

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 Mandaicans 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 Mandaeism 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.

Mandaicans 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. Mandaicans 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 Mandaican people.

There are now less than 100,000 Mandaicans 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.

“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.”

Across the five days of the Benja, hundreds of Sydney Mandaeans 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 Mandaeans 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 Mandaeans, the importance of the Benja goes beyond worship alone. “Mandaeans 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 Mandaeans – 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**









