

## Explanatory Text for Jesse Buckley's Video: MANDAEAN MAŠBUTA

By Jorunn J. Buckley

### I. The Setting

The video was taken on Sunday, June 13, 1999, in a park on the banks of the Charles River, across from Cambridge, Massachusetts, on the occasion of the international conference THE MANDAEANS, held at Harvard University under the auspices of ARAM, The Society of Syro-Mesopotamean Studies. The Mandaean are the last surviving Gnostics from the time of late antiquity; they reside in Iraq and Iran and, increasingly, in emigration throughout the world. Both scholars and Madaeans attended the conference, the Madaeans far outnumbering the scholars.

For the purpose of having a full Madaean baptism, mašbuta, ritual at the conference, we invited two Iranian priests (one of whom now resides in New South Wales, Australia, the other one of Ahwaz, Iran) and one Iraqi priest, now living in Detroit, Michigan. The head priest of the ritual is the ganzibra (treasurer) Sh. (=Sheikh) Salah Tawoosie, and the other Iranian priest is the tarmida (the term for the lower level priest): Sh. Taleb Dorraji. The ganzibra in Detroit, Sh. Fawzi Gharib Masbob, is also present at the ritual, although he does not officiate as a priest in the baptism. A few yalufas (learned laymen) act as āšgandas (helpers) in the ritual. These men play crucial roles as go-betweens, mediating between earth and the evoked Madaean Lightworld (the heavenly world). The priests are, essentially, Lightworld beings when they are consecrated into their ritual roles.

You will see the priests entering into and exiting from this status several times during the ritual by means of gestures, prayers, and changes in ritual garb. The precise markers for such entry and exit will not, however, be explained in any detail here. All the ritual workers are dressed in the obligatory white garments (rastas); all have long beards, but only the two officiating priests carry the olive wood staffs (margnas), the primary priestly emblem.

This was the first time a full Mandaean baptism had been performed --outdoors and with two officiating priests--in the United States. Only Madaeans are being baptized --about twenty of them in this film (Madaeans do not accept converts and non-Madaeans cannot be baptized). The other people on the riverbank are conference members, and in the background you see people just enjoying a summer Sunday.

## II. The Baptism

What is the Mandaean baptism? It is a repeated ritual, geared towards immersing the believers in fresh, running, "living," water (yardna: "Jordan"). Running fresh water is the form in which the Mandaean Lightworld reflects itself on earth, and therefore immersion in water is the way to connect with the Lightworld. Mandaean baptism, then, does not constitute an initiation ritual. In Madaeism, infants are baptized fairly soon after birth, and the dying are baptized, too. Priests perform baptism on Sundays (the Mandaean holy day) and during major festivals. Men, women, and children are baptized in separate groups (in this video, four boys are baptized after the women). For the sake of modesty, women add a cloak over their rastas.

The entire ritual, which began soon after sunrise, took ca. seven hours, and with two cameras, the total film time amounted to more than nine hours. This has been edited to fifty minutes.

### III. Sequence

1 As the video begins, Sh. Salah's voice is heard praying (this is prayer # 106 in The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaean, and the recording stems from a much earlier audiotape from Iran). The other sounds in the video are prayers and ritual formulas (all in Mandaic, an East-Aramaic dialect with its own alphabet.) and background conversations in English, Arabic, Farsi, and Mandaic.

You first see Sh. Salah, stripped to his waist as he immerses himself in what looks like a self-baptism. However, this is not the maṣbuta (which does require an officiant) but a preparatory lustration. On the riverbank, there are coals on a fire basin, the clay ṭariana. (We had secured a fire permit). After Sh. Salah has ascended from the Charles, he puts on his priestly dress, with its various required pieces, including the turban (2) (burziṅqa). Crouching by the ṭariana, Sh. Taleb keeps the coal fire going. Note the margna --the priest will hold on to this royal/priestly implement during required periods of the ritual. Mr. Dakhil Shoostary of New York is close by Sh. Taleb.

In the background, you see a temporary blue tarp shed, so that those who are to be baptized can change their clothes there. Note Sh. Fawzi, who is without a staff, because he is not acting as a priestly officiant at this ritual. Sh. Salah and Sh. Taleb are praying, dealing with their crowns, tagas, which are the round, white silk cloths. These are priestly emblems; no laypeople wear them. Watch what the priests do with their tagas

throughout! Also, keep track of the mouth-covers (pandamas), which the priests tie or loosen throughout the rituals. The pandama marks a barrier to the external world.

3 When a priest puts his right hand to the right side of his head while praying, he is emphasizing the crown on top of his head, but the crown is hidden under the burzinqa. Rules pertain to prayer positions: some are uttered while crouching, others while standing up. You will note the priestly gold ring, on a priest's little finger on the right hand. This priestly symbol is called Šum Yawar Ziwa ("The Name of Yawar Ziwa")--Yawar Ziwa is one of the beings in the Lightworld). The book containing the baptism liturgy is present, and an observant viewer will see the Mandaic text.

Note Sh. Salah, crouching in front of the fire, stroking his face and beard with the sacred emanation from the fire on the ṭariana.

The rasta-dressed men, who will be baptized first, are getting ready. Sh. Fawzi is making tiny myrtle wreaths, klilas. Keep track of the klila in the rituals! This is the evergreen, "female" symbol of the spirit, which balances the "male" symbol of the priestly crown. Both are necessary for life.

Two of the ašgandas, Sh. Salem Choheili and his brother, are in view. Pots and pans sit on the riverbank, and these will be baptized later. They belong to the priests, who are staying in one of the few available Harvard houses with a separate kitchen, so that the priests can cook their own food, with their own utensils.

4 Flour is washed in the river, and then secured in a little white cloth bag. The flour will be used to bake the small round pihtas, the breads for the sacred meal. One pihta is spread on the coals; in the close-up, note the incense cube on the right side of the ṭariana.

Sh. Taleb now comes up from the river with a brass bowl in his hand. This contains water for the ritual. Note Sh. Taleb counting prayer formulas on the digits of his fingers. Sh. Choheili, one of the *ašgandas*, is readied for his task by one of the priests, who is praying over him. Note how the priest holds the end of his stole up to Sh. Choheili's head. The priest consecrates his crown by moving it rapidly between his lips and eyebrows. The crown is then secured on the upper right arm. Note the *klila* on the little finger.

Sh. Taleb is in the river, washing his arms and drinking water (note: the river water had been subjected to a large number of laboratory tests, and no one became ill from drinking the water). The priest blesses each piece of his ritual clothes, puts the *klila* under his crown, which is under the turban. Sh. Salah is seen on the river's edge, signing himself with water across his forehead, from right to left --always the correct direction.

On land, note the book lying on white cloths. One of the boys is getting ready (but this turns out to be a bit premature). Another boy (Danny Al-Haider), led by his mother, is on his way into the blue shed.

Now, the men are ready. The priest, in the river, slips his *klila* down the *margna* so that the *klila* descends into the water. The first person to be baptized is Mr. Asad Askari of Tehran, Iran. Note the repeated baptism invocation between priest and the person who is to be baptized. Mr. Askari walks out into the water, goes around the priest so that he is on the priest's right side, and then crouches in the water. After the splashings, note the formulas ("May the Truth heal you!"--in Mandaic) and the following movements: water on head, water smeared across forehead, three handfuls of water, and the priest taking the *klila* from the person's little finger and tucking it securely under the turban.

Mr. Dakhil Shoostary is next. (Canada geese come swimming by). Note how the priest makes sure that his margna is set within the loop of his stole, so that the staff does not accidentally float away. One may note that anytime the priest comes up from the water and both of his hands are occupied, he will tilt his head to his right shoulder, securing the staff from falling away.

8 As the rasta-clad boy goes into the water, the women give the traditional joy-cries, the ululations. (But the boy is later to be baptized with the other boys--his baptism seems interrupted here). *given a name?*

9 From his pouch, the priest in the river picks a bottle (qanina), swishes it around in the water three times, fills it with water, and ascends to dry land with the filled bottle and the brass bowl. The men in the row are smeared across the forehead with sesame-paste--the priest has ground sesame seeds into a paste already. After the sacred handshake, kūsta (Truth), the men go to the water, wash their right arms, and come back up again. Next, they hold out their right, freshly washed arms to receive in their right hands pieces of the pihta, the baked tiny bread. Three bowlfuls of water are next, but please note how the third bowlful is not consumed but thrown over the left shoulder: this is the testimony to the earth, the spirit, Ruha, the "left" side of life, which also required its share in the ritual.

10 The men stretch out their right arms toward the river, taking the yardna as witness to their baptism.

Sh. Salah is grinding sesame. The boys, crouched in a row behind the men, are smeared with sesame. (There is a special prayer for the children). Sh. Salah pours water over the boys' hands. Note the handshake with the priest's hand wrapped in the stole.



Handshakes between the priest and the ašganda, Sh.Choheili, mark the connections between the priest--as a Lightbeing--and the mediator, the ašganda, who plays the role of a messenger between the two worlds, the earth and the Lightworld.

Now, as the boys are done with the baptism, the women get ready. First, however, Sh. Taleb baptizes one of the ašgandas before the pots are cleansed. Sh. Fawzi is helping here.

The priest dips his staff in the water, splashing water to ready the yardna for baptism (and getting demonic forces out of it--only one ninth of baptism water is pure, but it is that ninth that counts!).

The by-standing Mandaean women utter ululations as their sisters-in-Truth are about to be baptized. Among the baptized women are Sada Al-Haider of Woburn, Massachusetts and Anisa Kethir of New York.

Outsiders may be surprised by the ease of the priest with women. Mandaean priests are married and are allowed to touch other women in a ritual situation. Sh. Choheili, as ašganda, remains close by as the women are going through the ritual.

Next, you see Mr. Abdullah Tawoosie, of Ahwaz, Iran, in ritual garb, praying and kissing his bundled-up holy belt (himiana) as he gets ready to deconsecrate himself.

One of the priests holds his crown and klila together as he moves the two between his lips and eyebrows. This is a good illustration of combining the "male" and right-hand force with the "female" left-hand one.

A last group of men is baptized. Sh. Taleb officates. Off to the side, Sh. Salah pours water into containers for the priest's drinking water back at their temporary quarters. (Note the glass; plastic bottles are avoided because plastic is an oil-derived product). Sh. Taleb feeds himself with

13 pihta. Utensils are packed up, in white cloth bags. Sh. Taleb reverently kisses the books before placing them in cloth bags. Various laymen help with cleaning up. You see some of the ritual workers eating fruit. Saeed Moradi (of New York) and I have been in neighboring Watertown buying food for the priests. They are now free to relax and eat, hungry after many hours of work.

Dakhil Shoostary packs the ṭarianas in a paper bag. The last act: Mandaean carefully picking up leaves of myrtle to be thrown into the river, where they drift on the surface.

A very ancient ritual has just been performed in the Charles River.

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For further details on the Mandaean maṣbuta, you may consult:

Segelberg, Eric, Masbuta. Studies in the Ritual of Mandaean Baptism, Uppsala: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1958.

Drower, E. S. , The Mandaean of Iraq and Iran, Leiden: Brill, 1962

----- , The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaean (Leiden, Brill, 1959). (The first part contains the baptism liturgy).

Rudolph, Kurt, Die Mandäer II: Der Kult, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1961.

Buckley, Jorunn. J., "Why Once is Not Enough: Mandaean Baptism (Masbuta) as an Example of a Repeated Ritual," History of Religions 29, 1, 1989.