Iraq - Sabian Mandaeans

Profile

Sabean-Mandaeans are confined to lower Iraq, except for minuscule communities in Khorramshahr and Ahwaz, in southwestern Iran, and a community of silversmiths and their families in Baghdad. They are primarily located in the Marshes or on the two rivers, at al-Amara, Qal’at-Salah, Nasiriya, Suq al-Shuyukh and Qurna. The size of the community is estimated at less than 5,000 in Iraq.

The religion is a form of Gnosticism, descended from ancient Mesopotamian worship, with rituals that resemble those of Zoroastrian and Nestorian worship. John the Baptist is its central prophet, and they practise immersion in flowing water, symbolic of the creative life force, as an act of ritual purity. Nevertheless, scholars believe that the Sabean-Mandaean religion predates Baptism. Sabean-Mandaean faith bars the use of violence or the carrying of weapons. Adherents have dhimmi status as ‘People of the Book’, mentioned in the Qur’an, although this is disputed.

The Sabean-Mandaeans should not be confused either with the ‘Sabians’ of Harran, a pagan sect which deliberately adopted the name Sabian in order to avoid Muslim persecution, or with the Sabaeans, the inhabitants of ancient Sheba, in south Yemen.

Historical context

The Sabean-Mandaeans traditionally specialized in carpentry, boat building and silversmithing, pursuits still practised. In 1947 Sabean-Mandaeans, were reckoned to number about 7,000, and by the mid-1990s, about 30,000. Under the Ba’athists they faced extinction not only from the process of modernization but also from the drainage of the Marshes, which was destroying the locus of the community.

The threat to the community worsened with Iraq’s descent into chaos following the March 2003
American-led invasion. Despite its dhimmi status, Shi’a and Sunni Islamic militants targeted the group. This was made all the easier by the fact that Sabean-Mandaeans are prohibited by their beliefs from attempting armed self-defence. Hundreds of killings, abductions and incidents of torture were accompanied by rhetoric accusing Sabean-Mandaeans of witchcraft, impurity and systematic adultery. Sabean-Mandaean women were targeted for not covering their heads. In Baghdad, Sabean-Mandaean goldsmiths, silversmiths and jewellers were targeted for theft and murder at much higher rates than their Muslim colleagues. Faced with systematic pressure to convert, leave or die, many Sabean-Mandaeans have chosen to leave.

Current issues

Sabean-Mandaeans face extinction as a people. Since the outbreak of violence in 2003, most Sabean-Mandaeans have either fled the country or been killed. Today, there are fewer than 5,000 remaining in Iraq. As their small community is scattered throughout the world, the Sabean-Mandaeans’ ancient language, culture and religion face the threat of extinction. In 2006, UNESCO listed the Sabean-Mandaean language in its Atlas of the World’s Languages in Danger of Disappearing. The departure of many Sabean-Mandaean religious leaders from Iraq also threatens the ability of the remaining community to retain their rituals.

Sabean-Mandaean families have also been affected by the rise of ISIS in Iraq since 2014. Sabean-Mandaeans feared that staying in ISIS-controlled areas would mean either forced conversions or death, since ISIS does not consider them to be ‘People of the Book’ and did not offer them the option of paying jizya as they did to Christians. At least 50 families were displaced, mostly from Ramadi in Anbar governorate.

In Baghdad, Sabean-Mandaeans continue to be targeted for attacks and kidnappings. They also experience discrimination and negative stereotyping in all aspects of public life, with some reporting that other Iraqis will refuse to share food or drink from the same glass as a Sabean-Mandaean. These factors, combined with the effects of the ISIS advance, continue to drive Sabean-Mandaeans to leave Iraq.

Updated November 2017