises Subud and Sumarah as close cousins. This is probably correct if we look solely at the cultural background and early practice. In later years, however, the differences in organisation and practice by far overshadow the similarities. Sumarah members are supposed to receive through their *pamong* or group leader, who constantly coaches them step by step during the meetings and meditations. Each group is shaped in the image of its leader, in accordance with Javanese tradition. In this way renewal is sure to take place, but together with this, there is the danger of major deviations from the original path.

In Subud, the chances of such deviations are much less. Over a period of thirty years Muhammad Subuh travelled the world, consolidating groups and giving approximately 1500 explanatory talks about Subud and the *latihan*, most of which have been recorded and published. He alone was the spiritual guide, and he would have no successor, or rather, all members should become like him: "Hopefully, you will all become like Bapak. Not copies of Bapak, but able to receive for yourselves." He was instrumental in building up a world-wide organisation that after his death in 1987 has become even more consolidated. The *latihan* is the same all over the world, notwithstanding differences of language, culture, or religion. A Russian can walk straight into a group *latihan* in Angola, Colombia, or Norway, without understanding a word of the language, and do his *latihan* together with the others, feeling perfectly at home.

Though the initial impulse of surrender to God is still prevalent in both movements, it is evident that Subud and Sumarah are constantly growing further apart. Sumarah is collectivistic, the members being led in the same direction by the *pamong* or group leader, and at the same time diversified, each *pamong* pursuing a different style. In Subud, there is no such guide to coach the members through the *latihan*. Each participant receives directly for him/herself. At the same time, there is a strong sense of unity, arising from the shared experience of the *latihan* and reinforced by the democratic organisational structure of Subud. International officers are elected for a period of four years, and international meetings, including the world congresses, are open to all members, besides having a delegate system.

Works of reference:

Paul Denison Stange: "The Sumarah Movement in Javanese Mysticism", a doctoral thesis in history at the University of Wisconsin, 1980.

The anthropologist David Gordon Howe's doctoral thesis, "Sumarah: A Study in the Art of Living", University of North Carolina, 1980.

Sumarah

A dissertation (D.G.Howe) and a thesis (Paul Stange) have been devoted to this brotherhood. Its founder, Sukinohartono, was opened by Subud helper Wignosupartono. The latter was known for his healing powers and was also the first person to be opened by Pak Subuh, founder of Subud. Sukinohartono himself had a revelation in 1932 and underwent a series of experiences from 1935 until 1937. After an intense cleansing Sukino was given to understand that he would receive guidance through *hakikat* and the angel Gabriel. He was taken in sequence through nine spiritual stages. Stange: "The dimensions he passed through parallel the realms discussed in classical mystical literature and described in *wayang* and Sufism."

Subud

In colonial times the Dutch Government kept a sharp eye on these movements including the *tarekat* Sufi brotherhoods who often stirred up uprisings fired by messianic and millenarian expectations. The Indonesian Government followed this policy because it was afraid of communist infiltration into these groups. To keep an eye on them it required the mystical movements (*aliran kepercayaan*) to be registered.

- In 1947 Subud was registered in Yogyakarta as being founded in Semarang in 1932.
- The Bureau for Supervision of Religious Movements (Pakem) under the Ministry of Religious affairs had 360 movements registered in 1964. In 1982 there were ninety-three groups with in total 123,570 members in Central Java alone.
- Pangestu claims to have 50,000 members; Sapta Darma, 10,000.

Some *aliran kebatinan* (another name for spiritual movements) who lean towards Islam dislike being equated with the more obscure Javanese sects who are not averse towards *guna-guna*, Javanese black magic practices. These groups are formed around a teacher who claims to have received enlightenment (*wahyu*). □ Hundreds of such groups are known to exist. Their guru usually claim originality for their revelation or intuitive insight while rejecting knowledge from books or the influence of tradition. When the guru dies, the group often dissolves.

