



A Siddi quilter from the village of Mainalli in Northern Karnataka-India surrounded by quilts stitched by various members of the Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative and gathered during one of their meetings  
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# Soulful Stitching, Social Action

*Patchwork Quilts by African Indians (Siddis) of Northern Karnataka-India*

HENRY JOHN DREWAL

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**T**here are many African communities with rich artistic traditions scattered across the planet. We may be familiar with the work of African American and African Diaspora artists in the Americas but we know little of those in South Asia/India where they are known as Siddis.

Africans, probably from the Horn of Africa, traveled to the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia early in the first millennium CE as merchants and sailors. Later, beginning about the eleventh century, they went as professional soldiers, sailors, and administrators for the Mughals and Arabs. These early immigrants settled in Northwestern, Northern, and Central India and are mostly Muslim. Some rose through the ranks to become rulers, prime ministers, admirals, generals, and religious leaders.

Europeans arrived in the Indian Ocean and South Asian region in the late fifteenth century. Beginning in the sixteenth century, they enslaved Africans and carried them to India. Those brought by the Portuguese to Goa on the western coast of India

gradually escaped bondage and moved southward into the remote and generally inaccessible Western Ghats mountains of Northern Karnataka to create free, independent African Diaspora communities. Others left the service of Muslim and Hindu rulers and migrated into the area from various directions at different times.

Today the Siddis, descendants of these Africans, live scattered in the thick forests and high plains south of Goa and number about 20–25,000. 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 and transformed certain cultural and artistic traditions from Africa. In the visual arts, one tradition stands out—the art of patchwork quilts known as *kawandi*.

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#### SIDDI QUILTS (KAWANDI)

Walking through a Siddi village one sees a colorful array of *kawandi* draped over fences, hung on lines, or spread on low roofs to be aired and dried in the sun. Some are bright and newly sewn. Others show the effects of regular use. These wonderful textiles are the traditional beds and covers of the people, made with love by women, especially the elderly, for their children and grandchildren. This textile tradition is not unique to the Siddis—other neighboring cultural groups have their own textile arts, especially embroidery. Siddi quilts have a distinctive style that sets them apart from those of other groups.

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#### THE QUILTERS

Women, especially older women who can no longer work in the fields are the most numerous quilters, but younger women who have learned the skills from their mothers or female relative may also become well-known quilters. Those with the best reputations are sometimes commissioned to make quilts for friends and neighbors in exchange for goods or cash.

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#### THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The women gather pieces of old and worn-out clothing from family members and friends and bundle them together. When they have enough to make a quilt, they go to the market to purchase several items:

a cotton *sari*; thick white cotton thread and needles; and additional bundles of used clothing or cloth remnants if needed. At home, they begin the work sitting on a shaded veranda or inside the house near a window or doorway with enough light.

Sometimes several women (friends or relatives) will work together to create a quilt. At other times, they may work alone whenever they have free time during their long, labor-filled days. Whether working alone or in groups, they sometimes sing, choosing songs from a large repertoire that has been passed down for many generations. If they want to create a large quilt, they may sew two saris together to make a wider piece that becomes the backing for the patchwork facing of the quilt. Then they begin to select pieces of cloth for the patchwork design, sometimes cutting or tearing them to different sizes, sometimes using them unchanged. They start at one of the corners of the sari and begin the patches with a running stitch that eventually covers the entire quilt, both patchwork top and sari bottom.



Quilters Regina Francis (left) and Fatima Adikese (right) work amid a pile of colorful cloth.

Photo by Henry John Drewal



A baby quilt stitched by Kitera Gustin of Mainalli village in Karnataka  
Photo by Henry John Drewal

## DESIGN

Some women create running stitches that are closely spaced and small ( $\frac{1}{4}$  inch apart); others spread them farther apart. The stitches exhibit a distinctive rhythm that is part of the “visual signature” of the artist along with the colors, sizes, shapes, and designs/arrangements of the cloth patches.

Some women incorporate parts of garments uncut, like the neckline of a child’s blouse, or an old shirt with some of its buttons still attached. Others cut small square or rectangular patches of brightly colored cloth, *tikeli*, to place on top of other larger patches in contrasting colors.

One woman favors a kind of step pattern of small squares that descends diagonally across a field of large multi-colored rectangles. Others decorate their corners with a series of parallel chevrons that end in small, detached squares, a design said to be favored by some Muslim Siddi women. Depending on need, a quilter may choose to create a thicker or thinner quilt. To create a thicker one, she does extensive overlapping of her patches as she works inward toward the center of the quilt, or slight overlapping to keep it thin. As she works, she will take care to smooth down each piece so that it lays flat on the sari

## Siddi Women’s Quilting Cooperative

In 2004, while documenting Siddi visual and performing arts and living with a Siddi community, Henry John Drewal learned about the quilts and wondered if they could be an income-producing activity for the quilters. After discussions with the community, fellow researcher Sarah K. Khan, and The Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross (a social service ministry devoted to the Siddi communities for over 30 years), the Siddi Women’s Quilting Cooperative (SWQC) was founded. It was initially funded by Drewal, Khan, and Pashington Obeng, a professor at Wellesley College who has worked with the Siddis since 2001. The Cooperative continues to help provide a source of income for women of Siddi communities in Northern Karnataka, India, through sales of their traditional quilts.

To learn more about the Siddi quilters, to purchase quilts, or to donate to the Cooperative, visit [africanquiltsindia.com](http://africanquiltsindia.com).

backing and the other patches already attached by the running stitch. Sometimes she will fold under the unseen or ragged edge of a patch, but at other times, she may choose to leave it rough-edged. When she is nearing the center of the quilt and the end of her creation, she may include a “design flourish.”

Sometimes a Catholic Siddi woman will sew one or more crosses. A Muslim quilter may incorporate a crescent or mosque. Others will vary or intensify the straight-lined running stitch with a cluster of stitched patterns in the central patch. Occasionally a specially selected cloth from a favored discarded garment or highly decorative sari with sequins will be used in the center. After working from the outer edges of the center—the reverse of most Western quilters and regarded as a more difficult, challenging way of working—some quilters finish the edges with a row of stitches that seals the backing to the patchwork. One seemingly mandatory decoration is the sewing at each corner of the quilt of one to three square patches folded twice to form a multi-layered triangle called *phula*, or flower. These serve no specific function, yet they are essential to a properly finished or “dressed” Siddi quilt and are distinctive style element. As one Siddi quilter explains, “They must be there, if not, the quilt would be naked!”

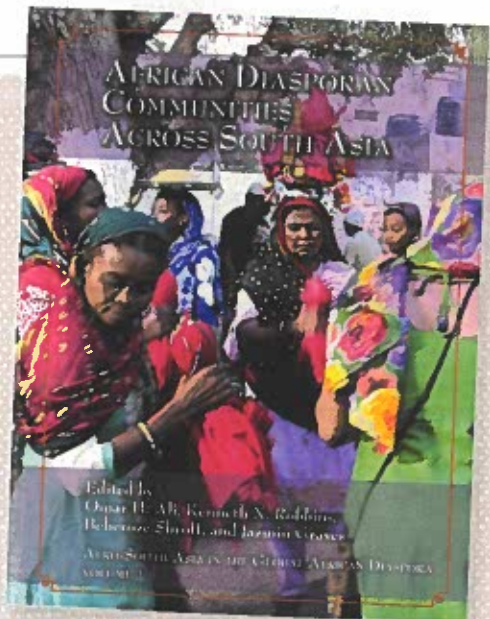
#### AESTHETICS

Siddi quilts are highly individualistic and unique. The size and shape of the quilts and their patches vary significantly from quilter to quilter. Some quilts are quite regular and orderly; others are more varied, dynamic, and “unruly” in terms of colors, patterns, and scale. Some have none or few small patches scattered over the surface; others are bejeweled with lots of *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. Siddis prefer bright and light colors, which makes sense given their interior domestic contexts—dark sleeping rooms in homes with small, shuttered windows, only recently supplied with electricity. When not in use or folded in piles in a room, *kawandi* are displayed outside. 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 prompt friends and neighbors to commission a quilt from a master quilter, but the vast majority are made by and for a family member.

A Siddi quilt is the visual history of a family and its fashions. A quilt documents the well-worn, discarded clothes of family members over the previous years. Mixing together a vibrant array of patterns, colors, and textures from all kinds of fabrics, this patchwork summarizes the fortunes and the styles of family members as they embody the artistic sensibilities of their makers—the women of Siddi communities. ♦

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