Ritual place of water among Mandaean religious group

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Abstract

Mandaean is a group of people that water plays vital role in their religious ceremonies. Although they hide their beliefs and religious practices from others, certainly baptism is one of the important elements of Mandaean rituals and rivers are essential places to perform these religious rituals. Baptism has detailed rituals. While clergyman reads verses, a person who perform baptism ablutions, whispers them. He/she must be plunged in water and because of it Mandaean live near rivers. Now, Mandaean live in Ahvaz city. Studying the relationship between Mandaean and water and their religious rituals is the main of this research. Data collecting method is field-based and library research method. Part of data is based on observations about the life style of this group and other part of data was collected from conducted library researches in this field.

Keywords: religious practices, baptism, rituals, Mandaean.
1-1 Statement of the problem

Water is lifeblood based on human creation. Each nation has special culture, rituals, customs, stories and ceremonies related to water. Water and culture are two rich, vast and global categories that are effective on each other. Social culture and customs in different religions show relationship between human and environment. So, humans think about water and how to use it. In the meantime, public beliefs about water were known as a symbol of purity and cleaning impurities and guilt. Water washes the sinners and gives them new life. Cleaning idea by water specially when to perform one’s ablutions shows this matter, clearly.

Mandaean are a group of people who follow Yahya prophet (Baptist of Jesus Christ). They know Palestine as their homeland and emigrated Khuzistan and shores of Karkheh river before the birth of Christ in Ashkanian period. They divided in two groups latter, a group resided in south part of Iraq and another group resided in Shoshtar and Ahvaz cities. Now, thousand of them live in Ahvaz, Khoramshahr, Dashtmishan cities of Iran, and shores of Dejleh and Forat, Basreh, Amareh, Mosel, Remadi cities of Iraq. They introduce themselves as Mandaean or Sabi (Shirali, 2010). Manda is a word in eastern language means a person who has obtained divine insight (Berenji, 1988). So, their temple is called Mandi (Frozandeh, 1998). Their holy writings are in Mandaean language. This language belongs to eastern Arami languages which has special letters and is related to writing system of Tabtian (Hinls, 2005). Mandaean literature has at least 1800 years old (Frozandeh, 1998). Mandaean language has properties of the west part of Syria that shows probability of their migration to east (Jakobson, 1994).

Since, they perform their rituals with water, they are called Sabobieh in Arabic language that means using water. Nold believes that Saebeh has been derived from Sabalma, that means using water and addressing their baptism ceremony (Jafari, 1995).

Arabs called them people who perform ablutions. They mentioned in Quran for three times, Baghareh Surah, verses 62; Maedeh Surah, verses 69 and Haj Surah, verses 17. Holy book of Mandaean is Gonzar (Great treasure) or human book and it is divided in two parts: left Gonzar and right Gonzar (Abdalmoleh, 1995). This book is most important book among holy books of Mandaean and it is about how to creation, creature creation and discusses about events which happened for human. Also, it contains important matters related to divine attributes, religious commandments, future life, life style instructions of Adam, Shait, Noh, Sam ibn Noh and Yahya inb Zakaria prophets (Elhami, 2000).

Great God is called Great Life in Mandaean religion (Shirali, 1998). It is hidden and has great place (Frozandeh, 1998). Mandaean mystics like Namonovian mystics believe there is battle between light and darkness and rescue light from darkness. Mandaean holy book emphasizes on avoidance from darkness. Avoidance of darkness means tendency toward beauty and charity. A mandaean follower always fights darkness and evil and tries reach to place of light angels (Alyadeh, 1994). Hints of Mandaean texts to mix of fresh and salt water are in fact symbolizes the combination of light and darkness. All perfumed, sweet and beautiful things are symbols of light and all bad, ugly and salt things are symbols of darkness. Darkness world is called Roha and
is located in south and under middle layers. World full of ugly, bad and evil creatures who want disturb the world. The transfigured world tries to take captive darkness to avoid from its disadvantages and damages. Thus, darkness world (Roha) is similar to Zrtosht religion and philosophy more that it is imagined. Zartosht religion used evil world function to enforce its religious philosophy (Frozandeh, 1998). Also, the effect of Iranian beliefs is obvious in their beliefs about light and glorification of their dead persons. Sabi group knows light symbol of life and protection from strength and justice (Zarinkoob, 2004). There is no doubt that main framework of Mandaean religion comprised of duality that in which two opposed groups not only conflict each other but also fight each other and know about each other rights (Jakobson, 1994).

Sabi population is about 25000 persons in Ahvaz. They claim they have 2000 years old. But there is no exact information about Mandaean residence and their previous generations in this region. They were skillful to make boats and small rowing boats in past. They made single and double boats and big boats well and their life was based on water. Today, most of them are jeweler, goldsmith and perform enamel-work. Sabi men distinguish from their white clothes and long beard. They live in their own neighborhoods.

This research has tried to study the water place among Mandaean religious group, because water plays vital role in their life and they believe that the water is lifeblood and spiritual and plays the role of link between God and human. So, Mandaean believe the water is God’s perfume.

1-2 Water and purity among Mandaean people

Purity and ablutions (ceremonial washing) are very important in Mandaean religion and have physical and spiritual aspects. Spiritual aspect of ablutions emphasizes on purity of spirit. Practicing religious rites (worship) is not possible without purification and ablutions. Spirit purification is obvious in fundamental themes of Mandaean mystics. Verses of their holy book emphasizes on importance of water, clearly.

“my rituals are not performed by fire and I am not Jewish and Christian. My rituals are performed by pure water that has been flowed by God’s command to purity of human and life giving them. The water has undeniable power in my purification from physical and spiritual impurities."

“Yahya revived baptism among Mandaean, he became owner rivers based on God’s command and performed baptism for people. He purified people who suffered from leprosy by water and cured them he give eyesight sense to blinds and hearing sense to deaf (Brenji, 1988). Some believe that tendency of Madaean to water and living near rivers (running and life water) has brought world of light to the earth according to Mandaean traditions (Arabestani, 2004). They know water as holy material consistence with other religions “و جعلنا من الماء كل شيء حي “ (Anbia: 30). So, water has direct effect in purification and baptism of Jewish, Christian and Muslims. One of beliefs of Mandaean is that holy water is running from throne of heaven and life origins from light world. Water has been descended from sky to the earth as granting human demand and prayer, thus human can see water and pray. They pray toward north, because their Kiblah (direction to worship) is toward north. Polar star is located in this direction and they believe it is
one of the paradise doors (Jafari, 1995). Mandaean temples are empty from each idol and water is running for holiness (Hejazi Sagha, 2003).

Purity is very important for Mandaeans and flowing water is only pure and cleaning element for them. Impurity is eliminated by water and purity rituals are performed by water (Arabestani, 2004). Water not only eliminates guilt but also it is symbol of light world. Baptism before funeral is one of the complicated, long time and mysterious religious rituals and is performed hidden from public (Jakobson, 1994). Mandaean emphasizes on purity and repentance. Baptism and ablutions by flowing water not only eliminates physical impurities but also eliminates guilt and spiritual impurities (Zarinkoob, 2004).

1-3 Ablution before prayer (Rashameh)

Rashameh, baptism and Tamasheh are purity stages of Mandaean. One of the main religious rituals and essentials of Mandaean region is Rashameh (ablution before prayer). Because every who having attained puberty must perform ablution before prayer three times in day, at morning, noon, evening and before sunset. Rashameh is performed in other rituals like baptism. The aim of doing Rashameh is purification of body to pray. Prayer (Brakheh) is performed every morning, noon and evening. A Mandae must stand near river sincerely and respectfully before doing every practice. Then he/she prays with calling God's name: washing hands, ears, lips and nose is one of practices that must be done. To perform Rashameh in flowing water, a Mandaee at first prays and washes his/her hands and then washes his/her face for three times. Then he/she washes the fingers of her/his right hand and wets her/his forehead three times from right to left. After that he/she sinks the tip of her/his fingers in water and brings toward ear and prays: my ears have heard the God's voice. Then, he/she brings a handful of water with her/his right hand and washes his/her nose and repeats this action for three times. A person who wants to perform Rashameh pours water on her/his left hand with her/his right hand and repeats it for three times. Then, he/she sinks his/her point fingers in water and points to his/her knees and finally he/she sinks the tip of his/her right and left toes in water while he prays. By performing Rashameh, a person reaches degree of purity that is essential to pray and speak with God. Rashameh is the highest degree of purity. In the other words, prerequisite for doing Rashameh is doing baptism and Tamasheh. Existence of each impurity whether on clothes or body leads to violating Rashameh. Rashameh must perform after elimination impurities and doing Tamasheh. Rashameh has symbolic role like other purity rituals. But, since Rashameh is done in short time, symbols are more implicit. Smelling water in Rashameh is like smelling God. Rashameh is similar ablution before prayer in Islam and there are religious practices such as smelling water and praying before ablution for pray among Mandaeans.

1-4 Ablutions (ceremonial washing)

Washing all body is called Tamasheh in Mandaeans language. In deed ablution is washing all body by water that is performed by a person. Tamasheh become essential for a person due to different reasons; when a person loses his/her purity due to different reasons, Tamasheh returns initial purity. To perform Tamasheh must be sunk hand or a part of body which has been polluted
in water. Mandaeans believe that they must perform ablution for everything that eliminates purity. Ablution means plunging in flowing water for three times.

Urine, blood, exiting gas from stomach, touching a woman who suffered from menses, woman who has just given birth, eating something before prayer eliminate ablution and Rashameh.

1-5 Baptism

The main religious ritual of Mandaeans is baptism. It is called Masbata in Mandaean language. Baptism must be performed by Mandaean clergyman.

It must be worn baptism clothe when performing baptism. Rasteh is one of essential tools for doing baptism that Mandaean called it religious clothes and they must wear it in some rituals such as funeral when they pray. Rasteh is white and made of cotton (Shirali, 2010).

Rasteh comprised of five parts; Kesvia (shirt/dress), Sherval (pants), Barzengha (turban, scarf), Hamyaneh (christian’s or Jew’s girdle for distinguishing from Muslims), Nasifeh (a cloth in shape of scarf that covers shoulders) and two pieces of cloth only for Mandaean clergyman; Shom Yavar (a golden ring that is worn in small finger of right hand) and Tagheh (crown, the cloth ring made of white cotton or silk), there are two other pieces; Dasha (a small pocket at right side of collar of shirt/dress) and Takhta (the rope of pants), this clothes is sewn in special way.

“baptism is essential for all Saebian at the festival day. Men and women perform baptism in a same way. Complete baptism is essential when great events such as marriage, childbirth and washing dead person (Arabestani, 2004) and Mandaean clergyman performs their baptism at Sunday. Sunday is the first day of week for Mandaean.

Baptism at river is the first and most important ritual and sign of tendency individuals to Mandaeans religion. Water is material for purification of body and spirit of individuals from guilt. Baptism ceremony is performed several times at a year specially in religious ceremonies. Baptism is usually done according to individuals’ demand. Since, each Mandaeans must perform baptism several times at a year. Each Mandaean can perform baptism whenever he/she wants. But, it is necessary to perform baptism 45 days after childbirth, a person who is not infant father, brings infant for baptism, bride and bridegroom perform baptism twice before conclude a marriage and one time after marriage by being plunged in water several times, women must perform baptism 30 days after their childbirth, a person who did unlawful action, after funeral ceremony, after touching dead person, after touching parturient after the first week of her childbirth and also parturient woman after one week from her childbirth.

Mandaean perform baptism near river every Sunday. Individuals wear Rasteh when doing baptism and read verses from Gozar book. Mandaean clergyman goes in water and the person who wants to do baptism, sits in water. If he/she was child, another person help him/her to go in water. Another person pours water on him/her. Then he/she comes out and sits on the chair and clergyman reads Gozar again. He/she prays and eats holy bread and water. Baptism ceremony is performed 30 minutes.
1-6 Marriage rituals and customs

Marriage ritual of Mandaeans young persons is performed near running water and in temples of Mandaeans in the presence of Mandaeans followers. Bride and bridegroom must have Rashameh before marriage ceremony. Clergyman who does marriage ceremony must have Rashmeh and then start reading verses from holy book and perform coronation. His crown is cloth ring which has been sewn in special way and is put on head like skullcap. He comes in water when reads certain verses. Then bride and bridegroom come in water when read certain verses, they pass from clergyman and stand behind him with 1m distance. Clergyman invites them to come near him when he reads ablution verses and he takes a ring from small finger of one of them and put under scarf or belt of them when he reads certain verses and confirms the have good selection. After that, clergyman pours water on their body. He gives them some of holy water to eat and they come out water. When they are coming out water, he reads certain verses and they must repeat: I praise God, angels, flowing waters, holy places and thanks.

In this stage, clergyman gives them some of holy water and bread to eat and then ask them to lengthen their hands toward flowing water and say O flowing water we performed baptism in it and did not any unlawful actions.

All these stages are repeated again and baptism is completed. Then they go to temple after replacing their wet clothes and wearing Rasteh to perform marriage ceremony. Marriage ceremony is performed only at Sunday and only marriage is allowable with coreligionists.

1-7 Fasting

Saebin fast 36 days. These days are called Ambatal. Slaughtering is unlawful in Ambatal days. These days include: 1-14 Dola (29th Tir (4th month of the Persian solar year) – 11 Mordad (5th month of Persian solar year)), 23 Dola (20 Mordad), 6-7 Dola. Baptism and eating meat, fish and egg are not allowable in these days. But in other days when are called small Ambatal, only performing religious practices is not allowable and eating meat is allowable.

1-8 Discussion

Although, water is valuable in all religions and traditions so it has been worshiped, but there is water in all religious ceremonies and rituals of Mandaeans religion. Their life depends on water and they try to live near flowing waters. Water with curing features as lifeblood has been subjects of stories, fictions and conversations. Water is symbol of purity in all rituals and religious ceremonies especially in Mandaeans religion. There are features only in flowing waters that is called life water. Water not only is material for washing but also is life and brings living.

One of the worst natural disasters is drought all over the world. People frighten when drought happens and do every work to rain. Mandaeans believe that river is symbol of life as flows, since it is holy. River is the holiest place for Mandaeans, since they perform their religious ceremonies and rituals in it. In fact, river is a place for praying Mandaeans, where God transfigures in it. White clothes which Mandaeans wear are symbol of peace in their behaviors. So, other people do
not remember any conflicts quarrels among themselves and others. It seems that deep relationship between them and water brings peace for them.
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