

ART IN REVIEW

**‘SOULFUL STITCHING’: ‘Patchwork Quilts by Africans
(Siddis) of India’**

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A few years ago, while researching African influences in India, the art historian Henry John Drewal was struck by the vivid beauty of a type of quilted bed covering that he found in a village home he stayed at in Karnataka. Walking through the village, he saw similar quilts draped over fences and airing on rooftops. All shared a distinctively African-derived [patchwork style](#).

Called kawandi, the quilts are made by women of the Siddi ethnic group, descendants of early African migrants to South Asia, including slaves brought by Portuguese colonists in the 16th century. Strips and patches of recycled cloth, solid-colored, patterned or shot through with glittery threads, are the basic components. Each woman develops her own variation on the general style by arranging the geometric pieces in a certain way, inserting religious symbols (usually Christian or Muslim), and using fabrics with familial associations. Each quilt became an archive of cultural and personal history.

Mr. Drewal, a professor of African and African Diaspora arts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, has transferred his own infatuation with kawandi into entrepreneurship by organizing the nonprofit Siddi Women’s Quilting Cooperative. Through the cooperative, quilts — small enough for cradles, big enough to cover several sleepers — can be sold internationally, with proceeds

going back to the Siddi makers.

You can view the images of the available stock at henrydrewal.com, but the real joy is in seeing the examples on display at the [Schomburg](#), where together they look like a spring garden in bloom. Each quilt is accompanied by a portrait photograph of its maker, and two short videos documenting Siddi music and dance contribute to a mood of exhilarated discovery.

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