

Amauti-Ladies Parka

-The Canadian Oxford Dictionary: Amautik. “An Inuit woman’s parka with a large hood in which a child may be carried.”

-Tununiq Dialect Inuktitut Dictionary: Amauti. “Annuraaq arnaqsiut amaqsivilik amautiuvuq.”

The women’s parka, the amauti is a unique style of Inuit clothing with a large hood that protects the child and the mother from extreme cold. Amauti is a big part of Inuit identity and culture. Amautiit are made for women but strong enough for a man. Styles may vary as each region has its unique way of making amautiit to suit their needs.

Years ago, the amauti was made out of skins of animals only but today, they are made out of polyester/cotton, duffle or any material the maker wishes to use. Parts of the parka are still made out of fur like the hood trim as it protects the mother and child from the cold wind. Some amautiit are extremely colorful and may have intricate designs depending on the user. You may even see NHL logos on some of them, or even baby pictures. Some are decorated, where as some are plain. Some are used only for special occasions, such as ceremonies, weddings or celebrations. But a truly functional amauti has one main purpose; to carry a child.

The amauti has protected the Inuit for thousands of years in this extreme harsh environment. Inuit women were expert seamstresses using mainly animal sinew to sew them together by hand. Women are still experts in making the amauti but with better technology such as the sewing machine. Years ago, women made clothing by hand and individualized them for each person as women are all different shapes and sizes. Today, women still make amautiit custom-made for an individual wearer. A comfortable amauti for one person may not be comfortable at all for another. One size does not fit all.

Women often make amautis by dead-reckoning of the person’s dimensions they’re making it for. No need for measuring tapes or rulers as they use their hands and fingers as measuring tools. Women can be precise in measuring right down to millimeters. Using their thumb to start off, they stretch their hand and use the middle finger as a marker and then use their fingers for precise measurements. It’s amazing to watch an expert-seamstress measuring for another, which goes something like this...“1, 2, 3 hands plus one finger”; or, “1, 2 hands and to the first joint of the index finger...”

Today however is slightly different as women tend to use pre-made patterns to measure what ever they want to make. The art of using the hands for measurement is slowly disappearing as the original knowledge-holders are aging. Young people tend to go for the easiest way to get what they want. Modern technology! The art of measuring with the hands is part of our culture and should not be lost. The hands have been around much longer than the measuring tape, after all.

Amautiit are unique, beautiful, well tailored, and just plain amazing when one thinks about it. The hood is large with a pouch in the back so a child can be carried in it and protected from the cold. The child can move around in the pouch without getting exposed to the cold air and the baby is in close contact with the mother for additional warmth. Small children and infants are often fed from the mother by shifting the infant to the front

area from the back, without exposing the child to the elements. The mother can move the child from the back and to the front or vice-versa depending on the need of the child.

The back tail of the amauti is quite wide providing much needed padding for the woman so they can sit anywhere including on the snow using the “tail” so they don’t sit directly on it. The *akuq* or the tail also protects the woman’s lower body from the wind and snow. Canadian amauti usually has a larger/wider tail than the Greenlandic amauti. – Greenlandic peoples are known as *Akukittut* “the people with small amauti tail” by Canadian Inuit.

Inuit children helped with caring for their younger siblings, often carrying them on their back with their own amauti (or in a boy’s case, using their mother’s amauti). A child may practice carrying children by using dolls, puppies, or even rocks. Super-hero figures are quite common these days. Children were often told not to use rocks as “babies” as girls who carried rocks are known to have heavy babies when they are of age.

Girls were also encouraged to carry babies so they can become better seamstresses. Boys on the other hand, also helped to carry babies with a promise that they would be great hunters, especially narwhal hunting. Some siblings would fight over a child so they can be the great hunter or expert seamstresses. Of course parents just needed a sitter more than anything else so they can get on with their chores.

Men have always helped with the raising of the children but they were not expected to use an amauti. Men and women had their gender-based roles defined more so than today in the raising of children. A man did not want to be seen in an amauti due to the fact that carrying babies was the responsibility of the women. Men wanted to be seen as “strong men” not as “wimps”. But of course, over time, the role of women and men has changed. It’s alright to be a “wimp” today especially if you depend on your spouse for support. Someone has to take care of the children.

In making an amauti, complicated mathematical concepts are used in the design of the patterns to make the various shapes fit perfectly. Inuit knew all about geometry, shapes, and measuring even without formal education. Also, proper material has to be considered for an amauti. Animal fur and modern material is used to make an amauti to fit their needs.

Animal made amautiit are mostly worn on the land due to its warmness; where as the cotton made are usually worn around town. Some are made thin, some in layers, and some with multiple layers. Most amautiit have three separate layers: inner fabric for comfort and softness; the second layer for warm; and the last layer to keep the wind out. Some amautiit have two layers. Some amautiit are well decorated with beads, strips and ribbons, logos and/or anything the artist wants to add.

In the past, metal coins, spoons, amulets, lead, brass, brass pellets, strips and beads have been used to decorate amautiit. It goes to show what money meant to the Inuit long ago: just an ornamental knick-knack to make beautiful things. -They would probably get stolen today. Some amautiit were also designed with nice fur hood trims or ruffs usually made from wolf, wolverine, dog, fox, or any fur that was available. Some amautiit were made out of eider duck (*Sanikiluaq*, especially), or caribou or seal (where they are readily

available, which is everywhere in the Arctic). An expert seamstress can complete an amauti in two or three days. Women with a fulltime job may take up to a week or more to complete an amauti due to its complicated nature. A lot of work goes into producing an Amauti.

The Inuit qayaq design has been stolen from the Inuit and sold worldwide. Will the amauti design be stolen too? Should Inuit patent the Amauti? Perhaps copy right it?

I encourage you to read “Sinews of Survival” The Living legacy of Inuit Clothing, By Betty Kobayashi Issenmen and “Miqsumniq” by Elisapee Flaherty.

Inuit would not exist today if the Inuit women did not produce clothing suitable for the harsh cold weather. I take my hat (cap) off to all women.

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