

## Impact case study (REF3)

<b>Institution:</b> University of Exeter		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> UoA 25 Area Studies		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Assisting the survival of endangered communities and cultures: Yezidis and Mandaeans		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2009-2018		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b> Christine Robins (formerly Allison)	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b> Ibrahim Ahmed Professor of Kurdish Studies	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b> 2007-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2014-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<p><b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Yezidis and Mandaeans are ethnoreligious Middle-Eastern communities which have faced persistent historic persecution and existential threats to their survival. Robins' research and unique knowledge of these communities have made substantial contributions to the survival and protection of these communities and their cultures. In the case of Yezidis, she helped resolve asylum cases in the UK, influenced public policy formulation on non-Christian minority persecution and inter-faith dialogue, and collaborated with NGOs around welfare provision and cultural protection. In the case of the Mandaeans, her research has helped preserve Mandaean culture and religious practices for the surviving 60,000 members of the global community. Her work on creating the world's largest digital repository of their religious practices and rituals, has helped dispersed Mandaean communities to connect with their heritage, as well as each other, and generated a growing awareness of this endangered community.</p>		
<p><b>2. Underpinning research</b></p> <p>The Yezidis are a religious minority from Iraq, Turkey and Syria, who also migrated into Armenia and Georgia during the First World War. Socially and politically marginalised in the Ottoman Empire, they never became 'People of the Book', a term which entitles its owners (usually Christian or Jewish), to protection under Islam. As their religion relied on oral transmission, they lack demonstrable Scripture. This, compounded by the slander of 'devil-worship', rendered them vulnerable to religious persecution.</p> <p>Robins is one of a handful of scholars worldwide to focus on their almost exclusive orality (until the late twentieth century) and the consequent vulnerability of their collective memory to interruptions in transmission through cultural change, displacement or violence. Generating knowledge about this displaced community was central to [3.2] and [3.6], articles which focused on the memorialisation of Yezidi pasts, cultural persistence and identity choices in post-Soviet Armenia. Her ethnographic work (e.g. [3.1], [3.5]) demonstrates that Yezidism has different knowledge structures from better-known scriptural religions: religious knowledge is traditionally confined to the <i>sheikh</i> and <i>pir</i> descent groups (castes); lay people are not expected to 'know' about religion; while everyday religion is a matter of practice rather than belief; and core religious texts are poetic in form. Yezidism is not well understood by Western governments or immigration officers seeking to 'test' asylum-seekers' knowledge of Yezidism. Inter-faith dialogue is complicated as Yezidism's formulation is qualitatively different from Christianity.</p> <p>Fear of assimilation and low social status ensure that Yezidi voices have rarely been heard. Article [3.1] surveys and critiques of Orientalist scholarly sources, which devalue Yezidi religion and culture, may have done harm by hypothesising about exotic 'pagan' origins. In [3.3] Robins has analysed Yezidis' more recent co-option into others' political propaganda, citing their idealisation as the 'original Kurds' by Kurdish parties in 1990s Iraq and their vilification as suspect by President (then Prime Minister) Erdogan of Turkey in 2012. After the Sinjar genocide of 2014, Western media constructed stories emphasising gender and sexual slavery, fitting into master narratives about gender in the Middle East and the 'saving' of non-Western women. Article [3.4], co-authored with an ethnographer addresses this trope, comparing it with Yezidis' own narrations.</p>		

Robins' insights on cultural transmission and orality [3.1], [3.4], [3.5] have been applicable to other 'closed' groups – non-proselytising religious communities who do not marry out – who face similar challenges in the current political climate in Turkey, Iraq and Syria as well as threats to their culture in the diaspora. This includes the Mandaeans (aka Sabians) of Iraq and Iran, who also entrust religious knowledge to their priests. For them, however, complex ritual (in a unique dialect of Aramaic) plays a key role and with fewer than fifty priests worldwide, many priests have concerns of how their teachings can be passed on to the younger generation and many in the community have no access to this ritual. This threat to cultural survival led the Arcadia Fund to approach Robins in 2013 to create a completely new digital archive for Mandaean cultural preservation.

Despite a history dating back to antiquity, Mandaeans figure little in historical sources beyond European missionary and scholarly texts prior to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Few studies on the contemporary community have supplemented Lady E.S. Drower's ground-breaking works of the mid-twentieth century. Since their violent displacements – from Iran, after the Revolution of 1979, and from Iraq, after the 2003 War – Mandaeans have dispersed around the world, with the largest communities of around 10,000 being in Australia and Sweden. In this context, the almost total absence of data on the contemporary community presented a huge challenge for cultural preservation. Leading a team which included the participation of the University of Leiden, Robins collaborated closely with the community, using an ethnographic approach and employing a priest as fieldworker to help identify the rituals, festivals and individuals to be recorded, and consulting with religious authorities, to generate, organise and present an archive [3.6].

The output resulting from 'The Worlds of Mandaean Priests' (2014-2018) is a permanent open-access archive [3.6]. The archive includes interviews with 15 of a possible 43 priests worldwide and members of Mandaean communities in Australia, Sweden and Iran. 24 hours of videos and 2500 photographs document the religion, exploring the priestly function, the future of the Mandaeans and documenting rituals, many of which have never formerly been recorded. The materials offer a rich diversity of experiences, practices, and perspectives representing both traditionalists and modernists, different religious ranks, social constituencies, and familial and religious lineages.

### 3. References to the research

- 3.1 Allison, FC. (2009) 'Unbelievable Slowness of Mind: Yezidi studies, from Nineteenth to Twenty-first Century' in *Journal of Kurdish Studies* VI, 1-24. DOI: 10.2143/JKS.6.0.2038086/
- 3.2 Allison, FC. (2013) 'Addressivity and the Monument: Memorials, Publics and the Yezidis of Armenia', *History and Memory: Studies in representation of the past 25 no. 1*, 145-181. DOI: [10.2979/histmemo.25.1.182](https://doi.org/10.2979/histmemo.25.1.182)
- 3.3 Allison, FC. (2014) 'Living with Labels: New Identities and the Yezidis of Turkey' in S. Brennan, M. Herzog (eds) *Turkey and the Politics of National Identity*, London: IB Tauris, pp.95-115. ISBN: 9781780765396.
- 3.4 Allison, FC. (2016) (with V. Buffon) 'The Gendering of Victimhood: Western Media and the Sinjar Genocide.' *Kurdish Studies*, 4, 128-147. DOI: [10.33182/ks.v4i2.427](https://doi.org/10.33182/ks.v4i2.427)
- 3.5 Allison, FC. (2017) 'The Yazidis' in *Oxford Research Encyclopaedia of Religion* DOI:10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.254
- 3.6 Allison et al (2018) *The Worlds of Mandaean Priests* <http://mandaeanpriests.exeter.ac.uk/>

### 4. Details of the impact

In 2014 the Yezidis of Sinjar, Iraq, experienced genocidal attacks by the so-called Islamic State. Hundreds were massacred, thousands of women and children were abducted into slavery and some 300,000 people [of a world population of approximately 500,000] were displaced into IDP camps. Robins' work with Yezidis resulted in direct benefits to members of the community, delivering key insights to public and third-sector actors in the UK and internationally, seeking to define their position towards, and assist the survival of, the community members and their culture.

**Yezidis****a) Contribution to the protection of Yezidi life through asylum cases**

In 2014, 2018, and 2019, Robins was approached by lawyers representing Yezidi asylum-seekers from Georgia and Iraq in the UK, with requests to provide expert reports that would assist the Home Office in determining the risks faced by the asylum-seekers in their home country. There had been very few Yezidi asylum-seekers till then and a lack of knowledge among officials about the minority, leading to their underestimating the everyday vulnerability of Yezidis in Iraqi Kurdistan, or even failing to distinguish Yezidis from other Iraqis. Robins' reports drew on linguistic and cultural knowledge from fieldwork in Armenia [3.2, 3.6], to demonstrate an appellant's Yezidi identity. For the Iraqi cases, she showed the complexity of the politics of religious identity in Iraq, especially Kurdistan [3.4]. The 2018 and 2019 Iraqi cases were successful, while the Georgian instance was separately resolved.

Those granted asylum noted that '*Christine made a huge difference [...] I believe the report from Professor Christine helped the judge to make a right decision especially [as it] was built on facts (actions) [that] happened in Iraq with very well understandably [sic.] details*', and that '*Christine [s] documented research about the Middle East was significant to be a shred of good evidence to convince the judge and Home Office that what happened to me in Iraq was true.*' [5.1] The founder of the only UK-based NGO focused on working with Yezidis, Yezidi Emergency Support (YES), who supported the asylum seekers, testifies to the significance of Robins's expert report in the circumstances in which the '*Home Office know very little regarding the true circumstances [...] surrounding the plight of the Yezidis post-genocide*'. She asserted that '*without Christine's expert report the outcome for [name omitted] may have been very different and in his case if the judgement had gone against him he was at real risk of deportation and as a genocide survivor an uncertain fate. The Home Office assigned particular significance to Christine's report [...] and this added much needed weight to [his] defence.*' [5.2]

**b) Influencing public policy on religious prosecution**

In 2019, YES and Robins submitted evidence on the persecution of non-Christian groups to the 2019 Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO Support for Persecuted Christians, a first step in the FCO's commitment to substantial diplomatic efforts to protect freedom of worship globally. The Review found a lack of religious literacy among civil servants and Home Office staff dealing with asylum cases, as well as an imbalance in numbers of Christians granted asylum in comparison with other minorities. The Bishop of Truro has testified that '*the contribution of Prof Robins added to the weight of evidence behind recommendation 7 on a more effective response to atrocity crimes and recommendation 21 on the need for international assistance not to have a blanket policy of being "religion blind" but to reflect the need for additional priority to be given to minority religions as a category of vulnerability.*' [5.3] The Prime Minister endorsed all of the Review's recommendations, and as a part of the commitment to protection of religious minorities, the UK government established a Freedom of Religion and Belief (FORB) Forum on the anniversary of the Review launch in 2020, to inform UK government's policies on FORB and hold it to account on the Review implementation. In November 2020, the Exeter Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies joined the FORB Forum with Robins as the point of contact. [5.3]

**c) Supporting welfare provision to Yezidi refugees, and public understanding of Yezidism**

Robins also worked with Yazda, an international grassroots Yezidi NGO headquartered in the US. According to the Yazda former executive director, Robins has been an '*important source of support and expertise*' in their humanitarian projects in Iraq, including healthcare and food provision, suicide prevention, and educational support. In the immediate aftermath of the 2014 attack, she advised on their public announcement and explanation of the crisis, alongside the organisation's subsequent advocacy work on humanitarian aid and military intervention with government agencies in Washington. In 2015-16, Robins provided on-

ground support in Iraq, assisting Yazda's culturally and '*politically sensitive negotiations with the highest level of Yezidi religious leadership*', and acted as advisor to their project of preservation of Yezidi oral tradition in the camps [3.4]. An AHRC-award in November 2020 will see Robins' work with Iraqi Yezidis to create the first substantial, community-centred archive of the endangered Sinjari oral tradition: a project formulated in response to Yezidi wishes, which will train a team of young Yezidi researchers to be stewards and curators of their unique history.

Robins was the only expert on Yezidism at a 2016 UK Cumberland Lodge seminar convened at the request of Baroness Nicholson in her capacity as Executive Chairman of the AMAR International Charitable Foundation. In providing knowledge of Yezidism as a religion [3.1, 3.5], Robins helped produce the Church of England's position paper on the theological dimension of AMAR's plans to help Yezidis in Iraqi refugee camps. According to Canon Ed Newell of Cumberland Lodge, Robins' contribution was 'crucial', and the position paper '*endorsed by the Yezidi spiritual council, [...] widely circulated and used by the AMAR Foundation to inform its continuing work to support Yezidis who are mainly based in refugee camps in Northern Iraq [...] the document [will] certainly help Yezidis to be better understood and enabled to participate in inter-faith dialogue.*' Newell further adds that '*Baroness Nicholson (who is also the Prime Minister's Trade Envoy to Iraq) uses the document frequently to promote the Yezidi cause in her work. The document has also been used to encourage inter-faith engagement with Yezidis, and recipients include the Archbishop of Canterbury.*' [5.5]

As a member of the advisory group advising the development of AMAR's music project to record and promote Yezidi music around the world, Robins was recognised by this organisation as '*by far the most knowledgeable person in the group as regards Arabic and Yezidi culture, so her insights were very valuable in helping us form an opinion and approach to the British Council.*' [5.6] AMAR's funding application to the British Council was successful, with the records of Yezidi music now housed in the Bodleian Library, and the 'formation of a Yazidi choir (featured recently on BBC Radio 3 in February 2020)' one of the outcomes of the project. [5.5]

After the 2014 genocide, Robins was approached by journalists working to raise awareness about Yezidis, with her knowledge of their culture and religion consulted in articles appearing in CBS, NBC, PBS, *National Geographic*, *Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *La Libre*, and AlJazeera. She contributed to radio and TV programmes in several countries, including the Amnesty International Media Award-nominated ABC documentary (in which she appears as the only academic expert), broadcast in 2016 to over 200,000 Australians, now available on YouTube with 48,716 views to date [5.7].

### **Mandaeans**

Since 2003, Mandaeans have experienced worsening violence in Iraq and tensions in Iran. As a result, almost all of their 60,000 population are now scattered worldwide. Robins' work with the Mandaeans has aided their cultural preservation and is helping increase knowledge of the community.

#### **d) Preserving Mandaean culture for the diaspora**

In 2013, the major international cultural heritage protection foundation, the Arcadia Fund, approached Robins to aid understanding and protection of the religious practices, rituals, and knowledge embodied in the rapidly shrinking and dispersed Mandaean community. Faced with the threat of cultural disappearance, Robins and her collaborators created the only existing archive of Mandaean religious rituals [3.6] and provided an important medium for the Mandaean communities globally to connect with their heritage and each other so as to exchange knowledge and experiences. Almost all the data generated is new to the public domain. The archive is a critical site of cultural preservation for Mandaean communities globally and an important source of information for those working with them. In addition to unique records of rituals, interviews with priests and community leaders, the project created

two documentary films on the lives of Australian and Swedish Mandaean communities, [5.8, 5.9]. A free exhibition of some of the project's photographic material and other objects lent by Mandaean communities (Exeter, Oct-Dec 2017) was visited by a group of Mandaean women, one of whom, a community leader in the UK, commended the portrayal of their culture: *'to me it looks amazing [...] I hope the documentation of the exhibition will remain on the YouTube longer than the end of this year'* [5.8].

In addition to accessing, recording, and sharing the knowledge of a number of priests, including within the cautious and precarious Iranian Mandaean community, Robins and her team interviewed the two world leaders of the Mandaean religion, one of whom congratulated Robins on her *'first effort to highlight faith in exile after the diaspora that has suffered from oppression and injustice'* and thanked her for *'her confidence'* and *'this wonderful documentary'*. Another priest living in the Netherlands, said that *'we can only express our sincere thanks and great appreciation'*. The project's Instagram account regularly attracts members of the Mandaean community from across the world, who express gratitude to Robins for creating the page, and *'finally [creating] something in English to understand our own religion better'* and for *'what you've done with this project - it really is amazing to have as a log of where our community is at this point in history. It is and will continue to be an invaluable resource for the coming Mandaean generations'* [5.8].

#### e) Raising awareness of the Mandaeans and their religion

The project's collection of images and recordings were also showcased in the media, e.g. *Sunday* programme on BBC Radio 4 (Feb 2018) increasing understanding amongst non-Mandaean communities [5.7]. In late November 2020, the archive footage was used by the 'Religion for Breakfast' YouTube channel (200k+ subscribers) in the production of a video on Mandaeans highlighting their religious practices and the identification of them as 'Sabians' in the Qur'an. In less than a month it had 100,000 views with viewers leaving comments such as *'I live in Worcester MA. which for some reason has a sizable enough Mandaean community to be mentioned in the wiki article for Mandaeanism. It's nice to learn about them. In my experience they seem apprehensive about talking about their religion to outsiders'* [5.10].

### 5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Yezidi asylum seekers' testimonials 29/4/20; 6/8/20.

5.2 Yezidi Emergency Support founder testimonial 29/4/2020; email 13/12/2020.

5.3 Bishop of Truro's Review file (BOP testimonial 3/7/20, FORB communication; 2019 Bishop of Truro's Independent Review for the Foreign Secretary of FCO; official news items: Foreign Secretary Launch of the review, PM endorses review in parliament; FORB set up)

5.4 Yazda former executive director testimonial 23/09/20.

5.5 Cumberland Lodge file (Invitation by Ed Newell to participate in Cumberland Lodge seminar, 13/7/2016; Cumberland Lodge testimonial 20/4/20 and emails Aug 2020).

5.6 AMAR file (webpage of music project; testimonial 17/4/20).

5.7 Record of communication with journalists covering the period of 2010-2018; ABC producer testimonial 16/11/20; BBC Radio 4 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09rws5> (18/02/2018)

5.8 Mandaean Priests file (Mandaean Priests final project report, September 2018; communication with community leaders 2017-2020; social media communication with community members May-June 2020).

5.9 Mandaean project films (*Like A Sugar Cube in A Cup of Tea* and *Faith in Exile* YouTube links and screenshots). Combined YouTube viewing figures surpass 5,000 by December 2020.

5.10 Religion for Breakfast YouTube *Mandaeanism* video (screenshot; producer email 14/12/20). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMx\\_JKJbvJI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DMx_JKJbvJI)