

Institution: SOAS University of London		
Unit of Assessment: 31 – Theology and Religious Studies		
Title of case study: Spotlight on an endangered religion: bringing Zoroastrianism to new audiences in the UK and beyond		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2000–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Almut Hintze	Zartoshty Brothers Professor of Zoroastrianism Lecturer	2010–present 1999-2010
Sarah Stewart	Senior Lecturer Lecturer Deputy Director, London Middle East Institute	2018–present 2003–2018 2003-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: October 2013– 31 July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>This research conducted at SOAS raised public awareness of Zoroastrianism – one of the oldest and least understood religions – in the UK and India, where the connection of resident diaspora communities with their religious practice is weak. This project connected Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians through exhibitions and public events, attracting 71,000 participants in the UK and India. It improved curatorial practices in India, by ensuring that endangered manuscripts in loan institutions reach new audiences, where the research was also used to underpin policies that protect religious pluralism. School and university students in India, the UK and Italy have increased their understanding of historical and contemporary Zoroastrian practices through new workshops and courses.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Zoroastrianism has an insular and text-based ritual history, rendering it inaccessible to both Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians alike. Religious practitioners are isolated, and cultural and religious artefacts are dispersed in museums and private collections worldwide. Religious history and contemporary practices are dislocated from each other, and remain little understood.</p> <p>Dr. Stewart (Deputy Director of the LMEI and part-time lecturer since 2003, Lecturer since 2009, and Senior Lecturer since 2018) and Professor Hintze (Lecturer since 1999 and Professor since 2010) have been conducting fieldwork and analysis on Zoroastrianism from 2006 to 2020. Stewart’s British Academy Major Award project (2006-2008, GBP140,000) ‘Zoroastrian Voices of Iran’ (ZVI) documented the changes in language, education, internal governance and demographics, as well as religious practice among Zoroastrians in Iran since the Islamic Revolution of 1979. The research mapped the remaining communities in urban and rural areas – numbering approximately 25,000 – and gathered qualitative data from over 300 interviews. Key findings included the way in which Zoroastrians in Iran have adapted successfully to the post-revolution socio-political realities, contrary to what appeared in mainstream narratives of diaspora Zoroastrian communities who left the country before or immediately after the Revolution [3.2].</p> <p>The methodology for the research developed an innovative approach whereby a person from the community in question conducts the interviews. This emic approach is particularly necessary and effective in Iran where religious minorities rarely talk to foreigners about their religion. The</p>		

research provides an invaluable tool for future scholarship since the majority of the interviews are in the Dari language. This language, which has been used exclusively by Zoroastrians since the Islamic conquest of Iran in the 7th century, is now in danger of dying out. The digitisation of the interview recordings and their archiving in the Endangered Languages Archive at SOAS (ELAR) [3.1] was sponsored by the Queen's Patron's Fund in 2017. The digital archive will serve both students and speakers of the Dari language in generations to come, when the community worldwide may well no longer have access to the language of their ancestors.

While the former research focused on modern and contemporary Zoroastrianism in Iran and predominantly on the lay community, Hintze's 5-year (2016–2021) ERC-funded EUR2,500,000 (GBP2,197,465) research project Multi Media Yasna (MU YA) aimed to unlock the meaning of the key Zoroastrian ritual, the Yasna, and to preserve this millennia-old heritage for posterity in photography, film, transcriptions, annotated translations and transcription tools [3.3]. This includes the first English-language rendering of the complete Avestan texts combined with an in-depth commentary. Together, Hintze and her team of 3 post-doctoral students (Leon Goldman, Mehrbod Khanizadeh and Céline Redard) and 6 PhD students focused on enhancing public awareness, understanding and interpretation of the key tenets and practices of Zoroastrianism by means of a) editions and translations of texts, for which cutting-edge technological tools were developed; b) film footage both in multimedia format and in virtual reality.

The originality of their research lies methodologically in harnessing time-tested rigorous philological and linguistic skills and applying innovative participatory research tools and strategies. The team built a database of images of manuscript [3.4] and developed a suite of electronic tools to transcribe, collate and evaluate different witnesses of the same text to produce online and print editions [3.5]. These accessible editions and translations of text accompany film footage captured in multimedia and in virtual reality. The multimedia application of the film unlocks the words and meanings of this ritual which to date is little understood. The multimedia film allows viewers to interpret a live performance of the ritual in which the text is recited, while the ritual in turn informs the interpretation of the text. The virtual reality film provides an experience of the ritual by full immersion. Hintze received an ERC Proof of Concept grant of EUR150,000 in 2020 to further investigate the social and commercial benefits of the electronic tools produced by the MU YA project. Alongside additional archival research interviews conducted by Stewart in 2011–2016, the digital archive and films were incorporated in the SOAS exhibition *Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination* in 2013 [3.6].

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

3.1. Stewart, S. (2018). Voices from Zoroastrian Iran (Digital Repository), SOAS Endangered Language Archive (ELAR). <https://elar.soas.ac.uk/Collection/MPI1089462>

3.2. Stewart, S. (2018). Voices from Zoroastrian Iran: Oral Texts and Testimony (Vol. I: Urban Centres, Vol. II: Urban and Rural Centres, Yazd and Outlying Villages). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. Vol 1, ISBN: 9783447111294 : and Vol 2 (2020) ISBN: 9783447114783. Submitted to REF2021

3.1 and 3.2 were produced as a result of British Academy Major Award.

3.3. Hintze, A. (2007). A Zoroastrian Liturgy: The Worship in Seven Chapters (Yasna 35–41). Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz (Iranica 12). ISBN: 9783447056656. Available on request

3.4. Database of Zoroastrian manuscripts (2017) <https://digital.soas.ac.uk/zoro>.

3.5. Electronic tools for editing texts and film of the Yasna (2020) <https://github.com/Multimedia-Avesta>

3.3, 3.4 and 3.5 were produced as a result of European Research Council grant. The film [3.5] received Special Mention at the 2020 British Academy of Film, Television and Screen Studies Awards

3.6. Stewart, S., ed. (2013). The Everlasting Flame: Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination. London: I.B. Tauris. ISBN: 9781780768090. Available on request.

Reviewed by Prods Okto Skjærø, Aga Khan Professor of Iranian at Harvard University, as an 'indispensable resource for teachers and students', and **nominated** as poet, scholar and critic

Robert Crawford's Book of the Year of national Scottish broadsheet, The Herald, https://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13134237.the-books-of-2013-part-two/

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

Zoroastrian Voices of Iran (ZVI) and The Multimedia Yasna (MUYA) focused on bringing to life the cultural and religious practices of Zoroastrianism, converting an insular and text-based ritual history into publicly accessible, visual, oral and material culture. Impact was generated in London and Delhi, where key Zoroastrian diaspora communities reside. Their small size (110–120,000 approx.) means their priority is to engage majoritarian cultures. In the UK, the work conducted by Hintze and Stewart **enhanced cross-cultural understandings** among the general public and inspired a notable Scottish poet, Robert Crawford. The research also allowed members and ministries within the Indian government to **enact strategies of religious pluralism**. Working internationally with museum partners, the project fostered new and cutting-edge **curatorial relationships and practices** between the UK and India. Additionally, it delivered educational programmes at school and university level, enabling a **greater understanding of Zoroastrianism among students in Europe and India**.

Greater cross-cultural understanding of an historically influential minority religion

The Everlasting Flame, Zoroastrianism in History and Imagination exhibition in the Brunei Gallery, London (October–December 2013) was the first exhibition internationally to give Zoroastrians, and the public at large, an opportunity to learn about the religion, its history and culture by means of a visual narrative. Engagement with the Zoroastrian community worldwide raised GBP500,000, which supported the publication of an exhibition Catalogue [3.6]. The Zoroastrian Trust Funds of Europe paid GBP30,000 to run a 3-month London Underground poster campaign which aimed at attracting a wider range of attendees [5.2c, p2]. Public events associated with the exhibition included poetry readings (at the British Museum and SOAS), lectures, receptions and guided tours, alongside a conference and its published proceedings. With an emphasis on immersion to increase understanding, and inspire and share learning, Stewart also specially commissioned a replica fire temple and a monumental glass etching of rock engravings from Persepolis, Iran. It had the 3rd largest footfall of any SOAS exhibition according to Brunei Gallery records, with over 23,000 visitors [5.1a], and 786 catalogues sold [5.1b]. A special educational needs teacher who visited the exhibition commented: 'Inspired by the Everlasting Flame exhibition, I have been doing RE work based on the Zoroastrian faith with my pupils. . . ground-breaking work as I don't know anyone else who has done this religion in a special school' [5.2b p3]. The notable Scottish poet, scholar and critic Robert Crawford composed several key poems that were inspired by his visit to the exhibition. 'I read Sarah Stewart's book [3.6] with considerable attention, taking details from it for some of the poems that appear in *Fire*...Without my reading of this beautiful book, several of the poems... (particularly "Waterfall") would not have taken their present form' [5.3 p2]. Crawford nominated the catalogue as Book of the Year in the Scottish *Herald* in 2013 [5.4 p6].

Based on Hintze's MUYA research project, another highly successful exhibition, *Living Zoroastrianism*, was mounted at the Brunei Gallery in 2018. The exhibition's centrepiece, a Virtual Reality (VR) experience of the Zoroastrian Yasna ceremony, was a technological breakthrough in disseminating knowledge about the religion. It received over 8,500 visitors and won a place as one of the highlights of the London Bloomsbury Festival Being Human (November 2018), during which it attracted over 1,200 visitors [5.1a]. 38 visitors submitted feedback forms: 95% (36 respondents) agreed that the exhibition had increased their understanding of Zoroastrianism, and 92% (35 respondents) were inspired to learn more [5.5 p1]. One visitor commented: 'I am Zoroastrian . . . with little knowledge of my own . . . roots . . . I am moved by this exhibition' [5.5 p1]. Another wrote: 'Also being a minority religious/culture made me want to learn more about preserving rituals'. [5.5 p2]. *Living Zoroastrianism* received a Special Mention at the 2020 BAFTSS awards ceremony as judges 'found the piece...informative and creative, dealing with ancient cultures and rituals, using new VR technology to evoke both the sense of the place and the experience of strangeness in terms of visiting unknown spaces. The work offers a strong contribution to the field of anthropology too as well as creative practice research.' [5.15]

Enabling implementation of MOMA's policy of religious pluralism in India

Following the 2013 Brunei Gallery exhibition, Everlasting Flame lent its name to an international programme of events in Delhi in 2016, in collaboration with the Delhi-based organisation UNESCO Parzor. In March 2015, the then Indian Finance Minister, Arun Jaitley, announced in Parliament that formal approval had been given: 'to showcase civilization and culture of the Parsis'. The exhibition proved crucial for ministries' aims to promote religious pluralism among the general public as it was 'the first time that an exhibition on a Minority community... was organized at such a large scale in India' [5.8]. There was extensive coverage – print, television, radio and social media – for both exhibitions [5.6]. Between February and June 2017, there were 7 print articles, 52 online articles, and 3 Facebook posts reaching over 12,000 people, and 6 tweets making over 18,000 impressions. Coverage was predominantly in Indian publications, including local newspapers servicing cities with large Parsi populations, such as the Mumbai Mirror, and national titles such as The Statesman and The Times of India [5.6]. The Delhi exhibition ran from March to May 2016 and attracted 40,700 visitors, with 162 catalogues and 241 supplements sold [5.9b].

New and better curatorial relationships and practices between India, the UK and Iran

The project brought key loan institutions such as the British Library (BL), British Museum (BM), State Hermitage Museum, Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj Vastu Sangrahalaya (CSMVS) Museum (Mumbai), National Museum of Iran, Afrasiyab Museum (Samarkand), in a first-of-its-kind collaboration with the National Museum in Delhi, India, with the BM noting a 'whole new audience was able to see, appreciate and enjoy these informative displays' [5.7]. Stewart's collaboration with the National Museum led to changes in curatorial practice there. The exhibition brought advanced technological expertise and improvements to the museum. Temperature and humidity controls were installed for the first time in any Indian National Museum, and 33 display cases were manufactured by Glasbau Hahn (Germany) and set up by their team. Staff in the National Museum were shown how to manage the lighting systems and all the other installations which were left in place permanently, leaving a legacy of skills acquisition, relationships and state-of-the-art equipment [5.8] with the BL [5.9a] and with the State Hermitage Museum in Russia [5.10]. The BL loaned over 30 manuscripts to the exhibition. This was the first time they had lent to a National Museum in India and resulted in plans being made for future collaboration and conservation of the museum's collection. The exhibition paid for every page of all the books and manuscripts to be photographed before leaving the UK, meaning that this would not have to be done again for subsequent BL loans. Such items have been repurposed for the BL web portal 'Discovering Sacred Texts' [5.9a]. Following on from this, the National Museum in Tehran also agreed to lend valuable objects to the Delhi exhibition. Sourcing items for this exhibition has led to instances where smaller Indian museums have benefitted from expanding their own collections. Stewart's research located portraits of a leading 19th-century Parsi family in the empty sanatorium in Bandra, Mumbai, which were restored for the exhibition. The portraits were subsequently given to the Bombay Parsi Panchayat and the sanatorium kept replicas. A fire temple and 9-metre glass etching, commissioned for the exhibition and funded by a Parsi philanthropist, were installed in the newly refurbished Alpaiwalla museum in Mumbai – the only Parsi community museum in India – as permanent exhibitions [5.11].

Greater understanding of Zoroastrianism among students in Europe and India

To accompany the exhibition, the National Museum in Delhi ran an educational programme for local schools, through storytelling and manuscript-making workshops, as well as a workshop on Yazdi costume, for over 50 10–12 year-olds. Four guided thematic walks, supporting 100 pupils aged 10–17, were also jointly developed by the Department of Education and the National Museum, in Hindi and in English. Feedback forms submitted by 75% of pupils showed that most attendees had fun, learned something new and would visit the exhibition. Most learned about Zoroastrianism and its practice as well as about the socio-political contexts that defined them. Evaluating what they had learned, one pupil responded: 'the way Zoroastrian[s] were forced to dress and over time became their tradition' [5.12 p21].

The cultivation of sponsors for the London and Delhi exhibitions led to a GBP5,000,000 pledge in January 2016 to create a world institute for Zoroastrian studies at SOAS, aiming to increase the reach of SOAS's teaching and outreach capacity in Zoroastrianism; share best practice in

increasing accessibility to insular religious and cultural practice; and promote multiculturalism and religious plurality. Led by Stewart and Hintze, the SOAS Shapoorji Pallonji Institute of Zoroastrian Studies (SSPIZS) was launched in June 2018. It provides, in perpetuity, for a post in Zoroastrian Studies, scholarships, administrative support and an annual income for outreach activities such as public exhibitions, poetry readings and courses. At the launch event, Mr. Shapoor Mistry, the benefactor whose donation made the creation of the Institute possible, said: 'These are the first baby steps that we take to protect our culture and religion [and] I'm sure that this initiative is the right initiative and the only way forward is with SOAS' [5.13]. Now housed within the Institute, the oral and film recordings gathered by Stewart and Hintze, including audio material collected in the Zoroastrian Dari language dating back to the 1960s, have been developed into ever more advanced and accessible formats, including summer school curricula. A summer school was held jointly with Bergen University in the Norwegian Institute in Rome in September 2019 for 25 students. Of the 10 students from the Rome-based school who submitted feedback, all agreed or strongly agreed that they gained insights about historical and contemporary Zoroastrian practices that they could not get from elsewhere [5.14]. One student commented: 'I feel like I gained a lot from this course' which was 'informative, lucid and engaging' [5.14 p20].

Other work in the Institute included the creation and maintenance of the SSPIZS Digital Library. Considerable progress was made in locating, identifying and scanning manuscripts in India and elsewhere as part of Hintze's MUYA project. The research resulted in the restoration and digitisation of the important Sanskrit Yasna manuscript S1 at Columbia University and its publication by Leon Goldman. Their work preserves and makes these accessible to students, scholars and the general public.

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

- 5.1. Brunei Gallery and SOAS Bookshop correspondence **a)** Letter from Head of Galleries & Exhibitions, Brunei Gallery and **b)** email from SOAS Bookshop
- 5.2. *Everlasting Flame* exhibition 2013: **a)** Brunei Gallery report; **b)** Visitor comments, events and tour summary report, *Everlasting Flame*, Brunei Gallery 2013; **c)** Press Marketing Summary, *Everlasting Flame*, Jan 2014
- 5.3. Crawford, R., (2017) Foreword, *Fire*, Hirundo Press, Hamburg
- 5.4. 'The Books of 2013 – Part Two', *The Herald*, 1 December 2013. Available online: https://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13134237.the-books-of-2013-part-two/
- 5.5. *Living Zoroastrianism* exhibition 2018 – analysis of 38 visitor feedback forms
- 5.6. *Everlasting Flame*, Media Coverage in India, SOAS Report, June 2016.
- 5.7. Email from the Curator of Middle Eastern Coins, British Museum
- 5.8. Letter from Outreach Department, National Museum, Delhi and Ministry of Culture, Government of India.
- 5.9. Impact on the British Library: **a)** Letter from the Lead Curator, Persia Collections, British Library; **b)** *Everlasting Flame* at SOAS and New Delhi, an exhibition case study – BL presentation to the SAALG June 2016
- 5.10. Letter from State Hermitage Museum
- 5.11. Letter from Framji Dadabhoy Alpaiwalla Museum, Mumbai.
- 5.12. Report on education/interactive activities, Dept of Education, National Museum, Delhi.
- 5.13. 'SOAS launches new institute on Zoroastrianism in London', SOAS News, June 2018.
- 5.14. 10 feedback forms - Summer School in Zoroastrian Studies, University of Bergen, 2019.
- 5.15. BAFSS 2020 Awards Best Practice Research Portfolio special mention: <https://www.baftss.org/awards-2020>