



# Kūkahekahe: Ulana 'ie – The art of weaving

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In this Kūkahekahe, Cultural Specialist Kumulā'au Sing KSK'89 shares information about ulana 'ie – the art weaving the 'ie'ie vine – as well as the cultural significance of feathered war gods.

'Ie'ie is an indigenous plant found in our native forests between the altitudes of 1,000 to 4,500 feet. The vine can be seen growing at the tops of koa and 'ōhi'a trees. They can have stems of about an inch in diameter and the vine has thin and pointed leaves that can grow up to two and a half feet long. At the center of the leaf cluster are rotund and elongated flowers that resemble spikes. The fruits of the vine are orange with seeded berries. Long and thin 'ie, or rootlets, extend from the stem of the vine downwards, sometimes reaching lengths of twenty feet before settling into the ground. Practitioners use these 'ie in weaving, the rootlets can take about six months to a year to mature before they can be harvested and they are collected during the summer months when drier conditions allow for safe passage in the mountains.

Although a variety of goods can be made using ulana 'ie, the kī'i akua hulu manu (feather war gods) were some of the most elevated: these powerful ancestral images possessed immense

mana and served many functions for our kūpuna. Given personal names, they were genealogically connected to ruling chiefs who passed them on to their descendants. Persons who inherited ki'i akua hulu manu were charged with the possession and custody of the god. These deities protected their chiefs in the realm of the living and also cared for them in the next life – the realm of the 'aumakua. They also were powerful protectors of the government and aided in times of war.

Traditionally, the ki'i akua hulu manu were powerful manifestations of Kū, the god of warfare, medicine, fishing and politics, among other areas. These deities were created using natural materials that were gathered with purpose and intention, endowing the akua with mana and other spiritual attributes. Materials included rootlets of the 'ie'ie vine, lā'au (such as kauila wood), niho (teeth from dogs or sharks), pā (shell), olonā (cordage and netting), hili (dye), and 'aila (oil).

The framework of the ki'i was woven using the 'ie, shaping the weaving into forms that approximate human figures. The hulu or feathers of birds were affixed to the woven image using fine netting that was securely tied on to the armature of the image. Because these ki'i were kinolau, or physical representations of Kū, they were covered with hulu manu 'ula, red feathers collected from honeycreeper birds such as the 'i'iwi and 'apāpane; its color evoked the blood associated with fishing and war.

Today, there are nineteen known and documented ki'i akua hulu manu in existence. In the past, the roles and function of the ki'i akua hulu manu included ceremonies involving death and burial, makahiki (new year) and luakini (sacrificial heiau) rituals, and warfare. When carried into war, the presence of these akua generated courage within the warriors; preparing them spiritually and psychologically for the ensuing battle. Conversely, these gods of war and sorcery would strike fear in their opponents and had the potential to bring about their destruction.

Perhaps the most well known of all akua hulu manu today is one that we have a connection to as Kamehameha Schools. Kūkā'ilimoku, Kū the snatcher of islands, was the personal war god of Kamehameha I. This akua was given to Kamehameha by his uncle, Kalani'ōpu'u, prior to his campaign of consolidating his rule of Hawai'i Island.

When I first started my journey in ulana 'ie, one of my goals was to apply my knowledge of weaving to recreate this form of 'ie. I have since woven six ki'i over the last two decades. The beauty of creating for me is learning and applying different skills to create the image – from carving wooden pegs for the ki'i's eyes and affixing them against the mother of pearl shell, to lashing canine teeth for the mouth and producing kukui bark dye and applying an oil finish. In my contemporary cultural practice and when teaching haumāna, I refrain from using hulu to cover these images of Hawaiian deities in order to highlight the workmanship, artistry and the beauty of 'ie'ie style basketry which would not be visible if the work was covered with feathers.

We may never completely comprehend the full extent of the roles and functions of our ancient ki'i akua hulu manu. However, through research and reconstruction of how these awesome images were made, we follow in the footsteps and path laid out for us by our kūpuna. Like them, we seek to coexist with the land by spiritually connecting with and having an appreciation for our natural resources collected from the 'āina; these natural materials are what give a ki'i "life."

'Ie'ie plant with flower



Kumulā'au & Makana Sing gathering 'ie in East Maui.



Ki'i closeup at MAMO 2019 at the MACC



TAGS:

ho'okahua, kūkahekahe, cultural conversations, employee 'ohana

<https://www.ksbe.edu/article/kukahekahe-ulana-ie-the-art-of-weaving/>