

other hand, the rituals are performed in the natural running waters as the only manifestation of God on the earth. Everything that disturbs the natural flow of water will ruin its living sacred power; thus, the immediate access to the natural running water can guarantee the relationship with the heaven. The evidence supports the conclusion that the Mandaean ritual symbolism offers a model based on the principles of ‘immediacy’ and ‘temporality’ in the worldview, as well as the ethical ethos and aesthetic taste.

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saloons, in order to provide a private area for the participants and protect them from the sunshine or cold weather.

Another ritual construct is reed hut that is called *shkhinta*, literally means ‘place’. This is a generic name which is used for a sacred place. According to the Mandaean cosmology, *Hayyi*, the Mandaean impersonal God, is also located at a *shkhinta* at the heart of the light world or the upper world, as opposed to the earth or *arqa d tibil*. Thus, *shkhinta* is an unworldly and sacred place, a piece of the light world on the earth. *Shkhinta* is built as a place for a temporary stay in the middle stage of the rites of passage. In a part of the coronation of the priests’ ritual, for example, the nominee has to reside in the *shkhinta* for a period of time and then pass to the next stage of the rite (Fig. 6).

After two times baptisms of the couple, the bridegroom and the priests move into a *shkhinta*, where the bridegroom makes a vow with the representative of the bride. In the next stage, the couple sit back to back and the priest officiates the marriage by reciting certain verses from the scripture and gently hit bride’s head to the bridegroom’s.

In both cases, *shkhinta* is erected just before the ceremony. It is a simple structure made by reeds and covered with a white cotton fabric. In this



Fig. 6.- Bridegroom- standing and holding the hand of the bride’s representative- and the priests- sitting- inside the *shkhinta* source: Mehrdad Arabestani, 2004.

case, despite the simplicity of the structure, the construction must follow strict ritual instructions. After the ceremony, *shkhinta* is destroyed immediately. Considering the materials used in the construction of both *mandi* and *shkhinta*, it is obvious that these structures are not meant to be monumental and durable. They are obviously minimal and simple and have basic geometry and without any decoration.

Reflections

When one looks at the constructions and artworks all around the world, those that are inspired by each religion reveal a common tendency for symbolically applying the particular worldview of the respective religion. This consistency can be better understood if we consider the religion as a cultural system as described by Clifford Geertz. According to Geertz’s well-known definition religions are a system of symbols which simultaneously provide the believers with a *model of* “reality” (world-view or cosmology) and a *model for* “reality” (an ethos including moral and aesthetical style) (Geertz, 1993: 93). Symbols here consist of any object, act, behavior, and quality that serves as a vehicle for a conception or meaning. As we have seen through few examples of Mandaean religious practice, the Mandaean ritual landscape and constructs convey a sense of simplicity, little elaboration, and closeness to nature, as opposed to culture or human manipulation of natural resources. The Mandaean Gnostic cosmology praises spiritual world at the expense of despising the worldly elements. The cosmology based on a clear binary opposition between the heaven (the light world or upper world) and the earth (the dark world or lower world). The cosmic scenario presents the human lifespan on the earth as temporal and inauthentic and purification rites are the symbolic devices for removing the earthly elements and preparing the humankind for their afterlife passage into the light world. The temporality of the earthly life is clearly reflected in the temporality of the ritual constructs. On the

the Mandaeans, if you for instance Google them, is the Mandaeans in their white ritual dress at the banks of rivers performing baptism or praying in different parts of the world.

The constructs

Every religion associates with certain sites that serve as the focal point of the religion, a place for ceremonies, a symbol of the religious community or a sacred place to visit. Some of the sites include the generic buildings such as a temple, mosque, monastery or church; and others may be regarded as a unique place of the manifestation of the sacred that usually serve as a pilgrimage destination for the believers, such as shrines. In both cases, these sacred places are marked with ornate and elaborate buildings or particular architectural structures. When I met the Mandaeans for the first time, I soon noticed that two significant concepts of the religions are nearly missed among them; that is the concept of a customary religious center such as a temple, and the concept of the sacred places that associates with pilgrimage. The building of the Mandaean Society of Ahvaz is actually an ordinary local house with few modifications to be suitable for small gatherings and community activities and has no sacred connotation. Even though the building is called *mandi*, which is a name for a cult-hut used in the ceremonies, as they say, it is not a “real” *mandi*. As far as I know, there is only one real *mandi* in Iran located in a rural area in Khuzestan.

Mandi (a colloquial pronunciation of *manda*) is a cult-hut made from reeds and clay. *Mandi* has a very simple structure and the simplest available materials, that is reeds and clay, are used in their structure. Nevertheless, making a *mandi* requires observing strict ritual formulation (Fig.4).

On the other hand, after the erection of the *mandi*, the priests perform a detailed and long consecration ritual to prepare the *mandi* for the ceremonies. *Mandi* is built inside an enclosed yard with reed walls and close to the river. In front of the *mandi* door, there is a pool that is used for the purpose of the baptism and other purification rituals. The

pool is connected to the river through two channels so as the water is supplied from the river and maintain its running quality, which is necessary for the rituals.

Nowadays, some Mandaean communities, for example in Baghdad and Norway, have roofed *mandis* with the yards turned into indoor saloons, in order to provide a private area for the participants and protect them from the sunshine or cold weather (Fig. 5).

Nowadays, some Mandaean communities, for example in Baghdad and in Norway, have roofed *mandis* with the yards turned into indoor



Fig. 4. *mandi* (cult-hut).source: Mehrdad Arabestani, 2004.

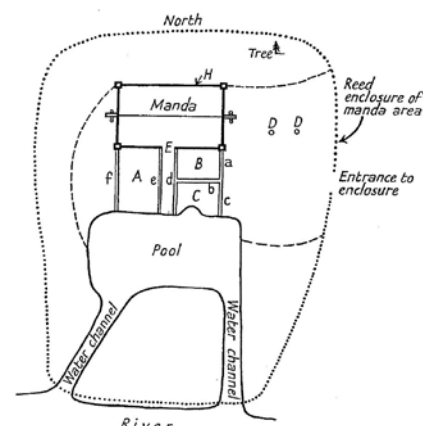


FIG. 7. THE MANDI

A, B, and C. Sections divided by *mirri*.
E. Doorway of *Manda*.
D. *Dravshai*.
H. Place of burial of dove and *fajiri*.
a, b, c, d, e, and f are the *mirri*, or furrows.

Fig. 5. The *mandi* plan. source: Drower, 1937: 135.



Fig. 1. Mandaean priests performing preliminary rituals in preparation for a mass baptism. source: Mehrdad Arabestani, 2004.



Fig. 2. Ritual ablation of geese before slaughtering in flowing water. source: Mehrdad Arabestani, 2004.

temples are usually fully elaborated edifices, Mandaean temple is a completely “natural” scenery with the least manipulation and the flowing water, or the river itself, as the sanctuary or Holy of Holies of the temple. This “temple”, however, the same as other temples are densely symbolized and reveals the underlying beliefs of Mandaism. *Yardena* is the only manifestation of the “light world” and the Mandaean God (*hayyi*, literally meaning ‘life’) on the earth; that justifies its unique status in the Mandaean cosmology and rituals. *Yardena*, directly originate from the “light world”, and its dynamic character symbolizes the living and life-giving character of God. To preserve the natural flow of the river water that serves as the core spiritual value of the running

water necessitates an immediate access to it in its natural environment with the least manipulation and obstruction. Therefore, the only construction that the Mandaean make at the riversides include a simple concrete platform with few stairs to access the water and the muddy ground (Fig.3). Recent environmental predicaments hit the Mandaean as well as other people in the area.



Fig. 3. Mass baptism in dehwa daimana (festival of John the Baptist’s birthday). People wearing ritual cloths (rasta) and sit in a queue to receive the blessing from the pries (the one with a stick). source: Mehrdad Arabestani, 2004

In fact, the problem of water supply shortage in Khuzestan province and extra pollution of Karun River with heavy metals, harmful chemicals and microorganisms, affected the Mandaean customary practices. Heavy air pollution caused by dust particles is also influences the outdoor everyday activities. This situation raised the question of suitability of customary ritual practice for health and the possibility of accommodating the religious practice with the changing situation of the world. As a modern people burdened with an ancient tradition, this is not the only antagonism that the Mandaean are faced today. Indeed, rising demands of accommodating the various aspect of religion “tradition”, and not just using the running water and performing outdoor rituals, with the exigencies of today life can be seen as a main challenge among the Mandaean communities in both the homeland and diaspora (Arabestani, 2016). Yet, the prominent image of

Eastern Aramaic language family. Besides the Classical Mandaic language that is fixed in the Mandaean scriptures, certain vernacular dialects are still spoken by few numbers of the Mandaean, mainly including the priestly families. However, in practice, almost all Mandaean speak Arabic and Persian, just the same as their neighbors. The very characteristic of the Mandaean religion attracted certain historians of religion and linguists that resulted in a fine collection of scholarship on the history, origin and the language of the Mandaean (e.g. Buckley, 2002, 2006, 2007; Drower, 1937; Drower & Macuch, 1963; Häberl, 2012). Another less developing trend of study is anthropological studies that are dealing with the identity, cosmology, rituals, and recent changes in the Mandaean religious practice and lifestyle (e.g. Arabestani, 2012; Arabestani, 2016; Drower, 1937).

During recent decades, because of wars and political unrest in the region, a large number of the Mandaean have left their homeland to North America, Australia, and western Europe. The Mandaean dispersion in the world and formation of the diaspora, is a turning point in the Mandaean history and can bring about unprecedented changes into the community (Arabestani, 2016).

This short essay briefly deals with the parts of the Mandaean culture that connote its attitude toward making ritual constructions, as well as the landscape of their ritual performance. The aim of the essay is to give a taste of the Mandaean culture in accordance with the particular interests of the magazine; therefore, it is not by any means comprehensive and the serious readers may refer to works pertaining the Mandaean and Mandaeanism. Thus, the general landscape of the Mandaean rituals and a few constructions that are usually seen in their ceremonies have been chosen to give a brief glimpse of their culture. As the reader will find out, these constructions do not present a high degree of elaboration and the ritual landscape also shows the least manipulation of natural setting; however, the very traits are

densely imbued with a symbolism inspired by the Mandaean cosmology and are exactly representative of the underlying cosmology of Mandaeanism.

The landscape of ritual performance

Mandaeanism is highly ritualistic and the religious practice more than anything includes sets of daily, weekly and annual rituals that are performed whether individually or collectively. The purification is the core concept of the most rituals that are aimed at removing the earthly, or the polluted, elements to restore or enhance the natural purity of creation. *Mašbuta*, 'baptism', that is usually pronounced *mašwetta*, is the pivotal rite of Mandaeanism. Every Mandaean has to be baptized at least once in his lifetime; moreover, it is an essential part of the ceremonies such as marriage, priests' coronation. Furthermore, in the annual religious festivals, mass baptism is performed for the participants. Since the flowing water, '*yardna*', is the only purifying element on the earth, the baptism can only perform in streams and rivers. There are different types of obligatory ablutions that have to be done in flowing water; among them are *Rishama*, the minor daily and preliminary ablution, and *ṭamasha*, total immersion and/or ritual washing of polluted areas, and preliminary ablution of the animals before slaughter.

Therefore, the riversides are the location of most of the Mandaean rituals. Marital baptism, baptism of the mother and the newborn, religious festivals and slaughtering are take place at the riversides. Even though, nowadays many Mandaean performs their preliminary ablution for praying by tap water, pious Mandaean still prefer to do *rishama* and *brakha* (daily prayer) at the riverside. In Ahvaz, for example, seeing Mandaean washing and praying at the banks of Karun River close to the Mandaean neighborhood at the prayer times is a common scene (Fig. 1&2).

Thus, in contrast to most the traditions that their

Landscape and Constructs in the Mandaean Culture: Immediacy and Temporality

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Abstract


Religions present their followers with a religious world that simultaneously set the worldview as well as the ethos of the community of the believers. The Mandaean are the followers of an ethno-religious minority who are originally living in Iran and Iraq. By drawing on the landscape of ritual performance and certain ritual constructs among the Mandaean, this essay intends to show how the Gnostic Mandaean cosmology and ethos are symbolically manifested in their aesthetic sense and the way they approach their rituals.

Keywords: *Worldview, Ritual Landscape, Ritual Constructs, Purity.*

Introduction

The treasurers: Regarding the number of the followers, the Mandaeanism is an obscure ethno-religion that its adherents reside in Iraq and Iran. The Mandaean have not had a major role in the history and, in fact, despite their almost long-lasting tradition, only sporadic references to this people might be found in historical texts. However, as the guardians of the only living Gnostic tradition in the world, they occupy a significant position in the religious studies and history of religion. Gnosticism consists of a set of ancient religious ideas that have significantly influenced the development of the “world

religions” such as Christianity and Judaism. Despite the small number of the followers and the localized character, the Mandaeanism is not a folk religion based on oral traditions. Quite the contrary, the tradition is a doctrinal religion that its world-view and rituals are well formulated in a collection of sacred scriptures written in Mandaic language, among them *giza rabba*- literally ‘great treasure’, the Gods revelation to Adam the first man- is considered the most important. The scriptures are traditionally preserved on scrolls that are prudently copied by the chain of scribes throughout the history; and only recently, some of the scriptures are published in limited numbers. Mandaic language is a dialect of

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