

LĀ'Ī - Ho'okupu
by Kaina Quenga



Lā'ī, kī, or tī (ti-leaf) is a sacred symbol and for me one of my most favorite foliage. It is the foundation and staple lei I grew up making that roots me back to the Best and Kahalewai 'ohana in Keaukaha Hawai'i. My kumu is Aunty Valerie Best, who is one of 18 siblings that comes from Moloka'i and Waimanalo, O'ahu. I have deep gratitude to have been taken in by this 'ohana to learn and exposed to all kinds of lei making.

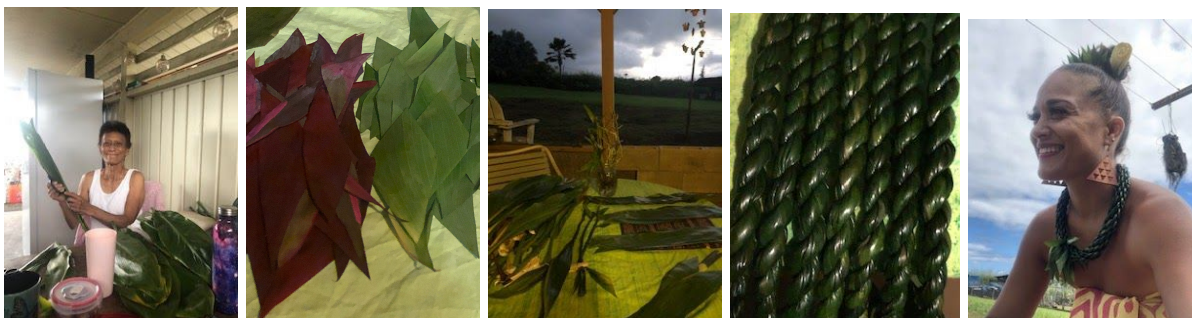
For Polynesians, lā'ī is a staple leaf with many uses including ceremony, healing, protection, cooking, lei, and so much more. This plant has taught me so much about relationships, cycles/stages of life, strength, and perpetuatural change.

Lei lā'ī connects us and nurtures us, as it recognizes our connection to oneself, 'āina (land), 'ohana, and each other. I have made numerous strands of lei over the years for many different purposes, and each time it is a new experience.



Ku'u kumu Aunty Val

There are two 'ōlelo no'ēau or Hawaiian proverbs that speak of my learning of lei lā'i in the hilo/wili style. First, "Ma ka hana ka 'ike" - *In working one learns* - the learning is in the doing. I learned to make lei lā'i the old-kupuna way, by watching - no talking and asking questions. Therefore, the second 'ōlelo no'ēau is "Pa'a ka waha, hana ka lima" - *Shut the mouth; keep the hands busy*. As I grew older I began to truly understand the importance and significance of this way - 'ike (*knowledge*) - has been passed down and received; through generations and generations of practice. The sacred treasures handed down through generations retain this power and vitality that link us to the past, a living vital art with very specific meaning, not static or just aesthetic.

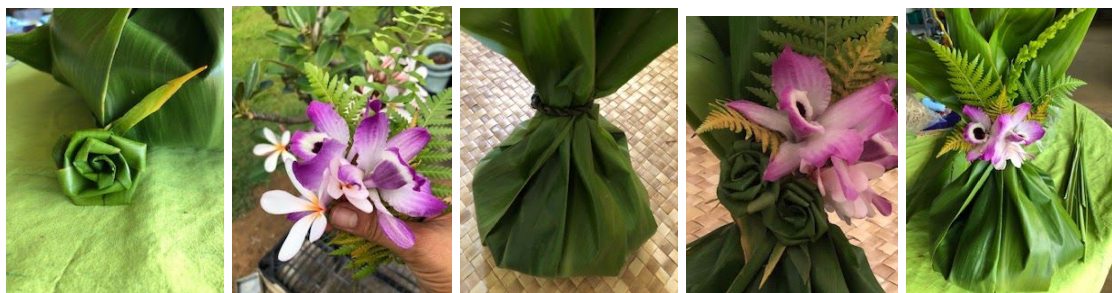


The seven-strand rope lei lā'i replicates the lei niho palaoa and represents their 'ohana tradition. It is symbolic of making the finest and best lei for the ali'i (*royalty*). The pictures above show us the process of preparing lā'i to make lei for ho'okupu (*gift*).



In these new, changing times everyone has been affected in different ways by the COVID-19 pandemic. I am among 13 Pacific Island artists and cultural practitioners from Hawai'i and New York to be recognized for the New York/Pacific Island Time award.

To welcome new beginnings and healing, we offer this ho'okupu as a tribute or offering of deep aloha, prayer, and gratitude for all life. Kupu means sprout, grow or offspring. Ho'okupu means to sprout forward or cause growth. We prepare the offerings with the most care.



Ho'okupu is giving with the best expression of love, compassion, and appreciation to acknowledge all the blessings and abundance received. Importantly, ho'okupu teaches us that we are all One and to give something back - to give the best of yourself. Ho'okupu recognizes our love and respect for a place of significance, our connection to each other, to the 'āina and to recognize 'āina as our kupuna or 'ohana.



7 strand lei lāʻī rope



Red/green lei lāʻī



Lei lāʻī maile

We make three different lei lāʻī filled with aloha to honor all our ancestors, our native relatives, and our Mother Earth.



The seven-strand rope lei lā'ī is for the generations that have come before us and for the next seven generations. For all those protecting the sacred and standing for the rights of our Earth.

The lei lā'ī using red and green leaves is made for two native relatives of the Tarrant 'Ohana, Kevin Tarrant and his mother Victoria Yellow Wolf Tarrant; Sky Clan, Bear Clan and Knife Clan. Both of them have transitioned to the spirit world in this pandemic and were very active and supportive in the community. Kevin was a beloved member of the Indigenous Peoples Community of New York City, Co-founder and Managing Director of Safe Harbors NYC, and founder and lead singer of Silvercloud Singers. I'm grateful for all the years he invited me to represent Hawai'i at many American Indian Community House Pow Wows and Community Socials. As a member of the Indigenous Peoples Day NYC Coalition, I've also had the blessings of working with him for the past five years in organizing Indigenous People's Day NYC celebrations. Hearing him sing and speak as one of the Masters of Ceremony for the commemoration will be missed. I also extend a huge mahalo nui loa to Kevin for bringing *'Au 'a 'ia: Holding On*, a hana keaka (*Hawaiian theatre*) play, which was performed predominantly in the Hawaiian language with bilingual segments, to the New York Theatre Workshop's Reflections of Native Voices Off-Broadway Festival in New York City. It was a surreal and full-circle experience for me to see our 'Ōlelo Hawai'i on the big stage with our people telling our stories, lifting up prayers rooted in love and empathy for their family and friends.

A lei lā'ī maile for our honua, acknowledging our kuleana to sustain and maintain a stance for aloha 'āina, giving back to the Earth for the bountiful blessings it provides.

The ho'okupu is adorned with lā'ī roses, plumeria, orchids, leather leaf and kupukupu ferns in all stages representing the cycles and beauty of life, which were all grown in my yard.

As we come into this new paradigm let us always remember to aloha i kekahi i kekahi - *Love one another, love everything*. Let's always give our very best to our 'ohana and our lāhui. Aloha nō.