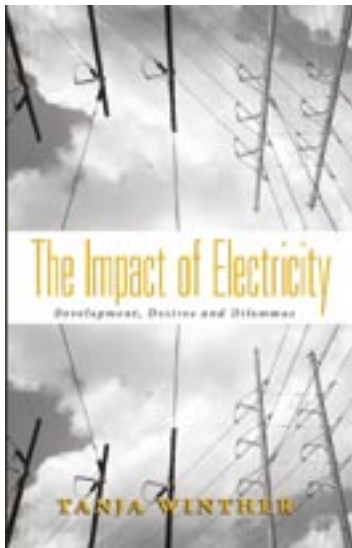


The Impact of Electricity

Development, Desires and Dilemmas

Reviewed by: **Wendy Annecke**

Tanja Winther
Berghahn Books: New York and Oxford, 2008.
274 pp



Between 1991 and 2006, Tanja Winther was periodically involved in observing the impacts of the electrification on the village called Uroa on the island of Zanzibar. She was well qualified to do this: fluent in kiSwahili, Winther is both an engineer and an anthropologist and the study offers a rare combination of the insights of both.

Winther addresses many of the questions that occupied researchers at the Energy and Development Research Centre (now ERC) at the University of Cape Town during South Africa's accelerated national electrification programme in the 1990s. Technology – generating the power, stringing the electric wires and getting the current moving – is only half of the challenge of electrification for development. The other half lies in the way electricity is received, perceived and used. The socio-cultural factors involved, the “desires” and “dilemmas” of the book's subtitle, usually determine the success of electrification.

How many households are willing and able to be connected? How are the advantages, such as television, shared with those

not connected? Most importantly for the viability of the utility, how is payment perceived and managed? While electricity is an undeniable good, it is an intervention that disrupts social, economic and cultural practices, often in unforeseen ways. It creates closed spaces that used to be open, changes cooking habits and even the kind of food that is cooked. Winther looks at these and many other interesting angles.

This book has appeared at a time when the president of South Africa has declared that there will be universal access to electricity by 2012. It is highly desirable reading for all the engineers and advisors involved in electrifying the rest of South Africa.