38. Log Cabin Courthouse Steps quilt by Plummer T Pettway, Boykin, Alabama, 1991. 72" x 70". Another example of how African-American women take Anglo-American patterns and enlarge them to create works of art that communicate like large paintings. Collected by Robert Cargo. (Museum of American Folk Art, New York; Gift of Helen and Robert Cargo) 1991.33.1

39. Log Cabin Courthouse Steps quilt by Cecilia Warner, Yazoo City, Mississippi, 1960. 65" x 67". Exhibited in "Ten Afro-American Quilters." A marvelous example of the way in which an African-American artist can Africanize a simple pattern by enlarging it, using bright contrasting colors, and improvising so that each square is slightly different. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)
40. Rattlesnake quilt by Alean Pearson, Oxford, Mississippi, 1985. 87 3/4" x 83". By manipulating small triangles often used to create symmetrical geometric patterns, Alean Pearson has created a bold modern design called Rattlesnake. 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) 1991.13.7

41. Smal Trail quilt by Mary Maxton, Boligee, Alabama, 1990. 90" x 77". Another modern painting in cloth that takes a small pattern and blows it up, creating a dramatically different image, easily seen from a distance. Collected by Robert Cargo. (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) 1991.13.2
42. Star Quilt by Nora Ezell, Eutaw, Alabama. August 1977. 94” x 74”. Exhibited in “For John Cox’ Daughter.” Here the quilter has deliberately fractured the typical star pattern to create an asymmetrical tour de force, a masterful composition that might only be dared by a folk artist very assured and proud of her textile tradition. The quilt is signed by the artist. Collected by Robert Cargo. (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) 1991.13.1
43. Star of Bethlehem quilt by Leola Pettway, Boykin, Alabama, 1991. 100” x 96”. Again, an African American artist takes a typical Anglo pattern and Africanizes it by blowing it up large so as to communicate her talents from a distance. I saw this quilt, on a backyard clothesline, out of the corner of my eye, while driving past Leola’s house. It stopped me. 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) 1991.13.4

44. Blue and white woven cloth, Peul people, West Africa. This men’s-weave textile is interesting because of the use of indigo-blue and white and the asymmetrical arrangement of the strips with designs that resemble the Nine Patch pattern in American quilting. Collected by Frances and Melville Herskovits. (Schomburg Center Research on Black Culture, New York Public Library)
45. Men’s weave, Yoruba people, Nigeria, 1960s. 73” x 53¼”. This textile displays an asymmetrical arrangement of strips to create an unpredictable pattern. Collected in Nigeria by Charles Counts. (Private collection)

46. Women’s weave, Yoruba people, Nigeria, 1950s. 64” x 30”. The textile illustrates the assimilation of the older men’s-weave style in women’s weaving traditions. This textile has only two pieces seamed in the center. The emphasis on vertical stripes creates the impression of men’s weave from a distance. Collected in Nigeria by Justine Cordwell. (Private collection)
47. Women’s weaves, Igbo people, Nigeria. 80” x 27”. This textile illustrates the African aesthetic of asymmetry, a deliberate staggering of design elements from one half of the textile to the other. Collected by Charles Counts in Nigeria. (Permanent Art Collections, University of Central Florida; Gift of William and Alice Jenkins)

48. Woven blanket by Luiza Combs, Tennessee, c. 1800. 61” x 79½”. Inherited by Kenneth Combs, this handwoven wool blanket illustrates a deliberately offset matching of the two sides of the blanket, just as in some African women’s weaves.

49. Doll quilt, artist unknown, North Carolina, 20th century. 9” x 6½”. Even this doll quilt illustrates African-American aesthetic principles of strips, bright colors, large designs, and asymmetry. Collected by Stuart Schwartz. (Private collection)
West African woven cloth. Judith Chase, in reference to African-American woven cloth, comments that:

Most of the old coverlets were woven in two strips, seamed down the center to make them wide enough to cover a bed. Interestingly enough, there sometimes appears to be no attempt to match the pattern where the seam is made. Considering the obvious dexterity of the weaver, this may be an Africanism. Black slaves oftentimes refused to plow a straight furrow, or follow a straight line in a pattern without occasionally deviating to foil the malevolent spirits.\footnote{We find even stronger asymmetrical tendencies in central African textile designs made by Kongo, Pygmy, and Kuba peoples.\footnote{Some African-American quilters, like Alice Bolling, also emphasize asymmetrical patterns. Contemporary examples often feature horizontal strips sewn together in panels which are offset when joined. Even an African-American doll quilt (fig. 49) was made with bright colors, strips, and an asymmetrical design. Other African-American quilts feature more subtle variations between the vertical strips (figs. 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55).}

We find even stronger asymmetrical tendencies in central African textile designs made by Kongo, Pygmy, and Kuba peoples. Some African-American quilters, like Alice Bolling, also emphasize asymmetrical patterns. Contemporary examples often feature horizontal strips sewn together in panels which are offset when joined. Even an African-American doll quilt (fig. 49) was made with bright colors, strips, and an asymmetrical design. Other African-American quilts feature more subtle variations between the vertical strips (figs. 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55).

**Imagery of Africani**

Asymmetrical arrangements of cloth are a form of improvisation, found in West and Central African textiles. Kongo people praise talented expressions of sound and vision with the phrase *eti dikia*, meaning “the mind plays the pattern strongly.” Improvisation (break-patterning or flexible patterning) in Kuba raffia cloth and painted Pygmy textiles has also been linked to spirit possession. The Kongo scholar Fu-Kiau Bunseki says, “Every time there is a break in pattern [it] is the rebirth of [ancestral] power in you.”

African-American quilters often adopt what we think of as traditional Euro-American quilt patterns, and “African-Americanize” them by establishing a pattern in one square and varying it in size, arrangement, and color in successive squares (figs. 56, 57, 58, 59, 60, 61). Their use of lines, designs, and colors varies with a persistence that goes beyond a possible lack of cloth in any particular size, color, or pattern. As Eli Leon says, “An improvisational pattern is always conceptualized as a range of possible structures.” Plummer T Pettway places her colors at uneven intervals, so that her patterns appear to be constantly shifting. Her quilts (fig. 62) have an elusive quality—the use of improvisation, and the manipulation of prints and hues, create an effect of constant surprise. Lureca Outland uses more uniform colors but achieves a similar effect (figs. 63, 64).

**Multiple Patterning**

Improvisation, as seen in asymmetrical textiles, shades into multiple patterning. Eli Leon describes this transition as flexible patterning.\footnote{Improvisation and multiple patterning form another aesthetic tradition shared by the people who made African and Caribbean textiles and African-American quilts. Multiple patterns are important in African royal and priestly fabrics, for the number and complexity of patterns in a fabric increase in accordance with the owner’s status.\footnote{Cloth woven for priests (fig. 65) and kings (fig. 66) may feature various woven patterns within each strip, as well as a variety of strips with each one featuring a different pattern.\footnote{Multiple-patterned cloth communicates the prestige, power, and wealth of the wearer, for only the well-educated and the wealthy can name the different patterns (fig. 67) and can afford to pay master weavers.}} If the patterns do not line up easily, the belief is that evil spirits will be confused and slowed down. Thus the textile becomes protective.

In Surinam, multiple patterning appears in a festive costume for a special African-American hostess called *A meki Sanni* (meaning “she makes the moves”). Her dress is made from patterned and vertically stripped handkerchiefs and is similar to Maroon-made hammocks with multiple patterns.\footnote{Contemporary African-American quilts often are made with four different patterns in four large corners. Plummer T Pettway, from rural Alabama, believes that many different patterns and shapes make the best quilts. “You can’t match them. No. It takes all kinds of pieces to piece a quilt.”}

Many of these contemporary quilts may not communicate an owner’s status or a religious identification, but they do retain an African aesthetic preference for improvisation, for variations on a theme, and for multiple patterns (figs. 68, 69). Improvisation and multiple patterning are also protective, for copying is impossible. While ostensibly reproducing Euro-American patterns, many African-American quilters maintain African principles of asymmetry, improvisation, multiple patterning, and unpredictable rhythms and tensions similar to those found in other African-American arts such as blues, jazz, black English, and dance.
50. Strip quilt by Idabell Bester, Alabama, 1980. 83” x 71”. Quilted by Losie Webb in 1980. This is another example of a utilitarian quilt made instinctively in the West African tradition of compiling design elements into strips that are then sewn together in a vertical format. The quilter has utilized manufactured materials with vertical black and white strips similar to patterns created with warp threads on West African men’s looms. (Museum of American Folk Art, New York; Gift of Helen and Robert Cargo) [1991.19.4]
51. Maple Leaf quilt by Lizzie Nelson, Tennessee, 1883. 94" x 104". An excellent example of asymmetry. Collected by Maude Wahlman and Rikki Saltzman. (Private collection)

52. Strip quilt (detail) by Martha Jane Pettway, Boykin, Alabama, 1974. Featuring very bright colors, this strip quilt also emphasizes asymmetrical arrangements of squares between the vertical strips. Collected by John Seelye. (Private collection)
53. Diamond Strip quilt by Lucinda Toomer, Macon, Georgia, 1981. 80" x 86". Another variation on the Box pattern, this quilt shows how a quilter skillfully manipulates a simple pattern to create twelve variations on a theme. The same principle is found in African-American jazz and blues. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)

54. Le Moyne Star Variation quilt by Lucinda Toomer, Macon, Georgia, 1981. 72" x 70". This quilt intrigued me because of the triple red and white strips and the asymmetry of their arrangement. (Museum of American Folk Art, New York; Gift of Maude and James Wahlman) 1991.32.1
55. Strip-Star quilt by Lucinda Toomer, Macon, Georgia, 1981. 83” x 63”. Lucinda Toomer, winner of a National Heritage Award, was a master of improvisation and asymmetrical textile design. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)

56. Sailboats quilt by Alean Pearson, Oxford, Mississippi, 1985. 90” x 72”. Although the ships are pieced in a similar manner, one sees subtle improvisations. 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) 1991.13.8
57. Green Snake quilt by Susie Ponds, Waverly, Alabama, 1979. 80" x 64". Exhibited in "Ten Afro-American Quilters." Snakes can represent Damballah, the Fon and Haitian god, also represented by a rainbow. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)
58. Drunkard’s Path quilt by Lucinda Toomer, Macon, Georgia, 1981. 79” x 66”. Exhibited in “Ten Afro-American Quilters.” A classic example of improvisation. Lucinda Toomer has taken the basic pattern for Drunkard’s Path and manipulated it to suit her own unique vision, yet it is constructed from strips, as in West Africa. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)

59. Star quilt by Lucinda Toomer, Macon, Georgia, 1970. 71” x 60”. Otherwise known as the Le Moyne Star pattern, this older quilt by Lucinda Toomer shows her more subtle use of color. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)
60. Star Variation quilt by Leola Pettway, Boykin, Alabama, 1991. 81 1/2" x 78". Using materials purchased from the Martin Luther King Freedom Quilting Bee where she worked, Leola Pettway has created a classic example of multiple patterning, similar in spirit to the West African prestige textiles woven for kings and priests. Scarcity of cloth was not a problem when the quilt was created; a deliberate aesthetic is evident. 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) 1991.13.3

61. Bird Trap quilt by Pecolia Warner, Yazoo City, Mississippi, 1982. 53" x 68". Exhibited in “Ten Afro-American Quilters.” Made of twelve different squares, each composed from her own combination of a Log Cabin pattern and triangles, this is a classic example of a multiple-pattern quilt, exhibiting the African-American aesthetic of improvisation. Collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)
62. Cotton Leaf quilt by Plummer T Pettway, Boykin, Alabama, 1982. 76" x 76". This quilt illustrates the African and African-American principle of multiple patterning and improvisation in that the Cotton Leaf pattern does not repeat without multiple variations. Improvisations upon the basic pattern collected by Maude Wahlman. (Private collection)

63. Wedding Ring quilt by Lureca Outland, Boligee, Alabama, 1991. 81" x 75". Here is improvisation in its finest form. The quilter refers to this as a Wedding Ring quilt, and we see here a squared version of the traditional Double Wedding Ring pattern. 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) 1991.13.5

64. Four Patch quilt by Lureca Outland, Boligee, Alabama, 1991. 87" x 83". Another example of improvisation. In this instance the quilter varies the colors around her diamonds. The diamond is a common form in African-American culture: one sees it in arts, on graves, on houses, and in paintings. It is thought to represent the four directions, or the four moments of the Kongo sun: birth, life, death, and rebirth. 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) 1991.13.6

65. Asante chief wearing Asusia cloth with multiple patterns, Ghana, West Africa, 1976. Ejisuene Nana Diko Im III, wearing an Asusia adweenease, a silk cloth made only for the royal family. Photograph by Doran Ross reproduced from The Arts of Ghana by Herbert Cole and Doran Ross, 1977, plate IV. Asusia adweenease means "My skill is exhausted."
66. Men's weave, Akan people, Bonwire, Ghana. 60" x 72". This black and white priest's robe was made from fifteen strips of narrow woven cotton, each with a different pattern. Collected by LaBelle Frussin. (Museum of Cultural History, University of California, Los Angeles)

67. Nasadua cloth, Asante people, Bonwire, Ghana, 20th century. 54½" x 32". A woman's wrapper made by stitching together ten narrow handwoven strips. Made of costly threads and woven into elaborate patterns, these cloths are worn by the elite. Cotton, silk, natural and synthetic dyes. (The Venice and Alistair Lamb collection, jointly owned by the National Museum of African Art and the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.)
68. Bow Tie quilt by Katie Pennington, Texas, 1950s. 60” x 80”. A classic example of African-American multiple patterning. Collected by Eli Leon.

69. Sampler Variation quilt by Mozell Benson, Waverly, Alabama, 1935. 90” x 70”. Another example of how a creative African-American artist draws on pan-African traditions of multiple patterning, yet is creative. Mozell has compiled various different patterns to create a quilt design that is exciting, but not predictable. Therefore, it cannot be copied easily. 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) 1991.13.10