Everything starts with a knot: Tying together indigenous crafts and solar design to foster women empowerment.

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Abstract

The traditional craft of working with the natural resource "palha" provides a livelihood for women living on Linga Linga, a peninsula in Inhambane province, Mozambique. Their work is inextricably tied to the landscape and to indigenous traditions. The well-being of these women is strongly impacted by inequity, which they experience, among other things, in the form of structural discrimination and exclusion, the very limited access to electricity and the commodification of their indigenous craft.

In response to this pressing issue, we – five artisans from Linga Linga and three designers from the Netherlands – created a safe space where we explored and shared our crafts and techniques. During this three-week “design residency”, developed based on principles from participatory design and transformative learning theory, the craft of the artisans and their cultural values were paramount. As designers, we shared our own craft of bringing solar design into everyday life in an accessible and meaningful way.

Combining the crafts in an equity-centered way resulted in a new material: "solar palha". During the making process the concrete needs and wishes of the women emerged. Their ideas resulted in six working prototypes: five Lâmpadas Solares; lamp shades that light up in the dark and one Solar Bolsa; a small handbag that charges a phone. Based on our experiences, documented through journaling and retold in this paper through a phenomenological account, we draw several insights that reflect on the impact of the residency. The contribution this paper offers, is an example of best practice in which the cross-over between solar design, participatory design and equity-centered design has been a fruitful strategy. Herein, craft firstly connects these different disciplines and approaches. Second, it has proven to be a powerful strategy of overthrowing the three described forms of inequity and becoming opportunities for positive change.

1. Introduction

This paper is based on the experiences of designing and executing a design residency in the province of Inhambane, Mozambique in January 2021. Here, a group of five female artisans from the local community of Linga Linga worked together with three designers (two female, one male) with their own backgrounds in equity-based and activist design, participatory design and solar design. The indigenous craft of working with the natural resource "palha" (a dried palm leaf) provides a livelihood for women living on Linga Linga, a peninsula in the Inhambane province. Their work is inextricably tied to the landscape and to indigenous traditions. The well-being of these women is strongly impacted by inequity, which they experience, among other things, in the form of structural discrimination and exclusion, the very limited access to electricity and the commodification of their indigenous craft.

In response to this pressing issue, we created a safe space where we explored and shared our crafts and techniques. During this two-week design residency, developed based on principles from participatory design and transformative learning theory, the craft of the artisans and their cultural values were paramount. As designers, we shared our own craft of bringing solar

design into everyday life in an accessible and meaningful way. Combining the crafts resulted in a new material: "solar palha", whereby solar cells became tied into the meshwork of the woven palha. The concrete needs and wishes of the women that emerged through making led to six working prototypes: five Lâmpadas Solares that light up in the dark and one Bolsa Solar; a small handbag that charges a phone.

This paper provides a phenomenological account of the design residency in which craft played a leading and connecting role. Through a series of insights, we reflect on the crossover between solar design, participatory design and equity-based design, and the impact these combined design approaches have on the artisan community. Herewith, we offer a contribution to other design researchers and practitioners working with marginalized or minority communities of artisans living in postcolonial contexts.

2. Theoretical Background

The work presented in this article stems from the convergence of three theoretical angles and associated practical design approaches, namely 1. decolonial theory for social change, 2. participatory design, 3. social innovation through crafts and technology. Through our project these are embedded within the context and work of an indigenous artisan community. In the paragraphs below, we briefly explain the three theoretical angles.

1. Decolonial theory for social change within an equity-centred approach

The decolonial lens on the importance of indigenous communities when it comes to sustainable solutions related to craft and design is seen as an integral formation of this project. Herein, craft can be read as a cultural text. In the context of Linga Linga, it thus becomes imperative to look at how the political, social and historical construct of Mozambique plays a role in the craft sector and how it has been sustained thus far. This is further contextualised in section 3 of this paper. By adopting a transcultural strategy to the design residencies created in Linga Linga, the collaborative effort of this project explores the emancipatory identities that are brought forth. These so-called hybrid settings (Bhabha, 1994: 111) warp the decolonial and the (subconscious) colonial mindset into a fusion of several identity constructs that inevitably question the fundamental equitable notion of the project. By utilising decolonial theory, we can begin to deconstruct these hybrid layers to understand the processes of decolonisation and how it can bring forth social change. An equity-centred approach to community-based design (Creative Reaction Lab, 2019) challenges the inequities based on race and gender whilst being applied to design and crafts, by dismantling power constructs in the design process.

2. Participatory design

Participatory design is a design research method that entails user participation from the very beginning of the design process. It is a democratic process in which the participants determine the design and research agenda and have equal input. (Muller, Kuhn, 1993: 24-28).

An important characteristic of a participatory design process is what it is called ‘a safe space’ in which participants can have a high level of involvement in the activities, such as designing and creating together and sharing their personal stories or values as a basis for the design. The characteristics of a safe space are aimed at providing trust and comfort to participants so that open communication, knowledge exchange and connections occur between participants (Duarte, at all, 2019: 188-210).

When participatory design methods are combined with methods from action research, a new field arises: 'participatory action research' (PAR). PAR seeks to understand and improve the world by changing it via small interventions. A first outcome of PAR is knowledge that is relevant for the participants to shape their own living and working environment. A second outcome is the empowerment of participants in learning new methods with which they can acquire knowledge themselves (Walter, 2009: 151-158)

3. Social innovation through craft and technology

When it comes to innovation, craft is essential to sustain and integrate tacit knowledge, as well as to facilitate cultural appropriation (Wilkinson-Weber & DeNicola 2016). Rachel Philpott (2012: 2) explains how the high degree of manual dexterity of craft practices leads to embodied knowledge that "forms the basis for creating artifacts”. The value of craft in relation to industrialization and digitalization is the making of discoveries by the human hand as opposed to the high degree of control and automation of machines (Sennett, 2009: 112).

Currently, there is a problematic discrepancy between high-income industrialized societies’ ‘top-down’ technocratic approach versus ‘bottom-up’ indigenous innovation based on multigenerational knowledge, practices and beliefs (Watson 2019). Acknowledging this gap, Digby Swift (1992: 1) states: “The extent to which science and technology contribute to the quality of life in developing countries is likely to be strongly influenced by the extent to which indigenous knowledge is employed.” As a result, education in science and technology should fortify existing knowledge and be mindful of the local environment. There are companies looking to give rural communities access to energy through solar technology, such as Little Sun, WakaWaka, and Rethaka. However, projects that let the community itself familiarize and design with raw materials such as solar panels are much harder to find.

3. Context of the design residency

The project centred on Palha and the female artisans of Linga Linga formats itself around an equity-centred community design studio (Studio Palha) that fosters collaborations between the artisans and fashion designers active in the Netherlands. Through the design residency, the project served as a facilitating platform in which design and the artisanal hand merge in a nuance of silent beauty, revealing the stories and meaning behind the products. The residencies focus on amplifying the voices of the makers — the women artisans; what drives them, what is inbred in their belief system and how this translates into the material they work with: palha, a dried palm leaf. Their work is inextricably tied to the landscape and to

indigenous traditions Local basket weaving techniques – one of the oldest techniques of the world – remain a symbol of Mozambique's craft tradition. Baskets with "gipatsi" or "sipatsi" strip-patterns, as produced by the Tonga people in central Mozambique, are now sold as handbags, although the tradition of basket weaving is very much rooted in rural life. Over 490 unique "sipatsi" patterns have been observed and collected amongst others by researcher Paulus Gerdes (2011). The artisans' labour of love reflects an influence of the past and transmits a technical know-how that in turn defines the local identity. On a larger scale, with the increase in attention towards the creative market in Africa as a continent, especially in design and fashion, the issue of cultural appropriation is undeniably becoming a relevant topic. Authorship and ownership of cultural manifestations lack to fall under intellectual property in fashion and design. Their use in disconnected circumstances adds to a growing problem of the preservation of many traditional expressions.

Mozambique has long been faced with impoverishment – a long struggle for independence, the consequences of a 16-year civil war and widely spread corruption. Burdened with social and economic complications, the country deals with numerous challenges from access to education, clean water, job creation and a functioning public infrastructure. Research by the MDG-F Joint Programme for Strengthening the Cultural and Creative Industries and Inclusive Policies in Mozambique (MDG Fund, n.d.), in cooperation with UNESCO, have identified the main issues of the country's cultural crafting sector. They named unstable market access, limited production capacity, product design and quality as the main impediments to the field. Additionally, the lack of governmental support and the informal nature of the crafting economy reinforce the limitations of sustainable development. Yet, there remains a country with an immense cultural heritage dating back to the Arabic traders and tribal formations in previous centuries (Waterhouse, 1996: 4). This provides an overwhelming inspiration for the creative arena, in which a collective artists, artisans and designers are still making a living by. Currently, national, and especially international market access is limited, which results in the constant struggle of artisans and crafters to make ends meet and support their families. Added to this, the COVID-19 pandemic has added on to enormous social and economic hardships and affected the tourism sector that Inhambane has fostered severely (ECHO, 2021). Due to this, the artisans of Linga Linga have been hit with a huge lack of clientele and demand for basketries.

4. Methodological approach

The design residencies provide a methodological context to elevate the voices and centre the voices of the female artisans in a community-based design environment. Here, interchanges in techniques and skills can be fostered between designers and artisans, to derive to equity-based design settings. The residencies are created based on a specific theme and corresponding material and/or technique. This residency was designed around the theme of 'the sun', with the premise of exploring the role and value of solar energy and solar design in relation to the Palha craft. The outlines of the residency were created by the team of designers. Based on previous experience we decided on a duration of three weeks for which

we invited five artisans from Linga Linga, namely Dona Louisa, Dona Gilda, Dona Dulci, Dona Joanna and Dona Joaquina. The already existing relationship of trust with Studio Palha made our plans possible. To accommodate the women and create a pleasant working environment, we rented a house and organized their travel. Carla Correia Parente, local designer, became involved in the team to ensure the women's needs were paramount in the process and assist as an interpreter and facilitator in the transcultural exchanges in language, ideas and creative processes. Since the residency took place during the covid-19 pandemic we took extra measures to ensure the safety of all participants.

The residency was set to take place every day, except Sundays, from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Beforehand, the residency program was divided into four phases: 1) an introduction phase to get to know each other and each other's craft, customs and language, 2) an exploration phase focused on making samples that combine materials and techniques, 3) the co-creation phase in which the samples were further developed into prototypes, and finally 4) a presentation phase in which the prototypes were presented by the artisans to other interested people.

Within the design residency the aim was to create an equity-based participatory design process that strives to create a safe space. To create this, we designed a context and process based on the following principles that are based on extensive experience with participatory design processes in the context of Ruimtekoers Festival (the design practice of one of the authors) and the theoretical background (see section 2):

- A well-known subject or theme forms the starting point ensuring that everyone can be an expert of their own experience, enabling us to work on equivalent positions and interests;
- From the start of the process, a clear formulation of roles and expectations is shared and it is made explicit that this topic will remain open for discussion throughout the entire process;
- The design process actively creates space for joint rituals, for example through daily meetings, and undertaking joint activities that break through these rituals, to offer variety and a basis for shared memories;
- Part of these joint rituals is explicitly naming the design process and making it visible and tangible to make sure everyone is provided with the same information. This establishes a shared basis from which all participants can work on co-creation as experts of their own experiences and role;
- The design process invites and promotes an open and curious attitude towards each other and towards the surroundings; thereby creating a place where all participants feel welcome to give their own rituals a place and a voice.

Throughout the residency, journaling was used by the designers as a phenomenological method to record participant experiences. Conversations and observations were documented in writing and the design process was further captured through photos and videos.

5. Tying together indigenous crafts and solar design

In this section we present a phenomenological account of the experiences of the design residency to do justice to the tacit knowledge and values exchanged in the craft process.

Figure 1: Dona Dulci testing her solar lamp

Lihani: "Sun on earth — the rays that touch our skin and the plants"

On the first morning, all participants sat in a circle in the living room of the house in Tofo. They were given the opportunity to tell something about themselves, share their expectations of the residency and explain their role. The Mozambican women explained their role as artisan who wanted to share their craft, Zinzi as the initiator and curator of the residency, Pauline as a solar designer, and Yosser - the only man among this group of women - as a designer of participatory processes involving communities. After introducing the theme of the residency, all participants were asked to tell an anecdote to explain their relationship with the sun. Yosser made drawings illustrating our conversation and the plan for the residency, which were hung on the wall. This drawing exercise became a useful way to align each other's expectations.

Lighty, lighty, lighty!

The afternoon was focused on familiarizing with solar energy. Pauline explained her work in this area through samples and videos. The women, when asked to reflect on what they were shown, explained how their cell phones give them access to remote family and radio news, but that they have to go to "rich people's houses" to get them charged. When dona Dulci discovered that it was possible to wear clothes that could charge a cell phone, she stood up

and performed how she would walk around confidently on the phone while charging it with her t-shirt.

Figure 2: Dona Gilda celebrating the lamp with a dance

Next, the first craft exchange involved making a solar lamp using a small solar panel, a pcb with components, battery and glass jar that needed to be assembled using tools that the women had never used before. Making these lights revealed the eagerness with which they learn a new skill. The reward was great when the lights worked. The women tested them by creating a dark space with a capulana (a type of sarong) and celebrated the lamps with a dance and improvised song with the phrase: “lighty, lighty, lighty” (Figure 1 and Figure 2).

Figure 3: The woman sharing their Palha craft

Everything starts with a knot

The next two days were dedicated to palha, with the artisans sharing their craft with the designers. We sat on the veranda floor amidst piles of beige-colored dried palm leaves that the women brought from Linga Linga (Figure 3). The women showed how to separate the individual leaves, strip them into narrower strands with their nails, and sort them by stiffness. Then they demonstrated how to paint bundles, using a discarded paint pot on a fire made in the garden. We went out to cut some fresh palha leaves and got a bucket of white beach sand that would keep the palha moist so it wouldn't break during the weaving process. Dona Dulci explained to us how “Everything starts with a knot” (Figure 4). An expression that reflected not only the actual making process whereby strips of palha are knotted together to form the starting point of the basket weave, but also the tying together of people and experiences that the residency was enabling.

Figure 4: Dona Dulci explains: “Everything starts with a knot”

Pia, pão, hodza — “Cut, bread, eat”

The craft process enabled the artisans and designers to get to know each other, and in particular each other's language, cultural beliefs and social rituals. On most mornings, the designers joined the women’s favourite morning ritual: drinking “cha” (tea) and eating “pão” (bread) together (Figure 5). This moment of sharing personal stories and looking at the workday ahead became a shared ritual. The fact that we could not all speak the same language, invited us to be very attentive to other communicative resources. Over the course of the collaboration, we developed a ‘composite’ language consisting of Gitonga (local dialect), Portuguese and English words and inside jokes that proved sufficient to communicate to each other. These shared rituals and repeated jokes became a way of making memories together.

Figure 5: Drinking “cha” and eating “pão” together in the morning

Documentation and shared experiences

Every day, many photos and videos were taken to document the creative process and our collective experiences in and around the house. After the first week we organized a drink at the house to view the footage together. This was a way to break up the work atmosphere so we could get to know each other in a different way and contextualize the shared experience of creating together.

Figure 6: Dona Joanna sitting underneath the five Lâmpadas Solares

Making solar palha

After learning each other's craft, we explored how to combine the two elements into what we called "solar palha". The designers first wanted to make some material samples that could inspire product ideas. The women are used to working on commission, but during the residency they were stimulated to explore their own ideas more deeply. During this specific phase the women explained how they preferred to make actual products; making samples only for research was difficult for them to support. In the conversation that followed, the women explicitly shared that they wanted to create useful products. Their ideas took shape in the creation of six working prototypes: five lamp shades that light up in the dark and one handbag that charges a phone (Figure 6). Several days of fabrication followed in which the artisans and designers worked together to determine the overall design, the weave patterns and integration of wires, solar cells and batteries. Finally, it was time for the presentation of the working prototypes.

Lâmpada Solar & Bolsa Solar

To present the final prototypes we went to the market in Tofo, where local vendors sell palha products that they buy from traders or directly via the artisans. We did not come to sell the prototypes, because the prototypes belonged to the women. Yet we wanted to get feedback on our work and explore the potential value of the products. The merchants were enthusiastic about the products. João, one of them, didn't want to return the Bolsa Solar: "It suits me so well, this one is made only for me", he said (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Merchant João is showing the Bolsa Solar

Visiting Linga Linga

The next day it was time to say goodbye, but not for long. The women had invited us to visit their homes, which created the opportunity to include autoethnographic research. A week later, almost as usual, we were having lunch together at the house of dona Joanna in Linga Linga with all the women. During our three-day visit we stayed with dona Dulci, her husband, niece and nephew. In this context with the blistering heat of the sun, the lack of electricity and clean drinking water, we experienced first-hand what the women told us extensively about. We also saw with our own eyes how important the role of women is in the household; continuously taking care of the fire, water, food, children and running the family and the community and making time for their craft. The intensity and importance of this role is often hardly or very little recognized by their husbands.

Figure 8: Lâmpada Solar hanging in the tree being charged by the sun

While visiting all the women at their homes, we saw the Lâmpadas Solares hanging in the tree being charged by the sun, to give light to the community of Linga Linga after sunset (Figure 8).

6. Insights of the design residency

The creative and cultural exchange of the making process throughout the design residency as well as the autoethnographic exploration on Linga Linga has generated the following three insights.

1. The residency method ensures that artisanal values are directly transferred to newly introduced materials. While exploring the value and meaning of prototypes requires autoethnographic research in the woman's living environment.

By working with the solar cells daily and gradually making them part of the craft of working with palha, they quickly acquired a ritual value. Daily practices with the new prototypes,

however, were not instantly formed. During the stay in the house in Tofo, the glass jars and the finished Bolsa Solar were often gathered in the house and thus kept out of the daylight. None of the women was aware at the time that it was better to put them in the sun. When we spent a long weekend at their homes and were able to observe their daily practices, we came across the palha leaves drying in the sun next to a pile of logs with the glass jar and a Lâmpada Solar on it (Figure 9). This revealed an intimate connection between the natural resource palha and solar technology, as both depend on and relate to the sun, unlike anything we could have experienced before in Tofo. Moreover, it emphasizes how a familiar context and everyday social practices were needed for these new products to become meaningful.

2. Implicit differences between the role of "designer" and "artisan" reinforced, by the power relations that are a remnant of colonial history, stand in the way of equal collaboration.

The residency revealed the challenge and need to overcome the implicit hierarchy between the different roles of participants, which is further complicated by the remnants of colonialism such as the power relations in race and class (Mozambique became officially independent in 1975). Despite the conscious efforts made to create an equitable design process, we noticed during the residency that "the designer" is typically seen as the one who decides what should be made and that "the artisan" executes and realizes it. This can be illustrated by two concrete examples. Firstly, the women had difficulty making what we know as material samples or swatches; they were quickly tempted to make actual products instead. When we brought this up, the women explained that the emphasis on form is common practice for them, as they normally always receive a concrete product order. Secondly, the designers were regarded as "clients" by the artisans, while the focus and aim of the residency was to develop ideas and products that could support the artisans in their daily lives. This became clear when the artisans returned home with all their belongings and deliberately left behind the solar lamps on the sofa in the living room of the house. While it was repeatedly emphasized that the needs and wishes of the artisans were central to our material and product exploration, it wasn't obvious to them that they would take ownership of the result of the work. We paid the women a daily fee for their work. This creates a degree of dependency, which can typically - in a context of limited inequality - be considered normal or self-evident, but which complicates the intention of equity-based participation in this particular context. It is worthwhile noting the importance of challenges equity-design spaces in this context and considering that an artisan from an indigenous community may differ in needing resources from what a designer may need, to arrive at the same place or create common solutions.

3. The celebration of craftsmanship and the sharing of knowledge has an empowering effect on the women

The joyful exchange of craftsmanship yielded new knowledge, skills and perspectives for both artisans and designers. Precisely because of the possibility to learn themselves as well as teaching others, the women became empowered. This observation was literally expressed when they described what the act of "making light" did to them: "I feel powerful". As a thank you and tangible reminder of the experience, we gave all women a printed canvas with two

photos of themselves, made during the residency. The excitement of this moment, expressed with cheering, singing and dancing was a culmination of the acquired knowledge, skill and shared energy.

7. Discussion

Our research raises several new questions that serve as points for discussion and inspiration for future research.

1. As our approach to the design residency shows, equity doesn't arise by chance but with intent and focus. Despite our conscious intentions and efforts to ensure an equity-centred design process, we still faced the complex power dynamics that minoritized communities are involved in; especially those that are more subtle and therefore more difficult to anticipate. Highlighting the voices of those in marginalised communities does indeed begin with a reorientation of the design process and the mindset and attitudes that everyone involved brings. Based on the positive feedback we received from the women, we believe our research is a good example of how this can be done. However, based on our experience, viewed through a decolonial lens, we wonder whether it is at all possible for design processes and practices to be truly equitable? Even over the course of writing this paper, we as authors have struggled with doing justice to the voice of the artisans who do not have access to writing academic publications. As a result, our work invites a rethinking of how equity is being mediated and actively negotiated in design practice. Our attempt to fluidly approach the role of the artisan and the designer challenged our consideration to the relationship designers and indigenous artisan communities have. In the context of the artisan's relationship with their surroundings, the holistic embodiment of community living where the artisan's livelihood depends on the craft and the craft depends on the livelihood, it is imperative to question how an equity-based design setting is even possible. After all, we ourselves repeatedly appoint/write from the perspective of the designer vs craftswoman; those differences may also be there, but they must be given a dignified and explicit role and place to come into their own.

2. The design residency enabled us to better understand the local traditions, the way the country is organized and the existing structures in which the women produce and sell their products. For a more durable impact and lasting empowerment of the artisan community an infrastructure is needed that incompases the materials and processes necessary for the solar palha products to come to life. While the women learned how to solder the electronics, they would no longer be able to do so at their homes in Linga Linga without access to electricity. Here, the engineers of local electronic repair markets could provide a viable solution, which we intend to explore further. In addition, a supply chain of materials should be established, preferably based on local resources.

3. Finally, our work points to the possibility of actively involving men for their side of the emancipation that is needed to give women in the community of Linga Linga greater independence and freedom. During the design residency the women were physically separated from their spouse. The prototypes and the printed canvas they brought home were a means to explain the work they had done and the experience gained. We had brought our digital camera to Linga Linga and showed José, dona Dulci's husband, some photos to make her work more tangible. It was striking how he suddenly opened up and became much more interested and talkative about it. This made us aware of the value of design anthropology in promoting greater involvement of men and thus greater respect for the knowledge, skills and role of women. In the future, the design residency could be physically closer to the actual living context, or the men could be invited during presentations of the work.

8. Conclusion

This paper presented a design research project in the context of Mozambique whereby five female artisans from indigenous culture collaborated with three designers active in the Netherlands. It described the theoretical foundations and practical considerations that went into the design of the residency, considering the sensitivities and challenges of this specifc context with its colonial history. Based on a phenomenological account that highlights the crafting process and the cultural exchange that it facilitated, three key insights emerged. These insights as well as the subsequent discussion points are meant to inform other design researchers and practitioners working in similar contexts. The contribution this paper offers, is an example of best practice in which the cross-over between solar design, participatory design and equity-centered design has been a demonstrable strategy, revealing how the fluidity in roles of artisan and designers can bring about new methods that offer true inclusivity. Within this strategy, craft is the thread that ties these different disciplines and approaches together. Moreover, it has shown to be a powerful strategy to overturn the three described forms of inequity to become opportunities for positive change. For the women, their craft first of all facilitated new intrinsic values; solar energy has become more accessible and understandable; ultimately empowering them to strengthen their position within the community.

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