

# **The Iranian Children of Adam**

*A study on the Iranian Sabaeen Mandaean  
community*

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*To the Iranian Mandaeans, in appreciation and friendship*

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## Summary

This dissertation investigates about the current status of the Iranian Sabaeen Mandaean community, which is a relatively anonymous ethno-religious tribe. They claim to be direct off-springs of the first human creature who is Prophet Adam, and the initial monotheist faith that is Mandaism. However, regularly scholars of religions' history locate the advent of their faith in the same historical context as the rise of Judaism.

The main settlements of Sabaeen Mandaeans have always been in Mesopotamia, and their current homelands are in Iraq, and Iran. The Sabaeans are mentioned in Quran as monotheist People of the Book, however there has always been a disagreement in the Islamic jurisprudence that whether the Mandaean community is identical with Quranic Sabaeans or not. Due to such suspicion, Mandaism is not recognized as a distinct faith in the Iranian constitution; the issue which has affected the Iranian Mandaeans' social rights in a negative manner.

In the current dissertation, I elaborate about the historical origins of the Mandaism as a monotheist faith and contextualize it among other big religious traditions like Judaism, and Christianity. I also write about the essentials of the Mandaean faith and discuss the vital role of ritual practices in the perpetuation of the orthodox Mandaism. Next, I explain the unrivaled role of the Iranian Mandaean priesthood in maintaining the Mandaean community as an independent faith community. Moreover, I point to the socio-political activism of the Mandaean priesthood to build constructive ties with the officials in the Iranian state and with the reformist, democratic forces who regard Sabaeen Mandaean as a legitimate minority with granted social rights. I also explain how the Mandaean priesthood attempts to maintain a traditional version of the Mandaen community and fight the unconventional interpretations regarding the orthodox manner of performing rituals, and other religious commands.

Further, I analyze the actual circumstances of the contemporary Iranian Mandaean community and their ongoing challenges. The strong wave of the emigration among the Iranian Mandaens and the rise of new interpretations, demands among the Mandaean laypeople and youth have subjected them into fundamental challenges which have the potential to transform the Iranian Mandaean society from its intact and original constitution.



## **Acknowledgments**

Surely, in writing this dissertation I owe great thanks to many people; but here, I should gratitude some of them with names.

First, I should thank Professor Brynjar Lia, for his acute vision and constructive comments on my writings.

I need to thanks Sahi Khamisi, the Iranian Mandaean scholar, who has always been sympathetic and helpful.

My great thanks to Dr. Hussain Abbasi, the knowledgeable specialist on the Iranian minorities, who assisted me to acquire official permission for conducting field research in Iran.

I must thank my family, more specifically my mother and brother, who have encouraged me to continue my research activities and assisted me to do them practically in Iran.

My special thanks go to my wife Asieh, who has always been interested in my research and supported me whole-heartedly in writing this thesis.

Finally, I gratitude all the knowledgeable who have been answerable to my inquiries as to the written English.

## **Transliteration**

In this dissertation, I use the same equivalents as mentioned in the International Journal of Middle East Studies; ‘IJMES Transliteration Guide.’” But, I do not use diacritical marks as ‘ayn (‘) and hamza (’) in transcription of the persons’ names. The initial letters of the organizations’ labels are written using the capital letters, and the entire label is written in italic. I do not translate, or transliterate the Persian and Arabic words which are commonly used in English; fatwa, Karun, Ahvaz, etcetera.



## Forewords

Who are Sabaeen Mandaean? In which faith they believe? How does it feel to be an Iranian Mandaean? These are examples of the questions which have always engaged my attention. It has been wondering for me to hear various contradictory statements in reply to such inquiries. Even in the Iranian Mandaean ancestral land which is located in Ahvaz, Khuzestan; native non-Mandaean residents does not know about a distinct faith community as Madaeans; rather they know of *Sobbis* who are the same as Sabaeans. Such a notable lack of awareness on the Iranian Sabaeen Madaeans, even among their neighboring native tribes, has always been intriguing and driven me to think of providing some methodic knowledge by myself. The current work is my initial step in the same path.

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# 1 Introductory observations

In this introductory chapter I discuss the nature of my dissertation; the specific nature, which distinguishes writing about Iranian Sabaeen Mandaean in an academic manner from the established scholarly endeavors. The main reason for such distinctiveness can be seen in the fact that there is a drastic gap in the academic production about the contemporary Mandaean ethno-religion and its followers, which surely includes the Iranian followers of Mandaism. The main emphasis of this thesis is on understanding the actively working dynamisms for persistence of the Iranian Mandaean community, which have been routinely overlooked in the available scholarly literature. Here I begin by formulating my research question and then proceed to discuss the literature, methodology, theory, and ethical issues of my work.

## 1- Research question

What is the current status of the Sabaeen Mandaean community in Iran, and what are its main challenges?

## 2- Existing literature

Many researchers have sought to understand the true implications of the Mandaean faith, and being a Sabaeen Mandaean believer. However, there are some iconic writers whose works must be consulted by any researcher about Mandaism.

**Lady Ethel S. Drower (1879-1972).** L E S. D is one of the most notable writers whose writings on the Mandaean believers in their homelands, Iraq and Iran, have had ground-breaking impact on the later scholarly tradition. Due to her long stay in Iraq, she had the opportunity of direct communication with the Iraqi Mandaean settlements; and for the same

reason her works still have a great empirical value<sup>1</sup>. The main focus of Drower's academic attempts is the Mandaean religious tradition; she is interested in the study of Mandaeism as a faith system.

**Rudolf Macuch (1919-1993).** R M is one of the most distinguished linguists who spent most of his life studying the ancient and modern Mandaic, which is the original language of the Mandaean tribe<sup>2</sup>. His professional collaboration with Lady Drower for long years resulted in a magnificent Mandaic dictionary, which has been unrivaled to date<sup>3</sup>. He learned spoken Mandaic from the Iranian Madaeans and in 1953 made academicians aware that the language was still alive among some of the Iranian Mandaean families<sup>4</sup>.

**Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley.** J. J. B is probably the most iconic researcher on the Mandaeism/Madaeans among the scholars who are still alive. She has researched both the roots of the Mandaean faith as located in the greater context of the rise of other divine faiths such as Christianity, Judaism and conducted field research among the present-day Mandaean communities around the world. As a prominent academician in the field of religions studies, her main ambition of research is to find a right historical stand for the Mandaean religion among other religions. Also, she has done much activism to bring the Madaeans rights of freedom of belief, and asylum-seeking to the attention of many Western governments<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> E. S. Drower, *The Madaeans of Iraq and Iran; Their Cults, Customs, Magic Legends and Folklore*, (Oxford, Clarendon Press: 1937).

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Macuch, *Handbook of Classical and Modern Mandaic*. Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 1965.

<sup>3</sup> E. S. Drower, Hon. D. Litt. Oxon, Hon. D.D. Uppsala, R. Macuch, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1963).

<sup>4</sup> Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, *The Madaeans: Ancient Texts and Modern People*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>5</sup> Published on 03.02.2017, <https://www.facebook.com/monther.alhadad/posts/10155104499559662>



**Edmondo F. Lupieri.** E F. L is also a specialist of the history of religion and tries to explore the theological foundations of the Mandaean faith as distinguished from other faiths; therefore he has written on the Mandaeanism as the last surviving Gnostic faith sect. Additionally, he described the actual life of the Mandaeans and attempted to provide some knowledge about the current situation of Mandaeans<sup>6</sup>. However, it seems that his notes on Mandaeanism from the viewpoint of religious studies are more precise than his description of the contemporary Mandaeans<sup>7</sup>.

**Mehrdad Arabestani.** M A's point of departure in studying Mandaeanism/Mandaeans is anthropological. He has written extensively in Persian and in English about the actual life of the Iranian Mandaeans<sup>8</sup>. Additionally he has done field research in one of the Sabaeans' main diasporic communities which is located in Australia. He is mainly engaged with the inquiry of how the current dispersion of Mandaeans around the planet could modify the traditional manner of practicing the Mandaean faith. He observes that there is no longer a unique narration about the requirements of doing the rites in the proper manner<sup>9</sup>.

As we note, all the scholars mentioned here have taken significant steps to re-introduce the Mandaean faith in academia during the last and current centuries. However, as we have seen, they have mainly studied the history/scriptures/language/rituals of the Mandaean faith and Sabaeans Mandaeans. So, there is still a critical gap within the Mandaean studies since the concrete circumstances of Mandaeans in homeland and Diaspora have not received much attention in the scholarly literature. In the framework of this thesis, I attempt to partly

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<sup>6</sup> Edmondo Lupieri, Charles Hindley, tr., *The Mandaeans: The Last Gnostics*, (Grand Rapids, William B. Edmans Publishing Company, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Edmondo F. Lupieri, "MANDAEANS i. HISTORY," *Encyclopædia Iranica*, online edition, 2012, available at <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mandaeans-1> (accessed on 20 January 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Mehrdad Arabestani, *Ta'mīdīyān-e Qarīb; Motāle'ī Mardom-shenākhī dar Dīn-varzī-ye Sābe'īn-e Mandā'ī-ye Iran* [Isolated Baptists; an anthropological study on the religious practice by the Iranian Sabaeans Mandaeans], (Tehran: Nashr-e Afkar: 2004).

<sup>9</sup> From recorded personal interview with him.

address this gap and explore the current status of the Sabaeen Mandaeans in one of their ancestral lands which is situated in Khuzestan, Iran.

### **3- Methodological Notes**

It is important to remind ourselves that the scholarly tradition on the Mandaean faith and the concrete status of its believers is still being formed. That is, there are various facts about the Mandaean community which have not been dealt with in the published academic works. So, doing proper fieldwork to gather authentic data about the research theme has been a professional ‘must’ throughout my studies on Mandaism/Sabaeen Mandaeans. The data, based upon which I write this dissertation, are gathered via two main method/sources. But, before going through those matters, it is necessary to discuss some linguistic matters.

#### **3-1 Persian competency**

Throughout my fieldwork, Persian has been the main working language; since my emphasis is on studying the Iranian Mandaean community. Being a native Persian speaker has been a great asset in conducting my research activities; since it has enabled me to look in-depth at the writings of the Iranian Mandaeans which are mostly in Persian. Also, I could communicate with members of the Mandaean community more intimately. Although many of the Mandaean families of Khuzestan speak in a local dialect of Arabic, they all understand and communicate very well in Persian. Now, the written productions of the Iranian Mandaeans in Persian require scrutiny.

#### **3-2 Writings by the Iranian Mandaean community**

None of the notable scholars who have been in touch with the Mandaean community in Iran pay much attention to the written words of the Iranian Mandaeans, themselves. It may look a little improbable, but I have concluded that the reason for such a lack of attentiveness can be found in the fact that writings by Sabaeen Mandaeans have until recently been very difficult to gain access. In order to explain the matter in more details I can cite my own experience of discovering one of the most notable sources which deals with the ongoing life of the Iranian Mandaeans.

##### **3-2-1 *beitmanda*<sup>10</sup>**

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<sup>10</sup> House of wisdom.

*Beitmanda* is the online bulletin which covers the latest affairs of the Iranian Sabaeans on a monthly basis<sup>11</sup>. When I began reading about the Mandaean faith and its Iranian followers at the very beginning of my masters' studies in the autumn 2015, I faced the inadequacy of the existing data in an immediate manner; notably, due to the reason that there were, and still are, almost no traces of the voices of the Iranian Madaeans, themselves. I had the idea that there might be an online portal where Sabaeans of Khuzestan discuss their faith, and ongoing challenges; but finding such a website appeared to be a thoroughly disappointing mission; a disappointment which could be emphasized by noting that there was not any reference to the Mandaean portal anywhere in the written or online articles.

However, as the result of long and continuous online searches I found *beitmanda* almost by accident during the autumn 2015. I was excited and grateful for finding such a primary source, but at the same time perplexed; for, even if today a reader with Persian abilities looks through it, s/he will find not any explicit indication of its affiliation with the Association of Sabaeans Madaeans, which is the governing council of the Iranian Madaeans.

Basically, *beitmanda* is a static webpage onto which the PDF files of the Madaeans monthly journal are uploaded. Only after checking through some of those files, the observer will note that this is the website of the Iranian Sabaeans community. This is hard to assert it with certainty, but it is quite probable that there is a hidden motivation behind being so anonymous.

Given the fact that the Sabaeans Madaeans' status as followers of a divine faith is not confirmed in the Iranian laws, and looking back to historically-rooted misconceptions about the true nature of the Mandaean community and its rituals-matters that I will explain in the course of this dissertation- the Iranian Madaeans are accustomed to not presenting and discussing their beliefs and circumstances openly. Additionally, there is evidence which proves that launching *beitmanda* was the outcome of a long struggle within the Iranian Sabaeans community. It had taken a long time to persuade the conservative and influential

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<sup>11</sup> Firstly accessed October 2015, <http://www.beitmanda.com/>

section of the faith community that the application of online media is an unavoidable necessity<sup>12</sup>.

At any rate, *beitmanda* is an absolutely essential source in studying the current status of the Iranian Mandaean community. I can provide much evidence to support this claim, but most notably *beitmanda* is of a unique status as a source for primary data, since it is actually the ‘single’ media from which the voices of the Iranian Mandaeans can be heard. There are a variety of facts about the Mandaean community of Iran which can be learned from studying *beitmanda*, in an orderly and methodic manner. To mention some, we may learn about their ongoing challenges, demands, rituals, activities, and social status through *beitmanda*.

I contacted the official e-mail of the journal and asked the person in charge to upload issues of the journal from past years, and they did so in a generous manner. However, for the reason that it has not been long since *beitmanda* was launched, there is only access to the issues which have been produced as PDF files originally. That is, there are issues from relatively far years which have been published offline. Actually, it was an important part of my field search to look for such sources in the Iranian documentation centers, and to ask the Iranian Sabaeans, themselves, about those data. As a result of my hard work, I could retrieve valuable reports by the Iranian Mandaean community long before the launch of *beitmanda* as an online source.

### **3-3 Personal communication and interview**

Another essential source/method which I have applied is primary data gathered by communicating with informants from the Iranian Sabaeans community. During the third semester of my masters’ studies in the autumn of 2016 I went to Iran and Khuzestan, to interview people who were knowledgeable about the current status of the Iranian Mandaeans. I visited many personalities, which I prefer to categorize in order to discuss methodically.

#### **3-3-1 Members of the Association of Sabaeans Mandaeans**

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<sup>12</sup> From documented personal communication with Sahi Khamisi; former member of the association, and a Mandaean researcher.

During my stay in Ahvaz, capital of Khuzestan province which is the spiritual and physical settlement for the Iranian Mandaean, first I went to visit the active members of the association. I looked for two representatives of the association in the jewelry bazaar and after long searches found them in their boutiques; many of the Iranian Madaeans have traditionally been engaged in the gold-smithing enterprise. One of those two people is currently head of the association, but I prefer not to mention their names; since they talked to me in a friendly and informal manner and refused to be recorded.

Both persons were highly attentive not to talk about the issues which could probably be regarded as sensitive by the Iranian authorities. However they provided some significant notes about their viewpoints, and challenges which I develop in my treatise, later. To mention one of such notes, it was clear that they look to the Mandaean community as the 'chosen people' with divinely bestowed privileges. As some of the notable researchers have argued, to believe in the *myth of ethnics election* is an important mechanism thanks to which many ethnic communities have prolonged their entity and managed to survive throughout the vicissitudes of history<sup>13</sup>. Confirming to the idea of such specialists, those members-and most of the other Madaeans- believed that the Mandaean community is an ethnically or racially pure, and unblended society which contributes to the Madaeans' great achievements throughout the world<sup>14</sup>.

### **3-3-2 The Iranian Mandaean priests**

Besides the association, Mandaean priesthood plays a crucial role in the spiritual/social affairs of the Iranian Madaeans. In the course of the current thesis I will discuss in detail the significant function of clerics in the continuation of the Mandaean faith and community, in its traditionally intact state. During my field research I talked with many Iranian Madaeans with priestly background and interviewed three active priests.

Firstly, I visited and interviewed Ganzibra Najah Choheyli, who is the highest ranking spiritual authority among the contemporary Iranian Madaeans, at the shores of Karun River where he was doing his daily prayers. Due to his high position, he was cautious in discussing

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<sup>13</sup> Anthony D. Smith, "Chosen peoples: Why ethnic groups survive", *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 15:3 (1992): 441.

<sup>14</sup> From personal unrecorded communication with the members of Association of Sabaeen Madaeans.

Mandaeans' current issues but explained that their hopes to be recognized as the followers of an authentic faith have increased under Rouhani's presidency.

Secondly, I contacted and interviewed Z who is a young, radical Mandaean priest. I do not mention him by full name, since he had serious criticism of the ways in which Mandaean fellows are treated by the Iranian officials. He was not afraid to explain why the Iranian Sabaeans experience many deprivations, and discriminations. Our interview took part along Karun River for about two hours. Although the interview was pre-ordered, he had not known of my questions before the talk, but he was quiet flexible toward discussing 'hot topics' as emigration, and difficulties of being Sabaeans Mandaean among Shiite Muslim majority of the Iranian society.

Finally, I interviewed Tarmida Sam Zahrouni who is a well-known and respected priest among the Sabaeans Mandeans of Khuzestan. Our talk took place in Sabaeans' *mandi* which is both a temple for performing rituals, and a salon for ceremonial gatherings. Although routinely personalities of the Iranian Mandaean community require the interviewer to provide the written version of their questions beforehand, Tarmida Sam did not ask me to do such; probably because I had tried hardly before the talk occasion to obtain a state-officiated warranty for my field activities and he was satisfied with that. During our dialogue, I asked about almost all aspects of the Iranian Mandeans life, including misconceptions about Sabaeans Mandeans by their neighboring Muslims, and he answered the inquiries patiently.

### **3-3-3 Non-Mandaean experts**

The last group of interlocutors consists of people who have been in touch with the Iranian Mandeans for long years. I visited Dr. Mehrdad Arabestani many times in his office at the Faculty of social sciences, at the University of Tehran [*Dāneshkade-ye olūm-e Ejtemā'ī, Dāneshgāh-e Tehran*], where he researches and teaches. I have already mentioned the significance of his academic endeavors on the Iranian Mandaean community in the section for existing literature.

I also went to Ahvaz which is located far from Tehran to interview Dr. Hussain Abbasi who is a specialist of Arabic literature and more specifically of the Sabaeans' poetical heritage. His deep understanding of the current affairs of the Iranian followers of all non-Islamic

faiths including the Sabaeen Mandeans was remarkable. We discussed many untold issues regarding the circumstances of the Mandaean faith/Sabaeans' life in Iran.

Finally, I interviewed Dr. Kiyanush Rad, a former member of the Iranian parliament from Ahvaz. He is the person who arranged meeting between the responsible of the Iranian Mandaean community with the Leader of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Khamenei about twenty years ago. The meeting resulted in famous *fatwa* by the Leader where he recognized Sabaeans as a genuine member of the People of the Book, stipulating;

People of the Book (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) are those who belong to a divine religion and consider themselves as followers of the prophets of Allah. They should have Holy Books as revealed to the Prophets; such as Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, and the Sabaeans; since, they [Sabaeans]- as we have inquired- are People of the Book too. So, they have rights of People of the Book. Interacting with them- in the framework of the Islamic regulations and morals- is not a problem<sup>15</sup>.

The significance of Ayatollah Khamenei's *fatwa* becomes clear, when we consider that according article 110 of the constitution, the Leader has the highest authority in the political structure of the Islamic Republic of Iran<sup>16</sup>.

#### 4- Theoretical outline

In the course of the current dissertation, I apply certain theoretical concepts in order to present my findings more academically. There are three main speculative viewpoints which I consult in my work.

##### 4-1 Chosen peoples

There is an established theoretical tradition which argues that communities with strong ethnic bonds are more likely to survive through the course of time; specially those that regard themselves to be racially privileged. As D. Smith puts it, survival of ethnic communities is dependent on maintaining attributes such as; “a collective name, a homeland, myths of

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<sup>15</sup> Al-Sayyed Ali al-Hosseini al-Khamenei, *Ajvebat al-Istiftā'āt* [Responses to the inquiries], Volume 1, (Beirut, Addar Al-Islammiyah, 1999), 96.

<sup>16</sup> Said Saffari "The legitimation of the Clergy's right to rule in the Iranian constitution of 1979, " *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 20:1(1993):75, DOI: [10.1080/13530199308705571](https://doi.org/10.1080/13530199308705571)

common ancestry and the like<sup>17</sup>.” This conceptualizing of the ethnic survival and community indicators fit well with any study of the Iranian Mandaean community; they understand themselves as an ethnic society with strong family ties, and a shared ancestry. The same impression has empowered the Iranian Sabaeen Mandaeans to maintain their community.

However, more powerful than to believe in a common heritage is the idea to be an ‘elected tribe.’ The ethnic communities which think that they should maintain their tradition since it is a sacred duty, have strong possibilities to endure through generations; “one is chosen on condition that one observes certain moral, ritual and legal codes, and only for as long as one continues to do so<sup>18</sup>.” Indeed, this idea has a great similarity to what the Iranian Mandaeans understand about being a Mandaean. They perform their ancient rituals, ceremonies, and customs only because they believe to be ancestors of a holy tradition. According to such a view, the Prophet Adam is the first human who inaugurated Mandaism and the current Mandaeans are privileged to be followers of the initial faith, and to have the same generation as Adam’s. Therefore, naturally they see themselves as an elected racial community; the fact which has assisted them to remain Mandaeans, as the members of a sacred ethno-religion.

#### **4-2 The identity as a multiple construction**

I also consult the theories which interpret native and indigenous identities as a mixture of several factors. This is workable in categorizing Sabaeen Mandaeans theoretically, since they have always attempted to maintain important components of an ethnically distinct identity. Religion, race, and language are regarded absolutely essential by the Iranian Mandaeans; in fact the chances of formulating a Mandaean identity are existentially dependent on the active presence of those three categories. Language plays a unique role in the constitution of a distinguished identity for many ethnic communities. As ‘constructionist approach to representation’ discusses “meaning is constructed through language. Thus, the words we choose to use... not only reflect but shape identity<sup>19</sup>.” Such an idea can be of great use in every study on the Iranian Mandaean community, because in the contemporary campaigns by

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<sup>17</sup> D. Smith, "Chosen peoples," 438.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 441.

<sup>19</sup> Hilary N. Weaver, "Indigenous Identity: What Is It and Who Really Has It?, " *The American Indian Quarterly*, 25.2: 2001, 242-243.



Sabaeen Mandaean to revive and maintain a Mandaean identity, learning and communicating with the ancestral ethno-religious language of the Mandaean tribe-Mandaic-has an ultimately important locus.

#### **4-3 Accommodationism**

The category of ‘accommodationist ethnocultural groups’ is appropriate for studies about the Iranian Mandaean, because accommodationists primarily seek to be part of the majority society<sup>20</sup>. Indeed, such a categorization exactly matches the social mobilization of the Iranian Mandaean to gain their desired citizenship rights. The Iranian Sabaeen community is politically conservative and do not have a socio-political change program, instead it struggles for guaranteeing its cultural legacy, while be accepted as a minority by the majority; “they want the option of retaining some of their cultural tradition without being discriminated against by the dominant society for their decision<sup>21</sup>.”

#### **5- Ethical considerations**

There are certain matters regarding the current status of the Mandaean community whose investigating requires ethical contemplation. To discuss those matters in more detail, we should look at the Iranian Sabaeen Mandaean community in a historical perspective. During the last forty years, which almost matches the period after the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Iranian Mandaean have tried to apply some strategies in order to secure the continuation of their traditional heritage. Most notably, they have attempted to prove to the authorities of the Islamic Republic that the Mandaean faith has a monotheist nature and is therefore eligible to be included in the Iranian constitution as a separate religion. Moreover, they have always claimed that due to ethnic limitation there is no Evangelical, and missionary activity within the Mandaean faith. This is a highly important strategy, since according Iranian laws,

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<sup>20</sup> Seyla, Benhabib, Ian Shapiro, and Danilo Petranovich, eds., *Identities, affiliations, and allegiances* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 307.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 307.

propagation of non-Islamic faiths within the Iranian territory is illegal and might be persecuted<sup>22</sup>.

At the moment, there are some heterodox, reformist voices among the Mandaean which argue that there is no need to be a member of the Mandaean family in order to become a follower of the faith. Those voices claim that there is evidence in the original sources of the faith, like its canonical scriptures, of conversion into Mandaism<sup>23</sup>. However, making such claims in public can create deep troubles for the Iranian Mandaean community. As we have already seen, the Sabaeen Madaeans have only been recognized as People of the Book for about two decades; the fact which can be taken as proof of the legally unstable circumstances of the Mandaean faith. Actually, if the state authorities learn about the Evangelical capabilities of the Sabaeen Madaeans, they will most probably revise their relatively tolerant treatment of the Sabaeans. Therefore, in the framework of the current treatise, I will not reveal the identity of the people with such reformist views.

Also, there are traces of vast disagreements within the Mandaean community; as issue highlighted by the ongoing activities of Mandaean non-priest scholars who distribute their ideas through online social media like Facebook. The Madaeans forming Diaspora has provided them opportunities to assert themselves more freely. Regarding Iranians, there are Sabaeans who question the formerly-accepted foundations of the Mandaean customs. For instance, they criticize the traditional role of the Mandaean priesthood as a powerful caste which has the legitimacy to decide every aspect of Madaeans' life. There is also an ongoing protest against the function of the Association of Sabaeen Madaeans. Critics accuse the association of being conservative and unable to defend the Iranian Mandaean community sufficiently<sup>24</sup>.

However, bringing such issues into public attention is not regarded positively by any of the Mandaean believers, since they think of themselves as a family which should solve its

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<sup>22</sup> Jennifer F. Cohen, "Islamic Law in Iran: Can It Protect the International Legal Right of Freedom of Religion and Belief," *Chi. J. Int'l L.* 9 (2008): 269.

<sup>23</sup> From personal communication with one of the Iranian Mandaean thinkers who has the idea. I do not reveal his identity due to the ethical considerations.

<sup>24</sup> From personal communication with some of the Iranian Mandaean activists who thinks this.

problems without the interference and surveillance of outsiders. It is a working idea for explaining the Mandaean situation that “belonging to an ethnic community endows members with the sense of sharing in a vastly extended ‘family’ which claims descent from a single, usually heroic and glorious ancestor<sup>25</sup>.” Due to the same self-perception, publicizing the individual disagreements among Sabaeans Madaeans will most probably be a source of irritation. I will therefore not go deep, and detailed into the internal controversies of Iranian Madaeans; rather I will describe the contradictory ideas by the Madaean reformists and conservatives as impersonal trends within the faith community.

Now, it is time to discuss the history, ritual, and cosmological aspects of the Madaean faith. I believe that for the purpose of this thesis, it is ultimately important to deal with such issues. First of all who are the Sabaeans, and what does ‘Sabaeans Madaean’ actually mean? Subsequent chapters will also discuss the signification of the Madaean priesthood, and its actual function within the Iranian Madaean community; and current status of the Iranian Madaeans, and their ongoing challenges.

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<sup>25</sup> D. Smith, "Chosen peoples ":438.

## 2 Mandaean Faith and Sabaeen Mandaean Community; History and Rituals

In this chapter I provide a guideline to the foundations of the Mandaean religion and its historical evolution. Doing so is highly important, since among other, it enables us to note the significance of rites, as conducted by the priests, in the continuation of the ancient faith.

Actually, this section primarily seeks to explain why certain ritual procedures are so vital in the view of current Madaeans, and what has distinguished Mandaism as a monotheist faith in a historical perspective. In order to do so, I need to begin with the very ‘Sabaeen Madaeans’ appellation; because there is a sort of ambiguity around the word itself.

### 1- Terminology

The composite term Sabaeen Madaeans-*Al-Sābe’at al-Mandā’iyūn* [Arabic], and *Sābe’in-e Mandāyī* [Persian] - is an indicator of the difficulties that writing about the denotation of the Mandaean faith involve; because it refers back to two historically distinguishable traditions. The word Sabaeen is the term by which the Islamic tradition will identify follower(s) of the Mandaean faith, and the word Mandaean is the word believers in the Mandaean faith, themselves, apply to their identity. At a deeper look, however, it is possible to find a shared historical ground for both words. Linguistically, the word Sabaeen

... derives from the root *s-b-gh* in Arabic. The verb signifies, in the first form, “to dye, to bathe, to immerse”, whence, in the second form, “to baptize (by immersion)”. Consequently, the noun denotes “Baptists”, named three times in the Qur’ān (II, 62; V, 69; XXII, 17), in the company of the Believers, the Jews and the Christians, with whom they share the title of “people of the Book” (*ahl al-kitāb*)<sup>26</sup>.

As we can see although Sabaeen is a term that Muslims use to denote the Madaeans, it has roots in the essential ritual procedure of the Mandaean tradition which is baptism. The term Mandaean is not well known among Muslims, and is a reminiscent of a terminology which tries to purify the Mandaean tradition from non-Mandaean imports. Scholars of the Mandaean language argue that ‘Mandaean’ is rooted in the Aramaic term *mandā* which indicates “knowledge; especially personified as *manda d-hiia* [literally “knowledge-of-life”]; the

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<sup>26</sup> C.E. Bosworth, E. Vandonzel, W.P. Heinrichs, G. Lecomte, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Volume VIII, (Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1995), 675.

Lightworld messenger and] the outstanding Savior-spirit of Mandaean religion<sup>27</sup>”. So, one may fairly interpret the Sabaeian Mandaean designation as a term which implies ritualistic and epistemic dimensions of the Mandaean faith at the same time.

As some writers have formulated this matter, the word Sabaeian which originates from the Islamic tradition is the label which Mandaean use in their communications with Muslim neighbors. That is, if a Muslim citizen asks how do you categorize your religious affiliation; they will answer with Sabaeians as referred in Quran. However, “within their community and to friendly outsiders, they identify themselves as Madaeans<sup>28</sup>.” Throughout my fieldwork I met Madaeans who were sensitive to the word and only recognized Mandaean as their label; they mentioned Sabaeian in a mocking tone, as if Sabaeian is not the true Mandaean<sup>29</sup>. But in the framework of the current dissertation it suffices to remind ourselves that Sabaeians are Madaeans and vice versa.

## 2- The onset of Madaeism (Mandaean version)

The complexities of elaborating the historical roots of the Mandaean community are not limited to linguistic considerations. There is in fact an unbridgeable gap between the Madaeans’ conception of the advent of their religion and the narration of scholars of religions. It is fairer, I think, to first look into the Madaeans’ own account of the genesis of their faith. Sabaeian Madaeans themselves firmly claim to be adherents of the first monotheist religion, as they call the Prophet Adam their primary messenger. In fact, they draw a line between the creation of the human race and the dawn of the Mandaean faith. They believe in what has been mentioned in their canonical holy scripture *Ginza Rba* [Great Treasure] about the creation of the first human being who is Prophet Adam and the initiation

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<sup>27</sup> Drower, *A Mandaic Dictionary*, 247.

<sup>28</sup> Karen Baker, "The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Mandaean Diaspora: New Opportunities to Reach Iraqi Mandaean Refugees with the Gospel." (*Masters Thesis*, 2007), 3.

<sup>29</sup> From friendly, undocumented communications.

of divine faiths at the same time; Adam is the first creature of the divine and the primary messenger whose religion is called Mandaism<sup>30</sup>.

### 3- Mandaean notion of the divine

The term *yardna* has a unique status in the ancient faith, because it represents the perception of the divine in Mandaism;

The core or nucleus of the Mandaean religion through all vicissitudes and changes is the ancient worship of the principles of life and fertility. The Great Life is a personification of the creative and sustaining force of the universe ... [which] remains mystery and abstraction. The symbol of the Great Life is 'living water' that is flowing water or *yardna*<sup>31</sup>.

From this passage we may conclude that the God of the Mandaean religion is an undetermined mystic conception. But here it will suffice to note the vital significance of Life, itself, and its earthly manifestation which is running water, for the Mandaean religion. It should be recognizable why the orderly exercise of baptism in running water has a vital significance for the Mandaean faith.

#### 3-1 The Mandaean diviners

Besides Prophet Adam who is the first diviner of the Mandaean religion, Sabaeans believe in other divine messengers such as *Šitil*, *Nū*, and *Shūm*<sup>32</sup>. The two last prophets are the same as Noah, and Sam who are recognized as diviners by the other religious traditions too. The scholars argue that the last prophet of the Mandaean faith and its most prominent figure, *Yahyā Yohānā*, is identical with John the Baptist in the Christian tradition<sup>33</sup>. Moreover, the last Mandaean prophet corresponds to *Yahyā bin Zakarriā* who has been mentioned in the Quran as one of the appreciable messengers of God. After the rise of Islam, in addition to

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<sup>30</sup> Sahi, Khamisi. *Āyā Sābe'īn-e Mandāyī rā mīshenāsīd?* [Do You Know Sabaeen Mandaeans?] (Tehran: Yadavaran, 2015), 59.

<sup>31</sup> Drower, *Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*: XXI.

<sup>32</sup> Masoud, Foruzande, *Tahqīqī dar Dīn-e Sābe'īn-e Mandā'ī; Bā takīye bar Motūn-e Mandā'ī* [An inquiry on the Sabaeen Mandaean religion: based upon the Mandaean scriptures]. (Tehran: Samat, 1998), 53.

<sup>33</sup> Mehrdad, Arabestani. "THE MANDAEAN IDENTITY CHALLENGE:" 4.

copying *Ginza*, the Sabaeans have ever emphasized their affiliation with the Prophet *Yahyā* in order to persuade Muslim officials to authorize them as genuine People of the Book<sup>34</sup>.

### 3-2 The Mandaean Scriptures

The primary Book of Mandaeanism, *Ginza*, consists of two distinctive sections: *Right Ginza* talks about the world of radiance and its residents and elaborates on the creation of the universe and the initiation of the human race<sup>35</sup>. *Left Ginza* “deals exclusively with the dead, [and] is written upside down<sup>36</sup>.” When I asked about the significance of *Ginza* for Mandaeans, one of the Iranian Mandaean priests talked of it as the ‘weapon’ which the divine bestows on Adam in order to enable him to fight the forces of darkness. Surely that is not a material/metal armament, but a non-physical and spiritual<sup>37</sup>. There are also some liturgical scriptures for the Mandaean faith. To mention a notable example, *Inyani* is the scripture which elaborates on the orthodox manner of performing the daily prayers. There, it has been mentioned that the Mandaean prayer must be fulfilled three times-morning, noon, and evening- when the sunlight is discernible; due to the apparent cause that darkness is depreciated in the Mandaean cosmology. Within the Mandaean worship, Light and the divine angels will be praised<sup>38</sup>. Another significant liturgical text is called *Sidra d Nishmatha* [Book of the Souls] which includes the essential verses that Mandaeans are supposed to commemorate on a daily basis. This is a reference for all who intend to enter the priestly elite; since the person-to be-priest will be examined on every detail of the book<sup>39</sup>.

#### 3-2-1 The alternative look

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<sup>34</sup> Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> John Olav Ryen, *The tree in the Lightworld: a study in the Mandaean vine motif* (Oslo:University of Oslo Unipub, 2006), 68.

<sup>36</sup> Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> From recorded personal interview of the author with Z, an Iranian Mandaean priest.

<sup>38</sup> Masoud, Foruzande, *Tahqiqī dar Dīn-e Sābe'īn-e: Īnyani* [An inquiry on the Sabaeen Mandaean religion, 2th Volume, Translation of prayer Book]. (Tehran: Jame'-ye Eslami-ye Pazhuheshegaran, 2000), II.

<sup>39</sup> Adel, Shirali, *Sābe'īn-e Mandā'ī dar Iran* [Sabaeen Mandaeans in Iran]. (Tehran, Cultural Research Bureau: 2013), 68.

Distinguishable researchers of the history of religions doubt that *Ginza* was written in a single time as claimed by the Mandaean believers. There is textual evidence to suggest that it was written non-synchronously; “the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> books of the *Right Ginza* contain very old material, presumably much older than from the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when *Ginza* was edited<sup>40</sup>.” The experts regard the 7<sup>th</sup> century, which is simultaneous to the growth of the Islamic faith, as a historical turning point for the Mandaean religion. During the same century Sabaeans attempted to provide a manuscript of their orally-transmitted prayers and ceremonies in order to convince Muslim governors in their homelands about the monotheist nature of the Mandaean religion, and thereby gain the support of Islamic rulers as being the believers in a legitimate Holy Book<sup>41</sup>.

### **3-3 The essentials of the Mandaean faith**

#### **3-3-1 Prayer**

The Mandaean prayer is performed toward the geographical direction of north. This is due to the doctrinal conviction that the divine scale for judgment is located there. North is also the starting-point of the sacred Lightword. As the North Star is found in the same direction, Sabaeans have been referred to as star-worshippers; an idea they strongly reject<sup>42</sup>. Personally, I heard from some Iranian Madaeans of Ahvaz that when they go to do their prayers at the shore of Karun, some Muslims assume they follow a weird sect and ask them to do prayer therapy and write incantation texts<sup>43</sup>.

#### **3-3-2 Baptism**

One of the most fundamental rituals of the Mandaean faith is baptism in running water. The baptism is carried out at the presence of a Mandaean priest and consists of immersing oneself in the running water while wearing the religious garment *rasta*. Baptism is a necessary ritual,

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<sup>40</sup> Ryen, *The Tree*, 68.

<sup>41</sup> Buckley, *The Madaeans*, 5.

<sup>42</sup> Khamisi, *Sābe ʿīn-e Mandāyī*, 61.

<sup>43</sup> From recorded personal interview with Madaeans in Ahvaz.



in the absence of which a person from Mandaean family will not be called a true Mandaean. This is the reason why Sabaeen Madaeans have always resided near running water; they need to do baptism repeatedly<sup>44</sup>. During my communication with the Iranian Madaeans, I heard their complaints about the current site for performing baptism, and prayer at the shore of Karun. They told me that the location is not appropriate for religious duties, since it is public and there are always non-Mandaean observers ignorant about Mandaism. For instance, there are occasions that the Mandaean believers intend to do their prayers, but young couples are flirting on the same location; a situation which is not expected about worship places<sup>45</sup>.

### 3-3-3 White clothes

White is the color of the ritual garment *rasta*. The reason lies in the Mandaean worldview where white is the manifestation of cleanness and light. All members of the Mandaean community, regardless of social status, wear the same garment in baptism. The procedure can be interpreted that all believers are the same, and the person who will undergo baptism with *rasta* is supposed to clear himself of all dark ideas/deeds<sup>46</sup>. It seemed really remarkable to me getting informed that some of the Iranian private companies, produce the specific textile for those garments, which should be interwoven of pure cotton; since, it shows that while Mandaism is not officially confirmed as a religion, there is no sensitivity about the Mandaean rituals, and ceremonies in a way that they can freely prepare necessities for performing them<sup>47</sup>.

## 4- The first Mandaean settlements

Most of the Mandaean scholars esteem that Mesopotamia is the main geographical origin from which Mandaism emerged. Supporters of such a viewpoint normally base their claim on certain pieces in *Haran Gawaita*, a canonical text of the Mandaean faith which, contrary to what non-Mandaean historians think, locates the initial settlements for Madaeans in the contemporary Iraqi and Iranian territories. According to such a narrative, Mesopotamia has

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<sup>44</sup> Adel, Shirali, *Sābe'īn-e Rāstīn* [True Sabaeans]. (Tehran: Basirat, 2010), 48.

<sup>45</sup> From personal communication with the Iranian Madaeans of Ahvaz.

<sup>46</sup> Khamisi, *Sābe'īn-e Mandāyī*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> From personal communication with the Iranian Madaeans.

always been the central residence of Mandaeans, and immigrant Mandaeans traveled from Palestine to join Mandaeans of Mesopotamia<sup>48</sup>.

Regularly followers of the non-Islamic faiths in the Middle East region think to be native residents of their homelands. The Iranian Sabaeans look at themselves as indigenous inhabitants of Iraq, and Iran. That is they reject the ideas which regard Sabaeans as an originally immigrant tribe; and indeed, there are many historical reports which confirm such an opinion. Here it might be asked about the reasons to neglect such reports by the non-Mandaean scholars. One can reply to the inquiry that only recently researchers have found pieces of archeological items which testify to the Mandaeans' residence in the Iranian lands, long before the time that historians estimate for Mandaeans' immigration from Palestine to Mesopotamia<sup>49</sup>. But there is a consensus regarding the status of non-Muslim believers of Mesopotamia in later historical periods; "at the beginning of the seventh century, prior to the Islamic conquest of Mesopotamia, about half of the populations of Mesopotamia were Christians [and followers of other monotheist faiths like Mandaism]. Islam became gradually the religion of the majority of the population<sup>50</sup>."

#### **4-1 The non-Mandaean account**

Non-Mandaean scholars of religion have developed different ideas about the first Mandaean settlements. They think that Jordan/Palestine or Syria/Palestine is the birthplace of Mandaism. The historians believe that "the ancestors of the present-day Mandaeans were originally situated in the Transjordan in view of the *Haurān* mountain range. They had their spiritual home in heterodox circles of Judaism<sup>51</sup>." They argue that Mandaeans are a western tribe that immigrated to Mesopotamia between the first-to-third centuries<sup>52</sup>. Scholars apply linguistic evidence to prove the non-Mesopotamian origin of the Mandaean religion. They

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<sup>48</sup> Khamisi, *Sābe'in-e Mandāyī*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> From recorded personal communication with Dr. Hussain Abbasi, and Sahi Khamisi.

<sup>50</sup> Hanish, Shak, "Christians, Yazidis, and Mandaeans in Iraq: a survival issue," *Digest of Middle East Studies* 18, 1 (2009): 2.

<sup>51</sup> Kurt, Rudolph, Dennis C. Duling, and John Modschiedler, "Problems of a History of the Development of the Mandaean Religion," *History of Religions* 8.3 (1969): 213.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

argue that the Mandaean terminology is replete with words such as *yardna* (running water), *kušṭa* (truth), and *manda* (knowledge) that point toward a western origin<sup>53</sup>.

## 5- Mandaicism in relation with other religious traditions

There is a tendency among scholars of religions to consider the Mandaean faith as an off-spring of the world's great religions, specifically Judaism and Christianity.

### 5-1 Judaism

Although Mandaeans themselves oppose this idea in a clear-cut manner, some have discussed the affinity of Mandaicism with other faiths, and especially Jewish tradition; “one can see that many of their [Mandaean ritualistic] requirements seem to be developed in opposition to the Jewish beliefs of the Old Testament<sup>54</sup>.” For example we may compare the Mandaean prohibition of the use of blue in the priestly robe with what is mentioned in the Jewish scriptures; while blue textiles are not allowed for the Mandaean priests as this color symbolizes the physical and this-worldly, in the Jewish tradition the robe of some rabbis must be totally of blue cloth<sup>55</sup>.

Additionally, number of experts dispute the Mandaeans' claim to be the followers of the most ancient religion, and point to contradictory citations in the Mandaean literature on the origins of Mandaicism. For example, Buckley argues that the origins of Mandaicism go back to Judaism, too. Referring to *Haran Gawaita*, she asserts that “... Mandaeans consider themselves former Jews<sup>56</sup>.” Such experts compare similarities of the Mandaic language with the language of Jewish believers of the ancient Palestine; “in this context it is worth mentioning that the language of the Babylonian Talmud is quite close to classical Mandaic<sup>57</sup>.” Also, some researchers have situated the oldest layer of the Mandaean tradition could be sought in the pre-Christian period. They designate that layer ‘polytheistic material’ which is

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<sup>53</sup> Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 3.

<sup>54</sup> Baker, "The Mandaean Diaspora," 82.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>56</sup> Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 4.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*

nourished from 'semitic nature religion' and 'Chaldaean philosophy.' Later Gnostic, Greek, Persian, and Jewish conceptions were added and assimilated to it<sup>58</sup>.

### **5-2 Christianity**

The writers have situated Mandaism as within the Christian tradition. Although it would be hard to deny that the "Mandaean beliefs bear little resemblance to Christian beliefs<sup>59</sup>;" with regards to the ever-present ritualistic exercise of baptism one may be tempted to think of Mandaeans as the followers of an unknown sect in Christianity. Human Rights Watch includes Sabaeans (Mandaeans) in line with Chaldeans, and Assyrians under the category of "Christians<sup>60</sup>."

### **6- Mandaism as a monotheist faith**

Contrary to a prevalent interpretation in the contemporary scholarly tradition, which considers Mandaism as a polytheistic conviction; Sabaeans themselves firmly believe in the monotheist nature of their faith. Some non-Mandaean observers second their belief and assert that while the Mandaean depiction of the divine is monotheistic and unified, He has various indications like the Life, Great Life, First Life, Lord of Greatness, King of Light, and the Powerful<sup>61</sup>. Others have talked about a 'monotheistic turn' in later stages of Mandaeans history; "Brandt places this second stage of Mandaean religion, which often imbedded itself in the texts, in the period from A.D. 300-600<sup>62</sup>".

### **6-1 Gnosticism**

There is a well accepted idea among many experts to consider Mandaism as the last surviving Gnostic faith of the world<sup>63</sup>. Regarding the Gnostic dimensions of the Mandaean faith, one may identify 'dualism' as its most essential foundation. According to the Mandaean

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<sup>58</sup> Rudolph, "Problems," 212.

<sup>59</sup> Baker, "The Mandaean Diaspora," 6.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>62</sup> Rudolph, "Problems," 212.

<sup>63</sup> Lupieri, *The Last Gnostics*.

cosmological dualism, the material life represents the evil. But although Mandaeans regard the matter as evil, they do not conceive it as absolute evil. The reason is that matter depends on the light in its creation and continuation, too; the same light which-by its very nature-manifests good<sup>64</sup>. Contrary to the physical universe, the upper world which is the locus of the Mandaean angels consists of pure good, following the idea that those angels are messengers of the light, representing reason and wisdom. It would be rationally contradictory to find traces of evil in the higher cosmos<sup>65</sup>.

### **6-2 Gender equality**

Sabaeen Mandaeans think that their faith treats male and female believers equally in all the social and religious issues. For instance, all [Mandaean] men and women have equal rights in issues like inheritance, and child custody<sup>66</sup>. However, one may find Mandaeanism to be a male religion, on account of the few Mandaean female personalities who have assumed spiritual authority. This impression is somewhat modified when we look at the original sources of the Mandaean faith, where one may note an obvious 'gender balance;' "for the male Lightbeings have wives, even the supreme Being, the First Life itself, whose spouse is called Dmut Hiia, the Image of Life<sup>67</sup>."

### **6-3 Racial supremacy idea**

Following what is stated in their holy scriptures; Sabaeen Mandaeans believe to be direct sons and daughters of the Prophet Adam. There are traces of a racial superiority theory in the Mandaean doctrines, where it is mentioned that the Mandaean blood should not be mixed with the blood of other races. Based on the same doctrine, intermarriage has always been prohibited in the Mandaean faith. As soon as a Mandaean person marries a non-Mandaean fellow, s/he is excluded from the Mandaean community<sup>68</sup>. Most contemporary Mandaeans

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<sup>64</sup> Foruzande, *Tahqīqī dar Dīn-e Sābe'īn-e Mandā'ī*, 55.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Khamisi, *Sābe'īn-e Mandāyī*, 115.

<sup>67</sup> Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley, "The Evidence for Women Priests in Mandaeanism," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 59:2 (2000): 94.

<sup>68</sup> From recorded personal interview with Z, an Iranian Mandaean priest.

think that their blood has not been blended by others, and to be proud in taking part in a racially pure dynasty<sup>69</sup>.

### **6-3-1 Ethno/religion**

In the aim of categorization/conceptualization of the Mandaean identity, it could be stated that there is a convergence between the religious and ethnic elements in the Mandaean identity. Within the dominant readings of the Mandaean Scriptures, only people from Mandaean families are allowed to be followers of the Mandaean faith. That is, from an orthodox viewpoint, converting to Mandaeism is impossible. This interpretation is strongly backed by the influential Mandaean priests, in Iran and elsewhere in the world<sup>70</sup>. If we adopt this viewpoint, it becomes impossible to draw borders between being a Mandaean believer and being from a Mandaean family; “once they have abandoned their specific religious identity they cease to exist as a separate ethnic group<sup>71</sup>.” However maintaining the ethno/religious identity of Mandaeism is not an easy mission to accomplish. The Mandaean community cannot prevent its members from marrying non-Mandaeans, a practice that is common among Mandeans in the Diaspora especially<sup>72</sup>.

### **6-3-2 Lack of coherent history**

It would be difficult to discuss the situation of the Sabaeans within various historical periods. Mandaean studies suffer from a lack of authentic documentation. The same is going on with the Iranian Mandeans. There are not even sufficient documents on the current status of the Iranian Mandaean community. The Mandeans' reluctance to present and discuss their faith in public is one of the main reasons for this lack. But, the general impression which results from consulting accessible sources testifies to the fact that the Mandaean faith has been relatively tolerated by the Muslim fellows surrounding them; most notably because Mandaeism has not been an Evangelical conviction<sup>73</sup>. Surely, Sabaeans have been subjected to the Muslim calls for leaving their original faith and

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<sup>69</sup> Foruzande, *Tahqīqī dar Dīn-e Sābe'īn-e Mandā'ī*, 80.

<sup>70</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Kiyānush Rad, former member of the Iranian parliament.

<sup>71</sup> Lupieri, *The Last Gnostics*, 5.

<sup>72</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Mehrdad Arabestani.

<sup>73</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Abbasi.

converting to Islam, but there are few historical reports of systematic pressures on them to convert forcibly<sup>74</sup>. Regarding the Western world's first encounter with Sabaeen Mandaeans, there are records implying that Portuguese Jesuit missionaries found them in Basra in the sixteenth century. Those missionaries and members of the Portugal's military forces brought the Mandaean heritage to Europe<sup>75</sup>.

### **6-3-3 Fighting extermination**

It seems that Mandaeans have always been struggling with threats to the perpetuation of their faith. As a notable instance, during the dreadful cholera of 1831 which is called the Plague of Shushtar, almost all Mandaean priests died; for the apparent reason that "cholera contagion travels predominantly by water, and priests, who spend much of their time in and by running water and also drinking contaminated water, would become virtually instant victims<sup>76</sup>."

One may argue that the extinction of the Mandaean priests would not amount to the extermination of a society in its totality. However, if we consider that all the Mandaean rituals must be conducted by priests, and note that the Mandaean faith without its ritualistic aspects will be just a soulless corpse, we understand the drastic harms that a lack of Mandaean priests would impose on the prospects for the community's survival. In fact, it requires a separable section to discuss the significance of the Mandaean priesthood in the perpetuation of the ancient faith.

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<sup>74</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Kiyanus Rad.

<sup>75</sup> Buckley, *The Mandaeans*, 16.

<sup>76</sup> Jorunn Jacobsen, Buckley, "Glimpses of a life: Yahia Bihram, Mandaean Priest," *History of Religions*, 39, 1 (1999), 37.

### **3 The Iranian Mandaean Priesthood; Its Role, Significance, and Ongoing Challenges**

One may expect to find a priesthood performing rituals and instructing followers of doctrinal beliefs; and the Mandaean priesthood, indeed, offers no exception to this idea. However, the role that Mandaean priests play in real life goes beyond religious issues. In fact, they apply their spiritual authority to play significant roles in the non-spiritual aspects of the Mandaean community. What are the sources of influence of the priesthood over the life of the Sabaeen Mandaeans?

In this section I attempt to discuss the actual situation, and challenges of the Iranian Mandaean priests. This is warranted since the priesthood institution has always played a prominent role in keeping the Sabaeen Mandaean community alive. As a start it is necessary to explain about some of the basic facts regarding the signification of the Mandaean priesthood.

#### **1- The importance of Mandaean priests**

The Mandaean worldview regarded priests as spiritual entities; since they represent the sacred creatures of Lightworld. As Arabestani formulates this;

There is a gap between the priests and laypeople in the Mandaean religion; and they are not located in the same continuum. Priests are of a radiant nature which is in the same line as *Mlkās* or glowing creatures. It is this specific nature as carriers of the divine authority, which allows the priests to baptize and marry people. That is, they are able to do things that laypersons can never do<sup>77</sup>.

Regularly, the ritualistic procedures for consecrating new Mandaean priests are seen by members of the community; because thereafter, the Mandaean believers are expected to communicate priests as the legitimate spiritual authorities<sup>78</sup>.

#### **1-1 Prerequisites**

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<sup>77</sup> Arabestani, *Ta'midīyān*, 171.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.



Traces of the racial purity theory can also be found in the process of becoming a Mandaean priest. There are clear bodily preconditions to becoming a priest, as well as restrictions pertaining to family lineage; the forefathers of the priesthood nominee of the three past generations should not be married to widows. In other words, the mother of the potential priest must have been a virgin before her marriage. Moreover, any bodily imperfection in the nominee will preclude them becoming a priest; he should be free from vitiligo, missing or extra fingers, and circumcision<sup>79</sup>.

### **1-2 The contemporary Iranian Mandaean priests**

*Škanda* or *šganda*, *tarmida*, *ganzibra*, and finally *riš ama* constitute the hierarchy of the Mandaean priesthood from down to the top. The primary role of those authorities is to carry out ritual procedures as baptism, marriage, memorial meal/prayer for the dead (*dukhrana*), and funeral<sup>80</sup>. At the moment, there are many *šgandas* or religious acolytes who assist other priests in performing ritual duties; at least three active *tarmidas* who are Sam Zahrouni, Payam Jizan, and Samwey Choheyli; and two living *ganzibras* who are Najah Choheyli, and Taleb Dorraji<sup>81</sup>. Most of those priests live in the primary settlement of the Iranian Mandaeans which is Ahvaz, the capital of Khuzestan province<sup>82</sup>. There are also two living *riš amas*; Sattar Jabbar Hilu who known to be head of the Iraqi Mandaeans and lives in Iraq, and Salah Choheyli who is the head for the emigrated Iranian Mandaeans and resides in Australia<sup>83</sup>.

## **2- The actual situation of the Iranian Mandaean priests and their challenges**

### **2-1 Significance of being Iranian**

I have learned by continuous monitoring of the Mandaeans online debates about their current status as a dispersed community, that non-Iranian Mandaeans regard Iran as a land, in which, the ritual duties are carried in their precise manner by priests. To illustrate this idea, I recite

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<sup>79</sup> Arabestani, *Ta 'mīdīyān*, 158-159.

<sup>80</sup> From recorded personal interview with Tarmida Sam, an Iranian Mandaean priest.

<sup>81</sup> From documented personal communication with the Iranian Mandaean priests.

<sup>82</sup> Bahador, Qayyem, "Jāme'e-ye Irānī-Eslāmī v Ahl-e Ketāb; Motāl'e-ye Moredī-ye Mandā'īyān" [The Iranian-Islamic society and the People of the Book; case study of the Mandaeans (2015): 7, retrieved from <http://4cp.olgou.ir/papers/128.pdf>

<sup>83</sup> From personal communication with Dr. Mehrdad Arabestani.

the occasion for the marriage of a non-Iranian priest; in August 2015 all the marriage ceremonies of Ganzibra Salvan Shakir, who is a high-ranking Iraqi religious authority residing in Sweden, took place in Iran, Ahvaz. Prima facie, one might find nothing to be specific about such an occasion; however, with a deeper look we notice the sincere trust and respect of the non-Iranian Mandaean for the Iranian priesthood. Here, such high regards derived an authentic spiritual leader to choose Iran as the preferable land for undergoing the marriage rituals<sup>84</sup>.

Moreover, the fact that there are two simultaneous *riš amas* can be explained as a further instance of the same viewpoint. The position of *riš ama* which is the ultimate rank of Mandaean priesthood is supposed to be occupied by only one person at the time<sup>85</sup>. Now, this can be proposed as a fair inquiry and ask what explains lack of consensus regarding the qualified person for being the ‘head’ of the Mandaean community. My own estimation is that the Iranian Madaeans seek for a distinctive stance within the Mandaean scattered community. There is no wonder that many Iranian Madaeans does not find it approving to obey an Iraqi Mandaean leader. Therefore, the Iranian Mandaean community in Diaspora has its own spiritual head that differs from the head of Iraqis. I have faced many occasions in which the Iranian Madaeans call Salah Choheyli ‘leader of the worlds’ Madaenas’ openly<sup>86</sup>.

## 2-2 Strict dedication to faith

Living a life of ritual dedication and carefulness is a notable sign of being a Mandaean priest, regardless of their pertinent priestly rank. As Drower puts it, the Mandaean priests “must only eat food prepared by themselves ... their bread may not be baked by laypersons. Wine, tobacco, and coffee are forbidden to them ... must avoid eating hot or heated food, and vegetables and fruit should be raw<sup>87</sup>.” Throughout the course of my field research among the Iranian Sabaeen Madaeans, I tried to ask the priests what really motivates them to take all

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<sup>84</sup> Published on 17.05.2015, <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/412103>

<sup>85</sup> Arabestani, *Ta ‘mīdīyān*, 146.

<sup>86</sup> Published 30 December 2014,

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=739451759443213&set=a.143597605695301.35953.100001351886520&type=3&theater>

<sup>87</sup> Drower, *Madaeans of Iraq and Iran*, 173.

the restrictions uncompromisingly. Most of them replied in a sincere tone that becoming a Mandaean priest is a divine selection; they just sensed a sacred obligation, and mission to help the members of Mandaean community perform religious rites and ceremonies<sup>88</sup>.

I take such assertions as the signs of a fundamental trend among the Iranian Mandaean priesthood; that is, insufficient justification and/or argumentation. Regularly, the priests does not sense urge to investigate about the rational foundations of the religious commands; rather, as soon as they make sure that a certain command is mentioned in a canonical text, take it as a must-be-done imperative. Therefore, Iranian Mandaean priests, perform most of the traditional rites in their ancestral form; “we continue and maintain the rites just in the manner that Prophet Adam initiated them<sup>89</sup>.” As a further instance, I have been told that some of the Iranian/Iraqi Madaeans believers who currently live in diasporic lands, have not eaten meat for long years<sup>90</sup>; since regulations of many foreign countries would preclude them from slaughtering animals in the ritually prescribed manner. So, the traditional institution of Mandaean priesthood is capable of resisting change, even in the lands with legal measurements which are fundamentally different from the laws of their Middle Eastern homelands.

### **2-3 Priesthood and the dominant Islamic discourse**

One of the most thought-provoking aspects about the Iranian Mandaean priests is their religious rhetoric. Throughout my research about the Iranian Madaeans I found a great similarity between the language that Mandaean priests employ to preach about their faith, and the language of Shiite Muslim clerics of the Iranian society. Certainly, long periods of physical and cultural proximity between the Iranian Madaeans and the Muslim majority, has had dramatic impacts on Madaeans’ understanding of their faith, and consequently on their verbalization. To clarify this, here I quote a piece of writing by an Iranian Mandaean priest on the notion of ‘prophecy’; “the true foundation and destination of all the prophets has been to declare the oneness of *Hayyi* [the Mandaean God], to save the humans from ignorance; and to

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<sup>88</sup> From documented personal communication with the Iranian Mandaean priests.

<sup>89</sup> From recorded personal interview with Z, an Iranian Mandaean priest.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.,

guide them toward emancipation<sup>91</sup>.” As to fact that the original quote is in Persian, it probably be difficult to confirm this in its English translation; but still one can observe the clear Islamic resonance of those words. In fact, the Iranian Muslims use the same words to elaborate their understanding of God, and Prophet. If we overlook the minor differences in the quoted words and substitute *Allah* of Muslims with the Mandaean *Hayyi*, it will seem as a generic writing by a Muslim preacher.

As a further instance, we can consider the way that Mandaean priesthood prescribes the Iranian Sabaeans to take part in the ceremonial practice of *Zidqā* (charity). During the recent years the priests have increasingly preached on the importance of charity deeds. Although the imperative of *Zidqā* is emphasized in the original doctrines of the Mandaean faith, the priest’s application of such a notion is heavily influenced by the Islamic command, *Sadaqa*. Just like the way that the Iranian Muslims maintain *Sadaqa* custom, Iranian Mandaeans gather in pre-announced occasions; and raise money to assist the poor cover their expenses for attending schools/universities, marrying, and taking medical therapies<sup>92</sup>.

### **2-3-1 Priesthood and the Iranian Islamic rule**

I think that radical impact of the Islamic discourse, which is a by-product of clerics’ rule in the era of the Islamic Republic, can also be found in the social activism of the Iranian Mandaean priests. Although the Mandaean priests firmly argue that they does not enter into current socio-political controversies; adopting the influential role of the Shiite Muslim clerics in the public sphere of the Iranian society, the Mandaean priesthood directly contribute to the process of decisions-making for the Iranian Mandaean community.

The Association of Sabaeen Mandaeans, which regulates the administrative affairs of the Iranian Mandaeans, claims that the Mandaean priesthood has a thoroughly distinctive function than entering into this-worldly issues of the community<sup>93</sup>. However, this is not difficult to provide many counterexamples to the mentioned claim. Through my talks with the Mandaean laypeople, or even Mandaeans from priestly families, I have noted that the Mandaean

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<sup>91</sup> Beitmanda, April & May 2014, [http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal93/MAHNAME153\\_154.PDF](http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal93/MAHNAME153_154.PDF)

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., September 2014, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal93/MAHNAME158.PDF>

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., August 2014, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal93/MAHNAME157.PDF>

priesthood has the potential to decide even about the actual members of the association. I heard from a former member of the association about the way he excluded from the association by some of the influential priests, because of his relatively radical viewpoints regarding the community and its activities. He thought that the Iranian Mandaean have the certain right of asking schools to make exceptions as to Mandaean students, and allow them not to attend Islamic courses; instead, perpetuate their own prayers, and rituals. However, the association and priesthood, due to their persistently conservative measures, opposed to his idea<sup>94</sup>.

### **2-3-2 Priesthood and politics**

During my personal encounters with the influential Mandaean personalities, both from priestly circle and laypeople, routinely whenever I asked them on the social problems of the Iranian Madaeans; they almost instantly replied that cannot enter into ‘political discussions.’ The main reason lies in a conformist mentality by the Mandaean authorities, according which, complaining about any sort of deprivation/discrimination against Iranian Sabaeans might irritate governmental offices; which in turn causes tension and trouble for Madaeans.

However, with deeper looks one note that not only Mandaean priesthood actually decide about the internal conflicts of the faith community, but also participate in the political controversies within the greater scale of the Iranian society. Two main aspects can be found for ever-denied political activism of the Iranian Mandaean priesthood. First, Mandaean priests have always attempted to prove their loyalty and submission to the Islamic Republic. To clarify such an attitude, I quote sentences from one of the latest public speeches by the spiritual head of the Iranian Mandaean community which was released in February 2017;

The Islamic Revolution has eradicated oppression in Iran, and caused brotherhood and unity between the divine religions... We as the Sabaeans Mandaean minority will actively take part in the 11<sup>th</sup> February demonstration<sup>95</sup>, in order to show to the Iranian nation and the revolution’s leader that we will always defend Iranian Islamic Revolution... We will display oneness of the Iranian people to Ayatollah Khamenei<sup>96</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> From documented personal communication with a former member of the association; due to the ethical considerations I do not mention his name.

<sup>95</sup> The annual demonstration to commemorate triumph of 1979 Revolution.

<sup>96</sup> Fars News Agency, 9<sup>th</sup> January 2017, <http://isfahan.farsnews.com/news/13951120001722>

Here, we can see that leaders of the Iranian Mandaean testify veracity of the official discourse regarding the constructive impacts of the Islamic Revolution on the circumstances of the Iranian followers of non-Islamic faiths. In fact, this is not just a hypocritical figure of speech to please the Iranian governors and convince them to take Mandaean issues more seriously; rather, it can be considered as a sign of sincere adapting to the ruling political viewpoint. But, at the same time, the Mandaean priesthood finds it necessary to declare their political loyalty publicly, since it will help the Mandaean to appeal the officials more rigorously about their requests.

As to the second aspect, I recite the occasion of my talk with the spiritual head of the Iranian Mandaean, during which, he said that cannot comment on the political controversies; but in another part of the same interview he elaborated on some of the positive, tangible changes in the attitude of the Iranian government toward Sabaeen Mandaean under Rouhani's state<sup>97</sup>. Surely, such a statement has a clear political inclination; since president Rouhani is backed by the reformist wing of the Islamic Republic. Also, during a friendly talk with another influential authority in the association, he called the Iranian former president Ahmadinejad- who was backed by the fundamentalist wing- a stupid politician who only brought misery, and harm to the Iranian minorities<sup>98</sup>.

From such observations, one can conclude that although the Mandaean priesthood has always denied its contribution in the political sphere; there is a hidden activism by them. Regularly, the Iranian Mandaean prefer to communicate the reformist political personalities; due to the apparent reason that reformist wing is more open-minded and welcoming to the appeals of the non-Muslim Iranians<sup>99</sup>. The Iranian Mandaean community, including its spiritual authorities have found it necessary to both reveal their loyalty to the Iranian government, and communicate with the reformist wing and help/support it; because they existentially need to build strong relations with the tolerant, democratic socio-political forces for guaranteeing interests of their minority community.

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<sup>97</sup> From recorded personal communication with Ganzibra Najah Choheyli.

<sup>98</sup> Due to the ethical considerations I do not mention his name.

<sup>99</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Kiyannush Rad, former member of the Iranian Parliament from Ahvaz.

#### **2-4 Priesthood as the ‘legitimate source of interpretation’**

The complexities of life in the rapidly-changing modern societies, both in the Mandaean homelands and in the diasporic settlements, have made many of the Mandaean activists to re-think foundations of their faith in a critical manner. The rise of online social media and applications such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, and Telegram have provided the Iranian Madaeans with wide opportunities to discuss the ongoing issues of their faith community and call for religious modifications. At the moment, it is possible to discern traces of an ‘interpretation movement’ among many Iranian Mandaean intellectuals. Prominent figures of this movement call the Madaeans to learn their ancestral language of Mandaic and refer back to the original sources of the faith as canonical scriptures. They think that in doing so; Madaeans will notice that a large portion of their current tradition which has been transmitted through generations does not necessarily match teachings of the holy texts. They claim for possibilities of intermarriage, conversion, and propagation within the Mandaean faith. Thereby, they challenge the traditional priesthood as the only spiritual authority which can legitimately infer religious commands from the words of holy texts<sup>100</sup>.

Definitely, circulation of such ideas is not welcomed by the Iranian Mandaean priesthood; first and most, because the priesthood has always been the single source of interpretation and understanding of Texts. Moreover, what the revisionist Madaeans propose negate widely-confirmed essentials of the Mandaean faith and its pertinent priesthood in a harsh way. The idea which regards propagation of Madaeism as probable worries the Mandaean priesthood- both in Iran and Iraq- more than other innovations. Besides the fact that missionary activities in the Islamic countries like Iran are not accepted; the awareness of their Muslim neighbors-in homelands and Diaspora- about any missionary agenda, might change their friendly, tolerant attitude toward Sabaeans Madaeans. Therefore, there is no wonder that the highest-ranking Mandaean priests will instantly issue notifications to falsify heterodox readings<sup>101</sup>.

However, the Mandaean priesthood itself, in an untold way has accepted to apply religious exegesis in order to keep performing ritual commands practical. To mention a prominent

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<sup>100</sup> From various personal talks with those writers, and references to their online productions; Due to the ethical considerations I do not mention their names.

<sup>101</sup> Published on 31.08.2011, <http://mandaeen.dk/node/509>

instance of the ‘legitimate interpretation’ by the Mandaean priesthood, which is highly reminiscent of the jurisprudential discussions among Shiite Muslim clerics<sup>102</sup>; most of the Iranian Mandaean priests now authorize baptism under the shower same as in running water, an issue which formerly was just unimaginable<sup>103</sup>.

Throughout this chapter, we have considered the notable roles that the Mandaean priesthood can assume. Although, the Iranian Mandaean priests take policy-making of spiritual authorities as impossible, we have seen together a political orientation in their activities. Also, at the same time that the Mandaean priesthood resists rigorously unconventional religious reading by non-priest Mandaean; inserts notable modifications in the traditional manner of performing ritual command through the ‘legitimate exegesis.’ Based upon such observations, one can assert that the Iranian Mandaean priests have implicitly confirmed changes in the traditional function of the Mandaean priesthood.

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<sup>102</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Abbasi, specialist of the Iranian minorities studies.

<sup>103</sup> Beitmanda, January & February 2015, [http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal93/MAHNAME162\\_163.PDF](http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal93/MAHNAME162_163.PDF)



## **4 The Actual Life of the Iranian Mandaean Community as an Ethno-Religious Community**

Until now, we have discussed many realities about the Iranian Mandaean community which are relatively overlooked in the existing scholarly tradition. We have analyzed through the written and online productions of the contemporary Madaeans to show how they understand their religious, ritual tradition as opposed to the conception of academic researchers; and how their self-perception as the divine's 'chosen people' has assisted them to maintain their ethno-religion. Also, based upon the same sources in addition to the data which I have gathered through field research, we have noted the religiopolitical activism of the Mandaean priesthood to both maintain Mandaism as a change-resistant tradition and to guarantee social interests of Sabaeans as a religious minority in a society with a Shiite Muslim majority; the issues which are hard to grasp through consulting available academic literature.

In the remaining pages I will analyze the current status of the Iranian Mandaean community, its ongoing issues, and strategies in approaching the majority Muslim society. I ask what constitutes a Mandaean issue within the Shiite Muslim majority of Khuzestan, Iran, and how the Iranian Sabaeans attempt to attain their desired social position. In order to discuss such issues, first I need to discuss the actual size of the Iranian Mandaean community.

### **1- Population size**

The complexity of research on the Iranian Madaeans begins with very basic information such as the actual numbers of Sabaeans residing in the Iranian territory. What can be found in the existing literature are sheer estimations. Buckley shows the confusion in the demographic data on the total number of the Iranian Madaeans, as they vary from 15,000 people to just 3000<sup>104</sup>. In my own encounters with the Iranian Madaeans, I have also faced various estimations. It seems the elderly are more inclined to provide confronted with higher

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<sup>104</sup> Buckley, *The Madaeans*, 6.

estimations, contrary to the youth, which is not worried to openly negate the common estimations and discuss that actual numbers are considerably lower. For instance, Ganzibra Najah Choheyli who is the spiritual head of the Mandaean community in Khuzestan, evades providing any sort of estimation on the population of the Iranian Mandaeans, and only asserts that the numbers of Sabaeen Mandaeans are high; while explaining there are many who prefer not to expose family lineage<sup>105</sup>. Elderly like him think the Iranian Mandaeans' propensity to hide their religious affiliation is in fact an unjustified fear; nobody ever bothered them because of their Mandaean identity<sup>106</sup>. Surely, such a firm assertion regarding freedom of belief for the Iranian Mandaeans is highly disputable<sup>107</sup>.

I believe that the actual reason for withholding demographic information is the legally unstable position of the Iranian Mandaean community. Due to disagreements in Islamic jurisprudence about whether the contemporary Mandaeans are the Quranic Sabaeans or not, Sabaeen Mandaeans have not been recognized as People of the Book in the Islamic jurisprudential tradition. The same problem appears in Iranian laws, where there is no reference to the Sabaeen Mandaeans as followers of a legal faith<sup>108</sup>. This legal exclusion is the main cause of dissatisfaction among the Iranian Mandaeans regarding their religious and social status. They appeal the authorities of the Islamic Republic to recognize Mandaeanism as a separate religion; an appeal which has not been fulfilled yet<sup>109</sup>. If this is true, it would be quite understandable that the Iranian Sabaeans present their demographic data in a way that could help them in their struggle for civil rights. According to Dr. Hussain Abbasi who has been intimately in touch with the Iranian Mandaeans for many years, Iranian state officials have

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<sup>105</sup> The Foundation for the Preservation and Reviving of Mandaean Memory, published on Mar 21, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EpcWjkIsgw>

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Encyclopædia Iranica, accessed on 20 January 2012, <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/mandaeans-4>

<sup>108</sup> *Sūrat-e Mashrūh-e Majles-e Barrasī-ye Nahā ī-ye Ghānūn-e Asāsī-ye Jomhūrī-ye Eslāmī-ye Iran* [The elaborated version of the council for final discussions on the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran], (Tehran: Majles-e Showra-ye Eslami, 1985), p 477-502 & 665-683.

<sup>109</sup> From recorded personal interview with Tarmida Sam.

recently stipulated recognition of Mandaism as an authentic faith on demographic numbers that there should be around 50,000 Iranian Mandaean citizens in order to gain a legal status<sup>110</sup>.

Regardless of the fact that realization of such a demographic condition would be impossible, since the population of the Iranian Madaeans in the most optimistic estimations would amount to 25,000 people; the very fact that such preconditions are occasionally proposed by state officials can make the Iranian Sabaeans present high estimations. By contrast, during my talks with youth in the Mandaean community, from both the priestly caste and laypeople, they were straightforwardly asserting that there are no more than 3000-4000 Iranian Madaeans in their ancestral homeland, Khuzestan<sup>111</sup>. Within this modest population a destructive trend is moreover going on, which is a strong wave of emigration.

One might justifiably expect to find the same contradictory attitudes toward emigration as to the demographic estimations. When I asked an influential person within the community about the probable impact of emigration on the prospects of continuation of the Mandaean faith in Iran, he just replied that he cannot answer the question and asked me to overlook this issue<sup>112</sup>. Only later I realized that discussing the Madaeans' emigration is considered a sensitive issue by the officials in the Iranian security apparatus. I was told by another informed figure within the Iranian Madaeans that the security forces summoned him and told him very resolutely that must avoid discussing emigration publicly, since it might encourage other Madaeans to leave their homeland; and hurt the reputation of the Iranian nation and/or government<sup>113</sup>.

## 2- Survival strategies

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<sup>110</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Abbasi.

<sup>111</sup> From recorded personal interview with Z, an Iranian Mandaean priest.

<sup>112</sup> Due to ethical considerations I will not mention name of that influential personality.

<sup>113</sup> Due to the same considerations I avoid revealing his identity.

The Iranian Mandaean community use various strategies to prolong their continuation as a distinctive ethno-cultural tradition. In the following, I shall analyze the most prominent among them.

### **2-1 Internal identity policy**

A look at the activities of the Iranian Mandaeans reveal traces of a conscious ‘identity policy.’ Based on a standard conception of identity as “a composite of many things such as race, class, education, region, religion, and gender<sup>114</sup>,” we can take the endeavors of the Iranian Mandaeans to perform their religious rituals and transmit their cultural tradition to the Mandaean youth as a Mandaean identity policy. Performing the rites in a persistent, collective manner is of great help for preserving their community. The Iranian Mandaean society needs a certain point around which being Mandaean can be identified and expressed in a clear way; and performing rituals in an orderly manner is that certain point. Arabestani expresses the same idea in a more elaborated articulation; “the constant threat of ethnocide and the priority of identity protection has confined the Mandaeans within their petrified religious rituals as the main reference of their identity<sup>115</sup>.”

Many would moreover ground identity in the ability to speak in an ethnically distinctive manner<sup>116</sup>. The Iranian Mandaeans think in the same way and take their original language seriously. There is an influential movement going on within the community which calls for the revival of the Mandaic language through teaching. The Association of Mandaeans has initiated courses of Mandaic and asked its members to encourage their children to attend the language classes<sup>117</sup>. However, there is a sort of reluctance among many Iranian Mandaeans about learning Mandaic and communicating within the form of that language. Probably the main cause is the impracticality of Mandaic for everyday communication; as a matter of fact it can be called a ‘dead’ language which currently some Iranian Mandaeans learn only to understand the original words of their holy scriptures better. Nevertheless, the association

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<sup>114</sup> N. Weaver, "Indigenous Identity," 240.

<sup>115</sup> Arabestani, "IDENTITY CHALLENGE," 12.

<sup>116</sup> N. Weaver, "Indigenous Identity," 247.

<sup>117</sup> Beitmanda, Published 19 July 2015, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal94/MAHNAME167.PDF>

continues to persuade the Iranian Mandaean parents about the utility of the Mandaic language for their children. It would be fair to conclude that this activism is part of a conscious policy to prolong the Mandaean cultural identity<sup>118</sup>.

## **2-2 Relating to the political authorities**

The immediate trait that will catch the attention of every researcher upon their first contact with the Mandaean community is an obsessively peaceful lifestyle. As Buckley explains this feature; “never aspiring to worldly, political power, Mandaean have merely wished to live in peace, at the mercy of varying political forces throughout the centuries<sup>119</sup>.” As a matter of fact, this might be seen as one of the main ‘survival policies’ of the Iranian Mandaean to remain non-political. During long historical periods and under various rules they have always sent the message to the governors that they will avoid taking positions in sensitive political matters. Rather, they have always interacted with the authorities of the various states without tension and conflict. To exemplify this, consider the sole administrative of the Iranian Mandaean community; the Association of Sabaeen Madaeans. It is very conservative in its interaction with the high-ranking officials of the Islamic Republic. In fact, the Association tries to harmonize all its activities with what is seen as significant by the government; in a manner that an outsider might think of a subordinate to the state. For example, when the Leader of Islamic Republic Ayatollah Khamenei had a Prostate Surgery in 2014, the Association issued an official letter to the leader expressing the Madaeans’ gratification with the success of his surgery and health recovery<sup>120</sup>.

Based on these notes, we can categorize the social mobilization of the Iranian Madaeans to ask more rights from the Iranian authorities as an “accommodationist right act<sup>121</sup>.”

Accommodationists are members of an ethnocultural group who engage with the ambition to become a respected part of the current order;

They want to integrate into, and function successfully within, the institutions of the majority society while maintaining aspects of their cultural identity... Other group rights that protect the interests of accommodationist

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<sup>118</sup> Beitmanda, Published 19 July 2015, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal94/MAHNAME167.PDF>

<sup>119</sup> Buckley, “Glimpses of a life,” 48.

<sup>120</sup> Beitmanda, Published 18 August 2014, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal93/MAHNAME157.PDF>

<sup>121</sup> Benhabib, *Identities, affiliations, and allegiances*, 307-308.

minorities are language rights, affirmative action programs that facilitate access to higher education and higher-status occupations, exemptions from school dress codes to allow the wearing of religious attire, state funding for minority arts and cultural events, and so forth<sup>122</sup>.

Currently, the social activities of the Iranian Mandaean fit the characterization 'accommodationist movement.' They have never had a grand agenda to bring about structural changes in the society, but seen to become a legally recognized component in the established order. Sabaeen Madaeans of Iran primarily hope to enter into public arenas of the Iranian society, like the universities, hospitals, banks, etcetera<sup>123</sup>. One of their notable strategies for survival has been to remind the Islamic Republic about the Madaeans' sincere presence in all critical moments of the Iranian nation after the triumph of the Islamic Revolution. For instance, they talk about their active role in the 1979 Revolution, their presence on the Iranian frontier during the Iraq-Iran war and suffering many victims, and their remarkable financial supports to the state during the war and after<sup>124</sup>. They provided their financial help both in the form of monetary aid and gold pieces; many Madaeans have been traditionally worked in the goldsmithing branch. There is no accurate report on the sum of their assists, but only in one occasion they gave the Iranian state around 50,000 dollars as monetary support<sup>125</sup>.

Sabaeen Madaeans of Iran always attempt to take active part in the ceremonies of the Iranian Muslims who constitute the majority of the population. They make persistent efforts to express their sympathy towards the values of the mainstream faith. Thereby, they hope to create a positive impression of their community among the mainly Muslim population and prevent the circulation of poisonous words on the Madaeans and/or Madaeism<sup>126</sup>. To maintain friendly, constructive relations with the officials of the Islamic Republic, both in Khuzestan province and in the center of policy-making Tehran, is a strategic policy to survive by the Association of Sabaeen Madaeans. The Association has always looked for open channels to communicate with the Iranian state, so that it can pursue Madaeans' demands

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<sup>122</sup> Benhabib, *Identities, affiliations, and allegiances*, 307-308.

<sup>123</sup> From recorded personal interview with Tarmida Sam, an Iranian Madaean priest.

<sup>124</sup> Beitmanda, 14 February 2016, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal94/MAHNAME175.PDF>

<sup>125</sup> From recorded personal interview with Sahi Khamisi.

<sup>126</sup> From recorded personal interview with Tarmida Sam.

peacefully. From my personal discussions with the Iranian Mandaean and non-Mandaean experts, I have understood that the Sabaeen Madaeans find themselves obliged to maintain constructive ties with the Iranian state, since they lack the necessary prerequisites for organized social protests; most notably, the Iranian Madaeans constitute a numerically small community<sup>127</sup>.

Correspondence with the authorities of the Islamic Republic is their preferred method for bringing their requests into consideration. The Iranian Madaeans have written numerous letters to high-ranking responsables such as the president, the head of parliament, and various ministers to ask them take measures to secure their demands. And their primary demand from officials has always been the recognition of Madaeism as an ‘official’ religion. Now, about forty years after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, there are increasing doubts about the efficiency of the correspondence for fulfilling their aspirations. Few of the non-Mandaean experts I spoke with were optimistic about the prospects of the correspondence method. Among many other things, they mentioned that unless the ‘Mandaean issue’ emerges as an urgent political issue, none of the decision-makers will bother to seek a decisive solution for the Sabaeen Mandaean demands<sup>128</sup>.

### **3- Madaeans among the Shiite Muslim majority**

Long periods of co-existence between the Iranian Madaeans and Persian and Arab residents of Khuzestan have had a strong impact on their manner of life. They dress in Iranian/Arabic clothes and speak both Persian and Arabic. Sabaeans have not made a corresponding impact on the non-Mandaean residents of Khuzestan who are mostly Shiite Muslims<sup>129</sup>. This is common for most minority societies; in the sense that minorities tend to undergo more drastic changes when they interact with the neighboring majority than vice versa. The minority will also know usually more about the majority than the majority knows about the minorities<sup>130</sup>.

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<sup>127</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Arabestani.

<sup>128</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Abbasi.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Arabestani.

There has long been suspicion among Iranian Muslims regarding the true nature of the Mandaean faith. For instance, in some of the Persian translations of the Quranic verses in which Sabaeans are mentioned, the word ‘Sabaeen’ is translated as ‘star worshipper’<sup>131</sup>. Such misconceptions pave the way for fundamentalists to look at Sabaeans as pagans and therefore unclean; even in the present-day society of Khuzestan, there are traces of such extreme viewpoints. For instance, although some of the Shiite Muslim citizens are ready to recognize Sabaeans as People of the Book, they avoid the occasions of eating, drinking, and communicating with them; apparently, because the idea that Sabaeans are unclean has been transmitted among many Shiite Muslim Iranians through generations<sup>132</sup>. There are in other words culturally-rooted reasons behind the discriminating practices in the majority’s interaction with the Iranian Mandaeans. That is, even if a thoroughly reformist state with tolerant attitudes towards ethnic, and religious minorities attain political power; the Iranian Mandaeans might not feel that they are fully-fledged citizens, for many Muslim residents of Iranian Khuzestan will continue to look at them as strangers.

The Iranian Mandaeans, themselves, have failed to explain their faith adequately to their Muslim neighbors. It seems they have serious difficulties presenting their faith without referring to non-Mandaean sources. They commonly expose their tradition based upon what is heard from non-Mandaean scholars of religion. For example, according to the Mandaean sources, John the Baptist, who is the last Prophet of the Mandaean faith, died a natural death; but according to the Islamic narration Prophet Yahya was killed<sup>133</sup>. Now, if we consult the literature produced by Mandaean writers and poets, we find that they elaborate on his martyrdom too. Such convergence demonstrates the fundamental influence of the Islamic tradition over the Mandaean heritage. We see that the Sabaeen Mandaeans have adopted a narrative which is unfounded in their own religious literature. One may see this as the sign of a deep ‘Islamization’ within the Mandaean faith; since they insert concepts of the Islamic faith even regarding the cause for death of their iconic Prophet<sup>134</sup>.

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<sup>131</sup> Arabestani, *Ta ‘mīdīyān-e Qarīb*, 33.

<sup>132</sup> From recorded personal interview of the author with Z, an Iranian Mandaean priest.

<sup>133</sup> Published 3 October 2012, <http://www.askquran.ir/showthread.php?t=33834>

<sup>134</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Abbasi.



To give a further example, although, according to the authentic sources, there are five Mandaean prophets; one Iranian Mandaean claims in his recently published book that the Mandaean faith has only four prophets. Most probably, this inaccuracy results from trusting and consulting non-Mandaean writings<sup>135</sup>. At any rate, regardless of the historical roots of the issue, it is an undeniable fact that the contemporary Iranian Mandaeans are disturbed by the misrepresentation of their faith among their Muslim majority neighbors. During my personal communications, Sabaeen priests and laypeople told me that they understand the reasons for the prevalence of misconceptions among their Muslim fellows; the Mandaeans have never had the opportunity to present their authentic convictions publicly<sup>136</sup>. From here, we can note another vital survival strategy for the Iranian Mandaeans; which is to seize every possibility for elaborating on foundations of their faith, firstly for their Shiite Muslim neighbors who are residents of Khuzestan, and secondly to the officials of the Iranian state. Actually, one of the main motivations of the Sabaeen Mandaeans to publish written material on their beliefs during the last thirty years has been to fight misleading conceptions about the Mandaeanism in the majority<sup>137</sup>.

As the result of those long endeavors, many of the Iranian Mandaeans feel that the negative mentality about the Mandaean faith is gradually changing. Some of the Mandaean priests note that their efforts have had noticeable success; citing the occasionally welcoming treatment by Iranian Muslims<sup>138</sup>. During my own field research in Khuzestan, I found clear signs of such gradual change in the majority attitudes toward the Sabaeen Mandaeans. To cite one occasion, I was in the Iranian cultural administration, the Khuzestan branch-*Edāre-ye Koll-e Farhang v Ershād-e Eslāmī-ye Khuzestan*- which is located in Ahvaz to gain an official permission letter for interviews with the Mandaean personalities. When I explained the details of my research to the official in charge, he politely answered that Mandaeanism is not a [recognized] religion and thus cannot be called a religious minority. However, almost instantly and without hesitation another colleague of his interfered and explained facts about

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<sup>135</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Abbasi.

<sup>136</sup> From recorded personal interview of the author with Tarmida Sam.

<sup>137</sup> Beitmanda, published 20 March 2016, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal95/MAHNAME176.PDF>

<sup>138</sup> From recorded personal interview of the author with Tarmida Sam.

the historical origins of Mandaism as a distinct faith in short sentences, and convinced the official to provide me with the needed document.

I have also heard from non-Mandaean observers about the discernible changes. It seems that many Iranian non-Mandaean residents of Khuzestan have a positive impression of the nature of Mandaean faith and are accommodating its followers. In 2014, on the occasion of the demise of Sheik Jabbar Tavousi, the former head of Mandaeans around the world who had been a resident of Khuzestan province, many Muslim websites, and newspapers covered the news and called on all the people-regardless of their religious affiliation- to take part in his funeral; an overwhelming attention by the majority toward the Iranian Mandaeans which was unprecedented. However, this attention and acquaintance is not sufficient yet, since it mostly can be found among the educated non-Mandaeans<sup>139</sup>.

#### **4- The Mandaean youth**

For the elders of the Mandaean religion, the young generation has an important role in the survival of the faith community. Indeed, the primary audience of the Mandaeans' campaign to revive the Mandaic language and learn the authentic manner of performing rituals is the Mandaean youth. However, there are also concerns regarding the youth's involvement with the faith. The main concern of the Iranian Mandaean elderly is the vast trend of emigration among young Iranian Mandaeans. Many of the Iranian Mandaean youth decide to leave their country, because they face difficulties in finding an appropriate job. It is hard for educated Mandaeans reach positions within the governmental offices; most notably, because one needs to be Muslim or a follower of one of the legally recognized faiths-Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism- to be hired by those offices. And since the Mandaean faith is not recognized as a separate religion in the Iranian constitution, it is nearly impossible for the Iranian Mandaeans to acquire a state job<sup>140</sup>.

Instead, many young Sabaeans pursue the profession/art of goldsmithing which is the iconic job of the Iranian Mandaeans of Khuzestan. However, there are also many young Mandaeans who lack the financial resources to initiate a career as jeweler. They would need to start

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<sup>139</sup> From recorded personal interview with Dr. Abbasi.

<sup>140</sup> Beitmanda, 21 March 2014, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal93/MAHNAME152.PDF>

smaller businesses such as greengrocer or fishmonger, which is common among the residents of Khuzestan. But due to an unspoken impression that the Muslim citizens will not buy anything from a Sabaeans since Muslims regard Sabaeans unclean- the youth often will not try such minor deals and consequently remain jobless. As a result, many Sabaeans suffer poor economic conditions<sup>141</sup>.

Here one can easily understand the worries of the elder Mandaean regarding the future prospects of the Iranian Mandaean community facing emigration; knowing the centrality of rituals for the continuation of the Mandaean faith. It is also hard to reconcile actual life in the Diaspora with the religious duties. For instance, in the absence of Mandaean priests, the ability to “baptize, celebrate marriages, officiate at religious festivals and at ceremonies for the dead, Mandaean religion could not-and still cannot- be sustained<sup>142</sup>.” When the Iranian Mandaean youth leave their homeland and travel to foreign countries, it is frequently impossible to have access to Mandaean priests. Therefore, there is a serious risk that the younger members of the Mandaean community will forget about their religious tradition and assimilate with the secular norms of the Western communities. Quoting an elder Iranian Mandaean, Arabestani formulates this matter very well; “if they go, they will scatter throughout the world, and our tradition will disappear, like dissolving a sugar cube in a cup of tea<sup>143</sup>.”

From this same point, another concern of the elder Iranian Madaeans appear; the intermarriage. As a matter of fact, the fear of intermarriage has always been strong among the Mandaean authorities. As Buckley explains one of the pieces in the Mandaean colophons; “Ram Zihrun [a Mandaean authoritative personality] warns against this practice, for a case of it has recently occurred in his community, a Mandaean having married a Muslim. "Guard the descendants!" Ram Zihrun admonishes<sup>144</sup>.”

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<sup>141</sup> From recorded personal interview of the author with Z, an Iranian Mandaean priest.

<sup>142</sup> Buckley, “Glimpses of a life,” 34.

<sup>143</sup> Mehrdad, Arabestani, " The Madaeans' Religious System: From Mythos to Logos." *Iran and the Caucasus* 20.3-4 (2016): 267.

<sup>144</sup> Buckley, “Glimpses of a life,” 47.

This is a main problem of the contemporary Mandaean community which cannot be resolved; since there are many occasions where the Mandaean youth defy the ban of the priests and the elderly not to marry outsiders. The Iranian Mandaean youth who lives in foreign lands frequently make relationships with non-Mandaean people. Arabestani cites his discussion with an Iranian Mandaean father living in Ahvaz whose family, including his teenage son, has emigrated to Australia. Once, the Father found a picture of his son with an Australian girl posted on Facebook, and warned the son that a Mandaean believer is not allowed to marry or befriend a non-Mandaean person. His son replied that “we are all created by God and we are all the same, I do not think that befriending a non-Mandaean or marrying her is not right<sup>145</sup>.” It seems that, the same phenomenon is present among the Mandaean youth of the homeland Iran. Although marrying Muslims is a taboo for the Iranian Madaeans of Khuzestan, the long co-existence of the two faiths caused intermarriage. The routine response of the elderly, conservative authorities of the Iranian Mandaean community will be to immediately exclude from their society<sup>146</sup>.

From such remarks, we may conclude that the neighbor societies have always had great impact on the Iranian Madaeans. In one time, the life with Iranian Shiite Muslims has caused Madaeans of homeland to understand their faith and present it by reference to the Islamic tradition. In another occasion, Iranian emigrated Madaeans have been influenced by the lifestyle and values of the Western lands. In such circumstances, the elderly and conservative authorities of the Mandaean community, hardly attempt to maintain a purely Mandaean way of life; however, as we have seen, there are not many chances to realize such an aspiration. The main reason lies in the attitude of the young Madaeans who seeks for a more flexible tradition toward the realities surrounding the faith community as an established inheritance.

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<sup>145</sup> Arabestani, "The Madaeans' Religious System," 270.

<sup>146</sup> Beitmanda, 20 April 2015, <http://www.beitmanda.com/mahname/sal94/MAHNAME165.PDF>

## 5 Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have analyzed the basic issues of the Mandaean faith, the signification of its ritualistic dimensions, and the current challenges of the Iranian Mandaean community. I have shown the methods with which Iranian Mandaeans pursue the continuation of their ethno-religious heritage through the vicissitudes of the times. Surely, rituals and ceremonies have a unique position within the Mandaean faith; since ritual procedures are the actual occasions which remind the Mandaeans of their belonging to an entire society which is constituted by family and spiritual bonds. We have also seen the absolute significance of the priesthood for performing the rites in an orthodox manner, and thus keeping Mandaism alive.

I have discussed the current difficulties the Iranian Mandaeans face to maintain their distinctive community. The legal exclusion of the Mandaean faith from the Iranian constitution has affected all aspects of their social life negatively. Due to the inability of many Iranian Mandaean youth to attend higher education or favorable job positions, they decide to leave their ancestral land in Iranian Khuzestan; an issue which endangers the prospects of the Mandaean faith further. The lack of Mandaean priests and consequent inability to perform the religious rites, the frequency of intermarriage, the missionary activities of Evangelicals to convert Mandaeans to Christianity, are some of the most pressing threats that can weaken foundations of the Iranian Mandaean community in Diaspora.

I have analyzed the Iranian Mandaeans' strategies to deal with these challenges. They have always tried to build constructive ties with the ruling Iranian state to maintain their cultural identity in a peaceful manner. In dealing with various Iranian governments after the advent of Islam, the Mandaeans have emphasized that they are eligible to be recognized as People of the Book. Moreover, they have highlighted the ethnic orientation of the Mandaean religion; that is the impossibility of converting from other faiths into Mandaism. The Iranian state can be confident that there will be no missionary agenda among the Mandaeans.

At the same time, reformist ideas among the Iranian Mandaeans are increasing. Using the newly-found capabilities of online social media, many Iranian Mandaean scholars who are mostly laypeople distribute heterodox readings of the Mandaean canonical texts. They argue

that the traditionally influential institutions of the Mandaean community are no longer able to guarantee the continuation of the Mandaean society. Referring to the written sources of the Mandaean tradition, they argue that Mandaism is originally an Evangelical faith. Therefore, intermarriage can be justifiably incorporated into the Mandaean religion, if the non-Mandaean side will accept to convert into Mandaism. The same scholars call for the active participation in the socio-political affairs of the Iranian society as well. They maintain that unless the Iranian Madaeans find a distinctive voice in the Iranian political sphere, none of the Iranian officials will take positive measures to fulfill their expectations.

Based on such considerations, I think there is an academic need to pursue research on the online activism of the Iranian Sabaeen Madaeans further. As a matter of fact, the Mandaean faith itself, and the contemporary Iranian Mandaean society are going through notable transformations. There is no longer a coherent narrative about the requirements of being Mandaean as a result of the social media. The calls for propagation of the faith, justifying intermarriage, socio-political campaigns, etcetera prove that online discussions by and among Madaeans require methodical and orderly academic studies. There are many understudied aspects about the contemporary Madaeans which require patient theoretical scrutiny. In the course of this dissertation, I have contributed new insight to the Mandaean studies based upon some of the uncovered sources like the written productions of the Iranian Madaeans themselves-primarily *beitmanda* journal- and experimental data-gathering through field research.

Surely, the field has just been opened; and the next researchers will have to go deeper into the precise denotation of the Sabaeen Mandaean identity, and the ongoing campaign of the Iranian Madaeans to revive and strengthen it.

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