

The production of rep weave floor coverings in Avinurme from the 1950s to the 1970s as a regional inherited skill

Veinika Västrik

Abstract

The making of rep weave floor coverings was an important source of income in Avinurme, a northern Estonian settlement, from the 1950s to the 1970s. Weaving began for commercial reasons after collective farms were established in 1949, when alternative sources of income were sought, as such farms only paid meagre wages. At the time, any sort of entrepreneurship was prohibited and punishable as “speculation”, and thus sales activities were banned, so the sellers sought to leave village council inspectors with the impression that the weaving was being done for their own families. A unique cultural phenomenon thus developed which was shaped (and eventually fell into decline) for the following period-specific reasons: cotton yarn which was suited to the rep weaving technique could be obtained from the Kreenholm Manufactory in Narva, floor rugs were not available in shops, all households had looms, and rep weave rugs were considered to be classier than rag rugs.

Despite the illegality of the activity, commercial weaving persisted for decades. Due to the wide territorial range of the sales, the Avinurme rugs had an impact on home furnishing culture throughout most of Estonia.

The special feature of the Avinurme practice was the use of a thinner and finer pattern warp (the so-called No. 10 thread) in conjunction with a thicker and coarser background warp; the dark weft is visible through the thin warp and is conducive to the formation of the pattern.

Other features peculiar to the Avinurme rep woven rugs include composition featuring a double cross of rhombuses, which cannot be found in any printed source. In addition, the region in question had a rich array of patterns which combine squares and rectangles. Brown was often featured as the warp colour in combination with beige or orange tones; the background warp was frequently made up of brightly coloured lengthwise-striped patterns along the patterned edges.

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The tradition of weaving these types of rugs and mats started to decline in the late 1970s when industrially produced floor coverings became available in retail stores, leading to changes in interior furnishing fashions. Purchasing power had also improved over the decades, and handwoven traditional floor coverings were seen as old-fashioned in this context.

Keywords: traditional weaving, rep weave, rep rug, warp rep pattern, subsistence practices in Soviet Estonia

Introduction

The tradition of weaving floor coverings emerged among rural Estonian people living on farms in the second half of the 19th century, when people started to build wooden floors in their threshing-room dwelling houses (Võti 1984: 13). Besides cross-striped rag rugs, lengthwise-striped rep weave floor rugs can also be found among the oldest floor coverings that were woven on the loom (ERM KV 223:52). Rep weave is a technique in which the lengthwise warp threads are positioned so closely side by side that the weft threads cannot be seen; the changeover from one row to another can only be seen on the edges of the fabric. By alternating warps of contrasting colours, it is possible to create a limitless number of geometric patterns. Rep weave floor coverings were considered more valuable than simple rag rugs because the amount of costly warp thread needed for making them was larger, and the process was more labour-consuming and required higher skills. Because of this, the making of rep weave floor coverings has been taught in all handbooks on weaving published in Estonia (Tammela 1896: 7; Rebenitz 1898: 16–18; Oikkonen 1926: 88–90; Varimõis 1927: 108–110; Mälksoo 1947: 130–131 and 1973: 39–40; Kelpman 1998: 75–77). These skills, acquired in weaving courses at the turn of the 20th century and later learned in home economics schools, were passed down from mothers to daughters and also from village weavers to their apprentices. Rep weave floor coverings were made throughout Estonia. However, there is a region near Avinurme village in Virumaa County where people used this technique of weaving in their homes so extensively that it developed into a kind of a small-scale production industry during the Soviet period. I received the first pieces of information about this in 2011, when I was talking with the then-Head of the Avinurme Centre for Local Handicraft and Way of Living, Küllike Pärn. Up to that time, none of the researchers of Estonian historic textiles had touched upon this subject.

I collected materials about the weaving of floor coverings during my fieldwork in Avinurme village and its neighbouring villages of Ulvi, Adraku, Kõrvemetsa, Västriku and Änniksaare. This fieldwork was carried out in



Photo 1. Floor rug woven of handspun tow-yarn by Iida Kiik (1894–1975) at Keskküla farm, Änniksaare village, Avinurme parish. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

cooperation with the Estonian National Museum from 31 July to 5 August 2012. During these five days, I asked questions and talked with ten individuals who have had something to do with rug weaving. My fieldwork resulted in slightly more than seven hours of recorded interviews and photos of 26 rep weave floor coverings and rugs.

I found out that, from the 1950s to the 1970s, the making of rep weave floor coverings was a considerable source of income for people living in Avinurme and its neighbouring villages. Weaving rugs for sale started after the formation of collective farms in 1949. Among the weavers were former farmers' wives who refused to join collective farms and started to weave to earn a living, as well as workers of the collective farms who needed to supplement their meager wages in the early years of the collective farms. All kinds of private business initiatives were prohibited and could be punished at that time; therefore, selling rugs was done in secrecy, and official inspectors from the village council were left with the impression that the rugs were woven only for the weavers' own use or for their families.

The weavers of Avinurme made a very clear distinction between the *floor rug* and the *floor carpet*. The rug was woven with a narrow width of 60–80 cm and a length of about 50 meters, rolled up, and the needed length of the rug was cut off the roll for the buyer. The carpet was a larger floor covering up to 2x3 meters, which was made of two narrower lengths of the rug sewn together. I use these terms in my article, and when necessary, also the more general term *floor coverings*.

The purpose of the present article is to give an overview of the boom of weaving rep weave floor coverings in Avinurme from the 1950s to the 1970s. By describing the acquisition of materials, different weaving techniques and practices, and the selling of floor coverings during the Soviet period, I attempt to find out why this phenomenon came into being just in this region. By analysing the patterns used on the items, I try to find the special features characteristic to the rep weave floor coverings from Avinurme. Were the patterns influenced by examples found in printed sources, or did the patterns follow local traditions, and were they created by the weavers themselves?

Acquisition and use of the materials

Up to the end of the pre-WWII Estonian Republic, the rural makers of rep weave floor coverings used handspun linen tow-yarn of a diameter of 2–3 mm, which was durable and could easily be found in their households. The oldest rep weave floor rug found in the region, photographed in the Änniksaare village near Avinurme, was woven using this kind of tow-yarn (Photo 1).

After the war, in relation to the formation of collective farms under the Soviet regime, the plots of land people were allowed to keep for growing plants for their own use were so small that it was not possible to grow flax anymore. That is why the weavers started to use cotton thread, produced at the Narva Kreenholm Manufactory, for making their rep weave floor coverings. According to one of the informants, fabric and thread already had been acquired from the Narva manufactory workers in exchange for food during the war. The informant believed that the materials had been stolen from the manufactory. By the 1950s and 1960s, there already existed a system of buying cotton thread from the manufactory and sending it via Mustvee village to smaller villages where the rep weave rugs were made.

And this is how we got the warp! These weavers stole it in Narva and brought it here, to Mustvee, to sell. Here were the people who sold it. And we went to Mustvee to get it. It was about 15 km to Mustvee [from my home]. I went on foot, there were no buses. It was like, all this thread was brought from Narva by the evening bus and we had to go to meet it. We had an agreement [with people in Mustvee], because there were many people who all wanted to buy

thread, not only one or two! Almost all families had a loom set up and they were weaving rugs. (Woman, b 1935.)

The warp brought from Narva was white, and the weavers had to dye it to get the colours they wanted. As shops did not sell dye for fabric, sellers of dye travelled from village to village. Most probably, they too had acquired larger quantities of dye powder from some factory (for example, from the Kreenholm Manufactory) and sold it to weavers.

There were dyes, but it was quite difficult to get them in the shops. You see, after the war, there were quite a lot of sellers who could get the dyes from somewhere. Such sellers had [larger packets of] dye in their bags, and when they came, they sold it by tablespoonfuls. They walked about in the village and already knew where the buyers were.

– Where did they get the dye? Did they talk about it?

– No, I do not know where they got it. They had to have got it from some factory where it was used. [---] No, nobody talked about it where they got it, because it was... Yes. (Woman, b 1935.)

Besides the thin weft thread, the thick tow-yarn, originally intended for tying packages, was also used in making rep weave floor coverings. Rolls of the tow-yarn were bought at a store in Mustvee, where the salespeople were already aware about the high demand for the yarn and ordered it in large quantities to meet the weavers' needs. The weavers used to dye the tow-yarn either brown or black so that the weft thread, visible at the edges of the fabric and sometimes also in between the warp threads, would be a better match with the black pattern warp.

In the 1960s, weavers started to buy No. 10 sewing thread, which was one of the thickest and most durable cotton sewing threads, for use as the warp thread. This made preparation for weaving much easier, as the weavers no longer needed to dye the warp. Former weavers told me that a spool of sewing thread was cheap, and if they found the spools of thread on sale in stores in Tartu or Rakvere, they bought these spools by hundreds:

These spools were sold in packages of twenty, wrapped in paper. People usually bought about ten packages or so, depending on where they could find them and how many packages were on sale. At that time, it wasn't like you went to a shop and bought whatever you needed. (Woman, b 1935.)

When closely examining the warp material of the floor coverings photographed during fieldwork, I discovered that often both the black (or any other darker colour) sewing thread and the colourful so-called Narva thread were used in the same rug. In such cases, the sewing thread forms the pattern



Photo 2. No. 10 sewing thread (black or coloured) used as the weft thread for the rugs. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

on the surface of the rug, and the coloured weft forms a striped background. The sewing thread is thinner than the Narva warp thread; it does not fill the surface of the rug too thickly, allowing the black (or dyed dark) weft thread to be seen, which accentuates the dark pattern.

In order to boost such an effect, the Narva warp was set up on the loom using double threads. A looser pattern warp allows the shed rise more easily; in case of a very densely set warp, rising threads are hampered due to friction. The method of using a looser pattern warp and allowing the darker weft thread to be seen through the warp can be called a unique technique of the weavers of the Avinurme region which distinguishes their work from rep weave floor carpets and rugs made in other Estonian regions. Due to these

very characteristics, and the motif of the double cross, which is also unique to Avinurme weavers, I believe that the floor rug of unknown origin found in the region of Raplamaa and described in the book *Läbi lõimede: rahvuslikud kangakirjad (Threads through time: Estonian ethnic weaving patterns)*, edited by Eva-Liisa Kriis, was actually bought from travelling salesmen from Avinurme (Kriis 2014: 82–83).

Due to the fact that rep weave floor coverings were made in the Avinurme region during several decades, the warp material can, to a certain extent, be used for roughly dating the items: the handspun tow-yarn represents the 1920s and 1930s; the soft cotton warp was acquired from the Kreenholm Manufactory starting from the 1940s up to the 1970s; the tightly spun cotton sewing thread was added to the Narva warp in the 1960s.

Work practices

In making rep weave fabric, setting up the warp is the task that involves the most responsibility. As the warp count is very high and the warp has a very close sett, the proper and tidy appearance of the fabric depends on even tension of all the warp threads. In this respect, the floor coverings woven in the Avinurme region are of perfect quality. The reason behind this quality is the method used for warping, in which the thread is wound onto four-legged wooden frames by using a winder with a crank. The warp is measured on an

upright warping mill. It was necessary to follow closely the order of the warp colours and to pay attention to the colour of the threads which were laid out together.

There probably were not as many of these frames as there were warp threads of different colours in a more colourful rug. Therefore, groups of warp threads of different colours were wound on these frames in an order which had to be maintained when measuring out the warp. It was necessary to make sure that the warp threads, which had to be laid out at the same time, were not wound on the same frame. Using these frames helped to ensure even tension for all the warp threads all through the process of warping. Today, the frames have been replaced by cone-shaped factory-wound thread spools. In the case of manually wound thread, its tension is higher when larger balls of thread are used, and it is looser when smaller balls of thread are used. Due to such changes to the strength of the tension, warp may be unevenly tensioned on the warping mill. When this has happened, then the warp threads of looser tension will get stuck to others during weaving and do not shift according to the pattern.

When making floor coverings for sale, the weavers set up a long warp sufficient for ten to twelve rugs. The informants explained that usually one floor carpet consisted of two halves of 2.5–3 meters in length. Consequently, the length of a warp chain could be about 50 to 70 meters. Another weaver told me that the warp length was eight “walls” or rounds of the warping mill, one wall was at least six meters, and thus the total length was about 50 meters. In some households, the great responsibility of warping was left to the master of the house. One informant recalled how, when she was an elementary school pupil, her father was warping and checking the colours and the length of the warp and how she could ride the warping mill during the process (woman, b 1957).

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Avinurme weavers mostly used simple counterbalance looms, weaving the patterns with two or four shafts. I was told about only one weaver who had



Photo 3. A detail of a floor rug. The colourful and thicker Narva yarn covers the warp more densely than the thinner black sewing thread. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

had a more sophisticated, Finnish-type countermarch loom which allowed for more complicated patterns.

When threading, it is important to follow the order of the colours of warp threads, which changed whenever the pattern changed. To avoid careless mistakes, the warp threads were divided into bunches before threading according to the parts of the pattern, making it easier to follow and check the order.

The density of the reed was chosen according to the thickness of the thread; two warp threads were sleyed into a single dent. In the case of a two-shaft fabric, one warp thread was from one shaft and the other warp thread from the other shaft. This helped to keep to the system and to avoid mistakes. Experienced weavers did not use a weaving draft; the pattern had a clear logic, and different patterns were created during the weaving process by varying the treadling order. "For a four-shaft fabric, you did not use a draft. You knew it by heart. And nobody made a six-shaft fabric at that time anymore." (Woman, b 1935.)

Characteristically of rep weave, two different weft threads were alternately used in weaving. The thicker thread was the dyed tow-yarn, and the thinner one was some dark-coloured warp thread. Having started to use the sewing thread, resourceful weavers put a spool of thread on the shuttle rod and used it as a weft spool. The length of different parts of the pattern (*klopida*) was closely monitored by counting the number of threads in each part because, when the two parts of the carpet were finally sewn together, the pattern had to match flawlessly at the middle seam. Thin weft thread was woven into both ends of the rug so that it would be easier to finish:

And when you finally finished this rug, you put in the thin thread for the length of about two fingers and wound it tightly with the shuttle so that it would not get undone. And then you started the next one the same way, and started it with exactly the same pattern, so that it would fit together when you started the other length. (Woman, b 1951.)

One carpet, meaning the two halves of it, both of 2.5–3 meters of length, was completed in one day. Besides, it was necessary to weave some additional length so that the beginning of the next freshly started rug could be wound once around the cloth beam. In this way, it was possible to cut the already completed rug off the loom without knotting the threads in the middle, which would have meant some loss of material. The edge of the new rug was tightly rolled around the cloth beam and it was possible to continue weaving.

When the fabric was taken off the loom, the fringes that remained after cutting were knotted into little tight bunches, or the edge was turned back and hemmed with a sewing machine. The fringes were often left loose, with the

hope that the extremely tightly woven end of the rug will protect the rug from quickly unravelling. Then, the two halves of the carpet were manually sewn together using the plied cotton thread warp material. At first, the stitching was slightly raised, but after having lain on the floor for some time, it became level.

The finished carpets were folded twice lengthwise and then rolled into a tight roll. Such rolled rugs were ready to be taken to be sold.

Patterns and the use of colours

Next, I will examine the characteristic features of the patterns used in the Avinurme rep weave floor coverings, and I will try to discover whether we can identify any effect of printed

sources on the development of these patterns. Prior to my work, I examined all handbooks on weaving and volumes of handicraft magazines published in Estonia, such as *Käsitööleht* (1906–1926, 1931–1935), *Eesti Naine* (1924–1940, 1945–1951), *Taluperenaine* (1927–1940), *Maret* (1935–1940), *Nõukogude Naine* (1952–1988) and *Kunst ja Kodu* (1958–1990).

Most of the rep weave carpets I saw during my fieldwork were woven using the rep weave technique derived from plain weave; only two out of 26 were twill rep weave carpets (Photos 5 and 6).

The patterns of narrow floor rugs consisted of the central pattern and patterns on the edges, separated by bright lengthwise stripes. Here we can find a close resemblance to patterns of woven belts in which parts of a pattern are separated by lengthwise stripes called *küü*. Wider floor carpets had no distinct central and edge patterns, each carpet was woven in two halves and, sometimes, these halves had a symmetrically reflected composition (Photos 7 and 20).

The patterns of plain weave floor coverings are formed of squares and rectangles of different sizes. The classic design of a warp rep weave is a chequerboard pattern (see Photo 1), which can be considered as a kind of a prototype. This helps one to understand the varied selection of chequered patterns in which the squares seem to be vertically and/or horizontally compressed or elongated (Photos 8–12).

This can also result in surfaces with optical effects (Photo 12).



Photo 4. Two narrow halves of a floor carpet were sewn together so that the patterns of both halves would match. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*



Photo 5. Twill rep weave floor rug, woven in Tudu village, Vinni parish, Lääne-Virumaa county; width of about 70 cm. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*



Photo 6. Twill rep weave floor rug, woven by Alice Klaas (1902–1994) in Sämi village, Sõmeru parish, Lääne-Virumaa county in the 1920–1930s. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*



Photo 7. Double-width floor carpet with a symmetrically reflected pattern composition, woven by Anette Raja (1904–1995) at Toomara farm, the village of Kiissa, Avinurme region, in the 1960s. 174x290 cm. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

The squares and rectangles can form certain recurring patterns, internationally called the *Monk's Belt pattern* (Swedish *munkbälte*; Henriksson 1947: 197; Lundell 1977: 102, 158; Kelpman 1998: 71). A single or a triple cross can be woven in the middle of such patterns (see Figures 1–2).

These varied square-pattern compositions, found in abundance in the Avinurme region, have no recognisable analogous rep weave patterns which could be considered as a direct source of inspiration either in weaving handbooks or in magazines published in Estonia. Consequently, the Monk's Belt pattern was adopted from other square-pattern fabrics woven using *drell* or *raanu* techniques and developed further to suit the long and narrow floor rugs by adding multi-coloured lengthwise stripes to mark the patterns on the edges.

Besides the square-pattern composition, there are also patterns formed of crosswise stripes in which the colour of one stripe represents the background (Photo 13). Disrupting the stripes with the warp threads in the background colour looks like a simple advancement of the pattern, creating rows of rectangles with a certain rhythm (Photo 14). Weavers called such chequered and striped rugs *two-shaft* floor rugs.

Rhomboid patterns, formed of squares and rectangles, require a more complicated weaving technique (Photos 15–20).



Photo 8. Square-pattern floor rug, woven by Meeta Hunt (1923–1994) in Piilsi village, Avinurme parish, in the 1960s. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*



Photo 9. Square-pattern floor rug, woven by Alide Oja (1904–1999) at Kure farm, Võtikvere village, Torma parish, in the 1950s. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*



Photo 10. Square-pattern floor rug, woven by Aliide Kuustik (b 1905) in Avinurme. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

This technique involves enlarging the initial twill weave pattern scheme. In the Avinurme patterns, the $2/2$ flat twill pattern was enlarged into an eight-shaft and eight-treadle weaving pattern scheme in which it was possible to merge identical shafts and treadles which had formed during the process. This again resulted in a pattern draft with four shafts and four treadles, but it differed much from the initial $2/2$ twill pattern. Weavers called such floor coverings *four-shaft* rugs. A rhombus with a double cross appears as a

recurring motif in such a pattern; it has been used by three weavers in four floor coverings (see Photos 17–20). I could not find any draft of this rather complicated pattern scheme in any Estonian publication, and there were no patterns of even remote similarity which could have been used to develop this scheme. Probably, the pattern draft originated from written learning material used at some home economics school which had been passed from hand to hand or sent to some weaver's acquaintances by mail. This could also have been the case with another unique twill rhomboid pattern which has no similarities to any pattern found in Estonian publications; however, a pattern of similar structure was introduced in a book about Swedish rep weave floor coverings (Lundell 2010: 58–61). The weaver from Avinurme had added rainbow-coloured edge patterns to the main pattern (Photo 7).

The patterns of the twill rep weave are totally different from those described above. Slender zigzags appear on the surface of the fabric which are, depending on threading and treadling, either horizontal (edge patterns of the rug on Photo 5), vertical (central pattern on Photo 6) or form a rhomboid pattern (Photo 6). Straight crosswise stripes are the result of threading the warp on shafts which move contrariwise to each other.

Different hues of brown and orange dominate in the Avinurme rep weave floor coverings. The contrasting pattern is either black or brown with a background of lighter colours ranging from beige to orange. This fact was noticed by a correspondent of the Estonian National Museum in the borough of Laiuse who wrote in 1973:

Skilful masters of floor rug weaving live in Avinurme; their floor carpets were brought to our households even after WWII. [...] Before WWII, brown and orange were the main colours persistently used in the [Avinurme] rugs, varying between darker and lighter, and still prevailing even now. (ERM KV 223:404.)

Changeover of the colours of the background warp is more characteristic of the patterns on the edges of the rug, but it can actually be found throughout the pattern (Photos 7, 14 and 16). Discussion with a former weaver clarified the reason behind such a unique design – at the Kreenholm Manufactory, it was possible to buy the leftover cotton thread

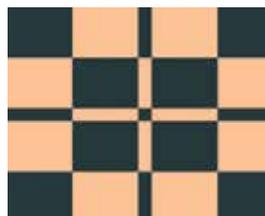


Figure 1. An arrangement of squares, originally found in the Monk's Belt pattern, which has been used in the design of rep weave floor coverings. Drawing by Veinika Västriik.

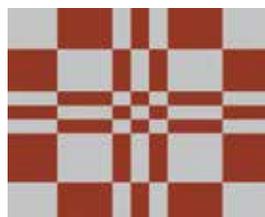


Figure 2. Variation of the Monk's Belt pattern with a triple central cross. Drawing by Veinika Västriik.



Photo 11. Square pattern floor carpet, woven by Ilse Rummel (b 1922) in Änniksaare village, Avinurme parish, in 1939. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*



Photo 12. Floor rug with a pattern which creates an optical illusion, woven by Ilse Rummel (b 1922) in Änniksaare village, Avinurme parish, in the 1970s. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

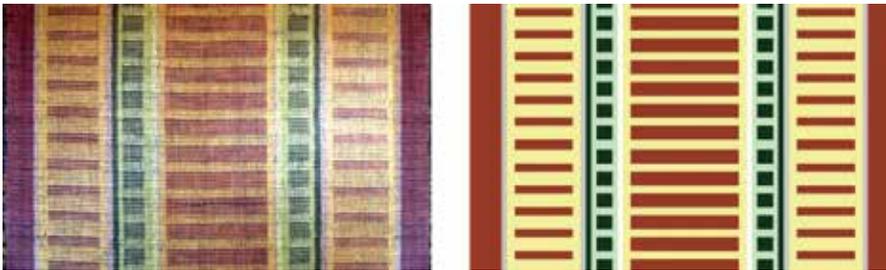


Photo 13. Floor rug with a pattern of crosswise stripes, woven by Kata-Rosalie Kallavus (1897–1969) in Änniksaare village, Avinurme parish, in 1969. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*



Photo 14. Floor rug with a pattern of crosswise stripes, woven by Lüüsi Kukk (b 1927) in Ulvi village, Avinurme parish, in the 1960s or 1970s. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

which had remained on the spools of weaving machines and could not be used anymore for technical reasons. As the length of the thread on spool ends was small, the thread was used to weave only narrow stripes in the floor rugs that were kept for the weavers' own use. Colours were matched shade by shade, imitating the colour wheel, usually starting with dark red through orange and yellow to green; blue was not used.

In some rhomboid compositions, the colours of the background warp have slightly shifted with respect to the pattern. This can be taken as an intentional additional effect in which the warp threads are getting darker shade by shade towards the central part of the rug (Photo 16), but it could as well be a mistake in setting up the warp (Photos 17–19).

Comparing the selection of floor coverings that I had seen during my fieldwork in Avinurme with the published weaving instructions, I was convinced that this was a unique local tradition. Some notices about such weaving had been published in Estonia at the end of the 19th century, but during the following generations, these written sources had been forgotten, and using rep weave had become a regional inherited skill.

Weaving for sale as a prohibited activity

Technical skills and experience in designing and making rep weave floor coverings developed due to the fact that people found ways for selling their product despite social restrictions. Under the Soviet regime, all kinds of private entrepreneurship and earning additional income beside wages were prohibited. Weaving rugs was allowed only for the weavers' own use, and making rugs for sale was punishable. If a suspicion arose regarding the activities of some weaver, an official from the village council visited this person's home to look for suspicious activities. A former weaver who made floor coverings for sale in 1958–1968 recalled an incident:

An inspector came to visit us! They came to our place, and we were just setting up the loom. My mother-in-law was warping the loom. And the inspector came and took samples of the threads and dyes, saying that they have to check whether I was going to weave for our own use. And they said that they would come and check later, whether this rug was on my own floor. [...] And they wrote everything down in a record. (Woman, b 1935.)

Rep weave floor carpets and rugs were made in many households, and it was like a public secret – everybody knew about it, but it was not appropriate to talk about it. There was an incident in the early 1960s in which the secretary of the village council fished for information from a pre-schooler who unsuspectingly talked about everything and caused trouble for her parents.

When I was a child, the secretary of the village council asked me questions and got me talking. A child definitely knows what is going on at home. But then there were these women from the finances [department], who gladly, or not so gladly, harassed others, and some of them even enjoyed doing it. And I remember that my mother scolded me: why did you have to tell them that we make floor rugs! But I did not know that it was a secret! [---] And I think that some kind of inspectors came to our home and I think we had to pay some fine. (Woman, b 1957.)

The fear of getting found out by inspectors was larger in the 1950s and early 1960s. A former chairman of the village council told me that the persistence and eagerness of the inspectors mostly depended on their personal characteristics. They were more driven by envy and vindictiveness than by instructions from the authorities:

I think that mainly, the demands of the government were not so strict, but the envy of the village council chairman was stronger. He was that type of an envious person who could not bear that people could earn money this way, that they could become rich! So envious! But when I started to work [in 1963 – V. V.], there was no such requirement! I did not hear about it and I asked myself, why



Photo 15. Floor rug with a rhomboid pattern, woven by Aliise Tooming (b 1922) in Avinurme. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

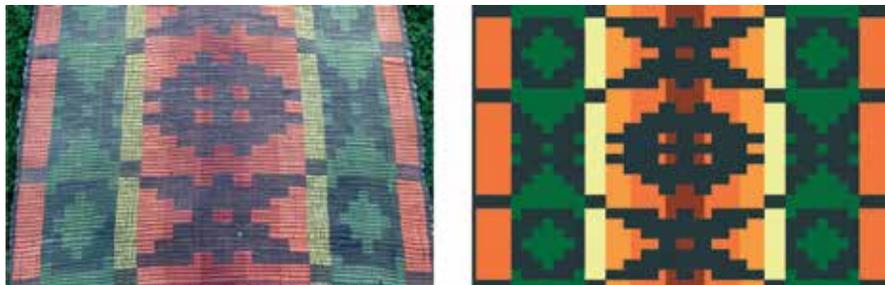


Photo 16. Floor rug with a rhomboid pattern, woven by Alide Oja (1904–1999) at Kure farm, Vötikvere village, Torma parish, in the 1950s. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*



Photo 17. Floor rug with a rhomboid pattern, woven by Lilli Irs (b 1912) in Tudu village, Vinni parish, Lääne-Virumaa county, in the 1980s. *Photo by Veinika Västriik.*

should I go and do it, it was not in my interests. Should I start to harass people? It was not required of me, I did not do it when I started to work as the next chairman after him. (Woman, b 1933.)

The weavers also felt the lessening of surveillance and monitoring over the years. One weaver who had started this work in the early 1970s said that, during the years when she was active, “the situation was not so frightening any more” (Woman, b 1951). However, the weavers knew that selling their products was illegal, and they did not talk about it with strangers. Even in 2012, during my fieldwork, I sensed a certain distrust when trying to establish contact with some weavers of the older generation, which made talking about selling rep weave floor rugs more difficult. I already knew from the preliminary information that this person had been a weaver, but she mostly gave laconic and evasive answers to my questions about rep weave floor rugs. Keeping this public secret had during decades been ingrained into people’s way of thinking, and it could well be one of the reasons why the making of rep weave floor rugs in the Avinurme region has so far never been discussed in Estonian cultural history.

Selling floor rugs

As the selection of floor coverings available in stores was poor or practically non-existent in the 1960s and 1970s, rug weavers of the Avinurme region started to sell their products farther and farther from their homes. They mainly offered large rep weave carpets, but they also had narrower rep weave rugs for those who did not need large carpets. Their works were sold both to nearby locations and farther away. People who could easily communicate with strangers and felt that selling activities suited them travelled to sell the



Photo 18. Floor carpet with a rhomboid pattern, woven by Meeta Hunt (1923–1994) in Piilsi village, Avinurme parish, in the 1960s. *Photo by Veinika Västrik.*

floor rugs made by their family members; others used the help of resellers or intermediaries. The main destinations of the sellers were towns and larger settlements of Virumaa county: Rakvere, Jõhvi, Kohtla-Järve and Kadrina, but people also went to sell their rugs in Tallinn and Keila. They travelled to other towns by bus, alone or in groups, carrying the folded rugs in their bags. In town, they stayed at acquaintances' places where they could leave the rest of their rugs while they took one rug out to sell. Usually they went to residential houses and moved from door to door, offering their rugs for sale, but this involved some risk; as such selling was prohibited, they could meet some flat owners who did not like their activities. A former weaver told me a story of what happened to her mother-in-law in the 1960s:

My mother-in-law told me how she went to Rakvere to go to people's flats! She would enter...

– *She went to strangers?*

– *Of course to strangers! She was carrying her large bag. She had an acquaintance in Rakvere to whom she went and left her rugs... when she had more rugs with her. Then she took one rug and went to visit other flats. And she saw the cap of a militiaman on the clothes rack in this flat! And she said "Oh, I came to a wrong place! I mixed up the doors!" She said she was sorry and backed away with her bag. It was such a rare coincidence. She was naturally frightened, too. (Woman, b 1935.)*

However, people who bought the rugs could also give advice and recommend their friends and acquaintances, who could in turn be interested in buying. Finding buyers by such a snowball effect eased to some extent the psychological pressure the weavers felt when knocking on strangers' doors.

Some families preferred to sell their rugs in rural areas. If necessary, they hired a trustworthy driver and went from Virumaa to Central Estonia, South Estonia or even to Saaremaa island, jokingly saying it was like:

You left your home in the morning and went where the wind blew, or threw a stone and went after it, or I even don't know how you finally decided where to go. You depended on your luck too. (Woman, b 1951.)

In smaller settlements, rugs could be sold to women working at cattle sheds. A day or two after pay day was a good time for successful sales, and group behaviour could also have an effect on sales – if one farmworker bought a beautiful floor rug, others also bought something:

And the cattle sheds, there were many women together and now and then some of them would buy your rugs. Then you went home and fetched another load [of rugs]. (Woman, b 1951.)

Those weavers who were not brave enough to go and sell their rugs to strangers used the help of intermediaries. More active weavers or their husbands or fathers who were ready to shoulder the risky activities of selling and communicating with buyers acted as intermediaries. I was also told about an older woman who did not weave rugs but earned money as an intermediary and used her earnings to help the families of her children. The so-called resellers bought floor coverings from the weavers, paying a slightly lower price. When they travelled to more distant locations, they filled the boot and the back seat of their car with rugs, “because there was no sense in driving to Saaremaa with only ten floor rugs.”

Starting in the 1970s, fairs were held in the country and in towns, and people could apply for permits to sell their products. Some weavers used this opportunity, and they regularly went to fairs all over Estonia to sell their own rugs as well as the rugs woven by others.

Stories about selling floor rugs told by former weavers prove the seemingly exaggerated saying that Estonia is full of these floor rugs which were woven here, in the neighbourhood of Adraku; just go to the island of Muhu, and you can see them there, or wherever you go [you can see them]. (Woman, b 1951.)



Photo 19. Rep weave floor carpet woven by the aunt of Aili Rummel for Aili's dowry, in Vinni parish, in the late 1980s. Owned by Ilse Rummel, Änniksaare village, Avinurme parish. Width 160 cm. Photo by Veinika Västriik.

By the early 1980s, stores had started to sell different industrially produced carpets and floor coverings made of synthetic materials (e.g. Mistra), reducing interest in manually woven, old-fashioned rep weave floor rugs. Among the letters sent to the Estonian National Museum by their correspondents, there is one letter from Kursi village, Jõgevamaa county, sent in 1994 to answer an inquiry about floor rugs and carpets; this is the only document to represent the point of view of the buyers of the Avinurme rep weave floor rugs:

Before 1955, we had long floor rugs that we had woven ourselves. These rugs were diagonally folded and laid on the floor in the dining room and the large living room. A large floor carpet was bought from the Avinurme travelling salesmen (linen warp, tow-yarn weft). These were good and durable carpets, 150x205 cm, as well as long floor rugs in matching colours and similar materials. When people started to buy sets of furniture, they also put the Mistra carpeting on their floors. We bought a large Mistra carpet in 1980. Such carpeting was typical in a modern rural or urban flat. We have other long rag rugs, alternately with the tow-yarn floor rugs [bought from the Avinurme salesmen – V. V.], in the corridors. (ERM KV 815:243.)

Weavers themselves also followed the changing fashion and bought new modern carpets from the stores. Several weavers have said that rep weave floor rugs were meant for earning money, they were made and sold as long and as many as possible, but they were not used at home:

People were probably reluctant to put them on the floor because it was money, wasn't it? How could you put a hundred roubles on your floor! (Woman, b 1957.)

The weavers thought that, if necessary, they could always make more floor rugs, but home furnishing fashions changed, and at the time of my fieldwork in 2012, many former weavers and their children no longer had any rep weave floor rugs or floor carpets left.



Photo 20. Floor rug with a rhomboid pattern, woven by Meeta Hunt (1923–1994) in Piilsi village, Avinurme parish in the 1960s. Photo by Veinika Västriik.

Conclusion

The making of rep weave floor coverings was an important source of income in Avinurme, a northern Estonian settlement, from the 1950s to the 1970s. Weaving began for commercial reasons after collective farms were established in 1949, when alternative sources of income were sought, as such farms only paid meagre wages. At the time, any sort of entrepreneurship was prohibited and punishable as “speculation”, and thus sales activities were banned, so the sellers sought to leave village council inspectors with the impression that the weaving was being done for their own families. A unique cultural phenomenon thus developed which was shaped (and eventually fell into decline) for the following period-specific reasons: cotton yarn which was suited to the rep weaving technique could be obtained from the Kreenholm Manufactory in Narva, floor rugs were not available in shops, all households had looms, and rep weave rugs were considered to be classier than rag rugs.

Despite the illegality of the activity, commercial weaving persisted for decades. Due to the wide territorial range of the sales, the Avinurme rugs had an impact on home furnishing culture throughout most of Estonia.

The special feature of the Avinurme practice was the use of a thinner and finer pattern warp (the so-called No. 10 thread) in conjunction with a thicker and coarser background warp; the dark weft is visible through the thin warp and is conducive to the formation of the pattern.

Other features peculiar to the Avinurme rep woven rugs include composition featuring a double cross of rhombuses, which cannot be found in any printed source. In addition, the region in question had a rich array of patterns which combine squares and rectangles. Brown was often featured as the warp colour in combination with beige or orange tones; the background warp was frequently made up of brightly coloured lengthwise-striped patterns along the patterned edges.

The tradition of weaving these types of rugs and mats started to decline in the late 1970s when industrially produced floor coverings became available in retail stores, leading to changes in interior furnishing fashions. Purchasing power had also improved over the decades, and handwoven traditional floor coverings were seen as old-fashioned in this context.

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The author's fieldwork materials

Transcribed interviews, unbound materials at the Estonian National Museum

Veinika Västriik (b 1974) studied Estonian and Comparative Folkloristics at the University of Tartu and graduated from the University in 2000 as a researcher of folklore. Since 2001, weaving fabric has been her main activity. She teaches weaving with a loom at the Textile Department of the Pallas University of Applied Sciences in Tartu. She fulfils requests for weaving and holds weaving courses at her handicraft cottage in the Torila village near Lake Peipsi. In 2013, she received her MA at the University of Tartu Viljandi Culture Academy for research in Estonian rep weave floor coverings.



Photo by Anu Pink.