

## Development and characterization of thermal insulation panels based on rice husks and kapok fibers stabilized with plaster

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### Abstract

This study is part of the recovery of agricultural residues and plant fibers in the thermal insulation of buildings. Set plaster is commonly used in construction as a thermal insulation for roofs or walls (in the form of panels or coating). The study analyzed the influence of the incorporation of rice husk and kapok wool on the thermal and mechanical properties of the set plaster. It consisted initially in finding the right mass ratios plaster/rice husk, plaster/kapok wool and water/plaster which combine good thermal performance and good mechanical resistance. Then, these ratios were used to develop two biosourced eco-materials in the form of thermal insulation panels made from rice husk and kapok wool using plaster as a binder. These panels were tested in the thermal insulation of the roof and walls of a model classroom. Thermal properties were measured with a thermal property analyzer. The results obtained show that the formulated eco-materials offer good thermomechanical cleanliness and improve the thermal comfort of the building. Their thermal conductivity varies from 0.109 to 0.214 W.m<sup>-1</sup>.K<sup>-1</sup> depending on the formulation. The study also showed that with these panels, for an insulation thickness of 2 cm, the interior temperature of the room can be reduced by 5°C ± 2°C on average. The eco-materials thus developed can be used as roof or wall insulation in order to reduce heat flows through the building's envelope.

### Keywords:

Rice husk;  
Kapok;  
Thermal insulator;  
Agricultural residues;  
Eco-material.

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## 1. Introduction

Faced with economic and environmental challenges, energy management in buildings has become a major stake [1], [2], [3], [4]. The insulation of a home is essential to obtain a satisfactory level of thermal comfort and to reduce its energy consumption. According to ADEME, 25-30% of the heat escapes from an uninsulated building via the attic and the roof (this is therefore the priority in terms of insulation), 25% via the walls, 10% or 15% by glass and windows and 7% or 10% by floors [5], [6]. A thermal insulation project must take into account not only these different elements of the habitat but also the thermal properties of the materials because they govern the heat transfers within the materials and from the habitat [7]. The search for local, ecological and low embodied energy insulating materials is very important for the eco-construction of new buildings or the renovation of existing buildings [8], [9], [10]. The recovery of agricultural residues and plant fibers by formulating biosourced insulating materials in housing remains an appropriate solution [11], [12].

In Burkina Faso, the enormous quantities of rice husks produced each year are not valued very much. The purpose of this study is to valorize agricultural residues and plant fibers by analyzing the influence of the incorporation of rice husk and kapok fiber on the thermomechanical properties of thermal insulation in plaster reinforced with fiber used in construction. The study set out to formulate, manufacture and characterize two thermal insulating eco-materials in the form of biosourced panels made from rice husk (agricultural residues) and kapok (vegetable fiber) using plaster as a binder [4], [13].

## 2. Research Method

### 2.1. Basic materials used

**Rice husk:** it is produced in very large quantities each year in Burkina Faso, it comes from the hulling of rice and comes in the form of a loose vegetable aggregate (photograph (a) of Figure 1). Its total porosity is around 90% [8], so it has an interesting thermal insulation capacity. The thermal conductivity of a mixture of loose rice husks at 24°C varies in the order of 0.046 to 0.057  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  for a bulk density of 139 to 168  $\text{kg}\cdot\text{m}^{-3}$  [8]. E. Chabi [14] found that it changes with density and varies from 0.062 to 0.079  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ . Rice husk is used in construction mainly as thermal insulation in bulk or in the form of bricks, rendering or agro-concrete.

**Kapok:** it is a vegetable fiber obtained from the fruit of a tree of the bombacaceae family very widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, see photograph (c) of Figure 1. This tree is known under the name of cheese tree or *Ceiba Pentandra* [16]. According to A. Wereme [1] kapok fiber offers very good thermal conductivity, this is 0.043  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  for a density of 35  $\text{kg}\cdot\text{m}^{-3}$ . Figure 1 below shows the basic materials used.



Figure 1: Basic materials used

**$\beta$  hemihydrate plaster:** the word plaster can designate the plaster powder resulting from the industrial firing of gypsum and the set plaster obtained by mixing the hemihydrate with water [17]. The semihydrated plaster is in the form of a white powder obtained by heating soft and crystalline rocks with a high percentage of gypsum, photograph (b) of Figure 1. The heating of the gypsum leads to the evaporation of the water contained in the rock and therefore its dehydration, then its calcination. Plaster is thermally insulating and fireproof, two highly sought-after characteristics in housing [18]. It is also a good sound insulator and has good fire resistance, but it is permeable to water vapour. Plaster is a hydraulic binder, mixed with water it hardens when it sets [15]. It is widely used in construction as a staff (plaster reinforced with tow), false ceiling, ceiling, false floor, façade cladding (plaster), screed, partition, lining, and in the repair of walls (filling). The thermal conductivity of a plaster coating is around 0.26  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  while that of cement is 1.15  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  [17].

## 2.2. Formulation of biobased composites

### ◆ Dosage of samples

About 10 sample composites were made to find the best formulation and dosages that combine good thermal and mechanical properties. The rice ball was weighed and pre-wet for 4 hours then drained on a sieve to get rid of excess water, this prevents it from absorbing the water necessary for the hydration of the plaster and the drainage of the plaster towards the bottom of the sample [19]. The kapok was cut into fibers of less than 1 cm in length to have more homogeneous composites. Different samples were made by varying the mass percentage of rice husk from 10 to 50% and that of kapok from 2 to 7%. Table 1 gives the mass ratios of the base materials in the samples.

Table 1. Dosages: mass ratios of base materials

Composites (formulation)	Mass ratios		
	E/P	P/B	B/K
Plaster + Water	0,5 ; 0,8 ; 1,0		
Plaster + Rice husk + Water	0,8	2,3 à 9,0	
Plaster + Rice husk + Kapok + Water	1,0	4,0	2,9 à 6,7

P: plaster (Binder); B: rice husk (vegetable aggregate); K: kapok (vegetable fiber); E: water

### ◆ Manufacture of panels

The characterization tests on the sample composites made it possible to retain the appropriate dosage to make two types of insulating panels with dimensions of 120 x 80 x 2 cm<sup>3</sup> each. The first is composed of 12% rice husk, 49% plaster and 39% water by wet mass, being the mass ratios: W/P=0.8 and P/B=4.0. The second consists of 12% rice husk, 3% kapok, 47% plaster and 38% water, the mass ratios being W/P=0.8; P/B=4.0 and B/K=4.0. The control panels are composed of 56% plaster and 44% water, i.e., a W/P ratio of 0.8. To manufacture the panels, the plaster is first mixed with water at a W/P mass ratio of 0.8 from the  $\beta$  hemihydrate powder [20]. Add the rice ball and the kapok, stirring until you have a homogeneous mixture. A first layer of the mixture is projected into the mold which will form the visible and smooth face. A light and airy mattress of tow distributed on the still fresh composite is then deposited to form a reinforcement and finally, a second layer of the composite is added to obtain the desired thickness.

## 2.3. Characterization of thermal and mechanical properties of composites

### ◆ Measurement of thermal properties

The thermal properties of the composites were determined using a powerful thermal property analyzer, the KD2 Pro. It uses a method called the double needle algorithm [21] and offers an accuracy of  $\pm 0.01 \text{ W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  for thermal conductivity values of 0.02 to 0.2  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  and  $\pm 10\%$  error for those between 0.2 and 2  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ . The method consists of pushing the two needles of the sensor into the material. A heat flux is applied to one of the needles for a defined heating time, and the temperature is measured on the other (monitoring) needle, 6 mm apart. During the cooling period following the heating, the temperature is again measured. The resulting data is fitted to the appropriate equations using a nonlinear least squares procedure [21].

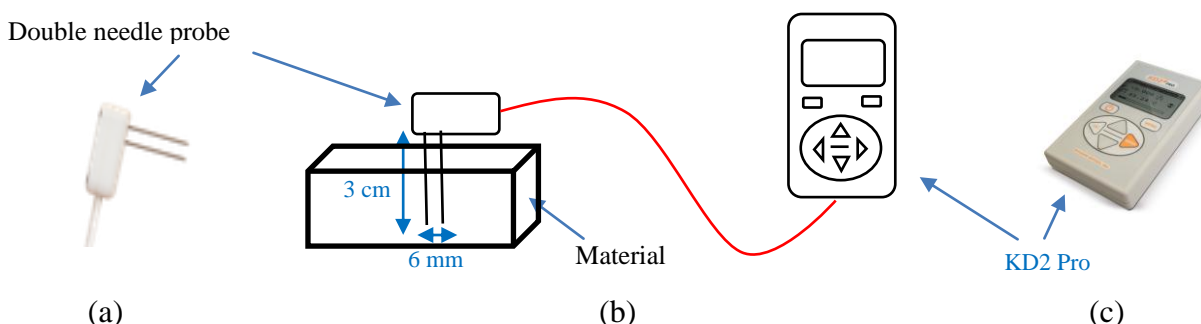


Figure 18: Measurement device using the double-needle algorithm (b) with a double-needle probe (a) and a thermal property analyzer (c)

The thermal conductivity of a material quantifies its ability to diffuse heat, it varies according to the temperature and the nature of the material. When the material is homogeneous and isotropic, the heat flux density passing through the layer is proportional to the temperature gradient and is given by Fourier's law according to Equation (1). In steady state and in the simple case of a one-dimensional heat flow through a

homogeneous material, the thermal conductivity corresponds to the coefficient of proportionality  $\lambda$  between the heat flow and the temperature gradient given by Equation (2).

$$\vec{\varphi} = -\lambda \cdot \overrightarrow{\text{grad}}(T) \quad (1)$$

$$\varphi = -\lambda \frac{dT}{dx} \quad (2)$$

$\varphi$  is the heat flux (in  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-2}$ );  $\lambda$  thermal conductivity (in  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ );  $T$  the temperature (in K);  $x$  the direction of propagation of the heat flux.

The thermal diffusivity characterizes the speed of propagation of a thermal wave in the material. It is related to thermal conductivity, specific heat and density. When the thermal conductivity is a function of the spatial coordinates and the temperature of the environment, which itself is a function of time, Equation (3) gives the heat equation [22].

$$\rho \cdot c \cdot \frac{\partial T}{\partial t} = \text{div}(\lambda \cdot \overrightarrow{\text{grad}}(T)) \quad (3)$$

For unidirectional heat transfer and when the thermal parameters are independent of temperature, the transient Fourier equation is written as Equation (4) and the thermal diffusivity is given by Equation (5).

$$\frac{\partial T}{\partial t} = \frac{\lambda}{\rho \cdot c} \frac{\partial^2 T}{\partial x^2} \quad (4)$$

$$D = \frac{\lambda}{\rho \cdot c} \quad (5)$$

$D$  is the thermal diffusivity of the medium (in  $\text{m}^2\cdot\text{s}^{-1}$ );  $\rho$  the density of the material (in  $\text{kg}\cdot\text{m}^{-3}$ ) and  $c$  its specific heat (in  $\text{J}\cdot\text{kg}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ ).

#### ◆ Calculation of the thermal phase shift

The thermal phase shift characterizes the ability of a material to delay the flow of heat. It represents the transfer time of a heat flux through the material. For the wall of a dwelling, it corresponds to the time interval between the moment when the temperature outside reaches its maximum and the moment when the temperature inside reaches its maximum [23]. The transfer rate  $v$  of the heat flux through the material is given by Equation (6). By taking a cycle of temperature variations of 24 hours and taking into account the thermal diffusivity  $D$ , the thermal phase shift is obtained by Equation (7).

$$v = \frac{2\pi}{T} \sqrt{\frac{T \lambda}{\pi \rho \cdot c}} \quad (6)$$

$$\tau = \frac{e}{v} = \frac{1,38 e}{\sqrt{D}} \quad (7)$$

With  $v$ : speed of heat flow (in  $\text{m}\cdot\text{h}^{-1}$ ),  $T$ : cycle period of temperature variations (in h),  $\lambda$ : thermal conductivity (in  $\text{W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ ),  $\rho$ : density (in  $\text{kg}\cdot\text{m}^{-3}$ ) and  $c$ : specific heat (in  $\text{Wh}\cdot\text{kg}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ ).  $\tau$ : thermal phase shift (in h),  $e$ : thickness of the material (in m),  $D$ : thermal diffusivity of the material (in  $\text{m}^2\cdot\text{h}^{-1}$ ).

#### ◆ Three-point bending strength test

Since the panels are intended to be used for roof insulation, the three-point bending method was used to characterize their resistance to bending. The panels were cut into test specimens of  $16 \times 4 \times 2 \text{ cm}^3$  which were arranged (its section  $16 \times 4 \text{ cm}^2$ ) on two supports spaced apart from each other. A third support is placed on the upper face of the specimen halfway between the support supports Figure 3. The press exerts a load gradually on the specimen until it breaks [24]. The three-point bending strength is given by Equation (9).

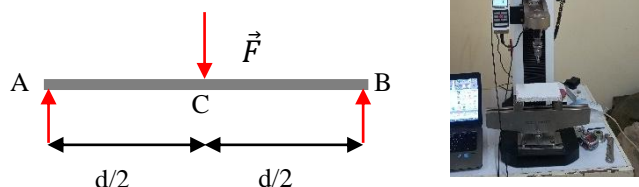


Figure 3: Schematic and device for three-point bending resistance test

$$R_f = \frac{3.F.d}{2.l.e^2} \tag{8}$$

With,  $R_f$ : the bending strength (MPa),  $F$ : the breaking load (N),  $d$ : the distance between the supports (mm),  $l$ : the width of the specimen (mm),  $e$ : the thickness of the specimen (mm).

### 3. Results and Analysis

#### 3.1. The different formulations

The formulations studied, the dosages and the mass ratios of the base materials that make up the various composites are given in Table 2

Table 2: Formulated composites studied

P + E			P + E + B				P + E + B + K				
N°	Composites	E/P	N°	Composites	E/P	P/B	N°	Composites	E/P	P/B	B/K
1	PE0.5	0,5	4	BP3.0	0,8	3,0	8	KB2.9	1,0	4,0	2,9
2	PE0.8	0,8	5	BP4.0	0,8	4,0	9	KB3.5	1,0	4,0	3,5
3	PE1.0	1,0	6	BP5.7	1,0	5,7	10	KB5.5	1,0	4,0	5,5
			7	BP9.0	1,0	9,0	11	KB7.3	1,0	4,0	7,3

P: plaster; E: water; B: rice husk; K: kapok

Dosages No. 5 and No. 9 were used to produce the panels and Dosage No. 2 (standard dosage) was used to make the control panel. Figure 5 and Figure 6 below are the photographs of the samples and formulated insulation panels, respectively.



(a) Photography of samples



(b) Photographs of the panels

Figure 4: Photograph of samples (a) and panels (b)

#### 3.2. Thermophysical characteristics of samples

##### ◆ Composite drying kinetics

After demoulding, the evolution of the mass of the composites was observed during their drying in the open air at room temperature for 14 days (Figure 5). The loss of mass is low during the first three days, then increases significantly until the tenth day before stabilizing, the mass of the composite becomes practically constant from the twelfth day. The observation is that the loss of mass is all the more important as the rice husk content is higher, it is even more so with the presence of kapok. After drying, the water content of the

composites is around 8 to 13% depending on the formulation (Figure 6). It is lower in composites containing more kapok wool, this is explained by the fact that kapok wool absorbs water more difficultly than rice husk. Apparent porosity varies from about 50 to 80%, it is higher in composites containing kapok wool. The density of the composites decreases with the addition of rice husk and kapok wool, at the same time their porosity increases (Table 3), which improves their thermal conductivity.

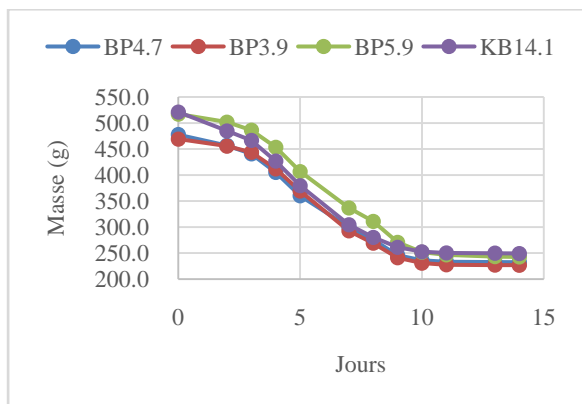


Figure 5: Evolution of the mass of composites over time

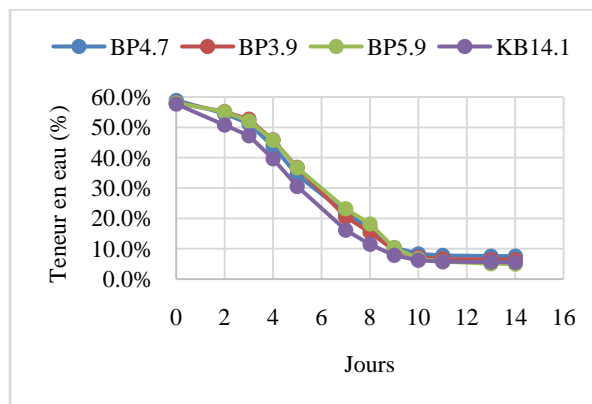


Figure 6: Evolution of the water content of composites over time

#### ◆ Water absorption capacity of composites

The water absorption by the composites was evaluated by immersing them in water and following the evolution of the mass of each composite as a function of time. The fraction of water absorbed is expressed as a percentage. The absorption of water by the composites is very rapid during the first minutes up to an hour of time and can reach 120% of their masses in water before reaching saturation after three hours of immersion. We found that water absorption is greater when the proportion of kapok increases (samples: KB13.7, KB8.5). This is explained by the higher porosity of these composites, this porosity was reinforced by the kapok fibers. Figure 7 below represents the curves of water absorption by the composites and Figure 8 gives the rate of water absorption. The presence of kapok fiber increases the rate of water absorption. Text source

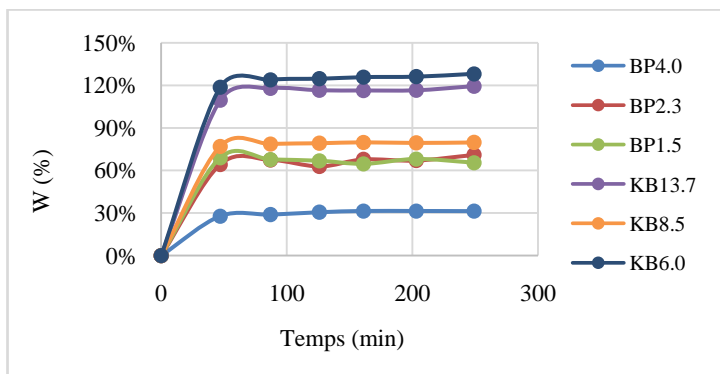


Figure 7: Water absorption kinetics of composites

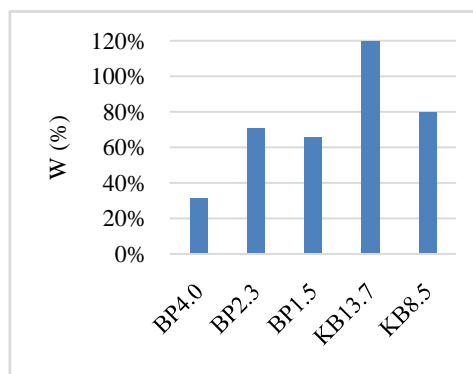


Figure 8: Water absorption rate

#### ◆ Influence of binder content on thermal properties of composites

Adding the rice husk to the plaster decreases the thermal conductivity of the insulation board. It drops from  $0.135 \text{ W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  for a plaster/rice husk mass ratio (P/B) of 2.3 to  $0.109 \text{ W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  for a (P/B) ratio of 1.0. From a ratio (P/B) of 1.5, the insulating panels obtained are quite light but friable. To avoid this crumbling, the dosage of the plaster was pushed up to a ratio (P/B) of 9.0. In this case, the panels are a little heavier and their thermal conductivities increase. With a P/B ratio of 1.9 the thermal conductivity is  $0.127 \text{ W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ , but we retained the ratio of P/B of 4.0 and E/P of 0.8 which is more adequate for the development of the panels. With kapok wool, the composites are more insulating but also more friable. The best results were obtained with P/B ratios of 1.4 to 2.1 and B/K ratios of 6.0 to 13.0; which gave a thermal conductivity varying from  $0.115$  to  $0.146 \text{ W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ , the average being  $0.126 \text{ W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$ . These results are in agreement with those of E. Chabi[14] who found that the average value of the thermal conductivity of rice husk concrete varied from  $0.070$  to  $0.171 \text{ W}\cdot\text{m}^{-1}\cdot\text{K}^{-1}$  depending on the binder dosage. For the manufacture of the second

insulating panel, weretained the proportions P/B of 4.0 B/K of 4.0 and E/P of 1.0; which gave a thermal conductivity of  $0.115 \text{ W.m}^{-1}.\text{K}^{-1}$ . The evolution of the thermal diffusivity is a little irregular, we believe that this is due to the fact that certain composites are not strictly homogeneous. Figure 9 below shows the evolution of the thermal conductivity and Figure 10 the thermal diffusivity of this first type of panel as a function of the binder content.

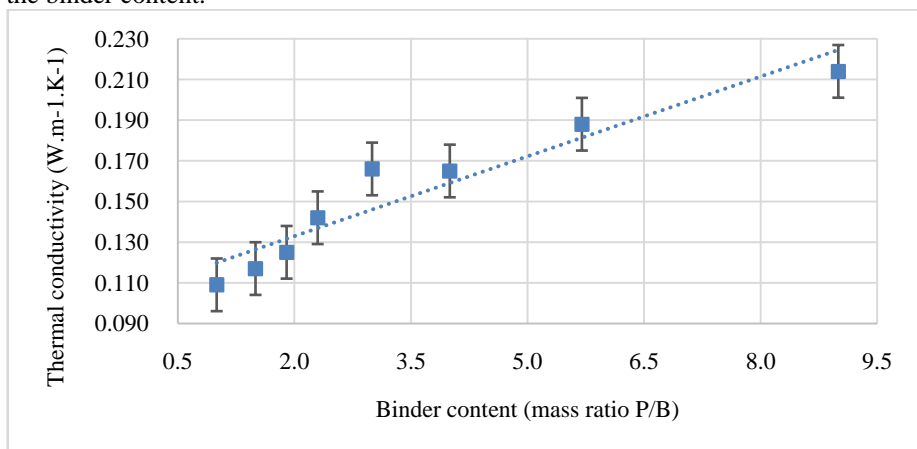


Figure 9: Variation of thermal conductivity as a function of binder content

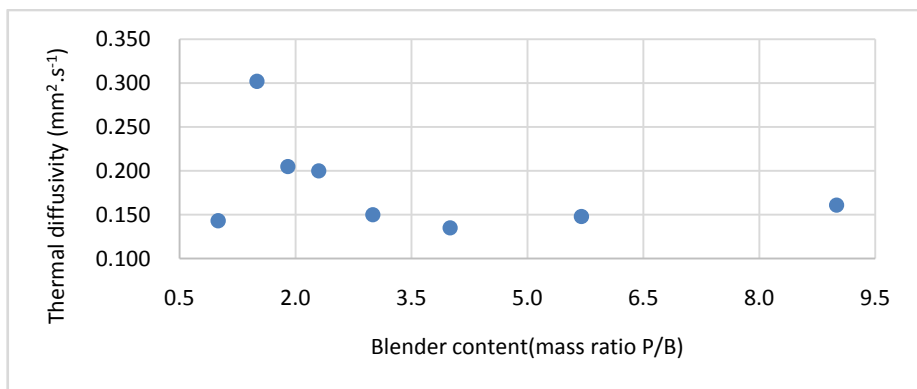


Figure 10: Variation of thermal diffusivity as a function of binder content

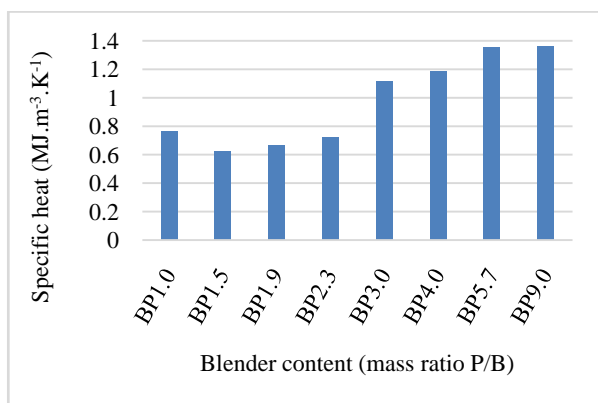


Figure 11: Variation in thermal resistance as a function of binder content

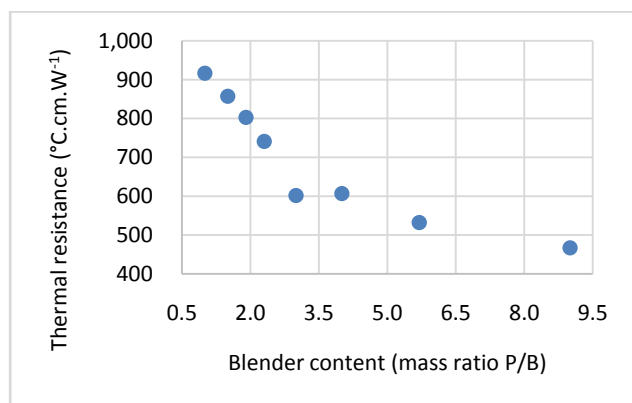


Figure 12: Variation of specific heat as a function of binder content

### 3.3. Thermophysical and mechanical characteristics of the panels

The results of the panel characterization tests are given in Table 4 below. The flexural strength of the panels increases as the binder content of the samples increases. Thus, for plaster P/B ratios of 1.0 to 4.7, the three-point bending strength increases from 1.62 MPa to 4.0 MPa.

Table 4: Thermophysical and mechanical characteristics

Composites	Densité (kg.m <sup>-3</sup> )	Porosité (%)	Conductivité thermique (W.m <sup>-1</sup> .K <sup>-1</sup> )	Capacité thermique (MJ.m <sup>-3</sup> .K <sup>-1</sup> )	Diffusivité thermique (mm <sup>2</sup> .s <sup>-1</sup> )	Déphasage thermique (h)	Résistance en flexion (MPa)
BP4.0	936	82	0,135 ± 0,010	0,723 ± 0,010	0,200 ± 0,010	4 ± 1	3,6 ± 0,4
KB4.0	917	56	0,115 ± 0,010	0,587 ± 0,010	0,201 ± 0,010	5 ± 1	3,2 ± 0,1

Bio-based panels can induce a thermal phase shift of 3 to 6 hours for an insulation thickness of 10cm. The test on the pilot building made it possible to see that without insulation, the temperature of the air inside the building reaches 40°C whereas with the biosourced panels with an insulation thickness of 2 cm, the temperature of the indoor air in the room is limited to 34°C (Figure 13). The amplitude of the thermal wave is attenuated by about 5°C ± 2°C on average.

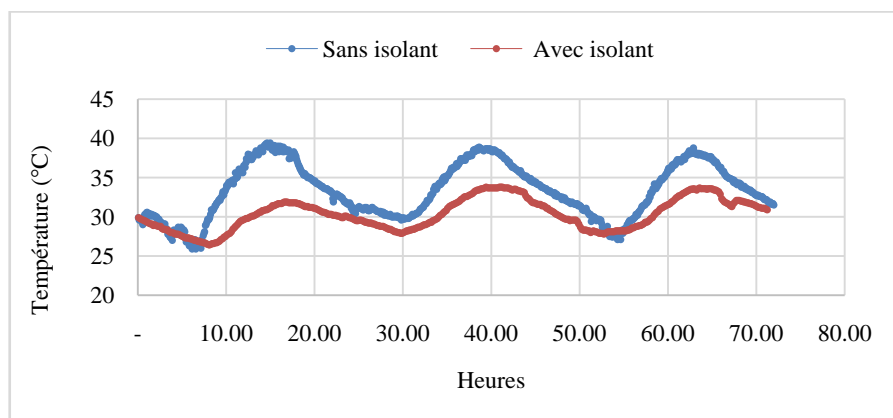


Figure 13: Variation of the air temperature inside the building

## 4. Conclusion

This study made it possible to develop biosourced insulating panels based on mixtures of rice husk and kapok wool stabilized with plaster. The characterization tests made it possible to evaluate the thermal and mechanical properties of the bio-based panels composed respectively of rice husk + plaster and rice husk + plaster + kapok and gave average thermal conductivities respectively of 0.115 ± 0.005 W.m<sup>-1</sup>.K<sup>-1</sup> and 0.127 ± 0.005 W.m<sup>-1</sup>.K<sup>-1</sup>. The results obtained show that the panels offer good characteristics for use as thermal insulation for roofs (false ceilings, ceilings) or walls and can improve the thermal and energy performance of buildings. They have the advantage of being good insulators, less expensive and light compared to ordinary set plaster (staff) commonly used in construction. They can also be used in the conservation of agri-food products, medicines and vaccines in southern countries where electrical energy remains inaccessible in rural areas.

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