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Soulful Stitching

Patchwork Quilts by Africans (Siddis) of India

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There are many African communities with rich artistic traditions scattered across this planet. We may be familiar with the history and artistry of African peoples and their descendants in the Americas, but we know little or nothing about Africans in other parts of the world, especially those in South Asia (Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka) known today variously as Makranis, Sheedis, Kafiris, Habshis, Chaush, or Siddis/Sidis (Fig. 1).¹

Africans, probably from the Horn of Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia, Somalia, Djibouti, Kenya, and Sudan), traveled to South Asia early in the first millennium CE as merchants and sailors (Map 1). Later (c. fourteenth century) they went as professional soldiers, sailors, and administrators for the Arabs and Mughals. These early immigrants settled in northwestern (Gujarat), northern, and southern (Deccan) India and are mostly Muslim (Map 2). Some rose through the ranks to become rulers, prime ministers, admirals, generals, and religious leaders.

The earliest evidence of Africans in India dates to about the second or third centuries CE (Chauhan 1995:2) when they came as merchants and sailors. Centuries later they came “enslaved,” first from the regions of northeastern Africa and then southeastern Africa. But we must understand the sociohistorical meaning of the term “slave” in the medieval Islamic Indian Ocean world, for it is very different from the institution of “chattel slavery” created and refined by Europeans in later centuries in the Atlantic world. As Amitav Ghosh (1992:259–60) so eloquently explains, “the arrangement was probably more that of patron and client than master and slave, as that relationship is now understood. If this seems curious, it is largely because the medieval idea of slavery tends to confound contemporary conceptions of both servitude and its mirrored counter-image, individual freedom.”

In the Middle Ages institutions of servitude took many forms, and they all differed from “slavery” as it came to be practiced after the European colonial expansion of the sixteenth century. In the Middle East and northern India, for instance, slavery was the principal means for recruitment into some of the most privileged sectors of the army and the bureaucracy. For those who made their way up through that route, “slavery” was thus often a kind of career opening, a way of gaining entry into the highest levels of government.

It was precisely by such means that many Siddis rose to positions of great trust, power, and authority in the military and governmental ranks of various rulers in India between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries and celebrated in paintings (see Robbins and McLeod 2006).

Europeans—first the Portuguese, followed by the Dutch, British, and French—arrived in the Indian Ocean and South Asia in the late fifteenth century. Beginning in the sixteenth century, they enslaved Africans and carried them to India and other regions of the world. Those brought by the Portuguese to Goa on the western coast of India served primarily in domestic households of the rich. Over generations they escaped bondage, moving inland and southward into the remote and generally inaccessible Western Ghats mountains of northern Karnataka in order to create free, independent African Diaspora communities, much like the *quilombos* of Brazil, *palenques* of Colombia, the *cimarrones* of Panama and Mexico, or the Maroons of Jamaica, Surinam, and Guyana. Others left the service of Muslim and Hindu rulers and migrated into the Karnataka region from various directions at different times (Map 3).

Today the Siddis of Karnataka live scattered in the thick forests and high plains south of Goa and number about 20,000. Those who fled Portuguese Goa are generally Catholics. Most speak a



1 Fatima Adikese examines the back of her quilt.
PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004



(opposite, top-bottom, l-r)

Map 1 The Indian Ocean World

Map 2 India, showing Gujarat, Goa, Deccan.

Map 3 Karantaka, India

(this page)

2 Siddi performing arts are strong, especially the song, dance, drumming tradition known as *goma* (from Swahili *ngoma*), or *dhammal/damam*. Here the quilter Flora Introse dances.

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004

3 A fine example of a Karnataka Siddis patchwork quilt (family size) known as *kawand*. Note the celebration of hand-created artistry.

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004

dialect called Siddi-Konkanni, but the younger generation now also speaks Kannada or English. Their African origins are probably in the region of Mozambique and eastern Africa, but precise places of origin are yet to be researched and determined. Another segment of the population, which may have come from Hyderabad or the Deccan, is Muslim and speaks Urdu or other local Indian languages. A small percentage of Karnataka Siddis is Hindu and speaks Hindi. Most Siddis marry other Siddis, but there has been some intermarriage between Siddis and other Indian ethnicities/cultural groups. Despite the fact that Africans have lived in India for more than 800 years, they are often still considered “outsiders” or “aliens” and stand apart from the pre-

vailing caste system (Prasad 1980, Prasad and Angenot 2008). Most Indians do not even know of their existence.

While they have adopted, adapted, and integrated many cultural aspects of the Indian peoples with whom they have lived for generations, Siddis have also retained, adapted, and transformed certain cultural and artistic traditions from Africa (Obeng 2007a). The performing arts are strong, especially certain music (drumming and song) and dance traditions known as *goma* (from Swahili *ngoma*), or *dhammal/damam* (Fig. 2) (Shroff this issue, Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers 2004).² In the visual arts of the Karnataka Siddis, one tradition stands out—the art of patchwork quilts known as *kawandi* (Fig. 3).





5 a-c Women of the Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative in 2006. They come from (clockwise from top left) Mainalli, Kendalgiri, and Gunjavati.
PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2006.

(below, l-r)

6 At home, a quilter begins work sitting on a shaded verandah, a bundle of used fabric nearby.
PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004.

7 Sometimes several women (friends or relatives) will work together to create a large family quilt. Here Dumgi Thomas, Flora Introse, and Mary Mariani quilt together.
PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004.





One seemingly mandatory decoration is the sewing at each corner of the quilt one or more square patches folded twice to form a multilayered triangle called *phula* (“flower”). These serve an aesthetic rather than a practical function for they are essential to a properly finished or “dressed” Siddi quilt and are a distinctive style element. As one Siddi quilter explained to me, “they must be there, if not, the quilt would be naked!”⁴

AESTHETICS

Siddi quilts are highly individualistic, yet quilters share many clear and precise opinions about quality and beauty, and the need to “finish properly” a quilt with *phulas*/flowers at the corners. The size and shape of the quilts and their patches vary signifi-



(l-r, top-bottom)

10 One quilter, Sushila Ruzai, favors “step patterns” of small squares that descend diagonally across a field of large, multicolored rectangles.

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004.

11 A series of parallel L-shaped chevrons at the corners, sometimes punctuated by small detached squares, is a design said to be favored by some Muslim Siddi quilters. This is a quilt by Fatima Adikese.

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2006.

12 Some quilters, like Clara Christos, may leave the original shape of a blouse or shirt and simply integrate it into the quilt (lower right corner).

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004.

cantly from quilter to quilter. Sizes generally fall into several categories and are measured by a “hand”—the length between the elbow and fingertips of the quilter, which can thus vary. The size categories are: large/family (6 x 6 hands); double (5 x 6 hands); single (3 x 5 hands); and baby/crib (2 x 3 hands). Some quilts are quite regular and orderly, others are more varied, dynamic, and “unruly” in terms of colors, patterns, and scale (Figs. 15a–b). Some have no or few small patches scattered over the surface, others are bejeweled with lots of small, colorful patches (*tikeli*), and these quilts elicit much praise for their painstaking artistry. Quilters unanimously admire work with straight lines of small, regular, closely spaced and carefully rendered running stitches, and the rhythms created by the patterns of stitches and patches. In terms of color, Siddis prefer bright and light colors and patterns, which makes sense given their interior domestic contexts—dark sleeping rooms in homes with small, shuttered windows, only recently supplied with electricity. They especially prize baby quilts filled with brightly colored *tikeli* in a variety of shapes and sizes that they explained would “stimulate and entertain” the child wrapped in it (Fig. 9).

When not in use or folded in piles in a room, *kawandi* are displayed outside, hanging from roofs, clotheslines, or fences in order to air out and dry in the sun. Their bright colors and vibrant patterns contrast sharply with the brownish red earth and tiled roofs. The beauty and artistry of the finest quilts sometimes prompts



fashions and fortunes. A quilt documents the well-worn, discarded clothes of family members over the previous years. But more than this, patches sewn together give new life to worn fabric and create a bed/cover that is stronger than a single piece. When things fall apart, we say we “patch things up.” A quilt of many patches, made by and for a family, keeps it strong. Mixing together a vibrant array of patterns, colors, and textures from all kinds of fabrics, *kawandi* summarize the style history of family members as they embody the artistic sensibilities of their makers—the women of SidDI communities.

POSTSCRIPT

HISTORY OF THE SIDDI QUILT PROJECT

In February 2004, while documenting SidDI expressive culture (performing and visual arts) and living with a SidDI family in northern Karnataka, I noticed the beautiful quilt I was given to sleep on. Then, as I visited SidDI communities, I began to see them hanging out in the sun to dry, and women sitting on shaded porches beside bundles of old clothes, sewing them into marvelous creations. I learned that my SidDI “mother” Dumgi was a well-known quilter and I asked her to make one for me.



14 Some quilts by Catholic SidDI women include a cross as in this example by Shashi Kala Doming. PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2005



museums, galleries, and art centers. In addition to portraits of the quilters and photographs of their homes and environment, the exhibition is accompanied by a twenty-minute film entitled *Scenes of Siddi Life* by the author and edited by Aaron Granat. Anyone interested in supporting this nonprofit project or in obtaining more information about the sale of Siddi quilts or the

traveling exhibition “Soulful Stitching” can go to: www.henry-drewal.com/sales/exhibitions, or contact me at: hjdrewal@wisc.edu or Department of Art History, Chazen Museum of Art, UW-Madison, 800 University Avenue, Madison, WI 53706.

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Notes

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1 Variants of “Siddi” in European literatures are: Sidi, Siddie, Siddee, Siddy, Sidy, Sedee, Scidee, Scidy, Sceedy, Scydee, Sciddee, Sciddie. The word is thought to come from the Arabic word *sayeed* for “mister” or “sir”—a term of respect throughout the Arab and Islamic world of northern Africa and the Middle East. Another interpretation suggests that it refers to a particular sailor’s rank. In the Portuguese literature, they are often referred to as Mulattos, Kafre or Kaphris (Caffree, Colfree, Kafra), and Kapir, from the Arabic term *kafir*, “unbeliever/pagan” (see Prasad 1980:71–3). An alternative term used in some places is Habshi, derived from the Arabic term for Abyssinia/Ethiopia (Al Habish) and thus Habshi meaning a person from the land of the Blacks or Habash. In Marathi documents, they are

referred to as *shamal* or “black faced” (Chauhan 1995:1). Chaush are Afro-Indians living in Hyderabad, where their forebears served as bodyguards to Muslim rulers. The term is thought to derive from an Ottoman military designation for “subaltern,” and due to the discrimination they suffer, they are, according to Allen Roberts, “subaltern subalterns” (see Roberts 2000:8).

2 Amy Catlin and Nazir Ali Jairazbhoy have done extensive research on Siddi performing arts, especially in Gujarat. See also the work of Beheroze Shroff, who has published articles and made films of the Sidis at the shrine of Bava Gor in Gujarat as well as in Mumbai (Bombay), as well as her article in this issue. Those studying communities of African descent in South Asia and adjacent regions are indebted to the pioneering work of the historian Joseph Harris (1971). See also the extensive bibliography following.

3 As suggested by Allen Roberts (personal communication, email, June 19, 2012), such gridlike patterns in quilts created by Muslim women may relate to *khatim* (sometimes *khatem*)—mystical squares that serve as protective devices for those who wrap themselves in the quilts at night.

4 In addition to their aesthetic purpose, *phula* may also have a protective one, like *khatim* grids, suggests Allen Roberts (personal communication, email, June 19, 2012). He notes that “A motif at the four corners accentuates the pattern, and is a common device in, say, Ethiopian paintings when the Archangels may inhabit the corners to focus attention on the center of the work;

such visual work further echoes mystical devices like *khatim* grids.” He goes on to suggest, “It would be very interesting to investigate notions of ‘the hidden side’ of overt presentation, that Muslims would call *batin* after the key Arabic term undoubtedly borrowed into Urdu and other languages used in Muslim communities.”

5 Since the creation of the SWQC, Sarah Khan and I have been working with an Indian colleague, Bani Singh, a design graduate of National Institute of Art, Ahmedabad, and now senior faculty at Sriшти School of Art, Design and Technology, Bangalore. She has been instrumental in encouraging high-quality craftsmanship of the quilts by holding discussions with the quilters about their aesthetic criteria—what makes a quilt beautiful, rather than what makes a quilt sell. Based on those conversations, she selects quilts for export. In addition, she has had discussions with Indian crafts industry promoters to develop a local market for Siddi quilts and other craft products created using Siddi quilting techniques. For this Indian market, we have been advised that the quilters must use new cloth, whether for the patchwork or the cotton sari backing. This is very different from the export part of the project, where what tends to be valued by buyers/art collectors (in the US and Europe) are “authentic,” that is, quilts with older, used fabric in good condition. Sustaining the quilting tradition may also be a challenge. Young Siddi women seem less interested in learning quilting as they begin to go to school and leave their village communities for larger, commercial centers or for seasonal, tourist work in Goa.

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compiled by Henry John Drewal, Beheroze Shroff, and Alicia Cannizzo

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