CHAPTER 1: Some Aesthetic Traditions

The use of strips is a chief construction technique, a dominant design element, and a symbolic form in West African, Caribbean, and African-American textiles. Beginning in the eleventh century (fig. 9), most cloth in West Africa has been constructed from strips woven on portable looms. Probably invented by Mande peoples, strip-weaving technology (fig. 10) spread via Mande-Dyula traders throughout West Africa.

These long, narrow strips, once used as a form of currency, are woven plain or with patterns. Some strips are tightly tacked together, so as to allow air through while hung up as screens. The Tuareg use such cloths as tent hangings (fig. 11). Woven strips are often sewn together (fig. 12) into larger fabrics to be worn as clothing or displayed as wall hangings and banners. This technical process of sewing long woven strips together to make larger fabrics usually worn as clothing, as in a seventeenth-century coat, is so old in West Africa that it has become a tradition, and has moved into the realm of aesthetic preference.

Blue-and-white designs, as in the earliest cloths, are still made (fig. 13) with domestic cotton dyed blue from a native indigo plant. Later, more colorful fabrics were made by unraveling European cloth and reweaving the bright colors African-style. *Nadsuo* cloth, made by the Asante weavers in Ghana, is the best known of the colorful West African textiles (fig. 14). It was once made from silk, but has been made with rayon since about 1947.

Strips were preferred in many African textiles whether they were woven, tie-dyed* (figs. 15, 16), starch-resist-dyed (fig. 17), or wax-resist-dyed (fig. 18). Cloth strips were a portable art that permitted flexible designs. Strips were such a strong tradition that they became an essential part of ceremonial costumes. For example, the Yoruba Egungun society, in Nigeria, exists to honor ancestors, and commissions festival costumes (fig. 19) that are worn by young men who personify the spirit of an ancestor.

**Patchwork**

Sewing strips together to form a larger textile is a form of patchwork. Many other examples of patchwork occur in the history of African textiles. Notable examples include cotton *jibbe*, Fante Asofo flags, *Egunju* costumes of the Yoruba people, Cameroon costumes, and patched-together barkcloth made primarily by the Kuba and the Pygmies in central Africa. Mbuti artists also paint barkcloth (fig. 20) with designs that resemble strips and patchwork.

**African Textiles in the New World**

A preference for strip textiles continued in the New World. In Brazil the Yoruba *Egunju* costume reappears, complete with flying strips. A Brazilian doll (fig. 21) wears the fancy costume of a Yoruba priestess; part of that costume is a single strip of cloth worn around the neck, chosen because it resembles a single strip of West African handwoven cloth. The small strip features bright horizontal bands of color, as if it would in West Africa.

In Surinam, on the north coast of South America, nineteenth-century black plantation women on the coast made patchwork textiles, called *mannio*, which means "different pieces of cloth sewn together." Black women continued to use African textile ideas when they ran away from plantations to Maroon societies in the Surinam rain forest. An 1823 illustration shows a Mandé-like loincloth made from three strips of cotton, two patterned and the center one plain, as in nineteenth-century Asante cloth from Ghana. Both Djuka and Saramaka women continue to cut strips from imported commercial cloth, and to save the strips until they want to make an African-style cape (fig. 22) called *Asesèrè* for their men. Then they sew the strips together, the aesthetic being determined by conversations among various women.

In Haiti, Africans made strip clothing—shirts, called *Mayo*, in red and white, or red, white, and blue, worn for protection against evil by those who believe in *Vodun*.

**African-American Strip Textiles**

While men did most of the weaving in Africa, in all probability it was women who most often created textiles in the New World, and it was women who maintained the strip aesthetic. They combined remembered traditions with Euro-American traditions for making textiles, to create unique creolized art forms: woven blankets, African-American quilts, and appliquéd funerary umbrellas. Their combined ideas would have been passed down from one generation to the next, most probably without verbal explanation for the meanings behind the aesthetic preferences.

African-American textiles often emphasize strips. West African women who came to the United States would have remembered West African cloth made from narrow strips sewn together. Strip textile traditions probably came to the United States via Charleston, South Carolina, and Jamestown, Virginia, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when West Africans were in demand due to their knowledge of rice cultivation. A rare painting from

10. Hausa man weaving on a narrow loom, Funtua village, Nigeria, 1972. Men weave in groups on narrow portable looms that can be moved to find the best shade and the best conversation.

11. Tuareg tent cloth (detail), Peul people, Niger, 1973. 96" x 60". A detail of the center strips showing gaps in the sewing to let air flow through. An example of asymmetrical arrangement of fourteen strips. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)

13. Woven cotton blanket, Mande people, Senegal, West Africa, 1973. 88" x 56". Made from ten strips sown together, this blue and white textile recreates the earliest patterned cloth woven in West Africa. Collected by Maude and James Wahlman. (Private collection)
14. Detail of a yellow and turquoise rayon nanaadua wrap, Asante people, Bonwire, Ghana, 20th century. This is an excellent example of men’s weave done with imported threads. The use of European colored thread dates back to the 17th century when the Asante unraveled imported European cloth for the colored threads that were then rewoven in Asante style. The patterns are done on a background called mampomhemmoa, meaning “Queen Mother of Mampom.” See Karl-Ferdinand Schaedler, Weaving in Africa. (Tribal Spirit Collections, Huntington, Massachusetts)

15. Tie-dye on sixteen strips, Dioula People, Senegal, West Africa, 1953. 66” x 413/4”. Each strip was tie-dyed before being sewn together. (Museum für Volkerkunde, Basel, Switzerland)
16. Tie-dye strip shirt, Mende dyer, Sierra Leone, 1973. 31" x 54". The tie-dyed strips alternate with plain strips in the construction of this shirt. Collected by Maude and James Wahlman. (Private collection)

17. Starch-resist *adire* (detail), Yoruba people, Nigeria, 1973. *Adire* is made by resisting indigo-blue dye by sewing patterns tightly or by painting cloth with cassava starch. Lately, stencils have been invented to speed up the process. Yoruba mythology attributes the origins of *adire* to a goddess, Yemoja, whose color is blue. The starch-resist *adire* is divided into squares decorated with a variety of patterns. Collected by Maude and James Wahlman. (Private collection)

18. Wax resist (detail) by Mrs. Abator Williams, Sierra Leone, 1970. This textile was created by a woman dyer who stamped plain white cloth with a carved wooden stamp that had been dipped in wax. The cloth was then immersed in a brown kola-nut dye, dried, and stamped on top of the brown with another carved wooden stamp covered with wax. Then the cloth was submerged in indigo-blue dye, rinsed, and allowed to dry. The designs are arranged in strips. Collected by Maude and James Wahlman. (Private collection)
19. *Egungun* dance costume, Yoruba people, Nigeria, 20th century. 61” x 70”. *Egungun* costumes are made to honor the spirits of ancestors. As the devotee dances, the strips fly out, thus enlarging the spiritual space and calling the spirit back to the present. (Birmingham Museum of Art, Birmingham, Alabama; Gift of Sol and Josephine Levitt)

21. Osiyah doll, Yoruba people, Brazil, 1940s. H. 16". The doll represents a Yoruba priestess, and the cloth scarf, an essential part of the costume, closely resembles a West Africa narrow-woven strip. Given by Melville and Frances Herskovits to their daughter Jean Herskovits. (Private collection)

22. Strip cape, Saramaka people, Surinam, South America, 1930s. 36" x 32". This cape was made with vertical strips. (Frances and Melville Herskovits Collection at the Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York Public Library)
North Carolina (fig. 23) shows a couple dancing, while holding narrow strips of cloth. Strip clothing was also made in the United States, as may be seen in a 1930s photograph by Eudora Welty of a young girl in a dress made from strips of light and dark striped material. The strips are sewn together in both vertical and horizontal directions. Strips also dominate many quilt patterns. Some quilters in rural Alabama and Mississippi say that the first quilt-top pattern taught to young girls is called Lazy Gal. An example (fig. 24), made for me in 1983 by Pearlie Posey, consists of plain strips sewn to each other in a vertical fashion. Some strip quilts made from blue denim scraps are called “blue-jean quilts” by African Americans and “britch quilts” by “white folks.” An excellent example was made by Catherine Somerville (fig. 25).

Many strip quilts are made from the smallest usable rectangles of cloth, called “strings.” One old strip-pattern quilt, made from “strings” of cloth, comparable to woven bands of color, is called Spider Leg (fig. 26) by Pecolia Warner. Pecolia Warner called its blocked version Twin Sisters or Spider Web.

Pecolia Warner learned to make quilts by watching her mother. “I just be sitting side of her. I’d get the scissors and cut me out something, and be doing it just like I see her doing. And she bought me a little old thimble and a needle and everything. That’s the way I learned how to sew. From then on I'd be sewing and piecing and if I didn’t do
24. Lazy Gal quilt by Pearlie Posey, Yazoo City, Mississippi, 1983. 82" x 71". Pearlie Posey says this is one of the first patterns taught to young African-American girls when they are learning how to make quilts. The pattern is derived directly from West African textiles made by sewing together narrow strips of woven cloth. Collected by Maude Walshman. (Private collection)

25. Strip quilt by Catherine Somerville, Alabama, 1940. 74" x 58". Made from denim scraps, this is a classic example of a utilitarian quilt made with West African aesthetic traditions in mind. (Robert Cargo Folk Art Gallery, Tuscaloosa, Alabama)

26. Spider Leg quilt by Pecolia Warner, Yazoo City, Mississippi. 75" x 70". Many strip quilts are made from the smallest usable rectangles of cloth, called "strings." One old strip-pattern quilt, made from "strings" of cloth, comparable to woven bands of color, is called Spider Leg by Pecolia Warner. Collected by William Ferris. (Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, Tennessee)
27. Blue and white Strip quilt by Martha Jane Pettway, Boykin, Alabama, 1979. 80" x 71". Exhibited in "Ten Afro-American Quilters." Although she has never been out of Alabama, Martha Jane Pettway has reproduced the color and style of the earliest West African textiles of around A.D. 1000, which were made of natural white cotton with designs created from indigo-blue dye extracted from leaves of plants that grew wild in West Africa. Is this near replication of the oldest patterned cloth coincidental, or does it indicate cultural textile traditions that are maintained in the New World? Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)

28. Strip quilt by Martha Jane Pettway, Boykin, Alabama, 1981. 74" x 72". Once again this is an example of "strings" of color that have been pieced together into vertical strips, then sewn together in a West African style. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)
it right she’d pull it out and make me do it again.” The first quilt top Pecolia pieced by herself was made of “strings,” the small rectangular scraps sewn into strips: “I got little strings like your fingers and commenced to sewing them together. As I got them long enough for the bed, I pieced up sixteen of them, and my mother gave me some old stuff to strip it with. And when I got me a strip, then she quilted it out for me and she named it Spider Leg.”

Many African-American quilters, like Martha Jane Pettway and Mary Maxtion, speak of “strip quilts,” “to strip a quilt,” and of how strips bring out the design. Whether made from single pieces or small scraps of cloth, the strips are apparent in most quilt designs (figs. 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32). Strips and strings are sometimes used in Anglo-American quilts, but as one of many geometric patterns. In West African textiles, and in African-American quilts, strips are a dominant design element as well as a chief construction technique. Nora Ezell says, I finished a quilt of strips and patches this evening. I like to do them because I can use all the little and big pieces. I hardly ever buy material. I have a dear friend who may buy a hundred dollars worth of material to make a quilt. That’s not what quilting is all about. Scrap quilts are the prettiest quilts, more so than the ones where people try to match all the pieces up.

Large Shapes, Strong Colors
Large shapes and strong contrasting colors, such as the indigo blue and white found in early and contemporary West African cloth (see figs. 13, 44) ensure that a person can recognize the pattern in a cloth from a distance and in strong sunlight. It can be important to recognize patterns from a distance if one needs to give a proper greeting to someone. Important people wear cloth with complex patterns and a great deal of color. Because colors are prestigious in cloth, Africans eventually imported European cloth so as to unravel it and reweave the colored threads into their own bold cloth. African-American women in Surinam value strong colors in their pieced textiles. They say that the colors should “shine” or “burn,” and that the color of one piece should “lift up” the one next to it—that is, it should provide strong contrast.

Contemporary African-American quilters like Jewell Allen (fig. 33), Mozell Benson, Alean Pearson, Nora Ezell, and Leola Pettway use bold colors and large designs (figs. 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44) as part of their textile aesthetic, perhaps due to memories their ancestors would have had of the communicative function of African fabrics. Memories of aesthetic preferences outline memories of African functions. A Mississippi quilter, Pecolia Warner, speaks of colors that must “hit each other right, and of “whooping” together two contrasting colors. A whoop is an African-American yodel, as in Pygmy music.

Plummer T Pettway is very careful when combining her pieces, cautioning that “you have to think about the next color.” Nora Ezell says, “A lot of people have asked me about my colors. I don’t care about color combinations. I do what looks good, but I keep the pattern in mind. I never saw a black flower so I won’t put one in a quilt. I don’t know which colors blend or fight. As long as it suits me, it’s okay.”

Lucinda Tumner was extremely sensitive to the visual impact of her quilts and was careful to juxtapose colors in ways that intensify the hues: “I get any color, you know, and I try to match with a different color... to make them work... see, that makes it show up.” Red was her favorite color because of its vividness: “I put it where it will show up the pieces... red shows up in a quilt better than anything else.... You can see red a long while.”

Small stitches are not always important, especially for utilitarian quilts. Bright colors and large designs are more important, since they can be seen from a distance (see fig. 53). Quilts are cleaned semiannually and hung on clotheslines to dry, advertising a quilter’s skill to all who drive by.

Asymmetry
In West Africa, when woven strips with patterns are sewn together to make a larger fabric, the resulting cloth may have asymmetrical and unpredictable designs (fig. 45). A sixteenth-century bronze figure shows a Nigerian priest wearing a strip-woven cloth with asymmetrical designs. Offbeat patterns, as Robert Farris Thompson calls them, are one option in West and Central African fabrics. When strips are sewn together, the colored or patterned weft blocks are staggered in relation to those in other strips. Roy Sieber has noted that “the careful matching of the ends of the cloth dispels the impression of an uncalculated overall design.”

Women’s Weave
Women also weave, but on wide stationary looms in their homes where they cook and care for children. “Women’s weave” features wide panels with vertical designs (fig. 46) that may look, from a distance, like the strips of the older “men’s weave.” While “men’s weave” is abundant and sold commercially, “women’s weave” is more for personal use.

African wide-loom weaving frequently features asymmetrical alignments (fig. 47). Wide-loom weaving was also once done by black women in the United States, the same women who made quilts and probably transmitted and preserved African textile traditions. Luisa Combs was born in Guinea (c. 1853), West Africa, but came at about age ten to Tennessee, where she wove textiles and made quilts. One example of her wide-loom weaving survives (fig. 48). Made in 1890 with bright colors and horizontal stripes, it was woven in two panels that were stitched together in an asymmetrical style similar to
29. Three-Strip quilt by Martha Jane Pettway, Boykin, Alabama, 1979, 76" x 71". Exhibited in "Ten Afro-American Quilters." Another example of how African-American quilters manipulate common elements, in this case, three "strings" of cloth, to create unique designs. This quilt is made from scraps bought from the Martin Luther King Freedom Quilting Bee. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)
30. String quilt by Mary Maxtion, Boligee, Alabama, 1989. 96” x 70”. In this quilt, the “strings” of cloth are equivalent to woven blocks of color in West African men’s weave.
31. Cattle Guard quilt by Pecolia Warner, Yazoo City, Mississippi. 65” x 65”. This strip quilt, with big red vertical bars that can be seen clearly from a distance, also demonstrates the aesthetic principle of bright colors and large designs. Collected by William Ferris. (Center for Southern Folklore, Memphis, Tennessee)

32. Log Cabin Variation quilt by Pecolia Warner, Yazoo City, Mississippi, 1982. 81” x 81”. Strips can also be turned in many angles to create a variety of patterns. Here, Pecolia Warner created a Log Cabin design from strings of cloth. (Museum of American Folk Art, New York; Gift of Maude and James Wahlman) 1991.32.3

35. Log Cabin quilt by Mozell Benson, Waverly, Alabama, 1979. 84" x 48". Exhibited in "Ten Afro-American Quilters." Featuring strips, this quilt is an excellent example of the African-American textile aesthetic that emphasizes bright colors and large designs. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)
36. Strip Variation quilt by Mozell Benson, Waverly, Alabama, 1991. 90" x 72". This utilitarian quilt is made from salvaged pieces of cloth chosen for their bright contrasting colors. The result is similar to a modern abstract painting. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Museum of American Folk Art, New York; This purchase was made possible in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency) 1991.13.9

37. Log Cabin quilt by Elizabeth Munn, c. 1951. 72" x 83". This quilt is a fine example of the use of bold colors and large designs. Collected by Eli Leon.