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THREAD: a meeting place for scholars and refugees in textile and dress research

Introduction

One day, long ago in the 1980s, a young Kurdish immigrant girl visited Lejre, the centre for experimental archaeology outside Copenhagen in Denmark. She watched a weaving demonstration as the textile team reconstructed the Huldremose woman's dress on a loom 1.85 m wide. Four adults were weaving together to reproduce the "three weft-crosses of each weft-pick in the original Iron-Age textile" (Stærmosse Nielsen 1987, 207). They were cramped for space and struggling to work comfortably. The Kurdish girl unexpectedly opened the weavers' eyes to a new interpretation of how to work. She explained that in her home region, where she had seen the same system in operation, the two middle weavers were children, which not only solved the space problem, it also helped them learn to weave while the more complicated and time-consuming edges were handled by the experienced adults (Stærmosse Nielsen 1987, 207).

This story was, in part, the inspiration for THREAD (Textile Hub for Refugee Empowerment, Employment and Entrepreneurship Advancement in Denmark), a 33-month, 4.8m kroner (€645,000; £575,000) project led by the Centre for Textile Research (CTR), University of Copenhagen, which aims to tackle the challenge of refugee integration (Nosch 2017). The so-called "Grand Solution" financed by the government-backed Innovation Fund Denmark takes the view that refugee and immigrant women are a valuable resource rather than a problem group – as demonstrated by the Kurdish girl who shared valuable knowledge about weaving from her memories.

When the European refugee crisis grew increasingly acute in 2015, citizens in universities, education, the creative sectors and museums began multiple

initiatives to help create new lives for the new arrivals. Pop-up schools appeared to offer training in software design among many other projects such as the HackYourFuture coding training which started in The Netherlands. German universities opened their auditoria and libraries (for example, Universität Trier, Universität Koblenz and Georg-August-Universität, Göttingen). The international network Scholars at Risk arranged temporary academic positions for asylum-seeking academics and the Philipp Schwartz Initiative sponsored by the Alexander von Humboldt-Stiftung funds such hosting arrangements.

In the field of textile research, scholars saw an opportunity for closer societal engagement, a way of helping to solve a serious problem, and to open new routes to new knowledge. The Natural History Museum in Vienna helped asylum seekers (who were archaeology students) to arrange training and internships. In particular, in 2016 an archaeologist from Aleppo (Syria), Nver Simon, participated in analysing an historical Syrian textile (Grömer et al. 2016). The THREAD project set out to explore whether textile culture and craft could be catalysts for improved refugee integration. At the heart of THREAD is the concept of a themed network of contacts who can help facilitate social and professional advancement for women forging new lives in Denmark.

Craft knowledge and expertise drawn from practitioners has long been closely integrated along empirical and theoretical studies of textiles. CTR scholars have actively collaborated with hand-weavers and spinners in Denmark, Sweden and Greece as informants and participants in experiments and research (Andersson Strand & Nosch 2015; Andersson Strand et al. 2016). In 2013, textile scholars launched a

research project and international network *Traditional Textile Craft*, in collaboration with weavers and textile craft organisations in Jordan, India, Sweden and Turkey, as well as Danish textile design company Kurage (Ebert et al. 2014). This initiative was rooted in UNESCO's strategic focus on intangible craft and cultural heritage. Knitters were crowd-sourced to explore Early Modern knitting technology (Malcolm-Davies 2018) and collaboration with a weaving cooperative in Peru to conduct experiments with bone textile tools provided a deeper understanding of Neolithic examples from Greece, the Balkans and Turkey (Sarri 2017).

Partners in this imaginative initiative represent a wide cross-section of organisations including the Danish fashion brand Vibskov, an open-air Viking Age Village heritage attraction, the Copenhagen teacher training college (UCC), the School of Design in Kolding (DSK), a private company specialising in terminology (TermPlus), a design company involved in social work (Design Vanilie) and an association of female refugees and migrants (FAKTI).

The CTR's contacts share a passion for textiles, dress and fashion from prehistoric archaeology to cutting-edge design, which is not only the focus of academic endeavour but also represents real market opportunities for economic growth – especially in the context of “modest fashion” which is relevant to many of the refugees extending beyond those who are Muslim (Lewis 2013). This worldwide market was worth US\$254 billion in 2016, increasing by four per cent from 2015 and expected to grow by seven per cent per year to reach US\$373 billion by 2020 (Thomson Reuters 2018, 103).

THREAD activities

THREAD offers a series of targets built around the partners' shared passion for textiles:

Enhancing empowerment

Refugees need to feel they can take charge of their new lives if they are to take advantage of opportunities presented to them. Empowerment has been characterised as interventions, which “enhance wellness while they also aim to ameliorate problems, provide opportunities for participants to develop knowledge and skills, and engage professionals as collaborators instead of authoritative experts” (Perkins & Zimmerman 1995, 570). The proven therapeutic effects of craft activity for women include a sense of achievement, possibilities for personal growth and the development of cognitive and physical skills (Pöllänen 2015, 58). Art therapy has also been used in the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

with specific examples of traumatised refugee women from Bosnia who undertook embroidery, needlepoint, crochet, knitting, needle-lace, and quilting reporting an increase in social interactions (Ramirez 2016).

Embroidery, knitting and weaving “Textile Techniques” workshops with Danes offer opportunities to share craft skills and socialise. Pop-up “Textile Talks”, where artists, refugees and scholars share experiences of textiles such as wedding clothes, the memories sparked by fabric textures, and how garments can narrate a life story. There have been more than 50 of these sessions held at different venues and hosted by THREAD project team members and guest facilitators. Weekly activities and workshops now run several places in Denmark. Participants at the textile workshops in Køge received a certificate of attendance to help overcome their lack of conventional qualifications. Design Vanilie in Tingberg and Husum is helping participating women find internships with Copenhagen businesses and at UCC. At DSK, participants are building portfolios of textile handicraft work to help showcase their skills in the jobs market. This has resulted in job offers, both in private companies by designers and as teachers in Danish evening schools where adults of all ages go to increase their knowledge and skills and enjoy craft.

Facilitating employment and education

Denmark has historically had few refugees and migrants coming to the country, and currently the proportion of the population share with non-western backgrounds is circa 350,000 people in a total population of 5.7 million (Statistics Denmark). During the 2015 peak influx, the country had few facilities for integration, and the municipalities faced major challenges which needed to be overcome swiftly. Traditionally, learning Danish has been a key way of accessing the labour market, and language schools were seen as core facilities for integration. However, during the refugee crisis, integration policy shifted focus from language skills towards labour market experiences as the successful keys to integration. This is supported by experience from other western countries. The Canadian Council for Refugees identified access to employment as the top priority for successful integration in 2011. Recent studies demonstrate that women face different challenges from men as they integrate – in particular in finding appropriate work (Premji et al. 2014). Recent research on senior Turkish settlers in Denmark (Liversage & Jakobsen 2016) shows that a lack of access to appropriate employment opportunities results in considerable inequalities in old age, and this observation is particularly relevant to women. While only 1% of elderly Danes live below



OECD poverty levels, 29% of elderly migrants do so. This financial disadvantage results partly from the accumulation of a lifetime of disadvantages, especially in the labour market, and continuing into pension age. The percentage of the population which is in the labour force (aged 15 to 64 years) is known as the professional activity rate. Danish women have a professional activity rate of 74%, while non-western women in Denmark have a lower professional activity average of 47% (Ritzau 2018).

Since 2015, most refugees in Denmark come from Syria and, although there are fewer women than men seeking asylum, their numbers are significant (just over 3,000 in 2015). The highest proportion of women refugees from Syria are aged 20 to 29 years. Nearly 1,000 individuals in this age group came to Denmark in 2015, and many of these women seek to enter the labour market for the first time. Other women from Syria are older (circa 500 women refugees aged 40 to 50 years settled in Denmark in 2015), and these are likely to have transferable skills (Udlaendingestyrelsen 2016).

THREAD brokers relationships between organisations and refugee women to arrange internships to help them familiarise themselves with the Danish workplace and aspects of Danish life. Several of these internships have been at educational institutions (CTR, DSK, UCC) giving them the confidence to take a first step into the Danish educational system. Research has shown that female non-western citizens in Denmark succeed particularly well in the Danish education system. Among the non-western female migrants and refugees, 13% come to Denmark with a vocational education, and 14% come with a professional bachelor education. In contrast, among non-western girls and young women who embark on their education in Denmark, 36% accomplish a vocational education and 22% a professional bachelor's education. Thus, more than 50% more non-western women complete these educational opportunities than non-western men (Rockwoolfonden 2016, 17-19). In order to facilitate this positive trend, THREAD offers enrolment for refugees in the annual CTR summer school with the theme of "3,000 years of textiles and dress", which is part of the curriculum of the University of Copenhagen. Here, refugee students can widen their professional and social networks, practice their academic English and Danish, and gain a first Danish university diploma. So far, two women archaeologists with bachelor's degrees from Aleppo University (Syria) and Kurdistan University (Iraq) have attended the summer school. They can use the



Fig. 1: A THREAD workshop programme at the community college in Køge culminated in a "show and tell" event with participants bringing their handiwork to display. Each participant received a diploma certifying their handicraft skills, which will go some way to demonstrating their capacity for work in the absence of more conventional certification (Image: Pernelle Fagerland)

diverse academic, business, social and educational environments as a stepping stone for new career choices.

Encouraging entrepreneurship

The THREAD project includes an initiative to explore self-employment as an option for refugee women. Immigrants are often successful entrepreneurs since they are risk-taking, resourceful and innovative (Halkias et al. 2010). There is a combination of factors which stimulate entrepreneurial activity usually categorised as push and pull factors. One of the latter is presented by the 'enclave effect' whereby members of a cultural group live and work in close proximity and are able to provide each other with same-language networks beneficial for marketing (Fong et al. 2007, 129-130). The shared perception of gaps in the availability of stylish modest clothing (see below) shows there are opportunities for women refugees to set up enclave businesses tackling these. A workshop on the benefits of self-employment, the

support offered by state agencies, and case studies from successful immigrant entrepreneurs will provide inspiration for those refugee participants who wish to explore this possibility.

Academic outcomes

All these activities are helping to build good practice for a themed model of integration, which is the ultimate aim of the THREAD project. The hypothesis is that the themed network integration model is transferable from textiles to other themes such as food, sport, gardening, or personal grooming – all activities in which people undertake social activities, share with friends and/or with which they have a professional or economic concern. The current phase of the project is working on capturing the essential characteristics of the THREAD network in order to provide a blueprint for future networks based around other themes. THREAD is a work in progress and this transfer of the themed model is yet to be tested.

In addition to this, the project includes two main academic lines of enquiry: wardrobe studies and terminology development.

Wardrobe studies

These have a well established methodology (Klepp & Bjerck 2012) in which scholars conduct interviews about a person's wardrobe, clothing combinations, histories, contexts, and gain insights into private histories, biographies, processes over time, and also consumer behaviour and patterns of consumption.

Wardrobe studies were undertaken with refugee participants during the period August 2017 to June 2018 by design historian Else Skjold and designer Solveig Berg Søndergaard of DSK. They documented the personal collections of dress objects stored by eight immigrant women. The study showcases how incomers try to manage their own integration process through what they wear and do not wear. It demonstrates the literal integration of dress as they negotiate relationships between clothing and values they brought from their countries of origin with the clothing and values they encounter after arrival in Denmark. The wardrobe biographies of these women become key to understanding journeys of immigration in which dress objects connect past, present and future, and express memories, dreams and aspirations for individual people (Bang 2013). The wardrobe enquiries work as explorative, deep insights into a limited sample of individuals (eight women). The research results cast light on the way in which modest fashion is played out and practiced in local Danish contexts such as the city of Kolding

(Malcolm-Davies & Skjold forthcoming).

Most of the dress objects worn for social events with fellow countrypeople – particularly other women - are not purchased in Denmark, as the interviewees find it impossible to source appropriate garments. This means that they often depend on family and friends who travel abroad and bring garments home, sales platforms such as Turkish We-Chat, ethnic bazaars (such as Bazar Vest, a mall of primarily ethnic shops in the vicinity of the large settlement of flats and social housing Gelluparken near Aarhus), or self-made garments fabricated in their homes with materials from abroad. There were many attempts to bridge these two main categories in their wardrobes by 'sparkling up' the Danish wardrobe through accessories, constructing three-piece ensembles through combining objects that colour matched, or finding dress objects in Danish shops that provided the right silhouette and then styling them in their own way.

Textile and dress terminology research

This is currently an expanding international, interdisciplinary research field. However, in the area of clothing and textiles, focus has been on technical/ industrial vocabularies and on ancient languages and scripts (Lervad et al. 2016; Michel & Nosch 2010; Gaspa



Fig. 2: A *Hijab Me!* participant, who spent a week working with a Henrik Vibskov designer following the process of designing and then creating an original design for a hijab. There were four participants in the programme, which was a pilot project for an academic/commercial collaboration offering refugees the opportunity to learn about work in the fashion industry (Image: Jes Saatterup)



et al. 2017). Collaboration with refugees provides access to other languages and dialects, which are otherwise difficult to study because few dictionaries focus on clothing and textiles, and studies of specialised vocabularies rarely encompass craft, fashion, clothing, textile tools or patterns. Earlier studies have shown that mistranslation occurs in this area, due to the translators' and philologists' lack of knowledge of the field and modern alienation from textile production generated by industrialisation. In addition, the errors introduced by gender bias are numerous because terminology and philology were driven mainly by male scholars, while textile and clothing knowledge was largely a female domain (Michel & Nosch 2010, xiii-xiv). Examples of mistranslations are distaff instead of spindle whorl, or embroidery as translation for in-woven patterns on the loom, or linen instead of hemp (Barber 1991, 263-264; Nosch 2014, 35 note 101).

However, in order to conduct terminological research in the THREAD project, the methodologies had to be redesigned because the participants may have specialised textile vocabulary but little technical knowledge and no conceptual framework for terminological work. The new methodology for textile terminological fieldwork includes using images of looms and types of clothing in order to grasp the dialectal, regional and semantic differences. The international team who interviews refugees is composed of terminologist Susanne Lervad (director of TermPlus), linguist Christian Gaubert (Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale in Cairo) who works with Arabic, Tigrinya, and Gez, and classical philologist Egzona Haxha works with Albanian clothing and textile terms. Results will be presented at international conferences on linguistics and terminology in 2019.

The CTR's first recruit from the refugee community was Manhal al-Barazi, an archaeologist from Syria, who undertook a comprehensive translation of a scholarly paper about CTR's textile research into Arabic, thereby disseminating the research to a much wider range of scholars (Andersson Strand et al. 2015). Farzana Khosrawi is an Iranian Kurd from Iraq with a bachelor's degree in Near Eastern archaeology from Kurdistan University who has joined CTR for a two-year integration contract from 2018 to 2019. Both colleagues received specialised training in textile archaeology and joined the annual international summer school on textile history and archaeology, thereby facilitating their re-entry into the academic community. Their contribution to CTR in terms of translations, networking with refugee communities,

their international outlook, and artistic work illustrates the two-ways benefits of this collaboration process.

Thus far, THREAD has approached the challenge of integration by focusing on the rich array of resources women refugees bring with them to Denmark. These include multiple and varied domestic skills, social skills, knowledge of and skills in ancient textile crafts such as special embroidery techniques, sewing, tailoring, crochet and knitting. It also includes an interest in modern and modest fashion, knowledge of consumer behaviour in Middle Eastern countries, and knowledge and experience with styling and accessorising in the burgeoning market for covering rather than exposing the body. Initial investigations into the size and growth of the modest fashion market has not only revealed what a vast opportunity for creativity and profit it offers but thrown into stark focus how narrow-minded it is to consider modest fashion as niche, alternative, embryonic or "other". Modest fashion is here, now and is the mainstream market for much of the world.

Fashion brands and companies play a significant part in the Danish economy, with a €6 billion turnover and exports of €3.7 billion with 4 per cent annual growth in 2015. However, exports are low to Muslim and Arabic countries, and Danish companies are actively seeking to enter this consumer market for clothing. The involvement of refugee women could constitute an important key to gaining market share.

Conclusion

THREAD taps into the central discussion of the role of universities in the 21st century. The prevailing model of the "Triple Helix" forms a scaffolding of interactions between universities, public and private sectors where excellence is fostered through the transfer of knowledge (Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 2000). The model was expanded into the "Quadruple Helix" by including civic society, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), cultural and non-profit institutions. This model embraces social and cultural innovation by reaching beyond traditional technology transfer in the shape of formalised collaboration and patents (Johansson et al. 2018). In its structure, THREAD encompasses all forms of the "Quadruple Helix" with interaction between national and municipal institutions as well as private companies and not-for-profit organisations participating. Its aim is social innovation but there is significant potential for participants to feed into research in highly specialised fields. The collaborative scope extends to refugee populations and unconventional partnerships

between diverse institutions. These have required the creation, development and testing of new collaborative methods.

THREAD has taken a few innovative first steps towards a new way of working with refugees to access the capacity they bring to the Danish knowledge and market economies. It has attempted to forge a collaborative approach between refugee women and textile scholars, which has generated new data about the process of integration (through wardrobe studies) and given rise to new methodologies (in terminology research). The extended network of contacts identified by the partner organisations has demonstrated the potential for a wide range of supportive activities for refugees – from craft workshops to internships – based around the theme of textiles. More work is required to refine the methods by which the enormous goodwill the project has harnessed can be converted into measureable benefits for refugee participants. But the potential for two-way learning between academics and refugees is also a very promising and exciting aspect of THREAD. How many more immigrants and refugees are there in Denmark (and beyond) who are just waiting for the opportunity to share their specialist knowledge with their new neighbours?

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