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Kakai Religion and the Place of Music and the Tanbur

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Zubeida S Abdulkhaliq

Summary

This paper discusses the historical context and mythic framework of the Kakai religion. While some information regarding Kakai theological views and beliefs may be known to outsiders, many facets of their religious life, customs and traditions remain undisclosed. Much secrecy surrounds this religion, and non-believers are not encouraged to engage in or witness most Kakai rites. Geopolitical instability in the Kurdistan region also makes access difficult. Throughout this paper we will look at the relationship between Kakai beliefs and music (tanburo), and how the tanbur (a sacred lute) is not merely a musical instrument but is seen as a symbol of Kakai identity, with the music preserving language and legend.

Keywords: Kakai, music, tanbur, religious minority, Yarsanism

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The main challenge in researching this paper was identifying texts considered authoritative and reliable by senior figures within the Kakai community. To ensure the authenticity and credibility of information, I needed to work with Kakai people directly.

I was greatly helped in this endeavour by Mr Rajab Kakai, Director of the Methra Organization for Yarsani Culture and Development, and Mr Khairi Bozani (Director General of Yazidi Affairs in the Kurdistan Ministry of Religious Affairs) in Erbil. They helped me make contact with other writers, intellectuals, university lecturers, and Kakai community specialists and students at Salahaddin University in Erbil.

I was introduced to a variety of specialists with years of varied experience – civil servants, university lecturers and activists. Rojan Akram, a student from the Kakai village of Hawar, located in the Halabja region, was kind enough to invite me to her home village to participate in two religious ceremonies that featured the tanbur.

The majority of Kakai live in western Iran (in the areas of Iranian Kurdistan and Loristan). Dr Kajal Fadakar's help in this area was invaluable (Dr Kajal Fadakar is originally from Sanandaj in Iran; she teaches the Kurdish language at the University of Zakho, in the Kurdistan region of Iraq). Mr Foad Godarzi (a Yarsani intellectual and photographer from the city of Kermanshah in Iran) and Mrs Golala Kamangar (a Yarsani activist) who lives in Stockholm, Sweden, were kind enough to allow me to interview them online several times.

Woman with a tanbur, Mountain of Ways, Kirmansha



Credit: Foad Godarzi, May 2019

1 Introduction

An ethno-religious map of Iraq is largely dominated by three major groups: the Shiites, the Sunnis, and the Kurds. Beyond these groups there are various ethnic, religious, sectarian, and linguistic groups. The history of this area shows us that political authorities seem unaware and disinterested in the importance of this diverse diaspora of cultural richness. Throughout history, the rich cultural diversity of these distinct ethnic, religious, sectarian, and linguistic groups has been threatened by emigration as well as forced assimilation into the cultural mainstream. Minority groups are at risk of being crushed by a complicated legacy of demographic manipulation, with their distinct identities ultimately lost in the conflict between major cultural groups competing for space and power (Saad 2013: 8).

Historically, Kurds who live in northern Iraq have practiced a variety of religions, including *Mithraism* at the time of the Roman Empire, ancient Zoroastrianism, Yazidism, Kakai (Yarsanism), Judaism, Christianity, and several sub-sects of Islam, including the Baha'i faith.

After the first Gulf War in 1991, the defeat of the Ba'athist regime and the foundation of the Kurdistan regional government led to an improvement in living conditions for ethnic and religious minorities. For some, like the Yazidi, this allowed freedom to express their cultural and religious identity. The Lalish Cultural and Social Center of Yazidis was established, and more attention was given to Yazidi cultural and administrative affairs. For the first time, the Yazidi had the right to teach Yazidism in their schools in this region. A general directorate of Yazidi affairs was established in the Kurdistan regional government, as well as many Yazidi civil society organisations, both inside and outside of Kurdistan (Munira 2011; Farha 2010; Jundi 2004).

The Kakai had an altogether different experience. According to Ako Shawais, the first political representative of Iraq's Kakai minority in the city of Halabja:¹

Following 1991, the Kurdistan Regional Government improved the situation of ethnic and religious minorities in this area but they make no reference to Kakai as a religious community.² Kakai have only recently gained official recognition (Law No. 5 of 2015). This law is protecting the rights of groups in Kurdistan and it mentioned Kakai, for the first time in modern history, as one of the religious and sectarian groups in Iraq's Kurdistan region. It is worth mentioning that until now, Kakai as a religious community is not mentioned in the Iraqi Constitution before 2005 or after 2005.³

He added that:

The Kakai has yet to be represented by the Ministry of Endowments and Religious Affairs in the Kurdistan region. This is primarily due to conflict within the Kakai community itself. While one group considers Kakaism to be a separate religion from Islam, the other believes that Kakai are indeed Muslims. We became victims twice, as Kurds and as Kakai. We have our own culture and faith, and we have always been targeted by armed organisations. For example, in the city of Kirkuk and other territories, they have held for the past 14 years, Daesh and extreme groups have executed over 250 Kakai after proclaiming them infidels...

2 Objectives of the research

Among the various religious groups that make up the Kurdish people, the Kakai or Yarsanseem are the most misunderstood. The history, beliefs, and social situation of this minority religious group is ignored, even by the majority of Kurds (Nebez 2004).

¹ Halabja is the capital and centre of governance in Iraq's Kurdistan region, and lies around 240 kilometers north-east of Baghdad. The city is located at the foot of the broader Hawraman area, which stretches from Iran to Iraq. Historically, Hawraman is the traditional home of the Kakai in Iraq and the Yarsan in Iran.

² Researcher Saad Salloum, who has published more than one book on minorities in Iraq, insists that 'the Kakai benefit from political representation and that the Iraqi Constitution recognize them as well as all other communities not yet recognized'. See Salloum, S. (2013) *Minority in Iraq: Memory, Identity and Challenge*, Baghdad-Beirut.

³ In an interview with Al-Monitor, Ako Shawais, the first political representative of Iraq's Kakai minority, discusses why the sect is so secretive, as well as its struggle for rights (religious and political). See: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2016/02/iraq-kakai-religious-minority-kurdistan-quota.html#ixzz7BRk6Illj>

This study will examine two axes of Kakai religion. The first focuses on the historical aspect of Kakai beliefs, exploring some of the social and religious dimensions that distinguish Kakaism from other religions in the Middle East. The second axis seeks to describe the role that music plays in the Kakai faith.

In Kakai religious and spiritual traditions, sound and music occupies an important, if not central, role. This paper provides a collection of data on the use of the tanbur and traditional music in the Kakai religion in Iraq and wider Kurdistan.

3 Background

3.1 Geographic distribution, demographic size, and language

The word 'Kakaism' and the adjective 'Kakai' is derived from the Kurdish word 'Kaka' (elder brother). Therefore, the literal meaning of Kakaism is brotherhood. Adherents to Kakai go by various names and live across at least three different countries – in the Kurdish regions of Iran, Iraq, and Turkey. According to Fahmy Kakai (2013), it is a Kurdish religion whose practitioners predominantly live in Kurdistan, which has now spread to many parts of the world. In Iranian Kurdistan, the Kakai also refer to themselves as Yarsan, translated as 'the Friend of Sultan' (the [Divine] king). In the Kurdish region of Turkey, they are known as Ahl-e Haqq (people of the truth) (see footnote 5; Vatanpour 2017: 3).

Kakai is a Kurdish religion whose practitioners predominantly live in Kurdistan. Kakaism or Yarsanism, which originated along the borders of current-day Iran and Iraq, spread and flourished with the arrival of Islam. The religion began to emerge around the year 800 A.D. However, it was not until the thirteenth century that its basic pillars were defined and confirmed by Sultan Sahak (for more information on Sultan Sahak, refer to the next section). To date, Kakaism has been evolving for almost 500 years, resulting in its current form. This late emergence and formalisation is likely to have taken place as a result of the collusion of different religions and cultures, as the local population of this area became increasingly exposed to the new Arabic faith, language, and culture, which were alien to them. As a result, the Kakai religion emerged, and alongside the Kurdish language it became a symbol of local culture. To this day, Kakaism and its religious ceremonies and rituals are still practiced in the Kurdish language (dialect of Gorani-Horamani). Other ethnic groups that practice the faith, such as Persians and Azeris, have also continued to do so in Kurdish (Kakai 2013: 19).

According to Fahmi Kakai, a Kakai intellectual and writer:

Kakai, Yarsan and Ahl-e Haqq are all the same religion, with not much differences in beliefs, culture, or primary faith but they are divided between different countries since 100 years. After the first world war and creation, the new States (Kakai Yarsan – Ahle-Haqq) were further divided between different (new nationalist State). They were violently oppressed and marginalised by the practice of these States and they continue to be. Because of strict border controls, they couldn't have relations and communication with each other. That is why through time we notice some superficial difference in daily practice, but it is not essential.

(Interview with Farhad Kakai, Kakai religious leader, writer and lecturer at Salahaddin University-Erbil , Erbil, 10 September 2021)

In Iraqi Kurdistan, the majority of the Kakai live in Kirkuk and on the banks of the Great Zab river on the Iran–Iraq borders. They also live in Khanqin, Madali, Julala, Erbil, Suleymanya, and Hawraman (in northern and eastern Iraq). Those living in Qasra Shirin, Sahnah, Kermansha, and Ser Pol Zahab (in the west of Iran) are called Yarsan or Ahle-Haqq. This community is dwindling as a result of the Islamic Republic's repression and assimilation programmes. Many Yarsanis left Iran for Europe or the Kurdistan regional government (in northern Iraq) (Nebez 2004).

A 2018 United Nations report (Human Rights Council 2018) documented that in Iran, the Yarsani were not allowed to build places of worship, they could not bury their dead in accordance with their religion, they could not print their holy book without fear, and parents were not able to register their children as Yarsani at birth. With the foundation of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, Twelver Shi'ism became the official state religion. This ushered in an age of suppression, undermining Yarsan identity, and complicating the relationship between the Yarsan and the authorities. As Iran sought to secure its borders with Iraq during this period, authorities went about 'Islamising' these border regions, resulting in an attempted cultural stripping of the people who lived in these areas (ibid.).

According to an interview with Farhad Kakai,⁴ 'each religion has its symbols. For example, in Islam, a beard is mandatory, and in our religion, a moustache is mandatory [for men].

⁴ Interview with Kakai Fahmi, Kakai religious leader, writer and lecturer at Salahaddin University, Erbil, conducted via Zoom, 23 February 2022.

For the Kakai, the moustache is a heavenly image and symbol of the religion. Customarily, Kakai men let their moustaches develop and never cut them'. In 2013, after Iranian prison guards abused a devout Kakai by shaving off their moustache, two Yarsans set themselves on fire in protest at the mayor's office in the Iranian city of Hamadan. Now, most Kakai shave their moustaches to deny their origin and avoid being easy targets for other religions (Rudaw 2013).

It is difficult to find reliable statistics on the total number of Kakai, but it is estimated to be between 1 million and 4 million throughout Iraq, Iran, and Turkey.⁵ Within Iraq, the Kakai are classified and counted as Muslims rather than a minority religious group. For this reason there are no exact population statistics available. However, the numbers in Iraq are estimated by community members to be between 110,000 and 200,000, living primarily on the Ninewa Plains near Daquq and Hamdaniya, in Diyala, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. The Kakai are mostly Kurdish, from the Guran, Sanjâbi, Kalhor, Zangana, and Jalalvand tribes.

During the post-revolution period, many Kakai Kurds were relocated in order to make way for Arab newcomers. Scores of communities were also destroyed. Kakai communities have been trying to re-establish in these areas since 2003. In the south-eastern Ninewa Plains, there are several Kakai Kurdish villages.

According to Kakai religious leader and writer, Farhad Kakai:

In Iraq, we are a clandestine religious minority. Until today, the Iraqi government has refused to recognise our religion. Over history, we have faced persecution and violence, such as with the Yazidi. We have experienced genocide in the past, but no one is aware of it. As a result, we'd like to talk and let others know that we're here. And we want the rest of the world to know about our beliefs and convictions. At the very least, if a genocide occurs, someone will know why. We have been attacked by al-Qaida in recent years, and they have changed their name to ISIS. ISIS slaughtered seven members of my family and relatives in 2014.

⁵ Kreyenbroek, P.G. (2014) Chapter 1 (pp 3–13) in K. Omarkhali (ed), *Religious Minorities in Kurdistan: Beyond the Mainstream*. Mehrdad R Izady estimated in 1992 that approximately 10 per cent –15 per cent of the Kurdish population are Yaresan (Izady 1992). Ziba Mir-Hosseini states, in a 1994 article, that 'There is no accurate information on the number of adherents, given that followers tend not to declare their affiliation to outsiders. The followers claim that they are as many as 20 million worldwide, of whom 5 million live in Iran. This is certainly an exaggeration' (Mir-Hosseini 1994: 211).

One of the most remarkable aspects of Kakai culture is undoubtedly the rich variety of literature that has been passed down in the oral tradition from generation to generation for centuries. This tradition of oral transmission is also found in religious literature itself, manifested largely in the music.

Sayings attributed to Sultan Sahak are written in Gorani Kurdish, the sacred language of the Kakai, also known as the Hawrami dialect, while some literature is written in Persian. However, few modern Kakai can read or write Gorani as their native language.

3.2 Fundamental beliefs, religious rites, and places of worship

According to the Kakai, the universe is divided into two distinct but interconnected worlds: the internal (*batin*) and the outward (*zahir*), each with its own set of rules and order. Despite the fact that humans are only conscious of the outside world, their lives are guided by the principles of the inner world. There are four main stages of religious education and advancement, according to Kakai principle. The primary stage is alluded to as Shari'at – the heavenly summons, in which the devout laws and ceremonies are characterised. This is exoteric because it speaks to things outside of human behaviours. It is the foundation of the religion and gives moral and ethical lessons for living in this world. After completing the Shari'at stage, one moves on to the Tariqat stage, known as the path. The third stage is Marifat, or knowledge of the spiritual. The final stage is called Haqiqqa, the ultimate or mystical truth. The esoteric component of the religion is comprised of the last three stages, which involve not only outward deeds but also internal ideas and intentions. Kakai adherents believe that all phases of religion have been defined by prior men of God, with the exception of Haqiqqa, which was defined by Sultan Sahak. The achievement of this stage, according to Kakai, is the final qualification for a human being to achieve permanent proximity to the Creator.

That God has come to earth in human form at various times since the beginning of creation is a central Kakai belief, a concept known as Mazhariat. In fact, the Kakai believe that the creation took place during the first of these manifestations, known as Khavandgar, when God himself was embodied as the Creator. The Kakai believe that Sultan Sahak was one of these manifestations, with his greatest contribution being the formation of the Haqiqqa, or ultimate truth, the highest step of religious advancement (Kakai 2013: 12).

Benjamin, David, Mustafa, Sir Musi, Khatun-e Razbur, and Sultan Sahak are the six incarnations of God that every Kakai must familiarise themselves with. God's true lessons were communicated through these incarnations. Sultan Sahak is the latest and most well-known of these educators.

Sultan Sahak, or Sultan Ishaq Barzanji, was born in 1272⁶ in Barzanj, a Halabcha village near modern day Sulaymaniyah in Iraq. After his father died, he and his siblings fell into conflict, and Sahak moved to the village of Sheykhani in Hawraman, in northern Iraq. During his lifetime, Sahak's spiritual organisation grew and spread. As well as disciples in Iraq, Sahak had followers from Iran, China, and India (Kakai 2013: 5). On his passing in 1396, Sahak was buried in Sheykhani.

3.3 Female incarnation in the Kakai religion

Khatun-e Razbur, the mother of Sultan Sahak, is the only female incarnation to exist in Kakai. Teachings say she was sleeping near a pomegranate tree when a bird came to eat one of the pomegranates. A seed fell into her open mouth while the bird was eating, and a baby was born from this seed. As a result, Sahak's was a virgin birth. Sahak is the primary incarnation of God for the Kakai and forms the foundation of their faith. This may be why the pomegranate has such a special place in Kakai religion. The pomegranate festival, Khawenkar, which takes place each year at the end of October, starts on a Monday and lasts three days, ending on a Wednesday. It begins with a worship ceremony and concludes with a festive gathering (Nebez 1997: 23). The pomegranate is also related to the Kakai belief system being rooted in nature. They focus on nature, society, and natural and social laws and traditions. They believe that flowers, vegetables, and other things are all taken from nature in all their colours. As a result, all the sacred ceremonies and feasts take their names from nature.

⁶ There are no definitive dates regarding the life of Sultan Sahak. Some sources state he was born in the seventh century, others in the twelfth or thirteenth century. See: Kakai, H. (1988) *estere geshekani asmani sharazor- Stars of Sharazor*, Sultan Sahak Berzenji, Karwan Magazin, Number 62. <https://www.scribd.com/document/289121866/Minorities-in-Iraq>

3.4 Social classifications

The Kakai religious and social pyramid consists of three levels:

- Sayyids or lords: Descended from Shiekh Isa, son of Sultan Sahak, the class of Sayyids includes princes as well as religious clerics who combine princely features and religious supremacy.
- Pir or guides: Pir are also called Mams, and they function to guide people and may also be referred to as Morshid or Baba.
- Kakai or brothers: These are common Kakai people who build their communities upon the Kakai principle of brotherhood (Kakai 2013: 5).

4 The importance of music in Kakai beliefs and spiritual identities

Through interviews with more than ten intellectuals, academics, and students who belong to the Kakai community, it was clear that the tanbur has an integral role in both religious and social life. In order to visit sacred Kakai sites and witness the recording of Kakai music, we required permission and blessings from religious leaders. Unfortunately, during the research period, Covid-19 prevented the author from attending gatherings and ceremonies as these were not allowed under pandemic regulations. Taking part in such events would have offered a direct opportunity to become more familiar with the daily routines, beliefs, customs, and religion of members of the Kakai religion.

Instead, through detailed interviews, the special significance of music as a means of expressing and transmitting culture and language, and as a way of preserving the cultural identity of the Kakai, became clear.

The tanbur is a stringed instrument with a long neck and pear-shaped bowl. It is made with mulberry wood, considered a sacred material by the Kakai. Four strings are tuned at different intervals, and the instrument is played without a plectrum, by using the fingers.

The tanbur is played at various events and offers a sense of continuity, as well as promoting the mysticism and language of the Kakai religion (Khaznada 1984: 409; Minorsky 1943: 16). The tanbur is the principal musical instrument used in religious and spiritual rites in Kakatism, and it is used to perform the entire sacred repertoire of Kakai music (interview

with Erkan Hawari, Kakai writer, Erbil, 6 February 2022). In certain rituals, before playing, the instrument is kissed, then used to play songs with special melodies during a recitation of the Saranjam (Kalam).⁷ Hundreds of men, women, and adolescents participate in the musical aspects of these different religious ceremonies, creating a safe space for the community to connect with their spirituality and heritage in a language that transcends words.

As Erkan Hawar, a Kakai writer in Erbil, noted:

The playing of the tanbur is also a method of proselytisation, in which potential worshippers are recruited by present worshippers through song. It is one of the behaviours that distinguishes the Kakai religion from mainstream Islamic theological doctrine, which forbids the use of music.

Music – particularly the playing of the tanbur – and mysticism have long had a close relationship, as evidenced by the rituals of most mystical religions and cults. The tanbur's history may be traced back 3,000 to 4,000 years BC when studying the histories left by the Yazidi, Shabak, and Assyrians in the same region. Further evidence of the instrument can be found from 1,500 to 2,000 BC, as evidenced by stone sculptures now kept in museums, and those at the ancient monuments in Mosul's Nebi Yunus hills. For our purposes, the tanbur's numerous varieties and various intervals and tunings were all described in detail by Al Farabi, Avicena, Abd-al-Qadir Maraghi, and Safi-al-Din Armavi during an interview we conducted with Rajab Asi Kakai, a teacher, writer, and Director of the Methra Organization for Yarsani Culture and Development in Erbil, in August 2021. However, the practical presence of the tanbur in the daily life of the Kakai is the main focus of our study.

Outsiders are not readily accepted in the Kakai community, largely due to their traditional culture, making it difficult for academics to conduct observations and investigations. Many contemporary investigations on this topic have relied solely on written religious scriptures or historical descriptions.

⁷ Saranjam is a fundamental religious text written in the Kurdish language. It includes historic texts from Sultan Sahak's reign. Other books, in addition to this one, can be considered Saranjâm because they include material from the same period of time (interview with Rajab Asi Kakai, 8 August 2021).

As Rajab Kakai explained during the interview:

Kakai play the tanbur, and it is revered by Kakai as a representation of God's words, earning it the title of Neda-al-haqq or 'God's voice'. When the spirit refused to combine with the body of man, Benjamin master blew the spirit into the body of man while playing tanbur, according to the Saranjam texts of Kakai.

4.1 Application of the tanbur

According to Rajab Kakai:

Tanbur music is not played at every gathering and occasion due to its sanctity and spiritual mood. This instrument is not permitted to be used at weddings or other similar ceremonies. It is used in jam sessions [detailed below], in funerals and on pilgrimage and fasting days.

Rajab Kakai added that in Iraq, playing the tanbur at gatherings has not been possible because of the increased presence of Islamic radicals, political conflict and insecurity, particularly in the region of Kirkuk where most Kakai live.

Kakai religious leader Farhad Kakai said, during an interview (27 February 2022), that centuries of persecution have made the Kakai people of Iraq particularly secretive about their faith:

Many of our holy songs are thousands of years old, passed down from generation to generation, and are never played in public. In fact, the music of the Kakai has rarely been heard outside of our community in Iraq before. We play it just between ourselves. But it has a richness not just for the Kakai but for all humanity around the world. Music is an element of our identity, our ancestors played tanbur 7,000 years ago. Nowadays you can find the tanbur in each Kakai family. It is just like a holy book. Women and men play it. We kiss it before we play it. It touches our soul. That is the reason we say our religion is the religion of love and peace.

4.2 The presence of the tanbur within jam ceremonies⁸

A jam, which means a gathering, is when men and women come together for the purpose of praying and performing spiritual melodies. A jam might be just three people or many hundreds. To take part, participants must be adult, their souls must be pure and their bodies washed. This ceremony, which has its own rites, heavenly promises, and prayers, is done with a special ceremony in which the tanbur plays an important role; and the purpose of performing this ceremony is to recite Dhikr and pray.

The ceremony lasts for between 20 minutes and 2 hours or longer (Minorsky 1921). Everyone faces each other as the jam is held in a circle. This symbolises equality as well as the divine presence at the centre of the assembly. In jam sessions, everyone must be washed, dressed and have their heads covered. While playing the tanbur, Kalm-khan, who knows the Kalam by heart, will recite it in a high voice. The only words spoken throughout the ceremony are kalams. During the jam, participants are not allowed to move; no one is allowed to leave or enter the room. Sometimes the intensity of the singing and the enthusiasm of the participants is so intense that the sound of the tanbur is clearly audible. The people in the jam circle are touched by the tanbur and recite the Kalam. This expresses willingness to serve as well as reverence for the diviner.

Historically, many elder Kakai and Yarsanmen were famous for their melodious voices and skill at playing the tanbur. These elders would chant joyful poems and play captivating melodies for disciples in the jam khanah (season of the jam), singing songs with enthusiasm and pleasure.⁹

The Kakai believe that separation from 'the Beloved', who is the only source of wellbeing and ultimate healing, is the cause of all aches and ailments. People need to close the gap between themselves and the Beloved in order to free themselves of suffering and illness. Individuals can minimise the distance between themselves and the Beloved by constantly remembering God in their hearts. They believe that uniting with God will eventually

⁸ Jam means 'to be together'. Kakai jam ceremonies take place on Thursday evenings. Prayers are said in Kurdish language and the tanbur is played. See: Kakai Fahmi, op., cit, p.10.

⁹ During an interview with Mr Godarzi from Kirmansha, he used to cite Yarsan.

eliminate the ultimate source of sickness. The jam ritual is an important part of the healing process during which the tanbur is played and a kalam is recited (known as a saranjam).¹⁰

Only those who deliver food to the jam are exempt from the rule of stillness. Each person is given an equal piece of the meal before what remains is distributed to others outside the jam (generally women and young children). Everyone eats after reciting a prayer. A pot of clean water is then brought in once the meal is done and any remains are cleared away. Everyone takes a sip from the pot. The water is said to have divine healing properties. Another prayer is recited, and the meeting ends. Holy melodies are sung to the music of the lute while the food is split and passed around. Everyone sings and plays in perfect unison.¹¹

4.3 Use of the tanbur in funeral rites

The tanbur is present in many aspects of Kakai life, and plays a key role in funeral ceremonies as well. It is played at funerals to accompany hymns sung to God asking for forgiveness for the deceased. According to Farhad Kakai:

The playing of some tanbur mogams¹² is not to express or maximise grief in mourning but has a religious aspect. They are played to escort the spirit, which flew out of the body, with pleasant tones so that the spirit has an agreeable journey to God and to the source.

(Interview with Farhad Kakai, Kakai religious leader, writer and lecturer at Salahaddin University-Erbil, Erbil, 10 September 2021)

And according to Fahmi Kakai:

Singers and tanbur players will perform at ceremonies taking place on the third, seventh and fortieth days after death. After singing a few mughams while chanting 'Hu Avval, Akhar Yaar' (meaning 'we have been with God and we will return'), the ceremony ends.

¹⁰ The Saranjam (Kalam), according to adherents, contains the vital and hidden concepts of their faith. Primarily in the Gorani dialect and written as poetry, the saranjam contains instructions and worldly Sharia, style and way of life, life and death of man, truth of life, remembrances, ideas and collective wisdom.

¹¹ Because the collective jam ceremony has not been practiced for years because of Covid-19, Mr Godarzi, who explained the ceremony, kindly sent me photos from ceremonies that took place during 2017.

¹² In tanbur, moqam indicates a sound foundation with precise intervals between sounds and specific roles that some of the sounds play in the melodic structure. Kakai moqam are comprised of 72 moqam in total. However, these 72 only include Kalam and ceremonial moqam, and virtual moqams are not included in this classification. See: Zavieh, Darvishi and Mehrpouyan (2016) 'Tanbur as Stringed Music Instrument: Role, Qualities, Influences on Yarsanism' *IJASOS - International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences* 11(4): 49-59.

As previously mentioned, the Kakai believe in the evolution of the soul, considering death as an episode within a life lived towards perfectionism. As such, due to their own faith, the Kakai do not have mourning or mourning ceremonies for their dignitaries and masters.

4.4 The tanbur in pilgrimage

The Kakai pilgrimage refers to religious visits to the burial ground shrines of Sultan Sahak in Uraman and Baba Yadgar in the Dalahu mountains (western Iran).¹³ The most important site is the burial ground of Sultan Sahak.

According to an interview with Rojan Akram, a Kakai student of Salahaddin University in Erbil, the pilgrimage to the resting place of Sultan Sahak can be made whenever the follower chooses.

When asked when, in her view, the tanbur became a hallowed instrument, Rojan said its holiness was more significant to her than its physical features or provable history:

The people of this region have lived with music and the tanbur since ancient times. In our family, the tanbur is located in the best place in the home. The instrument has been sacred since eternity.

(Interview with Rojan Akram, 6 February 2022)

5 Conclusion

Centuries of persecution have made the Iraqi Kakai discreet about their faith. While there is some literature and records available on Kakai theological views and beliefs, outsiders have little knowledge of many areas of their religious life, customs, and traditions. Many contemporary investigations on this topic have relied solely on written religious scriptures or historical descriptions.

Research shows that the Kakai have faced numerous difficulties in practicing their religion and safeguarding their rights to live and thrive in the region. The Kakai consider themselves to be one of the region's oldest religions, and the tanbur is an important part of their worship and identity. The tanbur and the Kakai faith are intimately connected. The Kakai consider

¹³

Kakai consider Baba Yadegar as one of Sultan Sahak's companions. He lived in the thirteenth century. Sultan Sahak asked him to go to India to spread the Kakai religion. His tomb in the Dalahu mountains, western Iran, was scattered with thousands of flowers every year.

the tanbur as symbolic of God's words, and refer to it as Neda-al-Haqq, the voice of God. It serves to protect both their language and culture, with many of their holy songs existing for thousands of years, passed down from generation to generation.

The song of kalam-seranjam (holy text of Kakai) is performed in the Kurdish language (the Goran-Horaman dialect). As we know, language is a fundamental aspect of cultural identity – it is how we convey our innermost selves from generation to generation. It is through language that we transmit and express our culture and its values. For the Kakai, playing tanbur and reciting prayer in their native language, in a region where the Arabic language has remained dominant for centuries, is a measure to protect their identity.

Due to its strong roots in Kakai heritage, ideology, and beliefs, the tanbur is a vital component of healing rites, and gives this religious community a sense of belonging and a way to safeguard their identity. However, it is only ever played within the Kakai community. Increasingly persecuted by Islamic fundamentalists, who believe music is haram (forbidden), the Kakai religious minority are in danger of being forgotten. They face an existential threat, not only to their right and freedom to practice their religion but to their right to remain in Iraq – a country they have inhabited for hundreds of years, where their culture is so deeply rooted.

The situation facing the Kakai is summed up by Kakai religious leader, Farhad Kakai:

It pains me to say this, but if things keep going this way, the next generation of Kakai will be gone. We have three options to secure the future of the Kakai: the government in the rest of Iraq, not just in Kurdistan, grants us our rights; no one scares us; and genocide ceases. We shall have a brighter future if this occurs. If that is not the case, we have two options: we will be slaughtered and buried, or we must leave the country.

(Interview with Farhad Kakai, February 2022)

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[†]Unfortunately the authors were unable to locate all the information for these references, so the Publisher acknowledges that they are therefore incomplete.

Annexe 1: Interviews

Khayri Bozani, Director General of Religious Affairs in Kurdistan regional government, Duhok, 15 July 2021

Rajab Asi Kakai, Director of Kakai Organization, Erbil, 25 July 2021 and 17 December 2021.

Foad Godarzi, activist in Yarsan community from Kirmansha, Iran, Zoom interview, December 2021.

Kajal Fadakar, from Sanandaj, Iran, Lecturer at Zaxo University, 25 November 2021.

Golala Kamangar, activist, Yarsan, lives in Stockholm, virtual interview December 2021.

Namiq Hawramani, writer, Kakai, Erbil, February 2022.

Fahmi Kakai, intellectual and writer in Kakai, Stockholm, February 2022.

Farhad Kakai, writer, Kakai, Erbil, February 2022.

Rojan Akram, student, Salahaddin University, Kakai, Erbil, September 2021.

Lila Kakai, student at Kurdistan University, Kakai, September 2021.

Annexe 2: Images

Some photos were taken by the author of this report, while some ceremonial images were taken by Foad Godarzi in Kirmansha, Iran, and were sent to the author.

Tomb of Sultan Sahak, Hawraman



Credit: Foad Godarzi, 2019.

Tomb of Sultan Sahak, Hawraman



Credit: Foad Godarzi, 2019.

Jam ceremony, at the Shrine of Baba Yadgar in Dalahor



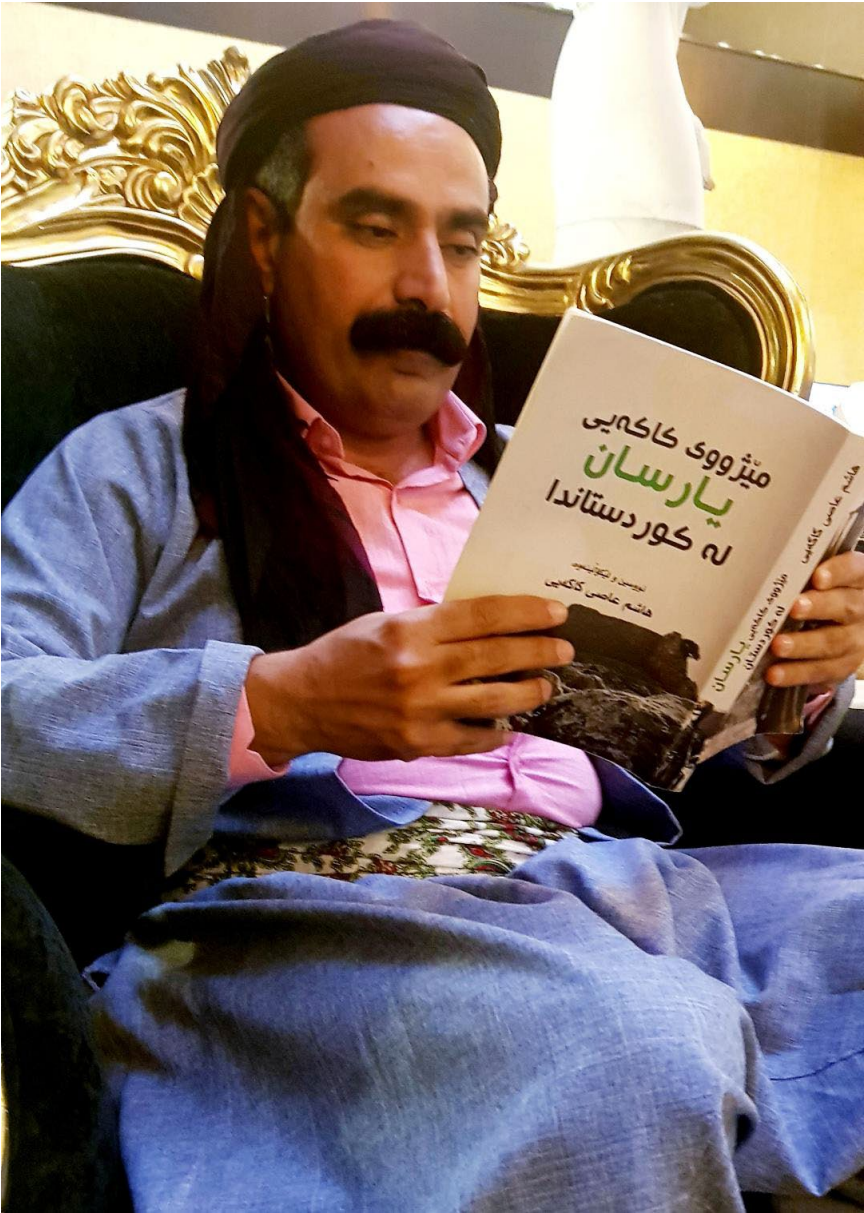
Credit: Foad Godarzi, 2017.

Jam ceremony, at the Shrine of Baba Yadgar in Dalahor



Credit: Foad Godarzi, 2017.

Interviewee, Rajab Kakai, writer, teacher and Director of the Methra Organization for Yarsani Culture and Development



Credit: Foad Godarzi, 2017.

Baba Yadigar, in Dalhoo, Kirmansha, Iran



Credit: Foad Godarzi, 2017.

Teenagers participate in a Kakai ceremony, playing the tanbur in the village of Qelawar, near Kirmansha



Credit: Foad Godarzi, March 2019.

Women playing the tanbur as part of a ceremony in the village of Qelawar, near of Kirmansha



Credit: Foad Godarzi, March 2019.



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