



Liberian Quiltmaking

Handcrafted Quilts from the Bensonville Diaspora

By John Singler

The Liberian Settlers—the African Americans who immigrated to Liberia in the nineteenth century—took quiltmaking with them. Going on two centuries later, quiltmaking endures. In the community of Bensonville (also called Bentol), quilting is no longer something that only Settler women do. In the years before Liberia’s civil war, all the girls, whether of Settler or Indigenous heritage, took after-school classes at the Sarah Eltin School of Home Arts and learned quiltmaking there. As a result, to quote quilting scholar Stephanie Beck Cohen, in places like Bensonville, Liberian practice “reflects a mixture of American and indigenous heritages.”

The civil war (1989-1996 and 2003, with the tyrant Charles Taylor in between) devastated Bensonville. The town was destroyed, and people had to flee. Wherever the quiltmakers went, they took their gift with the needle with them, as well as a gritty determination to survive. Alice Bracewell, one of the leaders of the displaced Bensonville quiltmakers, summed up their strategy, “When God gives you rags, make quilts!”



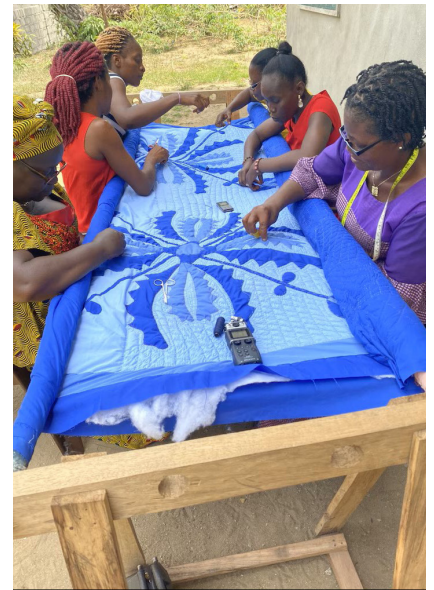
In 2019, I used my own interest in quilt collecting (developed earlier when I lived elsewhere in Liberia) as an entrée into the world of Barnersville quiltmakers. My purpose was to conduct sociolinguistic research among the quiltmakers, but they enlisted my help in getting word about their quilts to America. And here we are. The beauty of the quilts and the friendship of the quilters makes mine an easy task. I am friends

with four quilting groups, three of which are well-represented in the St. Luke’s exhibit.

The quilters have set the price, and they will receive all of the amount. I used the shipping/handling to get the quilt from Liberia to New York.

A caveat: the photos on this website generally fall short of capturing the vibrancy of the colors of the quilts, and they certainly do not embody the meticulous workmanship that is a hallmark of the Bensonville diaspora quilters.

The four quilting groups are worth looking at. First of all, it is appropriate to point out that all four of them span generations. Quiltmaking was traditionally seen as an “old lady thing,” but that has changed, in part because of the economic woes of postwar Liberia. In the two “family” guilds—Waste Not, Inc. and Quageh—teen-aged boys have begun to quilt as well.



Quiltmaking houses

(1) Quageh and (2) Waste Not, Inc., Women and Girls Empowerment Center are quiltmaking houses or, one might say, quiltmaking families.

Quageh

Quageh is a Kpelle phrase that means “We can do it.” Maude Davis relocated to Caldwell during the Taylor years. Here the quilters are family. Maude’s sisters Florence and Thelma joined her and her husband, her daughters, and her grandchildren. Florence lives nearby, and everyone else lives in the Quageh house.

Waste Not, Inc.

Alice Bracewell and her family were made homeless by the war. They spent a long time in an Internally Displaced Camp within Monrovia. Even there, Alice was making quilts. A prominent educator gave Alice a place to start a school to train young women in quiltmaking and other skills. In time, Alice moved to her own center in the Monrovia suburb of Paynesville. Alice runs programs to teach young women quiltmaking and baking, but Alice’s daughters, grandchildren, and nephew all live in the center and form a cadre of quilters.



Quiltmaking groups: Friends who quilt

(3) The Barnersville Quilting Association and (4) the Bentol Quilting Association

The Barnersville Quilting Association

The other two associations are groups of women who came together to quilt. When she located to Barnersville, Alice Daniels revived the association, and brought neighborhood women into the group. Today two young women are apprenticing with Alice. One of them travels across Monrovia to be there.

The Bentol Quilting Association

When people were able to return to Bensonville (Bentol), Sarah Logan formed the Bentol Quilting Association. Sarah is Alice Bracewell's sister and the senior quiltmaker among everyone in the quiltmaking diaspora. She too trains younger women in quiltmaking.

