

Tribute to Husein Rofé

by Michael Rogge

Now that his demise has been confirmed it may be time to pause and consider the important role Husein Rofé has played in all our lives. He and John Bennett were instrumental in bringing Subud out of Indonesia to the West and so to us.

Husein's coming into contact with Subud was the result of a chain of remarkable coincidences.

It all started with his friendship with Arnout Gischler, a young Dutchman with whom he went cycling in Holland after the war. Later Husein became fascinated by languages. Endowed with a brilliant mind, he studied astrology, and would make a game out of guessing someone's birthday from his character, the occult and so much else. Besides all that, he was a regular Royal Albert Hall visitor (he could whistle for me the themes of all the Beethoven symphonies).

Husein became a Muslim convert, although I never saw him go through the prayers. To the dismay of his Jewish father and Belgian mother he changed his name to Husein and broke with his family. (Curiously there was a strange pre-war connection between the Rofés and a favourite uncle of mine, the psychiatrist Dr. H.C. Rogge, who lived in the Rofé Apartments in Cairo!) Husein went to the Middle East where he made a living as a teacher and by selling antique manuscripts, to the British Museum among other institutions. But, as he describes in his *Path of Subud*, he was eventually kicked out on suspicion of being a British spy. After returning to England he visited Gischler's mother and confided to her that his life felt meaningless now. She suggested he visit her son Arnout in Indonesia. He was working for a Dutch shipping company there and might be able to put him in touch with Javanese mystical movements. A clairvoyant in Paris whom he knew well and had often consulted had already predicted he would meet his master soon. In June 1950 he arrived in Jakarta and stayed with his friend Arnout.

Some ten years ago I visited the Gischlers in Eefde, the Netherlands, accompanied by Rofé. Gischler told me about the circumstances of Rofé's encounter with Javanese mysticism after he arrived in Indonesia. In his autobiography *De Sirenen* (Dutch, to be published soon), he relates how he had by chance become acquainted with some high-ranking Indonesian officers, and introduced his friend to them. Only these officers could have given Rofé the necessary permission to enter Yogyakarta – at that time in the throes of rebellion against Dutch occupation – as no foreigners were being allowed to enter. Being the only Englishman in the sultanate, he discovered Bapak and his small group of followers after a few months. Muhammad Subuh was known there as a healer and for his exercise, the latihan. Curiously Bapak had already predicted the arrival of a man who could speak many languages: Rofé was one of the world's foremost linguists, with a command of over thirty languages. He once took part in a contest to determine who spoke the most languages in the world!

At the time when Rofé came to Yogyakarta, there was little zest for spreading the latihan beyond the boundaries of the city. On Java it was little known. Sumarah, a splinter movement, had far more members. It was Rofé, hardly a year in Subud, who took it upon himself to start a group in Jakarta. Many foreigners took part. Among them was the Dutch painter Auke Sonnega whose description of his encounter with Husein is to be found on my website <<http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/sonnega.html>>.

Later he founded groups in Sumatra (Asikin was opened in Palembang). Then Rofé took the big step of going to Japan, hoping to make Subud known to the world at a would-be congress of world religions. When he was not allowed to re-enter Indonesia, he became stranded in Hong Kong. There I met him in December 1954, in a third rate hotel room, as a result of a letter to the editor I had written in which I suggested forming a group of people dedicated to the search for the spiritual. I was opened soon after and became convinced of the value of the latihan. While he was there, Husein translated and published for the first time *Susila Budhi Dharma*, in two parts, from instalments Bapak sent to him.

In May 1955 I had to depart from Hong Kong on home leave and was Bapak's guest for a month in Jakarta. There were expectations at the time that Subud would spread abroad, but nobody knew how. Bapak wanted me to return after my leave either to Jakarta or Singapore to function as a stepping stone. When my bank was considering stationing me in Canada it was suggested that I could invite Prio Hartono there. I noticed when in Europe that no one seemed interested in this strange movement from Java with its odd explanations. I had also written to Bennett about Subud in 1955, but he showed no interest. I was not a helper and could not open people in any case.

So the burden was again on Husein's shoulders to take Subud from Hong Kong to the West. He managed to impress a group of people on Cyprus, such as Ronimund von Bissing and Roland Starr, so much so that he was invited to come and stay there. And soon enough he was to meet John Bennett in London in 1957. It did not take long for Bennett to become convinced of the effects of the latihan. From then on Bennett took responsibility for the spread of Subud around the globe, to the annoyance of Husein, who was skilfully manoeuvred into the background. Disenchanted, he left England for Beirut. At Ibu's urging he married and had a daughter, seeking a divorce soon after.

One might well call him a globetrotter, always traveling around the world with his companion Riza. In the seventies he started his translation agency Polyglot in Hong Kong, later handing it over to his friend Riza who made it into a thriving enterprise, adding multi-lingual interpreting services for conventions.

I have often wondered what would have happened if Rofé had not been there. Would Subud have remained another circle around a guru in a back alley of inaccessible Yogyakarta, like so many others all over Java? There are mystical movements like Sumarah, Sapta Darma and Pangestu, which have far more members in Indonesia, but are unknown in the West.

Bapak and Ibu had told Husein that he had a very high soul. Indeed he had powers, for instance, of healing, but also of intellect, that helped him attract people to Subud instantly. Wherever he went he made converts.

His mission ended in the sixties. He had become disgruntled with the way he had been treated in Subud and wrote about his doubts in his second book, *Reflections on Subud*, which I published in Japan in 1959. Bapak took a dim view of it and did not refer to Rofé in his historical reminiscences, but in later years gave him the credit due. A third book is to appear one of these days through the intermediary of Sharif Horthy.

I was one of the very few people Husein kept up correspondence with during his last years. His last letter to me, from Singapore, dates from December 18th, 2007. In it he complains of having to vomit often. Always living on a strict diet, Husein was eighty-

five years old when he died. I have not been informed of the circumstances as yet, or the precise date.

My thoughts are with this great character on yet another remarkable journey.

Michael Rogge

A Partial Bio of Husein Rofé:

- ▪ Born Peter Rofé on May 3, 1922 in Manchester, England
- ▪ Died February ?, 2008 in Singapore
- ▪ Studied at the University of London and became a fellow of the Royal Asiatic Society.
- ▪ Served in the Royal Air Force during WWII, probably in 'intelligence'.
- ▪ Taught at the London School of Languages, 1945-46.
- ▪ Was an interpreter for the British Consulate in Morocco, 1947-49.

Sources:

'Subud its origin and aim' (<http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/subud1.html>)

Michael has published his memoirs with photos and video clips, including how he met Rofé, in Dutch on the Internet.

(<http://www.xs4all.nl/~wichm/HongKong5.html>)http://www.whatissubud.net/whatissubud/experience_audio.html

Also see <http://nl.youtube.com/watch?v=gKAjACsXHTk> for a video clip of Husein visiting with two members (first seen Joe O'Neill; later on Giulio, now known as Ricardo, Calcaterra) and me, and the Indonesian consul in Hong Kong who was interested in Subud and who later on facilitated my getting a visa for Indonesia.

<http://nl.youtube.com/watch?v=gKAjACsXHTk>

Rofé's *Reflections on Subud* can be downloaded from

<http://www.subud.net/booksonline.shtml>

Also see the following for an audio clip of Rofé talking about early encounters with Bapak.

http://www.whatissubud.net/whatissubud/experience_audio.html