

STITCHING HISTORY



PATCHWORK QUILTS BY AFRICANS
(SIDDIS) IN 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 Karnataka, India, known as Siddis.

The Siddis are the descendants of early African immigrants to South Asia and enslaved Africans brought to Goa on India's west coast by the Portuguese beginning in the 16th century. Gradually escaping bondage, these former slaves moved southward into the remote Western Ghats mountains of Northern Karnataka in order to create free, independent African diaspora communities.

Today the Siddis live in villages scattered in the thick forests and high plains south of Goa and number about 20,000. While they have adopted, adapted, and integrated many aspects of Indian cultures, Siddis have also retained and transformed certain African traditions, particularly in the performing arts. In the visual arts, one tradition stands out – the patchwork quilts known as *kawandi*. These *kawandi*, unique to Northern Karnataka, are being shown now for the first time outside India.

These wonderful textiles are the traditional mattresses and covers of the people, made with love by women, especially the elderly, for their children and grandchildren. A Siddi *kawandi* is the visual history of a family and its fashions, documenting the well-worn, discarded clothes from previous years. Mixing together a vibrant array of patterns, colors, and textures, the resulting patchwork summarizes the fortunes and the styles of family members as they embody the artistic sensibilities of their makers. This textile tradition is not unique to the Siddis – other neighboring cultural groups create similar work. Yet Siddi quilts have a distinctive style that sets them apart.

Siddi quilts are highly individualistic, yet quilters share many clear and precise opinions about quality, beauty, and the importance of proper finishing. Some quilts are quite regular and orderly, while others are more varied, dynamic, and 'unruly.' 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.

The artistry of the finest quilts sometimes prompts friends and neighbors to commission a quilt from a master quilter, but the vast majority are made by and for a family member. Baby quilts, often highly decorated with bright colors and lots of small patches, fill wooden cribs suspended from the rafters of Siddi homes. Larger quilts made for three or more persons are seen as auspicious for they imply a prosperous, growing family.

Using cotton *saris* as the backing, the quiltmakers start at one corner and work their way around, fixing the patches with a running back stitch that eventually covers the entire quilt. The stitches exhibit a distinctive rhythm that is part of the 'visual signature' of the artist along with the colors, sizes, shapes, and arrangements of the patches. When she is nearing the center of the quilt, she may include a 'design flourish' like a cross or a crescent, a cluster of stitched patterns, or a specially selected fabric. One seemingly mandatory decoration is the sewing of one or more square patches at each corner, folded twice to form a multi-layered triangle called a *phula*, or "flower." These serve no specific function, yet they are essential to a properly finished or 'dressed' Siddi quilt. As one Siddi quilter explained to me, "They must be there; if not, the quilt would be naked!"

The Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative

While documenting Siddi expressive culture in 2004, I began to wonder if kawandi could become an income-producing activity, especially for older women or those who stayed at home to raise a family.

The Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross, a Catholic order active throughout India, has been working with Siddis and other marginalized groups in Karnataka for over nine years. With the invaluable help of these Indian Sisters and several Siddi women leaders, as well as assistance from the Catholic service organization Loyola Vikas Kendra, we established a Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative. The quilts in this exhibition are available for sale, with all profits returned to the Cooperative.

Anyone interested in supporting this nonprofit project, or in obtaining more information about Siddis and their quilts can contact me at: hjdrewal@wisc.edu.

Henry John Drewal

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Above: Dumgi Thomas. Left (l-r): Rosa Simau, Clara Cristos, and Paskin Diyeg.
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**LECTURE BY DR. HENRY JOHN DREWAL
SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 18, 2 P.M. IN RM. 21
RECEPTION 1-4 P.M.**