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Soulful Stitching

Patchwork Quilts by Africans (Siddis) of India

Henry John Drewal

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.

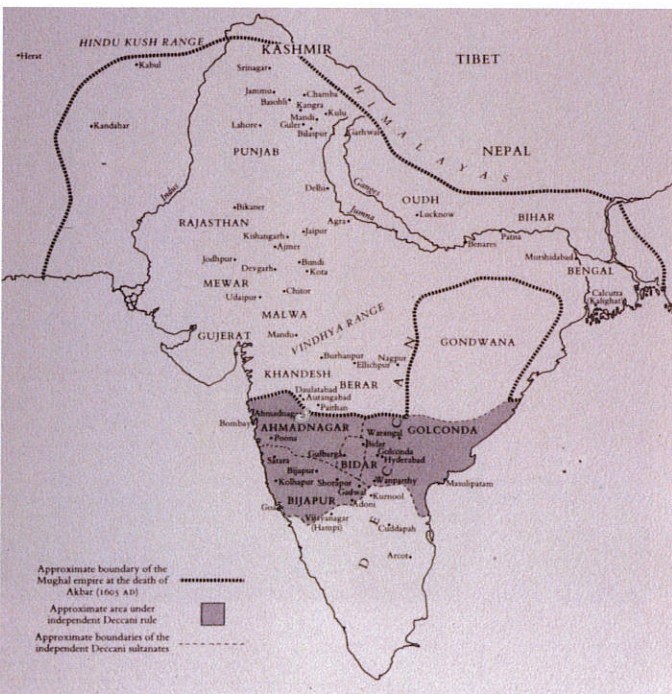
It was precisely by such means that many Siddis rose to positions of great trust, power, and authority in the military and governmental ranks of various rulers in India between the fourteenth and nineteenth centuries and celebrated in paintings (see Robbins and McLeod 2006).

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 Karnataka, 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).



4 Walking through a Siddi village one sees a colorful array of quilts being aired and dried in the sun like this large family one showing the effects of long term, regular use.

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004

SIDDI KAWANDI/QUILTS

Walking through a Siddi village one sees a colorful array of quilts 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 (Fig. 4). These wonderful textiles have long been the beds and covers of the people, made with love by women, especially the elderly, for their progeny—children and grandchildren. This quilting tradition is not unique to the Siddis—other neighboring cultural groups create similar work. Yet Siddi quilts are made by an unusually challenging process and have a distinctive style that sets them apart from those of other groups. It is to these creations that we now turn.

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 relatives 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 sometimes cash. In 2004, women in three communities formed the Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative (Figs. 5a–c).

THE CREATIVE PROCESS

The women gather pieces of old and worn-out clothing from family members and friends and collect them together. When they have enough to make a quilt, they go to the market to purchase several items: a cotton sari (the traditional dress of some South Asian women consisting of a piece of fabric usually 5–6 meters/6–9 feet long that is draped around the body); 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 verandah, or inside the house near a window or doorway with enough light (Fig. 6). Sometimes several women (friends or relatives) will work together to create a quilt (Fig. 7). At other times they may work alone whenever they have a free moment during their long, labor-filled days. Whether working alone or in groups, they sometimes sing, choosing from a large repertoire of songs that has been passed down for many generations (Drewal 2011). 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 to work their way around, usually in a counterclockwise direction, fixing the patches with a running stitch that eventually covers the entire quilt, both patchwork top and sari bottom. Some women create running stitches that are closely spaced (half an inch apart) and small, others spread them farther apart. The stitches exhibit a distinctive rhythm that is part of the “visual signature” (Figs. 8a–b) of the artist along with the colors, sizes, shapes, and arrangements of the cloth patches. Many cut small square or rectangular patches of brightly colored cloth (*tikeli*) to place on top of other larger patches in contrasting colors (Fig. 9). One woman, Sushila Ruzai, favors a kind of step pattern of small squares that descends diagonally across a field of large, multicolored rectangles (Fig. 10). Others decorate their corners with a series of parallel, L-shaped chevrons that end in small detached squares, a design said to be favored by some Muslim Siddi women (Fig. 11).³

Depending on need, a quilter may choose to create a thicker or thinner quilt. To create a thicker one, the quilter creates 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 backing and the other patches already attached by the running back stitch. Sometimes she will fold under the uneven or ragged edge of a patch, but at other times, she may choose to leave it rough-edged. Some women incorporate parts of garments uncut, like an old shirt with some of its buttons still attached. A quilter like Clara Christos may leave the original shape of a blouse or shirt and simply integrate it into the quilt (Fig. 12). Another unusual aspect of Siddi quilts is that the entire process of stitching the patches to the sari backing is done at the same time, rather than stitching the patches first, and then attaching them to the backing. This way of working requires strength and endurance in sewing as the multiple layers of different textiles resist the large needles that the quilters use with thick cotton thread.



5 a-c Women of the Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative in 2006. They come from (clockwise from top left) Mainalli, Kendalgi, 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.





8 a-b Quilt stitches are either closely-spaced ($\frac{1}{2}$ inch apart) and small or spread further apart. These stitches exhibit a distinctive rhythm that is part of the “visual signature” of the artist (on the back of the quilt on the left) along with the colors, sizes, shapes, and composition of the cloth patches on the front (right).

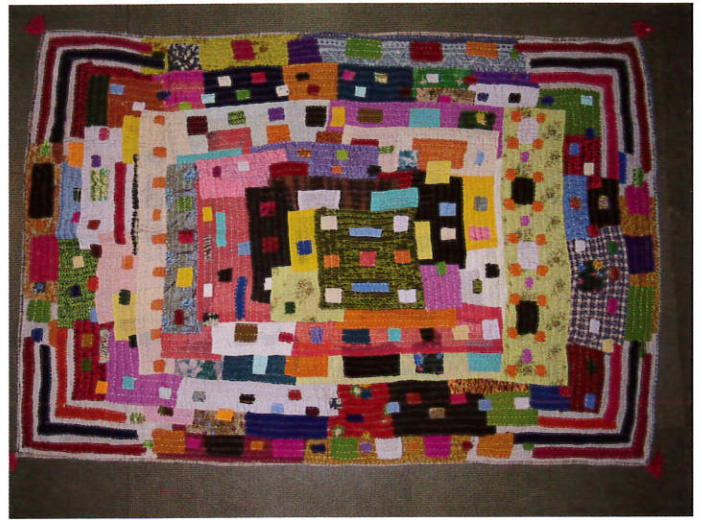
PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2005

9 Small square or rectangular patches of brightly colored cloth (*tikelil*) sewn on top of larger patches create a riot of color and pattern, especially in baby quilts meant to “stimulate and entertain” the infant, in this quilt by Mabobi Hassansahib Bhagavati.

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2006

When she is nearing the center of the quilt and the end of her creation, a quilter may include a “design flourish” (Figs. 13a–c). Sometimes a Catholic Siddi woman will sew one or more crosses (Fig. 14). A Muslim quilter may incorporate a crescent or mosque silhouette. 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, may be used in the center (Fig. 8b). After working from the outer edges to 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 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.

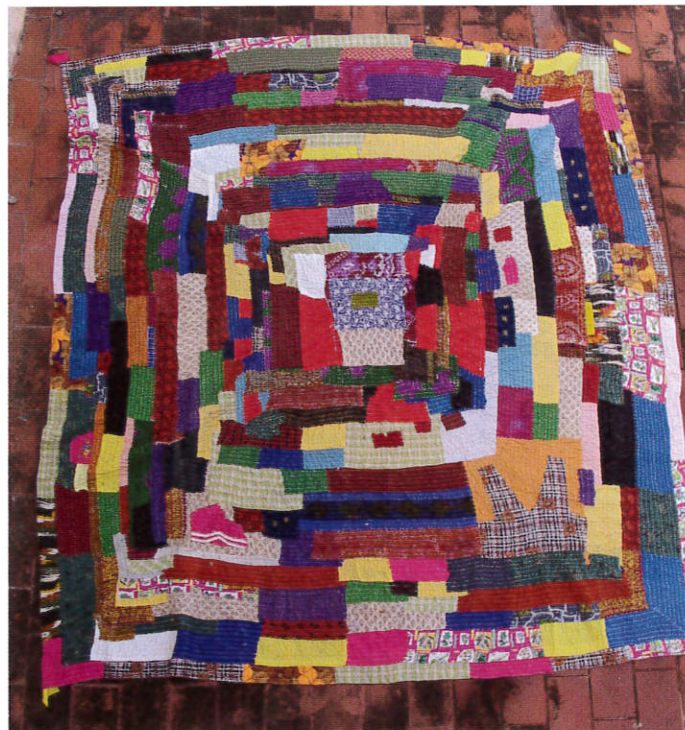
PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2004.

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



(this page and opposite top)
13 a-c Many quilts have a “design flourish” at the center like these by Bibijan Gunjavati, Fatimbi Gunjavati, or Khatumbi Mujavar.
 PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2005

friends and neighbors to commission a quilt from a master quilter, but the vast majority is made by and for family members.

USES

Quilts are made for family members as sleeping mattresses or covers to keep them warm during the cool, damp monsoon nights (May–September). Small, crib-sized ones are often highly decorated with bright colors and lots of small patches. As quilters explained, these are to “entertain and enliven” the infants. These fill wooden cribs suspended from the rafters of Siddi

homes. Larger ones come in sizes to accommodate one, two or more family members. Ones for three or more persons are seen as auspicious for they imply progeny—a prosperous, growing family with children. Old or tattered quilts may be repaired with additional patches both in front and back, but when they are no longer useful for sleeping, they serve other purposes – some may be recycled into newly stitched quilts, others will be used for cleaning, a door mat, or a verandah shade, until they fall apart and are thrown away.

A Siddi quilt/*kawand* is the visual signature of a family, its





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.

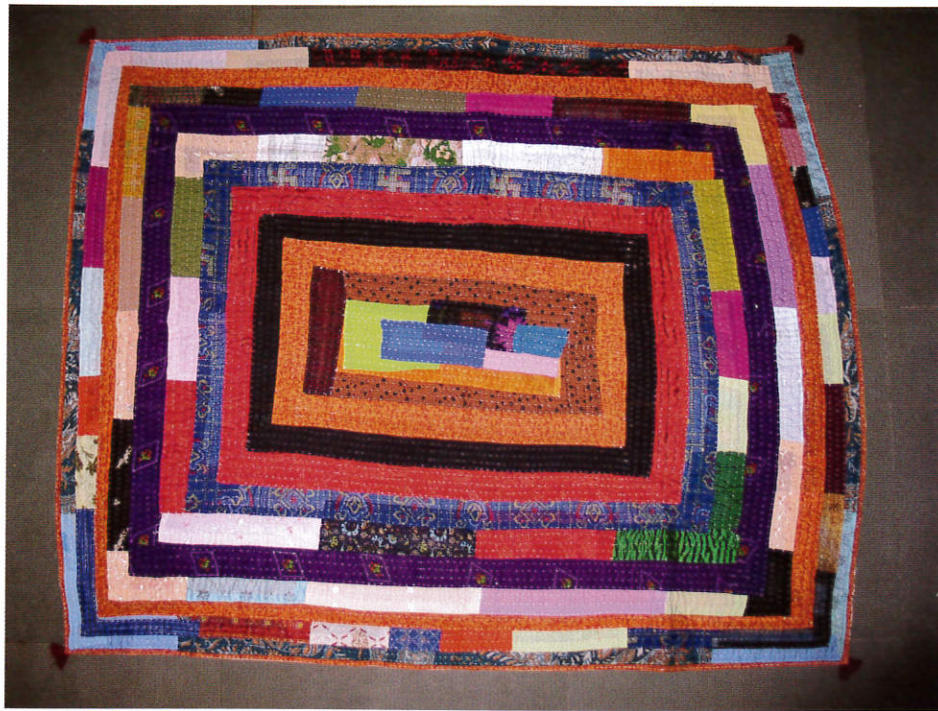
POSTSCRIPT

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



(this page and opposite)

15a-b Some quilts are quite regular and orderly (left, by Rosa Simao), while others are more varied, dynamic, and “unruly” in terms of colors, patterns, intensity, and scale (right, by Kusuma Antolie Mothes).

PHOTO: HENRY JOHN DREWAL, 2006

She contacted two close friends (Flora and Mary) and together the three of them gathered the materials and began to create a large “family” quilt (Fig. 7).

Soon we began to wonder if these family quilts could become an income-producing activity, especially for older women or those who stayed at home to raise a family. A Catholic order founded in Switzerland in the nineteenth century and very active throughout India, The Sisters of Mercy of the Holy Cross (a social service ministry devoted to social, educational, economic, and health empowerment), had been working with Siddis and other marginalized groups in Karnataka since 1996. With the invaluable help of these Indian Sisters and several Siddi women leaders in three communities, as well as assistance from another Catholic service organization (Loyola Vikas Kendra) founded by the Jesuits and inspired by an Indian adaptation of Liberation Theology, we began to discuss the establishment of the Siddi Women’s Quilting Cooperative (SWQC).

An initial grant (from the author, Sarah Khan, and Pashington Obeng, associate professor of comparative religion at Wellesley College and Harvard University) paid for the first group of large quilts made in August 2004. The project was then extended to two other Siddi communities and an additional grant paid for forty-five baby (crib-sized) quilts. All income from quilt sales (after the expenses of cleaning, cataloguing, and shipping) is sent to the Siddi Women’s Quilting Cooperative and used for projects determined by Cooperative members meeting as a group every two to three months. To date, these needs include seeds, fertilizer, school uniforms, fees and books, medical expenses, farm equipment, and livestock, as well as interest-free loans (for individual needs/projects) that are paid back to the Cooperative’s account.

The first three quilts were exhibited at the 13th Triennial Symposium on African and African Diaspora Arts held at Harvard University (April 1–3, 2004) and presented on a panel entitled

“Indian Ocean World: Arts, Cultures, and Identities” that the author co-chaired with Allen Roberts of UCLA. The quilts created lots of excitement. Several people placed orders for them and the Siddi quilt project was launched. Between March and my return to India in August, I communicated with the Sisters in Mainalli via email. They instructed several women to begin making quilts as they would for their families, but for sale. While these developments were going on, I met twice with Pashington Obeng, who has been working with Siddis in Karnataka since 2000. Together with Sarah Khan, we planned the next steps in the project, which Obeng undertook when he returned to Mainalli in June 2004. When Sarah Khan and I came at the beginning of August, we collected the quilts that had been made between April and June as well as others.

The first exhibition and sale of Siddi quilts was held at St. Mary’s College in San Antonio, Texas, in February 2005 with the assistance of a former student, Carol Parker. The next took place at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the Gallery of Design from August 26–September 25, 2005, and a third occurred during the international conference on “The African Diaspora in Asia (TADIA)” in Goa, January 10–14, 2006 (see Prasad and Angenot 2008). Two other exhibit/sales took place at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; one (April 2006) was a “quilt-turning” and another at the 30th Annual South Asia Conference, October 19–22, 2006, in conjunction with a panel on the Siddis of India with papers by Pashington Obeng, Bani Singh, Beheroze Shroff, and Ababu Yimene. Since then a selection of thirty-two quilts has been organized as a traveling exhibition entitled “Soulful Stitching: Patchwork Quilts by Africans (Siddis) of India” and shown at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, NY (January 31–June 30, 2011) and The Museum of the African Diaspora, San Francisco (July 15–September 25, 2011). It is available to various arts, educational, and cultural institutions—



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.hendredrewal.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, Coffree, 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 Srishti 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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