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| Institution: SOAS |
| Unit of Assessment: 33 Theology and Religious Studies |
| Title of case study: Raising Awareness of the Persecution of a Religious Minority (Erica Hunter) |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Mandaeism is a little understood minority religion whose followers have resided for centuries in southern Iraq and Iran, where, particularly since 2003, they have faced rising levels of often violent persecution. A large proportion of the Mandaean community has thus fled their homelands, with many now residing in the UK. Dr Erica Hunter's research into the history, culture and language of the Mandaeans has enabled her to improve public understanding of the community's plight, largely through her representation to the House of Lords and her active involvement in asylum cases for Mandaean community members in the UK.</p> |
| <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Dr Erica Hunter joined SOAS in 1999 where she is Senior Lecturer in Eastern Christianity and is Chair of the Centre of Eastern and Orthodox Christianity. Hunter is an international authority on 'Mesopotamian' Christianity and its spread through the Gulf, Iran, Central Asia and China; she is particularly interested in the role and situation of minority Aramaic-speaking ethno-religious communities (Christians, Mandaeans, Manichaeans and Jews) in Mesopotamia, from Sassanid times until today. Hunter is fluent in a number of Semitic languages, ancient and modern, including Aramaic, Mandaic, Syriac and Hebrew.</p> <p>Much of Hunter's research focuses on the Gnostic Mandaean religion and its followers, an interest which stems from a year spent studying Mandaean language and literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1982-1983. Mandaeans are an ancient ethno-religious group indigenous to present-day southern Iraq and Iran. Their scriptures are written exclusively in Mandaic. Their religion, which recognises Adam, Noah and John the Baptist, pre-dates both Islam and Christianity yet, unlike Christians and Jews, the Mandaeans are not seen by Islam as 'peoples of the book' and thus face severe persecution in their homelands.</p> <p>Hunter's first encounters with Mandaean communities occurred when, as Gertrude Bell Fellow of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, 1989-1991, she worked on the 700-odd collection of incantation bowls (Aramaic, Mandaic and Syriac) in the Iraq Museum, Baghdad. In 2000 and 2002, Hunter delivered public lectures, at the request of Mandaean elders, at the Mandi (Mandaean place of worship) in Baghdad, outlining her research on the history and development of the community.</p> <p>Her continued research on Mandaic incantation bowls, housed in the Iraq Museum and the British Museum, has enabled her to establish that the Mandaeans in the 6th-8th centuries formed a sizeable community, possibly 25%-30% of the population of southern Mesopotamia. This figure contrasts with many scholars' assumptions of the Mandaeans as a tiny, Gnostic splinter group (their modern situation). Her work on Mandaean incantation bowls excavated in Nippur in 1989, shows that Mandaic and Aramaic groups did not live in enclaves, findings presented in output a. She also illustrates the textual contiguity between Mandaean and Jewish Hekhalot literature, a very early Jewish literary genre related to visions of the heavenly ascent of Enoch and other Biblical figures (which later informed the Kabbalah school of thought), thus contributing to the on-going debate about the community's purported 'origins' in Palestine.</p> <p>In her pioneering work on the typology of Mandaic incantation bowls, Hunter also upholds the integration of the community within the larger Sassanian repertoire of material culture, whilst her analysis of iconography indicates that the Mandaeans had acquired, by the 6th-8th centuries, the cultural attributes of a distinctive community in Mesopotamia (also output a). She has also</p> |

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examined the community's distinctive linguistic traits (output b). In her latest publication, output c, Hunter demonstrates the embedding of 'classic' Mesopotamian influences within Mandaean religious literature, indicative of their wider acculturation within the Tigris-Euphrates region.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- a. "The Typology of the Incantation Bowls: Physical Features and Decorative Aspects." In *Catalogue of Aramaic and Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the British Museum*, edited by J.B. Segal, 163-204. London: British Museum Publications, 2000.
- b. "The Language of Mandaic Incantation Bowls in the Early Islamic Era". In *Und das Leben ist siegreich! / And Life is Victorious. Mandäische und samaritanische Literatur / Mandaean and Samaritan Literature. Im Gedenken an Rudolf Macuch / In Memory of Rudolf Macuch (1919-1993)*, edited by Rainer Voigt, 117-26. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2009.
- c. "Comparative Perspectives on Šapta d-pišra d-ainia." In »Durch Dein Wort ward jegliches Ding!« / »Through Thy Word All Things Were Made!« 2. *Mandäische und samaritanische Tagung / 2nd International Conference of Mandaic and Samaritan Studies*, edited by Rainer Voigt, 117-27. Harrassowitz, Wiesbaden: 2013.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Since the invasion of 2003, Iraq's Mandaean community, present in the south of the country for over two thousand years, has faced violent persecution, including incidents of forced conversion to Islam, rape and murder. A large majority has since fled the country; of an estimated 60-70,000 Madaeans in Iraq in the early 1990s, only 5-7000 remain. In Iran, similar, less violent persecution has nevertheless also resulted in mass exodus. An Iranian law of 1985, for example, has seen Madaeans prohibited from fully participating in civil life for almost three decades. Consequently, a large number of Madaeans from both Iraq and Iran have settled in the West, with around 1000 living in the UK. (7, below)

Hunter's extensive research into the history, language and culture of the Madaeans has equipped her with a unique understanding of the community which has, in turn, enabled her to develop a strong rapport with its UK members. Hunter has provided valuable support to the community by raising awareness of their persecution in Iraq and Iran and their little understood religion. This she has done in a number of contexts, including asylum tribunals and public events. Hunter has acted as an expert witness in 6 court hearings of Madaeans seeking asylum in the UK, all of which have been successful. In January 2008, Hunter gave evidence in support of a young Iraqi Mandaean woman who had requested asylum in the UK on the grounds that she would face violent persecution, even death, if forced to return to Iraq. Hunter wrote a comprehensive letter outlining the dangers faced by female Madaeans in Iraq, as well as their historical and religious background, and acted as expert witness in court. In the initial court hearing, the judge approved the application based on Hunter's evidence, although this decision was later overturned by the Home Office. The case was referred to the High Court, where the applicant was again granted permanent residency, with the judge citing Hunter's evidence as having greatly informed their decision, such is also corroborated by Trevor Wornham, solicitor for the applicant (1, below):

"Erica was the only expert witness called; she is unique in her expertise on the Madaeans. She was very methodical in countering the Home Office's arguments point by point. Her evidence was crucial to winning the case."

Waleed al-Murrani, the applicant's father, further substantiates Wornham's statement (2):

"Erica Hunter's contribution was extremely helpful. She was one of the major factors in the success of the whole case. The judge commented that what she had written was convincing and true. My

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daughter will soon be eligible to apply for British citizenship.”

Hunter has also represented the Mandaean community at public events with the aim of drawing attention to their plight in Iraq and Iran. In October 2012, Hunter presented on the Mandaean situation in Iraq and the UK's asylum policy at the Minority Rights Group International Conference held at the House of Lords, helping to make their case known in the UK and in Europe. Moreover, Hunter participates with Mandaean community members in conferences organised by ARAM at the University of Oxford, an independent, non-profit-making society concerned with all aspects of Syro-Mesopotamian cultures. She also invites their participation (presenting their current situation) in the annual Christianity in Iraq Seminar Day, that she has hosted since 2004 at SOAS. Hunter's efforts to involve Mandaeans in these events has afforded them an arena in which to share their experiences, while also bringing to light the social and cultural aspects of the Mandaean community to a UK audience. Dr Layla al Roomi, spokesperson for the Mandaean Human Rights Group (MHRG) who has presented at both conferences, attests to the support Hunter has offered Mandaeans in the UK since 2003, both through her research and her involvement in asylum cases and events (4, 5):

“Her research has been well read internationally which helps to put the Mandaeans on the map of minority groups in Iraq. She has helped to dispel ignorance about the Mandaeans and other gnostic religions. She has been pivotal in opening up to the world this ancient religion which is rarely heard of. She is very supportive and enjoys mixing with the community, participating in many Mandaean social events, such as baptisms. We are very grateful to her for taking up our case and listening to our problems.”

Hunter's continued endeavours to raise awareness of the suffering of Mandaeans in their homelands and her involvement in several asylum cases constitutes an important, concrete contribution to efforts to protect the rights of Mandaeans in Iraq, Iran and the diaspora. As Nasir Shathur, an Iraqi Mandaean refugee living in Wales and former member of the MHRG, affirms (6): “There is no doubt about it that in her involvement as an expert witness Erica Hunter has saved the lives of many refugees.”

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

1. Trevor Wornham, solicitor
2. Waleed al-Murrani, father of asylum applicant
3. ARAM Society website: <http://www.aramsociety.org/> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
4. Layla Al Roomi, spokesperson for the Mandaean Human Rights Group
5. Information on the Mandaean Human Rights Group: <http://www.mandaeunion.org/mhrg> [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].
6. Nasir Shathur, Mandaean Iraqi refugee
7. Background information on the persecution of Mandaeans in Iraq: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/6412453.stm [Most recently accessed 18.11.13].