

# How Not to Be a Cult

by Rosalind Priestley

My husband's parents used to tell an amusing story that dated back to their youth. There was a middle-aged spinster in the community who was known for her home-made and very potent elderberry wine. She would serve it to her guests in large tumblers, assuring them that it was quite safe to drink since she hadn't added any alcohol. She was quite unaware of how the process of fermentation works and, being a tee-totaler herself, would have been appalled to realize that she was sending her guests home inebriated, sometimes practically legless. No one had the heart to disillusion her.

In one respect, Subud members collectively bear a certain resemblance to that woman. We reject the concern that we could be a cult. There was no 'cult' in the recipe. We simply joined an organization to practise a spiritual exercise, and all the rest grew out of the natural respect we feel for Bapak and for the latihan. Bapak specifically said that we have no guru and no teaching. So how could we be a cult? The accusation is untrue and unfair.

But cults can be like that. Most cults are not intended, not planned; they grow. The ingredients combine and ferment into something unexpectedly powerful, even at times dangerous. In their innocence and ignorance cult members persist in a state of denial.

Cults have much in common with religions and the religious elements in Subud are obvious: the pervasive allusions to 'worship' and 'Almighty God', the reverence for Bapak as our 'Spiritual Guide', the promotion of his talks as something like a Bible for the members, the role of the helpers as a kind of priesthood, interpreting God's will. As with most religions, members have little power; change is usually initiated at the highest levels, top down rather than from the grass-roots up. The decision to join is regarded as very serious, requiring three months of preparation. The decision to leave is seen as ill-advised, a disappointment. Helpers, like priests, have a special responsibility to look after the members, their flock.

Although we claim that we are not a religion, the features listed above give a different impression. For some members the distinction doesn't matter much and is just a question of semantics. We *would* be a religion, they say, except for the fact that you can belong to Subud and practise a religion at the same time, whereas a Christian, for example, cannot remain a Christian and also be a practising Muslim. For other Subud members, however, the distinction is extremely important. They joined Subud as an alternative to a religion and don't want to mix the experience of the latihan with belief systems and authority figures.

The difference between a religion and a cult some say is a matter of size and success. Some religions or sects, like some cults, are repressive, controlling, bigoted, etc. Others have listened to the critics and been through a long process of liberalization. Religions at least are in the public eye. Abuses eventually are exposed, even if not always addressed. With religions, people know what they are getting into.

In Subud we have a strong, much-revered guru figure whose basic message is not questioned since it is assumed to come direct from God; a messianic vision of the future; a sense among the members of being specially blessed; a theocratic structure which

encourages conformity and discourages innovation; a preoccupation with growth; an expectation of sacrifice and effort; and a lack of financial accountability. These are all cult characteristics. Young people in Subud sense that, and that's why they don't tell their friends about Subud. They know how Subud will look to an outsider.

In the cultification of Subud there are two contributing factors. For one thing, Subud arose in a society very different from our own. One of the defining values of Javanese society is something called Bapakisme,[1] which can be translated as 'paternalism' or 'loyalty to a hierarchical structure of authority'. Indonesians tend to consult a Bapak, a 'father', when making decisions or needing help. A Bapak may be any man with a certain power and prestige: your boss, a local bureaucrat, the family patriarch. Bapaks are always deferred to, never confronted, never contradicted. They have an intrinsic right to your loyalty and respect. When deference of that order is translated into our own culture, the natural assumption is that it must be inspired by a person who is quite extraordinary.

Another problem in cultural translation is the *wahyu*, the light that is said to have descended upon Bapak when he first received the latihan. To Christian Westerners this suggests something miraculous, like the star the Wise Men followed or the Holy Spirit descending. In Indonesia, however, while significant, the *wahyu* is a fairly common occurrence. Even the choice of a village head may be indicated in this way.[2] So, through a misunderstanding, what in our culture would be the natural respect due to a teacher morphs into the reverence due to a religious leader, someone who might even be a Prophet or Messenger of God.

Keep in mind also that Subud was born in a culture where there is almost no tolerance for atheism, agnosticism, humanism or other alternatives to standard religious belief. In my country, Canada, only 72% admit to a belief in God and the percentage is lower among younger people. Many of those who reject religion and belief systems might well be interested in a practice like the latihan, but we do not provide a welcoming environment for such people.

We took our cues from the Indonesians, without knowing the cultural background. We were fascinated by Bapak's world-view, without understanding that it was mostly derived from the Sufism he had studied as a young man, from *pencak silat*, the Indonesian martial arts tradition, and from Kejawen, native Javanese beliefs. If you read about Javanese spiritual movements in general, you will find much that is familiar from Bapak's talks. Subud does not stand out among them as something radically new. Nor is it the most successful Indonesian spiritual movement.

Over time, Bapak's role as Subud's Spiritual Guide became increasingly important. He made world tours, giving talks at every stop, and was the prime attraction at World Congresses, where people hung on his every word (or believed they were absorbing his wisdom in their sleep). When he revealed his vision for a Utopian future, a world healed through the action of the latihan, members were proud and excited to be part of such a revolutionary impetus. When the Big Enterprises he initiated failed, Bapak was not blamed. It had to be the members who were at fault.

Since those years Subud has been in decline, but for many of us Bapak is still the Great Teacher, quite possibly God's Messenger or Prophet. Among those who steer the course of Subud in the world, Bapak's authority still holds. And the rest of us are still expected to hold him in the deepest respect and reverence.

But there is one big mitigating factor: that early on Bapak said that Subud is not a

religion, that it has no teacher, no system of thought, no dogma, no rules. That has given ammunition to the more independent members to fight a rear-guard action against the whole cult dynamic. Because we all affirm the above to be true (for one thing, it makes for better PR), newcomers still expect the right to form their own opinions about Subud, and the conformist pressures are less than they might have been otherwise. In addition, with the lessening of Bapak's influence since his death, along with more progressive views taking hold in our own societies, things have loosened up quite a lot: to give just three examples, Subud is much less sexist and homophobic than it once was; the dress code is no longer enforced; helpers have mostly abandoned their obsession with weeding out 'mixing'. The result is that, at least for some members in some groups, the cultish element is not so pronounced, and to the extent that we are a cult, we are actually a fairly moderate one.

However, the cultish elements are still present, often nurtured by the most active and high-profile members, since it is the conservatives who tend to involve themselves most in the running of Subud. So we have two views of what Subud is: (a) the simple exercise which itself is the teacher with no strings attached, and (b) the exercise including Bapak's world-view and teachings and the structures he set up. This dichotomy gives rise to the 'bait and switch'[3] accusation: that we present ourselves one way and once the applicant is 'hooked', the whole cult agenda is gradually revealed. Having these two conflicting interpretations of what we are means that in general Subud is a very confused and confusing organization, with one foot in each boat (as the Chinese say).

To give one small example: reports from the Christchurch Congress talk about how groups are stagnating; members are only interested in coming to latihan. If we're not a cult but just an organization set up to support people in their practice of the latihan, then why expect anything more than that? People practising the latihan? That's great; that's the whole idea, isn't it? Anything else is supplementary. But just doing latihan isn't enough for those who buy into the cult agenda. We also need to be doing all the other things that Bapak recommended.

The cult dynamic affects many aspects of the way we operate. It affects how we present ourselves, how we admit new members, how we keep new members, how we regard the latihan, how we make decisions, how we look at other organizations — almost everything about us.

But why is it a bad thing to be a cult? Why do people quickly back off at the least suspicion of one?

When people think of cults, cyanide-laced Kool-Aid is likely to come to mind. This was the ultimate in cult abuse: mind-control to the extent that members were induced to kill themselves. We've all heard about cults run by patriarchs who claim holiness while collecting young wives and overseeing every aspect of their disciples' lives. Or cults whose members were waiting for a comet to pick them up, or collecting weapons in anticipation of some holy conflict. We have little in common with those extreme examples.

But there *has* been abuse of authority in Subud: from overbearing, overconfident helpers, to parents who impose Bapak's authority on their children, to all members who feel it's their duty to enforce conformity with the accepted wisdom. There is in fact an unhealthy tendency (now perhaps less in evidence than it once was) for the helpers to see members as child-like and in need of guidance and direction, which they are ready, with Bapak's help, to supply. And although we constantly claim that we have no belief

system, some helpers are militant in their efforts to put down any criticism of the Subud status quo and vilify the critics.

There is the potential for abuse in any organization where questioning authority is forbidden or discouraged. The right to form and express our own judgements is a very basic right shared by all adults, exceptions being soldiers in the military, those living under a dictatorship, or people whose minds are incapacitated. We can see the disastrous effects of the cult of personality around Kim Jong-il, North Korea's leader, or Mao Zedong in the days of the Cultural Revolution. But the risks of coming under an absolute authority are even greater where there is a spiritual element, with the possibility of God's sanction added to the guru's own charisma.

In our culture, freedom of thought and expression is accepted as a right in itself, but it is further justified by historical evidence showing that it is the rigid, authoritarian influences that have tended to hold back the advance of human progress, moral as well as intellectual, whereas in the free exchange of ideas we find the solutions we need to the problems we face and an environment that nurtures creativity and growth.

When you have a guru whom you accept as an ultimate authority, you step down from your own responsibility to distinguish for yourself right from wrong, appropriate from inappropriate, desirable from undesirable. We are all different; the struggle to find and establish our own individuality is perhaps the essential task of our adult lives[4] (and a goal that, according to Bapak, the latihan can specifically help us attain). Many of us have had teachers, mentors, and heroes, but if we have a healthy self-respect, we hold back from giving them complete authority over our thinking. We need to develop our powers of discrimination, not suppress them. And to do that, we need all options to be open and available, including the option to decide for ourselves what we will believe or not believe.

If we don't want to be thought of as a cult, we need to look carefully and objectively at our cult characteristics. Some members place Bapak in a sphere far above ordinary human beings. But no claim of that sort should go unexamined. In fact, it's quite clear that, as with the rest of us mortals, Bapak's thinking and attitudes were influenced and limited by his own education and cultural background. He thought men were, as a sex, spiritually superior to women. He had little sympathy for, or understanding of, homosexuality. He had the common Javanese prejudice against Buddhism and Hinduism.[5] He did not predict the climate crisis; was not concerned about the environment. His main concern was to make money for Subud through enterprises. Considering all of the above, why do we still allow his influence to dominate our organization?

Non-Subud people are well aware these days of what it means to be a cult member, and they give anything that smells cultish a wide berth. They don't want someone else doing their thinking for them, determining their priorities, influencing their attitudes, stifling their normal responses, making them feel more helpless, less adult, unworthy. Who needs that? In Subud we still haven't recognized and admitted the degree to which we are a cult, so we don't understand why the world stands aloof from us.

You have all read the words sometimes attributed to Voltaire: 'I disapprove of what you say but I will defend to the death your right to say it.' If we want to convince the world that we are not a cult, we need to embrace that attitude in all our Subud dealings. We need to become aware of all the ways that conformist pressures manifest in our organization, and each of us needs to make it our business to vigorously resist them, no

matter who the target is. We don't have to abandon our own beliefs; that's not the problem. The problem is members making the assumption that everyone else ought to have the same beliefs as they do. When people assume that, and allow it to show, even in subtle ways, they become part of Subud's biggest problem: that it is too easily perceived as a cult, and to some extent is one.

Here are some general strategies for resisting conformist pressures and making ourselves less of a cult:

- Examine and question all claims to authority.
- Treat all members as mature adults in charge of their own spiritual development.
- Make our own spiritual growth our first priority, wherever that takes us.
- Make Subud easy to join, easy to leave and easy to return to, leaving such matters entirely in the hands of the individuals concerned and not radiating pleasure or displeasure over decisions that are personal and not our business.
- In discussions and meetings, insist on everyone's right to disagree with Bapak and/or Subud conventional wisdom.
- Demand the right to self-determination through the normal democratic process: i.e. free and open discussion concluding with a vote. Ask the helpers not to make decisions on our behalf through testing.
- Experiment with new structures; don't feel bound by old forms and practices that don't meet our needs or suit our own culture.
- Feel free to read the works of other spiritual teachers and to talk about what you've learned with fellow Subud members.
- Use ordinary language, not foreign terms, to communicate with each other and with the world about our practice.
- Become informed about the ways Subud is influenced by its Javanese origins.
- Make sure that the organization is responsive to the needs of the members.
- Demand financial accountability, including investigations into past failures and dubious practices.

We should reject the idea that joining Subud commits us to shouldering the burden of membership growth. When you join Subud, you make that decision because you think the latihan may be of benefit for your life. Then somewhere along the line you find that there's an assumption that all members will take up Bapak's mission to spread the latihan to the rest of mankind. But if you were taking a class in Tai Chi, for example, would you feel pressured to convert people to doing Tai Chi? If your instructor told you that this was part of your role as a Tai Chi student, would you accept that? Most people would feel this was an improper blurring of the boundaries. You are there to learn; the teacher is there to teach; and beyond that there are no obligations. You might find the classes tremendously beneficial and decide to help publicize them, but that would be from your own free will, not the fulfilment of an obligation.

But in our case, the international organization called Subud is sometimes seen as more than the sum of its parts, as a spiritual entity in its own right which can make demands on the members. This is another basic question that goes to the heart of whether or not we are a cult. Does Subud exist to serve its members' needs, or are the members there to serve the needs and goals of the Subud organization? Is the spiritual juice in Subud, the organization, or is it in us, the members, who practise a spiritual exercise? If it is in the organization, then there is not much hope of seeing any real democracy in Subud. The will of God trumps the will of the people. Helpers rule — as interpreters of the will of God — and the membership exists to serve that will. The members are subservient to a greater spiritual goal; they become secondary, a means to an end.

But if, on the other hand, the Subud organization's *raison d'être* is simply to support the members in their practice (through providing premises, communication and support services, organizing congresses, collecting money, etc.), then decisions can be made democratically — the spiritual dimension being that every voting member practices the latihan. The highest priority will be the needs of the members, and it will be up to the members themselves to determine whether their needs are being met.

These two different attitudes clashed very publicly over the question of the 2001 Indonesian Congress. Testing showed that it should be held in Kalimantan. But it made no sense practically or morally to hold a Congress in a country with limited medical facilities when the majority of participants would be in the 60 to 80 age range — with many of them not in the best of health and so especially vulnerable to the climate and tropical diseases. Ultimately because of unrest in Kalimantan the venue was changed to Bali, which in my opinion was the right decision. The needs of the members won out over the helpers' reading of God's will.

Subud will spread if enough people try the latihan and find it helpful. It is word of mouth that will do it, more than any promotion by the Subud organization. The idea that enterprises and other projects are necessary to supplement the latihan and draw attention to it seems very odd. Transcendental Meditation (in its present form), Tai Chi, Qi Gong, and other psycho/spiritual practices do not find it necessary to have a cult supporting them and supplementary activities to add interest. Those practices are sufficient in themselves, and it seems to me that the latihan is not intrinsically more boring than any of the above. We need to make it easier for people to join, by removing the long indoctrination period, and easier for people to stay, by removing the cult dynamic that puts so many off. We need to make the latihan visible and known; then it will be the world's decision whether it is worth keeping and cultivating. In other words, once the latihan is accepted as a spiritual practice, it will succeed or fail on its own merits. That is how it should be. It is not in our hands.

Throwing off the cultish tendencies might allow us to really tap into the energy of the latihan, which is the very opposite of conformist, fearful, rigid and limiting. If the latihan is to be made available to everyone, we need a Subud culture that is more honest, open, and flexible, that is wider, more free, more transparent, more egalitarian, more self-aware and informed, more accessible, more democratic, more accepting and generous, more courageous and willing to experiment, and more in tune with the world we live in.

What a relief it would be to relate to non-Subud people in an open and natural way, without feeling that we have to conceal the fact that we are (at least in part) a cult.

**Notes:**

1. See <http://www.expat.or.id/business/bigfive-bapakisme.html> An interesting web-site for foreigners doing business in Indonesia.
2. See David Week, 'History and Myth', *Subud Vision*, June, 2007.
3. See Helen Bailie, 'Bait and Switch', *Subud Vision*, June, 2007.
4. See Deanna Koontz, 'Subud the Tribe', *Subud Vision*, June, 2007 for the Stages of Faith, and pressures to conform in Subud.
5. See David Week, 'Anwar, Anwas and Subud Prejudice', *Subud Vision*, July, 2009.