



MANDAENS, a unique culture



As the Iraqi war battles into its fifth year, one minority religious group wonders if this latest conflict will finally destroy their ancient faith and culture. REBECCA HINCHEY spoke with some of the Mandaens taking refuge in Australia and found a people despairing for their very survival.

Shoulders shake, legs fly and hands clap in intricate rhythmical patterns. The wooden floor is packed as men and women revel in the joys of their frenetic traditional dance. It is the first anniversary of the Mandaean Women's Union and tonight they celebrate with much abandon.

There are perhaps 300 Mandaens gathered for the night's festivities. Almost every single one of those smiling faces hides the scars of deep personal tragedy.

"Before the war there were approximately 60,000 Mandaens in Iraq, now we have only 5,000," religious leader Rabbi Dr Brikha Nasoriaia of the International Mandaean Nasoraean Supreme Council said.

"The Mandaens have always been persecuted, but this is definitely the worst," he said.

"Mandaens live under pressure always. Always they are being attacked. Always hiding themselves," explained Dr Amad Mtashar of the Mandaean Australian Community Cultural Club.



The ancient Mandaean religion

Mandaeans are believed to be one of the oldest practicing monotheistic religions in the world. They have been living in Iraq and Iran for thousands of years.

Mandaeans are sometimes confused with Christians, possibly because of their history of persecution in the Middle-East, and their affinity with both the Adam and Eve story and tales (if somewhat different) of John the Baptist.

In fact, Mandaeans have their own faith, separate to any others - tiny in number and ancient beyond age.

While they share some things in common with Christian beliefs, they are not Christians. Their first prophet is Adam, and John the Baptist is their most recent prophet.

The baptism for which John is widely known is central to Mandaean beliefs and practices.

On any given Sunday, take a stroll along the banks of the Nepean river and you can watch modern Australian Mandaeans take part in this centuries old cleansing ritual.

Both a means of purging oneself of sin and protecting one's soul from earthly wrongs, baptism is the most important of the five tenets of their religion. The other tenets are a belief and love of god, prayer, fasting, and alms-giving.

Quoting from the Holy Book, the Ginza Raba religious leader, Ganzivra Salah Chohili, says, "If you see anyone hungry, feed him or her, if you see anyone thirsty, give him or her a drink and when you do a good deed with your right hand, don't tell your left hand and vice versa."

Peace is also extremely important to Mandaeans, who adhere to a non-violent code even when being attacked.

Religion by birth only Persecuted through the centuries

In contrast to many religions, Mandaeanism is only achieved through birth. No one can either convert to the faith or marry into it.

"Marrying only between each other is a problem when you're dispersed," said Rabbi Dr Brikha Nasoriaia.

The concerted effort to obliterate Mandaeans in Iraq and Iran, together with their dispersion across the rest of the world, presents additional hardships.

"Exposure of young people to a new Western culture is placing their traditional faith at risk," explained Esber Melhem, a counsellor at STARTTS working with the Mandaean community.

"Many Mandaeans, especially older Mandaeans, are concerned that their children will be lost to their faith; through marriage with others, through new ideas, through different avenues," he said.

Community leaders estimate that there are somewhere between 3,500 to 4,000 Mandaeans living in Australia, mostly in the Liverpool and Fairfield areas. Most have come here as asylum seekers and refugees, although a significant number have also arrived on skilled, business, and spouse visas. It is likely that this is one of the largest Mandaean populations in the world, with estimates putting their total population across all countries at just 70,000.

"For thousands of years they have survived, despite attempts to obliterate them," said Gamal Dawlatly, another STARTTS counsellor working with Mandaeans.

"It would be tragic if during our time, during times of such civilisation, their religion and culture disappeared," he said.

Ganzivra Salah Chohili agrees, "Mandaeans need a refuge in Australia so that those facing genocide may live and so that an ancient community with a rich and historically significant culture and spirituality may not be obliterated and exterminated, but may contribute to enriching Australia."

Persecution of the Mandaeans is almost as old as the religion itself, with early recordings of suffering at the hands of the Persian dynasty in the third century AD. Genocidal pogroms occurred again in 1480, 1632, 1782, 1853, 1870, 1890 and 1915.

Yet most Mandaeans can't recall times ever being this bad.

Jo French, a Child and Adolescent Counsellor with STARTTS, put it starkly when she said, "Almost every Mandaean client has survived kidnapping, either directly or through a close family member," she said.

Fadia Al Faris, a young Mandaean woman, says of her life in Iraq, "There's no freedom, there's no safety, we can't practice our religion."

Another young woman, also a recent Mandaean arrival from Iraq, describes the horror of this situation when she says, "We came here because of the persecution against the Mandaeans. [In Iraq] they come to your house and they slaughter you."

Robberies, assaults, forced conversion, confiscation of property, arbitrary dismissals, arrests, kidnappings and killings; the list of threats against Mandaeans in Iraq is both long and frightening.

The Mandaeans are persecuted because extremist Iraqi and Iranian Muslim clerics believe they are infidels who should be converted to the Islamic faith. Dedicated to peace and non-violence, the Mandaeans are an easy target for cowards and bullies.

Another significant factor is the wealth of many Mandaeans.

"We have been specifically more targeted than other groups because of our trade professions, such as jewellery and gold making. When there is lawlessness such people are mostly targeted," said Sabri Fezai, a member of the Mandaean Association.

Kidnap and ransom attacks have especially been a problem for richer Mandaeans and other minorities in the rapidly disintegrating democracy called Iraq.

Mandaeans in immigration detention

While wealth helped many Mandaeans escape, the cost borne was much higher than the gold and silver exchanged for their passage to freedom.

Like refugees from Afghanistan, Mandaeans became the victims of the international 'war of terror' twice over. Once in their homeland, then again when arriving in Australia on 'illegal' routes from Indonesia.

Locked in detention behind high wire fences they spent months, even years sharing quarters with some of the very people they were trying to escape.

As immigration detainees they lived with all the harsh realities of life behind razor wire. Particularly women and children (who came in greater numbers) were exposed to suicide attempts, repeated roll calls, inadequate medical care, little education and play facilities, exposure to acts of violence and brutality, interrogation by immigration officials, interrupted sleep and torches being shone in their faces many times a night.

Thankfully, almost all the Mandaeans who resisted the pressure to repatriate have now been granted permanent protection. But the effects of trauma, dangerous journeys, mandatory detention and a period of temporary Australian protection have taken a heavy toll on community members.

Research by STARTTS among members of the Mandaean community who experienced detention and temporary protection has shown that when compared with other Mandaean refugees not affected by these two policies they are at increased risk of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and associated problems.



Art classes with children from Iraq

Settlement issues in Australia

"The Mandaeans are suffering badly. We don't work ... life is expensive here," said Sabri Fezai.

Coming from mostly educated, middle-class backgrounds to low-paying menial jobs has been demoralising for some Mandaeans, much as it has for other refugees and migrants in the past. And that's for community members that can find work. Many can't, despite a strong working culture and high levels of education.

Unemployment is mostly related to a failure to recognise overseas qualifications and a lack of English skills which Dr Amad Mtashar describes as "being deaf and dumb in this language".

Like for many communities, the 510 hours provided by the government is often inadequate preparation for meaningful employment in Australia.

Lack of English also means that the Mandaean community has had problems communicating their circumstances, issues and requirements to service providers and government decision-makers.

Yaloofi dietary requirements (similar to the Jewish kosher) and a desire to build both a community recreation centre and a mendi (place of worship) are three specific concerns that Mandaeans are working to address.

Like refugees before and no doubt after them, the problems of the Mandaean community are complex, multilayered and overwhelming.

The future for Mandaeans in Australia

Yet there is hope for Mandaeans in Australia.

They have skilled and experienced leaders.

Their talents are beginning to be recognised. The Casula Powerhouse Museum has featured a number of exhibitions by gifted Mandaean artists.

Children whose schooling was interrupted by war and life in refugee camps are attending classes and developing skills they only dreamed of. A volunteer artist and teacher, Ibrahim Barsi is helping a group of young Mandaean boys realise their hopes of becoming artists. They have just completed their second exhibition.

Many young people are undertaking tertiary education.

The Sabian Mandaean Association soccer team looks like they will join the Federation next year.

Mandaean men and women, young and old, who just two years ago could not speak English, are studying, volunteering and working.

There are many jewellery shops owned and run by Mandaeans.

These are not isolated examples. They are a true picture of a culture and religion that is desperate to survive, and desperate to become part of their new community. Desperate to say thank you for the help they have been given and desperate for more. ■