

# Social Climber: 'ie'ie

September 29, 2019

Story by Shannon Wianecki

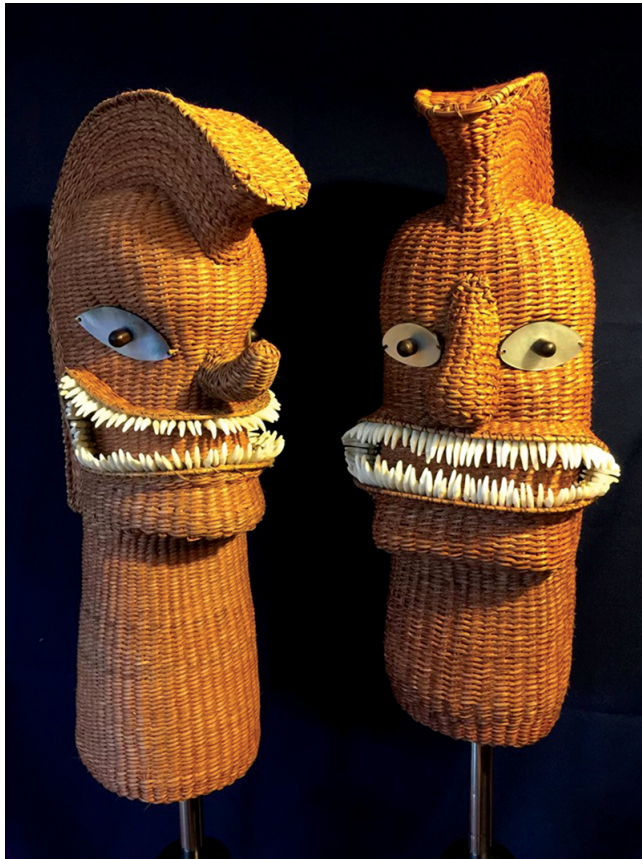


*Hawaiians used 'ie'ie as medicine, building material, canoe lashing and more.*

Deep in the Hawaiian rainforest, a woody vine climbs into the canopy. It winds around tree trunks, sends aerial roots reaching out for something to grab, and unfurls a mop of long leaves crowned by a bright orange inflorescence. In days past, the 'alalā, or Hawaiian crow, fed on its red berries. Today the bird and vine are both rare.

Hawaiians call the vine 'ie'ie. It looks a lot like *hala*, the pandanus tree found throughout Polynesia. *Hala* is the most important species for traditional Polynesian weavers, who use its pliant leaves to make everything from mats and hats to bedding and canoe sails. 'ie'ie is less common, but also significant; fiber artists in Hawai'i use its aerial roots to fashion sturdy baskets, fish traps, war helmets, and *ki'i*—fearsome representations of Hawaiian gods.

---



*The plant also took shape as ki'i (images), representing the gods. The ones below are among the pieces on display at Hale Hō'ike'ike at the Bailey House through December 2019.*

Like many indigenous art forms, Hawaiian weaving and basketry almost disappeared under the weight of Western colonization. Sacred objects like the *ki'i* were destroyed or carried off to museums. Few people today know how to weave 'ie'ie roots. Kumulā'au and Haunani Sing are bent on changing that. Partners in life and in craft, the two artists are fostering a new generation of Hawaiian basket makers. The Sings teach the traditional way: one-on-one, in small cohorts called *papa*. Beginning basketry students work with rattan, a nonnative substitute for 'ie'ie. As their practice matures, they learn how to harvest and care for the indigenous vine—ensuring the survival of the species and the art form.

You can admire their creations during a special basketry exhibit: Nā Akua Ākea Project runs now through December 2019 at Hale Hō'ike'ike at the Bailey House in Wailuku. The featured *mahiolo* (feathered helmets) and *hina'i 'ōpae* (freshwater shrimp traps) are as beautiful as they are functional. To watch weavers in action, swing by Kā'anapali Beach Hotel during the Kauluhiwaolele Maui Fiber Arts Conference, September 4 through 7. (Details at [KBHMaui.com/hawaii-culture/weaving](http://KBHMaui.com/hawaii-culture/weaving).)

---

---