



Kawandi

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QUILTS OF KARNATAKA

MY FIRST ENCOUNTER WITH KAWANDI, the colourful, rhythmic quilts of southwestern India, brought a sense of wonder. The words alone—Tikelis, Siddis, Phulas, Ghats, Karnataka (say these words aloud)—brighten and syncope the tongue. They transport a verbal aesthetic to what is already available visually from the many colours, shapes and stitches that make up a kawandi.

Kawandi are patchwork quilts made by Siddis, the long-residing East Africans of India. Typically crafted by elderly Siddi women who are no longer able to do the primary and physically grueling work of farming their Western Ghats homeland in the state of Karnataka, these matriarchs make artfully composed quilts that alternately serve as bedding, house adornment, neighbourhood beautification and intellectual stimulation for babies.

There is also a dense and little-known cultural history echoed in each Siddi quilt. The history involves eight centuries of East African merchant, sailing, military, governing and artisan communities in India and another few thousand years of Indian Ocean trade before that. Push back a bit further in geologic time to 88 million years ago, loosely imagining a geographic patchwork, and this region of India was part of Madagascar and the supercontinent Gondwana (South America, Africa and India). The relatively recent arrival of Europeans to South Asia and Africa contributed another, predictably vile, layer of history onto the Siddis, but one that is certainly eclipsed by the Siddi's longer legacy, stronger character and enduring art.

It was in a packed downstairs meeting room of the Schomburg Center in New York City, 2011, where these obscured histories were shared—and in a spacious upstairs gallery where dozens of lively kawandi, portraits of their makers and short films about Siddi daily life were presented. Translating and daylighting the work and lives of these members of the global quilting family were “kawandi ambassadors” (and married couple) Henry John Drewal and Sarah K. Khan of the Siddi Women's Quilting Cooperative. The Schomburg event was just one of many North American stops for Dr. Drewal's travelling exhibition, *Soulful Stitching: Patchwork Quilts by Africans (Siddis) of India*.





GLOSSARY

Kawandi

Patchwork quilts, built on cotton sari bases by the Siddi (Africans) of India. The quilts come in sizes that are measured in a way that intimately connects the user to the maker. Henry explains that “sizes generally fall into several categories and are measured by a ‘hand’—the length between the elbow and fingertips of the quilter. The size categories are large/family (6 by 6 hands), double (5 by 6 hands), single (3 by 5 hands) and baby/crib (2 by 3 hands).”

Tikelis

Bits and bobs of used textiles—brightly coloured, sometimes iridescent, other times glittery. They are either posh wardrobe relics or lucky market finds, remnants of India’s colossal recycled textile industry. Siddi quilters cleverly attach tikelis to their almost complete compositions to add layers of intrigue and stimulation, especially to their coveted baby quilts.

Phulas

The final, folded fabric adornment to kawandi that all Siddi quilters include. Described as flowers, they complete a kawandi quilt when sewn onto the four corners. More specifically, they are understood to dress the quilt. Henry recalls one Siddi quilter explaining, “they must be there. If not, the quilt would be naked!”



Both artists and long-time students/scholars of African Diaspora art (Henry) and Indian fieldways (Sarah), they have conducted documentary fieldwork in Mainalli, Gunjavati, Mundgod and Kendalgiri—major Siddi communities in Karnataka. Over a decade ago, Sarah and Henry extended their partnership with several Siddi quilter colleagues, including Dumgi Thomas, Flora Introse and Mary Mariani. Together, they established and began operating the quilting cooperative that would expand and tier domestic and international markets for kawandis, bringing in much-welcomed revenue.

Cooperative members quickly learned that consumer tastes varied in irreconcilable ways. Domestic (Indian) textile arts consumers often wanted more refined, new cloth and low-ish prices while North American and European consumers prioritized “authenticity” and story, welcoming the patina of used cloth and a price tag that accompanies a fine arts purchase. But what constituted a beautiful quilt for the Siddi? After being briefly tossed about the aesthetic ring, the cooperative brought in artist and cultural organizer Bani Singh to work with members. Together they clearly identified and expressed Siddi aesthetic values and translated those into a marketing narrative for consumers globally. They also collaboratively established quality production protocols that pivoted from their own values. Ghanian theologian and historian Pashington Obeng and Indian businesswoman Meeta Mastani also began serving the cooperative as coordinators. This talented collective knew the artist’s way, the consumer’s way, the retailer’s way and the community’s way and have sustained production and sales of kawandi globally.

Pashington explains the benefits of the quilting cooperative for the Siddi. “They give loans to people to go to school, they are





able to pay their own debts, they are engaged in a cottage industry that sells their products on a global market, and with this newly gained financial power, they and their relatives no longer need to take loans from moneylenders like the Brahmin, who charge interest rates as high as 20 to 30 percent.”

The majority of kawandi quilts for export are baby quilts, purchased to be hung on walls as decorative art. Sarah and Henry explained that the global (primarily North American, British and European) exposure to Siddis' kawandi has also resulted in some exploitation. “We now find ourselves in an awkward position of serving as both bridges and gatekeepers to the Siddis,” says Sarah. “We regularly receive letters of inquiry from artists, quilters, vacationers, photographers and filmmakers asking us to facilitate an introduction or visit to a Siddi community. Unfortunately, their letters often reveal shallow research and understanding. We always want to be bridges, but we can tell from the tone of an inquiry who is ready for meeting and participating in the complexities of Siddis life and who isn't. We're both artists and know the fine line between inspiration and appropriation. Some international artists want to improve their practice, but then offer nothing substantial in return. Others come to us with a great business plan that isn't all that great for the Siddis. They want to profit from a feeble translation of what they think is an exotic story.” Sarah continues, “We each struggle as artists and business people, but our struggles simply aren't equal. We first need to recognize our shared humanity and then find ways to level the playing field. That's ultimately what this is about.”

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“The quilts have always been made on women's down time,” says Sarah. “When they're not cooking, cleaning, child-rearing, they make quilts.” Henry further describes the quilters' 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; thick, white cotton thread and needles; and additional bundles of used clothing or cloth remnants if needed.”

The recycled textile industry in India is one of our world's most robust. Discarded clothing from primarily British, North American and European markets are sent to dedicated Indian textile manufacturers where the fibres are shredded, pulped and spun into second-life yarn (often called shoddy). This material is then used to create new fabric products. Several hundred thousand tons of discarded clothing are processed annually in India, with annual sales, in 2005, estimated at US\$1 billion.

Henry continues describing the Siddi quilters' process: “Whether working alone or in groups they sometimes sing, choosing from a large repertoire of songs that has been passed down for many generations. 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. The stitches exhibit a distinctive rhythm that is part of the visual signature of the artist, along with the colours, sizes, shapes and arrangements of the cloth patches. 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. When nearing the centre of the quilt and the end of her creation, a quilter 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 silhouette. After working from the outer edges to the centre (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.”

Though seemingly discreet from mainstream life, like every rural community globally, the Siddis operate in the larger economic and political context of their nation—as well as, in this case, their state of Karnataka, whose capital, Bangalore, is well-known internation-

SUGGESTED READING

Drewal, Henry John. “Soulful Stitching: Patchwork Quilts by Africans (Siddis) of India.” *African Arts*. Spring 2013. 46, no. 1 (spring 2013).

Obeng, Pashington. *Rural Women's Power in South Asia: Understanding Shakti*. UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

Indian Shoddy Industry (recycled textiles) wornclothing.co.uk/projects/indian-shoddy-industry

Norris, Lucy. “Cloth that lies: the secrets of recycling in India” in Küchler, S. and Miller, D. (Eds.). *Clothing as Material Culture*. Oxford, New York: Berg, 2005.

SUGGESTED WATCHING

Unravel. The film *Unravel* follows the Western world's least wanted clothes on a journey across Northern India, from sea to industrial interior.

wornclothing.co.uk/projects/unravel

soulrebelfilms.com/project

SUGGESTED LISTENING

Narrative Traditions of Karnataka, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. This selection is drawn from a variety of narrative traditions of Karnataka from the Asadi, Harijan, Jangama and Jogi cultural groups. The songs are all roughly called katha and are story narratives performed through recitation and music. This digital album does not include Siddi music, but it is an opportunity to hear the region's primary languages, Kannada and Telegu, and dip into the performance legacy of the region.

folkways.si.edu/narrative-traditions-of-karnataka/india-world/music/album/smithsonian



ally for its leadership in biotech, floriculture, agriculture and information technology. To find out exactly how Siddi women are able to create value for their overall work efforts, Sarah, a PhD ethnobotanist and photographer, applied for and received a 2014/15 US Fulbright fellowship allowing her to travel again to the remarkably biodiverse Siddi homeland. Despite having lived sustainably off the Western Ghats for centuries, the Siddis have been recently prohibited from living there following the establishment of a national park in the area. “National park policy prohibited all food harvesting, basically outlawing all the things the Siddis had done to sustainably survive for centuries,” Sarah explains. “In actuality, wealthy Hindus are routinely allowed to build weekend homes on national parkland and have developed the park with urban amenities. Simultaneously, the Siddis are forcibly removed in the name of conservation. This national policy has had a big effect on Siddi livelihood, gendered division of labour, production of quilts, Siddi labour migration and more.” Having worked to amplify the cooperative and kawandi for over a decade, Sarah is now keen on presenting their quilts in the full context of their lives. To this end, Sarah is curating a show of photographs and illustrations of Indian women farmers, including Siddis quilters. U



EXHIBITION

For details about Sarah Khan's *Siddis Women Farmers: Illustrations and Photography* and requests for visits, go to:

sarahkhan.com

COOPERATIVE

Kawandi represents 800 years of legacy craftsmanship, sustained and rich. To view current quilts for sale from the Cooperative, visit Henry John Drewal's website.

henrydrewal.com