



## WEAVING HERITAGE AND WOMEN'S CRAFT: A STUDY OF IDU MISHMI WOMEN IN THE DIBANG VALLEY OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

Weaving has been a cornerstone of Idu Mishmi culture, with women historically using forest-based resources to produce textiles for household and ritual purposes. Employing the backstrap loom, Idu Mishmi women create intricately patterned cloth featuring highly detailed motifs and embroidery, a skill traditionally transmitted from mother to daughter. Historically, families relied exclusively on women for clothing, supplemented by barter with neighbouring tribes, while specialised textiles were reserved for priests and ceremonial use. This ethnographic study, based on a field survey of 251 households in Anini, Dibang Valley, documents the diversity of textile products produced by Idu Mishmi women, their socio-cultural significance, and their adaptation to contemporary market dynamics. The paper highlights traditional practices of raw material procurement, dyeing, and embroidery, and examines the challenges posed by globalisation, including competition from commercial textiles. Findings demonstrate that Idu Mishmi weaving embodies a nexus of heritage, identity, spiritual belief, and economic practice, reflecting the resilience and ingenuity of women in sustaining this living tradition.

**Keywords:** Idu Mishmi, Weaving, Backstrap Loom, Embroidery, Textile Heritage, Women's Craft

#### Introduction

The Idu Mishmi are one of the indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh, India's easternmost state, and primarily inhabit the Dibang Valley and Lower Dibang Valley districts. Linguistically, they belong to the Tibeto-Burman language family. The community traditionally identifies itself as *Keraa-aa*, meaning "children of Kera," whom they regard as their primordial ancestor. Historical records indicate that the Ahoms referred to the Idu Mishmi as *Chullikattas*, a term derived from their distinctive hairstyle—cropped in the front, shaved at the sides, and kept long at the back by both men and women. In addition to interactions with neighbouring tribes, the Idu Mishmi maintained historical relations with the Chutiya and Ahom polities of Assam.

The Idu Mishmi traditionally inhabit *ChithuHuluni*, or the "twelve river valleys" (*chithu* meaning water source and *huluni* meaning twelve), and clan identities are closely associated with these river systems (Delley, 2024). Textile production occupies a central place in Idu Mishmi society and is recognised for its distinctive aesthetic patterns among the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Beyond its material function, weaving is deeply embedded in religious beliefs and ritual practices. Women's social status is closely linked to their weaving skills, and numerous customs and ceremonies revolve around textile production, making it a foundational element of Idu Mishmi cultural life.

The origins of weaving among the Idu Mishmi are embedded in mythological narratives and therefore cannot be dated with historical certainty. However, colonial-era accounts demonstrate that textile production by women was well established by the mid-nineteenth century. Dalton (1872) observed that the Idu Mishmi were among the earliest communities in the region to exploit the fibrous properties of *Rhea nivea* and other nettle plants. Using these fibres, they produced strong and durable textiles, often fashioned into jackets that functioned as protective armour. Dalton further noted that the Idu Mishmi not only met their own clothing needs but also supplied woven textiles to neighbouring Adi groups, with their products selling well in markets such as Saikhowa.

Similarly, Hamilton (1873) described the Idu Mishmi dress as consisting of short, sleeveless jackets and narrow skirts made from nettle fibres, resulting in coarse yet highly resilient cloth. Further confirmation of women's central role in weaving appears in the 1912–1913 Dibang Survey conducted by Captain G. A. Nevill, who reported that while men undertook most agricultural labour, women were primarily responsible for weaving and household management. Taken together, these historical accounts

indicate that the Idu Mishmi community was largely self-sufficient in meeting its clothing requirements, having developed sophisticated knowledge of forest resources for producing yarn and natural dyes.

### **Methodology**

The present study is based on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary data were collected through a field survey conducted in Anini, the headquarters of Dibang Valley district, Arunachal Pradesh, during 2023. The survey covered 251 households. A purposive sampling method was adopted, and data were collected exclusively from female respondents, as women are the primary custodians of weaving knowledge within the Idu Mishmi community. Information was gathered through structured questionnaires supplemented by personal interviews to ensure clarity and depth of responses.

Secondary data were obtained from a wide range of sources, including published literature, archival records, ethnographic accounts, official reports, and other relevant documents related to the Idu Mishmi community. These sources were consulted to contextualise the field data and to develop a comprehensive understanding of the historical, cultural, and socio-economic dimensions of weaving among the Idu Mishmi.

### **Weaving Tradition and Cultural Significance among the Idu Mishmi**

The development of weaving is widely regarded as a crucial component of the so-called “human revolution” of the Upper Palaeolithic, reflecting broader changes in technology, symbolism, and social organisation. However, weaving has rarely been examined through a systematic framework that fully engages with debates on the relationship between technology and symbolic behaviour. Archaeological evidence for early weaving was convincingly demonstrated by Soffer et al. (2000), who analysed garments depicted on Upper Palaeolithic “Venus” figurines across Eurasia, along with textile impressions preserved on clay fragments. Their findings indicate the use of plant fibres in the production of skirts, belts, head coverings, bands, and ornaments such as necklaces, while also highlighting links between clothing, gender representation, and social identity. Additional support for early textile production comes from the identification of specialised weaving tools and their spatial distribution at Upper Palaeolithic sites on the Russian Plain, suggesting designated areas for textile-related activities. Collectively, figurine carvings, textile impressions, and associated tools constitute the earliest archaeological evidence for weaving (University of Cambridge, Department of Archaeology, 2012).

In South Asia, evidence for textile production appears in later prehistoric contexts. Early indications include impressions of woven fabrics and cords on pottery and terracotta objects from Mesolithic and early agricultural sites, such as Bagor in Rajasthan. More substantial evidence emerges during the Harappan (Indus Valley) civilisation, where textile impressions on clay and terracotta figurines, along with associated tools, point to well-developed weaving traditions. These findings suggest that textile production played a significant role in early Indian societies, contributing to technological innovation, symbolic expression, and economic organisation.

The significance of weaving among the Idu Mishmi can be understood through historical accounts left by British officials and ethnographers such as Butler (1847), Dalton (1872), Hamilton (1873), Verrier Elwin (1957), and Captain G. A. Nevill (1913). These writings consistently suggest that the Idu Mishmi possessed a long-established tradition of weaving, which fulfilled both subsistence and economic needs. Dalton (1855) noted that the Idu Mishmi supplied woven textiles not only for their own use but also to neighbouring Adi communities, with Mishmi cloths being traded in markets such as Saikhowa (Sadiya). Later observations by Elwin (1963) recorded the popularity of black Mishmi coats among Adi groups in Upper Siang, including the Ashing and Shimong, and described trade routes such as the Aboroka Pass, where Mishmi textiles were exchanged for Mithun. Similar accounts by Roy (1960) confirm that inter-tribal trade involving Mishmi coats, mithun, and rice had been sustained for centuries (Delley, 2024).

Beyond their economic value, textiles among the Idu Mishmi are deeply embedded in religious belief and ritual practice. Central to this cosmology is the textile goddess Apili Mili, also known as *Angraya Miya*, one of the most powerful spiritual entities in Idu belief. Her influence is reflected in weaving terminology, such as *angroto*, the main horizontal bamboo beam of the loom, which derives from her name. Apili Mili is believed to design sacred garments for shamans and is frequently invoked for protection. Her husband, Asi Jalilewru, guards the shamanic shield, while their son, Ambribriaru, protects spiritual weapons.

The sacred dimension of weaving is further expressed through the myth of *abrato* (bamboo), regarded as the most spiritually potent and useful plant. During funerary rituals, shamans chant the origin myth while guiding the soul to *Kashiluaru*, the spiritual realm associated with *Asi-amime*. According to tradition, Asi-amime was killed through deception by the trickster *Anno*, and from the blood spilt at her death grew *abrato* bamboo (*Phyllostachys aurea*). This bamboo later became the spiritual emblem (*tothro*) of the great shaman Sineru and was endowed with power and fertility by *Dikri*, the serpent-eagle spirit, and the primordial mother *Innyi Dondoli*. As a result, *abrato* emerged as a symbol of fertility, regeneration, and weaving.

*Abrato* continues to play a central role in marriage rituals, where brides carry a walking stick made from this bamboo; if it later sprouts, it is interpreted as a sign of fertility. The plant was further sanctified by Apili Mili, transforming it into a symbol of weaving. Consequently, most weaving tools are made from *abrato* bamboo, and its motifs appear prominently in traditional garments such as the *Thuwe*. A *Thuwe* is a wrapper generally worn by women. Weavers are believed to possess spiritual powers bestowed by Apili Mili and enjoy high social status, comparable to shamans, hunters, and warriors. Their tutelary spirits are ritually invoked to protect the weaver, the household, and the textile process itself. During rituals such as *Meshallah*, shamans

chant invocations to pacify the powerful guardian spirits of weaving, requesting them to loosen their spiritual webs and allow ritual passage for the restoration of harmony within the household (Delley, 2024).

### **Idu Mishmi women and weaving**

Among the Idu Mishmi, weaving is an exclusively female domain and forms a central pillar of women's social, economic, and spiritual life. Folklore, myths, and ritual beliefs consistently emphasise the significance of weaving in defining womanhood. Traditionally, mastery of weaving was a prerequisite for marriage, and skilled weavers were highly sought after as brides. Early observers such as Dalton and Verrier Elwin noted that woven textiles functioned as important items of exchange, contributing to women's economic empowerment through barter—a practice that continues among some Idu Mishmi women today.

Women weavers are believed to possess powerful tutelary spirits, often regarded as equal to or even more formidable than those of shamans. Weaving tools themselves are spiritually charged: the cotton-spinning tool *nambo* is believed to blind hostile spirits, while the weaving sword *abripa* functions as a potent spiritual weapon. Women keep *abripa* near them during times of danger, and it continues to protect them even after death. During funerary processions for women, *abripa* is carried ahead of the body to clear the path of malevolent forces, just as weapons such as guns or arrows accompany deceased men. Thus, *abripa* is a distinctly female spiritual counterpart to male weapons.

Weaving also structures sacred space within the household. The southern section of the women's room (*ashondo*), where the loom is set up, is considered highly sacred and is avoided by men, including shamans and hunters. An accomplished weaver is believed to be capable of assessing the spiritual strength and status of men simply by clothing them in a *thuwe* (wrap-around skirt).

The Idu Mishmi belief holds that a woman who does not weave during her lifetime commits a moral failing. This belief is reflected in concepts of the soul's journey after death. At a spiritual trial called *Ade-Luhulu*, violent winds strip away the garments of women's souls. Only those who have woven in life retain spiritual clothing; skilled weavers remain well clothed, while others are left exposed and ashamed, causing some souls to abandon their journey and become wandering spirits. This belief strongly reinforces the continuity of the textile tradition.

Textiles are closely associated with female identity from birth. A girl child may be referred to as *Abi-aa* (weaving tools), and during pregnancy rituals, the vision of weaving implements signifies the birth of a girl, while weapons indicate a boy. At the same time, weaving is regulated by ritual taboos: women must refrain from weaving during major life-cycle rituals and when male members of the household are engaged in hunting.

The centrality of weaving is further reinforced through folklore. Legendary figures such as Anulu Akhiya, a master weaver whose designs are believed to have inspired many traditional motifs, and Enjalu Menda, famed for weaving vast quantities of cloth for barter, exemplify the ideal Idu Mishmi woman (Delley, R, 2024). These narratives underline how weaving skill traditionally shaped women's status, marriage prospects, and social prestige.

Together, belief, ritual, and oral tradition demonstrate that weaving is not merely a craft among the Idu Mishmi but a defining force in sustaining women's identity, power, and cultural continuity.

### **Organisation of Production**

Captain G. A. Nevill observed that Idu Mishmi women were largely engaged in weaving and household responsibilities; however, this description understates the intensive labour involved in textile production. Weaving was a time-consuming process that extended far beyond loom work, encompassing the year-round procurement and preparation of raw materials. Yarn production began with the collection of bark from plants such as Nahpre, Mallu, and Ahje (nettle fibre) from nearby forests. The bark was split into thin strips, buried in ash within the hearth for several days, dried in sunlight, and repeatedly refined before being joined into skeins. These skeins were then boiled with natural dyes – using wild creepers (*Ely*) to obtain red hues and *Makalu* leaves for black. In addition to bark fibre, raw cotton, either cultivated or gathered from the wild, was spun into thread using simple spinning tools. Depending on the intended use, the yarn was further processed into skeins or woolly balls. In earlier times, this entire sequence – from raw material collection to finished yarn – required continuous labour throughout the year, highlighting the skill, endurance, and central economic role of Idu Mishmi women in textile production.



From a Photograph by Dr Simpson



From a Photograph by A. Hamilton



In all these photographs, the attires are made from the yarn manufactured by barks of the nettle fibre plants after going through the stages mentioned above. The picture is the recent one, which was taken in 2006.



Mallu Bark (Nettle Fibre Plant Bark)



Bag woven from Mallu Bark

The photo depicts the bark of the nettle fibre plant, *Mallu*, and the bag is woven from yarn made from the bark of the *Mallu* plant.

After the completion of the collection of yarn, preparation for the loom set starts. At the time of loom set preparation, one person is required for the weft insertion. A person has to hold the other end of the loom, and another person has to sit at the other end, pass the woollen bowl from the horizontal pole, and give it back at the other end and so on. This procedure continues until it completes the required size of the loom, and the size of the loom depends on the type of products. Generally, the length of the skirt is longer than the coat. The helper for loom set preparation is engaged from any female from the family members or hired on a mutual reciprocity.

Once the loom is set and completed, the weaving starts. The completion of weaving depends upon the design and motifs. The more motifs and designs, the more embroidery works and the longer the weaving time.



Loom Set of Coat (*Etoma*)



Loom Set of Skirt (*Thuwe*)



Loom Set of Coat (*Anatubru*)



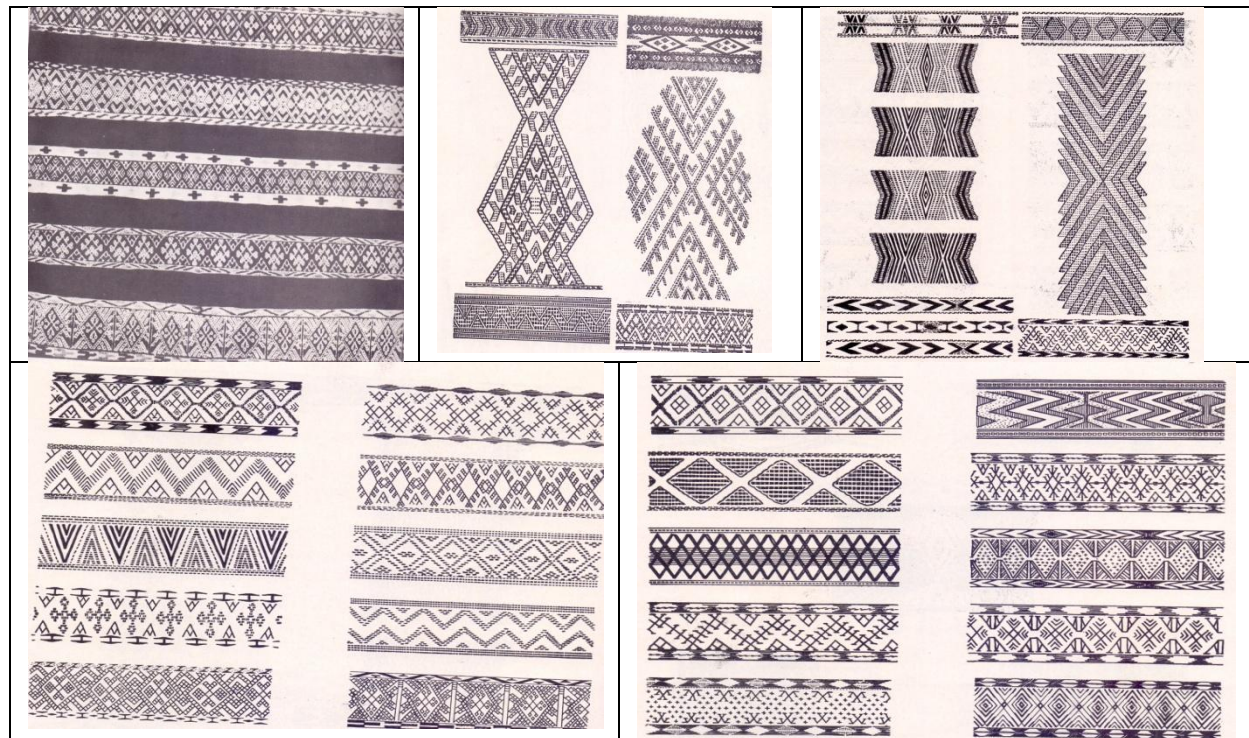
Loom Set of Warrior Coat (*Etandre*)



Loom Set of Loin Loom (*Lappu*)

Loom Set for Skirt (*Thuwe*)

The diversity of motifs and designs of the Idu Mishmi coat is presented in the subsequent picture.



Designs on Idu Mishmi Coat (Adapted from The Art of The North-East Frontier of India, by Verrier Elwin, 1988)

The evidence of the expertise and dexterity of Idu Mishmi women in weaving can be observed in the production of various types and designs of cloth. The status of the person can be identified from the cloths which he or she is wearing. For example, Black and White Coat (*Tipha-Lopha*) was the coat of those people who had never conducted a *Reh* festival or the symbol of poor people. Whereas other coat like *Etoma* and *Annatubru* coats meant only for rich or renown person those who had conducted the *Reh* Festival. Some of the clothes are presented in the picture along with a caption.

		
Female Coat ( <i>Etopolo</i> )	Male Coat ( <i>Etoma</i> )	Warrior Coat ( <i>Etondre</i> )
		
Male & Female Coat ( <i>Annatubru</i> )	Black and White Coat ( <i>Tipha-Lopha</i> )	Highly Embroidered Skirt ( <i>Thuma</i> )
		
Highly Embroidered Skirt ( <i>Thuma</i> )	Mild Embroidered Skirt ( <i>Thuwe</i> )	Simple Embroidered Skirt ( <i>Thuwe</i> )
		
Loin Loom ( <i>Lappu</i> )	Loin Loom ( <i>Lama</i> )	Blanket ( <i>Badu</i> )



The price of the products depends on the labour cost involved in producing them. Further, the design and motifs in the cloth determine the labour cost. Generally, simple cloth without any motifs can be completed within three or four days and fifteen to twenty days for heavy motifs and design cloth. Depending upon the motifs and their design, the price of the cloth ranges from rupees twelve hundred to five thousand five hundred.

### Emerging Scenario

Traditionally, Idu Mishmi weaving was a year-round, labour-intensive process, encompassing the collection of raw materials from the forest, preparation of yarn, dyeing with natural sources, and intricate embroidery on handlooms. Women were central to this system, and weaving not only fulfilled household needs but also symbolised social status, spiritual belief, and economic exchange. Historical accounts by early explorers and administrators, such as Dalton (1855), Hamilton (1873), and Nevill (1913), emphasise that the tribe was largely self-reliant for clothing, with women's weaving skills forming the backbone of household production and even inter-tribal trade.

In contemporary times, the expansion of markets has transformed the production and consumption of Idu Mishmi textiles. Weavers are no longer required to produce yarn manually, as raw materials can now be procured from the market in a variety of colours and qualities. This modern availability has facilitated the continued creation of elaborate embroidered garments, which remain popular among neighbouring tribes. In December 2019, the Idu Mishmi Cultural and Literary Society, the apex tribal organisation, secured Geographical Indication (GI) registration for their textile products, aiming to preserve and promote this heritage in national and international markets (Delley, 2024).

However, the growth of market-driven goods has had a profound impact on traditional practices. Loincloths and local blankets have largely been replaced by commercially produced clothing, and the use of traditional skirts and coats in daily life has diminished. Market products, being cheaper and more convenient, have become the preference of the younger generation, leaving indigenous textiles primarily for ceremonial or occasional use. The economic value of these handwoven products often does not reflect the intensive labour and skill involved, and despite their cultural and aesthetic significance, weavers receive minimal compensation relative to the effort required. Extended hours of weaving and embroidery also impose physical strain, including eye fatigue, and musculoskeletal discomfort in the shoulders and back.

To sustain Idu Mishmi weaving in the context of globalisation, historical knowledge and contemporary innovation must converge. Just as earlier generations developed techniques for forest-based textile production, modern interventions could focus on developing ergonomic looms and improved tools that enhance productivity while respecting traditional designs and methods. Collaborative initiatives involving community organisations, government bodies, and textile experts are essential to ensure that the craft remains viable economically and culturally. Preserving weaving as both a living tradition and a source of women's empowerment requires careful balancing of heritage and innovation, ensuring that this centuries-old practice continues to flourish in a changing world (Delley, 2024).

### Conclusion

The weaving tradition of the Idu Mishmi is a testament to the tribe's self-reliance, cultural richness, and the central role of women in sustaining both household and community life. Historically, Idu Mishmi women were responsible for producing all essential textiles, from everyday garments to ceremonial attire, demonstrating mastery over complex techniques and deep knowledge of natural fibres, dyes, and loom technology. Certain specialised textiles, such as priestly coats, ceremonial skirts, and ritual blankets, were produced only by expert weavers, reflecting the intersection of craft, status, and spiritual significance within the community.

Weaving among the Idu Mishmi has always been more than a practical activity – it embodies social identity, spiritual beliefs, and economic interaction, including trade with neighbouring tribes. Today, while market forces and globalisation have introduced new materials and alternative garments, the traditional craft continues to thrive in ceremonial and cultural contexts, symbolising resilience and ingenuity. Preserving this heritage requires integrating historical knowledge, technical innovation,

and community initiatives to support weavers, ensuring that the Idu Mishmi's unique textile legacy endures for future generations.

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