

**BEYOND THE VEIL OF
WEAVING EXOTICISM:
LOST DEBATES OF
UNEQUAL GENDER
ROLES FROM THE
MISHMI HILLS**

—

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ABSTRACT

Mishmi (Idu), a sub tribe under an umbrella Mishmi tribe in the State of Arunachal Pradesh, is known for dexterous skills in weaving textile. The loin loom or back strap weaving has been a hope and an expression of Mishmi (Idu) community apart from being an integral part of their socioeconomic and cultural life. Continuing for generations across various clans within the community these skills form a part of the narratives of exoticism today. Traditionally practiced irrespective of sex or gender in the community, it signified a unique feature in the whole state. Over the years, rapid decline in numbers of weavers has gained popular concern, and hence it is perceived as an existential threat to the weaving culture. An implicit and overlooked fact that arises from the present scenario is an attitude entrenched within the Mishmi (Idu) community regarding gender dynamics coupled with

approaches of state policies that affects the weaving tradition. Therefore, considering the need for revitalizing the weaving tradition, this essay focuses on the historical aspects and current perspectives on weaving *vis-à-vis* the steady shift in general opinion that the onus of revitalizing weaving practices lies only with a particular gender.

THE WEAVING ART

The colonial era narratives may not be perplexing should one choose to read beyond the observations of British anthropologists and expeditioners or explorers' memoirs on the tribal way of life from the then Bengal Eastern Frontier¹ region, now known as Arunachal Pradesh. For instance, Cooper (1918) referred to Mishmi,² as 'dirty' and 'brutish savages' whereas Dalton (1872) called them 'excitable savages', and Robinson called their clothing 'inferior' (Elwin 1957). These observations came during those phases when the tribal way of life saw the advent of 'white men' during British colonial expansion into far stretches of the erstwhile Assam Frontier. Departing from the observations of their predecessors and noting the motifs and textile designs around the late 20th century, British anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1959:22) observed:

I had read all this, and when I first went into this wild country (Mishmi Hills), it was frankly with the same apprehensions. In a few days I discovered the curious fact that their old botanists, administrators and traders seem to have something wrong with their eyesight. Not one of them had ever bothered to say that the Mishmis were beautiful. And I was entirely unaware and unprepared for the wealth and beauty of their weaving designs, for their sense of colour and pattern.

In one of his works, *The Art of North-east Frontier of India*, Elwin (2009) described elaborately the technical details of Mishmi (Idu)

weaving designs that he had come across. The art of Mishmis across its sub tribes have largely been confined to loom weaving and crafting cane and bamboo products. Their art does not indicate any woodcarving and pottery. Their textile designs, on their bags and other products, therefore, clearly lack human figures unlike those by Wancho, Monpas and Sherdukpen tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Their garment designs represent elaborate patterns of geometrical lozenges (diamond or rhombus lookalike shapes) internally repeated. In some cases, internal lozenges form a column and some exterior lozenges form petals thus resembling a flower. Designs such as herringbone and chevron are arranged in an elaborate manner. Crosses of saltire are found on coats either in red, white or yellow. ‘Most of the shapes or designs across all tribes are by and large similar. As tribes depended upon their surroundings and nature, imitation from it led to adoption of roughly common shapes and patterns,’ says Dr Rajiv Miso, an associate professor from Hunli, a remote village in Mishmi Hills. According to Pommaret’s (2002:187) observations, the elements of nature and the common thread of designs are visible across some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Therefore, different garments have several variations using common elemental shapes with a unique colloquial nomenclature. For instance, the most visible vertical zigzag chevron designs on the rear side of a coat known as *Abi wru* has within itself a lozenge known as *Lōkō*. Dibuli Miuli, a senior citizen from Roing provides folklore aspects to the origins of designs. She says, ‘our shamans narrate that all the living creatures have been blessed with various patterns by the holy spirit, *Asi-manyolímíli*, whose abode is believed to be mystic deep water. We have learnt to mimic from those creatures.’ For instance, there are many smaller lozenges so designed that they are given a name *Prabi* (bird’s eyes). There are also dual zigzag chevrons that are designed to meet consecutively at equivalent distance giving an impression of a rhombus which is interpreted colloquially as *Paley athro* since it roughly resembles a frog. Elwin (2009:40) has called many of these designs a replica of nature such as

birds, an eye, fish and mountains and imitation of a python, especially as chevron and diamond designs.

The task of procuring raw materials for preparing *athra* (threads) was a tedious one. One had to either travel for days to barter or produce it on one's own. Reminiscing her memories, Dibuli says, 'My mother bartered *awrowrôkô* (hide of an Otter), *manjoko* (deer hide), and *arhō* (honey) in lieu for certain types of *eyma* (wool) and *prā* (Himalayan salt) from *Tami āati* (Tibet).' Bartering was possible because the then precise boundary limit of Mishmi Hills along the current southern Tibetan boundary was not demarcated and could be accessed through a mountain pass (Holdich, 1912). Such trade references often resurface in the British botanists Ward and Smith's (1934) works. During the 'nation-building programme' that started after India gained independence, all the passes used as traditional trade routes were permanently sealed. Subsequently, the yarns available from Tibet were no longer available. However, some *sui generis* technique was used to obtain yarns from raw materials such as *athrali na* (nettle plants or *rhea* plant) and *apeh* (wild cotton). The tetchy outer membrane of *athrali na* was covered under the ashes in the hearth once separated from the main stem. *Apeh* was processed manually with hand spindle to obtain yarn ball. For dyeing fiber, plants such as *akha*, *erō* and *ili* (natural dyeing agents) were cultivated. *Akha* was used for obtaining *lò* (white), *sù* (red) and *ti* (black) colour for dyeing wool. *Erō* when steamed produced two colours - *pru* (navy blue) and *ti* (black) whereas *ili* fetched *mi* (yellow) and *sù* (red). To obtain all these colours they had to be subjected to different temperature levels. Black, yellow, red and white coloured threads were therefore the most frequently available material interlaced with the help of a shuttle or yarn ball alternatively between the shed. 'Once raw materials were processed into enhanced products it took four nights for my mother to reach the plains of Sudiya [Sadiya, the then flourishing marketing town prior to the great earthquake of 1950] from our village to barter the products with neighbouring tribal clans (such as Pangi, Pasi, Padams)³ and Marwaris

(business merchants from the mainland),’ Dibuli says. She adds, ‘*Ala hupi sha khegey jiga*’ (ten pieces of garment were equivalent to one *mithun* or bison). The dexterous designs today are not easy to come by. Many people do weave the cloth, but it is believed that ‘authentic’ fabric and designs can be verified by those who have been engaging in this traditional activity for a long time. The price was determined depending on factors such as quality, motifs and designs, material used, dedication and time invested to complete a garment. The quality depends on the effective process used to obtain raw materials, the manner of wefting and wrapping threads, the amount of stroke on the threads, manner of shedding and the way finishing is done. On the one hand, acquiring this skill does not require any formal training. Dibuli narrates that the news of a guest at home adorned with beautiful motifs on her garment would make news and get neighbours flocking because it provided an opportunity and ideas to learn the motifs by heart and implement them on their loom despite having no written script of their own. On the other, such a learning process through experience and observation facilitated intergenerational transmission of weaving culture and traditional knowledge. These technical and functional descriptions underscore the deep ability of so called ‘excitable savages’ to process the patterns of nature and transform it into tangible materials through an indigenous art of weaving. Distributed across different villages and clans the Mishmi (Idu) community has a uniform pattern of weaving with uniform colours and particular motifs and shapes with some flexibility in terms of an overall final form. Over the last few years, the practice seems to be dwindling because the number of weavers in the Mishmi Hills has declined. There is rarely a serious introspection about these artistic traditions which brings to the fore factors, particularly ‘self created’ ones, contributing to the decline of the numbers of Mishmi (Idu) weavers. Do the gender aspects play any role? What do the existing weavers and the community members feel or have to say about the present situation and what Elwin (2013) once called ‘excellent quality and patterns’. The responses to these observations do not seem to be linear.

THE LEGACY AT AN EDGE

Weaving was a part of the culture which one had to learn and offer to friends and relatives if they wanted to. Weaving not only helped them survive but enabled them to define and shape their identity despite leading a tough secluded rural life with no access to modern technology and equipment. Both the genders maintained that it was household or family work. ‘The salient aspect of *Kera-aa* community vis-a-vis weaving has not been a specific gender based role. People from both genders have been involved in weaving based on their will, interest and ability,’ says Miso, an associate professor who has also worked as a research assistant in the subject. Some living examples that I came across during the survey were Drindu Miri, an elder and Ichi Tacho, a graduate student, both from Anini in Talō Valley. The duo is known for weaving war coats. While Miri now no longer weaves due to his age, Tacho is at a nascent stage of the art. On the other hand, Injuya Miuli and Dibuli Miuli originally belonging from Anjayi village (Imu Valley) are other living examples who wove garments of all types including war coats but quit recently. The reason why men usually wove war coats is attributed to the occupations they were mostly engaged in. They were more likely to engage themselves in feuds with other clans and tribes or in other outdoor activities frequently. For instance, according to Dr Razzeko Dele there are records of a Mishmi raid on both Ahom and British territory during the 17th century mentioned in Ahom chronicles (Dele, 2018). Hence, for such kind of preparation they were naturally drawn towards making mostly shields, spears, machetes, baskets, fish and hunting traps, machete proof cane hats, bows, arrows and other related material including war coats. However, there are differing opinions on such a generalization of an informal occupation. Referring one of the elder ladies to make a point, Dibuli says, ‘late Kocho Pulu, used to practice bamboo weaving.’ Among other sub tribes of Mishmis such as Kman (also known as Mishmi [Miju]) and Tawrā (Mishmi [Digaru]), it has been observed that women were equally and exceptionally good in making craft works

of bamboo, cane and wood (Krong, 2018). Further, according to Dr Mite Lingi, Chairman of Idu Language Development Committee (ILDC), women in ancient days were equally capable of performing *ren* (a local festival) and some had earned accolades for their sheer determination and courage to perform it during their lifetime, as conducting it required enormous preparation. In subsequent years this fell into men's domain as it was comparatively easier for them (Lingi, 2018).

A visit to one of the villages provided an opportunity to understand how weavers, particularly women perceive weaving. Intaya village is a small sleepy rural area on the outskirts of the main market town – Roing in Lower Dibang Valley district. For its ageing elders like Maniya Mepo weaving has been a life long household support hobby that has sustained her and sometimes helps her to meet her needs. It has fetched her some income occasionally, and she weaves for her relatives too. The scorching sunny weather does not seem to deter her. Fully drenched in sweat in bright daylight, I stepped on to her wooden porch and gently knocked on the door. She had already sensed my arrival by the screeching of her dangling bamboo entry gate. She seemed to be in her sixties, and I found her sitting next to the window weaving a coat with the help of a loin loom. One can see a loin loom in most of the houses in rural Arunachal Pradesh. It is a weaving apparatus mostly made of bamboo and wood where one end of the thread is attached to a thin bamboo horizontally inserted between two strong bamboo pillars, and the other end is attached to thin wood held firmly with the help of a back strap wound up behind the back of the weaver. As Maniya's inquisitive looks wondered who her guest was I asked, '*Nani, prapo*' (Mother, how are you?). Her eyes looked smiling at me and she said, '*Nga pramchu*' (I am fine) even as her enduring fingers kept interlacing threads which she has been working upon for the last few weeks. Not many young people visit her. Pausing and warmly smiling, she asked, '*Nu kajiyana*?' (do I know you?). In a closely-knit *Kera-aa* (Mishmi [Idu]) community, the customary way for an elder to know about a person is to first ask the visitor's name, the



Maniya Mepo with her loom apparatus

Courtesy: Tilu Linggi

names of their parents and village names, which enables them to find the genealogy and trace the existing blood relationship, if any, with the person being asked about.

As she learnt my details, she said that after the demise of her spouse some 10 years ago she trekked down to the plains. Like Mepo, for several other surviving elders in Mishmi Hills, the resettlement seemed to have been either because of the demise of a close one, or an easy accessibility to new avenues of life, or natural calamities such as the Great Earthquake of 1950 (as chronicled by many, including

by the British Botanist Frank Kingdon Ward). Weaving gave them timely support. While our discussion continued simultaneously with her weaving activity, I could understand that as long as she is alive weaving is going to be a part of her life. Throughout our conversation till the time I left I did not see her moving an inch away from her loom. She has embraced the weaving tradition in her own way. She has no modern amenities yet her hospitable eyes and warm smile had much to offer a guest. The sense I got was that perhaps in her youth, like many such weavers of her generation, weaving was one of the best things that could have happened to their lives. Weaving is so integral and significant to the culture of Mishmi (Idu) that the *abino* (weaving room) is revered during a ritual called *anja* (mourning). The deceased is offered *abre-malu* (weaving items) by the guide as per the belief system of Mishmi (Idu) tribe so that the departed soul is not left without basic needs in the mythic after world. Even the garments woven are neatly stored during one's own lifetime in order to meet the needs of souls. Weaving is also about the traditions passed on by their ancestors and passion that keeps many engrossed in their daily affairs far from other worries of modern times, especially for elders. The reducing numbers of weaving practitioners at a rapid pace is a serious concern. Elders like Maniya do not let the sense of such threats creep in. When asked she casually agreed that not many are interested in taking up weaving though one must not give up one's roots.

THE SHADES OF NARRATIVES

What has been discernible in recent times in the general practices is that even in conversation, nuances of weaving are attributed inadvertently to a specific gender, and this is not openly talked about. The debate on gender dynamics related to weaving seems to be incidental to the community. Activities based on weaving, hinge on the projection of feminine character while the women also bear other responsibilities

equally in the community. There are implicit indications today that weaving is largely an aspect of women's life. Notwithstanding the notion that different manual work required different amount of physical effort, there was no strict gender division in terms of weaving. Weaving was based on free will and free participation, which saw the role of both genders. While both male and female weavers wove, the number of male weavers has reduced substantially which has tilted the 'gendering' of weaving activities towards women disproportionately. Weaving by the Mishmi (Idu) community irrespective of gender has faded over time. However, what is apparent is that the inequitable shifting of the onus towards women in the community is devoid of any thoughts of its repercussions.

To understand such a general outlook of Mishmi (Idu) community, particularly when it comes to gender roles, one may have to look back at the nature of tribal practice. For example, the concept of '*embeya*' (a colloquial term for a venerable person) as a mark of respect. An individual who has acquired or perfected almost all skills required for day to day affairs of life including weaving was regarded as *embeya*. What also sounds intriguing is that weaving skills have also rendered female counterparts as 'ideal brides'. According to Linggi (2018: 170), 'Men saw those females as potential brides who had the knowledge of weaving skills.' He also writes that it was compulsory for female members to learn weaving. In other words, if a woman wants to qualify as an ideal bride she had to know how to weave. Miri writes that even in the folklore of Mishmi (Idu), a legendary figure *naya* (great grandmother) Enjayu Menda known for her charismatic virtues loved weaving and inherited the skills from her mother and maternal grandparents (Miri, 2018). Therefore, even theoretically speaking, the general impression is that a qualified 'venerable person' who can perform various chores including weaving must therefore be female, and this idea has lived on for generations. Weaving and the feminine appears to be synonymous to the Mishmi (Idu). Male weavers or even male experts in other works being called as *embeya* (or by any such synonymous terms) has hardly been recorded.

Therefore, the ‘venerable person’ notion got so internalized over the course of time that it has been generally used for women only. To use a specific term for someone may mean no intentional harm to any gender, but the issue of fixing it to one particular gender and one specific activity may turn out to be a bane for women ultimately affecting the whole community. The taboos seem to have played an equally crucial role. A resident of Ezengo village, Hindu Meme, explained how taboo influenced weaving for both the genders in a family. He says, ‘It is believed that a man working upon the loom is a bad omen and bad luck for hunting. As for women, loom work was prohibited only for a certain period if concerned family members did hunt, and it was forbidden for all women if someone died in that village or if someone got snakebite which was not disclosed, or if there was a fire accident anywhere within the village. The rationale is particularly associated with the red colour that resembled blood. Therefore, red colour was avoided for a certain time period as it was believed that it would attract evil spirits to the family.’

It is also essential to understand that Mishmi (Idu) has evolved as a conservative society. As a community, it has begun to engage itself widely with the outside world significantly after the region began to be administered as a part of North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) in 1951 as a process of ‘integration’ with ‘mainland’ India. Till then the uncharted Mishmi Hills, were remotely a part of what was a politically administered region known as Bengal Eastern Frontier till 1874. Prior to that it was unregulated from 1826 to 1861. The tribe politically had no chieftain system, but it did not mean it was totally an unorganised form of society (Elwin, 2013). The kinship system or bloodline was highly valued.

A recent research study also found out that the community has a high suicide rate of youngsters especially among females (Mene, 2013). One of the probable reasons is that many do not think that it is necessary to share or communicate their thoughts even with their family members. These suicidal tendencies in turn exacerbate the decline of weaving because most of those women or girls who have

committed suicide come from villages, and villages mostly have weavers. Mishmi (Idu) society is predominantly a patriarchal society. There are still practices where parents restrict their daughters from talking openly about certain issues in public. However, it does not mean women do not speak out. It is believed that the men of the family, essentially the eldest male member should play a leading role in almost all societal aspects. There are also several proverbs and sayings that indicate gender casting. For instance, there is a proverb that goes, '*epo tho eya bayi*' meaning 'a man of higher status is not expected to involve himself in mean gossip as it suits only slaves and women' (Pulu, 2002: 44). There was a practice of maintaining *aepo* (a term for chattel or slave), a practice that existed in the past. Interestingly the first *aepo* was believed to be a woman whose name was Ambri Lapili (Mikrow, 2018). According to Mikrow this practice is believed to have originated as a result of enforcement by ancestors in the recent past but is not an ancient tradition. Hence, these practices in their totality help to draw lots of inferences about how the women have been or what significance they had in the community.

What also appears to be rarely contemplated among the tribal communities in the state is the perpetuation of gender roles through state sponsored policies that ties the weaving culture with a particular gender. This has, over time, facilitated the internalisation of such now popular narratives. For instance, one of the notifications⁴ of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh provides that women entrepreneurs are eligible for five percent interest subsidy annually for traditional textile weaving. Some central government's schemes (2018-19), for instance, the Deen Dayal Upadhyay Bunkar Yojna (DDUBY) is only for women who are eligible for a 7 percent interest subsidy in credit according to the Textile and Handicraft Department of Government of Arunachal Pradesh.⁵ Overall, these programmes appear to form a part of the incentive based policy under the New Industrial Policy of Arunachal Pradesh 2001, according to official sources of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh. Very recently a local print source reported that the first lady of the state, while

visiting the weavers in Lower Niti Vihar colony in Itanagar said, 'loin loom weaving is an extension of our traditions, and has been a time-tested self employment avenue for our ladies. It is important aspect of financial empowerment of women, particularly in the rural areas (*The Arunachal Times*, 2019).' One interpretation of such policies and opinions is that such affirmative actions are an effort towards attaining equity in the society. The other is that the tradition that was once a shared practice, particularly in the Mishmi (Idu) community, is now the domain of women with a 'new normal' narrative which compels us to indirectly and subconsciously believe that the onus of weaving is not on the men but on the women only. However, some like Yonli Pulu, a teacher by profession, believe that weaving activity is not necessarily a stereotyping of women. She offers a different view and says, 'weaving has never been an imposition on a particular gender nor it is an exclusive domain of any particular gender. With the passage of time we had to develop different career interests and opportunities that we saw before us.'

For others like Sipi Mega, Linaki Mepo, Nimi Mili, Line Mimi, Epula Mito, Mrashi Miuli who are mostly in their 40s and 50s their weaving skills are a matter of dignity and a contribution which provides them 'self-empowerment.' Some weave so that they are not 'dependent' on their spouses and family members. Many of the quadragenarians and quinquagenarians of today have grown up in the 'national integration' process, seeing and grasping what was offered to them, including the colonial, social and economic policies of independent India, which even the Mishmi (Idu) were not immune to. More so, because of the influence of the assimilative policies of Government of India and the role of mass media which picked up pace after the Indo-China war in 1962. Sipi Mega from Intaya village was featured in a short promotional documentary video sponsored by agencies like UNDP, ONGC and other groups in 2016. Most of the time such skilled women are called upon for the promotion of such 'exotic' arts and skills for 'cultural programmes' or 'cultural events'. Such occasional attention to the weavers motivates community members to conserve the weaving art,

but there is a lack of serious thought given to the core factors affecting the weaving practice. Elwin's (2013) observations on the exoticism of Mishmi tribe's weaving art still forms a part of the popular mood as it does not reflect on the 'other side' even in present times.

Other reasons why weaving has suffered is because of excess reliance on modern work culture, 'elitism' in the tribal community and the loss of its links with the historical, social and cultural significance of weaving. Many prefer the modern education system providing the option of well-secured jobs, and some prefer high paying contractual and infrastructural works. With an increase in the cost of living, today whatever one can bank upon to have more financial support is seen as 'profitable' and 'relevant.' While the main objective of loom weaving was purely to meet social, cultural and physical needs in ancient days, it is now seen as a major and integral part of a market economy not just in Arunachal but also in entire Northeast India. Things have taken a different path in terms of both the practice and objectives. Even the monetary assistance paid to the women weavers by the state is euphemistically done for women 'empowerment' and 'cultural preservation' and is a meagre amount. There is also a dearth of gender-neutral policies and community outreach programmes.

PURSUING AN ALTERNATIVE

Recently the apex body of Mishmi (Idu) tribe has applied for the Geographical Indication (GI), an Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) protection measure for garments produced by weavers. The community sees this a much needed measure. A legal measure like this is one step towards preservation of identity. However, such measures may remain ineffective in addressing the issue of revitalizing weaving practices unless 'effective' policies and practices including a gender-neutral attitude is disseminated in practice at the grassroots community level.

While the decline in the number of weavers is a serious concern in Kera-aa community, what is barely debated is how to approach the gender divide so that the weaving tradition could be revived. One way to address this could be to revisit existing practices. This requires disassociating practices – that is, following a ‘gendering’ approach rather than cashing in on exoticism. A fair distinction between appreciating artistic skills and sharing responsibility may have to be appreciated. Such a situation is comprehensible in what Mrashi Miuli, a resident of Anelih village, means when says



Anajo. Weavers for coats like this are rare.

Courtesy: Tilu Linggi

that she is losing her grip on the weaving rhythm, ‘*echago micipra bado elombrabu athuim hoba*’ (the age is taking a toll on my eyesight). The Mishmi (Idu) community has already lost one of its weavers, Loliya Ekru who wove a type of coat called *anajo* that hardly available now. With his demise the fear is that the possibilities of revitalization of this kind of coat is also facing threat without any serious takers.⁶

The engagement for any social, cultural and economic activity may require free will to engage and not stereotyping. Unless such a tendency is considered, the weaving culture attached to Mishmi (Idu) may be in danger. Though some efforts have been initiated, in the field of language for instance, to preserve and promote local Idu dialect which is recognised as being definitely endangered by the UNESCO, there is no such initiatives so far or a debate on gender sensitivity about weaving or skill development programmes such as those organized in Nagaland.



An etondre (war coat) in progress

Courtesy: Tilu Linggi

While the apex community body is investing some efforts to look for new measures, elders like Dibuli are content that before age could take a toll on her physical and mental ability to work, she could afford to complete more than a dozen garments including three war coats, each for her three sons and a garment for her daughter. Technology may offer some alternatives, but hand made products stand out as being unique significant. Unless there is gender sensitivity, and this burden is shared equally, this art may die gradually.

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NOTES

1. It was subsequently rechristened as Assam Frontier and later the North East Frontier Agency (NEFA) before being renamed as Arunachal Pradesh.
2. Mishmi is a collective term for the three sub tribes under it. They are Idu, Kman and Tawrā.
3. Currently they prefer to be known as *Adi* inhabiting the Abor Hills or Siang District as it is known today.
4. No. FIN/E-II/14/2017 notified by the Department of Finance dated 16th May 2017. Available at <http://www.arunachalpradesh.gov.in/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/DDUSY19062017165622.pdf>
5. *Arunachal24.in*, 5 August 2017, 'Chief Minister's Indigenous Textile Promotion Scheme launched in Lower Dibang Valley.' Available at <http://arunachal24.in/chief-ministers-indigenous-textile-promotion-scheme-launched-in-lower-dibang-valley/>. Also see, <https://cdn.s3waas.gov.in/s3dc912a253d1e9ba40e2c597ed2376640/uploads/2018/09/2018092149.pdf>
6. There are reports of very few weavers for *anazoh* but they don't practice due to age and health reasons.

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