THE MANDAEAN IDENTITY CHALLENGE
FROM RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM TO SECULAR POLICIES *

Mehrdad Arabestani
University of Malaya
m.arabestani@gmail.com

Introduction

In 2002, when I started my field work among the Mandaeans of Iran, the first thing that struck me was the highly ritualistic tone of Mandaeans of Iran, the first thing that struck me was the highly ritualistic tone of Mandaeans religion with a stress on purification rites. I found out that the rituals have a pivotal and irreplaceable status in Mandaeans religiousness. When one asks the Mandaean about their religion, the immediate answer is usually an account of the Mandaean rites rather than the Mandaean beliefs and theology. Drower, as the leading researcher in Mandaeans ethnography, had noted this point in her introduction to The Haran Gawaita and the Baptism of Hilbil-Ziwa:

[To the Mandaeans] the immutable and sacro-sanct elements of his religion are the ancient rituals, baptism and the various forms of the sacramental meal. It

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does not worry him that there are a number of creation stories, contradictory of one another or that there is confusion in his heterogeneous pantheon of spirits of light and darkness. What does matter is that no rule of ritual purity be broken, and that every gesture and action prescribed for ritual shall be rigidly observed. (Drower, 1953, p. XI)

One question that needs to be asked, however, is how have Mandaeans developed this ritualistic religion? And why has this ritualistic religiousness persisted among the Mandaeans? In other words, what are the social foundations of the Mandaeian religiousness?

Drower provided a substantial amount of ethnographic data on Mandaean rituals and folklore (e.g. Drower, 1937; Drower, 1956a, 1956b). However, for the most part, Mandaean studies have remained focused on the Mandaean history and the origin of their religion (Kraeling, 1929; Rudolph, Duling, & Modschiedler, 1969; Yamauchi, 2004; Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, 2005, 2008) and their language and the development of Mandaic scriptures (Naveh, 1970; Macuch, 1971; Häberl, 2006). Even those scholars who acknowledged the importance of the study of Mandaean rituals and rendering the rituals meaningful in the frameworks of Mandaean mythology, setoriology and native exigencies, in practice put emphasis on the Mandaean scriptures rather than living situation of the ritual performance (Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, 1981; Franzmann, 1989; Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, 2002, pp. 18, 80). Whereas this approach draws our attention to the significance of rituals as the manifestation of the Mandaic cosmology and reveals the Mandaean religious world, one of its limitations is that it sees the Mandaean religion separated from its social background and fails to consider the social meaning of the Mandaean religiousness. The Mandaeans are a living people and the way they practice their religion is in mutual relationship with their social environment. Therefore, to understand the Mandaean religion as a living tradition, we need to look at the Mandaean religious practice in vivo.

Mandaeans have been living in Iraq and Iran for about two millennia. During these centuries they have been a small ethnic group surrounded by the non-Mandaean people and under the threat of identity elimination. This situation inevitably made their group identity protection one of their main concerns. The Mandaean religion, as the most important reference of their identity, reflects
this concern very well. We will see how Mandaean religious practice symbolically mirrors the care for group solidarity and ethnic identity.

Since recent decades the Mandaeans have undergone a dramatic social change caused by wars and political unrest in the region. These changes led to emigration of a considerable number of the Mandaeans and the formation of Mandaean diasporas in Europe, North America and Australia. The concern for identity protection still persists among the Mandaean diasporas, however, the new social environment opens up new opportunities that affect both the religious practice and identity policies of the Mandaeans.

This article seeks to address the mutual relationship between the Mandaens religious practice and their social background in regard to their identity. First, a brief introduction about the Mandaeans as a historical entity is presented. The article will go on to Mandaic cosmology as the basis of the religious world. Purification rites and food related rites- as the main categories of Mandic rituals- and their social implications comprise the next parts of the article. Finally, we will take a look at the recent social changes and the formation of the Mandean diasporas and the consequent changes in identity policy and the role of religion among them with the special reference to the Mandaean diaspora in Australia. The study is based on a long term ethnographic study on the Mandean of Iran; however, the study on the Mandaean of Australia is just in the exploratory stage.

**An ethno-religion minority**

The Mandaeans for many centuries have been living in marshy regions of Mesopotamia along the banks of rivers in Iraq, and along the Karoon River in Khuzestan province, Iran.

There are no statistics about number of the Mandaeans in Iran and Iraq available. Kurt Rudolph (1978) estimated that there were no more than 15,000 Mandaeans in Iraq in 1978. According to Arabestani, the Mandaeans of Iran approximated 20,000 Mandaeans in the country (2004, p. 2). The Number of the Mandaeans of Iran is also estimated about 5000-1000 according to the UN Refugee Agency’s report in 2004(The U N Refugee Agency, 2004). Far from being precise and reliable figures, these numbers give a rough estimation of the population of the Mandaeans in Iran and Iraq.
The main resource for ancient history of the Mandaeans is a Mandaean script called *harān goweythā*, that was translated to English by E.S Drower (1953). Whereas the Mandaeans consider it as the true history of their people, drawing a line between fact and myth in the text is difficult. The colophons that appear at the end of the Mandaean scripts are another resource of the Mandaean history. In addition to the list of scribes, the colophons include a postscript that may hint at doctrinal disputes among the Mandaeans and their social and political conditions. However, since the oldest existing Mandaean manuscript comes from 16th century and the majority of them dated back to 18th and 19th century (Macuch, 1965, p. LVI), they do not contribute much in early history of the Mandaeans and the origins and development of the Mandaic religion. Therefore, the early history of the Mandaeans, as it were, is still a subject of debate (see: Rudolph, Duling, & Modschiedler, 1969; Yamauchi, 2004, pp. 8-10). Nevertheless, a general sketch of the Mandaean history can be drawn from the available historical resources.

The Mandaeans are originally a Semitic people who used to live in Jerusalem. According to *harān goweythā*, after a dispute with the Jews in the first century, the Mandaeans left their western residence to Mesopotamia. Since that time the Mandaeans have been living in this region, largely near the Euphrates and the Tigris in Iraq, and Karoon River in Iran.

The Mandaeans are followers of a long-lasting Gnostic tradition. They affiliate themselves to a chain of prophets starting from Adam the first man – as the first prophet- to John the Baptist (*yahyā yohānā*) – as the last Mandaic prophet. The Mandaean tradition names other prophets between Adam and John the Baptist who some of them are also recognized in Judo-Christian and Islamic traditions, such as Noah (*nūū*) and Shem (*shūm*), but other are specific Mandaean characters with no parallel in other traditions, such as the couple *shūrbāy* and *sherhābiyyel*. The Mandaeans hold a written tradition comprised of revelation books (such as *genzā rabbā*: great treasure), liturgical (such as: *sidra ed nashmāthā* and *enyani*) and historical texts in Mandaic language.

Mandaic language is a dialect of eastern Aramaic language (Gordon & Grimes, 2005) and all the Mandaean scriptures are written in this language. In fact, nowadays just a few Mandaeans know Mandaic language and even a fewer number of them - mostly members of priestly families- use it for everyday communication. Mandaic language is more a liturgical language than a common language among the Mandaeans.
In Iran and Iraq the Mandaeans are known as sobbi, a term derived from the Quranic plural term sābe’in referring to a group of ahl-il-kitāb (People of the book, the followers of authentic religions) * along with others including Christians and Jews. Living in Islamic countries, they have been struggling for being adopted as followers of an authentic religion.

Never being a big group, the Mandaeans have always been threatened by the dominant neighboring people. The coexistence of the Mandaeans and ruling people was not always a non-violent one. Massacre of the Mandaeans by Arabs in 14th century (Drower, 1937, p. 14), forceful circumcision by Arabs/Muslims in 19th century (Drower, 1953, pp. 89-90) and even coercive proselytizing to Christianity by Portuguese in 16th century (Kraeling, 1929; Drower, 1937, p. 15) are among the most violent events of the Mandaean life. On the other hand, the Mandaeans as a localized endogamous community have been prone to be threatened by the natural disasters. For instance, cholera epidemic in 1831 almost broke the Mandaean community and put them in peril of lack of priest, who as the authorized ritual performers and guardians of the Mandaic tradition has an essential status in Mandaic religion (Buckley, 1999). While these social difficulties and natural disasters show the most violent experiences of the Mandaeans as an ethno-religious minority, they hardly can be regarded as a profile of their usual life. Even though, feeling the threat of ethnocide and extinction of group identity was such a routine experience that turned the group identity the constant concern of the people. Since Mandaic tradition is the main reference of the ethno-religious identity, it has a pivotal role in the Mandaeans struggle to preserve their identity. Mandaic scriptures and language has been protected carefully during the centuries and having a written tradition has helped the Mandaeans to keep practicing their rites and customs with an orthodox enthusiasm. Mandaean elaborated and detailed rituals, that contain a condensed bulk of religious symbols, made Mandaism a ritualistic religion. Many aspects of the Mandaean religious life involve performing purification rites that must be done in running water, as the manifestation and symbol of the Mandaean God, hayyi, the life. It is said that their local name as sobbi, is derived from the Arabic sabb, meaning “to pour water”, that shows the historical connection between the Mandaeans and running water.

* sābe’in are mentioned in Quran three times (2:62, 5:69 and 22:17). According to Islamic law, they are regarded as ahl-il-kitāb. Nevertheless, there are some controversies among Muslim clergies about identifying the Mandaeans as the sābe’in who are mentioned in Quran. The Mandaeans are not mentioned among the official religions in Iran’s constitution. However, Iran’s supreme leader- Ayatollah Khamenei- has issued a fatwa stating they are ahl-il-kitāb (2009, Question 321)
The Mandaic religion is based on a cosmology that makes sense of all religious beliefs and rituals. In the next part the Mandaean cosmology is schematically depicted to unravel its underlying structure and basic values.

**The Mandaean cosmology**

Gnostic opposition of Light/Darkness lies at the base of the Mandaic religion. According to Mandaean cosmology, world is composed of certain strata, from the brightest and the most sacred (in the cosmological north) to the darkest and the most defiled (in the cosmological south). Moral position of each being is in accordance with its place in the cosmological strata. Three strata can be distinguished in the Mandaean cosmology: the light world at the top, the mixed world at the middle, and the dark world at the bottom (see Figure 1).

The supreme world, which is located in the cosmological north, is the upper world, light world or ālmā denhurā. Non physical beings or othrā are residences of this world, and among them are malkās - angels- who are the brightest/ the most sacred creatures after God (hayyi). The throne of
hayyi- the Mandaic God- is located at the heart of this world and is called eshkantā (place). emshūni koshtā, or “place of truth”, is in the southern part of the light world and is in immediate touch with lower stratum. abāthar or avāthar, the gate of light world, is located in this place and a malkā with the same name is situated here as the gatekeeper of the light world.

Next stratum- middle world- in turn includes seven sub-strata called maṭrāthā. This stratum extends from light world to the earth and is the place of all physical beings including planets and stars, animals and human beings. The surface of the earth – ara ed tībel- is the lowest part of this stratum, which is especially cosmological place of humankind. According to Mandaic tradition the humankinds are creatures with dual origins. Human essence- nashamtā- is from the light world; this human essence is restricted in physical body that is made from the dark essence of tībel- earth.

The lowest stratum in The Mandaean cosmology is the dark world or downward world which is called senyavis. This world is in opposition to light world and is the place of the dark beings. These dark beings are also non physical beings but in contradiction to malkas of ālmā denhurstā they have a dark and evil nature. The Dark world is also comprised of seven sub- strata which are ruled by dark chiefs, and the entire dark world is dominated by ruhā- the mother of darkness- and her son ūr.

The Mandaen cosmology is structured around certain values and binary oppositions. The sanctification of life, or principle of life, lies at the bottom of the Mandaean cosmology. Life is emerged from God and is the most important divine gift. The Mandaean God is called hayyi- meaning ‘lives’. hayyi is an undefined, impersonal and transcendental God. This transcendental Gnostic God has a manifestation in physical world, one which implies life and life-giving character of God: running water, yardenā or miyā hayyi. According to The Mandaean creation mythology, miyā hayyi (living or running water) is originated from the light world and donates life to the earth (Franzmann, 1989; Arabestani, 2004, p. 84). Running water is the sole pure and purifying phenomenon in the world. All Mandaic purification rites must be done in running water, including baptism- maṣvetta or maṣbettā - which is the key Mandaic rite.

The opposition of light and darkness forms the fundamental structural basis of Mandaic cosmology. Heaven is the place of light, and earth is the place of darkness. Therefore, there is
equivalence between light/ darkness and heaven/ earth oppositions. The more something is bright, heavenly and non physical, the more it is ritually pure; and the more something is dark, downward and physical, the more it is ritually polluted.

**Mandaean rituals, group identity and symbolism**

Different body purification and food related rites are the most frequent rituals of the Mandaic religion. In the other words, purity of body and what enters it are the main ritual concern in Mandaism.

Purification rites symbolize the elimination of dark/ worldly elements and are served to restore or enhance the purity of the body during both the life cycle crisis and everyday activities of each person. All these rituals must be performed in running water as the only purifying element on the earth.

Figure 2. Baptism: individual baptism (left), group baptism (right). Ahwaz, Iran, May 2003.

The most important purification rite is baptism or *masvettā* that usually is performed in certain life cycle crisis. Giving birth to a child reduces the purity of the mother and she must be baptized by a Mandaean priest 30 days after the delivery to restore her purity. At the same time the newborn also must be baptized to enhance his/her purity to a ‘normal’ level. Marriage is holy in Mandaean religion; therefore, before the beginning of the wedding ceremony the couple needs to be baptized two times to enhance their purity. Group baptism is also a common ritual in religious
festivals and the Mandaeans take this opportunity to participate in group baptism to enhance their level of purity.

Ablutions (tamāshe and rashāme) are other purification rites that usually are done on a daily basis. Tamāshe is a ritual washing that eliminate the bodily defilement and restore the purity. To touch semen, excrement, urine and women in menstruation period necessitate local tamāshe of the body part that touched the defiled materials. But, situations that involve such worldly functions of the body as sexual intercourse, ejaculation and menstruation necessitate a whole body tamāshe. Touching a corpse, that is a complete earthy/dark material with no touch of the light world, also demands a whole body tamāshe. The Mandaeans pray three times a day and before each prayer an ablution with a particular formulation (rashāme) is necessary to get the required purity for praying.

On the other hand, foods and eating is surrounded by elaborated rituals to ensure the purity of what enters the body. First of all, the Mandaeans are not allowed to consume all kinds of meat. The flesh of fishes, birds and rams are lawful meats for the Mandaeans. However, the flesh of predatory fishes and birds are unlawful. Besides, all land animals- except for the ram- are unlawful animals to eat. The rational of these food prohibitions can be found in the Mandaean cosmology. The land animals are in touch with the earth, thus they are more prone to be defiled by the dark world and consequently to transmit the defilement to human body. The only exception among the land animals is the ram. There is no clear evidence why rams are excluded from unlawful land animals. However, even in this case a male animal, but not a female/reproductive animal, is allowed to be slaughtered to avoid the violence against the life principle. Birds and fishes are not in touch with the earth and they are not in peril of being defiled by the dark world. The reason for prohibiting the flesh of the carnivorous and predatory animals is also clear: they offend the principle of life.

Slaughtering is a completely ritual act. One of the important ritual prerequisites for slaughtering is to make an ablution to the animal to enhance its purity. After the ablution, the animal must be kept away from the contact with the earth. The ablution is a pre- liminal rite that signifies the animal’s separation from its normal status and its entrance to a liminal stage that lasts until the death of the animal. In this stage, the animal is a ‘liminal entity’ (see: Turner, 1966) that is in an
undetermined situation. It is at the threshold of death: neither a normal animal nor an animal flesh ready to eat. This ambiguous situation that is located out of the established categories of being makes the animal prone to get polluted more easily. Therefore, more prudential measurements than the normal situations for avoiding the pollution must be taken. Even though, touching the earth does not normally cause the contagion of pollution, but at the liminal stage of slaughtering rite it can lead to the defilement of the animal and the degradation of its purity.

As we can see, the purification is a recurrent theme in the Mandean rituals with human body as its focal point. Adventitious pollution of the body, both through its entrances and external contact, is the subject of ritual care. Moreover, some rituals such as prayer and marriage ceremony require a higher level of bodily purity that must be obtained through a purification rite. Consequently, a constant monitoring of the body’s purity is the core religious practice of the Mandaeans.

It is true that the religious rituals are based on the cosmology, but they draw upon the cosmology selectively. This selection shows that the rituals are social constructions influenced by the social experience of the people. The significance of the ritual purity and pollution are inspired by the Mandaean cosmology. Nevertheless, the vigorous practice of purification rites and their repetition imply that the social grounds are involved and make some cosmological elements more significant. Obsession with purity and ritual concern for body entry and exit symbolizes a social preoccupation with the protection of political and cultural unity of a pressed minority. As Mary Douglas (1966, p. 125) said, the sociological counterpart of ritual anxiety about the bodily orifices is a worry about the protection of the political and cultural unity of a minority group. The Mandaeans were always under the threat of ethnocide and cultural extinction. This social experience is reflected in the elaborated and recurrent purification rites. What Mary Douglas said about the Israelites can likewise be repeated about the Mandaeans:

The Israelites were always in their history a hard pressed minority. [...] the threatened boundaries of their body politic would be well mirrored in their care for the integrity, unity and purity of physical body. (Douglas, 1966, p. 125)

To mix with other peoples and adopting the changes they impose will fade the boundaries of the distinct group identity. The long lasting obsession with the intactness of group identity and its
purity led to the prominence of the purification aspects of the Mandaean religious practice. It would be said that the Mandaeans have developed their rituals with the elements that best match their social concerns.

**Mandaean diasporas: new identity policies and demand for religious accommodation**

Since recent decades the historical homeland of the Mandaeans has been subject to dramatic social and political changes that inevitably affected the Mandaeans.

Islamic revolution of Iran in 1979 was accompanied by a revitalization of religious discourse in the country. The Islamic revitalization paradoxically led to the revitalization of religious awareness among the Mandaeans. The dominance of religious discourse in the new regime of Iran made the religious identities the main agent in the socio-political sphere. Nonetheless, the Mandaeans were ignored in the new constitution of Iran and their religion excluded from legal religions of Iran. Iranian citizens are not allowed to proclaim any religions other than those are mentioned in the constitution. This imposed big challenges on the Mandaean community of Iran including the restriction for their religious practice and discrimination in education and employment (see: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, 2004). Even though, local authorities treat them with some degree of tolerance, they never enjoyed the rights of a fully recognized ethnic group.

During the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-1988) a substantial part of the Mandaean traditional regions fell into war zones and the Mandaeans, along with other people of these countries, moved to interior areas as war refugees. Besides all difficulties, this compulsory move broke the closed and ghetto-like community of the Mandaeans and put them in closer interaction with the other people of the country. According to the Mandaeans of Iran, this situation played a crucial role in the Mandaeans’ understanding of ‘ego’ and ‘other’ and made a quest among them for learning their religion and finding their identity.

Since 1990, Iraq faced two other wars; first the Persian Gulf War (1990-1) and then American led invasion of Iraq in 2003 that resulted in the overthrow of Saddam Hussein’s regime. The wars and weakening of political power paved the way for religious and ethnic conflicts and
criminal activates that those smaller groups such as the Mandaeans were more vulnerable to them. In fact, some Mandaeans were kidnapped for ransom and targeted by criminals because of their wealth as traditional goldsmith (Jackson, 2007).

All these political and social instabilities, social restrictions and discriminations led to the emigration of a great number of the Mandaeans to other countries. This can be called the second migration wave in the Mandaean history. The first migration in the first century was a mass exodus from Jerusalem to Mesopotamia, while the second migration is a course of the Mandaean dispersion in the world. During this second migration the Mandaean diasporas formed in Europe, North America and Australia. This is a turning point in Mandaean history and definitely will bring about deep changes to the Mandaean people and their religion.

Now, Mandaean migrants are mostly living in secular and open societies with no religious persecution and social discrimination. This time the Mandaean diasporas experience their identity challenge in a different way. Small Mandaean communities, such as the Mandaeans of UK, are not easily able to reproduce their tradition because of the lack of the priests and have no place for the rituals and they feel their culture is slipping away from their hands (Crawford, 2008). To assimilate and absorbed in the host countries that would result in cultural extinction is another threat of the Mandaean diasporas. On the other hand, this new situation opened up opportunities for the Mandaeans to establish their own associations and societies and declare their religion freely.

The Mandaeans of Australia, for example, are among those Mandaean disporas that try to use new possibilities to keep their distinct identity alive. According to the estimation of Sheikh Salah Chohaili, one of the religious leaders of the Mandaeans of Australia, about 5000 Mandaeans are living in the country. Most of the Mandaeans are localized in Liverpool, New South Wales and a few families are living in other parts of the country. In the homeland ‘the religious’ and ‘the social’ were unified and inseparable. The constant threat of ethnocide and the priority of identity protection had confined the Mandaeans within their petrified religious rituals as the main reference of their identity (Arabestani, 2004, pp. 250-251). Living in a secular and multicultural society, a secularization trend- in the sense of separation- among the Mandaean community of Australia is observable. The Mandaeans follow their social interests- such as group identity and integrity- through their secular associations and organizations, whereas Mandaean Synod
Australia is in charge of the religious affairs of the community. Therefore, besides the religious practice, secular policies through Mandaean associations and organizations are involved in the strengthening the sense of ethnic identity in a multicultural society such as Australia. Mandaean associations, like Mandaean Youth of Australia Committee, arrange social and sport events, seminars and support the new arrival Mandaeans and leave the religious affairs to the synod.

Because of social exigencies, Mandaic religion in the homeland mostly played an identificational role and was little, if any, room to develop such aspects of religion as systematic jurisprudence and “self realization”. However, there are evidences that show the Mandaean believers in Australia are developing new expectations of their religion. Dr. Braian Mubaraki, an Australian Mandaean scholar, holds a critical approach to ritualistic tone of the contemporary Mandaean and put emphasize on “spirituality” and Gnostic roots of the Mandaism (personal communication, July 30, 2010)*. This is the first time that such an approach is publicized by a lay person among the Mandaeans and it can be representative of a wider demand among the Australian Mandaean for a reform in Mandaic religion.

Conclusion

The Mandeans are a Semitic people who in the first century migrated from Jerusalem to Mesopotamia (nowadays Iraq) and along the banks of rivers in the southern east of nowadays Iran. They are bearers of an ancient Gnostic tradition and practice a highly ritualistic religion. As a small ethno-religious group living under neighboring people hegemony, they have always been under the threat of cultural extinction. In response, the Mandeans resorted to their religious rituals as the main reference of their group identity and have developed elaborated rituals with repetitive theme of purification. The obsession with the ritual purification of the body that is expressed in Mandaean rites symbolizes the anxious care of this pressed minority about their group integrity. Dramatic social and political changes in the homeland of the Mandeans led to second migration of the Mandaean; this time a dispersion from Iraq and Iran to Europe, North America and Australia. For the first time in their history the Mandaean migrants experience a free and multicultural environment in the host countries. Primary studies about the Mandaean

* Brian Mubarki has set up a blog called ‘Mandaean Gnosticism: research, publications and debate’ and on which he has publicized the transliteration of a number of Mandaean texts.
diaspora in Australia shows that the new socio-political condition of the Mandaean diaspora has brought about changes both in their identity policy and religious practice. To a large extent identificational role of religious ritualism is replaced by policies such as the establishment of secular associations and organizations. On the other hand, signs of demand for religious reform towards a more spiritual and less ritualistic religion are visible. It seems that the main challenges of the Mandaean diasporas would be the development of the secular policies of identity protection and religious reformation according to the emerging needs of the believers. This new demands can make new interpretations of the Mandaic tradition both in the theology and practical level.

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