

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

Research Paper

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 – created a safe space where we explored and shared our crafts and techniques. During this two-week “design residency”, developed on the basis of 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”, whereby solar cells became tied into the meshwork of the woven palha. During this making process the concrete needs and wishes of the women emerged. Their ideas took shape in the creation of six working prototype: five palha solar lamps that light up in the dark and one palha solar bag; a small handbag that charges a phone. Above all, this process provided the following insights:

1. The process revealed an intimate relationship between the natural resource palha and the solar technology since both depend on the sun. New social practices with the prototypes, however, were not instantly formed and required a longer-term exchange and (auto)ethnographic research in context.
2. In our aim to create an equity-centered design process we found that participatory design does not always work out well in these kinds of contexts. The women depend on the monetary value of their work, whether it is done in or outside the context of a residency. Hence the products they created were at times understood as an assignment not for the benefit of themselves but for others, which impacted their ownership of the final prototypes.
3. The equal and 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. An observation which was literally expressed through their own words: “I feel powerful”.

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. Within this strategy, craft has been used first of all as the string that ties these different disciplines and approaches together. And secondly, it has shown to be a powerful method to overturn the three described forms of inequity to become possibilities for positive change: for the women, their craft has facilitated new intrinsic values; solar energy has become more accessible and understanding; allowing them to strengthen their position within the community.

Keywords: Indigenous crafts; equity-centered design; solar design; women empowerment

Pauline van Dongen is a designer and researcher. She explores human-garment relationships and alternative fashion (design) practices through the development of smart textiles and clothing. Her design studio received international recognition with projects such as the Solar Shirt, Phototrope and Issho. With her vision and through a hands-on, ‘material aesthetics’ approach she emphasizes the value of the physical, sensory experience of clothing and the nurturing qualities of textiles. This is central to her PhD dissertation entitled: A Designer’s Material-Aesthetics Reflections on Fashion and Technology with which she received her doctoral degree from Eindhoven University of Technology in 2019. Besides running her own design studio, Pauline is a postdoc researcher at Eindhoven University of Technology, she is one of the initiators of The Solar Movement and The Solar Biennale, and is a member of the advisory board of the ‘ArtEZ Fashion Professorship’ and of ‘New Order of Fashion’.



DR. PAULINE VAN DONGEN

Eindhoven University of Technology

Yosser Dekker, a participatory designer, researcher and curator and owner of Bureau Ruimtekoers, works on urban and cultural research presented as accessible art and community projects. Together with artists, residents, public, local governments and entrepreneurs, Yosser uses the public space in cities and villages to explore new ideas, dreams and directions for living together in future cities and communities. Led by artists, designers, musicians and performers Yosser invites creative practitioners to participate in a year-long residency and research project to explore the city and develop programs which in various ways bring the line of discourse between the city council and its local inhabitants back to a synergy. Through an accessible program, Yosser is also able to reach diverse audiences prioritizing simple but important daily practices which almost everyone holds dear, sharing ideas and stories through food and music. But the audience doesn’t just take a passive role, they are the central and active participatory ingredient in the program.



YOSSER DEKKER

Owner of Bureau Ruimtekoers

Zinzi de Brouwer (she/her) is an Advocate, Entrepreneur, Academic, Creative Director and founder of Studio Palha, an equity-centered community design studio based in Mozambique and the Netherlands in which female artisans take the central stage in bridging craft and design to new fashion narratives. Through fashion, she links academia and industry to foster social and environmental justice in specific regard to African fashion narratives and Indigenous sovereignty. She co-founded Stories of Near in 2015, the first trend forecasting studio dedicated to the African continent as part of the global map. In 2021, she joined the Amsterdam Fashion Institute, as head of Society & Context pushing the urgency of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion forward. She recently became the interim head of Design. Her research and practice are focused on looking through the fashion lens as a means to heal, bring joy, well-being, and belonging, through non-Western perspectives.



ZINZI DE BROUWER

Creative Director and founder of Studio Palha