

Keeping their Traditions Alive: Mandaean Baptism in the Nepean River

By Richard Walker

Photos by David Maurice Smith /OCULI



It was 6:30 in the morning when I arrived on the banks of the Nepean River in Penrith. The grass was still wet with the morning dew, and the smell of incense wafted gently from the river bank. I was there to witness an event called Benja – the Creation of Life – that few Sydneysiders ever get to see, unless you are a member of the local Mandaean community. Every year, Benja is celebrated over five days, with up to 1000 members of the community coming to the river to be baptised.

I was there on the first of the five days, and watched a small group of Mandaean holy men preparing themselves for the relentless schedule of baptisms that was to follow. But that morning all was calm – the men moved about the river bank reciting their own separate prayers, purifying pots and containers in the river water, and generally readying themselves for the days ahead.

Each was dressed in the traditional flowing white robe known as the Rasta, the same garment that has been worn by Mandaeans for over a thousand years. A powerful sense of peace and calm rested gently over the entire scene and, apart from the occasional sound of a speedboat zipping past, nothing disturbed the feeling that what I saw before me could have been taking place more than a thousand years ago.

The Mandaean community trace the history of their faith back to the third century AD, making Mandaeanism one of the oldest monotheistic religions in the world. It is considered by the Mandaean community as both a religion and an ethnicity at the same time, with a spiritual and cultural heritage formed through thousands of years

of practice.

Mandaeans revere Adam, Noah and John the Baptist as major prophets, place great importance on flowing water as a source of life, and live a life guided by principles of peace, non-violence and compassion. Their traditional homeland is around the lower Euphrates, Tigris and Karun rivers in the Southern parts of Iraq and Iran.

In addition to being one of the oldest religions, it is also one of the most persecuted. Mandaeans have survived over 1000 years of persecution, largely at the hands of Muslims who generally consider them infidels. In modern times, particularly since the Islamic revolution in Iran and during the reign of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, they have occupied a precarious position in a number of societies.

Largely excluded from the protection of the laws of the land where they've traditionally resided, they have been mistreated, exploited and assaulted with impunity. However, since the overthrow of Saddam Hussein and the war in Iraq, persecution has increased dramatically. Imprisonment, torture and killings, and aggressive forced conversion to Islam, threaten the very existence of the Mandaean people.

There are now less than 100,000 Mandaeans around the world. It is estimated that only 4000 now remain in Iraq, and between 5000 and 10,000 in Iran. The rest have established diaspora communities around the world, Australia being one of the largest of these.

These communities are now struggling not only to preserve their unique cultural and religious identity, but also to prevent their extinction. Holding on to the traditions and ceremonies that have guided them for generations is crucial to this task.

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Across the five days of the Benja, hundreds of Sydney Mandaean will arrive at the river to be baptised. A small handful of holy men lead proceedings and guide the people, one by one, into the river to be completely immersed in the water.

“It is like opening the gate to the world of light,” said Rabbi Dr Brikha Nasoraia, a Mandaean spiritual leader. “These [five days] are the days of creation in which the divine characters emanated into the universe. This is before the Creation, so we are celebrating the creation before the creation. This is just the start of the existence in which God, the great living being, created life. It is the beginning of light shining to the whole Universe of creation.”

Baptism is one of the most important tenets of the Mandaean religion. Flowing – ‘living’ – water represents the connection to the World of Light, and baptism serves both as a connection to this world and as a means of purification.

As Dr Nasoraia explains, “The idea [of baptism] is not only to have forgiveness but to have a holy union with the World of Light, with heaven and also with God. For Madaeans it helps them to achieve enlightenment, purity and above all to revisit and be united with the World of Light.”

But for a community with a history of loss and pain as long as the Madaeans, the importance of the Benja goes beyond worship alone. “Madaeans are a very strong society,” says Dr Nasoraia, “They suffered a lot. By doing this they achieve some kind of strength and special power. So it’s a matter of healing as well from the wounds

and persecution that they suffered. When people are baptised it is a kind of redemption from all kinds of suffering, physical or spiritual. That’s why it is so important for them to participate.”

As I stood observing the activities on the river bank, and spoke to the participants, I couldn’t help but feel the weight of history upon me. For the people I met that day, the Benja represents a connection to a history of worship that has sustained the Mandaean people through generations, and a foundation of strength and community that gives hope for their continued existence as a people.

Community leader and president of the Sabian Mandaean Association Yassmen Yahya was my guide that morning. In the midst of a busy, modern life filled with work, study, family and more, she – and many other Madaeans – put aside daily concerns and focus on a deeper meaning. “I feel peace inside me. You feel you belong to something, that’s your identity, that’s who you are – when you are with these people you are part of them and they are part of you.”

The Mandaean community has been pursued across the world to the brink of destruction. And yet, here in a quiet Sydney park, a centuries-old culture in danger of disappearing is being maintained. Like a river running through time, the Benja and the ritual of baptism represent an unbroken line to ancestors of long ago. As Yassmen said, “All the persecution that has happened... how many people have been killed? How many people have been forced to leave their beliefs and their religion? But this thing still exists. For how many thousands of years, it still exists – we’re still here.” R











Belonging, Hope and Survival

By Nicola Conville

Yassmen Yahya fled Iraq with her young family to make a new life in Australia. She has since overcome many challenges and was recently elected as president of her local Mandaean community.

Can you tell us a bit about your background and the journey that led you to live here in Australia?

I fled Iraq in 2001, when it was still under Saddam's regime. My husband had been taken from our home in the middle of the night six months previously. It was so scary. The soldiers came at 3am - through the front door, the back door, from everywhere. My husband was still in his pajamas. It was winter and they wouldn't even let him put on a coat.

Over the next six months we searched everywhere for him. We didn't know if he was alive or dead. Finally I received a phone call from a man who asked me to meet with him. He gave me a small piece of paper with just two lines on it - it was from my husband, telling me to take our two young daughters and leave Iraq.

We fled to Jordan and eventually my husband joined us two years later. We had to pay money to the regime for his release. My youngest daughter was only one when my husband was taken and she was almost four when we got him back again.

In 2007 I came to Australia with the girls and my husband joined us two years later in 2009. It was very hard having our family torn apart during that time.

You were recently elected as president of The Sabian Mandaean Association. How did this come about?

When I first came to Australia I went to the Association to do some paperwork. At the time it was a community service run by older people and the computer knowledge there was lacking. I said, "Look, I know what I want, so if you let me use your systems I can get it myself."

I ended up helping them out in a volunteer capacity. I was going to English classes at the time, so after class I would go for two hours each day to help out.

Then I would pick up my daughters from school. Then I joined the board - I was actually the first female board member. After that, I became secretary. Then I was elected as president in December 2014.

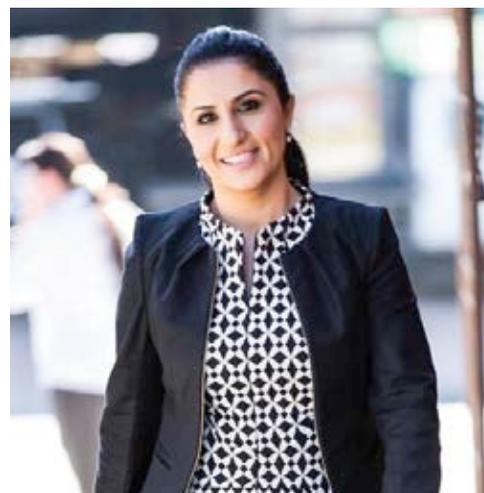
I am the first woman to be elected as president of The Sabian Mandaean Association, and as far as I know I am the only female president in a similar role in the world.

Can you explain the importance of the Association?

Mandaeans are a minority group and we have suffered a lot of persecution. There are around 10,000 Mandaeans currently living in Australia, and 5000-6000 of these are living in the Liverpool and Fairfield area, where the association is based.

Our association focuses a lot on immigration and just telling people who we are and what we do. We have a community centre which we opened three years ago in Liverpool. It consists of a church for prayer and services and a community hall for events and activities.

We have also purchased land in Wallacia in order to build a place of worship and hold our baptisms there. It



has taken a long time for us to get planning permission and it's a major project which we have undertaken with the help of the Mandaean Synod.

What kinds of services does the Association provide? And what are your responsibilities as president?

The centre is very busy and my role carries huge responsibility. A big part of my job is just ensuring everything is in place and runs smoothly.

The resource centre and church are open from 9.30am to 3pm, then the centre closes briefly and is open again from around 4pm until 10pm. We do a lot of casework and community work. We provide services for women, hold meetings and run classes and we hold playgroups for kids.

We also have picnics and run four or five large community events every year. We have a soccer team and run activities with that every weekend. We have a big Mandaean soccer team cup every December. And we also hold information sessions about Centrelink and access to legal advice.

I work at STARTTS full time, and after work I usually go to the community centre. Sometimes I don't get home until 11pm. I'm also dealing with emails and phone calls constantly.

Because the centre is solely run by volunteers, I need to make myself available to them when they need help or they're feeling frustrated, or they just need someone to talk to. We do, sometimes, cover volunteers' transport or food costs, but it's very nominal. My weekends are also spent at the community centre.

How do you fit the role in around your family life?

It is very demanding, but my family is very supportive. My husband is great and while the girls are older now - Sally is 16 and in year 10, and Sarah is 19 and in her

second year at UTS - to some extent they actually need me more than ever. It is really hard trying to manage everything.

Most of the time Sally is with me. She comes to the centre for a few hours in the evening after school. On Sundays we have family time after I finish at the centre. We always enjoy a late dinner together and just spend time talking and catching up. It is very challenging trying to balance everything.

Did you have to break new ground in terms of being accepted as a female in a senior position in your community?

When I first joined the board I was the only female. Another woman joined the board a while ago, but she didn't stay for long, unfortunately.

It was very difficult initially, because I was responsible for finances and sometimes people don't like to ask a female about such things. But people saw that I worked hard and began to believe in me. And I also had the support of our community leaders. I've been working in the community since 2008 and will hold my position as president for two years.

I am doing a social work degree part-time but I have put off my studies for now because I am so busy. When I finish my presidency, my plan is to finish my degree, focus on my career, and maybe just relax for a little while!

What are your plans for the future?

I want to build systems within the association so that if someone leaves, the service they provide doesn't disappear, which is what has been happening up until now.

I'm getting a lot of support from STARTTS to put systems in place and implement policies and procedures so that whoever comes after me won't have to start from the beginning.

It would be great to get some funding for the centre too so we are not just relying on volunteers all the time. That would help to take the pressure off.

Why is it important for you to be so active within your community?

It means that there's hope, and reassurance of the survival of the community for a long time. The "Mandi" community, as Mandaeans call it, is a home away from home.

It is the home to Mandaeans who are making a life here. The importance for me to be so active is because it's where I belong, something that I have been trying to attain since I left Iraq - and I'm not the only one. A sense of belonging, hope and survival is what is driving the community to give back and assist in any way we can. ☺