

Sabian Mandaean

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Profile

In 1947 Sabians, or MandaeanMandaean, were reckoned to number about 7,000, and by the mid-1990s, about 30,000. But they have been highly assimilated into nominally Muslim society since the 1930s. They are confined to lower Iraq, except for minuscule communities in Khorramshahr and Ahwaz, in south-western 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-Salih, Nasiriya, Suq al-Shuyukh and Qurna.

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 Sabian Mandaean religion pre-dates Baptism. Sabian 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 MandaeanMandaean have remained separate and intensely private.

The Sabians 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 Sabians traditionally specialized in carpentry, boat building and silversmithing, pursuits still practised. 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.

Current issues

Sabian MandaeanMandaean face extinction as a people. Around two-thirds of the population has been expelled or killed since 2003. In September 2005 the BBC estimated the remaining population at 13,000. Despite its dhimmi status, Shi'a and Sunni Islamic militants have targeted the group. This is made all the easier, as Mandaean are prohibited by their beliefs from attempting armed self-defence. Hundreds of killings, abductions and incidents of torture have often been accompanied by rhetoric accusing Sabians of witchcraft, impurity, and systematic adultery. Sabian Mandaean women have been targeted for not covering their heads. In Baghdad, Mandaean goldsmiths, silversmiths and jewellers have been targeted for theft and murder at much higher rates than their Muslim colleagues. Faced with systematic pressure

to convert, leave, or die, many Sabian MandaeanMandaeans have chosen to leave. As their small community is scattered throughout the world, Sabian MandaeanMandaeans' ancient language, culture and religion face the threat of extinction. In 2006, UNESCO listed the Sabian Mandaean language in its *Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger of Disappearing*.

According to Mandaean Crisis International, missiles fired into a house in the city of Kut in March 2008 killed ten people. The two Mandaean families living in the structure were among the last 40 MandaeanMandaeans in the city, and had previously been warned to leave the city and 'join the refugees'.